"Our lives, our mood and mind as we pass across the earth, turn as the days turn..." The Odyssey

In the beginning, there was the island. Slade Wilson, Lian Worth, and Oliver Queen need to find their way off - without dying, and without losing themselves in the process.

Although the tags make this look incredibly dark, ultimately this story is about persevering through adversity. My goal was to show that no matter how dark things may become, there is always good, always light waiting for us at the end, so long as we can keep moving forward.
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

PLEASE READ

Trigger Warnings: Rape/Torture and effects of such are described throughout the story by the relevant characters as they process the events, but it does not feature directly in any scene. Shows effects of PTSD, effects of murder by self-defence and otherwise, loosely describes abortion and the effects of such.

The characters learn to come together and support each other, but they do suffer and the effects of such do feature prominently in the story; I didn’t want to write about trauma and then brush it under the carpet for the sake of a tragic backstory and drama, so the fic actively deals with it. It deals with many issues I’ve wanted to tackle in writing for a while now, and I encourage anyone who has triggers, potential or present, to please prioritise keeping yourselves safe.

Please also read the author notes at the end of the story for a personal explanation, too. This is my first time writing about more serious topics, and honestly I’m nervous about posting - but nobody got anywhere by keeping their writing in a desk drawer. This story will update twice a week. Chapter 1 is the longest by far, but no chapter falls below 2.5k. Please enjoy, and leave some feedback if you can.

They had lowered their guard so badly around her that she finally had an opening. They thought she was completely broken – hollowed out, worn out; to just be used, mercilessly, until irretrievably broken. She knew that's where she was headed, sooner rather than later – but before that happened, a guard decided to bribe his friends to leave completely, abandoning the already isolated tent, and then he stepped inside, grinning like they all did.

Weapons were meant to be left outside. The fool brought his entire arsenal with him. The gun might be alien to her but knives and grenades were easy enough to understand. It played out how it usually played out, until she pulled his hair back, made a show of playfully biting at his neck, and whipped his own dagger across his throat.

It was both harder and easier than she imagined. The slide of the knife was difficult with her aching, shaking wrists, but her grip on his head was firm and any cry he might have given was almost instantly cut off. He could have howled, of course, and anyone within hearing distance would have thought she had simply started biting again, laughed, and walked away.

Because weapons were meant to be left outside. She was cowed and whipped, wasn’t she? Certainly no threat to any of them.

She didn’t waste time watching him die. She fixed his clothes on her body as best she could and gathered up his gear. She was about to use the bloody knife to cut a hole in the tent but her head spun with the paranoia that had made itself a home in place of rationality; if the plan didn’t work they’d know she escaped. Instead, she uprooted a corner of the tent, peering carefully around.
No-one was there. By now the dead guard's friends would spread the word that the tent was occupied and they'd wait for him to come back, strutting with pride at how easily he'd mauled their prisoner. And then the next one would come, and then the next, and then as the night wore on they'd abandon even that charade and come in droves, drunk and howling for blood and tears. Pain and fear had given away to emptiness, emptiness had morphed into blind fury, fury had melted into endless calculation. And now –

Night was drawing on. She'd have very little time. Maybe she'd die in the wilderness, but she'd rather die there than in a tent, with only a dirty blanket and purple–red bruises to call her own.

She left the radio, took the compass and map even if she couldn't read them. She took his weapons, holstered the gun she didn't know how to use, and held back tears at the sight of protein bars and a bag of nuts hidden inside a thigh pocket. Then, standing unsteadily on bare feet, she darted a look out the hole she'd made underneath the corner of the tent. The evening had grown even darker, and she slipped out into the cold air, stepping softly and leaving behind four of the seven grenades she'd looted from the corpse, pins pulled. Hopefully the explosion would be strong enough to mask the fact that there was only one body, and no weapons.

Then she ran as quickly and quietly as she could. Grenades went off in a matter of seconds –

Even though she knew it was coming the noise still startled her. She kept her head low, nearly losing her footing more than once, and headed for the long grass. Beyond that, the forest beckoned. A light breeze helped mask her movements in the foliage and itchy strains of fern and shrub scratched at her feet. The forest itself was pitted with ancient trees and painted with shadows. Surely someone would see her, surely they'd see her running. She wasn't nearly fast enough, weak with abuse and starvation, and it wasn't completely dark. They'd see her in the light of the grenade fire, heading for the grass, and open fire with their guns. Or worse – easily catch up with her. And when they were finished with her, this time they wouldn't call their doctor.

Nothing to do but keep moving. Into the forest now, legs shaking from exhaustion and lack of food, water and sleep. The trees closed around her, the shadows licked at her vision. The wind picked up. It was like the island was trying to swallow her whole.

Looking back, she couldn't remember the sound of the explosion, even though it had startled her at the time. But she would remember the terror it inspired, sharp and clear as ice, chasing her heels as she ran through the trees. No sound or taste or smell of that night stayed with her.

But the fear? The fear would never really leave.

~~~

She slept in fits during the day, staying close to running water despite the cold, burrowing as delicately as she could beneath bushes and the hollows of trees without breaking stems or leaving imprints or any evidence that she was there. The river would hopefully mask any noise she made while she dozed. Hunger gnawed at her, a familiar sensation, but her food was limited and she knew that as soon as she started eating she'd start running out, too. She had no survival skills by way of hunting, and no way of making a fire. All she could do is move far away enough so that she'd at least have a chance of figuring out how to survive.

There was no way to tell how far she travelled – mainly at night, softly as a deer despite her swollen, cut–up feet. The weapons weighed her down but the thought of leaving them behind raised a swell of terror in her.

She ate one of the protein bars. There were three left, the length of her palm. She ate four walnuts,
then one more because four was an unlucky number. She only drank from running water; icy but incredibly satisfying. Just having the water was enough to keep her going the first couple of days.

Her body's aches were accentuated by the new exercise, and then exacerbated. Constant tension and keeping her head swinging side to side gave her an endless headache; hunger made her dizzy. Another day passed in fitful sleep, alertness spearing rest at every slight crack and rustle. The wind rushed the tree tops, carrying the sound of whispered voices, or nothing at all.

Four more walnuts. Fuck fate. Anger settled in the place of fear, familiar and warm.

At twilight she began to walk again, despite her frozen limbs and shaking legs. Head swivelled around, looking for bodies, any kind of movement. She kept her eyes on the ground too, looking for wires and traps, sticking to the trees. Nothing jumped out at her, but she didn't know what she was looking for. On and on she walked, feeling her way forward in the dark. She couldn't tell how far away she was from the camp, or if there was any camp nearby. Odds were she'd only know about a patrol if she walked right into one.

They surely thought she was dead. The focus would be on the guard stupid enough to bring his weapons into the tent, especially grenades. It was only natural the prisoner blew them both up. Who'd want to live the way they were treating her? Nobody was looking for her. Nobody was looking for her. Please, no, nobody was looking for her.

Move. Move, move, move.

Another protein bar. Three walnuts. Water. Snatches of sleep. Where was she going?

The map was pulled out one day and she tried to figure where she was. Eventually she brought out the compass, gauged North, and turned the map to match the direction. That was how maps worked, right? And she was next to a river, she had tried to stay next to the river.

The previous owner had marked out the camps! Or, she thought that's what the marking meant. She couldn't know what meandering path she had taken, but she follow the river back with a dirty thumbnail and there was a camp fairly close to one spot.

She checked the compass. North led away. The river led to the sea. Most of the camps were south, clustered together here and there. The farther she walked North the farther she got away from the camp and the likelihood of meeting a patrol. It was enough to fortify her, and she started walking during the day, too, although only in the twilight hours where she was less likely to be spotted. The dead guard's clothing was good camouflage.

Hunger was likely to kill her before the cold. She didn't think about the food that men brought to her now and again, maybe once a day, all clearly leftovers of whatever slop they had picked through. It was never warm and never filled her, and she had always been made to beg before they'd throw it at her, laughing.

She wouldn't take it now if they offered it to her. She'd never be brought low like that again.

Still, her hunger gnawed, gripping her stomach in painful thrusts. The thought of the remainder of the food now brought her despair instead of fortification, and eventually she could only stumble through the forest, barely sensate of her surroundings, until she tripped and fell hard against a tree, barely managing to stay upright.

It took a while for her to realise that hanging right in front of her face was an apple. Small and stunted, accompanying a tangled, twisting tree, barely surviving in the harsh environment. But rosy,
fresh, clearly ripe. It was the brightest, prettiest thing she'd ever seen, and there were more.

She tried to control herself, but she wept uncontrollably as she ate, stifling the sobs inside her sleeve.

She'd survive. She didn't know how yet, but she'd survive. Somehow.

This thought lingered in her head, frozen in time, until all at once she jolted awake. Right in the middle of eating another apple, she'd passed out. Exhaustion had taken over her body, smothering her fear and forcing rest on her worn mind and body. She'd fallen asleep, almost entirely in the open, with a lap full of apples and apple cores. Staring uncomprehendingly down at the mess, she came to a slow realisation that she wasn't alone.

There was a man standing well out of reach, staring at her. The click of the safety coming off his gun must have been what woke her.

Everything stilled.

She had weapons. He wouldn't kill her straight away, the men always wanted a turn first. He could see her gun and at least one of the knives but he probably wasn't expecting her to make any move – she just had to wait until he was close enough –

He lowered the gun. A–ha, there it was, he was coming closer...

She remained completely still, aware that her hand was very conveniently resting on the hilt of a hidden dagger. He'd close his eyes – they always did, eventually – and she'd hamstring him, gut his –

He stopped walking. She stared, waited. He'd come closer eventually.

Except he didn't. He'd look around now and again, like he was checking for his patrol mates, but his eyes always returned back to her face. She waited.

"You're not with them, are you?" he said, and he lowered his gun completely. It was loose in his hand. She watched it; he was making a play at being casual. He could shoot her in an instant if he wanted to. Any of them could.

But he wasn't dressed like them.

It was a trick.

His gun was different.

It was a trick.

It's a trick. Focus.

"Who are you?" asked the man. She stared at him blankly. Her name seemed far away and so irrelevant, like it belonged to somebody else completely. Alien. Untrue.

He was waiting for an answer. She wondered what he would do if she never answered him.

But time passed, and all he did was snort. "What's your name?" he tried. "How did you get here?"

She said her name inside her head, trying in out. It didn't seem to fit. "What's your name?" she repeated instead, her voice almost as gravelly as his with disuse and abuse. She even lilted at the end by accident, mimicking his accent. South African? Australian. "How did you get here?"
The man just snorted again, putting his gun away and looking around. "Just my luck," he muttered to himself.

He took a step closer to her, looking around again. As he stepped, her guts clenched and her legs stiffened. He looked sharply at her, then stopped. Both hands rose, palms forward, tucked against his chest. Placating. He was anything but harmless, though, wasn't he?

"I'm not going to hurt you," he said.

*Good,* she thought. *I'll give me more time to hurt you first.*

He was eyeing the hand hidden against her side; no doubt he knew she had a weapon on her. More than one. The gun strap dug against her chest, but her clothing had stopped stinking of man after the first day of sweating and fitful sleeping. Now she stank of dirt and her own sweat, of blood and the forest.

She was too tired. Her wrists too weak to make the fingers grip. Her head spun with the horror that she'd have to let him get close, far too close, to do what he liked until he lowered his guard and he was weak enough that she could go for his neck. Stabbing anywhere else wouldn't slow him down, but she could always use her teeth. She had sent two men for stitches before they had caught on. She'd nearly lost her teeth as a result, but it was worth it. It was worth it. They could break her but she'd be remade. She couldn't be stopped.

But she didn't want to do this. She didn't want him close to her. She didn't want to do that again. She wasn't a whore or a killer, just a person, and she didn't want this.

As the man kneeled, she began to cry. The apples fell from her lap as she shook, and the knife handle fell from her fingertips, overbalancing in the strap and hitting the ground with a thump. The man said nothing, just knelt, palms out, watching her. She covered her face, curled her legs against her chest. The crunch of dead leaves made her fling a hand out, and his movements towards her stopped.

"Girl," he said, gently. "You're far away from the camp. I'm not with the mercenaries. I'm Australian Secret Service, my plane went down a couple of months ago just a short way from here. I'm going to move closer, all right? You keep a hand on that knife if you like, but I swear I'm not going to hurt you."

Her guts clenched again. "I'll hurt you before you can hurt me," she said, throat aching, hands scrabbling for the knives. The largest she fisted in both hands, fingers smeared with dirt. She held it out towards him, arms trembling. He simply nodded, hands still out.

"Stick me with it if I so much as blink wrong," he agreed. "But I'm going to take a look at your feet. I won't touch you."

And he didn't. Just crouched on the ground and took a quick look at her soles. She hadn't yet looked at them; so far the pain was a distant thing, familiarity breeding a sort of numbness, but she knew that would disappear as soon as she actually looked at the number of injuries her body carried.

After a moment he sighed and sat back — slowly, with his hands still up. He was close enough to smell; his rank man stench, the odour of unwashed body and the tang of weapons she could and couldn't see. It was enough to make her retch — he smelled like them, all men smelled the same — and he backed away quickly.

"You can't stay here," he said. She stared. What did he think she was going to do, build a house?
"Your feet are going to get infected. I have antiseptic back at the plane, but you'll have to walk there – it's not far, we should make it by sundown. There aren't many patrols around here; the forest is too dense. We should be all right."

Her head shook. The knife was heavy and her arms began to drag. He sighed, and sat back on the ground, crossing his legs beneath him, palms now on his knees.

"Look, I can't imagine what you've been through," he said. "But I can't just let you wander around the place. There are landmines, patrols. You'll get caught again, if you don't die first. And if you're caught, you'll tell them about me. Not that you're particularly talkative, but they –" He grimaced, hand going to his side. His fingers hovered, and he slowly began to lift his shirt. She shoved herself against the tree trunk, arms renewing their efforts in holding up the knife, heart beating too quickly for her to take a breath. But he wasn't looking at her; his eyes were on his shirt, hands carefully peeling up the bulky layers. It revealed deep scores along his flesh, clumsily stitched together with black thread, skin angry and red but clearly healing, albeit slowly and with difficulty.

Her knife lowered. Those were torture scars. But they only ever tortured prisoners. Mercenaries were too much of a valuable resource. Mercenaries bored easily, though. They all required entertainment...

No. It was a trick.

But you know what kind of cuts those are.

It's a trap.

So, I'll kill him if he hurts me. I kill him and take his weapons, and so what if he hurts me first? He'll be dead. He'll pay.

But how long can you keep doing this?

Until I die.

"I never heard them talk about any woman," he said, not moving, not even looking at her. "We were in different camps, I'm sure. Originally I came here with a partner, but...he betrayed me. And then they tortured me for fun. Fortunately for me, I had help escaping." He slowly began to lower his shirt; she recognised the small, almost–hidden winces he gave. He was in incredible amounts of pain.

"I think it would have been all right," he continued, looking down at his hands. "I've been tortured before. But this time the one doing the torturing was...he was my partner. The man I trusted with my life, my son's godfather. So, I...I don't know what you've gone through. I can't imagine. But I do understand betrayal. I understand being a toy, and how it feels to be laughed at while you scream and suffer. I swear I'll never hurt you like that. Never. I'd rather die than hurt a woman like that. Do you understand?"

Against her will, the knife dropped a little. His hands rose up again, still placating.

"I can't take care of you and survive," he said. "And girl, I don't want to kill you; I don't want to kill a woman. If you come with me, I'll show you how to hold that knife properly. I'll show you how to use that gun, how to hurt and fight and kill. I'll show you how to hunt, so you can find your own food – hell, I'll show you what first aid I know, so you don't need me to treat your injuries. We'll work together to get off this damn island, and after that you can go wherever you like. You'll be free. Like I said, I'm part of the Australian Secret Service. When we get off I can order an air raid and level this whole damn place. They'll die. They'll all die, every last man that ever looked at you sideways. How does that sound?"
The knife was now resting against her lap, large, jagged, cruel. She stared at it, at the distorted reflection it gave of the forest around them. Knives like these broke and remade her, fuelled with blood and pain and the echoes of cruel laughter. There was a long, furiously red line in her mind between her life now and the life she led before.

"I taught baking," she said, half to herself, like she was trying out the idea of it. Calling up the memories was like grasping smoke – but she fought for it, for the smell of flour and chocolate and cinnamon, the hot sweet air of the kitchen, early in the morning when she prepared desserts for the restaurant, and readied her own space for the afternoon classes. It was a small business, kept within a kitchen extension of a pretty house in suburban Gotham, a place too far away from inner-city violence to ever touch the idyll she had built around herself. Safe. Secure. Happy, blissfully happy.

Then her plane cancelled, and she’d had to take a boat to Hong Kong and then a tiny passenger plane back to Cambodia for a funeral, another funeral in as many months, ash still stuck on the roof of her mouth, stinging the insides of her nostrils, her perfect life gone up in flames and nothing for her left in Gotham. Nothing in the village she was born in, nothing in the country that adopted her when she was too young to even sit up on her own. The plane crashing to the island was barely a surprise. It felt like destiny, almost – except that she survived, and oh, how badly that had turned out for her. Barely enough time to be thankful for life before mercenaries swarmed and life showed that there was always lower it could bring her.

Life didn't want her to be happy. Life wanted her to suffer.

Well, she'd see how many of them she could take down with her before life finally drew the final knot tight around her neck. She had been strung along by the world for too long and now it could suffer for a change.

So she nodded. She put away the knife and curled her legs, trying to get feeling back in the frozen toes, letting the apples, whole and eaten, fall out of her lap. She gathered up the torn cores and hid them in a gnarly hole in the side of a trunk, trying to push down the evidence of her being there. He didn't try to approach her, and in defiance of her shaking guts, she thrust out one hand. Help me up.

She had to trust someone or she'd go crazy. She almost thought she recognised the look in the man's eyes; it was the look of someone who was just about hanging on. Someone who had been betrayed, whose world had shattered. He even hesitated to take her hand, but after a moment he stood and gently grasped her forearm. The grip sent her skin crawling, but the raspy material of the glove helped to distance the sensation. If only there was something that could be done about the stench.

"Good thinking with the apples," he said, letting go of her arm quickly, stepping back out of arm's reach. His arm's reach. He wasn't a stupid man, then. "By the time the animals drag out the cores it'll look like normal disturbance."

While he was talking she was filling the pockets of her flak with apples, whatever she could take, carefully balancing on unsteady legs. Her stomach still felt hollowed out and aching, her bones groaning in protest against the chilly air. The gun was now digging into her shoulder in a way it hadn't before, noticeable now that she had slept and eaten a little. Nothing fit on her body and it grated on her; the knife straps, the clothing, even the scarf she had made into a makeshift belt. The shirt dangled to mid-shin, like a dress, shapeless and dirty. The sweater was itchy and seemed to trap the cold air every time she moved. Holding it all together was a flak vest, with numerous pockets. She couldn't imagine what kind of picture she made, but the man didn't even flick an eye at her. All he did was nod grimly.

"If we want to make it back by sunset we'll need to make a quick pace," he said. "I don't have to tell you that the longer we wander around in broad daylight, the more likely it is that we'll be spotted."
Can you manage?"

She levelled a look at him, unwilling to speak. Words took up so much energy. For some reason, he simply grinned, sharp.

"Good. There'll be hot food when we get there, if it's any consolation. And I'll make a fire. I'll take it easy on you tonight, but we need to start training if we want to make it off the island. All right with you?"

She nodded, stepping gingerly forward. It wasn't going to be an easy trek, but it wasn't like it had been easy so far.

"Name?" she asked, following him through the trees. His hands had pulled his weapon again, and any slight relaxation in posture vanished beneath the tension in his neck and shoulders as he swiped his head left and right, constantly checking the surroundings.

"Slade Wilson," he said. "ASIS. You?"

"Lian Worth," she replied. The name still fit, somehow. She wasn't completely gone. This island wouldn't erase her, whoever it was she happened to be. "I'm from Gotham. Gotham City."

"America?" He whistled softly. "I've heard of Gotham. Is it true about that vigilante guy? And all those nutty mobs?"

She shrugged, although he couldn't see her. After a moment she copied the movements his head was making, just like what she'd been doing the past however many days – left and right, alert as she could be. No idea what to look for, but looking anyway. Any movement. Any shred of dark material, like a uniform. She stepped where he stepped, remembering what he said about landmines. Landmines. This place was hell on earth.

Unperturbed by her silence, he carried on speaking. "Well, if you're from Gotham this island should be a piece of cake for you. I've seen some crazy things in my time as an agent, but at least it never featured clowns."

She barely heard him, her eyes turning to her feet; she was fairly certain she should be feeling more than a dull ache – maybe the nerves were damaged? Eventually he went silent, focusing entirely on the walk. Occasionally he told her to watch her step, or he took them through a stream and let her rest a little. She had no energy left to think; she just drifted, letting her body put one foot in front of the other. Tiredness ate at her. Hunger sapped her legs of their strength.

He made no comment on her pace, though. Either he was taking pity on her, or she was doing better than she thought. But then, she'd always stepped lightly; there wasn’t much weight on her to begin with, and she’d danced when she was younger. It had translated well to the kitchen, where fleetness of foot had often made the difference between a hot plate of food, or a cold one. She tried to recall the last thing she’d made, or a dish from one of her favourite restaurants, or a recipe, or the smell of fresh bread. Anything. Anything at all.

Her mind was blank – of everything. No flavours, no recipes, no restaurant names. This, more than anything, told her that something had broken, and the unexpected wave of despair caused her to gasp out.

Immediately the man stopped, looking behind at her. "You all right?"

She nodded.
"Your feet?"

She shrugged.

"You have to tell me what's wrong," he said, turning fully to her. His hands still rested on his weapon, and she looked at it; black metal, heavy and deadly, kept in scarred, blunt fingers that knew how to hurt and kill.

"How far?" she asked, pushing the words past her throat. Exhaling the air needed for the words seemed like a mountainous task that sapped energy she didn't know she had. She was beyond exhausted.

He watched her for a moment before turning and walking on. "Not far. We're making good pace. I thought we'd be longer, but you're keeping up."

"I'm good at compartmentalising," she said, without meaning to. He barked a laugh, shaking his head.

"Good," he said. "You'll need it."

There was no more conversation. The watery sunlight grew greyer, fading into dull twilight. He paused at a small copse, scanning the area, before jerking his head. She followed, withholding pained sighs as the leaves gave way to pointy, dead evergreen needles, each one as sharp as a knife blade. Settled in a field, torn in two like a bread roll and resting against the crushed remains of the trees it landed on, was a plane. It was half–covered in camouflage and branches, which probably helped to mask it from any aerial patrols. It helped that it was an ugly grey colour, matching the large rocky parts of the island that they had passed on the way.

"This place is surprisingly hard to find," he said. "Most patrols wouldn't think to go through the forest – it's easy to get lost and the trees are crowded. A lot of the recruits just seem to be standard mercenary grunts, without many skills. The higher ups who have survival skills don't tend to go on patrols. Lucky for us, the bad guys are pretty lazy."

He made no comment on her lack of reply. By the time they got down to the plane, she could barely think, let alone maintain a conversation. The final straw was her feet hitting the cool metal of the interior; it smelled of forest, metal, oil, canvas material exposed to the elements. Her body hit the side of a stack of boxes and she slid to the ground, eyes closing with exhaustion.

Maybe she passed out. She couldn't be sure. But when she opened her eyes there was the beginnings of an unlit fire in the centre of the floor, and her new companion had stripped himself of all weapons and the top half of his uniform. All that remained was his boots and pants, a chequered scarf and a grey vest that had likely once been white. It was about as nonthreatening as a man built with muscles and scars could get in the situation. She closed her eyes so she didn't have to look at him. His dirt–streaked vest and sweaty skin reminded her of how unwashed she was, and the discomfort and itching spread across her whole body.

Her kingdom for a bath, and clean clothes. Something she was probably a long way from getting, if ever again.

He glanced up at her, in the middle of sticking a metal prong through a skinned animal. "Worth," he said, carefully laying it to one side. "Fire's coming. Sit up a little, would you?"

She tried, and after a while managed to pull herself up with the side of one of the boxes, wedging herself against the wall. She considered offering help, but he seemed to be doing fine; the fire
sparked into life, fed first with shavings of wood and dry grass, then with long twigs and thicker pieces of wood. It rose in strength and the warmth began to seep through the air. The skinned animal was stuck close to the flames but not so close it would get burned immediately. Once that was done, he slowly approached her with a blanket and a black bag with a white cross.

She sighed. The warmth was prickling at her. There was canvas at her back, and the smell of roasted meat starting filling the air. She was almost comfortable, and now she had to let him look at her feet. It was unbearable, and tears started. He didn't say a word as he knelt across from her, tucking the blanket over her chest and under her chin, then sitting back and zipping open the first aid kit. She burrowed beneath the blanket and tried not to weep too loudly.

The first touch made her flinch, the second – gentle but insistent – set her skin crawling, like thousands of worms and insects were writhing under her skin. Her head span; she closed her eyes tighter. Her wounds needed treating. This wasn't optional. She could get an infection and die; the sooner she let him treat her, the sooner it would be over.

Still. Bile rose; she swallowed it down. The pain seared across her soles as he disinfected and cleaned her cuts.

"Worth," he said. The gravel of his voice rolled around her consciousness, pulling her out of her head.

"Wilson," she replied, eyes stinging, unable to open.

"I'm nearly done. You were lucky. There are cuts and bruising, but nothing that won't heal if you stay off it. We'll have to find shoes for you. For now, I'll bandage it up. Do you feel like eating?"

No. She was nauseated. But common sense told her that it was due to lack of food as much as anything, so she nodded and accepted flakes of hot, fatty meat that he roughly carved from the speared animal.

"Rabbit," she said. He unscrewed a can of water and held it to her mouth.

"That's right," he said, tilting it carefully until she was done.

"You can't eat rabbit too much," she said, once she'd finished her water. The surety of her statement swam around her head; it seemed very, very important that she say it.

"I know," he said. There may have been a thread of amusement somewhere in his voice, but then there was warm meat at her lips, and another stream of water until the can was screwed shut. Then he ate, passing her scraps now and again until she grew too tired to eat. The warmth encircled her and she drifted until finally, blissfully – she slept.

Chapter End Notes

I can't put into words what this fic is to me. I've spent years going the same way most writers do; lingering around unfinished stories, starting one fresh story after the other, always chasing the end of the rainbow. I never in a million years intended on writing such a long fanfiction, but most of all I never expected to write an Arrow fanfiction. But one day I was at work, and the story…fell out. And I wrote it nearly every day since that day, in August.
Eleven weeks later, I had a first draft. My hands were aching and trembling, but I did it – I finished something. I wrote a story I wanted to read – something that dealt with dark things, and came out the other side, something where relationships grew instead of being taken for granted, that didn’t use trauma as a character flavour, and addressed the ups and downs of working through things – basically, what they mostly failed to do with Oliver, and almost all the characters in Arrow (and a lot in Flash, and don’t even get me started on Legends of Tomorrow…).

Part of what spawned this was the dissatisfaction I had with some of the character development on my favourite shows. There were a lot of themes they could have run with, but didn’t to the extent they could have – trust, loyalty, family, loss, life, death, morality, trauma, growth. It's my first time trying to attack such monumental themes, but I did my best, and I honestly learnt so much about writing as I wrote. I'm nervous about this fic, but most of all - I'm amazed at myself. I completed something. I pushed myself, and it paid off. So for everyone who's reading this, I hope you enjoy the story - I worked very hard to create it, and whether it's good or bad...I'm proud. Thank you.

I’m working on a Suicide Squad movie ‘sequel’ for NaNoWriMo (release estimated January 2017), and then I'm in two minds about writing a season 1 Legends of Tomorrow rewrite. There is an intended sequel to this story. I'll apologise in advance – this story isn’t perfect in many ways, but I do promise that I’ve tried my absolute best, and I’ll keep growing from here. Enjoy.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated 12th November 2016. Enjoy chapter 2.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Morning brought a new world. The air was tinged with heat, signalling a strong morning sun, and the metal of the plane was overpowered by grass and dirt, surprisingly crisp and fresh. Gone was the damp air of the forest, the constant rustle of leaves. There was a light wind drifting against the edge of the tarp, and sunlight filtered through gaps and tears in the metal and camouflage. She was hungry, thirsty, and her body was still littered with pain, both sharp and aching. But the sunlight was merciless in its mercy, and it soaked her with warmth down to her bones. She took a deep breath, no trace of male sweat or gunmetal anywhere; just cool dirt and canvas. She almost...felt human again. Like she could...move.

There was no telling how late it was. Next to her head was a little bundle; stretchy leggings that must have once belonged underneath body armour, a can of water, some leftover scraps of rabbit, and a rough strip of leather. There was no sign of Wilson. She listened carefully; just the wind, not so much as a crack of a twig. No sound of him either.

Carefully sitting up she peeled the flak from her body, wincing at the marks it left. With a start, she realised that she was missing all her weapons – no, they were all there, just within reach. She conceded the sensibility of not letting her fall asleep with knives and grenades, but the idea of his hands –

She shook herself. There was no room for that. She needed to survive, and to do that, she'd need his help. She couldn't even bandage her own feet, let alone find a way off the island. The idea of being near him nearly sent her doubled over with fear, yes; but what was she supposed to do about it? Just curl up and never move again? Hadn't she dreamed of this freedom, hadn't she enveloped herself in anger and fantasies of what she'd do, if only she was free?

Her hands went to her face. She sucked in a deep breath, steeled herself, and straightened – ready. As she'll ever be. Life wasn't done with her yet, and she wasn't done with life. The plane was getting a little stuffy, so after a minute of picking at it she peeled off the sweater, too. Maybe there was a chance of washing clothes, although she shrunk at actually asking. Dirty clothing, unwashed bodies – this was just the way things were now, and the way things would be for the foreseeable future.

She tried crossing her legs, but gave it up when the pain lanced up her abdomen and down her thighs. She sat with them pulled to the side instead and ate the meat, drank the water. After a minute she had a protein bar, and observed the leather cord. Did he mean it as a belt or a hair piece? Her hair was thick enough that it essentially stayed in one place, but the scarf served just as well as a belt, if she reworked it a little.

In the end she pulled on the leggings, wincing a little at the movements, body stiff with from bruising, and undid the scarf around her waist. She tried the movements, body stiff with from bruising, and undid the scarf around her waist. After a bit of careful folding and awkward twisting, she used it as a makeshift support for her chest; it might not have been perfect but at least it kept everything in one place. She loosened one of the knife straps and used it as a belt instead; it still
worked as a sheath for the knife, too. She braided her hair, like she had done a thousand times before, in another lifetime, and tied it off with the cord.

Properly dressed, with a half–way full stomach and hair out of her face – the sun's warmth now steeped in her skin – Lian really started to feel like a person again. She wasn’t very optimistic as to how long it would last, though. The last few times she had found peace in her life, something horrible had happened to take it all away again.

She sat down again and left all but a few mouthfuls of water in the can. Then, with nothing better to do and still too tired to try anything, she slowly slid to the side and dozed, the blanket pulled across her shoulders. Distantly, at some point, the sound of footsteps crunching on dry grass filtered through. Strangely, she wasn't afraid. It was like the her of yesterday belonged to somebody else, like a bad dream she couldn’t shake. She wondered how long that would last, or if she was lucky enough that it just wouldn’t come back around to her again. If she’d be free from memory, at least, if she wasn’t remembering right then and there.

The footsteps got closer, hitting the entrance of the plane.

It's Wilson, she thought, and she was right.

He stopped when he saw her, but kept moving once he’d decided she was asleep. Quietly, and with far more grace than to be expected from such a compact body, he swung a large plastic container of water off his back, landing it on the ground with barely a tap. He put kindling next to the ashes of the previous night's fire. Three rabbits joined it, necks wrapped in one piece of cord. He cracked his neck and shoulders, undoing his jacket and lying it over the top of a box. Muscles rolled beneath the grey vest, but before her guts could give anything more than a cursory clench, Wilson had picked up the rabbits and slipped outside. He had only looked at her once. He hadn't attempted to approach her.

Lian stayed still. There was a sharp sound, and a strange sort of tearing – he was skinning the rabbits.

She should help. Her sweet days of lying in were over now, weren't they?

Pressing against the ground, she tried standing. Her feet pulsed with dark needles of pain, but not dangerously so. He had done a good job of cleaning and disinfecting them; maybe he had even changed bandages during the night. There was no sign of the first aid kit, so she had no real way of knowing.

She gently hobbled towards the exit – the largest hole in the side of the plane, probably where the door had been. Or maybe it was always open, and had been used for parachuting. The extent of her knowledge of spycraft came from movies, as was the case with probably everyone she used to know. She gripped the side and leaned out, blinking against the sunlight. Her muscles begged her to sit; every movement was slow and needed calculation. She knew she’d have to catalogue the damage soon, but didn’t know how much point there was; she’d been grasped and cut and beaten just about everywhere. The sun though – the sun felt good. And the smell of the grass was incredible, and the breeze…she closed her eyes for a long moment, then opened them again, letting her eyes adjust. Wilson was just outside, sitting on an overturned crate and not paying her any attention. One of the rabbits was clenched in his hand, the knife deftly striking the skin from the flesh. He paused when she emerged, not taking his eyes off the large knife in his hands. There was less blood than she’d expected, and the sight of the dangling purple–red flesh strangely gave no rise of nausea. She’d prepared whole fish, she supposed, not to mention plucking chickens and slicing up raw beef. She'd always known where meat came from, after all, although the rabbit was definitely the freshest raw meat she’d ever seen. And she’d never prepared any animal completely from scratch before.

"Do you bleed them?" she asked. He finished skinning the back of the rabbit, only looking up at her
“Yeah,” he said. "Bleed them, gut them. Bring them back for skinning and prep."

“What do you do with the mess?”

“Leave it. Disguise the remains with dirt or foliage, but animals will take care of it. Badgers, carrion crows, foxes.”

“Circle of life,” she said, looking down at the bodies. They looked so much smaller in death, like toys. "Thank you for the...things."

“Glad to see the pants half–way fit,” he said, turning back to his skinning. He put one skinned body on a piece of canvas – waterproof, so the blood would wash right off, clever – and started on the next.

“I suppose all kinds of people do yoga,” she said, pulling at the knees. They were still loose, but the material was stretchy – on a man, they'd be skin–tight and very snug. On her, they fit surprisingly well. Her wide hips were finally paying their way.

“How are you feeling?” he asked, after a moment’s silence.

“Like I'd rather not talk about it, or anything,” she replied, easing herself down to the ground. "Although I know I'm going to have to.” She paused, then allowed; "My head's in a better place today. I feel like less of an animal."

He huffed a little, an approximation of a laugh. "That's pretty normal," he said. "Instincts take over; we do exactly what we need to survive. It's only when we're halfway safe that our brain begins to slow down, and process. Yesterday I wasn't quite sure what to make of you."

"Yesterday I didn't know what to make of myself," she said, resting her head against the cool metal of the entrance. "Now I've slept, I've had heat from a fire, and water to drink. I'm still exhausted, though. I haven't slept properly in a while. They don't –" Her stomach heaved suddenly. "It –"

She stopped. Wilson continued skinning, now finishing up the third.

“You don't have to tell me,” he said.

“Well, I know," she said. "But I should be able to say it without throwing up."

"Don't underestimate trauma," he said, cleaning his blade. It gleamed in the sunlight. "Believe me, I've seen my fair share of psychological injuries. I have some of it myself, I know – no agent goes through what we do without picking up a few nasty things along the way. There's a balance to be made between confronting what happened while keeping yourself in a safe space. And this island is no place for peaceful revelations."

She had to close her eyes against his words. "I just can't believe I feel better about wearing pants," she muttered. "It's stupid. But they took everything. Everything that made me a person. They made me beg for food. For water. And when they patched me up they made me say thank you, like I was being done a favour. They're worse than animals. Animals don't make you beg."

Wilson was standing. She started, then turned away, towards the sun, her face scrunching.

"Here,” he said, and when she opened up her eyes he was kneeling in front of her, not too close, with the handle of the knife turned towards her. She smiled, weakly, and took it.
"Like this?" she said.

"Watch your thumb," he replied, fingers gently adjusting her grip. Each touch felt like acid smearing across her skin, but it fluttered in the background once she concentrated on the shine of the blade. He took her through a few exercises and basic movements, much as she could do sitting down, pointing out a few places on his body that she could cut without too much difficulty and disable him.

There was a vein on each thigh that could cause a man to bleed out in thirty seconds without him even realising. The ankles were often protected by boots, but the calves and backs of the knees were just as vulnerable. A strike across the lower abdomen – dig deep enough and the entrails would spring out by themselves, like a Jack–in–the–Box. The kidneys, the liver – death would take a long time, but without surgery, even just nicking an organ would lead to internal bleeding and horrible death. There was a spot under the ear, under the jaw. The nose wouldn't kill them unless the blade was sharp enough and there was enough force to shove it through the cartilage. Previously broken noses were susceptible to repeat breakages. There was a soft part at the base of the skull; angle the blade upwards. Don't hesitate at the last moment; ignore the pang of sympathetic pain no matter what damage you plan to inflict on someone.

There were so many ways to kill and hurt a man. There were so many ways for a man to die.

Then he asked, "How did you escape?"

She flipped the blade around in her hand, watching the shine of it. "The guard brought his weapons in," she said eventually, eyes stuck on the blade. Remembering it was like recalling a nightmare that she could viscerally smell and taste. She wanted to leave it buried within her, forever, never to rise again. Forgotten. Dead. "You're supposed to leave your weapons outside. I – I had tried to grab knives and guns before. There were injuries. But, time passed, and I – I –" She swallowed thickly.

Her nose, her mouth was filled with rank male stench. As though he could sense it, Wilson carefully backed away, sitting back on his box, next to the skinned rabbits. He had taken the knife with him.

"I did what I was told," she said, forcing the words out through her thick throat. She knew she had done what she did to survive, but that was all academic. The shame of giving in, hoping they wouldn't hurt her if only she was good – it still burned. "Eventually they – they thought I was broken. I thought I was broken. But then a guard came in and I – just – I dreamed of a moment like that. I made plans, endlessly, of what I would do if only they'd give me an inch. It was like everything had lined up just for me."

Her hands were shaking; she clenched them in together in her lap and tried to calm down. They hadn't caught her. She'd escaped. She'd been too smart for them, and they had been too arrogant. They'd let their guard down and paid the price. She might not be safe yet, but she wasn't in that grey tent anymore, she had clothes and the sun was shining –

Her hands hit the side of the plane as she heaved. The movement was so violent she fell from her perch, her knees hitting the ground and her body curling in on itself. The pain from her lower body lanced like lightning and it forced the sobs out. She punched the ground, once, twice, a third time, inhaling the smell of warm dirt and grass, of freedom.

"I'm not there," she gasped. "Come on, come on, I'm not there anymore, it's okay –"

"What did you do, Worth?" said Wilson. He seemed to have stayed exactly where he was. Embarrassment washed over her, and she struggled to get her breathing under control.

"He – came in –" Her breath stuck in her throat. She tried to force it past, eyes streaming with the effort of reigning in her panic and nausea. "Same thing – as usual. But he brought his weapons. So I
tricked him. Did what I always did and he didn't even. See. Me. Coming."

"What did you do?" repeated Wilson, his voice calm.

"He took his clothes off! Left his weapons in a mess on the ground. I played nice, made him kneel and pretended – pretended like I was going to do – something – and, as quickly as I could, I took the knife, and took it out, and grabbed his head and –"

Her hands grasped her own head, forehead digging into the ground.

"I could see his shoulders tense," she said. "If he'd been quicker – I – I – I'd still be there. What he would have done to me – he would have – it always hurt but this time I would have tried to escape, I would have tricked them – it would have been worse! They don't like feeling stupid. And I would have tricked them. So I did it. As fast as I could. The knife made a lot of noise coming out and if it had stuck – if I hadn't been strong enough – if any one thing had gone differently, I'd still be there except they still wouldn't be done with me – the only sleep I'd get is when I'd pass out, the only food or drink when – when –"

She spat, the texture in her mouth unbearable.

"They didn't need to treat me like that," she said, weakly rubbing her forehead in the dirt. "I didn't – men don't have to be like that. But they just decided that's how they were going to be. Worse than animals. Stupid."

"Sit up, Worth," said Wilson, and she did, rubbing her hands and putting her back to the plane. The sky was an incredible blue. She could almost imagine she was taking a trip somewhere. Some place she could easily get away from. It was almost peaceful.

"I grabbed his head and yanked the knife across his throat," she said. She had to finish – she had to explain once, just once, what had happened. Like a band-aid, it had to be done quickly; if she didn’t, the nightmare would swim inside her head like a shark, waiting to consume her. And Wilson wasn’t judging, just listening, just listening.

She stopped. Tried to gather her thoughts, separate memory from invention. "I think now – maybe – he thought the sound of the knife was me tripping over it, pushing it away. I had done it twice before, when he was pulling me around. He laughed when I did it – watched me pick up the knife and put it to one side. I think that's why he didn't react properly. He stiffened, though. But I think I did it as quickly as I could. He barely made a sound."

Wilson still hadn’t made any comment. Warily, she continued staring at the sky.

"So I took his clothes and weapons. Hitched up a corner of the tent so any remains wouldn't look cut. It was getting pretty dark at that stage, and everyone else was at the opposite end. He had bribed his friends for privacy. I took his grenades, left some behind, and ran as quickly as I could. And then I kept running. I don't – remember a lot of that time. I don't know how many days I kept running. I travelled at night, stuck by the river. The jacket had a map and a compass, so I tried to go in the opposite direction of the camps –"

"What?"

She looked over at Wilson, who was now standing and staring at her. His eyes darted behind her, to the entrance she was propped up against.

"I – the camps?" she said.
"No – you have a map?" he said. When she nodded he jumped behind her, ignoring or not noticing her flinch at his sudden movement. She heard him rustling about, a quiet exclamation signalling he'd found what he was looking for.

"Wilson..?" she called. He reappeared just as suddenly, swinging down and crouching next to her. His grin was something she'd never seen before; like fire, like life itself. Feral, manic, happy.

"Worth, you've just brought me a map that marks out exactly where all the camps are," he said, opening it out. She stared; she'd guessed that was what it was, but hadn't connected it to anything more important than which direction not to go in. Wilson pointed.

"Look – here," he said, tracing an unremarkable spot on the map. "This is where we are."

The X's that marked the camps were a long way from the spot. Relief blossomed in her stomach.

"All right," she said. "That's...good..."

"Better than good, Worth!" he said, sitting back and folding the map in half, slapping it against one hand. "You have no idea what you’ve done, do you?"

She stared. “It’s a map…” she said slowly. “All I did was take it from a dead body…”

Wilson stood, holding the map in front of her. “You can worry about what they did to you and how you nearly didn’t escape,” he said, low and serious. “But here’re the facts as I can see them. Despite prolonged torture, you killed your enemy, stole his supplies, covered your route, and survived for days in the wilderness with no formal training of any kind. You’re strong, Worth. You’re a survivor.”

Lian shook her head. His words tried to worm their way into her chest, painfully. "It wasn’t like that. It was chance. An accident. I didn’t know that’s what the map was even for."

Wilson just laughed, sharply. Lian got the feeling that he didn’t do it very often; the sound was scratchy, like old dog barking.

"You’ll see, Worth," he said, unfolding the map again. "I have a feeling it’s going to be harder than just reading a map, though," she added, choosing to set aside his previous comments for the moment. Wilson had gone back to studying the map intently, tracing his finger down different routes. It was gibberish to her; a mess of different coloured patches and lines. The only thing she recognised was the river and that was just common sense. “Of course,” he said eventually. “It’s never easy. We need to train you up, at any rate – we’ll get your feet healed and some food in you, teach you how to point a gun and hold a knife. And then we get off this island, and rain hell on those bastards, and – we’ll both get our revenge. You’ll never have to think about them again. Sound good?"

Lian closed her eyes, wrapping her arms around her legs. “Yeah,” she said quietly. “That sounds good.”

“That’s the spirit,” said Wilson. “Hey, Worth?”

“Hmm?"

“You don’t have to be afraid anymore,” he said. He looked at her suddenly, dark eyes boring into hers. All traces of that manic gleam had been scoured away by seriousness, his mouth a grim line framed by overgrown stubble. “Don’t fear your past. You escaped. You killed one of them. You
won. That’s fact. All your other fears are just inventions. I know it sounds easy for me to say, but I know what I'm talking about, all right? Hold on to fact.”

She didn’t reply to that, instead turning her head once more against the sun. He lapsed into silence, pouring over the map. She knew he was right; there was nothing she could do about her past. Moving forward wasn’t the same thing as moving away, however, and it would take more than a few sincere words to make the pain go away.

Still. There was a certain peace to be found, at least in this moment. She closed her eyes, and in the silence and the sunshine, Lian rested while she could.

Chapter End Notes

Updating later than intended, and still nervous about posting. But gotta keep moving! Speaking of moving, I'm waaaaay behind on my Nanowrimo...XD I'm working on the Suicide Squad movie sequel (called "Suicide Squad: Salvation"). Comments are welcome and very helpful and encouraging.
Slade finally closed the map, after who-knew how long he spent examining it, running scenarios and possibilities over and over again in his head. He glanced up, aware suddenly of how quiet it was; the woman was drifting off again, slumping against the side of the fuselage entrance. Slade side-eyed her for a moment before gathering up his skins and his skinned rabbits, quietly bypassing her and stepping into the fuselage. The rabbits would hold so long as he kept them covered, and in the meantime he needed to clean the mess off his gloves. After that, he'd have plenty of time to contemplate just how stupid he was. In a life–or–death situation with little to no hope of survival, he'd gone and picked himself up a stray.

Then again, she'd brought a map with her. That was unexpectedly resourceful for someone who just yesterday had looked to be having difficulty remembering her own name. And she was up and about, albeit with severely limited movement – clearly the result of significant bruising that might take weeks to properly heal.

He laid his gloves to one side, having wrapped the rabbits and washed his utensils; where was that map? Outside, on the box. The numerous x's were stark against the khaki background, and Slade studied it carefully again, following the river and calculating the general distance from where he'd found her and the camp she must have come from. He did it twice, just to be sure. Then he put it down, sat back, and stared at her sleeping form.

...she must have been travelling for days.

How far could adrenaline really get you? She'd have been more than sore, in pain, cold, starved and sleep–deprived, carrying the extra weight of weapons she mightn't even have been able to use. And she managed to not only escape, but evade capture?

Briefly, it crossed his mind that she could be a spy. Except that he'd seen that hollowed out look in women before; hostages, or captives, people he'd been sent to extract from horrible situations. She'd been running on instinct, fear, and adrenaline, and the second some new obstacle presented itself – i.e. him – she'd both broken into tears and reforged with resolution in the span of a few minutes.

Slade considered himself a pretty good judge of character, his massive misjudgement of Billy aside. Maybe this was a long game somebody was playing – she could be an assassin, or an innocent victim sent to weaken him. But Slade didn't think so. He'd seen those mercenaries; he'd seen how greedily they took in every ounce of his pain. When he thought about it, he wasn't even surprised they'd had a woman transported here; in fact, he's only surprised that it appeared to be just the one. They were sick, sadistic bastards. He was going to kill every single one of them, and – he glanced to Worth – he was willing to bet that she'd want a piece too.

Food and fire could wait. He stood and went inside to a stack of boxes, rummaging around for the first aid kit. It was woefully under stocked, and given that he was no man of the forest, he had no
way of restocking it here unless he went raiding. But it had that large tub of anti–bac he'd used on her feet, a disinfectant spray, burn salve, a small swathe of bandages – the washable kind – and a stitching kit. His hand went to his side, briefly pressing against the clumsy, scarring wounds.

His hands had been shaking badly with the pain that night. He'd been bleeding through the whole forest, wandering and wandering, half–delirious with fever and pain, until he caught his foot and went tumbling down a slope, hitting every godforsaken rock on the way down. It was the night he'd escaped from Billy, the screaming from the mercenaries echoing through his brain like a tormented kaleidoscope, the pain like fire through his entire body. He'd wept, that night, like he'd never cried before, sobbing to the sky and ready to die, shaking hands soaked with his own blood.

Like an answer from a god he never prayed to, the clouds had cleared as he lay in the dirt. The moon glowed as bright as a lantern, and Slade had looked up to see the remains of the fuselage, just on the other end of the field he had fallen into.

He couldn't walk. He'd had to crawl. The moon watched him as he fought to live, tried to use the anger to drown out the betrayal and fear. By the time he got there he was ready to die again, but the feel of smooth metal spurred him on.

The first box he found held the bottle of vodka he and Billy always drank out of after a successful mission. He might have thrown it against the wall, if the first aid kit hadn't been underneath. It was like the world was throwing him a sign; live.

He'd survived until morning. A combination of disinfectant and vodka kept him from getting an infection, and ration bars kept him going until he could move. He caught rainwater in an upturned helmet. A few days later, he went hunting, catching small animals in snares. Eventually, he started organising the fuselage, cataloguing his stores and weapons. On the day he found that he could bend his waist without fear of opening his wounds, he caught a deer with one thrown knife and his bare hands. He'd felt alive in a way he'd never felt before. His flesh around his wounds had started to feel tentatively solid, even if it was still red and sore.

Then there came the day he'd finally started scouting again. And only a couple of hours in, he'd found her. Barefoot, bruised, tortured, beaten; carrying two knives, a gun, and wearing mercenary gear. Sleeping underneath an apple tree, littered with cores. There was symbolism there somewhere, but Slade wasn't the man to determine it.

He closed his eyes briefly against the memories. Inhaling deeply, Slade pulled out the first aid kit and left it to the side. The vodka clinked in the bottom of the box, and his ASIS ops mask stared up at him. He could almost see Billy's eyes staring back out at him, could almost hear the howling of the onlookers and ache of his arms from the way he was tied, open and vulnerable to the apathetic blades that sliced into his ribs – with a stab of fear, he quickly closed and locked the box. Then the anger came and he picked up his swords, stepping past the still sleeping woman and starting a drill in the middle of the field. He still couldn't risk pulling his stitches, but the workout was enough to get him sweaty and breathless; enough to blank his mind and drain his anger.

Staring down at the blades, he felt a surge of gratefulness that they had been left on the plane when he and Billy had parachuted down in a hurry; if he hadn't, they'd be in Billy's hands, and the thought of that pushed Slade into another drill, gripping his swords so tightly he nearly strained his tendons.

It was another hour before Slade managed to, figuratively speaking, cool himself down. The rest of him was soaked with sweat, but there was a breeze coming in and he'd been more uncomfortable than this in past missions. The humidity might be unpleasant, but at least it wasn't sand. He lowered both his swords and walked back to the fuselage, twitching now and again when grass brushed up against his bare arms. Worth had gone from the entrance in the time he'd been out, and he wasn't
surprised to see that she was curled up underneath the tarp and emergency blanket he’d placed over her in the night. They’d have to see about cutting some of that grass outside and making some kind of pallet; her bruises weren’t going to get better sleeping on the floor. Her breathing stayed level as he put away his swords and started up a fire; he’d be pushing it with the rabbits, but they’d been wrapped against insects and the corner he’d stashed them in was much cooler than outside. Soon enough the rabbits were cooking away, and Slade took the canvas and knives outside for washing.

When he came back, hair dripping down his neck – he’d used the leftover water to rinse over his head to cool him down faster – Worth was staring at the fire, eyes expressionless. She didn’t so much as flick an eyelid when he got closer, checking the rabbits, although when he sat on the opposite side of the fire, on his own bundle of blankets, she looked straight at him. The only part of her visible was the top of her head down to the bridge of her nose; the rest was buried underneath the tarp.

"Dinner's coming," he said, after the silence drew on. Her eyes seemed to bore into him; they reminded him of stag's eyes, black and shining, staring him down. "...rabbit," he added uselessly.

Her eyes blinked slowly; her mouth was slowly drawn from beneath her coverings. "What, no seasonal vegetables?" she said in a sleep–hoarse voice. "We'll get scurvy, Wilson."

He stared at her. "Well, madam is welcome to go foraging herself," he grunted after a minute, tapping his knees with his fingers. She simply blinked slowly before closing her eyes and burrowing underneath the blankets, stretching out her limbs and then folding them in.

"Used to fish in Gotham," she said, eyes still closed. The fire lit up her skin; he realised suddenly that she was basking, like a cat. "Just for fun. Drove out every now and again, took the kids. Had a picnic."

Slade's throat constricted. "...you have kids?"

She hummed like she wasn't paying attention, slowly stretching again before rolling over, putting her back to the fire and to Slade. "Used to," she said. "That was a different me. A different life."

Slade watched her back, waiting for her to say something else, but she seemed to be falling asleep again. "I had a kid," he said, almost involuntarily. "Have. I have..."

There was no answer. To her steady breathing, Slade added quietly, "...Joey."

The fire popped; Slade stared into its depths and let himself get blinded for long minutes. He blinked strongly, looked away. But there was nowhere else to look. His mistakes followed him everywhere.

The fire popped again, this time from the fat of the rabbits dripping down the spits. He watched the fire lick them for a moment before he reached over and turned them slowly. Then he closed his eyes against everything.

