Hang the Fool
by AlmaMeDuele

Summary

How the heroic organization Overwatch acquires the talents of one Hanzo Shimada, and how gunslinger Jesse McCree will probably suffer because of it for the rest of his days.
Preface
Hey there! If you're just now tuning into the story, thank you for reading! This story is a winding exploration of adventures belonging to some of the heroes of Overwatch post-Recall, seen through the eyes of former Blackwatch agent Jesse McCree and the assassin Hanzo Shimada. The story has a romantic center plot with many strong threads to backstory, tied in with a lot of twists and turns.

This story is rated M for Mature. That rating is established due to sexual (non-explicit) content, cursing, violence, graphic language and depictions of combat, injury, blood, and body horror. There are adult themes and depictions in this story that may not be accessible or enjoyable to all audiences, especially with regards to emotional distress and interpersonal conflict. Tags are visible at the front of every chapter for more chapter-specific types of content.

Before you continue:
1. This is a personal work, written for me, as practice to improve on my creative writing. It was not created for any other persons or groups. It is a free piece of media I created during my spare time.
2. While I cannot enforce an age limit for readers of this fanfic, please understand my concerns about certain age ranges and audiences reading it. The M rating is not necessarily just for the content, but also many events and thematic elements of the story. Overwatch is a video game for a wide span of ages and backgrounds, but this story reflects writing by a young adult with adult experiences and thus contains adult themes, references, and content. If you continue to read, know that you agreed to read an adult work, and I consider you an adult, and have defined expectations about how you choose to engage me about my work.
3. This story is long. The narrative contains a multi-thread arc designed to showcase character and story growth. There is a lot to digest, and sometimes it is not easy to skim.
4. This story is a piece created early in fandom. It is considered 'slow burn.' The couple in focus gradually come together after being strangers who encounters periods of conflict where they do not get along. If this is not your cup of tea, or if you prefer something with an established relationship and more fluff, there are lots of other really good fics you should check out instead!!
5. I will no longer be taking anonymous messages or comments unless I choose to make an exception.
6. I do not mind if you reference/draw inspiration from HtF and its components into other fan creations. Please credit the source and maybe throw a link back to the original AO3 posting. This was and will remain a free work, and I do not permit any use of it or its components to be used for sale, profit or financial gain.
7. Currently I have no plans to repost this fic on any other fanfiction-hosting sites. I cannot stop you from making hard/physical/book copies of the text, but I insist that you make them only for your personal enjoyment and not for any kind of sale.
8. This story is fanon. It draws off the established Overwatch canon presented to us from announcement to December 2016, nothing after. As more Overwatch lore is released, many of this fic's explorations of backstory and characterization will eventually be considered completely canon- divergent.
Minor changes have been made to the story for sensitivity purposes and consideration of characterization. The final text for the fic will always be what you see posted here on AO3. Any future amendments to the story will be mentioned at the bottom of this preface.

Translations of the fic are available; I will post links to the individual versions here when they are completed.

If you have created a fanwork for this piece, please let me know directly. I am incredibly grateful for all the contributions made to HtF and will endeavor to keep its connected pieces updated. You can contact me on Twitter or Tumblr. I usually access both via mobile during most of the day and may not see @’s on Tumblr.

Once again, thank you for reading!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It begins at night. Under cover of glowing synthetic lights, the base sits still and quiet. The Watchpoint at Gibraltar is carved out of a massive cliffside, its innards shielded in a monument of stone. In the summertime the weather is balmy; the reedy whine of wind coming down the crag mingle with the buzz of coastal birds. The ship channel has reopened since the base was shut down. The big tankers drone past the cliff late in the evening, moving seamlessly across the watery horizon, elongated bodies cutting past the lighthouse gleaming in the strait.

Jesse McCree watches the path of an orange cargo ship sailing off the coast. He’s standing on the second-story walkway outside of Winston’s lab, having a smoke, enjoying the purple view as the last licks of sunset dwindle from the sky. The trail from his cigarillo is rich, heady. If Dr. Ziegler catches the scent, she’ll chide him for the filthy habit.

She’ll chide him and he’ll be glad. Jesse spent five years after the fall of Overwatch with Mercy’s voice lingering at the back of his mind, soft among the chorus of hundreds more that are nested in his memories. He pulls her out and replays her like an old voice message, a sound clip on loop: *how are you feeling today, McCree? How is your arm? How is your eye?* Sometimes it offers questions he knows she’s never asked, blurring together with inquiries and words from long-lost faces. *How do you shoot? How do you ride? How did you do today?*

The drifter life is lonely. On the road, in his hideouts, along the weary trails he took to keep himself alive, Jesse McCree picked up habits that have kept him alive -- and, more importantly, kept him functioning. Kept him sane. He can last out on the long haul without human interaction for days at a time, now that he knows how to keep his thoughts close and the voices closer.

It’s been three weeks since Winston’s recall. The agents who answered agreed to regroup at Gibraltar. The dormitories are small, cramped, a little tumbled; Jesse’s room was filled with boxes of discarded equipment and had the tell-tale signs of mice. Two days of sanitation ‘bots and elbow grease got the place cleaned up, but the air still feels musty in the evening, unaccustomed to being breathed. Winston had some trouble getting the Watchpoint secure again after a surprise attack from Talon. Athena’s diagnostic repair took a solid seventy-two hours; he’s still concerned that some of her sectors will have to be quarantined until they can acquire some clean drives. But once the messages started coming in, Winston had to act fast. Accommodations had to be made. There were so many more replies than he expected.

And McCree arrived: weary, soot-stained, rumpled and worn out from the trans-Atlantic haul. He’d
been hiding out south of Knoxville, holed up in a cabin in the Smoky Mountains, biding his time until was sure he’d lost the bounty hunters that caught his trail down in Atlanta. Then there came the call. Jesse played it cool, tried not to sound too enthusiastic, rumbled some pleasantries to Winston (and a bombastic Lena, who Winston linked into the call) and assured them he’d be there if he could oblige himself to travel. He hopped the nearest airbus out of Greensboro (or, to be precise: an insulated storage container in the airbus’ massive cargo bay). From Charles de Gaulle spaceport in Paris to Madrid by skipper jet, from Madrid to Málaga by hypertrain, from Málaga to Gibraltar by the back of freighter trucks and the occasional rideshare that did not mind his sparse, twangy Spanish and preferred his credit chips instead -- he made it to the Watchpoint. His left arm needed maintenance; the rest of him needed a shower.

Lena did not mind that he stunk. She leapt to hug him; she laughed so loud it made his ears ring; she bounded back to Winston who knuckled him in the shoulder. Then Reinhardt, who roped him into a big, bellowing crush.

“My favorite people are together once again!” boomed the knight after he let Jesse go. “Brigitte has missed you, she will be glad to see you still have your hat.”

“Glad I still got it, too,” Jesse mused, unaware that he was smiling until his cheeks began to hurt.

One by one, they began to return. Angela arrived three days after McCree. The reunion was pure elation; the sound of tears and peals of laughter lured him to the dormitory foyer, bright noises that made McCree shiver when they touched his ears. Seeing her was almost as overwhelming as hearing. Years after signing up with Blackwatch after the Deadlock sting, the awe had yet to fade that Overwatch had managed to hire what most of the populace might mistake for an actual angel. Religion had left Jesse McCree decades ago -- or, perhaps it was more accurate to say that he’d left it instead -- but the irony of his greeting didn’t dampen its warmth.

“Reckon I’ve seen the light,” he rasped when the doctor came darting for his arms. “How’re you doin’, doc? Been a dog’s age since I seen that lovely face.”

“McCree,” was all she could say for the first few seconds of their embrace, sighing, pulling away to laugh as he respectfully took off his hat. “You are still wearing it!”

“Wearing what?”

Angela beamed; her smile flashed white. “Your hat!”

Funny: maybe it was a German thing.

“Gonna be a hard day and night that makes me hang it up, doc,” he replied, stepping back from Angela so that Tracer could accost her with chatter and cheer. Angela looked good: groomed, glowing and golden-haired. Not a strand out of place. Hardly a spot on her ivory coat and slacks.

Was it also a German thing to simply not age? She did not look a day older than the last time he saw her. Five years and not so much as a wrinkle. McCree pondered over this long after Angela left to freshen up the medbay; he decided not to bring it up again, lest he offend. It wasn’t polite to question a lady’s age or appearance. Better to silently owe it to genetics. After all, there was a more important thing to consider: Angela was Swiss, not German.

Is Swiss. McCree looks out over the water from the walkway again, corrects himself, forces himself to focus on another ship drifting down the channel. Angela is Swiss, she is no longer a concept in past-tense. She is real again; so is Reinhardt; so is Tracer and so is Winston and so is gruff old Torbjorn.
And Genji, who drifts into McCree’s thoughts just as the lighthouse beacon flashes. The cyborg had returned to Gibraltar only to leave three days later. Though he greeted his old comrades with genuine warmth, Genji’s return to the Watchpoint had been a diversion, an interruption to crucial business. He was summoned to the Shambali monastery and had to get there as soon as possible. He assured everyone that he would return in a week’s time, hopefully with his beloved mentor in tow. Zenyatta would be a valuable asset to the members of Overwatch; they would do well under his guidance, and he would revel in the opportunity to behold the reconciliation of some of the world’s finest heroes.

Reconciliation. A strange choice of words, maybe a questionable one. McCree chews on the inside of his lip as he watches a few striped gulls rise on the sea breeze.

There is certainly a lot of reconciling that needs to happen between now and whatever Winston has planned for Overwatch’s return. Three weeks have not passed between the recalled agents without a bevy of questions, curiosities and inquiries -- many of which are met by glum dismissals or outright silence. Everyone wants answers, and no one who has them wants to deliver. Mercy keeps her lips sealed tight. She’s the first person Jesse would waylay for the truth of what he’s missed. At this hour, she’s holed up in her medbay; she’s got a lot of work to do and a slim window in which to finish. Jesse could wander down to her floor with coffee or hot chocolate; he could fake injury or malfunctioning prosthetic; he could go nosing into her office like a peccary pig, hunting her down for honesty, sniffing for the story.

The story of Jack and Gabe: the strike commander, the Blackwatch lead, the brothers-in-arms that brought down the house in Switzerland and blasted a metaphorical crater, wide as a gulf, in Jesse McCree’s faith that true heroes never died.

He blows out a plume of smoke. He almost laughs.

“Catch phrase,” he murmurs softly, and he decides that tonight he’ll leave Angela alone.

The lighthouse beacon flashes two more times -- slow, languid beats of light. Far below the tarmac, the waves crash against the rocks. The lavender sky is rapidly sweeping to indigo, soon to darken into a swath of starry black.

He’s got time. Impatience will do him no good; there’s no need to scrap for answers just yet, not when everyone is in the process of coming back around. Jesse taps ash off his cigarillo and reassures himself that he’s a man skilled in the art of waiting. The ballad of Jack and Gabe -- no, it’s sure to be a lament, morose, a tale of dust and devastation -- will play out soon. At least he’s here to hear it. At least he’s here, he tells himself, and the voice he pulls from the back of his head is softer than Angela’s -- deeper, darker, like smoke. The rasp of a woman with dark eyes and darker hair, framing a brown face with an aquiline nose. He hasn’t seen her in years, but if he listens to the breeze long enough he can convince himself she never left. At least you are here -- at least.

McCree slowly takes his cigarillo from his mouth and pinches it between forefinger and thumb, lowering his prosthetic hand to the railing.

Crackling chatter bursts from the gulls. From the corner of his eye McCree sees a shower of pebbles cascading off the cliffs to his left. He looks up and sees the man; the bow he’s wielding; the arrow nocked and drawn.

A hundred feet away, suddenly: there he is.

A beat passes. The archer on the rocks has not moved; it’s as if he’s part of the escarpment, rigid
and still, knees crouched and muscles knotted. In the dim light Jesse can see the contours of the man’s armor: metal from toe to knee, black fabric at his thighs, something vaguely resembling a coat clenched at a twisted waist. A shadow from the crag obscures the archer’s face. Waving from his back is a strip of cloth -- pale white, washed of color by the gloam -- whipping like a pennant.

And Jesse McCree realizes he has been a dead fellow for several seconds now, unaware of it. His fate suspended between life and death by a string, pulled taut by this statuesque killer, a figure edging out of the stone in the trappings of a ghost.

Another beat. The gulls are gone.

It ends quickly. There is no opportunity to shout. He forgets the voices; he forgets Angela and Jack and Gabe. He thinks of Amari only when his right hand draws a loaded Peacekeeper from its hip holster. The barrel does not gleam for the lack of light. McCree cocks the hammer. He aims with his heart. He pulls the trigger with his soul.

His shot misses. Jesse reels from the recoil and jams back the hammer. The first arrow whistles, landing with a *thwack*; the second makes no sound, only pain. Jesse goes down to a knee and rolls with the arrow shaft sticking out of his left elbow; his boot crunches his dropped cigarillo; he gasps, pushes off the railing, skids out of sight back into the laboratory foyer. He collides with a tray of beeping instruments and sends them scattering, crashing across the metal floor.

Athena is there before he can thumb the comm clipped to his right ear.

“Agent McCree,” rolls the low synthetic voice, seemingly from everywhere at once. “Report your status.”

“We got an assassin,” is all Jesse can bark, scrabbling to get up, spurs scratching on the floor plates as he grips the skin above his prosthetic arm. “We got an assassin, sniper, cliffside. I’m hit.”

Alarms blare across the foyer. Peals of electronic distress jolt McCree with a sudden adrenaline rush; the pain shooting from his arm dulls to a hot streak as his instincts kick into gear. He’s on his feet and cocking Peacekeeper and flanking the doorway to check the walkway. Light from the strobes illuminates the place where he was shot with glowing red stripes. From the edge of the doorframe, he can just barely see the cliffside. He is ready to fire; all he needs is a sight.

The archer is gone.

“McCree!” rumbles a voice over his comm. It’s Winston, panting and thumping; he must be running. “What’s your location?”

Jesse ducks back inside. He’s trying to hold his left arm stiff. The arrow shot clean through; he can see the metal head sticking out the other side of his elbow. The shaft waggles in his line of sight, bouncing almost merrily as he braces the wall. Jesse takes in a deep breath and feels his vision swim as his eyes focus on the sloped edge of the fletching. It’s smooth, trimmed -- cream-colored, like the feather off a duck.

His hat skids forward on his brow, and that’s when he realizes the first arrow is lodged in its brim. “East side,” he replies. “Facing the ship channel, my left arm’s been hit, watch your entry!”

Athena’s emblem brightens to life on a viewscreen hanging in the foyer corner. Blue light from her display glows incongruous against the wild red strobes.

“I’ve located the intruder,” she states clearly. “They’ve disengaged from proximity and they’re
heading up the cliff.”


Athena’s emblem flashes. “They appear to be climbing with their hands.”

McCree flings his hat aside with a flick of his right wrist. He spits, pinches the arrow shaft an inch above the plume and snaps off the fletching. “Great, we got ourselves a billy-goat that thinks he’s Robin Hood.” He mumbles through gritted teeth. “What marvels o’ modern science they gonna come up with next?”

“I’m here,” chimes Angela, her up-link whirring to life on the comm line. “What’s your status? Who is injured? Where are they?”


Sure enough: the ape is thumping through the swinging foyer doors. He snorts at the smell of blood and gunpowder and nearly tramples right over McCree’s discarded hat.

His golden eyes grow large at the sight of the broken arrow in McCree’s left arm.

“An archer,” he rumbles.

“Sniped by the Hunger Games,” Jesse growls, lifting his arm wielding Peacekeeper parallel to the doorway. “What’s the best way to get up the cliff?”

Winston shuffles forward; he’s on edge, tense and snuffing. “Jet pack or rocket boosters. The slope is too steep to scale without gear or a harness, and it’s slow going up the ridge. Angela’s suit could go from point to point, but she’d need someone on the ridge facing to hop from. It’s a hard climb.” He looks at McCree’s arm again and grimaces. “We need to get you to medbay now, that could be toxic.”

Jesse lumbers forward. Winston is right, but he's loathe to retreat. “I missed. Drew and fired, but I missed the sucker. Lighting was bad.”

“Tracer here!” Lena rings out over the comm. “Sorry I’m late tapping in, loves, I heard the alarms and started scanning the cargo bays. No signs of intruders here, nor on any of the launchpads.”

Winston thumbs his comm. “That was a fast check.”

“Agent Tracer’s reconnaissance confirmed,” Athena adds. “The intruder has cleared from my sensors. I cannot track them. They must have cleared the cliff.”

“REINHARDT ONLINE!” booms the knight; Winston and McCree simultaneously wince at his volume, ducking their heads. “WHERE IS THE INTRUDER? I'M HEADING TO THE FRONT LOADING BAY!”

“Just a tick!” Tracer is nigh laughing. “Already checked those, big guy!”

Jesse tries to say something, but the soft plip, plip of blood dripping to the floor off his elbow distracts him from radioing into his comm.

“Mercy, McCree’s en route to medbay,” Winston says over the comm. He drags his knuckles over the doorway keypad and slides shut the door the walkway. The alarms cease blaring; outside, the strobes continue to lick the Watchpoint walls and scaffolding with neon-red stripes. “He’s been hit
by an arrow, we need to make sure it’s not poisoned.”

“An arrow!” Tracer pipes. “Well, then! That’s some specialty of sniper.”

McCree pushes off the wall, still clutching his left bicep. His elbow throbs and pulses with pain. The wound is close to the lip where his prosthetic begins. Any lower and it might have gotten lodged in metal plating. Any higher and he might have been able to reach toss a flashbang. But the spot where it landed has pinched his entire arm rigid, useless. He can cock Peacekeeper with his right thumb, but his balance is thrown off. His stance is badly off-kilter.

McCree’s thoughts fuzz out, circling around a singular conviction. Four words beat in his brain like the thudding tattoo of his heart: clever fella. Good shot.

“Copy that,” Angela calls across the comm. “I’m prepped and ready to receive McCree. Don’t worry, Jesse.” She sounds so confident. “We’ll get it out and have you patched up in no time.”

“I am sweeping the perimeter!” Reinhardt bellows. “Le-na! You should join me! Ha-ha! If this rock-climber makes another appearance, we will have them brought in, in no time!”

“On it, big man!” Tracer’s perky voice fades off the comm. McCree and Winston hear a distant clanking, like the impact of two heavy things colliding in rhythm. But Winston will not dawdle any longer; he buffers McCree as the gunslinger starts to push down the corridor.

The ape picks up McCree’s hat -- still speared through the brim by a pale, gleaming arrow -- and lumbers after him.


----

It takes Angela Ziegler thirty minutes to get the arrow out of Jesse McCree. Reinhardt and Tracer find no further evidence of the attacker; Winston spends most of the half-hour scanning through surveillance data in hopes of getting a better look at the would-be assassin. McCree watches the ape as he types furiously on Angela’s console, pausing only to adjust his glasses and scratch beneath his nose.

Just like old times again, he thinks numbly through a paradoxical haze of stress and sudden calm.

“Just like old times,” Angela says aloud, surprising him. She speaks borderline sing-song, a light yet harried tone befitting a physician who is both fond and exasperated of her patient. “You know, in the years since I last sewed you up, I think you have gotten a bit more tan.”

“That Albuquerque sun,” McCree drawls. Were he less tense, he might smirk. “Turn you brown as a berry if you don’t watch out.”

“Yes, well.” She tilts her head, tossing a strand of hair off her safety glasses. “You still use SPF, I hope.” She ties off the last stitch. “Thirty-five or better, you can’t be too careful when it comes to sun exposure.”

McCree bites back a laugh -- it’s a warm feeling, if only a little nonplussed. Mercy just wedged an arrow shaft out of his arm with a head the length of a shot glass, and here she is, ragging on him. About sunscreen, of all things.

“You know me, doc,” Jesse says wryly. “I always follow your orders. Wouldn’t dream of doin’ wrong by ‘em.”
“Of course. Hold very still now.” Her scissors whisper and click, clinking on the medical tray when she sets them aside. Primly she presses her gloved fingertips into the skin above his bicep. “How does this feel? Any pain?”

“No ma’am.” Jesse is reclining on the exam table, his left arm outstretched for ease of Angela’s work. “Not even a tingle.”

“Good.” She smiles. “The local anaesthetic will wear off in about an hour, you will probably want something for the pain. But you can’t take too much. We’ll have to schedule a small surgery to repair the tendon once the swelling goes down.” She rips open a packet of cleaning wipes and pulls her stool closer to the table. “Hopefully I can do it this week.”

Jesse sighs. His head hurts; it feels like the start of a migraine is thumping behind his eyes. “Ain’t even been back a month and already gettin’ cut open.”

Angela clucks her tongue. “Nonsense.” She sits with her heels slotted against the stool ring and starts to dab blood off his skin. “I would rather you view it that our first injury since recall is one I can easily fix. No shattered bone, for an arrowhead that large. I would call it a miracle. It could have been a much worse wound.”

Winston grunts from the console. “This is really weird.”

“What is?” McCree asks.

“The surveillance cams and the sensors aren’t showing any disruptions,” Winston answers. “Nothing, not even a shadow. No footprints, no movements. It’s entirely possible this fellow came directly down the cliff face, completely out of sight.”

“How d’you reckon one does that?”

“Well, with a harness or gear, he’d have to have anchor points,” Winston continues, gesturing to the screen. “But to set one up, he would’ve had to stay in one place long enough to get picked up by a sensor drone. Athena has them run outdoor scans every fifteen minutes. Unless you’ve got pretty snazzy tech, it’d be real tough to get points and a rappelling line in that fast, and then drop down to shoot at you and get back out.”

McCree wiggles his left foot. His spurs jingle. Part of him wants to admit embarrassment. It’s not like him to get caught off guard, much less miss a shot. Sure, the lighting might have been bad -- but he’s taken further shots in worse weather and still been a dead-eye. Lying supine on this exam table, McCree feels vulnerable, awkward. Angela made him take off his belts and holster; she’s got his shirt sleeve hiked to his shoulder; she would kill him before she allowed him to smoke here. He shifts uncomfortably. “I dunno how long he was standin’ there, truth be told. He wasn’t in my line o’ sight.”

“If he was there to kill you, there’s no telling,” Winston mutters.

Jesse’s eyes drift to Angela, who is silent as she wipes down his prosthetic arm casing. “What d’you think, doc?”

Angela’s pink lips pinch into a tight line. She looks attuned to her task -- too attuned, as if she’s purposefully focusing so she can’t pay heed to the conversation. “I am trying to figure it out.”

“Well surely he didn’t just shimmy down the rocks like a lizard,” McCree drawls, brows furrowing. “I only got a look at him in bad lighting -- I mean, if it were even a him. Didn’t look partic’larly tall, coulda been a lady. Dunno though. They had a strong stance. May’ve had
prosthetics on their legs. I mean -- they had that arrow drawn, aimed, lookin’ like a statue almost.”
His head lolls back against the table padding. “Almost like he was part of the rock itself.”

“Agents Tracer and Reinhardt are suspending their search,” Athena chimes in overhead. “I will keep threat levels elevated and switch sensor monitoring to shorter intervals for the next forty-eight hours.”

Winston grumbles. “Do you have enough disk space to record that much?”

“No.” Athena’s display glimmers. “But if you’d like, I can refresh the feeds every eight hours and delete the cache to make room. You will have to monitor the readouts for any hits, Winston. I’d advise you set up a surveillance shift with another agent so you don’t miss any potential sightings.”

McCree sighs. “I’ll help. Ain’t gonna be able to sleep, watchin’ cameras ‘s gonna be the closest I’ll get to relaxin’ for the next two days, anyway.”

“I insist that you rest,” Angela interrupts. “Constant vigilance is detrimental to your brainwaves and can interrupt the healing process.” She rotates her stool with a swing of her heels. “Winston, get Lena to assist you, or Torbjorn.”

“Jesse can help.” Winston shrugs. “It’s like he said, you just sit around and watch camera feeds for a few hours. Nothing physical.”

“Gimme some time to catch up on my shows,” McCree rasps, grinning weakly. “Ain’t had time to veg out for a coupla months now, doc, don’t deny a man his leisure time.”

Angela narrows her cool eyes at McCree. “I’ll deny you a local anaesthetic when I take your stitches out next time. Bitte.” She tosses the soiled wipes in an antiseptic bin and snaps off her gloves. “Let me get you something for when it wears off.”

She rises and crosses the room, and that’s when she sees the hat on the table, resting on his folded red serape, skewered by a shaft and plume. Angela pauses. She wanders to the hat, picks it up, holds it by the brim in her small pale hands.

“They shot your hat,” she says softly.

Jesse tucks his chin to his collar so he can lift his head. “Uh-huh.”

“They were aiming for your head, then,” Angela continues, closing her fingertips around the arrow shaft just above the fletching. “But they missed.”

Winston scratches beneath his ear. “They hit him with the second arrow, though.”

“They aimed for his arm,” says Angela, narrowing her blue eyes at the arrow fletching, running her fingertip against the eggshell plume. “They hit a soft spot but they didn’t break bone. They meant for it to go through muscle.”

“They meant for it?” Winston repeats. He’s close to scowling. “Does that mean they meant to miss with the first shot?”

“I think she means to say,” Jesse says, “that she doesn’t think he was shootin’ to kill.” He is scowling; his face goes dark, grim, dreading the depth of the situation on which Mercy is ruminating. “From that distance, and with me not payin’ attention, he coulda put those arrows through me any-which-way he pleased, if that was what he was wantin’.”
“You shot at him,” Angela adds. “And then he shot at you.”

Winston harumphs. “So Jesse shot first.”

McCree snorts. “I shot first.”

“Even with you firing first,” Angela interjects, “he did not want to kill you. Not even in self-defense. These arrows were well-aimed. He was more inclined to get away, and he did, as you can see.” She peers hard at the arrow shaft, as if searching for something in particular -- a hint, a sign. “I do not think this was an assassin. I do not think it was someone who came to harm.”

Winston snorts. “Well, he also certainly didn’t come to play nice, Doctor Ziegler.”

“If I’d never shot, there’s no tellin’ if he would’ve, either,” McCree sighs. “It ain’t worth debating. Fellow was armed and ready to fire. However he got down to that ledge, however he got out -- don’t matter at this point. We oughtta find him and figure out what he was doin’ here.”

“I agree.” Angela sets the hat down on the folded serape. She does not turn back to face Winston or McCree. She goes quiet; Winston resumes flipping through camera screens; McCree thunks the back of his head against the exam table cushion and shuts his eyes to suppress his headache. She lets the low hum of the electrical cabinets powering the medical equipment overtake the room before she decides, finally, to speak. “I think I know who we should ask about him first.”

McCree opens one eye. He wets his lips with the tip of his tongue. “Where’sat?”

“His brother.”

Winston looks up. McCree sits forward. Athena’s A-shaped emblem flickers with interest on her screen. McCree feels like his heart has edged up into his throat.

All eyes and sensors have drawn to Dr. Ziegler, who has turned around with the expression of a woman lost in thought. A sad and wistful look touches the corners of her eyes; Jesse has seen her wear similar faces before, many times -- usually when she’s worn out from her work. But this glumness is new. He viewed it just this week.

The same look she gave him when he asked about Jack and Gabe.

“His brother?” Winston hoots in reply, his face contorting in a frown.

Angela flicks a pale lock of hair from her forehead.

“Yes,” she answers finally. “Or, as you know him: Genji.”

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- More Overwatch agents (and new recruits) to show in Chapter 2.
- No better way to introduce yourself to someone than shooting them with an arrow.
- Title to become more relevant as chapters go on. Or so we all hope.
- You can follow me on Tumblr.
HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST
So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Content warning: insomnia, flashbacks, mention of pain medication.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The guy with the skates is named Lúcio, and he arrives from Brazil four days after the incident. Lena introduces him to everyone at breakfast in the Watchpoint mess hall. He’s vivacious, to say the least -- all smiles and high-fives. He’s wearing a green jersey, lime-colored shades, and loose black joggers. He squeaks across the linoleum in yellow sneakers with frog decals on the toes. Tied on his duffelbag are a pair of rollerblades; gold padded headphones hang around his neck. He is shorter than everyone expected, and no one is prepared for his energy.

“Winston!” Lúcio croons. “Been a while, amigo!” He offers the ape a fistbump; Winston is slow to respond in kind, as if the gesture confuses him. “Man, I am so excited” -- he’s suddenly bounding back on his heels, swinging his arms, snapping his fingers one-two, one-two -- “this is the chance of a lifetime, I can’t even begin to tell you guys how glad I am to be here.”

The audio-medic is a new recruit to Overwatch, courtesy of Tracer and Winston. They phoned him after noticing his posts on social media advocating social change and healing through the power of music. Not an hour after the call, Lúcio booked the earliest flight out of Rio de Janeiro to Gibraltar. His equipment cost an extra two thousand real to check-in and ship; he paid it in cash and had it delivered with his arrival.

Normally Jesse would take a shining to this kind of enthusiasm. Lúcio’s personnel file describes him as quite the freedom fighter, and his Crossfade suit is rumored to be a marvel of design. But McCree’s left arm is sore from surgery, and the pain is turning troublesome. Sleep evades him. His resting habits usually resemble those of the average housecat: dozes, naps, bursts of slumber. Snoozing where he falls whenever there’s a safe, amenable space. Returning to the dormitories does not change his routine. Since the attack, it’s gotten worse. When he lies down on his bed -- curled like a shrimp under a single sheet and blanket, head nestled in cheap foam pillow that smells faintly of mold -- McCree wakes within the hour. His brain will not shut off. His eyes snap open at the tiniest noise. He considers asking Angela for sleeping pills.

McCree pours a cup of coffee. He takes a sip from his mug and nearly sputters. Reinhardt is in charge of the kitchen’s main carafe, and made today’s brew so strong Jesse thinks he could chew it.

“THAT’S what you’ve been missing!” the knight laughs, clapping McCree’s right shoulder with his massive hand. “I know how those Americans drink coffee, McCree, it is just the water and beans. But when you drink it like THIS, I tell you” -- he hoists the pot up high -- “it will put HAIR on your chest!”

Jesse watches as Reinhardt sets the pot down so hard that a rope of coffee sloshes over the lip. He mutters. “It’ll put somethin’ on my chest, alright.” Like the summery delight of eight-A.M. heartburn.

Per McCree’s usual brass, he thinks he could have come back at Reinhardt with about twenty
They settle in over a morning meal cooked by Torbjorn: eggs, sausage, rye toast, porridge and a gleaming bowl of blueberries. A plate of gravad lax is passed around (McCree abstains, offering his share to an eager Tracer), followed by a basket of croissants courtesy of Angela.

“So,” Torbjorn says to the new recruit as they all tuck into their food. “You’re the loud-music fellow. The one who gave the Vishkar corporation all that trouble down in Rio de Janeiro.”

“That’s me.” Lúcio crinkles a packet of brown turbinado sugar over his porridge. “Made a lil’ bit of a name for myself doing that. Though I bet that doesn’t bother you guys much.”

Torbjorn huffs. “Nah, you’re in good comp’ny.” He slathers margarine over a piece of stiff toast. “I don’t mind tellin’ you that all of us just havin’ breakfast like this’s enough to make a name for ourselves again.”

“The PETRAS act rendered all Overwatch activity illegal,” Winston adds, peeling a banana. “Punishable by prosecution. By re-staffing the Watchpoint with former Overwatch agents, we’re... already sort of pushing it. But, by recruiting you, Lúcio” -- he points the banana at the audio-medic -- “we’ve technically violated it.”

“Mowed it right over,” Torbjorn agrees merrily. “And never was I more glad to see somethin’ so shoddy get a kickin’. The world needs Overwatch just as bad as it did before. Maybe worse, with all these rogue omnis and renegade factions poppin’ up and around.”

“We’re going to attract attention,” Angela says, stirring her coffee. “With so many people returning, and all the potential new recruits, well.” She sips from her mug. “Nothing like this stays very quiet for long.”

“We’re gonna handle it as it comes,” affirms Winston. “My plan is to build up our talent, gear up our roster and run a few intel missions before we really jump back into the fray. If we demonstrate to the public that we’re here to protect and serve, just like in the early days” -- he exchanges glances with Reinhardt, who is grinning ear to ear “-- we can work to getting the PETRAS act revoked and returning to full-support operations.”


Lúcio accepts the invitation with a toss of his hair. “Well, it wasn’t all me. It was, y’know, a demonstration by the public, by the people of Rio de Janeiro. Vishkar came in to redevelop parts of the city. They had this big, fancy plan to tear down all our neighborhoods and rebuild ‘em with their hard-light tech. But it didn’t go so well with the voters. The favelas were our homes, they were steeped in old tradition. And the people spoke out. There were protests and demonstrations, but the Corporation didn’t listen.” He picks up another sugar packet. “It really got to me, you know? Seeing my home on the brink of destruction, so I said” -- he purses his lips, clicking out a ‘pfft’ -- “fine, that’s how you guys roll, you’re going to find out how we do it here in Rio when you put our lives on the line.” Lucio pours the sugar into his bowl in the shape of a spiral.

“They were endangering civilian lives?” Angela asks, frowning over her cup of coffee. “I thought that Vishkar only specialized in high-tech construction, you know, redesign for the sake of --”

“Gentrification?” Lúcio interrupts, brows rising, chin bobbing, dark eyes peering hard at Angela across the table. “Yeah, they specialize in that. And a few other little things, too, y’know, like: curfews, labor exploitation” -- he ticks off each accusation on his gloved fingers -- “excessive
police enforcement, illegal detainment, imprisonment without trial or representation…”

Angela draws back. She exchanges glances with Reinhardt, who is listening attentively beside her. “Oh. Well.”

“Like, I don’t mean to sound salty,” Lúcio replies, with all the bravado of someone who wholly intends to be salty, “but when the truth started coming out, Vishkar really showed itself to be a big snake in the grass. Real good at public image, even better at coverups.”

“That’s a pretty steep list o’ crimes,” McCree says, pouring chili sauce on his eggs. “Ain’t like Vishkar’s workin’ out of a small house, either. They got influence in just about every corner of the globe. How’d you manage to keep them from comin’ back?”

Lúcio laughs. Jesse watches the way he sits back in his chair and thinks he can’t be much older than Lena. “The people do it! When the public got a hold of Vishkar tech after they left, they started cleaning up the city together. No one’s house got knocked down, no one’s heritage got rolled over. The power of unity.” He lifts his right fist and hooks it slowly through the air, knuckles facing McCree. Crooning merrily: “unity!”

Reinhardt guffaws. “You are FAR too young to know where that reference is from.”


“HAH.” Reinhardt wags a finger good-naturedly in Lúcio’s face. “Trying to butter me up!”

The conversation lapses to pop culture references and TV shows. Reinhardt gets started about a medieval fantasy series he loves; it was published long before the Omnic crisis and is soon to launch its third television remake. Jesse eats his eggs in silence. His left arm starts to hurt. He makes the mistake of rubbing his bicep just as Angela glances over to notice.

Pain? she mouths, pale brows rising.

McCree chews his last bite of eggs and gives her a hapless shrug.

Angela frowns. Want me to look at it?

McCree shakes his head. Need sleep, he mouths in return.

“-- and he NEVER finished it!” Reinhardt roars, thumping his fist on the table. “It is a crime, I tell you, to write such a fantastic tale that wins the hearts of millions, get five books in, and then leave it incomplete!”

“Knights and dragons are serious business ‘round here,” Lena stage-whispers to a mildly bewildered Lúcio. “Comes with the territory, I guess you could say.”

“No source material!” continues Reinhardt. “None at all! Every remake they do of the series, the ending is always different! Some new producer comes along and changes the theory about how Martin would have ended the books” -- he’s so passionately engaged that he doesn’t notice McCree pushing back from the table -- “and every time, EVERY time” -- or that McCree is silently tapping a two-fingered goodbye salute to the table as he puts on his hat -- “it is LESS believable, they kill MORE people each time, too, just more and more unnecessary death, less dragons, fouler language, more naked body parts --”
McCree leaves the mess hall and wanders down to the dormitory level. He considers muting his comm; he’s too grim to be good company right now. The hollow corridor echoes the sound of his jangling spurs as he approaches his rooms. He enters his keycode; the door unbolts and slides open; he shuts it behind him and thumbs down the lock button. His heel kicks a discarded aluminum soda can, sending it rattling beneath the dinette. Then his toe collides with an empty cigarillo box. Jesse stumbles for the switch; the lights flick on with a hum; his shabby rooms illuminate under cool halogen overheads.

They're a far cry from the accommodations he had at the Swiss headquarters, but Jesse is nonetheless glad for these dorms. A double bunk with the stiff foam mattress is carved into the back wall, framed by built-in shelves and pull-out drawers. There’s a flimsy privacy door for the in-set cubicle that shelters the lavatory and bath. The furnishings are sparse: plastic, vinyl, cheap particle board. A computer console with its own seat is wedged between the dresser and closet, propping up two clear screens. A red rug -- partially chewed by mice -- covers half the floor.

McCree sighs. He rolls his shoulders, winces, rubs his bicep. He tabs a quick inventory of his quarters: bed (disheveled), floor (littered), bathroom (shower), HVAC (running cold), mini-fridge (stocked). Pain meds (on top of the dresser), comb (right beside them), door (shut), lone window (secured). Chestplate (discarded on the floor), chaps (somewhere around here), knee brace (next to the pile of empty biscuit wrappers). Ammo (in a box on the dresser), flashbangs (in crate beside the bunk), cigarillos (damn -- that empty box he kicked must have been his last). McCree checks the wall clock: 0922.

Peacekeeper is placed in a pull-out drawer. If he needs to draw it fast while lying in bed, he’ll only have to reach down. He unlatches his belts and slings them over a coat-hook built into the grey wall; the edge of his belt buckle thumps the sheetrock. Jesse stoops to check the frayed stitching in his holster. The cartridge holder is starting to come loose. He needs to get the leather re-seamed or it’s going to fall apart.

McCree carefully sets his hat on top of an empty bookcase. Then he pulls his brown shirt over his head -- mindful not to stress his left arm -- and drapes it over one of the two dinette chairs.

Perpendicular to the bunk hangs a full-length mirror. It hasn’t been cleaned since who-knows-when; there’s a black smudge in the right corner and a crack spidering across the bottom. It looks like someone kicked it. Jesse catches sight of his reflection. In spite of his fatigue, he stands up straighter. He turns to face himself.

Jesse McCree is thirty-eight and looks it. He is not a big man; living with Reinhardt Wilhelm will change anyone’s view on what constitutes such, and Jesse hardly compares in size. But his frame is solid, broad in the shoulders and appreciatively muscled there too. Just as with his lodgings, Jesse takes stock of himself: warm skin, mud-brown eyes, a wide mouth and a heavy brow. Coarse, dark hair covers his jaw, chest and forearms. His beard is getting out of control. Everything about him looks scruffy -- weatherbeaten like his clothes, tattered around the edges and fraying at the seams. Scars stripe his ribs and shoulders. The barrel chest he wore so well in his youth now sags a little above his hips. If he slouches, his abdominal muscles vanish beneath a curve of rolling fat. McCree sucks in his stomach; he pinches the flesh around his lower belly. Not as lean as he used to be, hardly ‘strapping’ anymore. Too many of those sodas and he’ll risk going to seed.

Still: there’s a gleam to Jesse, a wild and roguish air. Despite a mechanical arm and bandages -- even with his shaggy brown hair and fledgling gut -- he cuts a handsome figure. There’s something enticing about the scruff, the devilish shadows flanking the lines around his eyes. It's scoundrel appeal, rough and rugged. He's someone time has failed to tame.
This is what he tells himself while staring in the dirty mirror, prodding at his pudge. His body is keen to disagree. McCree feels like a knight in one of Reinhardt’s kooky stories, riding under the weight of uncomfortable gear that no longer seems to fit. Dr. Ziegler said the surgery was a success, and assured him the nerves and muscle would take less than a week to go back to normal. But the pain has got him down. It makes him feel clunky and haphazard, an all-over stiffness he can’t shake. Part of him thinks it’s the nature of the injury. Another part thinks it’s because of the bastard who shot him.

He thinks back to the night of the intruder -- the revelation in the medbay, and Mercy’s unease.

“Genji told me,” she had said, worrying her knuckles at her chin, “that he had a brother. An older brother. Left behind in Japan. He never talked about their relationship, except for once when he presumed this brother might be dead.” She exchanged glances with Jesse and Winston. “Both of you remember our operations against the Shimada-gumi?” They nodded; she shook her head. “Genji was more than just an asset to those missions. He was critical to their success. No one understood the Shimada clan like he did: their movements, their personnel, their armaments --”

“What makes you think Hawkeye here was his brother?” McCree interrupted, pointing to his swollen elbow. “If he’s dead, how’s it possible he did this?”

“Presumed dead, Jesse. And it’s the climbing that convinces me.” Angela pointed at the ceiling. “To scale that cliff with only physical strength -- to get up and down it so fast -- well, that takes a certain amount of skill.” She pursed her lips. “It takes training, to be precise. A kind that Genji had. A specialized athletic talent, brought on by years of training. He said it was his family’s speciality, some kind of assassin clan heritage. Passed down through generations, only to a Shimada.” Angela folded her arms over her chest. “The archery, too. Like I said, Genji spoke of this brother only a few times to me. But one of those times, he mentioned -- his brother was an expert archer. Perhaps one of the best in the world.”

“Maybe we oughtta warn him,” McCree had growled. “Oughtta get him on the line right now. If it’s really his relative, coulda been him those arrows were meant for, not me.”

“Genji’s comm is off.” Angela shook her head. “He goes to the Shambali for peace and solitude. He will contact us when he’s en route to return.”

“Why would this brother come here, anyway?” Winston had asked. “If he was seeking him, since Genji’d already left -- don’t you think he would have followed him to Nepal?”

McCree rolled his eyes. Irritated, he drawled: “Maybe he was late. His flyin’ ninja cloud got delayed taking off outta Tokyo, who knows.”

“We will have to ask Genji himself,” Angela had assured, suddenly terse. “In the meantime, we have it as a guess, in case the man returns.” Eager to end the conversation, she diverted to a medical cabinet to dig out a tube of pain pills. Again, with the avoiding thing. Angela and her secrets.

Secrets which lead to revelations of the most startling kind. The best archer in the world! A cliff-climbing toxophilite turns out to be Genji’s goddamn brother!

McCree scratches his jawline. His gaze wanders from his bandaged wound to an ovoid scar just below his left rib.

A tired voice drifts from the back of his mind; it’s Amari again, low and smoky. You got unlucky, cowboy.
She would know, of course. She had been there on the day he earned it: Blackwatch, fourth month of active duty, a field operation. She sat by him on the medical transport back to base, watching with eagle eyes as he slouched on the stretcher. You hesitated. He had; no point in arguing with her on that one. You’re shit for timing. He tried to argue back. No, you’re shit for timing, cowboy, let me give you some advice. She had pulled off her beret, swept back her long black hair. Next time, shoot smart. Or don’t shoot at all. The mark of Horus gleamed above her cheek like the curve of a scythe. When the gun is in your hand -- she had leaned forward, soft, warm and deadly all at once - - you pull the trigger with your soul.

Jesse looks away. He’s done with the mirror. Hell, he’s done with being awake if it means listening to the ghost of Ana Amari.

McCree hits the lights; he kicks off his boots and crawls into his bunk. He hikes the blanket over his shoulders and closes his eyes, inhales through his nostrils, exhales through his lips. Jesse counts sheep, swings a mental pendulum, imagines a starry sky above Santa Fe. He thinks of tumbleweeds and buttes and far-off mountains. Cicadas, maybe -- or the buzz of a whip-poor-will.

Two hours pass. McCree snoozes through a dream of white sands baked by a yellow sun, swallowed by a raincloud sweeping gray sheets of rain. The storm is about to drop a slate-blue tornado when a thump in the hallway jolts him awake.

“Lúcio!” Lena is calling down the corridor. “You alright down there, mate?”

“Oh-ay, sorry.” Two more thumps, followed by a clatter. The sound of Lúcio’s laughter trickles through the dormitory wall. “Just getting my speakers set up.”

Jesse groans; he burrows beneath his pillow, pressing his cheek into the mattress. Heat from his sour breath irritates his nostrils. Outside, the muffled voices are chattering on. He can no longer make out what they’re saying. Not that he cares.

He should have asked Angela for sleeping pills.

Jesse malingers for five sore minutes in his bunk before he accepts defeat of sleep. He sits up; he rolls his shoulders. Weakly he rummages through the pull-out drawers until he finds a stray cigarillo buried among his underwear. Jesse swipes a lighter off his dresser. He shuffles to the window and slides open the pane; he squeezes the cigarillo, rolls it, lights it, puffs it.

After a long drag, he’s better. It’s not eight hours of uninterrupted sleep -- but it helps.

He smokes by the window for a few minutes, and then he gets an idea.

McCree wanders to the computer console and kicks the side with his heel. The screens whirr to life, brightening blue with a white log-in box. McCree slumps in his chair and finger-pecks his credentials into the keypad.

```
|| {athena} || LOG ON >> [Agent ID]: 3945_45
```
```
|| {athena} || LOG ON >> [Password]: highn00n
```

He presses ‘enter.’
Success. Welcome back, Agent McCree.

“Thank you, honey,” McCree replies aloud, pinching his cigarillo between his teeth. His fingertips tap slowly over the keys.

```
>{athena} QUERY >> [INPUT]: Genji_
Processing…
236 entries found.

>> Shimada, Genji
>> Age: 35
>> Nationality: Japanese
>> Occupation: Adventurer
>> Base of Operations: Shambali Monastery, Nepal
>> Affiliation: Overwatch [RECALL]
>> Relations: N/A
>> Primary Weap[cont.]...
```

“Naw.” McCree chews the end of his cigarillo and cancels the search. He hits ‘enter’ and starts again.

```
>{athena} QUERY >> [INPUT]: Genji Relations_
Processing…
0 entries found.
```

“Huh.” He tries another phrase.

```
>{athena} QUERY >> [INPUT]: Genji Family_
Processing…
0 entries found.
```

McCree narrows his eyes. He grunts and continues typing.

```
>{athena} QUERY >> [INPUT]: Genji Brother_
```
Just as he lets out a frustrated huff, the screen flashes with a new system message.

Agent, is there any way I can assist your search using the voice interface?

Jesse winces. There’s no further sound of Lúcio or Tracer in the halls, but he’d rather not risk anyone overhearing him chatting with the computer about this search. He groans a wry ‘ehhh’, puckering his lips around his cigarillo as he writes back a response. His wound is starting to hurt, so he types with his right hand.

|| {athena} || SYSTEM >> [INPUT]: No thank u ms Athena but tank u_

The reply pings almost instantly.

Very well, Agent. Please don’t hesitate to ask for further assistance.

“Very kind of you, darlin’,” he murmurs, taking another drag.

|| {athena} || QUERY >> [INPUT]: Shimada Brother_

Processing…

29 entries found.

“Bingo,” Jesse rasps as the screen begins to load.

A red-and-white window appears with a musical blip.

WARNING: External links may lead to unsafe websites. Do you want to proceed…

“Do it, dammit.” Jesse jams his index fingertip into the enter key before the cautionary pop-up can fully load.

The first hit is an article from a media outlet in Osaka. He has to parse it through a Japanese-to-English translator script; the result is just legible enough for McCree to read.

Death of legendary Shimada family entrepreneur and CEO, age 75 - Goro Shimada and his legacy celebrated across Hanamura in week memorial

He scans the rest of the page and garners very little. The article claims the Shimada patriarch passed away peacefully in his sleep at his home in Hanamura; there followed a private funeral and a public memorial. There are no pictures. The page displays two different publication dates, each
eleven years old.

At the very bottom -- garbled by the translator -- Jesse reads the phrase: *pay of the respects to brothers Shimada*. Four kanji characters follow the line, two of which are the same. Jesse guesses they represent proper names.

He squints at the screen until his eyes hurt. If only he knew Japanese.

The second hit is from The New Japan Times archive. McCree doesn’t have to run this article through a script, but the result is more disappointing than the first. The text describes the historical traditions of weddings held in Hanamura, namely the last big four held at Shimada castle. McCree cannot tell if the journalist was trying to write a piece for tourism purposes or special interest; it bounces from observations to anecdotes to personal interviews with local city officials praising the Shimadas for endorsing local business. The page is spotted with shots of a massive ivory pagoda beset by pink blooms and high wooden gates. One photo shows a woman in pearly kimono beneath a pale flowering tree. A white hood covers her head; even with her gaze downcast, Jesse can tell she is smiling. He closes the article and clears his throat.

Jesse finds his quarry on hit number three.

Shimada family to sign reconstruction deal after factory accident, eldest Shimada son to attend memorial for victims lost in fire

The article has pictures, but they don’t display at first. Spiral cursors swirl in their place, wide placeholders nested in between marching lines of text. McCree unconsciously leans forward in his chair. His left arm throbs with a dull ache.

The top image loads. Jesse blinks. A young man’s face glowers out of the screen, cool and unsmiling. Jesse’s cigarillo drops a chunk of untapped ash into his lap; he fails to notice.

Hanzo Shimada: twenty-seven years old. His long black hair is trimmed to frame his sharp, angular face. Jesse studies the contours of his cheekbones and the slope of his clean-shaven chin. His gaze is stark, almost severe -- coldly evaluating the viewer under a fierce, heavy brow. The intensity in Hanzo’s eyes immediately arrests him. They cut into Jesse like narrow black knives.

Jesse draws back. He’s suddenly embarrassed, like he’s been caught looking at something lewd. He thinks it must be the portrait. It’s as if this chilly Hanzo has spent his life practicing how to stare into a camera with enough imperative disdain so that anyone looking might feel slightly chastened.

Did Genji look like that before his untimely fall?

He looks at the picture again. It must be a decade old, maybe more; the man who shot him certainly cannot look like this anymore. And yet Jesse imagines this face -- this hard, chiseled visage with its lordly eyes and ruthless mouth -- glaring at him from a concavity in the rock. He imagines it on the head of the man with the bow, nocking the shaft and drawing back the string, honing in to aim for the notch between his brows. He imagines it hating him, barking at him, snarling. Shooting him full of arrows like the damned Saint Sebastian.

McCree swallows hard. The soreness in his arm is nigh unbearable, but he stares at the portrait for a solid minute before he finally gets his pain pills. He rises, flinches, spits out a ‘damn’; his left leg has fallen asleep. Jesse flicks his dead cigarillo to the floor and limps to his dresser. Angela’s voice
flits through his discomfort. *Take two if it’s bad, but no more within a six hour-period.*

Jesse shakes three chalky pills from the orange plastic bottle. He grits the third pill in half; he rummages through the mini-fridge for a drink to ease the pills down. There’s only two cans left (so much for 'stocked'). He picks a cherry soda and cracks it open with a hiss.

A cold shiver runs up his spine when he takes a drink and thinks of the face from the article. He orders himself to cease; to think of anything but those sleek, wicked eyes.

*Clever fella. Good shot --*

“Go blow yourself,” Jesse mutters aloud over the lip of the can.

*Shit for timing, cowboy.* Amari’s voice is soft and low. *Boy, was that an unlucky shot.*

These filthy habits that keep him alive.

A shower is what he needs, and he’s sliding open the lavatory door to start the water when his console chimes an alert. McCree pauses; he ambles back to the keypad to re-activate the screen. The Shimada article is still active on the page; he closes it before Hanzo’s glare can catch his eye again. The mail icon on the taskbar is flashing white. McCree squints and taps the screen twice.

It’s a message from Winston. The subject line jumps out, bold and candy-red.

**VISHKAR INVESTIGATION - LIJIANG KICK-OFF**

*[FOR YOUR EYES ONLY]*

**PERSONNEL: TRACER, MCCREE, GENJI, LÚCIO**

**6 JULY - (TENTATIVE) 2100**

**MEMO:** Sitrep and consult. 5 JULY at 1700 WP Gibraltar. Genji’s involvement pending his return within the week. Let’s get things rolling again and start small.

McCree scratches his head. “Someone got a helluva pep talk after breakfast this morning,” he mumbles to himself. A four-man mission to China with a week of prep doesn’t sound *small*, but -- hell, what does he know? He’s run crazier ops before, both Deadlock and Blackwatch. Besides: if Lúcio is involved, it will probably be tame.

Scratch that: he *hopes* it will be tame. For the new guy's sake, if not his.

And Genji will be there. Just who he’d like to see.

He taps ‘CONFIRM’ on the reply and the subject line flashes blue. McCree rises; he picks his half-spent cigarillo off the floor and sets it on the dresser. He shuts off his screens and disappears into the lavatory. Outside his window, shaded from the midday sun, Lúcio skates circles on the faded gray tarmac.

Chapter End Notes
- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Modern pop culture nods abound, as any Blizzard universe would prefer.
- Some of my inspiration for Hanzo and Genji's history come from the brilliantly-written Hanzo: Koi no Yokan by franklytriggering. You can read it: here.
- Speaking of Hanzo: I promise there's direct interaction coming. Maybe even (gasp) next chapter.
- (maybe even dragons)
- You can follow me on Tumblr.

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The air transport lurches and he knows they’ve arrived. They’ll touch down on the tarmac and the bay doors will open once the transport taxis off the runway. Blackwatch Squad A will deploy to the rendezvous point to retrieve their equipment; they’ll suit up, complete their checks, and move out with Captain Reyes. Six elite agents will follow him into the compound and heed his directions to extract the target and neutralize any hostiles that try to interfere. McCree will not take point unless Reyes gives the order. He usually guards their flank, flashbangs at the ready.

He’s sitting across from Reyes on the transport. They’re strapped into web seats, crammed together with five other agents. The recycled air around them buzzes with dust and engine noise. Reyes’ back is pressed against the bulkhead. McCree hunches forward, elbows dug into his knees. He’s wearing standard BDU’s and boots, tactical vest, a visor. No hat, no spurs. He’s looking at Reyes, who gazes back at him. The cabin lights glow red on Reyes’ scarred face.

Garbed in black, bathed in crimson, rattling in a prison of steel bulkhead plating -- he looks like someone who might escort him into hell.

The transport descends. Both men sway with the movement of the craft. He smiles. Reyes does not; he stares back hard through narrow dark eyes. He barks something to McCree; it’s lost beneath the din of the engines. But McCree knows what he said. His smile widens. He mouths something back, points to his exposed head, runs his fingers through his shaggy brown hair. Then he points at the cap hugging Reyes’ scalp, and Reyes smirks. He gestures to McCree like he’s tipping the brim of an invisible cowboy hat. McCree mirrors it. Now both men are grinning.

The transport touches down and the engines roar. McCree gets one last look at Reyes’ smile before they disengage. Reyes wets his lips, bobs his chin, twitches his index and middle finger ‘let’s move,’ and McCree is ready, he’s unbuckling from his seat, the cabin jolts with the aircraft brakes and Reyes rises, grabs a hanging strap, looks over his shoulder, booms out --

“Hey. Eastwood.”

Jesse’s eyes crack open. He blinks.

Lúcio is staring at him, one brow raised.

“You alright?”

They’re sitting side by side at a ramen shop in Lijiang Market, the same place they’ve eaten dinner for the past three days. Both men are dressed for the mission. McCree has his hat and a black serape to hide his chestplate; Lúcio wears a purple hoodie over his Crossfade suit. On the first day of their evening stakeout, they attracted a lot of looks. The second night was quieter; tonight, no one pays them any mind.

Repetition is reassuring, McCree had told Lúcio. Blend in with the scenery and someone may still see you. Become the scenery, and no one will care.

McCree scratches his beard. He gazes down at the pink slices of pork drowning in his bowl; he picks up his chopsticks to dig through the noodles for a piece of orange shrimp.
“Yeah,” he mutters. “Yeah, I’m doin’ alright. Zoned out there for a minute.”

“Gotta stay with me, Eastwood.” Lúcio’s skates clack against his stool. He’s chowing down on fish-cake ramen and green boba tea. “Can’t be zoning out on a mission. Just ‘cause we’re on backup doesn’t mean we get to chill!”

McCree watches Lúcio takes a sip from his cup and tries not to make a face as the sugary black pearls march up the fat neon straw. “How can you drink that stuff?”

“It’s good, you should try it. This flavor is the best. It’s got avocados in it.”

“Naw, I mean, when you gotta eat the bubbles.” McCree douses hot sauce into his bowl. “Looks like you’re slurpin’ up tadpoles.”

“Awww, c’mon, man,” Lúcio groans, wrinkling his nose. “That’s gross, why would you say that?”

“Thought you liked frogs.”

“Doesn’t mean I wanna eat them,” retorts Lúcio. “C’mon, Eastwood -- that’s like me saying, ‘Do you like your hat?’” Lúcio rolls his eyes. “Yeah, so, then why don’t you eat it.’ Just eat your whole damn hat.”

McCree laughs dryly and sets to finishing his food.

---

The four-man team is in the last hours of their five-day mission to Lijiang. It’s gone smoothly so far: Lúcio’s intel on the Vishkar Corporation contained information about a valuable server cluster in the Lucheng Interstellar tower. Two days of scouting the tower helped Lena identify three specific access points to the building’s main data center. With careful maneuvering (and by memorizing the tower’s security team movements and shift changes) she figured out a way to infiltrate the tower and access the cluster. All she needed was five minutes to plug in Winston’s extraction drive and bingo: the team would rendezvous in the closed-down tower gardens, trek to the transport, and come home with a trove of Vishkar data. McCree and Lúcio would be responsible for patrolling and scanning the surrounding area for signs of disruption. If they spotted anything suspicious, they could call off the maneuver. If Tracer’s route was compromised, they could run in as backup.

On the third day of the mission, the team learned that a cadre of Vishkar archi-techs were visiting Lucheng tower for a technology summit. To McCree’s surprise, Lucheng did not increase security to accommodate their guests; in fact, they lessened it. Tracer interpreted the drop in guard staff as a boon. McCree hazarded otherwise. Why cut a guard shift during an important corporate showcase? Either the Vishkar Corporation subscribed to reckless security protocols, or they had brought some of their own.

Genji arrived on day four, delayed from Gibraltar. After introducing Zenyatta to the remaining agents at the Watchpoint, he snuck aboard a flight to Lijiang and stealthily dropped in. Quite literally, in fact: he showed up at night while the team was playing Texas Hold’em in Lena’s hotel room. The cyborg scaled the building, climbed Lena’s balcony, popped over the edge and waved at the trio with a cheery ‘good evening.’ The agents quickly forgave him for the surprise -- especially Lena and Lúcio, who were sorely losing the round. As if to compensate for his tardiness, Genji showed up enthusiastic and ready to assist.

He was also eager to waylay McCree.
“Dr. Ziegler told me what happened,” Genji said later, following the gunslinger outside when he went for a smoke. “Because of your injury, she was hesitant for you to join this mission. I am surprised she let you go.”

“Can’t let it get me down forever,” McCree muttered, tapping ash off his cigarillo. He leaned against a wall. “It healed up quick, anyway, I got back to normal. You know how fast she works.”

“I do.” Genji perched cross-legged on a concrete statue shaped like a Chinese lion. “She showed me the report about the attacker, and the arrow. What you described and what I saw all convince me that the man who shot you must surely be my brother.” He noticed McCree’s scoff and tilted his head. “An unfortunate introduction. Not how I imagined it might go.”

“Unfortunate,” McCree snorted. He rubbed his healed arm. “Yeah, that’s a word for it.”

“Hanzo and I reunited earlier this spring.” Genji turned his gaze to the moon looming heavy in the sky. “Shortly before the recall, I traveled to our home in Hanamura, where I knew I would find him. We spoke for the first time in ten long years.”

The muggy breeze pulled at Genji’s scarf. McCree’s stomach twisted. Hadn’t he seen a similar piece of fabric fluttering from behind the archer’s head?

“The tenets of the Shimada clan cut a rift between us both,” Genji continued. “Our reconciliation has just begun, and I expected Hanzo to seek me out, per his nature. I underestimated his diligence. He tracked me very far.”

McCree huffed. “Guess that means I was right.”

Genji tilted his visor back to McCree. “What do you mean?”

“He came lookin’ for you at the Watchpoint, but you’d already taken off.”

“Yes.” Genji rose to his feet. “Unfortunate, as I said. Had I been there, your injury would not have happened.” With a whirl and a barely audible click, Genji landed beside McCree. He clapped his palms together and bowed forward at the waist. “Please accept my apology for his behavior. I am sorry he surprised you, and injured you so.”

McCree would have sulked if he had liked Genji less. “You know you ain’t gotta do that, it ain’t you who shot me.” He puffed on his cigarillo. “But, hey. You know me. I’ll get over it.” He tipped the brim of his hat. “No hard feelings to ya, Genji-kun.”

Genji relaxed. He almost seemed relieved. “The Shimada are warriors of great power. Trained by generations of the most skilled and deadly assassins in all of Japan. He could be a great asset, and a valuable ally.”

McCree squinted hard at the cyborg. “To who?” And then, with disbelief: “Overwatch?”

“Yes. It was my intention to introduce him to my mentor, Zenyatta, in hope of working through his suffering. And later to Dr. Ziegler, who saved my life. When Winston made the recall, I thought it might be fate.” Genji peered at McCree, noticing his scowl. “An Overwatch that is renewed and doing good for the world would be a place where my brother could find peace in his heart.” Genji’s visor lowered to observe a beetle skittering across the ground. “He is a very troubled man. He has done many things that weigh heavy on his soul.”

McCree grunted. “If that’s true, then I ain’t so sure this’s his place.”
“No?”

“No.” McCree’s head tilted back as he glowered over the hotel courtyard. “Lotta angry folks came through Overwatch in its day. Didn’t much work out for ‘em, didn’t work out for the crew. The way I see it, if we’re gonna turn over a new leaf, we need t’ take a few lessons from how the old leaf got burnt up.”

Genji’s glance was almost pensive. “You are speaking of Jack and Gabriel, yes?

An distant electronic bell chimed the hour: eleven o’clock. McCree snuffed out the dwindling end of his cigarillo and cleared his throat. The conversation, he decided, had run its course.

“Reckon now ain’t the time to talk about it,” McCree sighed. “I don’t got all the answers.” McCree wanted to add: ‘and I don’t know when I’ll get them.’ “I’m just a man tryin’ to make right in a world that ain’t real fair.”

“And it is admirable to me that you do so, all these years later.” Genji reached out to pat him on the shoulder. “You are a good man, McCree.” His robotic voice almost sounded fond. “I am glad to be fighting at your side once again.”

---

“I’m really excited to be working with you, man,” Lúcio tells McCree after they’ve left the ramen shop. He skates beside the gunslinger in a slow, casual roll. “No kidding, I really mean that.”

“Ah, well, thank you, pardner.” Lúcio’s youthful praise makes him feel awkward -- a little foolish, even.

“You know, I’d heard about you on the internet. With your bounty and all that?”

“Er, yeah.” McCree lights a cigarette; the corner shop didn’t carry his preferred brand of smokes. “Happens when you go around tryin’ to put bad guys in their place. Figure you know all about that.”

“Yeah, you know it!” Lúcio puts up his palm to the pack of cigarettes when McCree offers it out. “Nah, no thank you. I quit.”

“Good.” McCree crams the pack behind his shoddy ammo belt. “Filthy habit.”

“Hey, but Lena was tellin’ me about your shot. Got that” -- Lúcio finger-guns at the ground, making gunshot sounds, pchew, pchew -- “dead-eeeye action. The man with no name. Right?”

Just a little foolish, McCree thinks as they walk. ‘Don’t let the excitement get to your head, now. I’m still human at the end of the day.”

They idle through the market as the mission switches into its secondary phase. Tracer and Genji radio in their entry into Lucheng tower; the guard shift is changing, and they’re moving for the objective. McCree struggles to play it cool. The cigarette isn’t very good but it helps to calm his nerves.

The five-minute countdown has begun.

“Hey, can I ask you something?” Lúcio asks. “I mean, y’know.” He gestures between them. “Man-to-man.”
McCree raises an eyebrow. “I s’pose you can.”

The audio-medic skates closer. “Does Lena have a boyfriend?” He thrusts his hands into his hoodie pockets. “I mean, you know. Is she seeing someone?”

It takes everything in McCree’s composure not to laugh. “Come again?”

“I’m just asking,” Lúcio replies innocently. “Y’know -- I don’t wanna say something to her and make it weird --”

“Pretty sure she don’t,” McCree interjects, plucking his cigarette from his mouth. “Got a boyfriend, that is. But, alas for you” -- he tosses the cigarette to the ground and crushes it with his toe -- “and, don’t go quotin’ me, ‘cause I ain’t never asked after her business. But I always reckoned she bats for a team you ain’t on.”

Lúcio laughs. “Ah. Nah, that’s kinda what I thought. I was kinda wondering, y’know?” He shrugs. “She’s cute.”

“That she is, pardner. She is real cute.”

Silence passes between them as they approach the gate to the gardens. Lúcio pipes up: “What about you, Eastwood?”

“Eh?”

“How about you, you got a boyfriend?”

Amused, Jesse is about to retort with something mildly sardonic when his comm bursts with chatter. It’s Lena. She’s excited.

“Cheers, mates!” she chimes. “Pick-up’s successful, we’re in the green!”

“Extraction confirmed,” Genji’s distorted voice rings out. “We have a copy of the archive. We are making our way to the rendezvous point.”

Lúcio and McCree exchange glances. “Time to hustle,” says the former, and the latter drawls a ‘yeah.’

“Meet y’all at the checkpoint,” McCree radios back, and they take off for the gardens.

The pair reaches the moon gate and come upon two agents in pressed white suits. One of them is wearing a silver synthetic arm illuminated by a vibrant blue glow; the other has a winged visor with a thick cyan shield. Lúcio recognizes the logo emblazoned on their jackets and heels his skates to a hard stop. Jesse hears him curse as the suits approach.

The Vishkar Corporation. Just as McCree suspected: they brought their own security.

“This area is currently off-limits,” says the agent with the shield. His English is crisp and smooth. “The gardens are closed until tomorrow morning. We apologize for the inconvenience, but you’ll have to turn back.”

McCree goes for casual. “Oh, we’re just passin’ through,” he drawls. “Our car’s down that-a-ways” -- he points indiscriminately beyond the agents -- “and we’re just tryin’ to get around. If y’all won’t mind it, we won’t be but a second.”

“Take the market elevator to the L1 and use the route there.” The agent with the silver arm has a
light British accent. She turns to see Lúcio and narrows her eyes. “Skating is not permitted in the Lucheng garden compound. Code 4189 specifically bans the use of rollerblades, skateboards, hoverboards and skids --”


Lúcio bristles. He puts his left hand up to his headset. “Yeah, I bet you do.”

“Whoa, hold on, now.” McCree’s eyes dart between the agent and the medic. “Let’s slow down here, fellas, now -- we’re just tryin’ to pass through.”

“Case 290-A, Rio de Janeiro, it’s you!” The agent lifts his shield. “Lúcio Correia dos Santos! Wanted for theft and vandalism of property under jurisdiction of the Vishkar Corporation!”

Over the comm, Lena reports in. “We’re exiting the control center, incoming to the point in forty seconds!”

“Helica, alert the staff,” the shield-agent informs his companion. He faces McCree. “The two of you are coming with us.”

“I don’t think so.” Before McCree can interrupt, Lúcio flicks a switch on his belt. “We’re outta here, Eastwood!” The music starts instantly. A loud, tympanic bloom of electronic sound bursts out from his Crossfade suit. Lúcio draws his sonic amplifier from its hip holster; its outward speaker glows a brilliant neon green. The agents jump back as the audio-medic jets forward -- streaking like a green firework, thumping like the basement of a night market club -- and skids past the gate.

They do not expect that. Nor are they prepared when McCree draws Peacekeeper and aims it at the agent with the silver arm. He cocks the hammer. The agents freeze.

“Pardon us, fellas,” he yells, breaking into a run. “But we got a ride to catch.”

The agent snarls, backing away from the gun. McCree skirts past and darts away just as her associate jams his thumb into his visor and barks out: “This is Fractus! Helica and I have engaged hostiles, alert Lemma and Atraxus to support us at the gate!”

McCree catches up with Lúcio fast. The music pumping out of his Crossfade suit makes him sprint light and quick, like the tipping point of an adrenaline rush. His legs do not ache or burn from running. He feels like he could run ten more miles.

“Sorry, man!” Lúcio calls behind him as they cut through the empty gardens. “I’m not here to hurt anybody, but I’m not here to get caught, either!” The look on his face is a far cry from fear or panic; McCree cannot help but think the audio-medic looks thrilled. Elated, even -- like he’s having the time of his life. He leaps over a stone planter and lands with a resonating clack, seamlessly speeding ahead. Lúcio lets out a bright laugh. McCree almost grins.

When was the last time he had fun on a mission?

They reach the rendezvous point -- a shuttered tourist station roofed like a pagoda -- just as Tracer and Genji drop down from the walls.

“We got company on our tail,” McCree rasps. “Vishkar had security at the gate, two techs.”

“Where is the transport?” Genji asks.
“Past the second gate, the one at the east exit.”

“We should split up. Tracer and Lúcio prioritize getting to the transport. McCree and I will cover you and hold off the security.”

A loud horn sounds overhead, blaring from the array of speakers on the tourist station roof. It’s a deep, damming tone that chills McCree’s blood.

“Attention,” calls a grim computerized voice. “This is not a drill. Terrorist activity detected in the vicinity of the Lucheng garden plaza. All agents report to Control Center lobby 5-A. I repeat: this is not a drill. Terrorist activity detected in the Lucheng garden plaza. All agents --”

“Let’s go!” Tracer cries, darting ahead. “Lúcio, speed boost! We’re getting out of here.”

The audio-medic thumbs a switch on his sonic amplifier. The volume of his suit swells with a roaring shoom. Soon he and Tracer are speeding out of sight. McCree turns to Genji, who gives him a thumbs up.

Just in time for the gunslinger to see a bright blue laser slicing down from the wall behind them.

“Genji! Get down!”

A hiss precedes the blast, and Genji darts away like a startled frog. McCree fires Peacekeeper three times in the direction of the laser until he hears a ‘bang.’ Pieces of a white metal shell fall to the ground; there was a turret on the wall, primed to fire. Suddenly Genji calls out: ‘McCree!’

The two agents from the gate are charging on the station. A second pair of figures in similar white suits have joined them; one of them is wielding a massive white rifle, the other a long curved blade.

“Stand down!” calls the rifle agent, pulling back a lever on the gun. The barrel starts to charge with a humming aqua glow. “Surrender now, or you’ll be terminated!”

Unfazed, Genji draws his sword. “We shall see who will surrender.”

The blade-wielding agent vaults forward just as the rifle fires. McCree rolls away from the pulse; Genji leaps; the bladed agent jumps after him and strikes. Genji bats her sword away, parrying every thrust and swat. The sound of clashing steel rips through the station.

Winded now from the long run with Lúcio, McCree ducks between the garden wall and a station pillar. He aims around the pillar and fires three shots at Helica, the agent with the silvery arm. He hears her screech in pain just as he dives for cover.

“One down,” he mumbles.

The rifle-agent charges and fires another shot. It hits the wall in front of McCree, singeing a wide smoking hole that burns clean through the stone.

“Y’all gotta be kiddin’ me,” he breathes, reloading just as a shuriken whizzes over his head.

It’s been years since McCree has seen Genji fight, but the awe of seeing him in combat has not faded. The ninja and the blade-wielder are sparring up and down the station walls at angles most humans could not hope to scale. This agent (who Fractus addresses as ‘Atraxus’) is wearing hard-light accelerators on her boots that allow her to chase after Genji with ease. Her movements glow like her blade. Atraxus cannot land a hit on her opponent; Genji is unable to gain advantage on
Atraxus, who moves too quickly for him to outpace. They counter back and forth in blue and green streaks.

It gives McCree the perfect opportunity to keep firing at the other two agents. Fractus swings his shield to deflect two bullets, but the third slices into his right arm. McCree rolls away from the pillar just as Lemma discharges another decimating shot. The pillar crumples to splinters; the station shakes.

“Tracer!” Genji calls over the comm. He has dragged the fight out of the station and is leading Atraxus across the roof of a nearby teahouse. “Have you reached the transport?”

Tracer replies, “Coming in close! How’s our tail?”

“These guys are a pain in the ass!” McCree answers, reloading and skirting another pillar. “Genji, we gotta get outta here!”

He lunges around the corner and gets a faceful of Fractus’ wide blue shield.

“Aggh!”

McCree stumbles back, firing wildly in front of him as Fractus charges. All the bullets bounce off the shield. His head spins from the collision; the blow threatens to blur out his vision. But his wits recover just before his eyes do. McCree snatches a flash grenade from his belt and flings it forward just as Fractus raises his shield. The agent stumbles back: McCree lifts Peacekeeper and fans all six shots into the man’s chest. Blood splatters the pristine white wall, eerily blackened by the hard-light glow.

“Two down,” McCree says. He wipes a thin trickle of blood from his nose.

He picks up the shield and turns around to behold Lemma and his rifle.

“Aw, that thing again.”

The barrel glows. Lemma aims.

“Shit!”

He tries to swing up the shield, but it’s too late. Lemma pulls the trigger. McCree has just enough time to gasp, duck and --

Boom!

McCree jolts beneath the shield when he hears the explosion. The bolt strikes above him, blazing down a section of the wall. He watches Lemma drop his rifle and descend to his knees, slowly crashing face-forward into the grass.

“What the hell?” shouts McCree. He gets up, stumbles forward, hauls along the shield. The agent lies crumpled over his smoking rifle.

That’s when he sees it: the rigid white line. Long, pale, and gleaming like a needle.

There’s an arrow sticking out of the back of Lemma’s dark head.

McCree’s pulse bangs in his ears like the thunder of a drum. His throat runs dry. For a fleeting moment, he cannot breathe. Four words jump to his lips just as his heart leaps into his throat.
“We got another attacker!” he radios in. “Archer! Up high!”

Across the garden, skidding across the pagoda tiles as he races from Atraxus, Genji nearly loses his momentum when he hears McCree on the comm.

“Hanzo,” he murmurs as Atraxus closes in with her blade.

Genji rolls. He swings off the teahouse roof, lands on the grass, and darts away. Atraxus practically drops over him with her sword arcing for his neck. He hears the unmistakable whistle of the arrow just before it hits the wooden teahouse wall behind him; Atraxus stumbles, startled by the strike. Genji flashes down his katana and knocks her back. Her boot casings snap; one of the hard-light accelerators fizzes out.

“Howdy,” scathes McCree.

Hanzo says nothing. He only scowls.

McCree’s gaze bounces between Genji and his brother. Overhead, the loudspeaker has switched off. The quiet unnerves him. He smells smoke and blood and ozone from the rifle; he can see steam wisping off Genji’s exhaust vents. But the silence in the gardens is oppressive and overbearing.

Like his arrows, he thinks. This man is a weapon.

“Brother,” says Genji.

“Howdy,” scathes McCree.

Hanzo says nothing. He only scowls.
“Fellas.” McCree works his jaw. “I hate to ruin the moment, but we really gotta --”

Hanzo draws the string of his bow and fires the loaded arrow. It slices past McCree’s left cheek and hits the station wall behind him. McCree yelps. He jerks to the right, ducking behind his shield.

“Enough, brother!” Genji steps forward. “Cease your aggression. This is not the time.”

Hanzo has already nocked another arrow. He whips his gaze to his brother and takes a step back. McCree glowers around the edge of his shield, warily eyeing the archer.

A realization hits through his anger: for a warning shot, that came awful close to his face.

“Do not waste your arrows,” says Genji. “We are in the middle of a mission. If you have come here to aid us --”

“Yeah, don’t waste your arrows!” McCree yells, interrupting. He sticks his head further out from the shield. “Look, we gotta get the hell outta here, I ain’t dilly-dallyin’ around here no more --”

“Be silent,” Hanzo bellows. Mindful of another arrow, McCree nearly ducks behind his shield. It does little to hide him from the hatred in the archer’s glare.

A second realization: his voice is just as powerful as his cold, imperious gaze.

“I did not come here to aid you,” says Hanzo. “I do not care why you are here.”

“You want answers, Hanzo,” Genji replies tersely. “And you will have them, as you seek. But now is not the time.”

Bristling, McCree adds: “He’s right, now’s really not the time.”

"If you didn't come here to aid us --" Genji begins.

“Urusai!” barks Hanzo at the pair, more Genji than McCree. He doesn’t know much Japanese, but he knows enough to get the connotation: stop talking.

Realization number three: how in the world is it safe to leave one’s whole left side practically uncovered?

The gunslinger has had enough. “We’re getting the hell out of here.”

The comm crackles to life. “Transport’s up and running!” Tracer peals, edging on anxious. “We’re ready for take-off, loves, all that’s missing is you two!”

“We go.” Genji leaps back up to the teahouse roof. His brother whirs, watching him dart across the tiles and jump over the moon gate. McCree is not surprised when Hanzo bounds after him. Were he any less on edge, he might almost admire the way they move.

Whatever one can admire about a man who nearly killed him, that is.

McCree is just past the east moon gate in pursuit of the Shimada brothers when the ground begins to shake. He nearly stumbles, ducking behind a lion statue. The tremor turns rhythmic, a thudding boom-boom. McCree picks up on the electric whirring of a laser beginning to charge.

Genji’s voice cuts across the comm: “Something large is moving east, from the tower!”
McCree peers past the statue. “I hate it when this happens.”

Three more booms. Genji speaks again: “They have an omnic!”

A mechanical monstrosity -- twenty meters high, domed, lumbering on smooth digitigrade legs -- lunges around the building. Its rounded carapace gleams white like a shell; two long panels flank its head, like the wings of a Vishkar visor. Its four turret arms buzz and adjust until they're pointed directly at McCree.

“Gibbs protocol online,” it beeps, and its turrets glow red.

They charge a lot faster than Lemma’s rifle.

“Don’t think so, pardner!” he yells, tucking to roll away from the laser fire. The statue vaporizes in the blast; McCree books it down a perpendicular street. He thumbs his comm, huffing and puffing. “There ain’t no way in hell I can take that thing down on my own!”

"Rope and ride it, Eastwood!" Lúcio cheers. "If it's bigger than you, rodeo that thing down!"

A joke? At this moment? "Lúcio, I will straight-up tan your hide!" Struggling not to cough as he runs, out of breath.

“Can you outrun it?” Tracer replies. “We’ve got to get in the air, McCree, our window’s closing fast!”

McCree can hear the groaning metal of the omnic lumbering after him. “Ain’t sure I’m gonna be able to do that either!”

“Alright, Eastwood, where are you?” Lúcio again. “I can jump out and get you!”

“Stay there, I got this,” McCree puffs, mentally considering that he is the furthest from ‘getting this’ in years.

The omnic’s chase winds through four blocks of deserted Lijiang streets. Some of the streetlights are out; McCree only notices that the buildings all look abandoned when he skids down a back alley to flee another laser barrage. He has no time to puzzle over it. The omnic pursues fast; he cannot slow down.

Luck runs out for McCree as quickly as he fatigues. He lopes left, right, and then left again -- only to run straight into a dead end. The lip of the dark street leads to a three-story drop to the highway below. McCree skids to a halt, spurs jingling. He whirls around; he’s trapped. Nowhere to go but down.

His stomach drops in despair as the omnic clanks around the corner.

“Genji!” he yells into the comm. “Where are you, god-dammit, I’m about to get fried!”

“I see you!” The cyborg sounds frantic. “Hold on, McCree!”

Sensing cornered prey, the omnic speeds forward. McCree raises Peacekeeper and fires once, twice -- then, in a desperate fan, three-four-five-six. His bullets bounce off the omnic’s carapace, ineffective as pebbles. Panic clutches McCree when he tries to reload and finds his ammunition belt empty; at some point during his mad dash, the leather stitching finally gave out and dropped his last bullets. Cursing, he throws one flashbang -- then another, then his last.
“Go on, then, you piece’a shit --”

Nothing. Not even a scratch. The omnic looms, impervious. It comes to a halt.

Genji shouts, “McCree! I’m almost there!”

The turrets charge to a terrible red.

He sees that it’s too late. An ache takes over his chest. This could be the end, then: the black cage of the nighttime street, the crimson light from the turrets and the horrid, final blast. He feels a pulse of strange, dreadful sadness -- an ache that surprises him almost as much as his fear. Blown apart by an omnic, blitzed to ash. McCree looks into the inferno and thinks he sees hell.

*You got unlucky, cowboy,* sighs a voice in the back of his petrified mind, and he knows he’s about to die.

“Yeah, Ana,” he mouths, just before it ends.

The night suddenly explodes with light, brighter than anything McCree has ever seen. A wild, cosmic brilliance rushes up, yawning wide as it engulfs the black street. Like a maw, it rises and opens. It swallows the omnic and devours it whole. The turrets wither like ash; the carapace disintegrates; the omnic’s smooth legs crumble as it comes apart in shreds.

No, it *is* a mouth. Two of them, fanged and gaping, jaws stretched to the sky. And they are bellowing, screaming -- roaring as they emerge out of heaven and beyond.

God, they look just like a pair of --

McCree drops to a knee as the howl arrives, deafening the world around him into a mad celestial din. He sees stars and hears thunder; he grits his teeth through the seizure of a full-body electric shock. He crouches in the vortex and thinks of nothing -- no voices, no ghosts, no past and no future. His mind opens like an aperture that lets in only light. Only fury.

Only the wind.

With a shudder, it’s over. The radiance begins to fade; the roar dwindles to a hum. They’re gone in a streak of ethereal mist.

McCree looks up. He lets go of his hat, pushes up from the ground, scrapes to his feet. The world around him swirls back to nighttime darkness as the dragons disappear. He gasps. He’s slack-jawed and shaking. He can’t believe his eyes.

The omnic is gone. Mangled to shreds. Pieces of its hull are scattered all over the street.

McCree clutches his chest. Every hair on his body is standing on end. A thin, tinny ringing bangs against his eardrums; he reaches up and tears his comm out of his ear.

He doesn’t hear Hanzo land from the rooftop, but he sees the movement just in time to aim Peacekeeper for the archer’s head. Hanzo has an arrow nocked, but he does not draw his string.

It’s almost too much for McCree, until the archer speaks.

“Lower your weapon,” Hanzo rasps.

“What the hell was that?” Jesse grits through clenched teeth.
“Lower - your - weapon,” Hanzo repeats, nigh threatening.

Jesse’s chest heaves with each ragged breath. “Did you do that?” He flicks Peacekeeper’s barrel at the ruined omnic. “Those things -- was that you?”

Now Hanzo scowls, stalking around the gunslinger. “Your grenades are all gone, you have no ammunition. I watched you run. You have nothing left.” He tilts his chin upwards. “Lower your weapon, before you dishonor it.”

Slowly Jesse drops his right arm.

“You did that,” Jesse charges, panting. “That was you, just now. With the light and the blue.”

“Yes.”

“They were --”

“Dragons.” Hanzo narrows his eyes. He scrutinizes the gunslinger with something resembling revulsion. “You survived their wrath.”

Jesse doesn’t know whether to laugh or groan. The sound that leaves his throat is a mix of both. “I - - I guess?”

“You are not my ally,” says Hanzo. “Truly you should not even be alive. No one outside of the Shimada family's graces has faced the power of the dragons and lived to tell the tale.”

The gunslinger tenses. “Oh, so you were tryin’ to kill me.”

Hanzo scoffed. “No. I have had a thousand opportunities to do so already.”

Jesse’s voice is thin and wry. “Maybe you just needed the right one to come along.”

“Pfah.” Hanzo huffs. “You know nothing of what I have endured to come here.”

“Maybe so, but at least I ain’t dead yet.”

“Only by luck,” Hanzo retorts. “Dragons do not show mercy to the unworthy, so it must be so. You are either stronger than you look, or blessed by some other fortune.”

“What, I don't look strong?” Jesse almost sounds plucked.

Hanzo sniffs. "You look --"

Jesse waves his mechanical hand. “That was a rhetorical question, let's not answer it, thanks.”

“You are welcome.”

Jesse grinds his fist against his brow. His skull feels like it could split out of his scalp. “I’m bein’ sarcastic.”

“I know what sarcasm is.”

“Anyone ever tell you that you ain’t real friendly?”

Mild displeasure crosses Hanzo’s features. “We are not friends.”

“Most people at least shake hands when they stop the other from gettin’ sizzled to a crisp.”
Hanzo snorts. “We were just in the midst of a battle. Why would I shake your hand?”

“Nevermind.” Jesse mumbles, holstering his gun. He hitches up his belt and straightens his hat. “You know, I shoulda never brought it up. Best not to expect nothin’ from someone who runs around playin’ Robin Hood.”

Now it’s Hanzo’s turn to scoff; he wrinkles his nose at the nickname. “How foolish.”

“Thank ya kindly, pardner.”

“That was not a compliment.”

“Shoot me for it, then.”

“I will not waste any more of my arrows on someone who insists on behaving like an” -- he struggles to find a suitable word -- “ingrate.”

“Whatever,” Jesse draws flatly, prickled. “Listen, Sagittarius, thanks for all the help. You're a champ, that's for sure.” He straightens his serape, brushing grit off his shoulders. "Thanks for savin’ my ass, thanks for your dragons. Have fun. Take care. I got a ride to catch, I’m ditchin’ this shindig.”

He’s just about to walk when Hanzo grunts. “Wait.”

Jesse has to bite his tongue to keep from growling. “What.”

The archer squares up with Jesse, asserting his full height. For a fleeting moment, Jesse thinks there is only a modicum of disdain in his cold, hard eyes.

“Surviving the dragons is a commendable feat, even for a fool. Whether or not you are blessed, something within you was strong enough to withstand their judgment.”

McCree raises a brow as Hanzo steps forward. He bows at the waist, just barely. His gaze never leaves the gunslinger’s face. Jesse cannot shake the momentary weirdness that he might not be alive -- that he may have actually died, and this is some strange post-mortem fugue. He stares down at Hanzo for what feels like forever.

A fourth realization: this man is unlike any he has ever met before.

“Shimada Hanzo,” says the archer. For an introduction, his tone is not exactly friendly.

“Jesse McCree,” he replies, tipping his hat. It’s as if the movement is automatic, performed subconsciously without choice.

Hanzo’s brows furrow in confusion. “Mc-Cree?”

“Yeah. McCree.”

“McCree.” Hanzo makes a face, as if he does not quite believe him. “Hnn.”

Post-mortem fugue, Jesse affirms, shaking his head. “Yeah, it’s, uh, Scottish” -- he swallows a knot in his dry throat -- “I mean, the surname comes from Scottish.”

“Scottish.” Hanzo is still frowning. He mutters under his breath in Japanese. McCree swears he hears the words 'cowboy' and ‘Texas’ somewhere in that murmuring, and that’s when he decides he’s done. He lifts his hands.
“Alright, then, I think I’ll just be on my way --”

“EAST-WOOOOOOD! I’M HERE!”

A familiar voice booms down the alley, chased by a streak of neon green light.

McCree will think back to this later when the night is far behind him. He will turn it over in his head: each word, every gesture, all the facets of the exchange. He will ponder long on what he could have done differently -- on all the ways it might have gone. What other outcomes might have come to pass. A medley of scenarios will play out in his mind like scenes in a movie. He will come to the same conclusion every time.

With Hanzo, everything always happens very slow or too damn fast.

When Lúcio rounds the corner and skates along the wall -- not beside it but on it, racing down the siding perpendicular to the street -- he doesn’t see the omnic. He doesn’t see its ruins nor the shards of scrap and hull littered all across the street. Nor does he see Genji on the ledge above, about to drop down. He just sees Hanzo turning and lifting his bow. And McCree with his hands raised and Peacekeeper put away. And the arrow nocked and ready, and the string pulling back. And McCree about to shout -- and the bow -- and the arrow. The taut pale string.

Very slow or too fast. This time, it’s the latter.

“HOLD UP!” yells McCree.

“GET BACK!” cries Lúcio as he reverses the trigger on his amp.

The blast hits Hanzo directly in the chest. The arrow bolts skyward; Hanzo lifts off his feet. He flies straight into McCree, who in turn sails right off the edge. The impact knocks the wind flat out of McCree’s chest.

The moon swings above him, arcing through the sky as he twists, turns, and plummets.

Three stories whizz past them like the whistle of an arrow. He feels his stomach rising with the drop.

And just before it knocks him out, a fifth realization hits him. It overlaps his thoughts about the moon, the arrows, the splat that’s surely imminent when he and Hanzo meet the ground. For they’re definitely going to hit it any second now -- any moment, gravity willing. But he can’t think about it now because the epiphany is there. Flapping in his face, slapping wildly as they fall. Like the tail of a fish caught across his cheeks.

Realization number five: his scarf isn't white. It's gold.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughisemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Sorry for the length on this one, but that set-up was too tempting. Finally some one-on-one with the gentlemen of the hour.
- (I said there would be dragons)
- The memory of Blackwatch at the beginning of the chapter is partially inspired by
this artwork (link leads to artist's blog).
- Cliffhangers are a cheap tactic, but at least you know you're getting a chapter 4 and beyond!
- After a few messages and some kind advice, I've tweaked some of Lucio's dialogue throughout the fic to sound a little more fitting per his lines in-game.
- You can follow me on Tumblr.

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
“Here, get him up -- mind his leg. You have him?”

“I got him, I got him, you’re good, Genji. Let’s set him down easy.”

“Mind his leg. It’s injured.”

Music brings him back. Beating faint as a murmur, thudding gentle against his eardrums. Familiar voices ring out around him. He feels soft and cool, waking lulled by a gradually waxing light.

“Okay, okay, okay -- vitals -- check, we got vitals -- we got vitals, Genji’s brother’s still with us. Okay, McCree, get me McCree. We got vitals on Eastwood --”

“Do you got this, Lúcio? Do you got it under control?”

“I got it. I got it, Lena, I got it. I’m good --”

“Square, ‘cause we’re taking off. Instruments are reading normal, so I’m getting out of here. Strap yourselves in.”

“Gotcha. Genji, help me get your brother buckled up.”

“Wait. Lúcio, look. McCree --”

Blurry images focus into shapes that swell into view as he opens his eyes. He blinks; he rocks forward and ducks his chin to the cowl of his serape. He’s someplace bright and warm. He inhales and smells something tinny, pinched with ozone. Filtered air. He must be on the transport.

McCree bumps the cushioned headrest and realizes his hat is gone. Lúcio and Genji step back from where they’re crouched beside him. Genji braces the seat next to McCree almost defensively.

“Whoa, whoa, Eastwood,” says Lúcio, stilling a hand towards the gunslinger. McCree notices a luminous gold glow emanating from his Crossfade suit. “It’s alright, you’re fine. It’s all good. You’re safe. Tracer’s flying us outta here.”

A surge of pain hits behind his eyes. He reels forward. “What in the mother of fuck-all happened?”

The transport lifts before anyone can answer. McCree’s stomach hitches up with the sudden jolt; he grabs the brace on the seat to which he’s strapped. Lúcio lets out a whoop of surprise and grasps a nearby rail.

“Hold on, crew!” Lena’s voice peals across the intercom. “Clearing Lijiang airspace in five seconds, I’m hitting Mach 2 once we’re at thirty thousand feet and past the coastline!”

Genji ducks beside McCree, who has to squint to see clearly through his throbbing headache. That’s when he notices someone sitting in the seat next to him.

Hanzo. He’s unconscious. His head droops on his left shoulder, lolling from the jolt of the transport take-off. A panel of his gold scarf drapes over his forehead and down his cheek.
“What happened?” repeats McCree. Then, with a groan: “my hat.”

“I got your hat, man,” says Lúcio as he straightens back up. “I got it, we got your stuff.” He’s watching McCree with a look of guilty concern. “I screwed up, man, I really screwed up. I thought Genji’s brother was attacking you or something. I was in, like, full-on defense mode. So I blatted him, and my aim was bad, and you guys went straight off the edge.”

Instantly McCree remembers the dark street, the omnic, the otherworldly roar from the raging blue jaws. Dragons: real, honest-to-God dragons. Not the kind that Reinhardt always raved about -- not the variety that had wings and breathed fire and battled knights in old fairytales. These were fierce and twisting, like celestial cyclones.

And then the archer and his scathing eyes. His sharp, stiff words: how foolish. Jesse’s own threat: shoot me for it, then. The growls, the scowls. And then the way the archer stiffened, squaring his body to bow to Jesse and offer his name. How it almost felt like whiplash, going from prowling around each other to suddenly exchanging introductions.

What was he thinking, engaging that fellow? Challenging him, jesting at him? He might as well have gone for a stroll during a tornado.

“But Genji got you guys just in time,” Lúcio continues. “Just before you went splat. He dashed you guys out of thin air, it was something else. I had to skate the building to help pick you guys up and get you back here.” Now Lúcio frowns, hunching. “I’m still really sorry, though, Eastwood, I really snap-reacted. If Genji hadn’t have been there” -- his head droops with shame -- “I just, man. Maaan. If Genji hadn’t been there…”

Genji tilts his head. “They would have died.”

Lúcio rolls his eyes and clicks his tongue. “C’mon, man! I feel bad enough already, don’t rub it in.”

“What happened to Hanzo?” McCree asks, rubbing his sore temple. “He alright?”

Genji ducks his chin. “Usually if I intercept one target in mid-air, I can reach the ground and keep moving without trouble. Two targets is a little heavier. I” -- he hesitates “-- had a mishap, sticking the landing.” His green visor swivels to McCree, catching his raised brow. He pauses again. “I may have dropped him.”

“It’s all good,” Lúcio chimes in. “It doesn’t feel like he's got anything’s broken. Besides.” He flicks a switch on his suit. “I got just what the medic ordered.”

The warm, ebullient beat pumping from his Crossfade speakers lifts in volume. McCree feels the hairs stand on the back of his neck. He sucks in a sharp breath as his headache starts to wane.

Hanzo does not stir, not even when the transport abruptly jolts as it booms past the sound barrier. Nor when Lena’s voice sings over the intercom.

“Hiiiigh-waaay tooo the” -- she laughs -- “DANGER ZONE!”

“It’s good to see that someone is enjoying being back in the fray,” Genji sighs, mildly sardonic.

McCree slumps back against his headrest. His eyes drop to Hanzo’s left leg hanging limp against the seat. A swath of plated metal encases the limb from toe to knee. There’s a gold shell-like pattern on his trousers (for which McCree can’t recall the proper Japanese term, something that begins with an ‘h’).
Genji says softly: “I am sorry I could not get to you earlier, McCree.”

“Naw,” Jesse rasps. He runs his right-hand fingers through his hair. “You did your best, ain’t nothin’ else you coulda done.”

“Had it not been for my brother, I think perhaps we may have lost you.”

McCree’s eyes snap up to Genji, darting about his visor. “The dragons,” he grunts. A chill nicks at his spine.

“Yes.” Genji’s exhaust vents click and whirr. “The dragons are an ancient power wielded by blood kindred of the Shimada-gumi. My brother and I possess the ability to call them to our aid, though at the expense of a great deal of our energy and strength.” His visor lowers to the unconscious Hanzo. “To call the dragons to destroy the omnic was a risky move on his part.”

“Well, he said they kill anyone who ain’t an ally to his clan.” McCree does not try to hide the irritation in his voice. “Looked like he was usin’ them to take the damn thing out and didn’t give a rat’s ass if I wound up as their dessert.”

“You are an ally to me,” Genji says plainly. “I am still a Shimada by name and blood. Alas.” Genji pushes away from the seat row. “It is likely that my brother still operates in the mindset that I am dead, and that he is the last son of Shimada. A few months is not enough time for him to adjust to the truth of reality.”

McCree frowns. “You make it sound like he’s not all that overjoyed to find out you were alive.”

“It may seem that way. But Hanzo is a complex man. A product of our upbringing as Shimada.”

“You said you ain’t seen him in ten years. You sure you still know what makes him tick?”

Genji folds his arms over his chest and leans against the opposite bulkhead. “I am certain he has asked himself the same question of me.”

The intercom pings. “This is your captain speaking, loves. Cruising at our max altitude of nineteen-thousand meters at a nice and speedy Mach 3, we’re about two and a half hours out from the watchpoint. Should touch down around 1900 Central European time. How’s everything going back there?”

“McCree’s awake,” Lúcio calls up from where he’s taken a seat by a projector table. “Hanzo’s still out. Dunno if that blat to the face is gonna have him spaced out for a while or what.” McCree notices he’s taken off his skates, revealing a pair of neon-green socks patterned with grinning frogs.

“Summoning the dragons can exhaust even a powerful warrior,” Genji adds. “I would not be surprised if he is out for a few hours.”

“So can you summon ‘em too?” McCree asks as his gaze drifts back to the arc of Hanzo’s metal ankle.

Genji laughs, a robotic ‘heh.’ “Only one. If it interests you, perhaps one day I can introduce it to you.”

McCree closes his eyes. Another chill dances up his spine. He remembers the twin maws shuddering through the air like the heart of a tempest. Their teeth, their supernova eyes. Their mindless, deafening roar. He swallows hard; his face feels hot.
“I’ll get back to you on that one, pardner. Right now I’m inclined to tell you ‘no thanks.’”

“I understand.” Had Genji possessed a human face, McCree thinks from the tone of his voice that he’d be grinning. “You are not the first person to find the dragons a little intimidating.”

---

Winston, Angela and Reinhardt are waiting at the landing when the transport touches down on Gibraltar. Tracer leaves with Winston to begin downloading and decrypting the Vishkar data. Hanzo, still unconscious, is taken to the medbay by Angela. Genji, McCree and Reinhardt trail after her.

“Contusions to the thigh and knee,” she concludes after the examination. “But no broken bones. There will be heavy swelling around the patella. It may affect his prosthetic, but I can give him something to bring it down.”

“I trust your judgment, doctor,” Genji says, and McCree notices there’s something almost fond in his voice.

Mercy, however, looks and sounds grim. “Genji, is this wise? Having him here?”

“Is he unwelcome?” Genji asks.

“No,” Angela replies carefully. “It’s not that. I just” -- she pauses, flicking a wary glance to Reinhardt and McCree before turning back to the cyborg -- “I just want to make sure you’re alright with it, is all.”

“Yes.” Genji bobs his head. “As I said before, my brother and I have begun the path to reconciliation. Thus it is my duty to see that his injuries are treated and he is given safe quarter. I do not know what nature of enemy may still be hunting him.”

Mercy frowns. “If you’re sure.”

“Hold up.” McCree lifts his hands. “Somethin’ ain’t right here.” Three quizzical faces turn to McCree, who frowns. “I can’t be the only one here who feels kinda left out.”

Reinhardt scratches his head. “What do you mean?”

“There’s somethin’ y’all ain’t telling me,” McCree continues. “Somethin’ about Hanzo. It don’t line up. Ain’t been linin’ up since I got shot.” He looks at Genji. “What’s goin’ on between you two, for real? Did y’all actually reconcile, or is there some kinda” -- he gestures his hands up and down -- “big, weird ninja assassin thing goin’ on here…”

Mercy huffs. “Jesse, maybe this is not the time.”

It’s the last thing he wants to hear. Suddenly McCree turns to Mercy wearing a face hot with exasperation. “Oh, come off that shit, Angela, when’s it gonna be the time?”

Angela turns slightly pink. “Jesse!”

But McCree persists, piquing to anger. “I wanna know what the hell happened, what the hell you’ve been hidin’. What the hell you’ve been keepin’ a secret down here from me and from the others” -- Reinhardt steps up to put his hand on McCree’s shoulder, who shrugs it off -- “about this” -- he points at Hanzo -- “and, you know” -- his face reddens further and his tone turns rough, ragged -- “about other things, too, Angela, you know what the hell I’m talkin’ about --”
“Matte.” Genji intercedes, lifting his hand. “It is not Dr. Ziegler you should accost with your anger.” McCree fumes into the green slit of his visor, but Genji does not back down. “The truth about Hanzo is mine to give you.”

He tells them everything: the tale of the brothers Shimada, the dragons of the northern and southern winds -- the two little boys, a sparrow and a wolf. The heirs to a criminal empire so vast and powerful that its claws dug all over the malleable flesh of the world. How the dragon of the northern wind was a wild, lazy spirit who loved sport and idle play, much to the chagrin of his dutiful brother. How the time came for the siblings to rise to power in the wake of their father’s untimely fall (a recollection that makes McCree shift uncomfortably, remembering the article he snooped online) and how the sparrow, ever capricious, rejected the life of a criminal lord. How the wolf bristled and snarled at this claim, pressured by his elders to cage the sparrow and correct his song. And -- when he saw that his brother would not yield -- how the wolf instead substituted his fangs for bars and silenced the sparrow once and for all.

And Angela recalls the broken man brought to her hospital in Zurich, how she toiled over him through surgery after surgery, desperately piecing back together his shredded remains. The result of her labors: the cyborg that stood before them. Genji, the northern wind reborn: whole once more, but a far cry from the sparrow he was before his fall.

“I have forgiven my brother,” Genji ends his tale. “I have accepted that I still love him, and hope for his peace and happiness. Truly that is the beginning of our reconciliation, for he mourned during the years he thought I was dead and sought to redeem himself for his crime. He has that opportunity now, and I know -- in my mind, and in my heart -- that he will not waste it.”

Reinhardt breaks the uncomfortable, thick silence that hangs over the medbay after Genji finishes. “That, my friend, is a very noble, sad story.”

McCree is less gentle. “It’s fucked up, that’s what it is.”

“Jesse,” Angela warns, narrowing her eyes.

“He killed you,” McCree charges. “He meant to destroy his own kin!”

“And he suffered for it,” Genji replies. “At the price of his own lordship. At the price of his own life, in the end. What’s left of the Shimada-gumi will hunt Hanzo to the ends of the earth to make him pay for betraying his leadership and leaving the clan.”

“Doesn’t mean he should be forgiven,” says McCree. “Doesn’t change the fact that --”

Reinhardt cuts him off. “That is enough. You have had a rough night, Jesse. Maybe it’s best if you go and get some rest, and try these conversations again in the morning.”

McCree persists. “No, listen. I’m tired of puttin’ off hearin’ the truth. I’m tired of goin’ to bed and wakin’ up not knowing what the hell happened here after I left.”

"Jesse --" Angela starts.

But McCree presses on. "It’s been over a month since recall, and until I get some answers, every one of my nights is gonna be a rough --"

“Tomorrow.” Mercy interrupts, terse. “Tomorrow, once you’ve rested. Before Winston’s debriefing, in the morning, when you’re up. I will tell you.” She exhales through her nostrils; her shoulders are stiff, rigid with tension. “Will that work? Will that be what you want?”
McCree squints hard at Angela, working his jaw. “You promise?”

“I promise.” She faces him, stalwart. “For everything you ask, an answer.”

Silence settles in the medbay, interrupted only by the slow, steady beep of the heart monitor. McCree shoots a glance at Hanzo’s partition and bed; the light is off, and he can see nothing past the white curtain sheltering where the man sleeps.


It takes him two hours and the better part of a bottle of stashed-away bourbon to get to sleep. McCree coasts along the roaring blue surface of waking dreams, opening and closing his eyes to the heavy-metal hammer of fatigue.

---

Angela holds to her promise. McCree returns to the medbay the next day with two cups of coffee -- the beginnings of a peace offering for his behavior the previous night.

“Strong,” she comments as she bids McCree sit beside her console. “I don’t think I’ve had coffee taste like this since Ilios. Reinhardt made it?”

“Nope.” Jesse sips from his cup. “Got out the copper pot for it.”

Angela regards him with soft, wary eyes. “Oh, that’s why it’s strong. It’s boiled, Turkish style.”

“Yeah.”

“Ah, Jesse.” Angela reaches out to place her hand on his shoulder. She puffs, suddenly sentimental. “I’m sorry.”

McCree shakes his head. “No need to apologize, doc. Just tell me what I wanna know, and that’ll be enough for me.”

She shows him everything for which he asks and more. There’s a twelve page document detailing the dissolution of Overwatch and all its subsidiaries, signed by representatives from the United Nations. Nineteen addendums -- five of which are written by Angela herself -- loosely connect the dots in regards to the outcomes and whereabouts of the organization’s numerous personnel. She tells him a little about the explosion, the chaos, the funerals for Jack and Gabriel -- both of which the gunslinger missed while (he claims) he was on the run from bounty hunters in southern Mexico. He tells her about the loss of his left arm two weeks after his leave from Blackwatch: blown off by a shotgun aimed by an angry ex-Deadlock hoping to put him in the dirt. She believes him, doesn’t question it, brings up the classified record expounding on Gabe’s injuries at the time of death. Carefully noting the lack of an autopsy. He tells her about five years on the road, hopping from hide-out to safe-house, racking up a bounty big enough to buy a brand new base. Some of the bounty he's earned, but its rising value perplexes him. He suspects some government official somewhere has been padding it.

They don’t talk about her. The coffee seems to be enough.

Angela pulls up her email interface and shows McCree a long list of correspondences she and Winston have been covertly keeping with the former members of Overwatch. He recognizes some of the names, but not many; most of them are from the old science and research divisions. Angela points out a series of messages from a climatologist that was stationed in Antarctica; she’s just recently answered the recall and is making plans to travel to the Watchpoint.
“Which is good news,” Angela says, tabbing through the list, “but that’s not the main thing I wanted to show you. Wo bist du” -- she squints at her screen, humming as she hunts for a particular item -- “ah. There it is.” She taps on a folder with a red icon. “About six months ago, I started receiving these emails inquiring about the medical technology behind the Valkyrie and Caduceus series. I ignored them at first because I didn’t recognize the sender, but they kept coming. And they kept getting more precise. Technical, even. Clearly they already knew things about my work, much more than I’ve ever published. So I replied and asked for a clarification on how they knew so much about it, and” -- she pauses. Angela braces her palms on her knees.

McCree raises a brow. “And what?”

Angela clicks one of the messages and the screen flashes blue. The sender’s identification profile displays a single stripe of text. Soldier: 76.

“He said he was one of my former patients,” she answers. “Now he’s some kind of mercenary. Checking in on me. Wanting to see how I was doing, inquiring because he wanted to make sure I was doing alright.”

“Didja recognize him?”

“Yes, actually,” Angela says softly. “I did, the moment he told me.”

“Told y’ what?”

She knits her fingers together in her lap. “How I saved him.”

Silence passes between them for what feels like an eternity, until he sets down his empty cup and sighs.

“Listen,” he begins, “I know this stuff is hard for you to talk about. If it’s really that tough, if it’s too tough for you to tell me, then I get it. I can get by without knowing some of it, but what I wanna hear is the stuff about” -- and then he hears the yell.

Angela bolts from her office, scurrying into the main patient hold. Hanzo is awake; he sits up, fists his hands in the sheet, flings it off. He freezes when he attempts to swing his left leg off the side of the bed. The knee is too swollen. He grimaces in pain.

When he sees McCree emerge behind Mercy, he scowls.

“Where am I?” asks Hanzo.

McCree glowers flatly in return. “Well, you ain’t in Lijiang anymore, Toto, that’s for sure.”

“A safe place,” Angela cuts in, shooting McCree a scolding look. “I’m Dr. Angela Ziegler, you’re in my medbay. Custody of Overwatch. You are safe.”

Hanzo looks unconvinced. He flexes his hands and leans forward. McCree notices his movements are quick, bird-like. As if he’s testing each sinew for sign of pain. “What happened.”

“You suffered an injury from a fall,” Angela pipes, nearing the partition. “I’m Dr. Angela Ziegler, you’re in my medbay. Custody of Overwatch. You are safe.”

Hanzo looks unconvinced. He flexes his hands and leans forward. McCree notices his movements are quick, bird-like. As if he’s testing each sinew for sign of pain. “What happened.”

“You suffered an injury from a fall,” Angela pipes, nearing the partition. “Around your knee and hamstring, but it was minor. The pain should be gone within a few days.”

“You did not operate on me,” Hanzo interrupts, shrinking away from Angela. He looks like a man who might flash his fangs any second now. “You did not perform any surgery on me --”
“She didn’t.” McCree clomps forward, spurs jingling. “No need. You just had a small bump when we fell.”

Hanzo lowers his hand. Jesse thinks he almost looks sulky. “I did not fall. Your comrade attacked me.”

“He made a mistake, he thought you were tryin’a kill me.”

Hanzo sniffs. “Where is Genji.”

“He’s around.”

“I wish to see him. Bring him here.”

“Maybe ask nicely.”

“Please,” barks Hanzo, surprising McCree, though the ragged snarl at the edge of his dark voice is the very opposite of polite.

“I’ll get him.” Mercy swivels away from the partition to ring Genji on the comm. As she steps away, McCree moves in closer to get better look at Hanzo, now that he’s grumbling beneath the medbay lights.

Not surprising: he looks older than the internet photo. The crow’s feet etched around his eyes seem deeper, harsher when illuminated by a clearer light. Surprising: his eyes are not black but brown -- a warm, rich shade, like earth or chocolate. They’re ringed by a fringe of dark lashes so thick they might inspire a woman’s envy.

Also not surprising: he has bushy, prominent brows that sweep up his forehead to give him the appearance of a man constantly disdaining whatever’s in front of him. The severity of his profile makes McCree wonder if such a man could ever pull off a convincing smile. However, more surprising: he has a strong, firm jaw. The trim of his facial hair suits the bold sweep of his cheekbones. The stripes of grey in his hair make him seem austere, maybe even regal. The soft sable fans around his sideburns frame a face that would befit a king.

Final unsurprising observation: he’s wearing that same loathing scowl.

Biggest surprise of all: Hanzo is one of the most handsome men he’s ever seen. The picture in the internet article does no justice to the real thing.

He looks away when McCree approaches. He tugs up the arm of his robe; McCree furrows his brow with a pang of irritation when the dragon tattoo vanishes into the sleeve. He tries to catch a last glimpse of it, hunting for a chance to see more of its design and detail, maybe even to study the inner band above the breast, which looked like it had been etched in gold --

“What.”

Hanzo catches McCree staring at his chest and returns it with a withering glare. McCree steps back, hiding his embarrassment beneath a gruff frown. “Nothin’.”

Hanzo snorts. “Then please leave me be.”

Stung by the rejection (and irritated that it stings in the first place), McCree sets his hands on his hips. “Now, you gotta be out of your mind if you think you’re gonna be left unattended around this medbay anytime soon, pardner. Ain’t no way from here to Hades am I letting you get outta here -
Hanzo grimaces. “Please stop that.”

“Stop what.”

“Speaking.”

McCree prickles. “The hell?”

“You talk like some kind of Texas cowboy. Is that what you are?” Hanzo’s upper lip curls. “Or are you mocking me?”

“Why the hell would I be mocking you?” McCree scoffs. He points defensively at himself. “Who’s mockin’ who, huh? I am what I am.”

“Which is to say, you are foolish,” Hanzo replies. He crosses his arms over his chest. “Why do you dress like this” -- he dips his chin, indicating at McCree’s heavy belt buckle -- “like some kind of caricature, rodeo, gunslinger --”

McCree huffs. “Yeah, big words from Mister Fella with the Dragon Tattoo.”

Either Hanzo doesn’t get the movie reference or cares too little to pay it any mind. “Perhaps it makes sense. Foolish attire for a foolish man, who haphazardly endangers himself and his comrades, who either charges into conflict headlong or runs madly from it like a roach --”

“Says the fella playin’ warrior on the rooftops!” McCree retorts. “Stalkin’ around and showin’ up, jumpin’ in on a mission like that, coulda gotten all of us killed --”

“Not any more than you were already looking to die!” Hanzo interrupts. “I watched you. I have been watching you. You were completely outmatched from the very beginning.”

“The hell I wasn’t, you shut your dang --”

“Yes, you were!” Hanzo barks. “All the mobility of a one-legged bull. And half its wits!” His dark eyes crackle with scorn. “Who can you actually kill with that clumsy gun? Firing it like a peashooter at an omnic five times your size, without extra ammunition. Much less the sensibility to secure yourself an escape.”

McCree is bristling. Hanzo’s voice is wry and scorching. Angela peers around the corner, edging to intervene, listening. Watching.

“Did you think it could stop it? Did you truly think yourself that strong? Tch-ah.” Hanzo sneers. “Go on. Raise your hackles. Hubris won’t save your allies when you fail them on the battlefield.”

Jesse’s voice darkens, low and threatening. “Well, you’d know all about that, seein’ as how you treated your own kin.”

Hanzo’s face pales with offense. Genji’s arrival (which hastily turns into a physical intervention) is the only thing that stops it. Angela escorts the gunslinger from the medbay as he’s trading final insults with the archer. He clanks away down the corridor just as the sounds of the Shimada brothers arguing starts to rumble from behind.

McCree takes his cigarillos and nearly-empty bottle of bourbon to the southern overlook behind Torbjorn’s shop. He finds a shaded spot beneath a tree, kicks aside the gravel, sits, and lights up.
He smokes, drinks, and smokes some more; he watches ships chug along the channel for the better part of an hour until the steam clears out of his ears and he feels somewhat better. The plateau of calm waxes and wanes, nibbling at his senses.

Brother-killer. Dragon-dangler. No-good sonofabitch who will stick you up like a pin cushion. Who the hell does he think he is to call Jesse McCree foolish?

“I’ll show him a caricature,” he grunts through his second cigarillo, tapping the plated ‘F’ emblazoned on his belt buckle with his metal left thumb, thinking sullenly that someone who’s such an asshole really ought to not be so good-looking.

---

Winston calls the agents together at 1600 to debrief the results of the Lijiang mission. The cache of stolen data brought home by Tracer’s team provides a veritable goldmine of intelligence on Vishkar operations and internal protocol. As he expected, it’s dirt. Good dirt, too: violations of trade treaties and diplomatic sanctions, fraud, illegal trading, and far too many unsettling incident cover-ups infringing upon statutes protecting basic human rights. The campaign in Rio de Janeiro was apparently only the beginning. Lijiang and its surrounding sectors were next on Vishkar’s list for redevelopment -- hence, McCree pointed out, why all the streets around the gardens were vacant. From the first three directories out of the forty recovered, Winston has enough incriminating evidence against the Vishkar corporation to create a massive media scandal.

The incident at the Lijiang gardens has received full news coverage for the better part of the day. The Vishkar corporation faces an investigation by the Chinese government for the release of a remote-operated omnic system now revealed to be part of a new security initiative known as the Gibbs Free Defense Program. Public response to the program is overwhelmingly negative. Despite their claim that the omnic patroller was released to respond to a terrorist threat, the corporation receives a malaise of questions about the omnic’s destructive work. No one seems to think such a program is safe for human use. Vishkar is playing the defensive. Winston guesses they’ll be on their best behavior for a few months so that the Lijiang re-developments go off without a hitch.

Though successful, the mission has not gone without consequence for Overwatch. Risk is currently their number-one enemy. Winston worries that the investigation could reveal evidence of third-party involvement (that is, the four-man team), which would raise a slew of new questions from the public. He is already convinced that security satellites are already scrutinizing the goings-on at Gibraltar and will start mapping for signs of suspected Overwatch-related happenings around the world.

Thus, new orders: no missions for the next eight weeks. No transports, no launches, no new assignees. No public travel outside of Gibraltar or the surrounding metropolis. All recruitment will be conducted through emails, up-links and holo-calls. All resources (including groceries, much to Reinhardt’s chagrin) will have to be shipped or brought in surreptitiously to prevent unwanted attention. Winston passes out a series of task lists to occupy the team during the hold. He has a mountain of stock and provision requests: gear, weapons, armaments, tools, tech, upgrades, and more. Athena informs the crew that she has uploaded fifteen new combat and defense programs to the training range for their use. They have two months to brush up on their skills, both as individuals and as a group.

After Winston issues the orders, Genji points out that it is unwise for his brother to leave the Watchpoint premises given the risks. He formally requests that Hanzo be permitted the use of single dormitory and free passage around unrestricted areas around the Watchpoint. The proposition raises more than a few brows. McCree fumes silently throughout the discussion, unable
to bring himself to comment. Winston agrees only after Angela’s assent that after a calmer discussion (with Genji functioning as a mediator) Hanzo seems cooperative enough to be granted a temporary stay. Any further violence from the archer and he’ll be detained or dismissed. McCree rolls his eyes. Reinhardt notices and nudes him, mouthing: ‘alles gut.’

Genji catches him after the briefing is over. Following him (or, well, floating, he should say) is the Shambali omnic Zenyatta, Genji’s cheerful mentor. He greets McCree politely, introducing himself, offering to shake his hand. The omnic has a solemn, synthetic face is almost calming, and McCree cannot entirely figure out why.

“I would apologize to you again, on behalf of my brother,” Genji states. “But the second time around, I doubt it would be as effective.”

McCree shakes his head. “Look, real talk. Still no hard feelings.” His fingers twitch; he really wants another smoke. “What’s ill between your brother and I is ours to settle.”

Genji tilts his head. He almost sounds eager. “Ah. Good. So you are planning to settle things with him.”

McCree stammers. “I mean, it’s our business. I’m not gonna let it affect morale between you and me.”

Genji folds his arms over his chest. “McCree, I know you are struggling with what you have learned. The truth is not always an easy path to view. But my master assures me that harmony can be achieved once again, now that there is clarity between --”

“Yeah, yeah,” McCree interrupts, irritated, sullen all over again. “I get you. Plenty of time for that. Not like we ain’t all stuck together here for the next eight weeks.”

“If you find that you do wish to broach the matter with him, may I suggest --”

“Nope.” McCree turns away on a heavy heel, spurs chiming. “Thank you kindly, Genji-kun, but I’ll be seeing you around. Winston’s orders. I got some work to do.”

Zenyatta hums quietly as they watch the gunslinger clank away. He turns to Genji with an approximation of a smile.

“In time,” he murmurs, and Genji nods.

---

It’s 0117 and he should be asleep. Blackwatch doesn’t impose curfew at the Swiss headquarters but they’ll reprimand agents with slack performance. He hasn’t been resting. He’s been a firework lately, sparking at the end, liable to shock the first person who touches him.

And it might be because of her. He’s thought about it, denied it, decides later that he could accept it. Agitates himself over it just a little -- because what kind of outlaw is Jesse McCree if he’s not low-key tormenting himself about the people for which he yearns? Not that he’ll ever act on it. Blackwatch says he’s turned a new leaf. If Reyes sees the foliage shaking, he’s going to come and kick the tree.

She’s his teacher. She’s got a kid, a daughter, six years his junior. Plus she can shoot the balls off a fly at twenty-five hundred meters away. That helps cool him down each time. Puts things in perspective.
He comes in from getting a smoke and finds her leaning against the stove in the third-floor mess kitchen. Dressed down to her hoodie and sweats, black sneakers, ponytail -- watching the cezve pot on the burner. She likes this kitchen because it’s quieter than the others and has a view over Zurich at night.

“You got lucky, cowboy,” she greets, her voice warm as smoke, liquid and low. “I made enough for two.”

“They’re lil’ cups, anyway,” he says, hiding his eagerness. Trying not to sound excited, like a child.

They drink their coffee by the big industrial windows where they can see the lights stretch city all the way to the Zürisee. Once she told him it reminded her of a vista from her first apartment in Cairo. An upscale place: the Garden District overlooking the Nile. He would love to hear stories about this era of her life, when she was a young woman in Egypt, but her lips are sealed. She hasn’t lived in that apartment in over twenty years.

“Saw your shooting numbers,” she murmurs over her cup. “You’re doing good. Practicing, I can tell. No more of those shit-timing mistakes.”

“No’m,” he replies, savoring a sip. “You know I catch on pretty quick. Mighta given Torbjorn a bit of a shock, blew out one of his range set-ups real bad the other day. Said he didn’t think a six-shooter could pull that kind of damage.”

She laughs. “Technically, it can’t. Even he knows it’s a silly weapon.”

“Well, that begs the question.” McCree sets his empty cup on the windowsill. “Kinda wonderin’ what all you got left in the curriculum.”

“For you? Pfah. Everything.” She taps her pinky finger against the rim of her cup. “You could be an old man and I would still have something to teach you, cowboy. This dead-eye has seen a lot” -- she taps a forefinger to the Horus mark beneath her left eye -- “and there’s a lot left for you to learn.”

“Can’t say I’m displeased about that. Reyes, on the other hand -- he’s talkin’ about all these upcomin’ ops, and I know he’s gonna roast me. Think he might be a bit sore about you taking pity on me like this. Doesn’t like it when his trainees go sittin’ too often in classes with other trainers.”

She rolls her eyes. “No, not at all. Don’t think of it like that. Reyes means well, as always. He wants you to remember why you’re here. Just take the high road. He’s a crafty fellow.”

“Too bad he ain’t always the best shot.”

“But you could be.”

“I aim to be.”

“Don’t you pun on me, cowboy.”

He likes the way she laughs. Deep and rolling, a pleasant ha-ha that undulates from the belly. She takes a drink from her cup and sets it on the sill beside his. A thoughtful look crosses her features and McCree finds himself studying the slope of her proud, sleek forehead -- the curve of her mouth and the high, queenly arch of her haughty brow. The glossy rope of her black hair in its high, sleek tail.
“There’s a technique I think you’re ready to learn,” she says quietly, not looking at him but through him, permitting her gaze to dwell on something far beyond his lean, lanky body, sitting hunched and eager. Hanging off her every word. “It’s not an easy one. It’s dangerous. You will have to work at it. But you’re going to need it in your arsenal, if Reyes is going to push you.”

“Well, you know me, teach. I’m all eyes and ears. I’m ready.”

Ana laughs again. There’s something wise in her smile, calculating but tired.

“You think you’re ready, cowboy. You always think you are.”

---

He wakes after the dream, startled by its vividness, jarred from sleep with a gasp. He’s sweating, sticky-hot in the stuffy confines of his room. It stinks of old laundry, musty carpet, the earthy odor of cigarillo smoke. McCree catches his breath and sits; he reaches for the bourbon sitting on the floor by the bed and takes a swig. The last swig. He’ll have to go looking for more; maybe he can put it on Reinhardt’s grocery list.

The wall clock glows a weak, digital red: 0320. He rubs his jaw, winces at the ache from clenching his teeth. His right hand jitters; he’s not going to be able to get back to sleep.

He gets up, takes a piss, scrubs down his greasy face with water from the bathroom sink. He puts on his clothes and boots, finds his belt, digs out his comb and one of Lúcio’s borrowed hair ties. He gathers back his hair in a stubby tail. McCree straps on his holster with its missing ammo belt and slips Peacekeeper into the strap. No hat, no glove, no serape.

McCree wanders past the halls beneath Winston’s lab on his way to Training Range 2. It’s underground; he could take the lift from the lab foyer, but he’d rather walk. Get the blood moving. McCree pushes open the door to Stairwell C. The sound of his footsteps echo off the towering concrete walls.

Stopped at the landing is Hanzo. Rigid and motionless, one foot ascending the stairs, the rest of him paused as if McCree’s appearance has frozen him in place. Unarmed, from the looks of it -- or, at least, without his bow and quiver. Alone.

McCree puts his right hand to the stair railing. He looks square at Hanzo, who is looking at the floor.

Coward, Jesse thinks. Doesn’t even have the balls to look him in the eye. Or (after a weak pang of guilt): maybe it’s not about balls.

Maybe he’s scared.

“Evenin’,” Jesse grunts, cool and brusque.

Hanzo rasps, after a pregnant pause: “it is almost four in the morning.”

“Ah, well, you know. That jet lag.” Jesse drawls. “Messes your time zones all up.” Hanzo does not reply; Jesse clicks his tongue. “What’re you doin’ down here?”

“Leaving.”

“Sorry, pardner, but I’m sure you heard: none of us get t’ leave this rock for a few months --”
“Leaving this area.” Hanzo takes a few steps across the landing. His eyes remain glued to the floor. He has tucked his left arm into the panels of his robe, leaving the sleeve slack at his side. To McCree it makes him look injured, as if he’s hiding a bandage or a cast.

*Hakama.* Those pants. That’s the word he couldn’t think of on the plane.

McCree wants to say something shrewd and harsh now that they’re alone, but he can’t bring himself to it. A streak of guilt hits him. Maybe it’s the lack of sleep, the ungodly hour, the old dream. Maybe it’s the way Hanzo almost limps when he walks. He can’t tell; for a split second, he doesn’t care. He loses his bite.

“Listen,” Jesse begins, cocking his hip, shifting his weight. “We got off on the wrong foot here, real bad.”

Hanzo says nothing, advancing to the stairs.

“I ain’t sayin’ I’m just gonna hop to the right one, but I ain’t gonna dodge around you here for two months.”

Still nothing. Now he’s climbing.

“I mean it, fella, I ain’t gonna do it. I don’t got time to worry about it. You ain’t familiar with how we run things around here, this’s a team effort sort of thing.” He hesitates. “Um, I mean. It is now. It is again. Overwatch is again. Team effort” -- Hanzo continues up the steps -- “team effort means we get things done together. And as far as I’m concerned” -- he’s getting closer -- “ain’t no such thing as a two-month houseguest” -- four steps away, now three -- “meaning I ain’t gonna skirt you, I ain’t goin’ out of my way, if you’re gonna be in my general vicinity, then you better not cause trouble” -- he’s right there, close enough to throw a punch -- “all I’m sayin’ is a little civility will go a long way”

It’s bold, the way Hanzo steps up to the top landing. Pushing forward as if he wholly intends to shoulder McCree should he not move out of his way. But Jesse does move; he steps back, soles awkwardly scraping on the concrete, spurs clicking. He glowers down at Hanzo, who is so close now that Jesse can see the ridges on his lips. The individual lashes framing his eyes.

Hanzo’s eyes, which are now staring at him -- piercing him, silently measuring and judging and dismissing him all at once.

His eyes narrow. He snorts, a weak ‘hm’ -- and then, coldly: Hanzo *smirks*.

It’s over and he’s left alone. Not another word said. Hanzo disappears through the loud stairwell door, limping out of sight and earshot, gone. Jesse recoils; he swallows a knot in his throat that was not there a second ago. A chill sweeps the back of his neck all the way to his clammy palm. He turns to face the stairwell and realizes he’s sweating. Jittering. A live wire.

“Son of a gun,” he mutters under his breath, over and over, all the way to the range, where he checks in, sets up. He gets Peacekeeper out, wipes off the sweat, tries to fight down his pulse and shoots the worst round he’s had in weeks, months, years. “Son of a gun. *Son of a gun.*”

Chapter End Notes
- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- An elaboration on Ana Amari in this fic: we don't really know a lot about her and the extent of her contributions to Overwatch, but we can assume as a founder she was probably fairly influential. Every time we see McCree in pre-fall Overwatch media, he's standing near her -- and not his CO, Reyes. Intriguing.
- Reference for the style of coffee and method preferred by Ana Amari (and later McCree).
- For anyone disappointed at the slowww of the slow burn, please take my apologies and assurance that the next chapter is set to have some, ah, telling interactions for that 'Romance Will Happen I Swear' tag. We're getting there, I promise.
- You can follow me on Tumblr.

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Content warning: alcohol/drinking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With Hanzo, everything always happens very slow or too damn fast.

Week one sets the routine for lockdown life at the Watchpoint. The Overwatch agents gather every other evening for a big meal put together by the elder Reinhardt. Tracer and Torbjorn trek off-base every three days to a local mercado and return loaded down with goods from the knight’s grocery list. Lúcio breaks from music practice at 1630 to set up the kitchen and assist Reinhardt in preparing the meal. The others arrive to eat around 1800; McCree and Mercy take turns doing the dishes; by 1930 the team disperses for rest or recreation. Genji and Zenyatta do not partake but always attend. The omnic monk sits contentedly at the table, listening to mealtime banter with an expression that McCree thinks could be a placid smile.

Hanzo does not participate. Only Genji seems aware of what his brother does throughout the day. Mostly training, he assures, or mindful meditation. McCree assumes Hanzo sneaks meals when the others are occupied elsewhere on base. Save for a brief passing or peripheral glimpse here and there, the elder Shimada avoids most of the team. His movements are elusive: fleeting, spotted in distant glimpses when retreating to and from places he prefers to hide.

There are no repeat encounters of their brush in the stairwell, something for which Jesse is both glad and slightly piqued.

Reinhardt is cooking to oldies when McCree wanders into the mess hall for Friday night supper. The ominous, bouncy strains of a Eurythmics song crackle through the radio. Reinhardt is flipping eggs above the stove, dancing in place, humming along with the melody. He wears a red apron over his black coveralls; McCree guesses it’s the one printed with the bodiced torso of a Bavarian beer-maid on the front, giving the viewer the impression that the wearer has a considerably hefty bust.

“What’s on the menu tonight, boys?” McCree drawls, scratching his chest.

“Diced ham, swiss cheese, and cherry tomato omelets,” Lúcio calls across the wide kitchen island. “Sliced avocados, pão de queijo courtesy of yours truly, and a little sorbet for dessert.” He thrusts out at McCree a wicker basket full of small golden rolls. “Try one, Eastwood. These are the best. Bet you’ve never had anything like ‘em.”

After the dishes are done, McCree skips out on a multiplayer round of MEKA Gear Solid with Lúcio and Lena to smoke at the vista behind Torbjorn’s shop. He notices Genji sitting on a high ledge of the comm tower, alone.

He lights a cigarillo, looks out over the water, listens to the wind. A distant voice drifts from the back of his mind: how’d you shoot today, McCree? How’re you doing? Old habits die hard even when the team is together. The gang of mumbling ghosts in his mind never seems to go away.
On the way back to the dormitory, he sees a dark shape creeping down a stairway from one of the fuel depots. He stops to watch the shape disappear behind a pillar and emerge to cross a catwalk towards the dorms. A swatch of yellow flashes behind it. Jesse narrows his eyes. Hanzo.

“I’m figuring things out,” he says softly, aloud -- as if the ghost is still listening.

---

Angela accompanies him for a jog the next morning. The topic of Hanzo’s reclusive habits does not surprise her.

“He’s avoidant by nature,” she muses as they lap the track past the launch gantry. “Genji says he’s spent the last ten years roaming country to country. Picking off the Shimada-gumi and running their operations into the ground. He didn’t want to stay here, but Genji convinced him it was best.”

McCree puffs beside her, red in the face. “Just makes me wonder if he really intends t’ skulk around here like a possum under the porch, is all.”

“You’d prefer he came out and joined us?” Now she sounds puzzled. “Meine Güte, Jesse, I thought you rather didn’t like him.”

Jesse outright snorts. “I like him less than an outhouse fulla hornets, Angela, let’s be clear on that.” He coughs. “Just don’t think I’m cozy with the thought of him roamin’ around the Watchpoint unattended for two months. Better he stays in plain sight.”

“He promised Genji he wouldn’t get in anyone’s way.” Angela glistens as they run under the early sun, pink-cheeked and warm. “To be quite frank with you, Jesse, I think he’s out of his element altogether. This environment, all these strangers, and his brother, too. He’s spent the past ten years thinking Genji was dead. Now he hears his voice every day. Can you imagine that?” She squints into the sun as they jog up the concrete track. “Thinking someone you loved was dead for so long, and then they’re alive again?”

He says nothing. For a second, McCree yields to an inexorable pain of longing -- an ache that nearly winds him as bad as the jog.

The idea of rounding the corner and seeing her. Amari. Tall and slim in her blue flightsuit and aviators, dogtags glinting. Black hair beating in the breeze like wings.

“And if you felt at fault for losing, too, oh, that must be even worse, Jesse. The guilt he must feel! It’s really got to be something. Genji said his brother was reduced to agony, it was a terrible thing for them both. Not that I can tell you a lot about what happened, you know, patient confidentiality and all that. But I can see why” -- Angela pauses. McCree lags behind her. “Oh. Are you alright?”

McCree slows. He hunches with his hands on his knees, coughing again. His lungs grind like a faulty engine, overtaxed, thrumming out of whack. He looks up at Angela in her purple leggings and white tee, gold hair framing her face like a halo. She’s barely breathing hard.

“Yes, well, maybe if you’d quit smoking like I’ve been telling you all these years, you’d run with less knocks.”

---
Later, McCree wanders down the catwalk. He takes the stairs he saw Hanzo descending the day before. They lead through a maintenance shaft that exits to a rocky plateau overlooking the sea. In the waning light, he can see the start of a footpath up the cliffside. The breeze whistles hard on his ears. McCree eyes the trail for tracks before ascending.

He’s not equipped for the climb. The ridge is stiff and narrow; at times, the terrain turns sharp and uneven, slippery with moss and windworn stone. The angle of the bluff threatens to send any haphazard hiker straight into the rocks and water below. McCree trips twice. He drops his cigarillo, buckles himself to the ground, gulps back dread at how close he came to slipping off the precipice. How could anyone scale this on a regular basis?

He’s about to turn back when he hears a noise on the breeze: a thwack, faint but sharp, recurring in rhythm between long pauses. McCree crouches up the ridge and peers over the side of the embankment.

Poised on a flat swath of the cliff -- bared to the wind and sun -- is Hanzo. He’s shooting arrows at a training dummy propped on rocks a hundred feet away. His back is turned to McCree; the dragon tattoo flexes with each pull of the string.

McCree rises and ambles noisily down the rocks. Hanzo lowers his bow. He draws another arrow from his quiver. Despite the hum of the surrounding sea, Jesse hears him clearly. “What do you want, fool.”

“Hey,” he replies, holding down his hat with his left hand. “Uh.” He clears his throat. “Well. To tell you the truth --”

“Is something the matter?” Hanzo interrupts, arcing his chin over his right shoulder to glare at McCree. “Has something happened?”

Jesse works his jaw. “Naw, but --”

“Then be gone.” Hanzo turns. He loads the arrow, draws, and fires. It hits the dummy square in the neck.

Stung, Jesse puts his hands on his hips. The wind toys with the fray of his serape. “Listen, Shimada-san.” He puffs out his chest. “Wanted to say, the other day, ‘bout us bein’ on the wrong foot --”

“I have no desire to listen to your ramblings, fool.” Hanzo lowers his bow. His regal face darkens with irritation.

“I ain’t ramblin’, I’m tryin’ to be civil.” Jesse huffs. He takes a second glance at the dummy; it’s one of Torbjorn’s rejects. Hanzo must have picked it out of the trash. “A man can be civil, y’know, without havin’ to, uh --”

Suddenly the training dummy keels forward. Hanzo starts as it tumbles from its rocky perch.

“-- oh, goddamn.” McCree watches the dummy skid down the side of the cliff -- “hup, welp, there he go” -- and disappear over the ledge, arrows glinting from its hide. McCree whistles. “Well. Shit.”

Hanzo fixes the gunslinger with an accusing glare, as if the mishap is entirely his fault. “Are you done, fool?”
“Y’know,” wheedles Jesse, “you ain’t gotta sneak up here to practice. We got trainin’ ranges you can use. They ain’t off-limits, all you gotta do is ask. Lot less dangerous than billy-goatin’ up this damn rock every day.”

Hanzo snorts. “I do not need your amenities to hone my skills.”

“Reckon you don’t.” McCree squints at the setting sun. “But it sure beats gettin’ burned and winded up here, don’tcha think?”

“Only a weakling lets the elements of nature stifle his progress.”

Jesse clutches his hat through a sharp gust of wind. “Seriously, fella.”

“Nor do I wish to consort with you or your comrades,” Hanzo continues in an iron tone. “Your rapport with my brother ensures that I will be greeted with anger and mistrust. You yourself made this clear. Why would I subject myself to the scorn of those who know nothing of who I am?”

Jesse bites back frustration. “All I’m sayin’ is, I ain’t spendin’ two months on this rock actin’ like you’re some kinda ghost that comes and goes that I gotta watch out for.”

“Is that the sort of thing that scares you?”

McCree frowns. There’s something dark and rumbling in Hanzo’s smug voice. It fills him with a hollow ache; he’s reminded of the dragons whirling wild through the night. Just like in the stairwell, his nerve begins to wilt. “Maybe.” And then, acidly: “what the hell would you know.”

Hanzo says nothing, which irritates McCree. He had prepared himself for something moderately cruel; the least Hanzo could do is deliver.

“Ah, fine. Suit yourself, Shimada-san.” Jesse looks back over the horizon; the sky purples above the setting sun. “Listen. You wanna borrow my check-in ID for the range, it’s four-oh-four, one-one-one. Go at night if you wanna avoid everyone. No one uses Range 2 after suppertime. Not anymore, at least.” He adjusts his hat. “Just tell Athena you want it set up for archery practice and she’ll arrange it.” McCree turns to slowly trek the ridge back to the treacherous walkway.

He’s ten paces away when Hanzo barks behind him: “wait.”

McCree bites his tongue. He looks back.

“How does it work?” Hanzo asks gruffly. “Surely it will not allow me inside with another person’s identification.”

“I’ll set it up when I get back. Just say you’re signing in as a guest.”

Hanzo grunts. “I am not a guest.”

“Guess you are now.” Jesse is suddenly exhausted; he’s weary of the tug-of-war that turns every interlude they have. He stops once he’s back on the catwalk and smokes another cigarillo.

Dealing with Hanzo is like scaling the cliffside: slow, treacherous, and wholly unrewarding. Who the hell would bother with such a hassle?

Back at his console, he pours himself a shot of bourbon and pulls up his Overwatch personnel file. Winston has set up a placeholder profile for Hanzo; Jesse selects it, enters the permission code that allows range access for a visitor, and saves the file. He drinks a second shot, takes a shower, drinks
a third shot, and climbs into bed. His dreams are full of roadrunners darting beneath a high New Mexico sun.

A message informs him in the morning that Visitor 1 accessed Range 2 at 2310 the previous evening, checking out at 0156.

---

Winston sets up group combat simulations on Range 1 at the beginning of week three. McCree completes two runs successfully with Tracer and Reinhardt. Lúcio and Mercy fail their first round but improve significantly when Torbjorn joins the fray. Genji encourages Zenyatta to participate, but the omnic prefers to watch from the control center screens.

Hanzo’s check-in notifications tell McCree the same story every morning when he reads them on his screen. The archer goes down to Range 2 every night around 2300, enters the code, uses the training area for three hours, and signs out.

McCree gets the idea for the notes on a Monday. After dinner, he hikes down to Range 2 and sticks a yellow post-it on the lip of the control console.

Shimada -

Supplies & Groceries brought in 2x a week.

Do u need anything

I will pass it on

-JM

McCree wakes stiff and aching at 0548 -- twelve minutes before his alarm -- and jogs down to Range 2.

The note is gone. Nothing in its place.

That evening, Jesse tries again:

Hi its McCREE-

Do u need anything from the market?

Feathers/wood/tools/food just say so

-JM

Hanzo checks in, checks out. McCree sleeps, wakes, heads to the range. To his dismay, again: no answer.

On Wednesday evening, the post-it he leaves is orange.

Shimada-san

Do U need SUPPLIES?

-JM
By Thursday, he decides to quit with the notes altogether if Hanzo chooses again not to reply.

Gone to market tomorrow
Leave what u need & I will get to you

-JM

Friday’s message shows the archer didn’t even bother to sign out. McCree trudges to the range and finds Hanzo in person, standing by the console, extending out to McCree a torn strip of the yellow post-it.

“I had to find a pen,” he explains sourly at the bewildered gunslinger.

McCree reads the neatly-printed list: bamboo, ink, fiberglass dowels, fletching, cotton thread, glue, white rice, tuna, sake, and four boxes of hōjicha. “Reckon we may have some of this in storage already.”

“I will pay for the items I require.” Hanzo sweeps McCree with an evaluating glance. He clears his throat, lifting his chin when Jesse meets his gaze. “I shall not be a burden.”

Jesse shrugs. “Don’t reckon anyone here sees you that way, Shimada-san.”

“Hnn.” Hanzo simmers and tucks his left arm into his robe. “Why are you doing this.”

“Doin’ what?”

“Assisting me.”

Jesse scratches his jawline. “Where I come from, pardner, we usually just call it ‘hospitality.’”


McCree rolls his eyes. “I mean the South.”

Confusion seeps into Hanzo’s dark eyes. “South of Texas?”

“Naw, the United States. The South, the Southern US.”

Hanzo changes the topic. “You will seek something in return, then. Some appeasement. For your injuries, perhaps. Or insult to them.”

“Naw.” Jesse almost sounds surprised at his reply. “Nah, I don’t want that.”

“Then what?” Hanzo scrutinizes the gunslinger with narrowed eyes. A dark, hollow pang of confusion digs in McCree’s guts. Still squirrelly, he thinks. Wary of tricks and traps.

“How about, uh” -- Jesse glances to the rafters, as if scanning there for a suggestion -- “you… show me your aim.”

The archer frowns. “What.”

“Show me how you practice.” McCree shrugs. He rocks back on his heels. “You got a good aim, we all seen it. I know I seen it.” He bounces his left elbow, almost smiling, oozing with sentiment: no hard feelings. “We oughtta compare shots.”
Hanzo squints at McCree as if he’s just uttered something mildly offensive. “With your gun?”

“Naw, with a spittoon.” McCree nearly laughs, sobering when he sees Hanzo’s lip curling in revulsion. “Yeah, with my gun.” He pats the weapon holstered at his hip. “I like trainin’ solo myself, but’ -- he shrugs again -- “might learn somethin’ new. You never know.”

It takes Hanzo a few seconds to reply. “You are asking to practice with me.”

“Yeah.”

Hanzo clucks. “No.”

McCree balks. “Why not?”

“You would distract me.” Hanzo asserts himself, rolling back his shoulders. “Noisy as you are, with your weapon and your mouth.” He holds up a hand before McCree can protest. “If you wish to observe my aim, so be it -- you may watch. But that is all you may do. I forbid you to ruin my concentration with your mindless talk.”

It takes most of Jesse’s composure not to roll his eyes. “That’s all? Just watchin’?”

“Take it or leave it. I consent to nothing else.”

McCree lifts his hands. “Fine, awright. We do it your way, Shimada-san.”

Hanzo wrinkles his nose. “Why do you address me like this?”

“Like what?”

“‘Shimada-san.’ You are using proper Japanese address.” He sniffs, as if he’s just caught whiff of an unpleasant smell. “So far you have regarded me with nothing but crude names. Why do you address me as such now?”

Jesse scratches at his chest. “Just tryin' to be polite.” And then, "after all, ain’t you a proper Japanese fellow?”

Hanzo smirks. Jesse feels the hair prickle on the back of his neck.

“Yes,” he says, striding past the gunslinger to leave. “Moreso than you are a proper anything.”

---

Practice begins per Hanzo’s demands: no dialogue, no disruption, no tolerance for noise. McCree is more or less banned from speaking altogether. He may watch and observe from no closer than ten feet from the shooting platform. He is not permitted to comment on the archer’s form or performance. Assisting Hanzo with equipment or target programming is allowed so long as he keeps his distance. Hanzo seems reluctant to let McCree come within a five-foot radius.

Jesse complies without issue. He spectates from a chair, boots propped up on a storage container. Hanzo leaves the range whenever he deems the exercises are over; he retrieves his arrows, shoulders his gear, and bids McCree a silent nod in farewell. The gunslinger locks up afterward and shuts off the lights. He walks back to the dormitory under the glow of a saffron moon.

---

Torbjorn begins construction on a new turret defense system. He also starts a box garden outside of
his workshop. McCree takes up the chore of watering the plants each evening before he goes to Range 2. Soon the squash vines droop with fat gold blossoms.

Lena finds a broken karaoke machine in the old crew quarters. With Winston’s help, she fixes it and hooks it up to the main monitor in the rec room. The team takes turns singing songs after supper. McCree croons everyone to swooning with *Ring of Fire*; Lúcio hoots along in enthusiasm, only to groan a few minutes later as Reinhardt roars the strains of *Careless Whisper*.

“I’m never gonna dance again,” he agrees flatly with the lyrics, earning a swat from a laughing Angela.

Hanzo shoots Jesse a withering glance when he whistles the song’s saxophone refrain during practice that evening.

“Cease, fool,” he mutters.

“Sorry, Shimada-san.” McCree watches the archer take his stance again. The contours of his tattooed arm glisten with sweat.

He tries to imagine Hanzo singing karaoke before concluding he’s more likely to see pigs fly.

---

“What we need is firepower,” Winston announces in the briefing room after the twelfth round of failed simulations. Athena overlays the team’s low numbers on the holoprojector; Winston taps them with a pointer. “Heavy-hitters. Specialists. Another engineer, to supplement Torbjorn’s turrets, or a defensive arm to help Reinhardt out.”

“Could really use a sniper,” Torbjorn grunts, leaning against the table. “Someone to cover the turrets. Back in the old days, Amari’s eye kept my babies firin’ on all six chains. Not a single hostile could get past her.”

McCree feels Angela’s eyes from across the room. He says nothing.

---

The days drag by. The team struggles with cooperative exercises; they begin to lose steam. McCree wakes twice from nightmares of a tawny canyon filled with corpses. Crows circle the sky above the chasm; a chalky skull waits in the red desert sand.

*Shit for timing,* sighs the voice through his dreams.

---

The local newspaper has a crossword puzzle. McCree brings it one night while Hanzo tests a new bowstring.

“Hm,” Jesse says.

“What,” Hanzo grunts, glaring over his shoulder.

The gunslinger rumbles without looking up. “Six-letter word that begins with a ‘d’ and fits for ‘repugnant fruit.’”

“What did I tell you about mindless talk, fool?” growls Hanzo, turning back to the range. He expects McCree to drawl some annoying quip; when none comes, he looks over and sees him
Hanzo draws the string and aims. He fires; the arrow sticks a centimeter to the right of the center. He sighs. In a voice heavy with disdain, Hanzo mutters: “durian.”

McCree perks. “Hm?”

“Durian,” Hanzo repeats. “Six-letter word that begins with a ‘d’.” He frowns at the string as if it has insulted him. “They have a revolting odor.”

It fits. Jesse smiles and taps the paper with his pen. “Thanks, Shimada-san.”

*Clever fella. Good shot.*

The next day, the archer offers ‘priest’ as a six-letter term for ‘an officiant’, ‘flor’ as a four-letter solution for ‘the Spanish translation of flower’, and ‘dimwit’ as six letters to replace the word ‘cowboy.’

McCree passes the last half-hour of practice wondering how Hanzo looks with his hair down.

---

Genji hits him up after supper during week four.

“I wanted to thank you for taking Hanzo his supplies,” he offers as Jesse washes dishes. “I was remiss not to do it myself. As he is still adjusting, so am I.” Genji tilts his head. “It surprised me to learn that it was you who offered to see what he required. Are you settling your issues?”

“Well, Genji-kun.” McCree towels off an orange plate. “That’s just what we call ‘hospitality,’ where I’m from.”

Genji hums. “Ah, yes. I have heard it is important to be hospitable in Texas.”

McCree nearly rolls his eyes. *Not this again.* “More or less just th’ whole American South.”

Genji sounds less perplexed about the geography than his brother. “In Japan, too, it is a very important concept. I hope my brother accepted without rudeness. He can be very suspicious of the motives of others.”

McCree shrugs. “Nothin’ we can’t work out.”

He’s dragging to the dorms the next morning after a punishing workout with Reinhardt when he sees Genji perched again on the comm tower ledge. This time, he’s not alone. Together the Shimada brothers sit facing the sea. Their scarves flutter cheerfully in the breeze, like a pair of pennants.

---

Sleep brings only dread. McCree dreams of arid sands piled high with dead birds.

“You look terrible,” Hanzo startles him with the gruff comment at practice. He scans the weary gunslinger from head to toe. “Are you ill?”

“All fine,” Jesse lies, knowing he’s not, eager to sulk back to their usual silence.

A package awaits at his door when he returns. Hanzo has left four *hōjicha* teabags in a small
cardboard box. A shred of the orange post-it peeks from the edge, a little flag.

McCree makes a cup of tea with hot shower water. He falls asleep with an awkward sense of gratitude -- as if the drink helps better than the bourbon, despite the nightmares coming anyway.

---

Sightings of Hanzo increase during the day. Lúcio sees him wandering the cargo bay one afternoon; Lena spots him in the rec room leafing through paperbacks on the communal bookshelf. He leaves before anyone gets the chance to greet him first.

Conversation starts to creep into evening practice. Certain topics are off-limits; McCree feels like it’s easier to list what subjects he can discuss with Hanzo rather than what is taboo. Weapons, combat, and tactics are all acceptable. Jokes and long-winded stories are not. If a tale takes McCree more than a minute to relate, Hanzo cuts him off. Humming and singing are still forbidden. Any personal questions earn him a scathing glare.

McCree sometimes does it anyway just to hear the regal rasp of ‘be quiet, fool.’

---

By week five, Hanzo finally permits the gunslinger to practice with Peacekeeper. He does not expect for McCree to eliminate six moving targets with a single fan of bullets. He orders Jesse to reload and perform the feat again. McCree obliges; he struggles not to smirk at the archer’s surprise.

“You did not perform like this in China,” says Hanzo, incredulous.

“Nope.” Jesse spins his speedloader. “Wasn’t lookin’ to kill anyone on that mission.”

“The Vishkar certainly looked to kill you.”

He grins. “Well, look who’s still breathin’, eh, Shimada-san?”

Hanzo clucks. “Anyone can suffer good fortune.”

He thinks -- no, he’s sure -- that Hanzo looks away somewhat impressed.

---

“Heads up!” Lúcio clacks across the pavement during a weekend game of street hockey. Reinhardt passes him the puck and he swats it for the goal. Goalie Torbjorn blocks the shot to the sound of teammate Tracer’s cheers.

Jesse spectates from the catwalk while he smokes. He spots Hanzo and Genji observing from a nearby ledge; every now and then, Genji will point out something in the game to his brother’s attention.

It’s hard to tell, but he thinks Hanzo looks relaxed.

---

Jesse is watering the ripening tomatoes during week six when Hanzo approaches. He jumps when the shorter man greets him with a curt bark of ‘hello.’

“My brother tells me your organization is in need of more talent.” He narrows his eyes at McCree.
“Is this why you wished to see me practice? You wanted my assistance to your team?”

Jesse’s brows shoot up. “Uh, naw, that wasn’t behind it.” He flashes a simpering grin through his surprise. “More of a personal interest, really.”

Hanzo considers. “I have observed your team. What you have in spirit, you lack in cohesion. Perhaps a tactical mind like my own could lend your comrades the precision they require.”

Jesse doesn’t know whether to feel elated or dismayed that ‘personal interest’ went over Hanzo’s head. “Well, hey, Shimada-san. I bet Winston’d be glad to hear you’re willin’ to help out. All you gotta do is let him know you’re joinin’ in, and I bet he’d --”

“No.” Hanzo cuts in, harsh. “I will not join your Overwatch. That is not the proposition. I am offering my assistance in your simulation tests. That is final, and no more.”

McCree shuts off the water hose. “Same deal. Like I said. If you’re willin’ to help out, you got some voices in your favor.”

Hanzo evaluates McCree with heavy-lidded eyes. “I must call you something other than ‘fool,’ if we are to work together.”

“Reckon so.”

“Consider this my offer.” Hanzo bows forward at the waist before he departs. “I shall see you at practice, Yankee-san.”

---

The team’s statistics double after Hanzo joins the group simulations. The archer fights at a physical level that rivals some of Overwatch’s elite former agents. He outruns, outclimbs, and out-snipes the AI opponents in every simulation they face. Hanzo complements the team seamlessly; he is brisk but never rude, concise in his criticisms without crushing morale. Winston and Athena cannot praise him enough; his insight leads them to rewrite two of their five current mission strategies.

McCree would wholly share the enthusiasm if not for the nickname. He sulks in the locker room after a enduring a grueling simulation where Hanzo shouted it at him all throughout the fight.

At least the archer seems to genuinely enjoy the combat. McCree watches a replay of his performance on the control center screen: bounding wall to wall, agile as a wing, darting to cover his teammates from fire with a hail of pale arrows. Hanzo scaling a watchtower; Hanzo sniping ‘bots attempting to chew through a turret; Hanzo diving hawk-like to bludgeon a passing target with the broad side of his bow.

Jesse watches the replay five more times before hastily shutting off the screen.

---

They’re cooling down after a morning jog when Hanzo says: “blue.”

Jesse looks over, panting. “Say what, Shimada-san?”

“A favored color.” Hanzo puffs, standing with arms akimbo. His bare shoulder is slick with sweat. “You asked what mine was, some time ago. During all your talking. The answer is blue.”

McCree grunts, remembering. He stoops and pretends to tie his shoes to keep from staring at the
gleaming cords of Hanzo’s powerful throat. “Oh, yeah, I recall. That’s nice. Mine’s --”

“Red. Like your face. I remember some of your mindless banter.” Hanzo huffs, a dry *eh-heh.*
“Let’s go, Yankee-san. Winston will be waiting at the range.”

That could have almost been a laugh. He would've relished it, if only it wasn't for that stupid damn nickname.

*Guess that's what I get for calling him 'Legolas',* he thinks, half-sour.

---

“Come to supper tomorrow.”

Hanzo lowers his bow. He glances back at Jesse. “What?”

It's week seven. McCree is cleaning Peacekeeper. He looks up at Hanzo from the gun pieces glinting on the table. “Dinner with the team. Tomorrow evenin’, chicken teriyaki. You should come.”

Hanzo frowns. “I do not wish to impose.”

Jesse loosens a low, rolling cackle. “Reinhardt cooks like he’s feedin’ a Baptist church. An extra mouth would be doin’ us a favor.”

He is prepared for Hanzo’s silent dissent, not so much for the following night when the archer enters the mess hall beside his brother. The room goes quiet; only the radio announcer speaks as the team exchanges glances. Hanzo hesitates to enter, looking around slowly, as if he is the person most startled by his unexpected appearance.

Jesse breaks the silence with a warm, drawling “howdy.”

“Good evening,” Hanzo replies, and the team replies in kind. He sits at the table between Genji and McCree and dines without conversing. The gunslinger admires the way Hanzo eats: neat, methodical, not a crumb spilled.

Both Shimada brothers assist Angela with the dishes. Hanzo stiffly thanks Reinhardt for the food. He is taken aback by the knight’s smile, his roar of laughter, the hearty slap to his shoulder.

"Didja like it?" Jesse asks afterward, at practice.

"The big man fights well," is all Hanzo will say.

Torbjorn bets he won’t be back for another meal. Lena wishes she’d wagered money on it when Hanzo attends again two nights later. And, after that: all the rest.

---

By the end of the lockdown, the archer is a constant. Like the gulls or the box garden -- which is where Lúcio spots him one evening as he’s skating down the track. Hanzo is inspecting the white flowers on the trellis. McCree smokes nearby; he's watering the beds.

