A Thrilling Game of Cat and Mouse

by Ladytalon

Summary

President Blake and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day.
A wool-covered leaf on the desert wind. Again.

He can't remember the last time he was able to truly relax - the assassin who has been shadowing him through three different systems, multiple so-called 'safe' houses, and his very dreams has made sure of that. Attempting to fight back does no good, and neither does setting traps; whomever has been hired to end his life is a consummate professional.

Jeffrey Blake considers himself a man who can appreciate professionalism. He would never have risen to the Hyperion Vice Presidency (and subsequently inherited Jack's position after the man's passing) if he did not, yet he is quickly approaching the end of his patience. He has been ceaselessly hounded and Blake’s beginning to think he should simply let himself be killed just to get it over with.

He is supposed to be the proverbial cat in this situation, not the mouse!

Blake drags himself from the flaming wreck of his car, cursing himself for deciding to come back to Pandora – his mental state must truly be in danger if he’d genuinely thought that by coming here he could finally throw his pursuer off the trail. Instead, the attacks have increased exponentially; almost as if the hired killer has intimate knowledge of this terrible planet’s terrain. He’s barely survived numerous attempts on his life, this wreck being only the latest terror visited on him. Blake pats himself down with shaking hands, still partly deaf from the sound of the explosion – a land mine, apparently – and staggers on towards his destination, a Fast Travel station hidden in a shack. At least, he hopes that it’s still there…

All he has to do is make it into the building, if one could actually describe the trash heap as a building, and then he can get back up to Helios. Blake limps closer to it, feeling as though his left ankle has swollen to twice its normal size. Just a bit more. A few more steps, and...he can see that the damned thing has an electric fence that would fry him like so much bacon. Blake rubs at his face wearily, sinking down behind the rocks and trying to remember where the generator has been placed. The power lines are running to another Pandoran Special, as he’s taken to calling the buildings on this planet, and of course there are plenty of bandits wandering about scratching themselves. There also seem to be plenty of oddly-placed bombs, and many of them have been painted the color pink.

This adds up to the conclusion that there is no possible way that he will be able to evade notice and/or dismemberment. Blake pinches the bridge of his nose to help fend off the headache that's approaching as loudly as if it were an actual freight train... no, wait. The sound is of an actual freight train, and he watches the main engine ram into the gaggle of bandit scum who have been doing their wandering and scratching directly upon the tracks. Body parts and blood spray to either side as the train continues on its way.

Blake sidles towards the shack containing the generator, and reaches the rotten boards without being seen. He peers through the slats to get an idea of where he needs to go, but all he sees are piles of trash and evidence that the bandits use this charming structure as a commode. The static hum tells him that the generator really is inside, but it seems that getting in there is going to be just another nerve-wracking problem because he can't see a way inside that doesn't involve climbing up on the roof and jumping in. Perhaps he could simply throw something... but no, that wouldn't work either, because he's at the wrong angle and doesn't have a single thing to throw. Well, there's nothing for it - it seems that he must go inside.

There are some broken crates lying about as well as an old green metal dumpster with the Dahl logo stenciled onto it, so Blake gets to work scavenging items to make an impromptu staircase. A splinter from one of the crates slides beneath the skin of his left palm and he knows he should really make the time to stop and pick it out, but he's too close to the Fast Travel and the promise of safety to worry
about the risk of infection. It will be taken care of once he returns to Helios. Blake scrambles up onto
the roof and makes his way to the top beam, trying to keep an eye out for bandits as well as his
persistent stalker. The knees of his suit become snagged on the uneven shingles as he attempts to
slither over the highest part of the roof without being seen and, despite the fact that he's only just
survived an explosion and he has better things to worry about, Blake can't suppress a wince. He liked
this suit.

The drop is just ahead of him and there's not a soul in sight, so Blake backs up to the hole in the roof
and lets himself down. Tries, anyway - at the last moment he loses his grip and falls into an
unceremonious heap on the dirty floor. Thankfully Blake has not landed in the subhuman waste, a
fact for which he finds himself more grateful as he turns to see just how close he really came.

Propriety demands that he shudder in disgusted relief, so he takes a moment to indulge himself before
advancing towards the fuse box. He examines it critically, then decides to work on how best to get
out of the shack first... if one of the bandits happen to see the forcefield shut off, they'll know exactly
how it was accomplished and then Blake won't be long for this world or any other.

There's a table, but it's not high enough for him to be able to climb back out on the roof so Blake
looks around until he finds another old Dahl weapons crate. A quick glance inside it turns to a
double take, because there are actual weapons inside. "Unbelievable," Blake mutters aloud, reaching
in to pick up a revolver before discarding it in favor of a repeater pistol. There is even a small cache
of ammunition inside the crate, so he scoops up a few rounds and fits as much as he can inside his
pockets before loading the gun. After a few moments' consideration, he loads the first revolver he'd
picked up and lifts the back of his jacket before working it past the waistband of his trousers - with a
great deal of luck, it won't misfire and take a chunk out of his anatomy. The other two pistols get
tossed in the farthest corner, and the rest of the ammo is dumped in a small pile so that he can scrape
dirt over it. The empty crate is lifted onto the table with much grunting and sweating, but Blake is
pleased with his work when he can easily reach the roof.

He tucks the repeater into an inside jacket pocket and decides to climb out immediately - now that he
has a means of self-defense, Blake can use it to shoot the fuse box and save himself a great deal of
anxiety. He times the shot with the deafening noise of another train thundering past, and none of the
bandits even look up...because the idiots have allowed at least two more of their group to be
splattered on the tracks. Blake drops to a crouch and moves as quickly as he can towards the other
shack without attracting notice, but he's wriggling through the gap where the electric fence used to be
when he hears the first whooping, breathless laugh.

"Heh-huh! Strip the flesh...salt the wound!"

"Oh, good God," Blake hisses, because of course his suit has gotten snagged on something just as a
Psycho lopes towards him brandishing a rusty buzz-axe. He jerks himself backwards into the
Pandoran Special and, while the fabric stretches a bit, it's too well-made to actually rip. This means
that he's still a very obvious target to the mentally unstable heathen currently babbling about his own
mother. "Damn it!" Blake twists out of the way as the thing rears back and attempts to smash his
head in with the buzz-axe. He endures several more clumsy attempts before his suit finally gives up
the ghost and rips just enough to free him... of course by this time, two more bandits have decided to
investigate the Psycho's lunatic ravings and Blake's repeater pistol takes care of one of them.

Bullets spray past him as he flattens himself against the wall trying to ignore their taunts because
they're not terribly original - he's well aware that they 'have something' for him.

Not very subtle fellows, bandits.

Blake glares around the shack, trying to figure out where the Fast Travel could possibly be located.
He'd heard that it was definitely here, and that fence wouldn't be there without a valid reason to keep
people out, so where is it? Perhaps a secret door... he jerks in surprise when the hail of bullets come
to an abrupt end, almost as if the bandits have suddenly forgotten that they're trying to kill him. Blake leans back against the wall, pressing his ear to the boards as he hears another Psycho begin his recitation of flesh stripping - only to be silenced by a single gunshot that echoes off of the nearby rock formations. His own breathing sounds abnormally loud in the resultant silence and Blake gathers himself to move when he hears the slow, measured footsteps directly outside the shack. The sound of a gun's barrel being dragged across the wooden boards makes his skin crawl, and he raises a hand to cover his mouth as the scraping reaches the slats behind his head. Whomever is out there continues past slowly and Blake releases his pent-up breath... only to have the sounds stop because he's been heard, somehow.

The scraping noise comes back in his direction, and Blake casts his eyes around the room frantically - *where is the Fast Travel?* He finally sees the concealed hole in the floor and dives towards it just as the side of the shack explodes inwards. Blake throws himself down the ladder, scrambling to his feet and staggering towards the flickering blue and white light of the Fast Travel screen. He presses his palm to it and keys in his access override, glancing over his shoulder at the sound of someone coming down the ladder. "Come on, come on," Blake groans, waiting for the destination screen to load - his stalker is silhouetted against the meager light filtering down from the first floor as he spares another glance back, and panic rises to choke him. It can't end like this; he's only ten seconds away from safety!

The screen finally changes, and Blake slams his hand against the diagram of Helios just as a weapon is raised to aim at him. The person fires, but he's being digistructed into the system and the bullets pass through to slam into the console. Blake feels the familiar disorientation with unparalleled relief, yet as his atoms are stitched back together he finds the relief waning quickly because he hasn't been sent to Helios... he's in the Arid Nexus, just outside the ruins of Fyrestone.

Blake pats himself down to make sure that none of the bullets have actually pierced him, then makes his way over to another one of those Dahl dumpsters in case whomever was after him comes through the Fast Travel. He crouches behind it and takes stock of his situation, glancing down at his hand when the splinter causes a painful twinge to shoot through his palm. Digging at it only causes the vile thing to be shoved deeper into his flesh, causing him to waste valuable time. How had he ended up in the *Badlands?* The coding for Helios is completely different, so the old complaint of 'crossed wires' doesn't make a lick of sense... it has to have been deliberate. The thought that his pursuer has once again snatched hope from him, just when safety was within reach, is an unbelievably depressing one. Yet what more could he ever expect from such a sadistic personality?

He casts an appraising glance around, wondering if he could possibly reach the Hyperion Information Stockade before the assassin finds him once more. The Fast Travel remains inactive and Blake weighs his options before deciding to go back over and try for Helios one more time. He types in his access code but this time, the override shuts the station off completely. Blake aims a frustrated kick at it, then wheels around to run across the empty space between the station and the road overhead. The only good thing that's come of this disaster is that if the Fast Travel is out of commission, that means the assassin can't follow him immediately - he has a few precious hours to get himself to safety without anyone breathing down his neck. Blake reaches the dubious safety of the lift platform, intending to go on up to the Stockade, but the power mechanism seems to be broken and there's no possible way he could scale the nearest pylon.

There might be something nearby he can use to fix it, perhaps in the rubble of Fyrestone - he hasn't done manual labor such as this in quite some time because his current job doesn't require it, but that doesn't mean he's incapable. Blake thinks for a moment before deciding to search out the residence of one Theodore K. Baha, who had lived fairly close by unless he misses his guess. The irony doesn't escape him that Baha had fled for his life from the Hyperion Corporation and now Blake is fleeing for his own...if his luck doesn't hold, he'll meet his death in the very same place.
He skirts a slagpit, moving carefully to avoid notice from a nearby pack of skags, and angles back towards the dead Fast Travel station. Blake moves along the rocks until the house comes into view, and he slips inside gratefully. The windows are long gone and the door has been ripped from its hinges, but shelter is shelter. Here, too, is a hole in the floor much like the one he'd thrown himself down earlier - it seems that Baha had created himself a hidey-hole that will serve Blake's purposes admirably. There's no question that Vault Hunters, the galaxy's most pernicious leeches, had discovered the hidden room because no other bandit would ever be smart enough to find it.

His guess is strengthened by the fact that the room below is full of empty lockers and strongboxes - it has to have been Vault Hunters; perhaps even the same group who'd destroyed the prototype loader Saturn. Blake looks around before deciding that he'll stay here and rest for a few minutes, and then he climbs back up the ladder to drag a few items in from outside so that he can disguise the opening. No sense in fully advertising his presence, after all. When the hole has been neatly concealed, Blake comes back down and rearranges a few of the lockers so that he has a place to rest. He places the repeater pistol right beside him and leans back against the wall, not even caring that the rough stone will wreak havoc upon his hair. Just fifteen minutes...perhaps twenty...just a few minutes where he can close his eyes and actually rest. Just fifteen minutes, Blake tells himself.

The next time he opens his eyes, it's much darker inside the hidden room and his limbs ache as if he's slept for hours. Blake swears angrily, knowing that he's most likely slept the entire night when he'd only meant to rest for twenty minutes at the most. It's certainly cold enough to be early morning, he thinks as he begins climbing the ladder, but the searing pain in his hand immediately distracts Blake as soon as he touches the metal. The splinter has lodged even deeper during the night, and it seems as though it's become infected - what else he was expecting after digging through that hotbed of contagion, he has no idea.

Perhaps one of Zed Blanco's medical vending machines are still connected to power, Blake thinks. He's already planning on heading into Fyrestone anyway, so it's just one more thing to search for. He sets his teeth against the pain and makes it up the ladder, shifting the pile of detritus he'd set up the night before. It looks to have been untouched, much to his relief, but he's just turning towards the door when he catches sight of something that definitely had not been there last night. Blake picks up the square of paper, then nearly drops it in shock because it's a picture of him - and it had been taken while he'd been sleeping down in T.K. Baha's secret room.
A fond adieu to a great suit jacket.

Chapter Summary

Old Home Week continues as Blake reconnects with a grumpy acquaintance in Fyrestone, and does a little Parkour. Not necessarily in that order.

His heart rate suitably lifted due to this alarming discovery, Blake heads out the door and towards Fyrestone at a dead run. It's rather interesting that things like this can still cause him such distress, because they've been happening so frequently he would have thought himself inured to it by now. The space between his shoulder blades itch something fierce as he heads back towards the dubious safety of the raised roadway, and he pauses to catch his breath once he wedges himself in between a support column and one of the larger piles of rubble.

What should be a path is blocked by the rusted remains of a few Hyperion Loaders - while he could probably just climb over them, Blake can't risk having one of the things suddenly activate and tear him limb from limb... there have been reports coming in from Legal of decommissioned bots abruptly regaining mobility and going on homicidal rampages, which adds up to all the monetary settlements Blake has been forced to sign off on. He glares at the jumble of parts, and takes the detour.

Of course the 'path' winds around another slag pit, and of course there are plenty of skags sunning themselves outside of their dens. Blake huffs in annoyance and glances back towards the path of least resistance (and possible dismemberment), but decides to continue on in the hopes that he can evade the creatures' notice. He'd read somewhere that they're drawn to movement, so if he can manage a fairly slow amble towards Fyrestone he should make it just fine.

Blake narrows his eyes at the skags frisking about as if they haven't a care in the world. Vile creatures. He shuffles towards his destination carefully, trying to keep as many skags in sight as he possibly can. So far they haven't noticed him at all, but that threatens to change at any moment... and it does, naturally, because of course his shadow chooses this very moment to remind Blake of its presence. The echoing crack of a rifle firing dopplers out seconds before one of the skags explodes into chunks of bloody flesh. Blake feels the sweat begin to slide down the small of his back as he freezes in place, trying to figure out which way to run - the other skags are too busy converging upon their unexpected meal to notice his presence, but another shot takes out a second skag. He lurches into action as the third bullet slams into the hard-packed dirt between his feet, and Blake is dimly aware of the closest skag give its whining roar with those disgusting mouth flaps extended before it gives chase.

It's not easy to retrieve a revolver from the back of one's pants when one is busily running for one's life, but Blake does it with relative ease. He can hear the skag's snuffling grow closer with each step, and draws back the hammer before whirling to shoot the thing dead in its tracks.

Well, that's what is supposed to happen - what really does happen is that the handgun's slide locks into place because it's out of ammunition. Typical, he thinks. Just typical. The skag barrels into him since it's clearly not anticipated this turn of events, and they both slide right into the pit of slag. Blake scrambles to his feet and lurches away, coughing on the fumes as the skag is still rolling about trying to regain its footing and, when it inevitably charges at him once more, simply throws the gun directly into its maw as it pauses long enough to roar at him. He wheels around and takes off for the third
time, blind panic warring with irritation because now he has the rest of the pack chasing him and one of them is a Spitter. Blake attempts to give the thing a moving target by bobbing and weaving which proves moderately successful because while most of the projectile vomiting misses him, one corrosive glob strikes the back of his jacket.

He's forced to strip it off quickly and abandon it to the tender mercies of his pursuers, who immediately stop to rip it to shreds. Blake is given several precious seconds to pull ahead and round the corner into Fyrestone proper. The skags are still coming, however, so he runs straight towards the old bounty board and scrambles atop it and up onto the adjoining red-tiled hut. Blake keeps climbing and finally ends up clinging to a rung of one of the shorter water towers - the skags nose through the trash piles and whine up at him for several minutes before they finally lose interest and lope back to their dens.

His adrenaline level plummets, leaving him soaked in sweat and limp with relief. Blake's earlier panic firmly resolves itself into annoyance about being herded like an animal, and his hand takes this moment to remind him that he'll be the latest Hyperion amputee if he doesn't find an Anshin needle soon. He slowly climbs down and limps towards Building 03 only to find that not only is the med vendor out of service, but the town's previous occupant has returned to take up residence and is currently rummaging through a crate. "Doctor Blanco?" Blake blurts out despite himself.

Zed Blanco straightens to look at him, a buzz axe raised in one hand. "Who the hell- you."

"Unfortunately for us both," Blake says, walking forward. He immediately stops when the doctor's hand tightens around the axe and hoists it meaningfully. "You'll want to turn right around and get yourself outta my city," Zed warns him, eyes narrowed in anger above the surgical mask. "You got some nerve comin' back here, Blake."

"I assure you, I would not be anywhere near this planet if I were given a choice," Blake says wearily.

"That ain't what I heard."

"And what, pray tell, have you heard?"

Zed begins to tap the buzz axe into the palm of his other hand casually. "I heard you got bumped up to President after Jack met his end...that true, company man?"

"It's no secret, I assure you," Blake says, eyeing the weapon in the other man's grasp. "Let me also assure you that I took no especial pleasure in serving you with multiple eviction notices, Doctor. I was simply performing my duty."

He has to wonder how Zed knows about his promotion, however, but he's not about to give the doctor the satisfaction of having him actually ask. It's most likely something to do with those Vault Hunters, who seem to love spreading gossip almost as much as they love making money and stealing things. Zed gives his buzz-axe a few more threatening taps, and then slides it onto the edge of the crate he'd been digging around in. "Whyn't you just go on an' tell me what brings you to my city, Blake." His voice is just as flat and unfriendly as his eyes, which give Blake a careful once-over.

"Your city-" Blake cuts himself off as Zed slowly looks down at his weapon and back up at him. "Yes. Well." He clears his throat self-consciously. "It seems that I have made a few enemies."

Zed's eyes widen sarcastically. "No way! You made some enemies? Now, that's a shame - nice fella like you?" He crosses his arms over his chest and listens more or less quietly while Blake explains
the situation, only interrupting now and again to laugh. "So you're here in Fyrestone to...what? Loot what your people've already destroyed a half-dozen times so far? Nice try, but only power coupling around's in my possession and it's gonna stay that way."

"I simply require passage to the Stockade," Blake says through gritted teeth. "If you could only allow me access to-"

The doctor snatches up the buzz axe and his knuckles whiten as he grips the handle. "No. Oh, no. You ain't gonna come through here and borrow none of my stuff like you're some neighbor come callin' for a cup of sugar," he growls. "Not after what you did. No friggin' way. I'll destroy it myself 'fore I let you get to it."

"That is not a very sensible-"

"No," Zed says again, coming towards him. Blake holds his ground, determined not to be intimidated by a man who's less educated than himself even if Zed is a fairly large man. He'd never really noticed before how big the doctor really is. "No. You want up there, you're gonna climb up."

Climb? Blake stares at him in disbelief. "Climb...what, precisely?"

Zed jerks his chin towards what's left of the main thoroughfare. "Take a look for yourself."

He backs up warily, still trying to keep an eye on Zed, and glances up at the road to see one of the smaller water tower-like structures - most likely rusted to within a millimeter of its life - that nearly touches the Hyperion structure. The climb is possible, though incredibly difficult even if he didn't have a wounded hand... which reminds him that he still needs to ask. "Doctor Blanco, if you are still in the business of rendering services in exchange for compensation..."

"Now, ain't this somethin' grand - you trust me not to kill you outright for all you've done here?" Zed asks sarcastically, tossing the buzz axe back down. Strangely enough, Blake does. "Yes."

The doctor frowns. "Fine. Get over here and we'll talk."

Blake moves closer and sits down on an overturned crate that Zed gestures to, extending his arm. "It's become infected much more quickly than I'd thought possible," he says, explaining when, where, and how he'd gotten the splinter. "Tundra Express, huh?" Zed muses, prodding the sorest part of Blake's palm. "With your friend chasin' you around so damn much, you're lucky they didn't just shoot one of Tina's bombs...well, don't take a genius to see that splinter's gotta come out one way or the other."

"That depends on which two ways there are," Blake says, pulling his hand out of Zed's grasp and cradling it protectively.

The big man gazes down at him. "There's three, actually. One: I try to work that thing back out the way it came. Two: I slice into the pocket of infection, and take the splinter out that way while the wound drains. You ain't gonna like the third option at all. All three're gonna hurt like a mother, 'cause I don't got anesthetic."

Blake considers simply trying to get out of Fyrestone without further treatment, but he knows that the splinter needs to come out if he wants to keep his hand. "Very well. What do you recommend, Doctor?"
Zed scratches at the back of his neck. "I'll need to cut it open anyway if squeezin' it don't work and there's less chance of the infection bein' pushed any further into your hand. Let's talk about how you're gonna make this worth my while, Blake - somethin' tells me you ain't exactly carryin' the keys to Hyperion with ya."

"My credit is-"

"-not accepted here, Mister President. Try again," Zed advises. "Course I'll gladly take your hand off for free."

Blake reaches back in his waistband for the revolver, intending to offer it in trade, but then remembers that he'd thrown it at the Spitter. "I have a Dahl repeater pistol, which..." he trails off as he realizes that he's lost that weapon, too. "Oh, no." He'd slept with it by his side and had grabbed it up, but had put it back in his jacket pocket. The same jacket he'd had to abandon to the skags. "Fuck."

"They teach you to talk that way up on Helios?" Zed asks with raised eyebrows. "I wouldn't mind a Dahl repeater. Where is it?"

"Skags."

"So? Go back an' get it!"

"I beg your pardon?" Blake asks, and Zed calmly explains about the noxious trash piles - apparently the creatures will eat everything and vomit up whatever turns out to be indigestible. "You...want me to dig through their refuse? Is that what you're suggesting?"

The corners of the doctor's eyes crinkle with malicious amusement. "You want me to cut your damn hand off? Is that what you're suggestin'? Get to diggin', President Blake."
Thank you, and good night.

Chapter Summary

WARNING: Character death

The next hour of his life is time that he’ll never get back and probably never live down, given that Doctor Zed decides to accompany him and provide running commentary. He also ruins his latest pair of shoes, but at least he retrieves both guns and finds more ammo for the revolver that had jammed on him when he could least afford it.

Zed accepts the repeater as payment for his services, and they return to Building 03 for the surgery. There’s a suspicious lack of soap and water, something Blake can’t help but comment on, but then Zed holds up a blowtorch in silent explanation after pulling on a new pair of gloves. He shifts nervously as the other man heats up a knife until the blade glows, but the operation is put on hold when a sound coming from outside the building draws their attention. Blake’s eyes dart around for the best place to hide, as if that could possibly do any good, as Zed gives him a long look before jerking his chin towards the side door that presumably leads to his living quarters. “Get in there and shut up.”

He obeys with alacrity as the other man turns to walk out, and as Blake huddles in a shadowy corner of the room he can hear Zed speaking to what can only be Blake’s pursuer. He strains to pick up details - perhaps he can identify the assassin if he could only hear something - but the only thing he can tell for sure is that Zed is definitely talking to someone with all the requisite pauses needed for the other to reply. Blake’s heart rises into his throat as he clearly hears the doctor invite the assassin to look around, just to be sure that Zed isn’t harboring anyone he shouldn’t. The sound of heavy footsteps returning has him drawing back the hammer of the revolver, but it seems that Zed was convincing enough. “Did you see who it was?”

The other man gazes down at him, because he’s still crouched on the floor. “You’re a popular man, President Blake. That’s some bounty on your head.”

“Well? Who was it?”

“Looked like a hired gun – seen one, you’ve seen ’em all,” Zed says with a shrug. “We better get this surgery over with so you can get outta my hair – I don’t need no killer comin’ back to get me once they figure I lied.”

Blake stands up, following him back out into the main area. “Male or female? Did you see any identifying characteristics?”

Zed makes a gesture around his face. “They had some kinda mask on.”

“Male or female?” Blake asks again, feeling frustrated.

“No, I ain’t in the habit of guessin’ that kinda thing,” Zed tells him, sounding disapproving. “If anyone wants me to know their private business, I figure they’ll tell me. Now get over here so I can cut you up and then you can get the hell out.”
“Why even bother lying to…whomever that was?” Blake frowns. “You don’t think much of me, so I would think you’d be glad to be rid of me.”

The doctor glances back at him as he re-heats the knife with the blowtorch. “That’s true enough, but I already accepted payment from you so that makes you my patient…and my responsibility. Too bad they ain’t showed up just a bit earlier,” he says wistfully. “Gimme your hand an’ let’s get this over with.”

Blake extends his arm once more, and this time Zed places a hand over his wrist to hold his hand down on the table. The doctor presses down hard enough to make the muscles in his arm swell and Blake opens his mouth to complain about the pressure as the knife slices into the sensitive flesh of his palm. Pus erupts from the incision and he lets out a strangled yell at the pain of it, forgetting that he’s supposed to remain silent. “Ouch,” Blake hisses.

Zed sets the blade aside, still holding Blake's hand down easily despite his attempts to free himself. “Quit bein’ such a dang baby – we’re almost done.” He takes Blake’s hand in both of his and digs his thumbs into the sore skin, rubbing hard – Blake would argue more about this rough treatment, but he can see that the doctor is actually forcing the rest of the pus from the wound. The worst of the pain has passed since the infection had been lanced, agony being replaced by the simple dull throbbing of split flesh. Zed squeezes the rest of the greenish fluid out and when nothing but untainted blood is seen, he reaches for a bottle of liquor that Blake hadn’t noticed earlier. “This might sting a bit,” the doctor says calmly, pulling the cork out with his teeth and splashing a hearty amount directly into Blake’s wound.

This time, Blake’s yowl is considerably louder. “A little warning…!”

“Told you it might sting. What more d’you want?” Zed shakes his head, muttering under his breath about Hyperion lightweights, and tosses him a ball of stained white cloth. “Wrap that mess up and get outta my face; I’m sick of lookin’ at you.”

The doctor turns his back on Blake, who is left to wrap his hand up in silence – he briefly considers thanking Zed, but decides against it and heads out. Blake trots over to the water tower and begins to climb as quickly as he can. His hand throbs beneath the bandage, but it’s nowhere near as bad as it had been earlier…it will keep him focused. He can bear it.

He’s halfway up when he hears Zed’s voice, raised in argument. Blake looks down to see what can only be his ‘shadow’ lift an assault rifle and discharge an entire clip into Building 03. The assassin looks up at him and Blake knows that he should focus on the task at hand (staying alive) instead of the fact that Zed Blanco has just been murdered a few feet away, because Blake has seen – and caused – plenty of deaths. Why the violent demise of one irritable backwoods doctor should make any difference whatsoever, he doesn’t know… yet it does. Blake can't classify the man as ever having been a friend but he’d lied to protect him.

Zed had certainly been right on one account; it’s nearly impossible to guess the sex of the assassin who’s dedicated so much time to making his life miserable. Despite the heat that the Arid Badlands never ceases to produce, his shadow is wearing a long cloak and a full mask that looks like it was ripped from a bandit’s corpse.

They stare at each other before Blake remembers that he's supposed to be climbing and the assassin switches weapons...all the better to harry him with, apparently, because this next gun has corrosive rounds and the shots are aimed directly at the tower he's so desperately trying to climb. The bubbling hiss of the acid eating its way into the metal spurs Blake into greater efforts, and he nearly falls when the rung he's currently standing on breaks. He grits his teeth and pulls himself higher, feeling like screaming in anger as another bullet strikes the metal just above his wounded hand. Whoever is
following him has definitely proved themselves to be sadistic enough to rival Handsome Jack himself.

Blake finally gains the top of the tower and stands atop it awkwardly, trying to gauge the distance to the road and also trying to keep an eye on his shadow...who is now undermining the base of the tower and starting to push against it. He drops into a crouch, extending his arms out to balance himself as the tower rocks from side to side. The snap of the rusted metal comes just as Blake commits himself to the jump, and he hits the paved surface with enough force to knock the air from his lungs. Dragging himself back to the edge, Blake peers down to see that the tower had struck the ground just as he'd landed and that it's now in a twisted heap amid some Loader parts. He can faintly make out the sound of one of them activating and announcing that the enemy is being engaged.

There's no sign of the assassin.

"Of course," Blake mutters to himself, standing up and heading towards the Information Stockade at a limping run - in retrospect, he probably should've traded something else to have Zed treat his leg but it's too late for that now. Blake feels another twinge of guilt at the doctor's demise, but pushes it aside because guilt simply isn't useful to him and he has no time for it. Perhaps he can use the event as a chance to insert a Hyperion sleeper agent into the workings of this terrible planet; Zed would have definitely had access to Sanctuary, so it's possible that Blake can turn this to his advantage. Once the area is secured it should be no problem to recover the doctor’s corpse and extract enough DNA to fool the digitizing system.

He skirts the randomly placed roadblocks, cargo containers and empty ammunition cabinets. The Stockade still has its beacon lit, which means that he'll be able to communicate with Helios but, more importantly, he will have access to armed guards who can watch his back. Blake hasn't had time to think up a plausible excuse as to why he's not acting in his capacity as President, but he figures he can always disguise his erratic flight as a search for another patent holder whom Hyperion has declined to compensate. If he's careful, it should be no problem at all to cloak his misadventures as business dealings... anything else would amount to a show of weakness, and Blake refuses to allow that to taint his reputation.

He reaches the second floor and finds the data terminal, keying in his access code and praying that this hasn't been sabotaged as well. Blake enters in a secondary code to verify his identity and types in a message for his latest personal assistant, a simpering sycophant of a man who will be sure to respond almost instantaneously. Indeed, less than a minute passes before another message comes back assuring him that his orders will be followed and would he please stand by? Blake sniffs and turns away from the console, wondering just how long it will take for his shadow to make an appearance. There aren't any truly enclosed spaces anywhere in the Hyperion Information Stockade, which has always puzzled him, even though sensor pads beneath the roadway that will summon Loaders and Constructors alike protect the approach.

Why, then, hadn't his footsteps triggered the alarm? Blake runs his hands through his hair, appalled at not noticing this earlier. The distant thump of moonshot projectiles entering Pandora's atmosphere makes him wince and head for one of the side bays, hoping against hope that the canisters contain soldiers only. He can see it hurtling towards his location, and watches the walls break open to reveal the special mech-suits that Hyperion had perfected after the second Vault had been opened; designed to take the same amount of pressure upon landing as a Loader, they’re intended to function much like a Powersuit yet have a spare compartment for another person.

Three of the suits slam down just outside the Stockade, the seams opening to reveal three more armored soldiers leaping out to secure the perimeter. Blake inclines his head graciously as the first guard asks after his health, still feeling too wound up to truly relax. "Good to see you again, Sir," the
guard says. "We'll be happy to escort you wherever you need to go."

Blake looks the soldier up and down; since when has anyone been happy to see him? "Good. Let us begin by reaching the closest functional Fast Travel station," he says.

"Sir."

They arrange themselves around him in a loose circle and begin to head out in search of a Fast Travel that will actually connect to Helios. Blake is kept busy wondering where the assassin is and what will happen next, because it seems highly unlikely that such dedicated pursuit will end simply because Blake has acquired a measure of protection.

The newly arrived soldiers use the power core of one of their suits to make the lift functional once again, and it is when the lift is in motion that his shadow strikes at him once more. The sound of the machinery activating covers the thumps from the moon shot cannon, but the shriek of the loaders' arrival is all too audible. "...Sir?" one of the soldiers ask.

"Enemy sighted. Moving to engage," the closest Loader says.
Is that a digistructing Loaderbot, or are you just happy to see me?

Chapter Summary

Blake's streak of bad luck continues after he gets an armed escort.

There are three in total, one for each group of soldiers, but the playing field is far from even because another thump signals the arrival of that Constructor he'd been wondering about earlier. The thing begins digistructing even more Loaders, launching a turret to prevent them from destroying it.

The Hyperion soldier closest to the Loaders is caught out when his gun jams, and Blake finds himself noticing how very bright blood looks against yellow armor. The Powersuit that had been opened to expose its power core goes next, the man inside roasted alive as a Loader with a flame attachment fulfills its homicidal objective. "Let's get you out of here, Sir," another of his soldiers bellows at him over the din. "Sir, pardon me, Sir."

Blake finds himself picked up and slung over an armored shoulder once this hasty apology has been tendered, but he knows better than to complain - they're only doing what has been asked of them. Their original company of seven has been swiftly whittled down to three. Their retreat has taken them into Fyrestone, and Blake looks into Building 03 to see Zed Blanco's body lying facedown in a pool of blood. How the mighty have fallen, he thinks, staring in morbid fascination at the smear on the wall directly below one out-flung arm where the doctor had attempted to pull himself back up.

His armed escort breaks the locks on another door, which rolls up to display several Marcus Munitions posters and a few broken vendors. Blake is directed to conceal himself behind the desk, and the door is rolled back down as a few of the Loaders come into view. He sits with his back against the rough wood, listening to the sounds of gunfire and grenades. "Drop the damned thing, wait for the shield to lower-" The remaining soldiers exchange shouts as they attempt to destroy the Constructor and Blake would feel anxious if he hadn't already used up the last of his cares. No matter what he does, the assassin is always one step ahead to lure him into a false sense of security.

He sits there and uses the time to think about who might have the resources to hire such a dedicated individual. Something about the way his shadow thinks has Blake convinced that they're ex-military...though they could certainly still be active, too. Dahl has an elite team they've used for certain political assassinations, though nothing as infamous as the tightly knit group Atlas had created under the umbrella of the Crimson Lance. Blake's thankful he doesn't have them to worry about, since the Vault Hunter Athena had killed the rest of them years ago - still, it's a puzzle.

A gargling scream just outside the door alerts him to the demise of at least one of his soldiers and he's just sighing in annoyance when the door rolls back up. "President Blake? Sir? We've got to move now," the last remaining guard yells at him, voice distorted by the dented yellow helmet. He's always hated how the things make it seem as though the person wearing them has an eye in the middle of their forehead but at this point, he's surprisingly glad to find that he hasn't been left on his own again. Blake scrambles up to accept the shield and assault rifle that is passed to him, then they're both headed off at a run because there are still a few Loaders running amok. "If we can get far enough away, they'll go idle," the other man says, reaching out to put a hand beneath Blake's elbow when he stumbles. "You'll be fine, Sir. I've got you."

"I had six of you," Blake snaps.
"Beg pardon, Mister President, but there were five others plus me and I'm the one still alive, Sir - to your left, if you don't mind..."

They run until Blake's leg begins to hurt too badly for him to continue, and then he's embarrassed by his escort's insistence upon picking him up and carrying him. He has better things to worry about than how ridiculous he looks being carried through the Arid Badlands, but here he is doing it. The guard certainly seems tireless enough despite all that armor, still loping along as if it is perfectly normal to tote one's employer bridal-style. Blake is carried straight to a Catch-a-Ride and helped solicitously into the digistructed Lancer. "I thought these had been removed from the system," he says disapprovingly even though he is very glad that this particular vehicle is available - they're nearly impossible to destroy; if he'd had one earlier, that land mine wouldn't have been a problem.

"They have been, Sir, but occasionally we'll have cause to add the code back in."

Blake hmmphs. "This is obviously something I will be forced to look into...?"

"Colonel Theodore White, Sir."

"And what, precisely, is a colonel doing down here?" Blake asks, still feeling peevish about being hauled about like a sack of eridium.

White turns his head to glance over. Not that Blake sees anything but that unsettling round eye in the helmet. "You're an important man, President Blake, Sir. Only the best, for you."

He brusquely orders the man to remove the helmet, preferring to look into the eyes of the people he interacts with (it makes them wonderfully nervous), but another problem arises when the Colonel stops the Lancer and attempts to follow instructions. "What the devil are you doing?" he finally asks after the other man has been tugging on the helmet for a while.

"Uh...looks like one of the blasts from that HOT Loader welded it to the rest of my armor." the colonel pauses in his efforts to remove the helmet. "Sir."

Blake stares at him. "I certainly hope you've already had your lunch, Colonel White." The mere thought of being trapped inside a tin can like that makes him lift his hands unconsciously to touch his face. "What terrible luck." And better you than me, he thinks.

"Thank you, Sir, but I'll be fine - let's just get you back up there and then I'll worry about finding a mechanic to cut me out of this. I've actually had it happen before."

"Is it a common occurrence, then?" Blake asks. He knows it isn't wise to engage employees in casual conversation, but he's been alone a bit too long to care overmuch.

White steers the Lancer around an obstruction in the road before answering. "Occupational hazard, Sir. It's really not that big a deal."

It sounds absolutely horrific to Blake and he resolves to think no more of it, instead directing their conversation towards the mess that they've left behind. "I was under the impression that Hyperion forces had been better trained to deal with the possibility of rogue Loaders."

"Training only gets you so far, Sir, when a Loader's programming has been tweaked like that," White says.

"Explain."

"Part of their programming prevents friendly fire by color and pattern detection, but the rest of the
recognition comes through shield frequency." White's helmet turns towards Blake. "There's not much you can do when that information has been turned against you, Mister President."

"I see," Blake says quietly. "Those men, the ones who died - were you...close to them?"

The colonel sighs. "Collateral damage is a hell of a thing, Sir."

It is indeed, he thinks to himself.

They fall silent for the remainder of the drive, which takes a lot longer than he’d thought possible even though the other man uses the Boost as soon as it recharges and they only run into trouble once. A pair of Drifters gather near their vehicle and loose a barrage of acidic phlegm, dipping down occasionally as if unsure whether or not the Lancer will fit inside their mouths. Blake draws his leg up onto the seat and rubs at the aching muscles while Colonel White reaches across to access the mine controls. White backs the Lancer away from the mine wall and Blake watches as they're triggered by the spindly-legged creatures, reminded of the land mine he'd driven over...has it only been one day?

White takes care of the surviving Drifter by economical use of the energy cannon, moving from the turret and sliding back behind the main controls. "Everything okay, Sir?" he asks.

Blake surfaces from his memories of the Runner's explosion to look over at the other man - of course that one-eyed helmet remains as inscrutable as ever, but he'd like to think that there was concern in White's voice. "Yes, I..." he frowns slightly, looking out through the slits of the main windscreen. "Colonel, I wonder if you could answer a question I have," Blake says, turning back to his companion.

"Of course, Mister President."

"The mines in this vehicle; are they commonly available for purchase?"

"...Sir?"

Blake taps a finger against the mine console. "The mines. How restricted are their purchase? For example; the bandits here. Can one of the bandits get their hands on one or more mines from a Lancer?"

Colonel White tilts his head slightly. "Anything's possible on Pandora, Sir, but I highly doubt it. You'd think there would be a market for land mines, yet the majority of trade goes towards projectile weapons - once in a while, you'll get the odd bandit who tries to make their own mines but nine times out of ten they just end up blowing themselves to bits."

"Who would be able to get their hands on one of these mines?"

"It'd have to be military or executive personnel, Mister Blake. There just aren't that many people who even know it's still possible to digistruct any of the Crimson Lance vehicles, let alone have access to actually call one up at a Catch-a-Ride." White taps on the navigation screen suddenly. "Looks like we've got an active Fast Travel just ahead there, Sir."

Blake accepts this information with a preoccupied nod. "Yes, yes, thank you." So the actual pool of people who have access is small enough for him to work through. This is very good to know, he thinks.

White stops the vehicle and climbs out, pulling some sort of device from his belt and examining it before coming around to open Blake's door. "Last stop, Sir."
He gets out, still thinking about who could have possibly given the assassin the mine. Yes, he can definitely find out who ordered the hit once he's back on Helios. "I'll be needing you to gather your company once we're back aboard the station, Colonel. There have been some serious security breaches that I'll need to take care of."

"Yes, Sir."

Blake abruptly realizes that a long stretch of ground still lays between them and the bright beacon signifying a Fast Travel station. "How is this the last stop when the-

The slow click of a gun's hammer being drawn back makes him swallow the rest of the words. "Hands behind your head, if you don't mind."
**Stressed, not blessed.**

Chapter Summary

Blake's misadventures continue as he's forced to contend with a minefield in order to return to Helios.

"Who are you?" Blake asks, lacing his fingers together in an effort to stop himself from going for his gun.

Colonel White - if that's even his real name - laughs softly, the helmet filtering the sound into something that makes the hair on the back of Blake's neck stand up. "Do you see all that sand, Mister Blake? You seemed pretty interested in those mines. Somewhere between you and that Fast Travel are at least ten of them," his shadow tells him. "If you can make it through, I'll let you aboard Helios."

"Suppose I decide to overpower you, and take control of the situation," Blake says, licking his lips nervously.

Another laugh. "You're welcome to try, Sir."

Sir. "You're awfully polite for someone who's made my life hell these past months."

"Just because I've been hired to kill you is no reason not to mind my manners," White says calmly. "Did I mention that those mines will explode if left too long? Because they will."

Blake turns around to glare at the man. "I suppose you'll be waiting to shoot me if I decide to run in any other direction."

"That sounds about right, Sir." He fires into the sand beside Blake's feet, who skips backwards in alarm. "Now, if you wouldn't mind."

So begins his nerve-wracking jaunt through a minefield. Blake shuffles forward, not wanting to go too fast but unwilling to creep through at a snail's pace and risk having a nearby mine blow unattended. He has absolutely nothing he can use to test the ground around him - once again, it comes down to blind luck and hoping he has some of it left. He glances back at White, who has climbed atop the Lancer in order to get a good view of the show, and sucks air between his teeth. How long does one of those mines last until it goes? How long ago did White deploy them?

Are there any mines out here at all?

Blake rubs a hand over his breastbone, wishing he'd brought some sort of antacid. He can see the Fast Travel up ahead and wonders if he'll make it that far before he simply expires from stress.

His leg begins to ache again. Blake continues on, bracing himself for the inevitable explosion even as he's wondering why he even bothers - if he steps on one, he'll die more or less instantly. There's no use tiptoeing through the sand; the tension will probably kill him long before an actual mine will. He stops to gather his courage, and then begins to run as fast as he can towards the Fast Travel. Blake utilizes a zigzag pattern that probably looks as awkward than it feels, but there's no point in tempting fate by going in a straight line. A deafening explosion to one side makes him trip over his own feet in
surprise, and he winds up flat on his face in the sand.

Another of the mines goes off as Blake stands up, the concussive blast nearly knocking him back down, but he gathers himself into a graceless stumbling run that brings him closer to the Fast Travel as explosions – considerably more than the ten he was promised - thunder in his ears. He’s showered with sand and hot slivers of metal that burn and sting his exposed skin, but Blake couldn’t stop even if he tried. He drags an arm across his eyes to brush away the worst of the grit, staggering forward desperately because he’s so close now. Just a few more steps, that’s all he needs…

He's halfway expecting to be blown to pieces right before he reaches the station, so it's with a sense of resignation that Blake registers the sudden shift beneath his left foot. The heel of his shoe sinks down as the mine's pressure plate is triggered by his weight, and he feels like screaming when the thing begins to emit a steadily increasing whine as it arms itself. Blake turns his head to look back and see Colonel White training a sniper rifle on him. He makes a rude gesture as he waits...and waits.

The mine abruptly stops making noise and Blake looks down at his foot apprehensively, the sweat stinging his eyes making him blink furiously. He slowly bends over and brushes the sand away, examining the device compressed between the ground and his shoe; it's round, and the shell appears to be composed of thick metal. All the better to create deadly shrapnel when it explodes, Blake thinks. This close to the device, he should be able to tell if it's truly active or not, but there's absolutely no evidence to help him decide. He swallows with difficulty as he decides that, since it hasn't exploded already, it's likely that it won't at all. If it does explode, then it won't matter what he does or how far away he tries to run.

Blake drags the back of his hand across his eyes to wipe the sweat away, and glances at the assassin one last time before standing up. He could have just moved while he'd been crouched there, but there's something more civilized about meeting one's death on two feet. Blake takes a deep breath, exhales, and then lifts his foot from the mine.

Nothing happens.

He raises his head to look at White again and in a sudden fit of rage, picks up the mine and chucks it across the sand. "I've had enough," Blake yells. "Do you hear me? Enough! Take it and get the hell out of my life!" If only he still had one of his guns...

White leaps from the top of the Lancer in a sudden movement that makes Blake back up a few steps before he decides he's going to hold his ground. Planting a false mine for the sole purpose of scaring him? That is truly the last straw, as the saying goes, and he really has had enough of this nonsense. If the man is going to run up and murder him after promising him safe passage, so be it. Blake licks his lips nervously as the colonel lopes towards him, but he's surprised when White halts beside the mine he'd thrown. He watches the other man kick sand atop the useless thing before running back to the Lancer where he takes off the helmet.

The distance is too great for Blake to pick out any identifying features except for short, dark hair. If he'd only demanded to see where the damned helmet had supposedly been 'welded' to the rest of the armor... yet why would he have had cause to suspect that the helpful colonel was anything other than what he'd seemed to be?

White tosses the helmet in an underhanded throw towards the covered false mine and Blake begins to walk forward, intent upon securing the helmet for DNA testing, when the yellow helmet hits the mine with a metallic thonk. "This is the most ridiculous-"

The force of the explosion knocks him back against the Fast Travel, and his head connects with it hard enough to stun him. Blake rolls to one side, spitting out blood and sand, and lifts a shaking hand
to the back of his head. His fingers come away bloody, and he stares at them as if they belong to someone else before trying to get up. Blake falls back to the ground as his legs refuse to hold him, panic singing through his body because the Lancer is rolling towards the Fast Travel station...and him.

His head is beginning to hurt terribly and Blake can feel the blood seeping down into the shell of his ear and sliding past his collar, but he can't seem to make his limbs obey. The huge vehicle stops, and Blake hears the door open and close before White's boots approach and fill his field of vision. A strip of cloth blinds him so all he can do is lie there while the man examines the wound on the back of his head and feels at the pulse in his throat with bare hands. There's the prick of a needle beneath his jaw, which eases his pain before he's propped up on a hard surface that begins to move with him a few moments later. The last thing he's aware of before passing out is being digitized into the Fast Travel system.

Blake comes to in one of the 'executive recovery' rooms in Helios' medical wing, with Doctor Autohn hovering over him. "Water," he rasps.

"Can you tell me your name?" the doctor asks in that annoying pinched voice of his, holding out a disposable cup.

He frowns at Autohn. "You know it as well as I do, Doctor." Blake's not allowed his water until he recites his full name and date of birth, and then demands a full report after he drinks.

Autohn sniffs disapprovingly. "Apparently, you appeared at the main Fast Travel outside the Hub - you'll have to ask that assistant of yours for the full details because I don't know them - and were rushed to me with a head wound in need of stitching. A very impressive laceration, I must say - how did you get it?"

"A secret admirer," Blake says blandly, tapping his fingers on the cup in a pointed demand for more. "Anything else?"

"I removed a few pieces of shrapnel, and stitched up the cut on your hand; we've had you on intravenous liquids for the past 48 hours-"

"Forty-eight...!" Blake stops himself from trying to leap out of bed because there's probably a strategically placed catheter just waiting to cause him more pain and suffering. "Get my PA in here immediately."

The hapless moron comes racing in looking as if he might have a heart attack at any moment and Blake disguises his trail carefully with a series of orders that pertain to his chosen cover story about a new weapon design. The pieces fall into place surprisingly easily because Blake has remembered several plans that Jack had discarded after his acquisition of the Atlas Corporation - there aren't many who'd been privy to them, and it shouldn't take much to develop the trash into treasure. No one need know that the weapons won't have come from Blake's ingenuity and ruthlessness.

Despite his resolve to get right back to work now that he's returned to Helios, Blake finds himself tiring far too quickly for his peace of mind. The 'full details' of his dramatic appearance in the Helios Immigration Station seem to be that he had been transported and was then subject to immediate collapse. Several workers had alerted the medical personnel, and one enterprising 'data entry specialist' had been credited with saving Blake's life by purchasing several Healz from the nearby med vendor and immediately administering the injections. The quick-thinking woman has since been rewarded with a promotion and her choice of clothing from the Quick Change. Blake knows that his PA had assured her that the secondary reward isn't sexist at all; everyone on Helios knows that the interim CEO has a keen fashion sense, and wishes his employees to share an interest in the latest
Blake has it put about that he'll be leaving the medical wing later that day but moves into another, more secure, recovery suite until he's assured that his own quarters are completely safe. A contingent of armed guards have been assigned to protect him, but he'd insisted upon having each one remove their helmet as well as having his assistant verify that they had been still on Helios at the time of Blake's misadventures.

In the end, he's in the medical facility for another week though Blake makes sure that he's still seen in full command of his faculties, spending a few hours striding through the Hub and conducting the least strenuous duties that still need his attention before he's exhausted from the exercise and has to rest. It's times like these that Blake wonders how Jack had done it, but his former employer had almost seemed to *thrive* on the constant stress. While Blake enjoys the prestige his new position has granted him, he wouldn't protest much if the board of directors decided to return him to the vice-presidency... *that* had been the title he'd always coveted. He'd been high enough to oversee everyone else but being one step down from the presidency meant that he didn't have to worry about being ultimately *responsible* for everyone else.

He also wasn't seen as important enough to assassinate.
Me and my shadow.

Chapter Summary

Blake's return to Helios and the Hyperion presidency is less than triumphant, but at least his assassin is giving him some breathing room. Kind of.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blake returns to his office for increasing periods of time until he's finally able to fulfill his duties as Hyperion CEO with no detriment to his health, and the lingering trauma at being hunted like an animal begins to fade into an unpleasant memory...or so he's led to believe. He's busy with the new weapon designs, which have improved by leaps and bounds, and has just given orders to hire a few bounty hunters to track down T.K. Baha's niece when he returns to his office to find that someone has placed a helmet in the middle of his desk. "Sanders, what is that doing there?" he demands.

His assistant leaps into action to remove it. "I'll get this out of your way immediately, Mister Blake."

He spares a glance at it as Sanders trots past him carrying the thing, and reaches out to grasp one of his PA's lapels to halt him. "Wait a moment - let me see that first."

"Of course, Sir."

Blake lifts the helmet from the other man's hands, turning it slowly until he's looking down at the single hole provided for eyesight. There's nothing to suggest that this is the same helmet his shadow - Theodore White - had worn, but then again there doesn't have to be. The fact that it's been dropped on his desk like a gauntlet tossed at his feet is all the confirmation Blake needs. "So it's to be war once again," he says tiredly.

"Sir...?"

"Take it away, and have it tested for any trace DNA," Blake says, already knowing that the scientists won't find anything. "If there's a match, I want to know immediately."

Sanders retrieves the helmet and disappears at a dead run, and Blake sighs as he keys in a request for several security officers to be sent to his office immediately. He shouldn't even bother - one of them is bound to be White in disguise but if that doesn't happen then he'll have to worry about...something else. He'd worry that this entire debacle was going to make him grey before his time if his 'time' weren't the very property in danger.

The troops show up and he makes them remove their helmets as if that will make any difference at all, then tasks them with remaining outside and guarding any possible entrance points. They're out there for less than fifteen minutes before he dismisses them entirely; if White's going to kill him, then he'll be dead as soon as the man gets a move on and finally pulls the trigger. Blake's innate sense of self-preservation is only sporadically trying to gain his attention, as if even it has realized that it doesn't matter anymore. If Jack hadn't already been dead with his body unrecoverable, Blake would bring the man back to life and kill him again for dying in the first place and subsequently leaving him in this mess.
That night he readies himself for bed and double-checks the locks on his doors, thinking of all he's survived thus far. Blake can dimly remember how his shadow had examined his head wound before actually sending him to Helios where he'd been sure to receive medical treatment. He certainly remembers how the man had laughed when Blake had demanded to know his identity. The mere thought of that soft, filtered laugh makes his skin crawl. Blake doesn’t bother wondering what sort of man is cruel enough to play with him this way, because the memory of working under Handsome Jack is still so fresh. No matter what he does Blake is unable to shake off the steady, almost perverse, pursuit. He’s reliving their past encounter as he climbs into his bed, pulling the covers up around his chin and shoving a hand beneath the pillow to touch the comforting cold metal of his repeater pistol.

Tonight, it’s not there.

Blake turns and yanks the pillow up to check beneath it – perhaps it’s moved up by the headboard – but it’s well and truly gone. Cold sweat forms on his brow and his breath comes faster and faster, his heart pounding wildly because something tells him that this is the moment in which his life will finally end.

The lights go out, blanketing the room in darkness so thoroughly that he feels a scream building in his throat. Blake swallows it down with difficulty, his mind racing as he tries to think of what else he could try. Surely it can’t be the end.

Surely not.

Maybe…maybe he still has time to reach for the knives in his bedside table. Blake reaches over and his fingers touch the lamp, turning it on in time for him to see the muzzle of the gun that slowly descends to rest right between his eyes. “Oh,” he breathes.

He closes his eyes in an automatic wince, unable to keep from trembling as he waits for the bullet.

Blake waits…and waits. To his horror, he feels tears burning the back of his eyelids and can’t believe that his emotions have betrayed him like this – the gun is still resting against his skin and he doesn’t really know why he expected anything different from this man. He’s been harried past all endurance so what’s one last little game to draw things out? Anger begins to mix with humiliation, and Blake opens his eyes to glare up at the assassin, tears be damned. “Well? Go on, you bastard! Do it!”

He focuses on the man standing right there at his bedside, taking in the black armor, and Blake abruptly realizes who’s been sent to kill him. Not who, exactly, but…this is a Crimson Lance assassin. He’d thought Athena had culled them all long ago. The gun is lifted away, and they stare at each other for long moments before Blake’s tormentor sighs, the sound distorted through the mask, and turns to leave. “Where do you think you are going? How dare you turn your back on me,” Blake howls, so angry that he jerks the bedside drawer open and digs around for a knife. He’s still on autopilot as he yanks one out and flicks it at the other man’s right kidney in a skillful throw Blake hasn’t had cause to practice for a very, very long time.

The assassin’s frame is abruptly lit by the bright flare of a shield as the knife clatters against it harmlessly, and Blake realizes the magnitude of his mistake as the man stops in his tracks, but then he continues on through the door and disappears in the darkness of the living area. Blake sags back against the headboard weakly, wondering if he’s actually suffering from cardiac arrest or if this has all been a wild hallucination.

Sleep takes him while he’s attempting to stay awake in case his shadow returns, and when Blake opens his eyes he realizes that the man had returned…leaving a data pad on the night stand. He extends a finger and prods at it cautiously, trying to look everywhere at once in case this is an
elaborate ruse to distract him and he’ll be instantly beheaded once he looks down at the screen. It has to be a trick.

Blake waits nervously but finally reaches out to retrieve the handheld computer when nothing seems to be happening. The screen brightens as he touches it, and he finds himself staring down at what looks like a contract. He scans it quickly, picking out the key terms first; it seems to be between the CEO of Corazza (a bankrupt weapons manufacturer based out of Artemis) and an unnamed general under the employ of Atlas.

Interesting. Apparently Blake’s assassination had been ordered in an attempt to level the playing field...shareholders don’t tend to retain confidence in a corporation that can’t keep its Chief Executive Officer alive for more than one year at a time. He’s had his share of trouble deciphering the command structure of the Crimson Lance, and Blake can’t help but wonder if this entire mess couldn’t have been avoided if he’d just taken the time to restructure the Atlas holdings. He stares down at the contract and he’s scrolling to the bottom in order to view the electronically captured signatures when he sees it. On the lines directly below the signatures that verify the contract as active, there’s a paragraph detailing the process in which one could transfer the contract to another party. He can, in essence, buy out his own contract.

Blake gazes down at the transferral clause for a moment, then fumbles for something he can use to sign with. The first pen slides right through his fingers to become lost in the blankets after a wild, fruitless search. The second bounces off onto the floor, but he retains his grip on the third and holds his breath as he signs on the appropriate line. The screen reloads automatically as his signature is accepted, and it blinks once more after the Lance assassin signs from wherever he is. Blake squints at the illegible scrawl that appears beneath his own name, hardly daring to breathe because this means that it’s over. It's finally over.

He uploads several copies of the updated contract onto his private server and prints out several more copies to be secreted away throughout the station and his own suite of rooms. When this flurry of activity dies down, Blake decides that he will celebrate by ordering himself a new suit and having a long shower, safe in the knowledge that he’s now a free man.

Still...why had the assassin waited? According to the initial date on the contract, he had been requested to kill Blake as many as three months ago. There’s no explanation for the terrifying game the man had played with him, and none for the reasoning behind offering Blake purchase of the original contract. Perhaps this is yet another trick. The habit of strict vigilance he’d adopted during his long ordeal is hard to break, especially since this would be the perfect time to strike at him. Blake walks back to his bedroom and lifts the pillow to find that the repeater has been placed back underneath it. He looks to make sure there’s nothing wrong with the clip, but replaces the ammunition anyway and checks his entire apartment for any sign of the assassin; a man that size can’t hide very well in rooms that are as sparsely decorated as Blake’s.

Once he’s reasonably satisfied that he’s alone, Blake goes for the Quick Change station he’d had installed in one of the front rooms. There he chooses a new suit and puts in an order for three others to be tailored to his specifications, then calls his PA to make arrangements for breakfast in the main dining area; his nerves aren’t quite settled enough for him to eat in privacy. Besides, he’s always enjoyed watching the other employees - you could tell a lot about a person by how they ate, if they liked to talk during the meal...even the way they stood up once their leisure time was over. Blake doesn’t have the time to engage in this little hobby of his since he’d been raised to the Presidency.

He takes his private lift to the main concourse and walks slowly into the Hub, gazing around at the different tour groups assembling at various points. The Handsome Jack Experience, indeed, Blake thinks to himself with a snort. His assistant is waiting with a tray, and Blake seats himself while the
younger man bustles about arranging the food and making sure that the napkin is placed just so before backing away to a suitable distance.

Blake eats slowly, taking measured bites of each item on his tray as he gazes about at the variety of human life swarming about the Hub of Heroism on this fine morning. And it is indeed a fine morning, he thinks with a certain amount of satisfaction. Of course, he'll still need to hunt down that blathering jackass at Corazza and have the man killed - not to mention work on discovering which Atlas general authorized the hit to begin with - but today is going to be the most enjoyable day he's had in a very long time. "Sanders, have my appointments pushed back an hour and get the Atlas representative in my office...what was this one's name, again?"

"Creighton, Sir."

"Yes, Creighton. I want him there waiting when I..." Blake trails off, belatedly realizing that the voice answering him hadn't been Sanders. He turns his head enough to catch sight of the dark red jumpsuit and buffed armor, barely reining in the impulse to launch himself out of his chair. "What do you think you're doing here," he says flatly. Is there no way to rid himself of this man?

"Beg pardon, Sir, but I haven't been reassigned."

Blake is well aware of the looks they're getting, and grinds his teeth angrily. "So you thought it appropriate to approach me in public. Wonderfully inconspicuous outfit." He knows he should be a great deal more circumspect, considering the fact that the man he's scolding is more than capable of snuffing out Blake's life with those huge gauntleted hands, but he can't help himself. The humiliation is still too fresh for him to be able to get beyond it, and the desire to get some of his own back is far too strong. "Remove your helmet," Blake orders, turning in his chair to look up at the Atlas assassin.

The helmet in question tilts slightly as the man looks down at him. "No, Sir."

"As CEO of Hyperion and owner of all Atlas holdings, I believe that makes me your superior - does it not?" Blake hisses, openly furious at the blatant insubordination.

"Sir; yes, Sir."

"Then when I order you to take off your helmet-"

The man interrupts. "I am unable to follow that particular order here, Sir."

"If you do not get your ass to my office on the double where you will remain at attention until I arrive, I will make sure you return to Promethea and stay there until you rot - is that understood?"

Blake says softly, turning back around because he will not give this man the satisfaction of another emotional outburst. "March, soldier."

A slight sound filters through the offending helmet, almost as if the man is scoffing at him, but the assassin leaves. Blake holds up an unused spoon so that he can look at the reflective surface to see how well his order is being implemented. The man is certainly not dawdling, but Blake represses the urge to see if he can't beat him there just to have the satisfaction of being first - no, he will finish his meal and then leave.

Blake takes his time finishing up, and then heads for his office with the hapless Sanders trailing behind him. He walks into the mirrored cube, ignoring the Crimson Lance assassin who is standing at attention right in front of his desk. "Get me the revised numbers for that...acquisition, along with the contact details for Corazza Industries; it's a lovely day for a hostile takeover," he says, sitting down and pressing the controls that turn the walls of his office into a two-way mirror. People
watching isn't lucrative only during meal breaks.

He takes a certain pleasure in making the assassin wait while Blake runs through his itinerary for the day, shuffling appointments needlessly until he finally decides its time to face his shadow head-on. His PA leaves hurriedly and Blake pulls out one of the drawers in his desk, checking to make sure his gun is still there before looking up at the man waiting patiently in front of him.

"You've certainly had your fun, haven't you?" he asks quietly, leaning back in his chair. "Something tells me that your little games aren't a contract standard. Remove your helmet."

The assassin raises his hands to unlatch the chinstraps and slowly lifts the helmet off. Blake nearly falls out of his chair in shock, because the man who's made his life miserable for so long is...

Chapter End Notes

Don't you just love cliffhangers!!!
"Doctor Zed?" he blurts out before he can help himself.

The other man looks at him. "Not this time, Mister Blake." Without the filtration mask, he even sounds like Zed - of course he doesn't quite have the same drawl but they really could have been twins. Remarkable. "Colonel Ted Blanco, reporting for duty. Sir."

Ted? Blake frowns in confusion. "I'd heard something about a twin, but I thought you were based in Jakob's Cove."

"That'd be Ned, Sir."

"Good God, how many of you are there?"

"Just the three of us, Mister President."

_Not anymore_, Blake thinks. "Given the events of Fyrestone-" he stops abruptly, looking into the other man's face because something very obvious has just occurred to him. Ted's eyes, trained on a spot beside Blake's left ear, flick over to his and away again. The corners of his mouth twitch, and Blake's anger flares once more. "Unbelievable," he breathes. He entertains a brief fantasy concerning Blanco, the moonshot cannon, and a cargo container full of rocks. "What is wrong with you?"

"Well, Sir-"

"Close your mouth; that question was rhetorical," Blake says furiously. How many times has he been fooled so completely by this infuriating man? Granted, not a soul alive would expect to be hoodwinked by one third of a set of identical triplets - why, the very idea is beyond ridiculous! "Which of your generals signed off on that contract?"

Ted Blanco clears his throat. "May I open my mouth now, Sir?"

Heaven help him, he’s been saddled with another sadistic, homicidal smartass. Blake presses the tips of his fingers to his temples, struggling to take deep breaths so that he stays calm in the face of adversity. "Just answer the question."

"That’s…what they call a long story, Sir?"

"Then shorten it," Blake howls. _Theodore White, indeed_.

"Very well, Sir." Blanco tucks his helmet beneath his arm and focuses on a patch of wall just above Blake's head before beginning the shortened version. It seems that the kill order had gone through more than two years prior, intended for Jack, but bureaucracy had intervened. Someone named 'Admiral Mikey' had originally signed off on the paperwork by sending the order, along with an opened package of crackers and a rubber duck, to the creatively-named Assassination Division but the admiral's untimely death caused such an upheaval that it was decided that all open orders would
be suspended, pending a thorough review that never happened. As a result, the contract had been shelved until an enterprising general had forged Alphonso Knox's signature in order to extract payment from the rapidly diminishing coffers of Corazza. From there, it had been marked urgent and sent to Colonel Blanco who, apparently, had been steadily working through a backlog of other contracts.

Blake steeples his hands on the desk in front of him. "What possible excuse do you have for targeting me if the contract had originally been drawn up concerning Jack?"

"It didn't specifically state names, simply that I was to permanently remove the Hyperion CEO from office. You were in office, Sir."

He makes a mental note to reread the copies of the contract, just in case Blanco decides to alter the original. He also makes a note to have the medical staff verify the colonel's identity, and speaking of that... "Are you truly a colonel, or is that yet another of your fabrications?"

Blake is met with an incredulous look, as if he should really know better than to ask something as gauche as that. "Yes, Sir."

He calls up the Atlas files and searches them for any mention of Ted Blanco, but everything seems to have been redacted - the only thing Blake can find is his secondary designation as a medical doctor. A search for 'Theodore White' reveals a truly impressive kill count on par with the Enforcer whom Jack had hired, Wilhelm. There's a few disciplinary notes having to do with use of excessive force and one concerning fraternization within the ranks, of all things, and Blake skims over that before coming back to the official reprimands over excessive force. It seems that nearly all of the cases involve some degree of insubordination, and assault of a superior officer - while it's good to know that Blanco doesn't beat up his subordinates just because he can, it's worrisome to actually be this man's superior with a track record like this. Blake wonders why someone with such a disdain for authority had joined the Crimson Lance to begin with.

"You seem to have quite the file. Or records, as the case may be...how about telling me why your service record is split?" Blake would also very much like to know how he can get access to the full record and why, as interim chief of operations for Atlas, he doesn't already have it. He decides to wait before revealing the depths of his ignorance.

Blanco continues his staring contest with the wall behind Blake's head. "Plausible deniability, Sir."

"Deniability... of what?"

"I serve three separate purposes, Mister Blake, and as such am overseen by three separate command branches. If I am contracted to terminate a target and my identity is compromised in any way, the general in charge of the medical staff is able to claim that he has no knowledge of Doctor Ted Blanco being anywhere but the medical complex. Likewise, the general overseeing battalion placement can rightfully say that Colonel Ted Blanco doesn't accept any kill orders."

"And Theodore White...?"

"That name was only put into use after the other Lance Assassins were...deactivated by a former, ah, co-worker."

He obviously means Athena. Blake makes another note to find out just how many members of the Assassination Division remain, and if the squadron was really named that. "This means that your name and statistics were retroactively added to the Atlas database. To what name did you answer before the Gladiator's little tantrum?"
Blanco looks him right in the eye, as Blake had intended when downplaying the extent of Athena's vengeance. "Ares."

"I'm sure you mean Ares, sir."

The big man stares at him for several long seconds before opening his mouth again. "Permission to speak freely? Sir?"

Blake leans back in his chair and seriously considers denying the request just because he can. "Very well, Colonel. Let's hear it."

"You're talkin' real big for someone who was cryin' like a baby not too long ago," Blanco says, and suddenly Blake has the feeling like Doctor Zed really is standing in front of him dressed in borrowed armor. "If I was you, I'd prob'ly wanna be watchin' my mouth right about now."

While he'd been thinking along those very same lines, hearing it actually spoken aloud makes Blake embarrassed and angry. "How dare you!"

"Best keep that in mind...but you were already thinkin' of that, I'll bet, which is why you're gettin' so mad about it right now. Ain't that right, Mister CEO?" he goads.

Blake clenches his fingers into white-knuckled fists. "Enough."

"Yes, Sir," Blanco says, all traces of the Pandoran accent dropping from his voice as he shifts back to attention. Blake stares at him, feeling frustrated because he badly wants to punish the man yet knows that the attempt could place his life into jeopardy once again. It's also baffling how the colonel can speak so respectfully but twist the honorific so that respect is the last thing Blake hears...because he can literally hear the jeering capitalization.

This is probably the reason why he has so many citations in his file. As for the other...Blake knows he shouldn't ask, but it's like a child poking a dangerous, half-trained animal with a stick just to see what will happen. "Your record shows a reprimand for fraternization within the ranks, Colonel. Would you care to explain that?"

Blanco stiffens just enough for Blake to realize that his 'stick' has just prodded a sore spot. "No, Sir."

"Whyever not?" He finds himself asking.

The other man looks at him with eyes full of a coldness that makes Blake feel like scooting backwards. "Because it's none of your business."

He doesn't insist upon the 'sir' this time. "Very well; you are dismissed." To his surprise, Ted Blanco circles around the desk and stations himself just behind the left side of Blake's chair instead of leaving. "What do you think you are doing?"

"I'm fulfilling the terms of my contract, Sir, since I have not been reassigned." Halfway through this sentence, his voice changes to reflect the fact that he's put the helmet back on. Blake's not keen on having a trained killer looming over him, but there doesn't seem to be too much that he can do about it...but perhaps there is some way to salvage the shreds of his dignity. As much as he hates having his shadow truly become his shadow, it would be a step towards regaining control of the situation if the man were reassigned to be a shadow. He hasn't heard many stories about an assassin becoming the bodyguard to their mark, but Blake has the opportunity to make one now.

Blanco's only reaction to his reassignment is a slight sigh, which is beyond disappointing, but Blake will take his victories as they come. He goes about his day being trailed by the Atlas soldier and
makes a point to take the scenic route whenever possible so that all eyes are on him, taking note of
the man who remains a half-step behind him. When he's stepping onto his private lift and the colonel
is still behind him, Blake watches him remove his helmet without being told to and tucking it beneath
his arm. "Your presence is no longer required, Colonel."

"Sorry, Sir, but as your personal guard I cannot allow you into quarters I have not yet scouted."

He sighs. "Very well."

Blake is forced to wait in the lift while Blanco disappears into the executive suite, using the time to
think of how to best outfit his newest employee - he's not quite ready to have the man hovering over
him dressed in Hyperion yellow, and the standard Crimson Lance armor doesn't quite fit in. It's not a
bad idea to make sure everyone realizes that Blake is fully utilizing their Atlas resources, because the
Crimson Lance has largely been forgotten since being driven off Pandora. He's definitely put them
out of his thoughts, to his detriment, but it's one mistake he has no intention of repeating. Simply
running Hyperion with all its branches takes most of his time - what had Jack been using the Lance
for?

The other man returns to allow him entrance into his own apartments, holding three eavesdropping
devices that he hands over calmly. "If that's all, Sir."

You are dismissed," Blake says absently, looking down at the devices. "Ah, Colonel Blanco..."

He's passed another device, which resembles a button that might have come from an article of
clothing. "I can be recalled immediately with this, Sir."

"Yes. That will be all."

"Yes, Sir." Blanco is turning to leave when Blake clears his throat, making him pause and turn back.
"Sir?"

Blake gazes at him speculatively. "In the morning, I wish to see you dressed in your Lance Assassin
attire." Blanco's eyebrows lift slightly, making him feel unaccountably embarrassed. "It is a more
impressive uniform," he tries to explain. "Dismissed, Colonel."

Another sly "Yes, Sir" is delivered as the colonel heads out the door, and Blake is left to wonder just
why he couldn't have phrased that better. He wanders into his bedroom so that he can change into his
pajamas, only to find that his bed has been turned down - complete with an artfully fluffed pillow
and...a pack of tissues. Blake feels another headache beginning and fights the urge to call the man
back for a dressing down, because it would simply be a flirtation with death and he's had quite
enough of that experience. He picks up the tissues and hurls them across the room, feeling better
when they ricochet into the waste bin. His gun is still tucked beneath the pillow, and Blake fits a
brand new clip of ammunition inside it...just in case.

He gets into his bed and stares up at the ceiling for a while, because his change in circumstance isn't
one he'd ever expected to have since the day his new bodyguard began harassing him. Blake finally
decides to stay up for a while longer and swings his legs over the side of the bed, fitting his bare feet
into his slippers. Out in the main living area, he finds Colonel Blanco sitting cross-legged on the floor
inspecting his weapons - they're laid out neatly from smallest (a grenade mod) to largest, a massive
Tediore rocket launcher that looks like at least two men are needed to lift it. The assassin goes from
sitting to standing at parade rest in a fluid motion that makes Blake's own knees ache in sympathy.
"As you were, Colonel."

Blanco crosses his ankles and sinks back down onto the floor gracefully. "Trouble sleeping, Sir?"
"Must you say it that way?" Blake counters, walking over in front of the other man. "Is that vintage Atlas?"

"The SMG, or me, Sir? Which 'way' would you prefer I say...I'm afraid I'm not sure what word you mean, Mister President."

Blake sniffs irritably. "I find the word 'sir' to be insubordinate to a severe degree...and of course, I was referring to the SMG! Why would I ask you if you were vintage!"

"You think my use of the proper honorific is insubordinate, Sir? I don't understand - I can hardly call you by your given name, Sir."

"There you go again with your sirs," Blake mutters with ill grace as the other man looks up at him and pretends not to know how irritating he is. "'Mister Blake' will do just fine."

"Yes Sir, Mister Blake, Sir." Blanco returns his attention to the assault rifle in his lap, wiping down the barrel with a soft cloth. "I should inform you that I intend to kill your personal assistant in the morning, so I hope you're not too attached to him."

Blake, caught in the act of sitting down in his favorite chair, stops in surprise so that his ass is left hovering an inch above the seat. "Sanders? Why would you want to kill him?"

"The Loaders and that Constructor didn't send themselves...Mister Blake." He'd attributed that debacle to Blanco himself, and the man smiles slightly as he shakes his head. "No."

He'd never believed the twerp would have it in him, Blake thinks. "I want you to leave now and kill him immediately," he says calmly.

"Sanders was disposed of in the incinerator hours ago, actually," Blanco replies, bending his head over the weapon. At this angle, the light from the ceiling catches the white streak at his left temple and illuminates the assassin's head with an unlikely halo. "I needed to make sure you'd want him dead before I told you."

Blake barely catches his exasperated sigh in time. "What would you have done if I hadn't condoned it?"

"Tweaked the outgoing moonshot logs so that it looked as if he fired himself down to Pandora in a towncar, then reminded you that your lack of foresight led to his escape," Blanco says promptly.

"The incinerator," Blake muses. "He wasn't alive when you threw him in?"

Colonel Blanco looks up at him again. "Have you ever heard the sound a person makes when they're burning alive?"

"No, but it seems as if you have."

"Many times. It's not something I enjoy listening to." He explains about Promethea and its poisonous atmosphere which, combined with unstable gas vents, can cause unsuspecting individuals to burst into flames with the merest spark. "Even the zippers on our suits will do it if conditions are right. Once it got one of the generals when he went out to relieve himself instead of finding a latrine."

Blake shudders. "Horrifying."

"Not really - he had it coming to him."
"Well, on that pleasant note...I'll bid you good night," Blake says, standing up.

The assassin reaches for his scoped rifle next. "Goodnight, Sir."
Each one, teach one.

Chapter Summary

Blake is having a little trouble adjusting to the new 'normal' and Ted's not inclined to make it any easier for him.

Chapter Notes

While I sincerely doubt that anyone is waiting for updates with bated breath, I am sorry to have taken so long... my word processing program quit on me and erased the entire file, so I was forced to piece it back together and try to remember what I had already written. Good times.

In the morning, Blake nearly calls for Sanders to attend him before remembering. He sighs irritably and sends a message for Saul Henderson to select a suitable replacement. Hopefully the man won't be too busy playing a round of that ridiculous Finger Gun game and making extravagant promises to his latest protege to be able to fulfill his actual duties as Vice President.

He keys in his preference at the Quick Change before having a shower. Blake sighs again and wonders where he should go for breakfast, since he doesn't like to visit the same place twice in a row. He finishes washing himself and turns off the water before reaching for a clean towel - it's handed to him before Blake realizes that his shadow is standing right there in full body armor while he's nude and shivering like a shaved skag. "Do you mind?" he says testily. "No one is attempting to murder me in the shower!"

"Yes, Sir." Blanco's helmet tilts to give him a once-over before he leaves.

Blake feels embarrassment heat his cheeks at this latest insult. Really, the man is unbelievable! He storms out to get dressed and Blanco is there, too, holding his suit for him. "What is wrong with you?" he demands. "I have had just about enough, you insolent...Pandoran."

"...Sir?"

"Stop calling me that," Blake says, glaring up at the gleaming black and red helmet. "Do you get some sort of charge out of behaving this atrociously?"

Blanco shifts his grip on the suit so that he can remove his helmet. To his credit, he looks genuinely surprised. "I don't understand...Mister Blake. I was simply attempting to serve in my capacity as bodyguard."

Since when does a bodyguard dress their employer? Blake's eyes narrow as the other man relays the information that, within the Atlas Corporation, they certainly do. "The Atlas Corporation is under Hyperion's umbrella, and you'd do well to remember that fact," he says.

The assassin's expression shifts into wry amusement. "Remembrance goes both ways, Mister Blake."
Blake sighs. "I do not have time for this at the moment, but we shall address it later."

"Yes, Sir." The helmet is replaced, and his suit held out towards him once more. "Your suit, Sir."

He takes it, and Blanco stations himself beside the door while he dresses himself hurriedly. "You will need to accompany me to breakfast since Sanders is no longer with us."

"Of course, Mister Blake."

He walks into the living area, intending to take his ECHO pad on the way out, and stops in surprise at seeing the food that's been neatly arranged on a tray. "What is this?"

"Food, Sir."

"I know that, but why is it here?"

Blanco's put-upon sigh filters through the helmet. "It's much safer for you to eat in your own quarters, Mister Blake."

"I'm going to assume that you had this food tested for toxins."

"That would be a safe assumption. Sir."

The disdainful capitalization seems to occur whenever Blake has said something especially stupid, but it also happens when the assassin simply feels like it. Still, he'll gladly take disdain over the sadistic attempts upon his life. He sits down to eat while Blanco stations himself behind the chair at parade rest. "I don't suppose you can tell me anything about the day's itinerary," Blake says regretfully, spearing a piece of fruit on his fork.

"Uriens from R&D will be in first to complain that his funding's been cut in half, and will try to convince you to cut Spara's funding in order to restore his. Next, there are roughly twenty settlements to sign off on having to do with Loader malfunctions. After that is the meeting with the contractors upgrading the New-U stations," Blanco says.

"Good god - you actually know it?"

"Mind like a steel trap, Sir."

"I'm sure," Blake mumbles. "You're very modest, as well."

The assassin clears his throat. "With all due respect, Mister Blake, modesty doesn't get the job done. I get the job done."

"Very well, then. Any comments regarding the Uriens-Spara situation?"

"Uriens pirates his research from a contact at Dahl, sharing classified information regarding Hyperion sales contracts in return. His funding isn't the only thing that should be cut in half, Sir, but the info leak could be exploited."

Blake takes a drink of his tea, tilting his head thoughtfully. "I see. And Spara?"

"Anyone who creates a human/tork brain in a blender, then uses it as a guidance system for a rocket which flies directly to demolish her house...well, that's just funny. She's a keeper, Sir."

"We'll see about that. What about after the contractors?"
"Combat training, and then lunch."

He sighs and places his teacup back on the tray. "Why must you be so...I cannot think of the proper word right now, but I'm sure it will come to me. We have barely been acquainted two days and already I begin to long for the times you held my life in your hands."

His shadow laughs. "What makes you believe that I don't?"

Blake makes no response to this and keeps eating, making a mental note to discover which terminal Uriens has been using for his treasonous activities. It wouldn't take much to arrange for some false reports to be sent to Dahl, and they'd continue to reap the benefits of the incoming research. "Irrepressible. That's the word."

"Yes, Sir."

He's trailed all the way to his office, where Blanco stations himself behind the chair once more and doesn't move for at least two hours. Uriens is sent away with a steeper funding cut, simply for daring to disturb him - at least, that's the reasoning Blake uses...because it's really to encourage the man to start feeding the first of the false information. Saul Henderson wanders in from whatever he's been doing, and Blake relays his need for a new assistant. He's heard the rumors about the kitten-fighting ring, but has never cared enough about the personal lives of anyone else on Helios enough to actually find out the truth of the matter; for all he knows, it's yet another story Jack had concocted after snorting dried Spore.

Henderson keeps eyeing Blake's shadow nervously, and well he might - the man is certainly imposing enough to strike fear into the hearts of Hyperion underlings. When Henderson finally gets up enough courage to comment on the fact that there is an Omega Assassin standing directly behind him, Blake suppresses a smile. "Ah, yes. You've noticed Ares, have you? Well, he's been around before...you've no doubt looked him in the eye on more than one occasion."

"Of...of course, Mister Blake. Will we be expecting anyone else from Promethea?"

"Why ever would we do that?"

Henderson clears his throat uncomfortably. "Sorry, sir, it's just that...Jack had frozen the assets of the highest members of the Crimson Lance command. I didn't realize that the situation had been reversed. Would you like me to send in the likeliest candidate?"

No, I want you to send the least qualified, Blake thinks to himself. Imbecile. "There is no point in having a military asset, Henderson, if you do not use it. Send in your choice after I return from lunch; that will be all." He waits for the doors to close behind his Vice President before tapping his fingers on the side of his desk. "So."

"Yes, Sir."

"I think you had better tell me exactly what's been happening on Promethea, and...wherever else Atlas soldiers have been stationed," Blake says. "There are other planets, are there not?"

Blanco shifts just enough for Blake to hear it. "There are, Sir..."

He turns his chair and looks up at the assassin. "Take the helmet off, Colonel, and speak freely."

"Well, Sir," Blanco says, tucking the helmet beneath an arm, "The whole damn thing's so fucked, I ain't sure who knows which way is up. Supplies like medicine an' food's been scarce ever since the shares dropped right before Atlas was sold. We ain't been paid for at least a year, fuel's not comin' in
with anything close to dependability...half the troops've gone AWOL. Most of us can't get offworld, so there's fighting within the ranks and a lottery for available spaces on passin' transport ships."

Blake leans back slightly, wondering at the fact that the other man's drawl has miraculously returned. "You mentioned that remembrance goes both ways, earlier."

"Hyperion don't give a good god damn about us, 'cept when we get that tech out to ya," Blanco says bitterly. "Jack held our contracts for hostage, and now nobody else cares we've been trapped on a planet that makes Pandora look like the good life. You can talk to all the damned Atlas representatives you want, but they only represent the scientists."

Blake sighs and rubs at the crease between his furrowed eyebrows. "I was only ever supposed to be Vice President."

"Poor you."

The colonel begins to put his helmet back on, still looking angry, but Blake stops him. "If you want a military representative, then coordinate with the scientific representative and choose one. Perhaps Doctor Blanco might accept the appointment."

They stare at each other for a few seconds, then Blanco lifts his chin slightly. "Maybe."

"I don't suppose this concession will inspire you to cancel training."

"Nooo."

Blake sighs again and turns his chair back around. "It was worth a try." He finishes signing off on the settlements, and works out the timetable for the New-U upgrades before Blanco clears his throat to remind him of his next 'appointment.' "I can't possibly be expected to do any sort of exercise in this suit," he tries.

"I've thought of that, Sir, and have scheduled a five minute interval for an outfit change."

"Why do you do that?" Blake asks as he's herded towards one of the conference rooms.

"Sir?"

"The accent. One moment you sound just like...."

Blanco's helmet turns to face him, and Blake assumes he's being stared at though of course he can't be sure. "Just in here, Sir. If you don't mind."

The conference room has been retrofitted with padded walls and mats on the floors. There's no sign of the huge table that usually graces rooms like these, and it seems as though the colonel has removed all of the closed-circuit monitoring systems. "I must admit that I do not see the use of combat training. It would have done me no good when you were shadowing my every move."

"That's because it was me. If I'd wanted you dead immediately, you wouldn't be here right now," the other man says, sealing the doors and placing an anti-eavesdropping device in front of them. "Not all your enemies will stand still long enough for you to bury a knife in their backs. Sir."

"One does what one has the opportunity to do," Blake returns calmly, taking a moment to relive the memory of his ascension to Senior Vice President of Mercenary Relations and Tourism. Good old Dimsdale. "However, since I was fully exonerated, the point is moot and surely you can't expect me to wear that."
Blanco looks down at the bright yellow singlet in his hands. "Fashion isn't important, Sir. A decent knowledge of self defense techniques, on the other hand, is."

He begs to differ, but snatches the offending article of clothing and starts to undress anyway. "Surely there is time for you to find something else. Armor, perhaps."

"Why, Sir, it almost sounds like you were expecting me to bring you Lance Assassin armor...but surely that's not the case," Blanco says. "That wasn't what you meant, was it, Sir?"

Blake grits his teeth. "Of course not."

"That's a relief, Sir." He removes his helmet once more and tosses it into a corner, waiting while Blake scrambles into the tight singlet that leaves more flesh exposed than covered. "Those socks are really something."

"I suppose you're about to tell me how much you like them," Blake snaps, feeling irritated with himself for losing his temper once again. What is it about Ted Blanco that unbalances him so greatly?

The assassin smiles slightly. "Ain't never seen nothin' like 'em, that's for sure. C'mon, now - how much hand-to-hand you've been through?" Blake admits that his experience isn't much at all. "That's fine - we all gotta start somewhere, Mister Blake."

Their first 'class' is dedicated to testing Blake on his strengths and weaknesses where physicality is concerned, and he tries to hide his relief when his new teacher decides that it's finally time for lunch. Instead of his usual fare, however, Blake is presented with a huge tumbler full of something that probably tastes as boring as it looks. "Why are you doing this to me?" he complains. "And what the devil is this?"

"It's a protein solution," Blanco says, as if that should have been immediately obvious. "Meanin' no offense, Sir, but you're built like a bundle of goddamned sticks."

"'No offense'? How could I possibly take no offense to that?" Blake demands. "It's a wonder Atlas command never demoted you back to Private!"

"You know? They tried, Sir, but one of the generals had a change a'heart."

"Really. I suppose your powers of persuasion were not to be denied," he huffs, glaring down at his 'lunch.'

Blanco offers him a straw. "Nope. I mean that he really had a change of heart. His got ripped out an' replaced with a live grenade - he looked real surprised just before it exploded." He smiles slightly and shakes his head, as if reliving a cherished memory. "That sure was somethin'."

"It certainly sounds it," Blake says cautiously, declining the straw and tasting the terrible-looking concoction. "This is awful, by the way."

"Good health and halfway decent musculature come at a price, Sir."

He forces the rest of the 'protein solution' down and returns to his presidential duties, thankless as they are, still closely shadowed by the assassin who has lapsed into silence once more. This is a mixed blessing because, while Blake enjoys the reprieve from the irreverent backtalk and bottomless well of sass, he knows the man will eventually open his mouth again.

Chapter Summary

Doctor Ted makes his official Helios debut, to Blake's chagrin...how do you plot the murder of an alter ego?

In the morning, his new personal assistant delivers breakfast to his quarters and goes over the day's itinerary. It unfortunately still includes an exercise interval right before lunch. Blake flicks a hair from his lapels and glances around for Colonel Blanco, whose absence is slightly puzzling until he asks the fresh meat about it. "What was your name again?"

His PA looks up from the ECHO pad in her hands. "Paxson, sir."

"Go back over the schedule - which Atlas representative did you say will be arriving today?"

Paxson searches for the notation. "A medical doctor, sir. Colonel Ted Blanco from Promethea...military protocol states that any civilian designation is always secondary, unless the officer in question is retired from service." An answer to a question he never asked, but informative nonetheless. "He contacted me this morning and said that he was assuming your medical care, effective upon his arrival."

Clever, Blake thinks to himself. “Where is the Lance Assassin that was here yesterday?” he asks idly, as if not caring about the answer.

“Your guard detail is waiting just outside, Mister Blake.”

Blake walks out to find two Crimson Lance soldiers flanking the door who, upon questioning, tell him that 'the colonel' had assigned them to their post. He immediately has them remove their helmets and submit to a retinal scan, which Paxson administers. "I want to know who they are, how they got here, and how long they've been here," Blake murmurs. His new PA nods and lifts a hand to her ECHO-enabled glasses, scrolling through files as they walk into the Hub. Blanco's absence grates until he forces himself to examine why it should...even before he'd known the man's name, Ted Blanco has been a constant presence in his life for the past five months - perhaps longer. Well, he'll return to make Blake's life miserable soon enough.

There's no point in sentimentality, especially when it's becoming increasingly clear that Blanco will have to be the one sent after the Corazza CEO. It rather defeats the purpose of secrecy if he were to bring in someone else who will have to be made aware of the situation...why not return their hired assassin? It's the last thing they would expect, and the colonel already knows his target's location.

Blake draws up the 'paperwork' and shifts a few items from his agenda off onto Henderson's, not even feeling slightly guilty about it. The less time that man has to advance his own handpicked bootlickers, the better...Blake knows quite well that Henderson has been busy arranging for a new Senior Vice President of Securities Propaganda, but his labors might bear an entirely different harvest than what he’s expecting. Either way, it'll be interesting to watch.

He’s nearly forgotten about his upcoming appointment when his assistant announces that Creighton and Blanco have arrived. “President Blake, I would like to introduce you to Doctor Ted Blanco.
He’s just arrived from Promethea,” the idiot says as soon as the two men walk into Blake’s office; the two soldiers snap to immediate attention. “I’m told that he’ll be taking over your medical care.”

“Colonel,” Blake greets his shadow carefully, trying not to stare because of how utterly different Blanco looks. He’s wearing what seems to be the Atlas military’s dress uniform; an elegantly cut black outfit livened only by the dark red piping at the seams. It’s devoid of any of the medals that Blake knows that Blanco is fully entitled to wear, and it seems as if the only hint of his rank lies in the matching black enamel pins on the mandarin collar. Blake is well aware of the fact that he’s staring and drags his eyes away, telling himself that he was simply admiring the tailoring.

Blanco smiles pleasantly. “Oh, you can just call me Doctor when I’m at home…this sure is some fancy office ya got here, Mister Blake. If you got some time, we’ll need to get your physical done so’s we got us a baseline – I’ll be takin’ over your med care, strength trainin’, and your diet.” The tone is sweetness itself, but Blanco’s eyes are delivering a challenge at odds with the ‘aw shucks’ route the man has chosen. “An’ by that, I mean if I gotta sit on ya to get you to eat somethin’ more’n sawdust…” He laughs and claps an appalled Creighton on the back. “Ain’t he skinny as hell? Never seen nothin’ like it. Well, won’t take long ‘fore we’ll get you eatin’ like a Psycho let loose in a children’s hospital.”

“President Blake, if there’s nothing else-” Creighton is desperate to leave and though Blake would love to join him, he gives the other Atlas representative permission to leave.

“The particulars of my diet will remain in the purview of the fabled Me, Myself, and I. Doctor.”

“Sir, a newborn baby could knock you over just by burpin’ too loudly.” Blanco takes a moment to absorb Blake’s facial contortions (he can’t see himself but he’s sure they’re sufficiently conveying his outrage) before finally looking at the two Lancemen behind Blake’s chair. “At ease, boys, ain’t no need for that when I got this uniform on.”

Blake gazes into the twinkling eyes of the bane of his days. “You may wait outside the door – I wish to speak with your superior officer alone.” They don’t move a muscle until Blanco nods slightly, and then they acknowledge their dismissal. Blake waits until they leave before addressing this. “I will not allow you to undermine my authority-”

“You got authority just as long’s I decide you still have it,” Blanco cuts him off. “Let’s get that straight right the hell now, Sticks.”

“You are playing with fire, Colonel Blanco.”

“Really, now? Looks like the only one who’s got somethin’ to be afraid of here is you. Ain’t that right, Sticks? You’re lookin’ like you might start cryin’ and I don’t got a hanky on me right now, so maybe we can call your new assistant.”

“Don’t call me that,” Blake snarls, slamming his hands down on the desk and pushing himself to his feet.

Blanco’s eyes narrow in calculation. “Ooh, you’re gettin’ real mad, ain’tcha? You wanna shut my mouth for me, huh, Sticks? You think you wanna take a swing?” Blake’s rounding the desk, and to hell with the consequences, when the other man laughs and checks his ECHO. “Well, it’s about that time anyway so let’s put all that righteous anger to good use.” He reaches into his uniform jacket and pulls out the ridiculous yellow singlet, tossing it at Blake.

Blake closes his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose. “Are you telling me that you were intentionally angering me so that I would agree to physical training without immediate complaint?”
“Hey, whatever gets ya there – you really wanna punch me in the face though, right?”

“Oh, absolutely.”

“Then let’s go an’ see if you can do it.” That sly grin widens. “Sticks.”

They adjourn to the makeshift training area, where Blake is knocked on his ass repeatedly. Blanco provides enough taunts to fuel Blake’s desire to smash his fist into that smug face but he’s unable to make his new dream a reality. When ‘time’ is called and Blanco starts to drop his guard, however, the temptation is simply too much to resist – Blake takes a swing. His knuckles hit Blanco’s jaw and he immediately regrets it, because it hurts. “Feel better?” Blanco asks, completely unsurprised about the whole thing.

Blake cradles his injured hand against his chest, wincing. “Not really. You’re very hard.” As soon as the words are out of his mouth, he realizes what he’s just said.

“Heh. You ain’t seen nothin’ yet, Sticks. Let’s see that hand.”

Blake extends it and Blanco takes it, examining his fingers gently. “I don’t suppose you have an Anshin needle about your person.”

Pale green eyes study him. “Oh, I got a needle. You ain’t gettin’ it, though, so cool your jets.” When Blake opens his mouth to protest, Blanco presses down on his sore fingers to shut him up. “You gotta learn to handle the pain yourself – ain’t always gonna be conveniently placed vendin’ machines or New-U stations around when you need ‘em.”

“I did just fine when you were chasing me,” Blake points out, lifting his other hand to wipe away the perspiration stinging his eyes. It hardly seems fair that he’s practically dissolved into a sweaty mess while the colonel, still dressed in that impeccably tailored uniform, looks calm and collected.

“Did you really? Or d’you think I maybe let you get away with a lot more’n I should?” Blanco’s thumb strokes along his fingers in a strange sort of caress, and Blake clears his throat before pulling his hand back. “Hope you’re ready for lunch; I had ‘em make your favorite.”

After a quick shower and change of clothes, his ‘favorite’ turns out to be another protein solution. Blanco flirts outrageously with Blake’s PA, who pretends not to pay attention, but her pink cheeks give her away. Blake listens with an increasing sense of disquiet, not least because he doesn’t really understand why he should be upset in the first place. The man has to establish his ‘separate’ identity as Blake’s personal physician, and the comments aren’t directed towards Blake at all. Perhaps that’s why he feels so strangely about it, Blake thinks. He’s had Ted Blanco’s…personality…fully directed towards him for so long, he simply doesn’t know how to properly feel relief that someone else has been caught in the colonel’s crosshairs.

Yes, that must be it.

“So, Miss Paxson…what is a bright young thing like yourself doin’ as a personal assistant? Seems like you should be the CEO here – oh, no offense, Mister Blake – what with your obvious intelligence an’ all.”

Paxson’s cheeks are practically glowing. “Sir, should I rearrange your afternoon schedule? The bounty hunters you asked for have not yet arrived.”

“Bounty hunters? Now, that sounds pretty awesome… I wanted to be a bounty hunter when I was a kid,” Blanco says with an exaggerated sigh. “What kinda bounty’re they after?”
She looks over at Blake helplessly and he looks right back at her before diverting his gaze back to his ‘lunch,’ leaving her to deal with Blanco by herself. “They’ve been paid to hunt down every incorrigible old flirt on Helios. I’d watch your back if I were you, Doctor.”

Blanco laughs, and Blake sighs irritably because the man will undoubtedly take her comment as encouragement. He finally intervenes. “Cancel the appointment entirely. My new Omega Assassin will take care of the problem.”

“Of course, Mister President. Right away,” she says, tucking her ECHO pad against her chest and hurrying off.

Blanco, damn him, turns to watch her leave. “She’s a lot better lookin’ than Sanders, I’ll tell you that right now. Nicer legs.”

“You’ll keep your eyes - and everything else – off of my PA,” Blake snaps. “That’s not what she’s here for.”

Blanco laughs. “Sure she ain’t. Anyway, what’s all this about a problem?”

“Since you are here in your capacity as a medical doctor…that information is need-to-know. When you’ve decided to reappear as Ares, that is when you shall need to know,” he says coolly.

“Looks like you got yourself an attitude today, Sir.”

Blake gives him a sour look. “If I do, then I wonder why.” He glances behind their table at the patiently waiting soldiers. “How many have you sent for, thus far?”

Blanco looks back, too, and apparently something in his expression cues them to approach because they move up behind Blake’s chair. “My battalion’s on the way. They’ll vet the Hyperion forces and take out the trash. You got an awful lot of that trash, Mister Blake, an’ you’d best believe we’re gonna clean house.” He leans back. “Half of the med staff’s on the take, and I’m thinkin’ that Autohn could use some fresh air.”

“Let me guess; he’s involved in some sort of espionage for Iwan Vladof.”

“No,” Colonel Blanco says, “I just don’t like him.”

Blake reminds him that jettisoning the medical staff from an airlock will probably not be the best idea, given that he’s supposed to be establishing himself as someone to be trusted. The other man smiles and Blake again feels that flash of…something he can’t quite identify, like a thumb brushed over sore skin, before he turns away in confusion.

Blake stares down at his reddened, swollen fingers after Blanco leaves. He’s been browbeaten into a comprehensive physical examination, though it won’t actually be conducted until the following day, and subjected to several more cleverly worded insults. Most of them had likely been for the benefit of the other two Crimson Lance, who must have been tickled to death upon witnessing their commander in top form.

Blake is shadowed faithfully until he alerts Paxson that he’s retiring for the night, and doesn’t realize right away that his escort of two has now become three. “Sir,” Blanco says into his left ear, making Blake recoil in surprise, “Please remain in the lift while I scout your quarters.”

“What the- how long have you been there?” Blake demands, pressing a hand over his heart. “Your new role is to preserve my life, not end it by suddenly popping up out of nowhere.”
“Noted.” Blanco jerks his head towards the door, and one of the soldiers heads in first. “Watch him.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once again, Blake has to cool his heels in the lift while his bodyguards do a sweep of his rooms. He briefly considers attempting conversation with the remaining guard, but decides against it when the other two men return. Blanco displays the new eavesdropping devices they’ve found before handing them off to one of the soldiers. “Destroy them once you’ve finished.” They salute in unison. “That’ll be all, boys.”

“Yessir. Have a good night, Colonel,” one of them says.

“Mm.” Blanco tugs his helmet off and runs a gauntleted hand through his short-cropped hair. He casts a look over at Blake, then lifts his chin slightly to reaffirm the dismissal. “Again: what’s goin’ on with the problem you was talkin’ ‘bout earlier?”

“Problem?” Blake echoes, puzzled until he’s reminded of it in more detail. “Oh, that. I’ll need you to take care of the Corazza situation, if you can detach yourself from Helios for a few days.”

“A few days’? Try a week, an’ even that’s cuttin’ it close…you eat, yet?”

Blake shakes his head. “No, I find that it’s unnecessary for me to have an evening meal.”

“Well, no wonder you’re so dang skinny. Guess it saves on the bill when you don’t need coolin’, though…still, you need t’eat somethin’,” Blanco says, looking him up and down. “I know you’re hungry as hell, so don’t even play.”

He refuses to admit that his stomach has been growling, but that could simply be a natural result of those revolting protein concoctions forced upon him. “I feel perfectly fine.”

Blanco studies him carefully, then shrugs. “Eh, it’s all the same to me. You need anything fore you hit the sack?”

Like what? Blake stares back at him, but the physician-assassin’s face is inscrutable. “No,” he says slowly, “I do not believe so.”

“A’ight, then. Long as you still got that button, you know how to find me.”

“Of course. Thank you, Colonel.”

“Just one of the services I provide,” he’s told cheerfully. “Night, sir.”

Blake is halfway through the door before he realizes that, for once, the ‘sir’ actually sounded the way it should. His stomach refuses to be ignored when he finally makes it into bed, despite his best efforts to ignore that his regular diet is being held hostage by Dr. Zed’s identical (and astonishingly smart-mouthed) triplet. Blake makes up his mind to go out there and tell him that he won’t accept any more interference with his eating habits. Yes, he’ll definitely go out.

In a few more minutes.

Perhaps an hour.

When he finally gathers up enough courage to sneak out, the lights have been dimmed and the colonel is nowhere in sight. Blake sighs in relief and slips into the kitchen, reaching for the panel controlling the lights. “Took you long enough,” Blanco’s voice says.
Blake barely controls his flinch. “What are you doing out here? Waiting to gloat?”

“Nope. Just waitin’ for you.” He turns to find Blanco seated at the small table – in his spot – with a covered dish beside his left elbow. “C’mon over and eat. Said I knew you’re hungry.”

“That’s an odd shape for hiding one of your protein drinks,” Blake observes cautiously.

He sits down as ordered, not wanting to remove the cover in case he’s about to be made fun of once more. The other man reaches over to take it off, revealing that there is an actual meal sitting in front of him. “You are way too damn easy to mess with, Sticks. Go ahead an’ eat it – it ain’t been drugged or nothing.”

Blake hesitates only temporarily before seizing the provided fork and tucking in, both unable and unwilling to mask his pleasure at having real food to eat. He’s aware of Blanco watching him while he eats but is still too hungry to care. “Do you have actual quarters here on Helios, or do you just stay in mine?”

“Oh, I got my own spot. It’s supposed to be a closet or somethin’, but it’s fine. I don’t need much space, or a lotta sleep. We, uh, we are gonna need quarters for the incoming Lance.”

Blake finishes his meal, feeling comfortably full, and leans against the back of the chair. “Henderson can take care of it, first thing.”

“Henderson can barely wipe his own ass. You don’t mind, I can handle it.”

“You could’ve done so without seeking my permission,” Blake points out. “Why even bother asking?”

Blanco’s lips twitch. “I tell myself that it’s only fair t’let you think you’re in charge, once in a while.”

“Kind of you.”

“I thought so.” He takes Blake’s used dishes over to the disposal unit and slides them in, then walks back over. “Lemme see that hand again.”

Blake slowly extends his hand, that odd feeling spreading through him as Blanco drops down into a crouch beside him. The colonel’s hands rise to cradle his bruised fingers, and Blake stares down at the dark head bent over his hand. “Well? What is your…diagnosis, Doctor Blanco?”

“You’ll live to authorize another hostile takeover or two,” Blanco says, and then looks up. Their eyes meet and Blake looks away as a flush heats his cheeks. “Still pretty sore, huh?”

“I’m afraid that I’m not in the habit of punching people in the face.”

The other man squeezes his fingers gently. “That’s for sure. You could probably get a concussion from a damned cotton ball.”

“Were you born this rude, or was it something you were taught in medical school?” Blake asks.

“Oh, now. You know I’m just teasin’.” His shadow looks up at him again. “You need me to kiss it better?”

Blake feels warmth creeping up his neck again as they stare at each other, then he realizes he’s let the silence drag on for too long without protesting. “I beg your pardon?” he asks belatedly.

“If you like beggin’, I ain’t the type to stop ya.” Blanco’s laugh is low, and entirely too knowing for
Blake’s peace of mind. And, since he still has possession of Blake’s hand, there’s nothing stopping him from raising it to his lips.
They shoot smartasses, don't they?

Chapter Summary

Ted's still being Extra™ and Blake's finally had enough.

Another day, another disaster-in-waiting, Blake thinks as he heads out of his quarters. Blanco is shadowing him today, which seems odd given that he’s due to conduct Blake’s physical later on, but the usual sarcasm appears to have been put on hold for the moment. They’re also, apparently, completely ignoring what had happened between them. Tassiter had always told him that he overanalyzed everything, Blake thinks, suppressing the familiar twinge of pain that Harold’s memory tends to cause. He doesn’t have time for that today, Blake tells himself sternly. That period in his life is over, and it will never return. Blanco is obviously altering the way he’s conducting his psychological warfare, and it’s best to ignore the infuriating man. “Have you discovered the individuals behind the eavesdropping devices that keep turning up in my personal quarters?” he asks suddenly.

“Yes, Mister Blake.”

“And?”

“The situation has been taken care of, and the culprits vividly reminded of their own mortality.” Blanco’s head tilts slightly. “Would you like me to kill them?”

Blake considers it, and discards the idea as being much too heavy-handed. A warning seems fair enough, for the moment. “Not just yet, but I thank you for the suggestion.”

An unidentifiable sound filters out through the helmet, and they continue through the World of Shopping where Blake discusses business matters with the manager of the gun shop. There are several families out and about, and Blake is too busy patiently explaining the proper use of the new inventory forms to notice when the colonel drifts from his side. When he realizes that Blanco has disappeared, however, Blake hands the form back to the manager and walks over to the windows.

There, across the way, stands his shadow. He’s admiring a newborn child held out for inspection by its mother while the child’s older sibling cavorts around Blanco, tugging on his armor in a bid for attention. The colonel accepts the baby into his arms and bends to have a word with the older child, reaching out a hand to tousle the boy’s hair. The whole display is so puzzling that Blake isn’t sure what to think of it, so he does what anyone would do in such a situation – he simply pretends he didn’t see it. Blake turns back to the gun shop’s manager. “It’s really quite simple, but if you are not able to rectify the bookkeeping errors during next week’s inventory… I’m sure you would not wish to risk eviction from your residence here on Helios.”

“Y-yes, President Blake. I’ll fix everything,” the woman stammers.

“I’m certain that you shall.” Blake favors her with a small, tight smile. “You might find it instructive to visit another of the storefronts here and speak with whomever conducts their inventory.” Out of the corner of his eye, he sees Blanco slip back into place.

“Thank you, sir.”
He inclines his head towards her and sweeps out of the shop, heading towards the nearest set of stairs that lead down to the newly remodeled transit station. “Do you not think that kindness shown whilst wearing that uniform is ill-advised?” Blake finally asks, despite his earlier resolution not to mention it. “You do not seem like a stupid man, Colonel. Confine warm sentiment to the times you are present as a medical doctor, effective immediately.” Blanco doesn’t offer commentary on the reprimand, proving that there is indeed a first time for everything.

His shadow stays silent all throughout the tour of R&D. Sometime during his ECHO conference with one of the new weapons designers, Blake is joined by the same duo who had been his chaperones the day before. This time, however, they’re dressed in Hyperion yellow. “The Colonel thought we should be more inconspicuous, sir,” one of them says respectfully. “And speaking of Colonel Blanco…”

“Ah, yes. My appointment,” Blake sighs wearily. “Tell me, Lieutenant – has he always been like this?”

“Not exactly, sir, but he has always been one of the more…lively…officers. He may be high-spirited, but he protects his own.” The man coughs into a fist. “Shall we, Mister Blake?”

“So we shall.”

They’re joined by Blake’s new assistant, who seems as though she might actually be suitable for the position…another first. She’s done an admirable job shifting myriad responsibilities from his plate to Henderson’s, though Blake has no doubt that his Vice President is busy shifting as much away from himself as possible. He’s never minded delegation, as long as it was done responsibly. “Sir? I’ve had contact with the bounty hunters, and have paid them a small sum to remain on the station in case you changed your mind,” she greets him. “I know of at least five separate projects on the R&D level that might require their services.”

He has her list them, and signs off on only two – the rest will be dependent upon the outcome. She follows them into the medical wing and updates him on various other endeavors before falling silent as the doors to Blanco’s lair slide open upon their arrival. “You’re late,” the doctor says. “Thanks for comin’ by, though; I feel real honored you decided to finally grace me with your presence.” He points towards a disposable gown, and then to a privacy screen. “Go get changed, if I ain’t inconveniencin’ ya too much.”

Blake sighs inwardly. Of course, it had been too much to ask that the man wouldn’t take his temper out on him once given the opportunity. “Remain outside until I am finished,” he tells Paxson, who nods and prepares to step out.

“Hang on a sec, Diana. Somethin’ I wanna ask you,” Blanco says quietly, reaching out to touch his PA’s arm. He stares right back at Blake and jerks his chin towards the screen. “Changed. Now.”

The two other Lancemen exchange glances and move outside without being told, and Blake slowly picks up the gown while Blanco waits expectantly. “Doctor, you should take more care with how you speak to him,” Paxson whispers urgently.

“I ain’t scared of him an’ don’t even tell me you are,” Blake hears him say. “Hey, look – you wanna get that drink with me, later?”

His PA laughs. “Those bounty hunters are only an ECHO away.”

“I’ll take my chances. How ‘bout it?” Blanco’s voice drops, and Blake gnaws on his lower lip. Really, the nerve of the man! He’d been warned against it, and now here he is in active pursuit.
“You wanna live dangerously, honey?” Blake rolls his eyes and begins to undress, slipping the paper gown on and walking out before he realizes that he hasn’t heard his personal assistant actually leave the room.

She hasn’t left, he realizes, because she’s in a passionate clinch with Ted Blanco. The doctor has her pressed up against the wall and, if this is the man’s follow-up to a cheesy pickup line, Blake doesn’t even want to know what would happen on an actual date. Perhaps this is some sort of native Pandoran…no, he refuses to consider it any further. He clears his throat loudly, and Paxson jerks in alarm, disengaging her lips from Blanco’s with an unpleasant sucking sound. The doctor takes his time retrieving his hand from the front of Paxson’s blouse, turning to look at Blake meaningfully.

“Good, you’re finally ready.”

“Paxson,” Blake murmurs. She flushes and vacates the premises so quickly, he wouldn’t have been surprised to witness a smoke trail. “I did request that you keep your hands – and any other extremities – off of my assistant, did I not?”

Blanco taps his chin, gazing up at the ceiling. “Oh, was that who you was talkin’-”

“If you do not wish to be sent back to Promethea in disgrace, and lessened by a rank or two, might I add…I advise you to stop acting like a child,” Blake says mildly, sitting on the examination table. “I did not ask for my current position, and neither did you. This is not a game, and I will no longer allow your attitude to remain unchecked – we have been thrown together through circumstances beyond our control, so I suggest that we make the best of it.”

His shadow looks at him incredulously. “I was tryin’ to make the best of it ‘fore you said I couldn’t!”

“How old are you?” Blake sighs, pinching the bridge of his nose.

“That’s classified.”

“It is not,” he says heatedly, then sighs again when Blanco smiles. “Truce?”

Blanco shrugs. “Eh, I guess so.”

“Good.”

“Still gonna raw your PA first chance I get.”

Blake fixes him with a glare. “Don’t be vulgar.”

“Now you’re just askin’ too much.” Blanco walks over, looking pleased about something… which doesn’t bode well for the upcoming medical examination. He retrieves a pair of gloves and makes sure to snap them at the wrists. “Deep breath in.”

Blake’s obedient inhale turns into a croaking gasp as Blanco places the freezing bell of a stethoscope over Blake’s left kidney. “We brokered a truce not even thirty seconds ago,” he wheezes.

“That we did,” Blanco says cheerfully. “But I’ve had this thing in the cooler for two whole days, just waitin’ for the chance to use it on ya. Thirty seconds ain’t enough warmin’ for me to get it to room temperature, now is it?”

