### Beyond Good and Evil

**by** Zelda4dinner

**Summary**

A re-imagining of the events of MGSV the Phantom Pain; A Kojima Production 2015. Basically I was angry after finishing the game and said something like "I could write a better story" so here we are.

**Notes**

So my goal for this is to try to tie up some loose plot threads left by Kojima, and also better incorporate MGSV into the larger MGS canon. since this is a retelling some of the dialogue is lifted from the game, but I've attempted to keep it fresh and reword what I can.
“And as like must always proceed from like, so it will come as no surprise to learn that it is from these very same circles that attempts to sanctify revenge under the name Justice emanate just as they have so often in the past- as if justice were at bottom merely an extension of the feeling of injury- and with revenge to bring all the reactive feelings retroactively to a position of honour.”

- Friedrich Nietzsche

Chapter One: Revenge

Big Boss stood on the deck of the Command Platform staring out at the sunset over the sea; the water lapped at the sky like fire, early stars of twilight beginning to shine above the horizon. He thought back to the old Mother Base in the Caribbean, felt the cool breeze of the Seychelles waters on his face. He never stopped to take the time to enjoy things like this back then. Even after things had quieted down following the Peace Walker incident, he had always kept himself busy away from base- recruiting more soldiers to his cause, personally testing new field equipment. Kaz would always remind him that field testing was R&D’s job, that the boss didn’t need to micro manage everything. Of course not, that was his job. Snake smiled. The truth was, he always trusted Kaz to have all the facts straight, to have every little detail of a mission worked out. Even when the two of them would spend hours arguing over the best route or what checkpoints to watch out for, Big Boss always trusted Kaz to have his back. Now, nine years later, he was about to take command of a unit that was formed without him, had awoken to a world that had passed by without him. How much had Kaz changed in those nine years? Snake wondered if Kaz, too, had been frozen in time. For both of them, part of them had remained on that chopper over the Caribbean in 1975. Only now that they were together again would the inexorable march of time resume.

Snake lit up his phantom cigar and took a long drag. The smoke was remarkably pleasant, much softer than the tobacco he was used to. Ocelot had given it to him, explaining that the electronic cigar burned an herb called Wormwood, producing muscle relaxing and calming effects that would be useful against fatigue and stress. Snake found the wormwood left him very clear minded and strongly enhanced his ability to focus. Physically, it left him feeling very light with a strange sort of floating sensation through his limbs.

He drifted back to attention when he heard a voice calling his name. He was still getting used to hearing the voices of his old friends, side effects from the coma he assumed. He turned to face Ocelot, who stretched out his hand to give him something. Snake took it in his palm and looked down, turning the object over. It was a cassette tape. “Boss I’ve kept this safe until now, but I think you should have it. I don’t want Miller to get the wrong idea. I’ll leave it up to you what to do with it.”

Ocelot motioned towards Snake bidding him farewell, and departed for his quarters. It was getting dark and Snake figured he should get some sleep too, but first he wanted to hear what was on that tape. He adjusted his ear piece, and pressed PLAY on the tape player.

He could hear the angry voices of Russians, no doubt the men who had interrogated Kaz. There were sounds of a struggle, then the dry raspy voice of his XO. “Fuck you, you’re getting nothing out of me.” The men retaliated in kind for Kaz’s smart mouth, and Snake thought back to the rescue in Da Ghwandai Khar. At the time, he was so concerned with getting Kaz out of the hot zone he didn’t have time to consider the lives of the men stationed there. He hadn’t thought about whether or not any of them were responsible for Kaz’s condition. Would he have killed them if he had known? Kaz laughed sardonically. “Just you wait. I’m getting the hell out of here. The Boss is going to come for me, and when he does, I’m coming back for you.” Snake heard the sound of a door opening, recognized the sounds of heavy footsteps punctuated by sharp spurs. One of the Russians practically gasped “Shalashaska!” He frowned. Shalashaska? They mean Ocelot? He’d
have to ask Ocelot about that nickname later. Ocelot replied in a brusk tone, but Snake couldn’t understand his Russian. Ocelot must have ordered the soldiers to leave him to his work, as Snake could hear the sounds of them departing.

Ocelot clapped his hands in mock praise. “Well, well, that was some stunt you pulled Miller.” Snake heard the sound of a wooden chair squeak as Kaz strained against it, looking up at the GRU Major. “Ocelot? So you must be head of interrogations?” Snake could tell Kaz was damning Ocelot with praise, but for all that there was a hint of amusement in his reply. “Something like that.” Ocelot’s tone became more severe. “But what the hell were you thinking getting involved like that? You think the Soviets wouldn’t take an American training mujahideen to be CIA? Not to mention Cipher. They probably saw the whole thing.”

“That was the whole point, to keep their eyes on me,” Kaz struggled with his words. “He’s back. The Boss is back.” Ocelot seemed shocked. “He woke up?”

“That’s right. I got the call a little over a week ago. Had to put this thing together fast. I figured I’d create a diversion, get Cipher’s attention and give the boss a chance to slip away. I had some of Diamond Dogs very best with me, vets from nine years ago. But… we were attacked.”

“By who?”

“Don’t know. They had tech like nothing I’ve ever seen. They came out of nowhere and before we knew it half our unit was wiped out.”

“You think they were Cipher?”

“Could be. If it was, it won’t take long for them to figure out that Snake’s alive. Ocelot, I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I need your help. You have to get Snake out of there. Rescue the Boss. Bring him home.” Kaz paused, then added almost as an afterthought “And try not to forget about me while you’re at it.”

Ocelot’s tone was heavy with worry. “If it’s already been a week then we need to move fast. Miller, if the 40th army brought me in, they’re expecting results. You know what I have to do before I can leave.” Kaz replied “Do what you have to. Just promise me that you’ll get Snake.” Ocelot sighed, whether in relief or irritation Snake couldn’t tell. “You have my word. Believe it or not, but I won’t enjoy this. You’ve got two options.” Snake could hear Ocelot wheeling out some kind of heavy machine. When he heard the sound of the device come alive, his blood ran cold.

“This is called a picana. Introduced by the Argentinian police chief Polo Lugones, son of the famous poet and novelist Leopoldo Lugones.” Snake could hear the sound of Ocelot’s footsteps as he approached Kaz, the device steadily humming as it worked up its charge. “It looks like an ordinary cattle prod, but it’s so much more. The shocks it delivers are high voltage and low current. The high voltage makes the shocks powerful, but the low current means they’re less likely to kill the victim.”

Kaz shifted uncomfortably, no doubt trying to maintain his sense of composure. “You said I had two options.” Ocelot put down his current instrument and reached for something subtler. Kaz asked “What’s that, sodium pentothal?” Ocelot chuckled. “Worse. Its codename is SP-117. It has no smell, no taste, and most importantly, you’ll have no recollection of our little ‘heart-to-heart.’ Tough as you are, I doubt you’ve undergone the kind of training I have to resist this sort of thing. So, either I give this to you and you tell me things I might not want to hear, or, I have to resort to more… physical means of persuasion.” Snake could imagine Kaz puffing up with pride. “Fine by me. I’m ready.”

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It was after midnight as Snake stood outside the door to the room they were using as a medical bay. As soon as Kaz was back to full strength, he’d have to work on requisitioning the resources and personnel to construct a proper medical platform. In the meantime, it would be Snake’s job to recruit those personnel. Cautiously he entered the dimly lit room, greeted by the sounds of the medical equipment. He found Kaz asleep, and decided to let him rest turning to leave. “B-Boss?” Snake turned to see Kaz, the soft overheard lights casting deep shadows across his haggard face.
Nine long years and the weeks spent tortured by the Red’s 40th army had taken their toll on a visage Snake remembered as cheerful and vibrant. “You’re really here Boss? It’s really you this time?” Snake approached the bed. “Yeah Kaz. I’m here.” Kaz smiled, and for a fleeting moment resembled the man the boss remembered. “Soon as I get out this bed, I’ll give you the grand tour. Believe it or not, the new Mother Base started out as a test drilling rig operated by a mineral resources supplier. When the Seychelles government handed the place over to us— it was just scrap on stilts. Would’ve been dirt cheap if it hadn’t been free. Now that you’re back, we’ll really turn this place into our new Mother Base.”

“Kaz, you…I see what you’re doing. Recreating the Mother Base we had nine years ago. Kaz…” Snake was cut off, “That’s right, the Mother Base Cipher thought they destroyed will return from the grave to kill them. We’ll prove to the world that we were the victors.”

“I’ll… We’ll never lose again… The Japanese will never lose again. We’ll do… Whatever it takes!”

“But, why put Mother Base all the way out here in the Seychelles?” Kaz sat up, adjusting the numerous tubes and wires he was hooked up to. “We’re at the center of the world here.” Snake frowned. “We’re all the way out in the Indian Ocean.” Kaz smirked. “You’re not seeing the bigger picture. Come on— Lebanon, Sri Lanka, East Timor— and of course, Africa. From here, our reach extends to conflict zones the world over. We can go where we’re needed.” Snake tilted his head back. “So in other words, it’s prime real estate for mercenaries?” Kaz nodded “Exactly! Latin America isn’t as close as I’d like, but we have Amanda to help in that department. Besides, the way I see it the Seychelles government owes us a favor.” Snake raised an eyebrow. “Owes us?” “Yeah. The Seychelles has strong ties to the East, which the West wanted to shake up. It came to a head three years ago in an attempted coup led by some South African mercenaries. They were too much for the Seychelles military to handle, so they hired us for on-site tactical instruction. We put down a mutiny within the ranks, and made a lot of people happy. They didn’t pay us, but they let us have a piece of their offshore territory on the promise we’ll come running if the shit hits the fan.” This all seemed a little too familiar to Snake, thinking back to Costa Rica. “So we’re body guards too?” It was Kaz’s turn to frown. “It’s a good setup. We can only take Mother Base so far here. Eventually we’ll have to expand, look somewhere else to plant our roots.” “Aren’t you being a little hasty?” Snake was beginning to recall just how ambitious, and impetuous, Kaz could be when it came to making deals. “Nothing hasty about it- you’re back with us now.”

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In a few days Kaz was up and about, although the medical staff agreed he should have spent at least a week for R&R. But that wasn’t the kind of man Kazuhira Miller was. He insisted that after the demoralizing events at the zero line the men needed to be reassured that Diamond Dogs was just as strong as ever. That, and Kaz wasn’t entirely comfortable with how much time Ocelot was spending around Mother Base. The first time he and Ocelot had met in person was during the Rhodesian Civil War, and over the years Ocelot had dropped in from time to time, keeping Kaz updated on his boss’s condition. Although the two didn’t particularly care for one another, they formed an uneasy alliance over their mutual respect and loyalty to Big Boss. Now, with Big Boss back, Kaz felt Ocelot was quickly wearing out his welcome.

Kaz had called Snake to the Command Center saying they had received a job that was top priority. As Snake entered the room he could see Kaz leaning on his new crutch for support, pouring over maps and charts chaotically spread out on the conference table. Kaz looked up briefly to acknowledge his boss’s presence, then went back to his studying with a fierce intensity that made Snake smile. He was reminded that seeing Kaz in his element was a sight to behold; the man was a whirlwind of ideas and plans that he largely worked out for himself, talking excitedly as he did so,
arriving at his own satisfied conclusion before asking for his boss’s input. Snake remembered their disagreements were heated at times, even becoming physical; but both men mutually respected one another’s opinion and a compromise was always reached. Whatever it was Kaz had called him here for, he had already made up his mind and was merely waiting for Snake’s approval.

“Boss, I’ve got a job for you. Farming villages in Southern Wakhan have been subject to a strategic bombing campaign these past several weeks and the damage is spreading. The operation is part of the Soviet’s scorched earth campaign aimed at driving out the guerillas.”

“That’s right Boss.” Kaz frowned over his sunglasses at the figure of Ocelot, standing in the doorway with his arms crossed. With the grace and arrogance of a cat he sauntered over to stand by Big Boss’s side. “No one invited you Ocelot,” Kaz said tersely. Ocelot ignored him and continued “Soviet strategy has fundamentally changed since the beginning of the war. After the failure of the Afghan army to quell the growing Muslim insurgency, the Soviets have turned to airpower as a means of punishing the local populace.” Kaz hobbled over to Snake, and handed him a clipboard of intel reports. Attached was a single photo of a Spetsnaz unit, and in the center was circled the target. Kaz turned to face the boss. “This time the target is a commander of a Spetsnaz detachment who’s been key to the operation’s success. Rumor has it this guy’s the one responsible for wiping out the Mujahideen at Da Smasei Laman- the Hamid fighters- overnight.” Snake’s attention returned to the photograph, and was drawn to the figure of a man slightly older than the target, of proud bearing, with a conspicuous moustache. The target was not the one in command of the unit in this photograph, or if he was, he was at least outranked by this individual standing beside him.

“Who’s this?” Snake asked, turning to Ocelot. Ocelot inched slightly closer to Snake, much to Kaz’s annoyance. He pointed at the figure in the picture. “Boss, I know this man. He’s Colonel Sergei Gurlukovich of the GRU. Gurlukovich is head of Spetsnaz operations here in Afghanistan. He’s a tough and experienced commander. Don’t underestimate him.”

Snake took out his iDroid and scanned the documents, including the photo, before turning to Kaz. “What’s the contract?” Behind his dark frames Kaz shot Ocelot a glance before turning to the boss. “The contract from our client in the West is to shoot on sight. They want him out of the picture- for good. Sorry Boss. This one is purely wet work- a hired hit. Shame really. I’m sure we could put his talents to good use here” Ocelot leaned in towards Snake, “Boss we could eliminate him. Then again, he could be a valuable source of information. I’ve heard talk among the GRU that the Kremlin is preparing for something big. Whatever it is, it could turn the tide of this war, and this man just might know something.”

18:00 outskirts of Da Shago Kallai

The air was still, and Snake pulled his shemagh closer around his neck and face to keep out the chill of the Afghan night. The days could be scorching hot, but between day and night there could be a drastic difference in temperature. Taking out his Int-Scope, Snake peered out across the dunes at the faint lights of Shago Village in the distance. The villagers had long since fled and the village was now a recon station completely under Soviet control. He could see several guard towers with search lights, a truck, and a few soldiers on routine patrol. Ocelot had picked up a tip that the Spetsnaz commander had met with the local Wahk Sind platoon commander, but would be departing in the morning. Big Boss knew he couldn’t let that happen.

As he scanned the village mentally planning the best infiltration method, he paused at the window of one of the mud buildings. Zooming in while checking his iDroid for the target’s profile, Snake confirmed that the man he saw framed within the window was the commander. He radioed Kaz “I’ve located the target. He’s dressed as an ordinary soldier, but he’s still wearing the red beret.” Kaz let out a sigh. “We got lucky, but we’ll need better intel next time. I’ll get to work on it.”

Snake marked the distance at 100 meters, rechecked his surroundings and then took off in the direction of the target. For having only been awake from a nine year coma for a little over a month,
he felt that he was already back to full health, the cool night air filling his lungs as he ran. At times he felt like a stranger in his own body, but tonight he delighted in the feeling of his muscles straining, the raw power contained within each coiled limb released with every step. His body was a war machine fine-tuned by a life spent on the battlefield.

“I was made to fight. I... am a gun.”

Approaching the building where the target had been spotted, Snake slowed his pace and crouched down into his sneaking stance. Silently, he crept through the darkness avoiding the soft glow of lights. When he reached his destination, he pressed his back flat across the building and thought of his next move. He hadn’t seen whether anyone else was with the target, and without that knowledge clearing the building could prove a fatal mistake. With his Mk. 22 in one hand, Snake reached for an empty magazine clip. If it was too dangerous to get to the target, he'd have to lure the target out to him. Snake threw the magazine at the window and it ricocheted off the building with a loud, satisfying clatter. He could hear an exclamation of surprise, and the shuffle of boots on the ground.

Spotting a cluster of oil barrels Snake dove behind them for cover. Taking a crouched position, he brought his arms up to chest level, elbows slightly outstretched, fingering the trigger of his Hush Puppy. He waited. Soon, he could make out the figures of three armed men circling the building towards his position. They fanned out in opposite directions, and it was his good fortune that the one wearing the red beret happened to be approaching him. He dropped to a fully prone position, disappearing into the shadows. Keeping his eye on the other two, Snake tracked the position of the target. He passed with Snake completely unseen, and the boss waited until the target was several feet from him. Now was the time. Snake rose from his supine position and crept towards the target in one fluid motion, setting a strident pace while keeping his footfalls entirely masked. He grabbed the target from behind and put him in a full chokehold. Unable to cry out for help or even gasp for air, the man dropped his gun before reaching for his scout knife. Snake summoned all his core strength to hoist the man off the ground, letting gravity do the work for him and feeling the man’s weight sink down through his spine and into his feet. In a few seconds the man was unconscious.

Too close to a watchtower to risk a Fulton extraction, he decided his best course of action was to carry the target to an extraction point and wait for Pequod. Hoisting the prisoner over his soldiers, Big Boss took out his iDroid and called for Pequod to arrive at the nearest extraction point. As he headed into the black Afghan night, he called Kaz

“Target secured. En route to the exfiltration point.” There was a pause on the other end of the radio; a frustrated exhalation.

“I said it would be a waste to kill him, but knocking him out doesn’t count as eliminating him.”

“I’m sure you’ll think of something. I want to hear what he has to say.” Another pause, Snake could imagine Kaz pinching the bridge of his nose.

“I’ll tell our client we sent him to a place ‘outside of heaven.’” Kaz sighed in resignation. Snake smirked and clicked off the transmission, his new recruit bearing down on his shoulders.

When they reached the exfiltration point Big Boss bound the targets hands behind his back. It had been about five or ten minutes and he should be waking up soon. As he waited for the chopper to arrive he could hear the prisoner coming to, mumbling to himself. When he realized he had no idea where he was or what happened, panic set in. Before he could make too much noise, Big Boss stepped forward and pointed his gun directly between the man’s eyes. “You’ve got two choices,” Snake told him. Despite not understanding what Snake said, the man composed himself and remained calm. Lesser soldiers would have let themselves be overcome by the fear, either begging to be spared or lashing out in anger. This man was a true soldier, and Big Boss knew he had made the right choice.
Coercion was proving unnecessary. Although the prisoner had been shocked to see Ocelot, the two of them had a very long and intense discussion. It was almost sunrise by the time Ocelot emerged from the Interrogation Room.

Kaz was the first to step forward. “So, what’d he say?”

“He admitted they burned a bunch of the villages, but he denied any involvement in the deaths of the Hamids. He even said he gave his men explicit orders not to kill any civilians.” Ocelot said with a shrug.

Kaz made a snide noise. “Yeah right. If this guy is such a saint, what was he doing meeting with the local platoon commander?”

Ocelot smirked, “He did say something I think we should look into. He claimed this area is controlled by an unknown group, apparently working alongside the Soviets. He said there was something hidden out there in the desert.”

As Ocelot made to leave, Kaz brought his cane down; not hard, but enough to signal that he wasn’t finished with this conversation. “That’s it?”

Ocelot turned, a hint of annoyance in his voice. “That’s it. My recommendation is that we first get a Russian interpreter. If I’m to keep my cover within the GRU intact, I can’t be here all the time. Once we have an interpreter on the Intel team, you won’t need me around as much.”

Snake could tell Ocelot was throwing Kaz a bone, but wondered if there wasn’t some other reason for this uncharacteristic generosity.

“Second, we should hit the Communications Outpost to the east of Da Wialo Kallai. We might be able to intercept some chatter, and if we destroy the transmitter and comms equipment it will cripple the Soviet’s ability to mobilize and coordinate in response to a threat. I’m sure our friends, the Mujahideen, would appreciate the help.” With that, Ocelot left.

“Good riddance.” Kaz muttered.

“Kaz” Snake rebuffed sharply. The two men stepped outside into the early morning light, the first rays of the sun playing off Miller’s sunglasses.

“We don’t need him. He said so himself. I know you two have history together, but so do we.” Kaz pivoted on his crutch to turn and face his boss, momentarily stumbling before catching himself. He was still getting used to this. “Ocelot didn’t build this, and these aren’t his men.”

Snake glanced sideways at Kaz. “You’re right. You did.” Kaz stepped forward right into Snake’s space, his face firm with intensity.

“We built this. Both of us. This place- this pain- is ours. You were sleeping, but thinking of you was what kept me going. I always knew this day would come, and I’m not going to let that stuck-up Mail-Order cowboy get in my way.”

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**Truth Tape I- Project Deception**

(A telephone rings three times)

[Click]

“It’s me. I’ve got bad news.”

“They found out?”

“Worse than that I’m afraid. Your friend Miller planned a little divergence to take the heat off you in Cyprus. He was training Mujahideen at the zero line, but they were attacked. By Cipher.”

“Of all the stupid… I don’t need a heroic rescue I need an X.O. who’s alive. How is he?”

“He’s been better. I tried to avoid the rough stuff. He won’t talk.”

“I know.”

“But Boss that has to mean that Cipher knows you survived. If they went after Miller in
Afghanistan then someone, besides Zero, must be pulling the strings."
“Not likely. Zero made damn sure that only two people in the world knew your location- EVA and myself. Still, I wouldn’t take any chances. I’ll be headed to Cyprus as soon as I can to move you. We’ll have to wake up your ‘neighbor’ as well.”
“So he’s not… He seems awake now.”
“He’s spent the last nine years in an artificially induced coma. Unlike you, his comatose state allowed us to put him into an advanced state of hypnagogia. He’s been implanted with your memories, and he’s experienced all of your missions on record.”
“You make it sound easy.”
“We’ll have to move ahead of schedule. He won’t be ready, so if I can’t make it to Cyprus in time, you’ll have to put him through his final paces.”
“Good. I want to see his face again.”
“One more thing. It’s about Miller. Should I tell him?”
(a long silence)
“No. At least, not yet. I need to know I can trust him on this. I need to know where his loyalty lies.”
[Click]
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Part Two of Chapter One: Revenge. Venom has had his first run in with Skull Face at Da Smasei Laman, and has just rescued Huey. Kaz did some shady shit and now they're mad at each other, prompting Ocelot to return from the GRU.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Let’s go over what we know.” Kaz sat back in his chair rubbing his temples and lifting up a stack of papers. Ocelot folded his arms and cocked an eyebrow before shooting a glance at Venom Snake. The three of them were reviewing reports from the Intel and R&D teams concerning the last several month’s events, and ever since what happened at Da Smasei Laman, both teams had been working overtime. Kaz looked uneasily over at Snake who sat staring into his cup of coffee, expressionless and silent. It had been weeks since they spoke to one another besides idle chit chat or official business, and the tension between them was beginning to wear Kaz down. They had fought, sure, and he really expected Snake to understand, to back him up. The Boss had always been forgiving in the past, expecting people to learn from their mistakes. That was one of the wonderful things about the man. He never looked at you with a condescending stare or judgment in his eyes, he simply held you to a higher standard and if you didn’t live up to those expectations he had no use for you. This time, he wouldn’t look at Kaz at all, not even with disapproval. He wouldn’t make the judgement call, like he’d rather forget the whole thing than deal with the truth. Some part of Kaz knew he had screwed up, took things too far, but now he was almost glad that he did. When Snake had called Ocelot back, it felt like a stab of betrayal.

“The R&D team finished analyzing that weapon we recovered from Smasei Fort.” Snake continued to stare idly at his mug. “And?” The Boss asked without so much as looking in Kaz’s direction. Kaz shifted uncomfortably. His pride was hurt, but he didn’t dare show something like that in front of Ocelot. The truth is, he would’ve loved nothing more than to have it out with the Boss, maybe get one good blow in before he lost his balance. Would Snake even retaliate anymore, or would he simply dodge and brush off Kaz’s attack out of pity? Would Ocelot even consider his assault a big enough threat to his Boss that he would intervene? The thought of the two men treating him like a mere invalid caused his stomach to knot with rage.

“The bipedal technology is the same as Metal Gear. You saw them at the Soviet Main Base Camp. They must be bringing these in to drive the war to a close. With that kind of mobility, they could traverse any kind of terrain and hit the Mujahideen where they live. No wonder they were so desperate to steal it.” Kaz paused, trying to get a sense for where the conversation was going. He couldn’t get a reaction out of either men, and he was growing increasingly frustrated. If there was anything he and the Boss could come together about, it was the man they had recently placed into their “protective custody”. “We know who built this for the Soviets. Emmerich. Nine years ago, that bastard planned it all. He left all of us to die out in the ocean when he made good his escape. I think we have a lot of catching up to do with the good doctor.” Snake smirked, the first time in weeks he had shown Kaz anything but indifference. “Well we can’t just invite him in for a little chat, sort this all out over a couple of beers can we?”
Ocelot took a loud sip of his coffee before turning to face Snake. Just another one of the many things Kaz hated about the man. “Which brings us to why I’m here. Boss, I’ll be questioning Emmerich. A pencil pusher like him can’t be too tough. I don’t expect this to be a very long conversation.” Kaz frowned. “Boss we don’t need him. Let me talk to Emmerich.” Ocelot raised his eyebrow in amusement while Snake simply sighed. “Kaz we can’t risk going overboard with a guy like Huey. Right now he’s our best link to Cipher and we need him alive.” The screech of Kaz’s chair across the metal floor, punctuated by him angrily slamming his fist onto the table, startled Snake. “Goddamnit listen to me! Why won’t you just back me up on this? I’ve waited nine long years for this day, and now I can finally get the answers I need out of that prick. You’re going to take that away from me? You’re going to let him do it?”

Ocelot cleared his throat. “Miller, try to see this from the Boss’s perspective. You’re not thinking objectively about this, you’re too close. It’s too personal for you.” Kaz sneered. “That’s rich coming from you. You just like to get your sick kicks, nothing personal. You’re just a sadist. It’s like a sport to you, isn’t it? Not something as honorable or as impersonal as avenging the deaths of your comrades.” Snake motioned for Kaz to sit down, but Ocelot spoke over his gesture “Interrogation isn’t about petty revenge. It’s about getting results, and a detainee who is alive stands a better chance of talking than a dead man. An inexperienced interrogator is both dangerous and useless.”

Here, Ocelot had touched a nerve. Kaz pushed himself out of his chair, pivoting his weight on his crutch as he strode over to his nemesis, peering down at Ocelot from over the top of his aviators. “If you have something you’d like to say to me, why don’t you just say it instead of trying to show off in front of the Boss?” Ocelot rolled his eyes before standing to meet Kaz face to face. “I’ve seen what you’ve been up to. The Boss told me everything. You currently have 14 detainees on Mother Base. One of them recently deceased. Prolonged stress positions, sleep deprivation, simulated drowning. Not bad, for an amateur. You left that man naked and chained to the floor where he died of hypothermia on your watch.” Kaz looked away in anger. He knew he couldn’t contradict Ocelot about this, but he was too stubborn to admit when he’d been wrong. “Like I said, there’s no room for personal feelings in the interrogation room. It’s not about settling a score or trying to prove anything. It’s about instilling a sense of learned helplessness in a detainee. It’s about undermining a person’s sense of stability and consistency in personality, character, and morality. I suggest you look into the Stanford Prison Experiment and the Milgram Experiment, it’s all been well documented.” Kaz snickered. “What are you some kind of shrink?” Ocelot puffed up with pride “I have a doctorate in psychological studies, yes.” Kaz scoffed “Are you kidding me-” he was cut off by Snake “Kaz that’s enough. You’ll both be in the interrogation room with Emmerich. That’s final. Now, can we move on?”

Kaz begrudgingly took his seat. He couldn’t believe that Snake was brushing him off like that. They hadn’t spoken in weeks and now that the two of them were together again, that’s all he had to say? Ocelot slowly paced around the desk. “Boss, I have to tell you this is the first I’ve heard of the Kremlin in possession of a Metal Gear. It’s true, the KGB do have knowledge of some of the U.S. most top secret research projects. You can thank your ‘freedom of the press’ for that.” Ocelot chuckled “But the truth is that the Soviet economy is headed for a collapse, and there’s no way they could afford to finance a project like this. They must have one hell of a backer.”

Kaz pulled out several aerial photographs from among his sheaf of papers and tossed them into the middle of the table. “Which brings us to this new Metal Gear our ‘guest’ has built for the Soviets. We all know Metal Gear has one purpose- to launch nukes. We also know this wannabe Lone Ranger was there at Smasei Fort when Metal Gear appeared, and later at the Soviet Base Camp. Boss this guy has to be working with Cipher, and Cipher must be the ones funding the Soviet weapons program. The question is- why would Cipher be selling nuclear weapons technology to the Soviets?” Snake reached for the photograph of the man in the duster. As he stared at that
ghoulish face he thought back to their first encounter at Da Smasei Laman. He couldn’t recall ever meeting the man before, but something about his voice made Snake’s blood run cold.

“You look well rested, Big Boss. My, my, how you’ve changed. You’ve seen the fires of hell, and you too have returned to this world for revenge.” As the figure came face to face with Snake, he recoiled in shock and disgust before choking out “Who the hell are you?” The man in black replied “I’m like you, I have no name. No past, no hope for a future. I’m the man from whom you stole everything.” The man smirked. “I’m sure you’ll see the bigger picture, eventually. If you get out of here alive.” Snake struggled, but he couldn’t move. Something was holding him in an iron grip. The figure began walking away before turning back to cast Snake a glance “Rest in peace this time. I’ll see you in hell, ‘Boss’.”

He remembered a feeling of dread when he was face to face with this man; this stranger who seemed to know him. He was losing his resolve, losing himself into those deep and sunken eyes that pierced through him with such intensity. He could see Hell in those eyes, and his mind returned to that night in the Caribbean, when his whole world came burning down around him. Somewhere, in the back of his mind, something was eating away at him like a parasite.

“It will all be over soon, exactly as I’ve planned.”

Snake’s hand trembled slightly as he held the picture, the color drained from his face. Why couldn’t he remember? Kaz peered over his glasses at his boss worriedly.

“Boss?”

He could remember being pulled into the chopper by Kaz. He looked around to see the faces of the survivors, ashed and pale. They, too, were in shock. He was standing next to Paz, between her and Miller. The man was wild with pain and rage and Snake needed to get between them to keep Paz safe. No, that wasn’t right. He was on the floor, too stunned to do anything.

“..played us like a damn fiddle!”

Kaz grabbed him and shouted something into his face. All he could do was stare at his friend dumb struck. Kaz pushed his way past the Medic over to Paz and seized her in his arms.

“Boss?!”

That man had done terrible things to Paz. Unspeakable things. What was it all for? What did he want, what was he after?

“Give my regards to your boss when you get home.”

“Help me Snake.”

He remembered the cool night air hitting him in the face as he leapt out of the chopper after Paz. Not like this. After everything it couldn’t end like this. There was a flash and he could recall the white hot pain washing over his body, a pressure hitting him in the face and chest. Then, darkness.

“Hey are you listening to me?!” The edge in Kaz’s voice brought Venom back to the present. This wasn’t 1975, and they weren’t in that chopper. They were home on Mother Base, but a Mother Base from a different time. All he could think about was Paz. What did she die for? Did she really hate him? Did she think he had left her to die? He had been weak, foolish. He should have ordered the Medic to check her again. He should have saved her. He slammed the picture down onto the table giving both Kaz and Ocelot a start. He turned to Ocelot grim faced “Ocelot you said you thought you recognized this man? Who is he?”
Ocelot moved in closer to the Boss causing the corners of Kaz’s mouth to twitch slightly. It wasn’t like the Boss to lose his composure like that. Something was off. Maybe it was just side effects of the coma. Kaz thought back to when they had first arrived on Mother Base. Snake’s words had wormed their way into Kaz’s mind, eating away at him from the inside “Kaz, tell me what to do. Like you used to.” He thought back to their first night together, in the Med Bay. As the Boss had turned to leave Kaz had reached out and grabbed his arm. He had waited nine long years to feel the warmth of his boss’s body. He half expected Snake to stay, but… it wasn’t like the Boss to be sentimental.

Ocelot spoke. “I’ve never actually met the man, I’ve only heard rumors. His codename is SkullFace. His real name, age, race or ethnicity, all unknown. He’s the commander of the unit that attacked you at the hospital, and in the Caribbean nine years ago. Officially, they’re a counter-terrorism unit with the CIA. In truth, they’re Cipher’s private strike force- XOF.” It was Kaz’s turn to slam his fist down. “I knew it! Cipher knows the Boss is alive, and now they’re here to finish the job.” Snake ran his hand over his face and slumped back into his chair. Zero had sent Paz to steal ZEKE, had threatened to destroy Mother Base and kill everyone with it. But wasn’t that all just a means to threaten him into returning to America? Would Zero really go this far? Did Zero really want him dead?

“Well I don’t know all the details, but what I do know is that Zero first met SkullFace sometime in the early sixties. He was an assassin working behind the Iron Curtain before defecting to the West. SkullFace was instrumental in helping the CIA get Sokolov over the Berlin Wall. Apparently, when Sokolov came over SkullFace went with him, and after the CIA turned Sokolove over to the KGB to end the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Major began putting a task force together to get him back. That was your FOX unit Boss. But, unbeknownst to the CIA, the Major formed a separate unit to covertly aid FOX from the shadows, making sure their missions were a success. This unit was so secret not even the Boss knew about them. They were XOF, and the man Zero picked to be their commander was none other than SkullFace.”

Big Boss’s mind reeled from this revelation. “SkullFace, so he’s the leader of XOF. Zero really is behind this after all.” Kaz sighed loudly, tired and irritated. “Well it’s just like Zero to come up with such a stupid codename. XOF, FOX.” Ocelot pointedly ignored him, continuing “If I remember right Zero and SkullFace parted ways over what happened to you in the Caribbean. Which leads me to believe that if Cipher is involved with this new Metal Gear project, it might not be Zero who’s responsible. I bet there’s one person who knows the answer. What’s say we pay the good doctor a visit, eh Miller?”

Mother Base, Seychelles Waters
“Room 101”, Level 1, Warehouse 01, Command Platform

The interrogation had gone on for six hours, yet neither Kaz nor Ocelot showed any signs of exhaustion. Ocelot was always the consummate professional, while Kaz was fueled by pure hatred for Huey. Kaz was sitting at the desk recording the interrogation, furiously chewing through a pencil that served no other purpose than for him to take out his frustrations on. They had already injected Huey with Haloperidol, “A favorite back at Lubyanka” Ocelot had explained. The drug must not have worked the way it was intended, for Ocelot had seemed genuinely taken aback. Any other time and Kaz would have relished seeing the pompous bastard embarrassed like that. This time however, they had business at hand. Huey was glancing around nervously and giving half answers “I, uh, I don’t quite remember. Everything’s blurry, I… I was so scared.” Ocelot peered down at Huey with a disgusted look on his face “And why would you be scared? They let you live. Now, here it is, nine years later, and you’ve built a nice new Metal Gear for them too. So what’s Cipher’s interest in it?” Huey seemed nervous. “I don’t know. All I know is they told me they wanted me to build them a bipedal weapons system capable of standing upright and traversing any
kind of terrain.” Ocelot pressed the matter further “The Soviets wanted you to build them a nuclear equipped, bipedal walking tank? And you just said yes? Couldn’t resist putting your talents to good use. Was that why you agreed to that inspection? You felt the Boss and his organization were holding you back, building a nuclear deterrent then keeping it a secret from the whole world. That’s no deterrent at all. Then, along came Cipher with this fake nuclear inspection, and you agreed to it so you could build them a Metal Gear, one they’d actually use, is that it?”

Huey became increasingly agitated. “It wasn’t just Cipher! Back in the Caribbean the whole world had their eyes on us. A private army, just a bunch of guns for hire, with a nuclear weapon? Why wouldn’t people be uncomfortable?!’’ Lowering his voice to almost a whisper, Ocelot asked “Is that why you agreed to the nuclear inspection?” Huey shook his head. “I thought our best move was to prove to the world, through the U.N. that we didn’t have a nuke. Of course, I was the one who was against us having a nuke in the first place, but that was Snake’s decision!” At this, Kaz began to lose his patience. “The Boss isn’t to blame for what happened, you went behind our backs and agreed to the inspection.” he said sharply. Huey shrank under Miller’s steady gaze “Don’t get me wrong, I…I still believed in Snake back then. I just thought I was making the best decision for all of us, getting a third party with international authority to clear our name before proof got out. That’s all.”

Kaz couldn’t stand his simpering attitude, trying to weave a pathetic web of lies. He knew the Boss was watching, and he wondered if he would step in, intervene, maybe get his hands dirty. Kaz had almost had all he could stand, as Ocelot pushed the matter further “So the truth is, you took it upon yourself to agree to an inspection arranged by the IAEA. Except, the inspection was really just a ruse, and Cipher’s strike force XOF showed up instead.” Kaz had removed the pencil from his mouth and was clutching it in his hand, tighter and tighter as Huey continued to plead his case “I had no idea that would happen! You have to believe me!” The pencil snapped. “Enough bullshit! I’ve waited long enough. Ocelot, show him what’s behind Door Number 1.” Ocelot turned to Kaz and smiled. “With pleasure Miller.”

Kaz decided it was time to see just how his boss really felt. He momentarily left the room, meeting Snake in an adjoining room behind a two-way mirror. Snake stood expressionless watching the interrogation with an intense and fixed gaze. Kaz broke his Boss’s concentration “The truth serum isn’t working. Either some procedure he had done boosted his metabolic enzymes, or he’s undergone special gene therapy.” He paused tensely, waiting for his Boss’s approval. Finally, Snake said “Kaz, don’t forget the bigger picture here. Our vengeance doesn’t stop with Emmerich, but if he dies it ends with him.” The leather of Kaz’s glove creaked as his grip on his crutch tightened in anger. With contempt, he responded “He’s going to get everything he has coming to him.” Kaz turned to walk away before Snake cautioned him sternly “Kaz…” His second-in-command spun around pivoting on his one leg. “Don’t… don’t you dare talk down to me! I’m going to enjoy every second of watching that bastard fry because I’ve been there. He blames the whole world because he can’t walk? I lost my fucking leg and my arm! They did it just to keep me alive, and he whines about never really having lived. Look at him boss, he hasn’t lost a goddamn thing!” Kaz could remember the stink of his gangrenous limbs, his eyes stinging with his own sweat, the dry and filthy rag they had shoved in his mouth to keep him from biting off his own tongue. He would never forget the sound of the saw or the feeling as its jagged teeth bit into his flesh and began grinding through his bones. Kaz broke into a cold sweat and his chest started to heave, his hand trembled as Venom slowly approached raising his bionic arm to gently hold his X.O.

“I lost something too. We all have” Venom calmly reassured him. This was it. This was everything that Kaz had been waiting for. He left off his crutch and leaned into the stalky frame of his boss, letting his weight rest in those arms. He had waited so long to feel this embrace, to be enveloped in the musky aroma of his boss’s sweat and signature H. Upmann cigars. As he inhaled deeply he was
mildly disappointed—since his arrival on Mother Base, the Boss had only been smoking an odd electronic cigar provided to him by Ocelot. The smell was foreign to Kaz, and while not unpleasant, it didn’t evoke memories of the Boss he knew.

“I always knew you’d come for me. I never gave up hope, never stopped believing. All these years, I’ve never forgotten you, Snake.” Kaz leaned in close, trying to recall the feeling of their lips touching. Venom pulled back suddenly, looking at Kaz with surprise. “Kaz, I… what are you doing?” Kaz’s heart fluttered as he stared into Snake’s eye with confusion. “Boss?” Snake looked at him with concern and hurt in his eyes. “I don’t remember. Were we… were we like this, back then?” Kaz felt his heart drop like a lead weight in his chest. How much more could he lose? How much of themselves did someone have to lose before they were no longer the same person? He laughed weakly. “You really don’t remember, do you?” Venom gave Kaz a sympathetic look, and Kaz turned away before quickly changing the subject. “Like I said, Huey hasn’t lost a thing. At least, not yet.”

He returned to find that Ocelot had placed some kind of large belt on the desk where he had been sitting, and was now proceeding to walk towards Huey with a large bucket. Kaz glanced down at the object in confusion. “What the hell is this?” With a cool demeanor and even pace Ocelot approached Huey and threw the salt water on him. Soaking wet, he coughed and sputtered as Ocelot spoke over him “It’s a little something I’ve been working on, my own design. You might say it’s a ‘stun belt’. It can deliver up to 50kV to the subject, really does a number on the kidneys. With those metal legs of his I bet this’ll give his muscles a good work out.” Ocelot took the belt from the table and proceeded to strap it around Huey’s lap. Kaz shot Ocelot a worried glance. “With those legs of his won’t this kill him?” Ocelot grinned as Huey’s lips started to tremble. “Not at all Miller. You see, these legs are made of Titanium, or at least, a Titanium Alloy. Aren’t they, doctor? And Titanium—unlike steel— is a poor conductor. In fact, I bet those legs of his will give the current a safer path to travel rather than through the spine. However…” Ocelot paused with a sadistic grin on his face. “I’m willing to bet they conduct heat just fine.” Ocelot crouched down until he was inches away from Huey’s face. “Looks like you’re in the hot seat, doctor.” He rose and pressed the button on the remote.

Huey’s body became rigid, his muscles snapping taught. He felt as though his entire body was on fire, and he let out screams of agony. A full minute passed and the air became thick with the stench of burnt flesh. Ocelot turned the machine off. Emmerich vomited down the front of shirt. He looked up at them, pleadingly, his eyes red from the blood vessels that had burst. A small trickle of blood slowly pooled on the floor from his wrists, a result of straining against his bonds. The stench of urine greeted them as Huey’s bladder gave way, and he began to cry having lost any and all dignity and control of the situation. Ocelot whistled. “You see Miller, now that’s results.” Kaz looked on, stone faced. There was a point in his life when this would have been too much for him, when he would have intervened and made Ocelot stop. But not this time. Not for this man. Kazuhira Miller would never forget, and he would never forgive.

“How can you do this? I’m your friend, I’m on your side! Snake! Miller was in contact with Cipher too! He sold you out! He’s the traitor!” As Emmerich continued his hysterical sobs, Kaz winced, lurching forward in anger. “You’re the odd one out. Back then, we all lost something.” Kaz hobbled over to stand before Huey who looked up at him dazed and confused. “What… What?” Kaz bent over slightly examining Huey’s exo-legs. “Except you. In fact, you gained legs.” He spat the last two words with contempt. Huey’s eyes widened in fear and understanding. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Ocelot with the remote to the belt in his hand, his finger hovering expectantly over the button, and Kaz looked over to him shaking his head. He turned back to Huey, and reached down to take the remote controlling his bionic legs. With his legs locked in an odd crouching position, Huey could go nowhere. With the control in his hands, Kaz bored into Huey from behind his shades. Huey emplored him “Please…” Kaz pressed the button releasing the
locks, and Huey’s left leg started to move. Kaz pressed the mobility control further and further, and Huey’s leg lifted off the ground. His captive sobbed “Please don’t”. With barely controlled rage Kaz shoved Huey hard and he upset on his side with a loud crash. Surprisingly, Ocelot made no move to stop Kaz. He didn’t release his grip on the control, and the exoskeleton began to groan with the strain. An alarm began to sound, warning that too much pressure was being exerted. Too much of this for too long, and the femur would no doubt snap. Huey began to scream in protest, and Kaz felt his face flush with excitement. Would the Boss come rushing in to his rescue? Would he chew Kaz out for going too far, would he forcibly take the controls away from him?

“Kaz, don’t forget the bigger picture here. Our vengeance doesn’t stop with Emmerich, but if he dies it ends with him.” Snake’s words suddenly brought him calm. He couldn’t see before, he had been too blinded by his own anger to appreciate those words. They had sounded cold and indifferent at the time, but they were the words of the man he once knew, the man he called Boss. They were the words of a man who never judged you, never talked down to you, but held you to a higher standard in proportion to your calling. Even now when all they had left was revenge, Snake still spoke with the tone and authority of an ungodly god-like man. Kaz released the control and left Huey to Ocelot, pausing to stop the tape and taking the cassette with him. It was his passive aggressive way of telling Ocelot “We’re done here, wrap it up.” The Boss hadn’t come to stop him, but Kaz wondered if maybe he was simply giving him the dignity of not being dressed down in front of Ocelot and Huey. He felt that old tenseness in his loins as he opened the door and approached Snake. Whatever happened next he was ready. “Satisfied? It’s not like he can even feel it. But with that exoskeleton out of commission, he’ll know the pain of never being able to walk again. I can at least take that much away from him.” Motionless the boss asked “Did he talk?” Suddenly, Kaz felt the cold stab of panic. Huey hadn’t actually told them anything. Kaz had been so incensed over Huey’s newfound ability to walk, the fact that he had gained legs for himself while Kaz had lost one of his, he had forgotten about everything else. He had just wanted to make him hurt as much as possible. As he struggled to think of how he would explain his actions to Snake, his boss spoke “What’s he saying?”

