**Divided We Fall**

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**Divided We Fall**

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**Summary**

Los Santos is a city of crime and corruption; its streets run by gangs, their rules enforced with bullets and bloodshed. The Fake AH Crew are on their way up, with every intention to rule the city.

When a botched heist leaves Geoff with a bullet wound, suspicions turn to traitors amidst their ranks. Now, they risk tearing the crew apart to discover the truth, but as they delve deeper, they realize the situation's more complex than they originally thought.

The Fake AH Crew find themselves playing a dangerous game with more than their reputation at stake.

**Notes**

This story has undergone a re-write since it was originally completed (9th June 2017) and was re-published in its entirety 12th July 2017.


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The heist had gone to shit real fast; well, faster than usual.

The comms crackled over muffled cries and gunshots from outside the bank where the heist was going down. Ryan wasn’t sure if the cops shot first or they did, but he was sure as hell not letting anyone get away with it.

“That’s it. Everybody dies.”

Crouched just inside the bank’s heavy wooden doors, Ryan positioned the RPG on his shoulder and angled it towards a cop car that had pulled up in range. He stepped out of his cover just long enough to launch the projectile and see it impact the car, ducking back behind the doors as it exploded into flaming wreckage.

“Jesus Ryan! A little warning next time, please!” Gavin’s nasal British accent squawked in Ryan’s ear.

Ryan could see Gavin’s scrawny figure hunched over, carefully darting between police cruisers, discreetly placing sticky bombs on the unsuspecting officers’ vehicles.

“Sorry Gavin!” Ryan called back in a sing-song voice that most definitely didn’t sound as if it had come from beneath the black skull mask he wore.

The sirens wailed louder as another car pulled up to the scene.

Geoff sounded exasperated over the comms. “Is Ryan pulling a ‘Ryan’ again?”

“Yeah.” Jeremy’s voice was calm and even as he called out positions. “Another car pulling up, three officers getting out…” An exhalation, followed by a shot. “…two officers inbound.”

Jeremy was sniping from the adjacent roof, where the last rays of light from the setting sun behind him provided an extra layer of cover from being spotted as he picked off cops who got too close.

“Great. Just what we need,” muttered Geoff.

“Hey, they’re gonna be after us anyway, might as well be for more than one reason.”

Ryan’s bulletproof logic.

“Besides,” he added, “we’re the Fake AH Crew. We have a reputation to uphold.”

Geoff just shook his head and Michael giggled a little at his response. Geoff and Michael were in the vault room of the bank; Geoff having subdued the staff, leaving a few hostages for collateral should they need it. He doubted it at this stage.

“Well, keep ‘em out of our hair, we’re almost there.”

Meanwhile, Ryan could hear Jack in the getaway car around the corner, talking Michael through cracking the mechanism of the safe, and Michael muttering something about just using C-4 and destroying the joint.

It was a cacophony, but the crew were familiar with the sounds of gunshots and screaming and even amidst the chaos, they were able to tease apart each other’s voices and stay on top of it. It was almost
second-nature by now.

“Alright boys, we are in!” Michael declared gleefully, followed by a collective cheer from the crew, punctuated with a few more gunshots and another explosion from Ryan’s RPG.

“Good job Michael, I’ll grab the cash, you set the charges, meet you ‘round the back in 5.”

A few tense minutes later, Geoff emerged with a duffel bag full of cash. He gave Ryan an almost imperceptible nod which Ryan returned before slinging his RPG over his shoulder in favour of a more compact assault rifle and sprayed controlled bursts of suppressing fire into the cops outside the bank.

“Alright Jack, we’re coming out! Be ready!” Geoff instructed over the comms.

“Got you guys covered.” Jeremy’s radio crackled with the sounds of rifle fire as Ryan saw more cops collapse outside as three more police cars arrived at the scene.

Jack pulled up right to the front door, brakes of the custom Roosevelt screeching, causing two more cops to dart out of the way to avoid getting hit, the second only narrowly missed being dragged under the front wheel.

Ryan reached the car first, slid over the hood, shooting the slower cop mid-slide. Geoff tossed him the bag of cash as he checked everyone’s location. “Michael, what’s your position? Gavin, Jeremy, keep calling ‘em, got eyes on shit down here.”

Michael was the first to respond. “We’re rigged and ready to blow Geoff; no evidence, no witnesses.”

“Well done my boi!” Gavin exclaimed over the comms, quickly followed by: “Ryan, watch your 5!”

Ryan spun around and fired just in time to take out one of two armed officers. The other fell to the ground, having been shot by Jeremy.

“Damnit Gavin, that was my 7!”

“Sorry Ryan!” His voice mirrored Ryan’s sing-song tone from earlier and Ryan briefly wondered if it may have been an intentional ‘mistake’.

“Got you covered!” Jeremy piped in.

Ryan threw the bag in the car, followed by his RPG, and jumped in after, pushing the opposite door open for Geoff.

“Alright Michael, when Gavin and Jeremy are ready, blow it!” Geoff turned to get into the car but suddenly he staggered forward, grimacing in pain.

*Something was wrong.*

Ryan pulled him into the car, reaching over to close the door behind him.

“Shit! Goddamned motherfucker! I’m hit!” Geoff hissed through clenched teeth.

He was bleeding from the thigh; he’d been shot, but Ryan couldn’t make out by whom.

“Jack, drive. Get Geoff out of here!” Ryan instructed, reloading his gun and sliding out the door.
“Where are you going?” Jack called after him, “Ryan! God damn it Ryan! Fine.”

The car sped off leaving Ryan facing the bank rigged to blow and the remaining cops sheltering behind their vehicles.

“Ryan, what are you doing!?!” Gavin screeched over the radio. “You’ll be killed!”

Ryan ignored Gavin, “Ready Jeremy?”

“Ryan! Four to your left! I got the two on the right!” Two gunshots rang out in quick succession as Jeremy called out over the radio, “Ready! Gav, you ready?”

“Ready!” Gavin replied.

Ryan spotted the four and pulled a grenade. “Anytime now, Michael.”

“Yeah boy! Gonna be a big boom, be ready in 3, 2, 1…”

Ryan threw the grenade at 3 and the explosions rang out almost simultaneously as he hit the ground for cover. The front of the bank was decimated from Michael’s charges and the cop cars had detonated thanks to Gavin’s sticky bombs. The heat from the blast was intense, but it looked like there was no movement from the cops. Through the smoke and heat haze, Ryan could see Gavin and Jeremy making their way down from the roof for extraction via a back alley, Michael would have already made his way out the back and should be getting collected by Jack. But Ryan’s plan had now changed. His eyes darted around for an impromptu getaway vehicle, but anything parked close to the bank had been damaged or downright annihilated by the explosions. As he scanned he saw Gavin’s gangly frame dip out of view followed by the shorter, stockier silhouette of Jeremy, followed by someone else… Shit. He bolted after them.

“Jeremy, you got a tail!”

Gunshots rang out in the alley before Ryan could reach it, but it wasn’t Jeremy’s rifle.

Shit. Voices called out over the comms.

“Who’s shooting?”

“Where’s Jeremy?!”

“Gavin! We gotta go, we gotta go!”

“We’re moving! Ryan, Jeremy, get to cover or get outta here!”

Shit, shit, shit.

Ryan skid to a stop down the alley and found himself face to face with a man around his height and build, a little broader maybe, with tanned skin, a shaved head and dark eyes. He didn’t look like a cop, maybe a plain-clothed officer? Undercover? Rival gang? Ryan didn’t recognise him; he barely had time to contemplate before the stranger had a pistol aimed squarely at his chest. Ryan was thankful for his mask for the second time that day as it hid the surprise on his face. He took a deep breath, considered the heavy body armour concealed beneath his jacket and steeled himself as he raised his rifle anyway. Two shots echoed through the alley and Ryan stumbled backwards, feeling a rush of air and something sharp slide by his left shoulder. But it was the stranger who crumpled to the ground in front of him.
“Ryan!” Jeremy’s rifle barrel and head poked around the side of a dumpster further down the alley. “Are you ok?”

“Yeah, you?”

“Think so. He wasn’t very fast. Told you gymnastics would come in handy someday.”

Despite joking around, Ryan could see he was shaken.

“Who is he?” Ryan asked as he moved towards the man on the ground; blood still oozing from the fatal wound on his back. The sounds of approaching sirens made him start. “Shit, we gotta get the fuck out of here.”

He quickly rifled through the man’s clothes and pocketed his wallet before dashing to the far end of the alleyway.

Jeremy climbed unsteadily to his feet and slung his rifle over his shoulder. “How the fuck are we meant to…”

Another gunshot echoed down the alley, followed by the growl of an engine and moments later Ryan returned on a ridiculously green motorbike. Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “Crew colours? Really Ry?”

“Happy accident.” Ryan grinned beneath the black skull mask.

“How did you… Uh, I don’t want to know, just get us out of here.” He climbed on behind Ryan and they took off, passing a body with a matching green bike helmet on the ground just outside the alley, the sound of sirens rapidly fading behind them. Jeremy sighed. “Why does the getaway vehicle always have to be a bike?”

Ryan’s comm buzzed static in his ear and Jack’s voice faded in. “Ryan? Jeremy? You guys ok? We heard more gunshots.”

“We’re good Jack, just had to shake a tail, we’re on our way back.”

Jack paused. “There’s been a change of plans. Head to safe house ‘cumstains’.”

Ryan could hear the sigh in Jack’s voice as he said it, and Michael and Gavin’s giggles in the background, and found himself rolling his eyes.

“Geoff’s ok, but someone needs to look at his leg ASAP, we’ll meet you at the safe house after.” Jack quickly added.

“Copy that, meet you there; but that’s the last time we let Michael and Gavin pick codenames. Better go quiet on the comms from here on out; still not sure where the tail came from.”

“Right, be careful out there.” Jack’s voice was replaced by static and then eerie silence.

The pair rode on in silence for a few moments before Jeremy’s voice drifted from over Ryan’s shoulder. “Ryan, you’re bleeding pretty bad.”

“No I’m…” He started before realizing that the throbbing pain in his left shoulder was a lot more severe than he initially thought. Now that the adrenaline was wearing off the pain was kicking in and he realised he must have been grazed by a stray bullet. The stranger in the alleyway had fired a shot after all. Unfortunately, his heavy body armour didn’t protect his shoulder. “Oh. Well, it can’t be that...
bad since I didn’t notice. Uh, but you might want to take over driving. Just in case.”

The sun had begun to dip below the horizon and the city was becoming enveloped in darkness. Good. That should make them decidedly harder to follow.

* * *

By the time Ryan and Jeremy arrived at the safe house it was dark, and Ryan was in bad shape. His leather jacket was slick with blood down the left side and his arm was almost useless with pins and needles. The pain was so constant it had begun to border on numbness during the hour it had taken to get to the safe house – a warehouse in a lumberyard in the Paleto Forest, north of Raton Canyon. They had tried to be careful to ensure they hadn’t been followed, but with Ryan struggling to remain conscious, it had been difficult. Jeremy had kept talking to him to keep him from falling off the bike; asking him if he could see anyone following them, talking about his favourite video games, and movies - not that Jeremy had seen any of them - it was all small talk, but it had worked.

All the safe houses were stocked with full first-aid kits and the whole crew was experienced in patching up minor wounds, so Ryan wasn’t panicking yet. Jeremy helped him off the bike and into the warehouse. Ryan was taller than Jeremy, 6’ to Jeremy’s 5’4”; but Jeremy easily took his weight, propping him up under his good right shoulder with an arm around his waist.

Inside smelled of sawdust and mildew and everything was covered in a fine layer of dust. There were six cots they kept permanently set up in an annexed room just off the main warehouse space and Jeremy helped Ryan down into the nearest one, despite his protestations that he was ok by himself.

“Seriously dude? You nearly fell off the bike back there. More than once. Lay the fuck down.” Jeremy went to fetch the first aid kit.

For the first time since they left the penthouse Ryan removed his mask. It was a signature of the Vagabond, the persona everyone knew as the most destructive member of the Fake AH Crew. Few people outside the crew had ever seen the Vagabond without his mask and underneath, his face was a mess of black and white paint.

Originally Ryan had painted his face to prevent identification in case his mask was removed, but it had become a regular part of his routine, even on day-to-day jobs. The rest of the crew had originally found it extremely unsettling, which realistically, was the desired effect, but over time they had grown used to it and Ryan appreciated the distance it afforded him between the Vagabond and his true personality. Recently however, he had altered the design from black, white and red full-face harlequin-esque look, to a more minimalist black and white skull design which covered less of his face and emphasised the icy clear blue of his eyes. It was more intricate, still intimidating, but less intense and left him much more exposed. It was his subtle way of mirroring how over the years, he had grown to trust the crew and show more of himself to them. He didn’t know whether they had picked up on his obscure metaphor, but if anyone were to suggest the idea to him, he would surely accuse them of over-analysing it.

When Jeremy returned, Ryan was sitting up, struggling to take off his black and blue leather jacket with his useless left arm and his right slipping in the blood down his left side. Jeremy sighed and helped him, but Ryan kept trying to bat his hands away, muttering, “I got it.”

“You clearly don’t, Ryan. Just let me help you, geez.”
Jeremy helped him out of his body armour, looking a little surprised at the weight of the chest plate. Jeremy usually kept to light Kevlar armour, even though he knew it was useless against rifle rounds.

Ryan’s head was swimming. The blood had soaked through his torn, dark grey T-shirt, although with the faded Punisher logo emblazoned on the front, it seemed rather fitting.

“Damn, I knew I shouldn’t have worn my good shirt today.”

“That’s your good shirt?” Jeremy raised an eyebrow and grinned, only half-joking.

“It was clean at least,” Ryan retorted quietly, suddenly feeling the urge to sleep and trying to fight it. He struggled out of his shirt with Jeremy’s help and inspected the wound. It was more serious than he had suspected, he suddenly considered himself very lucky; a few inches lower and well... It had torn open a gash in the top of his left shoulder maybe 3 inches long and it had opened so he could see the tissue and shiny tendons covering the bone beneath. He winced. “Ow. Oh, that’s gonna need stitches.”

Jeremy had a wad of gauze ready and applied pressure to attempt to staunch the bleeding, but he cringed at the sight of it too. “We’ll patch it up now and get someone to look at it after the others get here. I hope Geoff’s ok.”

Ryan was starting to grey out, but managed to ask, “Did you see who shot him?”

The world got fuzzy and he closed his eyes, Jeremy’s voice barely echoing in his head.

“Hey, stay with me, Ryan...”
“We caught him trying to leave, Jack!”

Michael’s rage stirred Ryan back to reality and he had to blink a few times, the light way too bright, even in the dimly lit warehouse. The pain in his shoulder was more present now and the rest of his body felt cold and stiff. He was unsure of how long he’d been unconscious, but someone had added more gauze to his wound and covered him with a heavy blanket. Something stung his right arm and he slowly came to the realization that someone had hung an IV drip and there was an oxygen bottle next to him. He must’ve gone into shock after he passed out. Ryan noted the bag was a saline drip, probably to get his fluid level back up. It was about one-third empty, so from what he could remember of their first-aid training, he’d been out for at least three hours.

“You can’t just ignore it was his fucking bullet in Geoff’s leg!” Michael exclaimed, and Ryan could hear him clearly even from the other side of the warehouse.

Wait, what?

He tried to sit up way too fast and nearly knocked over the IV stand as his head spun and black dots danced in his vision. Jack was at his side immediately, trying to make him lay back down, but Ryan was sitting upright now and fighting hard to regain his senses.

“What was that about who shot Geoff?” Ryan asked his eyes narrowing with intent.

Michael was there too now, standing by his bedside. His face was flushed, his dark eyes intense behind his glasses. Jeremy was gone.

“Where’s Jeremy?”

Michael was still fuming, “It was Lil J’s bullet! The cops didn’t have any snipers as far as anyone saw. When we got here he was about to leave. Said he was worried and going to find Geoff, but he was more than happy to leave you here, unconscious.”

Ryan couldn’t believe what he was hearing.

“Look, it may have been an accident,” Jack said calmly, “he might have panicked or it might have been a misfire or a ricochet or… something. We can’t just go accusing people of treason.”

Jack was physically the largest member of the Fake AH crew, but his arguments seemed to shrink in comparison to Michael’s intensity. Despite Michael’s size he was originally Geoff’s muscle, and rightfully so. He could intimidate guys twice his size and had no reservations about violence. Since Ryan had joined the crew though, the combination of his imposing figure and psychotic-like tendencies had upset that particular dynamic and in honesty, Ryan had become the only man that Michael “Mogar” Jones truly feared.

“Where is Jeremy?” Ryan repeated louder, and the words came out a little more forcefully than he would have liked.

“He’s out in the back shed,” Michael said shaking his head, “Restrained. Geoff’s orders.”

What kind of hell had he woken up to?

Ryan ran a hand through his shaggy, dirty blonde hair and whistled out a breath. “Has anyone talked
to him yet?”

Jack and Michael shook their heads in unison. “Geoff wanted you to handle the interrogations once we got back here, but we found you like this—” Jack motioned to Ryan’s shoulder—“so we figured it was best to wait till Geoff got back.”

* * *

Of course. It was always him.

He showed no outward emotion, but something inside him twisted at the thought of interrogating Jeremy. Instead he nodded. “Alright, let me talk to him.”

“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Ryan?” Jack looked genuinely concerned for him. “You were in shock when we found you, you’d lost a lot of blood, you were lucky you managed to stop the bleeding before we got here.”

Ryan straightened up. “Ah, that was all Jeremy. I blacked out just after we got here. He was fixing me up when I passed out.”

“Yeah, well, we caught him packing up to leave; it mustn’t have been long after you blacked out. Jack got you on the IV and oxygen, otherwise you might have died!” Michael explained.

Jack wouldn’t look him in the eye, but gave a sad smile and nodded. “You were in a bad way.”

Ryan shook his head. “It’s Jeremy. He’s one of us. Surely there’s a logical explanation.”

Michael was getting worked up again; Ryan could see it in his face. “Ryan, man, he was gonna leave you for dead before. I mean, he’s a fucking traitor! None of us want to believe it but that’s what happened.”

“Look,” Ryan said, furrowing his brows, his face paint making it look even more menacing, “He’s restrained, right? I’m just going to talk to him, get an idea of what’s going on.”

* * *

Jack had refused to let Ryan get up until he was sure he wasn’t going to pass out or throw up; for which he was actually thankful but didn’t make an effort to show it. His shoulder ached painfully and while he could move it weakly, his left arm was still mostly numb. It was too painful for Ryan to lift his arm to put on his jacket and his shirt was torn and soaked through with blood, so he had draped a rough woollen blanket over his shoulders; open enough to reveal his scant chest hair matted with dried blood down his left side. Jack had offered him morphine for the pain, but he had refused, taking aspirin instead with the slightly bitter explanation: “I like how my brain works as it is and I really need it on board right now.”

He had learned that Gavin had stayed with Geoff, and he’d bring him around once Geoff was stable. Geoff had taken care of Gavin so many times in the past, it was about time the lad returned the favour.

It was almost dawn before Ryan made his way out to the shed at the rear of the warehouse. The shed was tiny and made of steel with a concrete floor and a single furnace fireplace in the middle of an otherwise bare room. It was probably once a break room for workers in the winter; now it was cold, bare and draughty.

Jeremy was sitting on the floor facing the back wall, his hands tied behind him to the furnace, his
back resting on the chimney and his legs outstretched out in front of him. He’d been sleeping but stirred when Ryan entered the room, door creaking closed behind him.

“Ryan?” His face brightened to see him and then immediately fell when the realization hit him that this was Geoff’s inquisitor. “Was kinda hoping it wouldn’t be you.”

“Hey Jeremy. Don’t worry, I’m just here to talk.” He walked around and sat down on the floor opposite Jeremy. “The guys say it was your bullet in Geoff’s leg.”

Ryan still hadn’t removed his face paint which had become smudged during the night, making him look more than a little off-putting.

“I didn’t shoot Geoff,” Jeremy said calmly.

*That was all he needed to hear.*

Ryan took a deep breath. “Alright. I believe you.”

Jeremy looked up, directly into his too-blue eyes, searching to see if he was lying, if this was a trick of the interrogation, but there was no malice in his face.

“If you had wanted us dead, frankly, we’d be dead by now. You had more than enough chances to kill me and make it look like an accident. So, I need you to level with me here, Jeremy; what is going on?”

Jeremy’s eyes searched the floor, Ryan knew the look on his face well, he’d seen it many times before; it said he knew something.

“Something big’s going down. I’m not sure what it is yet, and I don’t know how much I can say. But I think I’m being set up.”

“The Fake AH crew has a lot of enemies,” Ryan said matter-of-factly, “any ideas on where to start?”

Jeremy shook his head, but this time Ryan could tell he was lying.

“Damnit Jeremy, you gotta give me something to go on here, Geoff’s not going to be a reasonable man when he turns up.”

Jeremy looked up mournfully. “I don’t know what I can tell you. Not yet anyway. There’s something I have to do on my own first, then I can tell you everything. But for now, the less you know, the better.”

Ryan closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose; he could feel a major headache coming on. After another deep breath, Ryan moved to untie Jeremy’s hands. “Alright, I trust you, but you gotta get the fuck out of here before Geoff gets back. Stay in contact, at least with me and for god’s sake if shit gets real, call for help. I’ll let you know when Geoff’s calmed down enough for you to come back. I don’t want this to end in a shit storm.”

Jeremy’s big, brown eyes turned up with a genuine look of gratitude. “Thank you. I won’t forget this.”

“No shit. Now go.”

Jeremy didn’t hesitate, scrambling to his feet and out of the shed, the sound of his footsteps diminishing in the distance.
Ryan sat down on the hard, concrete floor with his back against the far steel wall. The metal was cool on his skin and the crisp fresh air felt good. Through the open door he could see the sun was beginning to rise and birds were starting to stir. After a while he could faintly hear a car pulling up to the main warehouse. He shut his eyes and enjoyed the calm while it lasted.

* * *

“Care to explain what the fuck is going on here, Ryan?” Geoff almost growled in the doorway, his hand resting on the pistol at his hip. Michael, Gavin and Jack were lingering behind him.

Ryan’s eyes snapped open and he sprung awkwardly to his feet. “Geoff, look, before you do anything rash…”

“Rash, Ryan? Like shooting someone in the fucking leg? Would you consider that rash?” He had un-holstered his pistol and with both hands, aimed it first at Ryan’s still-bare chest, then down towards his leg.

“Whoa, Geoff!”

Geoff looked furious, Ryan had never seen him like this except once before, a long time ago.

“Goddammit Ryan! Where’s Jeremy?”

Ryan looked down. “I let him go, Geoff.”

“What? Why?” Gavin squawked as Michael and Jack muscled past them to get inside the shed and stand either side of Ryan.

“You said you were going to talk to him!” Jack added unhelpfully.

“I did talk to him!” Ryan snapped back, “He said he’s being set up and he needs to take care of something on his own.”

“Well did he say where he was going?” Michael asked.

Ryan shook his head, “I don’t know. He said the less we knew, the better.”

Geoff looked furious. He pointed the gun back at Ryan’s legs. “Back inside now, or I will shoot you.”

“Geez Geoff, ok.” Ryan looked around with a distinct feeling of unease at being surrounded, but he remained calm and allowed himself to be escorted back to the warehouse.

* * *

“What were you thinking, Ryan?” Geoff was perched on a chair, his bad leg outstretched, while Jack paced behind him, as if to make up for Geoff’s inability to. Michael and Gavin had been sent to search the nearby area for clues as to where Jeremy might have gone.

“I think something else is going on here…” Ryan started before Geoff cut him off.

“Caleb found his fucking bullet in my fucking leg!”
“I just don’t think it was Jeremy, and if it was, I’m sure as hell he didn’t mean to kill you.”...or you’d be dead... he thought, keeping it to himself.

Geoff was beginning to sound like Michael now, his face getting redder with every sentence he spat. “He shot me in the fucking leg! It’s the perfect way to make it look like an accident!”

“Maybe that’s exactly what it was, Geoff, an accident!” Ryan was getting defensive and it was making him flustered.

Geoff shook his head stubbornly. “Jeremy’s a good shot, he doesn’t panic, he doesn’t fuck up like this.”

“He’s scared Geoff, I don’t know of what, but there’s something else going on that we don’t know about.”

Geoff raised an eyebrow almost as though offended by the idea that he didn’t know something might be happening under his own nose.

Ryan continued, “He saved my life, Geoff. Surely that’s gotta count for something.”

“Or maybe it doesn’t mean shit,” Geoff said, “or maybe it means you’re in on it too...”

“What could I possibly have to gain from betraying you?” Ryan was on the defence again.

Jack had wandered out of view and Ryan took a step towards Geoff.

There was a fleeting glimpse of fear in his eyes, but Geoff held his ground. “I dunno Ryan, but there’s always something...”

Ryan noticed the subtlest of gestures from Geoff too late as Jack’s bat slammed into the side of his head and the world exploded into pain and blackness.
When Ryan came to, his head was pounding and he could feel his left eye starting to swell shut from the impact of the bat. He attempted to move to touch it, but his hands wouldn’t comply and he quickly came to the realisation that he had been secured to a hard, wooden chair with duct-tape, holding his arms by his sides and his legs firmly against the legs of the chair. He was still in the lumberyard warehouse facing one corner, but the light inside the room seemed to suggest it was well into the day already. His shoulder stung badly and it was still in need of stitching to heal properly.

“Geoff, what the fuck?” Ryan called out once he had found his voice. “I’m getting real tired of being unconscious and I’m not real comfortable being the guy in the chair.”

Geoff had situated himself behind Ryan, just out of view. “Sorry Ryan, you’re too dangerous to leave loose if I don’t know if I can trust you; you understand, right?”

The proximity of the response made Ryan jump. “No, I don’t understand! I’ve done nothing wrong!” Panic was starting to settle in and Ryan was fighting to keep in at bay.

Geoff’s voice had taken on that authoritative tone he got when planning heists. “We don’t know that for sure. You went soft on Jeremy, I’ve never seen you go soft.”

Ryan was vaguely offended. “He’s one of us! Not some hired goon or rival crew member, I had to give him a chance…”

Geoff scoffed and limped around, his sleepy, dark blue-grey eyes meeting Ryan’s, “A chance? You just let him go! We trust you to get information-”

“Then you should trust me! I was getting the information! I believed him, Geoff.” Ryan turned his eyes to meet Geoff’s, if it weren’t for the face paint they would have looked genuine and pleading. Shame it didn’t translate and he just looked frustrated, the burst blood vessels in his left eye making it look even less sincere.

Geoff sighed, rubbing his face with both hands, upsetting his perfectly-groomed moustache and then twisting it back into place pensively.

Ryan switched tactics. “Look, if we did anything, especially if we were in it together, would we have even come back here?”

Geoff seemed to have already considered this. “Maybe you needed to finish the job? Maybe he hadn’t planned on you getting shot when you got all trigger happy during the heist?”

Ryan’s eyes widened, suddenly remembered the stranger in the alleyway. “That’s not how I got shot.”

Geoff looked at him sceptically, his eyebrows twitching upwards. “Oh no?”

“There was a guy in the alley. He shot at Jeremy and I flanked him and he shot at me but Jeremy took him out…” Ryan closed his eyes, recollecting the blur of the heist. “I got his wallet. It’s in my jacket pocket.”

Geoff was still looking sceptical, but gestured to Jack who retrieved Ryan’s jacket, now caked with dried blood. He shrugged as he handed it to Geoff and shot a worried look at Ryan before moving out of view again. There was that panic again. Ryan’s chest constricted as Geoff patted down his
jacket, reached into both pockets and inverted them. Nothing.

“Geoff…”

“You sure you want to go down this path, Ryan?”

*No.* Ryan thought miserably. “It was there, Geoff, I swear.”

Geoff cocked an eyebrow at how honest Ryan sounded. “Did uh, any chance Jeremy saw you take it?”

*Shit.* Did he want to throw Jeremy in it? Geoff would be nowhere near as lenient as he was being with him now. Ryan didn’t know how Jeremy’d stand up to being tortured and he knew Geoff would make him do it too. His stomach twisted again. “No.”

As soon as the word passed his lips, he wished he hadn’t said it. The look on Geoff’s face was pure disappointment; that of a father who knows his son just lied right to his face.

“You’re a terrible liar, Ryan. Jack, check the stuff Jeremy was packing, see if you can find anything.”

Ryan carefully avoided making eye contact, keeping his head bowed and eyes fixed at Geoff’s feet. Geoff waited until Jack had left the room, before awkwardly squatting down on his good leg to Ryan’s eye level.

“Allright buddy, what’s going on here? You know I hold you to a higher standard than the rest of these idiots, why are you lying for Lil’ J?” Geoff asked, surprisingly gently.

“He saved my life.” The realisation fully hit him then. Jeremy really had saved his life, multiple times. But then again, so had most of the crew on one occasion or another, and he’d done the same for them.

“Jesus, Ryan, it’s not like we were going to kill him! Why is it always straight to murder with you?” Geoff grinned a little and Ryan huffed an uneasy laugh. “But seriously, you’ve known him, what? Maybe a year, a year and a half? How long did it take for you to trust us like that?”

Geoff had a point; it had taken nearly three years for Ryan to start to trust the crew enough to even stop wearing masks around them. They’d presumed it would take just as long for him to trust Jeremy, especially after Ray left. They didn’t talk about Ray anymore.

Ryan suddenly sensed he might be able to wrench the upper hand. “Are you *jealous*, Geoff?” He asked, trying for his usual cheeky demeanour, but again, it came out with a hint of malice, becoming somewhat lost in translation through his battered appearance.

Geoff was immediately back on-guard and rose with a grimace to his feet. “Hey, *fuck you* Ryan, for all I know you could have been a traitor from the beginning.”

“You hired me! I went through multiple interviews.” Ryan sounded hurt.

“Yeah and I still hardly knew anything about you. You’re the shadiest motherfucker I know.”

“Why am I so shady?”

Geoff laughed callously. “Aside from the masks, the face paint, the killing sprees…Let’s see, Ryan, what have you done to make you seem suspicious? Um, one: You started killing everybody –”
“-To be fair, that’s not out of the ordinary…” Ryan interrupted.  

“You announced ’that’s it, everybody dies!’” He went on before Ryan could get a word in, counting off on his fingers. “Two: You got out of the car as soon as I got shot.”  

“I was pissed! I wanted to find the asshole who shot you!”  

“Three: You disappear and reappear shot and unconscious and Jeremy is about to leave you here, where Jack says you could have died!” Geoff’s voice, although enraged was tinged with concern.  

“To be fair, I think that should count against my suspicious-us-ness.”  

“That’s not even a word, Ryan!”  

“…pretty sure it is…”  

Geoff tried to get back on topic, “But then, then you go and defend him. You lied for him. To me. And that’s what makes me think, Ryan, that this guy, who you’re supposed to barely know, well maybe you know him better than we thought you did.”  

Ryan tried his hand at humour again knowing it was his best chance at disarming Geoff, “…Kinda sounds like you’re implying I’ve been fucking him.”  

Geoff was amused, but unfazed. “Have you? Because I’d be a whole lot more comfortable with that than the alternative.”  

“Which is??”  

“You’re both traitors.” Geoff said with all the weight it implied.  

It wasn’t lost on Ryan and he felt his chest tighten in panic. “I feel bad for him Geoff, he’s taken a lot of shit from us, from the other gangs. He’s scared and I felt bad.”  

“You felt bad for him? Enough to risk your life and our crew? Ryan Haywood. Feeling bad for someone. Imagine that.” His voice dripped rage and sarcasm and it stung Ryan to hear. For the first time, he felt extremely vulnerable in the chair.  

“In days gone by, if Ryan had been interrogated like this, you wouldn’t be talking to Ryan, you’d be faced with the Vagabond. Threats would be met with cold eyes, a sarcastic grin and steely resolve that if he survived, you sure as hell wouldn’t. But lately he found his discordant personality couldn’t just be summoned into play anymore, as he had put more and more of himself into his life with the crew, and he had steadily come out of his shell. It didn’t help that he was being interrogated by Geoff, his boss, his friend. Now was not the time to be weak, but anxiety had begun to build up in his chest.”  

“I don’t know what to tell you, Geoff.”  

Geoff wandered around to the back of the chair and put his hands heavy on Ryan’s shoulders.  

“What you did was downright stupid, Ryan, however you want to look at it. I expect more from you.” He squeezed, digging his fingers into Ryan’s shoulders as he said it.  

Ryan screwed his eyes shut and clamped his mouth closed, determined not to show weakness, but the pain was blinding and he let out a muffled groan.  

Jack returned just as Geoff let up. “Couldn’t find anything, if he has it, it must be on him.”
“If it even exists,” Geoff reminded him bitterly, “we don’t know what went down after we left, we can’t go assuming anything.”

Jack’s radio crackled and Michael’s voice came through. “Gavin picked up a lead from a scanner, Jeremy’s got some heat on him for picking up a Simeon vehicle. Looks like he’s heading back to Los Santos, we’re gonna trace him as far as we can.”

“Good job Michael, keep us updated,” Jack radioed back.

Geoff looked back to Ryan. “Are you sure there’s nothing else you want to tell us?” He said very slowly and deliberately.

Ryan put on his best shit-eating grin, smiling through clenched teeth; he knew it’d make little difference at this stage. “Sure am.”

Geoff sighed heavily.

“Look, Geoff, you and I both know you’re not going to torture me for information. That’s my thing. Hell, even if I did have any information you know you’d never be able to make me talk.”

Geoff motioned to Jack and a large, shiny roll of duct tape flew across the room, where he easily caught it. “Oh, I know. I don’t need you to talk just yet.”

“Then what the fuck-”

“Shut your mouth Ryan.” Jack’s deep voice behind him startled Ryan and suddenly the baseball bat was against his throat; Jack forcing his head up and back, jaw clenched.

“I’m gonna tell you something, but I don’t want any interruptions. Okay? I just want you to process this.” Geoff ripped off a long piece of duct tape and raised an eyebrow at Ryan as he taped his mouth shut, with no protest thanks to Jack’s bat firmly against his jaw.

With Ryan now effectively gagged, Jack let up a little and Geoff continued. “When Caleb was patching me up, I made a few calls to some of our contacts; see if anyone knew anything about how the cops got tipped off about the heist. Because they were definitely tipped off. I eventually got word from Kovic that Jeremy used to run with them; doubled for Kovic on dangerous jobs sometimes... ‘pose he kinda looks like him if you don’t have any height reference... Anyway, he was supposed to be a plant in our crew, so that Funhaus could keep an eye on us. Supposedly he left them when he got promoted from B-team to full time Fake AH Crew.”

Ryan’s mind raced, so Jeremy had been with another crew, that didn’t mean he was still with them or that he’d defected at any point. He raised an eyebrow as if to say, “so what?” but Geoff was way ahead of him.

“I know what you’re thinking, and I agree; no that doesn’t make Jeremy a traitor and Funhaus are technically allies... for now. But you have to admit, we don’t know him as well as we thought we did.” Geoff paused, giving him time to process the new information; Jack’s bat was still at Ryan’s throat and he was acutely aware of that fact. Ryan could see Geoff studying his reactions and instinctively he became overly cautious to hide any kind of response. He was so used to the ‘give ‘em nothing’ tactic he’d so often been on the receiving end of that he didn’t even pause to consider it might be more incriminating to him now. He nodded once, curtly.

Geoff’s eyes traced his face, scrutinizing in his gaze. He shook his head, knowing Ryan was shutting him out. “Dammit Ryan.” He turned around and limped off, leaving Ryan gagged and bound in the
corner. “Leave him to mull it over for a while.”

Jack shrugged, releasing his headlock on Ryan, who immediately cracked his neck in response. Instinctive intimidation tactics.

“Ryan,” Jack said softly, despite not moments ago threatening him, “You’re still really hurt. You need to calm down. If there’s anything you can tell us, just give it some thought. Please.” The look on his face was genuine concern, but for some reason it made Ryan uncomfortable.

Geoff called out from the annex. “C’mon Jack, we have some more calls to make.”
Ryan wasn’t sure how long he’d been left there, a few hours, maybe. His body was cold and stiff and sore, and it felt like his brain was being gently squeezed every now and then; probably a combination of the blunt force trauma and caffeine deprivation, he thought. The sun had faded away to grey and the humidity in the poorly-sealed warehouse had gone up. It wasn’t long before raindrops started to fall heavily on the tin roof above and the smell of rain on the dry earth outside began to permeate the room.

*Petrichor,* Ryan thought to himself, beginning only now to properly calm down.

While the others despised the rain, Ryan actually enjoyed it.

*It always rains on day two.*

As much as Ryan considered himself a logical man, he still hadn’t changed his mind about Jeremy. There wasn’t enough evidence to convince him that his instinct was wrong. Jeremy should have told Geoff about Funhaus sooner, there was no doubting that; but even Ryan would have been nervous to admit that to Geoff had he been in the same position. He had to get out and find Jeremy, let him know what Geoff knew before the crew tracked him down.

Footsteps behind him made him swivel around to get a better look. *Ow.* That was a mistake. His shoulder stung again. The dried blood congealed into the gauze dressing was pulling off like a scab and he could feel the warmth of fresh blood rising to the surface of the wound. He cringed and dropped his chin to his chest.

“How you goin’, Rye Bread?” Geoff asked, sounding far more mellow. “Ready to have another chat?”

Ryan looked up with a face that tried to say, “*do I have a choice?*” but the ruined remains of his stubborn face paint made it look vaguely aggressive and Geoff hesitated a moment before removing the duct tape from his mouth, pulling irritatingly at his coarse stubble.

Ryan moved his jaw a few times and licked his lips, tasting the bitter adhesive residue left over. “Wouldn’t happen to have a diet coke on you, would you?”

Geoff laughed and Jack scoffed, both grinning at him. “Sadly, no, but you can have some water,” Geoff paused, “After our chat.”

Ryan drew a deep breath. “He’s a good kid Geoff.”

“Oh, come on!” Geoff was frustrated again, but this time it was Jack to defuse the situation.

“Look, we know he’s done right by us in the past. If what Kovic’s saying about him is true, all he’s done is not tell us that he was running with them. That’s forgivable.” He sounded so certain, so reassuring, in the way only Jack could. “We don’t know what he’s up to now, but we need to keep our guard up, just in case.”

Ryan nodded. Geoff seemed placated for now.

They’d clearly been trying to determine Ryan’s potential traitor status, asking around if anyone had heard rumours of him working with outsiders, tracking down his contacts outside of the FAHC. He didn’t have all that many contacts, but the ones he did, he trusted, and they were the networkers, so
he rarely had to talk to more than one person for information. It worked well for him to keep the Vagabond as mysterious as he was known to be. So obviously, they’d found nothing on him, but he was still under close guard.

“Can I please get up? My ass went to sleep hours ago and I think I’m bleeding out again.” Ryan motioned to the growing patch of red on the gauze on his shoulder.

“Geoff, we really need to get that stitched,” Jack said quietly.

Geoff rubbed his hands together pensively. “Jack, uh, do you still have that Taser?”

Ryan practically whimpered. “Jesus, Geoff, is that really necessary?”

“I don’t know, but I’d rather have it and not use it than trust you and not have it. It’s better than getting shot in the leg though.” Geoff shot him a glare.

Exasperated, Ryan just shook his head. “Fine, just let me up. I’m not going to try anything. You have my word.”

Geoff scowled at that.

“For whatever it’s worth anyway,” Ryan mumbled.

* * *

Jack and Geoff had freed him and allowed him time to stretch; recovering some sensation and movement in his limbs and drink water. He hadn’t realised how badly dehydrated he was; it had definitely been a contributing factor to his headaches, which slowly began to subside a little.

Under Jack’s instruction, he had changed the gauze dressing on his shoulder, which was a nasty mess of drying blood and yellowish liquid and smelled rancid. It had started bleeding again as the superficial scabs had been removed with the dressing, so Ryan had been instructed to keep pressure on it until they could meet with Lindsay to stitch it. For that to happen though, they had to move to her.

It was still raining as they made their way to Geoff’s car; Jack drove while Geoff kept the Taser on Ryan at all times in the back seat. Ryan was still shirtless, but they had given him back his jacket, which he had placed over his shoulders. They had, however, taken his shoes in a frankly kind of pathetic attempt to deter him from running off at either end of the journey.

The ride was awkward to say the least. Geoff began by barely threatening Ryan with the Taser if he tried anything, while Ryan tried to convince Geoff that the idea was ridiculous: “We’re literally going somewhere so I can get medical attention! Why would I try something now?”

Geoff’s paranoia was starting to get the better of him and Ryan wasn’t dealing with it well. He clammed up instead, remaining silent for the rest of the ride, watching the bright neon lights of the seedier parts of Los Santos reflect on the heavily-tinted windows of Geoff’s car in stark contrast to the gloomy conditions outside. The sun was due to be setting, but through the thick cloud cover and pouring rain it was nearly impossible to tell. Ryan pressed his head to the cool glass of the window and shut his eyes, but a bump in the road made him pull back, revealing a smudge of grey paint on the window. His reflection in the glass stared back at him; eyes wild, bloodshot whites surrounding clear blue iris, his face a mess of running, smudged paint, purple and green bruises just beginning to show on his left cheek. His heart skipped a beat when Gavin’s voice came over the radio.
“Geoff! We think we found where Jeremy’s going. We’re on our way downtown, headed to the Vanilla Unicorn; we got a tip from Kdin that he’d been going there lately to meet a contact. We’re still a way off and have to do some recon, but we can meet you back at the safe house on Beytree after.”

“Good job Gavin,” Geoff yelled through to the radio in the front seat. “Be careful, do whatever it takes to bring him in.”

Ryan’s blood ran cold. They’d all heard that before. It was basically Geoff’s way of saying _kill him if you have to_. He swallowed hard. He had to do something.

The car slowed, only briefly, but it was just enough time for Ryan to react, spinning in his seat to plant his feet against Geoff’s chest and kick out hard, throwing him off-balance and knocking the Taser out of his grasp. In the same movement, Ryan reached back and threw the door open, tucking and rolling out of the car so fluidly it almost looked rehearsed. It was a fluke of course; he’d never be able to pull that off again.

Ryan’s bare feet hit the wet pavement and he ran like his life depended on it; which, he supposed, it might. The rain fell heavily all around him, cold and clarifying. He saw the shadows from headlights swing around in front of him and knew Jack was trying to give chase. He turned sharply and ran down a narrow alley, squeezing between two dumpsters, tripping over his bare feet as they stumbled over loose gravel, broken glass and slick spots of grease or puke in the alley. Leaving traces of blood in his wake, he ran until he felt like his lungs were about to burst and his heart pounded in his ears. He stumbled, caught himself and then finally slowed, reaching up to feel the gash on his shoulder pulsing steadily beneath his fingers. Blood was soaking through the fresh gauze dressing, running in small rivulets down his skin as it mixed with the rain. He struggled to catch his breath, the pounding rain making it feel like he was drowning, but he forced himself on. He had to get to Jeremy before the others.

* * *

“Hey, Gavin?”

“Yeah, Geoff?”

“He took the bait. You and Michael got incoming.”

“Top, Geoff. Good plan.”
Ambush

Ryan had stopped to gather his bearings in an alcove. He was downtown already; they hadn’t been that far away when Gavin radioed in. They’d been headed for Lindsay’s place in East Los Santos, cutting through Vespucci Blvd. The Vanilla Unicorn strip club was only a few blocks away. Surely not another fluke? Something felt wrong about this whole scenario, but Ryan couldn’t put his finger on it.

He took advantage of the rain to finally scrub the paint from his face and dried blood from his body. His jacket was still in the car, or somewhere on the road from when he tumbled out, his feet were still bare and bleeding, but he managed to pick out the shards of glass and gravel. His jeans were heavy with water and clung to his legs as he moved.

*Just stop and think.*

Something wasn’t right. A lot of things weren’t right, but something about this was fishy. They’d never have given a location over the radio unless they knew it was secure. Unless they knew something he didn’t. It was possible; he’d been unconscious for some time and then left alone for several hours. Enough time to get in touch with contacts and sort out security issues.

Enough time to find Jeremy.

*Enough time to set up an ambush.*

The idea came from somewhere deep in his brain, bubbling to the surface and fixing itself in the centre of his thoughts. Surely not. Surely, they wouldn’t go so far. Still, he couldn’t shake the thought. He had to proceed carefully. He had to be prepared.

It didn’t take him long to find what he was looking for; makeshift weapons were a Los Santos specialty. He pulled the 3-foot length of rebar from a dumpster outside a parking lot where construction was going on. It was light enough to wield one-handed, but solid enough to do some serious damage if needed. He found some rags, stiff with grease in the same dumpster and used the rebar to shatter a nearby window. He carefully picked a long shard of glass out of the debris and wrapped the rags around the end to make a crude shank. As he tucked it into his belt he sincerely hoped he wouldn’t have to use it.

He started towards the Vanilla Unicorn, but took the back route, keeping quiet and well-hidden in the shadows, the rain helping to mask his presence. It was still too early for the night life to have kicked into gear and the whole area was largely deserted. There was a ladder to the roof embedded to the side of the building opposite the entrance to the club; it was low, only single story, but would provide a good vantage point for someone planning an ambush. He took a quick look around to make sure nobody else was in the alley before awkwardly, but silently climbing the ladder. He poked his head above the ledge of the roof and spotted a body hunched over a sniper rifle, peering through the scope pointed at the entrance to the Vanilla Unicorn and for a split second, he thought of Ray.

Ryan could feel his blood beginning to boil. He didn’t want to be right, but there was Gavin, waiting, probably covering Michael who would be somewhere down there waiting for him to make his move. Ryan’s fist clenched around the rebar.

He struggled to remain in control of himself.

*It’s Gavin, it’s Michael and Gavin, they’re your crew, you don’t want to hurt them.*
He repeated the thought in his head, trying desperately to convince himself it was true. He took a deep breath and steeled himself.

With the rain and his bare feet, it was easy to go unnoticed as he snuck up behind Gavin. Gavin seemed fidgety, like he had been there for some time, his messy blonde hair plastered to his head, his usual nice grey shirt soaked though and transparent where it stuck to his skin. As Ryan approached, he could hear he was quietly talking to Michael through his earpiece and grinning like an idiot.

“...you get a million dollars, but for the rest of your life, you have to wear a fully open parachute around wherever you go.” Gavin all but stifled a nasal giggle.

Ryan caught him off guard, swinging the rebar down hard into his ribs with a sickening crack. Gavin let out a pained grunt and Ryan swung for the rifle, knocking it out of his hands. Gavin rolled over, still in pain and shock.

“Michael!” Gavin yelled into the comms. “Ryan’s up here!”

Ryan swung the rebar again, hitting Gavin’s left thigh and making him cry out again. Gavin raised his arms defensively as Ryan swung at him again, connecting with his forearm and he could feel the bone in his wrist fracture on impact. Gavin was much smaller than Ryan, so even with his bad arm, Ryan had no trouble wrestling him into a headlock, pressing his body against Gavin’s and turning his back to the ledge as he could hear Michael scramble up the ladder. Michael jumped to his feet at the top of the ladder and levelled his pistol at Ryan, who now effectively had a human shield. With his free hand, Ryan patted Gavin down, searching for his sidearm, but came up empty. Gavin had forgotten his pistol. Again. Not that it would do him any good at this stage, but it meant Ryan was still unarmed, and unable to wield the sniper rifle, he was again forced to improvise.

With his bad left hand, Ryan pulled the makeshift shank from his belt and held it to Gavin’s neck, right below his ear, pressing against his carotid artery.

Michael held fast. “Ryan! Don’t you fucking dare!” He looked to Gavin. “Gavin, you ok?”

Gavin wheezed in response, but managed to squeak out: “I’m ok, Michael.”

Ryan radiated danger. His eyes had grown dark and cold.

“Michael, I don’t have to hurt him.”

“Then don’t!” Despite the force of his words, Michael’s eyes flashed fear, but it was all for Gavin. If Michael was in Gavin’s position, he would have shown no weakness and Ryan knew it. But that’s what he’d counted on.

“Well, that’s gonna depend on you,” Ryan said evenly. “Where’s Jeremy?”

Gavin squirmed in his grasp before speaking up, sounding far too innocent and hurt. “I can’t believe you’re really a traitor, Ryan.”

“God damn it, I’m not a traitor!”

“You’ve got Gavin in a fucking headlock, you’re threatening to kill him, how are you not a traitor?!” Michael was furious, but Ryan held his ground.

“I’ve been tied to a chair for the last god-knows-how-many hours! You set me up to ambush me – it’s fucking entrapment by the way – I’ve been shot at, I still have no fucking clue what’s going on and I’m the traitor?” Ryan was on edge now, Gavin squirmed more anxiously, and Ryan tightened
his grip on him, making him give out a whimper.

“Fuck,” Michael mumbled.

“Care to explain what the fuck’s going on Michael?”

Michael lowered his gun. The rain was starting to let up and it was just a drizzle now.

“Geoff sent us to look for Jeremy,” Michael began, “He told us about his connections with Kovic and Funhaus. We were able to track him when he picked up a Simeon vehicle; he started heading back into Los Santos.”

“That much I know,” Ryan interrupted.

Michael continued, “We found out he had a safe house near here that he used to use when he was in contact with them that he still visited; Matt confirmed it for us.”

Ryan was confused. “Wait, so Matt knew about Funhaus? He used to run with them too?”

“Yeah, but we knew that. He told us straight away, him and Lil J came as a package deal; Geoff hired them for the B-team together. Lil J just kept his secret longer. Makes him a bit more suspicious, right?”

Ryan was annoyed he hadn’t been privy to this information sooner, but ignored his question. “So you caught up with him?”

“Yeah, we caught him trying to contact someone, he still hasn’t said who, but he was having trouble getting onto them. Seemed pretty worried about them too.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

“Anyways, we took him back to the safe house on Beytree. He’s still there and Geoff and Jack are on their way there now.”

“So why did you need to set me up? You already had Jeremy.”

Michael looked down and Gavin squirmed for breath, rasping out quietly, “It was Geoff’s idea.”

Michael nodded. “To be honest, I thought it was a pretty shitty thing to do,” he said with a grimace. “He wanted to see if you would run.”

_The innocent never run_, Geoff used to always say. _Fuck_. Ryan had taken the bait, hook, line and sinker.

“And that’s why you dropped the name over the radio? So I would find my way here, or back to the safe house on Beytree?”

Michael nodded again. “Yeah, we were gonna be ready for you one way or another. Guess we didn’t think it’d be like this though.” He smirked and Ryan returned it, letting up on Gavin a little. His left arm was starting to strain.

“Alright, I’m going to say it now. I’m _not_ a traitor. And I don’t think Jeremy is either.”

Michael sneered. “Ryan, man, come on! Maybe _you’re_ not, but Lil J? He shot Geoff. He ran.”

“He was scared! He was being set up, just like I am now…” Something clicked in Ryan’s head,
“Wait, does he know that Geoff knows about him and Kovic?”

Michael shook his head, “Nope. Geoff wants him to admit it. Needs to hear it come from him. Needs to know who he’s loyal to.”

Ryan scowled.

Michael paused. “Actually, before you let him go, Geoff wanted you to get it out of him. You’re the best at that stuff.” He shrugged. “Guess that’s not happening now.”

“Huh, why?” Gavin asked, somewhat oddly.

“Why the fuck do you think, Gavin?” Ryan began, before Gavin suddenly pushed backwards hard, sending Ryan stumbling towards the ledge of the building, dropping the glass shard in the process.

He quickly regained his balance, and Michael was back on him with the pistol.

Ryan heard a noise below him and suddenly realised that Gavin hadn’t been talking to him, but through his comms. He didn’t have time to turn around before he felt the impact in his bare flesh and his body seized up as he fell to his knees.

Gavin scrambled away and Michael rushed to his side. “Gavin! For once, I’m actually glad you forgot your gun.” A relieved smile washed over Michael’s face.

All Ryan could feel was pain. Every muscle tensed, and his mind raced as he realised he was being Tased. He couldn’t do anything but tightly curl his toes and even then, he couldn’t tell if that was involuntary. He was vaguely aware of a noise that sounded like it was coming from him, but he had no control over it. It felt like someone had put his chest in a vice. The electricity stopped just as suddenly as it started but Ryan was only just able to gasp for breath before it began again.

Once Michael was satisfied that Gavin was ok, he walked up to Ryan and kicked away his weapons, keeping his pistol trained on him. “Jesus, Jack, stop! I got it!”

From the ground below, Jack flicked the safety on, cutting the electricity.

“Sucks, doesn’t it?” Michael asked Ryan, a cheeky grin growing on his face.

“Sure does,” replied Ryan in a wheeze.

“Yo, Michael,” Jack called from below. “Leave the barbs in. Just in case.”

“Seriously? Aw man, sorry Rye Bread.” Michael sounded just as disappointed as Ryan felt. He knew what it felt like to be Tased.

Everyone awkwardly got down from the roof, first Ryan at gunpoint then Michael, assisting Gavin. Jack kept the Taser in hand and a pistol aimed at Ryan the whole time.

Geoff was waiting for them at the car. “I was right about you being too goddamned dangerous to leave loose.”

“You set me up,” Ryan said darkly.

Geoff returned his glare. “The innocent never run, Ryan.”

_They do when they’re being chased._
The drive to the safe house was even more uncomfortable than before. Jack drove with the injured Gavin in the passenger seat and Ryan was sandwiched between Geoff and Michael in the back. Geoff had been firm about keeping the Taser barbs in, despite Michael protesting on Ryan’s behalf. Ryan had just shrugged it off; he knew there would be no convincing Geoff, who now held the Taser. For a long time, no one said anything.

Just as they started to leave the city, Ryan finally decided he had gained enough control over himself to speak up. “You know you’re paranoid, right Geoff?” He asked in the calmest demeanour he could muster.

Geoff scoffed, but replied equally calmly, “I’m just looking out for my crew.”

“I’m part of your crew!” Ryan insisted, “So is Jeremy!”

Well, there goes the calm.

“Right now, Ryan, you and Jeremy are the part of my crew I can’t trust.” Geoff spat the words. “I really hope I’m wrong –”

“You are.”

“– but, I have to think about the good of the rest of us, too.” Geoff’s voice cracked at the word ‘too’.

“Do you think Jeremy is going to be able to just turn around and trust us after something like this if it turns out he’s innocent?” Ryan’s tone was becoming progressively darker.

Geoff, on the other hand, was growing more hysterical. “He should at least understand. You should too.”

“I never thought I’d say it, but I’m starting to doubt you, Geoff.” Ryan’s deep voice resounded as everyone fell silent.

The tension in the car was palpable. So thick you could cut it with a knife. The only sounds were of tyres on gravel and unsteady breathing as the words replayed in everyone’s mind.

Ryan had already gauged the situation; as far as he could tell, Michael was on board with the idea that he wasn’t a traitor, but he was probably still undecided about Jeremy. Gavin always sided with Michael, although he’d need more convincing because he was still wary of Ryan, and rightly so; he had just threatened to kill him. Jack was still firmly neutral, happy to do Geoff’s bidding, but still collecting evidence to form his own opinions. Ryan hoped that he’d given everyone something to think about and judging by the mood in the car, it had worked. Of course, this sent Geoff into a panic.

Geoff always had doubts about his leadership abilities when the crew first formed. Sure, he’d been the one to get everyone together, he hand-picked the best of the best to work for him. He largely relied on them to work together and was just plain lucky they all got on as well as they did. For years it had just been effortless, there had been bumps, like when Ryan first joined the Fakes and when Ray left. Jeremy had been the most recent and had seemed to blend in more smoothly than Ryan. But now he knew there was a reason for that and he knew that Jeremy would have to admit it if he was to keep his spot in the Fake AH Crew and prove his loyalty to them.
But here was Ryan, rocking the boat as usual, and this time Geoff was starting to worry it might capsize.

“You know what, Ryan? I think you should be in the room with Jeremy. If you’re not a traitor, like you say you’re not, he’ll feel guilty, right? He’ll want to tell the truth and not drag you into anything. But if you’re both traitors, you’re in it together.”

A look of surprise and concern crossed Jack’s face as he glanced back at Ryan in the rear-view mirror, Ryan made eye contact and he quickly looked back to the road.

“That’s messed up, Geoff!” Michael exclaimed without hesitation.

“That sounds like something Ryan would say,” Gavin added with an edge of darkness to his voice, but a slight cringe at the way it came out so easily.

Geoff thought for a moment. “Well, that’s fitting then.”

Ryan considered it carefully. It would give him a chance to see what state Jeremy was in, judge for himself whether he was likely to be guilty of anything and also let him know that Geoff already knew about Funhaus, which should save the confession part. After a long pause he said tersely, “That’s fine with me.”

Geoff added bitterly, “It wouldn’t matter if it wasn’t.”

The rest of the drive was dead silent after that.

* * *

They pulled up to the door of the secluded safe house and Gavin and Jack went in first to give Jack time to tend Gavin’s injuries before dealing with Ryan and Jeremy. Ryan was left sitting in the car in uncomfortable silence, with Geoff to his right and Michael to his left.

Again, Ryan was the first to break the silence. “Well. This isn’t awkward at all.”

Michael and Geoff both turned to look at him. Both with a look that said, I can’t believe you just made that joke, however where Geoff’s expression was infuriated, Michael looked impressed.

Ryan went on. “I guess the offer of stitches and painkillers is off the table too now?” He was fully expecting to be Tased by Geoff at any moment, but to his surprise it didn’t come.

“Why be a smartass for, Ryan?” Geoff asked, his eyebrows knitted together, forehead furrowed. “Where does it get you? What do you get out of it?”

Ryan was really struggling with self-control, but he didn’t want to admit that his smart-mouthing was literally the only thing stopping him from head-butting Geoff and beating him senseless. Even the thought of being Tased again didn’t deter him.

“I dunno Geoff, what do you get out of torturing me?” He cocked his head sideways. “Seems like nothing, so far.”

Geoff sighed audibly. Ryan was starting to wear him down.

“Shut up, Ryan,” Michael snapped, more as a warning to Ryan than in defence of Geoff.
Geoff was starting to doubt his plan, his crew, himself… everything was just going to shit.

No, he thought, this is exactly what Ryan does.

He’d seen it over and over. Ryan was a manipulator. Sometimes it worked in his favour, but many times he would get himself into trouble, only to promptly make it worse. He needed to feel like he was in control, even if it was only in his head, whatever the cost to himself.

He looked up at Ryan, into his piercing pale blue eyes, although he still tried to mask it, without the face paint his expression was clearer; he was in pain.

This is his coping mechanism, I've just gotta give him space.

For all his self-doubt, sometimes Geoff was a better leader than he realized.

“Fuck it, I need a drink.” He slapped the Taser into Michael’s hand and left, sauntering up to the house. If Ryan was going to try anything, Michael was the best person to deal with it. If he didn’t try anything, well, that spoke volumes as well.

Michael was more shocked than Ryan at Geoff’s reaction. “Well, shit. I wasn’t expecting that.”

Ryan just looked dumbstruck.

Michael looked down at the Taser in his hand with a frown, “I’m not gonna use this.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“I mean, you did hurt Gavin and I’m still pissed about that,” Michael said slowly and deliberately, letting the words sink in. “But I get it. I’d probably have done the same in your position… If I’d realized I was being set up that is.”

Ryan looked down apologetically.

“But still,” Michael continued, “getting Tased sucks dick. Want me to get those out?” He gestured to the Taser probes still embedded in Ryan’s back.

Ryan grinned and half-shrugged. “If it’s not too much trouble.”

Michael pinched the exposed part of one probe and put his other hand flat around the base of it on Ryan’s back. Ryan’s pale skin was already heavily marked with scars of all shapes and sizes, Michael’s gaze paused on a deeply scarred wound on his right shoulder, near the base of his neck and he quickly looked away. He’d taken many hits for the team.

“This part sucks too, but it’s nowhere near as bad as getting Tased,” he said as he wrenched the barb out of Ryan’s skin. He pressed his thumb over the small hole it left behind to stem the bleeding for a few seconds, before repeating for the other probe.

Ryan winced a little at the sight of the barbs, wicked little hooks extending from the probes with small fragments of flesh still clinging to them.

“Well, gotta say it feels like nothing compared to being shot.” He glanced down to his shoulder, the bandage still damp and bloody, but the sting had subsided. His feet brushed something smooth and he looked down.

“Hey, my jacket’s still here,” he said with a grin, picking it up and brushing it off. “Thought I’d lost it on the road.”
Things were now way too upbeat for what they’d just been through, it was making Michael uneasy. “So, this is the part where you bonk me on the head and make a break for it, right?” He nervously joked, not really sure if he was actually joking.

Ryan chuckled and it sounded like, well, Ryan and it instantly reassured Michael. “You really think I’m a traitor, huh?”

“Nah, I just assumed you’d want to get the hell away from Geoff while he’s in freak-out mode.”

Ryan shook his head; suddenly serious again. “I just don’t want to see anything happen to Jeremy.”

Ryan had been thinking about it on the drive, but he finally came to the ugly realization that had he not tried to help Jeremy in the first place, he’d be in a much better position to help him out now. It must have shown on his face because Michael attempted to reassure him.

“Ry, I…” He suddenly wasn’t sure what to say. “I’m sure Lil J’s gonna be ok…”

* * *

Jack had seen to Gavin’s wounds, fitting a simple splint for his left wrist and giving him painkillers for his cracked ribs. Luckily Ryan must have held back quite a bit, otherwise the damage could have been far more extensive. He’d left Gavin resting, waiting for the painkillers to kick in, before going back out to tell the others to bring in Ryan, but the clink of glass from the kitchen warranted investigation. He was surprised to see Geoff alone in the dark of the kitchen.

“Geoff? Are you ok? Where are Ryan and Michael?”

Geoff looked full of doubt and guilt. He’d poured himself a very large glass of whisky and was taking long sips. He had the heavy curtains pulled back just slightly, enough to see the two figures in the car outside. Geoff had seen Michael remove the Taser probes; watched anxiously to see if he’d fucked up, if Ryan was going to do a number on Michael like he had on Gavin.

Jack followed his gaze. “You left them alone out there?” He asked incredulously.

Geoff rubbed his face and groaned with frustration, mainly at himself. “I think Ryan’s telling the truth. I don’t think he’s involved in the same stuff Lil J’s been caught up in. I think. I don’t know.” He groaned again.

“What makes you say that?” Jack responded with a raised eyebrow.

“You think a traitor is going to be loyal to another traitor?” Geoff took another deep swig from his glass, emptying it. “Goddammit Ryan,” he breathed to himself, shaking his head. “This was a mistake, right?”

Jack knew Geoff was starting to crumble under the pressure and wondered if Ryan had gotten into his head. Ryan had a penchant for getting under people’s skin and he wondered if there was something else going on that he wasn’t aware of.

“No, we can make this work,” Jack said with a determination like he had something to prove.

Geoff still seemed miles away. “I will say something about Jeremy though. He fucking takes it; he takes it like a champ. I dunno if we’re gonna get anything out of him.” He was already pouring another large drink.
Jack heard a car door close and could see Michael and Ryan making their way to the house.

“I’ve got an idea. Let me handle it.”
Ryan was allowed to use the bathroom and clean himself up under the silent, watchful eye of Geoff. Meanwhile, well out of earshot, Jack explained his plan to Michael.

Geoff agreed to let Ryan see Jeremy on the condition that Michael and Jack accompanied him.

Jack led Ryan, followed by Michael, down to the basement where Michael and Gavin had restrained Jeremy earlier. As they made their way down the rickety wooden stairs in the darkness, Jack discreetly slipped on a set of brass knuckles, keeping them out of view of Ryan.

From the bottom of the stairs, they could see Jeremy. He had bruises covering his face and probably more on his body, judging by the way he was holding himself. He’d been handcuffed to a metal pipe that stuck out of the far wall and ran parallel to the floor before re-entering the adjacent wall, maybe four and a half feet above the ground. It had put him in the awkward position of not being able to sit down without causing injury to his shoulders, so he was forced to stand or squat with his arms above his head. Ryan knew Michael and Gavin would have done that deliberately to prevent him from being able to sleep. Ryan had taught them that himself.

When Jeremy spotted Ryan his eyes lit up. “Ryan!”

Ryan made a move towards Jeremy, when suddenly Jack spun around, the brass knuckles adorning left fist connecting with Ryan’s right cheekbone and he went down. Jack followed him, leaning his knees on Ryan’s chest and pinning him to the ground. Ryan saw stars, struggled for breath with Jack’s weight on top of him and faded out, not quite unconscious. His eyes drooped closed and he heard Jeremy calling his name more frantically. He was aware of being gagged again; he could feel tape being smoothed over his mouth, crunching against his coarse ginger stubble. Jack grabbed his arms and hauled him roughly across the bare concrete ground and everything felt like fresh pain again. The bitter metallic taste of blood reached his tongue.

Michael looked worried, but made no move to stop Jack, instead pulling a pair of handcuffs from his pocket and helping to position Ryan on a chair and secure his wrists behind him to the sturdy wooden support post in the centre of the room.

Ryan’s ears were still ringing when he was finally able to open his eyes and he had to blink several times in the fluorescent light to get them to focus properly. Jeremy was struggling against the wall, still calling his name.

“Jeremy, calm down,” Jack soothed. “He’s ok, see? He’s tough, he’s fine.”

He was over-emphasising the point, Ryan thought, before he realised why.

Jack continued evenly, “But he’s here because of you.”

_They were using his own tactics._

Jeremy looked confused. “He hasn’t done anything though.”

“Lil J, he let you go against Geoff’s orders, he stuck his neck out for you,” Michael said and Jeremy started to go red. “And then he hurt Gavin trying to get to you.”

Ryan could hear actual anger in Michael’s voice at the mention of Gavin and knew he hadn’t fully forgiven him.
“I didn’t mean for any of this to happen! I’m sorry, I don’t want anyone else to get hurt.”

“Well, you’d better start talking then.” Jack cracked his knuckles and glanced at Ryan, hoping the threat alone was enough to make Jeremy cooperate, while mentally psyching himself up to go through with it if it didn’t. Ryan was tough, and he could be a real jerk sometimes, so maybe, just maybe, he could justify it.

“Who else do you work for, Jeremy?” Michael asked.

“No one! Just Geoff!”

Jack punched Ryan in the stomach, hard enough to make him react, but still holding back.

Ryan wheezed and it had the desired effect.

“I swear Jack, I only work for the crew!”

“You sure, Lil J? There’s no one else you’re in contact with?” Michael probed. “Who were you trying to contact when we found you? There must be someone else…”

Jeremy winced. “I can’t tell you.”

Jack took a deep breath and twisted his right hand into Ryan’s hair, yanking his head back.

“Really?”

Ryan shut his eyes and pulled back, trying to turn away but the fist in his hair prevented him from moving. He knew there was nothing he could do to avoid the incoming blow.

Jeremy screwed his eyes shut and tried to block it out, but Michael threw a quick jab into his stomach, making him open his eyes and gasp. It was just in time to catch Jack land a solid, sickening punch across Ryan’s face.

The impact rang out along Ryan’s cheekbone and he could feel it reverberate through his skull. The cold metal had glanced off his cheek and split it open; his own body felt far too soft, too fragile in contrast. He imagined looked worse than it felt, but only just.

Jack and Michael both struggled to hide their disgust at themselves as they watched Jeremy carefully for any reaction.

He looked shattered and terrified.

“It’s Ryan! Please, guys! He’s been part of the crew for years; how can you do this to him?”

Michael had to turn away. He couldn’t keep it up; he pretended to examine something on the other side of the room as he regained his composure.

Jack on the other hand, took the opportunity to turn it around. “It can stop if you just tell us who you’re working with and who your contacts are.”

“I… I can’t.” He looked at Ryan, his bright blue eyes a stark contrast to his bloody, bruised face, pleading for him to tell them.

Jack launched a hard blow to Ryan’s solar plexus and he wasn’t expecting it. It sent him into convulsions. He tried to cough but got a mouth full of blood instead and with no way to spit to out, he spluttered as some of it sprayed out his nose and ran down his face. He struggled to breathe through the spasms in his chest and the blood, thick and sticky in his throat and nose.
“You get one more chance, Jeremy.” Jack grabbed hold of Ryan’s hair again, yanking his head back painfully, tears squeezing out the corners of his eyes.

The tape gag had started to slip from the force of Ryan’s coughing and having lost some of its stick on Ryan’s coarse facial hair and blood, he was able to discreetly begin to work it off.

“Stop! Stop it! Please!” Jeremy begged, finally admitting defeat and hanging his head. “Alright, yeah, I am a traitor, or at least I was a traitor. I was working with Funhaus but I’m not anymore. I left them to stay here. I understand if you don’t trust me. If you have to put me down... I get it.”

“Fuck that!” Ryan interrupted, finally spitting the tape off with a mouthful of blood, still spluttering. “And by the way, Fuck You, Jack and Fuck You, Michael.” His voice was tinged with darkness, but it was offset by urgency as he continued. “Jeremy, who was that guy in the alley?”

“What?” Jeremy looked confused. “I don’t know…”

“Drop the act, I already told Geoff and Jack about it. They know about Kovic and Funhaus and Matt.”

“Then why...?”

“Some pledge of loyalty bullshit, you can take it up with Geoff later...” Ryan’s eyes narrowed. “But the guy in the alley, you took his wallet from my pocket before you left. Who was he?”

“I thought he was sent from Funhaus. There was nothing in his wallet except a card,” Jeremy said carefully, shaking his head. “I couldn’t get an address or affiliation from it. Just said Shadow… Shadles?” He momentarily struggled to attempt to pronounce it before adding, “well, it was spelled like ‘Shadow’ with ‘L-Z’ after it. Shadowlz.”

Michael’s eyes grew wide, his mouth hung open with recognition; Jack and Jeremy looked confused.

“What the hell...?” Jack started before Michael interrupted.

“Shadowlz? Mother fucker!” Michael looked to Ryan, whose expression mirrored his own. “Jesus Christ, we need to tell Geoff.”

“Who the fuck is Shadowlz?” Jack asked in earnest.

“The bastard who framed me,” Ryan said darkly, spitting blood. The memories came flooding back instantly, and he suddenly knew why he had felt so uncomfortable being interrogated by Geoff before. It wasn’t the first time he’d been falsely accused. He’d buried the memory deep, as had the rest of the crew; none of them had been proud of that day.

Michael’s voice snapped Ryan back to reality.

“We never told anyone about that.”

Jeremy still looked confused. “What? Wait, you know this guy?”

“Michael, go. Tell Geoff,” Ryan instructed, “I’ll fill them in.”

Michael looked to Ryan, concern washing over his face. “Are you sure?”

Ryan inhaled sharply and nodded, steeling himself against the renewed pain of memory. Already he could feel his heart rate increase, his body going stiff as an instinctive fight-or-flight response took hold.
Funny it hadn’t kicked in until now.

But Jeremy and Jack needed an explanation and he knew he had to fight through it.

It was the first time he’d ever spoken about it aloud, but it was almost as if he was back there as he relayed what happened to Jeremy and Jack.

It was Ryan’s first time in the field with the Fake AH Crew; he was temporarily replacing Jack on what was meant to be a training exercise...

They were in a deserted compound and the sun beat down hard as they trekked through the empty passageways, weighed down by explosives for testing and armed with heavy weapons. Michael scouted ahead with Gavin, and Ray had ascended a building nearby to scope out the area and get in some practice long-distance shots. Ryan tracked behind Geoff, investigating crates and crevices as they went.

Geoff hadn’t seen where the bullet had come from, but he felt the sting in his arm and spun around to find himself face-to-face with Ryan.

Geoff, now temporarily disarmed, let out a cry and fled, frantically shouting, “Ryan shot me!”

Ryan held up both hands, still gripping his assault rifle. “Whoa, Geoff, it wasn’t me!”

Ray’s oddly serene voice came over the comms. “Alright, I guess it’s Ryan.”

Ryan had no idea where he was, but Ray’s skill with a sniper rifle meant he could already be dead where he stood. He quickly scanned for any sign of cover and started to make a run towards a nearby stack of crates and pallets.

In agreement Michael added, “So that’s a ‘kill on sight’ for Ryan?”

“No!” Ryan desperately called out, to no avail. Without any warning, a round entered his right shoulder from behind, dangerously close to his neck and exited just below his clavicle. Ryan went down like a sack of bricks. Eyes wide, mouth gaping, hands pressing to his chest where blood was now gushing from the exit wound; if not for the sudden surge of adrenaline he surely would have passed out. The pain was so agonizing that he wished he had.

No sooner had he hit the ground, a second shot went into Gavin’s leg. Gavin made an almost animalistic noise before collapsing just in time for another bullet to barely miss his head where he’d been standing moments before.

“Jesus, it wasn’t Ryan!” Ray shouted above the din that had erupted of gunfire, smoke bombs and confusion.

“Who is that? Who the fuck is that?!” Ryan could hear Geoff shouting and shooting at someone.

“Someone else is here?” Michael asked incredulously, “How the fuck did that happen?”

“Whoever he is, he’s good.” Ray confirmed. “I can’t get a shot on him.”
Ryan was phasing in and out of consciousness, snatching fragments of conversations.

“Michael! Help me!” Gavin was begging.

Michael, the hero he was, was by Gavin’s side in an instant. “I’m here for you Gav, I got you.”

“Where the fuck did he go?” Screamed Geoff.

Ray sounded rattled over the comms. “I don’t know, I lost him! Jesus, where the fuck –”

There was a grunt from Ray and he suddenly went silent.

“Ray?” Michael left Gavin with Geoff and jumped to his feet to climb to where Ray had been sniping.

Even though Ryan had just been what might have been fatally shot by him, his heart was in his throat as he awaited confirmation that Ray was ok, or, he dreaded to think, dead.

“Ray? Ray!” Michael’s cries were becoming more frantic as the crew on the ground could only listen and wait. “Ray! Oh thank fuck, he’s not dead! He’s unconscious, but he’s breathing.”

The team let out a collective exhale at the news.

“There’s something here.” Michael went on. “A card. It just says ‘Shadowlz’."

There was brief confusion as the crew wondered what the hell that meant, before Geoff came to the sudden and uncomfortable realisation that he had condemned Ryan.

“Oh shit! Ryan, buddy, stay with me!” Geoff rushed to his side, temporarily forgetting about his own injuries. “Michael, call for evac, we need to get him to a hospital.”

Ryan couldn’t remember much more after that, except the looming feeling of guilt in the team every time he walked into the room, every time he took off his shirt and they caught a glimpse of the scars they knew they inflicted. Ryan had been shaken by how quickly they had turned on him; all it had taken was a word from Geoff. He kept his guard up for a long time afterwards.

They never caught the guy responsible. Shadowlz. The whole crew swore that if they ever got their hands on him, they’d burn him alive. But the secret stayed with them.

They never even worked up the nerve to tell Jack.
Cracks

“Holy shit, Ryan…” Was all Jack could manage to say.

“Look, this isn’t the time for a pity party.” Ryan could practically feel the weight of Jack’s judgement on the others. “And it isn’t the time to start blaming anyone either. We need to contact Ray. He’s the only other person who knows anything about this and he could be in trouble.”

“I think he already is.”

Ryan’s head snapped around to Jeremy, who had been dead quiet until now. “What do you mean?”

“When Michael and Gavin picked me up, I couldn’t get in touch with my contact… with Ray. He was the one who had tipped me off that something was going down, not Funhaus.”

Jack and Ryan just stared, mouths agape.

“Geoff doesn’t talk about him, you all refer to him as being ‘dead’, so I assumed he was excommunicated. I’ve been in contact with him since I was promoted to full time crew. I didn’t think anyone would approve and I didn’t want to get him in trouble, so I kept it to myself.”

Ryan almost burst out laughing at the absurdity of it. Suddenly it all made sense, why Jeremy ran, why he wanted to get in contact with Ray, why he wouldn’t talk to Michael and Gavin about his contacts. Unless he’d been feeding information to anyone, he was in the clear.

“Shit.”

Jack seemed to arrive at the same conclusion only moments later and took off to tell the others, leaving Ryan and Jeremy alone but still handcuffed in the basement.

“I’m sorry, Ryan. I got you in the shit for this and all you were trying to do was help me.” Jeremy couldn’t look at him.

Ryan laughed weakly. “Don’t give yourself so much credit, you didn’t drag me into anything, I ran after you. Besides, you didn’t know.”

Jeremy finally worked up the nerve to look up at Ryan. “Thank you.” He paused and sighed heavily. “It’s just like… like I’m not good enough for them. For the crew. It was like… I was expected to be Ray, to fill this space that had years to form.”

Ryan scowled. “You know that’s bullshit.” He paused as his head spun a little, vision blurring before he continued, more softly. “You’re not Ray. It was never going to be the same, we knew that. But that doesn’t have to be bad. Trust takes time to build, I know, but they’ll come around. You’ve been good to the crew Jeremy. You’ve been good for us.”

Jeremy paused to take it in. “So I’ve heard that you and Ray, you had a …thing.”

Ryan grinned. “Jesus, why does everyone always have to make it sound sexual? We were a team on a bunch of heists. The ‘R & R connection’ as he dubbed it. Ray’s a helluva marksman, he was quick on his feet and had an even faster trigger finger, got headshots from 1500 yards out. He covered me on what would’ve otherwise been suicide missions… kind of like you do now.”

Jeremy smiled to see Ryan happy again, before thoughtlessly asking, “What happened then, why’d
he leave the crew?”

Ryan shook his head which had started spinning again. “I actually don’t know; we never really talked about it. But I remember one day he got caught off-guard, unarmed; had to beat a guy to death with his bare hands. He was always so detached about everything, I thought nothing could shake him, but he was pretty messed up about it afterwards. I think it just became real to him. Like suddenly all the people he had killed up until that point he hadn’t really thought of as people, but once he got close and personal, every kill afterwards took him back to it. He never really talked about it, but we could see it, you could tell by the way he’d come to work, something wasn’t right. This work changes you. In the end I don’t think he could deal with it anymore. Maybe too much guilt had built up…”

Ryan was suddenly overcome with exhaustion, involuntarily closing his eyes and slumping forward. He was again vaguely aware of Jeremy calling his name and he thought he managed a response, but everything was blurry and simultaneously sounded muffled and three times too loud. He was aware of Jack and Michael returning to the basement and releasing his hands, taking him and Jeremy back upstairs gently and laying him down on a couch. Sleep deprivation and the effects of multiple blows to the head were catching up to him. He was just starting to fade out again when Gavin suddenly dropped onto the couch beside him. It sent Ryan’s heart racing and his mind fought to keep up. He felt wired again, unable to settle and sat up with a renewed energy, trying to shake off the dizzying feelings in his head.

The whole crew were now gathered in the living room of the safe house, which looked decidedly civil. Jack sat in one of the large armchairs with Jeremy in the matching one opposite; Michael was perched on the edge of the couch next to Gavin who was nursing his arm in a splint, while Geoff stood with a glass in one hand.

Nobody was restrained, everybody looked exhausted and no one was making eye contact.

“Alright, I presume everyone’s up to speed,” Geoff said, still not making eye contact. “Jeremy, you’ve apparently been in contact with Ray the most recently, what was his last known location?”

Jeremy was quiet, still shaken, as if not sure how to continue.

Instead, Ryan jumped in sarcastically, his voice laced with venom. “That’s fine Geoff, it’s cool, it’s not like you just spent the last 24 hours hunting the kid down and interrogating him.”

“It’s ok,” Jeremy said softly.

Ryan was so focused on figuring out who had managed to get the crew to turn in on itself that he hadn’t yet stopped to consider that he was the one being wronged. Under normal circumstances, when someone in the crew turned on him, it was usually for a reason. He’d always been a troublemaker, he like to stir shit, but it was always in the spirit of fun. Besides, he always thought he’d get his own back eventually, on his own terms. Still, through it all, he’d never, even for a second, considered leaving the crew. Despite the heaping piles of shit he’d been through with them, he had been loyal since the day they hired him and he knew he would never leave them. There was no way he could figure out how to put into words why.
In his exhausted, sleep deprived state, Ryan just laughed. It was a crazy, desperate kind of laughter and it made everyone in the room uncomfortable instantly.

“Uh, Ryan, buddy, you ok?” Geoff asked cautiously.

“I’m not stuck here with you.” Ryan managed though the laughter. “You’re stuck here with me!” He collapsed back onto the couch in fits of laughter.

“Ooookay. Well, Ryan has officially lost his mind,” said Jack.

Geoff looked confused. “Was that a *Watchmen* quote?”

Ryan nodded, still giggling and wincing as though it hurt. It did.

“Well, he’s right, we’re stuck with him,” added Michael. “I mean, no one else could deal with that much crazy.”

Geoff ran his free hand through his hair, pulling at it and making it stick up at strange angles. “It’s like, you’ve heard the phrase ‘herding cats’? It’s like fucking wrangling retards with you lot. Every damn day.”

“Yeah, but you love us.” Gavin chimed in cheerfully.

The mood had lifted decidedly, and everyone felt a little more human, or maybe just a little more like themselves.

Geoff turned back to Jeremy, a genuine look of concern and remorse on his face. “I’m sorry. I should’ve checked in first. Are we going to be ok?”

Jeremy met his eyes. “Hell yeah, you guys are like family to me. I get it; you gotta look out for us. I don’t envy your situation.”

“I just feel like shit for this you know.”

“Don’t.”

“Alright.” Geoff turned back to Ryan who, at this point, was beginning to regain control of himself. “Are you ok?”

Ryan gave a lopsided grin. “Yeah, it’s just my whole body that hurts.”

“I’m sorry buddy, I’m a real asshole.”

Ryan smiled back at him and it was cheeky, but genuine. “Yeah, you are.” He laughed. “But only most of the time.”

They all laughed again before Geoff brought the mood back to a more serious tone. “What happened here today, none of this can ever get out, you all realize?”

They all nodded in agreement.

“Everything that’s happened, this stays between us and only us, because if anyone found out there were cracks in the crew…”

“That’s not the problem though is it?” Jack interrupted, his tone gentle and paternal. “It’s not the cracks that make us weak. Michael, you told me you’d never been more scared than when Ryan had
Gavin up on that roof. Geoff, you nearly tore yourself apart when you thought you’d made a bad call and put the crew in danger. Jeremy did everything he did to keep the crew safe in the first place, and the only reason he let on he was in contact with Ray was because…”

He cringed and looked at Ryan, he didn’t need to say anything, they all understood.

“We’ve all made enormous sacrifices for this crew, that’s our weakness, but it’s also what makes it work.”

The words lingered in the air. He was right of course, it seemed so obvious now.

After a long and reflective moment, Michael piped up. “Well, that was an intense 24 hours.”

Geoff downed the rest of the whisky in his glass. “It’s not over yet, boys. First, let’s get to Ray; then let’s find this fucker.”

Gavin flipped open his laptop to scan for media coverage of the heist. He immediately found a clip of a young male reporter standing in front of the charred wreckage of the bank.

Gavin cranked the volume so everyone could hear.

“Weazel News reported that the suspects of Thursday night’s bank robbery and blast that killed five civilians and twelve police officers are thought to be affiliated with the gangland outfit ‘Fake AH Crew’.”

The crew gave out a mixed cheer and quickly went silent again.

“The body of a man found at the scene has been identified as another known gang member going by the street-name ‘Alphonse’; his involvement in the crime is currently the subject of ongoing police investigation. The Los Santos Police Department urges anyone with information to come forward.”

“Sooo… Not Shadowlz?” Jeremy wondered aloud.

Jack was still intent on finding the guy responsible. “We need to find that gang.”

Michael looked to Gavin. “Gav? Think you can do it?”

Gavin grinned wide. “Should be a piece of cake.”

“Alright,” Geoff said, rubbing his hands together. “You two work on the gang; Jeremy, you and I’ll work on getting hold of Ray.” He frowned at Ryan who looked way too far out of it to be of any use to them. “Ryan, take a nap or something, Jack, take care of him.”
Geoff, Jeremy and Michael headed out in a stolen, unmarked car to Ray’s last known contact point. Ryan had insisted on going with them. Geoff had felt like he owed him at least that.

Jack had re-bandaged his shoulder and apologetically seen to his other, more minor wounds. He was feeling refreshed after a deep, dreamless sleep that had only been a few hours, but he’d awoken with a new sense of purpose and a clear head.

When they had left the lumberyard safe house, Jack had brought Ryan’s mask with them in the trunk of the car and the safe house had a change of clean clothes for each of them. While it was nice to be clothed again, albeit back in his bloody jacket; Ryan was most thankful for the mask. It hid the cuts and bruises on his face that the others couldn’t stop staring at, feeling sorry for him, or guilty at their actions. It also helped to hide his excitement at the idea of seeing Ray again after so long.

Jeremy had still been unable to contact Ray, so, desperate and on a whim, they’d decided to check the only place Jeremy could think he may still be, in case he’d left any clues. They made their way to East Los Santos and navigated their way to a block of seedy loft apartments above a furniture store. No one was surprised it was number 420.

Michael grinned and shook his head. “Figures,” he muttered quietly.

They knocked on the door but got no reply, instead easily forcing the shitty lock open.

The apartment was as shitty as the lock, barely furnished, static on the TV and everything upholstered in that 80’s shade of brown with the lingering scent of weed.

“This seems like the right place.” Ryan observed.

“Narvaez?” Geoff called, looking around the entry, “Ray?”

“Ray!” Michael was the first to spot him, lying behind the couch in a widening pool of blood. “Oh fuck! Ray!”

Jeremy was the next to rush over and Geoff limped behind, while Ryan drew his gun and made a check to secure the apartment, because god help him, he was not letting anyone get the drop on him again.

Michael knelt beside Ray, cradling his head in his lap, checking for signs of life as Ryan made his way back over to the group. Ray had a bullet wound in the shin, and one in the belly, the source of the blood that now soaked into the threadbare carpet beneath him.

“Ray?” Michael gently slapped his face and suddenly his chest heaved as he wheezed and coughed in reply. “He’s alive! Call an ambulance!”

Geoff looked down at Michael with the saddest expression Ryan had ever seen as he shook his head. He was too far gone; there was nothing they could do. They all knew it.

Ray was way too pale, he felt cold and clammy in Michael’s grasp and he knew it was true.
“Always keep your guard up, Ray. Always.” Ryan’s voice wavered, dangerously close to tears.

“I know. I fucked up,” Ray sputtered. “Motherfucker pegged me through the window.”

Ryan looked over to the window and saw two bullet holes through the glass, there was a fire escape outside they may have used, or a sniper on the opposite roof might be able to get a clear shot. He quickly drew the curtains closed.

Jeremy was still focused. “Do you know who it was?”

“Sure man, I know all the petty criminals by the sound of their rifles.” He offered a weak smile at his attempt at sarcasm. “If I was a betting man though, I’d say it had something to do with the Randoms.” His voice was getting quieter and his breathing was ragged, but he was still determined. “Remember Shadowlz?”

“Fuck him,” Michael began, but Ray continued, unsure of how much time he had left.

“He was just one of them,” he wheezed. “There’s a bunch more, they’re not affiliated with anyone specific but I’ve heard they have plans to bring down the Fakes and Funhaus... They want to reclaim Los Santos for themselves.”

“How do you know?” Geoff asked, voice cracking.

“They tried to recruit me. I told ‘em where to stick it.” He coughed and struggled to catch his breath, he was rapidly becoming paler.

Michael’s eyes brightened. “That’s what you were trying to tell Lil J!”

Ray laughed and it was barely more than a breath. “Yeah. He’s a good kid, Geoff, treat him well.”

Ryan felt a lump in his throat. He didn’t want to look at the others; he knew their faces would mirror his own hidden under the mask.

Ray was speaking very quietly now, Michael had to lean in to hear him, the tears that had welled up in his eyes threatening to roll down his cheeks, but he stayed strong for Ray.

“Hey Michael, tell Vav I said ... YOLO.” He smiled and looked over to Ryan. “This sucks... always thought I’d go out in a blaze of glory…”

He didn’t finish. His breathing shuddereded and his eyes drooped shut as he fell limply back into Michael’s lap.

Ryan squeezed his eyes shut and he heard Geoff let out a sob.

The tears finally broke, stinging the cuts on his face as he blinked them away. Without thinking Ryan turned around and slammed his fist through the flimsy drywall of the apartment, letting out a guttural growl.

It took a long time for everyone to get hold of themselves.

“They’ll pay for this.” Geoff’s expression had become stony, determined and filled with rage. “Nobody messes with my boys.”

* * *
The day of Ray’s funeral, Geoff planted red roses in the garden.

The funeral had been a quiet and solemn affair, held nearly a month after Ray’s actual death. They had left his body to whatever fate the Los Santos Coroner’s office had in store for it. None of them were particularly religious, so the funeral was more a formal commemorative occasion arranged largely by Jack to help give them some kind of closure. God knew they needed it.

The crew were still on cautionary lockdown and were making their best efforts to limit contact with outsiders and even the B-team. Until they knew more about what was going on, they couldn’t afford to trust anyone outside the main crew. They had moved to another safe house, one they could live in for some time, and told no one where they were.

Ryan had been wearing his mask more frequently and had gone back to his old face paint design underneath to mask his bruises until they subsided. The familiarity helped everyone feel more at ease, but the tension in the crew was still there, feelings of guilt and anxiety ran high.

Everyone dealt with Ray’s death differently.

Geoff found comfort in a bottle, whilst quietly plotting revenge in his brief moments of lucidity. Everyone was concerned for him, but no one was surprised.

Michael, once over the initial shock of loss, predictably got mad; making runs every day to their demolitions testing range up Mount Chiliad and getting into fights with anyone dumb enough to get in his way.

Gavin spent the first few days paralysed with grief, knowing he wasn’t there in Ray’s final moments had really affected him, especially after Michael told him his dying words. Once he had come to terms with it though, he got to work; he focused on finding those responsible for Ray’s death, working around the clock, completely withdrawn from the rest of the crew, only emerging from his room with bags under his eyes, to eat or drink and then returning.

Jeremy did whatever he could to help, but kept out of the way, getting the day to day jobs done when the others couldn’t manage. He couldn’t help but feel responsible, but he made sure it didn’t show for the sake of the others.

Jack was their pillar of strength; he openly showed all his emotions, validating the feelings of the rest of the crew. He was there for them all individually when they needed to talk or cry it out, which all of them, aside from Ryan, eventually did.

Ryan withdrew completely. He focused on repairing himself, rebuilding his strength for when he could finally face Ray’s killer and tear his fucking limbs off. While his shoulder eventually healed and he regained movement and even strength in his left arm, he never fully regained feeling and was left with a constant sense of numbness that ran from his armpit to his little finger. The loss felt oddly fitting.

A week after the funeral, Gavin emerged from his room carrying his laptop, eyes bright and alert despite days without proper sleep.

Jeremy and Ryan were sitting at the kitchen counter in silence, and both looked up from their breakfast to see him practically run to Geoff’s office.

“Looks like Gavin’s got something,” Jeremy observed, speaking to no one in particular. He’d been doing that a lot lately, to keep up the illusion of conversation in the house and while hardly anyone acknowledged it, it had really been helping. Today though, he was startled by a response from Ryan.
“Let’s hope so.”

It was the first thing Ryan had said in days and his voice was hoarse from disuse. Jeremy was actually taken aback.

He smiled warmly. “Hi Ryan.”

The way he said it in a childish, almost sing-song voice warmed something in Ryan and the steely gaze on his face dissolved into softness, his thoughts drifting from brutally butchering the bastards who killed Ray, back to the warm morning where they sat in the kitchen of the safe house, eating cereal.

“Hi Jeremy.” He returned in the same tone.

“Welcome back, I was worried we’d lost you for good there.”

Ryan just smiled back, and they continued to eat in comfortable silence.

About an hour later, the crew received identical text messages from Geoff:

*Heist room, 1pm.*

Chapter End Notes

When I bounced the idea for this chapter off my sister she simply replied with: "you sonovabitch."
She's still salty about it.
Some semblance of normalcy

Chapter Notes

Something to lighten the mood a bit.
Just don't get used to it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

At 1pm sharp, to everyone’s collective amazement, the entire crew assembled in the heist room. It was the first time everyone had shown up anywhere on time. The energy in the house had shifted noticeably since Geoff’s announcement, there was a sense that something was going to be done and everyone was ready for that kind of distraction.

It was hardly a surprise when Geoff had the laminated map of Los Santos laid out on the table, marker and pins showing the planned movement of the crew and local areas of interest. It looked and felt just like a heist, but this would be so much more. Geoff’s eyes had a clarity the crew hadn’t seen in days and he smelled less like whisky and ketones than usual; he didn’t even have his trademark glass in hand.

“Alright,” Geoff began, pressing his palms together. “This morning, Gavin came up with a lead on Shadowlz.” He pointed to Gavin, who beamed, also seeming revived by the sudden activity.

“The guy in the alley that Jeremy killed was Alphonse - a former Vagos member and recently, he’d been hanging out in online chat forums. Which seems to be where he met Shadowlz. Like Ray said, he runs with a group of nobodies collectively referring to themselves as ‘Randoms’, which is pretty fitting. But as it turns out, they’ve gotten into our communications. We haven’t been able to get much information, but from looking at some of their exchanges it seems like they’ve been following us for some time now, turning up to random jobs and trying to fuck with us. They’re probably the reason so many of our heists have turned out…” He paused with a slight cringe. “…less than ideal recently.”

There was a collective scoff from the crew, followed by incredulous glances.

“So they weren’t mercenaries shooting at me during Jack’s heist!” Ryan said, shooting a look at Gavin. “And it’s not because I’m crazy!”

“Probably,” said Geoff with a nod.

“It doesn’t change that you’re still mental, Ryan,” Gavin replied, Ryan smirking back at him, shaking his head.

“How did they manage to get in without us knowing?” Jack asked, bringing the conversation back on-topic.

Geoff looked at Gavin, who nervously chewed his bottom lip, eyes darting around the room.

“Well, it kind of… sort of looks like they got in when we added a sixth member to the crew,” Gavin said quietly.

All eyes were suddenly on Ryan, who stiffened, taking a slight step back defensively.
Geoff spoke up before anyone could react further, “Nobody’s accusing you of anything. It was probably an accident, a channel got left open or something when we added you to the comms.” He didn’t sound entirely convinced, but the authority in his voice indicated no one was going to challenge it.

“So, they’ve been in our comms since Ryan started?” It was less of a question and more of a statement from Jack.

“How the fuck are we still alive?!” Michael exclaimed with a hysterical giggle, his face equally bewildered and amused.

Jack looked troubled. “So that means they’re not getting enough information to do anything with yet. Or they’re not organised enough. Or they’ve just been laying low. What are they waiting for?”

“And why?” Jeremy asked. “I mean, sure, we’re not exactly model citizens, but we’re better than the Vagos and the other crews that used to run this town.”

“Oh, I think I might have an idea… It’s petty, but you’d be surprised how petty people can be,” Geoff explained with a smirk. “Back when we were starting out, we were pretty well known, but hadn’t worked it out yet, we used to have dumb kids try to join the crew all the time. We started off civil enough, explained we didn’t need anyone else and whatnot, but some of them were persistent and sometimes they just wouldn’t take the hint. So after a while, Jack would just answer the door and tell them to leave.”


Jack grinned. “Yeah, I’d just open the door and say: Leave.”

“I don’t think that ever didn’t work. They’d just fuck right off,” Geoff said with a laugh.

Jeremy’s eyebrow raised. “Jesus, you think you might have pissed them off?”

Geoff shrugged. “Probably. Didn’t care at the time. ‘spose it might have come back to bite us in the ass, but I hardly think that’s reason enough to try to take out the crew… who knows?”

Ryan shifted uncomfortably, he had a niggling feeling that this was more personal than hurt feelings, he’d been though a lot before joining Fake AH and something about this felt vaguely familiar.

Geoff planted both his palms on the table with a thud.

“Anyways, we know they have access to our radio communications and they know we’ve been silent for a while now. What we need to do, is plan a heist.”

“Eeeyyyooo!” Gavin almost involuntarily yelled, and the crew laughed.

“Problem.” Geoff pointed out. “We don’t know how deep this goes. We have no way to know how many of these ‘Randoms’ are out there or how many have it in for us. This could get really dangerous, so we gotta be at the top of our game.”

Jeremy’s eyes brightened. “We could try to infiltrate? Find out how they got together in the first place and get a feel for the group.”

Geoff nodded slowly. “Alright, Lil J, that’s your job, pick up a burner laptop, second-hand, make sure you’re un-traceable to the crew. Gavin, help him if he needs it.” Gavin and Jeremy nodded.
“Jack, you and I will plan the actual heist. The place we’re gonna be hitting is a jewellery store on Portola Drive in Rockford Hills.” He indicated the position on the map.

“Classy,” Michael commented.

Geoff continued, “It has to be something legit and big enough that they’ll see an opportunity to attack us again, but this time, we’ll be ready for them.”

Jack nodded, a smile spreading across his face. “Oh yeah.”

“That’s where you two come in.” Geoff pointed to Michael and Ryan. “There’s an alley that runs behind these stores, that’s gonna be our exit and that’s where we’re most likely to get jumped. So we’re gonna need to set some traps.”

“Aw, yeah!” Michael exclaimed. “You picked the right guys for the job, Geoff. We’ll bring the ruckus. I’m thinking big; lots of explosions, maximum carnage. Send ‘em a message.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed. “No, we want to take them alive. At least some of them.”

Geoff grimaced a little. “Look, just make sure you’re clever about it. Ryan, keep an eye on this one.” He jerked his thumb at Michael.

“Once we’ve got a solid plan, we’ll work out how to sell it to these clowns over the comms. Then we can figure out what to do with them.” He added darkly, “Ryan, you get first go at them.”

Something evil flickered in Ryan’s eyes as his one corner of his lips curled upwards into a crooked smile. It was the same look that often made the crew worry about his sanity.

“We’ll meet back here tomorrow to go over the plan and work out the details, everyone cool?”

Everyone nodded.

“Ok, get to work.”

* * *

Ryan and Michael packed two duffel bags full of a variety of traps, tripwires, explosives and timers and headed out to their makeshift demolitions range at the base of mount Chilliad.

Ryan drove while Michael stared listlessly out the window, still unusually quiet.

“You’ve been out this way a lot recently,” Ryan ventured.

“Mmmhmm.” Michael just hummed in response.

Ryan was usually fine driving in silence, preferred it in fact, particularly if Gavin was in the car; but Michael wasn’t his usual energetic self and it was starting to bother him. It had felt like they’d all just been starting to get back to normal, and something had set him back. Michael was still struggling to come to terms with Ray’s death and being in the car with Ryan probably wasn’t helping.

Ryan was observant enough to realise the source of the awkwardness between them, although he lacked the necessary social skills to rectify it.

The words were out of his mouth almost before his brain could process them. “Hey, you’ll probably
be able to finally overtake Ray’s Gamerscore soon.”

Michael’s heart felt like it dropped to his knees. Ryan saw his reaction and knew immediately it was very much the wrong thing to have said. The colour drained from Michael’s face and his breathing got shallower. Ryan expected an outburst, but Michael remained dangerously quiet; eyes focused intensely on the road ahead.

“Dude, that’s a fucked-up thing to say.” Michael kept his voice low and tight.

Ryan just cringed and kept driving.

He glanced at Michael every now and then and Michael would catch him and scowl.

“Stop staring at me, Ryan. I mean it, just stop.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, Ryan focusing on the road, sneaking glances at Michael when he was sure he wasn’t looking. Michael grew more agitated the closer they got to the range, muttering away to himself.

Ryan managed to catch the words: robot, psychopath, monster and a whole colourful variety of expletives on Michael’s lips. The way he was glancing at him every now and then made Ryan assume the comments were directed at him. He held his tongue.

When they arrived at the range, Ryan checked to make sure the place was absolutely deserted, and Michael grabbed the bags. He brushed past Ryan indignantly, knocking his bad shoulder.