He has a sinking feeling that there will be a lot more instances just like this one, in the days ahead. “Let me guess; the other medical implements in this house of horrors have been in the deep freeze, as well?”
“Oh, not all of ‘em. C’mon, Sticks, just think of it like a…refreshin’ surprise.”

Refreshing. “If this is how you treat your al-aaaaaaah!” Blake arches his back as the stethoscope gets him again “allies, I would hate to witness your treatment of enemies.”

“I leave the stethoscope in for a whole week, ‘stead of just two days. Now quit bein’ a dang baby – breathe in.”

“Don’t call me Sticks,” Blake warns.

“World of Shopping ain’t got diapers in your size; I checked.” This mental image is so absurd, Blake can’t help but laugh. “C’mon, let’s get your weight.”

The rest of the exam is conducted in a startlingly businesslike manner, save for the moment where his new doctor gives into the impulse to dip his hand in ice water before checking Blake for a hernia. Blake swears at him and goes to get dressed. “Have you finalized your plans against Corazza, Colonel?” he calls out.

“Be leavin’ day after tomorrow. My two’ll watch over you, make sure nobody pops you in the head while I’m gone,” Blanco says. “You need a souvenir provin’ I took care of it? Most people want a head or whatnot, but a hand’s easier to transport and it ain’t as messy.”

Blake shudders inwardly, but makes himself sound bored as he requests that Blanco make sure the target isn’t a body double. “Corazza is hardly in the position to make enough money to afford such a thing, but…”

“Jack had one ‘fore he was CEO,” Blanco finishes thoughtfully. “Sure, ain’t a problem to check on that. I’ve done it a couple times, though it’ll mean an extra couple days away…all depends on the equipment that’s around.”

“That sounds acceptable.” Blake moves out from behind the privacy screen in search of a mirror he can use to fix his tie. “Would you happen to have-”

The doctor comes over to stand in front of him, slipping the length of fabric from Blake’s hands. “I got it.”

“Ah, yes. The ‘deadly valet’ service,” Blake comments.

The corners of Blanco’s eyes crinkle slightly. “Somethin’ like that.” He knots the tie with a few efficient motions of his fingers and, just like Blake had somehow known he would, Blanco tightens it enough to cut off his air. He resolves to make no noise and not to grasp at the other man – Blanco is calmly studying him with those green eyes, waiting for a sign of surrender. Blake can feel his chest ache from the effort it’s taking to hold his breath, but he’s not about to give Blanco the satisfaction of scrabbling frantically for air. He forces himself to meet Blanco’s eyes, and they stare at each other for several long seconds before the knot is slowly retracted to its proper place. Blanco maintains the eye contact as he straightens Blake’s tie and adjusts the lapels, smoothing his hands over Blake’s shoulders. “There. Now you’re perfect, President Blake.”

“Many thanks… Lieutenant Colonel Blanco.”

Blanco hooks a thumb towards the door. “Go.”

Their next training session is not only twice as long as usual, but Blake is actually given a weapon. The concession is made on the grounds that, since Blanco will be absent for the next two weeks, Blake will need to gain at least some proficiency in self defense that doesn’t include a knife in the
back. Blanco also feels the need to add that ‘just about any idiot can hit someone with a stick,’ which is why he’s been given a staff. They run through scenarios together in slow-motion, with Blanco demonstrating the common angles of attack and explaining how best to block said attack, before they attempt it at full speed. The staff changes hands frequently and Blake limps away to change clothes when time is finally called.

“Are you quite certain that you are not still trying to murder me?” Blake asks ruefully, massaging his aching wrists as they’re joined by the other two soldiers.

“Pretty sure,” Blanco answers, stopping at one of the info kiosks and scrolling through the offerings. “This station’s got a masseur, don’t it?”

Blake sighs in exasperation. “I’m shocked that you didn’t ask the Honorable Ms. Paxson.”

“It ain’t for me; it’s for you…oh, here’s one. Ballard, go on ahead with the bug sweep. Saybrook, I’m need you to check this lady’s equipment.”

The two men head off with murmured yes, sirs, and Blake is left alone with the assassin. “The children, earlier today…”

Blanco is typing a request for the masseuse to come to Blake’s private residence. “Nice, huh? The wife had a girl last month, an’ her brother keeps wantin’ to trade her in for some toys.”

“I beg your pardon? Those children are yours?”

“For the life of me, I cannot figure just how you were made president. CEO, and gullible as hell,” Blanco roars, and mimes wiping a tear from the faceplate of his helmet. “I could tell you just about anything an’ you’d believe it. I just like kids, is all.”

Blake suppresses a sigh as they continue towards the lift. “Do…do you have any children of your own?”

“Nope, but it weren’t for lack of tryin,’” Blanco says cheerfully. “Though come to think on it, I could have a couple here an’ there – you never know. Maybe Ms. Paxson wants a few.”

He doesn’t respond to the teasing, waiting for the other man to check the lift before waving him inside. “Have you ever been married, Colonel?”

“Very well,” Blake agrees carefully. “However, I was led to believe that you wanted me to experience all manner of discomfort…so I must ask you why you have contracted the services of a massage therapist.”

“If I wasn’t leaving so soon, Sir, I wouldn’t have done so. We have one more day for weapons training, and you’ll be completely useless if you don’t have some measure of pain relief.” The flat tone, utterly devoid of the usual accent, makes Blake acutely aware that he’s misstepped somehow. He doesn’t wish to embarrass either of them by apologizing, especially because he doesn’t know what he’d be apologizing for.

As the lift ascends, Blake wonders if there is any connection to the question about marriage and the one concerning the official reprimand in the colonel’s file. A change of subject, then. “I admit to being surprised that you have not already set one of your underlings to take over my…training.”

“You bet I did – guess you’re just the last t’know.” Blake’s annoyed huff gets a small sound of
amusement from the big man. “Hope you ain’t the pearl clutchin’ type, ‘cause I’ll be around to make sure that masseuse don’t try nothin’… course if you wanna fire off a round, just let me know an’ I won’t watch.”

Blake’s face feels like it’s on fire as the doors open and Blanco glides out after delivery of this latest salvo. He’s ushered into one of the rooms that have remain mostly unused, if tastefully decorated by the interior designer he’d hired; the massage table has been set up with an assortment of lotions, towels, and scented candles all close at hand. There’s even a privacy screen identical to the one in the medical bay. “I presume my men have provided enough intimidation for one day, madame,” Blake says wearily. “I do not have the heart to add any more to your experience.”

The masseuse, a middle-aged woman he’s actually witnessed having lunch with her husband, simply smiles at him. “I understand the need for security, President Blake. If you wouldn’t mind changing into this robe, we can get started.”

He glances up at Blanco, who nods and steps back against the wall. “Yes, of course.” Blake accepts the robe she gives him, moving behind the screen to undress. His muscles have already begun to ache, and he wonders if he’ll be able to sneak an injection without Blanco’s knowledge. The masseuse requests that he lie down on the table and she eases the robe from his shoulders, dropping a towel to cover his backside. Blake barely manages to keep from disgracing himself with a loud moan as she begins to work on him, kneading the soreness from his muscles with a practiced touch – it feels wonderful.

Blake is so relaxed, he’s nearly asleep by the time she’s finished. He drifts in a pleasurable haze as he hears the woman ask Blanco something, and the low murmurs of a bargain being struck before the masseuse approaches him once more. “Sir, if you’d like something a bit extra?”

“Anything,” he sighs, not fully understanding what he’s just agreed to until her oiled fingers reach beneath the towel to stroke his scrotum and the head of his penis. Blake flails in surprise. “What the devil-!”

“Please try to relax, Mister President,” the woman says softly, placing her other hand on the small of his back to prevent him from rising even as she strokes him to fullness. “Your guard says you’ve been under a great deal of stress, and that this will help you.”

Blake twists his head to look over at the colonel, who has kept his word and is turned towards the wall with his hands loosely clasped behind his back. “I am not in the habit of…this,” he says through clenched teeth.

“That’s quite all right, sir. Would you like to turn onto your back? It might be more comfortable for you,” she tells him. Blake does so hesitantly, keeping his eyes trained on Blanco. If that man shows the slightest hint of movement… he’s belatedly aware that she’s just asked him a question.

“I…beg your pardon?”

“Would you prefer hands or mouth, President Blake?”

Is it his imagination, or are those broad shoulders heaving with suppressed amusement? Blake frowns across the room as he tries to gather his thoughts together. “I, ah…your hands…should be sufficient?” he feels angry with himself for making it sound like a question, but the nameless masseuse (had she told him what her name was? Terribly bad form for him to forget such a thing in circumstances such as these) simply nods and makes him feel at ease by stroking his stomach. Another untimely memory of Harold Tassiter surfaces, which nearly undoes all of the woman’s progress thus far, and Blake pushes it aside. He could definitely do with the relief, but he’ll need
something **inspiring** to think of.

Blake closes his eyes tightly, sifting through the usual scenarios before glancing over at Blanco once more. The other man really isn’t looking. The masseuse is still coaxing him back to a full erection, and a sudden bizarre thought accomplishes all that she hasn’t been able to. It’s startling…and unbelievably compelling. “Very good, sir,” he hears murmured down by his groin, and Blake fixes his gaze on the hands that Blanco has folded together behind his back. It’s easy to imagine that *those* are the oil-slicked fingers sliding up and down his shaft – no, he’s abruptly glad that he’s only requested her hands…because now he can wonder what it would be like to have Ted Blanco’s mouth on him instead. Blake groans softly, thinking of finally putting that smart mouth to good use. The memory of the preceding night looms, and he feels the first stirrings of orgasm. Blake knows exactly how it is to look down on the top of Blanco’s head as he’s being ministered to.

His fists bunch in the sheet covering the massage table and his back arches as he comes in the tight circle of a strange woman’s fist. Blake bites his lips against any cry he might make, his breathing already loud and embarrassingly ragged. The masseuse strokes his stomach and thighs gently to help prolong the sensation, not realizing that all Blake wants to do is flee at this point. “My thanks,” he says awkwardly as she cleans him up.

“It was my pleasure, sir,” she says kindly. “Just let me get my things together, and I’ll be out of your way.”

She helps him back into the robe and Blake leaves the room as quickly as propriety will allow, but not before he sees Blanco pass the woman several folded bills. He stays in the shower longer than he needs to, just to give them all time to clear out. When Blake reappears in the living area he hears the voices of the three soldiers and drifts closer to listen. “…make sure. The problem with Henderson might come to a head while I ain’t here.”

The younger-sounding officer answers. What is his name, again? Saybrook, perhaps. Or is it Ballard? “Yes, sir. What about the, uh, doctor situation?”

“It’s been taken care of. Just make sure he don’t get a wild hair an’ decide to get a checkup while I ain’t here, son.”

“But what if-”

“Keep him outta there – you get me?” Blanco repeats. “We don’t need slip-ups right now. Fleet’s a month out and who knows what the troops down there’ve caught wind of.”

“Sir…”

“C’mon, kid, I know it’s nothin’ you can’t handle. We’ll get a star on you, yet. Have some faith.”

A loud sigh. “You really think so, Colonel?”

Blanco laughs. “I do. Now go get Blake in here ‘fore he strains his ears too much with all that snoopin’. Ten bucks says he’s out there in the hall.”

Blake retreats just enough to make him lose the bet and pretends that he’s just walking in, which probably isn’t fooling anyone. “If you’d please come with me, Colonel Blanco would like to see you,” the young man says politely.

“What one are you?” Blake asks, studying him carefully. “We were never formally introduced.”

“First Lieutenant Ballard, sir.”
They go into the larger lounge area, where Blanco is waiting with Saybrook. “Here’s the deal, Mister President; these two’re gonna take over the trainin’ while I’m gone. Since you can’t keep from eavesdropping, you prob’ly already know I got someone comin’ in to cover me as Doctor Blanco – no need to go over to see him ‘less you’re at death’s door. Better for us all if your skinny ass stays put. Do me a solid and don’t get killed while I’m gone, huh?”

“I shall try my best,” Blake promises, already planning on defying the ban on visiting Medical. He’s informed that both Ballard and Saybrook will be moving in with him for the duration of Blanco’s absence and, while he doesn’t necessarily like it, Blake has to admit that it makes sense…if the situation with the Crimson Raiders is anything like what these three think it might be. He makes a mental note to find more about this at the earliest opportunity. “This seems rather alarmist, wouldn’t you say?”

“Depends on how ready you are t’meet your maker,” Blanco says drily. “Better to be prepared for the worst so you ain’t shocked when shit gets real.”

The other two men are dismissed for the night and Blake gets to the bottom of the Crimson Raider situation while the colonel tinkers with a shield. They’ve both decided to ignore the fact that Blake has experienced climax just a few steps away from Blanco, and within the last hour. “Surely it can’t benefit them to board Helios just for the sake of revenge.”

“You wouldn’t think so, but then again you ain’t never been completely abandoned on a hellhole like Pandora. Sure, it’s the good life compared to Promethea…but command culled the landing force from all the Atlas territories. Closed up the garrison on Eden 6 to shunt ‘em all down there,” Blanco says, frowning down at the shield in his hands. “Most of ‘em been away from Promethea too long to appreciate how good they had it. They’re mad as hell.”

Blake walks over to the windows, gazing down at Pandora. “You don’t sound as if you blame them overmuch.”

“You wouldn’t neither, if you ever been to Eden 6. There’s no way they don’t know you got Crimson Lance incoming…Helios has more info leaks than most people got unpaired socks. I figure I’ll let ‘em stew a bit, then pop down there and see if anyone wants back in. Rules’re a bit flexible ‘cause they ain’t technically deserters if Atlas was the one left ‘em behind.”

“Who, exactly, is the command?” Blake flushes slightly as Blanco slants an amused look his way. “I’m aware that I am, but I was given to believe that Jack disbanded the command structure when he destroyed the weapons caches. Something about an Admiral…Mikey?”

Blanco snorts. “Admiral Mikey. Naw, that one’s worm food by now – heard he fell down a lot of stairs. Wasn’t really such a bad kid, but his family ties made it so he had to clock out at the ripe old age of 6.”

“Stairs?”

“Don’t you look at me like that, Sticks – wasn’t me who pushed him.”

Blake turns back around to look at Pandora. “Of course not, Colonel. You did say that you like children.”

“Like I said, he wasn’t such a bad kid. His ‘advisors’ were the ones pullin’ his strings since he turned three.” Blanco raps the shield against the synthetic wood floor, giving a grunt of satisfaction when it crackles to life. “Finally, geez. Here, try this out – got a bit of an overcharge to it, and if you use a Tediore it’ll draw power from the gun’s auto-digistruct reload system. Anybody tries to get you
while you got this on, it’ll fry ‘em good when it depletes.”

He walks over to inspect the shield the other man holds out to him. “This is quite nice…is it patented, by any chance?”

“The company man rears his head.” Blanco makes a circling gesture with his fingers, and hooks it onto Blake’s pajama bottoms when he turns around obediently. “You just stick to makin’ guns and we’ll get along just fine.”

The warmth of his shadow’s fingers against his bare skin makes Blake clear his throat nervously, and look away. “As you say.”

He can’t see Blanco’s knowing smile, but he just knows it’s there. “Look, don’t worry ‘bout earlier. Figured it’d help you relax but here you are, ready to jump outta your own skin.”

“No, I…” Blake’s flush deepens. “It was relaxing.”

Blanco hums cryptically. “If you say so, sir. You’ll break my heart if you don’t say you didn’t think of me the entire time.”

Blake wants to slap the man’s hands away and throw the shield across the room, but a sudden impulse has him reaching down to grasp Blanco’s fingers. “You overstep your bounds, Colonel Blanco.” He squeezes the last two fingers on the man’s left hand, feeling the bones grind together, and exerts enough pressure to pop the smallest finger out of joint. “If my memory hasn’t failed me, we have a truce that you have just violated.”

He looks up in the physician-assassin’s face, expecting to see some sign of contrition or indication of discomfort. What he finds is a completely unguarded look of pure lust which startles him into releasing Blanco’s fingers. The big man’s chest is heaving, and they’re standing close enough together for Blake to register his burgeoning arousal. Blanco places his fingers back into Blake’s hand. “Harder.”

Blake’s mouth goes dry. “Very well, then.” He tightens his grip and watches Blanco’s pupils dilate further. “Perhaps next time, I will dismiss the masseuse entirely and require the service from you. You are a depraved soul, aren’t you, Colonel?” Blake shifts subtly, just to see if Blanco really is getting off on this sort of treatment, and a thrill runs up his spine at the feel of the man’s heavy erection pressed against his thigh. “If I had known this was the key to disciplining you, I would have taken it much earlier.”

“Mister…Mister Blake, I dunno if…I f we should…”

“Goodness,” Blake whispers. “How polite you sound.” Their eyes are still locked together, and he knows – he knows! - that if he were to angle his chin just so…and glance down at Blanco’s mouth… Ah, yes. He wants the kiss, and knows that Blanco wants it too, but the added thrill he’ll glean from withholding it will make any frustration worthwhile. So he angles his chin, glances down, and waits for the infuriating man to take the bait.

The moment Blanco begins to fall for it, Blake drops his hand and steps back. The mixture of surprise and confusion on the other man’s face is simply too, too good. “Goodnight, Colonel.”

“Shoulda killed you first thing,” Blanco growls.

“Yes, you should have.” Blake reaches up to finger comb his hair back into place and leaves, smiling to himself at the sound of Blanco angrily swearing under his breath.
While the cat's away...

Chapter Summary

Ted's gone for two weeks, Blake's working on consolidating his power over the Lance, and there's a familiar face in Medical ready and willing to share some hot gossip. What could possibly go wrong?

Two weeks, while not being a very long amount of time, can seem like forever when one is waiting for the return of someone who is sorely missed. Blake doesn’t exactly miss him sorely - not yet, anyway – but the ingrate’s absence is a glaring one and he hasn’t even been gone five hours. Blanco had disappeared without a single word of farewell, thus leaving quite a lot unsaid when Blake would have preferred to say them. The Omega Assassin had most certainly done so out of spite, sneaking off in the early hours of what passes for morning on Helios. Blake had finished his ablutions and emerged from his bedchamber to find Saybrook and Ballard standing at attention in front of a breakfast tray.

The tray held nothing but a huge cup of protein solution, on top of which had been stenciled a crystallized sugar heart.

He’s in a singularly vile mood as the three of them push through the Hub, and determined to make somebody (anybody!) pay for it, when Blake abruptly remembers the injunction against visiting Medical. He swerves around the latest tour group, whose guide immediately announces that they’ve just been blessed with the presence of Hyperion’s president. Ballard clears his throat nervously, jogging to keep up. “Um…sir? Colonel says you’re not to visit—”

Blake rounds on the young man. “I give the orders here, Lieutenant. Do not presume to forget that fact – is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Ballard actually salutes and, after Blake gives him a long look, Saybrook follows suit.

They trail him the rest of the way, and station themselves just outside the door. Blake enters to find his PA waiting there with a confused look on her face - this segues into an expression of comical horror once she realizes that Blake is there as well – while Blanco himself claims to have no memory of what had transpired just the previous evening. “I sure am sorry, sweetheart. This old man just can’t keep things locked away up top anymore,” he says with a shrug. “There was this one time I coulda sworn I secured the door to the infirmary, right? Well, turned out I’d locked it fine…I just didn’t close it. Thieves took everything that wasn’t bolted down, an’ even some things that were. Don’t you worry though, honey, I’m sure it’ll come back t’me in a day or so.”

Paxson is looking increasingly wild-eyed as she leaves without saying another word, and Blake takes a seat on the examination table. “I thought you had left already.”

“Oh, I did. Still outbound even now,” Blanco says, smiling. “Guess you could say I’m the kind who can be three places at once, Mister President.”

Understanding dawns. “Ned.”

Ned Blanco gives him a self-deprecating bow. “It’ll be two weeks ‘fore I answer to that particular
name... sir? I’m s’posed to call you sir, right? He didn’t see fit t’tell me – his nose was outta joint but good,” he laughs. “You musta done somethin’ to him.”

Blake bites the inside of his cheek. “We exchanged... words.”

“Well, he’ll get over it... long as you didn’t spank him or nothin’, ‘cause he’s real into that kinda thing – give him a smack or two an’ he’ll follow you around like a lost skag pup lookin’ for its momma. You ain’t heard it from me, though.” Ned laughs and shakes his head, looking towards the infirmary’s entrance as movement from outside catches his eye.

Blake glances over, then back again. “Are you always this garrulous in the company of someone you’ve just met?”

Ned smiles. “Shoot, you got history back a-ways with Zed so it don’t really feel like we met just now – he told me a thing or two about you, sir.”

“I did my best to convince him to leave before Loaders were sent in to ensure his evacuation,” Blake points out.

“Oh, he’s just salty as hell that he got forced outta Fyrestone. Don’t mind him,” Ned says kindly. “He knows you didn’t have t’come ‘round all them times.”

Blake sniffs. “Well.” Giving the other man a searching look, he leans forward. “You’ve yet to mention your particular vice, Doctor.”

“ Heck, Mister Blake; that ain’t no secret!. I just go ‘round half lit all the damn time.” Ned cocks his head to the side, a mannerism which Blake has noticed is shared between all three brothers. “Say, you like brownies?”

“Zombies?”

“I said, brownies.”

“Forgive me, I misheard.” Blake smiles slightly. “Contrary to my outward appearance, I must say that I have never met a brownie that I’ve ever disagreed with.”

“Well, good. We’ll get along just fine, then... though I better warn ya – shit pops off up here, I’m out. Sure as hell didn’t sign up for that mess.”

Blake certainly hopes there will be no shit popping anywhere, but then again... this is Helios, after all, and ground zero for corporate drama. “Perhaps we will talk again, Doctor Blanco.” He gets up to leave, tugging on the bottom of his suit jacket to straighten it.

“I just go by Doctor Ned, ‘f you don’t mind...” Ned trails off with a frown. “Damn, no, I gotta answer to Ted’s title now.”

“Aren’t all three of you doctors?”

Ned scratches the side of his neck, looking slightly embarrassed. It really is a marvel, how they can be identical and yet... not. “Kinda...? Ted’s the only one who’s actually got a license an’ all, so he gets to use the last name. Crazy how that works, when he spends more time killin’ folks than helpin’ ‘em!”

This hasn’t escaped Blake’s notice, either. “Yes, the Hippocratic Oath is certainly blindsided each and every time the colonel wakes up in the morning.”
“I asked him ‘bout that once,” Ned confides. “He claims he wasn’t even payin’ attention during that part of the ceremony, like he was asleep or somethin’. Anyways, it looks like you need to go an’ here I am just ramblin’ away…don’t get out much lately, so I do tend to talk a bit.”

“Think nothing of it,” Blake assures him as he’s walked to the door by the shockingly amiable triplet. “On the contrary, I quite enjoyed your insight into the mind of my newest employee.”

Ned shakes his hand with another friendly smile. “Nice of you t’say so. You have a good one, Mister Blake. Sure hope no one tries to murder you today.” The glass doors slide closed behind Blake as he’s still processing this odd comment, and he looks over at his guards before setting off towards Research and Development.

He learns many useful bits of information from Lt. Ballard and Capt. Saybrook once they’ve been lulled into a false sense of security without their commander present. It might be an old trick, but it remains an effective one – Blake asks about Ned, and manages to slip in a seemingly innocuous question which they would have never answered in any other circumstances. Once that’s answered, he asks about the training to divert their attention yet again. In this way, Blake gleans enough information from them to cobble together a few facts about Ted Blanco’s personal life – he tells himself that any employer would want to know things such as this, and that it has absolutely no bearing on the disquieting feelings that have been stirring within him lately.

Blake now knows that while the colonel has definitely never married, he had been engaged to a woman who had died several months later. He’s sure that Blanco’s nameless fiancee had been the reason for the official reprimand in the man’s file, because Atlas had created a singularly odd power structure to keep their soldiers in line. Apparently, the enlisted ranks were regularly used by the commissioned officers in any way they saw fit – and this abuse of power was the tool with which the command encouraged career advancement. Stay ‘easy pickings’ or work up the ladder into a predatory position…yet it became more and more difficult to attain the rank of general, because the Atlas shareholders only allowed those with the proper connections to rise any higher. Interestingly enough, once beyond the rank of Major, the fraternization wasn’t only not allowed with peers or superior officers…it was banned outright to keep officers from making alliances which might threaten the chain of command.

This subject proves a touchy one with Captain Saybrook, who is one promotion away from this particular prohibition, and Blake makes it his business to find out all he can about it. It’s almost laughably easy to get the man to discuss it once enough hints are dropped concerning Blake’s ability to repeal the rule and shuffle the command structure. While it is true that he can do such a thing, Blake doesn’t have any intention of going about it himself – Jack’s death had landed him in enough of a mess, and Hyperion’s remaining shareholders expect too much already. He’s not looking forward to the arrival of the Crimson Lance 3rd Battalion, charmingly nicknamed Blanco’s Butchers since The Blood Shrikes apparently didn’t have enough of a murderous ring to it.

Not a single soul at Hyperion could have guessed that the Crimson Lance hadn’t been as completely disbanded as Jack would have had them believe, Blake thinks sourly. It’s not enough that he has to rescue the company from near-disaster, but now he has to deal with the military leftovers from yet another weapons manufacturer. Hopefully he’ll be able to resuscitate both problem areas once Corazza is finally dealt with – Blake had given the colonel explicit instructions on how to secure control of Corazza once and for all. A companies could rise and fall overnight, if you knew just how to do it…and thanks to the moronic trade requirements about displaying proof of ownership at all times, Blake knows exactly how it’s done. Possession being nine-tenths of the law, and all that.

Tassiter had shared a great deal of insight regarding the day to day operation of the Hyperion Corporation, and it’s mainly to him that Blake owes much of his expertise. Blake lifts his eyes from
the sheaf of quarterly reports on his desk, staring at the screens covering the wall without really seeing them. Harold Tassiter… to this day, he can’t help referring to Harold by last name only. Force of habit keeps Harold forever in his memory as Tassiter, even after all they’d shared. They hadn’t ever really acknowledged their relationship and so much had been left unsaid because Blake had assumed that they’d have all the time in the world. Who knows what had gone through Tassiter’s mind about it? Unacknowledged or not, their bond had been a strong enough one to give Blake foolish daydreams of matching tuxedoes and vows exchanged.

Jack’s ascension to the Hyperion presidency put paid to all of that, and Blake had thought he would lose his mind when he’d learned that he had been the one chosen for the Vice President position. The only mercy was that his relationship with Tassiter had been a closely guarded secret, so Blake was forced to swallow down the bitter hatred and grief every single day he was in contact with his lover’s murderer. Watching those hands sign off on something while the only thing he could think of was that they’d been the same hands to strangle Harold to death.

Blake rubs at his eyes and pushes his chair back. “Paxson.”

His PA is at his side immediately. “Yes, President Blake?”

“Have Henderson deal with the rest of this, and I’ll need to look over a few things regarding the Atlas patents. Find Creighton and get any new developments sent to my private network.”

Paxson nods and makes a few quick notes, lifting a hand to her ECHO glasses to transmit the information. “I’ve sent the request to his office, and will have the necessary documents to you within the hour.”

Blake gives her a look of approval. She’s turned out to be most efficient. “Excellent.”

“Um…sir?” Paxson asks as he’s turning to leave. “It’s about your new doctor.”

“What about him?” he replies indulgently.

“What about him?” he replies indulgently. “I do hope he hasn’t been bothering you.”

She stares down at her shoes. “Not really, sir-”

Oh, good Lord. Most employees would come to Human Resources with a sexual harassment complaint, but this one is here to complain that she’s being left alone. Classic Blanco, leaving him to deal with something like this. “Doctor Blanco was warned against making advances towards my personal staff…” Blake trails off, wondering just how he’s managed to phrase that so badly. “Personal employees, attached to my…he was warned, Paxson.”

“I see, sir. Have a good evening, Mister President.”

Blake wonders if he should warn Ned in advance, but ultimately decides against it – if the man’s survived an encounter with four Vault Hunters determined to murder him, he can handle a woman intent upon his ravishment. Saybrook chuckles as the doors close behind her, but wipes the smile from his face when Blake looks at him. “Does this happen often?" he demands.

The Captain’s smile reappears. “Not too often. You handled the situation very well, sir.”

“Well, as long as you approve,” Blake says snidely, then grimaces at a twinge in his back. “You’ve both nearly killed me with those exercises I was put through earlier.”

Saybrook politely reminds him that, once again, Ted Blanco is to blame for his troubles. Blake grinds his teeth together as he’s escorted out to his private lift – even when he’s not present, Blanco has the temerity to interfere! Blake’s existence had been simple and straightforward before that insolent
Pandoran had invaded his life. Now it seems that everything about Blake’s daily routine involves the man to some extent, and it makes him furious as it was most likely planned to do. Perhaps these two weeks apart will be beneficial in more ways than one – he’ll get Corazza sorted once and for all, and Blanco’s strange hold on him can finally begin to dissipate. Already, the two Atlas soldiers are more talkative and receptive to the idea of Blake being in command. Yes, two weeks should be more than enough time to consolidate his authority over the remainder of the Crimson Lance.

Ballard stays behind while Saybrook conducts a sweep of Blake’s quarters, and the young lieutenant is expressing his heartfelt relief that he’s not stationed on Promethea anymore when a muted thump reaches their ears. “Stay here, sir, while I check it out.”

“He most likely tripped over something,” Blake says dismissively.

“Still.” Ballard clears his throat, and draws his gun. “If you’re wearing a shield, now’s the time to turn it on…and if you don’t hear from me in the next twenty seconds, get out of here and call for help.”

Blake nods, uncomfortably aware that the shield he’d been given as a gift is sitting right atop his bedside table. Ballard disappears with his gun at the ready but before Blake can begin to start the requested countdown, both soldiers reappear. “Sorry, President Blake. False alarm,” the lieutenant says needlessly.


“And this was the cause for alarm…why, exactly?” Blake is irritated, and makes no effort to hide it until Ballard reminds him that the recently-arrived doctor isn’t supposed to have access to Blake’s personal space. “Your colonel most likely shared the access codes with him.” The other two men exchange a glance, and say nothing further.

Blake treats himself to a long soak in the rarely-used tub (he prefers the faster method of cleaning himself in the shower), content in the knowledge that no rude and opportunistically homicidal Pandoran males will disturb him. His muscles ache something fierce from the use they’ve been getting lately, but he has discovered that his body is already adjusting to the strain. His ECHO chimes, indicating an incoming transmission, so he stretches a hand out for it and scrolls through the Atlas reports. He makes a few notations on the patents which show the most promise – some of them are a touch too reminiscent of Atlas in its heyday and will need aggressive rebranding so that not a single soul could possibly mistake them as anything but Hyperion.

He dries himself off and pulls a robe over his shoulders, intent upon enjoying a nice glass of wine before dinner. Dessert has obviously been taken care of, Blake thinks with a smile, and he walks into the main living area to find one of his bodyguards sprawled out on the floor. “I must live with you for the next two weeks, but that doesn’t give you license to simply camp out on the…” he trails off upon noticing the smears of blood on the wall, and slowly begins to back away. Of course this would happen now. Of course it would. A slight sound draws his attention to the doorway, and Blake’s belatedly aware of movement as his head is turning to look – pain explodes in the back of his head and the world goes black.
Blake's back in the desert, and learns the ropes of Hyperion's most notorious prison...with the help of someone he'd never thought he'd ever see again.

Blake's head feels like it’s about to explode. Awareness returns gradually as the lurching motions of...wherever he is...make his stomach long to reject its contents. There isn’t even that much in his system, as his abduction was thoughtlessly executed just before dinner. Well, at least he hadn’t been executed before dinner – look on the bright side, Jeffrey! He can’t see a single thing, but he knows without a doubt that his eyes are open because every blink of his eyelids causes pain to shoot through his skull. A hood, then, has been tied around his neck.

He closes his eyes and spends a few moments feeling sorry for himself, then resolves to figure out exactly where he is and who’s behind this whole caper. Blake attempts to push his discomfort aside, concentrating on the senses that are actually useful at the moment – there’s the aggressive swaying movement, so he’d bet against any sort of shuttle. Wherever he is, it’s not in vacuum. There is also a thumping sound that is regularly interspersed with hissing. If Blake adds this information to the theory that whomever’s abducted him is allied with the Crimson Raiders, then it means that he is aboard a train…on Pandora.

Fantastic, he thinks sourly. Back again.

The train hits a stretch of rail that isn’t as well-tended as the rest, and Blake’s stomach heaves in protest. He tries to shift his limbs to see how securely he’s been tied up, and feels his bathrobe gape open.

“He’s awake,” a voice says from the general vicinity of his kneecaps. “Want me to fix that?”

Blake opens his mouth to protest. “Whomever you are-”

“Shut it.” A blow to the side of his head closes his mouth rather violently, causing him to bite the inside of his cheek hard enough to draw blood. Instinct makes him spit the blood out, and hindsight makes him wish he’d just swallowed it because he still has his head in the bag and Blake now has a wet spot pressed up against his nose. A hand yanks his robe closed again, thank God. At least no one’s tried to eat him yet, he thinks as his tongue probes the sore spot in his mouth. Things could be worse.

His train ride lasts several more hours, barring the usual stops where his captors threaten him with severe bodily harm if he tries to escape. Yes, he’s just biding his time until he can leap up and dispatch all of his enemies with his house slippers. Blake glares into the darkness of the hood.

When he’s finally taken off of the train – they actually lift him up and throw him out - Blake is bundled into the back of a vehicle and presumably driven in circles before the hood is finally removed. His captors are wearing a hodgepodge of Crimson Lance armor and bandit chic, which heavily suggests that the Crimson Raiders are behind his abduction, but there’s no real way to tell for sure. For all Blake knows, it could be a rogue Hyperion faction trying to pin the blame elsewhere. There’s nothing to be seen but sand.
Sand, and more sand. Given that sand seems to be a Pandoran natural resource, Blake has no way of knowing exactly where he is – the only two places he’s been on this godforsaken planet with this much…nothingness are the Sunken Sea and out in the Dust, where Friendship Gulag is located. Surely they wouldn’t dare stick him in a Hyperion-run prison.

It turns out that they do, indeed, dare.

Once Blake has time to fully realize that he’s about to be Friendship Gulag’s newest inmate, the bag goes back down over his head for some reason or another. It’s taken off after he’s been led into one of the buildings below a guard tower and Blake looks around quickly, but the bandits are nowhere to be seen…only a handful of Loaders and Hyperion personnel. Demanding that they recognize him as Jeffrey Blake gets him exactly nowhere, because they had been ‘alerted to the presence of a body double posing as President Blake’ and turn a deaf ear to his explanations. He’s forced to disrobe, which would be amusing in any other scenario because the only thing he’s wearing is a robe, and subjected to numerous tests and scans before being taken aside and thrust into a chair. The back of Blake’s neck is stamped with some sort of barcode – hopefully below the line of his shirt collar – and then he’s finally given a dull-colored uniform that’s been digistructed to his measurements. Well, at least it will fit properly. He dresses quickly and is pulling on the socks and boots that have been dropped in front of him when the huge hangar doors on the south wall split open.

A Constructor glides in to scan him, and Blake gets hoisted into the air and taken out to the row of cells which presumably act as a temporary holding station. He spends the next few hours staring out at passing Loaders, and wondering if the motionless body he’d nearly stumbled over had been Saybrook or Ballard. Part of him wishes that it had been the captain, because that would mean that the young lieutenant would still have a chance to rise in the ranks for which he’d presumably been longing. For all Blake knows, the young man is either dead or had been the one to orchestrate his abduction.

He’s moved yet again, but this time it seems as if his assignment will be permanent. A HOT Loader herds him into his cell – he has to climb through a gap in the bars, and then is required to be an accomplice in his own incarceration by holding the missing bar into place while the Loader welds it back in place. Blake pats his eyebrows gingerly, wondering if they haven’t been singed off by the blast of heat, and turns to survey his new abode. The cell seems to be of standard size, which means that there’s just enough room to keep a claustrophobe on the edge of panic, but there is the added benefit of the airflow which the gaps in the bars provide. Blake pushes his hair back from his forehead, not even bothering to care how messy it will look, because it’s so damned hot. “Fucking Pandora,” he mutters to himself.

“You got that right,” a voice from his past says, and Blake freezes up. He can feel his heart galloping in his chest as he turns the other way and ducks his head. No, it can’t be – it can’t be, because Jack is dead. Dead and gone, and good riddance because all he’d ever done was to destroy- “Hey…don’t I know you?”

“No.” Blake forces the word past his lips, with what seems like the last bit of air squeezed from panic-constricted lungs.

The man sighs loudly. “Oh, I keep forgetting. I’m…not actually him. I mean, I am, but I’m not.” His voice cracks, a telltale sign of a voice modulator going bad, and this is what finally causes Blake to turn around to look. “Oh, Mister Blake! I thought that was you,” the body double (Thomas something. Or is it Tanner?) says.

Blake eyes him thoughtfully. “Timothy, your name was.”

“Well, it still is.”
“I am sure that matters in here.” He sits down on the concrete, ignoring the suspicious dark stains, and breathes deeply. Blake’s wondered more than once where the young doppleganger had gone— he’d thought that Jack had simply done away with the man. No, there’s nothing to be afraid of here. Blake repeats this silently, willing his still-racing heart to listen. He’d thought himself past this sort of reaction, but you never quite knew when something would bring it up again. “And speaking of here…”

“I was stashed here for safekeeping a couple years back. Then I was, uh, forgotten, so…” Timothy Lawrence throws up his hands, which is no mean feat in cells as small as these for men as tall as he is. “This is home, now. Why are you here, though?”

Blake takes a closer look at one of the stains to gain further time to compose himself. “When I am given the answer to that question, I shall inform you immediately. For the time being, I seem to have been labeled an imposter.”

“That’s probably why they stuck you back here with me, then,” Lawrence says, sounding disgustingly cheerful given the circumstances. “Us dopplegangers have to stick together.”

It doesn’t look like either of them have any other choice. “Quite,” Blake replies and then in a hopeless attempt to lighten the mood asks, “How is the food?”

They exchange inanities, nothing that really matters, but it’s comforting to have someone to talk to whom he actually knows. He’d been idly curious as to what could ever make someone want to take a job as a body double. Blake learns not only of the crushing weight of student loans, but all about what work he’ll be expected to perform during his incarceration. He listens carefully as Lawrence describes the machinery used during the eridium refinement process. “Sometimes we’ll swap shifts with the group doing the mining. Working in the refinery is bad enough, but I’m not sure if anything’s worse than being down in the mines. If a tunnel collapses, we’re on our own.”

“Wonderful news.” Blake stares out through the bars at a WAR Loader lumbering past. “How soon will the next…shift…begin?”

Lawrence squints out at the position of the sun. “One or two hours, maybe. They’ve got us working after sundown to make sure nobody dies from heatstroke, and then we get to stay in our pens to try and sleep during the day. It’s super duper hot, but most of the time I’m so tired I don’t even care.”

Blake supposes that it’s good that he didn’t have time to get dressed in anything made of wool. God, he hates Pandora. If it were up to him, he’d abandon Helios altogether and move the company’s headquarters back from whence it came. The shareholders have made it quite clear that it is most certainly not up to him. He draws his knees up to his chest and wraps his arms around them while staring out at the wavering image of one of the guard towers, the view gone hazy in the sweltering desert heat. “Mister Lawrence—”

“There are those who call me Tim,” the young man says in such a way that it’s clear he’s quoting something, and that Blake should know what that something is. He doesn’t have the slightest idea about it, so tries to look as if he does by nodding agreeably.

He clears his throat. “Timothy, then. I must confess to being surprised that your appearance was not altered to reflect Jack’s disfigurement at the hands of the bandit named Lilith.”

“Oh,” Lawrence says, “that.”

“Yes.” Blake narrows his eyes at the nearest tower, wondering just how many soldiers are inside it. “Why weren’t you given a scar?”
Tim is silent for several seconds, and then he gives a humorless laugh. “You know? I think you’re the first person to ever ask me that.” Blake waits patiently – he has nothing but time, now, after all – and the doppelgänger finally starts talking. “After the Vault was opened, Jack…he _was_ going to… but then Wilhelm thought that if I were out of sight…”

“…you’d be out of mind,” Blake finishes. “A bit naive, but it’s certainly understandable that the two of you might have thought something like that would have worked.”

“In case you haven’t noticed yet, Mister Blake, I don’t have an enormous Vault symbol burned into my face,” Lawrence points out irritably. “It worked just fine.”

Which still doesn’t explain why he’s still there, Blake thinks. “You’re in an Hyperion prison.”

“Well, gosh. That fact sure didn’t escape me. Look, I just don’t feel like talking about it…okay?”

“As you like.” Blake drops his chin to rest upon his knees and wonders what’s happening up on Helios. His frequent absences are bound to be remarked upon, especially since he’s taken care to be seen actually conducting company business. Many CEOs tended to gad about instead of doing their jobs, but Blake’s never truly had much of a personal life – work is all he knows, and he prides himself on being the best. Perhaps his employees aren’t really wondering just where he’s gone, and it’s only his paranoia at work. Except that it’s the _only_ thing at work, because he’s too busy _being in his company’s own prison_. He huffs angrily and wishes there were enough room for him to stamp his foot – there might not be any witnesses to how irritated this makes him, but it would probably make him feel better. Blanco would laugh at him, were he here now…yet, how can Blake know that his shadow isn’t the reason why he’s in this mess to begin with? Aside from the obvious fact that, had Blanco not left a day early, he would have been present to thwart Blake’s kidnappers. The man hasn’t truly given Blake much reason to trust him; just a signed document to take on faith.

Ted Blanco is driven clean out of Blake’s mind soon enough, when a loud siren splits the air with an unbelievable amount of noise. “What the devil-”

“Time for our shift,” Lawrence says, sitting up. “Scoot back from the bars. W4R-D3N’s coming by to open the cells, then we’ll line up and wait for the Loaders to take us to the processing plant.”

Blake moves away from the bars as instructed, waiting silently as an enormous Constructor glides past to begin opening the cells one by one. He moves behind Lawrence and glances around at the other prisoners currently lining up, wondering if there are any others who truly shouldn’t be there, and catches a fleeting glimpse of Lieutenant Ballard across the way. “Where is _that_ group headed?” he murmurs, jerking his chin in Ballard’s direction when Lawrence glances back. Blake rather thinks he knows even without asking.

Lawrence confirms the suspicion. “Mines.”

They’re loaded into a modified sand barge and hemmed in with GUN Loaders, along with a small complement of human guards who rattle off a bored-sounding speech on what the prisoners can expect if they don’t stay quiet for the duration of the transfer. Blake isn’t at all surprised to find out that death is the penalty for exchanging the latest gossip when they’re not supposed to talk. Lawrence catches his eye and smiles encouragingly, looking as if he’d probably offer a thumbs-up if their hands weren’t bound together.

The barge slides across the sand and out a side gate built specifically for this purpose, and several minutes later they’ve turned into the reinforced tunnel that connects the Dust to the Eridium Blight. Blake closes his eyes briefly upon realizing where they’re going – he hadn’t bothered to pay much attention to the working conditions of the newly built eridium processing plant, because back then it
hadn’t mattered. The workers had only been prisoners, after all.

Blake is paired with Lawrence, and the young man begins explaining the basics of their work – the raw shards pulled from the mines are sent up in carts, and several workers sort through it to separate the different grades which are then sent to one of three groups. The finest grade, which has the least amount of detectable impurities, are shunted to the side for E-Tech development. Mid-grade seems to be the most common type, which is melted down and forged into blocks for use as currency. The lowest grade is most often ground to powder and sent offworld as a potent, expensive narcotic. The by-product of the refinement process, slag, is commonly disposed of in remote areas (a notable example being Fyrestone) or used by Hyperion scientists.

Lawrence shows him how to create a makeshift dust mask out of his shirt, because tonight they’re manning one of the grinding stations. “No matter what you do, some of it'll still get in – I've seen a few ridheads just sucking it up over here and that is not what you want to be doing, trust me. Just try to time your breaths along with the machine’s rhythm and you’ll be okay.”

Blake nods grimly. “I shall do my best.”

“Taking it one day at a time is the only way to do survive in here.” Lawrence glances up at the time display and motions for Blake to tighten his ‘mask.’ “Just follow my lead, and let’s get through it.”

A claxon sounds, and the industrial machinery surrounding them shudders to life. Blake quickly sees what Lawrence had said about timing his breathing because as they push the ‘unacceptable’ raw eridium shards into the grinder, a thick purple cloud rises all around them. The dust mask keeps the worst of it out of his nose and mouth, but Blake can feel the sting in the back of his throat nonetheless. He’s never been one to use narcotics recreationally, aside from the obligatory period of rebellious experimentation in his teen years, so he doesn’t much care for the slow building of euphoria as a result of the eridium cloud.

The hours crawl past until it’s finally time to ‘hand over’ operations to the incoming shift, and Blake unties his shirt as soon as he sees Lawrence doing the same. He’s lightheaded, exhausted and in sore need of a bath, which of course he’s not going to get. “I must have swallowed several kilos of it,” Blake says, starting to shake the dust from his shirt until Lawrence stops him.

“Don’t dump that. What you do is, you unroll it carefully and try to catch as much as you can in your palm – here, watch me.” Lawrence twists open his folded shirt and tilts it, catching the majority of the powder in his cupped hand. “Once you’ve got it, dump it into your pocket and get your shirt on before anyone sees you.”

Blake raises his eyebrows, but does as instructed. “Do you actually use it?”

“Me? No, but you can trade with some of the guards. I got an actual magazine once, and I’ve heard of some guys getting pillows. You’re new, so you should probably use it for extra water rations until you get used to the portions here.”

“You must be joking,” Blake says flatly.

Lawrence gives him a look that’s pure Jack. “Laugh all you want, Mister Blake. You’re in here too long, you start to really appreciate the little things.”

Blake sighs and falls in line to board the sand barge. The sun has already risen by the time they’re locked back into their cells, and the heat is uncomfortable. His neighbor quickly curls up on his cot and falls asleep, but Blake is too hot to sleep even though he’s so tired that he can no longer see straight. He can feel the sweat running down his skin to soak his uniform, but he has no idea how far
the sun will reach if he strips down completely…his muscles are aching from the work he’s had to perform, and he doesn’t want to add sunburn to his list of troubles.

He compromises by removing his shirt and tying it around the bars, squinting up at the sun as he tries to judge the correct angle of the rays. Blake huddles on his own threadbare cot and closes his eyes against the glare, breathing deeply and attempting to ignore his discomfort. Sweat pools in the hollow of his hip if he’s lying on his side, or in the small of his back if he’s on his stomach. Blake tosses and turns until he’s so fatigued he can’t bring himself to move another millimeter – his eyes close, and he dreams of going swimming on Aquator.
Two jailbirds and a shitload of stones.

Chapter Summary

Blake struggles to adapt to life in Friendship Gulag and makes a friend. He also makes another enemy. **Trigger warning: attempted sexual assault**

Chapter Notes

Sorry for not updating last week, I didn't want to.

Blake’s days officially begin at dusk, to the sound of a siren piercing the air. They end in a cramped cell with the sun's heat beating down on him like a siege engine to the spirit. Timothy Lawrence’s seemingly flippant comment about being able to sleep in such extreme temperatures is proven valid for Blake as well, because it only takes him two days to become so weary that he doesn’t even care how hot it is. He *does* get sunburnt in places best left unmentioned.

By the end of the first week, Blake collects enough eridium dust to trade for extra water. Halfway through the second week, he becomes comfortable enough with his new friend to be on a first-name basis. They’re together every single minute of the excruciatingly long day, and Tim finally tells him the rest of the story as they’re both sorting through chunks of eridium at the refinery. "It was only supposed to be for a couple weeks, y’know? A month at the latest." Tim glances over at the eridium Blake is frowning at. "Oh, put that one on Belt Two…yeah, it was supposed to fool Jack. The old 'hiding in plain sight' trick. Wilhelm promised to come back for me once Jack stopped looking."

Blake nods. "I can assure you that he never gave the gulag a second glance – at least, not when I was around him. When I received my promotion, Jack tended to use me more as a personal assistant rather than his vice president…which means that I was around him quite a bit." He hadn’t, however, known a thing about Jack’s body double being in an illicit relationship with the Enforcer. The mere thought of *anyone* having been in a relationship with Wilhelm boggles the mind, but then Blake was rarely around the cyborg so there’s no real reason why he should be so surprised. Blake supposes that anyone else would think the same of *him*.

“He forgot me,” Tim says softly, lifting a piece of eridium from the belt and turning it over in his hands. “He said he’d come back, but he never did.”

Blake continues sorting, at a loss for words because what is he supposed to say? He doesn’t know what had gone through Wilhelm’s head - just that after Tim had disappeared, the cyborg had received further augmentation. He pauses, glancing over at his friend and weighing the possible impact. “Timothy…”

“Hm?” Tim doesn’t look up.

“I have a theory about why Wilhelm never returned for you.” The more Blake thinks about it, the more it really *does* make a twisted sort of sense. “What, precisely, do you recall about the origin of Hyperion Constructors?”
Tim’s head lifts sharply. “What do you mean? What about them?”

They both fall silent at the approach of one of the guards, who uses the mildly guilty looks on their faces as an excuse to speed up the conveyor belt. Blake sighs and concentrates on sorting as fast as he can, so neither of them have time to discuss the matter further until another guard comes up to demand that they explain themselves. “Ore’s going down the wrong goddamned belt – we never have a problem like this when you’re over here, Junior, so what the hell’s going on?”

“Sorry, Ben,” Tim apologizes. “The belt’s going a little too quickly but we’re doing our best to keep up.”

The guard swears angrily and types in a command at the console, which makes the belt shift back to its normal pace. “Who messed with these controls?”

Tim professes his ignorance about the matter, but Blake steps in. “It was that man,” Blake says, gesturing towards the guard in question.

“Oh, I don’t remember him being anywhere near—”

“No, it was him,” Blake insists firmly.

When the guard leaves to confront the culprit, Tim whirls on him. “You can’t do that, Jeffrey! Guards in here can make your life a living hell, just because they can…and that guy will.” He runs his hands through his hair, and Blake stares in fascination as the tousled locks fall right back into the weird swirling hairstyle that was Handsome Jack’s trademark. Well, apart from the mask. “C’mon, you gotta finish what you were telling me earlier. Constructors, remember?”

Blake takes a moment to collect his thoughts. “Yes, the Constructors. I read over the notes concerning their origin – that an AI named Felicity was placed within the prototype in the Titan Industrial Facility on Elpis.”

“I was there,” Tim says guardedly. “What about it?”

“I believe that in an effort to gain not only the key to your location, but to ensure Wilhelm’s undivided loyalty as well, Jack…upgraded…him.”

Tim bites his lip. “You mean, like a…like a bribe?”

“There’s no way of knowing exactly what transpired, but I can almost certainly assure you that Jack did not bribe Wilhelm at all.” Blake pauses to let this sink in. “I believe that, given Wilhelm’s predilection towards alteration, Jack used extensive surgery as payment for Wilhelm’s services. I hope that you can understand what I am getting at, Timothy.”

“You’re saying that he lost that part of himself that cared enough to come back for me?” Tim’s voice is starting to shake, and Blake sighs at his failure to phrase things properly.

“Not at all. I am saying that Jack most likely thought Wilhelm would divulge your whereabouts once he was more machine than man. I am saying that, at some level, Wilhelm was aware of this and refused to betray you.”

Tim rubs the grimy sleeve of his coverall across his face. “You can’t know that for sure.”

“Of course not,” Blake says, “but there were several different ways to get a particular kind of power core into the bandit’s hands at Sanctuary, and Jack chose to sacrifice one of his biggest assets in order to do it. He wanted you, and Wilhelm refused to give him what he wanted.” He turns away so
he doesn’t have to see the tears filling Tim’s eyes, and concentrates on sorting eridium.

Blake glances over at the guards, and sighs inwardly when he sees one of them aiming a murderous glare his way. He really should have followed Tim’s lead. Hindsight, and all that. Tim is still trying not to cry and Blake is still pretending that nothing out of the ordinary is happening, though a small part of him wishes he could offer Tim comfort because he’s heard that’s what friends do.

Friends. Blake sighs and shakes his head about it, because a friend is the one thing he hasn’t had in several years...he’d thought he might have been developing the foundation of a friendship with Ted Blanco until the man had left to bury Corazza for good. Of course, there’s also been Harold Tassiter. Blake would have never thought he would actually be friends with Jack’s body double, but here he is. “Would you, ah, like to…talk about Wilhelm?” he finally offers in lieu of physical contact. “I have heard that discussion of a lost loved one can help bring closure.”

Tim sniffs softly. “I don’t know, Jeffrey. I’ve spent so long thinking that he actually forgot me…”

“Well,” Blake says, tossing a piece of eridium off down one of the other belts, “I believe you know where I live if you would like to talk.”


The extent of Blake’s fuck-up with the guard is something that he’s made aware of almost immediately after the end of their shift. The cot in Blake's cell has been neatly rendered unusable, a fact he discovers when he lays down and finds that someone has slashed the canvas from the supports. He struggles to make himself comfortable enough to sleep, and finally ends up huddled against the back wall – as usual he’s hung up his shirt to block the worst of the sunshine, but Blake wakes earlier than usual to find it (and all of the eridium dust that was inside the front pocket) missing. “Timothy, have you seen-” he bites off the rest of the question because he’s just seen how Tim has managed to bolster his ‘spending power’ despite collecting roughly the same amount of dust that Blake does.

He’d also been wondering how Tim knew that guard’s first name – well, mystery solved. Blake courteously turns his back on them and busies himself with his ruined cot. He tries not to hear the guard - Ben - moan as he comes, or the sound of a zipper being tugged back up. “You can turn around now,” Tim says.

“My apologies,” Blake says, feeling awkward as he turns back towards the other cell.

The doppelgänger’s face is slightly pink and if Blake were a sympathy blusher, he’s sure he’d be brick red right about now. “Sorry, I try to time it for when you’re still asleep.”

“You do not have to explain yourself to me,” Blake tries to reassure him. “It is your business, and none of mine.”

Tim hunches his shoulders. “I don’t want you to think that I…that I’m…most of the inmates here do it, you know? It makes life easier.”

“I certainly do not sit in judgement.” Blake clears his throat. “However, I don’t suppose you saw who stole my shirt.”

“Your shirt? Oh, gosh – someone took it? It might have been that other guard; he’s kinda new.” When Blake tells him about the slashed cot, Tim’s eyes widen. “Jeffrey, you didn’t have your dust still in there, did you?”
“Well, yes.”

“You hung up your shirt with the dust still in the pocket?” Tim’s voice rises to a shriek, and the voice modulator crackles loudly. Tim coughs and rubs at his throat. “That….is not good.”

Blake is starting to figure that out. “No, I suppose that it isn’t.” He wonders just how he’s supposed to climb out of the hole he’s dug for himself. “I don’t suppose flowers and a hand-written letter of apology is going to work.”

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” Tim bites his lip. “I’ve actually seen this kind of thing happen around here. Some of the guards, they get off on power plays like this – and since they’re the ones who have the authority…” He leaves unsaid that the guard in question will likely proposition Blake for some sort of sexual services in exchange for being left alone in all other respects. “The only good thing about it is that they can’t actually get into our cells, unless they have a cutting tool or an explosive weapon.”

Blake suppresses a shudder at having to service the guard through the bars, because he doesn’t want Tim to see how repulsed he is at being forced into anything of the kind. It’s one thing to deliberately offer, and another thing entirely to be blackmailed for it. “I suppose that only time will tell.” Blake says more calmly than he feels. “I have experience with hostile negotiation situations.”

“Just…be careful, okay? Don’t do anything stupid,” Tim advises. “Wanna play a word-association game with me? It helps to kill time.”

“Let me check my social calendar first…”

They play word games for more than an hour before W4R-D3N comes around to open the cells, at which point Blake’s hostile guard approaches them. “You ready to admit you didn’t see what you thought you saw, Mister Blake?”

Blake glances over at Tim, who nods vigorously at him. “To whom shall I admit this?” He asks, striving for politeness and achieving condescension instead.

The guard leans in and jabs a fingertip into Blake’s breastbone. “You better watch your smart mouth, Blake, or I’ll stuff something inside it.” He’s close enough for Blake to hear the suggestive hitch of his breath. “I know you’re the real deal, you piece of shit, and I’m gonna make sure you rot in here if you don’t play along. Understand?”

Unfortunately. “I believe so, yes.”

“Good. Let’s go – you can’t work with no shirt on.” He hauls Blake along with him to the nearest guard station, presumably to retrieve another top, and laughs suddenly as he pulls Blake’s stolen shirt from one of the recesses in his armor. “Look what we got here, boys. Mister President’s decided he wants to smuggle eridium dust. Caught him trying to sell it.”

Blake jerks his head up in surprise. “What? No, I was not-”

The guard backhands him casually, knocking him to the ground with a split lip and a mouthful of blood. “Shut up.”

He gapes in disbelief as he’s quickly sentenced to work in the mines for this so-called infraction that never actually happened. Protesting against such treatment only makes it worse and instead of replacing one of the mineworkers for one shift, now he’s sentenced to two of them. The other guards don’t take half as much malicious pleasure in Blake’s punishment as his new nemesis displays, to their credit, but not enough to actually stop the punishment from happening.
Blake glances over his shoulder as he's hustled over to the line of miners, and sees Timothy staring after him with a stricken look on his face. He probably doesn't think they'll see each other again, Blake thinks to himself as he pulls on the shirt that another guard throws at him. They're taken out to a different area, where several sandskiffs are waiting for them. The guards separate them by twos to create a line in front of each skiff, and Blake's so busy worrying over what's waiting for him in the mines to notice that Lieutenant Ballard has been placed in his line.

"Sir," the young man murmurs, touching Blake's elbow to get his attention.

"Good God – you look horrible," Blake says automatically, taking in the sight of the Crimson Lance officer. Ballard's face and arms are covered in a purplish rash, and some of the skin has actually split open. "I mean…"

Ballard motions for him to turn back around. "It's okay, sir. Try to talk out of the corner of your mouth though; they crack down pretty hard around here for that kind of thing."

"I'm glad you've survived," Blake murmurs as he tries not to move his lips too much. "I don't suppose you know who sent us here?"

"No, sir, I sure don't." They both fall silent as the Loaders herd them onto the skiffs, and Blake sighs in resignation. Hopefully he'll be able to survive whatever is waiting for him.

He glances over at Ballard, wondering just what's in store for him. If the lieutenant looks like that after roughly two weeks, it's small wonder that it's difficult for Hyperion to legitimately keep the mines operational. From what Timothy had told him concerning the place, the particular eridium mine Blake's headed for also has a high rate of fatal accidents.

Their skiff powers up and begins to slide across the sand, taking a different route than the one he's grown used to, and Blake looks around with interest.

A prisoner from one of the neighboring skiffs decides to make a break for it, leaping off the side and floundering for the nearest rock formation. Surprisingly, none of the guards do anything besides tossing a grenade that completely misses the escapee. Blake opens his mouth to ask what's going on when the MIRV grenade detonates, breaking apart into a shower of smaller explosives. A massive sandworm breaches the surface, having been summoned by the concussive nature of the explosions, and the human guards laugh as the sandworm orients on the prisoner. Blake watches it spit a globule of acidic phlegm at the man, who goes down screaming until the screams are cut off by another worm swallowing him whole.

"Anyone else wanna run?" a guard calls out mockingly. "…no?" Blake sets his jaw and stares at the back of Ballard's neck as the skiffs keep going, leaving a patch of bloodied sand behind.

The eridium mines are as bad as he'd feared, and the only consolation is that he's able to stay in relatively close contact with someone he knows. "Stay close by me, Mister Blake, I'll make sure you stay safe," Ballard promises. "We've got to go into that branch and fill these lines of carts before they'll let us back up to the surface. Once I didn't make it and had to stay down here until the next shift came…the only good thing about being down here is that it's a lot cooler." He hands Blake a modified pickaxe, and quickly explains the mining process. Blake learns a lot more about what not to do but at the end of the day, it's really not that complicated: bash the walls until you see purple, and then chip out the veins of eridium while trying not to get caught in a tunnel collapse. They're lucky enough to find a rich vein only two hours into their shift, and Blake's chest and arms ache by the time they fill the first cart.

He's ready to die when the last one is nearly full, and Ballard sends him to sit down out of the way. "Take a few minutes, then come on back and we'll push the carts back up the tracks," Ballard says,
pausing to cough into his fist and wipe away the flecks of blood.

Blake collapses against the rock wall, tilting his head back with a sigh.

"Taking a break, huh?"

He jerks his head up at the sound of the guard's voice, trying to struggle to his feet and avoid being trapped against the wall and the corner of the nearest cart. "No, I'm…we're finished," Blake says, angry at the way he's tripping all over himself to explain the situation.

The guard pushes him back down to the ground with a laugh. "No, don't get up just yet."

"I believe I've already mentioned that I will say that I was mistaken in naming you as the one responsible-" he's cut off with another casual backhand that reopens his split lip from earlier in the day, and Blake finds himself frozen in shock as the other man hits him again before rolling him onto his stomach and starting to tug his pants down to his knees. "Don't – what are you…"

"Mister Blake?" Ballard yells loudly. "We're all set, need your help to push the carts…oh, there you are."

The guard gets up slowly, leaving Blake facedown on the packed dirt. "You'd better get outta here, Atlas filth."

Ballard averts his eyes while Blake yanks his pants back up, feeling numb inside from what had almost happened to him. "Sorry, but I didn't see you over here…I went to get a Loader as an escort so we'd be sure to get these carts back to the lifts," Blake hears the young man say. "But if you don't mind me saying so, I don't think it's a good idea to do anything bad to the man who signs your paychecks."

The Loader trudges up to the carts, a target sign appearing inside its holographic display. "Activating scan of contents."

Blake finishes rearranging his mussed clothing and circles around the Loader cautiously, knowing that the new versions sent to Hyperion-run prison camps have a degree of artificial intelligence that allow them to crack down on any possible riots. If a newer Loader is close to any sort of aggressive movement, it will immediately classify such movement as combat and take steps to rectify the situation. In this case, it would have also stopped what Blake's new nemesis had in mind. The guard stands there and watches him, presumably taking note of the way that Ballard eases in front of Blake in a protective stance, but finally leaves after aiming another malicious laugh in Blake’s direction. "I’ll be seeing you again real soon, Blake."

“Are you okay, sir?” Ballard asks.

No, he thinks. Blake nods anyway because it’s what’s expected of him, running trembling hands through his hair. He’s never felt this completely powerless before; even when Ted Blanco had been hunting him he’d felt that he had at least some options, but in this case he’s a total sitting scythid. “I don’t suppose you would know where I could borrow a knife.”

“Actually,” Lieutenant Ballard says, “I do.” He shows Blake the crude makeshift knife he’d made last week, an eridium shard carefully shaved into a deadly point with a rag-wrapped handle. “We get scanned as we go back up top, so I’ve just been keeping it down here…but it looks like you could use it, sir.”

He passes the blade over, and Blake weighs it in his palm before handing it back. "There’s no way to get it up there?"
Ballard jerks his chin towards the Loader who is still scanning the carts of ore. “Only way is to smuggle it in one of the carts…but unless you’ve got someone highly placed in the processing plant who can make sure you’re the one who processes that particular cart…”

“I see.” Blake thinks about it, then nods to himself. “Yes, that might work…because I do have access to that highly placed individual. The man occupying the cell next to mine can retrieve it, if you could send the knife during tomorrow’s shift.” He rubs his hands over his arms, shivering convulsively. “I never asked for any of this.”

“Nobody ever does,” Ballard says. “We just have to hold on ’til the colonel comes for us.”

“You honestly believe that?”

Ballard smiles. “I do.”

“How can you be so sure? The man is nothing if not opportunistic.”

“That’s just the nature of the beast, Mister Blake, but I’ve known Colonel Blanco for years – he takes care of what’s his, no matter what.”

Blake shivers again, wondering just how long it’s going to take until they’re allowed back on the surface. He’d been just fine earlier, despite being bone weary, but now the temperature seems to have plunged in the last ten minutes. “I belong to no one, Lieutenant.” Why is it so cold all of a sudden?

“If you say so, sir…sir? Let’s get you up to the lift and make sure you’re warmed up.” Ballard guides him up to the mine entrance, chattering about the first things he’s planning on doing as soon as they’re rescued. “I’m thinking, a really long bath. I don’t even care about this rash; I just really want a bath. What about you?”

“I might fake my own demise and go to live on Eden-6,” Blake sighs.

They fall into the line of prisoners who have managed to fill their quotas for the night, and Blake has a bad moment when he sees his tormentor talking to a few of the other guards watching them. Thankfully, he’s not to be left down in the mines but is allowed into the lift…right beside ‘his’ guard. Blake doesn’t even know what to call him, because he’s forgotten to ask Timothy about it – the only way he can distinguish the bastard from the rest of them is the corrosion around the guard’s boot braces. “Miss me?” The guard asks, closing his fingers around Blake’s upper arm and squeezing hard enough to bruise. “Don’t bother trying to report me, Blake…after all, who’s gonna believe you?”

Blake keeps his mouth closed and his face turned away, waiting for the lift to reach the surface. “Leave him alone,” Ballard warns. “What do you think’ll happen once he gets back on Helios?”

The guard’s helmet swings towards the lieutenant. “You think I’m letting either of you out of this place alive?” His fingers tighten on Blake’s arm until he finally wrings out a pained noise. “Your ass is mine now, Mister President.”

“You do not frighten me,” Blake hisses, trying to jerk away.

“That’s because I’m not really trying yet. I own you, Blake. Better get used to it.” He releases Blake’s arm and reaches down to grab Blake’s ass with the same force he’d used on the arm…and then moves away as the lift finally reaches the surface.

Blake grits his teeth against the pain and limps behind Ballard, who glances over a shoulder at him.
“You know what? Forget sending that knife up to your friend, sir, because we’re killing that fucker tomorrow.”

“I have no problem with that,” Blake assures him. “Why aren’t we moving yet?” He asks when the majority of the guards and Loaders begin milling around the mine entrance. “What’s going on?”

Ballard shrugs. “You got me…hang on, let me see if I can find out…” He turns to another prisoner, and soon a gossip chain is created with each of them passing the request along until it reaches someone who actually knows something. Blake waits until the information is passed back to Ballard, who turns to him. “Moonshot blitz from Helios knocked out one of the guard towers…official explanation is that they were targeting a bandit camp nearby. One of the guards said it probably had something to do with the Crimson Raiders – I’ve heard they’ll wipe out a camp and move in so they can keep an eye on Hyperion’s activities – and the cannon up there wasn’t adjusted properly.”

“And the unofficial explanation?”

Ballard grins. “I told you he’d come for us.”

The first breath of hope he’s had since being kidnapped pulls Blake’s head higher. Still… “How can you be sure it’s him?”

“There’s no way anyone up there would accidentally target Friendship Gulag – any locations designated as being under Hyperion control are automatically locked out of the computer…someone did an override, and set it up to look like it was an honest mistake.” Ballard wipes his face clean of all expression as their guards begin double-checking their numbers. “Just hold tight, sir. I think it’ll be a little while before he gets to us, so you’d better keep this to yourself until it’s time to go.”

It takes more than two hours to get back to his cell, during which time Blake is able to see the destruction for himself – the previously impenetrable ramparts of the prison wall have been shattered by a well-placed cargo container, and Blake is part of the crew conscripted to clear the rubble. W4R-D3N digistructs a temporary patch in the gap, and a few engineers are setting up a thermosonic barrier by the time he’s placed back in his cell.

Tim is waiting for him, and sticks a hand through the gap in the bars. “Man, I was really worried about you – you okay?”

“More or less,” Blake admits wearily, sinking down on the ruins of his cot and immediately yelping in pain because he’s forgotten the bruises. “Damn.”

Tim eyes narrow. “That guard was down there with you, wasn’t he.” When Blake ignores the question, he sighs. “I was wondering why he came back and was digging around in your cell…you’d better make sure he didn’t plant anything else.” That’s the last thing he’d need, Blake thinks irritably as he shifts to one side and yanks the crumpled canvas aside to find an old Atlas SMG that had been concealed there. “Is…is that what I think it is?” Tim asks incredulously. “You gotta get rid of it. If he comes back with a Loader-”

“The guard didn’t put this here.” Blake places a hand on the side of it, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. He hadn’t truly dared to believe that Blanco would come for him, despite Ballard’s reassurances. “It’s vintage.”
The not-so-great escape.

Chapter Summary

Lt. Ballard, Blake and his Plus One are liberated from Friendship Gulag. Tim is made to feel unwelcome, Ted does something unbelievably stupid, and Blake cements his title of Drama King by fainting. It must be a Monday.

Anticipation has never actually killed someone before, to the best of his knowledge, but Blake is starting to think that he might be anticipation’s first recorded casualty. He has a weapon. He has the assurance that he won’t have to spend another day in the mines or the refinery. What he doesn’t have is Ted Blanco; only the knowledge that his shadow is somewhere near. He could be any of the helmeted guards strolling about, or he could have gone down to the mines to search for Blake after finding his cell empty. “Where are you?” Blake murmurs.

Tim, after attempting to get some answers and failing, is curled up fast asleep in his cell…something that Blake should be doing. He’s too wired to sleep, though, not with rescue so close at hand. Blake’s already determined not to share any unnecessary information with the doppelgänger, because his friend tends to display his emotions even without meaning to. He’s decided to take the young man with them, which is something Blanco will doubtless object to, but there’s simply no way he can leave Tim here.

Such sentiment is surely a sign of weakness. Ah, well.

Blake shifts his weight, grimacing as the bruises on his rear end send a sharp pain upon connecting with the concealed SMG. He settles on his other side and leans against the bars so that he can pretend to sleep while keeping an eye out for trouble. Despite his best efforts, the heat and his own exhaustion catch up to him and Blake falls into a doze. He’s vaguely aware of lowered voices coming from the next cell and sleepily opens his eyes to see Tim and…whatever the guard’s name is…beginning their nightly ‘trade.’ Blake knows he shouldn’t watch, and he’s still unsettled enough at the reminder of his guard’s ill-intentioned advances not to really want to, but something makes him keep looking.

Tim shuffles forward on his knees as Ben (yes, that’s his name) tugs his zipper down and presses his hips against the bars so that his dick slides between them with plenty of room to spare. Blake is afforded an unobstructed view of how Tim sucks the other man into his mouth, cheeks hollowing out with each pull of his lips. Despite himself, Blake can’t help but think of the hidden weapon and the man whom it belongs to…more specifically, what had happened the night before Blanco had left in a temper. He hasn’t thought of it lately, having more important things to focus on, but it’s vivid in his mind now. What if he hadn’t sent the Omega Assassin out of the room in a rage that night? Perhaps it would have led to a situation like the one currently unfolding mere feet from where he’s pretending to sleep.

It’s distressingly easy to imagine that he is the one on his knees orally servicing the guard, because his shadow is most likely wearing the exact same armor…wherever he is right now. The rapidly forming fantasy is stifled just as quickly with the unwelcome memory of being struck across the mouth, of rough hands working at the waistband of his pants. Blake closes his eyes against the sight of the ‘trade’ but can still hear the soft sounds of panting, and saliva-slicked flesh squelching in and
out of Tim’s mouth. He grinds his teeth and forces himself to stop thinking about Ted Blanco.

Tim receives two extra bottles of water in payment and he unscrews the cap on one of them the instant Ben walks away, gargling quietly and spitting it out on the pavement where it evaporates. “Everything all right, Timothy?” Blake asks, pretending to have just woken up.

“As right as it could ever be,” Tim replies. “I don’t suppose you’re ready to tell me who left you that, uh, gift.”

Blake shifts his weight again. “Not particularly, no. Not yet, anyway.”

“Uh huh.” The hurt he’s feeling shows on Tim’s face, a stark example of why Blake can’t trust him with the truth just yet.

This is the problem with having any sort of friends, Blake thinks despairingly. “Timothy…let me tell you a story, if you’ll listen to it.”

“Is any of it true?” Tim says, still upset but struggling to hide it.

Blake crosses his legs and settles against the gun, ignoring the twinges of pain shooting up his spine. “I promise you that, one way or another, you will be able to find out by the time our shifts begin…” He trails off and eyes his friend, who starts to lean forward in anticipation. “Two months prior, I was conducting business on Thrace…” Blake talks, and finds himself seeing the dubious humor in the myriad situations Blanco had placed him in just because the assassin had felt like it. Tim proves yet again to be a good listener, gasping at all the right places and supplying short comments to let Blake know what he thinks of the recalled events.

A devilish impulse makes him withhold the information that Ares is the identical triplet of the renowned Doctors Zed and Ned. Blake also refrains from mentioning the undercurrent of… tension…that had sprung up between them (no pun intended), as Tim doesn’t really need to know anything about that. Tim bombards him with excited questions before finally arriving at the one worth all the eridium in the mine. “Is…is he coming to rescue you?”

Blake checks the position of the sun before answering; it’s nearly set. He might as well confess, since there’s no harm in it now. “I believe so; yes.” Blake brushes at the sleeve of his prison uniform. “Would you care to accompany us?” He’s somewhat startled to find that, when he looks back over at his unlikely friend, Tim’s eyes have filled with tears. “Oh, good god, Timothy. None of that, now.”

“S-sorry,” Tim blurts out. “I just – you really mean it?”

“Of course I do. Now wipe your face and compose yourself before you are noticed,” he says briskly. “Really, Timothy. This might be a nice time for one of your word games.”

Tim nods, rubbing at his eyes and smiling sheepishly. "Sorry, I just…it's been a long time since anyone's, y'know. Really cared.”

This is a sentiment that resonates deeply with Blake, and he ducks his head as Harold's memory takes the opportunity to intrude. "Well."

"Should we do rhyming, or another word association one?" Tim asks, still sniffling slightly. "There's this thing I do where I take a word and change one letter to make a new one…and you can't reuse that letter. It's kinda fun."

"Very well, let us try that one."
The sun slowly sinks beneath the horizon, and the two of them keep exchanging nervous glances, but still nothing happens. They’ve nearly given up hope when the work claxon sounds. “It's not happening, is it,” Tim says flatly.

"I am as clueless as you. Here comes the Constructor; sit back.” Blake scoots away from the bars as W4R-D3N begins its approach…and then stops dead. Could this be…? He looks over at Tim, who has gone back up against the front bars of the cell and is gripping them as he stares out. W4R-D3N seems to be having some sort of wiring issue, going by the ribbons of electricity spiraling out of its front digistruct lenses to crawl over the rest of the huge metal frame. A few guards approach and one of them is promptly electrocuted, to Blake’s delight, but they soon have the side panel of the Constructor opened to reboot the thing.

“What is going on-” Tim gasps as all three guards, who have conveniently lined themselves up for it, are slain by a single bullet passing through their heads. It’s getting too dark to really see specifics, but Blake has a clear view of the man closest to W4R-D3N getting his brains painted upon all that Hyperion yellow as the exit wound blows his forehead open. “Oh, my God.”

The sirens begin to hoot all at once after the initial shocked silence, and Blake finally reaches beneath his bedding to retrieve the gun. “I suggest you get back from the bars,” he says, but with all the noise there’s no way that Tim could have heard him so he mimes it instead and his young friend gives him a shaky-looking thumbs up.

He gnaws at the inside of his cheek and squints out in the gathering darkness that is lit only by the cycling orange lights that are attached to the guard towers…because it looks as if someone has disabled the floodlights that should have come on by now. The row of buildings ahead of their cells are briefly lit by the emergency lights, and Blake sucks in his breath sharply – did something just move out there? Despite his earlier advice to Tim, Blake leans forward and grasps the bars so that he can see better. “Looking for something?” A voice asks abruptly and Blake opens his mouth to greet his shadow before he realizes that it’s not Blanco at all.

“You,” he says, not bothering to conceal his loathing.

“That’s right, Mister President. Me.” The guard (who has decided to discard his helmet this time) reaches a hand inside the cell, clamping it around Blake’s left wrist before he can pull away. “I was looking forward to fucking you up the ass ‘til you blacked out, but it looks like I don’t have that kind of time – so you’re gonna tell me who wants you so badly that they send in three Atlas Assassins for you.”

Three? The hand around Blake’s wrist tightens, wrenching the tendons and causing him to cry out in pain. He reaches down for the SMG with his other hand, but can’t find it – it was just there. “I’m not telling you anything, you spineless- ahhh!” Blake’s voice lifts into a scream as the guard twists his wrist hard enough to break it.

He screams again as his wrist is wrenched the other way, this time. “If you don’t tell me, I’m going to kill you. So start talking,” the guard advises.

“Leave him alone,” Tim howls, beating on the bars of his own cell. “You’re a fucking coward, picking on someone who can’t fight back!”

The guard drops Blake’s wrist and reaches for the stun baton hanging from his belt. “Oh, look, Blake. Your pet whore thinks he’s gonna protect you from inside his own box.” Blake curls up around his injured hand, sending a feverish silent apology to Tim as he tries to feel around for the
dropped gun instead of attempting to keep the guard close. His search grows increasingly frantic as the sounds of his friend’s torture fills his ears, but he finally touches the cold metal barrel of it. “C’mon, little Jack – open your mouth for it, you fucking slut!” He’s over trying to force the end of the baton inside Tim’s mouth as the doppelgänger thrashes in a vain attempt to free himself.

Blake can barely believe this is happening – rescue is only moments away, something the guard has to realize, but he’s still taking time to terrorize them. Every time Blake thinks he knows everything about Pandora, something like this makes him realize the extent to which this planet twists everything it touches. “Step away from Timothy, you walking degenerate pile of excrescence.” He lifts the SMG, and the guard turns back towards him as Blake thumbs the safety switch to ‘off’.

“Where did you get that?” He comes closer, and laughs. “Five bars of eridium says it’s too old to even fire. You really think I’m scared of an antique?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Blake can see Tim struggling to pull himself upright. “It’s not antique-”

The guard stiffens suddenly, his mouth opening in pained surprise as the glowing red tip of a plasma sword exits his right shoulder. “It’s vintage,” Ted Blanco finishes. “Hey there, sir. This man botherin’ you?”

Blake sags back to the ground, lightheaded with relief. “You took your time.”

“Oh, you know me. Dramatic entrances are everything…” Blanco turns his attention back to the guard he’s currently skewering. “Here’s what’s gonna happen, sweetheart – you get on your tippy toes an’ make like a ballerina so’s I can cut through these bars. Got it?”

The guard draws in a sobbing breath. “Not…not enough room.”

Blanco leans in, helmet cocked to one side. “What’s that, now? Oh, right…this blade ain’t gone through you enough.” The red blade begins to slide through as he pushes it farther into the other man’s body, and the guard shrieks in pain. “How’s this? That enough?” Blake stares in horrified fascination as his tormentor is forced up on the toes of his boots, leaning in so that the sword exiting his flesh can slice into the bars of Blake’s cell.

“Not that I don’t appreciate this, Colonel,” Blake says delicately, cradling his hurt wrist, “but I believe that time might be of the essence.”

“You’re the boss. You want I should just kill him?” Blanco grasps the back of the guard’s neck roughly, and pulls the plasma sword free. The Omega Assassin slashes into the bottom of the cell and knees the bars so that they fall inwards. “Let’s getcha back up to the H, Mister Blake…oh, hang on a sec.” Blanco pauses long enough to push the guard down to the ground, resting a boot on the man’s backside. The sword flashes in a downward arc, and the guard’s screams redouble because he’s just been hamstrung. The blade vanishes from sight, and Blanco extends a gauntleted hand through the hole he’s just created in Blake’s cell. “C’mon.”

Blake looks from him to a positively astounded Timothy Lawrence, and then back again. “Open the neighboring cell. We will be taking him, as well.”

“We sure as shit will not, I ain’t come here for-”

“Open it,” Blake interrupts. “This is the last time I will tell you to do so.” The sound of gunfire is coming closer (a lot closer) and Blanco remains motionless for several seconds before thrusting his arm out to the side. The plasma blade slides out from the hilt, and Tim leaps backwards to avoid being cut by it.
Blanco brings the blade back through the bars and sheathes it, leaning in and grasping Blake’s arm before yanking him out. “We’re gonna have some words ‘bout this,” Blanco hisses at him furiously. “Both of you; go.” He declines to give Tim a helping hand, only lifting the glowing sword to indicate their path of escape.

“Let’s go,” Blake tells Tim needlessly, and they start running – in Tim’s case it’s more of a limp, as he’s still recovering from the torture of earlier. He pauses to look back at the guard, who’s writhing on the concrete, and is astonished to see that there truly are two more Atlas Assassins. There will be quite a backlog of questions for Blanco to answer once they’re safe.

Tim jerks at his arm and points. "There!"

Blake shoves a shoulder beneath his friend’s arm, helping to steady them as they run towards a frantically waving Ballard. A grenade explodes entirely too close to them, and Tim suddenly regains strength enough to haul Blake out of the way of chunk of rubble that are falling from Friendship Gulag’s damaged outer wall. Ballard darts forward to usher them through the gap, and Blake is suddenly treated to a view of the outside world that he'd been nearly convinced that he would never get to see again. Beside him, Timothy stumbles to a halt and Blake's forcibly reminded that the young man had been imprisoned for several years. What must it feel like for him? "We can’t stop here," Blake murmurs. "We have to go on."

Timothy sucks in a loud breath, nodding. "Yeah. I know. Yeah."

"This way, Mister Blake," Lieutenant Ballard says urgently. "Nearly there."

They run past the smoking remains of a few Surveyors and Ballard leads them to a steep dropoff, whereupon they're expected to just slide down and risk breaking their necks. Blake goes hurtling down and hopes for the best, hearing Tim's terrified yodel somewhere off to the left. "Where are they?" Blake pants.

"Just keep going, sir; they'll catch up."

Blake wants to ask how they're supposed to do that, and exactly who 'they' are anyway, but his questions are soon answered by the arrival of a Bandit Technical. The truck roars over the side of the closest sand dune and slides to a halt beside them, but the driver is someone Blake has only heard of...when Handsome Jack had been bragging about torturing her. "Get in," Dr. Patricia Tannis says irritably. "I hate Spiderants."

The men scramble inside with her and she slams the Boost immediately, almost making Ballard fall right back out again. "What's going on now?" Tim murmurs to Blake, who can only answer with a shrug. He can't think of any reason why Dahl's ex- Scientific Advisor would be assisting with an Atlas military operation.

The next several minutes are spent hanging on for dear life as Tannis tries her best to bounce her passengers out into the sand, and Blake grits his teeth against the pain as the uneven jolting causes agony to radiate from his broken wrist. They eventually crash down a steep embankment and their unfriendly driver takes the Technical out of gear before turning her head to look at them. Elpis has risen, causing the desert to be bathed in an eerie glow. Her mouth is set in a grim line and her eyes grow noticeably colder as they rest upon Tim's face. "I was not told about you," Tannis says carefully, reaching beneath her seat to withdraw a massive Tediore shotgun. "I would not have agreed if I had known-"

"Whoa, whoa- he’s a body double,” Ballard says in alarm, reaching a hand out for the gun. “That’s not Jack, Doctor Tannis.”
“Indeed it is not,” Blake says, which probably isn’t the best idea he’s had because her focus shifts to him and so does the shotgun’s muzzle.

Tannis stares at him without blinking. “It is bad enough that I was rousted from my latest dig site by that reprobate you call an employee, but now I am forced to help the very company that cosigned my torture at the hands of the man whose face he is wearing. There is a limit to anyone’s patience, however considerable, and I believe I have reached it. If he has been harmed in this endeavor, I assure you that I shall exact swift vengeance on par with the cumulative effects of any injuries taken.”

Blake risks a glance over at Tim, who shakes his head in shared confusion. “I am afraid that I do not understand.”

Her eyes narrow further, but spares them another long-winded lecture as her attention is diverted by the arrival of the three Atlas Assassins. “Oh. Good,” Tannis says calmly, returning the shotgun beneath the seat and shifting the Technical back into gear. “As you might be aware, we have considerably less room than anticipated.”


He climbs into the passenger seat, and both he and Tim are forced to make room for the other three who are joining them in the bed of the truck. “Let’s get out there ‘fore the JET Loaders spot us.” They’re all jostled again as Tannis floors it, and Blake is surprised to see one of the assassins station himself right behind her and place a hand on her shoulder. She reaches her own hand up to cover it, and keeps driving. The remaining assassin seems to be unduly fascinated with Tim, who shrinks back against the scrutiny coming from behind the featureless helmet.

They drive through the Eridium Blight where visibility is hampered by the ever-present fall of volcanic ash, but there’s an actual road so Dr. Tannis’ wild ride becomes halfway bearable. Tim nods off against Blake’s shoulder and although he struggles to keep his eyes open, Blake’s various mental and physical traumas take their toll. He wakes to the crunching sound of the vehicle’s tires on gravel, and the low murmur of voices. “Where are we?” Blake asks wearily. His wrist aches something fierce, and his exhaustion has translated into a splitting headache. “Near a Fast Travel station, I hope.” He lifts his head from where it’s been resting against Tim’s cheek and, to his dismay, sees that he’s been brought back to Fyrestone.

“Just hang in, we’re nearly there,” Blanco says from beside him. Which is curious, since Blake had thought he was in the front seat. “Home sweet home.”

“Oh, shut it,” Blanco speaks again, this time from his perch behind Patricia Tannis…well, perhaps Blake had struck his head on something. Or else his Blanco had enlisted the help of both brothers, Blake finally realizes.

“Doctors Zed, Ted, and Ned,” he says stupidly. “There are three of you.”

The triplet stationed behind Tannis shakes his head in disgust. “Picked a real winner there, Ted.”

“Nobody asked you.”

The Technical is parked directly outside the rusted ‘gates’ of Fyrestone and a Blanco jumps out, jogging through the gap and heading in while Tannis drives around to a section of the fence blocking access to the Information Stockade. Tim wakes up as the man opens a cleverly concealed gate, and the female doctor twists around to stare at them all. “Bring it on in, Trish – I’ll seal it back up, an’ then we can get settled.”
“Very well,” Tannis says, easing the vehicle inside the fence and waiting until the man climbs back behind her…then the Technical parks in front of an old motel that should have fallen down thirty years ago. “Zed.”

“Yeah,” their gate-opener acknowledges, jumping back down and reaching his arms up for her. Tannis slides over into his arms and, to Blake’s surprise, buries her face in his neck as he strokes her hair. “I’m okay, honey. It’s over.”

She nods her head, still clinging tightly. “Take that off, it stinks.”

“It don’t stink,” one of the others says, and Blake glances over at Tim as the helmets start coming off. He’s never witnessed all three of them in the same place before, and it’s certainly a sight to behold… Tim seems to think so, too, because his eyes seem like they’re about to pop right from their sockets. “Whoa, whoa – you never said there were three.”

“Whose idea was it to set that one loose? Nobody told me we were gonna bring Jack back here,” Zed says bluntly. “One was more’n enough.”

“He ain’t the real one, though,” Ned interrupts, slowly drawing off his gloves without taking his eyes from Tim. “What’s your name, kid?”

Tim’s skin is starting to gain a pinkish tinge, and he doesn’t seem to know where to look. “I…um. Tim. Timothy. Lawrence. There’s three of you.”

Zed casts an unfriendly look at Blake. “Looks like I spoke too soon ‘bout pickin’ winners. Listen close, Tim Timothy Lawrence,” he says, tightening his arms around the woman still pressed close to his chest, “I don’t give a damn where you go, but you sure as hell can’t stay here.”

“Zed, knock it off,” Blake’s shadow finally speaks, looking up from fiddling with his armor. “Your dick ain’t any bigger’n ours, so stow it. It was my call, and I don’t answer to you.” He looks at Blake, and jerks his chin towards the motel. “Get your scrawny ass in there.”

Blake’s been starved, deprived of water, assaulted, nearly blown up, and he’s so tired he can hardly see straight. Being treated like an errant child in front of witnesses is just too much. “No.”

“Ooooh.”

“Shut the fuck up, Ned!” Blanco (with the other two present, Blake should really just start calling him Ted to save himself some confusion) snarls, and is in front of Blake faster than he can blink. His fingers curl around Blake’s broken wrist, and the accent drops from his voice. “You start walking right now, or I swear to God I’ll make you regret it,” Ted whispers.

Ballard goes on high alert and tries to divert his commander’s sudden, inexplicable rage. “Colonel? Sir?”

Ted doesn’t take his eyes from Blake’s. “Stay out of this, Lieutenant, and make yourself useful by gathering up the armor.”

“Jeffrey-” Timothy’s ill-advised exclamation of concern makes Ted’s fingers tighten convulsively, and Blake’s stomach sinks to his shoes as he sees the other man’s shift of expression.

“Colonel Blanco will not harm me, Timothy,” Blake says carefully, despite the pain that makes him feel like screaming. He has absolutely no clue what’s set the Omega off, and he doesn’t dare look away because something tells him that it might be the most dangerous thing he could do at this
particular moment. “Do not worry.”

Ted motions towards the motel once more and Blake nods slowly, allowing himself to be backed through the door. “You work quickly, don’t you,” the assassin hisses, kicking the door shut and shoving Blake against the wall. “How long did it take, exactly? An entire day?”

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Blake says, licking his lips nervously. “If I might suggest it, medication might help with your mood—”

Ted lifts his hand and actually slaps him. It might be laughable were he not a large enough man to make a simple slap feel like a stunning blow. “Why’d you want the body double freed? Did you think the contract would revert to its original terms? Is that it?” He seizes Blake by the throat and shakes him. “Is that it?”

Blake grasps at Ted’s hand, his eyes starting to water from the pain shooting up his arm. “Can’t… breathe…”

“Good.”

“Ted…”

Ted leans in close and looks him over slowly. “It ain’t.”

“My apologies…Theodore.” Blake has no idea what’s come over him, but he knows that the worst of the danger has passed. “I was not intent upon any scheme that might impugn your, ah, integrity as the sole remaining Omega Assassin.”

“So why’d you want him out?”

“Believe it or not, we became friends during my incarceration.”

Ted’s eyes have a gleam in them that Blake doesn’t like the looks of. “Friends.”

“Yes, we—” the rest of Blake’s angry sentence is effectively silenced by Ted putting a hand to each side of his face, and kissing him. It’s a savage act, intent upon putting Blake in his place and showing Ted’s superiority, and Blake is so startled that all he can do is stand there pinned to the wall while the big man stakes his claim. “Are you quite finished?” Blake asks coldly when Ted finally gets it through his head that Blake is not about to melt into his arms and beg to be taken advantage of. In different circumstances, he might have displayed that exact reaction, but not now. Not after what he’s just been through at the hands of the sadistic guard and Ted’s deplorable, unnecessary display of… whatever this is. “If you ever touch me uninvited again, Colonel Blanco, you will pay for it.”

Ted looks down at him and steps back slowly. “Whatever you say. Sir.”

“Walk away, Colonel. Walk away right now,” Blake says, feeling the shivers begin again. The pressure inside his skull intensifies and he struggles to remain upright as Ted starts to turn away from him, but then his legs give out. The last thing he’s aware of is Ted’s voice raised in alarm as the ground rushes up to meet him.
Two too many!

Chapter Summary

The Blanco triplets prove that three isn't necessarily better than one, Blake recovers with the help of a beautifully tailored suit and the irresistible lure of revenge...and Ned makes sure everyone knows how inept Ted is at That Romance Thing™. It's mayhem in the streets of Fyrestone!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Blake floats in and out of consciousness, hearing the same voice in three different places at once conducting an argument that seems to be about him. There’s pain in his head and in his wrist. There are hands that hold him down when he tries to get up because there’s something he needs to do…but he can’t remember what. Darkness returns to claim him through the sharp pain of a needle entering his skin.

He feels impossibly weak by the time he opens his eyes and is actually aware of his surroundings, but a horrible thought makes Blake scrabble at the straps holding him to the bed. “Hey now, whoa…no need for that,” a familiar voice soothes. “You been through the wringer these past few weeks – just relax, Mister Blake.”

Blake collapses back against the pillow, relief surging through him now that he realizes he hasn’t been taken back to Friendship Gulag. “Which one…”

“Ned.” The other man pats his leg reassuringly. “You hungry? I could get somethin’ for ya, ‘f you want. We brought down a skag earlier an’ it’s nearly done cookin’. Looks like you ain’t had much to eat lately, so I’ll have to feed you so you don’t overdo…but if you promise to take it easy I’ll give you a free pass.”

He stares up at the dirty ceiling, then rolls his head over to look at Ned who’s sitting at his bedside with what looks like a pornographic magazine draped over one thigh. “What happened? How long have I been here?”

“Oh, not too long – just a day or so.” Ned glances around as if to make sure they’re unobserved, then leans in. “Ted’s been pitchin’ a fit ever since you went down; figures he’s to blame for it. I knew you musta smacked his ass at least once,” he laughs.

Blake looks away uncomfortably. “I wish to leave.”

“No can do, Mister Blake. You had a nasty case of the Shivers – probably from bein’ exposed to ‘rid rock an’ whatshisface,” Ned says, still sounding disgustingly cheerful. “Then you had your wrist all banged t’nell, and it still kinda looks like you’d blow away with the first stiff breeze…so no, you ain't goin’ nowhere.” He stands up and tosses his magazine onto Blake’s stomach. “Hold this.”

Blake finds himself holding a wrinkled copy of something called GRUNT, which promises to show girls 'going commando', while Ned leaves the room. He looks around at the room he's effectively trapped inside – there are faded promotional images sponsored by Dahl tacked up on the recently
patched walls; from Blake's vantage point it looks like they were only put there to hide the unevenness from where the carpenter had shored up the walls with scavenged lumber and a great deal of wishful thinking. He can hear the faint sounds of a radio playing somewhere outside and, even fainter than that, laughter.

He sighs and flips open the magazine because there’s nothing else for him to do, looking up in surprise when Ned ducks back through the door. “Back so soon?” Blake asks.

Ned doesn’t answer, instead giving him a long look while Blake realizes that he’d been mistaken – this isn’t Ned at all. “You look better,” Ted says carefully, moving his eyes back to Blake’s reading material.

Blake drops the magazine as if he’s been scalded and feels as if he should argue that it doesn’t belong to him, but he presses his lips together and nods instead. “Am I your prisoner now?”

Ted eases himself over the threshold of the small room without answering, because it looks like they’re not going to be adults who actually discuss what had happened between them, and drops to a crouch beside the bed. Blake finds himself holding his breath as the assassin reaches out - and tugs on the knots holding the restraints in place. “You’re free to leave whenever you’d like, Mister Blake.”

“Thank you,” Blake murmurs. Ted’s eyes flick up to meet his before he looks away again.

“There were…bruises.”

Blake frowns in confusion – of course there were, he’d been performing forced labor in his own prison camp – before he realizes to which set of bruises Ted is referring. “Yes.” He deliberately keeps his tone mild, wondering how much information Ballard had shared about the attempted rape. “I imagine that there were.”

Ted stays kneeling and silent, most likely waiting for Blake to identify his assailant, then rises to his feet again when Blake remains quiet. “Ned’s getting you food, and then Zed will check you over – you can leave directly after.”

“Thank you,” Blake says again when the silence between them stretches a little too long. They look at each other, and Ted breaks eye contact first as he turns to leave. “Theodore…”

Ted stops and reaches a hand out to rest it on the doorway, using his thumbnail to scratch away a tiny patch of dried paint and refusing to look back. “What.”

“…nothing,” Blake says, unable to find the words. Unable to even think of what he could say in the first place. “Except-”

Ted sighs. “Corrazza’s done in. There was no body double; will that be all?”

“Yes, I rather think that it will.” Blake looks down at the brace on his left wrist that has been wrapped tightly with gauze. “Dismissed.”

Ned passes his brother on the way in, a sly smile spreading across his face as he takes in the scene. “Y’all are like an ECHO show up in here…Ted, you might need to step in ‘fore Zed blows his top – he’s givin’ Tim that look again.”

Tim. With all the fuss and drama happening in his own life, Blake had completely forgotten about Tim. “Oh, dear.”
“I’m on it,” Ted promises with a sigh of disgust.

“I hope he’s doing well,” Blake says awkwardly as Ned comes in with a plate of food. He’d mentioned that they were eating skag, to Blake’s dismay, but surely that can’t be what smells so wonderful. Anything would smell good when you’ve been confined to dusty protein bars for the past two weeks, Blake reminds himself. “This wasn’t the best place I could bring him.”

Ned’s smile tugs on the corners of his mouth again. “Oh, I disagree. Fyrestone’s the best place you coulda ever dropped that boy.”

“If you say so,” Blake says. “Is that truly skag meat?”

“Smells good, huh?” Ned says cheerfully. ‘Both of y’all need feedin’ up and, like I told ya, Fyrestone’s the best place ‘cause in addition to bein’ three of the most handsome devils you ever did see…we Blancos know how to cook.”

Blake’s eyebrows lift in surprise. “Oh? That is interesting.”

“Yup,” Ned continues with a wink. “It’s one of our most marketable talents, despite one-third of us not knowin’ romance from a goddamn hole in the ground. I mean, Zed ain’t that great at it either but don’t you dare tell him I said so.”

“Oh,” Blake says again.

“Mister Blake…if you don’t mind me sayin’ so, Ted is friggin’ hopeless at this sorta thing. You want somethin’ from that idiot, you gotta get a billboard.”

“I appreciate the recommendation.”

“The kind that lights up and has arrows.”

“Thank you, Ned.”

“I bet Moxxi’s still got a few from the Underdome—”

“Thank you.”

Ned laughs and drops down into the chair at Blake’s bedside. “You might think I’m teasin’ but I really ain’t. Ted’s a damn mess after…well. Enough about that moron. Let’s talk about Tim, instead. D’you know if he’s into dudes, at all…?”

Blake reaches out for the plate, which is promptly slid out of reach. “Doctor Blanco,” he says, trying to convey his irritation, “I am in no mood to play matchmaker.”

“I ain’t sayin’ you need to do anything of the kind,” Ned points out. “Just a yes or no is fine.” He leaves unsaid the fact that he won’t hand the food over unless Blake humors him, but makes sure to fan his hand over it so the aroma wafts in Blake’s direction. "Course he might not even be interested in nothin' from nobody."

“If you are so concerned, I am not sure why you are bothering,” Blake sighs.

“You gotta be kiddin’ me – it’s like I hit the friggin’ twink jackpot! ‘Course I’m gonna go for it!”

Blake manages to get the man to trade him the plate in exchange for future advice, and he closes his eyes in bliss at the first forkful of meat. “This tastes wonderful.” He can’t believe he’s saying that about skag. Ned scolds him for eating so quickly and threatens to take the plate away if he doesn’t
slow down. “I don’t suppose…”

Ned grins. “You want more, huh? Maybe if you told me what I wanna know, I’d see what I can do.”

“I am going to relay everything I’m telling you, you must understand. I owe him that much,” Blake says, unable to believe that he’s been forced into gossiping about another man’s love life. “He was once romantically involved with Wilhelm the Enforcer, back when Wilhelm was more man than machine. Tread carefully, Doctor Blanco.” He extends his empty plate, and Ned immediately takes off with it.

Blake leans back and closes his eyes while his stomach gurgles loudly, unused to having actual food inside it. He doesn’t bother opening his eyes when he hears Ned come back in. “How’re you gettin’ on?” the voice is flat and somewhat unfriendly…so it belongs to Zed.

“I am much better; thank you,” Blake says politely, and starts to sit up before Zed brusquely motions him to stay where he is. The doctor checks his vitals quickly and asks him a few questions about his current energy level. “Your brother tells me that I will be able to leave.”

Zed shakes his head. “Farthest you’ll be able to travel is outside an’ back – you’d be lucky to get to the center of town ‘thout fallin’ over.”

“But…”

“But nothin’, Blake. Shivers ain’t somethin’ to laugh at,” Zed snarls at him. “You don’t wanna be here an’ I don’t want you here neither, but I won’t let you kill yourself just ‘cause Ted’s actin’ a fool. Now, shut up and gimme your arm.” He uncaps an Anshin needle and holds it like a dagger.

Blake slowly extends his arm. “I was supposed to sign off on your immediate forced eviction, Doctor Zed, but I tried to convince you to leave of your own free will.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Zed demands. “I don’t care how bad you feel about it! Just you look at what Hyperion’s done to my home – slagpits every goddamn where. On top of the mess y’all left, now I got you and Jack’s double here. It’s bad enough I gotta deal with you, but—” he breaks off, breathing hard and looking angry. “You keep him away from Dr. Tannis, got it?” The needle slides into Blake’s arm more gently than Blake had thought it might and Zed looks angry at that, too.

“I believe I understand,” Blake says quietly, because he’s starting to remember just how Handsome Jack had gotten his hands on the Vault key that had awakened the Warrior. He has no idea how he can possibly keep that particular tale from reaching Tim’s ears. “Doctor Zed-“

Zed lifts his hand sharply to cut Blake off. “Just keep him away.” He waits until Blake nods in agreement, then checks Blake’s pulse again. “Startin’ right now, you can go find yourself a new doctor – there’s two more out there so just take your pick. You can come outside with the rest of us, but center of Fyrestone’s off limits… you don’t wanna be in the motel here, well that’s just tough.” Zed eyeballs him, waiting for Blake to protest, then sniffs and walks out.

Blake waits for a few moments in case one of the others might come in, and then swings his legs over the side of the bed. He’s still wearing his prison uniform, though it seems suspiciously clean… someone has most likely undressed him, done the laundry, and then manhandled him back into his clothing. Blake scowls, wondering which triplet had done the honors as he puts his slag-stained footwear back on. It would have been nice to wear something else, he thinks as he opens the door and looks outside. The Blancos have a fire going and are sitting around it talking – the conversation doesn’t even pause as Blake slowly approaches, unsure of his welcome, but then he catches sight of Tim sitting hunched over beside Ned. His friend immediately sits up with a grin. “Jeff! Hey!” Tim’s
right hand, which had been flung into the air for a greeting, lowers just as quickly as Tim gives a self-conscious glance towards the other members of their group.

Ted’s eyes narrow slightly at the use of Blake’s first name, and Zed gives the doppelgänger a barely-tolerant look before returning his attention to their discussion. “I don’t know how much lumber it’d take, though – that entire wall’s fucked t’hell and back.”

“I’m tellin’ you, just use those fabricated panels,” Ned insists. “Easier to move.”

“I ain’t pickin’ ‘em just so you have an easier time liftin’, you big wuss bag...”

Blake settles down beside Tim, who looks genuinely happy to see him. “Timothy,” Blake says in polite greeting. “How are you adjusting to freedom?”

“Kinda wish I were back on Elpis,” Tim confides. “At least there, I knew what to expect. It’s pretty hot out here in the desert, isn’t it?”

“Be thankful you are not wearing wool.” When Tim looks at him inquiringly, Blake shakes his head. “Bit of a joke, that’s all. Ah...where did you get that, pray tell?”

Tim glances down at his clothing, a tattered Jakobs shirt and cargo pants that hang off of his narrow frame. "Oh, these? Ned loaned them to me. He seems really nice; wasn't that nice?"

A quick glance at Ned shows that he's busily pretending to not be listening. "I'm sure there were no ulterior motives at all behind his generosity," Blake murmurs discreetly.

"Why would there be?" Tim seems genuinely confused, as well as thoroughly blind. "Why aren't you wearing the suit that Ted brought for you? It’s a lot nicer looking than our old prison uniforms."

Blake sits up straight, and turns his head to look at the man in question. "I believe that is a question I must ask him to answer. Theodore?" he calls out. All three men look back over at him, and two start laughing. "Is there something that you have perhaps forgotten to give me?"

"Yeah, Theodore. How 'bout that case of Hodunk Hurps?"

"Goddammit, Ned, shut up." Both Ned and Zed laugh as Ted aims a kick at the offending brother before turning to Blake. "You're gonna...going to have to be more specific." When Blake calmly mentions a change of clothing, Ted has grace enough to look slightly embarrassed. “Oh. That. It’s, uh, it’s...in Fyrestone.”

Blake looks around pointedly, because where are they if not in Fyrestone, and Ned elbows his way into yet another conversation that doesn't involve him. "Whyn't you ask Patty to bring it? Better yet, just go get it...both of y'all. Together."

"Much as I would enjoy doing so, I am afraid that I was recently banned from entering the...town...of Fyrestone," Blake says impatiently.

"Zed, you can't just ban someone from goin' in there-

"Says you."

"Says everybody with a goddamn brain in their head," Ted snaps. "So you're mad – well, boo-fuckin'-hoo! He ain't the one made the decision to turn your favorite garbage heap into an even bigger mess! That boy Ned's puttin' the moves on ain't had nothin' to do with it either. He was locked up tight in Friendship Gulag when Jack and Wilhelm were carvin' filets outta your girl, and you
know it!"

A strangled noise escapes from Tim's throat, and they all turn to look as the doppelgänger scrambles out of his seat and runs into the motel. "What the fuck d'you think you're doin'? He didn't need to hear that," Ned says furiously, climbing to his feet and looking as if he'd like to drive his fist into Ted's face.

"Why not? Least this way, you can probably get t'fuck him quicker – 'cause that's what you're good at, right? Findin' a weakness you can exploit with a smile and an 'aw shucks I'm so harmless' so that you can swoop in and get some 'fore they realize what a manipulative piece of shit you really are," Ted continues.

Ned jumps the fire to get at him, Zed half-heartedly tries to stop the fight, and fists as well as insults are flying by the time Patricia Tannis walks up with an ECHO recorder in her hands. "What have I missed while I was vomiting?" she asks, squinting at the combatants. "And which is which? I must confess to not having paid attention to what they were wearing."

Blake looks at her, then over at the brothers. "I believe yours has just been punched in the eye… Ned is wearing the brown shirt. Or perhaps he's in the… green? I have no clue," he finally admits. "This is uncommonly confusing."

"I was not sure what to expect of you, Jeffrey Blake," Tannis says, fixing him with an intense look, "but you seem to be a man of decent education, unlike so many of the people and subspecies of humans I have come across here on Pandora. I look forward to conversing with you in the future."

The triplets are still deeply involved in their brawl, and Blake murmurs that he looks forward to talking with her as well. "They are a very emotional trio, aren't they?"

Tannis nods sagely. "That certainly seems to be the case and, as entertaining as it is to witness such fine specimens of manhood grunt and strain against each other…I believe I shall put a stop to this nonsense." She wades into the fray, swinging her ECHO indiscriminately and it bounces off a few skulls before the men register her presence. Zed immediately separates himself and carries Tannis to safety, bellowing for his brothers to be careful around her. This level of over-protectiveness seems at odds with everything he knows about Zed, but when Blake puts together her offhand comment about vomiting and the concerned manner in which Zed places his hand on her stomach…yes, that makes sense.

Ned takes immediate advantage of the confusion and smacks Ted in the face. "Speakin' of weakness…!"

"Don't forget 'manipulative,!'" Ted says, stomping on Ned's instep and shoving him away roughly. "Go try to get your free ride. Are you coming or not?"

This last is aimed at Blake, who blinks at Ted before nodding slightly and trailing after him. The big man stomps his way over to a section of the rusted fence without waiting for Blake to catch up to him, and disappears into Fyrestone proper. Blake rubs at the bridge of his nose and sighs – he'd never wanted any of this to happen. Back on Helios, it all had seemed so simple. His employees want him dead so they can advance their own careers, true, but that's what Blake is used to. It's familiar, and therefore comforting in a strange way.

He hates that he's been forced to wear his prison uniform even a second longer than he has to. It's a tangible reminder of what and where he'd suffered. Blake reaches a hand up to scratch beneath the collar, starting to feel sick to his stomach despite all the food he'd eaten earlier, and he drops to a crouch beside a patch of slag-stained grass. Footsteps approach, and Blake turns his head away. He's
done with showing weakness in front of this man, only to have it twisted around on him and thrown back into his face one way or another. "Just leave me. You've done enough," Blake whispers harshly.

"I know," Ted says softly.

Once again, humiliated tears are burning the back of Blake's eyelids. "Did you think it was funny, to leave me wearing this? That perhaps it would teach me some lesson I wasn't even aware of?" Damn him!

"I forgot," Ted murmurs. "I brought you a suit, but then when...when I...and you...I forgot to bring it out there. I'm sorry, sir."

"Don't look at me," Blake says.

"Okay." Ted clears his throat. "I'm gonna turn around and sit here. When you're ready to go, just say the word an' we'll get you somethin' nicer to wear."

Blake breathes deeply and feels the nausea slowly ebb back into nothingness. When he's sure that he won't vomit or cry (or a combination of the two) he looks over. Ted's sitting cross-legged in the dirt, rubbing his thumb against the side of his boots. "Well, then. As long as you didn't bring that yellow monstrosity."

The other man climbs to his feet and extends a helping hand that Blake slowly accepts. "Course not, Mister Blake."

They walk into Fyrestone together, and Blake stifles a sigh upon realizing that they're about to visit Building 03 once more. "How did you fake your brother's death?" he asks as Ted unlocks the door. The last time he'd been in there, he was convinced that 'Zed' was going to turn him over to the mysterious assassin.

"I had a dead bandit already prepped that I stashed in a crate," Ted admits. "You go on' get changed, sir."

Blake finds a neatly pressed suit waiting for him, complete with matching socks and his favorite pair of shoes. There's even a comb, pomade, and a small hand mirror. He glances out of the side windows to see Ted walking across the street to look at the old Marcus Munitions outlet, and then Blake turns back to look at the items his shadow had brought for him. Blake can't remove his prison uniform quickly enough, and it ends up halfway across the room by the time he's down to just his socks. He sits down on the edge of the bed and slides the pants up over his legs, sighing with pleasure at the comforting feel of the...linen? Startled, Blake rubs the fabric between his thumb and forefinger – yes, it's actually a linen blend. Ted has actually reproduced one of his favored suits, which should be wool, in fabric that's much better suited to the climate of the Arid Nexus. It's astonishingly thoughtful, and is a more effective apology than anything that could ever come from Ted's mouth.

He dresses a bit more slowly, enjoying the feel of the suit as well as the sentiment behind it. When Blake’s fully ready to emerge, he checks his hair in the mirror and glances out of the window once more. Ted’s waiting patiently for him outside, leaning on the old Fast Travel station. “Well? How do I look?” Blake asks.