~~~

He woke to the sound of a cut–off choke. It was pitch black, the fire barely glowing, the air dead. There were small rustling noises of canvas rubbing against itself.

“Worth,” he snapped. There was no reply. He realised that he couldn’t hear the sound of her breathing. Resisting the urge to repeat her name, over and over until she replied, Slade fumbled for the lighter in his pack and grabbed a bundle of tinder, coaxing the fire to life again. Only then did he allow himself to move from where he sat, crouching near but hopefully not to close to where Lian was twisting in her sleep. He should’ve predicted this. She’d been too calm when she’d woken up the first time.
“Worth,” he repeated, louder this time. It was clearly a strong nightmare; her breathing was impaired and the twisting motion of her body was unusual. He sighed, gritted his teeth, and sharply shook her.

The result was instantaneous. She jumped away, flinging herself against the wall, wild-eyed without really seeing anything.

“Don’t touch me,” she breathed.

Slade kept his hands up. “I’m sorry.”

“You said you wouldn’t.”

“I know, I’m sorry –”

“You said.”

He took a deep breath. Let it out. “You were having a nightmare,” he explained. She didn’t move, didn’t relax an inch.

“You don’t just get to make exceptions,” she said. Slade closed his eyes, sat back.

“All right,” he said. “I’m sorry. I am. I’m not good at this, Worth, I’m a soldier. Not even a soldier, I’m a – you’re going to have to cut me some slack here. Both of us are stuck in a nasty situation and we’ll need each other’s help to make the best of it. I know you’re scared, but please – I swear I’m not going to hurt you. I’d never hurt you like that. Never. All right?”

Her eyes went to the fire, then back to him. The fire, him, the blankets, the rabbits, the fire – him. To his relief, she nodded slowly.

“I was there again,” she said quietly. “They were choking me.”

Slade’s stomach clenched. “I’d suggest a drink, but I think you need to put on a bit of weight first to handle what I’ve got stashed away,” he said lightly. “Do you feel like food?” Goddammit, the rabbits were half-burned. What a waste. How had he just fallen asleep like that?

Worth carefully made her way back to her bedding, sitting close by the fire and taking up the knife he used to carve the meat. She hacked off a leg and started biting small pieces of meat off. She hadn’t let go of the knife.

“What time is it?” she asked. Slade exhaled.

“Can’t really tell,” he said. “Early morning. Nowhere near dawn, so I’m guessing about one or two in the morning.”

She sighed, looking down at the rabbit. “I’m not actually hungry,” she said.

“Your body’s just not used to taking in food,” said Slade, slowly beginning to move back to his spot. If she noticed, she didn’t give any indication. “It won’t hurt to start slow. There’s water in a bottle by your mat. Make sure you take in plenty of liquids.”

“Yes, Doctor Wilson,” she said absently, picking at the meat with her fingers. Slade chose not to dignify that with a response, instead lying down on his pallet with his hands underneath his head. It wasn’t unpleasantly muggy, and the breeze from the fire kept the heat fresh and comforting instead of weighing him down overly.

“We’ll start training tomorrow,” he said, speaking past the weight of the silence. She hummed in
“Is there somewhere to wash?” she asked after a moment. Her canvas rustled; she had slipped back into her bundle. Slade paused, trying to think.

“There aren’t any safe bodies of water nearby,” he said slowly. “There’s the river, but it’s a bit too exposed for my liking – we don’t know the full extent of the mercenaries’ patrols. There are a few lakes marked out on the map, but…”

“How far are they?”

He considered. “Far enough with boots, I’m afraid.”

“And the river isn’t safe?”

“…no. Sorry, Worth.”

She didn’t say anything in reply for a while. Slade fought the urge to make her promises; they both had to make do. And it wouldn’t help to expose either of their wounds to the elements until they had cleared up a bit more, although…who knew how long that would take.

“I can fill one of the boxes with water,” he began grudgingly, but he was interrupted.

“No,” said Worth quickly. “Come on. The last thing I want is special treatment –”

He turned his head to her. “Bathing might be a luxury right now, but if I’m benefiting too I’m not sure how it qualifies as special –”

Her back was to him; he saw her curl in on herself. “It just…feels too much like pity,” she admitted, so quietly he barely heard her. The words settled in the room like gunpowder, ready to explode.

“…rag and a dish it is,” he said decidedly, rolling to put his back to hers. “Just like the good old days.” He heard a soft sound that might have been a huffed laugh.

“Thank you,” she said. Her voice had filled with sleep. Slade determinedly shut his eyes.

“Don’t thank me,” he said. “I enjoy your smell about as much as you enjoy mine. Believe me, getting you washed benefits me just as much as it does you.”

That got a real laugh, and conversation subsided. Slade shook his head, staring at the wall of the fuselage as the fire warmed his back and Worth gradually fell asleep. Slade thought about his swords, which were too heavy for her. He’d need to whittle something. She could wash while he did that; it’d take a couple of hours if he drew it out. She’d need to learn grips, balance, blocks…and she’d need to learn them the hard way.

Looks like tomorrow he’d find out just how strong her survival instinct really was.

Chapter End Notes

Whoops, fell super behind in my Nanowrimo! Going to try and catch up tonight. I'm actually really enjoying all the CW Channel DC stuff at the moment, which I'm surprised at. Arrow went through a season-long slump there, and while it's not perfect,
it's waaayyy better than I was expecting. A few new interesting characters, actually addressing problems that hadn't been addressed for too long, and more in-depth look into how Oliver gained the harsh mentality he had at the start of season 1. The Flash is solid, Supergirl is super topical, and Legends is surprisingly not as horrible as I was expecting (although the list of faults I have is still longer than the list of positives. That Edo era episode was a total fucking nightmare, my god. I tried to explain to my husband why I had a problem with Japanese words mixed with English ones, but he just got annoyed with my complaining halfway...XD).

I think a Legends rewrite is definitely on the table, if only for the chance to have SOMEone say: "hey - why are you being such a dick, and why isn't anybody saying anything about it? We don't actually deserve this shit." Rip's role has basically been replaced by Amaya, and NO-ONE is questioning why this total stranger is able to walk around and say awful, awful things to the crew. At this point they really should have bonded more, so why aren't they sticking up for one another? Hell, after the first mission they should have bonded more than this. Aargh, I should have made the rewrite my Nano!

Anyway. Next update is Saturday (UTC+00:00 time zone). My tumblr is kako-pumpkin if anyone wants to commiserate with the constant abuse Mick Rory has to go through, or if there are any questions about my writing. Comments are appreciated.
Chapter 4

Training actually progressed a couple of days later. The day after Worth’s nightmare had been spent at a distance, while he whittled two long sticks and she bathed out of sight in the fuselage. As he had worked, he could hear sharp, cut-off sounds that told him any rough movements at that point would hinder rather than help. She eventually appeared at the entrance of her own volition, face nearly grey with effort. He took one look at her determined expression, with the dark behind her eyes and the grim edge of her mouth, and silently decided to start with self–defence techniques; it required more body contact, but physically demanded less of a toll with movements that could be practised at a slower pace. And then without moving from his seat – or letting on that delaying training was anything except his own preference – he’d told her to go rest some more.

He’d ended up hunting for most of the day. His burning of last night’s rabbits at least gave him a viable excuse.

Real training, therefore, had progressed the following day. He couldn’t put it off any longer. For both their sakes, Slade ignored every wince, shiver, and grimace Worth tried to hide, even as he drilled her, first in basic grappling techniques, and then in more complicated movements that could break a stronger man’s hold on any part of her body. He wanted her to know this shit inside out, for his own sake as much as hers; he couldn’t keep both of them alive if she didn’t even have rudimentary skills.

“Feet wider,” Slade said. “Keep ‘em planted. Centre of your body should be low – makes it harder for people to topple you. And –”

Quick as a whip he lunged. Worth shrieked and tried grabbing him, attempting the throw he had been teaching her for the past half an hour or so. She wasn’t doing too badly, but she utterly lacked upper body strength and he wasn’t a great teacher, if he was being honest with himself. Their body types were completely different, not to mention the difficulty her muscles had just making basic movements; if she had been tall and broad, Slade would have simply employed the skills that had been used to train him – i.e. he would have constantly and ruthlessly attacked until they learned the hard way. Worth, unfortunately, was not only of completely average height, but her body was clearly built with a background of light jogging and swimming classes; she was a civilian, with a civilian’s three–times–a–week, gym–bought muscle tone. On top of that, she was also injured in a way that made movement of her lower body very painful, and it wasn’t likely to get better without proper treatment. So there was all that, on top of the noticeable effects of starvation, dehydration, and exposure.

Treatment itself was going to be a problem. Yesterday morning he had left the first aid kit and a cracked piece of mirror next to her sleeping place while she was asleep. After his announcement of his intention to go hunting, she had retreated back into the fuselage without speaking. Hours later when he had returned, there was a fire going, and Worth had the spits ready. The mirror and first aid kit had been cleared away. Slade wasn’t sure there was anything in there that could actually help,
aside from a large tub of sensitive skin anti–bac cream and possibly bandages. It was military–speciality stuff, and could be used internally to treat cuts and protect against infection. That at least couldn’t hurt. Well, aside from the sting of application. The same stuff had protected him against a nasty infection during a mission in a jungle swamp; the smell of his open wound – flesh decaying and the anti–bac cream stinging – still followed him in his sleep sometimes.

Yesterday, after he got back, he hadn’t broached the topic of the cream. It hadn’t returned to the first–aid kit, which was found later in one of the boxes by his pallet. Her face had still been grey when he dared to look at it, and she winced while she moved – tiny jolts that spoke of unexpected, lancing pain. But she watched him skin the small deer without comment or complaint, only speaking to pepper a few questions now and again, mostly relating to survival techniques. So instead of asking how she was, he had talked about how to set a snare, how to keep track of yourself without losing direction the forest, how to pick up on faint traces of footsteps, how to open up your senses and use your surroundings to your advantage. She seemed to soak it all up like a sponge. Slade made sure to turn his eyes away from the loose slip of the shirt that sometimes slid over her collarbone when she leaned to check on the meat, exposing hideous bruises, purple–red and virulent.

The anger came, then. Better to avoid it than examine the feeling, and spend an hour with his swords, tearing and slicing invisible enemies until he was breathless and ready to drop. He needed to keep his cool. Not just for his survival now, but for the civilian he had stupidly picked up along the way. Billy always said his bleeding heart would get him killed; in hindsight, knowing that Billy considered Slade to be sentimental should really have been a giant warning sign right there.

Back in the present, away from his memories, Worth tried stabbing him underneath his armour, in the shirt–covered flesh of his stomach that had briefly been revealed when he stretched his torso up to block a messy swipe from above. Surprised, he stopped, and Worth thwacked him gently on the head.

“Bang, you’re dead?” she asked, pulling back the two pieces of wood that served as make–believe daggers.

“You got lucky,” he said, and she rolled her eyes. “I’m serious. They won’t be going so slow in real life. These are mercenaries –”

“Wilson.” Her eyes went dead. “Don’t lecture me on what they’re capable of.”

“Right.” It wasn’t often he felt chagrined. Sooner or later he’d have to stop tip–toeing around her, insofar as he ever tip–toed, ever. Besides, it didn’t seem like she’d appreciate anything but a blunt approach, which worked just fine with his personality. “Just watch your grip. We’ll work on your speed, since you’re small. You could build the core strength to overpower your enemies, but that would take months of physical training and we don’t have that. So we’ll exacerbate your strengths.”

“They won’t be expecting me to fight,” said Worth dully, examining the sticks. “I could probably walk into the middle of the camp with a bomb and they wouldn’t notice until too late.”

“They’d notice, all right,” said Slade. “Considering the fact that they think you’re dead.”

Oddly enough, this just seemed to cheer her up.

"At any rate, we'll need to get you better shoes than that if we're going to have a chance at training you," he continued, loosely tapping sticks with her. Worth frowned down at her feet – they'd been healing fairly quickly once she spent a couple of days off them, and she applied anti–bac twice a day, having foregone Slade's help after that first instance – but they were still tender, and the best protection they could cobble together were strips of leather wound around tightly over bandage. For
that reason they were training in a cleared space inside the fuselage instead of on the uneven terrain outside. He knew that he'd have to stop taking it so easy on her pretty soon, but there was no sense in exacerbating the injuries on her soles, especially since his scouting signalled no mercenary activity in their vicinity.

"I could make something," she said, although she sounded doubtful. "If I had something to sew with. They wouldn't be fancy, but the design itself isn't too complicated. A flat sole with a covering on top, like moccasins. Sort of."

"I don't know how to tan animal skin for leather," said Slade. He was an apt survivalist, but he didn't know everything. To his surprise, however, Worth apparently did know how to tan.

"You need salt firstly – lots of it," she replied, still frowning at her feet. She looked up suddenly and gave a pinched smile, as thought she was embarrassed for some reason Slade couldn't determine. "Well, I mean – that's not how you'd do it in the wild. You scrap the skin, then wash it, string it up and stretch it on a rack to dry. It takes days and I don't think we have that kind of time."

Slade stared at her. That was unexpected. In a rush against his silence, she added: "I was basically a homemaker. I mean, I taught baking, made desserts for a kitchen, but – that was like a hobby, something I did in between kids. I had a lot of time for...for hobbies. Go to the gym, choral club, eating out for lunch...it was a nice life."

He would have pressed for more details, but there was a wistfulness in her tone that warned him away from further questions.

"There's probably something lying around in the plane we could use," he said instead, stepping away from her. He made no comment on the imperceptible shift in her body language; she relaxed the further he got away. But of course she did; she'd tolerated his proximity for the necessity it was, while at the same time never so much as peeping a word of how uncomfortable he must be making her. That kind of resilience – or compartmentalisation, even – was admirable, and might just save her life in this hell. That said, if they ever made it off this island, those reactions would have the opposite effect – they'd break her.

ASIS had some hefty psychiatrists on their payroll. Slade had failed in his initial mission – find Yao Fei, uncover what they were doing – and this had led to the mercenaries staying exactly where they were. It's not like he was looking for martyrdom or anything, but failure and all its knock–on consequences rankled his pride. He was famous for getting in, completing the mission, and getting out practically unscathed. They sent Slade where they wanted a best possible outcome to the situation.

And maybe it would have worked out this time, too. Except he'd been betrayed by the one person he thought had his back.

Worth was no Billy Wintergreen. She was a civilian. But she'd proven herself ready and willing to survive, and Slade reckoned that might just make the difference between getting off this island, or being buried on it.

"If we get you shoes, I can start teaching you how to scout," he said, watching her rummage through boxes, looking for something to turn into durable footwear. "And we'll work on your reflexes."

"Head on a swivel, right," she replied distractedly. "Oh – glue. That could work. And –"

She pulled out a large sheath for a hunting knife, turning it over in her hands. It was a spare; the knife was long gone, buried in a forest or a desert somewhere, likely on another mission a lifetime ago.
"How do you figure that?" he asked. It was the vague shape of a foot – it even had a blunt edge instead of a point – but she'd need two, right? And her heel would stick out.

"We cut it in half," she said. "Boil to soften it a little, so it'll fit around my sole better. Then we find something for laces. I thought about the tarp, but it would make too much noise. Is there a spare shirt somewhere? No – I can cut off the ends of this shirt; it's too long, anyway. That'll be the top. And then laces to hold it together. Can you cut this in half?"

She held it out to him. He stared at her before huffing out a laugh and taking it. "Something tells me if these mercenaries hadn't shown up, you would have survived just fine on your own," he said, turning over the sheath in his hands. She snorted.

"No," she said. "I would have panicked and starved to death, or died of my injuries. I was – I was in a plane crash, with a concussion on top of lacerations, and burns. They – they did...unspeakable things to me. But – if they hadn't patched me up, I know that I would have died within a week. I –" She swallowed thickly, looking away from him. "I knew what they were planning. Any woman would know. But at that point, I still – I still wanted to live. I thought I could endure it, find a way out. Trick them somehow. But it hurt so much more than I –"

Her eyes shut tight. And Slade wasn't made of stone. "You don't have force yourself to talk about it," he said, but she just shook her head.

"Sometimes I think I must have been born broken," she continued, voice low and eyes opened but turned down and away from him. "You know, even at my lowest all I could think about was killing them, instead of ending my own suffering. Don't normal people in those situations think about dying? I wanted to escape. I wanted to hurt them. I was so angry. Life had already – done so much to me. It just seemed – stupid. Unnecessary. Such unnecessary violence and cruelty. It didn't make sense. They saved me so they could destroy me – for what, entertainment? Entertainment? They tried to crush me. All the horrible things – I just want – I don't – I want to live. I want to kill all of them and get off this island. The kind of person I'm turning into, I – I –"

"There's nothing so complicated about doing what you have to do to survive," said Slade. "It's not complicated. It's not. It's live or die out here. You already know –"

"But I dreamed about it!" she blurted out. "I fantasised about killing them. About how I would do it. And I hurt them when I could, but after a while I just gave up, they were strong, there was always more of them, I –"

"That's surviving too," he interrupted. "Survival is just as much about endurance as killing, Worth. There's no shame in surviving."

"I'd...get lost in my own head," she said, like he hadn't spoken, wrapping her arms around herself. "I'd shove it down, and drift. For a while it worked. Some days I didn't even notice them. But then they caught on. And – worked harder."

She turned away abruptly, continuing to rummage through the boxes. The stiffness in her shoulders gave her away, though.

"There's no reason anyone should do that to another human being," said Slade, slowly and clearly.

"I know that," she replied, giving up the pretence of her search and leaning her head against the edge. "But it's going to take me more time and space than we have to – to get through this. I don't want it to keep popping up like this –"
"Trauma wants to be dealt with –"

"I know. But I don't – I need to push it down. I need to learn how to kill. They might think I'm dead, but they'll still be looking for you. And every day they get closer to completing whatever it is they came here to do. So yes, my head spins when you get too close, and I feel like getting sick, and I can taste and smell –" She shook herself sharply. "But there's nothing I can do about it except shove it down and deal with it later."

"You'll break from that." Slade knew soldiers that had broken from less.

"Teach me things I don't know," she replied, pushing away from the boxes. She still hobbled on the edges of her feet, not really putting weight on them properly. "Can you separate that holster for me?"

Slade pressed it between his fingers, feeling for the seam. "Sure thing," he said, and went outside for his larger knife. It was waiting for him, where he left it, and he turned the sheath in his hands, re-examining the sealed edges instead of returning inside. She’d had a look on her face, a look he recognised from the faces of people he’d worked with over the years, and experience told him to give her a few minutes; despite her words, her mind still needed breathing space, time to clear. She wasn't wrong about where her focus had to be, but the thought of all the shit that was lurking around in her brain waiting to be processed sent a brief pang of sympathy through him. One thing was for sure – the world had lost out on a good soldier when Lian Worth decided to become a housewife. If she didn't crack – hell, if he didn't crack – then at the very least a whole lot of mercenaries were going to get a very unpleasant surprise someday soon.

Chapter End Notes

Hmm, I really need to kick it if I'm going to be anywhere close to finishing my Nano. Wish me luck...

I'm looking forward to the crossover episodes! Need to catch up a little with my watching, though...XD

Comments are helpful and very encouraging; please consider leaving one. I also have a tumblr, Kako-Pumpkin, if anyone has questions or comments about the story or my writing.
A couple of days later, Slade woke up to Worth's empty pallet. When his hand immediately went to his weapons, he realised with a start that one of his swords was gone as well. In the blue light of early morning, Slade inhaled deeply and calmly, rolling to his feet and going to the fuselage entrance. He slid a gun in his back holster before he left.

Worth, thankfully, was standing not too far away, in one of the small circles he'd long-since trodden in the grass with his previous workouts. Her back was to the fuselage; she was holding his sword, and Slade leaned against the entrance wall as he watched her slowly move through a drill he'd done several times over the last week. It was rough, and her legs were wrong, and the sword was clearly too heavy for her; but she moved carefully and with resolve, each step planting itself firmly in the ground before her arms brought the sword around. He could see the edge of the blade shaking from where he stood; with every focused swing he saw her shoulders contract with the effort. Finally – longer than he expected – she swung too hard, and she overbalanced, the blade swinging heavily into the ground. Slade winced at the sound it made as it buried itself in the dirt; Worth was now heavily leaning on the hilt, breathing deeply. Then, with a loud sigh, she pulled it out of the ground and turned around. The face she made when she saw him watching her – panic, then strong embarrassment – was enough to send a thrum of amusement through him.

"Enjoy that?" he asked, stepping away from the side of the entrance. She advanced slowly, holding the sword awkwardly in her hand; it was far too big for her. She'd be better off with something much shorter; something meant to slice skin instead of bone, something that suited her budding agility. Worth glanced down at the blade, frowning worriedly at the smear of dirt on the otherwise pristine surface.

"Uh..." she said. Good start. She bashfully held the sword out to him, handle first, and Slade carefully took it from her. Its familiar weight settled into his hands and he swung it easily, testing a few movements.

"We'll start you with sticks, I think," he said, holding the sword up like he was examining it. Really, he just liked the way it reflected the light of the morning. Everything around them was hued silver-blue, but the blade glowed. It always seemed to know where the sun was hiding.

"Sorry," said Worth. "Did you start with sticks?"

"No," said Slade, turning to bring the blade back inside to the fuselage. "I started with guns, then knives – I worked my way up, got used to the movements."

"When are you going to teach me about guns?"

He paused in his search for a rag to wipe down the blades. "We can't waste ammo," he said. "And we can't risk the noise, either. You've got a liking for the knives. They'll better serve you than a gun
in these conditions and we don't know how much time we have. I'd rather focus on getting you strong in one area than mediocre in several."

She was quiet for a few moments. As Slade cleaned the blade she said, "I'll have to get close to them."

Slade very carefully did not pause in any way. He continued to clean the blade until it shined again, then he slid it back into its sheath. Only after he'd done that did he sit cross-legged across from her and put both hands on his knees.

"Your form wasn't too bad," he said. "But these swords are too heavy for you; you'll end up doing more harm than good. I admire your enthusiasm, however."

She just nodded, embarrassment flicking across her face again. He watched her carefully, but once the embarrassment faded, her face became a blank slate, eyes downcast and fingers rubbing patterns into her ankles. He suppressed the urge to heave a heavy sigh.

"Well, Worth? Can you do it?" he asked, finally. "Can you look into a man's eyes and watch him die?"

Her mouth was tight. The eyes she turned on him were wet and tired. "I wasn't looking into his eyes, the last time. So I don't know," she said quietly. "I've been thinking about it. I don't know."

He regarded her for a moment before speaking. "It's a trick question, Worth."

She frowned, confused, and he elaborated. "You don't watch them die. You cut their throats, move on, and survive."

But in response to that, she squeezed her eyes tightly shut and half-turned away. He leaned forward a little, fingers digging into his knees.

"They hurt you," he said. "And you've done it before. Planned it, even."

"I know," she replied, looking down at the spent fire. "But – that was – I had to –"

She stopped, eyes gradually losing their focus. When the silence drew on, Slade asked, "What happened to your anger?"

Her eyes closed. "I'm just tired," she said. "I want to go home. How long do I have to keep doing things I don't want to do? I – I just –"

"You're scared of becoming something you can't excuse," said Slade. Worth didn't answer, but he knew he was right. "Worth, you could kill every last man on this whole damn island and not be wrong. You could even laugh while you did it. Don't be afraid of becoming like them somehow. They hurt you first."

She turned her face back to him, cheeks flushed. "But then it keeps going around!"

"What does?"

"The – the violence –!"

Slade suddenly grew impatient. "We are not in a normal set of circumstances," he snapped. "We're talking about a very specific group of people who actively tortured us. For fun. On an island of death. I'm not asking you to become a mercenary or a serial killer, I'm asking if you're ready to do
what you need to do in order to survive."

When Worth looked away from him, Slade just sighed, pressing his fingers into his knees. "Look, I know why you're worried – you think you'll like it, don't you? You think you'll like the killing. That you'll like the power it gives you. Right?"

This elicited a reaction. He kept talking through it. "I can't tell you if that's right or wrong because sometimes the bloodlust is what kept my head on my shoulders and my partners alive. You're worried about liking the death? Good. It's proof you're not like them. But you're going to have to kill, Worth. I need you to understand that, because we're not going to get off this island without it."

"Okay!"

He sat back at her exclamation. She put a hand over her eyes and flopped over on her bed. Muffled, she said, "I'm just tired. I know. I know what I have to do. And if we come across any of the men that – hurt me, I'll be happy to hurt them worse. I just..." She frowned into her blankets.

"You just..?" Slade prompted.

"I just thought about – what if some of them were just – guys, you know? With families. And I thought about killing a normal person and – I just –"

"None of these guys are normal, Worth –" he started, but she interrupted him with a surprisingly childish whine.

"I know, I know. I just got...thinking about it. Early this morning. And I couldn't sleep, so I..."

"Took my sword for a joyride," he supplied drily. She turned her embarrassed smile into her covers.

"Sorry," she said.

"Ask next time," he replied. "Although I wouldn't bother with it – mine are much heavier than anything you'd be potentially wielding."

She eyed the swords from her prone position on the bedding. "I like the knives," she admitted quietly. "But when I held your sword I realised how heavy it was, how weak I still am. And it all just seemed impossible. I got so tired, just thinking about how far there's left to go."

"Just focus on what's in front of you," said Slade. "We'll hunt out when that supply plane is due soon enough and work out a plan to get on it depending on the circumstances. In the meantime, eat, sleep, and train. Right?"

"...right." She lifted a fist in the air, dropping it down again against her forehead. "Sorry."

"Yeah, yeah." Slade glanced outside; the light was becoming less blue, transitioning into a watery white. After a minute he said, "Come and help me check the snares, Worth."