On top of all the snide remarks and snarky comments Michael had been making under his breath, Ryan finally snapped. “Jesus, man, what is your problem with me today?”

Michael turned, dropping both the bags, making Ryan flinch at the thought of handling such a cache of explosives so carelessly.

“Ray is gone, Ryan. He’s gone! And you’re just- just shrugging it off!” He was shaking with rage, fighting back tears. He’d obviously been building to this.

Ryan pulled off his mask, dropping it to the ground beside him, revealing the black and white skull design tinged with the faint green and yellow remains of bruises. He moved closer to Michael, but Michael didn’t back down, just stared up at him defiantly, eyes shimmering but determined.

“Do you blame me? Is that your problem?”

“No!” Michael choked out a little too loudly. “No,” he repeated quietly. “But he’s still gone.”

Ryan sighed, but he retained the air of cool detachment. “I know. I miss him too.”

“Then why can’t you fucking act like it?!”

Ryan grabbed the sleeve of Michael’s brown leather jacket and pulled him in close, wrapping his arms around the lad tightly. Michael buried his face in Ryan’s chest, he could feel warm tears seeping into his T-shirt and Ryan rested his cheek on the soft curls of Michael’s auburn hair. It was the first human contact either of them had had in weeks.

“I miss him too.” Ryan practically whispered but it came out so pained and Michael could hear Ryan’s breath catch in his chest.

Michael sniffed into Ryan’s jacket. “You’re just so fucking calm about it. I don’t get it, you and Ray
were so close. How do you keep it together?"

There was a long pause and Michael could feel Ryan swallow.

“I don’t.”

They stayed like that for a few moments, until both had regained their composure.

“You ok?” Ryan asked, looking down at Michael.

He nodded. “Yeah, you?”

“Yeah.” He smiled softly, pulling away from Michael. “Now, how about we test out these tripwires? Remember Geoff’s plan to create a ‘death funnel’?”

Michael looked at him quizzically.

“Ray said it sounded like the name of a Slipknot cover band.”

Michael laughed. “Oh shit, that’s right, you guys wouldn’t stop talking about it; Geoff was starting to think you were serious.” He laughed again at the memory and it felt lighter.

Ryan laughed too. “I think it’s time we revisited that plan.”

* * *

It was late when they returned to the house, a spread of pizza on the kitchen table, already half-devoured; Gavin and Geoff were still picking at pieces, while Jack and Jeremy sat on the couch playing video games. Michael and Ryan dropped their bags and joined Gavin and Geoff at the kitchen table, immediately turning their attention to the pizza, Michael filled a plate with no fewer than five slices, while Ryan picked distastefully at the chunks of onion that appeared to be on literally everything before giving up and eating them anyway.

“Productive day?” Asked Geoff.

Michael and Ryan looked at each other, their mouths both equally stuffed with pizza.

Michael attempted a reply anyway, coming out mumbled. “ooo cooo aay aaatt.”

Geoff erupted into laughter as some of the masticated food flew from Michael’s mouth and hit Gavin in the cheek.

Gavin squawked and then nearly gagged before giggling. “That was gross, Michael.”

Ryan finished chewing and then answered Geoff’s original question. “We’re revisiting the idea of the death funnel.”

Geoff cocked an eyebrow, “Please don’t tell me you mean your Slipknot cover band, because I told you, you can’t just start a band because you like masks.”

Ryan looked comically thoughtful holding up a finger as if to protest, before going back to exaggerated thought.

Michael finally swallowed his food. “It’s gonna work this time. The trap that is, not the band. That’ll
never work.”

Ryan laughed.

“Hey Ryan, I’ve been thinking…” Gavin started, absently picking at toppings. Ryan noticed Gavin hadn’t been eating his crusts, a habit that never failed to irritate Ryan.

“That’s dangerous,” Ryan retorted, interrupting him.

Gavin huffed. “I’ve been thinking that I should be allowed to hit you back. You know, for what you did on the roof. I never got to hit you back for that.” He held his arm up, which had been healing perfectly fine.

Ryan’s eyebrows sprang up. “You’re kidding right? You realize you were waiting to ambush me? No! You don’t get to hit me back for that.”

“Nah, it’d be like that time you threw the water bottle at me when we were doing that thing defusing the bombs.”

“I was trying to help you! If that’d been a real bomb, you’d be dead, you needed some incentive. Besides, it was empty, and I only let you hit me back to prove it didn’t hurt that bad.”

“But it did hurt!” Gavin insisted.

“No, it didn’t! You’re just a sook.” A grin was creeping onto Ryan’s face now, even though he tried to hide it.

Michael interrupted the banter. “Gav, c’mon, it was an empty water bottle.”

“It hit me in the neck!”

“You hit me in the face!”

Geoff rolled his eyes. “Glad to see you guys are mature enough to put all that petty shit behind you.”

Gavin made an indignant noise and grinned at Ryan, who did his best to hide the smirk on his face.

“He started it.”

“Oh, grow up you two,” Michael said mockingly.

Jack and Jeremy overheard the conversation from the couch and grinned at each other, silently acknowledging the improved atmosphere in the house.

Chapter End Notes

The exchange between Ryan and Michael was my attempt at an apology to my sister.
Heist!

The scanner radio suddenly crackled to life.

"We got activity."

“This is Jack testing: 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.”

“Geoff! 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.”

“Ryan testing: 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.”

“Lil’ J checking in: 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.”

“This is Michael: 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.”

“And Gavin: 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.”

“Can you all hear me?”

Everyone radioed back affirmative.

“Alright, we got it. Everyone’s good to go. One hour, be ready.”

"They're planning something. Get ready."

* * *

“Alright, does everyone remember the plan?”

Everything they said over the compromised comms was carefully scripted; the heist orchestrated so that they each remembered exactly how much information they could communicate without giving away their primary goal. It was a far cry from their usual methods: improvise.

One hour before the heist: test the comms, let the Randoms know something was going down soon. Once they were in position: give away their target and location. Once they got wind of onlookers: spring the traps, take them alive and root out the others.

Michael’s voice over the comms interrupted Ryan’s train of thought, which had started to drift to what he would do when they finally caught the people responsible for Ray’s death, “Jack’s on standby with the getaway car in the alley, Jeremy provides cover, you and Gavin break in and grab the jewels and money, and Ryan and I are on cop control on Portola Drive. Don’t worry, we got this Geoff!”

Michael was surprisingly convincing, in contrast to Geoff who sounded stiffer than usual. Hopefully he’d only noticed because the crew were so familiar and anyone listening wouldn’t have heard the difference. The subtle slip of the street name and the mention of jewels should be enough to alert them to their location; assuming the Randoms were within the city limits of Los Santos, it shouldn’t take them more than 15 minutes to start to arrive.
Ryan and Michael, of course, weren’t on Portola Drive, but in the alley off Eastbourne behind the store, awaiting anyone that might show up with a wicked trap of tripwires and explosives rigged to keep anyone who entered inside. One way in, no way out. Ryan had made sure he could get up to the second floor of the parking garage opposite the store to get a better vantage point, but also so he and Michael could make an escape on his bike. Jack was in the getaway car, not Michael’s usual Roosevelt, the “AH-mobile” they used on heists like this, but a van with ample space for hostages; low-key enough not to be noticed on the main street where Geoff and Gavin would actually be making their escape. From there, they would swing around the block to a narrower alley off Mad Wayne Thunder Drive that led behind the parking garage, and pick up the hostages that Ryan and Michael would have by then subdued. Meanwhile, Jeremy was posted on the taller roof adjacent to the jewellery store for surveillance and to provide cover, his vantage point allowed him to see the main street and the entrance to the store, the rear of the alley where Michael and Ryan were, as well as the narrower extraction alley. Once he saw the van in that alley, he’d jump off the roof and parachute over to them for extraction. Then it was a matter of Ryan and Michael getting away on the bike and reconvening at the safe house to find out how much their hostages knew. The part Ryan was most looking forward to.

“I’m disabling the alarm, when I give the signal, we should have a ten minute window to get in and out; after that, if we’re not out the cops will probably show up,” Gavin informed them, a blatant lie for the Randoms listening. The alarm wouldn’t go off at all the way he’d fixed it and unless there was another security system, or a guard on patrol, they should be set to get in and out at their own pace.

Gavin waited the agreed-upon five minutes before giving the signal, “Phew, that was tougher than I thought,” He exclaimed, laying it on thick, “Ten minutes, let’s go!”

Jack, Jeremy, Michael and Ryan had been on high alert since they arrived, eyes constantly scanning for any sign of movement, ears tuned for the sounds of sirens, gunfire and voices in the shadows. Geoff was the one to snap them out of their uncharacteristic silence, reminding them they were being listened to, “You guys are quiet as dicks tonight.”

Jeremy was the first to pick it up, repeating with a slightly questioning tone: “Quiet as dicks.”

“I suppose dicks are usually pretty quiet,” commented Ryan.

Gavin snickered, “What if… Ok, you get a million dollars, but every time you come, your penis screams.” He giggled a little.

“I dunno about you guys, but usually, when I come, it’s inside my wife,” Michael started.

Ryan interrupted, “but you think that’d muffle the sound…”

“I don’t think she’d appreciate it though.” Michael protested.

“Oh God, I can’t even imagine how horrible that’d make sex,” Jeremy said, the cringe in his voice so audible Ryan could picture his face as he said it.

The crew continued the conversation, as Ryan scanned the alley for signs of life for the thirty-thousandth time already.

There was a flicker of movement, a shadow cast from behind him. He silently motioned his intent to Michael, who nodded as he climbed up to the second floor of the parking garage. There was no ladder outside so he had to pull himself onto a guardrail and shimmy up a drainpipe to get to the
second floor before climbing under another guardrail, but it wasn’t too difficult a task and there were
stairs inside to make for an easy getaway should they need them. He hauled himself to the second
floor and carefully surveyed the room; empty, save for his bike and a few cars left locked in for the
night.

The banter in his ear continued and he randomly jumped into the conversation to make sure not to
raise suspicions. Somehow the conversation had moved from screaming penises to…


“In your pee-hole, it’s a real thing!” Insisted Gavin.

“Sounding,” Ryan said very matter-of-factly, “It’s called sounding.”

“Alright, well we knew Ryan would be into some weird shit, but that’s a bit extreme,” Jack joked.

Ryan played it cool, still thoroughly investigating the garage, “Can’t say I’ve ever tried it myself, but
I don’t think it’s something I’m into… Y’know, yet.”

“And there goes Ryan, being creepy. Again.” Michael craned his neck to look up at him as he said it,
and Ryan gave the signal for all-clear.

Geoff added quietly, “Ryan the creepy guy.”

“Real original…” Ryan began before he was interrupted by Jeremy.

“I can hear sirens guys, they may not be coming for us, but how far off are you?”

“Almost there with the safe,” replied Gavin, “gonna take a few more minutes though.”

“We’ve got nothing where we are,” Ryan said plainly, knowing Geoff would know what that meant.

Geoff sounded tense, “Ok, well, stick to the plan; good things happen when we just adhere to the
plan.”

* * *

All the planning had been done back at the safe house; they’d gone over every detail of the plan. Bar
one.

“What if it all goes to shit?” Michael had asked.

Geoff was adamant, “It won’t go to shit if we just stick to the plan.”

“We still don’t know how many of them there’ll be, where they’ll turn up, what kind of weapons or
resources they have…”

“It won’t go to shit,” Geoff insisted. He paused, considering the concerned looks among the crew,
before adding, “Look, worst case scenario, they or the cops get the drop on us, we each bail our
separate ways and we meet up at the safe house to debrief.”

Ryan shook his head, “If they figure out what we were trying to do, they’ll dissolve into the ether.
We’ll never be able to track them all down. We’ll have to go back into lockdown.”

“Fuck that!” Michael snapped, “There’s gotta be something else we can do?”
“I think…” Ryan started carefully, biting his lower lip, “I may have an idea.”

Geoff raised an eyebrow quizzically, “What are you thinking, Ryan?”

“Look, this is going to be a long shot, if, and only if we think they’re on to us, if I can get on the inside, it should stop them from scattering and we might be able to take another shot at them.”

Geoff looked confused, “What do you mean get inside? Get inside how?”

Ryan looked down, struggling to find the right words.

Jack’s eyes widened as he was the first to catch on, “You would get caught?”

The words were out of Michael’s mouth before he could stop them, “You’re crazy!”

“Well, no one’s ever accused me of being sane.” Ryan retorted without skipping a beat. He drew a deep breath, “Look, if we give them a reason to think they have the upper hand, we can at least keep track of where they are, and it’s our best chance at finding out who runs this thing…”

“No. No, no, no.” Geoff interrupted.

Ryan looked determinedly back at Geoff, “You know I’m right.”

Geoff drew a deep breath, the crew could feel it, he was right, but Geoff refused to hear it. “I don’t care, I don’t want to hear any more about it Ryan. Just forget about it!”

* * *

The cops arrived at exactly the wrong time.

They had approached from Mad Wayne Thunder Drive, out of Jeremy’s line of sight, swung around onto Eastbourne and immediately entered the alleyway where Michael was waiting.

“Oh shit!” Michael managed to get out as he turned to run, just as the first of the cop cars triggered the tripwires. Four cars entered the alley, the last two blocking the exit. The cops had time to get out of their cars and aim their weapons at Michael, the only target in the alley, as he turned to face them with his minigun at the ready.

For a tense few seconds they stared each other down. Then all hell broke loose.

The two cars blocking the exit to the alley were thrown in the air as the delayed charges detonated, debris from the surrounding buildings raining down around them; the officers in those cars were, in all likelihood, killed immediately.

Michael let loose with the minigun, cutting down the officers who hadn’t taken sufficient cover behind their vehicles.

From the second floor of the parking structure, Ryan could see the muzzle-flash of the minigun lighting up Michael’s face, a picture of fury and adrenaline-fuelled glee.

“Someone give me a sit-rep! What the fuck’s going on out there?” Geoff demanded over the comms.

Jeremy had turned his attention to the alley and was sniping at the now-trapped officers, “We got cops in the alley! Michael’s lighting them up.”

“Get some!” Michael was shouting, temporarily lost in the moment.
With his RPG, Ryan took aim at the remaining officers in the alley that had sheltered just out of Jeremy’s range, “Geoff, Gavin, get out of there now!” He let the projectile fly and the car and the officers were engulfed in flames. The explosion rocked the jewellery store and Gavin screeched.

“No!” Jack cried out over the comms, “Geoff, Gavin you’ve got company! They’re coming in from Portola Drive, they’re not cops. I repeat, they are not cops!”

“Shit!” Jeremy cried out and Ryan could hear him scurry to the other side of the building to try to get a shot at them before they entered the building or found cover, “They’re inside, I’m so sorry, Geoff!”

Ryan could hear shots being fired over the comms, coming from the jewellery store. The cops in the alley were no longer a threat, but the flaming wreckage of the cars blocked Michael and Ryan from being able to get into the store to help Geoff and Gavin. Jack was the only one who could reach them in time and he was inadequately armed to take them head-on.

It didn’t stop him from trying. He didn’t give any indication over the comms, but drove to the front of the building and slipped quietly inside with the intent to flank them.

“Michael, quick, up here; let’s go!” Ryan called down to Michael. Michael scrambled inside the parking structure, making for the stairs to get to Ryan’s position. Ryan turned his attention to his bike, securing the RPG to the side. He was just about to kick it into gear when movement on the other side of the garage caught his attention.

Without a word, he took off in pursuit, following the sound of footsteps down the far set of stairs and to the ground floor of the garage, then through another set of fire stairs to a basement level. Over the comms, there was a startled noise from Michael, like he was about to ask where Ryan had gone, before stopping himself, realising he may give away his position.

In Ryan’s ear the sound of gunshots reached a crescendo as another gun joined in, and then suddenly stopped. He paused on the stairs, waiting for confirmation that the crew was ok. He didn’t realise it, but he was holding his breath. Silence.


“Goddamn, that was fucking close.” Geoff’s voice finally answered, out of breath, “We’re ok.”

Ryan kept his voice low so as not to be overheard by the people he had been pursuing on the other side of the door, “Any survivors?”

“Negative,” Jack replied firmly, “they didn’t give us the option.”

Damn. Ryan played the incident over in his head. They must have tipped off the cops.
Ryan could feel the rage boil up inside him; *this must be how Michael felt so damn often*. He wanted to scream at the top of his lungs until his throat was hoarse, to blow something up, to breathe smoke and gunpowder. He wanted to watch the city burn.

So close. They had come so close. And it had slipped through their fingers. They knew they were out there now, they knew they were coming for them. The Randoms would go into hiding, evaporate into thin air as if they never existed; this had been the crew’s one chance and they had blown it.

*Unless…*

A chill ran down Ryan’s spine. He tried so desperately to silence the troublesome internal monologue, but the idea had already firmly implanted itself in his brain. It was the only way he could keep them within reach of the crew. Keep them in plain sight.

Ryan was driven by revenge, the hope of retribution. He wanted to make them suffer for what they’d done to him, to Ray, to the crew.

If that meant putting himself in harm’s way, then so be it.

He only had his pistol and the knife in his belt. He checked the magazine and carefully counted the rounds, making sure to include the one in the chamber.

Cautiously, he opened the door to the basement level of the car park. He could see a group of seven people making their way to two vehicles; together they would easily be able to overpower him.

He followed them, loudly and deliberately announcing over the comms: “I hear someone in the basement, I’m going after them!”

Predictably, they turned around.

*Idiots*, thought Ryan. *If we didn’t know they were in our comms before, that would have just given it away.*

Geoff’s voiced cracked loudly in his ear. “Ryan, don’t do anything stupid!”

“*Trust me, Geoff. I got this.*”

It was subtle, but the cue was there and only the crew who knew him so well would have heard it.

Geoff reluctantly acknowledged that he understood without giving anything away over the comms. “Fuck. Goddammit Ryan, be *careful.*”

Ryan fired off a few rounds in their general direction, counting them down as he went. The echo in the underground parking lot was deafening. A bullet impacted one in the calf and she stumbled forward, Ryan gaining on her. A few of the others stopped to help her up and fired back at Ryan. One of their shots hit home, hitting him square in the chest; his heavy body armour taking the brunt of the force, but it still hurt enough to take his breath away. They started to surround him, but he was quickly brawling his way into the bunch. Someone tripped him from behind and he could hear a
voice yelling: “Take him alive!”

Perfect. He knew he had to make it believable. He fired two more shots, seemingly wildly into the air in front of him, missing everyone except a concrete column, before pressing the muzzle to his own temple.

Damn, that’s still hot.

“You’ll never take me alive!” He yelled laughing hysterically; making sure the others could hear it over the comms. Cries from the crew rang in his ear as he pulled the trigger, praying he’d been accurate in his counting.

Click.

Internally he breathed a sigh of relief. Outwardly he let out a shocked gasp.

“Oh shit! I’m out of ammo!”

The surrounding party laughed and laid into him, pummelling him with blows from blunt objects, fists and feet. It didn’t last long before one of the members had him at gunpoint, two others restrained him, while another took his pistol and searched him for weapons, removing the knife holstered on his belt and tucking it into her own. She pulled off his mask, and was momentarily startled by his face paint, but collected herself to remove his communicator and crush it under her heel. Ryan struggled convincingly while they led him away and shoved him into the trunk of one of their cars, removing his boots, jacket and body armour before tossing his mask back in with him and slamming the trunk closed.

Without his communicator, Ryan couldn’t hear Michael frantically calling his name, racing down the stairs just in time to see the cars speed out of the garage.

In the trunk of the car, Ryan carried on for a bit so as not to raise suspicions, kicking out at whatever he could, mostly making noise and trying to save his energy. After a while he decided to give it a rest and focus on the movements of the car, trying to catch snippets of conversation, outside noises and smells that might give clues to their location.

Eventually the car came to a stop and he could hear the doors opening. Instinctively, he pulled his mask back on and curled into a defensive ball on his back, with his knees drawn up to his chest and his forearms over his face, hands clenched into fists over his head. That way, if they tried to hit him by surprise, he would sustain the least injury.

Muffled voices outside the car were discussing what to do with him. He heard: “Leave him in the trunk, but someone keep an eye on it.” Then he heard nothing.

Ryan relaxed a little, unsure of how long he might be detained, starting to mentally prepare himself for what might come.

It felt like hours had passed, but in reality, it might have only been 20 minutes; he had no way to tell in the stuffy dark of the trunk, but eventually he heard footsteps and voices return. He curled into his defensive position again and waited.

As soon as the trunk opened, a golf club came swinging in, striking his lower forearms. He yelped in pain, but he was thankful he’d been ready for it, otherwise it would have landed squarely across his chest. He held his palms open in surrender, but kept his arms up. A red welt was already appearing on his arms. The fluorescent light outside was blinding, he squinted to see the club stop mid-swing and a pistol was aimed at his head, a gruff voice behind it saying: “Up. Out. Now. No funny
Ryan complied, climbing carefully out of the trunk and stretching his limbs. He was in an unfinished underground parking lot, by the sounds and smell of the place it was likely near the docks of Los Santos.

“Shadowlz wants to see you.”

Ryan stiffened, but said nothing and allowed himself to be led into an almost bare, unfinished room. There was a chair, a low table with a black bag next to it and a hook connected to a mechanical pulley system by the far wall; the sort that looked like it might be used to lift a motor out of a car, but that was all. The walls were rough concrete, the same as the floor, although there was a large, cheap rug in the centre of the room that seemed remarkably out of place given the context of the situation.

Unless they planned on using it to dispose of his body later. How cliché.

“Shadowlz, meet the Vagabond.”

Ryan was shoved violently forward, thrown off-balance and landed hard on his knees just as a figure stepped out in front of him. Ryan didn’t move to get up, but noted the contrast between the worn, steel-toe boots Shadowlz wore under the smooth grey fabric of suit pants.

He glanced upwards. 3-piece suit, how fashionable.

Shadowlz looked down at him curiously, but frowned almost disapprovingly.

Ryan warily got back on his feet.

Shadowlz was taller than Ryan, at least 6’3” and built proportionately, but he had a shockingly innocent face that looked like it would fit in with the lads. Clean shaven, wide brown eyes under neatly trimmed light brown hair; he radiated charisma. He was the kind of guy that if you bumped into on the street, you’d like immediately and that made Ryan extremely uncomfortable.

“Hello, Ryan,” Shadowlz said simply in an almost effeminate voice.

Ah. That’s unsettling.

Nobody outside of the crew ever called him Ryan. He was always the Vagabond, and that’s how he liked it. Keeping his persona separate, it made it easier to keep his guard up.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, you caught us a bit off-guard, you see? We weren’t expecting uh… guests.” He slightly hissed the word.

Ryan resolved to say nothing, merely tilting his head slightly, which he knew made for a creepy display with his mask on.

Shadowlz was unconcerned with it though, peering through the holes of the mask to get a better view of his eyes underneath.

“Yes, it’s definitely you under there, I was a bit worried it might have been a decoy.” He raised his eyebrows at Ryan, looking for a response. “Nothing? No?”

Shadowlz sighed and motioned another, somehow even larger man over to his side. The remainder of the gang left the room. The large man held a length of rope and wore a wicked grin, like he was lucky to have been chosen for such a task. Ryan couldn’t help but feel a little flattered and for a
moment he considered making a joke about it, but thought better of it and continued to play it silent.

“Alright then, well, I suppose you know what comes next. You can fight us if you want, but I can promise you won’t win,” Shadowlz said matter-of-factly.

Ryan pondered the idea of taking them both down. He could probably do it, but then he’d have to take on the rest of the gang outside who were armed and he was without body armour. That was also beside the point. Instead he shrugged and reluctantly allowed the larger man to tie his hands in front of him with the smooth nylon rope.

He was led to the far wall and his hands were secured to the hook that was connected to a hoist overhead. The larger man activated the mechanical hoist, drawing Ryan’s arms above his head, painfully stretching his already bruised ribs and pinching his shoulder. He was forced up onto his toes and then the hoist stopped, leaving him balancing precariously. There was a wall behind him, but it was just far enough away so that it offered no support.

Shadowlz motioned for the other man to leave the room. He hesitated for a moment in the doorway, looking worried. “You know we still need him alive.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to kill him,” Shadowlz reassured him and sauntered back over to Ryan. “…Yet.” He smiled and it was eerily welcoming. “Now, the infamous Vagabond, are we going to have some fun.”

Chapter End Notes

Looks like things are getting real dark again.
Probably going to have to update the tags/ratings after this.
Ryan had been expecting this; he was an old hand at getting information this way. There was usually a 'gentle' warm up session to break them down a bit, then questioning, then stuff started to get serious but mostly non-lethal for as long as it took to get the information they needed. Hopefully the crew would be onto it long before things got too dire.

Shadowlz reached out and tugged off the black skull mask, tousling Ryan’s hair; long strands falling about his face and sticking in his black and white paint. He wouldn’t be able to hide behind the mask, but that he was also expecting and was yet another reason he wore the face paint.

Almost as if reading his mind, Shadowlz said slowly, “This isn’t going to go down how you’re expecting it to.”

Now they were alone, and the mask was off, Ryan figured it was safe to drop the silent act. He smirked. “I hate to disappoint you, but so far it all seems pretty predictable.”

Shadowlz’s lips twitched upwards.

There was that smile again. Ryan hated that smile immensely. He swore he would wipe it off his face as soon as he got the chance.

“The position’s new,” Ryan admitted teasingly.

“Mmm, you’ll see how that works. Give it time.”

Ryan knew this trick, he could already feel it in his lungs and diaphragm. In that position, he had to work for every breath; as his muscles tired, it became harder and harder to breathe. It didn’t help that he was already covered in bruises from the beating in the garage.

Shadowlz surprised him with a hard elbow to the solar plexus, causing him to heave and gasp for breath.

Not helping.

“I still remember the first time, you know.” Shadowlz paced as he mused quietly. “The first time I encountered the Fake AH Crew. I couldn’t believe my luck; you just wandered into the compound. I didn’t even have to do any recon.” He punched Ryan in the stomach again for good measure, “I just took a pot shot at Ramsey. It was hilarious to see his reaction; to see how fast they all turned on you. And Brownman – Ray – wow, what a shot!”

Ryan snarled at the mention of Ray, feeling hot, bitter bile rise in the back of his throat.

“You ate the dirt hard. I thought you were dead. Honestly, I was surprised you survived at all.”

“What can I say? It takes a lot to kill me,” Ryan quipped.

“I have no doubt, in fact, I’m kind of counting on it.” Shadowlz landed a hard, high kick to Ryan’s ribs, causing him to grunt involuntarily. “But when I found Brownmn – Ray– up on that roof; after he realised you weren’t the one who shot Geoff…” Shadowlz leaned in close. “He was shaking like a leaf. Just staring down his scope, watching you bleed out. He didn’t even notice me walk up behind him. He went down easy enough; I even had time to get his communicator. I could’ve killed him...
then, sure, but I thought it’d be so much better to see how you all dealt with that little slip up.”

Ryan glared at him with piercing eyes.

Shadowlz ignored him, turning around to rummage through the black bag, producing a small metal tin. He flipped open the lid and removed something cylindrical, but keeping his back to Ryan, he couldn’t make out what it was. He fiddled with things inside the case; faint metallic clicks and the sound of metal turning against metal. Ryan heard a quiet clicking, like the sound of a lighter or welding tool igniting and Shadowlz turned to face him again.

“Frankly, I was a little surprised I didn’t wake up to the headline: ‘Bloodbath in Los Santos, Vagabond takes down FAHC kingpin Geoff Ramsey’ the next morning,” Shadowlz mimed theatrically.

“Well, you don’t know much about the Fake AH Crew then,” Ryan scoffed, still trying to make out what Shadowlz was holding.

“Oh, but I know enough... I know they don’t trust you. They assumed you were a traitor then, all it took was a few words from their beloved leader. And now, again… They still don’t trust you fully, and rightly so, hmm? They’re threatened by you. If there’s one person in the crew that will bring them down, it’s you.”

Ryan snorted disdain. The thing that Shadowlz was holding looked vaguely like a mechanical sculpting tool or maybe… a soldering iron?

“You don’t want to believe me. That’s ok. I want to make sure you’re fully aware of the role you’re inevitably going to play in their downfall…” Shadowlz grinned, following Ryan’s line of sight to the tool he was holding. “Oh, you’re wondering what this is?”

Ryan smirked, trying to mask his apprehension with cockiness, “I’m a curious guy.”

“I think you’d really like this. Very handy, you see… It’s a cordless, butane soldering iron. It’s got this nifty tip on it –” He held it up for Ryan to see, a knife-like tip, wickedly sharp, and now probably searing-hot blade. “–I just couldn’t resist trying it out.”

Ryan must have looked confused because Shadowlz smiled, grotesque with barely-contained sadistic glee.

“Branding’s come so far from the days of cattle ranching.” Shadowlz flashed canines and Ryan felt his blood run cold. “I mean, it’s not exactly the same as the surgical grade stuff you’re supposed to use, but for what I want... well, who the fuck cares.”

The way he dropped all pretence at the end actually sent a chill down Ryan’s spine. There was no doubt in his mind this man was a psychopath.

A strange, dark part of Ryan wished he’d thought of it.

He’d been burned before, the usual shit; had cigarettes put out on him by douchebags pretending to be tough and trying to intimidate him. Not quite like this though.

Shadowlz placed a hand firmly on Ryan’s hip, and manoeuvred him to spin around to face the wall. There was little Ryan could do to resist without stable purchase on the ground.

A hand on the back of his head pushed him forward into the wall and Ryan felt the neck of his T-shirt pulled up behind him. There was a quiet sizzle and a slightly warm sensation as the fabric fell
against his back, but looser now, more open. Ryan realised it had been sliced with the hot knife, exposing the skin at the base of his neck.

*A cliché place for a brand.* He thought bitterly, still not quite accepting of what was about to happen to him.

That all changed the moment the iron touched his skin. It was a brief contact at first. Barely a second, but the pain was instant, and the sizzle of his skin made his hair stand on end.

It suddenly occurred to him: what was being *etched permanently into his skin?*

The next stroke was more definitive, and Ryan felt the sharp edge of the blade combine with the searing heat from the metal as Shadowlz pressed it deep into his flesh. It burned white hot pain and felt like all the air had been forced from his lungs with the sudden intensity. The smell was something of its own entirely. As the iron was removed, the pain didn’t subside at all; his skin still felt like it was on fire, melting, like acid was eating it away. Shadowlz went back in over the same line, deeper this time, it felt, and Ryan wondered how deep the brand would be… what was the intention for this? Or was he just looking to inflict pain?

Ryan clenched his teeth against the sensation; his face contorting as he struggled to get a full breath through the pain he was enduring and the position he’d been forced into. At the next stroke, the pain somewhat subsided in the immediate area and Ryan realised some of the nerves must have sealed off. The only saving grace. He also knew it was only temporary. If he was to survive this – and that was a big *if* – the healing process would be even more painful.

The smell of his own burning flesh made his head spin as he hyperventilated through the pain. It felt like the fumes were stinging his eyes as he screwed them shut against the pain, tears squeezing out the corners and streaking down his face. His body broke into a cold sweat and he shook violently, muscles contracting involuntarily, like being Tased. It did nothing to help the process and made the iron dig deeper into his skin. It hardly felt like Shadowlz had progressed with whatever he was doing at all.

Finally, Ryan relented, letting out an ungodly howl of pain before snapping his mouth shut and hissing breath through his teeth, thrashing futilely against the ropes that held him and trying to twist away from the iron.

Shadowlz simply stepped back for a moment and waited for him to calm.

“Y’know, Judas was supposedly the favourite disciple, before he betrayed Jesus,” Shadowlz mused. “Sold him out with a kiss and everything. You probably know the story… 30 pieces of silver and all that. Not that you would ever do such a petty thing. It’s more the symbolism of it. Iconic, really. No matter how much you’re loved, even forgiven… you’ll always carry that knowledge that it was you…”

Shadowlz grabbed a handful of Ryan’s hair and yanked his head back, twisting it around to look him in the face. His paint was starting to streak grey and run, but still, Ryan’s eyes were defiant. *But it wasn’t. I didn’t. I wouldn’t. Never.*

“…one way or another, it *will be you* who unmakes your crew.”

Shadowlz placed one hand on Ryan’s shoulder to hold him still and got back to work, the smell permeating the room once more.

Ryan wasn’t sure when he’d lost track of time. He greyed out, his head hanging limply, stretching
the skin on the back of his neck, pulling on the burned flesh and making it flare up in pain anew. The other, larger man came in to check on them after some time, but Ryan was hardly present anymore, his mind having settled into a haze of pain and he wondered how much of it might even be lack of oxygen as he struggled to draw breath. At one point, there was a reprieve as the soldering iron ran out of gas. Ryan relaxed with relief but only for a second as Shadowlz began to muse to himself.

“Not a bad little tool this one, you can get a solid 45 minutes of burn out of it. Good thing I brought more butane.”

Ryan heard himself let out a barely audible croak of “no” as he realised it wasn’t over. He hated himself for it. The time it took to refill the canister was mercilessly short and soon Ryan’s world was blinding, burning, searing pain again. This time however, it was blessedly short-lived. The iron was removed, and the pain slowly pulsed as it built again, residual heat still cooking his flesh and sending shockwaves through his nerves. His whole body was twitching involuntarily.

“Hmm… that looks pretty nasty. Don’t want it to get infected now. Better keep it clean.”

There was a strong smell of aniseed and alcohol as something cold was poured over his back, sending his body into reactive shock, not sure if it was hot or cold or burning him, but it stung the open wound and soaked into his shirt. As the smell hit his nostrils, his stomach finally turned, and he heaved, vomiting thin bile down the wall in front of him. It took a long moment for him to regain his senses.

The distinctive click of a camera shutter and morbid curiosity overcame him, bringing him back to reality.

Shadowlz slapped him on the back and gently coerced him around to face him with that hideous smile. His eyes traced over Ryan’s face, soaking in the image of the broken Vagabond, head hung, eyes downcast, face paint streaked grey with sweat and tears.

He held up the phone proudly, displaying his handiwork. “I don’t think I did too badly. Should scar up nicely. If you live long enough to appreciate it, that is. Spoiler: you won’t. But it will be a nice touch if we give your body back to your crew.”

Ryan barely lifted his head. He squinted to see it, his eyes refusing to focus. In scratchy, bloody, burned writing, cut deep into his flesh, the word “JUDAS” was permanently etched.

Ryan’s body was still shaking. At first Shadowlz assumed he was sobbing, but as his movements became more violent, he realised he was laughing. It was the same maniacal laughter that so often accompanied the screams of the Vagabond’s victims. His own personal soundtrack to death.

A crazed grin spread over Ryan’s face and without raising his head, his intense blue eyes looked up at Shadowlz. For a fleeting moment, it made his blood run cold and Shadowlz suddenly realized why some people called him Mad. It took him a moment to recollect himself.

“You know Judas supposedly went mad with guilt after his betrayal,” Shadowlz taunted, although there was a slight quaver of uncertainty in his voice. “In the end, he hung himself. Bought himself a one-way ticket to hell. An apt end for a villain.”

Ryan’s laughter stopped abruptly.

“When we’re done here and you’re begging me for mercy, and believe me, you will be begging; I’ll remember this,” Ryan growled, flashing his canines.

Shadowlz raised an eyebrow. “You’re assuming too much. For one: that you’ll get out of here alive.”
He bent down to pick up Ryan’s mask, turning it over in his hands, before pulling it back on over Ryan’s head and carefully repositioning it. “You’re quite the showman, you know? You might even enjoy this next part.” He turned on his heel and headed to the door, tapping on it a few times and summoning a small group of people to the room. Ryan vaguely recognised some of them as the group who had grabbed him, still nursing wounds he’d inflicted. They were carrying various items of tech and film equipment; a camera on a tripod, monitors, cables, a boom mic.

“What the hell is this?” Ryan demanded, looking around warily.

“Livestream. All the kids are doing it,” the larger-than-Shadowlz man said simply.

“I’ll send the invites, they’ll recognize my username, should get a response,” Shadowlz said as he strode out of the room, leaving the set-up crew alone with Ryan.

Despite being fully clothed and his face hidden behind his mask, he felt very exposed. He realised whatever kind of livestream they had planned would definitely involve his torture and humiliation made public. He swallowed hard. The tightness in his chest was back, made worse by the already suffocating position he’d been placed in. This was not going to be pretty.

Shadowlz had been right about one thing, this is not what he had been expecting.
Fall of the Vagabond

After Ryan’s capture, Michael had discreetly followed the cars back to the docks of Los Santos until he lost them in the industrial backlots. The crew had kept up the impression that they didn’t know their comms had been compromised; claiming they’d lost sight of the cars, that they’d have trouble tracking them down and bickering after a failed heist like they would usually, just in case anyone was listening on the airwaves.

 Afterwards, the crew met back at the safe house to debrief.

“Dammit Ryan,” Geoff muttered to himself as the others settled in. “For a smart guy, he always has to go and do the stupid thing.”

“To be fair, Geoff, it might not be the stupid thing,” Jeremy suggested cautiously. “I mean, they’re gonna have to do something with him now, which means they can’t just go back into hiding.”

Geoff pondered this for a moment, hands over his face, fingers rubbing at his temples.

“Hey guys,” Gavin said, eyes glued to his laptop. “Looks like we got an invite from Shadowlz.”


“Some livestream thing. Should I accept? Looks like we all got it.”

Geoff’s eyebrows furrowed. “Someone accept it, but be ready to power off if something weird happens.”

Gavin spun his laptop around for the rest of the crew to see, settling in on the arm of the sofa, while Jack got up to stand behind; leaning on the back of the sofa over Geoff and Michael.

The screen was black, save for a scrolling display on the left side showing usernames of people joining. A view counter in the bottom right-hand corner showed there were 212 people currently viewing and it was steadily going up.

“Un-mute your audio, dude.”

Michael leaned over Gavin and cranked up the volume. They could faintly hear shuffling of people moving things around, setting up for something.

“I have no idea what we’re looking at here… This might be a distraction or something to confuse us?” Jack suggested.

Suddenly the black screen was white, then as the camera was adjusted to the light in the room, the crew could see the figure of Ryan come into view. The caption at the bottom of the screen read: ‘Fall of the Vagabond – Fake AH Crew’.

“Oh fuck.”

* * *

The set-up crew were finishing up and checking their equipment when Shadowlz returned with that horrible smile.
“200 viewers already and we haven’t even begun.”

Ryan felt like his mind had been shattered into a million tiny pieces and he was grasping at them to try to reassemble it. The pain at the back of his neck wasn’t subsiding. “What is this about? Who is watching?”

“Everybody,” Shadowlz said with a grin. “The fall of the Vagabond’s big news. People will always tune in to watch the Fake AH Crew, haven’t you ever watched the news? Every heist you pull gets media coverage. But even better, I’ve personally sent invites to the others, all the rival gangs and the rest of your crew.”

The crew. God, he hoped they’d be able to get to him.

Shadowlz glanced down at his phone. “They’ve accepted my invite, looks like it’s show time.”

Don’t let him get into your head.

He was already so shaken. Shadowlz had managed to bring his guard down and that was what scared Ryan the most.

Find a way to get the upper hand. Stay in control.

“Zutora,” Shadowlz called out to the larger man. “Going to need your help for the stream. Just follow my lead, you might want a baton or club or something too, something to mix it up.”

The larger man – Zutora – smirked and went to fetch whatever blunt implement he had in mind.

Trying to keep his mind of the burns, Ryan bounced a little on his toes; testing the hoist and his bonds. They held fast, only biting further into his skin and jolting his shoulders. He rubbed his fingers against themselves and clenched his fists, his right hand was going numb already and his arms were steadily following suit.

Zutora returned with the golf club Ryan had been assaulted with before and lingered in the doorway. The set-up crew gave a nod to Shadowlz to indicate they were ready and all talk and movement ceased in the room.

On set. Ryan thought grimly.

A red light blinked on the main camera which was aimed directly at him. Shadowlz stayed carefully out of frame for the first few moments, as Ryan could see by a monitor at the side of the room.

Great. I get to watch too. If his situation hadn’t been so dire, he might have been amused by the concept.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Shadowlz began. “I welcome you to witness the fall of the Vagabond.”

Ryan rolled his eyes under his mask. For fucks sake…

Shadowlz stepped into view of the camera, facing Ryan. “As many of you will know, the Fake AH Crew has been terrorizing the streets of Los Santos for more than seven years, the Vagabond has been acting on their behalf for more than half that time. But now…” Shadowlz paused looking back to the cameras with that smile. “We have him.”

Out of sight to the cameras, Shadowlz nodded to Zutora, who silently stalked over with the club in hand and took a full-force swing into Ryan’s abdomen, causing him to jerk his legs upwards, nearly
dislocating his shoulders with the movement but aside from a stifled grunt, Ryan made no sound. He struggled for breath as the next blow connected with his ribs and he heard an audible crack, he clenched his jaw to stop from screaming, hissing breath through his nose.

Shadowlz held up a hand and Zutora’s onslaught paused.

“We would like to know a little more about the Fake AH Crew,” Shadowlz addressed Ryan directly. “Like where they’re currently hiding.”

Ryan gave the slightest shake of his head, but he remained stoically silent.

“In that case, we’ll have to continue.”

* * *

The crew watched on as Ryan was pummelled, paralysed by what they were seeing. The only saving grace was that they couldn’t see his face under the mask. They knew it was him by the way he held himself, even through the blows; it was definitely Ryan. The man hitting him had switched from the golf club to his bare fists, but it didn’t look like it hurt any less.

Jack suddenly broke the silence. “We can’t just watch this. We have to do something.”

Gavin sprang to his feet first and rushed to get his other laptop. “I’ll find out where they are.”

He started by searching satellite images and city plans of the area Michael had followed the car to for any places that might match where they were keeping Ryan. He also opened a small window with the stream and placed it in the corner of his screen.

“Someone needs to keep an eye on what’s happening with Ryan,” Geoff said, rising to his feet as well. Jack had already turned to organise something in a clear indication he wouldn’t be able to watch it.

Michael was very quiet and looked pale as he stared wide-eyed at the screen.

“Michael…” Geoff spared him. “I need you to start getting some sticky bombs ready, taking inventory we need to be ready to go as soon as we get a lock on them.”

Michael looked up at him and gave a small, relieved smile. “I’m on it Geoff.”

“I can kind of keep a half-eye on it,” Gavin said, pointing to the small window on his screen but cringing slightly as Ryan caught a blow to the face.

“I’ll watch,” said Jeremy. “I’m keeping track of all these usernames too, I’m screen-capping it; something might come up…” As he looked back to the screen they noticed a comment box had opened at the bottom of the window and text messages were starting to scroll up the side of the screen.

“What the fuck?” Geoff stared bewildered as he started to read the messages aloud, causing Michael and Jack to peek their heads back around the door frame.

“Lol, can’t believe you caught the vagabond. Randoms 4 lyf.” Geoff read aloud. “Oh for fucks sake, what the fuck is this shit?”

Shadowlz again halted the larger man’s attacks on Ryan and turned to the camera, moving to take up
the full view of the screen. “Some of you may have noticed that we have opened the comments on this stream. This is for two reasons: firstly, proof we are live, for those who may doubt it, and secondly, we are now taking suggestions. What would you like to see us do to the Vagabond?”

The first comment popped up on its own and froze on the screen for just a few seconds. It simply read: Skin him alive.

Everyone held their breath.

Then the comment stream unfroze and a wall of text rolled up the side of the screen, they could catch words, but not whole comments. Burn, shoot, slice, fingers, eyes, tongue, too good for him...

“Fuck! Go!”

* * *

Shadowlz’s eyes lit up as he read the comments now flowing in. “Ooh, very creative. Some of these are good, even you’d be impressed, Vagabond.”

Zutora picked up the golf club and gave one more swing at Ryan’s chest for good measure before stalking off to get a drink while Shadowlz continued his show for the cameras. Ryan was already spluttering from the blows he’d sustained, but the final hit made him heave, coughing blood into the inside of his mask. He wished in vain he could have spat it at Shadowlz.

“I’d have thought you’d be more willing to give us information, especially after your own crew set you up.”

Ryan stiffened, he shouldn’t have been surprised, but it was still jarring to hear. Of course Shadowlz knew. It had been set up through the compromised communication system. They knew that Geoff had set him up to be ambushed, and they knew he’d foiled it.

“I’ve heard the things they say about you, behind your back, how they call you mad, claim you can’t be trusted. I’ve heard you turn on them before.”

Judas. The brand stung the back of his neck. Ryan tried to block it out.

“Don’t let him get to you.

“They still don’t trust you, you know? They’re just waiting for you to sell them out. Even now, watching this, they are watching, by the way…”

* * *

“What? Who’s doing that? Oi, Jeremy, is that you?” Gavin called out in surprise, making his way into the living room, laptop in hand.

“What’s going on?” Geoff’s head appeared in the doorway followed by Jack and Michael.

Jeremy was set up in front of four laptops and the gaming system running on the TV, with the livestream up on all of them, logged in under everyone’s different user IDs.

Jeremy was furiously typing comments, bouncing from one device to another as the others tried to make sense of what was going on.
“Little help?” Asked Jeremy. “I only have so many hands.”

“What are you doing?” Michael asked squinting to read the comments as they came up on the TV screen. “Wait, are you logged into Ryan’s account?”

“I’m logged into all of your accounts, except Geoff’s, I don’t have your password, but it’d look good if you could log in too.”

Geoff’s eyes scanned over the comments, picking out Ryan’s ID from the list.

<BM Vagabond> Aww, a tribute stream, how sweet, you shouldn’t have.

<BM Vagabond> Don’t know what kind of stunt you’re trying to pull, but I like it.

<BM Vagabond> FYI for those playing along at home, that’s not me.

<BM Vagabond> I have a much better physique.

Jeremy had been using Ryan’s account to cast doubt.

“Jeremy you’re a fucking genius!” Geoff exclaimed, “Back him up lads.” He logged onto his own account and started typing comments.

<DGgeoff> You’re all idiots. Vagabond’s laughing his ass off on the couch next to me.

<MJones> Kids will do anything for attention these days.


<JackP> What kind of asshat pulls a stunt like this and expects to get away with it?

<GavinoFree> Vagabond, do you think he’s doing you justice?

<BM Vagabond> Hard to say, willing to bet he looks better than you under that mask though, Gavino.

<JDoolz> Want to look more like Gavin? www.NoseNoBoundaries.com

“Lil J!” Gavin scoffed, and the rest of the crew giggled.

“Can’t make it seem like we’re taking this too seriously,” Jeremy explained.

“He’s got a point,” said Michael. Some of the commenters were beginning to agree with them, asking questions of their own. The Fake AH Crew clearly still had some supporters.

<ImCarly> How do we know that is the Vagabond? Proof?

<VonGriff58> Fake AH Crew aren’t convinced. I’m calling BS.

<EvaSoThrowed> Anyone checked Snopes? Hoax?

<Pingnuts007> It’s clearly a stunt. FAHC probably set it up themselves. They been shit since BrownMan left. Their desperate for attention these days.

Ouch.

Their eyes drifted back to the image on the screen. It was hard to tell under the mask, but Ryan
wasn’t looking so good. Eventually Shadowlz checked the comments for feedback and looked mildly annoyed.

“Seriously?” He raised his eyebrows at the camera, seemingly looking directly at the crew. “You’re all doubting me now?”

The comments turned viciously; demanding proof, claiming no one knows what he looked like under the mask to confirm. His eyes scanned over his own screen disapprovingly.

“Oh, I see where this is coming from.” Shadowlz looked back at Ryan, his head now hanging limply, but the crew could see his eyes still alert beneath the mask. “Looks like your crew got into your account.”

“That’s right motherfucker,” Michael growled at the screen. “Let’s see you turn this around.”

Ryan’s head twitched at the mention of the crew, but other than that he said nothing and showed no signs of responding.

The comments were still scrolling, many now demanding proof.

Jeremy jumped for the only unmanned laptop at the table – the burner he’d picked up to try to infiltrate the Randoms. With deft fingers he logged in and furiously tapped at the keys.

<NotoriousDLC> Make him confess he’s the Vagabond.

“Jeremy! What the hell?” Gavin cried.

Geoff jumped in before Jeremy could explain himself. “Ryan’s not gonna give ‘em shit, Lil J just bought him more time.”

Within seconds other commenters were in agreement and the call for a confession went up.

They watched the screen as Shadowlz grinned and turned back to Ryan. “Seems they want a confession, care to tell them who you are?”

Predictably, Ryan said nothing.

Jack stood. “Guys c’mon, we gotta move if we want to get him back in one piece.”

The crew nodded, but their eyes remained fixed to the screens.

Shadowlz’s eyes drifted back to the comments, a smile playing on the edge of his lips. “Unmask him? Ooh, maybe... If you insist.” His smile widened as he looked over the comments rolling in.
Ryan desperately tried to regain his composure before his mask was removed. He was struggling to breathe and the inside of his mask was dank with condensation from his breath and blood he had coughed up. He still had his face paint, he reminded himself reassuringly. Very few people outside of the crew would be able to identify him; most people who survived encounters with him knew his distinctively deep voice better than his face. He made a mental note not to say anything or make any noise that might let him be identified.

He sure as hell wasn’t confessing anything. Sounded like the crew was banking on the idea that Shadowlz wouldn’t kill him until there was no doubt to the world that he was in fact the Vagabond. Ryan wasn’t so sure, but he knew it was pretty much his only option.

*Stay in control.*

He coughed again and more blood filled his mouth, but this time he held it there, the familiar metallic taste washing over his tongue.

“You saw it here first,” Shadowlz said without flourish as he tugged at the top of the mask. The blood inside the mask smeared across Ryan’s face, streaking the face paint with red. Dark bruises were already beginning to form on his face from Zutora’s beatings. Ryan’s hair was dishevelled and stuck out at odd angles. His eyes burned with intensity as he glared up at his captor.

Shadowlz’s lips twitched into *that* smile and Ryan couldn’t help himself. He spat the blood with all the force he could muster, landing straight in the smiling bastard’s eye.

The smile dissolved into malice as Shadowlz briefly lost himself to anger and punched Ryan hard in the face, connecting with the bridge of his nose, his head snapping back and his eyes tearing up instantly.

Ryan wanted so badly to laugh, to show that it meant nothing to him, but his laugh was too distinct, he didn’t dare try it, settling for a smug smirk instead.

Shadowlz pulled a handkerchief from his vest pocket – because *of course* he had a handkerchief in his vest pocket – and dabbed at the blood in his eye. “Make sure you get a close-up of his face,” Shadowlz murmured to the camera crew, scanning over the comments as he continued to clean himself up. He scoffed quietly. “Seems they’re not very impressed, although there are a lot of amused comments about your choice of face paint.” He looked back to the comments. “…his hair?” Shadowlz laughed again, more in earnest this time, clearly now directly responding to the comments as they came up. “He’s been hiding that mop under the mask.” He continued to read as he removed his jacket, draped it neatly over the table and carefully rolled up his sleeves to his elbows.

Ryan was thankful for the brief distraction as he averted his gaze from the camera lens as best he could and focused on getting enough air into his lungs.

Shadowlz, either responding to prompts from the commenters or simply having grown tired of them, returned his attention to Ryan. “So, Vagabond, the audience wants a confession. Gonna give it to them?”

Ryan sneered at him, blood now trickling from his nose, making him look deranged.

“No? Alright, here’s the deal…” Shadowlz was addressing the camera as much as he was speaking to Ryan. “I’m going to kill you. With or without a confession. If you confess, it will be quick. If you
don’t… well, I guess we’ll just see how long you last.”

Without his mask, Ryan’s peripherals were improved and out of the corner of his eye he could see Zutora’s eyes briefly widen at the threat.

*That’s interesting.*

For a split second the thought entered his mind that perhaps Shadowlz was bluffing about killing him, but it barely had a chance to properly form before he felt the cold steel press against his throat. The sharp edge of the blade of Ryan’s own, previously confiscated, hunting knife scratched against his skin as he breathed, afraid to swallow.

Shadowlz’s grin was back, as he withdrew the knife from his throat and ran it down Ryan’s left arm, tracing a line from his elbow to his armpit, leaving a shallow cut through his skin and finally slicing through the sleeve of his washed-out black T-shirt.

Ryan barely reacted, having actually not felt the cut of the knife in his nerve-damaged arm, but looked to see the blood beading along the wound and soaking into his shirt. Shadowlz used the tip of the knife to pull the fabric of his T-shirt away and sliced cleanly though it from the neck to the hem, then through the other sleeve so that the fabric completely fell away.

Ryan sighed. *There goes another good shirt.*

His body was covered in red welts and bruises, overlaying older, silvery scars. With a deft flick of the wrist Shadowlz ensured there would be at least a few new ones joining the collection after today. If he survived long enough for them to heal anyway.

He started with small, shallow cuts on Ryan’s torso, dragging the knife slowly though his skin, letting it catch and tear in places, gently twisting it in others to ensure the wound wouldn’t heal cleanly. Ryan grimaced though the pain, which was mostly just annoying and stinging, especially in comparison to the branding. He’d been with Jack when he got tattooed once before and he’d described it as feeling “slicey”; Ryan wondered if this was anything close to that. Soon he was covered in his own blood and the stinging sensation was starting to creep into his consciousness, competing with his other pains for attention. The burn at his neck, numbness in his arms, the ache in his shoulders, the dull throbbing pain from the beatings, the sharp, stabbing pain of broken ribs and his now constantly cramping legs and feet provided a veritable symphony of discomfort.

Shadowlz leaned in close and lowered his voice so only Ryan could hear. “I thought your crew would’ve turned up sooner. Looks like you’ve actually been abandoned this time, Ryan.”

The use of his name so bluntly impacted him more than any of the blows he’d taken and he physically recoiled.

His reaction wasn’t lost on Shadowlz, who pulled away, eyeing the camera again and stepping aside to allow them to capture his handiwork. “It’s quite a drop from the top, Vagabond… how are you feeling down there?”

Ryan caught sight of himself in the monitor, it didn’t look good. He was covered in bruises, open wounds of varying lengths and depths, blood trails punctuating the contours of his body, making him look pale and gaunt by contrast. He’d looked bad before, but he usually kept his wounds covered under his jacket; hidden from his enemies and the crew alike, so as not to show weakness or garner pity. The crew would be watching. Or maybe not. Maybe Geoff had forbidden them, leaving him to his fate. Maybe it was Geoff logged into his account, creating plausible deniability for when they found a replacement. Abandoning him. Just another sacrifice for the good of crew. At least he
wouldn’t be their downfall.

“Looks like you’ve actually been abandoned this time, Ryan.”

Shadowlz’s words replayed in his head.

“I thought your crew would’ve turned up sooner…”

“…one way or another, it will be you who unmakes your crew.”

He was expecting them.

Ryan’s head snapped up, eyes wide but determined. Shadowlz still had the knife in hand and his head cocked to one side as if trying to decide the placement for his next cut. As he stepped forward, Ryan put all his weight into his arms, drew his knees up to his chest and kicked out hard. His heels impacted Shadowlz’s chest, knocking the wind out of him and throwing him off-balance, stumbling backwards and coughing.

“It’s a trap!” Ryan shouted, looking directly at the camera and swinging his legs back down, desperately trying to find his footing before Shadowlz picked himself up. The force of the swing caused the hoist to sway and suddenly Ryan’s arms came crashing down in front of him, the movement sending waves of pain shooting through his shoulders and before he could react, he was on the floor in a heap.

Shadowlz was up now, fuming with rage, the knife still in his hand. Ryan willed his legs to work under him, awkwardly springing to his feet, nearly losing his balance again when his left foot seized with cramps. He lunged forward, making for the door, but he wasn’t quick enough as Shadowlz charged at him, tackling him to the ground. Ryan landed flat on his back, Shadowlz hovering over him. Ryan’s hands were still bound together, but he managed to swing his arms at Shadowlz’s head, the heel of his left hand impacting his jaw and snapping his head sideways.

Shadowlz was quick. Ryan supposed it helped that he hadn’t been restrained, branded and beaten for hours. Before he knew it, Shadowlz was back on his feet and his steel-toed boot connected with Ryan’s ear, and the world exploded again. His vision wavered, and all sound was consumed by a high-pitch ringing.

Suddenly Shadowlz was on top of him, his knees pressing into Ryan’s arms, breath hot on his face. Ryan couldn’t hear what he was saying. The knife was at his throat again, he could feel the skin break under the pressure of the contact and he could only hope it would be quick.

At least I sharpened my knife.

* * *

The feed went black.

Gavin made a strangled noise as he saw it cut out on his screen.

“Guys!” Jeremy called the crew back.


“I don’t know Geoff! Ryan said it was a trap and made a break for it, then the feed cut out. I don’t
know…I don’t know what happened…” Jeremy paused, swallowing. “The other guy was fast, and he had a knife and... I don’t know if Ryan made it.”

“Jesus Christ.” Jack pulled anxiously at his beard.

The crew were silent, save for the tapping of keys as Gavin kept working on finding where they were keeping Ryan.

An alert tone made them all jump. It was a message sent to Ryan’s account. From Shadowlz.

_You have 3 hours to decide how much of the Vagabond you get back._
Consciousness swam back to Ryan in slivers. Gasping for breath, a grab of blinding pain and then
the serene oblivion consumed him again. A sharp kick in the ribs, ringing in his ears and then
nothingness. A blinding light that seemed to burn his brain. Pins and needles traversing his limbs,
and finally, he was able to grasp at reality for more than a few seconds. His ears were still ringing,
but it was more muted now, as though it was coming from inside his skull. He squinted through his
long blonde lashes to dull the too-bright fluorescent light that seemed to fill every corner of the room.
As far as he could see, he was alone; on his side on the cold concrete floor, his knees pulled up to his
chest in a kind of foetal position. His arms were unresponsive as he tried to move, uncomfortably
pinned behind his back; his legs weren’t doing much better, seizing with cramps as he tried to extend
them. As his eyes gradually adjusted he craned his neck to look over his shoulder and felt a sting like
a papercut at his throat and a warm trickle of blood run down the side of his neck. The brand radiated
pain like it was still burning his flesh. He saw his hands were tied behind him with the same smooth
nylon rope from before. It was now bloodstained and his hands were a pale purplish colour from lack
of blood flow. He gently tried to curl his fingers and his right hand felt like it was on fire as he
attempted to reposition them to regain feeling. There was a large patch of blood on the floor where
his head had been that probably accounted for the ceaseless ringing in his head. His mouth was dry
and as he tried to lick his lips, he noticed the caked blood there too. A sudden inhalation of cold air
caused him to cough and he became aware of all the pains in his chest from broken ribs, bruises from
beatings and the cuts inflicted on his body. He glanced down and was greeted with hues of red and
brown and green and purple.

Wonderful.

His eyelids started to droop closed again, when suddenly the door creaked open and two men
walked in. Shadowlz and Zutora. Ryan closed his eyes and lay absolutely still, listening to their
movements as they shuffled things around the room.

It was now abundantly clear that Zutora was actually the one in charge of all this.

Ryan was slowly starting to put the pieces together. Less than an hour earlier he thought he was a
dead man, waiting for Shadowlz to slit his throat. Zutora was the one who cut the feed and jumped in
to stop it. Shadowlz had not been happy.

Ryan remembered the weight of the other man on his chest, hands covering his mouth and nose
before he’d lost consciousness. He’d been burked. But Zutora hadn’t allowed Shadowlz to finish the
job, so they clearly still needed him alive.

As bait. As a publicity stunt.

“Reckon he’s awake?” A voice cut through the ringing in his head.

“Oh, he’s awake. Vagabond? Will you be staying with us long this time?” Shadowlz mocked.

Ryan opened his eyes, already dark with pre-empted defiance. He could see the camera equipment
was still set up and had been moved, but didn’t appear to be on, this time just a camera and a
directional mic trained on him. Looked like the set-up team weren’t coming back. Probably preparing
for an attempted ambush in case the crew came for him.

“That depends, what’s the room service like?” He croaked out with a smirk through the grogginess.
Shadowlz laughed. “See, he’s fine! We’ll get a good show out of him yet.”

Well fuck.

“Just so you know; the AH crew aren’t coming. You might as well just get it over with,” Ryan said flatly, a little surprised with how honest his voice sounded.

“Aww, but that’d ruin all the fun,” Shadowlz tutted.

“Hmm, I’d hate to miss that…”

Zutora had dragged over a plain wooden chair and a roll of duct tape. Ryan could guess what came next. He was lifted up painfully by his arms, Shadowlz and Zutora dragged him to his knees, and they manhandled him to sit on the chair, forcing his arms over the high back and securing his ankles to the chair legs with the duct tape. He felt open and exposed, wounds stinging, branded letters still burning into the back of his neck. They turned the chair to face the camera set up.

“So, is this the part where it’s meant to get fun?” Sarcasm was his safety net.

Zutora ignored him. “Get the stuff, I’ll set up the stream.”

Shadowlz briefly left the room, meanwhile Zutora hooked up a laptop to the camera and presumably, started another recording. Shadowlz returned with a 5-Gal jerry can. Ryan immediately found himself sniffing the air to determine the contents. It smelled faintly of diesel, but more like it might just be residue, it didn’t have the sharp-sweet scent it would have if it had been full. When Ryan eyed the small towel Shadowlz was carrying, he knew it contained water. It must have shown on his face because Shadowlz’s eyes brightened at the sight.

“Don’t worry, it’s only water.” Shadowlz assured him sardonically.

“Yes, that’s, uh, hmm,” Ryan stuttered. “You and I might have different definitions of the word fun.” The blinking red light had flickered on the camera.

“You know, I disagree; I think you’d find this very fun. It’s funny how you change your tune when you’re the one getting fucked over.”

Ryan paused, looking exaggeratedly pensive. “Alright, I guess I gotta give you that one.”

Shadowlz shrugged and grinned, turning back to the camera. “Where are we at with the stream?”

“Ready to go when you are,” Zutora muttered, looking up from the screen. “Just don’t dick around too much this time, capisce?”

Shadowlz rolled his eyes but nodded. Zutora shrugged and tapped at a few keys.

“Do we think that’s something he’s capable of?” Ryan asked condescendingly. He was past the point of caring if he was recognised; he figured he’d already blown it when he tried to warn the crew about the impending trap.

Shadowlz took him by surprise this time, no introductions, no long-winded monologues; he simply hooked a foot around one of the front legs of the chair and kicked it out. The chair and Ryan toppled backwards. Ryan tucked his chin to his chest as he fell, but the back of his head still hit the solid concrete ground with a crack that felt like it split his skull and made his vision blur. His arms were still pinned behind him, but luckily the curve of the back of the chair prevented them from being crushed under his own weight. Small victories.
Shadowlz threw the damp towel unceremoniously over his face and seconds later the cold splash of water came flooding in. There was some small relief as the icy cold water trickled around to reach the back of his neck and soothe his still-burning skin. He held his breath at first, but it wasn’t long before his lungs felt like they were on fire. As soon as he tried to suck in air, the water felt like it flooded his airways. He knew it wasn’t as bad as his body was telling him, but there was no override switch for the feeling of being drowned, even for the Vagabond. He involuntarily thrashed his head, trying to dislodge the towel, or get away from the water and just as he thought he was going to succeed, the towel was pulled away and he was allowed to cough and gasp for breath, spluttering and dry-retching.

When he’d finally regained control of his breathing, Ryan found Shadowlz staring down at him with a bemused smile.

“See something you like?” Ryan coughed, maintaining his shield of sass as long as possible, but he could feel it starting to wear thin.

Shadowlz simply cocked his head to the side. “Maybe. Let’s see…” He pressed the towel to Ryan’s face, and Ryan instinctively tried to pull away.

He roughly wiped his face – his face paint. Shit. Luckily it was stubborn and the black around his eyes was mostly waterproof, just smudging under the efforts, but Shadowlz managed to remove most of it from the rest of Ryan’s face. His bruises and scars would be on show, maybe if he was lucky, his face was messed up enough for him to be unrecognizable.

“Check it out.” Shadowlz motioned for Zutora to get a better angle. “The Vagabond is just a man. Got a kind of ‘pretty boy’ face under all that paint… well, not so much anymore.”

Zutora laughed obnoxiously and Ryan wished he could just disappear into the floor, but he was careful not to show it. He kept his expression a mask of detached amusement, as though he was in on some joke they were not privy to.

Shadowlz picked up the jerry can and sloshed the contents around inside. “Don’t worry, still have plenty to go.” He tossed the cloth over Ryan’s face again and the waterboarding continued.

* * *

By the time Shadowlz had run out of water, Ryan was physically and mentally exhausted. The thought had even crossed his mind to actively try to drown himself, but his body would simply not allow him to do it. He now understood why it was such an effective torture method. His lungs and sinuses burned, and his throat was raw from coughing and vomiting the water he thought he’d swallowed or inhaled during the short breaks Shadowlz had afforded him.

Now that the can was empty, he lay acquiescent on the ground; breathing in short, raspy breaths. The water dripped off his face, making swirling grey patterns from his residual face paint and mixing in the long strands of his sandy hair, before leisurely making its way down the drain nearby.

Twice now. This is twice you’ve let him get the better of you.

The blood was starting to pool in his head from the position he’d been in, his vision was swimming. Shadowlz pulled the chair back upright and Ryan slumped forward as far as his arms would allow him, his head dropping to his chest and his wet hair falling around his face, looking even longer than usual. He was shaking involuntarily; the skin at the back of his neck felt like it was blistering.
It wasn’t worth fighting it. The crew wasn’t going to walk into a trap and he was due to be publicly executed soon enough anyway.

**Quitter. Don’t let them break you. At least go out swinging.**

He painfully swallowed the lump in his throat and allowed himself to shake, timing his laugh to match his shudders as best he could.

“Jesus, this again.” Shadowlz shook his head. “Your crew was right about you. You are crazy. Totally fucked in the head, Vagabond.”

“You don’t get it, do you? You get nothing from this. All this will get you is a painful death at the hands of the Fake AH Crew. They may not be coming for me now, but they _will_ catch up with you,” Ryan growled menacingly. “The only consolation you get is that without me around, you probably won’t suffer quite as long.”

Shadowlz’s expression darkened, the anger in him almost visibly building up. “You’re a smug prick, aren’t you?”

“So I’ve been told.” Ryan beamed back, gathering strength from the rise he’d gotten from him.

The quick backhand slap to the face that followed didn’t affect his smirk at all. Nor did the right hook that connected with his cheekbone and made his head ring.

Shadowlz shook it off and Ryan laughed again, this time it came out smooth as velvet. It was unmistakably the maniacal laugh of the Vagabond.

Again, it sent chills down Shadowlz’s spine. Even Zutora felt uncomfortable.

“How long?” Shadowlz practically barked at Zutora.

Zutora stared him down, shaking his head. “Not yet.” He was stern.

“Fuck.” Shadowlz snatched the roll of duct tape. “Help me with this then. I’m sick of listening to him.”

Shadowlz and Zutora managed to wrestle Ryan into a headlock and Shadowlz wrapped the duct tape over his mouth and around his head a couple of times to be sure. Once he was satisfied Ryan couldn’t open his fucking mouth, he pinched his nostrils closed to remind him of who ran the show. He waited until Ryan started to struggle, but kept his grip firm.

Shadowlz kept his voice low as he whispered in Ryan’s ear. “I _will_ break you. I can end you at any time. Remember that.”

Ryan stopped struggling and stared him straight in the eye. It took all his willpower as his lungs burned and his brain screamed for air. If he could have smirked, he would have. The look in his eyes said it for him; _oh, we both know that’s not true._

Shadowlz got the message. He didn’t let go.

Ryan struggled again, involuntarily and more violently, but despite his heart pounding, his efforts grew weaker as the world became fuzzy.

Shadowlz released him with a subtle kick from Zutora, but he was clearly frustrated.

Ryan sucked in lungfuls of fresh air through his nose and the world solidified again. Ryan knew he
was getting to him. Shadowlz might be able to physically hurt him, but every time he saw that anger flash across his face, Ryan’s determination grew.

Shadowlz tried to sound dangerous, but Ryan could hear a trace of whiny irritation coming through in his voice. “Fuck it, let’s just start now. I’ll go slow. I won’t kill him straight away.”

Zutora had moved back to the computer and quickly typed something before slapping the laptop closed. “You’re making us look like incompetent fools!”

Shadowlz huffed. “He’s making us look like fools, I’m just trying to keep them on their toes.”

“Yeah, well take a break. Go cool off for fuck’s sake. Stop letting him get to you.” Zutora was fuming, but kept himself comparatively well in control. “I said we’d start back in half an hour. Gives us time to get prepared.”

Shadowlz paced a little and groaned in frustration. “Fine.” He spat the word.

“Good. Go check on the others, make sure they’re armed and ready should the Fakes try anything. And get a patrol out on the perimeter. Have them check in at regular intervals. We’re getting close to crunch time. If they’re gonna show, it’ll be soon.”

Shadowlz nodded, turning back to Ryan just before he left the room, venom in his voice. “If they show.”

* * *

Thirty minutes was enough time for Ryan to lose what felt like all his body heat. The water had saturated his hair and had been constantly dripping down his face and body and the draughty concrete room seemed to suck all the warmth from his bones. The only consolation was that the pain of the brand had started to subside, if only superficially. By the time Zutora had finished preparing the equipment for the stream, Ryan was shivering.

Shadowlz returned, he looked as though he had calmed somewhat, but Ryan could tell there was a madness bubbling beneath the surface. He was just barely restraining himself. This was clearly personal for him. Shadowlz wanted to make him suffer. Ryan refused to acknowledge the fear that was creeping in, threatening to unravel him at the seams.

Don’t give up. Not yet. You still got a couple of assholes to prove wrong.

Shadowlz leaned in close to Zutora and lowered his voice, Ryan couldn’t make out what he’d said, but he did catch what looked like the word ‘perimeter’ on his lips and Zutora looked concerned, but Shadowlz waved him off. “Let’s just get on with it.”

“Hey. Don’t forget the bigger picture;” Zutora reminded him forcefully.

“Yeah, yeah, just let me know when you’re ready.” Shadowlz had a revolver that Ryan hadn’t seen earlier and was emptying the rounds from the chamber onto the table. He pocketed a single round.

Zutora gave him the nod, typing something as he did so.

“I’m here to end you, Vagabond.” Shadowlz began, remaining out of view behind the camera. “This is for the crimes you’ve committed with the Fake AH Crew. For everyone you’ve fucked over. This is the beginning of their end. This is the beginning of our rise. We’re taking this city back.”
He sauntered over to Ryan, found the edge of the tape gagging him and unravelled it, pulling strands of Ryan’s hair with it as he ripped it off. “This time I want to hear you suffer.”

Ryan glowered. “Bad news then sunshine, I’m not giving you shit.”

“We’ll see…” Shadowlz made a show of picking up a round from the table and loading it for the camera, then spinning the chamber. “I want to play a game.”

Ryan did his best to control his shivering and rolled his eyes. “Yeah, alright Jigsaw…”

Shadowlz continued unfazed. “I think you’re familiar with this one, Vagabond. It’s Russian roulette, with a twist.”

He pressed the barrel against Ryan’s right kneecap and pulled the trigger. Ryan’s eyes went wide, but he relaxed as soon as he heard the ‘click’ of an empty chamber.

“I suppose I should explain, for those playing along at home.”

That smug fucking smile was back now that he was in charge and in front of the camera.

“One round in the chamber, a one in six chance of getting shot, with the odds improving with each turn. With only one player though, that isn’t much fun.”

Ryan laughed sarcastically. “You don’t say?”

“So, we’re going to mix things up a bit.” He hovered the barrel of the gun over different areas of Ryan’s body. His thigh, stomach, heart, shoulder. Every time he hesitated Ryan flinched slightly, evaluating his chances of survival. \textit{Not there, not there, not there, that’s survivable.}

“One in five now.” He pressed the barrel to Ryan’s head, right between the eyes. “Any last words?”

If he was entirely honest with himself, he was almost relieved. The idea that he could pull the trigger and it would all be over...

\textit{No. Not like this.} He still had questions that needed answering.

“This is personal for you, isn’t it?” Ryan purred with a slight smirk, doing an incredible job of blocking out the pain and cold he felt to maintain his superior attitude. “Out of curiosity, what exactly did I do that drove you to this?”

Shadowlz’s eyes burned with rage, but he took a moment to collect himself and kept his voice steady. “I want you to think about every act that you’ve committed, every person that you’ve hurt, every family you’ve torn apart, that might make someone want to hurt you as badly as I do. I want you to reflect on that, because what I’m doing now, it’s for them as much as it is for me.” He gestured to the camera as he said it.

Ryan nodded, his expression was thoughtful, but he remained determined. “So you think you’re the hero of this story, do you? Well, I’ve made my peace with playing the villain. The question is: can you?”

“I won’t have to.”

Ryan wanted to shut his eyes but was determined to defy him until the end and threw an icy glare at him down the barrel of the gun.

\textit{Click.}
Ryan unconsciously flinched, and he could have sworn he heard a gunshot. For a second, he thought it might have been over so quick he hadn’t felt it, but he was still cold and still felt all the pain of his wounds.

“So, it’s not going to be quick then.” Shadowlz’s voice confirmed he was still alive as he walked around him. “One in four.”

He leaned the barrel painfully hard into Ryan’s left thigh and pulled the trigger. This time, Ryan definitely heard a gunshot. He could have sworn it had come from outside the room.

The pain didn’t register immediately, but the impact of the bullet did. It felt like he’d been hit with a hammer. He grunted in shock, and caught himself at the last minute, clenching and baring his teeth against the scream, remembering he couldn’t let Shadowlz win this one. His leg was suddenly warm and wet, and he looked down to see huge volumes of blood pulsing from the bullet wound, soaking into his jeans and spreading rapidly down his leg.

*There was so much blood.*

The bullet must have nicked his femoral artery. He wouldn’t have long until he bled out.

Shadowlz seemed more surprised than Ryan as he looked on in shock, watching the blood spread with a slight frown.

“Hmm,” he mused, sounding discontented. “That wasn’t nearly as satisfying as I’d hoped.” He paused, fishing in his pocket for the spare round and reloaded the revolver. “The next one was going to go in your belly; then, if you got really lucky, your heart.”

Ryan grimaced through the pain. “Sorry to disappoint you... Oh wait, no, I’m not.”

The colour was rapidly draining from Ryan’s face, the blood loss hit him hard. He was hyperventilating. He couldn’t focus properly; he thought Shadowlz was showboating or something for the camera again, Zutora was watching on, looking bored and disappointed.

Ryan’s vision became hazy and all he could feel was the warm pulsing blood leaving his body and the cold consuming him.

*Well, you fucked up, but at least you didn’t let them win.*

He closed his eyes and waited for death to take him.

Out of nowhere, an explosion rocked the building and Ryan was aware of intense heat – more than he would have expected from an explosion – and the sound of rapid gunfire.

He hadn’t been abandoned after all.


**3 hours earlier**

~

*You have 3 hours to decide how much of the Vagabond you get back.*

The words lingered on the screen.

“What the fuck does that mean?” Michael was the first to react, throwing his hands up in anger. “This is fucking bullshit! What do they even want from us?”

“Maybe we should respond?” Jeremy suggested, moving to pick up the controller and looking to Geoff for guidance.

Geoff hummed contemplatively, pressing his face into his hands, before sighing dejectedly.

Jack shifted uncomfortably. “Look, I hate to say it, but we don’t even know if Ryan’s still alive.”

The way he said it so bluntly made the air feel stale in the room.

Gavin just shook his head without looking up, already refusing to acknowledge the possibility.

“Oh, he’s alive,” Geoff asserted. “That sonofabitch is too damn stubborn to go down like that.”

Michael and Jeremy looked at each other, nervous uncertainty fixing itself on their faces.

Jack shook his head. “Then we should at least ask for confirmation that he’s alive.”

“I don’t like the idea of –” Geoff stopped mid-sentence as the previously blank feed flickered and everyone’s eyes snapped back to the screen.

Shadowlz was standing over Ryan’s unconscious form. Jeremy noted that his smile seemed far more forced than it had previously. Ryan must have scared some of the smug out of him.

“Now, I know you wanted a confession, but I consider that outburst evidence enough. Wouldn’t you agree?” Shadowlz nudged Ryan’s body with his steel-toed boot. “Don’t worry, I’ll be saving the execution and lead up for your viewing pleasure, but we all know it’d be no fun if the Vagabond couldn’t enjoy it too.” Shadowlz kicked Ryan again, harder this time, in the ribs, and he twitched a little in response.

The crew breathed a collective sigh of relief, seeing confirmation he was still alive.

“We’re going to take some of your suggestions on board and the bring you the big finale shortly,” Shadowlz continued, staring directly at the camera, as if looking at the crew themselves. “Hope you can make it.”

The stream cut off and the screen went black again.

“Yep, that’s definitely a trap,” Jeremy said emphatically.
Michael scoffed. “Fuck, that was practically a challenge! It was like he was saying: ‘Come and get him, come on, we dare you!’”

“I think I know where they are!” Gavin interrupted. He flipped his laptop around displaying a satellite image of Los Santos, zoomed in to a warehouse-looking building by the docks and a collection of tabs with questionably-obtained transaction records and building plans. “There’s a warehouse down on Dry Dock street, East Los Santos, near where Michael followed them to, it was sold off last year, but no one’s moved into it. There’s been construction going on down there recently and this place is still pretty much abandoned. It’d be perfect for this.”

Geoff slapped a hand down on the table, tapping it a few times, as he often did when got excited by something. “Alright. I’m not losing any more of you assholes. Especially to these motherfuckers.” He raised his eyebrows and his moustache twitched as he looked around at all of them. “We’re gonna get Ryan back.”

In that moment, no one in the room doubted that was true.

Geoff continued, looking around at his crew. “We’re not gonna respond to their messages. We’re not gonna engage them in any way. We want to make them think that we’re not playing their game. We gotta take ‘em by surprise.”

“If we can, we should try to keep up the impression that that’s not Ryan, that this is all some elaborate hoax,” Jack suggested. “Ryan’s got a reputation to protect.”

“A fuckin’ useful reputation,” Geoff agreed. “Yeah, we want that intact.”

“So, no one leaves that warehouse alive then,” Michael added darkly. “Yeah, I think we can manage that.”

“Maybe we should bring in the B-team for this?” Geoff nervously rubbed the back of his head. “Mmm… Maybe not yet.”

“What about Funhaus?” Jeremy suggested cautiously. “They have almost as much to lose as we do if these guys are going after the big crews. I know at least James and Adam saw the stream.”

Geoff nodded slowly, running his fingers through his hair. “I’d only need them for surveillance, and general cover, I won’t ask them to put anyone on the ground.”

The others agreed; it wasn’t right to ask to put another crew’s people at risk directly.

“Lil J, that means we’re gonna need you as boots on the ground for this one. We’re probably not going to have any good sniping positions once we get inside. You’re basically going to have to be our Ryan this time. But I think you’re the best man for the job,” Geoff confessed in earnest.

Jeremy swallowed. A lot of Ryan’s job depended on having a good pair of eyes watching your back. It was something Ryan had always been happy to admit to him and it also explained why he and Ray had made such a good team before Jeremy joined the crew.

“Sure Geoff. I can do that.” Jeremy hid his nerves well.

Geoff looked around the room. “Ok, Jeremy, get on the phone to Funhaus, see who they can spare and if they’re willing to help out. Let them know we owe them one, if they saw the stream, they’ll know what that’s worth. Remember, we have less than 3 hours to pull this off.”

“Is that enough time?” Jeremy asked.
Geoff shrugged it off. “It’s what we’ve got. Tell them we’ll give ’em a lift.”

Jeremy went to the kitchen to make the call.

“Jack,” Geoff continued, barely pausing to draw breath. “We’re gonna need a chopper. Something smallish, inconspicuous, but something we can use for evac. You’re gonna go pick up Funhaus, drop them at the warehouse and be our eye in the sky. We’re gonna need surveillance on the joint ASAP, so we know they’re not gonna transport Ryan off-site somewhere. We also need confirmation on their location. That’s gonna be Funhaus’ job. You can brief them in the air; just make sure they’re ready for it. Oh, and the new comm system is ready to go, make sure they’re up to speed with it too.”

“Got it. I’m on it.” Jack left to acquire his helicopter.

Geoff was in full-swing now, the natural leader in him taking over as he pointed to Michael and Gavin. “Team Nice Dynamite! Fuckin’ apt. Gavin, I need you to show Michael the plans and layout of the warehouse, find us a way in. Something they won’t be expecting. We need to take them by surprise, if that means burning the whole fucking building to the ground, then so be it.”

Michael couldn’t hide the grin on his face this time, he lived for this.

“Gavin, I’m also gonna need you to take a more active role in covering Michael and Jeremy when they go in. We might have the Funhaus guys, but I want to know I have someone we can trust in there to have their backs. You won’t have to snipe, just provide suppressing fire, cover them when they get in and on their way out. Think you can do that?”

“Absolutely I can do that. Uh, ooh! Actually, I have this thing… Well, it’s actually Dan’s… I was holding onto it for him, but I think he’d be ok with us borrowing it for this…” Gavin started excitedly ranting.

“Spit it out Gav! What is it?” Michael demanded.

“I’ll show you. Hang on,” He sprang to his feet, still talking as he ran to his room, “I’ll get it. Is there any chance we still have some diesel fuel...?” He trailed off, only to return carrying –

“Fuck Gavin! That a fucking flamethrower?” Michael nearly leapt off his chair.

“When were you going to tell us you had a goddamned flamethrower?!” Geoff practically yelled at him.

Gavin looked pensive for a moment. “Well, just now, I suppose,” he said with a wide grin.

“Fuck me, that is awesome,” Michael said, eyeing it carefully.

“Top, right?” Gavin’s grin now matched Michael’s.

“Can you use it?” Michael looked at him a little sceptically.

“’Course I can use it! Dan showed me.”

Geoff looked at the pair of them, grinning like idiots. He had never been prouder of his crew.

“Wait, Geoff, what are you going to do?” Michael asked.

“Me?” Geoff smirked, raising an eyebrow. “I’m driving.”
Outside, the streets of Los Santos were all but a blur as Geoff pushed the car to its limits down the highway. The alert tone sounded on Gavin’s phone as another invite was sent out from Shadowlz with the title: Waterboarding by popular request. This time they accepted without hesitation, not wanting to miss anything.

Before the video even came into focus, Ryan’s voice could be heard saying, “Do we think that’s something he’s capable of?” The attitude and sheer defiance behind it assured the crew that Ryan was, at least mentally, getting through it okay. When the picture did come into focus though, they were faced with the grim reality. In the back seat of the car, Michael and Gavin cringed as they saw Ryan’s head hit the concrete floor with a crack. They saw him fall completely still and watched intently until he started struggling. Jeremy, watching on his own phone in the passenger seat, subconsciously held his breath with him as Ryan was doused with water. When Shadowlz wiped Ryan’s face paint off they all looked away as if it wasn’t right for them to see.

Geoff’s eyes remained focused on the road ahead. He was spared the visuals, but the sounds coming from Ryan and the dead silence of the lads as they watched was enough to make his insides churn.

“What’s going on? Is there anything we can do?”

“They’ve disabled the comments, I think they just want us to watch,” Gavin said, shaking his head.

Geoff gritted his teeth; he was not going to feel helpless now. “Funhaus, where are you at?” Geoff demanded over the new comms.

The Funhaus team consisted of Kovic, Lawrence and Bruce. They had been briefed on the phone by Jeremy and picked up by Jack shortly afterwards; they also had James back at their base listening in on their radio for backup should anything happen. Kovic had taken the lead on this; despite it not being his fault, he felt guilty about what had happened with Jeremy and saw this as a way to make it up to them. Lawrence and Bruce had come along mostly for the fun of it.

Kovic responded. “Jack’s dropping us now, we’re gonna land near the Pisswasser loading docks and make our way on foot from there. Lawrence will set up surveillance and keep an eye on the stream, we’ll let you know when we have visual.”

“Adam!” Jack’s voice interrupted. “We’re coming up on the drop zone, be ready to go.”

“Alright guys, good luck!” The rest of the car had gone dead silent. Geoff stole a glance at Jeremy and saw his distressed expression fixed to his screen. “Lads?” He prodded gently. “How bad is it?”

“They’re waterboarding him Geoff,” Jeremy said after a silent beat. “It’s …not good.”

“He’s just lying there now. I can’t watch!” Gavin sounded distraught, but in the rear-view mirror Geoff could see his eyes hadn’t left the screen. He stepped on the gas.

Geoff was just about to tell them to turn it off, spare them having to watch these bastards break Ryan, the one everyone imagined to be unbreakable, when he heard raspy laughter. It was hoarse, but it was definitely Ryan’s.

“Is he…? He is!” Gavin started with glee.

“Son of a bitch…” Michael said through a toothy grin.
Geoff shook his head, but he was smiling too. “Un-fucking-believable, that motherfucker has no concept of self-preservation.”

Michael’s face was just as bright as Gavin’s as they listened to him threatening Shadowlz. Michael laughed as Shadowlz accused him of being a smug prick, then almost in sync with Ryan’s response he exclaimed, “He sure is.” The lads in the back burst into laughter again.

“Attaboy Ryan!” Jeremy found himself encouraging him.

“Well, he’s not making it easy on himself, that’s for sure, but at least they haven’t gotten to him yet. We might not need to worry about his reputation after all if he can keep it up.” Geoff took the next turn way too quickly and the tyres squealed. Ryan’s distinctly deep laugh could be heard over the engine, but was quickly cut off. “We’d better fucking hurry though, before they decide to shoot him just to shut him up.” Geoff hoped he was joking.

“Fuck it, let’s just start now. I’ll go slow. I won’t kill him straight away.” The feed cut out again, replaced by text reading simply: 30 minutes.

“Geoff, looks like we’ve got a ticking clock. 30 minutes,” Michael reported.

“You heard him boys, 30 minutes,” Geoff repeated over the comms “…then these assholes die.”

* * *

“Oh, oh… Uh, hey guys, this place is meant to be abandoned, right? Because there are lots of cars here.” Kovic radioed in from their position on the ground.

“Like lots. This place is going to be swarming with people,” Bruce agreed.

Geoff and the lads had pulled into an alley in the same block as the warehouse, behind the Thorns factory off Orchardville Ave.

“Shit,” Geoff muttered nervously. “Well, I guess we have the right place then. Ok, here’s the plan so far; Funhaus, you guys do a sweep, see if you can snipe a clear shot at anyone without alerting the others, we want to clear out as many of them as we can before we go in.”

“Cool. We can do that,” Bruce replied confidently.

“Michael, Gavin, what’s the plan for entry and evac?”

Jack interrupted before they could start. “Don’t forget, I have to land on the roof of the adjacent building, the one immediately to the East, so that’s your extraction point.”

“We remember Jack.” Gavin rolled his eyes and continued, “There’s an underground carpark that’s just been built. It’s probably not even properly finished, but there’s an emergency exit that we can use to get in from the rear of the lot. Hopefully it’ll be far enough away from the main building that we can get in unseen. It leads straight up into the warehouse, so that’s how we make our big entrance… well, how Michael makes our big entrance.”

“I’m packing the big boy toys.” Michael opened his bag slightly to reveal a stack of C-4, probably enough to be considered overkill, definitely enough to level the building if he wanted to.

“Holy shit,” mumbled Geoff.
“So, we create a distraction. Lure as many of them as we can into that parking lot and then Gav will light ‘em up and Lil J and I’ll mow ‘em down.”

“Fuck me.” Geoff rolled his eyes. “Could you two have come up with a more dangerous plan?”

“It’ll be fine, Geoff!” Michael insisted.

“So, between Jeremy’s assault rifle, Michael’s explosives and Gavin’s flamethrower, we should have this covered, right?” Jack interjected from somewhere overhead.

“Yup, we get in, kill everybody, find Ryan, kill anyone left and then get the fuck outta Dodge.” Michael confirmed. “There’s a side exit that leads almost directly to the building next door, it’s only two storeys and there are fire stairs, so we shouldn’t have a problem getting to the roof from there.”

“How are you going to know where they’re keeping Ryan?” Geoff asked.

“Well, I’m gonna assume it’ll be the room with people guarding it,” Jeremy replied.

Geoff looked as if he was going to say something, before reluctantly nodding assent. “Fair enough.”

Jeremy looked at his watch. “We have 15 minutes, Geoff, we gotta go,” he reminded him with some urgency.

“Funhaus, you’re up!” Geoff announced.

Lawrence had eyes on the lot from some rooftop vantage point and called out positions over the comms. “Alright, I have eyes on …ten, eleven, twelve guys. Two groups of two down near you guys at the North end of the lot, and two groups of four closer to the warehouse. They’re armed, but they mostly only have pistols.”

There was dead silence for about a minute before the comms suddenly buzzed with rapid-fire frantic chatter, startling the AH Crew.

“Two guys, I see two guys!” Adam called out.

“I see ‘em, I have a shot.”

“Bruce is going full Rambo…” Lawrence said.

“Well don’t alert them!”

Bruce sounded remarkably calm. “I’m taking the shot.”

Adam sounded precisely the opposite. “You take the shot, they’re gonna see the body, they’re gonna get suspicious!”

“Got ‘em!”

“You get both of them?” Lawrence said incredulously.

“Yep, let’s go,” Bruce said nonchalantly.

Adam finally relaxed. “Oh… ok then.”

Geoff’s voice sang out over the radio. “Uh, hey guys, you remember how the mics in the comms work, right?”
“Oh shit, these are on?”

The mics went silent.

“I…” Geoff paused, searching for the right words. “I can’t say that fills me with confidence.”

Michael and Gavin burst into laughter as they geared-up in the back.

A few minutes later Lawrence radioed back, “All cleared out back here. Bruce and Adam have moved up, they’ll pick off any stragglers as they see them.”

“Thanks Lawrence,” Geoff acknowledged. “Boys, you’re up! You got ten minutes; I’ll keep an eye on the stream.”

The lads slipped out of the car and carefully moved to the emergency exit that was their way in at the rear of the lot. Gavin struggled a little with the weight of the fuel canisters strapped to his back, but it seemed strangely natural for him. Funhaus had done a good job, aside from a few slumped bodies, the area was clear.

They reached the door to find it had been locked from the inside. Michael placed a sticky bomb and the crew took cover around the corner.

“Hey Gavin? What’s the range on that thing?” Jeremy indicated the flamethrower nozzle Gavin seemed to be holding far too casually.

Michael detonated the C-4 and they waited for the dust to settle.

Gavin returned a grin. “‘bout 50 feet I’d say. It’s pretty impressive.”

“Alright Gav, just be ready to use it,” Michael said. “There’s no way nobody heard that. They should be on their way now. Let’s get down there and give ‘em what for.” He pulled a grenade from his bag with a grin.

Gavin’s eyes bugged. “Is that a grenade?”

“Smoke grenade,” Michael corrected as they entered and descended the stairs. “They won’t see us coming ‘til it’s too late.” Michael set another sticky bomb on the door that opened into the carpark without checking to see if it was open. With any luck they’d catch anyone waiting too close on the other side. The trio backed back up the stairs and Michael timed the blast. As soon as the door gave way he threw the smoke bomb through the doorway. The lads made their way into the car park, Gavin in the lead. They could see figures moving through the smoke, but only for a second as Gavin unleashed the full force of the flamethrower with a maniacal cackle.

He wasn’t kidding when he’d said 50 ft.

The initial fireball engulfed everything in its path, blossoming through the haze and igniting the smoke particles themselves, fuelling the blaze to grow further.

The blast had attracted attention, and as the smoke burned off and the air seemed to still, the Lads could see no fewer than twenty people had gathered to inspect the commotion. The unfortunate ones within range of the flamethrower found themselves doused in a fine mist of accelerant, their hair and clothes igniting almost instantly as the intense heat overcame them.

Michael and Jeremy worked quickly to put them out of their misery, firing carefully placed single rounds into vitals. It was becoming painfully clear how disorganised the group really was. Their
strategy seemed to be a numbers game, but it was not one to work in their favour. The reinforcements who entered from the main building were totally unprepared for the fiery inferno they were faced with and many tried to flee back up the way they came, only to realise the doors had been locked behind them. Most didn’t even have time or presence of mind to draw a weapon. The Fake AH Crew knew how to work together, and these people thrown together at the last minute, even if they were competent on their own, were rank amateurs by comparison.

It was a massacre. In a few minutes, the underground carpark was cleared, save the charred and bloody remains of the unfortunate Randoms and the burned-out husks of cars. Gavin’s flamethrower had done most of the hard work for them and gunshots were kept to a minimum. Michael noted with a sense of relief that two of the burned-out cars had been the ones he had followed when Ryan had been taken.

Gavin was a little shaken by the whole experience, still riding an adrenaline high, but feeling nauseous from the sight of the bodies in their wake. “Well, that was a little more intense than I thought it would be.”

“I’ll bet Ryan would have loved that.” Jeremy pointed out, reminding them of their purpose.

Michael spared a few moments to rig the supporting columns with remotely-detonated sticky bombs. The whole place would be rubble by the time they were done.

The lads moved up, making their way to the main part of the warehouse, when Geoff’s voice startled them. “It’s starting guys, you gotta get a move on. He’s got a gun.”

“Almost in, Geoff,” Gavin reported as they reached the door to the fire stairs leading to the main warehouse.

“The door’s locked. Not a problem,” Michael said, calmly laying a charge over the lock and backing away, motioning for Jeremy and Gavin to do the same.

“Guess that explains why none of them ran back this way,” Gavin noted.

Michael sounded grim. “Whoever’s running this show decided they were expendable.”

The door exploded into splinters. As they reached the entry, Jeremy held Gavin and Michael back. “I’ll go first.”

The lads moved in silence now, up the concrete stairs leading to the warehouse. Luckily it seemed the heavy fire doors were soundproof enough that the ruckus in the carpark hadn’t carried all the way to where they were keeping Ryan.

Geoff narrated what was happening on the stream over the comms. “Oh God, it’s Russian roulette but it’s… Oh God no, not his… oh, ok, he’s still ok.”

Jeremy opened the door and peeked around the corner, spotting two guys posted outside a door.

“Guys, this might be it, you gotta go now!” The panic in Geoff’s voice scared them into action.

Jeremy lined up his shot and took it; even with the assault rifle he was still an incredible marksman. A single round buried itself between the guy’s eyes as he turned to inspect the sound of Jeremy’s footsteps advancing on them.

“Fuck! Ryan’s still alive!”
The other guard turned around a second too late and Jeremy shot him in the side of the head.

“Oh shit! Oh shit, fuck!”

“Geoff?!” Michael urged. “What?!”

“They shot him! They shot him in the leg! He’s fucking bleeding out, you gotta go!”

Michael threw a sticky bomb down the corridor to land just outside the door the men had been guarding and blew it as soon as Jeremy ducked for cover. He pulled a grenade from his pocket and held it at the ready while the smoke dissipated. He could see the outline of a man and the camera, meaning Ryan was probably on the other side of the room. It was a gamble.

Gavin looked at him nervously. “Michael? Please tell me that’s another smoke grenade.”

“Uh, ok…” Michael said as he pulled the pin and cooked it for a moment before rolling it though the ajar door. “It’s not, though.”

Chapter End Notes

I finished this chapter for my birthday :)
The real bad guys

Geoff watched on from the car as the feed footage shuddered, the audio cut out and it appeared that Shadowlz head-butted the camera lens. It took a moment for Geoff to realise the camera had been knocked to the floor by some unseen force, probably one of Michael’s explosives, and had been launched into Shadowlz’s face on the way down. Debris was falling around the camera, but the way it had fallen, all that could be seen was the far wall and the pile of Ryan’s discarded mask and jacket through the static.

He’d seen the bullet rip through Ryan’s leg. He’d seen the blood soaking through his jeans. He knew he wouldn’t have long.

He got on the phone and dialled Lindsay’s number.

* * *

The force of the concussion grenade exploding right next to the wall shook the building and blew debris through the room. Part of the wall crumbled away, leaving a gaping hole to the corridor outside.

Zutora was thrown forward by the blast, directly into the camera and then sent sprawling onto the floor. Shadowlz was knocked off his feet by both the force of the grenade and then by the falling camera, which hit his head so hard he was knocked unconscious.

Gavin entered first, firing bursts of flame to keep them down, making sure they wouldn’t try anything while Jeremy ran to Ryan. Zutora tried to scramble away, making a break for the hole in the wall, but Michael was quick to riddle him with bullets; no longer holding back, he almost emptied half a clip into him.

Ryan was aware of the explosion, heat and rapid gunfire, but it sounded muffled, as though he was hearing through earplugs or underwater. Something warm was trickling down his face and from his ear down his neck. He was having trouble focusing on any one thing and his head spun.

“Hey, stay with me man…” Jeremy’s voice brought Ryan back to the moment, his eyes blinking open slowly.

“Jeremy? Chumbawamba.”

“Did you just…?” Jeremy laughed incredulously as Ryan offered a weak smile. “I got you, buddy.”

Jeremy noted the fresh laceration above his eye and his left ear was bleeding, likely a direct result of the concussion grenade, but luckily Zutora and Shadowlz had borne the brunt of it. Michael had made a good call.

Jeremy made quick work of cutting the duct tape from Ryan’s legs and the ropes from his hands, accidentally slicing through some of the fleshy part of Ryan’s left thumb without apology. Luckily it was numb anyway. Thinking quickly, Jeremy grabbed the roll of duct tape that was still nearby and wrapped it very tightly around Ryan’s leg, just above the bullet wound in his thigh, acting as a makeshift tourniquet to try to stem the bleeding.

Ryan squeezed his eyes shut and grunted in pain through gritted teeth.
“Sorry man, I know that’s gotta hurt.”

The pulsing flow of blood immediately slowed.

His feet were now on the ground, Jeremy’s shoulder supporting his weight with an arm around his waist.

“Alright, Ryan, we’re gonna move. We gotta go now.”

Geoff’s voice over the comms startled everyone yet again. “What’s happening? Have you got Ryan?”

“I got him, Geoff. We’re coming out; he needs a hospital bad. He’s lost a lot of blood,” Jeremy replied.

“Get him to Jack. I just got off the phone to Lindsay, she’s on her way to St Fiacre Hospital, she’ll take care of things on that end. Jack, you catch that?”

“Loud and clear, Geoff, St Fiacre. They have a helipad, we can land right out the front.”

“Good. Is that asshole Shadowlz still alive?” Geoff growled the question.

Michael nudged his body. He was still breathing. “Yeah Geoff, want me to bring him out? It’s not gonna be easy. Or I could just put him down?” He aimed his rifle at his head and felt compelled to pull the trigger, but showed a remarkable amount of discipline and waited for Geoff’s instruction.

“No, leave him there. You guys help Ryan, but grab his mask and jacket, they’re in the corner. Leave them outside and I’ll pick them up. Adam, Bruce? You busy?”

“There’s nothing going on out here, you guys are covered,” Adam replied coolly.

“Good to hear you’ve worked out the mics. I’ve got an idea. Meet me ‘round the side entrance.” The comms fell silent again and Gavin quickly gathered Ryan’s mask and jacket, leaving his torn shirt, while Michael placed a few more remote-detontated sticky bombs around the room to make sure there would be no evidence.

Jeremy was struggling; Ryan was having a hard time staying conscious, let alone moving. Michael ran to support Ryan under this other shoulder and between him and Jeremy, they managed to get him outside and to the adjacent building.

Gavin dropped Ryan’s stuff outside the door and ran to help the others get to the roof where Jack was waiting with the chopper.