Ted looks him over slowly, and one corner of his mouth lifts. “You look just fine.”

“How kind of you to say so,” Blake says, brushing his hand down his sleeve, “But I’m not sure if
my tie is straight…would you mind fixing it for me?"

"Seems okay to me,” Ted says, but comes forward anyways and reaches out to adjust it. "Look, sir, about earlier…’m sorry. Real sorry. Won't happen again."

"I can certainly see that." Blake sighs, looking up. He's not really used to having to look up at people these days. "It has been a stress-filled two weeks, Colonel."

Ted gazes back at him. "You got no fuckin’ idea, Mister Blake." He holds up both hands and begins to tick items off. "Let's see here; I got rid of that lady for ya, but it turned out I had t’get rid of her private army. That private army had friends workin' for Dahl, so I had a meet ‘n’ greet with them, too. Think I said before, but she ain't had a body double. Got back a bit earlier’n I thought I would, only to find you gone 'cause Saybrook sold both of y'all out to some twerp in Purchasing. Took care of the twerp, so that's six already and I still gotta go through the rest of the week." Ted pauses for a moment. "Saybrook…had a friend down here, who had a bunch of other friends so it was like that Dahl crap I was just talkin’ about. Bribed a couple techs to alter the moonshot record logs and 'accidentally' fire off a few crates to make a hole in Friendship Gulag. Snuck into Sanctuary, which sounds easier than it was 'cause Fast Travel don't fuck around when it comes to identical siblings, and I had to convince Zed an’ Ned to help me out. That also sounds a lot easier…sir, I’ve run out of fingers on both hands and would rather keep my boots on."

"Well, it sounds as if you've had quite the time. I'm afraid any stories from me couldn't quite compare," Blake says.

"I'm sure that ain't quite true – we’ve both had our moments, huh?" Ted asks quietly. "Wish I coulda stopped it from happenin'."

Something tells Blake that Ted isn't talking about the bulk of his prison experience in general. "Yes. Well."

"C'mere just a sec, sir. I, uh, got somethin' for ya." Ted guides him out in the middle of the street and digs in his pockets to withdraw a rifle scope. "Here."

Blake looks at it stupidly. "You shouldn't have."

"Just…okay, here," Ted says, placing his hands on Blake's shoulders and gently turning him towards a broken section of fence. "Look through that scope – focus on that slag heap over there first…see that broken clothes washer, or whatever the hell that is? Now bring it up higher an' to the left a bit."

Blake obliges him and squints through the thing. All he can see is trash, parts of Hyperion Loaderbots, a hanging cage with a man inside of it, and slag absolutely everywhere. He lowers the scope, turns to look up at Ted, and slowly raises it to look at the caged man once more. "You went back there to retrieve him."

"Well…yeah," Ted says. "Ain't that him? I got the right one, didn't I?"

Blake's mouth opens and closes silently. "I…I'm unsure. Is that the one who, ah, his knees…?"

"Yup." Ted shifts into parade rest, gazing towards the suspended cage. "Only one kinda man stops to bug someone when he should really be runnin' from three assassins. Ballard didn't wanna say nothin', but I been around long enough to know."

Blake folds his arms across his chest, tucking his hands into his armpits. "It…wasn't as bad as it could have been."
"Maybe not, but I ain't paid to stand around an' look pretty." Ted is still watching the cage when Blake turns his head to look up at him again. "You wanna talk about it, I'll listen. You want me to kill him, I'll do that too – I just figured there was a chance you might wanna do it yourself."

He's not sure if he would ever want to do that himself, but maybe that's just because Blake's spent the last two weeks of his life being someone completely different. Now that he has his suit, Blake has the trappings of power once again...at least on the outside. He should really do something to prove that it was never really lost inwardly, either, simply misplaced for a while.

Blake's head is starting to hurt again. "Thank you for the gift, Theodore. I believe that I shall decide upon his fate...later."

"Sure, yeah. Just let me know...want me to take ya back now?" Ted asks. Blake suggests that they talk business first, and Ted doesn't miss the surreptitious way that Blake lifts a hand to rub at his temple. "Dammit – sit your skinny ass down."

He's manhandled back into the shade of Building 03, watching bemused as Ted uses a knife to pry open the front of the med vendor so that he can steal an InstaHealth syringe. "I see we're back to the insults...and you were doing so well, too."

"You bring out the best in me, Sticks – what else can I say?" Ted asks. Blake suggests that they talk business first, and Ted doesn't miss the surreptitious way that Blake lifts a hand to rub at his temple. "Dammit – sit your skinny ass down."

"You might start with explaining just who is keeping Helios operational."

Ted shakes his head as he slides the needle into a vein – the rush of energy banishes Blake's headache as if it had never been. "Official story is that you were takin' care of Corrazza, and Diana's in charge while you're gone. Everyone knows how damn slow those interplanetary shuttles are."

"Who is Diana?"

"Your assistant. The one I wasn't s'posed to nail, but I did anyway? Remember her?"

"Ah." Blake frowns. "When did you have time to disobey my orders and perform a consummation?"

"I fucked the absolute shit outta her right on your desk as I scheduled the moonshot blitz."

"You did not."

"Well, you just scan that desk for DNA an' then we'll see who's the liar here," Ted teases. "Aw, I'm just kiddin'."

Blake sniffs. "Just as I thought."

"I really just jacked off on it," Ted continues, surprising a laugh from Blake. Ted grins boyishly, leaning forward and tapping the toes of his boots against the ground. "Look, I know you've gotta be thinkin' that it's obvious that you're really not on all these trips...but it ain't. Far as any of 'em know, you're just busier'n hell right now."

"Right," Blake says quietly. "Busy is quite the understatement." They sit there for a while, enjoying a rare breeze, and then his shadow snorts out a laugh. "What? What is it?"

Ted shakes his head. "Consummation."

"How old are you, twelve?"
“Thirteen at most,” Ted insists and they both laugh, because they’ve somehow managed to get back to the point in their relationship where they do this sort of thing.

Blake leans back, crossing his legs and looking at the pattern of his socks. “I like the suit. It was a very thoughtful gesture after that outburst of unwarranted jealousy.”

Ted rubs at the back of his neck. “I wasn’t jealous.”

“No?” Blake raises his eyebrows. “What would you call it?”

“I already said I was sorry, like, twice,” Ted mutters. “Dunno what else you want.”

Blake turns to stare at him in disbelief. “Incredible. Absolutely incredible.”

“What is.”

“Your brother was under the impression that you are, as he put it, ‘hopeless’ and that you ‘wouldn’t know romance from a hole in the ground.’ I thought that this might be an exaggeration, but the situation seems to be even worse than I’d feared.” Blake smiles at the look of discomfort on Ted’s face. “If you are interested in me either romantically or sexually, it would be best to simply be honest and admit it.”

Ted looks at him, then away again. “Well, I…I mean, what – what if, uh, it was maybe…both? Both of, y’know, those?”

Blake barely keeps himself from laughing. Yes, the situation is a lot worse. “I would start by suggesting you call me Jeffrey,” he says, slowly reaching up to the collar of Ted’s shirt and pulling at it. “And then, perhaps, we could test our…compatibility.”

“Okay then…Jeffrey.” Ted leans down and Blake starts to feel as if he might faint again, but he knows that this time it has nothing to do with eridium-induced sickness. It’s the promise of something better, of wanting and being wanted in return, and it’s been so long since Blake has felt anything like it. “You said you didn’t want me touchin’ you ‘thout permission,” Ted says hoarsely. “So maybe you’d better let me know it’s okay.”

Blake sways towards him. “Permission granted.”

Chapter End Notes

What's really going on? Are they going to Do The Do? What exactly happened to Saybrook, anyway? These questions and many more will be answered in the next thrilling installment. Spoiler Alert: they're totally gonna Do It.
One of these is not like the others.

Chapter Summary

Blake's Badlands sojourn continues...

Chapter Notes

Self-indulgent banter, ahoy! I should've posted this ages ago but I needed to finish up a Big Bang entry and didn't want to get distracted by my Borderlands muse...I won't pretend this is worth the wait, but it's something at least. If you're looking for actual plot, you might have to sit this (and possibly the next chapter) out because ol' Jeffrey deserves nice things once in a while. Thank you for your patience :) 

Their lips are barely touching when Zed's voice rings out. “Y'all better not be doin’ nothin’ in there!”

Blake jerks upright, his heart going a mile a minute, and Ted swears angrily. “Dammit, Zed! The hell d’you want?!!?”

Zed comes into view tapping a buzz axe against the palm of one hand, and he looks at them with scarcely hidden satisfaction that he’s just interrupted something important. “Oh, I am sorry – were ya busy?” He smiles and looks them over. “You’re lookin’ kinda rumpled, there, Mister Blake. Maybe you oughta take a look in one of the mirrors back at the motel.”

“Y’know what? We-” Ted breaks off in surprise when Blake places a restraining hand on his arm.

“We would like to congratulate you, Doctor,” Blake says evenly. “Dr. Tannis seems to be progressing quite well.” He tightens his grip on Ted’s bicep when the other man starts to say something. “What wonderful news.”

Zed doesn’t seem to know whether to glare or not. “I don’t see that it’s your business.”

“Yes, there does seem to be a bit of that going around these days,” Blake says pleasantly. “Wouldn’t you agree? Come, Theodore – I believe there is a mirror awaiting my presence…and I am still hungry.” He releases Ted’s arm and stands up, walking past Zed and heading back towards the motel.

Ted lopes after him. "The hell was all that about?"

"Oh, nothing much."

"Well, it looked like somethin' to me." Ted frowns, falling into step with him. "Okay, so when you said you were hungry - that mean the regular kind of hungry, or…?"

Blake smiles. "Yes."
"Which one." Ted reaches out to catch him when Blake staggers unexpectedly. “Damn. I shoulda just brought the suit back.” He lifts Blake up into his arms, ignoring Blake’s protests to carry him back to the motel.

Blake hisses for Ted to put him down before everyone else sees and, wonder of all wonders, Ted actually listens to him for once. They walk back around the side of the motel to find that Patricia Tannis has cornered Tim and is asking him questions about the cosmetic surgery he’d been paid to undergo; Ned is adding more fuel to the fire and keeping that particular action literal for a change. Blake looks away as soon as he realizes that he’s been staring, glancing up at Ted self-consciously. “It takes some getting used to.”

“I guess so... better get your kicks in now, though. Gonna be a bit ‘fore we’re all three in one place again,” Ted says softly. “Feelin’ better? I can get you another shot.”

“Does extended use cause dependency?” Blake asks, trying to remember if he’d heard anything about it. There has never been much cause for him to use the needles, as Helios has its own pharmaceutical division for the executives on the higher rungs of the corporate ladder.

Ted shakes his head. “Nope. C’mon, let’s get you some food.” He leads Blake back to their seats around the fire and goes off to fill a plate, but hands it to Tim before pointing at Blake in a silent command. “Ned. Get your ass over here…”

Tannis looks momentarily disgruntled at having lost her chance to interrogate Tim, but she brightens and walks off purposefully – she’s probably caught sight of Zed, Blake thinks as he accepts the plate from Tim. “Timothy-”

“How are you?” the young man asks at the same time, smiling. “No, you go first.”

Blake carefully spears a chunk of meat on his fork, balancing the plate on his knees. It’s been quite some time since he’s had to be wary of staining an outfit. “I must apologize for not being available to you,” Blake begins.

Tim shakes his head. “At least you’re here now. Did they tell you that Ballard almost died? Turns out you got the Shivers from him; once the sores start draining, it’s really contagious…”

“Good Lord. I hadn’t heard a thing about it…though I don’t seem to have been conscious for that long.” Blake pauses to eat and glances up briefly as Zed and Tannis settle into their seats, talking with their heads close together. The other Blancos have disappeared into the motel. “I should warn you about Ned.”

Tim shrugs. “He already told me about the zombies.”

“Ah.” Blake breaks off a chunk of bread, wondering which triplet had made it. “You can doubtless take care of yourself, but if you are not interested in anything outside warm wishes and the thrill of platonic friendship…it might be best to make that immediately clear. I regret not informing you of the, er, possible setbacks you might encounter.”

“I should’ve known,” Tim sighs. “After so long with no real human contact, I guess I tried to tell myself that it wasn’t that bad. I just forgot what a monster Jack was because there was no one to hold that particular mirror up to me.”

Blake continues eating, wondering what he’s supposed to say to this. Already he’s feeling the chasm opening up between them now that they’re free and Blake has returned to power. More or less. He can’t really claim to be powerful when he can barely walk twenty steps before feeling faint. “I had
thought to ask if you’d like to accompany us back to Helios.”

Tim rocks forward and wraps his arms around himself. “I’ll never go back there, Jeff. I just…I can’t.”

“Elpis, then, perhaps?” Blake suggests. “I could help you relocate.”

“Actually,” Tim says, flushing slightly, “I might go to Jakob’s Cove.”

Blake nearly chokes at this announcement – Ned certainly hasn't wasted much time. Still, it's Tim's life and no business of Blake's. "I have never been, myself, but I've heard that it's very…quiet," he says diplomatically.

"Quietest neighbors around," Tim says, turning it into a joke that they both laugh at. "You look good – that's a nice suit. Have you met her yet?" his friend jerks his chin towards Tannis. "She's something else."

Blake looks over at the couple, who are still talking about something. Zed laughs suddenly and brings a hand up to brush her bangs off of her forehead, and Tannis smiles at him while he does it. "True. Timothy, do you remember the guard?"

"There were lots of the jerks. You'll have to be more specific."

"The one whom Ted hamstrung in front of our cells."

Tim hunches his shoulders. "That one I remember. What about him?"

"He's suspended above a slagpit at present, in a cage."

"He isn't," Tim says in a shocked whisper. "Ted went back to get him?"

Blake murmurs in confirmation. "Mm. Ted thought I might like to take my own vengeance, after…” he trails off, realizing that Ballard is the only one who'd really known what had happened. "My shadow can be quite vindictive when the mood strikes him. The thing is, I am not quite sure what to do about it. What would you do, if you’d been the one targeted?"

"I'd pay him back for what he did to me," Tim says darkly. "If I had a shock weapon, I'd go find him right now."

After promising his friend that it can and will be arranged, Blake claps Tim on the shoulder awkwardly and gets up in search of the requested weapon. Ted's sure to have at least twelve of them on his person, after all. He finds the brothers still inside the motel, moving furniture around for some reason with those distractingly impressive muscles all three brothers seem to have in abundance. "Theodore? I don't suppose you are in possession of a Maliwan."

"Sure am," Ted grunts, shoving a rusted bed frame against the wall to join another one. "What flavor you need?"

Blake wanders over to the door to peer inside. "Shock, if you please. What are you two doing in there?"

"Movin’ stuff." Ted draws an arm across his forehead, leaving a streak of dirt that Blake stares at. "Uh, I'm pretty sure I got at least three in my gear bag – just help yourself. Room 5."

Blake thanks him and drifts off towards the indicated room. He pushes the door open and looks
around in disbelief at how neatly everything’s been put away; Blake isn’t sure why he should be surprised because military men and women tend to be neater than most, but Ted seems like the type to buck this particular trend as well. He glances around for the ‘gear bag’ and finally decides that the pack stowed beneath the cot must be what he seeks, tugging it out into the middle of the floor and unzipping it.

While there are a few weapons inside the bag, it quickly becomes apparent that this isn’t what he was searching for – there are several ECHO storage disks with Ted’s illegible scrawl on them, and some neatly folded clothes that include a standard-issue set of Crimson Lance Badass armor. Blake looks that over appreciatively and glances over his shoulder towards the door before picking one of the storage disks at random. It fits into the ECHO device and Blake scrolls through reconnaissance photos from Ted’s trip to murder the Corrazza CEO…there can certainly be no room left for doubt that the person in question is dead, he thinks, staring at the photographic (with emphasis on the graphic) evidence of it. He’s about to return the disk back to the bag when something tells him to keep looking through the photos. Blake scrolls through the offerings until he reaches several that had been taken of him…sleeping in T.K. Baha’s shack. Further back are more photos, and Blake is disconcerted upon realizing just how closely Ted had shadowed him. He pulls the disk out and picks out another one to replace it, eyes widening with surprise at the sight of Ted himself.

The picture had obviously been captured by someone extremely close to Blake’s shadow because if he’s not mistaken, it's been taken during sex. Ted's head is thrown back, and Blake can just make out the fingers of the woman straddling him. Blake swallows with difficulty, checking the doorway before looking back at the picture; he nearly stops breathing altogether when he realizes it's not a picture at all – it's the still-frame of a video. "That's the wrong bag, Sticks," Ted says from where he's leaning on the doorframe and watching Blake invade his privacy. "You kinky li'l fuck."

"I do beg your pardon," Blake says quickly. "I…let my curiosity run away with me."

Ted looks at him, and shakes his head with a sigh. "D'you always talk like that, all prissy an' proper?"

"My parents saw to it that I minded my manners at all times," Blake replies stiffly.

A shark-like smile spreads across Ted's face. "Not at all times, I'll bet. Didn't see those fancy manners while I was chasin' you, and I don't think your please and thank you come out t'play when you're in bed with someone." Ted pushes off from the doorway and slides into the room, closing the door behind him. "Think I'm gonna fuck those pretty manners right outta your head, Mister President."

Blake's mouth goes dry as the assassin moves closer. "Really, now. That's…quite a claim." He lets Ted reel him in with a grip on his tie, and Blake gets slowly backed into the corner. They look at each other for several long moments before Blake reaches up to cup the side of Ted's face, urging him down. "If either of your brothers interrupts this time, I will kill them myself."

"Sounds like a plan," Ted agrees just before kissing Blake.

Their first kiss is surprisingly gentle, a mere brush of lips that cause the hairs on the back of Blake's neck to stand up. Blake sighs his delight against Ted's mouth, sliding fingers into his shadow’s salt-and-pepper hair. They draw apart just enough for Ted to fix his eyes on Blake's lips, and Blake watches Ted scrape his teeth on his own bottom lip before pressing forward for another, more demanding kiss as if he simply can’t help himself. As if Blake is somehow so desirable that he can't hold back. Ted shoves him further into the corner and, while Blake is initially quite happy to be there, a sudden thought of Friendship Gulag cools his ardor. “S-stop,” Blake manages, wrenching his lips from Ted’s and turning his head aside. “Please stop.”
Ted’s frustration couldn’t be more apparent. “What now! Fuck, you’re killin’ me here…!”

“I… I apologize.” Blake feels foolish as he struggles for the words to explain. “It is just that—”

He’s surprised anew when Ted’s eyes widen in sudden understanding. “Oh, damn. Shit, no, you ain’t gotta apologize for nothin’ – I’m the one who should be sayin’ sorry.” The hands that had touched Blake with such urgency only moments before, now stroke the side of his face and back of his neck gently. “I forgot… an’ I’m sorry, honey.”

Blake leans into the touch, closing his eyes at the endearment that has been uttered so matter-of-factly. “Honey?”

Ted’s arms come around him, and Blake is subtly maneuvered out of the corner so that their positions are reversed. “Sure. Why not?” He can feel the tender motions of Ted’s lips brushing over his closed eyes, and the prickle of the other man’s perpetual shadow beard. “You can be sweet like that when you wanna.”

“This is the most ridiculous conversation I believe that I have ever had,” Blake says tartly, but makes no move to back away from the strong arms still encircling him.

“Aaaand there’s the sting of that sassy mouth.”

Blake laughs and opens his eyes to find Ted smiling at him. “You are as impossible as ever, Colonel.”

“But you feel better now, don’tcha?”

“Yes, I believe that I do.” Blake traces the assassin’s mouth with a fingertip thoughtfully. “I must say, you are taking the unfortunate interruptions to your ardor surprisingly well.”

Ted sighs. “It might seem that way, but I think I’ma die if I can’t get off soon. I mean… no real pressure to ya, but I’ll seriously die.”

Blake has to admit to being familiar with this feeling – his libido hasn’t recovered enough to want another attempt at whatever Ted has in mind, but being so aggressively blue-balled isn’t good in any situation. He’d personally thought that their first time as lovers might include a great deal of passion and thrashing to and fro amidst the bedclothes, but Blake realizes that it will have to wait until he feels comfortable enough. As he has no clue when that will be, the least he could do is provide a temporary solution and they can figure things out further after nightfall. “I want you to lock the door and brace something beneath the handle,” Blake instructs. “I cannot have your untimely death on my conscience.”

Ted is quick to obey, for most likely the first time in his life, and is careful not to crowd Blake when he returns. Other instructions, which include removing his shirt and leaning back against the wall with his hands on either side, are followed without so much as a blink of protest. “Gonna be hard t’touch you if I gotta keep my hands on the wall,” Ted points out.

Running his eyes over the physician-assassin’s powerful chest and down the trail of dark hair that disappears into Ted’s BDU’s, Blake feels another surge of lust in the pit of his stomach. “There won’t be much time for that at the moment, Theodore, but we simply cannot have you traipsing about unsated. Can we?”

“No, sir.” That broad chest starts to heave and it should be amusing, but the front of Ted’s pants is filling out so beautifully and the breathy honorific sinks its way into Blake’s own cock.
Blake gives the side of Ted’s face a quick, approving caress. He’d originally thought to give the man a simple handjob, providing fast relief to tide him over until nightfall, but this is an opportunity too good to pass on. Blake is so used to being in a subordinate position during sex and having the reins passed to him like this is a heady experience. “My, we are eager today, aren’t we?” Blake strokes a finger down Ted’s throat, and through the graying chest hair to circle around a flat nipple. “I was thinking of touching you through your trousers, Colonel…do you think that you might like that?”

The sound of Ted’s labored breathing is absolutely delicious, Blake decides. “Y-yes, sir.”

“Then let us begin, Colonel.” Blake gives Ted a once-over, drinking in the sight of this dangerous man positively writhing and desperate to be touched. This is something he could quite easily get used to. Blake smiles, and flutters his fingers over the well-defined bulge pressing at the zipper of Ted’s pants. Ted moans aloud. “Goodness, Theodore. So eager.”

Blake gives Ted’s trapped cock a few more teasing passes of his fingertips, savoring each noise his shadow makes, and then begins to stroke in earnest. “Please,” Ted groans.

“Yes? How may I help you?” He concentrates a few pinches near the head of Ted’s dick, then palms his balls roughly.

“Make me come, sir. Please…!”

How can Blake resist such a politely phrased request? “Of course, my darling.” His own cock is throbbing by now, and Blake wonders if Ted’s completion will trigger his - surely neither of them will be able to last much longer. Blake teases one of Ted’s nipples erect with his other hand, then catches the hardened nub between two fingers. He squeezes hard as he rubs his palm over the head of Ted’s cock, and Ted’s hips undulate in a frantic circular rhythm as he fights to stay pressed against the wall. “Now, Theodore.”

Ted’s choked cry rings in Blake’s ears and he slams the back of the head against the wall, writhing helplessly as he comes in his pants. Ted gasps for air. “Shit.” Blake’s own sense of urgency has nearly become overwhelming and Ted surfaces from his own haze enough to notice. “Sir? Lemme take care of that?” He hardly waits for Blake’s nod before his knees hit the floor and the trousers of Blake’s new suit are yanked down around his thighs.

Blake’s cock is sucked into Ted’s mouth immediately, and all he can do is hang onto the wall while Ted steadily devours his crotch. It’s artless and sloppy, and Blake knows that Ted should be able to do better than that, but he’s not complaining. “I’m close,” Blake breathes, threading his hands in Ted’s hair. "Just a bit more, my dear." Ted's cheeks hollow as he sucks harder, humming around Blake's shaft. When Blake thinks to pull away at the critical moment, however, Ted reaches a hand up to hold him in place. Blake's breath hisses through his teeth as he ejaculates inside the snug warmth of Ted's mouth in several long pulses, and the feeling of Ted’s throat muscles working as he swallows…. “Good lord, Theodore.”

He lets out another shaking breath as Ted swirls his tongue over him a final time before sitting back on his heels and looking up at him. “That was fun.”

“Quite.” Blake motions towards his own face. “Ah, I believe that you have some…” A groan escapes him when Ted’s wonderfully talented tongue flicks out to clean the semen from the corner of his mouth. “You’ll be the death of me.”

“I almost was.” Ted nuzzles against Blake’s bare thigh, turning to place a teasing kiss on his softening dick before busying himself with pulling Blake’s trousers back up. “How’s the head?”
“Well, I certainly have no cause for complaints,” Blake admits.

Ted laughs and stands up. “I meant the one top of your neck, Sticks.”

“Consider my last statement as a…catch-all.”

“Still want that shock weapon?” Ted reaches into another duffle and pulls out a thick revolver with faded blue and orange paint, offering it grip-first.

Blake accepts it with a smile. “Thank you. I trust the edge of your frustration has been blunted for now, Colonel.”

“For now, yeah. Later, though? Later’s gonna be a different story,” Ted promises. He runs his fingers through his hair to smooth back what Blake had messed up, then looks down at the damp spot on the front of his pants. “Guess I’d better change ‘fore I go back out there…you go on, unless you wanna stay to watch.”

“That sounds like a splendid idea.” Blake settles on the edge of the narrow cot to watch while his shadow unveils a lower body just as magnificent as his top half, and equally liberally decorated with scar tissue. Ted pulls on a clean pair of pants after wiping himself off, totally unselfconscious of his nudity – though certainly not unaware of the effect it has on Blake.

They share another heated kiss as Ted unblocks the door, and Blake nearly forgets the gun. “Don’t mind me,” Ned yells from the other room. “I’m just dyin’ from old age waitin’ for you two to quit neckin’ and help me.”

“No thanks, I ain’t the one with a Hodunk fetish,” Ted calls back, nudging Blake in the ribs. “You watch; he’s gonna be pissed. I caught him screwin’ one of ‘em when we were seventeen – if you ever wanna tick Ned off, just remind him and watch what happens.”

Blake’s not sure how wise it is to deliberately anger someone known to have created his own army of undead. “I’ll keep that in mind. What exactly are you two doing, by the way?”

“Oh, y’know…nothin’ much.”

“Hmm.”

Ted gives him a wink before ducking back into the room from which Ned’s aggrieved complaints are emerging. “Let’s finish up, I ain’t got all day.”

“Shoulda thought of that ‘fore you wandered off to suck a dick…no, you get away an’ keep your jizz breath outta my face,” Ned yells back. There’s the sound of a scuffle, and Ned’s voice rises into an alarmed shriek. “No - aw, that’s…NO!”

Blake shakes his head and walks back outside to offer the handgun to Tim. “What’s going on in there?”

“I expect that Colonel Blanco is taking this opportunity to revert back to adolescence,” Blake says, taking a seat and watching Tim inspect the weapon he’s been given. Tim also has Zed’s undivided attention – the doctor has dropped a hand to the handle of a massive buzz axe that’s leaning against...
the side of his chair, and his fingers curl around it when Tim lifts the gun and sights down its barrel.

“Timothy…”

Tim lowers the revolver and follows Blake’s gaze over to Doctor Zed. “Oh. No, this isn’t…there’s a Hyperion prison guard in a cage.”

“Is there really.”

Tannis surfaces from whatever daydream has captured her attention. “A cage? I propose that we shoot the prisoner immediately and watch the convulsions. Sometimes the muscles lock up so intensely, they are torn from the bone.”

She looks so thrilled at this possibility that Zed’s brow furrows. “Honey, we need t’get you a hobby.”

“Don’t be a spoilsport, Zed. I want to go watch.”

Zed sighs and shakes his head in defeat. “Fine, I’ll walk ya over.” He helps her up and shoulders the buzz axe, flexing his fingers around the handle with a pointed look at Tim. “Let’s go see how well you shoot, pretty boy.”

The trio heads off towards town, and Blake leans back to look into the fire. He can hear the two brothers still arguing inside the motel about something. Blake closes his eyes briefly, listening to the popping sounds made by the fire and the muted buzz of the radio that’s been on for hours now; he doesn’t know when he’s felt this comfortable, Blake thinks suddenly. It surprises him enough that his eyes open once more. Here he is in the last place he’d ever expected to be, and with a companion he most certainly never expected to have…and Blake feels as if he belongs, somehow.

Foolishness.

He should leave immediately. Blake knows exactly where the nearest Fast Travel is located, he can get his hands on at least one other Anshin needle so he won’t collapse on his way there, and he’s currently free from all supervision. It would be easy.

Blake rises from his seat and goes inside the Fyrestone Motel. He finds the room he’d been convalescing in, but the bed has been moved and all that’s left is a night table upon which a small bag has been placed. Inside is a small map of the area surrounding Fyrestone with all the skag dens marked in red, several InstaHealth vials, and a Tediore pistol. He glances back towards the door, halfway expecting Ted to be waiting there, but Blake can still hear him teasing his brother about something Hodunk-related. Blake returns his eyes to the blatant challenge that had been left for him to discover and considers accepting it, but ultimately decides to pretend he’d never come across it in the first place…because how else is he going to find out what Ted’s plans for the evening are if he leaves now? Surely he’s entitled to at least a small amount of personal pleasure, after going so long without.

He filches a few of the needles, and returns to his seat by the fire. It’s quiet enough outside for Blake to hear Tim taking a few potshots at the prison guard. “Still here, huh?”

“It appears so,” Blake agrees, glancing up at Ned. “What did he do to you?”

“Licked my cheek – he’s nasty as hell. Don’t know what you see in him,” Ned says cheerfully enough, looking around. “How’s your head doin’, Mister Blake?”

Blake shrugs. “Well enough, at the moment. I’m given to understand that Lieutenant Ballard was much worse off than I…where, exactly, is he?”
“He’s up on the H. Those’re some nice medical bays you got up there…listen, you wouldn’t mind if I borrowed a few of your files, wouldja? Y’all got access to a lot more databases’n the ECHOnet lets us into.” Ned winks. “Pretty sure even Zed would appreciate it. Give ya a break now and then.”

“I am sure that could be arranged,” Blake says. “No trade secrets, mind you.”

Ned is innocence itself. “Oh, ’course not!”

Ted emerges from the motel, and Blake feels a definite tingling sensation as those green eyes rest on him. “Ned, why'n you go check on your twink? He probably misses you.”

"Think so?"

"No. Get outta here."

"Y'know, you better watch how you talk to me," Ned says, narrowing his eyes and somehow managing to look impressively threatening. "I ain't someone you want on the bad side of."

Ted cocks an eyebrow at him. "For real? I seen you cryin' over a newborn skag pup just 'cause it was so tiny."

"I was three."

"You were twenty-two."

Ned's looking angrier than ever, and Blake steps in before they come to blows over it. "Timothy tells me that he's looking forward to joining you in Jakob's Cove," he says. "I can say with no hesitation that he would appreciate your company." Ted scoffs and Blake looks up at him. "Theodore."

They both watch Ned walk off towards Fyrestone. "You think I'm bein' too mean?"

"Perhaps you could be kinder," Blake says thoughtfully.

"Let me guess: you were an only child."

"Well, yes…"

"Then I ain't got no more to say." Ted laughs. "President of fuckin' Hyperion tryin' to tell me when to cool it. Please." He sits down next to Blake and drops an arm across his shoulders, leaning in to nuzzle at Blake's neck. "You, uh, wanna go fuck?"

Blake struggles to keep his face expressionless. "We were just-"

"I know, but I could go again…” Ted catches Blake's earlobe between his teeth. "C'mon."

"No."

"You could pitch, if that's what-"

"Theodore!"

Ted claps both hands on his face and rubs briskly. "Okay, fine. It's just…"

"Yes, I'm aware of your imminent demise due to sexual frustration." Blake gives Ted's thigh a sympathetic pat, whipping his hand out of Ted's when the other man tries to grab it and move it to his crotch. "Really, Theodore! It's small wonder you haven't moved beyond your colonelcy."
Ted moves in to steal a kiss, then sits back. "I'll have your snooty ol' ass know that I used to be General Blanco, thanks very much."

"And how long did that last, pray tell?"

The physician-assassin's face grows solemn. "Like, a week? I dunno. Point is, I did get promoted. Look, let's talk about somethin' else – what's this about Ned takin' Baby Jack to Jakob's Cove? Hope that kid knows enough to keep from gettin' zombified or whatever the hell else Ned's into these days."

Blake assures him that he has, indeed, been warned – and by Ned himself. He waits until Ted cracks open a can of rakk ale and takes a drink. "It seems as though Ned really does move quickly when an opening presents itself." Ted does a spit-take into the fire, laughing at the double-entendre, and Blake smiles as the other four members of their company approach. Whatever has happened seems to have broken the ice between Tim and Zed, something Blake is glad to see because the young doppelganger actually seems happy. Ned is having a spirited debate about popcorn and bacon with Tannis for some reason.

They all gather around the fire, and Blake feels that strange sense of belonging once again. "How much skag we got left? We might need to bag another one for dinner," Zed says thoughtfully. "And since we gotta go out there anyway…I figure we can have us an initiation."

The three brothers look over at Blake, who sits up straight in alarm. "I beg your pardon?"

"You ever ride a skag before, Blake?" Zed asks. Both Ted and Ned start snickering. "Probably easier'n stayin' atop Ted, and makes a lot less noise, so you'll do just fine."

Ted stops laughing. "Hey."
Chapter Summary

Blake takes a skag for a spin and runs Ted’s bases. Being president can be exhausting.

The trick, Blake’s told, is to reach up beneath the spikes of the skag’s natural armor because there’s some sort of ridge there. As he’s escorted out near the ruins of T.K. Baha’s shack, Blake struggles to sort through the various tips that the brothers have been filling his ears with for the past five minutes. “Is this truly necessary?” he asks one last time. Ted looks sympathetic to his plight, but not enough to actually rescue Blake from this absurdity. “Has Doctor Tannis been initiated in a similar manner?”

“Don’t you go worryin’ about her, Company Man – just get your ass out there an’ make our Ted proud,” Zed says encouragingly. “Course if it makes ya feel any better, we can see if Lawrence here wants to give it a go. How ‘bout it, kid?”

Tim starts in surprise. “Me? Oh, I don’t…well, I mean…” he sneaks a glance at Ned. “I mean, I guess I could try; they don’t look any worse than kraggon’s. You won’t let me get eaten or anything, right?”

“Not by the skags,” Ted mutters loud enough for them all to hear.

This is ridiculous. After all he’s been through, Blake now has to put up with hazing. He sighs heavily and begins to remove his suit jacket, but Zed stops him with a surprised laugh. "Damn, you were really gonna do it!"

Blake glares over at Ted, who’s trying to fight off a smile and losing. "Is there anyone in your family who isn’t committed to making me look as foolish as possible?" He ignores Ned’s raised hand. "All of you clearly doubt my aptitude at this, and I shall prove you wrong. How long am I supposed to stay on the thing?"

The triplets confer about this, and it’s finally decided that Blake must stay astride his chosen mount for a total of eight seconds. "It ain’t real fair you gotta do it without actually seein’ it done first, though, so I’ll show ya the ropes,” Ned volunteers, stealing a glance at Tim. Ted makes a snide comment about Ned picking a skag pup to ride, and receives a rude hand gesture as his only reply.

They all watch as the scourge of Jakob’s Cove saunters out into the open towards the closest den and goes for a skag that’s wandered away from the rest of them. “See how he’s circlin’ around? They see you, they’ll just charge first thing…this one’s not payin’ too much attention so it’s an easy target,” Ted murmurs, coming around behind Blake. ‘Now he’s gonna jump on but he’s already figured where to put his hands – skags’re armored pains in the ass but if you stick your hands up ‘neath the spikes it’s actually soft there. Get a handful right up close an’ it’s real sensitive, so they’ll try to bite.”

Ned vaults onto his chosen mount and Blake watches closely as the skag immediately roars, shaking its head and attempting to twist around to attack Ned.

“I see that,” Blake says, narrowing his eyes and trying to watch as closely as he can. “I don’t suppose you have any other helpful advice that might prevent me from being the latest addition to the creature’s refuse pile.”
Ted brushes his lips against the back of Blake’s ear. “Sway with the motion, or they’ll get you if you try to brace yourself…and you’re, like, 90% leg so just keep ‘em outta the way. Junior,” he continues in a louder voice aimed towards Tim. “Go on an’ see if you can’t round up one of your own. Sticks here’ll take Ned’s skag for a test drive when he gets it over closer.”

Tim nods, his mismatched eyes fixed on Ned’s antics. “It doesn’t look that hard. I can do that.”

Blake isn’t too sure that he can, but keeps the mask of calm competence from disintegrating. “Eight seconds.”

“Combined,” Zed says suddenly. He doesn’t bother looking over at Blake, preferring instead to watch his brother make a fool of himself. “You’re on for four seconds an’ Lawrence takes the rest.”

Blake is sorely tempted to argue with this, but Ted leans closer and whispers an obscene suggestion as to what else Blake could ride for eight seconds. “When, precisely, should I…?”

“Soon’s he jumps off, you get on there,” Zed says, glancing down at the woman by his side. Tannis is bouncing on her toes and looking as if this is the best day of her entire life. “Get ready, Blake.”

Ned does indeed bring his trusty steed over and makes eye contact with Blake. “I’m gonna bring it around,” he yells. Tim jumps over the rocks and sidles towards another skag that isn’t paying enough attention to its surroundings.

Blake sighs and removes his suit jacket, handing it to Ted before climbing up on one of the larger rocks. He crouches in anticipation, ignoring a snort from one of the brothers, and makes his move right when Ned makes a surprisingly graceful dismount. “Get it, Sticks!” Ted yells supportively as Blake finds his hold. He’d thought it would be more difficult than described but the spikes are malleable as promised. The skag, still trying to snap at Ned’s rapidly retreating body, whips around in an attempt to murder Blake as soon as it becomes aware of his presence.

The horrid creature bucks and twists beneath him; Blake would look over to see how Tim is faring but he’d also like to keep all his limbs mostly intact, so he has to hope that the doppelgänger knows what he’s doing. All three Blancos are shouting conflicting instructions and advice at him, but all Blake really remembers is that he should keep his knees up. There’s an indecent amount of jostling and roaring (mostly done by the skag) because Blake accidentally spurs the creature away from their audience and they’re headed directly for the den which is populated by – what else? - more skags.

Blind panic makes him yank as hard as he can on one handful of the spines and the aforementioned sensitivity really is there because Blake’s skag veers to the side and takes him directly through the front gates of Fyrestone. “No!” he can hear Zed roaring at him. Blake leans forward, holding on for dear life as his noble steed skitters and slips through a puddle of slag before turning to zoom past the bounty board a second time. They make a total of three revolutions around the tire-marked graves before caroming back towards the Baha residence, whereupon Ted steps directly into their path and kills the misbegotten thing by calmly holding out one of his plasma swords and letting the skag impale itself upon the blade.

Blake’s stumbling dismount doesn’t earn him any points for style and it’s clear that Ted is worried about the toll Blake’s exertion has taken. “Please tell me that was four seconds,” Blake says over the sound of Zed and Ned’s hysterics. “How does my hair look?”

Ted’s expression of concern shifts into amusement. “You could do with a touch up, sir. C’mon, let’s get you sat down ‘fore you fall down…think you just set a new record.”

“Oh?” Blake looks around to see Tim watching him and desperately trying not to laugh. “I must
have looked absolutely ridiculous.” He’d definitely felt like it.

“Nah, you did good. Now it’s over with though, I do gotta admit that it was funny as hell...thought Zed was gonna have a stroke when you rode into Fyrestone like that,” Ted snorts. “Y’all just took off like nothin’ I’ve ever seen.”

Blake allows himself to be steered back towards the motel, marveling at how solicitous Ted has become as well as how stupid he’d been for accepting the challenge to begin with. He could have been seriously injured, if not killed outright. He watches as Ted brushes off the dust from the suit jacket he’d left behind, realization coming slowly. “You were running with me.”

The corners of Ted’s mouth quirk slightly. “Pulse seems fine,” he says, releasing Blake’s wrist and glancing over to where the others are hauling two skag carcasses towards them. “Wouldn’t be much of a bodyguard if I didn’t guard you, now would I?”

“Why…why me?” Blake demands before he can think better of it.

Ted’s smile deepens. “Ask me again, later.”

His shadow excuses himself to help butcher the skags, a task that Tim gladly forgoes. Tannis watches until she becomes bored, drifting over to them and staring at Blake thoughtfully. “Your performance was tremendously entertaining. I do not think I’ve laughed so hard in years.”

“I am glad to have been of service,” Blake replies as graciously as possible, pinning Tim with a stare when his friend lets out a wheeze. “I’m sure a glass of water would help with your cough, Timothy.”

“Sorry…”

Blake swings his jacket back over his shoulders and settles back in his seat, eyeing the proceedings – he’s never before had the dubious pleasure of watching an animal being butchered for its meat, but he supposes that the triplets are doing a decent job of it. They certainly seem efficient enough and have clearly done this many times, going by the ‘assembly line’ style they’ve adopted. Before long, the knives are put away and each brother is busy performing a separate task. Tannis wanders off to vomit amidst the weeds and Tim goes to help Ned drag the leftovers back to the skag den, so Blake decides to volunteer his services. He’s given a once-over by Zed, for some reason, and reminded to fix his hair.

“Leave him alone,” Ted finally says, keeping his eyes on the chunks of meat he’s carving up and tossing into a bucket that could do with a good cleaning. “Y’don’t see me goin’ after Queen Crazy, over there.”

“She’s got a name, and that ain’t it,” Zed reminds him.

“I’m sure we’ll all get reminded of that name when we hear you hollerin’ it out tonight.”

Zed snorts. “You’re a fine one to talk about hollerin’, the way you carry on whenever the slightest breeze hits your dick. An’ I do mean hits, you goddamned freak.”

“Sounds t’me like you’re jealous that I can get off ’thout flippin’ through a medical textbook and gettin’ riled about someone’s inner-ear imbalance,” Ted says blithely. “She read the terms off to ya? ‘Oooh Doctor Zed! Please tell me all about my saccule-tolithic organs! I want to detect your linear acceleration.’”

“That ain’t it at all,” Zed declares, rolling his eyes. “If you’re gonna insult me, at least try to get it right.”

Ted shrugs. “Hey, I been gone a while – you coulda branched out into people’s ear canals. Your
pecker’s small enough to fit…”

“I’ll just see if Doctor Tannis requires my assistance,” Blake says hastily.

The brothers actually laugh at this. “She’s just fine,” Zed says, “and we ain’t gonna kill each other at the moment.”

Blake clears his throat, looking from one to the other. “You seem remarkably…accepting…of this situation,” he tells Zed.

“Seems t’me like I can’t do nothing about it, now can I? That whole game of intergalactic grab-ass ain’t really my business but if it brought Ted back…well, Blake, I guess you’re good for somethin’.” Zed walks off without looking at either of them, and Blake watches him leave.

Ted glances up to meet his eyes. “You go on back by the fire; I’ll be there in a few.”

“Very well…Theodore.” Blake suddenly wants to reach out to touch the man’s white-streaked temple, but he’s not sure how Ted will take it. After a moment’s deliberation he does it anyway and notes the way Ted’s eyelashes flicker. “I suppose that I will need to rest up.”

Their merry band finally reconvenes around the fire-pit once all the meat has been processed and the detritus removed. Tim and Ned seem to have grown quite friendly, which bodes well for their plans of cohabitation, and it’s one less thing for Blake to have to worry about. The day continues its slow descent into night and as the fire grows brighter against the sky, the tales grow taller than the flames. Ted lies through his teeth about besting a Vault monster singlehanded, Zed tells them a story about being adopted by drunken varkids, and Ned swears up and down that his tale of being kidnapped by sand pirates is actually true. “I was the personal sex toy of none other than Captain Scarlett,” he says.

“You were not,” Zed snorts. “At least keep it halfway believable.”

“What’s a Captain Scarlett?” Ted wonders, and Tannis is quick to fill him in on how buxom and gorgeous the pirate queen is purported to be. They’re all shown some sort of pinup calendar featuring the captain’s charms – apparently Dr. Tannis keeps one on her person at all times – and Ted squints at it. “Well, she does only got one eye…maybe the sand was blowin’ in the other one so she couldn’t see Ned that well. You kept your clothes on, right?”

“Fuck all of y’all,” Ned declares to the amusement of his brothers.

Tim steps in with a story about delivering a pair of Moon Threshers to Sir Hammerlock, though he stutters to a halt when he sees that he’s once again incurred Zed’s wrath. “So it’s your fault!”

“W-well, not really. I mean, I was with a group and we all kinda played a part in…uh. That.”

“Then you’d best give out some names, son, ‘cause it looks like-”

“Like you could use a drink,” Ned interrupts. “Lord knows I sure could. C’mon, Tim, you can help me bring out the booze.”

Blake finds himself nodding off against Ted’s shoulder, and his shadow casually slips an arm around him. “Ready to head in?” Ted murmurs. “Looks like you could use a nap.”

“I am just fine, I assure you,” Blake says with a sniff, but doesn't make any move to distance himself from Ted’s warmth. “Though I wouldn't be averse to going inside.”

Ted’s fingers tighten slightly. “Let’s get you in there, then.” They make their excuses and head into
the motel; the only comment comes from Zed, who rolls his eyes and tells them to ‘keep it down.’ Dr. Tannis is on her sixth plate of skag meat and too busy loading her fork to care overmuch what anyone else is doing. “Man, that girl can eat,” Ted comments as the door closes behind them.

“I suppose so,” Blake says calmly, allowing himself to be steered right into the room where he’d seen Ted and Ned working earlier. “Ah. This is what you were doing,” he says, looking down at the invitingly large bed that had been created from two smaller ones.

There is an impressive quantity of blankets piled up, as well, though when he asks about it he’s assured that it’s because of how cold Fyrestone gets at night. “Believe me, you’ll be glad of ‘em,” Ted says, eyeing him speculatively.

“I’m sure I will, having a partner such as yourself with which to share them,” Blake says, feeling a different kind of warmth when Ted smiles at him. He is a truly handsome man, Blake thinks to himself – it’s hard to believe that there another two copies of his shadow milling outside even now. “You told me to ask you later. Is now later?”

Ted looks puzzled until he’s reminded of his earlier suggestion. “Oh, yeah. That.” His smile takes on a different quality that turns the warmth Blake is feeling into a roaring blaze in the pit of his stomach. “Well…tell you the truth, I was definitely gonna kill you. You were so damned sneaky, though, an’ I just wanted to keep seein’ how you were gonna try to get out of it…most people, they’re so desperate to live they’ll do just about anything.”

Blake swallows with difficulty, desire twisting his stomach as the other man approaches him slowly. “I wanted to live, too.”

“I won’t argue with that, but you weren’t desperate. I kept gettin’ the feeling like it was such an…an inconvenience, and you just didn’t have time for that shit ‘cause you had other places t’be. Made me kinda pissed ‘cause I wasn’t top priority.”

“You hounded me across countless planets simply because you were offended?”

Ted rolls his shoulders up into a shrug. “Hey, I never said I was perfect.”

Of all things, it makes Blake laugh. “No, I don’t suppose that you did.”

“I liked how angry I made you,” Ted continues, sliding his hands up Blake’s tie to loosen the knot. “You wanted to live, sure, but it was ‘cause you didn’t want me to win…but that’s what I do best, Mister Blake. Nobody’s better at what I do; if you win, you’d best believe it’s only ‘cause I let you.”

Blake reaches to place the palm of his hand over the sliver of skin that’s showing at the hem of Ted’s shirt, and smiles slowly at the answering hitch of breath. “Would you care to wager on that, Theodore?” He casts a look over his shoulder at the door, which is securely latched against any possible intruders, then back up at his shadow. The dynamic shifts to Blake’s advantage as he slips his hand beneath Ted’s shirt to feel the warm, muscled skin – they might as well be back in Room 5, and assuming control of this dangerous man is as easy as drawing breath. “I would like to see how much better you can do at performing fellatio – your last performance was a bit lackluster, I’m afraid.”

“Speakin’ of lackluster, I don’t even get a kiss first?”

“Don’t be ridiculous. I don’t keep you around for kissing,” Blake says, but gathers a handful of Ted’s shirt and tugs him forward anyway. Ted’s lips are warm against his, and Blake can taste the rakk ale that Ted had been drinking earlier. They move towards the bed in stumbling inches until the
back of Ted’s legs hit the frame and they spill onto the blankets in a lustful, panting tangle. Blake finds himself sprawled atop Ted’s body and can feel the other man’s hands purposely keeping him there; he leans down and closes his teeth over the side of Ted’s neck, biting down hard enough to leave a reddened ring of flesh. “Now then. I believe I requested a certain service from you, Theodore.”

Ted is kneeling by the side of the bed so quickly, Blake can’t even remember seeing him move. “Yes, sir.” He starts to remove his shirt before stopping to look up for permission, then continues when Blake nods.

Blake settles on the edge of the mattress and directs Ted to disrobe completely, then slowly begins to unbutton his shirt while watching Ted get undressed without even needing to stand up. There is something to said for military efficiency. Ted looks up at him again, waiting for the nod to continue and plainly wanting to say something insubordinate. “I would advise against any unnecessary remarks, Colonel. Let us see how well you can follow orders, yes?”

Ted’s brow furrows in consternation, but he swallows any insouciance. “Yes sir.” Blake motions towards his lap and continues working at the buttons of his own shirt while Ted’s hands slide up Blake’s thighs, parting them and shuffling forward. Ted rubs his thumbs over Blake’s cock while opening the pin-striped trousers slowly enough to make Blake snap at him for it. The gleam of humor in those green eyes has Blake fighting not to smile back, because the last thing the man needs is encouragement. He still takes his time drawing Blake’s cock out, pressing his thumb against the base so that it arches up from the opening of Blake’s underwear.

His view completely obscured by the top of the assassin’s head, Blake gnaws at his lower lip when Ted bends forward. The warm exhalation of breath directly on the head of his shaft makes Blake’s hips jerk upwards, but Ted simply leans back so that Blake doesn’t come into contact with anything but air. His eyes flick up to meet Blake’s, still full of sly amusement, and then Ted touches his tongue to the very tip of Blake’s dick. Blake looses a shuddering breath as Ted places several teasing licks along the bottom of it, working his way up with agonizing slowness before placing his lips over the glans. “You are a trial to my patience,” Blake murmurs, running his fingers through Ted’s hair. His fingertips brush some sort of raised scar hidden by the white hair on the left temple – he’ll have to ask about that later.

Ted rolls his eyes up to look at Blake as he presses forward, his lips parting around Blake’s cock as it gains entrance to that unbelievably sassy mouth. Blake’s breathing grows labored as Ted’s tongue molds around him in plain mimicry of another orifice altogether. Ted slides his mouth onto Blake’s shaft until Blake can feel the back of Ted’s throat, whereupon the other man begins the slow pull back off of him. He’s still keeping his eyes fixed on Blake’s, too, and he’s clearly aware of how uncomfortable the eye contact is for Blake to endure – Blake is much more used to his partners keeping their eyes on their task, or closing them completely. What Ted is doing is a blatant dare, and it seems incredibly indecent.

He’s not going to give the insufferable man the satisfaction of telling him to look somewhere else, Blake decides, so he’s going to make him want to look elsewhere. “It really is quite amazing,” Blake says, reaching both hands down to comb through Ted’s hair. “With your mouth stopped like this, there is really nothing to distinguish you from either of your brothers.” Those slyly watching eyes widen with surprised displeasure, and Blake abruptly feels Ted’s teeth closing around him in warning. “Careful, Theodore. You wouldn’t want to do anything I could make you regret.” Blake orders the other man up onto the bed, slapping Ted’s face sharply when he bites down before pulling away.

He’d planned on making Ted lie on his back in a more vulnerable position, but the biting has
changed Blake’s mind. If Ted feels the need to act like a temperamental brat, then he’ll get fucked like one. Blake snaps his fingers and gestures for Ted to go onto his hands and knees, then shoves him when Ted doesn’t move fast enough. The physician-assassin casts a look over his shoulder at Blake. “On the left. Sir.”

Blake frowns and glances over to where a bottle of lubricant and several condoms have been placed. “You certainly had high hopes, didn’t you, Colonel? I’m of a mind to take my own pleasure and leave you with nothing, since you cannot behave yourself,” he says. Ted stills immediately in response to the threat, and Blake gives the man’s well-shaped backside an approving pat. “Very good. We shall see, then… I am reminded that you wished to, ah, fuck the manners out of my head. Is that right? That is what you said, did you not?”

Ted clears his throat. “Yes. Yes, sir.”

“Perhaps it might be fitting for me to fuck some of those manners into your head,” Blake murmurs, settling behind Ted and reaching around to take hold of him. “Goodness knows you could use them.” Ted makes an unidentifiable noise as Blake strokes his stiffened cock, rubbing a finger through the precome that’s steadily leaking from the tip. “Open one of those for me, pet.”

Ted scrabbles at the pile of condoms, and Blake notices with satisfaction that Ted’s hands are trembling as he tears one of the wrappers open. A murmured suggestion has the condom passed back to Blake, who sets it aside and reaches for the lubricant. He squirts a generous dollop of it onto his fingers and reaches back between Ted’s legs with his other hand; Blake continues stroking that wonderfully thick cock, making the other man squirm in frustration when he doesn’t actually do anything with the lube. “Sir…”

“Patience, my dear.” Blake smiles when Ted attempts to shove himself back. “No, Theodore.” He waits until Ted stops squirming to stroke his finger over the tightly furled opening of the assassin’s body, enjoying the way Ted fights to swallow back a cry of pleasure. Blake teases with light, deft touches before unceremoniously sinking his index finger up to the third knuckle inside the man quivering in front of him. This time, Ted doesn’t bother trying to catch the moan that leaves his throat.

Blake draws another moan from him by burying another finger inside Ted’s ass, which spasms around him in reaction. “Please, Mister Blake - !”

“Roll onto your back,” Blake whispers roughly, pulling his hand back and giving Ted enough room to do as ordered. Once again he’s surprised at how quickly his shadow can follow instructions when he feels like cooperating, and Blake draws his breath in sharply when Ted seize his wrist and guides his hand back to its previous activity. “Look at you. The great Colonel Blanco, moaning like a back alley slut.” Ted’s eyes snap open at this and Blake suddenly wonders if he’s gone too far as Ted stares up at him. “Oh. I-”

Ted wraps his legs around Blake to urge him on. “Well, don’t stop.”

Blake clears his throat delicately. “The words or the…?”

“Both,” Ted says, looking at him as if he’s lost his mind. He wriggles his hips impatiently, and Blake is recalled to the task at hand. Literally. “Um. Please.”

“Very well,” Blake says somewhat awkwardly, trying to get back into the heat of the moment after the near-misstep. “Would you like me to fuck you, now?”

“I ain’t gettin’ any younger an’ neither are you,” Ted sighs. “Get over here!”
Blake scissors his fingers to make Ted gasp, then pulls them out entirely. “We really will need to work on that impatient streak of yours.” He notes with approval how Ted has kept his hands on either side, knowing better than to attempt to gain any pleasure not offered by Blake himself. “For now, I simply suggest you practice your breathing.” He moves forward and slides the condom up over the tip of his cock, rubbing against the other man’s slickened hole. Blake squeezes an extra amount of lubrication directly upon Ted’s skin and waits for Ted to ask what breathing has to do with anything – the moment his mouth opens, Blake wraps his thumb and forefinger around the condom and pushes forward, unrolling the latex sheath as he sinks into Ted’s body.

Ted arches up off of the bed with a choked yell at the sudden penetration. “F-fuck, what the…!”

“Easy,” Blake cautions gently, seating himself to the hilt and rubbing his thumbs into Ted’s hipbone. While his entry had been eased by the preparation of earlier, it’s plain that Ted hasn’t accommodated another man in quite some time. Blake moves back and forth slowly, watching his lover’s stiffened erection begin to twitch in reaction. “You feel wonderful, my darling.”

“Thank you, sir,” Ted whispers shakily, and Blake favors him with a smile as he reaches down to curl his fingers around the cock trapped between their bodies. Ted makes a noise in the back of his throat, pushing himself up on his elbows as Blake strokes him.

Blake murmurs his pleasure and moves his hands to grasp Ted’s hips, thrusting harder and biting his lip at how tightly his shadow is clasping him. “Look at you, practically begging me to work you open until you’re moaning like a cheap whore.”

Ted’s legs tighten around him, pulling Blake in closer with a sound that goes straight to Blake’s dick.

He shoves Ted’s legs even wider apart, bracing himself and setting a punishing rhythm that Ted eagerly lifts himself into. Their bodies meet with sharp slaps and Blake’s brow furrows in concentration as he puts all of his energy into fucking the man beneath him. Ted’s grunts of pleasure shift into the very moans that Blake had taunted him about, but the last thing Blake wants to do at the moment is laugh.

It surprises him when Ted comes with no other help but the friction Blake is providing and, judging by the look on Ted’s face, even Ted is startled. Blake isn’t ashamed to being fascinated with the way Ted’s back arches, the muscles of his abdomen tensing as he comes in several long spurts that decorate both their stomachs with pearlescent fluid. “Sir…!”

Blake surges forward, redoubling his efforts as the contractions of Ted’s muscles start to milk him for his own orgasm. “Yes, my darling,” he breathes, shoving in hard and grinding his pelvis against Ted’s. Light explodes behind Blake’s eyelids as his climax consumes him – he sags forward against Ted, the accumulated tension of several months draining from him as Blake finds his release.

When he begins to surface from the post-orgasmic haze, Blake realizes that they’re still intimately locked together; Ted’s supporting him with his back twisted at a clearly uncomfortable angle, holding them both up with only one arm because the other hand is stroking Blake’s back. “Hey there,” Ted murmurs when Blake lifts his head to look at him. “C’mon over here.”

He helps Blake up onto the bed with him, shivering as Blake’s cock slips from his body. “I…I hope I haven’t injured you in any way,” Blake says cautiously as he disposes of the used condom.

Ted smiles and shakes his head, wiping the mess from his abdomen before offering Blake the towel. “Nah, it’s all good. You got yourself some kinda mouth, Jeffrey.” Blakeflushes to the roots of his hair and Ted laughs aloud, pulling him close and nuzzling at Blake’s neck. “I like that. I like that a lot, actually.”
“I hadn’t guessed at it,” Blake says, letting his fingers slide into Ted’s hair to rub at the hidden scars there. “You require a firmer hand than most, Theodore.”

“You think you can handle me?”

Blake rolls over and tugs Ted’s head down to his. “I look forward to the challenge.”
Blake returns to Helios but the resumption of power doesn’t go as smoothly as he’d planned. He’ll figure it out eventually.

In the morning, they leave for Helios.

Blake has the unique and highly dubious pleasure of waking up next to a highly-trained, deadly Crimson Lance Omega Assassin…who snores loudly enough to wake the dead. He also vociferously denies it when Blake complains, after slipping out of the bed and retreating to a safe distance before throwing a pillow at Ted’s face. The pillow in question is in shreds on the floor after Ted’s natural defensiveness had caused him to grab his sword hilts from beneath his own pillow. “That could have been me,” Blake points out after he’s crossed over the pillow’s remains for the fifth time.

“No it couldn’t,” Ted says with a dismissive wave, glancing up from the bag of weapons he’s packing up.

“Forgive me if I do not share your certainty.”

Ted shakes his head and finishes checking the bag, zipping it up and stacking it atop the others by the door. Efficient or not, Blake isn’t sure why anyone needs to haul so many weapons around with them on a regular basis. “You got all your crap?”

Blake answers this question with a hard stare and drifts outside to look at the Technical that’s been parked beside the door. He can hear a Skag roaring at something, and suppresses a shudder. “I guess this is goodbye then, huh?” Tim says, walking up to him.

“I suppose that it is,” Blake agrees, rocking back on his heels and looking up at the massive ‘H’ hanging in the sky. “Will you stay here much longer, Timothy?”

Tim shrugs. “Ned’s going to stay for a little while to help fix up the motel so I figure I could help out a little, too. It’ll be good to actually help make something.”

“Mm.”

“Uh. Jeff? Did you, by any chance…tell…him to…?”

Blake raises his eyebrows. “Did I tell ‘who’ to ‘what,’ exactly?”

The younger man hems and haws before coming out with it: apparently, someone had paid a visit to the caged guard during the small hours of the night and divested him of his skin. And he had been kept alive and fully alert during the process. “It was like…a suit, or something, all in once piece,” Tim says, pausing to keep from retching at the memory. “Ned took care of everything, but I just wanted to ask if you…” He trails off and averts his eyes as Ted comes through the door with the first load of luggage.

“Everything okay?” Ted asks them mildly, tossing the bags into the truck.
“It seems that the captured guard from Friendship Gulag was discovered separated from his skin earlier,” Blake says. “Would you happen to know anything about that, Colonel?”

Ted favors Tim with a long, thoughtful look before returning his gaze to Blake. “I’m sure the colonel don’t know a damn thing about that, sir. ‘Scuse me.” He smiles and walks past them to retrieve the rest of the bags.

“That was kinda weird. Who else would’ve-”

“Do you have much experience regarding construction, Timothy?” Blake interrupts. “If I’m not mistaken, you were present during the construction of Helios. That might give you a competitive edge, so to speak.”

Tim laughs, casting another confused glance at the motel. “Most of that was done by worker bots – the engineers were all dead by the time I got there. Listen, are you sure he didn’t actually…you know?”

“If Colonel Blanco disavows all knowledge of such a thing, then Colonel Blanco is not responsible for it,” Blake says pleasantly. He steers his friend out of Ted’s way and Tim trails behind him as Blake says his goodbyes. Ned wallops him on the back so hard he loses his balance, and the friendly doctor hands out some advice raunchy enough to make his ears burn. Zed restricts his farewell to a nod, and Tannis suggests that Blake is not as ‘odious’ as she’d been led to believe.

He shakes hands with Tim, who opts for a hug instead, then walks back to the Technical where Ted is waiting. “Ready?”

“Yes. Did you need to say goodbye to your family?”

Ted shakes his head, climbing up into the driver’s seat. “Said all I needed t’say last night.”

“To your family, or just the prison guard?”

“I gave you the option of dealin’ with that,” Ted points out. “By the way, he wanted you t’know that he was real sorry for all the trouble he caused.”

Blake gets into the passenger seat, unsure of how to respond. He should have known that Ted would subject the guard to more torture, given his response the previous night when Blake had shied away from Ted’s more forceful approaches. “I’m not sure that makes me feel any better,” he admits. “Theodore, I am sorry that.”

“Told you last night it was fine. Whenever you’re ready is fine.”

“And if I never am?” Blake cuts to the heart of his unease, not wanting to look over as Ted starts the truck and steers it back out of the gate.

“Then that’s fine, too. I mean, it ain’t as if I didn’t spend my first years in the Lance on top,” Ted says, sounding amused. “Got traded around plenty ’fore I was promoted outta all that.” There’s nothing in his voice to hint that he’d endured violence any worse than what Blake had undergone, but Ted doesn’t have to actually say it.

Blake feels foolish for even thinking about this, because no promises have been made and he’s not even sure that he cares for any. He feels a certain fondness for his shadow, and of a certainty there’s a good amount of desire mixed in with that as well, but Ted hasn’t given Blake any clues as to how he should proceed. It’s been a long time since Blake has indulged in a purely physical attraction without an emotional attachment…it might well happen that they’ll drift apart once the heat between
them fades. Blake stifles a sigh and glances over at Ted’s profile as the Technical is parked in front of the Fast Travel; it’s madness to even imagine that this might be the beginning of some lifelong love affair. He’ll simply enjoy the newfound physical aspect of their working relationship as long as it lasts, and not look for more than that. He does have a company to run, after all.

“I want you to set up a purge of any systems compromised by your erstwhile underling,” Blake says, pausing at the look on Ted’s face. “What?”

“Oh, don’t stop on my account. It’s somethin’ I never woulda thought of in a million years, bein’ that I’m just a backwater bumpkin who don’t know nothin’,” Ted says, climbing down to start moving the bags. “Now get your skinny ass outta there so you can go back up there an’ pretend you never left.”

“I didn’t mean-”

“Yes, you did. Don’t do it again an’ we’ll be fine.”

Blake sighs and tries to make up for the gaffe by trying to help shift the weapons, but Ted yanks the bag from his hands, looking scandalized. “Theodore-”

“Just stand over there ‘til we’re ready, and act presidential or somethin’,” Ted advises. “You could even work on your story – whatcha gonna say?”

“Theodore-”

“Let’s practice. Hello again, President Blake,” Ted says, shifting his voice from its customary Badlands drawl into a clipped, precise accent. “We have been attempting to reach you and have met with nothing but resistance from your…assistant.”

Blake sighs again and pinches at the bridge of his nose, wondering how they’ve managed to circle back to…whatever this is. “It is no concern of yours unless, of course, you wish that I place my undivided attention upon your job performance. What was your name, again? I’m afraid I’ve forgotten.”

“Oooh, that’s a good one. Nice an’ uppity. What if they’re a shareholder?” Ted prompts.

“They would not come to Pandora-” Blake feels like throwing something when Ted gives him a pointed look. “There is one or more shareholders aboard Helios, at this very moment, and you are just telling me this now?!?” he barely refrains from screaming.

“Well, I actually did tell you. It’s fine, though, don’t worry ‘bout it.”

“When was this fictional point in time during which you confessed this news? Did you mumble it as you peeled the flesh from the prison guard’s left tricep? I’m afraid that I was sleeping at the time.”

“It was actually when you had me upside down on the edge of the bed; I was tellin’ you and you told me to shut the hell up ‘fore you gagged me with me own tie. Ain’t my fault you don’t wanna listen, and can I just say how damned shocked I am that you’ve been single for so long!” Ted yells at him. “We’re ready to go, so you can get your dumb ass up there an’ do your job!”

Blake levels a glare of his own to compete with the impressive glower being directed at him; if Ted wants to take offense at absolutely everything, he’s welcome to do so. “Very well.”

“Fine.” Ted gives him another scowl as he walks over, and Blake is drawing breath for another verbal riposte when his shadow abruptly drops something on the ground in front of him. It’s bright
yellow, it’s ridiculous, it’s the unitard that Ted had sworn that he hadn’t brought with him. “You wanna slip into this ‘fore we go back?”

He’s going to have an aneurysm, there’s no other explanation for the intense pressure building behind his eyes. “Come over here so that I can slap you in the face.”

“No thanks, I’m good where I am.” Ted finishes arranging all of the bags and motions for Blake to join him. “We’ll be usin’ the Fast Travel just inside Jack’s office – no tours today, so the way’s clear. You’ve got the shareholders scheduled in about an hour, then a handful of dumbasses want their funding approved. After that, we’ll get you out an’ about so nobody gets too big for their britches. Sound good, sir?”

Blake limits himself to a terse nod, wondering what the man is up to. “In which capacity will you be...showing...yourself?”

“I guess that’s up to you, ain’t it,” Ted says calmly.

“The, ah, Lance Assassin armor has proved an adequate deterrent,” Blake replies, catching the shift in Ted’s expression. “What.”

“Nothing, Mister Blake, sir.”

“If it is nothing, then I suggest we get on with our day.”

Blake notes the immediate change in Ted’s demeanor the moment they’re digistructed aboard Helios – he immediately becomes a great deal more deferential and businesslike, which Blake appreciates, but there is still a gleam of humor present whenever Ted looks at him. He directs his shadow to meet him at his office and walks out without looking back to see how this order has been received.

He pauses to take in the familiar sights and sounds of the Hyperion station, nodding casually when a gaggle of accountants make their way past whilst arguing about one line item or another. They immediately fall into a semi-terrified silence and scramble to get out of his way when he continues his purposeful stroll. Blake passes countless employees and is pleased to strike the same hefty amount of fear into their hearts.

His personal assistant, whose name has completely escaped him during his time away, meets him at the halfway point and quickly fills him in on all he’s missed during his enforced stay in Friendship Gulag. She doesn’t mention anything at all concerning Blake’s time as a convict, yet Blake finds himself wondering just how he’s going to ensure that she doesn’t share the information with anyone else, either...he’s loathe to have to dispose of such a capable, efficient assistant. Perhaps he’ll have her monitored to gauge the loyalty of which she’s capable so that he doesn’t have to rush into anything.

They make better time towards his office, discussing the upcoming meeting with the shareholders – as he’d suspected, they’re not exactly thrilled at boarding Helios to find Blake gone, but his assistant (what is her name?) had fed them a steady diet of carefully thought-out half truths. As a result, they now believe that he’s gotten his hands on Corrazza’s entire catalogue of blueprints. Blake isn’t aware that he possesses anything of the kind, but Ted might have foreseen a problem just like this.

Careful questioning reveals that Ned has been playing his role as Ted to the hilt and a few pauses alert Blake to the probability that Ted’s brother has taken full advantage of whatever arrangement Blake’s assistant had made with her original acquaintance.

Thinking about it too much is giving him a headache.
The only good thing to come of the awkward elevator ride is that he remembers that his assistant’s name is Paxson, so there’s that. Blake strides into his office to find that several of the screens are showing the security camera feeds from Research and Development. “I hope Uriens has not been overextending himself during my absence,” Blake says mildly.

“There’s been a slight increase in the communications he’s been sending to his contacts at Dahl,” Paxson replies, extending an ECHOpad with all the pertinent details. “It looks like he’s ready to jump ship, so to speak.”

Blake sighs – another useful link he’ll have to destroy. Still, he might be able to salvage part of this one if he’s careful enough. “Set up an intermediary; Uriens will doubtless request an escort, so I suggest that you give him one before he asks. Have the Dahl informant notified of his imminent departure from the Hyperion ranks. You know what to do after that.”

His assistant nods and makes a few notes while he glances through the information on the tablet she’s just handed him. “Of course, sir. Right away.” Paxson takes the ECHOpad back when Blake glances up at her and tilts the device slightly. “Sir? Your personal physician has scheduled a checkup for you. He was rather insistent, Mister Blake.”

Blake makes a noncommittal noise. “If I have the time, I will consider attending. Now, I believe I have a meeting to attend…”

“Conference room 287, Mister Blake.”

His years of service as Vice President (and deflecting Handsome Jack’s many bouts of murderous rage) serves him in good stead, and Blake is easily able to turn the shareholders’ attention towards the improvements Blake has worked hard to make since he’d first gained the presidency. He’s showing a schematic of the streamlined production facilities (updated robotic assembly using an in-house workforce of reprogrammed worker bots which might otherwise be idle) when Ted finally makes an appearance.

He’s found an Hyperion engineer’s uniform today, and gives the others a deferential bob of his head as he makes his approach. “The schematics you requested, sir,” he murmurs, offering Blake the data module.

Blake takes it from Ted’s hands, careful not to let their fingers touch for too long, and nods in dismissal. “That will be all.”

“Pleasure to serve, Mister President,” Ted murmurs, slanting a look of quiet amusement Blake’s way before excusing himself.

“If you see Colonel Blanco, do send him in,” Blake says for the benefit of their audience.

The corners of Ted’s mouth lift slightly. “Right away, sir.”

There is no way of knowing exactly what Ted has given him, so Blake simply inserts it into the main viewing station and hopes for the best…and it does turn out as the best thing he could have ever done because there are weapon schematics, shield diagrams, and even blueprints for vehicle-mounted weapons. The shareholders nod and smile their approval as Blake details the ousting of the Corrazza CEO. “You’ve proven to be very capable and efficient,” one of them says, coming forward to shake Blake’s hand. “There have, however, been rumors that you’ve requisitioned several Atlas soldiers from the main barracks on Promethea.”

Blake’s eyes drift towards the doors, wondering what on earth is taking Ted so long to get changed.
"Gentleman…and lady," he begins, bowing slightly to the sole female representative. "While there is certainly some cost involved in such a measure, surely you cannot deny that the abandoned Crimson Lance soldiers create more problems by being left as they are. I am of the firm belief that trained military personnel, if left to their own devices with neither pay nor supplies, are far more dangerous to the Hyperion Corporation than if we continue to treat them as the subsidiaries and assets that they truly are. Jack's vendetta against Atlas lacked foresight… resources are made to be used," he says mildly. "It makes no sense at all to ignore their value."

The doors open once again, admitting a slightly red-faced Paxson. "Sir, the colonel has arrived."

The others look up expectantly, and Paxson slips out as Ted walks in wearing the immaculate black and red uniform of the Crimson Lance brass. "Good of you to join us," Blake says.

Ted looks at Blake and gives him a short nod, for all the world acting as if Blake is the subordinate. "Mister Blake." He sweeps his gaze across the assembled shareholders, then glances up at the monitors that are still displaying the schematics he'd brought earlier. "I see you're already making use of the information; very good."

Blake gestures towards his unwelcome visitors. “Perhaps you would like to fill our guests in, regarding the nature of this…information.”

“Of course, sir.” Ted shifts his attention towards the small group. “The Crimson Lance is under the umbrella of the Hyperion Corporation, which I’m sure you’re all aware of. While Hyperion’s former CEO squandered our resources and placed a stranglehold on the supply chain to the planets on which the Lance is based…President Blake has had the wisdom to reinstate our various contracts,” he says smoothly, cutting to the heart of the shareholder’s objections. "While there are fewer soldiers amongst the ranks after our pay was disrupted in such an unfortunate manner, those remaining are grateful to be remembered by the current administration.”

“Exactly how many of you are left?” one of the men asks, his lips still compressed with disapproval.

Ted names a figure that makes the other man inhale sharply. “Communication with the remaining troops is still a problem, so that amount has most likely been estimated on the high side. However, once the supply chain is fully reestablished, Hyperion can look forward to reaping the benefits that come from our acquaintance.”

“Explain,” another of the shareholders demands, leaning forward so slightly that he probably isn’t even aware that he’s doing it.

“Each member of the Lance has been trained in a secondary capacity, to ensure that our association continues to be a productive one,” Ted says, and Blake is struck by how businesslike his shadow has become. He’s never truly witnessed Ted acting in his full capacity as an Atlas officer and the change is a fascinating one. His fascination probably stems from having seen Ted in his hometown surrounded by his family, Blake decides as Ted explains about several different groups of soldiers having been singled out to learn a specific trade such as mining or specialization in the field of data retrieval. “Our main goal is to be indispensable to our employers, and Mister Blake here is ensuring that we can finally be of use to the Hyperion Corporation...you can see the results right before you; the first of many.” He lifts a hand to gesture towards the screens, and then falls into parade rest.

Blake nods decisively. "As you can see, any underestimation of the Atlas resources would be very ill-advised."

Their visitors confer on the merits of Ted's claims while the man in question simply stands there patiently, eyes fixed on the far wall of the conference room. "The board will have to review a revised
"Consider it done," Blake replies, watching her cheeks flush as Ted smiles slightly. She's not the only one so affected, either – at least two of the men's faces have acquired a suspicious tint to them. *Oh, for heaven's sake.* “Thank you, Colonel. I do not believe that your further presence is required.”

Ted glances over at him. “As the official Lance liaison, I’m tasked with ensuring that all manner of militaristic inquiries are dealt with personally,” he says politely. “Once I’m sure that neither lady nor gentlemen have any further need of my services, consider myself placed at your disposal. Excuse me, sir.” He gives Blake an unreadable look as he’s beckoned over to one of the unwanted arrivals, effectively rendering Blake an extraneous presence in his own boardroom.

Blake briefly considers joining the group simply to hear what questions they could possibly have, but something tells him that half of those assembled have no real desire to learn anything concerning the Crimson Lance. A discrete press of a button summons his personal assistant with whom Blake discusses the rest of the day’s itinerary. “I’ve moved your meeting with the new director of operations at the Fenrir facility, Mister Blake, and rescheduled it for the morning due to the atmospheric failures. There was an unusually strong tremor that shut down several of the O2 generators, but they’ll be back up later this evening.”

“Losses?”

“Not much to speak of, just a few laboratories were vented. Non-essentials only.”

“Very well, tomorrow is fine,” Blake says. “I’ll need you to send a budget estimate to each of the committee members.”

Paxson clears her throat. “I believe Colonel Blanco has already taken care of that.”

Blake looks over towards his shadow, whose smile widens ever so slightly. "How…convenient."

"Yes, sir. Would you like me to move your appointment with the prison liaison? I wasn't informed of the generator failures at Fenrir until today, so if you meet with the director earlier there will be plenty of time for your medical exam."

"That will be fine," Blake says, turning away as the shareholders finish conferring with each other and deliver their decision. "I trust that Colonel Blanco has answered any questions you might have regarding the remaining Atlas garrisons."

He's told that they still might have further questions and advised to place Ted at their disposal, which does double duty in causing the corners of Ted's mouth to twitch and sending heartburn to sour Blake's stomach. This isn't the first time he's been required to prostitute one of his employees to ensure a project gets funding (for all that he has been put in command of Hyperion, he still must answer to others) but it is the first time he's had to send one of his own lovers to do it. Blake ponders how best to refuse, but takes too long and Ted speaks before Blake has a chance to. "Mister Blake, a word?"

"Of course," Blake says. "Ms. Paxson, if you'll excuse us."

Ted walks over to him, angling his body so that Blake is hidden from view. "Don't you dare blow this, Sticks," he murmurs. "I got a whole hell of a lotta people countin' on me t'get this done."

"It is dreadfully inappropriate to expect-"

"Already told you, I been through worse. You ain't worried or nothin', are you?" Ted eyes him, and
Blake feels like grinding his teeth. "Hang on…you're jealous. That why you didn’t say nothin’ earlier? Cause you’re jealous?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Blake says stiffly. "I have no claim upon you. It's nothing to me where you bestow yourself."

Ted raises his voice for the benefit of the group behind him, dropping his accent once more. "Of course I'll treat our guests with all *courtesy*, Mister President. The Crimson Lance takes hospitality very seriously," he says, sounding slightly irritated. The look on his face matches the tone, and he stares at Blake before turning away. "If you’d come with me, I would be glad to show you some of the security improvements my team has made during our time here on Helios…"

Once more, Blake has been caught wrong-footed for no reason he’s aware of. He gives the departing shareholders an unctuous smile that has no business being on his face, then exits the boardroom in a truly foul mood because he is, indeed, jealous.

He meets with a truly apologetic Director of Incarceration, who seems to be missing half of his guards after a recent incident at Friendship Gulag had cost many of their lives. As the experience had very nearly cost Blake *his* life, Blake is feeling rather less than sympathetic. He asks just enough questions to be sure that the man, who has held the same position since Jack’s tenure, hasn’t set foot in Friendship Gulag even once. While his negligence had almost certainly saved the life of Timothy Lawrence, it’s a failing that Blake cannot and will not accept. “I had been thinking about simply firing you but, as you have quite ably pointed out, Friendship Gulag is sorely understaffed at the moment…consider your reassignment as a second chance to prove your worth to Hyperion,” Blake says coolly. “Your entire staff will be expected to report to Transport Bay 16 in precisely thirty minutes, where you will board a shuttle bound for Pandora. I trust that the consequences for either being late or ‘losing’ a single member of your group do not need mentioning.”

The man looks totally crushed and hopeless as he leaves, and Blake leans back in his chair with a sigh of satisfaction. “What else is there?”

Paxson hands him a sheaf of papers. “Your signature on these authorizing maintenance on the moonshot cannon that malfunctioned while you were planetside.”

Blake reaches a hand out for them, and closes his other hand on her wrist to prevent her from backing away. “I haven’t yet decided what to do with you,” he tells her. “Do you have any suggestions?”

He can feel her muscles jump as she fights against the urge to pull free. “I would never jeopardize my position here at Hyperion, Mister Blake,” she says calmly. “However, if you feel the need to murder me for doing my job and helping restore you to power then I invite you to do so. Until then, may I suggest adjourning to the Hub of Heroism? The different factions in Accounting are planning one of their battles.”

“You do not sound very worried, Ms. Paxson,” Blake says, watching her carefully as he releases her wrist.

She smiles. “This is Hyperion, sir. I’m used to it.”

Blake signs off on the bogus repair orders. “We might as well go so we don’t miss a single gunshot. Anything new on Uriens?”

They head out to the main concourse and up to the second level, where a few enterprising caterers have set up tables on the bridges and are taking drink orders. “He’s already met his new ECHOnet
contact and is arranging for transportation. I’ve managed to set up a few bogus ‘scientists’ who have made contact with Dahl based on Uriens’ recommendations, so now it’s just a matter of time until they choose which one they’ll do business with…would you like a drink, sir?”

“Make sure there’s no protein anywhere near it,” Blake replies, turning his attention towards the two groups of accountants below. He’s not entirely sure how the tradition was started, but he’ll be damned if it’s not entertaining. Paxson brings him tea, and Blake sips the steaming liquid as he watches the drama unfold – he has to wonder what would happen if someone gave the accounting department real firearms and set them loose on each other.

He’s busily watching the grand finale (two accountants are using members of the opposing faction as human shields) when Ted appears behind his left shoulder. "What in the hell is going on down there."

Blake holds up a hand for silence. “Tradition.” Down below them, the two remaining combatants fire at each other and one stands victorious before slowly slumping down to the floor as she ‘dies’ from her wounds. “Very well done. I believe that performance deserves Employee of the Month, Ms. Paxson. See to it, will you?”

“Right away, Mister Blake,” his assistant murmurs, taking his half-empty cup for disposal when he taps a finger against the side of it. Paxson circles around Ted, giving him a wide berth because he’s back in his Lance Assassin armor.

Blake waits until she’s out of earshot to glance back at Ted. “Well?”

“It went fine, sir. The budget won’t be a problem,” Ted says without looking at him. Not that Blake could tell what’s going on beneath the concealment of the helmet. “You’re scheduled for a medical exam this afternoon.”

“So I’m told.” Blake sits back in his chair. “Anything else to report?”

Ted shifts slightly. “I may have killed one of your employees after they tried to pull a gun on me.” Blake turns to stare up at him, mouth opening to demand to know who had done such a monumentally stupid thing, but Ted continues. “It looks like they were just practicing for…whatever that was you were watching.”

He barely suppresses a groan. “Oh, Theodore.”

“Sorry about that, Mister Blake.”

“Well, the damage has already been done. Please tell me you identified the body before disposal,” Blake sighs.

“I didn’t have much time…”

“Oh, good Lord-”

“…so I pulled one of his teeth just before his body went into the waste unit.”

Blake firmly resolves not to ask where the tooth is at present, because something tells him that he’s not going to like that answer, either. “Just…send the information to my assistant and she’ll take care of it. The last thing we need is a corpse still drawing a salary, especially with the new expenditures.” He sighs and stands up, brushing at his suit. “Come, I’m sure she’s found several hundred new forms that I all must sign immediately.”
He’s shadowed by Ted for the rest of the day and though he purposely makes no mention of his appointment in the medical bay, Ted forbears to mention it until Blake’s ECHOpad is plucked out of his hands. “Doctor Blanco will be waiting for you, sir,” he’s told firmly for Paxson’s benefit. “I’ll escort you.”

“This is completely unnecessary,” Blake says as Ted placed a hand beneath his elbow to help him out of the chair.

“I’ll escort you,” Ted repeats himself, his fingers digging into Blake’s arm, “Sir.”

As before, Blake is directed behind a screen to change while ‘the doctor’ will be in shortly. He’s not entirely sure why Ted keeps up the fiction that he isn’t playing both roles, because they’re alone. Still, he goes with it and emerges from the screen to find Ted back in the tailored uniform. “Is there a problem, Colonel?”

“While we’re here, you’ll address me as Doctor.” Ted lifts his eyes from the chart he’s scanning. “Try again.”

Blake pauses before he says something unfortunate. “Is there a problem…Doctor?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out, ain’t we?” Ted drops the papers on the closest surface, which turns out to be a tray of sharp instruments. “C’mon, let’s get your weight. You’d disappear if you ever had t’turn sideways.”

Blake steps onto the indicated scale obediently before Ted leads him over to an exam table and taps it. “I really don’t think this is necessary.”

“In here, I don’t give a good God damn what you think. In here, I am God so whyn’t you just shut the fuck up an’ let me get on with what needs doin’?” Ted asks pleasantly. Blake eyes him warily and nods, which finally makes Ted’s cheerfully offensive façade melt into something that actually seems professional. “No secret that you’re malnourished, but I’ve still got tests to run ‘fore I can send you off to get fattened up…”

The tests all blend together after a while, and Blake is keenly aware that his stomach is empty at the end of it when Ted brings out several empty vials that he intends to fill for the myriad blood tests that Blake somehow needs. He’s starting to become lightheaded when Ted notices and becomes irritated.

“There was no time to eat-”

“That’s a load of shit an’ you know it.” Ted reaches for the ECHO console and keys in a food order, then comes around the desk and hauls Blake into what has to be his office. “Stay here, food’ll be comin’ in a couple minutes. I gotta process these samples in the meantime so don’t you try to go nowhere,” he warns.

“I wouldn’t dream of defying you.”

Ted snorts as he turns to leave. “That’s a good one.”

The food turns out to be surprisingly good, though Blake isn’t sure what he was expecting – one of Ted’s infamous protein shakes, perhaps. Ted drops the tray in front of him and then sits down, obviously intending to stay until Blake eats everything. “How was it…truly?”

Ted keeps his eyes on the ECHOpad he’s pulled across the desk, presumably working on Blake’s test results. “You really wanna know?”

“I wouldn’t ask if I weren’t concerned, Theodore.” Blake finishes his soup while Ted continues
typing. “You weren’t ill-treated…?”

“You weren’t ill-treated…?” Ted says finally, looking up at him. “That’s a funny way of puttin’ it.”

“What were you expecting from me? What do you want?”

“If you don’t know, then that ain’t somethin’ I can drill into your skull,” Ted says, going back to his work. “It was fine, it went by quick enough an’ I made sure they were happy. That what you wanna know, or would you like a play-by-play?”

“You yourself told me-”

“I know what the fuck I told you ‘cause I was the one who said it. Now, drop it and finish your goddamned lunch. I ain’t talkin’ bout this no more…some of us got work to do ‘round this piece.”

Blake winds strands of cheese-covered pasta around his fork as he studies Ted’s head, bowed as it is over the workstation. There’s plainly something he should be aware of, but it doesn’t look as if Ted’s going to tell him and the only other person he might question about it is back on Pandora. He finishes his lunch slowly as he thinks about it, finally arriving at the conclusion that a man like Ted might have difficulty accepting affection outside of the bedroom no matter how much he might actually crave it. Blake himself is so out of practice that he can barely remember what it’s like to carry on a relationship that is open and honest, but he does know that communication is the key to one. For as long as Ted decides to stay with him, Blake can certainly try to make their time together as fulfilling as possible even if both of them have enough emotional baggage combined to fill a fleet of cargo shuttles.

“I apologize for not speaking against your bargain. I was unsure how to secure the funding necessary without sacrificing your bodily autonomy, and I did not speak soon enough.” Blake clears his throat. “I felt…jealous that you might welcome it.”

Ted stops in mid motion, still looking down at the terminal, and then Blake sees the broad shoulders relax slightly. “Well.”

“I’m terrible at this,” Blake says, pushing his tray aside and pillowing his head on his arms tiredly. “But I am willing to try.”

“I ain’t so great at it, either,” Ted admits, then looks over when Blake laughs softly. “Nobody asked you for a comment, so shut it.”

“My mistake.”

Ted swivels in his chair to regard him seriously. “It probably is.” He changes the subject by lifting the ECHOpad up and showing it off. “Look, most of this’s comin’ up negative but I don’t want you runnin’ loose ‘til I know for sure. Let’s get you back to your place so you can rest – if Diana’s got anything else, I’ll take care of it.”

Blake rubs at his eyes and covers a yawn with the back of his hand. “My hero.”

“Hmm,” Ted says, smiling slightly. “C’mon, let’s get you in bed.” His shadow escorts him back to his quarters, where they’re met by a wan-looking Ballard. Blake is too tired to properly greet the young man in the manner he deserves, and makes a mental note to do so as soon as he has had some sleep. Fyrestone seems farther away than ever when Ted declines to follow Blake into the bedroom. “Get some sleep…Jeffrey.”
Putting the 'fun' in dysfunctional.

Chapter Summary

The boys swap Romance Origin Stories, have a few misunderstandings and a lot of sex. Which leads to more misunderstandings. They'll get it together one day, but that day is not today.

Chapter Notes

I know I always say that there's actual plot happening in the next chapter, but this time I really mean it! There's some foreshadowing in here and everything. For those of you unfamiliar with Ice Cream Day, you can find out about it here. Derrick is the worst and I wouldn't share my Rocky Road with him, either.

Sleep these days may come faster than Blake expects, but it’s full of troubling dreams and memories better left unexamined. He can’t count the times that he wakes in the darkness with his heart pounding and sweat drying on his forehead, but more often than not Ted is there to calm him with soft words and gentle touches until he’s able to sleep once more.

Tonight he surfaces from another nightmare and, yet again, Ted rolls over to spoon him. “That was a pretty bad one,” Ted murmurs, wrapping strong arms around Blake. “Wanna talk about it?”

“No,” Blake says, closing his eyes against the sudden vision of Harold Tassiter being strangled to death in front of him. He hadn’t been present when Tassiter had been murdered, but the last memory he carries of the man he’d loved is of Harold’s blood-blackened, contorted face with his tongue protruding from his lips. This image has been seared into his brain since Blake had been the one called in to remove the body. To this day, he’s not sure if Jack had known of their relationship and had ordered Blake to clean up his mess on purpose. “Not really.”

“Your choice,” Ted reminds him, dropping a kiss behind Blake’s ear.

Their relationship, because it definitely seems as though they do have one, has yet to settle into anything remotely resembling routine yet it suits Blake surprisingly well to have a lover to call his own. Well, mostly his own because it seems that monogamy isn’t one of Ted’s virtues. This particular trait is a bit eyebrow-raising considering how perversely irritated his shadow can become when he feels as though Blake isn’t paying enough attention to him.

The whole situation is something that Blake finds intensely confusing, though he cares for the other man and knows that Ted cares for him in return…as much as he’s able to, anyway. Blake settles back into his lover’s arms and tries to go back to sleep, but tonight it’s just not happening. “Are you awake?” he whispers finally.

“Not no more,” Ted yawns. “What’s up?”

“Oh, I just thought we could—"
“Fuck?”

“Talk,” Blake says, suddenly feeling foolish.

Ted stretches with another yawn, and Blake rolls over to face him. There’s just enough light to see him, filtering in from the reinforced windows looking out on Elpis. “Oh, now you wanna. Eh, I guess we might as well. You gonna tell me what these dreams’re about, or is this somethin’ else?”

“It’s…it’s not something I’ve ever discussed with anyone,” Blake says hesitantly. “I suppose you could go as far as to say that it was a very well-kept secret, though now I’m not so sure how much of a secret it was. It hardly matters now, in any case.”

He closes his eyes and takes a breath, feeling Ted reach out to place a hand on his breastbone as if to anchor him there. “Seems like it matters enough.”

Blake looks over at his shadow. In this light he seems like a shadow in truth, a sharply delineated shape occupying Blake’s bed with only the reflections of the starlight in his eyes to show that he’s something more substantial. “I was Senior Vice President of Mercenary Relations and Tourism before being chosen as Handsome Jack’s second in command, but I’m sure that you know that.” He pauses in case Ted feels like saying something, and continues when silence is the only answer. “While I was in that previous position, I…I was engaged in a romantic relationship with Harold Tassiter. We’d talked about moving to Aquator together, he and I. I doubt that he would have actually resigned his position, but it was a pleasant piece of fiction to bring into the open when either of us had suffered a particularly bad day at work,” Blake says quietly.

Ted’s hand remains resting on his chest, a warm and comforting weight against the memories being aired after so long in storage. “Jack.”

“Yes, indeed. Jack. You know,” Blake says, trying to distance himself emotionally by infusing some cheeriness into his explanation, “there were bets placed on how long I’d survive as his Vice President. I won in the end, of course.”

“Yes, indeed. Jack. You know,” Blake says, trying to distance himself emotionally by infusing some cheeriness into his explanation, “there were bets placed on how long I’d survive as his Vice President. I won in the end, of course.”

“Course you did, Jeff,” Ted says gently. “What happened?”

“When the ‘great and powerful’ Handsome Jack rose to power, he did so by locking his hands around Harold’s throat and strangling him until he was dead. And then he called me in to remove the body while it was still warm...after he’d sliced off part of Harold’s chin so that he could claim the goatee as a trophy.”

Ted’s eyes widen; he’s clearly never heard this side of the tale before, but surprising him doesn’t bring Blake a single shred of satisfaction. “Jesus.”

“That is what I still see when I close my eyes at night. It’s never quite been this bad, but after… forgive me, but after you skinned that man…”

“Aw, hell. I just, that night when you froze up, I just got so freakin’ mad that he was the reason why you were scared of me. I never meant to cause you more pain like that. Honey, I’m so sorry.” He urges Blake into his arms and Blake finds shelter there, breathing in the scent of his lover’s warm skin.

Ted’s hands move over his back and comb through his hair, something Blake would never allow in the light of day, and Blake finds himself growing bold enough to ask about whatever it is that’s created the scar on Ted’s heart. If he could see Ted’s face clearly, he knows he wouldn’t…but Blake supposes that being so vulnerable has created a need for reciprocation. “Tell me about her,” he
prompts.

The other man is silent for so long, Blake doubts that Ted intends to answer at all. “She died,” Ted murmurs finally, “and it’s my fault.”

“That surely cannot be the case.”

“Told that to myself for years, after, but it don’t make it true.” Ted draws back and rolls over to stare up at the ceiling while Blake pushes himself into a seated position. “Assassination Division’s a goddamned joke now Athena’s gone an’ slaughtered most of us. Back in the day, though, we were somethin’ else. When the Atlas eggheads found us a Vault, we’d be the ones to open it and kill whatever the hell was in there ‘fore it could kill us. My girl, she… she coulda used me there, so that I could kill that thing first.”

Blake supposes that it’s fitting that two Lance Assassins would have found love together. “I’m sure that, whatever happened, she would not want you to blame yourself. After all, there can be no doubt that she was a professional.”

“She was that,” Ted says softly. “But I told her I’d always be there for her and when she needed me, I wasn’t. I’ll never forgive myself for it.”

He falls silent and Blake has no idea what to say, so he keeps his mouth shut. After a while when it’s clear that neither of them will be falling asleep any time soon, Blake slowly reaches out for Ted’s hand. There doesn’t seem to be a way to convey his sympathy in a method that is neither stupid nor offensive. “Theodore.”

“Yeah.” Ted’s fingers lace with his. “I know.”

Blake isn’t sure how they should progress from here, but he supposes that they’ll figure it out eventually. He’s still wary of making commitments and it’s obvious that Ted is the same because of the losses they’ve both endured. Blake has to wonder how much different their personalities would be if fate hadn’t stepped in and severed them from their loved ones. “I won’t be able to sleep,” Blake finally admits. “Perhaps I should simply begin my day.”

Ted reaches out to turn the lights on at the dimmest setting. “No. Let’s get you some sparring practice an’ that’ll tire you out just fine.”

“What about you?”

“Oh, I reckon I’ll figure somethin’ out.”

They get dressed and the only upside to this is the fact that Ted’s mood doesn’t extend to teasing Blake with the infamous yellow singlet, so they move into the room that’s been been stripped of all furnishings and repurposed into a training area. There, Blake loses track of time and pushes his body to its limits in a bout against Ted.

Ballard pokes his head in to make sure nobody’s actually attacking Blake, and Ted calls him in. Soon both of them are trying to force Ted towards relinquishing control of the situation, but wind up bruised and panting with exertion when they’re held off embarrassingly easily. “You’re still slow on the left,” Ted says, helping Ballard up off the mat. “Work on it.”

“Yes, sir,” Ballard says ruefully, turning to give Blake a hand up. “Mister Blake?”

“My thanks.” Blake mops the sweat from his face. “You seemed to have recovered nicely from your ordeal.”
Ballard makes a face. “Well, as the Colonel says…not all of me is at full power. I’m glad that you were spared the brunt of the shiver sickness, sir.”

He’s not entirely sure what to say about that, so Blake limits his response to a curt nod before giving into his curiosity about Saybrook. Even though he’s been back on Helios for several weeks, information concerning the traitor has been scant and Ted’s deflected numerous questions about the situation. As the man in question is at the far end of the room digging through a bag of equipment, Blake deems it safe to pry the information out of his shadow’s subordinate. “I was told that your erstwhile compatriot had been dealt with. I trust that the extent of his schemes were uncovered?”

Ballard immediately glances over at Ted. “I’m…sure I couldn’t say, sir,” the young man says awkwardly. “There’s nothing to worry about on that end, let me just put it that way.” He lifts a hand to rub at the facial scars that his illness had left him with and leans in close to whisper. “Please don’t ask me.”

Blake hesitates, then accedes. “Very well.” He probably doesn’t want to know, but sheer morbid curiosity is hard to overcome.

“If you ain’t too tired to gossip, then I guess I’d better think up somethin’ else for y’all,” Ted says, coming back over. “Lateral bounds and grapevines ‘til you drop, startin’ right the fuck now.” Ballard lets out a groan loud enough for the both of them. It’s small comfort that Ted actually joins them in the exercises, and Blake is totally exhausted by the time Ted calls a halt to the proceedings, sending Blake to go shower.

In the morning, Blake realizes that Ted hadn’t come back to bed with him.

Ted’s there, calmly waiting behind his seat, when Blake finishes dressing and comes out for the morning meal. “Lookin’ sharp today, Sticks.”

“Where did you go, last night?”

“Good mornin’ to you, too.”

“Answer the question, if you please.”

“Maybe I don’t please,” Ted answers. “The hell’s wrong with you today?”

Blake curls his fingers up into his palms, feeling his heartbeat begin to speed. “Answer the question.”

“My personal life ain’t your business-”

“-except for when it is. I will not share my bed with someone who dispenses his favors indiscriminately, Theodore. What is shared with you is most certainly shared with me.” Blake feels the urge to strike Ted in the face, or scream. Perhaps both. What is wrong with the man? Is it some sort of self-sabotage that he unconsciously engages in after revealing one-sixteenth of an actual personal detail?

Ted just looks at him, unimpressed. “Only disease you got lately sure as fuck didn’t come from me. So try again.”

“Very well, then. From now on, if you wish to disport yourself amongst my employees – or anyone else…my permission will be required.” Blake feels the heat rush to his cheeks as Ted looses an incredulous laugh. “And yes, I am in earnest. As you undoubtedly require the threat of an adequate punishment should you choose to ignore my wishes, then I shall inform you that I fully intend to send you back to Promethea.”
Ted lifts his chin, looking stubborn and more than a little dangerous. “You ain’t gonna do nothin’ of the kind.”

“Oh?” Blake walks forward until Ted is forced to give ground. “Just try me, Theodore, and we shall see who has the right of it. If you wish to philander, you will ask me first. Is that clear?”

“You ain’t the boss of me.”


There is a fraught silence as Ted stares directly back at Blake, but his are the eyes that drop first. “Yes, sir.”

However grudging the acceptance, Blake will chalk this up to a win. “Wonderful. As you were, Colonel.” He sits down at the table and Ted shifts back behind him, burning holes in Blake’s back throughout the entire meal. Blake purposely takes his time, wondering what had possessed him to make such a demand and also if Ted intends to abide by it. He supposes that he’ll have to wait and see — it would be a shame to have to send his lover back to Promethea, but he will do it if Ted doesn’t stop his games; both of them are far too old for that sort of nonsense. “Let us continue our day, Theodore, and please confine any pouting to either your free time or whenever you are wearing your Lance Assassin helmet.”

“I don’t pout,” Ted mutters.

“You’re doing so right this very instant. If you cannot bring yourself to be monogamous, then the very least you can do is make sure I am duly informed of any indiscretions. I do not believe that it is too much to ask.”

“Man, this is unbelievable. I knew I shoulda taken my Ice Cream Day ‘fore your ass woke up.”

Blake resists the obvious lure of asking what Ice Cream Day is, deciding that he doesn’t even want to know. He dabs at the corners of his mouth with the napkin and drops it into the middle of the empty plate. “What is on the agenda for today, Colonel?”

Ted rattles off an exhausting list of tasks that must be accomplished before Blake can return to his quarters that evening. “Dahl’s been wonderin’ why Uriens ain’t checked in, but there was that passenger liner that exploded a week ago — records show he was on it when it blew and it looks like they bought it. Oh, and there’s some movement down in Data Mining.”

“Data Mining?” Blake asks as he heads for the door with Ted half a step behind him. “Was there a situation I was meant to be supervising?”

“Could be nothin’, could be somethin’. I’m keepin’ an eye on it ‘cause it’s to do with one of Henderson’s team.”

Sufficiently distracted from any further thoughts of his bed-partner’s various infidelities, Blake listens closely as Ted details some rather shady goings on concerning a certain mining deal. Well, it would be shady if it happened anywhere but at Hyperion — here it’s par for the course, as the old saying goes. “Keep me apprised of any further developments. A friendly rivalry can be good for the soul. This… Vasquez?”

“Vasquez.”

“This Vasquez sounds as though he would be easy to influence into thwarting whatever Henderson has in mind… and until that’s clear, it wouldn’t hurt to encourage this friendly rivalry into becoming
something a bit less fraternal.” Blake pauses to steeple his fingers beneath his chin. “Yes. Do that, will you?”

Ted assures him that it will be done and shadows Blake for the rest of the day, limiting himself to the occasional snide comment. Amazingly enough, Ted remains silent whenever Paxson comes around with her ever-present ECHO pad and Blake shames himself further by asking about it when they’re standing in the lift outside Blake’s quarters. “Diana?” Ted laughs as he tugs off his helmet, raking a hand through his hair. “Nah, Ned got in there and ruined it good.”

“Beg pardon?” Ruined?

“Oh, not like that,” he’s told once his expression has been properly deciphered. “Lemme just say that he’s got a, uh, different style an’ leave it there.”

Blake gazes at Ted in fascination. “You absolutely cannot leave it there. Whatever do you mean?”

“Me and him, we got different ways of doin’ things…well, not things - people. Guess you could say all three of us got our way. Like, it’s fun to switch it up but we each got our default? Anyways,” Ted says, pulling a small device from his suit and switching it on to check for listening devices, “You got me likin’ more pain than a normal person might enjoy. You got Ned who don’t mind causin’ it when he’s got permission. Then there’s poor ol’ Zed who’s about as exciting as watchin’ paint dry in the rain.”

He excuses himself to secure the premises, leaving Blake to think about what he’s just heard… and to wonder if he shouldn’t try to contact Tim with a warning.

Ted returns to usher him into the apartment, and Blake watches without comment as his shadow destroys three eavesdropping devices. “I believe I shall take a hot bath,” Blake decides.

“Since when do you take baths?”

“I have been known to indulge, on occasion.”

“Yeah, okay. Have fun with that.” Ted shakes his head and drifts off into the kitchen, threatening to eat everything in the cooling unit.

Blake is just settling into the tub when he remembers the last time he’d used it…just before he’d been abducted and sent down to his own prison. He squeezes his eyes shut and tries to force the unwanted memories to a safe distance – it’s bad enough that they’ve impacted his love-life; is he really going to have bathing become a traumatic experience, too? Blake opens his eyes again, grinding his teeth in anger. No, this is his life and he’s tired of living in fear. The best way to make sure he’s in control is to simply confront what he’s so uneasy about – clearly, not thinking about it isn’t making any of it go away. “Theodore, I need you immediately.”

Despite the fact that Blake hadn’t even raised his voice to call for Ted, the other man hears him and is in the bathroom within a handful of seconds with both plasma swords drawn. “What happened?” Ted demands, fully prepared to slaughter whomever launches themselves from the cabinets as he turns in a tight circle.

“Nothing yet. Do put those away, my dear doctor – the blade I require at the moment isn’t what you’re currently holding.” He holds Ted’s eyes and refuses to blush. “Would you care to join me?”

Ted eyes him. “You called me in here ‘cause you’re horny.”

“Is that a problem?” Blake asks, starting to wish that he hadn't said anything at all.

“Got room for me in there?” Ted starts shedding his armor, but pauses to give Blake another
meaningful look. “Don’t even think about tryin’ to use shampoo as lube ‘cause I ain't havin’ it.”

Blake sighs. “Just get in.”

“That’s what they all say,” his shadow says cheerfully, slipping into the water and settling behind Blake. “So, what is this – you wanna make up for callin’ me a whore? ‘Cause I’m still kinda mad about that.” Ted wraps an arm around Blake’s neck and pushes Blake’s head forward just enough to make black spots swim in Blake’s vision. “I could drown your ass right now and nobody’d even know.”

Blake relaxes against Ted’s chest despite the threat. “Please do. It would drastically reduce the amount of quarterly reports I’ve yet to make.”

“You ain’t even the slightest bit scared I’ll kill you?”

“Would it make you feel better if I said yes?” Blake pushes back until he feels Ted’s cock begin to harden against him. “Be a good boy and I’ll let you put that someplace interesting.”

Ted laughs and wraps the fingers of one hand around Blake’s throat while the other slides down beneath the water. “I see how it is. You really do wanna show me you’re sorry. Well, I should just get up an’ leave since you think you can bribe me like that…but I ain’t gonna.” Blake’s eyes drift shut as Ted’s hand wraps around his cock and begins to stroke slowly. “I bet I can get all kinds of noises outta you ‘fore I’m done,” Ted murmurs.

“Really?” Blake whispers back, feeling short of breath in a way that has absolutely nothing to do with the fingers around his throat. The memory of his previous love’s fate doesn’t cross his mind once. Blake tilts his head back and spreads his legs wider, murmuring encouragement of all that’s happening to him.

Ted kisses the sensitive area just behind Blake’s left ear, continuing the slow pump of his fist. “Ah, yes. Yes, my darling boy. Just like that.”

His lover releases his throat and reaches the other hand down, giving Blake’s testicles a nice firm tug before brushing a fingertip against his anus. “Relax for me, yeah? Gonna make you feel real good,” Ted purrs in Blake’s ear.

Blake wets his lips with his tongue, trying to keep from seeming too eager while also wondering how they can possibly move from bathroom to bed without lessening the mood. The water is still wonderfully warm, though, so he decides he’ll worry about the transfer later. Ted closes his teeth over the skin of Blake’s shoulder, biting down until Blake is no longer content to sit idle. “God, Theodore…!”

“Looks like we got ourselves a winner, here.” Ted nips him again and sucks on the bite marks, laughing softly as Blake squirms and thrusts his hips upwards. “Yeah, that’s it…fuck my fist.”

Ted continues his lazily murmured encouragement, his manner completely reversed from the way their sexual encounters are usually conducted – Ted is calm and quite obviously in control of the situation, which Blake finds hopelessly arousing. He doesn’t know if it’s because he’s returning to his ‘normal’ role during sex after having learned to dominate Ted in a manner both of them enjoy, but Blake is more than ready to proceed. “I want you to fuck me now,” he groans, lifting his hips to chase after Ted’s retreating hand.

“Well, I want a million bucks worth of Spiderant repellant but you don’t see that rainin’ from the sky neither. You’ll get me in there when I’m ready, so slow your roll.” Ted maneuvers Blake up onto his lap, shifting him around until Blake feels the blunt tip of Ted’s cock pressing against his perineum. Blake’s eyes drift shut at the feeling in the pit of his stomach as Ted rubs against him slowly,
murmuring things he wouldn’t be caught dead uttering at any other time. “You know what I like best when we’re fuckin’?” Ted whispers, pressing his hips up so that the flared head of his cock catches on Blake’s skin.

Blake reaches back to seize a handful of Ted’s hair, arching and rubbing against the thick shaft. “Oh, God. More, I need-”

“Young voice,” Ted says, answering his own question. “You got no idea how fuckin’ hot your voice is…you could make me come just by readin’ the damn wine list.” His fingers slide up the bottom of Blake’s cock teasingly. “Bad enough I gotta stand right behind you all day while you talk but then you start runnin’ that mouth while you give it to me? Mmm…” Ted makes a sound of enjoyment that sends shivers down Blake’s spine. “Wonder if you can suck dick as good as you can talk.”

“Let me show you,” Blake says breathlessly.

Ted kisses the side of his neck again. “Not just yet. Soon, though.” He shifts, and Blake can feel the tub’s water level begin to drop. “Lean forward, honey.” Blake obeys and is soon splayed against the side, squirming helplessly while his shadow’s hands part his buttocks and explore between them. Blake presses his cheek against the warm marble, moaning at the teasing strokes and shallow penetration. “You ever get your ass eaten?” Ted suddenly asks him, and Blake’s eyes open wide in shock.

“Pardon? I…no, it never – what kind of question…”

“Never? Well, well.”

Blake opens his mouth to forbid it, but Ted has already hoisted Blake’s lower body into the air and… oh. Oh. Apparently the man is still trying to kill him. “Oh, good God, that-” His voice breaks in an embarrassing manner when Ted’s tongue swipes over him again. After Blake has been rendered completely boneless and halfway insensate, Ted draws back and gives Blake’s ass a playful slap. “C’mon, you got some work t’do.” He’s helped to his feet and, when it’s discovered that he’s still unsteady, Ted throws a towel around him and totes Blake into the bedroom. There he’s abandoned, because Ted goes back to get another towel. Blake can barely muster the strength to dry himself because his head is spinning and his muscles feel as though they’re made of gelatin. Ted walks back in and towels himself off right in the doorway, grinning when he sees how lethargic Blake is. “Heh.”

“You needn’t act so pleased,” Blake says, trying for stern and failing miserably. “I don’t suppose…”

“Man, look at you! Mister High an’ Mighty, brought low by a few licks at his asshole,” Ted laughs. “And you say I’m the whore.”

Once again, the infernal man has outdone himself where crudity is concerned. “If the jackboot fits-”

Ted tilts his head to one side, the look on his face turning slightly dangerous. “We’re gonna see what fits in a minute. Get over here and suck me off, Mister President.”

“Theodore.”

“Okay; fine. Please?” Ted discards the towel with a sigh. “C’mon, Jeff.”

Blake shakes his head with a smile. “My promised services were never in danger of being rescinded…just… at least try not to be so uncouth.”
“Sure, I’ll start sayin’ shit like ‘I shall now attempt to bestow the merest hint of a kiss upon the delicate petals of your inner mystery.’”

“You are utterly impossible,” Blake interrupts, laughing. “Come here.”

“Hell no, this is s’posed to be about me gettin’ my turn. So you come here.”