They both could use a change of scenery, no matter how small.

~~~

"We're going to get that liver thing if we keep eating rabbit," said Worth, with absolutely no preamble. Slade glanced back at her, but she was looking up at the trees.

"I'm not sure it's a liver thing," he said slowly. She turned to him, surprised.
"Isn't it?" she said. "I thought it was. I thought your liver shut down or something if you eat too much rabbit without vegetables?"

"...I don't know. I'm not a doctor," said Slade eventually. "Aren’t you the chef?"

“Oh – part time, sure,” she replied. “I worked in a fusion restaurant growing up, during high school. Had all these… plans. I’d go around the world, visit all these different restaurants, maybe even set up a South-East Asian restaurant myself, with recipes from my grandfather. Then, I married… had children. Things got busy, switched to baking lessons. Made desserts for a local restaurant.”

She trailed off, footsteps slowing. Slade nearly passed right by one of the snares; it had a squirrel dangling from it. Better than nothing. It went into the bag. When he stood, Worth was looking up at the trees again.

"What are you staring at?" he asked, closing the bag.

Worth sighed. "If we had a bow and arrow we could shoot some birds down," she said, almost wistfully. The air that escaped Slade's mouth was too sharp to be called a laugh, but it was pretty close.

"I was sent here to find a man named Yao Fei, right?" he said, by way of explanation to her curious look. "He uses a bow and arrow. Shot two guards, helped me escape – haven't seen hide nor hair of him since."

Worth mulled that over. "So... can you use a bow and arrow?"

Slade continued through the forest, shaking his head with amusement at her single-mindedness. Somebody was hungry. "In theory," he said. "I've only had a few opportunities to try it out."

"Oh –"

He turned to see her stopping by a little stream, head darting back between him and it. Obliging, Slade went over and examined it carefully.

"Should be all right," he said. "I prefer to drink from something that has a bit more movement than that, though."

Sighing with relief, Worth crouched down, plunging both hands into the cold water and rubbing them together. He pulled his eyes away from tiny minnows circling her fingers and kept watch, eyeing the surroundings like it was about to burst open with enemies. There were only a few snares left to check. It was almost peaceful.

"Wilson?"

"Hm?"

"Have you tried fishing here?"

He grunted. "It'd take too long. I don't fancy sitting around in the open, waiting for a fish to bite, or a bullet to hit my head."

"You could make a net," she said, trailing her fingers in the stream. She started cleaning underneath her fingernails. "There's plenty of that camouflage in the plane."

Slade snorted. "You see these hands?" He waved his free hand, gloved fingers wiggling in the air.
"These are not the hands of a craftsman."

She rolled her eyes, clearly unimpressed. Shaking her hands free of excess water, she ran them through her hair, plastering loose strands against her scalp. Then she closed her eyes; it couldn't have been for more than a few seconds, but those seconds seemed to stretch on and on. He was aware of the sound of the brook, the scattered birdsong, the rustling tree tops; then she sighed, opened her eyes and stood. She opened her mouth to speak – and a huge gunshot in the air froze them both solid. She looked at him wildly and he put his hand out. He needn't have worried; she was perfectly still and totally silent.

"Could've just been a deer breaking a branch," he murmured, though he didn't believe it. "Follow me. Head on swivel, right?"

She nodded wordlessly, following him as he carefully stepped over the brook and crept forward through the forest.

There was no sign of anything that signalled where the gunshot had come from or what it had been shooting at. His main concern was at how close it sounded; were there scouts around? Were they hunting too? If that's the case then why weren't there more gunshots? Were they being spied on and a gun misfired?

Keeping his head moving, looking for the tell-tale sign of mercenary gear, Slade progressed; he stopped at Worth's gentle pressure on his arm. She was pointing to a tree trunk; there was a smear of blood and some fur scraped against it.

"Deer?" she mouthed. Slade nodded, following the path the deer had left. It didn't take long to find it; shot in the hind leg and bleeding badly, it was curled up on the ground by a rock outcropping, no longer able to walk. The doe was breathing heavily, sweat foaming her quarters and her ears flicked back against her head. Her black eyes watched their every movement; she was petrified and trembling. Abruptly her head darted to the side; a second later Slade heard it too. Without really thinking he grabbed Worth and quickly pulled them both to the closest available cover – the rock outcropping. It was far from perfect but it would have to do, because two mercenaries were crashing into the clearing where the doe had collapsed, talking and laughing loudly. Their harsh voices cut through the quiet forest air like a slap against the senses.

Worth swayed next to him, leaning heavily against the rock. Without looking, Slade grasped her hand and placed it on her knife, forcing her to take it. Once her fingers managed to grip the hilt, he locked eyes with her; she twitched once, far too reminiscent of the doe for Slade's liking. The mercenaries were speaking Portuguese and German, swapping languages until they understood one another – they were gossiping about their boredom, wet cigarettes, the lack of booze, how stuck up some of their fellows were. Their presence was a huge problem, but on the plus side, it looked like they had slunk out of guard duty; lone wolves who had disappeared without anyone knowing. Their glee at fooling the others set his teeth on edge. Slade eavesdropped fruitlessly; it was only casual talk, with no references to their movements or leaders, just near-constant bitching about their dwindling stocks of drugs, cigarettes, and alcohol.

One of them started laughing as he taunted the doe. There was a sharp sound – he had kicked out, and the doe shrieked with pain. Slade's hand immediately darted out to keep Worth's grip on her knife; she had nearly fallen over, her face grey, her limbs shaking. Her head twitched like she was disagreeing with something; her eyes looked at nothing. Slade gritted his teeth, hoping that she'd stay quiet enough until he could finish the job. He wished he'd brought his sword. He could have felled them both at once, keeping one for interrogation.

In the middle of trying to formulate a viable plane, he stiffened when one of them said he was going
to the bathroom – and then started heading right towards them, clearly intending on going behind the rock. Two wouldn't be a problem, of course, but it would have been easier if they had stayed together. Worth had pressed herself against the stone, but was still lost in her own head, seeing things he didn't want to fathom. He really hoped she wouldn't so much as twitch when he killed them; he needed surprise and speed on his side. Counting the man's footsteps, he tensed his body, ready to leap –

A whistling sound. Two thuds, two cut off gasps, two bodies hitting the ground. Silence.

Worth looked at him, wide–eyed, startled. Slowly, very, very slowly, he peered around the top of the overlook. The mercenaries were dead; each had an arrow sticking out of their hearts. The deer was trembling on the ground, foam flecking its mouth.

"Yao Fei," he said, under his breath. He carefully slid off the outcrop, helping Worth down – her legs were shaking so badly she actually seemed reluctant to let him go at first – and with his gun at the ready, he walked over to the bodies. Worth was looking around, a bit wildly, scanning the tree tops and every bush for some sign of the man.

"Yao Fei," she whispered. "That was the man you were looking for?"

Slade didn't answer, crouching next to the bodies and lightly brushing the feather with a gloved fingertip. It had been dark that night he'd escaped – but arrows were pretty distinctive. It had to be him.

"Why did he help us?" Worth said, still quiet. She had wandered over to the bodies, standing near him. When the deer flinched, so did she.

"I don't know," he answered, rummaging through the bodies.

"Are we looting?" she asked after a moment. Slade paused. It hadn't sounded condemnatory; on the contrary, she sounded fairly matter–of–fact. That'd be the compartmentalisation, he supposed.

"...yes," he said at length. "But don't call it looting."

"Why not?"

"Just...don't." He sighed. "It doesn't sound right, that's all. Criminals loot."

"Hmm." She examined the body. "I don't really want to touch that, Wilson."

He grunted. "Tough shit. I'll do this one, you take the other. We need to be fast. Put everything in the bag."

Grudgingly, Worth went to the other body and started rummaging through the pockets. "What about the deer?"

Slade eyed it. "...dinner."

"And what about the clothes?"

He paused. "...you're really thinking about everything, aren't you?"

She just shrugged, and he stopped to look at her. "You seem to be handling things well, considering you looked close to passing out a few minutes ago," he said.

Worth frowned at a handful of loose cigarettes. "I still feel like passing out," she said tiredly. "I feel –
I – like something’s crawling under my skin. Like I want to vomit out my organs. But there’s nothing I can do about it. Clothes, Wilson?”

He tried to evaluate her, but saw nothing besides bone–deep weariness. "Leave 'em,” he decided. It’d be nice to have a spare shirt, but naked bodies with arrows in them would raise far more suspicion than empty pockets.

He finished with his dead man, finding another compass and map, two lighters, some cigarettes, and protein bars. Worth emptied in almost identical contents; he'd be glad of the maps, since they were likely to be more up to date. By the time they got to the doe, it had already passed out from sheer terror. Slade carefully showed Worth the best place to land a killing blow – immediate death, with no pain to the animal – before driving the knife decisively home. With one full body twitch, the animal died. It probably would have gotten a heart attack even if it hadn't died from blood loss anyway; Slade only regretted the ignoble manner of its death. Hunting should be for sustenance, not sport. He'd never hunted and felt the joy of being cruel and killing for the sake of it; these mercenaries didn't deserve the death he was going to give them.

He didn't have time to bleed and gut it there, so it went on his shoulders. While heavy, it wasn't a particularly large doe, and he nearly laughed at the startled look Worth gave him when she saw him easily stand with it slung over his neck, arms keeping it in place.

"Head on a swivel, Worth," he said. "You're my eyes home."

He was gratified to see her straighten and nod grimly, pulling out her knife – she was even holding it correctly. Travelling at a cautious pace, they made it back to the fuselage in a few hours, Slade watching his every step, Worth on high alert.

Yao didn't show, of course. And Slade was starting wonder when – not if – he would.

Chapter End Notes

Tipping away at my Nano, but I definitely won't be finished in time. However, I do at least know I will, at some point, finish it! So that's something. On the plus side, I'm nearly finished my Christmas shopping, which is completely fucking insane.

Comments are welcome and very encouraging, so if it's not too much trouble please leave one as it really makes my whole week. My tumblr is kako-pumpkin if anyone has any questions about this story or my writing, or anything else.

See you on Saturday!
Chapter 6

It was another week before progress was made in the form of an arrow nearly spearing his eye. Without so much as a swear, Slade darted for cover, rolled, and braced himself behind the tree the arrow had buried itself in.

"Yao Fei!" he called, because who bloody else would it be – hiding in the forest, shooting people that looked like mercenaries? Two arrows were what had helped him escape in the first place – it had to be him. "My name is Slade Wilson, I'm with the Australian Secret Intelligence Service! I was sent to rescue you!"

He got another arrow for his troubles; this one at his nearly-exposed shoulder. It sank a good two inches into the trunk. Despite the danger, Slade couldn't help but be impressed; it took a lot of upper body strength and an impeccable eye to get a shot like that.

"My plane went down less than a mile from here – I can show you!" he called. "Yao Fei, I'm going to come out from behind this tree – my arms will be in the air. I'm no threat. Don't shoot."

The man he had travelled and suffered to find was waiting for him when he moved from his cover, dressed in a green hood with an arrow notched and ready to fly.

"Yao Fei," said Slade, arms high above his head. His stomach was exposed. There were fifty ways for him to die and they both knew it. "We need to talk. I've been scouting this area for weeks now and it seems fairly clean of the mercenaries. I have a map that indicates where their camps are. I don't know what they're planning, but I know they need you for whatever it is."

Yao Fei interrupted him – in Mandarin. It took Slade a second to dredge up those long-passed days in a hot bunker drifting along the Chinese coastline, stumbling his way through a dictionary while his partner at the time – Hong Kong born and Sydney raised – laughed at him. But he'd come away from the mission with a working knowledge of the language and the ability to pick out four kinds of accent. Russian and Polish came easy after Mandarin, and Japanese was a cakewalk. Later missions then reinforced and expanded his mental dexterity until he was a self-taught master of ten languages – and quite proud of the fact, too.

"You have a map?" asked Yao Fei.

"That's right," said Slade. "It marks out at least eight camps."

Yao Fei's face dropped, and the arrow dipped. "That's three more than I thought," he murmured. Slade kept his arms in the air.

"What are they doing here?" he asked. Yao Fei's face twisted.

"They're mercenaries," he replied shortly. "What else do mercenaries do? They plan to engage in an
"act of terrorism."

Slade stared. "What – but what –"

"Further than that, I can’t tell you," he interrupted. "They are searching for me, so I can only guess that it somehow involves China. Likely Hong Kong, since this island is only two days trip on boat from there, and less than two hours trip by passenger plane."

"Have you seen planes?" asked Slade quickly. If they landed nearby, it would be a good escape route. Yao Fei simply stared him down, without speaking – Slade knew enough about body language to know that he was being assessed. After a moment, he lowered his bow – although it was still notched with an arrow – and nodded at Slade. Carefully, and very slowly, Slade lowered his arms.

"I have seen no planes," said Yao Fei. "But it stands to reason. Boats take too long to get from the mainland, and are noticeable. Planes can carry more and are faster. It also explains how your plane was shot from the sky. They would only have spotted you through a watchtower."

Slade hesitated. "...how did you know, specifically, that it was shot down?"

Yao Fei just looked at him like he was mentally rolling his eyes. "I've been on this island much longer than you. I've been watching you for weeks."

"What?!"

"I couldn't be sure that you were who you said you were. Even with the mercenaries torturing you – they've used such tricks before to try and trap me. I had to be sure that this wasn't just a long game the leader was trying."

Yao turned his back completely on Slade and began to walk away, clearly in the direction Slade himself had come from – back to the fuselage. He'd had eyes on him the entire time, and never knew it...Yao Fei was a different class of man, that was for sure. Slade tried to take heart that the terrain was as unfamiliar to the mercenaries as it was to him, and that Yao Fei had just as easily outsmarted them as he did him, but it still smarted.

Slade could only blame himself though – he had gotten cocky, thinking they were safe, thinking that his skills alone could keep them free of observation. Without realising it – even while thinking he was constantly alert, constantly watching for dangers – he had fallen into a routine. He had stopped seeing. Worth had enabled it just as much as he himself had, and Yao Fei's secret watching was a thankfully harmless but extremely important reminder that they were surrounded by enemies. There was no such thing as a totally secret vantage point; they were always observable by someone, somewhere.

Maybe they shouldn't stay in the fuselage. It was a very obvious base of operations. But moving all the equipment would require a lot more work and organising than they had time for. Better to concentrate on developing Worth's skills and hashing out a workable plan. If Yao Fei proved willing, then they had just gained one more skilled fighter to help them survive.

They wound their way back to the fuselage, Slade noting that Yao made hardly any noise as he stepped on the ground. Even when they reached the tall grass, he glided through it like he was intangible instead of a fully grown man carrying a full quiver and a bow as long as his arm.

"Where is the woman you brought?" asked Yao, stepping into the entrance. Before Slade could answer, Worth appeared, one arm around Yao's neck and a knife pressed against his kidneys. Slade's
eyebrows raised – nice job. Hardly heard her move, although her footing was a little off.

Yao froze, although he didn't seem overly concerned. He locked eyes with Slade, who raised his palms up.

"Worth, it's all right," he said slowly. "This is Yao Fei. He's the reason I'm on this island, remember? He's an enemy of the mercenaries too. They've been hunting him."

Worth didn't move. Neither did Yao. Worth's face was creased with the effort of remaining close to him, with his back pressed against her chest, his head crammed against the side of her neck. Her nostrils were wide and her mouth was clamped shut.

Slade said, gently, "Worth. Let him go. It's all right."

Yao remained still for the long moments Worth took to calm down and remove the knife. He could have disabled her, Slade knew, but it hadn't hurt to let her have that bit of power. It would go a long way towards enabling her to trust him, if she felt that she could defend herself against him. He caught Yao's eye and nodded imperceptibly while Worth stepped back and took a few deep breaths. Yao returned the nod. By the time Worth was under control – long seconds – Yao had retreated further into the fuselage, creating a clear line between 'him' and 'them'.

"This is the man you've been looking for?" Worth asked. She hadn't put away the knife. Slade nodded. "And you just…led him back to our hideout?"

Slade hesitated, glancing back at Yao, who conveyed about as much emotion as a rock and was no help at all.

"He'd been observing us for weeks," he admitted. "He knew the way back to the fuselage himself."

Worth blanched, her face going grey around the edges. "It's not safe –"

"Soldiers don't come this way," said Slade immediately. "It's too far out of the patrol range. Hell, I only found it by accident. Even my old partner doesn't know where it is. We were hit out of the sky and parachuted long before it crashed. That night was stormy and would have masked any fire or smoke. Worth, breathe – the mercs don't know where we are and they wouldn't care anyway – there's nothing of value here they need and it's not sky–worthy, not by a long shot. The only reason Yao Fei knows it's here is because he knows this island like the back of his hand. He's been a prisoner here for years, since he led a local revolution about thirty years ago."

Yao started – apparently not only could he understand English, but he had also assumed Slade didn't know who he was. But Slade knew – Yao Fei, two daughters, widower, former farmer turned illustrious war General, and, later on, leader of a local revolutionary force that had gained notoriety and momentum in the late 1980s. The revolution was ruthlessly crushed, but Yao Fei remained in the public consciousness as a symbol of rebellion – hence why he wasn't executed, just disappeared to a godforsaken island where his memory would die and his political influence would fade completely. ASIS was thorough in its info gathering, possibly helped by the small influx of cross–border agents that immigrated to ASIS and carried the ups and downs of the many Chinese underground revolutionaries with them.

Some of those men and women had volunteered. But the higher ups had wanted a flawless infiltration that could also act as an equally flawless extraction if need be. Boy, he bet they were just biting their nails blunt with disappointment back home.

Worth stepped back abruptly, trying to mask the movement as a nonchalant slump against the wall of
the fuselage. The knife was still clenched in her hand. "So what does he want?" she asked. "Why come to us now, if he's been happy just to watch for so long?"

"He had to be sure we weren't just mercenaries in disguise," said Slade, but he stopped when Yao made a noise of disagreement. Speaking Mandarin – apparently while he could understand English just fine, he didn't want to speak it? – Yao said to Slade, "No, I wanted to make sure you weren't a mercenary."

Worth glanced at Slade as Yao spoke, but Slade just frowned, not really understanding the nuance Yao apparently meant. He replied in Mandarin. "What do you –?"

"I said before, they had tried to trick me many times. They would beat and torture their own men, and then let them escape. Sometimes even the ones doing the torturing were unaware that they were acting against their fellows."

"Then why did you shoot those men? Why help me escape?" asked Slade, confused.

"I thought it would help to add a variable," said Yao. "They might think that I was sympathising, and refrain from sending out more spies, at least for a little while. You seemed different than them, but they are adept actors."

"What changed your mind?" Slade's stomach bottomed out when Yao's eyes flicked to Worth. She picked up on the atmosphere immediately.

"What is it?" she asked nervously. "Is – are you talking about me?"

Slade tried to sort out what to say, but Yao continued talking, still in Mandarin, eyes back on Slade. "I knew she wasn't a mercenary. There are no women on the island, not even prisoners. I...know what they did to her – what they were doing –"

"You could have saved her?" Slade said, incredulous. Yao fixed him with a blank gaze.

"No," he said. "Not without endangering myself. I'm sorry. There were few openings available as it was and I couldn't linger without being spotted. There was almost always someone...present."

Red filtered down in front of Slade's vision for a split second before he reigned it in with sheer force of will. "So that's how you knew I wasn't a mercenary? Because I helped her? Instead of –" He stopped, trying to get control of his breath.

"Yes," said Yao Fei simply, filling the silence Slade's struggle provided.

"Wilson, what's he saying?" Worth shifted on her feet, knuckles white against the knife handle.

"He had to make sure we weren't mercenaries," Slade replied shortly. "Otherwise he would have come forward sooner." He frowned at Yao and switched back to Mandarin. "Were you there the night she escaped?"

Yao shook his head. "I followed a patrol from that camp the next day, however. They were whining about their loss and cursing their fallen comrade. The fire was so bad that no remains could be recovered or even identified. It had spread and consumed two other tents and generally devastated the camp. They put out the fire but made no efforts to deeply search the debris. Tell her that she's safe. They think she's dead."

"He's talking about me," said Worth. "He's looking at me. Stop speaking Chinese, Wilson – what's going on?"
Slade swallowed. "It's all right," he said. "It's good news. He tailed a patrol from the camp you were at. They think you're dead. They're annoyed at their colleague for lowering his guard around you. You even managed to destroy most of their camp with the fire from the grenades."

All show left her; Worth slumped weakly against the wall and slowly slid to the floor. "Oh god," she said, and her face turned away from them.

"You've been training her?" asked Yao. He had remained in the same spot since the start, impassively observing. Slade decided against moving towards Worth.

"I know you can speak English," he said, this time foregoing the Mandarin. "If you're just with me, Mandarin is fine. But while you're in front of Worth speak something she can understand too. Right?"

They held a sharp gaze between them, but eventually Yao nodded. When he spoke, it was directly at Worth, instead of Slade.

"Slade Wilson is teaching you to fight?" he asked. Worth seemed to steel herself, pressing up from the ground and standing, like she had never fallen down at all.

"He's teaching me to kill," she said. "And hide and hunt. He said it would take too long to build up my core strength, although we're working on that too, while we're here."

"We will be here as long as the mercenaries are," said Yao. "They will not stop until they find me."

"So why aren't they going through the entire island?" asked Worth. "They have the men to sweep the island and narrow down your hiding places –"

Yao held up a finger, and lifted another finger at each point he made. "One. They do not have the men to do such searches. Patrols are to keep the men busy and to exercise, not to actually observe or find anything. There are a great number of men on the island, yes, but no more than a hundred as of last week. Two, they believe their camps are the only place free of mines. This is incorrect. They have placed their camps on the only part of the island with landmines. Landmines only trace the easiest places for landing and unloading from air and sea. They also circle the old location of the first Chinese prison camp – their main base."

"Why would they do that?!" exclaimed Worth. Slade couldn't believe what he was hearing. Yao merely smirked.

"Because I broke free years ago from the prison, years before the mercenaries arrived. I changed the maps in the old guardhouse before I left – all it took was a little black ink, and suddenly a mine–free island became infested. Chinese government is famous for its cruelty. Mercenaries never questioned the maps they found. They put their lodgings in the areas most clear – the original sites of the landmines, the only sites of the landmines." He paused, continuing after a moment, the smirk falling from his face.

"I had not realised, however, that they were adding camps. What they are planning is very serious – what it is, however, I do not know." Yao fell silent, brooding on this point.

Slade absorbed this information, hand pressing against his mouth.

"Wilson – what do we do?" asked Worth. "If they're bringing more men in, it can't be any good. Should we – I don't know – try and figure out –"

"No," he said decisively. "We're just three. We can't take on an army. Our best option is to work on
escaping. As soon as I'm within range I can send out a distress signal – ASIS will bomb the crap out of this place and we won't have to worry about it."

"But..." Worth hesitated. "Isn't Yao Fei the one you were sent here for?"

"Yeah?"

"So, what do they want with him? I mean, why him specifically? Why go to all this effort – what does he – what do you know? Why do they want you?" She turned to Yao, fixing him with a confused, almost suspicious stare.

It was Yao's turn to hesitate. "I have political connections," he said eventually. "I was a war General; I led a revolt in my village. They sent me to this prison so that I would not become a symbol. This is the only reason I can think of. But this was almost thirty years ago. Any knowledge I have of politics would not be relevant anymore."

"And it doesn't matter," interrupted Slade. "I know it's a mystery, Worth, but it's not our priority. Getting off this island is."

"It's not just about curiosity, Wilson," said Worth. "This information could be important – more than important. They shot down your plane. They're building bases. They're bringing in more men. This isn't something small scale, and they need Yao Fei for whatever it is."


"But they're mercenaries," said Worth. "Their guns, their weapons, their constant whinging about pay and patrolling and not getting any action. All their food, their clothing, their cigarettes, are transported from inland somewhere – a few – every few months. Oh my god. Of course. The supply plane. There's a supply plane. Slade – the map –"

He already had it out, scanning the area for a camp that was next to an area big enough for a plane to land in.

"But that's not all," continued Worth. She was pacing now, knife still in her hand, handle pressed against her forehead. "They're here for a specific reason. They're here...because they're being paid to be here. Someone else is calling the shots. Someone with a lot of power and money."

"A government," grunted Yao, with more than a drop of cynicism. Worth snapped her fingers at him.

"You might be right," she said, pressing her hand back against her head. Yao frowned.

"A government. Paying mercenaries. To do an act of terror. Against..?" His eyes widened. "Hong Kong. They need me. I am a symbol. One that can be thrown away later."

"As long as we keep you away from them, they can't carry out their plans," said Worth, spinning around, eyes bright. "That's why they keep bringing men in, and making more camps. They need to find you. There must be a deadline, somehow."

"Planes," said Slade, like the word belonged to someone else. He stared at the map with unseeing eyes, mind whirling. "The commercial flights only need to change their course a few degrees to fly over this place. We even piggybacked one of those routes to get here. They shot us down with a tower, a tower. A supply plane coming once every few months wouldn't need such a permanent structure, it could work from radios. They're keeping watch for something. If a deadline is involved then there must be a specific target in a specific set of circumstances – for an international event or
something in Hong Kong, a bomb would be quicker and easier. It’s a plane."

The conclusion settled in the room, leaving everyone wide–eyed and shocked.

"They're planning to blow up a commercial plane and blame it on Yao Fei," said Worth. "Why would someone pay for that?"

"Warmongers," grunted Slade. "Someone always stands to make a profit from chaos. Racketeers and mob bosses, people with power and money to throw around. If it was a government, then they're probably hoping to destabilise the country. These kinds of dirty deals are made all the time. Hell, I've stopped more than a few in my time."

"And we can stop this one," said Worth. He looked up at her sharply.

"We're not heroes, Worth," he snapped. "My objective is complete – find Yao Fei, figure out what they want from him. Now our only mission is to get out of here."

"I know," said Worth, frowning back at him. "Like I said – they can't complete their job without Yao Fei. All I meant was that we can get him out of here and ASIS can bomb the place – we can stop their plans by escaping." She thought for a moment, adding, "And then I can get some therapy...and a hot shower. Hey, do you think they hand out medals for being in the wrong place at the wrong time?"

Slade actually laughed. "Yeah, Worth. I've even got a few myself."

That was probably the first carefree smile he'd seen in months. It lit up her face like she had sunshine running underneath her skin. The sound of her laugh glittered like rain, stopping him short.

"There is still the matter of the supply plane," Yao reminded them. "We do not know the schedule."

"They come once every three months, but I have no idea when the last one came," said Worth, sobering quickly. It was like a cloud had come over a summer morning, and Slade looked over at Yao, who was frowning down at the map.

"You know a lot about their movements," said Yao, adding hurriedly once she sent him a withering look: "I meant nothing – only that it is fortunate. It means that we have to approach them for only a specific piece of information."

"Too bad we're not great with electronics," said Slade. "We might have gotten that radio working. Couldn't be used to eavesdrop on their transmissions. Unless you managed to pick up radio repairs on your list of hobbies, Worth?"

"Ha ha," said Worth, rolling her eyes. But the good mood still lingered around the corners of her mouth – hope was a heady thing, after all.

The mission, as outlined, was fairly simple; identify when the supply plane was arriving and contrive to be on it when it left. Rubbing the back of his head, Slade sourly thought about all the ways it was probably going to end up FUBAR.

Chapter End Notes

I've really been knocked for sixes with a bad cold...I'm at about 60%, which at least is
an improvement on my previous 30% yesterday...doesn't help that our heating is on the fritz again and isn't working downstairs, and that the timer is broken so we physically have to go downstairs into the Arctic Circle if we want heat upstairs! But we'll be moving someplace shiny in a couple of weeks, so that's exciting.

As ever, comments are very encouraging and, well, just plain nice to get. Please consider leaving one. See you in a few days!
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the delay in uploading this; I’ve been hit with a bad cold and have totally and completely lost track of my days. I’ve spent most of this week convinced it's still last Friday. On the upside, tomorrow is also Friday. Still. What a weird sensation.

As ever, please be aware of author tags. Updated Thursday 1st December. Enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The day progressed fairly normally after their game–changing conversation, with chores, hunting, and training taking up much of the morning and afternoon. Yao had disappeared for several hours while Slade was schooling Lian in the finer points of knifework, returning with a whittled spear stuck with seven gleaming fish. Lian had actually dropped her knife in shock; still buoyed by the earlier establishment of a solid plan, her smile was something to see. Slade quickly lost her to the preparation of the fish; it was like a switch had flicked on somewhere in her, unveiling a practically chirpy personality, hands flying as they surveyed each fish in turn. She chatted – mostly to Slade, who still tried to practice his drills, and slip in bits of survivalist tips here and there – and turned teacher on him, elaborating each step she went through them.

To his surprise, her knife skills were surprisingly dexterous when turned on the preparation of food; the fish were cleanly filleted despite the inappropriate knife, and – with slightly more difficulty – deboned using a pair of tweezers Yao had carved at some point during his life on the island. Slade whistled, low, as she stacked fillet after fillet on a corner of canvas, the white–pink flesh gleaming. She laughed at the sound, head bowed and fingers slippery with fish, stopping now and again to wipe her hands on a rag that had been produced from somewhere to hold the spines and heads – it looked like a scrap of seat–cover, likely pulled from one of the old safety seats that were dangling from the walls.

“It’d make a change for you to learn something,” she said, teasing, as she slapped the last fillet on the bundle. “Why don’t you make yourself useful and set up the fire, Wilson?”

Grinning at her attitude, Slade put down his sword and climbed into the fuselage, passing Yao Fei as he did so. The other man looked to be meditating, legs and arms crossed, eyes closed. As Slade passed Lian, he inadvertently sucked in a waft of fish smell and he coughed, putting his hand against his nose.

“You reek,” said Slade, not bad–naturedly, and was rewarded with another laugh.

“You’ll be in a better mood once you’ve got a bit of Omega 3 in your system,” she replied, wiping the knife on a corner of the rag. Then she froze, abruptly; Yao Fei had unfolded from his seat and in one movement stood by her side, towering over her. Without speaking, he leaned down, took up the remains of the fish – all the slippery bones and bits of scale and fish heads – and left the fuselage, obviously intent on finding some place to deposit them. Wordlessly, Lian stared at Slade, eyes wide, her whites showing.

“You okay?” he asked, low. He wouldn’t have spoken, only that the look on her face was eerily
Slowly the tension bled out of her and her shoulders relaxed. She nodded, tightly, but was quiet from then on out. Slade narrowed his eyes at the fuselage entrance, pulling together bits of tinder and other twigs for the fire.

“You really do smell,” he tried. She sighed, looking down at her hands.

“Yeah…I didn’t really think that through,” she admitted. “I just love fish. I saw them on his spear and just went into autopilot.”

“At least you didn’t have to gut them here,” said Slade, striking the fire into life. Something tickled at the back of his mind, and, on a hunch, he went to one of the boxes.

“What are you looking for?” asked Lian. He just grunted, still searching, clattering through bits and pieces that hadn’t really belonged anywhere else and so got thrown into his version of a junk drawer. Finally, his hand hit a small, almost empty bottle.

“Ah,” he said, drawing it out. Barely the length of his finger, the bottle was black and otherwise nondescript.

“Wow,” said Lian, flatly.

“Don’t scoff, Madam,” Slade warned, tossing it to her. “That’s your ticket to fish–free fingers.”

Curiously she looked at it. The lid was a simple snap lid, and her eyes widened when she smelled the contents. “…Slade…”

“I’ll get you some water,” he said. “You’ll have to dilute it; there’s not much there.”

“…soap,” she said, faintly. “I think I might cry.”

“I’d rather you didn’t,” said Slade, filling a dish with water and taking it to the entrance. “C’mon, now.”

There was barely enough soap to make more than a little scum on the water, but it did the job; the stench of fish was now muted after several rinses and the arrival of a late afternoon breeze. The wind brought the scent of rain with it, so Slade wasn’t worried about refilling the water they’d used, instead taking a few swigs himself in between slopping the bottle over Lian’s hands. The sighs she made were almost comical.

By the time Yao returned the fire was blazing prettily and the fish was speared and roasting. He had washed the scrap of cloth in a stream somewhere and propped it next to the fire, taking a seat close—but not too close—to Lian. To her credit, Lian didn’t so much as flick an eyelid this time, choosing to slowly make her way through her third fillet, eyes drooping as time went on.

“Where’d you leave the remains?” asked Slade, quietly. Yao Fei stirred, speaking for the first time in hours.

“There is a stream nearby,” he replied, in English.

“There is not,” said Slade. “There’s a river that I use for refilling the tub.”

Yao Fei frowned. “What is the difference?”

“What?”

“River and stream. What is the difference?”
Slade paused. “…streams are small. Rivers are big.”

“I though streams were another word for rivers,” said Yao, inclining his head. Slade looked at him for a while, eyes hooded. The man’s face betrayed nothing but polite confusion, which cleared with Slade’s explanation.

“…all right,” Slade allowed. “Thank you for the fish.”

Yao nodded, staring into the fire. He glanced up at Slade and Slade nodded – so Yao took one of the fillets and made short work of it.

“No bones,” he said, appreciatively, once he’d finished. Slade glanced at Lian, but she made no response. She looked very close to sleep, and Slade couldn’t really blame her. The mugginess was settling and the afternoon was melting quickly into evening; with a fire and a full belly, even Slade was finding it difficult to stay alert like he usually tried to be. Despite the weariness catching up with them, however, the atmosphere in the fuselage bordered on the edge of awkward. It could have been different, in other circumstances, but Yao was still an uncomfortable, unknown element; Slade was already a poor conversationalist, Lian was unresponsive, and Yao Fei himself had a manner that clearly hadn’t been improved by decades of isolation on a killer island.

Watching the fire pop and the light fade behind a greying sky, Slade was struck by how insanely different his life had become in the past few month or so. He remembered the HQ in Australia, the hot cement buildings and the dive bars that peppered the otherwise bland area. His lifestyle was not one that necessitated flexibility, but guaranteed the total absence of stability – although this was only part of the reason his marriage had crashed and burned so badly. But through it all, Slade had always made it home, if you could call the standard assigned barracks a home, anyway. Maybe some of his people wouldn’t make it, and sometimes there might be another funeral to attend. But Slade had always made it back.

He was starting to doubt himself, now, despite his best efforts to keep moving forward, mentally and physically. There had always been bad situations, but this one really took the biscuit. He’d thought Saudi was bad, he’d thought Siberia was bad. But he’d always had a team, a means of communication, a partner, an escape plan. Now Slade had a civilian he was quickly whipping up into a killing machine and a probably certified island man who used bows and arrows. They had no tech, and an escape plan that depended on variables they didn’t currently have access to, up against over a hundred heavily armed mercenaries, amongst whom was his former partner who had trained him.

This doubt, though – he had to get rid of it. It’d be what killed them all, in the end, because out of all three of them Slade was the one with fighting experience, who could run raids and take on twenty men at once. He’d been a leader more than once, taking the head of countless missions. This was just one more mission, with impossible odds they’d just have to get over. Slade stifled a snort, trying to shake off his pessimism and glancing around at the other two; Yao Fei sitting with his legs folded, staring into the fire like it held the secrets of the universe, and Lian, slumped against a box and half asleep with the remains of fish in her mouth.

They made an unusual team, that was for certain. Slade could only hope that their differences would end up being their strengths, instead of what brought them down in the end.

~~~

Yao hadn’t stayed that night, although he’d said he would return at some point the next day. As the evening drew on, grey clouds gathered and the threat of rain turned into a full on downpour that was almost impossible to see through. Once it started raining, Slade roused (a very irritable) Lian and
spent four hours teaching her how to break chokeholds and disarm opponents. It was impossible to tell how she'd react to a real life situation, but short of ambushing her while she slept – which would probably just guarantee her freezing up – he was doing the best he could. He squashed down the feeling that he could turn her into something like what ASIS had churned out; optimism didn’t suit him. His training for Lian was short-term, fast and hard – they didn’t have time for the majority of long term techniques Slade had spent years building on.

With the fish long gone, Lian had re–stocked the fire and skinned the squirrel and rabbit Slade had picked up from the snares he’d hurriedly checked before the rain broke, bleeding and disembowelling without comment or asking for tips. She was methodical, attentive to detail, and clearly a million miles away, mentally speaking. He couldn’t blame her; all in one afternoon she had been surprised by a new face, discovered a way off the island, and had her ass handed to her in a very involved self–defence class that had her limping a little around the fuselage as she tended the fire and watched the meat roast.

She still hadn't talked about her…more serious injuries. She had described the circumstances, yes, but aside from that – well, there was only so far he could push her before she was ready to ask for help. If she even needed it – and what was he supposed to do if she did? She winced now and again as she moved – bending or sitting – but he thought that maybe the anti–bac was helping. He hadn't caught a steady glimpse of her skin since that first day, although she had taken to pushing up her sleeves during training; the deeper, more serious bruising left over from the mercenaries seemed to be fading without complication, the newer, fresher bruises – all from him, and his sticks – much more minor in comparison. He was no medic, though; all he could do was maybe give her a reason to keep going.

The air was starting to chill, creeping slowly through the open hole in the fuselage; the last few days had been sunny and warm without unwanted humidity, but these had obviously been unseasonable aberrations. It looked set to get colder from here on out; they were well out of the summer season by now. He was almost grateful for it. Cold and wet weather made men lazy and unobservant. Head coverings reduced visibility; warm coats inhibited easy and quick mobility. Some guns had a chance of misfiring if they became too damp, while his swords never lost their shine.

"My kingdom for a hot shower," sighed Lian quietly, interrupting his thought. He hummed in agreement, half–closing his eyes against the fire light. The world outside had gone grey–blue and sleepy. They had plenty of firewood, and thanks to Slade's inability to sleep a full night through, the fire would remain stocked the whole night, hopefully fending off infection and chills. The longer their bodies had to acclimatise to the weather, the stronger they'd become, and the less likely it'd be that they'd come down with something.

It would have been warmer, of course, if they slept on the same side of the fuselage. He'd done it with Billy, and with dozens of partners over the years – men and women – but he hadn't dared broach the topic with Lian. She’d been progressing well – faster than he expected – and the last thing he needed to do was to put any kind of idea in her head that he wasn't completely trustworthy. He needed to present himself as a neutral party, a non–entity, using the same tactics he’d trained in when he’d have to extract terrified hostages or escort traumatised war victims out of a dangerous area. Hands where they could see them. No sneaking up. Telegraph movements. Make an effort to clarify speech. Directness he had no problems with, at least.

He knew he was the least qualified person in the world to help her. The violence he was teaching her was only going to exacerbate her mental injuries. But he also knew that his own background was less than nuclear – more literally nuclear, actually – and that there was a kind of peace to be found in an exercise, in a bullet or the weight of a sword. Violence was a simple concept in a complicated world. After a shock, it helped to have something to focus on, and the trauma would work itself out
in the background. Just a few more weeks, hopefully – not that the word hope had any business
being in his vocabulary – and they'd be out of this shithole, back to the real world. She'd get help,
and he'd go home.

Lian was falling asleep by the fire. She'd get burned from the heat if she slept like that.

"Move to your pallet," he said, but his voice was hushed against the sound of the rain, and it
swallowed up the words. He shook himself out of his stupor, and moved to the entrance. Outside
was nearly blue with dusk. Lines of rain streamed in waves edged with white, growing more distinct
the further he looked out.

In context, their situation could be worse. They had good shelter, a fairly isolated hideout, food,
weapons, and fire. He'd survived on far less, after all. Naturally, it could be a lot better. They were
basically surrounded by enemies on an island peppered with landmines, deadly plants, and desperate
animals. They had no communications and a very questionable way out.

He shook himself again. On the way over to the bar he had wedged into the roof for exercising, he
nudged Lian's back with his boot. She made a disgruntled noise and rolled away; farther from the
fire, so it counted as a small victory. He jumped up to the bar and started counting pull ups; ennui
was no reason to quit his routine, and the exercise would help keep him sharp. He got to twenty–
seven before Lian spoke, voice heavy with sleep.

"You're not exercising."

He bit his tongue and grinned despite himself, determined not to lose count.

"My god. You're exercising. You are. I can't believe this."

Continuing his mental count, Slade replied, "No sense just sitting around, Worth."

He heard her sit up; there was a small grunt as she stretched. "Why am I even surprised? Of course
you're exercising on a day like this."

"Feel free to join me," he said.

"You can fuck right off, thank you," she replied pleasantly, shuffling over to her pallet. He chuckled.
Fifty–eight. Fifty–nine. There was a thump as she fell hard against what was less a mattress and more
a pile of grass stuffed into a piece of canvas, topped with more canvas and an emergency blanket.
After a moment, Slade lost himself in the pull–ups, waiting for the burn that would signal at least a
few hours sleep for him that night.


"Eyy–ooohh!" cooed Lian tiredly. He nearly lost count and had to pause on the bar, shaking with the
effort of not laughing with surprise. After a few moments he lowered himself down again.


"Eleven," interrupted Lian.

"Seventy–three," he gritted out. "Seventy–four –"

"Thirty–two."

"Seventy–five –"
"Twenty-seven."

"Seventy-six —"

"A hundred and eighty-one."

"I swear to god, Lian —!" He dropped to the ground, heavily, turning to her with his arms outstretched. She was shaking with suppressed laughter, face half buried in her pallet.

"Are you happy now?!" he demanded.

Shoulders shaking, Lian gasped: "Fifty — f—f—f—five —!"

And then she completely lost it, howling into her mattress. He was heavily tempted to pick her up and toss her outside, but the shrieking might attract attention. He tried stabbing a finger in her direction, growling threateningly:

"You are going to regret that."

She just laughed harder. Stuck for a means of punishing her that didn't involve kicking her out in the rain and whipping her at impromptu sword training, Slade just growled some more and stalked around the fuselage, banging things and generally making loud, irritating noises. Lian's laughter whiled away into weak huffs of breath, broken finally by a huge yawn.

"Ah–haha – heh…ahhh. You're so serious," she said, eyes closed as she yawned again, settling deeper under her blanket.

"It's a serious situation," he countered.

"They won't sent patrols," she murmured, words slurring slightly. "You said it. The weather is too bad. Dangerous, slippery ground. Noise everywhere, no visibility. If the boss tried to make them patrol, he'd have a mutiny."

"There's still no point just sitting around," he said. Contrary to his statement, he approached the fire and sat heavily, needling it with a long twig.

"So meditate, or something." She was nearly asleep, barely responsive. That one sentence had taken several minutes to be spoken.

Slade paused, considering her suggestion. He wasn't any good at meditation. His body demanded action, movement, some kind of exercise; otherwise his mind ran and ran and ran. It was hard to clear the mind when the body was tuned for movement; and when the body relied on movement for rest, it was easy then to run from his mind.

"I'm guessing you know how to meditate?" he griped, but softly, not really expecting an answer from her as she was now breathing audibly into the canvas.

"You can do anything," came the unexpected response, barely understandable and more than ten minutes later. He watched her back rise and fall beneath the canvas; her fists loose, her mouth open and hinting at the snores that were soon to come. He put his back to the fire, one eye on the rain outside, one eye on her.

"If only, Worth," he said, quietly, knowing she couldn't hear him. "If only."
Seriously, my brain is trying to convince me that it's still last Friday. I mentally still think I have an entire week in which to do things, but I...totally don’t! Haha...ahh, shit. On the plus side I'm tipping away at my Suicide Squad fic and rolling around some Mick Rory LOT ideas in my head...writing is tough, but when it goes right it's super fun!

See you in a couple of days! I'm on tumblr under the same name if anybody has any questions. As ever, comments are extremely welcome and very nice to get. Hope you enjoyed the chapter!
The days passed, quickly slipping into a week, then two. Yao lingered around the fringes of the field, always greeting them when he arrived and saying goodbye before he left. Although they shared a common enemy, it was clear that Worth wasn’t completely comfortable around him; Slade shared this feeling to an extent. Yao sensed this; as a result he never really intruded in their daily lives, only offering his opinion when he felt it needed. When Slade was reluctant to leave their hideout to go scouting, Yao picked up on his reticence, tactfully and silently volunteering to follow patrols and eavesdrop on camps. After the first few days, however, he approached Slade.

“You need to leave her be,” he said. Slade paused in the middle of skinning a rodent – nasty small thing, but it was the only animal they had caught all morning – and glanced at him.

He knew what Yao meant. He’d been avoiding leaving Lian alone with Yao because he was worried about her. He knew it was weakness. He knew he wasn’t doing her any favours. He knew he had to, at some point, trust that Yao wasn’t the enemy, and wasn’t going to hurt her. That she could defend herself even if he tried. Knowing, however, was very different from doing.

“I will work with her today,” Yao said firmly. “There are things I never got to teach my daughters. I would teach her. She needs to know.”

“Like what?” asked Slade, stalling. He played at nonchalance, finishing up the rodent and cleaning his knife. Yao wasn’t fooled – the man was sharp.

“There are plants on this island that can help her,” said Yao. Slade looked at him sharply, but the man was impassive.

“You wouldn’t step in before they hurt her, but you’ll patch her up afterwards?” he asked, low. He glanced at Lian; she was practising drills in the middle of the field, oblivious to their conversation. Not that she would understand it if she heard them; they were speaking Mandarin. “Well, that’s nice of you.”

Yao didn’t react to his needling. “You teach her how to fight,” he said. “I can teach her about the forest. The more she learns, the better chance we have to get off this island.”

Slade just glowered at his knife, turning it in in his hands, back and forth. Watching him, Yao let out a small breath; not quite a sigh, but clearly meant to be audible.

“You know much, much more about me than you would have me believe,” said Yao, placing his hands behind his back. At Slade’s curious look, he clarified: “I never said I had daughters before now. You didn’t react when I mentioned them.”

Slade paused. Then he tossed his knife into the ground and glared balefully at the other man. “It’s not
like you have to ask me *permission,*” he sniped. “Lian won’t turn down learning something that might help her hurt the mercenaries.”

“She would be learning for herself, Slade Wilson,” replied Yao. “Go scout today. Your mind is restless; sitting in one place only makes you more irritable.”

Slade intensified his glaring. “I understand that we’re allies now, Yao Fei,” he said calmly. “But we’re not *quite* at the ribbing stage of this relationship just yet. Watch yourself.”

Yao simply smiled; a small thing, but aggravating nonetheless.

“Go,” he said. “Don’t come back until this evening. I’ll look after her. You’re not the only one who must learn to trust me.”

Slade drummed his fingers on his knees, thinking hard for long minutes. Yao was right; he was getting restless. And he kept trying to go easy on Lian, even though he knew that was the opposite of what she needed. Granted, what he considered ‘easy’ was wildly disproportionate to what the average person might have considered normal, but…the point still stood.

“Fine,” he growled. Raising his voice, he called for Lian, who paused in her drill before trotting over. Her cheeks were red and loose hair stuck to her forehead and neck. She looked between them, eyes both curious and wary, and Slade cursed the positioning; it looked like him and Yao were ganging up on her.

“I’ll be scouting today,” he said shortly. “Yao wants to teach you about the forest while I’m gone.”

Her eyes immediately narrowed on the other man. “What, like Princess Mononoke stuff?” she asked. Despite the lightness of her tone, she couldn’t quite hide the nerves hovering beneath.

“I don’t know what that is,” said Slade honestly, and neither did Yao if his glance at Slade was any indication. Lian sighed.

“It was a movie. About –” She shook her head, dismissing the train of thought. “Never mind. How long will you be gone?”

Slade fought the urge to glance at Yao. “Most of the day, if not into the night.” He felt a pang of guilt when Lian’s face creased with worry. Whatever she was feeling, however, she didn’t vocalise. Her throat worked as she swallowed, glancing back at the field as her face worked out what to do with itself.

“Well, fine,” she said. “What, are you waiting for permission? No, you’re not allowed to scout, Wilson. My gosh, how dare you. Off to bed without supper, now, for your insolence.”

Slade snorted, retrieving his knife and standing to go collect his gear from inside. Lian started with surprise.

“You’re going now?” she asked.

“Yeah,” he said, deliberately not looking at her. “No time like the present.”

“Oh. Well, come back in one piece. Don’t, don’t get captured, et cetera.”

He snorted, throwing her an overly confident grin; it’s not like it was misplaced, seeing as he was excellent at stealth. One of the best that had ever gone through ASIS, in fact; becoming one with his surroundings was the closest thing he’d ever get to meditation. There was nothing to worry about –
he just had to walk around, possibly find a patrol or a camp, and eavesdrop for information. Hell, if he got lucky, he might be able to snatch a few luxury items along the way – like salt. Or soap. It was almost pathetic how low his standards had gotten.

“See you tonight, Worth,” he said. It wasn’t goodbye, because everything would go fine. He repeated that in his head a couple more times, even, to see if it made a difference to the worry in his gut.

It didn’t.

~~~

Lian spun the stick in her hands a couple of times, making a show of practicing when all she wanted to do was stare at the spot that Slade had disappeared in. The drill wasn’t a very complicated one – she had to be used to multitasking movements, or she wouldn’t have made a very good chef – but it did require a lot of concentration. Concentration was something sadly lacking when all of her consciousness was zeroed in on the burning presence of Yao Fei, who appeared to like nothing better than to silently observe her and not do anything else at all, ever.

She gritted her teeth and let the stick drop from its upright position. “Slade said something about teaching me things about the forest?” she asked, finally turning to face him. To her annoyance, he said nothing; just looked at her with those piercing eyes. Up and down. Like he was looking for something. Her stomach churned; she became instantly aware of the knife that was always, always strapped to her leg.

“Yao Fei, say something or get lost,” she said.

“Very well,” he replied, placing his hands behind his back. “A question.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yes?”

He asked his question. The stick fell out of her hands; her stomach turned to lead, her legs to jelly.

“…what?” she breathed. “What...?”

Yao Fei simply nodded, although through the haze she realised that his shoulders had slumped. Like there was a weight pressing on him. He looked old, suddenly. Very old.

“Come,” he said. “I will teach you about this forest. Things my wife taught me, things I will never pass on to my daughters. This is the price I pay for what I have done.”

She didn’t know what he meant by that, but numbly, she followed him as he went into the plane and rooted through her pack, adding things and removing others. The daze continued as he led her through the forest, pointing out this flower or that plant, collecting things along the way.

“It will hurt,” he said. This managed to penetrate the fog in her brain. Fear made her tremble, but she was tired of fear. And if she thought too hard…she mightn’t have the strength to last the night.

“It already hurts,” she said.

“I will give you something for sleeping,” he said. “Once it has passed through your system, I will give you something for the pain. The ingredients contradict each other, and could poison you.”

“How will I know?” she asked. They were at a little alcove near a stream. It was enclosed, an elderly willow on one side and large boulders on the other. It was almost like an illustration; serene and separate from the hell the island usually represented.
“You will not,” he replied. “Observing it in someone else? It will be obvious. Leave this to me.”

She scrubbed her face in her hands. “…what do I do?”

Yao told her, repeating things carefully where she needed it. The sleeping herbs made time immaterial and hazy; the pain herbs later dulled her senses further. She was vaguely aware of Yao coaxing her to eat, to drink. It was pitch dark by the time they returned, and Slade was already back at that time, fire lit and body tense. She smiled at him wearily, letting Yao help her down on her pallet.

“Sick stomach,” she explained. “I learned about the forest, at least. Everything here really is trying to kill us.”

Slade looked at Yao sharply. A pointed conversation followed, and since it was in Mandarin she let herself drift instead, waking only to sip at a cup of herbs Yao pressed against her mouth at some point later that night. She felt nothing. No – she was comfortable. Free of pain. Free from hunger, not unpleasantly tired. And for the first time in months…she wasn’t afraid.

“Amazing what some leaves can do,” she murmured, half to herself. Hushed, insistent Mandarin followed her as she fell further and further into darkness.

Lian slept. She didn’t dream.

~~~

The fuselage was empty, completely empty, when he finally he got back after a full day’s crawling, stalking, and hiding in the forest. Slade tried to swallow the worry as he slowly examined the fuselage, the dying light casting long shadows on the ground as he walked.

Two sticks were propped outside the entrance. Inside, the hearth was stone cold; no fire had been lit, so no food had been eaten there during the day. Her pack was gone.

This, strangely, managed to calm him down for about a minute. Then he realised that even if she left willingly, there was every chance Yao could have led her to a trap. Used her to barter for his safety –

"No," said Slade. Shut down those thoughts.

His pack he tossed to the side, and he got started on a fire. When that was lit, he sat on the edge of the entrance and skinned the fowl he’d caught earlier. Unable to stay still, he tried to track the footprints surrounding the fuselage; but it was too dark to see where they ultimately led. There was no direction to follow and no way of knowing where they’d gone even if he could follow.

He had to wait. He had to be patient. He had to – and he gripped the handle of his knife at the thought, so hard he nearly hurt himself – trust that Yao Fei was doing exactly what he’d promised. And that if he wasn't, Lian had cut his sorry throat and left him in the wild. She had the compass in her pack. She'd make it home. Unless she was injured.

*She wasn't injured.* She was learning 'about the forest', whatever the hell that meant. There was probably – meditation, and learning about stealth and the animals and trees, or some other stereotypical spiritual Chinese junk and –

He inhaled deeply. Tried to centre himself. This was what happened when you got attached. It was a
mistake to train her up, it was a mistake to get – to get *sentimental*. That's all it was. He felt sorry for her, he sympathised with her, he –

*Didn't want her to die.*

None of them deserved what this island had done to them.

His mind emptied as the fire grew stronger, and without really noticing he speared the fowl and set it to rest in the usual place next to the pit, turning it methodically now and again. The flames blinded his eyes, but for once he wasn't thinking about visibility.

He'd managed to spend the whole day not thinking about her, about her training, about leaving her behind with Yao Fei. He'd started out the day with – what was for him – a healthy amount of faith. Amazing how easily that all fell apart.

If they didn't come back, he'd progress as same. If Yao Fei was a traitor, he might have revealed their plan. This would make it both easier and more difficult to infiltrate the camp and get on the supply plane. It was fifty–fifty that he'd be killed in his efforts, but there was the chance that he'd be able to replace one of the guards with himself and either sneak or talk his way onto the plane. Hell, he could just kill the pilot – he'd flown bigger and in worse circumstances. All he had to do was get it far away enough. They probably didn't keep whatever bombadments they used on the plane he came in on available at a moment's notice; it'd be long minutes before they'd realise anything was wrong, if at all. He'd wait until the plane landed, dart in, kill the guards – he was sure he had a sniper rifle around somewhere – and get on the plane. The engine wouldn't even have time to cool before he'd have it up in the air again.

The meat was burning. He stared at it for long moments before finally reaching out and turning it.

It could have been minutes or hours later when he finally heard the tell–tale crunch of footsteps outside. Yao Fei usually made as much sound as a ghost, so his noise was obviously quite deliberate. Lian's step was – slow. Plodding, almost. Very different to her normal light stride, which was almost like a tip–toe next to his heavy boots.

Slade's hands gripped his knees so hard the knuckles went white and his knee protested; he kept his eyes on the fire as Yao Fei and Lian walked into the fuselage. His ribs ached with the force of his heartbeat when he saw that Yao Fei was supporting a grey–faced, tired Lian. His breathing didn't level out even when Lian offered him a weary, watery smile and he barely heard her assurances – sick stomach? – only watching carefully as she curled herself underneath the canvas and blankets. She fell into a deep sleep almost immediately.

It took Yao long moments to look at him, and when he finally did, Slade made sure his expression was as dark and deadly as a thunderstorm.

"She ate something," said Yao. He was speaking English, like it was some kind of peace offering. "She is in no danger. I believe many things are catching up with her, and have finally made themselves known. I gave her something for the pain, and something to help her sleep."