Kaz turned to see Ocelot patiently bend over Huey, whose body was wracked by sobs. When he could still himself, Huey seemed to be telling Ocelot something. After a feeling of momentary relief, Kaz thought twice before quietly replying “Probably the same as six hours ago. ‘I had no idea the nuclear inspection nine years ago was a ruse.’ ‘Cipher forced me to do their research after the attack.’” Snake looked aside at Kaz and the two locked eyes. It was the first time in weeks the two men had actually looked one another in the eyes. Snake gently placed his flesh hand on Kaz’s shoulder. “Do you think he had a hand in it?” Snake asked. A shiver ran up Kaz’s spine. Once again Snake was addressing him as an equal, sincerely asking his opinion. Barely concealing his trembling voice he said “I do. There’s no proof yet, but take a listen to this later.” He handed the boss the tape of the interrogation. Snake accepted, looking down at the tape and turning it over in his hands. Kaz turned to leave, but not before Snake reminded him “We need proof before we can pass judgment. Keep an eye on him, and don’t let anyone find out he’s in here.” The boss paused, seemed to be considering something before he said “I want him to continue his research in there, but he doesn’t get out and nobody goes in.” Kaz paused in the open doorway, a phantom of darkness before the daylight. He smirked and turned to Venom “If the older guys found out they’d want his head. If we let him out, we couldn’t guarantee his safety. It’s for his own good.” Both men turned at the sound of the heavy interior door creaking open. Ocelot stepped through.

“Miller, I can’t believe I’m going to say this, but I’m impressed. Going after his bionic legs like that was a quick, calculated stroke of psychological warfare.” Kaz snorted. “The only thing he cares about more than his own pathetic life are those legs of his. He can’t stand the thought of being a cripple. I figured we could leverage that.” Ocelot nodded. “I see. Interesting. We’ll definitely have to keep it in mind. I don’t think we’ll get much answers with the ‘rough stuff’, and
the truth serum doesn’t seem to work on him. Boss, it could take a while before we know everything he knows.” Snake turned away from Kaz to face Ocelot. “Did he tell you anything?”

Ocelot nodded. “He mentioned something interesting. The reason why SkullFace pulled the plug on their operation and sent the good doctor packing. Apparently, Emmerich’s funding started going to Central Africa instead. Cipher is pursuing new research there” Snake frowned. “Africa? What research?” The two of them turned to gaze back into the interrogation room. Kaz stood there, pensive. He had been complimented by Ocelot of all people. Ocelot continued “Emmerich says he doesn’t know the details, and I believe him. One thing he did say makes sense though. Sahelanthropus alone is enough to cause an RMA (Revolution in Military Affairs), but simply helping the Soviets win the war can’t be Cipher’s true objective. He claims that what they’re doing in Africa is the missing piece- a weapon to surpass Metal Gear.” Kaz felt his heart sink into his stomach, and turned to see Snake stone faced. He couldn’t imagine anything more terrible or strategically important than a nuclear weapon, but if such a thing existed, Cipher would be the ones to possess it. He and Big Boss exchanged knowing glances. “Meaning it’s not just another nuke.”

Truth Tape II- Project Omega

(The ringing of a telephone)
[Click]
“It’s me. How is he?”
“There’s been no change in his condition.”
“And the other one?”
“I’ve done just as you instructed. He’s in a drug-induced coma. We have him hooked up to a tape player listening to constant loops of all the audio transmissions of Snake’s missions on record. We just finished copying the tapes from Costa Rica.”
“We have Kazuhira to thank for that. And the deprogramming?”
“We’ve begun the process of erasing existing memories through electroconvulsive therapy and sub-aural frequencies, and reprogramming the psyche through hypnotic suggestion and parasite therapy. The cover story is that we’re testing experimental techniques for treating neurological damage sustained in combat situations and combat-related psychological stress”.
“I see.”
“I keep thinking about how much this is like The Manchurian Candidate.”
“I beg your pardon?”
“The Manchurian Candidate. It was a 1962 film about the Soviets brainwashing an American POW into becoming an assassin. They were taken to Manchuria, China, hence the title. Frank Sinatra played…”
“Enough. I get it. Have you heard from Ocelot?”
“Yes…he’s been here. He was real upset when he saw Snake like that. I mean, I was too, but for him…”
“This is something personal. To all of us, he was an invaluable friend. I blame myself. If only I’d told him the truth. If only he had come to me sooner…”
“Major?”
“I suppose none of that matters. All that matters now is the future, and the children.”
“Does EVA know? About him?”
“No. Best to keep things on a need-to-know basis. Aside from you and Ocelot, no one else will know. Not even Donald. When the time comes the world must believe that ‘he’ is the real Big Boss. The fewer people know the truth, the easier the information can be suppressed.”
“I see. Major?”
“Yes?”
“About that project.”
“Ah, yes. That project is over. All of the evidence went up in flames. Nobody will miss a place that doesn’t exist. It was nothing more than a process of trial-and-error, the end result of which is ‘V’.”

“V? As in, five?”

“Yes, if you include Jack, he’s the fifth Snake.”

“The fifth and final Snake. I received your orders to dismantle the project, and ATGC will be closing its account with DARPA.”

“Very good.”

“Major, I have one request.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about the children. We did as you instructed- Eli is still at the facility in Exeter. He’s never been around children his own age, and we’ll continue to model and monitor his behavior. David has been placed in foster care, and George was adopted by the Sears family, as per your instructions.”

“Excellent. I imagine our Senator Sears chances for re-election have greatly improved, wouldn’t you agree?”

“But Major, I don’t think we should stop with the children. We still have Big Boss’s DNA- I think we should continue with my proposed gene therapy research. Imagine, if individuals with identical genes were raised in an identical environment, what would be left to distinguish them from one another?”

“You’re referring to the Bokanovsky process? Do what you like, just don’t lose sight of the bigger picture. Someday it won’t be enough to control information from the outside. V is a perfect test case. Creating a context for people’s lives. Given the right story, the appropriate stimulation, anyone can become Big Boss. Genetic control, information control, and someday, identity control. Until then, we’ll still need our friend to keep playing his role. The world needs its heroes, after all.”

“Then, we’ll continue to monitor the situation. Until then, goodbye Major.”

[Click]

Chapter End Notes

I'm trying to keep most of the canonical stuff out of this story, otherwise you could just go play the game. In case I didn't make it clear enough, Kaz is actually shit at torturing and shouldn't be left unsupervised. Also, I changed the weapon the Hamid stole from being the Honey Bee- which had nothing to do with the overall plot whatsoever- and I'm trying to make the Walker Gear more important than they actually are. Skull Face gets a cooler backstory, which I'm going to tie in with the overall canon more than I think MGS V actually did. Just you wait. Oh, and from now on, it's Dr. Ocelot. Poor Venom, he acts like they're in high school and Kaz, who is the super hot captain of the football team, just handed him a note in the hall. So cute.
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

It's time to introduce everyone's favorite plant- Quiet. She actually has a backstory this time around, and legitimate motivations to go after Big Boss and resent him for lighting her on fire, even though she was trying to kill him. The kids arrive on Mother Base and Venom and Kaz have a tiff over what to do with them. Ocelot is a catty bitch who slinks around soaking up drama, and Venom has to take the upper hand in his relationship with Kaz.

Her grandmother looked down at her, beaming, before returning to the simmering pot of basmati. She was teaching her how to cook Kabuli palaw, the national dish of Afghanistan, and a dish that her grandmother excelled at preparing. The delicious aroma of the steamed rice, carrots, raisins and lamb filled their house and overwhelmed her senses. Their mud-and-straw house was one of many in their dense little village tucked neatly behind expansive poppy fields. Her brother had been working in the fields when the Russians came, calling out to him in Pashto. He only had a small knife in his hand, and as he turned to face them they began shouting and raised their weapons. Startled, he dropped the knife and remained frozen where he stood. She remembered the look of shock never leaving her brother’s face as the bullets tore through him, ripping apart the American jacket he wore with such pride. Their father had bought that jacket for him, and he wore it everywhere he went. She remembered the sight of him crumpling to the ground and disappearing beneath the poppies, the earth seeming to swallow him up. She started to…

run home from school. She was running home from school with her friends and they were all laughing and happy. One of them stopped in the middle of the road and the others stopped as well. They all ran to see what he was looking at. She approached them as they all began reaching down to pick up whatever had been left in the middle of the road. Briefly, she thought she had caught a glimpse of a butterfly. Suddenly, her friends had disappeared in a pillar of smoke. Something slammed into her chest knocking her to the ground, forcing the air out of her lungs. As she struggled to breathe, the dirt, rocks, and pieces of her friends came raining down upon her. She couldn’t breathe, her…

lungs were burning. Her body wracked by searing pain, pain like nothing she had ever felt before. She could barely even see the target now for the flames, and all she could smell was the stench of her…

flesh burning. All she could smell was their flesh burning. Her village, her entire world was being consumed; the corpses of her neighbors, her family, their elders, all were burning in a hellish conflagration whilst the Russians remained at a safe distance. Her mother was clutching her so tight and they were running, running so fast the wind hurt against her…

face. She remembered the look on the soldier’s face as he approached her brother, raising his pistol to deliver the killing blow. A cigarette dangled limply from the corner of his mouth as it raised in a rakish grin. He knelt, grabbing the boy by the hair and raising his body off the ground like a trophy. He called to his comrades in Russian, and one of them fumbled through their backpack producing a camera. After a few pictures were taken the men, talking amongst themselves
Proceeded to crowd around the body. The man who had slain him picked up the knife and began to cut the clothes…

Were ripped from her body. She couldn’t stop crying as she saw her mother thrown to the ground by the soldiers and her clothes ripped from her body. One of the men made eye contact with her as he shut the door, quickly looking away in what might be taken for shame. They had almost made it to safety, almost made it into the mountains when they had been captured by a Soviet patrol and taken back to their camp. She could hear her mother’s screams, hear the soldiers shouting at her and hitting her. She needed them to stop. She needed to save her mother, she needed to…

Line up the shot. She waited until just the right moment and gently squeezed the trigger. The target’s head exploded in a spray of gore and his body slumped to the ground as his comrade recoiled in horror, his face awash with his friend’s blood and what was left of his face. Quickly she reloaded and took aim again, this time her bullet finding its mark through her target’s chest punching a hole through his lungs. He wouldn’t die right away, but he was lung shot and you can’t…

“save your people. Soon the Russians will be through here and they will burn everything. There won’t even be enough left for the jackals to feast on. You’re scared. I know. I was the same way too, once. I, too, suffered at foreign hands. My world went up in ashes as will yours. I can make them leave. I can offer your people that protection. We have a common enemy. All I need is one small favor. Look at this. Do you see this man? I want him dead. Leave no trace, and no witnesses. Do you understand?”

“…Yes.”

“Then, do we have a deal?”

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She awoke with a start. She half expected to be back lying on the cold, hard Afghan ground with her comrades, deep within the mountains safe from the Soviet gunships. Instead, she found herself back in her cell lying on the rigid steel cot. Her eyes darted around the room quickly taking in her surroundings. There in the shadows of the far wall, his weight supported on his crutch, was the man they called Miller. “Have a bad dream?” He asked with mock concern. He began to hobble her way stopping at the very edge of her cell. The first rays of sunlight highlighting his perpetual scowl. “You might have the Boss and his lapdog Ocelot fooled, but you’re not fooling me. I know what you really are. You’re nothing but a damn spy sent here by Cipher. So what is it that you’re really after? Are you here to kill the Boss? Are you here for Emmerich, to keep him from talking? Or maybe you’re here to kill me.” He slowly paced back and forth in front of the bars like a predator trying to reach its prey. “Either way, it doesn’t matter. I’m going to get the answers I want, and you’re going to give them to me. I’m going to make you hurt, make you regret ever setting foot on my base, and when I’m done with you, you’ll be begging me to put you out of your misery!” One of Diamond Dogs came running to the top of the stairs leading down to her cell. “Commander Miller! The Boss is back!” Miller snorted in her direction before turning to leave. As he approached the stairs he paused, and without even glancing back over his shoulder said “You best watch yourself. Our men hate you being here as much as I do. The Boss isn’t always around to keep them in line and…I’m a very busy man. Lots of paperwork to do. I can’t guarantee your safety, and if you’re going to dress like that…like I said, you best watch yourself.”

Her eyes narrowed in anger and the parasites responded. Just another heartless man, no different from his Boss who set her on fire, or the men who burned her village to the ground. No different. Their faces may change, the language they speak may change, but men were all the same. She looked down at the curve of her chest, her cheeks flushed high with shame. She knew all too well the meaning behind Miller’s thinly veiled threat. She tried to cover herself by crossing her arms,
remembering the leering gaze of the soldiers as they escorted her to this cell for the first time. It was terrifying and humiliating, the same look in their eyes as the men who had violated her mother.

She could remember her mother taking her by the hand and patiently explaining to her that when she was walking outside she must cover her body, her whole body, for if it were to invite the gaze of a man she would be guilty of leading them both into sin. Her mother’s beliefs always gave her pause; she believed that a person’s actions were their own, and she could never understand how she could be responsible for the sins of another. However, she loved and feared God, and in her devotion committed herself to donning a hijab at age 13. But since the events at the hospital, that man had done something to her. She remembered her body engulfed by the flames, could remember throwing herself out the window and to what she thought must be certain death. At the time, she recalled the words of the Prophet from the Sahih al-Bukhari- “Whosoever purposefully throws himself from a mountain and kills himself, will be in the fire falling down into it and abiding therein perpetually forever.” But she didn’t die and didn’t fall into the fire. She had been denied hell and was forbidden heaven. She had made her choice. Pashtunwali called for Badal- an eye for an eye. So long as the ones who had murdered her family and friends walked this earth, she would too. She would invite the wrath of God, betray her devotion to her faith, all for revenge. No one would be spared. That man, the one they call Big Boss, he was responsible. Big Boss had cost her the lives of her comrades, her dignity and salvation, the last chance she had for a family. Her fist clenched tight with rage and she slammed it against the bars. Big Boss, and the man with the skull for a face, both of them would pay. And not Miller or anyone else would take that away from her. Wishing to be alone with her pain, she quietly disappeared.

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Kaz approached the Helipad as the boss was helping the kids out of the chopper. The mission was a complete success, and their client bought their story that the kids had been “disposed of”. It was the worst kind of wetwork, but they had been paid in full, and if the whole world knew that their organization was rescuing war orphans in cooperation with UNICEF, the fact that Diamond Dogs was openly committed to creating a more ‘humane’ battlefield would be great publicity. Of course, that wasn’t his only concern. Kaz thought back to one of his favorite lines from The Prince: “Everyone sees what you appear to be, few experience what you truly are.” He smiled to himself. He was just too smooth.

There were a few men from the Security Team, and one of the Medical personnel who was pushing a stretcher. One of the kids must’ve been injured, Kaz thought to himself with a frown. The two staff members approached and saluted the Boss who returned the gesture. The kids looked around mouths agape, struggling to take in the scope and size of Mother Base. Kaz approached one of the kids who seemed the most dumbfounded, when before he knew it the boy had stumbled into him. He hadn’t expected that, and found himself off balance. As both he and the boy began to fall Kaz let go of his crutch and wrapped his arm around the boy protectively. The two of them hit the ground, but not hard, and the boy quickly jumped off him. One of the staff members helped Kaz to his feet and returned him his crutch.

Quickly trying to regain his composure, Kaz looked from the boy to Snake, before asking “Whatcha thinking Boss?” Kaz had already made up a list of several potential contacts at UNICEF who would take the kids in, and he was really just waiting for the Boss to ask him what his opinion was when Snake replied “I’m thinking that he’s tougher than he looks. With a little training he might make himself…useful.” Kaz frowned. That wasn’t the answer he was looking for, but considering how eager Snake had been to bring Chico to Mother Base back in the Caribbean, Kaz wasn’t all that surprised. Things were different then, but he had sworn to himself that he would never repeat the same mistake. “I don’t like the idea of kids running around Mother Base. Especially ones with guns.” With that said, Kaz struck the child with his crutch with such quickness and unprovoked ferocity it even made Venom step back. The men gave each other brief
looks. They already suspected that Commander Miller wasn’t altogether there, psychologically as well as physiologically, but none of them would have expected him to hit a kid. The child unflinchingly reached behind him and snatched a gun from the Boss’s hip holster. Even more startled, Snake couldn’t even react before the weapon was trained on his second-in-command. Kaz stared down at this child, stared down the barrel of his gun. He had to give him credit, the kid had sharp reflexes. Few were born with the ability to just ‘switch off’, to act without thinking. Most of the time it was only by living through life and death situations that someone could reach down that far into their depths and find a proverbial killer instinct. What had these kids been through?

Snake grinned. “There, you see? The kid’s a natural.” Kaz grew even more annoyed with his Boss’s enthusiasm, and even more determined to dissuade him. “No. He’s no natural.” Kaz noticed that the kid hadn’t even taken the safety off. The kid might have abilities born out of desperation, but he lacked the training and discipline to effectively harness them. It was a rookie mistake, but one that gave Kaz the confidence for what he did next. Before he knew it, he reached out to take the gun from the boy and he felt as though time itself were slowing down. He felt something inside him change, something imperceptible. For a moment, the aches and pains, the straining of his muscles, all of it went away and he felt more alive than he had in months. Before he had time to think “Oh shit, what the hell am I doing?” he had disarmed the boy and, cradling the gun under the remains of his right arm, removed the clip before tossing the gun back to Snake. “Like I said, he’s no natural. Far from it.” Snake raised his eyebrows and smiled. Kaz turned to the staff. “Put them in temporary quarters for now.” The men saluted, and began ushering the kids away. As the group left Kaz and Snake remained alone facing one another on the Command Platform. They remained motionless, staring one another down not in some petty battle of wills, but because they were both genuinely trying to get a feel for what the other was thinking and feeling.

Kaz broke the silence “Boss, when I look at those kids, all I can think about is Chico. All these years, I blame myself for what happened. That chopper was no place for him to die.” Snake felt the onset of one of his frequent migraines, could see his vision blurring and the colors fading around him. He took out his Phantom Cigar and lit up. Taking a deep drag on his cigar, he thought back to nine years ago. Kaz blamed himself, but the truth was it had been Snake who asked Chico to join MSF. He had made him hombre Nuevo, had asked Chico to give his new life to him. And then…

“Paz is dead… They killed her. Right in front of me…Snake, Paz…Paz is…Let’s… Let’s go home. Snake… … No…No… … I wish I was dead. I’m sorry…I’m sorry, I’m so sorry… … I want to start over. …Hombre Nuevo.”

Snake grew silent. He didn’t know what to do or how to feel. He was always a man of few words, a man of action. What could he do? What could he do for the dead? Kaz took a step towards him “Hey, are you okay?” In a great exhalation of smoke Venom turned to Kaz and replied “He knew the risks. When you set foot on the battlefield, you always know you might not come back. Chico died trying to save Paz. He died fighting for what he believed in, and that was his choice.”

With growing annoyance, Kaz shot back “That might have been a choice he made, but those kids… They’re not fighting for a cause. They’re fighting because someone burned down their village, slaughtered their families, put a gun in their hands and forced them to fight. Men like us. We owe it to them to give them a chance for a better life.” Snake turned to face Kaz, rolling his head back and exhaling loudly. “Kaz, listen to me. When I left FOX I thought maybe I could be of use as a combat instructor and help reintegrate child soldiers back into society. I remember this one kid from Angola. I had brought him from the battlefield to an interim care center. Every night this kid had nightmares, he’d wake up screaming because he said he was being haunted by the spirit of someone he had killed. He thought this phantom had cursed him, and if he returned home he’d bring misfortune, crop failure, sickness, even death, with him. The counselors did all they could to help, thought by talking about it he could somehow exorcise the evil spirit.” Snake paused, taking a
long drag before letting it out slowly. “We found him one morning. He’d hung himself with his bed sheets.” Snake fixed his eye on Kaz. “When you have that much blood on your hands, there’s no going back. You think sending those kids away will end their nightmares? You, me, we know better. They never go away Kaz. Once you’ve been on the battlefield, tasted the exhilaration, the tension…it becomes a part of you. You can’t run from it.”

As Snake turned to leave Kaz lunged forward and seized his arm. Snake turned to face Kaz, annoyed, only to be met with a fierce stare. “You’re wrong. Those kids aren’t some lost cause, but if you think sending them away is a bad idea…fine. I’m ordering Mother Base to be expanded in order to accommodate them. They’ll have their own quarters. Separate from ours.” Snake smirked. “So we’re running a daycare now?” Ignoring him, Kaz continued. “They’ll learn how to do basic jobs, speak English. A chance for a normal life…just one not behind the barrel of a gun.” Snake arrogantly blew his smoke right into Kaz’s face. “Living behind the barrel of a gun is what we do Kaz. There’s no room for ‘angels’ in our heaven. Not anymore. But if you want to make it a wager, fine. We’ll see whose truth is right in the end.” Kaz was furious. “This isn’t a game Snake! This isn’t a ‘difference of opinion’ and we’re not going to ‘agree to disagree’. I’m not going to let you turn those kids into killers, you can forget it!” With that, Kaz was gone.

As Snake watched him leave he could hear a familiar jingle of spurs and heavy, measured footsteps coming from out of the shadows. Ocelot spoke. “People should either be caressed or crushed.’” Snake gave him a quizzical look. “What?” Ocelot continued “Men are driven by two principal impulses, either by love or by fear.’ Niccolò Machiavelli. Boss, everyone here follows you and obeys you because they believe in you. You’re a legend to them, a modern day Achilles. But Miller’s different. He thinks he knows the real you, and that makes him bold. He follows you, but he doesn’t obey you.” Snake shook his head. “It’s not like that. He can be impulsive at times and lose his cool, but I trust him. Just give him time.” Ocelot stared at Snake before carefully responding “Nine years ago, he was working with Cipher. Remember? He and Zero schemed to bring that girl, Paz, onto Mother Base and have her steal a Metal Gear- all in an attempt to strong arm you into following Zero’s will. Like it or not, everything that’s happened since then has been a result of Miller’s error in judgement, and he’ll do anything he can to soothe his wounded pride.”

“What are you saying, that my trust in him is misplaced?” Ocelot feigned innocence, refusing to acknowledge but not wanting to contradict the Boss. “All I’m saying is that a man who is used to acting one way will never change. He won’t take orders from you, not without a firm hand to guide him. There can be many slaves, but only one master. You have to decide which it’s going to be- caress or crush?”

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Snake stood outside of the door to Kaz’s office, his hand hovering over the keypad. The whole walk over Snake had been thinking things over, Ocelot’s words crowding out his thoughts. Like it or not, everything that’s happened since then has been a result of Miller’s error in judgement. He pushed these thoughts aside and entered the room. Despite being X.O. of Diamond Dogs, the office of Kazuhira Miller was small with only one window overlooking the ocean. In the center was a desk, although the desk was nearly invisible beneath the mess of papers. Kaz sat hunched at the center of this chaos pounding away at a computer keyboard. “Here I thought Ocelot was the only one rude enough to enter without knocking” he said, sight still fixed on his task and refusing to give his Boss the dignity of eye contact. Snake paused in the doorway, a look of surprise on his face as he registered the presence of the computer. “Kaz, what happened to your typewriter? The one you swindled from a pawn shop back in college?” Back during his MSF days Kaz proudly typed all official MSF documents on his Adler Universal 39 typewriter, and would have to balance it while in bed since there was no room on his desk. Since the loss of his dominant hand Kaz had tried to type one-handed; however, he kept accidentally hitting multiple keys at the same time.
causing the machine to lock up. One day, especially frustrated, he had thrown the old typewriter against the wall and the carriage never worked right since. “There was, uh, a little accident with it. So I made some deals and got this shipped straight from Japan.” Kaz gestured to the computer. Snake furrowed his scarred brow “What is it?” Snake could hear Kaz’s tone soften as he spoke, patting the computer. “This baby is the MSX home computer. It just came out last year.”

Snake walked around the side of the desk to stand behind his second-in-command, finding himself cramped between a large bookshelf packed with quite a few more titles than he remembered Kaz having before. He ran his fingers over the volumes before plucking one from the shelf. “The Portable Nietzsche? Fancy yourself a philosopher?” Kaz frowned. “Well I had to do something while you were asleep.” His mood returned to dark indifference. Snake sighed returning the volume to the shelf. “Kaz, I came here to talk.” Kaz’s hand paused over the keyboard, before he pulled himself away slowly to glance up at his boss with a forced smile that twitched at the edges. “Okay Boss. What do you wanna talk about?” Snake paused, uncertain. “I don’t really remember.” Kaz’s face twitched imperceptibly.

“You don’t…remember? I think… you wanted to talk about the children.” Snake’s eye lit up. “I get the impression you’re still mad at me.” Kaz made a noise somewhere between irritated and amused. “Let’s talk about the kids, Boss. Let’s talk about what should be done with the kids.”

“I thought you had that all taken care of,” Snake replied as he leaned against the desk, his misplaced hand accidentally knocking over a large stack of papers. Grumbling a “Sorry” he knelt to collect the scattered papers from off the floor, and when he rose to return them he found the smile had dropped from Kaz’s face replaced by sheer irritation. “Oh but I think you have some very definite ideas about what should be done with those kids” Kaz said drumming his fingers on the armrest of his chair. Snake opened his mouth to speak before Kaz cut him off. “I don’t know where you get the idea that you’re somehow an expert on raising kids. You might think you know what’s best for those kids because you make war orphans, but I actually was one. I got lucky. I could go to America and make a new life for myself. That’s what those kids need, not your…”

Snake was no longer listening to Kaz. He felt his mind cloud over and Ocelot’s words returned to his thoughts. You have to decide which it’s going to be- caress or crush. With his flesh hand he lashed out seizing Kaz by the throat. Behind his dark sunglasses, Miller’s eyes went wide and he choked out “What the hell are you?” Snake heaved and lifted Kaz out of his chair, his arm tense and solid like granite. He stood there in the office a figure of raw brutality amidst the trappings of civilization. Kaz clawed at his arm, his countenance turning a deep shade of red. Caress or crush? Snake’s grip tightened slightly around Kaz’s throat before bringing him in close mere inches away from his face. Despite this show of strength, Snake knew there was only one true way to dominate Kazuhira Miller. His bionic arm reached up and slowly removed Kaz’s sunglasses, his eyes milky white in the light. Kaz shuddered with rage at this indignity as Snake slowly reminded him “Kaz, you seem to forget who’s in charge around here. I don’t need your approval” before slowly lowering him back into his chair. Snake leaned in close “But if this attitude of yours doesn’t change, you can expect to have another little chat- and I won’t be so nice next time. Got it?” Weakly, Kaz nodded. Before turning to leave Snake noticed the clear outline of Kaz’s erection, and smirking to himself patted Kaz on the side of the cheek.

Truth Tape III- Love Deterrence

“He’s almost finished. Like I said, he’s experienced all of your missions on record. He has all of
your skills and all of your memories.”

“All my memories?”

“Zero was keeping tabs on you in the Caribbean. Of course, Miller was reporting everything back to him, and he was very thorough.”

[silence]

“John?”

“There’s some things that should belong only to me. I don’t want to share them with anyone else.”

“Zero wanted a clone of you that was perfect on the genetic level. Now you have a clone who’s perfect in every other way. Hell, he might even be superior to the original.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“I said Miller was very thorough. I wasn’t. I made sure to program a complete lack of…romantic interests...into him. His prime directive will be exacting your revenge. For him, the only thing he’ll believe in is the mission. Let’s be honest, that was your biggest mistake.”

“What did you say?”

[scuffling of feet]

“Easy, John. All I’m saying is that you put too much trust in that man, and he screwed you over. He went behind your back, made deals behind your back…with Zero. You were too soft on him. You gave him too much rope and you let him hang you both with it.”

[inaudible grumbling]

“Don’t you think Kaz will be…suspicious, when Venom doesn’t behave the way he expects?”

“Maybe Miller will stay in line for once and focus on his work, instead of the philandering he’s known for. I do have to admit, he’s done one hell of a job building up his little private army while you’ve been gone. He always did have a head for business.”

“You’ve kept in touch with him?”

“I’ve met him a couple of times, over the years. First met him in Angola. The small unit he was commanding managed to seize control of a diamond mine, struck some kind of deal with a foreign company. They put the locals to work in the mine, and Miller keeps all the profit. That’s why he named his little outfit ‘Diamond Dogs’.”

“Kaz…”

“You know he thinks you’re coming to save him. He’s got no doubt in his mind that you’re coming for him.”

“I will. Just…not me. Adam, make sure Venom’s ready. Make sure he brings Kaz home.”
Kaz frowned in disgust. For the first three months since Huey arrived on Mother Base his treatment had been “harsh” by Ocelot’s estimate; Huey’s food rations had been reduced—he was allowed coffee, precisely 350 grams of bread, water, and a litre of soup per day—and he had been deprived of sleep for 7 to 9 days at a time. When he would doze off, it was the job of the guard on duty to slap him awake. The interrogations had continued, but with Ocelot increasingly stepping back, letting Kaz take more of an active role. When things would become too intense, Ocelot would intervene and call an end to the session. Kaz would report to the Boss, who always observed from behind the glass, while Ocelot would “relieve” the detainee. From when he first arrived until now, Huey’s entire demeanor had changed. He was always apprehensive when Miller would approach, would shrink away from his questioning gaze, but seemed much more responsive to Ocelot. So far, they still hadn’t found out anything useful, and Kaz was growing increasingly frustrated. “It’s been six months and you still haven’t told us anything!” Kaz snapped. Huey protested “Please, I’ve already told you everything I know!”

Shaking his head, Kaz leaned back in his chair. “Which is what exactly? We know you’ve spent the last nine years developing a Metal Gear for the Soviets, or rather, for Skull Face. We know about its mobility—it can cross the rockiest terrain no problem, and even maneuver through deep mountain gorges. We know it’s equipped with surveillance mines, as well as conventional multi-wavelength guided anti-tank rockets and two 30mm Gatling-type autocannons, effective range 4 kilometers. What we don’t know is its nuclear capability. What’s Skull Face planning, and how does this ‘weapon to surpass Metal Gear’ fit in?” Huey struggled to find the right words. Ocelot calmly approached and knelt in front of him, face to face. Calmly he asked “Doctor, you’ve been most helpful to the Boss, developing our very own Walker Gear for us. You want to help the Boss, don’t you? You’re on Snake’s side, aren’t you?” Huey looked up, his brow glistening with sweat “Yes! I’ve always been on your side! I believe in Snake, I always have! That’s why I built ZEKE, that’s why I built Sahelanthropus…I always meant for it to make it back into your hands. Th-that’s why I had the cockpit painted with that skull decal—it’s just like the emblem of our old base, back in the Caribbean!” Ocelot smiled and gently put a hand on the doctor’s arm. “Of course. You see Miller? I told you we could trust him.” Huey sighed with relief. Kaz gritted his teeth in anger, but said nothing. Ocelot crossed his arms and began pacing around the room. “There’s just one thing I don’t get Doc. Sure, Sahelanthropus can walk, and that’s quite impressive, but what exactly about it makes it so special? Why are the Soviets looking to deploy it in Afghanistan?”

Huey’s face seemed to brighten. “It’s— it’s a mobile TMD! It’s a revolutionary antiballistic missile system. The idea was to deploy it in strategic ‘hot zones’ all over the world where it could intercept intercontinental ballistic missiles while they’re still high above the earth’s surface. The electromagnetic rail gun technology the CIA developed in Costa Rica can fire a computer-guided missile controlled by an AI.” Kaz made an annoyed sound. “AI huh? That was Coldman’s dream, you just built another Peace Walker!”

Huey grew not just defensive, but angry. “Peace Walker was meant to be merely a deterrent, and it pales in comparison to my Sahelanthropus! Listen, Sahelanthropus will decrease the likelihood of a global nuclear war! It wasn’t designed to launch nukes, only to shoot them down...for defense purposes of course!” Ocelot stepped forward. “The real question is why is Skull Face helping the Soviets to build it? Cipher’s not interested in prolonging the Cold War, but rather looking to shape a new world order in the aftermath. If word of a weapon like that got out, the global panic would start a whole new nuclear arms race. If other nations began to develop their own Metal Gear technology, Sahelanthropus would no longer be the threat that it is, and we’d be right back to the age of deterrence.” Kaz stood up from his seat and moved to stand next to Ocelot. Staring down at
Huey over his glasses he said “That’s one possibility. Or, consider this, a bipedal nuclear equipped walking launch platform capable of delivering a nuclear attack anywhere in the world! Just drop Sahelanthropus onto any continent, and its legs will do the rest. Isn’t that what you built for them Emmerich? You built them a weapon capable of turning any major city in the world into a Hiroshima or a Nagasaki!”

Huey strained against his bonds. “That’s not true! I’m telling you- Sahelanthropus was designed to shoot down nuclear missiles, not launch them! It has a missile module, yes, but…think about it. If the strength of Sahelanthropus is that it can intercept incoming nuclear missiles and remain undetected, standard nuclear weapons wouldn’t do any good.” Ocelot continued pacing while Kaz’s expression turned pensive. “You sure you’re not forgetting something?” Huey shook his head. “I’m not hiding anything! I built them a weapon capable of turning any major city in the world into a Hiroshima or a Nagasaki.” Ocelot continued pacing while Kaz’s expression turned pensive. “If you’re not hiding anything then why won’t you tell us everything you know?” Ocelot raised his hand for Kaz to wait. “Both the Soviets and the U.S. have been working on stealth missile technology since the late ’70s. It’s possible…” With a sudden burst of energy Ocelot walked over and seized Kaz by the shoulders. “Miller, the rail gun! That has to be it.” He turned to Huey. “The rail gun doesn’t burn any propellant, which means that unlike the standard missile’s rocket propulsion system, any warhead launched by Sahelanthropus would be invisible to enemy satellites. Plus, since the projectile doesn’t use fuel, it can’t truly be classified as a missile. I bet the Kremlin expects to use that loophole to get around all sorts of international treaties.” Huey looked confused. “I–I suppose that’s theoretically possible, but how would the Soviets move nukes into Afghanistan without anyone noticing?” Ocelot nodded in understanding. “True, they couldn’t move from their existing arsenal without attracting international suspicion. There have been rumors that organized crime, the so-called ‘Russian Mafia’, have infiltrated Russia’s nuclear forces. It’s possible they could smuggle a miniaturized portable nuclear device into another country.” Kaz frowned “Nuclear weapons require routine maintenance, otherwise they’d just end up as duds. If they were planning on bringing nukes into Afghanistan they’d have to have some place set up to store and work on them.” Ocelot shook his head in agreement. “I’m going back to the GRU. I’ll see what I can found out,” he turned back to Huey. “I’ll tell the Boss. I’m sure he’ll be pleased.” Huey sighed with relief and rubbed his wrists. “Oh thank you! Thank you! I’ll wait for the Boss’s orders.”

Ocelot, Kaz, and Big Boss stepped outside and the guard to Room 101 saluted. Venom returned the salute before lighting up his Phantom Cigar. Frowning, Kaz could feel the weight of the Zippo in his pocket. Venom turned to Ocelot “I have to admit I’m impressed at the progress you two have made. Emmerich’s been…cooperative, to say the least.” Ocelot puffed himself up. “Well Boss, it’s just your standard good cop–bad cop routine.” Venom stared blankly. “So who’s the bad cop?” After a brief silence, Ocelot chose to ignore him and continued “You see while I was heading up interrogations in Afghanistan I came to be quite feared by the Mujahideen. I’ve told you before how they started calling me Shalashaska.” Kaz sighed “Yes, you have. Multiple times.” Ocelot continued “Well, every time some poor soul was drug in from the battlefield they’d start spilling their guts as soon as they heard my name. None of what they confessed was true, of course, they were just so terrified they’d say whatever they had to, or at least what they thought we wanted to hear. The fear of interrogation was so great, rather than seeing the logic in complying, they could use critical thinking to fabricate whatever sort of lies they needed. So I thought, if I could just jar them emotionally by shifting them from one emotional extreme to the next, I could disorient them–disrupt their ability to think critically. I call it a ‘fear-then-relief’ approach.” Venom folded his arms, nodding, as Ocelot continued “I’ve set it up so that, in Emmerich’s mind, he sees Miller as an antagonist. Miller was a little more, shall we say ‘driven’, than I was so I decided to let him intimidate Emmerich–have his way with him. Then, I come in as the sympathetic authority figure. With fear-then-relief, Emmerich becomes much more compliant and likely to go along with suggestions without protest.”
Kaz cleared his throat. “Alright, but the one thing I don’t get is why hasn’t he got wise to your little good cop-bad cop routine? It might work the first time, but after that anyone with half a brain should be able to see what you’re up to.” Ocelot smiled. “That’s where things get a little more complicated. After each session I use hypnosis to put Emmerich in a trance like state. From there, I can implant powerful hypnotic suggestions, altering his memories and softening him up for future interrogations.” Kaz winced “Hypnosis? Really? You expect me to believe that?” Kaz rolled his eyes and looked to Venom for help, only to be dismayed by his fervent nodding. Ocelot resumed speaking, “When he wakes up, he remembers what I want him to remember.” Venom whistled. “Did you hear that Kaz? To think it’s that simple.” Kaz’s face burned hot as Ocelot put his arm around Venom’s shoulder “It’s not quite as simple as all that, Boss, but when somebody wants to believe something is true bad enough, suggestion can be a powerful tool. Dr. Emmerich wants to believe he has allies on this base, so why not give him one? Well, I’m off now. I’ll see you boys in a few weeks. Call me if you need anything.” Venom waved and Kaz huffed. “Oh, and Miller, do try to lighten up a bit.”

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Kaz awoke in the middle of the night, as he often did, gasping for breath. He had the intense feeling of his right hand clutching the blanket, but he no longer needed to look to know that what his mind thought and what his body was capable of weren’t going to match up. He struggled to sit up on the single couch in his office which doubled as a bed, the sweat from his brow glistening from the outside lights pouring through the window. Another sleepless night full of bad memories, the same as every night for the past nine years. This was only his second time waking up, but before the morning this would probably happen at least four or five times. He passed his hand over his face before rising and stumbling over to his desk. He opened one of the drawers, retrieving a bottle of Laphroaig and a small glass.

As he downed the single malt he thought to himself “I can’t do this anymore. I can’t. Why don’t I just end it already? The Boss doesn’t need me. I’m just fooling myself. I’m just holding on, but I feel like I’m drowning. I’ve been dealing with this for so long, but I don’t want to just ‘deal with it’ anymore.” Kaz glanced down at the latched wooden box stowed beneath his desk; it held his Type 94 pistol, another memento from the past. He could feel it stirring within him- all the anger and rage. Day and night all he talked about, all he could think about, was getting even with his enemies. But sometimes, when he was all alone, he had no choice but to face the one person he thought guiltiest of all. He could blame Zero, he could hate Huey but at the end of the day the graves of his men weighed heaviest on his own conscience.

He lifted the box and roughly placed it on the desk, fiddling with the latch he revealed the dull gleam of the pistol within. Trembling, his hand ghosted over the barrel; the cool metal in stark contrast to his whiskey warmed skin. He closed his eyes and imagined what his death would be like. He found himself thinking about that night in the chopper; Chico had died instantly, thankfully, the poor boy had suffered enough. Then there was the medic -best they had- he didn’t make it either. Kaz struggled to remember his codename, it was some French word Cecil had insisted on, Aesculape? So much lost, due in part to his own hubris. His mind snapped back to reality as he felt the weight of the gun in his hand, at some point he had picked it up without realizing it. Gently, Kaz lifted the piece to his head. He was about to make a huge mess of things, one more reason for the men to despise him. Ocelot would probably stand there gloating over his corpse while making pretensions of regret to the Boss. If only he could kill himself in Ocelot’s room. What about the Boss? How would Snake react? Would he mourn Kaz’s passing, or would he be judgmental, disappointed in his XO for abandoning their dream? But Snake seemed so distant now, a gulf of nine years between them, were they even fighting for the same dream anymore? His finger tightened on the trigger, his hand began to shake again and his leg trembled. Tears began to well in the corner of his eyes and he began to sob.
Suddenly he stopped, and listened. He could hear the faint sounds of D Dog barking, and someone yelling. The voice was that of a kid. Kaz felt a stab of panic that perhaps one of the kids had been walking about Mother Base at night and was attacked. Stuffing the gun back under the desk, he leapt from the couch and grabbed his crutch. He made for the door, pausing to tortuously put on his coat. As he stepped outside into the cool night air, he paused to look around. Recently, he found that his senses felt somehow sharper. Listening, he honed in on the sound of the barking and started off in that direction. The yelling grew more intense, and he quickened his pace. He rounded corner after corner until, finally, he saw them.

D Dog was bouncing around Eli playfully, barking and wagging his tail. Eli on the other hand, was anything but playfully tossing rocks at the poor dog’s head. One of them bounced off D Dog, who nevertheless didn’t seem to mind and continued jumping excitedly. “You stupid mutt! Leave me alone or I’ll gut you!” Kaz’s worry turned straight to annoyance as he called out to Eli “Hey! What the hell are you doing out here? Cut that out!” Startled, Eli paused before slowly turning to Kaz and briefly looking him up and down. He narrowed his eyes at the man, then lobbed a rock right at Kaz’s head. “Ouch! Knock it off you little shit before you hurt somebody!” Eli smirked and raised his chin defiantly. “Maybe I want to hurt somebody!” Kaz sighed as D Dog bounded over to him, jumping up to greet him and almost knocking him over. Kaz patted D Dog before turning his attention to Eli. “You’re not even wearing a shirt. You’re going to catch cold out here.” Eli puffed out his chest and crossed his arms. “I don’t need a shirt! Shirts are for sissies!” he sneered, looking towards Kaz’s coat. Kaz bit his lip in frustration. “Look, kid. Why don’t you just come back to my place for a bit and let’s talk.”

Eli snorted. “What are you, some kind of a pervert? Do you think I’m stupid?” Kaz’s face turned red. “Look kid I just want to talk! It’s not exactly like you have any friends around here anyway, so drop the tough guy act. You want a snack or something? I think I have some Doritos or…” This seemed to pique the boy’s interest. “What’s a Dorito?” Kaz laughed. “You’ve never had a Dorito? Oh man, you don’t know what you’re missing. What did your parents give you for a snack, tea biscuits?” Eli snarled “I don’t need snacks, and don’t you dare talk to me about my lousy father!” Kaz raised his eyebrows and held up his hand defensively. “Easy there, I was only joking. Why don’t you come back to my place and we’ll get you a snack? Look, you have twice as many limbs as me, and you can clearly take care of yourself. I think you’re pretty safe.” Eli paused and seemed to consider. “Fine. But if you try anything funny, you’re dead. D’you hear me?”

Kaz turned motioning for Eli to follow. He started hobbling back to his office when Eli dashed ahead, taking the lead. It wasn’t long before Kaz realized that Eli had no idea where Kaz’s office was. He just liked having the illusion of being the one in charge. Kaz chuckled lightly to himself watching Eli pause and wait for him to catch up. As soon as he did, Eli was out in front again scolding him “Hurry up old man, I don’t have all night!” Kaz smirked “Hey, I’m not that old. Not yet.” Suddenly, he stopped, a worried look on his face. “Wait a second, it’s this way, right?” Eli huffed, but Kaz could hear the twinge of panic in his voice as he replied “It’s your office. Shouldn’t you know?” Kaz laughed easily and continued back. “I guess I am getting old. My memory’s not what it used to be.”

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Eli threw himself onto the couch, firmly planting his dirt encrusted feet into Kaz’s pillow, which were quickly smacked away by Kaz’s crutch on his way to his desk. “I sleep on that, kid. Don’t you have any manners?” Eli waited until Kaz passed and began sitting down before putting them back up.settling into his chair, Kaz sighed. “Look, I don’t know where you came from or what you’ve been through, but believe me…I get it. I was just like you when I was younger; nobody wanted me around and that meant I had to be tougher than the other kids, tougher than the adults gave me credit for. I am half American, a constant reminder that Japan had lost the war. In Japan, a lot of the things we do are tied to our community; what job we have, the families we raised. I think
that’s why I always identified with America more. America was always about choosing your own destiny, about being yourself—not what others wanted you to be. I left Japan because I didn’t just want to be the half-breed son of a whore. I had to prove to everyone around me that I deserved to even exist.” Eli folded his arms behind his head and dug his feet in even harder “Is there a point to this sad story?” Digging around his drawers Kaz tossed a bag of Doritos into Eli’s lap. With a look of genuine surprise on his face, Eli sat up and took the bag. “The point is I understand that it probably hasn’t been easy for you. I know you’re not looking for sympathy from an old duffer like me, but if you ever want to talk about something, anything, I’m here. It would probably work better than pelting the knife wielding dog with rocks. Hell, I gotta be honest, I kind of like you kid. I admire the way you demand respect. Nobody really takes me seriously either. Not anymore.”

Eli sat in silence and Kaz worried that this conversation had dried up before it had even really started, before Eli replied “No one really wanted me either. I’m just Cypher’s leftovers. That’s why I ran away.” Kaz leaned forward in his chair “What do you mean by that?” Eli pointedly ignored him and continued “They just wanted to use me, but I won’t let them. I’ll never let anyone boss me around ever again. Especially not an adult” he said, glaring at Kaz. Kaz shifted in his seat uncomfortably, trying to steer the conversation away before it became violent. “So, how’d you end up in Africa? Sounds like you’re from England. That’s pretty far away.” Ripping open the bag of chips Eli inspected the contents carefully before shoving a handful into his mouth. “I lived in England, sure, but I wouldn’t call it home. You wouldn’t call a prison home. I never played with any other kids. While they were in primary, Cypher was teaching me how to kill. That’s why they sent me to Africa. They tricked me. They tried to get me to kill someone who didn’t deserve it just to save someone who did.”