They compromise by meeting in the middle, and share a heated kiss before Ted gently pushes down on the top of Blake’s shoulders. Blake sinks to his knees and rubs his palms up and down Ted’s thighs, feeling the ridged scar tissue and smooth burn marks – from this angle it looks as though the burns follow a pattern that’s familiar, but proper identification eludes Blake. Well, it’s not that important, especially with Ted’s cock standing at stiff attention. It’s been a long time since he’s done this but the clean, warm scent of that gorgeous dick has Blake leaning forward to have a taste. He touches his tongue to the bead of moisture welling from the slit in the fat head of Ted’s cock, lapping up the clear salty fluid. “You are quite delicious, my darling. How about a bit more?” Blake asks, rolling his eyes up to look at Ted’s reaction.

Ted licks his lips, breathing hard. “Thought I was s’posed to be in charge this time.”

“Hm. Would you like me to stop talking to you, love?”

“Fuck no…keep goin’.”

Blake places a kiss on the tip of Ted’s cock, sucking lightly before opening his mouth and licking along the sensitive underside of the glans. “Let me taste you.” Ted hisses through his teeth and his stomach muscles tighten as he obediently produces another generous dollop of precome that oozes onto Blake’s tongue. “Very nice,” Blake comments, then proceeds to take Ted into his mouth with no preamble.

“Oh, fuck-!” Ted seizes Blake’s hair and pushes in deep, with no regard for pre-existing gag reflexes. He does, however, apologize very nicely when Blake slaps the insides of his thighs in retaliation. He also asks Blake to slap him there again multiple times, but Blake decides they’ll save it for another day.

He loses himself in the pleasure of servicing a partner, tucking his feet beneath him and going to work with a will. Ted is sincerely appreciative of his efforts, if the moaned marriage proposal is anything Blake can judge by, but all too soon Ted is pulling back. Blake starts to remember the cruelty of the guard as he’s positioned on the bed with Ted’s weight beginning to settle upon him. Ted’s hands become the guard’s, never mind the fact that the guard himself is now dead, and Blake’s plan to reclaim his own pleasure is in danger of imminent collapse. He bites his lips to hold in the gape of terror when Ted drizzles lubricant on the appropriate area before pressing forward, and then…and then Ted stops dead. “I’m sorry,” Blake whispers, closing his eyes against the frustrated disappointment he knows Ted must surely be feeling. “I…I thought that I could, but – I am sorry.”

Ted lifts his hips and shoves a fold of the blankets between them, pushing up onto his arms. “You don’t gotta apologize to me.” He doesn’t seem to be disappointed at all when Blake hazards a glance at him.

“I feel like a fool,” Blake admits. “Indulging myself with you was fine because I was the one in total control, but when I am the helpless one… it’s hardly fair to expect you to be the only receiving party.”

“That, uh, that’s kinda what I like best though,” Ted says, shifting off to the side and looking vaguely embarrassed. “I mean, you probably guessed by now, but everyone expects me to be in
charge all the damn time. That’s fine once in a while, but I just really, really like bein’ told what to do… in bed, I mean. You try that shit anywhere in public and I’ll pop you right in the mouth,” he warns.

Blake has to laugh. “Of course.”

He offers to relieve Ted’s erection by an extended blowjob, but Ted has another idea. “Let’s try again.”

“Theodore, I hardly think a second attempt would go any better.”

“Just hear me out, okay? What if I got on my back and let you do your thing? In the beginning, anyways – you’d be in control the whole time, even if you wanted it from behind or upside down or however.”

Ted nuzzles at Blake’s neck, letting the idea sink in. The more Blake thinks about it, the more he likes it. “Consider me… cautiously optimistic.”

“Remember this morning, before you accused me of sleeping with half of Helios? Seems like sharin’ what’s on your mind was helpful then, so why not now?” Ted asks. “Maybe, if you wanted t’tell me just what happened, we could.. I dunno, maybe re-do it in a way that’ll make you remember this time whenever you think on it.”

Blake isn’t quite sure what this would entail, but it sounds plausible. “Maybe. Theodore… I am sorry for insulting you earlier.”

His lover sighs and props himself up on an elbow. “Sometimes I don’t sleep too well, so I take shifts at the crèche. That’s where I went, and that’s where I woulda told you I went if you’d asked nicely.”

“The… what, now?”

“Crèche. You know, where y’all keep the babies when the parents are on a night schedule?”

“You left my bed to babysit?”

“So what?” Ted huffs defensively. “Told you I like kids. They’re cuter’n you and smell a lot better!”

Blake moves into his shadow’s arms. “I’m sure. It just remains a surprise, that’s all. Thank you for telling me.” He plucks idly at a wiry strand of white chest hair, smiling when Ted slaps his hand away, but sobered upon thinking of their plans for the rest of the evening. “Do you truly believe it will work?”

“It ain’t gonna be easy, which is what I’m sure you really mean,” Ted tells him. “Sometimes it’ll get real bad, like it’s happenin’ to you all over again, but if you just take a breath you’ll remember that you’re safe. I won’t hurt you.”

His hands begin to wander slowly, and Blake lets them. Ted moves to kiss him and he allows that, too, before taking a steadying breath. “I had been separated from Lieutenant Ballard when the guard approached me. It… it happened so quickly, and it was as if it was happening to someone else.” He slowly details being thrown to the ground and of having his pants ripped down around his knees before stopping. “The guard never actually did any more than that,” Blake admits. “You must think me a fool for claiming emotional trauma when nothing actually happened. Whatever you have endured must surely be worse.”

Ted’s fingers lace through his, and the other man lifts up their hands to study them. “I dunno if I’d
say worse - just different. Whatever happened to me don’t take nothin’ away from your experience, ‘cause it ain’t a contest – neither of us won a damned thing. I survived, and so will you…all any of us can do is not let it beat us.”

“That’s…very well-spoken.”

“Don’t you tell nobody.” They kiss again and, when Ted gently prompts Blake to roll over onto his stomach, Blake starts feeling the shivers crawl along his spine again. This time, however, Ted talks him through it. “Deep breaths, honey – turn your head to look at me, yeah? I’m right here.”

The fear begins to lessen, helped along by the kisses and caresses Ted lavishes upon him, and then Blake finds himself relaxed enough to enjoy it as Ted’s affection gains a keener edge. “Theodore, I want…”

Blake trails off as Ted shoves a pillow beneath his hips and presses up behind roughly. “He do this to you?” Ted asks, lifting his cock and letting it fall with a meaty slap on Blake’s upturned ass. One of the physician-assassin’s hands reach beneath Blake to stroke his cock to fullness. “Or this?”

Pleasure spreads through Blake like a fever as those skilled hands touch and squeeze, bringing him nothing but ecstasy. “N-no,” Blake says unsteadily, pushing his hips back as Ted cups his balls. “What you did earlier, in the bath.”

Ted’s fingers dig into his buttocks, bringing another unwelcome memory that begins to deflate the erection Ted has coaxed him into. “Deep breath,” Ted urges, moving his hands to rub up and down Blake’s sides. “C’on now, baby – let me see that dick get hard again.” He ducks down to draw his tongue over Blake’s balls before moving his mouth up and continuing where he’d left off earlier.

Blake’s hands scrabble for purchase as Ted licks him into a frenzy, and the fitted bed sheet beneath them gets yanked from the corners at the top of the bed. “Oh, fuck. God, that’s…fuck-!” his voice rises into a shriek as a result of Ted doing something with his tongue that should definitely be illegal. It probably even is, on most civilized planets. Ted’s muffled sounds of enjoyment are a further goad to Blake’s pleasure as is the warm hand rubbing over Blake’s cock where it’s been trapped beneath his body, hard and aching.

A moaned command has Ted’s tongue swiping up the length of Blake’s spine, replacing it with fingers that stretch him wide. “Gonna treat you right, honey, don’t you worry,” Ted murmurs, fingerc**k**ing Blake with one hand while the other rubs Blake’s stomach. “Tell you what, though. Once I get my cock in this tight ass, I bet you can see it from the outside. You ever been dicked so good you got a belly bump?”

Blake grinds back into the touch, feeling his cock jerk in reaction to the obscene mental imagery. “Do you truly believe you are that large?” He says before he can help it, and has to laugh upon hearing Ted’s soft, shocked gasp.

Ted pulls his hand away and cracks his palm across Blake’s ass. “You li’l shit! We’ll see who’s laughin’ when I fuck you so hard you’re leakin’ jizz out your nose.” The absurd threat makes Blake laugh again and he can feel that Ted is barely holding in his own amusement. “Ready?”

“At least give me time to retrieve some tissues-”

“…show you who’s large,” Ted mutters beneath his breath, then he slaps Blake on the ass again when Blake’s caught fighting back another smile. “Settle down, Sass Mouth, I can’t find the damn lube. Where’d the fuckin’ thing…oh, there it is. Jeez. Quit laughing.”
“I am not laughing,” Blake protests, hiding his face against his arms.

“You’re a goddamned liar. I’m tryin’ to be all supportive and nice, but I’m met with all kinds of disrespect. Coulda just done you in the tub with a bar of soap as lube – it’d serve you right for sure, havin’ to explain why the great an’ powerful Mister Blake is trailin’ bubbles wherever his skinny ole ass goes.”

Blake bursts into laughter again, twisting around to see that Ted has indeed retrieved the lubricant and is smiling back at him. “You,” Blake informs him, “are terrible.”

“To know me is to love me,” Ted says cheerfully. “Now spread ‘em.”

“How could I possibly say no to such a charming request?”

Ted tilts his hips forward, and Blake bites his lips against a moan as he feels the fat head of Ted’s cock easing into his body. “Question is, why would you wanna?” Ted laughs breathlessly as he continues the slow penetration. “God, you’re a tight fit.”

“Don’t…don’t be - ah! - vulgar,” Blake groans back, writhing as Ted’s flared tip stretches him impossibly wide. Another incredibly slow push and it pops through the tight ring of muscle, leaving Blake to clench helplessly around the thick cock that’s only begun to impale him.

Ted rocks his hips, and the only thing Blake can really do is grasp at the blankets as he’s steadily worked open. “Who ain’t that large now?” Ted asks, gripping Blake’s waist and sliding in further. “Man, look at you; a hot mess if I ever saw one.”

Blake can only moan as, incredibly, Ted’s dick still isn’t in all the way. This teasing is going to be the death of him, Blake thinks feverishly, hooking his fingers into the mattress. He takes matters into his own hands the only way he can at this point – when Blake gets enough leverage to do so, he heaves himself backwards. Ted catches at his hips and they grind against each other with wordless sounds of mutual appreciation. “Much better,” Blake pants. “Fuck.”

Ted grunts as Blake’s body still spasms around him, and begins to withdraw until only the tip is left inside. Then he thrusts forward in a smooth motion that has Blake’s language growing considerably less than polite. “Now, now. Manners, Mister Blake.” Ted rubs his hands up Blake’s spine with another soft groan. “Been awhile, huh.”

“Mm,” is all Blake can say without disgracing himself by begging.

“Turn over for me, honey. I wanna see you,” Ted coaxes, but doesn’t pull out until Blake agrees to it. Blake feels like the worst kind of lazy as he’s carefully moved into position, and Ted starts leaning down to kiss him before pausing. “…you can pick that up later. Been awhile for me, too,” he says with a smile. “Still feelin’ okay?”

Blake nods silently and lets his head fall back onto the mattress as Ted smears more lubricant on his cock before mounting Blake again. Blake can feel the tension coiling inside his body, helped along with each slow rub that Ted makes over Blake’s prostate. A quick peek through his eyelashes show that Ted’s face has grown tranquil with pleasure – it doesn’t seem possible that this man, who has proven his enjoyment at being used roughly, could be so utterly considerate when handed the reins. Blake stares up at his shadow and Ted immediately makes a rude comment upon catching Blake looking, as if to make up for showing tenderness; perhaps they could make this sort of ‘trade’ more often, Blake thinks to himself.

“Don’t you look at me like that – we’re here to fuck, not exchange vows,” Ted informs him, and
then draws attention to Blake’s abdomen. “Told you you’d have a bulge, didn’t I? Look at that.” Blake looks, and sucks his bottom lip past his teeth upon seeing a fairly prominent rounding of his stomach as Ted moves inside him.

The sight is startling yet very, very…inspiring. “Put it in all the way,” Blake demands hoarsely, reaching down to rub his palm over the distended area. It is unarguably the hottest thing he’s ever experienced in his life, and the mounting tension inside him begins to build much more quickly to its natural conclusion. “Theodore—”

“Yeah.” Ted braces his legs, grips Blake’s thighs, and begins to pump his hips in earnest. The bed shivers under the impact of Ted’s thrusts as he drives into Blake’s body, becoming noticeably short of breath. Blake’s own respiratory function isn’t that stable either; at this point, all he’s trying to do is hang on and hope that Ted has enough sense to pull out if Blake ends up coming first.

No sooner does this thought cross his mind than Ted’s grunts of exertion plateau into a stuttered, guttural moan of pleasure and he sheathes himself so far inside that Blake’s hips are forced up off the mattress. Without the steady stimulation of his partner, Blake reaches down to stroke his own cock before Ted bats his hand away in order to take care of Blake himself. Ted’s hand feels as wonderful as ever, if not better than usual – Blake has no words as Ted continues to move his hips in conjunction with the twisting movement of his fist. The building ecstasy finally crests and Blake’s spine arches at the force of his climax, coming into the tight circle of Ted’s fingers.

He falls back onto the mattress and struggles for breath - a battle which isn’t helped along by Ted, who makes sure Blake’s watching before he licks his palm. “Depraved creature,” Blake says, his words (and limbs) shaking as Ted’s cock slips out of his body and Blake’s muscles clench against the loss.

“Takes one to know another,” Ted replies, pulling himself up onto the bed beside Blake where they lay barely touching. “You cold?”

“Yes,” Blake says wearily, and is immediately scooped against Ted’s warmth. His shadow is trembling slightly, Blake’s gratified to notice, but he still makes a fine pillow. He moves his head to the space just below Ted’s collarbone that’s perfect for resting against and sighs in contentment… perhaps it hadn’t exactly gone as planned, but what had happened was something he will certainly never forget. Though it is, hopefully, something that can be repeated.

Ted’s fingers sift through his hair and run down the ridge of Blake’s spine, pausing to explore the sharp planes of Blake’s shoulder blades. “Never once thought it’d come to this when I was huntin’ you. Thought you’d break for sure, but you didn’t…not even when you got sent to that Hellhole in the Dust,” Ted says thoughtfully.

“It was a close thing.”

“You think so? ‘Cause I don’t.”

Blake closes his eyes at the feel of one of Ted’s hand mapping out the skin of his back while the other moves down his side. Ted presses his thumb into the grooves of skin between Blake’s ribs but there’s no smart-mouthed comment to accompany the slow, deliberate touches. “I am not as strong as all that, I’m afraid.”

“You’ll surprise yourself with what you can live through,” Ted tells him. “It might come sooner’n you think. Hell, it always does.”

“Why are you saying this to me?”
Ted continues to count Blake’s ribs. “I been goin’ over security measures. Helios ain’t got but a fraction of lifepods compared to all who’s here…and I wouldn’t care one way or the other, but you got some bitty ones up here surrounded by the kinda folks who’ll smile at you one minute and try to knife your back the next. No offense.”

Good old Dimsdale.

“None taken. Your point is…what, precisely?”

“Four times this week alone, someone’s tried to get at you. The pod that’s reserved for you got messed with, so there’ll be another attempt soon. I’m guessin’ some kinda blast to take out a bulkhead and—” Ted pauses, clearly rethinking his disastrous pillow talk. “Nobody’s gonna kill you on my watch, I’m just sayin’ the evac plan is fucked up.”

Blake has recovered enough energy to push himself up to look in Ted’s face. “I sense an ‘and’ in there somewhere.”

“And I wanted to ask if you’d mind me makin’ some changes to a few cargo containers. Hangar bay’s’re big enough to store ‘em.”

“While I don’t pretend to understand your fondness for small children – or large ones, for that matter – I also don’t see a problem with ensuring their safety as long as your labors do not interfere with your primary duties.” Blake sighs. “Though I am sure you have already finished your project some time ago. How many containers have you requisitioned?”

“Only ten.”

“Your efforts will be for nothing if word gets out about this,” Blake says thoughtfully. “You had better hold practice runs for the caretakers with strict instructions not to inform – oh, I don’t know why I bother. You’ve done that already, too, haven’t you.”

Ted tries to look innocent. “Well…”

Blake’s not sure why the man is even bothering to inform him about the changes he’s made since he clearly isn’t interested in actually gaining permission. “As long as it’s been taken care of, that’s fine.” He yawns and allows himself to be tucked back against Ted’s side, idly tracing one of the swirling burn marks. “Where did these come from?”

“An accident a few years back,” Ted says casually. “So…that was some fun, huh?”

“Indeed it was,” Blake replies. He has a feeling that Ted’s waiting for something more than just confirmation, however. “I would like very much to try it again someday soon.”

His shadow sighs, alerting Blake that he’s screwed up yet again…somehow. “Yeah, okay.”

“Perhaps if you told me what you wanted to hear, then I would know what to say,” Blake says gently, which also doesn’t go over well. “Theodore. Both of us are much too old for this nonsense.”

“The fuck you talkin’ about? I get a backache from doin’ you, you needy li’l bastard, and now since I ain’t talkin’ much you think it’s some mind games? Please, ain’t nobody got time for that.”

“Of course,” Blake soothes. “I misspoke. I merely wanted to say that if you did have something on your mind, it would be best to share it.” Ted harrumphs and Blake has the feeling that he’ll be fielding several requests for Ted to sleep with any number of partners in the coming days. The man is absolutely infuriating. And not only that, but he’s apparently still stuck in adolescence. Blake really is
too old for games of this nature; no matter what he does or says, he simply can't win. The more he thinks about it, the more irritated he gets. "Actually," he corrects himself, sitting back up, "I didn't misspeak at all. If you have something to say, then I suggest you say it now. I will not accept any further gaslighting on your part and if you cannot be honest with me without making me jump through hoops, then our…association…will have to end. I do not have time for this, Theodore."

Ted sits up, too, and Blake thinks that no one has the right to look so inviting. "Told you I wasn't no good at this," he says irritably.

"That excuse is no longer good enough," Blake snaps back. "When you figure out exactly what it is that you want from me, I invite you to share it. Now, we were having a very pleasant evening and it looks as though you've ruined it through your…I don't even know what you're up to, but I've had enough of it! Grow up!"

Ted is beginning to look as though he's been backed into a corner somehow, and Blake is glad to see it. Maybe now he'll finally stop his childish games…though games are the only constant that Ted has shown even before Blake had ever seen his face. Well, there's an adult in there somewhere and Blake fully intends to bring it kicking and screaming into the open air if it kills them both. "I'm already taller'n you," Ted finally says, trying to defuse the situation with humor.

"I can't imagine how, with the depths to which you are constantly sinking," Blake returns, scrubbing his hands over his face. "Enough. That is enough for tonight. Just…let's just sleep, and deal with this in the morning."

For what is probably the first time in his entire life, Ted remains silent.
Chapter Summary

Ted's continued erratic behavior has Blake at his wit's end, right when he needs his wits to counteract whatever moves his corporate enemies have in play. Ice Cream Day, with a little help from Dr. Ned, provides the solution Blake needs. There also might be a tork suing for child support in the near future, but they'll cross that bridge when they come to it.

Any normal human being would take his sincere threats at face value, and adjust their behavior accordingly.

It's a shame that Ted isn’t anything remotely approaching normal.

Rather than quell the constant attitude and adolescent mind games, Blake’s ultimatum has apparently excited them into fever pitch. He’s found himself constantly fielding requests for Ted to explore the beds of whomever so much as looks at the man sideways, and Blake has already denied more than half on whim alone. The most recent request, this one painstakingly entered onto an official military requisition form, details the loan of approximately 4 cubic centimeters of sperm to one Rachel Spara.

Blake sets the papers aside and rubs at the bridge of his nose with a weary sigh. “Is this the doctor whose funding you recommended that I save?”

“Yes, sir,” Ted says from beyond his left elbow.

“Go on, then.”

“If you’ll just sign-”

“Go, Colonel,” Blake snaps. “Send Ballard in on your way out.”

Ted leaves without too much fuss, which is nearly unbelievable, and is replaced by the younger lieutenant who gives Blake a friendly nod as he moves into position. “Good morning, Mister Blake, sir.”

“That remains to be seen,” Blake says mildly, glancing up at his personal assistant when she comes into his office carrying a pile of paperwork. He’ll have to do something about the sheer volume of the stuff – what's the use of being CEO of an intergalactic arms manufacturer if he can’t have all of this digitized and easier to handle? “Paxson, I want you to run a trace on Doctor Spara over in R&D. Find out where she goes, and with whom she meets.”

Paxson nods. “Of course, sir.”

“And do something about all this paperwork. If it has to be scanned into the system after I’ve signed it all, then it can be created with a program that prevents tampering before I sign it. Hyperion does not have a warehouse solely dedicated to ECHOpad styluses if they are not meant to be used,” he says crossly. “Leave the updated schedule at the Security station.”

“Right away, President Blake.”
Blake lifts a finger as he glances over the documents she’s left him, and is momentarily confused when Ballard doesn't immediately follow Paxson to retrieve the schedule. Confusion becomes irritation, which seems to be a fixture in his emotional state of being these days. “The schedule,” Blake snaps. “That is, if it’s not too much trouble.”

“Sorry, sir,” Ballard mumbles, hurrying out. Blake exhales through his nose and watches the two-way mirrors of the wall as the other man quickly makes his way out to the indicated area. He’s well aware that he’s behaving badly, and says as much when Ballard comes back in – Blake also isn’t used to tendering apologies and he wouldn’t dream of doing anything of the sort if Ballard hadn’t become something of a friend to him. Well, perhaps not a friend as such…congenial acquaintance, maybe? Blake seems to be quite the social butterfly these days. “Sir, if I may; this is probably the cushiest job I’m ever likely to have. Nothing you could say to me could make that untrue.”

“Well.” Blake clears his throat and goes back to perusing the reports and signing off on various budget line items, forgetting the exchange entirely until he’s halfway through the pile and Ballard clears his own throat. “Yes, Lieutenant?”

Ballard shuffles his feet and takes a deep breath. “The other day, when you asked me about Captain Saybrook. I…well, sir, Colonel Blanco stuck him in the brig.”

Blake turns his chair around completely so that he can stare up at the pig-like standard issue Crimson Lance helmet on Ballard’s head. “Do you mean to tell me that the homicidal maniac actually spared the life of a confirmed traitor?”

“Uh. Yes…sir?”

“Hm,” is all Blake can say to this revelation; he’d have thought that Saybrook would be floating debris outside Helios right now, instead of alive and well in Blake’s own cells. He turns the chair back around and gives his head a sharp shake of disbelief, then immerses himself in the rest of the day’s work.

Ballard, acting on orders that were definitely not given out by Blake, disappears from his post to bring back a tray of food. “Here you are, President Blake.”

“My thanks,” Blake says automatically. A glance at the clock shows that it is indeed time for his evening meal, so he finishes the rest of the paperwork and reaches for the covered tray. Inside is a slab of protein, still hot and covered with a sauce he’s been known to enjoy, and a few side dishes. There’s also a sealed data module with Saul Henderson’s last name written upon it. “Monitor the doors.” He inserts the module into the appropriate slot atop his desk and starts to eat while the file (a digital file, thank goodness) comes up on the main view screen.

Blake chews thoughtfully as he scans the file’s contents, a synopsis of whatever reconnaissance mission Ted had embarked upon concerning the Senior Vice President of Securities Propaganda. Henderson has apparently been grooming one of his underlings in Data Mining, a young man named Rhys who had… Blake puts his fork down and enlarges the photo of the man in question, narrowing his eyes at it. “Well, well. It was you, was it?” He studies Rhys’ features, taking in the cybernetic arm and ECHO eye, and feels his lip starting to curl. This Rhys is the employee responsible for the reworked mining deal on Pandora and had an unknowing hand in Blake’s own mistreatment in Friendship Gulag. If not for the man on the screen in front of him, Hyperion would not have expanded its mining operations that deep into the Blight.

He exhales slowly, leaning back in his chair as a recent conversation he’d had with Ted starts to come back to him. The friendly rivalry Blake had asked his shadow to encourage…yes. The situation is about to become a lot more one-sided, Blake thinks to himself. It doesn’t take a genius to
see that Henderson is moving his pawns into position so that he can make his move on Blake’s territory and, if there’s one thing Blake excels at, it’s keeping what’s rightfully his.

Blake continues eating, and calls his personal assistant in. “Hugo Vasquez from Data Mining; have him here first thing in the morning. Cover his absence with a request from Medical to update his… oh, let’s say his immunization records. A temporary clearance for secondary lift access will be required, Ms. Paxson.”

His PA nods and advances towards his desk to hand him an ECHO pad. “I’ll arrange it right away. Here are the results of your earlier inquiry, sir.”

Spara. “That will be all for tonight.”

“Have a wonderful night, Mister Blake.”

Blake glances back at Ballard, who’s been waiting patiently all afternoon. “Lieutenant? Have you eaten?”

Ballard shifts to attention so quickly, Blake’s sure he’s just caught the man dozing off. “Sir. No, sir.”

“Do so. After you’ve finished, you will take me to speak with Captain Saybrook.”

“I was afraid you’d want to do that,” Ballard says despairingly. “Colonel’s gonna have my ass for this…”

“Not if I don’t extend my permission.”

“Sir?”

Blake shakes his head. “Never mind.”

Ballard dithers over whether or not he should leave Blake’s office to eat, until Blake finally orders him to have something delivered and eat it in the only other chair present. Ignoring the incredulous looks from the nameless employee who takes the empty tray from the desk and replaces it with the one intended for Ballard, Blake waits to pass it over until the doors are sealed. “Thank you, sir,” the other man says gratefully, yanking off his helmet and balancing the tray on his knees after he sits down in the chair.

Blake goes back to looking through the Henderson file again, then decides to check the one concerning Spara. Name, age, weight, spouse, planet of origin… he scrolls past until he comes to her most recent research project. Then Blake goes back to take a hard look at the line announcing whom her spouse is. “A woman,” he murmurs in surprise.

It seems that Doctor Rachel Spara has moved on from her early experiments with tork-powered rockets, and she’s now attempting to create tork-human hybrids using the DNA of volunteers. And that, Blake realizes, means that Ted’s ‘sperm loan’ was an actual research donation and not some ridiculous euphemism for sexual intercourse. While Blake is relieved that Ted is not really tangled in the sheets of one of Hyperion’s scientists, he doesn’t know what to think of what the sperm is going to be used for. The mental image of an unfaithful tork ‘speaking’ in sentences almost entirely composed of drawled contractions is tremendously entertaining. Blake’s lips quirk as he imagines one of the creatures with white stripes down the sides.

Ballard walks with him to the cells, and stands a half-step in front of Blake as they wait for the ‘high security’ section to cycle up to their level. Blake had never understood the purpose of having motorized cells that move, but now he can see that it was yet another of Handsome Jack’s
psychological torture devices – being trapped in one of these and not knowing if you would be the one selected for whatever Jack had in mind would have been highly effective for the purpose of demoralization.

It's too late to suggest that Ballard bring him a chair so that he can appear at ease and in charge of the situation, and Blake berates himself for not having thought of it earlier. He folds his arms across his chest instead, taking care to seem bored and as if he’d known all along that this is where Saybrook had ended up. “Cell 57 incoming, sir,” Ballard murmurs.

The inside of the cell is visible through the muted red glow of a Competitor Deterrence Field, commonly known as a Deathwall. There sits Captain Isamu Saybrook of the Crimson Lance D Company 3rd Starborne Brigade, and he doesn’t seem surprised at all to see Blake standing there waiting for him. “Hello again, sir.”

“Captain,” Blake greets him. “I understand that I have you to thank for my recent stay on Pandora.”

The other man raises his chin slightly. “There’s no need to thank me, Mister Blake. I was just doing my job.”

“Your job,” Blake says thoughtfully. Ballard shifts suddenly, but a light touch on his shoulder settles him down. “Who gave that particular job to you?”

Saybrook looks at the lieutenant guarding Blake. “General Knoxx.”

“Alphonso Knoxx has been dead for over six years, if I’m not mistaken.”

“That’s correct, sir,” Saybrook says calmly. “He left standing orders to ensure that Colonel Blanco always returned to base on Promethea, and the Command contacted me to carry out those orders.”

Blake glances over at Ballard, who seems ready to take a flying leap at his erstwhile companion, and back at Saybrook. “And my incarceration would bring about the means you sought….how?”

“If you somehow died in Friendship Gulag, the colonel would have no reason to stay here on Helios. Begging your pardon, sir, but he was supposed to have killed you a long time ago. Retaking Pandora is not cost effective and it is not an approved course of action in any way,” the captain sighs. “You seem decent, for an Hyperion executive, but Colonel Blanco is not going to return to base until you’re dead. I simply followed my orders to bring about that result.”

As someone who’s seen Ted’s disaster of a personal record, Blake can’t imagine any command structure actively desiring the man’s presence. “Is he truly that popular?”

Saybrook gives him a look as if Blake is being especially stupid. “Think about it, sir. A high-ranking officer who is not only an Omega Assassin, but has access to the personal information of most of the Command because of his secondary designation as a medical doctor. Wouldn't you want to keep someone like that where you could keep an eye on them?”

“You’re being awfully cavalier about revealing your mission,” Blake counters. “If I were you, I would keep silent about my motives in case I were offered the chance to escape.”

“I won’t need to escape, Mister Blake. The colonel will release me on the condition that I not attempt to kill you.” He seems pretty sure about this, and smiles when that’s pointed out to him. “Of course I’m sure. He’s already offered to do so.”

Blake’s eyes narrow. “What possible reason could Colonel Blanco have to release you and trust that you would keep your word?”
“Well, sir, I’d imagine it had something to do with the fact that I gave him the names of everyone I’ve contacted to murder you. You’ll have several vacant spots on your payroll, if he hasn’t remedied the situation already,” Saybrook says pleasantly. He answers several more questions before Blake decides that he’s had enough – poor Ballard looks to be on the edge of a nervous breakdown.

They walk back to Blake’s office in silence, until Blake finally demands a thorough explanation for Knoxx’s order. “He would have rescinded it, I think, if he’d thought of it during his last days on Pandora,” Ballard says.

“I would have thought that the last place anyone would want a trained assassin would be right beneath their nose, whether they wanted to watch him or not,” Blake replies. “There are better ways to keep track of a dangerous subordinate.”

Ballard punches in the code for the private lift and doesn’t look over at Blake. “Sir…Captain Saybrook wasn’t really telling you the whole truth about the Colonel. The Command wants him at Atlas HQ because he is popular – some of the most coveted positions in the Lance are in the Blood Shrikes. He, uh, he lost his promotion partly because of an alliance with Commandant Steele.”

That fact had been nowhere in his file, and Blake’s eyebrows lift in surprise. “Really. The Siren?”

“Yes, sir. General Knoxx felt that the Colonel should be monitored so that he wouldn’t gather any more powerful allies that he could use to stage a coup against the Atlas chain of command,” Ballard says awkwardly. “I never thought Captain Saybrook would be one of their spies. If it’s even called spying, I don’t know…he’s been the Colonel’s adjutant for the last few years.” That certainly explains why Saybrook hasn’t been vented from an airlock already. Blake thanks the other man for his candor and readies himself for bed once his rooms have been declared safe from both murder attempts and eavesdropping.

Ted is waiting beside his chair the next morning, but Blake’s too preoccupied with his upcoming meeting to take much notice. Undercutting his rivals before they can make their own move has always been a specialty of his, and he’s looking forward to seeing the look on Henderson’s face once the man realizes that the game is up. Blake finishes his meal and heads straight for his office, where he finds Hugo Vasquez already waiting for him in the reception area.

“Mister Blake, I brought you those reports you asked for. Given the, uh, sensitive material, I thought it might be better to hand them to you personally,” the man says unctuously, providing a plausible explanation for his appearance. When the rumor mill takes ahold of this, the focus will be on whatever is in the reports; the subterfuge is neatly done, and Blake gives Vasquez a small nod of approval. Yes, this man will suit his purpose nicely.

Vasquez glances over at Ted and seems to immediately regret betraying his curiosity. “Let us…cut to the chase, as they say,” Blake begins, sitting down behind his desk and motioning to the other chair with a negligent wave of his hand. “I have studied your track record here at Hyperion and, I must say that I approve of what I’ve seen thus far.”

“Thank you, sir,” Vasquez says, sitting down with another careful look at Ted. “I’d like to take this opportunity to say that your leadership has taken Hyperion t-”

“Enough false flattery,” Blake interrupts. “I called you here because you are smart, and ruthless when it comes to your competition within this company. A person such as yourself can find himself rising within the Hyperion Corporation a great deal sooner than you’d ever thought possible.”

It seems that he now has Hugo Vasquez’s full and undivided attention. “Sir?”
“Let’s not pretend you haven’t amused yourself with the occasional daydream about taking my position. You might have even made one or more attempts to make those daydreams a reality…but I will warn you that the presidency is not yours for the taking. The Vice Presidency, now…that is an entirely different story.” Blake pauses to watch the other man’s eyes widen. “I understand that you’ve something of a rivalry with one of Saul Henderson’s protégées.”

Vasquez slowly slides to the edge of his seat, as if he’s not even aware of doing it. “I do, Mister President.”

“Keep it in play while you take care of the problem’s source. I won’t have Henderson tipped off…and, Mister Vasquez?”

“Yes, sir?”

“Find me a Vault key, while you’re at it. Anyone can arrange a fatal accident; make this worth my while, and Henderson’s job is yours.” Blake steeples his hands on the desk in front of him and smiles. “Impress me, Mister Vasquez. Good day to you.”

His new Vice President gets to his feet, looking as dazed as if someone’s just clubbed him on the side of his head, and leaves. “What the hell d’you want a Vault key for,” Ted sighs.

“Some of us have shareholders to appease, in case you haven’t noticed. We can’t all be the doting parents of…whichever genus torks inhabit,” Blake says smoothly. “I understand that congratulations are in order.”

Ted snorts. “You can’t pretend it ain’t hilarious.”

“As long as you didn’t inseminate anything the old-fashioned way, I shall remain amused.”

“Gross.”

Blake glances back at him. “There have been rumors of another Vault key on Pandora and, as you well know, they’re scattered on any number of planets. If there’s one close enough to acquire, I’m sure Vasquez can handle it. If he doesn’t, then I suppose that I’ll have yet another body to dispose of.”

“Look at you, bein’ all stone cold and badass. I love it.”

“It goes without saying that I’ll want you to monitor his movements.”

Ted promises that it’s already being handled, and clears his throat before mentioning Ice Cream Day; it seems as though Ted has decided to take the following day off. “I’ll get Ned to fill in for a couple hours; he’s been in the suit before so nobody’ll know I ain’t really here.”

“I haven’t given you clearance to leave,” Blake points out, wondering just what Ted thinks he’s playing at. “I’ll need you here in case things don’t work out as planned.” He’ll have a full day of headaches, as he’s slated to begin negotiations for a new trading route. Hyperion has a real opportunity to expand its territory in the systems currently being colonized by people who will need weapons to protect themselves; Blake fully intends that they purchase them from him.

“Personal ice cream leave of absence. Atlas Crimson Lance manual; Code 3.5.31,” Ted replies, leaving Blake no option but to stop and look the damned thing up on the ECHOnet.

He’s extremely displeased to find out that he’s not actually able to forbid it, and that the time limit – an entire day - depends upon the rotation period of the planet on which the leave of absence occurs.
“I cannot spare you for ninety hours,” Blake says. What has gotten into the man?

“You could come with me,” Ted counters. “We had a good time in Fyrestone, didn’t we?”

Blake is struggling not to become annoyed, and it’s a losing battle. “Be that as it may, I cannot spare you.”

Ted leans over to tap a finger against the display that’s still showing that ridiculous code. “That’s too bad, ’cause I’m gone soon’s I wake up tomorrow.”

They glare at each other for a few more moments – Ted has to remove his helmet so that Blake gets the full effect of it – and then Blake throws up his hands in defeat. “I don’t think I’ll ever fully understand you, Theodore. My death will be on your conscience forever if anything happens that you are not here to prevent.”

Ted’s face goes white with fury. “Don’t you dare turn my words against me,” he snarls, and Blake belated realizes why his shadow is so angry. The words can’t be unsaid, no matter how much Blake wishes it were possible.

“Theodore, forgive me. I didn’t mean to salt the wound; being facetious isn’t one of my strong suits… it seems as though I am doomed to make constant blunders, where you are concerned.”

Blake extends a hand and Ted looks at it, the anger visibly draining from him. “No, it ain’t your fault. I’m just one big fuckin’ mess,” Ted admits, touching Blake’s fingers with his own. “I just… I’m tryin’, but it’s hard to… look, forget that meetin’ and come down to Pandora with me,” he finishes in a desperate rush.

“The trade route… my dear, I can’t. I am sorry,” Blake says regretfully, watching the look of entreaty on Ted’s face change to studied nonchalance and hating every second of it. “Please, love. Just tell me what you want from me.”

“Am I?” Ted asks, pulling his hand back to run his fingertips over the bottom rim of his Lance Assassin helmet.

“Are you… what?”

“Am I that confusing, you gotta keep askin’?” Ted shakes his head and lifts the helmet. “Never mind. Diana’s comin’ in now,” he says shortly, putting the helmet on and settling into parade rest behind Blake’s chair.

“We’ll talk about this later,” Blake promises, turning around.

Later doesn’t happen because, once again, Ted decides to leave earlier than he’d said he would.

Blake hopes that the consequences won’t nearly be as disastrous.

He’s thinking of their irritating pattern of communication – or, rather, lack thereof – early the next morning when Ned arrives to take up his duties as substitute. “Hey, Jeff,” Ned yawns, slouching into Blake’s office and yanking the helmet off. “It’s too damned early to be alive.”

Blake looks up into the handsome face of Ted’s identical triplet and wishes yet again that Ned’s easygoing personality was a trait that Ted shares. “Yet here we are, whether we like it or not. It is good to see you again, Doctor. I trust things are going well with Timothy? How is he?”

Ned yawns again, and gives Blake a slow smile. “Oh, he’s good. Tim’s real good.”
“Um. That is…that's nice,” Blake says faintly, because Ned hasn’t left any other avenues of interpretation open.

“He says hello,” Ned adds, “And wants t’know just when you’re gonna get off your ass to do somethin’ ’bout Ted. Well…maybe it’s just me that wants to know that. What’ve you been doin’, sittin’ on y’all’s hands up here?”

Blake sits up in his chair, ramrod straight in indignation. “How dare you.”

Ned lounges on the edge of Blake’s desk and ignores his anger. “Didn’t I say Ted don’t know romance from a hole in the ground? Didn’t I say?”

“It is none of your business what—”

“Yes it is,” Ned interrupts. “You tell that idiot you love him, yet, or what.”

Blake’s eyes narrow. “That is none of your business.”

“So…no, you didn’t. Well, there’s your problem an’ you are welcome. I’m a put this puke bucket back on my head an’ hope I don’t gotta scratch my nose, while you have your meeting or whatnot,” Ned says sweetly, cramming the helmet back on his head and setting himself behind Blake’s chair. “You hear any strange noises back here, just ignore ‘em ‘cause I got indigestion like a motherfucker.”

As the day progresses, Blake has to deal with a string of further irritations. Paxson arrives late and without the files he’d specifically requested, looking flustered because her personal ECHO device seems to be malfunctioning. The representatives he’d planned a meeting with want to reschedule for some reason. Ned does indeed seem to be suffering from indigestion, and his stomach is making an appalling amount of noise.

Ned’s problem is solved with a covert delivery of an extra-strength antacid, Paxson is issued another ECHO device until the previous one can be recovered, and Blake manages to convince the trade representatives to go through with the scheduled negotiations.

Blake is in the middle of said negotiations when he’s interrupted by an incoming call from Paxson and Blake is forced to deal with it when simply muting it won’t do. It had better be damned important, he thinks angrily even as he makes his excuses with a smile. “I do apologize – won’t be but a moment,” Blake says, slipping from the conference room into an empty office across the hall. “I thought I informed you that I was not to be disturbed,” he snaps.

“No, honey, that ain’t no way to talk t’your sweetheart,” Ted’s voice says.

Of all the times he could have chosen to call… Blake pinches the bridge of his nose and takes a calming breath. “Theodore, what are you doing? I thought you were on vacation.”

“I was, I am, an’ now I miss your bony ol’ ass. C’mon down, I need my dick sucked.”

Unbelievable, Blake thinks. Simply unbelievable. “Much as I would enjoy doing so, my dear, I am in the midst of negotiations for this new trading route. You and your throbbing member will just have to find another willing participant tonight…and I am going to guess that you are calling for permission because you have already found the aforementioned participant.”

There’s a moment of silence, and then “You actually just call it a throbbing member? What is this: real life, or a romance novel?”
“Don’t change the subject, love. Whom have you chosen?” Blake asks with a sigh, wondering if he really wants to know.

The sound of Ted’s answering sigh filters through the connection. “You ever seen that Vault Hunter, name of Axton?”

Blake pauses to compose himself, because that name was certainly nothing he’d expect to fall from Ted’s lips. “The ex-Dahl commando? Is that really whom you’ve drawn a bead on, Theodore?”

“Yeah, there’s…there’s a kinda hero worship thing goin’ on. I could bag him easy, if you don’t mind.”

_Hero worship._ This just keeps getting better and better. “I would hate for something like this to come between us, my dear doctor. Do make sure that it doesn’t, yes?”

Ted laughs. “Sticks, you know damn well that ‘stupid’ don’t look good on you.”

Breathe in, breathe out, Blake reminds himself. “One of these days, my darling, you will pay dearly for your constant insubordination,” Blake says slowly. “Perhaps that day is nearer than you think.”

Ted’s response is a typical one. “Ooh. Promise?”

Blake can’t help but laugh. “We shall see, Theodore Blanco. We shall see.” He cuts the transmission and stares at the device in his hands for a few seconds before walking to the door. Ned’s waiting for him on the other side of it.

“You want some advice now?” Ned asks slyly.

He doesn’t, but at this point Blake is running out of ideas. “Make it quick,” he says.

“Finish your thing first, an’ get your ass down there. Show and tell, Mister Blake, can’t make it any plainer’n that. If you love that moron, then you tell him an’ _then_ you’d better show it. Warm his backside, or whatever. He’ll settle down.”

They return to the conference room where Blake is forced to refocus his energy on making the proposed trade route a stunningly lucrative reality. The thought that Ted is with that _bandit_…no, the negotiations take precedence now. It’s in Blake’s best interest to conclude them as quickly as possible so that he can turn his full attention to getting his personal life under control.

It takes a little more than an hour to put together the bare bones of an agreement that all sides will be glad to make, and Blake suggests a cooling-off period of no more than one day so that they can reconvene after discussing the tentative arrangement with their respective analysts and whomever else has a controlling interest in the route.

Ned trails Blake back to his office, and takes the opportunity to wrench the helmet off again. “This thing smells like bargain basement ass,” the doctor complains.

“Where is he?” Blake demands.

“Man, look at you bein’ all assertive!” Ned holds up a finger and begins to squirm around in the borrowed armor, finally digging out a piece of folded paper. Blake’s not sure he wants to know where exactly it was hidden. “You eat that or somethin’ after you’ve used it – I sure as shit don’t need the Crimson D-wads comin’ after me. Again. It’s one-time access through Sanctuary’s shields,” Ned says.
Blake accepts the paper gingerly, wondering just how he’ll manage to track Ted through a bandit stronghold until he remembers the recall implant. He’ll be able to track its frequency, he thinks with satisfaction. “How did you get it?”

“Zed wanted me t’have it in case of emergency. He’ll smack me into another time zone when he finds out I gave it to you for a booty call,” Ned says, lifting the helmet up and taking a loud sniff. “Ugh. Someone hork up their lunch in here, or what?” Blake ignores Ned’s stream of complaints in favor of digging through his pockets to find the small transmitter Ted had gifted him with so long ago. He isolates the signal fairly quickly, and from there it’s only a matter of moments for him to program it into his personal ECHO communication device. “…wonder if Tim’d like me showin’ up in this thing,” Ned wonders aloud, and Blake suddenly realizes that he’d been talking this entire time.

“You might as well take it,” Blake says, slipping his ECHO device into the inside of his jacket. “I’ll tell your brother to come for it later.”

“Heh heh, I bet you will,” Ned laughs suggestively. “C’mon, I’ll show ya how to get Sanctuary on the Fast Travel map.”

Blake agrees, sending a message to Paxson and telling her to keep a close eye on Hyperion’s newest trade partners – once the route is finalized, they’ll find a way to ensure that they take full control of it and tracking the other representatives may provide key information. He’ll be back in time to resume negotiations. “Why are you helping me?” Blake has to ask as Ned brings up the Fast Travel schematic and explains that Sanctuary access is impossible on any Hyperion-owned stations; he’ll have to get to Pandora first.

Ned shrugs self-deprecatingly. “Eh, he’s my brother. He’d do the same for me.”

“Would he really?”

The other man doesn’t even need to stop and think through his response. “He would. Look…Atlas put Ted through hell; you don’t ever wanna know how they trained him. Losin’ his girl damn near killed him – he just ain’t been the same since, but I see parts of the old Ted now an’ again. Zed tolerates you ‘cause you brought him back to Pandora. I tolerate you ‘cause you brought him back to him; now get down there and tell that dumbass you love him ‘cause he’ll eat a rakk hive’s eyeball ‘fore he says it first.” There isn’t much to be said as a rejoinder to that, so Blake doesn’t even attempt it.

They Fast Travel down to a station in the Highlands, close to the entrance to Thousand Cuts and the main bridge that connects to the abandoned construction site that was to be the company town of Opportunity. Ned has Blake get out the piece of paper and enter the code twice to be sure it’s typed correctly, then shakes his hand and wishes him luck. “I’ll be fine,” Blake assures the doctor.

“Vendor’s over there, if you wanna grab a shield ‘fore you go,” Ned says. “Anyways, try not t’get shot on account of you bein’ Hyperion trash.” He shoulders Blake aside good-naturedly and selects the coordinates for Jakob’s Cove.

Blake lifts a hand in farewell and watches Ned become digitized as he’s scanned into the system, until there’s nothing but air where he’d been standing and it’s now Blake’s turn. He turns his head to look at the med vendor with the caricature of Zed’s face on it and exhales slowly, because he doesn’t see it as Zed’s face at all. Blake has no idea what he’ll be walking into, but he’s not worried about being the sole Hyperion presence in a bandit stronghold. One way or the other, things will change between himself and Ted tonight…and he’d better get on with it. “I’ll be fine,” Blake tells the med vendor, and turns to face the Fast Travel screen resolutely. “I’ll be fine.”
ECHOnet and chill.

Chapter Summary

Follows the sordid events of Guns and Ladies, And Sometimes You. Blake and Ted have finally reached an understanding, to their mutual amazement.

Lieutenant Ballard is waiting patiently when Blake returns from his sojourn on Pandora. The sight of the young man’s face, so clearly relieved that Blake has returned seemingly unharmed, makes Blake wonder what Ballard had been expecting. Had Ballard thought that Ted would murder him out of hand?

The thought causes a smile to lift the corners of Blake’s mouth. There had indeed been many little deaths between them, with the promise of many more to come…whenever Ted decides to return to Helios. It’s hard to believe that now, after all the antagonism and brazen infidelities, Ted’s loyalties have firmly settled in Blake’s corner. Blake’s smile grows as he thinks of what it might be like to finally have the man’s shenanigans actually brought to a halt…it sounds very unlikely. Ted will doubtless find other ways to express himself; he’s nothing if not creative. “Shall we?” Blake asks as Ballard falls into step behind him.

“Yes, sir.”

There’s just enough time to stop for breakfast before the resumption of Blake’s dreaded meeting, and he eats quickly while Paxson stands off to the side and brings him up to date on what the other representatives have been up to while he was planetside. “They won’t be in top form, so if we take the contract as had been agreed upon…it would be easy to make a few slight alterations to our benefit, President Blake.”

“Why, exactly, will they not be in top form?” Blake asks, lifting his eyes from the ECHOpad she’d given him.

His personal assistant smiles. “Well, sir, it seems that the drinks they’d had last night were all of a higher alcohol level than usual – the dispensers in their rooms malfunctioned. They also didn’t sleep very well because of another malfunction concerning mattress density.”

“So they are now hung-over and irritable from lack of sleep,” Blake sighs. “A bit unsubtle, isn’t it?”

“Several different living quarters suffered the same strange phenomenon. Engineers have been working for the past five hours to correct the fault in the system.”

Blake nods his approval. “I seem to have my sleep schedule similarly disrupted – the sooner we can come to an agreement regarding the trade route, the better for us all.”

Paxson holds up a compact of cosmetics. “If you’d allow me, sir?”

The lengths he’ll go to for this damned company… “Very well. Lieutenant? The signal jamming devices will need to be replaced and relocated.” Ballard promises to take care of it right away and heads for the nearest Fast Travel so that his task can be accomplished faster with a greater degree of discretion. Blake finishes refreshing his memory on the necessary data while Paxson quickly alters
his complexion. He’s inspecting her handiwork, and wondering if he’s ever really looked this horrible, when Ballard returns. The younger man pauses at the sight of him, clearly startled. “Horrific, isn’t it.”

Ballard makes a noise of mixed agreement and revulsion, but declines to comment further and busies himself with the work of taking up Blake’s dishes. The lieutenant has never before shown himself to be this attentive, but Blake supposes that it’s merely a reaction to the skillfully applied makeup. “If we leave now, Mister Blake, we should arrive just after the other reps,” Paxson suggests. “The caffeine level in their systems should have peaked by now, and the only available beverage options won’t have any stimulants added.”

“You are absolutely wicked,” Blake says appreciatively. “Keep this up and you’ll get a raise.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Paxson goes off to ensure that the food and drink is thoroughly sabotaged, and Blake gets to his feet with a sigh. It won’t take much to feign exhaustion because he didn’t get as much sleep as he’s accustomed to – he’d been too worried that Ted might revert to type and disappear on him. The only good thing about this meeting is that, by the end of it, Ted should have returned from Elpis.

Of course, the trade route will be finalized as well…but Blake is a man in love. He’s allowed a little selfishness now and again.

Ballard escorts him to the conference room’s level and, when Blake turns away to key in his access code on the lift’s controls, Ballard reaches forward and gives Blake’s ass a firm squeeze. “What the devil-!” Blake roars and whips around, intending to give the man a piece of his mind for this outrage, but Ballard is removing his helmet to show that he’s not Ballard at all. “How long have you been following me around?”

Ted wipes the tears of laughter from his eyes. “Shoulda seen your face! ‘What the devil’, oh my god. You are funny as shit when you get mad.”

Blake shoves at the chestplate of Ted’s armor, outrage doing an abrupt segue into abashed amusement. “I am no such thing. You, on the other hand, are terrible at any time.”

“Speakin’ of terrible…what is all this?” Ted removes one of his gloves and reaches out to touch a fingertip to the purplish-blue pigment that’s been used to simulate bags beneath Blake’s eyes. “I coulda borrowed some of Moxxi’s lipstick, if I knew,” he teases. “Gonna let me kiss you?”

“Oh, I suppose I could allow it. Don’t smudge anything,” Blake says, leaning forward as Ted immediately ducks his head. Their lips touch in a careful (and woefully brief) kiss, and Blake sighs when he’s forced to step back because the lift has stopped on the required level. “I do not know how long this will take, Theodore.”

Ted smiles and puts his helmet back on. “Don’t worry ‘bout it. I’ll be right here with you the whole time.”

“Not in that armor, you won’t. I’m afraid it might put them on guard.” Blake blinks as the doors open and Ned is waiting for them dressed in Lance Assassin armor. “Or not.”

“Hey, kids. Thanks for all that advanced notice, I sure do appreciate it…” Ned hustles them into the nearest conference room, kicking out two men who had been using company equipment to view some sort of race being broadcast from Pandora’s surface. Blake takes a moment to appreciate the raw terror in their eyes when they notice him, and then it’s time to appreciate the sight of Ted and
Ned stripping down to their underwear so that they can exchange outfits. Well, *Ned* strips down to his underwear because Ted has decided not to wear any. “That explains it,” Ned says to nobody in particular.

Ted frowns as he hauls on the tight fitting black undersuit. “Huh?”

“Oh, nothin’,” Ned assures him, cutting a glance over at Blake. Blake reminds himself not to smile at the insinuation; it doesn't seem as though Ted remembers Ned’s complaints about the armor being especially…aromatic.

“It was a different suit,” Blake murmurs.

“I’ll just bet it was.”

“What are you talkin’ about?”

“I’ll explain later, my love.”

“So you *did* finally tell him! Good for y’all.”

“Hey,” Ted interrupts. “Is that about the smell you were bitchin’ about? I’ll thump the piss outta you an’ send what’s left down to your fancy boy-”

“Go wash your ass!”

Blake clears his throat. “*Enough.* Ned, I’ll thank you for your service and assure you that your brother’s backside has never been cleaner. Ted, put your armor on and let us be about our day.”

“You…just called me Ted,” the man in question says.

“I shall also call you unemployed and celibate if you do not hurry.”

Ned mimes the cracking of a whip and dances away from the kick Ted aims at him, then crams the helmet on his head and makes his escape before any further bodily harm can be inflicted upon him. “See you lovebirds later.”

“Fuck off,” Ted suggests pleasantly. Blake yawns into his hand as Ted quickly finishes settling the armor properly. “Thought the whole idea behind that makeup was just so you could *pretend* to be tired.”

“IT was.” Blake yawns again. “A bit of truth can season this particular lie.”

Ted puts the helmet on and comes close to straighten Blake’s tie. “I got somethin’ to help you sleep good, honey. Just you get this deal wrapped up an’ I’ll be glad to give it to you.”

“It’s a bit early for double entendres, Theodore.”

The other man leans back, gloved hands clutching at his chest in exaggerated shock. “Oh, *no,* sir! I was only speaking of a medicinal remedy…what were *you* thinking of?”

Blake shakes his head. “Let’s go…”

The other trade representatives look nearly as awful as Blake himself. Ted stations himself beside the door, and Blake feels his spirits lift at having his shadow guarding his back once again. He’d been reticent about sharing his feelings for Ted, but now he only wishes that he'd been courageous enough to do so sooner…well, it can’t be helped. Blake is firmly resolved to enjoy every moment
they’re afforded, from this moment on. All that is currently standing in his way of reaffirming their fledgling relationship right now is a trade agreement. Blake pushes his thoughts of impatience to the back of his mind – if a simple lack of agreement is what’s keeping him here, then he’s going to finish the negotiations and make the others pay for wasting time that could be better spent in Ted Blanco’s arms.

It takes less time than he’d previously thought, and Blake is helped considerably by the machinations of his PA – she’ll be getting a raise for this, no doubt about it. The other representatives are carefully guided into accepting terms that Blake wouldn’t be caught dead agreeing to, and Henderson is called in the moment they all sign off on it. Blake instructs Henderson to wrap things up; there’s no point in Blake attempting to ingratiate himself with the others now that he’s gotten what he wants, and Henderson might as well make himself useful for the remainder of his shortened lifespan.

Ted follows him silently as they walk back through the Hub of Heroism on the way to Blake’s quarters, settling behind him on the lift and keeping Blake from turning around to look. “Theodore.”

“Shh.”

The doors cycle closed, and the short ride to Blake’s suite is accomplished in silence. Ballard joins them with assurances that the area is safe, is dismissed for the remainder of the day on account of Blake’s ‘obvious’ exhaustion, and seems none the wiser about the real reason he’s being kicked out. Surely he must have some idea. Does Ballard know of their relationship? Blake makes a mental note to ask Ted about it…but later, because right now the ubiquitous Lance Assassin helmet has gone sailing across the entryway and Ted’s mouth is on the back of Blake’s neck. “Shower,” he manages, nearly swooning at the feel of those strong hands moving over his body in urgent examination.

Agreement comes as an exhalation of warm air on his nape, and Blake shivers as Ted pushes him against the nearest wall. Blake turns and seizes Ted’s head in his hands as the physician-assassin crashes against him for a kiss that turns the blood in Blake’s veins into molten gold. This is what he’s longed for throughout the whole of that damned meeting, a sweet renewal of the promises they’d made in a dingy bordello bedroom…perhaps not sweet in the traditional sense of the word, but there is a world of difference in how Ted touches him. Even the kisses have a tender edge to them, like a rose petal wrapped around a razor blade; they both run the risk of being damaged, now.

Ted bends slightly to pick him up while still leaning into the kiss, and Blake wraps his arms around Ted’s neck as Ted maneuvers Blake’s legs around his waist. Ted supports him easily, moving into the bathroom. “This’s a good position if I ever wanted t’fuck you in your office,” Ted says suddenly, stopping and holding Blake so that their crotches rub together. “I could just hold you right here, make you come without even takin’ your pants off.”

“I thought you’d rather bend me over my own desk,” Blake says, gasping.

“Too predictable….hang onto me for a sec, honey.” Ted reaches out to turn the water on and knocks a few towels onto the floor, which Blake will definitely complain about later, then they’re kissing again. “Missed me, huh?”

Blake tears at his collar. “Terribly.”

Ted pauses, looking at Blake before a flush of pleasure replaces the momentary surprise on his face. “Missed you too.”

“Good,” Blake says decisively. “Remove your clothing and make love to me immediately.”

“Yes, sir.”
They struggle out of their clothing and assorted pieces of armor, all the while trying to maintain as much contact as their circumstance will allow; Blake is fully aware that they must look ridiculous. Ted picks him up again, as if he weighs no more than a down-filled pillow, and steps into the shower enclosure. The jets of warm water feed Blake’s pleasure at being in the strong arms of the man he loves, and he’s lazily aware of Ted shifting his grip to reach for the soap. “That was funny as hell, you bringin’ your own sheets to Moxxi’s,” Ted tells him, squirting liquid soap into his palm and reaching around Blake’s hip.

“I can wash myself,” Blake reminds him, but not too insistently, because Ted is being just the right kind of thorough. It seems like a lifetime since they’ve done this sort of thing, even though they were last together less than a day ago on Pandora. That had been more…discipline-based, however, and Blake hopes to never have to do it again in front of an audience. He hadn’t liked having the bandit there to share Ted’s body, even though it had seemed like a good idea at the very beginning. No, Ted is Blake’s, and he’s going to stay that way.

The discipline itself had been very interesting; Blake almost hopes that Ted will do something outrageous in the near future just so Blake can have the opportunity to punish him for it. That most likely is not in the cards tonight, so soon after they’ve reached an understanding, but Blake is sure that Ted might like to have another turn of being on his knees.

Ted kisses him again, slow and thorough. Blake doesn’t ever want it to end, but he knows they’ll have to come up for air sooner or later. He could die right this instant and be glad of it. Ted’s fingers stroke and tease, still using only the soap. Blake wants to ask him about it, but has a feeling that the mood will be broken instantly by whatever wild comment Ted might make. Well, the man is a doctor – surely he knows what he’s about…and it doesn’t hurt, so there’s that. “Theodore…”?

“Think you’re clean enough by now?” Ted murmurs. “God, you’re just tight as hell.”

The dirty talk makes Blake shudder and clench around the invading fingers. “Do you have…can you reach the…?”

“Um, I think so,” Ted says. “You want it, you’re gonna have to reach for it…got my hands full right now, President Bubbles.”

And there’s the comment he’d been missing. “Stop.”

Ted deliberately misunderstands him and pulls his fingers out of Blake’s ass. “Huh. Coulda sworn you liked that, though!”

“Tedodore-”

“Oh, you know I’m just playin’,” Ted reassures him, bracing Blake against the marble so that he can fetch the bottle of lubricant and open it one-handed. “You think I’d leave my very own sweetheart t’fend for himself like that?”

Blake couldn’t form an argument if he tried, because Ted’s hand has moved back down and Blake is being vigorously finger-fucked in a manner that precludes speech. He clings to Ted and cries out his pleasure against his lover’s scarred, muscular chest while his mind tries to comprehend that this sort of thing really will be available to him whenever he chooses. The bathroom is filled with steam that makes Blake’s vision grow hazy when he opens his eyes to survey the look of concentration on Ted’s face. “Fuck me,” Blake demands.

“Yeah?”
“Now, if you don’t mind.”

“I…don’t got any condoms in here. They’re all in the other rooms,” Ted admits after a few moments.

“Did you look in the bottom of the shower caddy?” Blake asks impatiently.

“In the…?” Ted cranes his neck to look. “Why, you nasty ol’ slut.”

“You’re welcome. Give it here.” Blake rips the foil packet open using his teeth and prods the latex ring with a fingertip to test which way it unrolls, then reaches down to grasp Ted’s cock. “It’s a good thing that one of us had the foresight to put that there.”

Ted laughs and leans back to watch Blake put the condom on. “I guess so.”

A few more preparations, then Blake gets to tip his head back and enjoy the sensation of Ted’s cock slowly pushing into him. “Oh, god…yes, that’s…yes…” Blake opens his eyes to watch, and Ted steps back so that he’s the only thing supporting Blake. It’s an overt reminder of how strong Ted actually is and Blake knows that Ted is just showing off, but he’ll be damned if it’s not working.

Blake loves that Ted can hold him up so easily for this; he’d never thought to take a lover with this much muscle definition, instead preferring other men who were built much slighter like himself. He’d definitely been denying himself.

Ted’s thrusts are slow and languid, and Blake can count the individual droplets of water on Ted’s eyelashes as they watch each other. “Kiss me?”

Blake doesn’t think that he’s ever loved anyone more. “Always.”

They christen the rest of the bathroom, several pieces of furniture, and a large swath of carpet in the main living area before Ted plasters Blake up against the reinforced glass looking out over Elpis. He does, however, promise that he’ll clean up the smears of drying liquid on the window. Blake is far too satisfied to raise his voice over the smiley face Ted is compelled to draw in the mess. “You are a child,” he complains fondly.

Ted drops down onto the floor, where he’s already arranged Blake on a few cushions and a blanket stolen from the bedroom. “C’mon, it’s funny.”

“If you say so,” Blake says, closing his eyes as Ted gathers him close. “We might be better served by resting in an actual bed, my love.”

He feels the scratch of Ted’s stubble as his shadow kisses his temple. “Am I really?”

“You are, truly,” Blake reminds him, glad that he’s able to provide the reassurance that Ted still needs. It will take some time to get used to, Blake supposes, but he’s not sure that either one of them will ever be able to take each other for granted. “And I will tell you so, whenever you need to ask.”

Ted’s arms tighten around him and they exchange several kisses before Blake’s back twinges painfully. “The bed, dear one. Our acrobatics have reminded me of my advanced age, and I’m afraid I’ll be frozen in this position forever…unless you have an InstaHealth.”

Ted reminds him that, on Helios and Elpis, the needles are called Healz - and that Blake should allow his body to recover naturally, which is a fine bit of hypocrisy given the fact that Ted had used several needles in succession. “That’s different, though, ‘cause my body’s used t’bein’ pushed. I know my limits and I know yours so when I say we ain’t gonna do that, then we ain’t doin’ it.” Ted sits up and offers to carry him to bed and, since there is no harm in doing so, Blake accepts graciously. “You shouldn’t be this damn tired…didn’t you sleep?”
Blake yawns into his hand as he admits that he hadn’t, but has the presence of mind to keep the reason to himself. This time, Blake knows quite well that Ted won’t run, but there’s no sense in alienating him. Ted sighs and clicks his tongue as he scoops Blake up into his arms and heads to the bedroom.

While he goes to sleep with his back being rubbed while Ted murmurs some very sweet nothings into his ear, Blake wakes to find that Ted has tucked the sheets in around him so tightly that he cannot move. “I suppose you’ve realized why I didn’t sleep earlier,” he tells the ceiling calmly.

“Yup.”

“Are you going to accept my heartfelt apology and release me from captivity?”

“Not right away, I’m still tryin’ to be mad.”

“I see. Is it working?”

Ted’s face comes into view, and he frowns down at Blake. “Not really.”

“Very well,” Blake replies, gazing up at Ted who still shows no inclination towards letting him go. “It wasn’t a conscious decision, Theodore.”

Ted lets him worry about it a few moments more, then laughs and untucks one corner of the sheets. “If anyone ever tried to torture you, you’d be fuckin’ useless. Your back still hurt, grandpa? Roll over.” He settles his knees on either side of Blake’s legs and drops down to kiss Blake’s shoulder. “Remember when you got a handy from that masseuse? Maybe I should see if she’s available.”

“Don’t you dare,” Blake says, glancing back warningly. “You know, I did pretend she was you.”

“For real? Was she any good? I mean, not that I’m gonna…just wonderin’ if I gotta up my game or not,” Ted says hastily.

Blake sighs as Ted begins to knead his back. “I can quite honestly say that the fantasy was a pale imitation of the real thing.”

“Speakin’ of real things.”

“What, again?”

“You don’t wanna?”

“While the mind is willing, the flesh is woefully middle-aged. Positively grand-parental, as you yourself have mentioned. Your ‘real thing’ will have to give me a moment or two…ooh. To the right, please. Yes, just there…” Blake groans appreciatively, pillowing his head on his arms. “What did you have in mind for our upcoming Pandora vacation?”

Ted draws a finger down Blake’s spine. “Well, we could catch a Death Race – ain’t been to one of them in a while. Maybe visit Oasis if you don’t mind sand, Jeff. I’d like t’go see Old Haven, though that’s kinda…work related. Never been to Aegrus before, neither. I could take you to Tartarus Station-”

“No, thank you,” Blake says quickly. “I have been there before, to quell the Claptrap Uprising.”

“The…the what, now?”

“A class of Hyperion steward bots, they…never mind them. They were unconscionably annoying.
Good riddance to them all, I say.”

“Don’t those things look like a yellow box ridin’ around on just one wheel?” Ted wonders. “I think I saw one in Sanctuary. Said I was its minion or some shit, invited me to a pizza party.”

Blake laughs. “Did you attend?”

“Hell yes, I did. Free pizza? C’mom now - but you would not believe what that thing ordered for toppings. There were marshmallows an’ skag piss on one of ‘em. You’d think a robot would have some kinda workin’ knowledge of pizza, ’cause Moxxi says it orders ‘em all the time, but…no.”

Blake wonders if it would be worthwhile to have Ted deliver a special upgrade to what seems to be the last remaining CL4P-TP unit. Its continued presence on Pandora might prove useful in the future and, as it is still technically owned by the Hyperion Corporation, Blake is well within his rights to reclaim it. “I hope you are not going to tell me that you actually ate the pizza, Theodore.”

“Don’t be gross. You wanna watch a movie on the ECHOnet?”

“Movies are there?”

“Oh, my god. Were you born, or just hatched in the fittin’ room of a menswear outlet?” Ted gives Blake a slap on the ass and gets off of the bed with a snort. “Movies.”

Trying to explain his comment does no good because Ted is determined to make fun of Blake for it. He’d simply meant that he was used to watching films in a different way, when he actually had the time and inclination to do so. Thinking back, it would make sense for those companies to simply offer them on the readily accessible ECHO network. Ted is still laughing at him and explaining what couches are used for when Blake pulls on a pair of pants and follows him into the main living area.

“Well, thank you, Theodore. Thank you, indeed. I would have never guessed that the cushions were detachable had you never entered my life,” Blake says. He has the feeling that he’ll be the butt of several jokes in the coming days, unless Ted gets tired of it earlier than that.

“Just you wait, Mister Blake. There’s whole worlds out there just waitin’ for you to not know what the hell’s goin’ on.” Ted laughs again and lifts his arm for Blake to slide beneath it. “Let’s see what’s on…ooh, check it out! There’s one I ain’t seen yet.”

Blake takes a look. “I wouldn’t think someone like you enjoys romantic comedies…”

“Oh, Atlas tries to train all that outta us one way or another. It’s kinda like when your parents tell you not to eat junk ’cause it’ll make you sick – then they catch you tryin’ it and beat your ass. Well, what’re you gonna do when you finally get a chance to sneak off? You’re gonna eat that shit ’til you puke, just ’cause they ain’t watchin’ you.”

“So…romance and comedy are the junk foods of the Crimson Lance?”

“Some of us take Ice Cream Day just so we can hold hands with someone the whole time. There’s secret cuddle parties an’ everything.”

Blake blinks slowly. “Secret…cuddle…parties.”

“Yup.” Ted doesn’t take his eyes off of the screen as he selects another movie. “Let’s watch a few minutes and see if this one’s any good. We don’t like it, we can just switch back. But yeah, cuddle parties. They’re pretty good. Hey, you got a blanket?”

“Just behind that cushion, I should think. Go back to the cuddle parties; are you making fun of me
again? That cannot be real.”

Ted stares at him. “You think I’d lie to you about a cuddle party? Just ask Ballard next time you see him; he’ll tell you. Matter of fact, we’ll call him right the hell now so you can ask.”

“Well. Go on.”

“I’m gonna.”

“Do it.”

“Oh, I’m doin’ it,” Ted assures him, snatching up his own ECHO device and keying in Ballard’s frequency.

It comes to life with a muted burst of static. “Yes, sir, Mister Blake, sir?” Ballard asks.

Ted’s eyebrows lift, and Blake snatches the device away from him. “Ah. My apologies for bothering you, Lieutenant, but I wished to verify a piece of information.”

“Oh. My apologies for bothering you, Lieutenant, but…”

“Of course, sir. Go ahead.”

“I’ve been hearing reports of Crimson Lance” Blake looks hard at his companion, feeling ridiculous for what he’s about to say “secret cuddle parties.”

There’s dead silence on the other end of the connection. “Yes, sir?”

“Well?”

“Sir, I’m…not sure what you want me to say about them.” Ballard sounds flustered. “I have not personally been involved, but…”

Ted coughs into his fist, and Blake narrows eyes at him. If this is another asinine joke…! “I simply wish to ascertain whether or not they exist, Lieutenant Ballard.”

“Um. Yes, sir. They, uh, they do.”

“Very well. Thank you, and goodnight.” Blake severs the connection and leans into Ted’s personal space to glare at his lover further. “What are you coughing about!”

Ted flutters his hands at throat level. “What? I got a tickle! I ain’t even allowed to cough when I need to, after havin’ your dick bust up my tonsils?”

“You don’t have tonsils, Theodore.”

“Course I don’t now. Get some strangle-and-dangle in your life an’ you can see how yours do.”

“I am not even going to ask,” Blake decides loudly, “So please keep your hare-brained definitions to yourself.”

“What’s a hare?”

“Just…watch your movie.”

Blake settles back against Ted’s side and folds a corner of the blanket over his legs, then pulling it over his chest as a slight draft reminds him that the only thing he’s wearing are pajama pants. Of course, that’s the only thing that Ted is wearing too, but his bare feet are much warmer than Blake’s;
a side effect of growing up in the Arid Badlands of Pandora, perhaps? Ted grumbles at him, but allows it when Blake stretches his legs out in an attempt to warm up his own freezing toes. The movie itself is awful and crammed full of every possible cliché, but Blake enjoys it anyway with Ted busily predicting the next plot point.

They’re having dinner together, and debating the merits of replacing most of the security forces on Helios, when Vasquez sends another update concerning his search for a Vault key – it seems as though he’s managed to locate one. “What do you know of a bandit named August?” Blake asks, swirling the dregs of wine in his glass. “This says he’s from Prosperity Junction.”

Ted looks up and shrugs. “You got me. I was more of an Old Haven kinda kid, if I wasn’t fuckin’ around in the Badlands. You tell me who his momma was then maybe I could I.D. the bastard, but I know you ain’t pullin’ that nonsense where you think I know someone just ’cause we’re from the same planet.”

“Of course not, my dear.”

“Good.”

Ted returns to his meal, but listens and makes an occasional comment as Blake reads the report aloud. “If all goes as planned, I shall have a Vault key in my possession by the end of next month. Not bad, wouldn’t you say?” Blake turns to his lover, who has abandoned his food to lean his chin against his fist.

“I dunno, hon, seems real convenient that he got a key so damned fast.”

“Perhaps, but we have no way of knowing what avenues of trade have been open and for how long. There’s not a soul down there that wouldn’t recognize Vasquez as anything but an Hyperion executive,” Blake points out. “Besides, we’ll have enough lead time for you to investigate the key’s legitimacy.”

His shadow gazes at him thoughtfully. “There is that. I just don’t like it.”

No, Blake can’t imagine that Ted would. “It’ll be fine.”

“You hope it’ll be fine. Whether or not it actually is ain’t up to either of us.” Ted rubs a fingertip over the burnished metal of the table. “I guess it’s the perfect excuse for us to go planetside, if you need one.”

Blake reaches across the table to lay his hand over Ted’s; he knows an olive branch when he sees it. “You are the only excuse I’ve ever needed.”

“You are just slick as anything, ain’t you?” Ted murmurs, threading his fingers through Blake’s and gazing down at their conjoined hands.

“Oh? Is it working?”

Ted’s mouth curves in a smile as he looks up to meet Blake’s eyes. “Hell, Mister Blake – it always has. Don’t see a reason why it shouldn’t this time, too.”

There are still a million things they will have to discuss concerning the Vault key, and Blake is tempted to broach the subject once more, but Ted’s hand is still in his. He is also still looking into his love’s eyes, and the message Blake reads there is a silent warning to say nothing further. “We will discuss the key further, Theodore, but I believe that it can – and will - wait for tomorrow.”
Ted’s grip eases slightly. “Good.”
The new weapon designs are very promising. Lieutenant Ballard knows more than he lets on, and Vasquez gets cut down to size.

The fourth time Blake hits the ground, he manages to remember that he’s supposed to roll with the impact and it becomes easier to handle. It only hurts a little bit less. “I thought this was supposed to be a lesson in self-defense, not a wholesale beating,” he complains, rubbing his shoulder.

“All right, All right,” Ted says, bouncing on the balls of his feet and performing an unnecessarily complicated maneuver with the staff in his hands. “You know what I’m talking about, don’t you?”

“Ballard, you let one of them big cats from Eden 4 in here?” Ted asks, bouncing on the balls of his feet and performing an unnecessarily complicated maneuver with the staff in his hands. “Show-off.”

Lieutenant Ballard clears his throat. “No, Colonel, I didn’t.”

“Yeah? What d’you think that noise was, then?” Ted’s very clearly setting Blake up for something, and couldn’t be happier about it.

Ballard glances at Blake apologetically. “It, uh…it sounded like a little pussy.”

Ted jams one end of the staff into the floor and leans on it while he laughs. “It sure as hell did.”

“Is this truly necessary?” Blake asks in exasperation.

“What ain’t necessary is the amount of hair gel you use every day, Blake. You slick enough on there to fuel a 20-year gangbang.” Ted declares, which causes Ballard to turn aside with a strangled cough. “C’mon. We ain’t stoppin’ til you get this down.”

Blake’s answering sigh attempts to convey his weariness but if Ted hears, it’s steadfastly ignored. He gets up and retrieves his staff from Ballard, who gives him a carefully concealed thumbs-up. “I will try,” he promises.

“Fuck off with tryin’, Mister President! You’d better damn well do it…you think I was born this handsome an’ gifted?”

“Yes?” Blake hazards.

“Yes,” Ted says. “But I got even better ‘cause I trained my tail off. With the gifted part; the looks came naturally. You can’t count on always havin’ a knife strapped to your skinny ass, but what have I already told you ‘bout a staff?”

Blake rolls his eyes. “‘Any idiot can hit someone with a stick.’”

You hear this, Lieutenant? I’m gonna shed some tears in pride. Now that ain’t the only reason I got you practicin’ with a staff, Blake…when you’re off somewhere and gotta fend for yourself - let’s say you lost your knife – all you’re gonna have is your brain.”

“What about my fists? They’ll still be present, I assume.”
“Your fists! Don’t make me laugh! Anyways, you got your brain. You just gotta use it to figure out what you can use as a weapon - there’s a high probability that somethin’ around you can be used as a staff. Nobody’s gonna expect a gaunt ol’ priss, no offense, to pick up a big stick an’ smack ‘em upside the head with it.”

How can that not be offensive, Blake wonders, but doesn’t give Ted the satisfaction of an outraged reaction. His shadow looks at him closely, seeming slightly disappointed with Blake’s calm demeanor.

Excellent.

“We’ll work on your knife skills as a secondary,” Ted continues. “You got an assassination attempt comin’ up soon, so we’ll work with you an’ get you ready for it.”

“Excuse me, am I missing something? Isn’t the entire point of your presence here to foil these attempts before they can be made?”

Ted’s eyebrows lift. “You don’t want the satisfaction of bein’ able to handle it your own damn self… sir?”

“Not particularly, no.”

“Too bad,” Ted says cheerfully. “Let’s keep goin’, there’s still ten minutes ‘fore you gotta go sign some stuff. Ballard? Go after him an’ see if he can stop you.”

Blake is forced to defend himself against an overzealous Ballard not once, but multiple times until he finally manages to hit the lieutenant hard enough to knock him down. Ted watches silently as Ballard gets back up to continue the bout and Blake grows so angry that he brings the staff down harder than he means to. Ballard goes limp, and Ted’s unfeigned delight makes Blake feel actual pride in his performance. “How was that?”

“That,” Ted tells him, “is what I wanna see every single time… think you can give that t’me?”

The knowledge that he can, indeed, do something he’d previously thought impossible bolsters Blake’s spirits. “I think so, yes. That and… something else, Theodore.”

“Ooh, sassy. For now let’s just stick t’havin’ you knock his ass out again, after he wakes up.”

Blake peers down at the supine Ballard. “I do not have that much experience in rendering people unconscious – if they’re sprawled at my feet, it’s usually because I’ve killed them.” He glances up at Ted in time to see a dreamy look pass over his lover’s face. “What are you thinking of?”

“Bein’ choked out in a whorehouse.”

“I said that I did not have much experience, not that I had none at all, pet.”

Ted smiles and looks pointedly at Ballard. “We should probably save the banter ‘til he’s gone.”

“If you prefer,” Blake says a little stiffly, unused to being rebuked by the king of innuendo.

“I don’t, but still.”

Blake is still feeling out of sorts by the time the practice session ends for the day, and would cling to his bad mood but Ted puts him in a better state of mind with a few carefully selected words of praise and several kisses. Being tended to in the shower doesn’t hurt, either. “I am surprised that he does
not know about us,” Blake brings it up casually, while going over the latest reports from R&D. “It seems so…obvious.”

“It affects you more’n it does him, is all,” Ted says, his voice filtered by the helmet. “’Sides, it ain’t his job to notice where I sleep.”

“So he isn’t aware of anything improper.”

“If he is, he knows t’mind his own damn business…look sharp, Vasquez’s comin’ in.”

His future Vice President – that is, if the man can manage to find the Vault key he’d been charged with the discover of – pauses in the reception area, and Blake changes the screens on the walls to rotating views of the main Hub. Vasquez enters Blake’s office with his head held high, oozing confidence and a truly horrendous cologne. “President Blake.”

Now, this bodes very well indeed. Blake waits a few moments before looking up from the reports, keeping his face slack with feigned boredom. “Is there a reason why you are here without an appointment, Mister Vasquez?” From the corner of his eye, Blake can see Ted shift slightly in implied threat.

“I found a Vault key for you, sir,” Vasquez says unctuously, as if he hadn’t already informed Blake about the thing. Perhaps he wants to repeat himself just for the added value of a face-to-face reaction. Does he think that Blake will perform cartwheels of delight?

“Have you, indeed. Ares? The key, if you please.”

Ted takes a few steps forward, and the other man’s face pales beneath the spray-on tan. “W-well, sir, I don’t actually…have it yet-”

Blake aims a hard look at Vasquez. “I beg your pardon? You do not have it?” Ted drifts closer to Vasquez, who scoots forward towards Blake’s desk, and Ted circles around to place himself directly behind the now-sweating Vasquez.

“I, ah, technically-”

“Ares,” Blake says quietly. Ted lifts his right arm in a fluid motion, one of his sword hilts in his hand, and the blade flickers into existence a hairbreadth away from Vasquez’s throat. “Technicalities do not interest me. Employees who get results interest me.”

Vasquez licks his lips. “Mister Blake, I – I assure you, the key is as good as yours.”

Blake looks at the man who would be one step beneath him. He doesn’t like that Vasquez thought he could claim the vice-presidency without presenting the required payment for the promotion. He also doesn’t like that he’s going to have to ensure that Vasquez doesn’t think he can get away it, because cruelty has never been Blake’s modus operandi, but there aren’t many punitive measures he can take as an alternative. “Tell me, Mister Vasquez, do you think that I am stupid?”

“No, sir.”

He’s sweating so profusely that Blake can actually hear the droplets striking Ted’s sword and sizzling as they’re turned to vapor. “And yet, here you are expecting me to take on faith that a Vault key will simply drop into my lap. Perhaps you also expect me to believe that you would be content as my subordinate.”

Blake looks at Vasquez thoughtfully. Pain would definitely be the best deterrent; Blake could
impound funds or property, but they would be easy to replace. His eyes move to Ted, who raises his other hand behind Vasquez’s shoulder and makes a fist before extending the fifth digit as if he’s at a tea party. “Are you left or right-handed, Mister Vasquez?” Blake asks.

Vasquez blinks in surprise. “Right-handed, sir—”

“The left, then, Ares.” The plasma forming the sword blade in Ted’s right hand flows back into the hilt, and the blade on the left slides out to sever Vasquez’s pinky from the third knuckle. It’s over quickly, and Blake watches silently as Vasquez’s mouth opens and closes in shock. “I imagine you’ll want to get that looked at. Do clean up your mess before leaving, won’t you?”

The pain is visibly catching up to Vasquez who, to his credit, doesn’t scream as expected. There is gasping, though. Vasquez bends, trembling, to retrieve his severed finger and would take it with him for reattachment, but Ted calmly holds out his hand for it and the other man is forced to drop it into Ted’s gloved palm before he walks out of Blake’s office.

“And how did that feel?”

“Not very pleasant, actually,” Blake confesses.

Ted walks over to the nearest disposal unit and drops the finger inside it. “You ain’t Jack. Don’t you waste time thinkin’ it.”

“The comparison is an easy one to make.”

“No, it ain’t. You did what you needed to, and just the thought of you askin’ me for reassurance in this matter is blowin’ my entire fuckin’ mind. I’m, like, the worst person you could ever want givin’ you a pep talk on this shit. You did not think this one through.”

Blake pushes his hands through his hair. “I should have no qualms about it, given that I’ve condemned any number of people to death.”

Ted comes to perch on the edge of Blake’s desk. “You’ll get over it, and he’ll prob’ly get a sweet prosthetic outta the deal so you basically did that moron a favor. ‘Sides, it wasn’t like he lost a thumb or nothin’. Want me t’go work on him?”

“I beg your pardon? What?”

“Oh, not like that. I just meant fixin’ his hand. Dude had some hairy knuckles, you notice that? Yikes,” Ted says mildly.

Blake nods in permission, and Ted slips from the room to change into his Lance uniform. Ballard comes in with a cheerful greeting, removing his helmet briefly so that Blake can verify his identity. “Good evening, sir. Would you like me to arrange for a meal to be delivered?”

“Finger sandwiches, Blake thinks with a slight tinge of hysteria. “No, thank you.”

“Of course, sir.”

Blake sighs and goes back to the reports before stopping and turning his chair around. “Lieutenant, might I have a word with you?”

“Anytime, Mister Blake. What can I do for you?”

Somehow, he can’t force the word ‘gossip’ past his lips. “Well, I have been catching up on my
reading – reading the Crimson Lance officer manual, to be more precise. In the, ah, section pertaining to interpersonal relationships…is the ban focused only on intimate associations formed within the ranks? As opposed to, shall we say, a random member of the Dahl military force?”

The helmet comes off again, and Ballard purses his lips in thought. “Well, sir, the only thing I can really tell you is that the Colonel isn’t supposed to be involved with you.”

“With…with me? I’m afraid that you have-”

“Eyes, and ears, and a healthy sense of the ridiculous. Um. Sir. It’s…really none of my business.”

Blake has no idea what to say to all this. “No, I don’t suppose that it is.” He pauses. “I have no wish for validation, Lieutenant. I was simply wondering.”

“Don’t worry, sir. Though, if I may speak freely?”

Blake wishes he’d never said anything in the first place. Still, it might be useful to know the mind of his secondary protector. “Of course.”

“The last time Colonel Blanco was involved with anyone – romantically, I mean – it….didn’t end well. For either of them. If he’s in love with you, which is absolutely not my business, then that means your safety is my primary objective. I’d die for him, Mister Blake, which means I’d die for you as well.”

“While that is good to know, it seems a trifle melodramatic.”

Ballard clears his throat. “I just thought I’d put that out there, considering the fact that Captain Saybrook was released yesterday. I’ll keep a close eye on him, Mister Blake.”

Well, that’s certainly no cause for alarm, now is it? Blake thinks sourly. “I certainly hope so.” Good Lord. Saybrook’s release is all he needs right now. He’ll have to hope that Ted really does know what he’s doing in this particular matter, and resolves to have a word with the man about it.

Ted returns an hour later without having bothered with his Lance Assassin armor. “He ain’t gonna try for your spot,” he announces, standing in front of Blake’s desk.

“Really? Why wouldn’t he?” Blake asks.

“‘Cause I told him not to,” Ted replies as if Blake’s question is the stupidest thing he’s ever heard. “Fixed him up with a gold pinky that’s got a li’l ‘H’ on there. Kinda cool, if you’re down with that sorta thing. Told him this new line’s got diamonds on the circuit board so he’s prob’ly already plannin’ on another accident soon.”

Blake frowns slightly. “Why would there be diamonds on the circuit boards?”

“There ain’t, but he’s swaggerin’ around like he cut that finger off all by himself. I mean, he still might pee a li’l bit next time he sees you, but he’s sure diggin’ his left hand now.”

“Wonderful news,” Blake deadpans. “Backtrack to when you told him not to usurp my position…?”

Ted grins. “Gave him the rundown on how many assassination attempts you’ve had an’ how many Henderson had…after his brush with death in this very office, sir, you’d best believe he’s happy to stick with the VP title.”

“You continually surprise me, Theodore.”
Blake gives him a dismissive wave. “Ballard is fully aware of our relationship. He seems to think that he would be glad to die for either one of us.”

Ted fixes Ballard with a stare that makes the younger man swallow nervously. “Fuck’s sake, kid, don’t make it weird!”

“Sorry, Colonel.”

“Watchin’ too many of those hokey movies on the ECHOnet,” Ted says irritably. “Just... go do some laps, get the hell outta here. Fuckin’ Byco.”

Ballard vanishes from the room as if he’s sprouted wings to do so, and Blake lifts his eyebrows. “Is that his first name? A trifle odd, isn’t it?”

Ted is still frowning after the recently departed lieutenant. “What a freak.”

“Theodore?”

“Huh? Oh, no, his name ain’t Byco. I just call him that ‘cause he’s the one left the armory code for the Vault Hunter’s t’find... good kid, but how dumb you gotta be to leave the goddamn armory code sittin’ around? Jeez!”

Vault Hunters? “You can’t mean that he was on Pandora. I read a report having to do with an Atlas soldier leaving the code to General Knoxx’s... is that really him?”

Ted sighs and rubs at his face, sinking down in a nearby chair. “Yeah, that’d be Derrick Ballard. Why am I not surprised you know ‘bout that mess? Is that, like, common knowledge now?”

“What I am surprised about is the fact that any of the Atlas forces were able to leave the planet – I thought they’d been abandoned.”

“They were; he stole the funds to get back to Promethea from a couple dead soldiers. A few other of them morons made the trip, too, but most just got abandoned here ‘cause no shuttle was gonna take ‘em without payment upfront.”

Blake can’t resist teasing Ted about his obvious discomfort at the depth of Ballard’s loyalty. “I’ve been told that everyone wants you for a commanding officer. Colonel Popularity.”

“Oh, God.” Ted rolls his eyes. “I only took him on ‘cause I felt sorry for the dumbass. He ain’t a bad kid, and it is kinda funny how he just left the codes sittin’ around so he could go see the World’s Largest Bullet. I mean, he fucked everyone over by doin’ it, but still. You’ve just gotta slow-clap it out for anyone doin’ somethin’ that dumb.”

They have a moment of silence for Ballard’s past idiocy, then Blake broaches the subject of Captain Saybrook being on the loose once more. Ted listens to Blake’s objections and points out that Blake himself has a policy of monitoring known traitors. “Do you really think he’ll keep his word about not trying to kill me?”

“If he wants to keep his head attached to his shoulders, he’d sure as shit better,” Ted says. “Remember how I sent for reinforcements that never arrived? Turns out Saybrook never actually relayed the message.”

“Were the supply lines reestablished?” Blake asks curiously. “I had my assistant allocate funds for
the Promethean garrison.”

Ted leans back for a stretch that Blake follows with his eyes. “You, darlin’, are the official sugar daddy of the Crimson Lance.”

“How I’ve dreamed of this moment,” Blake says drily, making Ted laugh. “There are a few things I must go over before I’m finished, and then I believe I’m scheduled to visit Research and Development. And speaking of fatherhood, we could go see your love child.”

“I dunno if it’s even hatched yet, or whatever those things do. Gonna get all misty-eyed? I’ll bring some tissues while you’re in floods over the miracle of life…and who scheduled you t’go over there? Got changed an’ everything, now you’re tellin’ me we gotta go somewhere else.”

Blake reminds him not to pout. “Come as you are; it will be a nice ‘change’ of pace and provide me with easy access should I decide to avail myself of your masculine charms.”

Ted snorts and puts his hands behind his head, settling in comfortably with his heels on the corner of Blake’s desk to watch the security monitors while waiting for Blake to be finished. It’s a different sort of pleasure for Blake to have Ted’s calm (and quiet) companionship…even if it has to include having combat boots planted on the edge of his desk.

The reports take longer than expected, mainly because Blake keeps stealing glances at his shadow while Ted pretends not to notice, but when he does finish Blake realizes that Ted has fallen asleep in the chair. Blake’s not too keen on waking him up – they don’t have to be anywhere just yet, and he’s sure that Ted could use a short nap. He sits back to watch Ted sleep for a few minutes, then checks the monitors to find that Ballard really has been doing laps around the Hub of Heroism all this time and is now headed back in to Blake’s office complex.

Blake waits for the door to slide open before holding up a hand for silence, indicating the sleeping form of the man’s senior officer. “I daresay you can stop running about the place, Lieutenant.”

Ballard nods in acknowledgement. “Yes, sir. Orders?”

“You might begin by telling me the best way to wake an Omega Assassin without dying five seconds after I’ve done it.”

The other man looks surprised and starts to open his mouth before shutting it with an audible click of his teeth. “Ah…well, sir, during Basic we’d all come running whenever an officer yelled ‘attention.’ It might not work on Colonel Blanco anymore, but it’s a worth a try and please never mention I had anything to do with it. Sir.”

“You have my word, my thanks, and my permission to leave immediately.”

Blake waits until Ballard is gone before turning to stare at Ted and wondering if he’s far enough away for this. He takes a deep breath and gathers himself to shout when the love of his life says, “Don’t even think about it, Sticks.”

The air in Blake’s lungs gives an anticlimactic whoosh right back out of his mouth. “I thought you were sleeping.”

“I was, an’ now I’m not.” Ted opens his eyes and looks at Blake. “You ready t’go?”

“No time like the present, I suppose.”

They take the Fast Travel down to the R&D level, which is bustling even at this late hour. There are
plenty of obsequious smiles aimed at Blake as his passage is noticed, but the true pleasure Blake experiences is walking – just walking! - with Ted by his side. They’re able to talk freely, for the most part, and Blake doesn’t have to pretend that Ted is only a hired assassin. “Let’s go check out the new weapons when you’re done,” Ted suggests. “Where we goin’ first?”

“Actually, we’re going straight to the ordnance prototype lab so you’ll get your wish straight off,” Blake says, smiling at the surprised pleasure on his love’s face. “The designs so recently liberated from Corazza are close to the production stage; if I’m not mistaken, the developers are looking for volunteers for testing…perhaps we might borrow a few to take back with us.”

Ted’s expression is one of pure delight. “Oh, man. Really?”

“I don’t see why not.”

Blake is abruptly yanked into a random laboratory, lifted off his feet, and soundly kissed in front of two Loaderbots who swivel around to watch. “I love you.”

“If I had known that this was the key to your heart, I would have done it much earlier,” Blake says, stepping back and self-consciously smoothing his hair. He could have gone without the public display of affection because he’s never been one to enjoy the attention they tend to bring, but he's deeply glad that he’s able to make Ted so happy. “What are you looking at,” he snaps at the Loaders. “Get back to work!”

“Understood,” one of them says, which makes Ted snort.

“Those things are freaky as hell. Let’s go make out.”

Blake fends him off with a laugh of his own. “That can wait until later. Let’s go choose your gun, shall we?”

The perusal of Hyperion’s latest prototypes is enlivened by Ted’s obvious enthusiasm, and if the tech giving them an explanation of the weapon’s features is surprised that a medical doctor is more knowledgeable than he is, there’s no indication of it. It’s interesting to see how the liberated plans have been turned into something that will make Hyperion a great deal of money, and Blake enjoys seeing Ted so totally in his element – it’s almost like watching a child on Mercenary Day.

They take the time to fully examine all five new models, though one is surely destined for the scrap heap unless the manufacturing division can correct the flaw in the cooling system; not a single soul is going to want an assault rifle that has the possibility of overheating to the point of explosion. “Get Quality Control on it; its design is too unique not to be used. If the structure will be changed too drastically to allow for the fix, bring a team from Aesthetics down here for a work-around,” is Blake’s final word on the rifle.

“Of course, President Blake. I’ll arrange for the copies to be destroyed, and send the prototype in for immediate revision,” the tech says.

Ted looks up from the elemental sniper rifle in his hands. “Copies?” he asks, and Blake can hear the slight hint in his voice.

“Have one delivered to Doctor Blanco’s office,” Blake says. “Destroy the rest.”

“I’ll send it right away,” the other man promises.

Blake selects the next batch of plans to be sent for production, and then he’s officially done for the night. Ted chooses a revolver to take with them, and is admiring it while they walk past the entrance
to the Stalker Biodome. “Isn’t this where your illegitimate monstrosity lives, or am I thinking of a different creature altogether?” Blake asks, gesturing at the doors.

“Nah, I got a bouncin’ baby Tork…though I shoulda held out for a Stalker; they got cloak ability an’ their names don’t rhyme with dork. This’s gonna be painted different, right? Not really feelin’ the color.”

“It’s just a mock-up; finalizing the paint happens a bit later, once the weapons have been fully tested and any adjustments have been made to them,” Blake explains. “And speaking of adjustments, what do you plan on doing with that defective assault rifle? I’d rather not have you injured if that could be avoided, love.”

Ted shrugs as he tucks the revolver beneath his uniform jacket. “Call me paranoid, but there might be a time when you’ll be glad to have somethin’ you know for sure’s gonna blow up. I’ll paint it for you.”


“Better safe than not. He may get a second chance, but that don’t mean I trust him the same as before,” Ted says quietly. “Saybrook so much as looks at you cross-eyed, he’s dead.”

Blake grudgingly asks why Ted had even released him in the first place, notwithstanding the identification of Saybrook’s contacts. “Is it simple sentiment that prompted you?”

“I guess there is some of that in there, yeah…but mainly it’s ‘cause I know how he works. It was a surprise that he flipped on me and it really shouldn’t’ve been.”

A sudden flash of insight makes Blake ask, “If Saybrook was your adjutant…to whom was he attached before that?”

“Commandant Steele,” Ted says slowly, and Blake nods in understanding. Whatever arrangement the two officers had made, it seems as though Saybrook feels that Ted hasn’t held up his end of it. “Listen, you still wanna see those things?”

There’s a story here somewhere, but he’s wary of pressing for more details. “I wouldn’t miss it for the world,” Blake answers, and the moment passes as if it had never been.
Go West, Old Man!

Chapter Summary

You should've gone before we left! The boys finally go on their vacation and Blake gets the Sucker Born Every Minute in-game achievement.

After two grueling weeks aboard Helios, Blake finalizes his vacation with Ted. The time alone will be an especial treat given that Ted has been absent for a few urgent assassinations that can’t wait until they return. As a direct result of Ted’s absence, Blake has fallen into his old habits of giving up sleep in favor of work that might be able to wait until later but if he's awake then he might as well accomplish something.

Blake doesn't even notice when Ted goes into parade rest behind his right shoulder, but he slowly becomes aware of his lover's presence after a series of peons have given him unusually fearful glances that Blake actually notices.

He turns his head slightly in order to watch the big man stationed right behind him. "So you're back, are you?"

"Looks that way, Mister Blake," Ted says calmly, still gazing straight ahead even after removing his helmet.

Blake never understood the hedonism that prompted Jack to request in-house sexual favors from his subordinates during his tenure as president, even if Nisha Kadam had technically been in a relationship with him at the time, but Blake is beginning to grasp the allure of it. The thought of receiving such favors from the physician-assassin is a rather stirring one. "Tell me, Doctor Blanco...have you ever considered performing fellatio in a public setting?" Blake asks.

"Well, Mister Blake, Sir, I suppose that would depend on something very important."

Blake sniffs and selects another file in need of review. "It would depend on what, precisely?"

"Why, it would depend on whether or not I could fit beneath that desk," Ted says, and Blake swivels his chair around to look at him. "I hope you're nearly done, sir." Blake nearly gives in to the warmth in his eyes because it really has been ages since they were last together, and he's sorely missed having Ted around.

"Tempting...but perhaps not right now, my..." He clears his throat. "Not right now, Colonel. I have a few more contracts to review before I am free for extracurricular pursuits." He can't quite help extending his hand slightly, and he clears his throat again as Ted touches fingertips with him.

The contracts are reviewed a bit more hastily than usual as Ted resumes his station behind Blake's chair, and it's a relief to finally call in his PA. "If I am disturbed in any way before tomorrow afternoon..."

Paxson assures him that he will not be contacted for any reason, and Blake smiles thinly as he sweeps from the room trailed silently by the large Atlas soldier. As soon as the doors to the lift close, Blake finds himself being backed against the wall and kissed very, very thoroughly. "Hope you
stayed outta trouble while I was gone, Sticks," Ted murmurs, his Pandoran drawl returning now that they're alone.

"Don't call me that," Blake says breathlessly. "Your insubordination grows worse the longer our association continues, and I simply will not have it!"

"You did miss me, didn't you?"

Ted's hands roam over him, and Blake sighs as the other man bites down on the side of his neck. "I missed you terribly, my dear Doctor."

His honesty is rewarded with another deep, drugging kiss. They stumble into Blake's suite of rooms while trying to maintain as much physical contact as possible, and Ted hustles him into the bedroom.

"Got s'more pillows, huh?"

"Just for you," Blake says, trying to pat his mussed hair back into place. "You did miss me, didn't you?"

Ted immediately reaches out and tousles it back into disarray, then Blake finds himself picked up and hurled onto the bed. "Theodore!" He says crossly, but they both know he's not really that upset. "Remove your armor this instant."

"You take off that suit and we got a deal," his lover says, already working at the chest plate of the battered armor. Blake is a little annoyed at how eager he feels, but they are in private and he supposes that one must occasionally give way in matters of love...because he does indeed love this infuriating, obstinate man. Ted takes him into his arms once they are both nude, laying him down for more kisses and caresses that electrify every single nerve ending in his body. "I like the pillows," Ted whispers. "How d'ya want this, hon?"

Blake shivers, closing his eyes briefly. "You may choose."

"Well, then." Ted laughs softly and rolls him over, reaching out for the bedside table. Blake runs his hands over the broad, muscular back as Ted rummages through the drawers in search of lubricant. He sighs when Ted begins kissing his way down his chest, slick fingers teasing at his anus.

The big man steadily works him open, lavishing open-mouthed kisses on Blake's straining cock. Blake writhes beneath his lover's ministrations, carding his fingers through the short salt and pepper hair. "Yes, there," he instructs breathlessly, jerking up off of the bed when Ted unexpectedly shoves two fingers inside him, burying them up the third knuckle while taking Blake fully into his mouth. "Oooh...!"

Ted mumbles something around his shaft, and the vibrations that the words produce make his hips jerk upwards. Blake tugs on his hair to urge him upward, and Ted grins at him. "You want somethin'?"

"Yes, you infernal tease! Get on with it!"

"Thought you said it was my choice," Ted points out. "Patience, Sticks."

"Don't...don't call me that," Blake moans, arching his back as Ted bends over his lap once more.

His cock is engulfed in the soldier's hot mouth, and he scrubs the back of his head against the pillow as the ecstasy builds. For a wonder, Ted actually decides to leave off his usual teasing and works him steadily with lips and tongue - even the slightest hint of teeth- so that Blake reaches orgasm a great deal sooner than he'd planned. He groans out his pleasure, feeling Ted's throat muscles move as his lover swallows around him.
Ted slides up his body for another kiss, then nudges Blake's thighs open so that he can nestle in between them. "You ready for me, honey?" Ted asks, desire thickening his voice. Blake looks down at the other man's erection, drawing in a shuddering breath.

"Oh, yes."

Blake gnaws at his lower lip, striving to stay silent as Ted grasps his swollen cock and rubs its crown against Blake's slickened entrance. "Let me hear you," Ted purrs, beginning the agonizingly slow push inside. "Want you to beg for this, baby."

He shouldn't allow anyone to bully him like this, but a part of him finds exquisite relief in submission. Blake wets his lips with his tongue before giving his beloved what he wants. "Please," he sighs out. "Theodore, please. I need you."

Blake grasps at the bedsheets as Ted breaches the tight ring of muscle, slowly rocking back and forth to create the most delicious sensations Blake has experienced in quite some time. His own penis stiffens to attention as a result, and Ted makes a pleased hum in the back of his throat. "Nice an' tight, honey. God, you feel good inside..."

He's stretched further as Ted sheathes himself to the hilt, and they both murmur appreciation as their mouths meet hungrily. Blake wraps his arms around Ted's neck as they move together slowly, and he nuzzles at the wings of white hair extending back from the big man's temple. "It feels wonderful, my darling," he whispers lovingly, kneading his lover's muscular back. "So wonderfully thick and hard, and all for me."

Ted moans in response, setting his knees farther apart and withdrawing almost completely before sliding back in with a strong thrust. "All for you, Jeff, every fuckin' inch is yours. Gonna make you feel so good, I swear...!"

"Do you want to know what I would like to do next?" Blake questions, sliding his hands down to grip Ted's backside as it flexes with each thrust. "I rather think I'd like a game of 'Yes, Sir' before the night is through."

He earns another moan, and a faster pace. "You see, I happen to enjoy hearing you beg. You do it so sweetly, my love, on your hands and knees as you beg me to fuck you... Because you always want it hard and rough, don't you? You love being disciplined." Blake is enjoying himself greatly, drawing gasps and shudders from Ted. He'd meant to submit, he really had, but he can't help himself. "You are my bad boy, aren't you?"

Ted grunts, bracing himself and pumping his hips in earnest. "God, Jeffrey."

"Would you - ah! - like me to... Oooh, stop?"

"Don't you dare," Blake is threatened severely.

"Well, then, my bad boy...do you know that I can...nnngh, yes feel those large testicles of yours bouncing against me? One of these days, I think I shall gather them into my hand and give a nice hard squeeze to spur you on." Blake cracks Ted across his right buttock with his open palm. "Would you like that, darling boy?"

Ted is gasping so loudly, Blake might think he was at risk of cardiac arrest if he didn't know any better. "Do it now," he demands hoarsely. "Can you reach?"

Blake can, and does. He strokes the soft, tender skin before teasing at the sensitive globes. "So large," he comments, rolling the sizable glands in his fingers before tightening his grip. It's not easy
to concentrate since Ted hasn’t stopped fucking him for a single instant, but Blake gets the reaction he wants when he wraps his thumb and forefinger around Ted’s scrotum and pulls down sharply.

He can feel Ted’s cock jerk at the same time he hears the hiss of pain. "Do it again," Ted snarls. Blake complies, tightening his grip while Ted cries out in agonized pleasure - he’s careful not to damage the man beyond repair, which isn’t always easy because Ted never seems to have a thought for his own safety and it is easy to become carried away by his sweet pleadings for more. Blake ignores another request that could cause serious damage that can’t be healed easily, instead releasing his soldier’s abused scrotum and rearing up to sink his teeth into the base of Ted’s neck instead. The sudden shock of pain brings him to orgasm, and Blake licks at the dental indentations as Ted shudders and moans.

"You moan like a cheap whore," Blake whispers lovingly, running his tongue over the bite marks. "I love it."

Ted makes another sound of deep satisfaction, then rolls off to the side with his eyes closed. "That was real nice, Jeff."

"You should take greater care with yourself," Blake scolds, sighing as he gets to his knees to inspect the damage. "One of these days, I really will do all that you ask of me." He gently manipulates the soft pouch of skin, frowning to see the discoloration of bruising. "Your level of carelessness is appalling."

Ted winces slightly as his endorphin level begins its decline. "I can live with it."

"Would you like me to administer an injection? It's lucky for you that I've begun to stock them anywhere your proclivities might take us," Blake scolds him.

"Not just yet...still feels good," Ted mumbles. "You're a fine one to talk 'bout proclivities when you're the one doin' what I ask."

"If that is an attempt to make me feel ashamed of myself, you are failing miserably." Blake lifts one of Ted's hands, examining the knuckles. "It would ease my mind greatly if you would simply agree to stay on in your capacity as a doctor. Every time you leave, I am left to wonder if you will return again."

Ted closes his eyes, smiling. "Always gonna come back for your scrawny li'l ass."

"I am serious."

"So'm I, honey." His eyes reopen to examine Blake's face. "We met 'cause I tracked you down and made your life a livin' hell - just for the fun of it. I was hired to kill you, an' now you want me up here safe. Don't that seem a bit crazy to you?"

Blake clears his throat. "Perhaps you should've taken the shot and put us both our of our collective misery."

Ted laughs softly and runs the pad of his thumb across the sharp plane of Blake's left cheekbone. "It was too late for me once I saw those tears in your eyes... you were so damned fed up, you actually cried."

"Yes, well," Blake huffs, irritated that Ted still sees fit to remind him of it now and again. "We weren't discussing your possible reassignment for the sake of rehashing our first...third meeting. I would like for you to fulfill your duties as a physician here on Helios."
"Really," Ted's voice carries the bite of sarcasm. "And just who d'you think will watch your back while I'm in the medical bay? Henderson?"

Blake shakes his head and pushes himself up onto an elbow. "Don't be ridiculous. There haven't been any attempts for weeks, now."

"Really," Ted repeats, stressing the word just enough to make it very clear that the only reason that Blake hasn't experienced any more assassination attempts is because he's put a stop to them.

"How many?" Blake asks.

"Don't worry 'bout 'em; I took care of it."

"And by whom?"

"I said, don't worry 'bout it. You grow deaf while I was gone?" Ted stares up at him in a way that reminds Blake about the steel that lies beneath both the teasing and the pleading. "'Sides, who says that was our third meeting?"

Damn it all, he's just offered the perfect bait. Blake can't help shelving his complaints in favor of a demand for clarification.

"You can't just say something like that and not elaborate, Theodore!"

His soldier smiles and rolls onto one side to face him. "C'mon, now, Mister President; think back a ways. Can't believe you really don't know."

"Know what, precisely?" Blake huffs in annoyance.

"Back on Thrace when you had that conference. Remember the waiter who spilled your drink on the blueprints?"

Blake isn’t in the habit of remembering members of the waitstaff, wherever they might be based, but that he does recall. As a result of the server's clumsiness, he'd been forced to go back to his room to retrieve another copy of the plans. Ten minutes after he'd returned, the assassination attempts had begun in earnest. “That…that was you?"

Ted laughs. “Had t’get close enough to snag a DNA sample, make sure you were really you.”

“‘You are the most underhanded individual I’ve ever met,’” he marvels. “I know I’ve said so before, but…it really never ceases to amaze me.” Blake reaches out to toy with Ted’s chest hair, noting that there seems to be more white than black these days. “I have wondered how you were in two places at once, when you were impersonating your brother.”

“Kinda late for you to be worried ‘bout that,” Ted says lazily. “‘Sides, the answer is literally at your fingertips. You think I’m the type to torment you if you just can’t figure it out?"

What Blake thinks is that Ted is the type to kill his entire family if the mood struck him on a day he has excess ammo, but there are things you just do not say to your beloved. "How did you manage it?" he asks before it dawns on him. The answer really is at his fingertips, because Blake is stroking the back of Ted’s neck where the scar is. “The personal teleportation device. Hmm.”

Ted opens his mouth to reply, but closes it on a wince. "Nnnngh...you still got that syringe handy?"
Blake sits up and reaches for it, uncapping the needle and carefully pushing it into the skin closest to the other man's scrotum. "Deep breath, my dear." He depresses the plunger to empty the syringe and pulls it out just as carefully. "Better?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

"I wish you’d consider having that implant removed, love. The spinal column is no place for complicated circuitry."

Ted reaches a hand down to rub at his balls, sighing in relief. "Nah, this one’s in there to stay…I had someone dig out the first one they put in, so when this one was installed it was fused in. Anyone tries fuckin’ with it, and I do mean anyone, I’m instantly paralyzed from the neck down. Fun stuff."

"Oh, Theodore."

"Don’t go gettin’ all maudlin on me now, Sticks. I don't got time for that shit…I do got time for some kisses, though, so you’d better get on that ‘fore I complain to HR."

Blake obli ges him with a willing heart. “Of course. We at Hyperion strive for a harmonious work environment.” Ted is perfectly happy to lie there and have Blake cuddle him, and Blake doesn’t mind a bit. “Another week and we’ll be on Pandora together. Will you be bringing your officers?”

“Nuh-uh, they’re gonna be watchin’ each other up here the whole time we’re gone. I checked on Vasquez ‘fore I came to your office…he’s about ready to make his move.”

“Then perhaps we should-”

“Let him do his thing while we fuck around on Pandora…and I do mean ‘fuck’, I got ahold of some Engorge and we are gonna try the hell outta that stuff.”

Blake makes a mental note to find Ted’s stash and flush it down the toilet at the first opportunity. “I quiver with anticipation, my darling.”