"She 'ate something', huh?" said Slade, low and dangerous. "You just expect me to believe that?"

Yao just looked at him. Slade leaned forward a little more, letting the fire throw shapes on his face. He wanted Yao to understand just how serious he was.

"It was nothing dangerous," Yao said after a moment. "It simply did not agree with her."

"You expect me to believe she just ate something you handed to her?" said Slade. “She was a chef,
"I was training her. She was showing signs of pain. I said it would help," Yao explained calmly. "Her stomach sickness is an unintended side effect. She is unused to eating like we do."

"She hasn't been sick so far," countered Slade.

"It was going to happen eventually," said Yao, now somewhat impatient. "It is a miracle she has not developed any sickness yet."

Slade glanced at the fowl, well-roasted on the fire, and was suddenly filled with rage. Yao's face grew dark in response.

"I would never hurt her," he said, speaking Mandarin now. "I'm not that kind of man."

"You were the kind of man to leave her in the hands of those –" Slade growled. He only spoke Mandarin in return because the idea of her finding out that someone knew, someone knew what she was enduring and chose not to even try and save her – it filled his throat with bile.

Yao Fei didn't offer any defence. He looked down, away – but not at Lian.

"She would be suffering more if you hadn't found her," said Yao, not denying his statement. "She would be dead – of starvation or exposure."

"I'm not trying to do her favours, Yao Fei," Slade growled. "I need her to be able to fight so I don't have to watch her back as well as my own. The stronger and faster she gets, the more likely it is I'll get off this damn island."

"She endured terrible things," said Yao, like Slade hadn't spoken at all. "And you gave her a path that helped her discover that she was strong in her own way. She is learning that she isn't weak or flawed. You gave her that."

"I didn't give her anything!" snapped Slade. "She got out of that damn tent by herself! In the middle of all that fucking trauma, she came up with a plan, killed a man, blew up the evidence, escaped a camp crawling with trained killers and survived in the forest for god knows how many days – she did that, she saved herself, she's the one whose given herself her opportunities! Don't act like I'm a saviour; I'm just the means to an end! She'd survive with or without me!"

"A soldier is not the same thing as a tool, Slade Wilson," said Yao calmly. "Yes, she is surprisingly capable. But this island can defeat the strong willed with ease. Perhaps she would have starved. Perhaps a patrol would have found her. But you found her at her most vulnerable and gave her a safe place to stay until she was ready to choose her path. You showed her how to hold the weapons she picked up herself. She created opportunities; you provided means."

"What are you getting at?" said Slade. His blood thumped in his neck; he couldn't seem to move his mouth out of the snarl it was stuck in. Yao looked down at Lian; her shoulders were gently rising in her sleep.

"I don't know," he replied, sighing. "Only that you regard her as something that needs to be protected, despite your insistence otherwise. And that I don't believe she needs to be protected. That difference is going to be a dangerous point of contention between the two of us, unless we can come to an understanding."

Slade breathed in through his nose, deeply. "Whether or not I feel like she needs protection isn't a question that needs to be asked or answered," he said. "The problem is that I can't afford to protect..."
her. I'll get her killed if I keep trying to shield her from – fuck it, from being triggered, or frightened of anything."

"You do her a disservice," said Yao.

"Shut up," hissed Slade. "You heard her screaming. Didn't you? You heard her begging for them to stop. And then you lecture me about being worried about her, like it's not natural I do? Any human being would worry. It's not like I want to! You think you can just stand there after what you did, and moralise at me about how I'm holding her back –?!"

Yao had looked away again. "I cannot condone my actions," he said. "And I never will. But I have already explained them. And in all honestly, if given another chance...I don't know if I would have done differently."

"And if it had been your daughters?" asked Slade. It was a low blow, but he wanted a reaction out of the man, something more than this distanced, detached regret.

He got a reaction. Like a fire had sparked inside the man, Yao sharply stared at Slade.

"Proximity shouldn't have factored, Yao," said Slade. "Did you at least consider saving her?"

"There was no way to!" snapped Yao. If Slade had known bringing up the daughters he'd never met was going to get this kind of reaction, he'd have used it ages ago. "I couldn't save her and protect myself! I've explained this!"

"And you think you can lecture me on worrying about her when you –"

"I am not trying to lecture you! I am trying to make you understand that your sentiment will not only hurt you – it will hurt her as well! And the point I was trying to reach was that it can also be a strength!"

Slade glared as Yao threw a hand in the air and turned away, murmuring curse words until he got himself under control.

"You're baiting me," said Yao. "Of course you are. We came back after dark and she's clearly unwell. You were worried and unsettled. Wilson, she doesn't just need to rely on you to survive, you need to rely on her – and you need to rely on me, and I need to rely on both of you. We can't get anywhere by second guessing one another – we have to know that we can rely on each other."

They both looked over at Lian suddenly; she had moved, but was still deep in sleep. Yao sighed, rubbing his face.

"For the rest of my life, I will regret my failings," he said. "I will do what I can to make up for my lack of humanity towards her. And you will trust her will to survive. It's not enough to be the means to her end, Wilson – you must be at her side, and she must be at yours. If you can't let go of the fear you have regarding her ability to handle her own circumstances, then you will be sentencing all of us to death."

Slade looked through the fire. Lian's form was barely distinguishable underneath her covers.

"What really happened today, Yao?" he asked quietly. Yao was silent for long, long moments.

"She will tell you when she's ready," he said finally. "If it helps – it really was something she ate."

Slade sighed. "How long do you think she'll be sick?"
Yao considered this question with a grimace. "Tonight. Most of tomorrow, possibly some of the following day. But no longer. I have something that will help with the pain. She is a very healthy woman otherwise, which will help her recovery."

"I'll scout again tomorrow," said Slade. "Yao?"

"Hm?"

"If you want me to start trusting you, you'll have to work harder than this. Understand?"

Yao inclined his head. Without further comment, Slade retreated to his bundle of blankets, staring at the fire until he couldn't keep his eyes open anymore.

Hours later, when the fire had dwindled and he was almost completely asleep, Slade heard Lian gasp with pain. He almost rolled out of his blankets until he heard her whisper for Yao, who immediately left his perch by the entrance of the fuselage, detaching from the shadows like a bird of prey. Together, and with halting difficulty, they went outside and walked a distance too far for Slade to determine from his bedroll.

He remained completely still and waited. There was no moon, and only pale red embers to see by. An age seemed to pass by before they returned, Lian being supported heavily by Yao, and Yao murmuring something to her before gently laying her into her bedroll. A canister was uncapped and something rustled; then there was the sound of something being chewed, swallowed with difficulty, and water following. Yao murmured something else, covering Lian with blankets before retreating back to his original seat at the side of the entrance.

It was just a stomach bug. She'd be fine in the morning. And then they'd be one more day closer to getting home.

Chapter End Notes

Apologies, this chapter was a day late. I had a pretty cool staff party on Friday, but hoooo boy, on top of trying to recover being sick, I was totally out of commission. Still not 100% with it, but pushing through! I could sleep for a week.

Hope you enjoyed the chapter - I'll try and get back to my regular days next week. As ever, please consider leaving a comment, it really helps.
Days had passed since then, turning into a week, then nearly two. Slade and Yao traded off scouting duties, only sharing a glance the one time Lian had fruitlessly asked to go along with one of them. There was no point sending her out when there were two of them already trained and capable; better to keep her at the fuselage where she could spend every available minute training. That, at least, was tactics instead of sentiment. It was one of the few times he and Yao Fei agreed.

There was a sort of detente now, between them. Slade accepted that Yao's help would be an invaluable asset. He had also made clear – perhaps in not so many words, but it was heavily implied – that if Yao put one toe out of line he'd rip the man into pieces. Yao might give him a run for his money, but Slade had actively trained as a killer for most of his life. Neither of them were under any illusions over who would be the eventual victor if it came to blows.

Slade may have even felt a bit smug when Lian showed no interest in the bow, preferring daggers overall and expressing further interest in his swords. Although that said, it was proving rather hard to score points against a man who didn't see training someone to survive against mercenaries as a competition.

Frustratingly, nothing helpful was gleaned from the scouting. He and Yao Fei darted in and about, trying to garner any kind of information. They hadn't learned so much as a name for their leader, although his weaselly face would be forever burned into Slade's mind. Even while on mind-numbing patrols, the mercenaries didn't really gossip. Everything else about them seemed terribly standard; their formation, their weapons, their methods of communication.

They only managed to establish two facts: One, the mercenaries never patrolled more than a few miles out of their camps. And two, at their main camp, they were cleaning out a lot of space; felling trees, levelling ground. If their theory was correct, and the mercenaries were trying to take out a plane or a city, Slade guessed that the open space was for the transportation and setting up of some kind of large weapon; a missile launcher, or something. Some kind of long range weapon with a fine-tuned aim.

Everyone's time was running out. Luckily, the mercenaries seemed to be a few weeks out from finishing their preparations. Unluckily, it was seeming less and less likely that they would manage to catch the supply plane. Even scouting near the landing strip yielded nothing besides a few tense hours of avoiding guards with sniper rifles and a watchtower that could see for miles out. It didn't help that the damn thing was basically surrounded by a field, with only a few rocks as cover. Whenever they finally did get on that plane, it was going to be a pain in the ass to get past all the guns and men.

In the meantime, life had taken on a strange kind of routine. Yao Fei lingered around the fuselage, rarely interrupting Slade's training with Lian, until he, at random points, decided that Lian needed to learn something really important about leaves or whatever and they disappeared for a few hours.
Slade always took this time to check his snares, or go scouting again, or gather water.

He was basically just waiting for the other shoe to drop. Lian still hadn't mentioned anything about the first day of Yao's teaching, and Slade hadn't asked. Something had to change soon, though.

Nothing stayed the same forever. Something *always* happened.

---

Yao Fei was watching her lace up her shoes. She ignored him as she worked, trying not to twitch at the uncomfortable sparks that went up and down her spine. Wilson was outside, whittling fresh sticks ahead of their upcoming training. She focused on threading the leather strips through the holes in the appropriated sheath halves, fastening the ends around her ankle. She had attached chunks of cloth cut from the end of her shirt to the leather to act as a cover for the tops of her feet – the superglue had taken two days to dry properly, but it was firm.

"Stop staring," she said, finally cracking under the weight of his eyes. Yao Fei wasn't even doing anything; just sitting in a corner, far away from her, arm crossed and silently watching.

"What?" called Wilson from outside. She gritted her teeth.

"Nothing," she called back. The fit of the so-called shoes was fine. She stood and stretched a little in anticipation of the training Wilson was about to put her through, his promises of not going easy on her becoming positively cheerful as the days had progressed.

"Wilson?" she called, stepping towards the door after she'd tested the shoes with a few twists of her feet. He was just outside, whittling two long sticks. He caught sight of her and grinned in that fierce way that always resulted in her ass being whooped, thoroughly.

"Ready?" he asked.

"What do you care if I'm ready or not?" she replied, hopping out of the entrance and raising her eyebrows. He chuckled in response, tossing her a stick.

"Congratulations," he said. "You're about to learn the art of the sword. On top of helping your reflexes, it's the weapon I like best, and it'll give you a better range than the daggers I've been having you practice with."

"What about guns?" she asked, weighing the stick and trying to copy his grip.

"Point and shoot," he grunted. She levelled a look at him.

"I'm pretty sure there's more to it than that, Wilson," she said, following him out further into the field. He just shrugged.

"Yeah...mind the recoil. You'll break a wrist if you're not careful. Line the shot up with your eye, hope for the best. If we make it out of here I'll take you to a range, show you properly; but we can't waste bullets or make too much noise here."

"Show me how to hold one, at least," she insisted.

"Yeah...all right," he said, stopping and turning. "Can't hurt. This though –"

He whipped his stick down. She shrieked and barely blocked it; her own stick raised and was nearly torn out of her hands with the strength of his blow. Worst of all, he was grinning.
"– this is gonna hurt!"

"You son of a bitch," she blurted, and then hell began to rain down on her.

Wilson, for his sins, appeared to be having a great time. It took him about three seconds to send Worth's stick flying, and she got a welt on her shoulder for her troubles.

The worst part was, he didn't stop.

"What, afraid of a little lovetap, Worth?" he shouted, basically chasing her around the field while she flailed and dodged desperately.

"You're a sadist, Wilson!" she shouted back, somehow managing to turn a full-body trip into a backwards kick that actually hit his shin. He'd hit her legs immediately, she knew, so as fast as she could she rolled and hooked his legs, sending him to the ground. All the bastard did was laugh, like she had done something amusing. So she threw dirt in his face, grabbed his stick, and ran.

"You should have gone for my legs while I was down!" he said, rolling up. She held the stick close to her, wondering if she could use it as a distraction instead of a weapon, since she had no idea what she was supposed to do with it.

"Noted, Wilson – next time, go for the crotch," she said, smirking when his grin dropped a fraction.

"Now, now, Worth...no need to go to extremes," he said, faking pleasantness while he slowly advanced. Her smirk just widened.

"'I can't go easy on you,' you said. 'No mercy, Worth', you said. Or something like that, wasn't it?" She laughed when he dived for her, even though he caught her right around the middle and they hit the ground, hard. All the wind knocked out of her, and the stick went flying. So she stuck her fingers in his eyes and rolled away when he lunged back, howling, and grabbed the stick.

The sound it made connecting with his head was so satisfying.

"Ow," said Wilson.

"Oh, come on, that could hardly have registered compared to what you've been through before," she scoffed. "So is this like a points system, or..?"

He took the feet from under her. She'd never seen somebody move that fast, and she had a split second staring up at the sky before he started hitting her with the damned stick.

"You and I have very different definitions of love taps!" she shrieked, rolling and trying to escape.

"We're trying to work on your reflexes – you don't want to get hit, you'd better learn how to dodge!"

The training went about as well as could be expected after that declaration. Hours later, Wilson sauntered and Lian limped back to the plane, with Wilson disgustingly cheerful and tossing the stick up and down in the air. She just glared at him and silently started to build the fire in preparation for the evening.

"You want to check the snares, Worth?" said Wilson, almost convincingly casual. She paused in the middle of teasing apart some fibres to act as a tinder nest.

The previous few mornings he had let her follow him around the nearby forest, setting invisible snares and stalking deer. They had only ever caught anything in the snares, since she hadn't been
quiet enough to get close to anything larger, but she hadn't been out on her own yet. She hadn't left
the plane actually, not by herself, not since she got here. The only times she had been alone was
when Slade had left to hunt and gather – Yao lingered around her now and again but usually left
whenever Slade did, likely because he still sensed her hesitance around him. Otherwise, they
performed chores or training together, unless they were gone for so long that her restlessness took
over and she tidied. One day she had even used a torn up tree branch to sweep out leftover debris –
stones and leaves and chips of metal – that Slade tended to ignore entirely. He had made no comment
on the cleaning, probably because the plane didn’t look very different despite best efforts.

*Even on this stupid island I'm still a housewife,* she thought sourly.

"Yeah," she said out loud. Wilson just nodded, concentrating now on cooling-down exercises. He’d
dlong since taught her how to find her way back using the compass and subtle landmarks. Her sense
of direction had always been pretty good anyway, once she'd known where she was going and
where she had come from.

"How long have I been here?" she asked, as an afterthought. The kindling was ready; it just needed a
spark later on.

"On the fuselage?" Wilson paused. "Almost a couple of months."

She stewed for a few minutes in that knowledge. "You've been scouting, haven't you?"

He gave up on stretching and sighed, leaning against the wall. "Yeah. Haven't picked up anything
useful. It's starting to look like we'll have to infiltrate the main camp if we want to get any idea of
when the next plane arrives." He hesitated; since he rarely hesitated at anything, she knew what he
was about to ask her. Her mind had already blanked out the answer, a mental brick wall standing
between her now and her...before.

"I don't remember anything about dates," she said. After a moment, she added: "I lost sense of time
there. I don't know how you're keeping track, to be honest."

He just grunted and didn't elaborate, moving away towards his weapons. Halfway there he stopped,
swinging his head around.

"Where's Yao Fei?" he asked. She looked around, even though it was futile; the plane was empty of
the other man.

"It's not like he lives here..." she said, despite the nervousness rising. Usually if one of them was
there, he hung around, watching; his absence was a break in his pattern. She felt around for her
knife, gripping it tightly. "He never said he was going to stay here permanently."

Wilson didn't answer; just started rummaging around the place like he was looking for something.

"What are you –" She started, but he interrupted with a sharp noise of relief and pulled out the map
from underneath a stone; it had been lying on top of a box, only obvious once it was pointed out due
to it matching the colours of the camouflage.

"I thought –" He shook his head sharply. She stared.

"What, that he'd betray us?" she said. "But he knows every inch of this island! Why would he need a
map?"

"He could be lying," Wilson growled, slapping the map in one hand. "We only have his word for
everything he said. He could have been lying about the landmines and about escaping."
"What? But – didn't he save you –?"

"Isn't his story the exact same as the one he gave us about the mercenaries trying to trick him?"

Wilson began to pace, checking his weapons without really looking at them. "A prisoner, barely escaping the people hunting him down, looking for safety, with a common enemy. He presents himself as a superior source of knowledge and we just took it for granted. I took it for granted."

Her head spun with confusion. "But why would he help them – they're – they –"

"He didn't know why they were looking for him," he said. "He was a revolutionary, sent to hell by his government. Separated from his children. He lost everything and couldn't even die to escape it. Maybe the mercenaries gave him a better offer. Maybe he was hunting me."

"Slade, he helped you escape," she said, going to him. She clenched her hand briefly, but managed to force it down on his arm. He looked down at it sharply, then up at her, almost confused.

"It could have been a calculated risk," he said, not moving. Underneath her hand he was a still as the earth, like he was going to startle her by moving. Hell, he might just. "I wouldn't talk under torture. Give me a desperate escape, an impossible beneficiary, a common enemy – who knows what I might say under the circumstances."

"Wouldn't it just be the exact same information as your partner gave?" she reasoned. His face cleared slowly, like an inner light had gone off behind his eyes.

"...you remember that conversation?" he asked quietly.

Apples. Numb wet cold. Starving and hurt to the point of despair, and a man out of nowhere who said he wasn't going to touch her and then didn't. She had been out of her mind, but the words that permeated the fog had lingered, shining and sharp as broken glass.

"I've got a few things floating around up there," she hedged. "Anyway, I'm not wrong. You said...they laughed. As they tortured you. Slade, they don't need you, they don't need your information. If they did, they wouldn't have just handed you off, right? They would have given you to their...professionals."

"I'm still a liability," he said grimly. "If I escape, I can rain down on them."

"They wouldn't need to con you for that," she insisted. "If Yao Fei is working for them, then it's not because of you. They don't need information from you; they need you dead. He could have killed us a hundred times over. There's no reason for him to be working with them."

"He might hate China," he said. "He might want to hurt his country. It abandoned him, and abused him before that."

"...doesn't he have any family living?" she said.

"He hasn't seen his daughters since they were born," said Slade, turning away. Her hand fell from his arm; the palm burned. "There was a file we were given before we came here. Two daughters. And he's been on this island over twenty years. They were born after he arrived."

"Does he know about them?"

"He knew his wife was pregnant with girl twins, as far as I can tell. I doubt he even knows their names, though."
She wrapped her arms around herself, shivering. Slade's shoulders slumped and he pinched his eyes, slapping the map intermittently against his thigh.

"I panicked," he allowed. She sighed, even as he continued. "But there is a chance that Yao Fei wasn't working with the mercenaries because he didn't know why they needed him. He could still agree with hurting Hong Kong."

"But they'd just kill him afterwards," she said. "Look, Slade, we're just going in circles. There's no way to tell, and no reason to make assumptions."

"I shouldn't have just...believed him," he growled, angrily staring at the folded up map.

"You have to trust someone, Slade," she said wearily. "You'll go crazy, otherwise."

The look he threw her was dark and unfathomable, but he glanced away just as quickly, opening the map instead. He froze.

"Worth, did you leave it on the top of those boxes?" he asked slowly.

"No..." she said, confused. "It was in your backpack. I put it back there myself. What –"

He turned slowly, showing her the opened map. There was a new mark – a circle around another piece of the forest, with a bit of Chinese written next to it. She took it in her hands.

"Can you read that..?"

Slade nodded. "It says, 'I'm here'." She stared at the map and he added, "It could be a trap, though."

She made sure the map was carefully folded up before she hit him with it. "Come on!" she said, pushing the map at him and turning to get her backpack ready. "He left us a note. It's not like there's a lot to write on around here. You've got to have a little faith in people, Wilson."

"There's a time and a place for faith," he replied, but he started assembling his gear as well. "And this island is no church."

"Has anyone ever told you what a massive drama queen you are?" She scoffed. "'No church'. For heaven's sake. You know what I meant."

"I stand by what I said," he insisted, pulling his pack on. "It could be a trap."

"Good thing I've been working on my dodging skills all day then," she replied. "And you've been promising for days that you'd take me scouting, properly. No time like the present."

"If it turns out to be a trap, I'm exclusively blaming you, madam."

"You're whining, but here you are – still doing what I tell you to do. You make yourself out to be a tough guy, but you have problems telling people no, don't you?"

He grunted, and she grinned smugly – turns out there was a point system after all.

Chapter End Notes

Feeling a lot better now, but still totally lacking energy. Not looking forward to all the
work left to be done before we have to move! But at least the house is nice and clean.

Comments are very welcome and it's really encouraging to receive them. Please consider leaving one. I also have a tumblr under the same name, kako-pumpkin. Hope you enjoyed the chapter! If the next one is a bit late, apologies - we'll be in the middle of moving during the weekend and I'm not sure what the story is with internet. In any case, have a nice rest of the week! :-}
Chapter 10

It was a long trek to Yao’s hideout, and it took them past an enormous waterfall that sprayed icy freshwater into the air, masking the noise they made with the roar of the tumbling waters. Slade let them rest a few minutes despite the openness of the area; the map still showed the area was far from camps, and there were no signs of footprints no matter how closely he looked. Still, he kept his eyes peeled and his gun ready as Lian knelt carefully by the water and pressed handfuls of it to her face. The sighs she gave were muted but telling; he’d long since gotten used to dirt and sweat from years of missions, and hadn’t really noticed how filthy he was. Lian was in no better shape, and there was only so much that could be done with a rag and a dish of rainwater. It would be nice to rinse out his clothes. Even in the most remote of mission spots, he’d always had a bit of soap on hand or a spare shirt. What hadn’t been destroyed by the crash, however, had since been spoiled by weather. And Slade didn’t think it was sensible to go raiding camps for toothpaste and safety razors, no matter how badly he needed a shave.

"Can you swim?" asked Lian suddenly, back turned to him as she refilled her canister.

"Don't talk by water," he replied. "It carries an echo."

"Is that a no?"

He mulled over the answer. Meanwhile, Lian stoppered her can and came behind him, pulling out his water bottle from the side of his flak. Without speaking, she returned to the bank to fill it up.

"I love swimming," he answered, finally deciding on the truth. "Just not in an icy waterfall that's probably filled with sharp rocks at the bottom."

She laughed. After a moment she walked back and replaced the bottle in the pocket she had pulled it from. "So what's the difference between a sadist and a masochist?" she asked, like she was teasing him. Her personality was really starting to re-establish itself; in offhand jokes and casual glares, things that managed to slip past the glazed eyes and tense mouth. Amazing what a few knife lessons and survival skills could do.

That, and the compartmentalisation. He could spot that a million miles away. Blindfolded.

"A masochist would jump into that water," he replied. He chanced grinning at her; the sharp one with his teeth. She raised her eyebrows, unimpressed, so he tried looming. "A sadist would push you in. Then laugh."

She shrieked when he advanced half a step, but there was a laugh behind it.

"You're such an asshole," she said.

"That's what the 'A' in my middle name stands for," he agreed, beginning to walk again.
"Oh, yeah?"

"Nah." He paused. "It's Joseph. My middle name."

She seemed to mull it over while they walked. "Slade Joseph Wilson. It's a good name."

He just grunted, keeping an eye on the treeline. They were going to skirt around the forest to try and cut down their travel time. It was a risk, but he needed to know whether Yao Fei was someone he could, if not trust, at least rely on. This was either a trap, or his base of operations. In any case, they were still a bit away from finding out.

After a few minutes silence, Lian spoke. "I don't have one."

Slade glanced at her. "A middle name?"

Lian's face scrunched like she was trying not to sneeze. He recognised it as the face she made while she was mentally trying to put together words she wasn't sure she wanted to say. It was a familiar face at this point. He sighed, but before he could speak – to tell her, again, that she didn't have to talk if she didn't want – she continued.

"My father was from Gotham, my mother from Stung Treng Province…it’s in Cambodia. He was a doctor that travelled over there, and she...I'm not sure. I think she was just a farmer's daughter. As in, I don't think she had a career as such, she worked on her family’s farm. But she either couldn’t or didn’t want me, and my father brought me back to Gotham with him."

"That was nice of him," said Slade. It was, sort of. Knocked up a local farmer's daughter, but at least got rid of the kid for her. Lian hummed noncommitally.

"He died. I barely remember him. But my grandfather – on my mother's side – he wrote to me. It's how I learned Khmer. He wouldn't talk about his daughter – I think she got married and moved away – but he'd talk about anything else. I didn't graduate high school, I never went to college. America is expensive. My father was a doctor, but not a wealthy one. He left a lot of debts." She fell silent; this time it was deeper, and darker. Whatever she was remembering –

"I got married. Had two kids. Taught myself cooking, worked in a restaurant, taught others." Her voice grew faint. "And then our house burned down."

"Jesus." Slade stared at her, but had to look away. She shook her head, gave a half-laugh.

"And then less than a month later, my grandfather dies! He was all I had left. He was the whole damn reason I was even on that plane in the first place. I never got to say goodbye. To anyone."

They walked in silence for a while, Lian's eyes fastened on the ground. Slade kept watch on the treeline, gradually steering them towards mild coverage.

"No wonder you're pissed," he said eventually. He wasn't looking at her, but he could guess her expression – confused.

"...what?"

"Life can only throw so much at you before you start punching back," he clarified. "People have breaking points. Except sometimes they don't put themselves back together afterwards."

She frowned, thinking hard. "So I'm putting myself back together...as what, a killing machine?"
He chuckled despite the seriousness of the conversation. "It suits you," he said. "You like the knives. You like swinging those sticks around. Makes you feel powerful, right? Knowing how to kill and hurt. Knowing that you can."

She was silent for a few moments. "Hurting people is wrong," she said quietly. Slade turned to her.

"Not if they're the ones trying to hurt you," he said, sharply. "Not if they're the bad guys. And contrary to most ethics classes, there's always a bad guy. The bad guy is always the person trying to hurt you. Hurt them first, Lian. That's survival."

She smiled, watery. "You make it sound pretty simple."

"That's because it is," he said, turning away and continuing his walk. "I'm not saying you're going to suddenly develop a taste for torture – but you shouldn't be afraid if you do. Bad things have happened to you. Own it before it destroys you. Face it head on. And if you can hold on to a moral here or there – well, that's more than a lot of us manage most days."

"You give one hell of a pep talk, Wilson," she said, but there was no fire behind it.

He sighed, then grumbling, said, "I'll teach you about guns later today. We'll come across a patrol one of these days and you'll need to know how to use one."

Lian didn't reply. When he dared chance a look, she was smiling at the ground, eyes turned away. So at least there was that.

~~~

Hours later, and maybe a couple dozen muted tips about noise control and tracking, instinct made Slade freeze in his tracks. Lian, to her credit, froze right behind him, waiting for a signal. There was barely any sound. A slight breeze rustled some leaves, but other than that, nothing. So then, what had he heard?

"Worth, back to back," he murmured, and she turned as softly as she could so as to press her back against his. She didn't give so much as a tremble; he could feel her shoulders tense in a familiar pattern and with a grim sense of pride, knew that she had already drawn her knife.

"I've got nothing," she murmured back, just as quietly.

"Keep looking."

Long tense moments drew out, until a split second noise caused him to dive over her, shielding her body and landing them both on the ground. To her credit, she had flung her knife hand to the side, so at least they wouldn't get impaled.

An arrow cracked to the ground and Slade stared at it for a second before he scowled darkly.

"Yao Fei, you bastard," he growled, shoving off the ground. Lian managed to push herself up with a little more grace, pulling the arrow out of the earth. Yao essentially appeared out of nowhere – his green hood and dark hair offered him incredible camouflage in the surroundings. He'd never met someone who could so completely hide their presence as Yao did; his years of isolation on a deadly island had obviously yielded some benefits.

"Thanks for the note," sniped Slade. Yao simply retreated back into the dense greenery without speaking. Growling under his breath, Slade followed, with Lian on his heels.
The hidden path led down behind some mossy boulders, and after squeezing through a narrow passageway they arrived in what was obviously where Yao had been spending his days; the ground was covered with pelts, there were weapons and traps here and there, live fowl kept under carefully constructed baskets, and the beginnings of a small fire in a bowl of rocks. Unpleasantly, there was also a body lying full length on the floor. Slade stared, distantly hearing Lian's exclamation of surprise behind him.

The guy was alive, but unconscious; deeply so. He forehead beaded with sweat and his clothes were filthy and totally unsuitable for the island terrain and weather. His shirt had been removed and his shoulder was wrapped tightly in bloody strips of cloth, a few herbs poking out the sides. He showed obvious signs of mild starvation and his clothes had serious water damage; poor sod must have washed up and been shot by the mercenaries first thing.

"How'd he get that?" asked Slade, pointing to the shoulder. He could have slapped himself in the face when Yao blatantly looked over at his bow before concentrating again on the body.

"You shot him?" Lian exclaimed. "He's unconscious from just that? He'll probably die from infection!"

Yao looked down at the body impassively, then looked back up. "He woke up twice," he replied. "To eat, to drink. I have kept him sleeping. He requires rest." Slade growled.

"Is this where you went earlier?" he said. "You were dragging bodies around?"

"He did not immediately die," replied Yao. "He is strong. He could be useful."

"Yao, the last thing we need at this point is more dead weight." Slade nudged the body with his boot; sure, there was a six pack, but it had clearly come from a gym. The boy's hair was cut horribly, and the only marks he appeared to have were from Yao's tender care, instead of from life handing out its bloody medals as it was supposed to do. On top of that, the remains of his clothes had obvious brands; three different kinds. It was some trust fund brat, probably American, who had likely been yachting around the ocean before things went arse up for him.

"You should have left him for dead," he said finally, annoyance flaring up. He ignored the sharp look Worth gave him; it had to be said. Every tiny action was crucial to their survival, and Yao had just landed them with a giant problem.

"He will be useful," said Yao. "All things happen for a reason. Fate led him to this island, as it did for all of us. This life is not finished with him yet."

"You're setting him up for capture and torture," said Slade bluntly. "I'm not going to train him. Lian is one thing, but this guy –"

"He has the will to survive," insisted Yao. "He will be useful."

Slade had to turn away; red was descending again. "I can't believe this."

"How do you know he wasn't a spy?" asked Lian. Good question. Slade was curious to hear the answer. Yao glanced down at the body, the chest rising and falling, shoulder swathed in stained clothes.

"There are many ways to lie," he said finally. "But you cannot lie to pain."

"...are you telling us that you determined he wasn't a spy...by torturing him?" said Lian slowly. "You didn't shoot him to protect yourself? You deliberately shot him somewhere non-fatal but problematic
enough that he'd have to react honestly?"

Yao nodded.

"...that's torture, Yao," she said.

He nodded.

"Yao couldn't be sure that the guy wasn't a mercenary," interrupted Slade, loathe as he was to point it out. "If he had turned out to be a mercenary, you wouldn't be complaining, would you?"

"I'm not complaining," muttered Lian. "I have more of a reason to hate those bastards than either of you put together."

"It's not a competition, Worth," said Slade, shaking his head in mock disapproval.

"Ah, shut it." Lian glowered.

"You have the will to survive," said Yao. "You know why you fight, why you live. As does Slade Wilson, as do I. This boy has the will, but does not yet recognise it for what it is. I will teach him this. You –" He directed this at Slade. "– will teach him how to fight."

Slade backed away. "The hell I will!" he snapped.

"You will," said Yao calmly. "Because we have less than two weeks before the supply plane arrives and leaves."

They stared at him. Offhandedly, as though he had just remembered, Yao added: "I infiltrated the camp. I stayed close by the supply tents and eventually overheard their complaining. We have a date for our departure. And we are not leaving this man behind."

Slade gritted his teeth, glaring down at the unconscious body. "Barely a man," he gritted out. "He looks like he's still in college, if even that. Probably closer to you in age, Worth." When he got no reply, he turned to find her staring at him in disbelief. "What?"

"Slade, I've got like ten years on this kid," she said disbelievingly. "How old did you think I was?"

He didn't answer, his brain trying to sort out something that wasn't even mildly offensive. After a long thirty seconds, he decided to just change the subject. Too bad Yao was staring at him now with something approximating a smirk.

"All right," he said begrudgingly. "If you get him up and about by tomorrow, I'll train him."

"Two days," Yao countered. "I will meet you at the plane two days from now."

"Fine," Slade snapped, and turned to leave. "Good luck – you'll need it. Worth, let's go."

The kid would probably be dead in two days, anyway. Problem solved. In the meantime, he'd have to up the scouting, and start trusting Lian a bit more as his backup. She might not be a fighter like he was, but at least she'd actually killed, and proved willing to kill. Yao Fei had better be right, or they were all even more screwed than before.

Chapter End Notes
We're moving today! It's a monumental and exhausting task, and we'll probably be at it all weekend. Ooooh, I'm so tired already.

I've uploaded this chapter early because I'm not sure what the story is with the internet in our new place. It could be 1-2 weeks before we get broadband. I can use my husband's phone as a wifi hotspot, but in case that doesn't work out and you guys are left waiting...here's an early chapter! I'll do my best to get the next few out on time, but if they're not, just know that it's because of internet problems and not because I've forgotten.

Also, hooray! We're a third of the way through the story. Hope you're enjoying it so far. If you are, please consider leaving a comment, they're really nice to get and just plain encouraging and uplifting. Have a nice weekend! :-}
Slade had been mentally grumbling at an imaginary Yao Fei for the better part of the allotted two days. He'd just gotten Worth to the point where she might actually have a chance to survive the damned place, and now Yao wanted to bring in a new kid who was so useless he couldn't even take one arrow without passing out?

...all right. Maybe his own pain tolerance was a bit skewed. But the point still stood.

Lian, to her credit, didn't comment on the sudden uptake of ferocity in their training exercises. The stiffness in her earlier movements appeared to have faded away, and her eyes seemed a little brighter as time went on, gaining more focus and determination with each swing of the branch or throw successfully executed. He'd begun to teach her the basics of his guns, taking her through aiming both a handgun and sniper rifle, unloading, reloading, taking it to pieces and putting it back together. With their own deadline looming, each lesson was loaded with even more importance, and he was gratified to see her take it seriously.

She still woke with nightmares each night. But then, so did Slade. He never commented on the dwindling bundle of unrecognisable herbs kept hidden underneath the flak she hadn't worn in weeks; Yao Fei had left her something that she chewed each morning like clockwork, regardless of whether Slade was watching or not. She seemed to move easier after that night she and Yao Fei had returned late, so Slade was going with the assumption that it took away the pain, maybe even helped her muscles. Even when she caught him looking, Lian never volunteered details; just regarded him with a far off stare before swallowing and picking up some food. His silence wasn't just respecting her privacy; something about that stare put him off asking.

In any case, training was progressing smoothly and scouting turned up no mercenary activity in the area. It looked like things were going well...up until, of course, they suddenly weren't.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated Tuesday 13th December 2016. Please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.
blades leaving behind a loose whistling noise. He heard Lian sigh loudly; looking over, he saw that she had lain down inside the entrance, her legs remaining in the sun.

"If we go tomorrow we'll just end up missing each other in the forest," she said. He turned and resumed his drill as she spoke. "It's like when a phone call drops and you're both trying to ring each other back. You ring, it gets blocked because he's ringing, and he can't reach you because you're ringing him."

"...What."

"It's a mess, that's what it is," she said, kicking a leg out. "We're better off staying here, Wilson. You know I'm right."

"Do I?" he said flatly. His voice lacked the usual lilt at the end that typically denoted a question.

"Yes," she answered decisively.

...dammit. She was right. No use giving her the satisfaction though; he turned and continued his drill.

"No answer is still an answer, Slade," she said, her voice filled with smugness. He restrained a growl, starting a new exercise.

The kid could have gotten a fever; Yao might have gotten injured. Anything could have happened. There was no use marching over there and ending up in an empty cave while Yao Fei arrived with a greenhorn in tow to an empty fuselage. They said they'd meet here, so here he'd stay.

...he just didn't need a lack of punctuality on top of everything else, that's all.

"Worth, get over here," he called suddenly. "Let's work on your throws."

Lian sighed noisily but complied without complaint, putting her food to one side and sliding out the entrance.

"Did you even eat?" she asked, trotting over. Slade just put away his swords, leaning them against the fuselage. She sighed again.

"Slade."

He grunted.

"Slade."

"What."

"He's fine," she said. He threw her a flat look.

"If he's not, we're goosed," he said. "That's the problem. He knows a lot about us; he was with us for days. If he's been compromised in any way – and there's no guarantee that kid didn't give him trouble whenever he woke up – then that could be fatal for everyone. So it's not him I'm worried about, Lian – it's us."

She crossed her arms, just looking at him. He wondered if he looked as tired as she did; he was sure he must. Dirty didn't begin to describe their skin and clothing; her hair was as messy as the scruff he'd been trying to trim off his chin with a hunting knife, except that at least she could pull her hair back in a braid and fasten it with that leather string he'd pulled – a lifetime ago – from the inside of the former co–pilot's seat. Sweat and dirt stained their shirts, the unfiltered sun quickly turning his
natural sallowness to tanned brown, the tips of his ears still dark red despite weeks of conditioning in the elements. Lian, while already a natural brown, now had freckles bursting across her nose and cheekbones, clustered like tiny stars.

He roughly ran a hand through his hair, the wiry spikes nearly unmanageable; strands fell into his eyes now and again as he drilled. While he had managed to hold on to the majority of his bulk – a mostly red meat diet hadn’t hurt in that regard – she remained thin. He didn’t think she was a naturally a thin woman – not that he was any expert, by any definition – but the little muscle mass she’d put on in the preceding weeks had turned her wiry, her collarbones visible underneath her shirt. Abruptly, he wondered what she’d looked like before the island. Still very different to him, he was sure. Scars and hands built for killing. She'd have been softness and gentle fingers for home-cooked meals and children.

Now she was like him. Not so bulky, no – but a killer. A survivor. Scars, and hands built for killing.

He turned away. She followed.

“Slade,” she said.

“I’m right here, you don’t have to keep repeating my name.” Never mind that it sounded so strange, hearing his name said aloud, over and over. His nights of wandering the forest bleeding out; his days of surviving and hunting – his name had seemed completely unimportant in the face of the monumental task of escaping and living. When she said it like that, it became...important, somehow. It was an uncomfortable feeling.

She huffed. “Talk to me. Come on. We’re in this together, whether we like it or not.”

He shook his head, stretching his arm and walking out into the grass. “There’s nothing going on in my head,” he said. Not strictly true, but what he meant was that there wasn’t anything important going on up there. Nothing helpful, either.

She didn’t look like she believed him. He didn’t blame her.

“I know you’re worried about Yao Fei,” she said. “But there comes a point where worrying becomes a disadvantage. There’s only so long you can keep looking over your shoulder before you have to just point your head forward.”

“Well, thank you for that advice,” said Slade, deliberately snarky. He assumed a fighting stance and she gave him a flat glare, taking her own position opposite him.

“You bait people when you’re worried,” she said.

“Oh yeah? How’d you figure?”

“I saw you do it with Yao Fei.”

His stomach bottomed out. Had she understood –? “What do you – did you –”

She was watching him; watching his reaction, curiously, a little concerned. He tried to school his face back into something more neutral, away from the panic that had hit him hard and fast.

“I didn’t understand the words,” she clarified, still watching him. “But I picked up on the tone of voice. You got rattier and rattier –”

“I did not –” He bristled; she ignored him.
“Then he puffed up, took a breath, and calmed down. Also, I had children, Slade; both under four. I can spot a temper tantrum a mile off.”

The silence hit like a lead weight. Slade lowered his hands from their stance, and after a moment, so did she. Except where he stared right at her, she looked down and away, pinching her arm a little with one hand.

“…you don’t talk about them,” he said, eventually. She sighed.

“You don’t talk about yours,” she replied.

Slade swallowed hard. “…Joey,” he said, quietly. After a pause, he added, “I – failed him.” Shame made him look away from her; down at the green–grey grass and his own dirty hands.

“…I failed my kids too,” said Lian. When he dared to look up, he saw her cradling herself, fingers on one hand rubbing slowly against her neck. She was still looking away, eyes half shut. After a moment, she gave a little half–laugh that was filled with bitterness.

“You know, I don’t even have any burns from the fire?” she said, miserable. “My husband threw me out the first story window. I landed in our tree outside. Nearly lost my damn eye on a branch, twisted my wrist, got scratched up…but didn’t get so much as a singe. I was treated for smoke inhalation and minor injuries. They let me go the same night I got in.”

Slade shook his head. “Your husband was a brave man.” He was nearly startled into taking a step back at the sheer grief and anger that appeared on her face. Before he could say anything, it was gone – flitting away and leaving behind grey–tinged tiredness.

“Are we going to train?” she asked. Her voice was as exhausted as her posture.

He rubbed the back of his head, scratching and pressing down on the ache that was starting at the base of his skull. “…no,” he said finally. “Let’s just call in a night. So to say, anyway.” The sun was still out, after all. They walked back to the fuselage in silence, Lian starting to build the fire in preparation for the evening. He sat on his bedding and began to sharpen every knife he could get his hands on.

“Will you tell me about Joey?” she asked suddenly. He paused like a rabbit staring down headlights, but she hadn’t looked at him. She appeared to be devoting all of her attention on separating some twigs for tinder. So after a few minutes he just…pretended like he was talking to himself.

“I don’t know how old he is now,” he began, haltingly. “I’m – I was never going to be a good father. I tried. But he was – my job is dangerous, and it put him in danger, too. One year – he was five –”

He stopped, trying to control his breathing. That night…it was still the worst night of his life. Even the night Billy betrayed him had nothing on the night he had tracked Joey down and saw –

Because Slade dying on his own was one thing. That was just the way things could fall. But to let his helpless child get caught up in the mix –?

“He’d been kidnapped,” he continued. The whetstone flew over the blade and he focussed on the sound it made, comforting and sleek. “I didn’t get there in time to stop them from hurting him. They cut his throat. Just to hurt me.”

There was a small noise; Lian had dropped the pretence of making tinder and was now staring at him with her hands over her mouth and her eyes filled with tears. Hastily he added: “He’s alive. But he’ll never speak again; the damage was too intense. I – put him with a foster family, a pair of decommissioned ex–agents. They’ll be able to protect him if anybody else gets any bright ideas. And
he was so young…”

“You hope he won’t remember you,” she supplied when he trailed off, voice murmured through her fingertips. Slade put down the whetstone before he cut himself.

“…yes.” The word barely made it past his throat. Lian sat back heavily, putting her chin into her hand, fingers covering her mouth again.

“Oh, Slade…” she said, after silent minutes dragged out. “Is it possible for life to be anything except a giant, horrible mess?”

He managed a laugh; weak, but sincere. “No,” he said. “That’s a fairytale, and fairytales are bullshit.”

“Don’t I know it,” she agreed. She sighed heavily, pushing off the ground, and walking over to him. He watched her warily as she approached, staying perfectly still as she gently took the knife out of his hands and placed it to one side. He continued to stay motionless as she sat next to him, folding her legs to the side.

And then, with another sigh, she rested her head against his shoulder. Slade tried not to breathe.

“Yao Fei will show tomorrow,” she said quietly. “And if he doesn’t, we’ll just go to him. All right?”

“Fine,” he said, a little weakly.

“You smell,” she added. The spell was not entirely broken, but Slade pretended it was.

“You’re no spring bed of roses yourself, Madam,” he grunted. But he didn’t move his shoulder, even when his arm started to go a bit numb.

She snorted. “When we get back to civilisation, you won’t even recognise me,” she said. He chuckled at that, finding himself completely unable to imagine her dressed like a normal person; a dress, or jeans – jewellery. It was surreal.

“If you think that’s a strange image, try and picture me in a suit.” He grinned at the noise of disbelief she made; he hated suits with a passion, but they had a time and a place. That said, he hadn’t even worn one to his own wedding, or his son’s christening. So…when exactly was the correct time and place?

“I can’t picture you in a suit,” she declared. “No way. I bet you’ve never worn a suit in your life.”

“Tough mental image, right?”

“Well it’s not the suit, exactly,” she amended. “It’s that the suit implies that you’d be clean. I definitely can’t imagine you looking like anything except a filthy, stinky caveman.”

Spell broken. Slade moved half an inch and she slipped, hitting her back flat against the floor.

“Oi!”

He smirked down at her. “That’s for offending my delicate sensibilities, Madam,” he said, smugly looking down at her consternation. She tried to kick him; it connected, but it didn’t have any power behind it. She gave it up as a bad job and sat up on her elbows, glaring. Like the kick, there was nothing behind it.

“I didn’t realise you were so sensitive about your appearance,” she snarked. “I suppose that’s why
you’ve been butchering your face with hunting knife a few times a week?”

He laughed, picking up the knife and whetstone again. “Is this your way of asking for shaving tips, Worth?” he snipped back, grinning at her exclamation of shock. Surprise, he didn’t think women were magical creatures who didn’t sweat, shit, or snore. A monster of an ex–wife had quickly disabused him of any fantasies that had survived the initial bout of black ops training.

“Such disrespect,” she whined, folding her hands over her stomach. “I don’t know how I put up with you.”

“It’s my sparkling personality.”

“…no. It’s definitely not that.”

“Check the snares, Worth,” he said easily.

“Rabbit,” she replied morosely, but got up without question. He shook his head, laughing under his breath as she trooped out, hopping easily through the entrance. It turned into a full bark when she called back from out of sight: “You’re not the boss of me, Wilson!”

Tomorrow was another day, he thought, shaking his head. But today wasn’t really all that bad, now was it? Well, it could definitely be better. A lot better. But…it wasn’t all that bad, no.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was humbly brought to you by my husband's wifi hotspot! Internet is proving troublesome, but at least the heating's working properly! Apartment is 90% there, just a few more boxes in the spare room to sort. We're aaaaaching after working three and a half days solid, but it was worth it - it's really coming together. Really happy with it, AND we've got our tree up and the decorations out! So it's looking the part.

Hope the holidays are treating you all well and you're enjoying the lead up to the season crescendo. Please consider leaving a comment, as they're really nice to get! Hope you enjoyed the chapter - so long as my husband's data doesn't run out, the next one should be on time. See you next time! :-}
Chapter 12

The following day dawned and closed. Yao Fei didn’t come. They shared a dark look with one another before turning in for the night. Hardly a word had passed between them the entire day; Slade kept his pessimism to himself. There’d be plenty of time for that tomorrow.

The dawn was clear and warm, though the sky quickly clouded over with grey clouds, soaking the earth with humidity. They didn't waste much time waiting around; within an hour of waking, both were packed and ready to go. Whatever optimism Worth had – somehow – found the day before last was muted in the face of the situation. Even the forest seemed quieter than usual, as though the oppressing uncertainty affected not just the birds and animals, but the wind and sunlight, too.

Slade shook himself. The mood lingered, so he picked up the pace, rolling his shoulders and wondering if he should have left his swords behind – again. He was faster without, yes, but it seemed that having their weight across his back had become more of an anchor than he realised.

"How you keeping up back there, Worth?" he asked, not looking around. She was breathing a little heavily, but hadn't complained at the pace.

"Hm," was all she said, clearly concentrating on her feet.

"Head on a swivel," he reminded her.

"Oh, shut up," she said crossly, taking larger steps to catch up with him. "I know that already."

His mouth tugged up at the corner a little. Without replying, he lengthened his stride. Didn't speed up or anything; just stretched his legs a little longer than he usually would.

"I know what you're doing," she said after a minute. Her breathing was getting shorter.

"...walking?" he said. His face could never look innocent, but damn did Slade try. He easily dodged a swipe she threw in his direction. And he didn't slow down.

"Men!" she exclaimed.

He laughed. "What?"

"You're all the same," she huffed. Taking pity on her, he slowed down. She rubbed underneath her ribs; obviously a stitch was forming.

"Husband pulled that shit," she mumbled to herself, under her breath and so quiet Slade barely heard. "...Dad, too." She was looking far away now, some memory deep inside her head.

"What was his name?" asked Slade, before she got too lost.
"Who?"

"Your husband's." He realised suddenly that although he'd told her Joey's name – rare as it was that he ever felt like even thinking about it – he knew very few specifics about her before the island. Plenty of loose details – grandfather dead, father dead, husband and children dead, worked as a chef – but hard facts were still missing, especially regarding the people. Where in Gotham had she lived? How old was she? How had that fire started? He at least assumed that her surname was her husband's, although it could have been her father's; Worth didn't sound like a traditional Cambodian farming name. Not that Slade was any judge, of course.

He also didn't miss the fact that the other night he'd given far more details about his past – things he barely thought about when he was alone, even – than she had ended up sharing with him. Usually he wouldn't care about another person's private life; he wouldn't find it relevant to the mission, he wouldn't ask or wonder or want to know more. But he found himself curious, somehow, and he didn't consider himself a naturally curious person.

Which is why he found it so strange, he supposed, when Worth's response to his question was to startle like she'd been pinched, and dart an unreadable glance at him before quickly looking away.

"Why do you want to know?" she asked, quickly. Slade stared at her, and she flushed.

"Sorry," she said. "It's not – I just...don't want to talk about him, that's all."

"Did he hurt you?" Slade asked sharply, a worm of dread twisting in his stomach. He was relieved when she immediately shook her head.

"No – no, god no," she said. "Nothing like – that. It's just hard. I...still see his face sometimes."

She obviously didn't mean in pleasant, summery daydreams. Slade turned away, putting his concentration into where he placed his feet and cursing his sudden and uncharacteristic nosiness.

"...sorry," he said after a moment. Lian murmured something in reply. They walked in silence for a few more minutes, passing by the waterfall they had encountered in their first trip. She looked at it longingly, but didn't ask to stop. Once they were back inside the forest, she spoke, quietly.

"David," she said. "And Michael."

For a moment Slade thought she was volunteering her husband's name, but the second name threw him off. Then it clicked. "Your children," he said. When all she did was give a soft, controlled exhale in reply, he added, "Those are good names."

"Mm. Both under four."

Right – he remembered that, from the other evening. "That must have been fun, two of them under four," he tried, after a long beat of silence. The responding laugh was weak, but the humour inside it was definitely present.

"Joey was a quiet kid," he offered after a few minutes. "Only cried when he was hungry."

Lian chuckled. "That was Michael," she said. "David was a nightmare. He had his mind made up in the womb that he was boss. I was always sure that Michael was our reward for going through David's cradle tantrums. And he was not happy when Michael came out – he wanted a sister. As much as he could understand who the new baby was, anyway." She sighed. "I would've liked a daughter..." she added, wistfully. "Would've name her Rose."

"That's a pretty name," said Slade, for complete lack of anything better to say. And, honestly:
"Dunno what I would've done with a girl."

Lian laughed. "You'd have been a pushover, Wilson," she teased. "All Dads are the same. She'd have you wrapped around her little finger the second you laid eyes on her."

Slade chuckled. "You're probably right."

Lian straightened abruptly, then looked over at him with a sly sort of smile. "Slade..."

He narrowed his eyes suspiciously at her. "...what?"

"I've just realised that you don't know my full name," she said.

He frowned at her. "What do you mean? You said you didn't have a middle name."

"It's Lillian," she said. "Lillian Worth."

"...oh." He took a minute to process that.

Wait.

"...your name is Lillian and you would've named your daughter Rose?" he said. It was her turn to narrow her eyes and slowly frown at him.

"...yes? Why?"

Slade feigned nonchalance. "Nah, nothing. It's just..."

"Just what, Wilson?"

He grinned down at her. "Well...it's not exactly original, is it? Ow. Not the face, Worth."

"It's not like I could make it any worse," she grumbled.

"What? Dirt–streaked caveman's not doing it for you?"

"Ah. So you admit that you're a caveman."

Slade paused. He reconsidered the entire conversation. "...head on a swivel, Worth," he said.

"Uh–huh." She practically radiated smugness, although he was gratified that in the next moment she had turned back to seriousness, her hand resting on her knife.

The walking was somehow easier this time around; Slade's free hand, the one not kept close to his gun, pressed briefly against the scabbed wounds along his stomach. They would certainly scar, but the messiness would be because of his own stitching as opposed to Billy's tender mercies. He could say a lot about the man – a lot – but he did neat work. Slade just hadn't ever, ever expected to be on the other side of that.

In any case, his wounds were healing well. Lian seemed less stiff as each day went by, which had definitely helped with training her. Their pace as they reached Yao's hideout was overall quicker, quieter, more alert than any other scout or forage run they'd done together in the previous weeks.

This may have been their saving grace – otherwise, luck, and only luck, stopped them from walking slap bang into the middle of a group of mercenaries.
In a flash, Slade had whipped both of them underneath a thick bush, the only available source of cover in the area that was near enough. His throat tightened when the patrol didn't move on; in fact, they were snapping and shouting at others to stay in place. Portuguese, Italian, Russian. One or two English, no Americans as far as he could tell – but there had been Americans, back at the camp he'd been held in. Slade heard some Polish. A lot of them were speaking Spanish, but not as their native tongue; the words were cuffed and mangled.

They were pouring in. Some even brushed against the bush. Orders were being barked to search the entire cave, to secure the area, to stand guard. Slade kept his hand firmly on Lian's shoulder; half for her benefit and half for his. She didn't so much as tremble, but he thought that might have been because she was utterly terrified. Slade wasn't exactly comfortable himself; every second was spent watching, muscles cording in preparation, fingers clenching his gun in anticipation of drawing and firing as quickly as he could.

The mercenaries evidently didn’t find Yao Fei, or anything else of interest in the cave. They almost descended into a massive fist fight, tempers rising and miscommunication rife. One stumbled into the bush, but a fellow merc grabbed him, swinging him around for another punch. Slade tried to pry his fingers off of Lian's shoulder – the last thing she needed was more bruising – but he found it impossible. Any second now, and they'd be discovered. Any second now, and they'd be dead. Worse than dead. He tried to focus, but it was this part he hated the most; you could only plan for a fight once you were in the middle of it. He was confident he could take out at least ten of the men, especially with a surprise attack. He only needed to get the immediate area clear before they could make a run for it. He could use the mercenaries' guns against them; no need to worry about noise. No need to worry about making their deaths quiet – just quick.

Then, amazingly...they started to leave.

Slade held his breath. Bit by bit, the mercenaries filtered out, grumbling and sniping to one another about the waste of time, the lack of action. They hadn't been told why they were sent out, either. Annoyance was dark and prevalent – amongst this group, at least. Slade wondered if any of them would really complain if he did end up killing their boss.

An age passed before they all left and the sound of their boots faded entirely. Still, Slade waited – until the animals started coming back, until the background noise reasserted itself. Then, and only then, did he manage to pry his fingers from Lian's shoulder and cautiously stand.

The mercenaries had found Yao Fei's hideout. Slade could now guess why Yao hadn't shown the past few days – he was either being hunted...or he had been captured.

Neither boded well for them. At all. And all Slade could do about it was send a silent, fervent, curse towards the sky.