Seeing an opportunity to learn valuable information regarding Cypher, Kaz thought for a moment about pressing the matter further. He decided against it. He’d already managed to get Eli to open up more than he thought possible, and he didn’t want to ruin things now. Kaz took the lull in the conversation as an opportunity to take off his coat, struggling a little as he did so. Noticing Eli staring at his conspicuously pinned sleeve he cleared his throat and asked “Something on your mind?”

“What happened to you? Your arm and leg?” Eli casually wiped his hands on the couch as Kaz poured himself another drink. “I was on a mission in Afghanistan. Our unit was ambushed; I was the only one who made it out alive, but I was taken prisoner. After several weeks, my wounds became infected. They still needed me alive, so it was either this or I die.” Eli continued chomping away at the chips. “Did it hurt?” he asked with a big mouthful, crumbs falling from his mouth. Kaz frowned. He could still remember the feeling of the saw biting through his flesh, every muscle in his body tensing against the pain, Ocelot holding him down and trying to talk to him. He couldn’t hear anything but a deafening ringing in his ears, but could feel in his throat that he was screaming. “Yeah. It hurt a lot. It was probably the single most painful experience of my life, and I’ve been through some shit. How about you?” Eli looked thoughtful for a moment. “Probably being stabbed. I was stabbed once in the leg, in a fight.” Kaz nodded. “Yeah, most kids don’t get stabbed in the leg on the playground. It must be pretty tough.” Eli’s chest swelled with pride as he ate another fistful of chips. “That’s alright, I killed the bastard who did it. Smashed his face in with a bottle.”

Kaz recoiled slightly. He had all but forgotten that he was talking to a child soldier, and for a moment he found himself mourning Eli’s lost childhood for him. “Hey,” he asked, “you can read, right?” Eli sneered “Of course I can read!” Kaz shrugged defensively “Just checking. If that’s the case, I have something you might like.” Kaz slid his chair over to his bookshelf and scanned the titles before grabbing a weathered volume and handing it to Eli. Eli squinted his eyes scanning the title. “Peter and Wendy? Do I look six to you?” he asked in an offended tone. Kaz smiled. “Good books don’t have age limits kid, and I think this one is right up your alley. Just give it a try” he
insisted, waggling the book in Eli’s direction. Eli frowned, hesitating before snatching the book away. He looked down, turning it over in his hands. Kaz smiled, “Besides, I think you could use some escapism.” Kaz could have sworn he saw the shadow of a grin on Eli’s face, but it could have been just a trick of the light. Eli handed back the crumpled chip bag as he headed for the door. Before leaving he turned and said “Thanks, old man.” Kaz grinned “Anytime brat.”

A mere three days later Kaz found his copy of Peter and Wendy sitting outside his office, a note attached to the cover with a single word - “Another.”

Truth Tape IV- Amor Fati

(The sound of a young boy screaming in pain)

“Enough. Now, leave us.”

(Gasping and sobbing)

“I told you he wouldn’t be gentle. You got guts kid. I guess the Les Enfants Terribles Project wasn’t a total failure. So, found your voice yet?”

(Eli spits on Skull Face)

“Go to hell! I don’t care if you are with Cypher. I’m not going back. Not ever.”

(Skull Face steps forward and grabs Eli by the hair. Eli winces in pain)

“You’ve got it all wrong boy. I’m your best chance to get even with Cypher…and Big Boss.”

“What did you say?”

“You heard me. I know they sent you here to kill me, to protect Big Boss. They must be desperate. But you ran away, didn’t you? Ran straight into my little operation. So long as they were after you I couldn’t just let you run around as you please. You understand?”

(Silence)

“Look kid, you’re free to go. Do what you like. You want to meet Big Boss, face to face? I know where to find him.”

“Where is he?”

“And just what are you going to do when you find him?”

(Eli looks unsure of himself)

“Ask him… ask him… why he abandoned me.”

“Oh? What did the Major tell you?”

“He told me enough. He said that, after I was born…created…my father left and he never came back.”

“How sentimental. It pains me to tell you this, but your father never wanted you.”
“What?”

“You see, you’re not the only son he has. Here…”

(Skull Face tosses a dossier at Eli’s feet)

“This will tell you everything. Top secret files from ATGC, a gift from me to you. The Les Enfants Terribles Project produced two sons of Big Boss, twin snakes. Your brother was chosen by Big Boss to exemplify all of his dominant genes, and you…you were given all of his flawed, recessive genes.”

“I…have a brother?”

“Your father and Zero chose you to be nothing more than a stepping stone to greatness, the chaff separated from the wheat. You were garbage from the day you were born.”

(Eli begins sobbing)

“Liar! You’re lying!”

“It’s all in there. Read it when you have the time. Why else would they send you to this god forsaken place? Even if you did kill me, do you really think they’d take you back? You’ve outlived your usefulness. No. It’s easier to dispose of garbage out here, where no one knows and no one cares.”

(Eli is crying now)

“Shut up! Shut up! I hate you!”

“Listen. Have you ever heard the phrase ‘amor fati’? No? It means ‘love of fate’. Not wanting things to be different than they are. You and I, we’re the same. We’re beasts created by man. Our humanity was stolen from us. We can’t be anything but what we are. But that doesn’t mean we’re tools of the government, or anyone else. You were created to fight, so fight for what you believe in. Go, find Big Boss, and when you do, look him in the eye before you carve your name into his wretched hide. But why stop there? It can be you who kills Abel and is cast out by Eve. Then, you can make your own heaven on the bloodstained earth.”
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

We get to see Quiet out on a mission and how she struggles between loyalty to her feelings and loyalty to her mission. Eli gets grounded by Venom and sent to his room. Skull Face's insidious plan begins to take shape and Venom makes a tough decision.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Quiet sat across from Big Boss in the ACC, en route to their next mission, rocking back and forth to Asia’s “Only Time Will Tell.” She loved Western music, loved it loud and loved to rock out, and loved even more that Miller’s attempt to wage psychological warfare on her had backfired. He could blare music into her cell day and night all he wanted. It wasn’t like she needed to sleep anyway. She smiled to herself as she remembered the look on Miller’s face, the way he gritted his teeth with rage and angrily rapped on her cell bars with his cane as Ocelot quipped “I think she likes it Miller. Good eyes, and good ears for music, too.” She glanced over at Snake and caught him smirking in amusement at her. She frowned, which elicited a dry chuckle from Snake.

Venom paused, listening. He stood up and switched off the tape player, adjusting a dial. “What was that? Kaz, repeat.” Miller’s frustrated sigh filled the chopper before he began his lecture “I said ‘Can you turn that damn music down? I’m trying to brief you on the mission.’” Venom pulled out his iDroid, bringing up a map of the area. Quiet got up from her seat and moved to casually sit beside him. Briefly, Snake glanced at her before moving over. If Kaz could see this, he thought to himself, he’d probably have a heart attack.

“Like I said, our ‘clients’ are the Mbele rebels you rescued from that mine. Apparently, their leader is a boy named Shabani. He was taken from the mine a few days before you arrived, and our intel indicates he was taken to a place the locals are calling Nzo ya Badiabulu- it means ‘the Devil’s House’. Officially it’s the Ngumba Industrial Zone. Nearby residents are terrified of it. They say that anyone who’s brought there never returns.” Quiet clutched her rifle a little tighter. Venom began checking his gear. “This Shabani must be a pretty capable leader. We wouldn’t be doing this for free, would we Kaz?”

Quiet thought back to the events of earlier that day, of when she first learned of their current mission and its objective. It didn’t matter that their operations had moved outside of Afghanistan. It didn’t matter where, she couldn’t stand the thought of kids on the battlefield. She had been relaxing on her cot, Ocelot having been occupied with the brand-new shooting range that had been built on base and Miller too busy trying to figure out exactly where from their budget Ocelot had taken to pay for it, for one of their so-called “chat sessions”. Just then, she noticed a boy descending the stairs to her cell. He bore a striking resemblance to Snake, but with greasy blonde hair and a stern expression. He was tough, his was not the body of an average twelve year old, but of a boy who had seen his fair share of combat. When she noticed the jacket he was wearing, it cut right into her. She couldn’t help but think of her baby brother, and her expression softened. Choking back tears, she nonetheless couldn’t avoid the markings that manifested on her face, the parasites way of responding to her stress.

Eli noticed the change and, curious, approached her cell. “Who are you?” he asked. She didn’t
respond. “Are you a prisoner too?” He waited, but still she said nothing. She couldn’t speak with him, not in that tongue. If the others heard them speaking, they’d know she really could talk and after that they’d do anything to make her. Eli frowned, and began asking the same question, no longer in English, but several languages that she didn’t understand.

Her eyes went wide. Could it really be? This boy had just spoken to her in Pashto? It had been almost a year since she had heard anyone speak the language of her people, not since she had left her comrades in the Jamiyat-e Islami. She had been on her own for so long, hearing only Russian and English. Her heart fluttered, and an overwhelming feeling of nostalgia washed over her. She stuttered, "هیچ معنا نه. ژو تامه ارام?

“Well you’re not very quiet, with that music blaring all the time. It sucks by the way. I want to listen to something good.” Quiet shrugged. “I don’t get to choose what music plays. It’s Miller. He thinks of this as some form of torture.” Eli scoffed “Well it’s torturing me. I’ll put in a good word for you. He’s so stupid he’ll do whatever I say. So, what are you doing here anyway?” Quiet’s face grew serious. She looked down at her feet, shifting uncomfortably. What could she tell him? “I’m here because of my father.” Eli clenched his fist in anger. “Because of him-I’m nothing. Cast aside. But it’s not over yet. I’m going to kill him, I’m going to surpass him!” He punched his fist into the cell bars with such ferocity that Quiet was taken aback. Most kids would have been crying after that, but this boy seemed to be burning with determination. Just who was he? “Your-father?”

“Hey, what’s going on down there?” came the voice of Big Boss. Eli turned with hate in his eyes, and stomped back upstairs. Quiet could hear the soft but severe tone of Big Boss, barely above a whisper. “Recess is over. Now get out of here, and don’t let me catch you wondering around base unsupervised again, got it?” Quiet slipped out of her cell and became invisible, creeping up the stairs and into the daylight just in time to see Eli sulking away, and Kaz sidle up to Snake. “Come on Boss, do you really have to be so harsh with him?” Snake frowned. “He’s no ordinary kid, and he needs to know his place. You let him walk all over you.” Quiet smiled. Even she had heard the men around base beginning to call him “Mother Hen” Miller when he wasn’t around. She felt pretty sure that was Ocelot’s doing. From behind his shades, Kaz’s brow furrowed in agitation “You just don’t know kids. Despite that, I have a job for you…”

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Pequod signaled that they were nearing the LZ. Kaz continued “Those kids really look up to Shabani. They gave us the last of their diamonds as payment to see him brought home. But you’re right. That’s not all. The industrial zone was abandoned a long time ago, but a few years back it was sold by the government to a certain corporation. You guessed it, it was SANR, a shell company acting as a front for Cipher. They have a PF actively guarding the area, and the security is no joke. We have no idea what they could be doing in there, and we need to find out. Right now, Shabani’s our best lead. Find him, and we’ll find out what Cipher’s up to. That puts us one step closer to Skull Face.”

As the chopper touched down and the two of them exited, Quiet turned to Snake wordlessly signaling that she would scout ahead. She took off, moving faster than his eye could follow even if she didn’t have the ability to phase in and out of visibility. Soon she had chosen her vantage point and looked back to trace the route of Big Boss without even the aide of her scope. Her abilities still hadn’t ceased to amaze her. How far had she actually moved away from him? 500, 600 metres already? It was dark, but she could see him as plain as day. Something caught her eye. Was that someone he missed? With quick, yet calm precision she raised her rifle and honed in on the target. Just as quickly and Big Boss had taken him down, a single dart to the neck. In no time at all he was extracted back to Mother Base to join the ranks of Diamond Dogs. She smiled. This Big Boss was truly amazing. In such a short time, he had determined this man’s skills to be such an asset as to
spare him his life.

“You’re going to extract him? That’s fine, just don’t lose sight of the mission boss.” Quiet listened to the grating voice of Miller over the radio. He was probably still mad that she had even accompanied the Boss on this mission, yet she insisted on coming. Why? It was for the boy. That’s what she told herself, but she knew that she had another reason. She still had a job to do. She stopped, Snake had too. They could smell it before they found it, the foul smell of smoldering bodies. Through the cover of dark, Quiet spotted the source of the stench- a shallow trench and the charred remains of a dozen or so bodies. She grunted over the radio, then used her rifle’s laser sight to guide Snake’s eye to the bodies. He scanned them with the iDroid, the images instantly transmitted back to Mother Base. “Kaz, see if the Intel team can ID these guys.”

“Some kind of mass execution? But, why leave them like that?” Kaz asked. “Whatever happened it looked like they were in a hurry. Boss, hurry and find the target.” There was urgency in Kaz’s voice. For all his tough talk and hard ass demeanor, his soft spot for kids was one of the few qualities about him that Quiet found she could respect. Ahead there was a small guard post and a truck. The intel file had mentioned that there was only one way in or out of the Industrial Zone, a single tunnel hewn out of the rock face. To get to the tunnel, there was a single route which only PF trucks were allowed through the checkpoints. That was no problem for Big Boss. Spotting one of the trucks he nimbly climbed in back and waited. As the driver started the truck, Snake checked the Intel file on his iDroid again. His current location was Munoko ya Nioka, and there were at least two guard stations up ahead. Suddenly, Snake jumped to discover that Quiet had snuck into the back of the truck just as it had taken off. She was living up to her name, as usual. He smirked “Guess you didn’t want to walk either.” Quiet feigned a smile, while in her head she was wondering why she hadn’t taken the opportunity to silently kill Snake, sneak right up behind him and slit his throat. This had been a perfect chance, maybe the only one she would ever get. Why? She felt something gnawing at her- was it doubt? “You can do this,” she reminded herself. “For your people. You have to kill Big Boss. Kill him, and then…”

Before long the driver stopped at another outpost, leaning outside the window to greet the commanding officer. Ocelot spoke over the radio “They even have a guard post out here? Security sure is tight. I guess they don’t want anyone poking around. Boss, find out what Rogue Coyote are guarding.” The officer saluted the new recruit, who returned it. “HQ has new orders for you rookie. Relieve the guard up ahead.” The driver looked confused. “Huh?” The CO frowned, clearly having expected the rookie driver to not question the order. “We’re short staffed and his shift is over. You’ll be taking over at the guard post before the tunnel. Once you get to the riverside guard post, head into the forest.” The driver shifted uncomfortably. “R-right.” The CO put his hand on the driver’s shoulder, but it seemed more of a warning than reassurance. ‘Devils’ who whisper curses at you or some shit. Just be careful out there. The last guy, he went into the tunnel and…Look, you lose it and start shooting at phantoms, we’re all fucked. Got it?’

The driver had continued from there on foot, both Snake and Quiet following at a safe distance, through the valley. There was something about this mission that had Snake’s blood pumping. Maybe it was because he knew how important this mission was—both to Kaz and to those kids. More importantly, they knew Cipher was involved with whatever was going on in the Ngumba Industrial Zone, and that meant Skull Face was involved. Skull Face. The very thought of him caused Snake’s stomach to knot with rage. They passed a handful of guards at a dingy outpost taking pot shots at target dummies, continuing through the mist enshrouded valley, following the truck driver up a steep embankment.

“There’s a cliff blocking the objective area. You’ll have to take the path.” Kaz cautioned. Finally, Snake stopped at the guard post outside the tunnel. The driver waited as another member of Rogue
Coyote, no doubt the guard whose shift he was taking, strode up beside him. He was swarthy with a brooding expression. “You’re here to take over? Just remember this— that tunnel up ahead is off limits. Do NOT go in there, no matter what you hear or think you hear. You get curious and you’ll end up like the last driver.” The driver turned pale. This was not his day. “Did-something happen to him?” The guard paused, considering whether was saying too much. “He went through the tunnel, to the factory on the other side. I don’t know what the hell he saw in there, but he came back out screaming like a fucking lunatic. He had these—people—in his truck. They looked like they were diseased or something, more dead than alive. I was on duty at the station and reported it. I thought he was going to drive through the roadblock, I didn’t know what else to do, you know? So I reported it to command. But…but then this other crew, guys I’d never seen before, they came out of nowhere and before I knew it they shot him on sight. They just burned the whole truck, with all those people inside. They killed him, killed all those people, and then they were gone just like that. I don’t know why the hell they didn’t kill me, too. The way I figure it, they wanted someone alive to warn other people, so now I’m telling you—stay the fuck out of that tunnel, got it?”

While the two guards were talking, Snake had already snuck past them and made his way through the tunnel. Quiet, naturally, had followed. Snake got on his radio. “Kaz, looks like we’ve got a lead on those bodies at the station. They were from the factory up ahead. It wasn’t Rogue Coyote that took them out. If this is a Cipher facility, it must’ve been XOF.” There was a pause over the radio, before Kaz answered “You’ve made it to the objective Boss. Now, find the target. I just hope he’s alive.” Snake signaled Quiet to wait and provide cover, and she took her vantage point scouting the area, while Snake surveyed at ground level. The place was a mess of old construction equipment and half-finished buildings. Exposed steel girders had long since rusted over, and the concrete facilities were overgrown with moss and lichen. The area was dead silent. No birds, no rustling of the underbrush, nothing made a sound. Snake made his way from one dilapidated building to the next, peering through broken windows and around corners, being careful of the broken glass and rusted nails. Nothing. Finally, Snake noticed an abandoned warehouse at the far end of the site, large enough for whatever operation Cipher had going.

As he approached the warehouse, the wind picked up and a foul stench arose. He wrinkled his nose in mild disgust, but continued. The windows were all boarded up, and from what he could see a single, heavy iron door was the only way in. It was rusted, all except for new hinges which were suspiciously and conveniently well oiled. Snake readied his weapon and prepared to breach. The door opened with ease, and Snake was immediately greeted by a horrible smell; a mingling of blood, feces and urine, and the putrid odor of anaerobic infection. Cautiously, Snake made his way inside the warehouse, his boots squelching in puddles of blood. While the walls were filthy, they were anything but neglected. In several places, Snake could see fresh brick and mortar, and the roof had been reinforced with wooden beams in weak areas. The walls themselves were lined with shelves of medical equipment of varying age, as well as charts and graphs. Snake paused, listening. He could hear the faint sound of voices, fuzzy and distorted. A recording of some kind? Maybe a tv? He moved slowly in that direction. At the end of the hallway he made a left and passed through an archway. The way was blocked by a hospital curtain. Snake grabbed it preparing to draw the curtain back. The stench intensified, like a dead animal, and instinctively he let the curtain fall back.

Snake hesitated, then grasped the curtain again pulling it aside. He froze. Before him was a body in mild disgust, but continued. The windows were all boarded up, and from what he could see a single, heavy iron door was the only way in. It was rusted, all except for new hinges which were suspiciously and conveniently well oiled. Snake readied his weapon and prepared to breach. The door opened with ease, and Snake was immediately greeted by a horrible smell; a mingling of blood, feces and urine, and the putrid odor of anaerobic infection. Cautiously, Snake made his way inside the warehouse, his boots squelching in puddles of blood. While the walls were filthy, they were anything but neglected. In several places, Snake could see fresh brick and mortar, and the roof had been reinforced with wooden beams in weak areas. The walls themselves were lined with shelves of medical equipment of varying age, as well as charts and graphs. Snake paused, listening. He could hear the faint sound of voices, fuzzy and distorted. A recording of some kind? Maybe a tv? He moved slowly in that direction. At the end of the hallway he made a left and passed through an archway. The way was blocked by a hospital curtain. Snake grabbed it preparing to draw the curtain back. The stench intensified, like a dead animal, and instinctively he let the curtain fall back.

Snake hesitated, then grasped the curtain again pulling it aside. He froze. Before him was a body on a small field gurney, two more bodies zipped up in bloody body bags were pushed aside into the corner. The man before him was an African male, middle aged, naked to the waist except for a surgical bib placed over his chest. He was hooked up to what Snake at first took to be an IV, but upon closer inspection was not inserted into a vein in the man’s arm, but rather his neck.

Big Boss slowly put away his gun and took out his flashlight. He bent over the man, listening for the sound of his breathing. His breathing was strained, and although his eyes were open they were
completely clouded over. The man, if he could see Snake at all, made no attempts to acknowledge.
Snake reached down and tugged the bandage over the man’s throat aside, revealing that the tube
had been inserted via a small incision into the man’s throat. Big Boss paused, considering, before
sharply yanking the tube free. The man sighed weakly, and then went silent. To Snake’s surprise it
wasn’t an IV at all, but rather a headphone. He lifted the ear piece up to his own ear and listened.
He heard unintelligible wailing and sobbing, followed by a voice deep and menacing, speaking in a
language he didn’t understand. He could hear the sound of boots to the chest, the sound of ribs
breaking and the air escaping a man’s lungs. More sobs followed by shouting. It was an
interrogation.
Snake’s eyes followed the cord up to a tape player hanging from the IV stand. It was a recorded
headphone into the victim’s throat? Letting the headphone fall, Snake turned his attention to the
man’s chest. Slowly, he dragged the bib off. His eye widened. Just like the bodies that had been
found floating in the river at Bwali ya Masa, the man’s chest was covered in large, wet tumors.
Looking closely, Snake could make out the faint outlines of some kind of worms squirming
beneath the epidermis. Were they eating him alive? Gently, he touched the man’s chest with his
bionic hand. Water. It was as if the poor soul was losing all his body’s moisture at once. Disgusted,
Snake flicked his hand dry and decided to continue the search for Shabani.

“Sweet Jesus, what the hell are they doing in there?” Kaz gasped over the radio. Ocelot joined in
“It looks like they’re some sort of test subjects. But for what? Do you think the kid’s one of them?”
Kaz stammered “If he is, Boss, you have to hurry!” Grim faced, Snake knew he had to find
Shabani and fast. He made his way through the facility, looking behind curtain after curtain. Each
time he saw several victims, some dead, some arguably alive, all with the same procedure having
been done to them. “Kaz, are you getting this?” Finally, Snake pulled back a curtain to reveal the
body of a small child, strapped tight to a makeshift operating table. Checking the photo on his
iDroid, there was no doubt that this boy was Shabani.
Snake knelt over the boy, his young frame thin and wasted away from the worms eating away at
him. His breath came in ragged gasps, and his whole body was slick with sweat. His chest had the
same strange tumors as the other body. He was clutching something weakly in his hand. Snake
gently uncurled his fingers and retrieved a small wooden necklace. Could he risk bringing him
back to base? That was his mission, to bring him back alive, but even assuming that Shabani could
survive until their extraction, they had no idea what they were up against. Their Med staff had
quarantine procedures, sure, but if Cipher had infected these people with some sort of disease or
contagion, it could be anything. Worse, it could be something nobody had ever seen before.

“Shabani?” Snake whispered, “Your boys sent me.” Slowly, Shabani’s eyes opened and his head
tilted to the side, searching for the source of the voice. His eyes were milky and clouded, the lids
fluttering weakly. “Shabani, who did this to you? Who did this?” Shabani struggled to speak and
began coughing and sputtering blood, his words mere mumbling. “Shabani tell me who did this.
What were they doing here?” Shabani squirmed in agitation, whether out of pain or an attempt to
answer him Snake couldn’t tell. Could this “thing” be the weapon to surpass Metal Gear? Not a
technological, but a biological weapon of mass destruction? They needed answers, and it looked
like their best lead could expire at any minute.

“Boss? What’s going on?” Kaz’s voice cut through the air. “What’s happening?” What should he
do? This might be their only chance to learn the truth, but Shabani seemed in no shape to talk.
Could Snake get him to talk? “Shabani? Shabani can you hear me? I need you to tell me what they
did to you.” Shabani struggled against his bonds, weak but moaning in great pain. “Boss, you’ve
got to hurry, get Shabani to the extraction point!” Snake doubted very much whether he would
even last that long. “I can’t Kaz. The kid’s been infected with something, if I bring him back the
whole base could be exposed.” With mounting agitation in his voice Kaz replied “What about the
quarantine?” Snake shook his head. “Too risky. We can’t chance it.” There was a brief pause over the radio, before Kaz demanded “So you’re just going to leave him there? To die?” At first Snake felt confusion, then shame, and finally humiliation and anger. “If he brings something back we could all die,” he snapped. “I’m in command here and I say that he’s not setting foot on our base.” Before Kaz could argue any further, Big Boss switched frequencies. He couldn’t believe that Kaz let his attachment to some kids cloud his judgment. This was bigger than them, all of them. Didn’t he see that? He had waited nine long years for Snake to return, and this was the closest they had come to Cipher. He wasn’t going to let Kaz and his personal feelings jeopardize this mission. He had gave Kaz too much leeway before, too much control, and it had cost them everything. What was he going to do next? What would Big Boss do? He pulled out his combat knife, turning the blade over in the air. The light gleaming from the blade caught Shabani’s eye and he struggled even more, crying out in fear and pain.

“Calm down. Calm down! I’m cutting you loose.” Snake sliced through the straps and Shabani’s struggling and wailing intensified. Big Boss gently, but firmly, placed both hands on the boy’s shoulders and said “Shabani listen to me! You have to tell me who did this. Who did this to you?” The boy just kept crying, the only words that Snake could make out were “Stop! No!” He shook the boy a little. “What did they do? You have to tell me- what did they do?!” Now he was shaking the boy hard. Time was running out, “Shabani? Shabani?!” The boy’s cries fell silent and his body went limp in Snake’s hands.

It took a moment for this to register with Big Boss. Fuck! Now the boy was dead, and there went their best lead on Skull Face. No. There was more than enough proof lying dead or dying around him, and besides that, they didn’t need hard evidence to pass judgment on Skull Face. Just then, Snake could hear the iron door open, followed by the sound of footsteps crunching over glass, splashing in deep puddles of blood. He crouched behind the table and readied his weapon, waiting. It wasn’t Quiet, but it couldn’t be a member of Rogue Coyote either-why would Quiet have missed him? Snake listened. These footsteps were not cautious or light. Whoever this was, they knew this place well.

Peering over the body of Shabani, Snake could make out a dark silhouette. The man spoke in what Snake recognized as Afrikaans, his voice deep and menacing. He didn’t understand the language, but the tone and intonation was all too familiar. There, brandishing what appeared to be a sawed-off Winchester rifle, was Skull Face. Remorseless, he shot and killed the man Snake had examined earlier. Snake backed up, trying to move to a better position, when the broken glass that he hadn’t noticed before crushed beneath his boot heel, alerting Skull Face to his presence. With reflexes on par with those of the legendary mercenary, Skull Face sunk to a half-crouched position and reloaded his gun with one, swift motion. The lever-action repeating rifle, known as the “Gun That Won the West”. It was so successful it spurred Samuel Colt to produce a .44-40 version of the Single Action Army known as the “Frontier Six Shooter,” which Snake remembered happened to be one of Ocelot’s favorite models.

“You…” Skull Face said, contemptuously, glaring at Big Boss down the barrel of his gun. Snake, too, had his sights trained on Skull Face as he slowly made his way into the light. “Skull Face.” His expression unreadable, Skull face gestured to the bodies around them. “Fascinating creatures, aren’t they? Organisms that can only live by leeching off the life of others, manipulating their host’s behavior. We, too, are invaded by parasites. From the moment we’re born we are invaded by words, burrowing and breeding inside us. Words are… peculiar. Words impregnate us with ideas, and these ideas alter our behavior, spreading ideas to others.”

Big Boss frowned. “What the hell are you talking about? Parasites are organisms. An idea is just a concept.” Had his face not been permanently frozen in that ghastly grin, Big Boss would have seen Skull Face smile. “And a concept is what- symbols on a piece of paper? Vibrations of the air? Or maybe electrochemical signals in the brain’s neural network? Ideas and parasites are both living
things. What is an organism, after all, but information? The blueprint of life, DNA, is nothing but a strand of information. The word made flesh.”

In such narrow space it would be impossible for Snake to circle round, and there was precious little cover for him to dive behind should the bullets start flying. How the hell did Skull Face get past Quiet anyway? Could he have possibly got the drop on her and killed her before she even noticed he was there? Snake doubted it, and wouldn’t he have heard any gunshots anyway? Right now, Snake knew his best chance for survival was to try and keep Skull Face talking. “Nine years ago, you took everything from me. You killed my comrades, my friends. Left me for dead. Tell me why?” Skull Face’s eyes narrowed. “If you want to catch a big fish, you need the right kind of bait. The only thing that would bring the Major out of hiding was you.”

Snake’s finger tightened on the trigger. “Major Zero? You did all that, just to get to Zero?” Tense, Snake waited for even the slightest falter in his adversary’s guard. Skull Face gave no opening. “You’ve heard the story of the Tower of Babel, right Boss? A united mankind built a tower reaching to the heavens. God, angered by their hubris, confounded their speech and scattered them across the world. You see, the diversity of the world’s cultures, their religions, none of it would have been possible without the diversity of language. The Major is building that tower once more, bringing humanity together as one.” Venom scoffed. “So what, you’re God now?”

“Then that must make you the devil. Do you believe in Hell, Big Boss? I do. I’ve seen it. I believe this world is Hell, and we’re all dead men walking.” Skull Face lowered the gun and turned. Snake fired three shots in rapid succession, all hitting their target dead on. Skull Face paused, unmoved by the bullets that had struck him in the back. He turned to glare at Snake over his shoulder. “Burn with the rest of them.”

For a moment, Snake saw something almost like it was out of the corner of his eye. It looked like a figure, a boy, floating in the air behind Skull Face. Some kind of hallucination? Snake could feel a presence to his left and spun around to meet the danger. Too late. His vision was engulfed in flames, and the Man On Fire was on top of him, both monstrous hands wrapping around his neck threatening to crush his windpipe. The pressure from the intense heat and the iron grip of the giant were choking Snake; he struggled but couldn’t escape. Suddenly, the Man On Fire stopped and the flames went out. Snake switched back to Kaz’s frequency. “I need immediate evac! Get a chopper out here now!”

Snake scrambled to his feet while the visual link was restored and Miller took stock of the situation. Seeing this as his chance to escape, Snake made a mad dash for the exit. To his surprise, Quiet was there, standing in the archway leading out. She was just standing there, the Floating Boy hovering in front of her wordlessly. The boy floated back over to the Man On Fire, who suddenly seemed to come alive again, wailing like a demon. “Boss get the fuck out of there!” Kaz panicked. Quiet remained motionless. Snake grabbed her by the shoulders, shaking her. “Hey!” he shouted. She fixed him with a baleful stare and he was truly taken aback by the look in her eyes. Her pupils contracted in hate before the skin around her eyes turned black, her flesh peeling off her skin as her body deflected the light. Snake could see the splashes of blood as she escaped down the hall, and he broke into a run after her. He glanced behind him quickly to see the Man On Fire explode around the corner in pursuit.

“Run Boss it’s him again!” Ocelot shouted “You can’t let him catch you Boss!” The whole place was coming down, and as Snake exited into the industrial zone he saw that the dry brush had already caught fire. Suddenly, a huge explosion rocked him and Snake could hear the metal and debris raining down around him. “Take cover Boss!” Ocelot warned. Snake swung his ADAM-SKA SP around and squeezed off a few rounds before a fireball knocked the weapon out of his hand. Falling into a roll, Snake extinguished the flames, and emerged in a crouch. He freed his combat knife and braced himself. It was Kaz’s turn to shout “He spotted you! He’s coming!” The Man On Fire leapt at him with a roar, and Snake tried to seize the advantage of the movement with
CQC. He was quickly overpowered by the brute’s size and strength and thrown through the air like a ragdoll, shattering through a dirt encrusted old window and into one of the abandoned buildings.

Snake lay in a crumpled mass on the dirt floor, blood dribbling down the corner of his mouth as he muttered “Kaz!” Back at base, Miller’s one gloved hand gripped tightly around the microphone “I’ll have the chopper touch down past the tunnel. Get over there now!” Snake pulled himself to his feet, but the Man On Fire was already on top of him. He tried to stick him with the knife, but fearlessly the monster seized the blade in one massive hand. Desperately, Snake tried to cut through the man’s fingers, but the Man On Fire twisted his elbow attempting to wrench the knife from Snake’s grasp. Snake could feel his shoulder pop as a jolt of pain went down his right arm. Just then, a shot rang out, and the Man On Fire violently lurched forward. He turned his attention away from his prey, just long enough for Snake to flee. He could hear Ocelot’s voice in his ear “Look at that! She’s covering the boss!” Another shot rang out, and the Man On Fire staggered back. Snake knew bullets wouldn’t work on this freak, and thinking back to their last encounter he remembered there was only one way to fight fire.

“This is Pequod! On route to LZ!” Snake slumped against a wall and placed his bionic hand over his right shoulder. Thinking back to the hospital, he also remembered what Ishmael had told him after setting his broken arm He grinned in nostalgia, and then groaned as he popped his shoulder back into place. With a deep, guttural roar the Man On Fire hurled one of his fireballs at Quiet. She was too quick for him though, dashing away as the ridge where she had been was incinerated. Barely tracking her with his eyes, Snake could see she had landed on a rooftop and resumed firing at the beast. As fast as she was, neither of them would last much longer as the whole industrial zone gradually became an inferno.

Snake looked around wildly for something, anything he might use to slow the man down. He had seen the Man On Fire tear his way through a tank, knock a helicopter out of the sky and hurl an ambulance through the air like it was nothing. Even if they survived long enough for Pequod to arrive, there was no guarantee they could make it out alive. “What are my chances the forecast is calling for rain?” Snake asked dryly. Then, he spotted something better. A water tower, and he just happened to have some C4 on hand. He turned to locate Quiet as she leapt from rooftop to rooftop. “Quiet!” he shouted, motioning towards the water tower. Briefly, she turned her attention away from the shower of fireballs to where Snake was pointing. With a thumbs up, she signaled that she got the message loud and clear.

The Man On Fire turned his attention back to Snake, lowering his center of gravity and charging in an attempt to crush Snake against the wall. At the very last moment, Snake slipped sideways and the Man On Fire slammed through the wall while Snake darted towards the water tower. His lungs burned, chest pounding, as he raced to the tower and began methodically placing the plastic explosives on the struts. He looked up briefly to see the giant thundering after him. He would have to draw him in, dangerously close, relying on Quiet’s timing to be precise. He only had two bombs in place before he realized the Man On Fire was there, failing to account for his unbelievable speed. Snake just had to hope that this old piece of shit was so structurally unsound only two would be enough. “Now!” he screamed to Quiet at the top of his lungs. At the very moment the Man On Fire was upon him, Snake leapt away rolling to safety. Quiet aimed and fired. The explosion blew away two strut legs, and the combined weight of the tower along with the years of rust and neglect were enough to bring the whole structure down. Hundreds of gallons of old, dirty water rushed out sweeping over the Man On Fire. With one final, almost mournful howl the apparition disappeared. “This is Pequod! On station at LZ! Will stand by!” Apprehensive, Kaz asked “Did that do it?” He crumpled into his chair and breathed a sigh of relief. “Quick, now’s your chance to get on the chopper!”

Exhausted, Snake made his way to the landing zone and hoisted himself up into the chopper. He
rested his head on the back of the seat, closing and opening his eye slowly. It was all like a bad dream. Tense, Snake waited for the familiar sound of Quiet boarding the chopper as well. Soon enough and she was there, silently taking her seat. At first, she wouldn’t look at him, before slowly turning to meet his gaze. His face bloodied and cut by the window glass, Snake grinned. Quiet turned away almost bashfully, before looking back to return the smile.

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When Snake arrived back at Mother Base the first thing he did was to deliver Shabani’s necklace wordlessly to the kids. He wanted to try and avoid Kaz as much as possible, but his XO had an almost uncanny way of knowing where Snake was when he wanted to be alone. Snake was headed to the shooting range, the one thing he did that passed as a hobby and oddly enough he found relaxing, when he noticed Kaz hobbling towards him out of the corner of his eye. For a while he kept pace, hoping Kaz would take the hint and leave him be. Of course, he didn’t, so finally Snake felt obliged to slow down and let him catch up.

“That was some mission, huh Boss? What the hell was that thing?” Maybe if he was lucky, he could steer the conversation his way. “Don’t know. He was at the hospital too. He took out the XOF hit squad like they were nothing.” Kaz shook his head. “To think Skull Face has something like that under his control. And, just what the hell were they doing at the devil’s house?” Snake sighed “Don’t know Kaz, maybe the Intel team should look into it.” They were almost to the range, and from the echo of gunshots in the distance, they wouldn’t be alone. “We were recording audio the whole time you were there. We’ll have a full analysis for you.”

Impatiently, Snake turned to face Kaz, lighting up his cigar. “Anything else?” Kaz looked askance at his boss. “What happened in there Boss? With Shabani?” Snake let out a thick puff of smoke. “He didn’t make it.” Snake turned to walk away when Kaz seized him by the arm, gently squeezing. “Boss, I made a promise to those kids. Just what am I going to tell them?” Snake shrugged off Kaz’s hand. “I already took care of it. It’s nothing to worry about.” Kaz gritted his teeth in mounting anger. “What happened to the radio? Did you take care of that, too?” Big Boss huffed “You want me to put our men at risk to save some kid? Everything we’ve worked for, bled for? Every night, I have nightmares about that day, Kaz. I can see them, dying all around me. I see Paz, too. The look in her eyes right before she—’ Big Boss fell silent. Defeated, Kaz turned to leave as Snake called out to him “I won't rest until they've been avenged Kaz. Until then, nothing will get in our way.”

Snake turned the corner to find the source of the gunshots they heard earlier. It was a single bullet, ricocheting off one target after the other, striking five targets in quick succession. Snake clapped and, beaming with pride, Ocelot turned juggling his two Tornado 6 revolvers in the air. “That’s some fancy shooting. I see you got yourself some new revolvers.” Ocelot stopped, pointing both weapons directly in Snake’s face. Big Boss stood stock still, a twinkle of amusement in Ocelot’s eyes. Ocelot paused, before dramatically holstering both. “Mmm yeah, they’re a little something I had R&D build. My own design, loosely based on the Russian Uragan-5. I hate to say it, but it just isn’t the same as my usual. I guess you can’t mess with a classic can you, Boss?” Snake drew the ADAM-SKA. Ocelot chuckled. “Engravings give you no tactical advantage whatsoever. Isn’t that right, Boss?” Snake smirked, firing off a few rounds. “It looks nice though.”

Ocelot placed one slender hand on Snake’s shoulder. “Boss, you switched frequencies with Miller inside the Devil’s House…but my frequency was still open. I heard everything.” Snake grew quiet. “And?” Ocelot slowly withdrew his hand and rotated around Snake to face him. “You did what you had to do, what you thought was best for the mission. You never lost sight of the mission. You never lost sight of the mission. Miller….well, he takes things too personally, he lets himself get too emotionally involved. You can’t expect him to understand.” Snake holstered his weapon, taking a long drag on his cigar. “Of course, you know you can trust me to keep it a secret.” Of course Ocelot could keep secrets,
better than anyone Big Boss knew. That’s why he was one of the few people Big Boss felt he could absolutely trust. After what happened twelve years ago, Big Boss found trust was a delicate thing. “Ocelot, there’s something else. Earlier today, I…I overheard Eli talking to. Quiet.” Ocelot’s brow furrowed and he stepped closer. “You’re sure? What did they say?” Snake shook his head. “I don’t know. It sounded like Arabic to me. The kid spoke it like a native. Do you think that’s why she won’t talk to us, because no one on base speaks Arabic?” Ocelot paused to consider. “Doubtful. Even if no one spoke her language, whether out of fear or the pain of interrogation she should have said something by now. Physiologically, she’s perfectly capable of speech. She hasn’t let any of us get close enough to do extensive tests, but she doesn’t appear to suffer from any brain damage either. Previously, I had two working theories but I think now we can narrow them down to one; she’s a selective mute, meaning she has the ability to speak, but otherwise chooses not to around people she doesn’t feel comfortable with.”

Snaked looked at Ocelot incredulously. “You mean to tell me she’d rather be tortured than speak because she doesn’t feel ‘comfortable’?” Ocelot held up his hands, pleading for Snake to hear him out. “No, but if she already suffers from anxiety severe enough that she’s selectively mute, putting her through the distress of an interrogation is certainly not going to alleviate her anxiety. Now, if you’re right about what you heard, considering we found her in Afghanistan, there’s a good chance she’s a victim of the Soviet invasion.” Snake nodded “A war orphan.” Ocelot continued “Something may have happened to her, hell any number of things, that would’ve traumatized her. That’s where the anxiety comes from.” Snake ran his flesh hand over his face, tired. “So what do you think we should do?” Ocelot leaned over the railing, staring out into the sunset. “Take her on missions, give her more freedom around base. The more we make her feel safe and included, she might just open up to us.” Snake prepared to leave. “I’ll think about it.” Ocelot called after him “One more thing Boss. You mentioned Eli. You know, Miller’s taken quite a liking to the boy. He’s even arranged to have a DNA test done, to prove whether or not he really is your son. I highly doubt that’s going to be the case, but if it is, what are you going to do?” Snake paused. “As long as he knows his place, and he stays in line, I don’t care who he is. He’s just another person to me.”

Chapter End Notes

Note- Quiet and Eli continue to speak to one another in Pashto, however, I myself do not speak the language and was finding that, shocker, Google Translate was mangling the intended message. So, after a few sentences I decided to write the rest in English so as to make sure the message came across. If I remember correctly, Eli asks for her name and Quiet’s response is "A name means nothing on the battlefield. I am called Quiet."
It was only just 6 a.m. and Kazuhira Miller was already working on his third pot of coffee, the shades to his office drawn allowing in only thin slivers of morning light. He always had something to do—payroll reports, logistics, delivery schedules. He was pawing his way through admission reports to sick bay, slightly surprised at the steady increase of admittance. “Must be something going around,” he thought to himself, turning to the computer to type. “I better order some flu awareness posters.”

In strode Ocelot, his gait slow and each footfall measured, heavy, ensuring his ridiculously unnecessary spurs were as loud and annoying as possible. With no reserve, he flopped onto Miller’s couch and firmly planted his boots into the pillow. Kaz, by now used to Ocelot’s crass lack of manners, doesn’t even glance away from the computer monitor as he mutters “Really? The spurs?” With a sly grin, Ocelot crosses his legs removing one, but only one. “Miller, we need to talk.” With growing annoyance, Kaz pauses his typing, tapping one of the keys with his index finger. “What, Ocelot?” Ocelot shifts his weight on the couch, getting extra comfy. Over the years, he’d made it a sport finding new and inventive ways of tormenting his rival, and he knew invading Miller’s personal space like this would be sure to make his skin crawl.

“It’s about Quiet.” The tapping ceased. “We all saw what she did out there. How she saved the Boss at the Devil’s House. Her abilities are beyond incredible, and I think she’s more than proven her loyalty. Don’t you think it’s time we made her a proper Diamond Dog? Let her go out on missions for real instead of having to sneak out of her cage? Hell, DD is treated more like a person than she is.” At the mention of his name, D Dog perked up from the corner of the office where he had been sleeping, only to plod over to Kaz and flop back down lazily at his foot. DD was counted by Kaz as one of his few victories over Ocelot, who, although he had personally trained DD for combat in the field, was largely ignored by the large and dopey dog. When he wasn’t on missions with the Boss, DD preferred to follow Kaz around, not even minding the man’s slower pace.

“That’s because she’s a freak, not a person. Her, one of us? Don’t make me laugh.” Ocelot swung his feet over the side of the couch to sit up, knocking off one of the pillows as he did so. “That’s two we owe her, or have you forgotten?” With growing irritation, Kaz drummed his fingers on the edge of the desk. “What’s your point?” Now Ocelot was up, sauntering over to lean on Kaz’s desk. It’s another gesture of disrespect, a way of keeping the heat on Miller. Ocelot knows Snake is already on his side. Kaz is fighting a losing battle. “My point is that things have changed. The way the men look at her is changed; when she first got here, they were scared to death of her, wouldn’t even look at her. Now, they all know she saved the Boss. Twice. She must want to be here, for one reason or another. If she didn’t she could leave at any time. She’s had plenty of chances to get to the Boss, and if she really wanted him dead, why would she have saved him at the Devil’s House? She put herself in harm’s way just to make sure he’d survive.”

Deep inside, a part of Kaz knew what Ocelot said made sense. He hated that most of all. “I said it before, she was just saving herself. If she tried to come back here without him, I’d shoot her myself, and if she abandoned him and took off, we’d just hunt her down.” It wasn’t that Kaz didn’t believe she had saved Snake’s life, more, it was the fact that it had been her, and not himself, that saved Big Boss that made Kaz hate her even more. Every time Ocelot gushed about her abilities or her performance in the field, it was a painful reminder to Kaz of what he himself was no longer capable of. No more running from Columbian rebels, back-to-back with Big Boss in firefights with hostile drug lords that Kaz had double-crossed, dragging one another limp and bleeding as they escaped from the flaming wreckage of their former Mother Base.
Ocelot leaned further over the desk, his one gloved hand brushing against a stack of papers threatening to knock them to the floor. Ready to snap, Miller’s hand shot out to grab the stack and pull them away from Ocelot, who explained “I’m not saying put her on the payroll, but let’s give her the freedom to come and go as she pleases. Let her mingle with the men, get to know them better. They need to know they can trust her, trust in the Boss’s judgment for bringing her here, and she needs to know that she can trust them, too.”