“I just bet you do.” Ted pulls Blake down to him, his intent unmistakable. “We only got a week left; we’d better practice while we still can.”

The week drags interminably, but at long last they’ve both finished prepping their underlings for their immediate absence (Ballard is openly thrilled, and earns himself several laps around the World of Shopping when Ted notices the look on his face) and have Fast Traveled down to the Pandora Travel & Customs Administration at T-Bone Junction.

“Never let it be said that I am unappreciative of certain changes in circumstance,” Blake muses as he leans over the fence to look down at the sand below. They’ve had to walk around several buildings to the closest Catch-a-Ride since the machine in Scooter’s garage is inaccessible.

Ted glances over, slipping his keycard in his back pocket. “Huh?”

“The last time we were here, you tried to kill me. Why are we here, again?” Blake fans the air in front of his face, feeling too hot to even appreciate the sight of Ted Blanco in cargo pants and a shirt that looks three sizes too small. It looks like the slightest movement should be enough to rip it in half and expose that magnificent chest. Blake is hard-pressed to find a single part of his shadow that isn’t magnificent. “Even the Badlands are cooler than this,” he complains.

“Someone’s grumpy.” Ted gives the Catch-a-Ride another energetic kick and this time, it seems to do the job because the screen starts to flicker and hum. “Finally. Zed musta ratted me out to Scooter;
“It shouldn’t take my freakin’ access card t’get this pile of crap digistricted!”

It looks like it doesn’t anyway, because when the digistrict sequence starts it’s fairly easy to tell that a Lance vehicle is not what’s being built right before their eyes. “What in the world is that?”

“I dunno, but it looks like we’re stuck with Technicals for now. If we run across Scooter I’ll talk to him.” Ted cancels the build and keys in a request for the same vehicle that bandits regularly use – there won’t be any air conditioning, but at least there will be room for both of them. “We’ll get you some decent clothes, honey, just don’t take your shirt off.”

Blake pauses in mid motion, because he was doing just that. “Theodore, it is sweltering.”

“Ten seconds in, you’d look like a cooked scythid and feel even worse. Hop in the car; I think Zed’s got some spare clothing in his clinic that’ll do ‘til we can get to a Quick Change.” Blake obediently climbs into the passenger seat of the Technical and they drive up and around to Dr. Zed’s Roadside Jumpstart Infirmary on the eastern platform, where Ted disappears around the back for a few minutes before opening the front door. “C’mon in, Jeff.”

Ted latches the door behind them once they’re both inside, circling around the big desk to rummage through the drawers. “I hate to be a downer, love, but I doubt that anything Zed might have left would fit me.”

“Oh, ain’t here to borrow Zed’s clothes,” Ted says with a grin, pulling out a carefully folded pile. “We’re here to swipe Patty’s. You two are of a size, and her taste don’t run to flowers or ruffles, so it’ll do for now.”

“She is shorter than I am, and by a large margin…a shirt might be fine, however.”

“At least try the pants,” Ted tells him, lifting them up and shaking them in Blake’s direction. “Oooh. Check it, Sticks, they’re a cotton blend - you know you want ‘em.”

Blake snatches the pants away with an irritated sigh. “Fine. Just until we reach a Quick Change, though.” He accepts a tantalizingly lightweight shirt as well and retreats behind one of the privacy curtains to change, which makes Ted laugh and shake his head. Blake can hear his shadow snooping through Zed’s desk, providing a running commentary on everything he finds inside it.

“A-ha! Lube!”

“That’s not necessarily the find of the century – every medical clinic usually has that in stock,” Blake says, stripping his pants off and reaching for the ‘borrowed’ pair.

“I’ll give you that, but…flavored? Looks like Zed’s out here gettin’ all kindsa freaky with that girl. Sure hope he keeps her pointed the other way when they’re fuckin’ ‘cause I never seen someone throw up that much an’ still have a pulse; maybe she’s got weight issues.”

That’s putting it very mildly, but Blake doesn’t want to be the one to spoil the surprise – what is it going to take before the man realizes that he’ll soon be an uncle? Blake finishes dressing and, feeling ridiculous, steps out from behind the curtain. “Well?”

Ted stops sniffing the lube cap and focuses on him, giving the six inches of exposed leg a very long look. “I like the socks.”

“I refuse to go about wearing someone’s trousers as capri pants.”

“Yeah, you’d get those skinny pins broiled for sure. C’mere and I’ll fix it.” Ted pulls a bandage roll
out of another drawer and kneels, wrapping the white fabric around Blake’s legs. “This’ll protect you for now; nearest Quick Change’s a half-hour away but it’s on our route so no problem.” Something tells Blake that there won’t be any lightweight suits available for purchase and Ted laughs merrily when he says so aloud. “Oh, honey. I sure do love you.”

They get back in the truck and head out to the Sunken Sea – Ted refuses to actually tell Blake where they’re going, but there are multiple billboard advertising the World’s Largest Bullet and it doesn’t take a genius to realize their destination. Blake isn’t sure why they’re going there, but his shadow is certainly petty enough to make the trip just to take several photos and send them to Derrick Ballard. They do, however, stop at one of the decommissioned Atlas checkpoints along the road because some intrepid (and highly optimistic) soul has installed a Quick Change booth there. Blake browses through the offerings while Ted slices a vandalized Crimson Lance recruitment poster from its place on a nearby wall.

Blake pulls on his new outfit, which consists of grey pants and a faded red shirt, and is finalizing his purchase of a pair of boots when Ted comes back over with the poster. “Check it out, it says Wield the Power of Cocks. We’re gonna put it in the training room.”

“It will make a wonderful addition, I’m sure. What do you think of these?” Blake points to the screen and Ted obediently leans in to take a look.

“Yeah, they look fine. You ain’t used to footwear like that, though, so I’d get another pair of socks to wear with ‘em ’til they’re broken in.”

“Oh, I hadn’t thought of that…”

“You could just wear those cute li’l loafers you got on now,” Ted says slyly. “Those tassels’re the sweetest things…”

“Stop.” Two pairs of socks it is, then. “Aren’t we going through an awful lot of trouble just for you to take a self-portrait at the World’s Largest Bullet?”

Ted scowls at him. “Who said we were gonna do that?”

“Nobody had to say it; I know you.”

“Okay, fine – that’s what we’re doin’,” Ted says with a certain amount of annoyance, then his expression smooths out. “We’ll get you a tour while we’re there, though, make it all worthwhile. You got your company account linked up, right? I didn’t bring change.”

Blake wonders how much a tour could possibly cost. “Yes, I have everything set up. Being Chief Executive Officer has some privileges.”

“Good,” is all Ted will say on the subject, and his motive becomes clear when they arrive at the less-than-impressive tourist trap. “He’d like the deluxe tour package,” Ted announces when the masked bandit guarding the gates looks up at them.

“Sure, dude. You got it.” The bandit – Blake’s tour guide – reaches for a nearby cash box and pulls an ECHOreader out of it.

Blake extends his wrist so that the embedded ID chip slides across the reader, then does a double-take at the amount that’s just been deducted. “What the – eight million dollars?”

“No refunds,” the bandit says. “Now, over here we have what is known as the World’s-”
“Theodore Blanco,” Blake bellows, turning around to see that Ted has gone into hysterics out by the car and is slowly sliding down the wheel well.

“I can’t believe you fell for it,” Ted screams, wrapping his arms around himself and stomping his feet. “Oh my God, you didn’t even ask how much! This is the best day of my life! Ahahahahahaaaaaaaaaaa…!”

Blake turns towards the bandit who’s just taken eight million dollars from his account. “I’d like to pay for another tour, please. As president of Hyperion, I have the ability to access any of my employees’ credit accounts and that man over there would like to match my generous donation to your…cause.”

For some reason, Ted abruptly stops thinking that anything about this situation is funny.

“I’m just gonna embezzle the money back soon’s we get back up there,” Ted insists later, when they’ve gotten their ‘tour’ and are headed back to T-Bone Junction.

“No, you will not,” Blake says. “What are those bandits going to do with $16,000,000?”


Six? “Doctor Tannis and Timothy will be in attendance, as well?”

“Yup. We can all just go our separate ways and just hang out for dinner, if we want. Could be fun,” Ted says casually as he takes the off-ramp and circles around by the Catch-a-Ride.

His manner is almost too casual – Blake wonders if another ‘gotcha’ moment is lurking just out of sight. “What I’ve seen of this planet consists of sand, sand, and more sand. It might be interesting to see what another continent has to offer.”

“And you’d get to see your best friend again.”

Blake leans across the seat. “Theodore. The only feelings Timothy arouse inside of me consist of friendship, and a moderate amount of sympathy. That is it, and that is all. Do us both the favor of abandoning petty jealousy for the knowledge that you are the only one alive to have my heart for as long as you wish to keep it.”

“Okay,” Ted mutters. “Sorry. It’s just-”

“I know. Now, may I suggest returning to Fyrestone? You seem to be in need of a few…reminders.” Blake rubs his fingers through the stubble along Ted’s jawline. “Are you quite sure that you will not mind having your brothers along? As I recall, there were more than a few arguments the last time you were all together in one place.”

Ted relaxes at the subject change. “Yeah, it’ll be okay. We’ve always picked at each other but it don’t really mean nothin’.”

“If you’re sure.”

“What, um, what’re you gonna remind me of, again…?”

“Let’s get back to Fyrestone, my dear, and then I shall show you.”
Their shared room inside the motel has changed drastically since they’ve been there last, and Blake examines it at leisure once they’ve finished breaking in the mattress – Ted has fallen asleep and can offer no information on how the new construction had been implemented, but it certainly doesn’t look as if wooden panels (like the ones Ned had been in favor of) have been used. Instead, the reconstructed walls closely resemble the paneling found in the Information Stockade. Blake has a strong suspicion that if he were to investigate, he’d find several rooms dismantled and with electrical wires exposed on the walls from where the panels had been pried loose. He glances down at Ted, sprawled on his stomach, and shakes his head gently before reaching out to draw a finger down the length of his shadow’s spine.

The lazy creature slumbers on without a care in the world, and the corners of Blake’s mouth lift in amusement. He draws the blankets up around Ted’s waist and stands up to start looking for his clothing – most of it is decorating the floor on the far side of the room. Once he’s dressed, Blake visits the other rooms to see that Zed has repaired the walls there as well; he wonders how much of the Information Stockade has been gutted to provide materials for the renovation…well, he supposes that he can just go up and see for himself.

He feels slightly guilty about not waking Ted to relay his destination, but also wants to let the man sleep – the mission Ted had recently returned from hadn’t been one to allow for much rest. Blake keeps a wary eye on the nearby skag dens as he makes his way through Fyrestone’s gates. The power coupling on the lift has been left intact, so that’s one less headache he has to worry about, but Blake starts remembering the pressure pads on the road as the lift takes him up. There should be some sort of control panel close to the lift platform where he can enter his personal access code in order to pass unchallenged, but Blake isn’t really counting on it.

The lift stops and, lo and behold, there is a panel close to the digistruct pads to the right. Blake crouches and uses his nails to pry it open, causing one to tear painfully. He sticks his finger in his mouth absently as he uses his other hand to enter his code, then decides to just get this over with. Either the override will work, or the Loaders will come down and he’ll deal with them once they arrive. Blake sets his shoulders and strides forward confidently, only stopping when he’s at the lower steps leading inside the Stockade itself. Well, they hadn’t appeared until after he’d gone inside the last time he’d been there.

Maybe he really should have made sure Ted was awake. No, he can do this by himself – nobody who wants to assassinate him knows exactly where he is right now. Hopefully.

Blake walks into the Hyperion Information Stockade to find that Ted’s brothers have definitely been busy looting company property. Entire terminals have been dismantled, and there are exposed circuits wherever he looks…well, it could be worse. Blake does a quick inspection tour of the entire facility, using his personal ECHO device to dictate notes on what to fix and how many ‘competitor deterrence fields’ will need to be installed.

He steps out to one of the highest ledges and takes a seat at the edge, looking down at the old Fyrestone bus depot on the far side of the motel. A few skags are wandering about snuffling at their own trash piles and as he looks, the Fast Travel station lights up to indicate an incoming traveler. Blake settles in to watch, wondering which brother is coming for a visit – his money is on Zed, but the form that’s being digistructed definitely isn’t male. Neither of them are, because another woman is arriving on the heels of the first one….who looks strangely familiar. Blake’s seen her before, he’s sure of it. Short dark hair with a purplish tinge – where does he know her from? He focuses on the other newcomer, a blonde with black marks running up the side of her arm; tattoos, probably. Blake frowns and leans forward because they are definitely tattoos, and they belong to a certain salvage dealer operating out of Concordia…which means that her companion is none other than Athena.
“Oh, no. Ted.”
Blake swings his body around in preparation for a leap back inside so that he can run down to warn Ted, and very nearly falls off of the ledge to find Ted standing right behind him. “What’re you ‘oh no’-ing about now?”

“She’s here. To *kill* you, she just – the Fast Travel – you have to go-”

Ted holds his hands up in a pacifying gesture. “Hold up there, sweetheart. Who’s here, again?”

“The Gladiator. *Athena.*”

Ted immediately goes tearing off down the stairs, leaving Blake to follow the vapor trail and Blake gets to the bottom level just in time to witness Ted’s leap from the edge of the overpass. He scrambles for the edge and leans over, but his view is blocked by one of the red-tiled huts. There’s no possible way that *he* can follow in the same manner, so Blake is forced to run back along the road to the lift. Of course the thing takes forever to power up and get moving; he can’t remember it being so slow earlier. All Blake can think of is the fact that the Omega Assassin who single-handedly wiped out most of the occupying Lance troops has now set her sights on Ted.

The sounds of their battle reach Blake’s ears long before the damned platform reaches the ground, and he simply waits until it’s close enough to safely jump down before running as fast as he can. Of course, there’s not going to be anything *he* can do to help unless he can get his hands on a gun and shoot her, or something.

He can’t even remember if they even *brought* a gun.

Blake skids to a halt in time to see Athena and Ted colliding with each other, each of them landing a flurry of blows too fast for Blake to register. The *thud* of fists striking flesh makes him wince in sympathy before he remembers that he’s supposed to be helping out. *Had* they brought a gun? Surely Ted has a small arsenal stowed away somewhere; perhaps in Zed’s building? He sidles towards it as Ted gets himself thrown against the old Marcus Munitions building and Athena’s head snaps up to register his presence. His woeful attempt at stealth is hurriedly abandoned in favor of a mad scramble for cover. Blake’s almost reached Building 03 when it’s Athena’s turn to become airborne; her body goes hurtling past him to crash into Zed’s carefully arranged shelving units.

A hand clamps down on his wrist and yanks him to safety behind the med vendor. “Keep your head down,” Athena’s blonde companion advises. “They’ll be at it a while yet.”

“I sincerely hope not,” Blake says, wondering why Athena has brought her girlfriend along to an assassination attempt even as a part of his mind realizes that this situation might not be what it seems. “You must be Ms. Springs, of the famous *Emporium O’Suff.*”

“Call me Janey. Heard you were Hyperion Itself – Blake, right? How’s things up there lately?”

They make small talk for a few more minutes, during which Athena and Ted show no signs of tiring,
and Blake sighs. “I don’t suppose you know why she isn’t actively attempting to murder him…?”

Janey grins. “Ares was her mentor, way back when. She didn’t come to kill him.”

“That’s, ah…that’s good to know. Are you quite sure?” It must be nice knowing more about what’s going on than he does, Blake thinks irritably. Ted couldn’t have mentioned that his protégée was the one responsible for killing everyone? No, of course not. It’s clearly insane for Blake to think anything different.

“No worries. He called her himself, said to come to Fyrestone if she wanted an arse-kicking…kind of a Joker, isn’t he?”

Blake rubs his hands over his face. “Yes, I suppose that’s one way of putting it.”

They both duck as a Loaderbot’s leg comes sailing into the building and, upon questioning, Janey tells him the reason she’s on Pandora as opposed to Elpis. “Most of the action’s down here, anyway, and it’s fun working on something different. No need for an Oz kit, either.”

The mere thought of Oz kits are enough to make his skin crawl. Blake would much rather keep to oxygen-rich environments, instead of willingly placing himself in a situation where he would be dependent upon a small device to stay alive – imagine buying one only to have the thing fail when you need it most, and are several kilometers away from the nearest generator! “Pandora has its own dangers, though I’m sure you’ve found that out by now,” Blake says diplomatically. “Good Lord, they’ve…what is that?”

“No not, but we’d better get back down just in case,” Janey says, squinting at the ongoing battle. “Oh, it’s the Bounty Board. Well, it was - she’s just broken it over his head…aaaand now he’s hit her in the face with one half of it.”

“Wonderful.”

“Kinda neat how he looks just like Zed, eh?” Janey muses. “Is it hard to tell ‘em apart?” Blake has the satisfaction of seeing her jaw drop as he relays the fact that there are actually three of them. “No fuckin’ way! That I’d like to see!”

“You might well get your chance. Ned is due to arrive soon with Timothy – that’s Jack’s doppelgänger – and I believe that-”

Janey’s eyes widen even further. “Tim? Oh, it’s been forever since I’ve seen him. I thought he died, after…well. Jack turned a bit batshit, didn’t he?”

Blake gets her caught up to speed on Tim’s misadventures (within reason; he’s not about to betray his friend’s confidence to anyone, no matter how friendly they might be) and then he realizes that the sound of punches has faded. “We’d better go see what’s happening.”

Their significant others have abandoned fisticuffs in favor of wrestling. Athena has seized Ted in a headlock and is currently dragging him towards the nearest slagpit. What’s even more surprising is that they’re both… “Are they laughing?”

“Looks like,” Janey Springs says cheerfully. “I count it as a good day when you can just get Athena to smile.”

“I see.” They both watch as the combatants continue to wrestle in the purplish ooze, splashing the stuff every which way and yelling incoherently. “Theodore, are you almost finished? There are quite a few things you need to fix before your brother gets here and threatens to kill us both.”
Ted flounders upright, blocking Athena’s attempt to push him face-first back into the slag. “Honey, I’m busy-”

“Yes, he is busy being defeated like the washed-up has-been he truly is,” Athena says.

“C’mon, Thena – you wrecked Dr. Zed’s home. Maybe call a truce for now?” Janey suggests. “Do it for me?”

Athena stares up at her girlfriend and slowly wipes the slag from her face…with a hand that is still completely covered in it, so things don’t quite go as planned. For her, anyway, because Ted capitalizes on his protégée’s momentary inattention by slamming her back into the slag pool and sitting on her. “Gotcha.”

Janey looks over at Blake and shrugs. “Maybe we can just hose ‘em off.”

That turns out to be the best option available, even if it does put a strain on Fyrestone’s outdated water purification system – at least this way, Zed can be furious on all possible fronts without needing anger specialization. Once both assassins are slag-free and have changed their clothing (Athena has to make do with a spare outfit found in the motel), they reconvene to tidy up the worst of the damage. “It might have been nice to know that she was not here to kill you,” Blake murmurs as he lifts one end of an examination table while Ted grabs the other. “Are we really going to have to sit down and map out all the things we don’t know about each other?”

“Given Colonel Blanco’s sordid and disease-ridden past, that might be advisable,” Athena says, because she seems to have the hearing of a blind rakk whose next meal is dependent upon listening for its prey.

Ted smiles. “Yeah, you just keep talkin’, Squirt. While you do that, maybe I’ll go whisper a few things about you into Miss Janey’s ear.”

“Do not call me Squirt.”

“Remember how mad you always used t’get when I called you Thena Bea-”

“Squirt is acceptable,” Athena abruptly decides, wheeling around to make sure Janey hasn’t heard this latest exchange.

“That’s what I thought,” Ted hoots, then hurriedly ducks to avoid being hit by the rock that Athena shies at him. “Get outta here, you homicidal hag.”

Blake busies himself with replacing all of the bone fragments and old skulls on the shelves, declining to imagine why Zed keeps them, and Janey helps out by picking everything up from the floor and handing it to him. “I might see if the old Catch-a-Ride needs fixing; Scooter says it’s been awhile since it was used regularly.”

“I’m not sure that there’s anyone around to use it on a regular basis,” Blake says. “Aside from the usual mix of bandits and Blancos.”

“Wouldn’t feel right leaving a job undone just because not a lot appreciate it,” Janey responds cheerfully. “I’ll just pop over and take a peek.”

She leaves, and Blake can hear Athena and Ted still straightening things outside, so he’s left with a mixed lot of bones and medical equipment to reshelve. He does his best to put everything back in its place, which proves interesting because he doesn’t have the slightest clue where all this junk goes. When he’s finished making wild guesses and creative decorating decisions, Blake decides to go back
through the fence to the motel – Ted is still deep in discussion with Athena and he’s loath to interrupt their reunion. Besides, he really does want to know if there are any guns in their bags.

He’s just verified that yes, Ted did indeed bring a miniature arsenal along for their vacation, and is walking outside to take another look at the Information Stockade when Zed arrives with Patricia Tannis. Blake takes comfort in the fact that the (formally) petite doctor won’t discover that he borrowed her pants for quite some time, because she obviously wouldn’t’ve been able to fit in them anyway. “My goodness, you’ve…er…”

Patricia looks up at him through narrowed eyes. “If you say that I have blossomed, I will murder you with a shoelace.”

“Sweetheart, you can barely even see your feet. How’re you gonna get the laces out?” Zed asks.

“I didn’t say it was going to be my shoelaces.”


Blake smiles uncomfortably. “Ah, I should warn you that Athena stopped by-”

“Oh, Lord.” Zed throws their bags down onto the ground and takes off, moving with a surprising amount of speed for someone his age. Blake’s aware that this observation is quite patently ridiculous given the fact that Zed’s identical triplet can move even faster; it’s probably because he’s never seen Zed move any faster than a curmudgeonly shuffle.

“I could have told him ages ago that she didn't kill Ted,” Patricia says, rubbing her palm over the startlingly pronounced curve of her belly. “He didn’t want to know, so he refused to ask. I had no such qualms.”

“You knew, yet decided not to tell Zed?”

“He said he didn't want to know,” she repeats calmly.

Blake shakes his head and picks up the abandoned luggage. “Shall I just place these in the motel for you, then?” Patricia nods and follows him in, so he takes a page from her book and asks an embarrassingly direct question. “I don’t want to pry, but…how is it you are so advanced, pregnancy-wise? It seems as though I’ve just seen you at half the size.”

Patricia looks at him as if he’s stupid. “This godforsaken dustball doesn't have much to recommend it, but the orbital period makes for a much shorter pregnancy for gravid individuals. There is still a ways to go, yet, but I am finally approaching the end of my gestation…which is a good thing, because I find myself using the restroom with a frequency that is unbelievably inconvenient!”

“Oh,” Blake says stupidly, because he’s not sure what else to say about this. “That certainly answers my question.” He’s relieved when she ropes him into a discussion concerning Vaults, because that is one area in which he has had personal experience. More or less. They slowly make their way back into town, taking the long way around to give their respective partners a chance to argue in private, and join up with Janey who is busy examining the Catch-a-Ride station. “Is there much to repair?”

Janey grins at them. “Not too hard a job, but our Plus Ones’re having a time over there. Figured I’d stay here and keep busy; funny how the extras always seem to stick together, eh? Let’s get you settled in the shade, Doc T. Holding up alright?”

“The sooner this child is born, the better,” Patricia says. “I am simply relieved that there is only one
of them, even if the scourge of my days is currently dancing upon my bladder.”

“I shouldn’t think you would have had cause to worry about multiples,” Blake says. “The trick to creating them mostly lies in the genetic history of the one who is pregnant, or any extra eggs being released during ovulation.”

Janey puts in her two cents. “That’s the way it normally happens, sure, but Pandora has a way of making strange things happen. Lots of people’ve turned up with multiples – all identical, too – who really shouldn’t have done. Some kind of radiation, maybe?”

“That is an excellent question,” Patricia says thoughtfully. “I should have thought of that earlier… there is a group of identical quadruplets in Sanctuary. Perhaps I will ask the survivors about their family history.”

They loiter around the Catch-a-Ride until Ned and Tim arrive, whereupon Patricia is made much of once again and Ned pesters her with questions about her pregnancy while Tim renews his acquaintance with Janey. Once again, Blake finds himself surrounded by people who have accepted him as part of their group, and he’d be lying if he said he wasn’t just a bit gratified.

Tim introduces Ned to Janey, who is openly amused at meeting yet another Blanco brother, and draws Blake aside. “This is the first time I’ve seen you without one of your suits; you look good,” Tim says, pretending that the first part of his statement is true.

Blake declines to challenge him on that, because he’d rather not think about Friendship Gulag, either. “My thanks. You also seem…healthier.”

“Ned’s a good cook,” Tim says, his lips tightening when he looks back over at his companion. “When he’s not…anyway. How is everything on Helios? No one’s assassinated you yet, obviously.”

“Business as usual, I’m afraid. The fact that I still have a pulse is proof that umpteen attempts have been thwarted, but I don’t doubt there are plenty more in my future. Timothy, is there anything you’d like to-”

Tim holds his hands up to block the rest of the question. “No. Sorry, Jeff, I just…not right now, okay?”

“Later, then,” Blake says softly, not missing the way his friend’s eyes flick over to Ned and then away again. Tim sighs as he realizes what Blake is thinking, and shakes his head.

“It’s not that.”

“Later,” Blake says again, and changes the subject. “Now, what have you been doing in Jakob’s Cove all this time? Surely there’s not many extracurricular activities…and I have just now realized my question might sound as if I am angling for information concerning your sex life, so I shall close my mouth immediately.”

After a startled instant, Tim starts laughing. “I wasn’t thinking about it like that at all, but now I am!”

“Ted is proving to be quite the corruptive influence,” Blake says, still feeling embarrassed.

“So it’s good, then, between you two? Oh god, now it sounds like I’m-”

It’s Blake’s turn to laugh. “It’s fine…and, yes. Things are very good, actually, on all possible fronts.”

“Are you talking about sex?” Patricia interrupts. “I want to listen, too.”
Janey and Ned look over. “Who’s having sex?”

“Nobody,” Blake says patiently.

“You probably got that over with ‘fore anyone else showed up,” Ned suggests with a grin.

“What I got over with was inspecting the Hyperion Information Stockade after you looted it. You could just as easily have asked me, and I would have made the requested supplies immediately available – or even sent workers to fix the motel for you.” They all know why that hadn’t happened, but Blake has a point to prove and a Blanco to mislead. He doesn’t need anyone knowing about his sex life; that’s about as private as it gets.

He misses the arrival of the others as their little party swells to eight. What he doesn’t miss, however, is Ted’s reaction when the man finally realizes that Patricia is pregnant. “Whoa-! Hold the fuckin’ ECHO…you been knocked up this entire time?” Ted yells, circling around Patricia in disbelief. “Oh my god! There’s gonna be a baby, there’s a baby in there,” he informs Zed.

“Well, I kinda helped out with puttin’ it there,” Zed says drily. “She did the rest by herself.”

Blake smiles at the dumbfounded look on his shadow’s face. “Perhaps we could go into town so that she has a place to rest…?”

“Oh! Yeah, you should – Zed, carry her! What if she trips-”

Patricia gives Ted a look that clearly doubts his sanity. “I am pregnant, not about to die at any moment. I can walk by myself…though if Zed really wants to carry me, who am I to refuse?” She looks up at her partner expectantly, and he shakes his head with a grin before bending down to scoop her up.

“I can’t believe he didn’t tell me,” Ted whispers to Blake, positioning himself where he can keep an eye on the other couple (who, Blake just now notices, is the only heterosexual pairing in the bunch). “You didn’t know about it, too, did you?”

Blake coughs into a fist. “Not precisely, but-”

“Aw, c’mon! News like that – about my own freakin’ brother - and you had t’let me find out when everyone else knew?”

“I only suspected, love. It’s not as if I were a medical doctor,” Blake says before he can think better of it. “Don’t be angry, you know what I mean by that,” he adds quickly. “Zed was obviously setting you up for a reaction like this and he seems to be very pleased with himself.”

Ted sighs. “There’s that, at least. He was real pissed when he saw what me and Athena did to Fyrestone; we put it all back an’ everything, too.” He reaches out to drape an arm over Blake’s shoulders and Blake resists the initial urge to pull away from the public display of affection.

“He was afraid to find you dead, Theodore, which is the same reaction I had earlier. Athena’s penchant for shortening the life expectancy of Lance Assassins didn’t leave either of us with much hope for your immediate future.”

“Leavin’ aside the obvious insult that you think she’s better’n me, I didn’t tell you she wouldn’t’ve done it?” Ted asks, actually sounding surprised. “She’s like the little sister I never had.”

Blake stops so that Ted is forced to stop, too, and moves aside so that a section of the fence blocks them from view. “No, you never told me.” Blake allows Ted to draw him close for a softly
whispered apology. “Losing you would kill me, Theodore. I love you far too much to pretend otherwise.”

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, unless you tell me to.”

“It’s a fine time for you to suddenly obey orders, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I’m total shit at it,” Ted admits. “Look, honey, I’d rather talk all this through in private – hopefully with you on my lap or somethin’ – but let’s go have us a party first. You got anything else you wanna tell me about ‘fore then?”

Ted leans down and butts his forehead against Blake’s gently, and Blake breathes out the last of his lingering fright. “I don’t think so. Well. There’s some sort of tension between Timothy and Ned, but I’m not sure what is happening.”

“You work on Tim, I’ll get Ned’s side of the story, then we can talk about ‘em together – how’s that? God, I love not mindin’ my own business.”

“That will work splendidly, my dear. Kiss me, if you please.” It transpires that Ted doesn’t mind at all fulfilling this request, and Blake reluctantly tears himself away when the others notice their absence and begin calling for them. “Maybe you can be on my lap, later.”

“Don’t you tease me like that,” Ted says fervently. “That’s all I’ma be thinkin’ of, now.”

Blake lifts a hand to pat the side of Ted’s face. “Good.”

“Y’all been makin’ out, or what?” Zed complains when they join the others. “Someone’s gonna think it’s me messin’ with Hyperion folks.”

Ted reaches over to shove at Zed’s shoulder. “Yeah, those skags were real scandalized. If they’d’ve had pearls they woulda been clutchin’ ‘em…come the fuck on, who the hell even comes out here?”

“There’s eight of us here right now, math whiz.” Zed sits down beside Patricia and draws her legs over his knees, rubbing her calves while she sighs in relief. “There’s also an extra room, if you ladies’d like t’come along to Aegrus with us.”

He doesn’t quite meet Athena’s eyes when he issues the invitation, clearly still irritated with her for not explaining her stance on Ted’s continued pulse. Athena doesn’t really seem to care one way or the other, Blake notices. “I do not think that would be a good idea. Perhaps another time.”

Janey explains about their current move to Hollow Point and makes Athena’s less-than-enthused refusal sound a great deal more regretful. “I did hear about some wild Fyrestone parties though, Doc,” she teases Zed. “Maybe we can have one of those instead?”

“You’re askin’ him?” Ned interrupts. “Nobody knows more about throwin’ a wild party than Yours Truly. I’ll show you girls a good time – well, y’know. All platonic and whatnot, of course.”

“Oh, please,” Tim mutters beneath his breath.

Athena conveys her agreement of Tim’s opinion by giving Ned a very thoughtful stare, which succeeds in making Ned nervous and instantly silent. As much as Blake enjoys Ned’s repartee, he could get used to Athena’s quelling influence on the man.

There is a party later. The brothers – and Athena – leave to hunt down a few skags while the leftovers, as Janey terms their group, set up in town. Patricia manages to find several strands of
colored lights and gives Janey advice on where to hang them, while Tim and Blake make sure the motel rooms are ready and gather fuel for a bonfire. “He hasn’t been mistreating you, has he?” Blake finally asks when it becomes clear that Tim isn’t going to say anything first.

“Mistreat…? Ned? No, I told you it wasn’t anything like that,” Tim says hurriedly.

“Then perhaps you might tell me what it is like.”

His young friend’s shoulders slump. “Ned’s…I just, I like him. I really do, Jeff. He’s smart, funny; it’s as if he was made just for me.”

Blake coughs delicately. “But?”

“He drinks a lot.” Tim looks up from the pile of dried grass he’s gathering. “I mean, a lot. My mom used to drink like that, before she thought I was dead; who am I kidding? She probably still does, unless the alcohol’s killed her already.”

“Have you discussed this with him?” Blake asks.

Tim shrugs, looking more upset than ever. “Ned doesn’t want to hear about it. He likes to pretend everything’s fine, and has a smart remark for any occasion. If he’d only talk to me about it.”

“It has been my experience that alcoholics drink to escape some part of their life they don’t particularly wish to share,” Blake says. “Beyond locking Ned in a cage where he cannot escape you, I haven’t a clue what you should do about it. I’m sorry I can’t be of more help.”

Tim nods, a brief smile flickering on his face. “The minute I find a large enough cage, maybe I’ll try it. Thanks for listening, though. I feel bad for not being grateful at every moment since he does kind of take care of me.”

“That is absolute nonsense,” Blake tells him. “We all know Ned’s ulterior motive in taking you in; don’t confuse that with altruism because I can assure you that he hasn’t done the same. If his drinking is really that much of a problem for you, consider how ‘grateful’ you truly feel and go from there.”

“I thought you didn’t ‘have a clue’ about what I should do.”

“I lied. If Ned is anything like Ted, and I strongly suspect that outward appearance isn’t the only thing they have in common, a nice threat should do the trick…as long as you fully intend to carry out that threat, because you will most likely have to do so.”

They walk back to the fire pit to finish their work in silence, because it seems that Blake’s given Tim much to think about, and Blake has to wonder at the depths of his friend’s feelings for Ned. While Blake himself finds Ned’s alcoholism mildly distasteful, Tim is truly upset by it – and he wouldn’t really mind if their relationship (whatever that entails) is only a temporary fling. This reminds Blake that Tim has never mentioned what he’s been doing in Jakob’s Cove, and the ensuing tale is so ludicrous that Blake has to stop what he’s doing and sit down because he’s not about to miss a second of this. “Once the Jakob’s Corporation found out that Ned was still alive, they offered his job back on the condition that he round up the remaining zombies. He told them that I was his assistant, so I’m basically being paid to keep an eye on him in case he goes back to his old ways and-”

“No, Jakob’s is. They contacted me separately, didn’t I say that? Well, anyway, we’re supposed to round up the zombies so Ned can turn them back. I always thought zombies were slow but oh my
god you should see some of them go! One time a pack of them chased us for about a mile. Ned said he was going to have a heart attack, but it turns out he’s pretty fast when something’s chasing him,” Tim says with a laugh before he remembers that he’s meant to be cross with Ned; Blake remembers the feeling all too well.

He listens to the other man’s animated – and highly amusing – story of luring a pack of the swifter zombies into a cage suspended above a bog, wondering if he’s doing the right thing by meddling. Blake technically hasn’t done a thing aside from providing a sympathetic ear, and Ted’s role could definitely be considered brotherly concern; this really couldn’t be further from his business. Yet, isn’t meddling what friends are supposed to do? Blake hasn’t had many, and none of those ever courted his friendship out of pure…well, friendship. He feels as though he’s obligated to ensure Tim’s happiness somehow.

Maybe they can get Ned into a cage somehow once they get to Aegrus – it’s supposed to be a hunting lodge, after all, so there should be at least one cage lying around somewhere.

The brothers return with one skag apiece, and it looks as though Athena has managed to bring down the biggest rakk Blake has ever seen in his life. He notices that Ned immediately looks to Tim before both men pretend not to notice each other, and then Ted comes to greet him. “I got you the biggest one,” Ted boasts, hoisting the limp carcass up so that Blake can’t possibly miss it. “You wanna learn to skin it? I’ll show you how.”

“That’s quite alright, love, I shall leave it to the professionals,” Blake says with a smile. Ted leans in for a kiss, and Blake hesitates slightly before giving it. “Have you recovered from your shock at Zed’s impending fatherhood?”

Ted rolls his eyes. “At least we got the proof that ‘boring’ really is contagious.”

“Tricia didn’t think it was boring when it was happenin’,” Zed says irritably. “You just ask her.”

“Maybe I will,” Ted challenges. “She’s gonna tell us ‘bout every li’l ‘ooh, Miss Tannis! Your doctorate just feels so good’”

The exchange comes to an abrupt end when Ted gets a skag carcass hurled at his head…and because his own hands are full and the quarters are a bit close, the body hits Ted right in the face and knocks him down. “Hey!” Ted yells as Zed keeps him pinned by leaping over the fire pit and sitting on him. “Get offa me – damnit, Ned, help me out here!”

“I got places I need to be,” Ned says hastily to avoid picking sides, and disappears into the motel with every iota of the speed Tim had mentioned.

“This skag stinks worse’n your ass, Zed! Get off! Jeff, c’mon!”

Blake looks over at Zed and takes the diplomatic way out; he’s had personal experience trying to wrestle someone that exact size, and it’s never turned out well. “Would you mind getting off of him at your earliest convenience?”

“Sure thing,” Zed agrees, not budging an inch.

“You just said you’d get off!”

“It ain’t my earliest convenience yet,” Zed informs his brother calmly. “You’d better watch that smart mouth if you wanna be around the mother of my child.”

“How d’you know it’s yours?”
“Theodore, if you ever want him to let you up, you might begin by not giving him more reasons to keep you there.” Blake gives Ted an exasperated look, and decides to go see what Ned is doing… and that idea is abruptly changed to visiting Fyrestone proper when he realizes that Tim is going into the motel. Well, he’d wanted to see how the other members of their group were getting on with the lights, anyway.

Blake is immediately enlisted to help fetch and carry for Janey, who has worked wonders with the primitive lighting system Zed has been using for an appalling amount of time. Patricia quizzes him on the whereabouts of the triplets, and leaves to go watch the skag corpses as they are transformed into dinner. “Athena brought a rakk; didja see the size of it?” Janey asks excitedly. “Rakk wings’re my favorite.”

He’s less than enthused about eating something that looks so hideous, but he’d thought the same about skag meat before trying it. “I’m afraid I’m not much of an expert on Pandoran cuisine; the meals on Helios are mostly synthesized.”

“I hope it’s nothing like the freeze-dried crap we used to get on Elpis.” Janey shudders theatrically. “I’m so glad we’re able to get some fresh once in a while. There’s a few new distributors opening in Hollow Point – one more reason I’m happy to be there, even if it’s in a big cave. Lower risk of windstorms, at least.” She cheerfully educates Blake on Hollow Point’s pros and cons with minimal urging, and they’ve finished their work long before Blake’s interest in the subject dies out. “You’re free to come visit whenever you’d like, just bring your guy along.”

Blake thanks her for the invitation as their significant others appear to claim them. “I see you were finally released from captivity,” Blake says.

“Man, that was gross as fuck. My face was, like, right up against some glands or somethin’. I don’t think I’ll ever be the same again,” Ted complains. “Don’t even get me started on the parts of the skag that was touchin’ me…”

Janey looks at Athena curiously. “What else was touching him?”

“Doctor Zed’s backside,” Athena deadpans.

The impromptu party is a rousing success – the Gladiator is seen to have smiled at least twice, and everyone gets drunk to a certain degree… which is something Blake and Ted discuss when they’re curled up in bed together. “He’s been this way for a while now,” Ted yawns. “Always had a hard time bein’ taken for Zed, and I guess it ain’t any easier since his scheme in Jakob’s Cove didn’t pan out like he’d hoped. I love the guy, but zombies?”

“It does seem drastic. While it is not my place to criticize your brother, dear one, I have a duty to uphold where Tim is concerned.”

Ted yawns again and cuddles closer. “Ned don’t really wanna talk about it; all he’d say was that Tim was gettin’ on his case for havin’ a couple drinks. You really think they got somethin’ more than casual?”

“Tim is my friend, and I’m grateful for Ned’s continued assistance. It couldn’t hurt to encourage things a bit, could it?”

“Eh, I s’pose not. I’d get to stick my nose in business that ain’t mine – again – so there’s that… kinda cliché for us to be settin’ this up though. Next thing you know, we’ll be pickin’ out fancy plates and towels.” Ted opens an eye to look at Blake. “What’ll I get out of it, besides gettin’ a chance to be nosy?”
Blake kisses his soldier gently and reaches out to turn off the light. “You will have my everlasting love and appreciation.”

“That’ll do fine,” Ted agrees sleepily.
The staycation of a lifetime.

Chapter Summary

What happens on Aegrus, stays on Aegrus.

The lodge on Aegrus is surprisingly comfortable and very convenient – there’s a Fast Travel in the main area. Blake inspects their accommodations interestingly, choosing one of the smaller rooms out of deference to Zed and Patricia who are in greater need of more privacy than the rest of them. He also doesn’t expect that a career marksman such as Ted will want to spend much time indoors when there’s so much to murder just outside in Hunter’s Grotto. There’s no way to tell what has been going on with Tim and Ned, because the two men have apparently decided to pretend that everything’s fine despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Blake feels relieved that Athena hadn’t felt the need to accept Zed’s invitation, because it’s unsettling for Blake to be around the Gladiator knowing that she’s more familiar with Ted than Blake is. It’s one thing to keep company with Ted’s own brothers, yet something about Athena’s presence rankles. Ted hasn’t picked up on it yet, thank goodness, but Blake actually feels a slight twinge of jealousy at the thought that Athena knows Ted better than Blake does.

It’s too bad that Janey couldn’t have come, however. He likes her much more.

He’s just started to unpack their bags when a strong pair of arms encircle him from behind. “I’m bored. You wanna suck each other’s dick?”

“Now there’s a conversation starter,” Blake laughs. “You can help me unpack and there might be time for something before your brothers arrive.”

Ted sighs and releases him. “I dunno how soundproof the walls are in this place. Whoever added on the rooms was probably in some kinda hurry…I just ain’t good at bein’ quiet, you know that.”

“On the contrary, love, I’m sure you’re up for the challenge.”

“We’ll see,” Ted says cryptically. “Here – I’ll do mine and you do yours. What kinda weapons training you have? You had a couple pistols back in the Badlands, right? I figure this’ll be a good time to get you up to speed on some long-range weapons.” He dumps his bag out on the left side of the bed and quickly slides the neatly folded clothing on one of the crude shelves bolted to the wall, but takes greater care with the weapons. “How d’you feel about assault rifles?”

Blake pauses in his unpacking and tries to wink. “I’m more partial to SMGs.”

“Okay, sure. Hey, you get somethin’ in your eye?”

“No, it was…never mind.”

“I got some saline if you need it,” Ted presses him. “Remember what happened when you got that splinter?”

“I was trying to wink at you,” Blake finally admits, feeling embarrassed.
Ted stares at him for a few seconds, then shrugs and goes back to sorting his portable arsenal. “I’m guessin’ you weren’t exactly a great pick-up artist when you were growin’ up.”

“No, no…nothing like that. It was an inconvenience for them, of course, because I couldn’t be married off to whomever best suited their interests. I was always pushed to excel and for the most part, I was glad to be given direction…what I told you a while back still applies, my darling. I am much better suited to a secondary position than a primary one.” Blake smiles at Ted, who has abandoned his weapons in favor of sitting on the bed to listen. “Being Vice President really was more than good enough for me.”

“I dunno, you do a pretty good job in the top spot,” Ted leers suggestively, making Blake laugh and swat at him. “Seriously, though, is it so bad bein’ CEO? What d’you think you’d do if you weren’t President any more?”

Blake finishes folding his clothing, ignoring Ted’s eye-roll when his lover spots the suits he’d brought with them, as he thinks of what he’d want if Hyperion was no longer in the equation. “I’m not really sure,” he admits. “Banditry is obviously out of the question. Perhaps something in the promotions department of another company? I really don’t know.”

“Tell you what. I’ll teach you everything you need t’know about bein’ a bandit – it really ain’t that hard, you just gotta act tough and look scary,” Ted teases him.

“Have you seen me?”

“I’ve seen you first thing in the mornin’ and if that ain’t scary as hell, I dunno what is!”

“Ha ha, Theodore. You remain as entertaining as ever.”

Ted laughs and reaches a hand out, which Blake takes without hesitation. “You’re too serious, honey. I still love you, though.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Blake says with a fond smile. “Would you like to look around outside, or would you rather see if this bed really is big enough for two?”

“Let’s split the difference and go find a good makeout spot outside,” Ted suggests. “Really give the locals somethin’ to talk about.”

“Let’s not, and say that we did.”

They do head outside, and Ted startles Blake by taking his hand as they walk down to the unimaginatively-titled Catch-A-Boat station. “I saw some villages earlier – we’d better go introduce
ourselves so nobody uses us for target practice.”

“Is that wise? I was told they weren’t very friendly,” Blake says worriedly.

Ted finishes keying in his code on the terminal, and a fan boat begins to appear on the digistruct pads before them. “Neither are we, under the right circumstances. How’d you feel if a gang of old dudes and a pregnant lady suddenly showed up on your patch an’ started killin’ stuff for fun? Let’s just go say hi an’ see how it goes.”

Blake decides that Ted is capable of defending both of them should the need arise, and tries to hide his anxiety when they steer towards the first hut where several men and women are milling about a large fire. “I hope there is at least one large stick nearby,” Blake says faintly, making Ted snort. “You’re too old for diapers… hey, y’all,” his shadow calls out cheerfully, as if he sees nothing wrong with having several spears leveled at him. “How we feelin’ today?”

A wizened figure in an oversized wooden mask comes past the warriors to peer up at Ted. “What the fuck do you want, Hodunk?”

“First off: rude. We just came here to introduce ourselves but if you wanna be like that, I’ll kill the fuck outta all y’all loonies,” Ted declares. “You know what happened to the last person that called me a Hodunk right out the gate?”

The witch doctor crosses his arms. “What?”

“Well… I married her, so maybe that’s not the best example I coulda given. Point is, we-”

Blake steps forward and lifts his hand to cover Ted’s nose and mouth. “Who does he look like, to you?” He has no idea as to whether they have a med vendor, but he’s willing to bet they’ve at least seen one at some point in their lives.

The others murmur excitedly, pointing. “Doctor Zed!”

The atmosphere lightens considerably, and all remaining spears are immediately lowered as Ted is towed into the hut to have a look at someone in need of medical attention. Blake explains the situation and is quickly assured that the incoming members of their party will remain unmolested. He limits his own identity to being Ted’s life partner, thinking that they might not appreciate having the CEO of Hyperion in their midst, and is quickly proven correct when he’s regaled with stories concerning the not-so-dearly departed Professor Nakayama.

He’s also given his own spear, for some reason, and is being shown how to use it when Ted emerges from the hut and gives him a dirty look. “I was handlin’ it just fine on my own,” Ted scowls.

“Of course you were, love. I just thought it more expedient to get us past the genital measurement stage of the conversation,” Blake replies. “Look at my spear, isn’t it nice of them to have given it to me?”

“I had to deal with gangrene and you get a spear? Lemme try it.”

Blake hands it over and talks to the witch doctor – who insists that Blake call him Darryl – about the best areas to hunt for game and which animals are actually edible. He has no personal experience with anything called a ‘borok’, so he just tries to look like he knows what Darryl’s talking about and attempts to remember everything to tell the others later.

They’ve just finished bidding their new friends farewell with a promise to send Zed himself over to
meet them, when Blake can’t contain himself any longer. “Ballard said that you had never married.” It comes out sounding very accusatory, which he regrets intensely once the words can’t be taken back.

“He didn’t know,” is Ted’s calm explanation. “It was only legal on Aquator, anyhow, so he’s no liar. He’s a dumbass, sure, but not a liar.”

“Ah.”

“I seem to remember you tellin’ me I had nothin’ to be jealous over. That goes for you, too… unless you’re gonna turn out like the folks who think I’m gonna cheat twice over since I like women, too.”

Blake shakes his head. “No, I know there’s nothing to worry about on that front. It’s simply that I…I sometimes feel as though I don’t know you at all, Theodore. Perhaps there is a part of me that wonders if I’ll be set aside the minute you find someone more compatible, because I do not know enough to keep you interested. At some level, I suppose I feel like I am in competition with your lost love.” He holds his breath waiting for the inevitable offended explosion but while Ted stops the boat, the only thing on his lover’s face is sadness.

“It took me a long time to get over what happened to her. I guess I’m still not over it completely and may not ever be,” Ted says honestly. “You were the first person I wanted to be with after she died, and for longer’n a few hours. Women…they’re soft, and they smell good, but I don’t think I could ever love another one of ‘em. Not after her. I’m too old for that, anyhow.”

Blake takes a deep breath and asks the one thing he knows that he shouldn’t. “And…after me?”

“This is one fucked up conversation to be havin’ on a damned boat, Jeff.” Ted turns his face away and guns the motor, steering the fan boat back towards the lodge. “There ain’t gonna be an ‘after.’ Not for me.”

Blake had thought that way once, too, but he doesn’t embarrass either of them by mentioning it aloud. It had taken him years to come to terms with Harold Tassiter’s death, and he’d certainly never dreamed that another love would come his way. “I suggest we concentrate on during.”

Ted doesn’t say a single thing until after they’ve reached the dock and their boat is being retrieved back into the system…and even then, it’s just a low murmur of “Jeffrey” as Ted pulls Blake into his arms. Blake leans into the kiss being pressed against his temple, and turns to seek Ted’s mouth. They manage to find their way up the path to the base of a tree that shelters them from view. Although Blake can feel the press of Ted’s erection against his stomach as they stretch out on the moss-covered rocks, he knows that there’s nothing innately sexual about this.

Blake doesn’t think that anything could be sweeter than the feeling of his love’s strong arms holding him and the brush of stubble against his lips. He pushes his hands through Ted’s dark hair and rests their foreheads together when air becomes a necessity. “My shadow.”

“Your what?”

“It’s what I called you, when you were hunting me. No matter how far I ran, you were always closer than my own shadow.” Blake rubs a palm over the small of Ted’s back. “I love you so, my darling boy.”

They kiss again, because this is during.

Patricia finds them still wrapped up in each other’s arms, though thankfully in a less compromising position against the tree. “I am not sure what it is with Blanco men and sex al fresco, but there does
seem as though genetics are a contributing factor,” she announces, eyeing them with an unseemly amount of interest.

“Oh, yeah? Whyn’t you tell us more about that,” Ted says encouragingly before Blake can set the record straight. “Zed likes it outdoors, huh?”

She rubs at her back with a sigh. “Of course. Once he was servicing the vendors in Tundra Express and when I suggested he service more than the vendors, Zed immediately—”

“Got frostbite an’ died,” Zed yells from the lodge’s entrance. “Damnit, woman, get up here and quit spreadin’ gossip! Last thing we need is you poppin’ that baby out in the friggin’ swamp!”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Patricia calls back before returning her gaze to them. “I don’t suppose I could prevail upon either one of you to accompany me back up the slope.”

Ted promptly volunteers both of them and Blake doesn’t really mind, because it would be useless to wish that they’d be left alone now that the others have finally arrived. There will be time enough to enjoy being with Ted. “When is your due date, if I might ask? I’m sure Theodore might like furlough so that he can make himself a nuisance around your newborn child.”

Patricia names a date that isn’t too far into the future as they escort her back up the rough-hewn steps; Zed gives her a mild scolding for wandering off without him, which she seems to enjoy, and Blake is amused to see Zed placing a proprietary hand over her stomach. “Didn’t I say to put your feet up? Coulda sworn nothin’ in that sentence mentioned waddlin’ down to the Catch-A-Boat,” Zed says in an offhand manner that fools absolutely no one. She stands on her toes to kiss his lips before patting Zed on the cheek and going to sit down where she can keep an eye on everybody. “She’s kinda touchy ‘cause she’s gotta take it easy – thinks she’s missin’ out,” Zed murmurs to them. “Anyways, y’all picked a room yet? I’d advise gettin’ one as far as possible from Ned and Tim, if they ain’t gonna sleep separate.”

“Oh, dear,” Blake sighs. “I don’t suppose you know of any large cages around, do you?”

“Come again?”

Ted drops an arm around Blake’s shoulders. “Only way Ned’s gonna listen is if he can’t escape. Maybe we can go back an’ ask Darryl if he’s got a cage.”

“Hammerlock says there’s a pretty big one not too far from here – mentioned it when I asked about traps and the like,” Zed says thoughtfully. “Count me outta that, though, I’m need his help coverin’ for me when the baby comes.”

They all glance over to where Patricia is sitting, looking irritated at being left out, and Blake has a sudden idea. “Speaking of coverage, might I suggest taking Doctor Tannis to meet Darryl’s group? I’m sure she would enjoy picking their brains concerning this particular continent, and she would have elevated status amongst them on account of her relationship with you,” he tells Zed, then has to explain who Darryl is.

Zed looks relieved at having something interesting to offer Patricia, though he’s none too happy about it being offered by Blake. The man’s ability to hold a grudge is nothing short of legendary, and Blake can practically hear the sound of rusted hinges squealing as Zed lets go of enough pride to thank him.

Patricia is less reserved about offering her own thanks, and assures Blake that she’s always liked him no matter what Zed has been saying lately. Zed rolls his eyes at her and goes to inspect the woefully
primitive ‘kitchen’ area while Ted asks Patricia several questions about Pandora’s first Vault. Blake isn’t interested enough to stay and listen, so he goes back outside to look around.

He’s in time to see an enormous…thing emerge from a deceptively shallow-looking pool, and he gapes at it until realizing it’s only a different species of drifter. Horrid things, drifters. Blake glares at it in the vain hope that it can tell how much he detests it, and shades his eyes with a hand as he looks over to where another group of dark-skinned people are clearly preparing to kill it. He wonders if they’re from the same settlement as Darryl – whoever they are, Blake wishes them the best of luck.

Blake wanders down the raised path on the other side of the lodge and pauses to look at the scorch marks on the rocks as he enters a stone hollow – it looks as if this is a popular spot for a fire. He follows another set of steps up to an outcropping which is littered with a few rusted Hyperion ammo crates, and peers over the edge at a group of strange animals. One of them, he notices, is pink. There are several more huts like the ones Darryl’s group inhabits, and large puffballs with flippers that float through the air. They seem gentle, but Blake has learned enough to withhold judgement on Pandoran wildlife until it tries to murder him. They are rather pretty, so he’s certain they’re capable of untold carnage.

Blake perches atop one of the crates when Ted comes to find him, walking up to slip his arms around Blake and resting his chin on the top of Blake’s head. “You okay, sweetheart?”

Blake leans back against Ted’s chest. “Everything’s fine, Theodore. It’s very beautiful here, isn’t it? What are those floating balls over there?”

“Course it’s beautiful; I’m here now,” Ted jokes. “And those things’re called Spores. Nasty li’l bitches.”

It figures. “Of course they are.”

“Zed and Patty went to go meet Darryl, Ned and Tim can’t seem to decide if they wanna fight or fuck, an’ I figured I’d make sure you weren’t gettin’ yourself into too much trouble…oh, check it! A pink borok!” Ted points towards the weird pink animal Blake had noticed earlier. “Think they’re endangered or somethin’. Wanna go for a drive? We could run it over.”

Blake doesn’t really feel up to another fan boat ride, but changes his mind when Ted wheedles him into actually driving. “Really? I could drive?”

“You bet. C’mon, baby.”

“Well…alright. You might have to show me how the controls work,” Blake says, then realizes something. “You just maneuvered me into this, didn’t you? This is another of your training exercises.”

Ted gives Blake his best ‘innocent’ look, which probably hasn’t worked since the day he was born. “Baby, I got no idea what you’re talkin’ about.”

“I know how to drive.”

“Of course you do.”

“Theodore, I am serious.”

“So’m I. Don’t you wanna scope out that big cage we’re gonna trap Ned in?”

Blake sighs. “Fine.”
They stop in the lodge to pick up a few weapons and run into Tim, who looks at them pleadingly when he’s informed that they’re only passing through. Ted rolls his eyes and invites Tim along. “I guess you might as well get some drivin’ practice in, too, since you got a big day tomorrow.”

“What’s happenin’ tomorrow?” Ned asks on his way through, holding a bottle in one hand and a large knife in the other.

Ted smiles at his brother. “It’s a surprise. You’re gonna love it.”

“If you say so.”

“Oh, Ned. Ned, Ned, Ned. I certainly do say so,” Ted says, ignoring Blake’s elbow digging into his side. “You want us to bag anything special for dinner? It’s your night for it, right?”

Ned looks at each of them suspiciously. “Yeah, it’s my night. Maybe get a couple boroks, I heard they ain’t bad if you roast ‘em.”

“We’ll get you a pink one,” Blake promises, and gives Ted a shove towards the door. “Isn’t that the color of the one we saw earlier, darling? Pink?” Tim stays behind a few moments longer, presumably to allay Ned’s suspicions, as Blake hustles Ted down to the Catch-A-Boat. “What the hell was that? Why didn’t you simply announce our plans to the entire user population of the ECHOnet?”

“Relax. He’d know somethin’ was up for sure if we didn't say nothin’ at all. Can’t believe I gotta teach Baby Jack to drive a freaking fan boat. You owe me for that.”

Blake reminds him that Ted had been the one to invite Tim along, which earns him a scowl and a rude hand gesture. “If I’m to drive, why don’t I be the one to access the boat?” Blake suggests, and steps forward to peer at the screen as Ted leans on the terminal with an ostentatious yawn. “Okay, what do I do now?”

“Did you try turnin’ it off and back on again?”

“Don’t be a pain, it’s asking for an access code.” Blake snatches the card from Ted’s hand when it’s offered with a highly amused grin, and is scrolling through the bodywork choices as Tim comes up to them. “There you are, Timothy. What do you think; a nice green, perhaps?”

Tim shrugs. “I guess, but wouldn’t you rather have something you can actually find again?”

“Get the green,” Ted says immediately, and Blake suppresses a smile as he presses the button that will cause the boat to be digistructed upon the pads. “Don’t you make me regret lettin’ you come along, Twinkasaurus.”

“Theodore,” Blake says, “Why don’t you explain the controls? These look a bit unfamiliar.”

Ted makes the ‘I’m watching you’ gesture at Tim, and begins pointing. “That there’s the throttle…”

Blake climbs up into the raised seat and is coached through the process of driving the unwieldy thing through the marsh, while Tim makes noises about motion sickness and Ted…is Ted. Despite the slew of wisecracks and double entendres (Blake had never thought it was possible for anyone to have this many sex jokes on the tip of their tongue, but it’s definitely happening), his shadow manages to instill a certain amount of confidence in Blake so that the boat is soon driving more or less smoothly. “You see? I told you I was able to drive anything.”

“Is that what you said? Look out for that midget!”
Blake stops the boat so quickly that Tim falls out, and Ted is hard-pressed to retain his balance. “What midget? Where?”

“There’s no midget,” Tim says irritably, slogging back towards the boat with a large wet spot on his backside.

“Not anymore, there’s not. Since we’re stopped, why’n’t you switch places? You’d be higher up so maybe your ass would dry off quicker.” This offer is delivered with a sunny smile to combat Tim’s poisonous glare, and Blake prods Ted in the ribs warningly. “What? There was a midget,” Ted insists.

Tim gets the trick of driving the fan boat much faster than Blake had, and is soon steering through the shallows like he was born to it. Ted sends Blake to the relative safety of the turret seat and crouches at the prow – Blake is relatively certain that the maximum occupancy for these things is two and that they’re pushing their luck, but knows what will happen if he asks about it. Ted will only laugh and say that Blake doesn’t weigh enough to count as an additional passenger.

They drive around for several minutes before Ted spots the cage Sir Hammerlock had mentioned. It is roughly the same size as one of the creature cells in the Wildlife Exploitation Preserve, which makes sense given that it was specifically built to trap one of the monstrosities that Pandora is famous for producing. Blake glances down at his own monstrosity and catches Ted looking right back at him. “Hey. You think Junior’d like it down here?”

“I’m sure he would enjoy himself immensely, Theodore, but I wouldn’t advise it unless you know he could defend himself against predators,” Blake says. “Perhaps you could have Saybrook capture a few creatures so that…Junior…could test the waters, so to speak.”

Tim kills the engine after maneuvering the fan boat close to the cage. “Who’s Junior?”

“Our son,” says Ted immediately. “Sticks here can’t decide if he wants t’be the mom, or not.”

Blake is rather enjoying the look of surprise on Tim’s face. “A family can be two fathers and one tork,” he says, making Ted snort loudly.

“A tork? Junior is a tork?”

Ted ignores the question and goes to inspect the cage. “This looks sound enough, but how’re we gonna get his ass in here, plant a bottle of Zaford whiskey on the ground and hope he goes for it?”

“Um. When Jack…hired me, there was this Lost Legion soldier we tricked into taking a moonshot ride,” Tim says, “but I’m not sure Ned would rush into a pizza party.”

“A what.”

Tim explains about the digistructed cargo-container pizza party (Zaford whiskey had also been a crucial ingredient in its success, which makes Ted and Blake look at each other) but Blake isn’t so sure that level of subterfuge is necessary. “All we have to do is lock you in first. Ned will take the bait,” Blake predicts. “Theodore, you can work out a way to block his escape route while I play the distressed friend who leads him into the trap.”

They finalize the arrangements and hunt down a few hapless boroks (including a pink one), then Blake has the dubious pleasure of being introduced to the art of grenade fishing. Ted has Tim stay behind to scare away anything that might want to steal the pile of carcasses they’ve created, and takes Blake to the nearest Catch-a-Boat. “Anything that smells ’em will want a taste, so you two’ll take the new boat on back while I follow with the boroks,” Ted tells him. “Sound good?”
“Yes.” Blake keys in an order for a new fan boat to be digistructed, and looks over at Ted. “There was no midget, was there?”

The corners of Ted’s eyes crinkle. “Maybe not.”

“How would you feel about showing me how to operate a sniper rifle? I think I might be good at hiding several yards away from my intended target.”

“Don’t see why not. We’ll split trainin’ between a sniper rifle and an assault rifle…unless you still prefer vintage SMGs,” Ted says innocently.

“Very funny, Theodore.” Blake climbs aboard the newly digistructed fan boat and steers it back to where Tim is waiting…the trip is livened by Ted ‘accidentally’ bumping his boat against Blake’s several times, and Blake finally gives into the temptation to exact revenge after the fourth consecutive accident. He rams his own boat into Ted’s and they spend several minutes chasing each other through the marsh and acting like children before returning to Tim. His friend seems openly skeptical when Ted blames the delay on Blake, who apologizes as he purposely steps on his shadow’s foot. “We truly were not intending to be gone that long.”

“Some things just can’t be rushed,” Ted adds, sidling away from the elbow that Blake aims at his ribs.

The dead boroks are left with Ned, who immediately challenges Tim to learn how to skin them without vomiting, and Tim’s too stubborn to back down. Ted grabs a sniper rifle and takes Blake off to do some weapons training, as Zed and Patricia are presumably still visiting with Darryl’s group.

They climb up high above Hunter’s Grotto, where a section of broken railway shows that the Dahl corporation tried their luck on Aegrus before failing miserably. The heavy mining door set into the face of the mountain behind them piques Blake’s interest. “Where does this passage go, I wonder? Do you have your ECHO device with you?” Ted unhooks it from his belt and hands it over without looking, intent upon something that’s happening far below them. “Thank you, love.”

A quick search on the ECHOnet later, and Blake has a map of Aegrus on the screen. “There are goddamned bullymongs over there,” Ted says. “What’d you need my ECHO for, again?”

Blake points at the door. “Ardorton Station.”

“You wanna go see it?”

“I’ve heard that the Terminus went down not far from there,” he says, and gets a look in return. “I know we’re not here for work, I was simply making an observation.”

Ted rolls his eyes andbeckons Blake closer. “Well, observe those bullymongs ‘cause you’re about to kill one of ‘em.”

Blake lies down on the rail next to Ted and squints off into the distance. “I don’t see anything.”

“Use the scope, darlin’. That’s what it’s here for,” Ted murmurs. “Scoot up a bit.” He helps Blake get settled and is a bit more ‘handsy’ about it than he really needs to be. Not that Blake is about to complain. “You see ‘em? Move the barrel carefully - just a small movement and you’ll lose their position.”

Blake looks through the sight and does his best to track one of the creatures ambling about. “Do I just…shoot it? Where do I shoot it?”
“Pop it in the head,” Ted tells him, as if it should have been obvious. “If you’re huntin’ a thing like that, best to just one-shot the bastard.”

He supposes that makes sense. “No sense in causing more pain and suffering than absolutely necessary, after all.”

“Nah, you just don’t want to get it mad enough to charge you. I mean, it don’t really matter now ‘cause you’re gonna snipe it.”

“Right. In the head. Easy,” Blake mutters to himself.

His first shot goes embarrassingly wide. So does the second, third, and fourth.

“This is not easy,” he confesses and is surprised to see that, for once, Ted isn't laughing.

“Don’t worry about it; I shouldn't’ve picked out a bullymong for your first try. Take a break while I figure somethin’ out.”

Blake rubs at his shoulder where the recoil had caused the butt of the gun to slam into him. He stretches and sits up to look out across Hunter’s Grotto, where he notices Zed and Patricia Tannis almost directly below them in one of the freshwater pools. Swimming seems to be the last thing on their minds. “Oh.” Blake hastily averts his eyes, glancing back over at Ted who is kneeling at the edge of the rail sighting down the barrel of the sniper rifle. “Theodore, wouldn’t you… know if someone was shooting at something close by you? You would hear it, correct?”

Ted looks up. “Usually, sure. Nobody else’s doin’ that, though. It’s just us right now.”

“But if someone were to do such a thing… would you be able to tell where the shooter was?” Blake persists.

“Most of the time, the gun’s too damn loud to hide. This one’s kinda different – why are you askin’?” Blake sighs and beckons Ted over to take a look. “Huh. That’s a pretty good spot to fuck in, actually. We should go see if there’re any more like it.”

“Do they know that they are directly below us?”

Ted shrugs as he draws back from the edge, abandoning whatever adjustments still need to be made to the sniper rifle. “Probably not, but I don’t think Zed cares that much – ‘sides, you saw how big she is now. If she feels up to gettin’ some dick, then good for her.”

“I should think he would care a great deal about-”

“Honey. Zed don’t give a rakk’s ass who sees, ‘cause he’s down there gettin’ his life. He’s gonna be a lot nicer to all of us, so let’s just wait it out,” Ted says, and stretches out on the rail with his hands behind his head. “You think it’ll scare the baby?”

Blake is becoming uncomfortably aware of certain noises which he would rather not be hearing. “I don’t think that’s possible.”

“What if it is, though? Can you imagine? That kid’ll be traumatized for life!”

“Where do you get these wild ideas from? Stop talking about it, please. I am begging you.”

Ted grins and reaches a hand down to palm his own crotch, rubbing slowly. “Maybe I just need to distract you from the fun they’re havin’ down there – you wanna have some fun with me up here?”
“No, I simply…” Blake trails off as Ted opens his pants and draws his cock out. His eyes follow the movement of Ted’s fist, and his mouth goes dry. “Yes, that sounds like a splendid idea.”

“C’mere.”

It turns out that they’re all a lot nicer to each other after being satisfied by their partners, Blake thinks to himself once they’re back in the lodge. He casts a skeptical eye over Ned and Tim, who look as if they’d mended their differences at least long enough to enjoy having the place to themselves; Tim won’t look any of them in the eye and Ned seems exceedingly pleased with life at the moment. Blake doesn’t particularly feel like meeting the perpetually inquisitive gaze of Patricia Tannis, because he can’t seem to shake the vivid memory of seeing her in a very private moment.

Zed notices. “Somethin’ wrong, Blake?”

“Hm? Oh, no-”

“He’s got shell-shock over seein’ Patty bang your brains out,” Ted says helpfully. “That was some acrobatic shit, I gotta say.”

Zed smirks and leans back in his chair. Patricia, however, leans forward. “Did it look terribly awkward?”

“Nah, you’re fine…and fine. You just let me know the second you get tired of Zed, sweetheart. I’d trade Jeff for you in a hot second,” Ted promises.

“Hey,” Blake protests mildly. “Don’t I get a say in the matter?”

“You’d have to start eatin’ a lot more first, that’s for sure,” Zed tells him. “Ted, don’t you ever feed him?”

Ted winks. “As often as he’ll let me.”

“Dammit, Ted, why you gotta be like this? With food, you sex maniac; with food.”

“I believe I have already fielded an offer much like yours, from Ned,” Patricia says. “While flattering in the extreme, I must say that I greatly prefer Zed in matters pertaining to companionship as well as various sexual activities…so I must decline.”

Zed raises his eyebrows. “See? She’s fine where she is.”

“That’s cause she ain’t tried us yet,” Ted needles. “C’mon, honey. Be honest, now – you ever get dick so good you couldn’t even think straight a week after the deed?”

Patricia blinks at him. “Frequently. Have you?”

“Well…no. Blake? Work on it,” Ted says, making Blake roll his eyes and sigh while Zed lets out a loud guffaw.

"Someone call Marshall Friedman 'cause we got a murder scene here!"

"Funny," Blake grumbles.

Ned comes in and starts handing out plates of borok stew and some sort of fried bread. “Y’all want any more, you can get it your damned selves,” he says cheerfully, dropping into a chair once everyone else has started to eat. “Who’s up next – Ted’s turn, right?”
“Yup. I’ma take Jeff grenade fishin’ – long as we can find a freshwater pond that ain’t been polluted by a certain horndog who’ll remain nameless.”


Ned glances over at Tim, who drops his eyes to his plate. “I dunno. Maybe.”

“I thought I might borrow Timothy for an hour or so, actually,” Blake interrupts smoothly. “Just in the morning. He’s promised to teach me a few things about hunting bullymongs – Theodore wasn’t quite up to the task earlier.” He ignores Ted’s glare and bites into a piece of bread, while Ned licks his finger and taps the air in front of Ted as he makes a sizzling sound.

They finish their meal and relax outside, talking and laughing. Blake finds himself in Ted’s arms as the chill of the evening sets in, and he leans against his lover’s broad chest contentedly. “What’s this I hear ‘bout you gettin’ your job back? Jakobs really let you back in?” Ted asks.

Ned shrugs, taking another pull from the bottle in his hand and ignoring the look on Tim’s face. “Turns out they value my services even more, now they know what I got up top,” he says, tapping a finger against his forehead. “Guess they got a thing for cobwebs, ‘cause that’s all that’s up there,” Zed teases. “Cobwebs, and a guaranteed treatment to stimulate re-growth of severed limbs.”

“No friggin’ way,” Ted says, his grip on Blake loosening as he leans forward. “How.”

Ned is clearly enjoying his rapt audience. “Patent pending, bitch.”

Zed’s eyes narrow. “You’re lyin’. No way you can do that; nobody can do that.”

“Well, guess again. Check it out – I lost two fingers last week.” Ned holds up his left hand, and Patricia levers herself out of her chair to go look.

She grabs his wrist and hauls his hand close to her face, frowning at it until her eyes abruptly go wide. “Zed.”

Zed moves in to take a look, and Ted follows curiously. “Junior, were you there when….what did happen to your hand?”

“It don’t matter,” Ned says hastily.

“Yeah, I was there. He thought he could stop a Dahl mining door from closing if he stuck his hand in there.”

Ned sighs. “Why you gotta expose me like this?”

“It takes a special kinda stupid t’do a damn fool thing like that,” Zed snaps. “You’re lucky it didn’t take the whole hand off. So how’d you get the fingers to regrow? I’m gonna guess they were smashed to hell…”

Ned explains the process, which goes in one of Blake’s ears and directly out of the other. The brothers seem to know what he’s talking about, so he decides to leave them to it because there is cleanup to be done. Patricia stays behind to listen, and Tim gets up to help Blake out. “Have you
decided how we should lure him into the cage with you?” Blake asks. “I was thinking that you could pretend to be injured by a stalker.”

“I’m not sure that would work, because Ned knows I’ve killed tons of stalkers up on Helios. Maybe one of those weird things that look like they’re on stilts?”

“Drifters, I believe they’re called.”

“Yes, those.” Tim sighs. “I’m not really looking forward to it.”

Blake assures his friend that everything will be fine, even though he has his doubts after Ned’s regeneration discovery. That sort of thing is bound to go to his head. “Ted and I will make sure you have the opportunity to speak with Ned, but the rest will be up to you.”

Tim rubs his hands over his face. “That’s what I’m afraid of.”

Blake waits to get his revenge for Ted's joke about his sexual prowess until they're all gathered together later in the evening. Ted's leaning back in his chair and fighting to stay awake, so Blake takes advantage of this and moves up behind his shadow’s seat. He slowly leans forward until his mouth is mere inches away from Ted's ear. Taking a deep breath, he bawls "AttenSHUN!" as loud as he possibly can. Ted thrashes upright and leaps out of the chair, snapping to attention before he realizes that he's being fucked with. "And yet another murder scene is created," Blake says calmly as Zed and Ned dissolve into laughter over their brother's discomfiture.

In the morning, Ted announces that he’s going off to search for another pond where he can take Blake grenade fishing. Blake glances over at Tim and suggests that they attempt to find one of the rare two-legged Drifters he’d read about on the ECHOnet. Ned doesn’t look happy about it, but doesn’t look for an invite – given that Blake had heard them arguing late the previous evening, it’s hardly a surprise.

They arrive at the cage to find Ted finishing work on an improvised pulley system that Blake looks at admiringly. “Excellent work, love.”

Ted smiles at the praise. “Aw, shucks - you’re gonna make me blush. Get on in there, pretty boy.”

“I have a name,” Tim mumbles.

“So do I, kid. But you know I’m a lot more fun to play with if you keep your mouth shut and keep your eyes on the prize.”

Blake looks up at his lover warningly. “Behave yourself, Theodore. Or else.”

“I’ll take the ‘Or Else.’”

“I mean it.”

“I sure hope so.”

Shaking his head, Blake climbs back on the fan boat and drives to the lodge. Ned’s reading something on the ECHOnet and looking extremely disgruntled about life in general, though his expression shifts to alarm when Blake runs through the door. “What’s-”
Blake puts a hand to the wall as if to steady himself. “It’s Timothy. Come at once,” he says dramatically, feeling like an idiot when Zed and Patricia exchange amused glances. Ned leaps to his feet, pausing when he sees that his brother doesn’t seem to care one way or the other. “He’s been injured, Ned. Come now,” Blake says, glaring at the other Blanco present.

“Sounds serious,” Zed says after Patricia pokes him in the arm. “You’d better go check on him.” She prods him again, so he tacks on an insincere-sounding “oh my goodness.”

Ned is too distracted about Tim’s unspecified injury to really notice, thank god. Blake steps aside when the other man finishes cramming various things into his medical bag haphazardly, and he starts wondering just how angry Ned might become when the hoax is discovered. While Blake does have Ted as his protector Ned is every bit as dangerous, but in a different way. “What happened to him; is he okay?” Ned asks worriedly, leaping up to the turret seat of the boat.

For the first time in his life, Jeffrey Blake is beginning to experience the foreign sensation of guilt. “We’re nearly there, it’s just up ahead.” The cage comes into view and as they get closer, Tim can be seen lying in the recovery position near the back of it.

Ned takes a flying leap from the turret, barely taking the time to snatch up the medical bag, and barrels into the cage. Blake is far enough away to see Ted jump up from where he’d been hiding and yank on the rope – the door comes crashing down behind Ned, and Tim sits up. “I think that should do it – thanks, guys.”

“It’s a miracle,” Ted exclaims, dropping onto the top of the cage and peering down at the men trapped inside. “Coulda sworn he was at death’s door just a minute ago!”

“What the hell is this? What the fuck is goin’ on?” Ned asks, but it’s clear from his expression that he’s rapidly figuring it out. “You open this goddamned door right the hell now.”

Blake finds himself relieved that he’s still in the fan boat, and can make a swift getaway if the enraged doctor bursts through the bars at him. “Apologies, Ned, but we thought it best if you talked things through with Timothy. He’s quite distraught-”

“I’ll make you fucking distraught when I kill your ass, Blake,” Ned roars.

Ted wrenches one of the boards from the steps behind him and brings it down through the slats in the cage to clip Ned’s right ear. “Don’t you talk to him that way, you drunk piece of shit! Anyone’s gonna threaten to kill his skinny ass, it’s gonna be me!” Ted yanks the board up out of reach as Ned twists around and makes a grab for it. “No way, numbnuts. This boy’s gonna talk to you, and you’re gonna listen - nobody’s gonna turn you loose ‘til he’s finished with your dumb ass, so you’d better pay attention.”

Ned turns on Tim, who takes a step back involuntarily. “He’s finished now.”

Tim takes one deep breath and two steps forward. “No, I haven’t even started. Thank you,” he says to Blake and Ted. “I’ll take it from here.”

Ted takes advantage of Ned’s momentary distraction to lean down and smack his brother with the board again. “Pay attention, dumbfuck.” Ned leaps up and grabs the slats of the cage, pulling his body up and reaching through to get to Ted, but his target skips backwards and slams the board
down on Ned’s fingers. Blake winces at the stream of profane threats Ned looses at his brother, and the way that the cage is shaking as Ned slams his body into it is more than a little worrisome.

“He’s not going to harm Timothy, is he? Maybe we’ve made a mistake,” he says once they’re heading away from the cage.

“Naw, he ain’t gonna do nothin’. Ned’ll threaten him and probably make him wet his pants, but he won’t hurt him.”

“Oh no,” Blake realizes. “He took his medical bag into the cage—”

Ted holds up the item in question. “You mean, this? I swiped it when he was yellin’ at you. Left ‘em some lube so they can bang it out, though, ‘cause I’m nice like that. Go left up here, honey.”

“You weren’t very polite to him earlier before I left to bring Ned.”

“Like I need to advertise the fact that I don’t completely despise that kid? Please. Stop here.”

Blake stops the fanboat and watches Ted start to get undressed. “What are you doing?”

“Enticin’ you into some scandalous sexual activity, I hope.” Ted removes his shirt in striptease fashion. “Plus, I stashed a scoped rifle over here earlier so we can keep an eye on Ned.”

“Theodore, I just do not think…” Blake trails off as the rest of Ted’s clothes are tossed onto the grass, and a bottle of lubricant hits him in the chest. “You just happened to have this with you?”

“You’re the one who said or else, so get over here and Or Else me,” Ted demands. “Oh, yeah. There’s a blanket back of the turret seat in case you wanna be fussy ‘bout it.”

Blake retrieves the blanket and spreads it out carefully, ignoring his lover’s obvious impatience. His worries about Tim’s safety recede as he takes in the wonderful sight of Ted, gloriously nude and trembling with eagerness as Blake snaps his fingers and points. “Present yourself, Colonel.”

“Yes, sir.”
“What the hell was that? You turn into someone’s granny when I wasn’t lookin’?”

Blake raises his eyebrows. “There is nothing wrong with an underhanded grenade toss.” They both step back as the grenade explodes, sending a fountain of water into the air. “Look, do you see there? I killed a fish.”

“More like, its secondhand embarrassment got the best of it,” Ted tells him. “I’m about to follow the thing’s example. Nobody throws a grenade granny-style! I kinda feel like I’m tainted by association.”

“It doesn’t matter, Theodore. You wanted me to kill a fish, and there is a dead fish as a direct result.”

Ted sighs in exasperation. “Just…just don’t do that shit again. Here, this’s the last grenade – think of it as an opportunity to erase your shame from history’s record books.”

He hands the grenade over and Blake pauses before he pulls the pin. “Do we know yet if Ned and Tim are almost finished arguing? How long has it been since you’ve checked on them?”

“Eh, I guess it’s time to snoop.” Ted starts to lift the scoped rifle up to his shoulder, and Blake uses the moment to toss the last grenade. Underhanded. “Goddammit! Jeffrey Blake!”

Blake smirks as he wades into the pool to gather up the fish. This time there’s a total of four, which Ted refuses to acknowledge, and Blake swears beneath his breath as one of his pant legs come unrolled right as he’s climbing back out. “Don’t we have enough fish by now?”

Ted lowers the rifle and glances over at the bucket they’ve filled. “That should be enough, but we got Li’l Miss Eating For Two Thousand back at the lodge. Maybe we’ll go out past the villages where the bullymong range is…Ned and Tim should be finished up by the time we’re done.”

“Good news, then.” Blake decides against asking for details as Ted makes a crude gesture to explain just what the other couple will be finishing. “You’re all remarkably cavalier about your attitudes concerning sex.”

“Only if we’re around folks we trust. It don’t matter if Zed and Ned know what I do, ‘cause we’re family. Their partners get some leeway there, too. ‘Sides, I ain’t ashamed of what I like or who I love.” Ted smiles at Blake. “Let’s drop these fish off at the lodge ‘fore we get the rest, honey.” Back at the lodge, they find Patricia engrossed in reading something they’ll later discover is a gift from Darryl’s tribe while Zed is fast asleep in the hammock outside. Blake manages to persuade Ted not to dump his brother out onto the rocks, and they leave once more after transferring their fish into the makeshift kitchen.

Bombing the daylights out of the remaining fish takes almost no time at all, so they decide to investigate things at the large cages. Ted fires a warning shot before they approach, and Blake is pleased to see that the other two men seemed to have mended their differences…perhaps not...
completely, but it should be enough of a foundation to build on. “Is everything okay?” Blake asks, and glances at his own lover when Ted makes a show of sniffing the air. “Stop that at once.”

“It will be,” Tim says. “Right, Ned?”

Ned is decidedly unenthusiastic about admitting anything of the kind in front of Ted. “Eh, I s’pose.”

“If we let you out, you gonna try to clobber me?” Ted asks.

“Yep.”

“Good, ’cause I’ll beat your ass right in front of your sweet young thing. Show him how easy it is,” Ted says with an evil-looking grin.

Blake rubs at the bridge of his nose. “Theodore.”

“I know what I’m doin’,” Ted murmurs to him. “He needs to blow off some steam ‘cause he’s feelin’ embarrassed. It’ll be fine.”

“Make it quick, then,” Blake says loudly. “That pool is large enough for us all to have a swim before the evening meal.” He stands aside as Ted hauls on the ropes to open the cage door, greeting Tim with a quick smile as his friend emerges first. “We might want to retire to the boardwalk before they get going, Timothy.”

Ned shoots out of the cage and tackles Ted before they have a chance to move to safety. “We’d better retire a lot faster,” Tim says, pulling Blake out of the way. “Let’s climb up over here.” They scramble up above the cages and watch the two brothers roll around on the ground.

“I take it that you’ve worked out your differences, somewhat?” Blake asks delicately.

“Yeah,” Tim says and declines to explain any further, to Blake’s relief. “How did the fishing go?”

Blake tells his friend about the experience of grenade fishing and is promptly laughed at for his ‘granny-style’ grenade toss. “It killed the fish, so why does it even matter?” He glances back down to see his and Tim’s respective partners trying to kick each other in the head.

“It’s just…it’s kinda stereotypical, you know? A gay man doing a dainty underhanded toss—”

“Of a grenade, which would explode either way!” Blake scowls. “Why would I need to perform an overhanded throw when all I needed was to blow a few fish to kingdom come? It’s not as if they were leaping to the attack. An overhanded throw in those circumstances is a waste of energy; there is no stereotype here, Timothy Lawrence, and I heavily resent the implication—”

Two identical heads pop up over the edge of the boardwalk. “What’re y’all talkin’ about?”

“None of your business,” Blake says immediately. “If you two are done with your foolishness, we might return these fish to the lodge now.”

“He’s mad because I laughed about his grenade throwing technique,” Tim says. “Underhand.”

Ned immediately starts to laugh. “You really are a granny banger,” he tells Ted. “Good t’see you holdin’ true to your roots.”

“Well, you just gotta find what you’re best at and then stick with it,” Ted says. “C’mon, let’s head back. I’ll get the fish ready – that way, they’ll be done by the time we get done with our swim.”
Blake demands clarification about Ned’s statement, and learns that his shadow enjoyed spreading himself around while the triplets were growing up. “Someone musta gotten drunk, ’cause I never heard of anyone else givin’ Mick Zaford’s granny a test drive. She was old as hell ‘fore we were ever born, but that sure didn’t stop Ted from havin’ a go at her.”

“She just needed a li’l attention, that’s all. And when that old girl took out those dentures an’ went to town on my dick – I’m tellin’ you, that was somethin’ else.”

“Whatever it was, it was messed up,” Ned says.

When they arrive back at the lodge and everyone else is talking in the main room, Blake follows Ted outside to watch his shadow prepare the fish. There are quite a few in the bucket and he asks to be shown what to do so that he can help out, but Ted shakes his head with a smile. “Just sit there an’ look pretty – I’ll get this done quick.”

“I am not sure how ‘pretty’ I can look, but I can certainly keep you company,” Blake says, drawing his knees up to his chin and watching Ted work.

“That’s the best help I could get.” Ted reaches for another fish, slicing it open and removing the bones with quick, efficient movements. “Ned seems happier’n he was.”

“I believe they both do. Dare we call our meddling a job well done?”

The corners of Ted’s mouth lift slightly. “Might be too early to tell. We’ll see. You think Patty’ll want the scales off hers? She seems like she might be fussy ‘bout that.”

Blake volunteers to go ask, and climbs to his feet with a groan that has Ted looking at him sharply.

“I’m fine, love. My knees aren’t as resilient as they used to be….not much of me is, I’m afraid.”

“Coulda fooled me.”

It transpires that Patricia does, in fact, wish for her meal be be scale-free. Ted’s already processed half of the catch anyway, which makes Blake wonder why he even bothered to check in the first place. He sits back down and watches Ted season the fish and wrap it all up in… “What is that? It can’t be leaves, can it?”

“Spore flippers,” Ted explains. “These’re from the kind that’ll set your ass on fire, so it’s real handy if you wanna cook with ‘em. Let me just stick these in the coals and then we can head out for a swim.”

He does, and they do. Blake is stricken by a sudden bout of shyness, however, when he realizes that everyone is going to swim and absolutely nobody has brought any swimming attire with them. Tim is also slightly hesitant, though it’s not a problem that any of the Blancos share. There’s a great deal of scarring, chest hair, and impressive musculature on display as the triplets strip down to their skin, and even Patricia follows suit without batting an eye. Blake removes his own clothing and gets into the water as quickly as possible, relieved when none of the others make any comment about how thin he is. Ted swims up to claim a kiss and tow Blake over to where Patricia is floating in the circle of Zed’s arms, talking to Ned. “All of the circuitry has been removed, has it not?”

“Eh, there’s probably some left in a weird spot or two, but Zed got out what I couldn’t reach,” Ned says, and looks over to where Tim is slowly moving towards them. “What’re you doin’ all the way over there?”

“The water’s cold,” Tim says, “and my foot just touched something gross.”
Blake is staring at Ned, because he’s just noticed that many of the doctor’s scars are in the pattern of computer circuits. “How did you get those?”

“Oh, just that whole mess out in Dividing Faults,” Ned says, referring to the CL4P-TP factory that Blake had done his best to eradicate by throwing large sums of money at a group of Vault Hunters. The same ones that had done their best to murder Ned, if he’s not mistaken. “A freakin’ nightmare.”

“You ain’t wrong there; I was the one had to patch your ass back up again. Again,” Zed says, sounding aggrieved. “I’ve had enough of y’all dyin’ on me.”

Ned insists that trouble simply seems to seek him out at its earliest opportunity. Zed insists that Ned’s full of shit. Ted’s sure that both of them are full of it, and Blake thinks that they’re identical for a very good reason. “I can honestly say that this is the first time in my life that I have ever been surrounded by so many penises,” Patricia says suddenly. “Actual ones, not just the slang terms intended for rude individuals.”

“I’ve never felt sorrier for you than I do right now,” Ted replies. “A gangbang is good for the soul.”

“Thanks for that piece of…wisdom,” Zed says. “Sure explains why you never came home.”

“Yup, that’s it.”

Blake evades his triplet’s sudden lunge, and splashes Ted in the face. “Don’t pull me under the water, it hasn’t been properly analyzed yet.”

“We’re not staying here very long, are we?” Tim asks anxiously, moving behind Ned.

Patricia looks at him in surprise. “I was under the impression that you were a Vault Hunter. Surely a germ-laden body of water is no problem for a wholesale butcher such as yourself.”

“Normally it wouldn’t be, but the only water I’ve been close to recently are the swamps in Jakobs Cove – you definitely wouldn’t want to skinny-dip there. Some of the zombies live in the water. Well, they don’t live but you know what I mean.” Tim crowds against Ned, who reaches an arm back to steady him.

“We’re almost done there, though,” Ned says. “Ain’t but a handful more to put right and check off a list.”

Blake bats away a particularly insistent groping hand beneath the water. “Are they easily recognizable? I’m afraid I have little experience with the undead.”

Tim explains about the database in which all Jakobs employees are entered. “Once the serum starts working, you can just scan them. Ned knows a lot of them, anyway, so we mostly use the database if someone’s too far gone for him to recognize.”

“I suppose that would be helpful, as you have never seen any of them before,” Patricia says.

“I’ve never seen anyone in Jakobs Cove before, but I’ve actually met you before,” Tim surprises them all by saying. “I’ve met Zed before, too. You were inside Claptrap.”

Zed heaves a long-suffering sigh. “We were where, now?”

Tim quickly explains about a paid mission to extract information from within a CL4P-TP unit, which Blake dimly remembers as it had been conducted on the heels of Jack’s hostile takeover of Hyperion. He tenses at the mention of Tassiter, and feels Ted slip a comforting arm around his waist. “You
okay?” His shadow murmurs. Blake nods slowly, aware that the thought of Harold’s death is not nearly as painful as it had once been. It seems like a betrayal, somehow, that he doesn’t feel the sharp ache in his chest at Tassiter’s memory…yet how could something so wonderful as his bond with Ted Blanco possibly be anything shameful?

“I’m fine, love.” Blake leans his head against Ted’s bare chest and lets Ted support him, finding the laughter wells up quite readily as Tim tells them about the digital copies of Zed and Patricia that live in Claptrap’s consciousness.

Patricia laughs herself into a cramp when they discover that Digital Zed refers to her as ‘Her Majesty’ and Zed has to admit that he had, on occasion, complained about her within earshot of Claptrap. “That was only before I really knew you, though.”

“Really? What would you call me now?”

Zed grins. “I’d call you Her Imperial Majesty ‘cause you’re ten times as snooty.”

“That sounds right,” Patricia says calmly, making them all laugh.

“She’s snootin’ for two now,” Ned observes.

Tim scratches his chin. “Can you even make that into a verb?”

“Sounds legit,” Ted says. “Let’s ask the ultimate snooter for the last word on this, though. Whatcha think, honey?”

“Leave me out of this, that word is ridiculous and so are you.”

They trade jokes and the brothers get into a fight that isn’t as serious as they try to make it sound, so Blake helps Patricia out of the water and passes her a towel to dry off with. “Have you determined the sex of your unborn child, or shall you keep it a surprise? Do you wish for one more than the other?”

She sighs and leans on him for balance. “At this point I wouldn’t mind if it turns out to be a skag, as long as it exits my body in a timely fashion. Zed is hoping for a girl who looks just like me, which is both ridiculous and embarrassingly maudlin, but sweet all the same. I have warned him that his future sexual activity will decline sharply if I turn out to be carrying twins.”

“I would be happy to supply you with updated medical scanners so that you could see for yourself,” Blake offers. “Helios could accommodate you both in our medical suites, for that matter, though I’m sure you would understandably wary of such an offer.”

Patricia wraps the towel around herself as best she can, looking over at the rough housing that is taking place in the water. “That would not be a good idea.”

Blake assures her that he takes no offense from her refusal, and changes the subject. “I have read several reports of Eridian Guardians being sighted on Elpis. In your experience, do the creatures tend to congregate around an opened Vault or would you say that they are protecting an undiscovered site?”

“That would depend upon the exact location of the Vault and their proximity to it. They most likely are remaining near their original power source, as most Guardians are mere simulacra…at least, the ones on Pandora are. They are increasingly difficult to find with each passing season. Perhaps the Elpisian Guardians are different, given that there is no atmosphere to sustain them.”
“What are you guys talking about?” Tim asks curiously, climbing out of the water and looking for his clothes.

Patricia glances at him. “The Vault on Elpis.”

“Weren’t you part of the team that…investigated…it?” Blake asks. “As I recall, it had already been opened, but it was never really clear whether or not the Lost Legion were the ones to have opened it.”

Tim frowns thoughtfully. “I found a few of Zarpadon’s personal logs but she never said that she opened it, just that she saw what was inside.”

“What can you tell me about the Vault’s Guardians?” Patricia asks, holding up a hand to shield her face as the impact of one of the brother’s bodies causes a large wave of water to exit the pond. “Zed, please control yourself.”

“Sorry,” comes her mate’s cheerfully unrepentant reply.

Blake pulls his pants back on, listening with half an ear to Patricia and Tim’s ongoing discussion about something called an Opha. The good-natured dispute between Ted and his brothers seems to be drawing to an end, so Blake sits cross-legged on the rocks and looks up at Helios in its perpetual orbit around Elpis. He can’t believe there was ever a time where he’d gladly stayed aboard it, shuddering in horror at the thought of coming down to Pandora. This planet is truly horrendous and he would recommend it to absolutely nobody, but it does have its bright spots.

He closes his eyes and breathes in the cool air, burdened only by a trace of rotting vegetation, then opens them to look around appraisingly. Hunter’s Grotto looks beautiful and wild in the gathering dusk, and deceptively peaceful. Blake glances over at his companions, still deep in conversation, then at the three solidly middle-aged men acting like adolescents as they do their best to drown each other. He catches Ted’s eye, and they smile at each other. Bright spots, indeed. “Ready t’go eat?”

His shadow asks, swimming over.

“Mm,” Blake agrees, admiring how good Ted looks as he’s climbing out of the water. “You look wonderful,” he says next, and watches the corners of Ted’s eyes crinkle.

“Flattery’ll get you everywhere, sweetheart.”

“I certainly hope so.”

Ted laughs softly and sits down beside Blake, leaning in for a kiss that’s promptly spoiled by Zed’s approach. “What d’you want?”

“Look over there,” Zed murmurs, jerking his head towards where Tim is still talking with Patricia. They both turn obediently. “She’s about to explode right outta that towel, but… Lord above, below, and freakin’ sideways,” Ted blurts loudly. “Ned, what the hell is wrong with you? I’da been on bended knee lookin’ for forgiveness if I was you. God damn.”

“Timothy, your towel has developed a gape,” Blake says warningly.

“What? Oh, no.” Tim hurriedly re-tucks it around his waist, but the damage has been done and they’ve all been…exposed…to the extent of Tim’s plastic surgery.

Patricia speaks up immediately. “That is enormous. I don’t normally pair the terms ‘goodness’ and ‘gracious’ but this occasion seems to call for it.”
“That ain’t a dick, it’s a damn murder weapon. How the hell d’you even sit down, son?”


Ted decides to weigh in. “He ain’t in the water no more. It don’t count…we’ll leave him be, though, out of sheer admiration if nothin’ else.”

“You’re a different matter, though, you dumbass,” Zed tells Ned. “If I wasn’t with Tricia I’d kill t’be in your spot and they had to trick you into a cage with him? The Brain Trust of Fyrestone strikes again.”

Blake clears his throat delicately. “I beg your pardon, but given Timothy’s unfortunate resemblance to Jack…”

“Yeah, that’s right; if I also hadn’t been run outta my own damn home.”

“I feel suddenly light-headed and I think I might faint,” Patricia interrupts the windup of Zed’s tirade, to Blake’s intense relief, and soon has the doctor occupied with fussing over her.

Ted laughs and leans in. “That was real slick, the both of y’all. Keep that thing covered, kid,” he advises a red-faced Tim. “Let’s go get some food.”

Their last evening in Hunter’s Grotto proves to be a quiet, relaxed one after all the arguments die down and there’s nothing left but calm conversation. Tim has recovered enough from his earlier embarrassment to make a few jokes at the triplet’s expense and share stories about his time on Elpis. Blake and Patricia are called upon to provide a few details about their respective home planets and early lives – Blake finds that he enjoys how intensely interested Ted is in his stories. When they retire to their shared room, Ted has even more questions for him until Blake laughingly begs for a halt to the endless barrage of curiosity. “Why do you want to know all of this?” Blake asks, tugging gently at a tuft of graying chest hair.

“I dunno, it’s…it’s like I know you, but not really,” Ted says with the slightly lopsided smile that never fails to make Blake’s chest tighten. “I wanna know everything about you.”

“There’s not much, dear one.”

“Then I figure it’s just enough for me.”

How is it, Blake wonders, that someone who can be so infernally irritating can also know exactly the right words to say? “Now that is slick.”

They’re driving through the Highlands late the following morning, and Blake has his face tilted into the wind. The greater elevation is a welcome relief from the oppressive heat of the desert, though he isn’t too sure as to why they’re actually here. Ted insists that he just wants to ‘see’ something, whatever that’s supposed to mean, so Blake simply assumes that a visit to the mortar cannon is in their near future.

He opens his eyes as the Technical slows to a stop. “This is not Aggregate Acquisition.”

“You have a bridge,” Ted says, shading his eyes with a hand against his forehead. “How’d you get a bridge?”

“It was either Blake Bridge or the tiny bandit village of Blaketon. I chose the bridge, as the other name sounded too much like a kind of underwater plant.” Blake smiles as he watches Ted get out of
the truck and walk up to place a hand against one of the beams. “Please do not hump my bridge.”

Ted raises his eyebrows. “Now there’s an idea. I was just gonna take a piss on it.”

“You were not.” He follows Ted out onto the pavement, and they sit side-by-side on the edge overlooking Whispering Riverbed. “Are those threshers, down there?”

“Looks like. I never saw one up close – weren’t they brought here by the same dude who let us in the lodge?”

“I daresay Timothy helped – do you not recall how incensed your brother was about the entire affair?”

Ted shies a few rocks at the riverbed below. “Yeah, that’s right. I almost forgot ‘bout that.”

Blake swings his legs idly, keeping an eye on the threshers just in case they decide to investigate the pebbles that Ted is trying to get their attention with. “Don’t make them come over here. If you want to see what they look like, we can unload the sniper rifle from the back.”

“We,” Ted snorts good-naturedly. “Naw, I’ll leave ‘em alone so your panties don’t get all bundled up over it.”

“Thank you very much. I greatly prefer my undergarments to remain bundle-free,” Blake says graciously. “What shall we do with the remainder of our vacation? You had some sort of race in mind, did you not?”

Ted reminds him that they still have roughly 70 hours left. “You mind if we take a look at Old Haven? Won’t take but an hour or two.”

Blake doesn’t mind at all, mostly because he’s curious about the town and wants to see it for himself. “Why do you want to visit? I thought the place had been abandoned.”

“It was, I just wanna see if our troops left somethin’ useful behind.”

“Such as…?”

“Weapons, armor, codes; things like that.” Ted frowns. “Mostly codes. Command ain’t good at changin’ stuff unless you give ‘em proof that it needs a fix. Could be that someone here’s got access to Promethea’s drop schedule and was re-routing our supplies.”

Blake looks over at him. “Did that happen?”

“I dunno. It’s what I’d do, if the command fucked me over like they did to the Lance here. There’re a few dedicated terminals I need access to. Now that the lines are re-established, the last thing we need is someone here messin’ with ‘em. I figure I’ll pull the control chips and destroy what’s left.”

They stay on the bridge talking for several more minutes until Ted stands up and brushes off the back of his pants, holding out a hand to help Blake up. “To Old Haven, then.”

Blake surveys the rather unimpressive rural area of the Rust Commons East from the Fast Travel station while he waits for Ted to get done with…whatever he’s doing over there. “Hang in there, I’m almost done,” his shadow calls over to him.

“What are you doing?”

“I had t’check if there’re any signals comin’ out of the city, and now I’m writin’ your name in the dirt
Blake looks over. “You’ve always known the most direct route to my heart, Theodore.”

“Heh.” Ted zips his pants back up and saunters over to the Catch-a-Ride. “This’s an older station so it don’t have Technicals, so you mind bein’ in a turret seat? It’ll muss up your hair.”

Considering his hair is a windswept mess at the moment, Blake can’t possibly think of how it could get any worse. “I’ll survive.”

Old Haven is much larger than he’d thought it would be, once they’re through the gates and walking around past the deactivated bounty board. Ted passes him an assault rifle, and stops to tuck a revolver in the back of his pants. “Could be some squatters, so keep an eye out. This shouldn’t take too long.”

“Right.” Blake weighs the rifle in his hands and tries to look competent, waiting for Ted to say something uncomplimentary, but Ted only nods before turning away.

“There’re two transmitters – one’s gonna be up high, so if I had to guess I’d say we need t’check that third-story stack of shit up ahead. Second’s around the underground tunnels, further along. We’ll skirt the edge of town ‘til we get to it.” Ted glances back. “Lotta open spaces up there, so let’s take a minute to find out what you know of hand signals. I’ll take point and I’ma need you to follow.”

Blake admits that he knows absolutely nothing of military hand signals, so Ted demonstrates a few basic gestures that aren’t that difficult to guess the meaning of. He’s a great deal more confident about this expedition by the time they set out, staying close to the walls and moving forward in an uncomfortable half-crouch. Ted somehow makes it look effortlessly graceful, while Blake feels as though he resembles some sort of gangly crustacean scuttling about the streets of Old Haven. The only signals Ted has given so far are the ones for stop and go, but as they approach the first transmitter Ted flattens his hand and makes a sharp downward motion. Blake drops obediently and stays right where he is as Ted gestures ‘wait’ and disappears around the corner.

There’s the sound of a startled grunt, quickly cut off, and then Ted comes back while wiping his hands on his pants. “Well?”

“Psychos. You got any hand sanitizer?”

“Unfortunately not. Please do not touch me until you’ve been properly disinfected.”

Ted looks as though he’s tempted to rub his palms over Blake’s face, but holds himself back. “Let’s just get up those stairs and get this over with.”

They sneak their way up a set of stairs that look dangerously close to collapse, and into a room with several military-grade consoles inside it. Blake crouches beside the door to keep watch while Ted pulls off one of the panels and fiddles with the wiring. From Blake’s vantage point he can see a small pile of no less than three bodies that are, most likely, his shadow’s handiwork. “Anything yet?”

Blake asks softly.

“Comm array’s disconnected, looks like. I’ll need to find the corresponding junction box,” Ted says, unconsciously lapsing into his faked ‘assassin voice’. “Let’s head to the other transmitter and check for the power relay as we go.”

Scouting ahead is no harder than walking outside and shading their eyes against the sun to look in the indicated direction. Old Haven is quiet except for the mundane sounds of half-tethered signs being knocked about by the fitful breeze and the creaking of doors left unlatched. “How many
“Psychos did you do away with?”

“There were four of ‘em snoopin’ around by the dumpster.” Ted points towards their destination. “Okay, you see that messed-up section of wall? There should be a transmitter up there and it looks like we got a straight shot, but it don’t hurt to be careful.”

They pick their way through the abandoned streets, pausing now and again to look at random pieces of rusted armor that could only have come from a Crimson Lance soldier. Ted looks increasingly displeased as they come across even more remnants of the failure of his peers but then they’ve reached the second transmitter, which still works. Blake watches the display curiously as Ted retrieves the communication logs, but steps back to a safe distance when it comes time to destroy the consoles once and for all. “So now we find the power source for the first one,” Blake muses. “Would it be connected to the city’s power grid? I’m sure my assistant can send a map to my ECHO.”

Ted explains that any Atlas occupation includes laying new cables so that the soldiers have a dedicated power source separate from the native inhabitants. “That don’t mean any local generators wouldn’t be commandeered; it’s just better to have complete control of an electrical – or otherwise – source that the locals can’t shut down on a whim.”

“That makes sense,” Blake admits. “Since you are intimately familiar with Atlas tactics, what exactly are we looking for?”

“It’s been a minute since Atlas sent the troops here and we’ve always got the eggheads on high alert where wastin’ power is concerned…so it’s probably gonna be an early model Zeus Kill-A-Watt.”

“That’s its name?”

Ted shrugs. “Don’t look at me, I didn’t think that one up.”

Blake shakes his head and puts his hands on his hips, turning at the waist to look around. “It might be best to climb to the top of one of the neighboring buildings; get a different vantage point.” It’s suggested that he keep an eye out for a rectangular-shaped red box and Blake immediately translates ‘red’ to ‘crimson.’ There is such a thing as being too predictable – not that people in yellow and white glass turbo mansions should be throwing stones.

Once they’re high enough, it’s only a matter of minutes before they locate two of the junction boxes. One of them is closer (and higher up) than the other, so Ted climbs over to that one first. “Huh,” Ted says after he’s opened the cover and has presumably adjusted the wiring inside. “I’ll be damned.”

“What is it?”

Ted disconnects the wire and replaces the cover. “Wrong one.”

It seems a bit odd that the junction box isn’t actually hooked up to anything, but perhaps whatever-it-was had been disconnected long ago. “There’s still the other.”

Instead of heading over to the second box, Ted drops down to street level and scuffs the toe of his boot over a crack in the pavement. “I’ll bet there’s gonna be three of ‘em.” Blake leans against the side of a building and watches Ted pace back and forth, still staring down at the concrete before suddenly straightening and following one of the seams to the side of another building. There, beside an old billboard advertising ‘Haven’, is the third junction box that Ted had predicted would be there. This one actually does what they need it to do, and Blake looks up at the large satellite dish that begins to move into position. “Almost done, just gotta yank the control chip and we can get the fuck outta here,” Ted sighs.
Blake elects to stay down by the street so that he can take a closer look at the billboard, and asks Ted about it once his shadow comes back down to disconnect the power. “I have only heard this place referred to as Old Haven, but from the looks of this…that wasn’t always its name.”

“Yeah, it was just called Haven back in the day.” Ted grabs the side of the huge advertisement and drags it to conceal the front of the junction box. “Did y’all ever…search through here, after the occupation went south?”

“Here?” Blake looks at him in surprise. “Whatever for?”

Ted gives him a long look before shaking his head. “Oh, no reason.” He taps a finger against the billboard as he turns away. “No reason at all.”
Off to the races

Chapter Summary

Blake and Ted's vacation is cut short by Rhys and Vaughan's machinations; Blake will have someone's head for this. Literally.

“Isn’t there anything but desert on this damned planet?” Blake roars, clawing at the scarf that’s gotten into his eyes for the millionth time in the last ten seconds.

Ted turns to squint at him through the gale and shout, “What?”

Blake scissors his arms to show that it was nothing important and attempts to wind the scarf back around his face. Visit Oasis, the billboards had insisted. Yes, what a fantastic idea that had been. Simply wonderful. He looks over at Ted through eyes narrowed to slits – not because he’s angry, of course, but because he would rather not have his corneas blasted off by the blowing sand. Ted seems to be having fun, however, which must be nice for him.

Their skiff lurches and scrapes through another concealed rock formation, then they’re pulling into the leeward side of a boulder. Blake spits out a piece of sand-encrusted fabric and wonders if he should even bother removing the scarf. “Ugh.”

“Sorry ‘bout that,” Ted apologizes, hopping down from the raised seat. “Lemme help you, honey.”

Blake obediently lifts his chin as his lover begins to unwind the scarf from around his face. “I have yet to learn which advertisements actually tell the truth. Probably none of them do,” he says, struggling to be heard over the high-pitched whistling of the wind.

“There’s some caves not too far from here,” Ted yells back, shaking the worst of the sand out of the scarf before re-wrapping it. “If you can hang on for just a li’l bit longer, I’ll get us there.” Shelter. At this point, Blake would gladly agree to being towed behind the skiff if it meant that they could finally get out of the storm. He nods and crouches down to take his place by the rail, and Ted reaches out to squeeze Blake’s shoulder before climbing back up on the seat.

They resume their hair-raising journey through the sands of Oasis and it’s a miracle that Ted can even tell where to steer because Blake can’t see to save his life. After what seems a lifetime, Blake is gratified to see the promised shelter looming in front of them. Ted guides the skiff around several improvised roadblocks, then cuts the engine. “Nice work,” Blake sighs in relief. “How long do storms like this usually last?”

“I dunno, but I figured we could wait it out in here.”

“Where is ‘here?’” Blake asks, swinging his legs over the side of the skiff and standing up.

Ted jumps down from the seat and pulls off his own scarf, bending down to rub his hands through sand-encrusted hair. When he straightens, Blake has to smile at the way Ted’s hair is sticking up at all angles. “What?”

“Nothing,” Blake says innocently.
“Okay, then. Looks like we’re in an abandoned bandit camp…Ned says they’re called sand pirates out here. I just thought it was ‘cause they hung out on the beach or somethin’, not that there was nothin’ but beach.” Ted sits down to pull off his boots, dumping a small mountain sand out of each. “We’d better make sure this place really is abandoned ‘fore we get too comfortable.”

Despite thoroughly enjoying Ted’s company, Blake is beginning to long for the creature comforts of Helios. There isn’t any sand on Helios. “I don’t think that will be a problem, my dear.” There had better not be any sand on Helios.

Ted eyes him as if he knows exactly what Blake is thinking. “Tell you what. Since Pierfest was a complete bust, how ‘bout I take you someplace nice?”

“Like a luxurious bandit camp?”

“That’s real funny. I meant, like a race. Those can be nice.”

“They can not.”

“You ever been to a race, Fancy Pants?”

“Well-”

“That’s what I thought,” Ted says triumphantly. “C’mon, let’s get out of the wind.”

“Someplace nice, I hope,” Blake murmurs.

“You just hush on up, Jeffrey Blake.”

The bandit settlement – no, the sand pirate settlement – is indeed deserted. This is a relief since Blake isn’t sure what kind of assistance he could possibly render that doesn’t involve spastic movements that spray sand from every conceivable bodily crevice. He volunteers to keep watch as Ted swarms up trees and braves flights of rickety stairs, so is the first to notice the hidden entrance to somewhere that the pirates didn’t want anyone to go. One doesn’t usually build a fence to enclose a simple wall of rock. “Where does that lead?” Blake asks, inserting a finger into his left ear and drilling it briefly. There’s sand in there, he just knows it. “Is that a cave?”

“Stop diggin’ at your ear, you’ll fuck up the eardrum…and that’s probably a cave. Wanna go check it out?”

“Nothing would bring me greater joy, Theodore.” Then, because he just can’t help himself, Blake says, “It could be nice.”

“Quit it.”