~~~

Lian’s mind blanked the second Slade shoved her underneath the bush and she realised what was happening: there were mercenaries surrounding them. And this time they couldn't rely on Yao to save them from the tree tops.

While the mercenaries moved about, Lian kept as still as she possibly could. Time lost all meaning as she waited, back aching, Slade's fingers digging holes in her shoulder. Her focus narrowed to the passing of each second, the feel of the ground shaking beneath the weight of the mercenaries running and walking, the smell of the dirt strong in her nose. She wasn't frightened. Her brain would have to be working properly to be frightened. As it was, she could only see the dirt; little rocks, tinier insects, rotting leaves. Her whole world became the smell of the earth, the shake of it underneath her knees,
the points of pain in her shoulder as Slade dug in, deeper and deeper –

The boots started converging, then headed into one direction. Like her head was underwater, she dimly became aware of shouting and angry voices, the sounds of fighting. It was lucky that Slade kept such a tight grip on her shoulder because one of them actually fell into the bush they were hiding in, before being yanked up by another. The fear began to seep in, then – the mercenaries were so close. So close. She could smell them, she could smell –

But the voices were moving away. Gunmetal and leather, sweat and piss and cigarettes; they faded. She was left with the smell of dirt, decayed and fresh all at once, overpowering. Slade didn't move, so neither did she. The ground seeped damp cold into her knees.

He smelled like the forest. Like dirt and decomposing foliage and skinned animals and burnt meat. Sweat, too. Metal, too. Stones and canvas. Unpleasant...but dissimilar. Lian closed her eyes until his fingers relented and he stood, slipping out of the bush and cautiously looking around. She took a longer moment to stand – inhale, exhale. Then she followed him, breathing carefully until her head cleared and she felt...a bit normal. What passed as normal for her now, at any rate. Nothing seemed amiss in the forest; sunlight sparkled through the leaves and the fresh smell of foliage mingled with the heavier scent of composting pine needles.

"They must have found him," said Slade shortly, voice hushed.

She deep another deep breath, inhaling through her nose. What Slade was saying – it didn’t seem possible. "He's stayed hidden for years; how could they find him?" she asked, looking towards the entrance of Yao's cave. It was now clearly visible amongst smashed bracken and smeared footsteps in the ground. She made a move towards it but Slade flung out an arm, keeping her still.

"Don't," he said, voice still quiet. It was barely above a whisper. "They could have booby–trapped it, or left a guard. Come on." He jerked his head and they left; Slade brought them some of the ways through the footsteps the mercenaries made, probably trying to obscure their own tracks, before veering off and taking another route.

Lian had always been cautious walking through the forest, even though she had almost always been with other people. Death could come from any direction, and she hadn't needed Slade to tell her that the mercenaries could pop up at any time. Seeing them so close, though – again – just reinforced her paranoia. She twitched at every chirping bird; flinched at every shadow. Her knife was waiting, and she was reasonably certain that she was ready to fight; not just mentally, but physically.

It was usually over so quickly, anyway, wasn't it? She just had to be faster.

The silence kept until they got closer to the plane, familiar trees blending into long grass. Only then did she dare to speak.

"How did they catch him, though?" she asked. "He knows this island inside out."

Slade growled, head still turning, still alert. "He let his guard down," he said. "That kid probably alerted a patrol by accident. Or else he really was a spy."

"Yao Fei said he wasn't, though," Lian disagreed. "Even if you still don't trust him –"

He half–turned, frustration evident on his face. "I don't not –"

"– you should at least try and trust his judgement," Lian finished, powering through his protesting. Slade didn't reply, but his shoulders went up and he turned abruptly away, stepping heavily into the
grass. Lian took long strides to catch up to him, pulling his arm back.

"Slade," she said.

"What do you want me to say, Worth?" he snapped. "We've got another unknown situation on our hands. Yao's place has been compromised. We don't know if he's been captured. We don't know what happened to the kid he had, and we now know that the mercenaries are getting closer to our hideout. If you're looking for a plan, I don't have one!"

"Not yet," said Lian, trying to remain calm. Slade just snorted, pulling away.

"I have to wonder how much shittier this place can get," he muttered. Lian startled when he froze mid–step.

"Wha –"

"Shh!" he snapped, holding his arm out. He waved his hand down and Lian lowered her body, matching Slade's posture as he crept through the long grass. Using it as cover, they slowly approached the plane the long way around, hopefully avoiding detection of whatever – whoever – Slade had seen. They stopped near the entrance of the plane, pressing their backs against the metal. Then she heard it.

"Hello?"

Someone was calling loudly from inside the plane. Her heart notched up its rhythm and she drew her knife.

"Is anybody here? Hello?"

Slade caught her eye. Using simple enough hand signals, he said, you stay here. I go in.

Lian shook her head, holding up her knife. Slade glared at her; she glared back. He repeated his hand signals more insistently.

"Helllooooo?"

He stared her down. Gritting her teeth, she nodded sharply, gripping her knife in a defensive position against her chest. Slade nodded in return, and in one smooth motion slipped in through the entrance. There was a cut–off yelp of pain and the unmistakable thud of a body hitting the ground. Lian waited.

"Huh...Worth?" called Slade. "You might wanna come see this..."

Chapter End Notes

We just got internet on Friday, woo hoo! Just about managed to get to my computer for an update - we were Christmas shopping, then cleaning all day, and now I'm stealth updating while the in-laws are visiting...heheheh. Home Alone is on in the background, the tree is lit up, and I've just had three cups of tea in a row. Life is going pretty good.

Hope the run up is treating you guys well, and that you enjoyed the chapter. Next week's chapter should be on time, knock on wood. It's also my last day at my current job.
job! Woo! To clarify as to why I'm excited, I'm going into a new job in January which is waaaaay better...yeah. Cool. :-) Anyway, please consider leaving a comment, they're really nice to get, and it is the season for giving! ;-) See you guys in a few days :-)
The conversation was distracting Slade, making tension rise up in his chest when he should have been concentrating on keeping a sharp eye out and getting back to the fuselage safely; he had to turn away from Lian, unable to look at her, unable to listen her request to trust Yao Fei’s judgement, not when he knew exactly where that man’s judgement had led before. His only plan had been to escape on a supply plane – and now that was potentially another disaster. He didn’t have any plan beyond that. And now he’d have to come up with something new, something that would save the day, get them off the island. But the doors were closing, and opportunities seemed to be slipping away no matter what Slade did. How much shittier could this place get, anyway?

And, heading towards the fuselage, there was a flicker – of something.

Slade's eyes told him that he was seeing things, it was nothing – his gut told him to fling out an arm and hush Lian. Every alarm he had honed into his body screamed at him to duck, to hide, to watch. There was somebody in the fuselage.

It was just a glimpse of movement as they had gotten closer – no colour, no shape, no noise. But he'd seen it; he knew what he'd seen. Lian, to her credit, followed him without question as he crept through the grass, circling the fuselage the long way around and pressing against the side of the metal.

"Hello?"

Slade glanced at Lian; pale, mouth set, and she'd immediately drawn her knife. Good.

"Is anybody here? Hello?"

Catching her eye, he used exaggeratedly simple hand signs; two fingers pointing at her, then at the ground, one finger pointing at himself and jerking towards the entrance. He could have growled when she narrowed her eyes at him and he repeated his signs, more insistently.

"Hellooo?"

She eventually backed down, although he didn't like how she seemed less affected by his darkest scowl. Nodding once, Slade turned and slipped through the entrance once he had made sure that the guy's back was turned.

The intruder was dressed in mercenary gear, only missing the typical mask and – oddly – weapons. Maybe there was a knife somewhere, but Slade doubted it. There definitely weren’t any guns; this guy's clothes didn’t even fit properly and his hair was filthy and overgrown. Slade stepped silently up behind him, preparing for the moment when the guy's instincts would kick in and he'd turn and see Slade, and defend himself.
The moment didn't come. The guy just stared at the ceiling of the fuselage, sighing noisily and putting his hand to his shoulder, rolling his back. Slade was almost tempted to stand behind the guy until he turned and got the shock of his life, but it was better to keep the advantage.

Slade raised his hand. It was a movement that had served him well countless times before, and it didn't fail him this time, either. He stared down at the body, and to his shock, he instantly recognised the prone form.

It wasn't a mercenary. It was that kid, the one from Yao Fei's cave.

"Huh...Worth?" he called. "You might wanna come see this..."

The kid had fallen with a just single blow, offering no resistance. He hadn't even tensed, and Slade contemplated the fallen body as Lian came up behind him and made a noise of curiosity.

"It's that guy," she said. "The one that Yao saved. How'd he find us?"

"Hmm." They'd find out soon enough. "Get some of that rope. He needs to be tied before he comes to."

"Knowing you that could be two days from now," grumbled Lian, but she did what he asked, pulling out a thick spool of rope from a box. He flung it over a hanging beam and secured one end, intending to string the kid up by his arms – a vulnerable position, and one most likely to quickly elicit panic, and therefore the truth. But the second he pulled the rope the kid groaned deeply, despite his unconsciousness.

"His shoulder," said Lian. Slade frowned at the body as she knelt, reaching for the kid's shirt.

"What are you doing?" he asked immediately, moving forward. She glared at him.

"He's unconscious," she said. "And you're here besides. Bare skin is nothing to be scared of."

"All right, good job on the self–pep talk, but you haven't answered my question –" Slade stopped as Lian pulled up the shirt.

Goddammit.

"He's been tortured," she said, softly, hitching up the shirt even higher. It revealed further lacerations, deep and neat. Torture for interrogation usually started with something small; finger, nails, ears, even knees and toes. The kid had no sign of those kinds of injuries. Whoever had been cutting him up had gone straight for the big stuff.

It was torture for the sake of it, without finesse or greater purpose. The kid hadn't even been interrogated; that, or he was a lot more stubborn than he looked. No, he'd been tortured for fun. Like Slade...like Lian.

"Son of a bitch," he said quietly. "Put his shirt back on."

"He needs to be treated," said Lian, even as she complied.

"He can do that himself when he comes to," Slade grunted, looking around for that broken pilot's chair he had tossed in a pile somewhere, months ago when he'd first come across the plane.

"I couldn't do it when I first got here," said Lian, almost like she was protesting. Pity shone in her eyes, and Slade was suddenly overtaken by impatience.
"That was different," he said shortly. "You were – you weren't all there. You needed to know that you could trust me, or else you might have gotten an infection."

"You don't know if he's all there, Slade," she replied, standing and putting her hands on her hips. Like she was a shield for the kid, or something. "You don't know what they did to him."

Slade jabbed a finger at her. "Your torture was different," he said, even though it felt like it was treading thin ice. He hadn't actually voiced opinions on what had happened to her – because why would he? – and seeing her eyes narrow, he was guessing she didn't like it. Well, tough.

"It was different," he insisted. The water was over his head now, might as well keep going. "They kept you isolated for months. They hurt you in every way a man can hurt a woman –"

"Just say it, Slade!" she exclaimed, face reddening. "I was raped! Just say it! They tortured me! I know! I was there. And you helped me when I had completely given up on ever feeling like a normal human being again. I get that you must have endured some shit things along the way, but we don't have to be like them. You helped me, you helped me trust you. If you hadn't that night, I don't – I'm already messed up just processing the garbage they put me through. When I was at my weakest, you showed me that I didn't have to just give up – that hurting them wasn't just an option, but a decision I could make for myself!"

"Lian –" He covered his eyes with one hand, sighing deeply, trying to calm himself.

"Doesn't he need to trust us too?" she insisted.

"You can't just keep trusting people like this!" he snapped.

"And if I don't I'll spend the rest of my life looking over my shoulder waiting for the next person to come along and hurt me again!" she shouted back. "I have to trust, Slade! I have to! I'll go crazy if I don't give people the benefit of the doubt, if I don't force myself to!"

He held out a palm, trying to placate. "You can't just trust every single person that you come across –"

She threw up both hands in the air, visibly frustrated. "Obviously if they're twirling their moustaches and cackling over tied up women on train tracks I won't think – hey, I'll give that guy a chance, I shouldn't judge, right?" she said acidly. "But is this really the lesson you want me to take away here? Trust no–one? Just stay isolated? I would have thought that everything we've experienced here only proves that islands will kill you."

All he could do was stare down at the unconscious body, watching the young chest rise and fall. Long, tense moments passed.

"I can't think like you do," he said. "I'm not built for it. The life I've led..." He stopped, looking away. "I had one man I trusted above everyone else, and he..."

Lian sighed. He looked up to see her pressing the inner corners of her eyes. Slowly, she walked towards him; he froze. But without saying a word, she reached out, gently enfolding her arms around his head, pressing her cheek against his, her eyes closed and eyelashes dusted with wetness.

She was hugging him. His mind blanked.

"Slade, I know," she said. She spoke right next to his ear, but it was so soft he didn't flinch at the unexpectedness. "I know, I know...you've been betrayed. You've been hurt by someone you loved as family. I know. But if you can't trust again, what hope do I have?"
Slowly, hesitantly, almost unsure of his movements, Slade moved his arms, resting his fingertips on her back as gently as he could.

"It was different," he said. "You can't compare it – what happened –" He stopped when her arms tightened. After a moment, he dared to press his hands against her back. Her muscles didn't so much as shiver.

"But if I can, can't you?" she whispered. "If you really think that my experience was worse, and I can still try, can't you?"

Slade's throat went dry. At their feet, the kid slept on, completely unaware of the impossible conversation taking place above him.

"I'm not built for it," he said, but it was less sure now, less strong.

"Slade, please try," she said. "I don't think you're built to just give up if something's hard, do you?"

He let himself tremble. Just once. He couldn't remember the last time he had.

He'd never trusted a man like he had Billy Wintergreen. Billy was the man who convinced him he was worth something, not just a throwaway soldier, an unwanted son, a lousy husband. The man who consoled him after that shitty divorce, who spent all night getting him drunk when he'd found out he'd be a father. He'd been there the day Joey'd been christened, standing proudly as godfather. He knew every inch of Slade's soul, because Slade had laid it bare, seen no reason to hide every part of himself because Billy was his partner and that meant something. Slade had no–one until Billy took him under his wing, and Billy had repaid that by stringing Slade up on a bar and carving him to pieces in front of a slavering crowd of mercenaries while their watery–eyed bastard of a boss looked on, faintly disgusted at the show.

Slade had run ops all over the world in all kinds of nasty situations, endured all kinds of torture and hardships and abuse. But he wasn't sure if he was going to recover from this. From Billy. From what Billy had done to him, from what Billy had betrayed.

At his feet, the kid groaned. Slade moved, but Lian had latched on.

"Let go," he said, hating how his voice sounded.

"Promise me you'll try," she asked. He hadn't moved his hands. He was weak.

"I won't," he said.

"Slade, promise. Promise you'll try and trust."

"The only one in this whole damn world I trust right now is you," he admitted, fisting his hands in her shirt. The words came unbidden from some long–untouched place inside of him, becoming more true as he spoke. "And even then, Lian – deep down I expect you to one day just turn around and burn me. Without warning. Without letting me try and make it up to you, whatever wrong I did, whatever it is I lack that made you hurt me."

She kissed his temple, then; gently, like a goodnight kiss he used to give Joey, before he mucked that all up. He wrecked everything he touched. Every person he came into contact with. He ruined them and they turned on him eventually. It was his own fault.

"You're all I have," she said.
"Not forever," he countered. His hands begged him not to let go of her, so he let them lie where they were pressed, desperate. "Just until we get off this island. Just until you find something better. Until you realise you're better than anything I could give you."

"Slade, no matter where I go, you'll still be the person I trust first, before all others," she said, gripping his head in her hands. The tears were gone from her eyes; he lost himself in their fire for a few moments. "One day you'll accept that. The world keeps turning. Hurts will heal. But only if we keep moving forward. There's no other way through."

Slade shook his head, trying for a grin. He couldn't – he – this conversation had to stop. Now. He couldn't.

"You can tan hide, you can trap, you can gut – too bad there's no merit badge for therapy," he said lightly, blinking hard and trying to pull away. She kissed his temple again, sighing as she did so, before slipping her arms off his shoulders and letting him go. His hands burned from the warmth of her back. He clenched and unclenched his fingers, just silently staring down at the now nearly-conscious kid groggily twitching on the ground.

"Fine," he said, filled with weariness. "We'll do this your way, Worth."

When she pressed a hand against his arm, he had to close his eyes. Just for a moment. He only needed a moment. By the time the kid was blearily blinking up at them, Slade was all business again, smiling with his teeth and cracking his knuckles.

"Welcome back to the world of the living, kid," he said. "Although depending on what you have to say, you might just come to regret waking up at all."

Chapter End Notes

Finished my last day of work, until my new job starts in January! Just five days until Christmas, hope everyone's doing well. :-) Please consider leaving a comment, they're really nice to get. You can also find me on tumblr (kako-pumpkin). Hope you enjoyed this chapter, and see you next time!
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags - this one's kinda heavy, and not at all seasonal! So take care of yourselves.

Updated Sunday 25th December 2016 - Happy Holidays, and I hope you enjoy the chapter! :-)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The kid only flinched once when they hauled him into the pilot’s chair. Lian stood in front of him, lazily twirling a knife as Slade roughly secured the kid’s arms; as distractions went, it was pretty good. Finishing his work, Slade walked to stand next to Lian; both of them were close, but far away enough that the kid couldn’t strike out if he felt so inclined. As an extra measure, Slade drew both his swords, relishing the sleek noise they made coming out of their sheaths. He kept them resting by his sides, ready for use at a split-second’s notice.

The kid made a very sorry sight indeed; he cringed at the sound of the swords, blinking up at them with sleep-deprived eyes, dark smudges surrounding bloodshot blues. He was gritty-looking; unshaved, unkempt, wearing mercenary’s clothing that – on a second examination – definitely didn’t fit properly. Too short in the arms, and the empty gun holster was too tight around his leg. He was favouring the shoulder Yao Fei had shot, as well as trying to pull his stomach in to make it a smaller target. Everything about him didn’t just scream civilian; it screamed privileged civilian. The hair might’ve been overgrown and filthy, but the cut of it – coupled with the way his eyes constantly went to Lian in a pleading motion and the clothes he’d been wearing when they first saw him, unconscious on Yao’s floor – told Slade that at best guess, this was some upper crust college kid who’d gotten dangerously misplaced on the road of life.

Then, out of nowhere, the kid stopped cringing. Stopped favouring his shoulder, unfolded his stomach. He sat as straight as could, looking straight at them, chin jutted out. Slade didn’t miss the way he swallowed heavily, though, or the way he was still blinking hard. If he wasn’t tied to the chair Slade wasn’t sure he’d still be sitting up properly.

“So – what? We’re just gonna sit here in silence the whole time?” the kid snapped. “If you’re going to torture me, then just do it, already.”

Interesting.

Without looking at Lian, Slade took a step forward, bringing one of his swords to rest near the kid’s face. The kid’s eyes widened, but he didn’t speak, didn’t flinch.

“All right, kid,” said Slade smoothly. “Let’s start with the basics. How did you get here?”

Eyes still on the blade, the kid replied, “I had a map.”

Slade glanced at Lian immediately; she stared back at him, shocked. He jerked his head in the kid’s direction and she went down to him, rifling through pockets. The kid flinched.
“Hey – hey! It’s in the left pocket, the left –”

“Who gave you the map?” Slade demanded. Lian pulled it from the kid’s pockets; it was barely a map, a shred of a corner, marked with a black circle and one word: *Survive*. Lian pulled out a compass as well – one of the standard pieces the mercenaries used – then backed off, her face a mask.

The kid hadn’t answered, a mulish expression coming over his face. Oh, that wouldn’t do. That wouldn’t do at all. Slade pressed the blade against the kid’s cheek; if either of them so much as blinked wrong then the kid would be walking around with a very nasty scar on his face – if he ever ended up walking at all.

“I’m not in the habit of repeating myself, kid,” said Slade, low and dangerous.

“Not a kid,” the kid grumbled, looking away. Slade moved the blade down to the kid’s neck.

“Oh, *really*?”

The kid gritted his teeth. “*Yeah,*” he said. “I’m twenty–two, asshole.”

Slade and Lian shared a stare; Slade nearly burst out laughing. Oh, the kid was a *kid* all right!

“Come back to me when you’re pushing forty, kid,” he said, unable to keep the humour out his voice, the tip of his blade now pointing at the kid’s chest. He only received a dark scowl in return, bottom lip pushed out, cheeks flushing. There was a temper tantrum in the works, no doubt about that. Jesus, twenty–two. He remembered twenty–two. This poor sod had no idea.

“Yao Fei didn’t say you’d be such an *asshole,*” the kid snapped, then looked horrified at his slip up.

The humour vanished from Slade’s chest, dread settling in place instead.

“Where’s Yao Fei?” he asked. The kid looked away; Slade used his blade to force him to look up. “Was he captured? Did he give you that map? *Talk,* kid. Give me a reason not to cut your throat and dump your body!”

The kid glared. “My name is Oliver Queen,” he started, with the aggravated air of someone who had explained their story several times. He spoke clearly through gritted teeth. “I was shipwrecked on this island – I don’t even know when, at this point. I was the only survivor.”

“Where are you from, kid?” asked Slade. He let the blade drift away; a little incentive for good behaviour. The scowl on the kid’s face didn’t let up.

“Starling City,” the kid said, shortly. “We – we were heading to Hong Kong. There was a storm, and the boat capsized. I washed up here.”

“And Yao Fei found you,” said Lian, gently. Slade didn’t know she was going to speak, but it wouldn’t hurt to play a little good cop bad cop with the kid. Maybe he’d be fooled by Lian’s gender and open up more to her; gender bias was a tried and tested form of interrogation, after all. It didn’t hurt that Slade looked like a bit of a maniac with his ops gear, swords, and wild hair; a fact he was well aware of and on occasion purposefully cultivated.

The kid was still wary, but seemed relieved that she had stepped in. “Yeah! I mean –” he hesitated. Lian moved closer, crouching just out of reach of the kid’s legs. She managed to make the movement looked concerned and personable, like she was trying to establish a private conversation. Slade was struck for a minute at her technique until he remembered; two kids, under four, and probably took them on play–dates and the like. She’d be used to pacifying, experienced in making connections with
people who were totally different to her in every way.

Good cop, bad cop, indeed.

“Oliver, it’s all right,” she said. “You’re amongst friends.”

“Then why am I tied up?” The kid glanced at Slade. “Let me go. Untie me.”

“It’s nothing personal, Oliver,” she said, smoothly. “It’s just that we need to establish some base facts. If what you say lines up with what we know, then we know that we can trust you.”

“Tying me up doesn’t really help with me trusting you, though,” said the kid, looking down at the ropes. Slade tightened his grip on his sword and the kid peered up at him, big blues through lank, dirty–blonde hair. So young. Lian sighed.

“Oliver, you have to understand what kind of situation this is,” she said, still using the gentlest voice Slade had heard from her. Like she was talking to a skittish animal. “This is life or death. The mercenaries are ready to kill us on sight, and we need to keep ourselves safe.”

“I know what those mercenaries can do!” exclaimed the kid, reddening. “That masked son of a bitch tortured me for hours – and then Fyers made Yao Fei –” He choked off, red–faced and trembling. Lian looked to Slade, wide–eyed, but Slade was staring at the kid.

“Masked?” he snapped, blade coming up. The kid tried to pull away, tears in his eyes, anger in every line of his body.

“Yeah, the masked guy!” he burst out. “Black and orange, and he had a sword! Fyers –”

“The leader of the mercenaries?” asked Lian quickly.

“Y–yeah –”


Slade growled, whipping his sword away and turning to kick a box as hard as his could. It clattered towards the opposite end of the fuselage and Lian stood, hand out, glancing between the kid and Slade.

“Hey,” she said. “Focus.”

“Focus?” he snapped. “You want me to focus –” He stopped, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. Walking over, he sheathed his sword and stood in front of the kid, crossing his arms.

“How did they find you?” he said, trying to clear his mind. The kid was like a rabbit, darting looks between Lian and him.

“Yao Fei said he was taking me somewhere,” he began slowly. “I don’t know where. He didn’t say much about it. We – we ran into Fyers. He had a bunch of men. Yao Fei told me to run, so I, I ran –”

“You just ran and left him?” said Slade, frowning deeply at the kid.

“Of course he ran,” said Lian wearily. “Of course he did. You’d tell me to run. Oliver, please continue.”
The kid swallowed, but his looks became less frightened and more curious. “I was able to escape most of them, but…one of the guys followed me. We…fought.” The kid’s eyes grew glassy and he looked away, ashamed. “We fell down a slope, the guy – he broke his spine on a rock.”

After a pause, Slade grunted. “And then what?”

He was completely unprepared for the kid’s answer. “You did what?”

“I dressed in the mercenary’s clothes and snuck into the main camp,” repeated Oliver. He looked like he didn’t know if he should be confused or worried at Slade’s reaction. “There was a map in the guy’s pocket. And compass.”

“Of course there was,” muttered Slade.

“But you got caught,” said Lian, speaking over his comment. The kid looked down again; his silence was much, much heavier than his previous bouts.

“I found Yao Fei,” he said, quietly. “But he didn’t want to come with me. Told me I was a fool. Then Fyers walks in…and that guy with the mask.”

Slade felt his guts clench with dread.

“And they tortured you,” supplied Lian in the long, dark silence that followed.

The kid nodded. “Wanted me to join up or die,” he said bitterly. “I told him to go to hell. Then he makes a smarmy quip about ‘already being there’. And leaves me with – with that guy. I don’t know how long he had me strung up for. Next thing I know they’re taking me down and – and Fyers tells Yao Fei to –”

The kid’s face went waxen. He shook his head several times as though to clear it, and Lian crouched down again, putting herself at eye level.

“What did he do, Oliver?” she asked, softly. The kid sniffed, gritted his teeth.

“He choked me,” he said, dully. “The mercenaries wanted a show, but Yao Fei did it quickly. Next thing I know, I’m falling off a cliff. I wash up somewhere and find a map and a compass in my pocket. And then…here.”

“How did you know we’d be here?” asked Slade, shortly. He didn’t have the time for sympathy; especially not when the kid hesitated before he opened his mouth, clearly ready to hedge.

“Kid!” he barked.

“Oliver, please,” said Lian. “We need to know. Are there more who know about us? About this place?”

The kid swallowed hard. “No – nobody,” he said, adding hurriedly. “Yao Fei never said anything about where he was taking me. Just that a friend would help train me up, and we’d all get off the island. He didn’t say when, or how. And he didn’t mention –” His eyes flicked to Lian, then flicked away again – “That there’d be more than one person.”

“But what happened to Yao Fei?” asked Lian. The kid just shook his head.

“I don’t know – I don’t know!” he said. “He’s working with the mercenaries now. That much is obvious.” The bitterness in the kid’s voice was stark and deep. Meanwhile, Slade’s stomach was
dropping, his chest constricting, his hands clenching and unclenching.

“But why?” Lian sounded confused. It was so innocent Slade almost felt like yelling.

“The same reasons anybody sells out,” said Slade, shortly, turning sharply away. “Revenge, or leverage.”

Lian could sense something was wrong; she stood, slowly, hands half out. But she wouldn’t understand, would she? Even now, she didn’t understand the danger they were in – revenge, or leverage, right? Yao Fei was in a position of power now; he held the noose, the gun, the knife, the guillotine. It didn’t matter if he was working with them voluntarily or by duress; he knew an awful lot about them, too much – their identities, their location, their escape plan. It was an almost perfect certainty that they were running the clock down on being sold out – for his freedom, for his skin, for money, who knew what it was that had made the man switch sides like that. And what did it matter? He was working with Slade’s former partner, for the boss of the mercenaries, with the men who had ravaged Lian and tortured for the fun of it. If he had been coerced, then – well, that was even worse, wasn’t it? Whatever they threatened, they could just threaten again, and Yao Fei would crack.

He wasn’t the man Slade was starting to believe in. He mightn’t have ever been that man. It was probably all a lie. It was probably –

Dimly, he was aware of Lian’s hand on his shoulder, firm and insistent, guiding him outside the fuselage.

“We’ll be back in a moment, Oliver,” she was saying, and then they were back outside, walking towards the far end of the fuselage, where they were least likely to be overheard. Only then did she stop, turning him to face her.

"We're not having this conversation again, Slade," she said, mouth set. It took him a second to get what she meant, but once he did, he just stared at her, anger bubbling up.

"You want me to trust this kid, and he tells us Yao Fei has joined up with the enemy!" said Slade, incredulous. "Which is it, Lian? We obviously can't trust both!"

"There has to be a reason, Slade, come on –"

"Yeah, there's a reason – he's a turncoat and when we catch that supply plane we're leaving his traitorous ass on this damn island –" He stopped abruptly when Lian took a step forward, well inside his space, her eyes flashing angrily.

"We can't just leave Yao behind," she said, hand set on her hips. "We can't and we're not. He's been stuck here for so long. He's never even seen his daughters, for heaven's sake. He wouldn't just work for the mercenaries, Slade, come on. They're hired by the kind of people he was rebelling against all those years ago. You said it was either revenge or leverage; well, I think it's leverage. If you had access to his personal details, then so do other people. They might have kidnapped his daughters, or an old friend. We don't know."

"Exactly," said Slade, planting his feet. "We don't know. We don't know who he is or what he's capable of – it could all just be a ruse. We can't trust him or his intentions. It's just as easily revenge as it is leverage, Lian."

For some reason, Lian's cheeks were reddening; not from embarrassment, as far as he could tell, but from anger, or frustration. "He's just – he didn't seem like the kind of person – to just blow up a city for revenge. He was a loyal general thirty years ago, before he became a revolutionary. A family
man who wanted justice for his community. Being a revolutionary doesn't mean he was a terrorist. It doesn't fit."

"Lian, please –" Slade pinched his eyes shut and took a deep breath. "I admire your optimism, I really do. And I heard what you said about, about needing to trust people. But men can lie. Deeply, for a prolonged period of time; the mercenaries could have just offered him a better deal. Yeah, he might have saved that kid's life, but that doesn't mean we can actually trust him – especially not with our lives."

Unexpectedly, Lian's eyes shut tightly and her head darted sharply away. The flush had crept across her cheeks and there were long pauses in between each shaking breath, her arms stiff and hands fiercely balled against her sides. Slade frowned; her expression, her body language, it was – well, worrying. So something had happened? Something with Yao Fei? What did he do to her? Slade opened his mouth, then closed it with a huff of breath, deciding to wait for Lian to push out whatever it was she felt she had to tell him.

"He – helped me," she finally said, voice so muted he had to lean forward to hear. He stared, mind skipping across scenarios, none of them making sense.

"What do you mean, he helped you?" he asked. "When did he – Lian, what did he do?"

Lian's eyes opened, although they still looked down and away, her lips pressed into a thin, sharp line. To his horror, Slade saw that they were shining, tears ready to spill over, only sheer force of will keeping them stuck under her eyelashes. Her voice still hushed, she continued.

"I – there were –" She swallowed thickly, clearly trying to get past a lump in her throat. Her face was so...angry. "It was a few weeks ago. He gave me something. I didn't think either of you would notice – men don't tend to notice, but – he did. He gave me something – and – and, remember – remember when, I said I had a stomach bug? I said it was something I ate? That's why I was pale? And I was gone for most of the day, and...then for the night, too...and Yao said he was going to tell you...that he was training me..."

Slade's head spun abruptly; the ground dropped from under his feet and he nearly took a step backwards. His body had come to a conclusion his mind had yet to reach. "Oh...no...no..."

Her tears started to fall then, hot and fiercely reluctant. "He gave me a thick ball of something. It tasted...vile. He said to put it under my tongue but not to swallow it, and he showed me to a small stream. He said to wait. Then he left me water, and some food, and, and rags. And then he left me alone. Later...he brought me something to drink, for, for the pain..."

"Oh god, Lian...Lian..."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry I didn't tell you, Slade, I'm sorry, I am," she said. But she took a shuddering breath and looked right at him, and there was something hard and unrelenting mingled with the regret. She swept away the tears with her fingers, smearing a streak of dirt underneath her eye. When she glared at him, there was no pain or fear in her expression; just anger, and almost weary resolution.

"We can't leave him behind," she said. "I don't care if you don't trust him, I don't even care if he's going to betray us. We're not leaving him. We're all getting on that supply plane, or none of us are."

Slade swallowed. He rubbed his arm distractedly, now unable to look at Lian and her smeared tears, her grim mouth.
"All right," he said, voice cracking. "Okay."

Lian sniffed, and nodded once. She scrubbed at her face with her sleeve, inhaled deeply, and without a further word, turned around and went back towards the fuselage.

"Lian," he said, and she stopped. "Why didn't you tell me?"

She stopped and sighed, her shoulders slumping.

"Turn around and look at me," he asked. He let out a breath when she did. Her face looked so tired, so grey.

"I didn't know how," she said, and it was such a painfully honest answer that any distress he felt at her keeping things from him withered away beneath the simplicity of it. Slade scratched at his mouth with his hand, trying to distract himself from the rush of incoherent thoughts in his mind. Lian then inhaled deeply, like she was trying to fortify herself against whatever he was about to say; she was clearly expecting some kind of blowout, and suddenly he felt utterly exhausted. Like he'd failed her, somehow, even though it wasn't anything he could have prevented or helped her with, even if he'd known.

"All right," he said. She just looked at him, frowning after a moment.

"I just gave you a big lecture on your trust issues and then you find out I was keeping something this big from you?" she said, confused.

Slade just sighed, heavily. "Lian...look, trust takes time and work, even I know that much," he said, rubbing his temple. "And frankly, I'm fucking exhausted after all this talking. I can't overthink this, and I don't want to. Something horrible happened to you, again, and I couldn't help you with it. There's no shame in hiding to lick your wounds, I've done it myself, and I'm not going to waste time getting offended that you held your cards to your chest when it's something personal like this. But from now on – how about we put our money where our mouths are, all right?"