Kaz snickered. “Trust? You want me to trust that-thing? No way. If you’re so damn confident she’s on our side, then tell me why the hell she won’t just say so herself?” Ocelot picked up the name plate on Kaz’s desk, started turning it over in his hands almost as though it were a toy. “I never said she was on our side, all I said was that when it comes to the Boss I don’t think she has it in her to pull the trigger.” With mock delicacy, Ocelot placed the name plate back on the desk-crooked. “As for the silent treatment, I’ve told you my theory. We don’t have any conclusive proof as to her ethnicity or where she came from, but judging by her darker tone and the fact we picked her up at the Aabe Shifap Ruins, I think we can at least assume she might be a native. You and I have both seen what the Soviets have been doing to those people for the past five years. It’s possible she won’t speak because of the trauma she’s suffered.” Miller made a snide noise. “You’ve seen what she can do. She’s killed dozens of Soviet officers, your own comrades, and you want to talk about how she’s the victim?”

Ocelot glared at Kaz. “She tried to kill the Boss, too, but she’s given up on that. The only way we’re going to find out why is if we can get her to trust us. In my experience, that’s the most effective way to get someone to talk. The men she killed were invaders of her country. Hell, to her we’re probably no different, just a bunch of men with guns. I think she was out for revenge. You should understand that better than anyone.” Kaz snorted. “Don’t compare me to that witch!” With that, Miller rose from his seat and prepared to leave, but not before remarking “I want to hear her say it. I want her to beg me to stay here, and maybe—just maybe—I’ll consider it. But if that attitude of hers doesn’t change, she can forget about ever leaving this base alive.” Ocelot stepped between him and the door. “You’re assuming you have some say in the matter. It’s the Boss’s decision, and I think he’s already made up his mind.”

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A trail of dust followed in Snake’s wake as his jeep bounced along the ragged dirt road, carving its way through the barren countryside. The civil war in the Angola-Zaire border region had devastated the civilian population, each village that Snake passed with its traditional mud houses was little more than a ghost town. A few hardy trees and shrubs eked out an existence in the arid environment, the only hints of green to break up the monotony of the landscape. The wind felt good on his weathered, leathery face, his cloak protecting the back of his neck from the midday sun. It had been a long night and was going to be an even longer trip. He was already working on very little sleep when Kaz had pitched the idea to him. Snake sat half-awake in Kaz’s office while his XO poured him a fresh cup of coffee.

“Boss, do you remember that contract we had to eliminate the ‘new, Western bipedal weapons’ on behalf of the MPLA?” Snake nodded taking a sip of his coffee. “Uh huh. The Walker Gears that were at Ditadi Village.” Pouring himself a cup, Kaz maneuvered himself into his seat behind the desk. “As I’ve previously reported, they’re already in active service with the CFA, but now PF’s all along the Angola-Zaire border have them. That got me thinking— we know Cipher is responsible for developing the Walker Gear in Afghanistan to aid the Soviet war effort, so why would they also be supplying them to Western PF’s in Africa? What’s in it for them?” Snake itched at his beard disguising a yawn. “You think we have a lead?” Kaz opened a manila folder and turned it around for Snake to see. His one gloved hand pointed to a road map across the border region. “We do. I think the answer lies in what Cipher might be getting as ‘compensation’ for supplying the PF’s with weapons. Many outfits in Africa receive locally mined resources as spoils of war-metals,
diamonds, minerals. As you know, we’re no exception.” Snake smirked. “Kids need to learn the value of hard work. It builds character.”

Kaz stared at his Boss seething for a moment before continuing “According to the Intel Team, there’s a PF convoy regularly crossing this route. They’re escorted by an armored vehicle, and that’s pretty heavy security just for transporting some minerals across the Angolan savannah. That truck’s gotta be carrying something else.” Snake scanned the map with his iDroid. “You think it’s that contagion we saw at the Devil’s House?” Kaz nodded. “It has to be the key to Cipher’s operations in Africa, and right now, that’s our best lead. Boss, I want you to extract that truck, cargo and all. Let’s find out what Cipher’s goals really are.”

He should have declined, or otherwise waited until later. The truth was he really wanted to be by himself, and he thought he would much prefer this little road trip to greet some troops out in the field to sulking around base all day with nothing to do but salute the men and listen to banter. Last night was another rough one, more so than usual. It must’ve been because he had visited Paz again that day. That’s what he told himself. He still hadn’t gotten used to the idea that she was alive. He had trusted that his memories of that night were clear, reliable, and yet the cold, hard slap of reality told him otherwise. Believing that she had been dead, she became his albatross. Now that she was alive, he had felt a great weight lift from his heart, even if it meant that the nightmares had intensified.

If he had been dreaming last night, he didn’t remember. He didn’t know what the trigger had been, but he had awoke in the middle of the night gasping for air, his chest tight. He couldn’t move. For what seemed like hours he lay in bed, completely paralyzed and struggling to breathe, his mind racing. Finally, when he broke the spell, he leapt out of bed and restlessly paced his room until morning. He found it hard sometimes to aimlessly wander around base. His family was different, he was different. He had lost something-no, it had been stolen from him- and there was nobody else there who understood that except Kaz. Him, and the scant survivors from nine years ago. Venom would look for their faces on base and together they’d get lost in conversation with him for hours, swapping dirty jokes and ribald stories about the good old MSF days, howling with laughter as each tried to top the other in seeing who could be the most offensive.

One night, the conversation turned serious as they all started sharing stories of what happened that night- March 17, 1975. “I was supposed to be part of the landing party to greet the inspection team,” Parrot began. “I was running late, trying to put my boots on, I didn’t want Commander Miller to find out. I didn’t want to screw this up for everyone.” He goes still for a moment. “That’s when I heard the gunshots. I almost made it out to deck when this guy, he shoved me back inside. He screamed something in my face but-but I couldn’t make out what he said. They shot the guy, I don’t know how many times. Blew the back of his fucking head out, all over me. Two other guys were trying to drag him in, and they got mowed down too. I ran. I just ran for it-you know?”

Eagle Ray took a swig of his Jameson before relating his story “We got pinned down as those assholes stormed the Command Platform. Me and a buddy of mine, we’re returning fire and some fucker lobs a grenade at us. He grabs me, throws me over this little half wall just as it goes off. For a second I thought I was a dead man. I come to, and bullets are still whizzing by me. So, I go to grab my buddy, I see he’s lying face down, right? So, I think he’s knocked out like me. I grab him by the arm and try to pull him to safety...” Ray downs some more whisky before continuing, “Next thing I know his guts are everywhere and...”

They all grew silent. Finally, Snake spoke up, “Men, we all lost something that day. We made it through hell, only because we had each other. We may have left our families behind, but we’re all still brothers and sisters. That strength is what has carried us through to this day, and that Brotherhood is what will see us through to the end. We will avenge our fallen. This is our calling, and until that day comes, we can’t believe in anything but the mission. Believe in your Brothers, believe in the mission. Believe in me.”
Miller paused at the top of the stairs leading down to Quiet’s cell. He knew the chances that he would catch her in the act of doing something incriminating were unlikely, but he also enjoyed taking advantage of the total lack of privacy she had been given. He knew it was petty, but he longed for the feeling of power and control, something he had precious little of in his life the past several years. As always, music was being pumped from loudspeakers in her cell at deafening volumes. Miller knew her hearing was unnaturally good, but at that volume even she couldn’t hear the sound of his crutch tapping on the stairs as he descended. Carefully, he made his way down, supporting his weight against the wall, and paused to peer around the corner at the bottom. He almost choked on his surprise and pulled back. Completely naked, Quiet was drinking showering in her cell. “Oh shit,” Kaz thought to himself, “What the hell do I do? Just leave?” He thought for a moment, before deciding against it. No, only a real woman deserved to have that kind of modesty afforded her, and he considered Quiet anything but a real woman. He resolved to stay and wait. Still, she was easy on the eyes. Cautiously, he glanced back around the corner. Her frame was lean but her chest and waist voluptuous, her features darkened from the desert sun. Kaz could feel himself stiffen as his eyes roved over her body, followed her long, dark hair down the curve of her back and fixated on her beautiful ass. She turned slightly, and he gulped as he could see the water cascade down the swell of her breasts. He stood hypnotized watching the play of her muscles, and he knew he was in trouble.

It wasn’t like he hadn’t kept company with various sordid women these past nine years; however, they were quick and cheap lays, nothing more. Quiet however, was different. Kaz felt his heart begin to race and something inside him stir. He didn’t trust her because she was the enemy, but he hated her because he knew she was something he couldn’t control. Just like with Snake, Kaz knew that Quiet was someone dangerous, someone who could just as easily crush as caress him. He felt a shiver of longing run through his body. Goddamnit, this couldn’t be happening. Not now, not with her!

Kaz left as fast as he could, struggling to conceal his burgeoning erection underneath his overcoat. His mind was racing and all he could think of was how to find some release. He needed privacy, somewhere he wouldn’t be disturbed by anyone. His office wouldn’t work, between Ocelot always barging in unannounced pretending he had something important to discuss only to conveniently forget at the last second, and Eli unexpectedly dropping in to make some unreasonable demands. There was only one place on base Kaz knew nobody would disturb him, and that was Snake’s room. The Boss was away on a mission, and since he wasn’t around neither Ocelot nor Eli would have any reason to be there. Of course, none of the men would even dream of entering the Boss’s private sanctum, not that anyone besides Kaz had the proper clearance anyway.

He stopped outside the door to Snake’s room to catch his breath, before checking to make sure no one would see him enter. He slid his card key through the reader and the lock disengaged. Inside, Kaz breathed a deep sigh of relief. He looked around the Boss’s dark and empty room. There were no personal belongings, nothing to make it feel like home. There was only a single bed and a small desk with a chair. The desk was empty save for a book that Kaz had lent to Snake months ago—Moby Dick. Kaz hurried over to the bed, peeled off his glove, and threw himself down, struggling with his zipper and reaching into his pants. With a final tug, he freed his swollen cock, giving it a good firm squeeze as he did so. He closed his eyes and held Quiet’s image in his mind as he began to work his hand up and down his shaft. This wasn’t right. How many times had he jerked off thinking about Snake over the years, and then finally when his Boss returned to him, he couldn’t get off even once? “Snake,” he breathed.

He tried to call his Boss to mind, but all he could think about was her cheeky smirk, the way she eyed him with bemusement as he taunted her. Those legs. He imagined himself suffocating between those thighs, strong enough they could probably crush him. His cock twitched at the
thought of her bare thighs, of how he imagined she would taste. He imagined his mouth all over her large breasts, sucking and biting, fantasizing about the kind of whimper she might let out. She was unbelievably strong, and his stroking intensified as he imagined her hands around his throat, throttling him, knowing that any second and Snake would be there to save him. Save him, and then all three of them would be together; Kaz balls deep in Quiet grabbing fistfuls of her hair, and Snake buried in his ass, now with his mitts around Kaz’s neck.

Kaz was mildly disappointed that he came after only a minute, catching all his fluids in his bare hand. He really should have taken the time to prepare for this before blowing his load in Snake’s room, and he began looking around for something, anything, to wipe his hand on. Suddenly, the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end. Some sixth sense told him he was not alone. His eyes darted around the room furiously before settling on the farthest corner near the door. It wasn’t a person he saw, more like a ghost, shimmering and translucent. His eyes adjusted, and just like once before—although he had thought it some trick his mind was playing on him—into focus came the deadpan, unreadable gaze of Quiet. She followed him. She had been there, watching, the whole time. She saw, and heard, everything. “Fuck”, Kaz thought to himself. Panicked, he absentmindedly wiped his hand on Snake’s bed and started trying to stuff his still erect penis back into his pants. “Okay, okay, I get it. We’re even. Would you just-get out of here? You get the hell out of here!” Quiet huffed and motioned that her eyes were on Kaz. “Look, fine. I’m sorry, just…” Defeated, Miller drew in a deep breath “You can leave your cell, but only under escort! Don’t think this changes anything between us. I’m not your friend. Got it?” Quiet covered her mouth, stifling a laugh, before making a masturbatory motion towards Miller. His face turning as red as Snake’s bionic arm Kaz shouted “Leave!”

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Snake brought the jeep to a halt several kilometers outside Nova Braga Airport. They had picked up an Intel file detailing the caravan’s route, and so long as Snake could make it in time, he might be able to extract the truck before it even left the airport. On his way to the airport, he had spotted three Zero Risk Security soldiers stationed at a junction along the route, and now that he had arrived at the airport it seemed security was no less tight. Recon showed snipers posted along the airport’s rooftops, and of course, this was the one time he had decided not to bring Quiet along on the mission. Ocelot growled over the radio “An enemy sniper. Boss, keep low and stay out of sight.”

“Don’t suppose they’d believe I was just looking for a flight?” Snake grinned at his joke as he shifted position. Snake could hear Ocelot mumbling something away from the microphone “Miller? Where the hell have you been?” There was a snort as Kaz no doubt shoved Ocelot aside to take his place. “Boss, I’m here. Give me a sit rep.” There. Behind the perimeter fence in the northwest corner of the airport, the Int Scope spotted and tagged the truck, and it was just Snake’s luck that the fence happened to have hole in it. “Looks like our Intel was right, the truck’s here at the airport. Heavily guarded, but it looks like I can get in through a hole in the perimeter fence.” There was a commotion, and Venom could make out the faint sounds of someone barging into the Communications Room followed by Kaz exclaiming “What the hell is this?” and the familiar and aggravating sound of Eli “Bastard! Let go of me!” The soldier who brought him in explained “Commander Miller! Sorry to interrupt sir, but Eli here led a mutiny in the mess hall. He convinced the other boys to steal food from the Mess Hall with him, and when we tried to stop them he tried to stab us with a kitchen knife.” Snake chuckled, “I’ll let you get back to the mission then, ‘Mother Hen’ Miller.” Snake exited the jeep and took off on foot for the airport.

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“For the last time, would you stop stealing food from the Mess Hall? It’s not exactly cheap to feed an army this size.” Eli scowled in response to Miller’s chastisement. “I was hungry, so I ate it. What are you going to do, run and tell my father?” Kaz sighed in frustration. No one around base
except himself and, oddly enough Ocelot, tolerated Eli’s bad attitude or the mischief he goaded, even bullied, the other kids into getting into. “Mother Hen” Miller was even getting frustrated. “Why can’t you just grow up? You think you’re tough enough to hold a gun, but you can’t even keep yourself out of trouble?” Eli folded his arms in defiance, challenging Kaz’s authority. “I’m a warrior, not some kid. Send me out on a mission, send us all out on missions. We want to fight!” Kaz’s face twitched beneath his glasses “No way. Out of the question.” Displeased with that answer, Eli broke free of the Diamond Dogs soldier’s grip, producing a Mess Hall fork from some concealed part of his person and lunging straight for Kaz. Before Miller could stop him, Ocelot had slid between them and had Eli on the ground, his arm pinned behind his back and the fork on the other side of the room. “Son of a bitch! Don’t you touch me!” Eli howled and tried to kick out from the older man’s grip. He couldn’t stand to look weak in front of the other kids. “Don’t hurt him!” Kaz commanded Ocelot to let go with genuine concern in his voice. Nodding, Ocelot released his grip on the boy. “You should show some respect to your elders.”

BOOM! The ground beneath their feet shook and the air rumbled as from a distant explosion. “Commander Miller! Commander Miller this is Sting Chameleon of Alpha Squad, R&D platform. Over.” Kaz seized the intercom while Ocelot and the soldier tried to quell the rising panic amongst the boys. “This is Miller. Go ahead.” Kaz could feel his heart grow cold, his whole body began to sweat. This was beginning to feel all too familiar. “Sir, enemy forces have seized control of the R&D platform. So far I count five of ours dead, at least ten wounded. They’ve started taking hostages. Unconfirmed, but I believe other platforms may be under attack as well. One more thing, I couldn’t believe it at first, but I saw these guys…” The roar of a gunshot echoed through the Communications Room followed by the loud THUD! of a body hitting the floor.

Kaz’s hand trembled as he stood there, silently trying to process everything that was going on. Where were the weakness this time? How could he have let this happen again? The first rule of base defense was to know the enemy, and already they were screwed. They didn’t know who it was, what their numbers were, what kind of firepower they had at their disposal. Most important of all, they had no idea what they wanted. Would they sweep through the whole base like last time and slaughter every last one of his men? Once again, Snake was gone, but this time there was no fake inspection planned. How could they have known this was the perfect time to strike, unless they had someone on the inside…

“Miller! We gotta move!” Ocelot was barking orders in his face, but Kaz wasn’t paying any attention to him. Instead, he turned his gaze on Eli, who stood there trying his best to not look like he was scared shitless. He might be tough, but he was still a kid after all. “I’m not going anywhere Ocelot. None of you are.” Ignoring him, Ocelot holstered one gun and grabbed Eli by the arm. Terrified, this time he didn’t complain. “Miller I’m taking the boys. We’ve got to get them the hell out of here!” Ocelot and the Diamond Dogs soldier moved to leave with the children following obediently behind them. With rage and humiliation building inside him, Kaz threw the handset and drew his pistol and, unflinchingly, pointed it at Ocelot. “I said, we’re not going anywhere.” Slowly, Ocelot turned and narrowed his eyes at his rival. “Have you lost your damn mind? If the base is under attack you can bet they’ll try to force their way to the Command Platform, seize the communications room! That’s precisely what happened last time!” Kaz leaned against the control panel for support. “Just, shut up and listen to me. Right now, the safest place for those kids to be is right here. I’m going to put the gun down and show you, and you’re going to stay right there and not shoot me. Got it?”

Ocelot nodded, and Kaz slowly laid the gun to rest on the control panel before reaching underneath it. With a loud CLICK some unseen mechanism gave way, and a small panel slid out from underneath the control panel. With his teeth, he removed his glove and placed his hand on what looked to be a keypad. With Eli in hand, Ocelot motioned for the kids to follow him before hurrying forward to peer over Kaz’s shoulder. It was a goddamned finger-print scanner. Ocelot
whistled “Biometrics?” Kaz hobbled over to a bookcase on the far side of the Communications Room. It appeared to hold only maps and charts, a few books on navigation and Signal Intelligence, but Kaz passed his hand over the shelves as though searching for something. “Here it is” he muttered to himself as the whole bookcase suddenly swung aside to reveal a heavy steel door. Kaz tried in vain to open the door, finally succeeding after Ocelot rushed over to help him. “I see you picked up a few things from working with Zero.” Kaz shot Ocelot a look “Just shut up and get the kids in.” Ocelot and the Diamond Dogs soldier helped usher the kids into a small room while Kaz checked over everything. The room was no bigger than Kaz’s office, but instead with a single cot and smaller desk with a computer and a phone. Kaz tapped the hinges of the steel door with his crutch.

“Mortise locks and a steel doorjamb. Nothing can get in. Soundproof walls too. That monitor is wired in to a whole network of hidden cameras, separate from the security cameras, all over base. The computer acts as a backup communications system. You can pull the power from the Main Communications Room and it’ll be redirected here, that way if the enemy should seize the Command Platform, they won’t be able to cut off our communications. Wire is the normal means for internal base communications between sentry posts, guard checkpoints, and the Command Platform. I’m still effectively in command while the Boss is away, and I can give orders from here. The satellite phone is for emergency calls only, got it?” The other boys stood in awe of the room, whereas Eli went straight for the gun cabinet. “Don’t bother, it’s locked, and I have the only key.” Eli huffed. “I’m still hungry.” Gritting his teeth, Kaz gestured to a large cupboard in the corner. “There’s enough MREs in there to last about a month. Ten gallons of water, too, so don’t waste it.” Clapping a hand on Miller’s back, Ocelot asked “What about the possibility of BW?” Kaz tried to shrug off Ocelot but his hand remained firm. “The room’s air-tight; separate air filtration system to protect from chemical gas, and dummy air vents to throw off invaders.” Ocelot nodded approval. “Good to know.”

Ocelot shoved Kaz hard, forcing him to lose his balance and topple over. Kaz rolled onto his back with a look of shock and absolute disdain. “Asshole! What did you–” Ocelot turned to the door. “Babysittin’s your thing Miller, not mine.” Kaz struggled to his feet as Ocelot stepped out through the door. “I said nothing can get in!” Ocelot turned and smirked as he replied “I know, and you and I both know it would be bad for morale if the men all knew they were out there bleeding and dying while we hunkered down here all safe and sound. One of us has to rally the troops, take the fight to the enemy. Here.” Ocelot tossed Kaz a radio. “I’ll be in touch. You”, Ocelot said pointing the Diamond Dogs soldier “You’re with me.” Nervously, the man saluted while Kaz quaked with rage. “Ocelot! You son of a bitch, don’t you leave me here!” Ocelot grinned. “Charming Badger sir!” Ocelot grinned. “Badger, remember the Alamo!”

Snake crept his way through the hole in the fence and up to the side of one of the hangars. The truck was only a few feet away from him, and the driver was nowhere in sight. With the latest Fulton upgrade, he could extract the whole truck and be out of here in no time. As he prepared to transmit back to Mother Base he could hear voices coming from inside the hangar. Snake froze, flush against the wall and readying his Mi9. Cautiously, he peered around the corner to spy Skull Face with his back to him talking on a cellular phone. “Are all the preparations complete? Good. We’re moving the last of it out of South Africa now, I’ll be there in a few days.”

Snake rounded the corner drawing his weapon and taking aim. “Skull Face!” Slowly, Skull Face lowered the phone and turned to face Big Boss. “Big Boss, as I live and breathe. I’m impressed you managed to slip away from our ‘mutual friend’. I should expect nothing less from the man who killed the Boss.” Snake’s eye narrowed. “What’s the Boss to you?” Skull Face grinned, spreading
his arms wide. “I’ve known you since your time at Langley. I’ve long been the ‘other side’ of your coin. 1964, Tselinoyarsk. Operation Snake Eater. The mission to eliminate the traitor.” There once was a time when those mere words could make Snake break out into a cold sweat. After the Peace Walker Incident in Nicaragua, he had buried those memories and any attachment to them for good.

“You completed your mission, and admirably.” Skull Face tapped the side of his head. “War changes a man, doesn’t it? Robs him of more than just his limbs. He may think he can leave the battlefield, live a normal life, but we know better don’t we, Big Boss?” Snake didn’t hesitate to squeeze off a few shots, although they seemed to bounce off some invisible force shielding Skull Face. “What?!” Snake exclaimed in disbelief. Skull Face laughed as the Floating Boy materialized behind him, hovering several feet above the ground. “The boy has proven quite useful to me. But, you of all people should know all about sending child soldiers to fight your battles, eh, Big Boss?”

With a roar like a wounded animal, Snake fell back and unloaded his entire clip on Skull Face, each bullet bouncing off harmlessly and striking the ground and truck all around him. Snake felt something wet and hot on his cheek and realized one of the bullets was a little too close and grazed him. Skull Face calmly removed his hat and pointed to Snake dramatically “You too have known loss, and that loss haunts you still! You and I, we’re both demons. Our humanity won’t return. We’ve no place to run, nowhere to hide.” With reflexes on par with those of Ocelot, Skull Face managed to strike Snake once in the arm and once in the leg as Snake dove behind the truck for cover. Reloading his clip, he rounded the corner to return fire “Who’s hiding? This time, you’re not getting away. Let’s finish this.”

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Twelve shots. This time he only had twelve shots, but Ocelot knew the layout of Mother Base as well as anybody. The shooting range was just a way to pass the time, and to antagonize that skinflint Miller. The long solo walks around base were when Ocelot truly put his time in, methodically studying every surface, mentally calculating the angle of departure, both vertically and horizontally. With all the variables to account for most people would have laughed at the idea that anybody could actually control the ricochet of their bullets. Miller certainly did.

It was during a particularly nasty encounter with the EPLF in Eritrea, Ocelot and Miller were cut off from the rest of their squad cowering behind cover. Well, one of them was cowering. “Fuck! Fuck! Fuck, I’m on my last mag!” Miller made with the usual theatrics while Ocelot quickly calculated, spinning his revolvers while he thought. Glancing at his partner standing there, apparently doing nothing of use, Kaz shouted “Asshole! I told you to bring a real weapon!” Ocelot grinned smugly. He was going to enjoy this. “Miller, this is the greatest handgun ever made, and I’ve got twelve shots. More than enough to kill any man that moves.” Bullets were throwing dirt in Kaz’s face, but he managed to see the red and white head scarf appear out of the bushes to his right. Kaz quickly turned and aimed, firing a shot right into the man’s chest. Exhausted, his heavy breathing threw the shot off and the man stumbled back hit in the shoulder. Leaning against the wall for support, Kaz fired again satisfied to see his target drop. Crisis averted, he turned his attention back to Ocelot.

“Are you for real? We’re possibly going to die here, and you’re telling me that you’re going to kill twenty to thirty rebel insurgents with twelve shots from an antique showpiece?”

“It’s not magic, Miller, it’s physics. I’m going to ricochet each shot to kill at least two per bullet. If you’re conservative with what you have left, we should get out of here alive.” As the bullets whizzed past them inches from their faces, bleeding and exhausted in the middle of the battlefield, Kaz stopped to look at Ocelot incredulously. Then, he burst out laughing. “What are you some kind of fucking magician? No, seriously, is that it? You wowed him with some cheap bullshit tricks like a wannabe Buffalo Bill? I know he’s gullible, but…”

It was exactly like the old Westerns Kaz had seen on tv growing up, where the lone hero takes on the whole gang of bandits and wins the girl. Those movies were the first taste of America he could
remember from his youth, and now he’d seen everything. Ocelot unloaded all twelve shots before ducking back behind cover, and judging from the brief lull in gunfire punctuated by groaning, each shot must have made its mark. “You see Miller, what most people don’t know is that a ricochet will almost always continue on a somewhat diagonal trajectory from the original trajectory, unless the impact is against a flat surface perpendicular to the angle of incidence*, in which case—”

Ocelot’s reminiscence was cut short by the enemy PF standing face to face with him as he turned the corner. Behind the man’s balaclava his eyes went wide with surprise, almost as wide as Ocelot’s when he realized that rather than trying to bring his gun up in time to shoot the GRU operative, this man was instead lunging forward in an attempt to unbalance and overpower Ocelot. It was CQC, but sloppy and amateurish, obviously learned second hand and judging from the gurgle of blood from the knife sticking out of his throat, no match for Ocelot’s own combination of Systema and one-on-one training with Big Boss. Ocelot shoved the dying merc forward, extracting the knife in a spray of blood and collapsing the man into his comrade. Before the other soldier could shove the corpse of his buddy off, Ocelot was on him, blade digging into the soft of the man’s throat.

“How many of you are there and what’s your objective?” It was useless for him to struggle. “Ah— we want- we want the body of-Big Boss. We came for Big Boss. Turn him over or we’re taking your men with us. Try to approach, and they die.” Ocelot dug the blade in deeper eliciting a wince from the pinned man and a small trickle of crimson down his neck. “How many?” The man’s eyes closed, his face scrunching as he braced for what was coming next. “That’s it, you’ll get nothing else out of me!” Ocelot smiled. “Suit yourself.” The man thrashed and wheezed as blood rhythmically pumped out the gash in his throat, Ocelot wiping his scout knife on the man’s fatigues before turning him on his side to examine the unit patch. Mosquito Stinger Force, a Western PF whose main base of operations were located in the North Pacific Ocean. What the hell were they doing all the way out here? Ocelot took the man’s radio dialing to Kaz’s frequency.

“Miller, it’s the Boss. They’re after the Boss and if they don’t get him they’re making off with the hostages. If we try and force it, they say they’ll retaliate.” Silence. This wasn’t the time for Miller to be panicking. “Miller?” The pitch of Kaz’s voice was inconsistent, unsure of himself. “Stand down. Get back here to the Communications Room and stand down until further orders.” Ocelot’s face wrinkled and Badger look to him confused. “We’re going to negotiate with them?” He sounded disgusted at the idea, waiting for the exasperated retort from Miller. It never came.

“We’re going to wait. We’re going to get in contact with Snake and wait.”

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Snake had long since Fultoned the truck back to Mother Base and was now inside the hangar, dashing up stairs and leaping from rooftop to rooftop as the Skulls relentlessly pursued him. Under a hail of machine gun fire Snake had ducked inside one of the buildings in time to see a helicopter hovering close to the ground. Skull Face had made good his escape. Out of breath, Snake yelled into the iDroid while sprinting “Immediate evac! I need out of here now!” After Pequod signaled he was en route to the LZ, the radio crackled with the panicked voice of Kaz exclaiming “Boss! Boss, we got an emergency here. Mother Base has come under attack, and several of our platforms are in enemy hands. The enemy is some rival outfit copying our MO. They’ve taken some of our staff hostage—we can’t make a move without endangering them. But if we don’t do something, they’ll try to take off with our men. That would mean losing some of our finest manpower. There’s only one option. Infiltrate without being spotted, eliminate their commander, and take back our platforms. Boss…you’re the only one who can do this.”

There was a loud explosion as some of the Skulls tripped Claymore mines Snake had strategically placed earlier, giving him just enough time to make it back to the jeep. Swerving around the Skulls and ducking through their gunfire as the bullets bounced off the jeep and shattered the driver-side mirror, Snake floored it and drove straight through the chain link fence. As the mist began to clear,
he radioed back to base “Kaz, this is Snake. Is Ocelot with you?”

“I’m here Boss. Badger and I went out to gather more intel on the enemy forces and the hostage locations. Fortunately, Miller and I are both intimately familiar with the blueprints and schematics of Mother Base, we could walk it with our eyes closed. I’ll get back to you about possible breaching points.” Snake grunted his consent. “Good. Have all personnel on the Command Platform form a defensive perimeter around the Communications Room. Ocelot, you’ll provide HUMINT in and around the target area. Kaz, you’re in charge of TECHINT. If anybody can find Quiet, have her form a sniper-observer team and provide reconnaissance and surveillance of the target area.” Panic was rising in Kaz’s voice “Boss, we don’t have time for this! Those are our men out there, and they’re going to get killed if we don’t do something fast. You need to move in now!”

Venom could feel the sweat cooling on his brow as the gusts of wind from Pequod’s chopper blew past him, his stomach knotting in uncertainty. This seemed like the right thing to do, didn’t it? This methodical, by-the-book approach which seemed so much closer to what Ocelot would do than like Kaz who had two default settings—cower and run or charge in guns blazing. He was the commander of one of the world’s largest and fastest growing mercenary companies, a living legend who had seen decades of combat. His home was the battlefield, so why did he suddenly feel so powerless to do anything? Why did it feel like his words, his decisions, were not really his own, and at the heart of it he really had no idea what to do? When it came to the day to day operations of Diamond Dogs Kaz pretty much ran the show, and even though Snake had the final say on all projects and ops he merely ordered his combat units on missions—the nuts and bolts of the operation were left to the individual unit commanders to plan. Diamond Dogs was anything but a conventional military outfit.

“Don’t let him push you around. Don’t forget, you’re Big Boss now.” Snake looked up in surprise at the man who helped him up into the chopper. Beneath the balaclava all he could see were crystal blue eyes, but the voice was definitely familiar. “Ishmael?” Ishmael tapped the headset he was wearing. “He’s not the boss, you are.” Venom’s eye sank, unsure of himself. “But…what if Kaz is right? I can’t let the men down again, I won’t let anyone else die because of me.”

“A friend of mine once said ‘Soldiers need a hero. They need a man for whom they can gladly risk their lives.’ If you can’t live with that, you’ll never be Big Boss.”

His expression growing stern, Venom radioed back to Mother Base. “I need a detailed sitrep. Ocelot, prep an assault team and wait for my command. I want any egress points sealed up. Sabotage their birds. I want demolitions planted on every connecting strut. Platforms are on lockdown. If they try to escape, blow the connecting bridges.” Miller tried to mouth in protest “Wait a minute…” before Snake cut him off “Kaz shut up. Get in contact with their commander and negotiate. Stall for time, make them sweat it out. By the time they start to lose their nerve we’ll be ready to strike, and when we do, we’re driving them to the bottom of the sea.” Venom turned to smile confidently and thank Ishmael for once again coming to his aide, only for his gaze to meet with an empty seat.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Man, it's getting really hard to turn out this stuff. To be fair, when I first started this I wasn't expecting a child, but now-I'm going to be a father! Of course, if we had a boy, my wife and I decided we had to name our son Eli. So, I haven't been writing as much because I'm preparing the house, etc. for Eli.

Originally, I wanted to write enough to cover three chapters- Revenge, Race, and Peace. However, I really might end up and have to shorten everything into just one big chapter. I'll still keep all the important stuff, as it's critical to the vision I have for how MGS V "could have" fit into the overall timeline.

This chapter is something of a turning point. I'm hoping to pick up the pace, and gradually begin to show an actual descent into villainy as Venom becomes more and more willing to do whatever it takes to get his revenge. Also, there's more Quiet. It's really difficult to write a character who doesn't speak without just telling you what she's thinking- harder to "show" and not "tell".

The rays of the midday sun beamed down on Quiet, imparting to her some of its warmth and strength. She quickly brushed a stray strand of hair out of her face, scanning for signs of movement and to distinguish the signature Diamond Dogs emblem from that of the enemy. There. Six hundred yards away was the target, on a catwalk signaling for others to come and go. Her view of his body was obstructed at this angle by the railing, but she noticed his unit patch and his head was visible. That was all she needed to line up the shot. When she was taught how to shoot, after joining the Jamiyat-e Islami, her mentor taught her to aim for the throat- this way if the shot tended to be too high it would strike the head, if too low the upper torso would be impacted. Quiet rarely missed.

With the slightest squeeze of the trigger she brought the target down, the bullet ripping through his soft throat and sending him falling some fifty feet to the ground below with a sickening THUD. Her unique abilities allowed her to stay on the move, leaping from rooftop to rooftop pausing to pick off the intruders as she encountered them. She had been patiently waiting in her cell for the return of Big Boss when she heard the warnings sound, followed shortly after by the explosion. She could see several enemy helicopters circling the area and decided they must’ve hit one of the helipads to clear their LZ. She just hoped it wasn’t Pequod.

Quiet paused, listening to the sounds of an unfolding firefight in the distance. Determining that they were Diamond Dogs, she moved to engage. Outflanked and surrounded by the enemy, a small group of five or six were pinned down in a small corridor between buildings. It was only a matter of time before the enemy made it to the rooftops and seized the high ground, turning the corridor into a kill zone.

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“Damnit! I’m hit!”

“Fucking bastards! I’m not going down without a fight!”
Armored Armadillo turned just in time to see the head of one of the enemy PFs peer out over the rooftop. Soon, two more PFs were leaning out over the side of the building and raising their rifles to fire. His body tensed as he prepared for the hail of bullets that would surely end his life, but instead he heard a loud, powerful shot ring out. One of the enemy combatants stumbled back, struck in the chest by some unseen force. A second shot rang out and this time the bastard was lifted off his feet. It wasn’t long before Armadillo realized it was a sniper shot, could see one of the enemy’s heads explode out the back in a shower of gore.

“Sniper!” the enemy cried out before scattering for cover, the confusion giving Armadillo and the others the chance to slip away. “Whoever that was they saved our ass,” Armadillo breathed. The words had no sooner left his mouth then, much to everyone’s surprise, Quiet appeared alongside them reloading. “Y-you? You took out those guys?” Quiet turned and nodded in assent. Gesturing to the rooftops, Armadillo understood her meaning, and signaled for the others to follow his lead. “Raven, you go with Quiet. The rest of you, with me.” Raven turned to nervously face Quiet. “I, uh…guess you don’t need me to be your spotter.” The lines on her face appeared as she gave Raven the thumbs up and made to leave. The tension broken, Raven grinned and made to follow.

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Crawling across the platform, Snake could only look on helplessly at the three Diamond Dogs bound and blindfolded, crumpled on deck under the watchful eyes and muzzles of their captors. Whoever this enemy PF was, Snake was going to make them pay for this. He rose to his feet slowly and trained his Int-Scope towards the roof of the R&D Central Platform. It was the highest ground, so it made perfect sense for the enemy commander to be there, directing his forces as they swept through Mother Base. Essentially, it was the same tactic Skull Face had used nine years ago. Snake’s heart pounded as he slowly scanned the rooftop, pausing to tag each man.

“Is that the target?” Kaz asked, his voice dry and raspy. “There he is. That guy’s the target!” Snake frowned. If Quiet were here, no doubt she could take out the target from here with a single, well-placed shot. His own marksmanship, such as it was, was no way near good enough, and with the platform crawling with guards in broad daylight, there was no way he could leave himself exposed long enough to get closer and set up the shot. He would have to take the fight to the enemy.

Minutes seemed like hours as Snake made his way across the 1st deck, a race against time to eliminate the enemy commander before they could kill any of the hostages. “Damnit, I don’t have time for this,” he thought to himself. He could imagine Ishmael chiding him “You better get used to a lot of waiting. You need to study the enemy routes first before making your move.” The rooftop was several floors above him, and the enemy was naturally patrolling the stairwells, which only left Venom one course of action for ascent. Summoning his core strength, he wrapped one of the large air ducts in a bear hug, and began to hoist himself up the side of the building. He would have to stop at each deck and wait for the enemy to make their rounds before ascending another duct, and he had to hurry.

Reaching the top, Snake slid onto the cat walk just in time to catch the eye of one of the enemy soldiers. He was slightly behind the sentry, who was mildly confused and began to walk over to the edge of the platform to investigate. Crouching stealthily, Snake turned the corner and crept up the stairs in time to seize the man from behind in a CQC hold. Clamping his hand tightly over the man’s mouth, Venom plunged the blade of his knife deep into the side of his neck twice, eliciting a gurgle muffled by Snake’s hand while thick, hot blood oozed from beneath the man’s balaclava and between Snake’s fingers. He gingerly lowered the body to the ground, before turning his attention to Mosquito. He had his back to Snake, preoccupied with shouting orders into the hangar below.

Venom could’ve killed him right there, just one shot and his brains would be spilled out all over the deck. That was too easy. Snake decided to take him alive; he wanted to know who their client
was, whether it was Cipher or Skull Face, or something more simple and petty. Ocelot would make him talk, he and Kaz could spend some quality time together over it, and then and only then would Snake exact his revenge. This wasn’t nine years ago, and Mosquito certainly wasn’t Skull Face, but Venom decided this would be a good warm up and grinned to himself as he crept closer and closer to the target.

Snake’s heart sank as Mosquito casually turned to face him, shock and awe dawning on his face. Everything seemed to slow down as Venom broke into a sprint towards the target, too late to stop him from shouting “Eliminate the hostages! Open fire!” Mosquito drew his weapon on Snake, too late to stop him from wrestling it away with the sickening crunch of breaking bone and snapping cartilage, body slamming Mosquito to the ground. Snake rushed to the edge of the platform, just in time to see the bursts from the MSF rifles.

“NoOO!” He screamed in primal rage, taking out all five MSF soldiers with head shots.

Silently, Venom brooded over his men while Mosquito winced behind him. “How does it feel-to watch your own men die? How does it feel, Big Boss?” Snake spun around and firmly planted his knee over Mosquito’s throat, cutting off his breathing. “Kaz, we got him. Tell them to stand the fuck down.”

Miller’s voice crackled over the loudspeakers across Mother Base. “Attention hostile force. We have neutralized your commander. Escape is impossible. Lay down your weapons immediately. Surrender now, and you will not be fired upon.” Mosquito struggled as Snake pushed harder and harder, relishing his enemy’s futile struggle for oxygen as he whispered “Kaz, they killed the hostages. We were too late.” After a long silence, the tired and strained voice of his friend replied “Copy that Boss. We’ll lay them to rest outside heaven.”

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In the darkness of the command center, Venom Snake stood hunched over maps and charts, tired and defeated from the morning’s events.

With a wounded cry Snake violently shoved the stacks of papers, folders, and charts off the table, hurled one of Kaz’s half drank cups of coffee across the room, and slammed his fists into the table again and again. He couldn’t protect his men. It was the worst feeling he could imagine. He could deal with the fatigue, the stress of constantly being out on missions, not returning to base for days at a time. This, however, was different. It was exactly the same feeling as nine years ago, when he couldn’t save Paz. He wondered what Paz would say if she could remember what happened? Would she blame him for what happened to her, for what happened to everyone?

Snake didn’t turn as both Kaz and Ocelot entered the room, neither bothering to turn on the lights, both waiting apprehensively for their Boss to acknowledge them. After some time, Kaz boldly broke the silence “A few of them talked, but they didn’t tell us much. Their contract came through a cut-out. All we know is their client was an American. Probably Cipher.” Venom didn’t acknowledge. Ocelot cleared his throat. “Boss, there’s something that’s been bothering me. This just doesn’t add up. First, why did they seize the R&D platform, if they weren’t trying to make off with our scientists? They didn’t even take Emmerich as a hostage, and he’s arguably the most important person on that whole platform. Not to mention how they found us in the first place. There must be a leak somewhere.” Venom glanced over his shoulder “You think it was Emmerich?”

Kaz snickered. “It’s what he does best. He was a traitor then, and he’s a traitor now. Ocelot might have him trained, but you can’t teach an old dog new tricks. Boss, it’s just like nine years ago. He was just trying to cover his ass; escape unharmed and leave the rest of us to die.” Ocelot stepped forward, shaking his head “Now, I think we should consider all our options, but for once I agree
with Miller. We can’t rule out that Emmerich was involved. I think we seriously need to consider monitoring all incoming and outgoing communications, even private ones made by our personnel. Only the three of us should know about it, and only the three of us should have access to the tapes.” Kaz spun around to face Ocelot “Wait a minute! You’re suggesting we spy on our own men?” Ocelot put his hands up defensively, but the condescending tone in his voice was clear “Well, it is the only way to be sure, right? Emmerich wouldn’t be stupid enough to do something that would give him away.”

Kaz turned to Snake with a huff, “Fine, but no one else can know about this. Boss?” Snake nodded in agreement, and with that out of the way Kaz sighed in relief before continuing. “Boss, we need to decide what to do with the leader, Mosquito, and the rest of his men. Normally, I’d say let them join us but, under the circumstances…” Ocelot interjected “Miller, business is business. They wouldn’t be the first of our recruits who took the lives of our men, but they’ve left all that behind once they decide to start fighting for the Boss.” Much to his surprise, Snake cast Ocelot a baleful stare. Usually it was Miller he was glaring at with displeasure. “Either he’s with us or against us. I want to hear what he has to say.”

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The three men stood in front of the crumpled body of Mosquito, bound in his cell with arm still broken. He was the only member of MSF that Ocelot and Kaz had not interrogated. In fact, he had been insisting that he see Big Boss ever since his capture. Wordlessly, Snake stepped forward into the light. Mosquito considered him for a moment, then laughed. “Age hasn’t slowed you down one bit. I’m glad I could see your face again, Boss.” Mosquito paused. “You don’t remember me?” Venom scowled. “Should I?”

“Nine years ago. I was away on a mission. I returned, to find my home at the bottom of the ocean. All my friends? Dead. And you? You were away. You had just left. They all died and you weren’t there!” Snake stood, stone faced, while Kaz looked stunned. Ocelot nodded, “I get it. Mosquito Stinger Force. MSF. That’s why your men were trained in CQC. You were trying to create your very own MSF from what you remembered.” Kaz almost gasped “You? You’re a survivor from nine years ago?” Mosquito struggled against his bonds in anger “That’s right! You left us to die! No one else wanted to believe it, but I know the truth! You sold us out to La CIA, you and Big Boss! It’s your fault! They’re dead because of you!”

Venom winced, visibly hurt. “Is that what you believe?” he whispered. Kaz stepped forward, the clack of his crutch against the metal accentuating the anger in his voice “You’re wrong! The Boss didn’t abandon any of us. He was coming back from a mission! He came back for us!” Mosquito lunged as far forward as he could “Liar! You’re lying! He left us all to die! I want to know the truth—was it all just a game to you? Were you just in it for the money, or was this all about feeding your own ego? The ‘legendary soldier’ Big Boss. All that crap about ‘soldiers fighting for themselves’? The good times we had with Chico and Paz—all just so much bullshit!”

Ocelot cast Snake a sideways glance “Congratulations Boss, you’re a regular monomania. The years have turned you into this man’s singular obsession. Revenge on you is all he lives for. That makes him truly dangerous.” Kaz hobbled forward to Mosquito’s defense “No. That makes him just like us.” Turning his attention to Mosquito, Kaz tapped his prosthetic leg with his crutch “Time hasn’t been kind to either of us, but I never stopped believing in the Boss, in the world we were building together. We can’t forget phantoms of our past, but you have comrades right here. Flesh and blood.”

Venom knelt down on Mosquito’s level “So? What’ll it be? I’m offering you a choice—fight for me once more, and I’ll consider your debt repaid. Your sins forgiven. Refuse, and I have no further use for you.” Mosquito remained silent, eyes downcast, seemingly deep in contemplation. Suddenly,
his head jerked up and he spat into Snake’s face.

Ocelot whistled. “The new blood has been rejected.” Calmly, Snake stood and ran his flesh hand over his face. “For hate’s sake, I spit my last breath at thee.’ Alright then. If you’re not with me, then you’re my enemy.” Kaz intervened, imploring Snake to reconsider “Boss! He was with us nine years ago. He’s one of us. He just needs some…time to reconsider…now that he knows the truth.” Snake’s eye narrowed, his voice edged with both exhaustion and anger as his gaze passed from his second-in-command back to Mosquito. “Kaz, he’s had nine years. What good’s a few more minutes going to do him now? He stopped believing in me, in the mission, and when he did, he turned his back on his comrades. A killer without a mission isn’t a soldier, he’s just a beast.” Kaz’s mouth stirred in protest, but he quickly swallowed his objection. He understood Mosquito’s desire better than anyone.