* * *

When Shadowlz regained consciousness after the stun of the explosions had worn off, his head was ringing. The Fakes must have come after all. He spotted Zutora’s almost unrecognizable body a few feet away; he registered no emotion, except to acknowledge that they must have thought he was dead from the blast for him not to share the same fate. Other than that, he was alone, the Vagabond was gone, a trail of blood in droplets and bare footprints leading outside. Rage coursed through him. He’d come so close to finishing the job he’d started. There was little chance of the Vagabond surviving long enough to make it to the hospital, but he knew he wouldn’t be satisfied until he actually saw him dead. The revolver was lying next to him, but the bullets had been scattered by the blast. He still
had the one in the chamber though. He tucked it into his belt and climbed shakily to his feet, looking around. The building looked as if it would come down around him at any moment; he had to get out.

He stepped over what pulpy mass remained of Zutora’s bullet-riddled body and followed the blood trail, staggering towards the side exit, emerging into the cool night air. He stopped dead in his tracks when he saw the limping form of the Vagabond, supported by Jeremy, making a break for it towards the rear of the lot.

No way is that bastard leaving here alive.

Armed only with the revolver and a single round, he couldn’t afford to miss the shot. He started to close the distance between them when suddenly he stumbled forwards, unable to support his own weight on his ankle as it exploded into blood and shards of bone. As he realised what had happened he let out an ungodly howl. The revolver bounced from his hand as he went down and he saw a sneaker-clad foot kick it just out of reach.

“Hey motherfucker.” Geoff’s voice snarled over him. “The real bad guys showed up.”

He looked up to see the Vagabond remove his mask and Bruce’s face grin down at him; Kovic, not Jeremy, propping him up.

“Surprise.” Geoff kicked him hard in the side of the head, knocking him unconscious again. The force of the kick sent a shockwave up Geoff’s leg and he cringed at the pain. Worth it, he thought.

Lawrence’s voice over the radio sounded thrilled. “Hey, you guys see that shot?”

“That was fuckin’ awesome, Lawrence,” Adam replied.

Geoff agreed. “Nice shot dude. Now let’s get this motherfucker in the trunk and get the hell outta here.”

“Just one more thing…” Bruce pulled a flare from his pocket. “Jack, are you guys clear?”

“Affirmative, we are clear of the block, heading north,” Jack confirmed over the radio. “Um, why do you ask?”

“You know, just… reasons. James, you catch that?” Bruce checked in on the separate Funhaus line.

“Got it. You mark it and I’ll call it in.” James’ voice could just be heard through the shared comms.

“Uh, guys?” Geoff raised an eyebrow. “Care to share?”

“I think we should be on our way now.” Bruce popped the flare and threw it into the middle of the open lot near the warehouse, orange smoke billowing into the air. Working together, they quickly stuffed Shadowlz into the trunk and piled into the car.

***

Ryan had barely managed to stay conscious as the lads bundled him into the chopper for evac, laying him down in the back. Gavin had climbed in next to Jack, keeping a close eye on the warehouse for any signs of movement.

Jeremy and Michael rode in the back, half hanging out the side doors, half keeping an eye on Ryan, knowing there was little they could do now but hope they got him to emergency in time. Jeremy’s
improvised tourniquet had been holding, the bleeding had slowed significantly, but then again it could also be that his blood pressure had dropped from massive blood loss. Jeremy found a pulse in Ryan’s neck and measured his heart rate with his watch. He wasn’t entirely sure what to expect, but he felt better feeling the slight beat under his fingers.

Over the radio, Jeremy could hear Jack confirming they were clear of the block, but couldn’t hear the response over the sounds of the helicopter’s blades and rushing air.

“Someone threw a flare down there,” Gavin observed.

“What the fuck…?” Jack started as the rumble of an engine rolled overhead.

They looked back just in time to see the firestorm rain down on the warehouse, detonating the explosives Michael had laced the place with and adding to the destruction. If anyone had been alive in that block before they left, they sure as hell weren’t anymore. The place was levelled.

The Funhaus guys let out a collective cheer over the comms.

“BOOSH! That was awesome!” Michael’s voice cried out over the radio. “I was just about to ask if you guys were clear so I could blow the C-4, but that answers that question.” He let out a thrilled giggle and Gavin chuckled with him.

“That was fuckin’ beautiful! You know, you guys don’t always suck as much as we think you do.” Geoff confessed looking over to Adam in the passenger seat next to him.

“Oh, gee, thanks Geoff.” Adam rolled his eyes with a grin.

“No, really though,” Geoff insisted in a slightly more serious tone. “We should work together more often.”

* * *

Lindsay burst into emergency at St Fiacre and screamed, immediately capturing attention of two triage nurses. “You have to help me! My friend, he’s been shot!” She immediately turned to run outside, the nurses following her to where Matt and Trevor were armed and waiting to take hostages.

As soon as Matt and Trevor had drawn their weapons on the nurses, Lindsay dropped the innocent, hysterical act, her gaze turning steely and determined. “I need your help, and you’re going to give it to me. My friend really has been shot and really does require urgent medical attention. I need one of you to inform the appropriate staff and make sure you’re ready to receive him when that chopper lands.” She pointed to Jack’s helicopter hovering less than a block away, beginning its descent to land. “Can you do that?”

The nurses looked at Trevor and Matt with their guns, then each other nervously, before one, an older lady with dark eyes and freckles dotting her dark skin, nodded. Lindsay noted her name badge said ‘Violet’. Matt released her and gave her a shove towards the door.

Lindsay pulled out her own pistol and aimed it at the other nurse, a young man with spiky black hair, whose name tag read ‘Sean’. “Oh, and Violet, if you call the cops, or try anything, or if my friend dies-” her voice seemed to turn to ice- “Sean dies.”

Lindsay flicked out her phone and called Geoff. “We’re ready at the hospital, give Jack the all-clear to land.”
“Lindsay, you’re a saint, I knew I could trust you.”

* * *

Jack touched down at the hospital helipad just before a team of nurses and doctors came out cautiously with a gurney ready to receive Ryan. The lads jumped out and let the medics get Ryan out, but Jack refused to turn off the helicopter engines. As soon as they had Ryan out of the helicopter, Geoff and the Funhaus crew pulled up.

Geoff barked orders over the air whipping around them. “Funhaus is with Jack. Jack, get them out of here, and hole up until you hear from us. Don’t attract any attention from the cops, that’s the last thing we need right now.”

Everything happened very quickly. Ryan was whisked away to surgery almost the instant they got him out of the chopper. He was barely conscious, drifting in and out as Violet introduced herself to try to keep him talking while other doctors and nurses buzzed around him, taking readings and inserting various needles and drips. “Hey, I’m Violet, can you tell me your name? Do you know where you are?” Despite the conditions, her voice sounded genuine and caring.

“Hi Violet,” he managed, sounding pretty out of it. “I have a cat named you…”

She smiled as they rolled him into the surgical theatre. The remaining crew was left waiting anxiously outside, still armed to the teeth and holding their unfortunate hostage, Sean.

“So, somehow we managed to turn a trip to the hospital into a hostage situation,” commented Michael.

“You sound surprised,” Geoff noted.

Gavin giggled. “I’m more surprised Ryan has a cat.”
How it was always going to be

There was a sharp, stinging pain in his right hand and he tried to flick it away, but someone was holding it down and he couldn’t find the energy to fight them. A warm sensation was spreading up his arm.

The lights were too bright, and people kept trying to talk to him, get him to do things.

Focus.

Answer questions.

Count down from 10…

Ryan woke up in hospital.

Michael was by his bedside playing a game on Ray’s Nintendo.

Ray was sleeping in the chair next to him.

Ray hadn’t left his side, Michael informed him. He’d only been eating out of vending machines and what he could scavenge from other patient’s dinner trays for days. He seemed pretty shaken up by the whole experience. He said he felt bad.

They all did.

Especially Geoff.

Nobody had told Jack what happened, just said that some random got in a few lucky shots. Knocked Ray out too. But he was ok. Everyone was ok.

They were worried he wouldn’t make it. He’d lost a lot of blood. Broken his collarbone. Was going to need some pretty intense therapy to get his arm in proper working order again.

The bullet had missed his spine by only an inch.

Michael joked uneasily that Ray needed to get his eyes checked.

Ray was pretending to sleep. Despite the fact that he hadn’t left Ryan’s side since he woke up on their way to the hospital, he still hadn’t come up with anything to say to him. It was like the massive weight of guilt was crushing his ability to find the right words. But now that Ryan was awake, something in him was really trying.

Can’t pretend to sleep forever…

Ray’s eyes fluttered open.
“Hey, he lives,” Ray said with a warm smile. “Guess that means Geoff’s going to fire me.”

Ryan laughed, and it was light and genuine. It felt like so much of that weight had been lifted from Ray’s shoulders.

Ryan grinned, pulling down his gown to look at the clean stitched exit wound on his chest. “Dude, you fuckin’ nailed me. I’m pretty sure your job’s safe.”

There was an awkward silence as no one wanted to discuss the elephant in the room.

What happens next?

So they didn’t.

It was strange, Ryan knew he should have been angry, he knew he should have felt betrayed, and he did; but he also understood. He’d never felt like he’d belonged anywhere as much as he did with the Fake AH Crew, what they had was different, unique; he couldn’t just let that go. It felt a little like Stockholm syndrome. Like he was in too deep and he didn’t know how or if he could get out, or maybe he just didn’t want to. Something begged him not to leave even though he knew he should. He really should. But he couldn’t.

He knew the score now. It was how it was always going to be.

His life for the crew.

And he was ok with that.

Ryan really hated anaesthetic.
A long night

“I always thought Ryan would be more of a dog person…” Gavin mused quietly after nearly twenty minutes of anxious silence.

“Seriously? You’re still on that?” Michael exclaimed loud enough so the rest of the crew could hear.

They looked at him inquisitively.

“I’m just curious…” Gavin started defensively.

Michael jumped in. “For some inexplicable fucking reason, Gavin wants to know if Ryan really has a cat.”

Lindsay laughed. “A cat? That man is like a magnet for rescue animals. He’s got a fucking menagerie.”

“How do you even know that?” Gavin asked, bewildered.

“Uh, we talk? A lot of it comes back to cats.”

“Everything comes back to cats with you.” Michael shook his head with a grin that was more affectionate than disapproving and sighed.

The nurse, Violet, returned from the emergency operating theatre to the sight of seven heavily armed criminals and their terrified hostage standing awkwardly in the corridor looking a mixture of worry and amusement. In all her years as a nurse it still wasn’t even close to the strangest thing she’d had to deal with.

“You can’t just be standing around out here like that, you’ll make the other patients uncomfortable. Come with me.” Violet motioned towards a door next to the operating theatre and led them in, ever mindful that Trevor and Matt still had their guns trained on Sean.

They were led up to the viewing room usually reserved for medical students, with rows of seats and a large glass window that allowed them to see into the operating theatre, where Ryan was surrounded by a team of busy, bloody surgeons and nurses.

“You’re lucky you got him here as quickly as you did. He’s lost a lot of blood. The bullet damaged some major arteries in his leg, but it went right through. There’s minimal damage to the surrounding tissue, and he’s lucky the bone looks like it’s still intact, although they’re going to X-ray for fractures after they get him stabilized. Right now, the surgeons are going to perform a graft to repair the femoral artery, which means they need to take some healthy tissue from his other leg and use it to patch up the damaged artery; then they’re going to give him fluids to get his blood pressure and volume back up and see how his other injuries look. It’s going to be a long night and probably a few more days here in recovery to see how he holds up.” She was upfront and honest with them, just as she would be with any other patient’s family.

Geoff was curt in return. “We don’t have that much time, lady.”

Violet showed no signs of being intimidated by the armed, tattooed man in a suit and sneakers. “You don’t have much of a choice. Without the surgery, he’ll probably lose his leg, if he doesn’t bleed to death first. Now if you don’t mind, it might be after midnight, but I’ve still got other patients to deal with.” She motioned to Sean. “And we’re down a triage nurse.”
There was a quiet sense of admiration in the crew. Nobody moved to stop her as she left the room.

Geoff shifted uncomfortably. “We haven’t got long before the cops will be here,” he pointed out. “Even if the hospital staff haven’t, surely someone’s alerted them by now. I, uh… I gotta get my car out of here; who’s coming with me and who’s staying with Ryan? If you come with me there’s something, uh, there’s someone we have to deal with.”

Michael’s eyes widened, catching on immediately. “You got Shadowlz didn’t you?"

Geoff nodded. “I have no idea what state he’s in, but I’m gonna see what I can get out of him.”

Lindsay and Michael looked at each other, seemingly exchanging a thousand words in a single glance and Michael’s face softened at her slight smile.

“I got this under control, we’ll stay here,” Lindsay confirmed, Michael nodding in agreement.

“As much as I’d love to be there to fucking take Shadowlz apart, I’d rather catch up with my wife.” He looked unashamedly adoringly up at Lindsay.

“I swear you’re getting soft, Michael,” Geoff said teasingly. “But fair enough, we might need your explosives here later anyway.”

Sean’s head whipped around at that, but he remained silent.

“Matt, Trevor, you guys good to stay with us?” Lindsay asked.

“Uh, sure Lindsay.” Trevor’s big brown eyes lit up, a grin spreading over his face at the prospect of being involved in some of the main Crew’s shenanigans.

Matt didn’t look quite as thrilled, but smirked and nodded. “If this is an invitation to the three way…”

“It is not,” Michael snapped.

“Eh, I’m still in. We got this.”

“Gavin? Lil J?” Geoff asked. “I could use the help.”

Jeremy had his forehead pressed to the glass of the viewing window, lightly fogging under his breath. “Yeah, I’ll help, you got it.” He still had a hard time tearing his eyes away from the surgery.

Gavin on the other hand hadn’t been able to bring himself to even look at the surgery, keeping his back to the glass. “I’m coming with you Geoff. Hospitals make me feel ill.”

Geoff nodded. “Yeah, me too. So, Jeremy, Gavin and I will go back to the safe house and deal with Shadowlz. You shouldn’t have too many issues with hostages in a hospital.” He deliberately looked at Sean, the young nurse quietly sitting in the corner, being remarkably well-behaved. “As long as everyone plays it cool, no one has to get hurt, so that should buy you and Ryan some time. We’ll sort out an exit strategy with Jack from the outside before things get too serious. Michael, Lindsay, keep us in the know. Everyone cool?”

They all nodded.

“Cool.”

Jeremy finally pulled himself away from the glass and followed Gavin and Geoff towards the exit.
“Hey Geoff,” Michael called after them, his eyes going dark. “Make him suffer.”

* * *

As they left the hospital, the sound of approaching sirens made them all jump and spin, arms at the ready as an ambulance pulled into emergency.

“Fuck me! Goddamned ambulance!” Geoff yelled, adrenaline pumping.

“Oh my god, Geoff, that scared the hell out of me!” Jeremy admitted.

Gavin giggled nervously. As they reached the car, they heard a noise coming from the trunk.

Jeremy put a hand on the car, feeling the movement inside. “I think Shadowlz might be awake.”

There was a stifled groan as Geoff unlocked the car and made for the driver’s side door. “I think it’s a good time to get going then.”

No sooner had he said it, the muffled moans morphed into animalistic cries of agony and the car started rocking violently.

Gavin scoffed at the noise. “Geoff, what did you bloody do to him?”

Geoff shrugged. “I only kicked him in the head. Lawrence may have shot him in the ankle. Well, he shot his ankle. There wasn’t much left of it when we put him in the car.”

Gavin squirmed. “Ugh! That’s gross. I don’t even want to think about that.”

“Well too bad, I’m gonna need your help getting him out of the trunk.”

“I might throw up on him Geoff!” Gavin was starting to gag just thinking about it.

“Knock yourself out, I won’t stop you.”

Gavin got in the passenger seat and twisted around to scoop his laptop out of the back seat where he’d left it on the way to the warehouse. Jeremy jumped in the back and Geoff cranked the radio, some big classic rock music that nearly drowned out the cries of Shadowlz.

“What are we going to do with him?” Jeremy asked, jerking a thumb towards the back of the car.

Geoff’s moustache twitched. “I dunno…” He tapped his hands on the steering wheel as they pulled out onto the street. “Alright, let’s recap; what do we know about these guys so far?”

Jeremy leaned forward so he was between Geoff and Gavin. “From trying to get in as NotoriousDLC –”

“Great name, by the way,” Geoff interjected.

“Thanks!” Jeremy continued, “It’s impossible to tell how many of them there are. Their communication networks seem to be mostly web-based, with a few key players in some of the bigger crews around town. They claim to have a few connections with the LSPD, although it’s hard to tell if that’s a bluff. There are a few members who keep tabs on our activity, they even track our gamertags when we’re online playing…”
“Fucking stalkers,” Geoff huffed.

“Well yeah, that’s kind of the point. Seems they just like to show up and give us shit wherever we are. It looks like it’s organized kind of like you would a … flash mob, maybe? Some of them really have it in for us, but others just seem to be going with the mob mentality.”

“So, they’re kind of like internet trolls?” Gavin suggested, flipping his laptop open.

“Basically, yeah. Trolls with access to money and guns and possible connections in the LSPD. Who want us dead.”

Geoff rubbed his chin. “So how do we deal with these trolls?”

Gavin scoffed a laugh. “You don’t deal with trolls, Geoffrey; you just ignore them. All they want is attention.”

There was a silent beat as they processed the idea.

“Gavin, you might be on to something there,” Geoff mused.

“Well, the streams were definitely about the attention,” Jeremy said. “That was their first big, public show. Right?”

“Yeah, but we shut them the fuck down.”

Gavin cringed at his screen. “Except someone’s archived the stream… Does it…? Oh, those bastards! It’s everywhere.”

“What Gavin? Use your words!” Geoff pleaded.

“The video is everywhere – except it’s been cut off at the end, right after Shadowlz shot Ryan. Looks like there might be a few different versions going around already. It’s even on the news! Oh, you can’t really see anything on the news sites. I guess that’s kind of good.”

Gavin turned up the volume on a news report where a woman was narrating over a blurry, censored image of Ryan being tortured.

“The notorious gangland outfit, the Fake AH Crew had been inactive for several weeks in the lead-up to tonight’s events, where it is believed they broke into a jewellery store in Rockford Hills. The Los Santos Police Department responded to an anonymous call shortly after the break-in began and were confronted with the criminals. It is, at this time, believed some kind of home-made explosive device was involved in a blast that resulted in six police casualties and numerous injuries. The members of the Fake AH Crew evaded police, but a short time later, footage showing the apparent capture of one of the members known as “Vagabond” was released online by an anonymous group identifying themselves only as “Randoms.” Some viewers may find the following footage disturbing; viewer discretion is advised.”

Gavin paused the video, turning away.

“Fuck. Goddammit!” Geoff let out a long exhale. He was not ready to deal with this kind of shit yet. “How the fuck are we meant to run damage-control on this?”

There was a drawn-out pause, filled by the heavy rock music from the stereo and Shadowlz screaming in the trunk.
“Alright, hear me out on this. What if we one-upped them?” Jeremy suggested.

Geoff raised an eyebrow. “What are you thinking, Lil J? We publicly execute Shadowlz? Like they were going to do to Ryan?”

“Oh god, no! That’d just be giving them the attention they want,” Gavin protested.

“And it would make Shadowlz a martyr,” Jeremy added. “We can’t risk giving them anything to fight for, to unite over. Our main advantage when we were in that warehouse was that they didn’t know how to work together.”

“So what do we do?”

“We need to send them a message,” Jeremy said, his voice hardening with resolve. “We need to show them what happens when you mess with the Fake AH Crew. Show ‘em that they haven’t rattled us, but we also need to be careful not to give them any credit for it.”

“Don’t feed the trolls,” Gavin agreed.

“And how do you suggest we do that if we don’t even know who it is we’re talking to?”

Gavin shrugged. “How about we make a video? Put it up for everyone to see. Definitely sends a message.”

Jeremy grinned. “Fight fire with fire, I like it.”

Gavin beamed.

Geoff nodded, considering the idea.

There was a brief break in the music and screams cut through the silence.

“Alright, that’s an option, but not a priority right now. And it still doesn’t help with the matter of what we do with him,” Geoff said.

“I think we should wait to see if…” Gavin started, then conscious of his phrasing, corrected, “…what Ryan says when he wakes up. I think he should at least have a say.”

Geoff glanced back with a smirk. “Poor bastard won’t know what hit him.”

As they pulled into the driveway of the safe house, Geoff’s phone buzzed in his pocket. It was a message from Adam.

Got a tip-off from a reliable source that the LSPD is planning something at St Fiacre. Thought you’d want to know.

Geoff discreetly replied, thanking him and making a mental note to keep them in mind next time they needed a hand with a big job. Funhaus had been proving themselves a solid choice for allies.

One of Geoff’s more interesting traits was his uncanny ability to focus on one task, while his brain was working away at something entirely different in the background. It wasn’t something he managed consciously, but under stress, it had always come in handy. As they got out of the car and made their way up to the front door of the safe house, he had already started to formulate a plan.

Jack opened the door before they could reach it, eyes scanning over the three of them. “Is this everyone?”
“There’s one more in the trunk,” Geoff replied nonchalantly.

Jack looked confused for a moment before the car rocked and the yelling started again. “Oh shit! You got a hostage?”

“Not quite.”

“Geoff got Shadowlz!” Gavin grinned. “You should um, give him a hand, you know, getting him out of the trunk and all that.”

Jeremy scowled at him. “You just don’t want to have to touch his broken ankle.”

“It’s so gross!”

“You haven’t even seen it yet!” Geoff cried.

Gavin gagged again at the thought.

“Well fuck. Let me see if we can’t knock him out with something before we bring him in then…” Jack turned to go back inside and a few minutes later returned with a bottle of chloroform. He claimed to have found it in the medical supplies, but no one could explain how it got there, so the instant assumption was that it must have been Ryan’s.

“I know the dude’s a creepy motherfucker, but it sure comes in handy sometimes,” Geoff mused.

Between the four of them, they managed to open the trunk, subdue Shadowlz and get him inside without too much trouble. His shattered ankle was bloody but mostly contained in his boot, so Gavin managed to not throw up anywhere. They tied him to a chair and locked him in the laundry while he was still unconscious, before Jack gave him morphine to manage the pain, after some debate with Geoff.

Gavin flopped down on the couch and, looking to distract himself, switched on the TV to check the news coverage and see if they’d made any headlines overnight with the warehouse. Within minutes the sound of snoring filled the room.

Geoff waved it off. “Let him sleep, he could use the rest.”

Jack looked concerned. “How’s Ryan doing?”

Geoff had forgotten he hadn’t been with them at the hospital. “They took him in for surgery. Told us it’d be a long night. Michael will let us know… There’s a chance the cops are going to get involved.”

Jack raised an eyebrow, not questioning where he’d gotten the information. “Do we have a plan for evac if they do?”

Geoff nodded thoughtfully, with a slight smile. “I’m working on it.”

* * *

“Hey Sean, how are you doing?” Lindsay was surprisingly gentle now that everyone had calmed down and the situation was well and truly under control on their end. The sun had begun to rise, and the sound of sirens no longer caused them to jump. Ryan was out of surgery, and the doctors had been attending to his other injuries while he was in recovery.
She sat facing him, out of apparent earshot of the others, who had begun to prey upon the sugary snacks from the vending machines. Matt’s idea of breakfast, obviously.

The kid swallowed and nodded slightly. “I’m ok.”

He still looked scared, but he seemed more relaxed now after nobody had threatened him for a few hours. He’d been acting as their go-between during the surgery, scrubbing in to help out and relay Ryan’s condition to the crew, all the while under close observation by Lindsay.

She pressed a bottle of water into his hand. “How’s my friend doing?”

He cringed, taking the water and uncapping it. “He’s lucky you got him here when you did. The surgery went well, but he still has extensive injuries. He’s on fluids to get his blood pressure and volume back to normal ranges and he has a number of minor lacerations that need stitching. The brand on the back of his neck was mostly second-degree burns, so it will scar.”

“How’s my friend doing?” Lindsay’s eyebrows arched up.

Sean looked surprised. “Looked like he was branded, like …hot iron, like you would with cattle.” He tapped the base of his own neck. “Just here. Probably with a heated knife or something by the looks of it. It went deep. He’ll need to make sure it doesn’t get infected.”

“What was the brand of?” Lindsay asked, eyes narrowing. It could be a clue.

Sean chewed his lip but didn’t vacillate long under the look she gave him. “It said ‘Judas’… Is he a-”

“No.” Lindsay shot him a look that could’ve melted steel and he immediately bit his tongue. “What else?”

Sean went on, tripping over his words a little with how fast he tried to talk his way out of her stare. “He’s also broken ribs, which means there may be complications with his respiratory system, especially after being under anaesthesia. By law we have to keep him for observation for at least two hours once the anaesthesia wears off…”

“Do we look like the kind of people who give a shit about the law?” Lindsay interrupted.

He hesitated, eyes darting back and forth, like he was trying to decide his next words. Lindsay cocked her head, but remained silent, waiting for him to volunteer whatever information he had for her.

After a long pause he almost whispered, “He’s the Vagabond, isn’t he?”

Lindsay nodded once, admiring his fortitude to even ask the question.

He swallowed. “Which means you guys are with the Fakes.”

Lindsay nodded again, but this time her eyes narrowed. “Which means that you know how much trouble we can be if things go badly here, and we don’t want that. The cops are eventually going to come for us and that’s not good for anybody; so we’re going to be leaving here and we need to know what we have to do to get him though this. Otherwise we’re taking you with us, and you know that doesn’t end well for you.”

Sean nodded, taking a long gulp of water before continuing. “He’s going to need constant monitoring over the next 24 hours, prophylactic antibiotics, some pretty serious medication for pain management…” Sean explained the follow up procedures and medications Ryan would need, while
Lindsay took careful notes.

* * *

Michael, Matt and Trevor had been gathered around the TV in Ryan’s recovery room, Matt still stuffing his face with candy, when the news broadcast flashed on. Reports of Ryan’s capture and a few on the destruction of the warehouse and the heist at the jewellery store had been playing all night, but now the news bar said “Breaking”.

The footage showed police and heavily armed SWAT teams gathered out the front of the hospital. Patients were being evacuated. They looked around and noticed the rooms around them were suspiciously empty. They had assumed it was for privacy and the safety of the other patients.

“Shit!”

Michael immediately pulled out his phone and dialled Geoff’s number.

“Hi Geoff. Um, so, I don’t know if you’ve seen the news, but it looks like there’s a chance we’re about to turn a hospital visit into a siege…” Michael explained.

Geoff sounded unexpectedly calm. “Again, you sound surprised.”

Michael sighed. “I guess I’m not really…”

“It’s ok. You just gotta sit tight for a couple of hours. I have a plan. It’s gonna be a big one.”
Just one more thing...

Geoff, Jack, Jeremy and Gavin had gathered around the kitchen table in the safe house, with Geoff’s phone in the middle of the table, connected to Michael’s on loudspeaker.

Michael, Lindsay, Trevor and Matt were in a similar position in the recovery room on the third floor of the hospital, where Ryan was still sleeping off the anaesthesia and Sean was seated by the window, out of earshot.

“Alright everyone, there’s a lot at stake here, so let’s not fuck this up.” Geoff began loudly so everyone could hear over the phone. “The first thing we need is a cargobob. Jack, that’s your job.”

Jack nodded. “Sure thing.”

“Michael, we need some serious firepower.”


“Like a tank.”

“That’s a big ask, but I might know a guy,” he said with a mischievous note in his voice, they could practically hear the grin on his face.

“Shut the fuck up.” Geoff grinned back. “I know you know a guy.”

“You got it, Geoff. I’ll call it in.”

Geoff pointed at Jeremy. “Lil J, you’re gonna be in the tank.”

“Yes!” Jeremy’s fist shot into the air.

“Meanwhile, I’m going to steal a chopper and provide aerial support.” Geoff took a deep breath and let out a slow exhale. “The plan is: Jack and Gavin are going to get in the cargobob and fly to the roof of the hospital. Meanwhile, Jeremy’s going to drive the tank right up to the front door and create a distraction for the cops, while Michael, Lindsay, Matt and Trevor get Ryan to the roof and everyone gets in the cargobob.”

“That’s one hell of a distraction,” Jeremy noted.

Michael giggled loudly.

“Yeah, no shit. So, by this stage, helicopters will probably be en-route…” Geoff paused, looking hopefully at Jack. “Jack, I know you can do this… you’re gonna pick up the tank with the cargobob and then, Lil J, you’ll take out the choppers.”

“Awesome!” Jack and Jeremy nodded in unison.

“But, we can’t make a getaway like that without being traced, I mean, it’s not exactly subtle. So we’re going to stock the cargobob with weapons and parachutes, and drop Matt and Trevor over the city. You guys will create a diversion for any of the ground forces that Jeremy misses at the hospital or any that get scrambled on our way out of the city. You guys’ll send the cops on a wild goose chase through Los Santos. Think of it as running interference, you know; help keep them off our tail.”
“Aww man…” Matt groaned; he and Trevor shared the same look of apprehension.

Lindsay rolled her eyes and shot them a look that simultaneously managed to convey “quit your bitching” and “you can do this” in Lindsay’s unique brand of threatening-reassurance.

“Hey, you guys are the least likely to get killed on sight. The cops don’t know your faces as well as ours, so you have that advantage. Plus, you know this city like you fucking built it, so you’ve got that going for you as well,” Geoff explained simply, reinforcing Lindsay’s encouragement.

“Meanwhile, the rest of us will be making for Mount Chiliad, once we’re clear of the choppers we drop Lil J, he takes care of any remaining cops on the ground. By this stage we should have lost most of the heat, but the cargobob is still too conspicuous. So, we’re going to land on the mountain, where we will pick up a vehicle to transport Ryan to the safe house where we wait for the all-clear. Everyone got it?”

There was a collective murmur of assent.

“You weren’t kidding about it being a big one,” Michael scoffed.

Geoff ignored him and the too-obvious set up. Trevor or Matt would surely pick it up; he could already hear the snickering. “Michael, you still have your comms?”

“Sure do.”

“Alright, there’s just one more thing. We gotta figure out a way to stall the cops… I mean, what if they decide to storm the hospital before Ryan wakes up?”

“They haven’t made a move on us yet… Maybe because we have a hostage?” Trevor suggested, glancing at Sean.

“Are you kidding?” Michael scoffed incredulously. “It’s one guy. For five of us. Guaranteed Fake AH Crew. Including the fucking Vagabond! They’re not going to care about one nobody.”

“Maybe they don’t, but they sure have to look like they do. I think Trevor’s right. The LSPD may be the most corrupt cops out, but they still have to look like they’re doing their job and a siege in a hospital… well, that’s not good publicity for anyone,” Lindsay reasoned. “I don’t think they’re going to make a move until we do. That way they get to look like the good guys, even if they do have to kill the hostage trying to get to us.”

“Are you sure about that?” Geoff asked nervously.

“No,” Lindsay said. “But it’s all we’ve got for now, unless someone comes up with a better idea. We just make sure we don’t make a move until we’re ready. And hope they’re not prepared when we do.”

“Ok. Good. We need to be ready to go as soon as Ryan’s awake and we know he’s stable. Call me as soon as he wakes up. Do not let the hostage out of your sight. Keep one eye on the news and the other on the door. If you get any sign of movement, make sure I’m the first to know. And take care of yourselves.”

* * *

“Pretty sure when Geoff said to take care of ourselves, he didn’t mean give yourself diabetes,” Trevor scolded Matt as he watched him scarf down yet another Twix from the vending machine.
“You really do only run on sugar, don’t you?”

“I’d like to think of it as: I’m speed-running life,” Matt quipped.

Trevor snickered. “I’d say so. How are you not broke yet, by the way? That shit’s expensive.”

Matt grinned through chocolate-coated teeth and nodded towards the vending machine where Trevor could see it had clearly been broken into.

“Oh, well in that case.” Trevor smirked, rapidly changing his tune. “Sean, you want anything?”

Sean stirred. “Are there any peanut butter Twix left?”

“I’ll check.”

Trevor went to grab the candy while Matt moved over to sit next to Sean.

“I didn’t think a medical professional would be too quick to join me in having Twix for breakfast… brunch… whatever it is now,” he mumbled.

Sean easily caught the Twix Trevor had thrown from the hallway, “To be completely honest,” he began, tearing open the wrapper. “Most of the staff here run on a combination of sugar, caffeine and nicotine. Especially the guys on swing and night shifts; we’re not exactly the healthiest people.”

Matt grinned, nodding. “I feel you, man.”

* * *

Much like waking up from a deep, dreamless sleep, consciousness came back to Ryan gradually at first, and then all at once. He still felt groggy and tried to shake himself out of his drug-induced hypnogogic state, where the world felt almost hallucinatory. His eyes blinked open, trying to take in his surroundings. He was in what looked to be a hospital room, all white and mint green. Across the room he could see Matt sitting with a young Asian man in scrubs who looked vaguely familiar.

There was a television showing news footage of police cars outside a hospital.

Michael was sitting next to him, watching the situation outside the hospital unfold on the muted TV.

“Hey, he lives!” Michael exclaimed, with a strange sense of déjà vu.

“Yeah, I suppose that’s your doing…” He managed to reply mostly coherently. “Thanks for showing up in time for once.”

“I don’t want to sound too grim here or anything, but honestly, we didn’t get to you in time,” Michael explained. He was unsure if Ryan would be able to take it in, but he needed to get it off his chest anyway. “If that bullet had been one position off where it was in the chamber, your brains would have been a painting on the wall of that warehouse.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Ryan nodded slowly. “I mean… Could’ve made for an interesting art exhibit, but I guess it’s a good thing that they’re not.” He shrugged and the movement suddenly made him aware of all the niggling aches and pains that whatever pain medication they had him on wasn’t quite suppressing.

He lifted the light blanket that was draped over him to look over his wounds, seeing stitches and gauze decorating his torso and down his arm from the superficial cuts Shadowlz had inflicted, before
seeing the dressings on both his legs. “What did they do to me?”

“What all the King’s horses and all the King’s men couldn’t, apparently.” Lindsay’s smiling face appeared in the doorway. “They had to perform a graft to repair your femoral artery.”

“Yeah, what she said,” Michael muttered.

“Hmm…” Ryan dropped the blanket, he now seemed a bit out of it, like he was struggling to put his thoughts in order. “Did… did Gavin have a flamethrower? Or was that an anasths, andasth… bleh…” He paused while Michael giggled quietly at his struggle to pronounce the word. Slowly and deliberately he re-pronounced, “An anaesthesia-induced hallucination. Just that… It would seem a lot safer if it was just my imagination.”

“No, that happened,” Michael said with a giggle. “He was actually pretty good with it. Gav really likes to burn things.”

“And you call me crazy…”

“You are crazy! Getting yourself kidnapped like that. Fuck, Ryan, you could have died!” His tone was that uniquely paternal mix of concern and reprimand and Ryan suddenly felt 12 years old again, coming home from the park with a black eye after some teenagers tried to steal his bike.

“I know, I’m dumb,” he said sheepishly, now clearly still affected by the drugs.

Michael grimaced. “Look, it’s not exactly over yet. We got a bit of a situation here… the police aren’t exactly thrilled with us blowing up a block of East Los Santos… or taking hostages in a hospital…”

“Or just our existence in general, I suppose,” added Lindsay with a cheeky smile. She sauntered over to his bedside and cracked the tab on a can of diet coke she’d gotten from the vending machine. “I’m not sure the doctors would approve of me giving you this, but we’re gonna need to get going pretty soon. The caffeine might do you some good.”

Ryan looked up at her with a lopsided grin, taking the can gratefully. “You’re an angel.”

Michael looked at Lindsay and raised an eyebrow. “Was he talking to you or the soda?”

Ryan was too busy taking gulps to reply.

“S’pose we should call Geoff,” Lindsay said, pulling out her phone. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Ryan swallowed the last mouthful of coke and feebly tried to crush the can, barely denting it, before giving up and setting it down. He pointed to the TV. “So that’s for us then?” He asked, sounding a little confused.

Michael hummed a quiet giggle. “Yeah buddy, that’s outside. They’re coming for us.”

“Oh no,” Ryan mumbled and shut his eyes, before adding, seemingly out of nowhere. “You could have died trying to save me.”

Michael sighed. “You are worth it Ryan,” he said reassuringly, knowing Ryan was out of it.

Eyes still closed, Ryan smiled. “Thanks man.”

Just as suddenly as he had nodded out of it, his eyes snapped open and focused on the TV again. He
sounded completely lucid when he asked, “So what’s the plan for getting out of here?”

Although he seemed lucid at the time, when later questioned about it, Ryan couldn’t actually remember any of the conversation taking place; nor could he recall violently throwing up immediately after asking Michael what the plan was.

His first clear memory after leaving the warehouse was the sound of gunfire.
“Oh shit! Um, we might be too late…” Geoff said, his voice cracking. He was already in a chopper, circling far above the hospital to get eyes on the situation. Jeremy had picked up the tank that Michael had called in and was approaching the hospital from northeast while Jack and Gavin followed him in the cargobob.

“What do you mean too late?!” Michael demanded over the comms.

“Looks like we’ve got a SWAT team on the roof, and choppers, lots of choppers. We need people up there to take ‘em down. Jack’s not going to be able to land until we clear the roof.”

Michael glanced back at the news footage on the TV. The only angles they were showing were from the ground, where the majority of cops were gathered out the front of the hospital. In retrospect, it had seemed odd that there had been no aerial footage from the news helicopters, but that suddenly made sense. The cops would have restricted the airspace.

Michael was suddenly angry with himself for not noticing sooner. “God I’m a fucking idiot!” He sprung to his feet, grabbing his assault rifle and making his way towards the stairwell down the hall.

“Don’t worry, I’m on it Geoff, gonna check it out…”

Only a few moments later, his voice returned to the radio. “Oh shit! I’m not on it Geoff. I thought we could sneak up to the roof from here to give Jack some support, but they’re in the building; they’ve got us pinned down on this floor. Elevators are locked down; SWAT on the floor above and below us in the stairwells.”

“What about the hostage?” Geoff asked. “Can you use him as cover?”

“I doubt it. One nurse for five of the Fakes? They’ll blow his ass away. He doesn’t stand a chance.” Michael shook his head, returning to the room where the others were, the look on his face alerting them there was a problem.

“Shit,” Geoff mused. “How are you doing for ammunition?”

“Maybe enough to get up to the roof, but definitely not enough to make a stand like this. I still have C-4 though. I could rig some to blow in the stairwells, try to clear out some of this heat…?”

“Whoa! That’s too risky,” Lindsay interrupted, picking up on the tone of the conversation even though she could only hear Michael’s responses. “We still need to get out of here and that’s our only way to the roof.”

“We could go down, out the front door? Wait for Lil J to clear a path?” Michael suggested to both Geoff and the room.

Geoff snorted. “No offense Michael, but that sounds like a fucking terrible idea, I mean there are a thousand goddamn cops out there…” There was a long pensive pause on Geoff’s end. “What if we… Jack! Do you think you can pick up the tank and put it on the roof of the hospital?”

“Uhh…” Jack started uncertainly.

“Can you do it?” Geoff repeated.

“It sounds like a goddamned nightmare…” He let out a long breath. “But I can try.”
“Alright, Lil J, change of plans. Need you to pull out into the open somewhere. Gotta try to make this as easy as we can for Jack. If there are cops inside the hospital already, we can’t risk kicking this thing off before we have a chance to get our guys outta there. So, Jack’s going to pick up the tank and put it on the roof for you to clear out the cops up there.”

Jeremy suddenly felt very nervous. “Uh, ok... yep. Bring it on.”

Geoff continued calling the shots, adjusting the plan on the fly. “You can take out the helicopters while you’re in the air, but we want it to be at the last possible minute, so they don’t have time to send guys in to take down Michael’s team inside. Gavin, you’re armed up there?”

“I am indeed,” Gavin replied sharply, glancing at the flamethrower, suddenly very glad Jack hadn’t been able to talk him out of bringing it.

“Michael’s team needs help getting to you. You heard him, they’re pinned down by SWAT and won’t have enough ammo to fight their way out. You’re going to make your way down to him and help clear the stairs to the roof. Wait till Lil J’s cleared the rooftop, then head on in.”

“Got it Geoff!” Gavin assured him. “Michael, my boi! I’m coming for you!”

“Be careful Gav,” Michael said. “We’re already gonna be carrying Ryan’s useless ass, I don’t wanna have to carry two people out of here.”

Ryan shot him a sour look from the bed and absently touched the gauze covering the brand on his neck.

Gavin snorted. “I’m always careful Michael!”

Michael groaned. “Yeah, that’s what I was worried about. If that’s how you define careful, we’re in real trouble…”

Geoff interrupted their banter. “As soon as that tank hits the roof, all hell is going to break loose, so you guys need to be ready to move up as soon as I give the signal. Michael, make sure you lock down any entrance points you’re not using to get out, do not let them flank you. You’re going to have enough trouble in the stairwells. You got your C-4. Use it.”

“Don’t need to tell me twice, Geoff.” Michael was already beginning to plan how to strategically rig the explosives around the room. He handed his last grenade to Matt. “Know how this works?”

Matt raised an eyebrow. “Uh, yeah man.”

“When I tell you, throw it out the window as far as you can, should buy us a couple seconds of distraction while they figure out what’s going on.”

“I’ve got Jeremy secured, we’re going airborne!” Jack called over the comms.

Despite the sudden change of plans, Geoff was still quietly optimistic. “Alright, we can do this. Good luck everybody.”

* * *

From Geoff’s vantage point, he could see Jack approaching the hospital, the tank swinging precariously below him. Over the comms, Jack and Gavin were calling out the positions of the police
helicopters to Jeremy as he swung the turret around to aim his shot.

“The ones in the air aren’t as big of a threat as the teams on the roof,” Jack pointed out. “For now anyway. We don’t want to start anything too soon, so wait until we’ve been spotted to start taking them out.”

Suddenly two of the hovering police choppers turned and started moving towards them, blaring instructions over some buzzing loudspeaker system to halt their approach.

“Oop! I think we’ve been spotted lads! Jeremy…” Gavin started.

“Booooom!” Jeremy cried, cutting Gavin off as he fired the first round directly into the helicopter nearest to them, silencing their requests for them to turn around. The force of the shot swung the tank back slightly; causing the cargobob to lurch, but Jack maintained control and masterfully countered the movement to regain balance.

“Nice shot Jeremy,” Jack said.

“I think they’re onto us, boys,” Gavin noted.

“Oh, you don’t say?” Jack said with a slight laugh.

Jeremy fired another shot and took down the second chopper, which had rapidly changed direction in a futile attempt to flee. The wreckage came down in the rear of the hospital with a thunderous crash, alerting Michael’s team inside that shit was about to get real.

“Be ready!” Michael’s voice was barely audible over the commotion, but he was clearly making sure his team was in position to move.

Jack guided the cargobob over the roof of the hospital and Jeremy fired a carefully placed round into the stationary SWAT transport helicopter, which erupted into a ball of flame.

“Lil J, hold fire, I’m putting you down,” Jack instructed. “Gavin, get ready!”

Gavin mounted up the flamethrower, threw a rope out the side of the cargobob and clipped onto it to descend, and almost as an afterthought, slung an assault rifle over his shoulder.

As soon as the tank touched down on the roof, an explosion went off out the front of the hospital just inside the perimeter the cops had set up, sending shrapnel through the front line of officers. Apparently, Matt had a better arm than anyone had anticipated.

“Gavin, go!” Geoff called out.

Gavin launched himself out of the cargobob door, swinging out remarkably elegantly, controlling his descent with expert precision that nobody had expected and landing just as gracefully. He unclipped from the rope and sprinted off towards the stairwell entry.

“Michael, get ready!” Geoff called over the comms. ‘Gavin’s inbound.”

Gavin was about 30 feet away from the door to the stairs when a SWAT team emerged to see what the commotion was on the roof. Gavin skidded to a stop, swinging the flamethrower wand around and shooting a wall of fire in their direction.

Jeremy’s head and shoulders emerged from the hatch of the tank, assault rifle at the ready. As the SWAT team braced for cover from the flames, Jeremy showered them with bullets, felling some and
sending the remaining retreating back into the stairwell.

Jeremy scanned the roof and skies for any imminent threat, but the nearest helicopters were maintaining their distance, wary of the tank.

“Gavin, we’ll go in together,” he said, climbing out of the tank. “Jack, let me know if you need me back up here.”

“Copy that,” Jack confirmed. He positioned the cargobob next to the tank and began to carefully land it so that the tank remained secured and they could make a quick getaway.

“Michael, Lil J and I are coming down! There’s SWAT inside but we have their attention.”

Michael sounded like he was scrambling his team inside. “Be careful, Gavin! Please don’t die!”

“Why would you even say that...?” Gavin pushed the door open a crack, firing a burst of flame through the narrow opening to force anyone behind the door back, as Jeremy sprinted up beside him. He shoved the door open fully and Jeremy fired wildly into anyone who happened to be in the path.

“They have body armour!” Jeremy realised. “Of course they have body armour!”

“S’ok, I got it,” Gavin said coolly.

Gavin briefly shut off the pilot flame on the flamethrower and sprayed fuel down the stairway to the landing below, showering the remaining SWAT team with the flammable mix. He re-lit the flame, leaned over the edge and fired directly into them. Before they realised what was happening, they were alight, beating at each other, trying to put out the fire and rolling on the ground in an attempt to smother the flames engulfing them. It wasn’t going well. Soon the smell of burning clothes, hair and skin filled the stairwell; thick smoke rising out of the door. Gavin coughed a few times, nearly gagging with the smell.

“Gavin?! Gavin!”

“I’m ok, Michael, it’s just a bit smoky up here is all.” Gavin was still remarkably calm and collected. Jeremy was beginning to wonder if this was the same Gavin they’d been working with for all this time.

“Lil J, after you,” he said with a grin. “Oh, and take this for Michael.” He held out the assault rifle he’d grabbed at the last minute. “Just in case.”

“Alright…” Jeremy took the rifle and held his breath through the smoke as he carefully picked his way down the stairs, avoiding patches of still-burning fuel and smouldering bodies. He made sure again to put bullets in the skulls of the survivors. The mental image was something he knew he’d never get rid of. The smell was even worse. He was briefly distracted wondering if he’d ever be able to eat barbeque again when movement caught his eye on the landing below him. He froze, then realised it was a regular police officer. He fired off a single round into the officer’s chest, and the man stumbled backwards into the wall, but regained his footing after a few seconds and looked up to where Jeremy was perched on the stairs.


Jeremy jumped down the remaining stairs and met the man face-on. The officer swung the butt of his gun at Jeremy’s head, but Jeremy was quicker. He dropped to the floor and kicked out hard into the officer’s leg; the man crumpled to the floor and Jeremy sprung to his feet, snatching his rifle and shooting the fallen cop again, this time in the head.
“Boo yeah! When you’re fighting Jeremy Dooley, you watch your shins!”

Michael’s amused humming giggle came from the landing of the stairs below him.

“You saw that, Michael?” Jeremy blushed crimson.

“I sure did, that was awesome.”

Jeremy grinned, regaining his composure. “We’re clear. Gav’s got the place on lockdown above us; still can’t believe Dan trusted him with a flamethrower. Still can’t get over how good he is with it either…”

“Yeah, Gavin always wants to set something on fire,” Michael mused before Lindsay appeared behind him.

“Are we good?” She asked.

Jeremy leaned over the railing, noticing movement far below. The SWAT team below may have retreated after the fire, but they’d surely be on their way up soon.

He nodded. “For now, better move quick though.” He held out the extra rifle and Lindsay took it without hesitation.

“Alright; Matt and Trevor, get Ryan to the roof, Michael, you take Sean, Jeremy and I will cover you. Let’s go!” Lindsay ordered.

Michael held out a small remote control to Lindsay. “When we’re all clear on the next flight of stairs, press this button, hold it for three seconds to arm it. There’s a 5 second delay after you let go.”

Lindsay nodded, not questioning him as Matt and Trevor awkwardly tried to carry Ryan between themselves.

Michael spotted the struggle and the look of frustration on Ryan’s face. “You guys get the hostage, I got this.”

“You’re good to carry me on your own, Michael?” Ryan asked, looking up at him sceptically.

“Hey man, I’ve been hitting the gym; these babies aren’t just for show.” He mock flexed his arms and grinned. Michael had carried Ryan before; managed to drag his unconscious body from a burning building when Ryan’s RPG had misfired and detonated too close to where he was taking cover. “Besides, you’re not that heavy, just fucking awkward ‘cause you’re so damn tall.” He hoisted Ryan up over his shoulders in a fireman’s carry.

Ryan grimaced in pain, but huffed a laugh. “I feel like a fashionable shawl.”

“You feel like 200 lbs of dead weight is what you feel like,” Michael grunted, shifting him a bit on his shoulders.

“I’ll have you know I’m a svelte 188, thank-you-very-much.”

Lindsay rolled her eyes at them as they made their way to the stairs. “Ladies, please, we need to get a move on, after you!”

Matt and Trevor guided the still very compliant Sean up the stairs, followed by Michael and Ryan with Lindsay and Jeremy backing up the stairs behind them, guns at the ready.
Heavy footsteps echoed up the stairwell from below them as they made steady progress up the stairs. Lindsay fired a few warning shots down the stairwell, a ricochet hitting one of the officers in the calf, sending him sprawling a few flights below them. They hit the first landing and Lindsay gripped the remote, ready to arm the explosives, urging the boys to hurry up. Trevor, Sean and Matt were just arriving at the door to the roof where Gavin was waiting.

Lindsay called up to them: “Leave Sean inside!”

Gavin stopped them before they could open the door. “Jack,” he called over the comms. “Are we still all-clear on the roof?”

“There’s another chopper approaching, but you can beat it if you go right now. Just be careful!”

“Go now! Get to the cargobob!” Gavin yelled, bursting out onto the open roof, flamethrower at the ready. Matt and Trevor made the dash across to the cargobob, climbing in and arming themselves to make a stand and cover the others, Gavin followed closely, keeping an eye on the incoming chopper.

Michael was struggling with Ryan as they reached the top of the stairs. “Alright, Ryan, I gotta put you down for a sec.”

“I can take him,” Jeremy volunteered, and they awkwardly swapped him between them.

“And now I’m Jeremy’s shawl,” Ryan joked through gritted teeth with a pained laugh.

Jeremy appreciated his attempt at humour, given the situation. “More like a full-length cloak on me…”

“Hey yeah, my legs almost touch the ground!”

They cracked open the door as the chopper outside hovered low and another SWAT team unloaded, rappelling down to the rooftop.

“More SWAT! I’m gonna take ‘em out!” Gavin dashed back toward the tank, popping the hatch and climbing inside.

Jack relayed over the radio, “Might wanna sit tight for a minute, Michael; let Gavin deal with these guys.”

“Don’t really have time for that, Jack!” Michael replied.

Inside the police were catching up to them.

Lindsay grabbed the remote Michael had given her. “I’m arming the explosives; Michael, cover Jeremy, get Ryan to the chopper, I’ll use the hostage as cover. Go now!”

“Michael! How do you drive this thing?!” Gavin cried desperately over the comms. “Why does it have six pedals?!”

Nope, that’s definitely the same Gavin, Jeremy thought to himself with a chuckle.

“Gavin? Are you in the tank?!” Michael was bewildered; the situation was almost as hysterical as it was infuriating. “Get out Gav! I’m coming, cover me!” Michael dashed out towards the tank and Jeremy ran with Ryan behind him.

Lindsay counted down the five second delay and pulled Sean out of the stairwell as the explosion shook the building.
The SWAT team were moving in as Gavin climbed out of the tank, Michael clambered up to get in it and Jeremy got Ryan to the cargobob, using the tank as cover. Michael slid into the cockpit of the tank with a comfortable familiarity.

“Alright, let’s light these fuckers up.”

Outside the stairwell, there was a low concrete wall between Lindsay and the SWAT team, she grabbed Sean and pulled him to cover behind it. She slung the assault rifle over her shoulder and pulled her pistol from its holster.

Michael fired an explosive round into the chopper, bringing it down in a fiery wreck onto the roof. The SWAT team were momentarily startled, and Gavin took the opportunity to clamber into the passenger seat of the cargobob after Jeremy and Ryan were in.

“Jack let’s go!”

Jack took the cargobob straight up, lifting Michael’s tank into the air with a jerking motion.

Jeremy was focused on making sure Ryan was ok, but Trevor and Matt immediately noticed Lindsay wasn’t with them.

“Where’s Lindsay?” Trevor’s eyes were wide as his head whipped around, scanning the rooftop for her.

Matt pointed out one side. “There! She’s still got the hostage!”

Gavin felt his heart sink. “Jack! We gotta go back for Lindsay!”

“What?!”

Geoff suddenly chimed in. “No! Just go! I’ll get her!”

“I’m sorry Michael!” Gavin cried out over the comms, sounding distraught.

“You forgot Lindsay?! How the fuck did you assholes forget my wife?!”

“Michael, this is important, I am the black Buzzard! You’d better not fucking shoot me down!” Geoff shouted over the commotion to make sure he was heard.

“Just make sure you get her out of there, Geoff!” Michael yelled. “Or I will fucking shoot you!” He continued to mutter under his breath about them leaving Lindsay behind.

Meanwhile, from her position behind the wall, Lindsay saw the cargobob take off and looked to Sean.

“Those motherfuckers. Well, shit. I guess they’re all trying to get fired.”
“Jack! Swing around to the front of the hospital, let me at least get a clear shot on the cops on the ground,” Michael called out from the tank.

“That’s the way we’re going, but I am not stopping,” Jack said. “You’re gonna have to shoot on the fly.”

“Can someone please try to do something about the SWAT on the roof?” Geoff asked with feigned politeness. “Lindsay and I would really fucking appreciate it!”

“Got you covered, Geoff!” Jeremy scrambled from his spot at the side door to the ammunition crate, secured to the webbing in the rear of the cargobob’s hold. Ryan had propped himself up against the wall next to it.

“How you doing, Ry?” Jeremy asked as he rifled through the crate.

Ryan coughed a laugh, the pain meds had definitely started to wear off. “I’ll live. You know, I mean, probably. As long as we don’t die in a fiery explosion.”

“That’s the spirit!” Jeremy grinned, retrieving the RPG – Ryan’s RPG – and casually loading a grenade.

“You be careful with that or I swear…” Ryan started, but Jeremy either didn’t hear him, or flat-out ignored him.

“I’d hold onto something if I were you, Ryan.”

Without questioning him, Ryan hooked an elbow through the webbing on the walls of the cargobob’s hold and braced himself. Jeremy did similarly on the opposite side of the hold, resting the RPG against his shoulder. It looked kind of awkward against Jeremy’s frame.

“Jack, I need you to drop the loading ramp, I wanna get a clear shot at the roof,” Jeremy said over the comms.

Jack yelled into the back for the sake of Trevor and Matt, “Alright everyone, hold onto something!”

The rear cargo door dropped and the air rushed through the fuselage, making it impossible to hear anything over the roaring wind. Ryan’s hair whipped about his face as his eyes scanned the roof for Lindsay. He spotted her still crouched behind the low wall with the hostage. The SWAT team were closing in on them and Geoff’s helicopter was hovering close by, moving erratically to avoid being shot out of the air.

Jeremy sank to one knee and took aim in the general direction of the SWAT team. They were too spread out for a single round to be effective against all of them, but he only needed to thin their ranks enough for Geoff to get Lindsay and get out. He fired and watched the round sail towards the rooftop, thanking whoever was listening that his aim was true, as it detonated just in front of the leading man and exploded into a fireball, sending chunks of loose gravel flying.

Geoff seized the opportunity to land the helicopter, far less gracefully than he would have liked, and called out to Lindsay.

She grabbed Sean’s arm roughly, pulling him close to her. “Stay close and stay behind me,” she
He was such a good hostage. As the smoke from the explosion began to clear, shots rang out and the ground around them was peppered with bullets. Sean lurched forward with a grunt, missing a step and falling into Lindsay, who grabbed his arm and urged him forward until they reached the cover of the chopper. She felt a pang of regret; they weren’t going to be able to take him with them anymore.

“Sean, I’m so sorry,” Lindsay said as she lowered him to the ground, shots still ringing out around them. She turned away before she could see the look of fear and pain in his face, leaving him bleeding on the roof as she climbed into Geoff’s helicopter without looking back.

Sean wouldn’t make it off that roof alive. But she would never know that.

“Get us the fuck outta here, Geoff.”

“Fuckin’ way ahead of you…”

The ground below them seemed to be on fire, as Michael fired on the ranks of officers gathered in front of the hospital, scattering them as they fled for cover and to get clear of the tank’s range.

Jeremy gave Geoff and Lindsay a wave as the loading door of the cargobob closed.

“Nice shot Lil J! Thanks,” Geoff acknowledged.

“No problem, Geoff!”

Lindsay looked back towards the roof as they climbed higher. “That was a shame about Sean,” she mused as they followed the cargobob at what they considered a safe distance from Michael’s turret.


Lindsay scowled at him. “The hostage, the nurse. Sean. We could’ve used him. He seemed like a good kid. Having a nurse on staff would’ve been a good move and he got on with the guys too.”

“Yeah… shame,” Geoff reflected. “I suppose now that Caleb and Kdin have decided to pretty much move on, you’ve got some hiring to do.”

“Only since you made it my job.”

Geoff smirked, “How are you liking it by the way? Boss Lady, ma’am?”

Lindsay hummed a little. “Can’t say you’ve been making it easy for me. Considering it’s still on the down-low and I have all the responsibility and none of the perks?”

Geoff grimaced. “…maybe don’t answer that just yet then… Oh, by the way, we might need to consider getting someone else on, we’ve got an idea for how to prevent shit like this from happening in the future…”

* * *

Michael was raining hell on the cops out the front of the hospital as they began their journey, as originally planned, to Mount Chilliad. Jack had been true to his word and hadn’t stopped to let Michael clear the area, causing the cops to scatter, police cruisers disseminating throughout the city
trying to evade the tank’s destruction, while keeping them in their sights.

Before long the only thing Michael could get a clear shot at were the police helicopters following them, and even then, they were keeping their distance.

Geoff radioed in from somewhere above them. “Oh my god dude, there’s like a thousand fucking cop cars following you! We gotta shake some of this heat. Can you go another way?”

“This tank is fucking heavy Geoff,” Jack replied. “I don’t know if the ‘bob can take it long enough to go any way other than direct. Once we get outside the city, maybe if we can get low, Michael will be able to get a clear shot at some of them.”

“Worth a shot,” Michael agreed. “I can try.”

“Alright then, do it, but watch out for trees and fucking powerlines and shit, no rookie mistakes. And tell Matt and Treyco to gear up and get ready. They’re running interference.”

“On the upside,” Gavin chimed in from out of the blue. “I’m getting some amazing angles of you Michael.”

“Are you filming this, Gavin?”

“Of course!”

Well, that explained why he was so quiet. Gavin always got really into filming.

Geoff could see the situation unfolding, they had to get the cops scattered, there were too many to take out. “If Matt and Trevor bail out over the highway they should have a good head start.”

Jack conveyed the message, yelling into the rear of the cargobob. “Trevor, Matt, chute up!”

They grabbed the parachutes and strapped in as Jack explained. “If you guys bail out up here, you can hijack a car from the highway, should give you a clear run and a quick getaway, we’ve got a good lead-time on the cops. You just need to keep them distracted. We’ll stay low so Michael can help you out.”

“Catch that, Michael?” Geoff added over the comms.

“Got it, I won’t shoot Matt and Trevor... Well, I won’t try to shoot them.”

Jack raised an eyebrow, “I hope you mean you’ll try not to shoot them.”

“Sure, whatever,” Michael retorted.

“It’s a pretty important distinction, Michael! How’s about just shoot the cops?”

“Yeah, that works too I guess…” Michael was just teasing now.

Jack took the cargobob down low. “Can you get a good shot from he-”

The tank began firing before he could finish the sentence.

“...guess so. Alright.” Jack turned to yell into the back again, “Guys, I’m going to take us back up so you can jump from a safe height to pull your chutes. Then I’m gonna come back down so Michael can keep the heat on the cops. You guys know what to do after that?”
“Yeah man,” Matt said. “Can we take some of the C-4?”

Jeremy started digging through the ammunition crate. “That’s why it’s here, there’s a bag for it in here somewhere… here.” He produced a duffel bag and handed it to Matt, who promptly started filling it with explosives.

Trevor explained, “We’re gonna steal a car, I’m driving, Matt’s on crowd control.”

Matt grinned wide, holding up the bag. “Wildcard!”

Jeremy laughed, as much as he loved working with the main crew, he still missed the crazy antics of the B-team. “Sounds fun, stay safe and give ‘em hell guys.”

“She should be good to head back up, Jack,” Michael radioed up. “There’s a fucking huge gap between us and the cops now, they all fell back when I started shooting.”

“Thanks Michael,” Jack confirmed. “Guys, heading up now.”

When they reached what looked to be a safe distance, they jumped, waiting until the last minute to pull their chutes and despite coming to a very tidy landing on the highway, they still managed to barely miss getting hit by a semi-trailer. Trevor was armed with an assault rifle and Michael kept a close eye on them as they stopped an SUV, forcing out the driver and hopping in. They fishtailed around and started to weave their way through traffic, heading back to the relative safety of the streets of the city.

Unfortunately, they weren’t prepared for the sheer number of cops that had been following them.

As they came up against the first wave of cruisers, one of their tyres was shot out and the car skidded violently to one side. Trevor did an amazing job of keeping it under control, but it was going to be damn near un-driveable.

“Trevor and Matt are in trouble, there are too many cops and I can’t get the right angle to get a clear shot.”

“Alright, I’m gonna try to take us down lower, but this is tricky…”

“Jack, don’t worry, just drop me!”

“That’s not part of the plan, Michael!” Jack disagreed. “How are you going to catch up to us?”

“Jack, I’m in a tank I’m pretty much as safe as it gets, I’ll figure something out. Just drop me!”

“Are you serious…?” Jack mulled it over for a moment before relenting with a deep breath. “Fuck... Ok, good luck, Michael.”

The tank hit the ground from a good height, bounced a little and Michael immediately started firing on the cops, giving Trevor and Matt enough time to hijack another car, this time a more appropriate sporty-looking Furore GT in bright fucking orange. Good for the getaway, not so good for blending in, pretty much perfect for a distraction though. The pair made it off the highway with just under a dozen police vehicles in pursuit, while Michael held back the rest and continued up the highway, following the cargobob towards Mt Chiliad.

Now that the tank wasn’t holding them back, the cargobob could move faster, but they also no longer had the protection of Michael’s mortars to use against the police helicopters, which had grown bolder and caught up to them.
Ryan repositioned himself in the hold, half-dragging himself over to the right side door and propping himself up against the wall, looping one arm through the webbing so as not to fall out.

“Jeremy! I need a gun!”

Jeremy retrieved an assault rifle and handed it over tentatively. “You sure?”

“Yeah, pretty sure.” Ryan offered him a toothy grin that verged on dangerous. “Jack! If you swing us around a bit, I can get a shot on the chopper to the right,” he yelled into the front compartment.

“You sure Ryan?” Jack yelled back.

“Why does everyone keep asking that? Yes! I wouldn’t be asking otherwise! Jesus fucking…” Ryan trailed off, rolling his eyes.

Jack complied, and Ryan started shooting at the other chopper’s gunner. Jeremy quickly joining him to try to take out the pilot.

Ryan suddenly noticed something. “Gavin! Why aren’t you shooting?!?”

“I am!” He was holding up a camera.

For fucks sake…

“Why aren’t you shooting a gun Gavin? Take out the pilot!”

“Oh yeah!” He swapped the camera for a rifle and fired off a few shots at the pilot, just as Jeremy took him out.

* * *

Lindsay had been watching Trevor and Matt zipping through the city; Michael had drawn most of the attention from the cops, but they still had a lot of heat on them. She had to help.

“Hey, do me a favour and don’t fucking crash this thing, ok? Actually, that’s an order: don’t crash, Geoff!”

“Why would I…” Geoff looked over to see her hurriedly putting on the only parachute in the helicopter.

“Bye Geoff.” She flashed him a smile before she jumped.

Goddammit.

* * *

“You know, I can’t help but think that this getaway would’ve been a lot easier if it wasn’t in broad fucking daylight…” Michael ranted, as he rolled along in the tank, casually annihilating police vehicles and obstacles around him. “Excuse me! Coming through!”

“Didn’t really have much of a choice in that, Michael, sorry,” Geoff replied casually. “Blame Ryan.”
“Ryan! This is all your… oh he can’t hear me…” Michael remembered Ryan didn’t have a communicator. “Lil J? Tell Ryan he sucks for me.”

Michael could hear Jeremy say: “Ryan, you suck. Love, Michael.”

There was a roar of laughter from the crew, and suddenly a deafening whooshing noise cracked above them, moving quickly, effectively scaring the shit out of everyone.

“Jesus Christ!” Geoff nearly leapt out of his skin. “What the fuck is that? Are those fucking jets?!”

Two military jets zoomed past them overhead, peeling away from each other and looping back around to engage them. Geoff’s eyes were locked onto them as he manoeuvred the helicopter into a descent towards Mount Chiliaid in an attempt to deter them from following.

Jack’s voice was in his ear over the radio. “Geoff? What do we do?”

Fuck.

“Uh… Improvise.”
"God damnit! Why couldn’t I have taken an attack chopper?" Geoff was bobbing and weaving, trying to make sure the jets couldn’t lock onto him as he tried to make a run for it, attempting to draw their attention away from the cargobob.

"Why didn’t you take an attack chopper?" Jack asked over the comms.

"Because there weren’t any!" Geoff yelled back with a frustrated growl.

"Then what are you complaining for? Stop complaining! Lead them away from us!" Jack snapped back.

"Yes, thank you, Jack, what do you think I’m trying to do?!"

"Looks like they’re falling away, you might be in the clear Geoff," Gavin observed, watching as the jets circled back towards the city and dove low. "What are they going back for…?"

"Uh guys?" Michael’s voice came over the comms with a slight giggle. "I might have a bit of a problem down here."

There was an explosion over the radio and in the distance, they could see the area near where they had dropped Michael go up in flames.

"Yup! They found me, I got the jets," Michael confirmed, still giggling.

"Benny and the Jets?" Jack suggested.

There was a giggle from the crew and Jack, Jeremy, Geoff and Gavin spontaneously broke into song. "B-b-b-Benny and the jets!"

Ryan, not being able to hear what was going on just laughed at the off-key warbling in the cargobob.

"Benny! – Benny! – Benn-"

The song was interrupted by Michael screaming as the jets dove and bombed the tank again.

"Arggh… I’m in trouble, I’m in trouble, I’m in trouble, I’m in trouble!" Michael frantically stammered out.

"Michael! Take ‘em out Michael!" Gavin screeched.

Over the comms and echoing in the distance they could hear the tank firing. "I’m trying Gavin! They’re fast... I can’t get a good shot at… BOOSH! Got one!" He giggled hysterically.

A cheer went up as the jet exploded into flame and fell out of the sky.

There was a rapid barrage of praise from the crew. "Nice job, Michael!"

"Good hit!"
“Nicely done!”
“Nice shot!”

The next explosion sent static through the comms as Michael’s tank took a direct hit from the remaining jet.

The tank was badly damaged, the cockpit filled with smoke, making Michael’s eyes tear up as he coughed through it. *Time to go.* He cautiously cracked the hatch, watching the jet pass by overhead. He was right next to the train tracks and for the first time ever, the train was right on time. He climbed out of the tank as the jet banked sharply to return and he dashed towards the train, running alongside it, before throwing himself against it and grabbing onto the side for dear life. It wasn’t elegant, but it worked, and he threw himself into the open train car, pressing against the warm metal side so he wouldn’t be spotted.

He radioed back to the others. “Oh man! That tank got *fucked up!* I’m on the train, heading north towards Mt Chiliad, I don’t think I’ve been seen.”

The jet circled the damaged wreck of the tank as the police on the ground caught up and moved in to investigate.

“Alright, I think I’ve got an idea…” Geoff piped up. “Michael, is that the train that runs by Paleto forest?”

“Uh, yeah, I think so.”

“Stay on it. Jump off at Paleto forest and lay low, someone can come pick you up from there. We’ll meet up at the lumberyard safe house...”

“Cumstains!” Gavin interjected gleefully. Ryan and Jack both sighed.

Geoff ignored him and continued, “I’m going to try to lose this fucking jet, I’m gonna lead it out over the water…” His stomach turned as he realised how dangerous what he planned on doing was going to be, and that he may not return from this one. He swallowed hard. “We’ll see what happens from there.”

Michael piped up from the train. “Geoff no! What about Lindsay?!”

“She’s already gone, Michael,” Geoff explained. “She went to help Matt and Trevor.”

Michael sounded furious. “And you just let her go?!”

Geoff snapped back, “Lindsay can take care of herself Michael; you above all people should know that, so shut the fuck up!”

Michael huffed quietly in response, but knew he was right.

“Look,” Geoff continued more even-tempered. “Jack, land the cargobob on the mountain like we planned. We have vehicles stashed there. Get to them and get the fuck away from there before you get spotted.”

“What kind of vehicles, Geoff?” Jack asked.

Jeremy’s eyes lit up and he muttered quietly to himself, “Monster trucks?”

Ryan heard him and gave him a quizzical look. It amused him enough that he repeated a little louder
and with a slight growl, “Monster trucks!”

“Not monster trucks, Lil J! They’ll be sedans or something; nondescript. Head for Paleto bay… No, head back towards Raton Canyon,” Geoff corrected. “If I survive this, that’ll be the extraction point, from under the bridge.”

Gavin and Jack exchanged a worried glance.

“What do you mean if you survive, Geoff?” Gavin asked.

“I don’t have a parachute,” Geoff admitted.

Jack shook his head. “We’ll come up with something else then, that’s suicide.”

“No time Jack, that jet’s coming back around. Just follow the plan and everything will be fine.”

Geoff shut off the crew comms and tuned into the chopper’s VHF radio, transmitting on the local frequency. He was long since out of touch with the proper etiquette for official aviation communication; he usually left that up to Jack, so he began with, “Hey assholes! This is Geoff motherfucking Ramsey, leader of the Fake AH Crew. Come and get me!”

That should get their attention.

* * *

The jet’s engine roared closer as Jack took the cargobob into a steep descent, to try to confuse the jet’s targeting systems. The jet didn’t follow; instead it looked like it was taking off in pursuit of Geoff’s Buzzard.

Ryan quickly realised what the plan was from the fragments of conversation he’d overheard and the movements of the choppers and jet. “Jeremy, did you bring the homing launcher?”

Jeremy immediately darted to the ammo crate and carefully lifted it out, nodding. “Oh yeah.”

Ryan’s eyes lit up. “Jack! Take us back up, let us get a clear shot at the jet, we might be able to keep it off Geoff’s back!”

Jack shook his head. “Not part of the plan, Ryan!”

“Fuck the plan! All we need is one clear shot and we can take out the jet, or at the very least buy Geoff some time.”

“Ryan, you are not in a position to argue, last time you deviated from the plan, you nearly got yourself killed!” Jack held firm.

Ryan looked hurt, angry and helpless.

Jeremy glanced back at him, then at the jet. He might be able to get a shot from his side at this altitude… He nodded at Ryan. I still trust you. He took aim out the side door, very briefly getting a lock on the jet, and fired the missile.

“What the fuck, Ryan?!” Jack screamed alarmed as the missile went sailing through the air, changed directions and followed the jet.

“Homing missiles, baby!” Ryan enthused.
“Jeremy!” Jack realised who’d fired. “God damn it you two. No more rocket launchers! I’ve still gotta land this thing.”

They all watched eagerly as the missile followed the jet, but the pilot was evidently experienced and having none of it. The jet banked hard, causing the missile to sail past harmlessly before looping back too wide and detonating mid-air. It had served to give Geoff a head-start as he headed out over Raton canyon, guiding his chopper low under the Calafia bridge and heading towards the ocean.

As Jack took the cargobob more inland, towards the Alamo sea, Gavin leaned out the side window, craning his neck to see below them. He was simultaneously fiddling with something bright pink at his feet.

Suddenly he was a mass of flailing limbs as he climbed into his proud Union Jack parachute, safely affixed his GoPro to his chest mount and flung the door open, preparing to jump.

“Gavin what are you…?” Before Jack could finish the sentence, Gavin hadn’t jumped, but slipped out of the cargobob, falling head over heel in a spiral towards the water below.

A fading cry of “Anus!” trailed after him.

“Did we just lose Gavin?” Ryan asked, head peering over the side to see Gavin’s parachute pop open just before he hit the water, probably just barely softening the blow.

Jack sighed. “Yeah, we lost Gavin.”

“Gavin’s dead?!” Michael cried out over the comms.

“Nah, he just jumped out,” Jeremy reassured him. “Should we go back for him, Jack?”

“Oh, hell no!” he replied adamantly. “We gotta ditch the cargobob while Geoff’s got the jet distracted. We’re barely going to make it as it is. Gavin? I don’t know if you can hear me, but hang tight, or make your way back to the safe house. We’ll meet you there.”

There was no reply from Gavin.

“Shit, I hope he’s ok,” Jeremy muttered quietly.

Ryan smirked. “He looked like he knew what he was doing, y’know, before he fell out like an idiot. I’m sure he has a plan.”

“Yeah, well, let’s hope so,” Jack said as he began the descent to Mt Chiliad.

* * *

Geoff was not the most confident pilot. He was swerving dramatically to evade the missile auto-lock systems he knew the jet possessed, but there wasn’t much he could do about the dual cannons except try to steer clear and hope the pilot didn’t land a lucky hit on the rotor blades.

Geoff took the Buzzard precariously low to the waves, daring the jet to follow him as he headed out to sea. He carefully banked the chopper to one side and prepared himself to bail out, hoping the pilot wouldn’t have a good enough eye at the distance and speed to catch him topple out. He took a deep breath; he wouldn’t want to emerge anywhere near the wreckage or he’d be spotted. Before he had the chance to throw himself from the chopper, it lurched violently forward, Geoff was shaken free of
the side and it exploded into flame, having been struck by one of the jet’s missiles. The wreckage crashed into the ocean; the still spinning blades of the rotors churning the water choppy and white.

Even though Geoff hit the water from less than 25 feet up, it felt like hitting concrete. All the air was knocked from his lungs and he gasped a mouthful of icy water. He managed to flail his way to the surface, splutter and gulp a lungful of air, but something hard impacted his head almost the second he surfaced and even though he told his feet to kick, told his body to fight it; he felt himself slipping into darkness as he struggled to stay above the waves.

* * *

Jack manoeuvred the cargobob to approach the steep Western slope of Mt Chiliad. It was the one of the least accessible areas to those who weren’t familiar with the terrain. Luckily, they were very familiar with this side of the mountain and the surrounding forest. The sedans were barely visible, parked on the side of the dirt trail that led up the side of the mountain, inconspicuous enough not to be immediately noticeable from the air.

Jack landed the cargobob heavily on a steep angle, Ryan and Jeremy struggled to hold their positions in the back as the chopper jolted about before coming to rest.

Ryan was still more or less useless. His body was broken, his legs couldn’t be trusted to keep him up and his head was still fuzzy although running on adrenaline had kept him going. He hated feeling this helpless. All he could do was gather what weapons and ammunition he could and try to be useful in case he was needed.

Jack wasted no time in jumping from the cockpit and running over to the cars, shouting over his shoulder at Jeremy. “The C-4; we wanna make it look like we crashed.”

Jeremy rummaged through the ammo crate, grabbing a couple of pre-rigged explosives and situating them near the cockpit and inside the cargobob.

Jack unlocked the cars and tested to make sure they both started. “Alright, I’ll take Ryan back to the safe house; Jeremy, you head back for Gavin and Geoff.”

As soon as Jeremy was done with the explosives, he didn’t hesitate to scoop Ryan up in a kind of bridal-carry to take him to the car. Ryan instinctively put his arms around Jeremy’s neck to support himself. He thought about making a joke of it, but he was exhausted to the point of not caring and instead just let himself be carried to the car where Jack was waiting.

“Michael? Are you still there?” Jack asked over the comms as Jeremy returned to the cargobob to retrieve the last of the weapons and ammo and loaded it into the other car. “Good, I’m gonna take Ryan back to the safe house and then I’ll swing by and get you, Jeremy’s going back to Raton Canyon to get Gavin and Geoff. Their comms are down by the sounds of it. We might have to follow for back up.”

Ryan couldn’t hear what was being said on Michael’s end, but he seemed to be ok with the plan as it stood. Jeremy’s car tore away down the rough dirt track at a speed probably not recommended for anyone but rally drivers. A few seconds later, the cargobob burst into flames.

Jack followed Jeremy, albeit at a less frenetic pace. Ryan couldn’t help but feel he was being moved out of the way. It was probably for the best. Still, the fact that they hadn’t been able to re-establish contact with Geoff or Gavin was bothering him and feeling helpless was not one of his strong points.
Jack noticed him fidgeting uncomfortably. “Hey Ryan, you did great back there.”

“Uh, thanks?” Ryan accepted the vague compliment with awkward uncertainty.

“At the warehouse,” Jack clarified. “You were really tough, it was impressive to watch.”

Ryan nodded. “It uh, it didn’t feel so impressive, I can tell you that much, but as long as it came off ok…”

Jack frowned sounding a little hurt. “You know that’s not what I meant.”

Ryan had not meant to offend him, but he was physically and mentally exhausted and it was starting to catch up with him. “Sorry, I know... Thanks for getting me outta there. Twice. That was impressive.”

Jack could sense Ryan was trying to force the conversation out of civility and dropped it. There’d be time to talk it over later. They continued the drive to the safe house in silence, both quietly fretting about what might have happened to Geoff and Gavin.

Chapter End Notes

Happy birthday chapter for Vix! :)

Also, I can't believe it took me 24 chapters to include a spontaneous sing-a-long...
Guilt

Ryan was alone. Back in the musty lumberyard warehouse. The walls still held all the tension of the last time he was there. The midday sunlight streamed through the dusty windows and cracks in the walls, bouncing off the dust motes that hung in the too-still air. A chill ran down his spine.

“They still don’t trust you…” Shadowlz’s words flashed in his mind.

He was in one of the cots, still set up from the last time. The same one Jeremy had laid him in after he’d been shot. There was still a blood smear on the sheet.

True to his word, Jack had dropped him off, made sure he had anything he might need and then left to pick up Michael and join Jeremy in finding Geoff and Gavin.

Guilt wracked his mind and gnawed away at his insides at the thought of Geoff leading the jet out to sea. Then there was Matt and Trevor. And Lindsay. He had no way of knowing if they were ok. He was in limbo.

“…one way or another, it will be you who unmakes your crew.”

He squeezed his eyes shut and took a deep breath, sharp pain emanating from his ribs at the top of his breath; he held it, feeling the stitches gently pulling against themselves in his skin. He forced himself to stay with the pain.

How could you have been so stupid?

There was no way to know…

You weren’t meant to make it out. They weren’t supposed to come for you. Now they’re in trouble. For you.

It was their decision, it was a good plan; it had worked… so far.

It shouldn’t have come to that.

He let out the breath he’d been holding. It was getting worse.

It was harder to silence that voice, that dark inner monologue that seemed to be taking up more and more space in his mind. It wasn’t the same as the Vagabond. The Vagabond was chaos, ruthless and violent. This was something entirely different; if anything, the Vagabond had retreated to make way for this new voice. It scared Ryan that he had so little control over his own thoughts in this way.

On the table next to him was a burner phone for emergency contact, a bottle of water and two tubes of inhalable methoxyflurane for the pain. Ryan looked at them disdainfully, determined he wouldn’t use them unless he absolutely had to and gritted his teeth against the pain that was promising to start afresh the moment he let his thoughts linger on it. It wasn’t the worst of it, but the burning at the back of his neck was starting up again.

* * *

At some point, he must have passed out.
Coming to, the first thing that hit him was the pain. Sleeping it off hadn’t helped, his whole body ached dully, and acute stinging pain shot through the deep muscle tissue in his legs. He thought he heard Geoff’s voice and, if he had ever had any, he would have sworn it was a dream. Well, except for the pain.

“…Gavin’s one sly motherfucker,” Geoff enthused. “Who knew you were capable of that?”

Gavin’s voice replied proudly, “I’m capable of lots of stuff when I have to be.”

“Yeah, but why can’t that be always?” Michael’s voice shot straight back.

There was a smattering of laughter that echoed the relief of a successful heist.

Ryan blinked his eyes open. The strong afternoon sun illuminated and warmed the warehouse and he could see the crew lounging and sitting on the other cots nearby. Geoff was sitting on the edge of the cot furthest from him, facing Ryan with Michael and Jack either side. Opposite them Ryan could see the back of Gavin’s gangly frame and Jeremy’s shorter silhouette beside him, leaning back on his elbows. Seeing they were all there and relatively unhurt, relief instantly washed over Ryan, but there was still an uneasy hesitance. He blinked a few more times and lightly rubbed his eyes to make sure it wasn’t an elaborate hallucination courtesy of his guilt and pain.

“Well boys, the original plan went to total shit in the first 5 minutes…” Geoff began, a little louder now.

“–But doesn’t it always?” Jack interrupted.

Geoff coughed a laugh and grinned. “Yeah, in true AH-crew style… Uh… but despite that, I think that might actually have been the most successful job we’ve ever pulled.”

“Yeah, all it took was Ryan getting himself kidnapped,” Michael added with a giggle.

“Well, that way he couldn’t fuck us over,” Geoff said.

Ryan flinched.

Don’t let him get to you.

“Hey! I can hear you, you know?” Ryan croaked out from his cot, to the surprise of Jeremy and Gavin, who hadn’t noticed he was awake.

“Oh, we know…” Geoff assured him. “Don’t worry, I haven’t forgotten about you.”

“Look at Geoff’s face!” Michael exclaimed with a giddy laugh. “Geoff is like a mixture of disappointment and pride furiously coexisting; fighting for dominance.”

It was probably the best way to describe the look on Geoff’s face, although now there was a grin creeping in at the edges. The rest of the crew laughed.

“That’s not…” Geoff started. “…Actually, that’s…that’s pretty fucking accurate…” He rubbed his face. “It’s like… You guys are my greatest mistakes.” He said it in the most affectionate way possible.

“And you’re the king of the idiots.” Jeremy added.

Geoff laughed. “Yeah, I sit on the throne atop moron mountain… Speaking of morons – Ryan…” The tone of his voice had a dark edge to it and he rose from where he’d been sitting.
Ryan cringed, he was fully lucid now, and he could see a lecture coming.

“What the hell were you thinking back there?!” Geoff yelled. It wasn’t really a question, but Ryan jumped to answer it anyway.

“Well, clearly, I didn’t think it would come to the point where I would have to explain myself…” Ryan began half-jokingly, holding up his hands defensively.

Geoff nearly growled, taking a few steps towards him, “No you didn’t think, Ryan. You didn’t think at all. You brought this up before the setup and I said no but you didn’t listen, did you?”

Ryan was never one to take a lecture without some backchat, even if he knew he was in the wrong. “Well, if you’ll remember, technically, my plan did work. I mean… You guys killed all those assholes, and we sent a message… So, there’s that…” His words were cocky, but the delivery was hollow. He felt riddled with guilt.

Geoff could feel himself trembling. He was furious at Ryan for acting stupid, for running off on his own, for forcing him to make the call to put the rest of the crew on the line to save him.

“You just ran in without thinking! You could have been killed on the spot!”

“But I wasn’t.” Ryan was quick to point out.

“You nearly were Ryan! Do you have any idea how close you came to being fucking shot in the head?! You put yourself in danger for your own damn need for revenge! But you didn’t stop to think. Your fucking murder-happy death-wish nearly got the rest of us killed!” Geoff’s voice broke at the word ‘killed’ and it cut through Ryan.

_He was right._

“You didn’t have to come back for me!” Ryan snapped suddenly.

“What else were we supposed to do, Ryan?!” Geoff roared back.

“You were meant to leave me!” There was a kind of desperation in Ryan’s voice and pain in his eyes. He quickly added. “I can take care of myself.”

Geoff just glared at him; if looks could kill, Ryan would be dead a thousand times over by now.

Geoff’s voice was low and controlled as he said, “You know damn well we couldn’t do that.”

The rest of the crew watched on, fixated by the same kind of morbid curiosity that causes people to slow down at car accidents.

“I mean…” Ryan began, but he was cut off by Michael.

“Fucking hell dude, stop! Take a hint! Just stop talking,” he begged, seeing Ryan was just digging a deeper hole for himself, and burying his face in his hands.

Geoff pointed at Michael, raised his eyebrows and glared at Ryan as if to say: _he’s got it._

Ryan sighed and cast his eyes down, hand going to pick at the adhesive of the gauze covering the brand. The crew had no idea about it yet.

“Sorry,” he mumbled under his breath.
Geoff let him stew for a few moments in silence before letting out a sigh. “You’re damn right you are.”

After a beat of awkward, uncomfortable silence, Jack piped up to change the subject. “…so Gavin, huh? Surprise hero of the day? Really?”

Geoff completely transformed, grinning wide; his pride was showing. “Dude, it was fucking incredible!”

Ryan forced a smirk and tilted his chin up in Gavin’s direction. “Alright Gavin, care to regale us with a tale of your thrilling heroics?” He pronounced ‘regale’ as ‘re-gall’.

Gavin beamed. “If by ‘re-gall’ you mean ‘regale’, I’d be delighted, Ryan.”

Ryan rolled his eyes. “C’mon guys, I’ve suffered a lot of head trauma… I’ve been unconscious twice today and under anaesthesia, I think I’m doing pretty well.”

If he hadn’t also flubbed the word ‘anaesthesia’ they may not have laughed so hard.

“Wait a sec, Gavin?” Michael pointed to Gavin’s chest, still giggling. “What is that? Is that a GoPro?”

“Oh, yeah. We’re making a video!” He waved awkwardly at the GoPro mounted via harness to his chest. “I can show you!”

Michael looked sceptical. “Why are you making a video?”

As Gavin fucked around setting up the GoPro to get the footage off it and onto his laptop, Jack checked over Ryan to make sure his fresh stitches were still intact and gave him some pain medication – the strongest Jack could convince him to take was codeine and even that was met with some resistance. Once it had started to kick in though, he was thankful Jack had persuaded him.

Meanwhile, for the sake of Michael and Ryan, Geoff explained, “We want to send a message to these asshole Randoms, right? Well, they did a livestream. So, Gavin and Lil J thought we should respond with a video of our own. Show ‘em we’re not affected, show ‘em we got you back.” Geoff nodded to Ryan.

“We get news footage of the warehouse, whatever reports of how many bodies they drag from the ruins, cut it together with us breaking Ryan out of the hospital and the news coverage of that. Should show them who they’re messing with,” Jeremy continued.

The warehouse. A shiver ran down Ryan’s spine, he was just about to ask what had happened back there when Gavin interrupted his thoughts.

“Here, got it.” Gavin had the recording up on his laptop and he scrubbed through the raw footage up until the part where he slipped out of the cargobob.

Seeing the fall, everyone laughed.

“Yeah, yeah; just wait, in a minute you won’t be laughing.” Gavin rolled his eyes and sped up through the footage of him stealing a speed boat and pursuing Geoff’s chopper.

He slowed the playback just as the jet fired on the chopper, clipping the rear rotor blades and sending it careening towards the waves below. They could just make out Geoff’s form as he flung himself from the Buzzard, but not far enough to avoid being caught up in the wreck. The wake thrown up by
the crash made the footage hard to decipher, but suddenly Gavin was in the water, reaching down to grab Geoff and pull him up to the surface.

“That was a lot harder than it looked,” Gavin explained.

The next thing they were looking at was the sky and a blur of arms, water droplets over the lens and flashes of a familiar bright pink.

Suddenly it clicked. The pink thing Ryan had seen at Gavin’s feet in the cargobob was a deconstructed sniper rifle. Ray’s sniper rifle. Michael had taken it after he died, Gavin must’ve brought it with him.

Now the footage showed Gavin skilfully reassembling it and taking careful aim at the jet as it doubled back to survey the wreckage and pursue the cargobob.

The footage showed Gavin fire a single round, thrown back by the recoil. He aimed for a second time and fired again, this time with much better control of the recoil.

The jet took a sharp nosedive.

“Wait! What the fuck just happened?” Jack asked, bewildered.

“Gavin shot the pilot,” Geoff said simply.

“You mean to say you can hit the pilot through the cockpit window to take down the jet?” Michael asked, eyes wide.

Gavin grinned, “You can absolutely hit a pilot through the cockpit window with a sniper rifle.”

“No, I mean you,” Michael clarified with a snarky grin sneaking onto his face. “You, Gavin, you can do it?”


“He did,” Geoff testified, immediately shutting everyone up.

Gavin beamed. “Can you imagine how good that would’ve looked in slow-mo?”

Again, Gavin could pull it out of the bag when it counted. And boy did that one count.

“Son of a bitch. Good job, Gavin!” Jack enthused. He was met all around with praise from the others.

Ryan congratulated him too.

He still felt terrible though. He should have been there; it was his fault after all.

* * *

It took a little while for things to settle down, everyone was exchanging stories of how things went down after they all got separated, filling in the blanks. It was only then that Ryan remembered.

“What happened to Shadowlz? And the big guy? Zutora. He was probably the one in charge, at least of trying to take us down – this time.”
Michael looked a little embarrassed, rubbing the back of his head. “The bigger guy? I might have put a few bullets in him… like, maybe…” He shrugged and pulled a face like a child caught eating candy he shouldn’t be. “…half a clip?”

Ryan cringed. “Jesus Michael.”

“What? I was pissed. At least I didn’t put any in Shadowlz!”

Ryan’s eyes went wide and darted back and forth between Michael and Geoff. “So he’s alive? Did he get away?”

A sadistic smile tugged at the corner of Geoff’s mouth. “He wishes he got away. We got him, bud. We got him.”

Ryan’s sick crooked smile was back.
It was well into the evening when Ryan heard the crunch of tyres on gravel. He was supposed to be resting but found himself entirely unable to sleep, instead laying on his cot, staring at the ceiling; his mind still on edge, playing over the escape and the events of the previous night. The pain wasn’t helping either.

He heard a car door close and soft footsteps approaching. He sat up and reached out for his pistol, only for his heart to skip a beat as he remembered it had been taken from him and he was left defenceless.

He grabbed one of the methoxyflurane inhalers he still hadn’t used and was about to throw it at Geoff when the door to the lumberyard warehouse creaked open. Through the ajar door to the annex where he and the crew were sleeping, he could make out the silhouetted figure of a woman and hesitated.

Lindsay stuck her head through the door and Ryan breathed a sigh of relief.

“Lindsay, you scared the hell outta me. You’re ok?”

She looked exhausted, smeared with blood that, judging from the lack of visible injuries, wasn’t hers, but still she grinned at him.

“Of course! Everyone’s ok here?”

“Somewhat miraculously, yeah.”

“Can’t sleep?” She asked, nodding towards the other cots where the crew were in various states of sleep. Michael lightly tossing, Gavin curled in a ball on his side, Jack and Geoff contentedly snoring on their backs and Jeremy flopped on his stomach, fingertips brushing the ground.

Ryan scoffed, resting back on his elbows, and raised an eyebrow. “Could you?” He cringed a little at how that came out, sounding a little more self-pitying than he would’ve liked. He quickly added, “I mean, with the noise that these two are making?” He jerked his thumb towards Jack and Geoff who had started to harmonise.

Lindsay laughed. “Hey assholes! Wake up!” She yelled, clapping her hands a few times.

Gavin and Jeremy woke with a start; Gavin nearly twitched himself off his cot. Jack just stretched out and opened his eyes.

Michael groaned and covered his ears with his hands. “Five more minutes!” He whined.

Geoff didn’t even stir slightly, still completely out cold.

Lindsay went over and sat on his cot, which creaked under their combined weight. “Geoff… Geoff?” She poked him a few times before he finally started to wake up.

Geoff rubbed his face with the back of his hand and blearily opened his eyes. “Lindsay?”

“Hey Geoff.”

“What time is it?”
Lindsay stood up and pretended to check a watch she didn’t have. “About 1:30.”

“God, don’t say AM…”

“…AM.”

Geoff groaned and lay back down, pulling the blanket over his head.

“Well, it’s good to see you’re safe and well too, Geoff,” Lindsay teased.

Geoff sat upright with a start, throwing the blanket off himself, coming back to his senses. “Shit, what happened? Are Matt and Trevor ok? How’d you get back here?”

Lindsay shrugged. “Well, the short version… Matt and Trevor are fine, well, Matt got shot, but it’s just a graze, nothing too serious. They ran into some trouble after the cops shot their tyres out, but I was able to pick them up and we managed to get back to the safe house you were using before the siege without any cops following us.”

“How the fuck did you manage that? I mean, you were unarmed!” Geoff asked incredulously.

“Please, Geoff, let me at least retain something of an air of mystery,” she replied with a sly grin.

“Whatever you say boss,” Geoff mumbled. “Good job with the guys back there, quick thinking.”

Michael stood up and pulled her down onto his cot, hugging her. He whispered something in her ear affectionately.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa; back up a sec. Boss?” Ryan asked, intrigued, but not completely surprised.

Geoff cleared his throat, “Uh, Lindsay, would you like to uh… wanna share with the crew what you’ve been doing for the past few weeks?”

Lindsay blushed a little. “Well, I’ve been taking over your responsibilities with the Fake AH Crew, Geoff.”

“You run the Crew,” Geoff affirmed, grinning. “Since we found out about the Randoms and all this shit that’s been happening behind our backs and under our noses. As soon as I knew Lindsay was clean, I promoted her. She’s been quietly running the crew and all the operations for weeks… and doing a fantastic job, I might add.”

“Suck up,” Michael teased.

“Awesome, so we don’t have to take Geoff’s shit anymore?” Jack asked with a smirk.

Geoff scoffed. “Oh no, you assholes still have to report to me, but for all official purposes, Lindsay’s in charge.”

“So… you’re like the boss without the responsibilities of being the boss?” Gavin asked.

“Exactly,” Geoff confirmed with a lopsided grin.

Jack laughed. “That sounds like it suits you perfectly.”

“Wait a minute, that means…” Michael interrupted. “Hey, everyone! I’m banging my boss!”

It was met with groans and giggles from the crew.
“Does that mean you’ve been heading up the internal investigations?” Jeremy asked eagerly.

Lindsay nodded. “Mmhmm.”

“So, everyone’s clean?”

“Yep,” Lindsay confirmed with a smile. “Caleb and Kdin moved on following the investigations, but they weren’t involved; it was more of a wake-up call for them that we’re not exactly in a safe business. It’s probably for the best. Everyone who’s left is clean as a whistle. As far as we can tell.”

“Good,” Geoff huffed. “That means we don’t have to worry about any more leaks. From now on, the only way anyone leaves the Fake AH Crew is in a fucking body bag.”

“Wait, why are we just finding out about this now?” Ryan asked sceptically.

“Oh, well, I didn’t want to give away what I was working on…” Geoff explained vaguely.

“Which is?”

“Well, can I just say… new job sucks. Gonna be a lot of meetings.” Geoff sighed. “I’m working on pulling together an alliance. Funhaus are the first of many to come. Yesterday was kinda like their interview. Did a fuckin’ excellent job too, passed that trial with flying colours…” The crew stared back with wide eyes as Geoff continued. “I’ve been reviewing the up-and-comers who have similar or complementary skills and, uh… values… as us. I’m hoping now that Lil J’s video idea will help with the recruiting.”

“Huh,” Jack said after a beat, nodding. “That’s actually a pretty great idea… A lot to take on though, sure you’re up to it?”

“Too fuckin’ late now.” Geoff smirked and shrugged.

Gavin had been sitting in silence, staring out at nothing in particular when suddenly he sat up and turned to Ryan with an excited grin. “Oh yeah, Ryan, I wanna meet your cat!”

Ryan, startled by the sudden change of subject, was about to say ‘sure’ before he realised he’d never mentioned his pets in front of the main crew. “Wait, how… how’d you know I have a cat…?”

Gavin looked a little embarrassed. “You were all loopy at the hospital and said you had a cat named Violet.”

“Huh? Ok then… I mean, I do. I don’t remember that.” He confessed.

“Yeah. Lindsay said it was true,” Gavin explained.

Ryan looked up at Lindsay with a sly smirk. “You didn’t tell them about our shopping weekends too did you?”

Lindsay, the improv enthusiast she was ran with his suggestion. “Well I didn’t, but I think you might have just given that away…”

Gavin chortled. “I can’t even imagine you going shopping, Ryan!”

Lindsay shrugged. “What can I say, Gavin? The man’s got an eye for style, even if he can’t apply it to himself…”

“Hey!” Ryan snapped playfully. “There’s nothing wrong with the way I dress. My clothes are fine,
even if I do seem to be running out of good T-shirts lately…”

“Did you ever have a good T-shirt?” Lindsay asked, only half joking.

“Why does everyone hate the way I dress?”

“Ryan’s a right chav sometimes, yeah?” Gavin said with a grin.

Michael shook his head. “I’m not even sure what you just said, but I feel like that might have been an insult?”

“Just you wait till my legs work again, Gavin; I’m gonna beat the English out of you.” Ryan was playing, but it still managed to come out kind of threatening.

Gavin made a sort of snorting noise in his throat and giggled. The rest of the crew laughed.

“Oh shit, I nearly forgot… Ryan, I brought you something.” Lindsay looked more serious now. “He’s in the trunk.”

Ryan’s grin melted away and the darkness was back in his eyes as his head snapped towards Geoff.

Geoff sneered, nodding. “I’ll uh, I’ll give you a hand with him… If you want it.”

Ryan nodded solemnly, something close to fear snaking its way into his brain. He put it down to anticipation and pushed it out.

Jack, Michael, Jeremy and Gavin went out to the car with Lindsay to deal with Shadowlz. A few minutes later, Lindsay returned to the annex with a lightweight foldable wheelchair and a set of crutches.

“I thought about how useless you were back in the hospital, so I got you these for you to use until you heal up.”

“Hey, wow, thanks Lindsay.” He meant it genuinely, but it sounded a little sarcastic nonetheless.

Lindsay wasn’t offended, she’d come to expect that kind of response, especially considering how she’d phrased it so teasingly.

No one questioned how she was able to obtain them at such short notice or so late at night, but Ryan was thankful she thought ahead. She always thought of everything. She was going to do great running the crew. Hell, she already was.

Ryan felt that guilt creeping back; if she hadn’t been so capable, if something had happened to her… Michael would probably have killed him. Ryan couldn’t help but think that, if something had happened to Lindsay, he probably would have let him.

Geoff watched on as Lindsay helped Ryan carefully get himself into the wheelchair. He was still wearing the teal-green scrubs Sean had given him back at the hospital, so Lindsay retrieved a shirt from the locker they kept spare clothes and other supplies in. It was one of Geoff’s; slate grey with a seemingly meaningless geometric pattern on it that, knowing Geoff, was probably some secret code or obscure reference. Ryan took it gratefully and changed, careful not to disturb the stitches and bandages holding his arms and torso together; thankful the neck was stretched out from years of wear and wasn’t going to rub over the covered brand.

Geoff caught sight of the bruising, dark reds and purples up and down his ribs, tingling green and
yellow at the edges. He couldn’t fathom how much that must have hurt, although he could sympathise with the bullet in his leg.

“Are you gonna be ok to do this, Ryan?” Geoff asked finally.

Ryan nodded, eyes already cold. “I need to do this.”

Geoff sighed, scratching his head. “That’s what I’m worried about.”

“Geoff, please, let me do this.” There was a kind of quiet desperation there, just beneath the surface. It still worried Geoff.

Jack stuck his head in the door to the annex. “Ready when you are.”

Geoff looked at Ryan as if to say, *it’s your call.*

Ryan nodded. “Ready.”
Despite the insistence he was ready, it still took Ryan nearly half an hour to mentally prepare himself to see the smiling bastard’s face again. He hoped he wouldn’t be smiling when he saw him. He knew he wouldn’t be smiling for long if he was.