"...everything's got emotional whiplash nowadays," said Lian after a moment, rubbing her arm and looking down. Slade looked away from her, towards the open field, where the grass swayed gently in an unseen breeze.

"It's – I'm sorry," he said. "I don't know when this will end. I wish I could give you a happy ending."

She just grimaced; it was clearly a failed attempt at a smile. "White knights are tacky anyway."

He returned the grimace, and she went back inside the fuselage without another word; just a deep, steadying breath. Slade, on the other hand, allowed himself about thirty seconds of boneless slumping against the outer wall of the fuselage, head blank and spinning all at once. He wondered how he had missed all the signs; how she had managed to go through everything she had without telling him a thing, or even showing a single sign of it to him. When she had seemed tired during training, she passed it off as needing to eat more. She never commented on the pain or the fatigue she must surely have felt, must surely be feeling –

Because she didn't want him to take it easy on her. He would have, if he'd known; he wouldn't have been able to help himself. And then she wouldn't be learning the best she could, and they might have ended up getting killed because he hadn't prepared her properly. Survival instincts had burrowed deep into her even without his training. Whether she meant it or not, she knew deep down, subconsciously even, that telling him what had happened would be exposing a weakness that would make him treat her differently. Again.
Survival instincts. She was a natural, wasn't she?

Just barely, he managed to restrain himself from punching the wall. The anger started simmering up again – Yao Fei, he’d be having words with that son of a bitch – before he tamped it down. It could wait for later – and it would rise again later, as soon as he got his hands on that man, wherever he was. Right now, he had a job to do. So he took a deep breath, just like Lian had done, and went back inside.

—

While he had been busy brooding outside, Lian had untied the kid, who was now rubbing his wrists and warily looking around like a rabbit, wide-eyed and young. He startled when Slade appeared, jumping back a few steps. Slade couldn't resist grinning, albeit a bit tiredly; maybe the kid's reflexes would be good enough to provide a bit of a challenge for him. Lian starting out had been dazed by the speed of his movements, but she soaked up every drop of information he gave her and although she had yet to be tested against a mercenary, he was fairly confident that she'd at least give whoever it was a hard run for their money. Hopefully this brat would measure up to his standards. If they were going to get off this island, they all needed to be ready to fight and kill.

"Yao Fei sent you here for a reason," he said, crossing his arms and planting his feet; there was one Alpha male on this godforsaken island and he sure as hell wasn't going to put up with any insubordination from some trust fund brat. "He said you had the will to survive, but you didn't understand it yet. You wanna live, kid?"

The kid warily eyed Lian like she was going to smile or nod – yeah, don't worry, that guy's crazy, it's all right, you're safe – but all she did was raise her eyebrows and coolly stare back. Good to know whose corner she was definitely in, at least.

"Well, kid?" said Slade, softly. "I don't have all day and I'm not going to repeat myself."

"Yeah," said the kid, quickly but sullenly. He had a bit of spine, good. Well, that, or he was spoiled rotten. A bit of sword training was sure to whittle out which one it was. Just to be an asshole, Slade cupped a hand behind one ear, elaborately miming out that he couldn't hear the kid's words. In response, the kid scowled darkly.

"Yeah!" he snapped. "I wanna live! Jesus."

Slade smiled. "Then welcome to hell, kid."

This time, he was gratified to see Lian smile; he was pretty sure it matched his perfectly, ounce for sadistic ounce. The kid just stared like he wasn't sure if he'd said the right thing after all.

And honestly? Slade wasn't too sure either.

Chapter End Notes

A day late, but I think extenuating circumstances apply...;-) We've got turkey in the oven, a whole bunch of sweets, and some lovely gifts (including Captain America: Civil War and Suicide Squad Extended Cut, thank you hubby!!!!!!). Hope these few days are treating you all well and you're having a relaxing time with good food and cheer.
Normal updating schedule should still apply over the next few days, so I'll see you guys next time! Hope you enjoyed the chapter, and if you did, please consider leaving a comment - 'tis the season for giving! And they're so nice to get too :-) Happy holidays! :-)

:-)

:-)

:-)
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated Tuesday 27th December 2016. Please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Stop it stop it stop stop STOP IT –”

The kid shrieked when Slade connected multiple blows to his arms and chest, forearms futilely blocking the most vulnerable spots. He went down like a sack of bricks, arms and legs flailing. Slade growled with irritation, humorous sight notwithstanding; the kid was useless. He lacked instinct, grace, and common sense. He wouldn’t be ready in time for the supply plane and if they brought him along he’d just get everyone killed.

“You’re not a quick learner, are you kid?” he said, swinging the stick over his head.

Red–faced, the kid turned on him. "Well you're not teaching me anything!" he snapped. "You're just hitting me with sticks!"

"I'm trying to improve your reflexes, kid," said Slade. "You need to be able to react before your opponent even starts to swing."

"This is bullshit," the kid muttered, scowling. Slade thwacked him again with his stick, on his collarbone for good measure. The kid howled and keeled over.

"You react, or you die," said Slade. "We don't have time to take things slowly. You need to be able to – oof!"

The kid had full–body tackled him, landing them both on the ground, with Slade underneath and the kid's elbow digging into his sternum. He took the chance to suck in a breath, but then the kid headbutted him, of all things. Slade's eyes watered, his nose sparked with pain, and to add to the hilarity, the kid actually grabbed the stick and tried to hit Slade's head. None of that, 'point at his head and ask for surrender'. He just straight up tried to decapitate Slade with the stick.

Slade could have laughed, but he was busy escaping being brained on the ground. He rolled, quickly, swiping the kid's legs out from under him. The kid landed hard, but to his credit, just rolled away, darting for Slade's legs in turn. He seemed to be powered entirely by rage and frustration; his tactics were crude and worthy of a frat–boy brawl, but there was a hint of power behind it and the kid didn't seem to be intimidated by Slade's overwhelmingly superior experience. With a bit of technique, he mightn't be too bad.

Slade jumped to the side and kicked out, catching the kid on his shoulder. Instead of yelling out, however, the kid's face went wax–white and he collapsed on his back, one shaking hand going to his shoulder.

Ah. Right.

"How're those stitches holding up?" he asked. The kid's lips just pressed together and he shook his
head. There were one or two stitches in the deeper wounds along his torso and solar plexus – they couldn't afford to waste much more string than that – but his shoulder had been patched up days ago by Yao Fei using what looked to be some kind of natural, gluey paste and a bandage. It was rough work and although it was healing cleanly and without so much as a hint of infection – Yao Fei's magical herbs again – it was clearly still raw and painful. Slade shook his head, extending his hand.

"All right, kid, take a breather," he said, raising his eyebrows when the kid not only declined to take Slade's hand, but actually shot him a very suspicious look. Slade grabbed the kid, pulling him to his feet and holding tightly onto his forearms. "Your reactions are already improving – you just need to push yourself. I'm gonna show you how to break holds now."

"They've got guns," said the kid with just a hint of petulance. "How's this supposed to help?"

Slade obligingly gave the kid a gun and showed him. This time, the kid did yell.

"I'd ask if you're ready to learn, but I don't give a shit if you're ready or not," said Slade. "Do you even understand what's at stake here? You've seen what those mercenaries are capable of – what they'll do if they catch us. Where's that survival instinct Yao Fei was talking about?"

"What do you mean?" snapped the kid. "When did you talk about me to Yao Fei? When did you even meet Yao Fei?"

Slade opened his mouth, but was interrupted by Lian yelling at them that the food was cooked. He jerked his head towards the fuselage and the kid followed, frowning.

Lian was already eating a strip of squirrel, sitting with crossed legs on the ground. Oliver landed heavily on the ground, reaching for one of the unidentifiable chunks of meat on a stick.

"...did you cut that rabbit in half?" asked Slade, taking his own seat. Lian hmmed.

"Cooks faster," she said. "It's my turn after this?"

Slade nodded. The kid looked up from his food, barely chewing in between his inhaling of it.

"Your turn?" he asked.

"Worth needs to train as well," explained Slade, tearing into his portion. "She might've been here longer than you, but she's still a rookie."

The kid's mouth dropped open; he swallowed hastily before speaking. "But – I thought you guys were like...partners or something?" he blurted, staring at Lian and Slade. Lian just laughed.

"Slade picked me up in the middle of the forest a couple months ago, Oliver," she said, leaning against the stack of boxes. "Before that, I was a homemaker in Gotham."

The kid's mouth fell open again. "But how did you end up on the island?"

Lian picked at her food. "Wrong place, wrong time, I suppose."

"Did the mercenaries find you?"

"All right, enough chit chat," Slade cut in. "Worth, finish your food. We've got training to do."

Without another word Lian took one more bite and stood, Slade following as they went back outside.

"What do I do?" called the kid.
"Try not to get indigestion," replied Slade, and he didn't have to look behind him to know that the kid was scowling again. Once they were deep enough into the field, Lian spoke, low.

"You don't need to protect me from a conversation, Slade," she said.

"That's not what I was doing," he said, grabbing her. She broke the hold and tried to flip him. He countered, then she countered, then he twisted her arm back, and she tried to headbutt him. His nose, still tender from the kid's earlier attempt, made him flinch harder than he'd intended, and she managed to sweep him over her shoulder. His face met the dirt, his arm was held tightly behind his back, and her knees settled into the centre of his back.

"That was half–speed, Slade," she said. "Come on."

Slade huffed off bits of dirt that were stuck on his lips. "That wasn't half–speed," he said, and broke the hold between one blink and the next. She still didn't have the upper body strength to maintain the hold, but the sharp pain she could deal out with the arm twists would be enough to give her a split–second advantage to cut her opponents throat, or brain them with some blunt instrument. It was better than nothing. Lian ended up with her face in the dirt; a perfect reversal of what she'd done to him.

"God – fucking – dammit," she groused, spitting dirt.

"It could be worse," said Slade.

"Don't talk to me about worse, Wilson," she said, and Slade abruptly realised he was holding her face down in the ground, his weight entirely on her body and her arms trapped beneath his hands. It was the most uncomfortable he'd ever been in his life and he instantly let go.

"Slade," said Lian sharply. He rolled away from her and she rounded on him. "Stop that!"

"What?"

"Hesitating! I'm sick of the way you look at me sometimes! Like what happened is all you see!"

Slade sat back. "...every time I look at you I'm reminded of it, Worth," he said. It came out without him meaning to, without him wanting it to. "I'm reminded that you're still in pain from what they did and it was only with Yao Fei's herbs that you got some relief, weeks later. I see you flinch away from me, I've heard it straight from you that your skin crawls when you're near me."

"But I can't help any of that," said Lian. "I need –"

"I know," he interrupted. "I think you'll make a good fighter, and I'm doing what I can. But we're in a set of shitty circumstances with a merciless time limit. Back home, you'd be fast–tracked for some heavy duty therapy. Here, I have to know that you hate being touched by me – and touch you anyway. There's no way I know that'll help you through that. I'll fight, kill, and torture, but it's pushing against every code I've made for myself just to put my hands on you when it's obvious you don't want me to. Even when it's to save your life."

Lian was flushing, looking away. "It's not about what I want –"

"I know," he interrupted. "I get it. We've both got to do things we don't want to do. That's the way the world works."

Her fist started to slowly grind into the ground, creasing the grass. "...I...don't want to be broken," she admitted, quietly.
"You're not *broken*," said Slade, almost exasperated. It felt like they were going around in circles, sometimes.

"I don't *want* to be," she said. "I don't want to be afraid of a hand on my shoulder, or a hug, or fingers in my hair –" She stopped. The redness in her cheeks intensified, and Slade chuckled suddenly; she was blushing.

"Oh, shut up," she said, crossly. "It's all this waiting around. It's making me emotional."

"Sure thing, Worth," said Slade. "Look, I'm not a naturally affectionate person anyway –"

"I'm shocked," interrupted Lian flatly. "Utterly shocked."

"–but I'll do my best to manhandle you during training and completely ignore your discomfort. Even moreso than I've been doing already. How's that?"

She threw him a glare. "I suppose I can't have both," she allowed. "I can't have your hesitance *and* your training. I can't have my headspace *and* my survival. I've picked my path by now and I need to stick to it – same with you."

"That's the spirit," said Slade, moving to stand. He stopped when Lian added, hesitantly:

"What...do ASIS agents do?" she asked. "When you encounter something...horrible."

He considered his words, thinking back to all the ops gone wrong, the murdered friends, the messy kills and the harrowed victims he'd had to extract. Drink, mostly. Some of them – suicide. Mental stability didn't always correlate to mental health. And special ops had a very short expectancy for their career. After forty, people started getting slipped into other programmes – training, admin – and that was if they survived. So many didn't, even when they got home. Nightmares had a way of chasing people even through their waking hours.

"Therapy," he said finally. "Shitloads of therapy, Worth."

She rolled her eyes. "Good to know I'm on the right track."

"You still think I'm taking it easy on you, don't you?" asked Slade, pushing himself to his feet. His hesitation to exacerbate her injuries might have been a repetitive issue in his training of her – hell, he knew it was. There was a touch of empathy for her trauma that was completely unavoidable; he might be a honed killer, but he wasn't made of fucking stone. He was pretty sure, however, that that was where it ended. Especially as the time had passed, and her resolve had strengthened, and the bruises he was giving her faded and reduced in number. "Worth, has it occurred to you that you might actually be *good* at this?"

Given her dark expression, he guessed that it had.

"All right," he said. "Get up. Another round."

He saw the leg swipe a mile off, but was gratified that – although he won, easily, like he always did – her hands were digging into soft spots, her legs twisting over his, constantly trying to use his weight against him. If he paired her up with the newbie, then they just might stand a chance together where they'd otherwise be overwhelmed on their own.

Speaking of the newbie...he was watching them from the edge of the high grass, still chewing on some meat.
"Ready for round two, kid?" shouted Slade.

"That was only round one?" exclaimed the kid, but there was a hefty amount of sarcasm behind it. He finished his meat and walked over. "You didn't answer me earlier."

"Hm?"

"When did you talk to Yao Fei about me? And when did you meet him?"

Slade glanced at Lian, who shrugged. "Long story, kid," he said. "The short of it is I was sent here to find him. I found Lian first, then Yao Fei found us. We're trying to escape on a supply plane that's due here in less than two weeks which is why it's essential that you shape up quickly. With Yao on the other side, we're down a good fighter. Although..." He pretended to consider the younger man carefully. "...you might just manage to make an effective meat shield for one of us if the training doesn't stick..."

The kid just glared at him, giving an insincere smile at Slade's comment. He then looked to Lian.

"Yao Fei said this island's name is Lian Yu," he said, slowly. "Are you Chinese too?"

Lian stared at him. "What? No...Cambodian. My father was born in Spain, though, originally. He was adopted and naturalised in Gotham as a young child. But no, I'm not Chinese."

"Oh," said the kid, seriously embarrassed. "Sorry."

"What a weird question," said Lian, raising an eyebrow at him.

"Sorry," he repeated, turning to finish the rest of his meat. He looked like he hoped it might choke him. "I just – they sounded the same –"

"Lian is short for Lillian," she said.

"What was your father's surname?" asked Slade, taking the chance to slip in his own line of questioning. "It wasn't Worth?"

She rolled her eyes at him, knowing full well what he was up to. Satisfaction brought back the cat, though, didn't it? "No," she said. "Worth was my husband's name. My father's name was Flores–Parker. I went by Lillian Flores, or Lian Flores, until I was married."

There was a lull in conversation before a number of things started slipping into place. To Slade's surprise, the kid beat him to the punch.

"Wait...Flores?"

Lian narrowed her eyes. "Oh my god, what now?" she griped. "Slade's already given me shit about my names."

The kid hesitated, but there was a hint of laughter in the corner of his mouth. "It's just...well...Lillian...Flores? Lillian Flores?"

"...yeah? What about it?"

Slade leaned into her ear and whispered, softly: "Lily Flower."

Behind his hand, the kid added, "Your name was Flower Flower."
She stared at them, incredulous. "...You're ganging up on me," she said, finally. "My god, you are. You're ganging up on me. I can't believe this. Such disrespect."

Even softer, Slade murmured: "*Rose Flower.*"

Lian spluttered. "Fuck you, Slade!"

The kid just laughed. The sound was short–lived, but loud and deep, straight from his belly. He laughed like he hadn't laughed in a long, long time – and he probably hadn't. The smile he gave at the end stripped away the dirt and mess, leaving behind a glowing, golden warmth that spread across his whole face.

"I think I'm ready for round two," he said. Slade grinned.

"Lian, would you be so kind as to get those sticks for us?" he said lightly, cracking his knuckles with satisfaction. Lian rolled her eyes and made a show of getting them, trying to catch Slade out with the tip of one of them. Suddenly, it was two against one as the kid joined in. That team up idea he had might actually bear merit, although they needed to work on their coordination; after taking a couple of superficial hits, he disarmed the kid and made short work of Lian.

From the ground, the kid groaned and looked up at him. "...does that count as round two?"

Lian just shook her head and backed away. "You boys have fun," she said. "I'm going to check on the snares."

"Head on a swivel, Worth," said Slade.

"Shut it, Wilson," she replied. He watched her go, noting with approval her inclusion of three knives and the compass with her person. He turned to see the kid looking at him strangely.

"What." Slade glared at him, tossing over a stick. The kid caught it fairly handily, but didn't look chagrined. Mostly just...curious.

"Nothing," he said quickly. "I just...didn't realise your face could do that."

Slade continued glaring, raising his stick. "Do what, exactly?"

"...uh, smile."

Slade raised the stick and the kid practically jumped away, arms wheeling as he tried to maintain his footing.

"I didn't mean it like that!" he exclaimed. "I just meant that you weren't looking like a homicidal maniac for once!"

"Not an improvement, kid!"

"Augh!"

The pleasure Slade took in whooping the kid's ass should probably have been illegal.

~~~

An hour or two later the kid was face down in the ground, groaning, and Slade was practising a two–handed drill, trying to cool himself down.
"Not bad, kid," he said. "Could've been a helluva lot better, of course."

The kid gave him the evil eye, shifting to his knees. "Did you beat Lian senseless when you found her?" he demanded. Slade snorted, winding up his drill.

"Nope," he said. "She'd been running barefoot. Took a couple of days for her feet to heal enough, and to cobble together something for shoes. We started with grapples, then moved on to the sticks. I'm lumping everything on you all at once –"

"Because we're on a deadline, I know, I know," said the kid. "What are these mercenaries even doing here in the first place?"

"As far as we can tell, they're looking to blow up a passenger plane," Slade replied. "That's all conjecture though – we don't know for sure. But the goal is to get off the island and blow it all to hell. I've got codes ready to go as soon as we're on that plane. We get off the island, the mercenaries are stopped – it'll be win–win."

The kid just frowned down at the grass, hand idly rubbing his stomach and side. When he caught Slade looking he whipped his hand away, mask falling into place. Slade pointed a stick at him.

"You said an orange and black mask, yeah?"

The kid eyed him warily. ". . .yeah."

Slade planted a stick in the ground, patting his own stomach. The kid's eyes widened, almost comically.

"You –" he blurted. "You too?!"

"Oh, yeah," said Slade. "That guy's name is Billy Wintergreen. And up until that scum showed his yellow belly, he was my partner. I've known him most my life, in fact."

Shock didn't begin to describe the expression on the kid's face. ". . .what a fucking asshole," he said, finally, staring at Slade's stomach. Slade chuckled.

"That's putting it lightly," he said, pulling the stick out of the ground.

"My friend Tommy –" The kid hesitated, but seemed to fortify himself and plunge on. "He'd never do something like that. Never."

Slade looked away from the grim line of the kid's mouth, a slash of seriousness in a youthful, albeit dirt–smeared and sweaty, face.

"People are capable of anything, kid," he said heavily, swinging the sticks around and starting another drill. The kid shook his head sharply.

"No," he said firmly. "Not Tommy. He's the best kind of guy."

"I'm not gonna argue with you, kid – I don't even know the guy," said Slade. The kid huffed.

"Would you use my name, already?" he exclaimed. "It's Oliver. Ol–i–ver. It's the least you could do after kicking my ass all around this stupid field."

Slade grinned. ". . .you're right. And I didn't even buy you dinner first. Poor baby."

Ol–i–ver jumped to his feet, suddenly ready to fight despite being close to collapsing not ten minutes
previously. Slade laughed, darting back, letting the kid swing whatever way he liked; he wasn't in danger of landing any hits, so Slade was safe. He didn't notice when Lian eventually returned; she took the long way around, coming through the tall grass and tackling him from behind.

“Now! Oliver!” she shouted, and Oliver swung down for Slade’s neck. With his arms twisted behind his back and Lian’s knees in his spine, Slade found himself with a stick jammed into his neck and a pair of triumphant rookies grinning down at him.

“I could take you down in a second,” said Slade, muffled with his face in the ground. “Just remember that.”

Lian let out a peal of laughter and let him up. Slade brushed himself off and stood, catching his breath and raising an eyebrow at Lian’s mirth; it was spilling over to Oliver, who was leaning on his stick. In a swift movement, Slade grabbed it out from under him, grinning at his flail and twirling the two sticks in his palms.

“What’s gotten you into such a good mood?” asked Slade, resting the sticks on the ground. “Catch something other than rabbit in the snares?”

He wasn’t expecting the reply she gave; both he and Oliver stared at her, floored.

“No,” she said, grinning from ear to ear. “Better. I’ve got an idea: we’re going to infiltrate the main camp, find Yao Fei…and rescue him.”

Chapter End Notes

Aaaaand we're halfway through the story! Wow! A not sooo heavy chapter this time around, hope you guys enjoyed it, and that you're still enjoying the holiday season - I'm back to work next week, so I'm getting as much relaxing time in as possible, because the New Year is gonna be craaaaazy busy...

As ever, please consider leaving a comment, they're really nice to get! I'm also available on tumblr under kako-pumpkin. See you guys in a few days! :-}
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated Sunday 1st January 2017. Please enjoy the chapter, and a happy new year to all!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Slade stared at Lian, ears not quite processing her declaration. It sank in, layer by layer, until the silence dragged on and on; her smile became less of a beam, but remained in place, becoming smug instead. Like she had said something clever and well-thought out, instead of something completely and utterly ludicrous.

“Cat got your tongue, Wilson?” she said.

“Are you insane?” he replied, hand rubbing hard against his head.

“We’re going to rescue Yao Fei?” exclaimed Oliver, shocked, and Slade put his hand out immediately.

“No,” he said. “No, we are not going on some fool’s errand –”

Lian put a hand on her hip, glaring at him. “At least hear me out – !”

“Lian, I – I don’t know…” said Oliver hesitantly, putting his hands up defensively when she looked sharply at him. “I want to save Yao Fei too, but I already tried, remember? And he didn’t want to come with me. I got tortured and half-drowned for my efforts.”

“If we can find out why he’s doing it, we might be able to help,” she argued. “We just need to talk to him.”

Slade scoffed, not believing his ears. “Worth, like hell I’ll sign off on some insane plan to infiltrate that camp. It’s swarming with mercenaries; the kid knows it –” He was gratified to see Oliver cross his arms and nod, albeit with a grimace –“And I’m not ready to sign my death warrant just yet, thanks.”

She levelled a look at him. “Well, I’m not ready to sign Yao’s. We’re not leaving him behind,” she said, hands going to her hips. Slade’s shoulders slumped a little, two fingers pinching between his eyes, and her frown deepened. “We’re not. You said. You said, Wilson.”

“I know what I said!” he snapped, pointing a stick at her. “But we’re a little short on time and ideas, in case you haven’t noticed! We’re down one warrior and up a useless rookie who’s barely old enough to drink!”

“Hey!” Oliver exclaimed, uncrossing his arms. Slade’s other stick went towards him.

“Don’t you start, kid!” he growled before turning to properly face Lian. “Worth, our deadline is narrowing. We don’t have the numbers to raid the camp, and us showing up is hardly going to convince Yao Fei to swap back sides. We need to face facts here and cut our losses. Unless your brilliant idea includes a way to somehow infiltrate the camp without being seen, contact Yao Fei
without alerting the other mercenaries, and get back out again?”

He and Lian glared at one another for long moments. Honestly, he couldn’t believe that they were even having this conversation; he knew what he’d promised Lian, but he thought she’d understood the stakes. There was no way they’d survive taking on the main camp, whether or not they managed to successfully sneak in. The problem was always sneaking back out again, on top of not getting caught while in enemy territory. Once they escaped and Slade made contact with his bosses back in Australia, an extraction team could be sent in for Yao Fei; heavy hitters, with artillery to match, and in the meantime Slade would be enjoying the sunny coastline with a beer and a clean shirt. No part of that plan involved endangering himself or the other two idiots he had taken under his questionable wing.

“Actually,” she replied, acidly. “It does.”

Slade stared at her. Oliver hovered, nervously, and Lian continued to glare.

“Right.” Slade slammed the sticks into the ground and crossed his arms. “The plan. This amazing plan. Which is?”

She levelled a look at him, mirroring his posture. “Oh, you’re going to listen now?”

He stabbed a finger at her. “You –!”

“Guys!” Oliver darted in between them. “Come on! Slade, let’s hear Lian out. I mean – it can’t – Lian, just…look, what’s your plan?”

She sighed, shaking her head and throwing her hands up. “I might have a plan,” she said, turning to go back into the fuselage. After a moment, Slade yanked out and jabbed his sticks further in the ground, sucking in a deep, calming breath as he did so, and then followed her, with the kid close on his heels. She took long strides, walking quickly, practically stomping the ground beneath her feet. Inside the fuselage, she began to carefully move boxes to the side.

“You might –” Slade started, calling after her as he followed. To his surprise, Oliver elbowed him sharply, looking at him like he was crazy. He returned the look, and Oliver did some complicated hand–and–shoulder shrugging combo that probably made sense in whatever privileged frat boy world he came from. Slade decided to ignore him in favour of watching Lian rifle through the box for whatever magical thing that was going to somehow ensure the success of whatever godforsaken suicidal plan she’d come up with while she was off collecting dead vermin from snare traps.

“I was thinking about how to get in and out unseen,” she was saying, hands moving slowly inside a box. Her shoulders were up, her back stiff. “Then I thought – what if we were unseen because they weren’t looking for us? Because they were occupied somewhere else?”

“A distraction?” said Oliver.

“Right,” said Lian, and turned around. Gently, and with extreme care, she proudly displayed three military–level grenades in her arms. Each grenade was the length of her forearm, with a hook at the end that allowed them to be strapped to a belt.

Slade stared. It wasn’t like he’d forgotten about the grenades, but aside from storing them carefully he hadn’t given much thought to them. Their survival had depended on stealth, and grenades were… basically the complete opposite of that. Just one of those things had the power to blow up a couple of trucks, and turn a couple of fully–grown men into nothing more than a fine, pink mist.

He couldn’t resist. He covered his eyes with his hand, briefly, before throwing it in the air and
barking out a laugh, loud and sharp and straight from his belly. Lian turned her proud smile on him, glancing back down at her trophies. And Oliver just stared.

“Holy shit,” he blurted. “Are those grenades? Where did you get them?”

“Picked them up from a camp I passed through,” said Lian lightly. “These things pack quite a punch. Throw them in the right places and we could start a fire that’d be very hard to put out. Especially if we managed to identify one of their weapons caches. Or a mess hall – never mind all the explosive weapons the mercenaries would be carrying; all their food is filled with grease. We could set off a chain reaction if we found their deep fat fryers!”

Oliver laughed; Slade couldn’t blame him. The idea of mercenaries frantically trying to put out a grease fire while trying to avoid blowing themselves up was actually fairly hilarious. But the pragmatism still ate at him; Lian’s plan still had enough holes to call it Swiss cheese, and enough baseless belief to found its own religion.

“While I’m impressed at the grenade idea, we still have a big problem,” said Slade, trying to get back control of the conversation. “Hell, we have multiple problems.”

Lian didn’t seem deterred. “And?”

“Well, let’s start with the obvious,” said Slade, crossing his arms. “Number One: we don’t know where Yao Fei is.”

“That’s what scouting is for,” said Lian, slowly putting down the grenades on top of a box, one by one – Oliver couldn’t seem to take his eyes off them. “We locate Yao Fei – I was thinking we could use your sniper scope – and then set off the grenades in the opposite side of the camp. Any mercenaries not ordered to control the blaze would be easy enough to deal with if we all went in.”

“And what about the small problem of him swapping sides?” asked Slade, standing firm. “Or did you forget that he’s working for the mercenaries now?”

Lian frowned. “I still think they’ve got leverage over him somehow.”

“We could at least try to find out what it is,” piped up Oliver hesitantly, crossing his arms as well. He blew a lank strip of hair out of his eyes and darted a quick look at Slade. “I think Lian’s right. We can’t just give up on him. He saved my life.”

“And mine,” added Lian. Slade tamped down on the flare of anger that abruptly burst in his chest.

Lian had no reason to believe that Yao Fei was anything other than a good man who helped her, who gave her herbs to take away her pain; she didn’t know what Slade knew. She didn’t know that it was Yao Fei’s inaction that caused her to suffer for so long, leaving her to save herself – not because help wouldn’t come, but because help chose not to come. And here he was, screwing people over with his choices, again, choosing his own skin over other people. The betrayal tasted all the more bitter for the fact of their tense détente; it wasn’t often Slade gave people the benefit of the doubt, and this whole piece of bullshit was an prime example of why. He pulled himself out of his anger in time to hear Oliver start to give his two cents.

“I think we could at least try,” Oliver was saying. “I don’t like the idea of leaving Yao behind without even knowing why he swapped sides like that.”

“You –” Slade jabbed a finger in his direction – “don’t get a say. You are barely capable of knocking the leaves off a tree, let alone take on an entire camp of mercenaries. It’s suicide. I did not get this far just to let you –” And he jabbed the same finger at Lian –“get yourself killed on a fool’s errand.”
“Slade,” said Lian, far too calmly.

“What.”

“When’s the supply plane coming?”

Slade paused, opened his mouth. He stared at her. Then he took a mental step back, back to the conversation with Yao Fei, back to every single thing he could remember the man having said.

“…god. Fucking. Dammit,” he hissed, grabbing his head with his hands. “Less than two weeks. Less than two weeks. I assumed the time based on what he said. He never fucking told us the exact time.”

“We don’t have a choice,” said Lian, shaking her head slightly. Her shoulders fell, her mouth tightened. “We need that information, and we need it from Yao Fei.”

“We can stake out the runway,” said Slade, but he already knew the answer – Lian told him anyway.

“Every single night for the next week and a bit?” said Lian. “If I had suggested that, you’d have knocked me on the head with my own stick. It’s way too high risk.”

“It wouldn’t be too hard to sneak into the camp,” offered Oliver. He returned Slade’s glare. “Well, it wouldn’t. They all dress up in balaclavas and avoid talking to one another – I would have gotten away with my attempt to infiltrate if Fyers hadn’t shown up. If we went in at night, and we were quick – it could work.”

“I can’t agree to this,” said Slade, knowing, deep down, that he was going to do it anyway. But he didn’t want to admit that, even to himself. It was one step too far into the wolves’ den, into hell and certain – as opposed to eventual – death. It was step closer to Billy, a step closer to Fyers; agreeing would be complete and total insanity. But their options were closing like a noose around their necks, and frankly, Slade was pretty sure he was already insane; this place had broken him up like no other mission had ever done.

Still, he wanted to resist. He’d always known his life would end violently, but goddammit – he didn’t want Billy to have the satisfaction. He didn’t want those bastards to get their hands on Lian, or – fuck it, even the kid.

“Slade,” said Lian.

He shook his head sharply. “Don’t –”

“Slade.”

“Lian, I swear to god –”

Without hesitation, she reached out put a hand on his arm. Godfuckingdammit.

“Please,” she said. “We have to at least try.”

Slade just gritted his teeth, trying to stare her down, trying not to swallow against his dry throat. She didn’t know, she didn’t know why Yao Fei wasn’t worth their skin. She didn’t know how badly he never wanted to see Billy again.

“I can infiltrate it myself,” he tried. His voice was harsh, even to his own ears. He could hear his own pulse; was it frustration, or fear, or both? Probably both.
“No!” To his surprise, it was Oliver who protested immediately after his statement, although to Lian’s credit she was probably delayed in responding by taking the time to puff up in self–righteous irritation, clearly ready to tear him a new one.

“Going alone is suicidal,” continued Oliver, moving closer and straightening his back. “Lian’s plan is good.”

“Lian’s plan is the opposite of good,” corrected Slade, taking a carefully casual step away from her hand and scowling darkly. “Lian’s plan will get us killed.”

“How else do you plan on getting the info, then?” asked Lian. Slade deepened his scowl.

“Interrogation,” he said shortly, and Lian threw him an unimpressed look.

“You think they won’t notice their men being picked off one by one?” she asked. “It’s a slow or quick death at this point, Slade. We die on this island without the information. My plan is far from perfect, I know, but it’s also faster and with more of us we’re more likely to succeed—”

She stopped. Slade had abruptly turned and slammed his hands into the wall, unable to contain his frustration – and his underlying fear – anymore. The echoes of his hands hitting the metal slapped his eardrums, and he breathed in and out, heavily and as evenly as his could manage. When he finally turned to look at her – a long time had passed, until his pulse calmed down and the anger bled out a little – his stomach dropped. He’d seen fear ghost across her face; her eyes went wide, her mouth clamped shut, her body stiffened, and she watched his every small movement like a cat. He wondered what she’d seen in his expression, and his mouth flooded with bitterness. The kid had gone quiet too, darting looks between them, clearly picking up on the thickening atmosphere.

“Three days,” said Slade eventually, looking away from both of them. “Kid, you have three days to become a fighting machine, because I won’t have some half–assed dead weight around my neck when we get to that camp. You need to learn everything Worth has learned and then some, in a much shorter amount of time. Or we’re dead. We’re worse than dead. You wanna be tortured again?”

“…no,” said the kid, quietly. But there was steel beneath it, or so Slade thought he heard.

“Then I don’t want to hear so much as an ow from you. Got it?” When Slade looked over, the kid was nodded his head seriously. “Outside.”

Once Oliver had scampered off, Slade dared to look at Lian. Her eyes were closed, and she was regulating her breathing.

“…sorry,” he tried. She huffed out a breath, opening her eyes.

“I can do this,” she said. Slade paused.

“Are you saying that for me or for you?” he asked. She rubbed a hand against her cheek, looking away.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Me. You. Both, I suppose. Slade, do I even have a choice?”

He wanted to say yes. He could track down some mercenaries, do some torturing on his own. But that would take up time they didn’t have and like as not alert the main camp to their whereabouts.

“I don’t like this plan,” he replied, crossing his arms.
“Neither do I,” she admitted. “When I was coming up with it, I thought – hey, I can do this. And now, I think…no, I can’t. But I have to. We’ve run out of options. Slade –” Her face creased – “Slade, we could die. Like, I knew before, I did – but now it’s actually happening. It’s not some distant point in the future, it’s here, it’s now. We’re making a plan that could get us killed. And I don’t know if I’m ready for that. But I also know that it doesn’t matter if I am or if I’m not. We’ve been running from them for so long and it’s gotten us hedged into this one spot on the island, hiding like animals, just barely surviving –”

“– Lian –”

“Slade, we’re going to walk into that camp and I know that if I don’t get caught in the crossfire they won’t kill me –”

She flinched hard when he took her arm, shuddered from her core out when he folded her into his chest. But she didn’t squirm or struggle or really, do anything at all besides sigh deeply and put her head against his shoulder.

“And I’ll have to watch you die,” she said, into his collarbone. “Because they’ll kill you, but not before they hurt you first –”

His grip tightened around her. “If you start thinking like that then they’ve already won half the battle,” he said gruffly. “Either we succeed, or we don’t. We go into this mission with a goal and a clear head, then we get out. Got it?”

“They’ll make me watch,” she whispered. “I know they will.”

And Slade thought: No – they’ll make me watch. He tried to suppress a shudder. They’d make him watch as they killed her in the slowest, most inhuman way possible. And then they’d kill him…eventually. Probably after they wrung out every last scream Oliver had left in him, before making very, very sure that Slade was ready to die.

“I’m going to go outside and whip that kid into shape,” he said, quietly and close to her ear. “You’re going to come with me – we’ll train together. And in three days’ time we’ll have a proper plan and head to the main camp. There’s a chance of success here, Worth, and we have to focus on that. Got it?”

She took a deep breath and nodded against him. Slowly, he let her go, examining her carefully. She hadn’t cried, thankfully, although her face had a waxy, grey edge to it. But her mouth was set in that now–familiar line of resolve, and although she radiated tiredness, she no longer seemed as frightened.

“How did I become the optimist here?” he wondered aloud, and was rewarded with a short laugh.

“Oh, shut it, Wilson,” she replied, shaking her head and pushing him a little towards the fuselage entrance. “Let’s go put the fear of god into the new kid.”

Slade grinned; his favourite grin, the one with most of his teeth. “Ladies first,” he said, and she returned the grin.

Poor kid.
Apologies for the late update! But I think extenuating circumstances apply, again...XD
Happy New Year to all, and may 2017 bring you peace, prosperity, and strength to endure until the good times due to you arrive.

Hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, and if you could please consider leaving a comment, they're really nice to get! See you all at the next update. :-}
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated Tuesday 3rd January 2017. Please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The plan, in the end, was a simple one: get in, get out, don't get caught. The bits in the the middle, unfortunately, would require a helluva lot of improvisation. And three days didn't give them much time to prepare.

The days progressed, therefore, with a surprising amount of regularity. Each morning Slade, an early riser by nature due to his inborn insomniac habits, woke the other two. Lian rose silently almost immediately; Slade got the feeling that she slept about as much as he did and was only really dozing by the time dawn crept across the horizon. Oliver, on the other hand, slept deeply when he managed to sleep at all, curled in on himself like an overgrown puppy, hands tucked against the side of his face. Oliver, therefore, required a gentle kick or two before he finally snapped into alertness. By that time, Lian had gotten the fire started.

Slade ordinarily didn't like having a fire going every single day. It used up a lot of fuel, which required more frequent trips into the forest, and with each trip, of course, they risked coming across a patrol or leaving behind evidence of their presence. At the same time, though, the fire was a good motivator; warm bodies and warm food weren't a bad way to start the day, and every little boost to moral helped.

Mornings were spent in silence, waiting for the food to warm up and the light to clear across the sky. The air was getting chillier, the unseasonable warmth finally dissipating across the sea. It wasn't quite cold enough to start frosting in the mornings, but the dew was getting colder and heavier as each morning passed, leading him to push his warm ups to extremes as quickly as he could without injuring any of them, and to train in the already flattened grass so as to minimise any wet clothing. The last thing any of them needed was a head cold, not with what was coming at the end of their deadline.

"We're getting low on fuel," commented Oliver, yawning widely. His voice drew Slade out of his thoughts, away from the countdown and the swell of worry that rose when he veered towards thinking about how woefully under–prepared they were. He glanced at the stock of wood – mostly torn branches or fallen twigs, with the occasional log left over from trees displaced or cracked by land slippage – and saw a pile large enough for that morning's fire, but not that evening's. He rubbed his cheek with his knuckles, examining the offending sticks.

"We'll have to collect more," he said, and shook off the surge of tiredness that threatened him.

"I can go," said Lian immediately. He shook his head, glancing at Oliver.

"No," he replied, stretching his back and making to stand. "I'll take the kid. We'll carry more."

Lian quirked an eyebrow at him. "I can carry just as much as you, Wilson."
"Doubtful," he said, raising an eyebrow back. "Especially seeing as I could bench press two of you and you could probably lift four rabbits on a good day."

Oliver darted in before Lian could do anything but puff up from where she was sitting, back against the boxes.

"Now, now Lian, please," said Oliver, putting his hands up placatingly. "I think what Slade is trying to say...is that frankly, you have very small and weak woman arms unsuited for hunter gathering. Leave it to the men. Now, hang on, wait – Slade's words, not mine – not mine, not mine Slade help!"

"You are on your bloody own, kid," said Slade, picking up the last cut of fowl, content to watch as Lian grabbed a knife and just went for Oliver. They ended up in a chase outside and he followed, leaning against the side of the entrance and eyeing their unpolished movements as they fought against one another.

Lian's agility wasn't too bad, and the height difference – while not very obvious when she had been training with Slade – seemed to help rather than hinder. Her reach was shorter, but she also had more access to the torso and legs. Oliver practically towered over her at just over six foot, and even had a few inches on Slade himself. Oliver wasn't using the height difference to his advantage, though – he should be trying to grab her wrist and disarm her, but he was leery of the knife, afraid of getting hurt. He'd have to get over that fear of pain. Sometimes getting stabbed was the only way to get your enemy close enough to deal a finishing blow.

"Worth, your grip!" he snapped. "Watch your wrist! Kid, you should be going for her weapon, and in failing that, try to make sure she can't use it! Pay attention!"

Lian finally corrected her grip after about half a minute, and the difference showed. Slade needed to make sure she was training with her non–dominant hand as well, though, and Oliver needed to watch where his feet were going, otherwise –

Yep, there he went. Tripped over his own feet. Slade opened his mouth to yell, but the kid had turned it into an offensive move, catching Lian's legs with his own. In her efforts to maintain her own footing, she dropped the knife – and Oliver grabbed it. Lian jumped to avoid and swipe at her legs, and then the battlefield shifted, with her on the defensive and Oliver trying to attack, albeit with pulled punches because he was clearly afraid that he'd actually hurt Lian. Slade would have to make sure that the kid didn't have the same hesitance when faced with the need to take out an actual opponent.

"Feet, Worth!" he barked. "Don't forget the basics!"

Oliver lunged, but he reached out too far – Lian grabbed the wrist with the knife, turned and twisted, and Oliver went flying to the ground, landing hard on his back. Lian stuck the edge of the knife against his jugular and they stopped for a second, staring at one another and panting heavily. Then Lian looked up at Slade, a dark slash of a smile on her face.

"Not bad," he said, forcing the words past his suddenly dry throat.

Oliver sighed, chagrined. "Not bad, he says. Not bad." Lian moved the the knife from his throat, her smile melting into something softer. She was still breathing quite heavily. Slade abruptly jumped down from the fuselage, snatching his gear before he left.

"That's right, kid," he said, shrugging on his flak and weapons. "Not bad – but nowhere close to good, either. You could have easily taken that knife from her at the start of the fight. Instead, you hesitated, and it cost you the victory. You're afraid of pain."
Oliver scrambled to his feet, scowling. "Of course I'm afraid of pain," he said. "Who wouldn't be afraid of pain? It's pain."

"Because it doesn't matter which way you fight, kid," said Slade, crossing his arms. "It's always gonna hurt. You need to accept that there's going to be pain, or you'll never progress. And then you'll get yourself killed."

Oliver's scowl just deepened. "How am I supposed to just...accept pain?"

"You tell me," Slade replied. "How did you survive being tortured for hours?"

The redness immediately drained from Oliver's cheeks; his whole face went slack and he took a step back, shoulders up.

"All right," said Slade. "I'll answer for you: somewhere, in your brain, you had a goal, right? Something to focus on, some kind of secret you had to keep, or person you had to see. Maybe it was even the pain itself you focussed on. It doesn't matter. You compartmentalised, and you managed to come out of it with your mind intact."

Oliver shook his head, hard. Slade examined him for a minute, then continued, quietly.

"And maybe it was death itself you focussed on. Eh, kid? When he was cutting you up did you think that – well, at least with every new slice it brought you closer to not having to suffer anymore?"

"Slade," said Lian sharply.

"Because that's what I thought about," Slade finished, and the silence afterwards was leaden. Oliver's eyes were filled with pain, every crease in his face etched with the memory of his torture; Lian, still on the ground, had both hands across her mouth, knife forgotten in the grass. Slade swallowed; his throat was still dry.

"My best friend tortured me for – I don't even know how long," he said, voice still quiet. "So believe me when I tell you, Oliver – you have to get over the fear of pain, or the pain will rule you. Get your opponent before they can get you, and if they get you, get them back harder. For the love of god, learn this before it's too late."

Wordlessly, Oliver nodded. Slade swallowed again.

"Good, kid. Now gear up – we need food and firewood."

Oliver practically ran to the fuselage. Slade's hand tugged; Lian had taken one of his gloved fingers and was examining it like it held the secrets of the universe. He sighed, removing the finger from her grip.

"I'm fine," he said. "And you really weren't bad, earlier."

She looked up at him, clearly unimpressed at his segue.

"I mean, you're not as good as me," he amended thoughtfully. "Obviously."

"Obviously," she repeated, the drawn–out word dripping with sarcasm. He lightly cuffed her head, turning to Oliver as the kid walked over, still fiddling with the knife strap across his thigh. Slade rolled his eyes and went to fix it for him, kneeling quickly and adjusting it in one motion.

"It should be attached to your belt to help with the weight distribution," he said, standing and making
sure that the belt, at least, was fixed properly. Oliver went red, stepping away.

"I know how to dress myself," he muttered petulantly.

"And you wonder why I call you 'kid'," Slade replied, throwing a nod goodbye to Lian. She stood and put her hands in the small of her back, stretching.

"I guess I'll train while you're gone," she sighed.

"Don't let the fire go out," said Slade.

She threw out a badly executed salute – her list of odd skills obviously didn't extend to proper military forms – and walked back to the fuselage. Slade didn't hang around to watch her go; he and Oliver took the opposite route, heading deeper into the forest. And maybe he'd sneak in a couple of 'lessons' while they were there...