Lúcio thinks he can hear the murmur of their low voices mingling over the breeze.

---
Jesse thinks he should have seen it coming. Such is Hanzo: very slow, or too damn fast.

It’s an off-night for group supper. Torbjorn has gone to bed early. Lena, Winston, Reinhardt and Lúcio are watching movies in the rec room. Angela works late in her office. Genji and Zenyatta leave to meditate by the cliffs. McCree hoses down the squash and tomatoes; he picks off a few hornworms and thinks Torbjorn should build a chicken coop.

He heads to Range 2 for evening practice and finds Hanzo absent. Jesse pulls up the screen and discovers that no one has logged in or out since the two of them left the night before.

“Can you comm him?” he asks Athena through the voice interface.

“He last logged in at Range 1,” Athena replies. “Two hours ago.”

Jesse scratches his neck. “Well, when did he log out?”

“He has yet to do so.”

It takes Jesse five minutes to cross the Watchpoint and reach the training rooms. An eerie foreboding pricks at him; he can’t shake the feeling that something might be wrong. It isn’t like Hanzo to deviate from routine.

Funny how that happened. The two of them have fallen into a reliable routine. He ponders it on the elevator ride down to the range.

He checks in, glances around the foyer, finds it empty. McCree wanders through the training range and finds Hanzo’s quiver and blue Storm Bow propped against a rack. McCree frowns. The weapons look idle, almost harmless when they’re not levied in the master’s hands. This bothers McCree more than he prefers to accept.

A static hiss charges the air around the entrance to the locker room. Water is running in one of the shower stalls. He squints through the steam. He’s about to turn around and leave it be.

Then he hears the rasp.

“Yannnn-kee-san.”

Behind him on a corner bench sits Hanzo. His cheeks are pink; his face is damp. He bounces a gilded gourd on his prosthetic right knee.

He’s drunk.

“I missed our practice,” Hanzo says lazily, jostling his right leg. “Did you come all this way to chide me?”

Jesse doesn’t know what to say. His right ear buzzes; he’s not sure if it’s static from the showers or the whoosh of his rising pulse. Hanzo is draped over the bench in a fashion that can only be described as provocative. His robe hangs loose off his left side all the way to his belly; it’s impossible not to appreciate the view. Jesse fights and loses to the urge to drink the sight of his bare flesh and muscles, chasing the tattoo to its tail above his breast. His gaze turns shameless. A kick of impulse gnaws at his guts; he’s been letting Hanzo get to him for months now, giving him leaden feet and dry throat. Wouldn’t this be a plum opportunity to cross the tiles between them and do more than just stare?

McCree frowns. It doesn’t seem right. If anything, this feels like Hanzo is mocking him.
When Jesse finds his voice, it’s hoarse. “Shimada-san, I think you’d better get on oughtta here, now.”

Hanzo snorts and takes a drink. “I think you are here to chide me.”

Jesse swallows hard. The archer says it like he's fond.

Hanzo rises from the bench and saunters across the room, swaggering, leering over the lip of his gourd. “Is that not a Texas thing to say, Yankee-san? ‘Get out of here now,’ like you are the sheriff of the town?”

Jesse’s stomach threatens to leap right out of his chest. He smacks his lips. “I ain’t from Texas.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I ain’t.”

"Yes, you are." 

"No, I ain't." 

Hanzo rattles, swaying as he nears: “who cares where you’re from.”

To his relief (and a sliver of guilty dismay), the archer breezes past him. Jesse turns to follow, serape gathered under his arm. "Is there a specific reason you're over here, drinkin' like a fish?"

Hanzo shrugs up his robe. It falls slack again. He throws McCree a dark look over his tattooed shoulder. "If I swim far enough up river, I will come back to let you know."

Jesse feels like there's some reference he doesn't get, but he cannot figure out why. When Hanzo stoops to pick up his bow, he decides to intervene.

“Put that down,” he starts, reaching for Hanzo’s quiver.

Hanzo swats away Jesse’s mechanical arm. “Get your paws off my things.”

“You’re drunker than a skunk, fella, I ain’t lettin’ you touch nothing with an edge.”

“Give it back!” Hanzo lunges; Jesse whisks the quiver away and yanks the bow up from the rack while the archer stumbles to recover. “You ragged thief --”

“Pack it in, Shimada-san. We ain’t stayin’ here.”

“I will do as I please!”

“I don’t rightly doubt it, but you ain’t doin’ it ‘round weapons.”

“Give me back my arrows or I will” -- trying not to slur -- "cut your scruffy neck.”


“Never do I go unarmed, even in a situation of respite or calm. Do not challenge my presumption that you have half a brain. Rest assured, Yankee-san” -- Hanzo swaggers back towards him -- “if I wished to pierce your flesh, I would draw the necessary blade.”

Jesse thinks this whole exchange might border on funny if he weren't so distracted by the contours
of Hanzo's bare sides. If it weren't so absurd to see Hanzo acting this way. “From where?”

Hanzo considers. Then, he smirks. “From my ass.”

McCree has had enough. He takes Hanzo’s sleeved arm as he reaches for the quiver and thrusts the leather squarely into his chest. The shock surprises Hanzo enough that McCree can throw his left arm around the man’s shoulders and nudge him along. “C’mon.”

Before Hanzo can wriggle out from the arm, they’re hustling past the foyer.

“Where are we going,” Hanzo mutters, stumbling away from McCree when they reach the elevator. And then, almost guilty: “I left the shower running.”

“I’ll go back and turn it off.” Jesse punches the elevator button; the doors slide open. Hanzo lumbers in obediently, clutching his quiver to his chest.

The elevator closes and starts to rise. Jesse stands against the back wall, puts his hands on his hips, sucks in a shuddering breath. He looks at Hanzo, who looks at the ground. And then looks at Jesse, who looks at the doors.

“I drink,” Hanzo mutters. And then, as if contrite: "sometimes."

“I see that,” Jesse replies.

“I am not a drunkard.”

“Never said you were.”

"Why I drink is my business. It is not mine to explain to you, or anyone here. I am not a member of your Overwatch and never will be. If I drink until I am drunk, that is my choice and my burden."

Jesse notices that Hanzo's hair is starting to fray from its tail. He'd reach out to straighten the scarf if he didn't think he'd lose a finger in the process. Instead, he sighs. "We all got vices, Shimada-san."

Hanzo mulls this over in drunken silence. His gaze swings up to Jesse. "Why do you smoke those cigars?"

"'cause I like 'em."

"They are cheap. Probably poison."

"So is sake, Shimada-san, but I ain't gonna give you a hard time 'bout it."

Hanzo clucks. “You are so hairy. Do you ever trim your beard?”

“Ain’t got any clippers.”

Hanzo gestures with the gourd, sloshing its contents. “Very fitting. You have a wild face.” When Jesse does not respond, he sulks. “This was a mistake. You will scorn me for this later. You will make jest and hold it against my honor.”

“Why would I do that?”

Hanzo does not answer. His eyes have fallen to Jesse’s belt buckle. “What does that mean?”
Jesse sorely wishes the archer would focus on any other thing that isn’t in the vicinity of his crotch. It’s bad enough that Hanzo’s gaze is all over him, searching and scoring; he can detect the faint smell of sweat and soap beneath the alcohol on his breath. If Hanzo comes any closer, Jesse thinks he’ll jump out of his skin. “It’s, uh, an acronym.”

Hanzo leans in. “Let me guess. Cowboy talk.”

“I’ll tell you when you’re sober.”

The doors open just as Hanzo clutches for his collar. Jesse jerks, yanked downward; instinct makes him brace the smaller man at his broad shoulders. His hat tips forward. He drops the bow. They collide. Hanzo thrusts him with a crash that bangs them sideways into the wall. A gasp escapes the gunslinger; Hanzo’s knee knifes into his thigh.

He’s so close that Jesse sees the dappling in his sleek brown eyes.

“Tell me what it means,” Hanzo murmurs, centimeters from his face, “or maybe I will kill you.”

Slowly Jesse realizes he’s caught once again. Pulled tight by that string, spanning life and death. Peals of delight and agony possess him when he realizes how easily he could seize those draconic stripes and pull him in. He wants to shove; he wants to fight; he wants to smother their lips with a smoky kiss. Incongruously but just as passionately: he wants to draw his gun and stick the barrel right in Hanzo’s face. But surely it would all mean his demise. An untimely obliteration by an otherworldly foe. They are both killers, but Hanzo calls himself the dragon. His next shot -- be it an arrow or kiss -- won’t miss.

Jesse licks his lips. He inhales; he shakes.

“Do it,” he rumbles, hanging by a thread.

Before they can, the elevator door alarm goes off in a high-pitched whine.

Hanzo jolts. He releases McCree, pushes him away, buffets off the wall. They exchange looks of surprise, hatred, sudden heat; Hanzo’s face flushes to red. Jesse is about to reach for him when Hanzo dips to grab his bow. He bolts through the doors. Jesse stumbles after him. The chime of his spurs echoes into the rafters. Hanzo is gone, vanished into the night under a waxing yellow moon.

McCree thumps his back against the wall. He reaches for his crumpled collar and takes a deep breath.

His heart beats thunder through his eardrums, roaring: fool, fool --

You are a fool.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- References: Lúcio’s bread, Hanzo’s tea, the song McCree sings, the song Reinhardt sings (and McCree whistles), the odious durian.
- Things are burning now. WHO KNOWS WHERE IT WILL GO FROM HERE.
- (I’m kidding I know exactly where it’s going)
- And, if you feel like Hanzo is pretty harsh/cold still, I assure you -- things do get better. He's got a lot of 'stuff' to get over.
- You can follow me on [Tumblr](https://example.tumblr.com).

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](https://example.com) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

* VISHKAR CORPORATION

* GIBBS PROTOCOL - OPERATION: BLACKHAT

* SYSTEM STAGE 1 - WATCHPOINT INFILTRATION

* LOCATION: 36°08'28.8"N 5°20'39.1"W

* EXEC OP MANAGER: SANJAY KOPPAL

* COMMANDING OFFICER: APEXUS

* ASSIGNED PERSONNEL: SCALIX; TESSELA; CHIRAL; AMARYLID; PALINDROS

* SUPPORT: 20

* MEMO: Our team is positioned off the coast of GIB territory in clear view of the target location. We are engaged to begin stage 1 infiltration of the Watchpoint at approximately 2000 CET (UTC+01:00) Friday evening after the teleporter has been set.

* MEMO: Retrieval of our archive is set to priority HIGH. Retrieval of Specimen C-1193 is set to priority MEDIUM. In defense of priorities, all hostiles interfering with the objectives are to be neutralized.

**TRANSCRIPT:** EOM Koppal reporting in for final check. Systems are green. You are cleared for progress.

**TRANSCRIPT:** Good luck, agents. Remember our briefing: the world does not need another rise of Overwatch.

**TRANSCRIPT:** Stage 1, standby.

---

Outside the elevator, when his hearing clears out, Jesse turns and beelines back to the dormitory. He charges to Hanzo’s door, spurs chiming, chest heaving with each hard-earned breath. He beats the door with his fist. “Shimada-san, hey.”

No answer.

Two more thumps. Jesse braces his metal forearm into the panel. He exhales, whistling quick through his nostrils. He licks his lips.

“Shimada-san, c’mon, now,” he says, raising his voice. “You in there?”
Silence. Jesse weighs his options. There are plenty of spots around the Watchpoint where the archer might have gone. Hanzo could have scaled the cliffside, creeping to some ledge or hideaway where he can hole up and get sober. Jesse quickly stifles an image that flits through his mind of drunken Hanzo slipping off the rocks, dangling to his demise. He tells himself it’s a stupid concern; inebriation won’t stop Hanzo from running away. At this point, who knows what will? Not him.

McCree laps the dormitory building, checks the box garden, revisits Range 2. Hanzo is nowhere to be found. Dejected, he retreats to his room. The clock gleams like a red eye on the wall: 2248. He throws down his serape, takes off his hat and sets it on the dresser, kicks the dresser, turns around, punts an empty cigarillo box across the chewed rug, and grinds his heel into the empty carton of hōjicha. McCree runs his metal hand down his face, pinching his chin, testing the coarse hair of his beard.

Hanzo can take care of himself. McCree, on the other hand, thinks this must be what a dog feels like when it’s left outside in the rain.

He flips open the windowpane so he can smoke. Through the slats, he can see the jagged silhouette of the cliff, the bright strip of the drone track wandering towards the comm tower and Winston’s lab. McCree tries to focus on the light reflecting off the metal -- glowing from the industrial lamps and the summer moon -- rather than think about the sensual dip of Hanzo’s throat. The raised flesh of his breast, his tattooed shoulder. The diamonds of muscle interlocking down his torso, a sinewy grid.

He grinds his thumb and forefinger around the bridge of his nose. All the cigarillos on Gibraltar won’t burn these images out of his head. There’s bourbon, too, if he wants to dull his mind with a different type of fire -- but he’s sparking, electric at the ends. Jesse stings all over, nibbled from inside out by Hanzo’s eyes and voice. That damn gourd, sloshing at his thighs.

He showers: hot, then cold. He cleans and oils Peacekeeper. He drinks a cup of tea. Nothing helps. McCree gives up.

Unlucky, sighs the dusky voice in the back of his mind.

“Go blow yourself,” he huffs -- later, as he crooks and bends in the warm, smoky hollow of his bunk, unhappily jerking off by himself in the dark.

---

McCree wakes in the morning to messages from Winston in his inbox. The emails declare that he’s cancelling simulations for today and tomorrow -- Thursday and Friday -- to allow the team to rest before the big upcoming mission to Siberia. There is a mildly passive-aggressive request that all personnel who use the showers next to Range 1 be mindful to turn them off when they’ve finished bathing. The floor has flooded in the past when the water runs too long.

He smokes, cleans up, gets dressed, wanders down the corridor back to Hanzo’s door. It’s shut and locked. He edges closer, left hand raised and balled into a loose fist. He stops. Maybe Hanzo’s asleep. Maybe he’s hungover; maybe he’s not there. Maybe Jesse is the last person he’d prefer to see, and by knocking he ensures that this preference will never change.

Avoidant by nature. Angela’s prim voice reminds him from a morning long ago. Jesse sighs and pushes off.

Suppertime reunites them. Hanzo arrives with Genji; nothing in his appearance seems out of the
ordinary, but McCree notices how quickly he looks away after they exchange glances. Especially when they sit beside each other, just as they have for the past two weeks, nothing altered in their placement -- and Hanzo eats in his usual neat silence.

It occurs to McCree that nobody in the room would notice anything out of the ordinary about Hanzo’s behavior except for himself. To any observer, Hanzo is just as rote and taciturn as ever. Nothing is amiss or out of place. And though McCree feels like he will jump out of his chair if Hanzo’s sleeve so much as brushes him, there’s no way he could explain why were anyone to witness it.

Later, he’s watering the box gardens (and smoking his third cigarillo since dinner) when he sees Hanzo trailing back towards the dormitory. McCree hurries so hastily to turn off the spigot that he nearly soaks himself with the hose.

“Hey,” McCree bursts once he finally catches up. “Hey, Shimada-san. Hold up, will you?”

When Hanzo throws a glance over his shoulder, Jesse’s heart leaps into his throat. “What do you want.”

McCree shakes water off his hand and dries it on the edge of his serape. “Uh, I just wanted to see how you were doin’, y’know, after. Um. Last night.”

Hanzo’s demeanor changes almost immediately; he stops, squares up with Jesse, and scowls. “I am fine.”

Has Hanzo ever sounded so defensive? “Ah, good. Me too.” Jesse tips his hat. “Just wanted to check, is all. Was kind of a weird evenin’, as far as things go.”

“Weird evening.” He repeats it as if Jesse has threatened him. His shoulders roll back, as if he’s about to bristle. “What do you mean.” Cautious, like he’s daring the gunslinger: don’t bring it up if you value your life.

Jesse shrugs almost innocently. “Yeah. Y’know. We didn’t really get to talk too much.”

Hanzo squints, as if this was not the clarification he expected. “We spoke enough.”

“Reckon we did.” Jesse scratches his head; now he wonders if Hanzo even remembers much of the previous night at all. “I just wanted to make sure things weren’t awkward between us or nothin’. Stayin’ on the right foot and all that.” Jesse blurts before the other man can speak. “Really, I just wanted to make sure y’weren’t avoidin’ me.”

“I sat beside you at the meal. I am standing here right now, speaking to you, in the flesh. Does any of this convey to you the sense that I am avoiding you?”

Jesse’s stomach lifts and dips. If it weren’t for Hanzo’s tone, this would be wholly affirming -- a weight lifted straight off his shoulders. Good, he’s not avoiding me.

“Naw, I guess you’re right. Was just a concern o’ mine, is all.”

Hanzo considers Jesse for a moment, scanning him head to toe. Then he lifts his chin: a haughty gesture that Jesse thinks could not be more irresistible. “Avoiding you would be detrimental to our progress. I will expect to see you at practice this evening. The Siberia mission will require all the agents to perform at their peak, with no space for error or miscalculation. I disappointed that the scientist cancelled the simulations. As such: we must train.”

“Uh.” Jesse puffs on his cigarillo. “Okay.”
“I want to see everything you can do with your gun.”

Jesse slowly blinks. “You do?”

“You heard me, Yankee-san.” And then, with eyes narrowed: “everything.”

The electric prickle returns to threaten the back of McCree’s neck. He pulls hard on his cigarillo, puckering his lips. “Everything I can do with my gun, ey?” Jesse hooks his thumbs around his belt. He cracks a grin, pinching the cigarillo between his teeth. “Awright.” Lightly he wiggles his brows. “You got it, friend.”

The archer draws back. Shit, Jesse thinks. Too suggestive. He shouldn’t have done the brow thing.

Hanzo regards Jesse with suspicion for a few seconds before he mutters: “friend.”

“Yeah.” McCree slowly tilts his head. “Y’know. You’re my friend.”

“Friend.”


“I know what it means.” Hanzo barks, rustled. He withdraws. “Bring your best to the range this evening. I will not go easy on you.”

“Thanks, Shimada-san,” Jesse calls, watching the other man retreat.

McCree shuffles back to his dormitory to pick up his chestplate. He finishes his cigarillo and muses on whether or not it’s unfair that he easily yielded to a man who threatened to kill him the night previous. Over something so silly as his belt buckle, no less. He gets the feeling he might be overthinking all this. Hanzo was drunk; drunkenness, in his experience, makes a man do things he normally wouldn’t do. There’s little more to consider here. Better to put it behind him and see what he can drag out of the bastard while he’s sober.

Absently, McCree wonders if Hanzo was like this as a young man: brusque, alluring, threatening -- a force of nature. Ruthless and handsome, prideful in spades. He should ask Genji sometime.

He’s on his way back to his quarters when he sees warm lights and hears strains of music pouring into the hallway. He pauses at the doorway: Lúcio’s room.

“Hey, how’s it going, Eastwood?” The audio-medic reclines on the cushion of a wicker papasan chair, sonic amplifier playing in his lap. He’s wearing bright yellow joggers and a green tee printed with smiling cartoon cat faces. A pair of spotted frog slippers hug his dangling feet. He grins and lowers his headphones. “How’re you doing, man?”


Lúcio snorts. “What? ‘Fine as frog hair?’ You Southwesterners have some weird sayings.”

“Yeah, sure do. Thought you might like that one.” He darts a quick glance inside. Lúcio’s room is a cheering milieu: bright curtains, lime-colored pillows, photographs and posters of landscapes from his tours around the world. A swath of teal eggshell padding hugs the wall by his console and recording equipment; a stuffed plush in the shape of his treefrog insignia lounges on his mixer and turntables. Hanging above his bed is a neon-yellow flag with the logo of the Brazilian men’s ice hockey team above the words RIO 2056 - GOLD. A myriad of black signatures scrabble the the
Lúcio switches off his amplifier and sits up. “Hey, man, I dunno about you, but I am so glad Winston cancelled sims today. I stayed up all night with Reinhardt and Lena, we were watching Lord of the Rings. I didn’t get any sleep.” He puffs. “I didn’t realize the first two movies were, like, four hours combined.”

“You ain’t ever seen Lord of the Rings?” McCree scratches his jawline. “Dang, that’s a classic.”

“Yeah, that’s what Reinhardt said.” Lúcio bobs his foot. “I really liked that wizard guy, what’s his name -- Gandalf? He was like” -- Lúcio splays his gloved hands out, wiggling his fingers -- “‘you shaaall not paaass’” -- he fists his hands, gesturing as if he’s driving a long object into the ground -- “‘bwyaaa,’ and the demon guy was like, ‘grayaaa,’ and Frodo was like” -- he claps his hands to his cheeks and exaggerates a look of wide-eyed despair -- “‘Gan-daaalf!’” Lúcio slaps his thighs. “It was wild! I didn’t know old movies could be so intense!”

“Yeah, reckon I recall that part, that’s when they’re gettin’ outta the mountain.”

“Damn, and, like -- right after that? When the orcs shoot up that guy, the one guy who says ‘one can’t just walk into Mordor’ --”

“Boromir.”

“Yeah, Boromir.” Lúcio shakes his head. “I almost cried. He didn’t deserve to die like that. He was just trying to help out.”

McCree tries to ignore the flip of his stomach when the mental image darts through his mind of a man descending to his knees, shot full of pale arrows. “Yeah, reckon he was.” He pauses, as if his memory’s been jogged. “Hey, quick question -- you got a pair o’ clippers?”

Lúcio points to his chin. “Like, for your face? Yeah. You need to borrow?”

“Yeah, don’t wanna trouble you. Didn’t bring mine after the recall, needa tame this forest I got growin’ on my face.”

“No problem. Here.” Lúcio hops up; he disappears into his lavatory and returns with a black trimmer. “You need anything else, lemme know.”

McCree thanks Lúcio and treks back to his room. When he finishes trimming his beard, he glances over himself in the mirror. McCree swings his jaw, picks a fleck of grime from the edge of his eye, pinches his septum and wipes beneath his nose. Then he leans in, eyes heavy-lidded, lips wide and smirking. To his reflection, he purrs: “hey. How’re you, Shimada-san? How d’ya like me now? Ain’t a wild face anymore, is it.”

*Maybe a little foolish,* he thinks.

McCree crooks his right hand in an L-shape, jabbing into the glass. “You wanna see what all I can do with my gun, huh?” He wags his brows, grins, blows a puff of air over the tip of his finger. Like smoke off the end of a barrel. “Haha. Yeah. I’m gonna show him.”

This is what he tells himself before he heads off to Range 2 -- where he’s wrung out by Hanzo via the most obnoxious practice session they’ve ever shared. It rapidly devolves from a display of skill into a competition over who is truly the more accurate shot. Hanzo beats him at nearly every spread; Jesse eventually concedes the other man has superior aim just so he won’t waste any more bullets.
They don’t discuss the locker room or the elevator. Not until they are departing for the night, when Hanzo briefly mutters that, by the way, he knows exactly what ‘BAMF’ stands for. Smirking, he adds that Jesse should consider some new acronyms -- perhaps ones that better fit a cowboy who cannot outshoot Robin Hood.

“Meaner than a snake,” he mutters under his breath, trying to shake the feeling that this is all familiar, a warm but peculiar déjà vu.

---

The next morning, Torbjorn asks McCree to accompany Tracer down to the *mercado*, explaining that he needs to hunker down and finish one of Winston’s supply requests for the upcoming mission. McCree agrees; he drives the truck, smokes with the window down, turns the radio to an oldies station. Lena rides shotgun with her feet propped up on the dash.

“So, getting excited about Siberia?” Tracer asks.

“Kinda,” McCree replies, squinting at the road. “First big mission back together as Overwatch, that’s sort of thing you can’t help but get a lil’ excited about.”

“I’ll say. Winston’s been busting his tail day and night trying to get everything set up and ready. It’s like he’s got a contingency plan for everything.”

“He always was a fella who liked to go into things prepared.”

“Really, though. I’m glad he’s doing it. He’s a hundred-percent on bringing Overwatch around again, heroes and all. And starting off in Russia, too. That’s going to be where it counts. Did you hear they’re saying it’s over seventy-five thousand lives lost now in the omnic attacks?”

“Damn. That’s about seventy-five thousand too many.”

“Rather glad we’ll be there soon to keep the number from getting any higher.”

An underground tunnel from the Watchpoint connects to a dirt road that leads into town. The truck bounces as they drive, trailing dust and gravel behind them in tan plumes. McCree relaxes at the sight of the water and vivid blue sky, white buildings encrusting the sea cliffs in rigid ivory rows.

Tracer snorts as they veer down a curve. “Still driving like a bloody maniac, I see.”

“Oh, like you ain’t hell-on-wheels, girl. If you’re such a chicken-shit, put your seatbelt on.”

“Ha.” Lena stretches her arms above her head. “Y’know, I missed you lot. I got to thinking about you all quite fierce sometimes.”

“Didja now?”

She grins; the gold rims of her aviator sunglasses glint with each bump of the ride. “Had some moments in the past five years where I’d think, ‘Boy, I wonder what that ol’ McCree’s getting himself into these days.’”

“Runnin’ from trouble, mostly.”

“Yeah. That was my first guess. That, and: ‘well, knowing him, he’s prob’ly down in New Orleans right now like that one off-site we had a few years back, sweet-talking all the pretty lads at the bar after one too many hand grenades.’”
McCree laughs. “Hey, I remember that trip.”

“I’m surprised you still have brain cells to remember it. Gabriel had to lit’rally scrape you off the street in Jackson Square, we could hear you both singing that one Mexican drinking song three blocks away. The one with all the ‘ay-yai-yai-ing’ in it. You boys were right pissed.”

“Yeah, I’d say we were,” he adds, grinning. “That was the night you and that sweetheart Miss Amélie were designated-drivin’ our dumb asses around. Same trip where y’all did all the translatin’ for us, too, if I recall, when we all went on that haunted house tour.”

Tracer’s reply is tailed by a brief hum of hesitation. “Well.” She flicks a lock of hair off her brow. “Yeah. Her, more than me.”

“Was a real fun time. Should do it again someday.”

“Yeah.” Lena quiets. The radio fills the void of their conversation. McCree wonders which part of what he said cooled her so quickly.

Neither Tracer nor McCree see the white car that has slowly begun to tail them since they’ve entered the town. Nor do they spot that same car parking a few blocks down from the mercado after they go in. Its occupants -- a man and a woman in sleek white suits -- get out and hike up to the parking lot. The woman snaps a flat disc along the truck’s undercarriage. She presses a blue button on the disc before she and her companion quickly depart, unnoticed, while the pair are inside stocking up.

---

They return to base two hours later loaded down with groceries, supplies, and good tidings.

“Butter my bread and call me a biscuit,” McCree announces, beaming, dropping a heavy cardboard box on the kitchen island. “I done struck gold. Y’all come take a gander at this.”

Lúcio, Angela, and Reinhardt are fixing their respective lunches; they draw close with interest to inspect McCree’s treasured haul. He pops the box top, revealing several neat rows of colorful sandwich pastries wrapped in cellophane.

“What are those?” Angela pipes, tilting her head.

“Cakes?” Reinhardt asks.

“Moon Pies!” McCree exclaims. “Y’all ain’t ever had a Moon Pie before?!”

“Pie?” asks Angela, brows furrowing. “This is a pie? It doesn’t look like a pie.”

“All y’all are all in for the treat of your lives,” McCree chatters, taking several of the pastries from the box and stacking them on the table. “Can’t believe my luck. Imagine: the whole dang Atlantic between here an’ the States and, right here on the edge of the Mediterranean, I’d find me an actual honest-to-God box of Moon Pies. Here.” He thrusts a yellow pie at Angela, a pink one at Lúcio, and a brown one at Reinhardt. “Try ‘em.”

Reinhardt unwraps his pie and takes a bite; Lúcio sniffs and pulls off a corner to nibble; Angela turns the unopened pastry over to wrinkle her nose at the nutritional facts.

“Not bad!” Reinhardt announces, flecks of frosting bouncing into his beard.
“It’s one-hundred percent sugar,” Angela says flatly.

“Yeah, it is!” Lúcio cheers, now digging in enthusiastically. “Aw, man, Eastwood. These are really good. I could eat these all day.”

“For the sake of your pancreas and your teeth, please don’t.” Angela hands her Moon Pie to Reinhardt, who immediately starts unwrapping it. “Lena, by the way. Winston has a modification to your accelerator. When you get a chance, come by the medbay so we can install it.”

“Copy that, love!” Lena calls around the refrigerator.

“Oh, by the way, Lúcio.” McCree starts stuffing Moon Pies into the cabinet. “You really wanna enjoy the finer points of them things? Stick it in the microwave for thirty seconds, then give it a try. You’re welcome.”

---

A late August heat wave bakes the Watchpoint. McCree naps through the afternoon in his room with the window open. He dreams about Hanzo: a lurid tableau cobbled together from their fight in the elevator and the shooting match. The dream weaves in physical encounters that didn’t occur on either night but please him nonetheless, especially a tangle where the archer uses a length of his bowstring for a particularly deviant purpose. He wakes with a jolt and a spot of drool on his pillow.

The wall-clock reads 1925. McCree gets dressed and treks to the mess hall under the evening haze. The sky over the water is striped orange at the horizon, softening to a pleasing lavender speckled with early stars. Shorebirds dive around the rocks near the cliffside. McCree pauses to watch them rise and swoop, glassy-black as volcanic stone.

The gunslinger finds the mess hall surprisingly empty: no signs of life, a few dirty dishes in the sink. He reaches into the cabinet for a pink moon pie; he suspects their number dwindled while he slept. Lúcio, no doubt, or Reinhardt.

He digs out the _cezve_ and fills it with water. Once it’s heating on the stove, he roots around a brown bag stowed on top of Angela’s granola bars. He’s unfolding it when he hears something outside of the hall. The noise rises from a murmur, piquing with two male voices arguing in angry Japanese -- one gruff, the other electronic. McCree suspects the latter belongs to Genji.

Hanzo comes stomping into the hall. His bow and quiver are slung over his back; his scarf gleams over his tattooed shoulder. They exchange glances; Hanzo grunts sullenly in greeting to Jesse’s warm, purring ‘howdy.’

“You doin’ alright?” Jesse asks, spooning ground coffee from the bag.

“Fine.” Hanzo stalks to the refrigerator to take a bottle of water. He flips up the cap one-handed, sulk ing down a long drink. Jesse’s task catches his attention. “What are you doing?”

“Makin’ some coffee. You want some?”

Hanzo clucks. “At this hour? No, thank you.” He pads closer, scrutinizing the pot, eyeing its long wooden handle. “I have not seen this fashion of coffee-making before.”

“It’s Turkish-style, Shimada-san. Takes a lil’ more time than a regular brew, but it’s a lot stronger. Better tastin’, too.”

“Takes more time?” Hanzo stares at the heaped spoonful of coffee in Jesse’s hand. “It is not like
“Naw, you gotta boil it. Can’t just drink it like this.”

“Boiled coffee?” Hanzo’s voice hangs with suspicion.

“Yeah, it’s pretty good. Sure you don’t wanna try it? I can make enough for two.” He takes two white espresso mugs down from a cabinet. “They’re lil’ cups, anyway.”

Hanzo huffs. He takes a drink of his water. “Pass.”

“Suit yourself.” Jesse takes the *cezve* off the burner and stirs in the grinds.

Hanzo watches like a hawk. “Drinking strong coffee this late in the evening will rot the lining of your stomach, Yankee-san. You will not sleep, and thus your performance will be worse. You are better off drinking tea.”

“Plenty of time durin’ the day for that.”

“Proper tea,” Hanzo cuts in, nearly frowning. “Not that syrup on ice you have with every meal.”

“Boy, you sure are in a sour mood.” McCree sets the *cezve* back on the burner. He tears open the edge of the moon pie wrapper. “What’s got your feathers all ruffled, Shimada-san?”

Hanzo nurses his water before leaning against the kitchen island. “It is none of your business.”

Jesse shrugs, scratching crumbs off his beard. “Reckon it is, if you’re gonna come in here and take it out on me. What happened? Snap another bowstring?”

“A personal matter, nothing more.”

So it must have been Genji in the hall earlier, bickering with his brother. Jesse hums quietly through a bite of his pie. “Awright, then. I won’t pry.”

Hanzo stares at the pink pastry. “What are you eating?”

“Oh, this here’s a Moon Pie. Rare treat from the South. Can’t believe I found ‘em all the way out here, complete stroke o’ luck.” Jesse digs in the cabinet again. He fishes out a white pie and tosses it to the archer. Fully expecting him to refuse, push it away, scoff in disgust. “Here, try one.”

Hanzo catches the pie. To Jesse’s surprise: he tentatively peels open the wrapper. “It does not look like pie.”

“Angela said the same thing. There’s filling in it, it’s like marshmallow.”

Hanzo sniffs the contents, picks off a chunk, and takes a bite. Jesse watches him register the sweetness, work his jaw, frown over the taste. Then he neatly folds back the wrapper and sniffs it again. He looks back up at the gunslinger with brows raised. “Sugar.”

“Yeah. You like it?” When Hanzo shrugs and continues eating, Jesse cracks a smile. “That one’s vanilla-flavored.”

Hanzo chews thoughtfully. He clucks. “Interesting.”

“Hm?”
“In Japan, we have a similar thing. Moon cakes and the like. Not pies. Nothing like this -- far less sugar than this. They are filled with red beans, sometimes honey. You see them at special occasions. They would be brought out at festivals or weddings for fortune and good luck. It has been a long time since I had one.”

Jesse grins as he sets the **cezve** back for a second boil. The conversation makes him feel light and giddy. “Don’t think I’ve ever tried that before, but I bet it’s pretty tasty. I’m a sucker for sweet stuff.”

“Ah. My brother, as well. He prefers things like this.” Hanzo frowns. He drinks the rest of his water in silence before murmuring: “preferred.”

Jesse isn’t sure how to reply. He pours the coffee from the **cezve** into the mugs. He considers: **good fortune.** He gets an idea. Jesse sips from one mug before extending the second one to Hanzo. “C’mon. Let’s take these outside, go sit somewhere quiet.”

Hanzo stares down at the mug as if the gunslinger has offered him urine. “I told you I did not want any.”

“I’ll drink both, then. Carry it for me, though, will ya? It’ll warm up your hands.”

“My hands are not cold.”

“Ooh, they ain’t?” Jesse sidles past Hanzo, eyes heavy-lidded. Before he can stop himself, he rumbles: “you’re gonna wanna let me be the judge of that.” He ambles out of the mess hall, suppressing a laugh.

Hanzo catches up, toting the mug, moon pie, and a scowl. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothin’. ” Jesse breezes out onto the drone track, grinning, sipping his coffee. A thread of glee tugs at him: Hanzo, at least, seems compliant to follow wherever Jesse is wandering. “Don’t mean a thing, Shimada-san.”

“Do not jest. I am not in the mood for your childish humor.” Hanzo’s mouth is half-full. “Are you implying I have cold hands?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Jesse finishes his moon pie, crumpling the cellophane, stuffing it in his pocket. His tone turns sly. “Maybe show me for yourself.”

“I will happily demonstrate such for you, when my fist makes offensive contact with your scruffy chin.”

“Hey.” Jesse challenges Hanzo with a sharp look as they pass a wide hangar door. “Who’re you callin’ scruffy, now? I’ll have you know: I trimmed.”

“Did you? I could not tell. You still look like a barbarian.”

Jesse rubs the flat of his thumb against his mustache, flicking off a pink fleck of frosting. He mumbles. “Well, dang. And here I was thinkin’ I might have gussied up a little.”

Hanzo sniffs beside him. He accompanies Jesse in silence down the track for a few meters before muttering: “it suits you.”

“Come again?”
“You heard me, Yankee-san. I said, it suits you.” Hanzo smugly nibbles a bite of pie. “A barbarian’s face, for a barbarian man.”

“Well.” Jesse brushes crumbs off his serape. He takes a sip of his coffee. “Guess that’s better than bein’ a fool.”

He is wholly unprepared for what happens next. It startles him more than the elevator, more than his arrows and dragons. The archer scrapes into his next step, tucking down his chin. Then he rolls his tattooed shoulders, tilting back his sable head. A pleasant sound rumbles from his chest. The corners of his mouth rise, softer than his smirk, less cruel. He smiles.

More than that: Hanzo laughs.

“You will always be such,” he says. There it is again: that fondness. Jesse’s ears soften at the pang of endearment that swells in his chest. “Even if you live to be old and wisened, Yankee-san. Perhaps I do not call you such anymore, but it does not change the facts.”

Jesse hides behind his coffee cup. The warmth of the drink barely rivals the glow rising in his stomach; he thinks he could snatch the gold right out of the moon. “Well, I s’pose then it’s just a matter o’ time before you get your facts right and quit callin’ me ‘Yankee-san.’”

“That will not cease, ever.”

“I ain’t a dang Yankee,” McCree laughs dryly. “Yankees are from the north, ain’t nothin’ about me what’s --”

So fast: it happens before he finishes his sentence. Jesse’s coffee flashes a black stripe across his serape when Hanzo abruptly grabs him and shoves him into the hangar wall. The archer buffets his right arm at Jesse’s sternum, bracing him, pressing his back hard into the stone. Jesse struggles by reflex, but Hanzo is stronger. He crushes into the gunslinger at the sternum. The coffee cups roll away; he thinks he heard the porcelain break. Hanzo’s hair flickers at the brim of his hat. He sputters.

“What in the hell --”

Hanzo jams his right palm to Jesse’s mouth, prying two fingers past his dry lips and hooking them in. Jesse’s heart aches all the way to his throat. He squirms against the wall, desperate to adjust, accommodate -- but Hanzo has him squarely pinned. Jesse’s spurs clink and scrape against the rock.

“Shh,” Hanzo hisses. The archer glowers down the length of the tarmac. Jesse can’t fathom why; all he can think of is the leathery taste of Hanzo’s glove brushing his tongue. And make no mistake: those fingers are moving. Hanzo curls them, as if testing his teeth. There’s that smell of soap again -- faintly medicinal, like sage.

Is this is how Hanzo prefers to get things rolling? Jokes, laughter, then jumping straight into rough handling? Jesse prickles. He’s flushed red all over, ready to yield. Hell, sign him up. The wall is a nice place to start. Preferably they’ll get to a bedroom (or storage shed, maintenance closet, whatever-the-hell they find first) sooner rather than later, though, given Lúcio’s preference for skating at night. It wouldn’t be proper to get caught here like a pair of teenagers. Unless he’s into that --

“Don’t move,” Hanzo rasps.

So he’s one of those guys. “Unh-unh,” Jesse replies, attempting to hook his left arm around
Hanzo’s back. He’s close enough to stroke the gold bars of his tattoo when Hanzo full-body presses him back to the wall. A fiery trill shoots up his spine. Jesse swears, muffled into Hanzo’s hand. “Fuhf, baeh, you realleh goh me --”

“I said: do not move!”

“Sweethearhf,” Jesse crackles into Hanzo’s ear. “Jush leggo a minuh --”


Jesse freezes. His eyes dart wildly until he can make out a white shape in his peripheral vision. Something is moving on the far end of the tarmac. Hanzo leans in; his hips grind ludicrously against the gunslinger’s belt. It takes his brain a few addled seconds of misfire before he realizes Hanzo is trying to flatten them into the wall.

“White suit,” mouths Hanzo.

Now the blood rapidly returns to his brain. He spits out Hanzo’s fingers. “What?”

“Vishkar.”

“Shit.” Jesse’s guts turn to liquid. “How many?”

“One. A woman. Armed with a photon pistol.” Hanzo’s breath is hot on his chin. “There is a teleporter.”

“Shit!” Jesse cannot believe it. “They musta snuck it in. Shit!” Hanzo jars him sharply in the chest; he lowers his voice to a weak whisper. “Buncha them are probably already here or got more on the way. Gun’s too loud to take a shot. If I miss, that teleporter could start pourin’ fellas out. You gotta take the shot. Take her out quiet as possible.”

“Stay still. I must get down to shoot. There is just enough clearance.”

McCree watches Hanzo slowly descend to crouch at his feet. He sinks his teeth into his lip so hard that he tastes blood. There is something inherently thrilling (distracting, maddening, damning) about the way Hanzo drops to his knees. It’s absurd: they’re in danger, the base is danger. Maybe it’s because of the danger that he feels like he’s going to catch on fire right here. Hard to tell. McCree flinches and forces himself to focus.

But, honestly: were the fingers in his mouth necessary?

The archer pulls, nocks, and draws an arrow. He aims and fires; the arrow whistles; the agent falls. Alarms bray from above, echoing through the storage bay. Hanzo darts, speeding along the wall, drawing a second arrow as he clears the corner. Jesse hurries with his gun cocked and ready.

They come face-to-face with a second Vishkar agent, frozen beneath the red strobes. He turns just in time to stare down Peacekeeper’s barrel.

“Howdy, pardner!” says McCree before pulling the trigger and bullseye-ing the man right between the eyes.

The agent hits the concrete just as McCree’s comm crackles to life. It’s Winston. “Athena! What’s going on? Report!”

“Intruders detected in Hangar 18,” rings her synthetic voice. “I’m reading both omnic and organic
signals. Twenty-six overall.”

“Vishkar’s here,” McCree radios in. “Shimada and I have their teleporter, we’re taking it --”

McCree whirls, hearing a shout. Three glistening humanoids circle Hanzo at the teleporter. Vishkar Omnic: tall, armored in white, smaller versions of the mech that chased him in China. Hanzo spears the one closest to him with an arrow, fizzling sparks from its corded neck. McCree snarls, aims, and shoots the second one through the head. Hanzo swings his bow to batter down the third; McCree fans the last four bullets of his round into its hull.

Hanzo flicks harsh eyes at McCree. “Yankee-san! The teleporter: assist me.”

Shooting at the teleporter proves fruitless when they discover the transmitter is armored against projectiles. Jesse gets an idea and starts the truck. He backs it up over the teleporter once, twice, three times to crush the gray disc. Its neon-blue beam flickers out.

“Takes care of that,” Jesse yells over the howling alarms and truck radio, which is pumping out an energetic country song. Right as he registers movement behind Hanzo. “Shit! Get in the truck!”

“What?” Hanzo barks.

“Get in the god-damn truck!”

Hanzo looks over his shoulder just in time to see seven more white omnis leaping down the hangar walls. The archer fires an arrow, hitting one of them midair; he skirts the truck to scrabble in through the rolled-down passenger side window. McCree slams his heel on the ignition and speeds out of the hangar just as the ‘bots charge the bumper. Hanzo hangs out the window, scarf whipping; he draws his bow and picks off an omnic dangling from the tailgate. Hails of laser-fire streak past them; the omnis are armed.

“Where the hell did they come from?” Jesse shouts over the guitars twanging out of the truck radio.

“Does it matter? They are here to kill us!”

“How many were there?”

“There are five now!” Hanzo yelps when Jesse hits a bump on the track. He sways to avoid another crackle from the lasers. “Still in pursuit! Moving fast!”

“Can you take ‘em out?” Jesse skids into a turn.

Hanzo lurches, missing his next shot. “If you can cease driving like a madman!” he yells, loading another arrow.

“No promises, Shimada-san!”

This time, Hanzo’s aim holds true. One omnic shatters after it’s struck through the chest. Its compatriots barrel down the pavement over its remains.

Across the comm, Angela calls: “medbay’s in lockdown! Tracer and Winston and I are here! We need defense on the laboratory, they’ll be going for the archive!”

“I’m ON IT!” Reinhardt cheers over the line. “Engaging the offensive! TORBJORN, my friend! ASSIST ME!”
“Roger that!” the engineer replies. “Turrets goin’ online!”

“I’m with you!” Lúcio bursts onto the comm. “Speed-boostin’ to you now!”

“Hold onto your britches,” McCree drawls, yanking the steering wheel, slamming the brakes. “We’re headin’ back up.”

Hanzo braces against the door as McCree whips the truck around at the end of the track. The remaining three omnis charge for the front of the vehicle.

“What are you doing?!” Hanzo rails, loading another arrow.

“I said, hold on!”

“Yankee-san!”

Jesse floors it. The truck tires squeal as he drives straight into the omnis. Laser fire splatters the dash and hood, spidering the windshield with cracks. Jesse leans out the window and fires all six shots in Peacekeeper in retaliation. One omnic crumples; he plows the truck directly into the others. Hanzo ducks just in time to avoid a severed robotic head whizzing past. He strangles a string of curses in Japanese as he clings to the doorframe. Jesse lets out a loud whoop as the truck sails over a dip in the track.

“You have a death wish!” Hanzo beholds him furious, wide-eyed.

“It ain’t our time, sweetheart!”

Now Hanzo bares teeth. “I” -- he draws from his quiver -- “am not” -- and flicks the spear of the shaft, firing a Scatter Arrow at the group of omnis that appear on the track ahead. “Your sweetheart!” Spots of electric-hot light shred the ‘bots in their path. McCree mows down the rest.

They tear past the comm tower just in time to see Reinhardt charging off the second-story lab entrance like a humanoid rocket. He barrels two white-clad Vishkar agents directly into the pavement below, feet from where the trucks screeches to a halt. Reinhardt emerges from a miniature crater left by the impact. The agents do not.

“Exactly where you belong!” the knight proclaims.

“Look out!” Hanzo shouts, leaping from the window. “Up there! Yankee-san!”

Off the bridge of the comm tower leaps a Vishkar omnic roughly the size of the ‘bot from Lijiang. McCree has no idea how they got it through the teleporter; he has no time to guess. It slams into the truck seconds after he rolls from the driver-side door. The vehicle crumples with a metallic shriek.

“Operation Blackhat, switching to neutralization phase,” scathes a voice from within the omnic.

Reinhardt immediately swings his hammer for the mech, connecting with a sickening crunch, steel on carapace. It’s stuck. The knight abruptly roars, unable to dislodge the hammer head. The omnic hatch splits open and shoots a black lump -- no, Jesse realizes: a pilot -- before it starts to beep. The mech’s winged visor rapidly flashes red. McCree bolts up, remembering the hell of turrets at the dead-end street.

*It’s a bomb,* he thinks, and Reinhardt knows it -- realizes it just as the mech begins to shake, rattle, glow. Reinhardt ducks for his shield. The omnic quakes, lurches, ready to blow.
Through the infernal red, a green flash cuts through, neon-bright, blasting the self-destructing omnic into the air with a with a bass boom! It crashes through a satellite dish, sails off the cliff, and explodes over the water.

When the ground stops shaking, McCree looks up to see Lúcio whizzing past with his Crossfade suit thumping. “Gandalf, baby! Get off my track!”

“HA-HA!” Reinhardt rises, raising his massive fist. “Amazing, Lúcio! That’s how it’s DONE!”

McCree gets to his feet. He’s covered in dust and ash; he brushes shattered glass and plastic off his hat and serape. Through the comm, a robotic voice is calling for backup.

“The pilot is still alive,” Genji rattles. “He is fleeing through the loading bay. With his enhancements, he is too fast. Hanzo! Assist me!”

McCree looks up and sees Hanzo scaling the comm tower, darting for Genji’s location.

“Archive’s secure,” Torbjorn calls. “Get those omnics down, bring the agent in alive if you can!”

McCree takes off after Hanzo, reloading Peacekeeper as he races down the track. In the high, hollow ceilings of the loading bay he can hear the echoes of a nearby scuffle; Hanzo’s shadow darts by and disappears just as he registers the sound of swords clashing.

He ducks behind a stack of supply crates. A peek around the corner reveals the pilot agent darting here-and-there in pursuit of Genji; he’s equipped with the same blue footgear as the agent from Lijiang. McCree leans around the crates to try for a clear line of sight. From this distance, he could easily take the agent out with a well-aimed blow. But the agent moves so fast. Genji keeps the pace, just barely. If only he could slow the bastard down.

A whistling noise catches his attention. He glances up to see three of Hanzo’s arrows fly by. The archer is hopping from beam to beam in the ceiling above him, trying to hit the agent and slow him down. His scarf whips with each leap, a lambent flag.

The agent cries: “Tessela! Handle the shooter!”

McCree draws back. He quickly evaluates the surroundings: no sign of omnics, other agents, allies. He turns, readies his gun, and swerves around the crates.

A soft huff flies overhead. Above him, Hanzo yells. Something drops from the rafters; McCree rolls away from the crates, losing his hat in the process. Wide-eyed, he witnesses Hanzo tumbling from a ceiling beam, plummeting -- a sight that freezes Jesse in terror. His mouth dries out; his jaw drops; he blanks, suspended in that fraction of a second where he knows -- without a doubt -- that Hanzo is about to die.

Inexplicably: the archer bounces mid-air. He swings; he’s caught. McCree gasps. Hanzo is tangled in a glowing blue net tethered to the beam. He thrashes wildly. Arrows shower the ground, falling from his quiver. His bow drops.

“Got him, Apexus!” squeals a woman’s voice. McCree sees her: Tessela. The second agent in white, emerging across the distant catwalk. She wields a big gun with a long, wide barrel.

A net, he thinks numbly.

Suddenly Genji makes an unnatural sound, strangled between a shout and a gasp. Jesse hears a loud bang! Genji skids across the ground spread-eagled. McCree jerks back, startled when he sees
Apexus leaping down on him in a jagged blue streak.

“Genji!” Hanzo writhes in the net. His brother releases a ragged cry.

“This is him. Specimen 1193.” McCree can hear Apexus speaking over the shouting. “This is the one who killed her. Tessela, get down here. Come look.”

The gun-agent leaps from the catwalk; McCree can see she has also has a blue pair of accelerators. Springy, she bounds over. The agents crowd over Genji, clean white vultures. “Is it? Yes: it is. The vents on his suit. It’s him.”

Genji bursts out something agonized in angry Japanese. The agents leap back from a spray of shurikens. They close back in a moment later. Inspecting him, taking stock. Tessela draws a photon pistol from her hip holster and aims it at Genji.

Apexus lifts his hand. “Don’t. We’re taking him in alive. Koppal’s orders. He’s valuable.”

“He doesn’t have to be conscious.” She lifts her pistol. “This is for Atraxus.”

Above, Hanzo bellows. “Genji! NO!”

She fires a pulse from the pistol at Genji, blasting him back. White vapor hisses off his chest. He’s twitching.

Hanzo snarls. “Genji! Genji!” He sounds desperate, maddened. “Let him go! Take me!”

Tessela’s visor glints as she lifts her pistol. “Do we need that one?”

“Take me instead!” Hanzo thrashes, screams. “Leave him! Genji, leave him!”

“No.” Apexus kneels. “Kill him.”

McCree sucks in a hard, fast breath. There is Hanzo, in the net, about to die; Genji, smoking on the ground, dying; and the two Vishkar agents, asking to get killed.

And him. And his gun.

And the one thing he does with it that Hanzo has yet to see.

This is how it starts: his heartbeat gives way to a tympanic roll, the first rumbles of an earthquake, the clang of a New Mexico church bell. The hammer of a hard wind down a red, rugged canyon. Solid in his mind, a footprint in the sand. Her voice comes next, soft and vaguely sad. It’s not an easy technique to learn. It’s dangerous. You get a few precious seconds, and that’s it.

McCree’s chin drops as his lungs lift and eyes narrow. The blood in his veins freezes, whooshing to a standstill. Everything slows. Everything greys. Once: he swears he saw a tumbleweed. It didn’t stop his marks from dying.

It’s all in the eye. Not the hand, not the gun, not the trigger. It isn’t even in the bullet, cowboy. It’s the eye that kills them.

Pinpoints contract in his pupils, red as blood, red as hell.

You’re going to kill them -- every single one of them you line up. Go into it accepting that. No sniper won a war firing flowers out of her barrel.
She always had a way with words.

Below her mantra forms the prelude of a choir, a thousand voices. Amari’s voice practically soars: hawk-like, clarion-clear, a single sound. Richer than heaven, loud, one solid peal. The roar chops, segmented by the snapping of a metronomic pulse. He scans Tessela and Apexus; they’re healthy marks, winded but whole. He needs to see the spots in their skulls he’ll hammer through, rapid-fire. Then they’re ready to die. Step right up. Say goodnight.

_Same principle, cowboy. Say a prayer, if you care about that sort of thing. Where I come from, peace never came without killing those who didn’t want it. So, watch me. Aim with your heart. Kill with your eye._

He lifts his gun. He braces his left arm as if it’s whole again -- one piece, all flesh. Suddenly alive. He looks down Peacekeeper’s barrel.

_Pull the trigger with your soul._

The clock is ticking. It’s time.

“Draw,” he says, firing three times, dead-eye hitting both agents in the head.

The agents crumple. Hanzo’s net snaps like a whip, slashed by the third shot. He swings, a blue pendulum, and then breaks free -- stifling a grunt of shock when he lands cat-like on his toes.

The world around Jesse spins. He lowers Peacekeeper before bolting to the cyborg’s side. Hanzo is beside him in a flash. Genji groans. He’s alive. The green vents on his chest and shoulders are battered and smoking. Blood and black liquid puddle at his sides.

“Mercy!” McCree blurs into his comm. “Genji’s hurt. You needa break lockdown now, we gotta get him help!”

Hanzo is already lifting his brother at the shoulders. “Help me.”

“Be careful, we needa get him stable.”

“Help me, damn you! Help me carry him!”

“Alright! Shit! Hold on!” Jesse’s head threatens to swim. The shots are still ringing in his ears. His vision frays at the edges when he stoops to hoist Genji’s legs.

They get Genji to the medbay in a blur. Jesse struggles down the hallway; Hanzo moves so much quicker than him that he nearly drags. He registers Winston’s huge flank and Angela’s blonde halo. Then there’s Hanzo yelling (why is he always doing that) and Tracer’s soprano, and Torbjorn on the comm (“the point is secure, area is clear”) and they’re carrying Genji away and Hanzo is trying to follow and Winston’s pulling him back. And Angela’s saying something reassuring (and then she’s gone, and Genji’s gone), the comm’s still going off (“Lúcio’s confirmed the teleporter’s down, but our satellite blew”) and he backs out of the din and noise to the hallway, slumps against the wall, shutting his eyes, wishing for silence, wishing the bullets would stop ringing, ricocheting, hammering in his head.

_Good shot._

He doesn’t know exactly how much time passes before a sharp shove catches his shoulder. Someone pulls him from the wall, yanking his shoulders. He stumble forward.
“Yankee-san.” It’s Hanzo. “Genji is alive. They are seeing to him right now.”

“Good.”

“You saved him.” His imperious voice has dwindled to a rasp. “You saved us both.”

“Um.” Jesse squints. “Yeah.” Hanzo is right in his face; those dappled brown eyes gleam in front of him, sleek as almonds. Too dark to be almonds, though. Coffee, maybe -- or chocolate. Jesse smiles fondly: moon pie eyes. “I was just doin’ my thing, y’know?”

“Yankee-san, how did you do that?” Jesse really wishes Hanzo would stop shaking him; his skull feels like it’s practically splitting open. “How did you kill them both and shoot down the net? How? You have never done that before. I have never seen such. Your gun is not capable of such a thing.”

Jesse holds up a palm. The world needs to stop spinning; his head needs to stop hurting. He braces his hands on his knees. “I need a minute. Can you give me a minute?”

Hanzo calls him a sharp word in Japanese. “Listen to me!” He fists his hands in Jesse’s serape, hoisting him up. “You saved my life! You saved my brother’s life! Answer me, fool! How did you do it? What was that? How did you do that with your gun?” When Jesse does not respond, he rails, clutching him: “answer me!”

Jesse’s head lolls back against the wall. He looks down; the archer glares up. He’s outright snarling. The bullets bounce off the confines of Jesse’s brain, hollow-point and ringing, but he’s just level-headed enough to make another one of his fantastic realizations. An executive decision of sorts, the finality of all the ones accepted before now.

Bristling, fuming, nigh spitting in his face: Hanzo Shimada is the most beautiful thing he has ever seen.

He lifts his arms. The archer freezes. Hanzo coils tight in Jesse’s grasp, rigid as a bar. Jesse pulls him closer. Hanzo tugs, on the edge of resisting.

“What are you doing,” he strangles out, tightening his grip on the red serape.

“Gettin’ my minute.” Jesse’s cheek presses into Hanzo’s brow. The man fits his arms so well -- all stock and solid weight, something satisfying to embrace. He did not dream it would be this fulfilling. His imagination came up short.

“Stop this.”

“God-damn, you’re meaner than a hornet. Hold on for a second, will you?”

“I said, stop this!” And then, softer than Jesse’s ever heard him speak: “you are being strange.”

“Ain’t you ever heard o’ gratitude?” Jesse drawls against the sable fans at Hanzo’s temple; he picks up a new, faint scent. Oil, maybe, or another soap. “Son of a gun. You’re a real asshole, you know that, right?” Jesse can’t say where any of his words are coming from, but he likes them nonetheless. He likes Hanzo too, with his warm smell and close breath and powerful body. More than he wants to admit with his ringing ears and gunshot skull. “Alright. Bless your heart.” Jesse releases him. Lets him go. Back to his hideaways, his cliff-side escapes. He doesn’t want to, but he must. Just when he thinks he’s got the archer eating out of his hand, he bolts.

Yes: bolts. He should be bolting now. That’s what Hanzo does. Dragons, nor their keepers, are
very stationary. He is still here. Why hasn’t he run?

“Go on, now,” Jesse mutters. “Get.”

Hanzo runs his fingertips down the rough red wool covering his chestplate. He says nothing. Jesse’s stomach inadvertently flips. So gentle.

“Look, I said,” he repeats, clearer this time: “get.”

“I owe you a debt,” Hanzo replies, rough as stone.

“We can talk about this later,” Jesse answers. Hanzo's so stiff, as always. When will he lighten up?

“I will ensure that it is paid.”

“C’mon, Shimada-san, it ain’t nothin’, I swear.”

“This is a matter of honor!”

He means it in jest, completely and totally: “then gimme a kiss.”

Hanzo stares at him in shock. “Are you mocking me?”

“I told you, it ain’t nothin’, now take off, will ya? I needa get my hat. I needa find the others, Winston, Reinhardt --”

Too fast. Should have seen it coming. Jesse feels the sting of the slap before he registers the sound; Hanzo’s gloved hand cracks his chin. Jesse reels, gasps, shivers. It’s going to draw blood.

The kiss, though. It draws a lot more out of him than he expects.

He replays it in his mind again and again for the rest of the night, days afterward -- weeks, months, years. It’s awkward but visceral, the way Hanzo seizes his mouth, how he grabs and pushes into him. He kisses like he shoots: whole body, no physicality shirked, not an angle unconsidered. Like he’s never done it before and is giving it his all -- or like he’s done it a million times and wants this one to be noteworthy. It doesn’t last and there's no opportunity to reciprocate. It’s a weapon gesture, meant to pierce. Hanzo kisses him. Not the other way around.

He retreats. Jesse starts. Hanzo’s eyes are heavy-lidded, soft. He fumes.

“The hell,” Jesse barks, but Hanzo turns. He disappears into the medbay. Jesse stares after the doors, stuck against the wall. Shaking, rubbing his mouth. Sucking in a deep breath, wobbling with half a mind to go after him, clanking the first step. Bullets still clatter in his red ears.

Jesse stops. No: that was final. This is not the time.

He’s going to get his hat. Maybe smoke. Maybe keel over.

Jesse pushes off. He stumbles down the hall.

Right past Lúcio: crammed into a doorway, watching the whole time. Eyes wide, gawking, afraid to interrupt.

Silently mouthing: *hooo-lyyy-shiiit.*
- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Tom, Fig, Penna and Entropy for beta-reading and letting me bounce snippets off them. And to the creative Andrew for lending me a certain Vishkar agent name.
- Not a ref, per se, but I imagine this is a good fit for what's playing on the truck radio.
- I feel so trite putting all the action at the end of each chapter. I guess I should switch that up in the next one...
- You can follow me on Tumblr.

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

To everyone who commented on my last chapter: thank you so much for your kind words and thoughts. I am completely sorry I did not respond to them individually -- there were so many, and I wanted to get this chapter out of my head and onto text ASAP. Please know that I read them all and I'm super grateful for each one. Your best bet to have any questions answered about HtF are to send them to me over on my Twitter and Tumblr! I really love hearing from you and cannot stress enough how deeply touched I am that so many people have found joy in this silly lil' work.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

流れに棹さす

*nagare ni sao sasu* - “to thrust a pole in the flow”

A proverb mistakenly interpreted as “to resist change.”

The ‘pole’ in the proverb is meant to evoke the kind used to navigate a boat; a tool to move with the flow, not defy it.

---

Hanzo wakes to the glow of the Gibraltar sun. He gets out of bed seconds after opening his eyes. There is no tossing or yawning when the dragon rises at dawn; he is either awake or asleep, no languid in-between. Nor does he move sluggish. He is alive the moment he stands.

Clad in a crestless *kyudo-gi*, he surveys his borrowed room. Four gray walls box him in; sheetrock panels frame a steely composite floor glossed to a weak shine. There is one window by the lavatory; a closet; an orange plastic trunk between the console and the dresser. A wide rubber mat covers the ground between the bunk and the door. Hanzo keeps his habitat intentionally spartan: no decor or ornamentation, no extraneous furnishings, no clutter. Storm Bow rests hooked to the side of his bunk, quiver leaning beside it, *yugake* gauntlet within arm’s reach. His scarf rests folded on the dresser, another spot of color in the drab dorm.

The fresh, new daylight readies him to challenge another miserable day head-on. In defiance against the forces that keep him here, tangled in a nebulous web. Tethered to questions to which he has no answer: *what* -- and then, bitterly, *why?*

Hanzo kneels on the mat. He settles facing the blank wall and doorway, spine rigid and shoulders square. He sits this way for a long time. He is not meditating; his brain is very much alive, running dynamic, taking in his environment inch by inch. Even in combat he cannot embrace a true void of thinking. He must follow the rote process to survive, to win. His mind blanks only when he shoots.

This morning he thinks of the same thing he thought of the day before, and the day before that. His brother Genji heals in the Watchpoint medbay. Three days have passed since the Vishkar attack and the surgery to repair the damage done to his chest cavity and dorsal vents. The Swiss physician believes he could be released as early as tomorrow. He will survive. For this, the dragon is glad. Deeply glad -- the kind he cannot describe with words, a gratitude that resonates like wind at the bottom of a hill or mountain. Once (he reflects, a sudden yank of memory) he traveled with his father to Kyoto on a jet -- the biggest he’d ever seen. The hum of the massive engines soothed him
to a lull, an eventual drowsiness, for which he was immensely grateful. That is how the gratitude feels: vast, calming, supportive beneath his slender feet.

He was still a child then -- six or seven years old. Clutching at his seat, afraid of heights. He remembers how much he loved that trip: the cobblestone streets in Miyagawa-cho, the neon lights, the shishi-odoshi clicking outside of their ryokan. The pretty maiko laughing at dinner, gathered around him like living flowers. Patting his head, filling his cup, cooing dove-like: Shimada-sama has the most handsome son! Such eyes! Such cheeks! The face of a little lord!

And then Genji, the noisy sparrow. He remembers his brother running up and down the hall with his toy sword, ripping the shōji, screeching until their father finally corralled him and took the blade away. Ruining everything, as usual. A constant nuisance.

Hanzo inhales deeply and exhales through his nostrils. He closes his eyes.

What is he doing here? Why did he stay?

He ties back his hair and strips down to begin daily exercise on the mat. Eight rigorous steps repeated over and over remind his body of its purpose: to move and strike as a weapon, in all things. By the end, he’s sweating. He showers, wrings out his hair, redresses. He needs new clothes; the embroidery and sleeve seams in his kyudo-gi are coming loose. Hanzo refuses to show himself looking like a beggar. When Genji is better, he will have to ask him for assistance in acquiring more things to wear.

Hanzo turns to look at the plastic trunk. He stares at it for longer than he likes.

He could ask the fool. That is an option. In fact: it’s probably the wiser one, given Genji’s condition. Yankee-san has acquired provisions for him before, even the complex components for his Scatter Arrows. It should be no arduous task for him to find a shop or tailor. For a moment, Hanzo considers it. He almost goes over to the trunk to lift the lid and look inside, knowing its contents would convince him.

Then he remembers the hallway outside of the medbay. The hatless head, the red cloak, the sudden embrace of strong arms. The slap. The appalling, infuriating kiss; the taste of saliva tinged with smoke. The thousand slaps that should have come after it, almost came. Anger simmers in his guts.

No: he won’t ask the fool. Not about this, not anytime soon.

Annoyed, Hanzo combs a snag from his hair. He looks at the wall-clock: 0648. Far too early to be thinking about this man, who usually does not occupy his thoughts until noon or later. His mornings are reserved for his brother alone, proof of his dedication to this so-called reconciliation. It unsettles him to feel the fool creeping further into his ceaseless thoughts. A bad omen, he thinks. One that he hopes does not bear fruit.

He hasn’t seen Yankee-san since the attack. Not necessarily out of avoidance, though Hanzo is glad to evade him. All standard operations at the Watchpoint have been thrown out of whack since the Vishkar attack. There have been no communal dinners, no range training sessions, no garden-watering and late-evening talks. Everyone is focused on repairs and security; thus, he reasons the fool must be occupied, too. Hanzo has only just recently returned to some semblance of normal routine since the attack, given Genji’s progress, so he prepares himself for the cowboy encounter that will inevitably come to pass. He envisions a moronic interlude in which the bastard comes by with his hat and his drawl and his lips and his bizarrely powerful gun. Wheedling him about some inane topic that means little and matters less: movies, country music (ugh!), or crossword puzzles.
Hopefully not the kiss, which Hanzo would like to forget altogether, and cannot.

The archer dons his quiver and straps Storm Bow to his back. He treks across the Watchpoint to the medbay, avoiding Hangar 18. The maintenance drones have yet to scrub the black spot off the concrete from where the Vishkar agents shot Genji. He won’t go in until it’s gone.

The Swiss doctor greets him at the medbay. Hanzo can tell by her thin smile that she’s still wary of him. A fitting regard, he thinks, from the woman who turned his kindred into an automaton. She is the last person on this rock to whom he intends to warm.

“Genji is asleep right now,” she informs him crisply. “I’ll be in within the quarter hour to take his vitals and change his coolant. You may see him until then if you like.”

Of course: she’s metering their time. Still suspicious of him, perhaps even protective, like she was when he was first brought here months ago. Could it be possible to like her any less?

Hanzo sits at his brother’s bedside. Genji’s visor rests on a nearby tray. Hanzo reflects that Genji always did look calm when he slept. Boyish, even -- a face that could belong to an innocent, were it not for the scars mottling his nose and cheeks.

Change his coolant. What a bizarre thing to say. As if Genji is a machine, or a vehicle -- incongruous to the body lying limp upon the bed.

He tries not to think about the net. Or the agents in their pressed white suits, standing over Genji, speaking in voices urgent with malice. They were going to take his brother away. They were going to cut him open. Experiment on him. They meant to take a dragon captive and turn him into a specimen. Just as his anger piques, a soft voice reminds from the back of his mind: all of which he has known before, because of you.

Hanzo digs his fingers into his synthetic knees to keep from shaking. When he hears Mercy coming to the partition, he’s already up on his feet. He doesn’t want to give her the satisfaction of asking him to leave.

In the mess hall, he finds the British woman, Lena, showing around a new recruit: a plump girl with round cheeks, button nose and large, dark eyes. Lena introduces her as Mei-Ling Zhou, an Overwatch climatologist, recently arrived to assist with the upcoming mission to Siberia. She wears a sky-blue coat, pink trousers, and thick, fur-lined boots. Her sleeves are embroidered with flowers and ideograms in cool pastel rose. A satchel shaped like a polar bear hangs off her back, dangling with crystal keychains. He can smell her plum-blossom perfume from the doorway. Her coloring startles Hanzo; so soft against the Watchpoint’s stark iron tones. Everything about her is comfortingly feminine. Mei smiles, bows, apologizes for interrupting his morning. To his surprise: she speaks good Japanese. The introduction nearly cheers him. Not quite enough.

Hanzo eats eggs and rice alone on the comm tower. A pair of small black birds chirp around the lip of the ledge. He flicks them a few grains from his bowl.

His brother sits here with him almost every day. He remembers their conversation on the evening of the attack. It began like most of their meetings: amiable, tacitly fond, pulsing with nostalgia. Genji’s strange new body has not dulled his wit. He still jokes and prods, whimsical at times and outright funny at others.

“And Takeshi-san,” he had prompted, lapsed into the comfort of their native tongue. “Father’s barber. The one who used to sneak us candy. Did you ever find out what happened to him?”
“That old fart.” Hanzo snorted. “Last I heard, he screwed up by slitting the wrong throat. Had a guy sitting in the chair, mistook him for the target. The fellow he offed by mistake was from a good family, which only made it worse when he had to answer for it.”

“Bad luck.”

“Yes. Big mess. It was in the news.”

Genji laughed. “A shame. I liked him.”

“You would. He favored you more than I.”

“He did my hair before my first year at university. You remember. The green?”

“The green!” Hanzo burst out. “Ugh! That was horrendous. I still cannot believe Father let you get away with it. You looked like a radish with a leafy top.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. It was amazing.” Genji swept his hand over his visor, perking his shoulders, feigning the motions of someone patting a coif. “The ladies didn’t mind. They ate the radish all up.”

After they finished laughing, Hanzo realized he had forgotten laughter -- the full, open-mouthed, deep belly pleasure of it. Genji drew it out of him time and time again.

He drew out things that were not funny, too.

“Yuki,” he asked after a long silence. “What happened to her?”

Hanzo picked a rock out of the ridge of his foot. “After I left, they took her in. They wanted to make sure she didn’t know anything, that she wasn’t involved in my departure. Then they let her go. She was lucky, honestly, that the hit on me didn’t extend to her. I’m sure it all terrified her, because she moved from Hanamura. About as far as she could get. I was wandering in Iwate four years ago and saw her at a marketplace in Ōfunato. In the middle of fucking nowhere, there she was. It was like seeing a ghost.”

“Did she see you?”

“No, thank God. I don’t know what I would have done if she had.” He shook his head. “She had a child with her.”

“Boy, or girl?”

“It looked like a son. Couldn’t have been more than five or six. He was holding her hand. I didn’t see a husband, but who knows.”


And then there were the bad things: frustration, guilt, and then the guilt over feeling frustration in the first place. The conversation turned to Overwatch and their allies, comments about his potential joining, which drove Hanzo to derision.

“You train with them every day,” Genji remarked, contemplative. “You fight beside them, you offer them your wisdom and expertise. They trust you, Hanzo. It surprises me that you still don’t consider taking up their cause.”

“And what cause is that?” Hanzo asked. “To shield the innocent? To protect the world? To be a
“A better question, Hanzo: why not start fighting for them now?”

He did not have an answer. Nor did he respond to Genji’s assertive belief that he could. Hanzo struggled to accept what Genji so openly embraced: that he was whole again, gifted with a second chance at life. That Hanzo deserved to move on -- to forgive himself for the past ten years and the day that brought them to pass. Round and round they went, more and more abrasive at one another with each topic. Grumbling like old men, then squabbling like young.

He wishes he had stopped their argument before it became a fight. A discussion about Zenyatta was the final straw. Genji made the umpteenth request for his brother to sit and hear the teachings of his sensei, hoping he would find in them an understanding of peace. Hanzo refused. Genji persisted. Hanzo turned adamant; Genji chided him for living backward in a life constantly moving forward. Hanzo accused him of knowing nothing of how he’d lived, much less the truth that living was his burden. The elder brother left first; the younger came scolding after. All the way to the mess hall, where he ended the fight with parting words that sting Hanzo’s ears even now.

“A stream cannot change its course if it is a pool.”

Hanzo lowers his bowl. Zenyatta is there. He hears the tell-tale whirring, knows he’s floating nearby as if suspended by the wind. He won’t give the omnic the satisfaction of looking into his slitted eyes. If they’re actually eyes, anyway. Hanzo isn’t convinced an omnic understands the concept of sight the way a living thing would.

He does not respond. The awful robot cannot read minds, but Hanzo is disturbed nonetheless.

“Furthermore, if the stream does flow,” Zenyatta continues in his deep, resonating voice, “it is always wise to know where the rocks are. Words of wisdom, passed to me by my teacher, and through me unto my pupils.”

“I do not seek your company,” he grunts. “Reconsider whatever spiritual chicanery you came to flaunt at me, omnic. I will have none of it today.”

“Then perhaps there is hope you may hear it tomorrow,” Zenyatta replies, almost sing-song. “Your brother believes so. It is a mantra by which he lives. A wish for true reconciliation, and peace between your hearts.”

“Be silent.” Hanzo bristles. “What sort of mentor are you, to so brazenly speak on my brother’s behalf when he is not present?”

Zenyatta lets out a metallic whirr. “One can be many things, Shimada Hanzo. Especially in the eyes of others.”

“You are implying something. Already, I do not like it. As I said: reconsider.”

“Time passes. Seasons change. I am more than a mentor to Genji. I am his friend.”

Hanzo can hardly contain his revulsion. “Do not pride yourself on the belief that you know anything of him.” He flicks the tail of his scarf off his shoulder. “Beyond such, do not dare to even assume that you know anything of me.”

“I know one thing, and that is that I know nothing.”
Hanzo rises without another word. He leaves Zenyatta, scaling down the comm tower and hopping to the ground. He storms down the track towards the dormitories, ignoring a distant wave from Torbjorn, who is repairing the satellite dish with help from Reinhardt. Hanzo only pauses as he’s turning the track corner near the Swede’s garden, where he glances for sight of a red cloak and hat. No one is there. Inexplicably: his mood worsens.

Where is Yankee-san? Usually the dolt is awake by now, lingering by the boxes with his offensively strong coffee, smoking, sniffing the flowers. Idling. Wasting time. What is he doing this morning that occupies him so? What has he been doing for the past few days?

Who cares, he tells himself. And then, wholly convinced: not I.

Resigned to find some respite, Hanzo climbs the stairs near the fuel depot and hikes the rocky trail up the cliff. The sun bakes down on the flat precipice where he practiced archery before Range 2. Ships dot the horizon in black spots; the Spanish coast cuts a jagged white line into the slate-blue sea. Hanzo remembers the jet engines, the old fear of heights. He tests his synthetic ankles, feeling the whirr of the muscle strands when he lowers to the ground. Storm Bow cradles in his lap; he takes out a single arrow from his quiver. He looks out over the vista with the fletching in his palms. He sits here for a long time.

Then he closes his eyes and calls for them on the wind.

Their arrival begins with a trickle against his senses. A low whistle on the breeze rises to a hum. Hanzo worries for a split-second that it will end here -- that it’ll be like all those times in years past where they decided not to come. But his dread evaporates when he hears the roar. All around him the air comes alive, fanning him in sheets like rain from a typhoon. The epiphany sweeps his mind just as they take form.

There they are -- there, that is their signal, that is how he knows they’ve returned. The light bursts, warping. Bright blue, soaring, searing around him in cosmic coils. Their emergence from the nether fills him with a novel awe.

The Shimada dragons greet their master with seething wild eyes.

“You are here,” he says aloud.

Their breath shudders in halting, inhuman huffs. As if to say: we are.

“Before,” continues Hanzo, “when I was lost, you would not come to me. Two years I wandered after I killed my brother, and you denied me. When I was prepared to lay down my life to make amends for his murder, as what is right by honor, you returned.” Hanzo watches them cross and overlap, tails lashing, whiskers trailing like celestial ribbons. “You would not let me die. You would not let me rest. You willed me to honor him in other ways than death.”

The dragons lope the sky in slow, silent circles.

“And now, you come. More powerful than ever. I have never known a time in my life when you were so strong.”

He cannot figure out why they’ve gotten more powerful -- or maybe he can, he isn’t sure. His reunion with Genji could be what has bolstered the dragons. Such arcane creatures were meant to live in harmony with their own, ruling side-by-side in all things. It could be some alignment of the planets and moons. Maybe both, maybe neither. Hanzo does not care. He has long since given up on terrestrial explanations for otherworldly power. He knows better than to apply reason to the
work of gods.

Hanzo inhales through his lips, exhales through his nostrils. The dragons are listening; the sea is watching.

“I am not strong,” Hanzo confesses. “I nearly lost him. Right before my eyes, he fell. He was going to die. I could do nothing. I was powerless. I have known weakness before, but never like this.” He lifts his chin. “Is this my punishment?” And then, with more agony than he means to show: “will it be like this, for the rest of my days?”

The dragons close in around him, silent and serene, undulating in the wind like starry flags. Hanzo wants them to reply. He knows they won’t. The dragons have never been very forthcoming; they show rather than tell.

“What am I doing here?” he asks aloud before they leave him. “Why did I stay?”

No answer. Hanzo sighs.

As the fool often says: it was worth a shot.

---

After a noon meal, Hanzo explores. He hikes and climbs around the cliffs, checking for signs of disturbance. Over the past two months, he’s memorized the routes taken by Athena’s drones and security sensors. Today he finds one knocked over by the wind and decides to bring it in for repair. On his way down the cliff, he spots a gull’s nest with two ugly gray chicks. Hanzo leaves for them the last strip of tuna jerky from his lunch.

Winston thanks him for retrieving the drone. He engages the archer in an awkward conversation about the upcoming mission to Siberia; the ape intends to continue as planned despite the attack at the Watchpoint. Hanzo is doubtful, but Winston assures him the best course of action is to move forward.

“With your help, I know we’ll be able to commit the effort that the Russian Defense Forces need right now,” he says. “You’ve done a lot for us, Hanzo. I don’t want to stop now and put all your hard work on hold.”

Hanzo regards Winston with a narrowed eyes. “You will be inviting aggression from your enemies. If the Vishkar intervene to sabotage the mission, innocent lives could be lost in the counter-attack. That will bode ill for a return of Overwatch.”

Winston grins. “I don’t think we need to worry about Vishkar getting in our way. You’ll see soon. I’ll be pulling together a briefing within the next two days when our resources are ready.”

Hanzo grunts. “I shall be there.”

“Great to hear.” Cheered, Winston resumes typing on his keypad before looking up, as if prompted: “Hey, I’m really sorry about Genji, by the way. I’m glad he’s going to be alright.”

Hanzo departs without offering a reply.

He practices through another night alone at Range 2, finding it harder to concentrate than usual. He imagines his brother sleeping in the medbay, hovered over by Mercy with her quiet steps and unnatural beauty. Then his mind wanders to Zenyatta and further into anger. The omnic goes with Genji on some days to meditate for hours on the cliffs. It annoys Hanzo that his brother spends
such time with his mentor, but he finds it further insulting that Genji considers this to be precious
time, non-negotiable. Hours when he is not to be disturbed. Hanzo is never invited; he feels keenly
left out, even though he’d never accept were he solicited. The last time they went, Hanzo felt so
sick with loathing that he dug out an unopened bottle of sake that Yankee-san procured for him
months earlier. He drank to drown his anger; it floated to the surface like a salted egg. Hanzo
cannot remember exactly how he wound up in the showers at Range 1, nor when Yankee-san
wandered in, gawking -- clanking about like a dimwitted schoolboy.

Which is how Hanzo imagines the fool would look now, if he wandered into the range through the
big bay doors. Spurs jingling, belt buckle flashing. Grinning wide at Hanzo from that shaggy tan
face. He glances away from his targets as if he expects him to appear. Summoned by the thought,
perhaps -- like the English idiom Hanzo once forced him to explain: speak of the devil.

The devil does not show. Hanzo shoots poorly; he snaps an arrow in half after a particularly bad
spread, chides himself for losing his temper. Even tea fails to calm him. He goes to sleep frowning.
Three days free of the fool, and he feels even more agitated than he did after the scene outside the
medbay. Utterly unacceptable.

Hanzo dreams about Miyagawa-cho and the teahouse maiko. One of them is wearing that stupid
red cloak over her kimono. When Hanzo demands she remove it, he’s politely informed that it’s
called a serape before she gives him a sharp, smoky kiss.

---

Genji is awake and sitting up the next morning when Hanzo arrives at the medbay.

“Dr. Ziegler said it’s been about four days since it happened,” he says softly. “I don’t remember
much. Only that the Vishkar had some kind of weapon designed to damage my regulatory systems.
I overheated and slowed down.” He stares at the ceiling. “She thinks they must have studied me
after the battle in Lijiang. Analyzed the alterations done to my body.”

“They meant to take you alive,” Hanzo replies grimly. “To study you further. They stood over you
and spoke of it. Vengeance, too, for a comrade you slayed.”

Genji leans forward and winces. Hanzo swoops in to steady him. Quickly Genji lifts his hand,
signalling I’m fine, rolling his arm and flexing his neck. He wheezes out a sigh. Hanzo thinks he
sounds utterly exhausted.

“It was McCree who saved us,” he says. “Dr. Ziegler told me after I woke up. I must see him soon
to thank him.”

“Yes. It was Yankee-san. He did something with his gun --”

Genji interrupts, shaking his head. “I don’t think we should call him by that nickname anymore.”

Hanzo stifles a bark of laughter. “A funny thing for you to say, considering you came up with it.
Remember, you said: people from Texas hate being called a ‘yankee’ --”

“Yes, but consider.” Genji faces Hanzo with solemn eyes. “We owe him our lives. We must honor
this debt.”

The slow hum of gratitude rises in Hanzo’s chest, but he suppresses it. “It is not a debt that he will
take seriously. I have already seen such.” Hanzo growls, remembering the kiss: “he is a fool.”

“You seem so convinced.”
“I have spent enough time around him to convince myself so.”

“And yet he saved your life, and mine as well. Foolish actions, perhaps, but ones that speak of something more than just himself.” Genji tilts his head. “Do you ever wonder what he must think of you?”

How many times in one week will he hear questions he cannot answer?

Hanzo is leaving the medbay later when he spots the hat resting on an exam tray. He recognizes the badge and bullets clipped into the band. Before he can stop himself, he’s wandering towards it, reaching for the ragged brim. Wary to lift it, as if something dangerous might be hiding beneath it. A scorpion (of which the fool talks incessantly about encountering in the desert), or a snake.

Of course: that creepy doctor comes by right when he picks it up.

“Oh, he left his hat!” she says behind Hanzo, nearly making him jump. “Poor Jesse. Ah, I’ll have to comm him and let him know where it is.”

Hanzo fixes Mercy with sharp eyes. “He was here?”

Mercy shrugs. “Oh, I’m sure he’ll be back to get it. It’s practically inseparable from his head.” Her smile does not reach her eyes. “You know, he’s worn it for as long as I’ve known him? Back when I first joined Overwatch, they were taking me on a tour of the Swiss headquarters and we passed him in the hallway. He told me ‘howdy’ and tipped his hat, and I thought I was seeing things, because I could not believe there was an actual cowboy on the base --”

“Did something happen to him?”

Mercy squints at his interruption. “Hm?”

“He treasures this thing. It is unlike him to forget it. Why was he here?”

“Patient confidentiality prevents me from discussing medbay visits, Mister Shimada,” she replies crisply. “I’m sure you understand.”

Just as he thought: wary. Suspicious. Apparently her protection extends to the fool. It irritates him more than the fondness in Genji’s voice every time he brings her up.

Hanzo picks up the hat. He stares Mercy down. “I will take it to him.”

“It’s fine, Mister Shimada, I can just ring him on the comm.” Before she can finish, Hanzo turns to depart. Mercy persists; an edge touches her voice. “He might be asleep. If you insist on taking it to him, please give him some space.”

Hanzo leaves the medbay without another word. He turns a scathing stare to the place by the wall where Yankee-san slumped after the attack, hanging his head and muttering. Perhaps he came by to visit Genji before he woke, or to have something in his left arm checked. He is always complaining about the circuits in that limb.

Give him some space. What does she even mean? Does he not give the fool plenty of that already?

Outside, he encounters Lúcio aiding Reinhardt with a load of supply crates. Hanzo is surprised when the musician greets him warmly. Normally he is not so enthusiastic when they see one another in passing.
“Heeey, Mister Shimada!” Lúcio calls. “How’re you doing today, man?”

“Fine,” Hanzo replies, nodding to Reinhardt, who waves. “Genji is awake.”

Both men notice the hat clutched in his right hand. They exchange quick, light glances. Reinhardt beams at Hanzo. “That is wonderful news! You must be so relieved!”

“A weight is lifted from my shoulders,” Hanzo replies. He squints at Lúcio, who is grinning ear to ear. “The mission to Siberia is still on. I do not know how I feel about such a course of action.”

“It is a risky one,” Reinhardt agrees. “I do not like it myself. We are better off taking some more time to reinforce the Watchpoint before sending so many valuable agents out into the field.”

Hanzo hooks the hat into his obi and motions to Reinhardt, a wordless offer to assist with their task. “Perhaps Winston will listen to a unified opposition instead of individual voices.”

“Perhaps so.”

They move the crates to the comm tower and pause to discuss the repair efforts across the Watchpoint. Torbjorn hopes to have the satellite array fixed by the weekend; Reinhardt thinks it will be longer given the work needed to patch the damaged hangars and track. Hanzo finds it almost easy to converse with the massive knight. He exudes an amiability that Hanzo can respect, even if he does not always appreciate the man’s volume.

Both comrades pull him in for a question before he leaves.

“Hey,” Lúcio mutters. “I don’t wanna, like, seem nosy or nothing. But Eastwood’s doing alright, yeah?”

Hanzo narrows his eyes. He knows the nickname is a pun on that Western actor Yankee-san never shuts up about. “What do you mean?”

Lúcio frowns. “Is he doing okay? I haven’t seen him since yesterday afternoon, and, like, I dunno, man. After that, I’ve been kinda worried about him.”

Hanzo startles himself at how quickly he seizes on Lúcio’s words. “After what?”

“Aw.” Lúcio backtracks, exchanging glances with Reinhardt. “Were you not there? Or, wait” -- he looks down at the hat in Hanzo’s sash -- “I thought, I dunno, wait. Do you not know? I thought you might know, like, ‘cause of, like -- y’know.”

“Not know what?”

“Uh, damn, you know, like, I thought you guys were --”


“Oh, alright,” Lúcio winces, as if he’s embarrassed himself. “My bad. I dunno if I wanna say, like, I don’t wanna be a gossip --”

“It is fine, Lúcio.” Reinhardt gestures to a bewildered Hanzo. “Tell him what you told me.”

Lúcio licks his lips, glances left and right. As if to scan for eavesdroppers. “Like, okay. Eastwood had a thing happen yesterday. I went by his room to ask for my clippers back. I get to the door, I buzz it, no answer. So I knock, and inside -- I hear a gunshot.”
Hanzo cannot explain the sudden drop in his guts. It hits him like a wave. His eyes bounce wildly between Lúcio’s own, hanging off his next words.

“And I freak out,” Lúcio continues. “I hit the deck. I hear him yelling inside, and I think, ‘shit, he’s hurt himself, I spooked him or something.’ But he opened the door, he was okay. He said he shot his gun by accident. He was just” -- the audio-medic trails off, shaking his head, palming his forehead.

Hanzo barks: “like what?”

“He was messed up, he was a total mess. Not hurt or anything, but he was messy. He was apologizing over and over, he was freaking out. He said he thought he heard something. I mean, I convinced him to go to the medbay --”

“Where is he now?” Hanzo’s gaze darts between Reinhardt and Lúcio.

Lúcio blinks. “Uh. If he isn’t in medbay, I’d guess he’s trying to rest. Maybe in his room.” He leans in. “Just between, like, the three of us? I think some anxiety thing happened to him. Like, a panic attack or something. Some post-traumatic stuff. He was really sweaty and kept saying it was his eye. Like, he kept pointing at his eye. But nothing looked wrong with his eye. I’ve never seen Eastwood like that before, you guys. It’s got me worried.”

Hanzo remembers the three revolver shots, the haze of gathering Genji and getting him to the medbay. In his frenzy to save his brother, he paid less attention to the fool’s slurred speech and the way he hung his head. The embrace, the kiss. The Swiss doctor’s frown. Give him some space. He feels like he’s missed something glaringly important.

Reinhardt interrupts his wandering thoughts. “I can see where it might have come from,” he begins cautiously. “Has McCree ever told you about what he did for Overwatch, before the recall?”

Slowly Hanzo’s brows gather above his nose. “He said he was a field agent.”

“More than just that. Jesse was part of a secret organization within Overwatch that specialized in covert operations. A very intense, dangerous crew. Special agents. Killers, mostly. More than questionable. There were rumors, always, about the nature of their missions: infiltrations, hits and stings, political sabotage.” Reinhardt frowns. “Kidnapping. Assassinations. Torture, even. An incredibly unethical spread of targets and directives. One I argued against consistently, when I heard the reports. Their commanding officer was a man named Gabriel Reyes. Jesse was one of their top agents.”

Through his stunned surprise, Hanzo asks: “What was this organization called?”

“‘Blackwatch.’ McCree was requisitioned to regular Overwatch field operations through their channels. Gabriel Reyes brought him on-board after taking him out of a gang.”

“A gang.”

“Yes. The Deadlocks. A very nefarious American criminal organization that Blackwatch took down in a sting operation. McCree was given the option of going to prison or turning sides and joining Blackwatch. He chose the latter. That is how we acquired him.”

Hanzo frantically searches his memory. He recognizes the name; Deadlock activity regularly appeared on Shimada-gumi dockets, sometimes friend and other times foe. He cannot recall Yankee-san mentioning either group. “I was not aware of any of this.”
“Me neither,” Lúcio chimes in. “I mean, I knew he was like, the dead-eye shot, Lena told me that much. That he was a bad-ass bounty hunter, y’know, like, his belt, the B-A-M-F. But I didn’t know he’d done some Jason Bourne-levels of stuff. I probably could have guessed, but I didn’t realize it went that far back.”

“I do not mean to spread his business,” says Reinhardt, slightly pious, as if spreading McCree’s business is an unfortunate consequence of a good deed. “But he has a very complicated past. Agents in Blackwatch were subject to heavy scrutiny to ensure that their missions and tactics did not take too much of a toll on their minds and bodies. Alas, almost every time: the result was the same. Too many broken people carrying out tasks meant to break everything else.”

Hanzo digests this in silence. Finally he says: “I appreciate the information you have shared with me.”

Reinhardt nods. “I am sure McCree had his reasons for keeping his past close to his chest. But I am also sure he is glad to have a friend like you. He may have been silent about these things in hopes of preserving your friendship.”

Hanzo does not know whether to feel embarrassed, indignant, or grateful. The look on his face piques with a mixture of all three. “I should return his hat.”

They watch Hanzo leave, his gold scarf flickering in the late morning sun. Lúcio puckers his lips and shoves his hands in his pockets. He glances up at Reinhardt.

“All right, man,” he says. “You gotta be thinking what I’m thinking.”

“What’s that?”

Lúcio waggles his eyebrows. “They’re doing it.”

Reinhardt bursts out laughing. “Maybe, Frosch, I do not know. Give them some privacy, you’ve already snooped enough.”

“Hey, man, I wasn’t snooping! They were kissing, like, right there in the hall, I saw it with my own eyes.”

Nonplussed, Reinhardt wipes his hands and starts unpacking the crates. “Don’t gossip, Lúcio. You may wind up with a dragon trying to eat you.”

Lúcio moonwalks past Reinhardt, hooting. “Not if it’s eating Eastwood, heyyyy!”

---

In his room, Hanzo kneels before the orange plastic trunk. He opens the lid and takes inventory of the neatly-packed interior: arrow shafts, sake, newspapers with the crossword puzzles filled. Tea, incense, fletching, interesting stones gathered from the Gibraltar cliffs. Two spare yugake, rolls of gauze, scissors, toolkits, and a bag of peppermints. He takes out the notebooks at the top of the pile.

There are three of them overall: black-bound, lined paper, no thicker than a centimeter. They are filled with Hanzo’s handwriting. Neat, strict characters file down the pages, chronicling his time at the Watchpoint. He does not open these first two; now is not the time to revisit his meticulous journaling of the past two months. Hanzo has written down every sight and sound he’s mapped around the base -- from rocks to tidal changes to the changes in plover plumage -- and every interaction he’s had with the men and women of Overwatch. Some of the entries embarrass him,
such as the time he accidentally insulted Winston by referring to him as an ape rather than a
scientist -- or when he witnessed a cheery Reinhardt breezing unclothed through the Range 1
locker rooms after practice. Some of the notes privately titillate him. He has written recollections
of watching the sunset with his brother from the comm tower ledge, or observing Lúcio’s street
hockey games. All his winning range scores over the fool are carefully scribed, tallied, commented
with jests. A sketch of a durian. Two pages marvel at the strange shape of the white flowers that
grow on the trellis in Torbjorn’s garden. Hanzo has copied down notes from a web search that
confirms the blossoms are of the genus Passiflora. All their kindred bloom with the same odd
shape, a likeness the fool pointed out jovially: *ain’t they just pretty as a picture?*

Hanzo slowly opens his third notebook. Stuck to the cover are four neon-bright sticky notes with
the fool’s poor, blocky print scribed on one side. One is torn at the corner; Hanzo runs his finger
along the ripped edge.

The first two pages in the third notebook contain sentences in English, followed by an equal sign
and notations in kanji.

> If that is not a fact, God’s a possum = *means that it is a fact [honest]*
>
> Ain’t seen that in a dog’s age = *means have not seen in a very long time*
>
> Bless your heart = *usually is rude and patronizing, but can also mean affection [??]*
>
> I could sit still for that = *means that somebody likes whatever it is*
>
> The dog does not hunt = *means it is not very good/inefficient*
>
> mesquite = *spice for barbecue, best kind [are there actually any others though]*
>
> Over yonder = *means somewhere over in the general area [?? how general]*
>
> Couldn’t find his butt with a bell on it = *means that the person is constantly losing
things*
>
> My eyeballs are floating = *means the person has to piss*
>
> Fine as frog hair = [?????]

He skips these pages of Southern idioms and their meanings -- which, he reflects, took more hours
of frustrated web-searching to translate than should ever be necessary. They are not important right
now. He hunts through later entries for words like ‘Blackwatch’ and ‘Deadlock.’ Phrases like
‘gang member’ or ‘special agent,’ or (he works his jaw, growling) ‘covert organization that
performs torture.’

Hanzo finds nothing. As he thought: the fool has never mentioned them.

He puts the books away, shuts the trunk, picks up the hat, and leaves his room. He goes to the
dormitory door. He sucks in a sharp breath and rings the buzzer.

No answer.

“Yankee-san,” he grunts into the panel. “It is I.” And then, after a pause, “Hanzo.”

Still no response. He pushes the buzzer again, leans in, repeats himself. The door hisses open by
sliver. Hanzo looks up. There he is.
“Hey,” rasps the fool.


The fool stares at him silently. Hanzo is taken aback by how bad he looks; his hair is stringy, his shirt wrinkled, his face greasy with sweat. Deep hollows hang beneath his earthy eyes, bloodshot at the corners. Stubble greys the fringes of his beard and mustache. He’s been drinking. Hanzo’s nose nearly wrinkles at the stench of old cigarillo smoke.

Finally the fool says, “I’ve been alright.”

“You look terrible.”

“Well. Nice to see you, too.”

Hanzo is not prepared for Yankee-san’s glib tone to put him on the defensive. “I do not believe for a second that you have been alright. You have not been at practice. I have not seen you around the base. I spoke to our associates. They said you have not been yourself.”

The fool regards the archer with heavy-lidded eyes. “And? Whatta you care.”

“Enough to be here. Right now.”

The fool slumps. He peels away from the slit in the doorway, thumbs the switch, opens it all the way so that Hanzo can come inside. A musty smell hits his nostrils, redolent of sweat and unwashed clothes. It reminds him of cheap motels and old houses, remnants of his days fleeing the Shimada-gumi from hovel to hideout.

“How long has it been since you have left this room?” Hanzo asks, stepping inside as the fool wanders away, crunching his heel into an empty can. He doubles back, toes the can aside, scans the floor. Trash litters the ground: empty bourbon bottles, sodas, tins and forks and plastic food containers. A crumpled water bottle by the fool’s bunk is stuffed full of cigarillo butts; Hanzo recoils at their heavy, dark smell hanging in the air. Yankee-san’s clothes lie in discarded piles here-and-there, tossed into corners, draped over furniture, pinned around the single window to block out the light. It’s like he’s walked into a hermit’s cave.

“I took some time off,” grumbles the fool, and Hanzo watches him drag across the room to sit at his console chair. “Ain’t been up to snuff, needed some downtime.” He slouches, scratching his chest through the open buttonholes at the top of his brown shirt.

“The mission to Siberia has not been cancelled. You do not have time to hole up in here and shirk your preparations.”

“The hell I don’t,” he replies, acidly. “My time’s my own, I can do with it what I damn well please.”

“Your time belongs to Overwatch. It belongs to your duty.” And then, with indignance: “it belongs to your comrades. It belongs to me.”

“What the hell’s that s’posed to mean?” growls the fool.

Wordlessly, Hanzo cuts past him to yank down the red swath of cloth blocking the window. The afternoon sun streams in; the fool groans, winces, ducks his head. Hanzo appraises Yankee-san, thrusting the cloth at him. His tattered red serape.
“Enough,” Hanzo says.

He feels the fool’s bleary eyes on him as he begins picking up trash. Hanzo bites back revulsion as he piles the floor garbage into a discarded plastic bag. Silently he curses the task until he feels movement behind him; Hanzo notices the fool getting up to help, stooping to gather bourbon bottles in the crook of his arm.

Hanzo takes the trash outside, dumping the glass and recyclables, wiping his hands when he returns. Yankee-san is piling his laundry with an unlit cigarillo in his mouth. Hanzo swipes it from his lips, startling him.

“No,” he says curtly, pocketing the cigarillo. He sniffs, nose wrinkling. “You need to wash.”

The fool draws back as if Hanzo has slapped him again. “Look, Shimada-san, I appreciate the help, but --”

Hanzo points at the lavatory. “Go.”

“Listen…”

Hanzo walks away before the fool can finish. He slides open the lavatory door and turns on the light. He is not surprised to find the fixtures grimy and unwashed. Sighing, he flicks on the shower tap. Soon hot water is streaming from the head.

“Go and wash yourself,” he barks at the fool as he emerges, pointing into the lavatory. “I do not want to speak to you until you have showered.”

The fool stares at him as if he’s spoken in another language. He scratches his head, dawdles, and -- after a moment of hesitation -- begins to unbutton his shirt. Hanzo folds his arms and steps aside as the fool shuffles past him, barefoot and undressing. The lavatory door shuts; he sighs, satisfied.

Hanzo straightens the room. He sets the hat on the dresser, mindful not to cover Yankee-san’s lighter and glove. He shakes out the sheets and coarse blankets in the bunk, which need to be scrubbed almost as badly as the fool. Hanzo hunts for a kettle or a heating coil; he finds none, and wonders how the fool gets by. The laundry is hauled out to one of the auto-washers in the hall. The rug is taken out for a brief beating. He returns to an absence of sound from the lavatory. He must have finished his shower.

Damn! The serape is still draped on the console chair. He forgot to add it into the laundry. Hanzo picks it up, folds it, smooths out the pilling wool. He traces the diamond pattern woven into the hem. Then he lifts it to his nose. Smoke, leather, a tinge of metal -- and something slightly spicy, like cedar or eucalyptus. Maybe mint. He can’t tell.

Before he can ponder, the fool slides open the lavatory door: soaking wet, dripping a puddle, stark naked. Yankee-san stares at him under damp strands of hair.

Hanzo stares back in spite of himself. He’s nothing poor to look at, if not startling in his exposure. He stands tall and strapping, no longer hunched. The fool is more swarthy than Hanzo thought, tan all over -- shaggy, too, borderline hirsute. He has a thick chest, sinewy arms (save for where metal interrupts the contour of flesh on the left) broad hips and broader shoulders. Powerful legs. Solid muscles. A weak roll of fat -- testament to laziness more than age -- circles his waist. On any other body, it might not be such an endearing flaw. Beneath the thatch of dark hair trailing down his abdomen, Hanzo appreciates the ridges and contours that lead to his --

“Towel,” the fool says, extending his hand. “Need a clean one.”
Hanzo meets the fool’s eyes, as if challenged. He lifts his chin. “They are being washed.”

“Then that’ll do.” Yankee-san motions to the serape and starts to stride across the room.

His approach is what makes the archer lose his nerve. “Stop it, you imbecile.” Hanzo draws away suddenly, as if repulsed. “Stay there! You are getting water all over the floor!”

“It’s just water. It’ll dry up.”

Hanzo realizes he’s clutching the serape protectively to his chest. With a grunt, he shoves it at the fool. “Before you drip all over the place.”

The fool mops off his face and shoulders with the serape, scrubs it over his hair, sprays droplets everywhere. Hanzo turns away. He cannot remember the last time the fool was so irritating. Perhaps it was the kiss, or when he called him ‘Legolas.’ His mind seizes with angry thoughts: what is he doing here? Why did he come by? Why is he standing here, fuming over the habits of a well-endowed cowboy? Why did he turn away? Why doesn’t he just leave?

The dresser clanks. Hanzo looks over his shoulder; the bare-assed fool is rooting through a drawer. He turns back around and seethes. “Will you get dressed already?”

“Workin’ on it, sweetheart.”

Hanzo whirls. “Do not call me that.”

“If you’d quit callin’ me ‘Yankee-san,’ I’d reckon we’d be square.” Hanzo watches the fool hike on a pair of boxer shorts and snap the waistband. They’re printed with playing cards. He imagines kicking him right in the rump.

“What would prefer I call you?” Hanzo grits out.

“McCree. Like everyone else.” He’s pulling on a sleeveless shirt. Hanzo watches the muscles of his back ripple when he bends. “Hell, you can call me Jesse, I don’t care, Shimada-san.” Now he’s fishing out a pair of black jogging pants with holes around the cuffs.

That’s when Hanzo sees them. Two faded tattoos on the backs of his knees. Black laughing skulls chewing on a lock, fanned by wings. He turns away. For some reason, this glimpse at the markings feels more intrusive than seeing the bastard in the buff.

“McCree,” he mutters, testing the word on his tongue. “Fine, then.” Hanzo fixes his gaze on the blank wall. “Now that you are clean, I will speak to you. Tell me what happened.”

“Whattya mean, ‘what happened.’ A lotta shit’s happened.”

“Start at the beginning.”

“You’re gonna have to be more specific.”


Behind him, McCree slams the drawer shut. Hanzo looks over his shoulder and sees him staring at his hat.

“I was just doin’ what needs to be done,” McCree says. “Puttin’ down evil so the good can keep on living.”
“I have never seen you shoot like that.” Now Hanzo faces McCree. “In all our time together, you shot well, but not like that. Where did you learn this? Blackwatch? Deadlock?”

“Where’d you hear ‘bout that?”

“Does it matter? I know now. Tell me about the gun. What you did, to save my brother’s life.”

Hanzo does not expect for McCree to look so tired when he turns back around. The shower cannot clean off the shadows beneath his eyes. Miserable and weary, he runs a hand through his hair. He sighs. Hanzo tries to stifle the twist in his guts and fails.

“Somewhere else,” McCree finally answers, his voice reedy. “I need outta this room for a spell.”

---

They settle on the box garden so the gunslinger can get some fresh air. Hanzo sits beside him in the shade of the single tree. He thinks McCree looks almost like Genji did as a child when he was in trouble: hunched, chin down, rasping as he speaks. Worrying at the frayed edge of his damp serape.

“So you know about the Deadlocks. Reckon somebody told you, and I guess that’s for the best. Wasn’t my intention to keep it secret, just more that I figured you’d not care. Being lord of the Shimada-gumi means you’ve seen your fair share of crime, so what’s a pack of Southwestern rats gonna mean to you, y’know? We ran outta Deadlock Gorge. I had a way with my six-shooter that the federales didn’t see comin’, so it got me on a lotta jobs. Namely the job that ran me into Gabriel Reyes’ squad. You probably know fellas like him. Grim-lookin’ sonofabitch. All scarred up. The kind you don’t wanna be in a room alone with when you’re a bad guy if he’s got a foldin’ chair. Which is what he had when they brought me in. Four brick walls and a damn foldin’ chair. He made me whistle Dixie out my ass and windpipe for the better part of a day until he offered me a deal. There’s me, lyin’ on the ground gargling my teeth -- and here he comes with what I think’s gonna be a loaded gun to my head and it turns out to be a god-damn deal.

‘Join Overwatch.’ Blackwatch, specifically -- his special ops crew. ‘Take that stupid gun of yours and put it to a better use.’ It was either that or life in prison, where he told me I would rot. And I reckoned he was right, if he wasn’t gonna turn me into a tortilla before the interrogation was over. Boy, he’d like to do it. He was a killer, Gabe Reyes. Made straight outta murder.

So I took opción uno. Signed up with the squad. They flew me out to Swiss HQ and had me running ops by week’s end. Hell on wheels. I was in the thick of it, Shimada-san. Blackwatch didn’t play by regular Overwatch rules. We did things real dirty. Things went pear-shaped? We cleaned house before anyone asked questions. And I loved it; I loved every second of it. Until about three months in, Reyes got on my case about being too reckless. Lost a payload here, missed an important target there. He started shakin’ me down. Nearly came close to getting burned, but he gave me a last chance.

There was a woman. Ana Amari, former Egyptian Defense Forces. One o’ the original founders of Overwatch. Eyes like a hawk. She could shoot the balls off a fly twenty-five hundred meters away. Best god-damn sniper in the world, tough as nails. Gabe brought me to her and said I was spit-fire good but dumber than a box of rocks, so would she consider taking me in under her wing, showin’ me some ropes, get me acquainted with how things at Overwatch ought to fly? God-damn, Shimada-san, you might as well have asked her to eat a bucket of snake turds. Told me to get the hell outta her office, she wasn’t showin’ the ropes to no backwoods cowboy. Gabe had to practically pull us apart. Wasn’t much between us but hate for a while until we got put together on an op in Dorado. Long story short: I saved her ass during a stakeout, but I got shot clearing out
leftovers. She rode back with me in the transport. Said I was an unlucky cowboy, told me I was shit for timin’. I’m lyin’ there with a bullet between my ribs, and she said somethin’ I’ll never forget. God-damn, you know how it gets when you think you might be dyin’? Sometimes you fix on things and you just can’t let them go. And: let me tell you. She had a way with words.

She said, ‘you pull the trigger with your soul.’ I thought she was gonna take my hand. Maybe she did, I can’t really remember. But I looked up at her and heard her say it and somethin’ in me changed right then and there. Like you flip a switch. I got back to base and got through surgery and the first thing I did when I could get back on my feet was go find Ana Amari and apologize for what I’d done.

Do you know what she did to me? Standin’ there all hang-dog, clutchin’ my hat, scrapin’ my boots? She forgave me. She god-damn forgave me. She comes up to me an’ gives me this look like the devil done tempted her and she’s about to laugh in his face. And she asked me if I thought I was an idiot, and I said I sure felt like one. And then she asked if I really wanted to get better, if I wanted this leaf Reyes was makin’ me turn. I said I sure did. I meant it, every word. I guess she knew.

And she said to me, ‘McCree: you’re a clever fella. And you are a good shot.’”

Hanzo sees moisture shining in the corners of the gunslinger’s eyes.

“She taught me the Dead-Eye. Short-range scanning snipe. Every mark I take goes down when I set them up. It wasn’t her technique, she’d adapted it from others. But when she taught me, she told me to make it mine. So I did. I made it my own. Added a touch or two to it, shit -- even called it ‘high noon’, for a while there, like that movie I told you ‘bout. But, god-damn, it got me. That’s the price you gotta pay, pullin’ triggers with your soul. It eats a little bit of you, more and more that you use it. It gets me every time, right in the eye. From the eye to the brain, it jolts me real bad. She warned me as I was learnin’, but she didn’t warn me ‘nough. I think, by then, enough of her had gotten eaten up to the point where it didn’t bother her no more. Maybe that’s why I lost her. Maybe that’s why she’s gone.”

“What happened to her?”

McCree shakes his head. “Deceased. Body unaccounted for. She was a soldier, Shimada-san, her place was on the battlefield and nowhere else. Hell, you’d think she’d been born there, given how badly she wanted to die there.”

The archer feels the silence fall between them. He takes the story in bit by bit, piece by piece. Finally he says, with a note of gruffness: “you loved this woman.”

“Naw.” And then, less convinced: “she was my teacher.” Hanzo is about to question it when McCree continues. “She was somethin’ special, but it wasn’t like that. She had a daughter not all that far from my age, don’t really know what happened to her. Thought about lookin’ her up, but I was on the run for so long it didn’t seem right.”

Hanzo squints. “How old are you?”

“Thirty-eight.” He pauses, glancing over, questioning whether or not to ask. “You?”

Hanzo grunts. “The same.”

“No shit.”

“Yes, shit.”
McCree cracks a smile. Hanzo nearly does the same.

He thinks McCree will lapse into another long tale and considers, briefly, that he could sit for it. It annoys him less when he speaks this way: deep, rumbling, and raw with honesty. But the low hum returns at the base of his chest -- a swell, like the tides, of ponderous gratitude. It rises to his throat like the dragon’s breath.

“Do you know,” Hanzo begins, “about holidays in Japan?”

McCree shakes his head.

“There is a day we celebrate every May. The fifth day of the fifth month. *Kodomo no Hi*. To you, it would be called Children’s Day.”

The gunslinger looks at Hanzo. Hanzo looks at the sky.

“On this day, we celebrate children. Families. Fathers, mothers, sons. There is a symbol that is important to this holiday, and that is the *koi*. You know of this, yes? A fish. The carp.”

McCree nods: he does know.

“They fly flags on every pole. Carp-shaped flags. *Koi-no-bori*. A black one for the father, a red one for the mother. One blue carp for each child in the family tree. The wind takes them, and it looks as if they swim. My family flew them at our home in Hanamura. One for Genji. One for me.

We have a legend for the *koi*. It swims up against the current that fights to push it back. No rocks or cascade can stop *koi* whose hearts yearn to reach the top -- to ride up the river to the place beyond the waves. For beyond this place, the *koi* will transform into a dragon. The dragon returns to its family bringing good fortune and wealth. It brings great pride to its family by overcoming every obstacle. The greatest honor of success.”

Hanzo closes his eyes. McCree is watching; so too is the sea.

“My brother died on Children’s Day,” he says. “I killed him, for disobeying me. For failing our family. For shirking his duty. It is on that day I would go back to Hanamura every year to pay my respects. And it was on that day that he found me, and gave me a second chance. Ten years after the day I ended his life, becoming the dragon my family desired that I be.”

McCree shifts. Hanzo opens his eyes, looks at him, sees him staring over the water. In profile McCree is wild and strong -- a chiseled edge of a man against the sun baking around them. More blade than gun. Hanzo stares. The hum of gratitude threatens his chest; he thinks, for a moment, it could become a roar.

“I owe you a debt,” he says. “A debt of life and honor. In saving my brother, you have saved me, too.”

McCree sighs. Hanzo thinks it is a gentle sound for someone so big. “Ain’t real sure how to handle things like that, tell you the truth. Usually, for me, it’s the other way around. Me owin’ big, and the debtor comin’ to collect.”

“Your life is as mine. I will defend you from death.”

“That really ain’t necessary.”

“For honor, it is.”
“Maybe I don’t care ’bout honor.”

“Maybe this is how it works. Maybe it does not matter if you care or if you do not.”

“I got a better idea.”

“You will forgive me if I do not believe you do.”

“Stay.” One word. McCree turns to Hanzo with those dark, wild eyes.

Hanzo furrows his brows. “What?”

“Stay here. Stay with Overwatch. Join us, join the team. You said once before that you would never join up, and I ain’t askin’ you to. I’m *debtin’* you to.”

“Why?” Then, with a wince: “no.”

“You have to. You ain’t got a choice.” McCree is insistent. He leans in; Hanzo tries to draw back. “If that’s how debts work, then this’s how it’s gonna be. If you honor me, Shimada-san, you’ll become a true member of this team. They need you. We need you. You say you honor my life? Then, boy howdy: join my cause.”

Hanzo looks away. He cannot believe it. Blood rushes to his face, then drains. His gaze darts across the horizon. How could he be so foolish? What on earth has he done?

What am I doing here? Why did I stay?

“If I consider it,” he says after a pregnant pause, “my brother may object.” It feels distinctly wrong to lie to McCree, but he’s grasping at straws. Excuses. “He may not want me here. This is not a decision I can make on my own.”

“You already have.”

“I have not!”

“Look, this’s what I’m askin’, Shimada-san. No more, and no less.”

“I told you, I will not!”

“Then hang me, god-dammit!”

McCree grabs him. Hanzo reels; he thinks the gunslinger will throw a punch or hug him again. It matters little which he’d prefer. He cannot move. Those searing eyes entrap him. They hold him firmly in place.

“Hang me,” McCree growls. “You heard me, string me up! If you can’t honor a god-damn debt like you say, just kill me already. Tie me up to that tree and just shoot me fulla arrows -- yeah, that’s what I said. I’m glad you’re finally listenin’.” His voice lowers to a deadly murmur. “This is what I want, *this* is what I’m debtin’. You’re needed here, you belong here. You’re wanted here, that’s a fact. By Genji, by Winston. Hell, by me, of all the people who shoulda never trusted you in the first place. I don’t know where you were thinkin’ of goin’, I don’t know what you had planned next. But things change. You’re stayin’. Right here, with us. With me. And if you say you’re not, look this dead-eye right where it counts and say you’re ready to hang the fool.”

The hum overtakes him. Hanzo does not fight back. For all he’d like to strike him -- a slap, a kiss, a sudden embrace or an arrow to the chest -- he fails to carry through. The gunslinger holds him and
he slowly lets go.

“Alright,” he says numbly.

Jesse blunders, “huh?”

“Alright. I will do it. I will join your Overwatch.”

“Uh.” Jesse’s jaw is slack. “Oh.” Then, stunned by his own relief: “okay.”

“Please get off.”

McCree obeys. Hanzo nurses the urge to violently shove him, but he’s already eased off. There’s something tender about the way he retreats, sweeping back his brown hair, tucking down his chin again. He huffs.

Endearing, wild-eyed. Hunched under his serape. Bless his heart.

“Thank you,” McCree mutters, shivering.

“You should rest,” Hanzo sighs. “The wind and sun will drain you. This is enough, for now.”

The laundry is done when they return to the dormitory. Hanzo helps him fold it and put it away. They say nothing. No verbal communication is needed; they both seem to know what happens next.

Jesse climbs over the fresh sheets in his bunk. He kicks off his shoes, slides beneath the blanket, presses to the wall. He watches Hanzo take the serape and drape it back over the window. The room darkens. His heartbeat thuds so loud he thinks the archer will hear it.

Hanzo does not. His ears are occupied by two nagging questions that will not go away. He’s had enough this week of things that he cannot answer. Suddenly exhausted, he closes his eyes. He turns for the door.

Jesse says softly, “c’mere.”

Hanzo goes. Like a fish, swimming slow in a watery blur.

They gather together without touching. The space is not meant for two people, but they make do. Jesse cramps into the far side of the bunk. Hanzo hugs the edge. They lie with their backs parallel, nearly meeting, just barely refusing to join. A brush of fabric, no more. The bunk creaks; the blankets rustle. In the dim expanse of the tiny room, they can hear the other breathe.

“If you tell anyone about this,” Hanzo mumbles, trailing off.

“Ain’t a soul that would believe me,” Jesse drawls into the wall.

They sleep for a while, Jesse more than him. Hanzo wakes after a dream about the jet, his father’s big hand patting his own. He jolts, feels warmth at his back, realizes McCree is still curled up on his side. Butted against him, seeking contact. His hand tucked under his chin, like a child.

Which is how Hanzo leaves him -- slumbering in the pitch-black -- to retreat to his own room and lock the door.
- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- References: Proverb at the beginning. Hanzo's clothing, Passionflowers, Children's Day and koinobori.
- A note re: Genji's deathday - Japanese viewers remarked on the irony of the koi flag flying in Hanamura during the Dragons short as a sign that Hanzo killed his brother on Children's Day. I took it and ran with it.
- Heads up: there will be sexual content in the next chapter. Nothing explicit (rating will stay M) but just warning you.
- You can follow me on Tumblr.

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](#) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

Heads up: some sexual content in here. Also brief mention of torture. Rating is still M.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Blackwatch: six years ago, three-day interrogation op in San Francisco. On Alcatraz, hunkered in one of the basements with his CO and the target. Reyes says this used to be a famous prison before they shut it down and turned into a national park, before it was a civilian bunker during the Siege of Silicon Valley, before they shut it down for good after the omnium fell. The grimy walls hang with mold and faded signs cautioning tourists in the slick stairwells: English, Spanish, Chinese. Their eyes are drawn to the español, a shared tongue. Cuidado.

Reyes works on the target. He’s just finished two extractions when, suddenly: “smoke break.” He shuts off the radio (playing oldies), stuffs the gauze back into the guy’s mouth, rinses his hands, gets his cigs, goes outside. McCree follows. They smoke on the concrete wall overlooking the Bay - cold water, foggy summer day. McCree notices a slice of what looks like it could be the guy’s lip stuck to the edge of Gabe’s cap, pinkish-red, glistening. Gabe can’t tell it’s there or doesn’t care. Maybe both.

Gabe keeps the conversation light at first: basketball, TV shows, getting lobster bread-bowls later when they’re finished here. But McCree can tell something’s up. He’s got something else to say and it isn’t nice.

He says he watches him. That he’s always watched him, he’s had eyes on the back of his head since McCree first got in. Amari took him under her wing, that dipshit Morrison likes him alright but Gabriel wants McCree to remember who he belongs to. “Blackwatch. This is Blackwatch. This isn’t Gunsmoke, cabrón. This isn’t True Grit, this is real. It’s never gonna be like the stories anyone else told you. You eat in the mess with the others, you bleed in their medbay, you run their cute little white ops when they ask me real nice, but at the end of the day, you’re Blackwatch. The only watch that will ever look after you when a bullet’s between you breathing or dying. You’re Blackwatch. You think those bootlickers give a shit about you? Amari? Ziegler?” There’s a weird gleam in his eye, hellish. Not his usual look at all. “Morrison? Nah, son. All me. I gave you the chance. I let you turn that leaf. I taught you everything you know. Hey. Don’t give me that face. You hear me, cowboy? You listening? Then say yes sir. What’s that? Say it again. That’s right. Yes sir. You’re Blackwatch.”

McCree tells him -- through a gritted mouth of smoke and bubbling resentment -- that there’s something on his hat. Reyes reaches up, picks off the chunk, looks at it. “Woops.” He tosses it over the wall. A seagull swoops, catches it. “Mira!” Reyes points and cackles, a brassy ha-ha-ha. “El pájaro lo comió!” He grins wide, claps McCree on the shoulder. “Alright, cowboy. Back to work.”

They go in. The guy starts shaking, yelling through the gauze. Reyes is in a better mood; he turns the radio back on, snaps his fingers to the slow guitar and crooning lyrics. “Oooh.” He likes this song. He swivels his hips, soles streaking the floor. Dancing to The Mamas and the Papas. He gets
the pliers, smiles. Back on the clock again. “Stars shinin’ bright ab-ooove yooou...”

McCree watches from a corner, arms folded over his chest. Something isn’t right. It’s not the first time he’s been backup while Gabriel Reyes attempts to get a guy to talk, but now it isn’t the same. He’s aware of what’s happening, like someone just turned on the overhead lights. Blaring down, lurid and yellow: a warning.

---

Over the weekend, Jesse shakes off the grim malaise of Dead-Eye. He emerges from his dorm to take walks around the Watchpoint. Torbjorn has fixed the satellite dish. Winston waves him down, asks how he’s doing, commends him for his bravery. Reinhardt and Tracer introduce him to Mei, the girl from Antarctica. McCree likes her instantly. She’s cheery and modest, pleasantly witty, a scientist. She laments arriving for the recall so late, that she would have helped subdue the attackers had she gotten there earlier. They swap Overwatch stories over moon pies and beer. Mei drinks faster than she eats and gets the hiccups. She laughs, making them worse, which makes her laugh harder. McCree wonders how someone so amiable could take out hostile aggressors, much less anyone from the Vishkar Corporation.

Angela checks him over in the medbay. She deems him fit for combat, advises him to take it easy. Lúcio shadows her in bright green scrubs; he finger-guns at McCree and gets a thumbs-up in return. The team understands. He senses it from each of them, supportive around him like an embrace. He’s grateful, almost glad. Healing used to hurt. This is a lot better.

Soon they will leave for Siberia. Provisions are packed, weapons and toolkits primed and prepped. Agents Reinhardt, Mercy, Tracer, Mei, McCree and Hanzo will load on the transport and set off to join the Russian Defense Forces for the first formal Overwatch mission since the organization’s fall.

Agent Hanzo. It’s official. ID Number 3945_84. He enters into Athena’s personnel system on the twenty-fifth of August, biometrics and combat profile finalizing on the twenty-sixth. Winston fits him for a tactical suit on the twenty-seventh (which he will never wear) and right-ear comm clip (which he puts in right away). By the twenty-eighth, it all database code: he’s the second member to join the roster in the new chapter of Overwatch. Mei helps Lúcio bake a small glossy cake; she pipes on the kanji for Omedetō in chilly blue frosting. Hanzo bows deeply when they present it to him at communal supper; he thanks them and accepts a small slice.

“Did we embarrass him?” Mei whispers to McCree as he’s washing dishes. “He didn’t seem all that excited. I sort of feel bad.”

“Nah,” McCree answers. “Don’t think he was embarrassed at all. Maybe the opposite. Was real kind of y’all to do that, truth be told.” He smiles. “You’re a peach.”

“You’re sure?” She scratches behind her ear. “I mean, he didn’t smile.”

He snorts as he rinses a glass. “He doesn’t do much of that. Real stoic sorta fellow. Takes a while to get him to warm up.”

“Oh.” Mei laughs. “Well, I’ll take your word for it. Since you know him and all.”

Her remark privately thrills him. Even the new girl has picked up on how close they are. Training brought them together by necessity, but since the Dead-Eye everything happens entirely out of mutual preference. If he isn’t with Genji (who has healed completely, and spends an hour every
morning with his brother on the comm tower), Hanzo trots after McCree for whatever else the day provides. His presence seems constant, even when he retires to his ratty bunk with only tender feelings and sleeping pills to keep nightmares at bay.

Sometimes they talk: long, interesting conversations that wander from subject to subject. Certain discussions are still off-limits, namely Genji and any personal reflection of their upbringing with the Shimada-gumi. But Hanzo opens to other topics: preferences in food and drink, music, shared experiences from their travels. Jesse finds himself constantly cross-referencing the cultural disparity between them, pondering over the stark variations in the minutiae of their everyday lives. There are similarities, but they’re rare. Glimmering amid their differences like flecks of gold. One night they spend an entire hour agreeing on the finer points of what makes for a perfect bowl of ramen. Another day, it’s horseback riding, a hobby they both claim as self-professed experts. Jesse reminisces one morning about motorcycling down empty mountain highways in Nevada and seeing snow-capped peaks, tall trees and endless road. Afterward he notices the hint of a smile on Hanzo’s lips. Twice he’s made Hanzo laugh, and -- though one occurred in mockery of McCree’s inability to spell the word ‘transcend’ for a crossword puzzle -- he secretly cherishes the sound. A scraping rumble, deep and rich. His favorite.

Then there are moments when they work beside each other without exchanging a word. It’s never quiet in his head, not with the unending chorus that keeps him alive -- but it reminds him of the night in his bunk with Hanzo and the calm that rivals peace. Jesse gets dizzy if he thinks about it too long: the warm, broad back against his own, motionless in the dark. The strong, soft breathing. The comfort. Better than any pill Mercy can prescribe.

The elevator was tough. The kiss was worse. Now McCree can’t shake the feeling that one touch at the right moment will set him off. Aflame, maybe -- like the song: *that burning ring of fire*. Hanzo has abandoned his prudence for physical space ever since he spent the night after the Dead-Eye. He sits close, walks side-by-side, passes in-and-out of arm’s reach without disdain. There have been a few narrow misses: a brush of hands, an accidental graze of limbs or hips, a jostle or a shove in response to a jest. One night at practice he catches the archer outright staring at his crotch.

“See somethin’ you like down there?” Jesse drawls, hooking in his speedloader.

He points at McCree’s buckle. “Where did you even acquire such a vulgar accessory?”

“Vegas.”

“What?”


Hanzo rolls his eyes. “So there are more like it elsewhere in the world. A travesty.”

“Since we’re talkin’ vulgar, where does a fella get runnin’ around with his whole left side out?”

“I have told you countless times: to properly draw my bow, my shoulder must be unhindered. A sleeve would catch and restrict my aim. It is for purpose, not vanity.”

“Sure gives you a nice peek.”

“What.”

“I said: it sure has been a nice week!” Jesse unloads on the targets, sharpshooting three in the dead center.
Hanzo narrows his eyes and throws a final glower below the gunslinger’s belt. As if for good measure.

Very slow or too damn fast. McCree is chomping at the bit to speed things up. He psyches himself up in the mirror, considers angles and odds, hems and haws on whether to be patient or handle this fire head-on. At night he replays their interactions, rewinding each scene like a favored film. He studies each movement, every word. All the lifts and falls in the iron tones of Hanzo’s voice. They excite him, agonize him. McCree worries he’ll wear them thin like every other pleasant memory: treasured and tired out and beaten to death until it no longer feels good.

Something has to happen: an affirming fuel, a spark. A concrete reality with Hanzo that he can savor in the grasp of his hands.

McCree daydreams through the last team briefing before they depart for Siberia. The six agents huddle in the briefing room around a circular table while Winston points out objectives on the holoprotector.

“After you rendezvous at the Volskaya checkpoint, Zaryanova’s team will escort you to the Svyatogor deployment zone. You’ll travel two to a walker. Once the walkers reach the threat radius, we initiate phase two.” Winston pulls up a three-dimensional diagram on the projector: four massive generators clumped around a series of pipelines. Six robotic Svyatogor ‘walkers’ lumber towards a circular territory marked in angry red around the generators. “Assist and cover the Russian Defense Forces while they take out the omnium power generators. You’ll be facing heavy omnic fire one you’re in the threat zone. It’s vital that you protect at least two walkers so they can complete the job. Any less than that and there’s pretty much no hope of taking all four down.” The diagram flashes the attack simulation: Reinhardt’s emblem charges in, supported by the glowing caduceus icon that represents Mercy. Mei’s insignia runs blue defensive barriers as Tracer and McCree bounce the offense between walker paths. Hanzo’s icon, outlined in dark navy, positions to snipe from walkers to walls. “Once the generators are down, we teleport out of the threat radius and so the Defense Forces can push in for full assault.” A white oval bursts on the screen as all six icons hastily retreat through it, vanishing off the snowdrift map with a blip. “Just like we ran in training.”

Athena adds: “the omnium operates on a one-hour refresh cycle. If the objective cannot be completed within the refresh, the teleporter will drop at the designated extraction point. You will have ten minutes to reach it and exit before it deactivates.”

“And less time than that, if the omnics get past our defense,” Winston grunts. “It’s our biggest risk here. The Svyatogor can get overwhelmed fast and lose mobility, so defensive lines have to stay up.” He exchanges a thumbs-up with Mei, who shoots back a smile.

“If we lose the teleporter, what’s our back-up plan for extraction?” asks Tracer.

“The RDF has an air evacuation plan in place for our teams, weather pending. We’re going in under the best predicted conditions possible for the time of year, though, so that shouldn’t be a problem.” Winston pushes his glasses up. “We’ll reconfirm mission protocol once you guys rendezvous with Zaryanova’s team, but, until then: any questions?”

Reinhardt raises his hand. “What is our plan regarding third-party interference? Once the news outlets confirm that Overwatch has in fact made a public appearance, there will be nothing stopping the United Nations from mobilizing against us. Or mercenary groups. Or” -- he shrugs, exchanging glances with Hanzo, who nods -- “anyone else who doesn’t like us.”

“They’ll only have an hour,” Mei says. “Who can mobilize that fast?”
“Vishkar,” says Hanzo.

“We don’t need to worry about the first one,” Winston remarks. Athena changes the display on the projector to a video clip of an angry man in an indigo jacket with gold trim. His crisp voice snickers over the speakers.

“-- to ensure that you uphold your end of the agreement. She is one of our finest, most talented archi-techs, and I assure you that even the slightest slip out of the accord will result in action. Rest assured --”

Winston pauses the playback, freezing the man’s face in an unflattering grimace. “This is Sanjay Koppal, one of Vishkar’s senior directors of operations. He was behind the infiltration attempt to get their archive back. I’ve arranged for him to make a public announcement of endorsement on behalf of the corporation for a return of Overwatch and a call for the PETRAS act to be revoked.”

Everyone exchanges looks of surprise. McCree catches Hanzo’s sharp glance and offers him a shrug: I don’t know anything about this.

“In return,” Winston continues, “we will refrain from sending the major news media outlets all these detailed, itemized disclosures that we extracted from the archive about the corruption and criminal infractions Vishkar carried out in Rio, Lijiang, and their new development planned in Mexico.”

“Sooo,” Tracer drags out, “blackmail?”

“Well, I wouldn’t call it that --”

Hanzo flatly cuts off Winston. “I am fairly certain this is the definition of blackmail.”

“It’s more of a stand-down. A truce.” Winston looks around. “We’ve got them in a position where they can’t back out, right as we’re about to need something to push us forward.”

Reinhardt frowns. “This tactic is too underhanded for my liking. The Vishkar Corporation should be publicly exposed for their crimes. We should not bargain with them after putting ourselves at risk to bring them to justice.”

Hanzo’s brows furrow. “Bargaining with a corrupt organization that has a foothold in nearly every nation on the planet is a guarantee for further aggression. They will grapple for some kind of upper-hand on the situation, if they do not already have one already.”

“I have to agree,” Angela murmurs. She cups her chin in her hand. “A company this large and unethical will not tolerate being manipulated this way for very long. We don’t have the force or resources to combat the amount of firepower they have. How can you even trust that they will uphold their end?”

Athena answers primly: “The answer to your question is set to arrive at the Watchpoint at approximately 1200 today.”

McCree is zoned out -- thinking about Hanzo, slouching in his chair with his chin propped in his mechanical palm -- when he catches Tracer flashing finger-guns at him. He blinks, mouthing: what? The realization hits him: 1200. High noon! He finger-guns back. Hanzo kicks him under the table; McCree throws him a weak grin and receives a derisive look in return: now is not the time.
“I’ve arranged to meet with a Vishkar liaison in person,” says Winston. “One of Koppal’s architechts. She’ll be here for three days to negotiate the official statement.”

“Ach,” mutters Reinhardt, drawing back. “That is even less to my liking.”

“Surely you would not allow a member of the Vishkar Corporation to stay here on base,” Hanzo charges. He nearly bristles in his chair. “Not when so many critical members of Overwatch are about to depart for a mission --”

“She’s staying off-base,” Winston interrupts. “It’ll just be her, no other agents. She’ll be unarmed, and Athena will monitor her during the visit. She won’t be permitted to go anywhere without an escort.”

“You will forgive me,” the archer growls, “if I do not believe that is enough to ensure our security.”

“Three days, Hanzo.” Winston holds up gloved fingers. “That’s all. By the time you return from Siberia, the statement will be released and she’ll be gone.”

Hanzo’s tone turns dogged. “It took them less than an hour to wreak absolute havoc. Imagine what they could do in three days!”

“A single archi-tech does not possess the capacity to damage our reinforced defense systems,” Athena answers overhead. “I have carefully assessed the threat matrix and concluded that the probability of the agent singularly disabling the Watchpoint within the time frame of her stay is approximately seven-hundred thousand to one --”

Hanzo rises. “I do not care if the odds are a billion to one.” He hoists Storm Bow from where it rests next to his chair. “I do not agree with this course of action.” Swiftly he leaves the room.

Silence. Bewildered, McCree realizes all eyes have settled on him, awkward and expectant. He knows what they’re insinuating. He’s your friend.

“Aw, hell,” he sighs. He pushes up from his chair with a grunt -- “gimme a sec” -- and lopes after Hanzo.

McCree catches up to the archer as he’s heading into Hangar 18.

“Hey, hold up,” he puffs. Then, when Hanzo does not slow down: “hey! Where’n the hell are you goin’?”

“To find Genji.”

“Uh, okay.” McCree clanks beside Hanzo as he beelines into the hangar. “Why?”

“To warn him. Immediately. My brother should be informed of this foolhardy decision, lest his safety be endangered.”

McCree sighs. “Y’know, you could just use your comm and call him. Y’didn’t have to get up and walk out.”

Hanzo’s synthetic soles rasp to a halt. He glowers up at the gunslinger, turns away, presses a finger to his right-ear comm, and mutters something briskly in Japanese. McCree picks out a few key words: ‘Vishkar,’ ‘Overwatch,’ ‘archi-tech,’ and -- to his surprise -- ‘Yankee-san.’ Hanzo finishes the conversation and turns back to find McCree eyeing him owlishly. “What.”
“I thought you weren’t gonna call me that any more,” he grumbles, hands on his hips.

“What are you talking about.”

“I heard you just now, talkin’ to Genji. You said ‘Yankee-san.’ I heard it.”

“I said no such thing.”

“You gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“Clearly you are hearing things.”

McCree balks down at Hanzo. “It was in there! Between all the Nihongo, I heard it!”

“If you heeded my advice for the past month and learned to speak proper Japanese, you would hear the truth of what I said rather than what you perceive.”

McCree narrows his eyes. “Aw, now you’re just screwin’ with me.”

“I have never screwed with you before.”

McCree feels the live wire prickle at the base of his neck. “Boy, if that ain’t a bald-faced lie. Well, then, sweetheart, guess this whole name-callin’ deal’s off.”

Hanzo withers McCree with his glare. “There are more pressing matters to attend to at this moment than that. A Vishkar agent will be here within the hour. This is a matter of security! Everyone is at risk!”

“Aww, c’mon, Shimada-san, you heard Athena. She said she’d analyzed the threat matrix --”

“I do not care what the AI says!” Hanzo retorts. “Genji is in danger. The entire base is in danger! It bodes ill on all sides of the matter.” He scowls up at McCree. “Does it not seem unwise to you that Winston is permitting a Vishkar agent to enter this Watchpoint while we are in Siberia? That his plan of action for global support is to blackmail a multinational corporation renowned for infiltration and sabotage?”

McCree scratches beneath the crown of his hat. “Well, he’s a scientist, Shimada-san.”

Hanzo scoffs. “How is that relevant?”

“He analyzes everything before he does it,” McCree replies, shrugging. “It ain’t like he just blindly made the decision, I mean, months of plannin’ prob’ly went into him organizing this.”

“Months into your organization’s return and your de-facto leader is already stooping to carefully-planned methods of extortion. Not very heroic, you realize.”

“It ain’t the most legit course of action, true, but it’s prob’ly all we got right now, Shimada-san. Besides, ain’t like Vishkar plays fair, neither. We just leveled the playin’ field.”

“Did we? Tell me: in all your years with the Deadlock Gang and Blackwatch, when did such tactics succeed without the target’s eventual hostile retaliation?”

McCree grunts. “Uh, well, to tell you the truth, it worked out a few times.”

Hanzo sours at his answer; McCree lifts his hands.
“Listen, I know -- in our line of work, we both seen plenty of shit like this go belly-up in the past. But, hey, it’s the plan for right now. Sometimes you gotta pitch a lil’ underhanded if you wanna come out on top.” McCree lightens. He lightly claps Hanzo on the arm. “Play a little dirty, y’know.”

Hanzo bats away his hand. “Since when did heroes play dirty.”

Undeterred, McCree leans in. “I’d be willin’ to tell you ‘bout a few times, if you’d sit to hear the tale.”

Hanzo mutters a rude word in Japanese under his breath. He resumes storming through the hangar; McCree follows a few paces. “Where’re you goin’ now!”

“I need to think.” And then, sullenly: “alone.”

Jesse simmers. Indignantly he points back the way they came. “Well -- uh. The briefing ain’t over yet!”

“I do not care!”

“Aww, c’mon -- Shimada!” But Hanzo dwindles out of sight without looking back. McCree rolls his eyes and pinches the bridge of his nose.

Classic Hanzo, Jesse tells himself. Unsure if he's a comrade, a friend, or anything remotely close to what McCree wants him to be.

---

Mercy and McCree greet the Vishkar liaison when she lands precisely at noon. Below the towering launch gantry, centered squarely on the charging pad, a small white heli-craft hums down its engines. Out from its pod door steps a tall, pretty woman in an immaculate violet suit. Her black hair is pulled back in a strict chignon framed by a headset with an orange visor. She has a full, unsmiling mouth and large, piercing eyes. Their color momentarily captivates McCree: vivid, fair hazel, almost gold. Striking, alluring even. If only her expression was not so cold.

Jesse feels Angela shift and fold her arms. He hooks his thumbs at his belt, eases his weight to his other foot. Silently reassuring: she ain’t nothin’.

“My name is Satya Vaswani,” she announces, approaching, toting a small briefcase.

“Good afternoon, Miss Vaswani,” Angela says. “My name is --”

“-- Dr. Angela Ziegler, codename ‘Mercy.’” Satya continues as if the doctor never spoke. “Swiss national, creator of the Valkyrie Swift-Response suit and Caduceus combat medic system.” Her gold eyes flick to McCree. “And you are Jesse McCree, codename same as your surname. American national, formerly a member of the Deadlock Gang. You are a bounty hunter. Your current fugitive bounty is set at eighty-five million US dollars.”

McCree snorts, rolls his eyes. “Well, hey, whattya know, it went up. Wonder how that happened.”

Satya replies mechanically: “possession of illegal firearms, burglary, assault on a commercial hypertrain en route to Houston, Texas --”

McCree waves his hand. “Oh, my bad. That was a rhetorical question.”
“There are no such things as rhetorical questions, Mister McCree,” she says tersely. “The Vishkar Corporation has answers for everything. The right answers. Including a proper solution to the situation into which you have forced our hand.” Behind her, the heli-craft glimmers. Its edges illuminate a bright, neon blue before evaporating with a whirr. Satya lifts her right arm; the blue light flashes into a pristine white disk centered into the palm of her black glove. “I believe you are here to escort me to meet with your” -- she pauses -- “leading coordinator.”

McCree folds his arms over his chest. “We sure are. But lemme give you some advice: whatever you do, don’t call him a monkey.”

“My file indicates that he is a gorilla, family Hominidae, order of Primates in the Class Mammalia --”

“He’s a scientist,” Mercy interrupts. McCree hears a bite in her voice. “Just like yourself. That’s all you need to know.”

They lead Satya to the compound to meet with Winston. After the first round of negotiations are finished, she’s offered a meal at the mess hall before she departs for her lodgings on the island. Satya politely declines. She instead requests a brief walking tour of the compound where the Vishkar agents staged their attack, as well as retrieval of any damaged tech left behind. Winston politely declines. Lúcio and Hanzo escort her to the launchpad, where she reconstructs her heli-craft from the accelerator disk in her glove. Hanzo glares at the archi-tech with unabashed loathing. As Satya boards, Lúcio silently points his index and middle fingers at his eyes before directing them at her. Satya shoots him a chilly frown. She flicks her thumb and forefinger against her shoulder, as if brushing off a speck of dust.

“Can you believe that?” Lúcio mutters later to Torbjorn as he’s microwaving a moon pie. “She didn’t even ask about the remains of the agents. Cared more about their busted teleporter than their own people.”

“Any corporation that puts its technology before its personnel is destined to be curriculum in an engineerin’ ethics class,” Torbjorn answers. “You want a timeline of their ancestors, I’ll give you one. Start with Morton-Thiokol, move to Omnica Corp, and so forth an’ so on. I’m tellin’ you.” He shakes a coffee stirrer at Lúcio. “Vishkar’s next in a long line of failed endeavors where history went right on to repeat itself.”

---

After supper, McCree waters the box gardens and treks to Range 2. Hanzo is already there; his bow and quiver are not.

“No practice tonight,” he says. “Rest is more important before a mission. Come: we walk.”

They stop by the mess hall so Hanzo can get a cup of hōjicha. Then they take the drone track down towards the loading bays. Overhead looms the transport, docked in Hangar 18, fueled and ready to take off in the morning.

“You get all the thinkin’ done that you needed to do this afternoon?” McCree asks, brushing fuzz off his serape.

“Yes.” Hanzo nurses his tea. “I studied the archi-tech from a distance, when the opportunity provided. It was vital that I collected as much information about her as possible.”

“Real shame someone so pretty had to be signed up with Big Evil. Thought she might shoot hard-
light lasers out her eyes for a while there, nevermind her lil’ glove.”

Hanzo’s voice drips with revulsion. “Beauty is wasted on someone so eager to restructure the world to false principles.”

“Uh, yeah. That too.”

The archer takes a long drink from his cup. “My brother assures me that this archi-tech is no threat, and that he is unafraid of any action levied in our direction by the Vishkar Corporation. He encouraged me to continue with the mission to Siberia despite my misgivings. After thinking it over, I have decided that this is the best course of action.”

“Oh,” McCree replies, scratching his jaw. “Good, ‘cause, y’know -- if you weren’t gonna go, the mission probably wasn’t gonna happen.”

“Winston and Athena could have adjusted the simulation protocol for my absence.”

“Ain’t no way they can adjust seven weeks o’ team trainin’, though,” McCree retorts. “’C’mon, you know that, too. Don’t be talkin’ like you ain’t mission critical, Shimada-san.”

Hanzo sips his tea. “Perhaps it is so.”

McCree rolls his eyes. “We kinda-sorta need you, you’re kinda-sorta important.”

“Kinda-sorta.” Hanzo sounds smug now, tilting his chin up at McCree. “Such ambivalence, from someone who I thought valued me.”

Jesse nearly whirls. “Aw, you’re doin’ it again.”

“What?”

“Screwin’ with me!” McCree bites back a laugh. His nerves are jumping. “You know I value you, you’re tryin’ a bait me into sayin’ somethin’ dumb.”

“I hardly have to bait for such a feat. Your talent for irreverent banter needs no lure.”

McCree works his jaw. They’re rounding the bay door when he finally decides: take the shot.

“Well, here’s you a hook.” He stops. “If we ain’t practicin’ tonight, let’s get some beers and swap some more tales.”

“Tales?”

“Yeah. Y’know, like that one time.” Jesse sees the shift in Hanzo’s expression and knows he doesn’t need to clarify that one time; the afternoon under the lone tree by the box garden is memorable for them both. “Nothin’ like chewing the fat before a mission, takes the edge off everything. Could tell you some stories ‘bout my Deadlock days. Got plenty more where they came from.”

Hanzo lowers his cup. McCree hangs, holds his breath, expects a refusal any second now.

“It is a long walk back just to procure beer,” Hanzo says, finally.

Jesse’s chest tightens. “Naw, I got some in my room.” He adjusts his hat. “It’s German beer, Reinhardt’s stuff, but it’s good. Goes down real smooth.”

Now it’s truly a gamble. Hanzo hums, scrutinizes the metal paneling of the floor. He rocks his
weight to his heels. Jesse watches the steam rise off his cup and thinks: *no go.* Not while he’s enjoying his tea, peace and quiet, his evening wind-down.

“Lead the way.” Hanzo takes a drink. Those three words have Jesse’s heart thumping in his ears.

McCree’s room is less orderly than when Hanzo saw it last. He opens the door and instantly wishes he’d aired the place out; the smell of old cigarillo smoke blunts his nostrils. Dirty clothes pile in the corners again; soda cans are stacked on the dresser; his chestplate leans upside down against the wall. Hanzo finishes his tea in the doorway as Jesse scurries to straighten the place.

“Alright, here you go,” McCree says as he picks two brown bottles from the mini-fridge. He clips off the caps with a flick of his mechanical fingers. “I dunno how you’re supposed to pronounce the name, it’s like” -- he inspects the label before passing the beer to Hanzo -- ‘“Schneider, Weisses, uh, Eisenbocker, somethin’”

“Thank you.” Hanzo sets his mug down by the door and accepts the bottle. “I suppose you do not have a glass.”

“Uh.” Jesse fishes a cigarillo out of a box on the dresser. “Nope.”

“I see.” Hanzo sniffs the lip of the bottle. “Shall we go outside?”

Jesse chews the inside of his cheek. *Dangle the bait.* “I was thinkin’ we could just hang out in here.”

“Here.” Hanzo answers flatly. “In your room.”

“Now, I know it’s kinda small, but I can go find another chair --”

Hanzo brushes past him, lightly clipping his shoulder. He opens the window slats with a *snik.* Cool evening air gushes into the dorm. Hanzo glances at Jesse, taking a drink of his beer with silent assent.

*Got ‘im.* Jesse’s stomach hitches into his chest.

McCree unwraps his serape and slings it over the back of his console chair. Excitement jitters his right hand. “Lemme find you somethin’ to sit on.”

Hanzo is already trailing back to sit on the edge of the bunk. “This is fine. Keep your chair.”

“Uh, alright.” Jesse sinks into the seat, suppressing the urge to sprawl his knees. He clears his throat, takes a drink, tries to act casual. “Yeah.” He scratches his chest through the unbuttoned top of his shirt, reaches for his lighter on the dresser, fires up the cigarillo. Hanzo looks at him expectantly. Jesse lightly raspberries his lips. “So, uh. You nervous?”

“For what?”

“The mission tomorrow.”

“Why would I be?”

“Oh, y’know. Kickin’ off a new Overwatch all over again. Kind of a big deal, if you ask me. Plus it's your first mission. Also a big deal.”

“I have no anxieties about the mission. Only what we leave behind.”
Jesse puffs on his cigarillo. “I betcha it’ll be fine.”

Hanzo sniffs. He sulks into his beer; Jesse sighs, scratches his neck, bounces his knee.

Well, here they are. Drinking in his room. He takes inventory: the door (shut), the window (open), the beer (good), the evening (quiet), Hanzo (handsome, stunning, left shoulder bared, poised and lordly even when drinking straight from the bottle in McCree’s disheveled bunk). This is what he wants -- what’s required, he tells himself, to get from Hanzo what he needs -- so why is he hunting for things to say? Why isn’t this easy?

And why is Hanzo abruptly tilting back his beer, gulping it down like he’s been through the desert? Working his long throat to drink it down, finishing with a hiss? Jesse chews on his tongue. He digs spurred heels into the legs of his chair.

“Might wanna slow down,” he strains through a weak laugh. “That’s, uh, strong stuff. I wouldn’t go chuggin’ it like that unless you’re lookin’ to get tipsy fast.”

Hanzo snorts. “You call this strong?”

“It’s like twelve percent, Shimada-san. That’s strong for beer.”

“Horses drink water with more barley than this.”

McCree squints down the lip of his bottle. “Didn’t know you were a connoisseur of barn troughs, Shimada-san, but I’ll take your word for it.” He glances up to see Hanzo staring at him hawkishly. “What?” Hanzo gets up. He starts towards Jesse, who stiffens -- “that was a joke, by the way, I was just kiddin’” -- and goes rigid when the archer halts beside him, sets his empty beer bottle on top of the dresser, turns, unhooks the gourd at his belt, and thrusts it out. A beveled ouroboros gleams on one side, two gold dragons devouring their tails.

“What’s this,” Jesse grunts.

“Sake,” replies Hanzo.

“Yeah, I’m familiar with what you got in there, are you --”

Hanzo jigs the gourd at him, sloshing the contents. “You think that is strong? This is strong.”

“I ain’t finished my beer.”

“To hell with your beer.”

Jesse smacks his lips, sets down his bottle, accepts the gourd, flips open the metal cap. He peers inside, sniffs, glances at Hanzo for confirmation. Then he takes a tentative sip. It has a powerful bite, enough to make him wince.

Hanzo barks a laugh. “You see? A worthy drink.”

Jesse hands back the sake, wrinkling his nose. “Reinhardt’d be awful slighted if he heard you talkin’ shit about his drinks.”

“I will know who to punish if he finds out.” Hanzo caps the gourd and hooks it back to his belt.

Half a beer isn’t enough to tipple him, but Jesse thinks having Hanzo this close could make him drunk. His gaze lingers over the contours of flesh above his bared chest, trailing the ink that snakes down his arm. The smooth cut of his silhouette makes his eyes go heavy-lidded. The live wire
burns again, snapping in his chest. A nagging impulse. Jesse could reach out right now and get him by the waist. Hanzo leans against the dresser; if he minds the cigarillo smoke, there’s no sign of it.

Dully, Jesse murmurs: “it sure is gonna be nice having you on the mission tomorrow.”

“Is that so,” Hanzo muses.

“Yeah. Of all the folks we got fightin’ on our side, we got you.” He smiles slyly. “A dragon.”

“The dragon is my strength. I am just a man.”

“I mean, y’know. A dragon-man.” Hanzo squints. Jesse clears his throat again. “Alright, maybe just the” -- his eyes fix on Hanzo’s tattoo -- “uh, the dragon --”

“This talent you have,” Hanzo interrupts, “for speaking incessantly about whatever first comes to your mind. I have a theory as to why you do it.”

“Why’s that?”

He watches Jesse with tepid eyes. “It is to fill the void in your skull with sound, so that you do not have to experience the discomfort of silence.”

A warm prickle rises in Jesse’s throat. “Okay. Uh. That’s a theory, yeah.”

“You were alone for a long time.” Hanzo reaches out and lifts the brim of Jesse’s hat. He removes it, sets it on the dresser. “Fleeing bounty hunters. Your past. Your Blackwatch and your Deadlock. During those years on the run, safety meant isolation. Isolation, which can drive the mind to madness. You did not know the values of meditation or vigil. You were a lonely man.”

The softness in his voice brings Jesse back to the last time Hanzo was here -- the cleaning, the showering, the vulnerable longing as he scrubbed off his fear. A visible shiver jolts his spine, nibbles his voice. “We all gotta cope, Shimada-san.”

“I know how you cope.”

“Listen --”

Just as he’s about to sit up straighter, Hanzo reaches for the cigarillo. He slips it from his mouth. Ash has collected on the end; Hanzo taps it off into Jesse’s lap. “Uh. Look, copin’ -- that’s a topic, I mean, that ain’t the tale I was gonna tell you, but” -- Hanzo takes a long pull of the cigarillo. Smooth as silk, no hint of a sputter. A natural. Jesse’s blood boils in his guts. “Uh, y’know, I bet you got some of your own” -- Hanzo holds him with those sleek, wicked eyes -- “like that, you were on the run, too, I’m sure you had to figure a few things out --”

He should have seen it coming; he should have guessed this was next. Hanzo purses his lips and blows a plume of white smoke directly into Jesse’s red face. He shuts his eyes, stifles a cough. The live wire crackles: clever fella. Good shot. Unlucky cowboy --

“These are disgusting,” Hanzo announces, shedding more ash over Jesse’s knee. “I cannot imagine how many years you’ve endured them.”

“Long enough.”

“There are better. Much better.”
“You gonna hook me up with ’em sometime?”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.”

Jesse grins. “Well, you know I’d appreciate it.”


“Listen, Shimada-san, I’ve been thinking --”

Hanzo reaches for him. His left hand glides along the shaggy line of his jaw, strokes the coarse hair of his beard to his chin, thumbs the scruff below his lip. Tentative at first, then sure -- halfway between exploring and affectionate. Like he might scratch a hound.

Jesse bolts upright. He inhales through his nostrils in quick shakes. If he’s going to do it, it ought to be now. Lest Hanzo flee again, like each encounter before. *Shit for timing.*

Hesitant at first, Jesse drops his chin and sinks his lips into the swell of Hanzo’s thumb. The scent of soap and oil rushes his senses; he chases it, kissing his palm, then his index finger, then jerking forward to catch the hand as it pulls away. He digs insistent fingers around Hanzo’s knuckles and buries his mouth against them. A barrier gives way like a breaking dam -- the spark he craved that sets his limbs in motion. He hooks his mechanical forearm around Hanzo’s waist and pulls -- searing inside with delight when the archer yields -- to bring him closer. Still such a good fit. So powerful.

Above him, Hanzo makes a sound Jesse hasn’t heard from him before. Too noble for a whimper, softer than a snarl. Maybe a sigh. He expects the archer to shove him off at any second, which is why he abandons kissing palms for knuckles and then knuckles for wrists. The shove never comes. Hanzo cards his free hand through Jesse’s hair, combing gently. *Fondly.* A pleasant buzz creeps up Jesse’s back.

This is happening. It’s real. He tastes real salt on the archer’s skin, no product of imagination. He has him at his lips.

Until Hanzo abruptly yanks his hair, strangling from the gunslinger a startled yelp. He momentarily sees stars.

“Mother of fuck-all,” Jesse wheezes.

“Mind your teeth.”

“The hell --”

“I felt them. Mind them.”

“Sweetheart,” Jesse breathes, cheeks flushed and pulse hammering. Humbled, he smiles. “Ah, sweetheart.” There’s a hundred things McCree would like to say right now, but damn: what are the chances he’ll dart away if he does? He looks up and sees Hanzo looming, shadowed in silhouette by the stark overhead lights. Calmly observing him. Scrutinizing. Jesse realizes he’s shaking; Hanzo is still as a pool. His guts twist. Is this better than all the times before, or worse?

Hanzo courses his fingers over Jesse’s scalp. Now he soothes. “You stopped.”

“Not for wantin’ to,” he mutters, now testing the fabric of Hanzo’s *kyudo-gi* with his fingertips.
Softer than how he remembers it from the medbay, less stiff. Dimly he recalls the lecture Hanzo doled out when he mistakenly referred to it as a yukata during practice. Even with Hanzo warm and touching him and so damned close, he feels like he’s earned a scolding. “I’m tryin’ to figure this out, is all.”

“What is there to figure out?”

“I been wantin’ to do this for a while now. Wanting you.” Jesse gulps a knot in his throat. “Weeks. Longer. Months, I dunno.”

“Months ago, we were enemies.” Hanzo’s other hand thumbs lazily at his chin.

“You been hauntin’ me since the day you shot me.”

“No.” A playful denial.

“I don’t care how that sounds. It’s the truth. You been on my mind. You been all in my god-damn head. Couldn’t get you out if I tried.” Hanzo does not reply; Jesse tugs at his kyudo-gi, nuzzling his brow where the garment crosses over his stomach. “God-damn, you burn me up real bad. Sitting around here thinking about you all the time, wonderin’ if you even gave a damn. You’re like to make me jump out of my skin every time you touch me.”

Hanzo tenderly lingers through his hair. He sounds wry. “Not very often, then.”