Ryan spent some time gathering things that may be useful. He knew there would be at least a 6-sided dice somewhere in the locker where they kept spare stuff; there was always a board game or two in each safe house, it kept them from going crazy in case they had to hole up for a long time. He rummaged through the locker until he found the musty old Monopoly box and retrieved the dice, pocketing it.

There was a generator around the side of the main warehouse that ran on diesel. Jack had indicated there was extra fuel for it around somewhere. Perfect. He had Jack leave a Jerry can half full of it outside the shed where Shadowlz was being kept. He also pocketed a book of matches, but only after Jack had made him promise he wouldn’t burn down the lumberyard.

He borrowed Michael’s knife; his own having been lost somewhere before he was rescued from the warehouse, he realised with a sudden sense of regret. Ray had gotten him the knife after noticing him fawning over it while running reconnaissance for a heist to obtain new weapons. It had been a risky move for Ray to get it, but he’d actually turned out to be a good thief after some instruction from Gavin. Ryan had only found out after the fact how much effort Ray had gone to in order to swipe it, and even then, through Gavin. The memory of Ray brought with it fresh rage, driving Ryan’s need for vengeance as he remembered Ray’s pained last moments.

Before he left the annex, Lindsay had run back to the car to bring him his jacket and mask, which she’d picked up from the other safe house. She was a Saint. He welcomed his jacket, but left the mask.

If he was going to do this, it was as Ryan. Not the Vagabond.

* * *

Ryan wheeled himself out to the shed, Geoff following close behind, standing at the door with his pistol loaded and his hunting knife at his hip. He’d promised not to intervene unless Ryan needed him to.

Michael, Jack, Jeremy and Gavin had tied Shadowlz to the pole-like chimney of the furnace in the centre of the room, the same way they had to Jeremy the last time they had been there. However, this time they had sat him in a chair so Ryan could be at eye-level with him.

Shadowlz laughed weakly at the sight of Ryan as he entered. “The Vagabond survived! Who’d have thought? Looks like I did a number on you though.” His voice was soft and shaky, but he sounded determined.

Ryan could see Shadowlz had been beaten by the guys sometime between getting him out of the car and tying him up, although he suspected it was largely Michael’s doing. He was thankful for it; he doubted he’d have had the strength to do an adequate job himself.

Ryan was unmoved. “Like I said, it takes a lot to kill me.”
As Geoff relaxed against the door frame, Shadowlz nodded to him. “You gonna get your boss to do your dirty work for you?”

Geoff chuckled. “Oh, believe me; I would love for him to let me.”

“If you think I need my legs to make you scream and beg for death, you’ve severely underestimated me,” Ryan said lightly. He smiled and there was nothing warm about it. “Don’t worry, there’s plenty I can do just like this.”

Shadowlz looked ragged. He was clearly in pain already. His mousey brown hair stuck out all over his head and he was nursing a swelling black eye and a split lip. There were bloodstains marring the smooth grey fabric of his suit pants and vest; one trouser leg was covered in blood up to the knee. Geoff had mentioned that Lawrence shot his ankle. Ryan noted it as a weak spot. The bridge of his nose was swollen and bloody from an older injury, probably sustained back at the warehouse, and was another point he could potentially exploit. Ryan had Michael’s knife for the time being, but it was the only real weapon he had brought with him. He had no intention of making this quick.

Ryan smiled darkly. “You should have killed me when you had the chance.”

“Go ahead then,” Shadowlz spluttered out. “Finish it.”

“No,” Ryan said flatly, wheeling himself closer. “You don’t get to die yet. First, I want to know why.”

“All I wanted was retribution,” Shadowlz said simply.

“Yeah? Well that makes two of us,” Ryan replied stonily. He used the butt of the knife to strike the shin above Shadowlz’s broken ankle; eliciting a cry of pain he was unable to stifle. “Why?” He repeated with a growl.

“I told you why,” Shadowlz gasped out.

Ryan wheeled himself around the furnace, to where Shadowlz’s hands were bound behind him, duct tape held his wrists together above the joint with his palms facing out. Ryan gripped his left little and ring fingers and twisted them away from the rest of his hand slightly, just enough to make Shadowlz twitch.

“No, you gave me a bullshit, cop-out answer for the camera. To make you look like some kind of hero.”

Ryan took Michael’s razor-sharp knife and began to slowly slice into the fleshy webbing between Shadowlz’s middle finger and ring finger. Shadowlz grunted and groaned through the pain, keeping his mouth shut just as Ryan had so determinedly done during his own torment. Ryan carefully positioned the blade to separate the bones of his knuckles, twisting them apart with a soft crack and popping sound as the tendons gave way beneath the blade, eliciting a sharp, swiftly stifled scream from Shadowlz. Ryan grinned and continued to saw through the hand another inch or so, essentially splitting it down the middle, blood dripping off the mangled fingers, leaving dot-work patterns on the concrete floor below.

Geoff looked away. He was uncomfortable watching. He didn’t want to intervene, but this was a side of Ryan he hadn’t seen up close before. Frankly, it scared him.

When Ryan was satisfied, he gently pried the newly separated fingers apart, hearing the bones creak against one another, until Shadowlz finally let out an anguished scream he couldn’t muffle. The sound echoed in the steel and concrete shed and Ryan smiled at the thought that it would probably
have been audible in the main warehouse.

Shadowlz doubled over with pain, chest heaving as he struggled to maintain his breath and heart rate, leaning forward as if physically pushing himself further away from his butchered hand would make the pain feel more distant.

“I want to know,” Ryan continued casually, quietly relishing in a moment of glorious personal victory, as he wheeled himself back around the furnace. “What was it exactly that I did to you? You don’t do what you did to me unless it’s personal.”

Shadowlz slowly collected himself and with great effort, straightened up. After a long pause steadying his breath and nerves, he glared right back at Ryan through watery eyes, and swallowed. “You said… you said you were happy to play the villain,” he stammered out, still defiant. “B-but I don’t think that’s true. I don’t think you and I are so different. We’re just loyal to different sides.”

Ryan twitched, holding back with all his resolution. They were using the exact same tactics, pushing all the same buttons. This was going to get him nowhere unless he could get into his head.

“You know, for someone who hates me so much, you sure tried your hardest to become me.”

Shadowlz snorted. “It takes a monster to destroy a monster. I wanted to make you pay.”

Ryan sneered; he was still avoiding the question.

“So, I’m a monster. Fair call. What was it then? Was it a slow build?” He ventured. “Watching us wreak havoc on the evening news, maybe you witnessed one of our heists first hand and decided enough was enough?”

Shadowlz was shutting him out now; the blank look on his face gave Ryan nothing to go off, so he switched tactics, thinking back to the things Shadowlz had said at the warehouse when he was the one in the chair.

“I want you to think about every act that you’ve committed, every person that you’ve hurt, every family you’ve torn apart, that might make someone want to hurt you as badly as I do.”

That was worth a shot.

“No… This is proper vengeance. Who was it? Your partner? Your child? Which family member did the Fake AH Crew take from you?”

That hit a nerve. Ryan could see it in his eyes; there was a fire there now.

“Oh, so I’m close…” Ryan smiled that sick, crooked smile, brandishing the blood-smeared knife. He started to wheel himself back around to Shadowlz’s hands and even Geoff felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Shadowlz realised where this was going and quickly relented. “My brother!”

Ryan paused and moved back to face him, and he relaxed ever so slightly.

“Twin, actually,” he continued with a gasp. “You know how they say twins have a special bond? It’s true. We did. Until you showed up. We were responding to a robbery at the Maze Bank by the Fake AH Crew.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow, shaking his head with disbelief. “You were a cop?”
He nodded curtly. “We both were.”

Ryan and Geoff exchanged a glance.

“The Fakes were inside, we had the place surrounded, we thought we’d finally won. Until the Vagabond turned up.” He weakly coughed a laugh that sounded painful. “We’d heard rumours, but we didn’t think they were true. You killed nine officers that day. My brother was one of them. And for all that, the Fake AH Crew got away.” He spat the last words.

Geoff cringed slightly; he remembered the day well. It was before Ryan had joined the crew, it was how he had gotten on their radar. They would have been royally fucked if Ryan hadn’t happened to show up when he had. His little killing spree kept the LSPD distracted long enough for the crew to get away. Geoff had personally spent months tracking him down afterwards, but ultimately, that day was what had earned Ryan his spot on the crew.

“So what? The cops couldn’t or maybe wouldn’t touch us – because let’s face it, they’re not exactly upstanding citizens themselves – and you decided to take matters into your own hands. Something like that?” Ryan probed.

Shadowlz nodded, groaning in pain. “Something …like that.”

Ryan scoffed a laugh. “Good cop gone rogue, sees himself as the hero, I’ve heard this storyline before somewhere… bit of a cliché don’t you think?"

“Clichés exist for a reason I suppose…”

“Touché,” Ryan mused, something else now playing on his mind as he reminisced the early days with the crew. “Did you kill Ray?”

“Does it matter?” Shadowlz retorted.

Ryan ignored him, continuing his line of questioning. “You tried to recruit him. Why?”

Shadowlz smiled that smile and Ryan wanted so badly to punch him in the face but held back.

“We could have used a sniper. God, I wanted him to turn against you. It would have been so sweet; but no,” he confessed, almost proudly. “In the end, his loyalty cost him his life.”

It was all a sick game to him.

“You dump-truck of shit of a human being!” Geoff growled, his hand instinctively moving to settle on the hilt of his knife.

Ryan flinched, but managed to restrain himself physically and spoke very slowly and deliberately. “This doesn’t end here, tonight, not for you. As much pain as you think you’re in now, I promise, I am going to make it tenfold worse. Just when you think you can’t possibly live through another second of agony, I will find a way to make it start all over again.” Ryan enunciated every syllable of every word. “I am going to ruin you down to your soul, so that the devil himself will have to scrape up the pathetic leftovers to stake his claim to you. After what I do to you, even an eternity in hell will seem like a relief.”

Ryan’s face was plastered with a sick grin, despite the turmoil he felt inside. “I have a very creative imagination. But first, because it’ll make me feel better…” He returned to Shadowlz’s bound hands and got to work repeating the process of separating the fingers on his right hand. He worked more deliberately this time, making sure Shadowlz felt every little tear of the knife as he screamed and
writhed in agony, no longer attempting to hide the pain.

When he was done, Ryan wheeled himself back around to face Shadowlz and wiped his brow with the back of his still-bloody hand, leaving a faint smear across his forehead.

“I’ve always been a fan of symmetry, you see.”

Actually, he wasn’t particularly, but it sounded cool.

Shadowlz was hissing obscenities through clenched teeth, thrashing around wildly as tears ran down his face and stung his eyes.

Part of Ryan felt a little better.

Geoff thought he was going to be sick.

“So…” Ryan started, drawing a deep breath. “I liked your take on Russian roulette. I don’t have a revolver, but I think we can still make a game of this.” He pulled the dice from his pocket. “Now, what to do? What to do…?”

He absentmindedly fiddled with the dice, throwing it in the air and catching it a few times as he pondered.

“I’ve never done a Columbian necktie before… that’s where you slit the throat of your victim—” he traced a finger along Shadowlz’s neck to imitate—“and pull their tongue through the wound before they either bleed out or drown in their own blood. I’m not entirely convinced it’s physically possible, but it’s always worth a shot I suppose. That’ll be if we roll a 1.”

Shadowlz eyes widened as he realised the extent of the game and he swallowed hard.

Ryan continued, “If we roll a 2, I think I might get a little bit ‘Reservoir Dogs’ up in here and burn you alive. 3 could be drowning in the sink, I’ve heard that’s not pleasant, but it’s simple enough.”

Ryan could hear himself speaking, it was his voice, but he wasn’t so certain they were entirely his words. It sounded like something he would say, but somehow it all felt surreal and he momentarily wondered if he might actually be dreaming. But there was the pain. Omnipresent and dull in his head and muscles, more acute in his ribs. If he was dreaming, it was certainly vivid.

“A roll of 4 earns you a gut-shot and a slow bleed out. 5, a shot to the chest, you might get lucky and it’ll hit your heart… If we roll a six, of course, you can choose your own adventure. I can make it quick and painless if that’s how you want it. A simple shot to the head, it’ll be over before you know it.”

A chill ran down Geoff’s spine. Ryan sounded so casual about it, like he was explaining the setup for a game of D&D, not actually describing how he planned on ending someone’s life.

“We’ll roll for it now, so you can get that feeling of anticipation, knowing what you’re in for, but I’m not going to kill you until I’m ready.”

Ryan tossed the dice loosely in his hand.

“Before we roll for it,” Shadowlz stammered out, interrupting the roll. “Just one thing. I answered your question… now I have one for you.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow, knowing full well he shouldn’t give him the opportunity. He couldn’t help
himself though; sheer curiosity prevented him from saying no.

Geoff frowned, he could practically see the wheels turning in Ryan’s head, knowing he couldn’t resist the urge to fuck with him some more. He almost wanted to step in.

Shadowlz’s eyes flickered to Geoff as if weighing the consequences of his next words, but he remained stony-faced.

“How did it feel? When I broke you?”

Ryan scoffed. “You think you broke me? It takes more than some rank amateur with a jerry can and a revolver to break one of us.”

Shadowlz smiled that smile, and Ryan felt his stomach twist involuntarily.

“That’s not what I was talking about…” He wheezed and cleared his throat. “How does it feel? Knowing that I’ve marked you for what you are? For all to see. A traitor.”

Ryan recoiled; just the same way he had in the warehouse and it made him feel ill that he still had that power over him.

It’s not true.

“Bullshit!” Geoff snapped instinctively.

“You still don’t want to believe me! Don’t you see?” Shadowlz continued, not breaking eye contact with Ryan. “They all walked right into our trap for you – knowingly even! That’s the kind of risk you are to your crew. One way or another, you will be their downfall.”

Geoff’s eyes went wide and his head snapped around to Ryan, hoping to see some kind of denial, or defiance; something that indicated he wasn’t buying it. But Ryan was frozen, the helpless look on his face confirming Shadowlz words had gotten through. Geoff’s heart sank.

Shadowlz continued. “The look on your face when I showed you the photo, I know it was brief – you’re a good actor, I’ll give you that – but that look; that acceptance. I’d seen it before. It was the same look that Ray had right after he shot you. Right after he found out it wasn’t you who shot first. When he realised how much of a threat he was.”

Ryan lashed out, striking Shadowlz across the face with a backhand that would have knocked him off his feet had he been standing.

“What is he talking about, Ryan?” Geoff asked cautiously.

Ryan snorted and his hand instinctively shot up to touch where he’d been branded, feeling the scarred skin beneath the bandage, knowing the mark would be there forever. A permanent reminder of how little he was trusted, even by the people he trusted the most.

To both their shock, Shadowlz laughed weakly. “Go on, Ryan, tell him. Tell him how I branded you the same way he did. A single word carries so much weight, doesn’t it? Traitor. Judas. Go on, show him, Ryan.”

Ryan’s fingers traced the edge of the bandage, scratching at the inflamed skin where the adhesive contacted. Geoff followed the movement with his eyes. Ryan couldn’t have said why he did it, but he obeyed. He slowly peeled the edge of the cover away, revealing the raised, scarred tissue, pink and puffy and grotesque. JUDAS.
It was like the wounds of the past had been opened up, their scabs ripped away and exposed to the sting of fresh air again. Would they ever heal?

That smile crept over Shadowlz’s lips. “It really suits him, wouldn’t you agree, Geoff?”

Ryan’s usual eloquence deserted him in his rage. “Fuck you.” He spat the words.

Geoff could feel his blood boil.

Ryan looked ready to tear him apart with his bare hands.

Geoff was quicker.

In one movement, Geoff took his knife- which was probably not as sharp or well-maintained as Michael’s- in his left hand and a fistful of Shadowlz’s hair in his right, and plunged the knife into his right eye socket.

Shadowlz convulsed, furiously shaking his head, twisting futilely against his bonds, crying out unintelligible noises, before Geoff thrust the knife further in, burying the 7-inch blade up to the hilt in his skull.

Shadowlz seized violently, before going completely stiff and finally slumping back against the chimney, a blank, serene expression overcoming what was left of his youthful face.

Ryan was silent, shocked; impressed that Geoff had it in him. Furious that it hadn’t been him.

For a long time neither of them said anything. Ryan was shaking. With rage, fear, adrenaline? Was he glad Shadowlz was dead? He didn’t know. He couldn’t work out what was going on inside his head. He didn’t have to. What happened next seemed like it happened at a distance, like he was watching someone else play a video game in first-person; or like some virtual reality game with a cut scene and you’re just along for the ride.

Geoff turned to face him, an apologetic look on his face. “I know you wanted…” He began, but Ryan cut him off with a growl.

“He was mine, Geoff.”

Geoff took a sharp breath, surprised at the force in his words. “I know, buddy, I’m sorry but I…”

“He deserved to suffer for what he did to us.”

Geoff nodded solemnly. “No argument there-”

Ryan wheeled himself closer to the body, reaching for the knife still embedded in his face, pulling it free and wiping the gore on Shadowlz’s motionless shoulder.

“He was supposed to plead for his life… He was supposed to beg for mercy.” Ryan’s voice had gotten quiet, reflective, dark. “And when I finally decided to end him, it would have been merciful.”

Geoff instinctively took a few steps back, something dangerously close to fear swelling up inside him. “Look, Ryan,” he said in a gentle but firm voice that masked his unease. “It’s over.”

Ryan went deathly silent, a slight tremor in his hands as he slowly balled them into fists and let out a long exhale. In a way, it was more terrifying than anything he could have said. Geoff felt his blood run cold.
Ryan suddenly shuddered and dropped the knife, almost throwing it from his hand like it was red-hot. It fell with a loud clatter to the ground.

Geoff hesitated. He’d seen something there for a split-second, something he wasn’t used to seeing in Ryan; fear.

“Ryan? Are you ok?”

No.

There was a long silence. Eventually, Ryan’s gaze softened, and he nodded, staring off into the distance. He ran a hand through his hair. “Yeah… I’m ok.”

He reached up and carefully smoothed the adhesive pad back over the brand, the skin still swollen and burning, his cold hands soothing over it.

Geoff relaxed, carefully picked up the knife and gripped the back of the wheelchair, steering it towards the door; he took one final look at Shadowlz before closing the door behind him.

Ryan didn’t sleep the rest of the night. He continued to lie on his cot, staring at the ceiling replaying what happened in his mind. There was little he could do to shake the mental image that had burned itself into his brain.

“Look, Ryan, it’s over.”

It wasn’t over. It would never really be over.

In that moment, he had pictured himself stabbing Geoff.

It was vivid, visceral. He’d almost been able to feel his muscles going through the movements, Geoff’s warm blood pulsing out in spurts through his fingers as he dug the knife into his abdomen, twisted it; an animalistic snarl escaping his lips...

What the fuck was that?

How close had he come to going through with it?

“One way or another, you will be their downfall.”

He shuddered to think.

Still, sleep eluded him.
It took the better part of 12 hours before Ryan could even pretend to function again.

He wasn’t sure he’d slept at all. It certainly didn’t feel like it.

The rest of the crew had slept until midday. When they began to stir, Ryan shut his eyes and listened to their movements, their attempt at whispers and soft footfalls failing miserably as they tried not to wake him. While he found it mildly amusing at first, he really just wanted them to leave; he didn’t need them worrying about his lack of sleep on top of everything else. Eventually they all left the annex and he could hear them chatting in the main part of the warehouse but not clearly enough to make out their conversation. His stomach twisted into knots as he wondered what Geoff would tell them about what had happened in the shed.

***

Jeremy was the first to ask.

“So, Geoff, what happened out there last night? We didn’t hear any shots.” His face wore an expression of concern, but also morbid curiosity. Ryan and Geoff hadn’t been out there very long, both had blood on their hands when they’d returned. Ryan still had some smeared on his face, so presumably things had gotten …messy. Neither had said a word, but then no one had been brave enough to ask them.

“I don’t know if I should say…” Geoff frowned, thinking about what Ryan had done, the things he’d said. How tenuous Ryan’s grip on sanity had seemed. Probably best the guys didn’t find out about that. He didn’t even want to think about it himself. “Ryan had a lot to get out of his system. Shadowlz fucked him up pretty badly.”

“I mean, are you really surprised?” Michael started. “I’d’ve probably beaten the guy to death with my bare hands if he’d done that shit to me.”

“Michael, you don’t know the half of it…” Geoff shook his head, checking to make sure Ryan was still asleep in the other room, before closing the door to the annex and motioning the crew to move outside.

The sun was warm outside, which was bad news for the body inside the poorly-insulated shed; it would warm quickly and begin to smell before long. Geoff knew they’d have to dispose of it soon.

The crew naturally gathered around a log, Gavin lazing back on it, casually flipping his sunglasses on and stretching his arms above his head. “You gonna give us the story then, Geoff?”

The others sat or stood around the log, all focused on Geoff.

Geoff kicked at some twigs on the ground absently. “So, it turns out Shadowlz used to be a cop,” he started. “And Ryan killed his twin brother, who was also a cop.”

Gavin snorted. “What are the odds of that?”

“Have you met Ryan?” Jack smirked. “Odds are pretty good I’d say.”
“It was before we knew Ryan, the first time we robbed the Maze, the first time we crossed paths with the Vagabond.”

“Oh shit, I remember that!” Michael exclaimed. “We would’ve been fuuucked if Ryan hadn’t shown up.”

Geoff nodded. “Well, seems he held a grudge and decided to take it out on all of us; probably fell in with the Randoms naturally. No way to tell now, though.” He shrugged.

“What did Ryan do to him?” Lindsay finally asked plainly.

Geoff winced. “It wasn’t good…”

Michael was fired up again. “So it shouldn’t be, I hope he made the bastard pay!”

“Oh, he suffered plenty… I did have to uh,” Geoff continued, hesitantly. “…I stepped in.”

“Why, Geoff?” Jeremy looked up at him with a glare; he had a right to be angry. But it was done now.

“I think it was the right thing to do. He was trying to get into Ryan’s head, trying to play games with him, and Ryan, the stubborn sonofabitch that he is, kept listening to him. Can’t fuckin’ help himself.”

Geoff shook his head.

“That’s weird,” Gavin noted with a scowl. “Why would he do that?”

“Look,” Geoff began, his voice taking on an authoritative tone. “Shadowlz was the one who shot me, yeah? That day in the field. He saw me turn on Ryan. He saw you all go after him… he’s been in our comms, right? So, he heard us trying to track down Jeremy, heard about the ambush we set for Ryan… Smart motherfucker used us against him.” Geoff let out a long breath and ran both hands through his hair and over his face; still not sure he should be saying anything at all. “Ryan was branded. ‘Judas’, it says. Back of his neck. It’s all kinds of fucked up. Worst part is I think Ryan-”

“Hey, what’s going on out here?” Ryan’s voice cut in from the doorway.

Geoff nearly had a heart attack. “Jesus Christ! Ryan, you’re awake.”

“Astutely noted.”

Ryan’s head poked through the door, he was stuck at the stairs because of the wheelchair. He looked like he hadn’t slept at all; his face was haggard, with dark circles under his still-blackened eyes, his face a mess of green and purple bruises, a smear of Shadowlz’s blood still on his forehead from the night before.

“Ryan, man, you look like shit,” Michael pointed out with a grin.

Gavin chuckled. Lindsay, Jeremy and Jack looked more concerned than amused, while Geoff was still barely containing his shock.

“Thanks Michael!” Ryan replied brightly, then, more seriously; “What are we talking about, Geoff?”

“I’m fucking starving,” Geoff seamlessly changed the subject. “Do we still have any food in this place?”
Ryan begrudgingly accepted a very late breakfast consisting of a can of diet coke and a few bites of a stale muesli bar which he barely managed to keep down. He wasn’t sure if it was side effects of the anaesthesia from surgery, the lack of sleep or the state of his nerves. Or maybe it was just the fact that the food in the place had been there for the better part of two years. Probably all of the above.

He drained the remainder of his coke and set down the can, eyeing it up to attempt to crush it, when suddenly there were arms around him from behind, pinning his own by his sides. He panicked, tensing up and preparing to fight.

But the arms were soft and warm and meant no ill intent and it took a few moments to register they belonged to Lindsay. She pulled him into a hug.

Ryan laughed nervously. “You scared the hell outta me!”

He hid his panic well. His mind raced.

I could’ve hurt you.

Lindsay looked worried. “Sorry, Ryan. Just thought you could use a hug.”

I could’ve hurt you, just like I could’ve hurt Geoff...

He let out a breath, steadying his nerves.

“Well, you’re not wrong, but a little more warning next time would be good.” He smiled up at her and she pulled him in for another hug, situating herself on the cot next to him.

She lowered he voice to barely a whisper. “I’m so sorry… If you need me to change that for you...” Her eyes flicked to the bandage on the back of his neck.

Ryan winced. “Geoff told you?”

Lindsay shook her head. “Sean– the nurse at the hospital told me.”

Ryan nodded, faintly relieved.

What did it matter if they knew anyway?

It still felt intrusive. Permanent. Like somehow the crew knowing validated it.

Ryan pushed it aside; suddenly realising Lindsay was still speaking to him.

“…to get these for you.” She held out her hand, holding a mix of pills. “Antibiotics and painkillers, I have some muscle relaxants and sedatives as well if you need them… If things get real bad.”

“What? Oh, um… thanks.”

He dutifully took what she’d given him, noticeably without the usual arguments that normally accompanied an offer of drugs.

Lindsay sat with him while he waited for the painkillers to kick in, one arm draped over his shoulders, letting his head rest against hers. The contact felt nice, but part of him still felt compelled
to shy away; like he was somehow undeserving of it.

At any rate, he felt marginally better with the pain back down to a dull ache.

Lindsay hugged him once more and went back to where the lads were trying to set up a game of monopoly; they were looking for something, and Ryan had a vague suspicion he should’ve known what it was.

Geoff approached him shortly afterwards, the same apologetic look on his face from the previous night.

*He instantly pictured the knife in his abdomen, warm blood between his fingers…*

“How you going, buddy?”

Ryan gave a crooked sort of grin, hands balling into fists at his sides.

Geoff grimaced. “You don’t have to answer that… I’m sorry about what happened, I shouldn’t have…”

Ryan cut him off. “Geoff, it’s fine. It’s ok. I’m fine.” It wasn’t entirely convincing, but it was a start.

Geoff’s eyebrows furrowed. “You don’t have to be ok, Ryan.”

Ryan let the words sink in for a moment.

*Trying not to picture Geoff’s blood on his hands.*

He sighed. “Well, I guess we’ll see. Right now, I’m ok.” That time it came out a little more reassuringly. “Thanks.”

Ryan’s eyes flicked back up to meet Geoff’s with renewed light. “There is something that’d make me feel better though.”

Geoff raised an eyebrow and followed his gaze to Gavin’s laptop on the floor beneath his cot. Geoff went over and stooped down to pick it up, bringing it back to Ryan. He held it out, but just out of Ryan’s reach. “What exactly are you gonna do?”

“I just want to know who he was, see that his story about his brother checks out.”

Geoff looked sceptical. “That’s all?”

“Please, Geoff. I just need to know. I don’t even know his real name.” Ryan reached out and eventually Geoff relented, handing the laptop over.

“Hey Ryan?”

He logged in using Gavin’s password and looked up quizzically.

“If you need to talk… I’m here, ok?”

Ryan smiled half-heartedly and dismissed him with a wave, immediately diving into his research.
Geoff was worried for him again.

* * *

The others were kind enough, or maybe concerned enough, to keep their distance until he was ready to interact again. Ryan buried himself in work, sifting through police files and news articles, occasionally calling Gavin or Jeremy over to help with getting access to some of the more tricky-to-obtain records. He kept up an act like nothing was wrong, just doing his usual thing, albeit a little more reservedly than usual. Sleep deprivation was hitting him hard. Trying to hold a conversation was near impossible. He struggled to be present in the moment; his mind kept drifting, catching flashes of memories like waking nightmares, and snapping himself out of them to realise he no longer had any idea what was going on around him. So the others mostly left him to it.

“Damnit,” Ryan muttered under his breath as he scanned through the LSPD records again. “Jeremy, am I missing something?”

“What’s the matter, Ry?” Jeremy returned to his side, he’d been the most patient with him of all of them.

Ryan squinted at the screen. “I know my brain’s probably not functioning at quite the optimal levels, y’know with the head trauma and all…”

No shit, Jeremy thought, keeping it to himself.

“…but I can’t find any record of twins in the LSPD for at least twenty years.” He frowned up at Jeremy, who gently took the laptop off him and double checked the records.

“Looking for twins?” Jeremy asked.

“Mmm,” Ryan hummed, a little spacey. “Shadowlz said I killed his twin.”

Ryan watched as Jeremy spent a few minutes scowling at the screen before his fingers flew into a fury and his face contorted into a confused frown.

“Why would he lie about that?” Ryan mused quietly.

“Maybe they weren’t really twins? Or maybe he wasn’t a cop?” Jeremy suggested, but Ryan had that faraway look again. “Let’s try something else.”

“Huh?”

“I’m gonna look up the police casualties from that heist. See how many are attributed to the Vagabond and then see if any of them were twins, ok buddy?”

“…yeah, ok.”

Jeremy frowned at him. “Ryan, get some rest. I’ll take care of this. We can look over it later alright?”

The faraway look on his face was back and Ryan was gone again.

* * *
The sun had started its lazy descent over the horizon in a stunning blaze of pink and orange, when Geoff announced to the crew, “I think we’d better dispose of the body tonight.”

Ryan immediately snapped out of whatever faraway headspace he was in. “What?”

Geoff sighed. “The body, Ryan. I wanna get rid of it tonight.” There was a note of frustration in his voice from having to repeat himself for the fiftieth time for Ryan’s sake, but he still tried to remain gentle.

“We can move on to somewhere more comfortable once it’s gone; preferably somewhere with hot running water,” Lindsay added hopefully.

“Oh,” Ryan said, absent mindedly nodding. “I wanna collect some samples first… fingerprints and some hair, just in case.”

Geoff scowled. “Do you really need to? Couldn’t you just let it go?”

“We still don’t know who he was. We don’t even know his real name.” Ryan pleaded with his eyes. “I know someone in forensics, I’ll just pass it on and they’ll let me know if anything comes up. Promise. I just… I just need to know.”

Geoff’s eye met Ryan’s and there was no way he could deny such a simple request. He relented. “Ok, but we’ll get ‘em for you. Lil J, you know how to do prints?”

Jeremy nodded. “Yep, should be able to sort something out with what we have here.” He smiled at Ryan, but Ryan didn’t really notice, or if he did, he didn’t acknowledge in any way.

“Good.” Geoff nodded, before pointing a finger at Ryan. “And you don’t go anywhere fucking near the LSPD or their forensics labs until all of this blows over, I don’t care who your contacts are. I’m serious.”

Ryan held up his hands defensively, flinching a little at the sudden movement towards him. “I… I was going to mail them,” he said quietly, shrinking back.

Geoff suddenly felt a little bad, self-conscious of his tone and movements. He didn’t think he’d been aggressive. He made a mental note that Ryan was still skittish, to be extra careful not to set him off in any way. That was the last thing he needed right now.

“Is there something I can do?” Ryan asked cautiously. “I could help with the body?”

Geoff rubbed his temples, with a quiet groan. *You’re just gonna get in the way…*

Michael shot him a worried look.

Lindsay, quick thinking as always, rifled through the medications she’d brought. “Oh Ryan, I nearly forgot.” She popped a few pills out and offered them to Ryan. “Here, you need to take your antibiotics. You don’t want to get an infection.”

“Oh, right.” Again, Ryan dutifully accepted the pills, swallowing them dry with minimal fuss.

Jack snorted at his compliance. Seemed like it was always the ladies who could get him to do whatever they wanted.

The sedatives she’d given him kicked in quickly; Ryan was out like a light. Lindsay felt bad for tricking him, but he did need the rest. She doubted he’d remember when he woke up anyway.
In the dim light out in the shed, a black mass of flies was already beginning to lay eggs in the soft tissue of Shadowlz’s body. Gavin gagged at the buzzing noise before they even disturbed the flies, dashing back outside the shed.

“I can’t do this Geoff. I’m going to wait out here. I’ll get the shovels or something.”

Geoff rolled his eyes. It definitely wasn’t the worst body they’d disposed of. That award had gone to one they’d dubbed “Mr Crispy,” after one of Michael’s explosions had started a fat fire – the fat belonging to the aforementioned Mr Crispy. The body had burned for hours, fuelled by the layers of winter clothes the man had been wearing and his own body fat. They’d assumed it was a good way to get rid of the evidence, so they didn’t attempt to put him out. In some ways they’d been right, but the charred remains of his skeleton, coated in the greasy residue of burned flesh had been one of the most disgusting things they’d encountered. And the smell…

Geoff wrinkled his nose at the memory. This was a walk in the park compared to that.

“Jesus, Ryan, in the face?” Jack commented as he saw the fatal wound, the withered remains of his right eyeball, shrunken back into his skull from the leakage of vitreous humour. He pulled a face of disgust as he examined the wound more closely.

“That wasn’t Ryan,” Geoff admitted quietly, staring at the ground.

“Oh, Geoff…” Jack shook himself, still disgusted by the thought.

“Look, can we please…” Geoff started as he rubbed his face. “Let’s just get him outta here.”

Michael took his knife and walked around behind the furnace fireplace to cut the bonds still securing Shadowlz’s arms to the chimney. He stopped short when he saw the mangled remains of his hands.

“What the fuck? I’m gonna say this was Ryan,” he muttered under his breath, shaking his head as he waved away the flies that had settled on the open wounds. There were dozens of them buzzing in the shed now, echoing eerily off the steel walls. Michael sliced through the duct tape, realizing with horror the very knife he was holding was the same used to butcher his hands.

“I’m guessing that’s where the screaming was coming from then?” Jeremy noted as he saw the hands and cringed.

Geoff pressed his lips together and nodded, still avoiding eye contact.

Jeremy blanched slightly but got to work collecting the fingerprints and hair samples as best he could.

Rigor mortis had kept the body fixed in position and was only just starting to ease up, so it took some effort to reposition and get it into the trunk of the car waiting outside. Between the four of them, they managed it. Gavin had already put the shovels in the car in preparation.

“Hmm… we don’t need this car for anything else, right?” Geoff mused to Lindsay before getting in.

She leaned against the door with her forearms, dropping her head down to the window, cocking it sideways. “Why? What’re you thinking?”
A smile tugged at the corner of Geoff’s lips, the first she’d seen all day.

“I’m thinking… barbeque.”

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Weazel News, reporting live from the scene. The body of a man, who is yet to be identified, was found late this evening in the trunk of a car which had been set alight and abandoned off the Great Ocean highway near the Paleto Bay area. While no official statement has been released by the Los Santos Police Department, local authorities have suggested this may be a move of gang retaliation in response to earlier reports of the kidnapping and torture of one of the members of the Fake AH Crew. Investigations are currently ongoing.
The sun had long since set over Los Santos, and the bedroom of Geoff’s Rockford Hills penthouse had gradually sunk into darkness without the occupants really noticing.

Jack lingered in the doorway for a moment, peering in. Jeremy was hunched over his laptop, the only light in the room now coming from the screen, reflecting on his face, which was far too close to be considered healthy. He’d been like that for the better part of three hours, while Ryan slept, dead to the world, on the bed beside him.

Jack felt almost like he was intruding. With a pang of guilt, he realised the last time the three of them had been alone in a room together, both Jeremy and Ryan had been restrained... He wasn’t proud of that. But it was done, he’d made his apologies; they’d moved forward.

It didn’t stop him from feeling terrible about it.

Jack flicked on the light as he entered. *Better to disturb Ryan than let Jeremy send himself blind,* he reasoned.

Jeremy looked up, startled, but Ryan didn’t show any signs of waking; it had been nearly 7 hours since the sedatives had kicked in and his body clearly needed the rest. Jack put down a bowl of Geoff’s home-cooked beef goulash on the table next to Jeremy and pushed it towards him.

“You missed dinner,” Jack pointed out. “It’s my watch now anyway; the guys are playing Worms in the living room if you want to go.”

They’d decided that until things died down they should stay together at Geoff’s penthouse. The official reason was for security, but it was also so they could keep an eye on each other. After the traumatic events of the past few days, they weren’t sure how they’d cope once it had all sunk in. They were still running on the fear and adrenaline high and had no idea how long it would take to break. Quietly, all eyes were still on Ryan. After Lindsay had slipped him the sedatives at the lumberyard safe house, the crew moved him on with them and although he woke for brief periods as they shuffled him from the safe house, to the car, to the penthouse, he had still not been entirely lucid.

At Lindsay’s suggestion, they’d decided it would be best not to let Ryan wake up alone in a new place, and so they had taken shifts staying with him, hanging out in his room just in case. Lindsay had changed the dressings on some of his wounds that needed it, including the brand. For the first time, she’d gotten a good look at it. It wasn’t infected, but the wound was horrific, it was going to scar deeply. She supposed that was the point. The letters were scratchy but instantly recognisable. The only way he was ever going to be able to get rid of it would be something like surgery. She knew he wouldn’t have approved, but she pitied him.

While the others had gone to help Geoff with dinner and eat, Jeremy had stayed with Ryan and had gotten back into investigating Shadowlz’s identity; pulling out all the information he was able to get his hands on about the heist at the Maze Bank and the Vagabond’s eight-cop killing spree that day.

Jeremy put the laptop down on the table, leaned back and stretched his arms overhead, his back popping from being in the same position for so long.

“Thanks Jack.” He picked up the bowl but made no effort to move, looking over at Ryan. “I think I’m gonna stay for a bit longer though.” He fell upon the food, realizing how hungry he actually was.
From the living room, they could hear an indignant squawk from Gavin, closely followed by the faint laughter of Michael and Geoff.

Jack nodded. “Find anything about Shadowlz?”

His mouth full of stew, Jeremy just shook his head.

Jack looked at Ryan, still out cold in his bed, still wearing the scrubs from the hospital and Geoff’s worn grey t-shirt. His hands and face were still crusted with burgundy remains of dried blood.

Jack scowled. “I’ll be back in a sec.”

Jeremy set about devouring the goulash and a few minutes later, Jack returned with a bowl of warm water and a washcloth.

Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “You’re giving him a sponge bath?” He asked with a quiet chuckle, mouth still half-full of food.

Jack rolled his eyes. “He’s fuckin’ still covered in blood, it’s disgusting.”

“You’ll wake him up…” Jeremy warned.

“He’s slept enough for now. He’ll need to eat something soon anyway.”

Jack sat on the edge of the bed as he dipped the washcloth in the water and squeezed out the excess. He gently started to wipe the blood from Ryan’s forehead, a few drops of water running down over his face as he did.

Suddenly Ryan’s eyes snapped open, he grabbed Jack’s arm holding the washcloth and yanked it away from his face, throwing Jack sideways and making him yelp in shock.

Jeremy bounced to his feet, sending his bowl clattering to the floor, spilling the last of his goulash.

“Ryan! It’s ok! It’s us. It’s us.”

Ryan was sitting bolt upright in bed, still gripping Jack’s arm, trying to catch his breath from the shock and sudden exertion. His body pumped adrenaline and his heart raced, his mind struggling to catch up. His head whipped around, eyes darting about the room as he tried to get his bearings.

There was something terrifyingly animalistic and instinctive in his movements and it became very clear why Lindsay recommended they didn’t leave him to wake up alone.


Jack gently pried Ryan’s hand off his arm, giving it a gentle, reassuring squeeze in his own as Ryan worked out what was going on.

“It’s ok, you’re safe,” Jack assured him. “We’re at Geoff’s. We’re all here and everyone’s ok.”

Ryan looked around and took a few deep breaths, slowly nodding comprehension.

_Not being water-boarded. In the penthouse with the crew. Safe._

“Sorry,” he breathed, withdrawing his hand from Jack’s.

He noticed Jack rubbing his wrist where he’d grabbed him, red marks in the shape of fingers just
visible. He cringed.

“It’s alright.” Jack picked up the washcloth and threw it at him. “Might wanna wipe your face though.”

Ryan looked at the cloth, then down at his filthy clothes, wrinkling his nose at the smell. “I think I need more than that… I might go take a shower.” He frowned at his still uncooperative legs, he dreaded to think what the bruising and swelling was like under the scrubs. “…or I suppose, maybe a bath… or something.”

Jack pulled a face and nodded at him. “That’s a really good idea.”

Ryan clutched his head, suddenly feeling like his skull was too small for his brain, his face contorted in pain, “Ok, yeah; gonna need some painkillers too. And maybe some water…”

“We gotcha buddy.” Jeremy grinned at him and went to fetch what he needed – and something to clean up the goulash. Luckily, Geoff always made extra.

* * *

Ryan was starting to feel vaguely human again. Clean for the first time in days, painkillers dulling the throbbing in his head and muscles; although he’d refused to take any sedatives after the first round and the state he’d woken up in.

He was still shaken from the thought of nearly hurting Geoff and Lindsay; he didn’t want to have to add any more names to that list. It could have been worse with Jack.

You’re safe. You’re with the crew. He reminded himself as he got dressed.

Geoff’s penthouse was big enough for all of them to have their own rooms and they all kept a staple wardrobe there, a few t-shirts, an extra pair of pants, underwear, pyjamas. It was a similar story in every safe house. Ask him any day and he’d swear blind he owned more clothes as a criminal than a fashion model. Going for comfort over style, he pulled on a loose-fitting pair of plaid pyjama pants and a soft navy blue t-shirt with an animal rescue slogan that he couldn’t remember the origin story of.

It was now late in the evening, but the others were still awake and probably would be for some time. He didn’t think he’d get any sleep tonight at any rate. He’d slept enough. His legs were responsive, but extensively bruised and not up to supporting his weight, so he reluctantly got back in the wheelchair and went out to see the others.

“Good morning, sleeping beauty,” Geoff greeted him with a curious smile.

“Absolutely nothing about that statement is true,” Ryan retorted with a smirk.

It earned him a giggle from the lads.

“How’re you feeling?” Jack asked sincerely.

Ryan thought for a moment. “About a million times better than I’ve felt in days, but that said, I still feel like a bag of dicks.”

“So lumpy?” Jeremy joked, but he was quickly interrupted by Michael.
“Told ya he’d be fine, pay up Gavin.”

Ryan frowned at him. “Gavin! Ye of little faith!”

“I thought you’d be more… messed up, Ryan, y’know?” he admitted sheepishly, slipping Michael ten dollars.

Ryan snorted, barely suppressed a chuckle. “You asshole.”

Gavin looked hurt. “No, but like, I would definitely be messed up. So it’s kind of like a compliment…” He tried to explain.

Ryan shook his head but grinned. “Y’know, it’s funny how your compliments are rarely actually compliments, Gavin. But hey, you’re the one who lost money over it, so…”

“Now who’s the arsehole, Ryan?” Gavin grinned back at him.

Ryan shook his head with a smirk. “Still you…”

Michael let out a burst of giggles that set Jeremy and Gavin off too.

The banter was reassuring. It felt natural, normal. Not as forced as it actually was.

Geoff dished up another bowl of the stew for Ryan; which he ate very slowly, careful not to upset his stomach, but in that moment, it was the best thing he’d ever eaten, and it took all his willpower not to just down the whole bowl. Something about Geoff’s cooking was always comforting, it helped everyone feel better.

“So, what’d I miss?” He asked through a mouthful of stew.

The guys tag-teamed telling the story; filling him in on what they did with the body, how it had made the news and they’d use the footage for their video. They explained why they were in Geoff’s apartment and how Lindsay had re-grouped with the B-team to start damage control. They conveniently left off the part about drugging him and let him assume he’d simply succumbed to exhaustion.

“Oh yeah,” Jeremy piped up from his spot, cross-legged on the floor. “I got your samples too; fingerprints and hair with skin tags.”

Michael snickered. “Yeah, I doubt the LSPD will have much luck with the evidence we left them.”

“They might be able to pull dental records…” Ryan mused, mostly to himself. “Thanks Jeremy.”

“I haven’t had any luck finding anything about Shadowlz in the police databases though,” Jeremy was quick to add. “Of the eight police officers that died that day, none of them had a brother in the force – or sister, I thought to check, just in case – and none of them were twins.”

Something about that didn’t sound right, but Ryan couldn’t put his finger on it.

He nodded. “Thanks for trying. Good thing you got those prints. I’ll uh, send ‘em off tomorrow. If the LSPD don’t come up with something before then.”

Ryan was itching to get back to doing his own digging into Shadowlz’s identity, but the way the others were looking at him made him very conscious of the fact that they were all waiting to see how he was going to handle this. Subtlety wasn’t exactly their specialty, and it wasn’t unfamiliar territory for him.
Instead, he positioned himself next to the couch and grabbed one of the controllers. “So what are we playing?”

* * *

They played various games into the early hours of the morning and gradually the others retreated to their bedrooms; first Geoff, then Jack and Michael and eventually Gavin, until it was only Ryan and Jeremy left absentely playing racing games in near silence, with only the occasional jibe thrown out at the other’s misfortune or congratulations at a win.

After a while Jeremy looked over at Ryan, a soft but serious expression on his face. Something was clearly on his mind that he’d been thinking about for a while.

“You know,” he said quietly. “You don’t have to be strong for anyone anymore. After what you’ve been through, no one expects you to be ok straight away.”

Ryan froze up. His on-screen character unceremoniously missed a turn and plunged over the side of a cliff, the car slowly sinking into the water below, his character not even attempting to escape from the vehicle as he silently drowned.

“I mean, you’ve repeatedly put yourself through hell for the crew. You took a beating for me…” Jeremy cringed, correcting himself, “because of me…”

Ryan found his voice as his character respawned.

“Hey, we’re Battle Buddies, we gotta look out for each other.”

Jeremy paused the game and looked over at Ryan.

“Well, this is me looking out for you now, Ryan; if there’s anything you need to get off your chest, whatever you gotta say, I’m here. And if there’s anything I can do, just let me know and it’s done.”

Ryan was momentarily taken aback. Geoff and Lindsay had already said similar things and it shouldn’t have shocked him as much as it did, but hearing it come from Jeremy… He wasn’t used to being seen as anything short of undoubting, unafraid, cold and calculating, even by the crew. It was an image he himself had carefully crafted, under the mask and paint of the Vagabond. It was easy to forget that under all that, he was still Ryan; something that sometimes even he forgot.

“Thanks, Jeremy,” Ryan mumbled with a weak smile. “One more race? I kinda fucked up that last one.”

Jeremy chuckled quietly. “Yeah you did. Alright, one more then I’m gonna hit the hay.”

Jeremy restarted the race and they were about halfway through the second lap when Ryan came to the realisation that there was only one thing he really wanted.

“Hey, Jeremy?”

“Mmm?”

“I’d really appreciate your help with tracking down Shadowlz – who he was, what his story was… I don’t want to bring it up in front of the others; I don’t want them to worry.”

Jeremy scoffed as he cut a corner and pulled into first ahead of Ryan. “Dude, they’re worried
anyway. But I get where you’re coming from. It is a bit obsessive.”

Ryan shook his head, his character throwing a proximity mine out the car window, landing square on Jeremy’s rear bumper and blowing him into the air. Jeremy let out a noise of frustration as Ryan overtook him yet again.

“I gotta know. It’s gonna drive me nuts if I don’t find out.”

“Why?” Jeremy shook his controller in frustration as Ryan’s car pulled across the finish line split seconds before his.

Ryan grinned at his victory, but it was hollow. “I don’t know… I just have to know.”

Ryan wasn’t entirely sure what his own motivation was or why it mattered so much to him. Maybe it was just his innate sense of curiosity kicked into overdrive by what he’d been through, although he suspected it was something else.

Jeremy put down his controller and stretched out. “Whatever it takes man, I’ll help you find out. But right now, I’m going to bed. You gonna stay here?”

Ryan nodded.

“Alright, ’night Ry.”

“’night Lil J.”

Ryan loaded a new game in single-player mode and selected a long mission on the hardest difficulty. If he was gonna be awake, the least he could do was earn himself some achievements.

* * *

Ryan hadn’t moved from the living room when he finally drifted off, passing out on the couch around 5 am. The quiet music lulled him to sleep and the soft blue glow from the menu screen on the TV reflected off his too-pale skin in the otherwise dark apartment.

Less than an hour later the whole penthouse awoke to horrific screaming.

Geoff was the first to the living room, in only his underwear and socks, shouting. “What? Ryan! What’s happening?”

Michael was next behind him, then Jeremy and Jack and finally Gavin, rubbing his face and still gripping his pillow.

Ryan was completely asleep. Screaming.

They’d never heard him scream like that. They never thought they would.

“Fuck, that’s disturbing,” Jack said what everyone was thinking.

Geoff took Ryan’s shoulders and gently shook him awake, and the screaming stopped as abruptly as it started. Then Ryan burst into laughter. Not his dark, threatening laugh, but sincere, hysterical laughter. It was that uncontrollable, almost involuntary high-pitched giggle he couldn’t suppress when a video game glitched out in a funny way or Gavin did something particularly stupid.
“What the actual fuck?” Michael looked mad but concerned, his expression reflected back at him in the faces of the others.

Ryan looked confused but couldn’t stop laughing. Between giggles he managed, “I don’t know… I can’t stop…”

When he finally managed to control his laughter after a few deep breaths, he looked around at their worried faces. “Uh, so… What? Was I talking in my sleep or something?”

Michael was the first to answer. “Dude, you were fucking *screaming*. It sounded like someone was murdering you.”

Ryan blushed but looked confused again. “I was? Uh, sorry.”

“It was really loud Rye-Bread, were you having a nightmare?” Gavin asked, still sounding drowsy. “I thought you didn’t have dreams?”

“Screaming? Really? No… I don’t. I don’t remember…” He looked up at them sheepishly. “It just suddenly seemed very funny for some reason.”

Everyone still looked concerned. Ryan’s eyelids felt like they were made of lead, he let them fall closed for just a moment.

“Dude, that scared the *shit* outta me!” Jeremy said, running a hand through his hair.

“Are you *sure* you’re ok Ryan?” Jack asked sincerely.

“Mmmhmm…” Ryan just hummed before he was completely out cold again.

The crew looked at each other, a mix of worried, confused and mildly annoyed expressions.

Geoff broke the silence. “Well, that was the weirdest fucking thing ever. Guess I’m awake now.”

“Fuck that, I’m going back to sleep.” Michael wearily made his way back to his room and the lads followed suit. Jack hesitated for a moment, shooting a worried look at Ryan then Geoff before heading back to his own bedroom.

*For Ryan to scream like that...*

Geoff sat heavily in one of the armchairs next to the couch, watching Ryan sleep, knowing he’d never have the slightest clue what was going on in his head; something for which he was ashamedly thankful.
Night Terrors

Geoff had sat with Ryan until the sun came up. Thankfully, Ryan barely stirred.

Satisfied there wasn’t going to be more screaming any time soon, Geoff showered, making the most of the hot water before the others got to it; not that his penthouse had ever run out of hot water, but if there was a time it was going to, with his luck it would be today. He got dressed, unconcerned with how he looked to the crew, not in his usual suit, but in comfortable old jeans and a soft, faded black T-shirt that simply read Make Mistakes.

He checked on Ryan again. Still dead to the world on the couch. The penthouse was eerily silent except for the faint snores of Jack, or maybe Jeremy, from one of the rooms down the hall.

Geoff put on a pot of coffee and retired to his office to begin the task of collating the video footage they had and uploading it to his editing program. In what felt like a previous lifetime, Geoff and Jack had taught themselves editing; making rudimentary promos, short films and mockumentaries about the gangs of Los Santos. Sometimes they were to send a message, and other times just a bit of fun. It was actually how they’d attracted the attention of Gavin and later recruited Ray and Michael. They’d documented their own antics on their rise to becoming the most notorious gang in the city, but now they had the news crews to do all that for them. The mere mention of the name ‘Fake AH Crew’ was enough to sell papers.

There was a lot of raw footage to upload, and Gavin and Jeremy had collected all the news footage they could get their hands on as well, plus the Randoms’ archived streams – Geoff was not looking forward to re-watching those. He made sure everything was set to go and let the program do its thing; it was going to take hours.

Geoff sighed audibly and let his face fall into his hands, mindlessly rubbing at his hairline with cool fingers.

Ryan’s screaming had bothered him. He’d seemed to be doing ok earlier. It was hard to tell what was going on in his head; sometimes Geoff doubted if Ryan even knew himself.

This had turned into a shit show. Nobody had gotten that close to them in years. Not like this.

They’d come so close to losing people. Ryan, Lindsay – Geoff nearly had a heart attack when she’d leapt from the helicopter, Michael had nearly been blown up in his tank; when his own chopper went down he thought he’d never see any of them again. If it hadn’t been for Gavin…

Geoff smiled at the thought of Gavin, the gangly, awkward kid he’d taken in years ago, who was so good at tripping over his own feet and breaking things and getting stuck in furniture, saving his life. Karma.

At least they hadn’t lost anyone. The crew was safe. That was what was really important. That was where they’d draw their strength from. And after how they’d left Shadowlz’s body, their reputation was probably still mostly intact.

But they still had a message to send.

Geoff looked up and frowned at the progress bar, glacially drifting across the screen.

The clock said 8 AM.
A quiet cough nearly made him jump out of his skin. Jack was standing in the doorway, two cups of coffee in his hands.

“How are you going, Geoff?” He placed one of the mugs down on Geoff’s desk and pushed it towards him.

Geoff took a sip of the warm, bitter liquid, half-disappointed by the lack of liquor in it.

“I’m worried about Ryan, I think he might be losing it.”


Geoff shrugged. “I’m ok.”

He turned his blue-grey eyes up to meet Jack’s hazel ones, bright but concerned behind his glasses.

“…don’t think we don’t appreciate what you tried to do for us.”

Geoff raised an eyebrow. “What are you getting at?”

“Leading that jet away,” Jack went on. “Don’t think we don’t understand the sacrifice that would have been.”

Geoff shook his head. “What can I say? I love you guys, you know that.” He took another sip of his coffee, eyeing off the whiskey on his desk. “But uh, I had no plans to die that day.”

“I can’t imagine many do.” Jack smiled. “But thank you. Really. I’m glad you’re ok. Now promise never to fucking do that again.”

Geoff said nothing, but huffed a laugh and stood up, embracing Jack in a tight hug that lingered long enough to get the sincerity of its meaning across.

Geoff glanced back at the progress bar. It had barely moved.

“Fuck it, this is gonna take forever. I’m cooking breakfast.”

* * *

The smell of cooking bacon was a sure-fire way to get the crew out of bed. As soon as the aroma began to permeate the penthouse, there was the sound of four flurried feet dashing to the bathroom, a door slamming and hands slapping at the door, followed by muffled giggles.

“No! Michael!” Jeremy’s voice carried down the hallway. “I called it first!”

“Too slow, Lil J!”

Gavin snuck past with his towel, in just a t-shirt and boxers, quietly edging his way behind Jeremy before racing to Geoff’s ensuite.

“Gavin, no!”

Jeremy gave chase, but not quite quick enough and Gavin made a noise that might have been either a laugh or a bird-call, as he made it to Geoff’s room first and slammed the door behind him.
“Gotta wait, Lil J. Sorry!”

More giggles came from the bedroom as Jeremy groaned.

“No, you’re not,” he grumbled, trudging back into the living room and slinging his towel over the back of the couch Ryan wasn’t on, before flinging himself dramatically onto it.

The kitchen was open to the living area of the penthouse and from a stool at the counter, Jack laughed. Geoff was starting to pile the bacon up on a plate and he already had toast and eggs ready to go. He was sautéing something else that smelled delicious too.

“Hey Jeremy,” Geoff called after a few minutes, softly, so as not to disturb Ryan. “Come get it before it goes cold.”

Jeremy leapt off the couch, vaulting over the back of it and nearly giving the Gents a show as his boxers briefly flapped open, he awkwardly pulled his T-shirt down in an attempt to cover himself, his face flushing crimson but still grinning.

“I mean, you might as well have a hot breakfast since you’re not getting a hot shower,” Geoff added with a smirk.

Jeremy’s grin flipped instantly with a huff.

“Kidding dude, you’ll be ‘right, but eat up before Jack gets to it.”

“Hey!” Jack feigned offense.

“I’m just trying to stir everyone this morning,” Geoff said with a sly grin.

Jack raised an eyebrow, looking past him. “Stir your mushrooms.”

“Oh shit!” The pan was starting to smoke. “It’s ok, it’s flavour,” he insisted.

“Sure…” Jack rolled his eyes.

Geoff scoffed. “What do you care anyway, it’s not like you were going to eat them. They are vegetables after all.”

Jeremy couldn’t help but laugh.

On the couch, Ryan stretched and yawned, sitting up and rubbing his face.

“Hi Ryan,” Jeremy greeted him cheerfully as he filled his plate with bacon and eggs, forgoing the slightly singed mushrooms.

“‘morning,” Ryan replied groggily through a yawn. The aroma of breakfast hit his nostrils and suddenly he perked up. “Ooh, what smells awesome?”

“You mean like burning?” Jack replied haughtily.

Geoff snorted. “Someone’s salty.”

“Your mushrooms are salty.”

It was a long-running tease that never failed to rile Geoff up.
“There’s one pinch of salt in there! I think we have bigger things to worry about than our sodium intake.”

“Hey! Save some for me,” Ryan called from the couch.

Geoff wanted to make a joke about always having salt for Ryan, but he was worried it was inappropriate or might come out wrong. Instead, he just put aside a plate for him; making sure he got the good bits of bacon and the less-burned mushrooms.

Ryan was a little disappointed Geoff hadn’t made the obvious joke from his setup.

Michael and Gavin both emerged from the showers at the same time and made a beeline for the remaining food. Gavin was leaving a trail of wet footprints on the tiles behind him from where he hadn’t fully dried off, T-shirt sticking to his damp skin, his towel still around his waist. Michael on the other hand was fully dried and dressed, and simply shook his head at Gavin’s mess, even though he knew by now this is what he should expect.

“No only you could make a shower look like a messy endeavour, Gavin,” Michael remarked with a sigh.

Ryan chuckled and added, “The mind boggles.”

“Gavin Free: Mind-boggler.” Gavin grinned. “Has kind of a ring to it.”

“Sounds like the name of one of your worms.” Michael giggled.

They started heaping food onto their plates, fighting over the better bits of bacon and both passing on the mushrooms.

“Speaking of mind-boggling,” Gavin said as he took his seat on the kitchen-side of the counter next to Geoff. “What’s going on with you, Ryan? What was up with the screaming?”

The crew almost collectively winced. Gavin clearly meant well, but it came out bluntly and all eyes turned to Ryan, who was trying to negotiate his legs into a comfortable position in the wheelchair.

“Wait, what?” Ryan looked puzzled.

Jeremy narrowed his eyes at him. “You don’t remember?”

Ryan frowned as he wheeled himself to the kitchen counter, a little annoyed that in the wheelchair he was about a head shorter than the others where they sat.

“I remember you guys were standing around and I was laughing… I can’t remember why though. Must’ve been pretty funny at the time.”

“Fuckin’ must’ve been,” Geoff muttered under his breath as he piled his own plate with slightly charred mushrooms, bacon and eggs.

Ryan just cocked an eyebrow. “Was it really that bad?”

Geoff looked at him almost pityingly. “I’ve never heard you scream like that.”

He simply shrugged. “I mean, night terrors? They’re not unheard of.”

Geoff shook his head sceptically. “Screaming in your sleep is not fucking normal, Ryan.”
“It was fucking freaky dude,” Jeremy interjected, with a mouth full of food. “Like, legitimately scary to wake up to.”

“It’s not like I was having a nightmare or anything. I don’t even know why I was screaming. I don’t even remember it!”

“Well you’ve never fucking done it before, as far as I know,” Geoff persisted. “Something’s definitely going on…”

Ryan shrugged. “I’m fine.”

“Stop brushing us off, Ryan,” Geoff pleaded.

“Just because you have issues with what I went through, doesn’t mean I have to!” Ryan snapped back, a little viciously.

There was a pause as no one quite knew how they should respond to that. Ryan instantly regretted it. The whole mood in the penthouse had shifted.

After a while Jack spoke up. “Look, there’s no way for us to know what you’re going through, but if you don’t talk to us, there’s nothing we can do. Please, just let us help.”

Damnit Jack.

It struck a chord. Feeling helpless was something Ryan wasn’t especially fond of. He did at least owe them something, even if he couldn’t give them an explanation. He sighed.

“Look, you’re acting like it’s a bigger deal than it is. You know what? Stuff like this doesn’t always have to screw a person up for good. What we do… You all know it; it’s not an environment for people who can’t quickly acclimate to different situations. I’m not gonna let it get to me.” He spoke calmly, evenly, but it sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as them. “Did it make me a stronger person? Fuck no. But I’m not gonna be the victim y’all need to pity either. It sucks, yeah, but in the end, we’re all still here.” He paused to let that sink in. “I know it sounds glib, but things will eventually get better. So, while I might hate myself right now for being an idiot about how I went about it …and even more so for putting you guys in danger; at the time I clearly thought it was the right thing to do by my evidently fucked-up moral compass. So just trust me.” He offered a weak smile. “I’ll be fine.”

The crew sat in awkward silence for a moment until Gavin quietly spoke up.

“Did you just say ‘comp-ass’ Ryan?” He grinned with a quiet giggle.

Ryan was thankful; the lad made it sound like a dumb, throwaway comment, but it was exactly what he needed from him at that moment. He sensed that Gavin knew that.

Ryan shook his head and laughed as well. Eventually, the others joined in.

Maybe he really would be fine after all.

* * *

Later that day, Ryan sent Jeremy with explicit instructions to mail the fingerprints and hair samples he’d collected from Shadowlz’s body to Adam Ellis, his contact in the LSPD forensics lab. Even
sending it express, it would still take at least a few days for Adam to get around to running the tests and getting results; and that was if there was even anything on Shadowlz in the system.

Still, it was better than nothing. The news hadn’t indicated any new information had been found.

Ryan looked over the information Jeremy had pulled up again. He was sure he was missing something. He went back over the victims of his killing spree that day at the Maze bank. Eight cops fatally shot. None with a twin. None with so much as sibling in the force. None of the other civilian casualties had been twins either. Eight bothered him… Shadowlz had said he’d killed nine officers that day… or was it nine people? No, he definitely recalled nine officers. Maybe he’d been wrong. Or maybe he’d lied. Why would he lie about that? Maybe the records were incomplete…

Ryan let out a growl of frustration. He hadn’t noticed the pain medication wearing off. Things were starting to ache again. He’d given up fighting it, he just took the meds now, there was absolutely nothing to gain from being in pain and it didn’t seem to affect his head too much, that he noticed anyway.

He went into the kitchen to retrieve the pills and a glass of water.

Michael and Gavin were on the couch playing some horror game, and Gavin screamed, as he did, often. He shouldn’t have thought anything of it.

The pitch was such that Ryan was instantly transported to the parking garage where it all started. He hadn’t been scared at the time, not really. But it all came back to him. The last thing he heard from the crew… the last thing he thought he might ever hear from the crew; their cries over the comms when he pressed the gun against his head, followed by the empty ‘click’ when he pulled the trigger. He could hear them so clearly now.

Gavin had sounded scared, like he wasn’t entirely sure what was part of the plan and what wasn’t. Michael and Jack’s voices had been concerned, but more frustrated, like when he made a mistake playing a co-op game that cost them a win. Jeremy sounded pained, no way to tell if what he was saying was simply part of his plan or genuine; terrified it may be the last thing he ever heard from his friend. Geoff had just screamed. It sounded frantic, simultaneously angry and terrified.

At some subconscious level, all of it had stuck with him. And now it was in his head, replaying… it brought back that pit of guilt, heavy in his stomach, like it was consuming him from the inside. His fingers crept to the edge of the burned skin at the back of his neck.

“Like it or not, Judas.”

Just when he thought he was doing ok.

Yep. That’s exactly what I need right now, Ryan thought bitterly as he took the pills.

* * *

After that, Ryan didn’t sleep at all. He would get comfortable, lie awake and wait for sleep to take him. But much the same way that his body would occasionally violently jerk him awake just as he lingered on the cusp of sleep, his mind had been trying a similar trick. He’d kept it together around the others; they’d been considerate enough to give him the space he needed, but strategically keeping him distracted with games and food and banter, for which he was silently grateful. But alone in the dark, it was a different story. As soon as his conscious thoughts melted away, they were replaced by vivid flashbacks to the warehouse. His subconscious apparently remembered every little detail or did
a spectacular job at filling them in for him. It felt too real. At first, he was thankful he never dreamed; he couldn’t imagine coping with the nightmares. In the end though, it didn’t matter anyway. He hadn’t slept since he passed out on the couch, and he likely wouldn’t again until his body gave in to the physical exhaustion. He cursed his insomniac resilience.

At least he wasn’t screaming.

Obsessing over Shadowlz was not getting him anywhere. Jeremy hadn’t been able to turn up anything either. There was nothing to go off, nothing added up. It seemed like everything he had said out in the shed had been a lie. He needed a lead. He hadn’t heard anything from Ellis and nothing from the media. It was starting to grate at his nerves.

He needed to keep his mind occupied with something else.

Luckily, Geoff had been paying close attention and he had just the thing.
An image worth protecting

“You want me to edit it?” Ryan’s eyebrows shot up at the suggestion. “You think that’s a good idea?”

Geoff had taken Ryan aside in his office and had pulled up the raw footage on his editing program.

“Sure. You’re great at this sort of stuff,” Geoff replied. “I’m not gonna make you do it if you don’t want to, but it needs to get done.” He was using his boss voice now, it carried the sort of tone that suggested he really wanted Ryan to do it. “Look, all you gotta do is pull out the stuff that looks good, cut it together and make sure it sends the message of ‘you don’t fuck with the Fake AH Crew.’ I know you can do that.”

“Oh no, I’ll do it, just…” Ryan wasn’t sure he should point it out. “Isn’t this more Trevor’s thing?”

“Worried he’s gonna show you up?” Geoff played up to his natural competitiveness.

Ryan scoffed. “No!”

Ryan paused and chewed his lip as Geoff realised what he was getting at.

“Oh, shit, no… I’ll, uh, I’ll do all the stuff from the warehouse,” he quickly added. “There’s no way I’m going to make you re-live any of that shit.”

“Oh thank god.” Ryan grinned, running a hand through his hair, thankful he could at least pretend to joke about it. “But yeah, ok, I’ll do the rest of it and you can do the final cut.”

* * *

“Have you seen Ryan this morning?” Jack asked, pouring two mugs of coffee and handing one to Geoff.

Geoff took the mug, immediately put it down and reached up to the top cabinet for a bottle of whiskey. He poured in a liberal measure and gave it a swirl. It wasn’t even eleven.

“He’s in the office. He’s been really off lately. I don’t think he’s been sleeping well…”

“He hasn’t been sleeping at all,” Jack pointed out. He’d noticed. Dishes had been mysteriously washing themselves overnight; Ryan’s favourite books had gone missing from the bookshelves, not to mention the sudden jump in his Gamerscore.

“…I thought it’d be good to give him something to do, keep him distracted, y’know?” Geoff took a long sip of coffee, feeling it pleasantly warm his insides. “I asked him to edit the footage Gavin got from the rescue.”

Jack frowned. Ryan and Geoff had very different ways of thinking about things; while he knew Geoff meant well, it might be more damaging to Ryan than he intended. Geoff probably wouldn’t even have had considered it.

“I don’t know,” Jack ventured cautiously, not wanting to offend Geoff or make him defensive. “That might not be the best idea. I’ve got a feeling Ryan’s in a…” He paused to consider the word. “…delicate place.”
Geoff scoffed, “Ryan and ‘delicate’, two things I usually don’t associate with one another.”

“Still,” Jack continued firmly, “Showing him that footage might bring back memories he doesn’t want to re-live.”

“It’s just the stuff after the hospital, nothing from the warehouse; if anything, it’ll show him what we went through to get him back!”

_Nope, Geoff hadn’t thought about it._

“Look, Geoff, I hate to say this, but you have to remember, Ryan doesn’t deal with these things the same way as the rest of us... He has no crutch, he internalises everything. You saw how he was after Ray... Just be careful, ok? At least keep an eye on him.”

Geoff was about to say something sarcastic but held his tongue. As much as he hated to admit it, Jack was probably right. He usually was about these sorts of things. And Ryan did have a habit of over-analysing things…

“I’m gonna be stuck in meetings for a while… Sorting out some things with Funhaus and a few others, don’t know how much I can say about it yet... Can you do it?”

Jack frowned; Ryan would see right through it, it’d feel too much like he was checking up on him. “Better to send one of the lads.”

Geoff nodded, rubbing his chin. “I’ll get Michael to do it.” He took another sip of coffee. _One more thing to worry about_, he thought grimly.

---

Ryan was grateful for the distraction, with limited mobility and an uncharacteristic lack of attention span when it came to holding conversations, he had quickly begun to feel useless, and there was little he despised more than feeling useless. Geoff left him with hours of GoPro footage, news clips and media coverage to go through, and no further instruction than his initial suggestion to “pull out anything that might send a message.”

Ryan normally hated vague instructions. He usually liked his work to be as clearly defined as possible, but for a project like this, he welcomed it. It meant he had to focus more on the task at hand, which gave his mind little time to wander and kept the voices in his head to a low murmur in the background.

He’d settled into Geoff’s office after breakfast with a can of diet coke.

Ryan scrubbed through the footage of Gavin rappelling from the cargobob on the roof of the hospital, sending waves of flames fearlessly into SWAT teams. He could see the effort and _attempt_ at coordination that had gone into just getting him out of the hospital. He knew it had been risky, but this was insane. Judging from the way the lads had retold the story, this wasn’t even half as bad as getting him out of the warehouse had been either.

He paused the footage for a moment to collect himself, snapping the tab on his can and hearing the satisfying hiss of carbon dioxide release. He took a long sip before continuing.

When the cargobob took off and the camera caught a glimpse of Lindsay watching them from the roof, Ryan’s heart nearly stopped.
He could feel the dark tendrils of guilt creeping up on him again, threatening to weave their way into his thoughts and take hold. He knew how hard it was to shake them when they did.

“For the love of God Haywood, get it together,” he muttered to himself as he worked through it.

A knock on the door made him jump. Michael was lingering in the doorway; he looked a little uncomfortable, like he may have just heard him. Ryan pretended like he hadn’t.

“Michael.” He acknowledged him with a nod.

“’sup Ryan, came to see if you needed any help.” Michael meandered in cautiously.

“Thanks, I should be fine… although, I can’t work out how Geoff has his shortcuts set up.”

“To be honest, I don’t think I’m actually gonna be any help at all…” Michael admitted with a grin. “I mostly just came to see the footage of Gavin being a badass… Feel like it’s something I gotta see to believe, y’know?”

“Oh, trust me, I know the feeling.”

Michael sat in Geoff’s chair a bit behind Ryan while he went back to trying to do something about the horrible audio quality. Finally satisfied it wasn’t going to make anyone’s eardrums bleed; he unplugged the headphones and let Michael watch some of his rough cuts through.

Ryan rolled his own chair back to watch the playback, but his gaze drifted over to Michael to see his eyes transfixed by the footage, watching on with alternating expressions of admiration, amusement and abject horror. Ryan supposed his own reactions wouldn’t have been that far off.

When Gavin slipped out of the cargobob, Ryan laughed, but looking over at Michael, the lad’s expression was only concern, bordering on actual fear.

“Are you ok, Michael?” Ryan asked in all seriousness.

“Me?” Michael looked at him incredulously. “Shit. I thought I was the one meant to be asking that.”

“Please don’t.” Ryan grinned but it was pained. “I don’t think I can take any more of people asking.”

Michael breathed a laugh. “Alright. And yeah, I’m fine. I’m just… god it sounds so cliché for me to say it… I’m just pissed that they got to us, y’know?”

“Yeah, I know.”

“It’s just, the thought of losing someone else… after Ray.”

Ryan nodded, understanding perfectly. If only he could find the words to say so. Instead he just sighed.

Michael let out a breath it seemed like he’d been holding for a long time before he continued. “Jack was right.”

“About?”

“The cracks in the crew. When you had Gavin up on the roof that night – and look, I didn’t think you’d actually do it – but I was so scared, because you could’ve. And I would’ve given anything in that moment to trade places with him…”
Ryan felt sick.

He remembered too. He remembered the way he had to remind himself it was Gavin and Michael. That he didn’t want to hurt them… the way he had to convince himself that he didn’t want to hurt them… and then when he hit Gavin, again and again, even though he could have stopped…

*One way or another…*

Michael was still talking. He’d missed what he said, lost in his own twisted horror show of a memory.

“…we’re all hypocrites. That’s ultimately our downfall, but it’s also how we’ve survived so long.”

Ryan hummed thoughtfully. It sounded profound. He wished he’d been paying attention.

He was more concerned with the fact that he’d had those thoughts about hurting Gavin before the warehouse; that there was a possibility that those thoughts were already there in his mind. Maybe Shadowlz hadn’t been the cause, but the catalyst. Maybe he just dragged them to the surface…

*Fuck it. You’ve got a job to do, just get on with it.*

He dismissed the invasive thought, and Michael’s concerned look, and went back to editing the footage in silence.

“There you go again!” Michael huffed, annoyed.

Ryan shrugged defensively. “What? What am I doing now?”

“The robot-cyborg shit you keep pulling, Ryan! Every time someone tries to open up, you just shut them down! Do you even have feelings?”

Michael was furious with Ryan for just ignoring him every time he tried to open up, but he remembered what had happened after Ray died. Ryan’s response when he’d asked him how he kept it together: *He didn’t.*

Michael knew there was something else going on in Ryan’s head. Suddenly he felt terrible, but it was too late, the words were out there now and there was no taking them back.

“Right now, Michael, if I’m completely fucking honest, I just feel guilty,” Ryan answered sourly.

“That’s what you got from that?” Michael’s voice rose hysterically. “Ryan, we did that to get you out. We went through all that for you.”

“Exactly. I put you all in danger.” Ryan’s tone was growing increasingly darker.

“God, you’re so fucking stupid sometimes! Can’t you see we care about you! We were never going to abandon you.”

“How was I supposed to know that?” Ryan snapped back. “The last time the crew was at risk – from no less than one of our *own* – you all turned on Jeremy! Then you all turned on me just for defending him! Geoff claimed it was to protect the crew. He doesn’t care about *us*. He cares about how it will affect the image of the crew!”

“Geoff does care, Ryan! He might act like he doesn’t, but he does. Killing is caring for Geoff!”

Again, the words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.
Something dark flashed in Ryan’s eyes and Michael knew his thoughts had immediately gone to Shadowliz. He knew how angry Ryan would have been at Geoff when he’d stepped in. Had Michael been in Ryan’s position, he would have been furious with Geoff too.

Ryan had gone quiet again. Michael was worried, and if he was totally honest with himself, he was a little afraid.

“Look, you wouldn’t have felt any better, Ryan. You’ve read Batman comics – I assume – you know vengeance is never the end of it. You just gotta keep going. Keep moving forward. You said it yourself, it’ll get better. It will. And we’ll still be here when it does.”

Part of Ryan wanted to explain. He wanted to tell him about the flashbacks, the vivid thoughts he’d been having at night. But then he thought about how close he had come to losing it. The number of times he’d nearly lost control. How close he was to losing control right now.

“Get out, Michael.”

The way he said it triggered something instinctive in Michael. With no hesitation he left the room, shutting the door behind him.

As he walked away from the office, his heart was racing.

* * *

“Oh, Gavin. Have a look at this.”

“You found something, Lil J?” Gavin moved over on the couch to where Jeremy was scanning over old news articles on his laptop.

“Dunno… maybe… Detective Shane Dowl.” Jeremy raised an eyebrow. “Bit too much of a coincidence to be a coincidence, isn’t it?”

“What? Are you serious? That’s his name?” Gavin squinted closer to the laptop to see the article.

“He was one of the cops on duty the day of the heist. News reports say he was injured and taken to hospital, but records get real sketchy after that. Nothin’ on having a twin either.” Jeremy had somehow managed to pull up a copy of a birth certificate, which even Gavin was impressed by his ability to acquire so quickly, indicating he was an only child.

“Bit too early to call it a find then? Maybe it is just a coincidence? I mean, who would use their actual name?”

“Know the funniest part? It kinda sounds like a ship name…” Jeremy grinned.

Gavin made a honking noise in his throat as he stifled a laugh. “A one-man ship.” He giggled.

“Should we tell Ryan?”

Jeremy’s eyes narrowed. “I wanna do a bit more digging first. I don’t know why Ryan wants to know so badly…”

He stopped short of saying what he was actually thinking: Ryan might go after their surviving family members; the last thing he needed was to put that idea in the rest of the crew’s heads.

“…but I think it’s best we wait to find out the whole story before we give him any ideas. Or false
hope.”

Gavin nodded, “ok Lil J… What do you think our ship name would be?”

Jeremy grinned but shook his head, “that is not something I ever want to consider…”

“Jerevin, I’d bet.”

“That’s fuckin’ stupid; I never want to hear it again.”

“Definitely Jerevin.”

* * *

It was late when Geoff got back to the penthouse. The meeting had run long and gotten unexpectedly complicated. What they were trying to do had never been attempted at such a scale. Still, he was way too sober for the time of night and his mind buzzed with thought.

Might as well make the most of it.

Geoff locked the door to his office, uncapped a fresh bottle of whiskey and poured a large glass. He loosened his bow tie and let it hang from his collar, undoing the top buttons of his shirt. Without sitting down, he took a long sip of his drink before logging on to his computer and opening his editing software.

It looked like Ryan had already gotten into his part of the editing, there was a new folder on the desktop for him. He ignored it for now.

Geoff had already loaded the footage taken from the Random’s archived streams. He scrubbed through it quickly, a kind of preview to prepare himself to watch it through. He’d done it at least half a dozen times before. Again, he fought the urge to close the window; this time he succeeded.

Get your shit together. You just have to watch it. He had to live it.

He winced. He suddenly felt like a coward.

He took a deep breath and sat down.

Geoff watched the footage through deep breaths, long sips of whiskey and a pained expression, cringing at every blow.

Ryan was stoic and silent. At first this had struck Geoff as odd… Ryan was normally one to taunt, his need to intellectually gain the upper hand getting him deeper into trouble; but this time, with so many people potentially watching, anything he said could give away his identity. Jeremy had picked up on Ryan’s strategy before any of the rest of them had even considered it.

Re-watching it now, Geoff came to the realization... When Ryan finally broke his silence. Three words. Geoff hadn’t realized at the time how much weight those three words carried. How much Ryan sacrificed in saying them. To warn the crew.

He really thought we wouldn’t come back for him.

He gathered himself and continued. He marked and edited the parts where Ryan’s determination shone through; the wit, the sheer defiance, the calm in the face of horrifying violence. The parts that
made him proud. Spitting blood in the face of his captor, the way he literally laughed in the face of his own torment. Parts that would make others think twice before messing with him.

Then there were the other parts. The parts where Ryan flinched before a blow was struck, fear in his eyes even though he did his best to hide it. The way he struggled for breath when Shadowlz wasn’t looking, the way he squeezed his eyes shut when he thought it was over. The crack of Ryan’s skull hitting the ground was a sound that would stay with Geoff for far too long. And maybe it hadn’t broken him, but it was clear the waterboarding had pushed Ryan to his limits, even though he denied it.

It made him angry. Furious that someone could get under the skin of one of their own; he was determined to prove to them that the Fake AH Crew were not to be fucked with.

When he got to the end – the part he knew wasn’t really the end – when Ryan was staring down the barrel of the gun, he could see a defiance in Ryan, but there was something else too… a kind of desperation, like he hadn’t given in, but he’d given up.

Geoff froze the video.

Ryan’s face under the streaks of blood and bruises and leftover paint showed utter acceptance. There was no fear there, but there was no fire either.

“I’ve made my peace with playing the villain.”

Geoff knew that, underneath the whole ‘Vagabond’ act, Ryan was the kind of guy who held the idea that the villains always got their comeuppance at the end.

Geoff finally thought he had a handle on why Ryan’s attitude had been bothering him, and it wasn’t as obvious as it first seemed.

If it was one of his usual, violent killing sprees, Geoff would’ve been all for it; but it had been the quiet desperation with which he had pursued his would-be kidnappers, the readiness of his self-sacrifice and the way he shut down when they interrogated him, the way he’d tried to keep the crew away.

He had been completely ready to die. And only Geoff had seen it.

“The only way anyone is leaving the crew from now on is in a fucking body bag.”

His own words seemed far more ominous now.
Cognitive Dissonance

Geoff was still in his study, on his third glass of whiskey when there was a quiet knock at the door. He saved his work and closed the window, then with his glass in hand, he got up to unlock the door.

Michael, Gavin, Jeremy and Jack were standing in the doorway.

Michael tilted his head towards him. “We need to talk about Ryan.”

Geoff sighed and drained the remainder of his glass. “Fuckin’… yeah. We need to talk about Ryan.”

Ryan had passed out in his bedroom. Given he hadn’t slept in days, it was likely going to be a 14-hour stint as it was, but Michael had slipped some sedatives into his dinner to help along the process. He reasoned it was for his own good.

Geoff motioned for them to come in and went back to his chair on the other side of the desk. Jack and Michael sat down in the chairs opposite, Jeremy stood behind them and Gavin perched on the edge of Geoff’s desk after closing the door behind him. Even though Ryan wasn’t likely to wake any time soon, they kept their voices low.

“We really should be talking to Ryan,” Jack began, already feeling guilty about sneaking around behind his back.

“Fuckin’ good luck trying to talk to him…” Michael muttered under his breath, still quietly frustrated by their interaction from earlier that day.

“No, we need to talk about what’s going on first, make sure we’re all on the same page. Then we can talk to Ryan.” Geoff looked around and they all stared back uncertainly, looking to him for leadership. Which reminded him- “Michael, make sure Lindsay gets the memo. This is as much her problem as it is ours.”

There was a collective cringe at the way Geoff had phrased it as a ‘problem’. Even Geoff realised it.

“Look, I didn’t mean it like that…” He didn’t need to explain, they understood, but it still felt wrong. Conspiratorial. Especially after realising what had been going through Ryan’s head.

“I’ve been looking over the streams…” Geoff began again, subconsciously wincing already, “Shadowlz was playing some pretty A-level games to try to fuck with Ryan’s head. Ryan’s good, but there’s stuff we didn’t see… you guys didn’t see what he was like in the shed either. It was definitely personal… But whether it was something Shadowlz said to him, or something he already had in his head when he went in there – and I hate to say it, but I’m inclined to think it’s the latter – Ryan didn’t think he’d be getting out of that warehouse alive.”

Four worried faces stared back at him.

Geoff sighed, his shoulders slumped in defeat. “He didn’t think we’d go back for him… or he didn’t want us to.”

They were all momentarily caught up in reflection. There had never been any doubt in their minds they would go back for him. They would have done the same for any of them.

Michael was unusually quiet, staring at the ground. It hadn’t gone unnoticed by Geoff.
“Michael? You got something to add? How was he dealing with the editing?”

Michael shook his head, recalling the intensity in his voice when he told him to get out.

“You’re right…” he started softly. “He didn’t think we’d go back for him. Not after what happened with Lil J.” Michael’s eyes darted between Jeremy and Geoff. “I tried to tell him, we’re all fucking hypocrites. There’s not one of us who wouldn’t sacrifice themselves for the rest of the crew, but then the second one person tries to actually do it, we immediately tear ‘em a new one. It’s because we care…” He shook his head. “…but it was like he was having a whole different conversation…” Michael frowned, the briefest flash of anger crossing his face. “Gavin, I think you should steer clear of Ryan for a while,” he suggested quietly.

Gavin looked up at him, confusion and concern written on his face. “Why, Michael?”

Michael felt guilty for suggesting it, but he had to go with his gut on this one. “I’m worried… I’m scared he might hurt you. Not even on purpose, just… I don’t know. Things got… weird.”

“What?!” Gavin snorted. “Don’t be ridiculous. I’m not afraid of Ryan, Michael… I mean, I used to be, but not anymore,” he explained simply. “He used to be the big, scary Vagabond, but now it’s just like, ‘oh, it’s just Ryan’ and even when he’s doing bad things, under all that, he’s still Ryan.” Everyone in the room felt it. The pang of guilt at the way Gavin declared it so simply and innocently, like there was never any doubt about it. He’s still Ryan… He was still Ryan when they accused him of being a traitor too. Under the mask and paint and sarcastic grin, it was still Ryan.

“But Ryan’s still dangerous, Gavin,” Michael pressed, the guilt not quite displacing the feeling of unease he got from Ryan earlier. “You know that. He’s hurt you before. Please, just be careful around him, ok? For me?”

Gavin nodded, but he looked a little wounded, pouting at the thought. “He wouldn’t mean to though. Not on purpose. Not to us.”

Jack tried to keep the conversation going; it was like pulling teeth getting everyone to discuss these issues and if they wandered too far off topic, they’d never get to what was really important. “Look, it’s clear that Ryan’s dealing with a lot of shit. And in our line of work, it’s not like we can exactly just ‘get help’. So we have to just be as supportive and patient as we can. Give him space, keep him busy with things that aren’t going to remind him of what happened…”

“We’ll get Lindsay on it, she’ll have something for him,” Geoff suggested hopefully.

“I don’t think we should let him get involved with tracking down Shadowlz or the Randoms yet either,” Jeremy added.

Geoff nodded thoughtfully. “Nah, you and Gavvers stick with it though; we need to stay on top of that.”

Jeremy and Gavin nodded together.

“How are you going with Shadowlz?”

Jeremy’s eyes brightened. “We might have a lead… too early to tell, there’s not much to go off, looks like our guy’s got his name on some documents the LSPD don’t want getting out. So, getting the info is a bit tricky.”

“We’ll sort something out,” Gavin added hopefully.
“Alright, don’t let Ryan know until we have something solid, or his contact gets back to him.” Geoff rubbed his face with one hand. “In the meantime, we do whatever we can for Ryan... Fucked if I know what that is. Let’s just hope we figure it out.”

* * *

Over the next few days, Ryan slowly regained the use of his legs with the support of the crutches Lindsay had gotten – in all likelihood stolen – for him. He’d been recovering physically, his wounds were healing up nicely; all the swelling and bruising had gone down significantly, he was down to over-the-counter pain medications and he’d taken out many of his stitches… some of them somewhat prematurely, which Lindsay had yelled at him for on one of her visits to check up on them. Lindsay had also been changing the dressing on the brand. He never asked how it was and she never told him. She cleaned it, put whatever medications or creams she had on it and covered it with a fresh bandage. He didn’t know if the others knew – if they’d asked, what Lindsay had said to them, if anything. Surely, she’d discussed it with Geoff… He didn’t want to dwell on it. It didn’t matter. Things were healing. He’d even started sleeping again. Sort of. Jack may have surreptitiously mixed some sedatives into his food on a few occasions. He didn’t mind.

All things considered, he seemed to be doing better.

Mentally however, he was just barely managing to hold it together.

He’d finished all the editing Geoff wanted him to do, even gone the extra mile to give it a bit of flair. Geoff was right; they needed to send a message. They couldn’t risk having something like this happen again. It actually had helped at some level; it reminded him how competent the crew were even without him. That gave him some hope...

But once the editing was done, he found himself aimlessly floating about again. Geoff and Lindsay expressly forbade him from digging into Shadowlz. They were clearly worried about his mental state, but they wrote it off as having assigned the job to Jeremy and Gavin. Technically, Lindsay reminded him, he was supposed to be “on leave”.

“Technically,” he’d replied with a smirk that belied the truth in his words. “I’m going to go stir-crazy.”

She’d laughed it off. He couldn’t blame her, but he wasn’t entirely kidding.

In the last few days the once-welcomed space the crew had given him had given way to what just felt like pity. Ryan could practically feel it burning into him in the sorrowful glances he caught when they thought he wasn’t looking. Maybe Geoff or Lindsay had finally said something to them. Maybe it was something else. Whatever it was, eventually, he couldn’t take any more.

Geoff and Lindsay had left early in the morning to represent the Fakes at yet another secretive meeting and Jeremy and Gavin hadn’t heard anything from the Randoms worth following up, so everyone was hanging out in the living room when Ryan came in. Their chatter immediately ceased, even though it probably didn’t have anything to do with him to begin with.

He grabbed a diet coke from the fridge, negotiated his way with one crutch to the couch and flopped down on it, eyeing the others suspiciously.

“Alright, I’m getting sick of this,” he finally announced. “You’re all walking around on eggshells and I’m gonna need you to stop it, for the sake of my sanity. Please.”
He said it with the same smirk he’d been wearing thin for days; they could start to see the pain beneath it.

“I understand if you can’t or don’t want to be around me for whatever reason, that’s fine, I can deal with that. What I can’t deal with, is the way you’re all pretending not to have your own issues for my sake.”

Everyone stopped in their tracks. They hadn’t considered it like that before. But he had a point.

“Just for now, can we just play some video games and talk about nonsense for a few hours? You know, pretend to be normal?” This time his grin was pleading; hopeful, but authentic.

Jack smiled warmly. “Alright, what do you want to play?”

“Anything where I can murder Gavin,” he replied without hesitation and a genuine smile on his face now. “Gavin, you get the dubious honour of being my virtual stress ball for today.”

A chill ran down Michael’s spine.

“Aww, why me, Ryan?” Gavin whined exaggeratedly.

“I mean, it doesn’t have to be you… but there’s just something so satisfying about killing you in video games.”

There was nothing dark about the way he said it, it was meant totally innocently, but Michael couldn’t shake the feeling of unease.

“I understand that feeling, Ryan,” Jeremy said, nodding, “Sorry, Gavin.”

Jack nodded too. “Yeah, he has a point…”

“Right?” Ryan’s eyes lit up at the banter. “He’s just so squishy. And he runs… Makes it fun.”

“Squishy?!” Gavin squawked.

“Don’t worry boi, I got you.” Michael finally snapped himself out of it and jumped to Gavin’s defence, reminding himself of Gavin’s words: it's still Ryan. “You are pretty fun to kill though…”

“No! Help me, Michael!” Gavin giggled.

“I’ll help you, Ryan,” Jeremy declared. “Battle Buddies vs Team Nice Dynamite, we got this.”

“Oh, you’re fucked,” Ryan chuckled.

Jack watched and provided commentary, only really serving to rile everyone up further.

It was oddly therapeutic to talk about heavy things so lightly. The way they could so casually throw around the idea of killing characters in video games when it was a fact of reality for them was something most people would consider morbid. For them, it was a coping strategy, and really, just a way to wind down and have fun.

It was good to start to feel normal again.

* * *
“Ryan?”

A firm hand on his shoulder pulled him back to reality with a start. Jeremy sat on the edge of the bed, wrapped in his own bedsheets, looking worried. Ryan was laughing again. It was that same hysterical laughter that he couldn’t stop, even though he had no idea what was so funny. He smothered his face with his pillow to muffle the sound until he regained control.

When he picked up the pillow, Jeremy noted the knife wedged into the space between the headboard and the mattress. It was his. They always used to joke that Ryan slept with a gun under his pillow, but he would always retort something along the lines of “that’s an accident waiting to happen”. He wasn’t sure if he’d always done it or if it helped keep his mind at ease after what he’d been through, but he wasn’t going to question it. Not now anyway.

Ryan looked sheepish. “Again?”

Jeremy nodded. “It wasn’t so bad this time.”

“Sorry.”

Jeremy shook his head. “There’s nothin’ you can do about it, don’t worry.”

Just like the first time, it only took a few moments before Ryan fell straight back into sleep.

Jeremy wasn’t getting back to sleep any time soon. He figured it was best to keep an eye on Ryan in case it happened again. Maybe if he could wake him up quickly enough, he’d remember why he was screaming. He wasn’t sure if that was a good or bad thing. He fetched his laptop and went back to Ryan’s room, making himself comfortable in the chair beside his bed and diving back into his research, trying to dig up anything he could on the seemingly-disappeared Shane Dowl.

* * *

Ryan woke early, he’d slept fitfully the remainder of the night, but he hadn’t woken properly until the sun had risen.

Jeremy’s quiet snoring startled him. He had fallen asleep in the chair next to his bed, his laptop open on the table next to him.

Ryan didn’t want to disturb him, but he also wanted to know what was going on and getting up was going to be too much commotion. He reached over to take the laptop to see what Jeremy had been doing.

*Probably reading those awful fanfiction stories again,* he thought with a slight grin.

It was a news report.

*The Los Santos Police Department released a statement today, formally identifying the body of a man whose remains were found in the trunk of a burned-out vehicle in the Paleto Bay area last week. Dental records were used to identify the man as 32-year-old former Police Detective Shane Dowl. The exact cause of death is yet to be determined but is being treated as a homicide in connection with local gang activity. Police are appealing to witnesses to come forward with any information.*

Ryan’s eyes skimmed over the article again.
Shane Dowl. Shadowlz. Creative.

He finally had a name.

*If the police knew, why hadn’t Adam Ellis gotten back to him?*

A quick search for the name and the date of the Maze bank incident immediately pulled up an article. The link had already been clicked.

“…amongst the injured, Detective Dowl suffered a gunshot injury… Intensive care…” He immediately went digging for follow-up records, but they were heavily censored.

Jeremy had obviously done the same, all the links he clicked were in his recently visited pages.

He must have come across it before he fell asleep, maybe that was why he was in here. He wanted to show him. When he woke up…

Something in Ryan pressed him, urged him to look deeper. He should just wait till Jeremy woke up. He should just ask him; get an explanation for what was going on. There had to be a logical explanation.

Without realising exactly what he was doing, Ryan checked Jeremy’s search history. It indicated he’d looked up the article days earlier. Before the police report was released…

Why was this the first he was hearing about it?

“They still don’t trust you, you know?” Shadowlz’s voice in his head mocked.

No, Jeremy knew how important this was.

*Why the fuck was he holding out on him?*

He squeezed his eyes shut and his hands clenched into fists as he tried to calm his breathing. Suddenly he was back in the shed with Shadowlz – Shane – knife slicing easily through the webbing of his fingers, popping the tendons from bone, the satisfying crunching of cartilage in the knuckles and the blood flowing over his own hands, warm and wet and sticky… he looked down, but it wasn’t Michael’s knife slicing through Shane’s hands, it was Geoff’s knife deep in Geoff’s gut, his own hand white-knuckled on the hilt as the blood pulsed out in spurts, he gave a moment’s thought that he may have severed the hepatic artery… he looked up into Geoff’s face, becoming progressively paler, mouth gaping, incredulous, grey eyes pained and disbelieving and disappointed; that of a father whose son just swore at him for the first time…

*I didn’t mean to.*

He could feel the blood.

Warm and wet and sticky on his hands.

*I’m sorry… I didn’t mean to.*

The sound of his own voice snapped him out of it. He was babbling. Aloud.

“I’m sorry…I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean…”

Jeremy’s eyes were wide, his mouth open, gasping, disbelieving.
Jeremy.

No.

His knife… Not his knife. Jeremy’s knife – the knife Jeremy had given him so he felt better about losing his own; the knife he now kept in his bed in place of his own – was in his hand, and the blade was nestled in the space between Jeremy’s left lower ribs.

And the blood.

So much blood.

Jeremy gasped. The colour was rapidly draining from his face. “Ryan?”

No. No, no, no, no, no.

“Jeremy!”

What had he done?

There was no more mask to hide behind and nothing left to mark the boundaries between Ryan and what he feared he had become. This wasn’t the Vagabond’s doing. This was Ryan’s.

The realisation of what he had done hit him like a truck.

He had trouble remembering what happened next. It all felt surreal, like it was happening at a distance. He called Lindsay, somehow managed to explain himself in a coherent manner and she organised …something… then everyone was in the room, hands were everywhere, pushing him, holding him back, voices quiet at first, then louder, shouting at him…

“Ryan what have you done?” “It wasn’t me…” “Jeremy, stay with me buddy…” “I didn’t do it…” “Let go of him Ryan!” “I didn’t…” “Get off him!”

…someone hit him. He didn’t know who or why. He didn’t fight back.

Suddenly he felt cold. Alone.

And then he remembered nothing. Silence. For the longest time he just stared at his hands, covered in blood, cool and congealing.

Jeremy’s blood.

At some level, he was functioning enough to realize that the buzzing noise he could hear was his phone. He picked it up but couldn’t remember the right words to make it work.

Luckily, he didn’t need to.

The voice on the phone was calm and collected and reassuring.

“Ryan? Are you there?” There was a pause. “If you can hear me, Jeremy’s ok. He’s gonna be ok.” There was another long pause. “No one blames you. We’ll be back soon, ok?”

He couldn’t find the words to reply, instead just putting the phone down on the table next to him.

After a few minutes, it buzzed again, and he received more or less the same message in text form. He read over it a few times to make sure it stayed in his mind.
Jeremy’s ok… No one blames you.

He ran a shaking hand through his hair, leaving sticky streaks of red behind and pulled himself out of bed. He hadn’t taken any painkillers today, the pain was bad, but he worked through it. The word ‘penance’ briefly came to mind, but it was so fleeting he couldn’t settle on it. His mind was already crowded with other conflicting words competing for attention.

“One way or another…”

“Ryan what have you done?”

“Jeremy’s ok… No one blames you.”

“…you will be their downfall.”

He got dressed and hobbled on crutches to the living room, where there was a letter waiting for him on the kitchen counter.

He ripped it open.

Vagabond,

Thanks to your contribution, we got an ID. Check the news.

See enclosed; the usual deal. You keep your job, I keep mine.

- Gilby.

Adam had included what looked like a highly confidential police report. Ryan’s eyes skimmed over it, only half-registering.

Shadowlz’s words immediately sprung to mind.

“I don’t think you and I are so different.”

His hands left faint burgundy fingerprints on the paper.

Jeremy’s blood.

Ryan felt a shiver run down his spine.

“It takes a monster to destroy a monster.”

He folded up the notes and shoved them in his back pocket before heading for the garage.

***

When the others got back, Ryan was gone.
It hadn’t taken long for Geoff to track him down.

It was the same place they used to find Ray when he started disappearing.

For Ryan, it was where it all started.

He sat atop the Maze bank, legs dangling precariously over the edge, arms draped around the guard rails, more for comfort than safety, head resting back against the sun-warmed metal. His crutches were far behind him as if he’d thrown them away. The cool evening breeze gently tousled his sandy hair and swept at the soft folds of his clothes. The view should have been beautiful; the sun setting over the Los Santos city skyline, the sky ablaze in shades of orange and pink.

At least it was a pretty hellhole.

Geoff made sure to close the door to the roof loudly enough for Ryan to know someone was up there and made sure his footsteps were heard as he approached. That was the kind of move that would ordinarily have seen a pistol aimed at him, or a knife thrown in his direction; the fact that Ryan didn’t even turn around made him more uncomfortable than if he’d actually shot at him.

He slid down next to Ryan, keeping his body on the safe side of the railing; Ryan’s position on the other side making him uneasy. He didn’t say anything for a few moments, instead just staring out over Los Santos with him.

“Hey Ryan. What are you doing up here?” Geoff asked gently. Let him take the lead, he reminded himself, don’t push it.

 “…I don’t know.” He shook his head slowly, a slight tremor in his movement.

Geoff frowned. “What’s going on in your head, Ryan?”


I hurt Jeremy.

He looked down at his hands, Jeremy’s blood still crusted beneath his nails and in the fine cracks of his skin, before balling them into fists, knuckles going white.

Ryan let out a slow exhale. “I hate to say it, but I think…” He was going to say I think he got to me, but stopped himself before the words could pass his lips. This was his own fault.

“You should have left me… You should never have come back for me. It was too risky.” He looked shattered.

Geoff felt his heart sink, remembering the look on his face in the video, before fire burned up in his belly and anger took over. “Look, there was no way we were going to let those random assholes show us up. We couldn’t stand by and watch while you were executed!”