“Anyone who will join us, give them new names. They’re with us now. Kill the rest.” Kaz’s grip tightened on his crutch, but he made no move to stop Snake this time. Mosquito might’ve been their ally once, but now he stood in their way. He was responsible for the deaths of their men, had cursed the name of Big Boss and defied their attempts to negotiate peace. Bringing him into their ranks would only sow discord among the men, and it’s not like they could keep him prisoner in this cell forever…they had learned that lesson with Zadornov, and Kaz understood why Snake wouldn’t make that mistake again. Ocelot turned to leave and, no doubt, carry out the Boss’s order. “What about him?” Ocelot asked. Wordlessly, Snake drew his pistol and turned aiming directly at Mosquito. Rather than cowering in fear, or begging for his life, their prisoner lifted his head as high as he could. “Permission to change codename…to Albatross, sir?” The room fell quiet as the tension between the two men grew, the air stale with sweat and blood.

“Granted.”

Venom discharged his weapon, the gunshot deafening within the confines of the small room. His head low Kaz turned to leave, pausing briefly as Snake spoke, barely above a whisper.

"Since then, at an uncertain hour,
That agony returns:
And till my ghastly tale is told,
This heart within me burns. ”

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For days, the mood across Mother Base had been tense, everyone feeling apprehensive despite the formation of a Rapid Response Team and huge investments of GMP being made to beef up base defense. For once, Commander Miller was absolutely silent as the money was spent. The schedule for the annual psych eval had been moved up, in light of recent events, although thankfully none of the men had been involved in the execution of Mosquito and the non-joiners. Killing someone in the heat of combat when your life was being threatened was one thing, but shooting an unarmed man to death was so much more personal. Ocelot had elected himself to take care of that task, afterward brushing off Kaz’s suggestion that he, too, should probably submit to an evaluation. “It’s the goddamn rules! You work here, like everybody else.” Kaz had reminded him through gritted teeth. Ocelot just looked away, boredom evident in his voice, “Well it’s nice to hear you finally acknowledge that I’m on your side, but I’ll pass. Thanks for the reminder though.”

The one person whose fortune had seemed to change for the better was Quiet. Before, most Diamond Dogs viewed her with a mix of awe and esteem, and fear and mistrust. They all understood that without her Big Boss might not have escaped some of his more harrowing missions; however, they were still fearful of her supernatural abilities- distrust that was only fueled
by their Commander Miller. It hadn’t taken long for word to spread around base that Quiet had fought back against the invaders, saving several Diamond Dogs in the process. With each telling, the number of lives saved rose and the more heroic her deeds became. Even Commander Miller could no longer justify keeping her locked up in her cage, and reluctantly had to tell her she was free to come and go as she pleased. “You’re welcome,” he muttered.

Armadillo and his comrades were among the first to pay her a visit. “Hey Quiet. How’s it, uh, going? We just wanted to thank you again for, you know, saving us back there.” She smiled, her face beaming, and gave her characteristic thumbs up. The guys glanced at one another nervously before turning to Armadillo expectantly, nudging him to go on. “So, we were all wondering, what do you like to do in your down time? Any hobbies or…” Quiet considered the question for a moment, working through what Armadillo said word for word. After some time, her face lit up as she nodded enthusiastically. The men all grinned at one another. “Great! Let’s do something together. What would you like to do?”

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Kaz sat in the Mess Hall, more irritated than usual, while Ocelot and Snake stood in line. When Snake was away on missions, Ocelot would carry both his own and Kaz’s tray back to the table. When Ocelot wasn’t around, Kaz would stubbornly hobble through line occasionally nudging his tray forward until some brave soldier volunteered to carry his plate for him, all the while being told “I don’t need your help!” Despite his complaining, Miller never tried to stop anyone from carrying his tray for him. Food was too expensive to waste if he were to drop it.

“They better not be serving that shitty ‘omelet’”- (standard MRE-vegetarian omelet) – “again today or somebody’s getting fired!” This wasn’t the first time Kaz had complained about the cooking, even once going so far as wishing for the good old days when Amanda, Cecile, and even Paz were with them. “Stop complaining, you’re the one in charge of the budget. It’s your fault the Mess Hall team can’t buy anything besides MREs,” Snake would chastise him. “You know, Boss,” Ocelot spoke up, “you’re the one in charge of the one who’s in charge of the budget.”

Today, Kaz was met with a pleasant surprise. Ocelot and Snake walked back to the table, both holding steaming, aromatic plates of some dish Kaz had never seen before. “What’s this?” Kaz asked, practically salivating. “It’s food, Miller. Actual food, not those disgusting jerky sticks you snack on in between pots of coffee” Ocelot reprimanded, to which Kaz made an annoyed sound in response. “Look who’s talking! I’ve seen you over the years. If you’re stuck out in the field you won’t eat for days at a time. You’re too lazy to pack your own MREs.” Ocelot rolled his eyes at the insult, “A man can subsist on as little as 1,200 calories a day before the body succumbs to physiological changes resulting from a restricted diet. Any more than that are reserves.” Snake sighed shoving the plate over to Kaz “Just shut up and eat it.” After a few exploratory whiffs, Kaz took a bite, his face lighting up as he did so. In fact, he quickly found he couldn’t get enough of this mystery dish. “This is some of the best damn food I’ve had in months. My compliments to the chef!”

Ocelot and Snake smiled, sharing a knowing glance with one another, before Ocelot turned to the direction of the kitchen. “Well, why don’t you go give the chef your compliments in person? I’m sure they’d be right proud.” Kaz was a bit taken aback, unsure whether Ocelot was acting the usual jack ass or was making a genuine suggestion. A few more mouthfuls later and Kaz struggled to his feet and headed back into the kitchen. He looked around for the usual crew scurrying about, but it seemed everyone was crowded together and talking very excitedly. Approaching, Kaz made to push his way through the crowd declaring in high spirits “Alright! I want to meet the new recruit, shake their hand. Who’s responsible for this…” As the Mess Hall team parted way for Commander Miller, his jaw nearly hit the floor at the sight of Quiet, wearing a chef’s apron, and tending to the
pot of steaming rice. Kaz could only stammer as Quiet turned, flashing him a proud smile as if to say “I’ll be accepting that praise now.”

“She’s incredible Commander Miller! This is the national dish of Afghanistan, and it’s delicious!” Kaz was sweaty, and it wasn’t just because of the heat. Wasn’t it bad enough he had to concede that she had saved Snake’s life, twice, and the lives of several of their men? He begrudgingly allowed her freedom to roam around base, come and go where she pleased, and bristled watching the men getting along with her and treating her as an equal. Now he had to admit in front of everyone that he was impressed with her cooking too? “I, uh…” She tilted her head to one side, the smile only growing. “It’s…pretty good.” Quiet nodded, then continued to stare at Kaz, her eyes drifting towards his left side. It was customary for Afghan women to wait for a man to offer their hand.

“Oh. Right.” Kaz stammered, nervously, before slowly extending his hand. With a gentleness that made the coarse and gruff Miller almost blush, Quiet took his hand in her left placing her right over her heart. It was the way of her people, Pashtunwali, and their requirement of Melmastia exemplified the spirit of Diamond Dogs, the concept of Outer Heaven; hospitality and respect for all, regardless of race, nationality, or religion. She doubted whether any of them would understand her even if she did speak Pashto, even if she could summon up the courage to do so, but at least in this way she could share her feelings with her new friends.
Chapter 8

The cool ocean breeze teased through Quiet’s hair as she sat on the deck of Mother Base watching the children at play. While Miller had insisted that they could spare the GPM to buy proper toys for them, the children had proved very resourceful in what they could find and transform. A few of them were playing skip rope fashioned from a bundle of electrical wires woven together, while some of the younger children had built toy trucks out of discarded soup and soda cans from the Mess Hall, scraps of old tires, and spare wood and metal. Still others had salvaged the tires from jeeps around Mother Base and with the aid of sticks were racing one another around the platform.

“Look at this! We’re letting these kids play with junk. They could get an infection, or worse, if one of our contracted NGOs were to tour the base and find them like this, think of what that would do to our reputation!” Quiet glanced up to find Snake, Miller, and Ocelot casually touring the “Kindergarten Platform” as Snake mockingly called it. If all three of them were walking together, it could only mean they were headed to the Command Center to review a client or a contract. Kaz scowled as he surveyed the makeshift toys, his expression softening as he, too, watched the children play. His glance shifted over to Quiet. “Should we really let that…woman…near them? Dressed like that? It’s lewd.” Kaz had been making a point of referring to Quiet in a more polite manner than ever before, and even he acted like he knew he really didn’t have an argument. “I don’t see a problem with it. Keeps them out of trouble,” Big Boss replied, “Especially that one over there.” Snake gestured towards Eli, who stood sulking in the corner while D Dog barked and jumped affectionately all around him. Arms crossed and eyes narrowed, Eli was deliberately letting everyone know he wasn’t happy or in the mood to have fun.

Ocelot leaned on Snake’s shoulder, adjusting his own custom pair of sunglasses with his other hand. “Eli thinks this is all just kid’s stuff. He wants to be treated like an adult. Sent out on missions.” Kaz put his crutch down forcefully, pivoting around to face Ocelot. “Not going to happen. Hey, Eli! Why don’t you play fetch with DD? He loves it.” Eli’s face wrinkled in disgust. “Why don’t you go jerk off? You love it!” Ocelot raised his eyebrows and whistled while Venom burst into a loud, growling laugh. Kaz blushed, spinning to face Snake “Boss?”

“That kid’s got quite a mouth. Are you going to let him talk to your XO like that, Boss?” Ocelot asked, shielding a wry smile with a single gloved hand. Snake cleared his throat “Alright, recess is over. He wants to be treated like a soldier? He can answer to Corporal Punishment.” Kaz waved his hand dismissively. “Forget it, let’s just get going. We have business to take care of.”

One of the kids had lost control of their tire which was hurtling towards the unsuspecting Miller, sure to knock him over were it to make contact. In what seemed like seconds Quiet crossed the deck from where she had been sitting moments ago to stand between Miller and the tire. Casually, she lifted her leg and planted her foot firmly on the tire, just as everyone else started to realize what happened. “Shit! How fast can you move?” Miller asked, flustered. The kids started to call to Quiet in Kikongo, waving their hands and motioning for her to take one of their sticks. She looked down at the tire, still beneath her boot, and then looked back to Snake and the others. The all-knowing Ocelot pointed to the tire “I think they want you to play. It’s simple. Once the forward motion has been established, the stick is used to guide it in a straight line and to continually propel it forward.” Quiet rolled her eyes at Ocelot eliciting snickers from both Snake and Kaz, the former of whom assured him “Ocelot, I think she knows how to roll a tire.”

Taking a stick from one of the boys, Quiet tried her hand at propelling the tire. Much to her surprise, it was much harder to control than it looked, and there were several times when she found herself almost losing control. The parasites within her epidermis responded to her stress and the
skin around her eyes darkened. She wasn’t going to let herself become a laughingstock in the eyes of the pompous Ocelot, the critical Miller, or Big Boss. The next thing she knew, Snake was alongside her rolling one of his own, the two of them locked in an impromptu race. Soon, they both found themselves laughing, the other children joining the race as well. Finally, both Snake and Quiet lost control of their tires and collided with one another, the kids circling around the heap of adults and cheering.

“Boss! We have work to do. Let’s go!” Kaz stormed off towards the Command Center, huffing all the way, while Ocelot extended his hand to help his Boss to his feet. Snake and Quiet shared an awkward smile while he dusted himself off and continued after his jealous XO. Quiet thought back to playing games in the streets with her friends, or cheering the adults of her village as they played buzkashi. Today was one of the first days in a long time that she had felt happy.

“What are you doing?” Quiet turned to find Eli judgmentally gazing up at her, addressing her in Pashto. Cautiously, she looked behind to make sure the others were safely out of range before responding.

“What do you mean?”

“Why do you take orders from them? Why do you waste your time with these stupid games and make a fool of yourself?”

“I stay because…I owe him. We have a common enemy. Skull Face killed Big Boss’s men. He’s responsible for the deaths of my people as well. Fighting alongside Big Boss is my best chance for getting revenge on Skull Face. So, until then, I stay.”

A sad, almost wounded look crossed Eli’s face. “So that’s it? When this is all over, you’ll leave?”

Quiet paused, seeming to consider. She felt at home here with him, and with the children. Even the other Diamond Dogs had come to accept her as one of their own. Yet, the Soviets were still occupying Afghanistan. There was still a bitter war being waged between the Russian army and the Mujahideen; a war in which Diamond Dogs would not take sides. Mother Base might feel like home, but she was not one of them. She still had a country.

“This is not my home, and these are not my people. My family are gone. I am alone, but I still have a country, a people. After Skull Face is dead, I will return to Afghanistan and continue fighting for their sake.”

Eli made a disgusted noise. “You’re all the same. Those kids, they lost their families too. Brothers, sisters, parents, their whole villages. You all have somebody you want to kill.” Despite frequently spending time with the children, particularly Eli, Quiet was always taken aback by his frank and often crass way of speaking. “Are you no different? Did you not say that you wanted to kill Big Boss?”

Eli laughed and waved his hand dismissively. “That’s different. People fight wars for all sorts of reasons- money, politics, religion, even something as petty as revenge. I don’t believe in anything so high as that. I don’t think people need a reason to kill. We’re all born killers, so I’m not going to hide from what I am. I was created by Cipher, but I’m not fighting for Cipher or anyone else.”

Perhaps it was the jacket, or the closeness of their age, but something about Eli always reminded Quiet of her baby brother. Her heart grew heavy at the thought of his death, at the deaths of all her friends. All the children here on Mother Base were victims of war, and each and every one of them might have died an equally gruesome death alone on some blood soaked battlefield. They hadn’t been given a choice, not the way she had. “Eli, you don’t have to fight. My people have been commanded by Allah to drive out the kafir from our land, just as the Prophet has commanded. It is pleasing to Allah and right and honorable to fight in His name. But you have no one to fight. You
have nothing to fight for or against. You are still a child, do not waste your life—"

Clenching his fists in rage, Eli shouted “Don’t you dare call me that! I’m not some little kid, d’you hear me? I fight for myself. I fight because that is who I am. I am a killer. Cipher is my enemy. Big Boss is my enemy. This world, and everyone in it, are my enemy. Cipher tried to subvert my will, make me fight their battles. Then, they tried to kill me. They brought me here, a so-called nation for soldiers, then they turn against me and refuse to acknowledge me as one of their own. Don’t you turn against me too.”

“Then, what will you do? Are you going to fight the whole world?”

Eli laughed. “And what’s wrong with that? Fighting the whole world?”

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Kaz, who had reached the Command Center first despite his slower pace, had taken his usual seat at the head of the table, with Snake seated to his right and Ocelot, feigning disinterest as he leaned back in his seat, legs crossed and both gloved hands folded neatly into a pyramid. As Kaz shuffled his papers into order, Ocelot began “Boss, our staff are falling ill. At first, it was only a few men and based on the symptoms we assumed it was nothing more than the common cold. However, after a few days blisters started popping up on their chests.” Ocelot leaned forward, hands still folded with only his piercing eyes appearing over them for maximum effect. “Blisters?” Snake asked.

“That’s right, the exact same symptoms as those bodies floating in the river and the test subjects you saw at the Devil’s House.” Ocelot continued “Whatever this is, it’s the same contagion we’ve encountered on our hunt for Cipher, and now it’s infecting our men. Maybe this is what Emmerich was talking about- the ‘weapon to surpass Metal Gear’ that Skull Face has been working on in Africa.” Kaz cleared his throat. “Construction’s already begun on a quarantine platform. The Medical team and I agreed keeping the sick separate from the rest of the staff was the best move. We’ve quarantined the symptomatic, but we have to assume some number of our men are infected but asymptomatic. We need to figure out what this pathogen is and how to stop it.” Snake exhaled slowly, clenching and relaxing his fist on the table.

“Our line of work puts us in the thick of it- third world nations with no adequate healthcare, clean drinking water. Exposure to diseases, viruses, bacteria, and parasites are inevitable. It’s going to take some time to figure out just what the hell Skull Face is doing.”

“How many?” Venom asked. Kaz flipped through the medical reports “Fifteen so far, symptomatic that is. Three dead, and it’s only been a little over a week. We have reports of infected staff on every platform.” Venom nodded grimly. “Any ideas?” Kaz continued. “The Med team is working as hard as they can to isolate anything they have in common, anything that might give us some kind of clue. Boss, I know you don’t want to hear this, but I think we have to seriously consider the possibility that Quiet is the one responsible for the outbreak. Think about it—all this time she hasn’t made a move, except a few weeks ago she attacked that staff member. A few days confined to quarters and then you let her out.”

Snake snapped at Kaz defensively “She was no longer a threat, but I made it very clear that if it were to happen again she’s leaving.” Kaz demonstrated his obvious displeasure while Ocelot sat back studying the two, “We all thought it was weird how she just up and attacked that soldier like that, unprovoked. Well I looked into it, and it turns out he’s part of our Mess Hall staff and he was there that day in the kitchen with her. Boss, I’m suggesting we seriously consider whether or not she contaminated the food, infected the whole base with something. We need to interrogate her—now—to find out the truth.”
Ocelot stretched. “Interrogation will do no good. Miller, we’ve been over this a dozen times—Quiet won’t speak around any of us, not if we try to force her. Besides, you’re fixated on only one of several possibilities. Consider—both she and the Boss were there at the Devil’s House. Either one of them might have picked up the infection and brought it back to Mother Base. Or, there’s the little matter of the Skulls. Both you and the Boss have spent plenty of time around them. We’ve seen firsthand they have some kind of ability to infect enemy combatants and turn them into some kind of zombies.” Snake raised an eyebrow at Ocelot, “Zombies?”

“You know, Night of the Living Dead? George A. Romero? Come on Boss, don’t tell me you’ve forgotten our good friend Dr.—” Snake abruptly raised his hand cutting the man short “I get the idea. Any other ideas?”

Kaz snorted. “I have the Intel team working harder and farther out in the field to try and pick up any leads on Cipher’s activity in Africa. Which brings us to our next bit of business.” Kaz slid a manila folder across the table to Snake. “We’ve begun expanding our operations in Africa, trying to pinpoint Skull Face’s base of operations. Whatever that was at the Devil’s House, whatever is here on Mother Base, Skull Face is developing it somewhere and we need to find him. We’ve started taking contracts all across Africa, and I want you personally to oversee this one Boss.” Snake began looking through the file, looking over detailed reports of troop strength, arms, deployment, tactics, every little battlefield detail. Finally, the name of the country caught his eye.

“Mozambique?”

Kaz nodded. “That’s right. This time, the mission is in Mozambique, a country torn apart by civil war. Both Mozambique and Angola have become battlefields for proxy wars fought between East and West. Both fell into civil war shortly after winning their independence from Portugal.” Snake scratched his head “When was this?” Ocelot jumped in, grinning as he replied “1977. You slept through it, Boss, but Miller and I were there for a time. Weren’t we Miller?”

Kaz shifted in his seat, obviously uncomfortable. “Yeah. Good times,” he replied, sarcastically. “Moving on, the combatants are the standing socialist government of FRELIMO and the national armed forces against the Mozambique Resistance Movement, or RENAMO. Initially, the FRELIMO were receiving substantial military and technological aid from the Soviet Union, while the RENAMO have been backed by the white-ruled Rhodesia and apartheid South Africa. More recently, FRELIMO has been supported by the United Kingdom, France, and—get this— the United States.”

Snake shook his head. “You’re kidding, right? The United States and the Soviet Union backing the same side?” Kaz explained “America is divided on the issue. The DOD, CIA, and many conservative politicians argue that RENAMO is the obvious choice. But, the DOS argues that FRELIMO has already been internationally recognized as a legitimate governing body. That and, of course, there’s the ugly little matter of RENAMO being backed by the racist regimes of Rhodesia and South Africa. At the end of the day, US involvement in the war is minimal, and America really has no interests keeping them in Mozambique. Currently the war is locked in a stalemate, and international support for either side is starting to wane. Both sides have had to start turning to PFs to fight their battles.” Snake flashed a half smile “Which is where we come in.”

“Precisely,” Kaz answered. “This contract comes from the Commander in Chief of RENAMO’s forces. Recently, one of their child soldier platoons staged an insurrection and split from the group. They took a hostage with them— the general’s No. 2. The message reads: “He is an excellent soldier. You must bring him back to me alive.” It also says this about the child soldiers, ‘I want to persuade them to rejoin the ranks of the righteous.’” Kaz snorted. “Sounds a little too forgiving for someone who abducts children and turns them into killers. I wonder…I wonder what kind of
‘persuasion’ the general has in store?”

Ocelot waved his hand dismissively. “I’m sure you can imagine.” Kaz could almost feel himself shudder at Ocelot’s callousness before continuing “The proliferation of small arms and light weapons has only intensified the bloodshed in this war and increased the use of child soldiers. Humanitarian workers have reported both FRELIMO and RENAMO forces abducting children to serve as armed combatants, spies, even sex slaves. It’s estimated that at least one third of RENAMO forces are child soldiers. Boss, you know what we have to do.”

Snake tilted his head, giving Kaz his best “Are you kidding me?” look.

“You want me to bring them back here?”

“Right. With that in mind, here are your objectives; First, rescue and return the general’s NO. 2, as requested. Second, extract the renegade child soldiers and we’ll keep them here at Mother Base. In other words, extract all targets out of the region. Good luck Boss.”

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18:00 Limpopo River Valley

Venom Snake peered over the tall grass, scanning the landscape with his night vision goggles. In the distance, he could see a few tiny figures heading away from camp. According to intel, this was the time the patrols around camp switched, only giving him a few minutes to infiltrate the camp. These kids were probably armed with little more than a few small arms and AKs, the latter of which was cheap at little more than $6 in most parts of Africa. Plentiful too. They wouldn’t be as heavily armed as some of the PFs he’d encountered in Africa, wouldn’t be great marksmen, and they certainly wouldn’t be as fast as the Skulls. But, the important difference was his inability to rely on lethal force should the going get tough. “Remember Boss, the child soldiers will treat you as an enemy, but they’re just kids. Make sure they don’t get hurt.” Kaz had chided him, as if he needed a reminder.

He studied the small soldiers crowded around a fire at the center of camp. They moved restlessly, something adults wouldn’t do. They were edgy, but focused, a dangerous combination. He took a moment to try and get a handle on his own adrenaline before setting off towards the camp, crouching and approaching slowly through the dry grass. In the still night, a single misstep would alert the kids to his presence, and depending on how disciplined they were they might either go on alert and make things that much harder, or, panic and start shooting wildly into the night.

Approaching the perimeter of the camp, Snake found one of the guards asleep at his post. Quietly, Snake circled around the camp behind a ram-shackled hut, little more than wood and scrap metal hastily assembled. He paused, steadying his breathing as he clutched his MK22 close. He rounded the corner and fired off two shots into the necks of two boys. Their smaller bodies meant less time for the tranquilizer to travel through their system, and before they could even turn to face him both had collapsed to the ground. Snake slowly moved in, rechambering a tranq dart as he did so. Turning his back to the fire, he pulled down his NVG and surveyed the camp for signs of the prisoner. There. Snake could see the outline of an adult body laying on a tarp towards the back of the camp, hopefully still breathing. Suddenly, from behind him, came the voice of a young boy, probably in Portuguese. The door to the shack swung open and Snake spun around to meet a young child, AK in hand, staring at him wide eyed. The boy’s muscles twitched as he made to raise the rifle, and without thinking Snake entered reflex mode. Decades of practicing CQC and his muscles instinctively knew every move. Seizing the rifle, Snake twisted the gun away from him with his bionic arm, dealing the boy a forceful—but restrained—blow across the face with his other arm. The boy crumpled in a heap, unconscious, at his feet. The adrenaline still rushing, Snake turned and
walked to the edge of the shack, waiting. Soon, he heard the sound of small footsteps, and at just the right moment his arm shot straight out, close-lining the now awake sentry who had come running at the sound of his comrade.

Afraid to use any more physical force on the boy, Snake hurriedly strapped a Fulton Extraction device to the boy and deployed it, his tiny frame shooting into the night sky. Snake made his way slowly across camp, stopping to extract each one of the child soldiers before finally heading to the prisoner.

Standing over the body, Snake took out his pocket sized flashlight and shone it on the man. “That’s the target prisoner! The general’s XO.” Kaz exclaimed. Kneeling, Snake checked his vitals. “He’s alive.” Snake began looking over the gaunt body, noted that both legs appeared to have been violently broken. “He’s injured…looks half starved, too.” Kaz thought for a moment. “Boss, it’s too dangerous to risk a Fulton extraction. You’ll have to find some other way.” Snake looked around camp quickly for any signs of returning patrols. “These kids didn’t hike all the way out here, Kaz. There must be a jeep or something nearby.”

“Remember, the contract is to turn him over to the general alive.”

Snake turned the prisoner over and grimaced at what he saw. The man’s face was covered in blood, a pulpy mess where his ears used to be, a cavernous hole that was once a nose. The man’s eyelids fluttered, no doubt from hunger, thirst, and shock. His lips trembled, his voice harsh and barely above a whisper “You…you came to bring me back?” With what might have been his last bit of strength he began to struggle in Snake’s grasp, his voice becoming more excited “Let me go…If I return, they’ll kill me. I have to save that girl! I have to…”

The prisoner collapsed from sheer exhaustion, his body going limp in Snake’s brawny arms. “Calm down. Calm down! What girl?” Weak, the man turned to face Snake, his eyes straining in the darkness. “Wait…Big Boss? Is that you? Can it really be you, here to save me again?” Snake was taken aback. Every soldier in the world knew the name of Big Boss, but few had ever met the man himself or even knew what he looked like. “You know my name?”

The prisoner either laughed or winced in pain. “Heh. I guess you wouldn’t recognize me, would you? It’s me. Frank. Frank Jaeger. Remember?” Outside the camp, Snake could hear the excited voices of children, the next patrol shift confusedly calling out for the others. “We’ll talk later. I’m getting you out of here.”

“Where? Where are we going?”

“A little place outside heaven. You’ll be safe there.”

Kaz’s voice crackled over the radio. “Boss, don’t forget the leader of the child soldiers.” Carefully lifting Frank over his shoulder, Snake slinked to the center of camp, careful to stay out of the firelight, and began looking around for an escape vehicle. “The leader of the renegade soldiers—have you seen him?” Frank lifted his head slowly and pointed. “There. We came here in a jeep I parked over there. It’s me. I’m their squad leader.” Kaz sounded taken aback. “He’s the general’s second in command, and the leader of the child soldiers?”

The voices of the children were louder now. They had entered camp. Finding it empty, there first thought would no doubt be to check on the prisoner. Snake hurried as fast as he could in the direction Frank had pointed to, while Frank explained “I convinced the children to rise up against the general. I’m his second-in-command, so I knew he couldn’t just let me escape. I have information, every dirty little secret. I thought I could black mail the general into giving me what I wanted.”
“The girl?”

“That’s right. Five years ago, during the Rhodesian Civil War. I…found this girl, a war orphan. My conscience wouldn’t let me be, so I took her with me. I tried to take care of her. I brought her all the way here, across countless battlefields. We never knew whether we’d survive through the night, but sometimes…sometimes, she huddles up to me, as if I were her brother.”

Spotting the jeep, Snake carefully lay Frank in the passenger side and buckled him in, before leaping into the jeep himself. The child soldiers, frantic now, were calling out into the night, scrambling to find their missing prisoner. Snake slammed the jeep into reverse as the children came running, guns drawn. Whipping the wheel around, Snake gunned it and took off into the night under a hail of bullets.

“Wait, the children…” Frank muttered.

“Kaz, send in a squad to pick those kids up. I’m done playing babysitter for the night.”

“Roger that Boss. Now, make your way to the extraction point.”

Frank shifted in his seat, trying to hold his head up and wincing as the jeep bounced across the African savannah. “I left her at a village. I thought she’d be safe there, but later I heard that the RENAMO had attacked the village. She was taken, sold to a human trafficker. Here.” Reaching into his pocket, Frank’s trembling hand produced a small photo of the trafficker. “He works for one of the big PFs, Rogue Coyote. He operates across borders, selling kids to brothels, black market organ trades, diamond mines. You name it. RENAMO has been raiding villages across the country, abducting children in mass for their forced labor system, Gandira. Kids are made to fight, made to labor for the soldiers out in the fields, and the girls…”

“So you were looking to blackmail the general in exchange for the trafficker?” Frank nodded. “Boss, I have a list- of all his clients…on an MO disk. I was going to go to an NGO, make RENAMO and Coyote’s involvement public. To escape the scandal, I’d demand they return the girl. What I didn’t count on was those kids turning on me. It was their revenge for making them fight. I can’t say as I blame them. I’m just as guilty as anyone else for putting a gun in their hand.”

Kaz was impressed by the sheer brutality of what these kids had done “They did this to you?”

Delirious, Frank struggled to continue “When I met you, I was fighting on the side of independence. This time, I ended up fighting on the other side as a RENAMO soldier. Race. Politics. I don’t care about any of that. I didn’t care about why or who I was fighting. I was just like those kids. War is all I’ve ever known. I don’t think I’ll ever live a normal life. That girl. She deserves to live a normal life, away from war.” Frank paused, contemplating, feeling guilty for what he was about to confess. “No. That’s not it. Saving that girl- it was the only way I could make up for my sins. That’s why I can’t die yet. She can be my mark…on humanity. Boss, men like us will die like dogs on the battlefield, with no one left to mourn our passing. Her life can be proof that I existed…proof that I could at least make one person’s life a happy one. I have to…save…the girl.” With that, Frank slumped unconscious against the stalky frame of Venom Snake. The sound of Pequod descending broke through the silence of the night as Snake killed the jeep’s engine, got out, and gingerly lifted the wounded Frank from the jeep. A few emergency medical personnel jumped out of the chopper and rushed to tend to Venom’s charge. “Leave him to us, Big Boss.” Snake nodded and followed suite, climbing into the ACC and preparing to leave for Mother Base.

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“How’s he doing?” Venom mouthed with his phantom cigar between his teeth. He and Kaz stood
just outside of Sick Bay, and even though it wasn’t a real cigar with tar and nicotine, the Med Staff still wouldn’t allow Snake to smoke his phantom cigar indoors. “He’ll pull through. It’ll take some time for his legs to heal, and the Med team are working right now on his face. We’ll get R&D to craft him some synthetic ears and a nose.” Snake held up his arm “Unless he wants to try bionic.” Kaz grinned, the artificial lights of Mother Base playing off his perfect white teeth. “Now that would be something. So, tell me Snake, how do you know him? He acted like he’d met you before.”

Venom grew quiet. “I…don’t remember. I wouldn’t have known the guy from Adam-and I don’t mean Ocelot.” Kaz rolled his eyes as Snake continued, the tone of his voice becoming serious. “It’s hard sometimes. Everybody seems to know all about me, but I feel like I don’t remember anyone. Not the way I should.” Inching closer to Snake, Kaz hesitated before placing his hand on Snake’s back. Even after all these years his friend’s body was more mountain than man, as though he had been hewn from solid rock. Kaz could still remember what it was like to feel those muscles flexing with such strength over him, like some great beast of prey triumphantly looming over its kill. He waited, but this time was pleased to see Snake did not turn away or shrug off the gesture.

“I know what you mean Boss. Nine years has a way of teaching you that trust’s a hard thing to come by. That’s why it’s good to have you back. Snake. I…I missed you.” The air was still and tense between the two men. “It’s…good to be back, Kaz.” Snake turned with an awkward, yet tender, smile. “It’s getting late. We should get some rest,” Snake gently put his hand on Kaz’s shoulder, “I’ll drive you back to your place.”

Kaz couldn’t believe what he was hearing. It was almost like the “old” Snake was back. “S-Sure.” He stammered. “So…what changed Boss? You’ve been keeping to yourself ever since…you know.” It was an uncomfortable question to ask, and Kaz could feel the hair on the back of his neck sticking up, could feel that single burning eye turning on him. “We can talk, but not here. Not right now.” Dejected, Kaz wasn’t willing to give up just yet. “The jeep’s just ahead Boss. Mind driving?” Snake smirked. “I don’t have a license. What if we get pulled over?” Kaz smiled warmly. Dumb jokes, now that was the Boss he knew. “I think Diamond Dog’s black budget has it all covered.” Snake grinned “Bribe the local authorities, huh? Classic Kaz.”

The jeep roared to life and before Snake took to the road he checked the cassette deck. “Perfect,” he said as he pushed the tape in and cranked up the volume. Over the sounds of the wind whipping past them, Kaz could hear the melancholy voice of Ian Curtis,

When the routine bites hard
And ambitions are low
And the resentment rides high
But emotions won’t grow

“You know Boss, we should take more rides like this around Mother Base. Enjoy what we’ve built for ourselves. We’re partners, two halves of a whole.”

“That’s right. You’re my partner and I trust you.”

“That’s- not what I meant.”

And we’re changing our ways,

Taking different roads
Then love, love will tear us apart again

They slowed to a halt on the Command Platform, Snake ejecting and pocketing the cassette tape before closing the lights and shutting off the jeep. Snake helped Kaz up the stairs and the two entered his cramped little office, more cluttered than usual with reports from the Quarantine Platform as well as Intel files from all across Africa. Moving a stack of papers to the side, Snake relaxed into the couch while Kaz went over to his desk and began rummaging through the drawers.

“Kaz, you asked me before why I wanted to see you.” Kaz emerged from behind the desk with two crystal glasses, placing them on the table before returning for the bottle of whisky. He slowly poured a few fingers of the golden liquor into each glass and handed one to Snake. As Snake knocked his back Kaz slinked over to sit next to him on the couch, uncharacteristically shoving the rest of the papers onto the floor. “What’s on your mind Boss?”

Kaz noticed the hand grasping the glass tighten, the knuckles turning white. Snake glanced at him, nervous and confused, neither of which Kaz had ever seen before. “Snake what’s wrong?”

“Kaz, do you—remember that night, nine years ago? The night Mother Base went down.” Kaz pulled back, trying to organize his thoughts and get his worrying under control. “Of course, I remember it all, like it just happened yesterday. Why?” Snake grew pale and could only stare straight ahead. “I’m not sure I do. Sometimes I think I remember it all. I’m sure I know what happened. Other times….” Snake got up from his seat and walked over to the desk, pouring himself another drink. Kaz held out his own glass. “Some kind of amnesia, caused by the shrapnel?” Snake poured Kaz another glass, shaking his head. “Don’t know. It’s not like I can’t remember, it’s just that—sometimes it’s hard for me to recall things. Sometimes I remember things one way, sometimes another.”

Kaz took the bottle from Snake’s hand and poured him another drink. “What do you remember about-us?” Snake shrugged. “We were always together around Mother Base, and when I was out in the field you’d always be on coms with me, worrying about every little detail. We argued, sometimes things would get physical, but we trusted one another.” Trust. It always came back to trust, and the uncomfortable, unspoken truth between them that one of them had violated that trust. One of them had kept secrets, lied, used the other as a pawn in a much bigger game in which both turned out to be merely players.

“Snake, do you remember when we first started talking about going big?” Kaz asked. “We were still in Columbia, just a shack and a few tents. We talked about everything—construction expenses, gear, recruiting the right kind of personnel. We stayed up all night under the stars, and before either of us knew it we were talking about our personal lives.” Snake nodded. “I was still getting to know you— not the cocky commander or the slick con man, but the real you. You told me about your life in Japan, about your mother and how hard it had been.”

Kaz poured himself another drink, beginning to feel the effects of the liquor. Intoxication began to loosen his tongue, relax him, and he found himself desperately trying to breathe in his friend’s presence in between words.

“So what do you think of me now?”

An awkward silence passed between them.

“I think you’re drunk.”

Sitting his glass on the couch next to him, Kaz began to loosen his tie and struggled to unbutton his shirt, his face already becoming flushed. Snake leaned in close to help him, undoing the first button
while Kaz shuddered.

“Snake…it’s hot in here.”

“You’re imagining things.”

“Don’t stop there,” Kaz pleaded. With an uncomfortable sigh Venom unbuttoned his XO’s shirt all the way down, catching a glimpse of his soft, fuzzy chest. Kaz had always religiously waxed his body, trying to maximize the effect of his chiseled physique. Now, rock hard abs had been replaced by a slightly paunchy midsection.

“I’m not in the best shape, but I’m holding together,” Kaz joked.

Snake looked him over- the immaculate uniform concealing a rumpled dress shirt. His beard was scraggily and several days overdue for a shave, his sideburns uneven. A previously perfectly coiffed head of hair was now greasy and unkempt, flattened underneath his beret. Compared to the man he once knew, Snake couldn’t decide if this was all the result of sheer negligence, or whether this was Kaz’s own way of punishing himself for his former hubris-denyng himself his signature vanity.

“Are you?”

Snake almost couldn’t believe that he had just said that. He knew Kaz was just barely holding it together. How would he react to what Snake had just said? What should he do?

Kaz flared up, his voice becoming angry and animated. “Why don’t you look at me and tell me if I am? What do you think?” Snake couldn’t see behind his sunglasses, but he knew there was a glint of something in Kaz’s eyes, something primitive and defensive, a challenge.

“I think you’re too hard on yourself.”

Kaz snickered “Someone has to be,” he said quietly.

“What did you say?”

Kaz raised his chin defiantly.

“You heard me. Ever since that argument we had about the kids you’ve been soft around me. Weak. You think I can’t take it?”

“Kaz what are you…”

“That’s it, isn’t it? I fucked up once and you can’t trust me again. You won’t put too much on me because you think I’ll snap. You’re always so…so…calm, about everything I do. Everything I say-you don’t argue, you don’t fight me on any of it. You won’t even look at me the same way.”

“Kaz, all that’s in the past. I understand why you did what you did, but remember, we’re fighting for the future…”

Kaz hurls the glass across the room and it shatters across the bookshelf.

“No we’re not! Our future is revenge. You. Me. Together. Avenging the deaths of our comrades—” He paused, failing to choke back the emotion anymore, “—seeing you again, that’s all I’ve lived for. That’s been my future for the past nine years, and now I have everything I wanted back again… except you. You’re here, but it’s not really you.”

“Kaz, I…”
“I know. ‘It’s a side effect of the coma.’ Well I’ve been trying, my hardest, to remind you-to get you to remember. Sometimes I wonder if you’re even trying to work with me on this.”

Kaz’s hand softly caresses Venom’s leg, slowly drifting upwards.

“You didn’t used to be like this.”


“We weren’t, you know, intimate. You liked girls, too much at times.”

Kaz looked at Snake in disgust, his hand slowly retracting “Jesus Christ—Snake, it really isn’t you. That’s why—all of this…”

“Kaz, I didn’t mean—”

Kaz struggled to stand and looked down contemptuously at Venom, his face cold and hard. “You try so hard to hide it, but you’re disgusted. You’re ashamed of me. I’m just some crippled faggot to you, aren’t I? Dead weight from the old days.”

Venom rose to stand, towering over his commander. He was still on the defensive, but his voice took on an edge, low and menacing.

“That’s enough.”

Kaz kept on the offensive, either trying to wear Snake down or simply too mad to care.

“What are you going to do about it Snake? Does the truth hurt? Look at you. You used to beat the shit out of me when I got this far out of line. Don’t you want to take a swing at me? Don’t you want to do something, anything?!”

Venom’s patience was growing thin “I’m not going to hit you,” he said through gritted teeth.

“WHY?! What are you afraid of, beating up the poor defenseless cripple? Fuck you!” Kaz braced himself and swung, the blow connecting with Snake’s jaw. Venom’s head twisted to the side, absorbing the blow. He stood, stunned that Kaz had actually hit him, and while he simply stood there Kaz threw another punch, and then another, the blows weakened by the loss of his dominant hand. Venom bit his lip and could feel the blood trickling down his chin, dripping to the office floor. As Snake tried to duck and avoid one of the blows, a punch landed directly on his forehead. The impact felt like someone hit him in the head with a sledgehammer, driving a railroad spike into his brain. His head reeled and the whole room grew fuzzy, the color draining from his vision. He staggered and felt overcome with nausea.

“Boss? Boss are you okay? Shit! Hold on, I’ll get a Medic.”

Venom thought that he had infinite patience for this man, but now that patience had reached its end. He felt the rage boil up into his chest, could feel it resonating in his arms tensing his muscles. Doubled-over in pain, he snapped like a taut wire, lunging into Kaz and driving his fist straight into the bridge of his nose with a loud, guttural roar. His XO’s head snapped back and through the sickening crunch of cartilage came a sharp exhalation of breath followed by a spray of blood. Kaz collapsed to the floor, blood pooling on his office carpet.

“Heh—I felt that,” Kaz gasped, “Snake-hurt me more.”
Venom attempted to marshal his fury. “Get up.”

Kaz grinned, blood running down his face into his mouth making his perfect teeth appear even whiter. “Can’t. I’m just a poor cripple, remember?”

Venom’s jaw set and anger once more flashed in his eye. He was beginning to realize just what sort of man Kazuhira Miller was, and just what sort of heavy handed approach was needed to bring him to heel. Venom firmly planted his boot on Miller’s face, pressing down with just enough force to hear the other man wheeze.

“Lick it.”

His cock visibly swelling, Kaz obeyed and began rolling his tongue all over the underside of his Boss’s boot. After a few seconds of this humiliating display, Snake knelt down and rolled Kaz over onto his front. He reached around and began undoing the other man’s belt.

“I should throw you in the brig for the shit you just pulled. Send Ocelot down every day just to keep you company.”

Kaz felt his pants pulled down around his ankles and could hear Snake unzipping his fly.

Kaz couldn’t speak, his breaths coming in sharp rasps through his broken nose. His throbbing cock more than indicated to Venom that he hardly objected to this treatment.

Kaz moaned in the back of his throat as he felt the tip of Snake’s cock penetrating his tight ring of muscle. He winced at the burning sensation as the first few inches slid inside him. Snake had never exactly been what you would call a romantic, but in the past he would at least have the common courtesy of spitting into your ass before entering. With a huff Snake slid in the remainder of his cock, both hands tightly around Miller’s waist. This was it. Kaz had been waiting for what seemed like forever for this and it was almost exactly the way he remembered it. His first time with the Boss had been so long ago, but that kind of intense pleasure and pain isn’t something you easily forget. He had experimented in college, slept with plenty of women and a few guys, but nothing had prepared him for Snake. He felt pretty sure he had limped out of that tent, only slightly embarrassed as the members of MSF he passed hurried to avert their gaze. Moreso, he felt pride at the tempest he had just experienced. Now, nine years later, this was so easy for him.

“Snake…” he mouthed, feeling a few delicate drops of precum trickle down his throbbing erection as his Boss thrusted. Snake shifted, placing his bionic hand onto Kaz’s head to steady himself while reaching around to feel his friend’s erection with his flesh hand, his finger tracing circles around the tip of Miller’s cock. Something in Venom began to change, the bitter resentment and frustration at his insubordinate, mouthy XO had been replaced by a blossoming lust. He caught a drop of precum and gently pressed it to the other man’s lips. Swooning, Miller’s tongue slowly reached out to caress his Boss’s finger before engulfing it with his entire mouth. A little salty, but all things considered, he didn’t taste too bad. Maybe he should cut down on the coffee though. Taking Miller’s dick firmly in hand, Snake gave a few experimental pumps. He could feel Kaz’s whole body shudder beneath him.

“Age hasn’t slowed you down one bit. But cut the gentle crap Boss- I can take it.”

Something about this man, the pushiness, neediness of Kazuhira Miller, awoke an even deeper desire, and Snake could feel his movements becoming easier, slicker with his own precum. He stroked the other man’s cock even harder, pushing his face into the carpet and thrusting faster, harder, low sighs escaping from his own mouth.
“How’s this?”

Miller could feel his insides clenching, could feel the rush from the tip of his cock into his balls, practically drooling at the weight of his Boss pressing down on top of him. Kaz was rocking his own hips now, pushing back against Snake as best he could, supporting his weight on his one arm. God he had missed this.

“That’s it-make me feel it. Make me feel alive again!”

Snake was the first to climax, a surprise since Kaz had never been able to match Snake’s endurance, no matter how hard he tried, and had always been the first to blow his load. Kaz could feel Snake spasming inside him, filling him, and the thought of this caused Miller to come shortly after. Snake extracted himself and wiped his gooey hand on the carpet. Normally, Kaz would’ve had a fit, but between both of their ejaculations he was definitely going to need a new carpet. Snake helped him shimmy his pants back up, gingerly tucking his cock back into them before zipping up and securing his belt. Kaz took Snake’s hand—his bionic hand—and Snake helped him to his feet. Kaz collapsed, exhausted, onto the couch. Snake stood there, awkwardly, not wanting to take a seat next to Kaz but not sure of how best to proceed.

“Well, I already walk with a limp, so nobody around base will be any wiser.”

Snake frowned “Don’t make this a habit,” he warned tersely. Upon leaving, he turned back and sheepishly motioned to the floor “Sorry about the rug.”