“Um.” Jesse opens one eye. “You stuffed your fingers in my mouth.”

Now Hanzo leans into his grasp, intrigued. “Did I?”

“The night the Vishkar -- oh, come on, Shimada, you know what I’m fuckin’ talkin’ about, you had me slammed against the wall! Shit. Don’t torture me here.”

Hanzo laughs: the deep, throaty rumble that makes Jesse’s hair stand on end. “You compromised our safety with your noise. I was prepared to utilize a pressure point that would have incapacitated you, had you given us away. A saliva gland right below the jaw, combined with force applied within the mouth. It would have dropped you to the ground in less than a second.”

Jesse doesn’t know whether this revelation excites or dismays him. It could be both. “Okay, well. You kissed me.”

“I struck you, as well.”

He tenses like a wire. “You should do it again.”

Hanzo stops stroking his hair. His brows rise. “Strike you?”


“A fitting time for a barbarian to remember his manners.”

“I’m dyin’ down here, sweetheart. Throw a dog a bone.”

Without warning, Hanzo scales his lap. Two nimble arcs of his knees and he’s straddling Jesse into the chair, lording over him, smirking. He’s weaving his fingers down the placket of Jesse’s shirt, unfastening the buttons, whispering apart the fabric all the way to his trousers. Jesse squirms, huffing like he’s out of breath. Hanzo peels the shirt away, drops it to the floor, pauses to still Jesse’s arms when they flap free of his sleeves. “Relax.”
“Listen, darlin’,” he says, grabbing for him, “ain’t a thing you could do right now that’s gonna make me --”

“Shh.” The archer traces across his chest, halting over scar tissue, thumbing the ridge of rib and collarbone. Jesse’s insides threaten to turn liquid under his touch. It’s masterful, the way he threads his fingertips against hair and skin, exploring, appraising. He can’t help but think there’s genuine appreciation happening here -- but for what? Which part? Does Hanzo like that he’s so hairy? Broad-chested? Tawny with a farmer’s tan? His hands glide past the grid of Jesse’s abs and over the soft belly flesh, gracing his navel. Jesse jolts. Does he like any of this? Any part of him at all?

“Sweetheart, I’m ticklish.” He laughs weakly; Hanzo ignores him. “You keep travelin’ down that road and I’ll have to --”

“Sh.” Sharper this time: a warning hiss.  Hanzo spans his ribs with a rigid palm, gathering what’s firm and what’s not, massaging both until Jesse whines. He sweeps his thumb in a spiral-shape around the oval bullet scar.

Jesse groans. “I got shot there.”

“Did you.”

“Why’re your clothes still on?” He yanks the blue obi. Hanzo pushes his hand away. Jesse tugs again, loosens it, drops it to the floor. The gourd clinks, turns over, sloshes. “Lemme look at you.”

To his surprise, Hanzo obliges. He draws down his sleeves and sheds his kyudo-gi. Jesse’s breath hitches. What a sight: Hanzo in his lap, sturdy in his arms, all pleasing angles and shapes -- their clothes mingled on the floor, the space between them rapidly closing. The chair creaks. He strains, trying to nudge Hanzo higher up the crook of his thigh. Insistent and obvious.

“Pretty as a picture,” he purrs. “You’re the prettiest thing I’ve ever seen. You’re the god-damn best.” Jesse’s hands roam the muscles of his back, mapping the dip of his spine. “I’m gonna make it real nice for you, darlin’, you’re gonna love it. I’m gonna make it so good for you.”

Another yank. Oww. Hanzo grabs a fistful of his nape.

“Say another word,” he whispers huskily, “and I will put my fingers back in your mouth and demonstrate what I spoke of earlier.”

Jesse simmers, slackens, boils in delighted defeat. There’s the scolding. Who would have thought he’d like it that much?

Deftly the archer loosens his belt and unfastens the heavy buckle with a click. The noise fires in Jesse’s ears loud as a gunshot. Louder than the sound of his heartbeat when Hanzo unzippers him, works back his fly, and plies down the waistband of his trousers. A reedy gasp strangles out of Jesse’s mouth. He nearly scrambles, spurs chiming, soles scraping. Hanzo thrusts his weight, pinning him down into the chair. Too damn fast. Should have seen it coming. Now he’s not going anywhere, not that he minds. The gunslinger yields, twitching -- a puppet yanked by a string at the hips. Or his throat, with all the undignified sounds bubbling from there. He can’t tell. Doesn't care. Hanzo has him now.

Without breaking his gaze, Hanzo spits in his hand. Jesse swallows, stares, dwindles beneath those brown eyes and thinks: oh, hell.

It’s enough to make him sing. His imagination couldn’t match it. Once again, he comes up lacking, paled in comparison to the actual deed. The slow, insistent drag of Hanzo’s fingers. The way he
grips him: precise, no-nonsense, efficient. Like he’s handling a weapon. Same as the kiss: no reciprocation. Jesse can only dig in and hang on, panting, one hand bracing the chair as the other hunts for purchase -- grabbing an arm, a shoulder, the tattooed breast that’s always bared, a hip, a thigh --

“No,” Hanzo barks savagely when Jesse goes between his legs. He speeds up. Jesse keens.

“Why not?” Jesse winces at how bad he sounds over his own ragged breath. “Meet me halfway, sweetheart.”

“When I want your paws on me, I will invite them.”

“God-damn, y’mean sonofabitch” -- Jesse thumps beneath him, clacking the chair legs -- “how’n the hell’s that fair” -- he catches Hanzo’s scarf between sweaty fingers, nails biting into the dragon scales gleaming on his shoulder -- “please. Please.” And then, through gritted teeth: “Hanzo.”

“No.”

Jesse goes to pieces fast. Embarrassingly so -- the kind of quick he thinks a man should take to his grave. Maybe it’s the denial that does it, the sound of Hanzo hissing contrary against the shell of his ear. Or the smell on him, waxy like soap (sage? wood? sweat? leather? he doesn’t have the faculty to inventory every scent, delightful as they are, wild and delicious). Or all the longing, the smoke and shooting and side-by-side suffering, the unending dilemma that Hanzo represents. A friend, a foe. A dragon eating its tail, a fool caught in his snare. He could laugh at the absurdity of it: two outlaws, persona non gratae to god-fearing folk and gangs alike, grinding out on each other in a Watchpoint console chair. Cause of death: waxed by the yakuza. What a way to go.

Correction: Hanzo grinds him out. Not the other way around.

Hanzo doesn’t want the kiss, hasn’t wanted it, nearly flicks away when it happens. Jesse steals it, catching the archer’s mouth, savoring the breath florid with smoke and strong beer. He growls a preemptive warning -- not that Hanzo needs it. He knows exactly when the gunslinger is about to go off, prepares for it, holds him down, works him through it, sinks his teeth into Jesse’s lip to stifle the humiliating, hound-like sounds rumbling deep in his chest. The bite draws blood: less than the arrow, more than the slap, enough to sting. Hanzo hardly makes a peep. Jesse’s the loud one, bucking in his fist, rattling in the chair like a overboiling pan.

Eventually the haze swims out of his vision. Hanzo lets go, eases up off him. Jesse puffs, red as a coal, damp-necked. He tries to say something -- darlin’, sweet darlin’, sweetheart of mine -- but he jams. He shoots out a cough. Hanzo leans down wordlessly and gathers his brown shirt from the floor, folds it, and cleans off his belly with slow, careful swipes. Jesse’s chin touches his collarbone, watching. Inwardly disliking the task. It’s too methodical, like he’s finishing a chore.

“Darlin’,” he finally thrums. And then, as he’s sitting up, curling forward: “Your turn.”

Hanzo lightly shoves him. Undeterred, Jesse clasps back. His fingernails have left red half-moons along Hanzo’s shoulder, nicking the tattoo dragon’s hide. He kisses the marks, kisses the tattoo, buries his mouth to the cords of his powerful throat.

“C’mon, your turn,” he rasps, adoring. “Tell me what you want.” As he indulges in the afterglow: “lemme make it good for you, sweetheart. You’ll love it. I promise.”

Hanzo says nothing. He permits the kissing, the pawing, the way Jesse full-body embraces him. He does not permit the wandering hand that strokes through his trousers. Just when Jesse swears he
feels a tell-tale swell along his thigh, Hanzo slips away. He stands and plucks his kyudo-gi from the floor. Jesse sits up, struggling with the cold rush that floods the archer’s absence. Hanzo is dressing, strapping on his obi, adjusting the tie. Jesse reaches for his hand. Hanzo pauses; he looks down.

“Where’re you goin?” Jesse bleats.

“We have a mission tomorrow,” he says.

Jesse mumbles against his forearm: “so?”

“Rest is important. I will take my leave.”

“You just got here, honey,” Jesse laughs awkwardly. He nuzzles the hand, kisses it again. “I just got you here. I ain’t done with you yet.”

“For tonight, you are.”

“Um. No?”

Hanzo withdraws. He smirks. “Thank you for the beer.”

Jesse blurts bewilderedly: “Are you’re screwin’ with me? For real this time. Are you actually screwin’ with me?”

Hanzo reaches out and twists Jesse’s ear. Jesse pulls back. The gesture is startlingly affectionate, almost incongruously. It should not be so fond.

Before he can respond -- or reach, grab, beg him back to his embrace -- Hanzo reaches the door. Jesse gets up to go after him; his knees go to water.


“Goodnight.”

“Han-zo.” He lumbers forward, belt buckle chiming, trousers sagging around his ass. Hanzo is gone. Jesse stares as the door slides shut. His right ear buzzes. He looks at the crushed cigarillo on his dresser, the empty beer bottle, the hat, the lighter. His gaze slumps to the floor. All around him, everything feels hazy and soft. His lip hurts.

Realization: that was his last clean shirt.

---

At 0640 the next morning, Tracer completes the transport’s pre-flight checks and relays to the team that they can take off when ready. The remaining Watchpoint crew gathers to see them off.

“If you check your inbox, I sent y’all something special,” Lúcio beams. “Be sure to listen to it before kick-off.”

“Keep your heads up,” Torbjorn advises. “We’ll be watchin’ from here, I’ll be sure to record the news when the first reports come in. Do us proud, now.”

Winston gives a quick speech: an affirmation of their place in a world that needs them now more than ever. Genji salutes. Zenyatta offers the team a gesture of benediction and simple words of encouragement: “know yourselves, and you will know your enemy -- and too you will know those
The flight to the Volskaya checkpoint passes faster than the trip to Lijiang. Tracer clips the transport along at Mach 3, no turbulence. Mei rides up front next her in the co-pilot seat; Reinhardt and Angela double-check the medical supplies and armor packs Torbjorn packed the day before. Hanzo sits adjacent to McCree, arms folded, eyes closed, ears occupied by a pair of neon-blue earbuds. McCree slouches in his seat, snoozes with his hat tipped over his face.

As if nothing happened the night before. No walk, no beer, no unexpected interlude. Not a word shared between them during the two-hour flight.

They touch down in Russia during an afternoon flurry. The five hour jump leaves the team a little jet-lagged -- nothing (Reinhardt assures) a cup of coffee cannot cure. The checkpoint looms: a large industrial compound poised along a frozen river. Angela passes out coats and cloaks.

The team disembarks across a snowy tarmac towards a red-brick warehouse, where they are greeted by the massive Zaryanova herself. She towers above all of them except Reinhardt. The snowy wind tousles the pink shock of her hair, stains her cheeks with color. Her bright blue eyes snap with a nigh-electric energy -- an excitement that McCree thinks must be deadly when glaring down foes.

Beside him, Mei lets out a soft gasp. On his left, Hanzo gives a muted ‘hmm.’

“I am honored to see this with my own eyes!” Zarya booms as they approach. “A return of great heroes to aide my people.” She beams. “Reinhardt!” The old knight goes to her immediately; they embrace, laughing like old friends. “You are smaller than I remember! Have you shrunk?”

“You have simply gotten bigger!” Reinhardt replies, clapping her on the shoulder.

“Wow,” Tracer whispers. “So, she’s cool.”

McCree nods appreciatively. “I’m diggin’ that hair.”

Mei stares in awe. “And her arms.”

“And, my goodness, her scar,” adds Angela.

“And this weather.” Hanzo mutters. “Let us go inside. Before the elements wear us down.”

Zarya takes them to the warehouse and introduces them to the team of Svyatogor pilots: six hardened members of the Russian Defense Forces. Mission kick-off is not for another two hours. Zarya shows them the commissary, the makeshift gym (where she and Reinhardt immediately discuss Wilks scores), and tells them they’re free to hang around the front of the compound.

McCree wanders outside to smoke. He leans against the warehouse wall overlooking the river. The sound of traffic lingers from streets across the way; the afternoon sun burns agate-grey over the ice. Hanzo joins him a minute later. The wind whips at his scarf. His coat is gone.

“The hell you doin’ out here?” McCree rumbles. “Go back in.”

“The simulations are nothing like the real thing.”

“Well, yeah. Never is.” McCree shudders. “Dang, it’s colder than witch’s right tit.”

Hanzo’s teeth chatter. “Of course, one of your sayings exists for a time and place like this.”
“And you got your whole side out, fella, you must be crazier than a goose.”

“I must endure it if I am to properly aim. A brisk jog around the compound may help.”

“So take a lap, Robin Hood.”

“I said it may help.”

Slowly McCree looks down at Hanzo. “Where’s your coat.”

Hanzo says nothing. McCree puffs on his cigarillo. They gaze out over the river as the late afternoon sun paints purple shadows on the ice.

Finally Jesse sighs: “ah, hell, sweetheart.”

He unhooks the clasp on his serape, opens it, extends it down and out around the archer’s shoulders. Hanzo huddles, bumps his hip, tucks the ragged red wool across his chest. Jesse clutches the ends between them. They bundle together, shivering, breath puffing out in clouds.

After a long pause, he mutters: “is it gonna be weird between us now?”

“No,” Hanzo grunts.

“You sure?”

“Yes, I am sure.”

“Why’d y’leave last night?”

“It was an appropriate course of action.”

“I wanted you t’ stay.”

“I prefer to sleep alone.”

McCree rolls his eyes. “Didn’t stop you that one time.”

“That was different.”

“How’n the hell was it ‘different?’”

“You were suffering, then.”

“I was sufferin’ last night when you wouldn’t stick around.” Jesse chews on the end of his cigarillo. “Shit, y’ just left me there, didn’t even kiss me goodnight.” Hanzo clicks his tongue; Jesse glowers down at him. “The hell’s your problem with kissin’, anyway? Wouldn’t have minded a little more o’ that. A man’s got preferences.”

“Indeed. Just as mine do not include the taste of those vile cigars.”

“God-damn,” McCree grumbles. “Fine. Next time just say so.” He shuffles against Hanzo, thrilled and agitated by the warmth of his presence. It feels illicit, like they’re delinquents sneaking from the law. *Technically, we are.* “D’you wanna talk about it?”

“No.”

“Why not?”
“We have a mission in two hours. We need to focus on the objective.”

"Are we even speakin' the same language right now?"

"Maybe when you actually learn proper Japanese."

“Bah, y’know, I figured this’d happen.” Jesse hunches. "You gettin’ all weird on me like this.”

Hanzo pulls the serape cowl up over his lips. “I said it would not be weird. You are making it weird. I do not even understand the definition of your classification of ‘weird.’”

“Look, I get it. Alright?” Jesse works his jaw. “Not wantin’ to talk about it. That’s fine, I guess, we picked a helluva time to get into this mess. You don’t like me talkin’ much at all, I get that too. But I wanted t’ repay you. I still do, you realize.” His voice lowers, darkens. Live wire crackling in his chest. “I wanted to be good to you.”

Glibly Hanzo says, “The opportunity may return. This mission is not forever.”

“I mean it, Shimada. I wanted t’ make you mine.”

"Hah."

"Why's that funny?"

Hanzo smirks. Jesse feels his arm brush beneath the wool, elbowing him.

“Because,” he says, after a silence that nearly stings. "It is the other way around.”

---

Two kilometers away, from the roof of a thirty-story high-rise, he’s there. Hunkered down in the ice. Slowly turning the dial on the visor-scan -- click, click, click -- zooming in the binocular view on the two figures on the wall across the river.

Red cloak. Hat. That's Jesse. The figure beside him, small and pressing close. That must be the other Shimada. How they managed to pull that off, he doesn't know -- nor does he care. Jesse’s enough to confirm what he came to see. This seals the deal. No doubt in his mind: they’re back. Overwatch. Old guard and new. Just like the data predicted -- and when do the facts ever lie? Not this time.

Click, click, click. He taps a finger on the zoom. A flock of birds chatter by. He sighs.

Wait. Are they kissing?

He puts the visor-scan down. Typical cowboy. It doesn't matter; wholly unimportant. He leans over to flip the safety switch on the heavy pulse rifle. Neon-yellow, gleaming: watch out when you pull the trigger.

Two hours ’til intercept. He's ready to go.

He missed them.

Chapter End Notes
- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- References: Reyes' 'happy' song.
- Well, that happened. Haha. Next chapter will have more of the same (I think).

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Once again: really sorry for so many unreplied comments and messages. The response to the fic has taken me by storm! I do read each and every one, and I'm so grateful for ANY time you take out of your day to read this silly work!! I apologize for the length of this chapter; it got way out of hand, and had to be split. Chapter 10 will hopefully come out quicker since there's already stuff written.

- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

前門の虎、後門の狼

zenmon no tora, koumon no ōkami - “tiger at the front gate, wolf at the back”
A proverb where one moves from a bad situation directly to another, out of the frying pan, into the fire.

---

The combination team of Overwatch agents and Russian Defense Forces departs Volskaya on an aerial transport to the Svyatogor deployment zone seventy kilometers north of the city. They assemble in the wide grey launch bay after suiting up, preparing their weapons, and running a final debrief. The bay clamors with excitement. Technical crews in oil-stained coveralls dart here-and-there with preparations and adjustments, calling to each other over loudspeakers in rapid bursts of Russian. Equipment carts hover past on invisible paths that snake around the bay. Team chatter is swallowed by the echo of roaring engines, generators, and loading equipment. They have to shout to hear each other over the din.

Hanzo dislikes it. After so many quiet weeks at the Watchpoint, the noise unsettles him. He must keep his sights on the objective. Especially after all the lurid distractions in the past twenty-four hours.

Six massive Svyatogor walkers loom above the team as they advance through the launch bay. Each machine is vaguely humanoid: a large torso chassis, steel bipedal legs, and two titan limbs studded with rocket armaments. The human-controlled robots are hooked into all manner of hydraulic pumps and fixtures that fuel them for the long walk ahead. Hanzo examines the machines with a measure of awe. He’s seen photographs and holovids, but none compare to the real thing.

Genji would love them. He reflects how fond his brother was of such technology when they were boys -- the bigger and more bombastic, the better. He considers using his handset to take a picture; Winston distributed to each team member a sleek black device no bigger than his palm before they left the Watchpoint that morning.

He decides against it. A story will have to suffice, if he makes it back in one piece.

Hanzo takes stock of the crew. Like Captain Zaryanova, the walker pilots are native Russians: iron-clad, robust, rainbow-haired towers swathed in armor and tattoos. Two of them are loud, vulgar young men from villages destroyed by the omnic uprising. Three are seasoned soldiers with the RDF, one tired man and two sinewy women in their late forties. The sixth is a wrinkled matron
with a pink helmet over chartreuse-green curls. Her prosthetic right arm is scrawled with what looks like children’s drawings and blocky Cyrillic. When she notices Hanzo inspecting it from afar, she points at the drawings and shouts, in halting English: “from my grandbabies. So I remember why I fight.”

It starts to snow hard over the surrounding tundra at zero hour as the team pairs off to their respective walkers. Reinhardt and Mercy board together; Hanzo is assigned to Mei. He tenses as they ride the elevator up to the cockpit loader. Solid ground dwindles beneath them, swimming out his vision. Hanzo prefers to climb at his own pace and volition. Automated lifts always put him on edge.

Heights and bone-chilling cold. Two obstacles Hanzo Shimada currently faces, two challenges to overcome. Two things he’s not particularly fond of but must endure. Dual components of a mission he quietly dreads, with a team of comrades he halfway trusts, as a member of an organization he joined only in debt to a man who is needlessly complicating his life. Not that he has the mental capacity to worry about this right now -- the mission is his focus. Two problems, two solutions.

Only one outcome: he will not fail. Even if he dies.

Across the bay, he spots a stripe of red. The fool (McCree, he corrects himself) stands beside Lena (Tracer, he prompts again -- for now he must use Overwatch callsigns, diverting all thoughts away from personal matters) on the lift. Their eyes catch. Hanzo hesitates; McCree is smiling, mouthing something at him, tipping his hat. Howdy. Hanzo rolls his eyes. He waits until Tracer resumes gawking at the walker before raising his right hand to flick two fingers in a curt wave. McCree grins, clutches his hand to his chestplate and leans back, swooning, pivoting on his heel, puckering his lips. Struck by Cupid.

Hanzo dully ponders how difficult it would be to hit McCree with an actual arrow from where they stand until Mei says: “hey, time to board.”

They crowd into vinyl jump-seats, stowing their gear and buckling in. Their young pilot straps into the big cockpit chair before a dashboard array of instruments and buttons. He wears battered grey armor enameled with grommets and spikes over black coveralls. Silver studs dot his ears, eyebrows and lips. His cherry-red hair sticks up in a prominent mohawk. Hanzo recognizes the gang tattoos on his nape and knuckles -- old enemies of the Shimada-gumi. The pilot goes by his callsign, which clarifies for Hanzo all the chicken-themed photographs, stickers, and paraphernalia stuck around the cabin. ‘Rooster.’

Winston’s voice rumbles on the comm. “Alright, guys. We’re monitoring from the Watchpoint. Athena’s drones are live, and we’ve got the satellite positioned on you. Let’s do this.”

Reinhardt crackles over the line. “Captain Zarya has cleared Mark One for deployment. Mark Two, how are you looking?”

“How fine as pie supper,” drawls McCree. “Tracer and I are with you, big fella.”

Hanzo taps the device clipped in his right ear. “Mark Three is in position and prepared for departure. We are with you.”

Rooster flips switches and turns gears as the Svyatogor powers up with a resonating whoosh. The restraints detach; a metallic screech floods the cockpit, followed by a low scraping groan. Hanzo braces the jump-seat as the walker leaves the bay. A harsh gust of wind hits the chassis. The cabin creaks. Rooster jerks the controls.
“Get a good look,” he laughs, gesturing out the cockpit window. “The most beautiful sight in the world. My home.” A wide white expanse of tundra spans before them, beset by distant black mountains and a purpling twilight sky. The walkers Mark One and Two are advancing ahead, blue-black monoliths marching resolute against the snowy wind.

“I think it’s gorgeous,” Mei says, sincere, smiling. “My kinda place, to be honest.”

“Good. We are going to fight well.” Rooster reaches down, opens a bulkhead panel, takes out a frosty bottle stamped with red Cyrillic lettering. He unscrews the cap and takes a long drink before offering it back to the pair. “We drink on it, eh? To Overwatch.”

“To Russia!” Mei accepts the vodka and takes a hearty swig.

“Yeah! To Russia!” Rooster grins; he has three gold teeth. “And kicking omnis in their assholes.”

“Sure.” Hanzo agrees but declines to drink.

“Twenty minutes until we reach threat zone,” Rooster says as they clank and thump across the terrain. “It’s going to get chilly. If it’s too cold for you, we hug. Yeah?” He cackles. “Kidding. I am a married man. My wife, she’d cut off my balls.”

“Is that her?” Mei asks, pointing to a picture taped to the control panel. A petite redhead beams out from the paper, hoisting an enormous blade. Hanzo guesses she’s less than a hundred pounds; the sword probably weighs more.

“Da. Love of my life. We got married two months ago. She is bounty-hunter. She will crush your face like tin can. Makes love like a nuclear missile, you know? Blows your dick straight off, pchew” -- he puffs his cheeks, emulating the sound of an explosion -- “greatest thing on this planet. I love her.”

Hanzo refrains from rolling his eyes. Mei, however, is charmed. “Aw, she sounds awesome.”

“Awesome is right. We are going to have, like, fifty kids.” Rooster thumbs his nose-ring. “What about you -- you got wife? Husband?”

“Single,” Mei says. “I’m married to my work right now.”

Rooster sniffs. “Hey, that’s nice, too. Dragon-man, you have family?”

“No,” Hanzo grunts. He sways with each thundering step. It’s like they’re on a jet rocked by endless turbulence, high above a frigid white sea.

Beside him, Mei murmurs in Japanese: “do you still have the earbuds I lent you this morning?”

“Yes,” Hanzo replies. “Do you need them back?”

“No. You just look queasy, is all. Sometimes music can help.” She waggles her handset, which is sheathed in a blue vinyl case patterned with penguins. “There are playlists already on here. The classical ones are great.”

“Yes, convenient. I listened on the flight over here.”

“It’s either music, or talking to me for twenty minutes,” she laughs. “Music is probably better.”

Hanzo nearly smiles. “You say it like that would be a bad thing.”
“Well, I don’t speak Japanese very well.”

Hanzo’s brows rise. “Better than anyone else on this team.”

“I am also boring.” She takes off her glasses to wipe the lenses. Then she grins. “Not nearly as cool to talk to as McCree.”

Hanzo detects the faintest hint of gossip and tries not to snort. So: the teammates have begun to make assumptions. He will nip that in the bud. They have a mission to win. “Nonsense. One can only stand so much talk about western movies.”

The walker console honks with an alert. Captain Zarya says something in Russian across the dash speaker. Rooster radios something back; all the pilots reply; Rooster snorts a laugh. Zarya sends a final message before the line cuts off. Mei sinks back into her seat, cooing. Her breath puffs out in clouds.

“The captain is so cool,” she whispers to Hanzo. “I have never met anyone like her. I got to talk to her before we suited up. Did you know: she was set to break world records for weightlifting? Everyone had bets on her doing it. And then she had to quit the tournament to go fight for her country.” Mei rolls her eyes and puffs dramatically. “Sooo cool.”

Hanzo stifles a sigh. Must everyone around him wax romantic? He slips out of his pocket the black handset and neon-blue earbuds. “Is that so.”

“Uh-huh. And when I told her where I was stationed with Overwatch, she said she always wanted to go there! I have never met someone who actually wanted to go to Antarctica? There’s not a lot there, so I thought, ‘Hey, I wonder if she’s just being friendly or’ --”

Hanzo tunes out Mei and activates the handset screen with his thumbprint. A prompt for his credentials flashes on the interface.

```
|| {athena: MOBILE} || LOG ON >> [Agent ID]: 3945_84
|| {athena: MOBILE} || LOG ON >> [Password]: 7!7bVcL22t9
```

Success. Welcome back, Agent Hanzo.

[Default LANG set: JPN]

I see you’re logging in near the loading zone checkpoint. Winston and I are monitoring from drones and your comm sensors.

You have 2 unread messages. Tap the mail icon to read.

“-- I think, I don’t know. I mean. Cryostasis will take you out of the dating scene for a while” -- Mei prattles as Hanzo brings up his inbox. “She isn’t that much younger than me, which is nice. I don’t know about you but I prefer people close to my age. Which is tough, considering I was asleep for so long --”

FROM: [3945_83] CORREIA DOS SANTOS, LÚCIO (LÚCIO)

To: DL_OW_SIBERIA TEAM ALPHA
Subject: Kick-Off Tune: “WE’RE GONNA BE HEROES”

Hey familia! I have been waiting a LONG TIME to share this with you guys and THAT TIME IS NOW!!! Enclosed is my latest track: WE’RE GONNA BE HEROES. I have been writing this during the lockdown using a new Crossfade algorithm. Not as good as me being there playing it live but it will get you psyched up! Give it a listen before things start. You guys are going to do great and I am so proud of you!! OVERWATCH IS BACK!! LOVE YOU ALL! BOA SORTE!

1 attachment:

TRACK_8-8-76.mp3

Hanzo marks the message as ‘read’ and flips to the next.

FROM: [3945_49] SHIMADA, GENJI (GENJI)

To: SHIMADA, HANZO (HANZO)

Subject: Good Luck

By the time you read this it will be your hour. I am proud of you. As I said to you last night: do your best.

He leans back in his seat and frowns. The message jolts his focus from the mission to a bleak, hollow dread -- a feeling he has suppressed all day. Hanzo’s thoughts leap to the previous evening. After leaving McCree hot and flustered in his room, he departed to find his brother, finding him with Zenyatta overlooking the rocky shores. Sitting side-by-side under the waning moon. Genji rose to greet him, asked him to join them in meditation, understood why he refused but denied him the last-minute meeting he desired. He ignored Hanzo’s insistence that they talk about the mission and discuss arrangements should Hanzo not return. He raised his synthetic hand to all protests: you will come back alive, I am sure of it. Then Genji wished him luck, bid him goodnight, and went back to Zenyatta. Hanzo sulked to his room feeling strange and empty, cast-off. As if he’d been slighted, but could not place exactly how.

Hanzo re-reads the text over and over. It’s a blessing he did not expect -- and yet, it’s vastly inadequate. It was one thing for the Swiss physician to restrict their time together, but now Genji seems eager to meter it himself. If Hanzo intrudes during hours that his brother allots to others, he will be refused. Even if he needs him. Even when he is afraid. It’s as if Genji is simultaneously the sparrow he knows and loves but also -- somehow -- a different person entirely.

He could die on this mission. Does he not deserve more than do your best?

Mei observes silently. She can tell he’s not listening. “Get some tough news?”

Hanzo hastily closes the message. “Ah. No.” He unspools the earbuds, slipping them into his ears. “Motion sickness, as you said.”

“Oh! I understand.” Mei smiles. “Better chill out, then.”

Hanzo pulls up a playlist of Puccini and selects a random track. As he dismisses Genji, his mind wanders to McCree. What is he doing right now? How does he feel right now? What a question. The gunslinger is probably dozing off in the walker to the yowl of country music. Maybe sharing liquor and cigars with their boorish pilot. Is Tracer as chatty as Mei? Do they gossip about their
teammates? Flirtations? Interludes? Surely he won’t speak about what happened in his room, nor his mawkish plea for another kiss outside the Volskaya warehouse. Surely he knows better. Hanzo will swiftly provide a lesson in decorum, if need be.

He coughs, shivers, blows out a sigh like smoke. The kiss comes back to him sensually through the strains of a humming chorus: the cold, the ice, the late afternoon sun. The smell of the cigarillo (florid, heady with vanillin, delightfully dark), the serape (woolen, ratty, soothingly spiced, like cedar), the flickering burn of his lips. Rich earth and fire. Hanzo indulged in spite of himself. *To make up for you not issuin’ me a proper goodnight.*

As if there’s anything proper about him.

Now the fool worms through his neatly ordered thoughts. Hanzo turns over in his mind the previous night. He would be errant to call it unpleasant, even with all the unnecessary chatter. There was merit to how McCree kissed his hands, stroked his arms, reached and pulled and plied him, yearned for him with his whole body. The way he arched into each gesture with hunger and affection, borderline desperate, soft and rough all at once. How *good* it felt to have arms around him, adoring him. To have lips and fingers doting across his hide with broad, loving touches. It excites him how quickly he succumbed to his control, eager to the point of being messy. Pleading without begging. Breathing out his given name. Writhing beneath him on that rickety chair.

“Rooster?” Mei pipes beside him, hoisting the bottle. “Want your vodka back?”

“Oh, *da.*” He mutters something in Russian, a word Hanzo knows. “*Spasibo.*’ Thank you.’

Hanzo cranks up the volume on his handset. Annoyed, he shuts his eyes. He could have -- *should* have -- gone back and bedded him. At the very least he could have slept there again, if for nothing but the comfort of another body in his bunk. Something to take the edge off his dread. The gunslinger comforts him with his exquisite shortcomings: big but broad, fat around the midriff and muscled everywhere else. Cheeky but sweet, wild but gentle. Clever but doltish -- but, then again, not doltish at all. Perhaps it is a feint. He can be witty, crafty -- perhaps even sly. Sometimes Hanzo thinks he must take a page out of the book of the coyote from his New Mexican tales. The consummate trickster. And such recklessness! So many bad habits! He isn’t getting any younger; how can he justify these flaws? The bad eating, the smoking, the haphazard sleep. Hanzo thinks about the way he slumbers: curled like a shrimp, hugging himself, seeking greedily for whatever warmth lies nearby. Rumbling in his sleep.

Perhaps he should be thankful that he can flee to his dorm at the end of every evening. Hanzo cannot call the medbay kiss a lapse in judgment anymore. It’s no longer a mistake committed under duress. The fool (*McCree,* he corrects again) has complicated everything. Hanzo was pleased to have a foe, fine to strike a truce, begrudgingly content to nurse a fledgling friendship. But now he suffers from symptoms of a greater problem, a disruption of his status quo. Because of McCree, he owes a life debt; because of the debt, he is part of Overwatch. Because of Overwatch, he is jammed in the cabin of this clunky Russian walker stomping out into the Siberian abyss towards great peril. Perhaps death.

*Do your best,* Genji says. Is ‘come back alive’ too much to ask?
Worst of all: this whole debacle is guaranteed to attract attention. News outlets will pounce like a tiger on any shred of Overwatch activity. It is only a matter of time before the Shimada-gumi sees him on a telescreen and hounds their agents to the hunt. Hanzo thinks assassins are preferable to the embarrassment of Overwatch notoriety. He feels like he’s been strong-armed into attending some maudlin evening drama starring dusty legends forgotten by time. Cue a scene where he’s jerked on-stage via audience participation, and then -- as if by some cosmic error -- thrust back out as one of the main cast. Too many lines to memorize and not enough rehearsals. The rest of the team can have their fifteen minutes of fame, crazy altruists that they are. Hanzo is no hero. He does not want to play one.

What is he doing here? Why did he stay?

Enough, he decides. No more ruminating about this disorderly mess. Focus on the mission is paramount, no matter his ambivalence. He will honor his commitment. That is the Shimada way, through and through.

Hanzo adjusts the lapel of his kyudo-gi, flips the playlist to Verdi’s Requiem. Chiding himself for bothering with Puccini in the first place. Who the hell listens to Madama Butterfly before a fight? A shitty opera, anyway.

Ten minutes later, the steely disk of the omnium rises over the white horizon. An alarm warbles in the cockpit. Hanzo yanks out his earbuds. Zarya barks from the dash in Russian; Rooster pulls a lever and the walker slows down.

“Coming up on the generators to the right,” he says. “Get your weapons.”

Mercy is on the line. “Team, now’s a good time to listen to the track Lúcio sent out.”

Hanzo braces Storm Bow in his lap. He looks at Mei. “Do we have to?”

“It’s good!” she pipes up. “It works like his healing song and his speed boost, it makes you feel amazing!”

Rooster hooks her handset into the dash. The cabin brightens with rich, vibrant music: a high, warbling melody floating over riveting bass. Synthetic bells ring out above guitar chords, softened by a brilliant, glassy harp. Deep, driving drums hammer hard into Hanzo’s veins. It thrums through to his blood. He bolts upright.

“Wow,” Rooster crows. “Wooow! This is great!” He jams a finger at the handset. “This is better than sex! What is this?”

Beside him, Mei sways with the tempo. “It’s our fight song!”

Hanzo sucks in a sharp breath. A frisson of delight shocks him, thrills him, wakes him up. Thirty seconds into the tune and he feels like he could jog a marathon, scale ten walls, glide or fly. Maybe all at once. Suddenly he craves sensation: a rush of wind on his back, water over his feet, steam over his skin. He wants to run, bound, shoot and leap. He wants to live, to die, to rise from the dead and jump back into the thick of the fight.

Invigorated, he rolls back his shoulders and grips his bow. The dragons stir beneath his skin, hungering. His dread fades.

A second alarm beeps. They’ve reached the threat zone.

Mercy calls again. “Mark One, preparing for the drop!”
The walkers ahead slow to a halt, turn, and face a new course to the generators. Hanzo sees something moving on the ground by the frontmost Svyatogor. Reinhardt -- a silvery behemoth in his armor -- descends from the walker with a single bound. Snow puffs in a spray from the impact of his landing. A flash of light flickers after him: Mercy’s Valkyrie suit. She’s activated the wings.

“This is your stop!” Rooster gives Mei her handset and pulls a grey lever. The walker shakes with a loud clunk. A hatch door opens; cold Siberian wind rushes up from outside. Rooster gives them a thumbs up. “Hey, remember. Together: we are strong!”

Mei descends down the hatch ladder; Hanzo nimbly follows. Her blue Snowball drone pops up from the lid of her cryo-tank and circles their descent.

The Overwatch team unites to move across the tundra on foot. Hanzo and Mei land, dust off, and race to join them. He sees Tracer streaking past. A pulse of fondness overtakes him at the sight of McCree loping after her, red serape whipping in the wind.

Strange. They have run this simulation countless times and he’s never felt that before. Perhaps it is due to Lúcio’s song. Focus, he chastens. Ignore all distractions.

Four omnium generators stud the frosty plain like fat black ticks. Hanzo eyeballs their placement: twenty meters high, a little over a kilometer away. Winston’s maps approximated the distance fairly well. Six Svyatogor can make short work of them so long as Overwatch maintains the defensive line.

An earth-shaking siren yawns from the distant omnium. It shatters through the wind like an ghastly scream. Hanzo feels it all the way to his bones. Everyone stops. Mei’s drone peeps and whizzes behind her back.

“I’ve detected a signal change from the omnium,” Athena hums over the comm. “They’ve spotted your approach.”

“They sure do got a nasty way of sayin’ ‘hello,’” McCree snorts.

“The hour’s started,” says Winston. “Here we go, guys.”

“Initiating Phase Two! Hostiles incoming!” Reinhardt swings up the white panel of his shield. “Get in formation!”

Under a gloomy violet sky thick with a waning sun, robotic forces pour from the outer slab of the omnium. They roil over the tundra in a churning grey wave. Red sensor stripes gleam from their chrome faceplates like hellish eyes. They advance in a static roar. There’s so many of them: hundreds, maybe thousands. Hanzo beholds the horde with momentary alarm. He thought the simulation was terrifying; the real thing is far worse.

“Phase Two confirmed,” calls Athena in his right ear. “Agents Mei and Hanzo: begin your defense.”

“Going up!” Mei storms ahead in a blue blur. She fires her endothermic blaster. The ground quakes. Hanzo shakes off his dread, takes off, speeds across the shaking earth. A thick, gleaming wall of ice juts up from the tundra. Hanzo elevates with the wall, leaping, darting over the glassy surface. The ridged edge of his metal soles skate over the top. Nimble as a cat.

“Defense is up!” Tracer peals. “McCree, let’s get in there!”

“Acknowledged,” McCree answers, just as a second ice wall bursts out of the ground. It rises nigh-
perpendicular to the end of the first. The twin barriers cut a vee in the terrain that funnels the ‘bots directly into Reinhardt’s hammer. The robotic wave diverts, follows the wall and surges towards the junction of both wall ends.

Just like Winston’s training: give aggressive AI a path and they’ll usually follow it. Even if it leads to crushing doom.

Hanzo reaches the middle of Mei’s ice wall. He draws, nocks, flips the switch on the shaft, and fires. Blue threads of metal rain geometric mayhem over the wave of ‘bots. The process repeats: Scatter Arrows, one after the other. Pistol fire natters over slamming hammer blows. Tracer completes the first offensive run just as the omnis make contact with Reinhardt’s shield. McCree’s Peacekeeper snaps off six loud reports. *Bam!* The hammer-head pummels down, again and again. More gunfire. More scratchy pistol rounds. Mercy’s Caduceus beam cracks through the frenzy like a holy ribbon.

Just like they practiced: the first omnic wave crumbles.

“HA-HA!” roars the knight. “TORBJORN! TELL ME YOU SAW THAT!”

“Quit showin’ off, y’old fart!” Torbjorn says over the comm. “The news drones aren’t even there yet!”

“Generator one is going down,” Winston updates. “Walkers have breached its outer hull. Prepare for Defensive Maneuver B.”

“Get ready!” Mei puffs; she’s running. “New wall coming up!”

“BRING IT UP! I’M TAKING THEM DOWN!” Reinhardt lets out a hearty laugh as he swipes a brace of ten omnis into the ground.

Mei’s second ice wall tumbles apart from duress. Hanzo releases another hail of arrows as Reinhardt flings up his shield, hoists his hammer, and brutally charges into the robotic surge. Mercy flits behind him, pale and glowing like a seraph, winging left and right to avoid shrapnel. Her Caduceus staff peals a harmonic chime; Reinhardt is fully healed, ready for another charge. Which he takes, obliterating another pack of beeping ‘bots.

“Nice one, old fella!” McCree calls. “Mercy, watch your left! Tracer, get up to cover their open side!”

The air cracks as a new ice wall bursts parallel to his own. He leaps to it, swings up, and rains down arrows as the omnis chase a backwards-charging Reinhardt. The first bars of Lúcio’s music ring out in his memory as he sees McCree flanking to meet Reinhardt’s charge. Then he spots a flash of metal and an angry red eye. Hanzo shoots through the faceplate of a ‘bot that nearly tackles the gunslinger from behind.

McCree whoops over the comm. “Thank ya kindly, pardner!”

“Keep your gun up, McCree. I have your back.” Hanzo resumes his downward fire.

McCree drawls warmly: “well, if that ain’t the most reassuring thing I’ve heard all day!”

“Stick to it, you guys,” Winston grunts on the line. “You’ve got another wave coming.”

*Boom!* The Svyatogor crush the first generator. They leave it in ruin, chugging thick black plumes into the wintry dusk.
“Generator one is down! Three to go!” Zarya’s powerful voice rings triumphant over the comm. The Russian pilots cheer in the background.

The second omnic wave hits. Hanzo jumps from wall to wall as Mei throws them up. Reinhardt and Mercy direct the mechanical traffic through and around her frosty barriers; only a few escape. Zarya hangs off Mark One’s hatch like a human turret. She fires her particle cannon at stray ‘bots before they reach the line of lumbering walkers.

“Doin’ great, team!” Torbjorn says over the line as they crash through a third wave. And then a fourth -- and a tumultuous fifth. The Svyatogor rip the second generator apart and stomp for the third. Twice the omnic tide gets too close to the walkers; Hanzo has to disembark from wallsniping to physically climb Svyatogor Mark Five and fire from its shoulder. Each shot hits its mark; every blue burst of Scatter Arrow dices the robotic surge to shreds.

“Hanzo, wow!” Winston cheers. “You just beat your sim record! Four-hundred targets down!”

“Good shot, clever fella,” McCree preens across the line. “Leave a few for the rest of us, won’t ya?”

“Not a chance.” Hanzo picks off an omnic trying to climb the ice wall. He permits himself a smirk.

By the time the Overwatch team runs through Defensive Maneuver E, Hanzo is back on the walls. The catchy strains of Lúcio’s otherworldly music soothe his ears. Thumping, warming him; filling his lungs with crisp, clean air. Driving each leap and bound. Reinhardt fights like no force Hanzo ever witnessed -- an impressive sight in the simulations, but nothing compared to the real thing. More gunfire. More clamoring metal. Tracer’s blue streak; the scarlet serape flapping like a pennant. In the thick of the fray, the team operates like a well-oiled machine. An elaborate choreography, a dance. More beautiful than any practice, every protocol executed according to plan. They are awe-inspiring.

Hanzo is halfway to feeling the tiniest bit heroic when everything goes to hell.

Crack! A loud blast. Something hits the sixth walker. Zaryanova yelps over the comm just before a second discharge. Hanzo halts, turns, and looks up to see Mark Six reeling forward. Its legs crumple, unexpectedly stricken. It veers chassis-first into the snow with a thundering crash. Stunned, Hanzo crouches to the wall. He suppresses a gasp. Mayhem erupts over the line.

“WE’VE BEEN HIT!” Zarya yells. “Mark Six has been hit!”

Reinhardt looks up mid-swing. “What?!”

The Russian pilots clamor in the background of Zarya’s transmission. “Defensive line! Report! We’ve got enemy fire on the Svyatogor!”

McCree calls out: “Bastion units?”

“Negative,” Winston replies. “We’re not picking up any Bastion signals. Athena’s running a diagnostic, stick to the maneuver!”

A blue streak of light slices across the sky. Hanzo nocks an arrow, watching its path. It strikes another Svyatogor in the leg joint. “It’s coming from behind us!”

“Plasma rocket,” Athena reports. “I’m narrowing down the weapon signature now.”

Mercy radios in. “Repeat that? Plasma rocket?”
“Confirmed. Triple-incendiary cluster.”

Another bolt soars across the sky. Now Hanzo sees it clearly: an assailant behind their line is firing rockets at the Svyatogor. The walker reels, readjusts, smokes from holes in its plating. His comm crackles. Zarya bellows in Russian; Reinhardt buckles under the strain of another omnic wave; Winston implores them to keep up the defense while the Watchpoint team figures out what fired the rockets. The ‘bots churn and crunch, beaten back by the knight’s glowing shield.

“We have a rogue attacker!” Hanzo barks.

Athena announces: “confirming third party interference. Two of my drones are down.”

“Shit,” says McCree.

“I’m repositioning the satellite for further analysis. Agent Hanzo!”

“Yes!”

“Reposition yourself to engage the attacker.”

“On my way.” Hanzo skids down the ice wall, aiming for the source of the blue energy blast. Two more pulses lick through the sky. Hanzo locks in on the offender: a lone dark figure whipped by tundra winds. Lifting its weapon -- something hefty, a rocket launcher or a cannon -- at the Svyatogor walkers. The pulse hits Mark Five in the other leg joint. It comes crashing down, keeling forward, slamming into the snow.

Hanzo shoots. The figure jerks, ducks, stumbles back up. He’s landed a direct hit.

“Symmetra online.” A rich, feminine voice resonates over the comm. “This is Vishkar agent Satya Vaswani. I am analyzing the data, this is not Vishkar interference. I repeat, this is not Vishkar interference --”

“Oy!” Tracer’s angry soprano. “What’s she doing on the comm?”

“I am assisting Winston in parsing the feedback. The weapon signature registers positive for Helix Security Systems.”

Hanzo scowls. Vaswani’s voice is the last he wants to hear right now. “Get her off the line!”

Satya almost sounds angry. “Your attacker is using a heavy pulse rifle. My sources cannot confirm its exact model number. It is possible they are using developed technology or an undocumented prototype.”

Beneath Vaswani, Mercy speaks shrill and breathy. She utters a single word. A name.

“Jack.”

McCree hears her, too. “What?”

Hanzo sees the explosion before his ears register it: a blinding-white burst rolling into a golden cloud over Generator Three. A mighty boom rocks the tundra. Generator Three detonates directly next to Svyatogor Marks Two through Four. Hanzo nearly skids off the wall; he catches the icy edge and hangs. The comm fritzes in the archer’s right ear, all static and screams. Hanzo’s stomach drops as he watches the walkers blow apart. Massive chunks of metal scatter over the terrain.

Just like the Svyatogor: the mission crumbles slow-motion right before his eyes.
“The generator must have had a self-destruct sequence!” Winston gasps. “Unless that was a bomb!”

“Reinhardt!” Hanzo sees Mercy, firefly-bright in the gloom, darting back from the omnic wave. “We have to pull back!”

“No!” cries Mei. “No, no, no! The walkers are down! They’re all going down!”

“They’ve still got one up!” Tracer says. “There’s still a chance!”

McCree sounds grim. “Mercy!”

Hanzo climbs back up the wall. He aims a second shot at the assailant on the tundra. The shot connects. The black figure reels. Two arrows in the chest area.

And then, it’s gone.

Hanzo yells: “the attacker has vanished!”

“Vanished?” Tracer pipes.

There’s no trace of the figure on the field. Hanzo stares in disbelief. “I have lost all sight on them!”

“I repeat, we have to pull back!” Mercy sounds shrill over the comm. “Medic priority! The pilots -- I need to get to them, I’m activating the fast-response system --”

“Mercy!” McCree yells. “What did you say!”

Pure chaos breaks out over the defensive line. The final omnic wave swells down the tundra. Hanzo bounds off the ice wall, hits firm ground, races in the direction of the rogue attacker. There’s nothing in the snow: no body, no pulse rifle. Reinhardt clanks back. Mercy’s Caduceus staff pings without ceasing. She’s overtaxing the stream to try and keep him on his feet.

“We’ve lost vitals on Mark Five, Six, and Four,” Zarya rages through the comm. “My pilots are down. Defensive line: report!” And then, desperately: “Overwatch: report! We need your help!”

“We’re coming to you, Zarya!” Reinhardt yells. “Hang on! Mercy and I are moving the line!”

“God-dammit, Angela,” McCree growls through the comm. Hanzo has never heard him sound so angry. “What the hell’s goin’ on here --”

“We’re evacuating,” Mercy replies fiercely. “Debrief later, move now!”

“Engage tactical retreat,” Winston confirms. “Agent Mei, we need Snowball. It’ll slow down the omnic attack.”

“Winston!” Mei gasps. “That’s really risky! The environmental response could change the atmospheric conditions!”

“No other choice! Do it now! Get it centered over those omnics so you can get outta there! Tracer! Drop the teleporter!”

“Okay! I’m sending it up now!” Mei tosses her drone. It rides skyward on a gust of wind, dwindling out of sight into a tiny blue speck.

A loud whirr erupts overhead, widening into a roar. Iron-colored clouds eddy together into a
whirling polar vortex, hailing down ice on the wave of omnis. The temperature plummets; frigid winds slice around the fleeing Overwatch team. A full blizzard sweeps the terrain. The group bolts for the Syvatogor wreckage. Tracer zips ahead with the teleporter under one arm. Hanzo notices McCree is lagging through the squall.

“Keep up!” he yells to the gunslinger, just as a hollow hum spreads through his ears. Rapidly the noise broadens, resonating, battering Hanzo’s eardrums until they ring shrill with pain.

“FOR RUSSIA!” howls Captain Zarya, just as she swings from the last remaining walker. She fires a purple-black sphere of energy from her particle cannon at the fourth generator. The discharge cuts off the gravitational hum; Hanzo feels the sonorous tremor from the blast all the way to the center of his jaws and teeth. The generator shell implodes with a sickening crunch. The comm erupts with cheers.

They did it. All generators are down. The objective is complete.

“Teleporter’s going up!” Tracer chimes. “How long ‘til the blizzard’s over?”

“Uh, it should be over by now!” Mei cries. “Snowball isn’t coming back. I don’t know what’s going on!”

Wintery winds lick at Hanzo’s heels. He looks around. The team advances; the blizzard screams; the omnis scrape and drag. No sign of the attacker.

No red serape.

“McCree!” Hanzo shouts. “Sights on McCree! Tracer, is he through?”

“Negative, love, I just opened it up. We’re clear for throughput!” Hanzo sees Tracer at the blue oval of the teleporter ahead. Mercy and the grandmother pilot are helping wounded RDF soldiers through its glowing disk. Reinhardt and Zarya dig out survivors from the walker wreckage. No hat, no spurs. No gunslinger.

“Agent McCree!” Winston calls. “Report your status!”

No response. Hanzo looks behind them and scours the scene: the blizzard roaring, the omnis crumpling beneath the gale, the remains of Mei’s ice walls peeking through the storm. He sees nothing but hail and frost, shattered robots and metallic remains. Bone-chilling cold. Whistling winds.

Wait. More than just the wind. There’s another sound. Lilting, high-pitched and fluty. Distinctly musical.

Is that actual whistling?

The omnium siren warbles. It’s losing power. Hanzo’s hair stands on end at the unnatural, electronic chopping as it fails.

“The blizzard is intensifying,” Athena alerts. “The refresh may have been interrupted, but I’m still receiving signals from the omnium. Get through the teleporter as quickly as you can.”

“Hold it!” Reinhardt bellows. “Confirm: where is McCree?”

“His comm sensors aren’t reporting in,” says Winston. “It might have gotten damaged, I can’t locate him!”
For the first time since they left the walker, Hanzo feels the cold. It touches his spine, chills him, grips him around the chest. Lúcio’s song evaporates from his ears. Suddenly he is aware of the ground beneath him: frigid permafrost, slick with ice.

There is no other option. He hoists his bow. “I will find him.”

“Agent Hanzo.” Athena is insistent in his right ear. “The omnium’s remaining forces are still moving into the threat zone. This is a dangerous course of action.”

“We are not leaving him here.”

“The situation is critical! Agent Hanzo: you do not have a lot of time!”

“I will locate him before the teleporter goes down.” He breaks into a sprint.

“Hanzo!” Winston’s voice. “Watch out, that rogue is still out there!”

“Good.” He grits his teeth. “Then there is nowhere for it to hide.”

Hanzo takes off through the blizzard. The drone is out of sight, spinning the storm out of control. Bleak winds blind and slice him as he cuts around jagged ice and fallen omnis. Hanzo puffs, shuddering, freezing as he bounds up the last barrier Mei left standing. The howling gale threatens to whip him off the edge, but he jams his gauntlet and metal soles to scale -- higher, faster, as quick as he can go -- to the top of the wall. His scarf flaps over his eyes. He nearly slips. Hanzo swallows panic and forces himself to focus.

Analyze:

where is the fool? Where did he last see him? Lagging behind the group. When did he last comm in? To bark at Mercy, something about a name she said. Jack. What became of the rogue attacker? Vanished. He can’t explain how. Hanzo crouches. His face stings; his nose and cheeks are whipped raw.

A flash of red catches his eye.

Below him, at the bottom of the wall, lying prone amid crushed omnic corpses, lies McCree. Crumpled, frosted over, hat still clinging to his head. Hanzo’s breath hitches in his throat. Is he dead? No, he’s moving -- just barely. Relief sweeps Hanzo like a warm bath. If he can get down the wall, pick him up, run out before the omnis arrive -- before the mechanical wave comes crashing across the field -- he can save them. They’ll be back at the teleporter before it switches off.

The figure is suddenly there.

Hanzo ducks. His pulse rattles like thunder in his ears. He freezes on the icy edge, belly-down, suspended in shock. The sight grips him: a tall, eldritch shape is standing over McCree. Hanzo’s breath hitches in his throat. Is he dead? No, he’s moving -- just barely. Relief sweeps Hanzo like a warm bath. If he can get down the wall, pick him up, run out before the omnis arrive -- before the mechanical wave comes crashing across the field -- he can save them. They’ll be back at the teleporter before it switches off.

The figure is suddenly there.

Hanzo wRENCHES Storm Bow forward, slithers in position, pulls an arrow, attempts to nock it. He
can see two shafts sticking from the figure’s black chest, bobbing in the wind. Good, he thinks. He’s going to put the last one in its head.

The figure stops whistling. It approaches McCree with unhurried steps.

“I missed them,” it says. Hanzo stills; his breath catches in his throat. The figure’s voice is inhuman: distorted, unnatural, loud without volume. Hauntingly deep. Hanzo should not hear these words through the tempest, yet he registers each one. “I missed all of them.”

Out of nowhere, it draws the biggest pair of shotguns Hanzo has ever seen.

“Especially you, ingrate.”

Anger bites him, sharp and sweet. Beneath the cold, the frost, the hellish blizzard -- spread out there on the ice, battered by horrid winds and stinging ice -- Hanzo yields to the rage coiling in his chest. There is only one outcome here, even if he dies.

A tremor beneath his skin announces their return. Tumultuous grey winds seethe around him until the spark catches through the snow. Hanzo feels them shatter into being. They burst on the breeze like a cosmic reminder, pouring to life in a starry blue stream. No blizzard can stop them. If their master commanded, they would swallow the storm.

We are with you.

The horrid figure looms closer to McCree. Hanzo grits his teeth. He bristles, takes aim.

We know your rage. We will not let you rest.

They’re speaking to him. Now, of all times to work those heavenly jaws.

We want what is ours.

He draws. His mind empties. The dragons roar.

We feast.

“Consume!” he bellows, and the Shimada dragons answer his call.

Hanzo shoots. The dragons fly forth in a radiant fury, devouring, howling. The nightmare releases a guttural scream, banshee-wild, unnatural as the omnium alarm. Hanzo knows he hit it in the face; when the dragon tails twine and clear his line of sight, he sees he struck dead-center in the it’s right eye.

Hanzo vaults down the wall, lands in the snow, and races towards McCree as the dragons charge the field. Hanzo does not pause to see what becomes of the wraith; he can hear it bellowing through the wind as it’s eaten alive. He hoists the gunslinger up and runs, tears through the snow -- fleeing as fast as he can with a shrill rush of triumph. A sharp internal gust drives him forward, setting his blood on fire. It's almost like the words of the dragons. Mine, mine -- this belongs to me --

His comm goes off. It’s Athena.

“Agent Hanzo!” Has she been silent this whole time? Did he tune her out during his dash up the wall? “The teleporter is down!”

Fresh panic streaks up his spine. Hanzo does not need to look over his shoulder to know there are still omnis on the field. He cannot outrun them or the wraith. McCree weighs Hanzo down; he is
only a fraction as quick. Adrenaline helps, but it will only get him so far.

“Where is your air evacuation point?” he puffs, leaping over shattered Svyatogor limbs. “Where should I go?”

“We can’t evac you out,” Winston answers, grim, almost miserable. “The blizzard is out of control. Mei’s drone won’t come down, it’s still up there.”

Hanzo feels the cold once again: violent, sudden, edging him to despair. The dragons exhaust him; the blizzard has worn him down. He cannot carry McCree like this for much longer. Their last chance at escape has fizzled out, no longer winking blue on the hill.

What is he doing here? Why did he --

“Wait!” Athena again. This time, she’s hopeful. “I have a possible solution. Six-hundred feet from Generator Four, there’s a subterranean maintenance station. You might be able to take refuge there until we can stop the storm or push in with RDF forces.”

She doesn’t have to tell him twice. Hanzo swerves, leaps over a walker’s ruined leg, races past the ruined generators. He counts them as he passes: one, two, three, and finally four.

“Up ahead,” urges Athena. “Do you have a visual?”

Hanzo sees the black outline of a hatch peeking out of a hill. “Confirmed.”

“The door is sealed. With the generators down, the lock may not function. You will be able to get in, but re-sealing it may prove difficult.”


“You can do it, Hanzo!” Winston rattles through the comm. “Just get to that station! Once you’re inside, you should be safe!”

“How do I know a thousand omnics will not pour out once I open the door?”

“There shouldn’t be any,” Winston says tersely. “It’s marked as unconnected to the underground tunnels. There might be one or two, but you can handle them.”

“I am low on arrows. If you have any other advice, now is the time.”

“Still your best option. Go, go, go.”

He reaches the hatch door and spins its wheel to the left. It jerks, turns, groans open to reveal steps descending through a black stairwell. Musty air stings his nostrils. Weak beams of reddish light pool at the bottom landing. At first glance, it’s a passage into hell.

“Delightful.” Hanzo shakes off a chill of fear and drags McCree inside the hatch by the strap of his breastplate. He yanks a flashbang off the gunslinger’s belt and flings it down the stairwell. A neon burst cracks across the concrete walls. No reaction, no response. That’s good enough for him. “I am going in.”

Hanzo shuts the heavy steel door and spins the wheel. The lock refuses to catch. He tries again. No luck. Fiercely Hanzo yanks the wheel down, up, right and left. The lock scrapes. He slams his fist
into a control pad by the door, digging gloved fingers between the keys. Hanzo yanks. The panel comes loose, snapping and shorting wires. A dismal beeps precedes a loud **click**. The lock mechanism fires within the doorframe. Bolted shut.

Hanzo blinks, stares, drops the keypad. *Good fortune.* There must still be power somewhere in the station. If the door panel shorted and the emergency lights are on...

The gunslinger stirs. Hanzo drops down, steadies him against the black wall, crouches in close in the dark.

“McCree.”

“Hesitated,” McCree croaks. He’s shivering. “Sh-shit for timing —”

“McCree!” he hisses. Hanzo palms his throat, finds a steady pulse. His skin is damp. “Are you injured?”

“Ana.” McCree’s head lolls against the wall. He sounds chilled and sleepy. “I’m sorry, ‘mari.”

A hot, sullen anger knifes through Hanzo when he hears the name. He jostles McCree’s shoulder, rougher than he intends. “Answer me!”

“Augh.” McCree jolts. In the dim red haze, Hanzo makes out the weak slits of his eyes. “Hanzo?”

“Are - you - injured.” Hanzo tries not to sound upset, fails, cares little.

“Where’re we?”

“Answer me! Were you hurt!”


“A maintenance station.” Hanzo feels past McCree’s serape, hunting for signs of injury. The glow from his chestplate sensors provides more light. “They cannot evacuate us. The blizzard went out of control.”

“A maintenance station?” McCree’s teeth chatter. “Aw, what happened —”

“Relax,” Hanzo grits out, the very opposite of relaxed. “We have to secure this station until the Defense Forces can get here. I need to know if you are hurt.”

Outside, the blizzard hammers. A low mechanical buzz resonates in the dark. McCree struggles against the wall, pats himself, reaches into his pockets. Hanzo hears a metal **click** before a reddish flare illuminates the hatch. McCree’s lighter burns a single flame between them, bouncing shadows off his wet, scruffy face. Blood mottles his nose and cheeks in brown patches. His wild eyes glisten. He’s alive.

Hanzo guesses how he must look: weary, ragged, scratched crimson by the ice. His scarf is loose; parts of his limbs are numb and shaky. Fatigue soaks him to the bone.

“What happened?” repeats Jesse.

“You were attacked.”
“Shit, I know, but by what? The rogue?”

“Yes. It was some kind of assassin.”

“The thing that was takin’ down the walkers.”

“Yes. What do you recall? Did it shoot you?”

Jesse slumps. He shakes his head. “I just remember fallin’. Felt like somethin’ caught me up, like a great big wind. Took the air right outta my chest. And then I fell. Right into the snow, face down. Coldest thing I’ve ever felt in my life. Don’t recall any weapons, no bullets or report.”

“Just a wind?”

“Yeah. Made me sick as hell. Thought I was gonna lose my lunch, if I didn’t freeze first.” McCree feebly groans. “Puke popsicle.”

Hanzo glances down the stairwell. Lingering in the hatch is unwise; they need to make sure there are no stray ‘bots in the station. But McCree is here, safe and mostly whole. Shaken, but conscious. If he’s wounded, it isn’t grievous. Unless the wraith used some other, less visible assault -- a bio-weapon, maybe, or some kind of scatter ray --

“Did you see him?” McCree coughs. “The fella shootin’.”

“Yes.”

“What’d he look like?”

“He -- I cannot say if it was a man. It was wearing all black. Coat, hood, tactical armor. Reinforced boots. White mask.”

“A mask?”

“Yes. Like a skull. It carried ammo, grenades. Shotguns along with the pulse rifle.”

“Shotguns? And a pulse rifle?” The gunslinger clucks. “I’ll be damned. If that don’t sound like Talon, I dunno what does.”

“Possibly.” Hanzo peers to the landing again. “We need to secure the station.”


“Yes. Zaryanova detonated the last one.”

McCree sounds astonished. “So we won.”

“Try to get up, if you can manage. Mind your limbs. You were exposed to the cold.”


“Through the teleporter.” Hanzo rises. McCree clasps his arm. The lighter flame bobs, throwing orange light across the folds of his serape. McCree holds him fast, staring up with wide eyes.

“Did you come back for me?” Jesse asks in a thin, reedy voice.
Hanzo looks down through the burning gloom. He says nothing.

“You came back for me.” Jesse sounds numb from disbelief.

“I did.”

“On your own. Everyone else went through.”

“Yes.”

A momentary silence. Hanzo pulls away; Jesse clutches his wrist. “Shimada, you saved my life.”

“Once again.”

The gunslinger reels. “Oh. Shimada…”

“The mission protocol did not specify procedure for abandoning Overwatch agents on the battlefield --”

“You came back for me. You saved me from dyin’.”

“It was a tactical decision in a critical hour.”

Jesse scrapes off the ground. Hanzo stands; Jesse pushes after. “You ran back through a blizzard to drag my ass out. You defended me from a Talon operative who took down six walkers.”

“You would have done the same.”

“You know why I would.”

“Do I?”

“Don’t screw with me.” He’s trembling. “Shimada. Please. Don’t screw with me here. Not now.”

“It was my duty. I did what I must.”

“Hanzo.” Suddenly the gunslinger is on his feet, shoving forward, grabbing for his arms.

“Mind yourself.” Hanzo pushes back, prickling from exhaustion, gritting his jaw.

But McCree blathers on, chattering in the cold. “God-dammit. You did it. Just say it, why won’t you? You came back and saved me. Say it, Shimada, would it kill you to say it?”

“There is nothing to say!”

“You know damn well!”

“Cease!”

It’s a futile attempt. Jesse has him. He presses in hard: damp serape, gelid chestplate, quaking body. Gripping him with fingers, steel and flesh. That smoky beard and mouth bristling against his neck. In the dark, they thump against the wall. His pulse drums in his ears. Jesse gathers him close, snuffling.

Suddenly Hanzo is tired, the kind that sucks all the way to his marrow. Weary across every fiber of his being, worn down like a rock in a stream. Completely spent. He yields to the flow, giving way all at once. Slowly he weaves ungloved fingers into the tangled mess of Jesse’s hair.
“You came back for me.” Jesse repeats it like a mantra, knees knocking, arms clenched.

“There was only one outcome,” Hanzo murmurs after a low, heavy pause. And then, sighing. “I came back for you.”

He isn’t surprised when Jesse kisses him. Nor when it deepens, turns senseless and sloppy, loses all semblance of manners or method. Even half-frozen, McCree sticks to his guns: kissing full-throttle, loose lipped, aiming where he pleases just so long as he hits the target. Hanzo lets the gunslinger take his tongue, all fire and smoke, courting a taste like steel. Corrosive as the sting of blood on his lips. Is it Jesse’s or his own? He doesn’t care. When those big hands clasp him close, Hanzo grasps for his nape. He seizes the kiss and returns it, drives it back, relishes the mutter of surprise that lodges in Jesse’s throat. A thick fistful of matted hair, a clutched gauntlet into the meat of his upper back. Jesse keens through his cheeks, whimpering huffs. Little pleas without words or form. Hanzo is silent. His mouth speaks for itself.

“Darlin’,” Jesse breathes after a bite that nearly draws blood. “Sweetheart. You crazy sonofabitch.”

Hanzo simmers. He swings pendulum-like between twin temptations: shoving him off, or dropping, stripping him and being with him right there on the hatch floor. Jesse is fondling him against the wall, clumsily scraping his right hand down his chest and abdomen. Hanzo almost lets him. If only this wasn’t an hour of peril.

The shove wins over the stripping. Hanzo pushes Jesse back just an inch.

“Enough,” he rasps. His lungs ache. “There is no time.”

Jesse’s voice shivers, dark and rich. “I owe you my life --”

“Our lives will mean nothing if we do not secure this station.” Hanzo slips away, elbows back McCree, draws his bow and crouches down the first few steps. Reluctant, Jesse shuffles after him, heels clanking, spurs jingling.

The landing gives way to a circular control room. Consoles flank the walls from floor to ceiling, cracked black viewscreens gleaming in the red auxiliary lights. All the hallway doors are jammed, halfway-open, battered by brute force. Rows of dented lockers line one room; in the lavatories they find broken spigots, cracked sinks, busted partitions. Signs of struggle and disrepair. There’s an alcove with a crumpled refrigerator, tables, toppled chairs. Dirt, dust, and debris litter the floors. McCree’s boots crunch over a patina of shattered glass.

No bodies. No signs of life at all, not even vermin. One emergency generator with a weak battery and limited petrol. They find crumpled omnis stuffed in a storage closet. Black spots of blaster fire scorch their remains.

It’s cold, filthy, and bleakly claustrophobic -- but the station is empty. Safe.

They take inventory at Jesse’s behest: three speedloaders of ammo for Peacekeeper, seven arrows, four flashbangs. Two medi-packs, three small cold-weather supply kits, a set of rations apiece. Two handsets, Mei’s blue headphones. No spare clothes, only a few battery packs. Hanzo’s comm has enough juice to last a week in low-power mode.

Athena delivers bad news. Snowball suffered a malfunction and spent all its fuel before falling back to earth. The artificial blizzard disrupted weather patterns across the region. A low-pressure system has moved in, fueled the storm, locked down their transports. Aircraft cannot fly in the gale, much less her drones. Athena cannot monitor the hatch; she predicts a seven-foot snow drift...
will cover it by morning. No hope of them getting out tonight, though no one else is getting in.

“Unless they have one hell of a snow plow,” Winston jokes. He’s trying to keep it light; stress is evident on his voice.

“When will the system be gone?” Hanzo asks. Behind him, Jesse sweeps out the control room, listening second-hand.

“They’re predicting continued precipitation and storm activity for the next forty-eight hours.” Distant voices murmur in the background of Winston’s transmission. Hanzo can pick out Lúcio, Torbjorn, and a low feminine purr. Vaswani, most likely. Symmetra -- her stupid Vishkar name. “Ground forces will move in once the snow lets up, and we’ll mobilize the air units right after. You should have enough to make it that long.”

Hanzo stares grimly at a dusty console. “Two days in a pit, with limited supplies. Next to a defunct omnium, which could reactivate any hour if they repair the generators.”

“Those generators are blown, Hanzo. Nothing’s going to fix them in two days.”

“With a teleporting assassin on our trail, potentially still out there looking for us.”

“As long as you keep the door sealed, you should be secure. We’re running an analysis on the rogue agent right now.”

“Ask him about Jack,” McCree calls from the hallway.

Exhausted, Hanzo throws him a sour look. He glowers and thumbs his comm. “McCree is asking about someone named Jack.”

A long pause. Winston sighs. “We’re -- running analysis on that, too. We need some more information before I can debrief you on that.”

“Who is Jack?” Hanzo asks.

“Hey,” McCree calls again. “What did he say?”

Hanzo looks up, prickling; he’s too weary to play telephone. “He has not said anything yet, please wait.”

“What?” Winston asks on the line. “Wait, was that to me, or to McCree?”

“To McCree, not you.”

“Oh,” Winston replies. “Uh --”

“Jack,” McCree interrupts. “Mercy said somethin’ durin’ the mission about Jack --”

Hanzo barks at McCree. “He is trying to tell me!”

“Guys,” Winston interrupts. “Listen, we’re still trying to sort through this mess. There’s a huge response right now, both in Russia and from the United Nations. The team is back at Volskaya, and the news is going crazy. I really hate to say this, but it might be easiest if you sit tight and save your batteries.”

Hanzo resists the urge to toss his comm at the console. “Forty-eight hours. You are certain there is no other option? No ground rescue vehicle?”
“The RDF is working on it. Look: do not leave that station. You wouldn’t make it a half a kilometer before hypothermia sets in, if you both aren’t hit with it already.”

He drums his fingers on the console, considering. Stewing. “I want hourly comm checks. If you do not hear from us every sixty minutes, or if we do not hear from you, we need a protocol to follow.”

“Hourly checks, then. Let me see what I can do about a protocol.”

McCree lumbers behind him, holding his hat. “What’d he say?”

“Sh!” Hanzo holds up a finger. To his comm, he mutters: “sixty minutes.” He sets the clip on the edge of the console and turns back to McCree.

“We cannot leave,” he mutters.

“For how long?”

“Forty-eight hours.”

McCree balks. “The hell.”

“The blizzard has worsened. The drone went out of control.”

“So we’re stuck here?”

Hanzo is too tired to chastise. “Yes, McCree. We are stuck here.”

McCree shuffles. He’s set his serape to dry on the back of a nearby chair, hung up his chestplate, untucked his shirt. In the weak light, Hanzo thinks he looks boyish and guilty.

“Well, hell,” he sighs. “Guess we just sit here and wait the damn thing out. Hot damn, I need a smoke.”

"Do not even think about it."

They finish sweeping out the control room. Jesse barricades the landing with three stacked chairs; Hanzo checks his handset, finds no signal, sets it on the console beside his comm. He roots in a supply closet and digs out a pair of heavy coats, oversized boots, a bright orange windbreaker.

“You don’t look so hot,” Jesse mutters, accepting a coat. “You wanna sit a spell and let me do the comm check?”

Hanzo wobbles on his feet. He can barely answer through his fatigue. “If you would.”

The floor is cold, but a corner between the console and the wall provides a decent spot to hunker down. Hanzo digs a foil thermal blanket out of his cold-weather supply kit and unwraps it over his legs. He bundles under the coat (which is too big and smells stale), huddles in the corner, lolls his head against the corner. The knot of his scarf irritates his scalp; he unties it, wraps it around his left wrist, shakes his hair loose.

McCree watches owlishly from the console, hunched in his chair.

“What,” Hanzo rasps, shivering under his coat.

“Nothin’.”
Hanzo nods his forehead into the wall. “Why are you looking at me like that?”

“I said nothin’, damn. Don’t be such a pepper.”

Silence. McCree’s chair creaks; he turns away. Hanzo shuts his eyes, sucks in a deep breath, exhales through his nostrils. Sleep hovers close. He can almost taste it.

From across the room, Jesse mumbles: “just ain’t ever seen you with your hair down, is all.”

Hanzo says nothing. A ream of responses come to mind, but he is too tired to choose. Now it is time to rest.

He wakes later with a jolt. McCree is there, steadying him, muttering in his ear. He was making sounds in his sleep, noises of dream or nightmare. Hanzo winces; his mouth feels dry, sour. Has the room always been so dark? No, McCree answers: he found the controls for the auxiliary lights. It’s two in the morning. Winston has no news; Jesse wants to sleep.

“Let me get up.” Hanzo’s voice cracks hoarse and raw.

“No.” He feels Jesse scraping across the ground, nudging against him, pressing close. Shivering in his boots and borrowed coat, toting a second blanket. “Stay here.”

“The comm.”

“To hell with the comm, I’ll get up if it goes off.”

Hanzo sinks into the corner. Jesse smells like sweat and cedar; he’s gulping, chattering, quaking into his side.

Slowly, blurred by fatigue, Hanzo shifts. Jesse moves in, accommodating for the space. Freely he offers a place for the archer’s brow against his shoulder. Hanzo takes it. He shuts his eyes. The familiar possessiveness stirs: mine.

Just like the Watchpoint bunk: they listen to the other breathe.

“This is hell,” McCree whispers.

“Yes.” Hanzo aches, dimly aware of how sore he is. Seeking McCree’s fingers beneath the blankets, crackling beneath the foil.

At least we’re safe, in hell.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Sylphy, Losebetter, Jamie, Penna, Entropy, and Fig for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- References: Puccini’s humming chorus.
- Haha, plot twist! Sorry for those of you who thought that was Dad at the end of Chapter 8... he’s still going to make an appearance, but not anytime soon.
- There will be more sexual content in Chap 10. I bet you guessed that. Same as
before: rating is M.
- I got a ton of questions re: Ana Amari and her in-game release. Before writing HtF, I planned for her potential placement in-game and accommodated the storyline arc for it. She will show up, but I won't say when!

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](#) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

Round two: sexual content in this chapter. Rating is still M.
- Still very sorry for so many unresponded messages. So much praise warms my heart, and I remain so grateful to everyone who reads and takes the time to comment!
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

針の穴から天を覗く
hari no ana kara ten o nozoku - “peeking at heaven through the eye of a needle”
A proverb for one who makes decisions through a narrow-minded point of view.

---

A defunct omnium lies between two hills twenty kilometers north of Sendai. Hanzo wanders through the woods surrounding its overgrown ruins. He prefers traveling off-road; the odds of running into Shimada-gumi or their ubiquitous informants run higher in major cities and thoroughfares. It also gives him the chance to examine the natural reclamation of places left in disrepair from the Crisis. Facilities succumb to sapling trees and stubborn shrubs. Wildlife marches in, commencing takeovers large and small: roaches, rats, birds and wild pigs. He watches a family of deer graze around a dilapidated fence. Yellow daisies grow out of a shattered omnic ribcage. Field mice nest in the shells of their limbs.

Hanzo hears about it on the news. Since its fall, the complex gives root to a vast, intricate network of vining wisteria. In late spring the woody tendrils bursts with fat, vibrant clumps of violet blooms. Their perfume permeates the undergrowth: vibrant and sweet, soft as powdered sugar. Scientists come to study the natural phenomena every year. They dread discovering one day that their biological analysis will reveal latent mutations due to toxin or radiation.

Hanzo doesn’t care. He’s not here to analyze anything. He just wants to see the flowers.

The sun gleams overhead in a white summer sky. Hanzo hikes up a bluff that overlooks the ruins from the west. He startles away flock of finches and settles on a small outcropping of rock, lowering his knapsack, adjusting Storm Bow and its quiver on his back. Before him -- as far as he can see -- stretches the purple plain of wisteria. It licks jagged edges into the thicket, bright knives of color cutting into the green. The smell of the flowers travels all the way up the bluff.

The gentle, waxy lavender is pure in his eyes. White and pink remind him of Hanamura; oaken tones, stone blacks, grey pebbles and papery wheat-brown weigh heavy on his heart. Orange, blue and gold are rich and unrepentant, reminiscent of memories for which he’s not worthy. Red is acceptable when depicting anything other than blood.

Green is out of the question. He will never deserve that color again.

---

The comm beeps at 0606. Hanzo wakes from old dreams and weak slumber. Pain greets him in
thudding pangs, alerting him to an inventory of parts affected by soreness: head, neck, shoulders, arms, back, hips, hamstrings. He jerks forward, sucks in an icy breath, winces. It’s cold; the room is dark. He kicks out his left foot and finds his knees numb.

Jesse slumps against him. In his sleep he wheezes, legs twitching beneath the crackling thermal blankets. Hanzo dislodges his fingers from Jesse’s own; they’re stiff but soft from shared warmth. They might be the only part of him that isn’t chilled to the bone.

When did that happen? Did he clasp their hands, or did Jesse? Hanzo flexes his fingers. He wrinkles his nose.

Immediately Jesse stirs. “Whuh.”

“Th’e comm,” Hanzo croaks. His voice snaps like a bowstring in his throat. He sounds like he feels: dry, ragged, stripped of all moisture.

“I’ll get it.” Jesse’s boots scratch across the floor.

“No.” Hanzo rises. The pain goes with him; he wants to know how bad things are going to ache and pinch for the next forty-eight hours. He huddles in his coat, moves in the dark towards the console, picks up his comm, clears his throat, stifles another wince and taps the transmitter. “Hanzo here.”

“Hey.” It’s Winston. “Checking in you guys, sorry I’m a few minutes past the hour. It’s been really hectic here, even this late at night.”

“Understood.”

“How’re you doing? McCree said you guys were trying to get some rest.”

Hanzo hunches over the console. He considers answering with the truth: cold, dirty, aching, thirsty, hungry, uncomfortable, and stuck in a derelict substation less than sixty square meters large -- how are you? Instead, he mutters: “we are managing.”

“I gotcha.” Winston snuffs. Hanzo thinks the ape sounds nearly as wearisome as they do. “We’re doing a lot of that right now. Calls, holo-meetings, more email than I’ve ever seen in my life. But physically, health-wise: how are you doing? Any signs of injury? Hypothermia is what we’re all worried about. Especially with you, Hanzo.”

“Soreness, pain.” Hanzo resists the urge to scratch at the spots on his shoulders and chest where the wind whipped him raw. “Dehydration.”

“Sounds about what I’d expect, if not a little better. Mercy’s Caduceus system doesn’t show you receiving much healing during the fight. The readouts showed you only getting beamed once.”

Hanzo squints, tabbing through recollections of the battle like pages in his notebook. He thinks he’d remember if she healed him; her weird staff has struck him a few times in simulation training. The cool, unnatural chill of Caduceus technology always makes him feel slightly ill.

“You still there?” Winston prompts.

“Yes.” Behind him, McCree rustles beneath the blankets. He’s trying to get up. “We have medi-packs and two sets of rations. The priority now is acquiring potable water.”

“Don’t drink from any taps in the station. From the data we’ve got, it looks like the place has been
abandoned for several years. Athena didn’t run much analysis on the facilities, but she suspects the environmental systems may have degraded from radiation. No guarantee the permafrost preserved anything, either.”

“Wonderful,” sighs Hanzo, glancing at the station’s black metal walls. “I assume that means we are being slowly microwaved in here.”

“Nah. Two days down there shouldn’t cause any problems.” Winston grunts. “How’s McCree?”

Hanzo looks over his shoulder. The gunslinger is on his feet. His hair is wild, lips yawning, arms yanked high over his head as he stretches. Hanzo watches the lip of his rumpled brown shirt and black thermal tunic craw free from his belts up his waistline. A bared slice of his lower belly: tawny, soft, dusted with dark hair. So handsome.

He turns back, sets his jaw, digs his fingertips into the console. “He is fine.”

“No signs of any lingering injury?”

“No.”

“Okay, good. We’ve been reviewing what little Athena could pick up of the attacker. McCree was debriefing me earlier, too. At this point, I think his assumption that it was a Talon agent is pretty sound. In fact, I think we know exactly who it probably was.”

“Who?”

“An assassin named ‘Reaper.’ He attacked the Watchpoint right before I initiated the recall.”

“Reaper.” Hanzo scoffs. Must their enemies have such stupid names? He looks over his shoulder; McCree is fiddling with the auxiliary light control box in the hallway. The room brightens with reddish-orange light.

“Yeah. A real nasty fellow. Our info on Talon personnel leads to some pretty convincing evidence that their current roster has of a lot of former Blackwatch operatives. Reaper is definitely one of them, we just don’t really have a solid idea of who he could be.”

“Hm.” Hanzo feels McCree edging in, drawing closer. He shoots the man a sidelong glance, mouths Talon. McCree mouths back: assholes.

Winston continues. “Whoever he is, he’s got a bad grudge on Overwatch. Really bad. During his attack, he tried to hack Athena’s registry and download location data on all the former agents. If that kind of information got into Talon’s hands, it would have been lights out for pretty much everyone in that database.”

“Given the nature of this Reaper’s attack, perhaps you might want to consider how much information they already have.”

“We’re working on it.” A gruff gorilla sigh. “We’ve confirmed that there were explosives rigged on Generator Three. We don’t know for sure if Reaper set them up, but it’s safe to say he may have been involved.”


Winston overhears. “Was that Jesse?”
“Yes.” And then, sputtering: “who else would it be?”

“Sorry, yeah -- no, you’re right. My bad.” An embarrassed snort. “I’m still not really sure what to say about the whole Jack thing. Mercy says she needs to critically debrief me on the situation, but she wants to do it in person. It all has something to do with the pulse rifle Reaper was using, the Helix Security one. I’m still kind of confused as to what the connection is, but she said it’s important. I scanned the database to see if Jack had ever used a similar type of weapon, but I couldn’t find --”

“Who is Jack,” Hanzo interrupts, holding up a hand to an insistent McCree.

“Well,” Winston begins. “I mean, it’s a full history lesson in itself, but -- ‘Jack’ ‘s the name we called John Morrison, the leader of Overwatch. He was one of its founders and its first strike commander.”

“I have heard of this man.”

“Then you also probably know that he died about six years ago, right before Overwatch disbanded. There was an explosion at the Swiss headquarters. He and a lot of other good men were killed.”

“I see. And, so: this Talon agent had his weapon?”

“No. That’s the thing. There’s really no way it could be his weapon. Satya says the rifle is some kind of unreleased prototype. It wasn’t produced until after he died.”

Confused, Hanzo frowns. He's tired. “I fail to see the connection.”

“Same here. Mercy has the missing piece. She said it has to be in person back here at the Watchpoint, there’s something she needs to physically show me. I don’t see how it can wait two days, but: if we’re getting you guys out, I don’t have much of a choice.” Winston clacks on his keyboard. “Are you still feeling secure in there? I’m pretty sure Reaper’s not going to be able to get through a ten-foot snowdrift, much less those winds.”

Hanzo remembers Reaper succumbing to the dragons: the heavenly roar and the banshee scream. “If he is still alive after the attack he incurred, I welcome whatever remains of him to pay us a visit.”

“Hah. That’s the spirit.” Winston laughs weakly. “Alright. Forty-eight hours, guys. We’re gonna get you out of there and then get you all back to the Watchpoint. The Siberia team is still at Volskaya with the RDF. I need to check in with them now. Do you guys need anything else?”

“No. We will assess the situation.” Then he presses: “is Genji nearby?”

“Uh, no -- he said he was going to rest for the night. It’s around 1 AM here, we’re about five hours behind you.” Winston pauses. “Do you want me to leave him a message, or…?”

Hanzo rubs his right temple. “I would like to speak to him, if he’s available during the next check.”

“Sure thing. Hey, I told McCree, but -- let’s move to four-hour check-ins. I gotta get some sleep, Lúcio or Torbjorn will handle the next one. You guys stay safe.”

“Understood.”

Hanzo switches off the comm and turns to face an expectant Jesse. He relays the conversation piece by piece. Jesse shakes his head, calls it ‘hogwash,’ mutters something about Angela having
too many damn secrets. His gaze wander to Hanzo’s throat.

“Dang,” he mutters, moving closer. “We needa get you some first aid. Shit, you got ripped up by all that ice.”

“Water is our priority.”

“Lemme handle the water. You siddown. Damn, don’t even wanna think ‘bout what your left side looks like under your gi.” Jesse digs through a medi-pack and turns back with navy-blue cylinder stamped with a red cross. “We got some of these. Didn’t think I’d ever be so glad to see one.”

Hanzo narrows his eyes. “A biotic emitter.”

“Yup. We get one o’ these on you for an hour or two and your skin’ll look a lot better. This is the low-dose version, but we got two to each pack. I can bust out another if you ain’t perked up after this one.”

Hanzo draws back. “Are these like Mercy’s staff?”

“Kinda similar. You needa stay in one place and be still while it works.”

“The water --”

“I got a plan. For now, you go on.” He tilts his chin at a station chair. “Sit.”

Hanzo drops to a seat. McCree thumbs a switch on the emitter; a buoyant golden glow radiates from its notched core. Hanzo softens instantly. The output feels like basking under an afternoon sun.

“Good stuff, ain’t it?” Jesse asks, setting the emitter on the console edge. “Wish her staff healed warm like that. Never did know why it makes you feel ten degrees colder.”

The emitter soothes Hanzo as McCree ambles about the station. Everything is labeled in Cyrillic; he opts to reclaim items that have enough legible English text. He digs out a bucket, cups and paper towels, a surplus of ratty coats and cold weather gear. Vacuum-sealed packets of instant coffee (good), three bottles of vodka (moreso a boon) and dented space heater (the best find of all). Two of the station’s first-aid cabinets yield excess medical supplies; toolkits and stock closets provide more battery packs, flares, and thermal tape. A large box of dehydrated soups and sauces that expired two years ago -- a last resort, remarks Jesse, given their low rations. Only one closet has evidence of roaches, enough to convince him not to check it further. The rest will do.

Hanzo thinks McCree is in fine humor in spite of his weariness. Glad to be alive, most likely. The good nature of a grateful man.

They rig the heater into the auxiliary power box. It draws too much current to run constantly, so they agree to use it sparingly, chiefly for melting snow. It takes Jesse the better part of a quarter hour to un-rig and open the hatch door. Just as Athena promised, a solid white drift covers the doorway.

“Almost wish Lúcio were here,” he mutters, toting a metal bucket of snow down the hatch stairs. “He could probably get that lock workin’ right. Might even be able to rig up some of these mainframes. That guy's got more smarts with electronics than a ramblin’ wreck.”

Hanzo watches McCree hoist the bucket over the space heater. There’s a practiced heft to his movements, as if the hard labor of hauling around heavy things is inherently familiar to him. Like a
ranch-hand, he thinks dully. “I do not understand the reference.”

“Southern sayin’. There was a tech university down in Georgia, back before the Omnic Crisis. Made a term for whiz-kids in computers and programming. I tell you what.” McCree tilts his chin. “He can hack just about anything. Betcha he makes Athena a lil’ nervous sometimes.”

They share lukewarm cups of snow melted over the heater. Hanzo imagines he’s drinking weak tea; already he feels less raw and chapped. The biotic field eases his blistered skin. McCree sits close by, sharing the glow.

“You needa take those off and clean ‘em?” McCree asks, angling his chin to Hanzo’s legs. “The prosthetics.”

Hanzo sips from his paper cup. “They do not come off entirely.”

McCree’s brows rise. “Naw?”

“The outer braces do. So does the knee armor, a few of the panels. The rest is built in. Synthetic mesh, some parts still organic.”

“Oh, huh.” McCree looks impressed. “Mine’s gotta have to come off soon” -- he lifts his mechanical arm -- “to get some parts replaced. Mercy said before the mission it was lookin’ real spotty ‘round the muscle strands in the wrist.”

Hanzo scans the limb over the rim of his cup. He’s studied the prosthetic before: segmented plating, mildly corroded joints, a gaudy skull chewing down the forearm. It’s a cheap hack job, courtesy of some back-alley sawbones. Tough guys employed by the Shimada-gumi sometimes had similar limbs, decorated with symbols or tattoos. Nothing like the mechanical intricacy woven into his own lower legs. How did the fool say he acquired it? **Blown off after a nasty shootout on a riverboat.** Hanzo questions if he told the truth. “If she were mindful, she’d give you a new one altogether.”

“Yeah. Probably.”

“You complain about it regularly. Why not acquire a better type?”

“cause they ain’t cheap?”

“Overwatch would not compensate for such an alteration?”

“Wouldn’t wanna put a burden on ‘em. They’ve done a lot for me.”

“You could perform stronger with a more enhanced prosthetic. I imagine the burden would be less on them if they improved on what you have.”

McCree clucks haughtily over his cup. “Maybe I like my cool metal hand.”

Hanzo rolls his eyes. “You could have a cooler one.”

“Why don’t you upgrade your cool metal legs?”

“No need. They are enhancements designed to accommodate for improved climbing and jumping. Combined with the casings and reinforced sinew, they allow me to perform greater physical feats while suffering less natural wear and tear.”

McCree peers at Hanzo’s ankles with a degree of appreciation. “Well, ain’t that fancy.”
“Synthetic knees and bones absorb shock from the heels and soles better than organic bone and ligament.”

“How’d ya get ‘em?”

Hanzo pauses, eyeing McCree hawkishly. He’s just toed an invisible line. “I was injured in a fight. The Shimada-gumi had them healed and enhanced.”

“Yeowch.” McCree mutters into the hollow of his cup. “Musta been pretty bad.”

“The wounds were considerably severe.”

“Bet the other fella looked worse.”

Hanzo slowly lowers his cup. His works his jaw, inhales, exhales through his nostrils. An agitated dragon. “Talk of something else.”

McCree scratches his jaw. “My bad.” He slurps his water, hunches, looks down at his boots. Like a scolded hound. “Sooo, uh, Talon. Like Winston was talkin’ about, I guess. You know much about them?”

“Some. Nothing very intensive. They are terrorists.”

“Yeah. Remember my story about the time I rode the train to Houston? How they were usin’ the old Blackwatch playbook?”

“Yes.”

“Really is startin’ to look like Talon’s staffed with a buncha old Blackwatch goons. Couple of them on that train seemed to recognize me.”

“This Reaper may have recognized you as well. Before I attacked, I heard it say it had missed you.”

McCree’s shoulder wrenches with a shiver. “God-damn. Really?”

“Yes,” he replies into his cup. The dragons stir beneath his skin, as if to say: *it can miss you a little longer.*

“Creepy as all hell. I’m glad every day I left Blackwatch, I tell you what.” He glances at Hanzo. “I told you that story, too, right?”

“You left Blackwatch on account of your morals, and your commanding officer’s failing grip on humanity. Not long after your mentor died.” He tries not to sound terse. It’s bad enough that McCree made light of the battle where he lost most of his legs. Surely he won’t use this time to revisit memories of the woman whose name he said at the door.

*Ana.* The word nibbles greedily in the cave of Hanzo’s chest.

“Yeah.” McCree keeps pawing at his beard. “Around the time I left, Reyes led those agents down a twisted path. Hell: this Reaper fella sounds like he took a couple o’ pages straight outta Gabe’s book, with the shotguns and all. Guess he may have been one of the up-and-comin’ trainees after I took off.” A dull edge nicks his voice. “Gabe always liked it when the new blood greased his boots.”

“He liked to be in control.”
“Oh, yeah. Like he was born to rule. ‘King Reyes.’ Was our nickname for him, behind his back.” He pauses, scoffs, shakes his head. Momentarily hangdog. “Made him feel powerful.”

“Yet he was not the leader.”

“Naw. He had guff with Jack over it. Kind of a down-low thing that everyone knew about.” McCree rakes back his hair. “Jack and Gabe bein’ original founders of Overwatch put them at the top of the food chain when it came to running things. But Gabe musta wanted to be numero uno. We thought at the end there that he got to feeling like Jack kinda stole his thunder out from underneath him, when he got picked to be commander all those years ago.”

“Hm.” Hanzo sips his water. “An unwise decision, to let rivals run such a powerful organization.” McCree laughs weakly. There’s something suspiciously wistful about his smile. “They weren’t rivals. They were best friends.” A snort. “Hell, more than that.” Hanzo’s brows rise. “More?”

“To be honest, they were practically married. They went through this experimental super-soldier program after they got outta OCS. Turned ‘em both into real powerful sons o’ guns. Whole thing kinda bonded ‘em together, y’know? You don’t go through shit like that and not come out a little closer than close.”

“I see. Perhaps still unwise. Such a relationship was bound to complicate their work.”

McCree hangs his head. Hanzo hears a dry gloom in his tone. “Tell you the truth, Shimada, I think it was the only thing close to keepin’ their work together, at the end. Not that it actually saved them, y’know, but it nearly held out.”

“A pity it failed them,” Hanzo says, zero pity in his voice.

---

They drink and converse for a little while in the biotic beam. Jesse doesn’t mind the claustrophobic space; it reminds him of old hideouts and safe-houses where he’d hole away from bounty hunters. Hanzo prefers open sky and wind; he tells him about the high, lofty ceilings in Hanamura Castle, all heavy beams and splendid towers. How it’s been in his family for generations. Jesse claims for heritage a row of squatty apartments from his childhood, gang hovels, bad diners and taco trucks. Hanzo makes him speak Spanish; he can translate abrigo and tengo hambre, but hace pinche frio eludes him. So do cojones, cochino, and el es cariñoso. McCree won’t stop grinning at the last one. It must mean something lewd.

The conversation turns to warm things. Jesse daydreams out loud about cinnamon in cocoa and desert whip-poor-wills, stripy roadrunners darting in the high yellow sun. Hanzo recalls a sandy beach on Kona, where a Shimada-gumi attendant watched the brothers splash and play during one of their father’s Hawaiian business trips. A shared preference: they like eggs cooked sunny-side-up, though Jesse is the kind of man who will order pie for breakfast if it’s on the diner menu. He tells Hanzo about the nigh-human silhouette of saguaro cacti standing resolute against the scrub, California poppies like gilded coins on long highway motorcycle rides. Hanzo remembers finches and herds of deer, purple flowers blanketing the omnium. Jesse smiles. Pretty as a picture. In the South, wisteria is a pest, like kudzu.

Hanzo wonders at how easy it is to observe the gunslinger when nothing is around to distract him, no points in the environment on which his attention can fix. The lighting is low, viscerally orange -
- a first band of sunrise in a black night sky. McCree’s pleasing bigness takes up the room, draws in Hanzo’s eyes, steals his focus. It all but floods his thoughts. Here we are, just you and I.

He dislikes it. Too intimate; too warm. Nowhere to hide.

Finally Hanzo sets his cup down. He pushes from the chair; his joints no longer sing out in pain. “I am going to wash.”

McCree looks up from where he’s re-rolling a cigarillo. “Huh?”

He gestures at the bucket. “The water. We have a reliable source for it now.” He unwraps his scarf from his wrist. “I will be in the washroom.”

“Oh, sure.” McCree hunches, nursing his cup. “Kinda chilly for that, though, isn’t it?”

Hanzo says nothing. He hoists the bucket of water and treads down the hall to the lavatory. Its weak lamps paint the walls cobalt-blue. Hanzo sets the bucket on the ground by the sink. McCree was right: it’s freezing in here.

Hanzo unties his obi, takes down his kyudo-gi, folds his scarf into a fat triangle and dips the edge into the tepid water. Slowly, laboriously, thoroughly as he can manage, the archer dabs off his healed skin. He washes his arms, his shoulders, his neck; a rigorous scrubbing behind his ears follows a dousing of his face. His pale outline dips and crests in the reflection of the cloudy wall mirror as he wipes down his chest and abdomen. There’s a cake of wrapped soap in a broken cabinet. It smells like cherries and artificial almonds, cheap scents from the bathrooms of inexpensive motels. Right now it’s heavenly. Anything to cleanse the tang of sweat and blood.

Carefully Hanzo untucks the patterned fabric of his trousers from the upper lip of his leg armor. Four bolts click the plating loose from his knees. He sets each piece on the lavatory counter side-by-side. Methodically he unlatches the shock-absorbing panels from behind each knee, peeling away the outer shell around his calves. He cannot remove every section; some are sealed into the remaining tissue, knitted tough by white stripes of scar tissue. But he can wash around them, especially the softer clefts above his calves. The pale tops of his feet, the calloused heels beneath his synthetic mesh soles. The slim arches and the metal bands encircling his crooked toes.

The places where Genji cut him, carving wicked red gashes with sword and shuriken. The fight where the sparrow thrashed beneath his blade, screaming for his life, desperately slicing at his brother’s bleeding limbs on a bleak spring night in Hanamura, koi flags fluttering on the old castle vanes.

Hanzo thinks of Genji as he washes. What is he doing right now? Was he watching during the battle? If so, what went through his mind? Do your best, Hanzo: that weak, back-handed encouragement. The flimsy assurance that is both too kind and not enough. Why not: come back safely. Even better: I know you will succeed.

He scrubs his bare thighs, remembering the last time someone told him such a thing was in the private hospital after the fight. Some withered Shimada elder in a green suit, looming tall and resolute by his bed, signing off on the operations that would rebuild his ruined legs. Greasy and smiling. The new oyabun makes us proud.

Hanzo grimaces as he rubs soap over his skin in light circles. The dim lights buzz; the echo of water splashing in the bucket pitters off the walls. Anxiety flutters in his intestines like he’s swallowed a live bird.
This place is dangerous for Hanzo. He dreads these gloomy ruminations of the past. This is no time to drop into that timeless spiral -- the backward flow that sends him crashing downstream like the unsuccessful carp. Time marches too slow here and his mind moves too fast. Things do not happen in places like this; they stagnate and die. Like steel-grey rivers in the winter, they freeze.

Forty-eight hours. If he’s going to make it through, he should gird himself now. No old thoughts about Genji, no doubts and second-guesses. No yielding to ancient despair.

The water is nearly cool when he hears from the hallway: “Hey, Han-zo.”

*Plop.* He sinks the scarf into the bucket. “What.”

“You doin’ alright?” By the throw of his voice, McCree is lingering by the doorway.

“Yes. Do not come in.”

“Wasn’t gonna. Just checkin’ on ya.” A soft grumble. “God-damn, it’s cold out here.”

“We are in Siberia, underground. In the middle of a blizzard. What else did you expect?”

“The chance to build a snowman woulda been nice.”

Hanzo soaks the scarf. “Go outside and try, if you so desire.”

“Doubt I’d be any good at it. Didn’t grow up in a place where it got very cold. That was prob’ly the most snow I’d ever seen in my life.”

Hanzo clenches his jaw, glowering into the bucket. Surely the fool is not going to lounge outside the door and blather while he bathes. “Is that so.”

“It’d snow up near Colorado, but like hell if I ever got around to seein’ it. Too ritzy for us gangsters. Sometimes if we were ridin’ through Tahoe we’d see it on the mountains…”

Wonderful: evidently he *does* intend to linger with his lips flapping. Hanzo switches to barbs, hoping it will nudge him away. “I do not imagine it snowed much in Texas.”

“The South,” McCree scathes. “The South-west. Shit, Shimada, when you gonna stop it with the Texas thing? You know I ain’t from there, I done told you enough.”

“How could I forget. You talk about it all the time.”

He starts ticking off his old hideouts. “Santa Fe ain’t Texas. New Orleans ain’t Texas. Atlanta ain’t Texas. San Francisco -- well. I ain’t even gettin’ started on how *that* ain’t Texas…”

“Have you a reason for interrupting me, Yankee-san?”

A muffled scoff. “Interruptin’ you.” Jesse still hates the nickname. “Naw.” And then, slightly put-upon: “maybe I just like your company, sweet pea, ain’t no merit to indulgin’ in the sounds of silence out here.”

Hanzo wipes the back of his neck. “Thank you for respecting what little privacy we have while we are here.”

“Well, yeah, of course, but, I mean. It’s just you and me.”

“What difference does that make?”
“Maybe somethin’. Maybe nothin’.” Jesse’s voice smolders. “Maybe we can make the most out of it.”

“What are you implying?” Hanzo says, in the tone of someone who wholly knows the implication.

“Oh, you know.” Jesse flicks his lighter, zip zip. “Couple of days alone to get a little more acquainted with one another.”

Hanzo’s thoughts leap to the fool’s dorm room: the console chair, the cigarillo kiss, the slick flesh. Exactly what he’s been trying not to think about since the mission began. Now he shivers from more than the cold. “This is no time to let our guard down. We are still in a perilous situation. It can always get worse.”

“It could also get better,” Jesse purrs.

“You will forgive me if I doubt that.”

“I’d forgive you if you’d hear me out and quit frettin’ so much.”

“Our security is paramount. No matter how idle we are.”

“I got a couple ideas how we could pass the time.” McCree’s words are sing-song, sensual and soft. “One o’ those bottles of vodka, take down the lights. You wouldn’t need a space heater.” That rich, rolling voice. Thick as honey. “I could keep you warm.”

So it is like the bedroom again. Hanzo doesn’t know whether to be offended or turned on. Is the fool so amorous that he’d seek to sleep together in this pit? Is his hard-on so bad that he can’t visualize the danger? Of course McCree wants to get wrecked in a shitty bunker, surrounded by ice and grime; scarce on food, ammunition and supplies. A spectral assassin from a terrorist organization could still be on their trail. If Reaper doesn’t get them, stray omnics might. The cold can kill what the ‘bots can’t reach.

Yet: isn’t that the thrill of it, this hazardous intimacy? There’s nothing going on here they necessarily signed up for, and yet the passion is thick in his throat as the snow outside their door. They’ve been all bullets and arrows up to this point, so why not lie together on a bed of them? Who wouldn’t love to get obliterated by friendlier fire?

Irritation sweeps the goosebumps on Hanzo’s sides. Here: in an underground maintenance station. No bed, no windows, no natural lighting. He imagines their shapes battering together at awkward, lurid angles -- limbs and hides grimy from sweat, banging against one another from wall to chair to ground. Potentially bathed in the glow of roach-baking radiation. How romantic. He nearly kicks the sink.

“C’mon, Shimada,” Jesse drawls from the hallway. “I owe you one.”

Hanzo clucks. “You owe me nothing.”

“I’m much obliged to please you. Haven’t forgotten what I said at the warehouse yesterday.”

Yesterday. Hanzo feels like a thousand years have passed between now and the icy river at Volskaya. “You say a lot of things. You say more than anyone I know.”

“That’s ‘cause I got plenty to tell you, sweetheart.” McCree’s voice is all sugar and smoke. “Especially after that little kindness you showed me the other night.”
“You call that a kindness.”

“‘Handjob.’ Seven-letter word for ‘bein’ real nice to a fella.”’

So lewd! He rolls his eyes, squeezing the scarf. “Must we talk about this now?”

“No better time for it. Nowhere to go, nothin’ to do. Ain’t got a team or a mission interruptin’ us.”

Before Hanzo can reply, Jesse huffs, hound-like. “I get it, y’know. You don’t like me yammering. But we don’t gotta settle it with words. There’s other ways to work this out.”

Hanzo sighs. “If that is what you wish, then wait until I am done.”

The lighter snickers -- zip, zip -- as Hanzo finishes washing. He reassembles his legs, dresses, wrings out his scarf, dumps the soiled water down the drain. Then he ties his hair back with the damp gold cloth and marches out. McCree is leaning against the corridor wall; he’s combed his hair, tucked in his shirt, taken off his chaps and chestplate. Chewing on an unlit cigarillo.

They exchange quick glances. A tepid hunger glimmers in the gunslinger’s muddy gaze. Hanzo bites back embarrassment; part of him was prepared (admittedly hoping) for the fool to greet him grinning sly with his shirt hanging open. Too cold for that.

“Feel better?” Jesse croons. Then, a plaintive aw. “You put your hair up.”

“We will need to melt more snow.”

“Sure.” Jesse clanks to Hanzo, reaches for him, repeats the action when Hanzo ducks away. “Hey.”

“Assist me.”

“I aim to, sweetheart.”

“Assist me.” This time Hanzo lets Jesse draw closer and hook his big hands on his shoulders. “We need to address the issue of the rations. We should also arrange this place to better accommodate our space.”

Jesse strokes the dragon tattoo. “However you want it, darlin’.” His smile is soft, sultry, swollen around his lower lip. Practically asking to be bitten. “Lookin’ at you, I feel warmer already.”

Hanzo thrusts the bucket between them. “Come.”

McCree laughs. “Ooh, darlin’, you first” -- Hanzo elbows him in the side -- “oof, hey” -- and wedges past him -- “Shimada, ha-ha, come on, hey” -- and stalks out into the control room. Jesse ambles after him with the bucket. “Sheesh, hold up.”

Hanzo pops open one box of rations and roots through its contents. There’s enough in the vacuum-sealed pouches to last him a while; McCree, on the other hand, won’t be satisfied with conservative portions.

“Han-zooo,” Jesse sings gravelly behind him. He loops two big arms around Hanzo’s chest. “You’re holdin’ out on me.”

“We need to separate this food to sufficiently last us the next two days.”

His beard rubs bristly on Hanzo’s neck, making him shiver. “Only thing I got an appetite for right now is you.”
It’s almost endearing. “You will reconsider, when your stomach starts making decisions instead of your anatomy.”

“Aw. Darlin’.” Now the gunslinger envelops him, bracing his back, nuzzling his scruffy chin into Hanzo’s shoulder. There’s his scent: earthy, spicy. Sweat and wilderness. “Damn, you’re all chilly. You got goosebumps. Lemme warm you up.”

“McCree.” Hanzo tenses.

Jesse slips his right hand into Hanzo’s kyudo-gi, strokes his chest, thumbs his left nipple. “Always wondered how your chest didn’t freeze off when you were up there on those walls” -- he grunts when Hanzo reaches back -- “hey, hey, heeey” -- and clenches his fingers at the bulk of his crotch -- “wooo, honey, ha-ha, careful, you’re gonna make me sing soprano.” But McCree hunches, doubles over and crumples when Hanzo palms him, strokes him, grips him through the fabric. Hanzo relishes the deep, stifled sounds. How the gunslinger presses hard into his hand.

Jesse mumbles through kisses on his shoulder. “Aw, hell.”

Hanzo’s voice is thin, low and dry. “Is that not where we are?”

“Keep touchin’ me there and you’re gonna make it heaven.”

“I suppose a fool could make paradise out of any hovel.”

“Drifter life is lonely, darlin’. God-damn, what I wouldn’t have done to have someone like you with me all those nights.”

“Someone like me.”

“Just you. There ain’t no one like you.” Now he’s rubbing insistently into his hand. “Shit, you burn me up so bad. I ain’t ever wanted anyone so much.”

“No?”

“Ever. Hell. You make me stiff just walkin’ in a room. All those times in simulations” -- Jesse’s breath hitches when Hanzo angles away from the console, hooks a thumb into his belt, pulls the waist of his trousers -- “I’d get to see you runnin’, climbing those walls. I’d sit and watch a mite longer than I should.”

“You watched me.” Hanzo almost preens. “How shameless.”

“You want shameless?” Jesse licks his lips; the archer realizes with a thrill that yes, yes -- he wants it. “Thought I’d beat it straight off after that one night in the elevator, I was so burnt up.”

Of course: the night in the showers in Range 1. He’d nearly kissed the fool after a drunken threat to kill him. Hanzo reflects how he sobered up on the cliffs under thoughts of Jesse’s wide, full mouth. He shivers again. “How unfortunate, to pine for your enemy.”

“You ain’t my enemy anymore, darlin’. That was a long time ago.” Jesse is hot against his ear, all flames and lust. “Right now, you’re all mine.”

The belt-buckle clinks when he unlatches it. Jesse sputters, strains, looks dizzy with delight. Hanzo sees it in his eyes; the gunslinger thinks he knows what will happen next. Pavlov’s cowboy. We will see who belongs to who.
He’s about to take him in hand when the comm goes off. Jesse lets out an undignified groan; he stops toying with Hanzo’s scarf. Hanzo wrenches away before he can untie it, padding across the room for the beeping device. Jesse slumps, wheezing like a deflating balloon. “Of all the god-damn times.”

Hanzo fits the comm into his ear and taps to transmit. “Hanzo here.”

A dulcet voice answers, prim and lilting. “Symmetra online. Satya Vaswani reporting.”

Anger spins his vision. “What.”

“I apologize for the unscheduled call. Winston requested you and Agent McCree receive a debriefing on the situation regarding Overwatch and the United Nations. Agents Torbjorn and Lúcio are currently indisposed with a major incident firewall issue on your network --”

“Who sanctioned you to use this line?” Hanzo barks. “Why are you still at the Watchpoint?”

Satya replies fluidly: “my position as liaison for the corporation has been extended due to the considerable response in regards to Overwatch renewal. That is irrelevant to the purpose of this call --”

“No.” Hanzo bristles. “I refuse to believe that.”

“Your beliefs are irrelevant. I have relayed the facts. As I was saying, I am here to provide a debrief on the situation regarding the official re-launch of Overwatch.”

“No one should have left you unattended to use this line!”

“I am not unattended. Your AI is monitoring.”

“I do not care. I want to speak to another agent.”

Satya drones her report. “The United Nations has issued a formal indictment against all Overwatch operatives. Mission activity in Siberia is classified as a direct violation of the PETRAS act. In concordance with our agreement, the Vishkar Corporation has provided its public defense alongside overwhelmingly positive public support.”

“Put another agent on the line.” McCree braces him; he pushes away; McCree grunts in surprise.

As if Hanzo never spoke, she continues. “Russian governmental officials have lobbied in agreement with the defense. Civilian response to the Siberia mission has been green across North America, Europe, and Asia. An emergency hearing has been arranged at the UN headquarters in New York City --”

“Enough!” Hanzo snarls. “Where is Genji?”

She pauses. “I am unaware of Agent Genji’s status or location.”

“I demand to speak to another agent. I demand to speak to my brother.”

The smallest note of irritation tinges her tone. “I am currently unaware of Agent Genji’s status or location. Perhaps you should call him directly. As I was saying --”

“No. I am hanging up. I will not feign tolerance to monsters.”

Satya rises slightly in volume. “Regardless of your opinions, Agent Hanzo, the Vishkar
Corporation leverages the finest scientific developments for the betterment of humanity --"

“Humanity means nothing to those who would make a specimen out of a human being!”

Insulted, she stabs back. “You are implying we do such a thing? What an egregious assumption. Human experimentation is an unethical practice absolutely unthinkable by our standards. Your tolerance is meaningless compared to my lack of regard for the greatly misinformed --”

“I know what your vile corporation does. I heard them say it when you invaded our base.”

“The truth may disturb your bias, Agent Hanzo, but it does not dispute reality. I assure you: the Vishkar Corporation would never carry out such a barbaric --”

“Specimen 1193.” He hammers out each syllable. “Tell me what that means.”

A pause. Satya replies, “I beg your pardon?”

“One-One-Nine-Three. What does it mean.”

“A series of numbers. Our classification system --”

“You were going to take Genji. Your agent called him ‘valuable.’ He referred to him by that number before he tried to capture him alive.”

“I fail to see how this is relevant to this call --”

“They were going to net him, like an animal. They had a special gun. I witnessed it with my own eyes and ears! ” Hanzo rages into the transmitter. “Specimen 1193. Tell me what that means, Vishkar. Tell me you weren’t going to make an experiment out of my brother.”

No response. He can hear the whine of equipment in the background; she must be in Winston’s lab. When Satya finally speaks, he can’t tell if she’s angry or puzzled. Perhaps both. “You are mistaken.” A quick breath. “Specimen 1193 was designated in the protocol as a non-hostile. A Gibraltan reptile species requisitioned for our zoology research center.” Now he hears distinct confusion in her voice. “It was not high priority. You must have heard incorrectly.”

“With my own ears.” Hanzo hunches deadly, poised to strike. Even if she’s thousands of miles away. “I will not stand for this. On my honor as Shimada, I promise you now: so much as look in my brother’s direction, and I will hunt you down and scatter you like hard-light across the ends of the earth.”


Satya replies warily, coldly, as if considering every word. “Your assurance is noted.”

“Put Genji on the line, or I am switching off.”

“For the final time. I do not know the current location of --”

Hanzo turns off the comm, slams it into the console, turns away. He draws in quick, aching breaths; every nerve and fiber burns.

Behind him, McCree pipes up. “The hell?”

“That archi-tech.”
“Vaswani. Yeah. Shit, it sounded real bad.”

“She meant to give a debriefing. Winston’s request.”

“His request?”

“She should not be permitted to use our communication lines. That is the last thing to which she should have access.”

McCree shifts from foot to foot. His pants hang loose, still unbuttoned around on his hips. “Well, she did kinda pop up on the comm during the mission. Guess she was just as invested in things going successfully as we were.”

Hanzo grumbles. “I do not want her anywhere near my brother.”

‘cause of the stuff about the specimen?’

“She claims I was mistaken. I know she is lying. You remember what happened. Why else would they have targeted him?”

Jesse frowns, scratches his head, lingers by the console in confusion. His belt buckle gleams by his thigh. “Vengeance?”

“The Watchpoint is not secure as long as she is there.” Hanzo fumes and grits his jaw. He storms past McCree, retrieves the metal bucket, and hops the barricade of chairs at the stairwell. McCree sputters, hoisting up his trousers.

“Where’re you goin’?”

“To get more water.”

Okay, well” -- the gunslinger calls as he ascends the stairs -- “be sure you come back when you’re done.”

As if there is anywhere else for Hanzo to go.

He reaches the door, fiddles with the lock and wires for a frustrating four minutes before he can unbolt the wheel and pull it free. After scooping the snowbank, he secures the door and returns down the stairwell to set the bucket over the space heater. He flicks it on with a snap.

“It’s a shame we got interrupted,” McCree murmurs.

“Help me make a bed.”


It isn’t quite what the gunslinger expects. Hanzo enlists his assistance in piling materials (spare coats, the windbreaker, empty tool bags, an oil-stained tarp) to create a ramshackle pallet in the center of the room. Which is where Hanzo lies down with his handset and blue earphones, stealing away to silence. He does not look back to judge McCree’s reaction; he imagines it’s disappointment.

“Rouse me if Genji calls,” he says before turning on a playlist of Vivaldi.

---
Lúcio handles the next check-in. Satya won’t be permitted on the comm anymore; he’s fresh from a nasty argument where Winston had to intervene and pull them apart. The ape has negotiated a pragmatic truce with her while they wait for the team’s return. None of the other agents are happy about it, least of all Lúcio.

“Man, she’s a real piece of work,” he clucks. “She hasn’t changed a bit since Rio. I can’t figure out Winston’s angle, either.” He pauses before whispering, conspiratorially: “between you and me, Mister Shimada? I think he might might like her or something.”

Hanzo inhales a drink of water. “Tch -- what!”

“Not like, like-like, you know, but, brains-like. They mesh when it comes to science, I’ve heard them talking about equations and stuff. I think he digs having her brainpower around, but he could also be trying to keep an eye on her.”

“Delightful.” Hanzo clears his throat, coughs, stifles a mental image of the armored gorilla offering to the haughty Vaswani a red rose bouquet. “You will continue to make sure she does not compromise our security.”

“You know it, Mister Shimada. I’m not letting her mess with anything.” He can hear the audio-medic’s grin through the comm. “You guys staying toasty down there?”

“As best we can.”

“You both had to stick together for warmth yet?”

Hanzo lowers his cup. “Pardon?”

“You know Eastwood’s favorite song, right? That good ol’ Johnny Cash.” Lúcio honks the bouncy trumpet line to *Ring of Fire*: “bap-da-bap ba-dap daa-daa-daaaa --”

Hanzo withers a glare at McCree across the room; he’s oblivious, cleaning Peacekeeper. “I know the tune.”

“Just ask him, man. I bet he’d sing it for you.” Wry cackling as the line prepares to cut off.

“Alright, I’m signing out. Gotta get back to work. Ping us if you need us.”

No messages from his brother. At every check-in, the younger Shimada is nowhere to be found.

The hours pass. They light two more biotic emitters. Hanzo slips into a bored, feverish blur of talk, sleep and waking. They eat carefully portioned rations, melted snow, acrid shots of vodka. Hanzo snoozes on and off, listens to music, remains mostly inert. Regaining his strength, suppressing his anger. He attempts a few push-ups before his back threatens to cramp. McCree watches while whittling a pencil with a pocket knife, whistling *The Strawberry Roan*.

No more fumbling or fond touches; McCree tries to initiate, but Hanzo gently shoots him down. He can’t drown that hateful archi-tech’s words out of his ears. McCree retreats. This isn’t a problem he can solve with his sly mouth or his gun.

During one nap, he dreams of the purple wisteria at the omnium. The finches return to the rocks, peeping and scuttling in the undergrowth. One of them lands by his knee.

*Hey,* it says in high-pitched Japanese. *This might come as a surprise to you, but you’re violating a proximity ordinance. Too close to the radiation. If a cop sees you, they’re going to write you a citation.* Hanzo scowls, informs it there’s no one around for miles. *Okaaay, well,* it flutes. *You’ll*
grow tumors on your balls. Big ones. The size of a radish. No he won’t, he assures peevishly. The radiation is long gone. When he looks back, the finch is wearing a small brown cowboy hat and a red kerchief. Well, go blow yourself, pardner! He swats it away. It pipes a tinny laugh, eerily electronic. Muffled, as if trickling from a cell phone speaker unbeknownst to the caller on the other line. Butt-dialed by a mean little bird.

He wakes groggy. Jesse lies beside him: back-to-back, staving off the cold, foil blankets pulled over their shoulders. Drowsily humming, playing something on his handset. A crossword puzzle app. Hanzo smells the cheap almond soap; he must have washed.

Sleep, he thinks. A five-letter word for ‘nothing better to do.’

He closes his eyes again.

---

day two begins at 0335. Hanzo has lost track of time. His body tells him this is the wrong hour to wake; his brain is too sated with sleep to stay down. He moves through the dark, goes to piss, comes back for two cups of water. The smell of old, sweet smoke lingers in the hallway; the fool must have snuck off for a cigarillo while he slept. McCree snores on the pallet, serape balled for a pillow.

The comm sits idle. Hanzo pinches it, slips over the chair barricade, climbs up the dark stairwell to sit on a middle step. The cold seeps into his haunches. Outside, the blizzard whirrs.

He considers Gibraltar and the Watchpoint. Five hours behind. He taps the transmit button and mutters an agent code: 3945_49. The line hisses, beeps, picks up with a click.

“Genji here,” answers the distorted voice.


“Hanzo!” Genji sounds delighted. “Boy, what time is it there? It has to be pretty late. How are you doing?”

“Alright.” Then, doubling back, shaking his head with a burst of frustration: “no. Not alright. Not alright at all.” Anger seeps through his sleepy cognizance. “Why haven’t you called me?”

“Was I supposed to?”

“I’ve asked to talk to you at every check-in. Did they not tell you?”

Genji sounds like he’s feigning an innocent shrug. “No, they did.”

Anger blooms bright in Hanzo’s chest. “Then why the hell didn’t you call?”

“I was busy!” Genji laughs. “It’s been crazy here since the mission. Torbjorn and I had to run security checks around the Watchpoint. There were drones trying to get a look inside, and helicopters. I had to climb every freaking cliff on this rock. Ever since you guys took off with the RDF, Overwatch has been all over the news.”

It’s a good excuse. Better than Hanzo expected. “So, then, you are safe? Everything is secure?”

“Yeah. Completely fine. Why: did you worry?”

“No.” And then, relinquishing his dread: “Maybe some. You couldn’t spare five minutes to talk to
me?”

“Well, to be honest…”

“For fuck’s sake, Genji. *Five minutes.*”

“I’m serious! It’s been balls-to-the-wall here! I see why you’re mad, but I thought you’d understand.”

“Were you watching the mission?”

“Of course!”

“Then you saw what happened!”

“Yeah! It was amazing!”

Hanzo squints through the darkness. Is he hearing things? “‘Amazing.’”

“Really, Hanzo, it was out of this world. I was applauding you the whole time. When you broke your sim record, the whole lab went nuts!”

“Not that, dammit! The assassin! The blizzard!”

Genji remains mirthful. “Oh! Yeah, that too. Well, Winston was worried something like that might happen. Third-party interference. He thinks it’s some Talon operative that tried to crash the base a few months ago, so, like I said. We upped security. Torbjorn said, ‘Wow, Genji, I’m glad you don’t need a lot of sleep, because without you, we’d be screwed keeping all these turrets online --’”

Hanzo cuts in. “I could have been killed. At any point in time during that mission, that could have been it. You saw how much went wrong. It was a fucking travesty.” Only a second after he says it does Hanzo realize he’s used their father’s favorite remark for when something went belly-up. “Did that not occur to you that I might die at any time while you were watching? Before then? *Now*?”

“Uh. Well. Yeah.” Genji snorts. “It comes with the territory. You’re part of Overwatch now. People die all the time.”

Hanzo pinches the bridge of his nose. His head hurts. “None of this is very reassuring.”

“And they’d get left behind. That was always the saddest outcome. Things would get too dangerous for the team to go back and reclaim other agents. We lost a lot of good people that way. But not you, Hanzo. You went back for someone in peril. That’s really commendable. Rarely used to happen in all the days before.”

*Before*. Hanzo remembers the fool slumped by the doorway, muttering that woman’s name. He picks at his beard, swallows, finds his throat scratchy. The nausea returns. “At the risk of my own safety. My life.”

“I understand what you’re saying. You think you could have died. But, hey. Guess what?”

“What?”

Plucky, sing-song: “you *didn’t.*”

Hanzo growls, rubs his jaw, rubs the bridge of his nose. “Be serious.”
“Just like I knew you wouldn’t!” Genji asserts. “I told you the night before you left, but you weren’t listening. Man, you are still really bad at listening. Anyway. You’re alive and still a badass. You did your best, just like I said. Didn’t you?”


“We can talk about it some more when you get back. We’ll go sit on the tower, okay?” He says this airily, casual -- a promise from someone with no intention of upholding it. “I know you’re stressed, being stuck down there with McCree. But he has to be grateful. Try to be nice about it.” A pause. “Please tell me you stopped calling him ‘Yankee-san’ like I asked? I feel bad that he dislikes it so much.”

“Who cares if he dislikes it,” Hanzo jabs.

“I do! I like McCree, remember? He was always nice to me on missions. He would ask me to teach him a few things in Japanese. He wasn’t very good at it, but I taught him how to cuss. It was funny.”

Hanzo blows a lock of hair out of his eyes. “Very amusing, I’m sure.”

“If you still call him ‘Yankee-san,’ at least explain the joke. I bet he wouldn’t hate it so much. Or, I don’t know -- given how he hangs around you all the time, maybe he’ll like it more.”

“Genji.” With bite this time.

Cheerfully: “hey, try to relax.” And then, all business. “Listen, I need to go. Another run and check around the perimeter in case there’s new snoops crawling around. I’m still rooting for you, okay? You’ll be out of there before you know it.”

“Brother, wait. You have to stay safe. If the archi-tech is there --”

“Pfft.” Genji raspberries. “Don’t worry about her. She doesn’t scare me. She tries to be a tough guy more than anything actually threatening. Hey: tell McCree I said ‘hi’, okay? And -- Hanzo.”

The archer grunts. “Yes?”

Genji is sly as the cat who caught the canary. “Take it easy on him.”

Hanzo piques. “You little shit --”

“Talk to you later!”

The line snips. Hanzo considers tossing his comm down the stairs.

He gets up, descends, returns to the pallet. McCree stirs when he lies down but doesn’t wake.

Hanzo shifts beneath the thermal blankets until his back brushes Jesse’s own. He tucks into a curl.

“What am I doing here?” he mouths for the hundredth, thousandth time. “Why did I stay?”

An acceptable answer is to simply admit that you do not know, the finch chirps in his dreams. It sits on the shoulder of the maiko wearing Jesse’s serape; she smiles over a tiny cup of coffee. It’s a perfectly valid answer. When he argues otherwise, she shakes her head. Pinches his cheeks. Ah, little lord!

---
They wake later and nibble a flimsy breakfast. Jesse finds a pack of playing cards stowed in Peacekeeper’s cleaning kit. Hanzo refuses a game of poker; Tracer warned him once that the gunslinger cheats. Jesse plays solitaire while chewing on a cigarillo. Hanzo recalibrates the grip on Storm Bow. The conversation wanders: card games, Go Fish, fishing as a hobby, the best kind of sushi. Jesse has never eaten *fugu* or *toro*; Hanzo cannot believe the latter. They must rectify this the minute they’re back in Gibraltar.

It’s a date, then, Jesse says. Hanzo snorts. A joke.

“What’s the one called where they put the lil’ quail’s egg on top?” Jesse asks. He’s playing cross-legged on the pallet, cowboy boots shucked nearby. They take more effort to get off than Hanzo guessed.

“The word is *uzura.*” Hanzo studies the inlay on his bow. It’s begun to chip; he’ll have to replace it back in Gibraltar. “They put it in *tobiko.* Fish roe. You have had it?”

“Yeah. Always thought that was cute. Tasty, too.”

“We have another preference in common, then.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“An acquired taste for some. I have always liked it.”

“Well, whatta know. Sure wish we had some now.”

Hanzo purses his lips, wiggling the grip. “Soup would be better. Something with broth.”

“Hell yeah, me too.” Jesse sets down a red ace. “No offense to Reinhardt’s cookin’, but last time I had good noodles was back on our first mission in Lijiang. Me an’ Lúcio camped out the night market runnin’ recon for a few days. We hit up this lil’ ramen stand every night. Good stuff. Miles above the microwave cups I ate all the time in Deadlock.”

Hanzo snorts. “The real thing is much better.”

“Yeah. Best part of that trip, tell you the truth. All that good food.” McCree grins down at his spread. “Well, that and runnin’ into you, of course.”

Hanzo pauses. “Running into me.”

“Yeah, you know. I reckon that’s kinda where we met.”

*It is, Hanzo thinks. He chronicles it; they exchanged names there.*

“Don’t know if you’d count the time before, at the Watchpoint.” McCree layers black cards over red. “ Didn’t have a clue who you were back then. Just a clever fella who shot me.”

He eyes McCree owlishly. “It was you who shot first.”

“I did. And missed. You” -- Jesse jabs a finger in Hanzo’s direction -- “didn’t miss. Got my hat, got my arm. Didja know I had to have surgery for that elbow shot?”

Hanzo frowns; he did not know.

Jesse laughs at his cards. “Coulda killed me.”
“I had no intention of killing you.”

“You had your bow up. Arrow loaded. Ready to shoot.”

“A shot does not guarantee a kill. You of all people know that.”

Jesse chews the cigarillo. “Y’know, I’ve never asked you straight, after all these months.” His raises one eyebrow. “What were you doin’ up there?”

“Looking for Genji. I followed him from Hanamura.”

“I figured that much. But why there? Why that spot?”

“I was observing the base from the cliffs in hope of seeing him. I mapped the drone flight patterns so I could avoid detection. That edge was one of their blind spots. I knew I would not have much time to get a good look, so I planned to return several days in a row. You were there outside the lab on the third evening. You were the first person I had seen.”

“Dang. Feels like forever ago.”

Hanzo’s brows furrow. He remembers Volskaya, the console chair, the bunk, the medbay. A thousand years.

McCree matches a two of hearts to a three of spades. “You were just a big ol’ unknown back then. I was fresh off the bounty trail, all I saw everywhere were fellas ready to kill me. And, shit: you had the perfect shot. Don’t know if I woulda done things any different, thinkin’ back on it, and all.”

“If you had not shot at me, I would not have fired back.”

McCree snorts. “You sure about that?”

“It is the truth.” The archer sits up in his chair. “I had countless opportunities to kill you. That one was arguably the best. You were not paying attention to your surroundings.”

“Easy for you, honey.” He grins up at Hanzo: roguish, wry. Hair tousled, beard uncombed, teeth flashing.

Warmth and sweetness. Like his terms of endearment.

His memory flits to the cliffside: the fool leaning on the railing, smoking, watching the sea. The hat, the red serape. Peacekeeper dull in its holster. A middle-age cowboy on the fringe of Europe; a caricature. A joke. How he nocked and drew and aimed, poised -- not desiring to shoot, but prepared to fire -- and stood ready to die or kill. A dizzying moment of ambivalence equivocating, purposefully either-or. Suspended in the wind, pressed into the craggy precipice, buffered by the wind and sea. Waiting, Stuck there. Hanging on his bowstring: a man unwilling to move.

McCree breaks Hanzo’s train of thought with a yawning groan. “God-damn, I hate this cold. I need to be someplace else.” He heels his palms into his brow. “Gimme hot-as-hell desert any day, I’ll take hot sand over this garbage.”

A familiar irritation pricks in Hanzo’s guts. Before he can stop himself, he mutters: “Egypt.”

Jesse looks up, jaw slack, cigarillo hanging off his lip. “Come again?”

“Hot-as-hell desert. Sand.”
“Oh, I’m sorry,” McCree drawls, squinting at Hanzo. “Did I, or did I not just hear you say ‘Egypt?’”

Hanzo says nothing. McCree narrows his eyes. Uncomfortable silence settles between them, thick as ice.

“Well,” Jesse replies dryly, breaking the pause, “mark that down as one of the weirdest things you’ve ever said.”

“Your mentor was from there, your Amari.”

McCree’s gaze snaps. “My who?”

“When you recovered from the snow, you said her name.”

A bark of laughter startles from the gunslinger. “Did I? Holy shit.” He leans back against the wall. “Well, damn, I didn’t know that. I must have been dreaming.”

“You dream about this Amari. You think about her, still.”

“She pops up from time to time. She was real important to me.”

“You loved her.”

“Well, kinda,” Jesse balks. “She was my teacher. I was a pup when I got signed up to Blackwatch. Time went on and Amari watched out for me. Hell, you wanna know the truth? She took care of me. She kept my dumb ass outta trouble. Hard not to love someone like that.” And then, incredulously: “I swear you know all this. I told you this before.”

Hanzo doesn’t know whether to feel pricked or relieved. Maybe both. “So you did not mean Egypt.”

Bewildered, Jesse stares. He takes out the cigarillo. “Are you messin’ with me again?”

Hanzo lowers Storm Bow. He edges up from the seat, crosses the small space, lowers to the pallet. Kneeling with ungloved hands settling on the tops of his thighs, sleek eyes scrutinizing Jesse’s shaggy face.

McCree crouches forward. Tenuous, loaded like his gun. He doesn’t know what to do. “Shimada?”

Hanzo slips to him, a fish cutting through water. The gunslinger freezes when he cups his jaw, combs his scruff, presents himself between his knees. He kisses gentle at first, muted, soft as linen. Jesse makes the weakest sound he’s ever heard. Hanzo feels his hands lifting, hesitating, hovering around his shoulders. Another kiss: firmer this time, lips fully meeting, a gesture of unification. Cigarillo smoke burns rich in his mouth, a taste he likes and loathes all at once.

They come together after a quick jolt; Jesse jerks away like he’s touched a hot circuit, settling to test Hanzo’s shoulders one by one. Stroking, steeling himself. Fearful his quarry will slither away. When will he learn that Hanzo does as he pleases? Especially when he desires to be pleased?

Slowly they go down one limb at a time, adjusting until the other can follow. Jesse makes little noises between each kiss, miniscule growls of thunder in his chest. Hanzo devours them, licks after them, welcomes those big hands pawing down his sides like he means to wrestle down a storm. Jesse grabs rough then rubs gentle, anxious then tender. Pushing then pulling. He can’t make up
his mind; he’s scattered like an overturned brazier, all coals.

“Sweetheart,” he breathes, fumbling the knot on his scarf. “God help me, sweetheart. I knew you’d come around.”

Hanzo says nothing, kissing him instead, answering with his tongue. Jesse unwinds the yellow fabric and fills his callused fingers with the spill of Hanzo’s hair, adoring the strands like he’s appraising silk. A whimper escapes him, the type of noise a man so tall should never make in modest company. Hanzo eats it up, tangles their knees, drags his nails down Jesse’s sun-baked arms. Wholly intoxicated. Give me more.

They burn together in a solid curve as they roll on the pallet. Eventually the belts come off, blue obi joining the jangling buckle. It’s too cold to disrobe, so they reach through each other’s clothes and touch whatever they find. Hanzo traces the bullet scar on Jesse’s left side; Jesse thumbs his left nipple until it stings. Still irritatingly sensitive, raw from the snow.

“That’s what you get for having it out all the time,” Jesse mutters when Hanzo bats his hand away, grinning, lips sticky with spit.

Of course he’s going to talk through this; they can’t lock mouths and rut against each other forever. Nothing short of a ball gag will keep him silent once the kissing stops (and who knows? maybe he’s into that). The least Hanzo can do is minimize the chatter. Biting won’t do; he has no teeth for this prey tonight. He snakes his hands down the gunslinger’s hairy belly, elicits a spasm, a laugh, a familiar whisper. Ticklish. Hanzo guides his hands to warmth and soft flesh, up and rigid. Filling his palm with it, fist him with a blithe, metered stroke. Jesse likes it loudly, sighing horse-like into Hanzo’s neck. The touch that makes the big man melt.

“Han-zo.” He drawls out his first name, inelegant and Southern. “Tell me what you like.”

“You.” Brutal honesty. Hanzo is surprised it feels so good.

Jesse shivers, snickers, grins like he’s been handed pure gold. “Let me do somethin’ for you, then.”

“What do you want?”

“Turn over.”

Hanzo tenses. Jesse notices; he soothes his large palm up his back.

“I’ll take it easy. Just let me love on you a little.”

Take it easy on him. Genji’s words ring in Hanzo’s ears. “What will you do?”

They’re disheveled and ruddy in the weak orange light, but Jesse’s the one blushing. “We’re in Siberia, darlin’, this place ain’t got the necessary provisions to stem the rose.”

Hanzo pushes up, searches Jesse’s features, makes a face. Is now really the time for his stupid Southernisms?

“Oh, nevermind.” Jesse nudges him; Hanzo feels their weight shifting; the tarp beneath them crackles. “I’m talkin’ too much.” One hand is guiding Hanzo to his side, cradling his hip, pulling loose the strings on his trousers. “Lie back, darlin’. Lemme do this for you.”

But Hanzo fixates. Roses? Is he trying to be romantic? He sits up. Jesse pushes him down, wedges between his armored knees, sneaks kisses over the contours of his abdomen. The sight
momentarily swims his vision. “Answer me first.”

“Somethin’ you’ll love.”

Hanzo tugs Jesse’s hair. The gunslinger lifts, wheezes. The rapturous look on his face makes Hanzo’s mouth run dry. He likes that.

“Tell me,” he rasps.

Jesse tongues the tip of his canine tooth. Then he licks his lips. Proudly, he announces: “I’m gonna blow you.”

Again with the lewdness. Hanzo’s cheek twitches. He lets go of Jesse’s hair, murmurs, angles back on his elbows. Tense as a wire.

Jesse notices this, too. “Relax, darlin’.”

“I am relaxed.”

“Like hell you are, you’re wound up tighter than a tick.”

“Must you talk?”

“I’ll be real quiet in a second. Let go for a little while, will you? Have faith.”

Hanzo exhales through his nostrils. The gunslinger slides down his thighs, adjusts the fabric, slips him free, unsheathes him and strokes in the clutch of his warm right hand. Hanzo chews the inside of his lip, claws the canvas beneath them.

He has a point. It will hush him.

The sultry awe on Jesse’s face is almost embarrassing. “Did I ever tell you what a pretty sight you are?”

“Shameless.” He brushes dark strands of hair from the gunslinger’s brow. “Mind yourself. It is cold in here.”

“Not for long, darlin’.”

Wryly, Hanzo huffs. “Watch your teeth.”

At first he observes, savoring the vulgarity of Jesse’s stretched lips and eager sounds. It’s almost as good as the fire that shoots up his spine, spreading thick through his belly like a cloud of smoke. But there’s more to it than a velvet mouth and slick tongue. It’s a deeper appreciation, a heat with a source he cannot name. There’s a deftness to his stroke, a measure of restraint, a subtle attention to how and when he moves. It sends him reeling. Soon it overtakes him: quicker than he expects, better than what he’s had before. It’s been too long. Hanzo tilts back his head, slackens, folds his elbows. He combs Jesse’s hair and reclines, sighs, listens to his lungs bellow in his chest, thinks of salt and the sun and desert whip-poor-wills. He’s never seen such a bird before. What do they look like? How do they sound?

Then he feels the touch. Hanzo sputters, yanks hair. Tightening all over.

Jesse’s tongue flickers as he's pulled away, red and glistening. Obscene. “What?”

“Stop it.” Hanzo growls out a knot in his throat.
“Stop what?”

“Get your finger out of my ass.”

“Oh.” Jesse shifts, crackles the blankets, drops his chin. The touch retreats. “Thought you might like it.”

Hanzo grits his jaw. “Your cool metal hand?”

“Is it cold? I can tell when it’s cold.” And then, cocksure: “it ain’t cold.”

The archer knocks his knee lightly into Jesse’s shoulder. “Use your other.”

“It’s kinda occupied right now.” Jesse grins. “C’mon, honey, trust me. My left works just fine.”

“You will forgive me if I --”


Hanzo flattens. His heart pounds against his throat. He does his best to summon some vestige of calm, breathing in and out, eyes shut. Eventually he rakes a thumb against Jesse’s jaw, sweeps his cheek, lets him resume, tolerates the new, sly prodding. The gunslinger hums. *Have faith.*

*Whatever,* Hanzo thinks. Let the fool abase himself. This is nothing new. He’s like this in practice sessions half the time, anyway: haphazard, intrusive, mouthing off with his gun and his spurs and his can-do attitude. At worst it’ll be embarrassing, at best it will be --

Hanzo seizes. *Oh.* The bliss returns swiftly, two-fold -- then, in delicious rapid-fire, three-four-five-six. He arches his back and gasps. Jesse rises with him, falls, persists, thrusts his head into the hand that grips his hair. Soon Hanzo is sweating, eyes wide, throat choked by sounds that climb unbidden from the dark delight pooling between his hips. He digs metal heels into the pallet, thumps back, abandons Jesse’s hair, grabs a fistful of nearby fabric, shakes, clenches every muscle. Hanzo covers the fabric to his face; anything to stifle his wet, undignified breaths. There’s the smell of smoke and old wood, pinesap and mint. Through a corporal shudder, Hanzo opens one eye. The red serape.

No warning, no sign of approach. Hanzo loses it, blanking, shooting off with a ragged groan. Jesse complains none, handles it smoothly; nosing his belly, dragging his tongue, insistent and messy and determined to the hilt. It’s enough to throw Hanzo back, teeth chattering, pupils blown. The gunslinger persists, still working, wringing him oversensitive. Hanzo has to pinch his jaw to pry him off. It doesn’t take long until he’s seeing stars.

“Enough,” he strangles out, *pleads,* echoing off the black station walls.

Below him, the gunslinger obeys, rustles, eases off his thighs. Hanzo feels him re-arranging, tucking him back in, neatly ordering his clothing. Tugging the crimson wool away from Hanzo’s chin.

“You alright there, darlin’?” he rumbles, laughing. “Aw, don’t hide that pretty face. Lemme see you.”

Hanzo says nothing, feels capable of nothing. Cooling sweat gathers on his neck, arms, lower back. A full, encompassing delight trickles over him, snapping off in his limbs with little electric twitches. He mouths a reply that dies on his lips. *Were you trying to kill me?*
Jesse grins exultant, wiping his mouth with the back of his thumb. Hanzo clutches the serape; Jesse folds in with it, drops beside him and sets his tanned right hand on his sternum. Warm as the sun over his heaving ribs.

They lie in silence, Jesse stroking the muscled grid of his stomach, until Hanzo finally shudders, “good.”

“Yeah?”

Sluggish, he simmers. He’s waiting to feel his legs again. “You have a talent.”

“High praise, darlin’,” Jesse answers, curling close. “It’s all yours now.”

Hanzo twists the gunslinger’s ear. No complaints. Thinking is out of the question, much less talk.

He succumbs to sleep sometime after Jesse pulls up the blankets. Dreams evade him; Hanzo dozes through their afternoon comm call, wakes to the sound of McCree talking to Winston. Drowsily he observes how Jesse sits in the station chair: shirt buttoned, shoulders loose, ankle crossed over his knee. His tanned throat bobs when he laughs, bearded chin tilting back, dark eyes light. He looks so calm, relaxed. As if he’s drinking diner coffee over his breakfast pie.

Jesse hangs up and beams at Hanzo. “Hey, sleepin’ beauty.”

“What time is it?”

“1605. Winston says the RDF’s preparin’ to move out. Storm’s let up, they got rendezvous clocked for us within the next three hours.” Jesse grins. “We’re gettin’ outta here.”

Relief washes Hanzo like a tide. He rubs his brow, sweeps back his hair, strokes his chin. “Soon.”

“Yeah. All we gotta do is hold tight.” He descends to the pallet one knee at a time. Hanzo watches him stretch across the thermal blankets, reaching, bluntly driving his head into the archer’s lap. Hanzo cups that sturdy, masculine jaw -- the source for a bawdy joke Jesse throws around when he’s feeling brassy: a fine place to sit.

Jesse looks up. “Hey.”

“Hm.”

“You alright?”

He combs through Jesse’s hair. “Yes.”

“Good.” A pleased thrum. “You liked it?”

“Yes.” Another bloom of honesty. And then: “you were neglected.”

Jesse’s brows rise. “Didn’t matter to me. That was s’posed to be about you.”

Hanzo tugs him, bunching the folds of his sleeve. Wordless and insistent: we are not done yet.

Jesse catches on quick. They fold into each other again, deliberate and digging. Down on the ground they lie then curl then writhe, indulging the other with flesh and fire. This time Hanzo lets him lead: lashing his palm around them both, stroking in unison until they’re red-faced and puffing. It feels boyish and clumsy; the awkward, erotic fumbling of self-effacing teenagers. Hanzo does not care. Jesse white out long before him, cursing, gritting out pleas of darlin’ and god-damn.
Hanzo permits his kiss, lapping at him with a stinging tongue, biting, peaking, whispering demands in Japanese through a blissful little death from which the gunslinger has to resurrect him, eager to hear it, light as a moth-wing on the shell of his ear. *All mine.*

Nausea nibbles at him afterward. He can’t figure out why. Maybe it’s the fatigue; maybe it’s the afterglow. Maybe it’s the way Jesse rumbles with his wild head pillowed on his chest.

Afterward, they get their bearings, clean off, lie side-by-side on their backs. Jesse lights a cigarillo; Hanzo stares at the industrial ceiling tinged by topaz light.


Hanzo says nothing. His stomach twists. *Is this heaven or hell?*

Jesse looks over. “Are we gonna talk about this?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“We will be picked up soon.”

“And?”

He reaches over, plucks the cigarillo, takes a hit, blows out an agate plume, hands it back. Then, less gently than before: “this will end.”

Jesse sits up. “What?”

“We will not be here any longer. We will leave. We will return to the Watchpoint and go back to our routines. There will be more training, more missions. More excursions for heroism. What happened here will fade into the normalcy of everyday life.”

Silence. Jesse’s face is a mix of bewilderment and hurt. “So: that’s it?”

“Yes.”

“Naw.” Jesse curls forward, hooking his arms around his knees. He hunches. “Naw, that’s bullshit. You’re screwin’ with me.” He rocks back and forth. “You’re screwin’ with me, Hanzo, I don’t appreciate it one bit.”

“What would you appreciate?”

“Maybe not wordin’ it that way?” Jesse barks. “You tryin’a break my heart? Shit, you can’t tell me we’re leavin’ all this behind.”

“We are leaving this pit and we are never looking back.”

“I mean this.” McCree’s arm jerks between them. “This, what just happened between us. You can’t abandon that, Hanzo. That ain’t somethin’ we picked up in Russia.”

He concedes dryly: “Perhaps not.”

“I’m serious, Shimada. It ain’t like you can’t go back to the Watchpoint and just wash it all off.”

Hanzo looks at Jesse with heavy-lidded eyes. “What are you asking of me?”
“Be with me.” Now he’s at Hanzo’s side, big and pressing, breathing on his collarbone. “Hanzo, you liked this. Yeah? You like bein’ with me?”

The anxiety nags at the base of his spine. “I am with you every day.”

“I mean, like we are now.” Jesse’s wild gaze glimmers, earth with embers. His deep voice is raw, almost pained. “Lyin’ here with me. Sleepin’ with me.” He bleats. “Bein’ with me.”

Hanzo winces. He aches. It’s like the life debt all over again. “Yes.”

Jesse practically scrambles. “Then be mine, Hanzo. I’ll be good to you, you know it.”

He huffs. “What if I belong to no one?”

“You can trust me, Hanzo. You trusted me before, didn’t you?”

He thinks, unfortunately, I did.

“Look. Trust me now.”

Hanzo stares hard at the ceiling, as if an answer lies hidden in the paneling. None comes. A black silence drifts between them, cold as heavy metal. Jesse gives up, groans ‘ah, hell,’ settles on his back. Dismal and dejected. Grumbling, finishing his cigarillo, scratching his chest.

One hour to go.

---

The rescue succeeds. Russian Defense Forces storm the inert omnium with tanks and planes; an industrial plow digs the hatch door out of the drift. The team reunites amid snow and cheers. Mei hugs them first, holding back tears.

Mercy checks them over back at Volskaya. The biotic emitters prove to be their saving grace; aside from dehydration and fatigue, agents Hanzo and McCree will go home in one piece. They shower, launder their clothes, redress with coats and scarves, devour a hot meal on the transport. Tracer wastes no time finalizing their deployment back to Gibraltar. They’re in the air a few hours later following an emotional goodbye with Captain Zaryanova: the heroes have saved the day.

The team dozes on the flight back. Hanzo cannot; he has slept too much. The cabin lights jar him awake. He sits in the cockpit with Tracer and listens to the news broadcasts: the return of Overwatch, legendary organization dedicated to protecting the world. Anxiety spins knots in his stomach; he mutters aloud that it’s like he’s stayed up too late and missed an important event. Tracer explains it as daylight deprivation. Mixed with jet lag, it will toss him out of sorts. She used to get it a lot after the Slipstream accident -- nothing hydration and routine can’t cure, she says. A few days of ‘back to normal’ will reset his biological clock.

McCree stirs when Hanzo returns to his seat. Jesse tips back his hat; he’s wearing a borrowed coat over his serape. They exchange glances. Neither of them smile. Around them, their teammates snooze, eyes closed, heads down.

Slowly Jesse looks away. The tension flits in Hanzo’s guts, feather-light, like a finch.

---

They land at the Watchpoint late in the evening. The remaining agents help unload the transport.
Lúcio whoops exuberantly through the hangar, embracing McCree and Tracer before leaping into Reinhardt’s hug with a triumphant cry. Genji greets Hanzo with a clap on his shoulder. Hanzo almost reaches for him, but the knots in his stomach tie him back.

Winston follows Angela to the medbay for her debrief. The rest of the team gravitates to the mess hall. Hanzo physically aches at the familiarity of the base: the sunny colors, the craggy rocks, the bright chatter. Lúcio has made a late supper. Hanzo cannot stand the idea of eating with his innards like this.

“Where’s Eastwood at?” asks the audio-medic. “I made brigadeiros, I know he’s gonna want some.”

Everyone glances around. McCree is not there.

“He said he was going back to his room.” Mei looks up from her phone. She’s been texting Zarya for the past fifteen minutes. “He said he was going to try to get some rest. He looked really worn out.”

“I don’t blame him,” Reinhardt adds. “It’s been a hard few days.”

Hanzo feels eyes on him as he steeps a cup of tea.

---

He climbs the comm tower and waits for Genji. The tea is good; the sky hangs wide and starry above him; the wind is mild on his limbs. Hanzo should try to sleep and reset his clock. Tomorrow there will be debriefings and reviews, countless developments to catch up on and digest. The upcoming week will bring wave after wave of news and media coverage. What has begun will not cease, slow, or suspend. A constant flow. He must be ready; he has survived this far, but there’s more to come. The world has changed.

Hanzo sips his tea. A rock in the stream.

An hour passes. Genji does not show. When Hanzo comms him, he begs off. Recharging for the night, he says. Get some rest! Talk to you tomorrow.

He stares over the sea after the call, eyeing the white strip of shore where the water meets the horizon. The lighthouse beacon spins lazily, butter-yellow, reassuring in the darkness. Have faith.

He climbs down the comm tower, walks to the lab building, wanders out to the walkway facing the ocean. The breeze threads through his scarf. Hanzo looks at the cliffside, studying the jagged contour of the escarpment.

Here is where it happened. Right here, against the dented handrail.

A deep, unfamiliar ache rises in Hanzo’s chest. He grips the rail, momentarily winded. Nauseous.

The archer retreats to the dorms and stares at his spartan room. The neatly-made bunk; the sparse furnishing; the single mat. Storm Bow. His quiver. The orange trunks, the notebooks. Welcome home.

What is he doing here? Why did he stay?

“I don’t know,” he says aloud to his empty quarters, loathing them, hating himself. He repeats it three times. It makes him feel worse. He wants to break something and has nothing to bend.
Twitching in his stomach, the anxiety digs out something unexpected. Dislodging it from the back of his brain, a live-wire fragment: *bless your heart.*

Hanzo leaves. He storms down the hall. McCree’s door is closed. He stares at the panel for a long time.

He knocks. No reply. He presses the buzzer. Silence.

*Trust me.*

Hanzo thumbs the entry button. The door slides open.

There he is: awake in the dark. Lying on his back beneath the sheets, hands folded over his chest. Taking up all the space in his bunk. When the door parts, McCree sits up. He freezes when he sees Hanzo. Four different expression cross his face: surprise, joy, suspicion, suspense. Maybe fear. Maybe longing. All at once.

Jesse says, after a pause: “hey, darlin’.”

“Hello.”

“You alright?”

“Yes.” And then, voice cracking. “No.”

“What's the matter?”

Hanzo hangs at the doorway, brows furrowed, pained. No longer a dragon-lord, just a man.

Jesse leans back. He doesn’t know what to say. Hanzo sees it in his eyes; he’s speechless. No words to describe it. A first time for everything.

Eventually, he smiles. Sweet as sugar and smoke. He opens up, reaches out, wiggles a hand. The bunk creaks. He sounds so *warm.* “C’mer’e.”

The gulf between them closes like a wave receding from the shore.

Hanzo moves. Three steps take him into Jesse’s room. He slides the door shut, where it locks.

---

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughisemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Sylphy, Losebetter, Penna, Entropy, and Fig for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- A note on Hanzo’s prosthetics: I realize the canon has disproved this, but I had already established that Hanzo had some prosthetics in HtF before that reveal. I tweaked it a little and made them slightly more complex, semi-organic, designed to assist his combat style despite having a very grisly origin. Overwatch seems like the kind of universe this could feasibly happen (re: Ana Amari’s eye), so why not?
- References: The *proverb* from the beginning. The *Ramblin’ Wreck.* The *song* McCree whistles. "Stem the rose" belongs to the prose of *E. Annie Proulx.*
- There is a lot of continuity between HtF's Hanzo and the young Hanzo in *Koi No Yokan* by *franklytriggering*. Shouts out to Brian for working with me and linking up the two stories to weave a cool tale.
- (we could almost just end the series here, couldn't we? Leave 'em to be happy... haha... yeah...)
- (that's a joke btw I don't do unhappy endings/endings where the ship doesn't happen)
- More of the 22-man roster to show up next chapter. Namely everyone's favorite Dorito-eater.
- (also yes: 'King Reyes' is a pun)

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](#) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

- Wow! You guys are still here for Chapter 11! I don't even know what to say... every message is like a ray of sunshine. I promise to take a break after this chapter and try to get around to answering more.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 1 hour ago

HEADS UP!!!! BIG NEWS COMING!!!!! Get together, this is AS REAL AS IT GETS!!!!!

334K retweets 480K likes

LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 1 hour ago

Things have been HUSH-HUSH this summer!!!! I’ve been hard @ work!!!!! How many watched the news @ what happened in Russia??

89K retweets 102K likes

LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 1 hour ago

REAL HEROES took the stage. Legends. Fighting for a better world for all of us. THAT’S MY JAM!

103K retweets 121K likes

LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 1 hour ago

So TIME TO BREAK IT DOWN!!!! Without FURTHER ADO…here’s where LÚCIO has been all summer!!!

67K retweets 80K likes

LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 1 hour ago

ARE YOU READY??????? HOPE YOU'RE SITTIN DOWN FOR THIS!!!!!

102K retweets 123K likes
COMING @ U LIVE FROM GIBRALTAR…

LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 1 hour ago

The world needs more heroes and we’re RAISING THE VOLUME!!!!! AGENT LÚCIO!!!! AUDIO MEDIC!!!! #Overwatch #MakeUFeelBetter #GonnaBeHeroes

LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 1 hour ago

Preorder my new album SYNAESTHESIA AUDITIVA and get the single WE’RE GONNA BE HEROES! AMO VOCÊS!! #Overwatch #MakeUFeelBetter #GonnaBeHeroes

---

The post-mission debrief happens on one of the hottest days of the year. A late September heat wave hits Gibraltar the week after Siberia. Silvery mirage lines stripe the tarmacs and tracks outside the briefing room; inside, the ten agents of Overwatch gather around the table beneath whirring fans. Winston wipes sweat from under his glasses as he runs the holoprojector. A diagram depicting a blue pulse rifle spins on the three-dimensional display as neat rows of text scroll down the main viewscreen on the wall.

First order of business: the mysterious correspondent with a cryptic callsign, potentially connected to the rogue attack.