They move around the fence and into the cave, which turns out to be a passage into an enormous underground cavern. Blake is taken aback by the beauty of it – the water reflects the glowing of the blue crystal formations and after the hellish environment just outside the cavern, it seems an oasis. Of course, various vending machines – Zed’s included – ring the boardwalk surrounding the pools, but he supposes that’s to be expected. “Oh, this is lovely.” He watches Ted kneel beside one of the pools and reach in to test the water, only coming forward when his shadow nods in permission. “Is it potable?”

“This pool is for sure. I would wash off in one of the others, just in case. You go on while I make sure the area’s clear.”
Ted moves off, and Blake drops onto his knees so that he can drink from his cupped hands. There’s a slight sulfuric taste to the water but it’s clear and cold, which makes it perfect. He can hear Ted’s ECHO chime with receipt of a new message as the other man checks the far side of the cavern, but knows better than to call out and ask about it when they’re not entirely sure the area is safe. Once he’s slaked his thirst, he selects one of the smallest pools to in which to rinse his face. “Come get cleaned up, love.”

“Yeah, I’ll…do that…” Ted walks back over, his ECHO device in his hands. “Honey, you are not gonna believe this. Byco says Henderson got vented.”

Well, well. It seems that Vasquez is finally moving forward. “Any word on the Vault key?”

Ted sighs. “Deal’s been set up. Saybrook caught the whole damn thing with a dictation program, but download speed in here’s enough to make you wanna beat someone to death with a dull axe. Want me t’go back out there?”

It will take some time for anyone to arrange travel from Helios, especially since Blake is one of the only individuals authorized to use the Fast Travel between Pandora and Helios. Ted doesn’t look too enthused about going back up to the surface, either. “It will keep for another hour or so,” Blake says, noticing that Ted is starting to look even more uncomfortable. “Come and wash off.”

“D’you remember how, when we were in Old Haven-”

“Come here, you impossible man! You’re practically a walking sand sculpture.”

Ted shakes his head and comes over, unearthng all sorts of weapons that Blake had no idea could even fit down a pair of pants that tight. “Keep an eye on the far side over there – I didn’t see any tracks, but you never know.” He peels his clothing off completely, starting to shake the sand out before Blake holds a hand out for it. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me, I’m only doing this in order to watch you bathe yourself.” Blake busies himself with turning pockets inside out while watching Ted lower himself into the pool. “Your level of attractiveness is really quite unfair.”

“It’s a natural defense mechanism,” Ted says, splashing water on himself to rinse the sand from his chest hair. “I gotta say, I’m kind of missin’ your fancy tub and those bedsheets.”

Blake smiles as he gives Ted’s shirt a brisk shake to expel the last of the sand. “You do tend to smell much better when those items are readily available.”

“That’s just plain mean,” Ted grumbles, ducking beneath the water before resurfacing with a premeditated flourish that causes water to slosh out in Blake’s direction…or rather, it would have gone in his direction if he’d stayed to wait for it.

He finishes shaking the sand from Ted’s trousers, then drapes them over a rock. “You needn’t be worried about the key, Theodore.”

“Bad shit happens around those things, even when you’ve planned for it. Hell, especially when you plan for it!” Ted climbs out of the pool and lifts his hand to point at Blake. “You’d better promise me right now that you ain’t goin’ near it.”

Blake pauses in the act of reaching for Ted’s shirt. “Believe me, I have no intention of opening anything but a bottle of wine when the Vault key is secured.”

“Promise me.”
“Very well. I, Jeffrey Blake, acting CEO of the Hyperion Corporation, do hereby extend my most solemn promise to keep a minimum distance of…shall we say, six feet? Yes, six feet from the Vault key at all times until such time as it is deemed safe by my devastatingly handsome Atlas liaison and chief of security for Helios station. How was that?”

Ted raises his eyebrows. “Not bad. Let’s go with ten feet, though.”

They shake on it, with Ted bare as the day he’d been born, and then it’s Blake’s turn to rinse himself off. “How much longer do we have? Some forty-odd hours, if I’ve counted correctly…”

“That sounds right.” Ted dresses slowly, keeping an eye on Blake while occasionally glancing at his ECHO. “Shit! We never shoulda come here.”

“Everything will be fine, love. Why are you so upset? This isn’t like you at all.”

“I just got a real bad feelin’ ‘bout this.”

Blake gazes at his lover, then gives a decisive nod. “Very well. Let me get dressed, and we will leave – storm or no storm.” Blake has never put much stock in trusting someone else’s instincts, but his are firmly directing him to trust Ted’s. “We can monitor the situation…from a distance of ten feet…and leave for Helios if you think it best.”

The other man nods absently, tapping his fingers on the ECHO device in his hands. “Let’s get outside so we can check out the transcript.”

Blake drags his clothing back on, grimacing slightly because the fabric is sticking to his wet skin, and follows Ted back out the hidden passage. It seems that while they were taking shelter and cleaning off the worst of the caked grime that the storm had bestowed upon them, the wind has died down and there are only a few errant gusts. “Anything?”

Ted narrows his eyes at the display and hands it over. Blake accepts it and they walk back to their skiff while he quickly reads the conversation log – Vasquez had been speaking with his Pandoran contact, and would presumably be en route once he’d gathered the required fee of ten million dollars. Blake pauses at Ballard’s postscript, which details the transfer of the fee…by someone other than Hugo Vasquez. It doesn’t take a genius to guess why that had happened, only an intimate knowledge of the cutthroat working environment of the Hyperion Corporation. He sighs inwardly as he sees the additional postscript which identifies the employee responsible for the unauthorized withdrawal and, more importantly, said employee’s frequent contacts.

He looks up to see Ted sweeping the sand from the skiff’s pilot seat with angry motions. “Theodore, love.”

“I know,” Ted snarls. “God fucking damn it.”

“It might be advisable to send for your men…and your armor.”

“They’ll meet us in Prosperity Junction. With the fucking armor.”

Blake tilts his head back to glare up at Helios, where Saul Henderson’s body is probably still floating around to provide the maximum amount of inconvenience possible. Damn the man! “Have Ballard and Saybrook left yet? I want Henderson’s underlings disposed of, immediately.”

“I’ll kill ‘em myself.” Ted promises. “If they go to ground, which I doubt, we still got access to this…Yvette. She’s been smart enough to flip her loyalty back where it belongs.”
“She’ll most likely play both sides against the middle. That’s just the way it goes,” Blake says, climbing into the skiff and bracing himself as the thing begins to drift when Ted hops up into the driver’s seat. “Who do we have watching her?”

The skiff turns back towards the town of Oasis. “Your PA is keepin’ an eye out – Miss Yvette start lookin’ like she’s ready to come down on the wrong side, her ass is gettin’ knocked clean off the damn fence.”

They meet with Ballard and Saybrook on the outskirts of Prosperity Junction, an old mining town which has clearly seen better days. Though, to be fair, all of Pandora seems to have seen better days. Blake is provided with a suit and Ted changes back into his Lance Assassin armor, and they both settle back into the employer-employee relationship. Blake’s not best pleased with their change in circumstance, especially since they’re still meant to be on vacation together, and he already knows how irritated Ted is with the whole Vault key business. At least Blake also knows that the irritation stems from a deep concern for his well-being.

This is the first time that Blake has seen Saybrook ‘in the field’ since the man’s release from the brig; Ted has taken pains to ensure that Blake is never in a situation where he might be alone with the captain, and they’ve been kept apart as much as possible. Now, he watches carefully as Saybrook approaches to give a preliminary report on the situation – it seems as though the late Henderson’s protégé and the thief from Accounting have appropriated a Hyperion towncar and traveled to Pandora, via moonshot, inside it.

“We’ve established that they headed here first, sir. The intercepted communications indicated that they will most likely meet Vasquez’s contact at the original meeting site.”

“The World of Curiosities,” Blake remembers aloud.

Ted makes a sharp gesture, which brings the other two Lancemen on either side of Blake. The helmet goes on, and all traces of Ted Blanco are immediately replaced by Ares. “Mister Blake, make sure you’re between my men at all times. We’ll go in and assess the situation, see what kind of head start they might have before we decide on the next course of action.” He waits for Blake to signal acceptance with a nod before turning and walking towards the town. “Let’s move.”

“Sorry about this, sir,” Ballard whispers. “I didn’t want to interrupt your vacation.”

“That’s quite alright, Lieutenant.” Blake glances to the other side, where Captain Saybrook is watching them silently. “Have you visited Prosperity Junction before?” He asks, purely for the satisfaction of forcing the other man to answer.

“No, sir.”

“I see,” Blake says mildly, looking around in distaste at the heaps of trash and random Psychos slinking about with unsheathed knives. He supposes that he can’t truly expect most native Pandorans to want to rise above their squalor if they’ve never known anything better – even Sanctuary had been sorely lacking in cleanliness. They walk through the refuse-strewn streets, where there are no less than three corpses sprawled directly in their path, and Ted only stops long enough to nudge the bodies out of the way with a boot.

More dead bodies, whole and otherwise, are shortly discovered beside a row of overturned outhouses and what looks like the remains of a food stall. Ted lifts a hand, and Ballard moves closer to Blake protectively while Saybrook joins his colonel. “What do you suppose they are doing?” Blake asks curiously, watching the two men gesture towards the carnage and look around at the surrounding buildings.
“Mapping out the fight, sir, and doing blood spatter analysis,” Ballard murmurs. “If you see enough of it, you can tell what weapon did the damage and who was involved…even if you don’t have scanning equipment.”

“Fascinating – can you do it? What would you say happened here?”

Ballard looks around quickly. “Well, at just a glance…see that big guy in the toilet? It’s out of line with the other ones, and you’d think someone just shot him while he was doing his business, but there’s blood all over the ground right in front of it and there’s some on the top. He was crushed, Mister Blake. Those smears on the ground, too, point to someone else being crushed and there’d be tire tracks if he was hit by a car. I’m not sure what did it without getting closer, though. The colonel will know for sure.”

“That’s…rather impressive,” Blake says. “You could tell all of that, from this far away, with a single look?”

The other man shrugs self-deprecatingly. “It’s really nothing much, sir. You just tend to pick up on things when you’ve been assigned to a part-time Omega Assassin.”

“Really? How- report, Colonel,” Blake says as Ted lopes up to them.

“Corpses indicate several local bandits converging upon one spot before being driven back by what appears to be a Hyperion Loader – tread patterns in the human remains show that it arrived via moonshot, so I’d recommend questioning their contacts in Requisitions. The other wounds were caused by ricochet and blunt-force trauma, which says that the Loader was equipped with a shield. Scorch patterns point to the probability of electric grenades.” Ted pauses in this surprisingly professional assessment, and lifts a hand to point. “World of Curiosities is over there, and it looks like the dumbfucks made it past another ambush point. There’s a couple bandits still alive if you want me to talk to ‘em.”

Blake frowns, wondering if they really have time for this. “How long ago was this?”

“Trail’s still hotter’n sin in church. I’d say they came down while we were in Hayter’s Folly; that’s the only place we wouldn’t’ve heard the atmospheric breach.”

“Have Saybrook question them,” Blake decides. “He can catch up with us at the original rendezvous point.”

“Yes, sir. Ballard.” Ted turns away to speak with the captain and Ballard touches Blake’s elbow discretely, indicating that they’re to continue ahead. They pick their way through another cluster of dead bandits and head towards the World of Curiosities which, Blake assumes, is some sort of tourist trap.

Ted rejoins them, sliding past with a lingering touch on the small of Blake’s back, and they make a circuit around the building. One side has suffered massive damage, so Blake assumes that this must be the point of entry… or hasty exit. “Well, Colonel? What do you think?” Blake asks, nudging a piece of rubble aside using the toe of his boot.

“If they were here, they’re not now. Ballard, get inside and give me a sitrep.”

“Yessir.”

Ballard hurries back around the building and Blake looks at Ted questioningly. “If anyone’s still in there and they hear us, they won’t come out over here,” Ted explains. “Infrared on my HUD is useless with so many bodies out there, so we need to check the old-fashioned way.”
“I suppose that makes sense,” Blake admits. “I wasn’t aware your helmet even had a display.”

Ted walks through the mess, pausing to grind his heel down on an old billboard with Handsome Jack’s face on it. “It’s never worked properly, sir, so technically I still don’t have one.” He removes his helmet and tucks it against a hip. “How far d’you wanna follow the trail?”

“Why does your accent change when it hits the open air?”

“Told you already; just a habit.” His shadow cocks his head to one side. “Huh. Sounds like he found somethin’.”

One of the twin swords makes an abrupt appearance, motioning Blake to take cover. “I didn’t hear anything.”

“Maybe if you’d clean your ears once in a while,” Ted murmurs. “Get behind me, Jeff!”

Blake obeys reluctantly, and they both share a rueful glance when Ballard leads their eyewitness out into the newly rearranged courtyard. “Oh, hi! I’m Shade, everyone calls me that,” the strangely-dressed man babbles, sounding thrilled to have company. Blake raises his eyebrows, taking in Shade’s appearance from the battered straw hat down to the…he supposes that they’re meant to be sandals. “This upstanding young man was just telling me about your interest in- well, oh my goodness! You must be the third Blanco who sailed the stars to make his fortune shooting helpless people right in the face! Doctor Ned told me all about you on his last trip to Oasis. Of course this was before he’d been kidnapped by Blood Tooth’s men and then got stolen by Captain Scarlett herself—”

“Yeah, okay; zip it,” Ted finally interrupts. “You see the deal go down?”

“I most certainly did,” Shade says cheerfully and proceeds to relate a rather long and rambling tale that involves his new best friend Fiona, as well as August and two men from Hyperion. Blake listens closely, but his attention is drawn away as Ted tries to get their new acquaintance to focus on telling them where the men are now.

Ballard, for some reason, looks in imminent danger of being violently ill. Blake watches the young lieutenant shoot miserable glances at Ted before quietly excusing himself to find out what exactly is going on. “Are you quite all right?”

“I’m fine sir,” Ballard protests, turning aside sharply to cover his mouth. “It’s nothing.”

“I cannot afford for any of you to become ill; not now,” Blake says. “If you need-”

Ballard retches again. “No, sir. I’m…I’m fine, Mister Blake.”

“You do not look it, Lieutenant.”

“It’s really nothing, sir. Inside the building are, uh, stuffed bodies of Pandoran animals and…they haven’t been preserved very well. The smell is a little overwhelming, sir, if you get my meaning.”

Oh. Blake is seized by the unwise urge to sniff the air experimentally. “I certainly do, and officially withdraw my curiosity on the matter.” Ballard nods gratefully and takes up position as far from the inside of the building as he can get. Ted is still attempting to rein in Shade’s conversational tangents and, catching Blake’s eye, rolls his own in humorous exasperation. Blake intervenes. “Have you determined where my erstwhile employees were headed?”

“Bandits stole the money,” Ted reports, “and we got a description, so we’ll find ‘em easy.”
“You are Hyperion, as well? *thought* you looked familiar,” Shade interrupts loudly. “I came by my acquisition legally but I suppose I could be persuaded to part with him for a modest donation that would go towards the upkeep of my humble museum. *Although*, if you wanted to throw in a full set of Crimson Lance armor for my collection, I could be persuaded to barter. I just love bartering. And people. No one comes to see me anymore,” Shade sighs regretfully. “Where did you get such a pristine set of armor?”

“Promethea.” Blake catches sight of Ballard shifting from foot to foot nervously, and hopes that the young man decides to vomit someplace else. “Whatever do you mean by *acquisition*?”

They’re rejoined by Captain Saybrook, who draws Ted aside for a low-voiced progress report, as Shade divulges that he has the preserved corpse of Professor Nakayama on display. “So you didn’t…um…want him back?”

Nakayama’s retrieval isn’t something that Blake had ever concerned himself with, and he doesn’t intend to start now. “Not at all, I’m afraid. If you’ll excuse me…” Blake disengages himself from the strange man’s scrutiny and goes to find out if his shadow has discovered anything useful. “Colonel?”

“We got a few eyewitnesses that place our boys at both scenes. The money attracted all sorts of attention,” Ted says with a disgusted look. “The idiots just strolled on past with a plainly marked Hyperion case. Looks like a Vault Hunter took an interest in either the deal or the bandit who wound up with the money – Bossanova, one of the Death Rally organizers. We find him, we find the money, and we also find Rhys and…John?”

“Vaughan, sir,” Saybrook murmurs.

“Yeah; him. Let’s see that poster.”

Blake leans in to take a look at the grimy piece of paper that’s been sliced from a nearby wall. “It looks as though you’ll get a chance to attend a Death Rally, after all.”

“Looks like,” Ted says, sounding pleased.

“We should leave before your new best friend attempts to exchange another exhibit for your body armor.” Blake is overly conscious of Shade slowly inching up to them. “*Now*, if you please, Colonel.”

Saybrook is chosen to take care of Shade, and they make their escape with Ballard looking more cheerful with every step that takes him away from the World of Curiosities and the reportedly horrible stench. Not that the lieutenant’s face is visible beneath his helmet, but his body language seems to show a marked improvement. Blake turns his attention to the problems aboard Helios, and puts his plan into action the moment they reach a Catch-a-Ride. Settling into one of the Lancer’s back seats, Blake powers on one of the newest ECHO devices his engineers had provided him with before they’d left and keys in his PA’s frequency.

Paxson responds immediately. “*President Blake, what can I do for you*?”

“A status report on the whereabouts of Hugo Vasquez will do nicely. You are still monitoring his activities, are you not?”

The young woman nods briskly. “*Absolutely, sir. Right now he is occupying the late Saul Henderson’s office, and has been in constant contact with the third member of Rhys’ clique.*”

“That would be the woman in Requisitions, if I remember correctly.”
Paxson nods again. “Yvette, sir. There’s been a few messages exchanged, and she’s sent down a SGT-Loader per request, but for now we’re maintaining the fiction that Yvette is being monitored too closely for her to send additional supplies. This, as I’m sure you’re aware, is no fiction at all; I’ve been keeping apprised of both hers and Vasquez’s every move.”

Despite the fact that it’s nothing he wouldn’t do, Blake is pleased to see that his assistant is on top of the situation. Another pay raise is definitely in her immediate future, as well as extended station privileges. “I shall want you to pay special attention to my new Vice President, Ms. Paxson. Something tells me that his usefulness has a rapidly approaching expiration date. Is there anything else to report?”

“There…is something, though I’m not sure what to make of it. To be perfectly honest with you, sir, I thought it was just another glitch in the system.”

Blake narrows his eyes. “What is it?”

Paxson is clearly embarrassed at having to relate this to him, which is assurance enough that she wasn’t actively withholding the information from him. “The late Professor Nakayama’s system ID was recently used. It could be nothing, Mister Blake, but…I’m simply not sure. I didn’t want to bother you with it until I could get clear answers.”

She might need time to do so, but Blake certainly doesn’t – not with just having left Nakayama’s body on display at the World of Curiosities. It’s plain that Rhys has looted the corpse and used the ID drive that had to have been present. “He’s uploaded Nakayama’s credentials in place of his own, and has access to…whatever the madman came up with,” Blake sighs. “I want you to forward this information to Vasquez; presented properly, there should be no issue with getting this…Yvette…to put aside any lingering loyalties.”

Paxson quickly relates her understanding of the situation and they spend a few minutes more discussing their next steps. Hers will include a regular check-in with Blake, and the publication of a generous reward for the capture of Rhys. “It’s probably best that we specify the return of his head, sir. After all, that is the most important part.”

“Very well, Paxson. Carry on,” Blake says, signing off and closing his eyes briefly. What a fucking mess this has become. “Theod- ah, Colonel Blanco…”

“What’s goin’ on?” Ted asks from somewhere in the front – given his native status, he’s most likely the one driving the Lancer. Blake quickly brings him up to speed on the most recent developments, namely that they might need to turn around to search Nakayama’s corpse a second time. Ballard makes a sound in the back of his throat. “We can go back later if we need to; we’re closer to the race right now. With any luck, those dumbasses’ll be there so I can finally kill somebody.”

Blake advises him to simply murder the first bandit they come across, if that’s what is needed to lower his tension levels, and sits back to contemplate their dilemma. There’s no real need for them to chase Rhys around like this; Blake could return to Helios at any time and let Ted do it for him – god only knows the job would be done faster without Blake tagging along for the ride. He does enjoy seeing Ted in his element, though, so puts off his official duties for the sake of entertainment…that, and he’s not about to let slip a chance to see the remainder of Henderson’s schemes spoiled entirely. An opportunity to mix pleasure and vengeance is one no Hyperion executive could ever pass up.

The Lancer covers an impressive amount of ground, and their group actually manages to arrive at the Death Rally before the scheduled start time. Ballard is quickly put to work tracking the Hyperion-grade tech that the thieves are using; Blake still feels embarrassed not to have remembered that all
company-issued augmentations have locator chips embedded within them, to be used only in cases of emergency or corporate sabotage. The chips in Rhys’ ECHO-eye and limb replacement have been offline during most of their trip, only broadcasting intermittently – if Blake had to guess, he’d say that some sort of electromagnetic pulse or system overload had forced a reset. And if he weren’t a petty man, he would say that he hoped it hadn’t hurt.

Ted sends Saybrook in to scout the place, which is apparently a decommissioned Atlas facility, and leans against the side of the Lancer. “Plannin’ a big ‘gotcha’ speech once we nab ‘em?”

“What?” Blake looks away from the swarm of activity ahead, and sees that Ted is fiddling with his helmet. “Not exactly. I’ve just been thinking how strange it is to be with you like this. Watching you be Colonel Blanco.”

Ted smiles. “You miss bein’ the one hunted, huh? Well, we got a while ‘fore the race gets underway – I can chase you around for a li’l bit if you want, even give you a head start.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Blake says with laughter in his voice. “We can wait to do that until we return to Helios.”

“Guess I’d better think up some fun stuff t’doo once I catch you.”

“I’m sure you mean, if you catch me.”

“That optimism of yours is somethin’ else, I’m tellin’ you.” Ted pushes himself up off the side of the vehicle and holds his hand out in a demand for Blake’s. “C’mom with me.”

Blake reaches out in response, and Ted’s gloved fingers curve around his. They walk away from the Lancer and into the shadow cast by the… “What was this building used for?”


“Not enough, that much is certain,” Blake answers warily. “Why are you asking now?”

Ted clears his throat, and Blake is suddenly aware that he’s not going to like the answer. “Back in Old Haven, the junction box I covered back up…the inside of it had a symbol marking it as part of the Gortys Project. When Atlas sent troops to occupy Pandora, one of our generals came along for the ride.”

“Knoxx, yes.”

“He came after the Vault was opened. The one who shipped out with the soldiers brought a handful of scientists with him; General Pollux. Back on Promethea, he was head of a project that aimed to - well, I’m not too sure of the particulars since I had other things to worry about back then. The main idea, though, was to build a device that would locate a Vault…and somehow bring it to the team chosen to open it.”

Blake’s eyes open wide. “The Gortys Project. It’s been under our noses this entire time? We have to go back and secure it; the shareholders would-”

“No.” Ted drops his hand and seizes Blake’s shoulders, giving a stern shake. “No.”

“Theodore, you can’t possibly expect me to ignore this!”

“That’s exactly what I fuckin’ expect from you,” Ted hisses. “You promised me.”
Blake jerks away. “And you purposely withheld this information so that I would! Why are you bringing this up now? Because you felt badly for lying to me earlier? It’s a fine time for you to start growing a conscience!”

Ted goes silent, and perhaps it’s just as well that it’s too dark for them to see each other’s faces clearly. “I didn’t have to tell you a goddamned thing, Jeffrey, and you know it.”

“So why did you?” The question comes out sounding huffy and petulant, but Blake grits his teeth against the embarrassment of it.

“Because you were right; I felt bad.”

Blake sighs inwardly. “I didn’t mean for it to sound-”

“Yes, you did.”

“I wish you’d told me while we were there, so I could see it for myself.”

Ted snorts. “That’s why I didn’t tell you while we were there. Now, we’re far enough away that we can’t get there in a hurry…which means you’ll get over bein’ all excited about the damn thing, and see the sense in sendin’ someone else down to take care of it. That warehouse up ahead is another one of the facilities Pollux used. Not the main one, but-”

“So it’s a little less about feeling bad and more about the possibility of my noticing the Gortys Project logo, is that about the size of it?”

“No, I definitely felt bad. But I knew you’d be all curious, too, so. Yeah.”

Blake’s sigh is outward, this time. “Here I was, thinking you wanted a last-minute grapple in the dark, when – no, keep your hands to yourself!”

“How mad at me are you?” Ted asks after they’ve both been quiet for at least one full minute.

“I’m not very pleased, that is certain. The idea that you are still manipulating me isn’t something I can be happy about. If what we have is…is to prosper, both of us have to be entirely honest with each other.”

“Yeah. I know that.”

Blake reaches out to place his hands flat on the chestplate of Ted’s armor, rubbing his thumbs against the cool metal. “I appreciate the fact that you did it with my safety in mind. I have absolutely no wish, whatsoever, to open a Vault or be anywhere near one that is being opened.”

“So that wasn’t you just now sayin’ you wanted t’go back and look around Old Haven?”

“Theodore, there is no Vault in Old Haven. There is some sort of secret facility and I would like to see where it is and how it has been concealed for so long – as the present owner of the Atlas Corporation, surely I’m owed that much. However, you have inflated notions of my adventurous nature…which is practically non-existent. If I had to become disgustingly maudlin about it, under oath and in pain of death, I would admit that you are adventure enough for me.”

Ted’s arms come around him, and Blake closes his eyes against a surge of emotion. Being at odds with the man he loves, even for the duration of ten minutes or so, is entirely too stressful for him. “I’m sorry,” Ted whispers.
Blake leans into the embrace, suddenly wishing he’d just let Vasquez deal with this in the first place. Whatever happens tonight, they’ll be returning to Helios as soon as it’s over, and he tells this to Ted. “We can finish our vacation on one of the Edens, if you’d like.”

“No sand,” Ted promises, kissing his forehead.

The remainder of their time in the shadows is spent in a more pleasant fashion than the beginning of it, but all too soon it’s time to rejoin the others. Saybrook returns, having planted several cameras inside the venue which they can use if necessary. “The money is still there, sir. Looks like they haven’t been able to open the case but they’re offering it as a reward to the race’s winner…I tried to see if I could just steal it back, but couldn’t get close enough.”

“We’ll just wait it out and get it once the race is finished. Won’t take long; these things tend to go quick once the murder starts,” Ted says casually. “Byco, you get a fix on that twerp yet?”

Ballard stands up, looking pleased with himself. “Yessir; the signal’s still fading in and out, but it’s getting stronger. He’s coming right to us, Colonel.”

“Perhaps we’ll get lucky and he’ll get himself killed during the race,” Blake says uncharitably. Having reached his decision to leave, all he wants now is for the race to be over with. “I can’t believe I’m even considering this, but would you like to view the proceedings up close?”

“We don’t need to,” Ted says in a way that indicates he would like it very much.

Saybrook clears his throat. “The percentage of fatalities in a typical Death Rally tends to include the audience, sir.”

“Oh, in that case—”

“We got shields, so let’s go,” Ted announces, grabbing a handful of Blake’s shirt and hustling him off towards the warehouse. “You two keep an eye out.”

Ballard cups hands around his mouth and yells out a warning for them to stay low so that most of the debris will go over their heads, and Blake reminds himself to think before he speaks from this point on.
Rhys and Vaughan have slipped the leash once more, and Blake's running out of excuses to stay on Pandora.

The race is over, and the ten million dollars stolen from Hyperion is wafting through the air like dandruff. Expensive dandruff. Blake would ordinarily compare it to the volcanic ash that falls in the Eridium Blight, but dandruff just seems more apt in this situation. His ears have finally stopped ringing, so that's a plus…perhaps the only plus in this entire debacle.

Ted has dispatched Saybrook to track down the elusive August and, if that task proves to be too much, to noise the name Vallory about until her attention is caught by it. Blake is more set on returning to Helios than ever before, but it's worthwhile to make Vallory's acquaintance – she'll be doing most of Blake's work for him by chasing his renegade employees. “I feel as if this is a retreat and that I should be ashamed,” Blake says as he rejoins Ballard, “but I’m simply relieved.”

“I know the feeling, Mister Blake,” Ballard replies. “At least we found out that the Vault key that Vasquez was trying to buy was a fake all along.”

Blake looks over at him sharply. “What?”

“Captain Saybrook found a few pieces of it back in Prosperity Junction. I, um, thought you knew.”

“For God’s sake. Theodore!”

Ted pauses the video playback and looks up from the ECHO pad in his hands. “What’d I do this time?”

“The Vault key was fake.”

“It sure was. Didn’t I tell you?”

“No,” Blake says with a glare. “You didn’t.”

His shadow favors him with a slow blink. “Oh. Well…it was.”

“Unbelievable.” Blake throws his hands up in defeat. “Where is the nearest Fast Travel?”

“It’s back a ways. Hang onto your pinstripes, there; I’m almost done…and what’re you lookin’ at? You wanna run some laps, kid?” Ted snaps, whipping his head around to stare at Ballard. The younger man wipes the smile off of his face and hurriedly says that he’d rather not. “That’s what I thought.”

Blake wanders around amidst the wreckage and is thinking about the Vault Hunter who’d murdered the race’s announcer when his ECHO comes to life in a burst of static. “Mister Blake?”

“Paxson: go ahead.”
“Vasquez has made travel arrangements to Pandora, and is attempting to contact both Vaughan and Rhys separately. He’s also spoken with August - I wasn’t able to get ahold of you, so I sent you the transcript in case you were interested,” his PA says.

Blake scrolls through the notifications list and sees that there has indeed been a text message received. “Yes, I see it now. Reception has not been at its finest…tell me, Ms. Paxson, do most of the R&D personnel keep their files on ID drives?”

“No, it’s nothing I couldn’t easily verify for myself. I shall be returning within the next twenty hours or so – keep me apprised of additional developments.” Blake signs off and walks back to where Ted is still frowning down at the ECHO pad. “If it’s not too much trouble, I should like to visit Prosperity Junction before we depart for Helios. What are you doing with that?”

Blake leans forward to study the still image. “I hadn’t realized it at the time, but I can definitely see the resemblance now. Didn’t the Lance command decommission you in favor of an all-female group?” Ted nods absently, still staring at the pad. “Perhaps this one originated from one of the other garrisons. You did mention that Promethea wasn’t the only base of operations, did you not?”

“Yeah, I did,” Ted says slowly. “Well, fuck me runnin’ – that…and explains a lot, actually. Huh. Prosperity Junction, you say? We’d best get on, but that shithole ain’t gonna have the best lighting this time of night. Might be better t’wait a bit, get some sleep.”

Blake considers this. “I don’t want to remain here any longer than necessary, love, but you’re right. It might be difficult to find that appallingly-dressed man and—”

“Baby, we don’t actually gotta ask permission. That’s…well, was your employee – you want him back, you take him back. Wearin’ gloves while you do it,” Ted amends. “Damn, I shoulda kept Saybrook for this. No way am I touchin’ no nasty-ass taxidermied folks.”

“You have the most experience with dead bodies than the majority of people who live on this planet, Theodore.”

“So? I kill ‘em; I don’t make ‘em a conversation piece for the freaking den.” Ted pauses to swivel around and aim another glare towards the hapless Ballard. “Byco, I swear to god you’ll be runnin’ behind the Lancer the whole way!”

“Sorry, sir.”

Blake frowns at his lover. “Leave him be. He was doing nothing but standing there.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t you be tellin’ him thank you, you dumbass! Get goin’ and maybe I’ll stop to let you in,” Ted yells.

Ballard stands up straight and salutes, then turns and begins jogging away from them. “Why do you do that? Surely he doesn’t deserve such treatment,” Blake says sternly.
“He’s a good kid, but you can’t let him know that. ‘Sides, he was lookin’ at us all goopy and shit – I told him to knock it the hell off, but it’s like he just can’t control himself. The ‘weird’ switch gets flipped and the only way to turn the damn thing off is to punish the dude with some physical activity.”

“He obviously sees you as a father figure.”

“Gross.”

Blake shakes his head and leans down to kiss the top of his lover’s head. “Where shall we spend the night, darling?”

“I was thinkin’ Hollow Point.”

“Are you going to make Ballard run the entire way there?”

“I thought we’d just drive alongside him for a bit ‘til he settles down.”

“Fair enough.”

Blake has never been to Hollow Point, so he’s taken aback when the entire city turns out to be in a cave…though he really shouldn’t be, after having visited Hunter’s Grotto and Hayter’s Folly. Still, it seems like poor planning in the event of an emergency – what if someone walled up the place and set it ablaze? “Is there any sort of organized evacuation plan?” he finally asks.

“Nobody’s gonna die in a fire. Calm down,” Ted tells him. “Let’s go grab a drink, then we’ll find a spot to crash for the night. Ballard? See if you can’t take this somewhere with digistruct pads; we’ll call up a new one when we leave.”

Ballard assures them that he’ll rendezvous with them as soon as his errand is completed, and Ted waits until the Lancer drives off before dropping an arm around Blake’s shoulders. “How did you know I was thinking of fire?”

“I know you,” Ted says with a smile. “Listen, we passed a bar a few blocks that-a-way – let’s get a few drinks in you, then find a private room somewhere.”

“That sounds nice.”

“Be nicer if you promised to fuck me blind, bandit king.”

Blake had been expecting Ted to take the lead as he’s been doing lately, but this proposition certainly isn’t a bad one. “I have been neglecting you rather shamefully, haven’t I? I am sorry,” Blake apologizes. “It’s still hard for me to remember that you prefer me to take the lead.”

“You don’t gotta be sorry, just…y’know-” Ted stops suddenly, throwing up a hand. “Whoa.”

“What is it?” Blake asks, looking around at the dimlit street.

Ted sniffs loudly. “Lesbians.”

“Hello again, Ares,” Athena says, appearing as if on cue from behind a stack of crates. “They are here, Janey.”

Janey’s head emerges to smile at them. “Hiya, guys! Thena said she saw a Lancer, so I figured it was you.”
“What are you doing over there?” Blake asks, walking over to look.

Janey shows him the pile of junk she’d been sorting through. “We were just headed home – I’m meeting with Scooter about the garage here, so I dragged the missus out to see what there was to see. She says it’s trash, but I dunno; I’ve found worse, and sold it for a profit.”

“I see,” Blake says supportively, and glances over at Athena and Ted. The two assassins are discussing something, and Blake can see that Ted’s showing her some of the footage from the race. “I don’t suppose you would know of a place where we could rent a room for the night? We’ll be leaving for Helios in the morning.”

“There’s a decent place not too far from here, as it happens,” Janey says. “I wouldn’t mention Hyperion at all if I were you, but the rates aren’t bad and they just fumigated last week.”

Fumigated? “Against what, or do I want to know?”

“I wouldn’t want to, if I was in your place. You’ll be fine though, so no worries.”

That’s far from reassuring. “Tell me, Janey, have there ever been many serious fires in Hollowpoint?”

The two couples end up sharing a few drinks at Janey’s favorite local, with Ballard standing watch outside even after Blake invites him in, and they leave after congratulating Janey on the impending sale of a new garage location. The recommended motel doesn’t have much going for it, but the rooms are adequate as promised and actually look halfway clean. Ted arranges for separate rooms on either side of the building, and disappears into their room for a shower while Blake bids Ballard a good night.

“Sir, I…I was wondering if I could ask you for a favor.”

“What is it?” Blake asks curiously. Given that the other man helped keep him sane while they’d been locked up in Friendship Gulag, there’s not much Blake wouldn’t help him with.

Ballard glances at the closed door of Blake’s room. “Colonel says we’re going back to the World of Curiosities to take one of the exhibits.”

“That is true.”

“Mister Blake, I don’t want him going inside that place. I don’t know if you noticed, but there’s a member of the Crimson Lance in there. Colonel Blanco doesn’t know about it and it’s best for everyone if it stayed that way. I’m still working out the details on how to get her out of there but, uh. He’ll take it badly if he walks in and sees Commandant Steele like that.”

Blake is momentarily puzzled, then he remembers the ill-fated alliance. “I’m sure that it would be a shock for anyone to see their former colleague put on display. Very well, Lieutenant. Perhaps you might be able to find a few survivors of the morning’s carnage so that he might question them, or even one or two people who might be able to share information on that Vault Hunter we saw earlier. I shall do my best to convince him that you will be able to assist me in retrieving Nakayama’s body.”

“Thank you, sir. I’ll owe you one.” Ballard smiles gratefully. “Have a good night, Mister Blake.”

“I hope that you shall do the same,” Blake responds and puts the matter out of his mind completely, because he has a shower to interrupt.

Ted gives a half-hearted complaint at the cold air Blake is letting in as he opens the shower enclosure. The space is beyond tiny so there’s not room for too much beyond using the facility as intended, but it’s the perfect size to press back against Ted’s bare body. “What’d Byco want?”
Blake’s eyes drift closed as Ted starts biting at his ear and the side of his neck. “Hmm? Oh, nothing much. Some leads about that Vault Hunter you were interested in.” He pushes back to rub against the hard cock pressed against his ass, almost wishing that he’d never promised to take the lead tonight. Hopefully they have an Insta-Health so that a second round is possible…and on that note… “How much lubricant do we have?”

“I dunno; enough? How much you think we need?”

“I’d rather not be at a disadvantage while I am attempting to work your sword hilt up inside you.” Ted’s strangled grunt of surprise makes Blake smile. “You can’t have thought I would forget.”

It’s late enough to be considered early, even by Pandoran standards, but they can both catch up on any missed sleep once they return to Helios. Tonight, they bid Pandora farewell and Blake intends to make sure that Ted remembers it vividly. His lover is actually trembling in anticipation, and Blake smiles as he tugs Ted down for the kiss that will begin it all.

Their foreplay is something Blake always enjoys, but he makes sure to skimp on none of it – the last thing he wants is to hurt Ted inadvertently, no matter what the lunatic might enjoy. Tonight is all about pleasure, for both of them, and Blake is drawing plenty of it from his shadow’s enthusiastic enjoyment. Things might be a bit easier if either of them had thought to bring a plug with them, but Blake decides it will be well worth the early onset arthritis. “Stay still,” he says for the fourth time, giving Ted’s stomach a sharp slap.

“I can’t,” Ted moans out, grinding back onto Blake’s hand and clenching so hard that it’s a wonder that none of Blake’s fingers have been wrenched out of joint.

It’s arthritis just waiting to happen, Blake thinks to himself. “Try, dear heart. Do it for me.”

He drizzles more lubricant in the appropriate area, and takes a deep breath to steel himself against the reaction he’s bound to receive before steadily pushing in a fourth finger. Ted’s fingers, gripping the metal headboard, tighten convulsively so that the knuckles go white. “Oh my fuckin’ god,” Ted chokes, manfully attempting to stay still as Blake slowly fucks him with his hand.

“If I hadn’t already promised to use your sword, I would simply use my fist,” Blake says. “You would enjoy that, wouldn’t you?”

Ted’s response is an inarticulate moan as Blake twists his arm to the right.

“Are you almost ready? I’d say that you are, but since you are the receiving party…”

“Fuck.”

“Is that a yes, or is that a no?”

Blake twists his arm again, and Ted’s hips writhe. “Just…just gimme a, uh, a second…oooh-!”

“Very well,” Blake says gently, leaning forward to kiss Ted’s spine. Balancing carefully, Blake reaches beneath his shadow’s body to stroke the insides of Ted’s quivering thighs. Ted gives voice to a wordless complaint when Blake declines to provide any further stimulation, then another as Blake steps back. “Do not even think of touching yourself, Theodore,” he warns. “Keep your hands where they are.”

Ted swallows with difficulty. “Yes, sir.”

Blake rips open a condom packet and rolls it on, taking a moment to stroke himself while he admires
the sight before him. “My god, but you’re magnificent.” He runs a hand over Ted’s back, then down across that sculpted, tight ass. “Just gorgeous. I could never get tired of looking at you” Blake darts a hand down to cup Ted’s scrotum “touching you…” he moves up onto the bed, and thrusts deep inside his shadow’s body. “…fucking you.”

Oh, it’s good. Beyond good. Blake grips Ted’s hips and does his best to deliver a nice, hard fucking as requested. Ted pushes back against him impatiently and Blake decides that if it’s not good enough, Ted can do the rest of the work by himself.

They change position and Ted’s chest is heaving as he straddles Blake’s hips, reaching a hand back to grasp the base of Blake’s cock before sinking down upon it. Blake runs his palms up and down Ted’s thighs. “I do not believe we’ve ever done it quite like this,” he says, watching as a fat bead of precome forms at the tip of Ted’s cock and drips down onto his own stomach.

“Guess it’s past time, then,” Ted sighs, leaning forward to brace his arms on either side of Blake before beginning to rock back and forth. “Used to be like this with the senior officers.”

“Oh. Would you rather that we not-”

“It’s good ‘cause I’m with you,” Ted interrupts. “All of it is.”

He stops to lean down for a kiss, and then there are no words for either of them to speak for quite some time. Blake presses his head back against the mattress as Ted rides him with an envious amount of energy, and all too soon it’s time for Blake to finally fulfill that promise he’d made in a Sanctuary bordello. It would be just as pleasant to continue on as they are, Blake thinks wistfully even as orders Ted back into position. “We will have to revisit that particular position soon,” Blake says, reaching a hand for one of the sword hilts.

After making sure that there’s no possible way that he could inadvertently murder Ted by doing so, Blake begins to slowly work the plasma sword’s hilt inside its owner. “Do it faster,” Ted complains.

“No, I don’t think so.” Blake twists the hilt in much the same manner as he’d done with his own hand, and smiles when Ted claws at the headboard. “Easy, my darling.”

“Y’ain’t the one with the sword up his- ahhhh!” The startled exclamation segues into a guttural moan as Blake pushes the hilt in further.

“My goodness, listen to you. It seems you like this,” Blake purrs, reaching a hand around to grasp Ted’s straining cock by its base. “Do you think I might be able to make you come, just by fucking you with your own sword?” He slides the hilt out entirely, and then thrusts it back in with a quick motion. Ted releases his death-grip on the headboard and pounds on the wall with the side of his fist. There’s an answering uproar in the room adjacent, spewed obscenities and demands for quiet. “It is fortunate that Ballard is situated several rooms away, otherwise he might have heard.”

Blake tightens his grip on the sword hilt, fucking Ted with it roughly. His lover is squirming and crying at this point, enthusiastically complicit in his own debasement, and Blake is forced to admit to a fierce delight in dominating Ted. It’s not simply enjoying himself because Ted is enjoying this… Blake has discovered that it is merely fortunate that Ted does enjoy it. It is far from easy to admit that he has yet another thing in common with Handsome Jack, or that it’s thanks to Jack that Blake even has Ted in his life.

He pushes away the unwelcome revelations and does his best to stay in the moment, ensuring that the man he loves is fully satisfied by the time they’re done. Blake teases and sneers, alternating violence with tenderness until Ted is so exhausted that he can barely remain on his knees. Even
while struggling to push himself back up he refuses to admit that he’s had enough, so Blake does it for him. “On your back, Colonel Blanco.”

Ted rolls over weakly, and Blake climbs astride in a reversal of the position they’d tried earlier. His right arm aches so he’s forced to use the left arm for balance, moving up and down while Ted’s groans become increasingly desperate. “Jeffrey-!”

“Yes, that’s it. Come for me, dear one,” Blake urges…and Ted does, almost immediately after being told to do so. Blake watches his shadow’s body arch up against his, listens to the stuttered gasps, and he loves every moment of it. His own climax is quickly achieved across the muscled plane of Ted’s stomach, twinges of pleasure shivering up his spine as he lifts himself up and off.

Blake moves to lay beside Ted, and they nuzzle at each other tiredly. Doing otherwise would require far too much energy. “Fuck, that was good,” Ted mumbles. “Coulda gone back in, at the end.”

“There will be other times,” Blake assures him, but Ted is already fast asleep and beyond hearing.

In the morning he wakes with Ted’s mouth on his cock, so perhaps his promise hadn’t fallen on deaf ears after all. They usher in the day with kisses, moans, and laughter – an exceedingly pleasant way to greet the sun.

One shared shower later, and Blake dons his suit while Ted disappears in search of food. What’s brought back is dripping grease and of questionable origin, but it’s filling and not poisonous. Ted also produces a cold can of rakk ale to go with it. “You try to have coffee with that, you’ll be horkin’ it all up two minutes later. I’ll make sure you get a decent lunch once we get back upstairs,” Ted says, jerking his chin towards the window where Helios can be seen in its fixed orbit around Elpis. “Maybe a nice protein shake, with a heart on it.”

“Thanks ever so,” Blake tells him, finishing his morning meal and wondering just how fierce his breath is at the moment. “Theodore, how is my-”

“It can’t be any worse than it was when you just woke up, but I got you a toothbrush anyways,” Ted says. “I used it first though, so you’ll get Atlas germs.”

Blake snatches the proffered dental supplies from Ted’s hand. “I shall take my chances.”

He’s reminded of the agreement he’d brokered between himself and Ballard when the younger man gives him a meaningful look once they’re heading back to Prosperity Junction. Ted’s sufficiently distracted by the mention of ‘Zer0’, as they’ve learned the Vault Hunter is named, not to mind Ballard taking over guard duty. “I dunno how long it’ll be, I might have to beat the information outta some folks…just keep an eye on him, Lieutenant.”

Ballard shifts to attention. “Yes, sir!”

“You look like you need some exercise, Ballard. Cool it,” Ted warns, then reaches out to squeeze Blake’s shoulder on his way out. “Don’t you let this kid get too comfortable with you, Sticks.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it, darling.”

“Scuse me?”

“I apologize most profusely: Colonel Darling,” Blake corrects himself, glancing over at Ballard. The other man is back to looking queasy, and Blake feels a bit ill upon remembering precisely what they’ll be doing inside Shade’s tourist trap.
Ted growls at the pair of them, and settles the helmet on his head before leaving. “This shouldn’t take long, should it?” Ballard whispers.

“I shouldn’t imagine so,” Blake says. “Let’s get on with it; the sooner we get started, the sooner we can leave.”

They walk into the World of Curiosities, and the competing smells hit Blake like a BUL-Loader. He can hear Ballard begin to gag, and clenches his jaw in order to control his own urge to follow suit – the stench is overwhelming. He retrieves his pocket square and holds over his mouth and nose, peering about in the dimlit interior. There are preserved animals everywhere, from the huge display bearing an actual bullymong to a small and rather gelatinous-looking scythid.

Blake carefully slips past the disturbingly lifelike skag, which seems as if it’s staring right at him, and past a trophy that’s even more disturbing than the skag. An imperfectly preserved man has been arranged on a chair, with what looks like a megaphone protruding from his chest. This, of course, promptly terrifies him by playing a recording welcoming to the Hall of Pandoran Luminaries. “Good lord, that’s disgusting.”

“Do you actually need me…there, or should I wait here? Sir?” Ballard can barely string two words together without making a gagging noise, and Blake gladly dismisses him to wait beside the bullymong.

Once he’s reasonably certain that his stomach will stop seizing up in sympathy, Blake takes a careful breath filtered through his handkerchief and walks into the next room. The foul smell of slowly rotting flesh is even stronger in the smaller space, and he flattens the cloth against his face as if the increased pressure will somehow help. Small wonder that Ballard had been close to vomiting when he’d come through here yesterday, Blake thinks.

The room has been divided by several partitions, each one housing a human corpse in varied states of decay, and Blake glances at each as he walks past – the displays have lighting systems that are designed to respond to movement. Closest to the door is some sort of bandit wearing a welding mask, and the next one… “Come out of there at once,” Blake snaps as another pre-recorded message begins to play.

“At least listen to the rest,” Shade says, shifting from his pose and adjusting his sunglasses. “Please?”

“No,” Blake replies, continuing past to stand in front of Nakayama’s display. “The smell in here is dreadful – who botched the embalming process?”

“Smell? What smell?” Shade asks. “I don’t smell anything. Did I mention it was good to see you again? Most people don’t come back.”

Blake suppresses a sigh. “I wonder why.” He glances to the right, where the corpse of Commandant Steele has been crudely held upright by a sharpened pole that extends out past her sternum. “Did you simply drive about collecting bodies, or were these brought to you? Don’t answer that, because I don’t truly care,” he adds hastily. Shade exhales a loud, disappointed breath. “You are about to lose two of your exhibits, so I suggest that you refresh your memory – quietly – on the best methods of corpse retrieval.”

“Two?”

“Yes, two. These two at the end are my employees and therefore my property,” Blake says. Steele isn’t really an employee of his, but since he’s acting CEO of Hyperion as well as Atlas…well, there’s certainly no harm in claiming her. He’s sure the Crimson Lance would want to lay her to rest.
once her dignity has been preserved, if it’s not already too late for the poor woman. Speaking of employees gives him an idea. “You mentioned that you would like a set of armor; how would you like to perform a trade for two sets of it? I not only have access to a pristine set of red armor, but also some armor belonging to an Omega Assassin.”

Shade’s differently-sized eyes are twitching like mad, and his cheroot is in danger of being bitten in half. “You…have…Lance Assassin armor?”

“Indeed I do,” Blake says smoothly, sending a silent apology to Ted. “You’ve already met the owner of it; he was the one who trained Athena, if you weren’t aware of it.”

“Really?”

“I will even throw in the bodies of two ex-employees, in the event that you need something to hold up the armor,” he says, glancing towards the door as the sound of Ballard’s raised voice is heard. It seems as if Ted has finished his inquiries and is coming to find Blake. “In the meantime, if you could perhaps shroud these two until I can arrange for their removal…?”

Shade is clearly too stunned at his good fortune to protest (or simply talk in general), and he wanders out of the door in a daze. Blake moves toward the other door purposefully, slipping through and placing his back against it. “Smells like shit in here,” Ted complains. “You about done, sir?”

Blake glances over at Ballard, who looks as if he’s ready to faint. “Very nearly. Lieutenant, I’m afraid I’ve promised that you will be the one to secure Nakayama’s remains for transport. The Colonel and myself are needed back on Helios.”

“Of course, sir.”

“You think you can manage it, son?” Ted laughs. “You look like you’re ready to paint the walls with your breakfast.”

Ballard gives his commanding officer a sickly-looking smile. “I’ll manage, Colonel.”

“That’s the spirit,” Ted says approvingly. “Cmon, Sticks, let’s light out.”

“Very well,” Blake agrees, and then realizes that he’s left his ECHO device back in the hall. “I will meet you outside once I have it,” he says after explaining the problem.

“Yeah, okay.” Ted shrugs and turns to leave.

Blake returns to the Hall of Pandoran Luminaries, intent on retrieving his property, but it’s nowhere to be seen. He had brought it here, he’s sure of it…

“No, sir, don’t go in there!” Blake hears Ballard’s voice rise sharply, and he turns to see Ted opening the door.

“What’s got his thong in a wad? Listen, honey, you left your ECHO out beside the-” Ted’s words cut off abruptly, and the ECHO device he’s brought in falls to the ground with a clatter as he sees what’s beyond Nakayama’s cubicle.

“Theodore? Ted,” Blake says, alarm spreading through him as Ted collapses to his knees with his eyes still locked on Steele’s display. As sheltered an existence Blake has led, he’s seen this same look on other men’s faces when they’ve taken their death wounds.

Ted’s mouth opens and closes soundlessly. “I’m…I’m sorry, sir,” Ballard says miserably from
beyond the doorway, and Blake looks from one man to the other as he slowly realizes what’s just happened.

All this time he’s been under the impression that Ted’s lost love was one of the Atlas Assassins, even though both Ballard and Saybrook had given him enough information to piece together the truth if he’d only taken the time to do so. Ted himself had asked questions concerning the very spot where she’d died, and had told Blake the method of her death.

And Blake had led him directly to her mutilated, rotting corpse. Oh, dear god.

“Helga Steele…was your wife.”
Blake presides over Helga Steele's removal from the World of Curiosities. Hyperion executives aren't known for their empathy but for Ted, he'll make the effort.

Blake wrenches his gaze from Ted, still frozen in shock and grief, and looks at Ballard. Why hadn’t the man told him? This could’ve been avoided if Blake had only known…but he hadn’t wanted to intrude on Ted’s privacy, so now he feels at fault as well. “Lieutenant, contact both of his brothers. Whomever can arrive quicker should do so. And for god’s sake, keep Shade out of here until we’ve gone.” Ballard gives him a wide-eyed nod and dashes off, no doubt relieved to get away, and Blake turns back around slowly. Part of him wishes that he could run, as well. What can he possibly say?

Ted’s eyes are still locked on the propped-up corpse of his late wife as if he simply can’t believe what he’s seeing. “Is…is she really…?”

Blake swallows against the lump in his throat. “I am sorry, Theodore.” Inadequate words for unfathomable pain, but what else is left? “I simply thought that- no, that’s…that’s no excuse. I wish I could do something, anything, to make things better.”

He walks over and hesitantly places a hand on Ted’s shoulder, unsure if Ted even wants to be touched right now. “One or both of your brothers will be here very shortly.”

“She can’t…she can’t stay here, I won’t leave her- fuck,” Ted chokes, finally looking away with tears beginning to form. He closes his eyes tightly and one spills down his cheek. “Look at her.”

Blake does, and he wishes that Ted has never had to. It was much easier to look upon her when he hadn’t known; now what was merely distasteful has become horrifying. He shudders to think of finding Harold Tassiter like this, his brain exposed to full view while flies buzz about an impossibly large torso wound. “We will take her away from this, I swear it.” Ted’s shoulders heave with a suppressed sob, and Blake feels a flash of anger akin to hatred. Ballard should have told him! “Come, let’s get you some air.” Ted shakes his head silently, not wanting to leave her, and Blake crouches down beside him to wait.

They stay there for who knows how long – the wait seems interminable in the stuffy room, though Blake is painfully aware of the muffled sounds of Shade’s voice as Ballard evicts the man from the premises. He has no real qualms against letting Ted murder Shade, but the man seems utterly devoid of empathy and Blake isn’t about to let Shade’s thoughtless comments cause Ted any more pain.

Blake suddenly curses himself for his lack of empathy, and stands up to remove his suit jacket. Her arms are curved too much for him to slide the sleeves on and, even if he could have managed it, the stake propping her up wouldn’t allow for full coverage. Blake risks a glance over his shoulder at Ted, still slumped on his knees staring into space – his eyes are turned towards Steele, but whatever he’s looking at isn’t in the room with them. “Ted? I need one of your swords.”

There’s no reply…not that Blake was expecting one. He takes a shallow breath, because at this distance the smell of Steele’s decay is really quite pungent, and walks back to gently slide one of the sword hilts from the back of Ted’s belt. It’s unbelievable to think that he’d been using it for something quite different just the previous night. It seems as if it’s been years. Blake softly explains
what he’s going to do, in case Ted’s still in there somewhere listening, then puts words into action. He carefully slices the wooden stake, paring it down to a stub protruding from Steele’s chest so that he can drape his jacket over her and hide the worse of her injuries. Blake’s wondering what to do about the brain case, for lack of a better term, when one of Ted’s brothers ducks through the door.

The grim expression doesn’t tell him much, but Blake catches a glimpse of a tattoo which identifies him as Zed. “What the fuck. She been here this whole freakin’ time?”

“It seems so,” Blake says. “If you have any ideas on how to cover her head…”

Zed pauses, then rips the red band from his bicep and hands it over. Blake catches a glimpse of a tattoo which identifies him as Zed. “What the fuck. She been here this whole freakin’ time?”

Blake ties the red strip of cloth just above the metal rim as Zed speaks to Ted quietly, and turns around as Ned arrives. “Holy-!

“Zip it; he don’t need to hear all that,” Zed snaps. “Blake, get your ass back over here and stay with him while we move her.” The eldest Blanco is furious, and getting angrier by the moment. “When I get my hands on Shade…”

Ned drops a hand on Ted’s shoulder, squeezing hard as he slips past. “Okay, let’s get our girl home. Zed, go find some blankets t’wrap her in while I check somethin’ real quick.”

Blake kneels beside Ted once more, reaching for his shadow’s hands. They’re freezing, and he folds his own hands around them. “Theodore? Theodore, listen now. We have to move away so that your brothers can-”

“I know,” Ted says suddenly, lifting his head slightly and looking over at Ned. “Don’t you hurt her.”

“White gloves all the way, dude, I promise. Go on with Jeff and we’ll bring her out real careful.”

It’s like assisting an invalid, Blake thinks as he slips a hand beneath Ted’s arm and helps him to his feet. Ted doesn’t speak again until they’re outside in the heat, moving towards the Technical that Zed has pointed them towards. “I keep hoping this all ain’t really happenin’, but I’m…I’m not asleep, am I.”

Blake’s throat tightens at the hopelessness in Ted’s voice. “I would give anything to be able to say that you are, love, believe me.”

“All this time, she’s been here. I’ve been up on Helios, with…and she was here, and folks came to point and stare. I said I’d be there for her, I promised her I would, and-” Ted breaks off the rest. “This fucking planet.”

He’s not sure how to best provide comfort so Blake slowly reaches out to touch Ted’s arm, only to be brushed away. “What do you need me to do?” Blake asks.

“I need for you to bring my wife back,” Ted says sharply, stopping to tilt his head back and rub his palms over his face. “God, this is so fucked up.”

Blake reaches out again, and this time Ted crowds against him. “Yes, it is.” He lays the palm of his hand against the back of Ted’s neck, rubbing his thumb over the skin slowly. “I don’t know what to say to you, except that I am here for whatever you might need.”

Ted exhales a shuddering breath and Blake’s heart aches to see how tightly Ted is controlling himself. He looks as though he’s aged ten years in the last hour. “Just be here, then,” his shadow
“Of course,” Blake promises. He doesn’t know the proper protocol for a military burial, but then it’s highly doubtful that Ted would want anything of the sort. Something tells him that she’ll be laid to rest in Fyrestone, a guess that’s verified by Zed once he and Ned emerge from the World of Curiosities carrying Helga Steele’s carefully wrapped corpse.

“Fast Travel’s still runnin’, so I’ll go on ahead and dig a spot for her – I figure right next to Momma, if that’s okay?” Zed asks Ted, who has lapsed back into disassociation. He has to repeat the question two more times until Ted hears and nods his permission. “Tricia’s gettin’ things ready, with Tim to help her. Ned’ll drive you two…three…on home.”

Blake watches the brothers lift Steele into the back of the Technical, and Ted resurfaces long enough to climb in to sit with her. Ned gestures for Blake to sit in the passenger seat, and gets in after another hushed conference with Zed. “Hell of a thing,” the doctor sighs, glancing at the back seat. “I liked that girl. She came to visit once, right after the Lance set up shop.”

“Oh,” Blake says, not knowing what else to say. Again. This is becoming quite the theme for him lately. “I never met her.”

“I think you woulda liked her, too. Shared interests, and all that. Helga was tough as nails – guess you’d have to be, though, bein’ a Siren. She was some kinda alright.” Ned says, maneuvering the truck around a skag that had been struck by another vehicle.

To have been loved by Ted, she surely must have been. “How far of a drive is it?”

“Couple hours, so not that bad. You might wanna get some sleep while you can – we’re gonna send her off Fyrestone style.”

Something tells Blake that it means another raucous party with double the alcohol intake. “I’m not sure that sleep is a viable option.”

“Yeah, I guess it wouldn’t,” Ned sighs, glancing over his shoulder at Ted. Blake looks, too, and sees that Ted is cradling Steele in his arms as if she’s still alive and in need of protection against being jostled by the truck’s movement. “He’s takin’ it pretty hard.”

“Is he?” Blake asks, woefully aware of how unprepared he is to deal with consoling a partner. Or anyone else, for that matter. “I don’t suppose you have any advice to dispense.”

Ned lifts one of his shoulders in a half-shrug. “Not really. Just try not to be upset if he don’t wanna be near you for a while – it ain’t personal. Bound to be tough gettin’ a scab like that ripped off, you know? At least now he’ll get a chance to say his goodbyes and know where the hell she is. Maybe this’ll turn out to be a good thing.”

Blake doubts it.

He turns to look back once more, and finds that Ted has angled himself to one side and that one of his hands is resting close to Blake. He places his fingers atop Ted’s, intending to convey a silent message of love and support before he turns back around, and Ted seizes Blake’s hand before it can be pulled back. They hold hands the rest of the way.

Blake’s arm is twisted and cramped by the time the Technical rolls up to Fyrestone’s gates, but he doesn’t let go until Ted finally releases Blake’s hand from his death grip. Ned drives them through the gap in the fence, letting the truck idle as Zed closes it up again and jumps up on the side. “Far side of the motel,” Zed tells them, and Blake lifts his head to see a massive scaffold-type construction
surrounded by piles of dead branches and building material.

“What is that for?” Blake asks stupidly, his mind supplying its use mere seconds after he’s aired his question. “Ah. A funeral pyre.”

“We won’t take her there just yet,” Zed murmurs, exchanging a glance with Ned before looking in the backseat at Ted. “What if I told you that you might be able to say goodbye to her? Like, say it and have her actually….listen?”

Ted lifts red-rimmed eyes from contemplation of the wrapped body laying across his knees. “You better be real careful how you explain that, Zed. I’m in no mood for your shit.”

Ned clears his throat. “Here’s the thing. When I was…like that…Zed managed to patch me up ‘cause my brain was still runnin’. Miss Helga, she’s still got some function up top. Even after…well, you know.”

“Are you saying that she is still alive?” Blake demands.

“Well, she is…and she ain’t,” Zed says cautiously. “It’s been a minute since she’s been, um, active and all. We think if we get enough power runnin’ to her brain, she’ll be able to communicate.”

Ted looks at both his brothers slowly. “There’s too much damage done.”

“It might not even work at all,” Ned tells them. “If it does, she won’t have much time…it might be better to put her to rest right now. But, Ted. She never got to say goodbye, neither.”

“How long would Ms. Steele have, if the procedure worked? Could you, ah, provide power from an outside source?” Blake asks.

Ned cocks his head to one side as he thinks it over. “You mean, hook this poor girl up to a generator? I dunno – we’d have to figure out how to provide the proper voltage first, but…I guess it’s doable. Zed?”

“If it’s what you want, we’ll get it done,” Zed promises, looking straight at Ted. “If you’d rather leave her in peace, that’s fine too. Your choice.”

Ted exhales slowly. “I never thought I’d be able to talk to her again. If you can do it, then do it.”

Blake stands beside him, watching as Zed and Ned lift Helga Steele back out of the Technical and carry her back towards Fyrestone. “Are you sure? You need not go through with it after the shock you’ve had, my love.”

“Fuck, I got no time for this.”

“Here’s always time for being human,” Blake says gently. “No one here expects you to hold it together after the shock you’ve had, my love.”

Ted rubs at his eyes in a rough gesture. “I expect it. Used to call it Daisy Duty, back on Promethea…if a soldier got hurt too bad for me to fix, one of us’d put ‘em down with a sword. There was a whole ritual to go through. We’d take the helmet off so they could see it was another human givin’ the mercy blow, promise to tell their families, tell a story sometimes so they didn’t need to be frightened when it was their turn to go. Helga figured out who I was after she saw me on Daisy Duty once. She even told me once that she wouldn’t mind dyin’ if I was the one to send her on.”
“I can understand the sentiment.”

Blake moves to embrace Ted, but isn’t too surprised when his lover objects to being touched. “Look, I know you want to comfort me and all…”

“But you are not ready for that yet,” Blake finishes. “I can understand that, too.” Something tells him that the walls, which Ted is trying to build to contain the brunt of his emotional response to Helga Steele’s passing, won’t hold up for very long under the full concentration of Blake’s sympathy. Blake knows that Ted is desperately clinging to control, and his own role as Ted’s partner requires him to step back and allow Ted to keep whatever dignity he thinks he needs. “Why don’t I run along and see if your brothers require my assistance?”

Ted’s look of relief makes Blake glad that he’d thought of it. “If you don’t mind.”

“Oh of course not.” He does, but it’s not really worth making an issue of it right now – it isn’t as if Ted is going to commit suicide the moment he’s left alone. Not while facing the prospect of actually conversing with the one person whose death had changed him so drastically. Blake is more concerned with what will happen once Steele dies for the final time.

He finds Zed and Ned in animated conversation once he reaches Zed’s hut, and they immediately stop talking and start looking behind him. “Damn it all, we ain’t ready yet-”

Blake holds his hands up in a peacemaking gesture. “He wished to be left alone. Have you made any progress?”

“Well, yeah. Voltage was less of a problem than we first thought but whenever we hook her up, her brain starts drawin’ power from the generator like crazy,” Ned tells him. “Thing is, she wants more power than we got - the circuits embedded in her think they still need their fair share, so they send signals to her brain to draw more.”

“I put in a call to Scooter, but he ain’t answerin’,” Zed sighs, “and Janey’s too busy to come – somethin’ to do with Athena. We might be able to get by with switchin’ the hook-ups while Steele’s still…movin’…but I dunno.”

Blake looks at the brothers’ unhappy expressions. “Couldn’t you just let her use up the power in one generator and then switch to the other?”

Zed casts a glance at Steele’s corpse, which has been strapped to the rusted exam table. “When we start her up, her mind jumps back to the same place. It don’t matter that we’ve, uh, already gone over some things ‘cause she don’t remember squat the next time ‘round.”

“It means she’s got a shorter time than we first thought,” Ned explains. “Unless you got some secret engineer skills you been hidin’.”

The memory of Ted modifying a shield for him surfaces in Blake’s mind suddenly. “I do not, but I know who does.”

He explains, and Zed’s expression goes from alarmed to pensive. “I’d hoped to spare him this.”

“Is it that bad?”

“Sure as fuck ain’t good, I’ll tell you now. Ned, why’n you go ask him.”

Ned flashes a mock salute and walks off, leaving Blake alone with Zed. And Helga Steele. “Something tells me that there is a reason I wasn’t the one sent away,” Blake says.
“Somethin’ like that. Look, Blake…he’s bound to take this badly, once she’s gone for good. I may not be oldest by much, but I’ve always looked out for both of them idiots even when they didn’t want me to.” Zed looks Blake straight in the eye. “I want you t’promise me you’ll stick by him. He’s not gonna do away with himself with you in the picture, no matter how guilty he feels, but you gotta hold on with both hands. Let him slip, and he’ll pick a fight too big to win.”

“Allow me to assure you-”

“Let him slip and I’ll come after you, Blake. It’ll be just like when Ted started huntin’ you but when I catch you, there ain’t gonna be no fun and games.”

Blake’s temper flares. “Are threats really the only thing you can think of, when your brother is in such pain? Are you truly that much of a backwater cretin? He wouldn’t be in this much anguish if not for me, and that is a guilt that I might never live down! I shall be atoning for this every single day, Doctor - how dare you suggest that I would simply abandon someone I love so dearly when he needs me the most!”

Zed is still watching him intently. “I lost him once, Blake. I’m allowed to not want that to happen again when I can do somethin’ about it.”

“As long as I still draw breath, I will be at his side,” Blake promises, wondering if Ted will even allow it. “I cannot guarantee that he will want me to be, however.”

“Some days he might not,” Zed says quietly in an echo of Ned’s speech. “Some days’ll be the worst either of you’ve ever seen, but they’ll pass. He might pretend now and again that nothin’ ever happened here and he’ll need you to pretend right along with him. He cry over her yet?”

Blake shakes his head. “He doesn’t have time for it.”

“Well, don’t make it a big deal when it happens,” Zed tells him, scratching at the side of his neck in embarrassment. “I know he likes…certain stuff…in certain situations, but this’s different and you need t’treat it different.”

“Anything else?” Blake asks drily.

The corners of Zed’s mouth quirk slightly. “I think that about covers it. Just treat him right, company man.”

“I’m trying,” Blake says, shifting his weight as he catches sight of Ned and Ted. “How long do you suppose that she will last?”

“Hard to say. I guess we’ll see, once Ted takes a look at the generator situation.”

“Let’s get this over with,” Ted says shortly, averting his eyes from Steele’s shrouded body and grabbing the tool kit from atop the nearest generator. “Jeff, I need you over here.”

Blake excuses himself and follows his shadow to the second generator, which they need to drag over to the first. “I wish you didn’t need to do this.”

Ted shrugs. “That’s just life for you; never quite works out like you hope it will. I’m guessing Zed was dusting off some old threats,” he says, and Blake is struck by the realization that Ted’s drawl is all but nonexistent…and has been since bringing Steele back from the World of Curosities. “Wanna talk about it?”

He squats next to the generator and takes the side panel off, tinkering with its inner workings. “This
isn’t about me,” Blake reminds him gently.

“It makes me feel better to concentrate on something else,” Ted admits. “Did he threaten to kill you? Hand me that…no, the one to the – yeah, that one. Thanks.”

Blake shakes his head. “Not in so many words.”

“He won’t do it, no matter how convincing he sounds.” Ted laughs humorlessly. “Zed always thought he needed to protect us.” He falls silent and stays that way throughout the rest of the modification process, finally looking up at Blake and nodding. “It’s done.”

Ted takes Blake’s offered hand up and they walk back to Building 03, where the other Blancos have propped Steele up into a standing position. Somewhere along the line, Blake’s suit jacket has been removed and bandages have been wrapped around her wounds. He squeezes Ted’s hand when he feels his shadow falter. “Courage, love.”

“You want us here for this?” Zed asks, and moves back at an angle when Ted nods wordlessly. “Ned, you go on and start her back up.”

Ned switches the primary generator on, and steps back as Steele’s circuitry begins to light up. The blood-red eyes focus suddenly as ‘life’ returns to them, and her body jerks in response to the electrical current. “The key works! Soldier, get your team ready to inside while I finish off…” her hands drop to her bandages and her voice begins to rise into its upper register. “Wait, where am I? What happened to the vault? WHY IS THIS HOLE HERE?!?”

Blake’s hand is nearly crushed by Ted’s grip. “Jesus fuck.”

Steele pauses in her scrabbling at the bandaged hole in her stomach, and her head slowly lifts towards them. “Teddy? What is going on? What has happened to me?” She looks at Blake uncomprehendingly and back at Ted. “Where are we?”

“We brought you back to Fyrestone,” Ted tells her haltingly. “And…”

She stretches her hands out, focusing on the circuitry that’s replaced her Siren markings before she goes back to patting herself down. “My tattoos are gone. Teddy, what has happened?”

“Honey, you opened the Vault almost seven years ago.”

“That is impossible; it just-” Steele breaks off as her fingers encounter the clear glass that encloses her brain. “What is this.”

Ted’s grip on Blake’s hand tightens even more, and Blake can’t help making a pained noise when two of his fingers are crushed together. “That thing from the Vault? It killed you once you opened it.”

“Explain.” Steele listens silently as Ted tells her all that has transpired since her first death. Her eyelids flicker now and again, as if she’s still trying to blink. “So now I am in Fyrestone plugged into a generator, after being made into…into…this?”

Blake winces as Ted squeezes his hand again, and is forced to speak up. “Theodore, you are close to breaking my fingers.”

Steele’s head turns to look at his face, and then her eyes move down to their joined hands. “And who are you?”
“Jeffrey Blake, acting CEO of the Hyperion Corporation,” Blake says, not particularly wanting to meet her gaze. “And of the Atlas Corporation, as well.”

“Seven years, lyubov moya.”

Ted’s voice drops to a fierce whisper that’s hiding a sob behind it. “Sparks, I’m…I’m so sorry. If I’d only known you were still here.”

Her eyes close briefly, and she raises a hand to touch her cheek. “I feel as if there should be tears here, but whatever was done to me has made it impossible.” Steele’s eyes open again, and she looks at them. “What will happen when the generators stop working? Will I die?”

Neither of them know the answer to this, so Blake casts a beseeching look towards Ted’s brothers. Zed clears his throat awkwardly, and Steele tries to turn towards the sound. “Yes’m, your brain’s gonna stop workin’ a few minutes after the generators go.”

“Come where I can see you,” Steele orders, and Blake watches her face soften as both Zed and Ned circle around obediently. “How long do I have…Zed? You are Zed, yes?”

Zed smiles despite the seriousness of the situation, and bobs his head in confirmation. “Yes ma’am, that’s me. Uh, you probably got two hours if you don’t move too much. One and a half for sure.”

“When you said one day we would be with your brothers, Teddy, this is not what I thought we would do,” Steele says, surprising a laugh out of Ted. “All of you, so handsome.”

Ned interrupts immediately. “I’m the best lookin’ one.”

“And you are Ned. I remember you, make no mistake. A lodestone for trouble.”

“All the best kinds of it,” Ned says.

Steele smiles at him and looks at all three brothers. “I am glad to see all of you in one place,” she says before focusing on Ted. “Listen to me, now. I would like you to sit with me for a while, and then I would like you to do one last thing for me.”

Ted shakes his head immediately. “No. No, I can’t.”

“But you must, my love. I do not want to die because a battery ran out.”

“No.”

“You came here as Ares. When you are Ares, you must do as I say.” Steele looks at him with the saddest smile Blake’s ever seen. “I want to die on my terms, Teddy. Let me go with honor.”

Ted ducks his head. “Is that an order?”

“It is a request, my husband. The last one I will ever make to you.”

“Oh, fuck off!”

Steele turns towards Blake as best as she is able. “You see what I have dealt with, yes?”

“That was low and you know it,” Ted says.

“Go and collect your things, Teddy. I want to talk to your Jeffrey.” When Ted leaves, swearing angrily, Steele beckons Blake closer and dismisses Zed and Ned with the same imperious gesture.
“This is still a shock to me. One moment I am at the Salt Flats opening a Vault, and the next I am a
talking corpse. Tell me…how bad does it look to you?”

Blake clears his throat. “I believe that you’ve definitely seen better days, Commandant.”

She smiles. “I suppose that is so. It is bittersweet for me to be here, Mister Blake. The last time I saw
Ted, we swore to each other that we would meet again in Fyrestone. I was going to open the Vault
and together we would escape from the Crimson Lance’s reach forever. Now I am like this, and have
one hour before I am dead again.” Steele looks away, out into the dusty street. “You are with him
now.”

Blake isn’t sure where to look, and he’s not sure why he should feel embarrassed. “Well…yes.”

“Good,” she says simply. “Would you like to know a secret, Mister Blake?”

“Jeffrey,” Blake corrects her.

She looks back at him and nods her acknowledgement. “Helga.” Helga’s limbs freeze up, but the
tension in her body seems to ease almost immediately. “I am not sure I will last an hour, Jeffrey, so I
will tell you plainly. The secret to loving our Ted is that while he will ask for what he wants, you
must give him what he needs.”

“I’ve been given what everyone thinks I needs – endless advice,” Blake says, suddenly angry with
her. Why couldn’t she have died somewhere - anywhere else? “What makes yours any different?”

“Because this isn’t advice…or even much of a secret; it’s something you already know. I wish I did
not have to be here, either,” Helga tells him as if she can see into his thoughts. “You care for him,
and that is good. More than good. Ted deserves to be happy.”

Blake shifts his feet nervously. “I’ve done my best to make that happen, and shall continue to do so
to the best of my ability.”

Helga smiles at him. “Will you tell me something, Jeffrey? Will you tell me how the two of you
met?”

“Is this truly how you wish to spend your last hour alive?”

She reaches out a hand to him and Blake accepts it readily. “It is.” Helga laughs as Blake recounts
those desperate, miserable days of being hunted, trying to condense as much information as he can
because Ted needs to have her last moments all to himself. So she gets an abridged version of Ted’s
unorthodox courtship and when Blake fumbles to a halt he realizes that Ted has come back and
seated himself at Helga’s feet to listen, too. “There is never enough time when we think we have all
that we need,” Helga says calmly. “It is a genuine pleasure to have met you, Jeffrey Blake.”

Blake presses his lips against the decaying flesh of her knuckles, feeling a prickling sensation behind
his eyes. “I can assure you that the pleasure and the honor, Helga Steele, were all mine.” He blinks
back the tears he doesn’t feel that he has the right to shed and he walks away as Ted rises to his feet,
face hidden behind the Lance Assassin helmet.

Moving back to give them privacy, Blake gives in to the temptation to turn around and look. Ted is
standing before her and removing the helmet, and Blake can hear the low murmur of their voices as
they say their farewells. He feels ashamed to ever have been angry with her – it’s no fault of hers that
she’s here. Still. If circumstances were different, Blake thinks that he would have liked her a great
deal. Why had she chosen to give him the advice that she had, knowing that he would have already
known it? Would Harold have been so accepting, if that had been him hooked up to those generators
and turned into a sideshow attraction?

Poor, dear Harold. Blake tilts his head back to gaze up at Helios, imagining the torrent of abuse Harold would have unleashed upon him. “You were many things to many people, Harold, but ‘asshole’ was chief among them,” he says aloud with a wry smile.

It slips from his face soon after its appearance when one of the generators makes a warning rattle. Blake turns his head to see that Ted has drawn Helga into his arms and he watches as Ted slowly disengages a hand, reaching it back for the hilt of a plasma sword. The hilt is pressed against the base of her skull, and Blake can see the glowing blade slide out through the bandages concealing the top of her head.

The generators, abruptly freed from the burden of their task, cough to a halt.

Across the street, Ted curls around the body of his lost love and Blake looks up at Helios once more. This damned *planet*. Zed and Ned have stationed themselves by the old bounty board, but are slowly making their way back to Building 03. “C’mon over,” Zed tells him.

“In a bit,” Blake says.

“Suit yourself.” The brothers move away and Blake watches them gather around their grieving triplet, embracing him wordlessly while he holds Helga’s ruined corpse to his chest.
Why do bad things happen to bad people?

Chapter Summary

Helga Steele gets a Fyrestone funeral, Zed gets drunk and breaks his leg, and Ned makes disparaging remarks concerning Blake's hairline. He's never been so glad to return to Helios.

Thinking that they would prefer their privacy to an audience, Blake gets up and walks out to the motel. Tim greets him with an awkward hug, and Patricia makes to throw her arms around him before faltering and deciding to shake his hand instead. “Is she dead yet?” Patricia asks.

He tries to keep in mind that she can’t help sounding so callous. “I am afraid that, yes, she has passed on.”

“I’m so sorry,” Tim says. “Ned sent me an ECHO about it, and I just…well, it sucks. Please let Ted know that we feel for him.”

“Why do people say that they’re sorry when someone dies? They shouldn’t say that unless they’re the ones responsible for the death,” Patricia says, and widens her eyes at them. “What? You know what I mean!”

Blake sighs. “Perhaps if you keep such notions to yourself while Ted is present…?”

Patricia blinks at him. “Oh, very well. Zed has already asked me to be as non-communicative as possible, and not to distress either of you. I suppose that I can try not to speak often.”

“I would greatly appreciate it,” Blake says, relieved. “I thought that I might offer my assistance with whatever it is that you two are doing.”

Tim shakes his head and assures Blake that it’s not necessary. “Everything’s already ready. It’s just been setting up beds and rigging refrigeration units for alcohol. Zed brought a ton of it from Moxxi. One of the Crimson Raiders, Maya, came by to check on him and when she found out about Commandant Steele she donated even more. I think she wanted to bring Lilith, too, but Ned said the funeral was family only. Zed’s probably going to get a visit from her tomorrow, but they didn’t want any Sirens here around Ted.”

“Yes, that was probably for the best.” Something else occurs to Blake, and he hesitates before bringing it up. “If tonight’s goal is to get drunk…”

His friend glances towards Patricia before answering. “I’m sure she’ll be fine, and Ned will be okay too. Hopefully.”

“Hopefully?”

“He decided to stop drinking entirely,” Patricia interrupts, “and the results were suitably horrific.”

Blake doesn’t particularly want to imagine a situation that Patricia Tannis would find distasteful. “I shall take you at your word on that,” he promises, and tries to change the subject. “Hopefully your own triplet can enjoy strong drink in moderation.”
Patricia makes a noise of agreement. “I have the envious position of being able to reap the secondhand benefits of Zed’s inebriation without suffering any adverse effects of extreme alcohol consumption.”

Well, he probably should have changed the subject to something else. “That’s wonderful news. Now, if you’ll excuse me…”

“What exactly did that mean?” Tim mutters, following Blake to the door.

“It means that Doctor Zed loses a substantial amount of his sexual inhibitions when he’s drunk,” Blake explains quietly, so that Patricia won’t overhear and treat them to unwanted details. Under normal circumstances it would be amusing to listen to, but he’s in no mood for it right now. “Did you ever meet Commandant Steele?”

Tim shakes his head. “No, I was still on Elpis at the time.”

They walk outside and climb up to the roof, seating themselves on an old red weapons chest. “We were supposed to have returned to Helios by now,” Blake says conversationally. “This is all a fucking disaster…I hate this planet with every fiber of my being. I’ve a mind to relocate corporate headquarters once this is over.”

“Ned and I might be visiting one of the Edens, but it’s Jakobs-related and he’s not looking forward to it.”

“Oh?” Blake glances over. “Those planets are fairly well known as ideal for vacations. Perhaps all he needs is a bit more incentive for enjoying himself. Which Eden was it? I might be able to give you a few suggestions, if you do not mind.”

Tim gives him a relieved smile. “Oh, would you really? That’d be great…only now I can’t remember if it was Eden-4 or Eden-6.”

His friend happily chatters away about his upcoming vacation, and Blake does his best to actually pay attention because from this vantage point he can see that the Blanco triplets are bringing Helga through one of the gaps in the fence. Her body is tightly wrapped in a black shroud, and Ted walks beside the stretcher on which she is being carried. Below them, the motel’s front door bangs against the threshold as Patricia comes out to watch the procession. True to her word, she stays quiet.

Blake rises to his feet in a gesture of respect as the brothers pass by, and Tim stands as well once he realizes what’s happening. “Should we go down now?”

“We’ll follow at a distance,” Blake decides. “I’ve never been to a funeral quite like this one before so I am coming up short on proper etiquette, but…”

“I guess that seems right,” Tim says. “Maybe if you had anything you want her to, um, take with her? On the fire, I mean?”

He’s not sure what Helga could possibly want besides the one thing Blake’s not willing to part with. “I doubt she’d want one of my neckties, or any of my socks.”

Tim snaps his fingers. “Hair! That’s…kind of traditional in situations like these. Cut a lock of your hair and put it down beside her – it’s supposed to show respect.”

“How would you know about that?” Blake asks as they’re climbing down from the roof. Patricia is watching them avidly as if hoping he’ll fall and break his neck.
“Those student loans weren’t taken out so I could go shopping,” Tim says with a rueful shrug. He taps his forehead and smiles. “I guess something stuck.”

Blake pats himself down in an effort to locate the knife Ted has been slipping into each of his outfits – today it’s a slim, gunmetal model with the Atlas logo stamped onto the side. He gazes at it for a moment before placing it back into his jacket’s inside pocket, nodding to Patricia Tannis, and following the three brothers.

He catches up with them at the foot of the scaffolding and, just like Tim had said they might, each man is contributing something in Helga’s honor. Zed gives her the red armband and a few pressed flowers that couldn’t have grown anywhere on Pandora. Ned tucks a comically large fake mustache into the folds of her shroud, and a faded piece of cloth. Ted pulls the ID tags from around his neck and threads a pair of rings onto the chain before he places them atop Helga’s body, then withdraws a carefully wrapped bundle from his armor and sets it down. “One moment, please,” Blake says politely, and they turn to look as he flicks the knife open.

“The hell are you doin’?” Ned asks, his expression turning incredulous as Blake reaches up to saw at a tuft of his hair. “You really have enough to spare, t’be doin’ that?”

“Leave him be,” Ted murmurs, and Ned steps aside to allow Blake past.

Blake places the strands of hair (that he really cannot afford to lose) on Helga’s shroud, and Zed gestures to a corner of her pallet. “Let’s get her on up there.” They each seize a corner of her pallet and lift it up onto the scaffolding; Blake is inwardly terrified that he will drop it despite the fact that it’s being supported by three other men roughly twice his size. When she’s situated, they climb down and Blake withdraws with the Pandoran-based doctors while Ted lights the fire using his plasma swords.

“Well, there she goes,” Zed muses, watching the first flames begin to race up the pretreated wood. “Never thought he’d ever get married, let alone to a Siren. Life never stops surprisin’ you, sometimes. Right, honey?”

Patricia looks up at him. “Life is unpredictable, filled with many variables.”

“I know it’s killin’ you, not bein’ able to come out with what you really think,” Zed tells her softly. “Thank you, sweetheart.”

“Just remember that my agreement comes with an expiration date.”

“Yes ma’am, I’ll keep it in mind.” He settles an arm across her shoulders and glances over at Ned. “What now?”

Ned shrugs. “I say we get it started around dusk. That skag’s been ready for an hour already – what if I get everything set up with Tim while y’all bring out the booze?”

“Fair enough. Blake? You go see how Ted’s holdin’ up.”

The brothers leave him on his own, and Blake slowly walks forward to stand on Ted’s right side. His shadow has his eyes fixed on the billowing flames that hide Helga’s body, and doesn’t look over to acknowledge Blake’s arrival. “She said she didn’t spend much time with me because she thought both of us would lose the courage we needed, in the end,” Ted says after a few minutes. “She didn’t want to beg to be kept alive like that.”

“Helga was an exceptional woman,” Blake replies. He’s not sure that he could have done the same if he’d been in her place.
“Yeah. She sure was.” Ted shifts into the watchful stance that Blake is used to seeing during business meetings, one hand clasping the other behind Ted’s back. “I wish I’d sent Ballard in to tell you about your damned ECHO device.”

So do I, Blake thinks. “Would you like me to stay with you?”

“Suit yourself.” Helga’s advice rings in his ears, as if she’s standing right beside him instead of being immolated a few yards away. Blake nods even if Ted can’t see him do it, and tries to settle into parade rest. “Shoulders back. Don’t lock your knees,” Ted says quietly.

“Right.” Blake makes the necessary adjustments and looks up at the flames. They’ve completely engulfed the platform by now and he wonders what the brothers have used as an accelerant. The wind picks up slightly after a few more minutes, bringing with it the aroma of roasting meat – Blake’s stomach heaves as he realizes just what he’s smelling.

They stay for roughly another hour which seems interminable given that the popping sounds coming from the pyre no longer resemble the regular noises a fire usually makes. “Let’s go in, now,” Ted says suddenly.

Nothing would give Blake greater pleasure than getting the hell away from there. “If you’re sure.”

“The grass over there,” Ted advises. “There shouldn’t be any skags, but I’ll wait ‘til you’re finished.”

Blake manages a quick apology and makes a stumbling run towards the indicated patch of grass so that he can vomit into it. He hasn’t had much to eat so it’s mostly bile that burns his throat on the way up, and he spits a few times before climbing back to his feet. “I am terribly sorry,” Blake apologizes again as he walks back to where Ted is waiting for him patiently.

“It happens. Don’t worry about it.”

“Theodore-”

“Not now, Jeffrey.”

While he will ask for what he wants, you must give him what he needs. “No. Not now,” Blake concedes.

Helga’s wake isn’t the most elaborate affair Blake’s ever attended, but it’s definitely the most heartfelt. They’re all invited to share stories about her, and to drink heavily while they do it.

Ted gets very, very drunk.

“We got a new shipment of jet packs,” Ted slurs. “Nobody was s’posed to fuck with ‘em but I swiped a couple ‘cause Hel said she wanted a try. We went up on the roof of the weapons depot an’ neither of us knew how to work the bastards so we just went for it. The packs were kinda heavy and when she hit the power button it knocked her over and she went zoomin’ right along the edge of the damn roof.” Ted flattens his hand in the air and moves it in demonstration, starting to laugh. “I’m only half strapped in but I know I gotta catch her, so I fire up my pack and slide right past her off the roof. So now she’s trynna brake and keep me from fallin’ while I try to fix the straps…and neither of us knew that one of the generals was down below so we’re panicked as fuck, and we can’t make no noise or he’ll look up and find us up there actin’ like fools. We laughed ourselves sick over that shit.”

He tells a few more, including one concerning a race in Devastator power armor that has them all in hysterics, and then it’s Ned’s turn to relate the story of meeting Helga for the first time. While there’s nothing inherently humorous in the story, Ned’s commentary has them laughing anyway. Even
Patricia makes Ted laugh when she tells him of her abduction from the Rust Commons, and subsequent interactions with Helga in the Crimson Lance compound in which she had been held.

The mood grows somber when the scaffolding’s supports are too damaged to remain upright, and the pyre collapses under its own weight with a loud crash. Blake’s had enough to drink that he’s nearly seeing double, but he manages to follow Ted back outside. “She woulda liked this party,” Ted says, swaying on his feet until he collapses in the scrub grass. “Whoa.”

“Would you…would you like to…to come in?” Blake says, rubbing at his eyes.

“Inna li’l bit,” Ted sighs, and promptly passes out on the ground.

Blake carefully lowers himself to sit beside Ted and guide his lover’s head onto his thigh, leaning back on his arms as he watches Helga’s funeral pyre slowly burn down to nothingness. He can hear shouts and laughter back in the motel, which momentarily grow louder as the door is opened. “He still awake?” Ned calls out.

“Not at the moment, no,” Blake says.

“’Kay. Good. C’mon, Timbo – let’s do it.”

Tim and Ned go past, reduced to dim silhouettes in the dark, and Blake wonders what they’re up to. “Be careful with that,” Tim yells, and the fire blazes up to illuminate the couple. Sobriety hasn’t quite returned to Blake, but he’s at least able to tell that they’re trying to reduce whatever is left of Helga’s body to ash.

Blake looks down at Ted, still sprawled out in the dirt, and he gently strokes the white streak of hair at Ted’s temple. The fire shoots up again and after Ned adds more accelerant, Tim comes over to sit down with them. Zed and Patricia come out, too, and bring more alcohol with them - when Ted regains consciousness, he can become even more drunk than before.

By the time everyone staggers off to bed, most of the liquor bottles and beer cans are empty and Blake feels as though he’s expelled his own stomach lining. He props himself up in the tiny bathroom and rinses his mouth out several times before braving the short walk to his own bedroom where Ted is waiting for him. “You shouldn’t be here,” Blake tries to say, but they’re both drunk and Ted looks miserable…so he doesn’t say anything at all.

Blake wakes up with a pounding headache, an empty bed, and a room that reeks of sweat and sex. He rubs his hands over his face and slowly levers himself upright, wondering where he’s supposed to go from here – there’s only one way that he can interpret Ted’s absence, and Blake curses himself for not saying no. He searches for his clothing and begin to wallow in self-pity as the room’s door opens and Ted walks in wearing his Lance Assassin armor. “It stinks in here.”

“Yes, well-” Blake is taken aback when Ted approaches him swiftly and drops to his knees to press his face into Blake’s bare stomach. “I hadn’t meant to take advantage of you, love.”

“You didn’t,” Ted assures him, the words muffled by Blake’s navel.

Blake strokes Ted’s hair tenderly, sifting his fingers through the short salt-and-pepper strands of it. “I never want to. Shall we sit? You’re much too old to be kneeling on an uncarpeted surface.”

Ted nods wordlessly, and Blake leads him to the bed where they sit beside each other amidst the rumpled sheets. “It was worse when I first got the report,” Ted finally admits, turning his helmet over in his hands.
“That does not mean that you are not allowed to grieve now,” Blake says gently. “Has she been interred yet?”

“I buried her a few hours ago.”

Blake sneaks a hand up to rub at his aching temples. “Is there any service you’d like to perform for her?”

“No,” Ted says, and stands up to indicate that he’s through with talking about this. “She was never a fan of those. Let’s just get you back up to Helios – I’ve said my goodbyes.”

There’s no way that Blake’s going to argue with that. “I just need to finish dressing, and find a-” he breaks off as Ted hands him an InstaHealth. “Yes, thank you. One of those.” Ted reclaims it and administers the injection, and Blake breathes a sigh of relief as the medicine banishes his headache. “Theodore, if you’d like to take a leave of absence…”

“No.”

“All I ask is that you think about it,” Blake says.

Ted shrugs. “For the past seven years, she’s been dead and I’ve moved on. Now I have a job to do, so I’d better do it.”

Blake finds his clothing and dresses quickly, trying to wrap his head around Ted’s reasoning. He knows that grief can make people act in strange ways, so perhaps this is Ted’s way to deal with his loss. Maybe he simply needs to pretend that everything is back to normal…whatever that is. “If you change your mind, just say the word. Until then, love, I suggest we put as much distance between us and this place as possible.”

“I’m ready to leave whenever you are.”

Ted agrees to wait by the Technical while Blake walks into Fyrestone to thank Zed for the hospitality. He also intends to wish Tim the best of luck on his vacation, and does so immediately upon entering the deserted ‘streets’ of the town. “I thought you’d be staying for a little while longer, but I guess you’ve got to get back up there,” Tim says regretfully. “How’s Ted?”

Blake shrugs. “In denial, I suppose.”

“He probably feels pretty guilty, too,” Tim muses. “I know I would.”

“Why would he feel guilty?” Blake asks. “Guilty about what?”

Tim puffs out his cheeks and releases the air noisily. “I dunno…maybe…everything? I mean, he loved her and then he loved you, but now he knows that she was still here while he was with you… and he still loves you, so. You know.”

“What? I have no idea what you’re saying, Timothy.”

“He might feel guilty about being with you because of her, and also feeling guilty about her… because of you.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Blake scoffs, but what Tim is saying does make a certain kind of sense. “If you would still like the travel information, Timothy, I can have my personal assistant compile a report and send it to you by this evening.”
Tim allows the conversation to be steered in a different direction, and promises to send an ECHO message once he checks in with Ned. “If you want to talk to Zed, he’s down by the town gates with Patricia. I think he’s still drunk.”

“Oh?”

“Why do you think I’m still over here?” His friend grins. “Don’t tell me you forgot about what Patty was bragging about yesterday.”

Blake thinks it over. “Oh.”

“Yeah. There were plenty of those last night, too, because I heard every last one of them.”

“And here I was, under the mistaken impression that Zed was the boring one. Perhaps I should simply wave goodbye from a safe distance, then?”

“That might be safer and more sanitary,” Tim laughs. “Just don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Blake smiles back. “Noted. Please convey my best wishes to yours, wherever he may be at the moment.”

They clasp hands in farewell, and Tim climbs back up to his perch on the fence. Blake continues down the street to find that Zed is, indeed, still drunk and attempting to scale the damaged water tower for some unknown reason. “Should he be doing that?” he asks Patricia, who takes her eyes off of Zed just long enough to look at Blake and shake her head. “Shall I attempt to get him down from there?”

“I am not sure that you would be able to do it, but the last thing I need is to raise this child by myself simply because its father decided to be a drunken moron.”

Blake shades his eyes with a hand as he peers up at Zed. “Why, exactly, is he climbing that?”

Patricia exhales an annoyed-sounding breath. “Ned dared him to do it last night and while I have endeavored to keep Zed too busy to actually do it, he waited until I was asleep.”

“So…you are saying that he’s only gotten that high?”

“Oh, yes,” she tells him. “Zed can become extremely slow when he’s drunk – at times, it’s like bedding an improbably handsome sloth. It can be both irritating and pleasurable, two things that I’d never before thought to combine.”

Blake opens his mouth to reply, and then closes it again. “Right. Zed, if you do not come down right this instant…Hyperion will expand into the very heart of Fyrestone and you shall be left with nothing but the population sign to prove that this town ever existed,” he yells.

Zed pauses in his agonizingly slow fumble for the next rung of metal. “The fuck did you just say.”

“Oh, this is wonderful,” Patricia says, clapping her hands together. “Irritate him some more.”

“Loaders will roam the newly paved streets—”

“Just you wait ‘til I get down there to beat your ass, Blake!”

“I don’t have all week to wait for you. Climb down faster,” Blake suggests.

Patricia calls out words of encouragement. “That’s done it. What a splendid idea – after he strikes
you in the jaw at least twice, Zed should be much calmer.”

“I beg your pardon? I’m not going to let him hit me,” Blake protests. She shakes her head at him and starts to argue when Zed, his balance compromised by his state of inebriation, missteps and falls off of the tower.

“This wouldn’t have happened if you had agreed to let him hit you in the face,” Patricia says as they’re bending over an extremely irritated Zed. “Are you okay?”

Zed glares up at them. “My goddamned leg is broken. What d’you think?”

“At least you are not dead,” Patricia chastises. “Jeffrey? I think you had better say whatever it is that you came to say, and then leave immediately.” She moves around behind Zed and carefully lowers herself to the ground, maneuvering his head into her lap and ignoring the impressive torrent of profanity.

This is certainly not the ideal setup to expressing his gratitude, but it looks like the only one he’s going to get. “I wanted to convey my appreciation for—”

“I didn’t do it for you,” Zed snarls as his forced sobriety kicks in. “Fuck off!”

“I suppose I shall be going now, then,” Blake says, wondering if they’re ever going to truly get along.

Patricia laughs and rests her hands atop her lover’s head. “He doesn’t mean anything by it. Please ask Tim to wake Ned and send him over to help.”

“The hell you talkin’ about, woman? ‘Course I mean it,” Zed insists.

“Yes, of course you do,” she says indulgently. “Go away, Jeffrey.”

Blake bids her a hasty farewell and looks over at the newly-filled grave, marked with a tire, before he turns to go.

Ted is waiting patiently when he returns, and listens impassively as Blake explains what had taken him so long. “He was that high up? Must’ve taken him all night,” is the only comment Ted makes. “If you’re ready to leave…”

Yes, he is. “Lead the way.”

Saybrook is waiting for them at the Fast Travel, along with Blake’s PA. “Welcome back, sirs,” the captain says respectfully before taking Ted aside for a murmured conference. Paxson circles around to station herself at Blake’s right elbow, offering an ECHOpad.

“It’s good to see you again, President Blake,” Paxson tells him. “I’ve separated each issue into a different folder, along with a short summary of actions that have been taken plus a few recommendations.”

Blake glances at the pad, and looks back at her. “We’ll discuss the Vasquez issue on the way to my office.”

“Certainly, sir,” she says. “The employee from Requisitions is now firmly in our corner after a few reminders of what company loyalty entails, and what rewards are available as a result of such loyalty…” Paxson has him up to speed on everything by the time they reach his office, and Blake has her stay behind to keep him apprised on a few other issues.
He keeps himself busy enough not to realize that the space behind his shoulder hasn’t been occupied by Ted, or anyone else, until Blake is finally finished with all the urgent tasks. He reaches out to toggle the security screens, flipping through the different feeds until he spots one of the Crimson Lance officers moving through the Hub. Blake sits back in his chair, wondering if he should call in one of them, but decides against it – he doesn’t need a chaperone simply for walking to lunch.

Idly wondering where Ted is and what he’s doing, Blake doesn’t see Saybrook’s approach until the other man slides behind him in the customary guard position. “Please alert one of us if you need to leave your offices for any reason, sir,” Saybrook requests politely. “Colonel’s orders.”

“Why are you here? Was Lieutenant Ballard indisposed?” Blake asks, still walking and angling his right hand towards the inside of his jacket – he should be able to reach the knife concealed there if Saybrook tries anything, though there’s likely to be collateral damage.

Saybrook clears his throat. “The lieutenant is in disgrace at present, President Blake. He won’t be entrusted with you any time soon, so it’s for the best if you and I get to know each other.”

Blake stops, turns, and makes no effort to conceal that he’s going for the knife. “I believe that we have tried that. Results were mixed.”

“Yes sir, I expect that they were,” Saybrook says politely. “However, the bulk of my loyalty was to Commandant Steele – she…deeded…me to Colonel Blanco upon her reassignment to Pandora.”

“So you were being loyal as you knocked the CEO of your parent company unconscious and sold me to my own prison camp? Is that it, Captain?”

“For what it’s worth, Mister Blake, I am sorry.”

“It is not worth very much,” Blake says coldly.

Saybrook ducks his head slightly. “Yes, sir, I can’t imagine that it is.”

He opens his mouth to say more, but stops when Blake lifts a restraining hand. “I am not interested in any explanations or excuses, Captain. Let me make myself clear – the only reason I have not had you executed is that Colonel Blanco has taken personal responsibility for you. If I catch wind of anything even remotely suspicious, your life is forfeit.”

Saybrook tails him for the remainder of the workday, a silent presence at his elbow occupying space that Blake wishes was taken by someone else, yet Blake doesn’t feel like admitting that he doesn’t know where Ted is.

The matter comes to a head when he’s escorted back to his quarters and finds that not only is Ted not there, but he’s removed all of his personal effects from Blake’s suite of rooms. There’s never been much to show that Blake doesn’t live there by himself anymore; a few weapons personal grooming accessories, and two spare uniforms…nothing much, but their absence is a glaring one. “Where is he?” Blake asks calmly.

Saybrook’s reply is cautious. “I can’t be sure, Mister Blake, but the colonel was on duty in the medical wing for most of the day-” Blake turns on his heel and walks out the door, leaving Saybrook to catch up to him.

He finds Ted, dressed in surgical green, counseling a bedridden patient as they walk into the recovery ward. “Give it at least three more days and the stitches will be ready to come out…no walking, not even with one of those exo-frames.” The patient nods in understanding and closes her eyes wearily while Ted reaches across to a dial near her IV. “Something I can help you with, Mister
President?” Ted asks, keeping his attention on the monitors.

“As a matter of fact, yes there is. May I speak with you in your office, Doctor Blanco?”

Ted’s shoulders stiffen. “I have a patient, Mister Blake.”

“Your patient is still asleep.”

“Her state of wakefulness, or lack thereof, does not void her status as my patient. Sir.”

What he needs, not what he wants. “Your office, now.”

Saybrook stands outside the office, taking refuge in what little protection that his helmet can provide.

“What seems to be the-”

“Where were you?” Blake asks, attempting mild inquiry and achieving unhinged accusation instead.

“All day, I have been worried-”

Ted takes his turn at interruption. “All day, I’ve been busy with surgical procedures on five different people who made the appointments for yesterday…which you’ve known about for a month already. Saybrook was monitoring you the entire time.”

“Oh.” Blake suddenly feels very, very foolish. “And I suppose that you simply moved your personal items into a closet.”

“Yes…but not the closet in your quarters,” Ted says unwillingly. “Look, it’s not what you think.”

“At the moment, I don’t know what to think. Theodore, we’ve been over this already; pretending that a problem doesn’t exist hasn’t worked for either of us.”

Ted looks even more unhappy than before. “I’m not pretending it’s not there, I’m just trying to make sure that it’s not there while you are. You don’t need to be around me right now, Jeff.”

“I beg to differ.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot.”

“Give me one reason why I should simply allow you back in that supply closet!”

“Living with you doesn’t feel right…not now. Later, yes, but for right now…goddamnit, Jeffrey. I just can’t.”

Blake rubs his hands over his face. “Theodore. I have been where you are, and where you thought you were all those years ago. I have already promised to be at your side. I cannot be here for you if you keep shoving me away with one hand and beckoning me close with the other.”

“I don’t mean to,” Ted admits. “The last thing I want to do is upset you.”

It’s far too late for that, Blake thinks, but decides to give way to Ted’s wishes. “Your brother once told me that you were, and I quote, a ‘fucking mess.’”

“Ned?”

“The very same.” Blake reaches out to place both hands flat on Ted’s chest, trying to silently convey a measure of his feeling for the obstinate assassin. “Very well. If having a greater measure of privacy will help you in any way I cannot, in all conscience, impede your wishes. However…I will require
you to keep in mind that I love you beyond measure.”

Ted ducks his head, reaching up to place his hands on Blake’s wrists. “You make it sound like you’re breaking up with me.”

“Is that not what-?”

Ted stares at him. “What? No! Didn’t I just say you’re a fuckin’ idiot?”

Blake feels lightheaded with relief and closes his eyes as Ted’s arms come around him. “Yes, I believe that you did.” He’s fully aware that he shouldn’t be the one seeking comfort here, but it’s a weight lifted from his shoulders nonetheless. “Theodore, I apologize. Being alone for so long...it has ill-prepared me for this relationship, and you can no doubt see the proof being laid out in front of you. If you need time alone to recover, you have my blessing.”

“Thanks.” Ted’s hand settles on the bare skin just above Blake’s collar. “You eat yet, you skinny bastard?”

Ignoring Ted’s fond epithet in favor of enjoying the slowly-returning drawl, Blake shakes his head and inhales the scent of surgical disinfectant. Who ever would have thought he’d come to enjoy it? “This is far more important.”
Chapter Summary

He has more important things to worry about than an embezzling employee...right?

Hugo Vasquez is dead. Blake lifts his eyes from the report confirming the event and leans back in his chair, crossing his legs and tapping his fingers together thoughtfully. “Paxson? Kindly retrieve that list of vice-presidential candidates for me.”

“Right away, Mister President.” His assistant uploads the relevant information onto Blake’s ECHOpad in less than thirty seconds, and Blake gazes at it before placing the pad back onto his desk with a sigh. “Sir? Would you like me to create another group for your consideration?”

Blake makes a slight gesture of dismissal. “No. This will be all.” Paxson bows her head in a show of submissive acceptance and leaves, darting a quick look at Blake’s guard on her way out. “I would appreciate if Captain Saybrook abruptly took it upon himself to search that one’s personal quarters. She’s had far too much opportunity to undermine my business dealings.”

“He’ll have it done by the end of the day, sir,” Ted promises.

“Thank you.” It could turn out that Paxson is either up to her ears in some sort of scheme against him, or that she’s strangely loyal – it’s been Blake’s experience that loyalty doesn’t count for much at Hyperion, so he’s not expecting anything of the sort. She has been a remarkably good assistant, though… “It will be a shame to have to replace her.”

Ted says nothing, which has become his usual response to almost anything Blake tells him lately. The affable ‘Doctor Ted’ persona has been placed on indefinite hiatus, and there have been no shortage of complaints about that. Having endured an interminable meeting with the head of Human Resources, Blake is intimately familiar with his employees’ latest disgruntlement. He turns his chair and looks up at Ted. “Your medical waiting list is threatening to crash the central processing unit, Colonel. Perhaps it is time that I authorize the hiring of another general practitioner or two.”

“Three would be best, Mister Blake.”

Blake winces. “Must we be so formal to each other?”

His question goes unanswered, as he’d known it would. They’ve been back on Helios for almost an entire week and Ted has withdrawn so completely that Blake is beginning to despair of ever seeing him smile again. The ECHOnet has been a valuable source of information on how to console a grieving partner and it makes no sense for Blake to be so worried, but...he is. “Send in Captain Saybrook and take the rest of the day off.”

That finally provokes a reaction. “What?”

“You’ve barely slept, love. I want you to return to your quarters and take whichever sleeping aid is readily accessible to you,” Blake says gently. “Helga would not want you to run yourself into the ground, and neither do I.”

Ted’s posture stiffens. “With all due respect-”
“Do I have to make that an order?” Blake asks. “Remove your helmet and let me see your eyes. If they’re not bloodshot from lack of sleep, then I’ll allow you to remain on duty.”

It’s clear that Ted doesn’t want to do it, but he finally lifts his hands and removes the helmet as Blake has requested. His appearance is every bit as horrific as Blake had thought it might be; not only do Ted’s eyes show the effects of insomnia, but it looks as if he hasn’t shaved since they returned from Pandora. “I’m able to—”

“You are nothing of the kind,” Blake says in exasperation. “As the Atlas Commander-in-Chief, I hereby *order* you to return to your quarters at once. Furthermore, I will be coming with you to make sure you go to sleep.”

Ted argues with it as expected, but Blake puts his metaphorical foot down and soon they’re both on their way to Ted’s alternate quarters. It’s in an often-overlooked part of the station near the power core and, if Blake’s memory serves, had been used as a safe room when Zarpedon’s Lost Legion had occupied Helios during its construction. More recently, the place has been used for storage – Ted had only moved a small section of machine parts from the closet area to make room for a cot and two weapons chests. “There isn’t room for you in here,” Ted says, obviously trying to make Blake go away.

“If there is no room for me there, then I shall sit here” Blake indicates a neatly stacked pile of Hyperion supply cases “and wait.” He perches on the closest one and leans back as if he’s never had a more comfortable seat. Ted, finally admitting defeat, slides his helmet on one of the higher shelves and begins to remove his armor. Blake pulls an ECHOpad from one of his jacket’s interior pockets and continues working, watching from the corner of his eye as Ted lies down on the cot.

Blake’s unaware of the exact moment that Ted’s breathing evens out into the slow pattern that means he’s finally asleep, but Blake pauses to look over when he *does* become aware of it. Ted is curled on one side facing Blake, with one arm pillowing his head – the harsh lines that have recently become engraved on his face are smoothed out, and he seems years younger. Hopefully he’ll be able to get some decent rest…Blake himself has had a difficult time lately, and wouldn’t mind joining Ted. The cot is too small for the both of them, however, so Blake will have to be content with his makeshift chair.

Well, he *does* have work to catch up on.

He’s puzzling over the latest report from Derrick Ballard (the lieutenant has ‘decided’ to remain on Pandora for the time being) and wondering why Janey Springs would want to build a rocket, when he glances over and discovers that Ted has gotten past him somehow. *It wouldn’t be too difficult,* Blake thinks to himself ruefully. He tuts at the mounded blankets under which Ted has placed a full set of standard-issue armor, and sticks his ECHOpad back into his blazer. “Very funny, Theodore,” he says sourly, wondering where the man has gone off to. A discreet call to Saybrook shows that Ted was last seen in the vicinity of Research and Development, so Blake brushes off the seat of his pants and heads for the nearest elevator.

He finds Ted in a lab not too far from the Stalker Biome, sitting cross-legged beside a…well, *something.* Whatever it is, it’s huge. “What on earth is *that*?”

Ted looks up at him. “Junior.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’ve *seen* your tork lovechild and this is most assuredly *not*—” Blake leans forward, squinting at it. “Are those *stripes* on the sides?”

Ted gives the monstrous beast a pat, and it promptly flips itself over to stick six too many legs in the
air. “Puberty makes fools of us all, I guess. Come over here, let him smell you.” He rubs the glowing carapace, which makes all those legs wriggle wildly.

“Will it eat me, if I do?”

“Probably not,” Ted replies, which isn’t the most heartening endorsement ever. “Come here.”

Blake would rather not, but he does anyway. Junior Blanco, because that is what Ted insisted upon naming his misbegotten…thing, rolls back over and decides to investigate. The enormous beast chitters at him and rises up on its back four legs, nearly causing Blake to have a coronary. “What is it doing?”

Junior plants its feelers, or whatever they are, on Blake’s head and proceeds to do the kind of nuzzling that’s really only allowable on the second date. “He likes you.”