Kaz shook his head, “I’m not. The rug’s got to go.

Kaz turned, “Anything else you’d like to ‘discuss’ Snake?”

Snake nodded. “We’ve got to find that human trafficker- for Frank. Bring back the girl.”

“If he’s on the run then we don’t have much time.” Kaz thought for a second. “I’ve got an idea, let me get back to you.”

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Snake sat with his new passengers in the ACC, still not believing how easy the trafficker had been to find. Even easier to apprehend. He had burned a lot of bridges in his line of work, even his comrades in Rogue Coyote wanted nothing to do with him. With no one to turn to and nobody to protect him, he naturally started looking for outside help to escape the country. He claimed a certain person of interest was out for him, and he needed to get out fast. He, and his daughter.

The Intel team had intercepted several calls the trafficker had been making across the country, trying to hire anybody who would listen as his escort and bodyguard. Naturally, upon hearing this, Kaz had seized on the idea that Diamond Dogs would take the job—for the right fee, of course. It hadn’t taken long for Snake to question the right people and find someone willing to spill their guts about the target’s location. People on both sides of every conflict had families, and when you were involved in wetworks as dirty as this, there weren’t a lot of people left to give a shit about what happened to you.

The target sat hunched over, hands bound behind his back and head sunk down underneath the black bag. Across from him was a small, scrawny girl of about nine or ten. Her swarthy complexion, long dark hair and dark brown eyes hinted that her ethnicity might be Indian, a descendent of the plantation workers who had crossed the border from South Africa almost a hundred years before. She hadn’t uttered a word since Snake met her, in contrast to the trafficker who was a babbling mess. Talking excitedly, he had implored Snake that he had to get him out
before “they” came for him. He trembled in fear as he related delivering his “products” to armored PFs-obviously XOF- on the outskirts of the N’gumba Industrial Zone. Women and children from all over Africa were taken to factories, mines, and other abandoned areas far from the watchful eyes of NGOs, and turned over to Skull Face.

“Please…let me go…My family is waiting for me..I don’t want to become…one of ‘them’.” He whimpered. “I saw it…saw the Skull…watching me…” The trafficker started sobbing and rocking back and forth. Venom thought back to Shabani and the others, his heart growing cold. “Shut up.”

Kaz and a heavily bandaged Frank were there to greet them when they landed on Mother Base. For a moment, the sight of Frank reminded Venom of his friend, Ishmael. Ishmael, the one Ocelot derisely referred to as “the Man Who Never Was.” Venom shoved the trafficker out of the chopper, eliciting a cry of pain from the client as he landed on deck. Next, Venom disembarked and gestured for the girl to take his hand. She stood where she was and stared, first at his bionic hand, next at him. Her eyes studied his careworn face, took note of every scar and line, before finally settling on his horn. “You’re safe here. Come on, your brother is waiting.”

Slowly, the girl moved closer and, hesitating at first, placed her small little hand in Snake’s. Hers was a child’s hand, but the palms were calloused and rough, the knuckles scabbed and the nails dirty. Snake could imagine the kind of life she had been living, a child who had lost her parents, her nation, with no one to protect her and no place to call home. No one, that is, except Frank. Venom hadn’t discussed it yet, but he sincerely hoped that Frank would agree to join them. His tenacity and skills as a warrior were beyond question, but more than that, he was another missing piece of Snake’s past. He couldn’t let him just walk out of his life. Not right now.

“Give me that sonuvabitch! Let me at him!” Frank’s recovery was fast as she shot past Kaz and made straight for the trafficker. Fortunately, he wasn’t completely healed, and in his current condition Venom could easily restrain him. “Listen to me. Listen! You have every right to want revenge on this man, but now is not the time.” Venom stared directly into Frank’s eyes, his voice strong and commanding. “Our contract was to get him safely out of Africa. He has information we need, so we can’t let him go just yet. Don’t worry. I know your pain. Trust me.” Frank relaxed and cast a final, hate-filled glance at the trafficker before moving past Big Boss. Beneath the bandages, his face softened and his eyes lit up. The girl shrunk away from Frank, his face unknowable beneath the bandages. Frank knelt down and placed his hands on his chest. “It’s me. It’s Frankie. Don’t worry, it’s me.” Recognizing his voice, she smiled and ran forward, throwing her arms around his neck. A few members of the Med Team approached and the girl’s grip on her big brother tightened anxiously. “It’s alright. They’re doctors. They’re going to take care of you, of both of us. Come on, let’s go.”

As the two of them held hands and prepared to head for the Medical Platform, Kaz stepped forward. “Hold it you two. There’s something we have to take care of first.” Frank tensed as Kaz approached, not entirely sure of how much to trust this man and having trouble reading him behind his dark aviators. “What is it?”

“You’ve just been calling her girl. Doesn’t she have a name?”

Frank shook his head. “She’s never told me her name.”

“Huh. Well, I’m sure she’ll get along here just fine. But, she needs a name. We can’t just call her girl, and her presence on Mother Base has to be documented. For humanitarian purposes.”

The three of them stood silent. “Boss, any ideas?”

“Search me. Frank found her.”
Kaz sunk deep in thought. “How about…Naomi.”

Frank almost whispered the name to himself “Naomi…”

“It’s Japanese-nao meaning ‘straight’ and mi meaning ‘beautiful’.” Miller paused. “It…was my mother’s name.”


Frank smiled down affectionately at Naomi. “What do you think? Do you like the name ‘Naomi’?”

Naomi seemed to consider before nodding in the affirmative, returning Frank a great, big smile. As the two of them departed, Kaz approached the trafficker who had begun mumbling incoherently under his breath. Kaz poked at him with his crutch. “What are going to do with him? If he makes it back to his country, he’ll be no more than a civilian and he’ll avoid facing a court-martial. Like so many other war-biz junkies…I’ll bet he plans on enjoying a new life financed with his blood money.” Kaz contemptuously spat the last two words.

“We’re an army without a nation Kaz. We exist outside the law. Our justice is swift revenge. He’ll have his day in court. He’ll face a jury of his peers, and he’ll be tried. I’ll be the one who decides his fate.” Snake smiled morbidly. “But first, I want to know what he knows. He’s going to spend a little quality time with Ocelot. Go get Frank and have him meet you in Room 101 of the Command Platform.” Kaz grinned, anticipating the cruelty to come. “You got it Boss.”
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Before you begin, I have to apologize. First, there’s a lot of Code Talker in this chapter, but I swear no biology lectures. Second, towards the end there is a lot of recycled dialogue. I’ve tried to keep from using in-game dialogue as best as I can, but it just didn’t seem right to cut it out and expect you, the reader, to just go along with some things, filling in the blanks. I’ve done that before in-between chapters, and since I’m very, very pressed for time I unfortunately might have to do it more. Ideally, I’d like to end this within two more chapters, but with only about a week until my son is born, it’s not looking likely.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Zero sat up in bed, gazing at the same monitor, the same wood paneled library with the empty leather chair. At the time he had purchased the apartment building it was antiquated and deteriorating, built during the Prohibition era. Development pressures owing to its Midtown location had been driving people out of Hell’s Kitchen since the late ’60s, which only helped accelerate Zero’s plan to replace the original occupants. Indeed, it had taken him only ten years.

Officially, the building was a three-story structure that had recently been renovated. The fourth floor, where Zero was hiding, was illegally built afterwards. Since the elevator was part of the original construction, it didn’t even reach the fourth floor. Having once doubled as a speakeasy, Zero took advantage of the many hidden passages allowing him to come and go more easily without being seen by anyone. The only access to the fourth floor was a secret staircase on the third. Nobody had the full story, and nobody knew the entire layout except Zero. During reconstruction over the years, agents of Cipher had moved in furnishings piece by piece. Regrettably, the only thing missing was a roaring fire- too much trouble to keep stoked. In its place, Zero made do with central heating.

The mahogany desk across the room might as well have been on the other side of the city. Today was a treatment day, and in those days he was weaker than usual and remained bedridden. He sighed, unable sometimes to stave off his melancholy. He held onto every word from the last conversation he’d had, like a drowning man grasping desperately for something, anything to keep him from going under. While he always prided himself as a respectable host, he’d wondered whether or not he had been too talkative, reminiscing for hours about “the old days” under the guise of preparing the girl for her mission. Her mission to contact Big Boss.

Zero felt a stab of guilt at the thought of his old friend. Would he still consider me a friend? Zero wondered to himself. After what had happened, he sincerely doubted it. If only he could have talked to Jack, talked some sense into him. Instead, he had to explain what happened over the telephone to a hysterical Kazuhira Miller. A brash, egotistical man, blinded by his ambition and foolish enough to believe he could outwit Zero. How utterly foolish. “I should warn you, Kazuhira,” Zero had cautioned, “I have been playing this game since long before you were born, and I’ve played it with more clever and dangerous men than you. Do exactly as I say, and we shall both get what we want. But if you try me, there won’t be a corner of this earth where you can flee to escape my wrath.”

Zero had been a precocious but lonely child, growing to be an exceptionally clever, if eccentric,
man—something that the Boss had always admired about him. He and the Boss had served together both in Rayforce and the SAS, responsible for some of the most daring and critical operations of the war, planning joint operations between the SAS and the United States Army Air Forces. Up until then, Zero had never thought of anyone as his equal in terms of sheer cerebral horsepower. Until he met Jack, the Boss was the only person he had considered a close friend and trusted so completely. There was a strength and conviction in the Boss’s voice, and Zero found himself spellbound by her words, her ideas, her idealistic view of America. English born, Zero would follow the Boss after the war, to America. The Boss and her words became the foundation, the heart, and the future to which he dedicated his life.

The Boss had the foresight to see the truth beyond the Cold War. America was at risk; not from Communism or the threat of nuclear annihilation. The true danger facing America was simply that the United States was becoming irrelevant. Both the United States and the Soviet Union had a nuclear arsenal with enough military might to crush any foe and unleash Armageddon on the whole world. Yet, as the Cold War and Vietnam drew on and on with no end in sight, America had lost its taste for war. The emergence of newly industrialized countries was forcing the United States into an economic recession, an end to the post-World War II boom. The world was changing, and while America had risen to the top of the international pecking order, that very status of top dog had bred resentment and distrust of America around the world. The United States and the Soviet Union were just two giants the rest of the world longed to see brought to their knees. Not destroyed completely, of course not. Their allies and trade partners needed the Superpowers far too much for that. At the very least, the rest of the world wanted to see America and Russia humbled. Humiliated.

The coming age was one of information, the dawn of the digital age. The world would be awash in codes and ciphers, a flood of information. With the individual free to find his own personal truth, America would drown in a sea of sophomoric relativism. Everything would become a matter of opinion—values such as truth, honor, even the very thing she treasured most—loyalty—would become nothing more than subjective points of view, convenient narratives created within a vacuum of power, sucking the will of the American people into a great, black abyss of nihilism. As people withdrew into their own little echo chambers, shouting down any dissenting opinions while hiding behind their pretense to freedom of speech, they would gradually come to lose any and all faith in the promise and values of America. The country would tear itself apart. A country reduced to zero. Hard won truths would be derided as “alternative facts”, and any information that didn’t confirm a person’s own unconscious biases would be declared as “fake news”. America could no longer be respected, let alone feared.

This was not the America the Boss had envisioned, not the country she had spoken so lovingly of before laying down her life for it. The Boss saw America as the leader of the world, a country that knew how to use the power of diplomacy rather than the fear of nuclear war; one that relied on espionage, blackmail, and covert assassinations over long drawn out proxy wars. The dawn of the twenty-first century would rise upon a world weary of war. When the entire world was united as one, the world would be too small, too crowded for nukes. Regional conflicts, ethnic insurgencies, and acts of international terrorism would replace the age of détente. The entire world would become a collection of battlefields, but there would be no world war.

In a world such as this, conventional armies were next to useless. No nation could afford to wage a war without borders against an army without borders. The moment Zero realized that, everything changed. He had seized upon the missing link—the final piece of the puzzle. If the world was to survive the collapse of the Cold War system of deterrence, it would have to be united through a network of information. All nations would come to share a common language, and with it, a common culture and a common set of values and beliefs. But Zero would need a force to safeguard his new world order. The only force capable of protecting his governance without borders would have to be an army without borders.
At least, that had been the plan. That was the plan, exactly as he had explained it to the others. his “Patriots”. Of course, Jack didn’t understand it. He always lacked her vision.

“People need a hero, Jack. A symbol, something they can put their faith in and gladly give their lives for. Whether it’s a flag or a person, the stars and stripes or a hero like the Boss. People need heroes, Jack, and if we’re ever to unite the world under one will- her will- they’ll need to believe in someone who transcends regional boundaries, who stands above and over this Cold War.”

“You make it sound like a religion. I’m just a man. I don’t want to be worshipped by anybody.”

“Oh Jack, be reasonable. I heard how the others spoke of you. Those Reds the CIA brought in from San Heuronymo. They’d only known you for a few short days and they were ready to give their lives for you. Gene’s ability to demand absolute loyalty from his soldiers was just a gaff, a parlor trick. That sort of charisma comes from a superior man, a natural born leader. It can’t be taught through some silly project to replace the Boss. It’s in a person’s genes…”

More and more Jack drifted away from the organization. Zero had to twist his arm to get him to take certain missions, and when they were complete he either wouldn’t meet up at the rendezvous point or wouldn’t report in. He’d disappear, sometimes for weeks at a time, with no word. Cipher’s surveillance would find him- sometimes in some war-torn corner of the world or some dive, crawling his way out of a bottle. Zero tried to reason with him; at least, that's what Zero had thought at the time. They argued, of course. Sometimes they wouldn’t speak to one another for days. The more Zero tried to monitor and admonish his friend for his erratic behavior, the further it seemed to drive Jack away. Jack would refuse to speak with the reporters, refused to meet with the heads of state- all wanting a chance to meet the hero who had prevented an all-out nuclear war. The hero who had killed the war criminal and traitor. When Jack did show, he would be drunk or hungover and would storm out halfway through. Finally, Zero decided he himself would have to take a hand in crafting the legend of Big Boss. Zero loathed the idea of a disinformation campaign. He preferred to think of it as Edward Bernay’s would have- a public relations campaign. Of course, it was when he really started to have his doubts that Jack would come back at all that he decided to go ahead with his other plan.

Now, here he was, alone. He spoke with Donald and Dr. Clark only through proxies, and hadn’t heard from Ocelot in quite some time. Once Jack left, Ocelot had quickly followed suite. Eva stayed- for the children- but as soon as they were born and turned over to the care of Cipher, she, too, left. Eva was no great loss, Ocelot had been a major setback. But it was the loss of Jack that was unbearable. He spoke with Donald and Dr. Clark, but only through proxies-

Oh, yes. He was repeating himself. He hadn’t been himself for some time now, adding to his sense of urgency with which he had moved forward with his plans in Costa Rica. He was sick and hadn’t been as diligent as he should have. He had let his eyes wonder too far.

Zero, the nerve center of Cipher, was suffering from a neurodegenerative brain disease, one which would slowly rob him of both his body and mind. With current medical knowledge, it was incurable. At his age, at best, he had a few years left to live. Unacceptable. He ordered Dr. Clark to forestall ATGC’s gene editing research and their studying of the human genome, and to shift all of their available resources into a more dependable, if less than desirable, line of work. Their work with the children had already demonstrated that the human lifespan could be altered through deliberate Telomere manipulation. The hope was that in time, telomerase gene therapy would at least delay the normal process of telomere shortening, and with it, halt the advance of aging and the progression of the disease. Dr. Clark had been most insistent, but Zero would have none of it.

“Absolutely not. I simply don’t have time to waste on theories. The parasite therapy is proven to work.”
“But, Major, parasites? They’re so…bleh!”

After Operation Snake Eater, the CIA had recovered the remains of the Cobra Unit member’s bodies. Cipher later appropriated the CIA’s parasite research. Although Dr. Clark had made incredible progress, Zero wanted to find the man responsible for the Philosopher’s parasite project—a man from Zero’s past. He had disappeared almost thirty years ago and was considered deceased, but Zero thought different. He was willing to believe the old man was still alive somewhere in the world. That’s where his XO came in. Despite his most recent and inexcusable behavior, Zero knew that if anyone could find the old Indian, it was Skull Face. In fact, he had not spoken to his XO since the “incident” and his subsequent reassignment to Africa. Zero turned the small unmarked package over in his hands. It was wrapped in plain brown paper, the only marking was a large peace sign. A peace offering. The irony of the gesture wasn’t lost on Zero, and he decided before he opened the package it was time for him to clear the air with Skull Face.

He picked up the telephone and dialed…

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“With the lyrics finished, I was ready to show Miller. He does not often take things seriously, but all of a sudden he was saying ‘Paz, you have the soul of an enka songwriter.’ I did not even listen to enka all that much! Maybe I am pretty talented after all?”

Snake nodded lazily, taking another drag from his Phantom Cigar, his eyelid drooping. He let the weightlessness cradle him, swirled the smoke under his tongue as he listened to Paz’s voice drone on. It sounded like her words were coming from far away, separated not by miles but by time.

“Snake?”

“Oh. Yeah, I’m…not a great judge. But, I can’t wait to hear it.” He lied. It felt wrong, deluding her like this. He wanted her to know the truth, but everyone agreed that mentally she couldn’t handle it.

“Snake? Can you tell me—what day is today?”

Snake shifted uncomfortably. “Uh, I don’t know. I’d have to—check the calendar.” Her face sank and her shoulders drooped. Barely above a whisper, she replied “It feels like I’ve been waiting forever. Sometimes I worry because we still need to practice, but there is almost no time left. It is just three days until Peace Day. But…” She lifted her head, her eyes filling with tears “I thought there were three days left before. I went and checked today’s date with Miller and the Professor. The date has not changed. It is the same day. Something is strange…Am I reliving the same day?”

“Paz, I…there’s something I’ve been meaning to…tell you.” Paz lay back on the bed, drawing her knees up and folding her tiny hands beneath her face. “Snake…I’m tired.” She sighed. “Would you please…let me rest awhile?” Snake gently pulled the blanket up around her, his eye drifting over her pale body to land on the hideous scar. V. He wanted to reach out and touch her, to let her know that everything was going to be alright. Seeing her like this was both another painful reminder of the past, but also one of the few threads he had left of that unwoven tapestry; a thread of fate unravelling over almost a decade. If only she woke up one day and understood. If only she would forgive him for everything that had happened. Could he even find the words to tell her how he really felt?

Snake stepped outside into the cool night air, rubbing his temples and letting out a low sigh. Usually, visiting Paz grounded him. She wasn’t like them. She had no burning desire for revenge, no emptiness at the center of her being like the yawning mouth of a great white whale ready to swallow her up. She wasn’t a Diamond Dog—she didn’t blindly follow the will of her master and
obey orders. Paz stood at the center of a maelstrom, looked directly into the eye of the storm, and still she wished for a day when men would put aside their guns. She truly was an angel of peace.

“There you are, I’ve been looking everywhere for you.” Kaz approaches only to be met with a blank stare. “Snake? Are you okay?”

“Hm. Yeah, I was just…” Perhaps now wasn’t the time to bring up the past. The old man Snake had recently brought back- Code Talker- had helped them stop the parasite outbreak. They lost a lot of good men, and had yet to pinpoint the source of the infection. Venom didn’t expect Kaz to be in a good mood, and reminding him of the one person who, at least in Kaz’s eyes, was solely responsible for everything that had happened to them probably wasn’t the smart thing to do. “It’s nothing. What’s up?”

“We know Skull Face is planning something in Afghanistan. Code Talker and Huey- together their research is the key to all of this. We need to figure out how it all fits together.” Venom nodded. “Agreed. But we have no idea where Skull Face is.”

“Oh, I think I know who does. Ocelot’s prepared something special to greet him with. After we’re done with Code Talker, we’re going to pay Huey a visit.”

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“Can I get you anything?” Ocelot asks Code Talker. He’s standing in the middle of the room, holding a small syringe and inspecting it carefully. The old man sits perfectly still, his lack of breathing and ancient, weathered appearance making him easy to mistake for a corpse.

Code Talker turns his wheelchair to face Snake and Kaz as they enter the room. “Thank you, but no.” His voice is low and raspy, like what Snake imagines a mummy would sound like. His eyes are cloudy and lifeless, like the “Puppet soldiers” created by the SKULLS. He waits patiently for the other two to take their seats, neatly folding his skeletal hands with their thin, parchment-like skin in his lap.

“I haven’t seen you eat or drink a thing since you got here. Let me guess- photosynthesis?”

“Hn. You are correct. But tell me, how did you know that?”

Ocelot smiled in that smug, self-congratulatory way Kaz finds so obnoxious. “I once knew a man with similar abilities.” Code Talker merely stares at Ocelot, his vacant expression revealing nothing, until he slowly nods his head in assent. “My children have replaced most of the cells within my body. They act as my skin, and my eyes. They are of a different species from the vocal cord parasite which killed your men.”

Snake glances at Code Talker, who slowly turns to meet his gaze. It’s eerie. He looks as though he’s blind, but when he looks at you it feels as though he can see all of you, from every angle. It makes Snake’s skin crawl, the way this old man seems to have eyes everywhere.

“Code Talker, you said that Skull Face ordered you to weaponize the vocal cord parasites. But, you also said he wasn’t the reason.”

“And he wasn’t. Skull Face merely resurrected my research, something I had abandoned long ago. Or, more precisely, I tried to bury it where no one would find it.”

“Afraid of your own creation?” Ocelot jibed.

“My research began long ago, when I was still a young man. Naïve. Foolish. When I was young,
science and the Industrial Revolution were changing man’s understanding of nature. I sought a balance between the old ways and modern medicine—between faith and science. I was a doctor in residence at a certain Foundation. They helped put me through school, even though I was Diné. They offered me a place to continue my research. At the time, tropical medicine, that is, bacteriology, entomology, and parasitology, was a field of study receiving substantial attention and funding. I came across literature at the Foundation, a journal which detailed a certain tribe living deep within the heart of the “Dark Continent”- Africa. The people of this tribe were said to live in complete symbiosis with a previously unknown strain of parasite. It was a fantastic tale. They were said to take their nourishment from the sun and the rain, and they were feared by all their neighbors as sorcerers, capable of uttering curses that would devastate entire villages.”

Ocelot arched an eyebrow “And you believed these stories?”

“I did, and so I journeyed to Africa in search of this tribe. Unfortunately, they would not allow outsiders to study the secrets of the parasites. So, shamefully, I must admit that in the name of science I trespassed upon hallowed ground and stole one of their sacred dead.” Code Talker sighed “It is one of the many mistakes I have made in my time. I was seduced by the parasites. That is a fact. But I had come to believe that my ends justified my means. I was hailed as a visionary by the Foundation. The wealthy and influential group who had founded and bankrolled the Foundation invited me to join them, to become a part of their inner circle. They offered me limitless funds and the freedom to pursue my research. Their dream was for mankind to use science and selective breeding to take an active role in guiding our evolution. By gradually improving the genetic quality of the human population, they believed they could wipe out the genetic legacy of superstition, brutality, and violence we had inherited from our primate ancestors. They believed that with my research they had the final key to unlocking the mysteries of human perfection. I believed in their ideals, and so I joined their Wiseman’s Committee. We came to refer to ourselves as the Philosophers.”

The room grew quiet. Finally, Kaz broke the silence “No shit? I thought the last of the Philosophers died around the time of the Second World War?”

“The ocelot said that he knew of a man who had abilities similar to mine. If you know of the Philosophers then you also must surely know of the Cobra Unit.” All three men nodded. “I was responsible for implanting the parasites within their bodies. It is true that many brave young Diné fought in that war. But I was not one of them. To conceal my true identity and purpose, the codename I was given was ‘Code Talker’.” Ocelot cupped his chin in his hand thoughtfully “I get it. So you served undercover as one of the Navajo code talkers, but really, you were there to monitor and care for the Cobras?” Code Talker slowly nodded, almost making Kaz believe he was falling asleep. “You are correct. But that was not the only reason. I was called Code Talker because it was I who breathed life into the parasites. That is something that Skull Face would never let me forget.”

“Why’s that?” Kaz asked, leaning closer in anticipation of finally getting to the heart of the matter.

“Because I am also responsible for implanting him with the parasites, in order to save his life. As a boy, fire washed over his thin, young frame. His skin, lungs, and vocal cords were all seared in the flames. His every waking moment became filled with the most intense agony, but he no longer had the ability to speak, to cry, to scream. My parasite therapy healed his wounds. My children replaced his skin, his scorched lungs, and gave him back his voice.” Code Talker shook his head, “Now he would loose the parasites on the world. He has taken the gift of life that I gave him and twisted it, corrupted the parasites into a weapon of mass destruction. If he is not stopped, I have no doubt that he will seek vengeance on the whole world.”
Snake’s expression grew harsh, his voice judgmental “Your little ‘gift’ cost the lives of my men, of countless men, women, and children Skull Face tortured and killed as his test subjects. Who’s going to deliver their vengeance?”

Kaz hurried to change the subject, afraid that Snake’s crass comment would offend Code Talker and therefore the old man would refuse to help them any further. “You said Skull Face resurrected your research? If everybody believed the Philosophers were dead, how did he find you?”

“I walked away from the Philosophers, or what was left of them. After the world learned of the atrocities committed in that war, interest in eugenics dried up over-night.” Code Talker hesitated. “No. That is not the true reason. Bilágaana had systematically suppressed our language. To erase our words was like erasing our people. Their ‘education’ was tantamount to ethnic cleansing. But it wasn’t just our language. Across the world, minority languages are being suppressed and destroyed by dominant languages, slowly parasitizing minority cultures. I began to think that minority languages needed a deterrent- in order that they, their peoples and cultures, may survive.”

Ocelot had grown restless and began pacing the room, finally stopping behind Code Talker. “So you had the idea to use the vocal cord parasites as a weapon,” Ocelot leaned in close, “didn’t you?”

“No!” Code Talker protested. “I wanted to retaliate against the English language, it is true. I theorized that if I could understand the mechanism by which the parasites had become attuned to the language, I should be able to raise a generation attuned to any language. But after what I saw, when I had seen the horrors that the Nazis had done in the name of science and ‘racial purity’, I vowed that my research would never be used in such a way. I faked my own death and assumed a new identity. I thought I could live out the rest of my days in peace, using science to help my people. That is when ‘he’ found me.”

“You mean Skull Face?” Venom asked.

“When sources of uranium ore were discovered on the lands of the Diné, the United States government saw a supply of uranium in their own backyard, eliminating the need for costly international trade. Bilágaana opened uranium mines, offering my people much needed jobs. The uranium poisoned our water and countryside. Many people grew sick from working in the mines and died. I had the idea to develop a strain of metallic archaea that would enrich uranium, saving our land and people. But the research called for funding on a colossal scale, and with no prospect of return, nobody was willing to invest. But Skull Face approached me. He said he worked for a certain organization that had become interested in my parasite research. They offered to fully fund my research into the uranium enriching archaea, all in exchange for my help in resurrecting the parasites.”

Ocelot shot Snake a knowing glance. “Except what Skull Face was really interested in was the vocal cord parasite. Like a kid with his parent’s credit card. With Zero gone, he must’ve been funneling money and resources from Cipher for years. Hell, with no one the wiser, I bet the whole world believed he was Cipher.”

Kaz rose from his seat with a jolt “Wait a minute…Code Talker, you mentioned something about uranium enriching archaea?”

“Yes. The archaea metabolize uranium 235 to subsist. Skull Face forced me to create a strain that can enrich uranium to weapons grade level. The archaea must be stored inside yellowcake, otherwise they cannot survive.”

Ocelot caught on to Miller’s train of thought “Then the yellowcake Cipher was transporting- the one the Boss recovered. The yellowcake wasn’t the real cargo-”
“-those biological traces we took for impurities! That’s how Skull Face managed to smuggle nuclear materials into Afghanistan! He plans to avoid detection by exporting small truckloads of minerals that contain trace amounts of uranium. He doesn’t even need to worry about enrichment plants or cooling towers, once on site, the archaea will enrich the uranium and weaponize it!”

Code Talker nodded and grimly explained “Loaded onto his al terrain bipedal machines, he plans to arm every country, even the smallest terrorist cells. Anyone can become a nuclear power.”

Snake snapped to attention “Bipedal…so that’s why they needed Huey.” He looked over at Kaz who sat, stunned at the sheer demented brilliance of it all “A nuke business to replace the arms business. And Skull Face owns the market.”

“That’s why he needs Sahelanthropus. Imagine, a bipedal nuclear equipped walking battle tank built by the Soviets and deployed in Afghanistan. If the world sees something like that, every country will want a deterrent against something so powerful. That’s where the Walker Gears come in. If they proliferate, conventional nukes lose all value, both strategic and political. The two superpowers become powerless.”

Snake interjected “Skull Face is going to use Sahelanthropus to launch a nuke. He wouldn’t spend nine years building a paper tiger in the hopes that merely seeing it walk around would make the world pants shitting scared. That’d be stupid.”

“But how do the vocal cord parasites fit in?” Kaz asked.

“We’ll figure that out later. They don’t need Code Talker anymore, and we’ve seen Sahelanthropus is operational. Whatever Skull Face is planning, he’s ready. We need to find Skull Face- now. Kaz, you said you think Emmerich knows where he is? Ocelot, can you get him to talk?”

Ocelot flashed a malicious grin, brandishing the syringe “Thanks to Code Talker’s metallic archaea, I’ve got just the thing to loosen the good doctor’s tongue. Come on, we’ve got no time to lose.” As the three of them rose to take their leave, Code Talker raised his hand for them to wait “One more thing. Although I have instructed your men to begin inoculation with the Wolbachia, it would be prudent to ascertain how the vocal cord parasite infestation was brought onboard. In order to do that, I will need complete access to your medical records, and I would like each and every one onboard to submit to a complete toxicology and x-ray.” Code Talker pointed a bony finger in the direction of the three men. “And I mean everyone.”

Snake could see Kaz’s shoulders tense, and he instinctively placed a reassuring hand on his shoulder. “Fine by me. Whatever you need, right Kaz?” Annoyed, Kaz shrugged off the hand. “Yeah. I guess there’s no telling who might be infected. Just look at Quiet…If you didn’t know any better, you’d think she was human.” Kaz turned to leave, and as Venom followed out of the corner of his eye he saw Kaz adjusting his sunglasses, his mouth twisting into an angry scowl.

Secret Conversation: Ocelot and D***** A*****n

“Who’s there?”

“Well, well, you’ve done quite well for yourself. You’re a busy man these days. Charged particle beam, Strategic Defense Initiative. I see the Major’s money is being well spent.”

“Ocelot. You know, I really wasn’t sure if you’d come.”

“It’s been years since I’ve received an encrypted message through one of Zero’s…I mean, Cipher’s
proxies. I was beginning to think the old channels weren’t even open. Remind me again what you’re calling it these days? The Patriots? Or should I say La-Le-Lu-Li-Lo?”

“Look man, I need your help.”

“Spare me. I quit being the Major’s lapdog years ago. You made your choice, now live with it.”

“You have to listen to me. There’s some serious shit about to go down, this country-hell, the whole world could be in danger.”

“Fine. But make this quick, I’m not as patient as I used to be, and I have something important to attend to.”

“Okay, look, you know the Major’s gone. He disappeared about eight years ago, nobody’s heard from him at all. He might even be dead. But Cipher didn’t end with him. There was this guy- ugly mother fucker. Apparently he was the Major’s XO, but more importantly, he was responsible for what happened nine years ago.”

“I’ve heard all this before. You’re wasting my time.”

“Man listen to me! Skull Face took control of Cipher. He’s been using me to steal technology, resources, information, and funding from DARPA for years.”

“Blackmail only works when someone has something to hide.”

“He controls everything under the Pentagon’s black budget, leeching off it like a parasite. There’s been a real brain drain in Langley, too.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean he’s been taking some of my best people. It started years ago with this one AI researcher, but pretty soon he had all the top minds in AI, robotics, weapons development, you name it, working for him. I come in one day and they’re just gone.”

“And you have no idea what he's up to?”

“I still have backdoors into Cipher. He’s tried to keep it all quiet, but I’ve picked up bits and pieces here and there from all the different intelligence agencies. Satellite confirmed it. He’s moving stuff from South Africa to Afghanistan, and he’s got something BIG in Afghanistan. You remember Granin, that weapons developer that was working in Grozny Grad?”

“Of course. Colonel Volgin had him working on some kind of bipedal weapon before he turned to Sokolov. He pulled all of Granin’s funding and the project was scrapped. He called it ‘Metal Gear’.”

“Well, that was a thread the Major wasn’t willing to leave dangling. Especially after what happened in San Heuronymo. Now, get this, Granin had a buddy back here in America. A robotics guy named Emmerich. He was working in Costa Rica back in ’79, and ended up with guess who?”

“John?”

“Exactly. Now, we have evidence that Emmerich survived what happened nine years ago, and I think he’s been working with Skull Face.”

“Metal Gear? You said he's been seen in Afghanistan?”
“You mean you haven’t heard anything? There’s been reports of bipedal weaponry popping up all over Afghanistan. Of course, the KGB are trying to keep it all under wraps.”

“This is the first I’ve heard of it, but now I’m starting to see why you called. The question is- what is it you expect me to do? Stop him? Save your precious reputation?”

“Heh. No. I don’t expect someone like you to stick your neck out for anyone. You’re not the ‘save the world’ type either.”

“I’m not John.”

“Man, I really wish he were here right now. The Major- we- never meant for any of this to happen.”

“Hindsight’s 20/20. The past is the past and there’s no going back.”

“You may be right, but we still have a future to protect. We have to be the ones to carry on her legacy.”

“You mean the Major’s will. I guess some things won’t ever change.”

“Look I don’t care who’s wrong or right anymore! All I know is, if we let that maniac get away with this, there’s no telling what the hell he’s going to do. If he gives that thing to the Russians, if he turns Metal Gear on America, we’ll be right back to the Cuban Missile Crisis. The world is changing, it wants to change. Our children, and their children’s children, deserve to live in a world free from this Cold War.”

“So what are you proposing?”

“After what happened, Snake’s partner, this guy, Kazuhira, he kept on fighting. He’s built himself a nice little mercenary company out in the Indian Ocean. Goes by the name of Diamond Dogs. If you join up with them, you just might have a chance of going after Skull Face. I’ll lend you whatever support I can. Money, tech, you name it.”

“Mhm. Well, I’m going to let you in on a little secret, and it has to do with your end of the bargain. You see, I already know all about Skull Face and Miller and his Diamond Dogs. John’s alive. He survived that attack nine years ago, and it was the Major’s last wish that he be kept in a medically induced coma all this time, until Miller could pull together a force strong enough to go after Skull Face and protect John. That time is now.”

“Holy shit. Are you shitting me? Snake’s really alive?”

“That’s right. In fact, you could say he’s been reborn. He’ll need some help getting back to his old self, and when the time is right, once Skull Face is no longer a threat, he’s going to emerge and announce his return to the whole world. I need you to make sure that every intelligence agency on the face of this earth, all of Cipher, knows the truth. Big Boss is alive, and he will return to America and retake control of Foxhound. That’s his mission, and that’s where he’ll be. These are my terms. Understand?”

“So you’ll help me? You’ll really kill Skull Face?”

“I’m doing it for him. But sure, I’ll help you. Just make sure you uphold your end of the bargain. You might think with the Major’s death that the hatchet’s been buried, but I think after nine years on ice John’s got a score to settle, and he won’t take kindly to double-crossers. So when the time comes, the whole world needs to know that there’s only one Big Boss. There’s only ever been one,
true Big Boss, and he is the commander of Foxhound. I’ll be in touch- Sigint.”

Chapter End Notes

I was disappointed the whole "Wiseman denied his homeland" thing wasn't actually a nod to the Philosophers. Actually, funny thing is, years before the game released, I had posted on...I believe it was the Metal Gear Wiki forums, saying how I thought Code Talker being one of the Philosophers was a stupid idea. Years later, I was reading through and was like "Wow, who's this asshole? That was a great idea." Whoops. It was me.

Keeping with the whole theme of Race, I wanted to bring in some eugenics and thought an ethnic cleanser parasite fit that perfectly. of course, the idea of Code Talker totally buying the racist ideas of the time in the same way guys like W.E.B. DuBois did was a great irony. That, and, it gives his nick name greater importance, and Code Talker more involvement with the Cobras in WWII. He probably even served alongside the Boss, since I really wanted to hint at the idea that Zero is the one who gave him the name "Code Talker". Only Zero would think that was such a clever idea. Of course, this also explains the big coincidence as to how Skull Face was treated with parasites when Code Talker is supposed to be the only person canonically who knows anything about them.

Kaz is acting kind of shady.

Oh look. Ocelot knows more than he lets on. What else does he know? Can anyone really trust him?

What is Big Boss's REAL plan?
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Skull Face has his big moment, so warning- wind bag ahead. It was another big disappointment that there never was a boss fight with Skull Face, or anything more exciting than a boring ass car ride. So, I tried to spice things up a bit.

Skull Face's story is something I'm very proud of. I thought the whole "I'm actually saving the world" thing was tired and played. I wanted a villain who had a very simple, singular motivation. Somebody who was absolutely fixated on revenge on one person in particular, and from that hatred was willing to burn down the entire world because it was never enough.

Also, his death scene was lame and anti-climactic, so I hope this rounds out his story well and serves as a decent ouvre for everybody's least favorite series villain.

(The ringing of a telephone)

(Click)

“Hello?”

“Colonel Gurlukovich?”

“Yes? Who is this?”

“Colonel, it’s Adamska.”

“Shalashaska! Shalashaska, my friend. How are you? I’d heard that you resigned.”

“I’m fine. I’ve been reassigned outside of Afghanistan.”

“I see.”

“I’m very sorry to be calling you at this hour Sergei, but I have news. It’s about what happened at Da Smasei Fort.”

“It’s no trouble at all. Go on.”

“I believe I’ve found our man. The one responsible for the massacre. Colonel, I believe he is still in Afghanistan.”

“You’re sure, Ocelot?”

“Yes, I’m sure. This may be hard to believe Colonel, but I have evidence that he’s been supplying our ground forces with some Western technology. You’ve heard the reports about the bipedal weapons?”

“You mean Granin’s designs?”
“Yes. It seems our comrade Granin had a certain friend from America whom he sent his design plans to after the ‘incident’ in Tselinoyarsk. That very scientist has been reported seen at the Soviet Base Camp in Afghanistan, and our mystery man has been seen with him.”

“You’re sure it was Afghanistan?”

“Yes. And Colonel-Sergei- I have reason to believe that this man has in his possession some brand new biological weapon, something nobody’s seen before. I’ve traced it in connection with the deaths of several Afghan villages, and I believe that it was what killed our men at Da Smasei Fort. Colonel, get your men out of there as soon as you can. This guy is out to eliminate all traces that he’s been working with the Kremlin.”

“I want that monster’s head. I will contact Moscow right away. Until then, send me whatever information you have Ocelot.”

“Very good Colonel. Again, I’m sorry to have bothered you so late at night.”

“Forget it. It has been good serving with you Shalashaska. You may have saved my life and the lives of my men this night. For that, I will always be grateful.”

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March 16 1975

As the lights of the camp faded from view, Skull Face pulled the brim of his hat down over his face, crossing his leg and casually leaning back in his seat. It had taken years of meticulous planning, but finally everything was coming together exactly as he had planned. Poor Major. He had quite the surprise in store for him. Parasites that would prolong his lifespan, slow down the process of aging. Yes, Skull Face would give Zero exactly what he had wanted. He was a man of his word, after all. He would enjoy contemplating how the Major’s disease would slowly render him a prisoner in his own body, leaving him a mere vegetable to live out the rest of the unnatural lifespan the parasites would grant him.

“Live as I have lived,” Skull Face thought to himself.

When he was young, Skull Face held such a burning desire for revenge against those who had given him his wounds. But over the years, he had come to feel a certain amount of gratitude for the lessons he had learned. The lessons that had been seared into his flesh. If you were strong, you lived. If you were weak, you died. This was the natural way of the world. Action and reaction, positive and negative. The world was a contest where the push and pull of forces determined the times. History was written by the victors. His country had been consumed by the flames of war because their government was weak. He alone had survived to learn the lessons of the strong. The vengeance he was about to inflict was not petty, nothing so personal as a vendetta. This was merely his reaction, the pendulum swinging in the opposite direction.

He had learned the true meaning of fear and of pain. After a decade of oppression under the occupying Soviet forces, the Hungarian youth rose up in revolt. Skull Face was there in the streets in 1956, fighting to reclaim his country. But they were weak. The times were not on their side. When the Politburo moved to crush the revolution, and Skull Face was thrown into prison, he realized their weakness. It was the first time he would meet face-to-face with Yevgeny Borisovitch Volgin. Volgin showed him just how weak flesh could be, but thanks to the countless parasites within his body, pain was nothing to him. Pain was a welcome sensation when he could feel it. It reminded him that he was alive. Volgin had reminded him what it felt like to be alive. The irony had not been lost on Skull Face that when he saw Volgin again for the second time, it was staring
down at the charred remains of his corpse in the rain.

“Do you really hate Zero?” The girl had asked him. No, he didn’t hate the Major. He was thankful most of all for the lessons that Zero had taught him. Zero had offered him his first chance at freedom. Zero brought him to America. It was all thanks to Zero that he had gained access to the truth. Thanks to Zero, Skull Face could take back his past, had seen the way open up for his future. Skull Face knew what he had to do. He could feel the forces of the times pushing and pulling him, this way and that. He could feel the forces of action and reaction filling him to bursting. His course was set, and nothing could change it now.

When he was a boy, he remembered sitting transfixed around the radio, tuning in to WXYZ to hear The Lone Ranger. He could still remember and quote the introduction to this day. A man who escaped death to fight for truth and justice, who concealed his identity as a means to honor his fallen comrades. Skull Face identified with the Lone Ranger; indeed, the ‘right’ that he was bringing to the world was exemplified in his own donning of the iconic domino mask. Pity he was surrounded by dullards. He bet Adamska would have appreciated the visual reference. “From out of the past come the thundering hoofbeats of the great horse Silver! The Lone Ranger rides again!”

This was a world of force, where men died and nations and empires were born and eventually fell into decay. Such was as it should be. But HE would arrest the hands of fate. The Major would ensure that the American ideal, the egalitarian ideal, would systematically be imposed on the entire world, dragging the strong into a mire of mediocrity and arresting the advance of history. In fact, what the Major sought was the very end of history itself.

Now, all the pieces were in place. The trap was set. The King had left his castle poorly guarded, the gates wide open. When the Major found out, what would he do? What would Zero do? Would he flee to another safehouse while his friend died at sea? Or, would he stay where he was, vulnerable, and coordinate a rescue? Skull Face knew the Major well enough to know the answer. He had studied Zero for decades for any hint of weakness. The fool always had been quite the sentimentalist.

“Below, four o’clock.”

Skull Face peered out the chopper window, fixing his blue eyes on the target. It was an impressive sight. Once a derelict offshore drilling platform about 150 feet above the water, now home to an international army over 300 strong. An army without a nation, but an army with a nuke. Most importantly, it was Big Boss’s army. Pointing to the 200-foot-tall Communications Towers, Skull Face ordered the pilot to land, “There. There’s a helipad on the north platform. The scientist will be meeting us there. Bring us around.”

As they circled the platform, Skull Face signaled his men. They checked their AM Type 69 AAS rifles and shouted directions to one another through their coms. The chopper began to descend as Skull Face mused out loud “People should either be caressed or crushed. If you do them minor damage they will get their revenge. But if you cripple them, there is nothing they can do.”

Removing his hat, Skull Face cast his narrow eyes over each man. “If you need to injure someone, do it in such a way that you do not have to fear their vengeance. The scientist comes with us. Kill everyone else.”

The helicopter lurched to a halt. Skull Face reached for the door and—opened and several armed XOF soldiers poured out of the chopper, rifles trained on Venom. Reflexively, Snake raised his gun, finger hovering over the trigger. Skull Face emerged slowly, gently laying his hands on his men’s guns and lowering them, as though he had all the time in the world. “They say when you seek revenge that you should dig two graves: one for your enemy, and
one for yourself.” Confidently, Skull Face strode forward to stand toe-to-toe with Big Boss. “How many have you dug, Big Boss?”

“How about you?”

Ignoring the question, Skull Face turned and began descending the stairs, pausing to signal that Snake should follow. “Whatever the Navajo told you…It’s just one possible scenario derived by Cipher. If the Major were still around, he’d know better.” Reluctantly, Snake decided to follow him. “And where is Zero?”

“Hard to say. You know how he is. He’s everywhere and nowhere. Although, his reach isn’t quite what it used to be. Consider this place.”

“You mentioned Tselinoyarsk before. You were there?”

Skull Face seemed to perk up at the mention, his voice tinged with nostalgia. “FOX’s first mission. Any mess you made, I was there to clean up. The ‘information’ you brought back was more than enough to fill our pockets. With it, our futures became- more or less- set in stone.” They had descended a level, standing on a catwalk over a huge shaft tunneling deep into the ground. Far down below, Snake could make out the imposing figure of Sahelanthropus.

“Then the Major came to me with an idea. ‘Washington doesn’t know how to spend money,’ he said. ‘I’d like to…redirect it.’” Skull Face continued, and one of the XOF soldiers jabbed Venom in the back, beckoning him to continue forward. “You know the rest. His goal was an organization dedicated solely- covertly- to supporting America. Cipher. To him, it was mourning the loss of his friend. To unite America and the entire world. That is Cipher’s goal. The Major thought this was his friend’s will.”