“Soldier: 76.” Angela narrates from a black tablet. “A mercenary. Operating alone, unaffiliated with any known groups. His emails began in late November of last year. Simple communication at first: inquiries about weapon safety, minor injuries, biotic solutions in combat. Gradually these messages turned to interest about my work, specifically with the Valkyrie and Caduceus systems. I ignored these at first. He persisted, nothing threatening -- but the messages started to change in tone. He started sending specifications, insight about the systems that I’d never released to the public. Precise, technical information. It seemed he was trying to tell me he already knew everything about my work. At first I guessed he had to be someone who was once part of Overwatch, specifically the Medical Research division. A former colleague, perhaps. Maybe
someone looking to reach out but stay incognito to avoid groups like Talon.

With a fear of Talon in mind, I confronted Seventy-Six about his reasons for contacting me. That was when he informed me that he was one of my former patients. I asked for clarification: when I had treated him, how, and why. He said there were too many times to name, but then he recalled a specific operation early in my career: a refinery in the Yukon under siege by rogue AI. There was an explosion, and I had activated my suit to protect the mission commander.

When he described it to me, I was astonished. I didn’t think it was possible. There are only two agents still alive today who were part of that mission, and none of them would have known the details that Seventy-Six relayed. The only one who could, aside from myself, well...”

Angela lowers her tablet, adjusts her glasses, brushes her hair from her brow.

“It would have been the commander I saved,” she says softly. “Jack Morrison.”

Reinhardt draws back from the table to swap glances with Tracer and Torbjorn. McCree eyes Hanzo sitting at his right and Genji just beyond. Neither of the brothers react.

Angela goes on. “I was afraid it could be a trap. Anything remotely close to this kind of information would’ve had to have been taken from Overwatch records that were either heavily encrypted or destroyed. Seventy-Six kept writing. Soon there were more hints. Breadcrumbs. Tidbits of things that only Jack might have known.”

“What sort of things?” Reinhardt asks.

“Inside jokes. Locations. Old places the teams used to go, reunions, get-togethers. In every message, he would end with questions. Nothing truly personal or time-sensitive, just how I was doing. Did I feel safe. Was I happy, saving those in need, continuing my work all these years later. Just --”

“Just what?” Torbjorn prompts.

She slowly shakes her head. “He just kept asking if I was okay.”

Hanzo speaks up. “What is the relevance of his inquiries to the rogue attacker and the weapon?”

“Several of his messages described minor injuries sustained while adjusting to the use of a heavy pulse rifle. He inquired if I knew any solutions to reduce strain and muscle tension from kickback.” She clicks her tongue. “He sort-of quipped that he wasn’t a young man anymore and lacked the same grip he once had. I told him I’d need to see the specifications for such a weapon to get a better idea of ergonomic adjustments, so he sent me these.” She gestures to the hologram.

“You have confirmed it is the same gun that was used in Siberia?” asks Hanzo.

“Yes,” Athena chimes overhead. “The model is an unreleased prototype produced by Helix Security Systems. Seventy-Six must have acquired it and the specifications through unsanctioned means.”

“So he stole it,” Genji states.

“Yes.”

Now the archer turns his sharp gaze on Angela. “This ‘Reaper,’ then. Perhaps he is Seventy-Six, posing with an alias. A Talon agent feigning benevolence to monitor your responses, as you
“suspected.”

“That could explain it,” Reinhardt cuts in. “These things that Seventy-Six told you -- you were wise to consider them dangerous. He could have been trying to get you to open up and lower your guard.”

“It is a possibility,” Angela replies. “All messages from Seventy-Six stopped just before the recall.” She looks back to the viewscreen; the final email rolls down. “He said he was heading down to Mexico, intending to investigate illegal arms trading with a gang called Los Muertos. Since then, nothing. I have not reached out to him, out of caution.”

McCree speaks up next. “I guess I don’t get the correlation to Jack. You think this guy’s pretending to be him or somethin’? I mean, if he’s tellin’ you stuff only Jack would know…”

“Well. This is the difficult part.” Angela sets her tablet down. “What I’m about to say to you all is going to sound completely absurd. It isn’t the sort of statement I make lightly at all.”

The agents lean in. Tracer and Winston exchange glances. Angela faces the table with a grim, chilly frown.

“Given what Seventy-Six told me,” she begins, “and the level of detail in his correspondence, I want to consider the possibility that Seventy-Six is Jack Morrison himself.”

Torbjorn bursts out: “how?”

McCree thumps his elbow into the table. “Jack’s dead!”

“I know. It sounds unthinkable. It sounds impossible, given what we know. But I am telling you, the information was too precise. He recounted the Yukon explosion and his injuries to a level only Jack or I could understand. It was like he replayed the scene right before my eyes. Like he never perished.”

“He did perish!” Reinhardt exclaims. “We attended his funeral! I spoke at his eulogy!”

“I know, Reinhardt,” Angela replies tersely. “We were both there. But there are items to consider. Jack went through an elite super-soldier program with the United States military. It helped him survive truly horrific combat situations in the past.” She shakes her head. “My gut instinct tells me there is a chance -- however small -- that he may have survived the blast. The remains found by the recovery team could have been misidentified, mislabeled --”

“It’s still impossible,” Torbjorn interrupts. “There were investigations, reports six, seven, eight manuals high! The United Nations demanded all th’ records!”

“Hell, I saw them,” McCree adds. “Angela, you showed ‘em to me in the medbay after Lijiang. You processed all this, right? You’d be the one to know!”

“A majority of those records were for Gabriel Reyes. His involvement with Blackwatch and all the allegations against them made him a more heavily scrutinized figure. There was a necessity for confirmation of his death.” Her eyes sweeps the room. McCree can tell: she’s on the defensive. “I performed the identification and final examination on his remains. I know Gabriel is dead. I wasn’t afforded that same conviction for Jack.”

“You said there was no autopsy done in Gabe,” McCree says. “I’m guessin’ none was done on Jack either?”
“No. Autopsies were not permitted because of specifications in their experimental program.” And then, softly: “the reports suggested Jack’s remains were insufficient to conduct one, anyway.”

Hanzo interjects. “It is unwise to linger on this possibility. There is less evidence to support Morrison surviving rather than a Talon agent gleaning personal information about him to use against you in hopes of lowering your guard. Perhaps your Morrison documented these events and stored them somewhere, in a place a rogue agent could dig them up.”

Angela pinches between her forefinger and thumb. “If Jack Morrison were the type to keep a journal, I still don’t know if it would have details in it like this.”

Genji adds in. “We have had a suspicion that outside agents could still be monitoring more than just our movements.” He turns towards Winston. “This Reaper attacked the Watchpoint prior to the recall, yes?”

“He did,” Winston answers. “He was trying to download our database of agent data. Names, locations, profiles.”

“Then we must reconsider our security.” Hanzo drums his fingers on the table; McCree can tell he’s trying not to sound irritated. “As I have been advising we do for the past several months.”

“No, I agree,” Winston huffs. “Now’s the time. With funding coming in from Russia, the first thing we need to do is upgrade every security system we have. Lúcio’s been a huge help with the firewalls, but now we can afford some better hardware.”

McCree looks up at the wallscreen; his stomach twists and turns. His thoughts flicker to snow and wind, stinging ice and hoarse breaths. The sound of Mercy’s voice on the comm -- Jack, like a blade slicing his consciousness, tearing his focus from the mission protocol. And then silence. Nothingness. Blacking out to a faceful of permafrost, feeling his lungs deflate, thinking dully to the throb of his heartbeat: what if I die here?

Hanzo’s voice brings him back. “You were running analysis on the Siberian mission and during the attack on the Watchpoint. Is there any way Athena can attempt to match Reaper’s combat profile against agents in the Overwatch database?”

Athena’s white logo spins on the viewscreen. “So far I’ve identified a thirty-two percent match between Reaper’s combat profile and the existing entries. Reaper’s observed biometrics align to Jack Morrison in height, but not in build or body mass. The data does not correlate to the last profile uploaded before Morrison’s death. So far it does not imply a connection.” Her logo halts, flashes. “However, there is another place to look. Since its foundation, the database for Blackwatch agent information has featured a secondary level of encryption. A complex series of code barriers designed to safeguard sensitive personnel records.”

McCree scratches his beard. “Yeah. I heard that before. Reyes set it up to keep our identities safe.”

“Reaper’s attack on the Watchpoint damaged some of my drives. I’ve had difficulty parsing advanced encryption ever since then, even with diagnostic repair. With updated drives, I could attempt to conduct a similar analysis on combat profiles in the Blackwatch database.”

“How long would it take?” Winston asks. “I know we’ve got you running a bunch of other stuff in the foreground, I don’t wanna wear you out.”

“If I conduct the analysis as a low-priority task, it will take approximately forty-eight days.”

Murmurs of disappointment go up around the room.
“That’s a long-ass time,” McCree drawls. “We’re bound to take on Talon by then, if not run into Reaper himself.”

“If he *somehow* survived the dragons,” Genji says, throwing Hanzo a knowing look.

Mei-Ling pipes up. “Honestly, it feels like someone’s trying to use the legacy of our former leaders to shake us up. Really conveniently around the time Overwatch returns to the public eye. Maybe to distract us? To throw us off our game?”

“She’s right, you know.” Lúcio shrugs. “News outlets are watching us pretty close. We’re all over social media. Even with public support, you know they’re gonna be asking questions about how things went down before. Instability is the last thing they wanna see.”

“We cannot just push this aside,” Angela insists. “We deserve to know what’s going on here. If Seventy-Six is actually Jack --”

Reinhardt speaks in a voice heavy as iron. “Hanzo is right. All doubts aside: if it were actually him, don’t you think he would be here with us now? In this room, aiding us?” He looks around; McCree almost winces at the sadness in his expression. “Jack Morrison would not give up on Overwatch. He would not fire upon his comrades on the battlefield.”

“This organization meant everything to him,” Torbjorn laments. “Can’t imagine a world where Jack’s alive and not at the forefront o’ things. He’d be on our side the minute news of our return hit the press.”

Angela takes off her glasses, folds the temples, places them beside her tablet. She rubs her brow. McCree shoots her a sympathetic look; she flashes a weak smile in return.

Winston taps the holoprojector. The blue rifle vanishes.

“Our first response is to continue beefing up security across the Watchpoint,” he says. “Digital, external, across the board. We nearly exhausted our resources during the lockdown before Russia, but with funding we’re at least back in the green. Lúcio’s also been generous enough to donate some of his record sales, so we’ve got enough to upgrade our systems in preparation for the results of the UN hearing.” Winston taps his keypad. “Which leads me to our next topic. Currently we’re all under threat of imminent indictment via Interpol. The governor of Gibraltar assured me that none of us will be extradited, but we can’t leave the territory until the UN hearing is finished.”

“How long until then?” Tracer asks.

“Two weeks.”

“What about the people who need us?” Lúcio asks. “I mean, you’ve seen all the messages. The world’s calling out for us. Are we gonna to just tell ‘em to wait for two weeks?”

Winston scratches his ear. “Unless you all wanna go to prison, we don’t really have much of a choice.”

---

The meeting toils for another hour. Winston covers the RDF’s successful take-down of the omnium and the outpouring of tributes in honor of the four Syvatogor pilots lost in the mission. Captain Zaryanova has pledged to consider joining Overwatch if the RDF permits her the time. Athena plays an inspiring clip from the wife of one soldier: a fierce red-headed woman who passionately expresses her gratitude for ensuring her husband’s life was not lost in vain but glory,
defending their home in the most triumphant moment in the motherland’s history. Mei-Ling covers her mouth and softly coos: “aw, Rooster.”

The presence of Agent Symmetra raises an issue. Pending suspension of the PETRAS act, the Vishkar Corporation intends to install Satya Vaswani as permanent liaison between Overwatch and their group. Hanzo objects; Lúcio and Torbjorn side with him. Winston, Athena, and Mercy debate her potential for genuine assistance so long as she’s heavily monitored. The team agrees to hold off on a decision regarding Vaswani until the emergency hearing delivers a verdict. Hanzo more or less accepts that she’s been given temporary lodging on base. McCree knows the exact reason for his indifference: the archer adheres to the strategy of keeping allies close and enemies closer. Cuidado. Satya ought to watch out.

Two weeks until the decision. Winston insists that everyone rest, recover, and stick together. No simulations, no off-base excursions. He’ll be occupied with UN hearing interviews, media reports and system upgrades in the meantime. Lúcio and Tracer volunteer with communications; Torbjorn requests help from Reinhardt, Genji and Mei-Ling to finish turret upgrades. Hanzo receives the task of Watchpoint patrols to take down news drones and ensure the entrances remain clear. He recruits McCree’s assistance with a nudge and a nod.


Hanzo moves to his side after finishing a conversation with Genji. McCree perks, looks down, softens at his presence. Stocky shoulders, stiff brow, strong jaw. The ephemeral hint of soap. Sweetheart.

“Hey,” murmurs McCree. “Still want me on patrol duty?”

“Yes.” Hanzo sniffs. “We take the truck route first. My brother says the drones are numerous. Scatter Arrows can settle them faster than shurikens or bullets.”

“Yup. I’ll go ahead and drive if you wanna do the honor of shootin’ em down.”

“Fine by me.” The archer rubs his upper lip and strides for the hangar. “Provided you handle the vehicle a little more gently than before.”

McCree grins, tagging after. The prospect of a morning with Hanzo after such a good night puts him at ease. “Sure thing.”

Another sniff. “Thank you.”

McCree raises a brow. “You alright?”

Hanzo clears his throat. “Yes.”

“Sounds like you got a runny nose.”

“A trifle.” Hanzo hikes up his quiver strap. “The air conditioner was running hard in the briefing room.”

“You sure you ain’t catchin’ cold? After the blizzard, the station, comin’ back here, with the hot weather --”
“It is a myth that colds occur from jumping between extreme climes. The real infection occurs when exposed to groups of people carrying germs.” Hanzo looks around the hangar. “Where is the other truck?”

“Down here.” McCree points into the second loading bay. “If you’ve got the sniffles, medbay’s got immune boosters that’ll knock it out quick. Now’s the time to treat it, while we’re stuck with all this downtime.”

“I am not getting sick,” Hanzo replies in the nasal rasp of someone who is gradually getting sick.

“Whatever you say, darlin’.” Jesse gets in, adjusts the seat, thumps his fist into the panel. A bobblehead omnic in a lei and hula skirt wobbles on the dash. “Dang. This truck doesn’t have a radio in it.”

Hanzo climbs in and shuts the passenger door. He wipes his nose with a scrap of cloth from his belt pouch. “A pity. We shall have to listen to something other than country music.”

“You got your phone?”

“Of course.”

“Slide ‘er on the dash. I’ll listen to somethin’ you like, for a change.”

Hanzo lets out a soft hm. “Perhaps you could also refrain from smoking.”

“Wasn’t gonna, sweetheart. Don’t wanna bother your lovely nose.”

“Thank you.”

Jesse laughs. “Reckon that might be the most ‘thank yous’ I’ve heard outta you in one day.”

Hanzo puffs. He shakes his head, hooks up his handset, mumbles under his breath in a tone Jesse thinks could be begrudgingly fond.

They cruise around the Watchpoint to one of Hanzo’s classical playlists. Once they clear the main tunnel, Hanzo spots a cluster of media drones edging around a rocky outcropping. He rolls down the window and takes them out with a well-aimed Scatter Arrow.

“Good shot,” Jesse applauds. “That oughtta take care of that gaggle.”

“For now.” Hanzo slides back into his seat as the track turns to Mozart. “More will come. Genji is concerned about the kind that might carry explosives. Assassins in the Shimada-gumi have utilized them in the past.”

“Your think they got enough goons left to come after you? Now that your name’s back in the news?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Hanzo dabs his reddening nose. “Maybe we ought to be prepared, either way.”

“Well, I ain’t scared,” Jesse says, tossing his head. “Bounty hunters been chasin’ me for nearly six years now. I can’t imagine the yakuza’s got tricks I haven’t seen before.”

“I assure you they have a few.”

“A gang’s a gang’s a gang. You seen how one works, you seen ‘em all.”
“No. The Shimada-gumi employed some of the world’s most talented killers.” He pops the shaft on his next arrow; the head gleams cerulean blue. “Though I concede, given what you’ve told me of Deadlock, there is some overlap in how we all conducted business.”

McCree drives slower so Hanzo can aim for another cloud of drones. He watches the archer curl through the window, all sinew and poise, drawing back his powerful arm to take the shot. Jesse relishes a live-wire crackle at the base of his spine. “The only assassin I’d ever watch out for is you and your pointy ends, darlin’.”

Hanzo shoots the gunslinger a smirk over the spirals of his tattoo: you had better.

They take the truck up on a cliffside trail. No drones, no signs of intruders. Hanzo points out a family of fat quails sunning themselves by the road.

“What do you think of Mercy’s assumption about the mercenary?” he asks later, still sniffing.

“That he’s Jack Morrison back from the dead?” McCree clicks his tongue. “Well, to be honest, the fact that she’s even considerin’ that possibility tells me that somethin’ just ain’t right. There’s somethin’ more we just don’t know.”

Hanzo murmurs, wary. “I am inclined to be suspicious. She withheld this information until now. There may be more she is withholding. You have said it before: she guards herself closely and uses her work as pretext.”

McCree gnaws on his tongue. The topic makes him want a cigarillo, something to chew or smoke to ease his nerves. “She’s been that way all the years I’ve known her. ‘Patient confidentiality’ and all that jazz. She’s real serious about that, even if I don’t like it. But when you get down to brass tacks, Angela’s committed to humanitarian work. I still think she ain’t got a bad bone in her body. Makes her an easy target, I guess, for someone with darker intentions, but her life work is savin’ others. That’s how she’s been since she first joined.”

Hanzo bounces as the truck cruises over a speed bump. “My brother says the same. I thought at first he defended her with bias, but” -- he ducks away to sneeze -- “you have both known her longer than I.”

“Bless you.” McCree brakes as they round a curve. “Yeah, it’s a weird situation. Guess we’ll dig up more dirt on this Seventy-Six when Athena’s systems finish upgrading, or Winston’ll figure out a way to do it before then. I just hope that Reaper guy is dead. Would rather like to never run into anything like that again.”

Hanzo wipes his nose and says: “you are welcome.”

---

They take down three more packs before finishing the patrol circuit. The playlist shuffles through a placid roll of Smetana’s The Moldau.

McCree stares out over the road and remembers the Siberian snow, the cold in his chest, the pain, the fall. A bullet between his ribs, Ana’s hand on his own (was it real? was she holding it? did he imagine more than the truth?). Shit for timing. Fog over the Bay, a seagull eating a man’s lip. Red Blackwatch transports and canyons filled with the dead. Crows on gallows. A skull in the sand. Crimson fields of hell, stretching far as his dead-eye can see.

And then the station, the hovel, the place where he suffered in sweetness. Hanzo’s hand on his brow, affectionate and soft. The first kiss on the station floor: dreamy, feather-light, a test. The
second kiss, which burned; the rest, which took him deeper, further into flames that the cold
couldn’t reach. Flames which licked and burned, bobbed and writhed, swallowed him whole. He
remembers agony (“this will end”), bitter protest (“we’re heading home”), sour loathing and
despair. Only Hanzo could be so gentle while ruthlessly scraping out his heart.

And only Hanzo could wander to his dorm, hangdog, silhouette like a cobalt slash against golden
hallway lights. Jesse thinks about how the click of the door lock squeezed his heart into his throat,
like gunfire or the snap of a summer firework. How Hanzo crossed the room, climbed into his
arms, kissed him over and over, apologized without speaking. The closeness, the intimacy, the
sudden overwhelming fatigue. Too tired for sex, worn out by desire past the point of
exhaustion. Speechless, Jesse drifted off with Hanzo crooked against him, still as a snake. None of
their clumsy come-togethers rivaled falling asleep slotted in each other’s arms.

He held Hanzo. Finally. Not the other way around.

Jesse’s stomach rolls with warmth. He reaches across the seat; he finds Hanzo’s hand, slack and
open; he laces their fingers, squeezes. Hanzo’s fingers fold into his knuckles. An unexpected
tenderness: he caresses Jesse’s palm with the pad of his thumb.

The truck descends for the entrance through a winding dirt trail. Hanzo watches out the window.
McCree keeps his eyes on the road. The playlist shuffles to Liszt.

---

By the end of their night patrol, Hanzo runs a low-grade fever with a headache. He eschews range
practice, slinks to McCree’s room, buries under the covers he neatly made that morning. McCree
brings dinner from the mess hall: shrimp stir fry and toppings, rice, a bowl of bamboo shoot soup
and a bigger mug of hōjicha. He watches Hanzo descend towards the food like an animal lured
from its cave.

Here he is: pale and puffy-eyed, slow-moving and silent, wrapped in Jesse’s red serape. Tentative
but docile, slithering into a new environment with less wariness than before. They sit on the rug to
eat; Hanzo plucks up a ball of rice, devours one half, and then adds to the other portion an
enormous lump of wasabi. Jesse guffaws at the way his cheeks contort after the first chew.

“Hot damn,” he says, thumping his fist against his sternum. “Looked like you were gonna breathe
fire straight out your nose.”

“That is the point. It clears your sinuses.” Hanzo coughs, eyes watering, brow wrinkling. Then he
pinches another clump with his chopsticks and offers it to McCree. “Try.”

“Naw.”

“Tch-ah. With as much hot sauce as you put on your food?”

“That’s a different kind of burn than this, sweetheart.” Jesse stares at the tea-green lump. “Can’t
you cut in half?”

Hanzo thrusts his chopsticks. “Perhaps you are chicken.”

Jesse clucks. “Like hell I am. God-damn. Give that here.” He takes the wasabi with a final wary
glance. White-hot pain streaks across his mouth when it hits his tongue. Jesse swallows, sputters,
hiccups. He mashes his metal hand to his nose, yowling. Hanzo covers his mouth to stifle a laugh.

“Nothin’ to it,” Jesse wheezes afterward, rheumy-eyed, catching his breath. “Hardly a sting.”
Hanzo crawls back into the bunk after the meal, head hurting and fever spiking. Jesse moves quietly around the room, cleaning up, making mental notes. Fumbling through chores: taking out the trash, washing out the bathroom, sweeping the rest of the dorm. Tidying up a bit, knocking off the dust. An electric thrill crackles in his chest. Hanzo might be hanging out here more often. All the more incentive to keep the room a little neater.

He’s hauling laundry to the auto-washer when he runs into Satya.

“Agent McCree,” she says, crisp and unsmiling, toting a plastic basket of neatly-folded clothes. She shifts the basket to her hip, rocks her weight back on her heels, stares him down.

“Howdy,” he growls briskly. Sullenly he wonders why he bothers to greet her at all. What’s the point in being polite? Here stands the enemy: tense, motionless, clutching her possessions. Her pretty visage offers no warmth, no kindness. She’s glancing warily at Peacekeeper gleaming in its holster. McCree expects her to make a snide comment about the gun any second now -- a rude remark, a thoughtless mockery. Typical Vishkar. Probably thinks he’s scum.

She takes a step back. Her gold eyes flick over his face. McCree pauses, purses his lips, realizes something.

Satya is not mocking him. It's the opposite: she’s afraid.

“‘scuse me,” he offers, gesturing to the auto-washer. He moves aside, gives her space, bobs his head. Less threatening. “Just gonna wash these. Don’t mean to interrupt.”

“I was leaving.” Satya squares her shoulders. A second realization: she’s as tall as Hanzo.

“Well.” Jesse opens the auto-washer. “Have a good night.”

Satya turns away. His eyes are drawn into the basket; on top of the other clothes sits a bright blue garment trimmed with black mesh and gold. Such lustrous, sleek fabric. Nothing like the others with their archi-tech hues: white, violet, and beige. Is it a tunic? A dress?

“Have a good night,” she repeats mechanically before disappearing down the hall, leaving him with the third and final realization. That’s not a left-arm glove, but a whole prosthetic.

---

Two weeks drag by. Everyone works overtime on ramping up Watchpoint security. All sorts of people want in; McCree admires the lengths the team goes through to keep them out. Winston, Lena, Angela and Satya attend six UN hearing interviews via teleconference: two a day, four hours per meeting, each one more grueling and exhausting than the last. Tracer remarks wearily at dinner (which Satya never attends) that the archi-tech is tireless, indomitable in debate. Furthermore, she has difficulty discerning tone when speaking with the representatives assigned to their case. She always shows up for the next call ready to argue her point until her opponent backs down in concession or flat-out defeat.

After some prodding, Genji convinces his brother to take an immune booster. It knocks the cold out within the span of an afternoon. Jesse prepares for Hanzo to resume sleeping in his own dorm, assures himself it was inevitable, frets despite his assurance. His worries go unfounded. Hanzo returns to his room that night and the next. And then during the day. And then: as he likes. A comfortable rhythm of coming and going when he pleases.

Pleasing. The way Hanzo sometimes reaches for him without hint or warning, pulls himself close, welcomes his embrace. The way they wind together at night, Hanzo languidly stroking him, biting
into his gasps with pointed, fierce kisses. How Hanzo hooks around his body, unwrap from the sheets, firmly places a palm on his chest, draws out raw, inelegant sounds that he eagerly stifles and consumes. Encouraging and scolding, as if he likes and disdains them at the same time.

“Loud,” he grits out into Jesse’s ear while he fists them in union, jerky but diligent, thumping in the bunk through a reprise of the firecracker moment on the station floor. “You - are - so - loud.”

No shit, Jesse thinks, shuddering through the sweat. Who wouldn’t be: crumbling to pieces in the silky, hot grasp of a man who can shoot you between the eyes just as smartly as he gets you off?

---

The day before the verdict, Zenyatta informs Lúcio that a stray cat has had a litter in one of the storage bays. They find the audio-medic in the hangar with four patchy kittens scrambling in-and-out of his hoodie. McCree likens the audio-medic's glee to discovering a hidden goldmine.

“This is the best day of my life,” Lúcio cries as a fuzzy black-and-orange head peeks up from his collar. He sniffs, hiccup, mimics tears. “This is a gift.” He holds out his phone. “Eastwood, get a pic, man. I gotta tweet this.”

McCree snaps a photo of Lúcio fake-sobbing against a storage crate while crawling with kittens. They relocate the cats to a sheltered box on a safer, covered walkway by the comm tower. The turret team stops by to investigate; Mei-Ling and Reinhardt are instantly charmed.

“Hold on.” McCree remembers Lúcio’s phone, digs out his own handset, thumbs the camera feature. “Here, y’all hold still.”

Hanzo glances up; Genji is attempting to deposit a kitten in his hands. “What are you doing?”

“Takin’ a picture.”

He saves the photo as his lockscreen: Reinhardt beaming, Lúcio posing, Torbjorn so short that he’s nearly out of the shot. Mei-Ling cupping a cat to her cheek, Genji flashing a peace sign. A calico kitten scaling Hanzo’s clothed shoulder, stubby tail wiggle, claws swatting for his scarf. Zenyatta spectating in the background, orbs spinning, faceplate gleaming.

He looks at it while the archer dozes beside him for the fourteenth (fifteenth? sixteenth? he’s lost count) night in a row. Smiling as he traces the line of Hanzo’s scowl in the picture. Sweetheart.

---

Good fortune arrives with the cats. The hearing concludes with promising news: after unprecedented worldwide response, the United Nations issues a six-month suspension and formal review of the PETRAS act. The fledgling renewal of Overwatch is granted temporary permission to assemble, train, and conduct a pre-approved quantity of missions and outreach per twelve-week period. Agents with outstanding records, warrants, and bounties will retain them until the review is finished; at that time, they may be revoked or reconsidered. They are allowed to recruit no more than two individual agents every four months. A three-hundred page dossier details the restrictions now imposed on their armaments, property, and funding; a sixty-two page contract dictates how closely their activity will be monitored by the UN, Interpol, and local Gibraltar law enforcement. Satya formally thanks the representative after he delivers the verdict. She shuts off the transmission, wincing when Winston and Tracer burst into cheers. Soon the announcement rings out over the comms.

The new era of Overwatch has officially begun.
Two things keep Hanzo from taking joy from the news: Satya’s official designation as Vishkar liaison to Overwatch, and the untimely demise of his hot plate. He spends twenty minutes toiling over the casing with a screwdriver until Jesse convinces him to scrap it. They’ll be getting paychecks soon; Hanzo can buy something new to heat his tea.

“Y’know,” Jesse muses, lying in the bunk, scratching his bare chest, watching the archer groom through his nightly routine. “I’m still real ticked ‘bout that archi-tech being here on the regular, but I’d bet money she’s sour about it too.”

“Who cares how she feels.”

“I ain’t sayin’ I do. But it makes me wonder how it’ll be around here. If we hate her and she hates us, how’s it gonna work? Winston’s gotta have an end-game to getting her outta here and kickin’ Vishkar to the curb.”

Hanzo brushes his hair in the cracked full-length mirror. “Another reason we should have never taken this course of action in the first place.”

“She’s a weird bird, that’s for sure. One minute you think you got her figured out: skulkin’ around and stayin’ outta sight, avoiding everyone after work. And then, the next thing you know, it’s like she’s all up in your business. Asking you stuff. Talking to you outta nowhere. Lil’ awkward, but kinda harmless. Then the next minute, it’s like she’s scared of her own shadow. Doesn’t wanna touch you with a ten-foot pole.”

“Cowardice,” Hanzo hums, smoothing back the soft fans at his sideburns. Flicking his fingertips over his brows and beard. Preening before he sleeps, like a lord. “She is wise to be mindful. I do not want her getting comfortable here.”

“I guess she ain’t got a family. No partner, no kids. Doesn’t really seem to have anybody. Never see her talking on a comm or a phone. Hell, I don’t think I’ve ever seen her eat. She must hide out in her room for that.”

Hanzo taps the brush bristles against his palm. “I have noticed all these things. I did not know you were observing her as well.”

Jesse snorts. “I ain’t as good at readin’ people as you are, darlin’, but I can pick up a few things.”

“You picked up on the news that we have already lined up a potential new agent,” Hanzo says, changing the subject, setting down the brush, turning off the light.

“Huh?” The bunk creaks as the archer climbs in. Jesse shifts; a peal of excitement blooms across his chest. The thrill of Hanzo sliding into bed beside him still feels delightfully new. “Naw, sure didn’t. Where’d you hear that?”

“It is a volunteer. A young soldier with the South Korean military. Genji overheard Winston and Tracer arranging talks after they contacted Lúcio through social media.”

“Really, huh? A soldier?”

“Reported to be one of their best.” Faintly derisive: “another up-and-coming hero for you all.”

“Well, good for us.” Jesse sinks down. “Seems kinda fast, though, y’know? Guess with all the restrictions the UN slapped on us, we’re gonna be makin’ up for lost time.”
“Perhaps.” Hanzo rolls against him. Beneath the sheets he’s smooth and flawless, all muscle and cool skin. He snakes a hand across his belly, lingering, stroking the hair on his chest.

Jesse shivers. “Careful, there, honey, I’m --”

“Ticklish. I know.” Hanzo noses close, nuzzles his shoulder, breathes warm on his neck. He coils close and whispers in voice that streaks fire up his spine: “I picked up a few things about you.”

“Yeah?” Jesse mutters into Hanzo’s sable crown. The sudden intimacy dizzies him, spins his thoughts, catches him completely off-guard. He craves more, covets it. Anxious to lap up every syllable toned in that rich, regal voice. “Like what?”

“An assassin does not part with such details so easily.”

“Aa-h, Han-zo, you’re a big ol’ tease.” Jesse wheedles. “Gimme just one.”

“You snore.”

“Hell, I know that. Been snorin’ to wake the dead since I was a pup, is what my mama used to say.” Calmly combing his chest, Hanzo says: “I wonder what else your mother used to say about you.”

“Hey, me too. She’s long gone, as far as I know.” Hanzo stills his hand. “Long gone?”

“Yeah. I dunno if she’s alive or dead.” He feels Hanzo shift against him in surprise. “That’s gang life, honey. When you join up with Deadlock, you leave everything else behind.”

A soft hum. “I see.”

“I figure she might be alive, but I don’t know. I try not to think about it. That was a long time ago, and I ain’t part of that world anymore.”

“This was the parent that taught you Spanish.”

“Yup. Her name was Sara. Dunno who my daddy was, so I’d make up names for him.” Hanzo shifts again; Jesse laughs a low rumble in his chest. “Used to call him ‘Hogan,’ like a fellow outta one of the Westerns, ‘cause, y’know -- ‘Hogan and Sara.’” He doubts Hanzo will get the joke. “Though a couple o’ times, I used ‘Butch,’ like Butch Cassidy. Or ‘Shane.’ That was a good one. Made me think he might actually be worth a damn.” McCree yawns and scratches his armpit. “At the end of the day, though, it didn’t matter. Everyone in-and-outta Deadlock knew they were fake. Only the folks at Overwatch fell for all the tall tales I used to tell, and only for so long.”

Hanzo lies motionless beside him. Completely silent, breathing in and out. Likely snoozing. That’s how you put the beauty to sleep, he thinks, leaving a kiss on Hanzo’s brow.

Hanzo rolls over. He faces away, bobs his shoulders, sighs softly. Black hair trailing across the pillow, like swipes of ink.

“Goro,” he says after a long, clotted silence. “My father was named Goro. My mother was named Akane. Both of them are dead.”

---

October begins hot. The environmental systems in Range 1 break down one morning during a new
training combat simulation. The team attempts to complete the objective (which focuses on neutralizing Talon agents) but gives up when the temperature climbs too high. Mei-Ling helps fix the heat exchanger, complaining to Winston that she hopes they never run into Reaper in the middle of the desert.

At first, Hanzo coordinates his numerous visits to McCree’s room as if to avoid being seen. He shuts the door immediately after he arrives and pauses to confirm silence in the hallway before he departs. *Pointless*, Jesse thinks. He catches enough suggestive glances from Lúcio, Lena, and Mei to guess they’ve spotted Hanzo either coming or going. The team will inevitably find out; he accepts it; at times, he subtly hastens it. The dorm walls are not soundproof. In the Range 1 locker room after simulation practice, when he takes off his chestplate and shirt, he can’t hide the swollen nail-tracks on his shoulders. Much less the marks blooming purple below his tawny throat.

“Wow,” Genji remarks wryly, noticing the bruises as he’s breezing past. He tilts his visor. “Those new assassin AI are pretty tough.”

“Got me real good.” McCree grins good-naturedly, toweling off his hair. Wagging his brows, leaning in, muttering so the nearby elder Shimada brother cannot hear. “You should see the other guy.”

---

Reinhardt’s armorer Brigitte arrives in her van at the Watchpoint from Stuttgart. She aggressively honks the horn as she steers through the front gates; a barricade of reporters and journalists gather there, hoping for a glimpse of the world’s new heroes. Reinhardt greets her with a roar and a crushing hug; merrily she scolds him for losing one of his hammers before assuring him she’s brought a replacement.

One afternoon, Genji takes a few hours off from turret duty to train with Hanzo on the cliffs. McCree idles around the labs, bored and itching to socialize.

“Man, if you think the news drones and the reporters are bad, you should see Athena’s primary inbox,” Lúcio snorts. He’s writing new tracks with his glow-touch soundboard, feet propped on the console. An orange-and-white kitten lounges in his lap. “We get, like, five-hundred stupid emails a day. Mostly from trolls or scammers. It's wild.”

Winston pops up from behind his workbench. “Hey, show Jesse the one we got yesterday. The Jawa kings.”

Lúcio cackles. “Aw, yeah, this one was great. Hold up.” He taps the luminescent circular buttons on his soundboard in rapid-fire clicks; the monitor flashes an email composed in huge font, littered with typos.

Greetings from Kings Frank and Bruce Jayakarta of the beatiful and noble kingdom of Jawa. I am contacting you on beehalf of the royal family of Jakakarta of Jawa. We are actual kings (not fake). My people are in grave danger under the threat of a recently reactivated omnium very similiar to the one in Siberria that your brave heros organization defeated so bravely in the north. I beseech you Overwatch: come to the beautiful yisland of Jawa and behold the beauty of our Princely Nation. Or you can deposit a percentage compensation towards our protection fund against Omknic Forces
(currently we have $225k AUS - PLEASE NO EUROS!!!!!!! AUS DOLLARS ONLY!!!!!!!!) and we will re-imburse you 30% once we have defeated the omnium and reclaimed our national treasure. This project is not risky. Thank you for your consideration Overwatch.

Best Regards,

Kings Frank and Bruce Jayakerta

Jesse squints in disbelief. “The kingdom of Jawa?”

“Yeah, we think that’s a typo,” Winston says. “It’s like they were trying to say ‘Jakarta’ and fat-fingered it. Either way, I feel bad for anyone who goes looking for the national treasure of Jawa.”

Lúcio stifles seizing laughter. “Ahh, man. Hold on.” He wipes the corners of his eyes. “I can’t get over this one, like, the kingdom of Jawa, like the little trash dudes from Star Wars” -- he crackles into his fist, a loud snrrrk -- “ah. Hoo. I dunno why that makes me laugh so much.”

“Do y’all ever figure out who sends ‘em?” Jesse asks, re-reading the email.

“Nah, man,” Lúcio sighs, recovering. “It’s just scammers, y’know? No idea where they’re from. This one was so good, though, I had to do a traceroute. It’s from somewhere outside of Sydney. There’s a fake name on the email account, and below that it looks registered to a user named” -- he pulls up a terminal window -- “Ratpig-underscore-69-underscore-420.” He leans back in his chair, scratching the sleeping kitten between the ears. “Whoever Ratpig-69-420 is, they made my day. Hi-larious.”

Satya strides in, all business. Lúcio tenses as she enters. Winston greets her with a ‘hello’ that McCree thinks could almost be warm. She eyes him suspiciously, just like in the laundry room. “Is there an issue?”

“It’s fine, Satya,” Winston pipes up. “McCree’s got clearance to be here.”

Her gaze drifts to the kitten in Lúcio’s lap. She startles. “Why is there a cat?”

“You got a problem with cats?”

“Why is there a cat in here.”

“I know you aren’t about to come in here and start problems with me and Chuchu,” Lúcio shoots back. Satya frowns in confusion; he points at the napping kitten. “This is Chuchu. Do not start trouble with me about Chuchu.”

“A laboratory is no place for animals. This base is no place for pets.”

Lúcio scoffs. “Push off, Vaswani.” He thumbs the neon-bright buttons on his soundboard.

She stiffens, incensed. “Excuse you.”

“Do not mess with my cats.”

“That’s enough, Lúcio,” Winston mutters, cautionary. “Satya, when you’re free, I could use your help.”

McCree leaves to smoke on the walkway. He spots Zenyatta meditating on the comm tower, facing the sea, serene as a cloud. Not a trouble in the world. Genji has nothing but praise for his mentor
and his many pearls of wisdom; his brother, on the other hand, cannot stand him in the slightest. Hanzo speaks of the omnic like he regularly dispenses the plague.

*Like snipers and cowboys,* he thinks, tapping ash off his cigarillo. Not everyone gets along at first.

---

In the evening, they open the window slats in hopes of catching a coastal breeze. McCree wakes throughout the night to pinched nerves and fits of sweating. Hanzo contests his space; the bunk is cramped and warm. Eventually they will have to do something about it. He can’t sleep like this forever, even if he desires to keep the archer close.

The topic of love-making hovers between them unaddressed, much like the bunk, the shared space, the tenuous thing they now share. Hanzo seems content with sudden take-downs and subduing; they’re both unabashedly greedy for each other’s hands and mouths. But all suggestions of going beyond that earn him nothing but curious looks and gentle refusal. Hanzo is never rude and Jesse never persists. It’s like he’s waiting for something -- the right time, maybe, or the right mood.

*Maybe he’s a virgin,* he thinks one morning with a hot, modest thrill. And then, self-chiding: what idiot beds around with Hanzo Shimada and walks away with marks like that and thinks any facet of him could be described as ‘virgin?’

A matter of preferences, then. Nothing Jesse can’t handle. Just so long as Hanzo doesn’t screw with him, they’ll figure out what goes where.

---

Hana Song arrives six days after Winston formally announces her recruitment. The nineteen-year-old Korean gaming superstar-turned-soldier has an entourage of suited bodyguards that disembark with her from a shiny black helicopter. The wind ruffles her blue sundress; she wears black combat boots over a pair of pink leggings printed with rabbits. Lúcio, Hanzo, and McCree meet her by the launchpad. She introduces herself, shakes their hands, flashes a cheeky smile. Lúcio receives a hug. They’ve been chatting over social media for the past month.

“So you guys are part of my team,” she chirps, surveying the line, pushing her big white sunglasses up over her bangs. “I dig it.” She stops on Hanzo, eyes widening, concentrating on his tattoo. “Wooow. I really like your ink. How long did it take to get that done?”

Hanzo stares at her in silence; Jesse can tell he’s surprised, but he hasn’t figured out why.


“None taken, Hana.” The audio-medic bounces excitedly in his sneakers. “Hana, this is Mister Shimada. Agent Hanzo. And this’s Eastwood. Agent McCree.”

Hana switches to McCree, tittering bird-like. “Oh my God. No way. Is your name really ‘Eastwood?’”


Hana bursts out laughing. “Oh my Go-o-od. He is an actual cowboy! You weren’t kidding!”

Jesse glances at Lúcio, who doubles over wheezing, amused. “What the hell’s that supposed to
“mean?”

“Nothing.” Hana waves before the audio-medic can answer; her fingernails are glossed candy-pink. “I just didn’t believe him. Now I do. Wow. Okay, anyway.” She adjusts the strap of her dress, looks over her shoulder, waves to her bodyguards. She shouts a curt exchange with them in Korean; Jesse recognizes the words ‘MEKA’, ‘bunny,’ and ‘all my stuff.’ Beside him, Hanzo leans back. Slightly overwhelmed.

“Okay, they said they’re gonna be flying my baby in soon,” she says, turning back. “That’s what I call my MEKA, it’s like my baby.” She tilts her head. “Winston said I get a dorm, is it near here? I got a lot of stuff bring in.” Hana puffs, scanning the high hangar walls. “God, this is really cool. It feels like summer for real here. It’s so hot!” Then, before any of them can answer: “and can I see the training rooms? I need to see how much trouble it’s gonna be to get my baby in and out of there, it requires a few more meters of clearance --”

McCree holds up his mechanical hand. “Whoa, there. One thing at a time, ma’am.”

Hana peeps. “He called me ‘ma’am!’” She beams at Jesse, plucky, faux-prim. “Do you have a horse? Is it named ‘Silver?’” And then, eyeing Peacekeeper in its holster and brightening: “hey, lemme see your gun!”

“Hold up.” Jesse pulls back. “Don’t you be grabbin’ for nobody’s weapon, now, that’s dangerous. Not to mention it ain’t very polite.”

“Psh.” Hana rolls her eyes. “You know I know how to shoot a gun, right? Guns way bigger than that.”

Hanzo steps in, gesturing. “Let us take you to your accommodations, Miss Song.” He sounds gentler than Jesse expects.

“Oooo-kay.” Hana bids her entourage farewell. She sashays after Hanzo, shooting McCree a sly look. Whistling over her shoulder the opening bars to the theme from The Good, the Bad and the Ugly.

McCree rolls his eyes. “Real cute.”

Just like Lúcio made him feel in China: a little foolish.

---

Agent D.Va enters the system under the ID number 3945_85. She incessantly asks questions throughout the process: how are ID numbers assigned? Who was ‘agent 01?’ Can she be reassigned to that number someday if she wins enough battles? How does Athena figure out her combat profile, and how did she get such a nice voice? Is she Greek? Does she have streaming capabilities? Important: does the base have fiber internet? When’s lunch? What’s for dinner? Can any of her teammates speak Korean? When does she get to meet the pretty angel, the big knight, and the cool cyborg ninja?

“Boy, she’s a pepper,” McCree huffs during target practice with Hanzo at Range 2. “Got a mouth a mile wide and a hundred miles per hour fast.”

Hanzo lines up a shot. “Finally, you have some competition.”

“She’s already talkin’ about doin’ some kinda video game tournament. Lena and Lúcio just about lost their minds.”
“She will adjust to the team after a few simulation runs. With our tactics switching to strikes against Talon operatives, she will need to commit total focus.”

Jesse takes out two training ‘bots with three bullets apiece. “Don’t quite know how I feel about sending a nineteen-year-old up against Talon.”

The archer lowers his bow. “Were you not close to her age when you joined Blackwatch? And before that: the Deadlock Gang?”

“I was still a kid. Just ‘cause I was in deep don’t mean I wasn’t a kid.”

“She is a capable soldier. She is most assuredly not a child.”

“Well, what were you doin’ at nineteen, then?” Jesse pinches his cigarillo between his teeth. “Did you play video game tournaments? Did you do go out with your friends?”

“At her age, I was a rising master of the clan. I had already bested the Shimada-gumi’s top combatants. Some of them were my relatives. Most did not survive being bested. Beyond that, I had killed countless enemies of the family and its allies. That was the year I began supervising deals and trades, arranging business with my father’s guidance. All while completing my third year in university.” Hanzo readjusts his aim, takes the shot, hits the target through the right-eye sensor. “I was a dragon. I did not have time to be young.”

McCree recalls Hanzo’s web-search photo with its haughty face and piercing eyes. He checks the weight on Peacekeeper’s barrel and thinks: maybe none of us did.

He tells him about bad apartments and poor priests and Our Lady of Guadalupe, ditching religion for TV westerns and a glistening six-shooter. Red canyons under blue skies, sandy hideouts in the gorge. Peccary pigs and rattlesnakes. Roadrunners, beep beep. The folding chair above his head, swinging down, bang bang. And then, like a channel change: Geneva. The Swiss headquarters in the snow. The silver silhouette of an airbus gliding over the Alps. Blackwatch. Bad sleep, bitter coffee. A little girl asking about the winged skulls on the backs of his knees. The sun overhead at Ilios, going in with guns a-blazing. He even tells him about Reyes making him run drills around the track until his nose ran blood-red. Hats off for the kid from Santa Fe, he saved the day, hoo-ray.

Hanzo listens. He takes another shot. He’s heard some of it before.

Eventually he concedes, in rare Shimada softness: “the team will support her, if she needs it.”

“Yeah, I guess so,” Jesse finally says, hunting for another speedloader. Trying to imagine the sharp young internet-photo Shimada beating his 19-year-old self at a multiplayer round of MEKA Gear Solid.

---

Mercy books him in for a morning appointment to examine his prosthetic arm. He passes Brigitte on her way out of the medbay toting a cup of Reinhardt’s coffee. She raises her mug in passing with a cheerful call of ‘high noon.’

“Girl, it ain’t even nine o’clock,” he laughs, patting her on the shoulder.

“Yeah, but it’s your catch phrase!” Brigitte laughs. “Listen: if a clock read ‘12:00’ whenever we were out on the long haul? Reinhardt would say it out loud. It kept our spirits up. It’s always high noon somewhere.”
Inside the medbay, Jesse takes a seat on the exam table. He removes his hat and hikes up his sleeve. “Can you believe she’s still followin’ him around? All these years later and she’s still hammerin’ the old coot along.”

“I’ve tried talking her out of it,” Angela quips, scooting her chair closer. She flattens Jesse’s arm, pulls down the exam light, looks it over. “Sometimes I think she’s just as much of an adrenaline junkie as he is.”

Her prognosis is gloomy. Deterioration in the arm’s muscle strands has lead to faulty wiring in the elbow; the plating is corroded; any more severe stress on the wrist and it might snap. He’ll need updates, replacements, surgery. Furthermore: his blood pressure is high. He’s lost a few pounds (a feat for which she commends him) but his glucose numbers don’t lie.

“Less of those marshmallow-sugar cakes, more water and vitamins,” she says, penciling on her tablet. “And, as usual, I’m going to write a recommendation --”

“Lemme guess.” He scratches his chest. “‘Quit smokin’.’”

“And, of course, you are going to ignore it --”

“And you’ll write it down again the next time I’m here,” he finishes, rolling down his sleeve. “You got a time frame when you wanna schedule this surgery?”

Angela brushes a lock of hair from her brow with her stylus. “Winston is planning our next investigative mission sometime in November. After that, it’s all strikes. I need to order the new parts and synthesize a few others. You’ll take a few weeks to recover, and a few more after that to readjust.” She taps a calendar app on her tablet. “Let’s shoot for the sixth of November. You may have to miss some strikes, but you’ll be healed up long before the holidays.”

“Merry Christmas to me.” He grins. “A shinier, cooler metal arm.”

They talk a little while longer, first with the casual fondness of friends catching up. The conversation gradually turns solemn. Siberia continues to perturb her; she reviewed Athena’s meager footage of Reaper’s attack and suffered nightmares for days after. She sticks to her gut instinct that he and Seventy-Six are not one in the same; her mind is made up on that, no matter what Hanzo ‘Stick-In-the-Mud’ Shimada has to say about it. As for whether or not he could be Jack Morrison, eluding a grisly fate: she doesn’t know anymore. She wants it to be him -- very much so, more than anything. Angela admits that much. But Reinhardt is right. If Jack survived, would he not be there? Would he not return to lead them again? What kind of Morrison would let a new age of heroes rise without him to make the world a better place?

Jesse wishes he had an answer. He can’t shake the feeling that the picture is incomplete. She’s hiding something, still; he can see it in her face. How she looks down at her tablet -- soft, sweet, almost guilty -- with that round-moon visage that hasn’t aged a day in six years. He hears the secrets in the fringes of her lilting voice, faint as her old assurance: heroes never die.

He doesn’t like it. Hanzo will like it less.

They wrap up on a brighter note: another karaoke night is happening soon. She expects to see him there. Jesse shrugs, cheerfully agrees, makes no promises he can convince Hanzo to come.

Which reminds him.

“Hey, before I go,” McCree calls, donning his hat. “Got a small favor to ask you.”
“Of course! Go ahead.”

“Uh.” McCree glances around. “You got any free stuff floatin’ around here?”

“Free stuff,” Angela repeats, tilting her head. “You mean, like, extra medical supplies?”

“Yeah.” Jesse hooks his thumbs around his belt, shrugs, purses his lips. An unassuming schoolboy. “Y’know. Free stuff. Stuff you don’t use. Stuff you give to patients who need it, in their spare time.”

“You’ll have to specify what sort of ‘free stuff’ you’re looking for,” she replies. Angela drifts to a supply cabinet, opens the door, searches inside. “Do you mean bandages? A first aid kit? Field dressings?” She peers over her shoulder. Quizzical. “Allergy medication?”

“No, you know what, I don’t wanna trouble you.”

“Jesse, please.” Angela fixes him a knowing look: are we not old friends? What do you need?”

He hems, haws, shuffles from foot to foot. Finally, in a wire-thin voice: “rubbers?”

Angela’s pale brows shoot up her forehead. Oh.

“If it’s a hassle, then don’t worry ‘bout it --”

“No, no, no!” She bustles for a drawer, heels clicking, hand raised reassuringly. “No, no, not to worry!” A light-hearted laugh. “Here, look in here. Get whatever you need.” She puffs, tossing her hair. “‘Free stuff.’ Honestly! You had me worried, here I was thinking you were going to ask for more sleeping pills.”

Jesse bags up what he needs, tips his hat and takes off. He smokes a cigarillo on the walkway outside the medbay to ease his nerves.

Pointless, he thinks. Now they’re definitely going to talk. He mulls over the knowing look on her face as she bid him farewell: wise as the cat that got the cream.

---

The heat wave ends around the middle of October. Torbjorn finishes the turret work just in time to thresh out summer crops from the box garden. McCree helps him harvest; they carry to the mess hall an oil-stained crate of the season’s last vegetables. Half-way through constructing a tomato sandwich, Jesse discovers an unforgivable act of theft: someone has eaten the last Moon Pie. Hana breezes by, nabbing a bag of chips and a soda; she stops when he inquires, fesses up, apologizes with a laugh. It was tasty, she tells him -- totally worth it. She’ll make it up to him, she promises, winking over her shoulder as she flits out.

“She made fun of my sandwich, too,” Jesse complains later that evening, smoking a cigarillo through the window’s open slats. “Lil’ turd had the nerve to tell me that eatin’ just bread and tomatoes is gross.”

Hanzo sits in the console chair, inspecting an order of new clothes that came in with his hot plate. “That does not sound very appetizing.”

Jesse considers poking fun at the archer’s usual breakfast of eggs and nattō on rice, a smell he can’t stomach no matter how much Hanzo encourages. “Yeah? Well, whatta you know.”
“I can see you have little experience with how most nineteen-year-olds demonstrate appreciation.”

“I guess I don’t.”

Hanzo turns over a collared shirt to test the stitching around the seams. “Miss Song is fond of you. She considers you friendly and easy to rile. She assumes you are too good-natured to retaliate, perhaps even gentle, so she ribs you for further amusement. You always respond, so she continues to goad. As long as you rise to the bait, she will tease you more and more.” He brushes his scarf off his shoulder. “‘Worth it’ is a phrase that competitive gamers frequently use.”

Jesse tosses his hair. “Well, thanks, darlin’. Didn’t know you spoke gamer-ese.”

Hanzo lowers the shirt, folds it neatly, sets it aside. “You are welcome.”

McCree finishes his cigarillo, blows out smoke, shuts the window slats and slinks across the room. He nudges Hanzo’s side. “Tell me, sharp eyes, ‘bout another one of your assassin things.”

“About what? You?”

“Yeah.” Jesse massages his shoulders, thumbing the cords of muscle at his nape.

Hanzo instantly yields to the touch, head lolling. He leans back in the chair, humming. “Why?”

“Because you made fun of my sandwich.” And then, grinning, lowering to purr in his ear: “make it a naughty one this time.”

Hanzo rolls his eyes. “McCree.”

“Be sweet, honey, people were mean to me today.”

“So you ply me for praise about your ridiculous manhood?”

Jesse’s brows shoot up. “Huh?”

“I did not stutter.”

“Aww, no, now you gotta tell me. Ridiculous? You can’t leave me hangin’ like that.”

“You could use a little hanging.”

“Hanzoo.” Jesse nuzzles; Hanzo snorts; he playfully bats the gunslinger away. Jesse lingers, crouches, toes him in the heel. “You better tell me or I’ll sing. I’ll toot you a country song right in your pretty ear.”

That does the trick. With a gruff sigh, Hanzo palms his scruffy face. He squeezes his cheeks and mutters: “it is large, ungainly, and curves slightly to the left.”

Jesse mock-gasps, lips puckered, lightly pinched by Hanzo’s thumb and forefinger. He croons in fake soprano: “oo-oooh, why, I never!”

Hanzo leans down, picks up his clothes, rises to set them on the dresser. He opens the empty bottom drawer and shuts the shirts inside. “Much like the rest of you.”

---

Karaoke night devolves into a loud, laughing spectacle in the rec room after communal supper.
Lúcio and Hana take turns playing emcee; Angela and Mei-Ling team up for a duet of *Manic Monday* by the Bangles; Reinhardt drives everyone to howling as he serenades Brigitte with *The Safety Dance*. Jesse leads a sing-a-long through The Proclaimers and Billy Joel, wrapping up with a rousing group rendition of *Africa* by Toto. Hana declares proudly that she has joined the biggest group of *dorks* on the planet.

Hanzo spectates with Genji, politely declining to participate. Zenyatta observes in the far corner, keeping a mindful distance from Torbjorn and the elder Shimada. Satya does not attend. McCree catches a glimpse of her passing, hesitating, glancing their way. When he looks back, she’s gone.

“I invited her, y’know,” says Hana. She sits between Hanzo and McCree on the couch as Lúcio sings the next round; Hanzo permits it, relaxing, almost tolerant of her bouncy presence. McCree can’t help but feel like she did it on purpose. *Little cockblocker.* “Y’know, the Vishkar lady? I told her she could come. I didn't really expect her to show up, but I invited her.”

Hanzo piques. “Why?”

“Because she’s here? I mean, why wouldn’t I? It would've been rude if I didn't.” She offers a bag of strawberry puff candy to Jesse. “She seems okay. I mean, I get why Lúcio doesn't like her, but she's never been mean to me. She’s kinda quiet.” Hana perks. “Also, her makeup is perfect every time I see her? Not that you guys probably care about that kinda thing, but I do.”

“You might wanna watch out,” Jesse says, taking a puff. “Things are kinda tense around here with her. More than just with Lúcio. We’ll give you the rundown sometime.”

“Uh. Okay.” She munches, cheeks expanding. Like a hamster. “So I shouldn't invite her to anything else?”

Hanzo reaches over and plucks a piece of candy from her bag. “Do as you like. Continue to expect her not to show.”

---

Jesse cleans up the rec room after they all go to bed. He straightens the furniture, picks up trash, puts away dishes, gathers recyclables, sweeps. He can’t remember the last time he saw so many soda cans stacked in one spot.

Hanzo lingers in the doorway. “You are still here.”

Jesse looks up. He smiles, scratches his neck, taps his mechanical fingers on the broom handle. “Aw, sorry, darlin’. Were you waitin’ for me back in the room?”

“Yes.” Hanzo drifts in. “Let me assist you.”

“Thank you, honey.” He sweeps the floor in short, broad strokes. “Feels like old times, havin’ nights like this.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah, we’d have stuff like this every now and then at the old headquarters in Geneva. Little get-togethers between missions. Team-building, sometimes. Or just blowin’ off steam.” He digs two discarded candy puffs from between the couch cushions. “Eatin’ junk food, screwin’ around, trying to get our minds outta mission-mode.”

Hanzo wipes down a sticky ring left by a can of soda on the karaoke machine. “Having fun.”
“Yeah. A whole lotta that.” Jesse watches Hanzo scan the machine’s flashy digital controls. He pauses, squinting. A flicker of déjà vu. “Woulda been nice to hear a song outta you.”

A snort. “I do not sing.”

“Not at all?”

“No. A talent I do not possess, nor one I wish to acquire.”

Jesse sweeps a neat pile, purses his lips, muses aloud: “I’m havin’ trouble wrapping my mind around that, sweetheart. You got a real pretty voice.”

Hanzo idly taps through the panel song selections. “A pity. You will simply have to believe me.”

Jesse stops sweeping. He squares his shoulders. Then, a hunch. “What about dancin’?”

“What about it?”

“Can you dance?”

Hanzo sniffs proudly. “Of course.” And then, warily: “can you?”

“You darn right I can.”

The archer balks. “Actual dancing.”

“Yeah!”

“Not line-stepping or the Macarena.”


Hanzo hesitates. He pushes back from the machine; he looks over his shoulder; cautiously he checks the hall.

Jesse crosses the room, slow but insistent. “It’s late, sweetheart, there ain’t nobody here.”

“There could be someone still up.”

“Don’t be nervous, no one’s gonna see.” He clicks through the song selections with one hand, reaches for Hanzo’s arm with the other. Jesse lets go when he pulls back. “Seriously, sweet pea. It’s just you and me here.”

Finally Hanzo says: “shut the door.”

A giddy thrill lopes through Jesse’s blood. “Sure thing, darlin’.”

“Thank you.”

They close the door, move the tables, take position and come together. Hanzo selects the first song: something light, bouncy, three-four synth-jazz from the 2030’s. Jesse has never heard it and can’t find the beat without vocals; he steps on Hanzo’s toes and earn a gentle nudge to the shins.

“Mind your feet,” Hanzo chides. “Let me lead.”

“Why can’t I lead?” And then, cheeky: “let’s pick another song. Don’t wanna bruise your lovely
ankles.”

They settle for a slower tempo, sliding through the steps, switching leads. Jesse knows the track, gets tender over it, selects it on purpose: an ancient ballad about fools rushing in. Over a hundred years old at this point, somehow still a jukebox staple. A love-song legend. The King of Rock and Roll. Hanzo frowns. He knows plenty about Elvis but he’s not familiar with this song. Twice they accidentally knee each other; Jesse gets caught in the moment and stumbles, bumps into the couch, ducks his chin. He noses Hanzo’s brow, a half-way kiss.

“Dang, you weren’t kidding,” he snickers. “You really do know how to dance.”

Hanzo presses his hand into Jesse’s lower back. “Come closer.”

Breathless, Jesse perks. “Say what?”

“Move in. Come here.”

“Oh, sweetheart, I’ll do anything to get closer to you --”


Jesse straightens, leans against him, head spinning. He’s still plummeting, falling hard. “Sometimes I wonder if you’ll ever stop screwin’ with me.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.”

Jesse shuffles against him, hanging his head. “Maybe I’d like it if you’d just be straight with me for once.”

“Would you?”

“Yeah.” Jesse pricks. His stomach leaps. “Please.”

Hanzo hums. “Alright.”

His heart yanks into his throat. “All this bein’ together. You like it, yeah?”

“That is my word.”

He shivers. Finally. “You like it, yeah?”

“I do.”

“You wouldn't do it if you didn't like me.”

“I would not.”

He flusters, blushing. A knot pulls tight in the base of his throat. “You ever heard of the term, ‘rope the moon?’”

“No.” Hanzo tilts his head. “Is it one of your Texas sayings?”

For that, Jesse considers purposefully tripping him. “It’s a Southern saying, yeah. It means, ‘I’d do anything for you.’”
“Would you?”

“I damn-well would. You oughtta know that. You saved my life. I’d save yours. I’d save yours a thousand times over. If you said to chase a whiskey spring, I’d be outta here by Monday.” He breathes in and feels it sting; Jesse closes his eyes and thinks: to hell with it. “You’re the stars shinin’ above me, Hanzo. You’re the yellow moon up in my sky.”

They stop. The track changes. Hanzo slides against him, a solid weight. He lowers his chin, looks over his shoulder. The door is still closed. No one is watching.

He kisses him once. Then twice, just as mild. They finish cleaning, turn off the light, and retreat to his room.

---

“Jesse,” he rasps later when they’re drifting off in the bunk. The gunslinger dozes; suddenly he is awake.

They roll and shift. He draws back. Hanzo pulls him closer. He winds tight, gently knuckles his jaw, tugs his ear.

“What?” he mutters weakly, insides turning to air.

Hanzo repeats it like a sigh. Two syllables, sibilant, soft with sleepy amusement. “Jes-se.”

---

Lúcio skates at night with his headphones in. He rounds the hangar, circles the launchpad, rolls back through the loading bay. The weather is light and cool. Above him spreads the black Atlantic sky, blurry with light pollution at the horizon, sickly orange like corroding enamel. It’s two in the morning; he can’t sleep. This happens often. He listens to his mother’s Brazilian folk songs until his mind and body give in.

He sees it out of the corner of his eye: crystal-blue, tiny, glowing in the dark. A twinkling light by the comm tower walkway. Lúcio clacks around the drone track, takes out one earbud, shoves his hands in his hoodie pockets. He gets closer; he sees it clearer; he stops. There she is.

The lighthouse flashes a lemon-yellow pulse.

Satya sits cross-legged with her back pressed against the wall. Two kittens nestle in her lap; the others dart around her knees. She flicks her hands like she’s pulling puppet strings. Blue hard-light shimmers from the accelerator disk in her palm. The kittens chase her tiny constructs, tumbling over their siblings, pawing the glow. She creates a toy mouse, a bell-shaped flower, a geometric ribbon of stars.

He hears her voice through his open ear, dove-like on the breeze. Chattering to the cats, laughing. Cooing in Hindi: a language he doesn’t understand.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
Much love to Jamie, Sylphy, Losebetter, Penna, Entropy, and Fig for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.

References: Smetana's *The Moldau*, McCree's inspiration for his dad's fake names. Lúcio's cool soundboard is inspired by Shawn Wasabi. The song on the karaoke machine (sans lyrics).

- Shout out to iliadandodyssey for this awesome fanmix, the last track of which inspired me to use the song at the end in the fic!
- There is a lot of continuity between HtF's Hanzo and the young Hanzo in *Koi No Yokan* by franklytriggering. Shouts out to Brian for working with me and linking up the two stories to weave a cool tale.
- I want to say there's about 5-6 more chapters left in HtF, but everytime I ballpark the number grows because they run so long. But we're sloping towards the end, about to hit the last big plot bump.
- There will be more Reaper in the next chapter. And probably another love scene.
- AND HALLOWEEN!!

- (this is the part where I reassure you I don't do: major character death, unhappy endings, endings where the ship doesn't happen/work out)
- A lot of folks have asked if I'll keep writing fics for Overwatch! My goal is to do so, as long as I have the energy/inspiration! I definitely hope to!

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Final (probably) round: sexual content in this chapter. Someone requested tagging: top!Hanzo for this chapter. Rating is still M.
- Thank you for so many kind comments and messages! I appreciate them all and really love getting them, even if I can't answer each one. This is a big long chapter and I am sorry it got delayed. I want to say the next few may be shorter, with some bigger ones towards the end.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

もちはもちや

mochi wa mochiya - “for mochi, go to the mochi dealer”
A proverb that implies one must go to the professionals to get the job done.

---

Autumn in Gibraltar is balmy with a bite of seasonal change on the breeze. Hanzo feels it like a nibble, prickling his guts when he stops to parse out the time -- seconds, minutes, hours, weeks, cycles -- since he accepted the strange new hollow in his chest and the man who fills it.

He doesn’t think about Jesse all the time. At practice or training he can clear out his brain and focus on the task at hand. The thoughts drift in during quiet moments, idle drags or busy work. Sometimes they overwhelm him. He has to pause, disassemble his observations, examine them in pieces. A mental synecdoche, taken apart with care: the outlaw spinning his wild revolver, the comrade who guards his flank, the friend, the fiend, the lover, the fool.

His fool. A title he now dispenses with an affectionate touch -- all harshness foregone, dismissed. A four-letter word for mine.

---

Genji brings it up during their usual morning visit on the comm tower. They converse in their native tongue as Hanzo drinks his tea. Below them, Mei-Ling, Lena and Hana carve pumpkins in Torbjorn’s garden, voices lilting on the sea breeze. Genji comments the weather is finally cooling; he reminisces about Hanamura and orange maples, cold evening nights, clear winter stars. Nothing compared to the moon in Nepal, which shines brighter than any he’s ever seen, high above jagged mountains that carve white teeth into the sky.

“We could go there someday,” Genji offers after a pause. Cautiously testing. “You and I, if you wanted. I’d be willing to go back, especially if you went with me.”

Hanzo watches the girls cut off green stems from their pumpkins and pencil grinning faces into the rinds. Staring off into space, thinking about the moon. “Hm. Perhaps.”

“Really?” Genji perks. “We could make a pilgrimage of it, yeah?” And then, enthusiastic: “There’s a lot to see. I could show you the monastery where I trained.”
The word ‘monastery’ brings Hanzo back to reality. “What?” He shakes his head. “I misunderstood. I thought you were talking about Hanamura.”

Genji deflates. “No! I meant Nepal.” A little sourly. “That’s the third time you’ve zoned out on me this morning. Are you okay?”

Hanzo sips his tea. “I’m fine.”

“Eh, Hanzo,” Genji replies, tilting his head. “I can understand one time, maybe two if you’re tired. But three’s a pattern.” Their father’s old saying. “You got something on your mind.”

“No.”

“Yeah, you do.” Genji idly bounces his legs on the ledge. “You don’t have to tell me.” He stretches and yawns, feigning nonchalance. “I bet I can guess.”

“It was a passing thought. Nothing more. There’s a lot going on, with the upcoming strikes --”

“There’s plenty of stories I could tell you about him.” Genji interrupts, no-nonsense. “Good ones, from when we ran missions together. Around us guys, he’d tell dirty jokes. Reminded me of when I used to go out bar-hopping with the brothers.” He wags a finger. “But if you want embarrassing stories, you’ll owe me. Don’t assume I’ll hang him out to dry. He’s still my friend.”

Hanzo draws back. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb, Hanzo! You know what I mean!” Genji laughs. “McCree!”

His eyes dart around, seeking focus; he flusters on the distant shape of a gold pumpkin in Lena’s lap. After a beat, he says: “how much do you know?”

Genji chatters in earnest. “Well. The two of you are together every day. Most of the day. Even if I weren’t a Shimada, I could guess there’s more going on than just the two of you being training partners.” He rolls his shoulders. “But, because I am a Shimada, I figured out the rest. Sometimes you say things in his manner, like the emphasis on certain words. His inflection. How he” -- Genji mimics a Southern accent -- “talks like this, y’all, eh? You both chat a lot. I see him looking at you all the time. He blushes around you, which is one-sided, because you never blush. But I saw you pull his ear once walking out to the truck once to do a patrol. You used to do that to Yuki.”

Hanzo grumbles at the name; he threads his arms in and out of his sleeves. Genji notices. “A few times, you’ve smelled like his cigars. You’ve come around and your hair has been loose, but you weren’t practicing, so it must have come undone some other way. Oh” -- he bobs -- “you spend nights in his room since Russia. He’s got more bite marks than fish left out for stray cats.”

Hanzo scoffs. “Genji.”

“That’s when it started, didn’t it? Or was it before then? I wasn’t sure. When you went back to save him, though, I knew it must be true.” Gleefully. “Then, when you guys got stuck in the station and you sounded so frustrated, I figured it was the cold or blue-balls or --”

“Who all have you told?” Hanzo interrupts, rubbing his brow.

“No one!” Genji laughs. “Hanzo, it’s me.” He reassures gently. “I know how picky you are about your privacy.”

“Does anyone else know?”
“No one has said anything. But they’ve got eyes, y’know. They’re going to see the two of you together all the time and guess.” Genji swivels his gaze back to his brother. His visor gleams. “You aren’t trying to hide it, right?”

“No.” Hanzo clicks his tongue. “It isn’t like that.” He watches Hana yank a fistful of seedy yellow guts from her pumpkin and thrust them at Mei-Ling, who squeals with laughter. “It’s a personal matter. It’s the principle of everyone knowing.”

“You like when people stay in their lane. But it’s a moot point here, brother. It’s not like how it was in the family. The team would understand.”

Hanzo mutters into the hollow of his mug. “The team can still mind its own business.”

“Pft. Hanzo.” Genji shakes his head. “Are you really going to be that way? Come on, now -- don’t get defensive. What were you going to do? Make an announcement?”

“Maybe? For all you know, I might have been planning on it.” His tone is crisp and glib. “He and I have worked out an arrangement.”

Genji hums. “Seems like a pretty good one.” A pause, cautious once again. He fingers the dark width of his scarf, inspects the seam. “Not like with Yuki, right?”

He can’t tell which shocks him more: how easily Genji mentions her again, or his audacity to bring her up in context. “No! Nothing like that.” And then, stingingly defensive: “You said it yourself: this isn’t like how it was in the family.”

“Good.” Genji looks back over the horizon. “I’ve told you this before, but I like McCree. I always have. I wanted you guys to get along since I found out what happened before China. I’ve always thought that if there was nice guy to come back to Overwatch, he’s the one I’d prefer to see.”

It takes Hanzo a full sullen minute to recover from his brother’s sincerity and finally say: “did you know he’s never had toro ?”

“Really? Wow. Well, hey, no one’s perfect. Does he wear the hat to sleep?”

“He would if he could. And the spurs, too.”

“Damn.” Genji snorts. “He takes his boots off inside, though, right? At least?”

“At least, yes. They’re hard for him to get on and off.” Hanzo sighs, batting his scarf from his shoulder. “He has decorum. It’s there, if you look for it. His ‘hospitality.’ He called me ‘Shimada-san’ for the longest time because he thought it was the respectful thing to do.”

Genji preens, mirthful. “I taught him all that stuff, y’know. You’re welcome.”

Hanzo folds his arms, puffs out his chest, puts on airs. “Sometimes he says and does things that remind me of the brothers. The attitude. He has that grit. Maybe you could call it devotion. Intelligent, too. There are days he’s clever as a fox.” He makes a demonstrative shrug. “Then there are days when he’s so American it makes my head spin. Days when I can’t imagine him on Japanese soil.”

“Maybe he thinks the same thing about you, brother. I mean, as far as I know, you’ve never been to Texas.”

Hanzo lifts his chin. “He’s not from Texas.”
“Oooh.” Genji crosses his arms over his chest, sits back, croons. If not for his visor, Hanzo thinks he’d be grinning. “Well. Excuse me.”

“Anyway.” Hanzo rolls his eyes. “Tell me one of the stories. The best, if you had to pick only one.”

“That’s all? Hey, tell you what: since I surprised you with all this, I’ll give you two for the price of that.”

Hanzo holds up fingers. “Three.” When Genji protests, he reaches to lightly tap the side of his visor. Using one of McCree’s favorite words: “to make up for all that sass you gave me in Siberia.”

Genji ends up telling four: a mission to Amsterdam, a movie night gone awry, the Geneva training camp (featuring the scarred commanding officer, Reyes), and the infamous taco incident. The girls look up from their pumpkins, startled by the sound of the brothers laughing.

---

Hanzo sleeps curled around Jesse in the bunk when their comms go off. He stirs; the comm beeps again; he sits up. The wall-clock reads 0320. Jesse wriggles from his grasp, clutching a pillow to his shaggy face.

Hanzo rolls and taps the gunslinger’s rump. “We’re being paged.”

Jesse jolts. He spills out of the bunk, hairy legs in the air, bedsheets dragging with him. “Shit.” He accidentally elbows Hanzo as they both reach to blindly grab for their comms on the floor.

Winston answers in a rush. Angela has received a message from Seventy-Six; he’s calling an urgent meeting with the Siberia team in ten minutes. No less.

They dress, depart, reach the labs just behind Lena and Mei-Ling. Reinhardt is last to arrive; Angela is already there, brooding by the message on Athena’s screen.

---

Dr. Ziegler,

I hope this message arrives to you at a better time than I'm sending it. It's been a while since we spokke -- or maybe it hasn't. The circumstances of this are unfortunate nonetheless. I wish I could continue to check on you. It made me feel a lot better to know you were doing alright. That's the very least that you deserve. It's people like you -- the kind-hearted, the altruistic, the quintessentially good -- who keep the world spinning on its dismal axis, and thus the world is what I wish we could have given you. I guess wise men at their end know dark is right, but I suppose I’m one of those whose words didn’t fork much lightning. Actions speak louder than words, anyway. Thankk you for convincing me in the end that we could all be heroes. It’s back to the heartland I go. Maybe I’ll see you again someday beyond that.

Goodbye, Angela.

- 76
Athena begins as they gather in. “The message was delivered to Agent Mercy’s personal email account via an auto-mailer system based near Veracruz, Mexico. Data from the traceroute shows that message was to be delivered pending a lack of log-in activity after a certain amount of time.”

“Kinda like a digital dead-man’s switch,” Winston mutters.

“We’ve analyzed errors in the message text,” Athena continues. “Each repeated letter combined to create the phrase ‘n-k-q-c-n-k.’ Nonsensical at first glance, until we put it through a few test algorithms to look for potential solution.”

“It’s encrypted with a basic shift cipher,” Winston explains. “A coded shift, to be precise. It took part of an alphabet crack, but we figured it out.” He scans the team’s faces. “The code was ‘cornfield.’ When you plug it in, the phrase translates to ‘Dorado.’”

“Hey,” McCree says. “I’ve been there. Ran an op there once.” Hesitantly, shifting his gaze. “Got shot.”

“The timestamp in the message was formatted in a method that implied more codes,” Athena carries on. “I ran it through a base-64 solver and received a series of coordinates that match to a LumériCo power facility within the city.”

“Coordinates, codes, hidden messages,” Winston finishes. “Whoever he is, Seventy-Six is trying to get our eyes on this place.”


“The code,” Reinhardt murmurs. “‘Cornfield.’ Jack used to talk about growing up on a farm.”

“Yes. Seventy-Six is trying to get our eyes on Jack, too.” Mercy presses a button on the keypad to bring up a window on another screen. A white orb spins on a red header banner at the top of the page. “This is an editorial from Olympia Shaw, a correspondent with Atlas News. It was published in July. It’s about Jack, his legacy, a reflection on his time as Strike Commander. It wasn’t much press due to the situation in Russia, but Athena managed to find an archived copy. Look.”

Angela highlights a paragraph; the phrase Soldier: 76 is bolded and underlined. “We’re not the only ones who know about him. He’s mentioned here briefly. A masked vigilante, conducting robberies, attacks. Stealing experimental weaponry. A forensic expert matched surveillance footage to Jack’s last public appearance. Precisely the same height and build.” She points insistently to the screen. “They quote some of my testimony with the first UN hearings, right here. And then they even go so far as to assume that Jack’s body was never recovered at all!”

“‘Bombings.’ ‘Breached bases.’” Hanzo reads accusations off the article. “‘Causing untold damages in the process.’” He faces Angela, eyes narrowed. “Reaper did the same.”

“If anything, this is evidence that Seventy-Six is not Reaper,” Angela replies tersely. “Reaper does not match the data on Jack, but Seventy-Six does. The correlations are obvious.”

Hanzo stares Angela down. “That does not mean this message was sent by him, nor any of the messages before. You cannot be sure that any of these communications are legitimate. Talon employs hackers as well as terrorists. Mail server addresses can be falsified, locations can be faked --”

“We can’t ignore this,” Angela interrupts. She fixes Hanzo with a frigid glare. “There is something going on here, whether it is a trap or not. We deserve to know what’s happening.”

Mei-Ling pipes up; Hanzo is grateful for a distraction from Angela’s cold eyes. “So what do we do
Whoever is sending these messages is trying to get us to pay attention to Jack and Dorado. Isn’t that where Seventy-Six said he was going before he stopped emailing Dr. Ziegler?

“Yes,” answers Mercy. “To investigate gang activity.”

“Sounds like Jack.”

Everyone turns; McCree is re-reading Seventy-Six’s email. He scratches the collar of his red flannel shirt.

“That line. Right there.” He points at the screen. “About wise men at their end knowin’ the dark is right. That’s a poem.” McCree looks up. “That’s from a poem Jack used to say, isn’t it? ‘Do not go gentle into the night’, you guys remember?”

Hanzo narrows his eyes; he knows it. “Dylan Thomas.” He clears his throat as the team turns to him. “It is a well-known work.”

“I remember,” Reinhardt says softly. “He would say it sometimes before a mission.”

“So it’s either a trap, or a cry for help, or some weird mix of both,” Lena muses. “Which brings us back to what Mei said. What do we do?”

Winston scratches his chin. “LumériCo blocks transmissions for a certain kilometer radius around its sites. We won’t be able to get any satellite observation, and drones will get shot down.”

“And if it’s a trap meant to lure us out,” Mei-Ling says, “sending a team is basically playing right into it.”

“We cannot send one, anyway,” Reinhardt adds. “All group missions are monitored by the United Nations. It would have to be sanctioned like the investigative mission in London.”

“Which, by the way, is coming up in two weeks,” sighs Lena. “We don’t have the manpower to split up our forces right now.”

“So -- send me.”

Again the team spins to McCree, who faces them with his thumbs hooked to his belt. He shrugs.

“One-man mission,” he says. “Lemme check it out. I ran an op down in Dorado when I was first in Blackwatch. I could get around incognito, report back what I see.”

“By yourself?” Winston asks. “Jesse, that’s dangerous.”

“Better than bein’ useless,” he counters. “I ain’t on the docket for the King’s Row mission. I got a surgery comin’ up soon, too. I’d just be lollygagging around here until then.” He scratches beneath the brim of his hat. “And after.”

Reinhardt shakes his head. “A one-man mission is just as risky as sending a team.”

“How quickly y’all forget,” McCree drawls, “this sorta thing’s my expertise. Lijiang was kid’s play. Blackwatch had me run solo digs all the time, movin’ in and out, gettin’ the scoop, high-tailing it before they ever knew I was there. Like a thief in the night, never left a trace.”

“Yes, but we are not thieves,” Reinhardt states. “This is not ‘back in the day.’ We do not operate Blackwatch any longer. The new Overwatch has no need for spec-ops.”
“You’ll have to pardon me if I disagree,” McCree replies. “Seems like this sorta situation is *exactly* what needs spec-ops. If Talon’s got movements in London, they might be movin’ in Dorado, too. Might find out something that benefits the King’s Row folks.” He spins his index finger in a circular motion. “Like I said, we can make quick work of this and get to the bottom of the mess. Go in under the radar, scope out the place. I can be in and out in less than a week.”

“The UN won’t sanction it,” Angela says, frowning.

“The UN ain’t gotta know ‘bout it, as far as I’m concerned.”

Winston rubs the bridge of his nose. “Okay, this is exactly the kind of thing that got Overwatch in trouble in the first place. We’re under strict surveillance for a reason: to make sure we perform without pushing any limits. If you were to get caught running an unapproved spec-op, it would throw everything we worked for. Siberia, the committee, the interviews. All of it.” He grouses. “Not to mention, your bounty’s still active. If you get stopped or picked up, we might never be able to get you back.”

“Bounty hunters ain’t caught me for five years,” challenges McCree. “I don’t see ‘em gettin’ lucky now. If you’re worried about limits, put a non-lethal SOP on it. If y’all get investigated, tell ‘em I took some R-and-R. Dorado’s a resort town, ain’t it? Last I checked, it’s not a crime to go on vacation.”

“Boy, that’ll get on the news,” Tracer says wryly, air-quoting. “‘Local Overwatch cowboy spotted holidaying on Mexico’s gold shores.’” She blows a lock of hair off her brow. “Next they’ll ask how our family leave and dental plans look.”

“Wait, we get dental?” Mei-Ling asks, rubbing her cheek.

“It’s not an option,” Winston interjects. “I mean, in theory, it’s an option, but in application it’s too risky. You’d have to basically sneak off Gibraltar and get to Dorado without being seen or identified. That’s risky, even for someone with your kind of expertise.”

McCree puts up his hands. “Alright, look. I get it. Y’all aren’t familiar with the Blackwatch playbook, but listen: Reyes and I used to do this all the time. Let me lay it out.” McCree ticks the details on his fingers. “Fake identities. Fly coach or stowaway in cargo. Frequent stops. Hoof it on foot as much as possible. Blend in with the crowds. Have an alias: a persona, a get-up. Play dumb but act smart. Keep your eyes open and your mouth shut, get in, get out, go home.” He claps his hands together. “Piece of cake. Y’all let me handle this the old-fashioned way and we can put this mess to rest.”

“No.” Reinhardt shakes his head. “I do not care if that is how it was done. Winston is right. Not an option.”

“Have we even got other options?” Lena murmurs. “I mean, it’s not like Jesse’d be running in to play James Bond. He’s *done* this stuff before, if we *really* wanted an answer fast --”

“Lena!” Reinhardt exclaims. “It’s too dangerous! You heard what Winston said!”

“And you heard what *I* said, big fella!” McCree throws back. “This sorta thing is my bread and butter, I’m prepared to do it again. If it ain’t Jack, we can put it to rest. If this’s actually Jack, well, we got ourselves a big damn issue, that’s for sure.”

“But we don’t know *who* it is,” Mei-Ling begins.

“There’s evidence,” Angela adds.
“It’s not concrete evidence,” Reinhardt finishes. “Jack was buried. He is a man long dead.”

They argue back and forth: bickering, clamoring, flooding the room with chatter. Reinhardt insists; McCree retorts and reassures; Tracer and Mei-Ling weakly defend Winston and Mercy, who vacillate in circles.

Hanzo gets their attention with a sharp, succinct cough.

“If I may,” he offers, looking around to confirm he has their attention. “While I prefer to discount this as little more than bait, it seems the only way to solidify our conviction is to find out the truth. If you want to do this, you need to do it right. First, focus on getting there.”

Winston starts. “But you said --”

“Fake identities. Fly premier class for lesser security, late at night to avoid other travelers. Constrain flights to be strictly international, domestic air transit security varies region to region. Once on land, take a hypertrain to Dorado. Blend in with the crowds. Play dumb enough to avoid interest, but smart enough to deter outside involvement. Change appearances at every stop, nothing drastic but enough to throw off or draw out a tail.”

Reinhardt starts to speak; Hanzo flicks his hand to pause him.

“The United Nations monitors our personnel closely but primarily via associated liaisons. Use it to your advantage. Convince the archi-tech that the agents are absent due to personal matters and she will take it as fact.” Again Winston tries to cut in; Hanzo tilts his hand and continues before he can speak. “Hypertrain security has been increased due to McCree’s alleged raid in Houston. While it is a terrible time to attack one, there has never been a safer time to be a passenger. With an alias and a suitably priced ticket, you are guaranteed discretion. Ease of transport.”

Jesse opens his mouth; Hanzo slices the flat of his hand through the air. Refusing to be interrupted. “Once you get there, start phase two. Scope the town. Gather information. If you want to investigate the power plant, pose the agents as LumériCo contractors coming in to check some system, perform routine maintenance, make a delivery. Something harmless. Invisible. Set the protocol to retreat without conflict. Weapons engaged but non-lethal measures. In and out.” Hanzo lifts his chin. “Piece of cake.”

Silence. Slack jaws, shifting glances. Hanzo does not need to look at Jesse to know he is beaming in awe as if he’s uttered the word of God.

“Well!” Tracer pipes. “That’s a man with a plan right there.”

“Wait, you said ‘contractors,’” Angela starts. “Plural. Do you mean --”

“Two instead of one,” replies Hanzo. “Lone travelers make easier targets. A pair blends in better. Less chance of engagement, two pairs of eyes to cover their backs. Have one pose as an attache or a bodyguard.”

Tracer squints. “You’re proposing sending McCree with a bodyguard?”

Hanzo exhales forcefully through his nostrils. Reminding himself: this isn’t like how it was in the family. “No. I am proposing you send him with me.”

---

By 0400 -- after Reinhardt gives begrudging consent -- the decision is made. Agents McCree and
Hanzo will complete a five-day covert, undocumented investigation to Dorado to look into the mystery of Seventy-Six. The team is dismissed at 0415 to discuss logistics later in the day. Hanzo drowses back into the bunk around 0430. A sleepy Jesse nuzzles after him.

A mission together, he says, pawing Hanzo’s sides. Such an exciting prospect: he and Hanzo relying on their wits and faculties, mercenary grit, years of experience as deadly instruments for hire. Dual weapons in tandem, putting months of practice to applicable use. The bounty hunter and the assassin, working as a two-man team.

Hanzo indulges a few minutes of languid manhandling before excusing himself to the lavatory. He flicks on the light, slides shut the door, and flips out his handset. Hanzo leans against the (clean, polished, spotless) sink and taps the screen, logs in, flicks through his (neat, orderly, properly organized) inbox. He pulls up a window highlighted with the icon of an impish pink rabbit, scrolls the conversations, changes the digital keyboard to Korean to match the language in the texts.

**:0441: [3945_84]**

Apologies for messaging you at this hour. Can I get your help with something later today?

He locks his screen and runs the faucet. Hanzo is squeezing toothpaste on his toothbrush when -- to his surprise -- his handset buzzes. A new text.

**:0441: [3945_85] Song, Hana:**

Ya what’s up?

Hanzo blinks.

**:0442: [3945_84]**

Early for you to be awake.

His phone buzzes again while he’s brushing his teeth.

**:0443: [3945_85] Song, Hana:**

Never went to sleep bro, I was doing a stream

Why are YOU up this early??

Did Mac keep you up all night talking about Garth Brooks again 🌸👀🌸

Hanzo rolls his eyes. He puckers his lips to hold his toothbrush in place and types back.

**:0445: [3945_84]**
Very funny but no. 
I need to borrow some things if it’s not too much trouble.
Mac and I have been given an important task and it could use your and Lu’s touch.
Might also need a small loan. Will pay you back when we return.
Consider it a fair trade for the archery lessons.

‖ 0447: [3945_85] Song, Hana:  
K I’ll tell Lu  
wtf you said the lessons were gonna be FREE 😲二线城市 😲二线城市  
( ) omggggg you suck LOL  
you better teach me ALL the good stuff then!!! 😘😘

Hanzo smiles.

‖ 0448: [3945_84]  
Deal.
Make sure you get some sleep.

He locks his phone, brushes, rinses, washes his hands, and shuts off the light. Jesse is dozing in the bunk; he slides in, nudges him over, pulls up the sheets. Jesse rumbles, snuffles, stirs until Hanzo reaches out to pat his hip. He closes his eyes and shuts down the thoughts running rapid-fire in his brain. Lingering only on the mental reminder to check his notebooks tomorrow when he gets up.

---

It takes two days to script and practice a mission protocol and to acquire, prep, and pack all necessary provisions. Hanzo enlists Hana to help procure their wardrobes for convincing, easy-to-change appearances. She spends part of an afternoon cleaning and manicuring Jesse’s nails (which he enjoys), trimming his hair and beard (which he tolerates) and tweezing his unruly eyebrows (which he outright protests, complaining even after Hanzo muses that he now looks halfway respectable). Lúcio assists them with false passports, fake credentials, and a special equipment crate with an electronic lock for Storm Bow. They plan to board it with papers as a rare antique that cannot pass through an x-ray machine, hopefully skidding them through customs. Peacekeeper will have to fly disassembled, checked and stowed -- which irritates Jesse more than his swollen brows.

Their personas: a wealthy Mexican-American CEO of a semiconductor start-up with a gambling problem (McCree) accompanied by his prestigious independent investor (Hanzo), traveling out of Madrid with a brief stop at the Atlanta spaceport. From Atlanta they board the hypertrain Crescent into New Orleans. There they switch to the Sunset Limited to Del Rio; the Silver Spur will cross them into Mexico down to Dorado. They book two rooms for three nights at a hotel by the historic Misión on the southern edge of the city. From there, they gather information in the manner they know best.

They leave the Watchpoint Thursday evening, two days before Halloween. Jesse finishes a long conversation in the medbay with Reinhardt, Angela, and Torbjorn -- a heart-to-heart on the past and future of Overwatch, the grim reality of what it means if Jack Morrison is alive but rogue.
Genji bids his brother a fulfilling, sincere farewell with Zenyatta hovering nearby. The omnic offers Hanzo his blessing. Hanzo returns a cool glance, polite refusal, stiff thanks.

“Come back in one piece,” Genji calls.

Hana is more pragmatic. “Or at least in a piece that can pay me back!”

Lúcio and Lena shuttle them off-base in the back of one of the Watchpoint supply vans. Together they ride dressed-down and low-profile through Málaga to Madrid via high-speed autobus, huddled in the back to avoid the handful of other nighttime riders. An omnic driver stares at them a moment too long; Hanzo almost notes suspicion before it looks away.

A flicker of memory returns unbidden, chased by lights streaking past on the hyperlane. Two years before his father died, the Shimada-gumi held council to discuss an underling family’s decision to employ omnis in their lower ranks. Goro opposed it, deemed it disgraceful, demanded fingers chopped and turf revoked until they made amends. Hanzo cannot recall why he agreed so passionately with his father’s decision. Was it youthful zeal? Legitimate insult? Desire to see subservience and fear in their servants? Later he mentioned it to Genji -- who, as usual, was absent from council, boondoggling at the arcade with pretty girls and prettier boys. Hanzo stewed over the sparrow’s indifference. I don’t see why it’s a disgrace, he said, scratching his shock of green hair, shrugging. The family thrives off people who will die for it. ‘Bots can’t bleed, but you can kill them. Doesn’t that fit the bill? When Hanzo insisted the need for reprimand, Genji blew him off, threw down kindling for an argument. Go to any shrine nowadays and they’ll say omnis have souls. Someday you’re gonna see miko with faceplates, Hanzo. Giving out prayer tokens. Feeding the birds.

Jesse snaps him out of the memory, slipping gloved fingers around his hand. Hanzo taps the gunslinger’s knuckles and directs his thoughts to the mission.

Focus. No unnecessary dread.

---

In Madrid they don the personas of Mr. Sawyer Barceló and Mr. Sanjuro Tsubaki. Jesse ties back his hair, straightens his tan trousers, sweeps the sleeves of his navy jacket and light-blue shirt. He clips on a gilded watch and pair of sunglasses. Hanzo matches in a smart black suit, all starched angles and lines, a wealthy walking weapon. They put on gloves, simple belts, no hats. Most of their wardrobe is fashionable knock-offs courtesy of Hana’s quick shopping. Anyone who looks too long will notice they’re not wearing genuine Tom Ford. For a red-eye trans-Atlantic flight and half a day cooped up in train cars, it’ll do.

Jesse hums in the mirror as they dress in the empty station bathroom. “How do I pronounce your name again?”

“San-ju-ro.” Hanzo smirks at the opportunity for a joke. “If anyone asks, tell them I am going on forty.”

“Huh?” And then, with his brow wrinkling: “are you screwin’ with me again?”

Hanzo rewards himself a mental point. Finally: a film reference his fool doesn’t get. “Don’t actually say that. It is a jest.”

“Suit yourself, honey. C’mon over here and tell me if this looks alright.”

Hanzo appraises. He folds his gold scarf into Jesse’s jacket pocket: a flash of color, a token for
luck. Telling the truth as he scratches the gunslinger’s trimmed beard: “very good.”

Mr. “Very Good” Barceló gets them through the spaceport with minimal trouble. He charms the attendant that stamps the permit for Peacekeeper at the baggage check. Later he sweet-talks the late-night airport security detail who wands down the case containing Storm Bow, gesturing and laughing in the familiar ease of someone idle with wealth. Hanzo cannot translate; Jesse’s Spanish is fast and sing-song, sensually fluid as it rolls off his rich, low voice. He slips crisp bills with a wink; in return, no one inquires after Hanzo’s steely feet or Jesse’s prosthetic arm. McCree is somewhat twitchy by the time they board, but he keeps cool, commenting that he doesn’t understand Castilian like he did during the Geneva days but he’s pulled the gambler sh*tick enough times in the past to work an unassuming mark. A sucker is a sucker, no matter the language.

The flight goes quickly, smoothly, taking off at 0300 and clipping across the Atlantic in just under seven hours. Jesse dozes, smoothly, taking off at 0300 and clipping across the Atlantic in just under seven hours. Jesse dozes beside him after too much of the complimentary bourbon served in first class; Hanzo indulges a brief thrill at the bite of liquor on his drowsy breath before getting back to business. He logs into Athena via his phone, signs off on their status, reviews mission protocol, re-reads the docket on Seventy-Six. The article from the news correspondent paints him out to be a reckless, red-white-and-blue madman with no regard for public safety. His feats of superhuman strength and speed go hand-in-hand with a degenerate destructive streak. A bank robber, a high-tech hooligan. Hanzo bites back disdain as he reads through the reports: white hair, weird visor, tacky jacket. The letters to Angela read slightly maudlin and morose, lingering on old memories and wistful what-ifs, battlefield glories and war memorials. Cliché poetry. So American.

Perhaps Mercy is right. But if Seventy-Six is not Reaper, Hanzo cannot imagine which will be worse to handle: a patriotic prima donna, or a dramatic teleporting ghost.

They touch down in Atlanta at 0358 local time, disembark, slip through customs without hassle. It’s been close to half a year since Jesse left the States; he reins in glee at the prospect of fast-food breakfast. Hanzo reminds him that Mr. Barceló wouldn’t get excited about such a thing at four in the morning. Jesse retorts that Mr. Tsubaki would know that sweet tea and chicken biscuits are a delicacy enjoyed by every nationality. Hanzo sulks by their luggage in the terminal while Jesse gets his food. A weather alert beeps his phone: forty-percent chance of thunderstorms in Dorado over the holiday weekend.

He feels her eyes before he notices her. There she is, standing by a wall papered with a posters of skeletons, bats and jack-o-lanterns: an aging woman in a blue headscarf. She wears a black duster; a silvery braid coils over her shoulder; a smart grey patch covers her right eye. A bruise mars her left cheek, just below the black smudge of kohl rimming her lashes -- or is it a mark? A dark hollow? A blemish? Hanzo does not get the chance to decide. Jesse’s return distracts him; when he looks back, she’s gone.

Strange, he thinks, taking a mental note. A beat-up old lady with a sharp stare.

They break for the adjacent train station to rest, realign, and change in the storage room of a maintenance bay. Hanzo checks in with Winston and Athena as Jesse reassembles and loads Peacekeeper. He puts on his hat, boots, jeans, different belt buckle, and a long-sleeved cotton button-down in striped red plaid. Hanzo pulls on a plum-dark dress shirt, tie, black trousers, and a pair of wire-framed reading glasses. Sleeplessness tugs at him.

So too does an old, hollow feeling -- familiar and flat, vaguely listless. A lassitude. Like he’s missed an important message and can’t find the number to call in return.

---
The cabin is small and clean, two blue seats facing each other by a wide glass window. Hanzo snoozes on and off during the leg to New Orleans. Jesse watches the terrain fly by as they cross through the South. When the Southwest got too rough for Jesse, he traveled east for hospitality. He’s told Hanzo about these places: Montgomery, Mobile, glittering New Biloxi. The swampy biker bars around Lake Pontchartrain, the run-down factories in Baton Rouge, the huge casino riverboats coasting through the industrial locks jammed along the Mississippi River. The place where he claims to have lost his arm, the chop-shop outside of Chattanooga (a name that amuses Hanzo to no end) where he got it fixed. Hideouts, safe-houses, coastal refuges and supply caches. Part of him still misses it, he says, for all the mosquitos and bad roads and blown-off limbs. A man accustomed to the desert will love a place overgrown with weeds, so long as it’s green.

“I could take you to New Orleans someday,” he murmurs over his second glass of sweet tea. “Show you some real cool stuff. I know those streets like the back of my hand, had me a few fine times there.”

Hanzo sleepily gazes out the window at a passing streak of loblolly pines. “It is a French city.”

“Cajun French,” Jesse replies. “Me and Reyes ran a lotta ops down around here for about a year, sniffing out illegal tech when it went south of Memphis. There was a Blackwatch op where I had this one undercover alias -- I was a casino dealer from somewhere in the Bayou Teche. Probably one of my favorites. Had to wear this fancy get-up: vest, long coat, nice tipped shoes. Talked real smooth, too, like the locals.” He fattens his accent, flicks his tongue, waggles his eyebrows. “I’d sure love’ta take a fine gennelmen like you out onna town, monsieur, show ya real good time.”

Hanzo fixes Jesse with a tired smirk. “Your penchant for theatrics and cheating at cards must have come in very handy.”

“Oh, I know a thing or two about handy,” he replies, finger-gunning with a wink.

They get coffee after the switch to the Sunset Limited. Jesse prattles about Blackwatch over a lopsided beignet mounded with snowy white sugar (a treat which Hanzo declines, not wanting powder on his slacks). He reminisces about stings on gangs and arms dealers all throughout the Midwest, riding long hours with bruised ribs and broken bones, crashing through cities like Topeka and Fort Collins on the way to Watchpoint: Grand Mesa. A series of interrogation ops with Reyes against a group of hackers running a long-con abruptly went bad when a reprogrammed automated 18-wheeler nearly crashed them off the highway near Portland. One phase of a mission might be cheap taco stands and motels, Reyes smacking the wallscreen TV to try and fix the shoddy reception; the next phase might be suits and steaks and single-malt whisky while swindling a wealthy target with valuable intel. Ups and downs, truths and lies, deception and digging and kicking down doors. Reyes never gave up until the threat was neutralized and the mission was over. Hard days, harder nights.

Hardest of all: when the high-octane action gave way to days of dull, listless ennui. Sometimes a target would run or fail to show, or they’d go rogue and require fast termination. Worst was when their informants went bust or led them down a dead-end. Lots of waiting for the next adrenaline rush, lots of time for the brain to wander. Reyes was creatively ruthless, the consummate captain. Jesse was brash, untempered, a young man. His thoughts traveled to unhealthy places and the rest of him followed.

He doesn’t mention Amari, which makes Hanzo wonder. Where was she in all this?

An attendant interrupts to refill and offer snacks. They’re half an hour from the changeover in Del Rio. From there, it’s three hours down to Dorado. Not far now.
Hanzo is drowsily chewing a speculoos biscuit when he feels Jesse’s foot against his ankle.

“How’re you feeling?” he purrs.

“Tired.” Hanzo eyes him over the rim of his glasses. “Jet lag.”

“I feel ya. Been a long time since I’ve traveled like a regular person.”

A *regular person*. Hanzo mulls over the phrase, thinks of the listlessness, the dread. A sea of faces in a spaceport, figures shuffling in organic streams of traffic. Nothing like the solitude of wandering, or the industrial coziness of the Watchpoint. “The same for me.”

“Kinda weird trying to mingle back in with all these people. I got that twitch, y’know? Like I’m gonna look the wrong direction and get spotted.”

Hanzo uncaps a bottle of water. “Perhaps you should take off your hat. You will be less easy to identify.”

“Naw, that’s part of my *image*. Been wearing hats with my get-ups since I was a Deadlock pup. I gotta maintain a look, you know? It’s key to my alias.” Jesse swells, jostling his belt buckle emblazoned with a howling coyote. “My *cred*. My rough n’ rowdy cowboy cred.”

Hanzo rolls his eyes. “Farmer cred.”

“Naw.”

He points at the red plaid shirt. “This looks like another one of your attempts to convince Torbjorn to build a chicken coop.”

Incensed, Jesse scathes. “Well, ’scuse me for caring about God’s sacred critters, Mister Tsubaki.”

A horn blares from the locomotive; they’re passing New Uvalde. Hanzo digs out two aspirin from his bag, drinks them down with his water, rubs his neck.

Jesse notices. “You stiff?”

“A little.”

“Lemme sit over there with you, sweetheart,” he soothes. “I can massage your shoulders.”

“You need not trouble yourself. I am comfortable here.”

Jesse blushes. “You know, that cologne you got on’s enough to make a man go crazy. If you wore that around the base, I’d follow you like a spotted dog.”

*Spotted dog*. According to his notebook: a term for a faithful companion. Hanzo lowers his biscuit and considers the locked cabin door. “I have to play the part. Mister Tsubaki is supposed to be a man of taste.”

“Well, Mister Barceló has it on good authority that Mister Tsubaki tastes delightful.”

“Shall I remind you that we are a mission? We have an objective for this trip. We have a subterfuge to maintain.”

Jesse tongues the tip of his canine tooth, sly, unabashedly suggestive. “What part of ‘subterfuge’ means Mister Barceló and Mister Tsubaki can’t go settling negotiations in the *intimate* fashion?”
Hanzo’s eyes narrow to stormy slits. He rests his hands on his parted knees. “That would go against Mister Tsubaki’s company code of business ethics.”

Jesse slides a hand over Hanzo’s knuckles. “Mister Barceló knows how to keep his mouth shut.”

Hanzo stops him from crowding into his space with one leg extended, the ball of his foot planted firmly on the inside of Jesse’s knee. They both rustle before going rigid; Jesse sucks in a sharp breath; Hanzo snaps alert, blood rushing to his throat.

A miniature stand-off. The archer draws first.

Straining, Jesse shifts, angling his hips. He thumps the seat cushions, huffing. Hanzo tests, nudges his foot further up the seam of his jeans, toes the swell of his thigh. Jesse looks at the archer with fiery eyes and gently heaving breaths. Hanzo slowly withdraws, only to brush in with his heel. Like the hair-pulling, he thinks. So eager to abase himself. Where did he learn to like it?

“Shit,” Jesse warbles softly, red in the face. Gnawing his lip.

“Mind yourself, Mister Barceló,” Hanzo says as Jesse squirms beneath his sole. “You are in the company of a gentleman.”

They change over to Silver Spur before it can go any further. Hanzo permits a few thieved kisses but little more. Jesse relents. He can wait. The third cabin is noisy and more cramped than the first two, anyway.

Hanzo leans back and realizes he can’t remember the last time he rode a train. It must have been during university: some unexpected sojourn on the shinkansen, streaking high-speed in a car full of people, no brothers, no bodyguards. No Genji, who liked flashier rides, and definitely not Yuki, who rarely traveled. His father avoided public transit, preferring his car and driver.

He can’t recall the station or his destination. Maybe there was none. Just the rattling car, the city racing by, the hum of humanity crowded around him. Hanzo riding all alone, a stranger.

---

Dorado glows beneath a maroon evening sky. Its tile roofs cut terracotta slashes against lush green trees and a sparkling blue bay; soft lights dot the city hills all the way to the luminous power plants. Spots of orange and white-gold splash across the planes of pale stucco buildings and houses along the calle mercado: gourds and grinning pumpkins, wooden skeletons, waxy candles ranging from tall to squatty to thin. Hanzo’s eyes are drawn to jars of fat sunny marigolds ringing the streets and curbs. Ropes dangling with colorful seasonal piñatas web the central marketplace. He watches them sway like neon flowers in the cool autumn breeze.

Hanzo understands the piñatas. Another memory: Genji as a boy, spinning, toting his favorite stick, whacking a melon during a summer party. Twittering when it cracked apart, running here-and-there, tugging fistfuls of Hanzo’s sleeve. I did it! I broke it! Hanzo gently ushering him back to pick up a watery chunk of fruit, viscerally pink, glistening. You did! You broke it! All on your own. Rewarding him, for once, for the achievement of ruining something.

Jesse checks them in at the hotel by the Misión, a historical plaza with ancient bronze bells hanging in sun-baked arches overlooking the sea. Fishing boats bob on the night-time surf; the moon’s white reflection glistens in the water. Exhausted, Hanzo has little breadth to admire the lavish courtyard and patios. He hauls the luggage to his suite, which he must secure before he can rest.

He scours the second-story room in three methodical sweeps. Every decoration searched, each
painting flipped, closets and nooks and fixtures inspected. Hanzo hunts for bugs, clips, cameras and wires. He examines the headboard, doors and windows for signs of tampering or trespass. It all checks out. Clean entrances and safe exits. No loose tiles in the floor, no jostled molding, no holes. Nothing catches his eye save for a small dead roach.

Jesse bursts into his room after he unlocks the adjoining door. “Damn, these digs are way nicer than what I had last time I was here. That tub can fit six people and the bed’s bigger than Dallas.”

“Try to keep your voice low,” Hanzo replies. “Come help me with the equipment.”

They unpack, settle in, slowly unwind. Jesse goes to smoke and grab drinks from the bar downstairs. Hanzo finds an easy-to-reach spot for Storm Bow beneath the bed. He scrubs before a hot soak in the wide stone bath, dozing with a damp towel on his forehead. Jesse startles him awake when he taps at the bathroom door, returning with yellow pan de huevo and a Mexican mule in a copper cup. He’s scoped out the street, chatted with the locals and hotel staff. There are at least ten decent routes if they need to escape the Misió in a pinch, plenty of hiding places to dive or smoke out. Crowds may work to their advantage. The busy holiday weekend attracts lots of travelers and tourists. LumériCo employees schedule vacation to visit family and attend celebrations; contractors fill in for regulars, coming and going via temporary IDs.

“I always heard you had to be careful drinkin’ the water,” Jesse muses, sitting on the mattress edge, brushing crumbs off the bedspread. “It’s all purified now, but Reyes used to tell stories about how before the Omnic crisis it would make you sick as a dog.”

Hanzo drinks the mule despite disliking the taste, washing down two analgesic pills for the weary throb in his neck. “We have tomorrow, Sunday, and Monday to check out the plant. We should optimize our time to get the most out of each day.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Hanzo replies. “Come help me with the equipment.”

They unpack, settle in, slowly unwind. Jesse goes to smoke and grab drinks from the bar downstairs. Hanzo finds an easy-to-reach spot for Storm Bow beneath the bed. He scrubs before a hot soak in the wide stone bath, dozing with a damp towel on his forehead. Jesse startles him awake when he taps at the bathroom door, returning with yellow pan de huevo and a Mexican mule in a copper cup. He’s scoped out the street, chatted with the locals and hotel staff. There are at least ten decent routes if they need to escape the Misió in a pinch, plenty of hiding places to dive or smoke out. Crowds may work to their advantage. The busy holiday weekend attracts lots of travelers and tourists. LumériCo employees schedule vacation to visit family and attend celebrations; contractors fill in for regulars, coming and going via temporary IDs.

“I always heard you had to be careful drinkin’ the water,” Jesse muses, sitting on the mattress edge, brushing crumbs off the bedspread. “It’s all purified now, but Reyes used to tell stories about how before the Omnic crisis it would make you sick as a dog.”

Hanzo drinks the mule despite disliking the taste, washing down two analgesic pills for the weary throb in his neck. “We have tomorrow, Sunday, and Monday to check out the plant. We should optimize our time to get the most out of each day.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?

McCree’s eyes follow him. “Seems kind of a waste to have two rooms, y’know, considerin’ how we do back on base.”

“Then we oughtta get some sleep,” Jesse murmurs. “Ain’t no virtue in stayin’ up. Plenty of time tomorrow to get started.”

Hanzo charges his comm and checks his phone. Athena confirms there’s no new data on Seventy-Six. It’s four in the morning back on Gibraltar; everyone is probably asleep. Maybe even Hana. Would Genji pick up if he called?
thought.

Everything has gone smoothly so far. Now they’re in the thick of it: Mexico, Dorado, the mystery of Seventy-Six. The obvious trap. Phase Two begins now; they have information to collect. Hanzo still feels unfocused, weary, out of sorts.

Like the gunslinger called it: ennui. The languor between danger, the train-ride between each stop. Which facet does he actually miss: the Watchpoint, or the comfort of a safe, familiar place?

He yields to exhaustion, dreaming of marigolds eddying down a great gray river.

---

Day One. Halloween. Mr. Barceló and Mr. Tsubaki dress casual for cool weather (sweaters, long-sleeved shirts, jeans, trousers, scarves) and take a walk around the city. They stop for breakfast and coffee at a local cafe, maintaining an easy distance with each other -- unassuming business partners unsure where the job ends and the fun begins. They sight-see while smoking cigarettes, snapping photos like tourists on their phones. In between pictures of costumed street performers, Hanzo tucks away shots of LumériCo vehicles idling through traffic. Evidence for memorizing license plates, identifying makes and models, gathering descriptions of their crew. The power plant receives two morning drop-off shipments via truck at eight and eleven o’clock. Afternoon deliveries run at four and six PM.

“C’mere,” Jesse says, flipping his handset after they skirt the butter-yellow gates of the president’s mansion. “Let’s do like Lúcio, ‘take a selfie with me.’”

Hanzo lifts his paper cup to his lips. “Pass.”

“Aw, why not?” Jesse holds out his phone, thumbing the camera button, snapping photos with his head slightly out of frame.

“We are supposed to be surveying,” After a sullen pause: “I dislike having my photo taken.”

“Real shame, sweetheart, with a face as pretty as yours.”

Hanzo hums into his coffee, sipping the praise. “Thank you.”

The gunslinger tips his hat, tilts his aviators, sticks out his tongue in a silly face. “I’m gonna send these to you when you aren’t expecting it.”

The archer watches over the rim of his sunglasses. “Why?”

“To catch you off-guard.” He flicks his middle finger at the camera while grimacing with a cigarette pinched between his teeth. “When you least expect it. Like when you’re trying to take a dump.”

Hanzo scoffs, rolling his eyes. “You are a child.”

“C’mon, Mister Tsubaki, get over here and take one with me. Don’t be a stick in the mud.”

After a little more badgering, he consents. They take shots with the noon sun throwing white halos in the background, others against the golden glow of the city streets. No crude gestures, no weird faces, nothing that Hanzo could call a smile. One humorous photo: Hanzo gently knuckling Jesse’s cheek, half-smirking -- Jesse’s expression contorted, as if punched. He lets Hanzo review and delete the unflattering ones. Hanzo lets him have seven out of the thirty-three taken.
They eat a late lunch on a secluded patio after scouting the power plant’s main entrance on the northern end of the city. McCree winds the conversation to Blackwatch tactics, breaking and entering, the best ways to infiltrate a secure location.

“Reinhardt told me once that you were one of their best agents,” Hanzo says, forking over a platter of lime-grilled fish. “How did you measure? Was it the number of missions you ran, or just overall performance?”

“Bit of both,” Jesse says over migas and corn tortillas. “I threw myself into it, did whatever op was available. Went in guns-ablazin’. Lived that life as hard as I could, until it got to be too much.”

“It was punishing,” Hanzo comments, thinking of the Dead-Eye. And then of dark hotel rooms and crowded train rides. Overgrown omniums. Small birds. “You had to do things that you didn’t want to do. Tasks that went against what you stood for.”

“Yeah. Reyes used to say it didn’t matter how I felt -- a job was a job. If someone had to die at the end of the day, it didn’t matter who pulled the trigger. Death was comin’ for us all.” A dull edge returns to his voice, same as the box garden, the station, the targets at Range 2. “He was a grim sonofabitch at the end, there, that’s for sure.”

“And Jack Morrison never intervened.”

Jesse cracks a rough hah. “Jack didn’t do shit about Blackwatch. Anytime he got wind of it, he turned a rosy cheek. Hell, everyone back at the Watchpoint was like that in the old days. Didn’t have a clue what kinda work we got into half the time, happy when the job got done. Happier to look away while it was going down. Reyes took them to task about it all the time. Some of the worst times Reyes burned my ass in the was whenever he and Jack were fightin’ over it.” His fork clinks against the green plate. “Got to making me feel like a punchin’ bag.”

Hanzo feels a sudden prickle. “He would punch you?”

“Well, we’d scrap.” Jesse puts down his fork. “Trainin' ring. You know how it goes.”

Hanzo sips his water and thinks: maybe I do, maybe I don’t.

His phone buzzes as they leave.

|| 1415: [3945_85] Song, Hana: HAPPY HALLOWEEN!!!!(づ◕‿◕づ)づ
How’s it going??

|| 1415: [3945_84]
Good. No trouble. Happy Halloween to you too.
Have you practiced today?

|| 1416: [3945_85] Song, Hana: Ya
You can see my numbers if you log into Athena’s perf panel
I thought I did good today but when you get back you can tell me what you think
I’m gonna do a stream later in my costume, it’s gonna be so cool haha (◕ω◕) 
Me and Lu just made these Brazilian fish cakes for dinner and they’re SO GOOD 
Mac would probably like them because they’re deep fried LOL 
I can teach you how to make them when you get back (∩▀ ▼ω▼)☆

∥ 1419: [3945_84] 
Aren’t you kind. Why don’t you teach him instead of me?

∥ 1421: [3945_85] Song, Hana: 
So you can make them for him!! ˘-dev\*˘ 
How do you say it in Japanese?? 
The way to a man’s heart is through his stomach 
OMG btw I have to show you something

“Jeez, who’s blowin’ up your phone?” McCree asks as they walk back to the hotel.

“Miss Song,” Hanzo replies, thumbing the keypad. “Excited about Halloween.”

“Wonder if they all dressed up. Angela and Torbjorn love Halloween, they used to do these lil’ 
costume parties at the headquarters. What’s she chattin’ at you about?” He gets a glimpse at the 
characters on the screen. “Man, how many people in the team know Japanese?”

“Korean.”

“You speak Korean?”

“I know enough from business, and studying it in university.” He taps the keypad. “It helps me 
practice and it helps her acclimate.”

Jesse whistles. “Damn, Mister Tsubaki, I learn somethin’ new about you every day.”

∥ 1419: [3945_84] 
The easier way to say it is:
“The way to a man’s heart is through his ribcage”

Before he can send the last message, an attachment pops up on the screen. Hana has sent a picture.

∥ 1422: [3945_85] Song, Hana: 
Lu found this in the lab in one of the drawers 
Look at your cowboy Mac LOL (♥ ε ♥)
He slowly lowers his phone.

“Hanzo?”

He looks up at McCree. Then he looks back at the picture. Back at McCree. The picture. McCree.

The picture of McCree: young, stalky, hatted with a red kerchief cresting the throat of his Blackwatch coveralls. No older than twenty-five. His shaggy brown hair hangs around his jaw. Hanzo takes in the pleasing hook of his cheekbones and the bare ridges of his clean-shaven face. No beard, no scruff, no sideburns. Sunburned, flashing dark eyes with long lashes. He has a sly, sweet look to him, full lips grinning from ear to (admittedly pokey) ear. Crooking his unmolested left hand at the camera in finger-gun fashion, cocky and self-assured, as if hoping to charm the viewer into treating him kind.

It blurs out of his thoughts unbidden, like the dull whack of an arrow: clever fellow. And then, honing in on the finger-gun, startling himself almost more than the picture did: good shot.

“Nothing,” he replies, putting away his phone.

Later, McCree brings it up during an evening scope of the power plant. First he asks innocently (‘what did she send you?’), then politely (‘may I see?’), then querulously (‘aw, c’mon, Mister Tsubaki, lemme see’) and finally conceding with sour grapes (‘aw, go blow yourself, I didn’t wanna see it that bad anyway’). Hanzo tells him it’s a joke in Korean, one he might not understand. McCree rolls his eyes, points out that Lúcio tells him Brazilian jokes all the time, not minding if he misses the punchline. Hanzo replies that Lúcio is kind where Miss Song is precocious. In friendly combination, they make an enthusiastic and positive pair. Distracting from the topic of the picture on his phone.

They dodge trick-or-treaters and laughing children in their retreat to the Misión. A small procession interrupts the calle mercado. Somber white floats carry glowing altars laden with statues of saints and angels, holy visages radiant against a backdrop of enameled flowers. Pictures of sacred figures lament morose and open-mouthed out of gilded frames. A small cluster of nuns in black gowns and habits wander after, singing in prayer. The walking vigil in celebration of All Saints.

Jesse points it out. Her mechanical gait, the sad chrome face, robotic fingers coursing over a string of beads. One of the nuns is an omnic.

Hanzo stares as they pass, eyes full of candlelight. Jesse makes the sign of the cross, mumbles something in Spanish, sighs. Vaya con Dios.

---

Day Two begins uneventfully. They check in with Athena, go out, get breakfast, tour around. Busted piñatas litter the curbs; twice they stop to scrape crushed candy from their shoes. A group of LumériCo custodians sweep colorful piles of paper and wrapping around the bank by the Banco de Dorado, cautioning the gentlemen to mind their feet. Jesse chats up kids playing football in an open-air portico by the courthouse. They tell him Los Muertos haven’t been around the city in forever -- months, maybe over a year. The soldado, however, comes and goes like a cryptid. He serves the role of a local hero and also a terrorist, bogeyman and common man’s boon. One boy jokes that he saw him three times last night at the Halloween carnival. Like other famous superheroes, Seventy-Six and his many mimics are a popular costume choice among the city’s younger children.

“So he’s a legend,” Winston sighs when he reports in through holo-chat on his phone. “And a
controversial one, too. Great. No telling what kind of information you’ll get now.”

“I do not think he has been in Dorado for a while. McCree spoke with a group of casino workers who claim that a legitimate sighting of Seventy-Six has not been documented in over a year. There has been more interest over a pair of bank robbers who committed a heist on the Banco last fall.”

“A heist?” Winston sounds interested. “Hey, can you send me the info on that? I doubt it’s connected, but I want to run the data through Athena anyway. See if she can come up with any potential links.”

Hanzo taps his phone screen to pass three files along: a document on the bank’s security upgrades, a wanted poster, and a dual-frame photo of the criminals responsible for the heist. A scrappy man with a fiendish grin and ratty hair, and a sizeable figure wearing a creepy porcine mask.

The picture Hana sent flickers in his photo gallery, easy grin catching his eye. Howdy.


“Yes,” Hanzo answers, snapping back to his senses, adjusting his reading glasses. “Tonight we move to investigate the plant. There will be enough activity in the city to suffice for distraction. We travel in via the six o’clock delivery truck, from where we will have at least thirty minutes to make our way in towards the coordinates.”

“Thirty minutes? That’s all?”

“It is a ballpark number. The goal is to acquire temporary identification to move around the plant. If we cannot get it, we will have to get out unseen and attempt again on Monday morning.”

Winston grunts. “Alright. Just remember, non-lethal. You guys have stayed under the radar so far. There’s been no inquiries here, nothing out of the ordinary. I don’t think Satya has even noticed you guys are gone. So keep holding up your aliases over there. We’ll figure this out. You guys are doing great so far.”

---

Hanzo tries to keep his focus on the mission, but Jesse distracts him. Not intentionally; he’s got his head in the game, perhaps moreso than when they arrived. Watching McCree work proves to be entrancing. He blends in with the locals, converses with ease, mingles without hassle, plays his part without flaw. Long, musical conversations in Spanish inure him to everyone and everything; he strikes up a quick, amiable accord with every target or potential informant. One topic folds into another and soon he’s charmed his mark into sluicing out whatever he wishes to hear. Jesse knows Dorado; Dorado seems to know him. Hanzo feels like he knows nothing. There’s too much noise and color in a language he doesn’t understand. He itches for some action, something where he can use his wits or his bow. If only he could stand up at the center of the town, wave an American flag and bellow Dylan Thomas at the top of his lungs, it might draw out the soldado.

He goes for a jog shortly after noon, eager for his synthetic soles over Mister Tsubaki’s uncomfortable wingtip shoes. The run helps. He sweats, pumps up a few hilly inclines; along the way, he lopes over a bridge festooned with marigolds. Hanzo returns to find Jesse toweling off naked, fresh from the shower, bantering about the best horchata he’s had in years. Hanzo observes as he idles around the room, tanned and lithe and towering, amiably sunning up the room with an unlit cigarette dangling from his full lips.

Longing rises in his chest, cresting like a wave. It reaches his throat and he says, “do you want to
“Do you want to go do something.” Hanzo fishes his gold scarf out of his pocket, wipes his brow, winding it around his wrist, craving the color and feel. Something to stabilize him through this sudden impulse. “Something around the city.”

“What, like” -- Jesse yanks up his jeans -- “together? As part of the job?”


Jesse practically pounces. “Well, sure, darlin’. Hell yeah I would. We got some time before we go hit up the plant, I’d love to go do somethin’ with you.”

Anxiety edges into his voice. Why did he think the man might say anything but yes? “What do you want to do?”

A thoughtful hum. And then, “hell, I know. Let’s go ride.”

“Ride?”

“Horses. You can ride ‘em on the beach, they got a stable down by the marina.” A lightness flickers across his feature, an ease. “We talked about it once. Remember? You said you were good.”

Hanzo licks his lips. The look on Jesse’s face reminds him of the photo in his phone: youthful, eager, rough-and-tumble. “Yes. You know a place?”

“I do. Get washed up and let’s go, darlin’.”

They go. Jesse rents two geldings for a two-hour ride up and down the bay trails, easy terrain with less reeds and few rocks. Hanzo takes a palomino with soft eyes; Jesse a sorrel whose coat glints like polished cinnabar. Jesse handles the horse well; he rides lean as a ranch-hand, bouncing with a keen sway and glinting spurs.

Hanzo has forgotten train rides, but he remembers the last time he rode a horse: dressage at the university, an exclusive class with other privileged students. The course precluding private lessons in traditional mounted archery, paid for by his father, indulged as a gift: to my eldest son and his fine bow. The rhythm returns to him naturally, a primal flicker of memory gnawing at his guts, the reverberating din of hooves drumming across dirt, thumping him in the saddle. The thrill of an arrow nocked and drawn, fletching gritting his fingertips, lips fixed, eyes sharp. Spearing a target in the back bullseye, roaring down the track, reloading to ride again.

It quickens his blood. He toes the palomino to a canter; Jesse laughs, calls whoa, kicks up sand to catch up. The horses aren’t used to speed, so they slow before they lather and edge around the dunes. Settling to a slow stride up the coast, watching the distant waves as white rolls of seafoam ladder up to the shore.

“You good?” Jesse asks over his shoulder, hat askew, eyes bright. Blown wild in the wind, a red streak on a fiery horse. Grinning fierce.

Hanzo pushes his scarf out of his eyes and gathers the bridle. He nods. Very good.
A late-afternoon storm cancels their investigation. As the leave the beach, the sky booms; a downpour catches them climbing the sandy steps. McCree laughs when Hanzo darts for cover, scaling the bay rocks two by two to get out of the rain. Like a billy goat, he says -- getting soaked, not minding it, shaking out his clinging shirt as he catches up under a plaster colonnade by the Misión. He takes off his hat, runs his mechanical hand over his scalp, shakes off droplets under the patio. Cheerfully wet, like a dog, beaming at Hanzo who unbinds and wrings out his hair.

“Ain’t breakin’ into no power plants today,” he snorts. “Mother Nature has spoken.”

Hanzo feels a wave creeping in his chest when they reach the room. He flicks off the lightswitch and taps open the shutters. Outside, the storm swallows the hills. Bolts of lightning spider electric-gold from the round black underbelly billowing the horizon. A low windy roar mingles with the high white crash of rain.

Jesse crows about how good it felt to be back in the saddle again as he unbuttons his shirt, sheds it, drapes it dripping over the back of a wooden chair. Hanzo watches the way his tawny back ripples as he peels off his undershirt, scars like pale grooves in his flanks, grey light flickering across musculature, some parts soft and others firm. Hanzo sees the dark hair dusting down his abdomen into the plunge of his open jeans, wild as a thatch of weeds. He can smell leather from where he stands.

The wave breaks. He cuts across the room, reaches Jesse, catches him, pulls him in. Their mouths come together first, then chests, arms, bellies and hips. An electric configuration slotting together, sudden, hot as a wire. Jesse shuffles, huffs, folds into Hanzo like a crumbling tower. Greedy kisses bloom into rough jabs, softening moments later when one mouth goes wandering affectionately down the cords of the other’s throat. Jesse tries to lift him. Hanzo grapples him back. The gunslinger scrabbles when he’s hoisted, carried, tossed on the bed. Over the sound of thunder and their hard breaths, Hanzo hears the spurs clanking unceremoniously when Jesse’s boots hit the floor.

This is not part of the operation. There is nothing on the docket that outlines this procedure; there’s no target, no objective, just a goal. The need -- overwhelming, all-consuming like a tempest -- to fit a union between them. Hanzo sees it in his face, knows his own eyes reflect it, adores it, desires it. After hours spent secluded, unwatched, alone together. In private, on a nice bed, during a thunderstorm.

Somewhere between rutting and shredding off clothes and licking fire into each other’s mouths, Jesse gets out a few hoarse words. “Do you wanna?”

“I do.”

“No foolin’ around like before, I mean: do you wanna do it?”

“Yes.” Hanzo gleams his hand from Jesse’s boxers, springing him free from the wilted waistband, marveling at how earnest and messy he already is. “You do too.”

“I brought stuff.” Straddled beneath him, Jesse strains. “I gotta get it. It’s in my bag.”

Hanzo stares, shivering when Jesse takes his fingers down the dragon tattoo. “What?”

“I brought stuff so we can fuck.”
So crass. Hanzo flattens a palm on Jesse’s chest. “I will get it.”

“Naw” -- Jesse coils forward, pinned at the hips. “I can get it, lemme get up --”

Hanzo slips from the bed, glides to Jesse’s borrowed satchel, digs through the pockets. There’s cigarettes, chewing gum, rolling papers, a pack of cards, the length of a rosary, half a pencil, two melted (potentially ancient) peanut butter cups, a dented flashbang cap --

Jesse puffs behind him, bared and shamelessly spread-eagled. “The white bag.”

Paper crinkles against his fingers. He opens it, looks in, narrows his eyes, glowers over his shoulder. “Where did you get all this?”

Innocently. “Uh. I had some of it lying around, y’know, the lube and all that --”

“From the medbay.”

Jesse flusters. “No.” And then, admitting defeat: “honey, I was just trying to be vigilant.”

Hanzo flicks his wrist and sends a foil packet flying across the room. It hits the gunslinger’s ruddy face with a succinct **thap**.

Jesse winces, pulls it off, starts unwrapping. “Look, you seemed like a particular sort of guy, I didn’t wanna just go and pester Lúcio or whatever --”

He stalks across the bed. “Give it.”

Jesse stills beneath him, tense as prey. “Huh?”

Hanzo noses his neck, easing him down with a firm hand while he purrs: “Give it to me.”

Dull heat glazes over Jesse’s earthy eyes. He palms over the rubbery ring, murmuring softly, swallowing audibly. A tangible shiver jolts his shoulders. Weakly he grins, acquiescing. “Ah, hell.”

They come together inch by inch, closing the gap, stirred by the storm. It takes more adjustment than he expects, less crudeness, a stretch of dutiful preparation. At first Jesse stiffens when Hanzo whispers to relax, having none of it, rigid and jumping like his gun. Then he takes his hand and guides it, gives him measure, directs two slickened fingers to work him, open him, ease out of him the sounds that Hanzo drinks so deeply every time they meet. A shuffle of legs, re-arranging of knees, and a few wet nudges has Jesse sighing, arching, twisting beneath him. Filled with a whine of satisfaction so good that he throws back his head. He wants it; Hanzo gives; Jesse seeks a kiss through the thick of it, which twists his belly like a tender knife.

They go at it quietly at first, which startles Hanzo more than the bliss from each stroke. No groans, no chatter, no **sweetheart, honey, sonofabitch**. It worries him enough to lift his head from Jesse’s neck, flexing against the hands scrabbling clench-tight on his back. The gunslinger’s face is red-hot, heavy-lidded, shiny with sweat. He grits his teeth.

“Are you alright?” Hanzo hears himself ask above the roar of rain and his own breath.


“Does it hurt?”

An insistent scratch. “No.”
Hanzo thumbs the bony vee of Jesse’s hips. “You are not normally so” -- he hunts for a word through a haze of lust -- “restrained.”

“Didn’t think you’d be this gentle.”

His gaze darts across Jesse’s face. “What?”

Reedy, whistling hoarse in his throat, Jesse gets it out. “You’re just bein’ real sweet, is all. Ain’t sure what you want me to do.”

Hanzo lowers, yielding, shivering at the brush of his calves on his back. “I want you to enjoy it.” And then, returning to nuzzle his jawline: “I am used to your loudness.”

Jesse spirals a fingertip on his nipple, strokes the dragon tattoo, grips his shoulder. “Yeah?”

“Maybe I like it.”

Jesse laughs, rich and rolling; the tension breaks instantly. “Yeah? God-damn, you’re a fuckin’ thief. Stealing my heart. Here I thought you got turned off when I talked.”

“It has a time and place,” Hanzo murmurs against his earlobe, licking his lips.

Playful, almost cheeky. “I swear, this’s the most I’ve heard outta you in bed ever. I’m inclined to think you’re lookin’ for a distraction.”

Now he fists him idly, languid, thumbing to tease. Sensing in Jesse’s voice a hint of pluck, itching to goad back. “Maybe.”

“What’s the matter, darlin’?” Definitely cheeky now. “Scared I’m gonna turn you into a minute-man?”

He squeezes Jesse at that, jerking, making him yelp. In Japanese, he chides. “Be quiet.”

Jesse shudders, squirming beneath him. “God-damn, I love it when you do that. You get me fired up. You could be telling me a fuckin’ grocery list and I’d probably wring it off.”

For that, Hanzo drives him hard, eliciting another noise. And then again, and again, yelping him along with rough thrusts until they turn to howls. Jesse’s nails stripe his back, digging in, hanging on. Hanzo gets a fistful of his hair, buries against his neck, lets him have it. The headboard bangs insistently on the wall, accompanying thunder.

So eager. So abasing. This is what he likes; Hanzo decides, as if gifted by epiphany: he likes it, too.

Sputtering, Jesse lets out a shout like a gunshot: “flip over.”

“What?” Hanzo cracks, unprepared for the bulk of the bigger man to push up so fast.

“Just do it for me, will you? Fuck’s sake --”

They grapple and writhe until Jesse wins out. A view of the white plaster ceiling greets Hanzo when his back hits the bedspread. Jesse looms over, thighs astride, enthusiastically saddling him. Grinning coyote-wild, hair in disarray, eyes glinting spitfire. Flushed red all over, swollen, devilish and biting. An older, wicked echo of the photo on his phone, aching to get wrecked.

That unravels him. No hope of holding it together after that realization. Jesse rides determined, soles digging the bedspread, speeding him over the edge. Hanzo grits his jaw, snarls, works him
fiercely in his fist. Forcing him to peak as if it will somehow even the score, letting out a strangled groan, stabbing sinewy elbows into the mattress to keep Jesse from bucking him off. Hitting him with a last thrust as if to say: *enough.*

They dizzy apart in a mess, Jesse toppling forward, Hanzo giving slack, the bed quitting beneath them with an anemic *thump.* Hanzo heaves whale-spout breaths, twitching, white-hot thrill subsiding off his skin and trickling down his limbs like sweat. Jesse goes up on his knees, slips off careful, slumps beside him in a sweaty heap. His lungs grind out like a smoky gale.

A peal of thunder outside signals from the storm: still raining. Still churning in the background, whorling around the two of them, the placid eye.

Hanzo feels a damp tickle on his chest. Jesse slopes beside him, a red slash, mopping off his neck and chin with his undershirt. Muttering an apology barely audible over the rain, sprinkling pet names through tumid breaths, like afterthoughts. *Honey, darlin’. Sweetheart of mine.*

---

It thunders throughout the evening. They clean off, shower, smoke in bed with the shutters cracked. Eventually they drift together again when the weather forecasts storms for the rest of the night. Hanzo wears himself out during the second coupling, pulling away so sensitive that his teeth chatter. Jesse has to bring him down, soothe him out of it, wind him close; combing his hair, pillowing his head on his barrel chest. Breathing deep and slow, a rhythm at rest.

“You gotta take it easy,” Jesse murmurs. His voice scrapes like boots on gravel in the dark. “Thought you were gonna black out for a second.”

“You have no room to talk.” Hanzo mouths against his sternum, sulky: “so rough on yourself.”

“I like it rough. Full-throttle in everything, sweetheart. Figured you’d know that by now.”

Wryly. “I guessed.”

Jesse rumbles a snort. “You wanna hear somethin’ funny?” He scratches his cheek, digs his pinky finger in his ear. “I sat around for a spell back at the Watchpoint and wondered if maybe there was some reason you didn’t wanna do it.”

“A reason?”

“Yeah.” Jesse resumes grazing his fingers into the greying fans of hair at Hanzo’s brows. “Figured you were shy. Then I remembered you ain’t shy. Then I thought, well, maybe -- y’know. Maybe it’s ‘cause maybe you were a virgin.”

Startled, Hanzo laughs. It starts small and builds, rising, bubbling out of his chest until he’s shuddering into Jesse’s chest. Full-on cackling. “Are you serious?”

Jesse goes rigid beneath him. “Mother of fuck-all.”

“What?” Hanzo snorts and taps the gunslinger’s chin. “Do not jest. Did you really think that?”


Hanzo strokes the coarse hair of his chest and rolls his cheek against his collarbone. Elbowing him gently. “Sometimes you are funny. What can I say.”
“Aw, are you gonna make fun of me now? It just seemed like you just weren’t real keen on it, so I figured there might be a reason.”

Hanzo hums, amused. “What if there was?”

“Was there?”

“Yes.”

“Okay, what was it?”

“The bed was not big enough.”

Jesse clicks his tongue, lolls back his head, groans. “You’re kidding me.”

Hanzo sits up. “A man can have preferences, can he not?” He reaches in the dark for the ashtray, crinkles cellophane and red cardboard, lights another cigarette. “Perhaps I do not prefer those small rooms and that close company. Perhaps I wanted something like this instead.”

“I mean, I like these digs and all, sweetheart, but I’d just as soon pitch a tent in a fuckin’ broom closet so long as it’s with you --”

Hanzo twists his ear. “A proper place, a time. A seclusion all to ourselves. An opportunity to get away from distractions and interruptions.”

“So” -- Jesse drawls flatly, gesturing around the room -- “a mission?”

Hanzo pauses, purses his lips, traces a spiral on Jesse’s chest. Eventually admitting: “the right moment.”

Jesse wheezes. “Aw, sweetheart. Shit. You shoulda just said something. Here I was, waitin’ for the other shoe to drop, thinkin’ it was gonna be like Siberia all over again.”

Hanzo thinks of the spaceport in Madrid, the train ride, the coffee and pictures and the photo on his phone. Jesse’s sun-baked shape weaving in and out of the crowds, grinning, laughing. He lets his mind wash with tenderness, reviewing their interludes like old photographs of black, white, evening sepia, flowering into memories clear as the colors spanning Dorado’s sprawling hills. Nothing like his dreams, which waver in his thoughts like distant objects in fog.

After a long silence, Hanzo taps ash off his cigarette and says, “you have told me a lot of things about your past since we left.”

“Yes. Guess I have. You know me, I’m an open book.”

Hanzo blows out a plume of smoke. “I want to tell you something.”

“What’s that?”

“My past. Before Genji died. I want to tell you something about that time.”

Jesse perks, flicking his lighter. “Well, go ahead, darlin’. I’m listening.”

“I was engaged to be married many years ago.”

“Oh.” Jesse shifts beneath the sheets. He grunts. “Yeah?”
“Yes. To a woman I met at university.”

More shifting. Jesse lights his own cigarette. Hanzo watches the lit end flare to life in the dark, a ruby-red coal.

“Well,” Jesse says, “what happened?”

“It was an arrangement. I knew her for many years before I decided we should marry. We had several talks. Discussions. I considered and assessed a number of angles and decided on a few that worked for both of us.” He takes a drag, exhales smoke, shakes his head. “She was studying in Tokyo at the time, but preparations were in the works for her to move to Hanamura. It was to be a very long engagement. It did not go as planned.”

“How do you mean?”

“When I left the family, I left her as well. I would have endangered her if I tried to contact her. The Shimada-gumi wanted any information about me that they could find. If they thought she had any, they would have killed her for not giving it up. I never spoke to her again.”

“Huh. Tough luck.”

“I think about her sometimes. Not in the way you think about things. Nor in the way you describe them. I think about her the way you remember weird dreams. Her face, her clothes, her body -- they come back in shapes. Blurry ones. Like through the wall of a fish tank, or a glass. I cannot remember her as a whole person, and I cannot trust any part of her that I remember. She is a ghost to me now. Maybe I never actually knew her at all.

We spent time apart. She could have had another life, away from me, purposefully installed to keep me in my place. I think about her now and question it. Was she really studying in Tokyo? Was her family as prestigious as I was always told, with so many good connections? Was she actually from their family or was she pretending? Was her name an alias? A pseudonym? It could have been fake. Everything could have been made up. Did I actually meet her at university, or was she carefully placed in my way for me to find, to like, to do what was expected of me and take her as a wife? A crafted path that they knew I would follow?

My father could have arranged it. He had arranged such things before: interests, hobbies, directions for one’s life. The family could convince you of anything, to do anything, to be anything. All they had to do was tell you it was right, and why, and you would believe it. If you didn’t want to believe it, they found ways to make it happen without you realizing it. They were a force of nature. They were weapons that did great harm without ever drawing blood, like gods.

An arrangement. It sounds so false. Maybe it was false. I ask myself what I was doing back then, and my only answer is: I do not know.”

Silence. Outside, the rain hammers on the tile roof. Hanzo stubs his cigarette; Jesse finishes his and does the same.

“What was her name?” he drawls, soft, sleepy.

Hanzo opens one eye. “Yuki.”

“Yu-ki. Could’ve been a real name. You know where she is now?”

“Gone. Somewhere in Japan. In a safer place.”
The gunslinger loops an arm around him, rubs his back, kisses his shoulder. Letting him lean limp and sullen in his big, warm grasp. “We’ll have to ask Mister Sanjuro Tsubaki if he knows.”

Hanzo gives. He laughs. Shedding the facade of a callous hide, unfolding in his arms, a man once more.

They doze through late rattles of thunder. Hanzo dreams of sunrise over wisteria, a soft white hand tucking something warm around his shoulders. A serpentine analemma chasing through a winter sky, snaking around his heart, blanketing him at night and daylight hours in between. A red drape.

---

Day Three. A cool, foggy morning. Seagulls natter on the roof; a breeze clean with the tang of salt whistles past the shutters; outside, on a lower patio, someone plays a guitar.

Hanzo sits up. He smells sweat and old cigarette smoke, an oily odor like gun grease. He squints. The digital clock on the wall glows blocky bluish digits: 5:15 AM. Beside him, the bed is empty. Jesse has taken his comm and scribbled a note: gone out for coffee, will bring you some back.

His sets his soles on the red saltillo floor. Hanzo winces as he rises, stretching, flinching, shaking out his limbs. The unfamiliar soreness of riding: everything aches.

He showers, hunts for clothes, settles for a pair of sweatpants and one of Jesse’s too-big shirts. The plaid cotton hangs soft on his back. Comforting, like the serape. Maybe when Jesse returns, he’ll ask for it back or try to take it off. An opportunity to grapple, tease, roll back to bed before they resume the job.

Then he sees it. Flickering through the adjoining door into the other suite: something blue.

Hanzo moves. He scrapes a throwing knife from its hidden slot under the bedside lamp and tosses it, watches it spin – slicing through the doorway and hitting solid matter on the other side. A guttural sound, a man’s voice: gah. Hanzo dives for Storm Bow. When the door kicks open, he’s nocked, aimed, and drawn.

The barrel of a blue pulse rifle gleams, aimed in return.

“Stand down,” grits the ragged voice of the man with the gun. “Hold fire, Shimada. I’ll lower my weapon if you stand down.”

A streak of anger sears behind Hanzo’s eyes at the sound of his name. He sees the throwing knife wedged in the man’s arm, jutting out of a leather sleeve. Blood dappling the blue fabric, red as his gloves.

_Tacky jacket._


Seventy-Six lowers his rifle to the ground. He starts a crouch, angling the barrel along the floor. Rasping again: “stand down. I’m not here to fight. Open fire and this place will go up like the fourth of July. You start a firefight in the _Misión_ and Talon will be on us like sharks to blood.”

“How are you here?” Hanzo barks. “I should kill you right now.”

“You probably should. It’d make a lot of things easier if I was actually dead.”
Hanzo tests the bowstring. “Explain yourself now or I will fulfill such a claim.”

“You know who I am.” Seventy-Six rises with his hands up. “I know who you are. Overwatch, Agent Hanzo. Genji Shimada’s brother. You’re here with Agent McCree. You’re both incognito. I can guess why, but it doesn’t matter. At least you’re here now. At least.”

“What are you?” Hanzo asks, itching to shoot. “Are you Jack Morrison?”

“I have valuable information for you. I know about Siberia. I didn’t get there in time to stop it.”

“Are - you - Jack - Morrison?”

“You need to secure McCree. The both of you, you’re in danger. If you came here hunting Talon, maybe you already know. They’re working on a systematic elimination of all your agents. Past and present. All associates, too. Your recall has upped the stakes, put targets on new faces, branched out to hundreds of new targets. Everything is at risk now. You don’t have the manpower and you don’t have the --”

Hanzo interrupts in fury. “A knife is lodged in your arm, an arrow is about to lodge in your skull. Tell me now or I will put an end to these questions and remove all doubt by killing you right here.”

A low, deadly hiss. “Are you Jack Morrison.”

Seventy-Six lowers his chin after a long, heavy pause. Hanzo winds tight, sinews knotting, honed and ready to fire.

“Yes,” sighs the gruff voice behind the visor. “Yes. I’m Jack Morrison.” And then, in a voice like steel: “former strike commander of Overwatch.”

Hanzo works his jaw. “You did not perish at the Swiss headquarters.”

“No.”

“You became a vigilante.”

“Yes.”

“Why are you here.”

“I know you have a lot of questions, but there’s important things you need to know --”

“Answer me or this arrow flies.”

“Shimada, you need to secure yourselves, this is a lot deeper than you think.”

“Answer me!”

“Reyes is alive.”

His eyes narrow to slits. The mercenary curls his fingers. He’s trying not to breathe fast. Afraid.

“What,” replies Hanzo, suddenly jarred, alarmed.

“Gabriel Reyes is alive. And he’s here. We both are. It can’t be a coincidence that we all wound up here at the same time. He made it out of Siberia alive. It doesn’t matter how, all that matters is that he is here. You need to secure McCree. You both need to get out of here, whatever mission brought you down here is now compromised.”
The strange languor returns out of nowhere, creeping up his chest, clawing his throat. He lowers his bow. His mind jumps. A realization dawns on him, crashing down, a stormy wave.

“Reaper.”

The holiday. November Second, the celebration of souls.

_Día de los Muertos_ -- as Jesse told him: the day of the dead.

---

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Sylphy, Losebetter, Penna, Entropy, and Fig for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- References: _The top proverb, Code cyphers, Jack's poem, Jesse's alias, Hanzo's alias, A Mexican mule, Pan de huevo_ ('conchas' where I grew up).
- This was a pretty self-indulgent chapter for me as far as cultural stuff goes. Some of my favorite towns/cities/routes in the South, traditions I grew up with from a Mexican family, good food.
- I do headcanon that McCree is half-Latino; the implication is pretty strong throughout here.
- (thanks Olympics update for hinting McCree might actually ride horses)
- There is a lot of continuity between HtF's Hanzo and the young Hanzo in _Koi No Yokan_ by franklytriggering. Shouts out to Brian for working with me and linking up the two stories to weave a cool tale.
- I told y'all Dad would show up.
- There will almost certainly be slower updates between this chapter and the next and 14 -- I will be inundated with IRL stuff until September, so I apologize for a slower-than-a-week update schedule!

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a _masterpost here_ that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

- Thank you guys for waiting a little longer for this one. Chapter 14 will be out closer to the end of the first week of September or so; I will be out of town for (US) Labor Day!
- Still very excited that you guys are following along!
- A tag (for which I apologize for being retro): there is some emotionally stressful content in here regarding Gabe and Jesse's relationship pre-fall of OW. If you're wondering: there is more clarification on it to come, as well as some alleviation.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Carrying a cup of coffee, wearing a wide smile, humming a song slightly out of tune, McCree takes a morning walk down the streets of Dorado. The city washes cool under the bay wind and smooth stone-colored skies, white fog clinging to the hills like wispy cotton tufts. He tips his hat to two elderly women in flowery dresses carrying shopping bags on their way to the mercado. They murmur and smile (“buenos días”), he answers jovially (“bueno, bueno”). McCree gives way for a LumériCo truck passing into a side-street, a squarish yellow license plate reading blocky digits: 44-4-DOA. He doesn’t recognize this one; he decides to add it to Hanzo’s extensive list of all the company transit vehicles currently running service.

His walk rounds a secluded park and playground with a few wooden benches sandwiched between stone planters and potted cacti. Alone, he takes out his phone, rubs off a slightly sugary thumbprint encrusted on the edge, and taps the button to bring up Athena’s mission profile panel. He enters the license plate code, fat-fingers it, squints, adjusts his aviator sunglasses, jabs backspace, re-enters. McCree checks the time: 5:50 AM, nearly one in the afternoon back in Gibraltar. He finishes his coffee, ditches the cup, makes a mental note to pick up some for Hanzo on the way back. Like he promised.

Then he flips open the handset photo gallery and sighs with a smile.

Seven pictures of himself and Hanzo by the president’s mansion, buffeted by daffodil walls and sunny blue sky, hints of orange autumn behind them. Hanzo at his shoulder, Hanzo flashing two fingers in a crisp vee, Hanzo gently pressing his knuckles into Jesse’s scruffy cheek. By his side in every frame. A digital snapshot of a single moment in a weekend that Jesse McCree thinks could be the best of his entire life.

An unexpected best. Hanzo has surprised him more in the past three days than he has in three months. He proves himself diligent in gathering information (as Jesse already knew), talented at undercover ops (as Jesse expected), resourceful as a coworker (and pleasantly compromising). Sharp at riding, devastatingly good-looking in glasses. Surprisingly gentle at making love, if not hesitant and quick to startle. The cool autumn bite in the air reminds him of the thrill of watching Hanzo shudder apart not once but twice in one night. He delights at the memory of unwrapping those powerful arms from his torso the second time and having to pry him off, doubling back and clasping him. Muttering in the same way he did to the horses as he soothed him down from going too hard and fast: whoa darlin’, hey angel-eyes, let it go.
Jesse shivers, fishes a fresh pack of cigarettes out of his shirt pocket, lights one, takes a drag. He wanders through a pair of orange stucco gates. A bronze plaque announces what lies beyond: *Dorado Cementerio Real.*

His thoughts circle the time spent with Hanzo, the trip, the mission. They have two days left to scope out the power plant; they’ll move in at the next delivery drop, posing as contractors replacing LumériCo technicians, aiming to get inside and wind their way to the coordinates in Seventy-Six’s message. Peacekeeper and Storm Bow will accompany them, but neither will be drawn unless they meet a life-or-death situation. They will find the coordinate location, inspect it, and bail out. He’s promised Angela this much; to the last remaining founders of Overwatch, he’s vowed more. McCree remembers the tired faces of his aging comrades as they circled him in the medbay before the mission.

*Get the truth*, Torbjorn grimly urged. *If Jack survived the blast, he belongs here with Overwatch. Not robbin’ banks and blowing up buildings. Not on his own, an’ not a vigilante.* Reinhardt’s low, musical voice echoes next in his mind. *Close the door on all of this, McCree.* Heavy words, heavier frowns, weighing down the space between them. *If it is not Jack, bring him to justice. If it is, bring him home.*

His phone buzzes. McCree fishes it back out of his pocket; there’s a new text from Lúcio, accompanying eleven he sent overnight. All of which he missed while sleeping with Hanzo.

\[2219: \[3945\_83\] Lúcio:
Hey I looked at the LumériCo network data you sent
They got a decent security admin but when you go into the facility I’ll try internal uplink
Tomorrow when you guys get to a terminal I will punch in access codes through Athena
I have 5 to try but the last two may not hash out
If they do, I can wire in via remote access and take an image of their DB\]

\[2303: \[3945\_83\] Lúcio:
Did my texts go through?? Testing\]

\[0230: \[3945\_83\] Lúcio:
I got ten codes now. You aren’t gonna have a lot of time to enter but 1-5 are best bets
Let me know if you get this. I’m uploading this to your docket\]

\[0256: \[3945\_83\] Lúcio:
Eastwood why do u never answer my texts….
I’m all alone now in the lab and not even u will talk to me……
ur buddy……ur amigo…..ur tadpole friend……RIP\]

\[0555: \[3945\_83\] Lúcio:
Hey I dunno if you’re awake but I got a question
Did you hear that Vaswani can dance\]
Hana says she can and I don’t believe it
She’s trolling me

Jesse hunt-and-pecks a response.

‖ 0557: [3945_45]
Idk I do not talk 2 Vaswani

Lúcio texts back instantly with a string of emojis.

‖ 0558: [3945_83] Lúcio:
EASTWOOD!!!!!
SO YOU IGNORE ME ALL DAY BUT REPLY TO GOSSIP
WTF!!!!!
that’s cold but I see how it is (I still love you)

Jesse cackles, tapping a reply.

‖ 0559: [3945_45]
Busy with mission stuff

‖ 0559: [3945_83] Lúcio:
Busy getting busy lmao
am I right

“Hell yeah, you know it.” He grins with his tongue pinched between his teeth.

‖ 0600: [3945_45]
hehe

‖ 0601: [3945_83] Lúcio:
EASTWOOD!!!!!!!
OMG
Jesse takes a long pull on his cigarette and looks around. A graveyard stretches over the hill in long grey strips, monument rows dotted with bursts of marigolds. Offerings gleam by the tombstones: sweets, frosted skulls and calaveras, tiny loaves of golden bread. Lopsided statuettes of holy icons nestle between multicolor beds of fruits and flowers. A colorful array of ofrendas big and small, somber and gaudy, happy and sad. Bittersweet, he thinks, like tamarindo candy.

Hanzo has told him about graveyards in Japan. How land plots are reserved only for the privileged, with most remains interred in glittering metropolitan towers showcasing smart, rotating digital mausoleums. The Shimada clan has an ancestral plot in Hanamura -- a clean, pastoral garden where sticks of floral incense burn beside fresh offerings. Someone comes to tidy them every day, wiping off the stones, pouring clean water, straightening the sotoba: Goro, Akane, Genji. There is no marker for Hanzo and there never will be. His ashes will never mingle there; they have banned him from this rite, exiled him, struck him out. No disgrace will smudge the purity of their gray, honorable graves.

The family holds one thing above all others. Hanzo soothes in the back of his mind, murmuring through the dark one night in the bunk back at the Watchpoint. They desire that you die for them. In their eyes, it is not much to ask. What I did was the ultimate disgrace. No freedom to keep living, nor a true death. I do not even have the same privilege as a spirit might have, going somewhere in between. I was wiped from reality. I simply do not exist.

McCree smokes as he strolls through the graveyard. He watches a white thread of fog drag across the sky. Ash accumulates on his cigarette; he taps it off; he thinks of the filigree censers swung by priests to spread fragrant smoke, waxy votives, cool sprays of holy water doused by a pestle. He remembers his mother’s chipped picture frames -- an abuelita he never met with papery brown skin, tías y tíos who came, went, took money, gave hardship. Stacks of magazines wilting beside marigolds on a red kitchen table. Once he found a gray ID card of a white man named Bill, a jarringly incongruous discovery when held up to the faded photos, like a lewd image sandwiched between newspaper clippings. The man in the card was a leather-clad grinner with wild eyes and white teeth, weatherbeaten ragged, hairy as a fur coat. His father the layabout, said his mother before throwing the card away -- the gambler, the good-for-nothing drunk who was better-off-gone. She bedeviled him, claimed he abandoned them before Jesse could walk or spit, profaned him as a gringo. He remembers clinging to her starchy skirts, inhaling the dusty tang of paperwork from the school where she worked. Jesse would ask, where did he go? She would shake her head, rattle a woebegone sigh, sluice her dark hands through grey dishwater in the leaky sink. Nudging him out of the way, too busy for questions, too tired to face the answers. Probably dead. No me importa. Rest in peace.

A voice returns: dark, rich, sweeter than smoke. Amari rustles regally in the back of his mind. Here she comes, reeling him in, coaching his hands with her own feathery fingers. Trigger discipline from the afterlife. Jesse smiles, welcomes her, indulges in her memory. Smelling like powder and spicy old roses, fecund and vaguely sweet.

“I dunno what you’d think of all this,” Jesse mutters aloud under his breath. “Of me bein’ back on the job. Runnin’ ops like before, Mister Barceló-style. Runnin’ with ol’ Mister Tsubaki.” He smiles, guilty. “Reckon you might not care for him right off the bat, seein’ as to what he did to Genji-kun, and seein’ as to how he did me for the first few months. You always did get kinda mama-bear on me whenever I put my nose in places where it was like to get bit.”

Unlucky cowboy, she purrs in his thoughts. He imagines her half-smiling. Watch out.

“But look, lady, I mighta shot straight on this one. He’s real nice. Nicest I’ve ever had. Hell, he’s
the god-damn best.”

He halts. Can he say it? The graves are silent; the hills are empty, devoid of visitors save himself. No one alive is listening. Hanzo is not there. Who will get jealous if he admits it to himself?

“When I was a young man,” he finally says, “I used to think that sort of ‘best’ would’ve been someone like you.”

She’d laugh at him for this and he’d have laughed, too. He wishes he could have told her before they lost her, before it all went bad. Back when he shaved, trimmed his hair, spit-shone his Blackwatch boots. When he could present himself before his superiors with his head hung, hat tipped, cheeks red and coyote grin flashing. Here comes the cowpoke from Santa Fe: half her age, live-wire, soft-hearted for anyone that treats him well.