“Lucky me,” Blake says, wondering how he can possibly get himself out of this. Thankfully, Junior quickly finishes all third-base activities and returns to gambol excitedly around Ted. “I thought you were supposed to be sleeping, not sneaking out like an adolescent on his way to a midnight dance party.”

“Sleep is a thing easier said than done,” Ted sighs, thumping the tork on its hindquarters in a companionable manner. “Has Saybrook been treating you decently?”

Blake cautiously seats himself on a nearby rock. “I have no complaints, except for the fact that he isn’t you.”

“He gets that a lot.” The joke is a feeble one, but Blake is grateful an attempt has even been made. Ted gives Junior a final pat, and stands up. “Let’s walk.” He motions for Blake to follow him, and the two men walk back out to the main laboratories. “By now, I’m sure you’ve heard about that rocket.”

“I was just reading about it in the reports, yes,” Blake says. “Do you anticipate a problem with it?”

Ted settles his arms behind his back, pausing to look into the open doorway of a lab they’re passing. “I anticipate a problem with everything. When you’ve got a rocket being built that can reach Helios, however, the anticipation starts growing faster.”

“What?”

“Your Rhys issue is coming back here, Jeffrey, and it’s coming back in a fucking rocket because Fast Travel’s no longer an option.” Ted glances over at him and correctly interprets Blake’s dumbstruck expression. “Where else did you think that rocket would go? Elpis?”

Blake’s eyes narrow at the challenging tone. “Theodore-”

Ted rakes a hand through his hair. “It’s not your job to worry about that, I know…listen, he’s been in touch with the Requisitions girl.”

“Surely he can’t think that friendship is in any way salvageable,” Blake comments. “What is he after?”

“I’ve no clue, but he’s passing himself off as Vasquez – some kind of holo trick, maybe? Would Tim Lawrence know?”

“I will contact him to see if he can shed some light on the subject, of course.” Blake reaches out to
touch his fingertips to the back of Ted’s hand. “Come back to my rooms, love. Just for tonight.” Ted’s fingers flex in response to the light touch, and Blake takes advantage of the movement and takes Ted’s hand in his. “Please.”

Ted stares down at him for a few moments, then gives a slight nod. “Okay.”

“Yes?”

“Yeah.”

Blake gets him moving immediately so that it’ll be harder for Ted to change his mind in-transit, and begins planning out their evening together. The first order of business is sending Ted for a bath and a shave while Blake figures out what sort of meal would tempt the appetite of someone who’s been unintentionally starving himself. Then, perhaps, they might see what’s on offer at the ECHOnet film archives…he doubts that Ted will want to spend the time talking as they used to.

He hates how thoroughly Helga’s final death has leached the vibrancy from Ted’s personality, though he’s grown beyond blaming her for it. During his first day back on Helios, Blake had transmitted letters of intent concerning his relocation to another Hyperion facility; it shouldn’t be hard to convince Ted to leave with him. He glances up at his lover’s stoic expression, the hated mask that conceals all inner turmoil, and decides that now is as good a time as any to broach the subject. “I’ve notified the shareholders of my intent to relocate company headquarters elsewhere.”

Ted doesn’t even blink. “Good.”

“Would you be interested-”

“Yeah.”

Well, that was easy. “Good.”

They reach Blake’s living quarters and Blake is once again ordered to wait in the lift while Ted scouts through the rooms. The thought occurs to him that all anyone has to do is just murder him while he’s in the elevator if they wanted to get around his ever-present Crimson Lance guards. Ted thinks that this idea is complete nonsense, and tells Blake so in the clearest possible terms, but Blake can see the speculative glance given to the lift’s confines. “Something tells me that you’re about to make me take a shower,” Ted comments after being on the receiving end of Blake’s speculation.

“Oh, not at all. I’m going to make you take a bath,” Blake says smoothly. “This way, please.”

Ted sighs softly as Blake busies himself with testing water temperature and laying out towels. “It’s nice.” He slowly removes his armor and peels off the undersuit while Blake reminds himself not to stare – there’s nothing there that he hasn’t already seen before, and he doesn’t want Ted to get the impression that Blake has only asked him here for sex. “You gonna come in here with me?”

Blake looks up to see Ted gazing directly at him with a serious expression. “This isn’t about that.”

“If you say so,” Ted says, stepping into the water and lowering himself down. “There’s room enough for two, if you change your mind.”

“How long has it been since you’ve eaten anything?” Blake asks and Ted shrugs before leaning back
against the marble backsplash tiles. “I want you to stay in there for at least ten minutes.” He leaves the bathroom after ignoring a mildly sarcastic request for chocolate cake, and finds the nearest ECHO-enabled device upon which he can place an order to Catering. Of course the request will be routed through Saybrook first, but hopefully it won’t be too long a delay.

Blake walks back to see if Ted has pulled another escape artist routine on him, but finds the other man fast asleep with his head tilted back against the rim of the bathtub. Well, this will never do; what if Ted slides down into the water? He’ll need to stay here and keep watch. Blake removes his suit jacket and rolls up his shirt sleeves after placing his shoes at a safe distance from the tub, then rummages through his shaving kit for a new razor.

Inching towards the sleeping Lance Assassin and wondering if he’s finally lost what’s left of his mind, Blake holds a can of shaving cream at the ready. Even the most surreptitious shake of the can makes Ted’s eyes snap open, and then they’re left staring at each other in a bizarre standoff until Ted snorts and closes his eyes again. “You cut me, there’s gonna be problems.”

“I will be careful,” Blake promises, settling himself upon the side of the bathtub and placing everything within hand’s reach. He wets the razor and smooths a liberal coating of shaving cream across Ted’s jaw before leaning forward and getting to work. There are a few moments in which he’s sure that he’s drawn blood, but Ted stays silent and unmoving until Blake has finished…then he merely requests to have his hair washed. “Lazy boy,” Blake scolds lovingly, leaning down to press his lips against freshly-shaven skin.

The corners of Ted’s mouth curl slightly upwards, and he declines to comment. Blake rolls up the legs of his trousers and kneels on a towel off to the side, reaching for the closest container of shampoo. He gathers up palmfuls of water to wet Ted’s hair and massages the shampoo in, unsure if he should acknowledge Ted’s burgeoning arousal. Blake decides against it and continues, trying not to look beneath the water at the thick phallus hardening against Ted’s stomach. “Change your mind yet?” His shadow murmurs, taking himself in hand.

Blake’s mouth goes dry at the sight of Ted masturbating with slow pumps of his fist. “That’s not why I asked you here.”

“What if that’s why I came?” Ted counters, opening his eyes and tilting his head back to look up at Blake. “We could both use a good fuck right about now.”

That much is certainly true. Helga Steele’s advice rings in Blake’s ears once more and he flushes guiltily, as if Ted knows what (and of whom) he’s thinking of…and yet, what if this is what Ted truly needs? The gods only know that Blake needs it desperately. “If you’re sure,” Blake finally says despite knowing that this might not be such a good idea. “Perhaps you might tell me what you’d prefer.”

“Well, first you gotta get in here with me,” Ted suggests, and Blake feels better about the whole situation upon hearing Ted’s original accent lacing the words.

“I think I can manage that,” Blake says, undressing as quickly as possible while Ted ducks beneath the water to rinse his hair. Stepping into the tub, Blake lets Ted pull him close and tug his arm below the water. “This is nice.” Ted murmurs agreement as he guides Blake’s hand on his cock, leaning in for a kiss that Blake is all too happy to give. Blake works him slowly, and whispers what he’d like to do next. “I want to suck you until you’ve come undone.”

Ted’s grip on Blake’s wrist tightens. “Yeah?”

Blake rubs his lips against the newly smooth ridge of Ted’s jaw, and moves his hand a little faster.
“Yes, indeed. I want it right here on the edge with your legs spread wide and trembling while you spill onto my tongue.”

“Okay,” Ted says breathlessly.

“I’m glad that we could come to an agreement,” Blake murmurs, tilting his head to kiss Ted’s throat. “Up.” Ted lifts himself up onto the edge of the tub, spreading his knees when Blake taps on them, and Blake gazes up at him. “You are truly breathtaking, my love.”

Ted lifts an eyebrow. “That’s kinda my job description.”

Blake laughs, seeing the pun. “So it is.” He moves forward and kisses the inside of Ted’s thigh, nipping slightly to draw a sigh from his shadow, before turning his head to admire the scene directly before his eyes. While it’s likely self-serving, Blake is deeply glad that Ted is actively seeking this manner of solace from him; he’s not the best with words in situations like Ted’s but he’s been there, too, and has no problem providing comfort of this particular nature. They could talk and he could offer his heartfelt condolences yet again, but this is a way for Blake to show his love and regard that doesn’t need to include any speech whatsoever. So he gazes at that gorgeous cock and then glances up at Ted, feeling desire twist his stomach in a delightful way.

He nuzzles between Ted’s legs, pressing reverent kisses at the root of his lover’s phallus, and brings his hands up to knead the tension from Ted’s thigh muscles. Blake careful closes his teeth on the sensitive skin of Ted’s scrotum and shakes his head from side to side briskly, feeling the heavy balls swing with the movement. Ted’s sighs become louder as Blake ducks his head to bathe them with his tongue and draw first one, then the other into his mouth. “God damn,” Ted groans appreciatively, moving a hand to the top of Blake’s head. “Slide your hips forward…yes, that’s perfect.”

Blake continues his teasing by gently rubbing his fingers back behind Ted’s balls, then lifting them aside and leaning in. He’s never performed anilingus on anyone before but he’s certainly enjoyed it whenever Ted has done it to him… surely it would be rude not to reciprocate.

Ted’s thigh muscles spasm in violent surprise at the first touch of Blake’s tongue, and Blake can hear the crack of the other man’s head hitting the wall. “Fffffuck!” There follows a great deal of squirming and startlingly high-pitched noises, but Blake considers his experiment to be a rousing success…pun not necessarily intended.

He moves his mouth up and laps at the slick of precome that’s slowly trailing down the rampant shaft. Blake spares a glance up at Ted’s flushed face and puts his poor love out of his misery by getting down to business. Closing his lips around Ted’s cock, Blake pushes his head down until he can feel it trigger his gag reflex by bumping the back of his throat. He forces himself to ignore it and breathe through his nose, staying still, while Ted’s fingers tighten in his hair. Blake slowly draws back up and off, then goes into a rhythm that they both can enjoy while his dominant hand moves back to tease at Ted’s opening. It’s still slick with saliva, so his fingers slide in and out easily.

“Nnngh,” is the only thing that Ted can say, frantically rocking into Blake’s touch. The water is starting to grow cold and it’s a minor irritant, but Blake shoves his discomfort aside and moves his hand faster. “Oh, fuck; I’m gonna.”

Ted tightens around Blake’s fingers and bucks his hips, and then Blake’s mouth is filled with the first strong spurts. Blake continues to suck as Ted groans out his release, emptying himself down Blake’s throat until there’s nothing left but ragged breaths and the occasional spasm from muscles that depression has forced into idleness. Blake concentrates on swallowing the warm, viscous fluid without coughing around the cock still in his mouth, rubbing his hands up Ted’s stomach and over
the still-spread, trembling thighs. “Let’s get you back in the water, love,” Blake says when he finally draws back.

Blake quickly turns the taps to give out hot water and Ted slides back into the tub with him. “That was somethin’ else.”

“Did you like it?”

“I’d say so,” Ted laughs, a genuine laugh that warms Blake more thoroughly than the water surrounding them. “A first for you, huh?”

Blake smiles slightly. “It was.”

“Hope you didn’t mind too much.”

“No, not at all. It was different, but your enjoyment made me glad to try.” Blake admits, moving into the circle of Ted’s arms. “I miss you.”

“Hell, Jeff, I miss me too. I’m still in here, somewhere.”

Blake reaches his hands to cradle both sides of Ted’s face, looking into his dearest shadow’s eyes. “If it takes a lifetime, I will find you.” He kisses Ted’s mouth before moving back to pillow his head on Ted’s chest – there’s a space there that is just right for laying against. They stay wrapped up in each other until the water grows cold once more, then adjourn to Blake’s bedroom to make love again. Ted falls asleep again after they have finished the food that Catering has finally delivered, and Blake leaves the bed long enough to clean up the towels and their discarded clothing.

It’s a welcome surprise to wake up to the feel of bare skin pressed against his.

Blake turns his head to look at Ted, whose breathing still holds the rhythm of a much-needed deep sleep, and decides to postpone his morning meetings so that he doesn’t have to move. It isn’t easy to reach for his ECHO device to send a message and after a few half-hearted attempts, Blake decides that Paxson will simply have to manage without instructions. At any rate, he’s sure that Saybrook knows that they are together and draw his own conclusions as to why neither party has emerged from Blake’s quarters. Blake himself hasn’t had a particularly good night’s sleep ever since the horror of Prosperity Junction, so it’s easy to drift off again.

The sensation of stubble rasping against the back of his neck rouses him once more, and Blake smiles into the pillow. “Shouldn’t you be off somewhere looking threatening?”

Ted nuzzles at him. “Shouldn’t you be doin’ some work, Mister CEO?”

“You are more important to me than mere work,” Blake says with a yawn and a stretch which alerts him to Ted’s current physical state. “Good lord, Theodore. You’re up for it again?”

“If you don’t wanna, that’s okay. I could just jack off,” Ted says, sounding apologetic. “It’s just… when we’re together, things don’t feel as bad.”

Blake rolls over to face his lover, feeling deeply glad that he’s able to provide the solace that Ted needs. “That means a great deal to me... as do you, my darling.”

Ted kisses him gently. “That mean I can fuck you?”

“I suppose that it does,” Blake says. “No fucking until after I’ve used the facilities, hmm?”
“I can wait,” Ted promises him.

The rest of Blake’s day isn’t nearly as enjoyable as the start of it, but he supposes that’s to be expected. Ted splits his time between watching Blake’s back during routine meetings and gathering intelligence on the rocket currently taking shape on Pandora’s main continent. Blake doesn’t think that Rhys can inflict any more damage upon his presidency and, if he’s truly honest with himself, the embezzlement was more of an irritant than anything else. Rhys and his band of misfits will be stopped soon enough – let them come to Helios, if they’re so intent upon returning. There are more than enough empty security cells and Blake will be able to suitably punish the conspirators at his leisure.

Ted continues to be vocal in his disapproval of Blake’s unconcern, still convinced that disaster is about to strike in the form of a gangly rogue employee. Blake could order him to stand down, but all that would accomplish would be to make Ted upset about a seeming lack of confidence. If it keeps Ted occupied to the point where he’s not constantly consumed by grief, then Blake won’t put a stop to it.

After all…it’s not as if a single rocket could bring down Helios.
The Fall of Helios

Chapter Summary

Blake tries to figure out how much attention he should really be paying to the return of Rhys & Co., and learns the true meaning of Too Little, Too Late.

There’s nothing terribly exciting happening down on the planet’s surface aside from the frequent progress reports that the exiled Lieutenant Ballard continues to send, but Blake certainly hears about it when the launch of that damned rocket is imminent. “Relax, Theodore. What’s the worst that can happen?”

“Would you like that listed alphabetically or…?”

“Silently is what I’d prefer,” Blake says pointedly. “Everything’s going to be fine, love. Don’t worry so much.”

Ted gives a loud Harrumph from behind Blake’s left shoulder. “You don’t worry enough, is what I think.”

“I know you do.” Blake continues sorting through the latest proofs sent from Marketing, then sets aside a few for further review. The rest seem to be mere copies of earlier Hyperion advertisement campaigns. “Have you had a chance to investigate Diana Paxson?”

He hears Ted shifts slightly. “She seems sincere about likin’ you, for whatever reason.”

“Thanks.”

“You know what I mean. I could get her in for a psych eval, I guess, but y’all’re crafty sons up in here. Think it’s in the water.”

Blake glances up from the proofs to catch Ted’s eye in the reflection of the security monitors. “I shall take that as a compliment.” Ted makes a dismissive sound and goes back to watching the station’s various security feeds while Blake makes a few notes on his ECHOpad concerning the grammar used in the advertisements and how that can be improved. “If you’d like to create a direct link to Lieutenant Ballard, you may certainly do so.”

Permission duly received, Ted slams the helmet back onto his head and disappears through the door without a single word. Blake shakes his head and finishes detailing the necessary adjustments that Marketing will need to make before Hyperion’s latest ad campaign goes live on the ECHOnet. The weapon designs lifted from Corazza are definitely a lucrative investment, and are performing well on the testing ranges; Blake’s already reaping the benefits in the form of a hefty bonus with the promise of another to follow. It will be easy to smooth any ruffled feathers caused by Blake’s transfer to another Hyperion facility, especially since Pandora has proven to be a drain on the company’s resources. Without any new Vaults, Hyperion occupation is pointless now that it has exploited as much of the eridium development as possible – of course, the shareholders will still want to continue to operate the mines until all remaining eridium has been recovered, but Blake’s presence here won’t be required.
Paxson stops by to deliver the corrected proofs to their final destination, and arranges Blake’s lunch while reporting on her latest contact with Yvette from Requisitions. It seems that everything will be ready by the time ‘Hugo Vasquez’ returns to Helios. “If you would prefer, I could keep Rhys in an isolated cell so that you could question him.”

“If I cleared my schedule for every employee accused of embezzlement, fraud, and/or theft of company property, I would have time for little else,” Blake says dismissively. “Send him for data retrieval the instant he’s in custody.”

“Of course, Mister President. Enjoy your meal.” With that, Paxson bows out and Blake whisks the cover off of the ostentatious lunch tray. The ridiculous thing looks like it’s been made from solid gold.

He’s slowly eating and lost in thought when a hand reaches down to steal a piece of his food from the tray. “The hell is this.”

“Mine,” Blake protests, belatedly reaching out to stop the theft. Ted pauses just long enough to let Blake think that a recovery is possible, then pulls it away and eats it. “If you’ve not eaten, why not order yourself something and join me?”


Blake pauses with his fork halfway to his mouth, and looks up. “Already?”

“Turns out Springs knows her stuff so, yeah, it’s comin’.”

“You seem very calm about it.”

Ted’s eyebrows furrow. “What good’s it done anybody when I wasn’t? You still don’t give a shit.”

“Nothing is going to happen that doesn’t involve the conspirators being locked up and executed. The law of averages-”

“I don’t give a fuck ‘bout no damn averages! Only law needs worryin’ about is named after Murphy, ‘cause that one’s universal. I am tellin’ you, dammit! Something ain’t right. What is it gonna take for you to listen to me?” Ted pushes himself back to his feet angrily and stalks over to the windows.

Blake places his fork back onto the tray. “I listen to you.”

“Please,” Ted sneers. “Do me a favor and pick a more believable line.”

“Very well, then, I shall. I am not worried not because I do not believe that rogue ex-employees could damage my life expectancy, but because I know you will protect me against any foul play from any quarter.” Blake steeples his fingers and gazes at his lover over them. “Is that believable enough for you?”

Ted’s glare intensifies. “Quit it with the sweet talk.”

“No.”

“Eat your damn food!”

Blake obeys with a smile which he tries to make sure that Ted doesn’t see but, judging from the way that those green eyes narrow even further, he’s unsuccessful. “I was hoping that you might spend the
evening with me,” he says delicately. “If you are not too busy.”

“You should be so lucky,” Ted informs him, but the warmth in Ted’s voice signals that Blake has already been forgiven. “Been a while since you did some training. Let your lunch settle and we’ll go over a few things.”

The struggle to hold in a despairing groan proves too much of a strain. “Theodore, no…”

“Theodore, yes. I’ll prep the room and find that little yellow thing you love wearin’ so much. Tell you what – you beat me, I’ll let you fuck me right on the mat.”

“What if you win?”

Ted gives Blake a beatific smile. “You gotta fuck me on the mat. Either way, I get nailed and we’re both happy…so finish up and get ready to raid this ass. We’ll be too busy for it once that rocket gets here.”

Well, he doesn’t have any meetings planned for the afternoon anyway. “Fine, get the room and yourself ready. To lose.”

“Ha! That’ll be the freakin’ day,” Ted laughs. “You got some sense of humor, Sticks.” He saunters out of the office and Blake sighs regretfully at the remains of his lunch – he should probably eat it, but the last time Blake had sparred on a full stomach he’d nearly lost everything inside it after a single well-placed blow.

Blake pushes his plate aside and re-examines the information concerning his PA, glancing from it to her as Paxson comes in to retrieve his tray. “Any new developments?”

She shakes her head. “Not yet, Mister Blake. We’ve estimated the arrival time to be in about four hours from launch.”

“Is that standard?” Blake asks, since she doesn’t really seem that happy about the timing.

“Not really, sir, no. The usual time for a rocket of that size and that particular launch method…sir, Hyperion used to have a launch site down on the surface. It used a sling-style launchpad and is still the top of the line.”

Blake nods absentmindedly. “Yes, the original Vault Hunters hired by Jack used it when the Lost Legion controlled Helios.”

“It took them six hours, sir.”

Something tells him that Janey Springs won’t be inclined to share her trade secrets, much less accept a job as a Hyperion contractor. He can’t see why she should complain about his inspection of her leftovers, however. “Send whomever you see fit to examine the launch site, and confiscate the passenger compartment once it arrives. Whatever detaches can be retrieved via worker-bot. That is all, Miss Paxson.”

Paxson hesitates, then nods. “Yes, President Blake. I’ll have Yvette standing by to intercept Rhys shortly after his arrival.”

“Good. Now, if there’s nothing else…?”

“No, sir. Of course not,” she says briskly, gathering up his tray and heading out with it.
Blake puts the conversation out of his mind as he walks to his private lift, instead wondering if Ted really will follow through on that threat concerning the yellow wrestling singlet.

Once he’s in his quarters and at the threshold of the exercise area, it turns out that Ted certainly does have the singlet ready for Blake to wear. “Haven’t seen you in this for a while – bet you still look cute in it.”

“Theodore.”

“It’s either that or you fight naked…which could be fun, too.”

As interesting as that sounds, Blake shakes his head. “Fine, I shall wear it. This is the last time, however.”

“Says you. Let’s go, Sticks.”

Blake changes into the horrid thing as quickly as he can manage, and the two men spar for several minutes before taking a break. “You’re rusty as hell, if you’re leavin’ your side open like that. Let’s do it again and this time, make sure I can’t break through,” Ted lectures.

“I thought the whole point of this exercise was for you to be on the receiving end.” Blake wipes away the sweat beading on his forehead and tries to regulate his breathing. “Good Lord.”

Ted reaches a hand down to help Blake back to his feet. “It was, but now I’m thinkin’ you could use some real practice.”

“Was I truly that terrible?”

“Not really, but you could do better so let’s get you to that point.”

Blake sighs and walks back to the far edge of the mat, settling into a combat-ready stance that never fails to make him feel ridiculous. Ted gives him an encouraging smile and returns to his own spot, only pausing for a moment before charging towards Blake. Blake barely manages to duck the first swing as he tries to pay attention to Ted’s movements, but gets knocked to the mat when he fails to block another punch that he really should’ve seen coming. “This is no use,” he complains, accepting a hand up. “I’ll never get it.”

“Sure you will. Let’s go again.”

It takes numerous attempts, but Blake does finally get it. He finally gets something else, too, and the exercise mats sprout bite marks and various other gouges by the time they’ve finished. “I think I’ve developed a taste for victory,” Blake says, lazily running his fingers over the burn scars that decorate Ted’s right side. They really do look familiar, but he can’t quite place the source.

Ted smiles, his eyes still closed. “It suits you.”

“Hmm.” Blake tugs at a tuft of graying chest hair. “It seems to suit you, as well. Shower?”

“That’d probably be a good idea.” Ted rolls over to kiss him. “You stink, Mister CEO.”

“That is a fine thing for you to say, given that your own aroma is also quite memorable,” Blake teases back.

The subject of Janey Springs’ incoming rocket isn’t broached until they’re toweling off and Ted has decided to snap his at Blake’s rear end. “You should probably get to your office; I’ll set up a comm
link through my armor,” Ted announces, sending the towel zinging through the air and making Blake jump backwards. “Heh, I almost got you that time.”

“Put your clothing on and go away,” Blake says tartly, snatching up an extra towel so that he can retaliate.

Ted drops the towel and holds his hands up in a peacemaking gesture. “Okay, okay…I’m goin’...”

As soon as Blake lowers his defenses, Ted grabs the towel and cracks the end of it against Blake’s thigh. “Hey!”

“…after I do that. You shoulda seen the look on your face when I smacked you,” Ted laughs.

“Speaking of getting smacked.”

“Promises, promises!”

“Go.”

Blake watches with a carefully concealed smile as Ted pulls on his armor, pushing his wet hair back away from his forehead before settling the helmet into place. “Get your skinny ass into a suit so I can walk you back.”

“One of these days,” Blake says, “I’ll call you to my office and bend you over my knee. Don’t think that I won’t do it.”

“Maybe you could do it after we get this Rhys problem taken care of. Til then, we both got things t’doo.”

Ted escorts him back to his office with a promise to send Saybrook as a replacement, and a final pat on the ass before departing for the docking bays. There really isn’t that much for Blake to do, since he prefers to stay caught up on the duties that a CEO is normally charged with, so he calls up a few files on the Eden planets. He’s reading through the information and making notes on locations to ask Tim about when his PA contacts him about the rocket’s progress.

“What do you mean, it launched a…? It is of Dahl manufacture, is it not? As long as it is not compromising the safety or the security of Helios station, it can remain there until our employee problem is dealt with.” Blake scrolls through the security feeds until he finds the remote cameras stationed near the shipping lanes. There, bold as brass, is a holo-advertisement featuring one very ugly man. “This must be the ubiquitous Scooter.” While he’s never met the man, Blake remembers Scooter’s connection with Janey Springs. “Once Rhys is in custody, send someone to remove it.”

He ends the call and drums his fingers on the desk as he gazes at the Catch-a-Ride advertisement. Perhaps Hyperion could use a few of those to advertise their products. They’d have to create a patent designed to freeze out other competitors, of course, but it’s not a bad idea provided that they register the patent immediately. Blake reaches out to his comm panel. “Paxson, send someone from Marketing up here right away.”

Saybrook clears his throat just loudly enough to draw Blake’s attention. “Security says that Hugo Vasquez has returned from Pandora. Bay 13.”

Blake frowns. “Colonel Blanco is in Bay three.”

“I’d imagine he’s venting his displeasure about that fact right now, Mister Blake.”
“I’m sure he is,” Blake murmurs. “Well, this station cannot afford to come to a standstill over such a minor detail – keep in contact with the colonel and inform me of any pertinent developments. Send the woman from Requisitions to Bay 13.”

“Yes, sir. There’s…half a Loaderbot stuck to the roof of the, uh, craft.”

“Then I hope it enjoyed the journey. I do not care, Captain Saybrook.”

Blake continues his day as scheduled and is interrupted a handful of times with inane reports about a tour group being vaporized after charging full-tilt at the security field in Handsome Jack’s former office. As this is the fifth such death this month, Blake is obligated to review the security footage and enter another new clause in the Handsome Jack Experience tour rules and regulations. “Ridiculous,” he mutters, watching the mask-clad men run directly into the death wall. He’ll most likely have to post even more signs around the wretched place because so many people don’t bother glancing at the ones that were there before… Blake would rather shut down the tour permanently, but it does make a nice sum of money for the company and the shareholders wouldn’t tolerate its removal.

He’s about to select a different feed when he catches a glimpse of the tour guide. Blake frowns and rewinds the footage, pausing it to get a clear view of her face. He’s seen many employees give the tour, given his penchant for people-watching, but this one is new. The badge used to access the tour areas is not. “Miss Paxson. I’d like this woman detained for questioning; at the very least, I want her identified,” he says, sending a still image to his PA. “She seems to be using the head tour guide’s ID badge.”

She appears in his office minutes later with an ECHOpad in one hand and a frown on her face. “Sir, Security has flagged her facial features and is compiling a search protocol on all Hub cameras and the head tour guide-”

“Good,” Blake interrupts. As momentarily interesting as this has been, he really has more pressing things to attend to – such as finding out why Ted hasn’t been checking in with him as promised. “Make sure the place is inventoried; the last thing we need are missing items from that infernal exhibit.”

“Right away, President Blake.”

“Sir,” Saybrook says cautiously when he’s questioned on Ted’s whereabouts, “I believe you may have taken the wrong ECHO device. The link with his armor would be to the earpiece, which is….still in your pocket. Sir.”

“Wonderful.” Blake inserts the earpiece and is immediately treated to a flood of profanity. “Bad day, Colonel?”

“The fuck I tell you about Murphy’s Law?” his shadow snarls. “Every goddamned thing is going wrong!”

Blake attempts to soothe the savage beast - it’s not music, but it’s the best he can do. “I’m sure it’s but a momentary setback. Is there anything that I can do to help? I do have access to the entire security network.”

“Unless you can scroll around and tell me if you see anyone you don’t recognize that’s not going to be a- wait. Is anyone running a trace on Rhys’ implants? Didn’t you say that all replacement parts have a serial number?”

“Oh, for the love of…! Yes, they do and I shall send you the pertinent information shortly.” Ted
snorts as he disconnects, and Blake rubs at his temples wearily. He should have known this would become unnecessarily complicated. Searching for the serial numbers is as easy as reopening Rhys’ employee file but actually searching for Rhys is not easy at all. “Colonel,” Blake says as he reopens the connection. “Something is interfering with the tracking system, as if he’s upgraded both arm and eye. Unless you have some sort of idea where Rhys will be headed next, you might be staying two steps behind.”

“What wonderful news,” Ted says drily. “And what a pain in the ass this’s turned out to be.”

Blake decides not to comment on this; it’s a singularly stupid man who would say ‘I told you so’ to an Omega Assassin. “At least you’re out doing something about it. All I’ve done so far is to secure a patent for spacial advertisement and flagging a new tour guide for possible misconduct.”

“When did you get new tour guides?”

“I didn’t think I had, but apparently— you don’t think…?”

“I’ll check it out,” Ted promises. “Your buddy Rhys didn’t come all this way by himself.”

Yet another thing that Blake didn’t think of. “I’ll have Paxson pull the video feeds from the hangar. Be careful.”

Ted’s answering snort is so loud, Blake winces. “Careful of what, a calculator? I know how to handle skinny company men, in case you’ve forgotten.”

“Now, that I do remember.” Blake signs off and issues the necessary orders, then sits back in his chair and resumes massaging his temples.

His headache isn’t helped by the abrupt blaring of alarms. “Attention: Helios is on heightened alert.” Oh, what now? Blake pulls himself to the edge of his seat and glares down at the screens indicating that the system has been hacked.

Paxson taps at his door apologetically. “Sir, I’m sorry to bother you…”

“Go ahead,” Blake says. “It looks as though I might as well start paying attention to this farce.”

“The body that was retrieved from Bay 13 has been positively identified as the remains of Hugo Vasquez. Plus a few remains from an unidentifiable human male.”

“I beg your pardon? A few remains?” Does he even want to know the answer to that?

It soon transpires that no, he doesn’t. “Rhys, wearing the guise of Hugo Vasquez, brought a wheeled container full of body parts and various fluids to Yvette.” His PA clears her throat and hands over an ECHOpad. “I’ve taken the liberty of securing footage from 13 – we’re looking at at least six humans and two bots. One is a standard Hyperion SGT-Loader which seems to be missing half its chassis, but the other looks as if it might be Atlas.”

Blake takes his time looking at each of the individuals who have infiltrated his station and caused untold amounts of trouble. “And one is currently impersonating a tour guide. I sincerely hope that something has been done about that.”

Paxson’s face freezes in an expression that Blake is all too familiar with – he’s seen it countless of times when other employees have had to say something they knew he wouldn’t enjoy hearing. “Well, sir…”
She’s saved from having to complete her sentence by Ted, who slides through Blake’s office door like the wrath of God. “I’ve got two women and one robot,” Ted announces. “Rhys is in Jack’s office.”

“Miss Paxson, take a team and get him out of there.” Blake waits until the doors close behind her, and leans forward. “What the hell is going on around here?”

Ted removes his helmet and tucks it against his hip, looking every bit as annoyed as Blake. “I almost snagged the nerd, too, but he was havin’ one of them finger-gun battles in the Hub. Looked like the whole damn Accounting department. Don’t think there’s nothin’ in that office he can do much with, but if you want me t’get in there…”

“No, I’m sure Security can take it from here. Well, maybe. What sort of robot? Paxson mentioned it might be Atlas.”

“Saybrook; the door,” Ted orders curtly. “That thing is definitely Atlas and, what’s more…her name is Gortys.”

Blake’s eyes widen in surprise. “As in…?”

“The Gortys Project. Yeah. Looks like your li’l buddy took a few souvenirs from Haven to get her up and runnin’ – they came here to get some beacon thing that she needs. You just guess where the beacon is.”

“Jack’s office.”

“Jack’s office.” Ted perches on the corner of Blake’s desk. “Front door’s on lockdown, thanks to that tour group headbuttin’ a forcefield, but there’s a trap door that leads down to the prison level… which is where I got those two girls. Yvette’s watchin’ ‘em, and she seems like the type to hold on to what she’s got, so I figured I’d come by and tell you what’s what.”

"How did you manage to find out that they'd actually brought Gortys here?"

Ted's smile widens. "I asked her, didn't I? You'll like her, she's cute as hell."

Blake reaches over to lay his hand atop Ted’s gauntlet. “Thank you, love. You’ve done wonderfully.”

“Don’t I always! Glad to see you’re takin’ it more serious, though.” Ted smiles back at him and gets up to stretch. “Well, I’d better get on up there and catch me a-”

He’s interrupted by a booming voice that echoes in the large office and causes a knot of dread to form in the pit of Blake’s stomach. “Hey hey hey, friends – remember me? It’s your old pal, Jack!” No. There’s no possible way he could be here. “Well…pencils down, amigos. I’ve got someone to introduce you to: there’s a new president in town. That’s right, people! Get those hands a-clappin’ ‘cause I wanna give a very special Hyperion welcome to the Chiepest of Executives, total president material. All the way from Janitorial: my man Rhysssss!”

Blake looks over at Ted, feeling sick. This isn’t happening, it is not. “It appears that I’ve just been… demoted.” Jack’s voice continues talking, but all Blake can hear is the roaring in his own ears as he struggles to remain calm.

“President Rhys and Handsome Goddamn Jack! Ha ha ha ha ha…!”

Ted narrows his eyes in thought. “Okay, here’s what’s gonna happen now. Saybrook will take you
to your quarters – you’ll be safest there while I try to figure out what the fuck’s goin’ on. If this’s a virus, we can get it cleared.”

“Yes. That…that is probably what it is,” Blake manages.

“Then let’s get started. Captain! Secure and contain, double time.”

Blake is escorted back to his living quarters at a pace that isn’t quite an all-out run, but is dangerously close to it. He tries to calm his nerves by reassuring himself that this will all be over shortly. Jack’s voice is still echoing about Helios, and they can all hear him rambling about his triumphant return from beyond the grave. “No offense, Mister Blake, but your old boss was a fucking asshole,” Saybrook tells him, pausing briefly to touch his earpiece before moving off purposefully. Blake thinks nothing of it until Saybrook brings back a travel bag.

“Is that truly necessary?”

“Colonel’s orders, sir. He wants you ready to go when he gets back.”

Ready to go where? Blake can’t imagine that Ted would want him to return to Pandora for any reason, but the fact that he’s being urged to leave says something bleak about what’s happening elsewhere in the station. He quickly fills the bag with a few essentials, and pads it out with several weapons. Blake can hear Ted’s voice as he’s still fussing over the zippered compartments of the travel bag, and he takes a moment to calm himself before going to investigate.

“Got everything?” Ted asks, gesturing towards the lift before Blake has a chance to answer. “Let’s go.”

“I hope you’ll share what you’ve learned with me before we go anywhere,” Blake says tightly.

Ted’s hand closes around his arm and keeps propelling him forward. “Rhys brought a fucking AI back from Pandora and installed it. I’ve personally seen three programmers get electrocuted trying to remove it from the mainframe, so the best course of action for now is to separate you from it. Fast Travel network’s down, but we’ll get you on a ship.”

“God help us all. Nakayama actually finished that AI.”

The two Atlas soldiers bracket him as they enter the lift. “Right now it’s not doing much – bragging, mostly – but we’re counting it as hostile so that means you need to get to safety as quickly as possible,” Ted says briskly. They make their way to the main hangar bay, only to find it closed.

“Shit. What now…”

The monitors flash a warning that is being repeated by the voice address system: Lockdown Protocol has just been put into effect. “We could override it,” Saybrook ventures.

“Negative. Any attempt could trigger a hostile response…let’s get up to the Moonshot station. If the two that started all of this could travel down in a towncar, so can we. Haven’s satellites still work; we’ll go there.”

Jack chooses this moment to start talking again. “Hey kiddos! Daddy’s home – yes, dare to dream, it’s me. Handsome Jack, your favorite! I’m back in the digital flesh, baby, and I need you to help me find my good friend Rhys. Hey everybody, remember that guy Rhys? The new president? The less handsome guy?”

They pause in one of the alcoves overlooking the Hub, and Ted draws Blake back as they see a giant avatar of Handsome Jack crouched atop the steps leading to the main Fast Travel terminals. “Hey,
hey – you; Idiot. You look like the kinda guy who hangs out with middle management. Do you know where Rhys is?"

One of the people gathered around the digital avatar scratches his head in confusion. “I, Uh… is he the one with the glasses?”
The avatar makes its hand into a gun and points it at the hapless employee. “Boom! Useless!” Ted hisses under his breath as a huge gun mounted to the side of the steps – had it just been digistructed there? – cuts down the man and several of the people standing beside him.

“Let’s keep moving.”

Paxson catches up with them before they reach their destination, with the unfortunate news that the digistruct system has become unavailable. “Take me with you,” she demands. Blake’s normally unflappable personal assistant is looking distinctly…desperate. “Please, sir. Don’t leave me here with that monster in charge of Helios.”

There’s a story here, but now isn’t the time to listen to it. “Ares?”

The featureless helmet tilts slightly as Ted regards Paxson. “She could be useful.”

There’s little doubt in Blake’s mind what Paxson could be useful for, but the woman doesn’t catch the subtle inference that she’ll be used as a human shield if Ted decides it’s necessary. “Thank you, sir.”

The Voice of Helios cuts through her babbled gratitude. “Core Venting Process initiated.”

Ted goes very, very still. “There’s no time to scrape something together that’ll get you to the surface in one piece, Mister Blake, and I’m not taking the risk of trying to breach the hangar bay doors. The only thing to do now is to get you into an escape pod.”

“Sir…?” Paxson whispers.

“Do what he says, Paxson.” Blake can hear the panicked screams as they make their way out to the main passageway, and licks his lips nervously. Whatever is happening elsewhere on the station, it hasn’t become critical enough for the automated systems to recommend use of the lifepods. Yet. Paxson’s hand slips into his and he should upbraid her for taking such a liberty, but the contact is comforting for him as well – the hand he’d rather be holding is too busy to comfort him just now.

“Warning! Air locks in the Legal Office failing. All lawyers vented into space.”

They come to a junction, and Ted pauses to glance back. “There will be no time to stop. If you fall, you will be left behind – do you understand?” Blake knows that the warning isn’t meant for him, but nods mutely along with Paxson all the same. The twin plasma blades flick into existence, and Saybrook slides his own sidearm from its holster. “I’ll clear the way – you follow him. Saybrook; guard formation.”

“Yes, sir.”

Ted leaps into action with startling speed with Saybrook only steps behind and Blake’s grip on Paxson’s hand tightens convulsively as they begin to run, too. There are several more announcements concerning the power core that are lost beneath the panicked and pained screams in front of them as Ted carves a path through Blake’s employees. The plasma swords are a red blur, sending blood and partial limbs flying almost before their former owners are even aware of the loss.

Blake’s arm is wrenched painfully as Paxson stumbles, slipping in a puddle best left unexamined,
and he pauses to pull her up. “Keep going,” he snarls, suddenly furious. Hadn’t she heard Ted’s warning?

“Sorry,” Paxson blurs, lurching back into motion when he yanks at her angrily. Her once pristine uniform of white and black pinstripes has been soaked through with blood from her fall, making it look as though she’s just escaped a slaughterhouse.

The Voice of Helios can be clearly heard as their small group spills into one of the side tunnels housing the escape pods, and the broadcast chills Blake down to the bone. “Helios thrusters offline. Orbital integrity compromised. Impact with Pandora imminent. Please begin evacuation procedures.”

“My god. You…you knew it would come to this,” Blake says, stunned, as Ted pauses at one of the pods and reaches for the travel bag that Saybrook hands him. “How did you-”

“No,” Ted says tiredly, reaching up to wrench the helmet off of his head. Paxson lets out a strangled gasp upon seeing him, which reminds Blake of what a mess she’s made of herself. He removes his jacket and passes it to her absently, still staring at Ted. “Warning: Helios planetary orbit compromised. Please calmly make your way to the nearest emergency pod and await further instructions.” Hyperion employees begin to pour through the doors, and the two Atlas soldiers position themselves around Blake and Paxson’s chosen pods.

“You’re coming with me,” Blake says in what he hopes is a stern command, but is probably more like a weak plea.

“You – get in there,” Ted tells Paxson, and she scrambles to obey. “Jeff, it’s time to go.”

“No,” Blake argues. “No.”

Paxson’s pod begins launching, and Ted gestures for Saybrook to take another. “There ain’t enough pods for everyone up here – don’t you remember me tellin’ you that? I got some little ones countin’ on me to keep ‘em safe, so that’s what I’m gonna go do. You get your skinny ass in there, and you take it down to Fyrestone.”

“I’ll help you, I can-”

“No,” Ted says, his voice dropping to a frightening hiss. “I already buried Helga; I’m not gonna lose you, too. You get the hell in that pod and you do it now, or I’ll knock you the fuck out and stuff you in.”

Blake feels the prickling begin behind his eyes and shuts his eyes tightly – he doesn’t have time for tears right now. “Theodore, please-”

“Get In,” Ted roars at him, coupling his words with a vicious shove that sends Blake stumbling into the pod. “Launch it.”

“I…I love you,” Blake says miserably. “Come with me.”

His hands fumble with the restraints, and Blake can hear Ted’s sigh of relief as he reaches out a hand to touch the ‘launch’ button. “I’ll see you down there.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” Blake says, voice thick with emotion as he strikes the button that seals the doors shut. He raises his head to see that Ted has positioned himself directly in front of the pod and,
as their eyes meet, Ted shifts to attention and lifts a hand to his brow in a salute from a soldier to his commanding officer. Blake presses his own hand against the tempered glass as if it can ward away the danger that Ted still has to overcome before they’re together once more. *Stay safe. Please stay safe.* They hold eye contact as Blake’s pod falls away from Helios and the embodiment of everything he holds dear, until the distance becomes too great and they can see each other no longer.

His pod begins a lazy spin as a shard of space junk hits it, and Blake is rotated enough to see Pandora looming below him. Another larger piece of metal slams against the pod, spinning him about to offer Blake a last view of the swiftly receding, doomed station of Helios. Other pods are arrayed around his, some crashing into each other with lethal force but all being drawn inexorably into Pandora’s atmosphere.

He should count himself lucky, Blake thinks to himself wretchedly. He’s one of the only Hyperion employees to have firsthand knowledge of the planet they’re all about to crash upon; he has a head start on survival. There’s a place to stay down on Pandora once he reaches it, and people he knows.

He doesn’t *feel* lucky, though.

He doesn’t feel lucky at all.
Blake arrives on Pandora, and receives a hearty greeting by the local wildlife. Lucky him.

Pain is the first thing that Blake is aware of as he opens his eyes in the darkness. The second thing he’s aware of is the fact that he seems to be upside down, and he fumbles with the restraining harness until the closure gives way and dumps him on his head. “Fuck,” Blake groans to no one in particular, pushing himself up onto his knees. His eyes have adjusted to the light (or lack thereof) enough for him to see the latch he has to manipulate to gain his freedom.

The pod’s door swings open slightly and then gets stuck on something when Blake tries to push it harder, so he’s forced to squeeze out through the gap and nearly gets wedged tight. Finally he tumbles out onto the ground, and Blake has his first good look around. There’s no way for him to tell exactly where he’s landed, but he can clearly see what looks to be a volcano in the distance…which means he’s most likely back in the Ashes, near the Eridium Blight, and northwest of the Arid Nexus. He’s considerably less than pleased to find himself back in the Blight, but at least now he knows where he is. All Blake needs to do now is to find a pumping station which should have either a map or some sort of communication equipment – the ECHO network on Pandora functions independently of any Helios satellites. He squints in the direction of Mount Hellsfont, trying to think which way he should walk; it’s been awhile since he’s studied a map of Pandora.

In the end, Blake simply chooses a direction at random and starts walking – there are slag pipelines all over the place and as soon as he reaches one, it will eventually lead him to a station if he follows it. All he has to do is to avoid marauding bullymongs and whatever other horrors the Eridium Blight has to throw at him.

Easy.

Blake rubs at the cut on his forehead that’s given him a horrific headache and his fingers come away covered in blood that he wipes on the front of his shirt. Hopefully none of this continent’s predators can smell it. Trying to draw in too deep a breath is also painful, a sure sign of damaged ribs. He walks for what feels like three hours before catching his first glimpse of the Hyperion pipeline, and takes shelter in the lee of one of its columns while he thinks of what his next move should be. Should he try to climb up, where he’s guaranteed to have better visibility and a real sense of where he’s going, or simply follow the armored sections of pipe from below?

He finally decides on sticking to his original plan of walking beneath it, because his various hurts would have even more strain placed upon them if he tries to climb anything but a gentle slope. There also might be rakks, and Blake has no intention on offering himself up as a midnight snack…or whatever time of day this happens to be.

In a twisted sort of way, his situation is remarkably similar to when Ted had hounded him across half the planet. Blake finds that the comparison lifts his spirits – he’d survived then, and he’ll be damned if he doesn’t survive now. Of course, no sooner does he makes this decision than he happens to stumble across his first bullymong.
It’s enormous and terrifying, though Blake would be hard-pressed to decide which of them is more startled by the other’s sudden appearance. His fight-or-flight response kicks in and Blake is running for his life by the time that the bullymong decides to give chase – the damned thing soars through the air at him as if it’s sprouted wings. It lands heavily and reaches for him with three of its four arms, and Blake yells in terror as he trips over a rock and falls right on his backside. His travel bag bounces a few feet away from him on the shrunken turf and the bullymong snarls at him, probably not discussing the weather in whatever language the monster uses.

Blake risks a glance at his bag, trying to gather his scattered thoughts to figure out which weapon he can actually use on the creature. It’s all going to depend upon whether or not he’s even able to reach the bag quickly enough for it to be of any use to him… and then, of course, whatever weapon he pulls out first is all he’ll have to defend himself with. Had he put any grenades in there? What did he put in there? “Good monstrosity. Niiice four-armed beast,” he tries, slowly pulling himself into a crouch. “Wonderful weather we’re having today, isn’t it?”

It roars at him again and, as it charges, Blake lunges for the travel bag and sticks his hand inside. He pulls out the first thing his fingers touch, which turns out to be a can of shaving cream. He stares at it a split-second before deciding to throw it. The can strikes the bullymong between its beady eyes, effectively halting its homicidal rush while it decides what to do about this interesting development. Blake uses this time to rummage through the bag and thanks his lucky stars that he’d thought to toss a hand grenade in there. Yanking the pin with his teeth, Blake counts to himself before throwing it… underhanded.

He scoops up his travel bag and is racing away from the scene as the grenade explodes, and Blake doesn’t bother sticking around to see what sort of damage he’s inflicted.

Well, ‘racing’ might not be the best term for the limping trot he falls into, but it certainly makes him feel better about himself.

An echoing shriek soon alerts him to another problem; rakk. One of the things swoops down and rams into the back of Blake’s head and before he even knows what’s happened, he’s facedown in a pile of volcanic ash. He hopes it’s ash, and not a product that has come from a place that’s missing the ‘h’ on the end of the word. Blake knows all about the leathery-winged pests, having run into them (and having them run into him) the last time he was fleeing across the continent. If he can manage to find cover relatively quickly, they’ll soon get frustrated with their inability to reach him, but if he stays out in the open they will keep dive bombing like it’s going out of style.

Blake manages to locate an outcropping after a few minutes of frantic searching and painful hair loss, and waves his hands around his head like a madman while screaming and running towards safety. He flattens himself against the side of whichever hill this is and waits while the rakk mill about overhead, presumably chatting amongst themselves over which strand of his hair they’ll want to pull out next.

They don’t lose their interest in him for roughly twenty minutes, during which time Blake amuses himself by cataloguing his various failures. There’s a lot to keep him occupied, unfortunately, but anything is better than sitting there staring up at Helios. His station is still on its way down, if his eyes can be believed, even though it’s probably broken up by now – the time lag makes it seem as if the whole mess could be salvaged, somehow. Blake wrenches his gaze away from Elpis and what should have still been orbiting it; there will be time enough to look upon Pandora’s moon without the view being obscured by a giant H.

His ribs, nearly forgotten in the madness of the bullymong encounter, take this opportunity to remind him that they are still injured. Blake hisses at the pain and probes at them gently, wondering what he
should do about it – he clearly remembers Ted’s grousing over one of the Hyperion engineers who’d wrapped his ribs without seeking medical attention immediately. “So…I do nothing, I suppose,” he says aloud, and is mildly surprised at how rough his voice sounds. Water, Blake thinks, would be very welcome right about now. Since he’s not likely to come across any, however, he’d better keep walking.

If memory serves, the Eridium Blight has an access point to the Arid Nexus. All he needs to do now is figure out where he is so that he can then find out in which direction he should walk. Pity that he’s not about to find a map conveniently laying about, or a helpful bandit willing to give him directions, so it looks as if he’s stuck with his original plans of following the pipeline. Dangerous as it is, he decides to keep walking beneath it now that he’s experienced the joys of rak. Blake rummages in his travel bag for various weaponry that he can tuck in his pockets, and resumes walking with a revolver in his hand.

He reaches one of the control stations after an interminable amount of walking and is pleased to see that, while bandits have attempted to vandalize the place, they haven’t actually managed to get inside it. Blake flubs the first three attempts to input the correct security code, but finally gets it right when he realizes that the codes hadn’t been changed since Jack’s tenure at Hyperion.

Inside, Blake makes a grisly discovery – it seems as if the last Hyperion employee present had never left. Thankfully it’s been long enough so that all that’s left is a set of armor-encased bones. The air could do with some decent circulation, so he props the door open with the body and keeps an eye out for trouble. When the station’s air has been freshened somewhat, Blake scoots the armor outside and locks the door before looking for communications equipment. Each station has a handset connected to the local ECHO network and this location is no different, but it seems as though all communications are being jammed by the debris passing through the planet’s atmosphere. Perhaps there is a map he could use instead.

He finds one, faded and peeling, further inside. Blake scans it quickly to ascertain his current location, and uses the tip of his index finger to trace the shortest route to the road that connects the Eridium Blight to the Arid Nexus. He’s not as far away as he could be, and tries to take heart from this fact. “We will be together again soon,” Blake says quietly, as if Ted can hear him somehow. Removing the map from the wall only results in its destruction and he’s forced to leave it behind, fixing Fyrestone’s general location in his mind.

Mount Hellsfont is rumbling ominously when Blake closes the door to the pumping station behind him, stepping over the skeleton sprawled just outside. Ash is falling faster than before like a thick, sulfurous blanket; he probably should have paid attention to how often the thing is supposed to erupt, but how could he have possibly known this would happen?

Ted, now… Ted had foreseen an outcome just like this one.

Blake glances up at the sky, not quite able to stop himself from doing it and sees that Helios is still ‘there.’ Had Ted managed to escape? A voice in his head whispers all that could have befallen Blake’s absent lover, and he grinds his teeth irritable. No. Ted made it off of the doomed station; there’s no room for speculation of this nature, not after all they’ve endured together. Despite his aching ribs and pounding headache, Blake continues to put one foot in front of the other. He loses track of how long he walks, tracing the lines of his imagined map and dodging marauding Pandoran wildlife – human and animal. There are more bandit camps than he’d ever thought possible but most of the inhabitants don’t actually come out past the gates, instead preferring to hang over the fence and hurl verbal abuse at him. None of the obscenity is particularly original, or really that offensive given that it’s being delivered by someone who doesn’t even have two brain cells to rub together, so Blake ignores it. He does, however, walk faster whenever he hears the moronic yodel of
a Goliath because he’s heard all about them and doesn’t want to be anywhere close if the creature loses its helmet.

The expected landmarks finally come into view, and Blake feels a renewed burst of energy upon realizing that he’s almost made it. Of course, that’s when he gets a good look at what’s parked itself in front of the gate that he will need to pass through.

It’s huge, ugly, and has nestled down right where Blake needs to be.

Typical.

The monstrous bullymong is even more hideous than its smaller cousins and Blake doesn’t doubt that it is faster, too. Lobbing a grenade at this one before legging it to safety won’t work this time, but he can’t stay here waiting for it to leave. Perhaps if he could somehow climb the wall…? No, not in these shoes. Damn it! Was there another way around? If only he’d managed to keep the map intact. “Fuck,” Blake hisses as he tries to think.

There had been several symbols on that map, including a few small icons of a steering wheel – a Catch-A-Ride. It’s hard to concentrate given his level of discomfort, but Blake dimly remembers one of the tiny wheels being relatively close to where he is now. Giving the bullymong one last frustrated stare, Blake scoots backwards and cautiously raises his head to look at his surroundings; if he goes back and climbs up to the road, there is a chance that the Catch-A-Ride will still be operational. A slim chance, to be sure, but a chance nonetheless.

He’s almost to the road when the Technical roars past, sending Blake diving for cover far too late to avoid notice. He hears the screech of brakes and is wondering how he can possibly get out of this one. “Get up here where I can see you,” a man’s voice instructs him calmly, and Blake doesn’t even have to look to know that there’s a gun leveled in his direction. “Come up slow.”

Blake lifts his eyes to see that the other man is indeed pointing a gun at him. He’s also wearing half a suit of Crimson Lance armor so he’s either a bandit who found the armor somewhere, or a bandit who is the original owner of the armor. “Do I have the pleasure of making the acquaintance of a member of the Crimson Raiders?” Blake asks politely.

“Well, well. Hyperion employees have some manners, after all,” the newcomer scoffs. “What’s in the bag?”

“My shaving kit,” Blake says. It’s not exactly a lie, because he does know how to shave using one of the throwing knives.

“Let’s have it,” he’s ordered, and Blake’s under no illusion about what’s going to happen to him once the travel bag changes hands.

“Tell me…does the name Blanco mean anything to you?” Blake asks quickly, hoping against hope that Ted’s popularity can save him.

The muzzle of the gun remains pointed at his face. “You know General Blanco?”

“I know Colonel Blanco, yes,” Blake says, wondering if this is some sort of trap.

They stare at each other (rather, the man stares at him and Blake stares at the gun) for a while, and then the gun is lowered to prod at Blake’s stomach. “How d’you know him?”

Given that this man probably looks up to Ted as a hero of sorts, Blake can’t exactly say that he ravishes Ted whenever an opportunity arises. “We…work together. Quite closely.”
“Oh, yeah? Doing what?”

_Fucking, you imbecile._ “He is my personal bodyguard, if you must know. And if you must ask a stone’s throw away from the biggest bullymong in existence,” Blake says, still trying to be polite.

“You’re actually trying to tell me that the Colonel is your bodyguard? Try again.” The gun rises to Blake’s face once more. “Hand over the bag, Hyperion.”

Screw politeness; he’s had it. “Don’t you dare you threaten me,” Blake hisses. “I’ve put up with more than enough. I need to get to Fyrestone and you are in my way. I don’t need any more of Ted’s ex-employees, or whatever you call yourselves, cocking things up more than they already are!”

It seems as though Ted’s name is what finally does it – the gun is put away. “I heard he was offering to take whoever wanted to go back to Promethea.”

“That particular plan might be put on hold, given the circumstances,” Blake says, trying to slide his hand into the bag as casually as possible. “So, if you will excuse me…”

The other man takes off his helmet and looks Blake up and down. “How far do you think you’ll get by yourself? Tell you what. You’re trying to get to the Badlands…I’m trying to get some hunting done for the folks in Sanctuary. Help me out, and I’ll drop you off in Fyrestone when I swing by there.”

“You were ready to murder me for my personal effects just moments ago,” Blake reminds him in case he’s somehow forgotten. “Why would I possibly want to accept your offer, mister…”?

“Private Jessup’s good enough,” the soldier says. “My last partner got eaten by a skag last week, so I could use the help. As for the murder…well, can you blame me?”

Blake supposes not. “Very well. Do you have a plan to drive around that bullymong?”

“King Mong? Oh, no. We’re not going _that_ way,” Jessup tells him cheerfully. “I’ve got a route and everything.”

After careful questioning, it transpires that this route won’t take them anywhere near Fyrestone for another week. To make matters even worse, the fall of Helios has created numerous issues with the planetary ECHO network which Blake has already experienced firsthand thanks to all the debris, the necessary signals are being blocked and will likely stay that way for some time. This means that the only way that Blake can get a message through is to deliver it himself and Jessup is proving to be irritantly immune to bribery. Ted’s smart enough to realize that Blake’s pod went off course, and will be looking for him – a week isn’t such a long period of time, after all. He doesn’t like it, but getting to Fyrestone safely is more important than getting there _quickly_. “I don’t suppose you have an InstaHealth,” Blake finally says, feeling utterly defeated.

“Why don’t you come on up, and we’ll see what you have to trade for it,” the younger man says. Blake sighs wearily upon seeing the crafty look that slides onto Jessup’s face.

It’s going to be a long week.
The Absence of After

Chapter Summary

Blake's travels come to an end, in more ways than one.

It’s been one week since Jeffrey Blake, CEO of the Hyperion Corporation, lost his job in what has to have been the most spectacular fashion in the known universe. He doesn’t count being fired as the pithy announcement from the Handsome Jack AI that had seized control of Helios – Jack, in whatever form, lost the power to appoint a successor years ago. No, Blake can safely say that his termination was effective immediately after he allowed a multi-billion dollar space station to disengage from its orbit and lost a majority of his workforce. The shareholders won’t allow his continued employment, and Blake can honestly say that he doesn’t blame them a bit. The loss Blake failed to prevent might not bankrupt Hyperion completely, but he’s sure that it will be a close thing… and, at any rate, it’s no longer his problem.

The memory is still fresh, like an open wound that hasn’t yet festered but that will inevitably do so. Blake tries not to think about what he could have possibly done differently, because there are any number of different paths he should have taken.

Now, he’s perched on the back of a Technical as it lurches and backfires its way across the uneven terrain of Krom’s Canyon. Blake doesn’t know who Krom is and neither does he care – all that’s important is that he’s drawing near to Fyrestone. He’d taken a risk by gambling upon Ted’s popularity within the Crimson Lance, especially since the soldier who’d found him could have gotten the old armor from any number of looted stockpiles. Thankfully, the man had agreed to deliver Blake to the custody of his ex-commander’s brother.

He can see the remains of his old life scattered everywhere he looks, and there are frequent meteor showers that have taught him to keep one eye open at all times. “Skag dens ahead,” the Raider – Private Ernest Jessup - grunts, and slows the vehicle. Blake hops down and uses his thumb to flick the safety catch off of the automatic rifle. “Three should be enough.”

“Three,” Blake agrees, because he certainly can’t protest about it – the deal he’d brokered with the man stated that Blake would do the hunting and, in return, would be safely delivered to Dr. Zed. It had been blatantly obvious that the terms had been set because Blake looked totally incompetent, but it hadn’t bothered him. Proving to himself that he could live up to the standards that Ted would expect of him… that was what had bothered him. It will make for a good story once they’re together again, and Blake looks forward to sharing the tale.

He picks his first victim, an adolescent skag that has wandered away from the rest of the pack to nose around a refuse pile, and then narrows his eyes at the others. Despite his benefactor’s request for three carcasses, Blake will have to kill at least six of them before the stupid beasts realize that he’s not worth the effort. The young skag is duly picked off first, and he has a few moments to line up his next shot before they all start pouring out of the den to race at him. It’s growing easier to do this each time it’s expected of him, and a part of Blake is starting to enjoy hunting; not so much the actual killing, but his own competency.

When there are five dead skags in the dirt (the sixth decided not to press its luck), Blake motions for the other man to pull forward so that they can load the unprocessed meat into the back of the truck.
“These’ll be decent barter for some medicine,” his companion grunts as they finish their task and climb back into the Technical.

“Zed is more than capable enough to kill his own food,” Blake points out.

Jessup shakes his head. “You’ll see.”

Whatever that means.

Blake discovers exactly what that means as they drive up to the main gates of Fyrestone several hours later. The handful of times he’d visited the place, the Blanco family had been its only occupants – now, it’s teeming with life. They bring the skags in and hand them over to a group of people who seem to be in charge of cooking; Blake is tired enough not to notice the looks he’s starting to receive, or the murmurs of recognition that are swiftly circulating. There seems to be an inordinate amount of *children*, which leaves him puzzled until he sees the Hyperion cargo containers.

These, then, are the children and families that Ted had remained aboard Helios to save.

Ted. Blake lifts his head sharply to look about – there seems to be a line forming outside Building 03, so that is where he’ll look first. He walks forward purposefully, hoping against hope that the triplet providing medical care inside the clinic is the one he’s looking for.

“…deep breath, an’ let it out. Good. Another one, now,” Blake hears…someone…say. It’s the same voice, but he won’t know until he gets closer. He brushes past the waiting people (his former employees) to enter the medical clinic, and the doctor looks up irritably. “Wait your damned turn, you people always…” The lack of an immediate welcome in his eyes identifies him as Zed, and the way Zed immediately looks past Blake signifies that Ted isn’t here. There’s something else in the doctor’s expression that Blake’s unable to read, but it sends a twinge of foreboding up his spine.

“Doctor,” Blake says in greeting, moving forward when Zed beckons him in and points to a spare apron.

“Wash your hands, put that on, an’ grab some gloves,” Zed tells him, sighing for some reason. “Got any medical trainin’?”

“No-”

“Too bad. You’re gonna be my assistant.”

“Doctor-”

“No now, Blake.” Zed turns back to his patient. “Sounds like you got some congestion in there. I’ll get you somethin’ to take care of it but you’ll need to cough much as you can up and out. Don’t get none on your clothes and keep away from any of the kids ‘til you can breathe clear again…and for god’s sake, wash your hands.”

He puts Blake to work cataloguing the various complaints of the waiting patients, and reorganizing the line so that the people with acute injuries or illnesses are seen first. When that’s done, Blake gets the job of wiping down the exam table and making sure the patients understand their treatment options. Most of those present have recognized Blake by now, but the majority of them don’t seem to blame him for their current circumstances. Those that do blame him, do so with raised voices until Zed slams the heel of his hand down onto the table. “You wanna bitch? Fine – take it outside where my girls don’t gotta hear you,” the doctor hisses. “You’re goddamned lucky I even let the lot of you in here t’begin with.”
“Thank you,” Blake murmurs, only to get his gratitude brushed off with an impatient hand movement. “Girls?”

Zed’s face momentarily clears of its irritation. “That’s right; you don’t know. I’ll show you later.”

“He…isn’t here, is he,” Blake says flatly, because while he doesn’t really expect Ted to come waltzing in he just needs to know.

Zed looks away. “We’ll talk about that later, too.”

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“It means that now ain’t the time and this ain’t the place,” Zed says after a long pause. “Let’s get these folks squared away ‘fore we get into it.”

Blake has a sinking feeling that he’s not going to like whatever Zed has to tell him. “I see.”

They settle into a routine of Blake questioning the patients while Zed goes about a perfunctory physical examination, then Zed takes over the conversation so that Blake can make notes on a positively antique ECHOpad with a cracked screen. When the clinic’s ‘operating’ hours reach an end, Zed walks over to rap his knuckles against the med vendor. “Time’s up, folks. Use these and if you ain’t dead come mornin’, I’ll be here.” He motions Blake towards the sink. “Toss the gloves.”

Blake removes the gloves as requested and hangs up his apron, pausing to wash his hands after seeing Zed do so. “I gather from your earlier comments that Patricia has given birth to a girl?”

“I can see how you’d gather that,” Zed tells him. “They’ll have moved on to the motel for now. You wanna come see, or…?”

Or know immediately that Ted has abandoned him here, or worse? “If it wouldn’t be too much of an imposition,” he says politely.

Zed leads him out beyond the fence to the Fyrestone Motel, which has improved beyond all recognition. “Your folks’ve been fixin’ it,” Zed tells him upon noticing the surprised look on Blake’s face. “Rest of the town’s bein’ built back up since there’s nowhere else to put ‘em, so they’ll work if they don’t got the funds for medical treatment.”

“Oh. You…charge them?”

“Course I do, this ain’t a dang charity! Folks like this need someone in charge of ‘em, Blake, and this is my town. Didn’t mind helpin’ for free when that station of yours came down over our heads, but we’ve had a week go by already so I’m exchangin’ service for service.” Zed stops suddenly as three children go barreling past them, shouting with laughter. “Been an age since there were any kids out here,” the doctor says, watching them run along. “Ted did good, to save ‘em.”

Blake forces himself to breathe normally and keep his voice level. “Did he arrive with them?”

“I don’t rightly know, Blake, but that sounds likely. He was here...that I can tell you.” Zed sighs. “You ain’t gonna like what I got to show you, though.”

Patricia and the baby, Blake thinks, are going to have to wait. “Perhaps it might be best to get that out of the way now.”

“If you say so.”
Zed leads him past the motel, and Blake feels icy fingers clutch at his heart when he realizes that they’re walking directly towards the New-U station. “Zed—”

The other man turns back to him, and the unrecognizable expression of earlier is firmly resolving itself into sorrow. “After what happened with Ned, I put his DNA in the system just in case. New-U records show this was activated seventeen times in a row by someone sharin’ our genetic makeup…only Ned was in Jakob’s Cove and I sure as hell wasn’t usin’ the thing either.”

“Seventeen? How is that possible?” Blake asks faintly. This isn’t happening. Not again. Not with Ted. They’re close enough to the station for him to see that both it and the surrounding area has been stained a peculiar shade of brown. He looks up at Zed questioningly. “Why is this…oh. No, this cannot be his, there’s too much of it—”


“Sitting down isn’t going to…it won’t bring him…it…” Blake is aware that his voice is steadily rising to a scream, but he can’t stop himself. “What could have-!”

He allows himself to be steered towards the closest ‘seat’, an old weapons chest, and away from that horrible patch of blood-soaked earth. “Ted’s been through a lot, in his life,” Zed finally says. “He ran off young, and Atlas twisted him into somethin’ that he never shoulda been. He told me that he tried to off himself after he found out about Helga, but that his command tied his implant into the regeneration system. Said he was their property and couldn’t die til they said it was okay.”

Blake stares down at the scrub grass beneath his feet. “Why does that matter here.”

“Well,” Zed says quietly, “What do you suppose he’d do if he thought you’d died on him, too?”

“Why-”

“I found your jacket, Blake. God knows why it was out here, ‘steada on your back where it belongs, but it was torn all to hell and with too much blood on there to be just a papercut. Think he found it and dropped it on his way over there” Zed gestures to the New-U “before he cut out the implant.”

“My guess is that he did too much damage for it to bring him back whole, so he got stuck in a cycle where he bled out ‘fore the station finally shut off,” the doctor finishes, looking away from the tears in Blake’s eyes. “They just ain’t rigged to carry that much power.”

Blake struggles to hold himself together even as he feels himself coming apart at the very seams. The jacket he’d so carelessly offered to his personal assistant, just because she looked so terribly messy…if he’d only minded his own business, Ted would be waiting for him now. “I took…took it off because…and he saw me, but…!”

“Everyone I been treatin’ says it was real hectic up there,” Zed tells him, and Blake feels a hand settle on his shoulder. “No fault of yours that he forgot.” It’s hard not to shrink away from the gentle touch that reminds him so much of what he’s lost, but Zed feels Blake tense and moves his hand away. “I’ll let you have some space. Be in the motel, if you feel like comin’ in there later.”

He waits for the crunch of Zed’s footsteps to recede before allowing the first tear to track its way down his face and then Blake draws his legs up against his chest. It had almost been too good to be true, finding love again after Tassiter’s death…and now here he is again, alone in his misery. Surely he should have felt Ted’s death, somehow. Surely they’d been close enough for that.

Blake weeps for what could have been – what should have been – and the thought that Ted had been so full of despair at Blake’s perceived death that all he’d wanted was to join Blake the only way he
knew how. The indignity and pain of being revived only to bleed to death on a patch of scrub grass, over and over and over. Had he known – truly known how much Blake had treasured him?

_Oh, my darling. I am so, so very sorry_, Blake says silently, huddling atop the ammo chest. If only Ted would have remembered that Paxson took his jacket. If only his lifepod hadn’t been bumped off course. If only he’d listened.

If only.

Blake sits and stares at the patch of dirt and grass that Ted had stained with his life’s blood several times over, and there he stays until the shadows lengthen and the sunset paints everything the same rusty orange. He doesn’t particularly want to go inside and see Ted’s face being worn by someone who isn’t Ted at all, but the only alternative is to walk back into town and ask his former employees for a place to spend the night.

It transpires that Zed has thought of this problem, and placed strips of medical tape on the floor to guide him. Blake follows the crudely made arrows to the room that he’d shared with Ted on the occasions that they’d been here together. The inside of the room hasn’t changed much despite the remodeling going on everywhere else, but Blake can see the subtle Crimson Lance markings on a few bags beneath the bed. He looks away and busies himself with removing his shoes, wondering just what other unpleasant surprises his new life is going to bring. He climbs into the bed after turning off the light, and stares up at the ceiling listening to the sound of a very angry newborn before grief-fueled exhaustion finally demands its due.

His dreams are full of blood and screaming, with the Voice of Helios calmly reciting messages about the station’s imminent destruction. Blake wakes several times in a cold sweat, until the bedclothes are yanked aside and Ted slides into the bed with him. “Oh, Theodore – is it really you?”

“You’re makin’ all kinds of a fuss in here,” Ted tells him softly, drawing Blake into his arms. “Try t’get some sleep.”

Blake presses his face into Ted’s neck, inhaling a scent that…isn’t quite right somehow, but he’s not about to complain. “I thought—” he chokes off the rest of the words at the feel of those big hands rubbing his back and stroking his hair as Ted soothes him into a dreamless sleep.

He wakes alone, and with a pounding headache. Blake leveres himself upright in the bed, reaching out to touch the space that Ted had somehow occupied during the night, but finds it cold. A vivid dream, then. Blake draws the blankets around him despite the morning’s heat seeping in through the walls, and stares at the door. Life is still very much happening outside of the motel, and he listens to the cheerful yelps of children playing outside…and some less-than-cheery howls coming from inside the motel.

Blake decides to get up and investigate since it’s better than simply huddling in bed feeling sorry for himself, following the outraged noises to another of the rooms. He taps on the door hesitantly, and is wholly unprepared for Patricia Tannis to reach an arm out and yank him inside the room. “Do you know how to silence an infant?” she demands, thrusting a squalling child at him without waiting for an answer. “They won’t stop…”

“They?” Blake asks, curving his arms around the tiny bundle that’s been given to him whether he wants it or not. He vaguely remembers something about needing to support the head, so he does that, and starts bouncing one leg reflexively. Babies are supposed to like it, and this one seems no different – the crying slowly dies down into some soft grunts. Now that the child he’s holding is currently quiet…ish…Blake can glance up long enough to see that yes, there is a they. “Twins.”
Patricia rolls her eyes at him, her annoyed expression at odds with the gentle caresses she’s giving to the identical bundle in her arms. “I see that Hyperion only hires the most eloquent to work for them. Yes, they are twins.”

“Please accept my congratulations. It must have been quite a shock to find that your expected child had turned into two of them, when the moment arrived.” Blake looks down at the tiny, bleary-eyed girl in his arms and feels a sharp pang in his chest. “Ted would have.”

Patricia waits for him to wrestle his emotions under control before speaking. “Zed is also very upset concerning his brother’s suicide,” she says, as plainspoken as ever. “However, I do not think it likely that he blames you for it.”

“That…does not make me feel any better.”

“I didn’t think it would, but I thought it best to tell you anyway. Now,” Patricia says, resolutely changing the subject, “What do you know about changing diapers?”

Blake accepts the diversion and is soon learning more than he’d ever thought to know concerning the sleeping, eating, and evacuation schedules of newborn children. Patricia is clearly desperate for some sleep of her own, so he volunteers to watch over the twins while she disappears into one of the neighboring rooms. If anything, the bedlam sure to result from his decision will keep him too busy to think much about Ted.

The baby in his arms grumbles sleepily and he transfers her to his shoulder, patting her back while he peers into the cradle at her sister. “I have no idea what I am doing,” he tells them. He probably should have asked their names so that he knows what to call them. One and Two will be good enough. Two is squinting up at him suspiciously as if she’s about to call the authorities, so he carefully scoops her up and settles her on his other shoulder. This seems to appease Two for the time being, so Blake takes exaggerated bouncing steps about the room while the two gurgle at each other in their shared language.

A gentle rap on the door, followed by Timothy Lawrence peeking around it, has Blake sighing in relief. “Thank god. Do you know anything about…these?”

His friend smiles and comes over to take One, leaving Blake to tuck Two into the corner of his elbow so that he can rock her. “You seem as though you know enough, Jeff. They like you,” Tim says softly. “Sorry we weren’t here yesterday – Ned needed to service the med vendors out in Three Horns.”

Blake looks away from the sympathy on Tim’s face. “There is nothing you could have done yesterday.”

“I know. I’m sorry anyway.”

“As am I.” Blake clears his throat, and changes the subject. “I don’t suppose you know what names these two have been given?”

Tim brightens instantly. “Aren’t they the cutest? Patricia and Zed named them for their mothers, which I think is really great. This one’s Leandra, and that one’s called Hypaetia. Or...is this one Hypaetia? If Tricia were still up, she’d know for sure.” He pats Possibly Leandra on the back as he tells Blake about the twins’ birth, a tale that has surely been heavily embellished. “She was so mad, I thought she was going to punch Zed right in the face. It was crazy. We’d only brought blankets for one baby, too, so there we were – in the middle of a bandit camp - taking off our shirts so both of them could keep warm.”
“Why…why were you in a bandit camp to begin with?” Blake asks.

“It was either that, or she’d have given birth in the back of the Technical and with Helios coming down around our ears…” Tim trails off and angles his bundle towards Blake. “Oh, she fell asleep! How’s yours doing?”

Blake looks down to see ‘his’ glaring at nothing in particular. “Imitating her father, it seems. That, or she’s about to relieve herself. What do you think?”

“She’s definitely dropping a deuce,” Tim confirms. “You know how to change a diaper, right?”

“I’m afraid that was left out of my chief executive training course. Patricia showed me, but now I can’t recall a thing. Shall we trade? I’m much better with children when they’re unconscious.”

Thinking of the uproarious laughter this would have brought from Ted, Blake hurriedly amends this statement. “By that, I mean sleeping. Quietly.”

Tim instead volunteers to teach Blake how to change a diaper by himself, whereupon Blake volunteers to slap Tim in the face. They compromise by performing the originally suggested trade, and Tim still teaches Blake how to change a diaper. It’s fully as foul as Blake had expected it might be, but he survives the experience and Hypaetia seems to be quite pleased with herself. Or was that Leandra? It’s hard to tell, Blake thinks. She settles down with a tiny, contented sigh and Blake is thinking about Ted once more. His shadow would have loved to see the twins, and most likely wouldn’t have batted an eye when it came time for a diaper change.

“Do you wanna talk about it?” Tim asks softly.

“No, there’s nothing to… no,” Blake says, willing himself not to cry. “He loved children.”

Tim’s own eyes are starting to look suspiciously wet. “They loved him, too. Those kids out there, they…they would’ve died if he hadn’t saved them. Ned gets mobbed each time we come out, did you know? Zed’s too busy to play with them all that much, but I’ve seen him join in a few times.”

It’s hard to imagine Zed playing with anyone…Patricia excepted, of course, because they’re babysitting the identical proof. “I’m trying to keep myself too busy to really think about him,” Blake confesses. “I’ve had practice at coping this way.”

“Yeah? Does it work?”

Blake forces a smile. “Not exactly, but it is the only thing I know how to do.”

“It’s gonna be harder than ever if you stay here, then,” his friend says. “I don’t know if I could be around Zed if anything happened to Ned, to be honest with you. Hang on, though…”

“Hm?”

Tim’s eyes have gone wide. “Whoa. That actually could work! With all the, er, new people we’ve been pretty busy just servicing the vendors. Some of the Hyperion medical staff have come down and Zed’s set them up at his other clinics, but he could use Ned’s help. If you could take over with the vendors, that could solve so many problems…plus, you wouldn’t have to be around them very much. So, you know, there’s that.”

Listening to Tim describe the potential new job, Blake has to admit that it doesn’t sound bad compared to sitting around feeling sorry for himself. This way, he can feel sorry for himself while driving. “I will need to learn the route first, I would imagine.”
“I could go with you,” Tim offers. “It goes faster if two people do it.”

“We shall see,” Blake says, and gently guides Tim into telling him about the Eden vacation.

The two men talk quietly until Hypaetia gives a tiny warning snort, and Patricia comes flying through the door to evict them from the premises while she nurses. Promising to send Zed to her, Tim pulls Blake outside. “They’re probably done by now, but we should probably check the clinic just in case.”

Blake places a hand on his friend’s shoulder. “You should go. I will follow later.”

“If you’re sure…”

“I am,” Blake says, and waits until Tim is out of sight before circling around the building and walking over to the New-U station. There’s no one to put on a show of bravery for, so he doesn’t bother trying to stop his eyes from filling with tears as he kneels in the rust-hued soil. This, then, will be the closest he’ll ever come to touching Ted again. The sun has baked it into clay, but it crumbles beneath the press of Blake’s hand as he slides his fingers through the dirt. “I am so sorry,” Blake whispers, achingly aware that the only shadow he’ll have now is his own. He should have insisted upon helping Ted load those containers. Why had he allowed himself to be bundled into an escape pod?

He sifts the dirt with his hands, fully aware of how ridiculous it is. Ted can’t feel Blake touching him – it’s just dried blood. It seems monumentally unfair, that all that’s left of such a strong, vibrant man is a patch of stained earth he’d never wanted to return to. Blake wipes his eyes on the sleeve of his shirt and hunts through his pockets until he finds a handkerchief to blow his nose with, then he sits cross-legged on Ted Blanco’s final resting place and makes a decision: there might not be a body to bury and mourn for, but he’ll be damned if he lets anyone else walk over this soil. With all the construction happening in town and on the outskirts, he should easily find the tools he’ll need. Blake places both hands flat in the dirt with a silent promise, and pushes himself back to his feet.

He finds a sturdy wooden box near the fence, and picks up another outside one of the newly renovated huts. Once they’ve been stacked beside the New-U station, Blake returns to town in search of a bladed shovel that he’s forced to ask Ned for. The other man looks at him silently for a few long moments before calling out to one of the children playing in the street. “Hustle your bustle over to your old lady’s shack, son – need t’ borrow her shovel.”

The boy runs off with his friends in tow, and Ned crosses arms over his chest as he returns to looking at Blake. “Nothin’ left to bury.”

“On that, we shall have to disagree,” Blake says calmly, looking away. “Is Zed here?”

“Nah, he went to look after his ladies. Cute, ain’t they?”

“They are, indeed.”

Ned reaches out to bump his knuckles against Blake’s shoulder. “Hell of a thing, Jeff.”

Blake turns back to look up into Ned’s face, a carbon copy of his beloved’s. “Yes.”

“You wanna talk about it?”

“Do you want to discuss it?”

Ned shrugs. “Not really.”
“Well, then.”

“Saw you with some boxes earlier. If you’re doin’ what I think you’re doin’... I’ll come help carry ‘em when you’re done.”

Blake clears his throat. “I thought that it might be nice if...he...could be with Helga.”

Ned’s gaze sharpens, and Blake can see the muscles in his jaw tighten before it’s Ned’s turn to look away. Blake’s experience with Ted has taught him how to recognize when tears are being fought against, and he reaches out to touch his fingers to the back of Ned’s hand. “Neither of us knew what the fuck to do with that dirt, so we just kinda stayed away.”

“Ned…”

“We’ve lived past our expectancy, tell you the truth,” Ned murmurs, staring down at the dust on his boots. “Anything more than twenty is a gift on Pandora – time starts runnin’ out after that, you know? Never thought I’d see Ted again, but then there he was. Got greedy, I guess, thinkin’ he’d still be around.” Ned shrugs again and shoves his hands in his pockets, looking embarrassed at discussing what he said he didn’t want to talk about. “Here’s that shovel.”

Blake glances over to see the young boy trotting towards them holding the requested implement. “Thank you.”

Digging up the bloodstained dirt is hard work in the desert heat, but once Blake starts he forces himself to keep going until he’s gathered every last bit of it into the boxes. He thinks about Ted as he digs, wondering what his shadow would say if he could see what Blake is doing. It would definitely be something rude, and Blake smiles at the thought.

Once both boxes are full of dirt, Blake allows himself to sit down and rest. He’s surprised to find the remaining Blanco brothers standing behind him, but he doesn’t ask how long they’ve been waiting. “Here,” one of them says, extending a moisture-beaded bottle. Blake accepts it gratefully and drinks the contents in several long swallows – it’s beer, which he wouldn’t normally go for, but it’s cold and it’s wet. That makes it perfect. “We opened her grave up.”

“Good,” Blake says with a sharp nod.

The other two men stoop to pick up the boxes when Blake signals that he’s ready to proceed, and they walk back through Fyrestone to the tire-marked graves just inside the main gates. They each take turns tipping the dirt into the open hole and all that remains of Ted settles atop Helga’s ashes. Zed crouches beside the grave and stares down into it. “See ya later, dumbfuck.”

Ned turns to Blake and holds out something. “You wanna toss this in there?”

Blake accepts the item, which turns out to be a half-melted piece of metal. “What is...oh,” he says, staring at it. He can barely make out the number 5104-6, the same identification marking that had been branded into Ted’s left temple. It seems so harmless, resting there in the palm of his hand. No one would be able to tell, just by looking at it, that its removal had caused a man’s death. “No,” Blake says softly. “I think that I might like to keep this for a while.”

Curling his fingers around the implant until its ridges bite into his skin, Blake watches the brothers start filling in the grave.
Blake gets a new job working for Zed, and Tim gets pranked in the shower. The new normal leaves much to be desired.

Blake slowly acclimates to life on Pandora. There are many places he’d rather be but he’s made his bed and now he’ll lie in it…mainly because there simply isn’t any other choice. During the extremely long day, he could be called upon to administer first aid or be roped into helping one of his ex-employees build a living structure. He’d even begun to accompany Tim to various places on the continent, learning the ins and outs of med vendor upkeep; now, he heads out on his own. On the occasions when he’s back in Fyrestone, it’s not uncommon for him to be taken aside and taught various medical techniques by whichever brother is currently in residence.

His dreams are as vivid as ever once darkness falls. Ted appears in them frequently and as busy as Blake tries to make himself, he’s begun to crave the dreams – both good and bad – for the times that his sleeping mind creates Ted’s presence to serve as a calming influence. Then and only then can he relax into his shadow’s embrace and unburden himself of his troubles… even if it’s only a dream.

The fact that this only seems to happen when he spends the night in Fyrestone is something that doesn’t occur to him.

When his work is at an end Blake usually retires to his room in the motel and, if he’s feeling particularly sentimental, he’ll tug the bags out from beneath his bed and open them up. He can still catch the barest hint of Ted’s preferred soap if he presses the spare clothes up to his face, and things don’t seem so bad for a moment or two.

Blake opens one of the bags now, lifting out an item that Zed had been careful not to mention to him – the cracked hilt of an Atlas plasma sword. He lifts it up to the light and wonders yet again how he’s supposed to go about triggering the thing, then puts it back in the bag. Blake’s well aware of the fact that it’s most likely what Ted had used to maim himself beyond repair, and that he shouldn’t even want to look at it let alone touch it. Yet…it had been Ted’s signature weapon for years, and the other one is still missing. It had been as much a part of Ted Blanco as had the spinal implant currently residing in Blake’s back pocket.

He sighs and nudges both bags back under the bed before slowly changing his clothes – he’s volunteered to look after the twins so that their parents can have a night off. This really means that Zed and Patricia will go to one of her dig sites for a few hours so that she can look around and he can take a nap while she does it.

It seems that the babies have not yet been brought back to their customary napping spot – they technically live inside Zed’s clinic, but the twins seem to sleep better in the quiet environment of the motel. Their parents prefer to keep them away from the settlers as much as possible, for a variety of reasons and prejudices they’ve yet to fully explain. Blake walks into town, exchanging polite nods with a few of his ex-employees, and pauses to look at the newest storefront – it seems as though Marcus Kincaid has decided to reopen his weapons shop and is doing quite well. If Blake were to sell any of Ted’s weapons, he’s sure Marcus would give him a good price…but he’s not quite ready to part with any of them yet.
He finds Ned leaning against the front gates, arms folded across his chest. “Ned, have you seen—”

“Pssht,” Ned hushes him, motioning him over. “C’mere and watch this.”

Blake comes over, and Ned jerks his chin towards the outdoor shower station that’s been built recently. It’s not that far from where he’d been bullied into riding a skag months ago, if he’s not mistaken. “What is… why are we watching Timothy take a shower, precisely?”

“‘Sides the obvious? Keep watchin’, this’s gonna be good…” Ned huffs with amusement as, across the roadway, Tim squirts some shampoo into his hands and starts lathering up his hair. It’s a small mercy that most people use the shower while partially clothed, as Tim is doing now, but Blake has happened across a few exhibitionists. “There, see?”

“What am I looking – oh.” Tim has set the shampoo bottle up onto the edge of the shower, and Blake can see a hand reach up from behind to grab it. “Is that Patricia?”

“Yup.” As they watch, Patricia squeezes more shampoo onto the top of Tim’s head and quickly ducks out of sight. Blake’s friend keeps rinsing his hair, and Patricia emerges from hiding to add more shampoo. The lather is streaming down Tim’s body at this point and the scrubbing motions he’s making are becoming increasingly more frantic. Ned is wheezing loudly, and Blake can feel his own chest begin to ache with the effort of holding in his laughter.

Patricia pours even more shampoo down on Tim’s head, and Tim lets out a roar of frustration that has Ned bent double and slapping at his knees. “Hey, y’all seen… ooh, lord,” Zed comments, coming up behind them and taking in the scene at a glance.

They’re all in hysterics by the time Patricia has emptied the rest of the bottle onto Tim’s hair before sneaking away to stand with them. “That is a lot of foam,” she observes calmly, which makes them laugh even harder.

“I haven’t seen anythin’ like that since we were sixteen,” Ned laughs, wiping away tears. “Oh, my god.”

Zed sways against Patricia, who is looking quite satisfied with the way her prank has turned out. “Least his hair’ll be real clean,” he points out.

Blake’s stomach hurts from laughing so hard. “Yes. There is that.”

They manage to get themselves more or less under control by the time Tim has successfully rinsed his hair and no more suds have appeared. The young man stamps up to them, still rubbing a towel on his head. “You would not believe what just happened to me.”

“Really? What happened to you?” Patricia asks, as if it’s all news to her, and Blake can’t hold in a snort that makes Tim look over. “I only put a little bit of shampoo on my-”

Zed and Ned exchange quick glances, and Ned caves first. “Ahahahahahahahaaaaa…!”

“Like I said, it was just a drop of—” Zed’s composure finally fails him, and he starts laughing again too. “What’s going on?”

“Nothing.” Blake manages.

“If you say so,” Tim says suspiciously. Zed staggers off to retrieve the shampoo bottle, and Tim
frowns. “He doesn’t have to clean up for me…so, Jeff? I heard you’re babysitting tonight?”

Blake coughs into his fist. “I am, indeed. Where are they, exactly?”

“They are in the clinic, being watched over by one of the Hyperion children,” Patricia says. “We shall depart after they have nursed.”

“I am sure that they will be no trouble at all,” Blake assures her.

Zed returns and tosses the bottle at Tim. “Heads up, Squeaky Clean.”

“Don’t spill the-” Tim nearly fumbles the empty bottle, having expected the thing to have more weight to it. “What the…? This was nearly full when - Ned!!!!!!”

Blake slips away from the ensuing uproar to find his small charges, pausing to look at the shared grave that has been marked with the rod of Asclepius as well as a stylized Siren tattoo on the left side of the headstone. It’s not the first time he’s seen it, but he remains deeply glad that the couple can at least share this. He bends to touch the headstone and walks past the fully functional bounty board and a stunning lack of slag, wondering yet again where the new settlers moved the stuff.

Each time he returns from his journeys, Blake finds that Fyrestone has changed further. The colored lights that Patricia and Janey had scrounged for are a permanent fixture with parties and dancing once every two weeks… but Blake notices the children, most of all. Ted had given so much to save them, it’s truly unfair that he’s not here to watch them grow.

Blake smiles as a loud group of youths run past, stopping to greet him respectfully and gathering speed once he’s left behind. In Building 03, three other children are playing with the youngest inhabitants of Fyrestone. “Hi, Mister Blake! Are you going to babysit tonight?” One of them asks.

“Indeed I am,” he answers. “I can take over now, if there’s someplace else that you would rather be.”

She smiles and directs another boy to put the twin he’s holding into the playpen, and carefully hands her charge to Blake. “Here’s Pae.”

“Pae?”

“Short for Hypaetia,” the girl explains. “Mister Blake? I, um, I hope you don’t mind but… I wanted to say thank you.”

Blake looks at her, startled. “Whatever for, child?”

She stares down at her shoes, embarrassed. “Well, sir, Doctor Ted told us you wanted us to be safe – that’s why you had him fix up the containers for us.”

He opens his mouth to tell her that, no, Ted had been the one with the idea. “Your safety was important to him,” Blake says instead.

“I liked him a lot, Mister Blake.”

“So did I.” Blake tucks Hypaetia into his elbow and rocks her slowly. “Were you scared?”

She shrugs. “A little, but it wasn’t bad at all.”

“That’s…that’s good,” Blake says. “I am glad that you arrived safely.” The girl smiles at him and, before Blake can react, darts forward and kisses him on the cheek before running after her friends. “That was odd,” he tells Hypaetia. She gurgles up at him in agreement.
He’s momentarily freed of his duties as Patricia comes back to give the twins their dinner, and Blake goes out to talk with Zed. The other man is frowning at an ECHOpad as Blake walks up to him, but lowers it once he realizes that he has company. “Hey, Blake. Any problems during your run?”

Blake nods in greeting. “Just the usual banditry, I’m afraid, though there are a few issues with the vendor in Frostburn Canyon. I believe that someone had attempted to liberate the machine of its contents, if the knife gouges are anything to go by. It was slow to cycle its offerings, as well.”

“Sounds like a coil goin’ bad – someone probably tried to get in there an’ fucked up the pressure seals. It happens,” Zed says. “Listen. Janey stopped by a few days back, asked about rentin’ a doctor for Hollow Point…I’m thinkin’ you know more about those medics we turned loose.”

There are one or two physicians who haven’t really enjoyed operating, pun intended, under Zed’s purview. Blake can definitely think of a few who would jump at the chance to set up shop away from a Blanco’s watchful eye, but none of them truly want to supplant the Pandoran doctors – the majority of the planet wouldn’t allow it, anyway. “I have two in mind that could share the responsibility,” Blake says. “Some restructuring would be required, however…”

Zed hands the ECHOpad to him. “You mind takin’ care of that? I can send the messages out when we get back.”

“I would be happy to assist,” Blake says, surprising himself by actually meaning it. This is a task that will come easily to him, and he knows that he will be able to do it well. Perhaps they might even be able to turn it into another facet of his current job, and leave Blake with less time to think about personal issues. “It might be better if I were the ones to contact them as they are used to dealing with me.”

“Sounds fine,” Zed agrees. “Just let me know who’s goin’ where. Ned’s drawin’ up the next route, should have it to ya by late tomorrow.”

Patricia drifts up to them, looking relieved. “They are asleep. If we are crushed to death by a falling column, you will be their designated caregiver.”

“…what?”

“Nobody’s gonna get squished by nothin’,” Zed interrupts. “We’ll see you later, Blake.”

Blake nods in farewell and heads in to check on the babies, who are indeed sleeping as promised. Pulling up a chair as quietly as possible, he’s soon involved in drawing up lists of Hyperion physicians who have expressed interest in continuing their trade here on Pandora. He selects three who aren’t that excited about practicing medicine in Dr. Zed’s shadow, and sends each of them a message concerning the job opportunities available in Hollow Point. A city of that size should have no problem keeping three doctors busy.

Another hour is spent examining the placement of the other doctors and where they could be more efficient. If only there was some way to tell which of the med vendors are typically emptied first, he would have a better idea of where to reassign the extra staff…not to mention that he’d know which location to visit first during his supply runs. There are so many of them that most are empty by the time Blake comes to restock. If Zed had a system to which all the vendors were connected, all they’d need to do is check the supply levels.

He makes a mental note to speak with Tim about creating a program, as coding has never been one of Blake’s strengths, and finishes the reassignment chart just as the first disgruntled noises are heard from the bassinet. Blake peers in to see that one is awake and gnawing at her sister’s fist, so he
reaches in and gently lifts her out. “Hello again, little one. They really should give the pair of you name tags so that Uncle Jeffrey can tell you apart,” he says. She settles into his arms with a happy sigh after being changed, waving chubby arms as she listens to a story concerning his close call with a few bandits. “You see, they made the mistake of thinking I was easy prey – it was probably the elegant hairstyle that lulled them into a false sense of security. Let that be a lesson to you; fabulous hair will help you succeed in life,” he finishes.

“Maybe that’s where I went wrong,” a voice says, startling Blake. “Oh, sorry…thought you knew I was in here.”

Blake glares at Ned. “No, I did not.”

“C’mon now, I don’t need two of y’all mad at me.” Ned passes Blake another ECHOpad. “Here’s the route…it’s a longer one, so you might want Tim to go along.”

“After what you did earlier, I’m sure he’ll jump at the chance to leave,” Blake says tartly, but moderates his tone when the baby in his arms squirms in response to it.

Ned snorts out a laugh. “Don’t you try to pretend that wasn’t funny as hell.” Their conversation is briefly halted by the awakening of the other twin. Ned takes care of the necessities and lets her gnaw on one of his (hopefully clean) fingers. “How you been doin’?”

“I have no complaints.”

“That’s hard to believe,” Ned says mildly. “Zed thinks it’s too much to expect of you. Says you’d be happier up in the Highlands runnin’ things in Overlook.”

Blake looks over in surprise. “Is he that eager to be rid of me?”

“I wouldn’t say that. Don’t take a genius to see bein’ in Fyrestone’s been hard on you, and I hope you don’t mind me sayin’ but… it’s been a minute since he died. You should be gettin’ on with your life, Jeff, not relivin’ things every time you come back here.”

“Am I being evicted? Is that what this is?”

Ned lets out a frustrated huff. “No. Fuck’s sake, Jeff – Zed actually likes you. You got any idea how hard it is to accomplish that shit? It’s just…you’re wasted, here. Anybody can drive a damn truck around and refill med vendors, but not just anyone can oversee an entire company and keep it goin’.”

“I ‘kept it going’ directly into the atmosphere of this planet, if I recall correctly,” Blake points out. “After my dismal performance as CEO of Hyperion, I highly doubt that anyone would want me as the head of their corporation.”

“What if there is someone, though?” Ned asks. “Would you do it, if there was?”

Blake stares at him. “What do you mean?”

“Tell you what. You go on that route and when you get to T-Bone Junction, I want you to look in the bottom left drawer of Zed’s desk. Ted left you somethin’ in there and I’m guessin’ he just never got around to tellin’ you to go get it – I found it last time I was over there.”

“What is it?”

Ned shakes his head. “Nuh-uh, you gotta go see it for yourself.”
Blake’s aware that he should be feeling upset about this, but he can’t summon up the energy for it. Besides, whichever little girl he’s holding would likely be upset as well and he’d rather not distress her. “Very well.” He scans the route that Ned has drawn up for him. “I have had a few thoughts on how to make the service schedule more efficient…” he explains and Ned listens quietly, nodding occasionally, and asking a few questions.

“That ain’t bad at all. Wish I’d thought of it,” the other man says admiringly. “Let’s get Tim in here and see what he says – Zed’ll go for it, no questions asked.”

“If it works, I’m sure it will be a great help…but what have you been up to lately? Do you simply visit each of the clinics?”

Ned shrugs. “Kinda. Zed won’t leave Fyrestone while he’s got his girls here, so I just bounce between his main locations…even Sanctuary, if you can believe that. They only tried to kill me, like, twice.”

“Good heavens. Everything is fine now, though?”

“Sure is. They’ll play nice from now on…seems me lockin’ up the vendors and the clinic taught ‘em the error of their wicked, wicked ways.” Ned laughs. “Those Sirens, I’m tellin’ you… sure wouldn’t mind if one of ‘em branded me.”

 “…excuse me?”

“You know, like Helga did to Ted. He said he asked her to do it, can you imagine that?”

Actually, Blake can. He’d wondered about the burn scars, but never got around to asking how Ted had gotten them. Despite everything, Blake has to smile. It’s exactly the sort of thing that Ted would ask for. “Are you not based in Jakob’s Cove anymore, since the…ah, incident?”

Ned explains about the various resettlement issues – namely, the Jakobs Corporation’s unwillingness to trust Ned around a large number of prospective employees. “I mean, I said I wasn’t gonna do that again,” the doctor says cheerfully. “Can you imagine someone not trustin’ me?”

“Yes, that does seem a bit far-fetched,” Blake says. The conversation shifts to other things – namely, gossiping about shared acquaintances – and Tim stops by to help them get bottles ready for the twins.

By the time that Patricia and Zed return, Blake has both babies fast asleep in his arms while he reads through a few articles on the ECHOnet. The trade off is tricky, but Blake has a sense of a job well done as he walks back to the Fyrestone Motel. For once, his sleep is dreamless.

In the morning, Tim helps him load up several crates of medicine and a few boxes of refurbished shields. “Is it such a good idea, to be leaving right after a disagreement?” Blake asks delicately.

“Disagreement? Oh, you mean that trick Ned pulled with the shampoo? No, it wasn’t a disagreement…he just got in trouble.” Tim gives Blake a wide smile. “There’s a difference.”

“Ah, yes. Silly me.” Blake double-checks the inventory against the list he carries with him, and then goes back inside the motel to gather his personal effects. There are a lot less than he’d been used to while he was still running Hyperion but then, personal disaster tends to tweak one’s priorities. He pauses to look at himself in the mirror, running a hand through his hair to make sure he looks vaguely presentable, and sighs at his current outfit of scuffed boots and plain trousers that have seen better days. Blake usually wears an oversized shirt in surgical blue, but today he’s decided to wear the shirt that Ted had chosen for him at the Quick Change all those weeks ago. Months, now. If he’s going to retrieve Ted’s last gift to him, he wants to dress appropriately.
Perhaps Ned had been right, and that it is past time that Blake lets go…but not today.

Not yet.
Blake's the Man with the Plan. Whether or not it's a *good* plan is still up for debate.

“…so then we just ran like hell,” Tim finishes. “I swear they get faster each time we go back!”

Blake spares his friend a quick glance as he steers the truck around the moldering remains of a rakk hive. “It seems to me that, if you would only manage to secure the healed members of the populace, you might have an easier time eliminating the infection.”

“Yeah, like it’s that easy! Nobody likes being locked up for their own good, Jeff,” Tim says with a pointed reminder of what he himself had endured in Friendship Gulag. “Good intentions only take you so far.”

“Couldn’t Jakobs simply relocate them, if they want control of the town once again?”

“Spoken like a true CEO.”

“I resent that remark, Timothy.”

Tim puts his feet up on the dash and leans back in his seat. “That’s not necessarily a *bad* thing, though. I mean, compared to the other Hyperion CEOs, you were practically a saint.”

“Thank you so much,” Blake says repressively, but Tim’s not finished.

“No, I mean it. You’ve had plenty of opportunities to be just *like* them… but you’re not. I know all about how you warned T.K. Baha about the Hyperion assassins; you didn’t have to do that. You also didn’t have to keep coming back to ask Zed to leave Fyrestone.”

Blake remains silent. While it is true that he apparently possesses a tiny shred of human decency, there is a lot more he could have done during his tenure as president…and it’s far too late for him to do anything about it now. If he had been like the other Hyperion CEOs, could he have stopped the destruction of Helios and the deaths of his employees? “Both brothers want me to leave Fyrestone.”

“Huh.” Tim stretches his arms above his head. “Do you wanna leave?”

“I’m not sure,” Blake admits. “I feel comfortable there, and yet…”

“It might help you to get away from Fyrestone, at least for a little while,” Tim says. “Ted wouldn’t want you to stay where you felt unhappy, and you know it. Hm. I kinda feel like we’ve had this conversation already.”

Blake *knows* that he’s had this conversation before. “I’ve considered leaving of my own volition. To be forced out, however kindly the forcing is meant to be, doesn’t sit well.”

He slows the Technical and pulls off of the road to stop in front of a med vendor. Tim’s already lining up the boxes in front of the machines as Blake opens the vendor. “I’m still working on that program you suggested, Jeff,” Tim says, passing him the shields. “It’ll make servicing these things a
breeze, as long as I get all the bugs out in time for the wedding.”

“I doubt that neither Janey nor Athena will mind if it isn’t completed,” Blake smiles. “Why is their wedding the deadline you’ve set for yourself? I’ll need just two more, if you please.”

Tim digs out two more. “Sometimes I’ll procrastinate, you know? If I psych myself up about meeting a deadline and get worried about it, it’s easier to get something done.”

“And that actually works for you?” Blake asks incredulously.

His friend laughs. “Not really, no.” Their conversation turns to subjects that are more light-hearted, and Blake has to admit that he’s actually having fun. It seems like years since he last had any kind of fun whatsoever, and he feels determined to enjoy it while it lasts. You never knew quite when happiness would be stolen from you, Blake thinks to himself. Better to make the most of it while it’s still in your grasp.

The final pieces of a not-quite-plan start to fall into place. He’d been happy in his role of Senior Vice President of Mercenary Relations and Tourism; he’d excelled at it, in fact. There are mercenaries here on Pandora, and numerous businesses that could use his guidance in drawing in more customers. Blake has already helped Zed’s medical business become more efficient (he’ll count his suggestions as foregone conclusions because he’s sure that Tim will make the inventory system into a success) and he has the necessary connections to draw in clients.

Blake lies awake later that evening, staring up at the ceiling and listening to Tim’s breathing on the other side of the hut they’ve sheltered in for the night. The plan he’s thought of for himself is a lot different than any job he’d ever planned on doing...but then there’s a great deal that he never planned on, and it just keeps happening.

In the morning, they drive out to service the vendors along the defunct Crimson Tollway. Blake’s been here several times since Ted’s passing, but today is the first time he doesn’t feel a pang in his chest when he drives past the abandoned Lance bastions. He’s not sure if this is a good thing, or not. Most of the vendors have been emptied, and one is simply gone. “What happened here?” Tim asks curiously, peering at the gouges decorating the concrete.

“I’m going to venture a guess that something huge and insanely strong dragged it off to raid its contents,” Blake says, barely stopping himself from hunching his shoulders and looking around fearfully, “and then I’m going to hope that whatever it is does not come back and find us standing here.”

Tim’s eyes widen. “Okay, good idea. Let’s, uh….let’s just go.”

“Do you hear that?” Blake asks suddenly, lifting one hand for quiet. He could swear that he’s just heard a-

“Psycho!” Tim hisses as an absolutely enormous slab of muscle emerges from one of the buildings and spots them. “D’you have anything on you?”

Blake frantically pats at his pockets but only turns up a set of keys, some lint, and a few headache tablets. “Perhaps we can ask if he has a hangover. How about yourself?”

“I have a pocket knife, and ten bucks. I didn’t think I was gonna need to bring the gun over here,” Tim says defensively. “If we start running now, we might be able to make it to the truck.”

“Weren’t you a Vault Hunter?”
“What does that have to do with anything? You were the one trained by Doctor Death himself, but you don’t see me out here suggesting you go for the jugular!”

They swap glares even though there’s not really enough time for that sort of thing, and look over at the Psycho – one of the bigger ones with an inexplicably shriveled left arm – to find that even he has been taken aback by his prey’s argument. He starts working himself back up to murderous enthusiasm, however. The grunts increase in both volume and intensity, and Blake casts about for something he can use to defend himself. “Throw the money at him, Timothy.”

“I’m not going to throw money at him,” Tim says, reaching for the pocket knife.

There has to be something the Blake can use- yes. “He’s going to charge at any moment. You go left, I shall go right and head for that section of rebar. If you throw the money, it might-”

The Psycho’s grunts reach a crescendo, and he charges them with a wildly flailing buzz axe held aloft. “I hate this planet,” Tim screams, diving to the left while Blake scrambles in the opposite direction. He can hear the soft *pap!* of the money hitting the concrete, and a surprised “Uhhh?” from the Psycho as his fingers close around the rebar.

When he turns around with his chosen weapon, Blake is just in time to see Tim scaling the behemoth and hacking at it with the small knife in his hand. At the very least, that keeps the Psycho too busy to pay attention to Blake. He runs forward, barely avoiding being tripped up by an uneven section of pavement, and brings the improvised staff down across the Psycho’s knees.

The buzz axe goes whistling over his head in retaliation, and Tim gets in another hit with the pocket knife as Blake receives the brunt of the Psycho’s homicidal attention. “Get one of the guns,” Blake yells, lifting the rebar in a blocking move that very nearly ends with the whole thing being implanted into his forehead when the buzz axe strikes it. Sparks fly as he blocks again and he can’t see if Tim is following his instructions or not, but he’s definitely hoping that’s the case.

There’s no artistry involved in this type of combat, nothing that Blake had actually trained for – at this point, Blake is simply on the defensive against someone (who might technically qualify as something) whose entire skill set is roaring and bashing their enemies into pulp.

Thankfully, Tim arrives with a gun just before Blake’s strength gives out. “Why don’t you pick on someone your own size?” his friend yells, which doesn’t make much sense as the Psycho is larger than both of them combined, but he has brought a gun so Blake supposes that it all evens out somehow. Blake hurls himself out of the path of the incoming bullets and gets to his feet with his staff at the ready…just in case all those bullets aren’t enough.

They aren’t.

The now enraged Psycho (apparently he’d just been mildly offended up until this very moment) charges at Tim, so Blake jumps back into the fray and hopes the other man has excellent aim under pressure. They alternate shooting and whacking the Psycho alongside the head until – finally! – the Psycho drops dead on the concrete and they’re about to collapse from exhaustion. “Good lord,” Blake says, trying to catch his breath. “I hope there was only one of them.”

Tim mops the sweat off of his face and staggers off to the side to sit down. “I still say we could’ve made it to the Technical.”

“Next time: we run,” Blake agrees wearily. “What was all that business concerning his own size?”

“I dunno, it’s one of those things that just…slip out, I guess. When I was on Elpis, I’d yell all sorts of
things that seemed right at the time.”

Blake looks over. “Really? Like what?”

“Like…let’s get sexy.”

“I beg your pardon.”

“It’s a long story,” Tim says. “And you really had to be there.”

“If you say so. By the way, didn’t I tell you that the ten dollars would work? He stopped to pick it up.”

Tim snorts and levers himself to his feet. “Let’s go through his pockets and see if he’s got anything else we can use.”

“Let’s not and say that we did.” Blake leans back against the Marcus Munitions vendor and closes his eyes, feeling his racing heartbeat slowly return to normal. Whatever ‘normal’ this godforsaken planet has changed it to, anyway. When he feels sufficiently calm, he watches Tim go through the Psycho’s pockets and turn up a startling amount of objects. “Is that a….what is that?”

“What, this? Looks like a bobble head. They’re worth more than you’d think,” Tim says, picking through the items. “Want anything?”

“No, thank you.” He has his life, whatever that’s worth. Blake retrieves his makeshift staff and decides that he’s going to keep it – at least for now.

After he cleans it.

They’re both a bit too ashamed of themselves for forgetting their guns to talk about their lapse in judgement, but they definitely make sure to take them on the next few stops. Tim suggests staying the night in T-Bone Junction, and Blake agrees readily – he’ll have a chance to look at whatever Ted had left for him there, and they should contact either Zed or Ned about the missing vendor.

Scooter’s Garage is shuttered as they drive past it, though it seems as though the Catch-a-Ride machines are still operational – Janey has definitely been here to organize things. The huge Marcus Munitions, Inc. outlet is open, and they decide to stop by after the rest of the medical supplies are safely locked inside the Roadside Jumpstart Infirmary.

The young man minding the store perks up when he sees them walking back, and Blake browses the selection of grenade mods before asking to see a few of the knives in the display case. Tim lingers over the rocket launchers. “D’you think I should get one? I don’t really need it, but…”

Blake looks up from the knives. “Were I you, I should stick with an SMG with a decent magazine size. They fire much faster than a revolver, and you don’t need two week’s notice of approaching enemies.”

“I know, but rocket launchers,” Tim groans covetously. “They’re so much fun, and you can rocket jump…”

“Get one if you want, but if you decide to fire it directly beside my ear there will be serious repercussions.”

Tim grins at him. “Literally.”
“You remain as amusing as ever, Timothy.” Blake looks back at the knives and makes his decision, tapping a finger on the glass. “This one and…that one, with the curved handle. Yes, just there. Do you have any that are weighted, for throwing?”

Tim finally chooses an SMG after giving the rocket launchers one last longing glance, and they walk back to the Infirmary to lock up their purchases before going to look for a place to eat. “Did you want me to save you a seat while you look at whatever Ted left for you?” Tim asks as they settle on the bar stools lining the outside of the…eating establishment. It would be foolish to label it an actual restaurant, since it seems the only things on the menu are Drifter wings and beer. Blake wasn’t even aware that Drifters had wings, but apparently it’s a misnomer. “Or we could just eat and I could wait here until you’ve seen it.”