“And you think what you’re doing now is carrying on the Boss’s will?”

Descending deeper into the depths of OKB Zero, Skull Face chuckled. “MY will is different. I was born in a small village. I was still a child when we were raided by soldiers.” He paused, his voice taking an edge of malice, “Foreign soldiers. Torn from my elders, I was made to speak their language. With each new post, my masters changed, along with the words they made me speak. With each change, I changed too. My thoughts, personality, how I saw right and wrong. Words are peculiar. Words can kill.”

Now they stopped before a service elevator. XOF soldiers rushed ahead to open the gate, after which Skull Face and Snake stepped inside. It was driving Snake mad having to be this close to Skull Face. He could reach out and crush his windpipe with just his bionic hand, finally make him shut the hell up. Forever.

“You too have known loss, and that loss haunts you still. You hope that hatred will someday make the pain go away. But it never does. It makes a man hideous- inside and out. As I lay there in that factory, burning, dying, I realized something. Where you’re born. The circumstances of the world, of the times, all these things determine a man’s destiny. His fate. We can’t be anything but what we are. You and I- we were born into this Cold War. It is our prison. Our fate.” Skull Face turned, holding up and wagging a single finger at Big Boss, “All of us- the Major included- we’re all bound by the Boss and her legacy. I never forgot the sight of those aircraft as they flew overhead. The flag of their nation was burned into my memory. I came to America seeking the one responsible for my phantom pain. It was all thanks to the Major that I learned the truth. You see- she was the one who led the raid on my village. She planned and oversaw the entire operation, working with the USAAF. During the war, it was the Boss, and her country, who were responsible for what happened.”
The elevator stopped. “That’s why you joined FOX? You wanted to get revenge on the Boss?”

Skull Face moved closer, sneering “YOU killed her. You and the Major finished her work- you took everything away from me. You stole my one chance for revenge, the only thing that had kept me going for years.” As the gate slid open, Skull Face moved past Big Boss, claspig a firm, bony hand on his shoulder. Snake could feel a cold shudder of hatred creep up his spine.

“And then it hit me. The Boss was dead, but her spirit lingered in this world.” Skull Face paused. “I think it’s time someone laid it to rest. So I decided that the ones who should feel my wrath would be the ones who carried on her will. You, her last apprentice; the Major, the self-proclaimed inheritor of her will; and last but not least, her motherland. America. She ripped me away from my motherland. Only fitting to return the favor.”

“That’s why you’re going to use Sahelanthropus… to launch a nuke on Washington?”

“Oh Big Boss, you think so small. Why bother creating a truly bipedal weapons platform simply for the sake of launching nukes? That was Coldman’s misguided dream. If you’re going to give a nuclear weapon legs, let it roam freely where it will. Sahelanthropus will walk out on center stage and draw back the Iron Curtain. Imagine- Sahelanthropus wading through Liberty Harbor and taking a little stroll through downtown Manhattan. What need do I have for ICBMS?”

“The metallic archaea! You bastard,” Kaz exclaimed, “so that’s the real reason you built the whole damn thing out of depleted uranium. The metallic archaea will enrich and weaponize the uranium turning Sahelanthropus into one giant bomb. And you’re going to detonate it?”

“I’m not going to, “Skull Face sneered, “you are. I have photographic evidence of your Boss-kidnapping Dr. Emmerich and Code Talker, stealing a truckload of nuclear materials. Not to mention the Walker Gear you stole from the massacred Soviets at Da Smasei Lamahn. The world will have all the proof it needs that you and your band of misfits are nothing but a pack of mad dogs that need put down.” Skull Face glared. “You, just like your Boss, will go down in history as a war criminal, a madman responsible for the deaths of millions. When the world sees what Sahelanthropus can do, the Superpowers will no longer be able to maintain peace and order in a world of such frightening power. My Metal Gears will offer that protection.”

“And that’s your revenge on the Boss?”

“I’m afraid it’s not that simple. We’re not talking about merely political or economic freedom here, Big Boss. We’re talking about mind control. America is a country of liberty. A meeting of immigrants. Instead of simply assimilating, it’s citizens live alongside others. Their roots are varied. Diverse. America’s never been made of just one people. But HE tried to forge a single consciousness for it, and from it. The idea that every citizen would use free will to unite behind their country. Unilateralism like that can’t be entrusted to any one individual. So the Major sought a system which used information- words- to control the subconscious. Language codes, information codes, beamed all around us- genetic codes spanning history. By controlling the codes, Cipher… Zero…intends to unify the world. A world reduced to Zero. Cipher plans to use its codes to control the world. They think they can. And the mother tongue of all those codes is English.”

“You mean?!?” Code Talker rasped.

“The word became flesh. An English strain of the vocal cord parasite. This last parasite- it knows English. You see, America might have no official language, but before there were Founding Fathers, there was a Mother Tongue- English. A language that takes the words of others and makes them its own. A language that exists peacefully alongside others while simultaneously leeching off them, driving them slowly to extinction. The one code by which all Americans are united,
regardless of race, creed, or nationality. Make no mistake, English is the language of America. I will divide the people of America, every one of them after his mother tongue, after their families, their nations. Sans lingua franca, the world will be torn asunder. And then, it shall be free.”

The elevator ground to a halt, the gate opening to usher them out before the towering giant of Sahelanthropus. It was strange. For being operational, there were no mechanics or support personnel running around. No final checks appeared to be made. Skull Face’s plan was nearly complete, Sahelanthropus was already activated before, but for now it just stood there, silently watching. Waiting.

“America is only the beginning. Once it falls, the scales will be unbalanced and it will only be a matter of time before the Soviet Union, this whole Cold War system of deterrence, falls apart. In the vacuum of power created by the absence of the two Superpowers, the religious intolerance, regional conflicts, and ethnic tensions that they’ve kept in check will unleash the birth of a new era. People will suffer of course- a phantom pain. The world will need a new common tongue. A language of nukes. My Metal Gears will be the great equalizers by which all countries are bound together. MAD will become the new standard between nations. All nations will aspire to MAD capability, and those failed states facing collapse- as mine once did- will never again go quietly. Sahelanthropus will take the first giant step into this new world- a world free from the Cold War, free from Zero and his Patriots, free from the Boss and her ‘liberty’.”

Suddenly, a loud grinding roar somewhere between beast and machine nearly knocked Snake to his feet. The hand of Sahelanthropus lowered and scooped up Skull Face in one titanic mitt. Snake raised his rifle, aiming for Skull Face, and fired. As before, the bullets seemed to hit a wall and disperse. Briefly, Snake could once again make out the spectre of the Floating Boy. If a child were the only one capable of piloting the Metal Gear, and Sahelanthropus clearly did not have a pilot, was this kid the one who was somehow controlling it? “Please. I put down my gun.” Skull Face mocked. With another roar, Sahelanthropus began to tear itself free, the entire structure shuddering and threatening to come down. Snake turned and ran. The XOF who had followed them were too slow, cut down by a burst from Snake’s rifle.

How was he going to get out?

Fighting his way past armed XOF, Snake could feel Sahelanthropus crashing through the facility behind him in pursuit. Every noise sounded loud as thunder. Snake could hear the XOF yelling to one another, the whizzing of bullets too close. Cutting through the deafening sound, Snake could hear Skull Face’s voice as though he was speaking directly inside of his head. “You don’t care what I have to say, Big Boss?” His lungs burning, Snake raced through the tunnels of OKB Zero desperate to find daylight. He had to get outside. If he stayed underground inside the facility the whole place could come down. At least outside he could call for backup, find a place to hide.

“Kaz I need backup now! Skull Face is on the move!”

“Get out of there Boss! Don’t stop. We’ll be there as soon as we can.”

Up ahead, Snake could see a small halo of daylight and made for it. As he emerged momentarily blinded by the light, he turned quickly around to survey the situation. He was surrounded with XOF before him, armed and advancing. Behind him was Skull Face and Sahelanthropus. With a loud crash, Sahelanthropus had reached the exit of the underground tunnel, and was now stuck, wedged at the cave entrance. The entire facility shook as it tried to squeeze through, letting out an ear piercing mechanical roar. Snake breathed a short sigh of relief. This ought to buy him some time.

There. He could see a few XOF exiting a Jeep and took off towards them. Snake pushed forward,
dodging machine-gun fire and weaving from building to building, trying to find as much cover as possible. Snake dropped the men by the Jeep, one shot each, and leaped into the driver side. Yes! The keys still in the ignition. The Jeep roared to life and Snake floored it. Looking over his shoulder as he backed up, Snake’s heart sank as he witnessed Sahelanthropus transforming. It was straightening itself up, more than doubling its height. “Fuck me,” Venom muttered. It had been pursuing him in a hunched over mode- not running after him so much as waddling. Taking notice of those legs, Snake knew he wasn’t likely to outrun that thing if it could reach top speed. Venom drove straight through the enemy’s killzone, ducking low as the bullets cut through the sides of the Jeep and penetrated the ground all around him.

The road curved up a hill as Snake raced along the cliff side, high above the water below. Evading the 30mm bullets and missiles, Snake barely had time to contemplate his next move. He needed better firepower, and he needed to buy himself some time before reinforcements could arrive. Bouncing through the Soviet base camp, Snake spun the wheel sharply and angled the Jeep towards the mountains, towards Serak Power Plant. Sahelanthropus wouldn’t be able to follow him inside the cave.

“Where are you going? Think you’re a free man?”

Glancing in the rearview mirror, Snake could see the ground behind him erupting in a shower of dirt and debris. He had seen that move before- it was weaponized Metallic Archaea, the same kind the Skulls had used. Approaching the chain-link fence, Snake gunned the engine and smashed the Jeep through the front gate of the power plant. Behind him, Snake could hear the loud metallic crash as Sahelanthropus plowed its way past the transformers, raining down a hot shower of electrical sparks which quickly ignited the dry brush. Soon, a thick, billowing cloud had enveloped the Jeep. The vehicle began to shudder and Snake could hear the motor ticking over. Slowly, the Jeep ground to a halt.

“Metallic archaea!” Code Talker warned.

“Boss! Get out of there!” Ocelot shouted.

Snake lunged from the Jeep and struck the ground hard, rolling away just in time as one massive foot from Sahelanthropus came down. Snake quickly stood up and ran for the cave entrance. “Kaz I need something fast!”

“Roger that Boss. We have a problem. It’s Eli. He snuck aboard one of our choppers. I don’t know if it was his idea of an escape attempt or what, but we can’t risk getting much closer. You’ll have to rely on the conventional supply drops.”

The whole area was now engulfed in flames, and through the fire Snake could see XOF-procured Soviet tanks lumbering towards them. Armored assault carriers pulled up and droves of XOF soldiers poured out of them. Snake could hear choppers over-head, and looking up recognized the ones more distant as belonging to Diamond Dogs. Sahelanthropus paused the assault, kneeling and uncurling its fist as Skull Face hopped to the ground.

“End of the line, Big Boss! I’ll never truly be able to live free until every, last trace of the Boss is wiped clean from the face of the earth. The Boss is dead. But one remains.” Skull Face drifted back surrounded by XOF as Sahelanthropus straightened and prepared to resume its assault. Suddenly, the giant mech froze in place. Silent, the behemoth stood there. Skull Face signaled one of his men “You. Go check it out.” Without question, the soldier moved to one of the control panels on the foot. As if instinctively, Sahelanthropus brought its foot down crushing the man in a cloud of dust. With a loud, ape-like roar, the cockpit began to glow an eerie red. The squadron of XOF advanced, weapons drawn and trained on Sahelanthropus. Several armed men seized Skull
Face, dragging him away.

“Wait. Who’s doing this? Such a lust for revenge? WHOOOOO?!!”

XOF opened fire on Sahelanthropus, which surprisingly did not react, but simply stood there. While they were distracted, Snake decided to slip away and go after Skull Face. The ground shook, nearly knocking Snake to his feet as he turned to look back. “Oh shit.” Sahelanthropus had stomped the rest of the XOF into oblivion, and now was turning its attention to Venom. Snake ran, barely able to avoid its colossal stride. Ducking behind a cargo container, Snake ended up adjacent to Skull Face and the rest of his XOF detail, preparing an assault on Sahelanthropus.

“All units move in!”

Several Soviet tanks and choppers began firing on Sahelanthropus with their mini guns. As the tanks lined up, they fired their shells in succession. Even with that much firepower, Sahelanthropus barely flinched. The Metal Gear turned its 30mm cannons on the XOF, mowing several men down and shredding the tanks until one of them exploded in a great fireball.

“Boss, there are still Soviet armored vehicles in the area. If you can get to one, you may stand a fighting a chance.” Ocelot coached him over the radio. “We’ll work on getting you that supply drop.”

Snake ran as hard as he could, scanning the horizon for any signs of former Soviet activity. Finally, he spotted a ZHUK RS-ZO. The rockets on the back were the obvious choice, but they’d take time to deploy anyway and Snake couldn’t make the shots on his own. But, he was willing to bet that whatever cannon the ZHUK was packing was at least as good a match for the Metal Gear’s 30mm.

“Boss, don’t listen to Ocelot! You’ll never maneuver those things around Sahelanthropus, you’ll be climbing inside a giant metal coffin. Stay on foot and take cover.”

“Get me some heavy artillery and we’ll talk,” Snake shot back, jumping into the ZHUK as Sahelanthropus charged at him. Snake swiveled the turret for the autocannon around and aimed straight at Sahelanthropus.

“Boss! This is Huey. Don’t fire directly on Sahelanthropus. You’re better off aiming for the six compressors located on each of the thighs. This will cause severe structural damage.”

Sahelanthropus was right on top of him now. Snake spotted the compressors and took aim.

“I hope to hell you’re right Huey.”

One explosion after the other, Snake destroyed the compressors, Sahelanthropus shuddering and shambling back with each blow.

“Nice work Boss! Keep it up!” Kaz cheered.

Metal Gear fired several of its homing missiles straight for Snake. On the one hand, the ZHUK could potentially take the damage from a direct hit, but Snake didn’t want to chance it. If he broke aim to shoot the missiles with the autocannon, however, it left him open to attack from Sahelanthropus.

“Shoot the missiles Boss! It’s your only chance!” Ocelot shouted.

Before Snake could choose, the missiles exploded one by one. A familiar voice came over the radio, humming encouragement. It was Quiet. She had made the shot airborne while still in one of the choppers. Sahelanthropus roared and turned its attention to the new attacker.
“This is Queequeg. I’m in hot. Watch out Boss!”

As Venom raked the ZHUK’s cannon across the body of Sahelanthropus, a small explosion ripped open a weak spot on the giant. Sahelanthropus stumbled backwards in a shower of flames and sparks. Suddenly, the whole area was engulfed in a crimson mist, visibility dropping to zero.

“The metallic archaea! Snake, get out of the vehicle or you’ll be trapped inside!”

Popping the hatch on the ZHUK, Snake dove outside as the entire vehicle rusted over. Coming out of the roll, Venom tried to get the hell as far away from Sahelanthropus as he could. The autocannons could rip him apart, the feet could crush him flat, or that plasma whip it wielded would drive the very ground up around him impaling him with metallic archaea. “Use this!” No sooner had Ocelot finished, than Snake glanced up, catching the glimmer of a supply drop. He rushed to the drop point and scrambled to pick up the Grom. Quickly, he looked back over his shoulder, expecting to see Sahelanthropus coming after him. Instead, he saw the beast hunched over, returned to its crouching position.

“L-lookout Snake! It’s charging up the railgun!” Huey exclaimed.

Snake looked around madly for any sort of cover. Of course the only option was a steep hill several hundred feet away. Sucking in as much air as he could, Snake sprinted for the edge and leaped over. The hair on the back of his neck stood up as he could hear the railgun discharge, the electromagnetic blast splitting the air straight for him. The blast passed directly over him where his body had been moments ago, and he could feel his skin tingling it was so close. He curled into a ball as he rolled down the hillside, sharp and jagged rocks digging into his sides, bruising his arms and legs. He winced sharply as his body twisted and one of the rocks slammed into his side. The breath was squeezed from his lungs as he felt the impact fracture a rib.

Falling, Snake could see a great dark shadow pass over him. As he rolled, he momentarily caught a glimpse of the sky above him and the hulking outline of Sahelanthropus barreling down on top of him.

Shit.

Snake hit the ground with a THUD, Sahelanthropus following right behind. The sound of the titanic machine meeting earth was deafening, the cloud of sand and debris it kicked up blinding. Within the miniature sand storm, Snake could see the clear shape of the Floating Boy. Always he was observing, never seeming to interact with anyone or anything. This was the closest Snake had ever found himself to the boy, and he found himself wondering what was behind that mask. What secret was the Floating Boy concealing? For a moment, Snake felt as though he were no longer lying on his back in the middle of northern Kabul with a nuclear equipped walking death robot towering over him. He could smell the freshly mopped and polished floors of the hospital in Cyprus, could hear the sounds of the various machines and monitors he was hooked up to.

He felt an intense hatred and sadness closing around like him on all sides, like a prison. He felt absolutely paralyzed, and found himself panicking as he remembered what it had been like that first week after waking up. There was a piercing pain in his feet, and his face and head felt as though they were wedged in a vice. Would they explode under such tremendous pressure? He felt something gnawing at him. It wasn’t grief. It went deeper than that. The only words he could think to put to it were a feeling of absolute loss, as though the bottom had fallen out of his whole world and he was being swallowed up. Consumed. Swallowed up into the belly of a whale.

He felt something else, too. Rage. A corrosive rage he could feel eating away at him like an acid, dissolving everything it touched. He felt flames on his face, then all around him. He could feel and smell his own flesh searing away, could see the fats and oils in his body bubbling away. His
screams were lost in the fire, and although he could feel his body growing weaker, that rage grew stronger and stronger. Rage against the one who had betrayed him. Rage against the one who had crippled him and left him for dead. Rage against the one who had rejected and abandoned him. Venom stood within the storm, the Floating Boy before him. Cautiously, he reached out his hand towards the mask. The boy put up no resistance as Venom’s hand seized upon the mask, gently tugging it free. His eye widened in recognition of the face behind the mask, but his mind became lost in confusion at what he saw. It was his own face, the face of Big Boss. But it was also someone else’s face, a face he couldn’t remember or recognize, yet he couldn’t shake the feeling that he had seen it before. More than that, it was also Eli’s face. Which one? Which one was the true face?

“Snake! What the hell are you waiting for? Shoot!”

Miller’s voice cut through the haze bringing Snake back to the present. Hurriedly, he unslung the Grom from his back and took aim for the exposed area beneath Sahelanthropus’ armor. CLICK Snake fired. The force and heat from the explosion was suffocating, and as Venom felt the blast wash over him he returned in his mind to that night in the chopper. Paz was falling and he thought he would fall with her. He leapt after her into the night and right into that explosion. Wasn’t-someone else there? He could sense this shadowy figure on the periphery of his vision, but it was almost like there were never there. As though part of his memory had been recorded over, like a tape player, so many times that what was originally there was now distorted. Backwards masked.

A chain of explosions brought Sahelanthropus to the ground, shaking the whole earth. Snake stumbled to his feet while Kaz cheered, “Excellent work! You never cease to amaze Boss!” Dusting himself off, Snake dropped the Grom and checked his pistol. “Let’s go see Skull Face.”

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Kaz could feel himself shaking as the chopper landed. Snake, on the other hand, was his usual withdrawn self. Snake got out first, turning to throw his arm around Kaz as the other man inched towards the end, gingerly lowering himself to the ground. The two men surveyed the damage— the whole battlefield was in ruins with one giant steel tower having collapsed, trapping the rusted and flaming remains of the Jeep beneath it. Kaz could hear a nervous shuffling behind him, and glanced back to see the skittering and loathsome form of Huey Emmerich following them. Kaz snorted, but decided to remain silent. Nothing and no one was going to ruin this moment for him.

Skull Face was pinned beneath the transformer, the ground around him stained red as the desert drank his blood. His entire lower half was crushed to a pulp, and he must’ve been bleeding internally from the impact of being thrown by Sahelanthropus. Snake wondered if even the parasites could fix this.

As the two approached, Skull Face slowly uncurled his arm, letting the canister with the vocal cord parasite drop to the side and roll away. He struggled to reach for his rifle, but Snake promptly kicked it away before kneeling to retrieve the canister. Venom opened the canister and inspected.

“There were three. Where’s the other?”

Skull Face coughed. “Very close…” feebly, he raised his hand and pointed to Big Boss, “to you.” Snake began tossing the vials containing the vocal cord parasites into the oil fire from the Jeep.

“I know…who…” Skull Face gasped, “Cipher will rewrite the records…and I will vanish from human memory. But...I know who it was. The thirst for revenge that I have planted will infest the system. No one can stop it now!” A little too excited, blood bubbled up from Skull Face’s throat and began trickling down the corners of his mouth as his head slumped back.
“The Boss is dead, but one remains. Do it. Finish your mission. Prove your loyalty.” Skull Face’s head began to lilt from side to side. “Finish me. Kill me…”

Not since that night so many years ago had Kaz felt such hatred boiling up inside of him. He had waited for this day, dreamed of it every night. To be here, together again with Snake, exacting their revenge on the man who had ripped their life apart. But now, seeing Skull Face before him like this was-pathetic. Kaz lashed out angrily, striking Skull Face in the head with his crutch. Skull Face’s head flopped back to the side, spitting up fresh blood. He slowly turned and began rocking his head as though he were pointing to something.

His gun. Venom walked over to the antique showpiece and picked it up, feeling its weight in his hand. How many of his men had it killed? Venom aimed and fired a shot straight into Skull Face’s chest. He fired two more times, each bullet eliciting a gurgle and groan from Skull Face, but doing little more than that. “Goddamn freak,” Kaz muttered. “How do you kill this guy?” These parasites turned men into monsters.

Skull Face responded with a wet, throaty chuckle. “You know, the only thing that burns in Hell is the part of you that refuses to let go of life? Your memories, attachments. They’re all burned away. But it’s not punishment. It’s freedom. So when you die…and you see devils tearing your life away…make your peace…and you’ll see that they are really angels…here to free you from this earth. Now, whether it’s Hell or Outer Heaven…free me.”

Kaz seized Venom’s arm and raised it. With a loud and slow exhale, Kaz steadied himself. “Kaz,” Snake said quietly, “guide my aim.”

The two men turned looking deeply into each other’s eyes. Under his breath, Miller recited:

And all our struggles and our toils
Tighter wind the giant coils

A shot rang out, loud and true. Then another, and another. Skull Face winced as first his leg, then his arm, were blown off, the bullets ripping through ribbons of flesh. Snake aimed for his head, and pulled the trigger. CLICK. Jammed. Snake tossed the gun to the ground and turned to leave. He stopped before muttering “Now I’ve put down my gun.”

Kaz spun the gun around with the end of his crutch, meticulously placing the ejected bullet next to it. “Do it yourself!” he scowled. Without his right arm, the gun was now useless, although Skull Face vainly tried to reach over himself with his left hand to grab it. Trembling, Kaz faced his partner. “Mission complete, Boss.” Wordlessly, Snake nodded and both men turned to leave for the chopper.
Venom paused in the open doorway, glancing around for any signs of Med staff before returning his confused gaze back into the empty room. She was gone. Just the other day he had stopped by to see Paz, right before leaving for his mission to OKB-Zero. So badly he had wanted to tell her who they were going after, to let her know that they- that HE- was finally going to get revenge for what Skull Face had done to them. Paz was her usual self, talkative and cheerful, and they had the same exact conversation, word for word, that they always had. Snake always hoped for signs of improvement, but it seemed as though time stood still for her as she waited perpetually for a day in the distant past that never had, and never would, come to pass.

“Boss, you okay?”

Snake turned to find Kaz approaching him slowly, trying to feel out his boss’s current mood.

“When did they move Paz? Why wasn’t I informed?”

In the shadow of the platform, Kaz’s brow wrinkled first in surprise and then deeper in concern.

“Boss, what are you talking about?”

Snake huffed impatiently. “She’s been in this wing, in this room, recovering for the past several months. Now, today, the room is empty. Where was she moved and why wasn’t I notified of the transfer? I specifically told Ocelot to keep me updated on her condition.”

Kaz stared blankly back at Snake, struggling to put the pieces together. “Boss, Paz is dead. She died nine years ago.”

Venom advanced on his XO, visibly becoming agitated. “Don’t screw with me Kaz. I know you haven’t forgiven her for what happened, and I don’t expect you too. But you can’t hold her responsible when she doesn’t even remember working for Cipher. So, if you discharged her or kicked her off Mother Base-”

“What the hell are you talking about? Snake, Paz died nine years ago. She jumped out of that chopper right before the bomb detonated. Chico went after her. She died, and he died in the blast. You and I were the only survivors.”

Snake’s heart began to race as cold, sickly sweat tingled the back of his neck. “No…No that’s not right. The second bomb…We got-”

Kaz leaned on his crutch as he moved to place a reassuring hand on Venom’s shoulder. “Snake, I told you, you’ve been working too hard. You need to take a break, you’re starting to lose it.” Venom recoiled in shock, panic flashing in his eye like a cornered animal. No, no- this wasn’t possible. He had visited her just the other day, could clearly remember every detail of the same conversation they’d been having for months. Ocelot had told him she survived, had explained about her amnesia. He wouldn’t lie. He couldn’t lie…not to Snake.

“Kaz,” Venom gasped, barely above a whisper. He stumbled, seized his XO by the arm and nearly dragged him to the ground under his weight. Venom could no longer see the sunken frame of his friend or the base around them. Everything became engulfed in a blinding light that seared his skin and had him closing his eyes as tight as possible. He could feel the old familiar heat scorching his body, the pain splitting open his head where the shrapnel entered his skull. The pain of hundreds of white hot needles piercing his body, shards of metal and fragments of-
human bone and human teeth

“Boss? Boss!”

When Venom comes to he’s slouched on the deck, Kaz supporting his weight as best he can while trying to hold Snake’s head up. He’s trembling, and Kaz is holding his face in his one gloved handing shouting “Boss, are you okay?! Snake, talk to me!” Confused and increasingly embarrassed, Venom scrambles to his feet, bracing himself against his commander. Face dripping sweat, he lightly touches the horn on his head, trying to feel out its size. Normal. Everything is normal.

“Snake?”

Slowly, Venom turns to Kaz. “I’m fine. I just…need to rest, is all.”

Kaz shook his head. “You’re a terrible liar Snake, but you’re right, you do need to rest. Why don’t you go sleep it off in your quarters and I’ll come by later to check on you. I’ll brief you on the meeting with Code Talker.”

Snake smiled wearily. “No. It’s fine. I want to hear what he has to say. Then, you can come by later and we’ll discuss it together. Privately.”

Kaz smirked “Roger that Boss.”

The two set off in the direction of the Command Platform before Venom paused, tugging almost childishly at the other man’s sleeve.

“One more thing. Don’t tell Ocelot. About any of this. The last thing I want is to be involuntarily committed to the psych ward under the care of Nurse Ratchet.” Kaz couldn’t help but laugh. “Don’t worry Boss. No electroshock therapy this time.”

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Kaz and Venom filed into the Command Center and took their respective seats. It had only been about a week since Skull Face’s death, but business went on as usual. There was always someplace to fight. Skull Face and his memory still hung over them like a lingering shadow, and the matter they had been called together to address was just one more piece of his legacy. Venom nodded respectfully in the old man’s direction. “Sorry to keep you waiting.”

Code Talker stared, “Not at all. The Ocelot and I were merely engaging in a little philosophical discussion.” Ocelot grinned from ear to ear as he glanced from Code Talker over to Snake and Kaz, an expression that always made the latter cringe. Having known Ocelot for as long as he had, Kaz knew the only times Ocelot smiled were if he were contemplating something really sadistic, or, as Kaz knew from firsthand experience, Ocelot was being patronizing. “Code Talker was explaining his ‘theory’ on how the parasites were responsible for prejudice- Is that about right?”

“Yes. I call it the behavioral immune system. Interactions between divergent populations of the same species, separated by geographic barriers such as mountains and oceans, carry the risk of infection from disease or parasites. For example, baboon populations living on the savannah all carry similar populations of bacterial fauna and interact with one another frequently. By contrast, the baboon populations living deep within the rainforests of the interior carry their own unique bacterial colonies and interact far less. Over human history, travelers to foreign lands have brought with them germs, disease, and parasites which tend to be highly virulent to indigenous populations.”

Ocelot nodded. “Hrm. I suppose you would know that better than anyone.”
“The immune system has evolved powerful and elaborate defense systems against parasitic infestation. However, such a physiological response comes at the price of metabolic resources consumed, leaving the host vulnerable to predation. It would be advantageous if an additional system evolved to detect potentially infectious things and avoid them altogether.”

“And this is your behavioral immune system?” Ocelot asked.

“It is a matter of balance. What differentiates man from the rest of nature is his ability to adapt his environment, bending nature to his own will, through culture. However, man is still a part of nature. As such, our behavioral immune system evolved to rely on primitive perceptual cues to detect the presence of infection- skin palor, foul odor, disfigurement, even old age- may all trigger aversive thoughts and behavior. Prejudice and racism are driven by superficial judgments. The behavioral immune system, operating largely without conscious awareness, explains mankind’s inherent xenophobia towards foreigners, outsider ethnic groups, and nationalities.”

Kaz cleared his throat. “That’s uh…that’s really something there, old timer. But you told us that you had the lab results of your investigation. The investigation to determine the origin of the pathogen?”

“Yes. I have the results.”

Venom leaned forward. “And?”

Code Talker exhaled slowly, “Inconclusive.”

Kaz slammed his fist into the table. “Goddamnit! I really thought we-”

“It is my strong suspicion that Skull Face planted the parasites here, using one of your own as the vector. Do you remember he said that the last English strain was ‘very close’?”

Ocelot shifted in his seat and glanced over at Snake, “Yes, as I recall he said that it was very close to the Boss. But, I thought you said we were dealing with the Kikongo strain?”

“That is correct. When I said that I suspected that Skull Face used one of your own to spread the parasites across base, I was referring to the Kikongo strain. However, I believe that the very same individual responsible for bringing the Kikongo strain onboard may also know where the final specimen of the English strain is.”

Kaz straightened up in his seat, “Oh yeah? Tell us more about Quiet.”

Code Talker shook his head. “I’m sure it will come as no surprise to you that the body of the woman you call Quiet exists in near complete symbiosis with the parasites. Out of dozens of test subjects over the years, I have only seen this degree of coexistence in three other individuals- the old man from the Cobra Unit, Skull Face, and myself. The One That Covers has replaced nearly every cell in her body, but I did not find any trace that she was infected with the vocal cord parasites.”

Kaz slumped back in his chair, silently fuming. Skull Face was dead, and now he was down one more scapegoat. Venom made a note to himself that maybe, just maybe, he’d have to accompany Kaz and Ocelot on their interrogations from now on, just to be safe and kept in the loop. Ocelot would never let Kaz go too far, but then again, Ocelot’s definition of ‘too far’ wasn’t most people’s. Ocelot could barely conceal a smirk flashed in Miller’s direction.

“That settles that. But, if Quiet wasn’t the person Skull Face chose as the vector for the English strain, then who is?” Snake asked.
“You may have noticed that certain individuals respond differently to the parasites. In most cases, nearly all but the most rudimentary cognitive functions are destroyed. The host’s memories, personality, their ‘soul’, if you will, is lost to the parasites. All that remain are the most primitive impulses and desires.”

“Well shit, Miller’s nothing but impulse and desire. We’d never know if he was one of the infected.” Ocelot scoffed.

“Ocelot-” Venom warned sharply.

“In rare cases, such as the woman you call Quiet, the individual’s consciousness is left virtually intact. This outcome is only achievable through access to decades of my research, cutting-edge technology, and limitless resources- all of which Bilágaana possesses.”

Venom fought the temptation to drum his bionic fingers on the table. He couldn’t help but sigh impatiently, wishing Code Talker would just get to the point.

“Yeah, go on.”

“However, I have never once seen anyone infected with the vocal cord parasites speak the trigger language, and survive. There is only one language to which the parasites do not respond- Diné. As part of my medical evaluation of your staff members, I researched all the non-English language speakers on this base. Of everyone on board, I am the only one who speaks Diné, meaning that I am the only one who may carry the vocal cord parasites without risk of infection.”

Ocelot tilted his head, “What are you implying?”

“Something I recall Skull Face asking me, back at the mansion. He wanted to know if there was a cure or otherwise any way to reverse the vocal cord parasite’s reproductive cycle once copulation had taken place. At the time, I did not understand why he would ask such a thing. He knew as well as I that the answer was no.”

Code Talker paused, leaning forward intently and folding his hands beneath his chin. “Now I understand. You see, the parasites are only a contagion so long as their host is alive to spread them. Once the host dies, the parasites die with them. The longer the host survives, the more people they have a chance to infect. Skull Face found a means of deploying the parasites without worrying about lethality to the host. The person close to Bideé Hólóni carrying the Kikongo strain, and possibly the remaining English strain, still lives.”

Ocelot shot Venom a worried look “How is that possible? You said yourself-”

Venom interrupted “Do you know who the carrier is?”

An awkward silence filled the room. Code Talker slowly nodded, “I have my suspicion.”

Venom glared at the old man intently, “Who?”

“I ordered a full medical examination of every staff member onboard this base, and that was as far as my investigation proceeded. When I expressed the necessity of submitting ALL aboard this base to a medical examination, I was denied my request.”

The room filled with silence. Finally, Venom spoke. “I wasn’t informed of this. Who denied the request?”

More silence, as all eyes slowly drifted toward one person. Under everyone’s stony gaze, Kaz
shifted uncomfortably. “I-reviewed the report myself. I didn’t see any reason to proceed. It was pretty clear Patient Zero had to be among the deceased.”

Frustrated, Snake replied through clenched teeth. “Well it’s pretty clear that you were wrong, just like you were wrong to not keep me updated.”

Kaz shot back, “How the hell was I supposed to know that Skull Face had some twisted ace up his sleeve? Since when do you give a shit about lab results anyway? You barely listen to the Intel cassette tapes I give you!”

Ocelot rose from his seat. “Enough excuses. Miller, you’re hiding something. What’s the real reason you denied Code Talker’s request? What are you so afraid of him finding?”

“I’ve heard enough.” Kaz said tersely, preparing to leave. “Kaz?” Venom tried to reach out, to place a reassuring and friendly hand on his commander. Code Talker folded his hands neatly on the table and leaned forward, fixing his blank stare in Kaz’s direction. “Think about Bwala ya Masa, and the Devil’s House. Skull Face was not purely opportunistic in his choice of test subjects. Many years of research and twisted experiments revealed to him that children, with their immature vocal cords, may carry and spread the vocal cord parasite without triggering copulation. That was his master plan. To fan the flames of war, create victims, infect these war orphans with the vocal cord parasites, and then send them back out onto the battlefield- either to spread infect the enemy, or to return home to infect their village, or maybe to be picked up by some unsuspecting NGO and carry the parasites across international borders…”

Kaz snapped “They’re just kids!”

Silence filled the room. Ocelot shook his head, “Well I’ll be a son of a bitch. All this time Miller, you were ready to burn Quiet at the stake, when the one who was the biggest threat to Diamond Dogs was you. Why are you protecting…”

“Shut the fuck up Ocelot! Just shut the fuck up!”

“Kaz…” Venom tried again, once more hitting the brick wall Kaz had put up between himself and his problems. “Kaz, it’s okay.”

“No, it’s not.” His voice was firm and insolent. “We’re done here. I’m leaving.”

As Kaz rose and made for the door, Ocelot rounded the corner of the table to intercept him. “You think you can just get up and walk away? You can’t just walk away from THIS. You put the men, all of us, at risk. You don’t GET to leave. You wasted valuable time-time that could’ve cost men’s lives. And for what? Because you couldn’t bear the thought of knowing you were responsible for the outbreak? Or is it because you wouldn’t accept the reality that some of these kids wouldn’t make it to go on and live happy, carefree lives? Because you didn’t want an inconvenient truth to get in the way of the nice little fantasy you have them believing-”

Kaz moved to shove Ocelot with his shoulder, snarling “Fuck. Off. Ocelot!”

Ocelot grabbed Kaz by the shoulder, firmly squeezing. Snake was impressed that he was demonstrating this much restraint. It must’ve taken a lot for Ocelot not to just shove Kaz back and knock him on his ass. “Or you’ll what? You won’t get far without the Boss’s help, and he won’t endanger the men any more than you already have. You can’t EXPECT him to.”

Snake was ready to step between the two when Code Talker interjected “Kazuhira, if the children on board this base are infected, it is only a matter of time until they reach sexual maturity, at which
time, their vocal cords will mature triggering the vocal cord parasites to copulate. At this point, death is inevitable. If you would only allow me to examine…”

Kaz wrestled himself from Ocelot’s grasp “Old man, you stay the hell away from those kids.”

Moving as a blur, Snake crossed the room and seized Kaz by the wrist. “Kaz,” Snake barked, “listen to me. Don’t make this worse. I’ll place the kids under quarantine if I have to, but I don’t WANT to. We need to figure out what the hell is going on. I can’t just let them wonder around base anymore. Think of the men.” Kaz’s face became flushed, raw anger rolling off him in waves that threatened to drag Snake under.

“Think of the men? I’m always thinking of the men. Always have been. I know what I’m doing.”

Ocelot made an annoyed sound, growing genuinely frustrated with the whole situation. “Miller, you’re incapable of taking an objective stance with these kids. You’ve delayed the investigation long enough. Who are you trying to protect- them, or yourself?”

Venom gently squeezed Kaz’s wrist, drawing him in close. “Kaz, I know you want to do what’s right by these kids. But they might be infected. We have to be sure.” Violently, Kaz shrugged it off, spinning around to face Snake. “We brought them here- I brought them here, to try and give them a better life. I wanted them to trust us, to find a life outside the battlefield. But all I’ve done is put them in greater danger. I thought if they found out something was wrong they’d lose all faith in us, lose all faith in adults. With what they’ve been through, those kids are just as much Diamond Dogs as the rest of us.” Snake could tell Kaz was fighting back tears. Kaz used to be someone who prided himself on being able to hide his true feelings, swallow his anxiety and put up a calm, cool façade. He was terrible at it, but the important thing was he believed it. More recently, he had dropped any pretense whatsoever. What you saw was what you got. The men didn’t have to like him, didn’t even have to respect him. But they would listen and do as they were told. At least, that’s what Kaz had told himself. He thought he had convinced himself that this was how he felt, but deep down inside, the longing for his comrades, the feeling of belonging to a family, had never left him. The children were different. They all beamed when he walked by, called him “Commander Miller” and addressed him as equal parts guardian and battlefield commander.

“It’s all my fault. If I hadn’t insisted they stay, they wouldn’t be in any danger. I didn’t want to let them go. The thought of them returning to their previous life making war is something I can’t stomach. I didn’t want to lose them.”

Code Talker wheeled himself around to the head of the table. “Kazuhira, if my suspicions are correct, a child was brought on board this base carrying the Kikongo strain of vocal cord parasite. It is my belief that Skull Face intentionally infected the young so as to study the rate at which the parasites spread. Once the parasites had reached optimal saturation, his men would descend on the village, burning everything to the ground. You tried to give these children a better life, a life away from war. You bear no guilt. Their blood is not on your hands.” Code Talker paused. “However, these is still the matter of the English strain. If indeed, it is close to Bideé Hólòni, there is a chance that one of the children here has also been infected with the English strain. Since all of the adults on this base speak English, and fluently, as a means of communication, either the infected must not speak English at all, or their vocal cords are not mature enough to leave them susceptible to the parasites.”

Kaz hung his head, followed by an uncomfortably long silence. Venom waited for his XO to respond. Kaz was in charge of all matters concerning the children, had argued for that responsibility since day one, and when his reply was not forthcoming, Venom was unsure what he should do. He looked to Ocelot for input, only to find the latter visibly impatient, staring with a
cool, detached gaze at Venom, as if challenging him to take the lead. Venom spoke up, “Whatever tests you need, you’ll have our full cooperation. I’ll inform Frank. He’s sort of the group supervisor. The kids trust him, almost as much as Kaz, so there shouldn’t be any trouble. Right Kaz?” Without even glancing up to acknowledge, Miller nodded, his eyes downcast.

“Alright. Is there anything else?”

Kaz shuffled awkwardly and tried to find his voice. “One more thing. The Intel team has finally located the site where Skull Face was running his little operation in Africa: a fortress located 200 km north of Galzburg, South Africa. We already know Skull Face worked with the South African government back in the 70s to detonate a nuclear weapon. My guess is he made a deal with the South African Defence Force (SADF) to develop chemical biological weapons (CBW) for use against South Africa’s enemies. Our Intel team identified four front companies working with the South African Medical Service (SAMS): Delta G Scientific Company, Roodeplaat Research Laboratories, Protechnik, and Infladel. All four companies led straight back to Cipher. We have directions and we have satellite images.”

Ocelot sat forward abruptly, suddenly interested in the conversation. “Miller, considering the present circumstances, don’t you think the Boss had better stay here and supervise the inspection? We should take the time and wait for Cipher’s response to Skull Face’s death, see what their next move is, before sending the Boss in.”

Kaz shook his head. “The clean-up crew is already on its way, and they’re none other than XOF. That’s right- they’re still active, even after the death of Skull Face. Most of their forces were wiped out in Afghanistan, but it looks like there’s still a unit remaining. Now that he’s no longer in charge, their original chain of command has been restored. We can only assume that means they have orders directly from Cipher to recover whatever research materials remain.”

Ocelot waved his hand dismissively, “I’m sure Cipher’s figured out the Wolbachia treatment by now. The Vocal cord parasites aren’t the threat they once were. I doubt America – Zero- has any interest in them as a weapon of mass destruction anymore.” Kaz merely stared, taken aback by how nonchalant Ocelot was reacting. “Even so, if this knowledge were to leak…The world- humanity – can’t be entrusted with this kind of power! We have to recover or destroy Code Talker’s research material before the enemy extraction choppers arrive. Boss, we have coordinates for that fortress. I’ll send the details to your iDroid.”

Venom nodded, rising from his seat about to leave. Code Talker held up a single, bony hand “One more thing. I took the liberty of having your men bring Skull Face’s body here from Afghanistan. After decades of parasite therapy, his cells- much like my own- have mostly been replaced by the parasites. On the cellular level, he is still alive, the parasites regenerating and replacing damaged tissue at an astonishing rate. Ironically, the only way to ensure his absolute death is by completely immolating his body with fire. For now, he remains in a medically induced coma. I assure you, he will never awaken.” Kaz could’ve killed the old man “He’s still alive? And you brought him here?!”

“Kazuhira, Skull Face may not have lived with the parasites cohabiting his body for as long as I have, but no one else has so completely had their life restored by the parasites. His body, and the secrets it holds, may be the only way of ending the menace of the vocal cord parasites. The balance of the world must be set right. My children, my research, have unleashed a terrible curse on the world. Skull Face was just one manifestation. I would atone for my sins by yet finding a way for my children to benefit mankind.” Code Talker paused before shaking his head. “No, that is only more arrogance. Mankind must learn to live alongside the parasites. The relationship should be symbiotic, not parasitic.”
Kaz scoffed. “You scientists are all the same. First, you create something without any consideration of how it might be used. Then, when the time comes to take responsibility for what you’ve created, all you care about is trying to find some way to put a positive spin on things. I think you just can’t let things go. You’re too invested, obsessed, with your own creation.” Code Talker nodded. “You speak the truth. I cannot deny that I cannot easily part with my life’s work. However, you of all people should understand the desire to change one’s fate, to fix past mistakes. Someday, the world may have its revenge on me for what I have created. On that day, I will have to answer for my sins. But until then, I will keep living the only way I know how. I will keep fighting for the future I believe in.”

“Hmph. Unable to die. Denied both heaven and hell. I guess this is the perfect place for someone like Skull Face. At the very least, I get to gloat over his unconscious body for all time. What do you say Boss?”

Snake frowned. “No one but the four of us and staff with the highest level security clearance can know about this. If word gets out, we could have a mutiny on our hands. If anyone is caught discussing this in any way with anyone besides the four of us, I’ll deal with them myself. And old man, if you don’t come up with anything, I’m personally dumping that bastard’s body into the sea.”

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Snake inched his way up onto the dock, the nice, cool water snaking its way down his face and leaving him to the scorching mid-morning sun. “Good work Boss. You’ve infiltrated the enemy fortress. Let’s go over the mission details again,” Kaz said. Snake scanned the satellite image, looking for any weaknesses in their defenses, choosing an angle of approach with the best chance of getting in and out, fast. “I see a lot of smaller buildings, maybe barracks or armories. Do we have any idea what their force strength is?”

“Negative,” Kaz replied. “As you know, most of XOF was wiped out in Afghanistan fighting Sahelanthropus. Skull Face most likely left a skeleton crew behind, confident that his plan would succeed. Don’t forget though, one of the last remaining XOF units is en route, no doubt under orders from Cipher to clean up the mess Skull Face left behind. Our early warning radar still hasn’t picked up the enemy’s choppers, but it’s only a matter of time before they arrive.”

“You can’t go firing on the XOF choppers,” Ocelot cautioned. “If we attack XOF now, it’ll be a declaration of war against Cipher itself. That time will come, but it’s not now. Looks like you’ll have to do this the hard way.”