“It wasn’t easy gettin’ accustomed to havin’ something worth sticking around for,” Jesse continues. He pauses, gnawing on his lip, suddenly sullen. Momentarily brooding. “It wasn’t easy doin’ right. It wasn’t easy livin’ straight.”

You’re doing good. She distracts him, reassures him, reminds him why he’s there. Just like old times, when he couldn’t sleep or shoot. An old, comforting recording -- a precious audio clip he can loop over and over. Saw your numbers. You’ve been practicing. How’s your arm?

A chilly wind hits the sapodilla trees, rustling their canopies with a hissing crash, redolent of rain or radio static. He looks over the thickets framing the graveyard fence and watches the marigolds bob in the breeze.

McCree can’t bring himself to say the rest, so he thinks instead of speaking: wistful words that men like him tell mothers and lost lovers. Two things she was not; two things she never could have been; two things that, in the end, don’t make it any less fitting. I think about you still. Even now that things are okay. Even now that things are okay. Even now that I got Hanzo on my side, it’s still you pulling that trigger when I get to firing. I hear your voice and I watch with your eye and I swear sometimes it’s like I’ll turn around and you’ll be right there. God-damn, it eats me up thinking about it. It could chew me from the inside out if I go on about it too long.

It gets him in the throat. The little choke, the prickle, the sting of smoke or tears. Jesse shuts his eyes, opens them again, settles for a squint. He hangs on the sound of the wind like he’s listening for a faraway voice.

Even now, I miss you, Ana. I miss you black-and-blue.

McCree pulls one last burn off his cigarette before he notices the owl.

At first he thinks it’s a decoration -- a decoy placed to deter pigeons, or a stray piñata thrown high by an ambitious child. He squints and sees it clearly: a white shape in a tree, fifty or sixty feet away, swaying in the breeze. Eerily it undulates, bobbing, unfolding its wings to adjust its grasp on the high green branch. McCree looks up into the somber disc of its face; he can make out the shape of its silvery talons; it sees him and tilts its smooth head. It gazes down at him, black eyes glistening like freshly pitted fruits.

Staring at him.

“An owl in the daytime,” McCree murmurs under his breath, tossing his cigarette butt, grinding it with his heel. He flicks through his mother’s superstitions like faded index cards, an antiquated rolodex of recipes for bad luck. If you saw nocturnal creatures in daylight, it always meant trouble -
- rabies in bats or raccoons, ill omens for everything else. Nothing that comes out at night is supposed to trespass on the sanctity of day. *Mal ojo*, he thinks, snorting, resisting the urge to feel creeped out. A mean old *lechucita* shooting him the stink eye.

The owl hisses. McCree mutters (“no thanks”), shivers, lazily flicks the sign of the cross above his brow.

Time to go. Hanzo will want coffee. He decides his walk is over and turns to leave.

He is there on the pathway. Six feet of death suited smartly in black, two shotguns, white mask. Wordless and waiting, a macabre slash against the steely morning sky.

“Hello, ingrate,” says Reaper, before opening fire.

McCree hits the ground below explosive reports, ducking, rolling, crashing behind a granite headstone. Shards of rock erupt around him as Reaper blasts at him, unloading round after round. He darts, gasps for breath, hears the gunshots cease, looks up. Reaper throws the spent shotguns to the ground and draws two more. McCree unholsters Peacekeeper and fans all six shots. Reaper flails with an inhuman screech.

Frantic, the gunslinger bolts for high ground. He crosses three cobblestone paths as Reaper shudders and shambles from the shots; he loads in the spare speedloader, spins the cylinder and ducks when the wraith coughs out a curse.

“Nice aim,” rattles Reaper, and McCree can hear the phantasmal gasp of air displacing as he lifts off the ground. “Someone’s been teaching you new tricks.”

So he was right. Not only did this asshole somehow survive Siberia, but he’s most certainly old Blackwatch. Just like the agents on the hypertrain. It explains a lot: the stealth, the heavy weaponry, the full cylinder failing to take him down once unloaded.

“Who are you?” McCree shouts before ducking again, getting a better look at Reaper as he ghosts down the path. The coat and ammo belts obscure a suit of body armor -- well-made, solid quality, expensive stuff. Maybe custom-built. There’s something hauntingly familiar about the gauntlets gripped to his forearms and the way the spikes gleam. Like teeth, or fangs, butcher’s hooks. The way Reaper moves: vaporous, otherworldly, beating like an unholy wing. Horrifying. “Which one of his were you?”

“What a stupid question,” laughs Reaper as he effortlessly hoists the black barrel of his gun. “Considering that anyone could ask the same about you.”

A chill crawls up Jesse’s spine, spider-quick and twice as threatening. He dives as Reaper fires. The blast shatters a marble statue of the pensive Virgin Mary, spraying her head and shapely hands to bits around McCree’s boots.

“Did you come to pay your respects?” snickers Reaper, his voice sleek and jagged at the same time. Rich but flat, flaring ghastly at the end of each syllable. McCree starts to sweat. Whoever he is, he’s got familiar diction. A practiced voice, public speaker.

Not the usual Blackwatch fare. Who could he be?

Doesn’t matter. Jesse has six bullets and a flash grenade. Time to make them count.

McCree jams a thumb into his comm and wheezes: “I gotta hostile, cemetery by the President’s mansion, Reaper’s here! I need back-up now!”
No answer. His stomach drops. Reaper looms; just before he can gun down the gunslinger, Jesse rolls from the brightly decorated grave and skids across the grass behind a squatty mausoleum. Concrete cherubs jut out from the eaves of the stone overhang, arms outstretched to receive the mourning penitent. He rounds a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi adorned by ofrendas and hibiscus flowers, feeding the sheep, swathed in birds. Smiling peacefully at his misfortune as he flees the bloodthirsty dead.

Silence. No more gunfire. Jesse hears his heartbeat whooshing violently in his ears, his neck slick and clammy, his body aching. His nerves spark with panic. Peacekeeper feels dull in his right hand, suddenly unwieldy.

Something about this feels unnaturally familiar, a murderous note of déjà vu.

Then he hears the whistling.

He gulps. Quickly Jesse flattens against the mausoleum wall. He inhales through his nostrils; a coppery warmth spreads over his mouth. He bit his lip during his mad dash to get away. The blood washes a morbid tang across his tongue, sickening his guts, chattering his teeth.

Stars shining bright above you --

He knows that tune.

Fear convinces McCree to move. He takes a shot when Reaper rounds the wall edge. McCree hears the bullet hit. Reaper growls and recoils; the gunslinger clanks around the other side of the wide stone wall just in time for the wraith to dart in front of him with one of his huge shotguns angled for his chest.

He lunges. Reaper fires. White-hot pain streaks up McCree’s left arm, reeling. He’s hit. Blood and heat sweep his shoulder in shrill pangs. McCree darts away, rolls, hits with his wounded arm and scrambles into the grass. The bad landing knocks off his sunglasses and punts the wind out of his lungs.

Reaper keeps whistling. He approaches. Jesse feels the wind shifting, rearranging, accommodating the assassin as he draws near.

Dream a little dream -- of me --

Is it possible? No: it can’t be. He’s dead.

McCree draws the flashbang. He flings; it pops with a hot flicker. Reaper freezes, immobilized. Howling mad.

“Stupid cowboy,” he warbles, shaking violently.

McCree pushes up to aim Peacekeeper for the scuffed white mask. He fires two shots between the eyes. The sadistic snarl that escapes the wraith’s throat is unlike any sound he’s ever heard.

“Why won’t you die?” he grits out, lining up a third shot, firing, scrabbling back when the assassin spasms but does not fall.

Reaper coughs a black rope of viscera under his mask, spitting it across the stone floor. An oily black fluid pools beneath his vapory knees. He solidifies, forms booted feet with defined soles, twitches in place while frozen by the flash grenade. A fetid, sickly-sweet aroma reeks from what was hacked up. McCree’s stomach tumbles; the comm is still quiet.
Where the hell is Hanzo?

“Good,” Reaper wetly gurgles. “You’ve gotten so good. Real improvement. I’m impressed.”

“Who are you?” McCree keens through clenched teeth.

“I missed you,” he answers. “I missed all of them, but especially you. I hoped to give my regards to the good doctor, but you’re a far better catch.”

“Who the hell are you? Which agent? Are you Lewis? Huynh? Ohanian?” McCree gets to his feet. He’s shaking; his voice goes haywire. “So help me, sonofabitch, if you’re that shitkicker Elliot, I’m gonna grind your skull into dust --”

“You know, this is poetic,” says Reaper. His voice is perversely distorted, trembling and erratic like a bad sound overlay on a telescreen. Even his body seems jittery and out of focus. A black, electronic nightmare. “The first time I came for you, you made it hard. The second time, I had it easy.” His head starts to twist and jerk, as if he’s seized by a tic. “But the third, that’s poetry. Three lines in a haiku, cowboy. This time’s the charm.”

A thin, tremulous hum threads through Jesse’s ears. Something in him twists to the point of breaking, like the abrupt snapping of a string.

This is not déjà vu. This has happened before.

“I’ve come to sign you up,” Reaper leers. The flash is fading; he’s leveling his shotgun. A liquid black tendril seeps from the right eyehole of the mask. “There’s a new leaf for you to turn. A new deal is on the table. The only ‘watch you need whether you’re breathing or dying. Write down your name or get marked off the list.”

Words fail him. Through the mind-numbing fear -- the crippling, disfiguring shock of it -- Jesse has no reply.

“Back where you belong,” the wraith finishes, aiming, ready to pull the trigger and take him down. “To m-- agh!!”

Too fast: never saw it coming. An arrow pierces Reaper’s throat, jutting from his collarbone. The metal head glistens like a scale.

_Hanzo._

McCree bolts. He scuffles around the mausoleum as the staccato nattering of pulse fire erupts behind him. A cold sweat clenches him as adrenaline surges through the pain. He looks around the stony wall and witnesses a flash of blue leaping down from a neighboring monument. Reaper roars; the noise of physical commotion thunders behind the mausoleum; reports from the shotguns crack one after the other, _pack pack pack_. McCree sucks in a fast, hurting breath. Terror grips him like a ring of flame.

A man with a crimson visor and a huge blue rifle is battling Reaper down. Reaper brutally swings his arm and shotgun for the man’s face; the man whips back to avoid it and sprays pulse rounds into the assassin’s face. Black bodily fluids splatter across the grass as Reaper flings his spent guns and leaps for the man’s face, clawing, screaming. A maddened animal pouncing on prey.

The sight freezes him in place, a deer in the headlights. Before McCree can act, a red plaid shirt rushes at his side.
“We go,” Hanzo barks, wrenching his right arm, yanking.

Jesse slurs. “Who’s the other guy?”

“Seventy-Six. We must go.” Another tug. McCree gasps; the shotgun pellets in his shoulder leak blinding red agony into his skin every time he moves. Hanzo realizes the wound, straps Storm Bow on his back, reaches around McCree and lifts. Jesse lets out a dull, hollow groan when the archer hoists him and breaks into a run.

“Shit, put me down!” shouts McCree, writhing, watching the gunfight beneath the mausoleum roof dwindle out of view. “Hanzo!”

“We cannot engage.” Hanzo darts through the neat rows of colorful graves like a rabbit bolting down warren runs. “Our cover is compromised. We have to get out of Dorado now or we risk blowing the entire operation.”

“Han-zo!” McCree nearly drops Peacekeeper as they sweep behind a shrubby green copse near the fence. He feels the archer bundling him off, flattening a palm to his hat. Jesse thrashes. Hanzo presses him down. A low hum buzzes overhead. Hanzo hisses to hush.

“The drones are moving in,” he whispers. “Talon back-up will be here any second, and security forces. We have to leave.”

“Hanzo, listen to me,” bays McCree. “This’s a god-damned mess. I gotta go back.” Heaving, Jesse clutches Hanzo’s arms. “I ain’t leavin’ here ‘til I see what’s under that mask.”

“Shhh!” Hanzo pinches two fingers at his neck; Jesse can’t tell if he’s checking his pulse or prepping to snap him out. Maybe both. “There is nothing you can do. Seventy-Six has secured us a way out of here. Every second we remain in Dorado, we are guaranteed to have our identities revealed. Or die.”

“Hanzo, I mean it,” Jesse chokes. “I gotta know, Hanzo, I gotta know who Reaper is --”

“Your former commanding officer.” Hanzo says tersely, harsh. No beating around the bush. “He is Gabriel Reyes. Somehow still alive.”

The hum in his ears needles into a high-pitched whine. Jesse jolts. His jaw slackens, sliding heavy off his face, leaden.

Hanzo speaks as the drones move in, black discs whizzing across the sky. “Seventy-Six intercepted me not long after you left. This was a trap. We are leaving.” He gets an arm under McCree’s shoulders and pulls. “Our vehicle is not far. Can you run?”

“What the hell did you say?”

“Can you run.”

“Reaper --”

Hanzo pulls again. Jesse gasps; the shotgun wound sings out in ruthless shooting agony. “We have to secure our vehicle, we need to go now!”

They escape past a maintenance shed and follow a footpath into the woods. Hanzo helps him
along, supporting his bulk, urging him to keep up. The blue truck is parked in the far corner of a secluded parking lot behind a small row of buildings. Hanzo gets Jesse in the passenger seat, climbs in, keys the ignition and speeds the engine to a fast, whirring hover. Jesse coughs, tastes blood and spit, clasps his left shoulder, grunts and growls.

Hanzo whips through surface streets, navigating winding stretches of residential cobblestone. Driving like a maniac. “Buckle your seatbelt.”

“What?” The command cuts through the delirium, snapping Jesse back into a reality he doesn’t want to face.

“Buckle your seatbelt! Sit back and hold still until we can get on the hyperlane. Once we’re there, the auto-driver can switch on and I can tend to your shoulder.”

His stomach turns over. Dizziness sweeps him in a hot rush. “Auto-driver?”

“Yes!” Hanzo barks. “We are getting out of Dorado. We cannot be seen. Defense force surveillance will span the entire city. We have to go. Fasten your damned seatbelt and hold on!”

Darkness immerses the truck as it slices into the hyperlane tunnelling out of Dorado. As the hoverwheels engage the track, the vehicle shifts into auto-driver mode. Jesse numbly fastens the buckle over his waist, struggling to breathe, overwhelmed by the cacophony of panic thundering in his head. The hair on his arms stands on end; he can still hear reports of gunfire behind them, pack pack pack, crashing below sprays of pulse fire. Rattling in his brain in a jabbering tide -- like the onset of howling voices that gradually crescendo, rising.

“What happened,” Jesse hears himself say, struggling in his seat. “How’d you know?”

“Seventy-Six broke into our room. He was trying to find us. He thinks Talon was responsible for the message to Mercy, potentially through a hacker. The coordinates led to a room rigged with explosives. It would have taken out the power plant and surrounding neighborhoods, potentially to incriminate Overwatch as responsible for the blast. Seventy-Six got there before us and disarmed them.” Hanzo exhales through his nostrils, coasting on adrenaline, a man on the run. “What does the word ‘Sombra’ mean to you?”

McCree’s teeth chatter. “Sh-shadow?”

“Any agents? Blackwatch? Overwatch? Before the fall?”

“No,” McCree replies, clutching his collar. The word feels wrong, knife-like -- a slash of español slicing through the mad chorus chanting apart his thoughts. Fear and anxiety winch a razor-edged noose around his organs. “Naw, I don’t know.”

They escape the tunnel and break out onto an open highway. Morning traffic is light. The auto-driver sings out their destination (Veracruz International Spaceport, four-hundred and fifty kilometers south) before confirming the weather (a pleasant 20 °C, calm winds, light rain). Hanzo tugs loose his scarf. He thrusts it out to McCree. “Your shoulder is bleeding.”

“Shotgun,” Jesse whines. “Got pellets in it.” He tries to tie it around his arm; the fabric slips. He tries again and fails, gives up, keels forward. It’s like a crank is unwinding his innards, yard-by-yard, spooling them out of his belly and into his dirty hands.

“Seventy-Six is Jack Morrison,” Hanzo continues, digging beneath the seat. “He survived the blast, leaving enough evidence of remains to pass for his own. He went rogue. He has operated individually ever since. Reyes is a less simple story. Morrison has reviewed all the data and
investigated the site of the old headquarters and Reyes’ grave. Reyes died, but he theorizes some kind of bioengineering may have managed to reanimate him. Perhaps something within Talon, perhaps something else.”

“Reanimate him,” Jesse repeats through a clotted throat. He hears a distant singing in his head, cooing to the tattoo of his pulse, fraying him apart. “Like -- like a zombie?”

“We need to get to Gibraltar immediately and interrogate Mercy. This could be her doing.” Hanzo fishes out from under the seat cushion a black case stamped with a red cross. A first-aid kit.

“Seventy-Six specified something about the Caduceus systems, the healing stream and the biotic interface --”

Jesse spins in and out of focus. His mouth runs dry. “Mercy? What does it have to do with Mercy? Mercy said he was dead.” He blathers and mumbles, rattling off the specs. “Dead, no autopsy. She showed me the files!”

“She may be lying.”

All Jesse can do is whimper. “Hanzo, you gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“Morrison was corresponding with her in hopes of getting information on its capabilities. If she failed to give him a direct response, he planned on locating her and hacking her consoles to find out what he wanted. I knew we were right to be suspicious of her. I knew there was something wrong about her system. It is too powerful, too advanced. After what she’s done in the past, after the things she has managed to do with it, she could have gone too far. It could be a crucial component in reanimation --”

It’s too much. He loses it. Jesse lets out a strangled gasp, banging his fist on the door, wheezing, gulping. Desperate to breathe.

“God help me,” he wails. “Hanzo, I hear ‘em.”

“Hear what?” Hanzo says, but to Jesse he sounds distant, distorted -- a hundred miles away. He opens his eyes; he can see the dash through a hellish red fog, thousands of miniscule lines gridding his vision. Crimson tendrils, like snaking vines, tongues.

“Pull over,” he yells. “Pull over!”

Everything greys out. The metronome of his heartbeat interrupts the choir, tick-tocking into a hollow, banging drum. He can’t get the images out of his head: footprints in red soil, crows circling overhead in irregular loops, a skull rolling over the dirt like a tumbleweed. Dead trees in white sand, gallows at midday. Corpses piled in a New Mexican desert grave.

Somewhere between the vehicle lurching to a halt and the door handle clicking and the scratch of gravel on his boots, Jesse gets a lungful of fresh air. He stumbles out of the truck, blunders into a road guard, trips. McCree grabs the steel railing on the barrier and rattles it, dropping to his knees, seeing nothing, ears ringing, heart racing.

The choir croons in horrified tremolo. *Say nighty-night.*

Hanzo calls out behind him, lucid and faint, a hollow shout. A fleeting pressure nudges his hip. He jerks, whirls around, reaches for his holster. Peacekeeper is gone. Jesse barks in shrill surprise; Hanzo has it. He’s unloading the cylinder, pocketing the bullets, stowing it in the waistband of his pants.
Through the peal of panic -- with a realization that twists discordantly soft in his ribs -- Jesse notices he’s wearing his red plaid shirt.


“Give me my gun,” Jesse bellows.

“We have to go.”

“My gun.”

“No.”

“Give me my gun, Hanzo! I swear! I need it” -- he lunges, misses; Hanzo grips his arms.

“We have to go now. It is not safe here.”

“I don’t care ‘bout safe, I want my gun!”

“Get back in the truck and you can have it. The truck is safe. The truck and the highway are the only things that are safe right now.”

“Give me my gun,” he pleads. “Give it to me. I need it. I needa feel it!”

“You need to get up!”

“My gun! Give me my god-damn gun! Give me my gun!”

Hanzo wrenches out of their tangled grasp. Jesse hunches, expects a punch, reels when the cold steel presses his palm. Hanzo thrusts Peacekeeper into his hands; Jesse lets out a weak moan, coughing, wilting. And then, as he’s clutching close, pulling him, drawing him in, the archer hisses: “Jesse.” Fearful, insistent, about to crack. “Jesse, we have to go.”

Guilt springs in his chest, a singular bloom amid a wavy nauseous sea. It’s too late to stop it -- the only thing to do is ride it out. He doesn’t have the privilege of a dorm room and a locked door. The last time this happened, the bad part was over. The archer arrived to clean his quarters and make him shower, but there was nothing left to resolve other than the dismal languor that inevitably followed. Just as McCree prefers. He doesn’t want Hanzo to see him like this: clenched up, sniveling, rattling against a guardrail like a wet winter leaf. But here he is: battle-hardened, smooth-tongued, the gunslinger extraordinaire. Thirty-eight years old, middle-aged and low-class, permanently high on the scent of his lover’s skin. Wanted dead or alive across the world -- in every county, parish, state, province and country -- weeping through a panic attack in the middle of nowhere.

A lash of color crosses his vision. Hanzo’s yellow scarf, mottled rusty-brown with blood.

They limp back to the truck. Hanzo throttles them back on the hyperlane, running the auto-driver, scanning on the radar for highway patrol. Jesse blubbers into Hanzo’s scarf, wiping his eyes, apologizing. He stretches out as the fright wears off, washing cool with sweat and fatigue. The pain in his shoulder returns; he weakly thumps his left hand against the first aid kit.

“Talk to me,” says Hanzo in a voice that Jesse can finally hear clearly.

“I’m fucked,” Jesse answers.

“Tell me what that was.” He can hear the tension in Hanzo’s voice, tight-lipped, livid and terrified
“Tell me what is happening to you.”

Jesse dithers. Wasn’t it obvious? “I lost my shit.”

“Because of Reaper?”

“And then, before he can reply: “how’d we even get this truck?”

The question jerks Hanzo out of his concern, a non-sequitur. “It was Seventy-Six’s escape route out of Dorado. He gave me the keys.”

“This’s Jack’s truck?”

Hanzo sounds like he’s at the end of his rope. “Yes.”

“Where’s our stuff?”

“Loaded in the back.”

“Are we goin’ back to help Jack?”

“No.”

Aghast. “So we’re leavin’ him there? With Reyes?”

“It was his specific instruction that we do so.”

Jesse gawks. “They’ll kill each other!”

“He seemed to think otherwise. There is a lot to discuss. Are you ready?”

The gunslinger shudders as he exhales. “I don’t know.”

“Then keep talking. Slowly. Work your way into it.”

“Where the fuck do I even start? This’s a left-field, fuck-all, god-damn shit-ass of a situation.”

Hanzo clenches his teeth. “Start at the beginning.”

“Reyes,” Jesse gets out, digging his palms into his eyes. “Fuckin’ Reyes, I swear. All this time, I thought he was dead. We all did. I thought it was all okay, it was okay as long as he was dead. But he ain’t, he’s not dead. He’s fuckin’ alive --”

“Keep breathing.” Hanzo rustles beside him and peels back his sleeve. He rattles in the first aid kit. “Speak slow.”

“He’s alive somehow,” Jesse repeats as Hanzo tosses a live biotic emitter onto the dash. The gilded glow reminds him of the station in Siberia, dingy and dull, a hovel. A safe hideout where he hunkered down with Hanzo, a refuge. Far away from here. “Ah, mother of fuck-all, he’s gonna kill Jack and come right after us.”

“No.”

“Yeah, he will, Hanzo, you don’t know him -- if this’s real, if this is really him --”

“No, he will not. We will get to a safer place and re-assess the situation.”
“Hanzo, I don’t know.” He lolls against the headrest. “It’s been five years since he died. Five years. Longer than that since I heard his voice. Either of their voices. Jack and Gabe. Jack and fuckin’ Gabe.” He gulps and repeats himself, a mantra in distress. “I don’t know what to do.”

Hanzo is silent beside him for a moment, digging in the kit, tugging out cleaning wipes. Finally he says: “tell me what you fear.”

“He’s gonna come for us.”

“And meet his demise, like the rest of our foes.”

“This ain’t kid stuff, Hanzo,” Jesse shoots back, sharper than he intends. “Reyes in with Talon? Reyes running terrorist Blackwatch outta the same house? God-damn, Hanzo, it’s a fuckin’ nightmare. It’s end-game. A worst-case scenario.”

“Seventy-Six said that Reaper is more of a free agent than he looks. Not always in with Talon, not always working alone. Struggling, even. He has far less allegiance than we do.”

Jesse twitches out of his desperate torpor, seizing on this news. “What else did he say?”

“I will tell you.” Hanzo sprays something on the wound, a numbing coolness. Fleetingly distracting. “But you too must tell me everything about Reyes. Everything I must know. What he can do, what he did.” Before Jesse can reply (as he winces through the tweezers pinching pellets from his arm) he adds: “what he may do.”

Hanzo explains the situation with Morrison as he cleans out the wound. Seventy-Six has spent the past five years in the shadows of vigilante justice, protecting all remaining Overwatch agents from falling into the cross-hairs of the terrorist organization Talon. Reaper, Jack explained, is a mercenary who has thrown in his efforts with whatever group will help him do just the opposite: destroy any remnants of Overwatch, especially former personnel. Seventy-Six chases him in a constant game of cat-and-mouse: trap after trap, strike after strike, careful maneuvering around the other via battles of combat and wits. He is unsure of how Reaper managed to revive and take such a horrifying form, unlikely to ever discover the truth, past the point of caring. He will ensure the world is safe from him, once and for all.

Through it all, Jesse starts to calm. Hanzo’s cool, methodical dialogue is like a rock in the storm, a precipice to which his fractured thoughts can cling.

“The breadcrumbs left a trail that brought us all together in Dorado,” he says. “Seventy-Six suspects that Reaper has been working with a hacker for some time now, specifically since Winston and Athena subdued him at Gibraltar before the recall. The hacker provided him with Seventy-Six’s earlier emails to Dr. Ziegler. They also provided stolen transmissions sent by the Russian Defense Forces, giving him one side of the information on our involvement to Siberia. Reaper took the information and decided to pay a visit. Before he attacked us at the omnium, he had waylaid Seventy-Six in a confrontation south of Kiev. Stole his rifle but left him alive. Seventy-Six thinks he wanted him to feel helpless, unable to assist. To watch it all unfold on the news.”

Jesse’s stomach thumps in dismay. “So that’s what he was doin’ up in Siberia. Playin’ games with all of us. Psychological terrorism.” Woefully: “Blackwatch tactics.”

“Reaper knew the attack would startle Mercy specifically. Potentially throw her off, cause our only medical support to falter. If that failed, he’d come in and finish whatever the mission could not.”
“So what’s Jack gonna do now? He knows Overwatch is back, why ain’t he come around?” Jesse thinks of Torbjorn and Reinhardt, solemn as a eulogy in the medbay before they left. “Is he gonna come to Gibraltar?”

Hanzo drops a pellet to the floorboard with a plink. “Do you want his answer, or the truth?”

Jesse stares blearily at Hanzo. “Both?”

“Morrison said he refuses to rejoin Overwatch because he believes it should stay defunct. In his eyes, the recall was a mistake. He thinks it will incite forces like Talon to band together and strike out against us, slaughtering a whole new generation of fledgling idealists. He would prefer that we lay low and keep our heads down lest we all get killed. No time in this world for heroes or heroism. We are better off thinking that he and all his old ideals are dead.”

A nauseous thought bites at him: does Hanzo agree with such a statement? “So what’s the truth?”

“The truth is that he is a coward. He has made mistakes and is afraid to face them. He makes himself out to be a daredevil altruist when in actuality he is grossly ineffective as a vigilante. Too haphazard, too noble. He wants to command. Men like him belong in groups, platoons. He is running from his past, but he is not running fast enough, and when it catches up, he will realize that he cannot -- does not -- want to do this by himself.”

“How d’you figure all that?”

“Because, as we were arranging our next moves, I argued with him no less than six times on the proper way to depart Dorado without blowing our cover.”

Jesse balks. “Ah, hell.”

Hanzo wipes off the tweezers, sneering as if they’ve insulted him. “He is still a commander at heart. Old soldiers need orders, either to give them or receive.”

Jesse wipes sweat from his hairline. “You know, I never imagined all this time whether or not to wonder if you’d get along with a guy like Jack Morrison. Now I s’pose don’t need to guess.”

“I do not question that he still has good intentions. He agreed without hesitation to protect me. To help us leave and guard our escape.”

“How’d he find us?”

“I do not know. He would not give specifics. Once he discovered we were in Dorado, he tracked us from afar. He could tell we were undercover. He assumed we were here to investigate Sombra. He wanted to alert us about Reaper. If Reaper appeared, he wanted us to leave the task to him.”

“What’s Sombra?”

“An unknown. Currently it is the codename for a protocol used by LumériCo, something on which he cannot find any further information. He has two suspicions: one, that it is a fail-safe process used at the power plants in the event of a cyberterrorist attack -- two, that it is an asset-protection mode connected to a Talon operative. Or potentially the hacker. Or they are one in the same. He doesn’t know.”

“Holy shit,” McCree shudders. “LumériCo’s working with Talon?”

“We do not know. It is possible. Seventy-Six has been in and out of Dorado for the better part of a
year trying to investigate their internal networks while fighting off remnants of Los Muertos.”

Hanzo flicks the last pellet out of his shoulder, dabbing the blood with a medical wipe, reaching out to rake the hair back from McCree’s brow. “Sit still in the beam. Let it heal your shoulder.”

Jesse sags with exhaustion; he doesn’t want to think. It’s too much to process at once. He sinks into the emitter’s luminescent glow and shuts his eyes. Peacekeeper sits unloaded in his lap, a comforting weight. He drifts in and out of a torpid, vacuous headspace. A mental safehouse where he can flee and hide.

Hanzo wipes his hands and stares ahead, monitoring the dash, watching the road. Outlined in biotic yellow as they hurtle through another tunnel, a gilded guardian in the dark.

---

They ride in silence for the better part of two hours, smoking cigarettes, checking the news on the radio. Jesse dozes, wakes, slips in and out of languor. He drags a hand against his scalp. His throat hurts, hoarse and dry.

Eventually Hanzo murmurs: “tell me about Reyes.”

“Feels like I’ve told you a lot.”

“I know there is more. Seventy-Six cautioned me that Reaper would specifically target you and Mercy. Which he has, twice now. Siberia, and this mission.”

“Yeah.”

“You have told me stories about him.”

“Some.”

“His tendency to be rough on you, his fights. How he acquired you in the first place, from the Deadlock Gang.”

Through a blur of fatigue, Jesse snaps. “He didn’t acquire me.”

Hanzo draws back into his seat, surprised. He says nothing.

“You acquire things,” bites Jesse. Suddenly defensive, edging on irrational. “You acquire assets. You acquire weapons. Not people. He and I made a deal. We shook on it.”

“You said, before, that he hit you with a folding chair.”

Heat surges to Jesse’s face. “When I was Deadlock. Like you’ve never beat up bad guys before, Hanzo. I was a wanted man, I was a criminal. Ain’t like I hadn’t earned it, with all the trouble Deadlock gave ‘em.” The memory flares to life, singing him like fire: falling to the ground, Reyes looming, extending an arm. Offering to help him up. The overhead light of the interrogation room blazing warm behind him, sodium-yellow, a beacon.

It startles him. For an image so old, it comes back so clear.

Hanzo’s voice cuts through the pause that follows. Soft as linen. “What else?”

He goes slack. Hanzo notices. Jesse ducks his head to avoid the piercing stare of those lordly eyes. “Not much else,” he mutters.
“There is something you are not telling me. Seventy-Six said something that convinces me so.”

He lifts his head. “What did he tell you?”

“A single thing. A discrepancy.”

Now it’s the other way around; he stares at Hanzo. “What did he say?”

It takes Hanzo a solid fifteen seconds before he replies: “he said the two of you were like brothers.”

That deflates him; the wind blows right out of Jesse’s sails.

“He did, yeah?” he weakly scathes. “Did he tell you we were like brothers?”

“Yes.”

“You believe it?”

“I don’t know.”

Jesse scratches his jaw. Another memory floats to the surface, unbidden, unwanted. Suppressed by disharmonic voices, a fragment juxtaposed with heartache: beer and lobster bread-bowls steaming on a table in a kitschy red cafe by Fisherman’s Wharf. They were eating dinner not five hours after extracting four teeth out of a target’s mouth. Reyes slouching in the seat, drinking from his bottle, observing evening diners as they came and went. A game they used to play: Reyes pointing out a woman at random, McCree giving her a name, a career, a birthplace, a destination. Inventing stories for passersby, people-watching, trying to out-do to the other. Reyes upped the ante every time, made it harder, challenged him to get more creative. McCree struggled; he had not yet traveled to as many countries or met as many people. Hadn’t lived as many years. Reyes always won, the undisputed champion of everything. Even bullshit -- which he loved to give, hated to receive.

*Go blow yourself, cowboy.* Jesse can practically hear him. *I wasn’t born yesterday.*

Hanzo continues before he can speak. “He told me you were more than just a top agent in Blackwatch. You were Reyes’ student. His protégé.”

“He taught me a few things.”

“Seventy-Six said you learned a great deal from him, moreso than you did with any other agent in Overwatch. Moreso than Amari.”

The name cracks Jesse’s consciousness like a gunshot. “Look, Jack don’t got a fuckin’ right to talk about her. He doesn’t know what the hell he’s talking about, she was *good* to me --”

Hanzo raises his voice. “This is not about her. Nor him. This is about *Reyes*. This is about the man who made you his pupil. Who trained you, who watched out for you. Who fought beside you, who trusted in you, who counted on you to execute critical missions.” He pauses, considering.

“Seventy-Six said that the two of you shared a language. You spoke it together regularly. You shared in this, you confided in each other with it.”

Jesse bristles. Every statement feels like an accusation. “Hanzo, come on.”

“Your so-called deal was a chance at a straight job. An opportunity to start anew, free from a life
of crime. An opportunity that criminals are rarely given, here or anywhere else. He took you from the Deadlock Gang and made a hero out of you.” And then, with bite: “and yet you have told me, time and time again, that he was hard on you. That he led his agents down a dark path.”

“And?” It’s all Jesse can get out.

“It is an enigma. I do not like enigmas. I struggle to figure it out. Nobody else at the Watchpoint speaks of Gabriel Reyes. No one -- not even my brother, save for once, in passing. He is only mentioned when referring to his demise and that any operations like his Blackwatch must never happen again. There is no physical memory of him. No profiles. No weapons. The files that exist are carefully encrypted. Hidden away. You discuss this man, yet only when we are alone. You have the missing pieces. You are the only one who can give it to me.”

“I’ve given you plenty.”

“You must give me this, too.”

“A man’s gotta have rules, Hanzo, I keep stuff close to my chest like everyone else.”

“There are no secrets now. Not after what we have shared.”

So the lovemaking changed things. He can hear it in Hanzo’s voice. Why does it surprise him?

“Tell me the truth,” Hanzo says, waxing imperial. “He is alive now, which means he can die again. If I am to fight him beside you, I must know who he is.”

“Honey, c’mon.”

“Who was he? Your brother, or your enemy?”

"Han-zo."

“Tell me.” And then, strained: “please.”

Jesse chews on his right-hand knuckle. Peacekeeper feels dense as lead in his hand. Hanzo’s eyes feel like hooks on him, tugging, insisting. “He was both, alright? For cryin’ out loud. He was both.”

“How?” Hanzo nearly scowls. “Listening to you, one would think he was as ruthless as the Reaper long before now. How can it be both?”

“Because he wasn’t always bad.”

“He wasn’t always bad,” Hanzo repeats, disbelieving.

Jesse rubs his brow. “He wasn’t always bad. He wasn’t always like that. Only at the end.”

“Then tell me.”

McCree spurs his heel into the floorboard. He tries to stop the boiling fume that grinds out of his chest, but it’s too late. It rushes up like nausea, tumultuous and blurring like vomit, satisfyingly awful like a throaty burn.

“The truth. Alright. You want the truth: not a story or a tale. The truth is, yeah: he was my teacher. I was his student, and he was my boss. He taught me more than Jack did, more than anyone else.”

His voice hitches as the words spill out, traitorous. “More than Amari. And yeah, he was like my brother. He might as well have been my fuckin’ kin. I came up under him, okay? That’s how we
say it in the South, when you got someone always watchin’ over you. I came up under Gabe. He came down to the Gorge with his team for a big sting op and wiped us out, stepped all over us. Like the fuckin’ cucuy, he scared the ever-livin’ daylights outta me. Here he comes, picks me up outta the fuckin’ dirt. Gets me to quit dealin’ weapons and scrubbin’ cash, and he takes me to this” -- angrily stammering -- “this fuckin’ glitzy Overwatch headquarters in the middle of Geneva. In Europe. I’d never been to fuckin’ Europe before, hell, I’d never been north of the Mason-Dixon line. I was this pokey, hard-up sonofagun, borrowed boots, stolen bike. You stop and think for a second what it’s like gettin’ thrown to the wolves in Switzerland when you’re a half-gringo wild deuce who never knew his daddy. I was a kid, Hanzo. A poor kid. Never even knew fancy tuna existed outside of a tin can of cat food.”

“Jesse,” the archer sighs, stung.

The live-wire crackles hot in McCree’s mouth. He’s not done.

“But I had Gabe, who knew everything. He knew me. He got me. We clicked. It took some time -- it wasn’t always smooth sailing. I still had Deadlock in me in those early days. No one trusted me. Hell, no one even fuckin’ liked me. Not Torb, not Reinhardt, not Amari, not Morrison, oh” -- Jesse rolls his eyes -- “especially not Jack-o, back then, he questioned it left and right.” Now McCree flattens his accent, tunes pedantic, emulates a Midwestern brogue. Minnesota nice. “‘Now, Gabriel, how’re you gonna bring a boy like that into Overwatch?’ ‘How will you persuade a gangster to turn a new leaf, Gabriel?’” He scoffs. “Everyone was afraid I’d bust out gang tricks and show true colors.

Well, you know what? I did show them. I showed them otherwise. And it was ’cause of Gabe. He understood me. He was from LA. You ever been there? You know how bad it was there after the Crisis? He did. He remembered how it went to hell all along the West Coast. He’d tell me about the Siege of Silicon Valley, ‘bout how the state defense force handled the omniums in Riverside and Orange County. About all the people left homeless and starvin’, the families and the lil’ kids. The bodies on the side of the road.”

He bites his lip and swallows the film of cigarette smoke in his throat.

“But you know what else he knew? He knew how to get out. He knew how to get people outta bad times. He knew how to push on and work hard through the shit and the mess until things turned alright. He worked harder than anyone I’ve ever known in all my life. That’s what he made me do. That’s how I turned that leaf. He pushed me through it. He made me work.

Remember how I said we called him ‘King Reyes?’ That’s a joke. My joke. ‘Reyes’ means ‘kings’ en español. Man was literally born deservin’ a crown. At the end of the day: he was numero uno. He was our king. The best of the best. A natural-born killer. All you had to do was look at the man’s combat profile and you’d see he outperformed every hot-shot in Blackwatch. Oh, he regularly outdid Jack. Hell: he’d been outperformin’ his numbers since OCS. The man was already a super-soldier, didn’t need no secret program to get him there.

But Jack. Good ol’ corn-fed Jack, soakin’ up all the glory. Morrison the poster boy, had himself a blue strike suit. Gettin’ all the praise, all the interviews, all the medals. You think Reyes was the only one gettin’ steamed up about it? He came off a mission hard one day, hard as tacks, stoppin’ a chemical attack from being launched on Prague. Reyes saved the lives of two million men, women, and children before we were finished eatin’ breakfast and no one at HQ even told him thank you. Not even his own fuckin’ man. ” Jesse bristles again. “You better believe I let Gabe take me on in the sparrin’ ring a few good times over shit like that.

Let me tell you why no one talks about him. Let me tell you why they all stay quiet. They’re
afraid. All of them. You think Morrison’s a coward now? Shoulda seen him before. Shoulda seen him when it came to what we did in Blackwatch. I told you: he didn’t know shit. He chose not to know shit. Kept his gloves clean. Kept his nose outta our business ‘cause he didn’t like the way it stank. Blackwatch was the clean-up crew. Who do you think hauled the marks away after Overwatch shot ’em? Who goes in and mops up when shit goes south? I waded through more biohaz than a sewage plant, I helped Gabe tarp up more bodies and dump ‘em where the sun don’t shine more often than I got to brush my teeth. You only got to run the glamorous jobs when you were up at the top, and do you know how long it took me to get there? Fuckin’ years. Me an’ Reyes, Reyes an’ Blackwatch, all of us did the hard jobs. The background jobs. The jobs no one at the Watchpoint wants to talk about, shit that no one gets any medals for. We weren’t poster boys, we didn’t wind up on the evenin’ news until the jobs started turning sour. And even then: those Blackwatch men did those jobs because someone had to do ‘em. Because of Reyes, they did ‘em well. I may have saved a thousand lives runnin’ Blackwatch ops, I know Gabe saved every single one of the old guard back at Gibraltar right now at least once or twice. That’s why they button up about it. They know they owe him their lives. They know they owe him that much, at the least.

But then you got the bad shit. You got all the reasons I left. You got the betrayal, you got the strike, the explosion at the HQ. You got all the shit he pulled on us at the end. All of us. Even me. The old guard gets fussed up about how he turned takin’ everybody down into his last dirty job, but there was more. There was a lot more they don’t know about. There’s a lot to get over. So you ain’t gonna hear them chitty-chattin’ about it. You don’t sit around reminsicin’ about the good times when the bad ones were so rough.”

His nostrils sting, threatening to water.

“So here we are. There’s your truth. You wanted it, you got it. He was my captain and he was my brother. It’s a lose-lose situation, Hanzo. So long as he’s alive, it’s a battle I can’t win. You speak kindly of a killer and his evil eye will come for you in the night. But you walk away and speak ill about someone who saved you, cleaned up after you, walked in your shadow makin’ sure you stayed safe -- well. You’re a real unworthy sonofagun. You’re nothin’ but a god-damned ingrate.”

The highway stretches on. Around the truck drones the hum of the hyperlane, rumbling under the engine and hover-wheels. A green horizon flickers ahead, bright with the October morning sun, swallowed by tunnel after tunnel. Beside him, Hanzo shifts, leans back, lets out a nasal huff.

The silence spreads between them like a hole. A miniature gulf that opens, closes, dilates with inchoate sadness.

Finally he answers, “I see.”

“I’m here ‘cause of him, in this truck with you right now. He gave me my life.”

“And now, what? Now that he means to take it from you.”

“Eye for an eye.”

“Do not say such a thing,” Hanzo warns, rubbing the bridge of his nose, struggling in the driver’s seat to digest it all.

Another heavy silence. Jesse looks down at his lap. Solemnly, as if he’s back in the graveyard paying his respects.

“You know,” he says softly. “He gave me this.”
Hanzo turns. “What?”

“This,” Jesse lifts Peacekeeper, tilting it, flashing the barrel. “You seen what all I can do with it. Ain’t you ever wondered where I got it?”

Hanzo says nothing. Jesse turns the gun and looks it over, inspects its cylinder, appraises its weight. Heavy in his palm, like solid bone.

“We made a deal,” he explains. “A year into Blackwatch, he came to me. Said it was time to finish the trade. I gave him my gang revolver and my shotguns, he gave me this. He had it custom-made. Modeled after the old Single Action Army. They used to call that ‘the gun that won the West.’ He said, ‘if you’re insisting on bein’ a cowboy, you’re gonna do it right.’” Jesse sighs. “God-damn, he knew me, Hanzo. Knew me through and through. That’s when it changed for me, y’know. I wasn’t good, wasn’t bad, but I wasn’t Deadlock anymore. Still wasn’t anybody’s hero, but I was done with the gang life. That’s when it really started. That’s where it really began.”

Hanzo rasps, “you loved this man.”

“I did.” No hesitation, no pause. No hemming or hawing. “I woulda followed him into hell.”

“You love him no longer.”

“Nope.” Jesse itches for another cigarette, reaches into the console, digs out the box. “Once burned, sweetheart.”

Hanzo puffs a ‘tch-ah,’ wrinkling his nose. The tension wanes. “Be serious.”

“I thought he was dead, Hanzo. That was enough for me. I been livin’ the past five years thinkin’ the world was a safer place ‘cause he finally got some peace. It’s taken me a long, hard time to get over leaving. I was doin’ fine at it, too, until I got interrupted.”

“What do you mean?”

He holsters his gun. Mirth blooms out of his misery. The opportunity for humor crests through his grief. “Well, you see, a clever fella showed up back in June, right after I got to Gibraltar. Had good aim, shot me right in the arm, came around later and got all up in my business --”

“Be serious,” Hanzo charges. “After all you just told me, are you really going to jest --”

“I'm being serious,” Jesse bleats. He puts down the cigarettes. The humor washes away, receding like a tide. “I ain’t pulling your leg. You interrupted me, Hanzo. You been hauntin’ me since you shot me. You roped the moon outta my sky.” Jesse’s throat tightens. “That’s what people do, honey. They interrupt you. They rush in when you don’t expect it and shake things up. I ain’t a spring chicken anymore. I thought I was past my prime for someone like you to come along.”

Hanzo reaches across the seat, feels for Jesse’s wrist, thrusts into his space. As if he means to scold him, or kiss him. Perhaps both. “Of all the things you talk about -- of all your stories, your tales, the people. You talk ceaselessly of everything, you fill the void with words.” His regal voice splinters, just barely. “Why not this? Why?” Gripping his steely forearm. “Why did you not tell me?”

The tightness draws quick, knotting his voice. Grit and gravel. “Does it matter? You know now.”

Hanzo takes his metal hand. Jesse smells oil in his raven hair, the cleaness of his breath and skin. He shudders and curls their fingers, brings them to his lips, doubles over. Hanzo touches his brow
and he’s gone, folding in, letting go.

He could laugh at the absurdity of it: the mission that became a vacation and then a mission again, the shootout and the stolen truck, the hyperlane tunnels gulping down their escape. Mister Barceló flattening in the arms of Mister Tsubaki, two nameless men fleeing gunfire, grim reapers and ghosts. He imagines it like a news headline, absurd and lurid, flashing like a yellow neon light: *studies show an alarming new trend of brothers returning from the grave*. What a joke.

But Jesse realizes it as the archer soothes him, strokes his hair, murmurs Japanese in his weary ear. Hanzo knows how he copes. Better than anyone else in the world, dead or alive or both.

---

They make it to Veracruz shortly after noon. McCree tapes up his raw shoulder with fresh gauze and takes two painkillers, more for the residual anxiety than the sting. Winston and Athena try to grill them about Reaper and the mission change, but McCree tells them to sit tight until he and Hanzo can get back to Gibraltar. They have all the information they need; they’ll be home soon.

Hanzo cleans out the truck, ditches it someplace safe, procures a small credit chip. He stares at it as they’re changing clothes in a secluded spaceport bathroom.

“What’s that?” asks McCree, tossing his bloody shirt in the trash can.

“Money,” Hanzo answers. “Seventy-Six gave it to me as part of the escape.”

“How much?”

Hanzo turns the chip over in his palm. “Ninety-five million dollars.”

McCree freezes. “Come again?”

“He robbed several banks to fund his ventures.” Hanzo gazes coolly at the chip as if he’s appraising a catchpenny purchase. A cheap token. “He said it has been laundered, but I have no guarantee. It needs to be checked.”

His jaw drops. “Holy shit, Hanzo. That’s more than my bounty!”

“More than mine, most likely, if the Shimada-gumi still posts it.”

“Why’n the hell did he give you so much money?”

“A gift, he said. Something for Overwatch.” Hanzo shrugs, borderline nonchalant. “In his words: ‘better in the hands of heroes than in Talon’s.’”

Incredulously: “he *stole* that from Talon?”

“Like I said. I do not doubt his good intentions.”

Jesse turns back to the bathroom wall mirror. He glares hard at the chrome faucets sloping like bird necks over the white strip of sinks. A hollow, empty ache pulls at his heart, gnaws and grinds, weighs him down. He hasn’t felt like this in a long time; he doesn’t want to feel it anymore. Cigarettes can’t chase it away; bourbon would only make it hurt worse.

Desperation bites. He reaches for Hanzo’s jacketed arm.

“Let’s leave,” he growls, low and pleading.
Hanzo pries him off and fixes his shirt. “We are."

“No, I mean” -- Jesse lumbers close, inhales a florid whiff of Hanzo’s cologne, wilts from a different type of ache -- “let’s leave. Everything. Let’s go. Let’s leave altogether.”

Hanzo stiffens. “What do you mean?”

“Leave. We can just go. With that kinda money we could get two tickets to anywhere.”

“Anywhere?”

“We could go to Greece. Ilios, I got places we could look at. We could go to Croatia, you ever been to Croatia? Dubrovnik, I know some places there, too. It’s beautiful there. It’s so pretty it’ll make your head spin. It’d be like the bay, we could get a villa by the sea.”


“Who cares.” Jesse sags, hammered out and hurting. “Maybe we leave ‘em, maybe we don’t. We can decide later. It ain’t nothin’. We can go to Australia, Alaska, hell -- we could go to Japan. It doesn’t matter where we go, just so long as we’re together.” He curls his fingers into Hanzo’s sleeve. “I want what we had this weekend, darlin’. I wanna go somewhere with you.”

“You want to run away,” Hanzo murmurs, bracing the gunslinger’s arms. “You want to abandon our return, our goals, our mission --”

“Fuck it, Mister Tsubaki. We don’t need all that mess.”

“Do not say that.” A note of warning glints in his voice, dangerous and sharp. Like an arrowhead. “We have a task to complete. We have work to do.” And then, accusatory: “I could not leave behind Genji.”

“We can go back someday. We can go back in a few days, a week, two weeks. A month. Or fuckin’ never, I don’t care. I just want it on our terms.”

“I do care. These are our terms.” Softer now. “I refuse to be afraid.”

“Wouldn’t you like it, though?” Whispering now, the devil’s tongue tempting. “Going far away with me? Seeing the sights? Livin’ fine, eatin’ fine, doin’ fine things with each other? Ninety-five million dollars can get us someplace good. It can do us real well. The world could be our moon pie, Mister Tsubaki. Sweet as can be.”

“Jesse.” Hanzo touches his chest. Almost yielding.

He lets the words tumble out, free and treacherous. Codeless and wild, no rules, no regulations. Soft, electric love songs pleading into Hanzo’s noble brow. “You and me, sweetheart. We could go far away from here. We could take the money and run.”

They come together in the cool blue glow of halogen lights, Hanzo clutching him, him gripping Hanzo. He can’t detect where the kiss begins, somewhere between the realization that he’s hard and Hanzo is too: palming through his jeans, gasping, surging against him. Both of them bitten by precipitous lust. He thinks they could do it here in this bathroom, in all its industrial starkness, nothing like the tiled splendor of the Misiòn hotel. Something rough and quick and overwhelming in an antiseptic stall, like lovers about to get on different planes. Like young men.
Hanzo pulls breathlessly away. “No,” he says. “We cannot. We have to go back.”

“God-damn,” Jesse wheedles, breathless, half-heartedly accepting. “If that don’t burn me up.”

“We have spent too long on the run,” Hanzo replies. He breaks from Jesse and shifts, adjusts his trousers, clears his throat. “We must do the honorable thing, even if we wish to digress. We have to finish our task.”

Jesse takes inventory with woeful eyes: his tailored suit, his crisp shirt, his fake watch. The bob of his throat as it slopes into his collar. The ridges on his nimble hands. Achingly beautiful, a glimpse into perfection. The man who took him to Mexico and made love to him in a storm.

“Promise me, then,” he says. “Maybe one day, when it’s all over.”

Hanzo fixes his sleek dark eyes on Jesse’s face. It’s haunting; in the halogen lights, Jesse sees beneath the suit and glasses the hard, chiseled visage from the internet photo. The Shimada lord at twenty-seven, cruel-mouthed and somber, ruthlessly gazing through a digital screen. Like a mythical figure: the prince of assassins.

He rasps back: “maybe one day, when it is all over.”

They trade smiles and weak kisses. The ache nibbles in his chest before he swallows it down, bilious, determined not to wince.

---

It takes the rest of the day to get back to the Watchpoint. A telescreen in the Madrid spaceport runs a highlight reel of the shooting in Dorado; news anchors are calling it the Día de los Muertos attack, another incident of terrorism foiled (or fostered) by the rogue agent Soldier: 76. Drone surveillance suggests a second attacker: an armed agent in black. Both assailants fled from the authorities, disappearing through a wooded gulch near the bay. No civilians injured, widespread structural damage across the Dorado Royal Cemetery. All public holiday events have been cancelled.

Hanzo catches him gazing at the telescreen and nudges him along. *Time to go.*

Lúcio picks them up in the same supply van used to drop them off. He parks on the drone track and ushers McCree to the medbay, Hanzo at his flank.

McCree bursts inside when the doors open. “Angela.”

A murmur of feminine voices. Dr. Ziegler works beside Satya, who is stretched on a padded table with her left arm extended for examination. Hana spins on a stool nearby, playing video games on a pink handheld. All three women look up, startled.

Beside him, Hanzo goes rigid. He speaks quick and fluid in Korean; Hana immediately gets to her feet. Lúcio senses the tension, stammers a quick *uh-oh*, backs up.

“Jesse,” Angela says, rising.

“We need to talk,” McCree says.

“I’m working with a patient --”

“We need to talk *now.*”
Satya gets up. Her gold eyes flick from person to person. “Dr. Ziegler is currently occupied. Please leave.”

“This can’t wait,” Jesse growls. “All y’all get outta here. Now.”

Coldly Satya replies, “Perhaps you can return when you have arranged a visit through the scheduling system --”

“Get outta here.”

“Stop it,” Angela steps in. Her gaze darts to the audio-medic, silently questioning: what’s going on? Lúcio shoots back: I don’t know. “What is this? What’s happened? Are you injured?”

Satya is about to step forward and say something abrasive when Hana cuts in beside her.

“Hey,” she says. “Let’s go.”

The archi-tech looks down, confused. “What?”

“Let’s go.” Hana taps Satya’s elbow with two fingers. “It’s cool. We can come back in the morning, no big deal.”

Satya flusters. “It is not cool, Athena arranged this appointment for me. My arm --”

Lúcio interrupts. “You guys can come in tomorrow. I’ll pull an early shift and you can come back in the morning.” He catches Satya’s ruthless glare. “What?”

“No.”

“I’m a medic,” Lúcio huffs. “You know? Hippocratic oath? ‘First, do no harm?’ I can take a look at it, I’m not gonna break it or anything.”

“You will not examine my arm.”

Now Lúcio frowns. “Seriously, Vaswani?”

“I did not agree to have you look at it --”

“Bitte, Miss Vaswani,” Angela chimes in. “Let’s reschedule. I can take the shift, Lúcio, do not worry.”

Hanzo says something else in Korean to Hana, briskly this time. Hana replies with a muted murmur, smiling weakly, tugging Satya by the arm, nudging after Lúcio. Satya protests two more times before they get her out the door.

Angela faces Jesse and Hanzo with a mix of anger and dread. “What is this about?”

He tells her. Her face drains of color. Within moments she sinks into a chair, hands over her lips, eyes wide and glazed in shock.

Repeating softly, over and over: no, no, oh -- please, no.

---

“Do you believe her?” Hanzo asks later when they’re alone in his bunk, afterwards -- following the confrontation, a brief reunion with Genji, the awful debriefing with Winston and Athena, a somber
explanation to Reinhardt and Torbjorn, who both gaped in horror. Leaving the room agonized, in disbelief, devastated.

“Yeah,” Jesse sighs. “Yeah, I think I believe her.”

“You believe she hid the truth out of shame. Fear, perhaps.”

“She broke the law, Hanzo. Conductin’ an unregulated autopsy on Gabe, against the rules of the super-soldier program? Shit, she woulda lost her medical license. On top of everything that happened with the HQ, they woulda thrown her in prison. Can’t save lives when you’re rottin’ in jail. Not a lot you can say about that. Even Mercy is human at the end of the day.”

“I am not talking about that. I am talking about what she did during the autopsy. I am talking about how she tried to revive him using the Caduceus.”

“Oh.” Jesse’s thoughts fuzz out. He still can’t wrap his mind around it. The jargon she used during her tearful confession confused him: necrotic liquefaction, vascular internalization, enhanced magnification of regenerative interface via reversal of the biotic beam. Something-something phagocytosis, something-something pulse. A heartfelt, miserable attempt to explain a method that went wrong. “Yeah. I believe she did.”

“You believe she regrets it.”

“Couldn’t you see it on her face? God-damn, Hanzo, I’ve never seen her cry like that. She failed. She thought she had a chance to save someone’s life and it didn’t work the way she thought it would.”

“Her pride is now hubris. It has created a fiend.”

“Yeah, well, tomorrow she’ll show us the specs at the meeting. She might be the only one who can reverse it.”

"And if not?"

"I don't know, sweetheart. I don't know."

Flatly, Hanzo rasps after a pause: “The only one who can kill the creation is Doctor Frankenstein himself.”

"Is that a saying?"

Hanzo says primly, "it is now."

Jokingly, in spite of himself. “You know, I always thought Frankenstein was the creation.”

Hanzo twists his ear. “Do not start.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Jesse laughs weakly, a coarse hah. “As the sayin’ goes: ‘the road to hell is paved with --’”

“Good intentions.” Hanzo finishes the proverb, tucks against him, curls tight.

As they lie silent in the dark, a cold, unnatural heartache creeps over him. He is exhausted and anxious, weary but wide-awake, on edge despite feeling dull like the facet of a polished stone. Worn down, drained, desperately vigilant. A dead-eye coping with the shocking reminder that he’s still alive.
Hanzo knows. He strokes his back. “Rest.”

“I’ll try.”

Drowsiness overtakes him. McCree dreams in fleeting patches: colors, blurry images, lapping waves of old emotions. He grinds his teeth through the rougher parts, weathering the bad ones with twitching limbs and dog-like huffs.

He doesn’t feel Hanzo get up, nor does he hear the soft padding of his bare feet across the floor. No sound, no disturbance. Despite his suffering, he sleeps.

The ballad of Jack and Gabe drones in the background of his mind, on mute.

---

Hanzo slips into the lavatory. He shuts the door, locks it, takes out his handset.

A message waits in his inbox.

‖ 2345: [3945_85] Song, Hana:

Hey
Lu looked up the stuff you requested and he got a few hits
Athena isn’t done decrypting the BW archive but she has some of the profile for 02
How much of it do you want?

‖ 0027: [3945_84]

All of it, please. Thank you very much.
When will the archive be finished decrypting?

‖ 0028: [3945_85] Song, Hana:

K I’m sending now
102 hours
Can you wait that long??
I’m sorry about earlier btw
I got worried when I heard things went bad. I’m glad you and Mac are OK
I know I haven’t known you guys long but I can still worry, you know? (づ ̄ ³ ̄)づ

He lightly traces the pink rabbit icon on the screen.

‖ 0029: [3945_84]

Do not apologize. You are fine.
I am glad to be back.
We have a lot to practice tomorrow, so be sure you get some rest.
His inbox flashes a notification. Three new messages, six attachments.


Hanzo stares at the grim face for a long time.

Another notification: a new file, a series of holovids. They took longer to transfer. Hanzo checks the volume on his handset, thumbs it down to ‘silent,’ taps the file. His screen flashes black, then white.

Purple text precedes the image that flares above his screen: internal_NewsLetter_may_issue.m1v7

Hanzo squints as the holovid loads. There are shots of green foliage, high gray buildings, a chain-link fence around an industrial complex. Blue sky, white clouds. Mountains edging the horizon when the camera pulls back: a panorama of snow-capped peaks.

Switzerland, he thinks, as a face appears.

A beautiful African woman with warm gold hair waves to the viewer. She smiles, says something, gestures excitedly. The scene cuts; the camera opens to a pristine courtyard surrounded by walkways and brick walls. Two women are playing volleyball by a wide yellow net. Hanzo recognizes the man who enters the frame, short and grinning, motioning at the viewer, look down here. Torbjorn Lindholm. He’s saying something.

Hastily Hanzo thumbs the volume up by one click, then two. The engineer’s voice crackles out quietly.

“-- play volleyball with our trainees, here, I’m not quite in the same league on account of my stature. Maybe next month they’ll relax the rules an’ let me have a team with my turrets. Ha-ha! Anywho, glad you’re takin’ up the task of gettin’ footage for this month, I’m lookin’ forward to how it turns out.”

One of the women playing behind him lets out a high laugh. The camera lifts, zooms in on her face, focuses on her smile. Angela Ziegler, young and fresh-faced, just as she looks now. She calls out something in German; Torbjorn turns and answers; Angela and the other woman look at the viewer. They wave. The camera cuts.

Hanzo nearly drops his phone as the holovid flashes to the next scene.

There he is: stocky, long-necked, tall and hatted. Bearded, wearing his red kerchief, a few years older than the picture sent by Hana. Sitting at a table surrounded by others, some standing, some crouched beside. McCree is grinning, hanging his head and occasionally shaking it; he looks modestly pleased, trying not to enjoy being the center of attention. Hanzo can make out a laughing Reinhardt, Torbjorn, and Angela. He taps the pause button to get a better look at the blonde in a t-
shirt and sweats; he recognizes Morrison as a younger, fairer man.

He doesn’t recognize the beautiful woman in blue with long black hair, nor the tall girl next to her. Her likeness to the woman in blue startled him; there’s no doubt in his mind that they are related, perhaps sisters. No, he thinks, mother and daughter. The look on the woman’s face is too fond not to be maternal.

Hanzo presses play. The girl reaches over to jostle Jesse’s shoulder and point at the camera. Her carbon-copy mother laughs and does the same. Jesse looks up, realizes he’s being recorded, and gulps a mortified laugh.

His mouth runs dry as he realizes exactly who the woman in blue is.

“Okay,” a voice says off-film, the cameraman. Smooth and masculine. “We’re filming. Focus. Time to focus. We’re gonna do it like we practiced. Are you all ready? On the count of three.”

“Y’all don’t gotta,” McCree says smugly, leaning back in his chair, soaking up the joy evident on every person in the room.

“Yes, we do,” Morrison says. “On the count of three ---”

“Yeah,” the room agrees, a multitude of cheerful voices. “One, two, three.”

The cameraman breaks into song: deep, vibrant Spanish. “Estas sooon -- las mañaniii-tas -- que cantaaba” -- he starts snickering through the song -- “el rey Gabiii”

McCree’s face shoots up, owlishly eyeing the camera. Incensed, he laughs. Drawling like a hillbilly. “Aw, that ain’t how the song goes, y’big ass-hole!”

“Pfah.” The woman in blue gently thumps the back of Jesse’s head. “Watch your words.”

He ducks forward. Everyone laughs mid-verse, especially the cameraman, who causes the frame to shake.

Hanzo notices the napkins on the table, the small brown cake, the single candle.

A birthday.

“Hoy por seeeeeer el día de tu san-to,” continues the song as the room joins in, accented voices ringing in together at various pitches. “Te las cantaaamooos a tiii…”

“Y’all are somethin’ else,” McCree says, shaking his head, beaming. He grins wide, looking around, taking it in. Settling fondly on the cameraman like he’s gazing at the stars.

Like one of his Southernisms: happy as a pig in mud.

Hanzo thumbs the sleep button. The holovid abruptly quits. He sets down his phone, shuts his eyes, and thumps his fist against his brow.

The lavatory lights buzz overhead, humming, as if in thought.

Chapter End Notes
This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!

Much love to Jamie, Sylphy, Losebetter, Penna, Entropy, and Fig for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.

References: The gun that won the West, Gabe's birthday song.

I've had a lot of commentary re: Gabe and Jesse's tumultuous relationship as it's portrayed in HtF. I would like to point out to folks who are displeased with McCree's recollections: please understand that his dialogue here is emotionally charged for reasons that will be explained in upcoming chapters, some of which by Reyes himself (namely when Jesse was captured out of Deadlock). We still really just don't know a lot about Gabe in canon -- plenty about Reaper, sure, but not the man he once was.

I've removed some contextual dialogue here that made it seem like Reyes was consistently physically abusive to McCree after bringing him into Blackwatch, which is not what I originally wanted to portray. As I said: Reyes himself will give a perspective of what happened during the Deadlock sting that brought Jesse onboard Overwatch.

Also, on the eve of finishing this chapter, Blizzard basically teased us with Sombra! If she's revealed with enough context, she may appear more clearly towards the end of HtF!

HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

- Back from a long break! Apologies it took me to the 2nd week to get this done; the chapter is pretty lengthy to make up for it.
- Still very excited that you guys are following along!
- There is mild sexual content in this chapter above the middle, but no love scene.
- There are some important footnotes at the bottom regarding edits made to HtF over the past 2-3 weeks due to reader feedback.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

目の上のたんこぶ
me no ue no tankobu - “the lump above your eye”
A proverb describing someone who irritatingly gets in your way, an obstacle.

---

They’re in pursuit. Mist hangs over the rooftops in Dorado where they run, darting over uneven pitch spotted with reddened stucco and terracotta tile. Hanzo swiftly swerves and bobs behind him, sees a jump, moves ahead, effortlessly bounds to the next eave. Seventy-Six follows. He’s bigger and slower but he crosses the gap without a pinch.

“There’s a truck behind the market row just shy of a kilometer east of the cemetery,” Seventy-Six advises. “Drop your supplies there and move in, I’ll come in from the northern perimeter and scout for the hostile.” He slows. “We split here. Sweep until you find McCree. Once you’ve got him secure, take the truck and go. The keycode is in the chip I gave you. The vehicle is cleared for hyperlane passage, registered to a John Doe. It’d be hard to trace, but not impossible.” Patronizingly. “Don’t go over the speed limit.”

“What about you?”

“Don’t worry about me. You know who I’m here for. I’ll run distraction, cover your escape, and handle the rest myself.”

Hanzo wholly accepts this. In the short time he’s had to both interrogate and cooperate with Seventy-Six, he has decided he does not care for him. Too military, too bull-headed. Quick to bark orders and expect compliance without question. A strike-out vigilante who plays poorly with others.

Despite his disdain, he’s grateful. The situation is critical and Seventy-Six is helping out. Without him, this morning would have ended differently. Badly.

“When you get back to Gibraltar, get to Angela,” he says before they part ways. “She has info. Critical information. And: don’t wait up for me. I can’t promise I’ll be able to contact you securely after this, but I’ll try.” Seventy-Six faces him, breath puffing, visor shining. An ominous span of ruby-red glass fixed in an infernal glare. “I’m glad you picked the right side, Shimada.”
Hanzo crosses the roofs as covertly as he can. Storm Bow weighs down his hands; his quiver is ready. His pulse beats in his ears as he focuses on the point: the Cemetery by the President’s mansion. That’s where McCree radioed in over the comm. That’s where he’s being attacked, where Seventy-Six assumes the hostile has found him. The Reaper -- a reincarnation of Gabriel Reyes, late founder of Overwatch, a man whose name rolled off Seventy-Six’s lips with tones of dread and fear.

And sadness, a sentiment that provokes him. A weakness, almost wistful -- as if Jack cannot bear the weight of it on his tongue.

---

Hanzo calls them at dawn on the mid-November breeze from his rocky perch above the Gibraltan strait. The sea washes before him, gunmetal grey against the horizon as a broad strip of sunlight seeps into the purpling sky. When the dragons appear, their hue outshines everything; they wrap the vista in neon-bright ropes that crackle around him in an undulating loop. They encircle him, wagging their tongues, licking their tails, leering like a divine ouroboros.

Come to me, he implores, as I bid you.

The Shimada dragons seethe around their master with jaws open and eyes aflame. They watch him like predators observing quarry. He faces them without flinching. He has a request.

In all the years he has known them -- felt their presence, understood their purpose, woven their power between his fingers -- he has never plied them for a non-lethal task. The dragons are meant to be wielded for the sake of harm and hurting. They operate on archaic fares like life and death, prices that are paid in blood, bone, or blackened flesh. Timeless weapons whose only service is to slay.

Hanzo has to find this target before he can slay it.

“You are here, again,” he says.

We are, they reply, a supernatural greeting expanding around him without word or voice.

“Still strong,” Hanzo adds. “More powerful than the last. In Siberia, you were ruthless. You are ravenous now.”

Yes, they agree, eyeing him with otherworldly hunger. You summon us, but you bring no feed.

He pauses. Do they suspect his intentions? Can they already guess what he’s about to ask?

I am not strong, he reminds himself, a hollow repetition of his plea the last time he called them. But I am not weak, either. Today I am simply a man.

The dragons move in. Hanzo straightening where he sits, tensing his fingers into his knees. Like a lens, they close around him, shuttering out the aperture of the early morning sky until he sees nothing but their glittering hides.

Why have you called us? they ask. Why are we here?

It takes a burst of conviction to push through the request, a reassurance of his reasoning. The task must be completed; the fee is already charged. The life debt to the gunslinger was paid long ago, but he cannot convince himself the job is over.
“The last one,” he begins. “The one on which you fed, in the snow. They call him the Reaper.”

*We do not care what he is called.*

“You did not kill him.”

The response hits him like electricity: no.

“You have killed all others. Anyone outside of the graces of my clan, you devour. This one you did not. Why?”

*Carrion,* they answer. *We cannot feast on that which does not live.*

“Tell me.” His gaze snaps up. “Tell me what you know.” He commands: “tell me what you learned when you took him in the cold.”

*Anomaly,* they answer, instantaneous and booming. *Strange. Unnatural. The cycle that should have closed was left open to decay. An existence of endless agony.*

Hanzo’s skin prickles. This is new; already the dragons have exchanged more between him than any other time in his life. More than the day when they first appeared: his thirteenth birthday, a sober celebration of the young master’s assumption, held within the dark, lofty rafters of Hanamura Castle. The dragons terrified him; at first he cowered, whimpered, feared wetting himself. It took him weeks to tell Genji about their emergence, only deciding to do so after he realized the boy would someday have to face a similar fright on his own. Hanzo knew -- after years of insistence from his father -- never to let his brother wander hapless or unprepared.

The Shimada brothers have come very far from those old wooden halls. Here, above the Watchpoint, with nothing but the sea and sky, there is nowhere to hide.

“I must find him,” he says. Plain and simple. “I must know everything about the Reaper, and then I must track him down. And when I find him, he must die.” A long pause. “Will you assist me?”

No answer. The dragons slowly lope along, coiling and chiming like the gears of a great celestial clock. Hanzo frowns. He’s accustomed to their silence, but now is not the time.

“I must fulfill my duty,” he implores. “I must take this as my burden.”

*An endless duty,* they reply. *A burden repeated. We see you standing at a point on an unbroken loop. The scavenger eats remains knowing it will someday be a carcass. The circle that never ends goes round and round like the moon. A serpent devours its own tail. A dead man lives and knows no peace.*

Hanzo grimaces. Of course: his family’s ancient spirits would speak to him in riddles during an hour of need.

“Assist me,” he demands. “Seek the one you took before. Take him, mark him, show me where to find him. I cannot rest until he is stopped and brought to justice.”

Without warning, the dragons disappear. Two blinks of light and they’re gone. They leave behind a wide, shimmering emptiness -- a lack of color and luminescence, draining the earth and sky of all but monochromatic hues. No sign of their understanding. No indication that they will do as told.

Hanzo closes his eyes. He exhales, shudders, swallows a sudden chill.
It’s the same departure they always make. Why does this one feel so bad?

---

“I never guessed the dragons could talk, but it makes sense,” says Hana, later when they’re practicing archery at Range 2.

“They are capable of speech,” he says over the console. He types in a series of control commands in Korean; with Hana, the default for both logistics and conversation always reverts to her native tongue. “But they say very little. I do not know if my request was honored or denied. Overall I would not consider them very forthcoming.”

Hana picks up an arrow, eyeing the range. She’s testing the string on her silver compound bow; she always attends practice in one of her colorful MEKA suits, stamped and printed with the logos of her varied sponsors. Today she’s clad in gold with black stripes, like a bumblebee. “Kinda like you, I guess.”

Yes, he thinks. She is far more loquacious. “Perhaps.”

“Not that it’s a bad thing,” she answers. “I sorta like it.”

Hanzo taps in a new setting for the practice ‘bots: moving targets and rotating centers. Something to give her a challenge. “Do you?”

“Yeah. I used to have to talk so much during missions. I would get kinda stressed out, it would fry my brain.”

“Did it bother you on the London mission?”

“Nah. That was easy-mode. It was like being a fish in water again.” Hana tests the arrow shaft, scratches the fletching, *scrip scrip*. “I mean, if you feel like chatting, I don’t mind it. I like talking to you. But I appreciate it, too, when it’s quiet and there’s nothing to do but shoot.”

He smiles. “There’s something to be said for silence.”

“Yeah.” She grins. Her hair is tied back in a thick braid. When she draws her bow, it’s reminiscent of a girl character from an old movie -- a dystopian tale about youths who kill other children in a lurid tournament to benefit their families and reinforce totalitarian rule. He came upon her and Lúcio watching it in the rec room after their King’s Row mission, sandwiched around a glum, recuperating McCree. Hanzo joined when asked, watched it, gave up on it after the first half. The whole thing felt too American for his mood.

It’s just the two of them this afternoon. McCree is recovering from the six-hour surgery to upgrade his mechanical arm. Despite his initial support for the procedure, Hanzo now quietly objected it, hoped he might delay it. The weak, ephemeral trust he built for the Swiss physician crumbled after Dorado and her confession about the Reaper; it took assurance from both his brother and McCree for Hanzo not to protest. He watched Jesse hawkishly during the first days of his recovery, doting and lingering until the gunslinger weakly admitted he had no intention of stressing out his limb and didn’t want the archer to skip daily routines on his behalf.

Hana slips into the routine as a new, enthusiastic pupil. Everything Hanzo does interests her, from his weapons and technique, his methodology and mindset, to his tastes and preferences and choices in dress. He’s let her ooh-and-ahh over the details of his draconic tattoo, chattering out a string of questions. *How bad was it?* Enough to hurt, though he was old enough to know he shouldn’t wince. *And how old were you?* Seventeen, he said, the year after he graduated (early, with honors) from
high school. When Genji was just emerging from happy-go-lucky childhood recklessness to the indolence that would eventually guarantee his end.

Funny, he thinks. The tattoo is her senior. By the time she was born, it was finished. He does the math; he’s exactly twice her age. Why does that surprise him? What does that make him to her? Too old for a brother -- and, he quickly decides, awkwardly young for anything paternal.

But is that not why he indulges her? Perhaps he slots into a patient but ambiguous role somewhere in between. An older friend.

Hana nocks her arrow and takes aim. She draws, fires, hits a ‘bot in the side. It spins and beeps in alarm. “Ugh. A miss.”

“Try again,” Hanzo comments. “Your form is still weak at the top of your draw. Relax your chest.”

She frowns. “It is relaxed.”

“No. You’re carrying a lot of tension there,” Hanzo continues, gesturing to his collarbone. “It will block your shoulder movement.”

Hana tries again. She pinches her tongue between her teeth, a bad habit. Her arrow slices the ‘bot at the neck joint. “Shit!”

“Here.” Hanzo rises, crosses the room, stands beside her. He motions for permission to touch; when she gives it, he gently presses the straps of muscle above her clavicle, pushing back her shoulders. Hana lifts her bow into proper stance; immediately she relaxes, blowing out an understanding breath.

“Better,” she says after her next shot, which punctures the ‘bot straight through the eye.

“Much better,” he replies, and they exchange nods.

They talk about the London mission. Hanzo and McCree watched it unfold over Athena’s uplink the day it happened. They all gathered in the Watchpoint laboratory to observe the five-man team of Tracer, D.Va, Mercy, Lúcio and Genji navigate the abandoned underbelly of an industrial complex in search of a Talon checkpoint. The investigation shifted into combat when the team discovered a stray group of operatives transporting a payload of explosives with the intent to detonate them beneath a busy thoroughfare of the upscale boroughs of King’s Row. No civilian injuries, minimal damage to city structures, nine members of Talon arrested. Public response was phenomenally positive. The leading agents -- Lena, Hana, and Lúcio -- earned celebrity status overnight after a charismatic interview with an Atlas News reporter that racked up over a million hits on their main webpage in less than three hours. The heroic young ‘dream team’ became social media darlings praised and admired across the globe.

“You won a lot of hearts with that interview,” Hanzo says, bringing over a bottle of water. “It will benefit Overwatch, increase appeal, reinforce no-tolerance. But it will also anger our foes. You three will be targeted above the rest of us.”

“Win some, lose some,” she says, cracking the bottlecap. “I don’t really worry about haters, you know? You see so much of that when you’re gaming, you either get used to it or you don’t game.”

Hanzo balks at her nonchalance. “These are not ‘haters.’ These are cold-blooded assassins. Terrorists.”

“And?” Hana shrugs. “I used to fight omnis. Sometimes one, sometimes twenty, sometimes a
“hundred at a time.”

“Still not the same.”

“Nope. I bet the omnis are worse.” Hana flicks her bangs off her brow. “I’d rather take on Talon. People are easy, but an evolving AI will always surprise you. When we’d dispatch out of Busan, we never knew what it would throw at us. Didn’t matter, either. All that counted was that we won.”

“The same might be said about our future strikes,” Hanzo presses. “The UN will demand further Overwatch action against all Talon movements. They will be evolving, too.”

“Cool. I like a challenge.”

Hanzo sombers. “This isn’t a game. The stakes are only going to get higher from here.”

“Probably.” Hana smiles wanly. “At least with Overwatch, I get a better idea of what I’m gonna fight.”

Hanzo watches her tip back the bottle and drink six succinct gulps. A horrid image flickers through his mind: Reaper gunning her down, reaching into her MEKA and extracting her like a cicada from its shell, soft and pink and shrieking. He imagines those silvery claws dragging across her pale throat and dropping her to the soil. Anger spikes his blood, hot as a coal.

She notices, lowers her bottle, turns quickly. “You okay?”

“Yes.” Hanzo lies, scrubs his brow, shakes his head. “Forgive me for questioning your judgment. I sometimes forget how rigorous your experience was in Korea.”

Hana’s mouth curls at the edges. “You’re kinda red. Were you thinking something trashy?”

“No. Do not start this again.”

“Oooh!” She giggles, wiping her chin. “I thought you were kinda distracted today.” Her eyes widen; her voice drops to a conspiratorial whisper. “Were you thinking about your boyfriend?”

Hanzo thumps her shoulder. “Hush.”

“He is what he is,” Hana snickers. “You don’t have to act shy about it.” A self-assured puff. “I don’t act shy about anything with you.”

She has a point. Hanzo sighs. “I should make you run laps. You know better than to take discretion as shyness.”

“It’s not really discreet when you ask me to practically wash and dress him up before you guys run off on a cool trip together.”

“That was a mission, not a trip.”

“Sure, sure.” Hana purses her lower lip. “How’s he doing, by the way?”

“Fine.” Again he lies, trying not to think about McCree’s listlessness. Hanzo left him snoring on the new floor futon: a recently acquired solution for the cramped dilemma of McCree’s small bunk. Sleep has been his primary activity since they’ve returned from Dorado: long stretches, frequent naps, heavy slumber interspersed by bursts of erratic insomnia at odd hours of the night. “The surgery slowed him down, but he is picking back up.”
Hana takes another drink of her water. “You’re worried about him.”

Hanzo narrows his gaze. “Pardon?”

“I can tell. All the stuff you told me about what happened in Dorado, and the debriefing with Dr. Ziegler? The stuff about Morrison and Reyes? Heavy stuff.”

He nods, tries not to sound as conflicted as he feels. “‘Heavy’ is a good word for it.”

“And he hasn’t been the same. I can tell, and so can Lu.”

Another point made. Hanzo watched Lúcio stitch up the last remnants of Reaper’s shotgun damage, but no one told him about the other wounds inflicted during the graveyard attack. Nor the breakdown afterward, when McCree stumbled haphazard into a metal guardrail along a scrubby Mexican hyperlane. Yet somehow he seems to understand. He’s texted Hanzo a few times since Dorado to ask after the gunslinger’s health. Hanzo guesses he remembers the bad days after the Dead-Eye. Maybe McCree has told him some of it directly.

Maybe there is a medical file; maybe the medic has seen it. Maybe Lúcio (still lauded as the most talented hacker and electronic cobbler Overwatch has ever had) could dig into the medbay archives in the next stage of his search for any more information on Agent 02, Gabriel Reyes, Reaper, the enigma --

“Hanzo?”

He looks up. Hana is frowning. He blinks, feigns innocence, raises his brows. “Hm?”

“You spaced out.”

Now it’s his turn to smile tiredly. “Calling the dragons sometimes leaves me a little winded. There is a lot to consider.” Before she can interject, he adds: “I could pester you about Lu, you know.”

Hana bobs her brows. “Yeah? Try me.”

“You spend so much time around him. Are you fond of him?”

Hana snorts. “Nah. He’s my best friend. He gets, like, little crushes on everyone, and he’s a huge flirt.” Thoughtfully, pursing her rosy lips. “But I’m the opposite. I don’t do stuff like that.”

“No?”

“Nope. Flirting’s okay, but that’s about all I can take. I dunno if it’s from gaming or the military or just how I am. I feel most comfortable around people when we’re just friends.” She sips her water. “Like, you know: me, you and McCree. And Genji. He was so nice to me during London.”

A third good point: Genji has fondly brought up Hana numerous times in their morning talks since the King’s Row mission. Hanzo is beginning to wonder if his brother is just as charmed by the MEKA soldier as he unexpectedly was. “Your preferences might change as you get older. You might find that you grow fond for certain people above others.”

“Yeah.” She shrugs, puts down her bottle, reaches for her bow. “Or for no one at all.”

Hanzo brings up the training program again, tabs through the options, raises the difficulty level. Imagining phantoms seeping after Hana’s colorful steps, Lúcio’s bright skates, Lena’s ribbon gait. Wraiths taunting them from the shadows, yawning to swallow them whole.
“Or that,” he affirms, shaking off his thoughts, resetting the ‘bots for another round.

---

He passes through the laboratories after practice to visit Mei. Winston lets her use the lab near his own research bay. Hanzo shivers when he arrives; the room is ten degrees lower than the rest of the building.

They speak for part of a quarter-hour, a polite but altogether warm exchange. He’s endeared by her assistance with upgrades to Genji’s coolant system as well as her new defensive diagrams for the upcoming Talon strikes. Her office is crisp but cheery: sky-blue walls, posters of penguins and polar bears, molecular models and textbooks dotting the shelves in candy-bright clusters. A framed picture of Mei and Captain Zaryanova glows by her console; they’re posed behind a multi-colored backdrop of the Moscow Kremlin. Zarya has a powerful arm looped around Mei-Ling, who laughs open-mouthed at the camera, delighted.

“Long-distance is hard, but we’re making it work,” she comments when Hanzo notices the photo. “She hopes to come visit us at Christmas, but right now it is still up in the air.” Mei beams at Hanzo. “Fingers crossed.”

“Of course.” Hanzo does not smile, but his voice is gentle. “If you need accommodations to take time off, please let me know if Genji and I can help.”

“You’re kind!” she laughs. “Between you two and Angela, I could have myself a team of lab assistants!”

He mulls over the comment after he leaves. How close is Mei to the Swiss doctor? Does Mercy involve herself with other research in Overwatch? It irritates him enough that she indirectly claims so much domain over Genji due to his cyborg body; he dislikes the idea that she could leverage influence anywhere else.

A flash of color distracts him as he passes the glass wall of the server rooms. Satya sits inside, working beside one of Athena’s primary input consoles. She perches primly on a stool, legs crossed at the knee, prosthetic fingers tapping away at a wide tablet in her lap.

He stops, provoked by the sight. Instead of her Vishkar uniform, Satya is wearing a sleek cyan-blue gown hemmed in gold panels. Her hair hangs down her back in a glossy black sheet. A pair of crystal earrings wink from her earlobes everytime she moves. The white wings of her headset remind him of animal ears, perked and alert, glinting with each turn of her head.

Hanzo ducks behind the wall, intent on eavesdropping. Satya does not notice; she is engrossed in the task at hand. She speaks softly: a clarification on your diagnostics. Athena responds in low, muted contralto; Satya smiles, bows her head, hastily tucks a lock of hair behind her ear. She’s blushing.

Athena says something else, a gentle murmur, a comment about ‘unmatched capability.’ A surprising response: Satya laughs. A soft, demure sound muffled by her palm.

Hanzo slips away, discomforted, like he’s witnessed something inexplicably intimate by mistake.

---

It’s a slow day at the Watchpoint. There’s no sign of Winston or Genji on the upper walkways. Hanzo has not seen Reinhardt outside of practice since Dorado. A burst of movement: Tracer passes him while jogging, laughing with a wave. Torbjorn waylays him as he rounds the track past
the box garden; he mentions the chicken coop is almost finished. Hanzo promises to pass the word
along to McCree. The engineer gives him a flat farewell, looking glumly preoccupied.

He returns to the dorm and finds Jesse still snoozing. The floor is messy: unwashed clothes, tossed
pillows, soda cans and a tipped bottle of bourbon puddling beneath the leaky cap. Hanzo
accidentally kicks an empty box of processed chocolate pastries as he crosses the room; the sound
of the box rattling against the wall rouses Jesse, who jerks up with a groan.

“Hey,” he mutters, scrabbling on his side. “Shit. What time is it?”

“Seven-thirty.”

Jesse rubs his eyes. “In the morning?”

“At night,” Hanzo grumbles, setting the bourbon upright. He scowls at the puddle, reminiscent of
urine. “How long have you been asleep?”

“Uh. How long’ve you been out?”

“Since noon.” Hanzo mops up the bourbon with the sleeve of a nearby discarded shirt. “Training
with Hana ran long. Mei wanted to review a new defensive maneuver. Torbjorn was looking for
you. They are all having dinner now in the mess hall.”

The covers rustle as Jesse sprawls out naked from the bedding, scratching his bare belly. Hanzo
watches him stretch, run a hand through his tousled hair, tug at his untrimmed beard. Tawny and
disheveled, shaggy and yawning.

*Your boyfriend.* Hana’s voice rings out in his mind. Hanzo chews on his lower lip, balls up the
soiled shirt, and crams it into the laundry bin.

“Hell,” Jesse says. “Didn’t mean to sleep that long.”

“Does your arm hurt?”

“No.” Jesse rubs his left bicep. The flesh surrounding the prosthetic elbow swelled up badly over
the weekend and resulted in a return to the medbay; Dr. Ziegler medicated a jumpy nerve that was
casing him pain. It’s healed faster since then, but Jesse was told to be mindful of any more
secondary reactions. “Still feels a lil’ squirrely ‘round the joint, but other than that it ain’t so bad.”

“You were tired, then.”

“I guess.” Jesse reaches for a pair of black boxers, sniffs them, pulls them on. He picks crud from
his eyes, blearily looks around, and toes the empty box of pies. “I must’ve gotten up. I don’t
remember it, but I must’ve. Thought there were three of these left this morning.”

“Did you eat all three?”

“Uh. Maybe.”

Hanzo makes a face as he finishes decluttering the floor. “Go wash. You need to eat real food.”

He reclines face-down on the futon while Jesse showers. The weak evening gloom puts him more
at ease. Since they’ve folded up the bunk and migrated to the floor, Hanzo doubles his efforts to
keep the space clean. Jesse loosely complies. By habit, he makes for a messy roommate, a quality
with which Hanzo struggles. His own belongings are stored neatly and organized to maximize
storage. Jesse cares less about where his garments go so long as he can find what he’s looking for in two loud slams of a drawer.

Does he have to directly admit that Jesse is not himself? This is not the first evening Hanzo has come back to a room scattered in languorous disarray. He has a feeling it won’t be the last, given what happened.

*No peace*, he thinks dully, remembering the dragons.

Hanzo cannot dwell on it for long. McCree emerges, towels off, drops next to him on the futon. A warm, alluring weight at his side.

“Didja miss me?” Jesse purrs into his throat, tugging open the fold of his clothes, plying for bare skin. One of his big hands finds Hanzo’s shoulder, maps the contours of his sinewy back, drags fingertips lazily down his spine.

Hanzo shivers at the touch. “Today? While I was here, on base?”

“Yeah.”

“I was hardly out of the room for eight hours.”

Jesse rumbles a low laugh. “That’s long enough, sweetheart.” And then, between kisses on his chest: “I’ve missed you for less than that.”

“You have not,” Hanzo muses dryly as Jesse slips a hand into his trousers.

“Have too.”

“Impossible.”

“I miss you all the time.” Jesse’s breath is hot on his sternum. He gets a lazy grip, folds him back, starts to stroke him. “It ain’t quite the same when you’re not around. Hell, I get antsy when you’re in the bathroom too long. Sometimes I worry you’ve gone down the drain.”

“Stop.” Hanzo scratches Jesse’s beard, stifles a laugh, tries not to shiver at the attention below his hips. “You are being a consummate ass-kisser.”

A snicker. “If you roll over, sweetheart, I’d be happy to.”

“To what?”

Jesse’s beard bristles into his neck. “Kiss that ass.”

Hanzo licks his lips. For all their wounds, the Dorado mission sent them home with an itch to scratch. Jesse’s urgent plea to abscond from Overwatch left a mark on Hanzo that burned more fiercely than he expected. Every interlude since then provides a momentary escape, a quick and passionate revisit to that wild, deferred promise: *run away with me*. They made short work of breaking in the new futon; Hanzo had to fist Jesse’s hair and muffle him into the pillow or risk the entire dorm hearing his delighted howls. Tonight will be no different. If he gives Jesse an inch, they’ll take it the whole mile, full-throttle.

*A distance worth traveling*, he thinks, finally yielding and stripping back his clothes.

They tug and tumble until Jesse straddles him, pinning him at the hips and angling down. Hanzo momentarily tenses; Jesse yearns to take the lead, but he is unaccustomed to giving it up.
“My turn this time,” Jesse soothes, clasping Hanzo’s calf. “On your side, turn over. Let me do it.”

Hanzo pants, parts his knees, considers the option. Tonight, it suits him. “You are so eager.”

“I’ll take care of you, darlin’. You’ll love it.” Gleefully. “No metal fingers this time.”

Ah: the recuperating limb. Hanzo stiffens. “Your arm.”

“Don’t worry about my arm. I won’t put pressure on it. I’ll be real gentle.”

“Be careful with your other arm.” He shifts; Jesse slides back; Hanzo props up on his elbow and reaches forward, feels along his hips, takes the gunslinger in hand. Jesse lets out a soft, startled noise. So does Hanzo.

A surprise: he’s limp.

Caught, McCree squirms. “Hold up, sweetheart,” he sputters, caving forward at the waist. “I’m just gettin’ warmed up.”

“Jesse.”

“Roll over, like I said. Let me open you up some first. That’ll, uh. Do it.”

Hanzo weakly squeezes. “You are not --”

Jesse twitches away. “I’m gettin’ there, gimme a sec.”

Hanzo releases him, shuffles aside, straightens out, gently presses Jesse’s thighs. He leans forward and sniffs. It’s a pleasing mix: water, warm flesh, a woodsy whiff of soap. Inoffensive, deliciously masculine. No oily staleness.

McCree draws back. “I washed behind my ears, thank you very much.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“No!” And then, defensive: “naw. I ain’t been.”

Hanzo tests his breath, licking the edge of his mouth. No stray tang of bourbon, no stink of cigarillo. The faintest tinge of mint; Jesse brushed his teeth. “Not even some?”

“Han-zo,” Jesse grits out, irritated. “When I say it, I mean it. It’s just takin’ me a minute, I’m tryin’ to focus here.”

“You seemed rather focused just before.”

“Well, things are a lil’ laggy right now, so cut me some slack, okay?” Jesse bleats, shakes his head, ducks his chin to his chest. Hanzo instantly softens, sweeps back his hair, settles on his haunches. They stare at each other, one sheepish, the other an uncertain shepherd. Sizing each other up in this unforeseen mishap where the mood, like Jesse, gradually sags.

Eventually Hanzo concedes: “not tonight.”

Caution flickers on Jesse’s features. “You sure?”

Hanzo puffs. “I would never press.”
“Well, me neither, but you’re still lookin’ spry.” Jesse brushes against him, nosing and affectionate. “C’mere, I’ll fix you up. I don’t mind it, sweetheart. I like making you feel good.”

“Sh.” Hanzo combs Jesse’s hair, eases him down, simmers reluctantly. “It is unfair to neglect yourself.”

They drop down side-by-side in the dark, hands roaming, fingers testing, both refraining from examining too far. Hanzo swallows a sting of frustration. This hasn’t happened before; he isn’t sure what physical mechanism of the gunslinger’s body failed to spring him with his advance. He has never heard McCree complain for lack of lust or thrill; Hanzo, he often lauds, is the most alluring bedmate anyone for which anyone could ever wish. Surely it’s no fault of his own. So what’s the hold up? Post-surgery blues? Performance anxiety? Some fatigue of middle-age?

“Hey.”

Hanzo lifts his gaze. Weary brown eyes watch him through the dim room light.

“You okay?”


“Aw, honey. It feels alright. Just squirrely. The new nerves are figurin’ themselves out.”

“Has Lúcio looked at it?”

Jesse shakes his head. “Naw. Why do you ask?”

“Perhaps have him do so, next time it bothers you.”

“Uh. Okay.” A snort. “You don’t want Angela doin’ my check-ups?”

Hanzo lets his silence answer.

Jesse frowns. “You don’t.”

“Not particularly.”

“Really?”

Hanzo shuts his eyes. He presses his lips into a thin line. “I have already explained my discomfort.”

“Honey, it had to get upgraded. Hell, you were the one who wanted me to get it done.”

“I disliked that it was done by her, given the recent circumstances.”

Jesse drawls, “Hanzo, she’s a doctor.”

“I have been thinking about her debriefing. About what she admitted, concerning the resurrection. About what the Caduceus system is capable of.”

“She didn’t use the Caduceus on my arm, darlin’, that was just regular ol’ surgery.”

“So you think. You were unconscious. Only Athena was attending. Nobody but Lúcio can physically monitor her work when she is in the medbay.”

Jesse sits up. “Boy, you really don’t trust her.”
“Say what you wish,” he replies tersely, “but remember that I was right. I knew she was hiding more information. I was correct to be wary of her.” Before Jesse can reply, Hanzo rises to his knees. “What if it is revealed there are anomalies or mutations within her healing methodologies? Everyone on this base would be compromised. We have all received some variety of healing or treatment from her.” Sourness gnaws at his guts. “Even myself.”

Jesse grunts. “When?”

“The immune boosters, when I had a cold. And the healing stream, in combat.”

“This’s silly talk, Hanzo, we’d all have three dicks apiece by now if that were the case.”

Hanzo flinches. “Be serious.”

“I am! That dang staff’s shot me fulla healing more times than I could ever count, and do you see me growin’ a second head?” Jesse pinches the bridge of his nose. “And, look, takin’ a biotic hypo in the butt for the sniffles ain’t nothin’ new, we used to get them back in the day all the time. Hell, sometimes we didn’t even get the chance to protest, Amari had this one rifle, she used to joke --”

“I do not trust her,” Hanzo interrupts curtly. “I reserve the right not to trust her.”

“Yeah, but you trust me.”

True, he thinks. “And?”

“So you oughtta take it to heart when I tell you: she only means well.”

“Means well,” he repeats irritably, stroking his beard. Sneering. “Of course. Simply another unfortunate mishap of playing God, bringing a man back from the dead.”

Jesse goes still. After a long pause, he growls, “I don’t know where the heck you’re goin’ with this.”

“I am trying to be vigilant,” he replies. And then, sullen: “I am trying to keep you safe.”

“Honey, I’m touched, but you know I’ll be fine. It was a bad situation, but I’m gettin’ through it.”

“You said he would hunt you down. I do not intend to let that happen to us. To you and I.”

He watches Jesse tuck down into his pillow; he can’t tell if it’s from tension or tenderness. Maybe both. “So why’re you freakin’ out about Mercy?”

“He will come for her, too. If I am to protect you, I must be wary of her. Do you not remember? Seventy-Six warned me.”

“Truth be told, a lotta that truck ride’s a bit fuzzy.”

“You said it was an end-game. A worst-case scenario.”

Jesse huffs. “C’mon, Hanzo, what part of ‘bad situation’ do you not ken? I wasn’t thinkin’ straight. I was frazzled out. Shit, I haven’t been thinkin’ straight since it happened.”

Now they match in sourness. Hanzo is trying not to think about the dirty clothes and whisky-dick. “I assure you, I have noticed.”

Jesse clicks his tongue. “Well, excuse me for havin’ a tough time, your highness.”
“That is not what I meant --”

“Aw, Hanzo, you think I like feelin’ like I got hit by a damn hurricane? You think I asked for any of this? Shit, if it’s so bad, why don’t I apologize, huh? Sorry I ain’t made outta stone like you.”

Hanzo scowls. “Jesse.”

Jesse fumes, jaw clenching. Before Hanzo can go any further, he blurts it out. “All the shit I’ve seen, all the shit I know you’ve seen, had me thinkin’ you understood. Some things get under your fuckin’ skin, alright? I just found out someone came back from the dead, alright? I think I had a right to be a little outta sorts.”

Slowly Hanzo pulls back. He remembers the files Lúcio sent: the combat profiles and the wistful birthday film. The rainy blur of the beach after the horses in Dorado, Jesse’s rich voice in the dark, the night-time glow of a distant LumeriCo power plant through the hotel window. Clean and clear, like the stream of Mercy’s staff.

A sudden, intrusive thought: does the Reaper have memories of her healing beam? Did he feel its cool flicker when the biotic technology dragged him back from the afterlife and wove him back into a broken body that could neither live nor die?

His guts drop. Does Genji?

Hanzo reaches for Jesse’s hand. Softly, a weak apology: “you did.”

McCree straightens, hesitates, wholly deflates. He droops against Hanzo, hangdog and heavy. All warmth and bristling beard. “I don’t wanna fight.”

“We will not.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Jesse --”

“You were good to me, sweetheart. You’re the god-damned best. I’m just real banged up about it, is all. I didn’t mean to get nasty.”

Guilt nibbles Hanzo until he cannot help but stroke Jesse’s hair, pull him close, draw him in. Thinking: I was not always good to you. Or -- thinking again of his brother and the Swiss physician’s staff -- to anyone, for that matter.

They lie quietly until Jesse laughs. He’s on the same wavelength. “You ever think ‘bout how it used to be? Before it was like this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Back when we’d fight. Back when you hated me.”

“I never hated you.”

“Honey, you sorta tried to kill me.” Amused. "Maybe more than once.”

Hanzo clucks into Jesse’s brow. “We did not know each other then. We were strangers.”

“Yeah. Mean strangers. Boy, you liked to scare the piss outta me, Shimada.”
A fond tug of the gunslinger’s ear. “I know.”

“Partially my fault. Y’know, Genji-kun wanted me to make up with you. He kinda talked you up from the beginning, when we were all comin’ back for recall.”

Genji-kun. The way McCree says his brother's name never fails to amuse him. “Did he?”

“Yeah. He tried to speak a lil’ bit for you, claimed we mighta just got off on the wrong foot. I was kind of thick about it for a while, ‘cause, y’know: we fought. But I started thinkin’, y’know, maybe he’s right. You were in a weird new place with all these folks you’d never met, far away from home — I mean, back then, I didn’t know all the stuff I know about you now. Figured you were outta your element. Genji-kun, y’know, he’d talk to me about bein’ Japanese back when we ran a few missions together, so I thought a little hospitality might go a long way. And damn, you made me jumpier than a cricket, but you weren’t bad to look at, either, so there I was, tryin’ to be polite and not let my pecker jump ahead of my brain —”

“Genji,” Hanzo interrupts. Of course: why didn’t he think of this sooner? His brother has mentioned Reyes before; surely he has more stories to tell. He will have to ply him for information at the first available chance.

Jesse cheers. “cause of him, I got you now. Reckon I oughtta thank him.” With smoky softness: “I’d thought I was long past my prime for someone as good as you to come along and stick around.”

Someone as good as you. Hanzo yields to fondness. The god-damned best.

They redress for dinner. He walks with the gunslinger to the mess hall under a lavender sky; the change in conversation warms them both. Hanzo tries to take in the moment: McCree hatted and whistling beside him, spurs jingling, thumbs hooked in his belt loops. A flash of his old self before the revelation and the ache. Waxing momentarily poetic: a glimpse of rugged wilderness below a setting sun.

---

Despite his wealth of stories about McCree, Hanzo discovers that his brother has less to provide about his commanding officer.

“I didn’t know him very well,” Genji comments during their next morning talk. “I remember him being around, but I did not speak to him very often outside of missions. I reported to Morrison most of the time.”

“What was he like?”

“Who? Morrison?”

“Either of them.” Hanzo tries not to sound pressing. “Whatever you can recall.”

Genji tilts his head. “Well, Morrison was strict. Military guy. Missions had to go by his rules and his rules only. I didn’t always care for it. He could make you feel very small. It worked on young recruits, but it pissed me off a few times. It reminded me of drill sergeants you see in movies.” He pauses. “Do you remember Chiba? The brother that used to drive Father around sometimes, the one with the big hole in his ear?”

“Yes. Are you implying Morrison was like Chiba?”
“Yeah. I was in a bad place during those days, so I probably remember him a little poorly, but he was like that. Total hard-ass.”

“I can imagine.” He nearly snorts at the mental image of his austere, elderly father relaxing in his favorite car as white-haired Jack Morrison navigates him through traffic in Hanamura. “What was his relationship with Reyes? What do you remember of it, while you were there?”

“People said they were a couple. They may have lived in the same quarters. That sometimes happened formally or informally, but I wouldn’t be surprised if they did. The story was that they got very close when they were young guys in the military, and after they founded Overwatch it kept them together.”

“You mean, the job?”

“Well, they were soldiers. They both liked fighting. Maybe they were adrenaline junkies, I don’t know. Reyes was an amazing tactician. If he ever got put on an assignment, you knew it was going to pull through.”

Stroking his beard, Hanzo muses, “did you ever hear about Blackwatch? The group he led?”

“Sometimes. I ran probably five missions overall that were co-operated with Blackwatch, and I never had access to their comm line. They kept things under wraps.” Genji lifts his chin. “I remember, there was this one mission in Amsterdam. McCree was there, Reyes was there, we were all in this old university building. It was a long stake-out, and the agents were getting bored. Someone -- I can’t remember if it was Reyes or McCree -- found an air hockey table in one of the downstairs rooms. Reyes played with them for the better part of an hour. He was really good.”

“Air hockey?”

“Yeah, you know, the table game? There was a fancy one in the arcade back home. McCree tried to get me to play, but I” -- Genji pauses, lowers his chin, shakes his head -- “like I said, back then, I was in a bad place. I just watched.”

“What was Reyes like with agents?” Hanzo asks, forgetting discretion. “With other agents. In either group, his or Overwatch.”

“I don’t really know. But if I had to guess, I’d say he was good with them. His agents were really dedicated. I do remember that.” His visor glints as he looks up. “McCree was one of the more loyal ones. He ran a lot of missions with Reyes. Sometimes I wouldn’t see either of them for weeks because they’d be out in the field.”

Hanzo seizes on this. “They worked well together, then. You would say they were friends.”

“It would be weird to imagine they didn’t work well together, I guess. But you should ask McCree if you want a better answer. Obviously, he’s the one who’d know.” The cyborg swivels his gaze to Hanzo. “Is there a reason you’re asking me and not him?”

Hanzo elaborates on Dorado and the truck ride down to Veracruz. When he finishes, Genji lets out a slow whistle. He looks out over the ocean and sighs.

“Bad luck,” he says weakly. “You know, I believe the thing about them being like brothers. McCree was friendly with just about everyone, and people liked to make a joker out of him, but he got real serious whenever it was time to fight. I don’t know how much Reyes had to do with it, but now that you’ve told me this, I would guess that’s why.” He flicks his scarf off his shoulder. “Ah. You know who you should ask?”
Hanzo asks, “who?”

“Angela. She’d know more. She worked with Reyes more than I did, and she and McCree have been friends for longer than I.”

Hanzo looks cross when Genji uses her given name. “I would prefer not to.”

Genji hums. “I can ask her for you.”

Even more cross. “Don’t bother with it.”

“Ates you sure?”

“Yes. Entirely.” And then, to change the subject: “if I need to take some time to get more information, I would ask that you help Hana with archery. Or anything, for that matter.” He folds his arms over his chest, swallowing sullenness. “She is fond of you, and could use more guidance.”

“Sure!” Genji answers. “I like her, you know? You should have seen her on the King’s Row mission. She’s tough.” Musing, as he tilts his head. “She has a kid’s taste in movies, but I wouldn’t say that to her face. Not unless I want her to shoot me with that dinky little pistol.”

Hanzo’s brows rise. The last term he would use to describe Hana's gun is 'dinky.' “Well, she is young.”

“Yeah. You know what I’m talking about. I thought The Hunger Games was dumb, too. Do you know: I’ve always thought it was just a ripoff of Battle Royale? It’s just too similar. Even some of the romances seem like they were directly copied.”

Now his brows furrow. “I have never seen it.”

“Ah, yeah. I figured you wouldn't have. It was good. It's another one I wish you would have watched with me back in the day.”

"Maybe someday," Hanzo sighs, remembering his brother's love for old films, his own disdain.

Afterward, he digs out his notebooks from the trunk in his room. A thin layer of dust has settled on the lid. He smudges it, wipes off his hand, tries not to sneeze. He hardly comes here anymore; the emptiness puts him on edge.

Reyes, he titles in English at the top of a clean page. He writes neatly. Born in Los Angeles, California. Military. Officer Candidate School. Advanced into special program for soldiers where he underwent experimentation/enhancement. Need to find out more about this program. Met Jack Morrison during either OCS or program. Went through program with Morrison. Became lovers when?? Survived Omnic Crisis. Fought in Omnic Crisis. Potential attachment to region of his birth/youth - west coast, California. Founded Overwatch w/ Morrison - Wilhelm - Amari -- his pen drags over the characters of her name -- Lindholm - Liao. Status of Liao?? Status of initial members post-founding?? Status of Mercy --

Hanzo pauses. He shuts his eyes, lowers his pen, exhales through his nostrils. Resisting the urge to drag his hands down his cheeks and put the notebook back in its trunk.

Mercy. Here he is, wanting to avoid her, now considering the benefit seeking her out. What’s the point? Would she even tell him anything? Why would she open up to a man who has never demonstrated reason to trust her in the first place?
It doesn’t deter him. *Like the river*, he thinks. Nothing can stop it once it’s started. An obstacle in its path will simply divert the flow.

---

“Sorry, Mister Shimada, but: no.”

It’s Friday in Winston’s laboratory. Lúcio is playing with his soundboard by one of the repair tables after pointedly refusing the archer’s request. Hanzo wants to peek for any medical files connected to the Reaper that might be lingering in the medbay archives. Lúcio won’t comply on account of the medbay’s principle rule.

“Patient confidentiality,” he states. “Fake passports and low-key hacking’s one thing, but Dr. Ziegler’s files are another. If I got caught? I’d be in a world of hurt.”

Hanzo crosses his arms over his chest. “You searched the Blackwatch archive without issue. There was sensitive information contained there.”

“Yeah, but Blackwatch is dead,” retorts Lúcio. “No one’s running it, so there’s no one to get mad at me if they find out I went snooping. Dr. Ziegler could take away all my access. She’s real serious about this kinda thing.”

Grimly Hanzo says, “so, not even a glimpse.”

“Nope.” Lúcio sits back in his chair, creaking the column. “You know I like you, man, but I like having my job, too.”

Hanzo sighs. “A shame.”

“Why do you wanna look in there, anyway? You still digging up all that information on Agent 02?”

“Perhaps.”

Lúcio leans over, chair creaking. “So, can I talk to you about that real fast?” He points between them. “Y’know. Man-to-man.”

Instantly Hanzo closes in. “Go on.”

“Okay, so, we’re new around here, right? But everyone else isn’t. Some of them have been here since it started, like Reinhardt. I asked him about those two guys the other day, you know, after Dr. Ziegler’s briefing? And he was *really* bent outta shape about it, man, like he went on and on and on about it.”

Hanzo piques. “What did he say?”

“Well, he was crushed, y’know? It hurt him *bad*, hearing those two were alive. He was telling me about how he’d gone to their funerals and given eulogies, felt like he had their blood on his hands. He loved them, you know? He was saying stuff like” -- his voice lowers, briefly mimicking a German accent -- “‘not a day’s gone by since they died where I didn’t think about them’ and stuff. Did you know: they forced him to retire from combat duty? Yeah, man, they made *Reinhardt* retire. I thought that was kinda screwed up.”

“Reinhardt, man, he’s like the gatekeeper of old stories about Overwatch. When I first joined up, he was really good about treating me like a comrade, showing me the ropes. We’d train together a lot, he’s really cool. He would talk about the missions, but a lot about the people. You’ve probably heard him say this, but he opposed Blackwatch from the day he heard about it.”

“Why?”

“He said they were too secretive. They kept things in the dark. He said they ran ops that were bad news for everyone in it, especially Reyes. Reinhardt knew this guy from the first days of the Omnic Crisis, like thirty years ago. He said things changed him.”

“Changed him how?”

“He didn’t go into the specifics. But -- relevant to what you were looking for, he did say once that Reyes was more than just a founder of Overwatch. He was the leader when everything first went down during the crisis. He was the boss.”

“But Morrison was promoted to Strike Commander. He was chosen for the title, which led to controversy.”

“Yeah, because before that promotion, Reyes ran things first.” Lúcio adjusts his headset. “And I got to thinking about it: don’t you think that’s kinda weird? Why would they give the title to Number Two, when Number One was already in charge?”

Gatekeeper, Hanzo thinks. A possibility arises: could he approach Reinhardt or Torbjorn in his quest for information? Neither of these men are comrades he knows very well; he’s kept a polite but respectful distance with them in all encounters outside of training.

“And why would they give Blackwatch — Lúcio continues, gestures, plucks with his hands — “to Number One? Like, why him? Did he choose it? Did he found it? Does anyone know?” He shakes his head. “It’s like a conspiracy, man. I can’t figure out what happened. It’s too many questions, like, how come no one seems to know what the hell was going on? How did a group so big and famous get by for so long with so many serious problems?”

Hanzo hums. “A careful glance at the past can make for a valuable lesson about the future.”

“Huh,” Lúcio muses. He taps his fingers against his soundboard. “You know what? I like that. That’s deep.” He smiles. “That’s some real dad wisdom right there, Mister Shimada, where’d you learn that?”

He squints. “‘Dad wisdom?’”

Lúcio shrugs. “Y’know: good advice! Sounds like some stuff my dad would say.” He digs for his phone. “You know what? I’m gonna text him that right now. How’d it go again?”

Before he can reply, the lab door hisses open. Lena strolls in with a pink jacket zipped over her chronal accelerator; Satya trails behind her with her hair in a thick black plait.

“Had a good lunch, skates?” Tracer calls, waving.


Satya glowers at him across the room. Her lips move, but Hanzo cannot make out what she has
“Okay, that’s cool,” says Lúcio, rolling his eyes. “Don’t say ‘hi’ to me when I say ‘hi’ to you. Whatever.”

Now the woman’s voice rises above the whirr of equipment and consoles. “I said, ‘good afternoon.’”

“Yeah, well, I didn’t hear you.” Lúcio glances conspiratorially at Hanzo. “I didn’t hear her. Did you?”

Satya shoots them a sharp glance and pulls on an anti-static coat. “Perhaps lowering the volume on your headphones would permit you better auditory reception.”

“Wow, okay,” Lúcio snorts. “Thanks for the tip.” He mutters dryly under his breath to Hanzo: “as you can see, the Vishkar Corporation doesn’t grasp the concept of a stressful work environment.”

“Will you be assisting me today?” Satya asks crisply, sweeping back her braid. Looking displeased.

“Yeah, yeah.” Lúcio sets aside his soundboard. His tone lifts slightly. “Hey, so: are you gonna help me with that thing I messaged you about?”

Satya looks away from Hanzo, who has been scathing her since she arrived. “If I have a spare moment this evening, I will consider assisting you then.”

“Guess that’s better than nothing.” Lúcio rises, tugs down his jersey, beams Hanzo a parting glance. “Alright, I gotta go install the last few patches to Athena’s firewall. You need anything else, or --?”

“No.” Hanzo bobs his head, eager to depart. Suspiciously wondering what thing that might require the loathsome Vaswani’s help. “Do not let me keep you.”

“Cool, thanks, man. Hey” -- Lúcio nods over his shoulder, following Satya into the hall -- “if you get any more hits on that stuff you’re looking for or if you want any more help, hit me up. Text me.”

Hanzo wanders out of the labs down the drone track in the midday sun. He looks up to a commonplace sight: Zenyatta floating serenely on the comm tower ledge. Then he catches sight of an unfamiliar glow.

Perched beside him is not Genji, but Dr. Ziegler. Clad in her Valkyrie suit with the wings extended, rising and falling like a gold moth at rest. Sunlight winks off the blonde halo of her head. She sits completely still, meditating in the breeze high above the glassy blue sea.

He hurries away with his head down. Clutched once again by the feeling he has viewed something meant for eyes other than his own.

---

The mission springs up in late November. Winston requests another undercover investigation on behalf of Misters Barceló and Tsubaki: a day-trip to the Overwatch Museum in New York City. A recent security incident at the museum has flagged through one of Athena’s observational algorithms as suspected Talon activity. Winston and Lena think it may be connected to an incident involving the Reaper that they thwarted a few days after the recall. Something to do with a
dangerous armored artifact and a sniper whose mention made Lena frown. Hanzo volunteers immediately; McCree takes a few hours to summon the grit. They depart the week of Thanksgiving, a defunct American holiday that McCree mentions during the flight while looking over the calendar on his phone.

“No one celebrates it anymore,” he says. He’s wearing a red collared shirt with a black blazer and bolo tie; Hanzo thinks it’s the nicest he’s looked since Dorado. “US government ditched it when I was a kid after all the post-crisis social reforms. Said it was ‘exploitative,’ if I recall what they taught us back when I was a kid.”

Hanzo snorts. He matches Mister Barceló’s attire in shades of dark blue and khaki with a slick gold tie. “You will forgive me if I have trouble imagining you in elementary school.”

“Aw, I was real pokey. Reckon you wouldn’t recognize me.” Jesse laughs into his plastic cup of airline bourbon. “My mama used to talk about it, Thanksgivin’ and all. You’d get together with your family and eat turkey and mashed potatoes. If your family was half-way decent, you’d get drunk and talk about all the shit you’re thankful for. If they weren’t, well. You’d just get drunk and fight.”

Hanzo wonders which category the Shimada clan might fall under if presented with such a holiday. Likely the latter. “Why is it on your calendar?”

Casually Jesse says, “I dunno.”

Hanzo squints at McCree’s handset. On the edge of the screen he can make out a line of red text on the scheduled block: ‘anniversary.’ Before Hanzo can get a better look, McCree clicks the lock button. The screen blacks out. Hanzo sits back, feigns nonchalance, strokes his beard. Thoughts racing.

An anniversary for what?

Rush-hour traffic stalls them getting to the museum. Hanzo has little time to soak into the metropolitan glamour; they arrive an hour before the museum is set to close. McCree charms the docent into letting he and his handsome gentleman friend skip the tour and wander for a bit. Hanzo elbows him in the ribs as they’re idling into the main hall.

“What?” McCree asks innocently as they pass a spray of crisis-era posters. “Can I not call you ‘my gentleman friend?’”

“Our identities specify that you are my business partner.”

Jesse strokes his beard. “Well, maybe Mister Tsubaki’s dippin’ in the company ink.”

“Mister Tsubaki has very strict principles about such things, and would not allow himself to make decisions that cross personal boundaries with --”

“C’mon, darlin’.” Jesse rounds on him, grins sweetly, flashes dark eyes. He offers out his arm, oozing roguish charm. “Play along with me. Please?”

Hanzo pauses. This sly, flirtatious side of Jesse is lighter than his recent drag. Shouldn’t he indulge it? “We do not have a lot of time. The Doomfist exhibit is in a further hall, we should check it and then run the sweep Winston requested.”

“Gimme your arm.”
Wordlessly, Hanzo complies. He hooks his elbow to Jesse’s, brushes beside him, shuffles into place. Catching a whiff of something fragrant in his clothes: spicy, warm, cedar with a bite of clove. Instantly soothing.

Hana’s prim voice returns to his thoughts. Isn’t he too old to have a boyfriend?

They walk together arm-in-arm through the exhibits, playing the part of business-casual tourists. Gradually they blend into the facade. McCree points out features, likenesses, and statues of agents he once knew, while Hanzo observes, comments, and follows the discussion with moderate interest. There’s a towering replica of knightly Crusader’s regalia; one hallway showcases nothing but various weapons and tools employed by some of Overwatch’s most famous agents. Hanzo lingers by a beautiful recurve bow designed to shoot plasma arrows, wielded by a renowned Greek adventurer and Overwatch demolitionist who was code-named Miranda. Jesse calls him over to a small, snowy exhibit about the organization's efforts against global warming. The holograph above the plaque features none other than Mei-Ling Zhou, beaming between the faces of her late Antarctic colleagues.

“Kinda sad when you realize she was the only one who survived,” McCree drawls. “Can you imagine: wakin’ up one day to find that all your friends are dead?” He shakes his head. “The whole world’s moved on without you for who-knows-how-long, and no one you used to know is around to help you get through it.”

Hanzo thinks of Mei and her ice-blue lab, her enthusiastic smile and lilting voice. He did not imagine it before; with brows furrowed, he does now. Kind of sad.

The monument to Ana Amari occupies an entire hallway’s end, a looming and regal presentation in white stone. Hanzo studies the stiff, resolute posture of the sniper in her cap and coat, badges glinting with embossed silver edges. Whoever carved this effigy took pains to elaborate on the high, proud ridges of her brow and cheeks, boldly highlighting the Eye of Horus beneath her eye. Her mouth is firm with grim conviction. A queenly figure, he thinks. The marble matron gathers her sniper rifle to her waist in a protective gesture, relaxed but ready, come and get me. McCree stares up at her in silence, momentarily sobered.

Hanzo looks away, searching to divert his attention. A different statue, another exhibit, a quicker way to the Doomfist feature --

He pauses. Across the hall, gathered by a display, there’s a man with a small child. The boy is no more than five or six: black-haired, smiling, dressed in an orange sweater with denim jeans. The lime-green soles of his sneakers flash with tiny lights as he circles his father, who is tall and thin with thick glasses and a camera. Hanzo can hear the boy chattering brightly as he points at the display. The father stops to offer a gentle reply; laughing, the child resumes pattering around his legs. Actual tourists, he thinks. They’re speaking Japanese.

A mishap: the boy trips, stumbles forward, falls on his face. He warbles softly in surprise; the father stoops and helps him up. They huddle together, murmuring as the father checks the boy’s knee. It hurt, whines the boy. Just a scratch, the father says. Be careful. Hold my hand. Hanzo watches the boy sniff, grasp his father’s fingers, and lift his little chin. They walk away hand-in-hand towards another exhibit.

Hanzo watches them go, realizing only when McCree interrupts that he could not take his eyes off them.

“Winston’s callin’ us,” McCree mutters behind him, his handset buzzing. “’mere for a sec.”
Tracer and Winston greet them on the holo-chat. The gorilla’s dark face takes up most of the screen. “How’s it going? Have you guys seen anything out of the ordinary?”

“No,” answers Hanzo. “Security is normal. The gauntlet exhibit has been moved to a different room with more protections. Once we get a good look at it, we will run the sweep.”

“The sweep’s the important thing,” Tracer says. “You can deploy the mini-drone pretty much anywhere, but try to put it some place where it won’t be seen.”

“High up?” McCree asks. He has Athena’s small white drone tucked in his jacket pocket. “We can get to one of the suspended walkways and let ‘er loose up there.”

Tracer’s voice crackles through the holo-chat relay. “You’re better off” -- a burst of static renders her unintelligible -- “wherever there’s a good sight.”

Hanzo frowns. “You cut out for a second. Say that again?”

More static. Lena’s freckled face flashes in and out. “I said -- er off -- good -- coming through.”

Jesse thumps the screen with his index knuckle. “The uplink’s cuttin’ out.”

Hanzo tenses. “That is strange.”

“Yeah. Reckon Athena might be laggin’ or something, sometimes it’d do this if someone was downloading a big file over the mobile network.” Thump thump. “Either that or we’re just gettin’ some feedback from another channel.”

“Stop that,” Hanzo chides, taking the phone from Jesse. “You will crack the screen.”

Suddenly the transmission goes black. A violet image flickers on the view, rotating, jutting into place at the center of the screen. It forms a white pixelated skull.

McCree pulls away. “What the hell’s that?”

Hanzo stares as the skull slowly spins, opens its jaws and beeps out in an electronic voice: “cuidado.”

McCree growls. Hanzo feels him reach for Peacekeeper in its jacket holster; he whirls, blocks the movement, and squares against him. “Don’t!”

“Hanzo, that’s fuckin’ Talon --”


McCree’s gaze darts around frantically as he hisses, “that’s Spanish. Those’re numbers.”

Hanzo grips the handset, scowling at the chattering skull. “It must be a forced transmission. If it is Talon, we have been compromised.”

The skull continues its clipped, rote recitation for several more seconds. Abruptly it stops, jitters, wiggles in-and-out of focus. An unnatural rasp scratches out of the handset speakers, a sound that sets Hanzo’s teeth on edge. It’s laughing.

“Él sabe que estamos aquí,” it says. The voice distorts, darkens, turns unnatural and haunting. A
robotic horror. “Cuidado. Cuidado.”

Jesse shuts off the phone. “We’re gettin’ outta here.” He turns and takes off down the hall, swerving through the exhibits, whisking to a red panel on the wall. McCree yanks a lever in the panel; the fire alarm blares overhead. Everyone starts to hurry for the exits; Hanzo and McCree blend into the fretful stream of visitors. Security guards wave them out.

In the crowd, Hanzo spots the father and his son huddling nearby, startled. The boy’s eyes are wide with worry. He considers stepping forward, saying something, reassuring them that all is well. No, he thinks finally, regrettably. Mister Tsubaki is supposed to be invisible; they have to get away.

McCree ducks them through foot traffic and around a corner so Hanzo can hook in his comm and answer the line. Tracer races breathlessly over the uplink.

“We’ve got trouble,” she says. “Athena received a rogue transmission, but her firewall blocked it from hitting her main subroutines. We’re working on it right now. Ditch your handsets and get back to the spaceport, you both need to get out of there quick as you can.”

“And here I was hopin’ we could’ve at least gone to dinner,” Jesse sighs into his own comm. He mouths at Hanzo: someplace nice. Hanzo rolls his eyes, shrugs, mouths back: wishful thinking.

“Sorry ‘bout this,” Tracer sighs. Her tone sours. “If it's Talon, I’m not risking either of you getting hit by her today.”

“Copy that.” Jesse’s got a hand tucked into his jacket, itching to get out his gun. “I pulled the fire alarm to get the crowd out in case there’s some kind of an attack. That oughtta distract ‘em long enough, get civilians outta the area in case they got somethin’ planned.”

“Good idea. Be safe, gents. Check back in with me once you’re at the spaceport.”

“Who is ‘her?’” Hanzo asks as they head away from the museum.

“Oh. Sheesh. My guess’s she’s talkin’ about the Widowmaker,” Jesse mutters. “The Talon sniper. Real nasty piece of work. Lena’s run into her a few times. They got some kind of a personal vendetta goin’ on, I don’t exactly know the details.”

They change clothes at the spaceport and prepare for their flight. Winston comms them with a puzzling development: the broadcast turns out to be a digital mimicry of a type of transmission known as ‘formatted numbers.’ Nothing like anything Talon has used to communicate in the past; usually such transmissions came from hidden short-wave radio stations operated nearly a hundred years before the Omnic Crisis. At first glance, the numbers provided no value, but Lúcio’s clever eye discovered a sound file cached in the transmission overlay. The stream of digits arranged in a cipher to unlock the file and decrypted it, revealing a child’s voice reciting a poem in Spanish:

Un dragón para ti,

Un dragón para mí,

Cuidado, chulitos,

Ellos vienen aquí.

“A dragon for you, a dragon for me,”” McCree translates. “‘Be careful, cuties, they’re coming
here.’’ He exchanges dark looks with Hanzo. ‘‘Uh. Okay. That’s a mite creepy.’’

‘‘Ominous,’’ Hanzo agrees. ‘‘A dragon, though. Specifically a dragon?’’

‘‘Yeah. Specifically so. I don’t like it, Hanzo. Not one bit.’’

Hanzo sits back in the spaceport chair, unsettled with dread. Neither do I.

---

He confronts her a day after they return to Gibraltar. Hanzo leaves McCree napping on the futon and treks through a crisp late afternoon to the medbay. She sits at her console, engrossed in her work.

Hanzo clears his throat. Angela turns, stiffens, puts on a polite smile. Instantly defensive before they’ve even said hello.

Good, he thinks. She is wise to be on-guard.

They decide to talk in her office. Currently she uses it for storage; Hanzo moves a stack of textbooks so he can sit in the offered chair in front of her desk.

He begins, ‘‘I would like to know what you can tell me about Gabriel Reyes.’’

Angela folds her hands in her lap. ‘‘The information I released at the briefing after you returned from Dorado had everything in there,’’ she replies coolly. ‘‘The UN statements, the interrogation dockets, and the Overwatch-specific confidential files on my unsanctioned autopsy. I should tell you, depending on what you want, you should consider --’’

‘‘Gabriel Reyes,’’ Hanzo repeats, interrupting, enunciating each syllable of the name. Conveying its power, like a key testing a lock. ‘‘I want to know about him.’’

Angela tilts her head. ‘‘You want his personnel file? His combat profile? You can request access to those items through Winston.’’

‘‘No,’’ Hanzo holds her chilly blue gaze. ‘‘I want to hear it from someone who knew him. I want to hear it from you.’’

‘‘I think there are other people you should ask about this, Mister Shimada. Maybe Genji, or perhaps McCree --’’

He interjects. ‘‘I have. I have seen the files and spoken to these people. Reyes remains an enigma. I do not like enigmas.’’

Angela looks down at her lap, then back up at him. Hanzo wonders what she's thinking. Suspicion? Fear? Loathing?

After a long pause, she asks, ‘‘where do you intend to start?’’

‘‘I will ask you questions with the expectation of an answer.’’

She says rather flatly, ‘‘as you like.’’

‘‘When did you first meet him?’’

‘‘When I was sixteen. I was a student. There was an educational outreach program sponsored by
Overwatch’s medical research division. He came to my school, along with Morrison and Reinhardt, and I was invited to tour the Geneva headquarters to visit their research facilities. At the time, they were some of the best in the world. Later they signed off on a special dispensation so I could use the facilities whenever I needed.” She lifts her chin. “Which was often.”

Hanzo does not know which tidbit of information surprises him more: her age at the time of their meeting, or how easily someone so young was allowed access to state-of-the-art resources. “So he supported you.”

Angela taps her thumb on her wrist. “Yes.”

“Do you think that he had designs for encouraging your advancement?”

She squints. “What do you mean?”

“A desire to use your efforts and research in a manner against their intended purpose. Malicious designs.”

“No!” Angela says suddenly. And then, as if startled by her own outburst: “no, I certainly do not. Not back then. That was not how he was.”

“Then how was he?”

She exhales through her nostrils; her pale hair shivers at her temples. “Mister Shimada, perhaps I can guess why you’re here asking me these questions.”

“Perhaps you can.”

“You want information on Gabriel Reyes. His skills, his personality, his person. Motives, methodology. Specifically who he was, before this” -- she hesitates, spins her hands -- “situation, where he has taken the identity of the Reaper.”

She’s on the right track. “Yes.”

“You are studying him,” she says. “You’re gathering information. Building a profile. Making a case. You think that it’ll give you some insight as to who you’re fighting now by examining who he once was. And what you’ve gleaned so far is not enough, not for the things you’re planning.”

Does she know what he’s planning? He tells himself: she might.

“I know what you’re doing,” she continues. “We do this in medicine. Doctors build profiles, cases, studies. We compile prognoses and evaluations, we gather and analyze all the data. Every little piece of the big picture. But we do it to find solutions. Treatments, to mend the problem.” Her mouthtightens into a flat pink line. “You are an assassin, Mister Shimada. Not a doctor. The opposite end of the spectrum. You are doing this so you can kill him.”

He says nothing. Angela has hit the mark.

She shakes her head. “I will not allow it.”

Sharply. “What do you mean?”

“If that’s the course of action you mean to take, I won’t assist you. I do not condone it. I will not entertain it as a solution.”

Hanzo’s head swims; he’s trying not to look stunned. His silence speaks for him.
“There may be a way to stop him,” she declares. Her gaze cuts like two blue knives into his skin. “A method to examine and correct where I failed.”

Brusquely. “Explain.”

Angela cups her hands on the table, gestures demonstratively. “If you recall from my debriefing, he experienced full biological termination. We know the Caduceus resurrection attempt bonded his tissue to the nanobiotic interface, the one that heals tissue. Normally the bond is temporary. I can disconnect the system and cellular regeneration reverts to normal. With the Reaper, there was a malfunction. The tissue absorbed the interface and adapted it for refresh.”

Hanzo regards her with a blank stare. “In layman’s terms?”

“Essentially: he gets hurt, the cells die, the interface brings them back and recycles the energy for the next trauma. Right now, I theorize that he exists in a hyper-regenerative multi-phase state, a stage between excessive cellular growth and decay. I think that’s what gives him the ability to take that” -- she waves her finger in circular motion mid-air -- “that vaporous form.”

Through the medical jargon, he picks this out. “The ghost.”

“Yes. If we can remove the nanobiotic interface, or slow or suspend it, then he should” -- another insistent gesture -- “should revert back to a state of normal decay.”

Confused, Hanzo asks, “would that not also revert him back to a corpse?”

“We must attempt to find out. If he terminates, we would have to destroy the interface immediately to prevent him from another botched resurrection. He could come back in a more unstable state than he’s in now. If he doesn’t terminate, we’d have an opportunity to bring him in.”

“And then imprisonment. Execution.”

Angela squares her gaze on Hanzo. “The primary objective would be to detain him and examine his systems and perhaps localize a method for repairing damage.”

Disbelief seeps into his voice. “Reaper is a terrorist. He has attacked civilians. Murdered innocent people.”

“I’m aware of his record.”

“Then you’re aware many of his victims are former agents of Overwatch. Seventy-Six said it himself, the evidence is everywhere. He is tracking down anyone associated with Overwatch to kill them. Nothing can absolve him of these deeds, especially not” -- he fumbles over her terminology -- “a suspension of his interface.”

Warily Angela replies, “I agree. However, there is more to consider.”

“What more is there to consider?” Hanzo insists. “If he is not put to death, he must pay for his crimes. Surely you are not implying otherwise, Doctor Ziegler.”

“There is more to this than just my failure,” Angela says tersely. “I have been examining all the data since you returned from Dorado.” She simmers. “Since before that, honestly, with what happened to Gabriel.”

"So what is it, then? What should I consider?"
“That Gabriel Reyes may have been compromised before the fall of Overwatch.”

Hanzo stares. “By what?”

A long pause. Eventually Mercy says: “the Soldier Enhancement Program. A specialized, top-secret project conducted by the United States military. It ended not long after it began, shortly before the crisis. The whole thing was too controversial and the public response was poor. All of its involved agents are presumed dead. All files are either lost or classified. If you’ve been researching Reyes, you’ll know its relevance.”

“He was part of this program,” Hanzo answers. “Along with Morrison and others specifically chosen for the same purpose.”

“A grim purpose,” she continues. “Participants were subjected to a barrage of treatments and tests designed to increase their strength, speed, and agility. Developmental serums were used, high-tech drugs with no published testing. Radiation in moderated doses.”

“If all of this data is classified, how do you know?”

She sighs, rotating her chair. Facing the wall, lifting her chin, setting her gaze on the steely panels. “Jack once told me a little about it. A pittance of information, really. He was violating all manner of laws by even hinting what sort of procedures they’d put him through, but I suppose he trusted me enough not to mind.

You see, Jack and Gabriel had special restrictions listed in their personnel files. I was never aware of why they existed until I became the director of medical research. The program’s scientists feared the truth would get out somehow, that their work would be further scrutinized as unethical, or -- worse, in their minds -- someone would reverse-engineer it. They didn’t want other nations to start churning out their own brand of super-soldiers in response.” She sighs. “There were procedures we could not conduct on them, medications I could not prescribe. Tissue samples were not permitted. Certain tests couldn’t be run unless the results were immediately destroyed. The autopsy” -- she points upward at an indeterminate spot on the ceiling -- “well, now you see why it was forbidden. Sometimes it felt like Jack and Gabriel were” -- she hunts for an analogy -- “more akin to lab experiments than soldiers, not to be poked or prodded without approval. It vexed me more than I cared to admit, considering how often they were injured.

Do you know much about genetics, Mister Shimada? I’m no expert, but I’ve taken courses. Our genetics are not the end-all be-all of our biological response, but they contribute quite a lot. Especially if they’ve been altered. I’ve worked long enough in this field to identify genetic alteration when I see it, and Morrison and Reyes had its hallmarks. Reyes even used to say, ‘good genetics.’ I think to him it was a point of pride. I dislike making assumptions, but I felt sure that the program’s procedures affected their DNA. Perhaps specifically the radiation. Which could have affected their physical makeup over time as they aged.”

“Did you ever find proof?”

Angela tenses; she’s on the edge of an admission. “I knew the autopsy was illegal, that I could lose my medical license and go to prison. But I had suspicions and concerns. I felt like I had missed something. With Jack, I was not afforded the chance to see his remains, so I decided to take the risk with Gabriel. I conducted the autopsy, I made the connection, and, like you” -- she takes in a shuddering breath -- “I found out the truth.”

Hanzo tries not to clench his armrests. “Which was?”
“Something was wrong with Gabriel Reyes. I made a discovery that deeply disturbed me. An anomaly, primarily across his nerves, glands -- the endocrine system, his pancreas and kidneys, thyroid, pituitary -- and segments of brain stem. A pattern of tissue and fibrous vessel inlay across several of his organs that" -- she breathes out -- “well, it was like nothing I’d ever seen before. It was almost like scar tissue, but with abnormal growth. It was --”

He presses, struggling to comprehend. “What? What was it?”

“It was healing. This tissue should have been critically necrotic, but it was attempting to regenerate post-mortem. I ran some samples and I couldn’t believe it. Gabriel’s body was attempting to shock itself back to life.”

Hanzo narrows his eyes. “So that is why you used the Caduceus.”

“Yes. I saw it as a chance. I activated the Caduceus system to try and help the tissue along. It was a desperate measure and it did not work. After the procedure, it showed no signs of adhering to the nanobiotic interface and began to disintegrate again. I thought I had failed. I redressed the remains and had them processed for burial, as you already know.”

“But you did not fail. The interface took, but not when you expected it.”

“Yes. It was delayed.”

“And you felt the genetic enhancement from the soldier program was responsible?”

“Yes. These tissue growths on his pancreas and brain: the pattern matched a more healthy cellular differentiation in his musculoskeletal tissue, which is primarily where the soldier program’s enhancements were designed to take effect. I guessed that, due to the genetic changes in his body, the pattern branched out across the rest of his body. Over time, it began to” -- she trails off.

Hanzo pushes, insistent. “Tell me.”

Angela droops. “There was evidence this tissue had been growing, shredding and regenerating throughout his body for months. Potentially years. Do you know how much pain it could have caused? How such growths could affect other bodily systems? In regenerative cycles like that, he could have had periods of convalescence, times when it wasn’t so bad. And I would have never known, with all the restrictions on how I could examine or treat him.”

“You think he was suffering. Coping with it, perhaps hiding it.”

“Very likely.”

The information rattles in Hanzo’s head. He hunts for something to say. “Seventy-Six, then. Morrison. He must be affected too.”

“Yes. If it hasn’t already begun, it almost certainly will. I would have to conduct an examination and see.” She sighs. “It’s taken me nearly six years to figure it out, Mister Shimada, but I think -- I truly think I know what must have happened when the resurrection failed. I think I have a consideration for things beyond it, even.” Her gaze goes hollow, heavy and cold. “I think, towards the end of his life, he was coming apart at the seams. The Caduceus could not save him. It only made it worse.”

A heavy iron silence works its way between them. Slowly Hanzo draws away; he lifts his gaze to the ceiling.
"Do you believe," he begins, "that this affected his actions against Overwatch? His betrayal and the Blackwatch rebellion?"

“I don’t know, Mister Shimada. As I said: it’s a consideration, not an explanation.”

"How strongly do you consider it?"

Angela looks down. "That is a loaded question. I tried to help him and Jack, but they had been struggling for years. I question if Gabriel was really the sort of man who would let just a title and a promotion brew enough resentment to influence him so."

“He was not so proud?"

“He was proud,” Angela answers, frowning. “But not baselessly so. He was a skilled and resourceful leader. He was very good at what he did, Mister Shimada. Whether I agreed with it or not.”

“And did you agree with him?"

She hesitates. “In truth: there were some early years where I sided with more of his decisions than I did with others. The militaristic pursuits within Overwatch concerned me, especially when we started taking on bigger targets. A lot of agents preferred to hit the battlefield hard and leave when the job was done. Reyes was different. He could be careful. Precise. Sometimes there was a sense of altruism in his work. A second nature, almost -- an inherent understanding. He fought against ever leaving anyone behind. He knew when to take an enemy out or give them a second chance.”

Hanzo thinks of the truck ride through Mexico, Jesse’s passionate diatribe, the holovid and the singing party. He remembers young Jesse’s eyes in the film: soft, admiring, offering silent adoration. Gratitude. “Like McCree.”

“Yes,” she murmurs. “Him, and several other agents who were once adversaries. But McCree most of all. He was very young when Reyes brought him into Blackwatch, and he was trouble at first. We were wary of him. I’m sure you know that.”

Hanzo leans in with interest. “I know some. Not enough. What can you tell me?”

“About McCree?”

“About them both. About Blackwatch. I have heard rumors that he was harsh.”

Angela clucks. “Gabriel had a certain demeanor. He could be brisk, sharp -- intimidating in spades, if you were unaccustomed to him. No one would necessarily describe him as ‘gentle.’ But I would credit it to his efficiency. As a captain, he had to maintain a level of camaraderie around his groups. Malice was not necessary. He could dress someone down for stepping out of line, but he did it judiciously.”

“McCree once mentioned Reyes scrapped with him. He took out anger on him. Did that happen?”

Angela sighs, glancing at the ceiling. “Ach. The sparring.”

His eyes narrow. “Sparring?”

“Well, perhaps you will understand, Mister Shimada, given your background as a fighter. But Blackwatch agents were required to maintain certain levels of physical and mental prowess. They sparred regularly, and they were all far too aggressive in the ring. Too many times Jesse would
be sitting in the medbay swinging his boots, waiting for me to get there, bleeding all over the place -- usually from his nose, as you say. Crowing about how bad his opponent looked. He told me they used it to establish a pecking order, to test out skills off the battlefield. Do I think Reyes ever intentionally hurt them? No. He needed everyone in prime condition, it wasn’t conducive to be constantly shuttling his agents in-and-out of medbay. Did they all sometimes go too far? Yes. I stitched up a lot of agents who should have yielded a match however-many-points ago, but they claimed that it helped them work out the stress.”

A brief flicker of memory: the dojo in Hanamura, shaded and cool, empty save for himself and a neat circle of opponents. His father’s best men with their swords raised against his own, ready to strike without mercy. “I see.”

“There's something I remember, though. Something that happened not long before Jesse left.”

"What was that?"

It takes Angela a moment to reply. “There was a mission he went on, a mission in the United States -- California, I think. It was just him and Reyes. He came to the medbay and said he wanted to blow off steam.” A weak beat of fondness. “You know how Jesse is, he loves to talk. Whenever he’d come by, I knew he’d try to get me with a joke, or a song, or a story he’d heard around the base. Flirting the whole time while getting patched up. But this time, he was upset.

Something was wrong with Reyes, he said. He thought at first it was just another rough trip, maybe he had a lot on his mind. There was something Reyes said to him that he couldn't get off his mind. They had a knack for code words, you see: speaking Spanish, soldier talk. But this was different. Reyes said something bad, something about \textit{owning} him. Jesse said that he didn’t want him associating too closely with the rest of us. I said to Jesse, ‘the rest of us? What does that even mean?’ And Jesse said, ‘I do not know. He wants me to remember that I am Blackwatch, not Overwatch.’ Emphasizing that, specifically, the difference. There was something about Blackwatch being equivalent to real life, and that the rest of us were living in some kind of fantasy world. Like the movies."

“What did you think of it?"

Angela lifts her hands. “I said, ‘it sounds unnatural.’ It was such a strange thing to imagine Reyes saying to anyone."

“Did Jesse say anything else?”

“He told me he had to find out what was going on. He was going to investigate and get some answers. He said something like, ‘all this time, we have had to do tough things, but this is more than just doing tough things. This is wrong.’ Soon after that, Jesse left.”

Hanzo feels a heaviness settle in his guts. He looks away; his head hurts. Silence aches between them, dense as lead.

Solemnly he thinks: \textit{enough, for now.}

Hanzo rises. “This is a lot of information to take in at once.”

Angela gets up too. “Is it what you wanted?"

"Yes." He pauses, considers, and offers: “thank you.”

A faint smile appears on her pale pink lips. It does not meet her eyes. \textit{Bitte schön.}
The medbay doors loom before him like two steel gates. He hears the click of heels behind him as he departs; Angela is following him.

“Do you still intend to kill him?” she asks.

Hanzo looks at her over his shoulder. “That is for me to decide.”

Frigid indignance sweeps Angela’s features. Coldly, she replies: “I implore you to reconsider.”

“Implore all you like.”

“You could assist me in this. You could help me find out all the other answers and bring him to justice.”

Hanzo presses the button to open the medbay doors. He says nothing.

“You are not an assassin anymore, Hanzo,” charges Angela. “There is a better option.” Unyielding, she takes one step after him. “You know what it means to seek redemption. That can happen here. It can be done.”

No answer. As he leaves the medbay, Hanzo wonders which statement is more infuriating: the mention of his burdens, or his given name spoken her firm, bright voice.

He returns to the dorm. Jesse is still asleep. Hanzo drops beside him, brushes his fingers through his shaggy brown hair, and closes his eyes.

A familiar figure returns in his dream: the little finch from the overgrown omnium. What's wrong? it asks. He sighs. Everything. The finch flits over his armored knees before settling on the tip of his toe.

That radiation, it chirps lazily. I warned you, buddy. It’ll get you every time.

---

Night falls. The Watchpoint glows under its synthetic lights. High on the cliffs, Genji Shimada meditates as his mentor has taught him. Alone, he finds peace in the cool stony darkness. Beneath his visor, his eyes are shut; the lights on his visor display are switched off. His synthetic systems run on low-power mode, defaulting to a low and pleasant hum.

No distractions. Perfect harmony. An empty mind balancing a body at rest.

The sound fills his mind before it reaches his ears. Genji opens his eyes. Instantly the visor flashes to life, populating his nerves with an onslaught of sensory information. He sees the starry black sky and the pitch-colored sea; waves crash far below him in a distant roar; he can smell salt on the wind. His scarf whips with a fresh breeze. Something is happening. It arrives.

The Shimada dragon emerges from the night like a ghastly jade ribbon, swimming towards him with jaws wide and eyes hot. Genji draws back. His heart thuds in its electronic carapace; for the first time in months, his chest draws tight with shock.

“You’re here,” he whispers.

I am, it says, voice like a verdant tempest.

He marvels at its strength, but recoils at its appearance. Very rarely does the green dragon manifest without his call. It has appeared before in times of great danger, only when there is peril. This
omen does not bode well.

They are coming for you.

“Who?” Genji asks, unfolding his legs, bristling with surprise.

The remnants, answers the dragon. Those who remain. The last ones of your clan. Betrayed, broken. A torn flag left swaying in the enemy wind.

Genji lets out a startled shout. Rapidly the image manifests in his mind: infernal red scales, inky-black eyes, fangs as long as the horizon. Crimson, serpentine bodies writhing out of carbon-fiber blades. A yawning maw offering a glimpse into hell before swallowing it up, diving, disappearing into the heart of an unholy void.

Corrupt, it continues. Defiled. An empire splintering into ruin.

He does not gasp, but it feels like an edge has lanced his lungs straight through. The dragon has never said so much in one visit.

“Where?” he asks. “Where are they?” And then, aggressively: “tell me what I must do.”

Agitatedly the dragon loops the sky with a low, shuddering breath. What you did once before. It dives, returns, contorts into a knot as it chases its tail.

Genji sits up. He taps his visor and activates his comm.

“Hanzo,” he rushes. “It’s Genji. Did you feel that just now?”

His brother answers, awakened: yes.

"Meet me down at the comm tower," he says. Bounding up, preparing to descend. "I think this is something bad.”

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Natalie, Sylphy and my sensitivity readers for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- LOTS of love to the D*C Overfamily, who I promised I would mention in this chapter for their support and friendship!!
- This chapter is a bit slow and dense, and I apologize for that; the remaining six are set to be very fast-paced. I am working on getting them all out before BlizzCon!
- Regarding Lúcio: About a week before I left for D*C, a reader contacted me directly and expressed concern for how I wrote Lúcio’s dialogue and descriptions in the early chapters of the fic. They pointed out some examples that they considered out-of-character per his in-game lines or seemed coded, inappropriate, or representative of an insensitive and potentially hurtful racial portrayal for a young Afro-Latino man. They volunteered to help me correct that portrayal, and with their continued help I’ve gone back over the past 2-3 weeks (and will continue to go back over, with their continued insight) while drafting Ch14 to amend his dialogue and descriptions, as well as enlist a
sensitivity reader to help with his dialogue and descriptions in the few remaining chapters to come and chapters past. These readers have been tremendously constructive and I'm really grateful for their help, as well as their patience while I was delayed heavily and kept offline with IRL/con stuff.

I'm glad for the dialogue that this reader established to educate me on how poor portrayals are assumptive and hurtful. While I feel like most creators (especially of fanwork) do not intend to harm anyone with such mistakes, those portrayals can be amended and the creator can learn a valuable lesson. HtF began (and continues to be) a practice effort for me in creative writing; it is my first time venturing into fanfiction and I have a lot to learn and digest about portraying established canon characters while also respecting race, ethnicity, personal values, characteristics, and lifestyles.

I'm genuinely sorry if the earlier portrayal of Lúcio was offensive, hurtful, or upsetting to anyone and would like to formally apologize to those hurt. Once again, I want to thank that reader for coming to me, talking to me about it and continuing to help me one-on-one!

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](#) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
The chicken coop goes up two weeks before Christmas. It’s bigger than Hanzo expected: a wide, boxy contraption with two ramps, nest boxes, auto-feeders, and warm cedar panels painted brick-red. Six hens -- dusky-black with fuzzy crowns and fuzzier feet -- are brought up from the mercado after Torbjorn finishes putting up the wire fence. Hanzo observes beside Hana and Lúcio as McCree assists the engineer with gusto. He’s wanted this little addition to the box garden since midsummer.

“Those are the weirdest chickens I have ever seen,” Lúcio comments. He has one of the Watchpoint cats (‘Frajola,’ a skinny calico with a speckled pink nose) bundled in his arms. “It’s like they’re wearing slippers.”

“These’re called silkies!” Torbjorn announces. “Funny-lookin’ fellows, but hardy as a rock. They’re better suited for the local weather than most of yer regular pullets.”

“Which one’s the rooster?” asks Hana.

“Don’t need him.” Torbjorn hands a hen to McCree. “Their feed’s got fertilizer innit that’ll help ‘em lay eggs.”

“Aw, c’mon, Torb,” Lúcio croons, grinning. “O galo! You can’t have a chicken coop without one!” He scratches Frajola’s sleepy head. “That takes away from the spirit of the whole thing!”

“Hold yer horses,” snorts the engineer. He opens a crate and takes out a shiny brass rooster with cherry-red comb and wattles. Torbjorn tweaks a switch below the rooster’s prominent tail; a low whirr precedes a digital squawk as the rooster flaps its wings and clucks around the run. Its beady black eyes dart around as it snaps its metal beak. The noise sends Frajola bolting from Lúcio’s arms.

“Well, I’ll be damned,” snorts McCree.
“Unbelievable,” Hanzo adds dryly.

Lúcio busts out laughing. “Oh my God. I need one of those. Can you imagine that thing hooked up to my deck? Torb, you gotta make me one.”

“Sorry, special request only,” Torbjorn laughs as the rooster settles on top of the coop. It crows an electronic cock-a-doodle-doo.

They step back to survey the box garden and coop in completion. Jesse spectates with his hands on his hips, shoulders thrown back and chin lifted with a grin. The image suits him: tilted hat, untrimmed beard, barrel chest and hairy arms wrapped in threadbare blue plaid. A pleased farmer surveying his newest pastoral project.

It’s the happiest he’s looked in weeks. A reassuring sight, though Hanzo -- distracted, wearisome, dogged by too many thoughts -- cannot pause long to appreciate.

“Hey,” McCree calls after the archer makes to depart. “Where you off to?”

“To practice,” answers Hanzo.

McCree follows after along the track, spurs chiming. “Lord almighty, darlin’. You’ve been like an athlete lately. We were in Range 2 most of this morning!”

“Yes, we were. Now I am going to train with Genji.”

The gunslinger's soles scrape to halt on the pavement. “Aw, honey, you trained with Genji ‘til nigh one o’clock last night. And the night before that.” Knowingly: “you oughtta take it easy.”

“Preparation is critical. If our concerns about the Shimada-gumi making new threats are true --”

Jesse interrupts. “Been the better part of two weeks with no new leads.”

Hanzo looks over his shoulder. “I am aware. That does not mean we should not be prepared.”

Jesse shuffles in place on the track with his thumbs hooked in his belt-loops. “Well, Hana was wanting to go out and get new duds for the party mission. Figured you might wanna come along.”

The party mission. Of course: Hanzo chides himself for forgetting. He’s been too focused on the haunting message delivered to his brother by the dragon. In five days, the trio of Lena, Hana, and Lúcio will depart for Los Angeles for an exclusive holiday gala sponsored by Goldshire Studios. Hanzo and McCree (alias Misters Barceló and Tsubaki) will lag behind them incognito as supplemental security.

It’s a carefully-crafted publicity move. The Overwatch ‘dream team’ has been plied to attend to functions, summits, conferences, and social events across the globe, but the UN has only approved a meager handful of these invitations. Jesse thinks the mission will be less perturbing than their investigation at the Overwatch museum, but Hanzo is hesitant. Too many mysteries linger right now -- first the enigma of the Reaper, now the cryptic warning from the dragon. Where are the Shimada-gumi and what are they doing? What could be so threatening that the brothers’ otherworldly weapons had to appear and warn of danger?

Hanzo glances past the gunslinger. Lúcio and Hana are snapping pictures of the rooster on their phones, a pair of green and pink streaks against the windy gray afternoon. For a moment, he considers it. Has he been training too much lately? Shouldn’t he prepare for this mission as diligently as he has done with others?
Too many questions. It’s enough to shake his confidence.

“I will meet up with you after practice,” he says, nodding, sealing his decision.


Stress. Hanzo broods on this as he makes his way to Range 2. Jesse is really one to talk.

He arrives and finds Genji waiting with his swords sheathed. A deviation from the norm: Winston sits at the console, rapidly clicking away at the keys.

Hanzo’s stomach leaps into his throat. They have news.

“We got a hit on your search about the Shimada-gumi,” grunts the gorilla in greeting. “What do you know about” -- he squints, adjusts his glasses, reads a line of text -- “Fukuoka?”

Now Hanzo’s stomach drops like a cold rock. “The city?”

“Yeah.” Winston pulls up an image of a metropolis by the sea. “The search algorithm picked up a news report out of there. Yesterday, local police in Hakata arrested some gangsters responsible for drug-related robberies. One of them coughed up a tip that lead to the discovery of a huge weapons cache hidden throughout a shopping district. Explosives, pulse cannons. Looks like pretty high-grade stuff.”

“Too high-grade for small crime,” Hanzo comments.

“Well, that’s not what tripped the algorithm.” Winston tabs to an image of a crowd of onlookers and emergency vehicles gathered on a street littered with debris. “The following morning, there was an earthquake. But only one building was damaged: the police station here, where the gangsters were detained.”

“A city earthquake that only affects one building,” Genji mutters. “Seems a little weird.”

“It gets weirder. The guys arrested the night before in connection with the cache were found dead. But only those guys. Everyone else in lock-up was fine. And none of the guys who died were injured or hit by falling debris. Causes of death were listed as several successive cases of cardiac arrest.” Winston points at a line in the article. “Examiners found them with their faces contorted in horror. Like they were screaming.”

“Their hearts simply stopped,” Hanzo says grimly. “As if they were overcome by fear.”

“Witnesses were calling it punishment from God,” Winston states. He glances back at Genji. “I think the two of you might have a better idea what sort of force of nature can take out a specific number of targets like that.”

The Shimada brothers exchange knowing looks. Dragons.

“I’m gonna go ahead and put this one to your file,” says Winston. “Athena will keep parsing information out of that area as well as Hanamura.”

Hanzo turns away and strokes his beard. He hasn’t been to Fukuoka in a decade or more. He closes his eyes and thinks of lonely highrise hotels, wide windowpanes that stretched from floor to ceiling with a view of city lights glimmering out of the haze. A heavy fog would roll in every evening, spreading thick like gray mortar between the black grids of city streets. The cobalt-colored sky at dusk, morosely hued against the misleading glow of metropolitan towers by Hakata Bay. The
isolation and the gloom.

Genji interrupts his walk down memory lane. “This is a lead,” he says sotto voce in Japanese. “It’s something to look into. Probably easier than going back to Hanamura and investigating directly, you know?”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Hanzo frowns. “We still don’t know enough angles here. The Iwata corporation held turf there, and the family stopped cooperating with them not long after Father died. As far as I knew, Fukuoka was basically scorched earth, but that was ten years ago. Iwata may have decided to play ball on our terms after I left.”

“This isn’t about business,” Genji interjects. “It’s something worse. I can feel it. Think about it, Hanzo: how were the defenses at Hanamura when you and I were last there?”

“Pretty weak. I took them out faster than in years past.”

“Exactly. No one with a dragon, right?”

Hanzo snorts. “Just tough guys in suits.”