“Then you should have just left me at the hospital. Innocent people there died because of me. I put the whole crew at risk. I put you in danger. We nearly lost Michael. We could have lost Lindsay…” It sounded at first like he was rising to meet Geoff’s anger, but it quickly dissolved back into the
same flat tone of quiet hopelessness. “It should never have come to that. You should have just let the cops arrest me.”

Geoff knew it wasn’t fair, but he felt himself get madder with Ryan’s attitude. “Ok, first of all, since when the fuck do you care if innocent people died? And second of all, I doubt the cops would have shown up to arrest you; they would have shown up to take you to hell, and you know it. You’re a shoot-on-sight for them!”

Ordinarily a comment like that would have made Ryan smirk, he was quietly proud of his bad reputation, but his face showed no change.

“Maybe I deserve it...”

“This isn’t you Ryan. What is going on?” Geoff pressed.

Ryan blanched, briefly taken aback. “I don’t know… I think… It feels like my brain downshifted without a clutch.” He took a deep breath, trying to steady his nerves. “I keep questioning everything I’ve done. Can’t stop thinking about all the damage I’ve caused. How much danger I put you guys in for my own stupid mistakes.”

The words stopped Geoff in his tracks. He’d had this conversation before. With Ray.

“Ryan, I know it’s not something you’re used to, but you have to realize, making mistakes is just part of the deal; you’re only human.” He hoped it might hit home with Ryan more than it had with Ray.

Ryan didn’t look at him. The words came out strangled. “I hurt Jeremy, Geoff.”

“He’s ok, Ryan. That was an accident, he said so himself...”

Ryan shook his head. “It wasn’t the first time I’ve nearly done something...” He trailed off, going very quiet, staring back out at the horizon without actually looking. It sounded like the words were physically hurting him to say. “I saw it, Geoff. That night with Shadowlz… Shane.” He still had trouble thinking of him as a person. “You were afraid of me.”

Geoff shook his head dismissively. “I’m not scared of you buddy...”

“You should be,” Ryan snapped back darkly. Then quietly, in barely a whisper, added, “I am.”

In that moment, Geoff was scared, but not of Ryan.

“You said it yourself, Geoff… I’m too dangerous to leave loose if you can’t trust me.”

Geoff stomach twisted at the way he could so easily turn his own words against him.

Finally, Ryan looked up at him, and Geoff’s eyes searched his.

Jack had used the word delicate. Right now, fragile came to mind. Perched on the edge, high above the city streets, it felt as if Ryan was made of glass, a single wrong move could see him shatter into a thousand pieces.

“Why’d you come up here, Ryan?”

Ryan’s eyes said it all... You know why.

The words that came out of his mouth were: “I don’t know.”
Oh god, please, no. Please don’t do this, Ryan. Geoff felt sick to his stomach.

Ryan looked back out over the city.

“Hey. We need you…” Geoff’s voice cracked.

Something inside Ryan scoffed, recalling words from some long-ago conversation. “…all it took was Ryan getting himself kidnapped,” “…that way he couldn’t fuck us over.”

No, you don’t.

 “…we care about you. You’re not the monster you think you are, Ryan…” He tried to meet Ryan’s gaze, but his steely blue eyes were fixed on the Los Santos skyline.

It hurt Geoff to see him like this.

“…whatever this thing in your head is, fight it. You have to fight it. Because with all you’ve been through, you deserve to fucking win.”

Geoff reached out and grabbed his arm, firmly enough to allay any fears that he might jump, gently enough that it wasn’t an aggressive gesture, reassuring that ultimately it was his choice… that one gesture conveyed more than his words could.

Whatever remained of Ryan’s already wavering resolve crumbled under Geoff’s touch.

We were never going to abandon you.

For the first time, he actually believed it.

This wasn’t how it was going to end. Not here… but then, he was still dangerous.

He couldn’t trust himself, how could he expect them to?

“I just…” Ryan’s voice faltered. “I don’t know where to go from here.”

“I do,” Geoff said confidently, standing up and offering his hand.

Ryan took it without hesitation; Geoff could feel the desperation in his grip and squeezed back reassuringly.

“Let’s go home.”

* * *

Jeremy was recovering with Lindsay and the B-team. Michael and Gavin had stayed with him.

Jack and Geoff reassured Ryan that it wasn’t his fault. Jeremy was ok. Nobody blamed him. It was a mistake. He was only human…

He’d slipped up. And now he had to face the fall.

Ryan had already made up his mind. He could still almost feel the warm blood running over his fingers.

He would do anything to keep the crew safe. Even from himself.
He couldn’t risk hurting anyone else. He didn’t think he could live with himself if he did.

It wasn’t as thought-out as it should have been. It was a rash decision, but he knew it was one that had to be made. He needed to keep moving forward.

*Fight it... because you deserve to fucking win.*

Like a desperate man lost at sea, some small part of his mind latched onto the words like they were his last chance at rescue; his last hope for survival.

He scrawled a note in barely legible handwriting on the other side of the report enclosed in Ellis’ letter and left it on the kitchen counter. He hoped it would be enough of an explanation.

*It was his life for the crew. That was how it was always going to be...*

He left in the middle of the night, took only the things he couldn’t go without.

He left his jacket, his mask, his paint.

He took a deep breath and stepped out into the cool night air; no longer the most feared man in Los Santos.

No longer a harbinger of death.

No longer the Vagabond.

Not Judas.

Just Ryan.
Geoff had risen early; stressed about Ryan, about Jeremy, about things he couldn’t share with the crew yet. It made chasing sleep damn near impossible.

He found the note on the counter, deciphered the words from Ryan’s handwriting as he put on a pot of coffee.

*I’m not in control anymore. Not completely.*

*I don’t want to hurt anyone else.*

*I’m sorry.*

*This is something I need to work out for myself.*

*Don’t come looking for me.*

-*Ryan.*

Geoff wasn’t surprised. Not really.

This was what Ryan did. This was his coping mechanism. He needed to feel like he was in control, even when he wasn’t, whatever the cost to himself.

*The asshole never could say goodbye.*

The last part was what worried him the most. Ryan wasn’t in control, but the battle was in his head.

“The stubborn sonofabitch is gonna fight it all by himself,” he muttered to himself.

Geoff sighed, poured himself a cup of coffee and flipped the note over to read through the report it was written on.

* * *

By lunchtime, Geoff had gathered everyone back to the penthouse. Jeremy was on heavy medication for the pain. The knife had penetrated his liver, but thankfully had caused remarkably little damage. Livers were apparently very hardy organs. *Good to know.* They’d taken him to his room and left him to sleep it off.

The others gathered in the living room with Lindsay, Michael and Gavin practically sitting on top of each other, sharing one couch; Jack sat in one armchair, leaving the other noticeably empty while Geoff paced back and forth from the kitchen.
“So, Ryan’s gone,” he announced simply as the others noticed his absence.

Lindsay’s face immediately fell. “Shit.”

“What? Since when?” Michael asked, a hint of frustration in his voice.

“Last night sometime,” Geoff said. “He left a note.” He held up the hastily scrawled message on the report.

Lindsay’s eyebrows knitted together. “What’s it say?”

Geoff sighed, glancing at the note. “He says he’s not in control and doesn’t want to hurt anyone else. He also said not to come looking for him.”

“Oh god… you don’t think he might’ve…?” Gavin trailed off, not wanting to say the words, but it was clearly written in the consternation on his face.

Geoff shook his head firmly. “No.” Despite what had happened yesterday, Geoff was now certain of this fact. Ryan was a fighter. “He wouldn’t go out like that.”

“What’s that it’s written on?” Jack asked, indicating the writing on the other side of the note.

“Police report. Confidential. Sent through by Ryan’s contact in the LSPD. It’s about Shadowlz.” Geoff handed the report over for Jack to read, but he went on from memory, “Detective Shane Dowl. Ryan shot him the day of the Maze heist; he caught a ricochet to the side of the head. Spent a long time in the hospital. Fucked him up pretty good by the sounds of it. But he got cleared to go back to work…”

Michael and Lindsay’s eyebrows raised in unison.

“First day back?” Geoff continued. “Shot his partner of five years – didn’t kill him but came pretty close. That fucked him up even more.”

“Holy shit,” Michael muttered under his breath.

Geoff went on, “He was pretty quickly kicked off the force, and ordered to undergo treatment for PTSD or some shit, but he checked himself out early. That’s where it ends. It’s probably why it was so hard to get the records; the cops don’t want shit like this getting out…”

Gavin nodded, recalling how much trouble he and Jeremy were having getting the records.

“But he checked himself out only about a week before he ran into us the second time, when he shot me and framed Ryan…” Geoff said it almost with a growl. “He’d been quietly stalking us ever since, just waiting for the opportunity to get Ryan alone, by the sound of it.”

“So why did he say Ryan killed his brother? Why would he lie?” Gavin asked.

Geoff shrugged.

“He didn’t.” Jack said simply, eyes still scanning over the report. “He genuinely thought Ryan killed his brother. Says here he developed ‘dissociative personality disorder’-like symptoms after he recovered. They couldn’t tell if it was psychological or physical because of the brain injury, but the psych report said when he shot his partner it was because he blamed him for letting his ‘brother’ die.”

“That’s fucked up,” Michael commented.
Meanwhile, Gavin had gotten out his phone and tapped away at the screen, pulling up a WebMD page. He read aloud from the screen. “Says here: Dissociation is like daydreaming – alright – and dissociative identity disorder is ‘a mental process which produces a lack of connection in a person’s thoughts, memories, feelings, actions, or sense of identity.’ …Caused by trauma and is thought to be a coping mechanism – ‘the person literally dissociates himself from a situation or experience that’s too violent, traumatic, or painful to assimilate with his conscious self.’ Kind of like a split-personality thing then.” He tapped again at his phone. “Symptoms include: depression, mood swings, sleep disorders including night terrors…” he trailed off, frowning as his eyes scanned the rest of the screen.

“Anyone else seeing some similarities here?” Lindsay asked somewhat hesitantly.

Everyone was thinking it.

“Ryan…” Jack instinctively uttered his name.

Geoff cringed and rubbed his eyes with one hand. “Fuckin’, doesn’t help that Shadowlz-motherfucker was already in his head… goddamn asshole even fuckin’ said it… he told Ryan they weren’t so different.”

“Shit…” Michael cursed under his breath.

“We gotta go after him Geoff!” A quiet but determined voice came from the hallway, where Jeremy was leaning against the wall with one arm, gripping his bandaged side with the other, a pained expression on his face.

“Jeremy, get the fuck back to bed,” Geoff barked at him.

“He needs to know it’s not his fault…”

Geoff shook his head, as though he was about to interrupt, but Jeremy ignored him.

“Please, Geoff, I at least deserve to be part of this conversation!”

Geoff was hit with guilt. Jeremy was right. He let out a long breath, nodding in agreement “…Yeah, you do. Alright, sit down.”

Jeremy carefully limped over to the chair where Ryan would ordinarily have sat.

Geoff went back to pacing behind the couch, frowning in thought.

“We’re gonna go after him though, right?” Jeremy asked no one in particular as he sat down, looking around at them all. “Guys?”

There was a drawn-out silence as they all looked around at each other, waiting for someone to make a call.

“Little J… he hurt you…” Michael ventured carefully. “You’re lucky to be here at all. He said he can’t control it… Maybe we should give him some space.”

Jeremy frowned and shook his head. “We have to go after him!” He insisted. “This is all real messed up, it’s not his fault, and he needs to know that!”

Lindsay clasped her hands together and spoke gently, “Jeremy, I know you’re worried, we all are. But if he doesn’t want to be found… you’re going to burn yourself out before you even figure out if he’s left the city; I can promise you that.” She sighed and continued more firmly, “Right now we
can’t afford that. I need all of you.”

“Please, guys… The whole of Los Santos knows who he is now – we gotta go after him.”

Lindsay shook her head, about to protest again, but Geoff cut her off.

“Ok.”

“Ok?” Jeremy repeated, a little surprised.

“Yeah.” Geoff said. “Whatever it takes. We find him.”

Lindsay narrowed her eyes at him, exchanging a glance that communicated something Jeremy didn’t know the full extent of, which Geoff seemed to acknowledge, but he remained resolute.

“It’s not gonna be easy. I mean, it’s Ryan. If he doesn’t want to be found, we’re not gonna find him… But fuck it. We’re gonna try.”

The crew collectively nodded. It felt better, right.

“Besides,” Geoff added, “I’m a man of my word. Motherfucker can’t leave the crew unless it’s in a bodybag. Same goes for the rest of you.” His words were macabre, but Geoff grinned and somehow it didn’t feel so hopeless.

That was more like it. That was the crew they knew.

“We can’t afford to let anyone know Ryan’s gone off on his own. He’s a target as it is; if he’s not with us, they’ll be looking for him,” Jack observed.

Geoff nodded. “Good point. In the meantime, we should think about employing a decoy.”

“We can use Trevor,” Lindsay suggested, already thinking ahead. “They’re about the same height, under the jacket and mask it shouldn’t make much difference.” She shrugged and added with a smirk, “just don’t let him talk. He’ll give it away.”

Geoff chuckled at the thought of Trevor impersonating the Vagabond, but Lindsay might have a point, he could probably pull it off at a distance. “Alright, Lindsay, get Matt and Treyco to relocate up here ASAP. This is gonna be the new base of operations so I can keep an eye on all of you assholes.”

Gavin groaned. “That’s like… eight people Geoff! All living here?”

Geoff gave Gavin a look that could really only just begin to convey the frustration he must have felt having Gavin live with him, more-or-less rent-free, in his tiny-ass apartment when he basically adopted him years before they started the crew.

“Matt and I’ll share,” Jeremy volunteered, no stranger to living in share houses, or with Matt for that matter. “Trevor can have Ryan’s room ‘til we find him.”

“Thanks Lil J.” Geoff nodded, still glaring at Gavin.

“Where are we with the Randoms?” Lindsay suddenly asked no one in particular. “Any new info?”

“I mean, aside from what we found out about Shadowlz, not much. It looks like we set them back a long way,” Jeremy explained. “They lost a lot of people, but they’re not exactly headless because they don’t really function that way. I think I’ve said it before, but they’re more like a flash mob;
anyone can make a call and if enough people get on board with the idea, it just kind of goes ahead. The only thing they have in common is that they want to cause chaos and bring down the big gangs. I don’t think they really know what they’re getting themselves into…”

“No shit.” Geoff snorted. “It’s like they don’t know what’ll happen if the cops and drug gangs take back Los Santos. It’s like they don’t remember what it was like before we came along. They’re not gonna like it if they ever find out… Not that they ever will. I’m gonna need you guys to keep an eye on ‘em.”

“Team Boston Tea Party!” Gavin leaned over to high-five Jeremy.

Jeremy shook his head but returned his high-five half-heatedly; quietly thankful he hadn’t said Jerevin instead.

“Alright, the other thing we still need to sort out is this video. Gotta put the final bits of editing on it, but then it should be good to go out. Just gotta consult with the, uh, family about the timing, make sure everyone’s on the same page,” Geoff mused.

Jack, Michael, Jeremy and Gavin exchanged a look between them before they all looked to Geoff.

“Something you want to tell us, Geoff?” Jack probed.

Geoff interlaced his tattooed fingers and pressed his hands under his chin pensively. “Not… Not yet. Soon.”

Michael cocked an eyebrow. “Y’know, “family” is starting to sound almost a little too Sopranos, even for us…”

Geoff grinned his dopey, lopsided smile, reassuring them nothing overly sinister was going on.

“Hey, don’t worry about it,” he said in the most mobster-inspired-accent he could muster, which spectacularly missed the mark and sent the lads into fits of giggles.

Michael imitated him; doing an equally bad job, defaulting back to a Jersey accent, “sure, don’t worry about it…”

That was enough to set the others off and Geoff could do little but roll his eyes and grin.

“Seriously though, first priority: Ryan. Check his home; Lindsay, you know the address?”

Lindsay nodded. “I’ll come with you, I know where he hides a spare key.”

“If he’s not there… and I doubt he will be if he actually doesn’t want to be found, but who fuckin’ knows with him, check all the safe houses and any contacts he may have hit up. That’s a start anyway, should keep you busy for today. Lil J, you rest up, you don’t need to be out there yet. Keep an eye on the Randoms if you need to do something.”

Jeremy shifted uncomfortably, like maybe it wasn’t enough, but he nodded, understanding.

Everyone looked around expectantly.

Geoff rubbed his hands together. “Well… what are you waiting for? Go.”

The guys went to get the necessary gear - weapons mostly, and Jeremy limped back to his room.

Lindsay lingered behind for a moment in the living room with Geoff.
“Are you sure that’s a good idea, Geoff?” she asked as soon as they were alone.

“I’ll pick up the slack…” Geoff reassured her. “Lil J’s right. We gotta get Ryan back. We need him, but-” he rolled his eyes- “as much as the stubborn asshole won’t admit it, he needs us too.”

Lindsay nodded, understanding what he meant. “I just hope you know what you’re doing.”

Geoff smirked. “Yeah, me too…”

Chapter End Notes

I’m back! It has been an intense month and lots of scary and exciting things have happened.
I want to thank everyone for being patient with me while I sorted out my life and this story, especially the Discord communities. I couldn't have come this far without you guys.
The television was on; a loud buzz of static disturbed him from his sleep. Ryan groggily blinked his eyes open. A Weazel news reporter, some 20-something petite blonde who looked vaguely familiar was standing out the front of the Maze bank, while red and blue lights from police cars and ambulances reflected off the floor-to-ceiling glass windows behind her, throwing coloured patterns on her crisp white dress, an eerie mimic of the white sheets covering the bodies behind her.

Ryan propped himself up on his forearm, leaning heavily into the thin foam mattress and turned up the volume. What had the Crew gotten up to this time?

“…believed to be related to gang activity, the shooting resulted in eight fatalities…”

Déjà vu.

Ryan knew this story. They were police casualties. This was the heist he interrupted before he met the Fakes...

They don’t do re-runs of the news...

To his shock, the camera panned over to the bodies, and Ryan caught a glimpse of dark ink tattooed on the back of a hand before the medical examiner peeled back the sheet to reveal a too-familiar, perfectly-groomed moustache and glassy, half open, grey-blue eyes.

His heart skipped a beat.

No.

The next sheet was peeled back, and the next, and the next… Lindsay, Michael, Jack, Gavin, Jeremy, Matt and Trevor. Bodies riddled with bullets, unseeing eyes staring into the sky.

It might as well have been you.

No…

“Traitor. Judas.”

That voice…

He woke with a start, gasping for breath. The television was buzzing static and the world was still outside. The glowing red LEDs of the digital clock flashed 00:00. There must’ve been another power outage. He pressed the heels of his hands over his eyes for a moment, trying to cleanse his mind of the thought – a dream? He couldn’t remember the last time he dreamed. Figured that the one time he did, he’d have a nightmare instead. He let out a long breath and pushed his hands through his hair, reminding himself to find a rubber band to tie back, it was getting so long. He’d need to re-dye it soon as well.

The first rays of light were just beginning to filter through the cracked and bent steel horizontal blinds that provided the barest of privacy from the overcrowded and unsavoury neighbourhood he now resided in. He resolved to get up, tossing the thin sheet aside and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed, letting them stretch out for a moment and rubbing his palms gently over the pale, asymmetrical scars on his thighs from the surgery. He wasn’t physically quite back to where he was before the whole ordeal, but part of him suspected he never really would be, and another part
assured him he would never be the same. He had his own suspicions that much was true. He rubbed a palm over the now-healed scars on the back of his neck, thankful he couldn’t see them, and they were usually covered in the T-shirts and hoodies he mostly wore now.

He didn’t take the time to linger on it, honest work started early in Los Santos and the days were long.

* * *

Ryan hated the Projects.

The only real colour was in the graffiti murals commemorating the fallen Vagos members, and even then, some had long since been defaced by the various teenage gangs and drug-crews attempting to encroach on the territory. It felt like the city’s way of speaking up for the voiceless; scribbled messages over bright images in cracked and peeling paint. It was fitting for Los Santos. An attempt at ownership. Nobody really owned anything out here after all. Even their lives felt borrowed, like they may have to return them at any time without notice.

It was definitely a step down from the Fake AH Crew lifestyle.

Turned out honest work in Los Santos was a lot harder than being a criminal. He was struggling. He’d been working odd jobs; tech service mostly, he once tried a shift at Burgershot but hated the place with such a passion that he had to walk out before he stopped imagining himself plunging the manager’s head into the deep fryer and actually did it. It had taken enormous restraint.

He’d instead found a part-time job at a florist of all places. He filled his shitty apartment with damaged or otherwise unsellable potted plants, succulents mostly, in an attempt to give it some kind of life, but they struggled in the dim light and stale air. Not to mention the cat kept trying to eat them.

Ryan would periodically find himself in a mood where he worried he might go back. He didn’t want the temptation. He refused to watch any kind of news, because frankly, not a day would pass without some mention of the Fake AH Crew… Especially since they had put out the video.

That was the one thing he had managed to catch. It was probably the reason he felt the urge to go back so strongly. The assholes weren’t making it easy for him to forget them.

Their video had spread like wildfire, getting picked up by major news channels as well as independent internet sites and social media. It was transcribed and printed in papers and magazines and soon all of Los Santos was painted with the words: “Fake AH Crew” and a message…

Anyone who messes with the Fake AH Crew gets burned.

Whispers surrounded the crew now. Ryan heard them throughout the city. Quietly, they made him proud.

“Have you heard of Red? I hear she runs this town. I hear they call her Firebird. The Phoenix. She raised them from the embers. Leaves ashes in her wake.”

“Ramsey still runs this city.”

“Maybe... But she runs the Fakes.”
The work day had run even longer than expected. A fresh crime wave had seen fatalities go up in the local area, mostly thanks to the gangs getting territorial - mostly thanks to the Fakes. Flowers were needed for funeral services and condolence gifts. Calla lilies were a classic and popular choice.

In the city of sin, business was good for the criminals and the florists.

The sun was rapidly setting as he closed up and left the shop; tying his hair back with a rubber band he’d pilfered from bunching flowers. It wasn’t too cold out and the streets weren’t busy, so he decided, somewhat recklessly, to walk. He hadn’t been identified yet – to the best of his knowledge – and it had been more than six weeks since he’d left the Fakes; they’d obviously gotten someone to take his place for the sake of maintaining their image… and keeping him safe… He assumed the Vagabond’s identity hadn’t been brought back into question. Maybe there was a chance he could live a normal life after all this?

* * *

Is that what you really want though? I call bullshit.

He was only mildly annoyed at the persistent voice trying to undermine his decisions. He hadn’t made them for himself. He’d done it to keep the crew safe.

I hurt Jeremy… I can’t go back, they won’t have me back.

You don’t want normal, any minute now you’re gonna snap. You can’t live like this for long and you know it.

He could feel himself slipping back into that dark headspace.

“Fight it… because you deserve to fucking win.” Geoff’s words were still there, fresh as if he’d said them yesterday, burned into his memory from repeated recall. Some days he thought those words might be the only reason he was still around at all.

Despite the fact that it had gotten dark, he’d not paid much mind to the gaggle of young men standing around on the corner drinking and smoking, it wasn’t an uncommon sight in the Rancho Projects. He’d only let his guard down for a moment, temporarily lost in thought as he trudged back to his apartment.

In this city though, sometimes a moment was all it took.

Before he knew it, the men had surrounded him, hands grabbed at his hoodie, grasped a handful of hair. Something was slipped over his head, scratching his face and tugging his hair loose from its ponytail. At some level, with an accompanying sense of dread, it registered to him that it was a noose. Lynching was rare, but not entirely unheard of, if a gang was trying to send a message, or for a high-profile target. The coarse rope constricted around his throat as his fingers scrabbled to work their way underneath it, but found no success as the rope bit in and he was jerked violently backwards off his feet to the sound of deranged trilling laughter of the men. His hands went for the knot instead, fingertips desperately feeling for purchase on an edge or a loose end he could work free. He was pulled backwards again, now on his back, the gravel grating against his spine and ribs as he twisted and scrambled to get some kind of support, anything to take the pressure off his neck, his air now almost completely cut off. He started to panic as he heard an engine rev behind him and realised the other end of the rope was tied to a pickup. The group of men surrounded him once more.

“What the fuck do you think you’re playing at, Puto?” A pair of legs appeared either side of his head, a man’s obnoxious bald face staring down at him. The man stepped on the rope, forcing
Ryan’s head back, effectively keeping him pinned to the ground by his neck. “We don’t much appreciate you moving in on Vagos territory, you got no business here. You got three days to make sure we never see your pansy-ass face around these parts again, got it?”

So they were Vagos. But they didn’t recognize him. They didn’t know who he was.

If he could have drawn anything more than ragged breath, he would have breathed a sigh of relief, but as it was, he was only just holding onto consciousness. He could feel the blood pound in his ears as his fingers kept working to loosen the rope from his neck. He still had enough sense to play dumb, nodding frantically.

The legs stepped away from him and he scrambled backwards to get the rope to slacken again. He was able to steal a single harsh breath before the engine revved again and the pickup lurched forwards suddenly, pulling Ryan behind it. He managed to get a hold of the rope, but only barely, to prevent it from strangling him as the truck dragged him 15 feet up the road on his back. His hoodie and shirt were shredded, the denim of his jeans had mostly held up, but his back and sides were bleeding already from where he’d been dragged. He could feel the sting of the open wounds in the night air and damp patches forming where the blood was seeping into the fabric of his clothes.

“Got it, Puto?” A voice called out from the truck. “Cut him loose, he’s not worth our time.”

Ryan saw stars, but the rope slackened and he immediately pried it away, defensively curling into a fetal position and taking in gulps of air. His mouth was dry and his throat felt like he’d breathed in fire. He was shaking. He wasn’t sure if it was purely physical or nerves, or a combination of both, but he found himself physically unable to get up.

The Vagos left, trilling laughter lingering in the air behind them.

Ryan lay on the ground feeling acutely vulnerable until he eventually stopped trembling.

Ryan had been sure he was dead. He should be dead. Alphonse, the Random from the alleyway that had tried to set up Jeremy all those months ago had been with the Vagos; he was sure of that now, he’d seen the mural and tributes around the projects. But they’d not recognized him. That was a good sign. He hadn’t responded like the Vagabond would have either, so that wasn’t going to raise any suspicions.

A small part of him worried that even if he’d wanted to, even if he needed the Vagabond, he wasn’t sure he could have mustered it. That thought itself scared him.

Ryan hated the Projects.

He didn’t remember getting home. He just knew he’d gotten there.

He’d peeled off his ruined clothes, inspecting the scrapes down his sides and back, picking pieces of gravel out of the wounds before heading to the shower to clean up. He caught sight of his reflection in the mirror, barely registering as his own as he ran his fingers through dark hair, traced the bruise along his neck that he knew was only going to get worse, saw the pinprick petechial haemorrhages in his eyes, the tell-tale signs of trauma that he should really get checked out, but knew he wouldn’t.

“Walk it off.” He muttered to himself as he stepped into the steaming hot shower and hissed through the pain.

“Fight it…”

Why? Why are you putting yourself through this?
“…because you deserve to fucking win.”

He wasn’t so sure anymore.
Keeping up appearances

Jeremy awoke to sharp, stabbing pain in his side and a look of horror on Ryan’s face.

Ryan was mouthing the words: “I’m sorry… I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean… Jeremy!”

Jeremy’s eyes snapped open. This time he awoke in a cold sweat in the passenger seat of Matt’s shitty, banged-up Asea, to the smell of sweet and sour pork. Again.

He instinctively rubbed his ribs where the knife wound had healed over, a lumpy pink scar now having taken its place.

He cracked his neck and rubbed his face with his hands, a habit he assumed he’d picked up from Geoff.

*Breathe, Jeremy. It’s ok.*

Ryan hadn’t meant it. He could see that, plain as day. As soon as he’d realised what he’d done… He’d had this discussion with himself over and over since it’d happened.

*Stop it Jeremy.* He instructed himself sternly.

He turned his attention to the others in the car, glancing in the rear-view mirror to see Trevor asleep in the back seat, arms folded over his chest, traces of paint still smudged around his eyes, head tipped back over the head rest in such a way that he was definitely going to have a sore neck when he woke up.

In the driver’s seat, Matt was trying to get his cheap wooden chopsticks to cooperate to pick up the slimy chunks of sweet and sour pork.

“Why’d you let me fall asleep?” Jeremy asked with a yawn.

“You looked like you needed it,” he said with a shrug, holding out the container of grey and red chunks. “Want some?”

“God, no. I can’t believe you can still even look at Chinese food. How are you not sick of it already?”

Matt shrugged with a grin, “It’s not bad. I can see why Ryan likes this place.”

“But three weeks straight? No thanks. All I want is a burger.”

In the white light of the street lamps, Jeremy caught sight of his arms; nearly two months later, the bruises had faded, but Jeremy could still remember the patterns of faint green and yellow fingerprints from where Ryan had held him until the others arrived. He remembered Ryan’s grip was too tight; it hurt him, but after a few minutes it was the only thing he could feel, and even though it hurt, he didn’t want him to let go, because he didn’t want to not feel anything. He remembered feeling scared. He remembered Jack trying to pry Ryan’s hands off him, Geoff trying to lift him out of Ryan’s arms, Michael desperately throwing a punch and Ryan’s hands finally released their iron grip on him. He remembered he felt cold and then he felt nothing. Ryan’s words replayed in his head as he had drifted out of consciousness.

“I’m sorry…”
He didn’t want that to be the last thing he remembered of Ryan.

They had to find him.

But they’d been drawing a blank.

All of the safe houses were empty. Lindsay had found no trace of him at his ‘civilian’ house and he’d only taken the bare minimum with him. They knew he wouldn’t be so bold – or stupid – as to try to get involved with any other gangs, but they had little else to go on. They asked trusted contacts, checked all the underground fighting rings, kept an ear out for mysterious mercenaries getting around, but nothing turned up. They couldn’t find any trace of Ryan in or out of Los Santos.

When they’d run out of all other ideas, they’d waited out the front of Ryan’s favourite takeout restaurant in the hopes he’d slip up, return for one sneaky order of beef and broccoli, or treat himself to orange chicken. They’d been there every night for nearly three weeks.

So far though, nothing.

They’d been keeping up appearances, for the sake of the crew’s reputation, especially in the wake of the video release. Lindsay had taken over planning and logistics and they’d been increasingly successful with their recent heists. They were mostly low-risk jobs, using Trevor as their stand-in for Ryan. He’d been doing a surprisingly good job. While he could be a bit spacey on the comms, he had Ryan’s movements and attitude down enough to fool anyone watching them, and so far, no one had questioned the recovery of the ‘Vagabond’. Rumours had even spread that the whole kidnapping had been an elaborate ruse set up by the Fakes themselves to garner some kind of support or sympathy. They weren’t the best thought-through theories, but anything that discredited the Randoms seemed to be a good thing. Lindsay hadn’t disclosed anything, but Jeremy had his suspicions she may have been behind some of the rumours.

Geoff had been busy setting up some kind of collaboration or partnership or network or …something, he kept referring to as ‘the Family’. Despite being practically run off their feet keeping on top of everything, Geoff and Lindsay continually discussed how the search had been eating into time and resources that could be better spent elsewhere. Geoff still hadn’t been able to bring himself to call it off, and frankly even if he did, it wasn’t going to stop the crew from looking for Ryan on their own time.

Like now. Like every night.

*Where are you, Ry?* Jeremy wondered, resting his head against the cool window of the car, eyes scanning over the figures heading into the restaurant, scrutinizing any that might even vaguely fit Ryan’s build.

He’d seen his fair share of street crime while he was making his way up in Los Santos… he’d even been responsible for some of it. He knew how violent, how brutal and unforgiving it could be. You didn’t need to be anyone special to be a victim in this city. You didn’t need a reason. The streets of Los Santos swallowed up the innocent and guilty alike.

Every night, he came up with new scenarios, new theories of what had become of Ryan. Sometimes he was sure he had gone to Mexico, was living a humble life somewhere, happy. Other times, more often, when he was being more realistic – imagining how he would be dealing with the same situation – his thoughts trailed into much darker places… Tonight he cursed his vivid imagination for gifting him with the mental image of Ryan unconscious in a bathtub full of ice while some backwater doctors removed his internal organs for sale on the black market…
Jeremy was snapped out of it by his phone, buzzing insistently in his pocket. He fished around in his jeans, eventually pulling it free, squinting at the bright light of the screen to see who wanted him.

“Geoff?” He answered casually.

“Jeremy, are you guys ok?” Geoff’s voice sounded tense, verging on hysterical.

Jeremy was immediately concerned. “We’re fine Geoff, what’s going on?” He switched his phone to speaker-mode so Matt could listen in.

“Fuckin’, just get back to the penthouse, now. Don’t stop anywhere. Just get back here, ASAP,” Geoff barked the order in such a way that made goose bumps rise up on the back of his neck.

“Geoff, what is this?” He asked loudly enough that Trevor was startled awake in the backseat, rubbing his neck, but listening in curiously.

“They know about our safe houses. It was a coordinated attack. They’ve been burned down.”


“All of them.”

They all froze.

“Jeremy?”

“Still here Geoff,” Jeremy affirmed. “We’re coming back now.”

Matt started the car in a hurry, nearly throwing his food on the floor in the process.

“Be careful.”

Jeremy could hear a kind of desperate sincerity in Geoff’s voice; it was the same concerned tone he’d given Ryan before he’d been captured.

“We will,” Jeremy reassured him as confidently as he could before he hung up the phone.

Jeremy pulled up Weazel’s live news coverage on his phone, scowling at the footage and images of dozens of properties – all their safe houses, with all their stored things; all their exit strategies, their fake passports, changes of clothes and stashes of emergency cash – up in flames, some reduced to nothing more than smouldering ashes. His mind reflexively reminded him of the scene at the warehouse where the Randoms had kept Ryan, the blackened corpses in the underground carpark, the warehouse reduced to burning rubble as they left; the carnage wrought by Gavin’s flamethrower at the hospital. If the Randoms had seen their video as a challenge, it sure felt like this might be their way of saying “challenge accepted.” Jeremy continued to scroll through the list of properties until he came across an unfamiliar one.

“Hey guys… they’re not giving exact addresses, but do you know if we have a safe house in Vespucci?”

Trevor’s eyes widened with recognition. It was the first place they’d checked after Ryan had disappeared. Lindsay had given them the address. She was the only one who knew before them. She’d been there to feed his animals.

“That’s where Ryan used to live…”
“How the fuck would they know that?” Matt asked, hands expertly gliding over the steering wheel as he took the corner at twice the recommended speed whilst maintaining total control. “We didn’t even know that!”

Jeremy glanced out the rear window as a pair of headlights followed them around the corner at almost the same speed. A chill ran down his spine.

“Matt, turn left up here, then left again,” he instructed, still carefully watching the lights behind them.

Trevor’s head spun around and Matt’s eyes flicked up to the rear-view mirror. They both saw the headlights and immediately understood.

* * *

In the living room of the penthouse, Jack hung up the phone at almost the same time as Geoff and they exchanged a nervous look.

“Lil J’s headed back with Matt and Treyco,” Geoff relayed. “Could you get onto them?”

“Michael’s got no service,” Jack stared, shaking his head. “And Gavin’s not answering his damn phone.”

“Fuckin’ typical…” Geoff huffed. “How the fuck did they know?”

Geoff resumed his pacing between the kitchen and the couches, glancing back to the TV, playing a loop of the breaking news about the spate of arsonist attacks at apparently random locations around Los Santos.

Jack paused for a moment, frowning and chewing his lip absently. “The only thing I can think is… we’ve been looking for Ryan; checking all the safe houses, right? …what if they’ve been following us? What if they were tracking Matt and Trevor when they made the rounds to the safe houses?”

Geoff was silent as he processed the information.

“What if they’re still following them? That means they know we’re here…”

“Shit.”

Geoff immediately snatched up his phone to call Jeremy, but before he could hit the button to dial, it started ringing in his hand. Caller ID came up as ‘Lil J’.

“Jeremy, don’t come back here!” Geoff answered frantically.

“Geoff! We’ve got company, but we’re dealing with it,” Jeremy started talking over the top of Geoff. “Get outta there, Geoff! Tell the others, stay away from anywhere we’ve been!”

There was a thump at the front door and Geoff’s eyes snapped up to meet Jack’s, wide as dinner plates.

Too late.

Geoff shoved the phone back in his pocket without hanging up and instinctively drew his gun. Jack
did the same, backing up next to Geoff.

“We don’t give ‘em shit, no matter what happens.” Geoff didn’t take his eyes off the door, taking careful aim the way he’d been taught, the way they’d practiced many years ago, that had long since become second-nature. He was acutely aware of it now.

In his peripheral he saw Jack swallow and nod curtly, his actions mirroring his own, eyes locked on the door. They both steeled themselves.

The charge blew splinters through the doorframe, exploding inwards, the heavy wooden door toppling towards them and crashing into the penthouse. A smoke grenade followed, plumes of thick grey smoke trailing after the canister as it bounced into the room.

Moments later gunfire shattered the suspended silence.

Geoff fired blindly through the smoke, knowing they’d have to pass through the hallway entry to get to them, spraying bullets in the hopes he could hit one. A scream soon after indicated he was correct in his assumption.

Jack was closer to the kitchen. He weighed his odds. There was a loaded shotgun under the sink. Better than just his pistol. He took the second of confusion and Geoff’s gunfire to throw himself towards the kitchen, rolling with an unexpected grace over the smooth granite countertop, but landing hard on his right shoulder on the other side, throwing it painfully out of joint. He ignored it and went for the shotgun under the sink, hearing the heavy footsteps of many people entering the penthouse. Geoff was still shooting, and the smoke was thinner now, disturbed by the motion of so many people. Jack felt pain shoot up his right arm but grimaced through it as he cocked the shotgun; just in time to catch a face pop over the top of the counter. He automatically aimed and fired, and the face exploded into sticky chunks of blood, brain matter and bone fragments that clung to the counters around him; a fine spray of red mist settling over the previously pristine white kitchen. Hands shot up to swipe at the face that was no longer there, before the body went limp over the countertop. Had the adrenaline not been keeping him hyper-focused, he might have gagged at the spectacle. It was not a mental image he wanted to commit to memory, but Jack knew he’d be haunted by it regardless. He didn’t have long to dwell on it however, as the faceless body was pushed forward by the next intruder in line, effectively shielding them and blocking Jack’s next shot. Pain shot through his right arm and it jerked involuntarily, the barrel of the shotgun dropping sharply in his grip.

He knew it was over before it even started.

His mind flooded with regret and thoughts of all the things that would go unsaid, unfinished, after they put the final round through his skull… but it didn’t come. For a split second he was relieved, before Geoff’s yelling cut through the deafening thoughts in his own head, and at some level it registered to him that their hesitation to kill him was probably the worse option. He scrambled with his good left arm for his pistol just as a figure vaulted over the counter and a thick-soled boot came down hard on his wrist. More followed, and soon Jack was overwhelmed with bodies pinning him down. He was strong, but they were many. He could hear Geoff swearing a string of colourful profanities as his clip emptied and he was similarly overrun. Jack struggled against them, making little headway when suddenly something hard impacted his head and Geoff’s frantic shouting faded out.

The next thing Jack knew, he was on his knees with a gun barrel flush against the back of his skull. His head was ringing and strong hands were holding both his arms out by his sides. His right arm radiated pain through his chest and side. Geoff was calling his name from across the room. He was held similarly, two men either side of him, one behind with a pistol aimed at his head.
As soon as Jack had the sense, he looked up at Geoff’s face, contorted with concern and mouthed the words “give ‘em nothing”.

Geoff gave an almost imperceptible nod, but his eyes betrayed his fear.

Jack scanned the room. There were at least four bodies on the floor scattered throughout the apartment, two more people incapacitated by non-fatal bullet wounds and two people tending their injuries, with three more standing by at the door. All of them were wearing simple black, with bandanas covering their faces and baseball caps or beanies, leaving only their eyes exposed. There would have been nearly twenty people all up.

*Jesus, they’re not fucking around.* Jack thought with a slight shiver as the gun barrel pressed harder into his skull. *They must’ve been expecting more of us. Or maybe not? Where the hell were Michael and Gavin?*

His mind raced, trying to explore all possibilities and formulate a plan, when he was harshly dragged back to the urgency of the moment by the sound of the gun being cocked behind his head.

“Stop!”

It took Geoff less than a second to open his damn mouth.

*So much for giving them nothing…* Jack thought with grim amusement.

“What do you want?” Geoff demanded.

The sinewy guy holding the gun to Jack’s head pulled his bandana down and stepped forward, hesitantly identifying himself as a leader of sorts.

“Frankly, we want you out of the picture,” the head thug said, trying to sound confident.

Geoff rolled his eyes. “Well, that much I’d gathered.”

The man responded by pressing the gun back into Jack’s skull, scraping against his scalp. “I can start thinning the ranks now if you’d like?”

Geoff gritted his teeth, trying to calm the sense of rising panic at the sight presented to him.

*They need us alive or else they wouldn’t be doing this. They’d have killed us already. He’s bluffing, fucking call it.*

It didn’t shift the lump in the back of his throat or stop the flutters in his chest. He growled in frustration but caught himself.

“You don’t have the balls,” Geoff spat instead.

Jack even surprised himself when his immediate reaction wasn’t a feeling of betrayal, but relief. *Geoff wasn’t going to give in to them.* It was reassuring in an almost morbid way. They were in this together.

The thug was taken aback. He hadn’t been expecting that kind of response.

“Big words coming from someone in your position.” The head Random relaxed his stance slightly. “Where’s Red and the rest of your crew?”

*That’s what they want.* Geoff and Lindsay had been playing their cards very close to their chest with
matters of the “Family”. Jack could see the thought process, Geoff’s eyes flicked up and down and he smirked. It filled Jack with hope.

“My crew? Puh-lease, don’t make me out to be responsible for these jackasses, I just work here.”

“Wow, thanks Geoff,” Jack added with a laugh, before he was swiftly silenced by the thug on his right twisting his arm painfully. He clamped his mouth shut, vowing not to give them the satisfaction of a scream.

Geoff tried to hide it, but it looked like it hurt him as much as it hurt Jack.

“Enough with the bullshit,” the head thug continued. “Where are the rest of the Fakes?”

“I honestly don’t know,” Geoff admitted, truthfully, with a large helping of snark. “I thought you’d’ve had more luck tracking them than us.”

Having seen Jack’s response, the head thug nodded to the guy on Jack’s right and he twisted his arm roughly, making Jack grimace and lean forward to try to alleviate the pain. He involuntarily let out a grunt and Geoff winced at his pain.

“Look,” Geoff jumped in, hoping they’d let up on Jack. They did. “If you’re looking for Michael and Gavin, I really don’t know where they are…”

The man smirked, flashing white teeth. “Oh, I wouldn’t worry about that, we got a lock on them a while ago.”

Jack’s stomach dropped, Geoff’s face flickered concern but only for a split second before rage took over.

“What have you motherfuckers done with them?!” Geoff growled.

The head thug tried to sound cool and detached, but he snapped back a little too enthusiastically, “You don’t need to know yet.”

Jack couldn’t help but think this guy was doing his best impression of Ryan… and failing miserably.

“Fuck you!” Geoff was clearly too worried to share Jack’s thoughts. “I’m not saying shit until I know they’re ok.”

That was a bluff, Geoff had no intention of saying anything to them anyway, but it was worth a shot. The thug didn’t fall for it.

He shook his head before turning around and delivering a sharp kick to Jack’s abdomen, causing him to splutter and double over in spasms.

“Fuck you!” Geoff called out without thinking.

“I want to know where the rest of the crew is, or I’m gonna put a bullet in him.” The thug aimed his pistol away from Jack’s head and down to his shoulder. “I can tell you now, it’s not gonna be pretty.”

Jack was still recovering from the kick, but it registered things were about to get a whole lot worse. He looked up at Geoff, frowning, pleading internally for him to stay strong. Geoff returned a worried look, and it suddenly occurred to Jack: He wasn’t sure how much Geoff actually knew. It didn’t matter. There was an implicit trust. Geoff would do what he thought was right. He hoped.
Geoff finally tore his eyes away from Jack and looked up at the thug. “What rest of the crew? God dammit! I don’t know what to fucking tell you. If we knew where the Vagabond was we’d have fuckin’ stopped looking for him by now…”

“You actually don’t know do you?” The thug suddenly looked amused. “Do you seriously think nothing’s changed since Red took over? …No, you’re just playing dumb. What have you been planning, Ramsey?”

The group of Randoms frowned at each other, some of the younger ones looked confused, looking to the others for guidance. It was clear that some of them disagreed with the head thug’s conclusions, but they weren’t quite sure how to go about bringing it up. It was painfully obvious that they had no firm leadership. They were going to end up self-destructing. Jack saw an opening.

“Oh please, Geoff doesn’t need to play dumb…”

Geoff caught on instantly, years of living in each other’s pockets allowed him to pick up on the tone automatically.

“Oh, fuck you Jack, you piece of shit. You know what? Just shoot him, go on, fucking do it, see if I care!”

There were a few snickers and more confused exchanges. The head thug hesitated, unsure what to make of the situation unfolding.

Perfect, Jack thought to himself, let’s buy some time.

Another of the Randoms found themselves comfortable enough to speak up. “Trouble in the Fake AH Crew, eh?”

The head thug shot him a glare, but the other man shrugged it off.

“Fuck you buddy,” Geoff spat back. “Mind your own goddamned business.”

That set them off, a few laughed, some began talking amongst themselves, they were now enraptured in the show.

“Jack, you’ve been a total pain in my ass…” Geoff was laying it on thick, but the Randoms either didn’t notice or didn’t care.

“You haven’t exactly been a walk in the fuckin’ park yourself, Geoff…” Jack began to reply, before the head thug was waving his gun around again.

“You’re willing to risk his life over something this petty?” He addressed Geoff.

Geoff laughed tersely. “You sir, underestimate just how fucking petty and stubborn I can be.”

That set them off again, sniggers and chatter erupting amongst them; their guard was down and the timing couldn’t have been more perfect.

There was a smattering of rapid gunfire from outside the penthouse, as the three men posted at the door who’d been paying attention to Geoff and Jack’s bickering, crumpled in a bloody mess.

“Well, well, what’s going on in here now?” Jeremy’s voice could be heard at the doorway and everyone’s head snapped around to the source of the sound.

Geoff seized the opportunity to kick out at the nearest thug, contacting the back of his knee and
sending him sprawling momentarily, before he climbed back to his feet and responded with a sharp backhand across Geoff’s face.

It didn’t matter anymore. Jeremy and Trevor were inside and they were ready. The Randoms were not. Especially when the .50 cal sniper round shattered the window and landed with a sickening thud in the back of one of the thugs holding Jack.

Jack and Geoff threw themselves to the ground and covered their heads.

For a minute, the world descended into chaos; gunshots, glass shattering, bodies falling around them. And then everything was still again. Only Trevor and Jeremy remained standing.

Geoff and Jack tentatively lifted their heads and sat up to their knees, taking in the carnage around them.

Geoff let out a long whistle.

Jack just shook his head and chuckled, everything hurt, but it was secondary to his relief. “God damn, Jeremy, talk about good timing.”
Of the nearly twenty Randoms who dared to storm Geoff’s penthouse, three survived.

Soon, they would wish they hadn’t.

All three were badly injured, two had been shot by Geoff upon entering and the third, the self-nominated ‘head thug’, had been taken down by a well-placed round to the knee. Jeremy and Trevor wasted no time securing them; using rolls of trusty and efficient duct tape to bind them to chairs and gag them, before dragging them into separate rooms.

The wind rushed through the shattered window with an eerie howl.

Geoff climbed to unsteady feet and immediately went to where Jack was slowly finding his own footing. “You ok, Jack?”

Jack nodded slowly, rubbing his arm and testing it for mobility. It still hung limply at his side. He would need to have it looked at. “For the most part. You?”

“Yeah.” Geoff had a large red welt forming across his face, but other than that, he only seemed shaken. He placed a hand carefully on Jack’s good shoulder. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to put you in that position … and I didn’t mean anything I said.”

Jack put his good arm on Geoff’s shoulder and squeezed it reassuringly. “It’s ok, Geoff… I didn’t mean any of it either. I understand. We’re good.”

“It was shitty and I never want to do that again.” Geoff sighed and shook his head, pulling Jack into a one-shouldered hug, being careful of his arm.

“Me either,” Jack reassured him as they pulled away, with a slight but entirely genuine smile.

Matt appeared in the doorway, out of breath, with the bright pink sniper rifle slung over his shoulder, just as Jeremy and Trevor were dragging the head thug into the bathroom.

“Geoff, you picked the worst apartment to try to get a shot on…” Matt said once he’d stopped panting.

“Why’d you think I picked it, dumbass?” Geoff grinned back at him. “Fuckin’ impressive marksmanship if you were able to get the shot.”

Matt looked smug. “Excuse me? I took down four of those assholes, thank-you-very-much.”

Trevor and Jeremy returned to the living room and Trevor flopped down over the blood-splattered couch, ignoring the shattered glass that lay scattered over the floor.

“Three by my count…” He ribbed playfully.
Matt shook his head, still grinning. “Whatever, man; I helped.”

“You guys did fuckin’ awesome.” Geoff beamed, before growing serious again. “So what the fuck was that? What just happened?”

“We got so lucky, Geoff,” Jeremy began, adrenaline still running high. “Trevor still had Ryan’s stuff with him.”

“Ryan stuff?” Jack repeated, mishearing him, cocking an eyebrow.

Trevor grinned wide, flashing canines. “Yeah, Ryan stuff, y’know? RPG, sticky bombs, proximity mines…”

“Ah, Ryan stuff, of course.” Geoff rolled his eyes while Jack shook his head.

“So, chaos in a bag, basically,” Trevor added. “Did you know Ryan replaced the warning label on his rocket launcher? It says Warning: not only will this kill you, it’ll hurt the whole time you’re dying. Pretty sure that’s not standard.”

Jack and Geoff scoffed incredulous laughs.

Matt smirked and shrugged. “Well, it’s not wrong.”

“I know, right? But I mean, what could it possibly have said before he changed it? Like, what’s the warning label on a rocket launcher gonna say…?”

“Anyway,” Jeremy continued, cutting Trevor off before the conversation derailed any further. “We spotted them following us and took care of it.”

“Just like that?” Geoff asked sceptically.

“Just like that,” Matt and Trevor replied, almost in unison.

“I think they underestimated us,” Jeremy admitted, sounding a little disappointed.

Jack scoffed, but it didn’t mask the pride in his voice. “Their mistake.”

“Big fuckin’ mistake,” Geoff muttered. “Never underestimate the B-team, goddamn dream-team.”

“Yeah…” Jeremy agreed with a proud chuckle. “But we heard gunshots over the phone, so we came straight back here.”

“Even after I said not to…” Geoff scowled, but there was nothing genuine about it.

“C’mon Geoff, aren’t you glad we didn’t listen?”

Geoff smirked sheepishly. “Yeah. You guys did great.”

They took in the sight of the room, bodies strewn everywhere, blood staining the carpet, splattered over the walls that were pocked with bullet holes; chunks of safety glass from the shattered window scattered over the living room floor. It wasn’t quite as bad as the aftermath of the party Gavin and Michael had thrown following Matt and Jeremy’s initiation to the Fakes, but then, the lads were known to party hard…

“Where are Michael and Gavin?” Jeremy asked, suddenly noticing their absence.
Geoff frowned solemnly. “We don’t know. Haven’t been able to reach them. The asshole you just dragged into the bathroom said he knew where they were; he might’ve been bluffing though.”

Somehow, he didn’t think that was likely.

“Shit. What about Lindsay? Is she ok?” The nerves that Jeremy had until recently reserved for worrying about Ryan were starting to kick back in, but he kept a level head.

“She’s ok, she was the first to know,” Geoff assured them. “Said she was somewhere safe. Didn’t say exactly where that was.”

The reality of the situation hadn’t fully hit them yet, but with the realisation that even Geoff didn’t know everything that was going on, it was just starting to sink in.

Jeremy chewed his lip nervously. “So, what’s the plan, Geoff?”

Geoff just frowned and shook his head. “I don’t know. We check-in with Lindsay. We try to figure out what the fuck’s going on… And where we go from here.”

Trevor sat up on the couch with a start, dark eyes shining brightly. “Well, we do have three ‘house-guests’. How ‘bout we start by asking them?”

Geoff grimaced at the thought, remembering the result of the last interrogation he’d witnessed, but he held out his hands. “Hey, you’re more than welcome to.”

Less than ten minutes later, Jeremy had bloodied knuckles and the first guy’s name: Sam.

“Sam? You still with me, buddy?” Jeremy asked, as the guy spat blood.

Sam had been one of the two Randoms shot by Geoff; the bullet was still lodged in his shin, so it wasn’t an easy task to get him to talk. He’d mostly been moaning in pain since they took the duct tape off. He’d barely hissed his name through clenched teeth.

“Sam, gonna need you to focus here man,” Jeremy soothed, playing the role of ‘good cop’ despite only a few moments ago being the one punching him in the face. “I need to know what you know, and then we can get you to a hospital and make all this pain go away.”

The man was probably younger than Jeremy, maybe only just. A typical wannabe gang member, not quite tough enough to roll with the big boys, but still desperate enough to do some damage and mean it. That was how most of the Randoms they’d encountered so far seemed to be. He was still immature enough to be a stubborn prick though.

“Get fucked!” He spat again, this time at Jeremy’s face, but Jeremy stepped back to avoid it easily.

“C’mon Sam. This shouldn’t be a hard decision for you, just tell us what you know.”

“Fuck you!” He reasserted, grimacing through pain. It sounded like he was regaining control.

Trevor stepped forward, cocking his head to the side, an inquisitive look on his face.

“Mind if I have a chat with Sam, Jeremy?” He asked innocently, a kind smile on his face.

“Sure, man, go ahead,” Jeremy enthused, waving him forward nonchalantly. Internally he was intrigued by what Trevor must be thinking.
We can’t play “good cop, good cop”, Jeremy thought to himself, as he turned and walked back to lean against the door frame with Matt.

Trevor approached Sam as if he was a small child, lost at a shopping mall. It immediately put Sam back in a position he thought he could control.

“What’s with the eyeliner?” Sam jeered through his teeth, seeing his opening and going for it.

“It’s not eyeliner!” Trevor blurted out defensively. “It’s face paint, it’s just really hard to get off around the eyes…” he rubbed at his eyes for a few seconds.

Jeremy and Matt exchanged a confused and slightly worried look.

“Oh my God!” Trevor exclaimed with a light and carefree laugh that cruelly juxtaposed the situation, seemingly accidentally. “I’m such an idiot. I totally shouldn’t have said that. I’m such a bad liar! The guys always tell me: they can see right through me, anytime I’m trying to pull one over on them... I mean, would you believe me if I told you I was the Vagabond?”

Sam looked confused and genuinely scared for a moment, before blurting out, “bullshit.”

Jeremy’s eyes flicked nervously from Sam to Trevor, whose grin hadn’t waned in the slightest; it was unnerving.

“See! That’s what I’m talking about! I’m not the Vagabond, by the way… I’m just pretending to be him while we find him, kinda like his understudy, yeah?”

Jeremy’s eyes went wide and he coughed to try to get Trevor’s attention; tried to get him to stop giving away information, but Trevor made a slight hand gesture that indicated he knew what he was doing. Jeremy sure hoped so.

“...he ran off, you see? Needed some time alone, but now we just can’t find him.”

Sam looked shocked at the news.

It then clicked to Jeremy what Trevor was doing… devious son of a bitch was probing for information.

“I mean, you guys don’t know where he is, do you?”

The innocent look on Trevor’s face completely masked his intentions. It was perfect. It was also extremely unsettling. Regardless of what this guy knew, Trevor’s tactic meant they were now going to have to kill him. Jeremy made a mental note never to piss off Trevor.

The look on Sam’s face was enough to indicate that he had no idea what Trevor was talking about. Which meant that as long as something hadn’t already happened to him, there was a good chance Ryan was safe… well, from the Randoms… for now. Probably. Still, it gave Jeremy some hope.

Trevor rolled his eyes. “Well, you’re not much use now, are you? Might as well go check with your colleagues, see if they know anything.”

With that, Trevor turned and left. Matt and Jeremy exchanged a look of utter confusion, but followed Trevor silently out of the room, leaving Sam to mull it over alone.

* * *
The acrid scent of solvent lingered in Gavin’s nostrils. His face itched, but he couldn’t move to scratch it. He opened his eyes, but he couldn’t see anything and for a moment he thought he might be blind. The faintest glow of light was visible, through what he gradually realised was a bag of some sort covering his head. He was seated, but leaning back, like in a dentist’s chair, and he could now feel that his arms were strapped down at the wrists and above the elbows. His legs were strapped down too. He tested for any kind of movement, but he still felt sluggish and couldn’t shake the feeling. He definitely wasn’t going anywhere at any rate.

His head spun, he felt drunk, was he drunk? He searched his memory, where had he been before? Everything was fuzzy. Why couldn’t he remember?

He was with Michael… Michael?

His tongue felt fat in his mouth, lazy and slow as he tried to form the word, but it came out as more of a gurgle. “Micoo?”

“Gavin?” The reply was quiet and muffled by the bag, but it was unmistakably Michael.

“Michael!” He wanted to ask him questions; if he was ok, what he remembered, if he could see anything, but it felt like his mouth had been stuffed with cotton.

“Gav, are you ok?” The tone of his voice was too concerned, too serious, bordering on scared.

Gavin hummed an affirmative, managing a crude “uh huh,” rather than mumbling unintelligible nonsense that might make Michael worry further.

“You had a fucking seizure.” Michael’s voice cracked slightly as it caught in his throat. “I thought it was game over.”

A seizure? That’s probably why he felt so out of it.

“Do you remember anything?” Michael pressed, wanting to keep him talking, reassurance he was actually ok.

Gavin licked his lips and swallowed, moving his mouth slowly and deliberately before attempting to speak.

“No,” That came out much clearer. His voice was still shaky and weak, but at least it was comprehensible. “What happened, Michael?”

Hearing Gavin’s speech improve, Michael’s voice picked up, a newfound rage replacing some of the concern. “They fucking got the drop on us. It was bullshit. I don’t know what they used, but you had some kind of reaction or something. You had a seizure. It scared the shit out of me; I thought you were dead for sure. All I remember was going to sleep after that and waking up here.”

Gavin thought back, he could remember leaving the penthouse after Jeremy, Matt and Trevor had gone for the usual stake-out. They’d gone to get food… They’d stopped for bevs… Then it was all flashes, snapshots; hands grabbing him and a bitter taste at the back of his throat, the hum of an engine and Michael’s voice yelling, just yelling.

“Fucking chemical warfare, Gav; what a fucking joke.”

He heard a noise that sounded like a stifled involuntary scoff. They weren’t alone.

“Pussies didn’t even have the guts to try to take us head-on,” Michael continued, a little louder and
more forcefully, he must’ve heard the noise too, it sounded like he was trying to lure them out of hiding. Gavin decided to try to help.

“Well, you saw what happened with Ryan… they’re not exactly the brightest bunch, Michael. We took ‘em out pretty easy last time…”

A voice in the darkness replied, “I doubt you’ll get so lucky this time.”

“Oh! Real fuckin’ original then. Let me guess, you’re gonna use us as bait as well? Try to flush out the others. Good fuckin’ luck!” Michael spat the words with venom.

The voice laughed; a menacing chuckle that made Gavin uncomfortable.

“I think smoke them out might be a more apt analogy,” the voice retorted. “But then again, we hardly need to do that when there’s nowhere left for them to run.”

Gavin felt goose bumps crawl over his skin, the voice, whoever they were, something about them sounded clever. Cleverer than the Randoms they’d encountered so far. He had a bad feeling about this…

“Didn’t you idiots see the fucking video?” Michael raged. “We always come after our own, and it doesn’t end fucking well for the other guys. In this case you, dumbfucks.”

The voice was not at all disturbed by the outburst. “Oh, but you see, that’s what we’re counting on. This time we’re ready.”

Well… fuck.

* * *

“Well… fuck.”

Matt, Jeremy and Trevor scowled at the now apparently deceased Random duct taped to the chair in the laundry.

Trevor pushed the Random’s face up and her head lolled to one side. “Damn. She lost a lot of blood, must’ve gone into cardiac arrest from shock. Guess we’ll have to settle for two. I was hoping to get some kind of statistical significance out of the three.”

“Wow,” Matt ribbed. “You’re such a fucking nerd.”

Trevor grinned, not denying it.

Jeremy frowned. “Sure seems like a real waste, though.”

“Well, maybe not…” Trevor glanced down at the large hunting knife he kept at his hip as part of the Vagabond getup. He hated himself a little bit for even thinking of it, but it seemed like a good idea at the time...

“Gross, gross, gross, so fucking gross…” Matt repeated over and over as he watched Trevor slice through the cartilage of the windpipe in the dead girl’s neck, stopping short when the knife glanced off the vertebrae.
“Almost there,” Trevor assured them, in the least possible reassuring way.

Jeremy had already turned away. He had been removing her gag when Trevor made the first cut, which had oozed still-warm blood all down her front. That was enough for him.

Trevor worked with remarkable precision, easily driving the knife through the joints and alternately twisting and slicing to separate the head from the spine. He gripped the girl’s hair and gave the head a gentle shake before pulling it free, droplets of blood splattering quietly on the tiled floor of the tiny laundry.

Jeremy looked green, Matt had gone pale. They weren’t good guys by any stretch of the imagination, but even they had their limits. Meanwhile, Trevor hardly looked fazed, holding up the severed head triumphantly.

“That’s fucked. This is so fucked up,” Matt muttered to himself more than anything.

“…and that’s exactly why it’s gonna work.” Trevor grinned, still managing to look completely innocent, despite the gory display.

Trevor took the head and with Jeremy and Matt in tow, returned to the heist room where they had been keeping Sam.

Trevor casually tossed the head at him and it bounced on the ground with a dull thud, before rolling to a stop at Sam’s feet, long blonde hair, wet with blood trailing behind it, glassy eyes staring up at him, mouth hanging open.

Sam screamed.

Trevor smiled.

“So… she wasn’t real helpful either, it turns out,” Trevor purred, absently playing with his still-bloody hunting knife, not brandishing it menacingly in any way, but still managing to make it look far more terrifying than if he had.

“Fuck! Fuck fuck fuck…” Sam stammered, trying to shift his weight in the chair to move himself as far away from the severed head as possible.

“Sam? You want to tell me something, or…?” Trevor didn’t even need to finish his sentence to get a response.

“I’ll talk! I’ll talk. What do you want to know? Jesus…”

Trevor nodded, looking over to Jeremy, who was now over the shock of Trevor’s apparent unconventional expertise in intimidation, at least enough to carry on.

“Let’s start with you. How’d you get involved in all of this?” Jeremy asked.

Sam swallowed hard and glanced down at the head, a reminder of the fate he might share if he refused to cooperate. “I was in trouble with the Vagos, owed them money for drugs… I was selling and got rolled and couldn’t deliver on the cash… one of them told me I could work it off by doing a few jobs here and there. Put me onto some websites, told me I might get phone calls with directions. If I participated there might be money in it for me… but then I found out what it all really was.”

“And what was that?” Jeremy asked, raising an eyebrow.
“An opportunity. There were so many of us, we could do some serious damage. It was fun.”

Jeremy’s eyes narrowed. “Who runs it?”

Sam shook his head. “No one runs it. It’s just like, a community, run by the people.”

“But surely someone started it, the orders come from somewhere. Someone has to be behind it.”

Sam shrugged. “Things just kind of happen. I dunno how it all works.”

Jeremy rubbed his face with both hands, trying to piece everything together in his mind. “How are you all coordinating? Does someone need to check in, or what?”

Sam swallowed hard again, cringing at the taste of blood he couldn’t get out of his mouth. “There’s someone monitoring centrally. After the last time, we couldn’t risk it.”

“What the fuck does that mean?”

“Someone’s wearing a wire?” Matt interrupted, catching on before Jeremy and Trevor.

Sam nodded. “I don’t know who though, maybe more than one, depending on how many people.”

Trevor immediately checked for any hidden mics on Sam, but came up empty, which was fucking lucky, given the way Sam spilling his guts like he was. They couldn’t afford to let the Randoms know how much they knew already, they needed to stay ahead of the game.

Matt ducked out of the room to go check the bodies strewn about the apartment, and presumably filling in Geoff and Jack while he was at it.

“Alright,” Jeremy said, switching gears now. “How was tonight supposed to go down?”

Sam cringed, but Trevor casually flicked the knife, spattering a trail of blood-droplets across Sam’s face and he quickly reconsidered. “We were supposed to take whoever was here alive. Try to find out where the others were hiding…”

“What others? Michael and Gavin? The other guy said he knew where they were…”

Sam shook his head. “No, the others. Red and the rest of her team.”

Jeremy was confused but didn’t let it show. Maybe they’d gotten some false information. Lindsay had been spreading rumours and ideas; maybe they’d gotten out of hand. He made a mental note to check later.

“What about the Vagabond?” Jeremy pressed, feeling a creeping concern for Ryan again. He doubted the kid knew anything, but he had to at least try.

Sam smirked slightly. “You really don’t know where he is, do you?” He huffed a laugh. “He’s long gone. We all saw what happened to him. You know he probably offed himself, right?”

Jeremy couldn’t contain his anger, he punched him right in the mouth, then the stomach, then square in the face again, causing his nose to crack and spurt blood. Trevor grabbed hold of his arm before he could land another punch, but Jeremy was still seething.

Sam spat blood and fragments of teeth, coughing and spluttering while Jeremy collected himself. *They don’t know where Ryan is either. And he’s full of shit. He doesn’t know Ryan.*
It took a minute longer before Jeremy could calm down and Matt returned shaking his head. Out of earshot of Sam he mumbled to Jeremy, “No mic on any of the bodies I could find… If he’s telling the truth, it’s probably on the guy we got tied up in the bathroom.”

Jeremy nodded, turning back to Sam, who seemed to be recovering from the beating.

“Where are Michael and Gavin? What was the plan for them? And you’d better give me a straight honest answer, or I swear to god…” Jeremy balled his hand into a fist again and the look on his face said he wasn’t putting up with any of his shit.

Sam screwed his eyes shut and shied away briefly. “I’m sorry, I’m sorry, please… We all got the same instructions as far as I know. Take as many of you guys alive as we can and then we were meant to go back to…” he hesitated, opening his eyes to glance again at the head at his feet. “Sandy Shores.” He sighed and shook his head. “There’s a self-storage shed at Sandy Shores. That’s where we were meant to take you…well, them. You three were just meant to be dead.”

“That’s comforting,” Trevor said sarcastically with a grin, glancing back at Matt, who grinned right back.

Jeremy looked Sam right in the eye. “So Michael and Gavin are alive?”

Sam nodded, not breaking eye contact. “As far as I know, yes.”

“So they’re bait for the rest of the crew?”

Sam nodded again.

“How long do we have?”

Sam bit his lip, but immediately flinched as the sharp crack in his front tooth cut through the skin and he winced. “The first fire was the signal. We were given twelve hours from then to get everyone back there. So, I dunno, whenever that first fire started, probably eight or nine hours until they make contact. I honestly don’t know what’s meant to happen after that. I wasn’t told.”

Jeremy was frustrated. It made sense to keep as many people in the dark as possible, but still, someone had to be pulling the strings.

“How many people?”

“I don’t know…” Sam muttered, head down.

Jeremy sighed. “Sam, we’re gonna be walking into another goddamned ambush and I just want to be prepared. Tell me what you know.”

Sam was close to tears now, it was probably the stress sinking in, but it could also be his rapidly swelling nose. “I don’t know; I don’t know anything else. That’s it, I swear.”

Jeremy looked at Matt and Trevor, they shrugged in response.

Trevor smiled that dazzling, innocent, genuine smile of his. “Well Sam, I’d just like to say: thank you for being so cooperative.”

Sam still looked terrified. “So, I get to live?”

Trevor walked up behind him, quietly drawing his gun out of sight.
“Oh no… don’t be silly, of course not.” He pressed the barrel of the gun against the back of Sam’s skull and pulled the trigger, sending a plume of misted blood and brain matter into the air.

The look on Matt and Jeremy’s faces said it all.

Matt stared, mouth agape for a few moments before commenting, “Trevor, I don’t know if this is a good thing or not, but I think it’s safe to say, you’ve been spending too much time as Ryan.”

Geoff heard the shot from the living room and stuck his head through the door. “What the fuck happened in here?” He demanded, eyes scanning the room, settling first on the body in the chair, then Trevor, casually wiping the blood off his hands, still smiling innocently, then to the severed head on the ground.

Geoff let out a long breath. “Well. I’m just gonna back the fuck up out of this room… um. Yeah.”

“Don’t you wanna know what we found out, Geoff?” Trevor called after him.

Geoff’s voice drifted in from outside, “Yeah, just not in that room.”

Trevor shrugged, and the group headed back to the living room to debrief.

Trevor made a beeline for the kitchen; Jeremy, Matt and Geoff joined Jack on the couches.

“Lindsay just texted, said she’s coming back here, she thinks the coast is clear, but she said she’s got someone watching her back.” Jack put the phone away, as the others sat down. “Whatever that means.”

“Oh, cool, yeah.” Geoff nodded pensively before turning back to Jeremy and Matt. “So, what’s the story?”

“Well,” Jeremy began, running a hand through his hair. “They were told to take us alive…well, you guys anyway.” He sounded so disappointed, but continued, “Because they fucked up, they’re gonna try to use the others as bait. We have twelve hours from when the first fire started until they’re supposed to make contact. The first fire started around, maybe 6 pm? That means if they have Michael and Gavin, they’re at least going to keep them alive that long.”

“What about Ryan?” Geoff asked. “Do you think they have any idea where he is?”

Jeremy’s heart lifted hearing that Geoff was still thinking about Ryan too, it made him feel less – guilty probably wasn’t the right word, maybe selfish was better – for worrying so much about him.

“No.” Jeremy shook his head firmly before his stomach flipped again at the memory of Sam’s words, he probably offed himself. “They don’t have a clue where he is.”

Geoff just nodded, sensing Jeremy’s discomfort.

“So, we’ve got until dawn.” Jack emphasised the urgency.

“Pretty much. He said they were taking them to a storage shed at Sandy Shores. It might still be a trap though, I don’t know if I trust him. Or at least, the information he’s been given,” Jeremy explained.

Trevor had been banging about in the kitchen, but suddenly piped up, “Well, we do have one more to corroborate the information.”

“Just don’t forget he’s probably wearing a wire, so we wanna be careful what we say around him
“until we disable it,” Matt reminded him.

“Ooh right, good point,” Trevor mused. “Anything we want them to ‘know’?”

Geoff frowned, rubbing his chin but Jack spoke up first. “I mean, it’s probably best if we make them think we’re still in the dark, right? Take the mic off him and fake an execution or something?”

“I mean, we could try setting a trap of our own?” Matt suggested.

It sounded like a good idea, Matt was always great at planning these kinds of things; he was a sort of mastermind in that respect.

“No.” Geoff shut it down immediately. “Don’t let them know, it’s too risky. If they have Michael and Gavin and if they think they know where we are, what’s to stop them from straight-up killing them? That’s the end game of all this after all; they just want to make sure they can get all of us in one go.”

Jeremy nodded. “You’d have to take out all of us to stop the Fake AH Crew.”

“I’ll make sure to cut the mic before we start then,” Trevor assured them, picking up a tray and carrying it like a fancy waiter to the table for the others to see.

He’d made a macabre mockery of a surgical table, an assortment of kitchen implements, mostly knives of all shapes and sizes, but also somewhat more disturbingly, a corkscrew and melon-ball, laid out on a tray he’d covered with a formerly-white, now blood-spattered tea towel that had been hanging near the sink in the kitchen.

“Anyone want to join us?” He asked, smiling brightly, eyes glimmering with just a little too much enthusiasm for what was about to take place.

The others looked around the room, concern and vague disgust crossing their faces.

“I think we’re good out here…” Jack said.

Trevor shrugged. “Suit yourselves; I’ll film it all anyway, so we don’t miss anything.”

“That’s great pal,” Jeremy called after him as he headed to the bathroom where the thug was about to experience his probably very painful and undignified last moments on earth. *At least it would be easier to clean up in there,* Jeremy thought to himself.

After a silent beat, Geoff let out a sigh and said, “I’m sure I don’t say this often enough, but Trevor’s a creepy motherfucker.”
Herding Cats

Ryan had been self-destructing.

Not in any of the overt, easily recognizable ways, but in subtler, more worrying ways; ways that he could even fool himself into thinking were normal. He’d been working overtime for no extra pay, thinking of it as ‘a good distraction’; he’d been working out to the point of exhaustion, convinced he needed to rebuild his strength, running late at night through Vagos territory despite their threats and the fact that the bruising from his last encounter with them hadn’t yet subsided.

A very small voice in his mind that sounded a lot like Geoff, or sometimes Jeremy or Jack, persistently asked him: “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

He didn’t know how to answer that.

So instead, he ran. Running was one of the few things that cleared his head; stopped his thoughts from wandering back to the crew, to the blood, to the fear and the loss of control. Ryan found that more and more he’d been retreating to the quiet corners of his mind, while the world went by around him at a pace he could easily keep up with, but the mundanity of it all was getting to him. His throat was still raw from his encounter with the Vagos, but that had been more than a week ago and they hadn’t shown up since. Well, they hadn’t made a move yet, he thought, still vaguely wary. He’d initially tried to cover the bruising, he wished he’d owned a scarf or something, but it didn’t take long to realise that people looked, they saw the rope burn, the bruising, and then they turned a blind eye. No one cared, or maybe it was just that nobody wanted to ask, and that in itself spoke volumes. He wasn’t sure if he was relieved or disappointed, but at any rate he wasn’t entirely surprised. Survival instinct in Los Santos was to keep your head down and mind your own business.

The cold night air almost stung to breathe; the full moon mercifully illuminated his path. His legs were still recovering but he had to build the strength back somehow. He was approaching exhaustion, but he wasn’t too far from where he now called home, however reluctantly. The pickup rolled past him a little too slowly for how quiet the neighbourhood was, and it instantly put him on guard. It sped up to overtake him and pulled around a corner ahead. The hair on the back of his neck stood on end.

Just stop. Turn around, go another way. They’re waiting for you.

He couldn’t stop. His feet kept pounding the pavement at the same pace, almost robotically, as if the rhythm had hypnotised him. It was like he had no control. It was like watching a video game cut scene after missing a crucial quick-time event. Like watching a car crash unfolding. It was terrifying, but at the same time, he didn’t feel afraid, not of the Vagos anyway. He was almost disturbingly calm, even as he recognised he was running into an ambush. The voice in his head sounded a lot like Jeremy, hysterically asking: “Are you trying to get yourself killed?”

Maybe.

He was startled by his own honesty, not entirely sure where it had come from.

Still pleading for his legs to work with him, he rounded the corner and was hardly surprised when a foot shot out to trip him. He didn’t go down, but rather, probably because he was expecting it, hopped forward and shifted his weight to maintain his balance. He only caught glimpses, but he took in the scene; there were four men and one in the pickup parked on the kerb a few feet away. Despite his initial panic at his lack of control, he felt comfortable, assured, like he knew what he was doing,
something dark and instinctive had taken over.

You got this.

A hand grabbed his hair and yanked his head back up; his hands instantly shot up in preparation for what was to come. Another pair of hands attempted to wrestle the noose over his head, but he snatched the rope with both hands, refusing to allow it to close. The hand in his hair yanked him back again, throwing him roughly against the stucco wall. He scrambled to regain his footing and pushed off the wall, throwing the man holding his hair off balance as he pulled free. He ducked out of the noose and in one fluid motion, spun around and slipped it over the other man’s head, cinching it closed and wrapped one arm around the rope to prevent him pulling away. He looked up and saw the first guy pulling a butterfly knife from his pocket. He yanked on the rope to pull the other man off his feet and sent him hard into the concrete before lunging for the knife; punching the guy in the face with his right hand, and wrestling the knife away with his left, paying no mind to the way the blade so easily sliced through the fleshy part of his hand as he grabbed it. The forth man standing near the pickup panicked, moving to draw a gun from the small of his back, but Ryan was quicker. He moved with the easy, practised fluidity of the Vagabond, tossing the knife first from his left to right hand, flipping it through the air to catch it by the handle, before sending it hurtling towards the other man and embedding it up to the hilt in his throat. The man clutched at his neck and gurgled; a pulsing fountain of blood spurted around the blade before he crumpled to his knees on the pavement, desperately slapping at the side of the pickup as he went down. It could not have played out more perfectly if Ryan had planned it. The driver heard the noise and took it as a sign to take off, accelerating away from the kerb quickly. Ryan leapt out of the way, as the truck dragged the unfortunate man on the ground behind it, bowling the other man over as he struggled desperately the same way Ryan had only a week earlier.

Ryan felt no pity for him. He felt no pity for any of them. He was insulated behind a wall of ruthlessly efficient indifference. He focused solely on completing the task in front of him. He retrieved the knife from the fallen thug’s neck; blood spouting from the impromptu tracheotomy he’d just received as he clutched weakly at his throat and collapsed, gasping onto the ground. He wouldn’t live long, but that didn’t matter to Ryan. The two remaining men were deciding whether to fight or run. The one the furthest from him, who’d tripped him as he’d rounded the corner was frozen, like a deer in headlights as Ryan’s steely gaze flickered between the two, settling on the one holding his nose and wiping tears from his eyes. Ryan yanked the man upright by his collar and without a second thought he drove the knife into the man’s abdomen; warm blood pulsed out in spurts though his fingers as he dug the knife in and twisted it, an animalistic snarl escaped his lips.

He could feel the blood, warm and wet and sticky on his hands and suddenly, he froze up. He looked into the frightened face of the Vagos member and he could see Geoff’s look of shock and pain, the fear and confusion in Jeremy’s eyes, and the guilt washed over him like a tsunami, nearly knocking him off his feet. He swayed and dropped the knife as if it was red-hot, taking a step back as he reminded himself of who and where he was. The fourth man took his chance and made a run for it.

Ryan didn’t give chase. Instead, he simply headed for his apartment, trying not to think about the blood on his hands.

* * *

Lindsay arrived to the sounds of muffled cries coming from the bathroom. She wasn’t entirely surprised. She had to step over no fewer than four bodies just to get to the living room of the
“Jesus, you really weren’t exaggerating…” She started before she was cut off by an even louder scream that echoed through the penthouse and was suddenly cut off with a choked sound. “O-kay…” Lindsay glanced around the room.

Geoff, Jack and Matt were examining the laminated map of Los Santos, while Jeremy had wiped a clean spot on the kitchen counter and was carefully constructing a sandwich while trying to ignore the blood. It was proving more difficult than it should have, largely because Trevor had taken all the good knives.

“You’ve got Trevor doing interrogations?” Lindsay asked the room, raising an eyebrow.

Jeremy snorted. “After the first one, we figured he’d be fine.”

Lindsay didn’t look too surprised, just sauntered over to sit on one of the stools at the kitchen counter and nodded thoughtfully. “No word from Michael or Gavin, I take it?” She smiled at him hopefully, but by now she figured she would’ve heard from them if they knew anything more.

Jeremy pressed his lips together and shook his head apologetically.

“Not a fuckin’ thing,” Geoff called from the couch. “We might know where they are though, waiting on Treycs for confirmation.”

As if on cue, there was another sudden strangled cry from the bathroom, followed by the sound of a running tap and then silence. Trevor emerged turning his phone over in his hands, trying to make the picture stay in the proper orientation.

“Got it,” he announced triumphantly. “Independent verification; they’re being kept at Carson self-storage shed, Sandy Shores. They have orders to keep them alive until they make contact, which should be 6 am tomorrow.”

“God damn, why do fuckin’ early?” Geoff immediately complained without thinking.

“Well that’s awesome. We have some time then,” Lindsay said with a grin; sounding way too relaxed for someone whose husband had just been kidnapped.

“Oh, and you might want to use Geoff’s bathroom if you have to go. It’s um… yeah. Just might not want to go in there,” Trevor added, pointing to the main bathroom he just came from.

“It can’t be any worse than that time Ryan caught that child molester,” Lindsay remarked casually, while all the men in the room collectively cringed.

“Yeah, I dunno…” Trevor warned.

“Well now you know I gotta see.” Lindsay pushed past him to the bathroom.

Trevor sat in one of the stools at the kitchen counter and pointed to Jeremy’s sandwich. “Weren’t gonna make one for me?”

Jeremy frowned at him. “I didn’t think you’d be hungry after…”

“Jesus Christ, Trevor!” Lindsay’s voice carried up the hallway from the bathroom.

“Yeah, that.” Jeremy jerked a thumb in the direction of the bathroom.
Trevor shrugged. “Well, it got the job done… I’m still hungry though.” He swapped places with Jeremy in the kitchen and proceeded to make his own sandwich while Jeremy ate and tried his best not to think about the vivid detail in which he got to experience an actual severed human head.

Lindsay returned from the bathroom shaking her head, “No wonder we have a bad reputation. I swear, sometimes it’s like herding cats with you guys…”

“I told you that when you took the job!” Geoff protested.

Lindsay smirked and cocked her head sideways. “Yeah, well, luckily I happen to really like cats.”

“Oh, trust me, we fucking know…” Geoff rolled his eyes and sat heavily back into the couch with a sigh. “What should we do about this then? You don’t seem too worried.”

Lindsay sat in the armchair and kicked her foot up onto her knee, rocking back a little thoughtfully.

“You’re gonna have to trust me here, Steffie’s already sorting stuff out for us. We’ve got this.”


“You hired Steffie! Before I was promoted! Remember? She’s sorting things, that’s her job.”

Geoff frowned and rubbed his face. “Alright… I thought… Ok, whatever… is there anyone else I should know about before we continue?”

“Well,” Lindsay continued, a little sheepishly. “There’s a team of maybe, half a dozen or so –”

“Half a dozen?” Geoff repeated incredulously.

Lindsay nodded, continuing, “Or so working with Steffie to make sure everything goes smoothly. I mean, why else do you think things have been going mostly according to plan lately?”

Geoff shook his head with a shrug. “I’d assumed it had something to do with Trevor…” Lindsay followed Geoff’s gaze as he looked over to Trevor in the kitchen, who was attempting to cut through a tomato with what looked like a cheese knife. Instead of slicing, the tomato simply squished under the pressure of the knife, exploding in a burst of seeds and juice all over Trevor, Jeremy and the kitchen counter.

“…really?” Lindsay asked sceptically, cocking an eyebrow.

Geoff bowed his head and sighed into his hands. “Whatever,” he mumbled through his fingers. “I trust you.”

“Good,” Lindsay affirmed. “There’s also Andy and Mica, who you’re probably gonna want to meet.”

Geoff just nodded, resigning himself to the fact that Lindsay had a much better grasp of the situation and was perfectly capable of dealing with it.

“They’re securing the remaining safe houses now.”

Geoff looked up. “Remaining? I thought they got all of them.”

“Please, Geoff,” Lindsay said with a smirk. “I like to retain something of an air of mystery about me.”
Geoff couldn’t help but feel proud as he grinned back at her. She was a Saint.

“Does Michael know about this?” Geoff asked almost teasingly.

Lindsay’s face briefly flashed worry at his name, he was still missing after all, even if he was relatively safe, but she quickly regained her composure. “I am a professional and I take confidentiality very seriously… but I mean, we’re married, so yeah, of course he knows.”

“Fuckin’ good.” Geoff relaxed slightly. “That means he’s got somewhere to go if they get away… or if by chance they haven’t caught up with them yet.”

Jack seemed worried for Lindsay. “Are you ok? You’re taking this all very well, I mean, your husband has probably been kidnapped…”

Lindsay shrugged. “Oh no, he’s definitely been kidnapped.”

Jacks brows furrowed. “Aren’t you worried?”

“I mean, maybe if I didn’t know exactly where he was…”

“Huh? Wait, what?” Matt suddenly seemed a lot more awake and everyone was intrigued by her words, leaning in for an explanation.

“They’re telling the truth about Sandy Shores, that’s where I tracked them to as well…” Lindsay looked down. “See after what happened with Ryan, I might have suggested – and this started as a joke – that we implant a GPS tracking chip in him in case something like that happened again…”

“You’ve gotta be fucking kidding me.” Geoff was grinning already.

“…we got a little drunk one night and we stole some of those pet-tracking microchips from the vet… Gotta say, I feel sorry for the pets, those things hurt like a bitch.” She held out her arm, indicating a small white mark on the inside of her bicep.

Mid-bite, something clicked in Jeremy’s mind. “Lindsay!” He nearly spat half-chewed sandwich everywhere. “Would Ryan have microchipped his cat?”

Lindsay shrugged. “I don’t know, mostly he fosters them; the only one he keeps is Violet, because she hates people… well, most people. The clinic really struggled to rehome a cranky, one-eyed, black cat. He won’t admit it, but he loves that damn cat.”

Jeremy’s eyes lit up and Lindsay’s face flashed sudden recognition as she caught up with Jeremy’s train of thought. “It’s a 24-hour clinic in Vinewood. There’s a chance he updated the microchip details if he hasn’t left the city.” She could see he was holding back the urge to just run out the door. Suddenly Lindsay was in boss-mode, something she seemed to have inherited from Geoff. “Take Matt and be careful. Keep us updated. We’ll sort things out here; it sounds like we’ve got some time. Do whatever it takes. If you can find him, bring him home. We’ll need him.”

Jeremy looked hopeful as he grabbed a bag of weapons and ammo Jack and Geoff had obviously been preparing. “Mind if I…?”

“Take it, good luck.” Geoff nodded at him as Matt shook his keys in indication he was ready to go.

Jeremy’s heart was racing as they left the apartment. He just hoped Ryan hadn’t given up.
The Vagabond had saved his life.

Was it worth it?

A part of him mocked, as he locked the door and looked around his near-dilapidated apartment, devoid of life except for his dying plants and antisocial cat sleeping on his tiny, second-hand couch.

He looked down at his hand, still bleeding slowly from the shallow slice from the knife. He had some gauze and bandage in a crude first-aid kit in the bathroom. Just the bare minimum, not like the kits the crew was used to. He meandered to the bathroom to wash and dress the wound, finishing up by wrapping it carefully with a clean bandage. He wandered back out to the main room, grabbing a bottle of Advil and taking a couple of pills with water, pre-emptively tackling the headache he could feel setting in. He felt like he was just going through the motions. He hadn’t yet stopped to properly think about what had just happened. He wasn’t sure he was ready to.

He took a deep breath and sat down next to the cat on the couch. Tossed carelessly on the floor and half-kicked under the couch was a tangle of rope.

Funny, the things you consider essential when your life revolves around crime, he thought grimly to himself. He hadn’t had need to use it since leaving the crew, except to fix the gate from swinging off its hinges on particularly windy nights. Despite the sting of the wound, he felt the overwhelming need to do something with his hands, just keep them busy; it helped, especially when he was stressed or anxious. He picked up the rope and absent-mindedly started running his fingers along the length of it, twisting it into shapes in his hands, tying off knots from memory as he replayed what had happened in his mind.

He should be dead. But he wasn’t.

The Vagos would figure it out now. At least one of them had witnessed enough and gotten away, it wouldn’t take much to put it together. The Vagabond was still in Los Santos, hiding in plain sight. Ryan didn’t fear them. He wasn’t worried about them killing him, so much as he worried that they would sell him out to the Randoms. That he would be used as a pawn in their games, as a lure for the Crew. That he might be used against them. Judas.

He couldn’t let it come to that…

His thoughts drifted back to the crew. Even if he couldn’t bring himself to properly acknowledge it; he missed them more than anything. He wondered what they were up to; if they were safe, if the lads were driving Jack and Geoff up the wall yet; if they’d moved on. He wondered if Jeremy had recovered fully. If he’d done any permanent damage. He ached for the life he had left behind… for goddamned plants.

And to keep them safe. He reminded himself. Safe from me.

Tonight had been a stark reminder of just how dangerous he was; how little control he actually had. Was it just going to get worse? What if he lost control for good?

“…Judas supposedly went mad with guilt after his betrayal…”

He felt a tug at the end of the rope and looked down. Violet was playing with the loose end of rope, batting at it.

In his hands, he’d tied a noose. His blood ran cold.
“...in the end, he hung himself.”

“Don’t read too much into that...” He muttered to the cat, who seemed to glare at him with her one good eye. He swiftly undid the noose and threw the rope aside. Violet went chasing after it, rolling around on the floor like a kitten, despite her age.

He let his head fall into his hands.

*Where am I meant to go from here?*

A rapid knock at the door snapped Ryan out of it. He peered through the blinds trying to get a better view of the front door, but the window was too caked in dust and grime to get a good look. He kept the security chain on as he cautiously cracked open the door.

“Hey. Can I come in?”

Ryan hesitated. His heart skipped a beat. He stared down at the man on his front step, his face largely hidden beneath a wide-brimmed Stetson. He looked far too colourful in his bright purple blazer, especially for this part of town, this late at night. His head whipped around, clearly and justifiably wary of the Vagos presence in the Projects.

“Please, Ry?”

Ryan swallowed and opened the door, quickly ushering him in, checking to make sure no one had seen him enter before closing and locking the door behind him. As he turned around, he had to do a double-take. In a moment of complete surprise, all the guilt and anxiety he’d been holding onto were forgotten.

“Jesus Jeremy, what have you done to your hair?”

As manners dictate, Jeremy had removed his hat as soon as he’d entered, and Ryan stared down at a bright shock of bubblegum-blue hair.

“You haven’t seen me for nearly two months and that’s the first thing you say?” Jeremy shook his head. “I could ask you the same question, by the way.”

Ryan ran a hand through his now jet-black hair. He’d dyed it as soon as he’d left the crew, remembering the comments the Randoms had made on the stream about his hair. He hadn’t re-dyed it since, however and dark blonde regrowth had started to creep in at the roots.

“I mean...” Ryan started, but before he could get any further Jeremy cut him off.

“You just left.” There was a hint of resentment in Jeremy’s voice.

Ryan cringed slightly. “I did.”

“And you’ve been here the whole time?”

Ryan nodded, all the awful feelings returning to him.

“You didn’t even say goodbye...”

“Look, I didn’t exactly think it through, ok. I stabbed you. You’ll have to forgive me if I didn’t think you’d appreciate a going-away party.” His attempt at humour fell flat in his delivery, specifically at the way his eyes shimmered. “Besides, it’s not like I was really gone, more like ... just not here right now.”
“But we didn’t know that. To us you were just gone. You could’ve been dead for all we knew!”

Ryan felt the blood drain from his face and he suddenly felt dizzy with a niggling thought at the back of his mind at how close it had come to being true.

Jeremy’s brow furrowed as he spied the bruises, remembering Sam’s words, “You know he probably offed himself, right?”

His hand went to his own neck. “You didn’t try to…”

“Oh, no! The goddamn Vagos tried to lynch me a couple days ago,” he quickly explained, but he wondered if there was a part of him that could’ve gone through it, if it had come to it.

“…An apt end for a villain.”

He shook off the thought, fingers gently prodding the bruise, examining if it still hurt to touch. It was still sensitive, but no longer painful. “They didn’t recognise me, luckily…”

“Jesus, Ryan.”

“…Until tonight, when they tried again.” He held up his freshly bandaged hand, a faint line of blood seeping through the off-white cloth. He offered a half-hearted smirk. “Think it’s fair to say my cover’s been blown.”

“Damn it, Ryan. You should’ve told us!” Jeremy scolded.

Ryan looked tired. He felt exhausted, physically and mentally, and ran his hands through his hair again. “What do you want, Jeremy?” he asked flatly.

Jeremy looked like Ryan had slapped him and Ryan instantly felt bad, but Jeremy recovered quicker. “What do you think I want?” He replied with more than a little salt and sarcasm.

“So, you’re trying to convince me to come back then?” Ryan said finally, crossing his arms over his chest, his expression growing more serious.

Jeremy moved in closer and Ryan took half a step back, mindful of his previous outbursts, not wanting to risk getting too close.

“We need you…” Jeremy started.

Ryan cut him off again, “No, you don’t. You’ve got Trevor – it is him filling in for me under there, isn’t it?”

Jeremy nodded, and Ryan went on, “He’s doing great, you guys are fine.”

“But…”

“I’m a liability, Jeremy.” The pain was clear in his voice, even though he did his best to hide it. “You, above all people, should know that.”

Jeremy bit his lip and hesitated for a moment, a sombre look crossing his face as he leaned against the back of the couch. He was quiet for a moment, reflective almost, gathering his thoughts.

“Listen, Ryan, it sounds really corny, but I used to get… just… star struck by you guys; by the crew. It doesn’t happen often anymore, but that feeling comes back sometimes, when I’m talking to Jack or Geoff or doing something dumb with Michael and Gavin. But not in a bad way, more just as a
reminder of how far I’ve come… I love what I do, what we do. And really, that’s all I want. All I want to be is someone who means something to this crew I love so much. Someone who can make people smile and laugh and sometimes forget things that are upsetting them.” He turned his eyes up to meet Ryan’s and smiled.

Ryan smiled back and for just a moment, he did forget.

“…I don’t think I’ll ever be able to put myself on the same level as the rest of the crew, because I was looking up to you guys before you even knew who I was, and deep down, I’m still looking up to you. It might make me sound like a wimp, but I love you guys and I would do anything for the crew.” He sighed and looked up at Ryan again. “It’s just not the same without you. For you to have walked away from that, because you were worried about hurting us…” He shook his head. “I can’t accept it. You’re not like him, Ryan. You’re nothing like him. I know you. You would never knowingly do anything to risk the crew. You know that. And whatever it is you’re going through, you don’t have to do it alone.”

Ryan caught a lump in his throat and swallowed hard before he spoke. “I just feel like… I feel like there’s no fixing this.” His eyes were dark, tinted with that dangerous edge. His hands clenched into fist as if he was physically trying to contain whatever dark energy was building up inside him.

Despite his own instincts screaming at him that Ryan might lash out at any moment, Jeremy stepped forward.

Ryan stepped back.

“Ryan.” Jeremy closed the distance again, putting a hand on his shoulder to stop him from backing away. “Look man, some things can’t be fixed. Some things can only be carried.”

“You don’t get it Jeremy; I can’t come back from this.”

“Yeah, you can Ryan. We’re asking you to come back. I’m asking you.”

For a split-second Ryan looked shattered, like his barriers were down and Jeremy could see pain, but just as quickly, the cold edge was back. “Why?”

Jeremy looked down, almost abashed. “You believed in me,” he said quietly. “When no one else did.” He smiled and looked back up at Ryan. “We’re Battle Buddies remember? Shit happens, we get hurt, we pick each other up and we keep fighting.”

The faintest trace of a smile pulled at Ryan’s lips. It wasn’t lost on Jeremy, who couldn’t contain his own grin.

“I want my Battle Buddy back. And I know you wanna keep fighting.”

All this time, Geoff’s words had stuck with him, like a mantra, keeping him going. *Fight it… because you deserve to win.*

Ryan nodded. “Well… Yeah.”

Jeremy smiled wide and let out a whistled breath. “Good. Because we kinda need you to start straight away…”

Ryan was immediately sceptical. “And why might that be?”

A very guilty expression fell over Jeremy’s face. “We uh… there might have been… look, some
things happened while you were gone.”

“I saw the video if that’s what you mean…”

Jeremy nodded. “That’s a start, yeah. So, uh, that might have been misconstrued as something of a challenge.”

“No shit?” Ryan added, unhelpfully.

“Have you been watching the news?”

Ryan looked away. “Not really.” In fact, he’d been actively avoiding it; he couldn’t bring himself to deal with seeing reports of the Fake AH Crew.

“Yeah, ok. Well… All of our safe houses were burned down…”

“What?! Why didn’t you start with that?”

“I wanted you to come back because you wanted to, not because you felt like you had to…” Jeremy started in his defence. “…and I’ve been thinking about what I was going to say to you for weeks. I mean, I wasn’t just gonna let that go to waste.”

“Damn it, Jeremy.” Ryan shook his head disapprovingly.

Jeremy took a deep breath and his eyebrows furrowed. “Also, they have Michael and Gavin.”

“Fuck…” Ryan blanched as the thought of them getting their hands on the lads filled him with dread and memories of his own suffering at their hands. The feeling was short-lived, replaced by rage and a burning desire for revenge, for a chance to get his own back. He was silent for a long moment as he processed the information. “After your hellish rebuke on those assholes, I thought nobody would be keen to touch you.”

Jeremy smirked. “After what we did to the ones who tried, they should’ve known better. And Trevor…”

“He’d better be upholding my reputation,” Ryan interjected. He joked, but there was a slightly more serious tone to it.


Ryan looked proud, and Jeremy continued, “We’re working on a plan, but we gotta go right now. I suppose we can come back for your stuff, we’ll have to be careful though, pretty sure we’re gonna be tailed, they might try to set a trap for us if we come back.”

Ryan looked around at the barely furnished room. “Nah, I’ll just grab the cat and we can get the fuck out of here.”

Jeremy looked around as well. “What about your plants? You don’t wanna take them?”

Ryan scoffed. “Why the fuck would I want a dozen nearly-dead cacti?”

Jeremy gave him a curious look, but shrugged. “I dunno, I just assumed they meant something…”

“Oh, hell no. I’ll be happy if I never see anything in this place again. Shall we?”

Jeremy nodded. “Let’s get the fuck outta here.”
“How the hell did you manage to find me anyway?” Ryan asked as they sped along Carson Ave towards the recently secured safe house Lindsay had directed them to.

“How...
Ryan’s ease was short lived. While catching up with Jeremy came naturally, he was anxious about facing Geoff and Jack. Despite Jeremy’s reassurances, he couldn’t shake the feeling that he somehow wasn’t going to live up to their expectations – the comparison he kept drawing was that of the family dog that attacked a child and was now waiting for the verdict on whether it gets rehabilitated, re-homed or destroyed. The child’s attachment to the dog rarely won much favour.

*Just think of it as a job. It’s just to get the lads back. That’s what they need you for. You can do that.*

A pit had opened up in his stomach since Jeremy had said Michael and Gavin had been taken.

*What they could be doing to them… What they might have already done…*

He didn’t want to think about it, but his thoughts kept going back to the warehouse. That was the last thing he needed. He traced the scars at the back of his neck lightly with his fingertips. That had been organised at short notice and it had shaken him to his core. To think what they could have done with planning…

He shook himself out of it.

“What about the destruction of a child?” Jeremy shook his head with a shrug. “I guess they’re coming up with something. I was half expecting Matt to call with an update, but I think Lindsay’s got a plan. At least she knows where Michael is.”

Ryan nodded. “That’s a start at least.”

Jeremy had already explained the drunken microchipping incident, much to Ryan’s amusement.

Back to that nagging silence. Ryan shifted in his seat, scratching Violet’s head while inspecting the blood that had seeped through the bandage on his left hand.

“Hey, uh, how much …damage… did I do? To you?” Ryan gestured to Jeremy’s side, but he averted his gaze. “I’m sorry, by the way.”

“Yeah, you’ve mentioned.” Jeremy smirked and lifted his shirt, twisting around awkwardly, while still trying to drive. “Well, you left a scar… other than that I had to stop drinking for a bit – not that that was a bad thing – but apparently livers are pretty hardy…” He flashed a reassuring smile. “It wasn’t as bad as it could’ve been.”

“And you’re ok…?”

“Yeah, I’m ok.”

Ryan cringed, not wanting to dig too much deeper, but it felt like Jeremy was being dismissive. It reminded him too much of himself.

“Ryan, I’m fine. Really,” Jeremy reiterated, sounding genuine.