~~~

Oliver couldn't remember the taste of tequila. It seemed insane, somehow, that he couldn't – but there you had it. He dreamed of pizza, and soft beds, and losing his mind on the dancefloor with Tommy and Laurel and other friends.

More often than not, though – he dreamed of Sara. The sheet–white terror on her face was branded on the inside of his eyeballs; he saw it every time he blinked and it swam in his brain every time unconsciousness took over. Every moment since then had gone by so quickly, even those days on the raft with the stench of his father's decaying body next to him, stiff and soft all at once. Now he had to be a killer to survive.

When he thought about it, he didn't think there was much of a change required. He'd already killed – he'd signed Sara's death sentence, and effectively violated his relationship with Laurel. His father, and the first mate – they were only dead because of him. Death trailed Oliver – but it had been handed to him just like everything in his life had been handed to him. And now he was being taught by a trained killer to infiltrate a camp filled with torturers, and he was frightened – but it was because he'd actually have to do something himself, wasn't it? Instead of leaving it to someone else?

Coward. He was a coward, a coward, a coward.

He couldn't come back from this. But there were so many mistakes he'd made, so many bad things he'd done – how could he come back from any of that? How could he turn around and face the enormity of his sins, his wastefulness, the useless pain and selfishness he had dealt out to everyone around him? How could he escape any of that when the crimes were so glaring, so huge?

He could only face forward. He had to change, he had to become something that people needed, because the person he'd been his whole life was a drain on the world and a parasite on good people, people who hadn't deserved to die and suffer in Oliver's name, for Oliver's life. He needed to be someone who could protect those people, who could survive the terrifying pain that waited for him in whatever the future was, because there was a book in Oliver's pocket that he carried everywhere, and in it were detailed more sins that he could understand, especially as he was now.

He knew all this. It was just...hard. And frightening. He didn't think he'd ever get used to the pain. Although he was beginning to realise he had a capacity to survive that even he didn't fully understand the depth of. Too bad Slade didn't seem to see that in him. Every time Oliver opened his mouth it seemed like the other man only heard complaining.

"How far is it?", for example.
Slade grunted. "Getting tired, kid? We've only just started."

"I'm pretty sure we've been walking for hours," said Oliver, stretching his back. The bag that Slade had shoved towards him was filled with a few animals; mostly squirrels today, with one fowl. Slim pickings, but it would do. "Lian said there might be edible mushrooms around," he added, giving a cursory glance to the ground.

The other man snorted. "I'll bet," he muttered.

Oliver raised his eyebrows. "What do you mean?"

"Hrm?" Slade glanced at him before sighing and shaking his head. To Oliver's surprise, his face softened ever–so–slightly around the edges. "Nah, nothing kid – it's just Lian's got a lot of random knowledge stored in her brain. The first couple of weeks we met she kept – surprising me."

Oliver jogged up to match Slade's pace, interest piqued. "What do you mean, skills?" he asked. "Like, she knew foraging or something?"

Slade shook his head. "Nah. Well – she knows how to make a fishing net. How to tan. How to prepare a fish, including how to bone 'em, although that was probably from her restaurant work. It doesn't really surprise me to hear that she knows how to find mushrooms too, that's all."

"It's all got to do with food, kinda," said Oliver thoughtfully. "Was she a chef? Like...before." He added lamely.

Slade paused; it was a silence deep with intangible seriousness. "...not exactly," he said, finally. "She used to, in a restaurant, but taught classes from home when she – had a family."

"Had?" Oliver felt his stomach dropping. Slade shook his head sharply.

"Don't ask about it, kid," he said. "It's her business. I shouldn't be volunteering you things like that behind her back."

"Ask her yourself, then," was Slade’s reply. "And we're barely a team, kid."

Oliver rolled his eyes. "Wow, you're a real sweet talker, aren't you? Just oozing good morale."

"If you've got the energy to be a smartass you've got the energy for another mile or so," said Slade, turning to smirk at him. Oliver barely managed to restrain a groan as Slade picked up the pace, hopping across a small stream and making a slight u–turn in the forest. Oliver tried to follow; almost losing his footing in the mud, he heard Slade snort, and looked over to see him shaking his head. Oliver tried to resist responding, just gritted his teeth and trotted to catch up.

"What about you, then?" he asked, readjusting the bag over his shoulder.

"What about me?" growled Slade.

"Aw, c'mon..." Oliver nudged Slade with his elbow, hopping away at Slade’s responding glower.

"Less chit–chat, kid, more focussing on your surroundings," said Slade shortly.

"I am focussing," said Oliver. "Look, if you don’t wanna talk about it, then just say so! You don’t have to keep being so...sour. I’m trying to work with you here.”
“You’re distracting, that’s what you are, kid,” grunted Slade.

“Being in a bad mood will distract you just as much as being in a good one,” said Oliver. “Hey, is there only ever meat from traps? Do you hunt? Fish?”

Slade closed his eyes briefly, changing course slightly and leading them downhill. Oliver hoped that he was maybe annoying the other man into heading back instead of carrying on their foraging. Surprisingly, though, Slade actually picked up the thread of conversation.

“Lian asked the same thing,” he said. “We’ve had fish – once. When Yao Fei was still with us.”

“Wow,” said Oliver. Suddenly his nostrils filled with the imaginary scent of roasted fish and his mouth watered. “Oh man. That’d be nice.”

“Hm. Should’ve seen Lian prepare ‘em. Didn’t come across a single bone.”

“Seriously?!”

“Hah, yeah. She filleted them with a hunting knife. Yao Fei had a pair of tweezers. I’ve never seen her so concentrated, before or after. If it was me I would’ve gutted ‘em all right, but otherwise just eaten them whole – holy shit.”

Oliver startled; Slade had darted to the side, jumping down the small incline and darting over to the side of yet another small stream. Oliver looked around, quickly; seeing nothing, no mercenaries or wild animals, he ran over to Slade, keeping his head turning from side to side.

“Slade!” he hissed. “What is it? What did you see – oh, uh –”

“Kid, hold that,” Slade said, somewhat unnecessarily seeing as he had already shoved the gun into Oliver’s hand. “Careful, safety’s off.”

Oliver gingerly held the gun as he watched Slade pick apart some indistinct kind of foliage from other indistinct kinds of foliage. He’d held guns before, of course – he’d even briefly attended a gun club at one of his schools, before he’d been kicked out – but this was Slade’s gun. It felt weird to hold what Oliver had come to think of as basically an extension of Slade himself.

“What are you doing?” he asked.

“Isn’t it obvious?”

Oliver re-examined the foliage, trying to see if the obvious would jump out at him. “Uh…no?”

Slade turned his head to stare at him; he honestly seemed amazed that Oliver hadn’t realised whatever it was he was supposed to realise.

“You know what blackberries are, kid?” he said, finally, pulling a few thorny lengths of greenery out for Oliver’s observation. The thorny parts were sort of brown, and the leaves looked prickly too – oh – oh! Further up, hanging heavily from their stems, were a number of plump, ripe blackberries. Some were still in the process of ripening – green to a dark red blush to black-purple – but a lot of them were ripe and shiny.

“Holy shit,” said Oliver quietly. He was almost embarrassed at how awed he was. Slade laughed.

“Jesus, kid, I’m pretty excited too, but you’d think you’d never seen blackberries before!” he exclaimed. His face looked more relaxed when he smiled, like the battle-hardened warrior was just a
mask, and a totally normal person actually rested underneath, just waiting for the right moment to surface. Oliver cleared his throat.

“Uh, actually….”

Slade stared. “Kid, you’re joking.”

“I’ve seen blackberries, obviously!” Oliver immediately insisted. “It’s just – I mean, never wild.”

“You’ve never seen a bramble,” said Slade flatly. Oliver winced.

“I didn’t even know it was called that,” he admitted. Slade seemed to be totally astounded.

“But it’s a bramble,” he said, like Oliver was trying to mess with him. Oliver let the bag with their kills in it slip from his shoulder as he rubbed his temple, the gun still held loosely in his hand.

“I know, I know – it’s just that I’m a city kid!” he said. “All the great outdoors I’ve been in have been pretty…well, uh, manicured, I guess. I can fish though!” he added, hurriedly. His memory of the summers spent at the family lake house, surprisingly, caused only a fleeting pang of pain in his heart. Probably because he didn’t stop to linger.

Ugh, Slade was still staring. Slowly, the other man said, “Kid…”

Suspicious, Oliver answered. “…yeah?”

“You do know where milk comes from, right?”

“Oh, fuck you, Slade!” exclaimed Oliver hotly. His annoyance only strengthened when Slade let loose a peal of laughter, short–lived but energetic. It was the first real display of humour he’d seen from the man in the whole time he’d known him – granted, that ‘whole time’ was about two days, so it wasn’t really saying much.

Slade reached out to take a blackberry, twisting it off the bramble and popping it in his mouth. “Hah – ah, bit sour, but damn that’s nice. Lian’ll appreciate these, I bet.”

“Yeah…” said Oliver. “But – how are we going to transport them?”

He shouldn’t have asked.

“Stupid question kid,” said Slade, a laugh behind his words. After a brief battle of wills, Oliver sacrificed his sweater and was now helping Slade delicately pick the bramble free of the soft fruit, gently placing them into the makeshift bag. At least the wool was black, and the stains wouldn’t show, right?

“How many are we going to pick?” he asked.

“All of them, kid,” replied Slade, taking another blackberry for himself. “Mind them. Berries bruise real easy, and they basically start to go off the second you pick them.”

“We’re gonna eat them all tonight?”

“Most likely. And we can listen to Lian bitch about what she’d be doing with them if she had a kitchen and some yams.”

“Yam?”
“Or whatever, I don’t know.”

Oliver paused. “…rabbit pie and blackberries,” he said. “Ew. Or maybe it’d be nice?”

“I’ll never touch rabbit again the second I get off this bloody island,” declared Slade, like a vow. “All right, I think that’s all. Not bad pickings.”

Oliver stood, assembling himself, and once he was put together to Slade’s satisfaction, they made the careful walk back. To his surprise, Slade actually talked a little – mostly relating to blackberries and food, granted, but it was voluntary conversation. Apparently he used to go foraging when he was a child, and the skills transferred when he was part of ASIS and sent to remote locations. Oliver, while totally aware that he didn’t have the first idea about foraging, was actually heartened by the fact that there seemed to be a lot more to eat on the island than he’d initially thought – something further shown by the snares catching another fowl and two rabbits when they checked them on the way back. Even Slade seemed cheerful, especially when the fuselage came into sight just as the twilight was deepening. There was a faint glow coming from inside; Lian had even gotten the fire ready. Oliver beamed down at his special load of blackberries that he’d been gently carrying for miles, and shared a grin with Slade.

“Lian!” Slade called, taking the bag from Oliver’s shoulder. They entered together, looking forward to dinner.

Oliver nearly dropped the blackberries. Slade let out a strangled snarl, whipping out his gun without hesitation.

“What the hell are you doing here?” he demanded, teeth bared and eyes wild.

Yao Fei was standing in the fuselage, dressed in mercenary black, with his bow and arrow tautly drawn. But the arrow wasn’t pointing at either of them; it was pointing at Lian – Lian, who was sitting cross-legged and hunched on the ground, foul-faced and with blood from a split lip smeared across her chin.

“Boys,” she greeted, coolly, like Yao Fei wasn’t about to let loose an arrow and kill her where she sat. “Good to see you. You’re late.”

Chapter End Notes

What a long day today! I had my first day at my new job - which went pretty well, as it was mostly training in their systems - and then got treated to a celebratory "first day at first professional job" dinner, and we went to see Moana, which was AWESOME and BEAUTIFUL and if you guys haven't seen it I totally recommend it! Totally gorgeous and heartwarming and funny and just lovely lovely lovely.

So this update is a little bit late today, but it's still within the day! Still getting the hang of my new schedule (sooo tired after waking up super early today XD) but it's all getting there, slowly but surely. :-) If you liked the chapter please consider leaving a comment, as they're really nice to get. Hope you enjoyed it, and I'll see you guys in a few days! :-)
"Put the bow down."

Slade's focus had narrowed to exactly one thing; his gun, aimed at Yao Fei’s traitorous head. Nobody so much as flicked an eyelid – the kid next to him was frozen, clutching the blackberries; Lian still crouched on the ground, eyes furious and blood stark against her chin; Yao Fei with his eyes still on Lian and his bowstring taught and arrow ready to fly.

"Yao Fei," said Oliver, quietly. It was the youngest, most lost he’d ever sounded since he showed up in the fuselage, cut to ribbons and still ready to live. "What are you doing?"

"I don't have much time," said Yao Fei, still not moving. The tip of the handmade arrow shone in the firelight. "There is a patrol several miles away; I told them there were too many well-hidden landmines to lead all of them through this area, but soon they will expect me back at the main camp to report."

"Yao Fei, if there's a point you might want to start getting to it," said Slade, softly. All he needed was a twitch from the other man, and he'd blow his brains out. He’d hurt Lian, again, after swearing he never would; that blood on her chin was a wake-up call, dark and primal, straight from his bones. He'd been right not to trust, he'd been right. Yao Fei betrayed them, again and again; he ruined the secrecy of their hideout, put their safety in jeopardy – whatever his motivations might have been, his sins just kept building up and up. And Slade was extremely low on patience. The gun felt hot and right in his hand, just waiting for the perfect moment.

"I know their plan," said Yao Fei. If he noticed Slade’s rising animosity he gave no indication of it. "We were correct. They will shoot down a passenger plane so to disrupt Chinese economy. Several hundred people are going to die."

"All right," said Slade, nicely. He could play calm and rational too. "And you're telling us this why?"

"Because their plan changed. The first plane was not supposed to be for another week. For whatever reason, they are now to target another plane."

"Why?" asked Oliver, taking a step forward before suddenly remembering the situation and stopping halfway through, almost sheepishly.

"It doesn't matter why," said Slade. "They're mercenaries; they do as they're told."

"Wilson," said Yao Fei. "The plane is coming tomorrow."

Silence greeted this announcement. Resounding silence, shock and horror.

"...what?" said Oliver, faintly. Out of the corner of his eye, Slade saw him gently deposit the jumper filled with blackberries to the ground, out of the way, before scrubbing his head with his hands, face
lost and utterly young.

"I thought that you would follow the original plan and escape using the supply plane," said Yao. "My first intention was to warn you that they are expecting that, and the plan will fail."

Slade’s vision whitened out. He distantly became aware of Oliver shouting at him – of Lian’s eyes dark and alarmed, her hand stretching out – but all he could see was Yao Fei, stoic and still. When his head cleared, he realised that he had crossed the distance between him and the other man, and now stood with the barrel of his gun pressed against dark, pulled back hair. Yao Fei hadn’t moved; his bow still drawn, his eyes still on Lian, the arrowhead still gleaming in the firelight.

"How?!" exclaimed Oliver, looking wildly between Slade and Yao Fei. He had stepped forward to separate the two but shock had clearly sent his head spinning. "Did you tell them??"

"No," said Yao Fei, sharply. His eyes flicked to Slade, briefly, before going back to Lian. "It was Wintergreen. I heard him talking to Fyers. He knows you."

Slade’s throat went dry; his head became weightless. His breath wouldn’t come, and he couldn’t tell if his heart was beating too quickly, or not at all.

"Slade, put your gun down," Lian said, quietly. He didn't move. He couldn't, he couldn't move. There was a flicker in the corner of his eye and he almost flinched; but it was only Oliver, who was slowly moving from their end of the fuselage towards Lian, eyes on Slade. Surprise managed to burrow in through the fog infecting Slade's brain; the kid was now standing in front of Lian, both hands out towards Yao Fei. If the man let loose an arrow, Oliver would either get seriously injured, or killed – hell, even a papercut was enough to sign a death sentence here, in a place with no proper medical help. It was enough to make Slade practically grind the end of the barrel against Yao Fei’s skull.

"Yao," said Oliver, calmly. "Lower your bow."

No-one moved. The only sound came from the fire popping.

"Slade," Lian tried.

"No," said Slade.

"Lower you bow, Yao," said Oliver, firmer this time. "Please."

Slade couldn't count how many heartbeats went by before Yao lowered his bow, so slowly Slade could hardly tell at first that he was moving; it was glacier pace, slow as mountains turning to deserts. Eventually, though, the arrow was not only pointing downwards, but loose in the bow. Finally, like somebody had cut invisible strings on his body, Slade moved away and let his gun fall from Yao Fei’s head.

"So Wintergreen's planning an ambush," Slade said, throat sore and voice filled with gravel. "On top of that, we don't even know when the supply plane is leaving. We were planning on trying to contact you."

This, finally – of all things – elicited a reaction from Yao. His eyes widened, his mouth very nearly fell open.

"Are you mad?" he demanded. "Three of you against a camp?"

"It was my plan," said Lian. She reached up from the floor and Oliver took her forearm, helping her
stand. To Slade's relief she seemed mostly unharmed; no limp accompanied her as she stood and there was no flicker of pain in her face, no hint of a tell–tale grimace. The only distraction was the smear of blood on her chin; he thought he could see small flecks of red dotting her shirt as well. His temper rolled beneath his ribs, ready and waiting.

"It was only going to be a fact–finding mission," interrupted Slade as he crossed his arms and glowered at Yao. "We were going to find you, get the departure date, and sneak back out."

Yao Fei shook his head, snapping a hand out. "There are too many men. You would be seen."

"I'm not going through our entire plan right now," Slade glowered. "Especially not with you. When's the next supply plane?"

The other man grimaced, slipping away his arrow and letting his bow rest loosely in his hands. A sign of peace, maybe, or perhaps he thought they trusted him now? "A week from today."

"Why are you telling us this?" said Oliver, crossing his arms underneath each other, his shoulders up. It was an excellent question. Slade looked forward to the answer.

"Because I, too, have run out of time," said Yao Fei. "I thought that I could kill Fyers and disrupt their plan from the inside, but now that their plan has changed, so has everything else."

"That's not all the truth, though, is it?" said Slade, softly. He took a step towards the other man, looking straight into his eyes. His fingers hadn't lost their strength on the handle of his gun. "What aren't you telling us?"

"They have something over you, don't they?" Lian spoke suddenly, moving past Oliver, a hand on her hip. When Yao Fei started, she frowned at him. "We as much figured that out, Yao."

"Yeah – when I got here," added Oliver. "It's pretty obvious that you're not working for them because you want to. Why else would you save me? They're going to kill you, Yao. They only want you for one reason, and once they're done –"

"I am aware," said Yao, sharply.

"So what are you here for?" Slade snarled at the other man, doing his best to loom Threateningly over him. But instead of meeting his eyes, as Slade expected, Yao looked down, away. His eyes shuttered, his shoulders slumped; but these minute movements were the only indication that Yao felt anything at all. He was otherwise a complete, unreadable statue.

"I thought I would at least offer you the choice of what to do," said Yao. "I have wronged each of you in my own way. I wanted you to know of the change in their plans, and to warn you of their suspicions regarding your escape."

"And that's all?" said Slade, his scepticism so strong it practically gave him heartburn. Yao Fei finally cracked, throwing him a flat look.

"It must occur to you, Wilson," he said. "That if the mercenaries know your plan, and if their plan has changed, then they will be leaving much sooner than anticipated?"

The words circled the air, refusing to penetrate or settle for long moments. It rested over their heads with a stunningly stark finality, sending their hearts into a panic and their lungs straining for air.

"...there won't be a supply plane..." said Lian, faintly. Her mouth fell open with horror at her own words, her hand coming up to weakly cover it. Oliver had blanched, like a corpse a few hours old,
ready to collapse, and Slade –

Shook.

Was it anger? Was it fear? A combination of everything? He didn't know, even with hindsight to help later.

"What about sneaking on when they're leaving?" said Oliver, desperately, and Slade could have laughed. Maybe that would work in worse circumstances, but in a well-organised clockwork organisation like what Fyers had going? Not a chance they wouldn't be found. That guy had code words and numbers and everything ticked and signed and crossed out – it wasn't a war zone, where people were just trying to run. There'd be guarded and secret transport locations, impossible to get into without a larger force.

Slade realised that he had punched the side of the fuselage – again. He needed to get control of himself. But the anger – it was flooding him, drowning him –

"What are we going to do?" whispered Oliver. Slade kicked over a box, the crash barely satisfying his rising bloodlust, and snarled. Everyone started away, wide-eyed, and watched as he grabbed his swords and leapt outside, shouting into the long grass, pacing and slicing at the grass and the phantom figures his mind projected – faceless mercenaries, Fyers, Billy.

The second, the second he made or accepted any kind of plan, it all went to hell. This island had it out for him. He was going to die here, they all were –

An arrow hit the ground next to his feet. The next one he knocked out of the air with his sword. "Fuck you, Yao!" he yelled, aiming both his swords at the Bowman. Oliver and Lian had jumped out after Slade, but Yao was standing on the edge of the fuselage opening, steady as a rock.

"Slade!" shouted Lian, running towards him. Oliver was close behind. Unbidden, his sword pointed at both of them.

"Stay away!" he snarled. "I swear to god –"

But they didn't stop. Oliver went low, Lian went high, and Slade found himself trapped in a dance that only lasted seconds but felt like hours. Oliver tried to slide-tackle his legs, and when Slade jumped out of the way Lian made to hit the nerve in his elbow that would make him drop his sword. Slade was caught between evading and defending while also trying not to hurt either of them, only ending up stuck with Oliver's forearms in a chokehold around his neck, Slade's arms pinned in the air, and Lian deftly ridding him of his swords. She had to drop one of them – they weighed a lot more than she was used to – but she kept up one of them, the hilt just long enough to let her use two hands for balance. She steadied herself, then levelled the sword at him.

"Slade," she said. Slade struggled to free himself, only to end up sending a lance of pain down his neck.

"Lian," he growled. "Put down that sword."

"Calm down, Slade."

"Put my damn sword down, Worth."

"Calm down first!"
"Slade, breathe," said Oliver, close to his ear. The kid was a solid mass behind Slade's back, his chest an unyielding stone wall and his heartbeat the only giveaway to his nerves; it was a juddering, anxious rhythm juxtaposed by his quiet, clear voice. "Slade. Breathe."

"I can't with your bloody arms around my neck," Slade grumbled, but it was a token complaint and they all knew it. Lian lowered the sword, letting the tip fall into the ground with a sharp noise, and by increments, Oliver loosened his hold. Strangely, this had the effect of mentally unmooring Slade, like a boat buffed by the wind, heading out towards the open sea. He reached for his swords, but Oliver's hand pulled his away.

"Slade," he said quietly. "We need a plan."

"I don't bloody well have one, kid," Slade replied. Weariness tugged at him, and he shook off Oliver's hand, collecting his swords and making his way back to the fuselage. Yao Fei waited there with his bow free of arrows, barely a shadow in the dark of the evening, silhouette lit up from the fire still going in the fuselage hearth.

"Wilson," he said.

"Don't you start." Slade walked right past him, stowing his blades in their usual spot and taking a seat by the hearth, fingers pressing hard against his lips as he leaned his chin against his palm, elbow digging into his thigh. He stared into the flames, thoughts whirling hard enough to make him dizzy, like there wasn't enough air in the world and water was closing over his head.

He shook himself. Then he did it again, harder, moving his hands to ball underneath his chin.

He wasn't dead yet. He wouldn't die here, he couldn't. But damn this place was testing him, and he'd long ago lost any certainty he may have once had that he would eventually come out of top. The walls were closing in, the hounds had his scent; there was saltwater in his lungs and smoke in his nose. Death scraped at his heels, hungry and patient all at once. Most obvious way off was to sneak away on the plane – hell, any plane at this point – since they couldn't risk openly attacking any camp, let alone the main camp, not without –

Slade breathed very quietly, trying to let a new, fragile idea percolate in his subconscious until it was ready to float to the surface.

"Radio..." he said, back slowly straightening, eyes staring off into the distance. He was distantly aware of Lian and Oliver climbing into the fuselage and hovering near him. They both eventually sat nearby, obviously unwilling to interrupt him. But the silence dragged on, Slade's idea swimming and swimming, like a shark beneath innocent waters, and Oliver soon interrupted with a tactful clearing of his throat.

"Look, it's bad," he said. "But we'll think of something. We came up with a plan before, right? We'll come up with one now."
"Except Yao says they know we'll try for the plane," said Lian. "And the fact that there is no plane, now."

"Yeah, but they don't know we know that," protested Oliver. Slade snapped his fingers; his face must have been quite a sight, because both Lian and Oliver stared at him, alarmed.

"Exactly," he said. They glanced at each other, confused.

"What, exactly?" asked Lian. Slade couldn't contain the rising energy in his limbs; he jumped to his feet at started pacing, feeling out the shape of the idea as he tried to put it into words.

"They don't know that we know," he repeated. "Our plan still works. Except that instead of aiming for intel on the supply plane, our goal is the radio."

"The radio?" Yao Fei had entered, but Slade ignored him, going so far as to turn his back on him.

"They need a radio for their plan to work," he explained to the other two. "I said before that we had to piggyback a passenger route to get to the island – but no planes actually fly near enough, not directly. They'll have to alter the plane's route, probably by hijacking an official signal. Which means that there'll be access to a long range, high-quality stream we can use to contact ASIS. Or hell, in failing that, we can tell the pilots of the closest flight to send help – or the local coastguard, the nearest airport – shit, my buddy in the CIA or my contacts along the West Coast. They owe me big for some messy shit in Vietnam."

"My mom..." said Oliver, hope dawning across his face. "Thea...Laurel..."

"We just need to hit one tent long enough to get the radio message out," said Lian. "It's another in–and–out mission."

"They monitor the radios," snapped Yao Fei suddenly, stepping forward. "They will catch you, and you will die. This is not what I intended when I gave you this information."

"And what did you intend, Yao?" asked Slade, turning to face him now. The other man was pale barring a flush across his cheeks, and his hands were clasped tightly behind his back. He was frowning.

"You could wait," said Yao Fei. "This is what I meant by a choice. To have the freedom to try and escape or to stay and wait for the mercenaries to leave."

"They wouldn't just leave us alone," said Slade. Billy's friendly face flashed across his mind – that stupid moustache, his cheerful smile, the deadness in his eyes as he was torturing Slade. Billy taught Slade how to clean up his messes, but Slade doubted he'd been taught everything that Billy knew.

"They'd tie up loose ends," Oliver agreed, shifting on his feet. He grimaced, fingers feeling along his ribs, probably unconsciously. "Fyers is...an exact kind of guy. He'd never just leave us running around."

Yao opened his mouth – no doubt to further harangue them – but Lian beat him to the punch.

"You keep expecting us to choose ourselves over others, don't you?" she asked. "Yao, what do they have on you?"

Silence washed between them; Yao left his mouth hanging open briefly, but it shut with a solid click shortly after Lian's question. He didn't appear to have any intention of answering – which, really, was a sort of answer of itself.
"What about the passenger plane?" asked Oliver. "I mean...we're saving it, aren't we?"

"How in the hell are we supposed to –" Slade stopped. They were running out of time and while he felt good about his radio idea, it was basically an idea made entirely of good-looking ribbons with no Christmas gift inside. Time was of the essence, and it was pretty obvious that their only advantage was surprise.

"Yao," he said. The other man looked to him, and Slade made sure he had his attention. "When are they expecting you back?"

He had the pleasure of watching the little cogs turn and turn in the man's head before everything fell into place.

"No," said Yao Fei.

"If we strike, we strike now," said Slade. "We have an advantage if we work together, but only in this window – and the window is small."

"Wait – wait – what?" said Oliver, looking between them, worry hitting his back like a backhand.

"Slade?" Lian's face creased into a frown, which she directed at him. "Wait – are you saying – are you seriously saying –"

"I'm saying we go now," said Slade. "As in now. Our basic plan still works. We run distraction, get in, get out. By the time the sun hits the skyline we'll have our getaway."

"But what's stopping them from shooting our rescue plane out of the sky?" asked Lian. "They'd see anything coming a mile off. And they'd surely know we were trying to access the radios the second the explosions went off. They'll be heavily guarded."

Slade paused, trying to think around that, mind going a hundred miles an hour. Oliver interrupted him though, filled with resolution.

"We need to stop them," he said. Slade let out a rough sigh, rubbing his cheek with the heel of his hand. Youth. What he wouldn't give for a gallon of what Oliver had.

"Kid, I know, and we will, it's just –"

"No, Slade, I mean we really need to stop them. For good. If we want a chance of making it off this island, we need to make sure their plan doesn't succeed."

Slade frowned at him. "How many times do I have to say this? It's just the three –"

"Four," said Lian, glancing at Yao Fei, who didn't respond. Slade growled.

"Yao," said Oliver. "You've mostly been in the main camp, right?" At Yao Fei's nod he continued. "Would you be familiar with how the camp works?"

Confused, Yao Fei examined Oliver as though his meaning would suddenly spring out, ready-made and obvious. Oliver hurried to explain.

"Would you know where the men would be late at night?" he asked. "Where the mess hall is? Where the weapons are?"

A light bulb went off in Slade's head.
"Ballistics," he said. "Grenades, dynamite. Hell, we might even find what they're planning to use to blow up the plane, turn it against them."

"We wouldn't need an army," added Lian, standing excitedly, eyes shining. "We'd just need to aim."

"Get 'em scattered – running – Yao, can you use a sniper rifle?" Slade spun around to the other man, seeing a pale but thoughtful face.

"No..." said Yao slowly. "But I know someone who can."

"A mercenary?" exclaimed Oliver, wide-eyed. Yao shook his head.

"Not a mercenary," he said, tightening his clasp on his arms and straightening his back. "A prisoner. I will free them, and they will remove the mercenaries who try to flee, or attack us from behind."

"Who is it, Yao?" asked Lian, loosely crossing her arms. "Is it the person they're holding against you?"

"Wait, wait –" Slade held up his hands. "Does that mean you're helping us?"

For a long moment, Yao Fei examined all of them, his face devoid of expression. Then he nodded slowly, a hint of emotion flowing in past the mask. It looked faintly like grief, or maybe even fear.

"No dicking around?" Slade asked, sharply. 'Dicking' probably wasn't in Yao Fei's vocabulary, but he seemed to get the gist of it. "You're with us, a hundred per cent? Because I promise you, if you turn around half way and try to fuck us over, hell will be a comfortable place compared to what I'd do to you. Understand?"

Yao nodded stiffly, his stance now reminiscent of a soldier at attention.

"So..." said Oliver, somewhat nervously. Slade tried to dial back his glare when he turned to the kid, but he didn't think he'd been very successful. "I guess we have a plan. Kinda. What...is the plan, exactly?"

Slade inhaled deeply, cracked his neck, and then his knuckles. "Gear up, kid," he said. "You too, Worth. We're taking the fight to them."

Chapter End Notes

First week of work done and dusted! Pretty frikking tired, but at least I got to sleep in today. Editing my Suicide Squad fanfic tonight, and working slowly on that Legends of Tomorrow one - it's becoming less and less of a rewrite and more of an exploration of some thoughts and ideas I had while watching the show, so...we'll see how it turns out! This is kinda the first time I've ever written stories that turned out longer than 5k, so it's all a learning curve!

Hope you guys had a good first week of the year - I know it can be pretty tough getting back into the swing of things, but just keep pushing! The days are already getting brighter, and we'll head into spring before we know it. In any case, hope you all enjoyed the chapter, and if you can, please leave a comment, as they're really nice to get. See you all in a few days! :-}
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated 10th January 2016. Please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Lian rubbed her lip absently as they geared up, throwing a glance now and again to the others, the firelight throwing long shadows in the plane. The night had deepened quickly, and the fire was getting low; soon it would be completely extinguished, and they’d head out – maybe for the last time. Oliver was twisting around, disgruntled, as Slade fixed his belts for him; he still hadn’t gotten used to the numerous straps required for the knives and gun holsters. Yao Fei had removed himself into a dark corner, arms crossed and separate from the group; he met her gaze for a moment before looking away, and she felt her eyes narrow, almost unbidden.

Earlier in the evening, she had been working through a drill with both knives as she waited for the others to return, when Yao Fei had appeared in possibly the worst way imaginable; silently, abruptly, and right behind her. She’d shrieked, struck out – actually managing to make him jump back with alarm and execute a twin move she’d copied from Slade – before he knocked both knives out of her hand and stood back, hands out.

“Lian,” he’d said, and she’d tried to punch him, still high from the panic he’d awoken in her.

So he’d punched her back. Right in the mouth. She went down like a sack of bricks, with Yao grey–faced and staring down at her.

“I am not here to hurt you,” he tried instead, and Lian grabbed one of her fallen knives and tried again, mostly just to see if she could.

She couldn’t. He had pulled out his bow, aiming an arrow straight at her.

“I don’t have time for this, Lian,” he’d said. “Where are the others?”

“Hunting,” she’d replied. The pain had lanced across her lip and she’d tasted blood; her hand shook as she went to her mouth. With a glare, she’d added, “You son of a bitch.”

“I apologise,” he’d said. But the arrow remained notched.

“I want to believe in you, Yao,” she’d said, as calmly as she could while still on the ground. “But you’d better keep your bow on me until we get back, because I really feel like trying to kick your ass right now.”

And there they’d stayed, détente, until nearly an hour had passed and the tell–tale crunch of dried grass signaled the return of Slade and Oliver.

She shook herself out of the memory, tightening her leg strap; over the past week she’d had to cut two new holes just to get it right. She caught Slade side–eyeing her as she put on her gear, his gaze flicking down to her lip and up again. Lian shook her head once and he looked right at her, assessing, before turning away.
“Aw, man,” said Oliver, the picture of disappointment.

“What?” she asked, shrugging on her gritty black sweater and rolling up the sleeves. Slade was now picking over the contents of one of the ammo boxes, ignoring Oliver completely. He looked like a kicked golden retriever, shoulders drooping and eyes big and sad.

“What are we going to do with the blackberries?”

Slade barked out a laugh, so loud Lian nearly jumped.

“We’ll eat them, kid,” he said, pulling out a couple of guns, similar to the kind he usually carried with him in his belt.

“. . . blackberries?” Lian looked over to Oliver’s suddenly bright face, walking over to where he crouched, picking over something on the ground.

“Check it out,” he said, grinning, and held up – blackberries. Lian whistled, crouching next to him. The sight of the plump black-purple berries, heaped in Oliver’s sweater, was like a breath of fresh air against her mood, lifting her up. Taking one of them, she popped it into her mouth – the hint of sourness told her the fruit must have had difficulty ripening, but it was otherwise sweet and pleasant. So much better than rabbit, and so welcome after months without vegetables or seasoning. She laughed, unexpectedly, and had to laugh again, sitting down properly on the floor and taking a few more into her palm.

“Is this what took you guys so long?” she asked. Oliver joined her crossed-legged on the ground, grabbing a few for himself and grinning hard.

“Yeah – Slade spotted them,” he said.

“Kid didn’t know what a bramble was,” Slade added, somewhere behind him. Oliver flushed, but the grin still hid underneath it. Lian couldn’t help but laugh again.

“You know where milk comes from, right?” she teased. Oliver practically exploded next to her.

“That’s exactly what Slade said!” he exclaimed, almost shrieking with indignation. Lian looked behind her to see Slade bent over, head ducked down and shoulders shaking. He could only wave a hand silently; he was laughing too hard to make a sound.

“I can’t believe this,” grumbled Oliver, chomping down on blackberries, his fingertips smeared with purple juice.

Lian smiled, taking another handful; she glanced over to Yao, inclining her head towards the rapidly declining pile, but he only shook his head tactfully, remaining in his corner. Slade finished up with his box, leaving two guns and a knife out for Oliver and Lian’s extra knives and knife straps on her bedroll. He snagged his own blackberries, and between them they finished the pile of sour-sweet berries in silence. When they were done, they all stood in silent agreement and finished gearing up – before turning, Lian threw each of the others a smile by way of a thank you for the effort they had gone to. Both of them returned the smile in their own particular way; Oliver’s all sunshine and glowing pride, Slade with the usual gruff hiding his underlying embarrassment at having actually done something nice and thoughtful. Lian just rolled her eyes at his back, licking her teeth clean of blackberry pulp and fixing her spare knife straps on her calves.

"Right, kiddos – here's the plan," announced Slade after a few minutes, sliding his swords into his back holsters and crossing his arms. "I've got the grenades. Yao, you're going to tell us everything you know about the camp – patterns, movements, where the weapons are stockpiled, where you
"There are twelve tents," Yao began, finally moving out of his shadowy corner. His face was pinched with worry, but his voice was steady and thoughtful. "Most are for resting, and they sleep in shifts. I know little about the contents of each tent, as I was mostly confined in one area. However, I have walked through the camp several times, with both Fyers and Wintergreen. I believe the weapons are stored in the tent next to where their jeeps are kept. The radios I believe are in a large tent in the centre of the camp. These, and one other tent, are the only ones that are being guarded."

"What's in the other tent?" asked Oliver, fingers tapping against his gun. His arms tucked underneath each other, then fell to his sides, and then a hand went to scratch at the back of his head; he couldn't seem to keep still.

"The prisoner who will help us," said Yao. He glanced at Lian and she couldn't help but jolt at his look; it was filled with pleading and fear. He closed his eyes briefly – longer than a blink usually took – and when he opened them again the emotions were gone, as though they had never existed at all.

"I would ask for your help with this, Lian," he continued, barely missing a beat. Lian's nails bit into the skin of her arm, hard enough that there would be marks later. Swallowing through a suddenly thick throat, she steadied herself, forcing her hand off her arm and down to her hip.

"What for?" she asked, unable to stop threads of suspicion from entering her words. Yao inclined his head towards the other two.

"Wilson and Oliver will have to be the ones to infiltrate the other side of the camp," he explained. "They can disguise themselves as mercenaries. You and I are too noticeable. We will free the prisoner and proceed to the weapons tent."

"Grab what you can and get the hell out," interjected Slade. "Prioritise grenades and the like – something that'll hurt them from a distance."

"Then blow the place up," concluded Lian. The thought of setting the camp on fire – and yeah, even killing some mercenaries along the way – sent a flutter of excitement up her spine. The thought, and the viciousness that accompanied it, was unexpected – though not exactly unwanted. Not anymore. Faced with hiding in their plane forever, waiting for the mercenaries to leave, or striking their enemies decisively and right in the heart, Lian was filled with sudden resolution. It didn't quite drown out the fear, of course, but it was enough to warm her blood and give her fingers new strength with which to grip her knives.

"So the plan is in two parts," said Slade, regaining their attention. "Team One – Yao Fei, and Lian – you head to the prisoner's tent, extract them, and head over to the weapons cache. You'll be our distraction – when that tent gets blown, we'll head straight for the large tent with the radio in it."

"If the radio is there," added Yao.

"Pick up a lot of grenades," said Slade. "If it's not there, I'd still like to leave a mess behind us. Odds are it will be; they don't guard empty tents, even if the guy in charge is as nutty as a bag of peanuts. Fyers might be thorough, but it's a waste of manpower and bored guards tend to gossip, loudly. They might be bloodthirsty as hell, but they're not real soldiers, and they've got little to no discipline."

"Three guarded tents, the biggest one with the radios, the weapons by the jeeps, the one with the prisoner on the opposite side of the camp," said Oliver, like he was trying to visualise the set-up. "It's pretty...distinctive, when you think about it."
"They've got to trade subtlety for security – an age old problem," said Slade. "It's not like they'd think anyone would be stupid enough to attack them, anyway, and the camp is temporary. Like I said – we've got a very small window of opportunity here. We need to move fast and decisively."

"All right," said Lian. Her knives were ready, her hair tied back as best she could get it, and her nerves were bubbling beneath the surface of her determination. "Are we going or what?"

Slade held up a hand, slicing it through the air. "Let's be clear," he said. "Team One, you've got five minutes to secure your prisoner and get over to the weapons tent. Oliver and I will make our way towards the main tent, but we won't be able to conceal ourselves for any longer than that. When you set off the explosion, we'll get into the tent, take care of whatever guards are inside, and I'll send a message to ASIS. Hell, I'll send messages everywhere. Kid, you've got my back. Think you can manage?"

Oliver looked a bit grey in the dying firelight, but he nodded firmly, gripping the gun Slade had given him.

"Good," said Slade. "Yao, when the weapons tent is set off, get Lian and your friend out. Immediately. Understand?"

Yao nodded stiffly, his brow drawn deeply with seriousness.

"We could steal a jeep," added Lian. "Send it off into the camp and toss some grenades at it."

"Lian, I like the way you think, but that's where improvisation kicks in," said Slade. "Plans work better the more basic they are. If there's a need to create a distraction, work with what you've got, but don't overcomplicate. Stay out of sight, raise hell quietly, get out. Understand?"

He held eyes with her until she nodded, and he turned to Oliver.

"Kid, I'm giving us three minutes to send those messages," he continued. "Then we get out, fast as we can. Take out whoever we come across, disappear into the forest. We'll arrange a place to meet when we get closer to the camp – Yao, get your friend to cover us with sniper fire as Oliver and I are getting out. Lian, your grenades?"

Lian nodded, retrieving the grenades from their place by her bedside, the weight of them in her hands familiar and comfortable. Slade took one, passing it to Oliver, and Lian handed another to Yao. The last she kept for herself, clipping it securely onto her belt. It dragged down a little, the sheer heaviness of the metal cylinder marking it as unmistakably dangerous. Discomfort swelled as she felt the press of it, hard against her thigh, her waistband slipping down a little with its weight – so she took a deep breath and put one hand on the cool metal, thinking about all the hurt she could unleash with it. She was using their weapons against them. All that pain they dished out, she'd turn back on them, at last. The tendril of fear unraveling in her stomach slowly twisted into anger.

Good, she thought. I can use anger.

She opened her eyes to see Slade watching her, making a show of fixing his glove as Oliver fiddled with attaching the grenade to his belt, face tight with the severity of his frown. Slade arched an eyebrow at her questioningly, and she was relieved when he finally turned away after she gave him a sharp shake of her head. She needed to focus; it was endgame, now. They could die, or be captured – and that would be it, the mercenaries would have won.

Slade poured dry earth over the remains of the fire, plunging them into darkness. The moon afforded them no light; it was barely a sliver in the sky, she knew, and the cover it afforded them would be
useful.

"One last thing," said Slade, as they gathered to leave. "No plan survives contact with the enemy. Be ready to improvise, be ready to push past failure, and above all – be ready to kill. Because if you don’t – they’ll do worse than kill you. Understand?"

Oliver nodded wordlessly; even in the darkness Lian could discern the paleness of his face.

"Head on a swivel," she said, dryly, and to her relief everyone – even Yao – smiled.

"That's right, Worth," said Slade. He made a movement, like he was going to pat her on the shoulder, but she tensed involuntarily and his hand just barely ghosted over her back, the motion aborted half-way. He turned, and with a head-jerk to Yao, began to set off. Lian tightened her hand into a fist before forcing a smile and lightly pressing Oliver's arm and encouraging him to start moving.