Genji’s visor angles towards the floor. “That’s why I worry. I didn’t think there were dragons left, besides ours. Years ago, when I worked for Overwatch, I took a lot of them out. None as strong as mine or yours, but still powerful. If they weren’t dead, we figured they were scared enough to go legit.”

“Scared enough to hide, maybe.”

“Yeah. I think that’s what’s happening here. Something new is pulling the family back together. This is bold, y’know? Trying to cover their tracks, trying to scare people. Whoever called that dragon on the gangsters in the jail was sending a message, both to us and to anyone thinking about ratting them out.”

Hanzo tugs on his beard. Since when was his brother so perceptive about the Shimada-gumi and its motives? Did he pick tidbits of deduction along the way between all his gallivanting, or did it stick during his time with Overwatch?

Genji continues with a solution. “My master and I can go to Fukuoka,” he offers. “He’s not an official member of Overwatch, so there’s no one watching when he comes and goes. It wouldn’t be hard to sneak off with him. We could be back within the week.”

Hanzo balks. “You would go without me?” He bites his tongue to keep from saying: and take the Omnic instead?

“I owe you this, Hanzo, to take the initiative regarding our family.” Genji faces his brother. “You have a lot on your plate as it is. All this stuff with Talon and Reaper, McCree, Hana, and everything in between. Me, on the other hand: I need to balance my blade. A little reconnaissance should help. When we get back, we’ll tell you everything we find.”

Moved but unconvinced, Hanzo shakes his head. “Genji, it is our burden. If we’re going to investigate this, we need to do it together. As we were meant to.”

Genji’s voice is firm as iron. “If I come back empty-handed, we will both go to Hanamura to figure it out.” He claps Hanzo’s tattooed shoulder. “I promise, Hanzo. We’ll get to the bottom of it. And once we do, we’ll put an end to it for good.”
At night Hanzo lies awake on the floor futon. He folds his hands over his chest, stares into the black swath of the ceiling, listens to the hum of the environmental systems buzzing throughout the building. He loops Genji’s words until they run nonsensically into others, flooding like a stream: for good, I promise, good promise, for what good?

Jesse lies beside him, warm and still. He cracks the silence with a drowsy rasp. “Havin’ trouble sleeping?”

Hanzo shifts. “There is a lot on my mind.”

“Been actin’ that way for a while now, sweetheart.”

Irritation bites at the archer’s throat. Inexplicably, too -- why does that comment annoy him so much?

Before he can answer, Jesse flaps off the covers. A gush of chilly air rushes Hanzo’s bare thighs; he snaps the sheets back over him with a gruff bark. “What are you doing?”

“I gotta take a leak.”

“Mind the cold,” Hanzo snips. “I prefer not to freeze my balls off.”

Jesse strides to the lavatory bare-assed and yawning. He shuts the door behind him with a click. Hanzo rolls over and curls like a shrimp; he hears Jesse humming behind the wall.

So irritating. Can he at least be a little considerate?

“Hey, Han-zo,” comes the baritone drawl from the lavatory.

“What?” he shoots back, sharper than he intends.

“You ever get real bad dreams?”

His brows furrow. “What do you mean?”

“Bad dreams. Y’know, the kind that happen night after night. You ever get ‘em?”

“Sometimes,” he replies. The toilet flushes; he can hear the sink tap running. “Why do you ask?”

Jesse emerges, shutting the door behind him. He scratches his belly and reaches to turn up the thermostat; the laughing skulls of his Deadlock tattoos leer from the backs of his knees. “You ever figure out a way to make ‘em quit?”

“No.”


“You thought I might know?”

“Well, hell, you’re a clever fella, figure I’d ask.”

Hanzo flattens on his back and stares up, as if hunting for an answer on the ceiling. Guilty for feeling annoyed, reminding himself: he’s still having a hard time. “My mother once said that telling someone a bad dream would prevent it from coming true.”
“Yeah?”

“It would convince the spirits to come and devour it so that it could not manifest and harm you.”

A weak snort. “Sounds like an old wives’ tale, darlin’.”

“I am not an old wife.” He thumps Jesse’s chest with two fingers. “Tell me what you dreamed.”

They lie close as he describes the nightmare: landscapes from his youth, memories warped by a raw, intangible fear. A vast desert canyon gaping out of the red ground beneath a white sky. Crows caw and circle overhead. They morph into amorphous shapes that jitter out of focus, like amoebas viewed through a lens. Clouds rush by in black strips. Sometimes a thunderstorm dumps down waves of rain. Occasionally there are tornadoes, dust devils, sun dogs. The dream turns truly frightening when the canyon fills with bodies like a grisly red bowl. Every footprint disappears behind him until he is lost against the horizon. He hears Amari’s voice urging him on, or Angela -- murmuring soft, cooing comfort, asking after his eye and his arm.

It ends the same way every time. He comes upon a shabby gallows, like the kind he used to see in Western movies as a child. A skull waits in the sand: cracked, yellow as a bleach stain, slack-jawed as it chatters out a slow, distorted noise. Lately, when it appears, it’s writhing with worms.

In return, Hanzo tells him some of his own dreams, though none are quite so awful. He talks about the finch and the maiko cooing beside her doting sisters in Miyagawa-cho. The violet wisteria hanging heavy over the ruins of the Sendai omnium. Sometimes he dreams of Genji as a child or a young man, green-haired and glowing. Texting on his phone, chatting about games and parties and money. Softer memories, too: the sparrow beside the Hanamura castle pond, lounging in his gi, woolgathering to the koi.

When he finishes, Jesse rumbles, “you ever think ‘bout goin’ back?”

“To where?”

“Japan.”

Hanzo tries to sound nonchalant. He hasn’t told McCree about Fukuoka yet. “I have work to do here.”

After a pause, Jesse asks: “do you miss it?”

“Yes,” Hanzo replies. “Almost every day.”

Silence eats away at the space between them. Jesse rolls over and faces the wall. Hanzo frowns into the dark.

He was only telling the truth. Did he say something thoughtless? Even if he did, what would he say to make amends?

Too many questions. Hanzo shuts his eyes. Sleeps takes him hard, dreamless and deep -- a jaw-clenching slumber that drags his brain when the rest of his body wakes in the morning. Grogy and clinging, like an embrace reluctant to let go.

---

The holiday gala is held in an upscale theater attached to a skyscraper hotel in the heart of Hollywood. Five gilded levels encircle a wide flagstone pavilion with three fish-shaped fountains
carved from ice. An opulent banquet sweeps the second-floor mezzanine; green holly and gray fir boughs glisten under the decor of luminescent holiday lights. The crowds drift and socialize in festive clusters of black, white, and red. Above, the air conditioners run full blast, shocking the theater with an artificial cold. Hanzo wonders how many of the attendees (popular actors and actresses, cinema moguls, miscellaneous Hollywood elite) regret dressing for the balmy Los Angeles night.

Hanzo sips whisky as he monitors the sparkling crowds from an unoccupied walkway circling the fourth floor. Jesse is situated at a bar across from the mezzanine. Both gentlemen are well-dressed, incognito, armed with their preferred weapons close by. They introduce themselves to idle inquirers with aliases that differ from the names on their counterfeit invitations. Occasionally they’ll slip away for a drink or a cigarette, pretending to navel-gaze into their shiny new phones. They blend in easily, a pair of handsome deuces easily forgotten.

He spots Lúcio and Lena strolling arm-in-arm around the two-story Christmas tree, cheery compatriots in sharp three-piece suits. They navigate the crowds with ease, stopping for hugs, chats, and eagerly-snapped selfies. Then he hunts for a sunnier hue. There they are: Hana and her guest, lingering by the splendid banquet line. She wears her hair in loose curls above a form-fitting dress in citron yellow, vivid in contrast to the electric-blue worn by the woman standing on her right.

Vaswani. Of all the people for Hana to bring as a plus-one! Tonight she cuts a sublime figure, sailing beside Hana in a resplendent sari with a pallu hemmed in gold. Her black hair drapes down her shoulder in a thick, glossy plait; an aquamarine gem glints in the tikka above her brow. Two columns of sparkling bangles enamel both of her slender wrists. Her beauty does not go unnoticed. Whenever Hana stops to greet a fellow celebrity, her lovely guest is brought to the forefront. To Hanzo’s surprise, she does not shirk from the attention. Vaswani bows and shakes hands and keeps up with conversation. Her smile is cool but inviting, stern yet alluring, the very picture of formality. He wonders if she has experience with this sort of thing.

Not that he cares. Her presence irks him, even if it’s pleasing to look at. Hanzo argued against her accompaniment from the start, but his protests fell on Hana’s deaf ears. She hasn’t left the Watchpoint in months, she defended. Athena says it’ll be good to have her along. It keeps up a cooperative image. So be it, Hanzo replied sourly, sparing his complaints instead for McCree, who listened dully while scratching his head. The more the merrier.

He has decided to keep an eye on her -- a task he rationalizes that someone has to do, given how the rest of Overwatch has adapted to her presence. Even Lúcio seems to be letting his guard down around her, if not potentially dropping it altogether. Aside from tolerating her on a now-daily basis, his sarcastic remarks seem less sharp when thrown her way. Hanzo wonders if he even means them as jabs. He knows the audio-medic’s habit for jesting with people he considers friends.

Most irritating overall: Genji has started trying to speak to her. Nothing particularly meaningful, just passing conversation -- which, to Hanzo, is as perilous as giving one’s house-key to an axe murderer. The interactions stem from a suggestion from Zenyatta to keep one’s perceived enemies as close as their friends; Genji dismissed his brother’s disapproval with casual reassurance. I told you she’s all talk, he said after Hanzo protested. She’s more sensitive than she looks. Can’t you see it? Most of what she says is corporate bullshit, not her own words. That’s how far they’ve got their arm wedged up her butt. Hanzo rolled his eyes, shook his head, chided his brother for the crude mental image. Genji laughed, purposefully teasing, itching to draw his brother’s ire. Aw, don’t act like you’ve never noticed. She has a really nice one. Scathed, Hanzo chopped back that one should never be distracted by their enemy’s physique. Suit yourself, said the cyborg, cheeky as ever. We’re only human.
Hanzo glowers down from the balcony as Hana leans aside to murmur something in Satya’s ear. Satya whispers back, intimate as a friend.

Vaswani the puppet, a mouthpiece pulled by strings. The low voice rolling across the comm in the cold Siberian waystation, confused and insulted at his accusations: you are mistaken. He doesn’t know if he believes it.

Before he can dwell any further, his phone beeps.

```
2002: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse:
Check in all clear
How r u doing up there
```

Hanzo huffs. Ruminating about the archi-tech has distracted him from hourly check-in.

```
2003: [3945_84]
All clear. All three agents and Vaswani are secure. Nothing suspicious.
Maintain your guard on that left door. It leads to a backstage lot with an unsecured bay. Trucks have to pass through checkpoint to get in but the walls are unguarded.
```

```
2004: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse:
Rgr that
God damned Boring shindig this turned out 2 be
Who do u have 2 piss on around here 2 get lil action going
```

Hanzo snorts. Despite the vile language, he has to agree: it’s been a slow night.

```
2004: [3945_84]
Be thankful it is calm.
```

```
2005: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse:
Hehe i kno
Just bored & this stool is small for my big ass
I think I saw the guy from the princess Bride remake
```

```
2006: [3945_84]
Did you tell him it was an abomination and a blight on all things cinema?
```

```
2007: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse:
```
aw i liked it tho
Hey might pick up some grass before we go back 2 hotel
If u want 2 unwind real nice with me ;)

\[2009: [3945_84]\]
Get some for yourself if you like. I prefer not to smoke it.
I will stick to drinks.

\[2009: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse: \]
ok
I would make it worth ur while tho
u need 2 relax
hey did u try the Kavalan

He looks down at his whisky. This idle talk is inappropriate on a mission, but the gala’s bar
selections are superb. Jesse’s good humor is a welcome respite.

\[2009: [3945_84]\]
I’ve got some right now. It is quite fine.
Did you like it?

\[2009: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse: \]
Not as much as I like drinkin u ;)

Hanzo doesn’t know whether to laugh or scoff. My fool, he thinks, halfway fond. Maybe tonight
they can patch things up a little more formally.

\[2010: [3945_84]\]
How much have you had tonight?

\[2010: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse: \]
Bring those pretty lips down here darling & u will find out real quick ;)

\[2011: [3945_84]\]
Since when have I preferred it quick?
2012: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse:
Give me 10 min & they wont notice were gone
Meet me in men’s room
I will act like Im going 2 get a smoke
then i’m smoke that fine dick ;)

So crass. Hanzo shakes his head. A smoke sounds good right now, though. He pushes off the railing and dips to an outdoor balcony that overlooks the city lights. A rush of sound greets him: traffic, street noise, the warm evening wind. Hanzo lights a cigarette and thumbs back a reply.

2013: [3945_84]
Save it for when we get back to the hotel.
More room to accommodate your boundless energy.

2014: [3945_45] McCree, Jesse:
Oh im going 2 go boundless all in ur fine ass
Did u leave post??
get down here honey
Christmas is going 2 come early & so are u ;)

He’s about to text back something unabashedly sly when a merry voice interrupts. He nearly drops his phone.

“Enjoying the view?” Tracer asks, suddenly present, leaning against the balcony at his side.

“You surprised me.” Hanzo flicks a glance at the chronal accelerator fitted snugly over her smart black vest; the device somewhat fascinates him. “Is something the matter?”

“Just saying hello. Lúcio just ran into some musician friends of his from Quito, so I thought I’d come up and check on our boys.”

“We’re fine,” Hanzo replies tersely. “Perhaps we should not be seen socializing together. It will raise suspicion.”

“It’ll raise a lot more if you hang out by yourself all night,” Lena quips. “Plenty of people brought hired security, but they try to mix ‘em in with the crowds to keep a low profile. Thought you might want to do the same.”

They pass a few minutes with a perfunctory conversation about the gala. Lena sips from a blush-colored cocktail as she muses over her experience so far: familiar faces, personalities, people of interest. She comments on McCree, mentioning how nice he looks all cleaned up, cutting such a handsome figure when placed at the archer’s side. Hanzo indulges a smug agreement. He suspects that friendly gossip is the real reason she’s here.

But her stance is too stiff, mouth too twitchy, gaze too flighty. Less busybody, more jitterbug.

Eventually she pipes up, “I wanted to ask you something, if you don’t mind. About Dorado.”
Hanzo flicks his gaze sidelong. “What’s that?”

“You saw Jack,” she says. “I read your debrief, how he ran into you first. I’ve been meaning to get around and ask you about it. I was wondering: how did he look?”

He’s prepared less for her question than for her unexpected visit. “What do you mean?”

“How did he look when you saw him?” And then, hesitantly clarifying: “health-wise, I mean. What kind of shape was he in?”

Hanzo wracks his memory. “It was not the sort of situation where one could easily tell. His clothing looked fine, decent condition, no visible wear or tear. A visor and a faceplate that covered most of his face.”

“I’ve seen that, his visor. Was he burned?”

“No.” Hanzo stares into his glass. “There was scarring around his eyes, but not from burns. I would say he was in good physical shape. Prepared for combat performance, very light and quick on his feet. Fast for a man his size, agile, durable. Whenever I took point, he kept up without trouble.”

Lena leans against the balcony with a wistful sigh. “He’s still got it, then.”

“Still has what?”

“It.” She sips her drink. “He’s still on top of his game, y’know? After all these years and the mess of what happened.” Lena laughs, a mild hee-hee. “Always liked that about him, really.”

“You admired him?” Hanzo asks.

“I did!” She smiles. “He was a good man. You’ve probably heard it before, but I came in fresh to Overwatch after the Slipstream project. Wasn’t with the crew nearly as long as Angela, much less Reinhardt and Torb. Before the Slipstream, I was with the good ol’ RAF. That was something we had in common, you know? Jack and I both got into the military real young, hotshots and the like. Rose up through the ranks quick, went in and out of a lot of special operations. When Overwatch got me in as an agent, he was my CO through basic training. Back then, most new recruits were solo types who were looking for fame and glory. I was the only soldier in our whole squad, and the three that came before. Jack and I hit it off real fast.”

“Interesting,” Hanzo replies, intrigued in spite of himself. “I was under the impression he was a bit of a --”

“Hard-ass?” she interjects, snickering. “Well, you’re not wrong. He wasn’t exactly a teddy bear. He ran things like an officer. Don’t know if you’re familiar with that sort of fellow, but I’m sure you can guess.”


“Yup. That didn’t always sit too well around HQ, what with Overwatch being so diverse back then. Board meetings would get heated sometimes. He’d butt heads with Winston or Angela and the folks in their division, the scientific research groups and all that.” She flicks a lock of hair off her brow. “But if you looked past the rough spots, he was a top-notch guy. People knew it, too. He was a real ace: quick thinker, smart leader.” Now she grins. “Knew how to roll with the punches, especially when it came to the press.”

Hanzo tries not to sound too interested when he inquires, “Reyes, then. You knew him, too?”
Lena falters. She’s quick to laugh it off. “Well, you sort-of had to know Gabriel if you knew Jack. They’d been together since before Overwatch, back when they were both in US special programs. Thick as thieves during the Omnic Crisis, real devoted. And even after that, up until the end.”

“The end,” Hanzo repeats. “You mean the betrayal. When Reyes led Blackwatch against the rest of you, and blew up the Swiss headquarters.”

She holds up her index finger through a sip of her drink. “Mm. Before that. They were having troubles before all that happened.”

He dangles the bait, feigning politeness. “A shame that their work was so heavily affected by such troubles.”

Lena shrugs, tugging the fringe of an uncomfortable topic. “I’d feel bad chatting about their personal lives if they were still around, but you’ve read the UN reports. Like I said, you know: they were American soldiers. Didn’t talk touchy-feely very often, but sometimes things would slip. All that mess about Gabe being sore for so many years about not getting Strike Commander. Must have been a bit of a long-term problem between them, seeing as how long ago that promotion happened, but I guess that wound up being a big part of it.”

“I imagine it was more complex than just that,” Hanzo persists, tapping ash off his cigarette.

“Oh, everyone knew there was more to it. Remember how I said most of the new blood in my day were rogue agents? Jack didn’t like that. He preferred soldiers over mercs. He was real wary about taking in former criminals, bad eggs and the like. He was always fighting this rumor that if Overwatch wouldn’t take you after you failed your background check, Blackwatch would.”

He remembers the Deadlock tattoos on Jesse’s knees. “Was there truth to the rumor?”

“Wish I could tell you,” Lena says. “The UN never publically released that part of the investigation. Just made a blanket statement about our bad hiring practices. You’d have to go through every entry in the Blackwatch archive and see who all’s in there, now that it’s decrypted.”

I may do just that, he thinks with a sip of whisky. “I see why they insist now on approving all our new agents, then.”

“Well, funny story. The UN actually did that before.” She purses her lips. “They had a lot of hands in approvals when it came to people joining up. Gabe didn’t like it one bit.”

“No?”

“Nope. He thought it was dangerous, letting bureaucrats call shots where they shouldn’t. Jack said it helped with transparency and that Gabe was just being paranoid.”

Hanzo seizes on this. “Paranoid?”

“Yeah. They had a fight about it one night, actually. A bad one. Jack told me a bit about it one night when we were out having drinks. He asked me just that: if I thought Gabe had been acting paranoid.” She snorts. “I just laughed a bit, like, ‘well, lad, what d’you mean by paranoid? Does he think you’ve got a wandering eye or something like that?’ And he said, no, he meant if Gabe’d said anything weird about the job. Apparently he had been asking all sorts of questions about the recent missions they’d been on. Picking apart the objectives on the dockets or the SOPs, disagreeing with everything. Getting real iffy during debriefs, right before they went on ops. Like he thought something bad was about to happen.” She swirls her glass. “After that, he asked me if I’d keep an eye out for it.”
He pushes further, abandoning subtlety. “And did you ever notice it?”

“No. Not a thing. Truth be told? I never saw Gabe do anything out of ordinary until what happened at the headquarters.”

“Were you there when it happened?”

“Mm.” Lena stares into her glass with a tepid laugh. “Sorry, this all turned a bit grim, didn’t it? My bad. Don’t mean to spoil your night. Guess it’s just been on my mind lately, since all that’s happened.”

Hanzo pushes back from the railing and looks out over the busy street. Just like Jesse said in the truck: she’s scared to talk about it. Can he blame her? He thinks back to Angela’s confession: the autopsy, the anomalies, the recollections of a man as charismatic as he was cunning. Was she scared to offer that, too?

He paints it out like a picture: a paranoid king in a tumultuous court. This efficient man so wary of everyone -- government yes-men and their political machinations -- and even his own lover. Tormented by envy. Haunted by resentment. Obdurate in his reign, ready to strike when his opponents drifted across the board to set up the pieces against his loyal Blackwatch tableau.

No, he decides. Too dramatic. Hanzo chides himself for the fanciful mental image. He’s been reminiscing too much about the Shimada-gumi and his father’s old tales.

The profile is incomplete. He has to find more pieces before he solves the puzzle of Gabriel Reyes.

“Hanzo,” Lena interrupts in a soft, thin voice. She’s gazing up at a nearby highrise tower. “You’ve got your bow handy, yeah?”

A beat passes, heavy as lead -- a silence that deafens all other noises in his ears. “Yes.”

“Good,” she replies. With a rising squeak: “because I think you should --”

Before she can finish, the shot rings out with a crack.

Hanzo feels Lena’s pull before he registers what is happening: she lunges, zips, and hauls him back at a speed no normal human should go. In a split second they’re off the balcony and back inside -- tumbling to the floor, rolling, gathering their bearings as screams rise from the crowds below. Hanzo snaps to his feet, momentarily dizzied.

“Sniper!” Lena cries, thumbing her comm. “Across the street! Just tried to take us out!”

Everything clicks back into focus. He tears Storm Bow from its hidden case behind a potted fern just as the building fire alarm goes off with an electronic shriek. The comm erupts with chatter.

“Evac! Evac!” It’s Lúcio. Hanzo can tell from his breath that he’s running. “Audio-medic reporting in, I’m clearing out all civilians on floor one!”

Crash! Overhead, a skylight bursts open; glass shimmers down like rain. A shadowy figure rappels down a cord, dropping like a pendulum. Lena gasps.

“It’s you,” she whispers weakly, and she’s gone in a hot blue streak.

Jesse barks out over the comm before Hanzo can follow. “I need backup by the bar! We got hostiles comin’ in from that unsecured door!”
“Stay behind cover, that sniper could be mobile!” Hanzo yells as he scales down an ornamental palisade to the floor below.

“Agent Hanzo,” rolls Satya’s low, feminine voice across the line. “You are defensive director on this mission. Agent D.Va and I await your directive.”

“Get everyone out of here,” Hanzo replies as he lands on the mezzanine. He kicks aside a clump of Christmas tinsel. “Unless you are armed, evacuate with the rest of the guests!”

“Hostiles engaged!” Jesse calls. Hanzo can see him up ahead; he’s chasing the targets through the door. “Three of ‘em, all armed. Pulse weapons. Black tac-gear, helmets, masks.” Two cracks of revolver fire. “One of them’s got a fuckin’ sword!”

Beyond the unsecured door stretches a dark hallway. Two bodies lie slumped against the corridor walls; Hanzo jumps over them and slips out into the open. Backstage behind the theater looms a high, lonely warehouse stocked with racks and crates draped in burlap. Hanzo nocks an arrow, ducking when he hears a shout and the distinct tow tow of Peacekeeper’s fire.

In the distance he sees McCree disappearing around a line of brightly-painted set pieces. Another cry; this time it’s from Jesse. Hanzo darts around the corner ready to fire, just in time to witness the gunslinger pistol-whip the attacker and kick him to the floor. The spur on Peacekeeper’s grip gleams fang-like as he spins the gun back into his holster.

*Clever,* Hanzo thinks through a pulse of admiration. And he thought it was just a gaudy ornament.

“Got him alive!” McCree calls as Hanzo moves in. “Quick, gimme a hand.”

They bind the man’s wrists with Jesse’s bolo tie. Hanzo kicks open the door to a maintenance closet; McCree shoves the man inside and pries off his headgear. The agent is a young man with black hair and dark eyes. A wide gash bisects his chin and lips. When he blinks into focus, his face flashes with cold anger. The familiarity of his gaze chills Hanzo to the bone.

“He recognizes me.”

“Smells like Talon,” Jesse grumbles, reloading his revolver.

“Let us find out,” Hanzo says tersely. He faces down the agent. “Tell us who sent you and we might let you live.”

To his surprise, the agent gurgles back in Japanese.

“Legless piece of shit,” he hisses through bloody teeth.

Hanzo thumps the tip of his foot against the agent’s chin wound until he yelps. “Is that any way to speak to your elders?”

“Kill me already,” says the agent. “Give the ungrateful snake its meal.”

Seized by sudden dread, Hanzo rasps, “wait.”

“What’d he say?” McCree asks.

“Get me a knife.”

McCree draws back, bewildered. “He wants you to give him a knife?”

Hanzo swears in Japanese as he digs a small switchblade from his back trouser pocket. He flips it loose and squats to slice open the agent’s tactical vest from throat to sternum. The agent curses...
when the blade knicks his skin. McCree hovers nearby, observing as Hanzo rips fabric to bare the agent’s chest.

There it is: a red tattoo spanning the man’s right shoulder. Stark black ink outlines the shape of a whiskered dragon snaking through waves of a churning crimson sea. It’s clearly unfinished -- with the ornate pattern halting to unadorned skin at the rise of his deltoid -- but it’s all Hanzo needs to confirm his fear.

“Shimada,” he murmurs, rocking back.

“In with Talon?” McCree asks, aghast.

Hanzo stands. He toes the agent in the collarbone. “Talk.”

The agent spits at his feet. Hanzo digs his heel into the man’s chin. The man squawks in pain; Hanzo grinds his foot until he can feel the agent’s jawbone threatening to give. He pulls back as thin rivulets of blood seep from the agent’s gritted teeth. One sharp kick to his bleeding chest leaves the agent gasping for breath.

The comm crackles with activity. Tracer has identified the sniper as the infamous Widowmaker. She’s chasing her retreat down Sunset Boulevard.

“Talk,” Hanzo repeats to the agent. “Why are you here? How long have you been with Talon?”

Behind him, Jesse shuffles. “Hey, if Tracer’s in pursuit, we gotta hop along fast.”

“Kill me, you coward,” the agent snarls. “Fucking pig-dog. What are you waiting for?”

“What’s he saying?” McCree asks again.

Whack! Hanzo kicks the agent again. “Answer me.”

“Eat shit!”

Coolly Hanzo turns, lifts his foot, and brutally grinds the point of his heel into the meat above the agent’s knee. The agent lets out a raw shriek. McCree steps forward to pull Hanzo back.

“Enough,” he whispers harshly in his ear. “We gotta go.”

“We can get him to talk,” Hanzo murmurs back.

“No.” The firmness in McCree’s voice surprises him. “This ain’t that kinda op and we ain’t those kinda fellas. Get your bow and let’s get a move-on. Pronto, honey, I ain’t hangin’ around here for more goons to show up, or the feds.”

“We cannot just leave him here!”

“Sure we can.” McCree nods farewell to the agent. “Happy trails, Call-of-Duty. Say ‘hi’ to your pals, hope they hook y’all up with good dental over there. Y’all’re gonna need it.”

“Jesse,” Hanzo hisses. “This could be a critical informant, we need to interrogate --”

“My pals,” the agent interrupts in English, “send McCree their regards.” He laughs with a wide red grin. “They wanted to tell you on the train to Houston, they miss you. They wanted me to tell you: say nighty-night.”
All color drains from Jesse’s face. He stiffens in the doorway. Hanzo turns back and delivers a slicing kick to the agent’s chin.


But the agent recovers, leers, and gargles out sing-song in a thick, clotted voice. “Saaay nighty-night and -- kiss me. Just hold me tight and tell me you missed me...”

“Enough,” Hanzo grits out, ready to kick again.

“When you’re alone and blue as can bee, dream a little dream of --”

Bang! Hanzo leaps back from the gunshot and the warm red spray that follows. The agent jerks and falls still. McCree clicks Peacekeeper’s hammer, lowers it, and pulls Hanzo for the doorway.

“To hell with that mess,” he eks out in a ragged voice. “We’re outta here.”

Hanzo fumes as they dart out through the storage bay. Incredulously: “you shot him!”

“I sure as hell did.” Jesse shoulders open a door that leads to a gray industrial alley. Sirens wail in the distance. Hanzo scans the rooftops above them, eyeing for snipers. He lets out a shaky breath that he did not realize he was holding.

Another realization: both of their pristine black suits are spattered with the dead agent’s blood.

Beside him, Jesse starts muttering to himself. “The train. Shit, he said ‘the train,’ didn’t he? The train heist was Talon. Blackwatch playbook, just like before. Like this, too, the way those fellas fought.” He looks up; Hanzo can see his thought process grinding gear-like behind his gaze. “But that song. God-damn. That song: startin’ to think there’s gotta be somethin’ else about the song.” Jesse sucks in a sharp breath. He’s shaking. “The hacker call we got at the museum. She said it -- ‘cuidado’ --”

Hanzo yanks his arm. “He had the beginnings of a dragon! Whoever he was, he was someone with blood and rank!” Now he jostles Jesse’s elbow. “He had valuable information, he could have given us answers!”

“Well, how the hell were you gonna get ‘em?” Jesse barks back, surging in. His dark eyes snap with anger. “Poke him? Cut him? Take off his lips? I told you, Hanzo, we ain’t doing that. And don’t try to reason with me ‘bout it, either.”

Piqued, Hanzo releases Jesse’s arm. “Nothing so messy. A few broken fingers could have given all we needed.”

“Nnah.” McCree rasps dismissively as he takes off down the alley. “I’m not arguing with you about this right now. Right now, we’re gettin’ outta here.”

Incensed, Hanzo charges after him. “Jesse! Cease and listen to me! We have to go back and search those bodies. They could have chips or communicators. They could have ways to track back to the Shimada-gumi --”

“Back toTalon.” McCree hurries on. “This’s Talon now, Hanzo, your clan just went up shit creek without a paddle. I guarantee you they got backup around here -- they’ll move in for us and take out any civilians in their way.” He puffs. “And then they’ll pin it all on Overwatch. We gotta vamoose.”
Voices flare over the comm. Satya, Hana and Lúcio have helped evacuate the block. All streets within a two-mile radius of the theater are shut down. A skyward roar confirms Tracer’s report: three unmarked helicopters are closing in. She can’t tell if they’re police or national guard.

“It ain’t neither,” McCree says grimly, dodging down another alley. “Backup. What’d I tell you? C’mon, we gotta go!”

It takes them ten minutes to clear the area and navigate the block. They rendezvous with Tracer just as she abandons pursuit of the Widowmaker; the sniper escaped after slicing open Lena’s forearm with a swing of her grappling hook. A hollow look haunts her youthful face as she clutches her bloody elbow. If Hanzo thought she looked on edge before, he decides now she is truly shaken. Like she’s seen a ghost.

They change for the trip back to Gibraltar and slip through security at the LAX spaceport. Holiday lights and ribbons decorate the walls, cheerily incongruous to the mayhem at the gala. Hanzo hardly notices the soft, cheery Christmas music jingling over the busy crowds of travelers. They spend the return flight side by side in silence.

Again he feels like something thoughtless has happened -- some unspoken offense for which he has no apology. But this time, it’s mutual. Every bounce of air turbulence makes his heart leap adrenaline-hot. Hanzo closes his eyes and thinks of the red tattoo until his blood threatens to boil.

A king, a dragon, a song. An opportunity interrupted, a mission deferred. Does McCree have any idea what his rash decision has denied them? A pulse of rage crests in his chest; he considers calling his brother and telling him to wait for him in Fukuoka. With the right planning, he could be there in less than twelve hours. Unhindered and well-equipped. *Alone.*

Then his phone buzzes. It’s Hana.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>0317: [3945_85] Song, Hana:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>So the news is calling it an assassination attempt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No one claimed responsibility but the internet is saying it’s definitely Talon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Satya got a call from the UN and said there will be an investigation for our defense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>We are leaving first thing in the morning so see you and Mac back at base soon.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m so glad you and Mac were there. You saved Lena’s life.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All our lives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thank you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Beside him, the gunslinger stares out the window with his arms folded over his chest. Hanzo notices a single smudge of blood along his hairline, mud-brown and barely visible. Like a birthmark.

He switches off his phone with a resentful *click.*

---

A sullen decay works its way between Hanzo and McCree up until the holiday shutdown. They complete their daily routines with little conversation and less physicality. Twice Jesse reaches for him in the dark of their shared dorm only for Hanzo to pull away. When Hanzo paws his hip one morning (half in apology, half out of sleepy desire following a lurid, pleasing dream), Jesse
complains of a backache and rises for a shower. Worse than the lack of sex: they find ways to avoid each other and the conversation neither of them wants to have. Hanzo opts for intensive lessons with Hana, who redoubles her efforts to be prepared for another Talon attack. Jesse retreats to lurking around the labs with Lúcio and Winston or sulking with the chickens.

Communal dinner brings everyone together, but the meals are no longer upbeat. Angela avoids eye contact on the rare occasion that she attends. Lena rarely smiles. Reinhardt remains reclusively reticent; his armorer Brigitte speaks in his stead, chiming in occasionally when Hana, Winston and Lúcio try to keep up the holiday spirit.

The grim reality of danger settles over the Watchpoint like an inescapable gloomy haze.

---

It all comes to a head two days before Christmas. Hanzo leaves the mess hall after supper with the intent to train; he changes into a clean kyudo-gi, retrieves his bow, and treks for Range 2.

Lumbering up to the landing with his spurs clinking, there he is. The unavoidable cowboy.

Hanzo stops at the top of the stairs. Jesse pauses. He looks up, tips back the brim of his hat, sees the archer. His hazel eyes soften down to his weatherbeaten cheeks.

“Hello,” says Hanzo.

“Hey,” Jesse answers. And then, scratching his jawline: “don’t mind me, was just lookin’ for a speedloader.”

“I see.” Hanzo wonders if he’s telling the truth. He moves aside to let McCree pass. “I do not mind.”

He almost smiles. “Kinda wish you did.”

For a fleeting second, Hanzo aches. Jesse is glad to see him. He considers setting down Storm Bow, padding down the steps, and pulling the gunslinger into his arms. Later he will wonder why he didn’t -- why instead he chose to let the moment hang like a broken light, flickering on and off.

The pause makes Jesse deflate with a groan. “C’mon, Hanzo, how long’re we gonna do this?”

“Do what?”

He thrusts a hand out demonstratively. “This. Not talkin’. Actin’ like we can’t stand each other anymore.” With a hint of soreness: “fightin’.”

Hanzo wrinkles his nose. “We are not fighting.”

“Then what do you call it?”

Irritated, Hanzo replies, “I have been busy.”

“Hanzo, c’mon, honey,” Jesse sighs. “This’s more than just being busy and you know it.”

“Do I?”

“You’re mad at me.”

Hanzo bites the tip of his tongue to keep from saying the truth: *maybe I am.*
Jesse waves his hand. “I get it, okay? I pissed you off. I’m guessin’ it has to do with what happened in Hollywood, when I shot that guy—”

Without a word, Hanzo pushes the door open and treks back outside. A cool nighttime breeze greets him, ruffling the length of his gold scarf. Flickering over his shoulder like an errant flag.

Behind him, Jesse sputters after. “Hey, don’t walk off on me like that.”

“I am going to find Genji. I have work to do.”

Jesse’s spurs rattle as he grinds to a halt. “Yeah,” he calls acidly, “work. Things to do and places to go, huh?”

Hanzo stops. He throws Jesse a sour look over his shoulder.

The gunslinger scowls in return. “Fukuoka, right? Next stop: Hanamura. Two tickets, return date negotiable, and not one of them says ‘Barceló’ on it.”

His guts drop. How did he find out? It doesn’t matter: Jesse glowers at him down the drone track with his thumbs hooked in his belt-loops. Waiting for an answer.

It takes Hanzo several uncomfortable seconds to reply, “it is not what you think.”

“Oh yeah? Let’s go find Genji-kun, then, and ask him.”

Betrayal pangs in his stomach. “You spoke to him about this.”

“He told me, Hanzo” Jesse drawls. “He asked me the day he got back with Zenyatta if I’d be going along to Hanamura to help out. Had to try and act like I knew what was going on and play it cool.”

Hanzo thinks he looks the very opposite of cool right now. “You weren’t gonna tell me, were you? Y’all were gonna take off and go dragon-huntin’ on your own.”

“The Shimada-gumi are my responsibility,” Hanzo begins with rising aggravation. “They are my burden. I am the master, it is my decision whether or not they are to be subdued or brought down.”

“Was,” Jesse says flatly.

“What?”

“You was” -- he pauses, scratches his chin, thinks for a moment -- “was. Uh. No, uh -- were.”

Awkwardly recovering from the grammatical faux pas and getting back to his point. “You were the master. You aren’t anymore, Hanzo. You said you were dead to them.”

Hanzo simmers, shifting his weight forward. Standing his ground. “They may write me off as dead, but that does not change who I am. That man you killed in Hollywood was not just some target. He belonged to my family. It was my duty to handle him, not yours.”

“Honey, he belonged to Talon. It’s everyone’s duty to handle them now. Everything you think you know about your clan is gonna be ten times worse now, I guarantee it. It’s all changed.”

“We do not know that.”

Jesse squares his shoulders, asserts himself, stares Hanzo down. He has something to say. “Maybe we do.”

“How?”
“The Widowmaker. D’you know who she is?”

The question startles him, a non-sequitur. “Talon sniper.”

“Right. Real question here is who she was. Tracer told me and it ain’t good.”

“How so?”

“The Widowmaker is one of us,” he states, like an accusation. “She’s Gerard Lacroix’s wife, she was a woman named Amélie. A civilian. Gerard -- you wouldn’t know him -- he was part of a special task force set up to investigate Talon. Talon took him out during off-hours, right in his own bedroom. Miss Amélie disappeared right after, no body found, no nothin’’. Whole base thought it was a message to everyone in Overwatch who had people back home worth protecting. ‘Mess with us and we’l mess with you.’ People up and quit over it. No one wanted to take Talon head-on if they were gonna slit your throat in your sleep and black-bag your family right after.

But this is worse. This’is scarier shit. They didn’t just take Amélie Lacroix, Hanzo -- they did somethin’ to her. They turned her into the Widowmaker. Lena thinks they’ve brainwashed her, done some kinda” -- his voice trembles with revulsion -- “modification on her. Something real unnatural’s been done to her, got her lookin’ and movin’ like some kinda reanimated corpse. Or” -- he gestures with his mechanical hand -- “like a machine. I mean, Lena knew her, y’know? Before all this shit happened. She’s been tryin’ to document it ever since the museum, and before that when she ran into her on King’s Row. She’s convinced down to the bone.”

Hanzo stares at Jesse as if he’s sprouted a second head. “You believe her.”

“Mental conditioning, Hanzo,” Jesse continues, waving his hand. “Body modification. Experimentation. That’s not borrowin’ from the Blackwatch playbook, that’s somethin’ way beyond it. That’s deeper. That song” -- now he cups his chin -- “you know it? The song. The one that Shimada guy was singing? I knew it. I’d heard it before. Way, way back.” Jesse shifts from foot to foot. “Before I left, there was an op. Me and Reyes, a Blackwatch op. It came on the radio. I heard it and I remember, I got this weird feeling. I can’t explain it” -- he palms the crown of his hat and ducks his head -- “I don’t even like thinkin’ about it, it gets to bouncin’ around in my head, like it got stuck there. But I knew. I’m tellin’ you, Hanzo, I knew somethin’ was wrong. With the op, with Gabe, with Blackwatch, I knew it. I kept thinking: ‘watch out, Jesse, watch out.’” He steps forward, gesturing again. “And then at the museum, the hacker? ‘Cuidado,’ that means ‘watch out’, it bounced in my head, too --”

The archer interrupts. “You are insinuating that Talon could have had a sleeper influence within Overwatch since before its fall. Since before you left. What does that insinuate about the organization today? Right now?”

"The recall’s a hero thing, Hanzo, it's a matter of people wantin' to do the right thing --"

"No." Hanzo searches the gunslinger’s features. “I am exhausted of heroics. If what you believe is true, how could either of us trust a single person here?”

Jesse looks him dead in the eye and says, “I trust you.”

Hanzo closes his eyes through another ache. “Jesse.”

“I trust you, Hanzo,” he continues, approaching slow, hands at his hips. “You’re my partner. I ain’t goin’ at this alone.”

“I have not left you alone. I am still here.”
Jesse’s voice hitches. “You know what I’m talkin’ bout. I can’t go back to that.”

“Back to what?”

“Back to bein’ the way it was before, when you and I didn’t mean nothing to each other. I don’t work that way, Hanzo, I can’t turn it on and off like a faucet. I need you on my side.”

“I am on your side.” Internally warmed by a wave of yearning: he needs me.

"Then take me with you."

"Jesse --"

“Please,” Jesse bleats, drawing close, looming. A heavy, broad presence in a brown shirt, all smoke and spice and comfort. “Don’t be like this with me, sweetheart. You’re like to break my heart.”

Hanzo stiffens. The plea simultaneously rakes and thrills him. His traitorous body yields where his words cannot.

“You promised me, Hanzo,” he whispers in Hanzo’s ear, beard bristling his cheek. Rough, like his kiss. “Someday, when this is all over.”

He remembers the gray bathroom at the spaceport in Veracruz. The way they came together beneath cold halogen lights, weary yet desperate, suddenly starved for each other. A novel exhilaration unlike anything he had felt before, jolting him to the core. They could have made love right then and there, the passionate and careless kind, like something out of a television series or a holovid. A sentiment that nearly makes him laugh: McCree the gunslinger, who calls Shimada the assassin the moon in his sky. As if the symbolism is lost on him that Jesse is an irresistible force of nature endemic to the baking desert sun.

“It ain’t over yet,” Jesse says, pulling him close.

And then it hits him. He has never wanted anything so much as this: to be less than Hanzo Shimada or any alias, any killer or a warrior or learned old master. Not a lord nor a leader nor an archer. No heroics, no dragons. He slackens in Jesse’s arms, digs his fingers into his shirt, and lets go.

Just a man, in the arms of a fool. His fool. Mine. A four-letter word for --

“Intruder alert!”

It’s Athena. The Watchpoint’s industrial floodlights flash around them. Sirens blare across the drone track, a droning woop woop.

They break apart into a defensive brace; Hanzo draws and nocks an arrow as Jesse unholsters his gun. The computer’s voice shocks the comm, terse with synthetic alarm.

“Intruder alert!” she repeats. “I’m detecting a proximity breach! Twenty-one armed unidentified intruders have entered the Watchpoint!”

Jesse growls, baring white teeth. “You gotta be kiddin’ me.”

“Talon?” Hanzo asks.

“The ‘twenty-one gun salute,’” Jesse replies. “Old Blackwatch code. That many agents is a kill squad. This ain’t gonna be pretty.”
Winston speaks on the line. “Medbay and labs are going into lockdown. All personnel, either get to a secure location or get your weapons!”

“They’re moving in from the launch gantry and the main tunnel entrance,” Athena rushes. “Drones are detecting both squads of intruders are starting to split up. Dormitories are locking down now.”

“Medbay secure!” Angela’s cool voice rings out next. She sounds surprisingly unperturbed. “I am suiting up!”

One by one, the agents of Overwatch successively chime in: Mei-Ling, Lena, Hana, Lúcio, Genji, Tracer, and Torbjorn. Reinhardt booms over everyone.

“NOT IN MY HOUSE,” he bellows above the sound of scraping metal. “BRIGITTE! TO ARMS!”

Hanzo readies to run. “We have the defensive advantage. I will scout from the upper levels.”

McCree is itching to move. “Copy that. I’m goin’ around the hangar. Cover me if you get up there first.”

They split and take off. The archer scales the comm tower and darts along the walkway. He leaps between the rock and metal walls until he can swing up to the high hangar rafters. In between whoops of the alarm, he detects the sound of footfalls. Just as Athena warned: a cluster of five Talon agents in black tactical gear are creeping fast along the track.

He flicks the head of his nocked arrow to the Sonic setting, aims, draws, and fires into the heart of the group. The arrow hits an agent in the neck. He drops.

“Up there!” one of them yells. Hanzo darts down the rafter with pulse fire rattling at his heels. A single bound brings him to the metal railing of a scaffold, where he redraws and shoots again.

To his dismay, the agent with the arrow in his neck slowly gets back on his feet.

Three more shots fly off amid blasts of rifle fire. Hanzo flits from wall to wall. What the Talon agents lack in accuracy, they make up for in durability. Arrow shafts stick out of their gear like porcupine quills, but they persist.

They must be wearing shields, he thinks, just before one of them unstraps and aims a wide taser.

He cannot dodge it fast enough. White-hot electric pain shoots up Hanzo’s shoulders when the probes hit. He slips, falls, and narrowly avoids crashing into a pile of storage crates. Shaking, he wrenches off the probes and flings the wire away; Hanzo swings Storm Bow into an oncoming agent and sends him flying. This time, the agent goes limp on the floor.

Damn! There’s still four targets left and the taser shot has him grounded. Hanzo shoves himself up, but his knees lock. He ducks down at the sound of their boots rushing across the concrete.

There’s no time. Where is McCree?

He’s prepared to lunge out with his bow again when a high-pitched hum fills the hangar.

“Left side, left side!” someone cries. “She’s got a gun!”

“GET DOWN!” shouts another.

Boom! Hanzo’s eyes go wide at the bright blue blast. The agents fly across the hangar, battering into the walls like ragdolls. The smoke clears to a faint azure haze.
Vaswani is there in a flash of cyan and white. Right arm extended, helping him to his feet.

“Are you injured?” she asks.

“No,” he replies hastily. And then, “took a shot from a taser, but I will be fine.”

Satya looks him over with a cursory glance. She’s wearing the same gown from the day he saw her in the server room. In her right hand is a smooth white gun with a barrel split like the petals of a flower. A luminous disc at its center shines like a sapphire. The strangest firearm Hanzo has ever seen.

Dully he realizes it, and thus Vaswani, may have just saved his life.

“My analysis confirms this is most likely a Talon attack,” she says quickly. “Athena predicts they are here to infiltrate, terminate, and strip her mainframes. Mei-Ling and Tracer are in the laboratories keeping her server rooms secure. Winston and Lúcio are assisting them by locking down the underground exits.” Satya peers at him with urgent gold eyes. “According to Athena’s simulations, you are the strongest defensive coordinator. I heed your judgment. Give the directive and I will take your lead.”

A strange feeling grips his guts when he hears the gravity in her voice. The unspoken sentiment: we are on the same team.

“Find McCree,” he commands. “Get him to assist Winston and Lúcio underground. Run defensive maneuvers around entrances and exits. Keep Talon from getting inside. If they are here to infiltrate, we have the advantage of familiar terrain.”

“I will do so.” She frowns. “Another concern: pending that this is Talon, there is possibility of aerial attacks or reinforcement by air.”

“Torbjorn’s turret system,” says Hanzo. “It has been upgraded since the recall. It should be able to take down small aircraft. I will alert him.”

“Acknowledged.”

He breaks into a loping run. “Be mindful of explosives!”

“Wait!”

A flat white disc skids past Hanzo’s synthetic soles. He picks it up and looks over his shoulder. Satya is backing away.

“Photon shield,” she says. “It will adhere automatically after you activate it. Use it wisely.”

“Thank you,” he offers weakly, watching her disappear down the metal corridor.

Tracer sounds on the comm as Hanzo climbs back into the rafters. “What’s the status on Gibraltan defense force assistance? We could sure use some outside help here!”

“No response!” Angela replies. Hanzo can hear the Caduceus chiming in the background. “D.Va and I need backup by the launch gantry! They’ve taken the drone and started it up the track!”

“Hey!” Winston barks on the line. “That’s my drone! What the hell are they doing with it?”

“I AM ON MY WAY!” howls Reinhardt. Hanzo catches a glimpse of the knight as he storms out of sight down the track.
“Torbjorn!” Hanzo calls as he scales an outdoor scaffolding. “Are the turret systems online?”

“Hot an’ ready!” the engineer replies.

The night wind whips at Hanzo’s scarf as he scans the horizon. Two oil tankers drift lazily down the lane; their signal lights glitter on the black stretch of the inlet. The lighthouse spins, a calm antithesis to the gunfire crackling down the track. No movement in the sky, not even the star-like twinkling of distant aircraft.

“Keep them primed for an aerial assault,” Hanzo continues on the comm. “We may see Talon reinforcements via air. Unmarked helicopters and hoverjets need to be taken down.”

“Copy that!” Torbjorn affirms.

A shout snaps his attention back to the drone track. Here comes Reinhardt, tearing back the opposite direction. The drone -- an elongated craft with silver metal fins -- pursues him. Hanzo crouches for a better look, readying an arrow.

But Reinhardt is not retreating; he’s dragging the drone down the track with his bare hands. With a heave, he chucks it into the hangar -- or, more precisely, at the Talon squad that now charges at him through the bay door. Two of them fall instantly, crushed. The other three avoid the crunch of impact and open fire. Reinhardt throws up his glowing shield, raises his hammer, and swings at them with a brutal roar.

Just as Hanzo fires a Scatter Arrow to assist the knight, a blur of movement catches the corner of his eye. He turns in the direction of Torbjorn’s shop. Talon agents crash across the box garden like a stream of black ants.

“Reinhardt! There are more behind you!” he barks over the comm.

Then he hears it: cock-a-doodle-doo!

A wild commotion shoots up from the chicken coop as automatic fire crackles off, pop-pop-pow. Hanzo can’t believe what he’s seeing: the mechanical rooster activates, lifts into the air, spreads its wings and starts firing on the Talon agents. An array of miniature turret guns pop out of panels in its chest, mouth, and feet. The onslaught distracts both the attackers and Reinhardt long enough for Hana in her pink MEKA to round the corner, thump down the track, and blast down the line.

In moments, the Talon agents lie dead and smoking across the track.

“Good job, buddy!” Hana calls to the rooster, waving from her cockpit.

Hanzo drops down to the track. Over the comm, Mercy grimly declares that they may have to handle this without any help. McCree reports that he and Satya are using her turrets to herd ten agents up from the mess hall in hopes of trapping them into the open.

“What’s our plan?” Hana asks, yanking her control gears. “What do we do now?”

“Die,” gasps a horrid voice behind them, as all hell breaks loose.

It happens so fast. The night comes alive and engulfs the track; a tornadic black whirl of smoke and acrid ash envelops them from nowhere and everywhere at once. Hanzo bolts and dives. Knife-like bursts of pain bounce over his limbs as he darts away, pelting after him like hail from a storm.

Through the din, he remembers Vaswani’s shield. The disc flares bright blue when he activates it,
bubbling him in a cool neon glow. He leaps free of the blooming miasma, bounds up the wall, and crouches in an outcropping while scrabbling for another arrow.

Then he sees the blood. Three splotches along his arm, black like charcoal smudges. A pointillism of tiny pellets nestled in each red center. Shotgun spray.

“The Reaper is here!” Hana yells shrill over the comm. “Reinhardt’s down! I need backup, my MEKA can’t take this!”

Panic grips Hanzo like a vice. The wraith batters down on her pink drone with point-blank blasts to the cockpit shield. Hana guns him hard in return, but the whirlwind threatens to swallow her whole.

“Eject!” bellows Hanzo. “Hana! Now!”

A flash of sea-green light slices through the black storm. The MEKA lurches and whirrs. Hana shoots out of the cockpit and into the air, a pink firework. Hanzo looks away just before the explosion, bracing the rock through the thundering quake.

When the smoke clears, the Reaper and the MEKA are gone. Chunks of the drone’s pink shell lie around a grotesque black spot scorched on the asphalt. Hanzo props himself up. He catches sight of movement on the comm tower: Zenyatta and Genji are perched on the ledge with Hana wedged between them, arms clutched around their shoulders. One of them must have caught her mid-air.

“Is he down?” she comms.

“I do not see him,” Genji confirms.

“I’m having difficulty tracking Reaper’s signature,” Athena chimes in. “My sensors do not detect his pattern overlay, but I cannot confirm that he was destroyed.”

McCree clamors in, grim as a graveyard. “Then he’s still here. Vaswani can handle these bad guys. I got a score to settle.”

“I will assist you,” Hanzo grits out, preparing to climb down.

“No!” It’s Mercy. “Don’t you dare! Hanzo, McCree” -- her voice resonates with anger -- “where are you, report your location! Do not go after him without support!”

Hanzo remembers the medbay and her confession -- her chilly plea and cold attempt to bargain for redemption. Anger lashes in his chest; would she really do this? Would she demand compassion even now, in the face of a blatant attack?

He sees Zenyatta floating Hana down the comm tower and decides in a flash: I do not care.

“He has attacked us first, Mercy,” Hanzo replies. “Here, on our grounds. There is no redemption for this.”

Before anyone can argue further, Reinhardt grits out: “Angela.”

Further down the track, Reinhardt pushes up to one knee. The knight must have gotten away before the explosion. Even so, he looks bad. His armor is battered and blackened; he leans on his hammer to stand.

Then he slumps and keels forward. His helmet droops like a heavy crown.

“Verdammt!” Her Valkyrie wings come into view, cutting through the night like gold blades. She
lands beside Reinhardt on the track, folding down and activating the beam of her staff. “Reinhardt is injured! I need to get him someplace safe. Hanzo, McCree, I know you can still hear me -- do not go after the Reaper alone -- do not -- now is not the time --”

**Boom!** Another quake rattles the outcropping. Hanzo lurches; he regains his balance just in time to witness a wide red wave streaking out of the main laboratory exit. The night brightens with crimson radiance and a hellish scream.

A red Shimada dragon explodes out of the rock. It’s lithe and thin with bulbous eyes, more sickly worm than reptile. Hanzo’s heart hitches into his throat; he has not seen a beast that was not his or his brother’s in years.

He spots something thrashing in the celestial creature’s jaws, a vibrant neon prey. It’s Lúcio. He’s encased in some kind of barrier -- glowing an unnatural chartreuse-yellow -- a shield produced by his Crossfade suit. And, to Hanzo’s awe, he’s fighting the dragon as hard as he can. They writhe and roll down the track, the dragon gnashing, the medic blatting subsonic beats down its throat.

It almost looks like he’s trying to swing free of its teeth and ride it.

“IIIII N-N-NEEEEED B-B-BAAACK-UUUP!” he yells, his voice jittering through the comm. He’s hammering the pulse of his amplifier as fast as it will fire. “GEN-N-N-N-JIII!”

“Hang on!” The cyborg darts down in a viridian flash. Now green collides with the red; fangs meet fangs as Genji’s dragon screams to life. The beasts tumble, roll, and disappear into the soil. Lúcio skids heels-over-head down the tarmac. He rolls to a halt, scrabbles up, and claps one hand over his open ear. Struggling for his bearings and stumbling on his skates. His amplifier clicks and shoots an empty cartridge across the track.

Then he exuberantly throws his fists in the air.

“WHOO!” he yells, borderline hoarse. “Did you see that? Did you see that” -- he points at the spot where the dragons vanished -- “it tried to eat me! It TRIED!” He breaks into a victory dance. “TOO FAST! TOO FAST! LÚCIO, NUMBER ONE --”

Abruptly the dragons erupt behind him, barreling up out of the earth a few feet behind him. Lúcio bolts with a screech. Hanzo watches the dragons soar upward and then arc out over the open water, entwined in combat, snarling like ruthless gusts of wind.

The red dragon vanishes. Genji lands and sheathes his sword. Satya emerges from the lab exit where dragon came forth; she hauls a single dead Talon agent by the collar of his tactical vest. She chucks his body to the tarmac and faces the floodlights. Stoic as a statue.

“All twenty-one agents have been neutralized,” Athena says over the comm.

Hanzo scans the horizon. No helicopters, no planes. A few black clouds streak the empty sky. Below, Mercy and Lúcio are trying to get Reinhardt safely underground.

It isn’t over. The Reaper: was he destroyed? Could the MEKA self-destruct wipe him out whereas the two Shimada dragons and Soldier: 76 could not?

Two reports of gunfire catch his ear. Then, a distant shout: it’s McCree.

No hesitation. Hanzo hits the ground and takes off down the track. Angela calls out on the comm, but he keeps running; he dares not stop. The sound of Jesse’s voice reminds him what will happen if he does not get there as quick as possible.
He ascends a high wall to get a better vantage point. Just around the track looms the overhang of the medbay. Hanzo sneaks along the wall and slips behind a stone lip eclipsing the bay door. He peeks over the lip at the sound of another yell.

There they are in the distance: the wraith and the gunslinger, locked in the last blows of a duel. Bullets have blown apart the medbay’s wide glass panels; glass sparkles in white shards across the ground. Hanzo judges that the Reaper is wounded from the way he moves, erratically half-drifting as his cowl and cloak flap around him in shreds. Four rapid reports go off as Jesse fans the hammer into Reaper’s chest. Reaper drops his shotguns after a sloppy attempt to club them over Jesse’s head. Jesse cracks a flashbang with a pop! The Reaper’s shriek is like nails dragging down steel.

Hanzo readies a shot and takes aim just as Jesse lifts his gun, brings it down, and strikes the bone mask from the Reaper’s face.

It clatters to the track as the Reaper laughs.

Jesse takes a step back, then another. And then a third. He lowers his gun; Hanzo thinks for a moment that he will drop it.

What does he see?

“Talon One,” Hanzo hears the Reaper says as he lifts a clawed hand to cover his face. “Call in the strike.”

In a gust of black wind, he’s gone.

He gets to the gunslinger just before his knees hit the ground. Hanzo grabs him, hauls him up, urges him to his feet. Jesse jostles in his grasp. He stares blankly at the space by the medbay where the wraith stood.

“I saw,” Jesse gasps. “I saw it.”

“What did you see?”

“His face.” Jesse stumbles against Hanzo with leaden feet. He’s not injured -- not physically, at least. “What they did to him.”

“We have to get inside,” Hanzo presses. “We have to get the others and get indoors.”

“Hanzo,” Jesse wails. As if finally registering who has picked up off the ground. “God help me, Hanzo. Did you see it?”

“No!” Panic sets in again; Hanzo tugs sharply on Jesse’s shoulder. “We must move! We need to regroup! The Watchpoint is still at risk!”

Silently Jesse turns. He grips Hanzo’s arms. His sweaty face is blank and empty, an expression hollowed out by despair.

Hanzo can only wonder with dread: what did he see?

A humming whine floods the air. Angry shouts bloom to life over the comm as Torbjorn rattles off a warning: aircraft inbound. He’s spotted a single helicopter, which Hanzo can see over the cliffside as they hurry up the track. Mercy reports back that she’s taking Reinhardt inside and underground.
The strike, Hanzo thinks, his throat going dry.

Clank. Clank. An industrial screech rings out as the turret motors rumble to life. The mighty guns menacingly spin as their muzzles lift to take aim.

Hanzo sees a cluster of figures a hundred meters up the track: Hana, Genji, Satya, Lúcio. They’re assisting Winston as he pulls the drone out of the hangar. Zenyatta floats nearby, incongruously serene.

“It’s an autopilot craft,” Torbjorn yelps. “It’s comin’ in too fast!”

“It’s heading towards the labs!” McCree says.

The turrets fire a booming round, but the helicopter persists. Torbjorn snarls, “too fast!”

McCree grimaces. “They’re gonna hit the damn comm tower!”

The hum grows to a full-blown whine. Hanzo watches the helicopter ascend, turn, and start to dive.

No, Hanzo thinks through the advent of a cold, shrill fear. It’s going to hit the track!

Beside him, McCree breaks into a sprint. He sees it too. “Y’ALL GET AWAY!”

Hana lifts her head. She sees Hanzo and Jesse loping their way. Then she looks up and gasps.

For Hanzo, everything slows to a surreal, haunting blur. The track, the drone, the shapes of his comrades. He watches them register what is about to happen -- his brother, his pupil, his friends -- as the helicopter clips over the comm tower. Nose down, blades fanning, a glistening black behemoth. Plummeting in a dive for the agents clustered on the track.

“GET AWAY!” Hanzo cries as a burst of light blinds out the floodlights.

The helicopter crashes and the whole hangar wall explodes.

They drop, cover their heads, and grit through the blast. Heat sweeps them in a scalding wave. An electrifying helplessness grips Hanzo as he pushes up from the ground; the fireball gulps out to reveal a lopsided hole blown in the side of the cliff. Black funnels of smoke steadily churn from its jagged edge. Debris litters the track. He can make out the shape of the helicopter’s tail sticking up from the track, crumpled like the peel off a discarded shrimp.

Dead, he thinks as he scrabbles to his feet. Dead, dead. They are all dead.

He breaks into a run. Smoke stings his eyes and lungs, but he does not stop. Not even when he slices his synthetic sole open on a metal edge, nor when he stumbles over a chunk of smoldering stone.

Dead, he tells himself, spiraling into despair. No one could survive this. No one.

“Jesse,” he cries over his shoulder. “Jesse! Help me!”

The gunslinger gets to his feet. He stares at the wreckage in blank, abject horror.

A voice rattles on the comm. It’s Mercy. “Status! I-I need a status! What’s happened?”

How can he tell her? How can he say it out loud?

“The helicopter,” Hanzo says. He hears himself speaking as if he is standing far away, deafened by walls and voids in-between. “There was a strike --”

He stops. He sees it. There, amid the wreckage: egg-shaped, cyan-blue, gently glowing. Eerily translucent, wavering and humming in the smoky night. Like a beacon.

Hanzo drops to a knee. He cries out.

A teleporter.

Somewhere between Jesse rushing to his side and Torbjorn hollering on the comms, he hears them. The gorilla’s rumbling bass, his brother’s startled tenor, the silvery little soprano bouncing over and over in dismay. Their voices tumble over the lines like a discordant symphony -- what happened? where are we? -- all in tones of panic and surprise. Wherever they are, they are all safe.

“We need a medic!” Hana wails. “We need a medic now!”

“We are you?” Mercy pleads. “Where? What happened?”

“Athena’s server room!” Winston bellows. “Satya pulled us through a teleporter, we’re all here, we’re safe!”

“It’s her arm!” Hana again, completely distraught. “Dr. Ziegler, please hurry! She -- she did something to her arm when she pulled us through! I-I think she overloaded it! Please, come help!”

Hanzo grips the gunslinger and rises to stand. Jesse coughs; the smoke is clearing, but the air still stings.

No words. No quips, no jests, no flat one-liners. They clutch each other and stare at the teleporter in silent shock.

The pearly oval gleams through the wreckage, a two-dimensional slash of hope.

---

Morning comes as they survey the aftermath. The early winter sun illuminates the damage with a hard, gray light -- a stark reality of how lucky they are to all be alive. A grisly black hole gapes from the rock around the hangar where the helicopter crashed. Genji and Zenyatta assist Winston and Torbjorn as they try to clear the track. Mei-Ling and Brigitte take stock of damage around the laboratories while Tracer handles a barrage of holo-calls from the UN and local defense forces. Reinhardt dozes in the main patient hold; he’s expected to make a full recovery.

He figures out which bay houses Vaswani when he makes his rounds to check on the medbay. Hana and Lúcio sit outside her partition like a pair of guards, watching the news reports on their phones while she sleeps. Both are physically fine save for the latter, whose musical dragon-wrestling earned a mild case of tinnitus.

“It was the teleporter,” he says when Hanzo inquires after the archi-tech. “She had to overload it to get us all through, and it messed up the accelerator in her arm. She’s stable, but the whole thing is shot.”

“Can it be fixed?” Hanzo asks.
“We’ll find out.” Lúcio shrugs. He sits hunched over, hanging his head, gnawing on his lower lip. Anxious. “Dr. Ziegler’s gonna do surgery soon. I’ll see what I can do after.”

Hana is equally solemn. “She saved our lives. If it weren’t for her, we’d all be dead. We have to do whatever we can to try and fix it.”

Lúcio looks over his shoulder at the partition. He mutters just low enough for Hanzo to hear: “we will. Don’t worry.”

Hanzo leaves the medbay to look for McCree. His limbs still ache from the taser and shotgun blasts. More discomforting is the hollow malaise that settles in his chest; a perturbing anxiety with an accompaniment of sheer exhaustion. Hypervigilance, Mercy explained it as she bandaged his injured foot. Everyone will have it for a few days. He couldn’t be sure (for he was tired, and she was harried) but he thinks she sounded even colder than before. Stick with the others, please. We all need to stay close.

Hanzo walks back to the dorms. The gunslinger slipped out of medbay around dawn, begging off to shower and change into clean clothes. Hanzo can think of nothing more splendid than doing both of these things himself. Maybe dropping to the futon with Jesse afterward to sleep or lie still, a chance to complete their reconciliation. An hour of comforting rest in the solace of privacy.

A moment, he thinks dully as he slides open the door. That is exactly what he needs right now -- all other necessities be damned -- and perhaps what Jesse requires too. Getting my moment.

The room is empty.

Hanzo pads in and looks around. The lavatory door is open, lights off, faucets silent. The covers lie flat over the futon, pulled neat and tight. No indentions in the fabric or pillows, no discarded clothes, no mess. No evidence of McCree’s casual, good-natured slovenliness.

He freezes. No holster belts hanging on the wall hook, either -- no chestplate, serape, or hat on the dresser. Hanzo opens and slams drawers and closet doors; all of Peacekeeper’s spare ammo is gone, too.

Hanzo taps his comm and murmurs the agent code 3945_45. “McCree?”

Silence.

He leans into the hallway, listening for signs of life. A brisk check confirms that the halls and laundry room are clear. Hanzo does a quick lap around the dormitory building. Nothing.


More silence. Not even static.

“Jesse,” Hanzo barks into the comm. “Jesse. Where are you?”

This time, Athena replies.

“Agent McCree has turned off his comm,” she says. “His status was set to ‘do not disturb.’ Is there something I can assist you with, Agent Hanzo?”

“Where is he?” asks Hanzo, bewildered. Trying not to panic. “Where did you last see him?”
“My last recorded location of his comm device is in dorm room 107.”

Hanzo bolts down the hall. He mashes the controls for the familiar door and greets another empty room. Spartan, unoccupied, swathed in a layer of dust. An orange plastic trunk sits by the dresser.

His old room, before Siberia and Jesse. Before everything.

A spot of yellow catches his eye. He drops to the rubber mat by the bunk and unwraps a yellow post-it note. McCree’s comm rolls into his palm; the sensor light is dark. Hanzo unfolds the post-it note and reads it in one glance.

He lowers it to the floor. Hanzo sits back on his heels. He stares blankly at the bunk for a long time.

“Agent Hanzo?” asks Athena, breaking the silence.

Hanzo says nothing. He reads the note again.

“Agent Hanzo.” She presses. “Do you have a status on Agent McCree?”

He gets up, gathers his bearings, and pockets the comm and the note. His hand clenches to a fist.

“I did,” he rasps. “He has left.”

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Natalie, Sylphy, Entropy, Vita and my sensitivity readers for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- Big thank you to the Brazilian reader (I need to get your name off anon!!) who suggested the cat names Lucio might pick (e.g., Chuchu and Frajola).
- References: The proverb, Silkie chickens, Kavalan whisky, The joke behind Torb's rooster.
- For those concerned that the last chapters might be an angst-bomb, I'd like to offer a reassurance that I don't enjoy writing angst just for angst's sake, but I also feel the same way with fluff. You gotta have a bit of both, in my mind.
- Another reminder: I don't do unhappy endings/endings where the ship doesn't get together.
- There is a lot of continuity between HtF’s Hanzo and the young Hanzo in Koi No Yokan by franklytriggering. Shouts out to Brian for working with me and linking up the two stories to weave a cool tale.

HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a masterpost here that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me
privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

- Getting close to the end here!! Thank you all once again for continuing to read! So glad that so many of you are still with me here as it draws to a close.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

尻切れとんぼ

*shiri-kire tonbo* - “a dragonfly with its tail cut off”

A proverb for a story left off without an ending, or unfinished business.

---

“Gone?”

Bewildered, they face him -- a hastily-called meeting of Mercy, Winston, Genji, Tracer and Torbjorn -- from around the briefing room table. Hanzo does not sit; he is too agitated to do anything but stand. He palms the edge of the table and stares at its surface as if a solution might be found there.

“He took his gear and weapons, turned off his comm. No phone, no sensors. Athena estimates he snuck out through the tunnel entrance around five in the morning.”

“Do we know where he was headed?” Winston asks.

“No,” Hanzo answers. “He left a personal message with an assurance that he was willingly taking his leave.”

“What did the message say?” asks Torbjorn.

Hanzo shoots him a sharp, chilly glance. “It was personal.”

“So?” Torbjorn grunts. “What’s that got to do with anything? This’s a matter of security --”

“He said it’s personal,” Tracer cuts in. “He doesn’t have to read it out loud or anything.” She looks up at Hanzo. “Has it got to do with the Talon attack?”

“Yes,” Hanzo continues, resisting the urge to glower at Torbjorn. “The note infers he left with the intention to find answers, specifically about Reyes and the connections to Blackwatch and Talon.”

Winston grumbles. “I’m not sure why he felt like he had to leave for that. We’ve been gathering information about Talon and their movements since the King’s Row mission. Athena’s been parsing the Blackwatch archive ever since it decrypted, too. With his experience, we could’ve gone through it and tried to --”

“Time,” Hanzo interrupts again. “The note says that he could no longer sit around and wait for the next bad thing to happen. He was taking matters into his own hands to keep the rest of us safe.”
Torbjorn slumps in his chair with a sigh. Winston looks gloomily at his keypad. Genji, who has said little so far, peers at his brother before turning back to the table.

Mercy brushes a lock of hair from her forehead. “This seems a little familiar,” she says, breaking the silence. “Not to call it deja vu, but I’m sure I don’t need to remind you all of the last time this happened.”

Hanzo narrows his eyes. “What do you mean?”

“Before,” she answers, avoiding his stare. “When McCree was part of Blackwatch, he left very abruptly. He disappeared overnight and went underground. No one could trace him.”

“A repetition of the situation at hand,” Hanzo mutters, thinking back to the duel in front of the medbay. “Reyes’ actions forcing his hand. Driving him away.”

Torbjorn rocks in his chair. “Eh?”

Lena squints. “Drove him away?”

A knot of irritation rises in Hanzo’s throat as he processes their surprise. “That is why he left the first time. Because of what was happening in Blackwatch. Because of Reyes’ failing grip on humanity, it drove him away.”

The agents exchange glances.

“If that’s what he said, I guess,” Lena says hesitantly. She glances around the table. “I mean, I heard from Jack that it was a real shock when McCree left. Gabriel got upset over it, took it real personal.”

“Uh, I thought he left because he wanted to go hunt down bad guys,” Winston says, drumming his fingertips awkwardly on the table edge. “Everyone in my department told me he bailed to go be a bounty hunter.”

“He told us at the hotel in Lijiang that he left because of unfinished business,” Genji chimes in, exchanging nods with Tracer. “I thought it had to do with the Deadlock Gang.”

“Nobody told me anythin’!” Torbjorn bursts out. “Never heard so much as a fart on th’ wind! All I know is he was here one day, gone the next!” He drums his fists on the table. “That’s the problem, same as it was back in the old days! Ya never knew what was goin’ on! Owls in the bog, and no one has a stinkin’ clue!”

“Bitte, Torbjorn,” Angela cuts in. “Now is not the time.”

“Never goin’ to be, either! Not one of you understands what a mess it really was, back then, compared to my day. The ranks got so fulla misfits an’ malingerers --”

“Torb!” Tracer warbles, sharper than Angela. “For pity’s sake, lay off!”

“Lay off!” The engineer drums his fist into the table. “That’s what happened! Layoffs! An’ it’ll happen again! The UN’ll be beatin’ down the door about this in no time!”

Silence. Shifting glances pass around the table. Irritation swells to anger in Hanzo’s chest, like a wave.

“We need a course of action,” Tracer finally pipes up. “We just had the worst attack since Geneva.
Talon’s never been so bold as they are now. Running off like this puts him in a world of danger. On top of that, the UN’s going to want to know the status of a guy with a price on his head so big it could buy land on the bloody moon.” She catches herself, winces, glances apologetically at Winston. “Er. Sorry, big guy.”

The gorilla adjusts his glasses with a sigh. “No worries.”

“We should consider the value of trying to bring him back,” Genji states firmly. “With Talon choosing to take Overwatch head-on, the best fight is to be had right here, where his expertise is needed.”

“Far easier said than done,” laments Angela. “We’d have to find him first. You all know Jesse’s speciality is staying on the move.” She points at the wall-clock. “Given how long since he left, he could be anywhere by now.”

“Or anyone, for that matter,” Lena adds. “With an alias or a disguise.”

Winston scratches his brow. “Even if we found him, there’s the issue of getting him back without trouble. Outside of Overwatch, McCree’s a wanted man. The UN agreed to consider wiping his bounty, but if they hear he’s taken off on his own, they might choose to censure him instead.”

“Anyone who goes after him could face the same,” growls Torbjorn. “It’ll be more than just a scoldin’. Almost seems like as big of a risk to chase him as it was for him to take off in th’ first place.”

“So what do we do?” Lena frowns. “Sitting back and doing nothing just doesn’t feel right.”

The archer feels Angela’s eyes before she speaks up. “Hanzo, at this point, you know him better than anyone else in this room. Surely you have a better insight to how we should handle this.”

Hanzo keeps his gaze on the table’s surface. “No.”

“You don’t?” She sounds perplexed.

Hanzo lets his glare speak for him. A sentiment he cannot bring himself to say aloud: I do not know.

Winston’s voice carries the gravity of a final decision. “Well, this is bad news, you all can see that much. But we don’t have a lot of bandwidth to send out a search party, especially not after someone like Jesse. If the UN asks about him, we’ll find a way to bluff for his absence -- but at this point, we don’t have much of a choice but to sit tight and consider his departure a loss. If we get a lead on his whereabouts, we’ll re-assess what to do.”

“A loss,” Mercy repeats. Slowly shaking her head. “After everything that’s happened.”

Winston looks up at Hanzo. “Can I ask you to monitor whatever communication lines Jesse might call back on? Your comm, your phone, anything like that?”

Wordlessly the archer turns to leave the room. Ignoring the rustle of voices calling out behind him as he slips away -- first the gorilla, then the engineer, the worried chirp from Tracer. He exits the building and maneuvers down the drone track with dismay buzzing in his throat.

Genji catches up with an electronic whirr. “Hanzo! Wait! Hold up for a second.”

He keeps walking. “What.”
The cyborg falls into step. “Before you go, we should talk about Hanamura. I can handle it myself. I’ll plan to head off when you get back with McCree, so that someone can keep an eye on things here.”

Hanzo lapses into Japanese. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Genji halts on the track. “What?”

Hanzo marches ahead, kicking aside bullet casings and empty pulse cartridges. “I am not going after McCree.”

“You -- aren’t?”

“No.”

“Then why did you leave just now?”

Brusquely: “because I want to go somewhere quiet, sit down, and clear my fucking head.”

Genji presses after him. “Winston wants someone to be on alert in case he reaches out. He seemed to think you were the best one to ask --”

“He isn’t going to reach out.”

“You don’t think so?”

“No.”

“No even to you?”

“No,” Hanzo snaps, finally boiling over. “He isn’t, don’t you see? There will be no message from him, no call. He doesn’t want anyone to know where he’s gone because he doesn’t intend to come back.”

“Eh, Hanzo,” Genji starts, voice tinged with concern.

“He knows no one can find him. You heard what they said back there. This is his speciality. I’ve seen him do it. Like a coyote” -- he sputters, hunting for a better word in Japanese -- “the clever fox.”

“Brother. C’mon.”

But Hanzo roars, relentless. “And at a time like this, too! When everyone is in danger! You were nearly killed, Genji, Hana too -- the whole of Overwatch. The whole damn base could have been wiped out from that Talon squad, and here he is, running off to be a fucking hero.” Hanzo swats his hand through the air, a damning slash. “So let him go!”

With that, Genji pulls back. He looks his brother up and down and slowly shakes his head.

“I’m sorry,” he says softly.

“Spare me,” Hanzo replies before turning back and picking up his stride.

He rounds the hangar fast, fuming. Genji does not follow; Hanzo doesn’t have to look back to know the encounter is over.
Gone, his soles tap out with each step. A staccato chatter of rising panic: he left, he’s gone, he abandoned me here. Hanzo bites back a grimace. He digs in the pouch on his obi until he feels the crinkle of the yellow post-it note.

Motion catches his eye. Up ahead, a flicker of red; his heart jolts with an irrational pulse of desperation. But then his vision adjusts. He sees someone moving on the track. Anger threatens to swallow him whole.

It’s just Zenyatta -- clad in gold with a crimson sash -- helping Brigitte carry debris away from the crash site. He hoists a large boulder and sets it down on a pile of other rocks, floating back to gather the shredded remains of a helicopter blade. Then the Omnic stops, notices the archer, and waves.

The gesture deflates Hanzo entirely, like a burst balloon.

It takes him a moment to register that he’s standing motionless and awkward on the broken pavement. Before Zenyatta can approach, Hanzo darts past the hangar and hurries away. No destination, no real direction -- just anywhere that is not the track, the crash site, the hole cratered in the Watchpoint wall. Instinct guides him to a concrete stairway that descends to an unlit stretch of underground corridor.

Range 2. The training room. Hanzo glances around as if he’s wandered into a place that’s potentially unsafe, by accident.

He turns on the console. Athena’s emblem spins to life on the viewscreen.

“Agent Hanzo,” she murmurs. “Thank you for checking in. How are you feeling?”

The question ignites his thoughts; a storm of anxieties swirl at the base of his mind. What does he feel? Why did he come here? He doesn’t want to practice; he cannot fathom turning off his mind and shooting right now. Shouldn’t he get to work assisting the others around the Watchpoint? Cleaning up debris, checking on areas damaged by the attack? Pitching in? Making himself useful?

“I am okay,” he says in the tone of someone who is anything but okay. “Thank you.”

Athena responds with an acknowledging flash. Hanzo pads to the shooting line, kneels, and stares up at the range. The training targets gaze back through dim unpowered eyes.

Then he sets the note before him. A sunny square of paper, lined and crumpled, scribbled with Jesse’s blocky print. The grim finale to the four scraps that Jesse left here for Hanzo to find earlier in the summer. A memory that makes his stomach lurch with a sudden, hollow ache.

“I lied,” he blurs out loud. “Before, when I first arrived -- when I borrowed his code to come practice here. He left messages asking if I needed supplies. I did not answer them at first, and when I did, I lied to him. I said I had to find a pen.” His brows furrow. “I had a pen. I could have answered him at any time.”

Athena makes no comment.

“The truth is,” he continues, “I did not know what to say. It was an action I did not expect. Nor did I know how it should be returned.”

“I would suggest a reciprocal gesture,” Athena offers gently. “Perhaps engage him in acquiring supplies at a future date, when he is in need of your assistance.”
Hanzo almost laughs at the absurdity, both his unexpected admission and her practical answer. “That is not what I mean.” And then, stifling a hoarse cough: “I did not trust him. I did not know him. I did not want to be beholden to a man I knew nothing about.”

Athena hums thoughtfully before she replies, “I see.”

“I would like to stay here for a while and clear my head,” says Hanzo, to the note, the computer -- to no one in particular and everyone at once. “Perhaps you could let anyone who inquires know that I am safe. If that is no trouble.”

“Of course, Agent Hanzo.”

“Thank you.”

He sits for an hour in silence, unable to meditate or clear his mind. No one calls or comes by. The A-shaped emblem glows sympathetically on the screen.

---

The holiday splendor is gone. At night, the agents gather in the mess hall for a safety check and a weak-spirited meal. Mei-Ling has repaired the snowflake decorations ruined during the attack, but black boot-prints still smudge the hallway floors. Cheery music streams from the radio over a stiff, quiet dinner; Lúcio does not sing along as he sets out plates of garlic ham and sliced fruit. No one has much stomach for mulled wine or gingerbread cookies. Hana attends wearing a red Santa hat; she occupies McCree’s spot between Hanzo and Genji at the table, mirthless.

Nobody brings up the gunslinger's absence. Hanzo notices a few cautious looks thrown his way. Everyone must know by now -- except for maybe Satya, who, according to Lúcio, is still sleeping off her surgery.

“Hana told me about Eastwood,” the audio-medic says after waylaying him outside in the mess hall. “How’re you holding up?”

“Well enough, thank you,” Hanzo replies, trying not to sound as weary as he feels.

“Yeah? You sure?” He bounces on his toes; Hanzo thinks he looks far too energetic for someone who hasn’t slept in forty-eight hours. “Er -- hey, can I call you ‘Hanzo’? I always thought, I dunno, because Eastwood used to call you ‘Shimada-san’, maybe you preferred --”

“Hanzo is fine,” he interjects.

“Cool. Anyway, I got your back. I know this has gotta be hard for you on top of what happened. You need to vent? Blow off steam?”

“No,” he says, withholding a bite of irritability. “Thank you, but I will manage.”

“Alright. Just checking.” He nods assertively. “Listen, I wanted to tell you -- I dunno who all you have in mind to help out, but whatever it is, I’m on board. I’m gonna have to help Satya get cleared to leave medbay, but if you give me a heads-up, I’ll do what I can to be ready to go.”

Hanzo squints in confusion. “Ready to go for what?”

Lúcio blinks. “Eastwood. McCree. Going out after him.” He scratches the back of his neck. “There’s no way we’re just gonna sit around here while he’s chasing down Talon, right?”
Hanzo has no answer. He watches Lúcio’s expression soften, fall, and then turn somber.

“Let me get this straight,” he says. And then, more statement than query: “you’re not going after
him.”

“Winston has requested we stay together in light of the attack,” explains Hanzo.

“Huh?” Lúcio squints, leans in, cups his hand over his ear. “Can you say that again? A little
louder?”

“I said, Winston has requested we stay together in light of --”

“Sorry, this ear is still ringing, I thought I misheard.” Lúcio laughs sardonically, waving his hand.
“I thought you had an excuse for why you weren’t going to get him back.”

Hanzo regards him flatly. “It is not an excuse. The situation with Talon has left us in a state of
critical alert. All hands are needed here.”

“Which means we need McCree,” Lúcio redoubles, folding his arms over his chest. “Now more
than ever. He knows what kinda guys we’re facing, he’s our expert on this kinda stuff.” With
renewed insistence. “And he needs us! You know he does, Hanzo, you know more than anyone
how hard this stuff is on him.”

The archer bites back a flash of irritation. “Not so hard that he chose to stay.”

Lúcio is about to retort when his comm sounds a musical beep. He thumbs the transmit button,
listens, responds with copy that. “Hey, I gotta get back to medbay. Satya just woke up.” He thrusts
his hands in his pockets. “I’m sorry for coming at you head-on with this, but” -- he shakes his head
-- “you need to know, it doesn’t sit right with me.”

“We do what we must,” Hanzo replies, turning, signaling his leave, itching to get away.

“I just really think you should reconsider,” Lúcio sighs. “Eastwood watched out for a lot of us. We
gotta watch out for him.”

Watch out, Hanzo thinks sullenly, remembering the creepy hacker at the museum. “Goodnight,
Lúcio.”

“See you later, Hanzo.” The audio-medic waves half-heartedly as he departs. “Feliz Natal.”

He turns over the conversation in his head as he slinks back to the dorms. A spray of mistletoe over
the building doorway catches his eye. The tenured members of Overwatch indulge in the spirit of
various winter holidays -- even McCree, who scorns religion and opts for commercial comforts
instead.

A memory returns: Jesse working on a crossword puzzle, musing over the cooler weather,
daydreaming about traditional wintertime foods. How he’d love to get his paws on some tamales
with hot coffee, or a type of pumpkin pastry with a Spanish name he cannot recall. Good food and
good people were the best parts of the whole damn season, he sighed, chewing on an unlit
cigarillo. The headquarters would turn out every year. All you had to do was throw a dart at a
calendar and see what holiday it landed on so we’d have a reason for a lil’ party. Hanzo educated
him on the Japanese tradition of white sponge cake and fried chicken on Christmas Eve, which the
gunslinger admitted to finding delightful. Sounds like my kinda meal, he sighed cheerily. Reckon
I’d like to try that this year, if you’d be willing.
Hanzo shakes his head. The ache returns and threatens to swallow him whole. He neglected to tell Jesse that the day is a special time for couples.

He slips into his old room and busies himself with the bedding, shaking off dust, straightening the sheets, looking around for a cloth to wipe off the pillow. Rote, familiar movements that he hopes will ease the rawness of settling in a habitat that has become foreign to him. It will be easier to sleep here tonight, where there is no remnant of the gunslinger’s presence.

Except for the orange trunk, which has four notebooks nearly filled. Hanzo makes the mistake of looking at it too many times. Torturing himself with the realization that they chronicle a man he may never see again.

By the time he’s ready to disrobe and climb in bed, he can no longer stand it. Hanzo gathers Storm Bow, treks back to McCree’s room, and thumbs the entry button. He steps through, locks the door behind him, faces the empty dorm.

Whose dorm is it now? Still theirs? Or just Jesse’s? Now that he’s gone: property of Overwatch?

He drops to the futon and buries his face in his pillow. If he rolls over just an inch, it’s there: the earthy sweetness of cigarillo smoke, pinewood tempered with a bucolic bite of mint. The scent of Jesse’s hair and skin, soaked into the pillowcase, radiating from his bedding, redolent in the dark. A fragrant, broad embrace in which he could drown.

“Goodnight,” he whispers, tucking into a ball, facing away from Jesse’s side of the futon. "Merry Christmas."

Silence. The chilly grey wall offers no reply. Hanzo digs his fingers into the sheets and shuts his eyes. Succumbing to exhaustion, abandoning restraint, giving in.

Bad sleep. No wisteria or talking birds. He wakes twice with a sore jaw, shuddering and cold, reaching out in the dark. Searching for purchase, finding nothing. Haunted by an imageless dream with a woman’s anxious voice:

Shimada-sama, could you check your messages? There might be an urgent call for you on the other line.

---

Captain Zaryanova arrives at the Watchpoint early Christmas morning. Mei-Ling meets her at the landing pad with a running leap. Zarya catches her; they spin arm-in-arm beside the hoverplane after a kiss and a burst of laughter. Hanzo hurries on his way to the mess hall to avoid seeing too much of their joyous reunion.

Genji meets him on the comm tower ledge with tea and nattō on toast. No mention of McCree; instead the sparrow brings up their rival kindred.

“Winston and I examined the body of the attacker that called the dragon,” he says. “His tattoo was complete. He’s probably been through all the clan trials. But, you remember: there was something bad about the dragon he summoned. It was distorted, like a snake with big eyes.”

“An impurity,” Hanzo says, agreeing over a bite of his food. “Like the message you received. The family must be getting into something that’s corrupting them.”

“It’s gotta be Talon,” Genji says. He flicks his scarf off his shoulder. “I just can’t figure out how.”

Hanzo grunts. He doesn’t want to think about the gunslinger after losing so much sleep, but the topic tugs at him. “I want to tell you something, but it has to stay between us.”
“Go ahead.”

“McCree told me that Talon could be capable of more than just terrorist threats. They might have the capacity to pull off mental reconditioning or body modification. Like a human chop-shop or something. I’ve been thinking about the corrupted dragon and wondering if it adds to the evidence.”

Genji lifts his head. “What evidence do you already have?”

“The sniper called the Widowmaker,” Hanzo says. “McCree said that Tracer had discovered she was once a civilian connected to Overwatch. It was a French name, a woman. Am-something. Ama-ni, Ama--”

“Amélie?” Genji confirms. “Really?”

“Yes. Did you know her?”

Genji looks out over the strait. “I remember her. She was married to a guy named Gerard. Angela knew her -- they were friends, actually. They both spoke French. I could ask her --”

“No.” Hanzo works his jaw. Of course the Swiss physician has more insight into this mess. “Don’t tell her anything about this. It has to stay between you and I.”

“Okay, okay. Keep talking.”

He sets down his mug of tea. “McCree said that Tracer is convinced this woman has been taken in and physically modified by Talon. Brainwashed. Turned into some kind of weapon or sleeper agent. If they’re capable of messing with civilians, imagine what they can do with Shimada.”

“Bad luck,” Genji mutters, shaking his head. “Guess that means we need to be prepared for some gruesome stuff.” He turns back to Hanzo. “Did McCree say anything else? Any other info we could use?”

Hanzo frowns. “He mentioned something about a song. In the theater during the attack, when we had the Shimada-gumi operative cornered, he told Jesse that his friends sent their regards. And then he started to sing a song. It set Jesse off.”

“How did the song go?”

“I don’t know,” Hanzo replies, mildly indignant. “It was in English. I’ve never heard it before. Something about saying goodnight, kissing you, holding you tight and missing you.”

Genji tilts his chin. “So, like a love song?”

“I don’t know!” Irritatedly Hanzo drags his hand down his jaw. “He made it sound like it could be old Blackwatch code. After the train heist, Jesse believed Talon had gone around and absorbed the remnants of his old team. It could be a reason why they targeted the Shimada-gumi, you know?”

“To teach them to sing love songs,” Genji snorts. Then he perks. “Hey! What about the hacker message you guys got at the museum, where the girl sang that creepy poem about dragons?”

Hanzo narrows his eyes, remembering. “‘A dragon for you, a dragon for me.’”

“‘Watch out, they’re coming for you,’” Genji recites. “‘Remember we thought it was just a threat? Maybe it could be a code, too. It was hard enough for Lúcio to figure it out.’”
“Maybe. Maybe not.” Hanzo sighs, sags, pinches the bridge of his nose. “If it is, I don’t know how to crack it. It’s enough to give me a fucking headache.”

“That’s probably Talon’s intention,” Genji muses. “Creepy stuff. Psychological stuff, intimidation. Subliminal threats, before a direct attack. Terrorism.” He regards his brother’s sullen silence with a sigh. “Hanzo, I know you’re upset, but I can see why McCree chose to leave.”

Dryly, Hanzo says, “can you?”

“This sort of stuff is scary,” he says. “It gets under your skin. And McCree’s probably been dealing with it for years longer than the rest of us. Since the recall, he told everyone he came back looking for answers.”

“And now he’s left to go find them,” Hanzo replies acidly. “Leaving the rest of us here to deal with the reality of the situation.”

Genji puffs. “Which is?”

Hanzo winces. “This whole thing is a mess. The recall, the missions, the attacks, everything. Sometimes it feels like Overwatch is shitting the bed before it even gets back on its feet.”

“Eh, I don’t think that’s the case.” Genji shrugs. “It’s not the same as it was before. Talon never had the balls to attack Overwatch head-on like this, they were never so brazen.”

“And why do you think that is? Take a look around you” -- he jerks his chin towards the comm tower -- “and ask yourself how much of this could have been avoided. What was necessary about attending that gala? About sneaking around the UN to help the Russians?” His tone darkens considerably. “The Vishkar Corporation! Blackmail! I told them it was a mistake from the very beginning!”

“Watch it, Hanzo,” warns Genji. “Because of Satya, I’m sitting here and talking to you today.”

Hanzo bites the end of his tongue. “Yes, but that doesn’t excuse the mess that brought her here.” He ticks off on his fingers. “Poor planning, poor execution. Zero communication. Jumping from one hazard to the next without any foresight.”

“It’s just different from what you know,” Genji persists. “We’ve said it a billion times: this isn’t the family.”

“No! It’s worse! Everyone here is afraid of their own fucking shadow! They wouldn’t know how to spot a rat if it snuck into their beds and bit them.”

“Hanzo --”

“I’m tired of all the enigmas,” he drills. “Don’t you ever wonder what happened? Don’t you get sick of it? Do you ever stop and wonder how you can trust anyone here?”

“I’ve fought beside them.” Now his brother’s voice hardens to steel. “And so have you, Hanzo. My blade has protected them as many times as they have shielded me.”

“That’s bullshit, Genji, this isn’t like one of Father’s stories. This is the real world! Real enemies, all around us! Talon, Shimada, Vishkar, and who knows what else!”

Genji says nothing. Then he reaches up to unlatch and lower his faceplate. Wisps of black hair pinch around his patchy temples. Brown scars stripe and mottle his cheeks all the way to the metal
bracket around his chin. He sets the grey visor on the ledge between them, the inside beveled smooth and shining, like a bowl.

“You’re anxious right now,” observes the sparrow. “Paranoid, like when we were young.”

“I am not.” Hanzo scowls. And then, bitterly, “and if I was, can you blame me?”

“You’ve seen what Overwatch stands for,” Genji charges. “The old members and the new. And even if you don’t trust what your own eyes show you, you trust me. My instincts have guided me in their midst for a long time.”

“In the midst of playing heroes,” Hanzo rasps distastefully. He grips his knees. “I’m not a hero. I don’t want to be one.”

Genji rounds on him. “Think about what are you doing here, Hanzo. Think about why you stayed. Would you really pick this side if you thought so poorly of it? Don’t” -- he holds up a hand when Hanzo tries to speak -- “say it’s just because of the debt to McCree. I don’t believe it anymore.”

“What is there to doubt?” Hanzo grumbles.

“He saved my life as well as yours,” Genji pushes back. “But you took it upon yourself to honor it. You never held me to repaying him.”

“Since when I have ever held you to repaying anything?” Hanzo scoffs, suddenly bristling. “Never, in all our lives.”

“You saved his life in Russia,” Genji presses, unrelenting. “The debt was paid then. But you stayed. You saved each other’s lives over and over again. One deed became a cycle. The cycle became part of your life.”

“It doesn’t matter now,” Hanzo growls. “He’s gone. It’s all forfeit.”

“And yet, you’re still here.”

Hanzo shuts his eyes and exhales before he says, “I don’t want to be.”

“No?”

“No, Genji, I don’t. I want to get out of here. I want to leave.”

“Leave.” Genji repeats. “And go where?”

“Does it matter?” Hanzo stresses. “So long as it’s off this rock.”

“You would be giving up this cause,” Genji peers hard at his brother. “You’d be giving up all these people who have relied on you. Who care for you.”

Hanzo flinches. “They do not --”

“Reinhardt, Lúcio, and Winston. Lena and Mei-Ling,” Genji jabs each name like the thrust of a knife. “Hana. McCree. You’re willing to walk away from them all?”

“I would still have you,” Hanzo wades through a tide of guilt. “The rest wouldn’t matter.”

Genji turns back to the cloudy horizon. His chest rises and falls with an robotic sigh.
“You are my brother,” he lips softly. “And from when I could first say your name, to the end, when you struck me down, I loved you. Sometimes I was a fool to you, when I went back on my word or did you wrong. But I still loved you, Hanzo. It was like a net. I used to think life could never be so bad, so long as my brother was on my side.

And then it happened. The most painful thing, after you killed me, was knowing you drew a line I could not cross. The surgeries were bad, my body was bad. But sometimes I would hear rumors that the family had taken you out, or that you’d disappeared and couldn’t be found. That was when it was really bad. I would get angry. I would wish I hadn’t survived, because why did you deserve peace after what you did to me? But it changed, after Nepal. I started to think about life differently. A clean death would have given us both a chance to be together again. In heaven or hell, wherever we belonged.

We’re different men now, but we’re both still alive. And it’s because of Overwatch that we are here right now. If you leave here, who knows what will happen? What side will you be on when I see you again?”

“It doesn’t have to be that way,” Hanzo blurts. “We can start over back home together. We can take back what belongs to us.”

“It does not belong to us.”

“Yes it does! Think about it.”

Genji regards him with weary brown eyes. Hanzo’s heart seizes when he realizes that thin creases of age now run parallel to the scars on his brother’s handsome face.

A long, cold pause. Eventually Genji picks up his faceplate and locks it back to his visor.

“I have thought about it before,” he says softly, rising to his feet. “But now is the wrong time, in the midst of this suffering.”

“Where are you going?”

“To meditate on this,” Genji replies. “You should, too. It’ll help clear your mind.”

“I don’t want a clear mind,” Hanzo pleads. “I want an answer. Will you consider it?”

“I will consider.” He bounds to a lower ledge. “And when I decide, I’ll let you know.”

Hanzo slumps against the comm tower wall, miring in discontent. He shreds his last piece of toast and flicks it to the gulls as he watches two white tankers chug up the ship channel. Down by the box garden, the silkie chickens chatter about their coop. He glances sidelong and catches a glimpse of Hana unlatching the gate and wandering into the run. She totes a plastic bucket of kitchen scraps; two of the fuzzy hens putter to her boots and start pecking at her toes. He hears her chiding them in Korean: wait your turn, assholes, everyone will get fed.

He gets back to the dorm, ducks to the dresser, yanks open one of the drawers. A colorful spray of cotton pops out; Hanzo unspools a messy wad of Jesse’s shirts and gathers them to his chest. The scent floods his nostrils, warm and rich like the gunslinger’s kiss.

It’s enough to drop him to his knees, yielding to heartache as it crests up over him. Stinging at the corners of his eyes, like salt water.

---
It takes him three days to visit Vaswani in the medbay. Not out of hesitation; Hanzo has scripted the encounter in his mind a thousand times so that he can get out exactly what he wishes to say. The delay is due to a second surgery -- this time a successful one -- to restore basic motor function to the archi-tech’s shattered arm.

She’s reading holo-charts off a tablet in bed when he arrives. Her black hair coils in a plait around her head, like a crown. Hanzo greets her at the partition with a tray of hōjicha. Satya accepts a cup, takes a sip, admits to finding the taste intriguing. Not her usual blend or variety, but a gesture for which she is grateful nonetheless.

They converse briefly, the placid exchange of two people who excel at feigning politeness. Prognosis on Satya’s arm is gloomy. Dr. Ziegler restored the muscle strands and sensors, but the hard-light accelerator is beyond repair. It must be fixed by a licensed Vishkar artificer, a task that will require travel back to Utopaea in India. She cannot do so; her director has suspended her position and credentials.

“I was charged with misconduct and insubordination,” she explains softly. “Overloading the teleporter and damaging my prosthetic constitutes two major violations of company protocol. Director Koppal says it was an unauthorized use of corporate technology.” Satya stares heavy-lidded into her cup. “My case is currently under appeal with a human resources panel.”

“Are they aware of the circumstances?” he asks, shocked by the news. Struggling to stick to his mental script. “We were under attack. Surely they realize the situation that you were in.”

“They do, but the violations still stand.” Satya takes a sip. Momentarily rallying. “I am confident the suspension is temporary. My curriculum and conduct records are pristine. I have never incurred so much as a warning during my tenure with Vishkar. It will speak in my defense.”

Hanzo taps his fingers against his cup. “Miss Vaswani, what speaks most in your defense are your actions. What you did was selfless.”

“I preserved five people who would have otherwise been detonated by an automated incendiary helicopter drone,” she answers. “Two persons, one gorilla, a cyborg, and an Omnic.”

“Your decision saved them in a moment of great peril.”

“I know what I did, Agent Hanzo. It has been reviewed to me many times.” She looks up at him warily. “What I would like to know is why are you here. Have you come to ask why I did it?”

He meets her golden gaze with a prickle of guilt. Satya is nervous; perhaps this confession is more personal than she prefers to share with him. Begrudgingly he concedes: I have given her no reason to trust me.

“If I have imposed on you, I apologize,” Hanzo assures with a bow of his head. “I only wished to issue my thanks.”

“For?”

“Saving my brother’s life.”

Satya looks away. “I see.”

“And Hana’s life,” he continues, just as he practiced. “And my own. You have committed an honorable act of great sacrifice. The people you saved will not forget what you have done, and neither will I.”
But Satya sighs. “I am not blind to your disdain for me,” she murmurs. “Nor for the Vishkar Corporation. If you have come to thank me out of self-reproach, do not trouble yourself. I did not assist you all and save their lives to change your views -- I did it because it was the right thing to do. The only thing.” Her regal face softens. “All life is precious, Agent Hanzo. I do not collect debts on its value.”

This is not how he expected her to respond. He was prepared for asperity. Hanzo is moved to witness tenderness instead.

Finally he asks, abandoning his script: “is there anything you would request of me?”

“No,” Satya answers, lowering her cup of tea.

Slowly he rises from the chair beside her bed. “Then I will consider the slate between us clean.”

He’s passing the partition when she calls behind him: “wait.”

Hanzo looks over his shoulder. Satya sits forward, upright, back straight. Momentarily imperial, like a queen.

“When you were stranded in Siberia,” she says, “you accused me of supporting unethical practices done by the corporation. You mentioned an acquisition that I told you was a reptilian species. Specimen 1193.”

He reins in a frown. “Yes.”

“I am looking into it,” Satya states. “After you returned from Russia, I noticed a discrepancy with the protocol file. I believe parts of it were amended before it was uploaded to my device. My director failed to corroborate what I had found, so I decided to look further on my own.” She lifts her chin. “When I can get the directive file on Specimen 1193, I will produce it for you. Then you and your brother can make decisions about Vishkar practices as you see fit.”

“Thank you, Miss Vaswani,” Hanzo replies. His thoughts leaping to Genji; will they even still be here at the Watchpoint when her task is through?

Movement catches his eye as he leaves. Lúcio's cat Chuchu is padding down the hallway; he acknowledges Hanzo with a gentle, trilling meow.

"How did you get inside?” remarks the archer, stooping to scratch behind his ears.

But Chuchu seizes an opportunity. He darts through the medbay doors before they close. Hanzo watches the cat beeline for Satya's partition, an orange-and-white flash. The sound of her voice, low and delighted, to a visitor she is happier to see.

---

While Reinhardt recovers, Brigitte takes the lion’s share of repairs around the Watchpoint wall. Torbjorn micromanages her work as she seals the rock with mortar and steel rebar. Hanzo overhears them quarreling one morning while he’s trimming vines in the box garden; at one point, Brigitte throws down her welding helmet and loudly declares just where Torbjorn can shove his specs.

Public response to the Talon attack reaches an all-time high just before the new year. Lúcio and Tracer field a steady stream of interview requests from news outlets across the globe. Messages and tokens of solidarity arrive every hour, some from governments, some from major multinational
corporations. Most are from individuals and families around the world, promising support, entreatying for strength, holding firm in the face of terror. Urging the heroes of Overwatch to stay strong.

“It’s nice to know we’re appreciated,” Hana tells him one afternoon over a game of chess in the rec room. “Times like these when the whole world is looking at you can make you feel really lonely.”

Hanzo moves his black rook. “I imagine you have experience with that.”

She taps a pink fingernail on the tabletop as she ponders a move. “Yeah, some. Lu might have more. Sometimes I think he’s better at this whole hero thing than I am” -- she nudges her white bishop diagonally up the board -- “but it bugs him sometimes, too.”

“He has been very busy lately.”

“He still thinks we should go get McCree,” Hana says. She takes one of Hanzo’s pawns. “You know how I feel about it. I haven’t changed my mind.”

He leans back in his chair. Like Lúcio, Hana disagrees with the decision not to pursue the gunslinger; she has tepidly argued on-and-off with him about it. What he did was dangerous and wouldn’t fly with my old unit, she said. But this isn’t Korea and he’s definitely not a soldier.

Hanzo sighs. “Let’s talk of something else. Are you still making plans to go back and visit your family for Seollal?”

Hana snaps her gaze up from the chessboard. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?”

“Don’t change the subject,” she says. “I want to talk about this. It’s bothering you.”

Piqued, Hanzo narrows his eyes. “Is that so.”

“You haven’t been the same since he left,” she retorts. “It’s literally all over you. I can tell.”

“Can you?”

“You keep hanging around with me and Genji, but you’re distant. Like you don’t know if you want company or to be alone. You want to talk about distracting things so long as it won’t take your thoughts too far away. You’re tired of having him on your mind, but you’re not ready to push him out.” Hana’s mouth flattens to a lipsticked line. “You eat less at supper so all the sake you drink afterward will hit quicker. In spite of that, if I had to guess -- from the bags under your eyes, you haven’t slept a wink.”

Clever, he thinks wearily. She’s picked up more from his lessons than just archery.

“You don’t have to act tough about it with me,” she continues. “I drop the tough act with you all the time. Don’t you trust me?”

Hanzo observes her at a glance: bangs askew, brown hair in a bun, hammered-silver earrings glinting by her cheeks. Denim jeans with holes distressed in the knees, pink furry boots, an oversized green sweater. Her makeup shaded to perfection, flattering her round features. Stylish yet comfortable. Completely at ease with herself and the world around her.

A fleeting sadness: he will miss her very much, after he and Genji leave.
“I trust you,” he says glibly. “I just do not know what to say.”

“Start at the beginning,” Hana prompts. Gentler than before. “Do you miss him?”

Hanzo looks down at his chess pieces. “Yes.”

“Do you want him back?”


“So go get him.” She presses, nonplussed. “You’re a Shimada. You could probably track a fly through a hurricane. How hard is it to find a cowboy with a ninety-million dollar bounty on his head?”

“Harder than you think.” He remembers Dorado and the smiling Mister Barceló, weaving through the crowds with his cheery Spanish and rolling laugh. Effortlessly blending into his surroundings, like a creature skilled in camouflage. “McCree was once a special agent within Overwatch. He had special training for this sort of thing, going underground and staying out of sight.”

She moves her queen two spaces ahead. “So tell me about it. Talk about it, Hanzo. That way, maybe I can help some other way besides picking up his chores and feeding his chickens.”

Despite the ache, he tells her. He narrates what he knows as they play, piece by piece. Three times Hana checks him, but she yields to a less aggressive strategy so that the game stretches on.

In the end, he takes her king. Hana shrugs, smiles, and concedes. Good game. Knowing as well as Hanzo does that, this time, she let him win.

---

As the hole in the Watchpoint wall closes, so too does the sense of ennui. UN approval allows the team to begin assessing new strategies to combat Talon. Winston fills the archer’s inbox with message requests about defensive maneuvers and sniper protocols. He leaves them all unread and avoids the gorilla in person when he can.

One week without Jesse. No call, no message, no news. The UN ambassador makes no inquiry about his status, a development for which the team is both glad and dismayed. His absence is an unspoken weight that hangs over the base like a heavy cloud.

By New Year’s Eve, Hanzo is ready to leave with his brother for Hanamura. He wakes early after sleeping little and drinking too hard. After showering, he packs clothing, prepares his quiver, digs out a cloth to clean his prosthetics. He sits in McCree’s console chair to disassemble the plates around his knees. The futon stretches before him across the floor, warm and blue and inviting.

Hanzo fights back the ever-present tightness in his chest. A morning will come that will be the last time he wakes from this room. Soon he will leave it for good -- no more cramped bunk, cheap furnishings, tiny lavatory. He remembers the first time he saw it after the Vishkar attack, discovering the gunslinger wallowing in lethargic malaise. How he tidied it up, straightened it out, liberated it from disarray. Hanzo closes his eyes and thinks of the hour they spent under the single tree by the box garden: Jesse’s story of Blackwatch and Amari, Hanzo’s grim memory of Children’s Day and koi that swam into dragons. The debt, the request, the promise to join his cause. Sleeping together afterwards with their backs barely touching, bodies motionless in the dull afternoon heat.

And the night before Siberia, how Jesse lured him in with a different type of comfort. Those big,
callused hands raking his sides, stroking through clothes, pleading for a lover’s touch. How quickly he came, spasming in his grasp, sighing and rumbling through a searing kiss.

_In this chair,_ he thinks miserably. It almost feels sacred. The first intimacy he’d shared in years, with the only person he’d desired since…

_Beep._ A chime from his comm brings Hanzo back. A welcome buzzkill: it’s Genji.

“I’ll be at the comm tower soon,” Hanzo says. “Are you ready to go tomorrow, maybe? The sooner, the better.

“**Eh, Hanzo,**” Genji replies. “**I’m calling to tell you: I already left.**”

Hanzo reels. “**What?**”

“I left last night,” says Genji. “I’m not going to Hanamura.”

He bolts upright with his pulse pounding in his ears. “This is a shitty time for jokes.”

“It’s not a joke, Hanzo. I’m not at the Watchpoint. I’m going to track another lead on the Shimadagumi and the Talon connection. I left while you were asleep.”

“You’re screwing with me,” Hanzo says. His head swims. “Are you screwing with me right now? Where are you?”

“I’ve thought about it enough,” rings the tinny voice through the comm. “And I’ve decided: this is on me. Like I told you before, I owe this to you. After everything the clan did to us -- to you, to me, to everyone --”

“You’re _fucking_ are you?” Hanzo rails, shaking the cleaning cloth in his fist. “So help me, Genji, if I find out this is some kind of ploy, or set-up, or _plan_ --”

“Listen to me!” Genji shouts over the line. “You’re angry, I know -- you’re going to be angry at me for a while. I accept that. But I couldn’t let you do it, Hanzo. I couldn’t let you walk away from Overwatch, not after everything you’ve done.”

Furious, Hanzo throws open the dorm door. “What _are_ you _talking_ about? This is our burden! _Ours!_ The family is _our_ responsibility, it’s not just yours to go at alone!”

“Yes said it yourself,” the cyborg insists. “You’ve never held me to repaying anything. Well, I’m changing that. I’m holding myself to this. And I’m holding _you_ to what matters.”

He stumbles into the hall, searching, eyes darting. Looking for signs of trick or trap. “Genji, when I find you, when I get my hands on you, I swear --”

“You belong there now,” declares the sparrow. “You belong with Overwatch. If I let you walk away, it’ll be the end of what we mended between us, as brothers. I’m being selfish about this, Hanzo, because I love you. You need to see how far you’ve come.”

“What do you even _mean?_” Hanzo seethes as he storms outside.

“Honor! Redemption! _Redeeming_ yourself, Hanzo -- don’t you see? You’re doing it. Whether you realize it or not, these are the final steps. All this time, I wanted you to find some peace to your heart. You found so much more than that. In honoring our comrades, you honored me. Don’t you remember the story about the dragon who became a man? It happened! Look around you. You’re
seeing the world clearly for the first time.”

Hanzo thinks his brother’s speech might be more empowering if he were not staring into a wall of grey Gibraltan fog. “You have no idea what you’re talking about, Genji. I don’t know what you were thinking when you planned this, but I want you to know” -- he balls his hands into fists -- “I’m going to come after you, I’m going to track you down and find you.”

“No. You know who to track down instead.”

“You can’t just leave me here, Genji, you can’t just run off!”

“I will return,” interrupts the cyborg. “And so will you, after you do what you know you should have done a week ago. If you try to find me, you’ll fail. We both have jobs to do.”

“Genji, please --”

“I’m proud of you, Hanzo. Do your best.”

The line disconnects. Hanzo bellows into his comm. “Genji!”

No answer. Overhead, a flock of shorebirds chatter on the wing. Hanzo clutches the lapel of his kyudo-gi and stares blankly at the track. Then he pounds his fist between his brows with a gurgling snarl.

It takes him less than a minute to race through Hangar 18. He barrels down the underground hallways until they wind into the sleek black walls of the laboratories. Mei-Ling’s office lights are on; she’s sipping coffee from a blue mug while browsing the internet at her desk.

“Have you seen Genji?” Hanzo pants, shaking.

“No,” Mei-Ling answers. Her brows furrow. “Not since yesterday.”

“What about Zenyatta?”

“Uh, yes, he was talking to Winston outside the mess hall when I went by about an hour ago.” She turns in her chair, concerned. “Are you okay? You look like you’ve seen a ghost.”

“Apologies for interrupting,” he huffs before darting down the hall.

He finds the monk flipping through the catalog on the karaoke machine in the rec room. Hanzo thrusts through the doorway. Zenyatta looks up. When standing upright, the two match in height.

“Where is Genji?” the archer growls. “Where did he go?”

“I do not know,” Zenyatta replies. “Since you are asking me, I presume the answer is ‘not here,’ and ‘not Hanamura.’”

“You are responsible for this,” Hanzo charges. “You convinced him to leave without me.”


Hanzo bares his teeth. “Do not test me. Do not. I will not hesitate --”

Zenyatta interrupts. “He asked me to give you something. He knew this would aggrieve you after the departure of your beloved. I promised I would assist you however I could.”
Before Hanzo can protest, a mechanical trill prickles through the room. From his ring of glowing orbs, Zenyatta plucks a single sphere. He holds it out to Hanzo with spindly metal fingers.

“Harmony,” he says. “A blessing on the balance struck between two brothers. Something to guide you through his absence.” He bows his head. “My friends and pupils have told me many stories over the years, Shimada Hanzo. Genji’s tale is a sad one, but it may yet be my favorite.”

Helpless, Hanzo sags. Cold sweat washes his skin as his fury drains away. He turns to leave, unable to answer. The orb floats along with a hollow chime.

It follows him as he sulks through the halls. He bats it away once, twice -- giving up the third time when it sails back into orbit around his head. Hanzo slips into the mess hall, digs through a cabinet, pushes past snacks and boxes of tea. There they are: two bottles of shōchū he had saved for an end-of-the-year gathering. Genji had encouraged him to set one up and contribute to the team’s exuberance for holiday celebrations. A bōnenkai is meant to be shared by a team, he explained. Everyone drinks until they’ve drowned out all the year’s troubles. Jesse had grinned over his cigarillo, waggled his eyebrows, nudged close. Exactly the kinda thing I wanna do with you, darlin’. Sign me up.

“Other way around,” Hanzo whines after three long swigs. “You signed me up.”

He doesn’t know which is worse: how cheap the shōchū tastes or how fast it makes him tipsy. Hanzo cannot stomach the idea of drinking in Jesse’s dorm or either training range, so he slithers to the first dark enclosure he can find. Some closet or service room, an alcove for maintenance or storage. A place where he can shut the door, hunker down, and sink beneath the bottle.

I did this, he thinks, a mental yelp through drunken tears. I did this. I deserve this. No questions asked: this is my fault. For all the times I was harsh to him, or distant. Every time I was ungrateful to his kindness. For lying, for delaying, for not being forthcoming with him sooner. Hanzo drinks until it burns, burns until it hurts, hurts until he drinks again. The downward spiral of a dragon gulping its tail.

A fitting punishment, he thinks, miserable. For a drunk and worthless fool.

---

“Hey, Mister Shimada.”

Hanzo’s eyes crack open. He coughs.

“You alright?”

Two youthful faces stare down at him, obscuring the glare of overhead lights. He pushes his scarf out of his eyes to get a clearer look. It’s Hana and Lúcio.

“What time is it?” Hanzo rasps. Blearily: where am I?

“A little after eight,” Lúcio replies, offering out a hand. “You didn’t show up to dinner, so we went looking for you. Athena said your comm was last detected around here.”

Hanzo gets up. Zenyatta’s orb hovers after him. “Thank you for checking on me.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Hana is holding an empty bottle in each hand. “You look awful. You better have an explanation for this.”
His vision adjusts. Somehow, he ended up in the corner of the armory research lab. Hanzo glances between them. Lúcio frowns in concern; Hana, meanwhile, looks far less sympathetic.

Wordless, Hanzo drags a clammy hand down his face. Where the hell does he begin?

“We know about Genji,” she says. “We wanted to talk to you about everything that’s happened.” She wags the bottles. “Should have talked to you sooner.”

“We want to help,” Lúcio adds. “We were gonna suit up and go with you after McCree if you were willing to take the lead, but now we gotta stay here. Vishkar is giving us a lot of trouble over Satya’s suspension and she’s stressing out about it.” He bobs enthusiastically. “But we got a few other options, if you’re willing to hear them out.”

“McCree was Blackwatch,” Hana continues. “We have the Blackwatch archive. Lu’s been trying to index it so you can search for whatever you want. You know McCree better than anyone -- if you look through it, you could find something that’ll give you a lead on where he went.”

“That archive is old,” Hanzo mutters, wincing. Trying to digest everything they’ve said. “The data in there could be obsolete. Beyond that, I do not know where to start.”

“Start at the beginning,” Hana counters. “We’ll help you. Come on, Hanzo, let’s get him back.”

Heartache surges in Hanzo’s chest, worse than his hangover. He shakes his head. “We will not find anything.”

“Hanzo,” Lúcio urges. “You gotta put your faith in it. This is the best we’ve got.”

“It is a waste of your time.”

“Hanzo.” A note of warning lifts in Hana’s voice. “Seriously.”

“A waste of everyone’s time,” Hanzo growls, dismissively swatting his hand. “No. I appreciate your sentiment, but I am done troubling myself with enigmas --”

But Hana has had enough. She sets the bottles aside with a clink, marches to one of the equipment racks on the wall, and removes one of Lúcio’s sonic amplifiers.

“Uh.” Lúcio piques, taken aback. “Excuse you, that’s a prototype.”

With a no-nonsense expression, Hana lifts the amplifier, aims at the ceiling, and pulls the trigger. The speaker booms three resonating bass blasts that shake the walls. Hanzo crashes back with a stifled shout.

Lúcio’s head pops up between two lab tables. “Hey, hey, hey! Turn it off! Agh, what the” -- he claps a hand over his ear -- “oww. Oww, oww, tinnitus, Hana, watch the tinnitus --”

Blat-blat-blat! Three more hits. The lights flicker. Zenyatta’s Orb of Harmony bounces between the floor and ceiling. Hanzo rolls on the ground in agony until he can brace the wall.

“Stop!” he groans, clutching his skull.

“Until I see some cooperation around here,” declares Hana, “the discomfort will continue.”

“Are you out of your mind?”

She levels the amplifier at Hanzo’s head. “You need to get back into yours.”
“Hana, don’t!” Lúcio croaks, peeking from behind the lab table. “That’s a prototype, don’t aim it at anyone! C’mon, Winston’s gonna kill me --”

“Get up,” Hana says. “I’m not going to stand around and let you drink yourself through a pity party.”

Hanzo slowly rises, dizzy with vertigo. “Mind yourself, Hana, I have had a very terrible day.”

“No excuses.” She stomps forward with the amplifier aimed and poised to fire. “Listen. You’re a Shimada. A world-class assassin. You’re not the sort of man who lets a terrible day stop you. And if you think today was bad” -- she glares down at Hanzo -- “I guarantee you I can make ‘em worse. So get up, let us help you find McCree, or I’m going to make sure you spend your first week of 2077 in medbay.”

Both men behold her with a mix of shock and fear. Lúcio shoots Hanzo a look that says it all: that is no empty threat.

He acquiesces in the end, too nauseous to call her bluff. They check the halls, lock the doors, and set up a projector on wide lab wall. Lúcio sets up his laptop and three viewscreens for extra workspace. Hana brings in bottled water and a pot of sweet-smelling yujacha for Hanzo’s hangover; she thrusts a cup in front of him with an insistent drink this.

The Blackwatch archive contains over fifty-thousand individual files and records. Lúcio estimates that at least four of its six sectors are corrupted due to errors in the original encryption. He cannot explore some levels of the remaining two sectors due to password-protected controls.

“What someone tried to scrub it,” he announces. “Before this archive was encrypted, someone went through and deleted a ton of files. Case in point.” He opens the image of a tree-shaped diagram. “The organizational chart. All entries and ranks have been wiped out, save for the guy in charge.” He jabs a finger at the top of the chart. “Gabriel Reyes.”

“Does it tell you who erased what?” Hana asks.

“Nope. The changes were made by a user with a deactivated account. Someone internal.”

Hanzo narrows his eyes at the name. “None of Reyes' subordinates are listed?”

“Not anymore. Looks like he had several guys ranked right below him, if you follow the lines.”

Hana points at the diagram. “Blackwatch wasn’t as big as I thought. There’s sections for squads and squad captains, but they’re gone, too. McCree would’ve been on here somewhere, right?”

“Yeah,” Lúcio says. “See, this is why we need him. He’d know which rank was what.”

They start with a sector dedicated to internal documentation: specifications and standing operating procedures -- or, as Hana calls them, SOPs.

“The backbone of pretty much any major organization,” she clarifies as Lúcio flicks through the screens. “MEKA, Overwatch, everyone’s got ‘em. Look and see if you can find any that are mission-specific.”

Lúcio squints. “Alright, let’s look at this one.” He reads the title aloud. “‘B-O-S-D-O-C. Blackwatch Operational Standard Documentation, mission logistics. Man, there’s a lot of acronyms. Uhh” -- muttering as he scans the page -- “this is for an operation that happened in May 2068. Prague, Czech Republic. Commanding officer, Reyes G.”
“This one,” Hanzo says quickly. “McCree mentioned an operation in Prague. Reyes defended the city from a chemical weapons attack.”

“The objectives sound kinda vague,” Hana notes as they scroll down the screen. “I can’t tell if they were defending civilians or the weapons themselves.”

“Much has been redacted,” Hanzo observes. He points to a paragraph with a series of blacked-out lines. “Names, locations, dates. Someone took out relevant information here.”

“Hold on.” Lúcio taps the keys. The page turns yellow; small red annotations flood the margins. “Ha! Check this out. This SOP has been edited so many times that it’s practically unreal. And whoever did it wasn’t very good, because they forgot to erase the version control metadata when they were done.”

Hanzo seizes a flicker of memory: Vaswani’s promise about the Vishkar experiment. “Can you retrieve unedited versions?” he asks.

“I can try.” Lúcio opens a terminal window. “Let me run this script. You guys go through this folder and see what you can find about Eastwood.”

The documentation paints a fragmented picture of Blackwatch operations. McCree is listed primarily on missions focused within the United States; they find the occasional mention of Morrison, Amari, and Mercy. Hana identifies code-words for locations or targets -- innocent, harmless terms like apple, geranium, and pink-polka-dot. A flurry of addendums describe the team’s resource lists, weapon schematics, and tactical maneuvers. Some phrases make Hanzo’s stomach tighten: extraction, attrition, unconditional surrender.

According to Lúcio’s tests, almost every SOP, including the file on Prague, has been heavily edited from their original state.

“Hard to imagine the Reaper saving an entire city,” Hana muses. “But, there you go. The evidence is right here.”

The search bears fruit after the better part of a half-hour when Lúcio finds a cluster of holovids classified for ‘Operation Sunbeam.’ Playback reveals footage of a news conference in a stately rotunda. The shape of a brown hat tunes into focus; a younger McCree peeks into the camera with a grin. Hanzo yields to a pulse of fondness at the sight of his warm, bearded face.

“There he is,” Hana chimes. “Just like his picture.”

A tilt of the camera pushes McCree out of the frame. It zooms on a podium where a man in dress blues delivers a speech to a rapt audience.

“Reyes,” Hanzo points out.

Hana’s eyes widen. “That’s him?”

“Yeah. That would be him.” Lúcio checks the file information. “Says this was recorded in Manila on October 9th, 2063. Thirteen years ago.”

“What language is he speaking?” Hana asks. “Tagalog?”

Lúcio leans in to listen. “Pretty sure, yeah. There’s no translation.”

They fast-forward the clip to Reyes shaking hands and taking pictures with a white-haired
diplomat. He sports a thin, frigid smile. McCree is nowhere to be seen or heard.

“Look at his scars,” she murmurs. “Reminds me of one of my old COs.”

They spot the gunslinger again during another clip of a crowded gathering where Reyes addresses the room in English about the latent threat of drug trafficking. McCree is seated in the background in a row of agents in matching military fatigues. Hanzo cannot help but think the uniform looks good on him.

The other holovids offer glimpses of everyday life and daily routine. Some of the scenes are reminiscent of the birthday clip that Lúcio procured -- with snapshots of the Swiss headquarters and everyday goings-on. A montage titled ‘C-Squad’ opens with a shot of the Swiss Alps above an outdoor training course. The camera pans to Reyes in the foreground in a hoodie with black sweats, monitoring three trainees lapping around a dirt track. He yells something in their direction and gets a choir of exhausted hooahs in return. Then he turns to the camera and says something low and relaxed in French.

Hana scratches her chin. “How many languages does this guy speak?”

The cameraman replies in a deep voice. Whatever he says makes Reyes laugh, open-mouthed with his shoulders thrown back. The response is contagious; the cameraman immediately joins in. He lapses into English with a thick French accent. She just finished with Swan Lake, yeah, she’s got free time to give you some lessons. Reyes slaps his hip. This is why we keep you around, Gerard. Hey, ballet is good endurance! Tell her I said ‘sure.’ Haha. Wait. Are you filming? Don’t film yet. Waving a hand, grinning. Wait until C-squad lands. I wanna get a shot of them coming off the transport. The camera zooms to a trainee lagging on the track. Reyes swivels to bellow just before the clip cuts off. Oye, Lewis! I see you! You got it, son! Keep it up! Push, push, push it!

One clip startles them with a jumpscare. The footage begins with a shaky walk down a clean white corridor. When they round the corner, an agent in Blackwatch greys pops out with a HOO! The camera drops amid shouts and distant laughter. Holy shit! She got you good, Ohanian! Menacing, the silhouette of a black tactical helmet with a face-mask comes into view. Nah, says the cameraman to the pranksters. I knew you guys were there, I got you on tape -- a cluster of uniformed figures linger about the hall, snickering, waving -- gonna roast ya. More laughter. One-vee-one me, Parisa. Catch you in the ring.

“Okay,” Lúcio sighs, clutching his chest. “I could do with less of that.”

“None of these have McCree, though,” Hana says irritably. “Keep searching.”

They find their quarry in a sector locked by a password. Lúcio runs one of his custom scripts to generate a key; he’s surprised when it takes only a few minutes to crack.

“A few files in this sector have the word ‘McCree’ in them,” he explains. “But some have been deleted.”

“Can you restore them?” Hanzo asks.

“Let’s see.” He drags up a folder titled ‘New Recruit Debrief.’ “More holovids. I think this is a good place to try recovery.”

“Here.” Hana cuts in abruptly, pointing to the file list. “These have first and last names. And dates. This is personnel. This is good, look in here.”

“Let’s see what we got.” Lúcio clicks the most recent file: Elliot_Brock_N_12-03-2069. The
holovid loads to a view of a dark conference room. Reyes, seated at a black table, occupies the center frame.

Hana gasps. “Oh, whoa. Look.”

Hanzo narrows his eyes as he registers what he sees. Reyes’ proud, handsome face is badly scratched and bruised. A white gauze patch covers his right cheek. One eye is swollen, sclera blown red. Beneath his black cap peeks the bright yellow edge of a bandage wrapped around his head. Most unsettling is his expression: blank stare, snarling brow, hell-bent scowl.

_Grim sonofabitch_, thinks Hanzo, remembering Jesse’s words.


“He looks _beat up_,” Lúcio mutters. “Check out the contusions on the brow bone and jaw. That’s a broken nose and a busted lip.” Wincing. “I wouldn’t wanna see the other guy.”

Reyes glowers at the camera without blinking. The cursor ticks along the seekbar; a low electronic whine buzzes in the background audio, the only sound.

He stares at the camera for a minute and thirty-eight seconds, completely silent.

“What _is_ this?” Hana whispers. “This isn’t a debrief” -- she shrinks back -- “is he gonna do something?”

“Fast forward,” Hanzo prompts. Glaring back at the battered and stoic face, trying to ignore the hair prickling on the back of his neck. “Go to the end, see if anything happens.”

Nervously they advance the cursor by thirty seconds. No action. Reyes maintains his ominous gaze.

Lúcio grimaces. “Okay, I think I’m done with this one, I dunno what’s going on --”

When Reyes speaks, all three of them jump.

“I know you’re watching this,” he rasps. Leaning forward, slow and menacing. “I know what you’re doing. You thought the shadows were on your side, but I’ve been here the whole time. Truth is, I was here first. You’re in _my_ house. I didn't invite you.”

Hanzo’s stomach hitches with dread. The other two huddle against him, breathless.

“Number one,” Reyes continues, “is looking at you. Not Jack, _me_. You thought you had us, didn’t you? You thought those fancy tricks were working on me? Now you know. If you think you’re gonna take us down, you don’t go through him -- you go through _me_. You’re gonna go through the king. And I always finish the job.”

Reyes points two gloved fingers at his eyes and directs them at the camera. The vid cuts to static. All three of them sit back, alarmed.

“That was _not_ a debrief,” begins Lúcio. “I don’t even know _what_ that was.”

“I don’t think we were ever supposed to see that,” Hana adds.

Hanzo prickles; he doesn’t know what to think. “Maybe there are more. Check the next one.”

But the next file (_Kavrazli_Milena_C_11-22-2069_) provides a glimpse at the intended format for
the personnel clips: Reyes reviewing each new Blackwatch agent at the same black table. He reads off a tablet, listing names and countries of origin, skillsets, talents, stats. No more bruises or bandages, just a taciturn sense of business-as-usual. Narrating data briskly in a casually flat tone.

“Look at how many there are for 2069,” Lúcio comments over Reyes droning in the background. “Like they had a recruitment boost.”

“Compared to years past,” Hana points at the file list. “They went from bringing on one every ten months or so to fifteen or twenty at a time. Wonder why.”

They play the last vid before the year of batch recruits: *Huynh_Harry_12-23-2067*. A deviation from the norm: Reyes conducts the review while sipping from a silver can of soda. Instead of his usual black cap: a red Santa hat.

Beside him, Hana lets out a weak *hah*.


“Pull it up,” Hanzo urges, gripping the back of his chair.

The holovid rolls. A different setting: white stone walls, brown wood table, a yellow folder instead of a tablet. Smoke rises from a cigarette slanted on a clear ashtray. Reyes is younger; he wears an army-green shirt, no beanie or tactical gear. He hunches in his chair, elbows on the table, palms rubbing his arms. Morose.

“Okay,” he begins in a scratchy voice. “This is Captain Gabriel Reyes, Blackwatch, Overwatch spec-ops. New recruit debrief. Location, Watchpoint Grand Mesa. Date, November 25. Uh” -- shuffling papers out of the folder -- “squad members included, N/A. It’s just me tonight. Agents Darton, Holloway and Kapoor are still in medbay. Juuust me.”

Reyes takes a drag from the cigarette, taps off ash, takes a paper out of the folder. Hanzo thinks he looks exhausted.

“New agent vitals,” he reads. “Last name McCree, first name Jesse. Suspected to be a Deadlock alias, agent refused to give us his real name. He maintains that it’s actually ‘Jesse McCree.’” Reyes pauses to shake his head. “Sooo, uh, that’s what we’re putting in the system. Anyway.” He clears his throat. “Agent’s height, hundred-eighty-two centimeters. Weight, eighty-one kilos. Hair, brown. Eyes, brown. Blood type, O positive. No social security number, no ID stamp, no ear chip, wrist chip, no thumbprint or dental match in any North American registry. DNA hasn’t flagged with any databank.” A beat passes. Reyes is bouncing his knee beneath the table. “Agent’s age was confirmed for seventeen.”

Hanzo feels his throat run dry as Reyes scrubs at his brow.

“Seventeen,” he repeats, defeated. “Agent wouldn’t tell us where he’s from. We got a tip from the other two Deadlocks we took in, Bravo and Charlie, that he’s from Santa Fe. We’ve checked with all local authorities there and there’s no records or files. No mention of legal guardians, next of kin, nothing. Kapoor’s got a note here that a lot of folks in that region evaded the census post-Crisis. He’s probably one of the ones who slipped through the cracks. I don’t know.” Another beat. “Honestly -- and I don’t care if this goes on record -- I don’t really know what to tell you.”

The chair scrapes as Reyes adjusts his seat.

“Agent was acquired via Operation Two-Step. Deadlock Gang incursion, illegal arms payload. We
picked him up during Phase 3 outside of the Gorge on Route 66. He was part of a three-man kill team with the other Deadlocks -- Bravo, Charlie -- broke off from the main group.

Okay. So, agent combat profile. He’s a sharpshooter. Two shotguns and a Python revolver, 357 magnum. The weapons are in bad shape, obviously stolen, but he knew how to use ‘em. We were in position for Phase 3 and the agent came in blazing. Darton and Holloway were down first, less than thirty seconds. Firefight ensued, our team called for backup. He downed Kapoor with a hit to the knees. This guy can roll like a stone.

So backup came in, we subdued these three and bring ‘em in. Agent’s interrogation went poorly. He wouldn’t talk, gave lots of lip. Real spitfire. Tried to bust out during a shift change. He managed to get the chair out from under him and knock out both guards at the door. Eesh.” Reyes groans, dodging a sour memory. “After that, the other two, Bravo and Charlie, coughed up details on the agent’s identity, confirmed his alias, age, rank with Deadlock. They tried posing it like they were gonna cut a bargain with me and avoid prison if they ratted him out.”

Reyes pauses to grind out his cigarette in the ashtray. He looks up at the camera, tosses down the paper, and leans back. Spreading his powerful shoulders, taking up space, almost losing his cool.

“Allright,” he says. “Look. I don’t care if this goes on record. I really don’t. I need to get this down somewhere before we get back to Geneva.” Reyes scratches his scarred brow again. “I’ve been up for thirty-six hours, my whole team’s in medbay, everytime I sit down” -- he shifts in his seat, grunts, mutters -- “it feels like I have a pellet or two in my ass from those shotguns. Jack, if you see this before I get back, just, look.” He lifts his hands, mea culpa. “Hear me out.”

A stretch of silence. For a moment, Hanzo wonders if the playback has frozen.

“This guy,” Reyes starts softly, “well, I’m gonna be honest. He’s good. Damn good. This guy’s a killer. You could see it in his eyes” -- Reyes points at his face -- “he’s made straight out of murder. We had intel on him, but we didn’t expect him to crash the party. At seventeen. We were gunned down and nearly outmaneuvered by a kid.”

Reyes fidgets his hands around the ashtray on the table.

“According to Bravo and Charlie, Ma and Pa Deadlock picked him up way down in Santa Fe after he stole some bikes. They brought him in, hoped to make an enforcer out of him. But he was so good that he pissed off the big boys. Bravo said he got unpopular real fast and it escalated. Started antagonizing their suppliers, didn’t respect turf, ran too wi--”

The audio track cuts out. Reyes keeps talking, but there’s no sound.


“Hold on.” Lúcio drags the cursor around the video. “Hold on. It’s the recovery, the file probably got damaged.”

Hanzo’s heart races. “Can we fix it? Can we get it back?”

“I’m trying, I’m trying.”

Blip. The audio returns. All three lean closer. Hana chews on her knuckle; Lúcio hunches with his elbows on his knees. Totally engrossed.

“-- go back in there and tell him Deadlock was gonna kill him.”
Hanzo holds his breath. In the holovid, Reyes leans into the table. He lightly pounds his fist on the edge, bam bam. Pissed off.

“Can you believe this?” he asks the ceiling. “Bravo said they take ‘em out like they do in the wild West. The more gruesome, the better. In the year 2056. Post-Crisis. That’s” -- he shakes his head -- “it’s not just hillbilly gangster stuff, it’s fucking barbaric, Jack. What would they do? Like a firing squad? Bury him up to his head in the desert? Are they gonna, what -- put him on a horse across a river full of snakes, like that part in Lonesome Dove?” Reyes drums his fist and starts anew, angrier than before. “And this kid has no idea what ‘Deadlock justice’ meant. He really thinks it’s like in the movies, like they got some kind of ‘honor among thieves’ code. Like this is Gunsmoke, or, what’s that one -- High Noon.” Reyes rolls his eyes, flicks his fingers skyward, who knows.

“So that’s why these two ratted on him. They said, ‘if he survives this, it doesn’t matter who you hand him over to. He’s marked.’ They said local police would’ve dumped them right back for Deadlock to pick back up. And when that happened, pchew” -- he mimics a gunshot sound -- “call ‘em buzzard food.”

Reyes runs his hand down his jaw. He looks at the camera, but his gaze is far away.

“They were going to take out a kid, Jack. They were gonna kill him. They picked him up, taught him to run guns, turned him into a hotshot, and crkkk.” A slicing gesture across his throat with his thumb. “Nnah. Nah. Nah, nah, nah.” He rubs his palms over his eyes, exasperated. “Not in my 'watch.”

It takes Reyes a few moments to collect himself. Hana stirs; Hanzo feels her shoulder against his arm, a reassuring weight.

“So, after shaking down Bravo and Charlie, I went back in there and we made a deal. I told him: ‘Overwatch or prison, son. You pick.’ It worked. By then, he was scared of me. I needed him to be a little scared, that made it easier to get him to come along. He had this attitude like he’d never been afraid of anything in his life.” He laughs weakly, shifting again.

“And that’s good, you know? I figure, we need it. True grit. Look, I don’t really care where he’s from or what his real name is. The minute I went back in there, I wanted him on our side. It was the right thing to do, even though I did not” -- he gestures emphatically with his hands -- “get up this morning, put on my pants, and walk out the door to have my ass kicked in by a seventeen-year-old cowboy.”

By now, Reyes has propped his feet up on the table. He produces a pack of cigarettes, takes one out, lights it and bobs it in his mouth. A motion that clutches a shrill pang in Hanzo’s chest.

A ghost of Jesse’s usual stance: cool, relaxed, chewing on his smoke. Take it easy.

“But you know what?” Reyes lazes against the back of his chair. “That happened.” Spuming out a wisp of grey cigarette smoke. “That’s how it goes. Guy runs in, interrupts our mission, hits us when we least expect it, shook things up. You know what? He deserves this shot. Seems fitting we take him back with us.” He laughs, taps ash off his cigarette, smiles at the wall. “Figure we’ll take some time to get the Deadlock outta him, run him through the ringer, see what kinda hero shakes out. And if he doesn't take to it, he can go back to Santa Fe.” Shrugging, shutting his eyes. A confident king. "At least he won't hang."

Reyes removes the cigarette and coughs into his fist.

“Anyway. Gotta finish this up. Ehh. What's on the rest of this docket, let's see --"
The holovid ends, yielding to black. Three blank faces stare back in the reflection of the screen. Hanzo says nothing. He sits back with the dull realization that his tea has gone cold.

“You want to look for anything else?” Lúcio murmurs, breaking the silence.

“No,” Hanzo replies, hearing his words as if someone else in the room is talking. A far-off voice coming from a distant source, like a muffled speaker. “This is enough. Thank you.”

---

The trip from Gibraltar to New Mexico takes him most of New Year's Day. Hanzo travels alone, incognito, armed with Storm Bow hidden in Lúcio’s special case. His comm is turned off but his phone is on; Hana and the audio-medic are the only ones who know that he has left. His notebooks are stowed with Zenyatta’s Orb of Harmony in his bag; Hanzo flicks through one of them on the leg through Minneapolis. Over yonder, he reads off the page of post-its and colloquialisms. A general distance far away from the seeker, unmeasured and undefined.

He disembarks from the hopper jet and stops to take in the horizon: high brown mountains, cloudy gray sky, weak morning sun. Winter in the desert has a dry, icy bite. Cold winds nip at his sleeves as he wanders into town on foot. A dented metal board welcomes him with bold red text: Santa Fe - Enjoy Your Visit. Right below it hangs a second sign, an accompaniment from before the Omnic Crisis, now obsolete. Refugee Shelter Closed.

Hanzo stops in front of the Cathedral Basilica of St. Francis at the heart of the city. Jesse has told him about this place. Like Santa Fe, it’s smaller than he expected, not nearly as looming. Sandy hues in the ancient limestone have yellowed the church walls. Daylight gleams off the central stained-glass window like spokes on a golden wheel. Beautiful, despite the gunslinger's tall tale.

The carillon chimes; nine in the morning. He closes his eyes in veneration, letting the bells chase the drumbeat of his pulse in his ears.

Hanzo thinks: I am going to find you. A mental broadcast to his partner, the man with no name.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughisemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Natalie, Entropy, Wesley and my sensitivity readers for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- References: The proverb. St. Francis Cathedral. If you ever get the opportunity to attend a bonenkai, I hope they're as fun as the ones I've been to (please drink less than we did, though)!
- Another reminder: I don't do unhappy endings/ending where the ship doesn't get together.
- McCree is not lost, his perspective will be back very soon. With a few others, too.
- The last few chapters (including this one) have had big significance in my notes for several months now, and it was really good to finally get it out. I've mentioned this on my Tumblr before but it bears posting here: HtF began as a writing exercise for me, and was meant to have a long over-arching story with a certain end, outcome, and result ever since it began. A lot of the themes introduced from the beginning (e.g., brothers, group camaraderie, concepts of found-family and 'belonging', heroism,
redemption, dreams/fantasy/perception vs. reality, etc.) will draw off to completion within the arc. And, in a pinch of writer's luck, the arc has not changed beyond a few tweaks here and there, mostly to reduce story length and adapt info given to us in Ana Amari's release. The narrative and narrative technique, especially early on, has not been kind to certain characters; I have received a lot of messages asking if I dislike certain ones because of how they're described by their narrators (especially Jack [sorry dad]). The answer is no, I like them all, as well as many different interpretations of them as heroes and humans alike. Even Torbjorn. ... mostly.

- There will be an author's note at the end of this project that will go over the major themes and canon events I wanted to draw on in the story, as well as thoughts on influences and imagery (e.g., references, colors, music, framing, and many more) that went into the overall story. I figure this might be an easier way to knock out some of the questions I receive, though I do very much appreciate those as well.
- After HtF is done, I have a few plans for other connecting pieces: a story about Lena and Amelie before Overwatch's fall, a meeting between Satya and Fareeha (who will eventually appear in HtF), and a backstory during the Omnic Crisis about Reyes first meeting and working with Reinhardt. Most of it will depend on time. I would very much like to keep writing fic, but I have non-fic projects now marching onto my plate as well!

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](#) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

- Another step towards the finale! Thank you all so much for sticking with it! I've been keeping my feet on the fire trying to push this to completion and will keep doing so now that real life is giving me the all-clear.
- Expect Chapter 18 to come out quickly on this one's heels.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

うんでいのさ

undei no sa - “the separation between clouds and mud”

A proverb for a vast difference between two things.

---

At night, cold wind blows down the desert over the city of Santa Fe. Thin winter clouds strip the red edge of the horizon at sunset. Stars creep over the night sky in clustered sprays, shining undeterred by the weak industrial light that hazes off the city. Traffic wanes along the hyperlanes. A sleepy Sunday night dwindles into the first week of the new year.

Hanzo faces the dingy, glowing exterior of the Honky Tonk Donkey, a biker tavern on the outskirts of town. It’s a rundown joint of red-stained stucco, rot-brown decking, dirty tin roof and ancient chain-link fence. Hoverbikes ring the left side of the gravel lot. Internet review sites award it a wide span of ratings, ranging from ‘roach-infested shithole’ to ‘best drinks in town’ to lewd proclamations that it's the place to go if one wants ‘a good old-fashioned suck.’

It’s also the local Deadlock hangout, which makes it the next stop on his quest.

Wearing denim jeans, Jesse’s plaid shirt, and a black leather jacket, Hanzo pushes past the saloon-style doors. The smell hits him first: cigarette smoke, old wood, moldy carpet, the latent chord of grease redolent of feces. Country music jangles from black wall speakers; a dilapidated jukebox in the corner flashes candy-pink and mint-green. Two ancient pinball machines flank a box that Hanzo surmises is a payphone, a relic from the days before the Omnic Crisis.

He takes stock of the crowd: one bartender, five guys at the bar, six playing pool, a spread of seven-or-eight scattered across tables and corners. Judging from the noise, the adjacent rooms have at least ten or twelve more, who-knows-how-many outside on the deck. A rowdy bunch, decked out in leather, metal and gang tattoos. Nearly everyone is packing heat.

He strolls to take a spare seat at the bar. The bartender’s jerky movements catch his eye as it approaches; an older-model Omnic with a thick neck and torso. A ratty black jersey hugs its metal frame beneath a stained green smock. Hanzo looks up to see a dour, corroded faceplate leering down at him.

“What’ll you have?” it asks in a rough, robotic voice.

“House special,” he replies.
“No house specials,” the Omnic says irritably.

Hanzo narrows his eyes, feeling the weight of the room’s gaze. “My apologies. Whisky, neat.”

The bartender brings his drink with a damp napkin. Hanzo sips, swallows, bites back revulsion. Unbearably cheap booze; it’s the same swill Jesse hid around his dorm. He’s not surprised, but it sours his mood. He wishes the three burly gangsters to his right would stop staring.

Hanzo is eyeing the far wall mural of a burro humping a cactus when he feels a tap on his shoulder. An enormous bald man hulks behind him.

“That’s my seat,” he mutters.

“Your seat is taken,” Hanzo answers dryly.

“I said,” insists the man as he reaches for Hanzo’s shoulder, “that’s my seat.”

“Hold up,” a third voice calls, interrupting. A tall, wiry gangster in studded chaps looms in; he’s accompanied by three roughnecks in baseball caps. On his belt gleams a gaudy buckle emblazoned with a winged skull. His voice twangs raw, a Southwestern tenor. “Show some manners, Haskell. This one ain’t from around here.”

Laughter rustles around him. Hanzo offers the wiry man a crisp smile. Smooth and aimless, the kind that could affectionately cup your jaw or break it, you choose.

“Let us take this somewhere else,” Hanzo murmurs, amiable but firm.

“Outside,” grunts big bald Haskell, ready to throw down.

They’re about to swat and brawl when the wiry man pulls Haskell back by the shoulder. The bartender hoots in synthetic alarm: take it outside. But Hanzo lifts his hands, disarmingly passive. Disguising his nascent disgust.

“You’ll have to excuse him,” the wiry man laughs. “Y’see, you’re in my bar, and you’re in his spot. We’re just keeping an eye out. Not everyday a pretty face comes in wanting a saddle at the Donkey.”

More snickering. Hanzo clicks his tongue, purses his lip, shrugs. I understand.

“What business you got here, pardner?” asks the wiry man, polite but menacing. A salacious cruelty lurks in his pea-green eyes; he knows another killer when he sees one.

“The unfinished kind,” Hanzo replies. “As I said: best discussed somewhere else, if you fine gentlemen would not mind.”

“Gentlemen, eh?” The man licks his lips. “Perhaps we can.”

Hanzo restrains a fleeting urge to snap out the man’s tongue. The bar draws its collective attention to the confrontation; the roughnecks and big bald Haskell circle nearby, eager to dive when somebody makes a move. The wiry man is too tall for a quick punch, but short for a good groin shot. There’s almost certainly a pistol in his waistband. Hanzo decides: this guy goes down first.

They pull him to a room with pinball machines and dart boards. The wiry man is Bonny Boudreaux, nicknamed the ‘Bastard.’ His accomplices Threadwell, Flippen and De Silva grunt when introduced. Threadwell pats him down, checks for guns, scans his neck and arms for any
markings associated with Deadlock rivals. Their eyes hang on the dragon tattoo as Hanzo finishes rolling down his sleeves, an echo of the Bastard’s earlier observation: *not from around here.*

He proposes a game of cards while they chat. Boudreaux agrees to Texas Hold’em. They light cigarettes and survey one another sidelong as De Silva shuffles and deals. Threadwell cracks a vile joke and breaks the tension; Hanzo finds it too mean-spirited for his tastes, but laughs anyway. A casual ease settles over them, crooked men doing crooked business. Everyone waits for the archer to state his quarry.

Hanzo checks his cards to discover a weak starting hand. Ace of hearts, eight of clubs.

“My name is Tsubaki,” he says, sipping his whisky. “I am looking for a man named Barceló.”

Flippen wrinkles his pock-marked nose. “Ain’t ever heard that name.”

“Me neither,” Threadwell bleats.

“What’s he do?” De Silva asks, turning over the flop, pulling on his cigarette.

“Small-time deals,” Hanzo answers, reciting the mental script he’s rehearsed since he first scoped the Donkey and its denizens. “Imports, mostly Russian.”

“Not our sorta fella,” Bastard drawls.

“No, perhaps not. But he is local to this area. Unfortunately he has found his way into ill rapport with my people after getting his hands on some things that did not belong to him.”

“What sorta things?”

Hanzo is quick to reply, “*my* things.”

The Bastard slouches in his chair, musing through his poker face. “This guy must’ve ripped y’all outta quite a pretty penny, to send someone after him all the way from cherry blossom central. Though it interests me that they didn’t send you with the usual company. Don’t y’all lizards normally run jobs two-by-two?”

The roughnecks exchange glances. Hanzo smirks. Just as he suspected: this rude man knows his criminals. Furthermore, he’s familiar with Shimada-gumi logistics. He wonders how such a cretin got an opportunity to see the family’s operations up-close.


“My people are more inclined towards leniency during this auspicious time of the year,” he murmurs. After tossing a few credit chips to the pot: “hence, they sent only me to do the job.”

“Or,” he counters Hanzo. “They sent you, because you’re hunting somethin’ other than a thief.” The Bastard narrows his eyes. “The Gang doesn’t do bounty work. Your wise masters woulda told you that. Only reason you’d come in here lookin’ for info on a man we don’t know ‘bout is because you ain’t in here for that to begin with.”

“Perhaps,” Hanzo replies, biting the end of his tongue, hating him.

“Sounds like you got some explainin’ to do,” sneers the Bastard.

Just before Hanzo can answer, De Silva dimly mutters, “Judy.”
Bastard scowls. “What?”


The table groans with a kick from Threadwell, who hisses, “quiet.”

“Shut your goddamn mouth,” warns the Bastard. “Don’t fuckin’ talk.”

Silence. De Silva withers under Bastard’s gaze; Threadwell and Flippen swap wary looks; Hanzo maintains his courteous smile. In the adjacent room, the jukebox bounces along to upbeat electric guitar. *Tequila.* A hundred-year-old song playing in a shitty country bar.

“Now, you’re in a Deadlock house,” Bastard mutters. “And Deadlock’ll be happy to drag you back out. Come clean about your business and maybe we won’t send your ass back to Hanamura in a box.”

Hanzo lowers his cards. He finishes his whisky and starts to laugh, pointing beyond the table. There it is: a ratty poster pinned on the dartboard across the room.

A picture of McCree.

Bastard rounds on him. “What’s so funny?”

But Hanzo is open-mouth chortling like it’s the funniest thing he’s ever seen. De Silva, Flippen and Threadwell sit paralyzed, glancing between each other like they’re watching ping-pong.

The archer stubs out his cigarette. “Alright. You got me.”

Bastard bristles; he’s about to pull a gun. “Got what?”

Hanzo clears his throat. Still snickering. “I have also brought a message.”

“Which is?”

He smiles, lowers his cards, and lurches across the table to smash his whisky glass into Bastard’s head.

Chaos cracks across the room. Threadwell lunges out of his chair; Hanzo wrestles him by the neck. One mighty tug allows him to swing the man into both Bastard and Flippen, who crash heels-over-head into the wall and down to the ground. Hanzo heels De Silva in the chest before he can rise. He drops to wrest a gun from Flippen’s spasming hand.

“Cut his fuckin’ nuts off!” someone shouts -- Threadwell, from the sound of his gurgle -- as Hanzo pistolwhips Bastard across the brow.

*Pow!* Hanzo fires at the ceiling. Chairs scrape amid screams and footfalls. The room clears out just in time for more Deadlocks to rush in. Hanzo hoists a chair and batters down the first assailant that rounds the corner, and then the next, and then the third -- which is when the chair breaks. He’s forced to bring the gangster down with a sweeping kick, though the fifth is easily deterred by a throwing knife to the shoulder.

The jukebox trills on, dirty horns and plunky bass.

“*Outside!*” buzzes the bartender, scuttling with the fleeing crowd. “*Outside! Police on their way!*”
It takes him three adrenaline-fueled minutes to clear the tavern. Hanzo disarms whoever he can, spraying his attackers with four more throwing knives before he resorts to joining the firefight. What Deadlock lacks in accuracy, they make up for in sheer brazenness. He abandons all hope of non-lethal combat when a pair of tough guys with sawed-off shotguns crash in from the deck. A shower of broken glass rains on Hanzo as he jumps behind the bar; their blasts blow bottles off the shelves. He takes them out with two shots between the eyes.

The smoke clears and no one’s on their feet but him and De Silva, who tries to escape through a broken window. Hanzo ties him up, drags him to the back, and levels the muzzle of his gun at his forehead.

“Where is McCree?” he asks, point-blank.

De Silva blubbers. “I-I-don’t know!”

Hanzo cocks the hammer. “Where is he?”

“I don’t know!” he peals, shaking. “I-I-don’t know, I-I-don’t know, I’ve n-never seen him! I’ve never seen him in my life, I-I-just heard he w-w-was a K-O-S, s-some old burnout who joined the feds -- n-nobody’s seen him in years!”

“How many years?”

“Five? Six?” Panicky, fast breaths. “L-last p-people talked about, they saw ‘im in Deadlock Gorge --”

“Where?” Hanzo demands.

“R-route 66!”

“Where on Route 66?”

“I-I-don’t know!” De Silva’s teeth chatter. “I’ve never been there, I’ve never been there, th-they k-keep it a secret. I-I-heard i-it’s outside of Flagstaff -- th-there’s a diner, th-th-the Panorama -- ah, c’mon, man, don’t kill me! Don’t kill me, I swear I don’t know --”

Hanzo leaves him, ditches the gun, snatches the poster of McCree off the dartboard before slipping out into the cover of night. He scales a nearby building wall, crouching low as he lopes away. Blue lights and sirens drone closer as the police arrive.

None of them believe De Silva, who wails as they haul him in. Blathering insistently that the devastation is owed to a single guy.

---

Later, Hanzo returns via rooftop to his lodgings at the Eldorado Hotel and Spa. Most of Santa Fe’s buildings are flat-topped adobe, easy to jump between and cross. The archer zig-zags on his way back to ditch any Deadlock tails or drones.

The window to his hotel room is on the fourth floor; he climbs in via the roof, shuts it, locks it, and surveys his surroundings. Brown walls, white carpet, wooden furnishings. Nothing out of place, no sign of disturbance. Storm Bow remains hidden under the king-sized bed. His notebooks are stored in the suite safe. A paper sack full of groceries rests on the dresser, courtesy of the nearby gas station.
Hanzo opens the safe to dig out his phone. No new messages from Lúcio, a single encouraging text from Hana with an attached picture of a silkie chicken in a basket. Three missed calls from Winston, all marked urgent, and one text: *talked to Hana, you're not in trouble, please call when you can.* Athena’s uplink flashes a log-in window on the screen. Hanzo shut the system off to avoid her tracking protocols. His comm is silent, too -- no input from Genji. Not that he expects it. His brother will contact him when their jobs are done.

He undresses, showers, and gathers his dirty clothes. The jeans are ruined; he will have to ditch the leather jacket for something less identifiable. He scrubs blood from a flap of Jesse’s plaid shirt with cold water from the sink.

Carefully Hanzo unfolds the dartsboard picture of McCree from the bar. It’s a bounty mugshot; Jesse is wound in his red serape, grizzled and hatted, grilling the viewer through fierce brown eyes. He inspects it side-by-side with the photo on his phone. No comparison. The young Jesse in Blackwatch greys and red kerchief is lean and smiling. Twenty-one or twenty-two, at the oldest. A young pup concealing his fangs.