It did make him feel marginally better.
They pulled up to the address they had been given. Out the front, three luxury supercars were parked; each would have been worth more than the house on their own. And then there was Matt’s shitty, banged up Asea.

Ryan laughed at the less-than-subtle spectacle. “Think we’re in the right place?”

Jeremy shook his head. “At least it’s a quiet neighbourhood. With any luck, no one will have noticed.”

Ryan still hesitated.

Jeremy leaned over and gave Violet a gentle pat on the head. To Ryan’s surprise, she seemed receptive to it.

“Lindsay’s gonna be happy to see her again,” Jeremy remarked casually, opening his door first, but looking in such a way that he was waiting for Ryan to follow suit.

After a moment longer to brace himself against the protestations in his own head, Ryan got out of the car and followed Jeremy to the house.

The house in Vespucci was small, maybe two or three bedrooms, but nice; near to where Ryan’s civilian residence had been, but on the more upmarket side. Surprisingly, the door was unlocked, and Jeremy waved him in first. The interior, from the doorway at least, looked modern and clean, fully furnished in that popular Swedish minimalist style. It was a far cry from where he’d come from. He could see himself living in a place like this. Maybe.

From the entrance, Ryan could see some of the others crowded around a dining table with their backs to them. His heart was pounding again. He gave Violet a reassuring pat before putting her down, and she made a beeline for what might have been a linen closet that had been left ajar to hide. He vaguely wished he could get away with that too.

Jeremy shut the door loudly behind them and everyone looked up. Ryan swallowed, but his mouth was dry already.

“Hi.” Ryan waved awkwardly.

Lindsay immediately rushed over and hugged him.

Geoff and Jack blinked a few times in disbelief before exchanging a glance with each other and Jeremy, who beamed back at them proudly.

“Sonofabitch,” Geoff said with a nod and a half-smile. “Good to have you back.”

Ryan nodded over Lindsay’s shoulder, but said nothing; still struggling to assign appropriate responses to his emotions. It was easier to distance himself for now. Not rush back into anything.

*Just a job.* He reminded himself sternly.

Lindsay finally let him go, glancing questioningly at his suspicious bruising. His long hair thankfully obscured the scarring from the brand that wasn’t covered by his hoodie.

“Long story,” he muttered.

She nodded with a smile and a quiet, “glad you’re ok.”

“Me too,” he confessed under his breath.
“Matt said the address was in Rancho. What the fuck were you doing in Rancho?” Jack asked bluntly.

Ryan scratched the back of his head. “Uh, I was, y’know, keeping out of trouble… Mostly.”

“No one goes to Rancho to keep out of trouble,” Matt commented.

“Listen, it was cheap, there was work…” He was about to say I knew you wouldn’t come looking for me there, but thought better of it. He cringed when he brought up the subject of work as a few eyebrows raised when he mentioned it.

“What could you possibly have been doing for work?” Jack asked. “We couldn’t find hide nor hair of you anywhere!”

Ryan knew in these kinds of situations it was better to say nothing and let their imaginations make the assumptions. It was one of the better perks of his reputation, “Just… things.” …like floristry, he added mentally, but he said it with enough of a dark edge that Geoff visibly squirmed.

“I don’t wanna hear about what kind of creepy shit you’d do for money, Ryan.”

Ryan shook his head. “No, you probably don’t.”

“Hey Ryan.” Trevor sidled up to him, seemingly out of nowhere. “I think you might appreciate this…” He was holding out his phone, turning it sideways to try to make the picture stay the right way up. Ryan could see blood crusted under his nails and was reminded of the kind of brutality they must have been through.

“Sure.” Ryan steadied the phone with one hand, tilting it to see the screen. “What am I looking a… oh. Whoa. Trevor…” It took Ryan a few moments to realise he was looking at a person – or what was once a person – and suddenly the blood under Trevor’s fingernails made a lot more sense.

“Wow. I mean, nicely done, but still… wow. I know I have a reputation to uphold but… I guess it sends a message. Well played.” He handed the phone back over to Trevor with one eyebrow still cautiously raised.

Trevor grinned back widely. “I had a feeling you’d like it.”

Ryan looked around at the others, who were cringing already with the memories of the screams. He felt a twinge of pride.

“Well, remind me not to piss off Trevor,” he said with a smirk.

Jeremy laughed, but Geoff, Matt and Lindsay only nodded in agreement.

Ryan’s expression grew serious again. “So we’ve got another ticking clock?” Jeremy had filled him in on that much. He’d told him about the interrogation of the Randoms and how they operated, and Matt and Trevor had filled in everyone else. “Have we got a plan?”

Lindsay nodded. “Yeah, but there’s a good chance you’re not gonna like it… Surveillance only until they contact us at dawn. Then Geoff and I are running interference while you guys extract Michael and Gavin.”

Ryan raised an eyebrow sceptically. “That… I guess that’s almost a plan.”

“That sounds really risky,” Jeremy added.
Lindsay pouted a little. “We’re still working out the details, but I’ve got some people working on it and until we get more information we don’t want to do anything that could put Michael and Gavin in danger. Ground team will be you two and Matt and Trevor. As long as you’re up to it?”

Ryan nodded solemnly. “I wouldn’t be here if I wasn’t.”

A small figure emerged from one of the side rooms, carrying an empty glass before disappearing into the kitchen. Ryan cocked his head to the side inquisitively.

Lindsay and Jeremy followed his gaze as the figure, a girl, returned with a glass of water and a can of diet coke. Ryan suddenly realised how thirsty he was.

“Who’s this?” Ryan jerked his thumb in her direction. Jeremy shrugged and pulled a face to indicate it was news to him as well.

The girl turned and smiled sweetly at them. “I’m Mica.”

“She works here now,” Geoff said with an accepting shrug.

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “What’s she do?”

“Resident BAMF,” Lindsay replied before Mica could get a word in.

“I thought that was my job,” Ryan huffed in feigned indignation.

Mica opened her mouth to speak, but Geoff spoke over her, “Well, you weren’t here, so…”

Lindsay cut him off, “She actually handles …kind of PR? And stuff. Yeah. That’s it. PR. Right, Mica?”

Mica stared up at them, one eyebrow raised, saying nothing for a moment. “Are you actually gonna let me talk now?” The sass was real. “Hey, look at that! You did.” She grinned, and Ryan knew instantly she would fit in perfectly.

“And please, I do a whole lot more than PR. Transport, logistics, inventory, intel… I take care of the stuff you guys forget to think about.”

Lindsay nodded. “She keeps a lot of things running.”

“Can you shoot a gun?” Ryan asked with a sly grin.

Mica looked at him as offended as if he’d asked if she could count to three. “Want to find out?”

Ryan’s grin widened. “Well, I like her.”

“Aww, aren’t you just the sweetest?” It was wonderfully sarcastic, but there was also a hint of genuine affection in her voice. “As long as you let me do my job and stay out of my way, we’ll be cool, cool?”

“Cool,” Jeremy couldn’t help but reply, his grin now matching Ryan’s.

Ryan felt the need to push it just a little further to test the limits. “Bet it’s nice not being the shortest one around here anymore, hey Lil J?”

“Oh, you just wait till I get my heels on, mister. I am not going to be the shortest around here for long.”
“Damn it.” Jeremy stomped in feigned frustration and Ryan just laughed.

“Well, nice to meet you, but I got shit to do.” She waved and flitted away back to the room she had come from.

“There you go,” Ryan said encouragingly, nudging Jeremy playfully. “More proof you don’t need to be tall to be intimidating.”

“No kidding,” he mumbled. “I’m already scared of her.”

“That’s fair.”

“Mica and Andy – he’s in there working on getting vehicles sorted I think – secured the remaining safe houses. There’s this one, a penthouse downtown and two more around Blaine County. They’re completely off-radar, not even the other crews in the Family know about them,” Lindsay explained.

Jeremy’s eyes narrowed. “The safe houses or Mica and Andy?”

“Both. They’re our little secrets.”

Geoff looked impressed, Ryan noted that this must have all been going on under Lindsay’s orders.

Lindsay rubbed her hands together. “So, while we’re all here, let’s make sure everyone’s on the same page as to what we’ve got so far.”

* * *

Gavin listened hard.

Bound and bagged, it was really his only option.

The room was oddly loud, almost echoing; uncarpeted, probably and poorly insulated judging by the cool, damp feel to the air. It almost felt like they were in a garage. He could hear his own breathing, the rustling of the fabric of the bag as it scratched against the stubble on his face and neck. Michael had run out of insults to hurl at their captors – well, realistically he’d probably just gotten bored of them not responding – for now he’d gone quiet, saving his voice for when he’d need it.

Gavin held his breath. Quiet tapping was coming from not too far away to his right, as if someone were typing on their phone.

He let his ears adjust and focused on the sound.

*Click click click click… pause. Buzz buzz. Pause. Buzz buzz.*

Maybe multiple messages? Group chat? He wasn’t sure what he was expecting to figure out, he just knew he needed any clues he could get. He wondered if Michael was doing the same.

An agitated huff came from the direction of the tapping and a quiet scoff followed.

*That was interesting.*

What sounded like very soft footsteps made their way out of the room, but the tapping continued.

*At least two people then.*
That was probably the extent of the information he was going to get from listening. He sighed and relaxed back into the chair. He wasn’t scared really. He supposed he should have been, but he was almost comfortable, kind of dozy even. Although maybe that was a side-effect of whatever they used to knock him out, or the seizure.

* * *

Everyone was up to speed on exactly what had happened since the coordinated attacks on the safe houses. The beginnings of a plan were coming together, but there were still many unknowns. It was putting everyone on edge. The lack of sleep wasn’t helping either – not from lack of trying though; the adrenaline was running too high for anyone to be able to nap, well, aside from Matt, who somehow managed.

It had been a long night and there were still a few hours until dawn.

With the important discussions largely out of the way, Ryan stretched out and walked away from the group, perching on the edge of a sturdy-looking coffee table that squeaked under his weight. He re-evaluated and slouched into the couch instead, wondering if there was any more diet coke in the fridge. Probably not with the way he and Mica had been drinking it.

Geoff wandered over and sat down on the couch beside him. “You doing ok, buddy?”

Ryan rubbed his face with both hands and ran his fingers through his hair, trying not to dislodge his ponytail in the process. “Yeah,” he replied, half-heartedly.

“Ryan?” Geoff used that almost-fatherly tone that said I know there’s something more there.

“Look, we can sit down and discuss everything after we get Michael and Gavin back, ok?” He dodged the question, still not quite up to the discussion despite the weeks that had passed.

“Fine, we can digest everything that’s happened while you’ve been gone later, but right now, I need to know you’re on board. I gotta know where your head’s at if I’m gonna be able to trust you out
there, so we’re gonna fucking talk about it.” Geoff knew he was avoiding it, but he also knew if he pressed the matter, Ryan would eventually relent. “Do you think you can pull it off?”

“Yes,” Ryan said, without hesitation.

“But...?”

After a long pause, Ryan did relent. “I still feel… I don’t know. After all this… I’m not the same. I don’t want to hurt anyone, well, not anyone who doesn’t deserve it. Not like…” he trailed off.

Geoff sighed sympathetically. “Look, we’re not who we were, Ryan. None of us. This is going to sound trite, but I mean it. You just gotta keep moving forward. I don’t buy into all that bullshit that pain makes you a better person, because let’s face it, that’s the shit that fucks us up to begin with, right?”

*Geoff had such a way with words.*

“I know I’ve never been the good guy, really.” Ryan sighed, and it was loaded with such weight that Geoff could almost feel it crushing him. “But I never thought I’d be… Dangerous? The one you all fear? Uncontrollable. The dog analogy sprung to mind again.

Ryan shut his eyes and shook his head. “…I just thought I knew what I stood for.”

“Look, Ryan, shut up for a minute…” Geoff cut him off before he slipped further into his dark introspection. “I was hoping to give you this in happier circumstances, but I feel like you need it more now…” He pulled a small black box wrapped with a green ribbon from his deceptively deep jacket pocket and went to hand it over, before pulling it back just out of Ryan’s reach as he moved to accept it. “And remember, Ryan, whatever happens, you stand with the Fake AH Crew. Whatever you stand for, it’s not alone. You stand with us.”

The others had clearly been listening in and progressively moving closer. Ryan looked around at Geoff, Jeremy, Jack and Lindsay; Trevor and Matt on the far side of the room. The crew, *his* crew. Very slowly, carefully, as if not to scare the idea from his mind, he nodded. “Yeah. Ok.”

Geoff almost smirked as he handed the box over. “I know how much it meant to you… and I know this doesn’t really make up for it, but…” He trailed off, Ryan would understand.

Ryan tugged the ribbon away, winding it around his fingers neatly and putting it in his pocket, and carefully opened the box.

Inside was a brand-new knife, just like the one Ray had given him years before; expertly sharpened, probably by one of the guys, with an inscription on the blade: *vincit qui se vincit.*

Ryan picked up the knife, running tentative fingers over the inscription. He wasn’t proficient in Latin, but he recognized the words from somewhere he couldn’t quite remember and immediately understood the sentiment. He couldn’t do anything to hide the smile that crossed his face, not that he tried.

“Thank you,” he said sincerely. “This is…” He looked down at the knife in his hand for a minute longer, before looking back up at his crew who’d gathered closer at Geoff’s beckon.

They hadn’t seen him look this happy in a long time.
“…This is gonna look so good buried in some fucker’s throat.”

The response was a mixture of shock and laughter.

“Jesus, Ryan!”

“Oh God!”

“What the hell?”

“Ryan, why?”

Ryan grinned and something about it was familiar and comfortable, despite how disturbing it seemed.


“Yeah, he is,” Jeremy agreed with a giggle.

“Ooh!” Trevor leapt to his feet and nearly flew out of the room, returning with Ryan’s jacket, mask and face paint, holding them out for him. “Nearly forgot.”

Ryan took the jacket and paints, but pushed the mask back to Trevor, raising an eyebrow. “Maybe you should hang on to that… might come in handy.”

Trevor nodded, a sly smile forming as he understood Ryan’s line of thinking.

“Alright,” Lindsay affirmed. “Now let’s go get our boys back. Or burn this city trying.” The first trace of malice tinted her voice, finally betraying just how dangerous she was. “This ends here.”
Gavin had been holding up ok.

That was the important thing. Michael had been scared out of his mind when he’d seen Gavin seize up. He couldn’t shake the feeling of guilt from not fighting back harder when they had been ambushed, but as soon as Gavin’s eyes had rolled back into his head, he’d known something was seriously wrong; he’d practically cooperated with their kidnappers, begging them to help him, the whole time his eyes fixed on Gavin. The people who had taken them hadn’t even been very big, he probably could’ve fought them off, but it was like he’d forgotten everything else in that moment, his own survival instinct replaced by fear for Gavin’s wellbeing. Stupid. But at least they were together, and they could be found.

Michael wanted to reassure Gavin; to let him know that the crew knew where they were, that Jeremy, Matt, Trevor, Jack and Geoff would probably be turning up any minute now to get them out. To lay the place to waste and show them, yet again, that the Fakes are not an easy target. He hoped.

He wasn’t sure what the Random had meant by “smoke them out” being a more apt analogy, and he was worried about the “having nowhere left to run” comment, but Lindsay had a few cards in her hand that he knew she was keeping close to her chest. He wasn’t worried yet. Whoever had taken them clearly wanted them alive for some reason.

Probably bait, like they tried with Ryan – dumbasses.

The crew would come prepared. Probably.

He shivered. He tried to assure himself it was the cold, although he wasn’t entirely convinced. He had been stripped of his jacket, leaving only his thin, red T-shirt to keep him warm and the long period of inactivity wasn’t helping. The uncertainty of not knowing was starting to unravel his nerves.

“Michael?” Gavin’s voice interrupted his thoughts again, bringing a welcome distraction. “Would you rather: have to wear one roller-skate every time you leave the house or never be able to use pockets again?”

Gavin was doing ok. That was reassuring. He wished he could have filled him in; let him know about the stupid drunken exploits that led to possibly one of the best ideas they’d had, about the safe houses and the extra hands Lindsay had hired to help them out. But they were almost definitely being watched. So, he did the next best thing: play along with Gavin’s ridiculous hypotheticals as if nothing was wrong.

“Oh, that one’s easy,” he said as nonchalantly as he could, “I’d take the roller-skate, definitely.”

“But you could just carry a bag?”

“…or I could put on the other roller-skate and skate everywhere…”

“What about driving? And going to formal places?” Gavin snorted a giggle. “Do you think you could heist in roller-skates?”

Michael laughed. “Sure! I mean, with a bit of practice, maybe…”
“Would you– oof!” Gavin’s voice cut off mid-sentence and Michael could hear him coughing and wheezing for breath.

“Alright, that’s enough,” an airy and mildly annoyed voice announced as Michael heard light footsteps approach.

“Gavin?” Michael called out almost instinctively. “You ok?”

After another coughing fit and a splutter, Gavin replied weakly, “I’m ok.”

Michael was relieved, but it was short-lived as suddenly the bag over his head was ripped off. It didn’t take long for his eyes to adjust to the dim light in the room, illuminated only by a single yellow bulb above their heads, which frankly, probably needed replacing a long time ago; although without his glasses it was hard to tell. Everything was a little fuzzy and it was hard to make out edges. He wondered where they were; quietly hoping they were still in range of the tracking chip… *Best dumb idea ever.* He wasn’t about to pin all his hopes on being rescued though, and his head whipped around, searching the room for any clues as to where they might be. It was small and bare; concrete floors and metal walls with no insulation – some kind of storage room maybe – with what looked like a folding chair in the far-left corner and a bottle of water or something on the floor, next to a kind of metal toolbox thing on wheels that made his stomach clench up. It looked very similar to one Ryan had. One he kept “tools” in. One he would bring along to interrogations.

*You’ve gotta be kidding… Is there some kind of sadist handbook somewhere that says you need one of those things?*

There was a doorway to his left as well; the door was ajar and looked like it led to a dark hallway. There may have been some movement out there, but Michael couldn’t make out much more beyond that.

Gavin was across from him, strapped down to what could have been an old dentist’s chair, same as the one he was in. Michael’s stomach dropped to see his head was still bagged and he was straining forwards, hands clenching and flexing and legs kicking out as much as his bonds would allow. Michael wondered how long he might have been struggling like that.

The Random standing next to his head was androgynous-looking, with piercing eyes and angular features. Well, what he could see of them anyway. They wore a black hoodie pulled up over their head and a black bandana covered their mouth and nose. It was still pretty clear that they were done with Michael and Gavin’s shit. In their hand was a large surgical syringe.

“Not too long before we get in touch with your boss… but I think we can start the preparations now, if that’s ok with you?”

It wasn’t a question.

Michael was at a loss for what he should do. His default settings apparently a permanent and overriding feature of his personality: his mouth was open before he could stop it. “Fuck you, you fucking fuck! You’re a fucking –”

From behind him, a slender but strong arm snaked around and locked under his jaw, wrenching his head back and clamping his mouth shut. He tipped his head back to get a look and another, almost identical-looking Random glared back at him from over the back of the chair.

The Random with the syringe hardly acknowledged him. They maintained their even tone as if he’d said nothing. The one silencing him merely shifted their position to better tighten their grip.
The first did something with some tubing that Michael couldn’t make out before he felt a sting in his right arm and instinctively tried to pull away, feeling his skin tear and the needle dig further in. He tensed up and tried to remain still to stop the pain, groaning through gritted teeth. He could feel blood trickling down the inside of his arm as the needle was adjusted in his arm and taped in place.

The arm holding him relaxed slightly so he could look down to see the needle with a loop of tubing attached to a collection bag, just like at blood donation centres. He could see dark blood in the tube leading up to what may have been some kind of clamp or regulator, but nothing was flowing yet.

“Michael? What are they doing? Michael?!” There was a distinct note of fear in Gavin’s voice.

The Random who’d put in the needle returned to the toolbox and pulled a similar set of needles and tubing from it and moved over to Gavin. Without removing Gavin’s hood and with no warning, they repeated the procedure, eliciting a fair amount of struggling and squawking from Gavin. Michael hissed through his teeth and managed a few muffled profanities, but that was all.

“What are you injecting me with?!” Gavin cried out, but the Random only tutted in response.

“Oh, don’t worry; I’m not injecting you with anything… Well, not yet.” The Random shrugged casually.

“Then what the bloody hell are you doing you crazy lunatic psycho?” Gavin was just throwing words out now.

“Did you know,” the first Random continued casually, “that under the right conditions, you can survive losing 40% of your total blood volume? If I’ve done my math right and you just relax, we should be able to maintain a nice and steady flow rate of about 15 mL per minute… just slow enough for you to enjoy every moment before your body starts to shut down and your brain starves of oxygen. I’d give it about 2 hours for you two.”

“This is fucked, this is fucked, this is fucked,” Michael’s internal monologue furiously growled on repeat. He struggled, as did Gavin, but there was no dislodging the needles in their veins.

“Well, might as well let you two get comfy and settled while we sort out all the boring stuff,” the Random suggested, tugging off Gavin’s hood, leaving him squinting and shaking his head the same way Michael had. “I’m sure you two would love to have a proper chat, you know, get all those heartfelt goodbyes out of the way in private…” The arm around Michael’s neck slid away and the two stalked out of the room.

“But don’t worry,” they called out from the doorway, “we’ll be back soon to check up on you.” And then they were alone.

* * *

Gavin’s eyes adjusted quickly. The first thing he noticed was the cameras. Mounted in what should have been discreet locations in the corners of the room, they were angled to capture himself and Michael.

So, they’re watching us, but are they listening too? He wondered as he scanned the room looking for microphones. They couldn’t risk sharing anything that might give away the crew.

Across from him, Michael was saying something along the lines of “we are fucked”, but Gavin was
so absorbed in his search that it barely registered. He spotted what looked like a mic rigged up to Michael’s chair. That could make things difficult.

“Oi, watch your bloody language.” He spoke carefully and deliberately, trying to warn Michael they were being monitored, without tipping the Randoms off.

Michael looked at him like his head was on backwards. Gavin pulled a face that would’ve been too subtle for the cameras to pick up and prayed that Michael would be able to catch his meaning.

“Watch my fucking language?!” Michael asked, the tone just slightly more tempered than what Gavin would have expected from him.

“Sorry, force of habit,” Gavin stammered, just in case Michael actually hadn’t caught it the first time around. “I kind of forgot where we were for a moment there.”

Michael nodded instead of going off on a rant and Gavin breathed a sigh of relief; he understood. Now that they were on the same page, Gavin calmed down a little, but the fear of what they had planned for them started to settle back in like a knot tightening in his stomach. He looked over at Michael, finally actually taking in what he saw. Michael had a black eye and a few scrapes, but nothing that looked too serious, and the way they’d been talking before left Gavin thinking he couldn’t be too hurt, so that was a plus. He looked worried though, eyebrows furrowed, his glasses were missing. God, he’d been lucky Michael had caught on so quick, he was lucky he could bloody see him. Gavin’s head spun a little and he blinked a few times to try to clear the haze, without it really helping. The look was still there on Michael’s face when his eyes re-focused; that worry, even under the mask of control he wore. Michael was worried for him. Michael had seen the seizure, of course he was worried. Gavin knew it was entirely unreasonable, but he couldn’t help but feel guilty. He knew there was no way to make it better either, except to keep up a strong face.

“What do you think they want from us, Michael?” He asked quietly after a moment.

Michael shook his head. “Whatever it is, I’m sure as fuck not giving it to them.”

“Do you think they want our blood?”

“I think they want it out of us…”

Gavin snorted, “But do you think they’re gonna keep it?”

Michael squinted at the collection bags they had set up. “What the fuck for? No. Why?”

“Maybe they’re vampires?” Gavin hardly batted an eyelid, completely deadpanning the delivery, ignoring the way his head still spun, before he offered a weak smile.

Michael laughed. It must’ve completely sideswiped him because he was nearly in tears.

Gavin was kind of proud. It was far less scary when they had something to laugh about. Gavin giggled quietly as well, before cringing as he glanced down to where the needle stuck out of his arm, a small pool of blood around the creases in his elbow from where he’d struggled.

“Fuckin’ vampire mercenaries. Yeah, ok. Got any silver bullets?”

Gavin swallowed and tore his eyes away from his arm, trying not to gag at the thought of them draining their blood. “Nah,” he said defiantly, “you’re thinking of werewolves. We’d need sunlight. Or crosses, or garlic or something.”
“Holy water?” Michael suggested.

Gavin nodded, pseudo-thoughtfully. “That’d probably work. Got any on you?”

Michael wiggled, grimaced as it upset the needle in his vein, causing Gavin to wince in sympathy, before acting like he’d come up empty. “Nope. Do you suppose if a priest blessed my dick that’d make it holy pee?”

Gavin laughed. “I think a better question is: could you find a priest to bless your penis?”

“Gavin,” Michael started, “surely there’d be at least one out there who’d be into that.”

Gavin giggled and could just hear a faint chuckle from the hallway.

He was right to assume they’d been watching them.

His eyes flicked up to Michael’s, whose own flashed recognition, but Michael continued as if nothing had happened. “I mean, they’re not getting any action anywhere else, right?”

Gavin squawked a laugh.

“Wait, you really think these guys are mercenaries?” Gavin asked, now genuinely curious and not entirely caring what the Randoms would make of their speculations. It might even get a reaction out of them that could give them a clue.

Michael shrugged as best he could while restrained. “I mean, I guess. They seem to fit the bill, they’re more organised than we are, not like that’s hard, but they’re clearly a team. Then there’s the whole matching outfit thing, got a kinda angsty teenager feel to it, but I’m diggin’ it.” Michael smirked.

Gavin nodded thoughtfully, considering what kind of implication that would have.

The most important one: Mercenaries could be bought.

Still, his mind raced. Were there more of them? Probably… depended on what they were planning for them; if they were setting up an ambush, definitely. Surely that was the plan, wasn’t it?

Gavin couldn’t help but think of how clever the first voice had sounded, how this lot had already put them in a vulnerable position, they could start the flow of blood and leave them there and if the crew didn’t get to them in time they’d just bleed out here and the Randoms would be gone without a trace…

That was their escape route. That was how they planned on surviving this.

Gavin felt like the floor had dropped out from under him, the blood drained from his face and suddenly he felt like he might throw up. His vision swam. He was faintly aware of Michael’s voice calling him from across the room, although it felt like he was calling from across the universe. “Gav, you ok? You don’t look so good…”

* * *

Gavin’s head slumped sideways, rolling back at an odd angle onto the chair, his hair flopping into his face. Michael’s heart skipped a beat.
Almost immediately, one of the Randoms appeared in the doorway, it was hard to tell, but it looked like the same one with the needles. They went to the sadist toolbox and pulled something out, rushing back to Gavin.

“He’s faking it!” A voice came from beyond the doorway.

“Don’t you fucking touch him!” Michael screamed. “Get away from him, you fuck!”

The random pulled down their hood, revealing a shaved head that in no way helped their identification. They cocked their head sideways and put their ear to Gavin’s face, with a look of slight relief. They pressed something against Gavin’s chest, and put a hand to their ear … a stethoscope?

Michael opened his mouth to speak but the Random held up a finger. “Look, just trust me; I’m a doctor.”

A sarcastic-sounding voice to Michael’s left called out with a slight giggle, “Yeah, but not that kind of doctor.” The smaller Random was leaning casually against the doorframe. A third, taller, again, also almost identical Random slunk up behind the smaller one.

“You’d better not’ve killed him, we do need them alive after all, they’re no good to us dead,” the third Random said, who Michael noted had a skull pattern printed on the bandana covering their face and short, dark hair sticking out from under their hood.

“Not yet anyway,” the sarcastic one added.

“I didn’t kill him, he’s fine,” the bald one asserted, “well, relatively. He’s tachycardic.”

Michael was watching this all unfold in utter disbelief. “Who the fuck are you people?” he demanded, as the bald one pulled their hood up again and packed away the stethoscope, picking up the bottle of water nearby.

“Don’t worry about it,” the skull-faced one said dismissively with a wave.

“I mean, it’s not like it’s gonna matter soon anyway,” the shorter one added, a little aggressively.

“What do you want?” Michael asked again, this time sounding a little more defeated. The way he’d said it made him suddenly aware of how worried he actually was for Gavin. For a split-second he was reminded of their attempted ambush, where Ryan had turned the tables on them and had threatened Gavin months ago. Before any of this had started. The Randoms had been in their comms. Picking them up together had been no accident. It was more than likely they intended to use them against each other. Michael immediately reconsidered his question.

“Ideally?” The skull-faced one said, “I want to finish this job, collect on it and then pizza, Netflix and Chill… without the innuendo, because fuck that.” The other Randoms both nodded along. Even Michael had to admit, that sounded like a good deal.

The bald Random had headed back to Gavin with the water bottle and splashed a small amount on his face. Gavin stirred sluggishly.

“Well, I’m going to prepare for our little call. I’ll leave you two to take care of these two, get ‘em nice and warmed up, ok?” The skull-faced Random turned on their heel and left.

It didn’t take long for Gavin’s eyes to flutter open and the look of confusion on his face took a few moments to transform into recognition. Michael felt even worse, repeatedly waking up to this? No
thank you. At least the bald Random offered him a sip of water, which he took greedily, before choking on it and spluttering everywhere, much to the shorter Random’s glee.

“Yay! You’re both awake now,” the shorter Random enthused. “Feeling fine are we? Nope? Never mind that!” They pulled two identical switchblades from the pocket of their hoodie, tossing one easily to the bald one, who wasn’t quite expecting it and fumbled it a bit before catching it.

“Smooth,” the shorter one pointed out, raising their eyebrows playfully.

The bald one rolled their eyes. “Any preference?”

“Him.” The other nodded towards Gavin. “He looks like he’ll suffer real pretty for me.”

“That’s fuckin’ creepy dude,” Michael involuntarily blurted out as the other Random made their way to his chair, squatting down next to him.

“You’re telling me,” the bald one agreed, unexpectedly.

“Oh, shut up. You love it. As if you’re not thinking the same thing,” the shorter one teased, pulling the folding chair from the side of the room over to next to Gavin’s chair.

The bald one breathed a laugh. “You know me too well. I’ll let you get started, I know how much you like to surprise them.”

“Aww, why thank you.” The Random took their switchblade and hunched over Gavin at such an angle that Michael couldn’t see what they were doing to him, but suddenly Gavin let out an ungodly howl.

“Oh God! What are you doing? Stop! Stop! Don’t hurt him! Gavin!” Michael cried.

The Random, realising they were blocking his view, shifted their position so Michael could see what they were doing to him.

“Michael!” Gavin screamed; almost squealed, as the Random held his hand flat and drove the tip of their knife up underneath the middle fingernail of his left hand. Blood immediately pooled on the tip of the blade and Gavin clamped his mouth closed and squeezed his eyes shut, struggling against his restraints.

Gavin screamed again as the Random repeated the process on his index finger, twisting the knife slightly to make the nail tear away from the skin.

“What would you do to make us stop?” The bald random asked slyly. “What would you tell us?”

“Don’t tell them anything Michael!” Gavin shrieked as they moved on to the ring finger.

“You sick fucks! Stop! Stop! What do you want? What do you want to know?!”

“Honestly?” The one holding the knife to Gavin paused for a moment and shrugged a little. “I just wanna hurt you a little. It is pretty fun.”

They went back to Gavin’s next finger, pressing the knife in and twisting it and Gavin thrashed in the chair.

“Oh, wait, no, we had a reason, didn’t we? What was it again?” They were clearly playing dumb, but it didn’t make it any less disturbing.
The other Random rolled their eyes. “We have a dramatic phone call to make, remember?”

“Oh yeah.” The shorter one’s eyes lit up. “Guess that means it’s your turn now.”

Michael braced himself as the bald Random snatched up his hand in a surprisingly strong grip and with a deft hand, drove the tip of their blade up under his nail. It wasn’t the first time Michael had been tortured like this. He’d had the bamboo thing tried on him before, but they were an amateur at best and too squeamish to continue with it for too long. Something told him that wasn’t going to be the case here. Especially as the Random reached the full depth of the nailbed and ever so slightly twisted the knife, holding it for a few seconds to allow the blood to pool under it and flow out onto the tip of their knife, collecting along the edge of the blade and beading neatly down the length. There was something almost surgical about it. Michael was briefly reminded of watching Ryan work. Maybe there was a sadist handbook after all. As they withdrew the blade, the pain hit him, resonating through this arm, hitting all the sensitive nerves up to his shoulder. *Yup. That felt… not great.*

He groaned loudly, trying not to give them the satisfaction of a scream, before the process was repeated.

After a little while, as their resolve had started to crumble, and stifled screams were becoming more common; the skull-faced Random entered the room with a phone, holding it up and sweeping it over the scene.

“See?” they said to the phone. “Just like I said; they’re fine… well, relatively… for now.”

The Randoms with the knives now both moved onto the index fingers and simultaneously inserted their blades under Michael and Gavin’s nails, twisting and prying them away from the skin, stinging horrifically and making them try desperately to clench their hands into fists and squirm away. Both the lads kept their screams in check, hissing and groaning through their teeth in favour of giving them the satisfaction, or alarming whoever they were on the phone with.

“If you lay so much as one more finger on my boys, I can assure you that the Fake AH Crew will personally fucking end you. It will not be quick, and it will not be pleasant.”

Geoff’s voice over the phone was the best sound Michael had heard all day.

“Stop struggling or it’s going in your dickhole.” The frustrated threat made by the Random working on Gavin only just registered above the blinding pain shooting through Michael’s fingertips and up his arm as the bald Random slowly drove the knife tip further under his nail. He locked his jaw and barely swallowed a scream.

Meanwhile, Gavin roared in pain – no, that wasn’t pain – that was *laughter*. Gavin was in hysterics. Still struggling and moaning, but laughing through it.

“Sounding!” Gavin managed to just choke out through the noises he was making. “Extreme sounding!”

Michael blinked in disbelief. It took him a few seconds to catch up, before he too burst out laughing.

Over the phone, Geoff was laughing too.

The skull-faced Random snapped back, “You have two hours to comply and you *might* just get them back alive.”

“Yeah, alright dickheads,” Geoff laughed. “Good luck with ‘em in the meantime… trust me, you’ll
need it.”

Geoff hung up the phone first.

The Randoms looked pissed.

Michael giggled again, and Gavin squawked nervous laughter. It was definitely easier to deal with
the pain.

The Random holding the phone scowled at it before looking at the scene before them. “Fuck it,
we’re done here. Start them now.”

The bald Random glared at Michael as he kept laughing, slowly withdrawing their knife at an angle
deliberately askew to maximise pain, but Michael only grimaced through his laugh. He couldn’t tell,
but the other Random working on Gavin seemed to have done a similar thing, leaving Gavin
grunting his laughter. The Random did something to the tubing connected to the needle in his vein,
readjusted its position to ensure the blood was flowing and stepped back, nodding as the other
repeated the process on Gavin. Soon the collection bags began to slowly but steadily fill with warm,
dark blood.

With a final sweep of the room, the Randoms left. Michael reminded himself that they were still
watching, but for now, he felt like he could let his guard down a little.

He looked down at his bloody, mangled fingertips and cringed, before looking back at Gavin, whose
expression mirrored his.

“Dammit…” Gavin looked back down at his fingers. “That’s going to get bloody infected.”

Michael giggled with relief. Gavin was still doing ok. He was starting to think Gavin might actually
hold up better than he would himself. He let out a long sigh and rested his head back, closing his
eyes for just a moment. His nerves were fried from their continuing threats on Gavin; realising how
close he’d come to giving up information that might have compromised the crew… that Geoff
would’ve been the first to know about it, too.

“Michael?” Gavin implored, almost reading his mind. “Once, you told me that whenever I was
afraid, it made you feel more brave, because you thought, at least you weren’t as scared as I was…
that you’d be brave for both of us.”

Michael felt a tear run down his cheek before he even realised he was crying.

Gavin wheezed. “Whatever happens, you can’t give ‘em anything. Promise me.”

Michael squeezed his eyes shut and blinked away the tears, channelling his energy back into anger.

“Fuck’em,” he spat in agreement, “I’m not giving them shit. It’s you and me, Boi.”
Trade

The night is darkest right before the dawn. If you class dawn as the moment the sky starts to lighten due to the sun’s rays reaching it, and ignoring other conditions such as cloud cover and moon phases, then technically, that was true. At any rate, it had been a long and fucking dark night indeed. Dawn did not promise it would get any better.

When Geoff’s phone rang, the house fell silent.

Ryan edged away from the group, instinctively distancing himself from the others. There was a chance he wasn’t going to be able to control his reaction to whatever they had to say. The thought alone made him uncomfortable, but it was something he had to keep in mind, for the sake of the others.

Geoff answered it without a word. It was a one-way video call. Clearly someone had something to show them. Dark eyes stared back at him from beneath a black hood; mouth and nose covered by a bandana bearing the lower part of a skull.

“Where’s Red, Ramsey? Don’t play dumb, I know you know.”

The Random wasted no time.

Geoff was just as curt in reply, “You have my crew. You deal directly with me.”

“I know it’s not your crew to run,” they retorted darkly. “Where is she?”

“You talk to me, or you don’t talk at all. Your choice.”

There was a long pause. The Random looked like they were pacing in a dark hallway.

“Relay this to Red then… My colleagues want a trade. Your boys for her. No negotiations.”

Geoff looked at Lindsay, who frowned and nodded for him to go with it.

The Random continued, “You’ll get a message with directions. She comes alone. When she arrives at the destination, you’ll get a second message with the location of your boys. If you hurry, you should be able to get to them in time.”

Matt and Trevor looked nervously at each other, Jack was a picture of concern, Jeremy looked openly furious and Ryan tried his hardest to be unmoved, but the way his eyes narrowed and his lips pressed together suggested he was barely containing his anger.

Geoff’s expression was heading towards the same look of open fury on Jeremy’s face; he nearly growled, “Why? What do you want with her that you can’t get out of them?”

“That’s for you to take up with my colleagues, I’m afraid. Oh, but I’ll tell you what; they’re a lenient bunch, if you’re worried about her ratting you out, and you think you can take care of it, they’ll take her dead or alive… Or if you’re worried about what they’ll do to her, after what happened with the Vagabond and all…”

Lindsay froze. Everyone in the room felt the air go still.

Ryan’s blood ran cold. He bit his tongue hard enough to taste blood and looked away, knowing there were eyes on him.
“Your call.”

“Fuck you! What the fuck have you done to my boys?” Geoff demanded. “I want to see them.”

The Random scoffed. “I’m not a moron, Jesus, why do you think I made a video call? And don’t panic… they’re fine.”

The Random pushed a door open, flooding their face with light as they switched to the rear-facing camera and it took a few moments to adjust.

Geoff could see Michael and Gavin, it looked like they were in one of the storage sheds, strapped down to reclined chairs. They looked like they were in pain – when he saw the two hooded figures hunched over their hands, he had an idea why. Gavin’s face was contorted in pain; just seeing it made Geoff’s blood boil.

“See?” The voice teased over the phone. “Just like I said; they’re fine… well, relatively… for now.”

Jack peered over Geoff’s shoulder as Geoff looked away. He just caught the look on the lads’ faces as the Randoms got back to work on their hands before the phone was turned back around. They could hear muffled groans and hisses of pain in the background. Even though he could only see their eyes, the smug look on the Random’s face was unmistakable.

Geoff couldn’t stop himself, the rage plain in his voice, “If you lay so much as one more finger on my boys, I can assure you that the Fake AH Crew will personally fucking end you. It will not be quick, and it will not be pleasant.”

He’d said it with such authority and assuredness, that in that moment, no one in the room doubted that was true.

“Stop struggling or it’s going in your dickhole.” The frustrated threat made by one of the Randoms was only just audible, but then Gavin’s laughter on the other hand was clear through the phone.

A voice that was unmistakably Gavin’s squawked, “Sounding! Extreme sounding!” Gavin’s giggles followed and soon after, Michael could be heard laughing too.

It took a second to connect the threat and Gavin’s reaction, but as soon as it hit, Geoff roared laughter and the others grinned and giggled.

A very pissed off Random snapped back, “You have two hours to comply and you might just get them back alive.”

Geoff collected himself, but was still laughing, “Yeah, alright dickheads. Good luck with ‘em in the meantime… trust me, you’ll need it.”

Even after the show of bravado, it took all the courage he could muster to hang up the phone.

“Alright; Michael and Gavin are hanging in there,” Geoff announced loudly, reminding them all of the positives. “That’s the important thing.”

Everyone was quiet, hopeful, reflective, apprehensive, all of the above.

Ryan had braced himself against the door frame, his mind racing, trying hard to latch onto anything that wasn’t a memory of what had been done to him, a vivid visualization of what they would do to Michael or Gavin or god forbid Lindsay, or that selfish urge to run again, to bury all this deep in his past. He clutched the hilt of his knife like a lifeline, a physical reminder of his purpose and his place
in the crew. He was here for them. It was how it was always going to be.

Geoff’s phone made a buzzing noise, and everyone gathered around the table. Ryan took a steadying breath and joined them.

Geoff read the message aloud, “90 minutes until drop off at point marked. Red only. Others will be shot on sight. Further instructions upon delivery. And there’s a map.” He scanned over the message and zoomed in on the map, squinting at it sceptically. “Is that Chianski passage? Fuck me. Goddamned sons of bitches. That place is one way in, no way out.”

There was a long pause as everyone processed the information.

“I’m going,” Lindsay said it so bluntly.

“What? You can’t,” Jack protested almost instinctively, before biting his tongue to let Lindsay and Geoff work it out first.

“Look, this plays perfectly into our plan; I’ll keep them busy while you guys get Michael and Gavin back,” Lindsay explained. “It’s pretty much what we were planning anyway. And besides, it’s for Michael. I’m going.”

Geoff nodded, reluctantly. “Ok, but I’m coming with you.”

“Geoff, they said they’d shoot on sight; it’s too dangerous…”

“You’re not going alone! They’re bluffing. They know we won’t kill you and they won’t turn down a chance to take both of us alive if there’s something they want from us. Plus, Michael would kill me if I let you go alone.”

“Well…” Lindsay conceded, “You’re not wrong, but-”

“They’ll be expecting us to bring backup, they’re probably counting on it to take us out. They’ll be expecting us to make our stand there.”

“What makes you so sure, Geoff?” Lindsay asked.

The rest of the crew were deadly silent, the same question in everyone’s mind.

Geoff hesitated. “Because they wanted you. So far, they’ve been trying to play us against each other; they’re trying to exploit our weak spots. They’re going for the cracks.”

Ryan nodded. “That’s why they’re keeping Michael and Gavin together, I’m sure. Those two are insufferable, the only reason you wouldn’t separate them is if you were trying to…” He trailed off, taking a deep breath and letting it out slowly. “…these guys are either really dumb, or they know exactly what they’re doing. And they have enough information to know how to make us tick.”

Lindsay pressed her hands together, holding her fingertips to her lips, almost as if praying. After a moment she said simply, “we can’t let them win.”

Geoff just nodded.

Jack couldn’t contain himself any longer. “You know we’re gonna be walking straight into a trap here, right?”

Wouldn’t be the first time.
“Yes!” Geoff burst out, far too enthusiastically. A plan had been forming in his head as they’d been speaking, quietly ticking over in the background and was only just beginning to congeal. “But the thing is: they know that we know.”

“Ok… and that helps us how exactly?” Jack asked, puzzled.

“Well, they’re gonna expect us to pull some kind of trick, they’re gonna expect us not to play along. But we’re gonna do everything they ask of us…” Geoff went on.

The mass confusion was evident on everyone’s faces.

“But, we also know where Michael and Gavin are, and they’re not gonna be expecting us to turn up there at the same time. We can catch them off guard in two places at once.”

“How?” Jeremy asked. “We might be able to get Michael and Gavin, but if it’s just you and Lindsay heading out to the drop, you guys are gonna be outnumbered and they’ll have you exactly where they want you… besides, who knows how many are gonna be guarding Michael and Gavin. Even we might be outnumbered.”

Geoff nodded, understanding, but not showing any concern. “Which is why I’m calling in some favours. What we’re going to pull isn’t a heist. No, what we need is a cunning stunt.”

He seemed a little too proud of that.

* * *

The crew had readied up as much as they were able to in the time they had. Andy and Mica had made countless phone calls, pulled all the strings and had a cargobob on standby, already loaded with weapons and explosives. Steffie was on her way to the safe house to set up a working base of operations, and keep an eye on Ryan’s cat.

Ryan had painted his face, looking fiercer than ever with his long, dyed hair tied back in a ponytail. As he donned his jacket and slipped his knife onto his belt, it felt a lot like coming home.

Jeremy, Matt and Trevor had gone through their usual pre-heist routine, taking inventory and going over creative exit strategies and backup plans. But with so many unknowns in play, there was only so much they could do. A lot of this was going to be improvising.

Lindsay, Geoff and Jack had been going over scenarios, trying to plan for anything, but after a while they just had to accept they’d done all they could.

“Jack, think can you fly?” Geoff asked, gesturing to his arm, which had been tended by Lindsay and Andy, who had turned out to be surprisingly helpful in a range of things. Unfortunately, there wasn’t much that could be done for it; there was a good chance he’d torn some ligaments and it was still not cooperating. He’d just have to hope it healed over time. Which put flying out of the question for now.

Jack shook his head. “Need two hands to operate a chopper, Treyco’s a pretty good pilot though…”

“In a Besra, maybe, he can’t pilot choppers for shit,” Geoff mused, wishing he was exaggerating.

“Ryan’s good with a chopper,” Jack suggested.
Geoff shook his head. “I want you guys to be able to get out of there as quickly as possible, and there’s no chance he’s waiting in the chopper.”

“Mica can fly,” Lindsay declared, taking on the authoritative tone she’d picked up from Geoff. “Andy can assist; Jack you stay on the comms, coordinate them. God knows they need it sometimes, and besides, they’ll listen to you.”

Jack raised an eyebrow, not entirely sure that was true. He nodded though, because damned if he’d be left behind.

Lindsay continued, “So you, Mica and Andy take Trevor, Matt, Jeremy and Ryan to Sandy Shores and wait for our instruction. You guys will wait in the cargobob, and standby for evac and medical. We don’t know what kind of condition they’ll come back in.” Her voice caught a little at the end and she cleared her throat before going on. “Do not let the guys go in before we give the all-clear. Geoff, you and me, we cooperate as far as we can, keep them focused on us. I have some of the team working on exit strategies for us, so we’ll have options. But we need to know what we’re dealing with. We gotta try to get as much information out of them as we can before we move.”

Geoff and Jack both nodded in unison. It was high time they figured out exactly what was going on.

“Steffie’s on her way over, to set up here. If things go bad, we radio her. She knows what to do.” Lindsay took a deep breath, steadying her nerves. “Alright? I’m gonna go catch up the others.”

Geoff nodded solemnly. “Thanks Lindsay. We got this.”

Lindsay left Geoff and Jack in anxious silence.

“I don’t know if I like this plan,” Jack protested quietly, shaking his head. “It’s too risky Geoff, we can’t.”

Geoff sighed and put a hand on Jack’s good shoulder, “I know. Believe me, I know. But this is a high-stakes game, we gotta go all-in or they’ll call our bluff. We’ve gotta give the others the best chance we can to get Michael and Gavin back.”

Jack winced. “I still don’t like it, Geoff.”

“Sorry buddy, that’s how it’s gotta be.” Geoff sounded almost pained and genuinely apologetic. “But look, if anything happens to us, you’re in charge, ok?”

Jack was shocked, “What the fuck? No! Geoff…”

“Jack, shut the fuck up. You don’t get a choice here. I know you can do this,”

It came from a place of love, but it made Jack uneasy.

“If anything happens, you get ‘em back, ok?”

Jack looked defeated. “…ok.”

“Fuckin’ promise me.”

“Yeah, I promise Geoff,” Jack reluctantly replied.

Geoff looked relieved. “Thank you.”

Lindsay emerged from what had been dubbed ‘the control room’, Mica and Andy following close
behind her. Jeremy, Matt, Trevor and Ryan were all hanging in the doorway geared up to go.

Geoff nodded at all of them.

“Alright, ramblers; let’s get rambling.”

* * *

The first set of collection bags filled quickly with blood, and the short Random changed them out for new ones without too much fuss, labelling them and placing them on a table next to their chairs.

“So we can put it back in you if your crew comes through,” they’d explained, although something about it had seemed off.

When the bags filled again, all three of the Randoms returned to the room. The bald one and the shorter one were mid-conversation as they each changed a bag.

“What would be your go-to? What would you want to do first?” The bald one asked.

The shorter one paused pensively. “I’m a slut for vivisection.”

Michael would have laughed if they’d not been referring to him and Gavin.

“Me too!” The other’s eyes lit up but then looked away as if disappointed. “Probably shouldn’t, we’re s’posed to leave them in good condition. Might send them into shock…” Their voice suddenly picked up again. “If the deal goes south though, I’d totally be up for that.”

“If the deal goes south, you two can do whatever you want with them, just make sure you film it for the others, and save me any trophies,” the skull-faced one called from near the doorway.

The shorter one let out an excited chuckle. “We’d have to keep them awake though, right? So that they could watch each other.”

Michael’s skin crawled, Gavin looked like he was going to be sick, but he’d been looking like that for a while, it may have just been the effect of blood-loss. Michael was worried for him.

“Of course!” The other said plainly. “It wouldn’t be nearly as much fun otherwise.”

“If you’re trying to creep us out,” Michael cut in, “I got news for you: it ain’t working.”

The skull-faced one giggled. “I mean, I wish I could say that’s what they’re doing, but truth is, they’re always like this.” They shrugged and motioned for them to move it outside.

The worst part was that there was nothing he could do. If they’d been physically hurting Gavin he could have shouted profanities at them, words of support to him, gotten angry in all the ways he was familiar with. But this? This was slow and subtle and cold and left him feeling so fucking helpless and almost numb as he watched Gavin slowly fade. He was angry, but with Gavin’s energy draining, he couldn’t justify the outbursts. He couldn’t keep it up long either, he was getting progressively weaker himself.

Gavin had been quiet for some time; his breathing seemed to have gotten shallower, Michael’s heart fluttered in his chest.

“Gavin? How you doing, boi?” He asked quietly.
Gavin hummed in response, barely loud enough to register.

“Don’t worry Gavin, they’ll be here soon. They’re coming for us, I know they are.”

Gavin made a little huff and smiled sleepily, closing his eyes again.

*Can’t let him give up hope.*

“Gav, you don’t have to say anything, just listen to my voice, ok?”

Gavin nodded slightly.

“Just gotta stay with me, ok? Hold on boi. We’re gonna be ok…”
Geoff and Lindsay drove together to the rendezvous point, with the remainder of the crew following a safe distance behind in the cargobob; maintaining visual on the car as long as possible, but steadily increasing their altitude so they could circle around undetected. They sped up the Los Santos Freeway in Geoff’s dark, heavily tinted Sultan RS, thankful for the light morning traffic as a golden sunrise broke over the mountain ranges.

“That sun might cause some issues,” Jeremy’s voice came over the comms in their ears. “You guys are gonna have the glare to contend with. If they’re clever about it, they’ll position snipers up high with their backs to the sun; they’ll be damn near impossible to spot. At least, that’s where I’d be.”

“Thanks for the heads-up, Lil J.”

Geoff reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a pair of dark-tinted aviator sunglasses. Lindsay opened the glovebox and retrieved her own, slipping them on and brushing her long blonde hair back off her face. She checked her phone again, going through the lengthy conversation she’d been having with Steffie. She muted the mic on her comms and Geoff did likewise. They could hear the chatter of the others as they discussed the layout of the storage shed and went over their movements and possible strategies.

“We’re gonna have company soon, the others are on standby if need be.”

“Good,” Geoff replied, nodding absently.

Lindsay could tell he was doing that thing he always did, processing plans almost subconsciously.

“Is this a bad decision?” Lindsay asked nervously. “Do you think we can trust them to come through?”

Geoff’s expression softened, and he smiled hopefully. “If there’s one thing I’ve learned in my time with this crew, it’s that if you make enough bad decisions, every once in a while, things work out for you… Sometimes you just gotta take that leap of faith.”

Lindsay nodded, thinking of Michael, reassuring herself that whatever happened, this was the right thing to do.

“Also, Geoff? I don’t mean to disrupt the mood or anything, but what the fuck are we listening to?”

The music on the stereo had taken a sudden turn from classic rock to something far more bluegrass that Lindsay hardly expected to hear in Geoff’s car.

Geoff raised an eyebrow and looked at her with a grin, “You don’t like Lesbian Folk music?”

* * *

In the cargobob, Matt and Jeremy were looking over the satellite images of the storage shed and surrounding areas, trying to work out what might be the best way in and where potential vantage points were. Until they got there though, it would be hard to tell. They had no way of knowing how many Randoms could be waiting for them, but they hoped Lindsay and Geoff were right, most of them would be focused on the rendezvous point. Ryan and Trevor were more focused on Michael
and Gavin and the Randoms holding them.

“Did you notice the collection bags?” Trevor asked.

Ryan looked at him quizzically and shook his head.

“I think – I only caught a quick glimpse – it looked like they had an IV or something in Michael and Gavin, like they were about to collect blood. I can’t figure out why they’d want to.”

Ryan cringed, a few different scenarios immediately coming to mind, any of which wouldn’t be out of the realm of reality, given the current state of reality.

“The thing with torture is, you’re really only limited by your imagination.”

Trevor nodded; he knew too well.

“Regardless of what they said, we should prepare for the worst. Be prepared to get them outta there and straight to hospital.”

Andy stuck his head around into the cargo hold. “I’ve got the med kits ready. Jack and I’ll be on standby. I might not be the best medic, but I can at least follow instructions.”

Ryan and Trevor nodded, both now feeling an anxious flutter in their chests, considering their own actions in similar situations before. Ryan’s mind kept trying to focus on events of the warehouse, the sizzle and smell of his own roasting flesh, but he refused to let them settle, continuously reminding himself of things happening here, now. He fiddled, loading and unloading weapons, counting bullets, just noticing things happening around him; trying to be consciously present in the moment. Jeremy’s hand landed hard on his shoulder and Ryan’s own went instinctively to rest on the hilt of his knife. Not in the terrifyingly animalistic way it had before, but now as a physical reminder, vincit qui se vincit; “he conquers, who conquers himself.”

“We got this Ryan, Battle Buddies.”

He nodded. “Battle Buddies.”

“We’ll get ‘em back.”

Mica’s voice on the comms crackled in their ears. “Alright boys, we’re going up and around, hang tight.”

It was closely followed by Jack’s. “We’re going to fly ahead, circle around, scope out activity at Chianski passage for Geoff and Lindsay and then head back and wait for their instruction.”

Ryan was already eyeing the parachutes and wondering if more immediate action might be required.

“Ryan, whatever you’re thinking about: don’t.” Jack pre-emptively cautioned.

“What? I wasn’t doing anything!” He protested somewhat petulantly.

Jeremy followed his gaze and gave him a knowing look. That kid would follow him anywhere. He would probably do the same.

Jack continued, ignoring Ryan, “Everyone, keep your eyes open, call out anything suspicious, if they’re expecting us to make a stand, they’re going to leave a trace.”
Geoff and Lindsay had been talking about the intricacies of exactly what constituted Lesbian Folk music and more importantly, how Geoff had come to listen to it… the answer was obviously Griffon had recommended it to him after meeting the musicians on one of her own inexplicably outlandish adventures. The off-topic conversation was good for their nerves, but again, they were interrupted by Jack on the comms.

“Geoff, Lindsay, you guys might be in for a fight. Got what looks like maybe five vans parked around the grain store near Union road, might be planning on following you down to block you in. Could easily be more than 40 guys in there, probably more further down the road. Can’t get visuals on the lab side without getting too close, but it looked like there was activity down there.”

“Yeah, that’s about what I was expecting,” Geoff replied.

“Looks like there are some choppers further up North, near the railway shed. Might not be related, they look a little bit like the FIB ones.”

Lindsay and Geoff exchanged a nervous glance.

“Thanks Jack… not much we can do about that now. We go ahead as planned, don’t worry about us, just focus on getting Michael and Gavvers out.”

“Geoff,” Jack sounded pained to say it and everyone could hear over the comms, “be careful, ok?”

The comms went quiet again and Geoff continued driving, coming up to Union road and the grain store.

“Stick to the plan. Find out what we can and when push comes to shove, we push back.”

As Geoff turned off Union road, five sets of headlights turned on behind them and one by one fell into line behind them.

“Well, we got the welcome party on our tail,” Lindsay reported through the comms.

Suddenly, the leading van accelerated until it was almost on top of them, then braked hard and matched their speed, driving as close as possible behind them.

Geoff nearly had a heart attack. “What the shit was that?!”

The comms had turned to static.


Geoff looked tense, but in control. “It’s ok. We’ve still got this.”

Lindsay nodded. She still hadn’t entirely dismissed the idea that whatever happened they might just be pulled from the car and executed on sight. Her heart was racing.

“You ok, Linds?”

“Honestly? …I’m shitting myself. Just a little bit.”

Geoff laughed. “Me too.”

“You didn’t have to come with me, you know.”
Geoff shook his head. “I’ve sat out enough, and there’s no way I’m giving them exactly what they’re asking for. We throw spanners wherever we can. Whatever they’re expecting, we make sure it’s not what they get.” He wasn’t about to tell her he had every intention of switching places with her if given the opportunity.

Lindsay nodded.

“Besides, I’ve given Steffie very clear instructions on what to do if we go dark.”

“You didn’t think she was only working for you, did you?” Geoff asked with a smirk. “Because I sure as hell didn’t realise she was getting two pay checks.”

“Wait… She’s been working for both of us?”

Geoff nodded. “But she’s also been stocking the liquor cabinets, so I can’t stay too mad at her. And right about now’s when it’s gonna pay off. She’s got the tracking chip details for you and Michael, and she’s got Funhaus on standby. Something happens to us while the others are busy, we’ll have backup.”

That was reassuring.

“And if they kill us?”

Geoff wasn’t sure how to answer that.

He slowed down, driving more carefully as they passed a small shack on the side of the road. There was movement around the outside, men in dark suits, but they weren’t easy to make out in the shadow of the mountains. There was one blind corner in the pass. Neither was surprised as they rounded it and, shielding their eyes from the glare of the rising sun, they saw another five vans parked haphazardly across the road just in front of the entrance to Humane Labs. To shut down those labs they had to have either some serious firepower, or impressive connections.

This was a big deal.

Geoff pulled up a little way from the blockade and killed the engine. With the entourage now following them, the road exit was just about useless anyway. They made no move to exit as armed people dressed entirely in black with balaclavas covering their faces spewed out of the vans all around them. Within seconds their car was surrounded. There was something almost military in the way they moved that worried them both. But the most disturbing thing was the last man to exit the van immediately in front of them.

Geoff’s blood ran cold. It was like he’d seen a ghost. He wasn’t entirely sure he wasn’t looking at one, to be honest.

The man stood tall, in a grey, three-piece suit and worn work boots, with a shockingly innocent face even with a few days of stubble, wide brown eyes and neatly trimmed light brown hair.

Shadowlz.

* * *
“Shit!” Jack exclaimed, slamming down the radio receiver and fishing his cell phone out of his pocket and immediately calling Geoff’s number. **Nothing.**

“What happened? They cut out?” Mica asked.

He tried Lindsay’s. **More nothing.**

“Must be jamming the signal,” Jack mused, “we’ll give it a minute, see if it clears, head to the storage shed, but keep this altitude. Don’t want to give anything away just yet.”

Ryan’s head whipped around to Jeremy, who was already making for a parachute. Ryan was close behind him, adjusting his heavy armour beneath his jacket before he donned his own. Matt and Trevor watched them nervously.

“You’re gonna jump?” Trevor asked quietly.

“No!” Jeremy acted offended.

“Definitely not,” Ryan agreed.

Matt scoffed. “Umm, shouldn’t you at least wait until we get there?”

Jeremy shot a look at Ryan as if to say *‘ready?’*

Ryan returned the look with a smirk.

“Tell you what, we’ll race you.” Jeremy patted Matt on the shoulder as he leapt from the side door of the cargobob without further fanfare.

“See you there,” Ryan added as he jumped after Jeremy.

They could practically hear Jack smouldering in the cargobob. “Wait! Who just jumped out? You motherfuckers.”

Jeremy and Ryan streaked through the air, pulling their chutes almost in unison at close to the last possible second to avoid being spotted and spiralled towards the open field behind the storage warehouse. They’d easily beaten the cargobob.

“Ryan, you asshole, you were meant to wait for the signal!” Jack was still yelling over the comms. Now that they could hear something other than wind rushing past them, Ryan rolled his eyes and radioed back: “if their signal’s being jammed, how are we meant to know? What that *means* is that they never intended to send that second message at all, which means, Jack, that Michael and Gavin could be in trouble right now. So, no, I’m not waiting.”

“What if they tip them off that you’ve gone in and they kill Geoff and Lindsay?”

“Jammers don’t discriminate! They can’t tip them off if they can’t get a signal to them.”

“He’s right, Jack.” Jeremy backed Ryan up without hesitation.

“There are other ways to get a message across, Ryan!” Jack sounded borderline panicking. “Jesus, just stop and think about it for a second! Literally all it would take is to have some guy standing outside the range of the jammer with a cell phone and he can *walk over and tell them!*”

Ryan hadn’t considered that. Nor had Jeremy it seemed, considering the look they exchanged.
Still, they were about to touch down and as far as they could tell, they’d have a pretty clear run at the place.

“Too late now.” Ryan touched down with practiced ease, releasing his chute and letting it fall away, while Jeremy touched down not quite as elegantly a few feet away.

“Hang back, just until we’re sure, do some surveillance, at the very least wait until we can touch down for evac. Please. I know you’re angry, but you gotta think of the team.”

Jeremy was fully expecting Ryan to make a snarky comment and run in anyway, and frankly, so was Jack; but it didn’t come.

Ryan froze. Jack was right. They needed to work together. His reckless actions last time had fucked them over and as much as Jeremy believed in him, he’d already hurt Jeremy once, he wasn’t ready to lead him into a possible ambush. Or into a situation where he could be responsible for anything that happened to Geoff or Lindsay. Jeremy wouldn’t be able to deal with that. He wouldn’t run in. Not when they had backup so close.

“Alright Jack. We’ll hold back, but hurry your ass up and get down here.”

Jeremy frowned at him. “So, surveillance?”

Ryan nodded.

Jeremy whipped his sniper rifle off his back, moved up to a better position and carefully peered through the scope.

“See anything?” Ryan asked after a few minutes.

“Nothing yet… Wait! Yeah, looks like there’s someone coming out of the building… Make that two someones… and looks like there might be snipers on the adjacent roof. They’re not set up yet, just hanging out. We should take them out first.”

_Probably wise to wait then._ Matt was a far better shot from this distance and they’d need to take them down simultaneously.

“We should do it now, they’ll probably spot the cargobob,” Jeremy continued.

“Ah, yeah,” Ryan agreed reluctantly. “Ok, let’s take ‘em out.” He slung his own rifle over his shoulder and they carefully advanced to a better position.

“I’ll get the one on the left; you take the one on the right, yeah?” Jeremy wisely gave himself the more difficult shot.

“’kay, ready?”

“On three. One… two… three!”

Two shots rang out, quickly followed by a third.

“Damn!” Ryan muttered under his breath as he missed. Thankfully, Jeremy was fast, and both the snipers went down before an alarm could be raised.

“Signing up for the suicide squad eh, Deadshot?” Jeremy joked, but Ryan just grumbled, he couldn’t help but feel a little useless.
It was a jolt to his nerves that made him feel sick to his stomach, but then again, that could also be the lack of sleep and the growing sense of worry for Michael and Gavin. Whatever the source, it was not good for his mental state. He was already beginning to doubt himself.

“Ryan?” Jeremy asked carefully, “you ok, buddy?”

“Yeah.” He shook his head and tried to tell himself to snap out of it.

Jeremy looked worried for him. It was the same look of concern he’d had after everything that happened at the warehouse.

“I’m fine.” Ryan was still functional enough to focus on what needed to happen next. “Keep an eye on the patrols, they might’ve heard something. They start acting suspicious; we take ‘em out and move in.”

Jeremy nodded. “On it.”

Overhead in the distance, they could just hear the whirr of the blades of the cargobob as it descended to drop off the others and await evac.

It wasn’t long before Trevor and Matt were panting beside them, Matt with a duffel bag of assorted weapons and explosives on one shoulder and a distinctive pink sniper rifle slung over the other. Trevor had his phone out, he’d been tracking Michael’s chip, the signal was accurate to within a few meters.

“It looks like they’re being kept in one of the smaller storage rooms towards the centre of the facility, the kind usually used for storing archived files and the like,” Trevor pointed out, showing Ryan the overlay of the signal location.

“Not so easy to get in and out undetected, might be easier to go in loud,” Ryan noted.

Matt smirked, dropping the bag to the ground at Ryan’s feet and peering through the scope of his rifle to survey the scene. “You going in loud, Ryan?”

Ryan shrugged. “Yeah, I’m kind of a brute.”

“I’d never’ve guessed,” Trevor remarked, rolling his eyes. He checked in over the comms, “We’re here Jack, standing by for your signal.”

“Give it a minute; we’re still not getting anything from Geoff or Lindsay, Steffie says back up’s on the way. She also says if you guys get in trouble, she has reinforcements on standby. So let me know if shit gets real.”

*Back up? What kind of reinforcements? Where were these people coming from? What had been happening while he was gone?*

It really just asked more questions than it answered and Ryan again felt suddenly like he might be in over his head.

*Keep it together, Haywood. Still gotta get Michael and Gavin back. Focus on that.*

“We might not have a minute…” Jeremy interjected.

Matt hummed agreement, peering down his scope and taking aim. “The patrol looks spooked, I think they...”
“Yep, they tried the radio, they know something’s up… Take ‘em down, Matt.”

Everything happened so fast. Matt and Jeremy took them out in an instant; it shouldn’t have surprised Ryan as much as it did. They’d been working together on the B team for years and they’d been teamed up recently, so they were back in practice. Still, it was impressive to watch and definitely a confidence boost.

Ryan checked the time. It’d been just over 90 minutes since the phone call. With any luck, they’d still have the jump on the Randoms.

“So, I guess that means we’re going in loud then?”
A cunning stunt

“You are not going in loud, Ryan,” Jack’s voice commanded over the comms. “Stay quiet, no guns unless absolutely necessary. Steffie says go now; in and out as fast as you can. You’ve probably still got the drop on them.”

Ryan sighed. “Yeah, ok… Any word from Geoff or Lindsay?”

“Nothing yet.”

Ryan had a bad feeling about that.

Swift, but ever-wary, the ground-team crept to the side of the self-storage shed. There was a ladder to the roof next to an emergency exit and without any consultation; Matt immediately went for the ladder, making his way to the roof with his sniper rifle slung over his shoulder and his pistol at his hip. They waited for him to reach the top and after a few minutes, he waved down to give the all-clear.

They entered the storage shed through a fire escape, finding themselves at the end of a long corridor with a yellowed plastic strip door at the far end. Ryan held up a closed fist, the universal symbol for them to hold up. Barely audible was the shuffling of several pairs of feet on the other side of the door, the faintest hint of a shadow of movement thrown for a brief second against the wall. Ryan looked to Trevor and Jeremy and back to his fist, shaking it as an indication to stay as he withdrew his knife, already appreciating the weight and feel of it in his hands; he made his way to the end of the corridor, pressing his back to the wall next to the strip door, barely breathing. He turned his head slightly and nearly jumped as he saw Jeremy and Trevor were right next to him, having blatantly ignored his order to stay. At least they were quiet. He glared at them and they smirked back at him, defiantly.

He waited until the footsteps passed the strip door, silently pushing the flaps aside and peering out. Two figures clad in black were making their way up the hall with their backs to them. Ryan held up two fingers and quietly moved out.

Trevor was the fastest. His lanky frame gave him the perfect angle to slit the throat of the Random closest to them, who barely managed a choked gargle before they collapsed on the floor in a crumpled heap, alerting the other to their similar fate as Ryan plunged his own knife into their back, clamping a hand over their mouth so they couldn’t cry out as their body sagged and went limp in his arms.

Two more rounded the corner just as Ryan let the body fall to the floor.

Shit.

“What the fuck?!” One cried out, pulling a gun as the other tried to run for it.

Ryan flipped the knife in his hand, catching it by the blade before flinging it at the one going for their gun; catching them in the throat and making them stumble forward, dropping the gun and clutching at the knife in their neck. Their hands reached the hilt and instinctively pulled it out, a thick spray of blood immediately spurting from the wound, slowing to a pulsing flow beneath the scrabbling fingers of the Random as they fell to their knees in shock.

Not bad for a first-time throw. The thought flashed in his mind before Jeremy took off chasing the second Random around the corner. Trevor followed him, and Ryan leapt to his feet to follow,
retrieving his knife and making sure the other wasn’t getting back up. There was a scuffle, the sound of fists hitting flesh and by the time Ryan arrived, the Random was in a heap on the floor, head twisted at an unnatural angle, eyes staring, unseeing at the ceiling.

Jeremy spat blood and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, smearing blood from his freshly-split lip across his chin. “Alright, I don’t care anymore. Everyone dies.”

Ryan just shook his head. “I mean, realistically… they were all gonna die anyways, so…” He couldn’t help but feel a little bit proud.

Trevor looked back at his phone, the blinking indication of Michael’s tracking chip on the screen. “C’mon, they’re supposedly down this way.”

* * *

The skull-faced Random strode into the room just as the pair finished changing what looked like the final collection bag.

“Be ready to move,” they warned. “We don’t wanna be here if they have to give out the location. There’s no doubt things are going to get messy.”

“Good. I love messy,” the shortest Random professed.

“Of course you do…” Skull-face rolled their eyes.

The bald one finished changing Gavin’s bag, placing the full one back in the tray with the other. “It would be fucking cool to watch… I wonder how many people will show up?”

“Who would you bet on?” The shortest one mused. “I know the Lost have it out for the Fakes. The Vagos are pretty keen to see them gone, but they’re kinda out of area, dunno if they could be bothered coming all the way out here.”

“Personally, my money’s still on the Fakes,” the bald one confessed.

“You really don’t think they’re gonna try something with the others?” Skull-face raised an eyebrow.

The others? Now Michael was worried. What if they’d gotten their hands on someone else?

The bald one shrugged. “I dunno… really depends on where their loyalties lie. They’re unpredictable… I mean, maybe if they managed to get the actual Vagabond back. The new guy seems pretty capable, but he’s not the Vagabond.”

Michael hadn’t thought it was that obvious, but he supposed these guys would’ve been paying close attention, and as good as Trevor was, he wasn’t Ryan.

The shortest Random rolled their eyes. “Are you still on that theory that he’s up living with the Altruists?”

Michael silently scoffed, they’d checked the Altruist camp long ago – no sign of Ryan at all.

“All I’m saying is that I don’t think he’s dead… The Altruist camp would be a good place to lay low. I mean, who wants to hang out with a bunch of nudist hippies?”

The short one shook their head. “Man, old dongs just don’t do it for me.”
“And I doubt they’d do it for him either,” Skull-face interrupted. “Dead or not, he’s not coming back.”

The bald one looked like they might be about to argue, but thought better of it, and Michael felt his heart sink a little at the thought.

“Like I said,” skull-face continued, “be ready to go, I doubt we’re gonna be able to salvage anything left behind.”

There was a noise from outside the room. Something hitting the ground, what sounded like someone yelling out. Some more thuds. Very soft, hard to hear, but then, Michael wasn’t sure how much the drop in blood pressure was affecting his senses. He felt very light-headed now. He was reasonably certain sleep deprivation was also playing a role.

The way the Randoms’ heads snapped around made him sure the sounds were real, and he couldn’t help but feel hopeful that it was the Crew coming for them.

“Leave ‘em, c’mon,” the skull-faced one instructed, the other two following them out the door into the dark hallway beyond, leaving Michael and Gavin temporarily alone.

“D’you hear that Gavin? The others are gonna come for us. They’re expecting a war – hoping we’ll lose.” He barked a laugh; it sounded far more forced than he would’ve liked. “Good fucking luck.”

He hoped the Crew were one step ahead of them… they already knew their location – probably – so there was that. But the fact that they hadn’t heard anything yet made him anxious. His skin prickled with goose bumps and he felt cold, far colder than he should have.

Gavin was slow to respond, the blood loss hitting him hard. “Michael?” His voice was so quiet now, barely a whisper, lips only just moving.

“Gav? You ok? How you feeling, boi?”

Gavin breathed what might’ve been a laugh but sounded more like a sigh. “I’m tired, Michael…”

“Gavin, c’mon boi, stay with me, you gotta fight it. We can’t let them win!”

Gavin’s eyelids fluttered, fighting to stay open, “…it’s ok. They won’t win.” He breathed a laugh that sounded very strained. “Michael… I think I need a nap, Michael.”

“Oh no you fucking don’t –”

“…If I don’t wake up my boi…”

“–Gavin, no–”

Gavin sighed and smiled, ever so slightly, as he closed his eyes. “…I’m glad I met you…”

Michael’s voice cracked and was too loud, “Gav–”

“You two are just touching, you know that?”

The sarcastic voice made Michael’s head whip around; he fought the exhaustion he felt with anger and hatred and the need to hurt the people who had done this to them.

Skull-face was gone, but the other two Randoms had re-appeared in the doorway with barely a sound. The shorter one holding the same bloody blade that made Michael clench his hands
involuntarily and grind his teeth together not so long ago.

“You!” Michael hissed. “You sick sons of bitches!”

He knew better than to let his true emotions show, so as usual he masked them, spewing bile and obscenities instead.

The Random only seemed more amused, raising an eyebrow in a smirk beneath their bandana.

“You really only have yourself to blame for this you know? We wouldn’t even be here if it wasn’t for you.”

The bald Random half nodded in agreement, wandering back into the room to stand closer to Gavin, curiously inspecting the blood flow.

The shorter one continued, “I mean, we all get our inspiration from somewhere, right? And the Fake AH Crew is just so successful; they have such a great model... teamwork, friendships, deep emotional bonds... all those lovely little things you read about in the fairy tales. You’ve even got romance, depending where you look. It’s disgustingly picture perfect.” They stepped forward and held their palms open. “And then you get us... the ones who bleed and sweat tireless effort, the ones who will stop at nothing to reach their goals, the ones who work day and night to perfect their craft – and they are perfect. And yet... despite how hard they work, and despite how well they get every single job done... they were never quite good enough for the Fake AH Crew. Oh no, the Fakes are too good for the likes of us. You all made that abundantly clear... and now it’s our turn to make something clear: we don’t take kindly to being ignored.”

They were seething now; Michael could see the anger briefly flash in the eyes of the other, but there was a hint of sadness there too, of rejection. A chill ran down Michael’s spine at the thought... It’s petty, but you’d be surprised how petty people can be. These were the ones who never made it. The ones who’d looked up to them, admired them, emulated them. Been rejected by them. Told to leave...

“This one’s probably not gonna make it...” The bald Random barely registered any emotion as they nodded towards Gavin’s chair. “Bleed might’ve been too quick, he’s pretty skinny. Oh well.”

Gavin had gone very still, he was quiet and pale, and Michael wasn’t sure if it was just that he didn’t have his glasses or if Gavin had actually stopped breathing. His own heart nearly stopped in his chest.

“Gavin?”

Gavin didn’t respond.

“Gavin? Gavin! Fuck! Gavin!” His voice cracked, but Gavin still didn’t move.

The Random cocked their head sideways at Gavin’s limp form, moving closer to inspect him.

“Hmm... yeah, looks like you might just be out of time on this one,” they commented coolly.

Michael no longer cared about saving face, his sole focus was Gavin.

“Please Gavin, hold on boi! We can make it through this, just a little longer...” His voice caught in his throat, choked in a sob and his eyes teared. “Gav. Say something. Please. Please!”

He blinked, and tears broke again as he stifled a sob. He squeezed his eyes shut as the shorter
Random made their way back to his side, looked over at Gavin’s body and sneered down at him.

“Aww, isn’t this just a heart-wrenching scene…”

A voice – Ryan’s voice – drifted in from the doorway, dark and tinged with danger.

“I think you mean ‘heart-rending’. It’s ok, it’s a common misnomer; people get confused with ‘gut-wrenching’. I mean, you wouldn’t exactly use the phrase ‘gut-rending’… although, we could make it appropriate in this particular circumstance. You see, not many people get the best of us, but no one gets the best of us and lives to tell about it.”

Michael had never been so happy to hear one of Ryan’s patronizing lectures.

That son of a bitch.

* * *

“Son of a bitch!” Geoff exclaimed staring, mouth agape at the figure in front of the car.

“It can’t be…” Lindsay began, but Geoff shook his head.

“It’s not. Shadowlz fucking said he had a twin. We all thought he was crazy. It was a fucking elaborate set up.”

Before they could say anymore, their doors were yanked open and they were both immediately seized by the men in black and dragged out of the car. They were forced to their knees and shoved roughly in front of the man in the suit while another patted them down for weapons, pulling pistols off both of them.

“Hello Geoffrey. Hello Red… or should I say Lindsay?”

Lindsay’s eyes widened. Like Ryan, few people in Los Santos knew her true identity; it was jarring to hear her name spoken.

“Alright, this is bullshit. What the fuck is going on? Who the fuck are you? What do you want and where the fuck are my boys?”

“That’s a good question. Where indeed?” The man looked around to the surrounding hills, carefully scanning the rapidly-lightening sky for signs of choppers or jets. “I was expecting more of a show of force. I thought you’d at least put up a fight for Lindsay, the beloved leader of the Fakes… but then again, you turned up, so I suppose that’s better than nothing. As for where your boys are… soon all of Los Santos will know.”

He waved a hand and a few of the men peeled away to search the surrounding areas.

“What the fuck?” Geoff repeated.

The man scoffed. “You really have no clue, do you? Is it that hard to figure out? I expected better.”

Just keep talking asshole, Geoff thought to himself, continuing to play dumb. By now, they’d been without radio contact long enough that Steffie would’ve told Jack and the crew to go ahead and gotten some of the others on standby.

The man in the suit gave a signal and a few of the vans towards the rear of the convoy reversed,
turned around on the narrow road and sped away, undoubtedly – now satisfied that the rest of the Fakes weren’t hiding out waiting to spring a trap on them here – heading to the storage shed at Sandy Shores to try to head off the crew sent to rescue Michael and Gavin.

Geoff hoped the network was solid… the boys might need the backup after all.

The man in the suit hummed a giggle. “…As if we’re the only ones who want you dead.”

Lindsay looked to Geoff apprehensively.

“So, who are you?” Lindsay asked; her tone far more moderate and professional.

“Oh please, you can’t tell me my brother never mentioned me!” He feigned offence. “It was all he ever wanted… retribution for my untimely death, revenge on the people who caused it… the Fake AH Crew, the Vagabond, Los Santos and its criminal underbelly. He became rather obsessed…”

“So, you let him think you were dead? You convinced people he was crazy?” Geoff was confused now… how had he managed to cover up all evidence of his existence? It was do-able, but certainly not easy. Geoff was wary, he knew the same thoughts would be going through Lindsay’s head and glanced over to see her expression matched his.

“Oh, Shane was crazy, just not in the right way to make the Vagabond leave the Fake AH Crew; to make him question his own sanity, fearing he too would crack under the pressure. No, my brother wasn’t the most stable, but we did take some liberties in recreating his records – our profilers did a brilliant job on that, worked a treat… Unfortunately, Shane never would learn the truth; he couldn’t, but he played such an important role in all of this. His sacrifice won’t be forgotten.”

“So, you faked the records?”

“We knew the Vagabond had connections in the LSPD. And now we know who… Poor Dr Ellis. He recently met his own untimely end in an unfortunate car accident.”

*How the fuck did they get inside the LSPD? How could they have planted that kind of information… unless…*

“How?” Geoff asked outright, unable to stop himself.

“Oh, I’m not dumb, Ramsey, I’m not going to give away all of my secrets… but I am a man of my word. You want your boys back?” He nodded to one of the men who made a hand signal to someone in the van that had followed them in – the one jamming the signal – and a moment later, the man returned a thumbs-up. Another man handed Shadowlz – *not Shadowlz* – a tablet, and he tapped at the screen a few times before turning it around to face them.

“Here they are.”

It showed video footage of Michael and Gavin alone in the storage shed, needles in their arms, blood collecting in bags as if they were at a donation centre.

“What is this?” Lindsay demanded.

“We thought we’d try our hand at streaming again… we did so well last time.” He looked down at the screen. “Over nine hundred viewers! Not bad. Nearly one thousand people in Los Santos with an interest in the Fake AH Crew – and perhaps their whereabouts. You wanna know where your boys are?”
He tapped at the screen again before holding it up to show them. A text box had popped up with their location, address, map, photo, coordinates. All the information to find them.

“Well, so do they…”

“Bullshit,” Geoff spat, knowing that was the same address they’d tracked Michael’s chip to.

Shadowlz’s twin smirked. “You didn’t think you were the only ones interested in finding them, did you? The race is on.”

Suddenly it all made sense.

“Clearly that’s not live,” Geoff remarked nonchalantly. “Otherwise we’d be seeing our boys busting them out.”

Shadowlz’s twin’s smirk faltered. “Excuse me?”

“Oh, you thought we didn’t know where they were?” Lindsay added, her own grin spreading.

The man snorted. “You’re bluffing.”

Geoff and Lindsay exchanged a glance.

“Well, we are, or we aren’t.” Geoff smirked. “Better call it.”

Shadowlz’s brother again looked around at his own men, searching for any indication they’d found even a trace of the Fakes in the surrounding area. Nothing.

For a second, his face flashed fear. He turned his back and reached for his phone, punching numbers and holding it to his ear. A few seconds passed and nothing. He paced and started to look more worried. He waved another of his men over and said something to him that neither Geoff nor Lindsay could hear. The man immediately hurried off to take care of whatever business he’d just been given.

Shadowlz – not Shadowlz, Geoff had to remind himself – smoothed his hair down and scratched nervously at the nape of his neck. He was getting impatient. Geoff knew their time was running out. He only hoped Steffie had gotten word out quickly enough. His eyes scanned over the horizon behind the vans, near the entrance to Humane Labs. Facing the glaring sun, even with his sunglasses, he had to squint to make out the figures approaching.

He drew a long breath.

“If that’s how you want to play… fine. I can play hardball too.” Shadowlz’s brother drew his pistol and levelled it at Geoff’s head.

Geoff held his breath.

The smoke grenade sailed clear over the van in front of him, bounced and rolled to a gentle stop at Geoff’s knees.

Geoff looked up at not-Shadowlz and flashed a broad smile before he was consumed in the smoke.

Then, all hell broke loose.
**Trust Exercise**

Gunshots rang out all around them, the thick, billowing smoke the only thing between Geoff and a sure death. He moved fast, threw himself to the ground and rolled away from Lindsay, creating as much distance between each other as they could, like they had discussed. *Get up, get going, I’ll meet you there*. Think of it like a trust exercise.

*Hell of a fucking trust exercise.*

It was the first time they’d called on the Family without the rest of the crew. The others were still very much in the dark in case things fell though. It was safer that way. Geoff swore if they made it through this he’d tell them everything. He wasn’t comfortable keeping so much from them as it was, but it had to be done.

A bullet whizzed past him, so close he swore he felt the breeze and he was briefly reminded he was still far from anything remotely resembling safety. He pulled himself to his feet and ran, heading directly into the rising sun, where he *hoped* there was a boat or chopper or plane or something waiting. He was weighed down by heavy body armour, as was Lindsay, but it didn’t stop them from hauling ass. Anything but a direct hit at close range or a headshot would give them a fighting chance at a getaway. As if to remind him of the fact, a bullet landed square between his shoulders, striking his armour and knocking some of the wind out of him, more from the shock of being hit than the impact itself. Still, he didn’t stop. In the corner of his eye he saw Lindsay keeping pace, movements serpentine and erratic to evade the shots.

He squinted into the sunrise and saw silhouetted figures returning fire. He made a beeline for them. Another smoke grenade sailed over his head, providing cover as he and Lindsay sprinted through the empty parking lot of Humane Labs; a little way ahead of them two others were backing up while returning covering fire into anyone who emerged from the wall of smoke behind them. As they caught up to the others, they turned and ran ahead, leading them towards a small rubber dinghy just off-shore.

To Geoff’s left, a somewhat panicked voice that sounded very much like James gave away how last-minute this plan was, “Oh shit, oh shit, goddamn, why is it so fucking open?”

“Keep those smoke bombs coming!” That voice was unmistakably Bruce, and seconds later more smoke provided dearly needed cover as they negotiated the stretch of beach to the dinghy.

Lindsay had enough momentum to jump the gap and land in the boat, catching her balance, but only just barely in time to prevent her toppling overboard on the other side. Geoff threw himself at the side of the dinghy, landing with a splash in the water and pulling himself over the edge, rolling into the boat.

Bruce and James gave the dinghy a shove to get it off the shore, climbing in un-gracefully, but still managing to spring back to their feet and fire back at their pursuers as they broke through the smokescreen on the beach.

“Elyse, you might want to step on it,” James called out over the din.

Geoff’s eyes finally started to adjust, and he looked up to see James shooting a semiautomatic wildly in the direction from which they’d come. Bruce was taking more calculated shots, crouched next to him. Elyse was at the helm.
“Hi guys…” Elyse greeted them warmly, ignoring the chaos around them. “So, where am I going?”
“I could tell you, but I’m afraid I’d have to kill you,” James joked.
“Alrighty then…” Elyse took off in seemingly no particular direction, more concerned with getting them out of immediate danger.

“Now that was a cunning stunt! Wooo!” Geoff exclaimed, his heart still pounding in his chest. The sounds of gunshots faded behind them, but Geoff knew it was temporary as they would surely be pursued.

“Is everyone ok?” Bruce asked as soon as they were out of range.
Lindsay patted herself down as if to double check, not trusting her senses. “I’m good.”
“I’m fuckin’ out of shape…” Geoff huffed, “but yeah, I’m ok.”

“Sorry we’re late, we had a little company. I guess they figured you might try something like this. Luckily, they didn’t seem to be counting on it and it was just a few snipers. James could take them out.”

James mimed finger guns at them and blew away the imaginary smoke.

“Hot,” Lindsay deadpanned.

“I know, right,” Elyse enthused with a big exaggerated smile and nod that Lindsay couldn’t help laughing at.

Geoff snorted. “I’m just glad you showed up.”

“I still can’t believe you trusted us to,” Bruce shot back.

“Desperate times my friends…”

James smirked as the boat approached the seaplane just outside the bay. “Soo… just for clarification, how desperate are you? Because one of you is getting in the plane… and Bruce has insisted he’s flying.”

* * *

Ryan’s timing was impeccable, materialising in the doorway as if on cue.

“Haven’t you seen enough movies to know?” Ryan taunted as he entered the room, ensuring the Randoms’ attention was fully focused on him and off Michael and Gavin, “…you never wanna get caught monologue-ing.”

The shorter Random’s eyes narrowed, piercing with a look that suggested they wanted nothing more than to put a blade through Ryan’s vital organs. It was a look of seething, vile hatred that most of them could relate to right now.

“I’ll monologue as much as I god damned want once I’ve spilled your guts all over the floor.” The smaller Random pulled off their bandana, no longer caring about concealing their identity – if that was even the purpose to begin with. They readied their knife, like a snake ready to strike.
Ryan’s own blade was sheathed at his hip, but the Random didn’t give him any time to retrieve it, throwing themself at him, lunging for his body, but the knife glanced off Ryan’s heavy body armour and he sidestepped the second slash. Recalculating, the Random adjusted their stance and lunged again, this time grabbing the front of Ryan’s jacket with their left hand, pulling themself in close to Ryan, rather than the other way around, using the size difference to their advantage.

This time the blade struck home, sliding through the joins in the left side of Ryan’s armour, the thickness of it preventing the blade from penetrating too deeply, but the sharp sting of steel sent a shock through Ryan’s body and forced a guttural sound from his throat.

The Random grinned wickedly up at him.

With a sharp intake of breath, Ryan locked his fingers around the wrist of the Random’s weapon hand, pulling it away from himself, using his height to spin it above the Random’s head and twisted them around fully, so that their back was pressed close against his chest, almost as if they were dancing. He pinned their hand against their chest to still their knife and leaned in close to their ear, “Sounds a little clumsy… maybe try *eviscerated*.”

“What?!”

The Random growled and dropped the knife from their right hand into their free waiting left hand and swung backwards, again, barely missing Ryan’s arm and only just scratching his armour. They grunted in frustration, instead throwing an elbow hard into Ryan’s chest and twisted free of his grip, swapping their knife back to their dominant hand.

Ryan sprung backwards, putting himself out of striking distance.

“If you’re gonna monologue,” he explained, “you’ll want a better vocabulary…”

In the corner of his eye, Ryan could see that Jeremy and Trevor were at the door with their guns drawn. Ryan finally acknowledged their presence and flashed them a look. It said: *this is mine.* Jeremy nodded understandingly. He trusted Ryan could do it. Ryan needed to do it. Needed to prove to himself he could.

The smaller Random and Ryan were locked in combat, preventing Jeremy and Trevor from getting a clear shot at the bald one who backed up instinctively, straight into the tray holding the blood collection bags; the over-filled bags falling to the ground. They took another step back, directly onto one of the bags and it split under the heel of their boot, blood spilling over the floor and pooling beneath the chair.

Ryan ignored them; focusing on the more aggressive Random, ready to strike again.

“I’m going to rip out your entrails and make a scarf with them,” the Random spat, “how’s that for vocabulary?”

“There’s room for improvement,” He unsheathed his own knife. “We gonna do this?”

The Random scoffed. “You better believe it, buddy boy. I’ve been *waiting* for this chance.”

A soft scoff from the far side of the room reminded Ryan of the other Random’s presence and it was just enough for them to try to get the jump on him.

The Random faked to the left then came from the right and swung for Ryan’s face. He jumped backwards to dodge, and his back slammed into the wall behind him. He braced himself against the wall and kicked the Random in the gut, throwing them off-balance and winding them; sending them...
sprawling backwards. They caught themselves just before they went crashing into Michael and sprung back at Ryan, who lunged forward to meet them, blade bared. The Random was determined, but Ryan had a longer reach and grabbed the Random’s weapon hand, twisting the blade away from him and yanking their arm towards himself as he thrust his own knife up into their abdomen with his other hand. The Random stopped in their tracks.

They gasped with the impact, coughed involuntarily as the blade tore through their diaphragm and suddenly their breathing stuttered. They could barely more than splutter, frantically panting for breath.

Ryan pulled them in closer, to almost whisper in their ear, dark and menacing. “Is it everything you hoped for?”

The Random coughed a laugh that only succeeded in sounding painful and spraying blood across Ryan’s shoulder. “You bet your ass.”

They gagged and blood ran from the corner of their mouth.

Ryan gave the knife a twist, driving it deeper into their chest, holding them still through their convulsions. Eventually they went limp in his arms.

Meanwhile, the bald Random, was attempting to sneak away when their boot slipped in the blood that had spilled from the bag. As if a light went on in their mind, they immediately grabbed as many of the blood bags as they could, and tore into them with their knife, until only one intact bag remained. One of Gavin’s.

They clutch it to their chest as if it were their own. Their one bargaining chip.

Trevor glanced at Ryan with a slight nod. Ryan returned it and Trevor took careful aim.

“Motherfucker!” The Random yelped as Trevor’s bullet grazed their calf, springing into the air and scooting to put Gavin’s chair between themself and Trevor and Jeremy, who were now attempting to surround them. They were clutching the still-warm blood bag to their chest with one arm, holding their knife against it with their other, threatening to slash it open and spill the precious contents.

Trevor levelled his gun at their head and they moved to strategically stand as close as possible to Gavin to make any shot at them more difficult.

“You don’t wanna do that…” They hissed through clenched teeth. “I can save him.” They nodded towards Gavin who was pale and unconscious in the chair. “Or I can see to it that he dies.” They pressed the knife against the bag, not quite enough pressure to pierce it. “Your choice.”

Everything happened so quickly.

Gavin’s eyes snapped open, his hand flicked to the table and for the first time, Michael noticed he’d managed to wiggle his hands free. He had progressively loosened the grips on his arms since they’d woken up and now he had just enough wiggle room to slip one hand free and swing his arm back to hit the Random’s leg, just near the graze. The Random jumped backwards in shock, the movement causing them to simultaneously slash and drop the blood pack; but it was enough of a distraction for Trevor to leap across and wrestle them into a headlock, Ryan following. The Random struck out with their knife, but it didn’t make contact before Ryan managed to grab their arm and wrench it free of their grip while Trevor kept them still.

Jeremy got to work freeing Michael and Gavin and carefully removed the needles from their arms, wrapping them with bandages to stop the bleeding.
“Gavin, you sneaky asshole!” Michael cried out while Jeremy wrapped his arm. “Are you fucking kidding me?”

Gavin grinned dopily and he stumbled a little over his words before he responded. He wasn’t by any means in a good way, but he wasn’t as close to death as he’d been making out. He’d been playing it up perfectly.

“See? I’m capable of lots of stuff, Michael,” he replied croakily with a smile, “you just gotta trust me.”

“Gavin, you scared the shit outta me, don’t ever do that again.”

Gavin nodded relaxing back in the chair and closed his eyes, seeming to almost instantly drop off to sleep.

Meanwhile, Ryan landed a right hook across the Random’s face; there was a loud crack as it connected with their cheekbone and Ryan shook his hand angrily, like it hurt him almost as much as it hurt them.

*Worth it.*

“Tell us everything you know.”

The Random laughed. “Well, I mean, that might take some time, I am a doctor after al-”

Their snide remark was cut off by a sharp intake of breath as they fought to contain a scream while Ryan twisted their arm into an unnatural position, threatening to snap it like a twig with only a little more pressure.

Ryan flipped their knife in one hand, holding their hand still and splaying their fingers out with his other.

“Let’s start with something a bit more specific then,” he suggested darkly. “How many more of you are there?”

The Random swallowed. “And why should I tell you that?”

Ryan sighed, only half-feigning exasperation. “Look, I’m just gonna start cutting off fingers; when we get to the correct number, say ‘stop’.”

Without hesitation, he angled the knife in such a way that he could make a clean cut through the base of their middle finger.

Incredibly, as the knife drew blood they giggled and stammered, “I don’t have enough fingers…”

Trevor and Jeremy exchanged a worried look before both turned to Ryan, eyes wide.

“Yeah, that’s what I thought,” Ryan said gruffly, loosening his grip on their arm and grimacing at the pain in his side.

Jeremy pulled out his pistol and trained it on the Random and Trevor slowly released them from the headlock and backed off.

They seemed like they might be a little more cooperative now, so Ryan tried again; “Who sent you?”

“Ah, now *that* one’s a little trickier.”
“Better start talking then,” Jeremy cut in, moving closer to better threaten them, but they hardly seemed fazed. Ryan yanked up on their arm again and they winced in pain.

“You’re in deeper than you think,” they gasped, with a hint of a crazed laugh. “You’ve made some very powerful enemies and they have lots of friends who ca-”

“Traitor!” A voice yelled from the doorway.

Ryan froze, his brain seized on the word and it was almost as if he could feel the letters on the back of his neck burning. No.

A shot echoed through the room and the Random teetered backwards, a chunk of their skull suddenly replaced by an explosion of bone and brain matter and red mist. They gasped a few times, shuddered and fell limply to the ground. It immediately snapped Ryan out of it. Reacting instinctively, he threw his knife in the direction of the door; the blade embedding in the wooden frame as footsteps took off running down the hall outside.

“Shit!” Ryan looked at the bloody mess that had been their only solid source of information, feeling a lurching disappointment at how close they’d come to getting some truth, if their own teammates had felt it necessary to take them out.

His eyes fell to the slick pools of blood on the floor, a mixture of the two Randoms’, some of his own and Michael and Gavin’s. He looked up at Gavin and saw him passed out, and the crushing realisation hit him that Gavin’s best chance of survival was now spread thin across the concrete floor.

Jeremy started to take off after the fleeing Random, but Ryan called him back, “Jeremy, no! We gotta get them outta here first. You heard; more are coming.”

Jeremy looked torn, but took one look at Gavin and Michael and nodded. “Yeah, ok.” He immediately got on the radio. “Matt, one just fled, keep your eyes peeled; don’t want a single one of these fucks to get away.”

“Got it,” Matt called back, “no movement out here yet, I’ll keep you posted.”

“Jack, we need evac now, there are more incoming, not sure what to expect, but keep an eye out.”

“Are all the others ok?” Michael asked, his voice harsh and croaky.

“That we know of,” Ryan nodded, replying maybe a little too honestly.

“That’s not…” Michael shook his head a little, about to crack a joke, but feeling dizzy again, he reconsidered. “Yeah, ok, good.”

Michael shifted slowly; he sat forward and the world lurched around him, he swung his legs over the side of the chair and felt his feet contact the earth. When he stood, his legs immediately gave out from under him, crumpling under his weight like paper. Ryan caught him before he fell too far.

Trevor joined him, propping him up on his other side. Michael’s focus was still only on Gavin.

“Gav? Gavin, you with me, boi?”

Gavin made a noise of recognition at his name, but he wasn’t doing well. He was struggling to even move. He might have been playing up how bad he was for the sake of their captors, but now it was evident he wasn’t faking as much of it as Michael had hoped.
Michael steadied himself against Trevor and the chair, “I’m ok, help Gavin.”

Ryan went to Gavin’s side. “C’mere Gavin,” He said as he scooped him up in his arms. He was in no shape to do so, he’d just been stabbed; he’d been pressing one hand against his own bleeding side, but now he used it to hoist Gavin up bridal-style. Gavin’s own arms loosely snaking around his shoulders in an attempt to hold some of his own weight.

“You ok with him, Rye-bread?” Michael asked, still trying in vain to shake off the effects of blood loss.

“It’s fine; my armour took most of it,” Ryan assured him. “I’m ok.”

Jeremy was keeping watch at the door in case the other Random should reappear, or reinforcements arrive.

“We should move, it’s all clear out here. I’ll cover us.”

Ryan nodded, following behind Trevor and Michael with Gavin in his arms.

Jeremy led the way, ever vigilant for the reappearance of the remaining Random. The one with the skull bandana. They made it to the exit they had come in through without incident.

“Where the fuck are they?” Jeremy asked, his anxiety rising.

“Maybe they just made a run for it?” Trevor suggested.

Given the unsettling behaviour of the other two, Ryan doubted it.

“We clear out there, Matt?” Trevor asked through the comms.

“Oh, Trevor, glad to see you’re not dead, man,” Matt replied.

“Thanks?”

“Yeah, looks pretty clear out here, no movement on this side anyway, should have a clear run to the ‘bob. I’ll cover you.”

Jeremy swung the door open and almost instantly a bullet ricocheted off it, dangerously close to his head and he slammed the door shut.

“Fuck!” Jeremy exclaimed. “Matt, what the fuck? What was that?”

“Shit man, I don’t know. Gimme a sec, I don’t think they know I’m here.”

Ryan looked back at Michael, who was still nervously looking at Gavin. They didn’t have much time.

“Oh shit… Guys? Guys, we got company out here… Holy shit dude, there are choppers incoming,” Matt called down from the roof. “You gotta move now.”

Mica responded over the comms, “I see ‘em, Andy, Jack, be ready to get on the guns and give us cover if we need it. You guys get your asses over here now!”

“Matt?” Trevor called, “Got eyes on that shooter?”

“I can’t see anything. I need a point of reference.”
Jeremy seemed to consider his words for a moment, before he nodded.

Ryan recognised the look. “What’s your escape plan here Jeremy?”

“…I don’t have one,” he admitted, “but I have an idea… Matt, I’m expressing ultimate faith in you…”

“What?”