Venom rummaged through his loadout. It was too late to change it now, but he had tried to strike a balance between good old-fashioned wetworks and taking the place by storm. He had an AM MRS-4R slung over his shoulder, should the shit hit the fan, but decided the appetizer would be the smaller, silenced Macht 37. It had low range, but up close it was a beast. With lethal aim it could easily turn a man’s head into swiss cheese. Quick and dirty, nothing flashy. Keeping low, he hurried across the loading platform, ducking and weaving between large shipping crates for cover. Finally, he came to the first door. Exhaling slowly, he nudged the door open, and cleared it. Sweeping the hallway, Venom was surprised to find no sign of the enemy. He paused in front of a row of lockers. Something wasn’t right. He turned and, face inches away from the locker doors, began carefully inspecting each one.

“What is it Boss?” Kaz radioed.

Finally, Venom carefully opened one of the lockers, his submachine gun trained on anything or anyone that might emerge. His eye went wide when the body of an XOF soldier came tumbling out and thudded to the ground. Venom knelt beside the man and instinctively checked his neck. He
could feel the cold sweat tingling the back of his neck as he removed the tranquilizer dart that, for some unknown reason, he knew would be there. He was not alone in the fortress.

“Kaz, there’s someone here besides me.”

Venom moved through the compound methodically, each and every guard he found laid out cold; where the locker trick couldn’t apply, the bodies were slumped against the walls, in the shadows and out of sight.

“What are you saying Boss?”

“There’s another intruder besides me, and whoever they are, they’re good.”

“This doesn’t make any sense. No one outside our organization knows about Cipher’s existence, and they shouldn’t know about the vocal cord parasites either. Why would Cipher send someone on a solo sneaking mission if they had already dispatched XOF? Unless they still don’t trust them…”

“Whoever they are, I’d like to meet them. We need this kind of talent Kaz.”

“Boss, our early warning radar just picked up the enemy choppers. We’ll keep you informed of their ETA. Hurry up and extract the target.”

***

Ocelot stretched his arms wide leaning over the deck railing, staring into the dark void of the sea below. There was nothing to worry about. He might not have been able to prevent the inevitable, hadn’t foreseen this most recent turn of events, but ultimately, it didn’t matter. The truth alone never set anyone free.

“Etepe, Eli, what’s the matter?”

Ocelot slowed and turned his attention to the voice. It was the man Venom rescued, Frank. He was escorting the kids, most likely to the Med Bay for Code Talker’s examination. That kid was with them. Eli. The son of Big Boss.

“Fighting will get you nowhere Eli.”

Moving in a blur, Eli seized the combat knife from Frank’s belt. Defiantly raising his chin, the kid began shifting his weight from foot to foot, tossing the knife playfully from hand to hand. Ocelot knew this was no childish game. He meant to challenge the older man’s authority. Eli grinned slyly, motioning for Frank to come at him. Frank merely stared, cold as granite.

“You’re acting like a child. A blade is not a toy, Eli.”

Suddenly, the grin turned into a scowl, and the boy leapt at Frank like a wild animal.

“You don’t call me that!”

Ocelot couldn’t help but watch in amusement as the blow was deflected, the boy’s arm and the blade fluidly twisted away from Frank’s throat. He hadn’t been training with the Boss for as long as most of the other recruits, but Frank’s natural talent and experience made him a natural at CQC. Eli, however, lacked any formal fighting style. His style was scrappy, that of a street brawler, the kind who could improvise and fight with belts, bottles, boots and teeth just as well as with a knife. It was undisciplined, unpolished, and therefore, unpredictable. Like a spider monkey, he crawled
up the man’s front and, before Frank could react, had locked his legs around his head, the weight of the boy bearing down on him sending him crashing to the ground. He had already wasted too much time watching the kid fool around, but still Ocelot moved to intervene. He knew John’s history with this man and knew that he would never forgive Eli if he killed Frank. With a sadistic sneer, Eli pressed the blade to the man’s throat.

“I’m-not- a kid. You hear me?”

Ocelot seized Eli by the wrist and pulled him up off Frank. “That’s enough.” The boy struggled and growled before Ocelot shoved him away. Eli was furious- Ocelot knew he couldn’t stand to be pushed around by adults when the other kids were around. This humiliation would not go unchallenged. Ocelot glared at the boy, commanding him to stand down. Eli sneered and charged. Damn, the kid was unpredictable. Ocelot knew what your average mercenary armed with a knife would do, had prepared himself to defend with CQC. Eli, however, was fast and it was all but impossible to know from what angle he was going to attack from. Ocelot’s body twisted and ducked, narrowly missing blade strikes that otherwise would’ve severed arteries and left him bleeding out on deck like a stuck pig. He wondered just how many people this kid had killed to get this good?

One moment of hesitation was all it took. He misjudged the boy, stepped back when he should’ve ducked and rolled to the side. He had just enough time to see the blade coming down for his arm and thought to himself “Shit. Not my shooting arm.” Then, with a strike so fast that neither Ocelot nor Eli saw it coming, Frank grabbed Eli by the wrist, twisted the blade out of hand, and struck him in the chest-hard-sending the boy flying.

Eli collapsed on the deck gasping for air after Frank knocked the wind out of his lungs. Ocelot stooped to pick up the knife, and handed it back to the other man. “Thanks,” he mumbled. Frank looked at him, cracking the faintest of smiles “You looked like you could use a hand.”

***

Venom had finally reached the laboratory. Desks were in disarray, charts and graphs lay scattered about the floor. All that was left were empty examination tables, the only sound the low hum of… The refrigerator. Venom moved to open the door, peering inside at the rows of chilled test tubes. They were all marked with the abbreviated names of languages- SPNSH. FRNCH. PRTGS. KKNGO. They were all here. All except for English, of course.

Then, Venom noticed a sound that he hadn’t heard before. It was barely audible over the refrigerator, a forgotten piece of his load out. The Ion-Mobility Spectrometer. The room was rigged with plastic explosives.

“Kaz, this whole place is rigged. Whoever’s here they’re not here to steal Cipher’s research, they’re here to destroy it!” Suddenly, Snake could hear something else, growing closer, throughout the compound. He could feel the vibrations through his feet. Shit. Venom dove for the hallway just in time for the pressure wave to wash over him. He slammed face first into the ground, ears ringing and his head felt like it split open from the pain. He must’ve hit his horn again, every time all he could think of was of the shrapnel being pushed a little deeper, a little more into his brain. One of these days, it would undoubtedly kill him.

He struggled to his feet, his world a wash of reds and white. He leaned on the wall for support, and peered down into the gaping floor where the lab had been only moments ago. The building must’ve had multiple sub-basements, no telling how far down it went.

“Boss! Boss, are you okay? Snake, answer me!”
Venom brushed the dust and debris from his face before answering, “Yeah Kaz, I’m fine.”

“Snake, it’s XOF. They’re inside the fortress! Get out of there, now!”

Whoever had planted the C4 must’ve known of their arrival. They detonated the explosives prematurely, just to make sure Cipher didn’t get their hands on anything. As Venom lumbered through the smoke-filled corridors, he wondered whether the man had survived.

Out of the haze came two XOF commandos, weapons raised and shouting orders. So much for the stealthy approach. Still bracing himself against the wall, Venom calmly raised his sub-machine gun with one hand and squeezed off a burst. The bullets struck the men directly to the chest and they collapsed to the ground in a heap. He continued. If the XOF chopper was grounded, then all he had to do was get outside and he could signal Pequod for extraction. He marked the spot on his map and made the call with his iDroid.

Venom pushed open the heavy steel door, emerging into fresh air and blinding sunlight. Fuck. Eight or nine XOF troops had regrouped in a small courtyard between buildings. They spotted him and opened fire. Venom ducked back inside the fortress and seized a grenade from his belt.

“Game on assholes.”

He tossed the grenade out into the courtyard and listened for the satisfying sound of the explosion sending men sailing through the air only to come back down in a gentle rain of bodies and dirt, shrapnel ripping through bone and flesh. He moved past the pile of corpses, keeping low and moving fast. More explosions rocked the compound, followed by the sound of distant gunfire. Venom headed for the direction of the firefight, eager to trap any XOF troops between the other intruder and himself. “The enemy of my enemy is my friend,” he thought to himself. “You taught me that, Boss.”

Running through the corridors of the fortress, Venom emerged in a small hangar with only two TT77 NOSOROGs, a freight elevator against the far wall and a shit load of XOF in between. Someone was pinned down in front of the elevator exchanging gunfire with the XOF commandos-most likely his friend, the other intruder. Venom crouched behind one of the tanks, considering his options. There was no way he could sneak past them all and get to the elevator undetected, and the elevator was his best shot at making it to the surface. XOF were carrying their usual- Sodomka zbrojovka Type 336, and their rifle of choice, the UN-Automatic Rifle for Combat PT. The Sz. Type 336, like Venom’s own Macht 37, had a short, but effective range, which it more than made up for with its extremely high rate of fire, making it especially deadly in close quarters.

Venom switched to full-auto on his rifle. Keeping low, he took aim while he slowly strafed across the hangar from one tank to the other, aiming high, firing short bursts that caved in skulls and sent a spray of glass and gore into the air. Confused, both the XOF and their target ceased fire for a second, before they hurried to regroup- four of the remaining XOF hunkered down and resumed firing on the intruder, while the rest spun around and turned their attention to Venom. Good. He hadn’t forgotten the last time he was this close to these assholes indoors. Now it was time for payback.

Venom considered a flashbang but didn’t want to run the risk of stunning the other man and leaving him vulnerable. So, there was only one maneuver left. Venom reached for his belt and couldn’t help but fight a grin. No matter how many times he used this, it never got old. He tossed the object as far as he could to the other side of the hangar, the clatter momentarily drawing the enemy’s attention away. Venom depressed the button.

POOF!
A life-size, inflatable Big Boss emerged from the shadows, brazenly taunting the XOF.

“Kept you waiting, huh?”

The voice sounded a little tinny, Venom noted. He’d have to get R&D to work on it.

“Contact! Multiple hostiles!”

It worked. The enemy began firing on the decoy, giving Venom enough time to circle behind the tanks and flank them on their left side. One. Two. Three. The Legendary Mercenary didn’t spray bullets, he took down the three remaining XOF firing on the elevator with well placed headshots. By the time the other XOF realized what happened, the other intruder had already put a bullet through two more. The one remaining XOF managed to squeeze off a few shots before another burst from Venom’s rifle struck him the neck, dropping him like a limp ragdoll.

As the smoke began to clear, Venom turned towards the elevator just long enough to see the other man slide the gate closed.

“Hey!” Venom called out, breaking into something of a half run.

A few feet from the ascending elevator, Venom skidded to a halt, gasping from the shock.

The beard, the single ice pale blue eye. Each of the stranger’s features slid into place as Venom’s mind recognized the face that stared back at him. Venom’s head was spinning as he struggled to get a grip on things. He was shaking, sweating all over, could feel his heart racing to beat out of his chest.

The stranger’s face was his own face, his body complete. This was the legendary Big Boss, not the broken and empty shell that crawled out of the burning wreckage of the chopper, or the shadow of a man who awoke nine years later. But then, who was he? They locked eyes for only a moment before his double disappeared from view, but it was a moment that felt like an eternity. Venom ran to the edge of the elevator shaft and shouted after him, “Wait!”

He was gone. Some kind of hallucination? Something brought on by the trauma? Or something else...

Venom’s radio crackled.

“Boss, are you there? Answer me!”

Venom felt an enormous pull, like being dragged down by the riptide, and felt himself dragged, or rather thrown, back into his body, in the moment. The radio. XOF must’ve been jamming their communications. In all the excitement, Venom had forgotten the last time he had heard either Miller or Ocelot. Kaz sounded out of breath, his voice strained.

“What’s wrong Kaz?”

“Boss, we have an emergency. There’s been another outbreak of the vocal cord parasite, inside the Quarantine Platform’s Laboratory. Several men are dead.”

A hole opened up in the floor and Venom could feel himself swallowed by it.

“How did this happen?”

“It began after we discovered a radiation leak in the facility’s Research Block. I dispatched the
Security Team to seal off the source and moved the researchers to the Containment Block for the time being. That’s when they discovered the outbreak.”

Snake swallowed the dry lump in his throat. “Containment is our number one priority.”

“I immediately sealed the lab and sent a MOPP3 rescue team, but they haven’t returned. Comms are dead. We have no idea why the parasites have shown up again. I thought we took care of it…”

“Where’s Code Talker?”

“He was working in his lab. He finished examining the kids hours ago and was preparing his final report. Nobody’s seen or heard from him since.”

“Have Ocelot take some men and go find him. We need to get any asymptomatic personel out of there, but we’ll need to know how to tell who’s infectious or not. We need more information, we need Code Talker.”

“I’m on it Boss. Just, hurry and get back here as soon as you can before things get any worse.”

Secret Conversation: Ocelot and Big Boss

“John, we’ve finally located Skull Face’s main base of operations in South Africa. The fortress he’s built lies inside a 700 square kilometer weapons test range in the Kalahari Desert. Technically, it’s three main buildings. It used to belong to the South African National Defence Force, allowing them to practice tactical bombing operations as well as service their now defunct nuclear weapons test site.”

“Nuclear weapons testing?”

“That’s right. The site was first detected by a Soviet spy satellite in 1977. The Soviets reported it to the Americans, sparking top secret talks between the US, the Soviet Union, South Africa, and France. Officially, the site’s been closed and the underground shafts were sealed under the supervision of the IAEA.”

“Yeah, I’ll bet. We’ve seen how their inspections go.”

“Two underground shafts were drilled from 1975-1977. Now, the building where Sahelanthropus was stationed was 20 km north of Building 2. Our intelligence indicates this building has only one above-ground floor with an elevator leading to a hardened bunker 100 stories below the surface. That’s more than enough room to disguise a 216 metre shaft and a giant bipedal nuclear equipped weapon of mass destruction.”

“But that’s not all.”

“No, it isn’t. There’s still the matter of the vocal cord parasites. John, we can’t let her get her hands on the vocal cord parasites.”

“Hmm, you’re right about that. The last thing we need is for the world’s biggest cunt with a fetish for gene therapy messing around with a parasite that crawls into people’s throats and kills them for talking. That goes for the old man, too.”

“Loose ends?”
“Clean ‘em up.”

“Then you’ll take care of the research materials at the facility. You’ll have to hurry. With Skull Face dead, I’m sure Cipher already has a strike team on their way to clean up his mess. That’s right, XOF. They’re still around.”

“Not for long.”

“Is this your revenge?”

“Adam, this is bigger than that. With XOF gone, Zero’s lost his muscle. If I come crawling back to the table and offer to retake command of Foxhound, there’s no way he’ll refuse. Cipher can continue to covertly extend its reach and police the world.”

“What about the Phantom? He and Miller have raised quite an army while you’ve been away.”

“Wasn’t that your plan all along? He does the wet work while Big Boss remains the ‘Legendary Mercenary’, the ‘Greatest Soldier Who Ever Lived’?”

“That was Zero’s plan. And don’t be like that. I only went along with it to keep you safe.”

“Next time, don’t do me any favors.”

“You never answered my question.”

“Kaz can handle himself. Always has. I gave him an ultimatum the first time we met, and the offer still stands. It’s up to him to decide.”

“And the Phantom?”

“…”
“I used to advertise my loyalty
And I don’t believe there is a
Single person I loved that I
Didn’t eventually betray.”
- Albert Camus, The Fall

Eli watched through eyes that were not his own. He could see all four of them, arguing now about what to do with the kids on Mother Base, what to do about the threat from the parasites. Ocelot and Big Boss had left the room, no doubt to discuss their own plans out of earshot of Miller. They didn’t respect him, that much Eli knew for certain. It was one thing that he and Miller had in common. Everyone on base merely tolerated their presence, complaining about them in private or when they were sure not to be discovered by either Miller or Big Boss. Anyone who had been loyal to Commander Miller over the years had either systematically been dismissed or reassigned to an FOB by Ocelot, for various reasons, or so completely infatuated with Big Boss their allegiance had shifted entirely. As for Eli, if any of the staff had been at all sympathetic to the idea of grimy faced, dewey-eyed war orphans, their sympathy was not extended to himself. At best, he was viewed as a troublemaker who needed to fall in line. At worst, a danger to everyone on board.

They all lied to his face, all the time. Every polite greeting, every mock show of solidarity. It was insulting. Infuriating. They all believed he was too young, too stupid, to know the truth. That would be their greatest, most fatal, mistake.

“Boss, you do realize if the kids are infected with the parasites, we’ll need to administer the Wolbachia treatment to them as well.”

Snake grunted in agreement.

“Yeah.”

“I don’t know how far Miller’s considered the ramifications, but you DO know the end result will be sterility? We’ll save their lives, but in doing so, we’re robbing them of the future. It’s a choice our men could make willingly. But these kids…”

“We’ll do what must be done. There’s nothing else to say about it. Even if we no longer keep them here, we can’t send them back out into the world carrying the parasites. We’re not exactly an NGO, and they don’t exactly have parents. Kaz wanted us to be their guardians, so I’m making the decision with everyone’s best interests in mind.”

Bullshit. Big Boss was such a liar and a hypocrite. He’s never had anyone’s interests in mind except his own. He didn’t want them here, but admitted he believed their true place was on the battlefield. He only cared about them in so far as they could fight for HIM. But would he let them return? Would he accept them as Diamond Dogs, let them go out on missions, acknowledge their warrior’s pride? No, because, once again, it was in HIS best interest to appease his boyfriend. Now, after years of being a guinea pig for Cipher’s pet science project, after being tortured and infected with the vocal cord parasites, once again adults would lie to him and trick him, subjecting him to more pain, more humiliation, in the name of his “best interests.”

Eli clenched his teeth and instinctively balled his hand into a fist, digging his long, dirty nails into his palm so hard it hurt. He hated them. All of them.
“Of course they lied to us.” He spoke to the boy lingering in the shadows, the one through whom he could see everything on base. “They don’t care about us. If they knew you were here they’d lock you up, put you in a cage, poke you and prod you like you were some kind of animal. A freak. Is that what you want?”

(You want a family. All you want is to belong. I can feel your pain, your anger. You want them to acknowledge it, too.)

“Shut up! I want all of them to pay. The whole world must be made to pay for what it’s done to us. I know you feel the same way. You, who could kill your own father.”

(I could feel it. He wanted to kill me.)

“You killed him. You got your revenge. Why stop there? You’ve seen it, too. The world’s full of adults who lie, who hurt others. Kids like us. Don’t you want to make them pay?”

(You want to use it? His final gift.)

“Why not? He trusted it to us. But why stop there? We already have the ultimate weapon. Seems like a shame not to use it, wouldn’t you agree?”

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This time, no one rushed to greet him as the chopper landed. Instead, they stood as brooding sentinels, rifles relaxed but all reflexes tuned to respond should anything go wrong. The entire quarantine platform was accessible only via helicopter, an island from the rest of Mother Base. The Containment Block had been sealed. No one could come out, and nothing could go in unless either he or Kaz gave the order. Still, the advent of a second outbreak had set everyone on edge. The last time, morale had dropped so low fights began to break out across base. Petty squabbles degenerated into outright brawls, knives were drawn, and the Boss himself had to intervene.

Kaz approached Snake, haggard and pale under the sunlight.

“Boss, we lost contact with the Security Team. I’ve sent in a rescue team to help, but they haven’t returned. Nothing on the radio either. We’ve got a backup team prepped and waiting. Just give the order…”

“I’ll go. Alone.”

The platform fell silent as the men turned in awe of their Boss. Kaz’s crutch clattered to the floor as he stumbled forward, placing a hand on Snake’s shoulder as much to express concern as to catch himself.

“Boss, what are you…There’s no need for that.”

Venom shook his head. “We can’t risk losing anyone else. I’ll go.”

Kaz pleaded with him, “We don’t know what’s going on in there!”

“Exactly,” Venom said, his voice firm and decisive. “Anyone left alive is going to be at their breaking point. The last thing they want to see is another unit storming in. They trust me. They’ll be looking for me to save them.”

Kaz bowed his head. He knew Snake’s mind was made up and there was no more use arguing the point. “Fine. First order of business is to find out how much the infection has spread.” An
uncomfortable silence grew between them. “Containment comes first, then rescue. Boss, if you find anyone who’s infected. You’ll have to…”

Grimly, Venom nodded. “That includes me. What about the kids and Code Talker? Has Ocelot made it back?”

“The security detail brought the kids back safe and sound. We currently have them under quarantine, since they were picked up from the Research Block. Ocelot insisted on going after Code Talker alone.”

Kaz waited for Venom’s disapproval. Finally, Snake replied “He can take care of himself.”

“One of the researchers managed to isolate the parasite behind the outbreak. He faxed over his findings. Code Talker’s analyzing them now. His lab is on the south side of the platform.”

“Tl’iish,” Code Talker spoke over the iDroid. “Despite the inoculation of Wolbachia, there is yet another outbreak. It may be premature to theorize, but I believe there are only two possibilities—one, the strain of parasite has somehow mutated, or two, we are dealing with a different strain, one that has not been introduced to the Wolbachia.”

Kaz frowned, “Meaning someone brought a unique strain on board. Snake, find out what you can, but exercise extreme caution.”

Snake approached and ducked inside the quarantine tent as one of the men hesitated. Calmly, Miller gave the word.

“We’ll- have to close the tent behind you Boss. Don’t think the infection is airborne, but…”

“You never know.” Venom snapped the breathing mask over his face as the door to the Research Block slid open, bathing him in an ominous crimson glow. Inside, the air was quiet and still, like being sealed deep underground. The only thing Venom could hear was his breathing, raspy, through the mask. He stopped. There was something else.

“What is it Snake?”

“Something sweet. I can smell it even through the mask.”

“The rescue team reported that, too. Said it smelled like ripe fruit.”

Deeper into the block, everything but the auxiliary power had been cut. The corridors were pitch black save for pools of light here and there. He thumbed on the flashlight to his AM MRS-4R, raising his rifle to the ready and slowly creeping through the corridors of the Quarantine Platform. The floors were slick, and without having to glance down Venom knew it was blood. Tables and beds had been drug out of the rooms and piled on top of one another to form makeshift blockades—barriers which obviously did not hold.

He passed one of the researchers, sprawled out on the floor, his mouth and the front of his crisp, white lab coat stained in blood.

“Looks like he didn’t make it. Don’t touch him Boss. He could be infected.”

Shots rang out, echoing through the corridor. Venom hurried around the corner to see one of the Security Team running out of a room, firing wildly behind him.

“Stay back! Stay back!”
Return fire from within the room and his head snapped back, body dropping to the floor. Venom peered inside. Another member of the Security Team lay in a bloody, crumpled heap in the corner.

Clawing at his throat, he reached out feebly in Venom’s direction.

“Help me, Boss.”

Snake looked at the man, searching his memory to put a name to the face. It was Parrot.

“I’ll come back for you.”

It sounded like a cheap promise, tasted bitter in his mouth as he said it. Parrot flashed a pained smile, blood seeping from his mouth.

“Vic…Boss.”

Snake continued deep through the block, trying his best to drown out the sobs, the hyperventilating breaths. Bodies lay slumped or face down through the halls, struggling between trying to crawl to safety and escape and trying to tear the parasites from their throats. At this point, there was no escape. The parasites would eat them alive from the inside. They were all marked for death.

Finally, Snake came to a single room. The door was barricaded shut, and he took great effort on his part to force it open just enough to slip through. There were still bodies, throats and chests expertly dissected and neatly folded back by forceps, autopsies that had been interrupted. In the corner lay a single man, murmuring to himself-

“I’m no snail- I’m no snail...”

Cautiously, Venom approached and crouched, gently taking the man’s head in his hands and bringing it up so his eyes met his.

“What the hell happened?” Venom asked.

The man looked confused, his jaw agape and his eyes clouding over. His lips curled into a pained smile “I win… I’m no snail.” His head slumped forward, the NVG on his forehead bumping into Venom’s face. Solemnly, Snake closed the man’s eyelids and took both of the man’s hands in his own, neatly folding them in his lap. He noticed a radio on the floor next to the body, picking it up.

“He must’ve sent the transmission.”

Kaz exhaled loudly over the radio, “Damnit! We haven’t learned a goddamn thing.”

Snake gently removed the goggles from the dead man’s head and placed them on his own. “Maybe we have.”

“What are you saying Boss?”

“It looks like he had a way of IDing who was symptomatic.”

“Snails…” Code Talker ruminated over the radio. “Yes, of course. Tl’iish, you mustn’t let ANYONE infected with the parasites escape! As the parasite takes over the host’s central nervous system, it will manipulate their behavior, creating an irresistible urge to get out into the open. This is the parasite’s means of escape. If the infected make it to land, the birds will feast on their carcasses, spreading the parasites. The whole world could be infected.”

THUMP THUMP THUMP

Snake spun around to the sound of frantic pounding on the door. He could see a tangle of arms, heard the throaty groans of the infected trying to force their way into the room. He drew his rifle
and approached. Two men broke through and charged at him. He knocked one man to the ground with the butt of his rifle, pivoting on the ball of his foot to stop the one who ran past him. The man was almost to the exit as Snake quickly took aim and fired, the bullet ripping through the man’s calf and dropping him instantly.

More infected came pouring in, three of them throwing themselves on Snake, clawing and trying to bite him through their balaclavas. Six or seven rushed for the door, and Snake felt panic and anger rising up inside him. Breaking the grip of the infected, he squeezed off a short burst with his rifle, ripping holes through his men and showering himself in their blood. Horrified, he threw the rifle aside and feebly reached for his pistol. As another infected lumbered by, ignoring him for the hope of making it outside, Snake took aim and put a bullet straight through his temple. There were too many for just a pistol. They were going to make it outside.

“Light ‘em up!”

There was a faint whistle as the napalm fell, slow enough in Snake’s mind that he could dive for cover and witness the flames wash over his men. He scrambled to his feet and could only watch as they screamed in agony, vainly trying to extinguish the flames before falling silent forever.

The flames danced around the bodies of the fallen. The sprinklers activated, turning the floor into a river of water and blood. This time, there would be no Man On Fire. He would be the demon walking through the flames, bringing death and despair. He walked through the halls in a daze, the survivors crawling or shambling towards him. Through the goggles, he could see their glowing larynxes. Infected. With cold and clinical precision, he dispatched them one after the other. Kaz whispered a hushed “I’m sorry,” to each one, until he couldn’t fight back the sobs anymore. As Venom descended the 4th floor staircase, another voice, nasally and out of breath, spoke to him over the radio.

“Snake, you just-killed your own men!”

Grief and anger roiled up inside Kaz as he shouted through his tears, “Emmerich? What the hell! Nobody wants your opinion.”

“Y-you expect me to just stand by and watch this, this MADNESS? Maybe you can, Commander Miller, but I won’t!”

The audio muffled as the headphones were removed and undoubtedly thrown across the room. Venom could hear signs of a struggle and wondered if it was Ocelot intervening, probably keeping Kaz from mouthing off and saying things that would just upset Snake more.

“Staff member has died.”

 Venom’s iDroid monitored, in real-time, the vitals for all staff members on base. One by one, those vitals flatlined.

“Staff member has died.”

They all die with my name on their lips, Venom thought to himself. I couldn’t save them. I could never save anyone.

This can’t be happening. This can’t be real.

“I have to do this. Better this than to let them burn,” he reasoned.

“So you ARE here to kill us?” One of the men shouted in outrage. “Fuck you Big-”
The infected man raised a gun, trembling, his aim unsteady, and fired in Venom’s direction. The bullet barely missed his head, grazed his neck instead, bringing forth a small trickle of warm blood. Venom shot him through the head, unthinking and unfeeling. It felt like he was no longer in control. Something else, something darker, was doing this. This wasn’t him. He was someone else.

“You’re not the Big Boss I used to know. You’re insane! These are your men!”

Oh no

Not me.

I never lost control

One of the lab coats writhed in agony amidst a pool of blood.

“Why? Why me?”

Snake couldn’t answer him. Kaz reminded him over the radio, “His throat’s glowing. He’s infected Boss. We can’t save him now. You’ll have to…”

Kaz couldn’t bring himself to finish his sentence, so Venom answered with his gun. Wordlessly, Venom continued to move from room to room, looking for the mark of the parasites. Snake worked his way down to the 2nd floor, turning the corner to see three men, part of the Security Team, stumbling towards him.

“Save me, Boss! Please, I don’t want to die.” His voice is pleading. He trusted Big Boss with his life. Through the goggles, Venom sees his throat glowing. “Forgive me,” he asks as he raises his gun.

“Boss…please.”

You’re face

To face

With the man who sold the world

“You said yourself that we’re a family. Or was that all lies, too?”

“That’s enough Huey!” Kaz spat.

Every word from Emmerich’s mouth twisted in his gut like a blade, and he would pull it out except he felt it belonged there. He had no kaishakunin. There was nothing left but to stab himself in the throat or fall with the blade to his heart. This was his burden to bear. His duty. He would carry it out alone.

Venom reached the last floor, coming to one final door. Inside, he could hear the sounds of a struggle, the sounds of the men arguing amongst themselves.

“Let go of me! I’m going outside. I need to go outside.”

“Shut the fuck up! We’re dead anyway.”

Venom approached, could see the door was locked from the outside. He picked it and manually slid the door open, stepping inside to find several scientists and the last remaining members of the Security Team. Venom recognized one of the men, Armored Armadillo. He had his gun drawn, trembling as the Boss approached.
“Hey, let’s let the Boss decide. We live and die by your order Boss.”

His answer welled up inside him, finding itself stuck in his throat. Was this what it all came down to? Was this how it all would end? One by one, they all lined up, resisting the parasite’s urge to escape, and gave their Boss one final, shaky salute.

His eye blurred with tears.

Chico, growing up means choosing how you’re gonna live your life.

Why was he thinking about this now? He tried to force the memory away, to face what it was he was about to do.

BANG. BANG. BANG.

They died, one after the other. With tears in their eyes, they never broke formation. Never lowered their arms. They were too proud to run. Proud to die like Diamond Dogs.

I can’t go back…I can’t face everybody.

…I wish I was dead.

“Snake, is that?”

Venom snapped to at the sound of Kaz’s voice, and his eye caught a single remaining man. Although his fatigues were covered in blood, he was wearing a breathing mask like Snake. “He might not be infected,” Venom said hopefully. He knelt to examine the man who cautiously started backing away. “It’s okay. You’re clean. I’m here to get you out.” Venom could see he was unable to walk. Heaving him over his shoulder, Venom assured him, “I’m not leaving without you.”

“Thank you…Boss.”

Together, the two men made their way through the bloody ruins of the platform. Passing the room where he had left Parrot, Venom peered inside. Dead. Parrot had died waiting for him. Waiting for his Boss to save him.

As they entered the air lock, Venom radioed the crew outside, “I’ve got a survivor. Unlock the door!”

“Wait.”

Venom froze.

“I don’t think I made it…after all.”

There was a sharp intake of breath on the other side of the radio as Kaz cried “Impossible! You just checked him!” Code Talker also seemed shocked. “Could it really have spread so quickly?” From his place in the Command Center, Kaz shook his head in disbelief. “Boss, take another look at him with the goggles.”

Venom lifted the man and exited the air lock, gently lowering him to the ground. This couldn’t be happening. Reluctantly, Venom looked at his throat, his heart sinking as he clearly made out the tell-tale glow.

“Maybe they got in through my wounds,” the man offered. He began coughing up blood, his voice growing hoarser, confirming Venom’s worse fears. “They’re waiting now. All of us. They want to
“go outside.” Venom’s hand trembled as he raised the gun. Shaking, the man removed his goggles and balaclava. It was Raging Raven. Opening his arms wide, Raven reared back his head and exposed his throat.

“Do it, Boss. Kill me.”

Ok, then. I’ll put you out of your misery.

Was this why he woke up after nine long years? Was this all this world had left to offer him—more loss, more tragedy? Haunted by phantoms from his past, a phantasmagoria of words and visions that felt strangely alien yet so familiar. And in front of him, an uncertain future whose road was lined with the bodies of the fallen.

Any last words?

“Boss…I’m sorry.” Kaz whispered.

Shoot, you are only going to kill a man.

After the echo from the shot a dead silence fell on the Quarantine Platform. No one spoke, the only sounds the dripping of water, or blood, and the hiss from escaping coolant. Venom turned to leave the carnage behind, before thinking better of it. Slowly, trancelike, he stepped back into the devastation and calmly, aimlessly, walked through the corridors, eye lingering over every single corpse. Deep inside, he could feel a darkness rising. Sorrow, pain, fury, a swirling torrent of emotions that was dragging him under and carrying him away. This time, he wouldn’t fight it. This time, he let the darkness take hold of him. Venom collapsed among the bodies, wracked with sobs. Trembling, he reached out for one of his men, only to find the hand he once shook so proudly now stiff and cold. The blood was pooling around him, cool and sticky as it ran over his fingers. Gently, he cupped his hands gathering as much as he could, before burying his hands in his face.

“You’re crying? Big Boss would never cry.”

Venom lifted his head in the direction of the voice, and through the blur of tears he could make out the figure of Ishmael, his old first mate.

“I wish I was dead. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.” Venom offered, weakly.

“Listen. To do the right thing, you sometimes have to leave the things you care about behind…”

“I just want to start over.”

Hombre Nuevo…

From behind Venom, another voice called out from the shadows.

“No more war games. You’re a real man now, soldier.”

Skull Face approached Venom, kneeling to face him.

“You carry their will, their words, into the future. They live on through you. Free them. Without these words there is only the pain, only loss and devastation. Let the words cleanse you. Release them into the world!”

“No,” Ishmael countered, placing a firm hand on Venom’s shoulder. “It’s not over yet. You’ve still got a job to do. Skull Face was just the beginning. Everything that’s happened, every man and
woman who died here today, nine years ago, they all lead back to Zero. You know what we have
to do. That’s how SHE would’ve wanted it.”

Paz…

No...The Boss, your... MY...old mentor.

“You’re too late, Big Boss.” Skull Face exclaimed. "The cycle of revenge that I have started will
infest the system! Nobody can stop it now! I truly found a weapon to surpass Metal Gear, and all I
had to do was nurse that grudge, the seedling of hatred that you and Zero planted. Let the Hero,
born of woman, crush the serpent with his heel!”

Suddenly, Venom could hear the distant sounds of the base alarms. He snapped to attention and
radioed the Command Center “Kaz, what’s going on?”

“Boss! It’s Sahelanthropus- it’s active!”

Snake could hear the sounds of gunshots- Kaz being escorted by an armed guard.

“Find Emmerich. Shut that thing down!”

A loud mechanical roar, followed by explosions and bursts of more frantic gunfire were only
interrupted by a single cackling laugh over the radio.

“You’re too late Snake!”

“Eli!” Kaz shouted in disbelief, “What the hell are you…”

“Shut up! I’m through listening to your lies. I’m through with all of you!”

“Kaz, shoot him! Bring Sahelanthropus down!” Venom shouted into the comms.

“Boss, the kids! They’re stealing one of the choppers and escaping with Eli.”

“I told them ‘If you’re dragged back here, you better be ready. Ready to face the world as
enemies!’”

Snake took off for the door, forgetting that he had been sealed inside. He pounded on the thick,
cold steel, barking orders into his iDroid in the faint hope that someone was still alive and at their
post to hear him.

“Open the damn door!”

More explosions. The screams of his men, his comrades, cut down by a hail of machine gun fire or
crushed to death by Sahelanthropus.

“Spread the word, I’m leaving you with a parting gift- the English strain of vocal cord parasite!”
Eli cackled.

The carnage outside turned to hissing static in his ear, fueling his sense of desperation. This was
the only way in, and he could only think of one way out now. Rummaging through his loadout he
planted the C4 on the door and took cover, exhaling slowly as he depressed the button and waited
for the pressure wave. The roar of the explosion and the door being ripped open might as well have
been the earth itself swallowing him up whole within the corridors of the Quarantine Platform.
Through the smoke he could see the outline of the entrance and made for the door, gun at the
ready.
Snake emerged into the daylight just in time to see the towering Sahelanthropus as it slowly rose into the sky, one of the Diamond Dogs choppers by its side.

“Goodbye father! I don’t need you anymore.”

Snake watched as the metal giant slowly faded over the horizon, the deep hatred he had come to trust returning like an old friend. More than just Metal Gear had been taken from him today, and he wouldn’t rest until Eli and his co-conspirators had paid with their blood. Skull Face hadn’t escaped his wrath, and neither would they.

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Weeks had passed since the incident on the Quarantine Platform, and Eli had made good on his promise. The entire platform he had released the English strain on had been locked down, preventing the spread of the parasites. However, with most of the Med staff on Mother Base dead, there simply wasn’t enough personnel to treat the infected. Word had been sent to FOBs across the world, and doctors and nurses had come as quick as they could. To make matters worse, Snake and Kaz had been informed by Ocelot that Code Talker was also amongst the dead. A single shot from a standard 9mm pistol, the kind anyone on base would carry. Ballistics traced the bullet back to the pilot the kids had taken hostage, and so it was concluded that Eli had most likely escaped his escort and returned to kill Code Talker before stealing Sahelanthropus and triggering the vocal cord parasite outbreak.

“I just…I can’t believe he would do this.” Kaz murmured under his breath.

“Well you better start believing it, Miller, because that’s our reality now. Maybe if you believed what that kid was capable of before and actually listened to the Boss and I’s advice, we wouldn’t be here right now.”

The room fell silent. Kaz no longer had the spirit to object, and Venom no longer cared to shield him from Ocelot’s more barbed insults.

“What about Emmerich?” Snake asked.

“He’s under arrest until his trial. Ocelot is helping put together the case against him as we speak. Until then, he’s safe.”

Snake paused. “You think he’s guilty?”

Ocelot leaned on the table, his eyes drifting between and meeting the gaze of both Snake and Kaz. “He was the only one with the opportunity and the motive to install that Beta Ray emitter. He intentionally mutated the vocal cord parasites to create a strain immune to the Wolbachia and intended to use that as his bargaining chip out of here. We have the call logs to prove it, Boss. He was in contact with an American pharmaceutical corporation, a shell company run by ATGC. He was trying to sell Code Talker’s research to Cipher.”

Snake seemed to consider. “He likes to talk. He can represent himself. Kaz, you’ll be the prosecution. I have final say as judge. When you have a case prepared, set a time for his trial.”

Wearily, Venom rubbed his temples before motioning for Kaz and Ocelot to continue with their report. Kaz cleared his throat.

“Boss, the chopper pilot Eli had fly them out of here is back. We picked him up in Africa. Guy was nearly dead of dehydration when the medics found him. Apparently the kids used vines and duct tape to bind him to the cockpit. He’s recovering in the Med Bay now, but we managed to get a
statement out of him.”

“And?”

“He said once Sahelanthropus and the chopper got out to sea, they split up and headed in different directions. The chopper headed straight for Africa. He said they made it about 50 miles inland before they ran out of fuel. Boss, they left him alive so he could deliver a message.”

“Yeah. Eli thinks he has a score to settle. So, let’s find them and finish this.”

Ocelot handed Venom a crumpled note. Snake opened it, revealing a torn page from a book and coordinates scrawled in blood along with a skull.

Shakily, Kaz reached for the note. “That’s…that’s from one of my books.”

“What?”

Ocelot continued. “Apparently there are already men asking coastal villagers if they’ve seen the ‘giant in the sky’. Cipher’s been after Sahelanthropus ever since Afghanistan, and if they beat us to it, Eli and those kids won’t stand a chance. Not to mention, Cipher will be getting more than just Metal Gear. Eli is infected with the vocal cord parasite.”

“Damnit, already? But we wiped out XOF. So who…”

“My guess is it’s your former unit. The one you created back in San Heuronymo before you ‘disappeared’ off Cipher’s radar. That’s right. Special Forces Unit Foxhound.”

“So they’re still around…”

Snake gritted his teeth. “First, we deal with Emmerich. My justice will be swift. Then, I’m going after the kids. Alone.” Slowly, both Ocelot and Kaz nodded.
Chapter 13

Sweat stung in the eyes of the men crowded together inside the warehouse for Huey’s trial. Standing elbow to elbow, their hot breath filled the room. All were quiet and still as Ocelot paced back and forth reading the charges.

“Nine years ago, this man acted as accomplice to the attack on Mother Base. He then provided support to Skull Face, the very man responsible for said attack. Conspiring with Eli, he repaired Sahelanthropus in secret. His ‘research materials’ caused the leak at the quarantine facility, which in turn caused the Wolbachia mutation…letting the parasites off their chains. All this as a diversion, drawing our attention away from Eli and his boys…so they could steal Sahelanthropus and unleash Skull Face’s masterpiece, the English strain of the vocal cord parasite, right here on Mother Base.” Ocelot turned from the accused, slowly scanning the crowd with a steely gaze. “We lost a lot of good men.”

“Th—that’s ridiculous! I never did any of that! The inspection was supposed to help everyone! I-I didn’t know!”

Ocelot smirked, raising his eyebrows before continuing “He also stands accused of murdering one of his own family. Hiding the body.”

“I haven’t killed anyone! The rest is all wrong, too. I sacrificed myself for my companions just as much as any of you…why won’t you believe me?”

Huey’s protests were cut short by the rhythmic pounding of Miller’s crutch, the sea of men parting to allow their Commander to pass. Kaz approached the accused, glaring contemptuously down over his aviators before his voice rang out “The prosecution calls a witness.”

Men stood aside as the roar of the crane slowly signaled the Mammal Pod to the stand. As the machine ground to a halt, Kaz continued. “Strangelove’s gravestone. Haunted by her phantom.”

“It’s…just a machine.” Huey asserted nervously.

Without warning the Mammal Pod surged to life, the light from it’s single bloodred eye bathing the warehouse in crimson as a voice, shrill with panic and hatred, cried out from beyond the grave, “Open this thing! Huey! Damn it Huey! Open it now! Please! Let me out…Kill me.”

Sneering, Kaz tossed a stack of personal photographs, confiscated from Huey’s lab, to his feet. One of the Polaroids stood out showing a slightly older Strangelove, the only time either Kaz or Snake could recall seeing her appear truly happy, cradling a small boy in her arms. Kaz pointed gently to this picture with his crutch, trying to honor his fallen comrade. “It recorded it all. Everything you did living together. She was the only one to find happiness after the Caribbean…and you killed her for it.”

Huey kneeled in stunned silence. “How…could a machine…”

“You forced your own son into the cockpit of a Metal Gear. A test subject.”

Tears began welling in the corners of Huey’s eyes at the mention of his son, “Hal…”

“His mother tried to hide him away, and when she did that…you got rid of her. For that, you locked her in that coffin.”
“No! She…she did it herself. I already told you, it was suicide!”

It wasn’t hatred or even fear behind Huey’s eyes as he looked up to Miller, turning aside to meet both Snake and Ocelot. It was a prideful, sneering glare.

“And even if I did…what right do you have?”

Kaz relished the challenge. “Oh, there’s more. We have you…to tell us everything you’ve done, everything you’ve thought, all this time. Nine years ago, you agreed to the inspection in return for Cipher’s guarantee that you’d be spared.”

“I thought it was real!”

Kaz shook his head.

“Please…”

Kaz brought his crutch thundering down before turning, looking over the entire room. “Has the jury reached a verdict?”

The room exploded “Kill him! Kill him! Kill that sonuvabitch!”

Grinning wickedly, Kaz looked over to meet Snake’s gaze. From the higher platforms the cries for Huey’s death rang out, echoing back against the steel walls and drowning out his weak cries for mercy. The crowd behind Kaz began to surge forward, their animosity reaching a fever pitch until the piercing sound of a gunshot silenced the crowd, followed by Ocelot shouting, “Order!”

Obediently, the men fell back in line, crossing their arms impatiently.

“We exist outside the law,” Kaz reminded them. “But our organization is one built on order. Here, might makes right.” All eyes turned towards their beloved leader. “What should we do Boss? Just give the order, and we’ll handle the rest.”

Quietly, Snake approached Huey. He knelt, reaching among the photographs, gently selecting one and turning it over in his hand to read the back. He flipped it over, examining the front. It was all of them, on the deck of Mother Base- Chico, Paz, Huey, and Kaz…months before that night. It was the day of the big soccer game on deck, and they were all smiling from ear to ear. Happy. Snake thought of the long chain of events that had brought them to this moment, ripped that happiness away from them, and how this one man was at the center of it all.

Snake rose, slowly extending the picture out to Huey with his bionic arm. Lip trembling, Huey raised his eyes to look from the picture to Snake. “P-please. Snake. It wasn’t my fault.”

Snake’s bionic hand coiled around the picture, silencing the voices from the past before releasing the crumpled remains to the floor.

“Guilty. All counts.”

As the room erupted in bloodthirsty praise, Snake moved between Huey and the mob signaling for Ocelot. With a nod of approval, Ocelot approached and dragged Huey to his feet.

“The sentence is death. Tomorrow at dawn. I’ll be the one to pull the trigger. Until then, get him out of my sight.”

Like a cornered animal Huey struggled against his captor, “You can’t do this! You’re all insane! You’re the murderers. Snake! I risked my life trying to save you all. How can you do this!”

Tears streamed down Emmerich’s face as Ocelot drug him away. “Am I the only sane one here?
I...It’s...not my fault."

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