He checks the door and window locks before settling in. Hanzo climbs in bed with his notes and a bottle of bourbon pilfered from the bar. With a plastic hotel pen, he updates the page between bites of a vanilla Moon Pie.

*Deadlock Gorge - Route 66 - Flag Staff (??) - Panorama - Diner*

*Not seen in 5-6 years*

*Judy Barceló - old woman - Santa Fe - worth checking?*

*McCree - got alias from this?*

*Potential relative?*

Hanzo nurses the bourbon and flips pages in search of a woman’s name. Jesse mentioned his mother’s name one night after Siberia while they lay cramped in his bunk. *Sara,* he said, and his father, Hogan -- sometimes ‘Butch Cassidy’ or noble ‘Shane.’ An unknown entity, someone Jesse could admire or malign to fit whatever yarn he wanted to spin. So different from the Shimada patriarch, whose name and legend were irrefutable, like ancient stone.

It doesn’t take long for the bourbon to go to his head. Hanzo opens the bedside drawer. A black book with a gold lettering gleams up at him. *The Holy Bible.* He scowls and pushes it back, covering it with the bottle, slamming the drawer. A memory flits to the surface: Jesse on hands and knees in Range 2, digging beneath the repair table. Hunting for a chestplate hose while muttering aloud. *Saint Anthony,* he explained, patron saint of the lost. Repeating his charm would invoke his blessing and bring about the missing object. Later Hanzo looked it up on the internet, intrigued by the gunslinger’s love of superstition without faith. Anthony of Padua died from ergotism, a condition from eating bad food.

He glances at his empty pie wrapper as the ache returns in force. Hanzo brushes crumbs out of the bed, turns over, and flicks off the lamp. Weak and anxious.

Sleep pursues him fast. He dreams about the underground station in Siberia, the darkness and grime and cold metal walls. A subdued splash of color: the pallet of blankets and old coats are lined with wisteria. Jesse lies naked beside him, warm as sun. Stroking him with callous fingers; no metal hand, all flesh and blood. Conviction seizes Hanzo, the surreal understanding that only comes in dreams. Their union somehow fixed him. By miracle of the heart, he’s restored.
We were safe there, purrs Jesse. Wasn’t a thing in the world that could get to us. Hanzo agrees, overtaken by fleeting joy at this unexpected reunion. They belonged in that station; however bleak, it was theirs alone. No Reaper, no Talon, no omnis in the snow. A grim, abandoned paradise free of hostilities or heroics.

I ruined it, he wants to say. I was a coward. That was where I should have loved you. I never should have thought to leave you, ever. But Jesse isn’t listening. His mouth speaks for him, smoky and sweet. A familiar weight presses on Hanzo, firm at some places and in others delightfully soft. This is no time for apologies. The gunslinger’s hands are warm and whole.

Just us, sweetheart. The Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost. Rolling Hanzo to his back, kissing his belly, parting his knees. Oh, darlin’, we should’ve stayed.

He wakes in hot sweat. The room is dark. White digital numbers glow from the bedside table: 3:10 AM. He clenches his jaw, rolls over, stifles a groan. Hard as a rock. How eagerly his body betrays him.

Jesse’s shirt drapes on the other pillow. The smell of cigarillo smoke stings his eyes with tears.

He gives in, sniveling into the fabric. Clenching up beneath the sheets, lamenting: we should have.

---

He checks out of the Eldorado on Wednesday. The hotel associate helps confirm the intended address on his phone’s map -- Yucca, a rural neighborhood at the low end of the city. He rents a car and navigates past rows of pueblo-style houses boxed in by clay fences. His notebooks and Moon Pies occupy the passenger seat.

Judy Barceló’s house is a squatty red cube at the end of a cul-de-sac. Hanzo parks at the mouth of the street to get a distant view. Green houseplants ring the concrete yard in decorative pots; a lopsided statue of a monk with a flock of animals sits by the wooden front door. Three speckled inca doves huddle on a nearby telephone wire. It’s quiet, save for the distant barking of a dog.

9:55 in the morning. Commuters are at work, children at school. The regular world spins on around him, domestic and dull. Drowsy with the fecundity of everyday life.

He pulls up the old picture on his phone. Jesse grins up at him, handsome and sly. He remembers the cheeky pride in his voice when admitting a love for tall tales, the wilder the better. How only the folks at Overwatch fell for them, and only for so long.

Except me, he thinks sourly, who falls for them even now.

Movement: an old woman putzes across Judy Barceló’s yard in house slippers and a red coat. Yellow rollers clutch her greying hair. She carries a black garden hose from pot to pot. A small white terrier darts around her feet, nips her toes, squats to piddle by a shrub.


J-U-D-Y, a four-letter replacement for Sara?

The old woman stops and looks up. He sinks down in his seat. She stares down the street with her water hose running.

She waves. Hanzo does not wave back. Uncertain, she turns away. He watches her go back inside.
Two long minutes pass before he gives up and starts the car.

He turns onto a paved road into the heart of the neighborhood. Hanzo drives slow, mindful of signs that warn for crossing children. A park comes into view, shaded by towering cedars. Over the engine he hears the distant sound of joyful recess. Three teachers escort a cadre of preschoolers to run amok across the playground. Pointing, nodding, and laughing as the little ones play.

The youngest woman catches his eye. Black hair, narrow nose, soft brown eyes. In a pink cardigan and long white skirt, he nearly mistakes her for Yuki.

Up ahead, two bigger boys are idling by a chain-link fence. Not quite teenagers, but close enough. Nothing about them seems reprobate, but he guesses they’re playing hooky from school. One has an orange jacket; the other taps a baseball bat against the fence. A green cap sits askew on his head. Siblings.

He pulls over, rolls down the window, and calls out, “hey.”

The boys look up, instantly on alert. Orange Jacket narrows his dark eyes. He steps forward. Hanzo nearly smiles. *That one’s the big brother.*

“Do you know Judy Barceló?” Hanzo asks.

“*La vieja*?” asks Orange Jacket. “Yeah. We know her. Why?”

“Is she okay?” Green Cap chimes in, frowning.

Hanzo works his jaw. He sounds concerned; she must be a neighborhood fixture. Perhaps someone beloved. “She is fine. I am looking for her son.”

“Which one?” asks Orange Jacket.

Weakly Hanzo says, “Sawyer.”

Green Cap rubs his cheek, wrinkles his nose, laughs. “What kinda name is that?”

“Oh, *señora* only has two sons,” Orange Jacket adds. “Manny and Lazaro. They don’t live here any more, they moved. Uh.” He glances up the street, down, then back to Hanzo. “You could ask Father Tony at the church?”

“Thank you,” Hanzo replies, deciding: *enough.* Rolling up his window. “Have a good day.”

Orange Jacket nods. Both boys wave. “‘bye. You too.”

He sags as he drives on, heavy beneath his doubts. Jesse’s stories and soliloquies whiz by with each landmark he passes; soon he’s indexing the recollections of his lovers one by one. He sorts truths in one row, deceits in the other. It wears him out, dehydrating his patience like the brown bushes peppered along the road.

Family. That’s the problem here. It reminds him of the family, despite Genji’s assurance otherwise. He doesn’t know if this mess is as bad as his fears regarding Yuki, or worse. Maybe the latter; at least, back then, *he* was the one with the option to run away. He made no last call, no final goodbye. A thousand strings left unwoven, cut without finish. The insult of radio silence must have stung as much as a cryptic yellow note.

He gnaws his tongue at the memory of the soft bed at the *Misión* in Dorado with his cheek
pillowed against Jesse’s chest. How they coupled then smoked, talked, then came together again. The cool luxury of lying in bed side by side, drunk off cigarettes and sex. Hanzo bites his lip, itches, scratches beneath his collar. Dwelling on their lovemaking for even a moment prickles him with desire. He can’t focus like this. Hastily he flicks on the radio, desperate for a diversion.

“... though his mind is not for rent, don’t put him down as arrogant, his reserve a quiet defense, riding out the day’s events -- the rii-ver --”

Rush. Tom Sawyer. An old ditty Genji used to sing, the anthem of a modern warrior. The storytelling scamp. A two-hundred year old tale about a boy who lived on the...

“Mississippi river,” Hanzo snarls. “Blew his arm off gambling on the riverboats -- upstream --”

Anger sweeps Hanzo like a tide. The street rounds out into a dirt lot ringed with dumpsters. He drives in, slams the gear to ‘park,’ slams back in his seat. He beats the steering wheel with his palm, thunk thunk.

“Where,” Hanzo rails. “Where are you? Where did you go?”

The song bounces on, discordantly cheerful. “Catch the myth, catch the mystery, catch the drift --”

“Where are you?” Hanzo fumes through gritted teeth. Glaring into the steering wheel, losing his temper. “Where are you? Where are you, where did you run off to, how can anyone find you” -- as he hunches, nearly breaks down, feels tears rising to his eyes -- “you liar. You fool!” Thunk thunk. “You fool --”

A grey flash. Hanzo looks up. There’s a dog darting between the dumpsters. It has something in its mouth. He sits up, breathes in, collects himself. Trying to get a better look at the animal: ticked coat, long snout, pointy ears. Limber and lithe. Chewing on discarded food, foil wrapper and all.

A coyote.

“No, his mind is not for rent -- to any god or government...”

He shuts off the car. The coyote backpedals as Hanzo opens the door, eyeing him, lowering closer to the ground. Its fur is thick and deceptively plush around the belly; years of feeding off scraps and garbage fare has softened it with a well-fed sheen. His throat tightens.

It’s afraid of him.

“Shh,” he says, extending a hand. “Hey.”

But the coyote prances away. It ducks behind a dumpster, whispers into the brush, takes off like a tawny streak. Hanzo watches him disappear beyond a hillock of twiggy scrub, blending in with the soil. Looking over its flank, daring him to chase.

It dwindles out of sight, and so too does Hanzo’s desire to stay in Santa Fe.

He gets back into his car and drives until he reaches Highway 25. The road takes him down to Hyperlane 40 where the auto-driver kicks in. The fastest route to Flagstaff, which is six hours away.

---

The car breaks down on a stretch of highway south of Canyon Diablo in Arizona. A crackling hum
precedes the vehicle sputtering and slowing down, the dash flashing with alerts. Hanzo pulls off to
the side of the road just before the car quits, cursing.

A burnt-out hover battery. No cell service. Hanzo glowers into the steam rising from the hood of
the car as he calls Lúcio through the satellite line.

“If it didn’t come with a jumper pack, you’re gonna have to get one,” he advises, frowning through
the screen. “I’m looking at where you are on a map. It says there’s a service station about eight
kilometers north of you. You can probably pick one up there and bring it back, or get another ride.”

Hanzo looks up. The desert stretches around him, vast and red. Surprisingly cold for a sunny
afternoon.

“Not too far of a walk,” the archer decides, shutting the hood of the car.

Hanzo takes off on foot with his belongings slung on his back. Lúcio chats with him for part of the
way, but Hanzo is in the mood for silence. Crossing the terrain proves to be no easy feat; in some
places, the footpath vanishes into rocky uneven ground. Dry winds gnaw at his face, whip his
cheeks, chap his lips. He dislikes the arid winter just as much as he thinks he’d hate the heat.

He imagines the gunslinger out here in his self-proclaimed natural habitat, wandering beyond tall
saguaro and wind-eaten rocks. Once Jesse tantalized him with the assurance that he’d bring him
here someday for a big desert bonfire with stargazing to follow. Hanzo indulged in the promise
with a reciprocal offering: ghost stories, both Eastern and Western, and a competition to see who
could scare the other fastest.

More tall tales, he thinks glumly. If he stays out past sundown, maybe he can find some truth to the
legend of the desert whip-poor-will. But perhaps he shouldn’t; Jesse once mused that some
cultures thought their calls signaled omens of death.

An encouraging blip on the horizon comes into view, but his relief is short-lived. To his dismay:
there is no service station. Instead, a cluster of deserted buildings await him, crumbling into decay.
Two cylindrical water tanks loom above the ruins; one is painted with the faded image of a
laughing cartoon cow. Nearby, a clump of crows squabble over something dead in the sand. From
the look of it, the service station hasn’t operated in years.

“Shit,” he mutters under his breath in Japanese, digging out his phone to call Lúcio back.

Pchow! Pchow! Gunfire reports in the distance. Hanzo drops, crouches, flings open Storm Bow’s
case. More gunshots; he can see three black figures scrambling towards him from two-hundred
meters ahead. A low hum follows. They’re being chased by someone on a hoverbike.

The archer nocks an arrow and eases around the ruins. A loud cry goes up; the hoverbike runs
down one figure with a sickening thud. Then it pursues the second, swinging a club. Hanzo spots a
decal on the side of the vehicle: a flaming lock in the jaws of a skull.

He aims for the driver, draws, and fires. The arrow hits. Another scream -- the hoverbike passenger
tumbles off and rolls. With a wham, the bike skids to halt in the dirt. More gunshots crack across
the terrain as the passenger opens fire on the two men fleeing. Hanzo nocks again, but the attackers
collapse after a final shot.

Hanzo gets up. He closes in, eyeing for signs of survival.

Five bodies lie in the sand, three men and two women. Leather gear and gloves. Deadlock skulls
leer up from their jackets; one of them has the logo tattooed on his bloody throat. Bullet holes gape
between the eyes of four he did not shoot.

Strange, he thinks. Such clean marks, for pistols at close range.

He stoops to collect their weapons when a voice calls behind him: “good shot.”

On top of the water tower crouches a figure in a dark cloak. Hanzo spins, draws, and fires; the figure rolls forward, dodging.

“Cease fire!” the figure cries as Hanzo nocks. “Save your arrows!”

“Show yourself,” barks Hanzo.

Two jacketed arms wave above the lip of the tower, flashing gloved hands. A circular disk peers over the edge; the figure is wearing some kind of helmet. Blue slashes of light glow on its faceplate, a heads-up display.

Hanzo narrows his eyes. An Omnic?

“Show yourself!” he repeats.

“Hold your fire,” says the figure in a low, smoky voice. “I’m a friend.”

“Doubtful,” he snarls, itching to fire. “Come down from there or I will shoot.”

The figure peeks down at Hanzo and giggles.

“You are going the wrong way,” it says, “if you’re headed to Deadlock Gorge. Not that I fault you: it’s a hard place to find. It’s in a ghost town, and the gangsters kept it off GIS data for decades to cover their tracks.”

Hanzo grits his jaw. Their voice is feminine, and he can’t place the accent. “I am not going to --”

“Deadlock Gorge?” the figure interrupts. Another laugh, this time a cackle. “You might want to consider heading there, then. These sort of things tend to go back to the source, where they began. You” -- she points -- “you’re good, very good. But, if you will pardon me for saying this, the dragon looks a little lost.”

“Who are you?” he charges, bewildered.

“A friend,” she says again. “Do you like birds, Mister Shimada?”

With a grimace of disbelief, Hanzo says nothing.

“I do,” she continues quickly. “Quite a lot, actually. There is one called the shrike. A butcher bird, colloquially -- it’s small, but packs a punch. Let’s go with that for now, until we’re better acquainted.”

“Shrike,” Hanzo mutters, still scowling. “I do not have time for games. Why are you here?”

“Birdwatching,” she replies, folding her arms on the tower railing.

“Are you mocking me --”

“It can be a boring job,” she interrupts. “Some of them are hard to find, even if you’re familiar with the desert.” The Shrike tilts her head. “Very good at hiding, those roadrunners.” And then, with a
note of sadness: “even better than owls.”

His heart leaps in his chest. *McCree.* And then, darkly: “what is your business with him?”

“Originally, I came to watch out for him,” she says, “but I don’t think that’s necessary now. If you are tracking him down, that means Overwatch is after him. And I’m not ready for that right now -- not yet.”

Hanzo clenches his teeth. “You are a bounty hunter, then? Here to collect?”

“Goodness, no,” she snorts. A pause. “Well, bounty hunter, *yes.* Collect on him, *eh.* It’s a lovely number, but he didn’t earn it all on his own. He wears some of it unfairly, in punishment for his flight.”

“By whom?” Hanzo asks. "Who put it there?"

“I don’t know,” replies the Shrike. She shakes her head. “It’s a bit sad. I wish I did. I used to know a lot of things, Mister Shimada, and a lot of people. But not anymore.”

“There is much I do not know,” Hanzo says tersely. “My patience is thin. Tell me your business, or leave me be.”

“I’d like to point you in the right direction,” she says, “but beyond that, I must let you go.” The Shrike indicates to her left. Hanzo notices something lying across her lap, a staff or club. “The canyon you’re looking for is further west. If you follow the train tracks about thirty to forty kilometers, you’ll get there. An old industrial railway passes through the Gorge just north of Flagstaff, right above Route 66. Once you see signs for the Panorama Diner, you’re close.”

“It could be a trap,” he accuses. “I have no reason to believe you.”

“You don’t. And nothing to lose from listening, either.” The Shrike settles back. “Go ahead, see if I’m lying. If I am, you can come back and try to kill me. I’ll wait.” She hums. “My contact is late, anyway. It’s very like him to show up at the last minute. I’ll be here for another day, the way things are going.” Muttering. “Such bad timing…”

Hanzo piques. “There are more of you?”

“No,” quips the Shrike. “Not quite. Different birds, similar plumage. Back in my day, Mister Shimada, people used to say there was no one quite like me, and I’d like to think that still holds true. But then I see *you*” -- she gestures as if shooting a bow and arrow -- “and I realize you’re giving me a run for my money.” Another laugh. “Times change.”

Hanzo slowly lowers his bow. He says nothing. Déjà vu prickles in his chest, new and almost nostalgic. This is familiar: him down here, a bird up there, nature and the cold blue sky sprawling around them. There’s something about her tone, light and cheeky, slightly playful. Half-cautionary, half-jest.

Has he dreamed this before?

The Shrike looks up. Sunlight glints off her faceplate. “Is it high noon yet?” She rises to her feet. “Please forgive me for speaking in riddles. Like I said, I’m not quite ready. I will be, someday. Until then, this is the most I can do to help.”

The object in her lap is not a staff, but a gun. Cradled in the crook of her arm.
A sniper rifle.

“Who are you?” Hanzo demands, already backing away. “Tell me this, at least. Before I go.”


The Shrike backs down. Hanzo grits his jaw and turns away.

When he looks over his shoulder to say thank you, she’s gone.

With the sun overhead and cold winds at his back, Hanzo takes the hoverbike and races over the scrub. He follows the ridges of Canyon Diablo to the west, zooming between high jagged cliffsides and rust-colored bluffs. The hoverbike is heavy but durable; it cuts past rock and cacti without sputtering. Storm Bow feels light on his back, a comforting weight.

His bag rustles. The Orb of Harmony pops free, glints in the sun, zooms to keep up. A flash of blue and gold against the vast winter sky, luminescent and smooth.

I will find you, he thinks, urgent and sure. His personal plea -- to the dragons, the Iris, Saint Anthony -- whoever will listen. Wherever you are, I will be there soon.

---

* * *

---

Midtown Atlanta. One block from the Margaret Mitchell house, in front of the Federal Reserve Bank, facing 5:00 PM rush-hour traffic, they people-watch. Reyes on the right side of the bench, McCree left. Civilian clothes, comms off, no gear. Weapons hidden. Reyes has a faded Georgia Tech hoodie, Jesse wears the beanie. Mission’s over; they’re off the clock. Between them sits a greasy paper bag from the Varsity, burgers and dogs.

“Alright,” says Reyes, pointing to a blonde man on the crosswalk. “That one. Go.”

“His name’s Bill Sikes,” drawls McCree over his chili-dog. “About fifty or something. Business investor. Uh. Does business in that building right over there” -- he points at the reddish skyscraper across the street -- “Married, two kids, lives up in Alpharetta. Likes football. Goes duck-huntin’ to avoid his wife. Hates his life. Eats ass.”

“Eh,” Reyes mutters through a mouthful of french fries. “Dunno about ‘Sikes.’ Sounds too made-up. Other than that, though, good story. A regular Joe would believe it.” Digging in the bag. “You gotta be more careful about that one thing you do, though.”

Jesse pauses mid-bite. Here comes an adjustment, probably because of ‘eats ass.’ “What thing?”

“The ‘fifty or something.’ ‘Hating his life.’ ‘Likes football.’ Broad strokes. The others, though, I liked those. Like the duck-hunting.” Reyes slathers ketchup on his fries. “Everything’s in the details. Whenever we’re out casing an op, remember that. That’s how you’re gonna keep up with what I do, yeah? Mira: once you got details, step back” -- gesturing with a fry in his hand -- “and
look at the whole picture."

McCree jabs his thumb at the stream of passersby. “Only so much you can get by lookin’ at someone for a few seconds.”

“You aren’t looking hard enough.”

“Well, fine, then,” McCree says, taking a bite. “Show me.”

Reyes wipes his fingers with a napkin. “Pick one out first, son.”

McCree scoffs, mouth full. Cheeks puffed. “Don’t call me ‘son.’”

Reyes rolls his eyes. He’s fought this battle before. Today, he concedes. “Pick one out, cowboy.”

Jesse noisily slurps his Coke and scans for a challenge. At best, it’ll only slow him down -- because when has Gabriel Reyes ever gotten stumped on the job? Not in Jesse’s lifetime. This man’s got the credentials, numbers you can’t blink at, the stellar reputation for hard work. Saving the world is not a monarchical process, but someone has to do it. Might as well be him. After all: the king always knows what to do.

Target acquired: a woman in blue. Reyes raises an eyebrow. Yeah, McCree insists -- that one. So Reyes scripts the tale.


“Why’d you give her stims?” McCree counters. “What if she’s actually just twenty-three?”

Reyes looks at him while chewing on a fry. “She isn’t. Saw her in the database. Marisa Dunn. Suspected of involvement with an underground op ring specializing in marked-up drugs.”

McCree groans. “Boss, that’s fuckin’ cheating.”

Laughter. Reyes eases back, wipes his mouth, reaches for another fry. “Nah. I’m screwing with you, cowboy, I’m screwing with you. Aw, c’mon. Don’t look at me with that face. That’s the whole point of the game! You gotta go in with the details. Alright, look, you’re right -- she’s probably never used a rejuv stim in her life. But now you’re thinking about it, yeah? Are you thinking about the whole picture? See, that’s the game! You’re getting more creative. Listen: you did good with that last guy, just focus on detail. Go with something current. Something you know.”

“Yeah, but I don’t,” McCree says. Defeated, trying not to sound like it. “I don’t know so much, boss. This doesn’t come easy like it does with you.”

“Not yet. It will. Gotta stick with it.” Swatting McCree’s shoulder. “C’mon. Otra vez, let’s go again. Paint me the whole picture this time, yeah? And -- hey.” A finger in his face, wagging, listen to me. “Pick a better joke besides the ass.”
That lightens him up. Jesse sits forward, grins, cherishes the rebuke. Reyes drapes his arm on the bench, silhouetted by a red evening sky. Eyes alive. Hunting for the next mark.

“Alright. Let’s see. My turn...”

---

He wakes, rolls over, and takes aim. Arm straight, shoulder braced, hammer cocked. Peacekeeper is loaded, six bullets in the cylinder. Ready to fire.

Dark room. Shutters drawn, walls empty. He’s on a musty pallet jammed into the far corner; stale blankets beneath him, grimy boxes beside him, ratty dresser juxtaposed with a broken chair. Wind batters the tin roof. It’s freezing.

He’s alone.

McCree lowers his gun. He sits up, coughs, and listens to the cabin creak.

No one else is there. Same as the day before, the night before that, and so on. He picked a good, secure place -- an abandoned shack, run-down and disheveled, far out in the bluffs -- for a hideout. It’s not as bad as others. At least this one has a bathroom.

He gets up, stretches, winces. Sleeping in his boots is hell on his back, but he’s too far long in this goose-chase to bed down without them. McCree is close to a real lead, an opportunity, a break. A chance to get him, though he’s not sure what will come from the getting, or after.

One glance through the shutters tells him the time of day: mid-afternoon, maybe two or three. McCree shambles to the bathroom, takes a piss, runs the sink tap. Eventually the brown water runs clear; he fills a chipped coffee mug and takes a sip. Bitter, but it beats hunting for an arroyo. At least the well still works.

At least you are here, soothes the regal voice in the back of his mind. At least, at least.

“Yeah, Ana,” he mutters into his mug. “Yeah, yeah, whatever.”

He wanders back, stares at the floor, dwells on the mess. A quick inventory: ammo (boxed), flashbangs (two extra), Peacekeeper’s kit (intact), holsters and belts and spare tools (scattered nearby). His stash of food rations (bland-tasting), cigarillos (thank God), bourbon (thank all the other gods) and a wad of spare clothes. Six green post-it notes chronicle the details of what he knows (Reyes lives), what he doesn’t (Talon, Lacroix, Blackwatch, the song) and what he can’t figure out (everything else). His serape for a pillow, hat for shade, cards for solitaire. A single-player game.

No Gibraltar. No Overwatch; the room has no trace of comrade and kindred. He brought no reminder of the happy, noisy family with their cohesive strategies, communal suppers, and wealth of second chances.

The silence, like a gulf, from an absence of Hanzo. Filled by the ballad of Jack and Gabe.

He closes his eyes and his brain churns -- spinning the wheel, grinding the gear, renewing the cycle of his transgressions -- until he can think straight. Reviewing his list, and what’s left to check off.

---

His first few hours on the run passed in numbness. Jesse left without looking back; he booked it
out of the Watchpoint to hitchhike, train-hop, and smuggle himself across the Atlantic. Talon’s attack prompted raised security across every stop and station along the way, but it was the familiarity of routine that wore the gunslinger down. Traveling without Hanzo felt unnatural and hollow, a precursor to the heartache that hit him after touching down in Houston.

From there, he hoofed it through Baytown in search of intel, old contacts, familiar faces. A few tolerant thieves with whom he’d worked during post-Blackwatch days warned him that the Reaper was not worth chasing, no target a single man could take on his own, no matter how big his balls. A good way to get his other arm sliced off, they said. Jesse pardoned their caution, insisted on buying their info, paid handsomely for their trouble. The most recent Reaper sighting placed him at the old Watchpoint in Grand Mesa, a lead which McCree pursued with gusto. Trying not to dwell on the fact that it was Christmas Eve back in Gibraltar, where he could’ve been (should’ve been) spending the night with the archer in their dorm. Their futon, a sacred space. The sweep of Hanzo’s black hair across the opposite pillow, like silk.

And then it got him hard and hurting, like brushfire in a field. While waiting for the night hypertrain up to Denver, Jesse spent thirty minutes dry-heaving in a stall in the men’s bathroom, hands spanning the partition to keep him up. It was starting to sink in. A whole day without his partner -- sweetheart, lover, gentleman friend -- and the dread was galvanizing despair. The gut-cranking agony of a bad decision he couldn’t take back.

He almost stopped there. Almost gave up, turned around, went back. Almost.

But then he remembered he saw behind the Reaper’s mask -- and pushed on.

The transcontinental line didn’t sell tickets to people like Jesse McCree before the recall and wouldn’t have obliged him since, so he rode stowaway. Just like old times, he told himself, heartsick and shivering on top of the train. Bundled down in his serape -- which he considered leaving at the Watchpoint for Hanzo to keep in case the search turned bad and he didn’t make it. In the end, he chickened out. There are things a person can come back from, McCree told himself, and things they can’t. Better to mourn a ghost completely gone than one discourteous enough to leave traces of himself behind.

The trek to Grand Junction took him three days. Nostalgia kept him going. He’d been a regular at the base since Blackwatch dragged him in; one of the holding cell walls probably still had his sloppily-carved ‘FUCK U’ from when they’d locked him up after the Deadlock sting. Later visits were less tumultuous. McCree grew to like the place, even considered it home-away-from-home during the year he and Reyes ran stings in the Midwest. Wintertime, like in Geneva, powdered the base with snow.

Reaper had a point. It was poetic for them to reunite there. This time, like many years ago: on different sides.

McCree showed up. Reaper did, too. A ghastly encounter that lasted less than two minutes, deterred by the Watchpoint’s new owners. Helix Security International had staffed the base since Overwatch’s fall and took every precaution since Seventy-Six committed his untimely thefts. Their heightened defenses turned floodlights on the skirmish after the first exchange of gunfire. Reaper fled before McCree could lock him down, giving him just enough time to get away from the base’s armed guards.

From Colorado into Utah, Utah to Arizona, Arizona down through the sands, he followed. Sometimes by bike, often by foot. Avoiding major hyperlanes and thoroughfares, laying low. Reaper showed himself then faded, enough for a glimpse. When they faced off, Jesse opened fire first. To his surprise, Reaper aimed but missed, took bullets, disappeared snarling into thin air.
Eventually combat stopped altogether; the broad, hooded back would flicker into view before dispersing into the night.

Now he understood. Reaper was losing steam. This was less of a hunt, more a chase.

Through snowdrifts and a somber heart, McCree pursued. Three times he came close to quitting; each wintry stop brought him little rest and greater doubt. But he hunkered down, grit through the pain, and yielded to the chase to force himself on. Reminding himself of the ballad and the answers that complete the chord.

Which brings him here, to the Gorge.

---

McCree straps on his chestplate, belts his chaps, buckles his holster. He forces down some of his rations: biscuits, two strips of jerky, a vegetable wafer. Pursuing ghosts is weary work, but the trail -- carefully laid by his phantasmal guide -- requires endurance.

He hikes three kilometers from the cabin and crosses a dry riverbed. A ground squirrel scuttles out of his path; the gunslinger pauses to admire its bushy tail.

If he looks too long, his eyelids start to droop. Jesse is exhausted, a physical state he guesses is part of the plan. That’s one boon in this whole mess: less sleep means more vigilance. He rouses expecting to see Reaper’s mask looming above him in the dark. At this point, he wishes it would happen. Get it over with already.

The waking part of the past two weeks have been hard on him. He misses Hanzo so fiercely that it hurts in his bones. His thoughts have soured into hot, haunting things: old events, older words, distorted faces he can no longer block out. If he sits too still for too long, the memories come back. Hanzo is not here to distract him as they unbury themselves one by one, looping like the voices do, licking his anxieties. McCree tells himself he deserves to be immolated by guilt. It was bad enough the first time he bailed from Overwatch; another lap around the same track should award him double.

But he’s good at keeping himself alive, even when burning. He sticks to his guns and his habits. Reciting what he knows, like a mantra.

He knows Deadlock Gorge. The canyon runs parallel to where historic Route 66 crosses the railway, a vast natural maw split between two lips of urbanization. A gang heist destroyed the bridge earlier in the year; McCree sees the transport wreckage jutting over the cliffs like a greenish tumor. Rumor has it that Deadlock built and abandoned an underground storehouse in the years since he left. If he makes it through this, he might go see if it’s still there.

McCree follows the riverbed to the mouth of the canyon. He stops and scans the horizon. For the third day in a row, there’s nothing. No sign of life. If Reaper was here, he missed it. Jesse scrubs his chapped lips and groans. Shit for timing.

But it’s Mercy, not Ana, that flits to comfort him. How is your arm? Your eye?

“Who gives a damn,” Jesse rumbles, wincing up at the sky, sweating despite the breeze.

Beneath the waning sun, he sits on a red chunk of rock, watches, and waits. His thoughts keep him company, itching now and then for the occasional swig of bourbon.

What will he do when this is over? If it ends the way he desires (questions answered, mysteries
solved, justice dispensed), where will he go? Are there any more leaves to turn? The crew was forgiving at recall, but he tells himself it was the critical hour that worked in his favor. Back then, Winston was desperate for support; now he has it in spades. With the UN behind him and new recruits lining up, there’s no need for a fugitive cowboy -- especially one with a habit for unsanctioned departure. He doesn’t expect clemency from Overwatch, not after running off again.

And zero forgiveness from Hanzo, who has (probably, surely, definitely) left for Hanamura by now.

He lights a cigarillo and burns through an oncoming ache. Thinking about the fight always weakens his resolve. Or, correction: fights, as he’s convinced now that their November tensions qualify as such. He tells himself that Hanzo was already on his way out; he should’ve prepared to get ditched the minute the archer told him how often he missed home. And when Hanzo gave him the cold shoulder after the Hollywood gala, well: morosely, the gunslinger thinks he earned it. But this sentiment is nothing new. McCree argued with himself for weeks after Dorado -- weighed his baggage, contemplated leaving sooner, decided it would spare them both a lot of pain.

Irrational, argue the voices, especially Amari. Taking up the tone of his conscience. Should have talked to him. Your sweetheart. Running away? You’ve done enough of that. Stupid cowboy, you’re hesitating.


Dusk sets in. He packs up before it gets dark and goes back to the cabin. There’s no heat; he could use the fireplace, but he’s wary of making smoke. So he gathers the blankets over his head and lies still.

What is Hanzo doing right now? Is he glad to be back in Japan? Maybe he’s lounging at one of those covered heated tables whose name he can’t recall, something that began with ‘ko.’ Hanzo wanted one for the dorm; Jesse hoped to oblige him one as a New Year’s gift. If Genji is with him (and surely he is; he doesn’t fault his lover’s brother for being the center of his world) maybe they’re having a good time. His clever fella, warm and far away. Safe.

The gunslinger curls into a ball and shuts his eyes.

“Goodnight, sweetheart,” he mutters into his serape.

The wind howls. Tonight, like every night before, he can’t get the archer out of his thoughts -- so he whistles the first tune that comes to mind. Over and over, until his brain turns soft and loops itself to sleep.

---

The next day: same routine. He wakes, aims, discovers he’s alone. Rises, pisses, drinks old well water. Gears up, eats, and goes out to the canyon. The ancient faces of the town billboards leer down at him, watching.

By noon, he’s about to give up and look elsewhere when he sees it. A shimmer in the distance, like a black mirage.

Reyes.

McCree takes off into the Gorge with Peacekeeper loaded and ready. The mirage disappears; he keeps running, spurs chiming. Further along the riverbed, another inky flicker.
There he is.

Clouds of black vapor swell from the sand as the Reaper takes form. His bone mask emerges first, an ivory slash. Two shoulders and a torso take shape, followed by a tattered cloak.

Then the clawed hands, which is when the gunslinger opens fire.

*Bang-bang-bang!* He fans three bullets into Reaper and ducks, drops and rolls forward to avoid return fire. The wraith lets out an inhuman shriek; Jesse gets to a knee, waits for a report, hears nothing. He looks up.

“Ingrate,” Reaper rasps, stumbling.

McCree clutches a spare flashbang. He can’t tell if he’s feigning or genuinely dragging as he hovers over the sand. Reaper drops, snarling, jittering in and out of focus. The mask vanishes within the dark chasm of his hood.

Then Jesse sees it: black liquid spattering the rocks, like tar.

“Stay down!” bellows McCree, charging forward with Peacekeeper held high.

But he’s gone. A gust of wind takes the wraith just as McCree brings down his gun. He whirls; Reaper is recollecting behind him.

This time, he’s armed.

He throws the flashbang. Reaper twists. He swings the flat side of his shotgun like a bat.

*Clink.*

No time to back up. He can’t even gasp. The last thing he sees before the blackout is the neon glow of the grenade, reflected back at him.

---

He wakes to pain, then panic.

The gunslinger jerks and comes to, bolting forward. He’s seated on hard ground; wherever he is, there’s light. He opens his eyes to a rust-colored wall: jagged rock, mineral stripes, uneven edges. Sputtering, McCree flexes his arms until he registers a pinch.

His wrists and ankles are tied with a length of brown rope.

McCree coughs. He scoots until his back touches something hard. His vision clears to a familiar palette and setting.

The desert canyon. Jesse grits his teeth and glances left-to-right, up-and-down, a quick once-over. Stains on the sand and signs of a scuffle. He’s still in Deadlock Gorge; the same place where he knocked out. His hat is missing and Peacekeeper is gone.

Then he looks forward. Crouched in front of him, a streak of hellish black against the vibrant red rock, the Reaper watches.

“Fuck,” McCree grunts, kicking, jerking his heels. “Fuck, fuck -- fuck you, Reyes, *fuck!*”

Silence. Reaper remains motionless, like a grisly statue.
Spittle flies from McCree’s lips as he flails, kicks, and blurs a string of expletives. He wrests and wriggles the rope. “God -- *fuck* you, Reyes, you grim sonofabitch, *asshole,* you *monster* --”

No response. The bone mask stares, transfixed. It’s like he’s not even breathing.

“Go to hell!” Jesse growls through gritted teeth. “Go to hell, Reyes! Do you hear me? Do you hear me in there, you sick sonofabitch? Whatever you’ve done, whatever you planned, I hope it sends you straight to --”

He stops. Reaper’s arm moves, slow as the hand on a clock. Lifting one hooked finger to the beak-like vee of his mask.

Shh.

“Nah,” McCree croaks. Testing his bonds, knocking his heels. “Nah, nah, just kill me already.”

Reaper breaks his squat and rises. He stalks toward the gunslinger with heavy, measured steps.

“Kill me!” yells McCree. “Kill me, *kill me,* just end it already! Just finish the job -- what’re you waiting for” -- he’s fighting, close to thrashing, unable to come up with a last-minute trick -- “enough playin’ around, Reyes, just finish the *job!*”

*Thump. Thump.* Leaden footfalls. He’s inches away.

“Go on!” Now Jesse’s chest seizes with desperate breaths. He rattles and shakes, cold with terror and rage. Glaring up at him, bellowing. “Get it over with, Reyes!”

The Reaper reaches into his cloak.

McCree keeps his eyes open, wild and wide. Telling himself frantically: *this is it.* Here’s where the chase ends. Now it’ll be over, and he’s ready to be through. Preparing himself for when the wraith will draw the --

-- box.

McCree blinks. Reaper says nothing.

No -- *wait,* he snaps. Wait, wait; what is that?

A small black box. Not a shotgun.

*Click.* Before Jesse can speak, Reaper digs a clawed thumb into a red disc (button? switch?) on the box. It whirrs. Static crackles, and then, unmistakable, McCree hears it.

A guitar.

“And now, to sing this lovely ballad: here is Mama Cass.”

Jesse’s jaw falls slack. Reaper tilts his head.

It’s a music player.

“*Stars shining bright above you,*” the vocalist croons. “*Night breezes seem to whisper: ‘I love you.’*”

“Gah,” Jesse bleats. Rapidly shaking his head. “Gah, no, nah, no -- nah-nah-nah-nah --”
But the singer keeps going. “*Birds singin’ in the sycamore tree* --”

“Nah! Turn that shit off! Reyes!”

“*Dream a little dream of meee* --”

“No!” McCree kicks, jolts, starts spitting again. “Nah, *fuck* you, Reyes, go to hell with that garbage! You creepy asshole, the *hell’s* wrong with you, gah” -- spurs jangling -- “what’re you doing, stop playin’ around!”

Shh. Reaper holds up his index finger once more. The song bounces on, whimsically forlorn.

“*Stars fading, but I linger on, dear, still craving your kiss* --”

“A-a-aARGH!” With a whoop, Jesse lunges. He flings himself forward at Reaper with the last of his balance and strength. Effortlessly Reaper steps aside; Jesse falls on his face; Reaper displaces a few inches away and looks down at the gunslinger as he writhes belly-down in the sand. Jesse hollers without speech or word, a man at the end of his wits.

Reaper taps the red button. The song quits. He tosses the music player over his shoulder; it sails into the canyon wall, shatters, clatters in pieces across the ground.

Then, he *sighs*.

Fuming, McCree rolls to his side. He scrapes to his knees, sits up, and bellows, “*enough, Reyes! Enough!*”

Reaper circles him with a lighter gait. He stops in front of McCree and takes another object from his cloak.

A scrap of yellow cloth.

Now McCree draws back. His guts twist with novel fear; whatever Reaper is doing, he doesn’t like it at all. “What’s that?”

Reaper pinches the cloth between his thumb and forefinger. He dangles it in the gunslinger’s line of sight.

It looks like a dish towel.

“Stop it,” McCree hisses. Suddenly anxious. “Stop -- stop it -- what *in hell* are you doing?!”

With a *snap*, Reaper shakes out the scrap and holds it at both corners. He thrusts it in Jesse’s face: a wide, flat plane of gold terrycloth. Wiggling it, *lookie lookie*.

Jesse lurches. He’s suddenly nauseous, on the edge of vertigo. “*Sto-o-op!*”

*Whip*. Reaper tosses the rag aside. He takes a few steps back, stoops, and crouches in front of McCree again. Jesse leans away, panting. Red-faced. Struggling not to lose the contents of his stomach.

It takes ten agonizing seconds for the wraith to finally speak.

“You look ridiculous,” Reaper mutters in his jagged, flat voice.

“What the hell,” McCree growls. “What the *hell* did you just do, Reyes, what are you --”
“Save it,” he replies. “Your breath. Save it.” He holds up a clawed hand. “No more flailing.”

“God-dammit, Reyes, you fuckin’ monster --”

“I said save it,” Reaper snarls, thrusting forward. Threatening again. McCree tenses; he quiets, fidgeting in place. Sizing up the wraith, evaluating.

They face each other for ten more awful seconds of silence.

“No more flailing,” repeats Reaper, settling. “You’re dehydrated. Worse than I thought. I predicted you would be in better condition by the time you got here.”

“Why?” Jesse asks, a little wry. “So you’d have an excitin’ time takin’ me out? Drainin’ me dry?”

Reaper tilts his head. He almost sounds offended. “Please.”

But Jesse persists and taunts. Wanting the upper edge. “C’mon, Reyes, I know why you’re here. I’ve read the reports. Killin’ innocents and leaving behind their husks. I know all about it. There’s no need to play games --”

“You’d already be dead,” Reaper interrupts. “During any of the three opportunities I had which you know about, or the countless others you don’t.”

His words strike the gunslinger’s ears like hammers on steel. “What?”

“Come on, cowboy,” Reaper says dryly. “Give us both more credit than that.”

McCree slouches where he sits, disbelieving. “Then fuckin’ explain this. You owe me that much.”

“Verification,” replies Reaper. “A matter of security. I needed to check and see.”

“See what?”

Reaper goes silent. He lowers his head. Jesse’s mouth runs dry.

A realization: he’s drooping.

“I needed to check and see if it was you,” he says.

“Whatta you mean?” Jesse charges, bristling. “What’s that mean, ‘was you,’ who else would I --”

“Relax,” Reaper shoots back, commanding. “You check out. The first two times, I wasn’t sure, but this is enough. However long you were involved, it’s worn off. Or, maybe, it didn’t even take.”

“What the fuck does that mean,” cries Jesse, shuddering. He can’t parse his confusion and fear. “For fuck’s sake --”

“We need to talk,” he interjects. “Just you and me.”

“Oh, we’ll do that alright.” Jesse rallies again. “You’re gonna answer for your crimes, Reyes -- after Gibraltar, Siberia -- after what you did to all those people, to everyone, Gabriel, to Overwatch an' Blackwatch and --”

Clunk. Reaper chunks a black disc at Jesse; it lands a few inches in front of him. It’s a canteen. Then he tosses a black utility knife. Jesse’s throat tightens. His stomach threatens to twist a knot in his chest.
Gabe’s knife. US military, standard issue, Swiss-type. Multipurpose. It’s seen so much use that the edges are worn down to silver metal.

Another long silence. Jesse slumps, nudging his chin to his chestplate.

“When you’re ready,” Reaper rasps, “come with me.”

He rises, turns, and sets off into the Gorge. Jesse watches him go until he disappears around a distant bend in the path.

Realization number two: he’s limping.

Jesse stares at the canteen and the knife. One glance at the yellow rag and he’s suddenly dizzy. He looks away and clenches his teeth.

Finally he moves. Three quick scuffs on his knees and he reaches the knife. McCree cuts the rope and leaps to his feet. Did Reaper take his gun and hat? No: a final realization. They’re perched on a rock across the riverbed. He grabs them, gathers his wits, looks down the path that leads into the Gorge. Listening to his breath, the wind, the cry of a faraway bird. No voices. Once again, he’s alone.

The canyon spins around him, all red with gash of blue sky.

He picks up the canteen, and follows.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Natalie, Entropy, Wesley, Vita and my sensitivity readers for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- References: The proverb, The jukebox song, St. Anthony, Tom Sawyer, the the song and the story, A Shrike, The Varsity (dunno about you guys but this place always gave me an upset stomach). A suggestion for where McCree might have gotten the name "Bill Sikes." And, in case you want a refresher: the song on the music player at the end...
- Have you checked out the McHanzo tumblr lately? You should! It's a really great place for fans of the ship!
- Hope you guys enjoyed this one. Scenes in this chapter have been on my mind for months, since I first started drafting it all out. It was thrilling to finally get to this point, and even moreso to start working on what happens next. I don't think I've ever really gotten to this point in a narrative before, to be honest, without stopping or moving on! It's been a bit of a wild ride, and will get a little wilder -- but don't forget, I still have your happy ending noted out.
- As I said before, Chapter 18 will be hot on this chapter's heels, with 19 hopefully out before BlizzCon. Fingers crossed!

HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST
So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes --
because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](#) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

- Thank you for waiting! Here's the showdown chapter!
- Content note: body horror. Discussion of brainwashing, mental conditioning, and its effects in this chapter, but all in recollection.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The gunslinger catches up around the canyon bend. Reaper heads down the canyon; he sways and hobbles on every right step. The broad plane of his back stands out in stark, unnatural contrast to the red rock. He’s moving slow.

“Reyes,” calls McCree.

Reaper keeps walking. He doesn’t look back.

McCree slides his right hand over Peacekeeper’s grip, tests the weight, reassures himself that it’s there. When things are tense, nothing feels as comforting as his gun.

“Hey!” he calls again, open-mouthed and hoarse. “Where’re you going?”

No answer.

“Reyes!” hollers McCree. “Ain’t got time for games!”

The Reaper maintains his limping gait down the dry riverbed. A six-foot specter, looming down the desert.

McCree fires the last three shots at the back of the wraith’s peaked hood. Reaper disappears; the bullets whizz harmlessly through the now-empty space.

Snarling, McCree reloads. He bolts through the canyon, dodging clumps of brush and uneven rock. Soon he’s panting, huffing and puffing, struggling as he lopes down the shadowed red chasm. His pulse drums in his ears, thick and dull. The voices urge him on. Gotta get him, clever fella. Good shot, gotta get him. Gotta get him, clever fella, bad shot --

He races around a turn in the riverbed that opens into a clearing. Here the canyon breaks wide, encircling a shallow gulf of reddish sand. McCree grinds to a halt. His vision threatens to spin.

Beneath the chilly midday sun, in the middle of the clearing, stands a wooden platform. Four rotting posts and dingy stairs elevate it off the ground. A heavy beam runs parallel to the dilapidated scaffold; three lengths of rope dangle from its beam. At the end of each rope hangs the running knot of a noose.

A gallows.

Reaper sits at the edge of the scaffold, legs crossed. Head down, hunched, resting his wrists on his knees. A grim ghost.
Crows begin to caw overhead; their clamor snaps McCree out of his shock. He takes two shaky steps forward, preparing a third when he sees it.

A sun-bleached skull grins up at him from the sand. Unmistakably human. Sprigs of tawny grass protrude through the socket of one eye.

McCree rocks back on his heels and lets out a horrified gasp.

“You know this place,” says the Reaper in his dark, omnipotent voice.

“I do,” whispers McCree, transfixed. Like he’s walked onto a murder scene.


McCree has no reply.

“You were destined for this place,” says the Reaper. “The gang only came here when it was time to take out the trash. Washouts. Spitfires. The ones who didn’t make the cut.” He pauses, rattling a low wheeze. “Maybe they told you about it, their court for Deadlock justice.”

Slowly the Reaper rises. The canyon wind whips at his cloak; he stares down at Jesse like a grim, solemn judge.

“But you took a different path,” he continues, “Instead of coming here, you went away with me.”

McCree reins in a shiver. Which is more of a nightmare: this place, or the wraith?

“A new leaf,” Reaper says mechanically. “We made a deal. The only ‘watch you’ll ever need.”

“Deal’s over, Reyes,” the gunslinger declares. “This is the end of the road for you.”

All at once, the threat breaks. Reaper’s shoulders rise and fall with a shuddering laugh. McCree shudders, itching to run.

“It’s the end of something,” Reaper replies, almost patronizing. “You got that much right.”

McCree points Peacekeeper and aims. “Explain yourself, asshole.”

“That might take a while.”

“I mean it,” barks McCree, stalking closer. “And you know it. You’ve got somethin’ planned. There’s a reason you led me out here. Whatever you’re doin’, you wanted me alive and watching. Whatever that was back there” -- he points behind him “-- whatever you were doin’ with that song, that” -- cloth? towel? rag? -- “that thing --”

Reaper waves his right hand, almost irritated. Enough. “Drink the water first.”

“Like hell I’m drinkin’ your --”

“Drink,” Reaper demands.

McCree steps back, grits his teeth, readies to fire. “I ain’t got time for your games --”

But Reaper swoops, crouches again, leers from the scaffold. “Desert survival 101,” he says. “You got about six hours of daylight left before the temperature change hits. At the rate you’ve lost
water, you won’t be able to handle another night below freezing. Am I wrong?” Tilting his head.
“No. Do us both a favor. Replenish or you’ll be sick before the sun comes up.”

McCree looks at the black canteen. Then he looks at Reaper. Then the canteen, then back at Reaper again.

A weak flash of nostalgia, reminiscent of field training with Captain Reyes. He’s right.


“You expect me to believe,” drawls McCree, “that you lured me all the way out here to make sure I stayed hydrated?”

“No,” replies Reaper. Genuinely irritated now. “I did that to make sure you came alone.”

“Yeah? So you can gang up on me with your Talon buddies? Lure me in with your --”

*Ka-chak.* Abruptly, Reaper chokes, cowers, clutches his face with hooked fingers. McCree quickly backs up as the wraith racks through a heinous groan. He watches Reaper lurch forward and spit up a glob of tarry liquid onto the sand. McCree makes a face. It smells horrid. The wraith hunches and heaves, croaking like a hellish bellows.

“Just drink,” he gurgles, audibly miserable. “Spare us both the trouble.”

Slowly -- after a heavy pause, in which he considers the facts that might convince the average man of what a poor choice this is -- McCree uncaps the canteen. He sniffs the contents (smells like water), squints inside (looks like water), and takes a very hesitant sip. Surprise: it’s water.

“You’re welcome,” Reaper sighs, wiping a bubble of oily spume from the beak of his mask.

McCree pretends to sip while sizing up his foe. For a murderous bogeyman, he’s in pretty bad shape. There are smears of black blood mottling his gear, some fresh and others dried. Bullet-holes speckle his cloak with innumerable rips and tears. McCree guesses his creepy physical state is not so invulnerable; perhaps he’s struggling to recover from being gunned down on Gibraltar and the fights after. Maybe he’s walking wounded. No position to fight.

*Fine,* he thinks. If he wants to chat before getting down to business, he’s all ears.

Eventually the Reaper gets his bearings. He braces the scaffold edge, dangling long legs over the side. Clutching the planks with his clawed hands. Peering owlishly.

“No communicator,” he observes. “No logos, no markings. No tac-gear or shields. You took off right after the attack, didn’t you? You don’t even have a cell phone.”

“Maybe I do,” McCree replies between drinks. “Maybe I don’t.”

Reaper flatly counters, “maybe look into getting a different belt buckle every twenty years or so.”

“Maybe look into a retirement plan that doesn’t involve going around murderin’ innocent people.”

A caw of laughter. “Innocent?”

McCree wags Peacekeeper’s barrel. “Last time I checked, invading a Watchpoint and attempting to crash a ‘copter-drone into off-duty operatives qualified as ‘murderin’ innocent people.’ Same with riggin’ explosives on a Siberian generator and killin’ Russian soldiers. Oh, and” -- he ticks off on his fingers -- “doing business with Talon, huntin’ down and slaying former Overwatch agents,
shootin’ up a museum full of civilians during a heist” -- he bobs his brows at Reaper, a sarcastic scolding -- “some of which were school-children, by the way. And, of course: blowin’ up the Swiss HQ with your band of bad guys.”

“Nice to see somebody’s keeping score.”

McCree wipes a dribble of water from his bearded chin. “In fact, I bet if I looked up ‘murdering innocent people’ in the dictionary, I’d find me a coupla your mugshots.”

Reaper sways before finally replying, “hope it’s the ones where my hair looked nice.”

“Go blow yourself, Reyes.”

Bah. Reaper laughs again. “Still using my old lines. What else managed to stick after all these years?”

“Certainly none of your degenerate preferences to set up shop with terrorists.”

“You think I’m with Talon.” A statement, not a question.

“Sure looks like you enjoy the perks of workin’ with ‘em.”

Wryly. “Contractors don’t get the dental plan.”

The jest sparks the livewire in McCree’s chest, low and smoldering. “Y’know, it wasn’t hard for me to believe it, after I found out whose side you were on. You may have shocked everyone else, scared ‘em real good. Hell, for the better part of my life, woulda shocked me, too. But not after the end.”

Reaper says nothing. The wind toys with the end of his cloak.

McCree digs in. “During those last years I was in Blackwatch? The way you started turnin’? Nah. You went down a dark path I couldn’t follow.” He bristles, swallowing his guilt and regurgitating it into anger. “I knew before the explosion, before all the investigations and witnesses. I knew there was blood on your hands. I was there.”

Silence. McCree watches the wraith droop as if pulled by a lead weight, just like he did at the mouth of the canyon. Heavy with moroseness, a gloom.

“Yes,” Reaper says softly. “You were. Which is why it’s important you’re here, now.”

McCree narrows his eyes and bites his tongue.

“It’s you,” Reaper declares. “The only one they couldn’t get to. A last chance.”

“Last chance for what?”

“Verification,” says Reaper. “To cross a few things off my list.”

McCree lowers the canteen; a strange, solemn sadness hits in his guts like a bullet. For a moment, however fleeting -- despite the inhuman timbre of his voice -- it sounds like him.

God, he still sounds just like Gabe.

Eventually the gunslinger asks, “what d’you mean by all this?”
“You had some of it figured out in Mexico,” Reaper answers. “You asked which agent I was. Lewis, Huynh --”


“All Talon now,” Reaper says.

“Yeah,” grumbles McCree. “There was a train heist. They jumped it for a hidden payload, used the old playbook. One of them recognized me --”

Reaper cuts in, casually menacing: “heard about that. They weren’t very happy to see you.”

“Feeling’s mutual.” McCree scowls. “You still haven’t answered my question. This ain’t news to me that Blackwatch went into Talon.”

Reaper lifts his index finger. “Ah-ah.” He spins it in a circle. “Other way around.”

McCree can only spit out, “what?”

The finger keeps spinning, loop-de-loop. A thread of black smoke chases its curved tip. “Confusing, isn’t it.”

“Mother of fuck-all,” rails McCree. He’s about to snap. “Answer the question!”

“I will, when you drink,” Reaper retorts. “Do you want the whole picture, cowboy? Because I don’t tell short stories.”

“I want the truth.”

“Then do as I said.” His hooded head slowly tilts. “If you really want to hear it, drink.”

McCree looks down into the canteen. He looks back at the Reaper. Then he holsters his gun. To hell with it, he decides, before he exhales, lifts, and takes a gulp.

A beat passes. The Reaper looks skyward. In the distance, the crows start up a raucous back-and-forth, yaw yaw. The mask slowly tracks to the right as he follows their flight across the horizon.

“Do you know,” he finally says, “the principle of Occam’s razor?”

McCree shakes his head.

Reaper’s voice turns gravelly as he speaks, loud and clear and everywhere at once. “‘Lex parsimoniae’, the law of briefness. If multiple explanations exist for an occurrence, the one with the least amount of assumptions is most likely to be correct. Choose the simple route.” A coal-black tendril of smoke escapes a slit in his mask. “For example, which story would you take as fact? That you’re on your way to a costume party, or the truth that you watched enough old movies to convince yourself you were actually a modern-day cowboy?”

Over the lip of the canteen, the gunslinger narrows his eyes.

“Not a principle I stressed very often,” Reaper says. “I always had my eye on the smaller parts of the whole picture. The more detail, the better. Creativity solved most of our problems when the simple route reached a dead end.”

Now Reaper pushes off the scaffolding, descending in a black streak. He lands with a thump;
plumes of smoke billow up when his soles hit the sand. McCree watches him rise and unwind like a steel coil, all sinew and strength. Even now, in this macabre form, he is the picture of prowess. Sleek, like a repurposed weapon. More deadly than he was in life.

The wraith starts a slow circle around the gallows. Shreds of his cape shed off like feathers, disintegrating as they hit the ground. McCree grinds his heels, watching. The Reaper walks with an executioner’s gait: heavy and unhurried, on his way to seal an unfortunate fate.

“Looking back at what happened,” he begins, “I see things in points. Dots on a line, stretched out one after the other. Facts. Data. Sequences of events.” A pause. “After I plug in the details, I step back to look, and there it is.”

He flicks his right hand. Long tendrils tear loose from the hem of his cloak and amass at his fingertips. Spinning together, a mutable fluid -- threads, ink, hair swirling under water.

“Occam’s razor,” Reaper announces. “The sharp edge along the line.”

McCree swallows another gulp, but the sight makes his throat feel unquenchably dry.


McCree steps back. He’s never seen anything like it. Not even Vaswani’s hard-light constructs look so real.

“Some of this you already know,” the Reaper lectures as the sphere floats behind him. “When the last omniums fell, everyone was watching. Six of us were credited for saving the world. Cameras were flashing. People were cheering. They showered us in medals and praise. But I couldn’t stop thinking about it. We were shaking hands with world leaders and I couldn’t get it out of my head: what now? What’s going to happen next? They asked me why I didn’t smile. They said, ‘well, you’re a hero, Gabriel.’ ‘Take a moment to enjoy the glory.’”

He scoffs, halts, rakes his claws through the sphere.

“Forget glory. The job wasn’t finished. If you looked around, you could see we were on the verge of a turbulent time. Post-war restoration always is. Every textbook will tell you that’s when the biggest changes happen. It was always on my mind. The work had just begun.”

The sphere reforms and flattens into a circular disc. It spins into a familiar emblem: the clasped hands of Overwatch.

“The question: if the world is safe, what do you do with the team that saved it? Originally, I wanted to disband. We needed discipline, not heroism. I thought we could do more by splitting up efforts in individual countries. At first, Jack” -- a weak clench of revulsion -- “took my side. The others, not so much. They thought we could do more with an established image. The world governments agreed. The United Nations found a quorum and let us set up the headquarters in Geneva. You know what happened next, after those meetings wrapped up.”

McCree nods; he does. “The blue strike suit.”

“The newly-appointed poster boy. Strike Commander Morrison, the face of Overwatch. Guess I should have smiled more, maybe they would have given it to me.” Reaper wiggles his index finger like a talon. “But here’s another point on the line. They gave the title to a boy scout. And the funny thing about boy scouts is: they don’t lead. They follow.”
Now the sphere spins into four distinct shapes: a dark parade of ducks in kerchiefs and Strike Commander cloaks. Visors and sailor caps swaying as they waddle in a row.

McCree nearly snorts, stifling it into the canteen.

At the front of the parade sails an avian shape with a smooth, round head. It spreads black wings, loops the gallows, and takes wing. The birds loop the Reaper in a distinct V-formation.

A barn owl. Now all the gunslinger stifles is a shudder.

“We worked out a plan,” Reaper says. “Jack took the spotlight, I took the shadows. As Commander, he kept up our image. From Blackwatch, I could run a tight ship. Give orders, get results. Observe people instead of deal with them directly. I could go under the radar to make sure the hard work got done.” The owl skims the ground, banking left and right. Leading the flock.

“People assumed it was a bureaucratic insult, making him the boss after I led through the war. But they didn’t understand how Jack and I ran things back then.” Reaper lowers his chin. “Very few did.”

“Wait a minute,” McCree cuts in. “Are you tryin’ to tell me you chose? You chose to head up Blackwatch instead of Strike Commander?”

“No.” The birds vanish. “The United Nations chose. I just accepted. Opted not to contest it as a matter of strategy. If this was their decision, I decided to play into it. At the time, so did Jack.”

The gunslinger’s eyes dart around the scaffold as if searching for an answer. “But you weren’t happy about it. You wanted that title. That was in the reports. Hell, people talked about it around the headquarters, they said --”

“-- that I resented him. Craved the attention. Longed for recognition. After a long and illustrious service in which I received the accolade of preserving all humanity, despite close and personal commitment to my work and my team, ceaseless dedication, performing my job to the best of my ability for decades, the reason was conveniently reduced” -- a flick of his wrist -- “to envy.” Reaper snorts. “Cute story.”

McCree shakes his head. “There were UN hearings. After the explosion, Mercy testified --”

“What she believed,” Reaper interrupts. “What was simple to believe. There’s the razor again. She’s a physician. She thought she understood us. A safe tactic, if not a winning one.”

Confusion sparks anxiety, prickling across the gunslinger’s skin. He looks around, keenly unsettled, hunting for response.

Reaper notices. “You remember things, don’t you. It doesn’t match up.”

“Naw.”

“More than just reports. There were moments. Conversations. Talk in the dorms, the locker room.”

“Sparring room,” McCree blurts, trying not to grimace. “When you came back hot off a mission, when we’d all be trainin’. We thought it was ‘cause of Jack and all the spotlight. Shit, I remember the first time it happened. Me and Kavrazli were in the ring one night, one-on-one. You’d just gotten back from Prague that morning, you hopped in and said ‘two-against-one’ --”

The Reaper holds up a hand. “Keep it.”
“Huh?”

“Remember Prague,” Reaper mutters. “It’s a point. It will be important. You need more, before we talk about what happened there.”

McCree takes the opportunity to fish a slightly crushed cigarillo out of his pocket. He lights it, only for one of Reaper’s vaporous wisps to slither by and snap out the end. “Hey!”

“Filthy habit. It’ll kill you.”

Gripping, McCree lights it again. “I learned from the best.”

“And look at him now.”


Reaper stares at him pointedly, chagrined. Wordlessly asking: are you done?

McCree puffs, exhales, chomps the cigarillo between his teeth. Spreading his hands in a gesture of by all means, go on.

Reaper scoffs. He leans forward to cough and wipe away an inky dribble from his mask. Then he resumes his walk. The wisp of black smoke follows him, undulating like a flag.

“The first few years were rough,” he continues. “Missions had a limited spread back then: clean-up, retrievals, missing persons, haz-op. Clearing out the ‘bots and chasing down thieves. But it needed to be done. Somebody had to do it. For that, they always came to me.”

The wisp splits and bounces, whipping left and right like a firecracker shot into a wall. Silent shotgun blasts and pistol fire over an invisible battlefield.

“Hard work. Bone-grinding. The kind you never put down. I wasn’t good at shaking things off. I told you about the omniums in Orange County and what happened to all the families afterward. I could hear them every night when I went to bed.” He huffs, borderline aggravated. “At the time, Jack understood. He did what he could, he cut me a lot of slack. We still made it work back then. But there was another point on the line. A big one. Shook everything up. One I never saw coming.”

“Which was?” McCree asks.

Reaper stops. The smoke coils around his feet, elongating, hunching into the silhouette of a canine crouching. Stiff, peaked ears. A long snout. Scruffy tail.

“The kid from Santa Fe,” says the Reaper. “Turning new leaves and shaking the tree.”

As if prompted, the smoke spirals upward, swirlng with the image of leaf-litter caught on the wind.

“What you don’t know is the impact. It was a first for Blackwatch -- and Overwatch, overall. We’d never hired a career criminal before. And after you, we accepted others.” He bats a hand through the smoke, which slithers up his arm like a snake. “Including one you’re very familiar with these days.”

McCree’s heart jumps when he notices its scales. A dragon.

“Jack was never sold on it,” Reaper reminisces. “Even after the success of Genji Shimada. He preferred soldiers. Whenever a new one came in, he said it felt like I was letting what happened in
Orange County and the Crisis get to me. But I didn’t care. It didn’t matter. You were living proof of how far someone could take a second chance.”

“We made a deal,” McCree interjects. “You said it yourself. ‘Overwatch or prison.’” Gesturing to the gallows. “As far as I recall, there was never anything back then about me being destined for this.”

“I didn’t want you to know.”

“Why?”

The smoke dissipates. Reaper crosses his arms over his chest, another shade of Gabe.

“Wasn’t an option,” he rasps. “Was I the sort of man who played by Deadlock terms? No. I wanted you out of that world and far away from them. If you knew they planned to kill you, you could’ve come on-board thinking you owed some kind of life debt.” His shoulders hitch like a surly cat. “You weren’t an acquisition. I wanted you to make a choice.”

McCree chews on his cigarillo. His mind leaps to Hanzo -- a sudden, visceral lurch that makes his head spin. He shuts his eyes and remembers the lone tree by the box garden overlooking the sea: sea breeze, warm sun on the rocks, the feel of freshly-washed clothes. His nostrils sting with the memory of soft, soapy scent of the archer’s hair and skin. Achingly close, as if he’s right there and not thousands of miles away.

Silence passes between them, interrupted by a squabble of crows. The Reaper looks away; he drags his left hand over his mask, claws clacking on the white surface. A few more grisly coughs.

“It’s funny,” he starts again, “how this all came back to bite me in the ass.”

“What d’you mean?”

“Points on a line,” Reaper sighs. “Back to that history lesson. This one the monkey would appreciate.”

It takes McCree a head-scratching moment to connect ‘monkey’ to ‘Winston.’ Too much desert sun.

He trudges around the gallows. More slivers of his cloak sizzle off the soil after each step.

“Edgar Mitchell was an astronaut. Apollo space program, over a hundred years ago. He was quoted about how seeing Earth from the Moon gave him a sense of global consciousness. A dissatisfaction about things like politics. Markets and governments. When you save the world, you see something similar. A lull of optimism. Everywhere I went, it was there. This hippie-dippie hope that, somehow, after coming back from the brink of extinction, mankind will somehow evolve beyond common atrocities as if looking down at itself from a million miles away. Thinking, ‘okay. We learned our lesson. We won’t do awful things to each other ever again.’”

McCree looks over the canteen and notices the fallen tendrils of Reaper’s cloak are now writhing across the sand. Like worms, he thinks, disgusted.

But then he notices their shapes: bodies, torsos, scrabbling arms and legs. Each one pulled to its feet by another with an extended hand. Humanity.

“So we turn history into a science class. You know what happens when there’s a vacuum? It gets filled. Even if you see only air. During the Crisis, many nations broke down or reformed into regional federations to combat the Omnic forces. There was mass conscription, migration, martial
law. When it was time to demilitarize and move back, conflicts broke out. People went home to their empty, devastated countries and found squatters. Militias moved in. Crime turned into movements. Movements turned into hegemony. Coups, offensives, strategic takeovers.” Reaper stops walking. “It was impossible. You fixed one power vacuum, another opened nearby. Puppet governments and fear tactics. Terrorist cells popped up like weeds. I kept telling Jack, ‘this is it. This is what I feared.’ History was repeating itself. So much for learning a lesson.”

The tendrils fade into the ground. His cloak flares out as if tugged by invisible hands.

“I remember,” he murmurs, “when the first intel on Talon came in. The exact day. July twenty-eighth. Our anniversary. Jack had fucked up reservations at our usual place. He was calling every restaurant in Geneva to try and get a table. I told him, ‘postpone it. Athena has a new terrorist report I need to look at.’ So it saved him the trouble.” He raps his fingers on the edge of his mask. “The only courtesy they ever did for anyone.”

Anniversary. McCree glowers into the canteen, suddenly pinched by the word. He thinks of November and Thanksgiving and the alert on his phone calendar. The summer with Hanzo, stretching into a blissful early fall. A pulse of thought: what day -- if he had to choose -- is worthy of calling an anniversary? The day they met? Kissed? Decided to share a dorm? A dull ache gnaws at his guts. Every milestone is accompanied by some awful incident: an arrow through the arm, a Dead-Eye and dead Vishkar, a tense interlude in a Siberian bunker. Maybe the storm in Dorado...

Reaper goes on; if he notices Jesse's deliberation, he doesn’t show it. “At first we thought it was the usual mess. Guerrilla fighters with a death wish, pushing around and taking turf. But they disappeared. Abandoned the target locations before our boots even hit the ground.”

“I was on that mission,” McCree pipes up, shaking out of his daze. Remembering the transport, the web seats, the red descent. “A-Squad. Six-man team. We went in and the whole compound was empty. It was like they got wind we were comin’ and ran off.”

“And showed up across the globe three months later,” Reaper adds. “With big headcount and bigger weapons. They hiked to the top of the international watch list after the first few strikes. Even then, I couldn’t even guess back then what we were dealing with.”

Around his boots, the black vapor churns to illustrate a scurry of life-like rats.

“Talon traveled like a plague,” he continues. “If a cell popped up in one country, it was only a matter of time before activity moved between borders. We’d bring in captured agents and find no data, no records. None of them would talk, and when they would, they didn’t have information. Just gibberish. Coded talk.” One by one, the rats vanish. The smoky owl returns, swoops, snares a catch in its colorless claws. “Lacroix used to say Talon had one step ahead of us, with the other foot straight up our ass.”

“Gerard,” McCree interjects. “Or Amélie?”

“The former,” comes the wet snarl. But then his tone softens, gloomy again. “Though, the latter...”

Reaper gazes down at the remaining rat. It sits up, sniffs, and leaps to his outstretched hands. He catches it, cradles it, strokes its ghastly head. As if it were real and tame.

“Here’s another science lesson,” he says morosely. “One with no moon-shots or hope. A complex bioengineering experiment conducted at the highest price any test subject can pay.” Carefully, almost gently, Reaper soothes the rat huddled in his palm. “You talk about killing innocent people. Innocence is subjective in most cases, but, in others, it’s fact. Amélie Lacroix is one of them. She
had no idea what they planned for her. She doesn't deserve an iota of what they did.”

Another guilty flash: McCree recalls Tracer and her woeful tale. “What did they do?”

“A test run,” Reaper sighs. “Talon kidnapped her, stripped her consciousness, and conditioned her into a paragon killer. She’s one of their finest weapons.”

“So it’s true,” McCree mutters. “They can do that.”

“And more.” Puff: the rat disappears. “I used to look at her and wonder if there was any of her left. I hope there isn’t. After everything that’s happened, a clean death is the least I would give her, if she asked.”

Reaper digs at the cuff of his gauntlet before carrying on.

“So, an experiment. It was enormously successful, and Talon found their next host. And they got lucky, too. When it was time to move in, they walked right in through the front door.”

“The hell does that mean?”

“It isn’t obvious?”

“Just say it straight.”


McCree’s jaw sets to a grim line. “You gotta be fuckin’ kidding me.”

“You can’t seriously be surprised.”

“Who was it?”

Reaper lowers his chin. A long silence hangs between them, swinging like the ropes.

“What was it, Reyes?” McCree barks, dreading any answer. “It was someone in Blackwatch, wasn’t it? It had to be.” He shifts his weight from foot to foot. “One of the bad ones, a reform, someone with a past. One of the ones we brought on with a criminal record.”

Reaper lifts a claw. “Occam’s razor.”

“Huh?”

“The simple hypothesis,” he says. “Came back to bite me in the ass. It was easy to assume the rats came in with the recycling.”

“It wasn’t someone in Blackwatch?”

“Not at first.”

“So who was it?”

“You probably know better than I.”

“God-dammit, Reyes, who the hell was it --”

“I don’t know,” snarls Reaper, turning, flaring, clenching his claws. Radiating rage in an unnatural
McCree steps back, clutching his canteen and the cigarillo between his fingers.

Whirling, Reaper turns away. “I don’t know who it was. Or how many there were. Or when. I don’t know the extent of what they managed to do. All these years later and I still haven’t caught them all. I’ve hunted some down, gotten a few to confess, crossed them off the list. But there’s more. I know there are. Still out there, hiding.”

He dithers with another fit of coughing that nearly loosens his mask.

“They came in through Overwatch,” he says, regaining composure. “The UN sanctioned increased recruitment and started pushing specific approvals. All those heroes filing through the front door, looking for fame and glory, and Jack Morrison was up front to greet them. I argued against it every week. It was bureaucratic nonsense, letting all these celebrities and mercenaries join up, just to appease some diplomat waving dollar signs in our direction. Once the rat was in, they would’ve found out Blackwatch existed. You might as well have handed them the keys to initiate phase two on a silver platter.”

“What the hell’s ‘phase two?’”

“Large-scale multi-target mental conditioning,” he replies. “Systematic operational interference and mass-conscription via subversion of command.”

The gunslinger shakes his head. Another flash of Gabriel: too much jargon. Too damn precise. Always the smartest person in the room.

“Think about it,” Reaper drills. “Talon created the Widowmaker from an individual with no combat experience or weapons training. An assassin cut from whole cloth. Imagine how much easier it would be if you acquired the templates, already laid out.” He scratches at his mask again. “They wanted to bring down the house, so they moved into the shadows. Once they got in, there was no getting them out.”

“That’s what you mean,” McCree says, jittering. “About it being --”

Reaper spins his finger. “The other way around.”

“And when you say ‘mental conditioning,’” McCree plies further, “you’re talkin’ about the song.”

“An elaborate system of mental and physical restructuring in which commands were subliminally transmitted to targets during states of consciousness and unconsciousness. Triggered by types of sensory input -- the first being an auditory component. Certain lyrics and chord patterns.” Reaper's shoulders hitch with derision. “In the movies, they call it brainwashing.”

“You were whistlin’ it in the graveyard,” McCree prompts. “And then the music player --”

“A test, to see if you’d respond.” Reaper growls. “You didn’t.”

“So the brainwashin’ didn’t work on me?”

“No.”

“You said it either wore off, or it didn’t take.”

“Ding ding ding.” Reaper gestures as if tapping an invisible bell.
McCree clicks his tongue. “So why’d you shoot at me? What was all that creepy shit ‘bout comin’ for me, signin’ me up --”

“I was trying to scare you to see what would you would do next.”

Piqued, McCree says exactly what first comes to mind: “fuck you.”

Reaper arcs his head as if he’s rolling his eyes. “Look, if I’d offered you a chat over coffee --”

The gunslinger jabs the cigarillo at him, pinched between two pointing fingers. “Go fuck yourself.”

Reaper shrugs, acquiescing. Taking the blame on the chin. *Okay.*

McCree caps the canteen and paces. He mutters to himself, chewing on his lip. Struggling to hold in his anger. Reaper watches, head tilted, like an interested bird.

“I don’t know if I believe it,” McCree finally says. “I don’t get how they would do it -- how long, and how it’d work --”

“Specialized technology snuck in and implemented into Blackwatch communications. Run through undetected subroutines, like a virus. Athena didn’t have regular access to our lines because I kept them secure. If it slipped under my nose, no one else would’ve caught it.” Reaper rakes his fingertips down his mask, *screep screep.* “It isn’t rare tech. In fact, it’s not even uncommon. You” -- he points at McCree -- “know all about it. Someone very close to you exposes you to it every day.”

McCree draws back. “How in the hell --”

Reaper flicks two fingers, sending up a spray of smoke. It contorts, twists, and starts to hop. Spindly legs and buggy eyes. A tree frog.

The gunslinger’s heart leaps into his throat. “Lúcio?”

“Stole his gear from the Vishkar Corporation. Who stole it from Talon. Or -- hmm.” Reaper tick-tocks his finger, bobbing the frog left to right. “Maybe *Talon* stole it from *Vishkar,* who stole it from the *Omnica* Corporation during the *Crisis.*” The frog scales his arm, bounds to his shoulder, leaps to flatten on hood. “Funny thing about history. When the winners get to write it, they can strip the losers down to the bone.”

“Yeah, but Lúcio ain’t got *shit* to do with this,” McCree charges. “Before all this, he was a DJ, he was --”

“A renowned musician,” finishes Reaper. “Known for his invigorating shows and influential message. The elements used in his music psyched up entire arenas full of his fans. *Rejuvenated* them. An ironic difference in application, but the same technology underneath it all.” The tree-frog skates circles around the Reaper’s hood. “He’s a rabble-rouser. Not a terrorist. Too high-spirited for Talon. Sometimes I wonder if he’d have been more cut out for Jack’s crew, or mine --”

“Hold on,” McCree interrupts. “This still don’t make any sense. I don’t understand how it would’ve worked.”

“It worked very well. Subtly. Touch the mind with a needle, not a hammer. Like those old movies you loved so much” -- his derision returns as the frog shape-shifts into a series of music notes -- “where they took a team into someone’s mind and suggested natural schemes of thought.”
“Um.” McCree scratches under his hat. Maybe he means Inception. “So, layers?”

Reaper wiggles a claw. Correct. “Transmission by transmission, op by op, they built on it in layers. It activated through two keys. The auditory conditioning synced with a visual component that flashed through the HUDs. A series of symbols and images with a trigger card of a specific hue. Talon still uses it today.”

McCree feels his stomach drop. “The rag.”

“Yellow,” Reaper elaborates. “Chosen in mockery of the arc on the Overwatch emblem.”

A soft grunt. “Son of a gun.”

“But more than that. It was so subtle that it conditioned latent responses to objects with similar shades. Innate patterns left in the sympathetic nervous system.” Reaper shakes his head. “A lot of things are yellow. So much happiness and light. To think: you could corrupt something so innocent as a color.”

The gunslinger turns away. He palms his brow and clenches his teeth.

Ofrendas in the graveyard, gilded with flowers. The biotic beam and the Caduceus. The ebullient glow of Lúcio’s Crossfade suit and the hum of his cheery songs. The sun, the moon, the sodium lamps and lighthouse at the Watchpoint. Sand on the beach around Dorado. The New Mexico state flag. Post-it notes and desert flowers. Lightning crackling in a storm. The ecstasy of gold.

The silk scarf that hung from from his lover’s hair.

Behind him, Reaper silently idles. The phantasmal frog reverts to a duck; he permits it to swim placid circles in the palm of his hand. Sighing, cataloging his own cache of cursed sunny colors.

“How’d you find all this out?” starts McCree when he finally finds words. “Why didn’t you tell anyone?”

“I tried,” Reaper rumbles. “I tried to piece together what was going on. Which is where we come to Prague.” He claps his hands, blooming the duck back into vapor. “A point on the line. The first time I tried to tell Jack something was wrong. Prague was a C-Squad mission. We had ninety minutes to disable a chemical weapons payload. Something felt off from the start, there was too much static on the line. But then we hit critical hour. Adrenaline was pumping. I was navigating the target sight when I got knocked in the head. Rookie mistake, wasn’t watching my peripherals. But that’s when I noticed the HUD was flashing. Yellow lights, tiny text, some words in French and español. No one else comm’ed it in. But then I heard the tail-end of the song. Somebody whistled it. Before I could call the abort, it stopped. And during post-mission debrief, not a single one of them verified what I’d heard.”

A thread of vapor curls from Reaper’s collar as he scratches his neck. McCree notices a crackle in his voice, like an electronic stutter. He’s trying to keep it together.

“So I went to Jack. He was fresh from a press conference. You know what those did to him. Less duck, more peacock. I told him about the HUDs, the errors, the whole operation feeling wrong. He said I was being paranoid. I checked the SOP, tried to get him to read it. He demanded I let Athena scan our systems so she could identify potential issues. We got into a fight that lasted all day. He blew me off and went off with his crew, I went to the sparring ring with mine.”

“But you knew,” McCree presses, more and more agitated. “You knew something was wrong, so
why didn’t you do something?”

Insistently. “I tried.”

“It didn’t work?”

“I tried to leave messages. Notes. Threats, mostly. I wanted to let them know I was on their trail. I hid a few in the Blackwatch database, in case someone was messing with the files. But no, it didn’t work. Not for long.”

“Why not?”

“Because,” Reaper growls, “they got me, too.”

“They got you?”

“I was compromised.”

The words echo across the canyon, hollow as a drum. The Reaper drags his hand over his hooded scalp, vexed.

“Wide-scale, multi-target,” he says. “You couldn’t take Blackwatch without taking me. Talon knew it. They went for the throat to get to the head. It was the only way.” Reaper jabs a claw at his chest. “I ran a tight ship. I had eyes on everything. There was no way around me or over me. So: Occam’s razor. Simplest route. Go right through him instead.”

McCree can hardly speak. “Reyes…”

Whish.

The wraith’s cloak spreads like a span of ominous wings.

“History lesson,” he rumbles. “Want to upset a king? Well, you can start by shaking his throne. Want to get under his skin? Isolate him. Drive away his support. Wanna take his crown? Present evidence to the court he’s not fit to rule. Restrict him. Reduce him. And if you want the world to believe it, put him at the scene of the crime and let him get blood on his hands.” He whips back, palm outstretched, talons clutched around a writhing black ball. “Convince his loved ones he’s gone down a dark path they can’t follow and human nature will finish the job.”

The ball shifts into a crown, which disintegrates through Reaper’s fingers like sand.

“So do you remember it?” McCree grits out. “Do you remember the things you did?”

“Some,” he replies glumly. “Less than before the explosion. Enough to know I was being framed.” Now it’s his turn to pace, boots thumping around a tighter circle. “It was such a subtle process. Designed to set in over time: build up, encroach, gradually take over. One incident justified another until the targets were eliminated. And Blackwatch was so contained, nobody knew except those on-board.”

The darkness hisses out of his hands, reforming into the swooping owl. Wobbling as it flies, crashing at his feet. Hopping, as if with a broken wing.

“But then there were holes,” Reaper says. “Moments of lucidity. It was like waking up without remembering if you ever went to sleep.”

“How’d that happen?”

Kah-heh: a weak laugh. “Good genetics.”
McCree says nothing. Reaper digs at the cheek of his mask, *scrip scrip*. The owl dives, dissolves, reappears as a fork-tailed dove.

“Back to that science class,” he mutters. “The good doctor and her medbay were part of the Medical Research Division. Dedicated to preserving our health and good-will. Since she was a student, Jack and I had our eye on her. The best of the best.” The dove lands, plumps, and preens on Reaper’s shoulder. He strokes its vaporous plumage with a clawed thumb. “And she kept her eye on us. But there were medical restrictions. Tests she couldn’t run. Procedures she couldn’t do. We had to do self-maintenance ourselves, thanks to dear old Uncle Sam.”

“The SEP,” McCree blurs, dawning with realization.

*Whuff.*

A second ghostly creature appears on Reaper’s other shoulder: the docile rat. It grooms, curls its tail, hunches close to his hood. “From one laboratory experiment to another. All that stuff they pumped into us had more than just the obvious benefits. The serums affected the brain stem, hypothalamus, pituitary. I discovered that a strong fight-or-flight response could knock me out of the fog. It would come back, over time. I couldn’t stop that.”

“But you’d clear up,” McCree ventures. “You’d snap outta it.”

“Too many hits -- in the ring, on the field, out during missions -- and it would shake some things loose. Just like Prague: I’d come back, even for just a snap. I began to realize things were wrong, but who could I tell? I didn’t know who else was affected. Blackwatch seemed normal, but Jack thought I was losing it. I didn’t know who I could trust.”

“So is that what happened to me?” McCree asks, heart racing. “Is that why it didn’t take? Fight-or-flight? Good genetics?”

With a soft *huff*, the animals swirl away. Reaper stares at him, once again the stoic judge.

“No,” he explains. “The mind is one thing. Your *soul* is another.”

Then he lifts his gaze to the canyon ridge.

“A zenith,” he says softly, “is a term for an imaginary point above a given coordinate.” He lifts a finger. “You know the astronomical application. The solar indicator for when it’s directly overhead.”

McCree looks up. In a cloudless sky, the winter sun.

*High noon.*

The smoke at Reaper’s feet begins to quicken. It soars above his hood, winging left and right, emulating flight. A return of the phantom raptor.

“Opposite of *nadir,*” Reaper continues. “Two words derived from a language I haven’t spoken in years. Not since the woman who taught me was left on the battlefield to die.”

The gunslinger’s blood runs to ice. He steps back; the cigarillo drops from his mouth. There’s nothing to brace him when the realization hits.

It’s a hawk.

*Arabic.*
“The Dead-Eye?” he whispers. “How?”

“A short-range scanning snipe,” Reaper finishes. “Every mark goes down when you set them up. It wasn’t her technique. She’d adapted it from others. But you made it your own.”

“Reyes --”

“And it took something out of you,” he presses. “It took a little bit out of you each time. Jolted you real bad. Eye to the brain. The heightened concentration required to take out each target always led to synaptic overload. You were a mess afterwards every time you used it. Classic symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Whatever Talon had built up” -- he taps a finger mid-air, click, on an invisible button “-- the technique reset.”

The gunslinger draws back. “You knew?”

Reaper extends an arm so the smoke-hawk can settle on his gauntlet. “Blackwatch seemed normal, except for you. I couldn’t figure out how you weren’t affected. And then, after you left, I remembered: she taught you. It clicked.”

Thump-thump. McCree’s pulse hikes through a cold sweat. “God-damn, Reyes, how’s that even possible?”

“She had a way of protecting people,” Reaper elaborates. “She always had your back. That was why I asked her to take you. She could teach you things I couldn’t. And you needed it. I used to think you’d never known anything soft in your life. Not even a standard-issue pillow.” He looks at the hawk. “But a mother’s love? That endures. Long after we’re all dead and gone.”

Thump, thump. His pulse thunders on. McCree shuts his eyes as a steady whine kicks up in his ears. He shakes his head, mops off his forehead, bites back a clench of heartache. He can see her: black and blue, tall and slim, clutching her rifle in the crook of her arm. Sleek eyes piercing him from a mile away. That 0.338-caliber smile, like a bullet to the heart. Smart as brass. Always watching, constant vigilance. A guardian whispering in the back of his mind.

Clever fellow, she says, hushed and encouraging as the words become his own. Clever fella, good shot, clever fella, good --

“God-damn,” he mutters under his breath. Wincing, tightening up, yielding to the sting of tears. “God-damn, son of a gun. Son of a --”

“Do you need a second?” Reaper asks dully.

“No,” McCree sputters. Then, reconsidering. “No, I mean, yes.”

He stoops to pick up his cigarillo, dusting it off. The wraith watches him with a cocked head; mimicking, the smoke-hawk does, too.


“Too many tumbleweeds bouncing around in there, cabrón?”

“I knew somethin’ was wrong,” he bleats. “I knew -- I knew, several times. Those extraction ops you and I ran at the end, I remember hearin’ the song. I coulda stopped you.” His stomach flip-flops. “I could’ve done something. I should’ve done something.”

“You did.” Reaper stares him down. “You ran away.”
Guilt licks at him like a sour flame; he glowers at the soil and tries not to think of the gold silk scarf. The words bounce off his brain: *ingrate, outlaw. Fool*, which he misses the most.

The hawk flaps its wings and merges into Reaper’s arm with an inky splash.

“It scared you,” he murmurs. “It would have scared anyone, even a soldier. But you -- you always went easier when you were scared. Ever since I picked you up out here, you were motivated by fear. You watched me take down our foes without remorse for over a decade. A mean streak against your enemies makes the roost feel safe at night, but if your allies fear you turning it on them, they fly the coop. It’s exactly what Talon wanted.”

“No,” McCree insists, rallying. “No, I should’ve stopped you, Reyes, I could’ve --”

“Stayed,” Reaper completes the thought. “And probably died.”

McCree’s mouth wavers. Reaper’s shoulders gradually slump. Less pedagogue, more contrite.

“When you left,” he says softly, “I didn’t know what to do. What was I supposed to feel? Grief. Resentment. Relief. A part of me knew that chasing you off was the only good that could come from what was about to happen. It meant you were safe.”

“Reyes, look, for years after I left --”

“It saved your life.” Reaper holds up a hand, refuses to let him finish. “They would’ve put you down when they found out the conditioning didn’t stick. You would’ve been caught in the fighting, or the blast.”

It takes McCree a few seconds to ask, “did you cause the explosion?”

Reaper shakes his head.

“Did you really do it?” Gulping. “Did you lead Blackwatch against Jack?”

“The whole world thinks I did,” he replies. “It’s what they wanted. It played into their hands.” Inky fog filters from the holes in his sleeves. “Occam’s razor. Tell the right story and no one will question how the hero became a villain.”

McCree works his jaw. “So that’s who you are now,” he charges. “After all that -- after everything you’ve told me -- that’s what you accept? The villain?”

But the Reaper pulls back his hood and pulls off his mask.

The gunslinger stops. He nearly turns away. An erratic flicker catches his eye, like static on a telescreen -- a moment when the wraith threatens to vanish.

So Jesse steels himself, and looks.

At first, it’s hard to take in. Spans of necrotic skin still cling to his skull, just barely; they stretch over his features like mismatched puzzle pieces jammed incongruously into place. Little hair remains, mostly bristly brows and patchy beard. Milky, lifeless eyes leer out of sunken red sockets, no irises or pupils. He’s missing a chunk above his nose. The corners of his ruined lips are blown wide open to expose muscle and jawbone, though McCree knows a normal human corpse should not have so many sharp teeth. But the skin bothers him the most: the shedding, flecked flesh turned sallow in death, sloughing off like sand or soiled snow. Before it can hit the ground, it evaporates into black steam. An unliving cadaver, eternally regenerating against the natural catalyst of decay.
He doesn’t know which horrifies him more: the face, or the realization that somehow, despite the putrefaction, it’s still him.

“Look at me, cowboy,” he says. “You know who did this.”

McCree clenches his teeth. Nostrils flaring, heart racing, stomach churning. He’s trying not to stare at the mottling scars along Gabriel’s throat when he recognizes the hallmark pattern of burns.

“Not Talon,” Gabriel insists. “They did. Overwatch left me to die. My own people left me to become this thing -- to be cursed.”

“So they deserve the same?” McCree asks acidly.

"It wasn't just me who suffered. Others did too. Even Amari was left behind. I'm not the only one who died with blood on clean hands.”

“The new agents, then.” Forcing himself not to look away from the putrid visage. "The ones you attacked. They deserve your vengeance, too?”

“They volunteered. They knew the risks involved when they signed up and put on the badge.”

“How can you say that?” implores McCree, incredulous. "How? How in the hell d’you justify killin’ people while you break bread with the terrorists that brought it down in the first place?”

Clunk. Gabriel tosses the mask to the sand.

“The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” he replies. “And when my enemy is gone, they go back on the list.”

“Aw, that’s horseshit, Reyes, and you know it.”

“Is it?” He grimaces, flashing blood-red gums and an ashen tongue. “If you can’t beat ‘em, use ‘em. It’s good tech, familiar manpower, easy pay. And what better way to take them down than using their own tactic?”

“Got about a snowball’s chance in summer that it’ll work,” McCree laughs in disbelief.

“A renewed Overwatch won’t bring them down any better,” Gabriel shoots back. “And you know it.”

“They might surprise ya.”

“Already did. Wilhelm and Lindholm? Wasn’t hard to believe they’d go back. The good doctor, maybe a bit. But, after all those years away, imagine my shock to find out you answered the recall.”

Guilt smolders in his throat like an ember. McCree bows his chin, sinking beneath the brim of his hat. He’s suddenly aware of his weary body: the moisture on the back of his neck, the grit in his clothes, the damp discomfort of fatigue. His weakness, dried like sweat, pulled tight like the sinew of a bowstring. He has forgotten how unforgiving the desert can be, even to a veteran -- especially to the former outlaw once again living on the run.

And beyond it churns the dread of the open road, spare and sprawling, bleached and bare like a spine of carrion in the sand. The drifter life, the isolation. An era of lost love.

The wraith peers at him through unblinking white eyes. Jesse suddenly feels as if he's been hit by a
heat-wave. His captain understands: years of solitude, no one to talk to, nothing but memories, voices, and torments. Few of which he could trust.

“You missed them,” says Gabriel.

McCree looks up at the familiarity of the phrase. The face that gazes back at him could almost be sad. Almost.

“You missed all of them,” he observes dimly. “Joking with them. The big meals in mess hall. You remembered a time before everything went bad. It was enough to lure you back. You thought a second chance might turn out differently.”

“Guess that wasn’t in the cards,” is all Jesse can say.

Gabriel laughs, a toothy keh. “You wanna talk about cards? Look at the hand you were dealt. An autodidact with guns a-blazing, out of a gang and straight into black ops. And you were a child of the Crisis, all piss and vinegar. From the day I brought you on, I knew everything would be hard on you. But you made it. You’re good at surviving.” He shudders with a gravelly sigh. “Which isn’t the same as being good at fighting. People kept wondering what kind of hero we could make out of you. I would say: ‘fuck off.’ Let him decide.”

Jesse shuts his eyes and flexes his fingers through the clutch of a ghostly hand. An old delirium. “That op, down in Dorado, where I got shot coverin’ Amari.”

“A turning point,” Gabriel rumbles. “I remember.” He points at McCree’s hip. “Not long after, you earned that.”

Peacekeeper. McCree unholsters his gun, lifts it, shines the barrel. “Still got it.”

For a fleeting moment, he thinks -- swears -- the ragged curve of Gabriel’s lips could almost be a smile.

“You’re the sole survivor of Blackwatch,” he says. “Everyone else is gone. All their weapons and talents as well. That story is yours. I have nothing else to give you. But you can tell me one thing in return.”

“What’s that?”

Gabriel wordlessly points at the gunslinger’s mechanical arm.

McCree tucks his left elbow against his chest. He says nothing.

“How’d it happen?” asks Gabriel.

A long silence creeps between them. McCree turns away. The wraith waits with an air of stoic patience.

Of course, he wants the truth. And who can lie to the king?

“Two weeks after I left,” Jesse eventually gets out. “Was my first two weeks bein’ on my own in God-knows-how many years. I was tryin’ to stay underground, but made a few blunders. Rookie mistakes. Wasn’t thinkin’.”

He hangs his head. It’s hard to get it out. Gabriel looks away and sighs a ghastly fog.

Jesse clenches the steel cylinder of his elbow as he attempts to go on. “I wasn’t watchin’ out, I got
cocky, I overestimated, and I --"

Gabriel waves a hand. He catches Jesse’s startled look and murmurs, “oye.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t.”

McCree wavers. “Don’t what?”

Leaning down to collect his mask, Gabriel says, “you don’t have to tell me.” Rising, he adds, with the gravity of a superior’s command: “you don’t have to tell anyone.”

Relief nearly takes his breath away. Jesse bites his lip to hold back the tears. He watches Gabriel gather the mask back to his face and drift towards the gallows.

Another silence. Jesse looks down at the canteen; it’s empty. The Reaper lifts into the air, a spectral arbiter once again.

“So what happens now?” Jesse asks weakly, breaking the quiet. “What will you do?”

“I have what I need,” Reaper says. And then: “so do you.”

McCree jerks back. “Naw.”

"Go underground, cowboy. Keep your head down and stay away from Overwatch. You know the recall was a mistake. What happened before will happen again, whether I'm involved or not."

Dread sparks in his chest. "Reyes, you got a lot left to answer for, we ain't even talked 'bout Siberia yet. I ain't goin' anywhere 'til you --"

Reaper gestures to the gallows. “This has no place in the world today,” he mutters, interrupting. “When you’re gone, I’m going to make sure it’s destroyed.”

“So that’s it?” McCree swishes his serape off his arm, bewildered. “You think this is over?”

“It is, for now.”

“Like hell it is,” he barks, prickling. “Ain’t no way in hell I’m letting you walk off back to Talon. Not after everything you just said.”

“The job isn’t finished,” Reaper counters. “When it is, I’ll let you know.”

“God-dammit, Gabriel!” McCree throws the canteen aside. “You know I won’t let you walk away from this! Not after what you’ve done, or what you told me! I ain’t lettin’ you leave to go back to the other side!”

“You should consider the same,” Reaper growls. “Go back to Gibraltar, and there’s no guarantee you’ll stay off the list.”

“To hell with your list!” McCree yells. “And to hell with your plans!” Standing his ground, breaking his heart. “These’re my terms now, Gabriel. Time for you to turn a new leaf.”

Reaper cocks his head. He says nothing.

“A new deal,” challenges Jesse. “Come back and answer for what you’ve done.”
“No.”

“I’m here to sign you up.”

Reaper flinches, agitated. “Get out of here, cowboy.”

But McCree endures. “Mercy can help you, she has a way to treat you. The rest of them? We’ll figure it out. Tell them what really happened, Gabriel. You owe ‘em all that much.”

“Go,” Reaper snarls, slicing a jagged hand through the air. “Now.”

Click. McCree lifts Peacekeeper, cocked and prepared to fire. He takes aim. The last demand goes unspoken, a sentiment to settle the score: decide where you belong.

The Reaper slowly descends. McCree keeps his arm braced, eye straight, finger ready to pull the trigger. Peacekeeper’s barrel follows the wraith as he lands.

“Do it, then,” Reaper rasps. “Kill me.”

Tick. Top. Tick. Water drips from the lip of the canteen, spotting the rock beneath it. An impromptu metronome. Jesse grits his jaw. Sweat beads under the band of his hat and rolls down his cheeks.

He could do it. He has a few precious seconds, and that’s it.

The Reaper stares, motionless. A rigid silhouette of doom.

Tip. Tock. Tick. Top.

Suddenly the air displaces, whooshing, surging the gunslinger like a stormy gale. He gasps as a shroud of black bursts around him, swirling into focus inches from Peacekeeper’s barrel. McCree bares his teeth at the wicked white mask that hovers before his face.

His voice reaches all the way to Jesse’s bones. Otherworldly and demonic, a cacophony from hell.

“Kill me! roars Reaper. “Kill me, Jesse, don’t just stand there!”

And he nearly does it. The gleam of his gun, the weight, the solid power of it -- all condensing in his hand. It’s the eye that starts it, sets it up, convinces his blood to rattle and roll. A boom of drums begin in his mind, thundering as a wind trickles through the tired red canyon. The hiss of Reaper’s smoke precedes the low crooning of a choir. He takes a step back -- a footprint in the sand, like so many he’s left before -- and grinds his heel into the bleached white skull.

The clock is ticking. It’s time.

McCree lines it up. His pupils constrict to pinpoints of crimson. In the nightmarish storm, he sees it: the headshot. A dead-center beneath the mask. Reaper is ready to go. It’ll only take one shot to snap the string that holds him between life and death. Nighty-night.

“Do it!” Reaper reaches for him. His claws dig in, tearing his serape. Scraping his biceps through his sleeves. “Finish the job!”

But he stares into the mask, and then he hears her voice. Like the snap of a whip as he beholds the owlish bone, she kites through his mind. A final realization. She always had a way with words.

He sees him at last, unviolated and whole: the face of Gabriel Reyes. He’s real again.
You hesitated.

And he lets go of the trigger.

Shoot smart, or don’t shoot at all.

It stops. He steps back. The skull crunches as he turns, lifts his arm, and pulls back his gun. It’s over. The world around Jesse comes back into focus: gallows, canyon, a phantasmal storm.

“No,” says the gunslinger.

Reaper gathers into a turbulent slash.

“That ain’t how it’s gonna be.” McCree lowers Peacekeeper as a chilly breeze comes down the gorge. He wipes the sweat from his brow. His knees are shaking. “There’s no justice in that.”

No response. Reaper only growls, a low and horrible sound.

“You’re my captain,” Jesse declares. “You were my friend, and my family. I woulda followed you into hell. Now” -- lifting his chin -- “it looks like I’m gonna have to drag your ass out.”

“Redemption is for the living,” snarls Reaper, blooming forward. “The dead have already been judged.”

This time, McCree does not flinch as the haze reforms around him. “Then I guess there’s a reason you’re still he-- eauch!”

Wham! Reaper hits him head-on, barreling him into the ground. McCree hits the dirt flat on his back, wind knocked from his chest. The shock nearly sends Peacekeeper flying out of his hand.

His vision spins. Frantic, he scrabbles to force the oppressing weight off his chest; Reaper evaporates, immediately giving way. Jesse scrambles to his feet, eyes darting, arms twitching. Ready to fight, if that’s what it takes.

Piercing the soil, in the spot where they stood a split-second ago, is an arrow.

Jesse whirls. His jaw drops.

A hundred feet away, on the precipice of the canyon, outlined against the sun, there he is. Bow raised, arrow nocked and drawn. His scarf, like a pennant of gold. There’s a flash of recognition when their eyes meet; Jesse can’t tell if the peal in his chest is from fear or shrill, unrestrainable joy. His base reaction overshadows logic and reason, tightening his throat, stinging him with the threat of tears. Cracking his cheeks with an awed, feeble gasp.

Hanzo.

Whoosh. The colorless storm condenses. McCree jolts in shock as Reaper reforms in a cloud behind the archer.

“No!” he shouts, “Gabriel! No!”

But Hanzo leaps. Just before the miasma swoops in, he’s squirreling down and dropping into the gorge. Jesse lopes to intercept him.

“Hanzo!” he cries. “Hanzo, Han-zo!”
The archer lands, crouches, and lifts his bow. He aims for the gunslinger’s head. Staring down the glint of an arrowhead, McCree gulps.

So much for a happy reunion.

McCree takes a step back. “H-hey.”

“Explain,” he barks.

“Sweetheart, my God -- God-almighty, I will, I can explain” -- unable to keep from smiling, tearing up, sputtering laughter -- “how’d you get out here? How’d you find me?”

_Crik._ Hanzo draws the bowstring tight. “Explain _now_!”

Jesse throws up his hands defensively; Peacekeeper’s barrel points at the sky. “It’s okay. It’s all okay. Put your bow down, I can explain everything.”

“No tall tales!” The archer clenches his teeth. “What is going on here, Jesse, what have you _done_?”

But the sight of Hanzo stills him. His stance, his posture, his regal bearing. Those sleek, furious eyes leave him momentarily stunned.

Still the most beautiful thing he’s ever seen.

The air rustles beside them before he can properly reply. Reaper is suddenly _there_, bursting into view with a shotgun leveled at Hanzo’s head. McCree snaps out of his daze; he points Peacekeeper’s barrel for the bone mask.

Nobody moves.

Overhead, the crows start up a racket. Wintry, arid wind trickles down the riverbed, rustling hair and cloth -- serape and scarf and wicked cloak. Black, red, and blue. Three figures caught in a standoff where no one can back down. Hanzo’s eyes dart to Reaper; McCree glances between the archer and the wraith; Reaper slowly lowers his chin, as if processing what has just occurred.

_Just like in the Westerns_, he thinks, before Reaper groans. A non-verbal affirmation: he thought the same damn thing.

“You can’t be serious,” he rasps.

“Alright,” McCree says, the wary voice of reason. “Alright, fellas, let’s just relax here for a second…”

“Lower your weapon,” Hanzo hisses at Reaper.

“Big Shimada in the flesh,” Reaper replies menacingly. “Nice to meet you instead of your worms.”

“Hanzo,” McCree warns. “Hanzo, c’mon, sweetheart, we gotta de-escalate.”

Scowling, Hanzo says, “I am not your _sweetheart_.”

Jesse’s face contorts as if the archer just shot him. “Hanzo --”

“I am your _partner_!” Hanzo rails. His brows knit, resentful and torn. “I came to find you. I came to bring you back!”
Partner. Jesse’s heart somersaults. He puts on a look of penitence, the very picture of a hangdog husband. “Honey, honestly, I’m so glad you’re here, but if you’ll just lower your bow and not shoot, we can talk this out—”

“There is nothing to talk out!”

A beat passes. Jittery footing, twitching fingers, shifting glances. Only the wraith seems unperturbed by the exchange.

Eventually Reaper growls, as if put-upon: “can you save the lover’s quarrel for later?”

“Fiend!” Hanzo barks. And then, to Jesse: “you were going to end him! I saw you raise your gun and then put it down. He was going to attack you! Why did you stop?”

A realization: Hanzo must have been watching up on the ridge and fired a warning shot. Jesse thinks fast. “Gabriel, put your gun down, now.”

Hanzo mouths, bewildered: Gabriel?

“He shot first,” Reaper muses. “Guess you’re sleeping on the couch.”

The archer murmurs something low, deadly, and distinctly offended in Japanese.

“Alright, y’all quit!” McCree’s aim wavers. “Everybody, let’s just -- on the count of three, we’re gonna drop our weapons” -- half-pleading, wagging his eyebrows demonstratively, faking it ‘til he makes it -- “and sort this out. Real calm-like.”

But Reaper continues teasing, hostile and sly. “Never pegged you for a toxophilite, cowboy. Or crime lords, either, but to each his own.”

"Gabe, c’mon --"

“Why did you stop?” Hanzo persists at Jesse, momentarily ignoring the wraith. “He attacked our comrades. He tried to destroy the Watchpoint! You had the opportunity to end him, and you stopped!”

“You’re late for the family reunion,” Reaper derides. “Hanamura’s probably saved you a cozy spot in the graveyard.”

Hanzo visibly bristles. “You degenerate monster --”

“Gabriel, ENOUGH!” McCree shouts.

Reaper’s shoulders cackle with a rheumy ha-ha-ha.

“Count of three,” says McCree. "Y'all drop your weapons. I mean it.”

“Jesse, listen to me,” Hanzo protests. “Remember what he did, to our base! Our comrades! Our home!”

“Count of three!” McCree yells. “One --”

“Jesse,” Hanzo threatens.

“Two --”
Desperate, furious, on the verge of panic, Hanzo bellows, “Jesse!”

*Boom!* Before he can say *three*, the canyon quakes. Jesse shoots and misses; the bullet ricochets off the ridge. Hanzo drops as the Reaper evaporates in a ghastly burst. Showers of ridge rock clatter down in a red hail. Jesse looks up. Did something hit the canyon edge just above them?

Confirmation: yes. It came from a rogue assailant. And a second blue streak shoots across the sky just before the second blast.

Then he hears it: the primal screech. Just like in the graveyard at Dorado.

“Shit.”

McCree feels strong hands wresting him away as the fight breaks out, blue and red spattering in vivid, chaotic mayhem. Hanzo is trying to lead him back and out of the gorge as pulse fire chatters across the gallows.

*Jaaaack!* howls the inhuman voice, flooding the canyon from everywhere at once.

McCree looks up to a flash of blue battling black. It’s Soldier: 76, and he’s relentlessly firing on a rampaging Reaper.

“Son of a gun!” he yells. “Jack, fuckin’ no!”

“Jesse!” Hanzo savagely pulls his arm. “We have to get out of here!”

“Did you bring him here?” Bracing Hanzo’s arm, eyes wild, hair flying back from his face.

“What?” Another ruthless tug. “No! I have no idea how he got here, and I do not care! We need to leave!”

“I gotta stop them.”

“Are you out of your mind?!”

“Hanzo, he has to answer for his crimes!” McCree watches Reaper and Seventy-Six gun each other down, crashing into the gallows, splintering the rotting wood. “Mercy was right, we have to take him in!”

“Jesse!”

The archer lunges but it’s too late; McCree takes off running. He ducks as Seventy-Six shoots a cluster of helix rockets into Reaper’s chest. Reaper cannot dissipate in time; the explosion sends him flying across the sand. Grey smoke envelopes the black. Reaper skids to collapse in a heap. Vehement bursts of foul, clotty viscera sputter from the slits in his mask. He coughs and chokes, clawing at the soil. Cutting in and out of focus like a holovid with corrupted playback.

“Stand down!” Morrison yells. “McCree, clear the area! This isn’t your fight!”

“Like hell it ain’t,” Jesse roars, standing between him and Reaper. “Jack, this has to end --”

Behind him, the eldritch voice rattles, “go.”

A fierce wind strikes, bowling Jesse over as the Reaper makes his last stand. He has just enough time to clamp his hat to his head and look up as the infernal cloud sweeps Seventy-Six, forcing him to retreat further down the canyon. Firing his rifle into the smoke.
Another sourceless command, thundering around him. A specter in the storm. *Go, now, get out of here.*

But Jesse presses on, disobeys orders, chases after. He hears Hanzo behind him, all rage and alarm, begging him to *stand down! Stand down!* The gunslinger’s legs burn until he thinks his heart might burst.

Then the third quake hits, *hard.*

Seventy-Six and Reaper disappear around the bend as the first explosion hits. Jesse stops, skidding back, avoiding the first fireball. The reaction starts in slow-motion like a crashing red wave. More plumes whoosh up in red-hot blasts; the ground shakes until Jesse can no longer stand. Of He thinks -- in a hysterical flash -- that the world is ending. Crumbling apart, an omnipresent calamity.

Three more detonations. McCree looks up and sees black specks clustered around the ridges. *Explosives.* Just as the Reaper promised, he's ridding the world of the gallows in the canyon.

A flash of gold. Hanzo at his side, grabbing, darts, scrambling. Shriek panic, fight-or-flight. *There’s no time!*

The last bombs go off, and everything -- the gallows, the Gorge, and the gunslinger -- goes down.

---


“Jesse!”

A voice -- urgent, bright with panic, something new through the void. It’s close to his left ear; that must be breath on his face. Is it male? Female? A mix of both. Another lurch, this time a synaptic impulse. Someone is holding his hand. Mechanical hand. Flesh hand. Mech-flesh-ical. Mysteriously, in his delirium, they merge into the same limb. How many years has it been since he’s savored this sensation? There’s a saying for this: *‘fit as a fiddle.’* Or, wait, no -- that’s not the right saying, which one is it? Which --

“Jesse, Jesse -- can you hear me?”

More synapses go off, a crackle of muted static, purring murmurs of sound. It’s like someone is changing the dial on a radio to find the right channel, trying to avoid old commercials. He understands completely: there’s nothing worse than having a catchy jingle stuck in your head. ‘Don’t worry ‘bout changing the program on my account,’ he wants to say. But then the pain kicks in (his head) and trickles down (his neck, his shoulder) before he realizes voice belongs to Hanzo -- yes, thank God, it’s Hanzo! he’s safe -- and the woman must be Amari. Just like she did before, when he was a trainee during his fourth month of Blackwatch, when he got shot in the ribs. Dorado, Mexico. La ciudad del amor. How sweet.

Except that Ana Amari is dead.


Hang on to what? Oh, he must mean the hand. Maybe they got him into a transport back to base. ‘I’m hangin’ on,’ he wants to say. ‘I’m hangin’ here, sweetheart, you got me.’ But that might upset
him (Hanzo sounds so hurt already) and half-conscious ramblings never helped anyone. Not that Jesse has been very helpful, screwing with poor Hanzo like that, putting him through all manner of misery. Leaving him to figure out where he ran off to, finding him by a gallows in the desert. Running off on Christmas. There’s an earworm he’d like to forget. Jingle bells, Jesse smells, dumb-ass ran away --

“Jesse, hang on. Jesse” -- beep, hiss -- “here! Here! Get him up!”

More hands. A familiar coldness. What the heck is making all that beeping? A machine? Static crackles as the woman’s voice rolls in, palliative and low. He shivers; Hanzo lets go of his hand. Who is holding his hand? Hanzo? Amari? Hanz-o-mari? Ho-lee shit! he thinks, that’s a good one. He’d laugh, but neither of them would find the joke very funny, straight-shots that they are. There’s no match for them; they are beautiful and unparalleled, like royalty.

“You’ve got him? Mercy, have you got him? There -- take his leg. Mind his arm. Jesse --”

A new voice, thank God -- or, well, God and all His saints and angels. Angela. How did she get here? Doesn’t matter; it explains the cool rush up his spine. They must have hooked him into the Caduceus. Good sign? Bad sign? He wants to yell, ‘nothin’ a little bourbon can’t cure!’ But Southern hospitality dictates one should be respectful to their physicians. Another flicker of music, jouncy guitars, country drums, a thick and rowdy voice. Some ageless chorale from a grungy tavern.

“Jes-se… Jes-se…”

Mental static. Channel change. There -- Hanzo’s back. His Moon Pie in the sky. It’s real; he isn’t dreaming this. But now the archer has lapsed into Japanese, crooning and whispering, and he can’t understand a dang thing. Should’ve learned Nihongo when he had the chance, Maybe he’s saying something real pretty. Or (he thinks lovingly, ripe with fondness) the more likely option, Hanzo is just cussing him out.

‘It’s okay, darlin’,’ Jesse wants to say. ‘It’s okay, the bad guys won’t getcha.’ But then the darkness comes in. They must have sedated him. That’s not so bad; he won’t feel as much pain. But it isn’t great either, because it takes away Hanzo, which weakens him, takes from him the single thing he wants. He’d trade a thousand Amaris right now to look Hanzo in the eye. Through the drugs and the pain, the longing hits him so hard that it kicks the radio and starts a new song. Jolted loose from some crevice, a chunk of melodic flotsam in the dead-eye’s mind.

Wise - men - say…

At first, he panics. Music hasn’t been kind to Jesse McCree lately -- not with words like ‘conditioning’ and ‘corruption’ and ‘compromise’. What kind of terrorists (read: unforgivable assholes) would go so far as to try and fuck up a whole color? Who does that? Did they lodge any other wicked little tunes up in his brain to pop out unexpectedly some day, like a snake?

But then a man comes into view, and the panic fades. Instant calm; a moment of reassurance. He’s momentarily blurry, like a camera lens struggling to adjust to new light, before it clicks. The rainy sky hangs with a winter-white fog. He’s got his hoodie, cap, cigarettes. Leaning against the retaining wall looking over a wide grey bay. Smoking. Watching the birds.

Only fools - rush - in…

Captain. Oh, there he is -- completely real, like his left arm. Conviction grips him through the old, dredged-up dream: this is how it should’ve been. No loss of life or limb.
Gabriel is saying something to the seagulls, but he can’t hear it. The song overlays him; it’s like the sound system is set to mute. He laughs: not the crow’s caw or the cackle from hell. Just the regular one. Eyes crinkled, cheeks scrunched. Flashing his teeth.

But I - can’t - help …

The good laugh. His brother. A wise old king.

Fall-ing in love - with - you.

The memory snuffs out like a match. Gabe is gone. Seized by the moment, the now, the save-him-while-you-can -- Jesse considers bolting after him. But Hanzo has his hand. It’s even better than holding his gun. A lassitude pulls him down, covers his nerves, blankets his senses. The meds get him right in the eye, placidly numbing him out.

But I - can’t - help …

The gunslinger finally understands. He’s going to be okay. There are things a person can come back from and things they can’t. So he lets go, and gives in, and decides -- for once -- not to run.

Fall-ing in love - with - you.

He lets the ballad play to the end. The music drones out, soft and forgiving. Jesse fades to sleep after a smoky voice whispers, reassuringly: goodnight.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Natalie, Vita (hey happy birthday!), Lynn and my sensitivity readers for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- References: Occam's razor, Edgar Mitchell.
- Have you checked out the McHanzo tumblr lately? You should! It's a really great place for fans of the ship!
- Well, so, there you go! A lot has been tied off, wrapped up, and brought down with a bang. The end of the story has been on my mind for a long time. I like to stress that I am not one in the same with my narrator or their tone, but Reaper's explanation of how he saw Overwatch brought down is a nod to how I (personally) want to believe things might have actually gone. The whole Atlas News/UN testimony story of 'Reyes was resentful and turned on OW/Morrison' just ... never sat right with me, you know? But, as Reyes says, that makes a story. Back when I first began planning, writing, and setting up the facets of the plotline that come together here, we still had not had even had Ana Amari’s release and all the content that's popped up after that. I still feel like it's a flicker of writer's luck that the lore released so far has not changed what I originally noted for the story arc (and this chapter!) back in June.
- A few parallels to the the Dragons short between the other two major 'brothers' focused on in the story.
- If you feel a little confused, I understand -- the fic is long and dense, and many of what Reaper touches on can be sourced from far earlier chapters. And there's a little more to come!! The Author's Note will go over more of it, and I hope to be able to answer some more questions about it on Tumblr now that the last two chapters will
wrap up how McCree, Hanzo, and Overwatch move on from here.
- (and yes they will move on)

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](#) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.

If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

- I'm super sorry I couldn't get this out before BlizzCon! I'm happy to say, though: we are right at the end!!
- Content note: sexual content towards the end of the chapter. For tagging: top!McCree.
- You can follow me on Twitter and Tumblr.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

* VISHKAR CORPORATION

* GIBBS PROTOCOL - OPERATION: BLACKHAT

* SYSTEM STAGE 4 - WATCHPOINT INFRASTRUCTURE REDUCTION

* LOCATION: 36°08'28.8"N 5°20'39.1"W

* EXEC OP MANAGER: SANJAY KOPPAL

* COMMANDING OFFICER: SYMMETRA (U17)

* ASSIGNED PERSONNEL: N/A

* SUPPORT: 0

* OPERATIONAL UPDATE ENCLOSED:

* MEMO: Operation: Blackhat has been suspended at Stage 4 following the December 23 Talon attack on Watchpoint: Gibraltar. Operation halted due to archi-tech U17 committing two (2) acts of insubordination and unsanctioned compliance in defense of Overwatch agents.

* MEMO: Commanding officer U17 has violated the confidential directive advising NO ASSISTANCE in event of attack/harm that might result in termination of Overwatch agents or cause collateral casualty.

* MEMO: Further violations: CO U17 has engaged in socialization and fraternization with multiple members of Overwatch (including Case 290-A, Lúcio Correia dos Santos). CO U17 has failed to follow her secondary directives of destabilizing the Athena program and collecting information on Specimen 1193.

TRANSCRIPT: EOM Sanjay Koppal is online. Recording is now live.

TRANSCRIPT: So. We are coming up on a month since Agent U17’s assistance in defense against the terrorist attack. I think there’s been enough debate. It’s time to make a formal decision.

TRANSCRIPT: Agent U17 has cost the Vishkar Corporation an absolutely vital
opportunity to not only retrieve our stolen archive but also eliminate Overwatch within the confines of its own base.

TRANSCRIPT: However you choose to look at her actions, our loss is obvious. We needed all of these Overwatch agents dead, either by an outside aggressor or by their own stupidity, so we could get our archive back, erase what they had on us, and be done with this sordid arrangement. And she knew that.

TRANSCRIPT: She was given direct orders that if such an opportunity arose, she was not to assist or provoke conditions that might aid, protect, or shield Overwatch agents in any form or fashion. No compromise permitted.

TRANSCRIPT: It is one thing to analyze Agent U17’s disobedience of my directive as some silly moral choice to save lives in a moment of peril. It is another thing entirely to discover that her logs confirm my suspicion that she has been less attentive to the goals set for her and instead began showing lenience towards the Overwatch team. Actually fraternizing with them. Specifically the Korean celebrity Song and the talking gorilla. And that street ruffian from Rio! Of all people! The criminal!

TRANSCRIPT: She had an easy job to do. Get the archive back, shut down the Athena program, eliminate agents and detain useful specimens as necessary. Yes, I knew it was going to take a long time to pull it off, but I was assured she was up to the task. Assured that she wouldn’t wind up double-crossing us just because she made some sordid new friends.

TRANSCRIPT: As most of you know, Agent U17 is unlike our other archi-techs. We agreed early on to ensure that she never viewed commonplace obstacles as limitations. Thus I felt it was time to give her an opportunity to see how far she would comply without my direct guidance.

TRANSCRIPT: An error on my part, one for which I realize now we’ll dearly pay.

TRANSCRIPT: I believe our only remittance right now is the assurance that this can all be re-aligned.

TRANSCRIPT: I’m approving the process to extend her suspension. We’ll consider re-assessing her position and start the necessary procedures to retrieve our technology from her person if she chooses not to comply. Specifically the arm.

TRANSCRIPT: Once she’s removed from the Watchpoint, I’ll take a team in and finish everything off myself.

---

After Lúcio reads the memo, he thumps down his keyboard, yanks off his headphones and pushes back from the lab console. He stares at Koppal’s transcript as if it personally insulted him.

Figuratively: it has.

It’s taken him ten hours (give or take) to dig out, rewire, and re-code the Vishkar communicator in the broken teleporter. The effort bears fruit. His Crossfade suit’s cobbled hardware allows him to brute-force access the Vishkar comm line and download a few emails from the director’s account. Lucky him: they’re just the emails he and Winston (to whom he forwards each one) need to see.

Maybe ‘lucky’ is the wrong word. Reading the messages makes his head hurt. Words like
aggressor and no compromise and terminate boil his blood. Lúcio already knew plenty about the Vishkar Corporation, including this dipshit Koppal, but now he understands.

Athena beeps a confirmation after the emails deploy, declaring: “thank you, Agent Lúcio.”

“No problem, Athena.”

“With this information, Winston and Tracer can end our arrangement with the Vishkar Corporation and present a public case for a formal investigation on their business practices.”

“Hope it brings 'em to their knees. I told Torb it wasn't right, treating their own people like this.”

“Indeed.” The computer drives whirr before she adds, softly, “beyond that, I appreciate what you are doing for Miss Vaswani.”

Lúcio pauses, taken aback by her tone of voice. Since when has Athena ever sounded so gentle?

“Uh. Like I said, no problem. Just trying to help out.”

A soft mow catches his ear. Lúcio turns and greets Frajola, who leaps into his lap to knead on his thighs. He scratches behind her ears, chirps to her in Portuguese, asks where's Chuchu? He already knows the answer; the orange-and-white cat prefers to spend all his time around a different person at the Watchpoint. Another pulse of understanding: Chuchu is more her pet than his now, and -- after everything that’s happened -- he accepts it.

Lúcio shuts off the cobbled communicator and sets it on the table. Once the line disconnects, there’s a chance that the Vishkar system firewall will alert one of their cronies that he managed to crack their security -- but he doesn’t care. So what if they find out he hacked their line? They’ve called him a criminal for years now. He’s more than ready to return the favor.

“Sanjay’s a real piece of work,” he mutters to the cat. And then, an unspoken assurance: but not for much longer.

Lúcio tabs from his inbox to the panel that hosts his music software. He switches out his keypad for a multi-button soundboard and pulls up the composer’s window. Hundreds of candy-colored notes speckle the staff roll in harmonic sine waves. Exquisite chords, pristine arpeggios, percussive swells are carefully laid out in the key of C Major, 4/4 rhythm and passive andante tempo. A musical palindrome with the beginning tailored to fit an equivalent end, a format unlike anything he wrote for Synaesthesia Auditiva. No chaos, no discord. He’s most proud of the melody -- an exercise in precision, crafted to standards of mathematical perfection.

It’s not his next big hit, nor will it be on his upcoming album. Only the person he’s writing it for will get a chance to hear it when he’s done -- a person he no longer desires to call by an archi-tech number or alias. Far from a foe, but -- in spite of Hana’s efforts as a go-between -- not quite a friend. What is Satya now that she’s saved their lives? His ally? His comrade? Lúcio frowns. Can he even call her ‘his’ by any degree of association?

Chuchu’s person, he decides silently, and that’s that. When in doubt, let the cat’s opinion take precedence.

He’s about to get back to work when Athena’s alert goes off again. It’s the patient in medbay room 2.

“Eastwood!”

Lúcio startles Frajola out of his lap, scrambles up, and bolts from the lab. Darting down the hall,
huffing and puffing, jamming the button on his comm.

“Hey, doc! Medbay 2! McCree’s up!”

---

He wakes to cold, and then pain.

McCree’s eyes open to a blurry white glow. He sits up, flinches, flattens back into the gurney bed with a groan. Through his left eye (his right won’t open, too much pain) he can make out the shape of a steel-grey curtain, partition walls, and a wall of medical electronics and sensors. A sterile unappealing environment. The curtain rustles as two people burst into his line of view. Angela and Lúcio.

“Jesse,” Angela says, urgent but firm. She rushes to his side, a flurry of pale movement. Moving tubes, checking vitals, looking into his eyes. Speaking slow and clear. “Jesse, it’s Dr. Ziegler. You’re in the medbay, safe at the Watchpoint. You’ve just woken up.”

Safe. The word lurches him further into consciousness. He’s cold due to a lack of clothing; a thin white gown covers his chest and shoulders. He reaches up to touch his right cheek and feels a tuft of gauze.

“Careful,” she says quickly. “You were injured during an explosion at Deadlock Gorge. You suffered a head injury, your right eye is bandaged for protection.”

So that explains the pain. McCree’s vision blurs in and out of focus. He processes each word slowly: explosion, Deadlock, head injury, bandage.

Protection. Where is Hanzo?

“Take it easy, Eastwood,” Lúcio chimes in, steadying his shoulder. The audio-medic bustles at his right arm, green scrubs and yellow medical gloves. “You’ve been out for a while. Take it slow, tell us if you have any pain.”

Pain, he thinks shrilly, struggling to match the movements of his body to his sluggish brain. McCree’s lips move to eke out a dry wheeze.

“Let me get you some water,” Lúcio murmurs, darting, returning with a paper cup. A straw pokes his mouth; Jesse seizes on the moisture and manages a sip. “You got it, Eastwood, just take it slow.”

When he can finally speak, the gunslinger mutters, feather-light and hoarse: “Han-zo.”

“Hanzo is alright,” Mercy answers. “He’s fine. He wasn’t injured.” McCree hears her snapping at the sensor panel beside him as she unwraps a medi-kit. “Can you tell me if you have any pain?”

“Where’s Hanzo?” McCree rasps.

“He’s good,” Lúcio replies. “He’s just fine. Don’t worry about him, Eastwood. Let us worry about you right now, okay?”

“Where is he?”

Angela presses a gloved hand against his upper arm. He looks down at his prosthetic elbow, vision swimming. The decorative skull leers back at him, scuffed and scraped.
A comforting realization: he still has all his limbs. They’re numb, but there.

Less comforting: the medics are exchanging glances, as if judging how to explain why Hanzo is absent.

Lúcio pipes up causiously, “he’s not here right now.”

Angela cuts in quickly. “Not currently at the Watchpoint.”

“Where?” McCree whispers, twitching, struggling not to sit up again. “Where’d he go?”

“Hanamura.” Angela hooks a syringe from the medi-kit into the tubing of his IV. “He took a leave of absence. It’s all fine, Jesse. He’ll be back.”

McCree lets out a rumbling huh? He can’t parse what they’re saying. Hanamura, leave of absence, he’ll be back...

“He had to take care of some stuff with the Shimada-gumi,” Lúcio adds. “We got a call from Genji not long after you both got back from the States. Once he knew you were stable, he requested to take off and go help. He’s supposed to be back when he’s handled everything there.”

McCree slumps, instantly despondent. His brain grinds like a wheel, struggling to cache the events that led him here: Hanzo, the Gorge, the explosion. Seventy-Six (jackass), pulse rifle (firing), combat (a din of madness). The blue winter sky (heaven), the red canyons (hell), a ruined gallows and a skull in the sand. In the midst of this place -- borne out of his nightmares -- an owl-faced arbiter in the shape of the Reaper.

No: not Reaper. Reyes. The captain. Gabe.

“Hang on,” Lúcio urges when McCree dithers with a groan. “Hang on, Eastwood, tell us where it hurts. We’re gonna get you something for the pain, okay? You just gotta tell us where it hurts.”

“God-damn,” he bleats. “Kinda hurts all over.”

A cool rush eases over his arm as Mercy administers the syringe. “This’ll flush out some inflammation, Jesse. Just stay with us, alright?”

The gunslinger seizes on the sound of her voice, scrabbling at another realization through his agony. “Gabe,” he says. “Gabriel. Where is he?”

“The Reaper fled the canyon.”

“Fled to where?” Jesse whines. “Did you see him?”

“No,” Mercy’s brows furrow. “No, he managed to escape. The canyon came down, but only you and Seventy-Six were injured.”

“Gabe was injured,” Jesse persists. Shivering to the chill of the fluid rushing into his arm. “He was hu-hurt. Spittin’ up blood. He was b-bad off. You didn’t g-get him?”

“No,” she answers. “I didn’t get there in time.”

A third realization, this time with a jolt: Mercy must have been there. She must have been close to the Gorge. How?

“Jesse,” Angela says softly, “there’s a lot we need to discuss.”
McCree looks away. He thinks of Reyes and the smoke, the red sand and the skull. Memories of Hanzo -- gold scarf, dark eyes, proud face -- and the hand that held his own. A loving benediction whispered in his ear, English and Japanese, more plea than prayer. In his drugged haze, he thought it was Ana Amari, clutching his fingers and cooing soft, just as she’d done on the transport back from Dorado.

How did Hanzo find him? How long had he searched before tracking him down? How soon after they returned did he leave? Is he really handling affairs in Hanamura, or is this some equivocal decision to spare himself the possibility of being left behind again?

Tears swell from his throat to his eyes. He would rather not be seen crying, but -- right now -- he wants to weep.

He wants Hanzo. Unabashedly, maybe even uncontrollably. And, beyond that, he wants Reyes and Amari. Three golden ghosts he badly wishes -- in a burst of misery that nearly nauseates him -- to see again.

Lúcio pipes up on his right. “Hey, doc,” he says softly. “Let’s do the concussion check and then give him some time, yeah? Waking up’s probably a little hard right now. We can all talk later.”

“Of course.” Angela lowers her voice, soothing, just before McCree’s chin starts to shake. Stroking his brow as he shuts his eyes. “Of course we can.”

---

A day passes. McCree flickers in and out of tormented sleep. Someone comes in periodically to change bandages, check vitals, administer medication -- a dreamy mishmash of Mercy or Lúcio, sometimes with the additive voice of Hana or Tracer. Twice he wakes from unsettled slumber with the conviction that Hanzo is right beside him in the room, speaking in Japanese -- only to discover it’s a newscast on a nearby telescreen.

When he’s lucid, Angela sits beside him with crackers and broth. She informs him that the synthetic nerves in his arm are more alert than the organic ones in his shoulders, so his left hand may move quicker than the rest of him. He will have to take it slow for a week or two, but everything should heal up (she borrows his saying) fit as a fiddle.

They talk quietly with Angela leading the conversation. She tells him about Genji’s departure to places unknown, Hanzo’s shortly after, Hana and Lúcio confessing to Winston and Tracer what they’d found in the Blackwatch archives. Reinhardt snapping out of his recent doldrums and insisting that the team stall the upcoming UN investigation to instead prepare an offensive strike on Talon in retaliation. How everything stopped (again, she chides, just as we were finally getting some stability) when Angela received a new message from Seventy-Six.

“It was actually him and not a hacker,” she explains. “He contacted me to tell me he was in pursuit of Reaper and believed Reaper was pursuing you. I realized the three of you were probably about to converge on the same place, so I decided to leave and try to intercept you all.” Angela gazes at her lap. “I wasn’t going to let anyone try subdue him with you and Hanzo already out in the field.”

“You were tryin’ to stop him?”

“Trying to,” she replies. “In truth, I wanted to stop all of you. There was a non-violent option. You all knew I wanted to see the Reaper brought in unharmed.”

McCree stares hard into his bowl of broth. “Reyes.”
Angela blinks. “Hm?”

“Reyes,” he repeats, insistent. “That name, ‘Reaper’ -- it ain’t nothin’ but a ghost. It’s Reyes behind that mask, Angela. I heard him. I spoke to him.”

Angela leans forward. “What did he say?”

Slowly, haltingly, Jesse tells her everything he can remember. He narrates the long, drawn-out chase into the desert, hot spats of combat preceding unexpected revelations. Her eyes widen when he describes the gallows and the sand, Reaper the ghastly storyteller illustrating his tale through shapes in smoke. The truth shocks Angela into silence. When Jesse explains the grim fate of Blackwatch and its commanding officer, she sits back with wide eyes and a slack jaw.

“How?” she finally whispers. “How is that possible, Jesse? Talon, infiltrate Overwatch? Without the rest of us knowing?”

“Easier than you’d think,” McCree replies. “Gabe kept Blackwatch cut-off and encrypted to keep agent identities safe. But that worked against him. Once Talon got through, no one on the outside had a clue what they were gettin’ up to on the inside. I don’t even know if Jack coulda figured it out, had he looked.”

“Jesse, I healed those men. I took care of you all, you were in and out of medbay all the time. And Gabriel” -- she hesitates, momentarily overcome by emotion -- “I-I suspected something could’ve been wrong, but not Talon. Not an infiltration or conditioning.”

“It was there, Angela. It was turnin’ our own man against us.”

She frets. “Ach, it’s just as terrible as what happened with Amélie! I should’ve looked harder, I should’ve known --”

“Naw.” He grits his jaw. “There’s no way you could. You thought you were seein’ something else, just like I did. Only someone on the inside coulda figured out what was happenin’, someone who wasn’t affected.”

Angela eyes him sadly. “And you left.”

McCree chews on his lower lip. “I see it now. I see how it all happened. God-damn, Angela -- they got us good.”

“But they didn’t get you,” she presses. “You’re still with us.” She reaches out to brush a few strands of hair from his forehead. “Now that you know what you were seein’, do you think it had any lingering effects on you?”

Jesse manages a little humor. “Reckon it explains why I start square-dancin’ if you press my nose and pull my ear at the same time.”

Angela huffs. “Oh, Jesse, come now.”

He caws a dry laugh, waves it off, answers sincerely. “I dunno if it did or not. Been thinkin’ it was Blackwatch ops and all those years on the run that got me feelin’ so twitchy sometimes, but who knows.”

“And you’re certain Reyes is no longer under Talon’s influence? You don’t think they still had some kind of control over him?”
“Didn’t seem like it.”

“You realize what this means,” she mutters. “You realize what Winston will say -- the levels of investigation we’ll have to do on all our old records, our files --”

“We gotta,” McCree interjects. “Whatever it takes, Angela. We gotta make sure it doesn’t happen again.”

Silence falls between them. Angela places her hand over his metal fingers. A rush of tenderness sweeps the gunslinger, gripping his heart with longing.

If only that was Hanzo’s hand clutching at his own.

“Tell me,” she pleads. “Tell me if you think it’s possible to bring him back.”

“Back?” McCree sinks down into the bed. Between heartache and an injured eye, he’s starting to hurt again. “With the Caduceus?”

“With anything.” Urgency flickers in her voice. “If he’s not a full agent of Talon, if he’s still Gabriel, then surely there’s a way we can subdue him and try to treat him. If all of this is true, he deserves that chance, at the very least.”

McCree winces again through a fog of dismay. “I dunno how you’re gonna be able to treat him, Mercy. I saw beneath the mask, it was awful.”

“How so?”

He shuts his eye, wishing the pain would cease. “His skin -- God almighty, it looked like it was made outta ash. Kept fallin’ off an’ growin’ back. Sheddin’ off in pieces. He was missin’ some of his nose, cheeks. Looked like he was put together outta mismatched parts.”

“He suffered burns in the explosion,” Angela sighs softly. “Tac-gear kept him protected, but not around his head and face.”

“Well, he also kept spittin’ up this black mess, like blood. Sometimes it seemed like he’d be halfway there and halfway about to turn into smoke. I dunno if it was injury or if that’s just the state he’s in.” His chin droops to his chest. “God-damn, I can’t, Angela. I can’t shake it.”

“How so?”

“Can’t shake this feeling that I was watchin’ him fall apart,” McCree whines softly. “All those ops we ran, before I ran off? The ones where I told you he was sayin’ all that grim shit? God-damn, that could’ve been Talon talkin’ right through him. He said he tried to leave messages, tried to find ways to let people know what was happenin’. You say you shoulda known, hell” -- he weakly jabs his fingertips into his sternum -- “I shoulda known. I shoulda been listenin’. I shoulda stayed and figured it out.”

“Bitte.” The hand on his fingers squeezes. “You cannot change the past. It is like you said. The Reaper is a ghost, Jesse. The man we knew was the man who saved the world. A hero. And heroes never --”

But Jesse is staring straight ahead at the man now leaning against the partition. He cuts an imposing figure: six feet tall, cropped white hair, red-and-blue jacket. Scars mar his aging visage in jagged stripes. Angela halts, turns, stiffens. The man says nothing; his eyes meet McCree’s own. In spite of his age, they’re vivid blue, a wide open sky.
“Jack,” Angela murmurs.

But McCree has a sharper reply. “What’re you doin’ here?”

“Overstaying my welcome,” replies Jack, his voice rough as gravel.

“He’s recovering here,” Angela explains quickly. “He had a few wounds that needed treating, he came back with us.”

“How long’s he been on base?” McCree barks. And then, flinching, “how long have I been out?”

Mercy frowns. “You were unconscious for ten days.”

Silence. McCree’s stomach turns over. He can’t tell if it feels like a millennia or the blink of an eye.

“I’m glad you’re recovering fast,” Jack says. “You’ve been through a lot. When you’re feeling up to it, I’d like to hear what you have to say about what happened in the Gorge.”

“Sorry,” McCree says, not sounding sorry in the least. “Patient confidentiality.”

Angela lifts her hands. “Let’s not have any animosity here.” She shoots the old soldier a wary look: *not now.* “Jack, wait outside. I’ll help you with whatever you need.”

“What we need is information,” Jack declares crisply. “Anything regarding Reaper and Talon is critical at this point.”

“Critical my ass.” McCree scowls. “You know what was more important? Takin’ a split-second before you ran into a dangerous situation with guns-a-blazin’.”

Jack snorts, a terse ‘*tchh.*’ “A situation where two co-operatives were engaged in a stand-off with a hostile. I wasn’t going to wait around for one of you to decide to lower your weapon.”

McCree rolls his eyes. Typical Morrison: always the commando. “You coulda killed us all in that canyon, Jack.”

“With all the explosives tacked around that ridge, Reaper could have, too.”

McCree clenches his teeth. “Reyes.”

Jack’s tone turns chilly. “I know who he is, McCree. I’m the one who told your Shimada the sit-rep when you were both undercover in Mexico.”

The mention of Hanzo and Dorado spikes fury in McCree’s blood. “Did your sit-rep happen to include the truth?” And then, as the fury rises: “did it include any info ‘bout how he was betrayed?”

Another beat of silence. Jack narrows his eyes. “Come again?”

“You heard me,” McCree quips back.

“What do you mean, ‘betrayed?’”

“B-E-T” -- McCree sarcastically drawls out each letter -- “R-A-Y, E-D. Eight-letter word for gettin’ screwed over by your own people.”
"What all did he tell you?"

"If you're still hell-bent on killin' him, I ain't telling you a dang thing."

Now Jack bristles. “Listen, if you want to stand around and point fingers, you can do it on your own time. Talon doesn't take days off and neither do I. You’ve got information I need --”

“Go blow yourself, Jack.”

“Alright, that’s enough.” Angela rises to her feet. “Jack. Move out. Jesse” -- her tone softens -- “keep resting. I don’t want anyone disturbing you.”

She escorts Jack out. McCree glares at the wall; he can hear them arguing beyond the partition. He focuses on a panel of lights bordering a status screen that displays his vital signs. His heart rate, blood pressure, oxygen level. A numerical matrix of his bodily strengths and weaknesses, neatly arranged cell by cell. The lights glow blue: *situation normal.* By their data, he's doing fine.

Leave it to a bunch of statistics to dictate his closeness to life or death, when every cell in his body aches for people who are very far away.

---

Within a week, he’s up and walking. A brief procedure to correct some swelling on his right eye gets him down for a day, but Angela assures him it will prevent the need for future surgery. McCree adjusts quickly to having full eyesight again; he passes through a few sessions of physical therapy without hassle. In fact, this time, it feels like he’s bouncing back faster.

Winston calls a mandatory meeting in the debriefing room on the day McCree is discharged from medbay. The gunslinger retells the tale of the canyon chase and the Reaper’s information before a captive audience of the Watchpoint team. Once he’s finished, Seventy-Six -- supported by a stoic Reinhardt and grim-faced Torbjorn -- stands before them with a bowed head and broken voice.

“Out true,” he begins, “that I deceived you. I lied to you -- all of you, and the whole world -- to preserve my identity. I know you may not forgive that deception, but I can tell you I did it for the safety of others.” He looks around the table. “I was betrayed. All of us were, and people beyond this room, too. The roots of that betrayal run deeper with every fight. But I’m still fighting. I’m in this battle because I want to keep innocent people from losing their lives. That’s what soldiers do.”

Hana quietly huffs. Jack shoots her a sharp glance; she returns it fearlessly. One young warrior sizing up the old.

After a beat, he continues. “Since the explosion, I’ve committed myself to finding out the truth about what happened. Sometimes I feel like I’m no closer to that truth than when I set out, but it’s taken me a few places. Now it’s brought me here. I think it’s time I faced that fact. I can’t promise I’ll put the badge back on, but I want you all to know I’m on your side.” He glances to the men beside him. "No more going gentle into those good nights."

“We’re glad you’re here, Jack,” Lena pipes up. She receives supportive nods from Reinhardt and Torbjorn. “So long as you’re willing to help, you know you’re part of the team.”

“The UN may not think so,” Hana counters. She narrows her eyes at Jack. “You’re a vigilante. How many countries have warrants out for you right now?”

“Our relationship with the UN is about to get a little hairy,” Winston grumbles. He taps the holoprojector; columns of text scrolls down the wallscreen. “Jack’s intel has alerted us to a
potential connection between certain UN diplomats” -- certain words in the text turn red -- "and Talon."

Murmurs of disbelief go up among the team. Lúcio is the first to speak out. “You gotta be kidding me.”


“Financial,” Jack answers grimly. “Some of the banks I broke into were fostering off-shore accounts linked to diplomats within the UN and corroborating government structures, some of which served since the restoration after the Crisis. The accounts were making deposits to companies like Vishkar and LumériCo, but they also connected to subsidiaries and funds belonging to organizations that didn’t check out. I tracked them down and discovered a series of dummy companies set up to fund Talon centers and cells. All across the globe.”

Torbjorn folds his arms over his chest. “Smells like a conspiracy.”

“Smells like a lot of wicked people are about to answer for their crimes,” Reinhardt adds, grim.

"Wait a second," Hana interrupts. She squints at Jack. "You robbed banks?"


Hana looks at McCree. "So that cash he gave you and Hanzo was from Talon?" With a shrug, she purses her lips. "Cool, I know who's buying me a new MEKA."

Winston cuts in. “Let's focus, guys. This is why I needed you all here for McCree and Jack’s statements. Since the recall, we've taken things pretty head-on, doing it a bit on the nose. There hasn’t been much time for long-term strategic planning since Russia, but we’ve got to buckle down and do it now while our enemies still think we're in the dark.” He points to the telescreen. “Between Talon, Vishkar, and the United Nations, we’re going to be fighting on a lot of battlefields. That means a few important things.”

Athena’s emblem flashes on the display before spinning through rows of data records. Dozens of faces flick by, familiar and new, human and Omnic. A series of profiles load in card-like squares; they’re headlined with names, pictures, and biodata. McCree recognizes two of them instantly: Zenyatta and Captain Zaryanova.

Winston adjusts his glasses. “We’re gonna need a few more heroes.”

“Excellent!” Tracer chirps enthusiastically.

“The Russian Defense Force and Volskaya Industries have sponsored Zarya to join our ranks,” Winston states. “Along with that, Zenyatta has volunteered to serve as our formal emissary to the Shambali in Nepal. Once Genji and Hanzo return, the Shimada-gumi will be finished and Talon will be down one ally as we gain those three.”

Mei beams from her seat, pointing delightedly at Zarya’s image. “And after that, we’ll be taking on more recruits?”

“That’s the goal.” Winston lifts his chin. “An autonomous, renewed Overwatch. With the funding from Volskaya and Jack, we’ll set up our headquarters here and open a formal operations center in Hangar 18.”

Another round of muttering rises from the table, this time with excitement. McCree watches their
faces, young and old, experienced and green. A cluster of comrades ready to save the world.

“Which leads into our tertiary plan,” Mercy says. Now she rises; the telescreen shifts to a rotating image of the Reaper. “I’ve received approval from Winston to take on a three-man mission in support of one of our founding heroes.”

Reinhardt and Torbjorn look up as she levels her gaze at the team. Lúcio and Hana glance at one another before turning to McCree. The gunslinger takes in a quick, startled breath.

“In forty-eight hours,” declares Angela, “Jack and I will be departing the Watchpoint to make an attempt at retrieving Gabriel Reyes.”

Mei’s eyes widen. “Retrieving him?”

“Yes.” Angela firmly presses her palms into the table. “It was my error and hubris that caused him to suffer. It is my responsibility to try and fix what went wrong.”

"How?" asks Mei.

"I have a new protocol for the Caduceus that might reverse and potentially even heal his wraith state.”

Silence. Uneasy glances. Tracer shakes her head. “How’re you going to handle the whole ‘hostile to everyone in Overwatch’ thing, though?”

“The plan is to reach some kind of ceasefire before we bring him to a safe location for treatment. After that, pending his compliance, we’ll make an executive decision on” -- she nearly falters -- “what should happen next.”

“What if he doesn’t comply?” Mei worries.

Mercy frowns. “We retreat and try again.”

“What if he’s got Talon forces on his side?” Tracer asks. She looks nervous; McCree can hear the unspoken threat of ‘Widowmaker’ in her voice. “Are the two of you enough manpower for this kind of risk?”

Mercy clears her throat. “We have a rendezvous scheduled outside of Cairo with a trusted contact. Jack has enlisted the help of a bounty hunter who has been tracking Reaper since before the Watchpoint attack and the canyon incident. Their callsign is the Shrike.”

McCree leans forward. “You’re goin’ after him with a bounty hunter?”

“No,” Jack interjects. “Just getting a helping hand. The Shrike is an ally, one I’ve worked with throughout the past year. They have personal investment in Reyes’ well-being, not collecting on Reaper. They agreed to join our mission to detain him with intent to aid. They operate with some” - he pauses, tilts his head, considers his words -- “similar designs as Overwatch, in terms of wanting to keep the public safe.”

“Altruism don’t come natural to freelancers,” McCree rasps, indexing all the bounty hunters he’s crossed throughout the years. “How do we know you can trust ‘em?”

“Heh.” For a moment, McCree thinks -- swears -- that Jack is trying not to smile. “Let’s just say we’ve got enough history to make it work.”
“Wait a minute,” Lúcio interrupts. “This is kind of a bad time for someone so vital to be taking off.” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder. “If Dr. Ziegler is leaving, what’re we gonna do about medbay?”

Angela smiles faintly. “I figure you’re just the person to answer that, Lúcio.”

The audio-medic pauses before pointing at his chest, mouthing: me?

“You’re beyond capable now,” Angela offers. “A talented medic who knows the ropes. If you’re willing, I would like to transfer leadership of medbay to you as head medic while I’m gone.”

Lúcio’s eyes widen. His gaze darts from Hana to Reinhardt, to Reinhardt to Winston, Winston to McCree, then back to Angela again. All of them offer back encouraging nods.

With a quick breath, he puffs up. “Yeah!” And then, firmly: “yeah. I’ll be glad to.”

“Then that’s settled.” Angela turns to Winston. “I’ll lock in the transfer of authority through Athena before we depart.”

Winston faces the team. “From here on out, we’re no longer the Watchpoint at Gibraltar. After today, it’s the new HQ. A lot is at stake, but we know who we’re fighting. Your skills and expertise are needed now more than ever.”

The telescreen fades into a circular shape: clasped hands below a radiant bow of gold. They watch the Overwatch emblem spin, a luminous symbol for a bright future.

"This is it, guys," Winston declares. "The world is counting on us.”

---

McCree checks on the chickens and box garden before he returns to his dorm. He hovers in front of the door for five heavy seconds before he summons the strength to brace himself, press the button, and open it. The scant space before him remains unchanged, but he still has to steel himself each time he goes in. Without Hanzo, it doesn't feel the same.

He scans the room and takes inventory: futon (still clean and covered), furniture (still intact), laundry (still neatly folded in a basket). His chestplate, gear, and belts remain piled on his console chair. No dust, no grime, but a distinct lack of red. His serape is gone.

Either it was destroyed in the canyon, or Hanzo -- who cleaned everything before he left, like the most diligent roommate -- took it with him. Jesse engenders a brief beat of fondness for the latter.

He kneels beside the futon. There’s an indentation in the center of the right pillow (his side; Hanzo prefers sleeping on the left). McCree reaches out to brush a few strands of black hair from the spot. The archer must have slept on his side of the bed while he was gone.

On the dresser, there’s a sheet of paper with torn margins. McCree picks it up and re-reads the neat, elegant print for the umpteenth time. Tracing the words handwritten with real ink.

Jesse,

I will be back. Genji has alerted me to the final steps necessary to remove the Shimada-gumi and Talon from Hanamura. I wished to stay with you but the dragons warned me that they were destroying our home. But I will be back. Forgive me for
leaving your side. This is brief because I did not know what else to say.

I will be back. It is audacious for me to ask, but please wait for me.

- H

Loneliness burns through his chest like a torch. It’s hard to look at the room as it is, grey and silent, devoid of Hanzo and the comfort of his presence. Slowly he idles down the dormitory hallways, hunting for signs of life. No glimpse of Reinhardt or Torbjorn, nor Lúcio, Tracer or bustling Brigitte. Faint strains of music leak from Hana’s door, but she’s set her status to ‘do not disturb.’ He’ll honor that. They haven’t spoken since he got back. Maybe she’s a little mad at him.

Could Hanzo -- despite the gentle urgency of his letter -- be a little mad at him, too?

He sequesters in the hallway with his comm and dials the archer’s call code. The line rings, rings, beeps a no-answer and switches to the messaging function. McCree sighs and mutters into the mouthpiece.

“Hey,” he begins. “Hey, it’s me. Uh. Figure you might still have your comm off ‘cause you’re takin’ care of business, but I wanted to let you know I was okay.” He winces. “Dunno if Angela was givin’ you updates, but I’m doing alright” -- he scratches his beard -- “yeah, doin’ just fine. All in one piece, nothing missing.” A thin laugh. “Just a slice of my heart, y’know. Really wish you were still here.”

It occurs to him that, out of all the previous messages he’s left for Hanzo, this is the first one that isn’t on a slip of paper.

“I got your note,” he says into the comm. “Says you’re comin’ back, and I believe it, honey. I’ll be waiting here for ya. I got a lot to tell you about Gabe. When you’re back, y’know, I’ll try to make up for --”

Static crackles. McCree thinks for a moment that someone else might be picking up, but then the comm beeps twice. *End of recording.*

“Son of a gun,” he growls. “Aw, c’mon, I wasn’t done” -- tapping the transmit button to try and call again -- “dang, I wasn’t finished --”

He’s interrupted by a muted sound from the laundry room; one of the drying units dings in completion. McCree lowers his comm, shuffles down the hall, peers in. He stops in surprise.

Satya sits beside the unit, clad in her sleek cyan gown, hands covering her face.

“Hey,” McCree offers weakly.

Startled, she looks up. Her cheeks are wet and puffy. “You’ve recovered.”

“Yeah.” McCree rubs his neck; he would like to feel recovered. “Sorry for intrudin’, was just lookin’ to see who was around.”

“I am.” Satya straightens, stiffens, fidgets her hands in her lap. Forcing a posture of poise. “I have noticed your partner is not here.”

McCree blinks. Another fond thrum: ‘*your partner.*’ “You mean Hanzo.”

“Yes.”
“He took leave to go to Hanamura,” McCree says, leaning in the doorway. Trying to keep a stiff upper lip. “He’ll be back in the next few weeks.”

Satya looks at the floor. “Were I still the official Vishkar liaison, I would be compelled to report his unsanctioned departure to the corporation and the United Nations. As with your own, when you left without approval after the Talon attack.” She taps her long blue fingernails on her knee. “And the times before that, when you snuck off on covert operations under aliases. I was not aware Overwatch was re-instigating any special-ops, but I was not surprised to hear it was comprised of the both of you.”

McCree wonders how long she’s been crying in the laundry room. He frowns, watching her straighten her long black hair. *Hopefully not too long.* “Guess I should’ve never put it past you to be keepin’ an eye on us, ma’am.”

Realization: she said ‘*were I still.*’ That’s past-tense. Is she no longer the liaison?

In a tiny voice, Satya says, “you need not worry about it now.”

“What happened?”

“I have been officially suspended from the Vishkar Corporation,” Satya replies feebly. Tears glint at the corners of her eyes. “My former director wishes to remove me from my position.”

Shocked, McCree steps forward. “Aw, Miss Vaswani.”

“Please do not.” She puts up a hand. “I have not accepted their decision. They are blocking me from making an appeal. I appreciate your concern, but I would prefer not to engage in discussion on the matter. It makes me uncomfortable, considering the circumstances.”

Stunned, McCree retreats. His shoulders slump. “Please tell me it wasn’t ‘cause of what you did during the attack.”

“It makes me uncomfortable,” she repeats. “I will not apologize. To you, or to them, or to anyone.”

“You don’t gotta, Miss Vaswani. Hell, if anyone does any apologizin’, it’d be all of us here. We owe you our lives.”

But Satya rises, stone-faced and solemn. The conversation is over. “Please excuse me.”

“Miss Vaswani, your laundry --”

He moves out of the way to let her pass when a feminine shape skitters into view down the hallway. It’s Hana.

“Hey,” she says, catching up to Satya. “Are you okay?”

The women converse in low tones until Hana motions for the archi-tech’s retreat. Satya does not look back as she hurries away. Hana turns to scrutinize McCree; she’s clad in one of Reinhardt’s oversized bodybuilding shirts and purple leggings patterned with crescent moons. A pink gaming headset loops around her collar. Her latest choice of attire for chilling out.

“Did you say something to her?” she asks, nearly accusing.

McCree balks. “Naw.” And then, with a defensive shrug, “I mean, yeah.”

“What did you say?”
“I was jus’ tryin’ to apologize and thank her for all she’s done.”

Hana pinches the bridge of her nose. “Okay. That’s good. She’s just in a really bad place right now. Lu and Winston and I are doing everything we can to try and help her fight this.”

“Vishkar’s done her real dirty, then, huh?”

Hana pads closer, lowering her voice. “Vishkar is everything to her. Did you know she’s been employed with them since she was a child? They took her away from her home in Hyderabad to give her a better life. But then they came in and mandated everything she did. All her habits and routine. Right down to the hours of her day.”

He winces. “I’ll be damned.”

Hana clutches her headphones. “They had so much control over her, they wouldn’t even let her speak her native language. They make their archi-techs learn standardized ones and forget the others. Getting cut loose from them isn’t just like losing a job, it’s losing your whole way of life. Don’t you know how hard that is?”

McCree searches her youthful face; he’s reminded of Hanzo in Range 2, muttering about their teenage years as the young Shimada master and the kid from Santa Fe. Formative memories flash by in sequence: Deadlock and dirty deals, highways and crime, Reyes and Blackwatch swooping in like birds of prey to take him away. And then the years after he left, living like a coyote: drifting, head-hunting, escaping from a world that wanted to string him up. The innate longing for a place where he belonged.

“Maybe,” he says, trying not to sound rough. “Just a lil’.”