Jeremy flung open the door and ran for it. Another shot ricocheted off the door where he’d been standing only a second earlier.

Ryan froze, staring after Jeremy as he ran, serpentine, across the open field; fighting every instinct to go after him.

A shot that sounded like it had come from not too far away was closely followed by another coming from the roof and then everything went silent.

Ryan watched as Jeremy took a round to the chest and was knocked off his feet from the shock moreso than the impact. Ryan’s heart skipped a beat.

“Oh shit,” Matt’s voice came over the comms. “Got ‘em, got ‘em! You’re clear!”

Without hesitation, Ryan shoved open the door and hurried out still carrying Gavin in his arms, Trevor and Michael following behind them, Matt keeping them covered from the roof. Trevor and Ryan took Michael and Gavin straight to the cargobob.

“Jack, we’ve got incoming, Gavin needs help and Jeremy’s been shot.” Ryan had taken on the same authoritative tone Geoff used. “Matt, get to Jeremy!”

Ryan reached the cargobob and handed Gavin over to Jack and Andy, immediately turning around to go back for Jeremy. Trevor wasn’t far behind him and Matt was at the edge of the roof starting to climb down when his head whipped back around.

“Shit! They’re not dead. Ryan! They’re not dead!” He pointed in the direction of some shrubs near a low wall. The angle such that, even though the sun had now risen enough to illuminate the whole area, Matt wouldn’t have been able to see them take position.

Jeremy was moving, and Trevor and Matt were going for him, so Ryan went after the Random. His side stung, but he ignored it, breaking into a run; he couldn’t risk them taking another shot. As he approached, he could see the skull-faced Random was on the ground, reaching for the rifle they’d shot Jeremy with. It was high-powered and Ryan’s blood ran cold, knowing a shot from it would nearly be enough to shatter his own heavy plate armour; Jeremy’s light Kevlar stood almost no chance of saving him from serious injury. He kicked it out of their reach. They gagged on blood; Matt’s shot had been well-placed in their back, high up so that it had punctured their lung and judging by the way they were crawling, had likely damaged their spinal cord.

They looked up as if only just noticing his presence, their bandana slipping from their face and hood falling away; their large, dark eyes flashing recognition at him.

Ryan was conflicted, he wanted to hurt them for what they’d done to Jeremy, but he was in too much of a hurry and he needed it to end so he made it quick.

He took his knife in one hand and a fistful of their hair in the other and slit their throat.
To his surprise, they smiled warmly back at him, no trace of malicious intent as they managed to
quietly mumble, “Hello…”

He dropped their head and left them to bleed out, rushing back to where Matt and Trevor were
hoisting Jeremy to his feet. The sound of choppers above them grew louder and a line of black vans
approached from the east. Ryan squinted against the rising sun; they looked disturbingly like police
choppers.

“Guys move it, we gotta go!” Mica radioed over the comms.

Together they managed to get Jeremy back to the cargobob, and they all climbed in, frantically
working out what they could do to help.

“Hold on everyone, I’m getting us the fuck outta here!” Mica took off just as men dressed in all black
jumped out of the vans and gunfire erupted around them.

* * *

“Circle around,” Geoff instructed Bruce as soon as the plane was airborne. “I want to try to swing by
Sandy Shores to see if the guys made it out.”

“Damn Geoff, wanna pull a riskier stunt?” Bruce retorted as he obediently brought the plane around.

The seaplane, the Dodo, was tiny and not built for speed or manoeuvrability, but that wasn’t exactly
why Bruce had chosen it. He had a different kind of getaway plan in mind.

Lindsay had gone with Elyse and James in the dinghy; their plan was to head to a boathouse a little
further north and lay low. Geoff and Bruce would act as the bait; they just needed to outrun them
until they got to Mt Chilid, which shouldn’t have been too hard in a plane…

“Oh shit, are those choppers? They’re Buzzards! How the fuck did they get choppers?” Geoff
demanded frantically upon spying the helicopters spreading out in the distance, two heading towards
their position, with at least one other heading in the opposite direction, towards where they were
keeping Michael and Gavin.

“Whoever these guys are, there sure are a lot of them, and you guys’ve pissed them off bigtime.”

Geoff frowned. “These guys are big fucking trouble. We need to figure out how the fuck to take ‘em
down.”

“Right now, we just need to make sure we get out of this in one piece,” Bruce added. “That’d also
be good.”

“I think we might need some help… Can I borrow your phone?”

Bruce dug around in his pocket and handed his phone over. Geoff was briefly distracted by the lock
screen, bearing a photo of the band Sex Swing.

“What?” Bruce asked, raising an eyebrow.

Geoff shook his head. “Nothing… just hadn’t pegged you as a fan.”

He dialled a number he knew he could reach Steffie on and she picked up immediately.
“Gonna need some more backup, the boys too, send whoever’s closest, broadcast the chip information to everyone in the network, we’ll deal with the fallout of that later, I need everyone to be able to watch each other’s backs. Let Jack know what’s up. And Bruce and I are in a Dodo heading toward Chiliad… so if someone would like to help us out too, that’d be awesome.”

Geoff hung up, gave the phone back to Bruce and rubbed his face, feeling the effects of sleep deprivation hitting him, knowing full well he’d be pumping adrenaline in just a few minutes.

“This is stressful as dicks.”
“Still wanna swing past Sandy Shores?” Bruce swivelled his head to see the choppers gaining on them.

“Fuck no,” Geoff exclaimed. “Head north, put as much distance between us and them as possible, try to lead them away from the others.”

“You got it.”

The Dodo was not proving to be the best getaway vehicle. It didn’t take long for them to catch up. Once the Buzzards were within range, there was little they could do to avoid the onslaught. They took heavy fire and before long one of the engines was burning out. Geoff looked out his window and saw flames licking along the edge of the wing.

“Bruce! We’re on fire!”

“It’s just a little bit of fire!”

“God, you sound so much like Jack right now…” Geoff sighed and checked his seatbelt was secure, picking up a grenade launcher from the duffel bag at his feet before securing the strap of the bag to the leg of the seat.

Bruce gave him a funny look as he banked hard to avoid the incoming gunfire. Geoff smirked and swung open the side door of the Dodo, kicking it hard as he did so. Combined with the force of the wind resistance, it was enough to tear the door off its hinges. Wind ripped through the cockpit.

“Geoff? …little exposed there, aren’t you?”

“You know what they say about making an omelette…”

“God, I hate omelettes.”

Geoff chuckled, taking aim with the grenade launcher. “Yeah. That.”

He took a shot at the nearest Buzzard, the grenade streaking towards it, only to strike the very outer edge of the rotor blade and surprisingly, not explode on impact, but get thrown back a short distance before detonating.

“Oh, come on!” Geoff yelled in frustration as the Buzzard was rocked by the blast, but relatively unharmed. “What kind of bullshit was that? That should’ve hit them!”

“Geoff? Uh, Geoff?” Bruce was looking behind him again, transfixed on something in the distance. “What the fuck is that?”

Geoff turned around to see a fully armoured, fully armed, sleek military helicopter.

“Oh good,” he commented casually, taking aim with the grenade launcher and this time missing completely, the Buzzard having dropped just out of range for safety. “About time.”

Bruce blinked disbelievingly. “That’s a goddamned flying gunship Geoff!”

Geoff laughed a slow, deliberate chuckle that said, ‘I know…”
“Wait, are they on our side?”

Geoff giggled and nodded. “It’s our chopper.”

“Where the hell’d you pick up one of those?”

Geoff grinned. “Ryan’s been saving it, keeping it in a warehouse he didn’t think I used. Found it when he disappeared. So, I might’ve loaned it out it be useful.”

“You’re kidding?” Bruce gave him an incredulous look that somehow managed to simultaneously say ‘that’s not cool’ and ‘I would’ve done the same thing’.

“Look, I know the guy’s been though a lot, but he’s also been hoarding a fucking Valkyrie! Besides, he’s gonna be fucking thankful I found it when it saves all our asses.”

Bruce banked sharply – as sharply as the Dodo would allow anyway – to move out of the potential line of fire.

“Who’s flying it?” Bruce suddenly realized. “…and why didn’t you offer it to us?”

Geoff smirked and tapped into the radio. “Craig, Bolen, can you guys hear me?”

“Loud and clear, Geoffrey!” Bolen’s voice returned over the radio.

Geoff turned to Bruce. “I don’t trust you guys not to crash it.”

Bruce looked like he was about to protest but thought better of it. “Ok, that’s probably fair.”

“Craig, call in with Jack and Mica first,” Geoff instructed over the radio, “they’re gonna need some help getting clear.”

Craig scoffed in reply, “They, at least, are armed, you guys are sitting ducks… Or flying ducks, or Dodos, or whatever, but we’ll see what we can do about these guys first.”

Geoff watched on as the Valkyrie swooped in on the Buzzards heading towards them. That thing was fast. And armoured. And the 40mm cannon capable of firing explosive rounds definitely gave it a bit of an edge.

Geoff suspected the Attack boys were going to have a hard time giving it back… so long as they didn’t manage to destroy it first.

Geoff and Bruce watched as it annihilated the tail rotor of the Buzzard closest to them and put it in a spin. Another of the explosive rounds impacted the body and it burst into flames and dropped like a rock from the sky. The second swerved away and looked like it was making a run for it. A wise decision.

“Nicely done! Now go help the guys, I’ll get Steffie to patch everyone through to the comms.”

“Cheers, Geoff,” Bolen confirmed, “we’ll circle back for the sweep after we get some of the heat off the lads.”

“Good luck boys.”

They watched as the Valkyrie took off southwest to intercept the Buzzard closing on the crew’s cargobob. Geoff hoped they’d be ok.
“So, you’ve got a plan from here, right?”

“As soon as we fly over the peak, we’re gonna bail. If I angle her right, she should cruise for a bit and that’ll buy us time to get the hell out of sight,” Bruce explained as they headed towards Mt Chiliad.

“Then where?”

“You know Donkey Punch Family Farm?”

Geoff rolled his eyes. “Fuckin’ sounds like a name the boys’d come up with…”

“It’s a front,” Bruce confessed with a shrug. “Elyse and James came up with the name.”

Geoff nodded, less than surprised. “Figures.”

“The barn’s one of our better kept secrets.” Bruce grinned, before growing serious again. “Also, if any of the boys are seriously hurt, we’ll send them to the Altruist camp.”

“You’re kidding, the nudist hippies?”

“Well… technically they’re more like nudist cultists… And they seem to follow Peake. No one’s really sure why.”

“Not even Peake?”

Bruce laughed, “Especially not Peake. He has no fucking clue… but they have medics and they’re pretty good. Not to mention no one wants anything to do with them. So that’s another of our better-kept secrets.”

“No shit,” Geoff muttered. “I need your phone again.”

Bruce handed it over and Geoff dialled Steffie again.

“Steffie, need a sitrep on the boys, are they injured?” There was a long pause and Geoff’s face fell. “Shit. Thanks.” He hung up, face grim and white. “We’re going straight to the camp. I wanna meet them there.”

Bruce looked worried, but he didn’t argue.

Geoff absently chewed his thumbnail. “Hey, if we survive this, remind me to give Steffie a raise.”

* * *

The cargobob was airborne, but there were choppers and ground teams in pursuit… not to mention the gangs that would shortly be onto them.

“Do we have everybody?” Mica demanded from the front.

Andy looked around and did a quick head-count. “Yeah, everyone’s here.”

“What’s their status, how we doing back there?” Mica was relaying information back to Steffie on another channel.
Jack was hunched over Gavin, checking him over. “They’ve nearly bled him dry, we can get his fluids up, but he really needs blood. Michael too, but at least he’s conscious. How’s Jeremy? Where was he shot?”

Matt and Trevor had laid him out on the floor of the cargobob next to Gavin and Michael. His eyes were closed and there was a tear in his blazer right over his heart.

Andy crouched over him, but Ryan nearly pushed them all out of the way to get to Jeremy, pulling open his horrendously purple jacket and pulling up his shirt to reveal armour – not the light armour he usually sported, but heavy plate armour like his own. The bullet – or what remained of it – was still lodged deep in the plate over his heart, which was now severely cracked.

Ryan immediately breathed a sigh of relief. He had taken hits like this before, and while they hurt like hell – he’d probably have an impressive and painful bruise later – it was survivable. He cut away the armour vest with his still-bloody knife and threw it aside, where Trevor immediately picked it up to examine it. The round had barely broken skin, but already the area was red and swelling. Ryan pressed his ear to Jeremy’s chest and heard the reassuring whoosh of air into his lungs and a strong heartbeat. Ryan ran a hand through Jeremy’s hair and over his head, trying to check for any signs of a head injury, feeling for bumps or lacerations.

Jeremy’s eyes flickered open and he immediately grimaced in pain.

“Hey Ryan,” Jeremy said quietly. “Chumbawamba.”

Ryan relaxed a little and he clapped a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder, the side he hadn’t just been shot. “Jeremy, you are a god damned hero.”

“I learned it from you,” he muttered weakly with a slight laugh, as he lay his head back down, wincing in pain again.

That sat uncomfortably with Ryan.

“Yeah, well, thank god you finally upgraded your armour.”

Next to Jeremy, Michael was trying to sit up.

“…Gavin?” Michael’s voice was unsteady.

To be fair, none of them were in what could be considered good condition.

“He needs blood, he’s critically low – fluids will get the pressure up, but he needs blood to carry oxygen or he could end up with brain dam-“ Jack couldn’t bring himself to think of Gavin like that, he didn’t want to put the image in anyone else’s mind. “He could go into a coma.”

Ryan nodded, understanding, but not entirely absorbing all the new information; his brain still screaming at him to do more, do something. “What can we do?”

“What’s his blood type?” Trevor asked Michael, his brow furrowing.

Michael looked lost and shook his head. “Fucked if I know.”

“Alright, then Matt, what’s your blood type?”

Matt squeezed his eyes shut, trying to remember, “Um, AB, I think?”

Trevor shook his head. “That’s not good, he’d have to be AB too, we need an O negative to be sure,
and even then, there are issues of MHC incompatibility to con…”

“I’m O,” Ryan interrupted.

“O what?” Trevor asked, a little startled, “Positive or negative? That’s the more important part.”

“I don’t know,” Ryan admitted, annoyed. “But if we don’t do something right now, he’s going to die. Unless someone here knows his blood type or they’re whatever type you need, this could be our best shot.”

“Ryan, you’re bleeding, you can’t…”

“Watch me,” Ryan growled, a little too aggressively.

“Ryan, we can’t afford to lose you again,” Jack said plainly.

That hurt. But he knew losing Gavin would hurt them more.

“It’s just a flesh-wound.” He pulled his hand away from the slowly seeping red stain on his side. It did look like the bleeding had slowed, but it was probably far deeper than he cared to admit. The little bastard had done a number on him… he had a sneaking suspicion he’d be pissing blood later. “I’ll tap out before I pass out.”

“No!” Jack snapped. “Not this time Ryan. Sit the fuck down and when we get to wherever the hell we’re going you’re gonna get stable and then, maybe, you can help Gavin. He’s only just lost consciousness, right?”

“Yeah, but-” Ryan started.

“Ryan, sit down and shut up. We don’t need to do this now, there’s time. And besides, you can’t help if you’re dead…” Jack’s eyes focused on something outside the cargobob and narrowed. “But you can help keep them off our tail.” He nodded out the side door to the two approaching choppers.

They were out of range, but they were bad news. Especially because they looked heavily armed. Ryan found his nerves redirected yet again.

“Hey Jack, Mica… anybody?” Kovic’s voice came over the comms.

“Adam?” Mica replied.

“Hey! There you are!”

“What are you doing here? Why are you in our comms?” Mica demanded as she took the cargobob higher to clear the incoming gunfire.

“Geoff got Steffie to broadcast your comm lines and GPS tracking details, told us you guys needed a hand. So here I am,” Kovic explained. “Geoff’s with Bruce by the way, they uh… they’re doing ok, from what I’ve heard – and James and Elyse are with Lindsay, they’re laying low.”

“Alright then, so is there a plan? I got some real injured boys in the back.”

There was a pause from Adam and one of the vans following them below suddenly exploded, a glaringly bright orange supercar rapidly catching up to them.

“Sorry, just dealing with some things down here…” Adam said coolly.
Mica let out a nervous giggle. “I think I can see that…”

“Oh good, you can see us? The orange Zentorno?”

“Yeah, I can definitely see you. That’s kinda hard to miss.”

Jack and Ryan, listening over the comms, leaned out the side to see what they were talking about. Lawrence was half hanging out the passenger side window throwing sticky bombs on every van they passed as they sped along Calafia Rd at breakneck speed, zipping in and out of vans and explosions. It looked fun.

“Yeah, head up to the Altruist camp – Peake’s got a medical setup there. What I’m gonna need you to do is drop the guys off and take the cargobob back towards Paleto Bay, that should give Geoff and Bruce time to do what they need to do and whoever’s in the flying gunship up there time to do their thing and hopefully clean up.”

“Flying gunship?” Jack asked, leaning out to look behind them. “Wait, they’re on our side?”

“Hey guys!” A voice that Ryan recognised as Craig – one of the Attack gang came over the comms, “we heard you needed some help, just do us a favour and don’t shoot us down, ok?”

“Craig? What the hell?” Jack asked bewildered.

“No time to explain, we’ll get some of the heat off you and then we’re circling back for Geoff and Bruce.”

“Is that a Valkyrie?” Ryan asked, squinting into the distance, “Where the fuck did you get a Valkyrie?”

“Geoff said we could borrow it,” Craig replied nonchalantly over the sound of rapid heavy machine gunning.

It took Ryan a minute to put it together, “Wait… is that… that’s my Valkyrie?”

“Geoff said it was the Crew’s…”

“God damn it Geoff, that’s my Valkyrie! I was saving that!” Ryan yelled in frustration more to himself than anyone.

“Saving it for what?” Jack asked.

Ryan shrugged helplessly, feeling the pinch from his wound in his side. “Y’know…”

“Ryan, if it makes you feel any better, I’ll try not to crash it, ok?” Bolen added, interrupting.

“Thanks,” Ryan replied, “I’d appreciate that.”

* * *

Geoff and Bruce cruised along at a top speed that felt far too slow for comfort. Admittedly though, it was quite picturesque. The explosion of the attack chopper as it was shot down by Craig and Bolen in the Valkyrie painted the sky in pretty bursts of red and orange, and black smoke contrasted against the clear pale morning sky. On the road below, Kovic and Lawrence were wreaking havoc on the convoy tailing them, leaving behind a trail of destruction that left the roads near un-drivable and with
any luck, would dissuade rival gangs from following them.

“Well, this was less than ideal. Why would they try this in broad daylight?” Geoff puzzled, scratching his head.

“Well I’m tired as shit,” Bruce confessed, “not used to getting up at the ass crack of dawn, so there’s that. They probably weren’t expecting shit to go down this way, so that’s another thing. And it makes it harder for us to get away…”

“But they’re exposing themselves just as much… What the fuck kind of sense does that make?”

Geoff was doing that thing again, redirecting brainpower to processing the problem in the background. All the clues were there, he just needed to sort them out.

Bruce shrugged and shook his head. He twisted in his seat to glance behind them. They were still being tailed, and now there were more choppers incoming from Los Santos.

“Wait, are those fucking cops?” Bruce squinted into the distance, just able to glimpse the patterns on the choppers. “What are they getting involved for?”

“Something about all of this is real fucking fishy.”

They were almost at the peak of Chiliad, preparing to jump. Both had pre-emptively put on their parachutes and they could follow the descent of the mountain directly to the Altruist camp. With a bit of luck, the gliding plane would be enough of a distraction for them to drift at least most of the way there before they’d have to cut away their parachutes to avoid being seen.

Bruce’s phone buzzed with a text and Geoff immediately opened it, recognising the number as Steffie’s.

It just read: Inbound LSPD choppers. CC’s taking care of it.

Geoff laughed.

“What?” Bruce asked.

“We’re probably not going to have to worry about those cops… pretty soon they’re gonna be flying over Cow Chop’s range.”

“Those crazy bastards.”

“Shame we’re about to miss it,” Geoff added with a smirk as he watched the peak pass beneath them and Bruce jam the controls, “gonna be a hell of a fireworks show.”

* * *

“You guys are clear for now, drop the boys and get the cargobob out of there,” Adam instructed Mica from the ground, no longer leading a convoy of black vans, but speeding away from a pile of black wreckage. “Find a safe place to ditch it wherever you can and then head up to Donkey Punch Family Farm, you know the one?”

“You’re kidding…” Mica rolled her eyes, you could almost hear it over the comms. “…boys.”

“Actually, that was mostly Elyse’s doing…” Lawrence corrected.
Mica shook her head, as she began the descent. “Who’s with me?” She called into the back of the cargobob.

Andy’s head popped into view. “I’m gonna help unload them, then I’ll go with you.”

“Trevor and I aren’t injured, so we’ll stay with you too. We should team up just in case they do end up following us,” Matt added.

Mica looked briefly relieved that she wouldn’t be on her own, before the cool air of control was back.

They touched down and Jack, Trevor, Andy and Matt helped to unload the injured Jeremy, Michael, Ryan and Gavin, and get them inside a small cabin to where Peake was waiting amidst a crowd of seemingly random men in surgical scrubs. They laid Gavin in one of the cots and Michael took the spot next to him. Ryan and Jeremy sat down on the cot on the other side of Gavin and tried to stay out of the way, letting the medical team – or whatever they were – tend to Gavin first.

Jack stayed with the lads and Ryan, while Andy, Trevor and Matt ran back to the cargobob, just as Kovic and Lawrence arrived.

Adam and Lawrence hurried inside to escape the cloud of dust kicked up by their Zentorno and the touchdown of the cargobob, exchanging a nod with the leaving crew on the way.

“Glad to see you made it,” Adam commented, looking genuinely happy to see them.

“How the fuck did you find us?” Jack asked as Peake’s surgical team bustled around Michael and Gavin, checking their drips and replacing them with blood bags they’d seemingly had on hand, measuring their blood pressure and doing other various monitoring things. They kept trying to check Ryan’s bleeding side, but Ryan kept swatting them away from him, directing their attention to the lads. He insisted he could wait.

Adam held up his phone to show a crude flashing dot on a map. “Michael’s tracking chip.”

“Shit, Geoff broadcast that?”

“Yeah, you might want to nip that in the bud right here,” Lawrence suggested. “Don’t want that kind of information falling into the wrong hands.”

Ryan had already gotten his knife out and was looking around as if looking for something to sterilise the blade.

“Jesus, Ryan, c’mon man, we’re in a freaking surgery!” Adam rolled his eyes, gesturing to the space around them. A man tending Gavin shouted something unintelligible.

“What was that?” Michael asked, sitting upright, despite protestations from one of the men connecting his IV for transfusion. “What does that mean?”

“Gavin,” Peake said simply, pushing past everyone to get to the lad who was still unconscious despite being freshly hooked up to an infusion of apparently O negative blood. He took a stethoscope from one of the men … medics or nurses or cultists or whatever they were… and listened for a heartbeat.

“Compressions,” he instructed and without question, the man obeyed.

Peake took Gavin’s wrist and frowning, felt for a pulse. Michael, Jeremy, Ryan and Jack watched on
nervously in silence. It felt like it went on forever, but in reality, it was probably only a few minutes. Michael’s eyes went wide, his face went pale and for a moment he thought he was going to throw up. Gavin wasn’t breathing. His heart wasn’t beating.

He tried to remember the last thing he’d said to him…

Michael’s words came out babbling, choked. “Not again… No, no, no, no, no… Gav-”

Jack held his shoulders gently.

Ryan and Jeremy exchanged a fretful look.

Peake let go of Gavin’s wrist and stepped up. He adjusted the flow controller on the IV drip; pushed the other man aside and took over compressions. He looked at Michael, the expression on his face calm but determined. “You should know better than most; when life tries to steal something from you…”

He looked back down at Gavin and continued the rhythmic compressions, pressing down more forcefully on Gavin’s chest.

A few seconds later, Gavin gasped a breath.

“…sometimes you have to steal it back.”
Gavin awoke with a gasp, sitting up slightly and looking at Peake standing over him, then to the drip in his arm. He slowly moved as if to try to take it out, still confused after what he’d been through, thinking he was still at the mercy of the Randoms. He swayed and slumped back, Peake’s hand gently pressing him back to lie down.

“We’re putting it back in. You still need blood,” Peake explained.

“Huh?” Gavin blinked a few times, still looking around confused. “You’re… putting it back?”

“…just needed your heart to be pumping for that to work.”

“Did I…? …I …died?” Gavin’s voice was thick, weighted with lethargy and confusion.

Peake was unfazed. “Kinda…”

A funny sort of amused grin came over Gavin’s face, not the kind you’d expect from someone being told they had just cheated death.

He snorted a giggle and muttered, “Maybe not, Ray; not quite…”

Ray? Ryan looked at Jeremy, then Michael. Jeremy mustn’t have heard him, or not picked up on it, but Michael looked heartbroken. It took a few moments for Ryan to make the connection, but when he did, it hit him like a hammer.

‘Tell Vav I said YOLO.’ …Ray’s dying words.

Michael finally relaxed and laid back down on the next cot over. “Jesus, Gavin, please, I’ve said it before but please, never scare me like that again.”

“Sorry boi, didn’t mean to do you a frighten…” Gavin said dopily, rolling his head sideways to look at him.

Michael slowly smiled and giggled, some colour returning to his cheeks. “You did Gav, you did me a frighten.” The relief in his voice was clear.

Ryan finally allowed himself a moment’s pause to take stock of his own injuries. He immediately noticed the pain in his side – not that it had gone anywhere, and it definitely didn’t feel like it had subsided at all, but he’d been able to deprioritise it. That wasn’t an option anymore and he leaned back with a groan, moving his hand away from the wound to reveal probably a lot more blood than anyone had been expecting. Himself included.

“Oh,” he said simply, a few heads turning to look as he nudged Jeremy out of the way slightly to lie back on the cot, instantly feeling the combined effects of shock and sleep deprivation; his vision growing hazy and filling with swimming black dots.

“Ryan? Help! Someone…” Jeremy’s voice faded out with the rest of the world as he slipped into some place between existing and nothingness.

It was peaceful for a moment. But when he returned, it was to bright light and pain.
Ah yes, this seems familiar, the voice in his head taunted, the sweet sting of failure.

Hardly a failure. We’ve still got everyone. We got the boys back.

He hadn’t let his need for revenge get the better of him. He easily could’ve chased after the skull-faced Random when Jeremy took off after her, but instead he’d opted to get Michael and Gavin out. That was a step in the right direction…

It nearly cost Jeremy. If you’d chased her down, he might not have gotten shot.

There was no way to know that, I did the best I could with what I had.

He looks up to you, poor, dumb kid. If he hadn’t been wearing armour…

Don’t do this. Snap out of it Haywood. We’re fine. Everyone’s ok.

But for how long?

…Well, that was always the question, wasn’t it?

For now.

The first real voice Ryan heard was Geoff’s and it made him blink and squint to try to refocus his eyes, but they refused, so he let them fall shut again and just listened. He couldn’t quite make out what Geoff was saying. He felt a gentle tugging at his left side followed by a sting and more tugging. Someone was stitching his wound. They must have given him something for the pain, while it still hurt, it wasn’t anywhere near as bad as it should have been.

“Ryan? We gotcha buddy…” Jeremy’s voice sounded muffled again. “Chumbawamba.”

Ryan smiled with recognition, but before he knew it, he was out once more.

* * *

It was dark and cool when Ryan woke again. It was like everything had had the volume turned down. The pain was still present, but mild, his head still chattered away, but it was in hushed whispers now. All the hard edges seemed softer.

Morphine was a wonderful thing sometimes.

He opened his eyes and blinked a few times, letting his eyes adjust. He wasn’t in the makeshift medical centre anymore. Soft moonlight flooded through a wide dusty window, illuminating what looked like a large bedroom, almost dorm-like with five beds along one wall and one more at the far end against the opposite wall nearest to the door. Yellow light spilled through the door that had been left ajar, and Ryan could hear soft voices nearby. From the outside, the camp had looked like it was in total disrepair, but inside everything so far seemed highly liveable. It was a great cover. To his right, a Jeremy-sized lump occupied the bed next to him, while to his left, a mop of Michael’s unkempt auburn hair stuck out from under the blanket, and in the next bed over, Gavin was curled up like a cat and making some kind of not-quite-snoring humming noises. The far beds were empty, but the sheets were disturbed. Probably where Geoff and Jack had been sleeping. If they could even sleep. He had half a mind to get up and try to find them, find out what had happened, but he wasn’t
sure if his body could physically handle it. He felt that uncomfortable sense of uselessness that he’d become familiar with while he was cooped up in the penthouse, starting to eat away at him again. He sternly reminded himself there was nothing more to be done for it and thankfully the voice of protest was too sleepy in his head to put up much resistance.

Next to him, Michael stirred, pulling the blankets down and rolling onto his side to face Ryan. He looked exhausted and sickly pale, but he smiled to see Ryan awake.

“Hey Rye-Bread.”

“Hey,” he croaked back. “You look like shit. Have you slept?”

“Hey, thanks man,” Michael said, making an attempt to shrug, “and depends how you’d define sleep…”

“Have you heard from Lindsay? She was with Geoff, is everything ok?”

“Yeah,” he smiled. “She’s with the others someplace safe.”

Gavin was still making quiet whimpering noises and Ryan peered over Michael’s shoulder to see him twitch. “How’s Gavin?”

“He’s hanging in there. He’s tougher than we give him credit for.” He said it with a sad smile and more than hint of affection and what Ryan recognised as pride. “Lil J’s doing fine as well. Everyone’s ok.”

Ryan looked at him sceptically. “How are you holding up?”


Ryan cringed. “You heard what Gavin said?”

Michael nodded and blinked hard a few times, as if discouraging tears. “I thought it was going to happen again. I thought I was going to have to watch Gavin die.” He let out a long, shaky sigh and rolled onto his back. “I was fucking scared.”

Ryan nodded. Ray had died in Michael’s arms. How close had he come to that happening again… Michael was usually protective of Gavin, the two were virtually inseparable as it was, but after Ray’s death, Michael had been constantly vigilant. What Ryan had gone through was one thing, but to be taken with someone who could be used against you? To watch them suffer with you? Things could have gone so much worse. Ryan didn’t envy his position.

“It’s ok.” Ryan remembered what Geoff had said to him after everything, he didn’t feel like he could be as supportive; he felt just as lost himself. “You don’t have to be ok…”

“Good, because I’m not!” Michael snapped abruptly, causing Gavin to stir slightly. He waited until Gavin was settled again before he went on, glaring at Ryan. “You’re about to start doing that thing again, I can tell.”

“What thing?” Ryan asked, taken a little aback.

“You’re the biggest hypocrite sometimes, Ryan.”

“What did I do?”

Michael shook his head. “You act like it’s ok to talk about it and never say anything yourself. It’s
always ‘I’m fine’ with you, even when you’re clearly not fine.”

Ryan bit his lip and looked away, before a sad kind of smirk crossed his face. “Look, sometimes it’s just a case of: do what I say, not what I do…”

Michael breathed a laugh and shook his head. “Well at least I’m not going anywhere.” There was a trace of contempt in his voice. “Why did you leave? You didn’t say anything….”

Ryan chewed his lip again.

“Geoff didn’t show you the report?”

Michael nodded. “Yeah, but that shit wasn’t your fault. You didn’t have to leave.”

Ryan ran a hand over his face, only just now realising his face paint had been washed off. “Yeah, I did. I can’t control what’s going on in my head sometimes. Shadowlz had the same thing. He shot his partner for it… and I stabbed Jeremy… He said we weren’t so different…” He sounded hurt. “He was right.”

“No, he wasn’t.”

Geoff’s voice came from the doorway, just loud enough for them to hear him without disturbing Gavin. Jack was standing just behind him.

“Geoff?” Ryan asked, waiting for clarification.

Geoff stepped inside and sat on the end of one of the empty beds. “The report was fake. It was a deliberate attempt to get to you. They had profilers make up some bullshit to try to fuck with your head and throw us off the track.”

“How do you...?” Ryan started but Geoff cut him off.

“I’ll tell you everything all together in the morning. I don’t wanna repeat myself fifty fucking times, so get some sleep.”

“But…”

“In the morning, Ryan.”

Ryan huffed, but lay back, folding his arms behind his head and staring up at the ceiling.

* * *

The next morning, the “cult of Peake” members had prepared a breakfast of eggs, oats and fruit… which seemed to be their staple diet. The crew were left alone, seated around a large wooden table in the same cabin they had slept in; most of them on their second helping of breakfast and painfully disappointed at the lack of caffeinated beverages. All of them were shaken, bruised and sore, but
rested and grateful to be alive.

Gavin and Michael were both still very pale.

“I feel hungover,” Gavin complained, “it’s awful.”

Michael nodded. “Helps to eat something, Gav.”

Gavin scowled and stirred the oats distastefully, but eventually gave in and ate them.

Ryan was agitated; his stitches itched and he was preoccupied thinking about what Geoff had said during the night.

“Peake was pretty worried about your kidneys, Ryan,” Jack explained. “Couldn’t find any sign of damage, but still, if you find yourself pissing blood at any stage, that’s something you should get checked out.”

Ryan frowned. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Yeah,” Jeremy added, between bites of apricot, “looked like the little fucker who stabbed you was really gunning for ‘em.”

Ryan was a little confused, poking at the tear where the knife has slashed his still-bloody T-shirt – he could probably stitch that up – to see the bandaged area where he’d been stabbed. It took him a moment to realise why that sounded both funny and familiar.

“Oh yeah!” He laughed. “Jokes on them. I don’t have a left kidney.”

It was met with confused looks and blank faces.

“What do you mean: you don’t have a left kidney?” Jack asked incredulously.

Gavin looked confused. “Can you live with just one kidney?”

“Gee, what do you think, Gavin?” Michael asked in frustration.

“I mean, apparently you can,” Ryan said, raising his eyebrows but taking pity on Gavin as he laughed at his own stupidity.

“How is it that we’ve known you for so long and yet we’re still finding out new things about you?” Geoff asked, looking completely puzzled.

Ryan shrugged. “It’s never come up.”

Gavin and Jeremy giggled, and Geoff and Michael shook their heads in unison.

“Anyway, we’re all still here,” Geoff announced, “and more or less in one piece.”

“The proverbial cockroaches that we are,” Ryan interrupted.

“Despite their best attempt so far to get to us. And I have a feeling it’s not going to be their last. These guys are more determined than ever, and I think we might finally be able to get an idea of what’s going on.”

“First of all, fill us all in on what we missed,” Michael said, pushing his now-empty bowl away from him and leaning in. “Last thing I remember, Gavin and I went out and got jumped, and suddenly
Ryan’s back and we can’t go home…”

Geoff, Jack and Jeremy tag-teamed telling the story, filling Michael and Gavin in on the events leading up to their rescue. Michael was understandably less-than-impressed to hear of Lindsay’s involvement, especially in a role that essentially boiled down to “bait”.

“Look, it was her idea!” Geoff insisted.

“Of course it was!” Michael rolled his eyes, but he meant it genuinely. Geoff had already explained she was fine and back with the rest of the support crew, working out what their next move was.

“Anyway… we played along and went to the rendezvous point. Most of their firepower was concentrated there. This time it was more than a few rag-tag ex-gang members… these guys seemed almost military; could’ve been mercenaries, but maybe some other kind of training… But you’ll never fucking guess who else was there.”

“Who?” Ryan asked without hesitation.

“Shadowlz’s brother,” Geoff said flatly. “Fucker lied to us… or didn’t lie to us, or… whatever. Point is; he does have a twin and he’s still alive and involved in all this somehow. He faked his death and his brother wasn’t in on it, left him thinking we were responsible. Made him think he was crazy. Shadowlz didn’t have whatever it was they said he had. They planted forged records – still have no idea how they’d manage to do that…”

Ryan’s mind raced. So how much had been a lie? He had a brother, he’d faked his death, been completely erased from the system, managed to get forged records back into LSPD hands for Adam to get them back to him and then what…? What was the next step there? He shivered as he recalled his initial reaction to the report. When Geoff had found him that evening on top of the Maze bank.

They had almost won then. If Geoff hadn’t arrived when he did…

“…they had a big team ready to put up a fight, looks like we were right to call it how we did. Which also means they know we wouldn’t give up Lindsay without a fight.”

“God damned right,” Michael snorted in agreement.

Ryan felt like he’d glossed over something important, but he was too shaken to focus on it. Digging would have to wait.

Gavin pushed on, “so that was your plan? Just the two of you walk blindly into a trap?”

“Pretty much…” Geoff smirked. “We needed to see what we were up against. Remember the first time we encountered them – they couldn’t work together – our strength was our teamwork… this was different. The guys that were waiting for Lindsay – waiting for us to try to take them head-on, they knew what the fuck they were doing, even had jammers to block our comms – our strength this time was that we got the drop on them. They weren’t expecting the extended family. They were prepared for an ambush, not an extraction.”

“The team at the storage shed were mercenaries,” Michael noted, nodding, “they were saying how we inspired them. They were probably hired for the same reason.”

“This time we were supposed to be meeting them on their terms, that’s why the mercenaries. Back at the warehouse it was probably a last-minute scramble, they weren’t ready for Ryan to get caught,” Jeremy observed, cringing a little at how bluntly the last part came out. “Luckily we were still one step ahead of them this time because of the tracking chips.”
Michael held up his bandaged arm where Peake’s team must have removed the chip the day before. “Just remember that’s not an option anymore, ok?”

“But it was just luck,” Ryan reiterated, following Jeremy’s logic. “We’re gonna have to be a lot more careful from here on out.”

The others all nodded in agreement.

Geoff slapped the table. “Well, the good news is, the network’s functional and the Family came through.”

“That was one hell of a trust exercise, Geoff.” Jack shook his head.

Geoff snorted. “Fuckin’ tell me about it… I hope the Cow Chop boys didn’t have too much trouble with the cops.”

“Wait, the cops got involved?” Jeremy’s eyes narrowed, “They never get involved in shit like this. Not when it’s so far out of the city.”

You’ve made some very powerful enemies and they have lots of friends… The Random’s words sprung to Ryan’s mind.

“They would’ve had to be bloody quick to respond too,” Gavin pointed out.

Jack nodded. “And they weren’t messing around, either; they had attack choppers up there.”

Jeremy and Michael both tried to talk over the top of each other and Ryan temporarily lost focus on the conversation, trying to collate his thoughts into something coherent…

They’d been able to get into the LSPD records, they were more organised, hired mercenaries, the cops had gotten involved and not deterred them in the slightest. Ryan leaned into the table with both elbows, massaging his temples with his fingertips. Again, the Random’s words resonated in his head, ‘You’ve made some very powerful enemies and they have lots of friends…’ What if somehow, they had some kind of immunity? What if that’s why the cops were getting involved? If the gang was truly ‘random’ that wouldn’t be possible…

“So… hear me out on this…” Ryan reasoned aloud, interrupting the conversation, but feeling the niggling sensation he was onto something. The others fell silent, usually an opening line like that was the start of a bad idea, but they were willing to listen to anything at this stage.

“…they hire mercenaries, they infiltrate the LSPD to plant forged records…” Ryan explained, “That means they’re not ‘headless’ after all… there has to be some method, something that directs them, unites them, they had to start somewhere… like, kind of like… Fight Club.”

“Fight Club?” Jeremy raised an eyebrow.

“Please tell me you’ve seen Fight Club?” Geoff rolled his eyes at him.

“I have seen Fight Club,” Jeremy assured him.

“It’s a great example,” Ryan explained, “One guy starts it, says to keep it quiet, ‘first rule of fight club’ and all that; doesn’t spread it actively, just plants the seed… after a while there are clubs all over the country, and then it doesn’t take long before they go from a place to take out your frustrations by beating the shit out of some guy you barely know…”
“…to waging class warfare and coordinated attacks bringing down financial institutions.” Jack nodded. “You’re right. This isn’t a flash mob anymore, this is Project Mayhem. Shadowlz was Robert Paulson.”

“His name was Robert Paulson,” Jeremy, Michael and Gavin muttered in eerie almost-unison.

“So, who the fuck is behind this then?” Michael wondered.

“Shadowlz?” Gavin suggested hesitantly, “his brother?”

“Nah, this is bigger than them, they’re there for the same reason as the rest of them – like those Randoms we rejected, they have a personal vendetta,” Ryan answered, reasonably confident in his assessment.

“No. Who wants us out of this city more than anyone? Who’s always wanted us dead? Who’s never been able to do it?” Geoff asked, the look on his face suggesting he’d already figured out the answer.

“Uh, everyone?” Jack answered.

“The fucking cops.”

It took a moment to sink in.

“What if it’s come from within the system itself?” Geoff reasoned. “Turn the gangs in on one another; use them to take each other down. Give them enough information to do some actual damage. They don’t have to act within the law anymore. They don’t have to worry about protecting their image.”

“We gotta get that through to Lindsay, get ‘em to start digging into the LSPD files,” Michael said.

Ryan piped up, “I can get in contact with Ellis, he should be able to –”

“He’s dead Ryan,” Geoff said flatly. “I’m sorry.”

To everyone’s surprise, Ryan laughed and shook his head. “I’ll believe it when I see it. Takes a lot to kill Gilby. More than they’ve got…” The doubt didn’t register until he’d finished his sentence, but he still wasn’t convinced. Adam wouldn’t go down that easily, he was clever; he’d have an out, maybe hit up Joel if he was still around… he hoped.

Geoff nodded, the others looked worried, as if Ryan might be entering some new stage of denial, but no one said anything. Only Jeremy looked like he believed there was any truth to his words.

“Alright, well, it’s a start. Obviously there’s not much we can do until you lot are back on your feet. But I feel like we can lay low here a while, as long as Funhaus will have us…” Geoff paused, scratching his head. “If anything, this has made it clear; we’re not alone in this anymore. We have backup.”

“Funhaus saved our asses,” Jeremy noted.

Geoff nodded. “They’re part of the Family now.”

“The Family?” Michael raised an eyebrow. “We’re sticking with that? We’re going full-Sopranos these days, huh?”

“Kind of…” Geoff conceded. “Funhaus is on our side. They’re honorary Fakes now…”
“FakeHaus,” Jack pointed out with a chuckle.

“Sure, Fakehaus. But also, you guys know the Attack gang, the Cow Chop crew and maybe even the Kinda Funny boys will be watching our backs. There are a few others who’ve said they’ll lend a hand if we ever need it too.”

“That’s one hell of a network,” Ryan admitted with a smirk.

Geoff grinned back quite proudly. “It’s quite the extended family, yeah.”

They let everything sink in for a few minutes, staring pensively at their food, looking around at each other, considering what everything meant for the future of the crew…

“Also, Ryan’s back,” Michael pointed out matter-of-factly with a grin.

Ryan shrugged. “Seems so.”
Revelations

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Lindsay had instructed the Crew to stay at the camp until everyone was 100% again. Between Jack’s arm, Ryan’s stab wound and Michael and Gavin’s massive blood loss – not to mention their fingertips – it was going to take some time. But then, it was time they dearly needed. They were officially in lockdown again. No contact with the outside except on a strictly need-to-know basis.

Meanwhile, under Geoff’s instructions, Lindsay had the support crew and various arms of the Family hard at work trying to get into the LSPD files, with Trevor instructed to track down Dr Ellis. Ryan’s assumption about his death had been correct; they discovered the car crash that Shadowlz’s brother boasted had killed him, had only left him in the hospital. As soon as Ellis had left the ICU, he’d promptly disappeared without a trace.

When the Crew had received the news, delivered by Trevor in person; a smirk crossed Ryan’s face. He’d told him: “Ask around for Joel Heyman. If he’s been in contact with anyone, Joel’s your best bet.”

“Joel!” Geoff scoffed. “Geez, that takes me back… if he’s anything like he used to be, you’ll probably either find him trading in the stock market or hanging around the pier in Del Perro. He’s…” he paused, looking for the right wording, “…a little unpredictable. Hard to tell which side of the law he stands on most days. He wears a lot of different faces, so be careful. If he gives you any trouble, tell him Ramsey sent you.”

Ryan had raised an eyebrow but said nothing. He shouldn’t have been surprised Geoff and Joel went way back. Geoff had connections to all the major players and untouchables in Los Santos. It was part of how he’d managed to pull together the groups that now formed the Family.

Despite the initial excitement over their theory about the Randoms’ motives, the first few days at the camp had been primarily dedicated to sleeping – rest and recovery, while they waited for more information from the support crew. Nights and days melded seamlessly into one another, normal circadian rhythms thrown off by disrupted sleep cycles, many the result of nightmares and night terrors. None of the crew had had a decent night’s sleep in far too long and while none of them were capable of sleeping through the night, after the first week they managed to get back to something resembling functioning.

It was some ungodly hour of the morning when Ryan had gotten up, sick of staring blankly at the ceiling and crept from the room, noticing Geoff and Jeremy’s empty beds. He paused just outside the door, hearing their voices coming from the main room.

“…that’s really the only reason I’m alive right now…” Jeremy said quietly, sounding almost ashamed.

Ryan wished he’d heard the first part of that conversation.

“I just hate what they did to him, y’know?” Jeremy continued. “I don’t even know what to say… I think he tries to hide it, under his hair and stuff, like, it wouldn’t be a big deal because we know it’s not true…”

Ryan’s hand crept to the scars on the back of his neck, brushing his hair away and feeling the raised
edges of the brand above the neck of his T-shirt.

“Tell me about it…” There was an audible cringe in Geoff’s voice. “You think I don’t feel responsible too?”

Jeremy sighed. “I just wish I knew what to do.”

He peered around the corner to see Geoff shake his head and place a hand on Jeremy’s shoulder. “Jeremy, listen, the only reason any of us are here is because of each other. We’d all be dead ten times over if we hadn’t been around to save each other’s asses, to push each other to be a bit better. That’s what being part of a team is about. We are never fighting alone… and it’s probably best to remind Ryan of that next time we see him.”

Again, Geoff coming through with the pearls of wisdom.

Ryan stepped out into view, but neither of them noticed him right away.

“You don’t need to remind me.”

Geoff nearly leapt out of his skin. “Jesus fuck! Ryan! God damn it. You fucking creep. You nearly fucking killed me.”

Ryan chuckled, and Jeremy grinned. “You don’t need to remind me,” he repeated. “I know. I came back after all.” There was an odd, almost uncomfortable silence between them for a beat before Ryan blurted out, “I mean, redemption, right? People love redemption.”

Geoff and Jeremy laughed.

“Ryan, consider yourself redeemed.” Geoff sighed and ran his fingers through his hair, pulling at it lightly. “Alright, now get some sleep or something. Had the same goddamn thing with Michael and Gavin last night.”

“How are they coping?” Ryan asked, genuinely worried for them.

Geoff shook his head. “We have got to work on communication skills…” He rubbed his face. “They’re about as ok with all this as any of us.”

“So, not.”

“Exactly. They came real close to having to watch each other die. …but I think they’ll be ok. They spent a long time talking it over last night… I went back to bed. Just like I’m gonna do now.”

“Yeah, alright, we can take a hint.” Jeremy huffed a laugh. “’night, Geoff.”

He just mumbled back, “Go the fuck to sleep.”

* * *

The next morning Ryan found himself zoning out over breakfast while the others chattered away, Gavin leading them through a series of increasingly ridiculous hypotheticals. Ryan had been on board for the first few scenarios: “would you rather cry hot chili sauce or sweat wasabi?” Clearly the correct response to that was to cry hot chili sauce; but soon afterwards, the conversation had become
increasingly convoluted and Ryan stopped following in favour of staring out the window, watching a group of ravens settle in a tree nearby.

*An “unkindness” of ravens, if he remembered correctly.*

“What about you, Ryan?” Gavin asked.

Ryan’s ears pricked up at his name, but he’d missed the entire conversation before that.

“What about me?” He echoed. “I missed that.”

“What would you change? If you could change anything?”

“Could I make you mute?” Ryan quipped with barely a thought, raising an eyebrow.

The others laughed.

Gavin snorted. “No, like about you. Surely there’s something you’d change?”

Ryan rubbed the back of his neck without thinking. “...I try not to think about it,” he said dismissively.

“Aww, why not? It’s fun.”

“It’s really not, Gavin.”

Suddenly the conversation got serious.

“Ryan…” Jack started, aiming for comforting but not quite getting there, “do you want to talk about it? You’ve been through a lot. Surely you’ve got stuff you want to get off your chest?”

Ryan shook his head. “Not really, no.”

Michael picked up Jack’s plea. “You gotta stop pushing us out, it’s what those fuckers want – to divide us.”

Geoff shook his head. “Look, you don’t need to…” he started, but Michael cut him off.

“How are we supposed to trust you if you can’t even open up to us?!”

Good point. Why should they trust you?

Shut up.

The voice in his head laughed maliciously.

You can’t tell them because you know it’s true.

Shadowlz’s voice inside his head, mocking him.

“How does it feel? Knowing that I’ve marked you for what you are? For all to see. A traitor.”

Show them then.

“He doesn’t have to say anything, Michael!” Geoff snapped.

It was shocking to hear, firstly, Michael pushing the issue as far as he had, and secondly, Geoff
snapping at Michael – something virtually unheard of unless Michael was deliberately trying to piss him off. Then there was also Geoff defending Ryan’s right to remain silent. Ryan keeping his mouth shut usually meant he was up to something. Suddenly it was very clear to the crew that Geoff knew something the others didn’t, and everyone shut up all at once.

Geoff was on his side.

“We are never fighting alone.”

Ryan let out a long sigh. “No, Michael’s right…”

If he was honest, it’d been playing on his mind for a few days now. Since he’d talked to Michael the first night they’d arrived in the camp. The talk with Geoff from the night before had only served to bring it back to his attention.

“Hey, Ryan, we’re here for you, buddy,” Jeremy added.

“Thanks.” Ryan nodded. “…So there’s this.” He turned around, pulling his ponytail to one side and his shirt down to reveal the brand. Before the crew could react, Ryan went on, “I dunno how it looks, but if you can’t read it, it says ‘Judas’. Shadowlz explained that in no uncertain terms.”

Sure enough, shiny, pale, deeply scarred tissue formed the still very recognisable word: JUDAS. No one had the heart to tell him they could read it.

“Shadowlz did that? How? That’s fucked up,” Michael said instead.

“No shit,” Ryan agreed, letting his hair fall back into place, appearing a little paler in the face than a minute ago. “He uh… used a soldering iron.”

“Jesus Christ,” Jack muttered under his breath.

Gavin looked pale and disgusted.

Even Michael cringed. “Fuck me, that would’ve hurt like a bitch!”

“It did. Believe me, it did. But uh, if I’ve been out of sorts since then… yeah. That might have … something to do with it.” Ryan rubbed the brand with the back of his hand before realising what he was doing and flinching away from it. “I just hate feeling like he got to me. I don’t want to have to second-guess myself all the time. It’s one thing to attack the crew openly; it’s another level of sadistic fuckery to pull that kind of shit.”

The others were in stunned silence.

“So that’s why you left?” Jeremy asked.

“I stabbed you, Jeremy!”

“Yeah, and I say you’re not a traitor, so what does that say?”

“Ryan man, you’re not a traitor,” Geoff said with an air of finality. “You don’t need us to tell you that.”

Ryan nodded. “I know. I just didn’t like my options. Either he was right, or he’d gotten into my head. Somehow, I ended up going with both… Look, I don’t regret it. I’ve said it before I was stupid, I went about it in the worst possible way, but I don’t regret it. Because everything I did…” he cringed at how sappy it sounded in his head: I did it to keep you safe. “…I’m not ashamed of why I
As awkward as it was, he felt better. His hand slid up to the back of his neck again, thumbing at the scars. “Although I can’t say I’m much of a fan of the new body modification.”

Jack cocked his head sideways, “I wonder …if maybe we could fix that?”

***

Ryan would only let them use a local anaesthetic, the procedure wasn’t long and comparatively, there was little that could have been worse than being branded in the first place, so he was willing to risk it. Jeremy and Geoff sat with him, keeping him distracted with conversation. Michael and Gavin watched on from a distance, forming their own kind of peanut gallery, while Jack assisted the medical staff – or who they assumed to be the medical staff – they’d never really cleared that up, but they had insisted they could help remove the brand. They would have to cut it out. It was going to leave a scar, but it would no longer mark him as a traitor. It would become just one more for the team.

He could live with that.

***

During the nearly-fortnight they had been at the camp, the Crew had hardly left the building for fear of being spotted. There had been several surveillance attempts by various gangs, some casual fly overs or drive-bys but there had been few attempts to force their way in and properly check out the camp. The Crew had been entirely ready to fight back; Funhaus had the fire power and had been discreetly running them weapons and supplies sent from Lindsay should they need them, but they’d yet to leave their crates. The Altruists, the Cult of Peake, put on an impressive display of resistance, fighting back and driving away the other gangs that got too close. Not to mention the fact that they played up the nudist angle really deterred most from going up there in the first place.

Everyone, including Ryan, had been healing up well. But they’d quietly been going stir-crazy. That particular day they had spent hours just talking shit completely unrelated to anything that had been going on, but even so, the tedium had well and truly begun to set in. They weren’t used to being so inactive and aside from throwing around unsubstantiated theories, there wasn’t much they could do. They had just started to get into a game of Uno… the only set of cards the Cult of Peake seemed to have in the place, when a car approached the cabin and they heard the coded knock on the door.

Jack got up to answer, rubbing his now almost-fully-functional shoulder, more out of habit than any actual pain. Lawrence was standing there while Adam and Bruce were hauling a crate from the trunk of the car.

“Someone thought you boys could use a drink,” Bruce said with a grin.

“They’re not fucking wrong,” Michael replied, appearing in the doorway behind Jack, the others following.

Ryan was more concerned with the fact that his caffeine-withdrawal headaches hadn’t been getting any better, but the guys had been all but climbing the walls at the lack of alcohol at the camp, especially since there was nothing better to distract them with the technology ban. Geoff had taken the opportunity to sober up.
Geoff and Michael looked at the haul, beer, spirits, Irish crème…

“Hey Rye-Bread, you’ll be happy…” Michael sang out, bringing Ryan curiously nearer to see the crate also included loads of cans of diet coke, clearly meant for mixers, but Ryan immediately hoarded a handful to himself.

A note stuck to the side of a bottle of whiskey said: “Love, Steffie.”

Geoff laughed as he inspected it, “I guess the raise went through. I picked a hell of a time to quit drinking, huh?”

“Was there ever a good time?” Jack took the note with a smile. “P.S.,” he read aloud from the other side of the note, “Ryan’s cat hates me. Send help. Or Lindsay.”

Uno was immediately forgotten in favour of celebrations.

None of the lads had ever hit the liquor so quickly.

Lawrence and Adam stuck around at Geoff’s insistence to help pick up the slack and get drunk with them, while Bruce stayed mostly sober to drive them back; but not before Jack and Lawrence, both with a skinful of beer and whiskey, took their shirts off and proceeded to wrestle. The lads found it amusing, despite being notably sober, Geoff and Bruce were nearly in tears laughing, while Ryan watched on, cringing, hoping they didn’t seriously injure each other, especially with Jack’s arm, but knowing it’d put a stop to it if they did. He wasn’t sure what to hope for.

Embarrassingly for Jack, Lawrence wiped the floor with him and in his victory, Adam and Bruce had convinced him it was time to leave.

Gavin promptly filled the space Funhaus left with ridiculous bets and hypothetical questions that left the crew in hysterics.

Ryan couldn’t shake the feeling that it had been orchestrated somehow… not in any malicious way, it just somehow felt like they were being treated, comforted, maybe in preparation for breaking bad news. At any rate, it had a kind of ‘last supper’ quality to it that made Ryan uneasy. He wished he could let go and just enjoy it, just for tonight. With something of an effort and after downing a half-glass of Jeremy’s Irish crème, which hadn’t tasted too awful, he did manage to quiet the persistent voice of anxiety and let go.

Eventually they came full circle and Uno was resumed with slightly drunken enthusiasm.

“Hey Ryan, here’s looking at you!” Jeremy reversed the order again, allowing Ryan to put down another card. The pair had eerily effectively paired up against the others and had been dominating the game for the past few turns.


“Fine…” Jeremy laughed and finally played a card that wasn’t a reverse. “Michael, this is for you.”

Geoff saw the card and his eyes lit up. “Draw four motherfucker!”

“You’re not the boss of me!” Michael slurred indignantly.

“You’re right; technically Lindsay’s the boss of you,” Ryan pointed out.
Michael hiccupped and giggled. “You are not wrong.”

“Hey!” Geoff exclaimed, “The Fake AH Crew is my creative vision!”

Jeremy patted him on the shoulder as he brushed past him to get another beer. “You’d better get glasses my friend.”

Geoff laughed. “You guys… you guys…” he scratched his head, a dopey grin forming on his face. And he was the sober one. “Shit. I dunno where I was going with that.”

Everyone laughed at that.

“I love you guys. Sometimes I hate you, but I love you.”

Gavin grinned devilishly, scheming behind green eyes, “who do you love most?”

“That’s not fair… it’s like… I feel like a parent. You can’t just pick a favourite,” the dopey grin was back on Geoff’s face, “It’s like: Daddy loves you all in different ways.”

“It’s Gavin,” Jack said teasingly.

Geoff laughed, but his grin faded in reflection, “you guys… all of you guys... we’ve been through shit together. We’ve always gotten through it. I appreciate every one of you.”

They had. They knew it couldn’t last forever. Realistically there was always going to be an end… a day when they wouldn’t. But in that moment, no one in the room doubted that was true.

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Lindsay had given them a day to recover from their shenanigans – a day they sorely needed – before she made sure everyone was present for a teleconference. The crew was thankful for the final disruption to the monotony, but Ryan’s gut instincts felt like they were about to be confirmed. Funhaus had dropped off a laptop for them a few hours earlier and it had the same feeling of energy and action as the first heist meeting after Ray’s death. They only hoped the outcome would be better this time around.

Mica had some news for them.

“Pay attention, because there’s a lot of information here,” she wisely pre-warned them. “We had a hell of a time getting access to restricted files in the LSPD, but it wasn’t entirely hopeless. I got in contact with some of my sources in the know, and they said a few years ago there were allegations of major corruption in the force, but they never got properly investigated – well, that’s to say they never saw the light of day. But, my girl managed to dig up some of the original interviews that sound a lot like the LSPD and FIB were hitting up gang members to do their dirty work for them. Kind of like a plea-bargaining thing.”


“The FIB have always had rats, we know that,” Ryan added.

“Yeah, well, this sounded like it was more than that,” Mica went on, “it sounded a lot like they were trying to set up a way they could act outside the limitations of the law to regain control of the streets. And you know who one of the main players was? Steven Haines.”
“Who?” Jeremy asked.

“Don’t you own a TV, Jeremy?” Mica teased. “He was the host of Underbelly of Paradise, remember that shitty reality show about the gangs of Los Santos? But before that he was also a corrupt-as-fuck FIB agent and, more importantly, Shane and his twin brother Jason Dowl’s uncle, and it turns out he was quite the role model.”

“Was?” Jeremy asked, again although he wasn’t the only one in the room who needed to be filled in, just the only one with the guts to ask.

Mica sighed. “He got taken out by a sniper, on camera. The tapes were never released, but everyone knows the story…”

“Oh yeah, I think I remember that…” Gavin exclaimed.

“But yeah, he got investigated after his death and turns out, aside from being greedy, corrupt and manipulative; he was big into torture, a real sadistic fuck,” Mica went on. “Internal investigations showed he used torture on his informants that wanted to walk, and he had a bunch of sexual assault cases that were uncovered and then just as quickly covered up again it seems. Charming.”

“His nephews learned a few things then…” Ryan said quietly, a very dark edge to his voice.

“He was basically their hero. The reason they both became cops it seems. So, it’s not a huge surprise that Jason followed him all the way to the top and is probably the reason all those cases got re-buried. Didn’t want to tarnish that reputation now.”

“What do you mean?” Jack asked, eyes narrowing.

“Jason Dowl is the current – very well-kept secret – head of the FIB.”

“You can thank Joel and Dr Ellis for that bit of information,” Lindsay added, “and Trevor for tracking them down.”

Trevor bowed in the background with a smile and a quiet, “a-thank you.”

“That’s why his death was faked and we couldn’t find any records of him,” Mica explained. “They completely wiped him from the system, maybe even especially for this, considering they’ve never gone so far to keep that kind of thing secret before.”

“That we know of…” Lindsay pointed out a little ominously.

There was a long silence as everyone processed the information.

“So, how’d they do it?” Gavin asked, brow furrowing.

Trevor stepped up and Mica stepped back, letting him take over. “It started with plea bargaining, exploiting favours owed, bonus points if they could recruit anti-FAHC members; eventually they got enough players in the game that the community built itself. All they had to do was drip-feed them information, plant the seeds and let them run with it. If they went in the wrong direction or tried to pull something the cops didn’t want, well, they were on the inside, so they could pretty much shut it down before it started. That’s how they were tipped off to our heists. They were really just there to push us and them in the right direction. The cops also got the added bonus of being able to eavesdrop on the other gangs’ activities, because most of them can’t keep their mouths shut.”

“That’s the problem with recruiting rats,” Ryan pointed out matter-of-factly.
Trevor shrugged. “At any rate it worked for ‘em. The cops that is. It’s a win-win for them.”

“And now they have an army,” Lindsay added, taking over the screen once more. “So that’s what we’re up against.”

Geoff nodded, the cogs already turning.

“I dunno how you want to play this one, but it’s not going to be long before they figure out where we all are; if they don’t know already,” Lindsay warned.

“Good job everyone,” Geoff said, “unless anyone’s got anything to add we’ll kill the connection and get back to you… I’m not risking our dicks getting overheard.”

Gavin and Michael snickered.

Lindsay nodded. “That’s fair. Anyone got anything else?”

“Good luck,” Matt offered.

“Yeah, thanks, we’ll need it.” Geoff killed the connection and shut down the laptop.

Ryan chewed his lip and looked around at the others, all in quiet contemplation of the scale of the threat they now knew they faced.

Michael finally stood up. “Fuck hiding man, fuck this. We have to do something.”

“We’re going to do something,” Geoff said finally. “We’re gonna take back this fucking city.”

“How?” Jack asked. “They have the FIB, the LSPD, fucking NOOSE, not to mention all the little gangs they’ve managed to get onside, the whole of the fucking Randoms network…”

Geoff stood up, pacing slightly. “No, don’t you see? They haven’t. The gangs and Randoms think they’re working autonomously. They don’t know they’re being played. All we have to do is expose them. How many are gonna follow when they figure out who’s leading them?”

“They’re not all gonna believe that,” Michael pointed out. “Most of them hate us, they’re not gonna listen to a word we say.”

Gavin’s eyes lit up. “They don’t all have to. We just need enough of them to doubt it to not turn up. Cut their numbers; shift the odds in our favour.”

Geoff nodded. “We know how to work together, they don’t. The police and the FIB will have training, but they can’t control their masses. We can. We have the Family to fall back on.”

“So, what exactly are you suggesting?” Jeremy asked.

“We’re gonna make another video. We’re gonna expose them for who they really are and let the people make up their minds for themselves. Then we bring ‘em down.”

“How?” Jeremy reiterated. “How do we fight that?”

Geoff let out a long breath and they all knew; whatever he had in mind, it wasn’t going to be easy. “We take a page from Project Mayhem. Destroy their intelligence. Even if it means razing the city. We wipe the slate clean.”

*Even if it means razing the city.*
The gravity of the situation hit them fully. This was the high-stakes game. This was where they had to go all-in. This was for Los Santos.

Jack cringed. “It sounds a lot like we’re talking about an all-out war for the city here.”

Ryan nodded. “Like Peake said: sometimes you gotta steal it back.”

“That’s one hell of a heist,” Michael pointed out after a beat.

Geoff shook his head. “This isn’t a heist… this is a revolution.”

Chapter End Notes

And on that bombshell, I prepare to head to RTX Sydney, so there might be a delay in getting the next chapter out.
The moon was full, but the cloud cover was thick and threatened rain, throwing the camp into near-pitch darkness. Ryan couldn’t sleep again. He was perched on the porch of the cabin; the slightly rotten wooden boards creaked under his weight as he leaned back against one of the support beams holding up the scrappy awning. His head had been buzzing all day with thoughts and plans of what they were about to go up against. They’d already started planning the details, gathering the necessary equipment, recruiting the right people. Discussing how they could pull it off… if they could pull it off. He took a deep breath of the cool night air, filled with the resinous scent of pine and a far-off note of petrichor blowing in from wherever it had already started raining.

Funny how memories could attach themselves to something as simple as a smell…

“It’s about to rain, I can smell it.” Ryan put down his binoculars and blinked a few times, not wanting to rub his eyes and further mess up his already-smudged red and black paint; glancing up at the dark overhead sky.

“Figures,” Ray mumbled, still staring down the scope of his bright pink sniper rifle. “It always rains on day 2.”

They had been staked-out atop an apartment building in Rockford Hills waiting for their target, a FIB informant Caleb had discovered through his ‘community connections’ and tipped them off about. It was the second day they’d spent waiting on the roof for said informant to show her face. It was their job to take her out. It was Ryan’s first job back in the field with Ray after their original encounter with Shadowlz. It had been playing on their minds since Geoff had given them the order to go out together. They were accustomed to working in silence, but this wasn’t the familiar comfortable silence they were used to.

After another long and awkward pause in conversation, with no sign of their target, Ray finally mustered the courage and broached the subject head-on.

Still staring down the scope of his rifle, as if using it as cover; he asked point-blank, “How come you stuck around?”

He gave no context, but he didn’t need to, Ryan knew immediately what he meant.

“I’m not one to hold a grudge.” Ryan shrugged. “Besides, where else was I supposed to go?”

It wasn’t the most reassuring answer, Ryan had realised in retrospect, and it came out with brutal honesty.

If it hurt Ray to hear, he covered it with his usual brand of sarcastic humour.

“You had a job before this right? Surely… nah, let me guess, you were born with the mask, you’ve been killing since before you could talk. Can’t fool me, Vagabond.”

“You got me…” Ray held up his hands in mock surrender and chuckled. “IT, actually… I was a tech guy. I dabbled in a bunch of other stuff too, but mostly security systems, which in a long and roundabout way, is sorta how I ended up here.”

“Well fuck, there goes the mystery.” Ray spared him a glance and flashed him a smile. “Of course
you were a nerd.”

Ryan shrugged. “Turns out; this pays better.” Still not helping, Haywood.

“Go figure.” Ray turned his attention back to the view through his scope. “But still… you stayed.”

With a slight nod, Ryan sighed and absently rubbed his shoulder where his clavicle had broken and subsequently healed. After another long silence, he asked, “Why do you do it?”

“I dunno man, I’m good at it?” Ray shrugged, seeming even more apathetic than usual. “I just do it.”

Ray paused, let out a breath, held it and fired a single shot.

“Got her. You’re on clean-up duty.”

Completely detached, no emotion, just a second of recognition of the target in his sights, a quick calculation and a squeeze of the trigger was all it took.

A chill ran down Ryan’s spine.

He wondered if it was the same when it had been him in the crosshairs.

Ryan cringed at the memory, realising what he had mistaken at the time for apathy was actually guilt wearing Ray out from the inside. The same way it had done to him. It was Ray’s way of coping. For a moment he wondered if maybe, there was a chance he could’ve won Ray back, the way Jeremy had done with him… if he’d been more open with him, if he’d pushed a little harder, maybe, just maybe…

He blocked out the idea. No use dwelling. What had happened, happened.

Too late to un-fuck that one.

Ray was gone. And not just gone, dead.

With perfect timing, the rain began to fall lightly around him. The awning of the cabin offered only the barest of shelter, but he didn’t mind. He sighed and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees and his forehead in his hands, raking fingers through his hair.

Why do you do it?

I dunno. I’m good at it?

That was his answer, not yours. Maybe it was true once, but not anymore. Why do you do it?

Does it matter?

Yes. You’re about to start a goddamned revolution, you’d better have a fucking good reason.

To his surprise, a memory of Jeremy’s voice answered him.

“All I want is to be someone who means something to this crew… Shit happens, we get hurt, we pick each other up and we keep fighting… I know you wanna keep fighting.”
Ryan’s hand went to the hilt of his knife, kept constantly at his hip, feeling the smooth curve of the handle settle neatly into his palm, reminded of the inscription; *he conquers, who conquers himself.*

*So why do you do it?*

I want to keep fighting. I want to win.

*And it’s fun… The dark, yet familiar tone of the Vagabond reminded him.*

That too.

He couldn’t deny he never felt quite as alive as when he was with the Crew, tearing through the city with the guys, a trail of destruction and howling sirens in their wake, the rush of adrenaline and the smell of gunpowder and gasoline fresh in the air… even if the heist was a failure, even if there was no payoff; when they were together, there was no better feeling.

*And that’s why you came back.*

For them. For us.

*Good answer.*

The footsteps behind him were muffled by the sound of the rain, but he felt the boards shift and creak beneath him and looked up with a start. Geoff leaned against the beam behind him, still dressed in the khakis and T-shirt he’d been wearing that day.

“Hey Ryan.”

Ryan nodded back at him. “Geoff. Can’t sleep?”

He dragged his palms over his face. “What’s sleep?”

“Fucked if I know,” Ryan said with a smirk.

Geoff grinned back as he sat down carefully on the steps next to Ryan.

“Heard you and Gav are nearly finished with the video… Nervous?”

“Nervous?” Geoff repeated with a quiet scoff. “Not really. *Shitting myself* would be a more apt descriptor.”

Ryan nodded. “That’s fair. Do you have a plan?”

“I’m …working on it,” Geoff confessed.

“I have some ideas that might help.”

“Good. We’re gonna need all the help we can get for this.”

They sat and stared into the raining darkness for a few minutes, soaking in the relative peace before Ryan spoke up with something he’d been weighing in his mind for longer than he cared to admit.

“What about when all this is over?” Ryan asked. “What’s the plan then?”

Geoff hesitated, eyes glazing over ever so slightly before blinking back to reality. “We’ll cross that
bridge when we come to it I guess…”

If we come to it. Ryan’s mind filled in grimly.

“Think you’ll ever retire?” Ryan asked Ray as he unpacked his ‘clean-up’ supplies. Bioremediation it was called. For their more discreet jobs, he could eliminate all trace of them and their target from the scene. No one would believe them if they confessed to it, but sometimes the Fake AH Crew needed to be subtle and untraceable. Sometimes they didn’t want anyone to know they were involved; especially in matters the FIB might want to go sticking their noses in.

Ray had scoffed. “Please, I’m not that old… besides, what the fuck do we retire to? Playing video games? …I mean, if that’s the case, sign me the fuck up.” He laughed quietly to himself. “But really, there’s nowhere to go after this, right? This is it for us. Fakes for life.”

Even at the time, Ray hadn’t sounded sure. But the words were right and hearing them aloud, they’d fixed themselves in Ryan’s mind almost as dogma.

Of course that was it for them. It’s not a life you can walk away from.

It was like that line from that Batman film: “You either die a hero, or live long enough to see yourself become the villain.” …well, what about the villains? Realistically, there was only one way this was going to end. They all knew it, as much as none of them would acknowledge it. It was only a matter of time. Fakes for life.

We all die in the end. Why not have a bit of fun with it?

I intend to deserve it. The Vagabond’s dark edge was back.

For some reason, despite not feeling entirely like his own, that thought was comforting to Ryan.

But there was another thought that was far less comforting, a thought he couldn’t keep dismissing any longer.

“Geoff,” Ryan started after a long pause, immediately biting his tongue and reconsidering.

Geoff raised an eyebrow but waited for him to go on.

Ryan swallowed. “I can’t… we can’t let them take any of us alive.” His breath caught in his throat and he bit his lip, taking a steadying breath. “I’m asking now; if it comes to it… I’d rather die than let them get their hands on any of us again… You understand?”

The desperation in his eyes was enough to make Geoff avert his own, still completely unused to seeing Ryan this vulnerable, even with all he’d been through.

Geoff nodded. “We go on our own terms. They take no prisoners.”

“Promise me.”

Geoff looked back up, Ryan’s blue eyes staring, pleading, into his own and this time he didn’t look away.

“I promise, Ryan.”
“Thank you.”

* * *

“If we do this, there’s no going back,” Jack reminded them.

It was the last day they had planned on spending in hiding at the Altruist camp. Realistically, they were surprised they’d been able to go this long. Geoff, Jack, Michael, Gavin, Jeremy and Ryan had gathered in main room of the cabin to review the digital Molotov cocktail they were about to hurl at the heart of Los Santos.

Geoff nodded. “And we gotta go all-in. If anyone wants to back out now, speak up.”

Ryan looked around at the others, each as determined yet scared as he was.

It looked like a heist, but this time it didn’t feel like one.

His heart was racing. It shouldn’t have been, he was sure of his decision, but Jack was right, there was no going back once this was out there. It was all or nothing. The high-stakes game.

It had only taken them a day to throw the video together.

* * * a day’s all it takes. Empires have fallen in less.

Mica and the support team had embedded all their supporting documents in the video as links, overt and subtle, encrypted and blatantly open for all to see; they’d hidden them in different sites, left breadcrumbs for those eager enough to follow; they needed everyone to see. If the FIB wanted to cut all ties to their involvement, they’d have to tear down a significant chunk of the internet to do it.

It left them wide open on the digital front, but if everything went to plan, it wouldn’t matter.

And if everything went to shit, well, then it wouldn’t matter either.

“It looks good to me,” Michael asserted.

“I’m in,” Jeremy said with a determined nod. “One hundred percent.”

“Me too,” Gavin agreed.

“Ryan?” Jack prompted.

Ryan nodded solemnly.

“And we’re all in agreement with the last part?” Geoff asked them, eyes flicking to each of them in turn. “It’s important. We all have to be clear on that, I mean fucking crystal.”

“Yes Geoff, we get it, and yes!” Michael nearly yelled at him.

Gavin added more quietly, “Wouldn’t have it any other way.”

Jack and Ryan both nodded, they’d already made their positions well known.

Jeremy looked almost offended when Geoff turned troubled eyes towards him. “Of course, like you even need to ask.”
Geoff let out an audible breath. “I know I’m making a big deal out of this, but that’s because it is a big fucking deal. What we’re about to do has never been done before.”

Jack nodded. “The Family is definitely a game-changer in all this…”

The others nodded, but Geoff shook his head.

“This isn’t about the Family, this is about our family.” He sounded dangerously close to emotional. “What we have here is something I never had as a kid. Something better than family, because we all chose to be here. And as much as I hate to say it, we may not get out of this one ok. And I need all of you to understand that going into it.”

“Geoff,” to everyone’s surprise, it was Michael to speak first, “this may come as a shock to you, but that’s how it’s always been. Every day we’re here we’re risking something, be it our lives or our freedom… ok, usually our lives… but every time we go out there as the Fake AH Crew… well, I mean, we know what we’re in for.”

Geoff snorted. “Well, now I feel like a bit of an asshole, really.”

“Why’s that, Geoff?” Jeremy asked.

“Remember when I said, uh… ‘the only way to leave the Fake AH Crew was in a body bag?’” He grinned, looking at his hands before back up at the rest of them and chuckling to himself.

Jack laughed. “Honestly, that’s the only way you were ever going to get rid of me.”

Michael and Gavin both nodded.

“Yeah, me too,” Michael added.

“Pretty much.”

“Same,” Jeremy agreed.

Ryan had been quiet and one by one, the others turned to him.

“What are y’all looking at me for? I could’ve left you fuckers months ago and I’m still here.”

Geoff burst out laughing, setting off the others.

“So, I think that answers your question at any rate.” Ryan cocked an eyebrow as he motioned to the screen. “Are we gonna do this?”

He was met by a chorus voices.

“Fuck yeah!”

“Hell yeah!”

“Do it.”

“Yes.”

“Seems so,” Geoff said with a grin. “Alright, let’s do it.”
The cursor hovered over the link for a few seconds, as if doubtful of the validity of the content.

The video was titled simply: “pick a side.”

The Fake AH Crew had pulled stunts like this before; more often than not they turned out to be relatively harmless shenanigans, the only real victims being the members of the crew themselves and their reputation as a serious force to be reckoned with. With everything that had been going on lately, this felt different.

He clicked the link and turned up the volume.

“A war is coming...”

Jack’s voice overlaid sweeping shots of Los Santos that Gavin had gathered from his own personal footage and some of it was nothing short of stunning.

“This is addressed to all those who associate with the Randoms. Whether you’ve been recruited, are trying to get a foot in the door or signed up for a ‘worthy cause’. Whether or not you believe the lies they’ve been feeding you; because they have been feeding you lies. Take a good look at where your orders are coming from, because chances are, you’re not the heroes you think…”

There was a carefully assembled montage of still images, security footage, news reports and their own edited footage, set to dramatic music. Ryan had rolled his eyes at such a cliché when they had first pitched the idea, but even he had to admit it was effective. Embedded in the video were links to supporting documents. Give the people enough information to make up their own minds. Sure, they’d be blocked or taken down, but not before they were picked up and circulated. They’d get to where they needed to go. It was the one thing the internet was really good at. Even now, the video was spreading like wildfire.

“Take a look at your martyrs and see the resemblance they bear to the devil you don’t yet know.”

Gavin had spliced news footage of the identification of Shadowlz’s body with everything they could gather about the twins and their sadistic uncle, making very clear their connections with the FIB and the LSPD and all their shady dealings.

“Turns out we have a common enemy. You’ve been played, but you can have your revenge if you join us. This is your chance to pick a side. Our side. We don’t care who you are, and we don’t care what you’ve done, because frankly, we’ve probably done a hell of a lot worse. And more importantly, we are not alone.”

The other crews forming the Family had sent their own footage to add and their own unique brand of destruction, chaos and carnage.

“We may not stand for good, but we will not stand for being used or manipulated and neither should you. Whether or not you like it, Los Santos is going to war. And when we win, you’re gonna want to hope you were on our side, because we will not be so forgiving to those who weren’t.”

The aftermath footage was brutal, more from their own archived footage, some fresher; the smouldering ruins of the warehouse, charred and broken and bullet-riddled bodies. A ruthless reminder that they weren’t the good guys, that they would never pretend to be something they were not, that they weren’t anything like those they were taking a stand against.
“And for the Randoms who continue to stand with the LSPD, the FIB, NOOSE, whatever guise you’re all fighting under, whoever orders you’re following; know this: this war will take no prisoners.”

The final image was a screen burn of the crew’s logo.

“Shit.”

He clicked a few of the embedded links, eyes scanning quickly over the data contained within the files.

“Shit.”

He picked up his phone and dialled a number from memory. It rang for a good while before they picked up without saying a word.

“Burnie. We’ve got a problem.”
Ready-up

Ryan would be happy if he never saw another bowl of oats again.

It was the morning after they’d released the video and they were preparing to make their move to wherever Geoff and Lindsay had decided their new base of operations was going to be. Gavin had been glued to the laptop screen since they’d decided the technology ban wasn’t going to help them anymore and now that they were all busy readying up for the move, he’d left Weazel news running in the background. Ryan couldn’t help but notice how truly god-awful the sensationalism was. Even the most mundane news was over-hyped and over-sold, each story trying to top the last in shock value.

*Wait ‘til they get a load of us*, he thought, somewhat smugly.

They’d all been keeping an ear out, listening for any news of their video, which, despite being repeatedly removed, had been shared and re-uploaded and had progressively gained views on all platforms it had spread to, much to Gavin’s delight. The Fakes were about to be real big news again.

Ryan, Michael, Jeremy and Gavin were in the main room, checking and re-packing some of the arsenal that Funhaus had dropped off to be used in case of raids, which they were now appropriating for their own purposes, while Geoff and Jack were organising the vehicles.

Ryan passed a grenade to Michael as the reporters nattered on about some celebrity scandal, the rise of tattoo culture on Vеспуcci beach, and the latest crystal meth fuelled rampage where a man was arrested after speeding down the Palomino Freeway in a stolen convertible, waving a golf club out the window and blasting Kenny Loggins.

Ryan chuckled to himself at the last one before he was abruptly snapped out of it by the urgent announcement tone of…

“Breaking News! Fake AH Crew release ominous video declaring war on Los Santos.”

Gavin darted to the door to yell out, “Geoff, Jack, news!”

Michael and Ryan grabbed the laptop and they all gathered around it, turning up the volume.

“Residents are being urged to stay inside as the LSPD consider issuing a curfew following an alarming video that went viral overnight. The video is believed to have been released by the Fake AH Crew, one of the most notorious gangs in Los Santos. We do have a clip of the video to show – a warning though: the following footage contains graphic images.”

Jack and Geoff came in just as a clip of their video flashed on the screen; despite the warning it was still heavily censored.

Ryan filled them in as they watched the clip. “LSPD are considering a curfew, no details yet.”

The report went on, “The video, which has gained more than a million views, hints at corruption within several law enforcement agencies and warns of an impending large-scale gang war on the streets of Los Santos. Representatives of the FIB and LSPD continue to decline to be interviewed for a statement.”

“Surprise, surprise,” Jack muttered.
“For those concerned about their safety, the LSPD have assured the public that there will be an increased presence of police and armed forces on the ground in high-risk and targeted areas, and in an unprecedented move, Mayor Hullum has ordered a close of the downtown business district and evacuation of the area from La Puerta Freeway stretching East to Strawberry Avenue following close of business today. We’ll be staying with this story, stay tuned for more details as they come in.”

“Holy shit… they must know we’re gonna hit the Bureau,” Michael mused, turning back to the others.

“That’s ok,” Geoff assured them, “they’re still not gonna see us coming.”

In the background, the news went on to report something that Ryan swore was about erectile dysfunction, but he was no longer paying attention.

Jeremy scoffed. “How are they not gonna see us coming?! They’re gonna have the whole suburb on lockdown. Guaranteed there’s gonna be riot control along the entire perimeter… we’re not going to be able to get within two blocks of it.”

A sly grin tugged at the corner of Geoff’s lips, “Remember how Lindsay said she had a few safe-houses we didn’t know about?”

The others looked around to each other then back to Geoff as if to say, ‘and..?’

Geoff’s grin widened. “On the corner of Atla St and Integrity Way is the Tinkle building. Lindsay and Steffie procured the top-floor penthouse. Only one block away from the FIB building. That’s where we’re going to be.”

Gavin let out a half-stifled nasal laugh. “This is ridiculous! Total lunacy.”

Ryan smirked, quietly impressed. “Well, I like it.”

“Good… But there’s one more thing we need to take care of.”

“What’s that, Geoff?” Jack asked in earnest.

“We need to rebuild a weapons cache. This is a good start, but it’s not enough. Almost everything we had was taken out when they hit the safe houses. All the warehouses went up too; well, except Ryan’s ‘secret’ one… and I said the Attack boys could have whatever they found in there, provided they helped us.”

Ryan scowled as he recalled the Attack boys still had his Valkyrie.

Geoff went on, “So we’re gonna need to beg, borrow and steal… and we’re gonna need to get creative.”

“I can do that,” Ryan said with a smirk and a nod.

“I don’t doubt that…” Jack muttered.

The lads grinned like idiots.

“I do have a plan. It’s a risky one-” Geoff started.

“When is it not?” Michael interjected.

“-but if we get some of the others involved, we might be able to pull it off, and kill two birds with
one stone.”

“What’s the job, Geoff?” Gavin asked, eyes lighting up. The energy was back up and suddenly it became painfully clear how much being stagnant had affected them.

“Got a tip-off that the FIB’s getting a delivery of weapons to the building, help to arm riot control. Six armoured trucks worth, coming in from NOOSE headquarters. Gonna make the run today before the lockdown,” Geoff explained. “Now, these guys are going to be armed to the teeth. They have access to huge quantities of heavy weaponry,” he stumbled over the word several times before it came out right, “and we need to make sure either we get them, or no one does. So, what we need to do is get those trucks.”

“I’m down for that. A little pre-heist heisting,” Jeremy said.

Ryan raised an eyebrow. “Where’d the tip-off come from?”

Geoff hesitated for a moment, before looking around the room as if mentally making the decision to come clean with them. “Lindsay, Trevor and Mica have been working on getting the media onside; getting in contact with the people involved in the original corruption investigations that Burnie started when he was the Mayor. Turns out there are some familiar faces at Weazel nowadays. Kdin’s moving up the ranks and she’s made a few friends who have some extremely valuable connections.”

“I thought Kdin was out,” Gavin said.

“Kdin is out, but she still wants to help,” Geoff explained. “I’m not gonna drag her back into anything she doesn’t wanna be involved with, but she’s been keeping us in the know for quite some time now and she’s been really pushing to get our stuff out there, both in the media and through … less reputable outlets.”

“Wait, back up.” Jeremy looked confused. “You said Burnie? Like Burnie Burns?”

“Yeah, he was Mayor of Los Santos, pretty popular with the people because he swore to investigate the corruption in the LSPD,” Ryan explained patiently, remembering that Jeremy may not have even been in Los Santos when this all went down. “And he did. Of course, you go sticking your nose in the LSPD’s business and you’re gonna get shot at… not very well, mind you. They can’t shoot for shit. They tried to take him out on a few different occasions, but it didn’t stop him from following the trail all the way to Haines.”

“That’s Shadowlz’s uncle, right?” Jeremy followed on.

“Yeah. Well after all that, it wasn’t entirely unreasonable for Burns to step down. Then he straight-up disappeared.”

Geoff nodded thoughtfully.

Ryan continued, “Hullum had some big shoes to fill, but he also wanted to live longer than the election campaign, so he kept his head down. Don’t get me wrong, the LSPD were still corrupt as fuck, but things aren’t as bad as they were… well, they weren’t until this whole Randoms nonsense.”

Michael giggled and exaggeratedly mimicked his “nonsense!”

Ryan shook his head at him.

“So, who exactly are these contacts, Geoff? And how do we know we can trust them?” Michael asked, starting to move back to inspecting and packing weapons, Ryan following suit.
“Ok, so, Kdin’s one, but we also have Ashley Jenkins – she got involved in the original corruption investigations as an investigative journalist; she was the first to get anything solid on Haines and that started the internal investigations. There’s also Gus.”

“Wait, Gus Sorola?” Jack asked, ears pricking up.

“Yeah.” Geoff nodded. “Honestly, I thought he was dead. But nope. Just laying low… probably same as Burns, wouldn’t surprise me if they were in on it together. He’s still in with the IAA, although I doubt officially, and we all know the IAA and FIB hate each other’s guts. They clearly have beef with the FIB pulling this bullshit, but they don’t want to be associated with it any more than the Mayor does.”

“Wait, Hullum’s not in on this?” Jeremy asked. “You sure?”

“Hullum’s always been onside with Burns… well, in matters like this. The FIB has been trying to go over his head for years, he’s never approved any of this shit and this whole Randoms recruitment scheme is their way of getting around it and into the LSPD. He has a few good men in the LSPD, but most of them are on the take and following the FIB’s lead on this.”

“And you learned all this… last night?” Ryan looked at him sceptically.

Geoff winced. “Ryan, look, for now, that’s really all I can say, just trust me on this. Please.”

Ryan was instinctively disinclined to trust him; part of him wanted to press for information, to get the full story, and that same part of him felt he deserved it. But then, after all they’d been through, if Geoff was keeping things from them, it was in all likelihood for a very good reason.

For us.

He nodded and moved on. “Ok… So, what about these trucks?”

Geoff’s eyes lit up and everyone’s attention was back on him.

“So, the plan is: We got multiple trucks; we’re splitting them between us, Funhaus, Cow Chop, Kinda Funny and the Attack boys. If we can’t take the trucks, the next goal is to destroy the trucks. We’re gonna hit them as soon as they leave NOOSE headquarters, before they get into the city and get them out to Funhaus’ other location – Donkey Punch Family Farms.”

Jack rolled his eyes. “Never suspected that would be a front…”

“That’s on the other side of Chiliaid!” Gavin whined.

“Exactly. Lead ‘em away from the city, the Attack boys are gonna be in the Valkyrie to make sure we’re not followed and then we unload the weapons, swap out vehicles and go our separate ways. We get them back into the city in unmarked vans and back to the garage of the Tinkle building. No one’s the wiser. If we time it right, we can be done before the evacuation and lock down and we’re all safely inside the perimeter.”

“When are the trucks leaving, Geoff?” Jack asked, raising an eyebrow and glancing at his watch.

“Should be in a few hours.”

Ryan’s eyes narrowed. “So… we should ready up?”

Geoff nodded. “Ready up.”
The man flashed his work pass at security at the entrance of the FIB building. Security was on high alert, but the janitorial staff were all contracted out and few bothered to get to know them by name, so it was easy enough to slip in unsuspecting. The pass was genuine, his identity, however, was not. He wasn’t concerned. He was here to do a job. He took his mop and bucket and rode the elevator to the 49th floor. He dutifully mopped the linoleum floors while distracted FIB agents avoided eye contact and the wet patches on the floor. When the activity died down, he casually picked up the bucket and made his way to the bathrooms, checking to make sure he was alone before carefully securing the device to the cistern of one of the toilets. He checked to make sure the signal from the transmitter was being received, washed his hands and quickly made his way out.

Only once he was clear of the building did he take out his phone and dial a number from memory.

“The package is in position; let your guys know when they want in, they just have to ring the doorbell.”

The voice on the other end of the phone sighed. “You’re really taking this whole espionage thing seriously, aren’t you, Chris?”

“Guys, I got eyes!” Bolen radioed from the chopper overhead. “They’re leaving NOOSE headquarters now, heading down Sustancia road – you guys called it – looks like they’re avoiding the main freeway. Six trucks – they’re using Police Riot to transport and they have escorts; four cruisers, two at the front and two in the rear.”

A few giggles could be heard over the radio and for a brief moment it was easy to forget they were Los Santos’ most feared gang members and think they were children. Frankly, they wouldn’t want it any other way.

“Perfect!” Lawrence radioed back. “They brought their own blockade.”

Ryan could practically hear the grin on his face as he said it. To be fair, he was thinking the same thing.

They’d looped around through Los Santos to intercept the convoy head-on on either the Palomino freeway or the alternate, less-populated route down Sustancia road before the trucks made it to the city, where they’d have LSPD and FIB backup ready. Ryan was relieved it was the latter, there was far less chance of traffic and civilians getting in the way. It was also further from aerial support, with the exception of the Maverick choppers NOOSE kept at their headquarters, but that’s what the Valkyrie was for.

Funhaus would be targeting the front two trucks and the Fakes had the rear two, with Kinda Funny and Cow Chop targeting the ones in between. A well-placed proximity mine on the road ahead would do the trick. The escort cars would create a wreckage, blocking in the others in the convoy and if they could avoid the carnage, the Fakes could blow past them to hit the other two escort cruisers from behind and totally block them in.

“You guys got proximity mines?” Ryan asked over the comms.
“Do we?” Adam replied, the glee in his voice audible.

Ryan laughed. “Great, well, just let me know if you need more… I got plenty.”

Next to him in the back seat of Jack’s car, Michael rolled his eyes at him. “Of course you do, you’re a real piece of shit with them too.”

Ryan switched off the mic on his comms and grinned back at him. “You’re just mad that I nearly blew you up that one time.”

“That one time, Ryan?! More like dozens. Where the hell do you get them all from anyways?”

Ryan shrugged. “I make ‘em. Hobby, y’know?”

“Holy shit, Ryan!”

Jack must’ve overheard them.

“You’re really fucking creepy sometimes, you know that, right?”

Michael let out a slightly hysterical giggle.

“How is that creepy?” Ryan defended, legitimately confused. “It’s practical, is what it is.”

“Sure, Ryan…”

The rotors of his Valkyrie beat loudly overhead and he stuck his head out the window to catch a glimpse of it zipping off, letting out a sigh as he wondered if he’d ever get to pilot it himself.

Following in the car behind them, Ryan could just make out Geoff at the wheel of the silver Cheval Fugitive with Jeremy and Gavin in the backseat, in much the same setup as they had with Jack, although Jack had been too slow to call dibs on the silver one and they were stuck with the Fugitive with the white paint job. Between Jeremy and Gavin, there would be a duffel bag of weapons including bullpup rifles and a handful of explosives in case they needed them; which it was now apparent they would. Between himself and Michael they had a similar stash, albeit with more explosives.

“We’re going to have to hit the rear cruisers on the fly,” Jack announced, switching his mic to the internal channel that could only be heard by the Fakes. “Think you guys can do that?”

Ryan nodded. “Shouldn’t be too hard.”

Michael’s grin was ear to ear. Gavin’s voice came over the comms at the same time and almost in unison they said, “absolutely!” They promptly broke out in laughter.

“Ok, my motherfuckers, we don’t have long, so listen up!” Geoff announced as soon as they fell silent again. Michael giggled and quietly repeated; “My motherfuckers.”

“You’re with me, so you’re mine; now listen up,” Geoff huffed. “I don’t want to see any heroics from any of you.”

Ryan imagined he’d be throwing a look to Jeremy and Gavin in the rear-view mirror… about the same way Jack was doing to him and Michael, he noted as he glanced up.

“We need everyone in one piece for tomorrow, so if anything seems off, looks wrong or suspicious, we back the fuck off. We can blow the trucks if we have to and if we really fuck it up, our priority is to get the fuck out and leave it to the others to clean up.”
“C’mon Geoff, we’re not that dumb…” Jeremy started in their defence, but Geoff quickly cut him off.

“Every single one of you motherfuckers has done something stupid trying to be a hero! So, I don’t wanna hear it; I want to hear that you’re not going to do anything to get yourselves killed.”

“Ok Geoff.”

To everyone’s surprise, it was Ryan who was the first to respond.

One by one, the others agreed.

“Good,” Geoff said, “I feel marginally better.”

Geoff opened his mic channel back to the whole group.

“I hope everyone’s ready for this?”

A chorus of voices responded in the affirmative with varying degrees of enthusiasm. The Cow Chop Crew managed to peak all their mics in a seemingly coordinated attempt to make everyone’s ears bleed.

“Jesus, well, I’m gonna take that as a yes… Bolen, call it; how far off?”

Shaun’s voice from the Valkyrie called back through static, “Maybe 500 ft up the road, just past the oil plant ahead of you, that’s where you wanna drop the mines, Funhaus start falling back there and Fakes, you need to pass the whole convoy and sweep the stragglers, get those last cruiser escorts and block ’em in. The others just fill in the gaps.”

“Everyone clear?” Geoff called to confirm.

Again, everyone indicated in the affirmative.

“Ryan, would you care to do the honours?”

“I would be delighted, Geoff.”

Ryan threw a handful of proximity mines out the window in the approximate centre of the road as they passed their mark. Looking back, he watched the bizarre collection of vehicles following them swerve and start to fall away, carefully avoiding his mines to either side of the road. Thankfully they hadn’t passed a single other car on the road.

Ryan could see the first of the convoy approaching them and Jack accelerated to pass them.

“Gotta work fast up here,” Jack warned them. “Michael, Ryan, be ready and Jeremy and Gavin, you guys be ready to sweep if they miss.”

“We won’t miss,” Ryan assured him.

A few seconds later, the boom of the first explosion told Ryan his proximity mines were a success, the distant sound of metal twisting against metal, followed by a second detonation, screeching brakes and a dull, heavy thud, let them all know the plan was in full effect.

The effect in Ryan’s brain was like flipping a switch. All the nervous, anxious energy faded away into focus, his attention turned solely to the task at hand, to their trucks and his crew, everything else was secondary.
This is gonna be fun.

No. …well, yes, but that’s not the point.

Everyone’s gotta die sometime.

Yeah, but not today.

That nervous energy was back.

Ryan absentmindedly touched the hilt of the knife at his hip.

They passed the fourth truck, then the fifth; the drivers had already seen the wreck ahead and were slowing down, looking for a way to avoid it. Behind the final truck, the cruisers’ tyres were squealing and smoking as they tried to fall back to offer some support.

Jack accelerated to get around behind them and Michael wasted no time, throwing the explosives he’d had at the ready, scoring a direct hit on the first cruiser, its engine exploding sympathetically as the entire car was engulfed in flames and the officers inside attempted to throw the doors open and roll from the vehicle. Jack sped up again to get them within range of the second escort cruiser while Jeremy and Gavin cleaned up the mess; hanging out the windows of Geoff’s Fugitive and shooting anything that moved away from the flaming cruiser.

Ryan had hesitated. He cursed himself for it, but he knew he could count on Michael.

The second cruiser had managed to turn around and was attempting a retreat. This time Ryan had the explosives at the ready and he didn’t hesitate.

He missed.

He’d underestimated the distance, the proximity mine landing on the road just behind the cruiser, not close enough to detonate, but right in their own path.

“Whoops!”

“Ryan!” Jack threw a hard turn, fishtailing to avoid the explosive package.

“God dammit Ryan!” Michael yelled.

“Ryan’s trying to fuck us,” Jack confirmed to the others. “They’re getting away.”

“No, they’re not…” Ryan threw another explosive device, this time more carefully aimed, and it hit the rear wheel-well of the cruiser, detonating on impact and sending the car careening sideways before coming to an abrupt stop against a large rock.

“Watch out for the mine Ryan left,” Jack warned Geoff.

“Oh, don’t worry, I see it,” Geoff replied. The silver Fugitive pulled up close to the last truck, just as the agent in the passenger seat threw his door open, already shooting as he came out. Gavin shot a few rounds in his general direction before Jeremy moved in, strategically shooting out his kneecap, causing him to crumple to the ground. Gavin finished him off as Jeremy went for the driver, who was struggling with his seatbelt that had gotten tangled up in his shoulder holster. It was almost sad.

He made it quick.

“Eyy! We have ourselves a truck,” Jeremy declared gleefully, hauling the body out and climbing into
Jack drove around to the fifth truck, which was trying to turn around to find an exit route, but had been pretty successfully blocked in. Ryan and Michael jumped out of the car with their rifles at the ready. The driver seemed to recognize their predicament. There was no way for them to get out either up ahead or behind them, the road was blocked until they moved the trucks out themselves. Instead, they simply sat there.

It took Ryan a moment to put together. *Fuck. We should’ve thought of that.*

“What are they doing?” Geoff asked over the comms.

“Waiting,” Ryan explained. “Probably for backup.”

Michael followed his logic and shot a few rounds at the driver’s window. The driver flinched, but the window was unbroken. In frustration, he loosed a few more rounds. “We can’t get in! The damn things are armoured!”

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“Are the tyres?” Jack asked plainly.

“…good point.” Ryan shot at one of the tyres and the truck listed sideways. “Nope.”

Geoff hummed thoughtfully. “Well, at least they’re not going anywhere.”

“We’re never gonna be able to get in,” Michael said. “These damn things are impenetrable; all they have to do is sit there. Unless someone’s got a spare jaws of life in their trunk?”

Ryan looked up and noted a few of the other trucks ahead of them had similar ideas and they were sitting waiting, safe behind their armoured and bulletproof vehicles.

“Shit, uh, Geoff…”

“Yeah, I see…” Geoff thought for a moment, clearly surveying the scene.

“Ok, everyone without a truck: new plan!” Geoff yelled into the comms, opening up his mic to all channels, “Forget the trucks! If you can, pop the back doors and get the weapons! Destroy anything you can’t carry. We’re still heading back to Donkey Punch, but whatever you’re currently driving is your getaway vehicle now.”

“Still better than a bike,” Jeremy muttered.

Michael and Ryan popped the back of the police riot truck with little fuss and loaded Jack and Geoff’s Fugitives with the stolen weapons, a veritable arsenal now filling the trunks and backseats, while Gavin and Jeremy jumped out of their truck and kept their rifles trained on the agents in the cab, who were now actively radioing back to base about what was happening. They wouldn’t have long before NOOSE backup would be on their way.

Ryan took the lead to radio the groups. “We’re gonna wanna cut our losses pretty soon, we’re going to have company any minute now. Blow what you can’t carry and then we need to get the fuck out of here.”