Blake opts for the second choice, thanking his friend for the thoughtful gesture, and tries to distract himself by asking how things are going with Ned. Tim seems honestly pleased with his new relationship (though it isn’t very new anymore, if Blake really thinks about it) and hopeful for his future with one of Fyrestone’s strangest exports. Tim even discusses marriage, of all things, which is an odd thing to consider…but Blake supposes that it’s no stranger than his own union with a physician-assassin who saved lives as often as he took them. He wishes Tim well, and sincerely hopes this attachment will be a fulfilling one.

As promised, Tim stays behind to nurse his beer and ‘wings’ while Blake returns to the Roadside Jumpstart Infirmary. He flips on the lights and sits down behind the desk, gazing at the drawers and wondering if he really wants to open them at all. “I suppose I shall have to get on with it,” he says aloud, turning his head to look at the med vendor. Blake double checks to make sure that Tim hasn’t come back yet because it’s ridiculous, but he wants to hear Ted’s voice just once before opening the drawer. Technically it’s Zed’s voice, as he’s the one who recorded the messages, but Ted had shared that voice once upon a time.

Blake places his hands flat on the vendor and closes his eyes, feeling foolish as he hits the button that illuminates the machine’s contents. “Almost dead? I can fix that,” Zed says, but in this moment it’s Ted promising to heal him.

“I wish that you could, my darling.” Blake leans his forehead against the smooth plastic before forcing himself to walk back to the desk and open the indicated drawer. Inside is the bottle of flavored lubricant that Ted had been so gleeful at finding in his brother’s clinic, and… “You absolute pain in the ass,” Blake breathes in disbelief as he lifts out Ted’s gift; a stock certificate naming him as sole owner of all shares of Corazza. He’d simply assumed the certificate had been duly filed on Helios, and thought no more of it…but Ted, knowing that Blake wasn’t all that happy to be named as interim CEO, had ensured that Blake would always have another option should he choose to leave Hyperion. He’d probably meant to tell Blake of it, but circumstances had made it impossible for Ted to do so.

Blake had been meaning to reinvent himself as something of a public relations and advertising specialist, and offer his services to those in need of them – and, after traveling the length and breadth of Pandora on medical supply delivery missions, Blake knows that there is a surplus of prospective customers out there. This, though… this would mean he’d be able to leave Pandora behind. Possibly forever.

He has no burning desire to stay on a planet that’s been responsible for the deaths of those dear to him. Blake will miss his friends when he has enough spare time to miss anyone, especially Timothy Lawrence, but he knows that they can always keep in touch via the ECHOnet. He runs his thumb against the edge of the certificate and smiles, grateful all over again that he’d been given the chance to love and be loved by Doctor Ted Blanco.
Carefully sliding the paperwork into the protective sleeve on which it had been laying, Blake packs it away in his bag and heads for the door. He doesn’t want Tim to be worried by an overlong absence and, besides, he has a future to plan for – he’d better get started.
It was funnier when it happened to someone else.

Chapter Summary

It’s not a glass cage of emotion, but it’s pretty close to it.

Making his farewells is easier than Blake had thought it would be.

Athena and Janey (if he’s honest, it’s mostly Janey) are sad to see him go and express regret that he won’t be staying long enough to attend their wedding which has been postponed yet again due to some trouble with the personalized napkins. His ex-employees are not sad that he will be leaving, and Blake can’t blame a single one of them… the children are a different matter altogether. He’s accrued quite the art collection thanks to their generous donations and, contrary to Tim’s belief, will be taking every last piece of it with him.

Blake still hasn’t figured out where he’ll go – Corazza had a few different manufacturing sites on different planets thanks to its founder’s familial connections, but two of them are in the same system as the Eden planets so he figures that he will visit one of them first. He’ll need to inspect all of the sites before deciding which to dismantle and which to build back up.

He explains as much to Zed and Patricia the night before his departure as they sit around the bonfire outside the motel. “I have a sizable amount of money in my accounts, not having had much use for it until just now, but I plan on traveling as economically as possible.”

“If you think you can handle not goin’ First Class,” Zed says mildly.

Patricia transfers her gaze from the fire to Blake’s face. “If you hear any rumors concerning the Eridians, I expect to be informed immediately.”

“Of course,” Blake answers. “I would have done that even without your prompting.”

She blinks. “Well. Good.” Patricia looks over to where the twins are being played with by Ned and Tim. “What are you two doing with my children?”

Ned smiles innocently, as if he hasn’t just been caught pretending to make Hypaetia punch her sister in the jaw. “Nothin’.” Tim guides Leandra into making a soldierly salute, and the little girl burbles happily as he lifts her up onto his shoulder.

“You got yourself a ride to the field?” Zed asks, and offers this very service when Blake explains that he’d meant to avail himself of a Catch-a-Ride vehicle. “Haven’t been out there in a skag’s age. Might be nice to see how it’s changed…so, you’re all registered? How’s that work?”

Blake tells them about the lengthy process of verifying his ownership of the company in question. “Interplanetary transport vessels have a faster, and more secure, connection to the ECHOnet. As it will be a long journey, I intend to start the process as soon as I have boarded. All the relevant information will be at hand without my needing to search for it, and there is little else for me to do on the ship.”

“It seems as though you have figured it all out,” Patricia says. “I detest enforced idleness, and commend your forethought.”
“Coming from you, Doctor Tannis, that is the highest compliment I could receive,” Blake returns graciously, watching Zed smile at the surprised pleasure on Patricia’s face. “I shall miss our conversations.”

That night, Blake sorts through Ted’s weapons one last time and chooses which of them he’ll take with him. It’s not practical to take them all no matter how much he’d like to, and it wouldn’t be fair to Ted’s brothers either. After emptying everything out onto the floor, Blake realizes that the image files that he’d previously run across are still in one of the bags – he just hadn’t emptied either of them out to make the discovery earlier, and had assumed that Ted had moved them long ago.

Blake has little use for a sniper rifle, so that as well as two rocket launchers will stay. The infamous ‘vintage’ Atlas SMG goes into the ‘to keep’ bag along with two repeaters and a high-powered revolver. Several assault rifles are packed into the other bag, as Blake only decides that he’ll take one of them. He finishes packing away all of the shields, since Zed and Ned have enough of their own, and reaches for the image disks. He wants to look through them all immediately, but ultimately forces himself to pack them away – he’s gone this long without even knowing that they were even here, so they will be a special treat that Blake can ration in the coming days. At the very least, he will have something to look forward to.

He finishes packing and gets into bed, staring up at the ceiling as usual. Blake finds it strange, that this will be the last night he looks up at it…and the last night he’ll ever sleep in a bed that’s been shared by Ted. His recollections of the man he loved have started to lose the razor-sharp edge of pain, filed down by the passage of time and he knows that it’s inevitable that this should be so. It had happened somewhat faster with Tassiter, Blake realizes. It’s fitting that Ted should visit his dreams during Blake’s last night on Pandora. “Ready t’go?” Ted asks, propping himself up on an elbow.

Blake reaches out to place a hand on his lover’s powerful chest, sifting his fingers through the coarse chest hair. “Yes and no. I feel as though I am leaving you behind completely.”

“That’s dumb as fuck, Sticks. You know I’ll be wherever you are… for as long as you want me.”

“I always want you here. Perhaps that is the problem.”

Ted gathers him close, and Blake nuzzles into the warmth of Ted’s neck. “You’ll do just fine, out on your own. I know it.”

Blake closes his eyes, content to be held by his dead love even if it is just a dream. “I will miss your brothers – even Zed, which is something of a surprise. He is nowhere near as boring as you constantly assured me he was, and seems to have grown beyond his initial resentment of my presence.”

Ted’s hand curves around the back of Blake’s head. “I think he realizes that it’s good t’form a connection with somethin’ other than a grudge. He spent a lot of years on his own when we left, and he never was decent with sharin’ his feelings.” Ted clears his throat suddenly, a nervous gesture that’s out of character. “You, uh… you wanna do somethin’?”

“This is enough for me, Theodore.”

“If you say so.”

Blake wakes up the next morning with the details of the dream fresh in his mind, and a nagging feeling that the dream hadn’t been a dream at all. He thinks back to that first desperately unhappy
night, and slowly pieces the facts together until he reaches the startling conclusion that it hadn’t been a dream. *None* of the dreams had been what they’d seemed.

He says his goodbyes quietly, with an embrace for each of his newfound friends while Zed loads the bags into a Technical.

The drive to the landing field is a quiet one, and Blake decides to keep it that way until they’ve almost arrived at their destination. “Would you have done it, if I had accepted your offer?”

Zed keeps his eyes on the road. “That’s what blew my cover?”

“That, and a few other…discrepancies. I did not fully realize until this morning.”

“Fair enough. You ticked at me?”

“No exactly, though I *am* curious as to why you did it.”

Guiding the Technical around a moldering skag carcass, Zed glances over at him. “You were havin’ nightmares. Loud ones. I figured there might be somethin’ I could do to help with that…in a way I guess I thought it could help me out a bit, too.”

Blake isn’t sure what to say and even if he was, Zed might not appreciate an in-depth examination of his own motives. What Blake is sure of is the fact that what Zed did had brought Blake comfort when he needed it most. He’s sure it couldn’t have been easy for Zed to set aside the lingering resentment those first few times, especially when Zed had been grieving over Ted’s death as well. “I…I must offer my thanks.”

Zed grunts disinterestedly, signaling that this conversation is at an end, and Blake directs his attention to the landing field so that neither of them are embarrassed any more than necessary. It’s a long way from the sophisticated docking areas such as the ones that had been aboard Helios, yet less primitive than the launching sites that used to be the main option for Pandorans. Several launching ‘slings’ have been positioned within the dubious safety measure of barbed wire (no doubt intended to deter a bandit or two), and one of the other landing pads is occupied by a VTOL shuttle with massive thrusters specifically designed to break planetary orbit. These are guarded by a complement of ten armed soldiers who train their weapons on the Technical as Zed stops the vehicle.

“C’mon, I’ll walk ya up there.” Zed hops out and grabs one of Blake’s bags, which happens to be Ted’s old gear bag. “Marcus heard about the guns you were leavin’. Said he’d give me a good price for ‘em.”

“I’m sure he-”

“Told him to suck it. They’ll stay in the family,” Zed says casually. “One of them snot-nosed Hyperion clods’ll start sniffin’ around ‘fore you know it. No offense.”

He’s heard that line before. “Speaking of things staying in the family.” Blake smiles as he shoulders his other bag, and the two men walk up towards the waiting shuttle. The armed guards lower their weapons when they recognize Zed, and Blake’s luggage is passed through into the tiny passenger area after his identity is duly verified. “Well, I suppose this is it.”

“I guess so.” Zed shoves his hands in his pockets and rocks back on his heels, giving the shuttle a once-over. “Not a whole lotta people actually get to leave Pandora. You’re what they call one of the ‘lucky ones.’”

Blake holds out a hand. “You wouldn’t call me that.”
“Naw, I prob’ly wouldn’t. This planet’s a pain in the ass…but it’s the only home I got. Figure I’d best stick with it.” Zed reaches out, squeezing just hard enough for the handshake to become uncomfortable. “It’s been real, Blake. Take care of yourself.”

Zed releases him and steps back, making his dismissal plain by turning towards a few of the guards who are waiting to speak with him. Blake hears the murmur of their voices as he ducks into the shuttle and straps himself into his seat, then wonders if he should go back out when he hears Zed’s voice lift sharply. “Is everything satisfactory?” He asks the pilot, who has turned around to watch him closely for some reason. “My payment has gone through, has it not?”

The pilot glances towards the door and then back at him. “Everything’s just fine, Mister Blake. Couldn’t be better… so, where are you headed?”

Blake looks at her calmly. “The passenger transport, of course.” The guards were clearly acquainted with Zed so there should be nothing to worry about…but he’s not about to give personal information to anyone he doesn’t know.

“Of course,” the pilot says, turning back around. Blake relaxes slightly – idle curiosity seems to have been the only thing prompting her inquiry. “We’ll be getting underway as soon as Doctor Zed’s medical supplies have been unloaded.”

On the other hand, it might be useful to muddle the scent if anyone really does mean him harm. “I will be grateful to leave, as I’m told the trip to Aquator takes quite a bit of time and effort. Tell me, if you please, which transport stations are recommended?”

She turns around with a smile, and he soon learns the answer to his question in great detail – one day, Blake might even follow her advice. For now, he simply takes pains to pretend that he will. The subtle art of small talk is one he hasn’t needed to practice in a while, but it’s easy to slip back into the habit of conversational concealment.

One of the guards comes to give them a three minute warning, and the plating beneath Blake’s boots begins to vibrate as the shuttle is powered up. “Lemme just say somethin’ ‘fore y’all go,” he hears Zed say, and then the other man sticks his head through the door. “Was there something?” Blake asks politely, thinking that they’d already said their goodbyes…what more could Zed want?

Zed seems distracted as he looks at Blake. “Listen. Wait ‘til you’re somewhere safe ‘fore you redeem that…that thing you got.”

“I certainly do not plan on doing so in the vacuum of space.”

The other man’s gaze sharpens. “Listen, wiseass, I’m tryin’ t’ do you a favor.” Zed glances over at the pilot who is pretending not to eavesdrop then back at Blake, who finally gets the message. It’s clear they can’t discuss this in private, but Blake is used to hostile environments- whatever is going on, he’ll make sure that he comes out unscathed. “Someone might steal it.” Zed finishes, lightly emphasizing the word it to make sure Blake knows that he might be in danger of abduction.

“I’m sure it’s of no interest to anyone, but I thank you for the warning.”

“Anyone bugs you, just you tell ‘em they gotta answer to Ned for it,” Zed says mildly. “I’m sure nobody wants to risk gettin’ the Scourge of Jakob’s Cove ticked off. Anyways…see you around, Blake. If your thing don’t work out, you can always come back and work for me.”

Zed leaves and Blake notices that the pilot very carefully does not look at him – neither do the guards, who seem to have heard Zed’s threat. The shuttle’s door closes with Blake as the only paying passenger, and the throb of the engines fills Blake’s ears. He’d imagined that the shuttle might be attacked at the very last minute by some bandit with a rocket launcher and too much time on their hands, but liftoff is completed without incident and it takes no time at all before the shuttle is climbing up and off of Pandora. The darkness of space folds about the front view screen like a blanket, replacing the almost unbearable brightness as they’d breached the atmosphere, and Blake reflexively looks for Helios…but of course it’s not there. For the first time in years, Elpis has a completely unobstructed view of the planet it orbits.

The passenger liner comes into view momentarily, and Blake thinks about Zed’s warning as the shuttle pilot matches velocity with the larger ship. He can’t ask any of his companions here for details, as they would most likely lie about it, so he resolves to stay on his guard until he can reach a dedicated ECHO terminal and see for himself.

Docking is accomplished without incident and Blake gathers his luggage as he disembarks from the shuttle, nodding coolly to the watching pilot. After presenting his credentials to the man waiting at the bay’s exit, Blake politely asks directions to the nearest restroom…and there, he searches through his bags until he finds the tracking device planted by one of the shuttle’s guards. There is a high probability that the guards planted more than just the one, so Blake decides to do a thorough inspection once he’s checked into his quarters. After that, he will need to inspect the room itself unless he can find someone to swap with. On a transport such as this one, there is always someone dissatisfied with their accommodations - this shouldn’t be a problem at all.

He stumbles across the needed ‘someone’ once Blake’s belongings have been safely stashed in the room. Another man of indeterminate age is complaining bitterly to his companion about the size of their quarters, and Blake listens covertly before deciding to approach them. “I am sorry to bother you, but might you gentlemen tell me how I can possibly downgrade my living quarters? I had requested a smaller berth and now find myself with far too much space, if you’ll pardon the pun,” Blake says.

“You want a smaller room?” The man whom he had overheard complaining says in disbelief. “Why the hell would you want a smaller one?”

Blake gives him the smile reserved exclusively for reassuring corporate nemeses of his harmlessness. “Nerves, I am afraid. Large rooms whilst traveling tends to underscore the feelings of being helpless in the vastness of space – I much prefer the reassurance that a smaller room provides me. Shall I ask the ticketing agent? I had thought to inquire earlier, but I did not wish to block the way…”

“What’s your destination?” The other man takes the bait quickly. “We’re headed to Eden-6.”

Blake pretends not to have known this already, and smiles encouragingly. “I am also headed for the Eden system.”

“For real? Listen, how about this… we’ve got a room that’s too small and you’ve got a room that’s too big. Why don’t we just switch passkeys? No need to wait in line for an hour, either.”

He makes a show of considering the offer. “I do hate waiting,” Blake says thoughtfully, “and the company I represent has already paid for the room in question… I suppose it could not hurt. I shall need to collect my personal effects beforehand, however – shall we perform the trade here in the lounge once that’s been done?”

He’d almost forgotten how invigorating it could be to manipulate someone this easily. The two men glance at each other, and they both smile as if they just cannot believe their luck. “That’d be great.
Would one hour be enough time, Mister…?"

“Lawrence,” Blake answers promptly. Tim won’t mind the white lie. “One hour would be splendid.”

Blake returns to his room and begins combing through everything in search of any tracking equipment. Three of them are found during the first cursory inspection, and several more turn up during the subsequent searches. It certainly pays to be thorough, Blake thinks to himself as he frowns at the small pile of circuitry. A sudden thought has him shedding his clothes and searching them as well, and he discovers that two tiny devices had been attached to him this entire time. Hopefully they didn’t transmit anything but his location, or he’ll need to change his quarters yet again.

He dresses in his only other outfit and checks the chrono display on the wall – it’s nearly been one hour. Blake would like a bit more time to research just why the shuttle’s crew had been so eager to tag him, but it looks as if it will have to wait until he’s settled into his new residence. He’s not looking forward to moving into such cramped quarters but if it reduces the risk of abduction then it will be worthwhile.

The passkeys are duly swapped, along with a few of the tracking devices, and Blake sends the men on their way with honest appreciation for the trade. After leaving the room he’d originally reserved, Blake had hidden the rest of the trackers amongst the topiaries outside of it – he anticipates slipping one into every bag he comes across so that the people monitoring them have a devil of a time trying to keep up with him.

His room for the next month is even smaller than he’d thought it would be, and it’s no surprise why the couple he’d switched with weren’t happy with it…but it will serve. Blake wouldn’t even have considered it a year ago, but much has changed in the last ten months. He sighs and begins to unpack his things, such as they are, putting off accessing the ECHOnet until he’s completely finished.

When it’s finally time to see what sort of trouble he’s landed in now, Blake keys in his name and sits back to view the results. Most of it is the usual biographical information, but his stomach lurches as he sees that a bounty has indeed been placed upon his head…and by the same people.

The Atlas Corporation has renewed its desire to see him dead and while the generous bounty has no accompanying explanation, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out why. Blake stares at the image of himself on the screen, a readily available portrait that had first been used as his identification badge years ago and brought out whenever Blake needed his photo used for an ECHOnet article or conference pamphlet. He doesn’t know if he pities the man in the photo or envies him…life had seemed much simpler back then.

Ordinarily Blake would pace in reaction to news like this, but there just isn’t enough room for it. He leans back in the stunningly uncomfortable chair and thinks for several moments – the original plan of claiming Corazza Industries can (and must) still be accomplished, but to do so on an unsecured ECHO terminal would be beyond foolish. The process typically encompasses two weeks, give or take a few days, so Blake will need to locate at least four terminals within the passenger liner that are meant for public use. It’s already known that he is aboard the transport, but he’s not about to lead any would-be bounty hunters straight to his door.

He accesses the ship’s schematic and carefully plans his movements for the next month, writing down the locations of the terminals he’ll need to use and making sure that he won’t be following a discernible pattern when he uses them. Blake returns to the ‘wanted’ advertisement, feeling a headache beginning to form as he realizes that the bounty had been posted a handful of hours after he’d booked passage on this very transport. It’s very likely that the Atlas Corporation had simply assumed his death until he’d given them evidence to the contrary, so he has only himself to blame.
Blake rubs his hands over his face. “Wonderful.”
I should’ve gone (insane) before I left.

Chapter Summary

Blake meets new friends, is betrayed by a few of them, and ponders the eternal question: is he there yet?

The passenger transport is getting closer to the Eden system, but Blake isn’t getting any closer to a decent plan. He’s halfway through the lengthy process of assuming control over Corazza’s stocks and is stuck in the tedious identity verification phase for now. This wouldn’t normally be a problem, but the added stress of needing to protect himself from abduction is taking its toll…Blake’s running out of places to hide, and the ship is still two weeks away from the Eden system.

He’s scheduled to contact his broker again today, to help get things moving, so he spends a few moments in front of the small mirror with a comb. Blake has needed to alter his usual hairstyle in any number of ways whenever he leaves the sardine can he’s forced to call home, and today’s coiffure is a particularly ridiculous one. A small packet of temporary dye has turned his blond hair to a dull black which does his complexion no favors; Blake thinks the color makes him look constantly depressed and slightly undead. “I suppose that’s not far off the mark,” he murmurs to himself, simply so that he can hear the words said aloud. He’d grown used to the constant conversations happening around him in Fyrestone and needing to be shut into a tiny room is making for cramped muscles of all types. He can – and does – turn to the ECHOnet for something (anything!) resembling human interaction, though it certainly is not the same thing.

Damn the Atlas Corporation. They should have sent a recovery team for Ted, if he was that valuable to them – what good can it possibly do, to exact revenge upon Blake for Ted’s failure to return to the fold? He supposes that he should be grateful that the bounty doesn’t explicitly state that the reward can be collected even if all aspiring treasure hunters return is Blake’s dead body. It would be nice if they would specify that payment will only be made if the quarry is still alive, he thinks wistfully.

Blake gives his sallow reflection a once-over and a despairing sigh, then leaves the room and makes a slow circuit around the ‘pod hub’ to stretch his legs. He hopes the two men comfortably ensconced in his original room are enjoying themselves.

He casually walks into the main area of the ship, blending in with the crowd that usually congregates here at this time, and tries to keep an eye out for anything suspicious. Most of the other passengers give him disinterested glances as Blake moves past, but he watches for any double-takes or surreptitious glances. The hair dye is a new enough change that Blake’s passage goes unremarked, but he knows it’s only a matter of time before any bounty hunters stop looking for his natural hair color.

In keeping with his constantly fluctuating plans, Blake decides to visit an ECHO terminal that’s much further away than the one he’d used last time. This session doesn’t seem to last as long as the others had, to his relief, but Blake is warned that he’ll need to check in at least twice more before the transfer of ownership is complete. He signs off as quickly as possible and distances himself from the terminal he’s just used, watching to see a few men circling around it less than five minutes later.

Blake returns to his tiny living area, so small that he can’t even pace in thought properly, and wonders if he should risk using the public access ECHO channels to get a message to his broker –
there simply will not be enough time for him to finish the assumption process, at least while he’s still on board the transport vessel. It’s risk enough for him to stay put in his ‘pod’ while anyone with credit fever can simply force the men using his original room to reveal Blake’s current location.

Since it has become too dangerous to stay on board, Blake must find a way off of the ship and it seems as though bribery is the best means of achieving his goal. The small passenger shuttles would be ideal if not for the fact that he’d need to bribe every member of the crew – there are simply too many variables to this particular risk, so Blake needs to find something else. The ship is too far away from any habitable planets for him to take a lifepod, which leaves the supply shuttles. This plan can only work if the supply schedule lines up correctly, so Blake accesses the ECHOnet and re-familiarizes himself with the names of the shipping companies most likely to serve transports like this one. There’d been a time when he could have listed them off the top of his head, but Blake doesn’t let it bother him – there’s a lot that he’s fallen out of the habit of memorizing.

A few hours later, Blake is rubbing at his eyes and standing up to stretch as best he can. He’s calculated that, if he can keep a low profile for at least another week, he’ll be able to make contact with the workers who route the supplies through the passenger liner. A quick, generous bribe and he’ll be smuggled back aboard the shuttle in an empty container.

To work off some of his nerves Blake does several sets of exercises, modified for the size of the room he’s in, and then he settles into the narrow bed to do a bit of reading. Before flipping the light switch, he reaches for his ECHOpad and one of Ted’s image discs. The picture that loads is the same one that Blake had already seen two days ago, but he spends a few minutes looking at it again; it’s a still image of both Ted and Helga at what was presumably their wedding ceremony. They look happy, Blake thinks. He wishes that they could have both stayed that way, sharing each other’s life instead of a grave in Fyrestone.

Blake’s eyes return to Ted, and he gazes wistfully at his shadow. “I would give everything I have for you to be with me now,” he says quietly, touching his fingertips to the screen. “But that is not going to happen.” Blake turns off the ECHO device and tosses it to the side before folding his arms behind his head. He tries to think of something else, wishing that he had left the image discs in Zed’s possession; seeing Ted only seems to exacerbate his feelings of loneliness and heartbreak.

To combat the onset of a depressive episode, Blake decides to start his reconnaissance early – it’s ‘late’ enough that there shouldn’t be many people out and about, so he shouldn’t have to worry overmuch about being accosted. He makes sure to change his outfit before leaving the room, idly wondering about following Ned’s example and manufacturing a fake facial accessory to help muddy his trail.

He finds a suitable candidate for bribery after an hour of searching the ship for disenfranchised employees; a tired-looking woman is despondently picking up trash from a container that some of the more boisterous passengers have knocked over. “My goodness, what a mess!” Blake says, stopping to help. “One would think you might have more help.”

“Oh, sir – please, don’t worry about helping me,” she replies as she drags an arm over her brow,
though she’s clearly grateful for the assistance.

“Think nothing of it. I’m quite sure that all of us have needed help at some point in our lives,” Blake says. There’s much he’d rather be doing instead of picking up rubbish, but this could very well mean the difference between life and death...besides, he can always wash his hands afterwards. He carefully steers their small talk towards the topic of the supply shuttles once he’s sure that she won’t realize that she’s being used. “Tell me; how often does a ship this size need fuel? I would have thought it might require it more often, but…”

She’s smiling by now. “A lot of people think we’d have to stop but there are shuttles that bring in extra fuel – this is one of the only transports that never actually stops unless there’s some sort of accident.”

“Really!” Blake exclaims, pretending that this is all news to him. “How very impressive!”

Her smile falters, and he has the sense that she’s about to let something slip that will be very advantageous. “Yeah. Impressive.”

_Hmmm._ Well, he can still work with this. “It must be wonderful to be able to see so many different planets. The transport company _does_ allow you plentiful leave?”

The woman – her badge says that her name is Theresa – shakes her head. “That isn’t really how it works, sir.”

“Ah, well. At the very least, you must have one of the mid-sized rooms…? _No_? Oh, dear. This will not do at _all._” She doesn’t have to tell him that her wages aren’t enough to afford anything larger than what he’s spent the last few weeks cooped up in – the thought of having to live there indefinitely makes Blake’s skin crawl. He reaches into his jacket pocket and withdraws a thick wad of bills, pretending not to notice the way she stares at it hopefully. “It never ceases to amaze me how some companies can forget to properly reimburse their workers for the effort shown.” Blake peels off several notes and when her disbelieving stare has transferred to the amount he’s planning on giving her, adds a few more. “Your dedication has not gone unnoticed, Theresa.”

“Oh, but I can’t accept-”

“Nonsense,” Blake interrupts gently. “I have surveyed most of your fellow employees – quite discreetly, I assure you – and have found that your customer service is beyond compare. Please accept this small bonus as a token of Harbor Freight’s appreciation.”

She looks as though she might burst into tears at any moment. “You’re…you work for them, too…?”

Blake limits his response to a knowing smile, letting her draw her own conclusions. “I will be conducting a few more surprise inspections and I would appreciate it if your reward was not discussed before I leave.”

“Oh of course not, sir,” she says, nodding sharply.

“My thanks,” Blake replies with a reassuring smile. “I shall need access to one of the incoming supply shuttles, however, as I intend to conduct an inspection there. The company’s policy on stowaways is need of revision and there is no better way to effect change than to inspect the problem head-on, as it were.” He sells this outrageous scenario with another smile, waiting for her to realize how preposterous his explanation really is, but her ‘bonus’ seems to have driven rational thought from her head.

With any luck, she won’t recover her thought processes until after he’s gone. Right now, she takes
the bait and agrees to help hide him. Blake stays in his room after that, not wanting to tempt fate any further than he’s already teased it.

On the day of his departure, he makes contact with Theresa once more and she presents him with a neatly pressed uniform and a knowing look. “I would’ve helped you anyway,” she says quietly, showing Blake where to stow his bags.

“I could not take that chance.” Of course she would have worked it out, he thinks. What had he expected, a miracle? “I apologize for misleading you.”

Theresa smiles. “Atlas is offering a lot of money for you. Why do they want you so badly?”

“They seem to think I stole one of their employees from them.”

“Did you?”

“I took nothing that was not freely given,” Blake says. “I suppose this is the part where you demand more money from me.”

She shakes her head. “I have enough to get off of this damned transport ship when we pass into the Eden system. Atlas can go to hell.” There’s a story there somewhere, but there’s no time for Blake to listen to it. She wishes him luck and leaves him to get changed.

He’ll have to spend time thinking up more believable stories, he thinks ruefully.

Blake’s tune changes a few hours later as he decides that there’s nothing wrong with his stories at all - the crew of the supply shuttle simply need to spend some time on becoming a little less gullible. They’ve accepted at face value Blake’s tale of being left behind on the last run and not a single soul thinks to check with anyone else to see if he’s telling the truth.

It’s a vast relief to be away from the passenger liner, especially since Blake can now see the unusual amount of escort ships around it. “Is that…normal? I don’t remember seeing those during the last delivery.”

One of the other men glances at the view screen. “Eh, there’s some exec on the ship that Atlas put a marker on.”

“I’d heard about that, but I’d assumed someone would have found him by now,” Blake says blithely. “I wonder why.”

The pilot snorts. “One of the credit chasers went to the guy’s room, tossed a few grenades inside – he goes in to collect to find out that not only is it not the guy Atlas is after, but there were at least two in there and he’d blown up any identifying documents. Nobody knows who the hell they were, or why they were in his room.”

Blake abruptly feels the need to sit down. “Oh, my.”

“No shit, right? Can you imagine being that fucking stupid? Notice doesn’t even say to kill him! I’d be pretty pissed if I’d spent all that time following the bastard and then, when I finally hauled the carcass to Atlas, they tell me he’s wanted alive and they won’t pay.”

The others laugh and Blake laughs too, in an excess of relief. Well, that’s one mystery solved.

The trip back to the supply barge lasts another few hours, and then Blake manages to insinuate himself into another group heading elsewhere. This time the destination is an actual planet; he fully
intends on slipping away the instant his feet touch the surface.

His new group of ‘fellow employees’ make no mention of the bounty which makes for a nice change, but Blake soon realizes why they haven’t said a word; there is a Crimson Lance advance guard waiting for him at the end of the ramp with weapons at the ready. “Jeffrey Blake?”

Blake’s companions pointedly step away from him. “He’s all yours. What about the reward?”

His association with Ted has taught Blake to recognize rank markings on Lance armor. The sergeant advances up the ramp towards him. “My men will arrange your reward once I verify his identity. I'll just need to borrow your hand,” he tells Blake, reaching out confidently as if Blake would love to cooperate.

Blake knows a deliberately misleading sentence when he hears one, and has no plans to come quietly to his own execution. “Once he makes sure I am who you’ve told him I am, they’ll shoot you all so that Atlas doesn’t have to pay the advertised reward,” he says loudly.

The men who’d turned him in suddenly have much to discuss. “He just said that-”

“He’s lying-”

“He never said that he would give you the money,” Blake interrupts, stepping away from the sergeant’s repeated attempt to grab him. “He said the soldiers with the guns would arrange your reward.”

“It doesn’t have to be this way, Mister Blake,” the sergeant warns. “Come with us.”

Blake backs up a few more steps to where he’d seen that a member of the custodial staff had left their broom. “I respectfully decline your invitation.”

“I have orders to deliver you to the admiral, sir, and that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

One of the other men decides that he’s not about to wait around to be murdered, and makes a run for it. This has the benefit of distracting the Lance sergeant long enough for Blake to drop his bags, lunge for the broom, and knock the end off of it. The soldier is just turning back around when Blake goes low, sweeping the wooden bar behind the man’s knees and sending him clattering to the floor.

Blake tucks the broom handle beneath an arm and stoops quickly to pick up the bags, then runs past the other soldiers who also have their hands full. “God fucking dammit - get him,” he hears the sergeant roar after him.

He doesn’t dare stop long enough to look behind himself or change his grip on bags which now seem as if they weigh a hundred pounds each. He ducks and dodges his way through the crowd at the port, then hurls his bags inside the first vehicle for hire that he sees. “Triple your usual fare if you can get me away from here now,” Blake yells.

The woman operating the ground transport doesn’t need to be told twice. “Come on, then.” She barely waits until his ass touches the seat before pulling out into the stream of traffic. “Late for something, huh?”

“You might say that, yes,” Blake says, sagging back and mopping at his brow. “I don’t suppose you could tell me of another port?”

She glances back at him. “You just got here…and now you’re leaving? Stack on another two fares and I’ll take you all the way to the landing area on the other side of town.”
“Done,” Blake responds instantly, reaching for the small ECHO console so that he can enter his payment information before she can change her mind. “You seem rather blasé about this, if you don’t mind me saying so.”

“It happens more frequently than you’d think but I will warn you that someone’s bound to give them the heads-up about it; I’ll try to get you there before they do.”

Blake shrugs. “I suppose that is all that I can ask of you.”

She also warns him away from making small talk since she has to concentrate, but this prohibition suits Blake just fine. He leans back and stares out the side windows for a while, wondering at the irony – if Atlas had found him just a few months earlier, Blake wouldn’t have bothered to run…yet he’d been left that stock certificate as if to make sure Blake has something to live for. He’ll try his best to complete this last task rather than fall to the same company that had wreaked such havoc in Ted’s life.

He spends the next two hours sorting through his luggage and rethinking his life choices while he tries to pick which weapons to move to the small travel bag he’d brought from Helios. Blake isn’t best pleased at the necessity to condense his worldly possessions even further, but it makes sense to separate the items further in case he’s unable to haul both larger bags with him. He still can’t quite believe he’d escaped carrying them and a broom handle, but he supposes that adrenaline helped with the lift-and-carry.

Blake finally decides to add one grenade, all his knives, and the SMG to the bag. He wraps it all in one change of clothing and slips the half-melted spinal implant as well as the image files in there, too. He’s tucking the revolver and some spare ammo into his coat when his driver gets his attention. “Looks like you’ve got a welcoming committee here, too,” she says, and Blake’s heart sinks upon seeing the heavily armored red and black Atlas shuttles waiting for them. “I’ll get you as close as I can, but then it’s all you the rest of the way.”

“Thank you,” Blake says politely. She lets him out behind a mound of crates bound for Themis, and leaves without a backwards glance – he’s not sure why he’d expected anything more. Clearly his time on Pandora has infected his better judgement.

He crouches behind his cover and tries to bind the bags together as best he can, intending upon slipping the straps over his shoulders so that he has his hands free for his staff and travel bag. At the very least, it should change his silhouette just enough to confuse anyone searching for a man of his description. There’s an elastic band in one of his pockets and Blake considers using it on his hair before he finally admits to himself that it’s a ridiculous idea.

There’s nothing for it but to wade into the fray, as it were. Either he’s captured or he’s not, but he certainly can’t spend the rest of his life huddled behind some crates.

Blake straightens the bags after putting them onto his back and tries to stand up, very nearly falling over due to their weight, and manages an upright position the second time he attempts to stand. The confusing silhouette is going to be a bit hunched, he thinks as he staggers out of concealment.

Angling his body to face away from the Crimson Lance soldiers, Blake slowly walks amongst the foot traffic; it’s not easy trying to keep an eye on one’s pursuers, looking for a viable escape option, and staying upright under difficult circumstances all at the same time but someone has to do it.

He pauses at a few shuttles that look fast enough to outdistance the Atlas ships, but is told in no uncertain terms that his patronage will not be accepted at one of them and the rest seem to have overly inquisitive crews. The patrolling Lance eventually take matters into their own hands by noticing him as Blake is jostled so violently that he nearly falls over. “Spread out and stop him,” he
hears the call going out.

There’s nothing for it but to dump the bags and run. It’s scant satisfaction that he trips up one of the soldiers as they’re forced to dodge the thrown luggage, because now Blake truly is out of options. The only thing he can think to do is to head for the nearest shuttle ramp and pull out the revolver. “Close the door; we’re leaving.”

The pilot of the craft he’s just shuttlejacked looks up, decidedly unamused. “The fuck we are – get out of here!”

“I’ll make it worth your while-”

“No. Get out,” the pilot repeats.

Blake’s half-formed dream of escape dies an ugly death at the sound of several pairs of boots running up the ramp behind him. “Mister Blake, we asked nicely the first time. We’re done talking,” the same sergeant from earlier says, apparently not winded at all from his leisurely jog through the landing area crowds. Blake’s arms are seized in uncompromising grips as he’s bracketed by two soldiers, and the sergeant motions them back down the ramp. “Take him.”

His travel bag is liberated from his possession before he’s frog-marched to one of the Atlas shuttles. Blake opens his mouth to offer payment but reconsiders when he catches the look on the sergeant’s face. “You do not have to do this,” he says quietly.

“It’s not up to me, sir,” the other man replies. “Watch your step.”

Blake is brought into the shuttle as he argues for the return of his bag, a request which is firmly denied. He’s thoroughly searched once the hatch closes, and he notices that anything remotely resembling a stick is placed well away from his position. “You’ve gone through an awful lot of trouble for someone who’s likely to-”

“Mister Blake, my orders were to bring you in alive. If you can’t keep quiet on your own, one of us will be forced to help you out. It would be better for everyone if you closed your mouth and kept it that way,” the sergeant says, sounding remarkably cheerful about it. “We’re going to have to restrain you for the duration of our trip.”

His hands are secured behind his back and he’s guided to a seat between the two largest soldiers who decline to remove their helmets so that Blake can get a good look at their faces. He watches the others for any sign that their vigilance might dim, but it soon becomes clear that none of them are going to take their attention from their prize for a single instant. Blake surreptitiously tests his bonds, staring back at his captors when they catch him at it.

The luggage he’d abandoned in his bid for freedom has been brought on board, he notices, not entirely sure why he finds this fact so annoying. Apparently Atlas wants to make sure those they’ve marked for public execution aren’t missing any of their belongings. One of Blake’s seatmates, a burly PFC, keeps glancing around until the sergeant moves up to sit with the pilot. “So, is it true that you and…?”

Blake gives him a quelling glance and despite the fact that he’s not used this particular expression for almost a year, it seems to still work perfectly. The private settles back in his seat uncomfortably. “No talking,” the other soldier says. “Either of you.”

“Kindly fuck yourself,” Blake returns politely.

“Sir.”
“What’s going on back there?” The sergeant yells. Blake’s guards exchange glances and say that it’s nothing at all. “Good, now shut the hell up!”

Blake allows himself a slight smile and starts pulling against his bonds again. The shuttle rises from the planet’s surface and Blake sighs in resignation; they’re gone, and so is any chance he had at a clean escape. There will be no gullible transport company employees for him to trick – or to make him think he has. The most he can hope for is an unattended shuttle he has no idea how to fly, or a miraculous rescue that will never happen.

The hull vibrates as they breach the atmosphere and Blake wonders if he should use the movement as an excuse to ‘fall’ from his seat. The instant he tips forward, the two men grab his arms and pull him back. “Careful, Mister Blake,” one of them says, sounding as if he genuinely worries about Blake’s welfare. There’s some sort of commotion up in the navigational area of Blake’s flying prison, though he’s missed the beginning of it. Blake leans back and closes his eyes, uncaring of whatever is going on up there because it’s nothing to him if they’re having a bad day – his is worse.

The moment that the entire shuttle rocks under the impact of…something, however, it becomes his problem. “Shit,” the PFC says.

“What is it?” Blake ventures, not really expecting an answer.

He gets one, anyway. “We’re about to be boarded.”
Blue, Yellow, Cyan, Orange.

Chapter Summary

Blake finally discovers the real reason behind his capture and why he's being dragged off to Promethea.

The next few minutes are a blur of yelling, hand-to-hand combat, and motion sickness. Blake barely has time to hit the floor as the hatch is blown open and the newcomers swarm inside, but he can definitely see that they’ve been boarded by other Crimson Lance soldiers. The noise and fuss are enough to provide Blake with the perfect escape, if only he knew where the hell he should go from here.

He settles for squirming his way beneath the seats and fumbling at the whatever-it-is that’s binding his wrists together. The battle above him rages unchecked while Blake carefully pulls his legs up, arches his back, and forces his wrists down around his ass. He has a bad moment when he gets temporarily stuck, but manages to wriggle until he’s brought his hands up in front of him.

The furor begins to die down as he’s sliding under another row of seats, intent upon reaching his luggage, but Blake is unceremoniously hauled out into the open by his ankles. “I’ve got him,” the soldier who has a grip on his socks yells out.

“Good work, Brandt. Let’s get him onto ours before these idiots wake up,” another soldier says, thumping over to kneel beside Blake and look down at him. “Mister Blake? Please come with us.”

“He’s ours,” Blake hears the sergeant say groggily from the deck somewhere beneath two other unconscious bodies.

“Nine-tenths of the law, ballsack,” this new one replies. “We have him now.”

Blake is courteously escorted through the airlock, as it seems that he’s the guest of honor, and he’s warily pleased when his saviors immediately free his hands. “I don’t suppose you’ll tell me what that was all about…?” He’s shown to a seat, offered a ration bar, and promised a full accounting as soon as they get underway. The new shuttle seems a carbon copy of the last one, but the main difference is its inhabitants. Where his first set of kidnappers were grim and silent, these seem curiously jubilant about having appropriated him – there must be some sort of in-house reward for his capture.

The officer in charge comes back to sit with him, removing his helmet. “Sorry about that, sir. Gunnery Sergeant Eli DeWitt, at your service…what can I help you with?”

“You might begin by releasing me immediately,” Blake tries.

DeWitt shakes his head regretfully. “I’m afraid I can do just about anything else but that…sorry. There’s a rank-up waiting to be claimed by whoever brings you to Iron Spine, and that’s not the sort of thing we can turn our backs on.”

“I suppose this would be the admiral I’ve heard so little about.” Blake has his doubts about earning the forgiveness, if not forgetfulness, of anyone dubbed Iron Spine by his subordinates.

The other man nods. “Yeah, that’s him. I’m not sure why he wants you, sir, but the colonel said to
go find you and bring you back to him.”

Blake draws in a quick breath. *It couldn’t be, but...what if?* “Which colonel requested the dubious honor of my presence, if I may ask?” he asks if he couldn’t care less about it. *Please. Please* say-

“Ballard,” DeWitt says, crushing the last fragile threads of hope that Blake was foolish enough to nurture. What had he expected?

“I’m afraid that I do not...wait. Not Derrick Ballard? Byco Ballard?” Blake asks, effectively startled out of depressive thoughts.

DeWitt laughs. “Yes, sir. He goes by Lieutenant Colonel Ballard these days – nobody calls him Byco unless they want swamp duty. Once we rendezvous with the cruiser, I’ll have him contact you.”

Blake is finally realizing that the end goal of his capture might not be an execution after all. There’s nothing for it but to ask instead of continuing his current assumptions. “Is anyone planning upon my immediate death, Sergeant?”

“I’m sure *someone* out there is, Mister Blake, but you’re safe with us. Colonel Ballard was *very* clear that you remain unharmed when he sent us after you.” DeWitt professes ignorance as to why Ballard wants Blake, but is unfailingly polite and charming as he officially welcomes Blake aboard. “We’re a tad low on food supplies, sir, but if you just sit tight we’ll get you aboard the battle cruiser in no time. They’ll have better rations than these protein bars.”

He offers Blake a ‘spare’ uniform, suggesting that another group might try to steal him and the different outfit will make it that much more difficult. Blake is still less than pleased at having his plans interrupted by anyone, least of all Derrick Ballard, but he supposes that he can still finish assuming the ownership of Corazza once he’s aboard the fabled ‘cruiser’. After he gives the new colonel a piece of his mind for this latest insanity, of course. What *could* the man have been thinking of?

Blake opts to change into the jumpsuit, feeling slightly embarrassed upon noticing that one of the soldiers is sitting off to the side wearing nothing but his underwear. He offers his clothing in exchange, but is waved off cheerfully.

Only one other attempt is made to free Blake from the custody of his current companions, but the other shuttle is turned away easily without having the chance to send a boarding party. Blake’s questions about the conditions on Promethea are promptly answered and he feels oddly unhappy at the thought that he might not see this particular group of soldiers again. They’ve welcomed him, *fed* him, and set his mind at ease in a very kind and courteous manner. Blake thinks that Ted would have liked them, too. “Which battalion are you from?” he asks as the shuttle approaches the huge Crimson Lance battle cruiser.

Gunnery Sergeant DeWitt exchanges glances with PFC Brandt. “Blanco’s Butchers, sir.”

Of course, Blake thinks with a smile. How very fitting. “You do him honor.”

“We try our best to make him proud, Mister Blake.”

They gather around to wish him well as the pilot goes through the landing sequence. “Shall we be seeing each other again, Sergeant?”

DeWitt reaches out to clasp Blake’s hand in a friendly manner. “We might, at that. Good luck to you, sir, and don’t mind the admiral – he’s hell on wheels, but he’s a good man.”
Blake apparently isn’t expected to comment on this bizarre assurance, because they’ve landed and the welcoming committee is pounding on the hatch. It opens to reveal a handful of soldiers, and a man he hasn’t seen for almost a full year. “Lieutenant,” Blake says warmly, then immediately realizes his mistake. “No, that’s not right…forgive me. Lieutenant Colonel, is it now?”

Ballard reaches to clasp Blake’s hand. “Yes, sir. It’s…it’s really great to see you again, Mister Blake. I hope you’ve been well-treated?”

The callow youth has matured even further to a calm, confident officer. Blake is pleased to see it, but he does still have a bone to pick with the man. “To be perfectly honest, Ballard, I am less than pleased with how my life has been disrupted by what seems to be your whim. There are things I must do, and this nonsense has kept me from it…but I have nothing but the highest regard for Gunnery Sergeant DeWitt and his team.”

“Gunny DeWitt has a way about him, I’m told,” Ballard says wryly, nodding to the man standing at attention behind Blake. “Was the hair his idea?” he gestures for Blake to walk with him, promising to explain everything.

“The disaster atop my head can also be laid at your door.”

Ballard actually smiles instead of looking repentant. “I had my reasons, sir.”

These reasons, Blake soon discovers, have to do with a job offer. “Ballard, this is beyond ridiculous! I am in the midst of assuming ownership of an arms manufacturing company, and you’ve promised field promotions to whomever abducts me…all because your admiral needs a new assistant?” Blake presses his fingertips to his temples and closes his eyes, wondering if he’s having a stroke. One should be occurring at any moment, he’s sure of it.

“We don’t call adjutants assistants, sir-”

“You have absolutely no right to do this to me, especially after…” Blake looks away, unwilling to finish the sentence. “Where are we headed.”

Ballard murmurs that the stateroom is just ahead on their left, and stands aside to let Blake enter it first. When the door closes behind them with a muted whoosh, the new colonel surprises Blake by sinking to his knees in a gesture of supplication. “Mister Blake, I can’t convey how deeply sorry I am for all that’s happened. There hasn’t been a single moment when I can escape the fact that I could’ve prevented this, and I just…I just want to make it right, sir. Please. Please let me make it right.”

What on earth? Blake stares down at the man in incredulously. “Leaving aside the fact that you most certainly could not have prevented anything about my current situation save for leaving me in peace…how can you ‘make it right’ by hauling me off to Promethea to become the gofer of a man I’ve never met and would rather not meet at all? Now, get up off your knees – you are embarrassing yourself.”

Ballard stays right where he is. “You’ve met the admiral, sir.”

“I know of no-one by the charming moniker of Iron Spine, Colonel. I believe I would be aware of it if I did.”

“You knew him before he became an admiral, Mister Blake. He’s not called Iron Spine just because of how stubborn he is.”

Blake rubs his hands over his face, struggling to tamp down his rising ire. “For God’s sake, man – get up and stop talking nonsense. After you’ve done that, you can retrieve my luggage because I
shall be *leaving*.”

“I need you to come with us to Promethea, sir. If it’s necessary, I’ll even lock you in a holding cell to make sure you can’t run,” Ballard continues stubbornly.

“Ballard, I want you to listen to me very closely. I—”

“Let me show you three pictures, sir,” Ballard interrupts, his voice rising to a yell to drown out Blake’s reprimands. “If you still decide that you want to leave after you see them, then I’ll personally take you wherever you want to go.”

The idiot finally stands up when Blake nods, so irritated with Ballard that he’s actually thinking of striking the man. Brought all this way because their damned admiral needs a new babysitter – it defies all comprehension. Does the Lance now think that, since Blake had lured the famously difficult Colonel Blanco into double harness, he’s now available to deal with all their ‘problem’ officers? The only Atlas officers he ever remembers meeting are Ballard, Saybrook and, of course, Ted himself… though there had been that liaison, hadn’t there? What had been his name? Creighton, he thinks it was. Well, he’s not interested no matter who it is.

Blake waits impatiently as Ballard moves over to the large ECHO console, typing something in before beckoning him closer. Blake sighs and walks up, looking at the screen. “How am I supposed to recognize anyone by the back of their head?”

“Three pictures, sir; this is just the first one. Do you see this man, here?” Blake follows Ballard’s pointing finger to a white-haired man in a dark red dress uniform.

“I have never seen the back of his head in my life,” Blake says irritably, but obediently looks closer when Ballard requests it. The sides of the man’s head have been shaved, but at the nape of his neck is a thick metal cable in Hyperion yellow. “I suppose that is what gained him that wonderful nickname?” Blake grimaces at the sight, because he can see the reddened scar tissue on either side of it – it looks painful.

Ballard clears his throat. “Yes sir, it is… though he does have a reputation for being very strict.”

“I still do not know who he is, Colonel, and I am getting tired of this.”

“Then maybe this one will jog your memory,” Ballard tells him. The picture changes to a shot of the same man, but this time he’s turned his head slightly…and Blake forgets how to breathe, because he can see the numbers that have been incised into the man’s temple. The same numbers Blake had traced with his fingers time and time again, but had never seen except on the half-melted piece of metal he’s carried with him for months: 5104-6. “Would you like to see the last picture, sir?” Ballard asks gently.

He changes it and Blake lifts trembling hands to cover his mouth. No longer will the Blanco triplets be identical, he thinks inanely, staring the man he’d thought lost to him forever. Ted’s customary salt-and-pepper hair has changed to a blinding white, and there’s a chunk of flesh missing from his left eyebrow. He’s the most beautiful thing Blake has ever seen. “How did…just…how?”

“I downloaded his profile from the New-U, and waited to pull the chip until just before another, uh, impartial reconstruction,” Ballard says, reaching out to grip Blake’s shoulder supportively. “Saybrook and I had a hell of a time getting him back to Promethea, but the command brought in a few specialists. It took them about a week to get him stable enough for surgery but even then, there were…problems.”
Ballard doesn’t have to explain that the regeneration cycle had been constant, but his fingers tighten convulsively on Blake’s shoulder and Blake’s heart aches just imagining it. Oh, my poor love. “The, um, the cable…?”

“It’s a modified exoskeleton, sir. He was…he was awake for most of the surgery, and when they told him about the spinal replacement he asked for one made by Hyperion.”

Tears, only held at bay by the intense shock Blake has suffered, threaten to make an appearance. “I see.” And Blake does, only too well. “I think I would like to be alone for a moment, Colonel, if it is all the same to you.”

“Oh, my poor love.”

“Of course, sir,” Ballard says, and the sincere kindness in his voice is what shatters the remainder of Blake’s self-control.

Blake turns away as Ballard makes a diplomatic retreat through the door, and he stares at Ted’s picture until his vision becomes too blurred to see it. Alive. He’d dreamt of finding that Ted had somehow survived his ordeal, and now his dream is reality…but at what cost to Ted’s body and mind? He can’t imagine the suffering that his shadow has undergone – it has to have been horrific, and Blake weeps for the pain he was unable to take from the most important person in his world. He’d castigated Ballard for disrupting his life, yet Ted hadn’t even been able to control his own…not even the smallest part of it. An entire week of the same regenerative loop he’d been caught in at Fyrestone, and then a slower cycle as he’d been experimented upon while metal had been grafted to his body. Horrifying is the mildest term Blake could ever find for it.

He slowly wrests his emotions under control, taking his penance in the form of a splitting headache and an unshakable resolve to return to Ted Blanco’s side where he belongs. Blake returns to gaze through red-rimmed eyes at the photos which had been intended to bribe him into accepting a job that had probably never been available in the first place. Ballard really had intended to redeem himself by bringing them back together, and Blake can’t help but love him for it.

He would have forgiven Handsome Jack himself if it had meant that Ted would be returned to him.

Blake drinks in the image of Ted’s face, feeling his heart grow lighter than it’s been for almost a full year. “I am coming for you,” he promises the still image.

He finds the facilities and washes his face quickly, intent upon questioning Ballard at length, but finds that the other man has been waiting just outside. “I don’t suppose you’ve reconsidered coming with us to Promethea,” Ballard says.

“I don’t suppose you’ve reconsidered coming with us to Promethea,” Ballard says.

“Of course I’m coming, you moron,” Blake snaps. “Get in here.” Ballard obeys with a relieved smile, as if there had been any doubt that Blake would want to be reunited with Ted, and Blake seizes him in a brief embrace. “Thank you, Derrick. I am in your debt.”

Ballard rubs at his eyes, looking slightly embarrassed. “I just wish I could’ve found you sooner, sir.”

“You might as well call me Jeffrey. We’ve been through too much together to stand on formality.”

“Oh, no, sir. I couldn’t do that,” Ballard says. “That would be like calling Admiral Ares…well, you know.”

So that is what he styles himself, these days. I have many questions for you,” Blake says, eyeing the other man speculatively. “Let’s begin with this one: how is it that you were able to, ah, come across him in Fyrestone? Zed was under the impression that the New-U station overloaded.”

Ballard settles into a chair. “Communications weren’t that big a problem in the beginning, so we
were able to meet up once all the cargo containers with the Hyperion kids were delivered to Fyrestone. It was…it was hectic, to say the least; a lot of the children were hurt and all of them were scared out their minds. Colonel Blanco had us go out and look for your pod while he got the little ones into the buildings where they’d be safe; he figured you got knocked off course somehow, but that you wouldn’t be too far away. Some of the pods we found…it wasn’t nice to see, sir. Where did your lifepod end up?”

“Within spitting distance of Mount Hellsfont, unfortunately.”


Blake shrugs. “I survived. Again. When did the three of you make the discovery of my suit jacket?”

“Well, sir, it was about a week or so after the…the, ah, event. We tried to keep in touch with Zed because we figured you’d go there, but the Colonel was starting to lose hope. He found your jacket near a burned out Runner; there were tracks all around it, and some…some remains. The Colonel sent us off to scout ahead and when we got back, he was gone. Saybrook says he should’ve known something was up from the way Colonel Blanco got so quiet, but he wasn’t talking all that much since that first night when we had to come back and tell him we didn’t find your lifepod.” Ballard looks down at his boots. “We weren’t that far from Fyrestone, so we just figured we’d go see if that’s where he went but when we got there…”

Blake clears his throat, trying to force himself to stop thinking about it. “So you took his profile from the machine hoping that he could be successfully reconstructed on Promethea.”

“That’s exactly right, Mister Blake; yes,” Ballard says, relieved at not having to spell it out. “Sometimes I’ve thought it might have been less cruel to just…lose…that chip. I’ve thought about it a lot, actually.”

They each lapse into their own form of thoughtful silence, and Blake wonders how his shadow could have possibly gone from a forced, violently unwanted resurrection, to the admiral in charge of the main Crimson Lance garrison. Given what he knows about the level of loyalty Ted had commanded before he’d left for that fateful assassination-that wasn’t on Thrace, it’s highly unlikely he would have been promoted. “He killed the other officers to gain his current rank,” Blake says aloud, knowing them for truth.

“Yes.” Ballard abruptly refuses to meet Blake’s eyes, and another line of questioning meets a dead end. Pun intended or not.

“I must inform you that I fully intend to continue my plans for Corazza, so I will need access to a reliable ECHOnet connection.” Blake resolutely changes the subject, glancing towards the console in the room with them. “Do I understand correctly, that he does not know of my continued existence? How long before we reach Promethea?”

Ballard perks up at not having to answer any more questions concerning Ted’s murderous housecleaning rampage – Blake fully intends to hear the whole story, and Gunnery Sergeant DeWitt is the perfect person to ask. “We’ll be there in about a week, sir…and no, the Admiral has no clue we’re bringing you to him. Our spymasters routinely search for – well, I guess you’d call them keywords. Saybrook had them put your name in the search files just in case, and the system flagged a few uses. Each time it’s turned out to be someone else thinking they could claim a few paychecks…Admiral Ares wasn’t pleased, to put it mildly.”

“Does Atlas have the resources to be sending troops to respond to something like that?” Blake asks, remembering the sorry state of affairs for the Lance before Ted had reprimanded Blake for forgetting
“I know that funds have been an issue in the past.”

“They kinda still are. I mean, it’s not as bad as before you started paying us again but it’s sure not good. The Admiral liquidated the assets of the, um, officers and shut down a lot of nonessential operations, but we’ve been keeping afloat by hitting Dahl mining ships and taking escort contracts with anyone that pays.” Space piracy, Blake thinks. How quaint. “So to answer your question…if we get a ping, it gets relayed to the Admiral and he sends the closest available ship to respond. Comm officers picked up your transactions; he asked Gunny DeWitt’s team to take care of it, but DeWitt contacted me with a photo…so here I am.”

Blake would like to question him further, but he’d also like time to think about all he’s learned so far. A shower, decent food, and some rest wouldn’t go amiss either.

He’s offered the use of the stateroom for the duration of their trip and encouraged to mix with the crew if he feels up to doing so. Ballard places a few of the lesser ratings at Blake’s disposal and has one of them bring food while the others retrieve the luggage.

Blake is left to his own devices a short time later and he stands in the reception area surrounded by his personal effects, a tray full of gently steaming food, a tailored uniform, and three still images of Admiral Ted Blanco on the ECHO console’s monitor. An embarrassment of riches.

He decides to shower first, knowing that he’ll be too exhausted to do so after he eats, and is surprised at how elegant the furnishings are as he moves through the stateroom’s living area. The bed is of a generous size, the floor thickly carpeted, and there is even comfortable seating – perfect for some much-needed relaxation. Blake shakes his head with a laugh and continues into the bathroom, feeling ridiculous for being impressed with conditions he’d grown to expect as a matter of course back at Hyperion. The stateroom is obviously reserved for the higher end of the officer scale, though Blake can’t imagine Ted ever availing himself of a room such as this.

Blake showers quickly and eats as fast as he dares, because the surge of adrenaline is starting its decline, but takes a moment to call up the pictures Ballard had used as bait. He’d thought that he might lose Ted after Helga Steele’s final death, but his love had found his way out of despair’s foul miasma only to be plunged into an abyss much deeper. Ted will need steady, patient care to recover from this…if it can be managed at all. Blake isn’t sure about Ted’s current state of mental health, but he knows that it can’t be good.

“If it takes a lifetime, I will find you,” Blake murmurs aloud, echoing a promise he’d made Ted months earlier. “Wait for me, Theodore. I am coming for you.” He brushes his fingertips across the screen, his heart equally full of joy and hope…two emotions Blake had thought might never blend together again.

He turns off the monitor and climbs into the luxuriously soft bed that’s the perfect size for two, and falls asleep while planning how to entice Ted into sharing it with him. Renewed hope has the side effect of reminding Blake of how much he’d enjoyed sharing a bed with the man he’s traveling towards, and he wakes a few hours later with a painfully hard erection tenting the blankets. Blake tends to himself slowly with one arm tucked behind his head, listening to the steady hum of the ship’s engines. His eventual release is as draining emotionally as it is physically, and he dashes the tears from his eyes before sitting up to look for something he can use to wipe the mess from his stomach.

Blake feels refreshed when he wakes a second time, many hours later. Once he’s certain that any masturbatory evidence is well concealed, he avails himself of the shower and gets as presentable as
possible…this includes donning the uniform that had been left for him. He also realizes that his quarters have been guarded by four soldiers who snap to attention the instant he steps outside the door. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” he asks mildly, looking in each of their faces.

“Colonel Ballard’s orders, sir,” one of them says. “Would you like us to bring you a tray, or provide an escort to the officer’s mess?”

“An escort would suffice,” Blake replies, and delicately broaches the subject of the uniform he’s currently wearing – there are no indications of rank, but he doesn’t want to alienate anyone on the battle cruiser if there’s a way to avoid it. He’s treated to an explanation that puts him in mind of Ballard’s initial glee upon discovering that Ted had paired off him; it makes him slightly uncomfortable, but Blake deals with it as tactfully as possible.

One of Gunnery Sergeant DeWitt’s men – Brandt, Blake thinks his name is – spies him and liberates Blake from his four-man escort. “He’s ours, boys, get your own…Mister Blake! Good to see you again, sir. I hope the stateroom was decent enough. Come with me; we’ve saved you a seat.”

Heads are turning as Blake follows the other man to one of the tables, and he clears his throat. “I seem to be the main attraction.”

Brandt grins and gestures to a seat. “You sure are, sir. Hard to believe we actually found you.”

DeWitt reaches across the table with a firm handshake. “Glad you’re coming back with us. If anyone can tame that terror, it’s gonna be you.”

“I beg your pardon?” Blake asks in surprise, but soon learns that they’re speaking in jest…for the most part. He’s regaled with stories of hellish training exercises, surprise drills in the middle of the night, and endless shuffling of personnel between battalions.

“We’re kinda hoping – off the record, of course – that once we deliver you to Promethea, Iron Spine’ll be too…busy…to keep thinking up stuff like that,” DeWitt admits. “The Admiral doesn’t expect anything more from us than he’d give, himself, but…we need a break, sir. He’s got that personal teleportation device and just comes out of nowhere for field inspections.”

Blake promises to see what he can do, smiling at the very thought that he’s somehow expected to influence Ted’s command style, and finishes his breakfast surrounded by several soldiers who trade jokes and make him feel welcome.

He’s taken on a tour of the ship where he meets more of the crew. Ballard finds him near the armory and extricates him from DeWitt’s men long enough to relay news from the main garrison. “We’ll be there in less time than expected, Mister Blake – it seems there’s a rumor spreading that you’ve personally guaranteed to put an end to the midnight drills, so the engine room has been lifting the power restraints from the system.”

“Does it not seem odd to you, that there is an entire ship full of people convinced that I am somehow their savior?” Blake asks. “I am finding it to be extremely uncomfortable.”

Ballard smiles and leads him down the corridor, nodding to the men and women heading past in the other direction. “Consider this, sir: one of the only officers to truly care about their wellbeing was betrayed in one of the worst ways imaginable, simply because he was the best at what he does. He can, and does, lead us but the Admiral would be…more balanced with your influence. He’d also be a lot easier to get along with, but you didn’t hear that from me,” Ballard says cheerfully. Blake murmurs the appropriate reassurances and Ballard invites him onto the bridge, where he’s introduced to the officers on duty.
Blake spends the three remaining days solidifying his new position as Corazza’s new owner and preparing as best he can for a reunion he’d never thought would happen. He familiarizes himself with the ship and its crew until he knows each soldier by name, and spends a large amount of his seemingly endless ‘free time’ with DeWitt. Blake makes notes on an ECHOpad during these conversations, determined to learn the intricacies of Crimson Lance politics so there won’t be any missteps once they arrive.

Promethea appears on the main viewscreen three days later looking as if something had taken the worst parts of Pandora, set them on fire, and then molded it all into a planet. Clustered about the place is any number of warships and freighters, with shuttles busily moving between them. The largest vessel looms off to the side, dominating the view, and Blake catches a glimpse of blue decorating one half of it…this, then, must be the flagship.

He’s assigned to Eli DeWitt yet again, and boards a shuttle bound for the surface with his unofficial guardians.

Blake looks out of the viewscreen curiously as the shuttle descends, taking in the sight of the desolate landscape that’s had most of the life blasted from it. Drifting sulfurous clouds blight the stunted, blackened earth and even the flora looks sickly in a dangerous sort of way. The huge structures in gleaming black and crimson rise above it all, and they grow even larger as the shuttle swings around on its final approach.

It’s foolish to be so nervous, Blake tells himself firmly. After all, it’s not as if Ted will send him back.

Ballard is waiting for them as they disembark, giving Blake a hurried once-over. “The plan’s been changed – he’s on his way, and we don’t have time to get you into his office. You can go back in the shuttle until he leaves if you’d rather not-”

“All present and accounted for,” one of the ratings bellows and, all around Blake, soldiers begin leaping to attention.

“Admiral on deck,” one of the ratings bellows and, all around Blake, soldiers begin leaping to attention.

This is it, then, Blake thinks, struggling to control his breathing. He steps into the receiving line beside DeWitt, who gives him an encouraging thumbs-up. Ballard moves off with a look of mild panic, and Blake can hear him giving his report. “We managed to track the usage to a few ECHO terminals on the passenger liner, Admiral, but the subject eluded capture. Sergeant Conners tried and failed to bring the man into custody but Master Sergeant DeWitt brought him in.”

The two men have moved close enough by now that Blake can see them, and his heart pounds wildly.

Ted.

His love keeps walking forward, surveying the clustered and nervous troops with a glacial, unblinking stare. Blake had expected something like this, yet the coldness in those pale green eyes takes him aback – it’s as if everything connected to the innate liveliness and warmth of Ted’s soul has finally been locked away in response to the disappointments that life has dealt him. He won’t want a demonstrative public welcome from anyone, but it’s far too late for Blake to slip away in favor of a private reunion.

“All present and accounted for.” The words are uttered in the tone that Blake likes the least, clipped and precise. Impersonal.

Ballard clears his throat. “Yessir. I’d promised that each member of the crew that brought him down would be rewarded-”
“I see. If the Lance is to promote each of its members for doing the task assigned to and expected of them, we’ll soon be up to our ears in Lieutenant Colonels,” Ted observes, glancing over at the men and women standing directly across from Blake. “I expect that the matter was taken care of, if it yielded a reward that generous.”

“Yes, Admiral, I guarantee that it was taken care of in a manner that you would approve of.”

Ted turns to look at the troops directly surrounding Blake, and their eyes meet. Then, impossibly, Ted’s gaze slides over him as if he isn’t there at all…and he walks on.

Blake stares after Ted in shocked silence, aware of the surprised looks he’s receiving from everyone else around him. “Um.”

DeWitt recovers first, and gives Blake a nudge in the ribs. “Go walk with him,” the newly minted Master Sergeant hisses. Blake’s not sure what else he’s supposed to do, but following someone who’d just made a point of ignoring him doesn’t seem like it’s a very good idea. “Go,” DeWitt repeats. “Don’t make me shove you out there, sir.”

It might not a very good idea, but it’s the only one Blake has available at the moment. He calmly steps into the aisle with Ted’s subordinates lined up on either side of him, and follows with as much dignity as he can muster.

The ‘inspection’, or whatever Ted is doing, ends roughly ten minutes later. Ballard casts a quick glance at Blake after he’s dismissed, and then Blake moves up to walk beside Ted so that they can go…wherever admirals go after nearly bringing their junior officers to tears. “Well?” Ted demands, still not looking over.

“It’s lovely to see you again, as well,” Blake chides gently. “You might have been kinder.”

“Kinder,” Ted echoes. “Yes, because *that* always works.”

Blake continues to keep pace with him. What is happening? “You don’t seem surprised to see me.”

Ted finally stops and turns to face him, looking more tired than anyone has a right to be. “Why does that matter? You’re not here, Jeffrey.” Those broad shoulders slump, and Blake’s heart aches at his next words. “You never are.”

“Then I highly suggest we adjourn to the nearest private room so that I can prove how here I really am, you ridiculous man,” Blake says after a moment of silence.

“Right-” Ted breaks off as two soldiers begin to walk towards them, and Blake fights to keep from breaking into manic laughter. All this time, and he’s relegated to being a figment of Ted’s imagination.

“Hello,” Blake says, much too loudly. “Can the pair of you recommend a decent place to eat around here?”

The soldiers stop and glance at Ted deferentially. “I’m sure Admiral Ares would be able to tell you, Mister Blake, but-”

Ted is decidedly wild-eyed as he looks back and forth between the PFCs and Blake. “You…you can see him.”

“Not if you don’t want us to, Admiral,” one of the soldiers says promptly.
“I’m sorry to bother you, gentlemen,” Blake interrupts. “Your Admiral looks as though he’s just remembered his manners.”

Ted dismisses them and turns back to Blake, looking him up and down slowly. “What the fuck is with your hair.”

“I have been waiting to ask you the very same question, Theodore.”
An Officer and a Gentleman. And then there’s Admiral Ares.

Chapter Summary

One reunion, many paths: psychopaths, sociopaths, and more psychopaths. Blake finds a new home on Promethea with his old love...but don’t let Ted hear you call him old. He’s a little sensitive about the new hair color.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

If anyone were to ask him about it later, Blake wouldn’t be able to say which of them moved first – all he knows is that he’s in the arms of the man he loves more than life itself, and crushing embraces are interspersed with frantic kisses that taste of saline. “You’re here,” Ted breathes disbelievingly for the third consecutive time as they both try to burrow into each other. Blake rubs his face into the familiar warmth of Ted’s neck, noting that he’s changed the soap he uses. “You’re here.”

“Take me to your quarters.” Blake inhales the scent of the new soap and struggles not to disgrace himself by weeping – he rather thinks that Ted might not appreciate any underlings coming across them like this, either.

Ted mumbles something, holding Blake so tightly that breathing is becoming difficult. In the next instant, Blake’s stomach feels as though it’s been flipped inside out – but instead of standing in a hallway clinging to each other, they’re now clinging to each other in a room that reminds Blake of the sardine tin ‘pod’ on that horrid passenger liner.

They’ll discuss moving to living quarters of a decent size later. Ted’s mouth is on Blake’s again and they stumble to the nearest horizontal surface, which is not nearly large enough for the both of them, and then they’re on the floor. Blake gathers a fistful of Ted’s military uniform, still reassuring himself that he is awake and they truly are together again. “I missed you so,” Blake whispers.

Ted draws back enough to caress Blake’s face, his fingers trembling. “Every time your name got a ping, I hoped it’d be you.”

Blake leans into the loving touch, closing his eyes briefly against a swell of joy that brings more of the tears he can’t seem to run dry of. It feels like the sun is rising inside his body. “Oh, my darling boy.” He feels Ted gently wiping the moisture from his eyelashes, and opens his eyes to see that he’s not the only one so affected. “I suppose I shall need to find another name for you.”

“What?” Ted butts his forehead against Blake’s, still looking unconscionably solemn.

“Thanks to your hair, the usual fond epithet seems to be apt no longer,” Blake says, reaching a hand up to sift his fingers through all that soft, gleaming white. “How did this happen?”

Ted assures him that he wouldn’t like to hear the details. “Let’s just say that a body can only take so much, and leave it there for now.”

“For now,” Blake agrees. “But, Theodore, I have to wonder…”

“What’s that?”
Ted leans in for a slower kiss this time, and Blake’s stress level has finally dropped low enough that he cannot fail to respond to it. “Did your hair turn white… everywhere?”

The laugh he gets in response is a bit rusty from disuse, but it’s an actual laugh. “You’re free to look for yourself, Jeffrey.”

“I’d rather not do searching of such an intimate nature on the floor,” Blake says primly, though he’s loath to leave the comforting circle of Ted’s arms. “I also doubt that your bed would support us both.” His fingers trace the shell of Ted’s ear and back around Ted’s neck, stroking over the ridges of scar tissue that hem in the metal spine.

Ted watches him carefully, as if waiting for an inevitable expression of disgust. “I have other quarters, but I’ve never used them.”

“Would it take very much to find them, love? It might benefit us both to have a larger bed,” Blake says. “Does this hurt you?”

“No, it’s just…you’re the first who’s ever touched it,” Ted explains. “Nobody even wants to look at it.”

Blake reminds Ted that he most definitely is not ‘nobody’, and deliberately closes his hand over the nape of Ted’s neck. “While I wish that…this…was never necessary, it is a part of you now. How could I not love every part of you?”

Ted shakes his head slightly, a ghost of a smile on his face. “You’re still slick as hell.”

“Now that is much better,” Blake says.

“What is?”

Blake leans in for a kiss, which turns into five of them. “I detest how cold you’ve been forced to sound, just to save your own sanity.”

Ted draws him close and they hold each other, still getting used to the fact that they can.

When Ted would whisk him off via teleport, Blake insists that they get there the old-fashioned way. Of course, this means that any public displays of affection are strictly prohibited; Blake has cause to regret his choice when he reaches out for Ted and finds that Admiral Ares is the man with whom he’s walking. The frost begins to thaw anew once they reach their destination and it’s clear that their arrival has been anticipated.

“Are those flower petals?” Blake asks interestedly.

“They’d better not be,” Ted replies, looking around. “You have to be kidding me. Champagne and lube, just sitting over there beside each other.”

“Let’s go see what else they’ve done,” Blake says. He reaches out again and, this time, Ted reaches back. They’ll need to work something out for when they’re in public together, because Blake refuses to play along and pretend that he doesn’t know Ted whenever they leave their quarters. The rooms are really quite nice…much larger than where he’d lived on Helios. He could do with a touch less red and black, though. “The stateroom which I occupied on my journey here was wonderful, Theodore. I wished you could have joined me there.”

Ted’s brow furrows slightly. “How long did you know I was here?”

“It has been about four days,” Blake says. “I have tried to move on since the moment your brother showed me to that damned New-U station, but you have never been far from my thoughts. Did you
ever contact Zed?”

“No point in it. I swore I’d never go back there again, once…and when I did, I lost everything. Better to let them continue thinking I was dead; there hasn’t been a single day when I haven’t wished that I really was,” Ted says slowly. “I’m…I’m sorry I didn’t look for you hard enough.”

So am I. “Perhaps you might like to send your brothers a message.”

“Maybe.” Ted looks at him sidelong. “What did you like so much about that stateroom?”

“It had a very large bed,” Blake admits, feeling himself – incredibly – begin to blush. “Between that and knowing I was on my way to you, there were…dreams.”

The corners of Ted’s mouth turn up slightly. “Dreams.”

“Oh, yes. I was transported back to one of the most inconvenient parts of adolescence.”

“Really,” Ted comments, moving closer until there’s mere inches between them.

Blake’s body is running riot with Ted so near to him, and he knows that neither of them is going to have the patience to take things slowly. He closes the distance and pulls Ted’s head down to his, tired of waiting. The desperation that had been in their first kisses is back, but they’ve gone beyond happy to see you into the…darker territory that’s strictly reserved for sex.

He shoves Ted back until they reach a wall, and reaches down for an inseam check. Blake curls his fingers around what he’s so boldly grasped. “Do you remember the first time we-”

“Yes.” Ted knocks his hand away and does some grasping of his own.

Blake’s breath hisses out between tightly clenched teeth. “I need more, I need - !” He’s not entirely sure what he needs, aside from an immediate orgasm, because he can’t force his mind into providing the pertinent details. Although…yes, that might do nicely. “Bend your knees and slide down – no, that’s too far. Yes, there.” Blake steps into the vee of Ted’s legs and pushes his hips forward so that his own trapped, aching cock rubs right against Ted’s.

Ted’s lungs empty the rest of their stored contents by way of a low, deep moan that is absolute music to Blake’s ears. They rub against each other slowly at first, attempting to find the angle that works best for both of them, and then it’s discovered after a few moments of concentrated exploration. Blake presses Ted back against the wall, only halfway aware of his shirt being ripped as Ted seizes it in white-knuckled fists. They rock together urgently, and the only sounds in the room are of labored breathing and unarticulated grunts. “Ah, fuck…!” The back of his lover’s head strikes the wall with a thud and Ted grinds against Blake with feverish need until Ted’s entire body shudders with the force of his release.

Blake follows suit moments later, spurred on by Ted’s grip on his ass and the ragged panting filling his ears. “Oh, my goodness.”

Ted’s sigh is cut off partway, ending in a spluttering sound. “You are just unreal, Jeffrey Blake.”

“What’s the matter?” Blake asks in surprise.

“Both of us’ve come in our pants after a dry-hump, and you’re out here actin’ dainty like we’re at a tea party.” Ted gasps. “If you jacked me off, you’d have your pinky finger up in the air for sure.”

“We have been together for less than three hours, and you are already-”
Ted cuts him off by seizing his collar and pulling him in for a kiss that has Blake in danger of imminent collapse. He’s forced to cling to Ted in order to remain upright, as if that’s a hardship. “I love you. I love you so fucking much,” Ted whispers harshly.

Blake answers him with another heartfelt kiss, and they huddle together until the mess in Blake’s trousers becomes too uncomfortable to ignore. “Shall we bathe together, love?”

“I guess we could,” Ted agrees, and Blake doesn’t think he’s ever seen a loving gaze that was quite as fierce. “Jeff, I’m not…like you remember. I hope you won’t mind too much.”

“I believe I’ve made my position on that quite clear,” Blake reminds him gently.

The bathroom dwarfs the facilities that Blake had been so fond of sharing back on Helios – the bathtub is the size of a small pool and exclaims in delight upon discovering that the floor is not only made of roughened stone to reduce slippage, but it’s heated. Ted undresses slowly on one of the padded benches, watching Blake inspect the facilities. “It’s a lot, huh?”

“Theodore, it’s wonderful. Whom did you kill to get it?” Blake asks curiously, running his hands over the stone embedded in the walls.

“Nobody. I had it built in case our new CEO wanted to stop in; it was halfway done when I found out just who the new boss was so I, uh, redid everything how I figured you’d want it. Did I do okay?”

Blake smiles, crossing the room to kneel at Ted’s feet. “It’s perfect.”

“Too much red and black.”

“Perhaps a bit much,” Blake confesses, and the corners of Ted’s mouth curve upwards once more. “I was unaware that the company had been claimed – who is in possession of the controlling shares?”

Ted promises to tell him later; now is only for the two of them. He’s removed his boots and set them beneath the bench, and Blake watches silently as Ted opens the creased uniform coat and begins to fold it unnecessarily. “Could you maybe get the water ready?” Ted asks, slowing his movements.

“Of course,” Blake assures him and kisses his hands before standing up, listening for the sounds of rustling fabric as soon as his back is turned. Ted waits for him to become fully occupied before removing the rest of his clothing, and despite Blake’s resolve to not be shocked, he’s still stunned when he turns to see exactly why Ted is so self-conscious. “Oh, Theodore.”

Ted flinches involuntarily and immediately begins to turn so that his ravaged torso is angled away from Blake’s gaze. “I already said-”

“Let me see you,” Blake says, crossing to him and taking Ted’s hands in his own. “How much of the damage is self-inflicted?” He feels like weeping again, looking at what’s been done to his shadow. Chunks of flesh are missing in various places, and thick strands of scar tissue bloom outwards from the worst damage in a tangled web of lines. Blake struggles to contain his sorrow as he circles around Ted’s motionless form to finally get a good look at the Hyperion spinal implant. On each side of the smooth yellow metal, the scarring is bright red and obviously inflamed. The evenly-spaced divots on either side of it show that Ted’s…doctors…had used surgical-grade staples there during the grafting process.


Blake silences him by leaning forward and pressing his lips against the cool metal of the modified
exoskeleton. “Is there anything that I can do to ease the pain?” He traces the length of it from its start to its end, where it has been fused to Ted’s tailbone. On impulse he places a kiss to the angry-looking scar tissue.

“It’s fine,” Ted tries to argue, but finally admits that a course of anti-inflammatory medicines would help – it appears that he’s been without a suitable assistant to administer the injections. Blake insists that he have the medicine delivered to their new quarters while they bathe, since he’s sure that cleaning the injection sites beforehand will only be a benefit. He bullies Ted into contacting someone from the infirmary, and gets undressed as he walks around the palatial bathroom. “Change your mind, yet?” Ted asks, coming back into the room with a box in his hands. He’d dressed himself before leaving, so Blake gets to watch him disrobe once more.

This time, Blake is able to conceal his disquiet at Ted’s injuries. “About the bath, nursing you back to health, or you in general? The answers are no, no, and absolutely not.”

Once they’re in the bathing pool together, Ted seems content to simply gaze at Blake. They’re close enough to touch, but neither of them feels a burning need to do so…it’s enough that they could, if they so choose. “Jeff.”

“Hmm?”

“Will you…will you stay with me?”

“What sort of a question is that? You know quite well that there will be no getting rid of me; now, do you need help washing your back? Come here.” Blake narrows his eyes, struck by a sudden thought. “Theodore. The reason why your back is still so inflamed.” Ted’s resulting expression can only be described as shifty. “Oh, for god’s sake! All you had to do was to ask either Ballard or Saybrook, if you couldn’t reach it yourself!”

Ted shakes his head with another of those almost-smiles. “I almost forgot about that, too.”

Blake refuses to humor him by demanding clarification, and ducks beneath the water. “Now that I am not being hunted by persons unknown, I can safely return to my natural hair color. Yours will still need getting used to, but I think that I like it. I cannot countenance the cause of it, but you look very elegant and wise.”

The almost-smile abruptly becomes a fully fledged grin that nearly takes Blake’s breath away. “Me, elegant and wise?”

“No one need know the truth,” Blake says tartly. As much as he would like to laze about in the warm water, the first order of business is making sure that Ted is comfortable enough to share a bed with him – the constant rubbing of the uniform must have been hellaciously uncomfortable. He carefully pats Ted’s back with the towel when they emerge from the pool, and tries not to stare at the evidence that (as the saying goes) the carpet really does ‘match the drapes.’ One of the benches is perfect for Ted to lean across after the syringes have been laid out and their use explained.

Ted stretches out after indicating which one that Blake should select first, and shivers as Blake runs his fingers down the artificial spine. “Asking for help is not a sign of weakness, especially to those of us who love you,” Blake says softly. He carefully inserts the first needle and depresses the plunger to administer the medicine, then repeats the process in different areas until all of the syringes have been emptied. Remembering Ted’s usage of InstaHealth ampoules, Blake massages the twin ridges of scar tissue all along the length of Ted’s spine. He starts to draw back and see if the anti-inflammatories have started working when he’s forcibly reminded that stubbornness isn’t the only trait of Ted’s that he’s forgotten about. “Theodore. Really?”
“I can’t help it,” Ted protests. “It felt good.”

Blake reaches out to touch the serial number etched into his shadow’s temple. “Come with me.” Ted hauls himself to his feet and wraps a towel around his waist, which doesn’t do much to disguise his erection and does nothing at all to dispel Blake’s interest in it.

Their fingers twine together as they walk through the rest of the suite, Ted exerting gentle pressure when reaching one of the only closed doors. “I can show you the rest of the place later,” Ted tells him, and guides Blake into the most sumptuously appointed bedroom that he’s ever seen.

“You’ve outdone yourself,” Blake says, allowing himself to be drawn over to the bed. He’d thought the bedroom of the battle cruiser had been nice, but it doesn’t hold a candle to this. “I love it. I love you.”

Ted kisses him as they sink down onto the bed and Blake kisses back, reaching between them to untuck both towels. He slips his arms around Ted and, finding that his fingers settle quite naturally just beside the still-healing scar tissue, begins to massage it in the slow motions that Ted had enjoyed so much earlier. Ted moans against Blake’s mouth, and the erection which had subsided to half-mast returns to its full glory. “Please,” is all he says, exhaling the word into Blake’s left ear as he presses close.

Blake, realizing that neither of them have access to any lubricant or prophylactics, casts about until he catches sight of the closest bedside table – if any of the matchmakers who left champagne and lubricant in the main room had any brains at all in their heads, they will have stashed something in the bedroom as well. “Kneel up, my sweet. If it has been as long as I suspect it has, you will need help to relax.”

While fretful at the delay, Ted does concede that particular point and they separate long enough for Blake to retrieve the needed supplies. “I don’t care if it - ooh! - hurts, I just need…ah, god. Do that again-!”

Smiling at how talkative his lover has abruptly become, Blake continues his preparations while Ted squirms and sighs. “The point to doing this is to prevent you from feeling any discomfort. Is there a certain position you would prefer?” Blake hates being so businesslike about this, but he doesn’t want to exacerbate any of Ted’s injuries – the infernal man might have kept himself from healing as some bizarre sort of penance, but Blake is determined to return Ted to full health before subjecting him to any strenuous sexual activity. He would prefer to make love face to face, but he’s not about to insist that Ted lie on his back. Perhaps if they were both on their sides…?

Ted, however, has an idea of his own that they’ve actually tried once before. “Get on your back,” he demands hoarsely, straddling Blake’s hips once his request is granted. His cock juts out, leaking cloudy fluid that drools down onto Blake’s stomach as the thick length sways back and forth. Ted looks down at him, breathing heavily as he accepts the offered condom and rolls it onto Blake’s dick; their earlier loveplay might have taken the edge off momentarily, but Blake is back to feeling needy. At his age, it’s ridiculous.

He barely manages to contain himself as Ted grasps him by the root and begins to sink down. Despite the preparations he’d made, Ted’s body has clearly grown unused to any sort of penetration. “Don’t hurt yourself,” he cautions, hearing Ted’s breathing roughen.

“Mind your own buh…business,” Ted groans, pressing down until Blake feels the head of his cock push through the tight ring of muscle. “Unnhh.”

Blake digs his fingers into the sides of Ted’s waist, letting his eyes drift shut. “Ah, love…” He resists
the urge to push up, letting Ted set the pace instead. Despite his shadow’s initial eagerness, Ted now seems inclined to go slowly. Blake represses the urge to stroke that wonderfully tempting cock, as it’s plain to see that Ted is fighting for control.

“Shit,” Ted says. “Not supposed to be like this-”

“I’ve slept with Zed,” Blake interrupts, and sheer surprise is all that stops Ted from disgracing himself.

“What?”

“He would visit my bed in the Fyrestone Motel from time to time, and he would pretend to be you,” Blake says, easing his grip and sliding his hands up to rub his palms over Ted’s heaving chest. Some of the hair he’d grown used to is simply missing, the pores completely sealed by the riot of scar tissue. What’s left is patchy and uneven…and, of course, completely white. “I only realized his subterfuge the night before I left Pandora.”

The urgent, maddening clenching of Ted’s muscles begins to ease. “So, did you-”

“No,” Blake assures him, gasping. “It is easy to tell that you have not, either.”

Ted deliberately tightens around him with the particular brand of mischief that Blake remembers well. Some habits are more difficult to break than others, apparently, and Blake’s heart is lighter for it. “Who the hell’s gonna fuck me, lookin’ like this?”

“I am. Move, if you please-!”

“What happens if I don’t please?” Ted dares him.

Blake stares up at his beloved, mischievous shadow, and curls his fingers around Ted’s cock. “This is what happens.” He gives it a few teasing pulls of his wrist before Ted decides to behave himself.

“Don’t…mgh, I’m…” Ted’s entire body is shuddering now, and Blake gives into the impulse to thrust up inside until Ted’s hands slam Blake’s shoulders onto the mattress. “Let me do it.”

While Blake had imagined that their first act of lovemaking would be slow and sweet, this is turning out to be anything but. Ted is curled over, still pressing down on Blake’s shoulders, and riding Blake’s cock as if his life depends upon it. “I won’t last,” Blake moans.

Ted’s teeth are bared and his expression is full of fierce concentration. “Good.” He levers himself up and places his hands on the back of his own neck, artificial spine flexing as he moves up and down. “You’re mine.”

Blake’s open-mouthed pants mingle with Ted’s grunts of exertion. “Always.”

He’s reaching out to hold Ted’s hips in place when he feels the sharp contraction of muscles around his cock, and watches as Ted leans back and grind down on him. “Jeffrey.” Ted’s cock lifts untouched as he reaches orgasm, forceful spurts arcing out to coat Blake’s chest.

Blake’s own climax is spurred on by how tightly Ted’s body is still clenching him, and he pushes upwards in a final flurry of movement before collapsing back onto the bed. It doesn’t occur to him how quiet Ted has become until he finishes catching his breath and turns his head lazily. Ted is still perched upon him with his hands locked behind his head…and with tears steadily leaking from beneath his closed eyes. Blake’s first instinct is to apologize for any hurt caused, but then he realizes that hurt isn’t the reason for these tears. “Oh, my darling. Come here,” he says tenderly, reaching up.
Ted curls forward, allowing Blake to help him with a less than graceful dismount, and falls into Blake’s arms. Blake freely dispenses kisses and gentle touches, feeling an answering ache in his own chest; he’d been given a handful of days to adjust to the fact that Ted was still alive, but Ted hasn’t had a tenth of that luxury . . . and he’s finally been overwhelmed. Blake holds him tightly and lets him weep until a year’s backlog of trauma, coupled with today’s physical and emotional stress, prove too much and Ted falls into an exhausted sleep huddled in Blake’s arms.

Careful maneuvering allows Blake enough room to remove the used condom and tie a knot in it before dropping it on the floor, and then he leans against his beloved to enjoy the simple fact that he’s there for Blake to hold. He runs his hands over the metal spine that doesn’t seem quite so odd anymore, and Blake probes gently at the ridged scars that still seem entirely too warm to the touch.

He spends the next few hours relearning his shadow’s body by tracing the new scar tissue with his fingertips and dozing for several minutes at a time until he’s jerked awake by the insidious thought that this is all a dream. Hunger finally drives him to extricate himself from Ted’s grasp, and he slides one of the (black and crimson, of course) robes that have been thoughtfully provided for them.

The quarters truly are massive, he thinks to himself as he walks back into the main living area. Through some trial and error, Blake finally locates the kitchen and rummages around until he finds a cleverly concealed cooling unit. There are numerous food items inside that he doesn’t have a prayer of recognizing, but Blake discovers some familiar fruit and snags a few pieces of it to take back with him. He’d rather have a warm meal, but recognizes that it will be for the best if he simply waits for Ted to wake up first – the last thing anyone here needs is their admiral’s life partner accidentally burning the place to the ground.

Ted is awake, sitting up and rubbing at his face wearily as Blake walks back into the bedroom. “You should still be asleep,” Blake says gently, extending the plate in his hand. “Fruit?”

“I’m good,” Ted assures him, looking anything but. “Did you check out the place yet?”

Blake perches on one of the side tables and carefully selects a piece of fruit, then turns and throws it directly at Ted, who snatches it from the air reflexively. “I thought we might do so together, while you tell me about the new Atlas CEO. No, don’t set that down – eat,” Blake commands.

Ted frowns at him, but does as he’s told. Blake smiles and eats half of what’s on the plate before taking it and crawling onto the bed. “I could make you food,” Ted yawns, lifting his arms up and stretching before flopping back on the mattress. Blake smiles down at him, slapping Ted’s fingers as the admiral tries to sneak a hand into Blake’s robe.

“No teasing, Theodore; we both know you haven’t the energy to follow up on it. Come and share this with me,” Blake says and Ted, still bare as the day he’d been born, curls around Blake and rests his head on Blake’s thigh. The fruit disappears rather quickly as Blake sets every other piece to Ted’s lips and has it sucked from his fingers in a manner that earns Ted another scolding.

Neither of them feel inclined to move, so Blake leans back against the pillows and combs his fingers through all that surprisingly soft white hair while they exchange stories of the life they’d built without each other. Ted is deliberately vague where his bodily reconstruction (and the subsequent revenge for it) is concerned, but it’s easy to tell that he’s built up a colossal sleep debt which will need to be paid sooner rather than later. He’s genuinely interested in Blake’s plans for Corazza, however, and immediately refuses Blake’s offer to return the Crimson Lance to a state of financial solvency. “Back on Helios, when we had that fucker locked in Jack’s office . . . he took the certificate,” Ted says. “I didn’t realize it was on display there ‘til it was too late.”

To say that Blake isn’t happy about this turn of events is putting it very mildly. “Rhys is the owner of
The Atlas Corporation.” The owner of you, he thinks, and is instantly ashamed of it.

“What’s more, he snatched the last piece of Gortys and called a fucking Vault with it. No idea where he is now, or what he intends on doing with the loot…doesn’t look like he intends on paying our wages, that’s for sure. Right now it’s easier to just pretend we’re still Atlas – we’ve got all the gear and it’d be a pain in the ass to chisel the logos off every damned thing.” Ted closes his eyes, sighing as Blake traces the serial number carved into the side of his head. “That feels nice.”

Blake narrows his own eyes in thought. “The Crimson Lance seems to have been operating independently of formal Atlas control for quite some time…barring a small portion of my tenure as CEO. Rhys won’t have the resources to assert his legal authority over any of you, unless you allow it.”

“Not gonna happen. Not here, anyways – he could go to the other three garrisons and try some shit there. Eden system’s been cleared out but Eunomia, Menoetios, and Demophon still have a decent Lance presence. Technically, I outrank everyone in all four garrisons…but I just don’t have it in me to go make ‘em kiss the ring, Jeff. I’m so fuckin’ tired.”

“It seems to me that a rest is in order, my dear,” Blake continues to run his fingers through Ted’s hair, smiling at how drowsy his shadow looks. “And I am here to watch over you while you take that rest…old man.”

Ted revives enough to glare up at him. “Watch it.”

“Of course I am watching it,” Blake says in deliberate misunderstanding. “You’re still completely nude.” His dubious wit earns him another smile, and he reaches a hand to pat Ted’s backside. “I’m still hungry; make me some food?”

Ted uncoils himself from around Blake and rolls onto his back, stretching out in a successful attempt to distract Blake from the prospect of dinner. “I’m still horny. Show me your dick.”

Blake rolls his eyes and gets up to grab the other robe, tossing it at Ted. He makes no attempt to catch it, and it winds up in a heap covering his head. “I asked you first.”

The black robe is a stark contrast to Ted’s hair, even more so than the crimson uniform he’s taken to wearing, and Blake asks about it while Ted prepares the evening meal. “The proper uniform color for an admiral is white but it made me look like a one-man snowstorm,” Ted says, bringing down a plate from one of the compartments. “Figured the red one was the lesser evil.”

“It’s very striking,” Blake admits, “but I’ve always liked how you look in black. Second only, you must understand, to how you look wearing nothing at all.”

Ted smiles and gives Blake a sidelong glance. “Speakin’ of that…I noticed that somebody’s filled out.”

“Hard to avoid when Ned has been shoving food down my throat at the slightest opportunity,” Blake points out, touching Ted’s hand in thanks as his shadow nudges a full plate of food over to him. “Am I allowed to even think of you as my shadow, anymore?” Blake wonders aloud. “With that hair-”

Ted yanks the plate from Blake’s grip and, leaning down over it while still maintaining eye contact, begins to lick several piece of food before standing up and passing it back. “Keep going and you’ll see what I do to your drink.”

Blake tries, and fails, to keep a straight face. “That’s disgusting.”
“You’re a bad influence on me, Sticks.” Ted grins and steals a piece of the food he hasn’t licked, causing Blake to complain.

They move into the living area, sitting on the floor in their bathrobes as they share a single plate. Ted teases Blake by insisting upon feeding him by hand, and things would get out of control if not for the fact that both of them are much too old for repeated sexual exertions. Blake has a very good idea about how Ted has been managing without sleep, and it has ‘Anshin’ written all over it – there’s bound to be a dust-up when Blake outlaws the use of InstaHealth needles for purposes not expressly related to traumatic physical injury, but he’ll cross that bridge when he gets to it.

Which likely means in the next handful of hours, because Blake can tell that a dose has already been skipped. He reaches out to cup the side of Ted’s jaw, feeling tenderness fill his heart to bursting as Ted leans into the touch. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” Ted yawns, then gives a sudden start. “Damn, the drill-”

“The drill can wait until tomorrow, darling boy. I need several hours of sleep with an elegant and wise admiral at my side, who might be persuaded to make love to me once we are awake.” Blake caresses Ted’s face to emphasize the point. “I will need a sleep aid, though. Do you have anything that might fit the bill?”

Ted answers in the affirmative, and would teleport to the medical center, but Blake grips his arm and begs him to stay. This is less to do with being clingy and more about not wanting Ted to get his hands on an InstaHealth, but Ted doesn’t have to know this. “I’ll get my adjutant to bring it by,” Ted promises.

“I thought I was being hired as your new adjutant,” Blake says lightly, walking over to the massive window overlooking the rest of the garrison while Ted contacts his assistant. The view is impressive, but Promethea’s atmosphere seems to be a perpetual swirling mass of dark clouds and a red-tinged light coming from an undetermined light source. It could be a reflection of the glowing red lights issuing from so many of the buildings, but somehow Blake doesn’t think so. “What time of day is it?”

“It’s early morning…and no, I doubt that’s appropriate,” Ted says, coming over to stand behind him and off to the left, just like old times. The accent still isn’t quite right, but it’s getting there after a solid year of disuse.

“You cannot deny that I would be good at it, once I’ve learned the Lance code of conduct,” Blake replies. “Of course I will still be in charge of developing Corazza assets, but I could do that from here if you wouldn’t mind. We would have to negotiate some sort of contract whereby your Lance would be available for manufacturing and supply purposes.” It would be easier if they were married with their assets as shared property, Blake thinks, but declines to mention this aloud. He won’t have Ted laboring under the impression that a marital union would only be for business purposes, not for a single moment.

Ted rests a hand on Blake’s shoulder. “There’ll be time for us to discuss all this later.” Blake lifts his own hand to cover Ted’s and they stand there together, staring out of the window, until the sound of the door chime interrupts their reverie. Ted leans forward to brush a kiss behind Blake’s ear before leaving, and Blake takes advantage of Ted’s momentary absence to move back into the kitchen and find their half-emptied glasses of wine.

Luring Ted over is laughably easy, and so is drugging Ted’s glass with the sleep medication solely intended for Blake. “Shall we have a toast, love?” Blake asks with a smile.
Ted smiles back and plucks the glass, which Blake had kept back for himself, from Blake’s hand.
“To us,” Ted says, lifting the drink high before clinking it against the one Blake’s been left holding. He drains the glass and puts it back on the counter. “You’re gettin’ sloppy in your old age.”

“Am I?” Blake sips at his slowly, swirling the liquid before deciding to simply toss it back as if it’s a shot of hard liquor. “You were the one who neglected to see that I split the medication in equal parts…in anticipation for your precise actions. Now, I suggest that we start searching for the closest horizontal surface because I can already feel the effects.”


“It looks as if I’m not the only one ‘getting sloppy’ in their dotage,” Blake says archly.

He has no memory of actually returning to their bedroom but he’s obviously made it there, because that’s where he wakes up several hours later. Blake stares into the darkness, momentarily disoriented before remembering where he is and why a buzz saw seems to be operating next to his right ear.

The noise is horrific, and sounds as if someone is choking to death on a kazoo, but Blake discovers that he doesn’t mind a bit.

For a grand total of thirty minutes, and then it’s as irritating as it had been a year ago.

He slips out of the bed and hunts for something to throw, but then realizes that silencing the snoring is as simple as leaning over and placing a kiss just below Ted’s navel. The snores are cut short and replaced by a startled silence as Ted undergoes his own revelatory experience, after which point he most definitely ceases to breathe through his mouth.

Blake is loath to leave his new apartment, even on the proverbial arm of the fleet admiral, but he does have to admit that Ted looks magnificent in uniform. He’s less pleased to find that Ted’s rank seems to preclude actual emotion, however – it’s like walking beside a handsome block of ice.

Master Sergeant DeWitt is waiting for them with another man Blake hasn’t been introduced to yet, but he seems to be Ted’s adjutant. “Good morning, Admiral; I’ve gathered your messages and-”

“No,” Ted tells him. “Cancel it.”

The aide blinks. “Sir, you haven’t heard-”

“No, and I’m not planning on it. DeWitt; give Mister Blake a tour and run through some evac drills. Make sure he has lunch…and does something about his hair. Dismissed.”

DeWitt brings an arm up in a sharp salute. “Sir. We’ll keep him safe; I’ll stake my reputation on it.”

Ted focuses on him, and the temperature drops thirty degrees. “Your reputation won’t be the only thing at stake, Master Sergeant.”

“I understand completely, sir.”

“See that you do,” Ted says and, shifting to look at Blake, extends his hand slightly.

Blake briefly considers reaching out to touch his fingers to Ted’s in the manner that they’d put into practice so many times on Helios, but decides against it. Instead, he grasps Ted’s hand as if he’s going for a courteous handshake and yanks Ted close enough to steal a kiss. “Be a good boy, Theodore,” he says for the benefit of Ted’s officers.
Those same officers are furiously attempting to pretend that they’ve seen nothing at all, as Ted turns to stare at them before looking back at Blake. “That was unprofessional.”

“Don’t worry, you can look forward to it again tomorrow. Behave yourself, dear one.” Blake reaches up to pat Ted’s cheek in a patronizing fashion and gets his hand slapped away.

“I’ll have DeWitt shave you bald,” Ted threatens.

Blake smiles and turns away. “No, you won’t. Come along, Master Sergeant…”

He can feel Ted watching them as they walk away and so can DeWitt, who finally says something as they enter a nearby lift. “Sir, nobody talks to the Admiral like that.”

“Yes?” Blake asks interestedly. “It’s a good thing I am here, then, because someone should. Tell me, DeWitt…do you not have duties of your own that you are neglecting by making yourself my tour guide? I would hate to think that I am contributing to your delinquency.”

DeWitt laughs at this. “It’s far too late to be worrying about that, Mister Blake. Anyway, we asked to be your guard detail and the Colonel approved it.” He leads Blake around the main compound, making a point to introduce Blake to the other members of the Blood Shrikes – there are far too many people for Blake to actually remember, but he’s quickly told that introductions aren’t for his benefit at all. “Don’t worry about memorizing anyone’s names, sir. The important thing is that they know who you are. They’ll spread the word and always keep an eye out for you so if there’s trouble, you know someone’s always got your back.”

“I hope you don’t expect that to happen…the trouble, I mean.”

The other man looks at him thoughtfully. “Truth is that I don’t expect Admiral Ares to be more than two steps away from you at any given moment…or, I didn’t. Maybe he’s showing me how trustworthy I am, maybe he’s showing you that he believes you can handle yourself. Maybe he’s following us around right now, and we don’t even know it.”

Now that, Blake thinks, sounds a lot like something Ted would do. “That is very likely.”

DeWitt finishes the tour and explains about the evacuation drills that the entire garrison participates in at least once a week. “They used to be done every other month, but it’s better for us to be so used to hearing that damned alarm that everyone does what they’re supposed to – it’s a pain in the ass, sure, but there isn’t a single soldier on base that isn’t able to respond properly even in their sleep.”

Blake listens carefully to his own instructions, which boil down to getting himself to the nearest pressure-sealed bunker as quickly as possible – different ranks have different instructions in case of an emergency that could run the gamut from various environmental disasters to full-scale invasions. He has to admit, after being briefed on the nature of those environmental disasters, that there are more than enough to choose from. Blake also knows exactly why the drills are conducted so frequently; perhaps the loss of life aboard Helios might not have been so catastrophic if he’d just had his security team conduct a few drills once in a while.

After he’s run through a few practice scenarios with DeWitt, Blake is shown the way to his new barber…who turns out to be none other than Isamu Saybrook. “I had no idea you were a stylist,” Blake says, attempting to not show his distaste for the man.

“Admiral Ares expects all of us to have multiple skills,” Saybrook tells him. “If you’d rather have someone else fix your hair, sir, I understand completely.”

DeWitt glances between them curiously. “Everything okay, Mister Blake? Major Saybrook?”
“Major? Your rank is lower than that of Colonel Ballard, is it not?” Blake asks despite already knowing the answer. He also knows that it’s beneath him to pick at the man, but he just can’t seem to help it. “I imagine your superiors were thrilled that you finally fulfilled your orders.”

Saybrook has the decency to look ashamed, which is something. “Yes sir, they certainly were. Until he made them regret it.”

“Please wait for me outside, Master Sergeant,” Blake says.

“Sir, I was specifically told—”

“My life is not in danger,” Blake assures DeWitt, keeping his eyes locked onto Saybrook’s as he speaks. “Not today.”

DeWitt retreats unwillingly, and Saybrook sighs. “I guess forgiveness is out of the question.”

“If I thought that forgiveness was something you were genuinely interested in, I’d certainly consider it,” Blake says bluntly. “The last time we spoke of this, you assured me that you had simply been following orders and your actions were not personal. You appear to have gained a measure of Ted’s forgiveness, so I shall advise you to be content with that; my corporate experience has taught me to never turn my back on a known threat, no matter how penitent they seem. Now, if you don’t mind, I would like to be rid of this horrid color and have a trim along the sides.”

Saybrook takes the reproof with a silent nod, and gets to work.

When Blake leaves the room, his hair has been restored to its former (and extremely dubious) glory and DeWitt is waiting for him anxiously. “No problems, then?”

“Why ever would you think otherwise?” Blake asks mildly. “If our tour is at an end, DeWitt, I would like to—”

“There you are, sir,” a voice says, and Blake turns to see Ballard loping towards them. “Admiral’s compliments, and would you mind following me to the infirmary?” Ballard gestures for DeWitt to leave them, and the other man nods sharply as he falls back out of earshot.

“Saybrook didn’t give you any trouble, did he? Your hair looks better.”

Blake assures him that there was no trouble at all. “I was not expecting him to have the same skill set as a beautician, to be honest with you…or that he would be of lesser rank than you.”

“He wasn’t expecting to gain those skills, either, Mister Blake. Admiral Ares thought it might teach Saybrook some humility.”

They set off, presumably towards the infirmary. “What taught him humility? Having a lower rank to a former subordinate, or styling hair as a side job?”

Ballard grins at him. “Both.”

The medical wing is larger than Blake had thought it might be, and learns that it had been enlarged several months ago at the expense of several ‘private’ officer’s medical suites. Ballard shows him into one of the offices, where Ted is scowling at something he’s reading on one of the monitors.

Blake sits down in one of the chairs provided, content to watch Ted as he waits. “I’m surprised that you are still in charge of the infirmary,” he says lightly.

“Nobody else can do the job better,” is Ted’s rejoinder before he finally looks up. “I like the haircut
"Mm," Blake agrees, deciding that he likes the look of Ted wearing green surgical scrubs. "Were you shadowing me today?"

Ted smiles slightly. "You can’t tell if I was, or not?" He leans back in his own seat, stretching. "Believe it or not...I trusted DeWitt with you. He seems to think he’s your main bodyguard; he and his crew begged for the assignment."

"So you truly didn’t follow us around?"

"Don’t be ridiculous," Ted scoffs. "I had my Assassins do it."

"I saw no Assassins-"

"Honey, I once carried you around the Badlands in my arms and you had no idea it was me." Ted’s eyes return to his work. "I’ll be done in a minute, then we can go get some food."

Blake sighs gustily, as if this is all much too boring for him to handle. "I would rather have some of you."

"That could be arranged." Ted looks up at him, and they smile at each other.

Blake stands up and circles around the desk, stationing himself directly behind Ted, and begins to rub his shadow’s shoulders. He also sneaks a peek at what Ted is doing – it seems to be some sort of medical history file, which might as well be written in Eridian for all the sense that it makes. Ted rolls his shoulders up into Blake’s touch, sighing, and Blake leans down to press a kiss directly upon the serial number on his shadow’s temple. He kneads Ted’s muscles slowly, wishing that they were back in their quarters already so that he can massage certain other areas, but all too soon Ted finishes his work and draws Blake down into his lap.

"I could get used to this," Blake says, running a finger down Ted’s nose. "Being your...kept man."

Ted laughs, and the sound isn’t nearly as rusty as it had been the previous day. "I hope so, ‘cause I really am gonna keep you."

"Forever?"

"Always," Ted promises. "Unless you got a problem with that."

Blake twines his arms around his beloved’s neck and leans in for a kiss. "It just so happens that I have no problem at all, where ‘forever’ and ‘always’ are concerned."

Their lips are barely touching when Lieutenant Colonel Ballard comes through the door, unannounced and most definitely unwanted, holding a tray. "Admiral, I’ve brought you some-oh!"

Blake nearly launches himself from Ted’s lap, but is held there with an unyielding grip.

"Byco, the fuck are you doin’ in here?"

Ballard disregards the dangerous softness in Ted’s voice, staring at them in obvious delight. "Oh, sirs-"

"About face, and march your ass outside. Full gear, full speed. Go," Ted says. "Take the Butchers with you; they need the exercise."

"Yessir," Ballard says, trying to salute before he realizes that he’s still holding the food. "Um-"
Ted sighs irritably. “Put the damn tray down and get outta my face!” The tray is duly deposited on the desk and the salute made, complete with boot heels snapping together smartly, and Ballard flees for the door. “What a goddamned moron,” Ted mutters.

“Some things, It seems, never truly change,” Blake says finally, smoothing his hair back into place. “However, this office isn’t the best place for an assignation so might I suggest adjourning to our new quarters?”

They stop by the window first and watch the steady stream of Blood Shrikes, with Lieutenant Colonel Derrick Ballard in the lead, jogging past in full battle armor. “Dumbasses; each and every fuckin’ one,” is Ted’s predictable observation. “C’mon, let’s go have sex. How’re those delicate petals of yours doin’ these days, Blake?”

Blake laughs and sidesteps Ted’s playful lunge, but allows himself to be captured on the second try. “Awaiting your delicate yet manly intrusion, Admiral.” He lifts his face for Ted’s kiss, his heart filling anew with the joyous love that he’d thought lost for so long. It will still take time for Ted to fully recover himself, but Blake can already see that it is possible.

This is the second chance he’d prayed for and wept over, and he’s determined to make the most of it.

They are together; he’ll forget the rest.

fin

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for reading, and putting up with my nonsense for...what, two years? Yikes. I had a lot of fun writing this (for the most part) and while I could keep this going, I figured it’s time to bring this particular story to an end at 40 chapters. I do intend to keep writing these two and have several ideas of what their life together on Promethea might be like, so keep an eye on their tags.

There might be some weird-ass typos in here given that I am, in fact, human...and I also had to get a new keyboard that I am struggling to get used to. You have my heartfelt apologies and a promise that I do continually re-read in an effort to edit out the goofs.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!