Hana seems to understand. She sags with a sigh. “I just wanted to make sure people were considerate. This has completely messed up her life. At this point, I just want her to be happy again. So I appreciate anything you can do for her.”

“I hear ya, rabbit-ears. Ain’t gotta tell me twice.”

“Honestly, I should be mad at you.” Hana folds her arms over her chest. “I should be mad at both of you, you AND Hanzo, but we don’t need that right now.”

McCree cocks an eyebrow. “Is that right?”

“Yes!” she retorts, mildly indignant. “You, especially. You ran off in a time when we really needed you. Your knowledge and expertise from Blackwatch? It was important. Lu and Han and I found so much stuff in the Blackwatch archive that lines up to what you told us about Reyes. If you’d been there, you might have figured something out without anyone running off.”

McCree lifts his hand. “Hold up. Hanzo went through the archive, too?”

“Yeah. The three of us went through it to try and find information on where you might have gone.” Hana shakes her head. “Like I said, I should be angry, but I can’t be. I just want you two to work this out.”

Deflating, McCree lowers his hand. “Now, look. I get that you wanna be mad, but the truth is --”

Hana cuts him off. “He loves you.”

McCree says nothing. His heart somersaults.
“He’s not good at talking about it,” she continues. “He’s not good at talking about anything, honestly. I don’t know if that’s his nature or his upbringing or what. Maybe all of them. Maybe he doesn’t even know the answer, I wouldn’t be surprised. It’s kinda hard to get gritty details out of an assassin who talks to dragons that eat people.”

“Hana --”

“He was lost without you, okay? The guy was completely miserable. On New Years’ Eve? We found him drinking in a lab closet. That’s how bad it left him.”

McCree puffs a surprised laugh. The mental image flashes by: Hanzo lounging around the showers in Range 1 with his blue gourd, leering with each inebriated sway of his head.

Hana carries on. “Ever since I started getting to know him, I could tell he was stuck in a rut. But you moved him to do things he’s probably never done in his life.”

“Like what?”

She clicks her tongue. “Okay, look at Hanzo and tell me if you actually think he’s ever loved anyone before, besides Genji.”

Again, McCree has nothing to say. Hana tosses her hair as if to say: I thought so.

“And I don’t know you like I know him,” she says, “but Lu does. He’s seen it from the beginning. He told me you guys didn’t get along at first, but you managed to work it out. Which means: I bet you love him, too. I bet you thought you were being noble by running away in the first place. Going to handle everything so he wouldn’t get hurt, not realizing how much it was going to hurt you both in the end, and so on.” She flaps her hand. “Am I right?”

Now McCree gawks at her in silence. Hana stares him down, pleased with the effect of her words.

“I get it, you know?” she insists. “Neither of you are perfect. You’ve both got problems. You aren’t used to having new people and things to care about. There’s all the baggage, hang-ups, issues” -- she ticks off on her fingers -- “whatever. But, look” -- Hana stretches her arms wide “- everyone has problems. Guys younger than you, guys older than you. Gamers, regular joes. Heroes.” Her arms flap to her sides. “Some people never get over them, and some people do. What matters is that you try. When you have something worth fighting for, isn’t it at least worth a shot?”

None of her heartfelt admission is as surprising as that last line. “Yeah,” he concedes. Silently understanding: a shot is what started it.

“So try,” Hana demands. “Please. The both of you, at least try. Don’t run away anymore and don’t be so stuck. If it doesn’t work out, you’ve got that much, at least.”

At least you are here, the voice murmurs at the base of his mind. Rich and purring, resonant as Amari and wise as Gabe. At least, at least.

McCree looks down at Hana before offering out his right hand.

“You sure are a pepper, you know that?” he asks gruffly.

Hana stares flatly at his hand. “Bump.”

“Huh?”
She taps his palm. “We bump on it. C’mon. Do a fist.”

McCree balls his fingers. Hana thumps her small fist on top, down below, *boom* at the knuckles. Making a gunshot noise with her mouth, *pchew.*

“You’re forgiven,” she declares over her shoulder as she heads back to her dorm. Dwindling out of sight with a last hoot down the hallway: “I’d rather be a pepper than a tomato sandwich.”

He lets her take the last word and turns back to the laundry room. Satya’s clothes are still in the dryer. McCree considers taking them out and folding them, but decides against it. Like Hanzo, she seems too particular. He’s too wary of upsetting the last person at the Watchpoint anyone should offend.

---

Jack finds him during target practice in Range 2 two days later, just before he leaves with Angela to rendezvous with the Shrike. He slips off his tactical visor and surveys the room, brows raised.

“Hasn’t changed much,” he says.

“Nope,” McCree says through a mouthful of cigarillo. He keeps his eyes on his gun as he reloads.

Jack tries to make small talk. “Looks like some new safety rails got installed over there,” he comments, pointing to the guard zone. “Was there some kind of accident?”

“Hana accidentally shot off the panels while testin’ out Winston’s Tesla cannon.”

“Huh.” Jack squints at the range. “She’s kind of an odd choice for your roster.”

“Why’s that?”

“A celebrity?” He wanders to lean against the maintenance table behind McCree. “Video gamer?”

“World-class soldier and pilot,” McCree counters. “National hero. Saved most of the Korean peninsula from imminent destruction at the hands of a sub-aquatic Omnic. Real tough little tank in that bunny ‘bot of hers.”

Jack grunts. “Guess I stand corrected.” He narrows his eyes. “Winston lets you smoke in here?”

“What d’you want, Morrison?” McCree asks, still focused on his gun. Refusing to look up into those chilly blue eyes. “Why’re you down here before a critical mission? Shouldn’t you be hooah-ing yourself up for the job?”

Jack sighs through his nostrils. His tone turns less casual. “I wanted to come by and speak to you before Angela and I left. Figured I owe you some words, some gratitude.” After an uncomfortable pause: “maybe a few apologies.”

“Maybe.” McCree snorts. “Don’t go soundin’ too sincere about it, now, Jack. Someone around here might believe you.”

“I owe you an apology,” Jack persists, working his jaw. “For jumping in when I should have held back. For getting you wrapped up in some of this without stopping to get you out. For failing you, and Shimada. And everyone else, more than once.”

"That'll do."
Jack exhales, patting the table. "You don't think I'm being sincere."

McCree finally looks up. He stares hard at Jack, a look that speaks through the emotional weight of a wearisome decade. “You owe someone else the same, and more.”

A beat passes. Jack shakes his head. “I know.”

The gunslinger puffs on his cigarillo. After another beat, he speaks up. “Out there in the canyon, I made peace with a lotta things that've kept me up at night. Took me a long walk to get there. But you” -- he eyes the soldier over his shoulder as he spins the revolver’s cylinder into place -- “you got a hard road ahead of you, Jack. One you may not get off for a real long time.”

“Maybe so.” Jack fidgets at the supply pack clipped to his belt. “But you’ve got no chance of finishing if you never get on it in the first place.”

McCree watches him dig in the pack. “What’s that?”

Jack produces a black data tablet. “I picked this up at Grand Mesa about three years ago. It’s from the old days, before the fall. Had it with me all this time, started getting a little weary of carrying it around. Given where I’m headed, I think maybe it’s better off in your hands, now.”

McCree accepts the tablet. He turns it over; a metal stamp gleams from the case, etched with the number 3945_02. And, just below that: Reyes, G.

Speechless, he looks up at Jack, who replies softly, “the password is ‘Orange county.’ You can see for yourself.”

He watches Jack turn and head for the range exit. Just before he reaches the door, McCree calls out: “hey.”

Jack stops. In the hollow vastness of the room, beneath pale industrial lights, McCree notices how old he looks. Jack is far beyond the resolute blonde commander he remembers from years past. His stomach twists when the mental image changes to how Gabriel might have aged: dark-eyed and dignified, maybe with reading glasses like Hanzo’s. That prominent brow, creased with lines of age; streaks of white to complement his scars.

He clenches the tablet in his palm. Should, not might. How he should look.

“Do right by your man,” says McCree.

Jack’s expression slackens with surprise before drooping into a wistful frown.

“If that still means anything to you,” the gunslinger sighs, tipping his hat, “do right by him.”

They share a parting nod before the door hisses shut. McCree lingers before the range with the tablet in his hands. He activates the screen, prepares to enter the password, and stops.

Not now, he thinks. Later, when there’s news on Gabriel. When the answers from the canyon are less of a recent memory.

The ballad plays on, but the tune has permanently changed.

---

By late afternoon, there’s still no call from Hanzo. He sprawls on the futon, tweaks his comm, decides to try again. Just as he activates the line, his console beeps.
“Agent McCree,” Athena flutes from the telescreen. “You have a video call.”

Hanzo! McCree scrambles to the console chair. “Put ‘em through!”

The screen flashes with a holovid transmission. McCree hastily runs his fingers through his hair, smooths his beard, straightens his collar.

Bwip. A face pops up. McCree’s heart jumps into his throat.

“Sweetheart, how’re you --”

It’s a woman’s face. Dark eyes, bold nose, blue jacket. Gold beads glint from two tails of her black hair, a style he instantly recognizes.

“-- doing …”

The woman grins, and McCree freezes.

“Jesse!”

He can’t believe who it is.

“Fareeha?”

The woman laughs, low and rolling. Jesse slumps back in his chair, astonished. That face, those features, that mark beneath her eye! If it weren’t for the name on the bottom of the screen confirming her callsign, he’d swear it was …


“Look at you!” she bursts back, bobbing up and down. “How long has it been? Actually” -- she holds up a gloved hand -- “don’t tell me.” Then she socks her fist into her palm. “If I were there right now? I’d beat you up. It’s been way too long, way-way-way too long.”

They rush through a slew of cursory re-introductions, discovering where the other has been since they last spoke. After years of proud and decorated service to the Egyptian Army, Fareeha now works as a security agent for Helix Security International. She patrols in the innovative Raptora Mark VI, a weaponized suit of combat armor powered by jetpacks. Her soldierly enthusiasm shines through the screen, redolent of her mother’s spirit and wry charm.

Peals of joy eclipse him; soon he forgets all dismay that the caller is not Hanzo. “I’ll be damned, Fareeha, you’re a sight for the sorest of eyes.”

“You are too!” She’s bouncing in place. “Ah, Jesse. I can’t believe all that’s happened. Overwatch is back? And you’re back, too?”

“Can’t keep me down,” he replies. “Sure beats hittin’ the dusty trail all these years.”

“I can imagine,” Fareeha says. She scrutinizes him through the screen. “Your bounty profile comes through our system here at Helix every now and then. You’ve managed to make yourself pretty popular in the past few years, haven’t you?”

Scratching his brow. “Juuust a lil’.”

“What were you doing at Grand Mesa?”
Shit. McCree’s gaze darts left and right. “Uhh --”

“You do know Helix owns it now, right?” Fareeha’s smile is almost apologetic.

“I may’ve heard that once or twice.” He squints. “Is that why you’re calling?”

“No.” Fareeha shakes her head. “I was just curious. An alert passed through our network that you were spotted outside the perimeter. Some sort of firefight with a suspected terrorist.”

McCree “Ah, hell, Fareeha, it’s a long story. I dunno where I’d begin.”

“Well, I’d want to hear it, but I don’t know how much time I’ve got.” Fareeha glances off-screen briefly. “Listen, there’s a reason I’m calling. It’s pretty important.”

“Yeah?”

“I’ve been talking to Angela for several months now,” she says. “She wants me to consider joining up with Overwatch, and” -- Fareeha puffs up with a wide smile -- “I want to. I’m going to. There’s a lot I have a lot to sort out here at Helix, but I know where I want to be.”

McCree brightens. A sentimental spark cheers him; she's following in family’s footsteps. “Well, I’ll be damned.”

“But that’s not the reason,” Fareeha continues. She pauses. “It’s actually a lot more personal than just Overwatch. I’m coming specifically to you about this. I haven’t told anyone else.”

“Go on.”

Fareeha’s features soften. Her mouth flattens into a thin line. “I need your help.”

McCree leans in. “I’m listenin’.”

“There’s a lot of people I could entrust with this,” she explains, “but I felt like it had to be you. From what I remember, your training involved finding missing persons. Right? You were very good at following a trail, gathering information. Undercover ops. That sort of thing.”

“Reckon I was,” McCree replies. “Is that what you need?”

“Yes.” Fareeha sombers. “Jesse, this is going to sound absurd, so I’m just going to come out and say it. If you don’t believe me, I understand. But I have proof. It’s the truth.”

Suddenly his guts twist, wrenching as if hit by a premonition. He knows what she’s about to say. It’s on the tip of her tongue, but he’s already figured it out. A sobering burst of understanding, like the implosion of a star.

“My mother is still alive,” murmurs Fareeha. “Ana is still alive.”

He sits back in the chair. The room spins around him on an otherworldly axis, a globe of numb shock from which he’s slowly detaching.

For once, the smoky voice in the back of his mind has nothing to say.

“I received a letter from her,” Fareeha says. “We thought she died on that mission all those years ago, but she managed to survive. I don’t know how long she was lost or precisely when she recovered, but the letter said she was still out there. And still fighting, too.”

“It said she had people who still needed to be protected. I don’t know who she means specifically. I certainly don’t think it’s me. I don’t even know where she could be, Jesse, all I know is that she’s out there. That’s why I’m coming to you.”

“Fareeha,” McCree begins hoarsely. “You’re absolutely sure? You’re one-hundred percent sure --”

“I am,” she insists. “Jesse, I know it. I could feel it in her words. And with everything that’s happened -- the Talon attacks, all the assassinations on past Overwatch members -- I’m worried. I don’t want to bring her home if she has battles to fight. I just want to make sure she’s safe.”

Safe. There’s that word again, yanking him back to reality. He lets out a shuddering breath. The answer’s already obvious, blaring like a bell at the forefront of his mind. After all the mysteries he’s solved lately, this one’s a no-brainer.

There’s only one requirement before he can acquiesce.

It takes him several long seconds to finally reply, “if you’re certain.”

“Completely.”

“How soon you want me out there lookin’?”

“ASAP.” Relief sweeps her face. “As soon as you can.”

“Copy that.” McCree squares his shoulders, lifts his chin, asserts himself. “You let me clear some necessary travel stuff, I’ll be outta here lickety-split.” He points upward. “Gotta make a quick detour beforehand. I ain’t doin’ this alone.”

Fareeha’s brows rise. “What do you mean?”

He offers her a wry, knowing smile. Drumming his metal fingertips on the table, drawing himself together with determination.

“I gotta go get my partner.”

---

Two days later -- after a long, turbulent discussion with Winston and a longer, less turbulent flight -- he arrives in Tokyo and boards a high-speed rail to Hanamura from the spaceport. Even undercover as Mr. Barcelo, Jesse feels the weight of his ninety-million dollar bounty. The Omnic police-enforcer ‘bots guarding the station have face-recognition software. He keeps his head down to avoid their gleaming red eyes. No hat, no armor; he opts for a leather bomber jacket, jeans, and a less conspicuous belt buckle. A cowboy will stand out like a sore thumb, especially in Japan.

McCree reaches the castle district of Hanamura after a short bullet-train ride from the outskirts of the metropolis. The crowds around the station are sparse, mostly tourists and boutique shoppers. Street traffic is limited to a few delivery trucks and hovercars. Even for late January, it’s too cold for his tastes. Heavy grey clouds hang in the wintry sky, tormenting pines and power lines with icy wind. The weather app on his phone predicts snow within the next day or so.

McCree breathes out white puffs of vapor, tugs his jacket closer, buries his chin in the soft wool collar. Our favorite type of weather, he thinks, remembering Siberia.
He passes an arcade before the Rikimaru ramen shop, stopping at a street corner to inspect the castle gates. High, imposing walls encase the compound, ballasted by slabs of stone that shape the area into a high hill. No cars linger around the road or gate entrance. The sidewalks are unoccupied save for pigeons and chirping sparrows. Nearby businesses sport shuttered windows and drawn awnings. Two large plaques emblazoned with Japanese and English text welcome visitors to the historic Shimada castle. Beneath them, a wooden board displays, in block letters: CLOSED.

Though scenic, this section of the district feels distinctly abandoned.

McCree circles the gates and hunts for a way inside. He finds a service entrance bolted with a chain and reinforced padlock. In an era of electronic security and force-fields, he marvels at the old-fashioned device before remembering that enemies to the Shimada clan probably infiltrate strongholds via rooftops and walls rather than doors. Not that it matters; he came prepared. McCree digs a ratty toolkit out of his satchel and has the lock picked open in less than a minute.

Beyond the entrance lies a spectacular courtyard bordered by three ancient towers with wooden red roofs. McCree strafes the wooden walkway with Peacekeeper at the ready, but the space is just as empty as the street. One of the towers houses a shrine with a massive bell. A rock garden sits below its steps; footprints sweep and scuff the neatly-combed sand, but his eyes are drawn to a brown splash of dried blood. A more ominous sign of struggle.

Still no sign of the Shimada brothers. Or anyone else.

A second courtyard spreads before the entrance to the castle proper. Here McCree stops to admire the view: pristine gardens, stone lanterns, cobblestone paths, a small gazebo sheltered by leafless trees. McCree wonders if these are the famous sakura that Hanzo always talks about, pink and bursting in the spring. The symbol of ephemeral beauty for which Hanamura takes its name.

He lived here, he thinks, arrested by the sight. Of course the dragon-lord would grow up in an ethereal place like this.

Jesse presses on. Two stripes of blood across the gazebo’s wooden grate reminds him of the more grisly business for which Shimada castle is secretly renowned.

McCree crosses the wooden bridge into the mouth of the castle. Two dark hallways jut from the entrance. He covers his sides, crouches, moves along quickly.

And there he is.

Beyond the foyer, past a wooden footpath that leads into a lofty hall, kneeling before a scroll of calligraphy above a small dais, is Hanzo. Storm Bow rests on his right, quiver lying parallel to its string. He’s clad in kyudo-gi and a black drape -- a shawl, maybe. Or, no: an overcoat. The ends of his scarf hang down his back like sunny tails.

Jesse watches him sit without moving for a full minute.

He lowers Peacekeeper, edges closer, and softly calls out: “Hanzo.”

The archer turns, freezes, stares with wide eyes and a dropped jaw.

Immediately McCree lifts his hands. Disarming and defenseless, a show of no threat. “It’s me.”

Hanzo swivels to a crouch. He puts a hand on Storm Bow.

“It’s just me, darlin’,” Jesse says quickly. “Don’t shoot.”
Hanzo rises, straightens, faces him. Jesse relishes a twinge of relief; the bow stays on the floor.

“You,” he says.

“I tried to comm you,” says McCree. “Tried a buncha times” -- his lips involuntarily twitch into a smile as Hanzo slowly draws closer -- “thought you mighta turned it off, didn’t know if you were gettin’ my messages --”

“You are here,” Hanzo whispers, stalking towards the gunslinger. “How did you get here?”


“How did you know where?”

“Where to find you?” McCree grins through a pang of tenderness. Did Hanzo think he'd forgotten all the times he mentioned the ancestral Shimada castle could be found in Hanamura? “Well, y’see, a lil’ bird told me. But I had to use one of them translator apps, ‘cause he only spoke Japanese --”

“Did something happen?” Hanzo asks abruptly. “At the Watchpoint” -- he tenses -- “was there an attack?”

“No!” And then, gentler: “naw, it’s fine. I took off to come find you. Had to let Winston chew me out for a bit, but he eventually signed off.”

Hanzo’s expression contorts. “Why?”

McCree gradually lowers his arms. Hanzo’s presence leaves him jittery, breathless, aching from the simple pleasure of just looking at him again.

“I didn’t wanna wait,” he says. "I wanted to be with you now."

No reply. He can’t tell if Hanzo looks appalled or confused. Maybe both.

“Now,” begins McCree, “I realize this may not be a good time. I didn’t know what all you and Genji might be handlin’ out here, but when Winston cleared me to go, I figured --”

It happens so fast. Just like Hanzo: swift and sudden, familiar and true, like so many times before. They rush together, pressing chest to chest by seeking movement and searching hands. Jesse jolts. Hanzo’s powerful arms brace his sides, bring him in, bracket him with a hold that begs not to let go.

Like ash from the end of a coal, the gunslinger crumbles.

“You are here,” Hanzo breathes through their crushing embrace. Feather-light against McCree’s throat, somewhere between a flame and the flutter of a moth. “It is really you.”

“Yeah,” McCree says, mousy, unfitting for a man of his tenor.

“It is you.” Hanzo palms his back, clutches his jacket, searches with his mouth. And then, just before their lips meet: “it is you.”

They fold in first at the knees, Hanzo tugging him down, Jesse gladly going. He lets the archer pull, grapple, feel across the fabric of his chest for traces of musculature underneath. And then his sides and abdomen, soft parts that elicit wolf-like growls from the archer’s throat when he takes hold to squeeze.
McCree breaks from the kiss long enough to gasp, “mother of fuck-all, I’m so glad to see you.”

*Whump.* Hanzo knocks him on his ass. He prowls into Jesse’s lap, thrusting with broad and powerful weight. Jesse lets out a delighted huff; he’s more than happy to accommodate this kind of reception. It’s far beyond what he expected, so visceral and real. When Hanzo nuzzles his face against his jaw, shivers dart up his spine that rival any he felt from the cold.

But that’s when Jesse notices that Hanzo is trembling.

He stops, props himself up, and gently shakes his shoulder. “Sweetheart?”

Hanzo says nothing. He buries his face at Jesse’s neckline.

More than trembling: he’s *weeping*.

“*It is you,*” Hanzo ekes out, grabbing fistfuls of Jesse’s jacket.

“*Aw, darlin’,*” Jesse bleats. His throat tightens. “Of course it’s me, it’s the real me.”

“*It is really, truly you.***”

He laughs, a jittery *heh-hah.* “The genuine article.”

The archer finally lifts his face and speaks in a tone that nearly breaks his heart.

“*You left me,*” Hanzo says.

Jesse gathers him tight, expects Hanzo to pull away, floods with fondness when he only clings closer. “*Honey, I fucked up. I messed up real bad, honey, I did you wrong.*”

“*You left me.*” Hanzo’s cheeks glisten with tears.

“I know, darlin’, I know. I was bein’ a real jackass.”

“*You left me. I deserved it.*”

Now McCree thinks his heart will outright shatter. “Darlin’, please. No, you didn’t.”

“I did.” The soft fans of Hanzo’s hair swish against Jesse’s chin. “For being cruel to you. For treating you ill. For calling you a fool, when all along, the fool was me.”

“Sweetheart, c’mere.”

“I do not deserve this.” Hanzo balls against him. “I do not deserve you. I am a fool. Why would you come here for me?”

“Because,” Jesse bursts another laugh, tinged with weak hysteria. He strokes Hanzo’s back, struggles to hold together, asks himself: *is this really happening?* “I had to, darlin’. I didn’t want to wait.”

Hanzo cuts him off with another kiss. "Come with me." One swift movement and he’s hauling the gunslinger to his feet.

"Where're we going?" Jesse laughs, out of breath again.

No reply. They escape the towering room in a rush. Hanzo pulls him down a corridor, around a
corner, past a series of dimly lit rooms. One hall gives him a glimpse at a second-story overlook with a wooden railing. Arrow shafts stick out of the beams like pale thorns. Whatever combat they conducted outside must have traveled through here.

Hopefully it isn't planning to make a return trip.

They collide again after crossing a small bridged walkway. Jesse’s back flattens first to the wall, then threatens to slide down to the floor. Hanzo cups his bearded jaw with one nimble hand and balances himself with the other. From his jaw to his shoulder to his chest to his abdomen, the hand wanders, strokes and seeks. The wall is cold, but everything about Hanzo -- lips, tongue, fingers and flesh -- is an ecstasy of warmth.

“It is really you,” he mouths into Jesse’s neck.

Still reeling from the whiplash of sneaking around an ancient castle to tangling with Hanzo in its depths, Jesse gets out a reply: “you keep sayin’ that like you expected an imposter or something.”

“I thought I had lost you,” Hanzo says, tearing open the placket of Jesse’s shirt. Kissing the center divide of his barrel chest, adoring the thatch of hair below his navel. “I thought you were going to die.”

“Oh.” The gunslinger seizes. He stares up at the hallway ceiling. How is he supposed to answer that? “Well, I didn’t.”

Click. There goes his belt buckle. Jesse gasps, oh shit.

Hanzo’s breath sears through his undershirt as he purrs: “I went to find you.”

Prickling with anticipation, Jesse thumbs the hard ridge of Hanzo’s cheek. “You sure did.”

“I wanted you. I wanted to be with you again. I would have gone into hell to bring you back.”

Jesse steels himself by the elbows and glances down for a better look. Hanzo cuts a sublime figure; one end of his scarf brushes against the denim covering his thigh, a sensual streak of gold. The sight of his sturdy shoulders tilting and cocking by his hips makes his head spin. “Oh. Han-zo.”

Hanzo lifts his head. His lips are red, pupils blown, cheeks and chin damp from wet breath and tears. The knot of his scarf threatens to unfurl.

Jesse shudders, hot as a live-wire and hard as rock. “Honey, you’re killin’ me here.”

Hanzo draws back with a soft grunt. “I will cease.”

“No!” Jesse lurches; his hips bounce and the belt-buckle jingles. “God almighty, please don’t.”

“What do you want?” Hanzo tugs at his clothes, pleads with his eyes, yearns with his whole body. “Tell me.”

The answer to this question is surprisingly easy. “You.”

“Then let me.”

"Um. Right here?" Jesse's heart races. He points feebly up the walkway. "What if someone comes down that way?"

Hanzo peers up at him, one hand fondling his groin. “We are the only ones here.”
“Uh.” He stops short of asking after Genji; if the other Shimada were around to spectate, he doubts Hanzo would go this far. Much less any errant family. “Oh.”

"Let me."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes."

Jesse’s eyelids flutter with delight. “God-damn, sweetheart.”

It’s just what Hanzo wants to hear. One nestled neatly between the gunslinger’s knees. He kisses the hairy slope of his stomach, looks up, hooks him with his gaze. The smoldering plea of a lord on his knees.

“Look at me,” Hanzo rumbles. “I want you to see.”

Jesse’s jaw hangs slack, struck dumb.

After warming his palms on the woolen lining of Jesse’s jacket, Hanzo kneads the swell of his thighs and tugs down his jeans. A brief nuzzle springs him free; the promise of watching has him already twitching and drooling in Hanzo’s hands. Touch leads to kisses, which embolden his graceful tongue. Between hot breaths, Hanzo thrills him, lavishes him, deftly coaxes him bit by bit. The heat goes straight to his spine, arches his back, curls his toes.

Feels like silk, he thinks, distracting himself, stifling a groan. Satin. Bedsheets. We oughtta be doing this on a bed. Someplace proper: a secluded room or sheltered place. A hallway is no appropriate place to get head, though -- considering that it’s the master’s velvet mouth he’s throbbing in right now -- Jesse wonders if there’s anyone else around that could call that shot.

He looks down just in time to catch the diligent bob of Hanzo’s dark head, a view that dizzies him. Just as Hanzo’s finger nudges between his thighs, corkscrews in, and elicits from him an eager yelp. Jesse sinks back and scрабbles for something to grab, desperate to hang on, gradually losing it. A low growl kicks up in his throat. Jesse wants to savor this, but he can’t tell what pushes him closer to the edge: the urgency of the act, or the threat of potentially being seen. Maybe both.

Until Hanzo pauses, loosens his lips with a lewd pop, and guides Jesse’s needy fingers into the thick of his scalp.

That does him in. His breath hitches, the only warning he can offer. Jesse unknots Hanzo’s scarf, fists his silky hair, and bucks in his mouth until he comes apart with a sharp bark. Hanzo weighs him down, drinks him through it, rides his hips as he seizes. Jesse digs his heels hard enough to scuff, writhing as he pounds his mechanical fist into the wall with three dull thumps.

Unlike his partner, Hanzo does not linger or torment him until he’s oversensitive or raw. He neatly zippers him, buttons up, smooths out the hem of his displaced shirt. He sits back and wipes the corner of his mouth with his thumb. The tip of his tongue wags playfully against his canine tooth.

Panting, Jesse whines, succumbs, slides down the wall and slumps into Hanzo’s waiting arms. “I missed you so bad.”

Hanzo leans into him, slipping his cheek against Jesse’s chin. Replying with only a gravelly sigh.

They hunch motionless in a quiet spell. Jesse stares numbly at the floor, searching the woven tatami as if it might offer hints at something appropriate to say.
“Ah,” he drawls softly, “do we really got the whole place to ourselves?”

The archer grunts. “For now.”

“What happened?”

“Talk is for later.” Hanzo rises and tugs at his jacket. “Come with me.”

“Where’re we going now?”

“Further inside,” he replies. Snaking over Jesse, holding his gaze with those sleek, noble eyes. “I must see that you are properly welcomed.”

Jesse laughs as they get to their feet, stumbling. His knees swim as if weighted by lead. “That wasn’t a welcome enough?”

“No.” Hanzo reaches for his hand. “I am far from through.”

---

Hanzo takes him through another labyrinth of narrow corridors boxed in by sliding shōji. Relics and antiques -- mostly weaponry -- stand proudly on display at each corner and turn. Jesse gawks in awe as they go; the paths seem to be endless. There must be twenty rooms in just this section of the tower alone.

They cross a small flight of wooden stairs into an austere but lofty bedroom. The entire right wall bares to the outdoors, lipped by a sunken veranda made of polished wood. A spectacular view greets them from the open wall: gardens, hills, wintry Hanamura at midday. The city glistens in silver panorama, chiseled by the black shapes of trees and tower rooftops. Fuji-san calmly dominates the horizon, omnipotent and vast.

The outer visage of Shimada castle is unlike anything Jesse has ever seen, but this takes his breath away.

“You lived here,” he rasps. “I’ll be damned, Hanzo. Y’all actually lived here.”

“Yes,” Hanzo says beside him. “This was my home.”

Attached to the room is a closed-off pavilion with a sunken bath and marble shower. Jesse marvels at the luxury as he strips off his clothes; he hasn’t seen digs this nice in years. Hanzo follows silently, nuzzles at his flank, removes his robes fold by fold. Ushering him into the shower stream, which, though blissful, is more than a little scalding.

What starts in the shower, they take to the bed. This time, Jesse is ready; greedily he dotes on every span of Hanzo’s clean, lithe body. Hanzo stifles a cry into his fist when Jesse gets between his thighs to open him up; a few languid sweeps of his tongue and the archer starts to beg.

“Hold your horses,” Jesse teases, sitting back, digging the crumpled white bag out of his satchel.

Hanzo, spread and supine, throws his head back against the pillow. “This is no time for horses.”

Gleefully Jesse slickens his fingers. “Says the fella yowlin’ for me to saddle up over here.”

“Are those the same condoms from Dorado?”

“Yeah. Um. I forgot to unpack everything from this bag.”
Hanzo sits up. The dragon tattoo already shines with sweat. “What good fortune.”

“Well, I’m just lazy. The only good fortune in here is you —”

Pfap. Hanzo blunts his ankle against Jesse’s bare leg. Then he presses a synthetic sole into the jut of his hipbone.

“Put it on,” he implores, low and commanding. “And fuck me.”

Jesse gulps, shudders, fervently obeys. No need to tell him twice.

They come together slow at first, steady and deliberate, chest-to-chest with Jesse’s arm hooking Hanzo’s waist. To his relief, Hanzo handles it well. He looks rapt, ecstatic, a man on the cusp of a religious experience. Not a shred of hesitation to take him in full; soon he’s urging for roughness, driving the gunslinger on. Jesse shuffles legs and limbs to pivot Hanzo at a particularly pleasing angle; Hanzo rewards the maneuver with a shrill rake of his nails.

Then Jesse hears it: a nigh-soundless whisper fluttering on the archer’s lips.

“Tell me,” he rumbles. “Tell me, sweetheart.”

Hanzo hooks an arm across his back and sighs a single syllable: “I …”

“You…?”

“I …”

Jesse snorts. He slows his pace. “You what?”

But Hanzo hisses into his neck, smooth and rushing, shhh. For a moment he thinks it might be something in Japanese. Jesse shivers, thrusting through a corporeal thrill; he hasn’t got a clue what it means, and doesn’t care. It’s music to his ears. Having Hanzo like this surpasses every fantasy he’s ever had. Maybe the archer would agree, if he could speak; he repeats the sibilant word over and over, like a litany.

It lasts longer than he expects -- though, by virtue of their eagerness, it still feels as if it’s over too soon. The gunslinger labors over him in a taut, sinewy arch until he hears a tepid plea to finish, finish please. Jesse obliges, gets a gentle grasp, strokes the archer to a peak with a few flicks of his wrist. There’s no climax for him in this, not after what transpired in the hall -- but the wild look on Hanzo’s regal face as he unravels beneath him is nearly as satisfying.

They split apart carefully, tumbling down to lie side-by-side in bed. After a few panting minutes, Hanzo rises, wipes off, helps him clean up. Jesse watches him move around the room, a silhouette of handsome shapes.

He slips back into bed and offers out a long, slender pipe. “Here.”

McCree beams, sits up, sniffs the metal bowl. “Reckon you just about read my mind.”

“Perhaps I simply know you.” Hanzo flicks a lighter. “Try.”

McCree leans back and takes a long drag. The taste soothes the back of throat, tobacco heady with vanillin. “That ain’t bad.”

“You approve?”
“Real fine. Hell, that might be some of the nicest stuff I’ve ever tried.”


A pulse of fondness spreads through his blood, thick as the smoke. He reaches for Hanzo and pulls close.

"Are we really all alone here?" he asks.

"Yes."

"You gonna tell me what happened?"

Hanzo muses, "I will show you, if you would like. Later. For now I’d rather rest."

Jesse rustles under the bedcovers. Rest doesn’t sound too bad. With Hanzo, too -- hell, sign him up.

“Feels like I’m dreamin’,” he observes wearily.

“Does it?”

“Here we are, after everything that’s happened,” Jesse says. And then, softer, as he shares the pipe: “just you and me.”

Hanzo hums, puffs his lips, blows out white rings. “What if it was truly a dream? What would you do?”

“Never wake up.”

“That is one option.” He puts out the pipe and sets it aside with a metallic clack. “This reminds me of a story.”

Jesse pillows his cheek on Hanzo’s chest. He chases the dragon tattoo with his finger. “Tell me.”

“There are legends that shrines are built in places where gods once lived. Gods who come when called or summoned, but never stay long. One may have walked here long ago. Perhaps it flew or swam, like koi.”

“A fish that swims upstream,” Jesse prompts. “The one that becomes a dragon.”

Pleased, Hanzo thrums. “You remembered.”

“‘course I did.”

Hanzo laughs, rakes his fingers through the gunslinger’s hair, continues the tale. “The gods are not all-knowing, but they command respect. When they visit, an offering must be made for their blessing. Mortals can seek their protection if they have honor in their hearts. Sometimes, the very strong can beseech the gods to grant them a wish. An unending dream is not beyond their power.”

Lulled by the somber tone of his voice, Jesse gazes at the gardens beyond the open shōji.

Outside, it’s snowing.

“So what would you wish for?” he queries, drowsy and content. Gradually melting beneath his touch.
After a long silence, Hanzo whispers, “nothing.”

Jesse looks up. The archer strokes his hair, wholly calm. A man at peace.

“Nothing?” asks Jesse.

Hanzo smiles. His eyes are soft.

“Nothing,” he repeats, thumbing Jesse’s cheek. “Because this is not a dream.”

---

They wane with the afternoon, wearing out and winding down. As evening draws close, Hanzo and Jesse burrow beneath heavy covers under the glow of a ceramic heater. Occasionally he wakes to the sound of Hanzo murmuring in his sleep; he dozes off each time when he registers the familiar bulk of the archer against his back.

By nightfall, the snow stops. Delicate white drifts coat the castle roofs, blanketing the compound from the noisy, urban night.

Leaving them to slumber, safe and undisturbed, as the rest of the world spins on.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Much love to Jamie, Jay, Natalie, Winter, Vita, Lynn, and my sensitivity readers for reading snippets, beta-ing, and being cheerful sweethearts.
- Have you checked out the McHanzo tumblr lately? You should! It's a really great place for fans of the ship!
- References: shōji. I would like to apologize for all of the ones I’ve accidentally put holes in (and for the ones McCree and Hanzo are going to ruin).
- Ho-wow! Finally something uplifting, right? Reunion! Communication! A few narrowly-missed encounters and withheld information (‘shit for timing’, anyone?) but it some real healing going on! That happy ending is right around the corner!
- That Vishkar printout at the beginning is meant to complement the one you saw in Chapter 6. Miss Satya's story will wrap up (positively!) in the last chapter and the epilogue. There will also be a few last mentions of the characters we've seen so far (including the Kings of Jawa).
- I really do want to thank you all for sticking with me through this. The messages of support and enthusiasm with the story have helped me push through. I'm way behind on updating the master list (so many sorryes for that) but that is my #1 priority right now after getting this chapter up.

**HTF CREATIVE MASTERPOST**

So I ran into the most delightful dilemma! I have received so many beautiful, inspiring, thoughtful, and astounding creative works (from fanart, to fanmixes, to offerings for language translation) that I can no longer credit them in the fic notes -- because they blow the character limit! So: I am making a [masterpost here](link) that I will update and tend. Like my own personal garden patch of gratitude.
If you don't see your work here a few days after an update, please message me privately and let me know. I don't want to forget anyone!!

Please accept, from the bottom of my heart: my utmost love and thanks for taking the time and energy out of your busy day to contribute something creative to my work. You have all brought life into the story and touched it in a unique and really COOL way!
Nighttime in Lijiang on a deserted street slotted between highrises. The night market and tower grounds sprawl behind him; there’s a full moon. A weak breeze whistles in McCree’s ears as he stands on the street’s edge to stare down at the hyperlane below. He recognizes this long fall; one glance and he feels the drop in the pit of his stomach. Any second now, Lúcio is going to skate up and accidentally blast him off the edge like he did all those months ago.

The dragons are there. No arrival or announcement. They flank him and peer down the concrete slope of the high retaining wall.

“Hey,” he says, startled, abruptly convinced that he’s dreaming.

No answer. They undulate in place with a motion that reminds him of fish immobilized in a river current. He can see every fiber of their long, elegant whiskers. Glowing, like starry ribbons.

McCree rocks back on his heels. This isn’t how it happened, is it? When he encountered the dragons here before, they flew through him after ripping apart the Vishkar Omnic. He thinks he should be afraid, but he’s sufficed by the lucid understanding that -- right now, as they hover in place -- they mean no harm. In fact, as far as his dreams go, this is placidly uneventful. No skulls or crows or gaping jaws of red rock. If any old ghosts have worthwhile omens to portend, he can’t hear them. Only the cosmic chime of wind over dragonhide.

He doesn’t know what to say, and that’s fine. An old adage pops into his head as he stands at rest between the dragons: silence is golden. Just like the glow of the moon overhead.

---

McCree wakes to the sound of morning birds. He stretches, yawns, seeks beneath the sheets. The bed is warm but empty. He sits up, glances around, and relaxes with a grunt of relief.

He’s not alone. Hanzo sits on the veranda beyond the open shōji, kneeling on a cushion, drinking from a cup. Silently watching the snow fall.

McCree shuffles to his feet. A black object shifts onto the floor; he picks it up, shakes it out, and hangs it by the shoulder seams. It’s a heavy lined robe. He pulls it on, ties the sash, and lumbers out to join him.

Hanzo looks up at his arrival with a warm, placid smile.

“Good morning,” he says.

“Hey,” McCree answers. “What time’s it?”
“Eight-forty-five.”

“In the morning?” McCree asks, gazing out over the snow-covered gardens. “Here I was, thinkin’ I’d slept ‘til noon.”

“Not quite.” Hanzo motions for McCree to rest at the cushion beside him, and McCree sinks down to his knees. There’s a tray between them with a second cup and a black cast-iron pot; Hanzo offers the cup out to the gunslinger. One whiff of the steam and he knows it’s hōjicha -- a scent and familiar warmth that makes him shiver.

To be more precise, contributes to the shivering.

“Cold as heck out here,” Jesse says.

Hanzo laughs. “As you can see, it is the middle of winter.”

“You don’t say.”

“Go back inside if you are chicken,” Hanzo says, leaning over to knuckle his calf. “I will come back in soon. I wanted to see the snow.”

“I can handle a lil’ chill,” Jesse replies, reaching out, swatting playfully in return.

They converse quietly, starting off slow, catching up. Both men stick to simple questions and answers, who-what-where-and-why. There’s a lot of ground to cover between them; Jesse can’t tell which of them is more eager to elaborate on what they’ve missed.

Hanzo speaks first. He reassures McCree that the castle grounds are empty; the last remaining members of the Shimada-gumi have been thrown out. After departing Gibraltar, he reunited with Genji outside the castle and dropped in to find a cadre of enforcers maintaining the property with the guidance of a few remaining elders. A surprise for the brothers, though not an unwelcome one: Talon’s occupation caused infighting within the ranks of the Shimada-gumi. Several older members of the group took offense to the violation of ancient traditions of combat concerning the spirit dragons, gathered up supporters, and threw Talon out of Hanamura.

“The loyalists rose up in an attempt to retake the family,” Hanzo says. “They won the castle back after several days of fighting. They did not expect Genji or I to arrive when they were weakened and few in number.”

“What all did they do?”

“Fought us,” Hanzo says. “As hard as they could, but not hard enough. Genji and I bested them within a single battle.”

McCree blows on his tea. “Saw some signs of fighting out front. Looked like y’all scrapped a good bit.”

Hanzo’s gaze lowers to the snow. “Were I the man I was many years ago, as a young master, I would have shown no mercy for allowing a force like Talon to come in and take power.” He wilts. “But I was weary of this conflict. They were so weak and afraid. Talon had promised the elders so much and delivered none of it. Genji agreed that their crimes were a punishment, and we could spare their lives and send them into exile. We drove them out of the city after making them vow never to return.”

“Damn,” mutters McCree. “So what happened after that? Genji took off?”
“He left after to cut down one of the last Talon-occupied cells in Tokyo. We decided I would return to Gibraltar after I handled the property here.”

“Handled how?”

Hanzo looks into his cup. “In the years since I left, the family lost a lot of money. They were trying to make more legitimate business arrangements, namely through realty. Not long before you arrived, a member of the National Tourism Board came by to check and see why his calls had gone unanswered for the past week. A few stern conversations later and I had his assurance that the Board would come in after I departed and sanction the grounds for the city of Hanamura.”

Jesse scratches his jaw. “Really?” And then, curiously, “so you’re lettin’ it go?”

“On paper, yes. But, off the paper…,” Hanzo’s tone lifts. He sits back on his feet. “A certain generous donor and person of interest to the castle’s heritage will return on a regular basis to make sure it is being properly maintained.”

“Son of a gun,” Jesse cracks a grin. “How’d you manage to work that out?”

“Discretion. The donor will cooperate with the Board using a pseudonym.”

It takes Jesse a moment before he guesses. “Mister Sanjuro Tsubaki.”

Hanzo murmurs into his cup. “The genuine article.”

“I’ll be damned,” Jesse says admiringly. “To tell you the truth, honey, I didn’t know what kinda situation I’d find out here. Figured I might walk up in the middle of a fight.”

“I figured the same, the last time I saw you.”

Another silent beat. Jesse clears his throat. His robe is a few inches too short; no matter how he sits -- cross-legged, kneeling, calves tucked under -- he catches a draft. He thinks of the red canyon and the ruined gallows as the cold creeps up his spine.

“Reckon you gotta be wonderin’ what that was all about,” Jesse rasps.

“I have had some time to consider what transpired.”

“Hanzo, I know what you saw, but I gotta tell you my story, and you gotta believe me. Everything I thought I knew ‘bout Gabriel is not the same.”

Now the archer looks at him intently. “I did not want to be gone when you woke up. I knew you would have things to tell me. If it had been anyone other than Genji that asked me to assist --”

Jesse reaches out to him, brushes his sleeve, moves the tea tray aside so they can sit side by side. He hooks an arm around Hanzo’s shoulders and pulls him close with a shh.

“I know,” he says quietly. “Read your note a couple hundred times. Don’t hold an ounce of it against you.”

“No?”

“Nah. You had to go set your family straight. The minute I saw that, I understood.” He sighs. “There’s just been so much, sweetheart. What I learned in that canyon changed me. It’s gonna change Overwatch, too, that’s for certain.”
Hanzo takes his hand, laces their fingers, and squeezes his palm. “Tell me.”

Slowly -- like he did with Angela -- Jesse tells him. Hanzo listens without interrupting. The recollection sombers him; when he describes the Talon conditioning and his Dead-Eye immunity, Hanzo looks out over the snowy gardens in disbelief.

Jesse’s eyes rest on the length of his yellow silk scarf.

“I see, then,” Hanzo says finally. “I see now.”

He can’t figure out Hanzo’s tone; is it grim? Bitter? Sad?

“When I saw you from up on the ridge,” he continues, “I did not know what to think. I watched you aim to kill him, and then relent, I did not understand why. It made me fear that he meant to take you, or deliver you to Talon. But, when I was carrying you away afterward, you were calling out for Gabriel. You kept saying his name.”

Jesse’s heart sinks in his chest like an iron weight.

“Deadlock is where it began,” Hanzo murmurs. “That place -- the ghost-town, the desert. That was the source of everything between the two of you. He lured you there for a reason. If he did not mean to kill or capture, he meant something else. A message, an understanding. He had to settle it with you -- just you.” His voice becomes soft and rumbling, thoughtful. “A reunion beyond the grave. It happened to me. It could happen to others.”

“They’re gonna go get him, Hanzo. Jack went to go track him down. Angela has some way to heal him and try to fix what she did. Don’t know if she can actually do it, but she’s determined to try.”

“Yes,” Hanzo says dimly. He shuts his eyes; again Jesse is at a loss for pinpointing the tone of his voice. “She will not stop until she has her chance.”

Jesse leans into him. He closes his eyes for a moment; the taste of grit and sand stings his mouth. Coyotes howl in the depths of his memories. There they are again: the smoky voices of Reyes and Amari.

“You faced down such old horrors,” Hanzo murmurs. “Your soul is so strong. I did not understand that before. I understand it now.”

“I used to see that place in my dreams,” McCree says. “The gallows, the trail, that whole canyon. It was a Deadlock place. Reyes said he’d kept me from it. The deal we made after the sting was what kept me from --”

“-- washing out.” Now Hanzo chimes in. “Falling to ‘Deadlock justice.’ The gang had brutal methods of handling its affairs. Barbaric things that Reyes abhorred.”

Jesse’s brows rise. “How’d you know?”

“I saw a holovid in the Blackwatch archive. It was about your recruitment.”

McCree tries not to wince. “Reyes made those, yeah.”

“I learned a great deal from what I saw,” Hanzo continues quietly. “More about Reyes than you told me, and more about you. I see now why he destroyed that place, and why he has tried to destroy many things. It does not exonerate him, but I understand now.”
Jesse says nothing. He shuts his eyes, holds his breath, lets his silence speak for him.

A realization: this is the most Hanzo has spoken in a long time. Maybe since Dorado, or the Watchpoint nights before that. The archer’s low, coarse voice is warm on his ears, raw and affectionate. Almost loving.

“I questioned everything, Jesse,” he says. “Why did you hide things from me? Why did you hold back the truth? Who were you?” He clenches Jesse’s hand. “But then, you were here. It was you -- really you. You came all this way for me, after I went so far to bring you back. When I woke this morning and saw you lying beside me, the questions mattered less.”

Hanzo pulls away. His long black hair shifts over his shoulders. In the stark light of the early morning, reflecting off sheets of undisturbed snow, he reminds Jesse of an old portrait. Regal and austere, posed in a moment of his aging rule. A kindly lord in a moment of calm.

“You are with me again,” he finishes. “That is what matters most to me now.”

Jesse turns away before tears threaten the edges of his eyes.

“Ah, Hanzo,” he rasps. “I never wanna do this again.”

The archer tilts his head. “Do what?”

“This.” Jesse clears his throat, turns back, reaches for the archer once more. “Me runnin’ off. Running away from you. Darlin’, I ain’t gonna run off on you again, I promise.”

Hanzo relaxes and pats his arm. “Thank you.”

“God-damn, Hanzo, it gets me like a bullet in the heart. I should’ve never done that to you. I was wrong. I’m still not sure why you haven’t roared off at me already about it.”

“I do not want to roar at you,” Hanzo shakes his head insistently. “This is not a time for roaring.”

“Well, I got a lot more to tell you, darlin’. There’s more to why I came here than just to see you again.”

He lets go of Jesse’s hand and rises to his feet. “Then come with me, now.”

Jesse looks up. “What’s now?”

Hanzo extends his palm.

“Whatever we would like it to be,” he replies. “You can tell me while I show you around.”

---

They dress warmly to wander out onto the castle grounds. The snow has stopped; everything is blanketed white and fringed with ice. A few crows sulk on the lips of the red roofs, hopping from edge to edge, occasionally rattling a dry caw. The wind feels muted, as if it blows through a dense filter to drown out any unnecessary sound. Daylight, though weak, washes the view in a monotone haze of chalky winter grey.

Jesse’s arms prickle with goosebumps. The grounds feel so eerie, so quiet and still. Such little movement and sound, as if it’s been abandoned for years.

Hanzo leads him around the central tower, through the dojo hall, and outside. They pass an archery
range with targets obscured by piles of snow; beyond that, they cross a covered bridge. After wading through a knee-high drift, they come face-to-face with a large stone supporting a metal statue of a leaping *koi*. Jesse stops to admire it. Beside him, Hanzo takes his elbow.

“It was spring the last time I was here,” he pipes up beside him as they walk arm-in-arm. “I did not know when I might ever return.”

Jesse’s breath puffs out in pale clouds. “Can’t say I’ve ever seen anythin’ like it.”

“It is a rarity. The land alone is worth billions. Several parts of the castle will have to be restored after all the damage done over the years, but it is a worthy investment for the city to make. They will turn it into a historical site, or perhaps a museum.”

“You think you’ll have to come back here often, or do you think they’ll keep it up alright?”

“I believe they will.” Hanzo sighs. “The less I have to return, the better. With the Shimada-gumi depleted down to exiles and individuals, Talon will see no strategic interest in this location or any affiliated spots around Japan.”

They circle the gazebo. Hanzo points out the cherry trees -- now stark and devoid of foliage -- and describes the splendor of pink that will burst from their boughs during spring.

“I wish you could see it,” he offers. And then, a little wistful. “I wish I could see them again, too, but through your eyes.”

“Through mine? Why?”

“They are shrouded from everything that has happened here. They would appreciate the beauty so much more than my own.”

Jesse’s soles rustle over the snowy gravel. “Well, what do you see?”

“A place that was once my home.” Hanzo looks up at the bleak sky. “There is a majesty here that comes from understanding that the land is very old. Traditions and legends, things that make me nostalgic.”

Jesse feels him slow down. He looks and finds Hanzo gazing at the ground. Stray snowflakes powder his scarf, glint on his hairline, glisten on the tips of his long lashes.

“There is ugliness, too,” he replies. “Like finding a stain, or rot beneath the floorboards. For every good thing, I see two things hidden beneath them which bring me no joy.”

“Oh. Dang, sweetheart.” Jesse shoves his gloved hand into his coat pocket. “That’s some heavy stuff.”

In a soft but weary voice, Hanzo replies, “it is fine.”

*Doubt.* Now Jesse has a word to describe that hesitant tone.

They pause before the building with the red eaves and brass bell. Jesse stares into its shadowed depths; several inches of snow coat the steps laddering up to the entrance. Hanzo sighs through his nostrils and elbows him gently.

“Follow me,” he says. “We go around. I do not wish to disturb this area. The fighting badly damaged some of the rear walls.”
Jesse eyes the bell and maps the contours of its sloping crown. “This is a shrine, right?”

“It is sacred like one. You could come here to honor the dragons and thank them for their protection. I will make sure the Tourism Board sees that the building is restored and the area is better maintained.”

Jesse gives the inner room a final glance before bowing his head, tipping his hat, and mouthing a whispery thank you.

They trek between buildings to a cobblestone walkway bordering the compound’s high wall. Jesse notices a drag in Hanzo’s step, gradual and lagging. Hesitant to continue the tour.

Eventually Hanzo stops. “Beyond here,” he says, pointing past the eaves of adjacent buildings, “there are graves, and household shrines. Other sacred places. Many generations of the Shimada clan rest there. It is where my father’s ashes are kept, and my mother’s.”

“Yeah,” Jesse prompts, remembering their names. “You told me ‘bout that once.”

Hanzo nods slowly. His gaze is far away. When he looks up at Jesse, his eyes are weary and anxious.

“If you do not mind,” he mutters, “I would like to go the opposite way.”

Jesse bobs his head. “You lead.”

Silence passes between them as they circle the courtyard. Jesse repeats the archer’s words about restoration and maintenance in his thoughts. He thinks of the Watchpoint and the hole in the rock wall. He replays in the back of his mind the old news broadcasts from the destruction of the Swiss headquarters: ‘an organization, along with its shady history, now smoking in ruins.’

Beside him, Hanzo stares out over the view of the daytime metropolis. He runs a bare hand over the wooden fence railing and knocks off clumps of snow.

“There is so much I have wanted to say to you,” he mumbles as they come to the end of the walkway. “Now you are here, and I do not know where to begin.”

Jesse squints up at the cloudy sky. “You don’t gotta say anything if you don’t wanna. I don’t mind if you’re quiet.”

After a long pause, Hanzo murmurs, “I owe you an apology.”

“Yeah?”

“Many apologies. For words and deeds, and a lack of them.”

Jesse clucks and shakes his head. “Aw, Hanzo.”

“I cannot let it go unspoken,” says Hanzo. “I was bad to you. You showed me hospitality and gentleness that I did not deserve. And even then, I did not trust you. I thought you were mocking me. I was thoughtless, coarse, when I should have been --”

“Hey.” Jesse stops, rounds on him, braces him by the shoulders. “Don’t beat yourself up about it.”

“I am not beating myself up.” Hanzo squares up with him, turns somber, lifts his chin. “I have had time to think on it. There are things I want to tell you that I have told no one else. Things I want to share with you, and you alone.”
Hanzo speaks quietly through a thin tremolo of agitation. “All my life, there has never been anyone like you. Approximations, but no one who understood. I was angry, when I met you. For ten years, I was so angry. Wandering, and thinking of nothing but Genji. Everything before you was always him -- when we were young, and then after I took his life, and then when he returned before my very eyes. I chased my brother to Overwatch because I wanted to be near him. I was not even thinking what the rest would entail. I would ask myself: why? Why did I come here? Why did I stay? Each time, there was no answer. Not even the dragons could tell me.”

He reaches for Jesse’s hands, gathers them between his own, and laces his fingers.

“And you,” he continues, “you were a constant. I used to think you meant to be my enemy. That you were mocking me, making light of my principles. I chose to perceive rudeness in you when there was none. But you proved me wrong. There were so many times you deserved more than what I gave you. I cannot let that go unspoken.”

Jesse returns his look with mild eyes. “Do you remember once, when we were together -- I asked you if you remembered what it was like before? ‘Back when you hated me?’”

“I never hated you.”

“I know,” Jesse gently shakes their hands. “I know you didn’t. I’m just sayin’. What you said next, though -- that was the truth. We were strangers back then. We didn’t know a thing about each other. Fellas like us, well -- we got plenty of reason not to trust strangers.”

Hanzo’s brows furrow. “Perhaps.”

“I forgive you, Hanzo. You were in a bad place. I know a lil’ ‘bout being in a bad place. Knew ‘bout being the FNG, too, and startin’ over from scratch in a place like Overwatch --”

“FNG?” Hanzo’s brows wrinkle.

“Oh.” Jesse laughs . “F-N-G. Fuckin’-new-guy. It’s, uh” -- the gunslinger chews on the edge of his lip -- “old military term.”

Hanzo gets it, returns a soft ‘oh.’

“Anyway, like I was saying,” Jesse stirs their hands. “You were hurtin’ back then, sweetheart. You had the look of a man who knew what it meant to hurt. Lord knows I’d seen that look in people before. We just got a little lost in figurin’ each other out. Doesn’t mean we can’t make it work.”

“I want to make it work.”

“Me too, darlin’,”

The archer puffs out a cloud of smoky breath. “Then, we will.”

“We sure can try.”

They linger by the vista until Jesse’s stomach starts to growl. Hanzo ushers him back indoors while apologizing, chiding himself for not offering a meal sooner. Jesse minds it none; he’s more eager to get out of the snow.

As they re-enter the lofty hall, Jesse notices a tapestry of bullet-holes snaking across two of the
sliding screen doors. He gets a chill and chooses to blame it on the cold.

---

They spend most of the afternoon talking in one of the castle’s wide, modern kitchens. He enlists Jesse’s help in digging through the refrigerator and larders until they amass a small feast. Hanzo is not hapless around the cookware; he pulls together two cast-iron pots and enough fixings to approximate nabemono. Jesse cuts vegetables, salts and seasons broth, eats the results without complaint. Even slightly chewy, the udon noodles hit the spot.

There’s so much to tell him: Winston’s new plans, Jack’s sobering intel, Satya’s unfortunate situation. When he explains that Lúcio is the acting head of medbay, Hanzo seems pleased; he remarks that Hana will soon accompany Reinhardt as point-leader during combat missions. Both of them agree: the old guard is gradually making way for the new.

He holds off on the news about Ana. That’s a conversation which requires the right time.

“Got some good eats in here,” McCree muses as he sniffs a cup of durian pudding. He wrinkles his nose, samples a bite, finds the taste far better than the smell. “Did y’all have a chef?”

“We did.” Hanzo roots through a cabinet and retrieves a dark green bottle. “Or, the family did. Several of them.”

“I’m not causin’ any grief by raiding your pantry here, am I?”

Hanzo raises a brow. “Why would you?”

“Don’t wanna take anybody’s snacks.”

“Who would take offense?” Hanzo asks, nonplussed, gesturing around him. “All of this is mine now. Please, eat what you want.”

“Well, what do you want?”

Hanzo sets the bottle on the counter. “I want to drink. I want you to drink with me.”

Jesse smiles. “Sounds like a mighty fine idea to me.”

A pleasant discovery: sake tastes good when heated, almost (in Jesse’s opinion) as when chilled. Hanzo pours for him first, explaining it as a gesture of hospitality to a guest. After they sip the initial round, Jesse returns the favor and fills the archer’s black ceramic cup. The guest can honor his host, he replies -- a statement that puts a smile on Hanzo’s regal face. It warms him more than the drink.

They set the carafe, cups and two spare bottles on a tray and head back through the halls. Jesse spots a myriad of arrow shafts sticking out of a stately paper scroll that hangs on a narrow wheat-colored wall. Two wide spatters of blood streak the floor, trailing into the adjacent room like footprints.

No: those are actual bloody footprints. He gets another chill, definitely not from the cold.

Hanzo notices, and seems unperturbed. “As I said, the fighting was fairly bad.”

“Did Talon do all that?”

“That?” Hanzo glances over his shoulder at the blood. “Hard to say. Those are not my arrows.”
Jesse decides to change the subject. “How old is the castle?” he asks.

“It depends on who you ask,” Hanzo replies.

He leads Jesse up a dark staircase to the walkway that circles the center hall. Jesse glances over the lofty wood walls until he spots a glint of steel. Shurikens are lodged in a silver streak across the wood. There must be nine or ten of them.

“That’s real beautiful,” Jesse says, pointing at the high mural on the wall. “The blue dragon and the green dragon.”

“It was not always that image.” Hanzo is mindful not to tip the tray. “Over the years, it has changed. Much of the decor and even some of the relics have been destroyed, or stolen.”

“D’you know by who?”

“No.”

They seclude themselves outside on an open-air overlook with a sprawling view of the city. The winter clouds give way to a clear afternoon. Jesse sits cross-legged across from Hanzo; he sips warm sake until it tingles down to his toes.

Hanzo, for once, is less than reticent.

“Genji could tell you about its age,” he mutters, hunched over and nursing his cup. “He never believed it was nearly as old as the family claimed.”

“Why’s that?”

“It is a long story. Do you want to hear?”

Jesse beams over his cup. “You know I do, darlin’.”

Hanzo smiles faintly, but the gunslinger notices his gaze is, once again, far away.

“A few years before he died,” begins Hanzo, “my father remarried. She was his third wife. It was a needless arrangement. He knew that I did not like it.”

“Why didn’t you like it?”

“First, she was very young. Second, her name was the same as our mother’s. ‘Akane.’”

Jesse winces. “Ouch.”

“There was a big reception for them in Tokyo, at a castle that was supposed to be hundreds of years old. Genji had just started his first year at university. He was not as wild back then, but he was beginning to slip away. I had to chaperone him at the reception. It was awful.”

“What happened?”

“The whole affair was unpleasant. Father was enjoying himself irresponsibly. Everyone was drunk -- Yuki, but especially Genji. He was being intolerably childish.” He takes a surly sip. “I took him outside for some air and he tried to tell me to lighten up. He said that I needed to enjoy the special occasion. That maybe our mother had been reincarnated, and come back to us.”

Another wince, this time with a dismayed whistle. “Ouch.”
“Even then, I could not be angry at him. He was so drunk. I blew it off, but he kept talking. He said he didn’t like the castle. He pointed out parts of it that must have been cut in a factory, or were synthetic. Concrete. Nothing authentic, just cobbled pieces, old and new.”

“Huh.”

“He despised it. He said it was like Frankenstein. At the time, I thought he was just being drunk and rude, but after, I never looked at old buildings like this the same.”

Jesse tilts the carafe, refilling Hanzo’s cup. “People say a lotta silly things when they’ve been drinking.”

Hanzo rolls his eyes. “Tell me about it.”

Laughing, Jesse lowers the carafe. “What? It’s true.”

“I am still ashamed about that time in the showers. When you came to find me at the training range.” Hanzo scrubs his brow. “That was awful.”

“Always kinda wondered why you were hangin’ around down there that night.”

Hanzo wipes a dribble of sake off his lip. “Genji had gone away to spend the evening meditating with his teacher. I was insulted, and angry. I resented him for blowing me off. I thought he was pushing me away.”

“Oh. I figured you were just hurtin’ real bad ‘bout somethin’ and needed to drown it out, like a lotta folks do.”

Hanzo shifts. “You never told anyone about it, did you?”

“Han-zo.” Jesse cocks his head, furrows his brow, gives him a look. “C’mon, now. Why would I do that? That was between you and me.”

Outside, a crow croaks defensively; two more join in the ruckus. Hanzo looks up, sighs, and shakes his head. He sets down his cup and stares hard at the carafe, eyes glazed over.

“There are more things that should be between you and me,” Hanzo says. “Things about my family. I dogged you once about your own brother, and rarely spoke of my own.”

“Hanzo, you don’t gotta tell me anything if you’re not feelin’ up to it. I ain’t gonna press.”

“I can tell you anyway.” He flicks his scarf off his shoulder. “Genji told me something before he left that has been bothering me.”

“What’d he say?”

“He told me to consider giving up this place entirely and having no part in it anymore. Not even anonymously.”

Jesse lowers his cup. “Really?”

“Yes. He told me that when he was first taken into Overwatch, after missions to put our family’s cruelties to rest, he would be consumed by anger. He would dream of coming back here and destroying it.”

“Oh.”
“Did you ever see this in him?” Hanzo asks, lifting his gaze. “This rage?”

“Not really,” Jesse searches his memory. “I mean, I’m sure it was there. I’ve told you before ‘bout how we used to chat around missions. He taught me a lil’ Japanese, I cut a few jokes, we stayed on good terms. Whatever rage he had, he was good at hidin’ it.”

“He said it would get so bad that it used to overpower him. But through the teachings of his master, he overcame it. He wanted me to look around and see Hanamura as he did: just a place.”

Jesse frowns. “Reckon that’s not been real easy for you to do.”

“I have tried.” Hanzo strokes his beard. “Do you remember, once -- I told you about a place in the north, an Omnium in Sendai? It was overgrown with wisteria.”

“Yeah,” Jesse perks, remembering. “When we were stranded in Siberia.”

“I dream of that place. Like you dreamed of the canyon. I close my eyes and I can see the ruins covered in flowers, like a grave.”

Jesse sips his sake and listens -- tries not to dwell on the familiar irony that wisteria, across the South, was a pest.

“These grounds,” Hanzo whispers. “All my life, I understood they would someday be mine. I used to see it in my mind when I was young, and imagine something better than what the family was making of it.” He taps the edge of the tray. “I imagined myself here, with my children. I imagined Genji and his children. I used to believe that everything that was meant to happen to us would happen here.”

He looks over Hanzo’s face -- proud, noble, austere with wistful sadness -- and watches him shake his head.

“But it did not,” he laments. “The destruction was already done long ago. Every year that I returned was just a witness to the reclamation. I thought I was coming to honor my brother, but instead, I was just visiting the same overgrown ruins.”

Jesse grunts. He thinks of the shurikens jutting from the splendor of the hall, arrow shafts porcupining the walls and window-frames. Then he remembers the canyon crumbling around him into the cold sweep of unconsciousness. A chorus of voices urging him through dark and dismal times.

If Reyes were here, what would he advise? What about Amari?

Hanzo continues quietly. “The Shimada name has nowhere to go. What is left of it, aside from Genji and I? Murderers and criminals. Cruel men and cruel dragons. Gods moving things with unseen hands.” He lifts his hands, offers them out, displays his palms. “When I was young, I used to wonder what my hands would do with what they were given. Would I be a strict master? A wise one? Would I show mercy, or would I be ruthless? Never did I imagine them doing such unforgivable things. Wretched tasks from wretched men.”

Jesse watches the archer curl his fingers into his palms and gather them to his chest.

“I look at this place,” Hanzo says, “and ask myself now: what do I do? Keep it? Give it away? Do as Genji once wished, and burn it to the ground? What must I do so that I can look at it the way he does now, as just wood and stone?”
Jesse sets down his cup. “You can look at it however you want, Hanzo. It was your home.”

Hanzo glares at the floor and runs a hand through his hair. Now his tone is softer, deflated, as if he cannot maintain his frustration.

“It was,” he concedes. “It was our home. And now my brother is free, Jesse. I listen to him speak and think sometimes that he has no attachment to anything anymore. He does not need Overwatch or any cause. He does not need me, and maybe he never did.”

He droops again, rotating his cup between his fingers. Jesse thinks, for a moment, that Hanzo has never looked so forlorn.

“But we are together,” he finishes. “We are united again, the two of us, like our father’s old legend. After everything that has happened, he has truly forgiven me, and I am ready to accept his forgiveness. I see now what he wanted for me.”

Jesse leans forward. “What did he want for you?”

“He wanted me to move.”

“Move?”

“Like the river,” Hanzo says, sweeping his outstretched hands. “A natural change in motion. To see the world for what it truly was. So many times I thought he was being flippant with me, but he was pushing me to open my eyes. Things were happening around me, people were moving in and out of my life. I had to act. I had to go with the flow. I was” -- he exhales heavily -- “living again.”

Jesse lifts the carafe to pour more for himself. “You weren’t a stranger anymore.”

Hanzo gently catches his wrist, pushes down his hand, takes the carafe. “Let me do that.”

“Oh, sure. Thank you.”

Hanzo sighs as he pours a stream of sake into Jesse’s cup. “Which brings me back to here. This place. He wants us to move away from it.”

“D’you think you can go through with it?”

“I must.”

“You can always come back.”

“There are people who need me, elsewhere.”

Jesse says nothing; the archer is right. When Hanzo speaks again, he sounds a little drunk.

“Oh,” he grumbles, “more likely, maybe I am thinking about it too hard.”

“Well, thinkin’ and drinkin’ don’t always go hand-in-hand, Hanzo.”

Hanzo takes a long, deep drink. He wipes his lips. “Maybe the answer is less corporeal.”

“Yeah?”

“Maybe I will leave and never come back. My spirit will be as my brother’s, unattached to all its burdens. Maybe, when I die, I will do as all the legends say and reincarnate into something that can
fly or climb, like a bird. I will return and sit someplace high and lofty, as birds do, ignorant of everyone and everything that has ever been here.”

The gunslinger snorts. “Then what?”

Hanzo lifts his cup to Jesse. “Who knows.”

_Clink._ They toast, sip, and settle back. Jesse smiles, softens, reaches out to rub his index finger along Hanzo’s wrist.

“Maybe you’ll build a nest,” he says.

Hanzo mutters fondly, “and take a shit on the roof.”

Jesse clutches his chest and sits back with a bark of laughter. Instantly relieved by the change in mood. “You ain’t had _that_ much to drink, sweetheart.”

“You joke all the time! Am I forbidden to?”

“Naw, honey, just not used to you bein’ silly at me.”

“That you know of.”

“Huh?”

“Mm.” Hanzo holds up a finger. “Being silly. I have another confession.”

Jesse tries to sip from his cup without snickering. “A silly one?”

“Yes.” Hanzo hiccups, catching a drop of sake off his lip. “Yes, yes. This is an old joke. I have never told you it was a joke.”

“Go on, then.”

“Do you remember when I once called you ‘Yankee-san?’”

With a groan, Jesse rolls his eyes. “Lord have mercy, Hanzo, I’d just about forgotten about that name.”

“How funny. I had almost forgotten about ‘Legolas’ and ‘Robin Hood.’”

“Aw, c’mon.” Jesse reclines, props himself up by his elbow, and mock-scowls at Hanzo. “You’re an archer! Those were self-explanatory.”

Hanzo sits with one knee propped up, jouncing his forearm on his thigh. “Do you want to know the joke?”

“I _know_ the joke, you son-of-a-gun, and I already told you I was from the South _west_ , not the South, so it wasn’t pickin’ on me so much --”

“No,” Hanzo coughs through a laugh. “No. No, no. It was more than that. It had a pun. I do not think you would have ever gotten it if I did not explain. A pun on silly old movies.”

“What silly old movie you talkin’ about?”

“My brother loves them,” Hanzo says, gesturing with his hands. “So do you. Everyone in
Overwatch, too. Reinhardt, and Lúcio. You and Hana tried to get me to watch the one -- what was it called? With the girl who had the bow and arrow --”

Jesse balks. “Hunger Games?”

“That one ,” Hanzo says, snapping his fingers, pointing emphatically in McCree’s face. “Before that, we had Battle Royale. Our version was better.”

“*Your* version?”


“Honey, I still don’t get it.”

Hanzo giggles; he’s definitely drunk now. “Genji -- there were things Genji clung to, old things, like movies and music. Sometimes he could get me to watch them with him. He liked cyberpunk movies, fighting movies. There was a type called ‘yankee movies,’ about young gangsters and their motorcycles. You reminded him of those tough guys, back when he first knew you. When I complained about your nicknames, he said I should give you one back. A better version.”

“Bet you two thought you were real clever, huh.”

Hanzo snickers over his sake. “I *told* you many months ago to start” -- a hiccup -- “learning Japanese.”

Jesse rolls his eyes as he runs his tongue over his teeth. “Guess I’ll just have to get good real fast, huh?”


“My what?”

“Your *sayings,*” Hanzo drawls. “Your Southern colloquialisms. I learned them all, I kept a list. It is fine, I am happy to teach you mine.”

Jesse tilts his head, pleasantly astonished. “You kept a *list*?”

Hanzo gurgles, “bless your heart.”

“Alright.” Jesse lumbers to his hands and knees. He grins and crawls around the tray. “You’re officially askin’ to get wrestled now.”

“Mind yourself!” Hanzo scolds playfully, nudging McCree’s shoulder with his sole. “You are in the company of a --”

“C’mere.”

“Jesse!”

They laugh and tumble together, howling and snorting, rolling as Hanzo flails beneath the bigger man. Jesse catches him by the waist and cheers a delighted *gotcha* ; Hanzo slithers away, cackles, and bats him across the brow with a cushion. Another lunge convinces him to yield, grapple back, and silence the gunslinger’s laughter with a kiss.
Joy leaps in his heart, glowing like the lights gradually flickering on as evening crosses the cityscape.

---

By nightfall, they're smashed. Hanzo hangs off his arm as he attempts to navigate them through a first-floor corridor that winds around the dojo hall. Jesse swings around a corner, trips, and accidentally plants the tip his socked foot through one of the shōji. The paper tears with a crisp rip.

“Shit!”

Hanzo bursts out laughing. “Oh, no.”

“Aw, fuck, Hanzo, I’m sorry.” Jesse drops to his knees to inspect the damage. “Dang.”

“What?”

“I tore it.”

“Yes, you did.”

“Shit, I’m real sorry, darlin’, I didn’t mean to do that. I don’t wanna mess anything up.”

“It is fine.” The archer stoops beside him and pokes his finger through the torn paper. “They can be patched.”

“They can?”

“Of course! You should have seen it when” -- he drifts off, sways before finding the thought -- “children. It was never a decent sparring match until we tossed someone through one.”

“So I’m not gonna have seven years of bad luck or anything, am I?”

Hanzo bellows out laughter, rocking back, hitting the floor with a hard thump. He clutches his abdomen and throws back his head. “No!”

McCree grins. “You promise?”

“It is paper, not a mirror. You saw the other parts of the dojo, there was enough fighting to” -- more hiccups -- “to” -- and more -- “to. Uh.” Too drunk to come up with a comparison, Hanzo extends his leg and pokes his metal toe through the hole. The paper rips wider. “Damn.”

Jesse gasps theatrically. “Han-zooo.”

Gawking, Hanzo whispers giddily, “I made it worse.”

“You did!”

Hanzo stumbles up, pushes off Jesse’s shoulder, and ducks down the hall. “I have your serape. We can drape it over and hide it.”

A beat of drunk fondness sends Jesse lumbering after him, grinning. “So that’s where it went. You hauled off with it.”

“It is mine now,” Hanzo slurs, smirking, wrapping his arms around his chest. “I claim it for my own.”
“Get back here, you big ol’ thief.”

“Never!”

They chase each other until Hanzo lets Jesse catch him. His cheeks redden, puff, and then blow out a laugh that shakes him from head to toe. Jesse doubles over howling in his lap.

When was the last time he laughed so hard?

They get up, dust off, and resume pursuit. Twice he has to keep Hanzo from careening into the wall; the archer shoulders off, snorts, sputters swear words in Japanese. Jesse gives up the hunt and guides him over another narrow wooden bridge -- which is where Hanzo stops, turns, and pulls him into a sudden embrace.

“Please do not leave me again,” he begs, clutching Jesse’s chest. “Please. I missed you.”

“Darlin’, I won’t. I promise.”

“I want it to be like this,” Hanzo bleats. “I want it to be like this all the time. I do not want to fight.”

Jesse re-evaluates just how drunk he is at the moment, somewhere between ‘spinning-head’ and ‘face hurts from smiling.’ “Aw, Hanzo, look. People fight. Ain’t nothin’ you can do ‘bout it sometimes. That’s just how it goes, when you’re with someone.”

“Pfah,” Hanzo tugs on his collar, looks down, shakes his head. Strands of his hair tickle McCree’s nose. “I want you to be happy. You deserve to be happy.”

“We got back on the right foot, Hanzo. You know I’m happy.”

Hanzo looks up at him in bleary-eyed amusement. “I like your big feet.”

Jesse hoots. “Oh-ho-ho, do ya?”

Grinning with his tongue pinched between his teeth, Hanzo purrs, “I like your big everything.”

Jesse swivels on his heel. He lifts Hanzo’s hands, pulls him close, lowers his chin.

“C’mon then, darlin’,” he drawls. “You know what they say ‘bout fellas with big feet.”

Hanzo leans into the gunslinger as he begins to sway. “What do they say?”

Jesse slips their palms together -- Hanzo’s right to his mechanical left -- and slides an arm around his waist. “They dance nice.”

Drunkenly Hanzo moves along with the motion before rasping, “you want to dance?”

“Ain’t you my partner?”

“There is no music!”

“I’ll make some.”

They shuffle in place, one-two, one-two. Jesse hums as they rock side-to-side. After a few beats, Hanzo stifles a weak snort.
“What?” Jesse prompts, looking down, beaming.

“What?”

“Naw, Hanzo, tell me. What’s so funny?”

“I recognize that song.”

Jesse grins, flashing white teeth. Stepping back and leading Hanzo into a small turn, twisting him, trying not to wobble. “I figured you might.”

“We must look like fools.”

“A pair of killers in an ancient castle, two-steppin’ in the middle of winter.” Jesse shrugs. “Probably.” He arcs his arm, guiding Hanzo into another lazy spin. “But there’s no one here to know, honey. It’s just you and me.”

“Yes.” Hanzo tucks against Jesse and buries his cheek into his chest. “This belongs to us.”

---

Later, in the bedroom, tangled sleepily against Jesse under the sheets, Hanzo says something for which he is completely unprepared.

“Tell me your name.”

Jesse slowly lowers his weight to his forearms, gazing up at the archer with wary eyes. Hanzo lies beside him, propped on one elbow, staring at him through the dim light.

They were laughing a moment before, goading, toying with each other. Getting ready to rest, joking through an inebriated haze.

Neither of them are laughing now.

“My name,” he repeats.

“Yes.”

Jesse’s brow wrinkles. “You know my name.”

Hanzo shifts against him. The red glow from the room’s ceramic heater illuminates the contour of his tattooed arm.

“Your mother,” Hanzo prompts, “was her name Judy?”

Now his brows shoot up. “Come again?”

“Was her name Judy, or Sara?”

Surprised by the question, Jesse tilts his head. “It was Sara. Why?”

“I went to Santa Fe,” answers Hanzo.

Jesse’s eyes widen. “You did?”

“Yes. It was the first place I went to look for you. In Reyes’ holovid, he said you were from Santa Fe.” Hanzo’s fingers weave against his sternum, stroking his chest. “There was a Deadlock bar. I
found out about Route 66 and the Panorama from there.”

“You went to a Deadlock bar?”

“The whisky was as bad as the music.”

Jesse caws a sharp laugh, bewildered and bemused. “I’ll be damned, Hanzo. Did you leave any of ‘em alive?”

“Most of them.” Hanzo lowers his cheek to Jesse’s shoulder. “I am serious, though. Who were you? Where did you come from in Santa Fe? Who were your parents? Who was your family? What was your real name, before all this?”

“Slow down, sweetheart. That’s a lotta questions.”

Hanzo nuzzles against his neck; he’s clean, warm, rich with the smell of soap. After a long pause, he says, “I want to know who you are.”

Jesse stares at the ceiling. He closes his eyes.

“You sure?” he asks quietly.

Hanzo nods.

It takes him a while, but he tells him.

For over an hour, he confesses everything: each answer, all the explanations, one truth at a time. A slow, careful recollection of childhood and youth, alias and disguise, yarn and tall tale. Jesse pieces out the terrain of his past like an illustrated map, drowsily recalling mountains and plains and vast Southwestern deserts -- the landscapes that set the stage for some of his greatest, wildest times.

It isn’t easy to do. He laughs, scorns, sings through the details. Some of the stories taste like iron on his lips; others are redolent of sweetness and light. With a deep breath, he steels himself and speaks of Reyes -- his captain, his brother, the king that saved the world -- and the shadows of Blackwatch. Beyond the ruins of the Swiss headquarters stretches the life of a drifter with nothing to hang on to but the solid weight of a gun in his hand.

When he finishes his story, he opens his eyes. Hanzo is still awake. He stirs, but says nothing. The room is warm and dark, like a womb.

Hanzo murmurs three words that arrest him, snare him, catch his heart in his throat. He’s familiar with them; this isn’t the first time they’ve been offered. He scrawled them at the bottom of a post-it note the day before Christmas and left it where he knew the archer would eventually look. But hearing them from Hanzo -- soft, raspy, coarse as a cliffside -- transforms them. Jesse repeats them back to him without hesitation.

He closes his eyes and drifts off to sleep. No voices, no smoke.

Only the three words -- which, finally, are real.

---

Morning brings them hangovers, stiff necks, sore backs. It’s still snowing outside. Jesse herds them both into the shower; he helps Hanzo scrubs off the cold and permits the archer to groom back his hair into a high tail afterward. They retreat to the kitchen for a slow, lazy breakfast: eggs, rice,
toast, a gourmet type of coffee that Jesse thinks might be the best he’s ever had.

It beats anything Reinhardt could ever brew back at the Watchpoint, which leads to a thought that snaps at Jesse from the back of his mind.

The mission.

He looks at Hanzo over the table and says, “there’s something else I need to tell you.”

“Hm?”

“I came here to find you because I didn’t wanna wait for you to come back. I didn’t wanna wait for you to come back, because something important’s happened.”

Hanzo rests his chopsticks. He’s listening.

“I got a job for us,” McCree explains. “And a bit of a proposal to go with it.”

“Go on.”

“A missing persons case. Someone we thought was dead.”

Hanzo’s eyes narrow. “Who?”

Jesse sets down his mug. He smiles weakly. “Who do you think?”

Silence. Hanzo sits back in his chair. Now his eyes flare wide.

“Turns out,” McCree says quietly, “she isn’t.”

“Jesse.”

“I know, Hanzo, I didn’t know what to say when I first heard. Her daughter Fareeha called me, told me right to my face --”

“Jesse,” Hanzo leans forward.

“Fareeha told me. Called me not long after I was back on my feet. That’s why I had to come get you, honey. There’s no way in hell I’m going back into the field without you on my side, ‘specially not if I’m going after someone this important.”

“You are certain?”

“Cross my heart and hope to die, Hanzo. She’s out there.”

Speechless, Hanzo stares at him. Jesse sits up, squares his shoulders, scoots his chair closer. Ready to lay the offer out on the table.

“There’s more to this than just findin’ Amari,” he says. “I wanna do this legit, Hanzo. I want us to do this for Overwatch on a regular basis.”

“What do you mean?”

“Special ops,” Jesse states. “Undercover. Intelligence. Retrievals. No hits, no bounties, none of that -- non-lethal protocols unless civilians are in danger. Like what we did in Dorado, and then all the times after.”
“Like Blackwatch.”

“Not like Blackwatch,” amends Jesse. “Beyond it. We work it out with Winston and Tracer and coordinate our operations so they run parallel. We’re the guys for the job, Hanzo, we got the skills. We got the know-how. And if it’s just the two of us, well…” He gestures with his palms out, so it goes. “Way easier to keep track of two agents than a squad.”

Hanzo says nothing. He looks down at his bowl.

Slowly, he shakes his head.

“How long?” he asks. “How long until we are found out? The history with Overwatch and special ops is globally condemned. And we have bounties on our heads. Working for Overwatch is already a massive liability for them and us both.”

Jesse presses. “Overwatch is changing, Hanzo. Jack’s new intel is gonna throw everything up in the air soon with the United Nations. There’s no telling what could happen in the next six months. The people we care ‘bout are gonna need us, Hanzo.”

“Us?”

“Yeah. Winston, Tracer, Reinhardt” -- he ticks off the names on his fingers -- “Lúcio, Hana, everyone. They’re all gonna need our skillset, our tactics, and everything that comes with it.” Jesse looks at him intently. “They need Mister Barceló and Mister Tsubaki, honey. No ifs, ands, or buts about it.”

Hanzo’s brows furrow. “They need heroes, Jesse.”

Jesse lifts his chin. “We could be heroes, Hanzo. Not like them, not like the old. Our own kinda hero.”

“Our own?”

“You and me. Behind-the-scenes heroes. Keepin’ the big guys safe.”

“It may not work,” Hanzo finally looks up at him. “It may cause a mess. It may backfire. So many things could go wrong.”

“And so many things could go right. We could save a lotta lives doin’ what we do best, Hanzo. Might make up for some of the ones that’ve gotten messed up along the way.”

“Jesse…”

“This is our chance. Our take on it. A new leaf, Hanzo, ours to turn.”

“And the leaves before us?” Hanzo counters, tense. “The men who tried to do similar? We are walking in the footsteps of people who saved the world, Jesse. Even they could not stop the enemy. Even they would tell us that it may not work out.”

The gunslinger sits up straight. His dark eyes are somber, scrutinizing -- the look of a man faced with harsh reality.

“You’re right,” Jesse’s voice is low and gravelly. “You’re absolutely right. It may not work out. You never know when something isn’t gonna work out, do ya? Whether it’s Overwatch or Talon, or good guys or bad guys, or two fellas tryin’ to make things work between them both. I reckon
“That’s a fact of life.”

Hanzo sighs through his nostrils, accepting. Somewhat defeated.

And then, Jesse rallies.

“But, listen,” he insists. “At the end of the day, in the life we live, and with the people we got: why not? After everything we’ve been through, and everything we know now, he slides his mechanical hand across the table. “Hanzo, tell me. Ain’t it worth a shot?”

Hanzo stares at the hand through a long, heavy silence. Jesse thinks -- for a fleeting second, as the quietness of the room threatens to beat down on them -- that he will pull it back unacknowledged. His stomach twists. He starts to withdraw.

Too slow, or very fast. He should have seen it coming.

Hanzo reaches out and clasps his fingers around Jesse’s hand.

“Perhaps,” he says softly. “At least, a shot.”

---

Snow falls in silent sheets as they depart Hanamura in the afternoon. Hanzo does not look back once they’ve passed the castle gates. Jesse asks him twice if he’s alright; he assures that he is. McCree can’t shake the feeling that Hanzo is trying to keep a stiff upper lip. The archer sits close beside him on the train back to Tokyo and tightly clutches his hand. He doesn’t let go until they’ve disembarked at the spaceport station.

“You can come back,” McCree reassures him at the ticket kiosk. “You know that, honey. You can always come back.”

Hanzo returns nothing but a muted hm.

His spirits lift when Genji comms Hanzo before they board. He’s safe, and Talon is retreating. He intends to follow them north to the city of Niigata for reconnaissance before he returns to Gibraltar. Hanzo’s tone is bright and animated throughout the conversation; before he hangs up, he says something fondly to his brother that ends with a laugh. He flashes a smile to Jesse before informing him good to go.

On the flight back, Hanzo drinks too much of the complementary airline bourbon and naps slumped against his shoulder. Jesse checks his messages, replies back to Winston and Athena, asks for news on Reyes. No word yet, they say. Mercy’s comm is on, but the signal is low. Her last recorded location was south of Tunisia.

He looks down at Hanzo (dozing, mouth slightly open, drool glistening on his lower lip) and sighs. Muttering a soft benediction on behalf of those on Gabe’s trail: vaya con Dios.

---

They return to the Watchpoint hoping to find Winston, instead running first into Hana and Mei outside of her laboratory. Both women startle Hanzo with hugs; McCree looks on with a smile as Hanzo modestly returns them.

Satya waits in the wings. She asks to speak to Hanzo alone. He acquiesces, follows her down the hall, slips past the corner. McCree hears them talking in low, hushed tones.
As if summoned, Winston arrives with a relieved ‘hey’. They catch up quickly; McCree confirms Genji’s impending return and agrees to talk mission logistics before the evening meal. His attention flicks back to Hanzo and Satya when he overhears the latter’s wavering voice. She’s upset.

Winston notices. “She’s not with us for much longer,” he says. “Zenyatta offered her refuge among the Shambali in Nepal. They’re going to repair her arm, and give her a safe haven from Vishkar.”

“Vishkar issued an order for her detainment,” Hana adds, instantly somber. “It turns out, they lied to her about parts of her mission, specifically one about Genji, and when she found out, she dropped her appeal. She’s been wanting to talk about it to Hanzo since she found out the truth.”

Instantly Jesse understands. He remembers the fight in Hangar 18 with the archi-techs, the net, the unexpected Dead-Eye. Hanzo’s suspicion, from the cold argument in the bunker in Siberia to the trip to Hollywood.

“Well, what can we do for her?” he asks.

“We’ve practically begged her to stay,” sighs Winston, “but she declined. And I understand why. She wants to figure things out on her own, away from the Corporation and away from us. Lúcio thinks that after she’s had some time to process what happened, she’ll come back. Maybe even join up with us.”

McCree glances over his shoulder to get another look at them: Satya burying her face in her hands, Hanzo with his palms pressed together and his head bowed. He’s murmuring to her quietly as she shakes her head, distraught.

Then, to Jesse’s surprise, Satya lowers her hands from her weary face and gives the archer’s arms a fleeting pat. Hanzo bobs his head and withdraws with a deep forward bow.

She hurries away. Hanzo returns to his side. He greets Winston, explains that all is well, tries to act like nothing’s wrong.

But Jesse sees relief in his gaze, like the yield of an overturned stone.

Forgiveness, he thinks, is a freeing thing.

---

“Heeey, Hanzo and Eastwood! Welcome back!”

A mirthful cry goes up from Lúcio when they enter the mess hall for supper. He bounds forward to hug them in greeting; tonight he’s wearing a green smock apron over his neon-yellow scrubs. Beside him, at the stove, Reinhardt has paused mid-hoist of a heavy cast iron pan. He roars out a congenial *hullo*, shakes Hanzo’s hand, urges them to wash up and get ready for the best salmon stir-fry they’ll ever eat.

One by one, the agents file in. Mei arrives with a loud and amiable Zarya, who deals Reinhardt a hearty slap on the back. Hana and Tracer come in from the training range laughing, chatting, matching in grey pilot uniforms. Winston and Zenyatta trek through as they wrap up a somber, grumbled discussion. Torbjorn and Brigitte gravitate to Reinhardt’s side of the kitchen, bantering back and forth in German. Soon the room is alive with laughter and noise.

Everyone gathers at the table, takes a seat, basks in the excitement of another communal meal. Jesse’s heart swells with fondness; not everyone on the team is present, but the joy is still here.
A hiss from the hallway announces an arrival. Satya is there, right on the hour. She folds her hands in front of her, lifts her chin, and hesitantly approaches.

The table goes quiet. Hana’s eyes are wide, almost glistening. Overjoyed.

Immediately Hanzo stands, pulls back the chair beside him, motions for her to sit. It’s Genji’s usual seat, but he politely explains that his absent brother will not mind in the least.

She sits. Hanzo does, too. Satya looks up at the table full of heroes -- their faces warm and shining beneath the glow of the gold kitchen lights -- and smiles.

As if by unspoken understanding, Lúcio offers out to her the first plate.

---

After the meal, McCree wanders to the box garden. He smokes a cigarillo while checking the winter crop: beets, onions, a few tufts of young kale. The chickens rush to greet him at the coop. He checks their feeder and spends a moment checking them for bumps and broodiness. Then he washes his hands in the comm tower lavatory and takes a walk in search of Hanzo, who he guesses is back at the dorm or in Range 2.

A flicker of gold catches his eye. There he is, up on the walkway by the lab building. Facing the cliffside, watching the ocean, leaning on the railing. Basking in the purple evening light.

Wearing the red serape. Drinking from a little cup.

Boiled coffee.

He climbs the stairs and ambles out to the walkway with a placid ‘hey.’ Hanzo smiles, greets him, motions for him to join. Jesse sidles beside him, rests his arms on the guardrail, looks out over the slate-colored strait.

“All set to go,” he announces. “Winston approved us some funds, gear, a couple more things to keep our identities secure. We can head outta here whenever you’re ready.”

“You have a protocol prepared?” Hanzo asks. “An intel file?”

“Yup. Check your phone, I sent it to your inbox.” He takes a black tablet out of his pocket. “Also, got this.”

“What is it?”

Jesse extends the tablet out, activates the screen, enters the code. “Jack gave this to me before I left to come get you. It belonged to Reyes. Couple of the files on here have some correspondence ‘bout Amari and her field work. Combined with the data Fareeha sent, this’s a good start to help track her down.”

Hanzo looks down at the screen. “This was his personal device?”

“It’s got some personal stuff on it, but only I got the password for that. Winston and Athena made a copy of the operations files on here. They’re gonna run ‘em against the Blackwatch archive and see if they can uncover some more stuff ‘bout what Talon might’ve done.”

“I see,” he hands the tablet back.

Jesse slips it back into his pocket. “You alright?”
“Yes,” Hanzo answers. He pulls the serape tight around his shoulders. “Thinking about a lot of things, but that is nothing new.”

“Penny for your thoughts?”

Hanzo laughs. “Only that?”

“How ‘bout a quarter.”

The archer reaches out to stroke the line of Jesse’s bearded chin. “For you, there would be no charge.”

Jesse grins and leans into the touch. “Listen, let’s talk on the trip. I was thinkin’ we could leave tonight.”

“Tonight?” Hanzo asks.

“Yeah. Get all our stuff together and head out, grab a bite to eat in the city, get to the train station or the spaceport, take a late-night leg. What d’you say?”

Hanzo blinks. “We just got back. Why not wait until the morning?”

“Aw, y’know.” Jesse shrugs. “Get a head start, get back in the mix. Y’know.”

The sea breeze blows a tail of Hanzo’s scarf over his face; he brushes it off his cheek. He looks into the cup of coffee.

“You are eager to find her,” he says gently.


“I do.”

“But it’s more than that,” Jesse assures him.

“Is it?”

“I’m lookin’ forward to gettin’ back out there with you,” he says, smiling. “Doin’ what we did well together. The two of us.”

Now Hanzo smiles. “There is still the option of a full night’s sleep and re-adjustment to the time zone before we take off.” He gently elbows Jesse. “Mister Tsubaki shares in his partner’s enthusiasm, but he is not a young man.”

Jesse taps ash off his cigarillo. “Drinkin’ coffee at night? Guess he ain’t gettin’ any younger, either, eh.”

Hanzo offers out the cup. McCree takes it, finishes off the last few sips, sets it down beside them. Hanzo folds his forearms on the railing; his dark eyes linger, heavy-lidded, over the white spray of surf and seafoam that crashes against the rocks.

Eventually he says, “no.”

“Tell me, sweetheart.” Jesse presses, his voice warm and low. “Tell me what’s on your mind.”
Hanzo slowly settles against the rail. “I will save it for the trip. You want to get back on the trail, and I do not want to linger if we have work to do.”

“This life’s never uneventful, Hanzo,” Jesse muses. “Amari knew it, Reyes knew it. Everyone in Overwatch did, before and now. You get a little bit of your soul wrapped up into it and you’re always gonna be lookin’ to get a little more.”

Hanzo purses his lips. “It may not always be that way.”

“Yeah?”

“The day may come when we want a calmer life,” he pauses. “A settled life.”

“It may.” Jesse blows out a wisp of smoke. He glances at Hanzo with a wry grin. “What, you already thinkin’ ‘bout Mister Tsubaki’s retirement plan?”

Hanzo snorts. “It never hurts to consider and plan for the future, Mister Barceló.”

The gunslinger puts out his cigarillo and squints over the horizon. Gold flashes from the lighthouse beacon in pale, reassuring swipes.

“You want a future with me?” Jesse asks, glancing back at Hanzo.

“I do.”

“No matter what happens? For better, or for worse? Sickness, health? Old hairless fools with no teeth?”

Hanzo lightly elbows him. “All of the above.”

Jesse edges against him, bumps his shoulder, leans in. Hanzo immediately yields, permits a tender brush of their lips, and reaches for Jesse’s left hand.

They look into the other’s eyes, and Hanzo’s expression turns soft.

“To our future,” Jesse rasps, tipping his hat.

Hanzo replies warmly, “to our future.”

They hold one another on the precipice, braced by the railing, buffeted by the wind. Beyond them, the cliffside cuts a jagged silhouette along the purpling sky. Jesse traces the edge, looks back at the archer, and smiles.

This time, they’re on the same side.

Jesse and Hanzo watch the sun set over the ship channel. Dusk wanes into night; early stars glitter into view. A cluster of gulls take wing on the sea breeze, rising over their heads, soaring high above the cliffside, arcing across the rocky niche that houses the Watchpoint at Gibraltar.

Which is where, for now, it ends.
Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- Artwork at the end of this chapter is by Jamie Kinosian.
- Thank you for reading this far. There is an epilogue to come, and an Author's Note.
EPILOGUE

Chapter Notes

- Content note: violence, blood, body horror.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

EPILOGUE

---

Sendai Omnium, Miyagi, Japan

Standing on a rocky outcropping above the snow-covered ruins, Genji Shimada looks down and guesses this is the right location. There’s no other facility like this in the region: crumbled buildings, tumbledown walls, a cage of ruined chain-link fence encircling the perimeter. Thick drifts of snow blanket every surface and shape. Above him stretches a charcoal-grey sky, edged by distant black hills, morose with the promise of more winter weather. He sees nothing but white, like a blank paper canvas.

Gently he brushes snow off a nearby branch. There’s a woody tendril coiled around the base.

Wisteria. Yes, this must be the place.

There’s no threat here, so he sets his weapons down on the ground beside him. Genji disposed of the last cluster of Talon-affiliated agents two days ago; he commends anyone with enough endurance to follow him this far.

Unless it’s Hanzo, who doesn’t know that his brother is here, nor how he knows this place exists.

Slowly he sits with his legs crossed. Within seconds, the snow starts to melt, trickling away and seeping down the rocks. Genji blinks twice; his visor’s HUD flashes a series of numbers and characters; he lowers the temperature of his internal heating systems via the sensors wired throughout his cyborg body. A shiver flickers up his spine. He remembers what it used to feel like to get cold.

Nothing feels the same anymore. What he sees and knows today will not be the same tomorrow, or the day after that. Genji Shimada understands this, accepts it, encourages himself to embrace it. It floods his soul with lightness and ease.

Respite, the green dragon croons softly, omniscient in the back of his mind. Its voice breaks the otherworldly silence of the wintry world around them.

“Yes,” he replies calmly. “These ruins were a place of solitude. It comforted him. Do you think he came here often?”

In life and in dream, the dragon sighs, placid. A cycle has ended. The tenebrous loop, an angry cord that could not be broken. A hollow existence from which my brethren and I are free.

“I am glad that you can commune with them again. Thank you for showing me the way here.”
He closes his eyes and thinks of his brother. Genji doesn’t expect to see Hanzo again for a month or more. He is with McCree on a mission to find someone important. It may be weeks before they’re reunited, but there’s no rush. They will have a glad reunion no matter when it occurs. He is already looking forward to it, and -- with an assurance that gladdens him -- Hanzo is, too.

*Finally, there is a future,* he assures himself, and the dragon wholly agrees.

Out of the soundless thicket, a noise breaks his concentration -- thin and musical, a staccato *peep peep*. Genji opens his eyes.

A group of small birds have gathered at the outcropping. Finches, maybe sparrows. There’s six of them: mottled brown plumage, dusky beaks and throats, white breasts. Genji watches them bounce and chirp, unperturbed by his presence. Diligently pecking for seeds in the cracks of the exposed rocks.

One of them lands on his knee. Genji offers out his finger. The bird chirps in alarm, flits away, but eventually reconsiders and returns to perch. It fluffs up, flicks its head, evaluates him with bright black eyes.

Beneath the shield of his visor, Genji smiles.

He sits until the birds have flown away. Cracks of afternoon sun filter through the cloudy sky. Though he cannot stay for long, Genji decides to come back someday. Maybe even with Hanzo.

In the summer, when the wisteria vines are green.

---

*LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 16 hours ago*

I owe a BIG shout out to my followers in India who helped me w/ a very important translation. Telugu and Urdu are beautiful languages

33K retweets 604K likes

*LÚCIO CORREIA DOS SANTOS @lucio - 16 hours ago*

It was for a very special gift. Lots of feelings about it. feelings translate into the music like the words
This gift is for a beautiful PERSON. A fighter and a HERO. A friend.

MUSIC is a language. LOVE is a language. We ALL speak them from the day we’re born.

We can speak these to each other without even realizing it. Open your ears and then your eyes. Are you listening???

Wave at that big blue sky and mountains for us. Give Chuchu a scratch for me.

We’ll be here when you come back.

---

Medbay - Watchpoint: Gibraltar, Isle of Gibraltar

Lúcio shuts off his Twitter app, sets down his phone, and drums his fingertips on the table. Alone, and deep in thought.

It’s been two weeks since she left. He’s still feeling down about it, but the Watchpoint keeps him busy. Between rigging up the medbay with the first pieces of his prototype Curada rejuvenating sound-system and helping out with the usual tech help, he has no time to slack off. Winston thinks the Curada will work as well as his Crossfade suit; if it does, he’ll have to write a lot of protocols.
to get it approved. Less music, more paperwork and SOPs. Like Hana would say: *welcome to being a hero.*

He finished Satya’s song just before she departed to Nepal. Lúcio thinks about when he saw her off at the loading dock -- hair plaited, swathed in a green sari, standing beside her suitcase and the cat carrier -- and offered out the tablet and earbuds. How she covered her mouth in shock when she saw the title and track notes were written in two of the native tongues from her birthplace in Hyderabad.

Lúcio smiles as he recalls how she recited the words out loud; one of his followers that helped with the translation knew enough Urdu poetry to make the phrases more lyrical. He thinks they must have done a fantastic job; Satya looked so soft that he thought she might cry.

After all the crying she’s done lately, he’s glad she didn’t.

“Agent Lúcio,” Athena says, jolting him out of his thoughts. “Winston would like to see you in the main laboratory.”

“Gotcha,” Lúcio replies. He stands and reaches for a jacket. "Back to work."

He tugs the zipper, stops, and smiles.

“You miss her, Athena?” he asks, glancing at the main screen above the desk. “You know. Satya, I mean.”

It takes Athena a beat to reply, “I do.”

“I figured. She was pretty special, yeah?”

“Agent Symmetra’s devotion to her work was unparalleled, even for a member of the Vishkar Corporation. Beyond her work on my internal systems, she fixed several external patch points that posed potential hacking risks. Even Winston had not isolated them as security concerns.” Another beat. “I am looking forward to her return, whenever it may be.”

“I can’t promise I’ll keep you running as well as she did,” he sighs. “But I’ll try.”

Athena says gently, “I have complete faith in your skills, Agent Lúcio.”

He double-checks the medbay systems (all stable) and glances through its inbox (empty). Then he looks over the main room before locking up and heading out. Everything is nice and neat, orderly, sterile eggshell-white. Boring and clean, just like Dr. Ziegler likes it.

Lúcio, briefly relishing his appointment as temporary head of medbay, wonders how the team would react if he gave the place a fresh new coat of paint. Something a little more uplifting, like a bright and sunny yellow.

---

“-- best regards to you buncha bloody cowards in your little cave over there, me and my business partner ‘ere have an offer you won’t be able to refuse! ”

Winston stares at the holovid blaring on his main viewscreen with a banana halfway to his half-open mouth.

“-- and by ‘won’t be able to refuse,’ I mean in the literal sense, because we’ll blow your little
He’s so transfixed by the skinny Australian man shouting on the screen that he doesn’t notice when Lúcio walks in.

“Whoa,” Lúcio interrupts. “What is that?”

Winston slowly looks over at him. “Your pals.”

Lúcio’s brows shoot up. “My pals?”

The man hollers, gesticulates wildly, emphasizes with aggressive slaps of his prosthetic fist on the table. He’s wearing a tattered black suit, white shirt, red tie. The cuffs are scorched and shredded, seams charred as if the garment was set on fire. “So let’s talk business! Forty-million dollars, that’s AUSTRALIAN dollars, if you don’t mind, we don’t take euros, who wants any of your stinkin’ euros, anyway --”

“Ratpig-69-420,” the gorilla sighs, reaching for a remote control, hitting mute. “Sent us a new message. They’re claiming to be bounty hunters who want to collect on pretty much everyone here unless we cough up some kind of appeasement fund.”

“Uh,” Lúcio stares at the man raving silently on the screen. “No?”

“Yeah,” Winston replies flatly, taking a bite of his banana. “No.”

A realization dawns on the audio-medic. “Hold on,” he says, pointing at the screen. “Do you recognize that guy?”

Winston answers with his mouth full, “huh?”

“Him. Ratpig. I recognize him. It’s the face and the head on fire.”

“You do?”

“Holy shit! That’s one of the guys that blew up the bank in Dorado! When Eastwood and Hanzo were on that undercover mission?” Lúcio squints at the screen, wanders over to a keypad, taps in a command to zoom in on the man’s smoldering hair. “Look! That’s gotta be him!”

Winston sits up and adjusts his glasses. “Huh. Whoa. I think you’re right!”

“I’m positive that’s the same guy. Hey, Athena.” Lúcio looks up. “Can you run an analysis?”


“Rat and hog,” Winston grunts. He tosses the banana peel in a garbage can under his desk. “Well, I don’t know about you, but maybe we ought to jot this down. They might be worth looking into these guys sometime in the future.”


Winston gestures at the screen. “Uh, yeah. I mean, they’re criminals. They blew up a bank. It’s worth keeping an eye on them in case they make a bigger threat someday.”

“A buncha internet trolls?” Lúcio counters, frowning. “I dunno, Winston. I mean, you’re the boss, but I bet you Żarya could stuff that guy in a tin can in two seconds flat.”
“Hah.” Winston snorts. He shuts off the holovid; a diagnostics screen pops up. Athena’s logo spins above the progress bar, which is set at 57%. “We can go ask her. She’s gonna be testing out her new gravity cannon in about fifteen minutes. You wanna come?”

“Sure,” Lúcio grabs a spare pair of headphones off the wall. “You need me to check anything on the firewall before we go?”

“Nope,” Winston replies, getting up from his chair, reaching for his lab coat. “Athena, can you keep running tests on the stuff we got from Reyes’ tablet? We’ll be back in a bit.”

“Of course,” Athena answers.

Winston and Lúcio flick the lights off as they leave. Athena dims her system lights.

The viewscreen glows lucid blue as the progress bar for the tablet files gradually ticks up.

57% … 58% … 59% …

The screen flickers.

60% … 61% … 62% …

Another flicker. Two. Three.

63% … 64% …

Blip.

The viewscreen blanks out. A white cursor blinks on the screen.

Athena’s drives whirr as the screen returns, lights up, shimmers back to blue again. The progress bar has jumped ahead to 99%. It rapidly scrolls a list of decompressed files upon completion and closes the diagnostic window.

A tiny purple skull appears on the display.

Cuidado, it warns with an electronic chirp. Its pixelated jaws open and close, laughing.

Then, it disappears.

---

|| 1523: [3945_83] Lu:
Luuuuu

How is your mission in the lovely city of Ilios today
Any more Widowmaker sightings?

It’s good 😔😔 kinda rainy
No sightings this afternoon but Lena is scouting part of the city right now & I’m posted above Point A
The intel put WM in the city less than 6 hours ago tho so Lena wanted to do another search
But yeah still no sign of her since the dig site
Did Winston ask for an update?

No I was just curious.
Is Lena doing okay though?
Still kinda worried about her tbh.

Ya she’s staying positive as usual
She’s pretty sure we can get WM to ceasefire and talk to us this time
As for actually bringing her in? idk
It’s not like the Reyes situation.
Trying not to be skeptical but she is convinced we can do something about WM too
And you know how Lena is

Okay good.
Yeah. Endless optimism. We need that though.
Just keep me posted.

I will 😛😛otent
Anything fun happening at the WP?

We’re watching Zarya show off her new gun
Mei is so cute lmao
I can send you some pics in a sec
LOL what is she doing (> <)

Lu:
She squeals and jumps up and down when Zarya hits a target
I love it......I love them

omggg me too >•<
Next time we do a co-stream we should put them on it
We need to do another one when I get back btw 🙊(⊙﹏⊙)

Lu:
Yeah definitely.
Get some more donations flowing in!
Hey btw any word from Satya?
or Eastwood…
He never answers my texts I stg

She’s going to be offline this week working on her arm (づ·  •`)づ
but she’ll be back by next Wednesday
omg ok so I did talk to Hanzo
He said he and Mac got a lead on Amari
He found a connection to the bounty hunter 76 was working with

Lu:
Are you serious

yup
he said it’s either a connection or there’s a chance they could even be the same person
can you even imagine ➔(⊙_⊙)➔

Lu:
This is the sound of my brain exploding.
Eastwood would FLIP
Do you think that will run them into 76??
Winston might want to know so he can be prepared.
Winston probably already knows
but maybe tell him in case that happens

|| 1541: [3945_83] Lu:
Weirder stuff has happened though.
so maybe

|| 1543: [3945_85]
True

|| 1543: [3945_83] Lu:
That doesn’t bother you, though, does it?
Weird stuff happening, I mean

|| 1544: [3945_85]
what do you mean??

|| 1544: [3945_83] Lu:
I dunno, just been thinking a lot today
You know about all the stuff Rein used to tell me.
Like sometimes I just kinda stop and go: whoa
I’m standing in a room with a talking gorilla who is the smartest scientist I’ve ever met
watching a Russian weightlifter fire a gravity gun
You’re in Greece with someone who can move through time, looking for Spider Woman
And then I mean. Satya.
These are REAL HEROES. We are REAL heroes.
If you think about it, this time last year, we were all in completely different places.
Who knows where we’ll be this time next year, right?
SORRY I got really deep for a sec
Just been thinking a lot.
With great power comes great responsibility. And thinking deep. lol

|| 1548: [3945_85]
I thought you were giving me another pep talk LOL

|| 1548: [3945_83] Lu:
I just want to make sure you’re still feeling good about this
You know?
I don’t want you to wake up one day and regret being recruited.
With the old guys gone up to London and you and Lena out in the field, I dunno.
I just wanted to reach out.
aww Lu
welcome to being a hero bro
Nah you know I’m good
Still going for Agent 01 someday
Han and I talked about this a few times. This is my team now.
We’re here to fight and to win
You don’t wake up knowing what you’re going to face today so you just have to face it
I appreciate it though ophile
you should give Hanzo a pep talk like that sometime

Lu:
LOL
That’s Eastwood’s job.
He’d probably just tell you another story about how he lost his arm though.
“Welcome to Overwatch, here’s how a man-eating horse bit off my arm”

LOL omggg
he told me it was an alligator in a swamp
Hey Lena is on her way back
I think she has new info, will send update if WM is here
Thank you for this. (.jsoup

Lu:
Gotcha, be safe
Love you both.
D.Va's #1 <3 BOOM

boom <3

---

Illos, Greece

Smiling, D.Va closes the messenger app on her MEKA’s main screen. She’s sequestered under a concrete overhang high above the seaside hills of Illos. It’s drizzling outside; in the confines of her new drone unit, D.Va remains warm and dry. She looks down at the city below and watches a blue streak ascend the rooftops up to her perch.

“Did you see her?” she asks over the comm as Tracer bounds into view.
“No hostiles in sight,” Tracer lands beside her and shakes the rain off her jacket sleeves. “But I’m not ready to turn in yet.”

D.Va tugs the unit controls. “You still think she’s here?”

“There’s another part of the city left to look at, around the cistern. Wanted to see if you’re still up to scout some more.”

D.Va pulls up a map on her screen and points to a quadrant. “The place with the big well?”

“Yup. Great place to hide, if you’re trying to stay outta sight.”

“The itsy-bitsy spider went down the water-spout,” D.Va says. “It’s already raining. Time to see if Miss Sunshine’ll get her to show.”

Laughing, Tracer shoots back a thumbs up. “I knew I could count on you.”

“Let’s go, you take point.”

Tracer darts away; her comm flares to life again. “You’re the best!”

The MEKA whirrs as D.Va engages the controls. She guns the thrusters, chases after Tracer, and grins from ear to ear.

*The best*, she thinks, cheered despite the rain.

---

King’s Row, London

*Overwatch Ground Transport - Tactical Co-operative Mission against Talon*

“The worst,” Torbjorn says to Brigitte and Reinhardt, spinning the steering wheel of the hover-van, navigating evening traffic. “I’ve said it before, I’ll say it again -- *The Hobbit* was the absolute worst series I have ever seen, in all my days, and I am that much less of a person for it.”

“Oh, great,” Brigitte groans. She’s seated beside Reinhardt in the transport, clutching the restraints. “*This* argument again.”

“A redundant argument,” Reinhardt offers sagely, shrugging. He’s seated beside her, fully armored save for the helm sitting in his lap. “If he would just concede he has bad taste in cinema --”

“Don’t start!” Torbjorn rails, swerving into the adjacent lane. “You want to talk about redundant?
Makin’ that many boring films was just a studio lookin’ to make a buck on consumer indulgence in nostalgia.” He veers back, curses, honks at a passing taxi. “Not to mention stretchin’ out the source material like that completely ruins the *spirit* of the whole thing…”

“Slow down,” Brigitte insists. She looks slightly nauseous. “I know you’re excited to see her again, but we don’t have to be at the checkpoint for another half-hour.”

“I *am* drivin’ slow,” retorts Torbjorn. “Slow as molasses, this traffic’s not goin’ anywhere.”

“Neither is our back-up!” Brigitte clutches the hover-van handrail as Torbjorn swerves again. “Use your damn blinker!”

“Torbjorn does not like the films because they have dwarves in them,” challenges Reinhardt, unperturbed by the reckless driving. “That’s the main reason, but he won’t admit it.”

Torbjorn jerks his thumb at the knight and glowers at Brigitte in the rear-view mirror. “D’you hear this old fart? You hear that kinda antagonizing? This’s the kinda mess I had t’ put up with while you were gone, y’know, this is what I get fer comin’ outta retirement --”

Brigitte offers a queasy smile. “Actually, you know what? This is the first time in a while that you two have bantered like this in weeks. I can tell you’re both feeling better about all this.”

The old men exchange glances through the mirror.

Reinhardt sighs. “A few weights have been lifted off my shoulders.”

“Aye,” Torbjorn replies gruffly. “Just a few.”

“Knowing someone is out there looking for Gabriel,” Reinhardt clarifies. He looks down at the helm in his hands. “And, for Ana --”

“Feels like everyone’s workin’ together again,” Torbjorn interjects. “Old blood an’ new, runnin’ together like we used to.” And then, gruffly, “induglin’ on that nostalgia, I s’pose.”

“It isn’t easy,” Reinhardt says. "Knowing that all the people you loved were still alive, years after you believed them dead. Now that we have the truth, now that we are *doing* something, everything feels more” -- he pauses, gazing up at the ceiling -- "more …”

“Hopeful?” Brigitte offers.

“Hopeful,” Reinhardt concurs. He smiles. “That is a good word for it.”

Torbjorn stares at the sprawl of traffic before him and mutters, begrudgingly, “hopeful.”

They pull off the hyperlane, veer down side streets, and park the hover-van in an empty abandoned lot. Reinhardt gets out first; Brigitte helps unload his hammer while Torbjorn comms in their arrival to Winston. It’s not far to the underground sub-station entrance they’ll be investigating tonight.

The high hiss of jet engines catches their attention. Brigitte points out a small drone coming in for a landing at a concrete platform by the lot.

“That’s no drone,” Torbjorn murmurs, squinting, sheltering his eyes with his palm. “That’s a person.”

“Our back-up?” Reinhardt offers, watching their descent.
The figure lands, shuts off their boosters, and takes off their helmet. It’s a woman; she shakes free a long wing of black hair and throws up her arm in an enthusiastic wave.

Reinhardt gasps. “Is that a ---”

“Rocket-powered suit,” Torbjorn crows, slack-jawed.

“What’s the matter, guys?” the woman cries, still waving. “Don’t you recognize me after all these years?”

Roaring, Reinhardt takes off across the lot. He sweeps the woman off her feet with a mighty hug; Torbjorn bolts after him with a whoop.

Brigitte watches and thinks that Fareeha Amari cuts as striking a figure as the two old men predicted she would.

“LOOK AT YOU!” Reinhardt booms, lifting her off her feet. “It is so GOOD to see you again!”

“I could say the same!” she laughs. And then, squirming in Reinhardt’s persistent hug: “careful, careful with the suit. Mind the exhaust pipes!”

Reinhardt sets her down with a sheepish but jubilant “sorry.”

“Yer a sight for sore eyes, Fareeha,” Torbjorn says, nodding appreciatively.

“They’ve been talking about you non-stop,” Brigitte says, observing, smiling. “Sounds like Talon won’t stand a chance between this kind of co-op.”

“Not in the least!” Fareeha declares boldly, reattaching her helmet. Then, after evaluating the group: “well, we could stand here and catch up all night, or we could get moving and save it for after the mission. I went ahead and cleared the route down into the sub-station. All we have to do is get there and move in.”

“Already looking out for us!” Reinhardt laughs, shoulders his hammer, beams warmly. “Just like someone I remember.”

“What can I say?” Fareeha asks, leading the team towards the entrance. “I looked up to good people, back when I was a kid.”

---

* *

* *

---

Outskirts of Numbani, Africa
It happens early in the morning, 0330. They’ve tracked him to an industrial storage complex built into an abandoned work site twelve miles south of the City of Harmony. One of Helix Security’s subsidiaries ran this facility many years ago, but no one owns it now. Its security systems are disabled. The place is run-down; the Shrike warns her companions that there might be a lingering Omnic or two, but the three-man search team encounters only their target.

The initial firefight shreds most of the front loading bay. Jack moves in as Reaper unloads on Mercy and the Shrike; he circles him, distracts his attacks, leads him deeper into the complex. Mercy pursues in a gold streak as Shrike moves up to higher ground.

She flips the toggle on her Caduceus staff and calls out over the comm: “Reversal Protocol is engaged.”

“Whenever you’re clear!” shouts Jack, ducking to avoid shotgun fire. “Take the shot, Angela!”

“You’re covered,” Shrike adds, raspy but terse.

Mercy moves into line of sight. Reaper swivels; the bone-white mask hooks her gaze like a snare.

He’s looking right at her.

She freezes. Shocked by a mix of terror and exhilaration, thumb hovering over the switch on her staff. Reaper starts to billow out in a vast black cloud. Her Valkyrie suit pings an alarm: achtung. Irregular heart-rate detected.

Why does it feel like she’s dreamed of this before?

“You’re clear!” Jack yells again. “Mercy, do it now!”

The Reaper laughs. He raises his gun.

Gabriel, she thinks -- a clarion call that cuts through her fear.

No time to hesitate. Just as Reaper fires, she hits the switch. The beam shoots off and envelops the room in a blinding gold light. Jack ducks; Mercy holds fast but feels her knees threatening to give. The recoil from the Reversal stream hits so hard that she nearly drops the staff.

At the epicenter of the burst, Reaper screams.

“Contact confirmed!” Shrike cries over the comm. “You got him! He’s retreating!”

When the light clears, he’s gone. Mercy heaves forward in a cold sweat, wings flared and eyes wide. Her pulse hammers wildly in her ears through a shrill ring. A report from the shotgun blast, she thinks. He missed, and it nearly deafened her.

“Where did he go?” she asks, fumbling her comm to her other ear. “Which way?”

“I’m in pursuit,” Jack barks. She sees him tearing down the hall in a red-white-and-blue streak.

Mercy lowers her staff. Did it work?

Over the comm, Shrike calls out: “I’m tracking from the second level. He’s on foot.”

Mercy races down the hall and emerges into a wide, cavernous room bisected by towering storage racks. Panting, lungs burning, struggling to follow, she halts and looks around. Shouts and gunfire echo off the metal walls; she dips down an aisle and hunts for the commotion. The Valkyrie suit
chimes a new alert: recharging. The Reversal Protocol takes more power out of her equipment than the regular healing beam. She won’t be able to fire it again for another five minutes.

“Jack,” she comms. “Fall back. Stop pursuit until I can catch up.”

No answer. Another distant report of gunfire. She curses under her breath.

“Jack?” Mercy darts down another aisle. “Where are you? You’ve got to fall back, I need confirmation that the Protocol worked! He could be unstable, you musn’t injure him!”

Just as she clears the row, Shrike drops from the rafters. She stands, tugs off her faceplate, and stands her ground; a white strand of hair springs free from her blue hijab . Mercy steps back, swallows a breath, steels herself.

Even now, three weeks after the revelation, it’s disorienting to confront the fact that the legendary Ana Amari is still alive.

“Let’s get to a higher level,” Ana says tersely. “Quick.”

“I need to confirm it worked,” Mercy demands. “Which way did they go?”

“Up ahead,” Ana replies. She starts moving. “Come with me. Let Jack handle this.”

“I must get to him,” Mercy insists, following. “Immediately, Ana, I need to see the effects --”

Ana dodges around a rack. “He’s on foot. No vapor.”

Mercy’s heart threatens to leap into her throat. “You saw it? No form-flux?”

“Yes. Come, quick -- up the stairs. We need a better look.”

Numb, she chases Ana to the second-level walkway encircling the room. Another shout echoes out -- Jack, howling: ‘Gabriel!’ -- as the women climb onto a scaffolding that overlooks the adjoining warehouse.

“Target in sight,” Ana hisses, ducking down. “Here.”

Mercy hunches beside her. She stares.

There he is: shambling, limping, grasping his left arm. The Reaper is trying to disperse into a waft of smoke; his left arm dissipates into a black cloud, only to erratically blot back together like spots of ink. He dives behind a metal crate and hunkers down. Hunching over, hacking into his hands.

Overcome with purpose, Angela swings a leg off the scaffold. “Cover me.”

“Wait,” Ana jerks her by the shoulder. “Jack is in pursuit.”

Mercy nearly shoves the sniper back. “I have to get to him.”

Another jerk. “No, Angela.”

Seized, Mercy searches the woman’s face. “The Protocol must have worked, my priority is assessing his condition. I need to get up close to see if it completed the process --”

“If you engage him and he damages your suit, there may not be an opportunity to use the Protocol again,” Ana peers back hard at Mercy through her single eye. “We have to get him to come
willingly for an examination, or at least without a fight.”

“Ana, move. I’m going down there, now.”

“Not yet,” Ana replies. “This is about timing, Angela. We can’t screw this up. If you want a second chance, you have to stay here.”

“No!” Mercy hisses. “The time is now! This is more than just a mission, this is Gabriel, this is our comrade and our friend, this is our --”

“-- hero,” Ana interrupts. “Your prerogative is to help a patient, but if something happens to you, the two of us won’t be able to get him back.” The sniper braces the scaffolding rail with her arm. “Just wait.”

Before Mercy can push her aside, a loud shout cracks across the warehouse. Jack has found Reaper; they’re brawling between stacks of storage crates. Angela sees no rifle or shotguns.

They’ve resorted to hand-to-hand combat.

“Time to move in,” Mercy whispers.

“Give it another second.”

Mercy has had enough. “I’m not going to let them kill each other.”

Ana puts up a gloved hand. “They’re not going to.”

“Ana!”

“Look.”

Mercy glances down. Reaper clocks Jack hard across the face and sends him sprawling. The visor shatters in a spray of red.

Then he claws the white mask from his face. Ana draws back; Angela gasps.

From their perch on the high scaffolding, they can see it: the left half of his face is ashen gray, ragged with shreds of disintegrating flesh. The right side looks completely normal. Dark skin, black hair, lips curling back in a reddening grimace. Flesh and blood.

Human.

“It’s working,” Angela breathes. “He’s healing!”

“Now we move in,” Ana urges. “Get your healing stream ready.”

Down on the ground, Jack gets to his feet. He looks up; Gabriel’s left arm disperses into the air like black fog. His right shoulder sags as if slung with an invisible weight.

“Gabriel,” he grits out. “Come away. Stand down.”

Gabriel growls, lurches back, and stumbles around a rack.

Then, he breaks into a sprint.

“Wait!” Jack bellows, giving chase. Thundering down the hall as the man in black flees.
He runs through the complex until his body gives out. Bluish halogen lights illuminate the complex’s narrow corridors with a morose industrial glow. The maintenance hallway leads to a dead end; Jack is still on his trail, but there’s nowhere else to go. He crumbles to the ground. His head hangs as his chest heaves.

Inhale, exhale. Oxygen comes in, carbon dioxide goes out. His lungs, inexplicably, are functioning again.

What did she do?

Panicking, Gabriel claws at his throat with his left hand. The gloves dissipate, but his neck doesn’t. A hot burst of pain yanks his left arm back into firmament, reshaping it into a solid limb. He snarls, slams his left fist into the concrete floor, and sinks down. His arm evaporates into smoke again, but the same anomaly occurs: more pain, sudden reformation, a shudder of agony.

What the hell is going on? What did she do to him? What happened when she fired the Caduceus?

Did she… stop him?

Gabriel pushes up to his feet. He sways, stumbles, crashes back to his knees. His jaws feel so heavy; a metallic flavor coats the flat of his tongue, raw and pervasive, like the taste intravenous medication. It’s seeping up into his senses as if injected into his blood.

No, he thinks abruptly, staring at the floor. He doesn’t have blood anymore. Viscera, maybe -- an excess of abnormal tissue that he forcibly removes when it regenerates incorrectly. But then what else is staining the floor beside him in little round drops? Paint? Red ink?

He touches his lip, then his eye, then his nose. Spots of red. Gurgling, he coughs.

Then Jack is there at the opposite end of the hall.

Gabriel stands up. Jack faces him, no rifle and no visor. The hallway yawns between them, a metal stretch of electric blue.

Gabriel wipes the corner of his healed mouth and decides: fuck it. This is how it’ll go down. They’ll do this the way it used to be, before the headquarters in Geneva and the battles that followed. Before the canyon, Dorado, Siberia, Cairo -- a myriad of bad encounters and missteps along the way. A time when he bled for Jack, who bled for him, back during the years of the battlefield.

Back when they lived.

Gabriel charges down the hall. Jack stands his ground. Gabriel hits him head-on; Jack takes it, goes down with him, tenses up when they topple and Gabriel rolls out on top. He beats on Jack, punch after punch, until a red streak slashes his scarred brow.

Then his arm gives out. Gabriel lets out a ragged cry. Whatever Mercy did with the Caduceus is weakening him fast; he struggles to square up but Jack seizes the opportunity. He pushes back, hard. The shove sends Gabriel toppling onto his back, breathless. Aching through in a new and startling thrum of pain.

Jack scrapes to a stand. Gabriel scrabbles back, digs his elbows in, and looks up at the man he loved -- bloody and battered -- looming above him like an ancient blue ghost.
“God, he looks so old.

“Gabriel,” he says hoarsely.

“Jack.”

“End of the line,” says Jack. “Wail on me all you want, but it doesn’t change that fact.”

“It’s not over,” Gabriel shoots back. “It’s never going to be over. These wars don’t end, Jack. Men like us don’t die so easily, either.”

“You’re talking,” he replies. “That’s good. Mercy said the pain might be bad. Might make it hard for you to communicate.”

“Communicate.” Gabriel boots him in the shin.

Jack jumps back, stumbling, the opposite of nimble. “Enough.”

“Go to hell, Jack.”

Jack sways. He takes two steps back and wipes his nose with his sleeve. Gabriel can’t explain why he’s swallowed by a sudden, horrible thought -- a conviction that grips him through pain and fear. But he sees it all over the old soldier’s face. Jack is thinking it, too.

They’re already in hell. They’ve been there for a long time.

Gabriel drags his hand down his half-charred face. “What did you do?”

“A last shot.”

“You put her up to this.”

Jack says softly, “you know I didn’t.”

Suddenly Gabriel writhes through a fresh twist of pain. He grabs his face with both hands and groans; the ache is deep in his head and throat, emanating out of his bones.


“What I should have done a long time ago,” Jack answers, stepping forward.

Gabriel snaps back. He wants to get up, stand on his feet, and take Jack down. There’s a knife hidden in his boot; he could reach down, slip it out, get it in the femoral artery. Or maybe a flash grenade. A claw to the face might work, if Jack gets close. He tries to do a quick inventory, but his brain goes to mush.

What did she do? What is happening to him?

He doesn’t want to go out this way. No king should meet his match like this: shaking, shriveling, seething at the mercy of his maligned body. He imagined it would be explosive and awful like the Headquarters, something poetically destructive. Or maybe the opposite: coastal winds, a high and lonely precipice, the silent type of oblivion with no witnesses.

Gabriel Reyes didn’t want to die; Reaper is outside the cycle, already dead. The entity he was hours ago is not the same as what he is now, scraping and shambling on the floor of this desolate
hallway. Staring up at the man he hoped to rest beside, at peace, when all the wars were finished.

One golden day. Cornfields and sunsets. Oldies and slow dancing. Two birds on the same branch, roosting together. Growing old.

And then, Jack holds out his hand.

Gabriel feels like his chest will explode.

“No.”

Jack stands there with his right hand out -- bloody glove, open palm.

“No,” Gabriel spits. “No, no.” -- he chatters through clenched teeth -- “no, no, no! No!”

Jack says nothing.

“Fuck you!” roars Gabriel. “Fuck you, Jack, fuck you, fuck everything you did to me! You did this, Jack, you did” -- he grinds an elbow against the floor, kicks, fumes -- “you did this to me! This was all you! You left me there, you left me! You left me to die, you left Ana to die! You left us all, you left me!”

“Gabriel.”

“Fuck you! After everything you’ve done, what -- you think? You think. You really fucking think? You think this is possible? You actually think it’s possible -- Jack -- Jack!”

“Gabriel.”


“Gabriel.”

The hand swims in his line of sight. Gabriel bares his teeth, pants, struggles to breathe slower.

“No,” he growls. “No, Jack. No! Get away from me, Jack. No.”

“Gabriel.” Is that all Jack’s going to say? His name? Doesn’t he have anything better to offer in this bizarre twist of events -- some ramble, a confession, one of his limp and bureaucratic apologies? This can’t be how he won Angela back on his side, much less Ana. They’re soldiers. This is a war. This isn’t what he wants to hear some trite and unfulfilling modicum of regard for the millions of lives he and Overwatch have put at risk. Or, in his case, ended. There’s no answer for an apology beyond the grave.

He asks himself again: is that all? And then, in a fleeting pulse of weariness: is that enough?

Is it ever going to be enough?

“Get away from me,” says Gabriel. Weaker this time. “Get away.”

“Please,” Jack says.

Gabriel’s teeth set on edge. He has nothing else to say.

Without warning, Jack rips off the glove. He discards it with a flick of his wrist. Now he thrusts out
his bare hand; it’s not a pretty sight. Gabriel glowers at the fingers silhouetted ultramarine beneath the hallway lights: scarred, striped with old burns and new bruises. Purple spots under broad fingernails, blunt knuckles pimpled with red calluses.

Then he sees the lumps at the base of his forearm. There’s three of them, domed and smooth, like cysts. If his chest was hurting in a second ago, now it wants to cave in. Gabriel’s eyes dart over Jack’s shaking hand and he instantly knows: SEP. Him, too. Maybe it just took longer to manifest, but there they are. The counter-effects of pill and serum, experiment and test, years of growing old in a body conditioned not to age.

A body like his own, altered to survive, destined to fall apart.

He watches the old fingers twitch. The hand hangs there, trembling. Beyond Jack, two figures gather at the end of the hall: the women. Angela’s visage glows like a pale moon; Ana, crouched beside her, is cloaked in drab wings of gray.

They’re waiting.

He looks up at Jack. For the first time, he sees him -- really, wholly takes him in. The blonde is gone; now he’s all white, from brow to crown. His eyes are heavy-lidded, unspeakably tired. Between the fringe of his lashes, the irises are still cornflower blue.

“Gabriel,” sighs Jack in a voice heavy as lead.

Gabriel closes his eyes and swallows the taste of blood. All around him, the hallway lights hum. His name hangs on the air like a grand finish, the final murmur before the crowd goes home at the end of the night.

The last note in a sad, old song.

He stretches, reaches out, and -- clasping his talons into Jack’s palm --

Gabriel takes it.

Chapter End Notes

- This fic is fueled primarily by encouragement from CptJazzbeard, thoughiseemtame, and franklytriggering!
- At the time of posting, the story is officially completed. I'll be posting the Author's Note next shortly after this!
- Thank you very, very much for reading this far.
Author's Note

Thank you for reading Hang the Fool. This fanfic is a personal project and writing exercise that I wrote for myself, started out of a desire to get better at creative writing. It’s the result of taking on an ambitious narrative with new and changing source material while being out-of-practice with the craft by about 6-7 years.

This is my first fanfic. I’m not unfamiliar to fandom or fan followings, but I was new to the process of sharing and contributing personal fanwork. This has been a learning experience on which I reflect as I commit to future projects, both original and fanfiction. Every message and exchange that resulted from the fanfic contributed to a series of lessons from which I will benefit and grow.

A lot has changed since I started working on this piece in June, and change is good. There have been new lore developments for Overwatch. Some affected small scenes and angles of the story, though none altered the main course of the narrative. Since I started, we’ve learned more about the histories and relationships for characters like Jesse McCree, Hanzo Shimada, and several other important faces in the story. I still have plenty of personal criticisms for some of the depictions of characters and cultures in Overwatch, and I feel like writing fanopened my eyes to many more of them. But, the writers behind Overwatch announced (in an update regarding First Strike) that they were making changes to the canon story behind the game. Hearing that the creators behind the source content were adapting and shifting the story reassured me that so too can fan creators -- so should they, perhaps, in the spirit of flexibility for things like headcanon, characterization, and relatable views.

Beyond the changes in source material, my thoughts on fanwork and fandom have changed. What I used to view as a mostly personal effort is now something I understand to be much more transformative and collaborative. Fanwork, no matter its audience, doesn't happen in a vacuum. I’ve learned so much about the importance of multiple levels of beta reading, stresses that come when publishing in serialization, work constraints, content caretaking, reader perception, impact, and so much more. I’m deeply grateful for the responses to the fic, and the lengths that some of its readers have gone to help me improve not only the work but my skills and focus as a writer and a person.

I look at the fanfic as it stands and accept that I feel differently about the lore and the main ‘ship around which the story builds. And I think that’s important to to accept and encourage. HiF, to me, is a product of the time in early Overwatch fandom when it was created -- a story arc and series of dynamics that I felt like exploring at the time, but wouldn't necessarily choose to write today. Still: it is a completed exercise. Lessons learned from this will go on to influence the next project, and the next, and so on.

Hang the Fool is listed as being part of a series. I have other pieces planned for this series, but I also intend to create fanworks (both McHanzo and for other ‘ships) that are unconnected. I don’t plan to write sequels or continuations of this fic -- at most, maybe a one-shot or two for Misters Barcelo and Tsubaki -- because I think the story ends best this way. A hopeful future, with lots left for our heroes to do.

---

Thanks and Credits

The work was tough to complete when combined with a day job, home, family, and other major life responsibilities. I credit friends and fellow writers for encouraging me to push ahead.
I would like to thank franklytriggering, thoughiseemtame, captainjazzbeard, and my friend Kat for inspiring me back in April to try out fanfiction as a way to practice creative writing in my free time. Fellow fic writers Alba, AVoresmith, Deviri, Frosty, Lynn, MJ, Sassanids, Vi, Wolfie, and many others showed me boundless support and kindness while working on this project and have my gratitude. I want to extend special thanks to Winterwhite for being an enthusiastic and understanding ear (quack!) and for taking valuable time out of their day to help a fledgling writer grow a little quicker.

To my beta and sensitivity readers: thank you enormously for all your time and effort. I owe you very much for taking the time to read lengthy chapters and offer genuine critique and suggestions for amendment. You helped someone who was woefully out of touch with the impact and potential power of their own words, and you not only forgave my many errors but also had the grace to encourage me to keep writing, keep improving, and widen my awareness of not only what I write but how I think.

A lot of kind people showed me support during this project. I owe very special thanks to Natalie, Rox, Pay, Aki, Wesley, Dorien, Losebetter, Lyn, Ghost/kae, Cat, Chloe, Viv, and many many others for keeping my spirits up during slow times. To Jamie: I’ve thanked you many times, but I’ll gladly repeat it here again that you mean the world to me. To the Overfam: you have all profoundly affected my life for the better. For you, I will always keep the watch.

To everyone who contributed fanwork to Hang the Fool, you have my deepest gratitude as well as my sincere astonishment for your contribution. I remain moved by the beautiful work generated from readers of the story. I still feel like I owe you all more for what you gave me, and will continue to improve and write in honor of how much you have inspired me.

And to all who read the story: thank you. You took some time out of your day to peruse some free words generated out of a passion for something I love to do, and at which I want to get better. That, to me, is the real integral exchange that makes writing worthwhile. Writers are readers, and very often readers become writers. Taking in another person’s words is a lot to ask, but you did -- and I am very grateful.

---

Thematic and Technical References

I posted the first chapter on June 6, 2016, not too long after the game’s launch. My original goal was about 10-12 chapters, maybe 4 months of writing. It turned into 20 chapters and a little over 6 months. It was drafted in Google Docs with the use of Google Keep to create notes and outlines for each chapter.

Story Title

The title is a two-fold reference. The Southwestern colloquialism McCree uses in Chapter 7 when he’s challenging Hanzo to turn his life-debt into a choice to join Overwatch gives the story its name. This colloquialism is ‘cowboy quote’ I heard growing up in the Southwest, specifically in rural Texas -- ‘just go and hang the fool’, a way to say ‘just get it over and done with.’ The use is a throwback to McCree’s history and immersive image connections to Westerns and Wild West-related media -- for example, songs by Roger Miller and Johnny Cash, and movies like The Good, the Bad and the Ugly where the hangman’s noose (also one of his in-game sprays) is a key piece of Wild West symbolism for the fate of outlaws and vigilantes facing ‘justice.’ There is a parallel between two ‘deals’ made in the story, one that took a young McCree out of Deadlock and into
Blackwatch, and another which brought a reluctant Hanzo into Overwatch post-recall. Both involved the debt of preserving life: Reyes saving young McCree from Deadlock gallows, McCree saving Genji and Hanzo from Vishkar.

Tarot is not directly mentioned in the story, but concepts of fate, chance and related symbolism are placed throughout. In the Major Arcana, the cards of The Hanged Man and the Fool contained themes that gave me inspiration for Hanzo and McCree, respectively. The Hanged Man can be interpreted as a figure willingly stuck/suspended and unable to move, neither living nor dead, and often viewed as a card for a traitor. The Fool, conversely, is a card of freedom and journey; it depicts a wanderer traveling (perhaps haphazardly) on the cusp of discovery for life’s many lessons. The juxtaposition of these two figures (Hanzo ‘hung’ by his remorse over Genji and years of seeking redemption -- McCree the ‘fool’ living a drifter’s life, ready to bail should the journey demands he flee) tied in with the colloquialism.

**Narrative Structure and Plot Parallels**

**Perception/Perspective**

The story is viewed through two primary narrators: McCree, and Hanzo. Common themes of ‘perception’ and ‘not everything is as it seems’ come into play from the beginning of the story, felt strongest via McCree’s narrator, who is, at times, unreliable in accordance to his character. McCree, in dialogue, lies or misdirects information to his compatriots (e.g., the story of how he lost his arm). Hanzo, on the other hand, is more honest -- plagued by indecision and constantly questions his surroundings and motivations. Issues with perspective factor into various characters’ search for information or answers, but also in their interactions with one another. McCree and Hanzo get off on the wrong foot, perceiving rudeness, hostility, and insult in the other. Over time, they start to realize who the other person really is beyond first appearances, and gradually grow close.

Primary inspiration for this narrative flow of this piece were the works of Akira Kurosawa, specifically the film *Rashōmon*, which ties into the narrative’s many references to classic cinema. The Rashomon effect comes into play primarily about Reyes and the real reason for the fall of the Overwatch, but also for other characters in general (e.g., flashbacks, unreliable narration, McCree trying to figure out Hanzo, Lúcio trying to figure out Satya, Hanzo trying to figure out … well, everything).

This was a major writing challenge throughout the story, as canon information was still pretty sparse at the time I began drafting. Differing characters can possess opposing viewpoints or thoughts on certain issues and events.

**“Redemption” vs. Revelation**

Satya Vaswani’s story arc and reveal of her inherent goodness and heroism is meant to nest within the exposition of Gabriel Reyes’ fall from heroism by Talon manipulation. Tying into the theme of perception (e.g., ‘not everything is as it seems’), this is less of a ‘redemption’ arc for either character but more a revelation that they were not truly villainous in the first place -- in Satya’s case, hardly villainous at all, instead mistaken due to being a victim of association to an ethically questionable group.

I received a few messages asking for a ‘tl;dr’ of Gabriel’s “Occam’s razor” explanation in Chapter
18 about what happened with Overwatch and its fall.

- After the Omnic Crisis, Gabriel and Jack worked out an accord where they accepted the promotions and assignments given by the United Nations -- namely, Jack taking Strike Commander -- and ran the group with Gabriel still informally ‘in charge’ (as he was during the war) and running things out of the shadows of the secretive organization Blackwatch. The ‘myth’ that Reyes resented Morrison for his rank was furthered by witnesses who perceived resentment rather than a more complicated betrayal.

- Certain actions along the way set Gabriel up for later conflict. He recruited and reformed criminals into Blackwatch, namely McCree, against caution from Jack and other Overwatch members. Gabriel’s belief in second chances and ‘turning new leaves’ lead him to secure the Blackwatch archives and comm lines from other Overwatch agents to protect identities. This worked against him when Blackwatch was uncovered by the press and some of its agents’ criminal histories were revealed.

- Talon’s appearance signaled a change that Gabriel (as a lover of military history and tactics) had predicted. Direct combat was now replaced by terrorism, shadow wars, and Cold War-era conspiracy threats. Talon seemed to no overt goal besides instability, though later Reyes understood they were trying to infiltrate Overwatch and bring it down from within.

- By killing Gerard Lacroix via his brainwashed wife, Amelie, Talon sleeper agents already installed within Overwatch moved to ‘phase 2’, spreading influence into Blackwatch. They set up a system in the Blackwatch comms that exposed the agents to wide-scale subtle conditioning that would bring them all (including Gabriel) gradually into Talon control. The two triggers for the conditioning to take effect were a song (‘Dream a Little Dream of Me’) and a yellow visual.

- Since Blackwatch was contained and secured, the infiltration and changes in missions/activities (e.g., assassinations, kidnapping, torture) occurred with agents who seemed mostly complicit in these actions. Including Reyes, who (thanks to side-effects from his SEP exposure) began to snap out of the conditioning whenever his brain triggered a fight-or-flight response from shock or injury.

- McCree, whose Dead-Eye tactic learned from Amari honed his mind to execute his targets, was freed from this conditioning altogether. Unable to rectify what he saw happening between Overwatch and Blackwatch (namely Reyes) and the public, McCree fled to avoid the infighting. Gabriel was left alone to try and combat/fight the infiltration while slowly succumbing to both the conditioning and his fears and paranoia of betrayal, which led to the insurrection and explosion at the Swiss HQ.

- Jack later reveals in Chapter 19 that the UN could have been covertly funding Talon.

- The resulting story told to the UN and the public was the result of Occam’s razor: a straightforward, easy-to-follow explanation was accepted because Talon set it up for them to perceive it this way. It’s hard to say what might infuriate Reyes more: that he was so simply dismissed, or that the whole world seemed to believe it.

There is evidence throughout the fic of Gabriel’s unfortunate compromise, namely in Chapter 8 (when the trigger song plays on the radio during a nasty flashback) and in Chapter 16 when the agents are going through the Blackwatch archive and discover some of Reyes’ hidden messages to the infiltrators. The sparse mentions of him from other characters do not corroborate with McCree’s dialogue about Reyes in Chapter 13, and moreso in Chapters 14-17 as Hanzo tries to gather more information.

Also: for sake of clarification, regarding a lot of (understandable) perception from readers, through McCree’s dialogue in Chapter 7 and Chapter 13 -- there is context given now that the ‘folding chair’ incident that occurred when Reyes took McCree in from Deadlock occurs before he realizes McCree is 17 years old, and gets the information from the two Deadlock captives. There is more
context around this in Chapter 16, during Reyes' Blackwatch recruitment debrief video. The context implies that McCree might have actually been the one to get the folding chair to begin with.

A similar situation occurs in the background of the narrative with Hana and Lúcio as they gradually discover the truth about Satya’s strong moral code, good heart, and gentle disposition.

Troublesome Brothers/Found Family

The complex relationship between Genji and Hanzo is mirrored by the turbulent past between McCree and Reyes, whose mentorship and influence the former keeps close to his chest until faced with the understanding that the latter was still alive. Similar to the Shimadas, a showdown is placed within a location of relevance to this past. Hanzo’s perception of what McCree says about Reyes inspires him to do his own research into the man that was his lover’s ‘brother’; the reader can infer that he might have done so as part of his ongoing quest to heal the relationship with his own brother. Hanzo may have wondered what Genji would have said of him in the days before Overwatch fell, and if he would have had the same conflicted mix of anger, resentment, and lingering devotion.

The recurring theme of Overwatch presenting a “found family” to its ranks is explored throughout the story. A parallel can be drawn between Ana Amari’s mentorship and guidance to McCree and Hana Song’s support as Hanzo’s young friend and pupil. Neither man ever assigns the woman a specific ‘role’ in his mind (e.g., mother, sister, daughter), but instead lets her occupy a unique space.

Dreams/Surrealism

Dreams and surreal events occur and are referenced to throughout the story, especially for Hanzo’s chapters.

Characterization of Hanzo and Genji is taken from the fanfic *Hanzo: Koi no Yokan* by franklytriggering. The Shimada brothers portrayed in HtF share several character bases (e.g., family relations, connections, personality traits, experiences) and parallels with the younger Hanzo and Genji in KnY. While the two stories are intrinsically linked, certain events in KnY stand out as discrepancies against the timeline of HtF (e.g., Reyes and Jesse running into the brothers early on, Morrison meeting Hanzo and his family), and posed the question: ‘how are they in sequence?’ The author and I agreed upon a ‘dream-like’ connection between the stories where the main narratives connect even though certain events are never mentioned in HtF and aren’t considered part of its canon. In doing this, we tapped into two sources of inspiration shared for our writing: the surrealist works of author Haruki Murakami, and the film *Lost in Translation*.

Some references about the yakuza were borrowed from the (probably fictitious) recollections in Jake Adelstein’s *Tokyo Vice*.

Imagery and Stylistic Device

Westerns, Jidaigeki and Chanbara, and Popular Media

Cinema is used throughout the story to bring together elements of certain characterizations and
character dynamics. Numerous pop culture references exist throughout the story, a homage to Blizzard’s tendency to put similar references into their games (e.g., World of Warcraft).

I was drawn to the main relationship of the story because of the parallels between aesthetics of a rōnin and a Western drifter, themes that appealed to me as a fan of jidaigeki and chanbara films and several of their counterpart Westerns (e.g., Yojimbo to Leone’s Dollars series, Seven Samurai to The Magnificent Seven). I liked the potential connection based off this link between old thematic media and decided to explore it a little within the fic. This connection is interwoven into the narrative many times -- from direct film references, to Hanzo’s undercover alias (a ‘man with no name’), to the roots behind nicknames and inside-jokes (Genji’s love for ‘old’ Japanese pop culture and cinema both in HtF and KnY, namely yankii and bosozoku films) and the ‘Japanese version is always better’ (the Man with No Name vs. the original Sanjuro, The Hunger Games vs. Battle Royale). These and other references I’ve used may not be accessible to every audience, but I hoped to give at least some context that might encourage readers to look into the history of classic films and cultural connections.

Use of color, time, and setting

The color yellow is used throughout the story both figuratively and literally as a way to attract the reader’s attention to certain details or scenes. Reaper explains that Talon likely used the color yellow as their conditioning trigger out of mockery for the gold arc in the Overwatch logo. Yellow symbolizes both hope, happiness, energy -- but also alarm, caution, anxiety, deceit, and cowardice.

Juxtapositions of red and blue, day and night, sun and moon occur frequently between the two main characters as a dichotomy to highlight their differences as they grow into a more harmonic relationship. Most of McCree’s early scenes with Hanzo occur at evening/night. Hanzo’s first chapter shows a major interpersonal scene occurring in the daytime.

Scene settings are primarily taken from the main maps of the game. Several places described in the story (namely in the geography of the South, Southwestern, and Western US) were taken from author experience. Numerous locations described in the fic are places I’ve lived or visited many times.

Music

Character interactions and histories are sometimes framed with musical themes throughout the story. Songs used in the narrative were used for their lyrical and musical relevance. I Can’t Help Falling in Love was chosen primarily because of its lyrical connection to major themes in the story (e.g., ‘fools rush in’, ‘flowing rivers’, ‘wise men’, ‘take my hand’), as well as its romantic value. Dream a Little Dream of Me was originally going to be a children’s song, but was changed due to the whimsical and easily-whistled main melody. The overarching theme of Hanzo and McCree’s blooming relationship occurring within the distant ‘ballad of Jack and Gabe’ is another intentional musical reference. As the reader spun out their love story, they had to also see the remains of Jack and Gabe’s.

Lúcio’s creation of a song for Satya is symbolic of peace made between them after her sacrifice in Chapter 15.
Language

The use of language, turn of phrase, colloquialism and idiom, pun, and play-on-words recurs throughout the story. Several characters in the story speak multiple languages beyond the context we're given in canon (e.g., Mei speaks Chinese, English, and Japanese; Hanzo speaks English, Japanese, and Korean; Reyes is a polyglot). Given that Overwatch is touted by its creators as “a game about Earth,” I factored in a few of my own experiences with language and living in diverse neighborhoods and areas. I am Hispanic and Chicana with parents who were first-generation Americans, part of families that immigrated from Mexico and Guatemala. I made the decision to give McCree some Latino/Chicano heritage based off his roots/bases of operations in New Mexico and inferences in Train Hopper that depict him as Hispanic. This gave him a shared tongue with Reyes, who is later revealed to speak many different languages. While I’m far from fluent in Japanese, I've lived and worked in a predominantly Japanese neighborhood and office for over half a decade. McCree’s early use of suffixes towards the Shimadas may seem casual to some readers; Genji admits in Chapter 12 that he taught McCree proper Japanese address. There is also a personal nod in this towards a neighbor and friend of mine.

Colloquialisms and cultural differences/similarities are a recurring theme in the story; Hanzo keeps a running list of McCree’s ‘Southernisms,’ and his chapters begin with a saying/parable in his native language.

Food

Like movies and pop culture, food and is used throughout the story to illustrate the ‘slice of life’ components of the story, as well as give a method to bring the Overwatch team together (e.g., the communal meals at the Watchpoint). Character food preferences also tell more about them than they might offer (e.g., McCree’s affinity for junk food eventually revealed as something he probably picked up from Reyes). Mentions of Turkish/boiled coffee, hōjicha tea, Moon Pies, and other distinctive foods are taken from other personal nods and real-life experiences of mine.

Miscellaneous

Deleted/Removed Scenes

Some contextual scenes involving secondary characters in the story were removed or edited to cut down on length, and may be published at a later date.

- There were originally 2 more scenes between Lúcio and Satya in which they explored their similarities as young people who grew up in areas affected by poverty. The scenes occurred over the ‘medium’ through which they began to interact: the stray cats at the Watchpoint.
- Two flashbacks for McCree enjoying his early 20s during trips with Overwatch (it’s referenced in Chapter 6 when Tracer recalls how he, Gabriel, and the team bonded during an Overwatch holiday/vacation in New Orleans). A reference to tarot cards was going to be included in these scenes.
- An interview with Atlas News between Tracer, Lúcio, and Hana on their King’s Row mission, highlighting the “new faces” of Overwatch, originally kicked off Chapter 14.
- Transcripts of conversations between Satya and Sanjay Koppal were included at the beginning of Chapters 9 and 15. The first transcript describes a Satya who is very uncomfortable with her position at the Watchpoint and dislikes the ‘criminals’ that she is forced to work with. The second shows a very different Satya, changed by her time with
Athena and the heroes, purposefully delaying Sanjay’s goals to de-stabilize Athena and leave Overwatch exposed.

- An exchange between Mercy and Zenyatta in which the latter consoles and guides the former on her determination to fix mistakes made in resurrecting Reyes. It was going to be strongly hinted that Mercy has eschewed romantic relationships for decades out of dedication to her job and had reached a point where she was content without them.
- Chapter 11 and 15 had scenes of Lúcio training under Reinhardt and seeing the difference between the knight after learning that Jack and Gabriel were still alive.
- Bastion originally appeared later in the story. I think it's much better that he's off in the woods.
- There was a scene in Chapter 12 in which McCree explained some more about Jack to Hanzo, namely why he suspects Jack was a fan of certain poetry (Dylan Thomas). It led into a discussion about poetry in which McCree talked about some of his own favorites, and Hanzo some of his. It was a good scene, and it gave more context to how McCree felt about Jack and his leadership, but it was ultimately scrapped because it felt a little out-of-tune with the way the chapter was going.

There are a few nods in the story to ancillary/background characters belonging to certain media, or to old friends and RP pals throughout the years.

- "Rooster" is a mohawked character concept that belonged to my RP buddy Andrew, who also lent inspiration for the characters Apexus and Atraxus, who are members of the Vishkar Corporation.
- "Sara", Jesse's mother, is named after the protagonist in the Western film Two Mules for Sister Sara.
- "Miranda," the Overwatch heroine and archer described in Chapter 14, is a nod to my best friend Melpomeni and her various RP characters, namely one who was an archer.

A Last Personal Note

Many creative people create personal works to cope as well as express, whether they realize it or not. As an author, fan, and general internet denizen, I do not endorse or support the pervasive fandom pressure on fan-creators to ‘produce credentials’ of their experiences with certain facets of life and function that are commonly explored in fan work. However, I am comfortable enough with the finished piece to understand and accept where my own experiences -- especially more intimate ones, such as struggles with anxiety disorder, PTSD, PTSA and related triggers, chronic pain conditions, and trauma survival -- are woven in the work.

A common struggle for me as a writer is the ability to ‘write what I know’ and draw off personal experience while also creating a narrative to which an audience can connect and relate, while also considering how the reader will interpret what is written. My experiences are my own individual and personal burden; their presence in the narrative, even unconsciously, was not done to hurt, discredit or invalidate the experiences of others.

Reference Links

Films and Media
- Sergio Leone's Dollars trilogy
- High Noon
- The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly
- The Man with No Name (Blondie)
- Two Mules for Sister Sara
- Jidaigeki and Chanbara
- Rashomon
- Yojimbo (film)
- Sanjuro (film)
- Haruki Murakami: Kafka on the Shore
- Lost in Translation (film)
- Tokyo Vice
- Battle Royale (film)
- Tetsuo: The Iron Man (film) (mentioned by Genji in KnY)
- Bosozoku

Music

- Ennio Morricone: "The Ecstasy of Gold"
- Johnny Cash: “Ring of Fire” and “I Hung My Head”
- “Mama” Cass Elliot: “Dream a Little Dream of Me”
- Elvis Presley: “Can’t Help Falling In Love With You”
- Rush: “Tom Sawyer”
- Marty Robbins: “The Strawberry Roan”
- Roger Miller: “Dang Me”

Other Inspirations

- Stephen King's The Dark Tower
- LOST (TV)
- McCree's 'hangman's noose' spray
- "The Hanged Man" (tarot)
- "The Fool" (tarot)
- Occam's razor

(note: 12/13 - to be added upon; as I post this I am rather ill w/ a head cold and I know there's more I need to add here later)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!