“Way ahead of you!” Funhaus had already successfully taken both their trucks and headed back to Los Santos, where they’d double back onto the Palomino Freeway and head North towards Donkey Punch Farms. Chow Chop and Kinda Funny were right on their heels, although neither had managed to get the trucks out intact. Cow Chop hadn’t been able to get into their truck at all and had...
resorted to loading it up with explosives and blowing the lot. In their wake was flaming wreckage.

“Scatter,” Ryan instructed. “If you’ve got nothing to take back and somewhere to hide out and change vehicle, do it, anything to take the heat off the haul.”

“Good call Ryan,” Bruce confirmed. “You guys heard him.”

Geoff nodded at him, looking pleased. “Don’t forget, no one dies today. You assholes save that for tomorrow at the earliest.”

Ryan peppered the truck with explosives and jumped in the passenger seat of Geoff’s car, while Michael got back in with Jack and Jeremy and Gavin took the truck. The truck wouldn’t be able to pass the wreckage Cow Chop had left to head back towards Los Santos.

“That could be a problem…” Jeremy pointed out.

Geoff shook his head. “It’s faster to head back up Sustancia road and join up with the Freeway.”

“That takes us right past NOOSE,” Jack warned them. “What happened to ‘no one dies today’?”

“Trust me,” Geoff assured him, “it’ll at least confuse them and take some of the heat off the others. We can deal with it.”

He opened up the channels again. “Craig, Shaun, you guys still around?”

“We’re right above you!” Bolen radioed back. “Got eyes on a couple of helicopters mobilising from NOOSE headquarters, a few ground units gonna be headed your way soon too. Looks like three cruisers – so far.”

Ryan nodded, if they could hit the freeway before they sent too many more units after them, and the Attack boys could keep the choppers off their tail, they’d have a good chance of evading them.

“One a piece, I think we can manage that.” Michael mirrored his own thinking.

Jack and Michael led the way, followed by Jeremy and Gavin in the truck and Geoff and Ryan pulled up the rear. Ryan couldn’t afford to miss again. He promised himself he wouldn’t let the pressure get to him, he knew he couldn’t really afford to. If he went, Geoff was likely to follow. He’d seen Geoff crumple under pressure before and it wasn’t pretty. If Geoff panicked, it made the others nervous.

It was rare for Ryan to be so conscious of his own thinking at a time like this, ordinarily he’d go into a kind of auto-pilot mode, letting his instinct and experience and muscle memory guide him, but he couldn’t afford to be reckless. Not now.

“Alright, we’ve got incoming!” Jack called out.

He was closely followed by the sound of the Valkyrie’s cannon firing and an explosion ahead of them, but Ryan couldn’t see around the truck.

“Jesus Christ, what the hell was that?!” Michael exclaimed.

“Oh man, that thing is fun!” Craig’s voice came over the comms. Of course, the Valkyrie had some impressive weaponry of its own.

Michael was clearly impressed. “Dude, that thing is badass!”
“Thanks for letting us borrow it, Ryan!”

Ryan grumbled exaggeratedly, “‘letting’ and ‘borrow’ are very loose terms.”

“Gonna take care of the others?” Jack asked as the other cruisers approached.

“I got this one.” Michael must have thrown explosives because although Ryan couldn’t see what happened, he certainly heard it. The ensuing maniacal combined giggles of the lads confirmed it.

The third cruiser ran itself off the road and the convoy blew past it, Ryan threw a proximity mine out the window as they passed, landing it square of the hood of the car and leaving an inferno behind them as they made for the freeway.

As soon as they passed NOOSE headquarters, Ryan started laying down proximity mines all over the road behind them. Not a chance they were getting any vehicles out of there in a hurry.

They seemed to be getting away without too much trouble. None of them could believe they’d pulled it off.

Overhead, two Maverick helicopters had been deployed, presumably to track them. It surprised everyone when they made a coordinated run at the Valkyrie. Shaun and Craig were caught off guard. Craig switched from the canons, which were better at targeting ground objectives, to the mounted guns, which had more range and could follow the choppers as they sliced through the air towards them.

“Shit shit shit shit shit…” Craig repeated over and over as he unleashed on the choppers. He caught the tail rotor on the closest one and it started to waver, the pilot fighting the uneven forces and trying to keep it under control, but rapidly descending and falling away from them. Craig kept firing at the other, and it returned fire in kind.

Shaun at least had the sense to start heading out towards Blaine County, away from both the City and the rendezvous point the others were heading to. If Ryan recalled correctly, one of them had mentioned Chad had a place they could lay low somewhere around Sandy Shores.

“You boys have parachutes, right?” Geoff asked; the concern in his voice evident and genuine.

“You bet your ass we do,” Shaun confirmed.

“Jump if you have to,” Geoff instructed. “Cut and run if you think they’re gonna get a hit on you.”

There was more gunfire followed by a beeping noise over the comms, a scuffle and a curt “welp” before the comms cut out.

“Shit!”

Ryan stuck his head out the window of the Fugitive and saw the second Maverick in a tail-spin and two figures falling away from the Valkyrie, which was smoking and rapidly falling out of the sky. He watched the figures as they fell, unsure if they were alive, or even conscious, buffeted by wind as they were, but then suddenly, parachutes deployed.

“They’re ok!” Ryan let out a long breath. “They jumped, they’re ok.”

The second Maverick plummeted to earth and exploded, followed by Ryan’s now former Valkyrie.

Ryan made a noise that might have been classified as a whine as he watched it hit the ground.
“Ryan? Was that you that made that noise?” Jeremy asked from the truck ahead.

Ryan sighed. “Yeah… I never even got to fly it…”

Geoff started quietly giggling next to him.

“You know that would’ve come in real handy for tomorrow…” Ryan glared.

Geoff’s laughter got louder.

“You suck, Geoff,” Ryan said flatly, folding his arms across his chest in a mock-sulk.

Geoff burst out laughing. “It was almost worth it just for that!”

Geoff’s laughter set off the others in the crew.

“That was a successful heist!” Gavin noted. “I almost can’t believe we got away with that.”

“I actually can’t believe we got away with that,” Jeremy said with a giggle.

“And no one died,” Jack pointed out.

“Well, not yet anyway,” Michael added.

“Good,” Geoff said. “Let’s try to keep it that way.”

As they pulled into Donkey Punch Family Farms, still disbelieving of the name; they saw that the others had already arrived and were unpacking and sorting the stolen weapons. It was a very impressive haul and a good start.

They added their bounty to the cache and got to work helping the others.

The old adage “many hands make light work” seemed to ring true, or maybe it was just the adrenaline and anticipation of what was to come, but they worked quickly and with an easy buzzing energy of coming down from a heist, so it took them almost no time to unpack, sort and redistribute their takings.

When they were done, Geoff addressed them all as a group.

“We’re going to be arming the populace at strategic locations throughout the city. You’ve all been given instructions from Lindsay, Trevor or myself. Tomorrow it all kicks off. So, head back to Los Santos, keep your heads down, deal with this, then rest up. You’re gonna need it. Good luck.”

Ryan couldn’t help but get the feeling they were going to need all the luck they could get.
“Matt,” the voice on the phone answered on the first ring. “How’s it all going on your end? Oh, and good call on the evacuations and lockdown.”

“I just don’t want more people getting hurt.” Matt looked at the pile of paperwork on his desk, the requests for statements and comments that kept coming in from the media, the documents that were quickly making it evident that despite his position and the shiny plaque reading: ‘Mayor Hullum’ on his door, he wasn’t going to have much of a say in how this was going to be handled. The worry in his voice was clear. “I don’t know what else I can do… Look, I don’t ask for much-”

“You usually don’t have to…”

“…but we can’t afford this.”

“And you’ll understand that neither of us can afford to be seen getting involved in this. But we can’t stop it, so we have to roll with it,” the voice on the phone said sternly, reminding them both of the long game. “We’ve already given them a way in. Best we can do now is send in a clean-up crew when it’s over. And hope they don’t let the city fall into the wrong hands.”

Matt hummed in contemplation. “You think they can do it?”

“I wouldn’t’ve hired them if I didn’t.”

* * *

The drive back to the new headquarters was almost relaxing until they reached the city. The closer they got to Downtown and the FIB building, the more tense the feeling on the ground became. It wouldn’t have been obvious to civilians; those who weren’t looking for it, but the police presence was at least tripled, and they’d even spotted some vehicles that were likely Merryweather; a private military-level security company. It set Ryan’s nerves on edge and made his trigger finger itch. The sun was just starting to dip below the horizon as they approached the corner of Integrity way and Alta St, throwing the city into silhouettes framed by vivid fiery hues.

Geoff hadn’t been kidding when he said the new headquarters were close. They would be able to see the FIB building from the penthouse on the South-East side.

In the private underground parking garage, a Weeny Issi in bright metallic pink was parked in one corner, but other than that it was empty.

“Mica must already be here,” Geoff noted.

Of course, it was Mica’s. Ryan couldn’t help but smile at how fitting the undoubtedly modified, compact convertible was as he noticed the bumper sticker reading: Kawaii! He couldn’t help but think Kdin would love it as well.

They left the new haul of weapons in the van – they’d already checked and readied them, so they could leave them until they were needed. A private lift took them from the parking garage directly to
the penthouse floor lobby. Inside, Mica and Andy had already begun stocking the place with supplies, including an impressive arsenal of weapons to add to their freshly acquired cache. Ryan was happy to see his RPG on the kitchen counter and on the ground below it, Michael’s minigun. Bullpup rifles littered the living room and against one wall were Jerry cans and funnels, presumably full of fuel to fill the bottles lined up next to them to make Molotov cocktails. It was both terrifying and exhilarating to think about, but they certainly weren’t pulling any punches.

“When shit kicks off, we’re gonna shift it to the garage; that way you can restock from there,” Mica explained. “Andy and I’ll be overseeing things from here, so you’ll have backup if you need it. Lindsay, Trevor and Matt are making the rounds to the outposts and making sure Steffie’s crew – ‘home-base’ – knows what’s up, but they’ll be back here later.”

“We’ll be able to arm an army with all that,” Gavin noted, eyes widening at the sight of the duffel bags full of miscellaneous ammunition.

Andy grinned. “That’s the plan.”

“Make yourselves at home,” Mica gestured to the rest of the penthouse, “oh, but B-team are set up in the room at the end of the hall, and there are only four bedrooms, so a few of you’ll have to get cozy.”

“God dammit,” Jeremy muttered. It was really the story of his life.

Gavin immediately turned to Michael. “Wanna bunk with me, boi?”

“Gavin, please.” Michael rolled his eyes. “What would my wife say?”

Gavin looked genuinely a little heartbroken.

“I’ll share with you, Gavin,” Jeremy offered.

“Aww, you would’ve been my next choice Little J.”

“I’ll take the couch,” Ryan quickly claimed. Despite having shared a room with the others for days on end, he felt like the space might do him good, and the oddly familiar vibe of the penthouse kept reminding him of-

_How dangerous you are to them?_

-events he’d rather not remember.

At any rate, there was a good chance he’d get a better night sleep, even with all the activity in the penthouse, rather than sharing with Geoff or Jack.

Geoff pulled a face like he was about to argue, but he thought better of it.

“You and me, buddy,” Geoff said to Jack.

“Works for me.”

Geoff smirked. “It’d better. You don’t get much of a choice.”

Everyone started making their way towards their nominated sleeping quarters.

“Seeing as I’ve sacrificed my bed for the couch, it’s really only fair that I get the first shower,” Ryan stated, slipping into the bathroom and locking the door behind him before the others could argue.
Through the door, Ryan heard Jeremy immediately yell: “Dibs second!” and a chorus of voices started arguing.

* * *

Geoff had snuck off while the others argued over the shower. He found a quiet place in the upper floor of the penthouse in a small study room and dialled a number from memory. He’d been putting off this call for too long.

“How’d it go?” The voice on the other end answered.

“Not entirely according to plan, but all things considered, pretty well.”

“Good to hear…”

The conversation was long and detailed, covering all aspects of what they had been planning and what was to come.

“If we pull this off, it’s a huge deal.”

Geoff sighed. “I know, but…” Something in his voice gave it away.

“You haven’t told the crew about all this, have you?”

“They’re definitely suspicious, but no…” Geoff felt the guilt of not telling them already eating at his insides, “I don’t think they know.”

“Good. Probably best you keep it that way. I can’t imagine they’d react well to finding out now.”

“I can’t keep them in the dark like this.”

“Yes, you can,” the other insisted. “Why does it matter, it’s been like this for years! They trust you and we need them to do this; we can’t risk them scattering now.”

“Exactly; they trust me. This has never come up as such a big deal before; this doesn’t even have to be their fight. They deserve to know that and decide for themselves.”

“Geoff, think about the bigger picture here; after all this is said and done, how much easier things will be for us.”

Geoff paused, considering his words carefully. “I don’t think you and I have the same ‘bigger picture’ in mind anymore.”

“I know how much they mean to you-”

“I really don’t think you do.”

“Just think about it, ok Geoff? Don’t throw this all away.”

“Well, that’s not really for me to decide anymore.”

Geoff hung up. The monotonous beep of the dial tone signalled that the conversation had ended, but Geoff’s shaking hands indicated it was far from over.
He had to tell them.

* * *

Ryan stepped out of the shower onto the plush, navy blue bath mat. Mindful of the still-healing wound on the back of his neck, he roughly towelled off his now nearly shoulder-length hair before wrapping the towel around his waist. It was good to have a reliable stream of hot water again. The camp’s facilities had been somewhat less than ideal. He wiped the condensation from the mirror with the heel of his hand and took a good look at his face for the first time in weeks.

He was surprised to see he didn’t look like complete shit. A shave had helped. His hair was still long and unruly, faded brownish-black except for a good inch or so of dark ashy-blonde regrowth. He had put off cutting it to cover the brand, but he remembered it being grabbed by one of the Vagos back in the projects. It could’ve gotten him killed.

The brand was gone. The scar that remained was just another one for the team.

He pulled his hair back into a ponytail at the nape of is neck and loosened the band away from his scalp a little. He retrieved his recently-sharpened knife from the pile of clothes at his feet and with his hair in his left hand, he sliced upwards through the hair next to the band, letting the free strands fall around his face. He tossed the severed length of hair in the bin and ran his hands through what was left. It looked a bit off, but he figured it’d do. It wasn’t going to get him grabbed anytime soon.

He finished towelling off just as there was a knock on the door.

“Ryan, you done in there?” Jeremy’s voice came through.

“Just about…” He pushed his hair back off his face, and it was still wet enough that it simply slicked back as if he’d never cut it. “Hey, are there clean clothes out there?” He probably should’ve checked that first.

“Yeah,” Jeremy replied. “Steffie’s all over that stuff, found some in the bedrooms. Should be something for you in there.”

“Great, because these need to be burned.”

Picking his dirty clothes off the floor and making sure the towel was secure around his waist, Ryan opened the door and sidestepped Jeremy as he pushed past him into the bathroom, a shower cap on his head. Ryan noticed, but it didn’t really register as odd and he went back to find some clean clothes.

About 10 minutes later he strolled back out to the living room, grabbing a diet coke from the fridge and flopping down on one of the large, unfortunately white couches that had come with the pre-furnished penthouse. He vaguely wondered how long the white would last.

Michael looked up from the weapon he’d been strategically disassembling to clean and let out a hysterical giggle. “Ryan, what the fuck have you done to your hair?”

Ryan instantly flushed red. “What? It’s not that bad… I mean, it’s functional.”

“Oh man, no… No, it’s bad. It’s real bad.” He was trying to hold back the laugh as he shot a look across the table at Gavin, who had an almost identical look on his face of barely contained laughter.
Ryan looked abashed but pretended not to care. “It’s fine.”

Michael finally exploded into giggles, Gavin following suit.

“Ryan, no… hang on, let me find some scissors… I don’t know if I can fix it, but I can at least try to make it look… not like that.”

Ryan reluctantly agreed.

Just as Michael returned with the scissors, Jeremy emerged from the bathroom, sporting a shock of fresh, fiery red hair.


“Hey!” Ryan stifled a laugh. “At least I’m not trying to make myself an easy target!”

Gavin snorted. “Could you be any brighter, Jeremy?”

“Dude, remember when it was green?” Michael asked, still grinning.

Gavin scoffed and rolled his eyes. “Remember? How could I forget?”

“Good, I’m going for memorable,” Jeremy sniped. “You don’t get the luxury of forgetting the day you get your ass handed to you by Jeremy Dooley.”

Gavin and Michael exploded into giggles again.

Ryan just smirked. “Well, you nailed it.”

Michael was just setting up behind Ryan, trying to work out the best way to attack the cubist art arrangement that was his current hairstyle, when Geoff walked in.

His eyes ran from Ryan, to Michael then to a still giggling Gavin and Jeremy, before he shook his head and turned around, leaving the room the same way he’d come in without a word.

* * *

One haircut and a moment of adjusting to Jeremy’s new style later; Ryan ran his fingers through his short, much lighter hair, hardly any of the black dye remaining. He looked more like himself – more like the version of himself he wanted to be – than he had in a long time.

“Better?” Michael asked.

“Much. Thanks Michael.”

By that stage most of the others had gathered in the main rooms around the kitchen, dining and living areas that had become a kind of armoury, everyone checking weapons before giving them over to Mica and Andy to run down to the garage.

“Where’s Geoff?” Gavin finally noted.

Jack shrugged, stuffing a rag into the top of a glass bottle and placing it carefully in a box with several others. “He was making calls… I think he was on the phone to Lindsay, last I saw. Said they should be up soon.”
Andy and Mica each took a box of checked ammunition and pre-prepared Molotovs and headed back down to the garage.

The sun had well and truly set and glancing out the south-east floor-to-ceiling glass windows towards the FIB building – Ryan still couldn’t believe the view – he could see the place buzzing with activity. Lights on, a stream of cars and vans and people arriving, dropping things off, giving directions to the lost-looking LSPD officers trying to help set up the perimeter outside. The remainder of the city was deathly quiet and in darkness. Even the International Affairs Agency building right across from them was almost still, with only a few lights on. Clearly not evacuated, but sensible enough not to get involved.

*And why would they?* Ryan thought to himself, *they hate the FIB’s guts, might as well give them enough rope to hang themselves with.*

The north-facing windows looked out over Integrity Way, up towards the northern edge of the lockdown perimeter. NOOSE had started setting up for riot control. It really was the perfect vantage point to coordinate events from.

Sometime between when Ryan had started staring out the windows, Geoff had silently made his way back into the main room. He walked over to where he was pacing near the couch, it seemed he’d already found the equivalent of his pacing spot from their previous penthouse headquarters. Geoff wore an expression of consternation, not just weighed down by the gravity of what they were about to attempt, something else was clearly bothering him at a deeper level. The others hadn’t seemed to notice yet.

“Geoff,” Ryan started gently, quietly so as not to alert the more rambunctious others. “Are you ok?”

Geoff sighed. “I’m a piece of shit…”

“Well, yeah, what else is new?” Ryan joked with a laugh.

“I’m fucking serious!” Geoff snapped. It was loud enough that the others quietened down to listen in.

Ryan’s laughter stopped, his eyes narrowed. “What is it?”

“Look,” Geoff started, loud enough for everyone to hear, “I haven’t been completely honest with you…”

That got everyone’s attention. All eyes were immediately on him.

“How so, Geoff?” Michael asked dangerously seriously.

Geoff rubbed his face with both hands and pulled at his hair.

“I need you to know this going on. Because I’m not going to ask any of you to fight for something you don’t believe in… And I understand if none of you want to stay.”

“What are you saying, Geoff?” Jeremy asked.

Ryan bit his tongue, feeling his stomach turn in anticipation.

Geoff took a deep breath. “What I’m saying… is that the Fake AH Crew was orchestrated from the beginning. We were hired to keep the balance in Los Santos.”

“It doesn’t change anything I’ve done or said since; you guys are still my crew and I care about you as much as if you were family – but I can’t let you go into this with that on my chest. Not in good conscience anyway.”

Ryan looked ready to take him apart.

All this time thinking you were the traitor, he just let you go on with it.

It’s Geoff, don’t act too hastily.

He lied to us.

There’s an explanation.

He lied to us.

There has to be…

“Geoff,” Ryan began slowly, hands balling into fists at his side, knuckles going white, carefully avoiding touching his knife for fear he may not be able to resist the temptation of swift vengeance at his words. He swallowed thickly before going on. “Answer the question. Who were you hired by?”

Geoff walked slowly around to the single seat recliner and folded into it. The others moved closer; Jeremy, Michael and Gavin sitting on the couch while Jack and Ryan stood behind.

Geoff cleared his throat. “Years ago, back before Burnie was mayor, we were friends. When he was seriously looking at getting into politics, I was testing the waters in …less reputable areas – I’m sure you get the picture.” He shook his head and moved on. “But he knew we needed to do something about the LSPD. They were being influenced by the FIB in one ear and IAA in the other, not to mention they were corrupt as fuck…”

“Still are,” Michael added.

“We needed a way to keep them in check. So, a few of us got together and started working on something… Joel Heyman, Gus Sorola and Matt Hullum were all in on it as well. We made a pact – we were going to have each other’s backs in whatever venture we got into. So, for Gus, that was Internal Affairs; Hullum, obviously went on to take up Burnie’s spot after his little stunt put a target on his back and Joel – well, Joel did a lot of things, but he was always around when we needed him. When Burnie was Mayor, he hired me to start the AH crew and ultimately I reported to him.”

“Why couldn’t you just tell us?” Gavin asked, sounding hurt. “It’s not like we would’ve disagreed with any of that. Sounds pretty reasonable, actually.”

The others half-nodded, it did make a lot of sense in a kind of convoluted, underhanded way.

It still made Ryan feel dirty, like he’d been manipulated, even though he didn’t disagree with their ideals or goals. He felt like a pawn. Like the Randoms must feel. The idea that they could be so similar shook him to his core.

“So why didn’t you just tell us? None of us would’ve been bothered by that,” Gavin reiterated.

Geoff rubbed his face before letting out a long exhale and looking Ryan directly in the eyes.

“Because of what could’ve happened to you if you knew.”

God damn it, Geoff.
Ryan wanted to be mad, knew he should be, that he had every right to be. He knew he could take this opportunity, walk away now.

But he also knew he never would.

*It was his life for the crew. It was how it was always going to be.*

“Has it ever changed the way you did things, with us?” Jack asked cautiously, probing.

“No. It might be… It might be like… like one day we thought we were going to be robbing a liquor store – petty gang-type shit, and then the next thing I get a call from Burnie that a turf war’s going to interrupt a drug bust that Gus and some ‘good agents’ had been working on, and so maybe we happen to take our heist down there and break it up…” Geoff grinned, clearly remembering a specific event that may have ended with Gavin desperately gripping the roof of their getaway car, squawking in terror as they sped away from the scene with nothing of any value, but plenty of great stories. “…but I’d never let it get between us. I’d never let it do anything to risk the crew. Well, outside of what we normally do anyway. So, I hope… If any of you want out, this is your chance. I won’t hold anything against you.”

They all looked around at each other, everyone still looked determined.

“What about the Family? Was that their idea or yours?” Jeremy asked.

“No, that was mine. I’d been thinking about that for a while. I wanted more support from other crews. Burnie was supportive, but that was my idea.”

“What about Gus?” Michael asked. “You said you thought he was dead?”

“I did!” Geoff burst out, eyes wide and grinning. “Sonovabitch never gets in contact with me!”

“And so, everything with the Randoms,” Ryan finally calmed his nerves enough to speak, “that’s all because of this?”

“No,” Geoff asserted quickly. “I don’t think they know. I mean, they have personal issues with us, but face it, so’s half the city. No, they think they’re real original trying to get control with the gangs… but I feel like shit for not telling you. And I’m sorry you had to find out like this. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn’t risk putting you or the crew in any more danger. And I’m sorry, for tricking you into doing things you had no business getting involved in. And I promise I won’t hold a grudge if you leave now. This political bullshit… it’s not your fight.”

Again, they all exchanged glances.

“It’s not about that… not really,” Jack said, full of a patience and compassion that Ryan envied. “And in a lot of ways, it never has been. It’s about *us*. What’s the real reason we’re going after these assholes? Because you say so? Because someone else has told you to tell us to do it? You know that’s not how it works, Geoff.”

Jeremy scoffed. “Good luck telling these assholes what to do.” He jerked a thumb at his own chest and gestured to the others with a grin.

“So clearly, we’re all staying.” Ryan said, looking around at the others, all nodding together, determination in their eyes. “This *is* our fight. And we’re going to fight…” He smirked as Geoff’s own words instinctively came back to him. “…because we deserve to fucking *win.*”

Geoff breathed a sigh of relief as the others relaxed around him.
“I’m gonna be honest with you here,” Geoff admitted with a grin. “I did not see that going so well.”

Chapter End Notes

Geoff and Gus' phone call earlier had gone something along the lines of:
“You sonovabitch Gus, I thought you were dead!”
“Well if you’d known I was alive you would’ve tried to contact me.”
“That’s my point!”
“Exactly! What about that don’t you get?”
“God damn it Gus.”
The Plan

Geoff hung up the phone with a grin on his face.

“What are we doin’, Geoff?” Jack yelled across the room playfully, aiming for annoying, but too genuinely excited to really pull it off.

“In about 2 minutes, Lindsay’s gonna tell us. She, Matt and Treyco are on their way here now; we’re gonna meet them in the garage,” Geoff announced.

Michael looked sceptical. “Umm, ok? Why the garage?”

“You’ll see…” Geoff said, still grinning.

“The whole area’s in lockdown, do they have some kind of cover?” Jeremy asked.

Geoff just grinned and repeated with a giggle, “you’ll see…”

Ryan looked at Jeremy with a raised eyebrow and they both shook their heads. Geoff seemed so very pleased with himself, so he was definitely up to something.

They all headed towards the elevator to the garage; Jack picking up the final box of prepared Molotovs to take down on the way.

“So,” Geoff started, “the plan for us is to get inside the FIB building to gain access to their servers, wipe the data and blow the joint; which is no small task on its own, but they’re expecting something so it’s going to be even harder. We’re going to use every trick in the book, starting with an old favourite: Misdirection. We’re gonna start a riot.”

Michael grinned. “I like that plan.”

Ryan only just noticed the T-shirt he was wearing said RIOT. Apt.

“Technically, Cow Chop’s gonna be leading that leg,” Geoff pointed out.

“How’d you manage to talk them into that?” Jack asked.

Geoff laughed. “They’re complete lunatics; I doubt I could’ve talked them out of it.”

The elevator arrived at the garage level and Jack put the box with the others, lined up neatly against one wall, ready to be distributed the following day.

The others spilled into the open area and with impeccable timing, the mechanics of the door engaged and the roar of a truck engine echoed though the space.

The LSFD firetruck only barely cleared the entrance.

The engine cut out and Trevor, Matt and Lindsay climbed out of the cab, the others staring in quiet awe at the acquisition.

Trevor gestured to the truck. “So, here’s the plan.”

“Hate to break it to you Trevor, but that’s a fire truck,” Jeremy deadpanned, earning a chuckle from Ryan.
Gavin’s eyes lit up. “That’s the best bloody plan I’ve ever seen!”

Lindsay pulled a large box full of stiff-looking yellow fabric from the cab. “Your uniforms. This is how we get around inside the perimeter. Emergency services have free roam, especially if there’s an actual emergency. So we’ll be incognito.”

“This is brilliant!” Gavin was ecstatic.

“Of course Gavin likes it.” Michael rolled his eyes. “But I gotta admit, it is a pretty fuckin’ great plan.”

“Still doesn’t help us get into the building,” Ryan pointed out.

“That’s where the actual emergency comes in,” Lindsay handed the box over to Michael and climbed back into the cab of the truck to get something else.

“Yeah…” Geoff continued, “There’re a few more steps to the plan, but now that you all know about the thing with Burnie, I can properly explain that.”

The relief in Geoff’s voice was audible and Ryan suddenly realised how much that secret must’ve been weighing on him. Especially since they had made the connection between how the Randoms were being used by the FIB. He still couldn’t find it in himself to be angry with Geoff. If any of them had known about the ties to Burnie, it could’ve placed them all at risk; carrying a secret like that would’ve meant none of them could leave the crew alive. Geoff’s paranoia, the ugly kind that reared its head all those months ago, when he thought Ryan and Jeremy were traitors, now seemed a lot more justified. Besides, the knowledge that they may have been acting in the service of some greater good actually carried with it its own sense of relief. They still weren’t the good guys – they never would be – but maybe they weren’t quite the villains they had cast themselves as. Maybe there really was room for a redemption arc in their story after all.

Lindsay emerged from the cab with almost a dozen pizza boxes with ‘Pizza This: Get Stuffed’ printed on the lids. Matt took half the boxes from her and Jeremy quickly offered to take the rest, peeking under the lid of the topmost box and getting a face full of cheesy-smelling steam.

“Are these from the Mission Row place?” He asked.

Matt nodded. “It’s not as good as the Vinewood one, but…” He shrugged.

“Hey, pizza’s a pizza,” Ryan said, edging closer to the boxes Jeremy was carrying.

Jeremy looked insulted. “A pizza is not ‘just a pizza,’ Ryan.”

“He’s right,” Michael backed him up.

“One day I’ll show you what a really good pizza is and then you’ll understand.”

“That sounds like good incentive not to get ourselves killed tomorrow then,” Ryan said, swiping a piece of pizza from Jeremy’s stack before he could stop him and shoving it into his mouth. After the weeks of healthy eating that the cult of Peake had put them through, the pizza would’ve tasted delicious regardless of where it came from. He couldn’t suppress a moan of pleasure as the taste filled his mouth.

Gavin stifled a laugh. “I love that that’s a valid reason for you not to get killed, Ryan.”

“It’s as good as any…” he muttered back through a mouthful of pizza before adding, “and better than
some.”

Geoff followed Lindsay to the elevator to head back up to the penthouse, the others looking around confused as Geoff held the door. “You assholes coming?”

“Wait, that’s it? You dragged us all down here just for that?” Jack asked with a scowl.

Geoff grinned dopily. “Yeah, it was a hell of an entrance though, right?”

There was a collective sigh as they all got back in the elevator to head up to the penthouse. The pizza smelled great though.

“So, like I was saying,” Geoff continued in the elevator, “this ‘actual emergency’… Burnie had one of his guys plant a device on the 49th floor of the FIB building that we now have remote access to. And if a bomb goes off in the FIB building, it’s only natural that the LSFD should respond to help evacuate the building, right?”

The elevator arrived back at the penthouse with a cheery ‘ding’.

“I’m gonna give it to you Geoff, this is a pretty solid plan,” Ryan confessed, finishing the slice of pizza and trying to snatch another one from the box while Jeremy kept moving it just out of reach.

Geoff grinned proudly. They spread the pizza boxes out on the kitchen counter, grabbed plates, drinks and paper towels – Steffie always knew to make sure they were well-stocked with paper towels – and spread themselves comfortably around the expansive living space of the penthouse.

“So, the bomb goes off and we make sure we’re the first on the scene,” Geoff explained, pausing to take a bite of pizza.

Gavin had been looking over the layout of the FIB building earlier and suddenly perked up. “Wait, you said the bomb was on the 49th floor? The servers are on the 53rd. And if we wanna wipe the slate, we’re going to need access to them first…”

Geoff nodded, swallowing the pizza he was chewing and cutting him off, “that’s why we’re splitting up. Ground team – that’s you four-” He gestured to Michael, Gavin, Jeremy and Ryan, “-head in as firemen. Jack and I will be heading over from the roof and working our way down to secure the sever room before you guys reach it. After the bomb goes off, everyone inside should be making their way down and out, so there shouldn’t be much to deal with in the way of resistance. We clear the room, get in to the servers and wipe the data, Michael rigs explosives and we get out of there before we blow it. We go late afternoon; we’ll be running a zip-line from the West, so the setting sun will give us some cover on our approach to the roof.” He nodded with a grin to Jeremy, who had inadvertently inspired the idea from his own sniping tactics.

“That sounds a lot easier than climbing all those stairs,” Matt said, “why don’t you all just go over that way?”

“I don’t like to put all my eggs in one basket,” Geoff replied, “besides; we need a reliable exit strategy. I want everyone to have parachutes as well, in case things go tits-up, especially since we’re rigging explosives in the building. Burnie assures me his guy made sure the building would be structurally sound enough for us to go up there, but there’s no guarantee that it’ll stay that way once we blow the room with the servers.”

“You guys wanna be at least at level 50 to pull off that jump if you do have to though,” Trevor noted matter-of-factly. “Any lower and it gets too risky. Plus, you’ll be really visible. Pretty easy to get shot
out of the sky.”

“That’s just what I wanted to hear, thanks Trevor,” Jeremy added sarcastically. While Jeremy could throw himself out of a plane no worries, he wasn’t the best with heights and base jumping from an exploding building surrounded by riot control and FIB agents on high alert didn’t sound like the most appealing idea to him either.

“Well, that’s why that’s the backup plan,” Geoff explained, “and why I need most of you to be coming in as firemen. Firemen are expected to be escorting people out of the building. It’ll be a clear getaway back to the penthouse to regroup before all hell breaks loose.”

There was a pause as everyone took it in, most mouths still crammed with food.

“Then what?” Jack asked finally.

Geoff swallowed another mouthful of pizza; he’d barely finished a slice and took a sip of his diet coke before he explained. “We need to make sure they don’t regain control. Once the servers come down they’ll be vulnerable. That’s the signal to step it up. Kinda Funny’s going to be working on interrupting their communications and calling weak points in riot control for the others, directing the flow and working the crowds. The Attack boys will be on the ground supporting Funhaus and the rest of our crew to strategically hit the big targets; working their way up the chain of command to Jason Dowl; we know he’s planning on sticking it out – we don’t stop until he’s dead. Cow Chop’s arming the masses and leading the riots. They claimed they were immune to pepper spray; they wanted to test that theory – crazy bastards. The IAA will step in once they realise the FIB can’t handle it. That’s when we can pull our guys out of there and let things die down on their own.”

“How long will that be?” Jack asked, a worried expression forming on his face at the thought of so many of them in direct combat.

“We just gotta keep at it until the IAA take over. Gus will give us the heads-up.”

“But how long?” Jack repeated.

“I don’t know,” Geoff admitted dejectedly.

The words hung in the air.

It was as if Geoff was just waiting for them to come to their senses and abandon him. It was a feeling Ryan knew all too well. A feeling he knew Geoff didn’t need or deserve right now.

“As long as it takes,” Ryan spoke up. “Until we win.”

Michael, Jeremy and Gavin nodded instantly. The others slowly joined in. Relief washed over him in much the same way it seemed to do to Geoff. They were all still in this together.

Fakes for life.

* * *

They spent the rest of the evening discussing minor details of the plan, talking shit, telling jokes and stories and finally falling victim to Gavin’s rhetorical questioning before people started falling away to attempt to get some proper sleep before the big day.
Michael and Lindsay were the first to head to bed, likely for reasons other than sleeping; followed by Matt, Trevor, Mica and Andy in a flurry to not be the last one in their one room – who would most likely end up sleeping on the floor.

Gavin and Jeremy retired next, Gavin continuing his onslaught of questions as they trailed off to the bedroom. “Jeremy, if you had to choose one of us to be stuck on a desert island with, who would it be?”

Jeremy’s answer faded down the hallway after them, but Ryan smiled to hear it.

Jack yawned and stretched out, looking about to drop off himself. “You sure you’re ok on the couch, Ryan? You can have the room if you’d prefer.”

“I’m ok out here. I’m gonna be up a while longer anyway.”

“As long as you’re sure…”

“I’m fine Jack, but thanks.”

Jack sighed, getting up and yawning again. “Well if that’s the case I’m gonna hit the hay.”

Ryan gave him a nod. “Night Jack.”

Geoff rubbed his face with both hands. “I’m not far behind you… Just gonna finish my drink.” It was mostly melted ice and Geoff swirled the paltry remainder of his glass a little pathetically. Ryan knew instantly he wanted to talk to him privately. Jack seemed to take the hint and left them alone.

Ryan stared out the window, eye drawn to the illuminated letters of the Vinewood sign in the distance, the ever-present reminder of the city’s illustrious façade. The glamorous face that masked the underbelly of sin and corruption that they were far more familiar with. Geoff seemed to follow his gaze, but he had that look that suggested he wasn’t really seeing, lost deep in thought.

“Do you think it’s do-able?” Geoff asked sincerely, looking for a direct honest answer.

“The plan? ...It’s not going to be easy, but yeah, I think it’s do-able,” Ryan replied. “As long as we’ve got enough time to wipe the servers and rig charges. Should only need a few minutes, if everything works out, people will have evacuated from the upper levels by the time we get up there. If they’re suspicious though, and my money’s on ‘they will be’; they might be less inclined to leave. We’re going to need to be careful and make sure we’re prepared if they call it as a trick.”

“You think the FIB would leave agents in the upper levels of a burning building?”

“You think they wouldn’t? This is the same FIB that endorses waterboarding as a valid interrogation technique, Geoff.” He smirked, but it was predictably humourless, and Geoff returned a look of pity that made him uncomfortable. “They don’t play by the rules is what I’m getting at… but then, these days, it seems few do.” There was a bitter note in his voice, it wasn’t directed at Geoff, but it probably felt that way. “Once that’s all done, it’s just a matter of bringing some extra firepower onto the streets and showing them what we’re capable of. Sending a message. It’s dangerous, but that we can do.”

Geoff flinched, picking up on the tone of his voice. “I’m sorry I didn’t- I couldn’t tell you about Burnie’s involvement sooner. I wanted to, but I kept thinking about what might happen to you if you left. What might have happened to Ray… or any of you if you wanted to leave, if you knew or if anyone thought you knew anything...”
Ryan nodded, that had already occurred to him, he wanted to cut him off, to tell him that he understood, it was ok. Save him the embarrassment.

*He needs to say this. Let him say it. This is for him.*

Geoff ran his fingers through his hair, scrunching it in fistfuls. “There were times when I let it get the better of me. When keeping my secrets became more important than protecting the crew and you got the raw end of that deal every time. And for that, I really am sorry.”

Ryan hadn’t thought about it like *that* before. But he was right, every time there was suspicion in the crew it had been his neck on the chopping block. Even when it wasn’t directly – his going to the defence of Jeremy had the same effect. And yet he’d been the first to put his own life on the line to save them.

Geoff sighed. “Look, Ryan, I know you give a shit about this crew. You’ve said it yourself, the reason you left – of all the reasons you *could* have left – you left because you wanted to save us from yourself.”

Ryan gave the briefest of nods. It was for them. *It was how it was always going to be…*

“Hey Ryan, be honest with me here,” Geoff’s voice cracked slightly, “That day on the roof… What would’ve… if I uh… if I hadn’t been there…”

Ryan sensed his discomfort and where the question was going. He closed his eyes and shook his head, chewing his lip a little as the realisation hit him as well. The guilt that had eaten at him then probably wasn’t all that different to what Geoff was going through, or at least, had gone through.

*Be honest. You both deserve that.*

“I uh…” He couldn’t bring his eyes to meet Geoff’s, looking out the window again. “Well, let’s just say we wouldn’t be having this conversation now.”

Geoff winced as if it physically hurt him to hear it. “Jesus Ryan… I’m so sorry. I just… shit.”

“Look, if it’s any consolation,” Ryan said stoically, recollecting himself. “Things are different now. I’m not going to do that again.”

Geoff winced again. “I’m sorry…”

“Don’t be sorry,” Ryan said firmly. “You don’t have to be. You did the right thing…” His gaze drifted back out the window. It was remarkable that anyone would go to war over this city… but it was home. It was the only place that had ever felt like home. And he had his suspicions that that didn’t have anything to do with the city. “What you did today – telling us – that took guts, Geoff.”

Geoff huffed a laugh, the look on his face agreed with Ryan.

“You didn’t really think any of us would walk though?” Ryan looked at him quizzically.

“I didn’t know!” Geoff confessed. “I didn’t know what to think, you’d walked before; Lil J, Michael and Gavin… you should’ve seen how badly that shook them up. I just wanted to give you the choice. I needed to know that you knew what you were getting into. And why.”

A grin tugged at the corner of Ryan’s lips. “Well, you don’t have to worry about me going anywhere. You’re stuck with all of us.”
A weight seemed to slip from Geoff’s shoulders, some of the tension visibly leaving his body. “Thank you. That actually means a lot. You’ve done a lot for this crew, Ryan. I know you all have, but…” Geoff sounded like he was struggling to find the words. “…we couldn’t do it without you.”

Ryan cringed, the last niggling doubts resurfacing. “But I still fucked up, I hurt Jeremy, I nearly killed you…”

As if deliberately ignoring him, Geoff drained the remainder of his glass, stretched and stood up, heading to the kitchen to wash up. “Ryan, I know you do whatever you think is right for the crew. I don’t doubt it for a second.”

Ryan just listened, accepting the words in all the brutal honesty he uttered them. He wasn’t wrong.

“Which is why I want you to lead the lads in this one. They listen to you, they respect you. You’ve all got each other’s backs, you’ve proven that over and over. It’s not an easy job, not by any stretch of the imagination, but you’ve got this. And I know I’ve been an asshole in the past… but I trust you. Are you up for it?”

Ryan’s expression softened. It was a strange dichotomy, he’d been given more responsibility, more pressure, the task ahead of them was daunting; but Geoff’s faith in him gave him strength.

“Yes.”

Geoff smiled and nodded. “Ok then. You should get some sleep, we’re gonna need it. We have a revolution to start tomorrow.”
Bad things happen to heroes

“Gear up.”

Lindsay gave the order mid-afternoon. The morning had passed uneventfully, with the crew making the most of the downtime to try to relax; they’d gone over all they could regarding the plan and no one had any unanswered questions. With weapons and equipment already triple checked, they scattered to their rooms to get ready; strapping and taping old injuries and weak spots, layering armour under their clothes, going through their pre-heist rituals, whatever that may consist of.

Ryan took his paints and headed to the bathroom, carefully laying out his brushes and pots on the edge of the sink. He had a healthy five o’clock shadow from the previous day; his beard tinged with shades of ginger and grey amidst the dark blonde, not enough to be noticeable, but enough to remind him he was getting older. Not to mention the silver streaks that had started creeping in around his temples. He’d never considered he’d go grey. It wasn’t like he was in denial about aging; it was more that he’d always realistically doubted he’d live long enough to see it happen. He had to admit, it didn’t look too bad. *Almost something to be proud of,* he thought with a smile, deciding to leave the stubble. He started the process of painting his face, taking his time to make sure the design was just right. It was an almost meditative ritual and it usually helped to calm his nerves. Today he allowed himself to become completely engrossed in the task. Pausing to check the lines were even, fixing any minor mistakes he would normally smudge over and re-do, giving extra attention to all the little details in the design. Completing his black and white skull paint normally took him 15 minutes, 10 if he was in a hurry. But today felt different. He spent a whole 30 minutes perfecting it.

He put down his brushes and took a good look in the mirror. The paint masked his expression; black covering his eyebrows, replaced with the severe high arches of the ones he painted on, a permanent scowl to help hide any trace of emotion that crept its way onto his face. It was intimidating, but intimidation wasn’t the point anymore. Neither was anonymity; the city had seen his face, heard his voice. It was symbolic. It was the Vagabond. And as much as he could’ve denied it, it was still a part of him. A *useful* part. As terrifying as it was that he wasn’t in complete control, deep down, it was still him. He just had to trust himself.

A knock at the door startled him.

“Ryan, you done in there?” Jack’s voice came through the door. “Need the bathroom back; Geoff desecrated the ensuite.”

Ryan chuckled at the use of the word ‘desecrated’, opening the door as he packed away his paints.

“Wow, that looks really good …well… *terrifying,* I suppose.”

Ryan smirked, only serving to make the display creepier, his piercing blue eyes all that remained to get a read on. “Thanks Jack,” he said cheerfully, “all yours.”

He stared to head out, but Jack put a hand on his shoulder to stop him.

“Ryan, look, I never really said thank you. For coming back; for everything you did. And I’m sorry. I’ve been a real asshole to you, sometimes when you really didn’t deserve it.”

“Did Geoff put you up to this?” Ryan asked, sensing a pattern and knowing Geoff’s MO.

“No, actually, he didn’t. But I may have overheard what he said last night about you getting the raw end of the deal. He’s not wrong. And I’ve been responsible for some of that too. And I’m sorry.”
Ryan smiled warmly but realised suddenly that probably didn’t translate through the face paint.

“Thanks Jack,” he said in the most sincere tone he could manage. “If it’s any consolation, I understand… I forgive you.”

Jack looked relieved. “That means a lot… now I actually have to use the bathroom, so get out.”

Ryan laughed as he closed the door behind him.

* * *

The mood in the living room was deceptively light. The lads were lounging on the long white sofa, Geoff hovered around the kitchen and Matt was practically horizontal he’d slumped so far down in the recliner. The only thing hinting at the gravity of what was about to go down was that they were all geared up in their trademark outfits, soon to be covered by the protective garb of the LSFD uniforms. Gavin wore his navy, slim-fit silk shirt, gold-rimmed sunglasses hooked into the front; hair gelled and preened into place to look just stylishly messy. Michael had dusted off his soft brown leather jacket, the snarling lonewolf logo and phrase “confide nemini” of the special airborne unit emblazoned on the back – Ryan had found it ironic, given Michael’s nature as a team player, but he supposed he hadn’t always been that way… like most of them. Meanwhile, Jeremy stood out in technicolour, a vulgar offence to fashion in his bright purple blazer over an orange t-shirt and disturbingly yellow pants. And bright red hair, which he (thankfully?) covered with his cream-coloured Stetson. Yet still, somehow, he managed to pull it off.

*He did say he was going for memorable.*

*I’ll give him that. Shame it’ll be covered.*

Ryan eyed the box of firefighting over-wear next to the couch where the lads were lazing.

*I hope this works…*

He was just about to open his mouth to ask how long they had, when Jack emerged from the bathroom in his Hawaiian shirt, forgoing his usual shorts in favour of jeans. Harder wearing, marginally more practical for zip-lining, or maybe he was just getting colder as he got older. Ryan certainly was. He wore jeans religiously and he zipped his black and blue leather jacket up over the black t-shirt featuring the Deadpool logo that had been left for him. Well, he assumed it was for him. It seemed fitting at any rate and it was in his size.

Across the kitchen counter, pouring himself a glass of some green juice; Geoff had suited up. Much like Ryan, it looked like he’d taken his time to make an effort. The suit was clean and ironed, crisp white and black and his bowtie was impeccable. He’d even waxed his moustache.

Ryan’s hand went to the knife at his hip, thumbing the hilt as he looked around at the crew. His crew. If anyone could do this, it was them. He trusted them with his life. And they trusted him. He was finally starting to accept that.

“You guys wanna suit up?” Lindsay came into the room with Trevor on her heels and gestured at the box. “Matt, you too, I know you’re driving, but you still need to look the part.”

Matt groaned but hauled himself out of the chair to rifle through the box of uniforms, throwing them out into five roughly sorted piles as he went through. Geoff immediately slid into his spot on the recliner.
“First off though, I have an announcement,” Lindsay said, clasping her hands together as the room went silent. “For obvious security reasons, as well as more personal ones, I’m stepping down as head of the Fakes.”

It was a surprise, but it made sense given she’d been exposed already and a few of the crew nodded, notably Michael. He would have been much happier knowing she was no longer in direct line of fire.

“As of today,” Lindsay continued, “…ok, well, technically, as of a few days ago, but now you know; Trevor will be your new boss.”

“Treycs! Good job Trevor!” Gavin congratulated him.

“Hey, thanks man!” Trevor smiled and blushed slightly, there was little doubt he’d do a fine job though. Kid was a genius after all, if a little twisted. Kinda perfect for the job really.

“So, boss, how long ’til we kick this thing off?” Jeremy beamed, barely containing his pride at the announcement; he was always genuinely happy to see others do well, and he and Trevor had come from similar beginnings.

“Not long.” Trevor replied coolly. “So suit up and make sure you’re ready… Geoff, Jack, you come with me up to the roof; we’re going to set up to get over to the FIB building. We have to get across to the roof of the Union Depository first, then to the Bureau, and we’re only gonna have a 15-minute window to work in, so we have to be ready to go.”

Geoff made a similar groan to Matt and pulled himself upright but followed behind Jack and Trevor with little further fuss. The others started to make a move for the piles Matt had set out on the floor.

_Bright yellow. Inconspicuous._

They donned the protective outerwear as Lindsay read off a sheet Trevor had given her about the safety specifications of the uniforms, where they needed to go and what they should and shouldn’t do once inside the building to prevent it from collapsing down around them. Thankfully, she noted that the elevators should still be in working order, but they should only take them to the 48th floor in case of any damage, then they’d have to take the stairs to the top floor and cross the building to get to the server room in the southeast corner, where they’d meet the others. That would at least save them from having to run up so many stairs and hopefully avoid some of the lower level employees who may recognize them. Other than that, it was pretty common-sense stuff – at least Ryan thought so. He hoped the others were paying closer attention.

Mica wandered into the room from the garage where she and Andy had been taking final inventory for the riot crew; a huge grin spreading across her face as she digested the image of five Day-Glo criminals in the living room trying to work out how to conceal their weapons and equipment under the tunics.

“You boys look like you’re about to go rescue kittens out of trees,” she giggled.

“They do!” Lindsay agreed with a laugh, “You look like real heroes.”

“You would say that…” Michael started.

“Heroes?” Ryan scoffed. “Oh no, bad things happen to heroes… when we’re around anyway.”

“Good thing we’re not heroes then,” Matt pointed out, quite rightly.

“Rimmy Tim’s a hero,” Jeremy said haughtily.
Michael laughed. “Yes, but Jeremy, as you’ve pointed out multiple times, you’re clearly not Rimmy Tim.”

Gavin giggled, and Ryan grinned.

“Definitely not Rimmy Tim,” Lindsay affirmed.

“I mean, no… of course not, I just hear he’s a really cool guy,” Jeremy played along, acting abashed.

“Yeah! Rimmy Tim’s a hero, Lil J’s a piece of shit.” Michael grinned even wider.

“Alright…” Jeremy huffed, about to step it up when Ryan interrupted to put a stop to it.

“So… are we just waiting on them now or what?” He asked, gesturing vaguely upwards to indicate Geoff, Jack and Trevor on the roof.

Lindsay glanced at her watch, then out the window. “We’re waiting for the sun. Probably another 20 minutes or so?”

As she said it, Geoff, Jack and Trevor returned and Trevor immediately dashed off, probably to finish gearing up himself. Geoff plopped down in the recliner; a blank expression on his face that Ryan supposed masked the nerves.

Gavin quietly disappeared into one of the bedrooms and returned a moment later with a ball. “Jeremy! Flinchless kickie-doo?”

Somehow Jeremy understood what that meant and leapt to his feet, squaring off opposite Gavin and bracing himself.

Ryan watched on curiously as Gavin lined up a shot directly at Jeremy and proceeded to kick the ball full-force directly at his head.

Jeremy let out a scream, then with lightning-quick reflexes, ducked and only just grabbed the ball out of mid-air with his fingertips.

“Whoa! Uh… yeah, actually, how ‘bout let’s not play that?”

“Keepie uppie then?” Gavin suggested instead.

“Ok, but I’m real bad at it…” Jeremy grinned as he kicked the ball back to Gavin, who headed it back to him.

It took a few moments of Gavin and Jeremy awkwardly kicking the ball between themselves for Ryan to realise they were essentially playing kickball hacky sack. He and Matt immediately moved to join in, while Jack went to talk to Lindsay, Mica and Andy, who had just come up from the garage, while Michael stood back at a safe distance. Geoff just sat where he’d plonked himself in the chair and didn’t budge, despite being in the middle of the game.

“You guys sportin’?” He asked teasingly as the ball got increasingly out of control, resulting in wild, ultimately useless flailing as they attempted to prevent it from hitting the ground. “Y’all are …graceful.” He commented, before succumbing to fits of laughter as Ryan fell backwards into a chair trying to kick the ball and Jeremy dove over the couch trying to save it.

They improved slightly before getting much, much worse, Gavin insisting they needed to make it to ten passes for it to be respectable. Michael and Matt had joined in at the outer edge of the circle and
the others watched on, Andy and Mica filming from different angles, and Geoff roaring with laughter in the middle of it all, somehow amazingly unscathed.

Trevor returned to the spectacle and literally blinked in disbelief. “So, this is what the infamous Fake AH Crew does to warm up before a heist. I’m glad someone’s filming it.”

Lindsay laughed. “The media would have a field day with this. If we pull this off, we should leak that footage.”

“Hell, we should leak it anyways… What an obituary, amirite?” Trevor smiled, flashing canines, eyes crinkling at the edges.

“Damn Trevor, that’s not morbid at all,” Jack deadpanned.

The others laughed, but at that moment Gavin headed the ball with a little too much force in the wrong direction and it went sailing into the TV, causing it to sway dangerously and Ryan to leap to try to catch it in case it fell. Thankfully it didn’t.

“Jesus Christ.” Michael shook his head.

“…and that’s where we stop,” Gavin announced, grinning sheepishly. “We didn’t even get to ten.”

“Good timing at any rate,” Trevor said, “we gotta get going.”

Out the north-facing windows behind him there was an explosion, right about where the perimeter was. They saw it before Trevor heard it and he jumped slightly, spinning to see the riots kicking off, Ryan assumed with Cow Chop leading the charge.

Trevor turned back to the crew, wide-eyed in front of him and jerked a thumb in the direction of the explosion. “That's our cue.”

* * *

The nerves kicked in as Ryan watched Matt, Gavin and Jeremy climb into the cab of the firetruck. He and Michael would be riding on the sides. That wasn’t what worried him though.

We got this. Just like any other job.

The comms crackled to life and Ryan was just about ready to jump out of his skin. He immediately relaxed to hear Jack’s voice.

“This is Jack, testing: 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.”

They each tested in turn. No one pointed it out, but with the new comms system, it was entirely unnecessary. The familiarity of the routine felt right.

“…and this is Trevor: 1, 2, 3. 1, 2, 3.” Wind howled through the comms on Trevor’s end as Ryan realised he must’ve been on the line crossing buildings.

Trevor would be going in with Jack and Geoff to give them more back-up if things went pear-shaped. That was some small comfort. Lindsay, Mica and Andy would be coordinating from the apartment and supplying the other groups and support teams on the ground. Funhaus and the Attack boys were due to turn up any minute now; with Cow Chop and the riots soaking up the LSPD resources and the Kinda Funny crew guiding them, they should be able to break through.
“Alright, first responders, y’all ready to get that siren sounding?” Trevor called out above the wind howling through his comms from their position on the rooftop. By now they’d be on the roof of the Union Depository, getting ready to run a second line to the roof of the Bureau.

“I cannot wait,” Matt replied.

“Welp, here goes nothing,” Trevor announced.

There was a moment of silent anticipation as they waited on confirmation the device had detonated.

“Whoa!” Geoff cried out. “Did you see that?”

Gavin and Jeremy replied simultaneously in completely contrasting tones; “No! What happened?!” and “Sure Geoff, with my X-ray vision.”

“The side of the building blew out,” Jack explained. “It was incredible, it was raining glass!”

“Alright, gents we gotta move,” Trevor reminded them, “15 minutes remember? Matt, that’s your cue, give it 2 minutes and then get over there, you guys need to be first on the scene.”

“Got it.” Matt hit a button and the door to the garage started to roll open. A pair of vans were just pulling around the corner and headed straight into the garage. Mica and Andy stepped out of the elevator as they pulled in. The timing was eerily synchronous.

The windows of the vans rolled down and Ryan was just able to catch Kovic and Bolen as their own truck pulled out.

“Good luck guys,” Ryan called out to them.

“You too man,” Kovic called back, “give ‘em hell!”

“Bring ‘em down boys!” Bolen yelled, to the sound of cheering from inside the van.

Again, Ryan’s spirits lifted.

_We can do this._

Matt turned on the siren as soon as they left the driveway of the garage; they had only a block to travel. In the shade of the buildings, Ryan looked up and could just see the line Trevor, Jack and Geoff had used to cross over to the building. Then he saw it detach from the FIB side and fall away.

“We’re here. There’s a chopper up here with us. They might think to use it to evacuate, so there’s a chance we’ll encounter some resistance,” Trevor called over the comms.

“You could wait until they leave?” Gavin suggested, worry in his voice, “hide out somewhere, no resistance.”

“Can’t risk it Gavvers,” Geoff replied. “Don’t want any of them getting away, especially not if they might be saving files. Besides, it could be for Dowl and there’s not a chance in hell that motherfucker’s getting out of this alive.”

“We’re almost there,” Jeremy reported, “we’ll be on our way up soon. Just hang in there.”

“Doesn’t look like there’s too much activity up here yet, we might be able to go in stealth,” Jack noted.
“Good call Jack,” Trevor responded, “going stealth, check-in in five.”

“Not a second later,” Michael added.

Roof team’s comms went silent and Ryan felt his stomach tighten in anticipation.

Sirens still blaring, they pulled up on San Andreas avenue and they all jumped out of the truck. Matt stayed outside the building, directing people to move away, the way a fireman should, whilst keeping watch and being ready to jump back in the truck at a moment’s notice, with or without the others.

Ryan, Michael, Jeremy and Gavin ran into the building against a stream of people evacuating. They waited for the lobby to clear out for a moment before piling into an elevator. Ryan punched the button for the 48th floor and thankfully, it lurched to life.

“All right,” Ryan addressed his team, “when we get out, we’ve gotta cross to the stairwell on the other side of the building and then go up six floors to the top, where the server room is. With any luck, Jack, Geoff and Trevor will already be there. Now, we’re still incognito, so for the love of god, don’t kill anyone.”

Michael giggled hysterically. “That’s a bit rich coming from you, Ryan.”

He paused, exaggeratedly deliberating. “Ok, that’s probably fair.”

Michael laughed again. “We won’t kill anyone until you do, how ‘bout that?”

Jeremy and Gavin joined in laughing but nodded along. Ryan just shook his head, catching a glimpse of himself in the mirrored walls of the elevator. Thankfully, the tinted face shield of his helmet hid his face paint. They were approaching the 46th floor when the radio silence of the other group was broken by Geoff.

“It’s clear up here now, we need to get into the server room, we’re going to have to set some charges and blow the door. Let us know when you’re clear of the elevators, don’t want to risk you getting trapped in there.”

“We’re almost there,” Ryan replied, watching the numbers above the elevator door. 47, 48. There was a quiet ‘ding’ as the doors slid open. “We’re –shit!”

As the doors slid open, they came face to face with half a dozen agents, all with handguns drawn, at the ready for them.

Ryan immediately snapped to action, simultaneously ducking and hitting the door close button while the others jumped to the edges of the elevator, whatever cover they thought that provided them. Thankfully the doors were responsive and as the agents opened fire, the doors slid closed, giving them time to retrieve their weapons.

“So… about killing people…” Ryan started, checking his pistol.

Jeremy already had his out, aimed at the door, ready for them to open again and Michael and Gavin weren’t far behind.

“I think we can assume that rule just went out the window.” Jeremy added with an adrenaline-fuelled giggle.

“Ready?” Ryan asked.
“Ready,” the others all replied.

“Geoff, we’ll be clear in about 30 seconds. But we’ve got some company. We’ll take care of it.” Ryan hit the door open button and steeled himself. There was no way no one was getting hit; it was the closest situation they’d been in to the proverbial fish in a barrel. He took solace in the fact that they were all wearing heavy armour. He’d made sure.

As the doors opened, he threw himself into the open space and opened fire, catching the closest two agents off-guard and scoring lucky blind headshots on both. Somewhere above them, an explosion went off and suddenly an alarm rang out through the building.

Shit. That wasn’t part of the plan.

Well, neither was this. Improvise.

Ryan kept shooting. He caught a bullet in his armour right in the gut, knocking some of the wind out of him before the others took the remaining agents down.

“Everyone ok?” Both Ryan and Geoff asked in near unison.

The lads looked shaken, but they were all ok.

“We’re ok, Geoff,” Gavin radioed back.

“Good, get your asses up here, we won’t have long. We need your explosives for the servers; we used ours on the door. Trevor’s wiping the stuff now, but we’ll need some more time.”

“On our way,” Ryan affirmed.

Ryan checked his armour; it was damaged, but still mostly intact. It could probably stand up to a few more hits, but he’d have to be careful.

“So, change of plans…” Ryan said, looking around at the lads. “Everybody dies.”

Jeremy and Michael smirked, both very ok with the new arrangement.

“Stairwell, now.”

They moved quickly through the hallways to the opposite corner of the building, moving into the stairwell and looking down to see people evacuating from the lower floors. Above them, there was movement of agents in the stairwell, but they weren’t coming down.

Shit.

“Guys,” Ryan radioed up, keeping his voice low as they started climbing the stairs. “I think you’re about to have company.”

“Welp… You’re not wrong,” Trevor replied, a slight tremor in his voice.

The sound of gunshots echoed above them.

Shit.

“Hurry up!” Ryan picked up the pace, leaping up several steps at a time ahead of the others. “Trevor, talk to me, what’s going on?”
“We’re taking fire, oh god, wow, yep, there’s lots of them.”

“Sit tight Trevor, we’re coming.”

The comms went disturbingly quiet, but gunshots continued to ring out. Ryan glanced behind him. The others were about a flight below him now, but he reached the door first and paused for just a moment. He took a deep breath and consciously reminded himself that Geoff, Jack and Trevor were in there as a means to cool his burning trigger finger. He pushed the door open and immediately several guns turned to train onto him. Only one face stood out to him though.

Ryan’s blood ran cold.

The man stood tall, in what would have been a grey, three-piece suit, if he still had the jacket, and worn steel-capped boots, with a deceptively innocent face, wide brown eyes and dishevelled light brown hair. He was holding someone in a headlock. For a second Ryan thought he’d finally snapped. Maybe he was dreaming?

It was him.

Under Shadowlz – not Shadowlz; Jason’s – arm, his own black skull mask stared back at him.

Trevor.
“I suggest you all stand down,” Dowl growled, pressing the barrel of his gun against Trevor’s temple through the mask. “Or I finish what my brother started, and the Vagabond gets it for real.”

Geoff and Jack were by the door to the server room. They had their guns aimed at Dowl, but each had several others aimed at them. Ryan did a quick head-count. Nine agents total, including Jason. The two nearest to him immediately turned their weapons on him. It was a classic showdown.

Ryan didn’t flinch, nor did Geoff or Jack. Ryan could just hear the lads move up inside the stairwell behind him, but no one in the room responded to it. The comms were still active; they must have heard the threat. Probably against all their natural instincts, they were holding back.

Good.

Dowl laughed, almost childishly, snapping Ryan’s attention back to the room.

“Who would’ve thought the Vagabond of all people would prove himself to be the weakest link in the Fake AH Crew!” He adjusted the angle of the gun against Trevor’s head, pressing it harder into the back of his skull, aiming it away from himself for a clean shot. “Honestly, I feel like I’d be doing you a favour by killing him.”

“Fucking- get away from him!” Geoff barked, raising his pistol again, taking a more definitive stance, preparing to shoot to kill should he have to. Jack mirrored his movements.

“Seriously? ‘Get away from him?’ You lot are painfully cliché. We’ve been expecting you all day. The bomb was a bit of a surprise though. You must’ve had some help to plant that, so I’m willing to give you that one. Got someone on the inside? Or maybe just friends in high places?”

“I ain’t telling you shit,” Geoff spat.

“Stoic as ever, I see. I suppose he had to get it from somewhere.” Jason pushed Trevor’s head forward with the barrel of his gun and smiled. It was the same smile as his brother and it made Ryan’s skin crawl. He leaned in close to Trevor’s face and hissed, “Oh Ryan… I’ll bet my brother had a grand time with you. Before the cameras started rolling, hmm?”

Predictably, Trevor said nothing.

“I’m guessing he doesn’t talk much now? PTSD will do that to you. Frankly, I’m surprised he’s still here at all. The way you tolerate a traitor in your ranks…”

Ryan’s blood boiled, defiant, but he fixed his face to stony indifference, conscious not to let anything translate to outward expression.

Geoff’s eyes flicked to Ryan, and then back to Jason, “You’re a twisted motherfucker Dowl! Let him go!”

He laughed again, still addressing Trevor. “They’ve risked their lives for you before, let’s see if they’ll do it again.”

That’s enough.

Ryan stepped forward.
This time, the voice in his head wasn’t Geoff, or Jack, or Jeremy. It was his own.

Are you trying to get yourself killed?

“No. Not this time,” Ryan growled responding to Dowl and the voice in his head with complete conviction; his distinctive voice triggering recognition in the eyes of some of the agents in the room who briefly forgot their targets to look up at him.

Everything happened very quickly, but it felt like slow motion. Ryan reached up with his free hand and pulled off his helmet, exposing his face, the perfectly executed face paint, his familiar dark blonde hair and intense blue eyes.

Dowl was confused for a moment. Long enough to hesitate for just a second before turning his gun on Ryan.

“Ryan, no!” Geoff lunged forward, whether instinctively, or trying to cause a distraction, Ryan wasn’t sure; but in the very same moment – a moment of panic – Dowl turned and fired a shot, just as Trevor threw a hard elbow into his chest.

Geoff cried out and crumpled to the floor.

The movement gave Ryan an opening. Trevor twisted away from Dowl, just slightly, enough to open up a narrow, but risky shot. Ryan didn’t think; his movements were almost mechanical, muscle memory merged with instinct. He was in the familiar territory of the Vagabond now.

Trust me.

I do.

He didn’t hesitate. With practiced precision, Ryan fired a single round. It entered through Dowl’s right eye socket and took the greater part of the occipital bone of his skull with it, in a spray of blood, bone and brain matter.

Jason Dowl was dead.

Dowl’s body sagged limply to the floor and Trevor pulled himself free, diving behind a nearby table for cover. Jack threw himself to the ground, trying his best to cover Geoff.

Geoff.

Gunshots rang out all around him, but Ryan was on autopilot now. The lads had emerged from behind him and were laying the place to waste. It took a moment to process that he’d crouched behind a desk for cover and was returning fire of his own.

Ahead of him, Jeremy had found a better position and Ryan moved up to join him, catching another bullet in the chest as he crossed the open space. Jeremy put a bullet between the eyes of the agent responsible.

“Cover Geoff!” Jack called out.

Ryan reloaded and peeked over the filing cabinet to see Jack dragging Geoff back to the sever room, Trevor providing covering fire as they backed in; a handful of agents ducking behind various items of office furniture.

“We gotta clear the room,” Ryan instructed, glancing over the filing cabinet for the next clear shot.
He was rewarded with a very near miss as he hit the floor again. Luckily Jeremy was on it, he popped up and fired once and Ryan heard the body hit the floor.

“Nice bip, Lil J!” Michael called out from the other side of the room as Gavin sprung to his feet with suppressing fire to cover Jack, Geoff and Trevor.

With the agents down three men and on the defence, the odds were more in their favour. Jeremy, Michael and Ryan jumped to more offensive positions and strategically swept the area. It was all a blur to Ryan. Gavin fired a couple of rounds and Michael yelled something over the din, a body fell to the ground, but the clearest thing in Ryan’s mind was the sound of Geoff groaning.

Jeremy upturned a desk with blatant disregard for the equipment on it; sending an expensive looking monitor flying, catching on the cord and smashing violently into the ground. He and Ryan took cover behind the desk to reload, the server room just ahead of them. Michael and Gavin were still unleashing hell on the room, not actually sure if they were hitting anyone, but at least it was keeping the fire going one way. The agents were surely wearing body armour and even with the building in the state it was, reinforcements would no doubt be arriving soon.

“Trevor, sit-rep?”

“Bit busy, Ryan.”

“Is Geoff ok?”

“He’s been shot,” Jack reported. “He’s bleeding pretty badly, but he’s alive. He needs medical attention, now.”

_God damn it, Geoff…_

“Geoff, don’t you dare die!” Michael emptied his clip and ducked for cover to reload.

“I’m not dying, you assholes!” Geoff shot back over the comms, sounding clearly in pain.

“That’s the spirit, Geoff!” Gavin joined Michael behind cover to reload.

Gavin and Michael were bickering, but Ryan focused on reloading. Suddenly, the space between his and Jeremy’s heads exploded into pulpy MDF splinters. Not ideal.

“Oh, fuck you!” Ryan blurted out in surprise, ducking lower behind the desk.

Jeremy finished loading his pistol and cocked it, speaking deliberately loudly, “This is going right through your temple; I want you to know that.”

In one fluid movement, he stood and spun around, scanning the room and tracing the path of the bullet to where the agent who’d fired was just peeking out from cover.

He was true to his word.

“Nice, Jeremy!”

“Moving up, moving up!” Michael reported, Gavin hot on his heels.

“Stack up lads,” Ryan instructed.

Michael filed to the front. “I’ll take point.”
“I got your rear, boi.”

“Phrasing?” Ryan muttered under his breath.

Gavin giggled.

“Alright, sweep it; get to the server room!”

With ruthless efficiency, they moved up as a unit, cleaning up as they went until there was no one left to shoot at them. Gavin caught a round to the chest that nearly knocked him off his feet and sent his arms pinwheeling to maintain his balance. Jeremy sought swift retribution. Within no time they joined the others in the server room. Trevor was hunched over a terminal, fingers flying over the keys. He’d taken Ryan’s mask off and left it on the floor while Jack tended Geoff nearby.

They immediately rushed over to Geoff.

Jack maintained pressure on the wound; he’d bandaged it with strips of cloth from somewhere, but it looked serious.

“Geoff!” Gavin was the first by his side, “are you ok?”

“God damn it!” Geoff hissed through his teeth, “He shot me in the fucking leg! Again. Motherfucker.”

Ryan wasn’t so amused. It was the same pulsing flow of thick, dark blood that he had seen in his own leg back in the warehouse. Nowhere near as rapid, but it was definitely going to be life-threatening if they didn’t do something soon.

The comms crackled in Ryan’s ear.

“Hey, uh, guys?” Matt’s voice came over the radio with sirens and commotion in the background.

“Talk to me, Matt,” Trevor said, not looking up from the terminal.

“Umm… You coming down anytime soon? Because I think they might be onto us. I have a feeling I should leave…”

_There goes another plan._

“Also,” Matt continued, “the FIB and LSPD really don’t like it when you spray them with water. They’re sorta mad.”

Michael, Gavin and Jeremy stifled giggles.

Trevor couldn’t hold back the grin that had been growing on his face. “What’re ya doing watering the law enforcement, Matt?”

“I figured they needed a drink.”

“Well, looks like our cover’s blown,” Trevor said nonchalantly.

“Guess we won’t be needing these anymore.” Jeremy shrugged and started stripping out of his overclothes, revealing his proud Rimmy Tim colours beneath. He seemed rather happy with that arrangement.

Ryan followed suit, as did Michael and Gavin.
“And there goes our exit strategy,” Michael remarked as he stepped out of the yellow over trousers.

“Yep…” Trevor paused, just momentarily to think it through. “Matt, get out of there, radio through to Andy, get him to give you an evac, you know the best locations to lose them.”

“That I do…” Matt confirmed, “but what about you guys?”

“Umm…” Trevor hesitated.

“You said there was a chopper on the roof, right? Can we use it?” Ryan asked.

Jack shook his head. “It’s a 2-seater, couldn’t fit us all in if we tried.”

“Can you fly it, though?”

“Yeah, I can,” Jack assured him.

Ryan nodded thoughtfully. Six of them and Geoff. Geoff wasn’t walking out of the building. With their cover blown, they weren’t walking out of the building. Plan B. They’d have to jump. The only solace in plan B was that there were enough of them that maybe they wouldn’t all get killed. Statistically speaking.

“Jack, take the chopper; get Geoff out of here. The rest of us… plan B.”

“Plan B?” Jeremy almost whimpered.

“No!” Geoff protested. “You guys need to stick together. More are gonna come and you’re going to need all the help you can get. Just leave me here, I’ll be fine.”

Ryan drew a long breath and threw a look to Trevor, who looked unconvinced. “Then we’ll take you with us, but I swear to god, Geoff, if you slow us down…”

“No.” It sounded like Geoff was putting his foot down. “Look, I can get to the chopper by myself; I’ll get out and find my way to a treatment centre. They’ll be swamped because of the riots, there won’t be anything they can do but treat me… and if I get arrested, then I’ll make sure I’m as fucking compliant as dicks… and we’ll deal with that later. We’ve pulled off prison breaks before.”

_That was true._

The crew looked around at each other, a similar pained, but resigned expression on all their faces. Geoff needed treatment, or he’d surely die. This was the fastest way he could get it.

“I’ll go with you, Geoff. I’ll fly,” Jack insisted.

“No, you stick to the plan. We don’t need two of us out of action.”

Ryan looked to Trevor again and Trevor looked to Geoff.

He gave a resigned sigh. “Ok, but we’ll get you to the chopper – Jack, Ryan, make sure he gets there. I’m almost done here. Michael, start setting it up.”

They all nodded.

“Are you _sure_ , Geoff?” Jack asked, helping him to his feet as Ryan propped him up under his shoulder, taking most of his weight on right side, so he didn’t exacerbate his leg.
Geoff sighed. “Yes, I’m sure.”

“Be careful Geoff,” Gavin pleaded. “Good luck.”

“See you on the other side,” Michael added with a nod, already starting to rig up the explosives to blow the server room.

“Gavin, Jeremy, keep an eye on the stairwell; get the feeling like we’re gonna have company real soon,” Trevor instructed as Ryan and Jack took Geoff away.

They headed towards the emergency exit to the roof and started helping Geoff limp up the stairs.

“Ryan?”

“What, Geoff?”

“This sucks.” Geoff snorted a laugh.

“No shit,” Ryan grinned back, “you sure you’re gonna be right to fly? I mean, they can scramble jets from the airport in no time. You might have some heat on you.”

“Are you suggesting I can’t handle a little heat?”

Ryan gave an awkward half-shrug. “Sorta, yeah.”

“You asshole.” Geoff laughed through a wince as they reached the top of the stairs.

Ryan’s tone turned serious again. “We can stay up here and give you some cover…”

“No. You guys stay together, no matter what happens. Watch each other’s backs. You got this.”

Something about his tone made Ryan uneasy.

“I’m going to keep an ear at the door, Jack, you right to get him to the chopper?”

Jack nodded. “We’re good.”

Ryan pushed open the door to the roof and let Jack take Geoff’s weight.

The sky was dark, and the air was cool, and considering hell was breaking loose on the streets below them, it was remarkably peaceful on the roof.

“Hey Jack,” Geoff grimaced through the pain, clearly trying to keep his mind off it, “do you ever wonder why we’re here?”

“You’re not getting all spiritual on us now are you, Geoff?” Ryan asked with a smirk and a raised eyebrow as Jack and Geoff continued to the chopper.

“No! Just genuinely curious… do you?”

Ryan turned his attention to listening down the stairs for any signs of trouble, but he could still hear Geoff and Jack clearly across the roof.

Jack thought for a moment. “Nope.”

“Why not?”
“The way I figure; the reason doesn’t matter. What matters is that we’re here.”

*Jack. The most optimistic realist.*

“Huh. Never thought about it like that before…” Geoff smiled through a wince. “Jack, I’m glad you’re here. I couldn’t think of a better man to have by my side.”

Jack smiled back. “Me neither.”

Ryan probably shouldn’t have been able to hear that, so he pretended not to.

Jack helped Geoff into the chopper and stepped back. “Be careful, ok Geoff? No heroics; just get out of here and get to help.”

Michael’s voice came over the comms, “We’re set to go, if Geoff takes off just before we blow it, it might give him more cover to get away and we can jump once everyone’s cleared the area below.”

“Good thinking,” Trevor agreed. “With a bit of luck, they’ll be too distracted to deal with us, and definitely not all of us.”

“Copy that, I’ll wait for the signal; just let me know,” Geoff radioed back.

There were a handful of mixed ‘good lucks’ over the comms as Jack and Ryan gave a final nod to Geoff and headed back down the stairs.

“So, plan B…” Gavin mused as Jack and Ryan made their way back to the others, “how’re we meant to get *out* of the building?

Jack’s head snapped up. “The 49th floor; the first explosion blew the windows out, they would have cleared that whole side of the building.”

Ryan and Jack pushed through the doors back to the main room, where the others were waiting outside the door to the server room.

“Remember when I said we’d have to be at least level 50 to pull off that jump?” Trevor asked. “Well, you’re really pushing it… but hey, worth a shot.”

“We want to be right the fuck away from here when we detonate that,” Michael said, turning the detonator over in his hands anxiously and gesturing back to the server room.

Jeremy laughed, but Michael didn’t bat an eyelid.

“I’m fucking serious, that shit’s gonna blow. Geoff, you hear that?”

“Got it, just let me know *before* you plan to blow me up.”

Gavin and Jeremy both laughed at that.

“Sure thing, Geoff.”

Jeremy and Gavin’s laughter stopped abruptly, and Ryan glanced nervously towards the stairwell. Gavin carefully and quietly opened the door and made his way back to the rest of the group. Jeremy backed through the door a little way behind him.

“Guys?” Jeremy yelled back into the main room. “We need to go.”
Ryan quickly joined him as he held the door open. Glancing down the stairwell, sure enough, the voices echoing off the walls told there were agents coming for them. A fair few floors down, maybe not quite at 49 yet... If they were lucky. Jeremy and Ryan exchanged an anxious look.

They both backed out, closing the door quietly behind them.

“We can beat them, but we’ve gotta go right now,” Ryan said.

“Go,” Geoff instructed, “while you can.”

Trevor nodded and motioned towards the stairs. Ryan led the way, switching to his bullpup rifle, Michael following suit, pushing his detonator into his back pocket.

“Geoff, you’ve got about 2 minutes to get airborne,” Michael radioed up.

“All the time in the world,” Geoff replied coolly.

“Not when you’re bleeding to death…” Michael muttered under his breath.

They burst through the door to the stairs and began descending in leaps at a time, racing the agents coming up to get to level 49. They had four floors to make it down, eight flights of stairs; the agents probably had only six, but they were climbing and probably tiring. As soon as they heard the crew’s footsteps, the agents attempted to fire up through the narrow gaps left in the layout of the overlapping flights of stairs. It was virtually impossible to get a shot, not that it stopped them from trying. Ricochets pinged off the banister and threatened to lodge in places no one wanted them. As they closed the gap between the groups the gunshots got louder and more frequent until they finally reached the 49th floor, where a handful of agents caught up with them and came face to face with a wall of gunfire as Ryan and Jeremy unleashed on them.

“Do it, Boi!” Michael yelled from somewhere behind Ryan.

Gavin was holding a small bottle with a rag sticking out the top. In his other hand was a lighter. Where he’d been hiding it was anyone’s guess.

The grin on his face was wicked.

Gavin hurled the Molotov right into the line of agents waiting on the landing. Ryan and Jeremy kept them back with – honestly superfluous – supressing fire while the others dashed for the door, which, despite being off its hinges and not closing properly, was remarkably still intact. Ryan and Jeremy backed in after them once they were sure they weren’t going to be immediately followed.

Level 49 was a mess.

Thick smoke billowed and hung heavy in the air, smouldering furniture and drywall still glowed eerie orange. The acrid, chemical-filled air stung their throats and noses.

“Where’s the hole?” Michael wondered aloud.

Gavin scoffed, “You can’t find the hole?”

“Phrasing,” Ryan muttered under his breath.

Jeremy caught it and grinned. “Where’s a good hole when you need one?”

“The bomb blew out the North-West corner of the building,” Jack recalled, pointing down the hall in
roughly the direction the smoke was coming from.

“Follow the carnage,” Trevor said with a shrug, “makes sense.”

They started making their way towards the direction Jack had indicated, Michael and Gavin on point and Jeremy and Ryan pulling up the rear, sweeping behind them to make sure they weren’t followed or flanked.

“I can’t believe we’re about to do this…” Jeremy mumbled to no one in particular, but Ryan heard him loud and clear.

“Don’t worry Jeremy, we got this. Battle Buddies, remember?”

Jeremy gave him a nervous half-smile and scoffed a laugh. “Battle Buddies.”

Their moment was interrupted by Geoff’s voice over the comms. “Michael?”

“Geoff? What’s up?”

“We’re about to have some company… a distraction might be real good about now.”

“What kind of company?” Trevor asked, eyes narrowing.

“The bad kind. The ‘they have a Valkyrie of their own’ kind.”

“Shit.” Michael fumbled for his detonator and paused. “So…?”

“Blow it!”

Michael depressed the button without a second’s more hesitation.

The explosion shook the building. Far more than it should have.

“Jesus!” Geoff gave a startled cry over the comms.

“Uhh… I don’t think the building is as structurally sound as we thought it’d be,” Trevor said as the entire building felt like it swayed beneath their feet.

A wall crumbled just ahead of them and part of some ventilation ducting fell from a panel in the roof. There was the ominous creak of stressed metal reverberating throughout the structure of the building.

“We should hurry,” Jeremy urged.

No one argued. They picked up the pace and moved carefully through the blackened hallways, heading towards the stream of fresh cool air they could only just sense from the pull of the smoke around them.

“Oh no…” Geoff’s voice came over the comms.

“Geoff?” Jack was the first to respond. “Geoff? What’s going on? Talk to us.”

There was only static in response.

“Shit, Geoff?” Trevor looked around to the crew. “Does anyone else have comms?”

They started radioing to check, but Geoff’s voice interrupted them, and his tone made everyone fall silent.
“Hey guys, I- I can take out their Valkyrie. I- I dunno if you can still hear me… but if you can, I just wanted to say – and this is gonna be sappy – but, I’m so proud of you… I couldn’t have asked for a better crew.”

Ryan could hear the look on Geoff’s face; the cheeky, quietly proud half-grin, his eyes bright and calm, despite the chaos and impending disaster surrounding him, warning alarms wailing in the background. He sounded happy.

“So, this is for you.”

A lump lodged in Ryan’s throat as the next sound they heard was the stomach-turning creak of metal twisting against metal and static, followed by silence on the comms. A second later there was an explosion outside and the sound of heavy metal hitting concrete. The building shook again.

“Geoff!” Michael screamed, despite knowing he couldn’t hear him.

Gavin let out an animalistic howl as he collapsed to the ground in tears, clutching his head, while the others took a moment longer to process what had just happened.

“We’ve gotta keep moving,” Ryan grabbed Gavin’s arm and pulled him to his feet, half-dragging him behind him.

“The building’s coming down, we gotta move,” Trevor agreed.

Jeremy’s eyes were watery, he sniffed and swallowed. “He’s right, we’ve gotta get out of here. We gotta go, c’mon!”

Michael came to his senses and helped Gavin.

Jack just looked like he was in shock, unsure of what to do, but followed their directions mechanically.

Not far ahead of them, a chunk of floor was missing, collapsed into a pile of rubble they could see descended to a clear shot out. The windows had been blown out on that side of the building. It was the best place to jump from, but it was still going to be dangerous.

“We climb down, and we jump from there,” Trevor instructed, pointing down.

Gavin was still wracked with sobs, but he was regaining control. Jack looked like he might break down any second, but he was holding it together for the others… at this stage, they all were. Ryan’s insides were stone.

Take care of the lads.

I will.

They picked their way down the rubble and found themselves at a gaping hole where the windows would have been, hundreds of feet above the city streets. Trevor leaned out to look down, letting out a long whistle.

“I think we’ve got a good chance. Well… as good as it’s going to get anyway.”

Michael shook his head. “Trevor, you really need to learn when to stop talking.”

“That’s a fair call,” Trevor admitted.
Jeremy checked his ‘chute, visibly shaking. Everyone else gave themselves a cursory once-over and steeled themselves.

Ryan looked around at the crew. *His* crew.

“Pair up for the jump. We go together. No matter what, we stay together.”

They nodded; the fire reigniting in their eyes. Gavin clung to Michael, who held him back; Trevor looked at Jack and linked arms, Jeremy’s hand found Ryan’s and squeezed. He squeezed back reassuringly.

“On three, we jump. One, two…”
This is it guys. The last chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“…three.”

For a moment, it seemed like everything slowed down. Ryan became hyper-aware of his surroundings; Jeremy’s grip firm in his – noticeably dry despite his nerves and the exertion; the recognisable side effects of a surge of adrenaline. His own heart was pounding in his chest and the heat radiating from the charred ruins of the building behind him contrasted with the cool air he was throwing himself into. They had all jumped together – Ryan hadn’t even felt a tug of resistance from Jeremy, and the lad would have been terrified. Now it appeared they were all falling together, hundreds of feet above the city streets where the LSPD and bureau agents were trying to push back the wave of rioters that had broken the perimeter and were beginning to take a hold in the streets surrounding the FIB building. Air support was nowhere to be seen.

*Geoff had taken out the Valkyrie, for them.*

* A Valkyrie took him... seems fitting.

“Bad things happen to heroes.”

Memory of his own words mocked him.

“Pull your chutes!” Trevor’s voice yelled in his ear over the rushing of air, snapping him back to reality.

Ryan immediately pulled his ripcord, Jeremy was only a split second behind him and to their relief, both caught the familiar jerk of air resistance at once and were pulled back by the deceleration.

Ryan saw Michael and Gavin deploy their chutes a moment later and then Jack pulled his ripcord.

At first, it looked like Trevor had simply hesitated, but then they heard the scream.

As Jack’s chute deployed and opened, he grabbed Trevor’s free arm, the other still frantically tugging at the ripcord. His chute had deployed, but it was a tangled mess and refused to open, trailing behind him but doing little to slow his descent.

“Jack!” Trevor gasped, eyes wide with terror.

“I’ve got you!”

Jack grunted as Trevor latched onto him, grabbing his arm with both hands as they tried to find a better way to hold onto each other. Jack’s parachute was holding up, taking their combined weight. They were falling faster than the others, but that wasn’t entirely a bad thing. The longer they were in
the air, the more of a target they were… so long as they could find somewhere to land that wouldn’t see them both break their legs on impact.

Trevor was still panicking, Ryan doubted he was even aware of it.

“Trevor, it’s ok, I’ve got you. I’m not letting you go. We’re gonna make it, ok?” Jack reassured him.

Ryan was intently fixed on them, everyone was. So much so that the debris falling all around them came as a surprise when it nearly knocked him and Jeremy out of the sky.

“Oh shit!”

“What was that?!?” Jeremy tried to twist around to look up, but the fabric of their parachutes blocked out most of their view.

“The building’s coming down.”

“That’s not our only problem,” Michael observed, pointing to the ground, where despite the debris, armed police officers and agents were moving up on their position, yelling over the chaos, some taking aim with their side arms, a few even taking the shot as if they actually had a chance of hitting them from that distance, all trigger discipline apparently gone to hell…

Then it clicked. There was no coordination. They weren’t following explicit orders anymore. Ryan’s eyes scanned over the ground, his attention catching on a few rioters that had broken the lines. The police were only defending themselves. A few had even started retreating.

“Guys, their comms are down!” Ryan yelled out. “They can’t coordinate.”

“How can you tell?” Gavin asked with a sniff, still recollecting himself.

“You’re right! They’re not all shooting at us, they look confused,” Michael noted.

“Bingo,” Ryan confirmed, “they haven’t been given an order. It’s everyone for themselves. Some are running away – look!” He pointed out the group that had run, the rioters not bothering to chase them, turning their focus instead to the ones still determined to put up a fight. Ryan could’ve sworn he recognised a couple of the tattooed hooligans, throwing themselves headlong into the fight like the lunatics they likely were.

“They’ve got the right idea.” Jeremy grinned at Ryan.

It again struck him just how fortunate they were that Geoff had set up the Family. He’d always been looking out for them, right until the end.

Below them, Jack and Trevor were almost down; their combined weight on the shared parachute having sped their descent.

Mica’s voice in their ears caught them off guard. “We’re coming to pick you up, some of you are gonna have to hold them off for a bit – Matt’s good, but not good enough to make a getaway in a fire truck, so Andy went to pick him up and they’re taking their sweet time getting back…”

“Hey! We’re working on it!” Andy replied, tuning in. “I’m on my way; Matt’s just getting a car.”

Matt grumbled something, and it sounded like he was holding something between his teeth. There was a growl of engine – something high-performance – and Matt tried again. “Just needed to find the right vehicle for the job…”
“That would be *any* vehicle, Matt,” Jeremy pointed out.

“I thought you guys liked to travel in style?”

Ryan suddenly thought of Geoff and his heart skipped a beat. *B-team didn’t know.* The tone of the crew immediately fell.

“Right now, we just need to get out of here,” Jack said.

“I’m almost at you,” Mica said, “I can take three; Matt and Andy will have to sweep for the remaining four.”

This miscount felt like a dagger to the heart.

No one bothered to correct her. Not yet.

Trevor and Jack landed in a heap on the ground. Trevor cried out in pain as the pressure shifted from his arm; he’d likely dislocated it when Jack had caught him. He was alive though. That was the main thing.

“You saved my life, Jack.”

Ryan could almost hear Jack thinking it.

*No, Geoff did.*

*Geoff saved all of us.*

It hurt.

“We’re ok,” Jack reassured him.

Mica’s hot pink Issi came screaming around the corner, surprisingly with no vehicles in pursuit. The rest of the crew hadn’t even touched down yet as she threw the door open and instructed Trevor and Jack to climb in.

“Where’s Geoff?” Mica asked, looking around at the rest of the crew as they began to land.

“He’s not coming,” Jack said stiffly.

“Is he…?” Mica must’ve read the look on Jack and Trevor’s faces, because even from the distance he was at, Ryan saw her hands fly to her face. “Oh my god.”

“Trevor’s hurt, we need to restock, we should get back and regroup,” Jack said, taking charge.

Approaching sirens and the squeal of tires indicated the cars that had been in pursuit of her had finally caught up.

“Go,” Ryan agreed, “we’ll sit tight for Matt and Andy. We got this.”

He wasn’t sure they did, but they couldn’t afford to lose Jack and Trevor. Not now. Not after…

“You sure?” Mica asked, still shaken.

“Go,” Ryan urged, more gently than expected.

“Ok, ok, ok…” Mica put the car in gear and shot off, the police vehicles only slowing down for a
moment to gauge the scene before apparently deciding to continue the pursuit. She’d have to lose them, but that was evidently something she was more than capable of.

Meanwhile, the riots seemed to grow around them, people spilling down the streets, throwing petrol bombs, igniting the sidewalks, chanting and raging against the night. Ryan spun around, feeling the sudden, compulsive need to know the exact position of the lads. Jeremy was to his right, Michael was behind him and to his left, Gavin a little closer to him but further back, nearest to the floor to ceiling glass windows of the FIB entryway. For a brief second, Ryan caught his reflection in the glass. His face paint was somehow still immaculate, and it only served to make the image all the more terrifying as the rioters surged forward, framed against a backdrop of orange flames licking through curls of thick smoke given off from the homemade incendiary devices. The red and blue flashing lights and sirens growing ever more present all around them.

*Who would’ve thought the Fakes could rally so much support on the streets?*

*Geoff, apparently.*

*Stop. Stop thinking about it.* He tried to convince himself. He needed to be functional. *The lads are counting on you.*

“Weapons! What’ve we got?” Ryan asked.

Police cruisers were slowly starting to surround them at a distance… the heroes determined to bag themselves a Fake were starting to close in.

The lads all looked to Ryan.

“…not enough for this…” Michael said quietly, the honesty and resignation in his voice was heartbreaking.

“Matt, Andy, ETA?” Ryan checked over the radio.

Matt sounded like he was concentrating, the roar of the engine audible as he pushed the car as hard as it could go. “Just hang in there, almost there…”

If anyone could make it, it was Matt, but even Matt couldn’t work miracles.

The circle of cars and agents grew steadily as they seemed to be working out the best way to approach the skeleton crew of Fakes. They were still deadly enough with just the four of them that the authorities maintained their distance, analysing the situation. They didn’t have long before they’d get cocky enough to try something.

“Boys,” Ryan tried to keep his tone light, “this might be it for us. No matter what happens, we go out swinging. Blaze of glory.”

“Blaze of glory,” Michael repeated.

Gavin actually huffed a laugh. “I suppose I can’t say I’m surprised.”

Jeremy giggled but it was laced with nerves. “Guys? It’s been fun.”

“It sure has.”

In the distance, a pair of flashing blue and red lights were growing steadily stronger. Ryan braced himself for the worst.
The two cruisers approached them at speed; for a second it looked like they weren’t going to stop, but at the last possible second, the tyres of both squealed to a halt and the cars drifted to a stop right in front of them. Ryan braced himself, but Jeremy ran forward.

“Jeremy!” Ryan started to move after him. *Like hell he was letting the kid take another bullet for him.*

The door to the cruiser flew open and Matt’s head poked out the window, long shaggy hair hanging about his grinning face.

“Thought you could use a lift.”

Just behind him Michael and Gavin were hurriedly scurrying into the other cruiser, driven by Andy. Jeremy jumped into the passenger seat and Ryan ducked as bullets flew past his head and he climbed into the backseat.

“Fuckin’ A!”

“Matt, you are a god damn hero.”

As soon as Ryan slammed the door shut, Matt was taking off again, hitting the streets of Los Santos at breakneck speeds with the practiced ease of a professional driver; while Andy with Michael and Gavin, managed to keep up with all his highly technical manoeuvres.

“Told you I was going to get you in style. Just needed the right vehicle.” Matt grinned.

“That you did,” Ryan confessed.

“And that you *did,*” Jeremy repeated.

As they rounded the corner of the building, they passed the twisted, smoking wreck of a Valkyrie entangled in the still-flaming remains of a Buzzard. As soon as Ryan realised what he was looking at, it felt like someone had knocked all the air out of his lungs. There was little doubt in his mind that Geoff hadn’t survived whatever they heard, but he wasn’t fully ready to process it yet. Seeing the wreck was almost worse than seeing a body. He swallowed hard and looked at Jeremy, eyes wet with tears as he too tracked the wreck as they passed it. He knew Michael and Gavin would be doing the same.

Matt kept his eyes on the road, but he sensed it, “Geoff…?”

“He didn’t make it,” Ryan replied simply.

Matt didn’t push it, shaking his head a little and pressing his foot harder into the accelerator.

Jeremy and Ryan sat in silence as Matt navigated the streets and riots, leading the police away from the downtown area, while somehow Andy kept up. They lost the authorities before looping back and under the guise of actual police cruisers they barely got a second glance from other officers on the scene. They discreetly pulled into the garage of the penthouse; Andy still right behind them, and they noted Mica’s Issi indicating Jack and Trevor were already here.

They’d probably gone over what happened.

For what felt like the first time since they’d left the penthouse, Ryan took a breath. He let it out; long and steady and slow.

*You got this.*
Gavin, Michael and Jeremy were bleary-eyed as they got out of the cars and made their way to the elevator, barely exchanging more than a few sniffles as they rode it to the top.

When they arrived, they were greeted with the sight of Mica and Lindsay in a half-embrace, sitting by medical supplies with Jack and Trevor.

Jack’s eyes were red as he tended Trevor’s arm, securing it in a sling for the time being until someone could take a better look at it.

As soon as she looked up, Lindsay immediately rushed to pull Michael into a hug.

The atmosphere was sombre.

“I can’t believe he’d do that…” Michael shook his head and smiled sadly. “What an asshole.”

The others sniffed a semblance of laughter.

“What happens now?” Gavin asked, echoing the thoughts of many others in the room.

Lindsay let go of Michael. “Well, I let Bruce know what happened; I’ll leave it up to him to tell the others when he thinks it’s right, but as far as they’re concerned, they’re sticking to the plan. They’re in this deep anyway.”

“What’d Bruce say about...?” Jeremy asked, trailing off.

Lindsay shook her head, looking a mixture of confused and amused. “He just said ‘fuck omelettes’ and that he was sorry. He really looked up to Geoff.”

“We all did,” Jeremy said flatly, Gavin nodding in agreement.

There was a long silence.

“So, what do we do now?” Lindsay asked.

“We could leave…?” Trevor suggested.

Jack shook his head. “Not that easy. All our exit strategies, our plan Bs… all of that went up with the safe houses.”

“All except mine,” Lindsay interrupted. “We still have the option to leave. I have passports and cash. Not much, but enough. We could run. We could pack up and leave this city. Scatter so we can’t be traced. Start fresh somewhere else…”

**Scatter.**

Ryan mentally recoiled at the thought.

*No. “Stay together,” that’s what Geoff had said.*

The Fakes would never up and leave like that. That’s not how they were destined to go out and they knew it.

One by one, they shook their heads, even Lindsay knew it was never going to happen.

Ryan looked around at the unanimous decision.
“No. Tonight, whatever happens, no one is left behind. We go together.”

It was unsaid, but they all knew what it implied.

They’d all give their lives for the crew.

And they were ok with that.

“This is where we started – on the streets, in bloodshed, these people we’re fighting alongside, they’re fighting for the same thing as us,” Jack said.

Michael nodded. “This is where we belong. We’re not the bad guys anymore.”

“We have to finish this,” Jeremy added.

“Yeah. We fight,” Ryan spoke up, “until we win.”

“For Geoff,” Gavin chimed in.

“For us.”

*Once more into the fray…*

They tended their wounds, replaced their armour and headed back to the garage to restock their weapons – this time they would only take what they could carry onto the street.

They knew what needed to be done. Maximum chaos. Make the LSPD and FIB run home with their tails between their legs.

Reclaim Los Santos.

*Even if it means razing the city.*

The Fake AH Crew stepped out onto the street, filled with the scent of burning gasoline and gunpowder and smoke hanging in the cool night air, the wail of sirens punctuating the background buzz of the city. Not far off they could hear the rabble, the riots, they could see the orange flames reflected in the glass of the surrounding buildings, the reds and blues of flashing lights cutting through the dark smoke. They could hear the crackle of gunfire, the shouts of the others, the Family fighting alongside them. It felt familiar, right.

To Ryan’s right, Jack, Matt and Trevor, still beside them despite his dislocated shoulder; to his left, Jeremy, Gavin and Michael – the lads he’d promised to watch over.

“So, maximum carnage, right?” Michael asked.

There was a moment of silence where they anticipated Geoff’s confirmation, but when it didn’t come Ryan felt a familiar rush of adrenaline and within him, something stirred.

They were waiting for him.

“That’s it.” He nodded. “Everybody dies.”

Around him, nervous laughter echoed quietly, growing more relaxed as it continued until it only felt genuine, almost confident.
As they began to make their way towards the frontline of the riots, Trevor’s phone buzzed. The one Geoff had left with him.

He paused and glanced at the screen, reading over the message a few times, almost in disbelief.

“What is it?”

His voice was quiet, shocked. “The IAA are stepping in...”

“Wait, does that mean…?” Jeremy started, trailing off at the look overcoming Trevor’s face.

The relief in the air was palpable as his lips curled into a smile and he nodded slightly.

“...we won.”

The celebration wasn’t immediate. Lost in a moment of reflection, reverence.

They’d won, but they’d lost so much along the way.

Ryan swallowed, taking it in, looking around at the crew, his crew. The people he’d give his life for, and he knew would give theirs in turn. Slowly, they all smiled, grins growing wide and eventually erupting into laughter and celebrations.

Despite all they’d been through, they knew: as long as they had each other, whatever happened, whatever came at the Fake AH Crew; it would never destroy them, not completely.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for sticking with me through this monster of a first fanfic. Thank you for your patience with the update schedule, your input and support. It’s been a hell of a ride. I couldn’t have done it without you.
Update!

You can now buy a hard copy of Divided We Fall!

(Priced at cost - purely so you can have a nice copy to keep)

You can also listen to it as a PodFic.

Oh, and one more thing... if you're looking for a sequel to this story, just check out the Let's Play GTA V Criminal Masterminds series.

Works inspired by this one: Podfic - Divided We Fall by lilbev24, The Criminal Masterminds of Los Santos by lilbev24

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!