"Let's go," she said, quietly, and they disappeared into the forest, leaving far behind their safe, secret hideout.

~~~

There was an ideal piece of outcropping rock just outside the range of the camp, covered with tangled growth and shaded with trees. It had the benefit of both overlooking the camp and providing cover, so it was chosen as their meeting point – so long as everything went well. Lian slid her fingers up and down the sheath of her knife, mentally going through the movements she had been learning over the course of the last few weeks. She watched as Slade murmured one last pep talk to Oliver, the younger man nodding silently, eyes serious but face set and white with nerves. Glancing at Yao, she saw him examine the camp carefully, moving to tap Slade on the shoulder and point out a few locations in a low undertone, Slade completely focussed. It was like another mask had slotted in over his usual, mostly exasperated face; he was composed, thrumming with compressed energy, and practically exuded ruthless efficiency, each movement calculated and precise.

Then he glanced at her. She could barely see his eyes in the darkness, but there was a shine to them; it hinted at worry, and she couldn't bear the look of it. So she pulled a crappy, sarcastic salute, and was relieved to see him grin toothily – all shark – in return. She examined the camp, trying to pick out the radio tent, or the weapons cache – everything was doused in shadows, with only dull orange lights here and there, probably to lessen any attention they might get from the air – and Slade came up beside her. She knocked elbows with him, as a sort of make up for flinching earlier, to herself as well as to him.

"Worth," he started.

"Don't," she said, even though she wasn't sure what she was trying to stop him from saying. But his voice had a tinge of something in it that she really didn't want to hear. He paused.

"I'm not going to give you a pep talk," he said. "I just want you to do one thing."

She turned to look at him. It was no good; his face was mostly shadow and she couldn't read him. His voice was too soft for her to pick up anything concrete from his tone. "...what?"

He paused again, glancing quickly at the camp before looking at her again. "If things go south, Lian...I –"

"Don't talk like that, Slade," she said quickly, crossing her arms like a chill had rushed through her. "We can't go in there already preparing to fail."
"I don't mean it like that," he said. "I just want you to promise me something."

"What?" She said. He glanced again at the camp. The weight of his gaze when it turned on her was heavy, like something tangibly solid was slipping over her shoulders. Her throat went dry as long seconds passed, and he moved half a step closer.

"Lian, I want you to promise me that if things go south, you run," he said. "You get the hell out and you escape."

She stared; her head suddenly became light and she pinched her arms and shook herself. "What?" she hissed. "The hell I'm promising that!"

"Lian, please," he said. Damn his calmness. He couldn't be serious – but he was, wasn't he? He was far too stoic for his own good.

"I'm not going to promise that, Slade," she said, voice low and temper rising.

His hand twitched; another aborted movement. "They can't know you're alive, Lian," he said. "They'll tear up the island looking for you, just to get revenge. Orders won't matter, Fyers won't have a say in it."

"You don't have to tell me that," she snapped. Inside, her stomach was trembling; she didn't even want to think about getting caught. Thinking about it was like admitting it was something that could happen – because, well...it was. There was an overwhelming possibility that something would go wrong and they would get caught, and new depths of hell would be unleashed on them. But it was an unhelpful train of thought. And a distracting one. So she grabbed his arm instead, digging her fingernails in; just for a change, he was the one who flinched.

"We get in, we get out," she said, lowering her voice as far as she could. "We take down whoever gets in our way. Or we don't come back. There's no running unless we're all together."

"Wouldn't you tell me to run?" he asked. It was her turn to pause.

"Yes," she admitted, after a moment's thought. "But you'd actually stand a chance at outrunning them."

She tried to move past him, to get to Yao and start the damn mission already, but he stayed where he was, catching her arms with both of his hands.

"Are you saying you wouldn't even try to run?" he said, hands gripping her tightly. But not that tightly; it was a loose hold, for him, and she could easily escape, pull free – if she wanted to.

"No," she replied. "I'm saying that there's no point in trying to escape if you're not running with me."

He made some kind of movement then; too sharp for a shiver, too soft for a jolt. Then, suddenly, he raised a hand, pressing it to her cheekbone. The rough material of his glove rasped across her skin as he gently pushed back a few stray hairs behind her ear, his fingers coming to rest at the spot where her jaw met her neck.

"Slade," she said, her heart beating in her throat. He moved his hand away; his other hand, still on her arm, squeezed gently.

"Head on a swivel, Worth," he said. She just about managed to nod, pulse racing as he stepped away.
"You too," she said, forcing out the words. Yao appeared then, and it was like ice had broken over her head; reality came rushing in. She looked down at the camp, with its many shadows and dingy orange light, then back to the others; Oliver, with his serious face and clenched jaw, nodding quickly to her – Slade, eyes dark and unreadable beneath the murky moonlight – Yao, solemn and silent. They took one last look at one another –

Then Slade raised his hand, and sliced it through the air. Go. And they started forward.

~~~

They split up closer to the camp; Slade leading Oliver to the right, and Lian following behind Yao to the left. She lost sight of the other two almost immediately, and fought to concentrate. Terror nipped at her ribcage, at the base of her skull, at her ankles and between her shoulder blades. Her knives were already out, and she kept her head on a swivel, just like Slade had trained her, so many weeks ago.

Yao led them along the edge of the tents, skirting the outside. The empty quiet gave Lian the sensation that they were at the back of the camp, at a more isolated section; she nearly started when a loud snore tore through the air, like the lining of the tent wasn't even there. They were passing the tents where the men slept – or else there was a very lazy guard trying to sneak in a few extra winks while no one was looking. Either way, the mercenaries they'd find here would be complacent, probably relying on patrols around the perimeter to keep them safe. Yao had clearly slipped past them all earlier while the patrols had lulled.

She suppressed a sound when Yao pulled her sharply into the space between two tents, hunkering in between two barrels; a couple of mercenaries were walking around the outer edge of the camp just as she and Yao had nearly reached the end. She thought they were maybe speaking French, and they were both smoking cigarettes, talking low to each other. One turned to the side, handing his cigarette to his friend, and to Lian's disgust, started relieving himself – right in the middle of the field. The other men sneaked a drag as his friend was pissing, passing the cigarette back once he was done. They walked heavily towards Lian and Yao's hiding spot – but didn't so much as glance down as they passed. Watching them depart, carefully, Lian saw them duck down the side of another opening in the tents and disappear.

After a few long moments, Yao tapped her shoulder, and they proceeded. No other mercenaries appeared by the time Yao stopped at one tent that looked almost exactly like all the other tents – although, at second glance, it looked to be slightly narrower than the others and not as well constructed. Yao jabbed his hand to it and Lian nodded, turning to keep watch. They were at a corner, so she had to watch two sides while keeping her cover, a fact her insides didn't appreciate at all.

Carefully, they stood in the long shadow of the tent, with Yao gradually leaning to the side, trying to get a clear glimpse into the interior of the tent. Lian kept her head swinging side to side, as smoothly as she could without making herself dizzy, and made sure she inhaled deeply and slowly through her nose. She had to bite her tongue now and again, but there didn't seem to be any more mercenaries around this side of the camp. There were no lights, no smell of cigarettes, no snoring, no clinking metal or marching vibrations. Still, she kept as alert as she could, trying not to let fear white out her reflexes – if anyone came around the corner, they'd be seen, instantly. Maybe she'd get a second to act if whatever mercenary couldn't see that they were obviously intruders – she and Yao were wearing the same type of gear, after all – but that would be the only chance she'd get.

Her alertness sharpened even further when Yao froze, suddenly. Letting out a low hiss he – without warning – pulled out a knife and sliced a hole down the side of the tent, darting in. Left outside
alone, Lian had no choice but to immediately follow, her mind fighting not to blank out with nerves, her hands forcing her knife to be ready to attack whoever was waiting inside,

But the tent was empty; there were no lights, no bedding, no sign that anything had been in there at all. Yao was spinning like a broken compass, hands grabbing his hair in lumps, murmuring to himself in Mandarin, completely panicked.

"Yao!" she hissed, pulling his shoulder. "What the hell!"

"She's not here..." he said, voice stricken. "She's – she's not –"

Lian looked around hurriedly, trying to listen out for the guards, or anyone at all who might be passing. "Shh! Who, who's not here? The prisoner?"

Yao turned to her, eyes wet, face crumpled in on itself, torn with terror and grief.

"She's not here," he repeated, his voice made quiet from hoarseness. The tears began to trickle down his flushed cheeks, but his hands were frozen in his hair, unable to move and wipe away the streaks they made. "Shado. My daughter. She's not here."

Chapter End Notes

Super tired this week. Hope you guys enjoyed the chapter, and if you can, consider leaving a comment - they're really nice to get. See you all in a few days! :-}
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated 14th January 2017. Please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*Shado. My daughter.*

The words circled around Lian’s brain as she stared at the uncharacteristically distraught man pace and pace and pace the inside of the tent.

“Your daughter,” she said, numbly. She shook herself hard, turning her ears to the sides of the tent again; they were making too much noise. But *damn it* – she’d been right. It was leverage, Yao really *hadn’t* wanted to join with the mercenaries.

“They swore they would not harm her,” he was murmuring. Lian was thankful that at least he was keeping quiet. “I would never cooperate if they – *hurt* her –”

He stopped, glancing at her before quickly looking away, eyes filling with tears. Lian’s throat went thick; she swallowed to clear it, shifting her grip on her knives.

“Yao, think,” she said. “Where would they have brought her?”

“Anywhere in the camp!” said Yao, stricken, beginning to pace again. Lian pulled him to a stop, trying to hush him for the umpteenth time.

“That doesn’t make sense,” she said. “Try to *think*, Yao. She’s their only bargaining chip, and this tent – it’s far away from the busy areas. They *wanted* to keep her separate. Why? Because she’s *valuable*. Fyers is no idiot. Think!”

Yao stared at the ground, eyes still filled with panic, and he pulled at his hair again. “…the plane…” he said, finally. “They may have taken her to the radio tent in preparation for their plan. They – they may be aware that I have not yet returned –”

“Then we need to move fast,” said Lian. “Yao, come on. Get us to the weapons tent. It’s your daughter’s only chance. We create a big enough distraction, Slade and Oliver will have more time to send the message *and* free her. Now let’s go.”

Yao sucked in a huge breath – honestly, it was unsettling to see the usually composed man so utterly *unravelled* – and led the way out of the tent again. Their way was still clear, the surrounding area nearly pitch black without proper moonlight and only the dull orange lights poking out from a tent here and there. Lian could almost pretend that they were circling a completely empty camp – except that, every now and again, there was soft chatter in deep voices, harsh laughter filtering out through the thin canvas, the occasional lump pressed against the wall of the tent. Everything was a reminder that the tents only provided visual cover; there was no disguising the faint sounds of their footsteps, or the silhouettes that might poke through the gaps in the cloth.

Smells streamed in the longer they walked, and she found herself trying to reign in her breathing the further they got; cigarette smoke, piss, the filthy sour reek of unwashed man. Strange how Oliver and
Slade must smell the same, but it was different, somehow, wasn’t it? No, not ‘somehow’ – she trusted them. She’d had to. But these smells, accompanied by the occasional swish of canvas, the confusing bits and pieces of different languages sniping and arguing, and the very texture of the air surrounding the camp, sent her stomach heaving and her heartbeat wild. She fought dizziness as they stopped for a moment, crouched between stacks of boxes – similar to the kind in the plane – and waiting for a handful of mercenaries to pass through one tent into another, murmuring to one another in German, laughing softly and swapping an obviously contraband bottle of cheap whiskey, if the stink and the furtive way they were drinking it was of any indication.

She looked to Yao, waiting for his signal to start moving again, and realised that he was examining her. She threw him a questioning look and he made a strange hand movement; his palm level with his solar plexus, moving upwards to his throat. He repeated the movement until she understood; she wasn’t breathing. She needed to breathe.

As quietly as she could, she sucked in a deep breath. Yao passed his hand down over his eyes until she closed hers; but this made the dizziness worse. It felt like the earth was moving from beneath her, and she was sliding sideways, slowly, inexorably. Her eyes shot open and Yao grabbed her outstretched hand, steadying her. He took a deliberate, deep breath, and she copied the motion for another minute, closing her eyes when he did. But they were running out of time; it didn’t matter if her head spun. They needed to go. Slade and Oliver were relying on them. So she opened her eyes and nodded firmly to Yao. He gave her hand an unexpected squeeze before letting go and carefully leading them out from behind the boxes.

It was almost easy from then on out. There were more mercenaries, but they were practically relaxed, most of them complaining – not that she understood many of the words, but the tones were pretty obvious – and smoking, staring at the sky. There was more cover, too; more boxes, the tents closer together, parked vehicles. Six jeeps were parked in rows of three; Yao jabbed his hand towards the tent they bordered one side of; the weapons cache. Mercenaries guarded it, and they looked fairly alert even considering the lateness of the hour. Lian counted four, but there could have been more along the sides they could see. Yao put one hand over hers, helping her quietly pull out her knife; then he held eye contact with her. She understood, suddenly, what he was asking, what he was saying.

I’m going to have to kill them, thought Lian, and all at once she wasn’t ready, she wasn’t as ready as she thought she was. She had wanted to hurt them so badly but now she’d actually have to take a life, another life, and she could do it, she knew, but she didn’t want to! She mouthing Yao’s name before biting down on her bottom lip, trying to breathe steadily. His hand gripped hers, forcing her fingers around the hilt. There was a dark texture behind his eyes as he looked at her; it was unrelenting, like trying to stare down a carving or a statue. But at the centre of it all was a calmness, a resigned sort of resolution. She tried to take that feeling for herself, breathe it in, mould her mind to what he was showing her.

She inhaled, deeply, let it out. Did it again. His other hand pointed at her eyes, then his: watch me. She nodded, and he led the way to the side of the jeep closest to the side of the tent. He made sure that she was watching – the four guards were just visible from this side, with two guarding the entrance and another two guarding the length closest to them – and he jabbed a finger at the furthest guard, the one facing the opposite direction to them. He pointed at her: that’s yours. Three fingers jabbed in the other direction, then he pointed to himself. She nodded again, looking to the guard as Yao prepared his bow; he was yawning, so heavily that Lian felt her mouth try to stretch in sympathy, and he was slightly shorter than the others. His gun looked more awkwardly held; he might have been new, or gotten the raw end of the stick when it came to weapons assignments. Then Yao was drawing his bow, silently. Lian braced herself, eyes on her guard, every sense conscious of the others and knowing that she’d have to move as quickly as possible to reduce the noise –
And Yao moved, darting out from his cover and firing two arrows in quick succession, dealing with his final guard with a few quick movements. Lian was only peripherally aware of that happening – she was living in the space that existed in between each second:

The guard jumping, turning –

Her knife went up –

He opened his mouth to shout, gun swinging forward –

She jabbed his elbow, his throat to stop his scream, his knee to bring him down to her level, her knife up, up – he tried to block but his arm is tangled in the strap of his rifle and his other hand came up but her knife was long and wickedly sharp, Slade had made sure it was ready and the guard was stronger but she had momentum on her side –

The guard went down, the knife met the resistance of his jaw bone; she meant to hit the neck cleanly but it tilted when he knocked her hand and it went through the underside of his jaw and through his mouth –

This close she could see the metal streaked with blood, spearing his still twisting tongue; he didn’t yet understand what was happening to him he looked young but there was a scar underneath his eye and gritty stubble across his chin and his hair hadn’t been washed for days –

He was still trying to grab her hand so she pulled out the knife, let him have that hand and pulled out her other knife and this time she got the throat, plunging it right through his oesophagus, Slade showed her weeks ago the best spot, pulling his collar down and running a finger along the column of his throat, his gloves absent for once –

The blood –

It was a quick death, but not an easy one. Deaths rarely are, Lian, said Slade’s voice in her mind’s ear. She pulled out her knife and looked around hurriedly – but there was only Yao, dragging the bodies into the tent. He examined her only briefly, jerking his head. She looked down at the body; the guard was still alive, choking slightly, but the lights were going off.

Oh god, she thought, but there was no time to stop and think about it properly; she wiped her knives quickly on the body and sheathed them, adrenaline giving her shaking arms the power to hitch the body up and drag it quickly into the tent. Yao helped her settle it inside and he went to the tent flap, carefully keeping watch through a slit. The inside was lit up very faintly with a dim, flickering light; as quietly as she could, Lian flicked open boxes. There were reams of guns, complete with a few holsters, so Lian took a couple of them, stuffing extra rounds in her pockets. She passed the same to Yao, who took them with barely a glance, eyes still on the outside. The next box she opened had rifles, which she passed. Grenades, where were the grenades? She tried scanning the outside of the boxes, but there were only numbers slapped on to the plain black trunks, so she kept opening, kept searching. Knives, more guns, some flaks, spare maps and compasses. Her throat was so dry that she could barely swallow, each sound from the camp heightened, like it was right inside her ear.

In the very last box she checked, she found them, finally – neat rows of carefully stored grenades lining a box. Best of all? On the very top of the box were stacked a number of bandoliers, lined with special pockets to safely carry numerous grenades at a time. She slung one over and under her shoulders, making sure it didn’t interfere with her other weapons, and started stocking up. Long moments passed as Yao Fei did the same, and then they generously distributed the remainder of the box around the tent. Sucking in a breath, Lian caught eyes with Yao; he nodded, and they took two more grenades each.
This part would have to be quick. First, Yao determined that the outside was clear. Then, at his nod, they pulled the pins and threw their grenades into the centre of the tent.

And then they ran like hell.

The resulting explosion was enough to make the ground shake. Lian nearly lost her footing, pings of metal scattering the ground from above, searing hotness hitting her exposed skin. She shielded her head and ducked where he ducked; finally they found cover in between some other boxes, just far away enough that they could see the commotion their fire was causing. And wow, it was causing some commotion; men were running and screaming, and the fire had taken on a life of its own, the flaming debris raining down on nearby tents, spreading the blaze as it licked across canvas. Funny how something waterproof was also so very highly flammable. There was a movement beside her; Yao was drawing his arm back, letting another grenade fly. Then another, and another. They hit their mark, spreading the chaos even further. The former weapons cache then exploded again, shooting fire in every direction. It was beautiful, in its own way, and Lian’s heart was filled with a kind of glee as she saw mercenaries shrieking in fear, running back and forth and rolling to put out the flames that had landed on their clothing.

With Yao behind her, Lian didn’t think to look around, her attention fixed on the scrambling mercenaries and the raging fire. Just when she was about to move back and ask Yao to lead them away, she jolted, pitching forward without warning. She hit the ground, hard, completely disorientated and blinking slowly towards unconsciousness as the sounds filtered out and colours blurred. She was out before she really understood what had happened; someone or something had hit her on the back of her head. The last thoughts swirling in her mind were about the fire, blazing high into the inky night sky. It was beautiful, in its own way.

She wasn’t aware of the hands pulling her up, the arm that clamped around her middle, pinning her arms – she didn’t feel the cold edge of steel at her neck, she didn’t see Yao Fei’s despairing look as he put his hands in the air and turned, slowly beginning to walk towards the radio tent amidst screaming and scrambling mercenaries.

And she didn’t see the mask her attacker wore.

Half orange.

Half black.

~~~

After they parted ways on the hillside, Slade led Oliver towards the camp, hoping against hope that Yao’s directions were accurate. There were no signs of any mercenaries; no chatter, no cigarette lights drifting around – he would have thought that the camp was deserted if it wasn’t for the faint sound of music playing somewhere in the camp and the occasional spurt of harsh laughter, probably from men playing cards. As they passed the closest tents Slade occasionally heard coughing, or snoring, but overall much less noise than he would have thought. Still, there was enough to let him know that each and every tent was occupied, even if it was by lazy and unresponsive guns-for-hire. Eventually he located the possible radio tent, if Yao’s instructions could be relied on, and after a few tense moments of waiting in silence for mercenaries to pass through one batch of tents into another they slipped deeper into the camp and found their way close to the radio tent. They were now crouched in between it and some boxes, shadows providing most of their cover.

Slade waited, still as a stone, gun ready and poised in one hand near his temple. Oliver crouched next to him, facing the other direction and keeping quiet and watchful. The camp barely rustled in the night – soft murmurs, the occasional harsh bark of laughter, heavy footsteps now and again – and the
area was bathed in darkness from the nearly moonless night. He counted down the seconds, allowing a little leeway for the loose way time sometimes played with people unused to militant timetabling; still, those seconds slipped past until minutes gathered and he could only come to one conclusion.

Yao Fei and Lian were late.

Anything could have happened, which is why it was so important to stay in position and wait for a sign – any sign. If they had been caught, he and Oliver were in the perfect position to assist them; especially since he was fairly certain he’d heard Fyers’ loathsome voice coming from the tent now and again. And if Fyers was in there, odds were Billy was too.

He gripped his gun, trying to will his fingers to relax somewhat. Beside him, Oliver was shaking slightly, but that was probably more from cold than nerves. To the kid’s credit, he didn’t make a sound, and his gun was out, safety already off. Slade had been privately relieved when it turned out the kid knew how to shoot and aim; his footwork needed a lot of improvement, but the combination training with Lian was really paying off, even in the short amount of time they’d had to practice movements and throws. If they were quick, and there weren’t too many opponents, and they were lucky, Slade had a glimmer of hope that they might actually survive.

A weak wind filtered through their cover and Slade turned his attention to the radio tent, trying to hear something, anything. There were definitely voices inside, but it was impossible to tell how many were actually there. A harsh shriek of static arched through the air, bringing Slade’s heart up to his throat; there was a radio in there! And it worked too, if the dull sounds of hasty refocusing and Fyers’s angry snapping were any indication. Slade felt his shoulder nudged and looked over to see Oliver grinning, the motion ridiculous underneath the baklava pulled messily over his face. Slade resisted rolling his eyes at his enthusiasm, the humour quickly buried by the reminder of just how damn young the kid was. Slade had twelve kills at his age, and seventeen missions; it sometimes felt like he’d been born old, like the killing and fighting was all he’d done. But then he remembered that he was good at it – very, very good. And that at the very least, he had a government to hide behind, somebody bigger to blame for the violence he perpetrated. Mercenaries were just another source of the world’s capacity for random cruelty.

When the explosion finally came, Slade nearly shouted with surprise. It was huge, just about shaking the ground, and he could see the fire it made even from their hiding place, men screaming and running everywhere. Oliver gripped his arm, grinning wildly and still looking ridiculous under his balaclava and all Slade could do was nod, heart pounding. Somewhere near that explosion he knew that Lian and Yao Fei were hiding, trying to escape the influx of mercenaries that were now all heading towards the noisiest, brightest place in the entire camp. Yao Fei had better be keeping his wits about him.

Inside the tent there were hurried footsteps, the sound of men scrambling for weapons and running around, wondering what the hell the explosion was. Fyers was, of course, furiously shouting orders before – and Slade could hardly believe his luck – a slew of mercenaries ran straight out of the tent towards the fire, sprinting right past them. And then – Fyers himself, angrily marching after his underlings and disappearing around a corner. Slade nodded to Oliver; the kid had seen Fyers as well, his enthusiasm from the explosion immediately sobering. Taking a deep breath, Oliver stood and quickly slipped out the side of their hiding place. Before he left, Slade let himself squeeze Oliver’s shoulder in support; the kid seemed to appreciate it, if his straightened spine and solid stride were any indication.

Their was a rough plan, and would require luck despite its simplicity – or perhaps because of the simplicity. Oliver would stroll into the tent, pretend that he was gathering more people for the fire control efforts, announce how many people were there, and Slade would slice through the side of the
tent and take care of whoever was in there. Oliver would watch his back, they’d get to the radio, and be in and out in less than a minute, ideally. Slade drew his blade and waited. Seconds trickled by before he heard Oliver, clear as anything from behind the thin material of the tent.

“Hey – what –” The kid’s voice faltered for a second. Slade’s stomach started to rise as the moment stretched; what was going on in there?

“What?” said another voice, a mercenary. “Who the hell are you?”

Oliver seemed to fortify himself, as he spoke without pausing, using an obnoxious tone to cover his nerves and youth. “I could ask the two of you the same question!” he said loudly. “Why aren’t you helping with the –”

Slade couldn’t wait any longer. He cut through the tent wall and in a swift movement he took down both mercenaries, slicing one neck open before burying his knife in another. They fell without a single sound; very luckily they were standing close to his side of the tent, right next to the hiding place he’d picked for Oliver and himself. He was glad now that they had stayed as quiet as they did; even a slight cough could have exposed them. Sheathing his knife and glancing at Oliver, he walked towards the radio quickly and nodded towards the tent entrance.

“What are you standing around for, kid – hurry up and watch the door!” he said, eyes now scanning the equipment. He wasn’t a techie kind of person, but he could at least send a message, right? He just had to figure out what went where, easy enough.

After a few seconds he snapped again when he saw that Oliver hadn’t moved; the kid had pulled up his balaclava, staring worriedly at the dead bodies. “Kid!” he said.

“We have a problem, Slade,” said Oliver, slowly walking towards the bodies. Slade growled.

“Kid, we don’t have time for this,” he said. “You should know by now that it’s kill or be killed here –”

“What?” Oliver looked at him, confused. “No, not the – Slade. We have a problem.”

He pointed, moving forward, and Slade followed his finger, finally seeing what Oliver was talking about. He tried to move, tried to speak, but everything had come to a stop in his brain; air was stuck in his lungs, blood frozen in his body.

Tied up and hiding fearfully beneath a table was a woman, a young woman, surely no older than Oliver, with duct tape over her mouth and wide, wide eyes.

And now – radio beneath his fingers and mercenaries due back any second – Slade had a choice to make.

Chapter End Notes

Two thirds the way through! Weird, huh! Seems like yesterday I started writing it. Well, I hope everybody had a good week, or at least that there were good parts to the week! I'm having a pretty cool time, but I'm so so so exhausted. I'm ready to go to bed now and it's only 6.30pm!!! The weekend is flying by.

Hope you guys enjoyed the chapter. Please consider leaving a comment as they're really
nice to get. My tumblr is kako-pumpkin if people wanna hit me up there. Either way, have a good one and I'll see you in a few days! :-)

Chapter 21

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated Wednesday 18 January 2017. Please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Slade stared and stared at the girl. She was Chinese, at first glance, and dressed in a dirty tank top, jeans, and runners – typical college girl attire. She watched them warily as they watched her; arms tightly bound behind her back, legs free, presumably so the mercenaries wouldn't have to carry her everywhere. Slade thrust an arm out, stopping Oliver in his tracks.

"Slade, what –?"

"Kid, she could just be a trap," he said, although even as he spoke he doubted it. Especially since the girl's eyes didn't widen with pleading; they narrowed with anger, and she struggled to move from beneath the table; it looked like her restraints had been tied around one of the poles holding the tent up. She'd clearly only ducked under the table with fright when Slade had barrelled through it, killing the two mercenaries moments earlier.

"Slade, we can't just leave her here," said Oliver. Slade's stomach churned.

"And what are we going to do with her once she's free? Another civilian we need to cart around and rescue? You're already enough of a handful as it is, kid." Slade turned abruptly, going to the radio.

While the system was unfamiliar to him, it didn't look overly complicated. He got ready to send out his codes when a sudden clattering scraped across his nerves; turning swiftly he saw that the girl was standing now, having overturned the table in her haste. Her eyes were wide and panicked and she was shaking her head, words muffled behind the duct tape. Oliver glanced at him and Slade jerked his head towards her.

Oliver cautiously approached the girl, hands out in front of him. He'd sheathed the gun in his back holster and was now carefully peeling back the duct tape from the girl's mouth.

"Don't scream," he cautioned, and at her glare added a hasty: "Uh, please."

"Don't use the radio," she burst out, as soon as there was enough tape off her mouth. "They have to input codes that will transmit to the tower. The tower scrambles the signal and makes it appear like a legitimate transmission. I watched them practice many times today."

"And why would they let you watch that, hm?" asked Slade, hands fisting along the edge of a metal seat pushed into the table the radios sat on. The girl's face twisted.

"I am leverage," she said, bitterly, and several things began to slot into Slade's brain.

"Leverage?" said Oliver, confused, but Slade's shoulders were already shaking, the back of the metal chair nearly giving away beneath the fury his hands were channelling.

"You're Yao Fei's daughter," he said, quietly, tasting bile across his tongue. "They're using you to make him comply with their plans. That's why he betrayed us."
"My father would never betray –" started the girl hotly – was it Shado or Mei? Of course he'd remember their bloody names from a report he'd read a hundred years ago in another life – but she was cut off by Oliver's heavy wince, and possibly Slade's venomous glare.

"Uh," said Oliver, clearing his throat. "Look, we can sort out who did or didn't do what later, okay? Right now we're kind of on a deadline. Slade?"

"What are the codes, girl?" said Slade, head nearly light with all the anger he was trying to tamp down on. What was he even angry about? The additional complication of the girl? The fact that Yao Fei really did have a reason to betray them? That he really was under duress? That he only acted to save his family?

Or was it the fact that now he was faced with the exact same decision that son of a bitch had been faced with: save a girl captured by mercenaries, risking everything in the process?

She was undoubtedly the one Yao had wanted to save, which meant – unless he was lying, again – that she had some skills. But that also meant that she wasn't where Yao had expected her to be, which could mean that Yao was leading Lian around the camp, looking for her. And here she was, right within Slade's ability to save.

He sucked in a deep breath, shaking his head. Why was he so angry? Why was his blood jumping in his veins, why was there black in the corners of his eyes? Why did he want to yell, scream, tear this place apart? He needed to breathe, he needed to stay in control. It wasn’t just his own skin that was in danger, after all.

"Your father had the chance to save someone on this island, and he didn't," he said, unlatching his hands from the back of the chair. "You're lucky I'm a better man than he'll ever be."

She looked confused mostly – angry too, at the jab against her father – but didn't put up any protest as Oliver darted forward and began cutting her loose. Slade jabbed a finger at her as she rubbed her arms and wrists.

"The codes, girl," he said. "And so help me god you'd better not be a trap."

She glared at him, but stepped forward, still rubbing her arms. "It's a few quotes from a book," she said. "The Odyssey. But I –"


"Care to share with the class, kid?" he growled. The kid just beamed at him.

"That's like the only book I've ever read!" he exclaimed. "Like – ever! I basically know it off by heart!"

Slade and the girl stared at him.

"You're shitting me," said Slade.

"I'm fucking serious!" said Oliver, practically bounding forward. "What's the code? Do you remember the words? I should be able to piece together the quote!"

As he watched Oliver and the girl hash out whatever the code phrase was, Slade was overcome by a numbing realisation:

Stars had aligned. The universe was smiling. God was real.
The kid was actually good for something.

And *just* when Slade was starting to regain a sliver of optimism, mercenaries burst through the tent entrance, heavily armed and immediately swarming them. Oliver was punched several times, easily defeated – the girl disarmed several but was eventually overwhelmed – and Slade –

Slade *howled*. Six had to drag him away from the radio; it took four to disarm him, and three were left holding him, arms locked around his limbs and neck, nearly twisting him into pieces. The remainder of the mercenaries trained their weapons on them. They were caught, like rats, the only thing left for them was death. Slade could only hold on to the hope that Yao Fei had gotten Lian out, but of course, of course that was just foolishness and he should have known better. But it was the only thing he could think about, the only thing that was keeping his mind in one piece. A couple more mercenaries pushed aside the opening, smirking when they saw their prisoners. One of them spoke up.

“Guess you guys forgot about the tower’s visual, huh?” he said, his relaxed stance damn near blinding Slade with rage. “We picked you coming in pretty easily, even with that cloud cover. Your friends are here too.” And he laughed, nastily, as the tent opening parted again.

First came Yao Fei, hands up and face stricken, a gun at his back and another pointed at his head. His eyes went to Slade, agonizing, and he had to be pushed forward once he caught sight of his daughter, held down by three mercenaries.

“Shado,” he said, voice cracking.

"Father," she called out, in Mandarin. Slade didn't turn to see her expression, but Yao crumbled like a man finally broken by life. He felt the mercenaries press down on him and realised that he was growling, trying to pull away. Yao no longer looked at him, allowing himself to be herded into the tent and forced to his knees. A few more mercenaries followed Yao, and Slade watched the tent entrance, heart beating furiously into his throat.

When Wintergreen finally brought in Lian, her body limply slung over his shoulder, Slade closed his eyes and slowly turned his face away.

He'd gambled. And he'd lost. Now everyone else would be taken down with him.

Wintergreen let Lian drop to the floor, the heavy thump arching into Slade's spine, putting his shoulders up. The man didn't say anything, just rolled Lian into the center of the tent with a boot, one sword drawn. Slade poured as much hatred out of his eyes as he could, the damn mask preventing him from seeing if there was any effect – or hell, if Billy was even *looking* at him.

"My, my, what a graveyard this island is turning out to be," said Fyers, nasal voice cutting in the air as he stepped through the tent. Another mercenary joined the three strong-arming Slade into submission; his rage had almost managed to pull him free of their grasp, the sight of the mercenary's vile leader setting his blood on fire.

"Just look at all these dead bodies turning up," Fyers continued, standing to the side, close to the radio and arms clasped behind his back. His watery eyes scanned over the group; smug, when he glanced at Slade and Yao Fei – widening slightly at Oliver, kept prone by two soldiers – but he stopped entirely once they hit on Lian. He even took a step forward.

"Leopold reported her dead," he said. Slade didn't know who he was talking to; none of the mercenaries so much as twitched. "Well. Well, well, well. Dead bodies and surprises." He frowned then, deeply. "I dislike both."
He snapped his fingers and they were all thrown to the ground. Slade snarled and two extra mercenaries weighed him down, six of them ruthlessly pinning him with knees and elbows. Fyers smirked, strolling towards him and leaning down slightly.

"You made a good attempt, I'll give you that," he said, casually. "But you're too little, too late. The fire was a good plan, but a fairly obvious one in the end. Now —" He stepped away, nodding at the mercenaries who held Yao Fei. "Put him in front of the camera, if you would."

"Sir!" A mercenary was sitting by the console, microphone prepped and ready.

"What?" snapped Fyers.

"Sir, radar's picking up the plane," said the mercenary. "It's twelve minutes early, sir. What should we do?"

Fyers went red, shaking with sudden fury, before inhaling deeply and visibly re–centering himself. Slade was glad to finally see the man's feathers ruffled; how he must hate having plan after plan upset and derailed.

"Fine," said Fyers. "We'll make the recording afterwards. Contact the plane, send out the message."

Slade tried to shout, but his mouth was covered to the point of near–suffocation, mercenaries practically burying him. The kid was in the same boat; Slade could hardly see him beneath the mountain of men who were pinning him. Hell, he could hardly see anything at all – the radio was at the other side of the tent, he knew, with Fyers' back to him. Lian, in the middle, Yao Fei and Shado somewhere far behind him, at the other end, similarly buried by mercenaries last he saw. Oliver was beside him. He couldn't speak, could hardly breathe, and all he could do was listen helplessly, furiously, as the man on the radio zeroed in on the passenger plane's frequency.

Then – a heavy clink, metal catching against metal. A torn up scream – and the ground shook with a very close range explosion. The mercenaries on top of him were swept away and Slade – slightly singed and ears ringing – was able to stand again. He did so as quickly as he could, pulling out his guns and instantly shooting any damn mercenary he saw. They were far, far worse off than he was, thanks to their unwitting protection of his body. The same thing had happened to Oliver, although he was still blinking slowly on the ground, clearly confused.

"Kid, up!" Slade bellowed, dragging him to his feet by his arm. Oliver shook himself, pulling out his gun and, panicked, shooting at something over Slade's shoulder. Slade's ears didn't need the extra abuse, but when he saw a keeled over mercenary, he slapped Oliver's back.

"Keep going!" he said, and started to fire. One, two, six – the kid got four, the close range and confusion making it easy for even an amateur. Yao Fei and Shado were fighting behind him and didn't look to need any help; Yao had shared his knives and Shado had obvious experience in close combat. Where was Lian, where was Lian –

They cleared the tent in record time; all the mercenaries that had been standing were shell–shocked and incapacitated from the blast, or were immediately killed. Yao was kicking the bodies just to make sure, and Oliver looked ready to vomit underneath the brave face he was putting on.

"Where's Lian?" said the kid, pasty–faced and frightened. His gun was steady, though, and Slade saw that he had reloaded it seamlessly at some point during the fight, the empty cartridge at his feet.

"Where is Fyers?" asked Yao, face pinched. "He isn't among the dead. Neither is Lian, or Wintergreen."
Yao was right – the place was clear of the people he was most worried about, although his worry for Lian and the two men were for very different reasons. The radio sparked, shooting up flames; the whole tent was quickly catching fire. Feeling more animal than human, Slade put away his gun and took out both his swords.

"They're gonna barter for her," he snarled. "And they're gonna lose. C'mon." He made for the exit, almost rounding on Oliver when the kid pulled at his arm, stopping him.

"They're gonna expect the tent entrance, Slade!" he said, backing away.

"Oliver is right," said Yao, already slicing a hole down the back of the tent. The fire had begun licking across the top of the tent; very soon the whole thing would be consumed. Outside was no better; the fire had spread across nearly the entire camp, both illuminating the surroundings and blinding them from actually seeing anything. Valiant efforts were being made to put out the flames; with a little more coordination and a helluva lot more foam, there was a slight chance of actually salvaging something. They needed to locate Lian before the mercenaries got their second wind.

"There!" cried Shado, pointing with a gun she'd pilfered from one of the many corpses. Slade looked around, trying to see – well, anything. The flames were disorientating and the night was otherwise nearly pitch black with the previously bright chunk of moon blocked entirely now with thick, rolling, clouds. The wind had picked up again; rain was coming.

"Where, girl?" he snapped and Shado darted ahead, ignoring her father's startled gasp as she plunged into the tents. The three remaining followed quickly, and their path through the tents led them out the other side, past the few tents not alight with barely controllable fire, out onto an open field.

"The tower!" panted Oliver. "They're going to try and hit the plane anyway!"

"They won't make it with the path the plane is on now!" said Slade.

"They will if the tower radar is strong enough, and they can reach the radio," said Yao, easily keeping pace. He pulled ahead sharply before planting his feet and seamlessly drawing an arrow. Shado, similarly far ahead, hit the ground with her knees, aiming with the gun. It was no sniper rifle, but it did the job, scattering bullets at the running figures.

"You'll hit Lian!" Slade bellowed.

"I won't hit your friend," replied Shado, gun still up. Yao Fei let loose another arrow as Slade and Oliver ran past; this one made impact – on Fyers, the rat bastard. His howl of shock and pain was like sweet honey, giving Slade the extra boost he needed to cross the remaining distance. Lian was kicking, heedless of the sword at her neck, her arms pinned to her sides and her face furious and wild-eyed. Closer and closer he drew, blades ready, until Wintergreen realised that his threat to Lian wasn't working, Slade wasn't stopping, and all he could do was take the blade from Lian's neck and use it to protect himself from the wrath Slade rained down on him –

"WINTERGREEN!" Slade howled. The other man now had his forearm around Lian's neck to try and hold her – a mistake, one which, through the haze of fury, Slade was proud to see Lian manipulate. Wintergreen's wrist was exposed and she bit down directly on the bone. His grip immediately loosened with a gasp, and quick as a whip she dropped, pulling out a knife and burying it in his knee, right between the knee guard and the socket it protected.

Slade had heard men scream, many times. But he'd never heard Billy scream before, and something dark tipped out inside his head, flowing over all his thoughts. Lian was already rolling away, pushing herself to her feet and pulling out another knife; her first was still lodged in Wintergreen's knee.
"I wonder what you look like behind that mask, old friend," said Slade. The world became him and Billy, only darkness beyond the small circle they created. Billy tried to take the knife out of his knee, but it was a sharp knife and a deep wound, and the pain of just touching it brought him to his knees, injured leg awkwardly put to the side. Slade bared his teeth. Pathetic.

"Get up," he snarled. "Get up! How many days did I suffer under you, Billy? How many knives did you cut me with? And you can't even handle one? GET UP."

He saw the gun before Billy had even pulled it out. It was about to play out like it had a thousand times before; Billy playing injured innocent, waiting for the prey to get closer. Then he'd pretend to struggle to his feet, whipping out a hidden gun in the process. Slade could see it all in his mind's eye, like it had already happened. By the time Billy's hand came up, gun ready to fire, Slade was already swinging his swords.

They were finely polished, sharper than a razor blade. They sliced through Billy's hand with minimal resistance, the appendage and accompanying gun flying uselessly somewhere in the grass.

Billy screamed. It didn't matter now that he wore a mask – there was a human, a man underneath. There was always a man underneath, no matter what mask was covering it up. And men could bleed.

"You taught me many tricks, Billy," said Slade, bringing his swords back around. Billy looked up at him, the emotionless mask at odds with the crumpled posture, the trembling shoulders, the handless wrist clutched against his chest, slowly spurting blood. Slade took a deep breath, compressed his anger, his pain, his betrayal, focussing it along the length of his blades. Time slowed, sound evaporated. Just him, and Billy.

"You took me in," Slade continued. "Cared for me. You were family. Taught me just about everything you know; taught me how to survive." Slade drew back a sword. "So rest assured, Billy – I've learned my lesson well."

And then he plunged the sword right into Billy's eye, out the other side of his head. His sword was so sharp, so beautifully precise that it was about as difficult as cutting through a fillet steak. Billy's body twitched once, then went still, and Slade cleanly withdrew his sword, letting the body fall.

The world expanded, suddenly. Sound rushed in, smells flooded him. Blood and smoke, grass and incoming rain, far–off yells from men still trying to put out the fire. Billy was an unmoving lump, half–hidden in the grass, and remained motionless as Lian went over and tried to remove her knife.

"Ah," she said. "Handle's slippery." Slade stuck his blades into the earth, catching her as she took a step backwards and apparently lost feeling in her legs.

"Lian," he said, holding her up. She grabbed his arms, dazedly looking up at the sky. He caught sight of blood in her hair and lowered them both to the ground, trying to pinpoint the wound with a growl.

"Son of a bitch," he said. "You might have a concussion."

"How do I know?" she asked.

"Any dizziness? Nausea? Difficulty forming words?"

"Yes, but is that the concussion, or the – everything else?"

Slade glanced over at Billy's body; once moving, now a useless hunk of cooling flesh. The startling quickness of death had always struck him, but now it seemed to ricochet inside his body, rattling
around in his skull.

"Good point," he said, swallowing thickly. He pulled her up, fighting his own jelly legs, and retrieved his swords from the ground after he was certain that Lian could stand on her own. There was hardly a shiver up his spine as he passed Billy's body, even as he accidentally hit the severed hand as he walked. He just pulled Lian past, making their way over to the others. The sight of Fyers, prone and sweating on his back, was damn satisfying, and went a long way towards improving his mood. The arrow sticking out of his side made things even better. He pointed a sword at the men, revelling in the large flinch that resulted.

“Hello, Fyers,” he said, pressing the sword closer and closer towards the man’s neck. “I’ve got a few things I’d like to ask you. And I’m sure I’m not the only one.”

He watched the arrogance and anger in Fyers’ eyes slowly bleed away into pure, perfect fear.

And Slade smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the late update! I lost track of my days, I was convinced that it was later in the week, so I was waiting for Saturday......and then I went to bed last night and realised that made no sense, because it was Tuesday and....well, anyway! Sorry!

Work is going well, although I'm still tired a lot. Hope you guys have gotten back into the swing of things by now. :-) If you liked the chapter, please consider leaving a comment, as they're really nice to get. :-) See you guys in a few days!
The heavy stench of burning rubber and canvas filtered towards them, the breeze picking up and drifting over their heads, pulling smells and sounds with it. Fyers was frozen on the ground, too nervous to breathe a word, and they surrounded him, all: Slade with his swords, Lian with her knives, Oliver and Shado with their guns, and Yao Fei with his bow and arrows. Oliver’s stomach was bubbling with something that was difficult to pinpoint at first, if only because he had spent so long not feeling anything close to it: anticipation. He was ready to go home; ready to stop fighting and running and starving and freezing. They were so close to home he could practically smell Starling’s streets, the flowers in the entrance way of Queen manor, his mother’s perfume and his sister’s shampoo; tiny things he’d passed by without even noticing, thousands of times, but which now battered his senses with longing in his loneliest moments, filtering in through rain and wind. He’d done things he never thought himself capable of, most of it involving death, and he just wanted to go home. He was about to shout at Fyers to start talking when Slade stepped forward.

“You’ve worn us down to the wire, you son of a bitch,” Slade said, letting his sword rest just below Fyers’ chin. The man looked like he was about to piss himself. “You’ve hunted us. Tortured us. But now you’ve got nothing left. Your camp is on fire and you’ve got no back up. It’s time to talk.”

“Seems pretty simple to me,” said Lian, twirling a knife. “You get us off this island. We don’t immediately kill you.”

“It’s not that simple –” Fyers cut himself off with a hiss as Slade pressed the blade against his skin.

“Seems pretty simple to me,” said Lian, twirling a knife. “You get us off this island. We don’t immediately kill you.”

“Simple plan,” agreed Shado. Oliver grinned, shifting his weight and keeping his gun on the man.

“My employers –” Fyers choked, now nearly lying on the ground in an attempt to get away from Slade’s blade. “No no no – stop – you don’t understand! They’re not the kind of people who will simply allow me to leave without completing my task!”

“My employers –” Fyers choked, now nearly lying on the ground in an attempt to get away from Slade’s blade. “No no no – stop – you don’t understand! They’re not the kind of people who will simply allow me to leave without completing my task!”

“Cry me a river,” spat Oliver, jabbing his gun in the man’s direction. “You’re telling me there’s no way off this island tonight? No plane, no helicopter, no freaking submarine? You’re telling me you don’t have an escape route in case things go badly?”

“If you’d let me complete my objective –” Fyers tried. Oliver snorted.

“If you’d let me complete my objective –” Fyers tried. Oliver snorted.

“Are you serious?” he said. “That’s your bargaining chip? ‘Let me kill all these people and I’ll totally help you.’ Yeah, right.”

“You can’t have it both ways!” said Fyers desperately. “You can’t save everyone and yourselves! Even if we did make it off the island, you’d never make it back to your homes!”

“And how’s that?” growled Slade, eyes flashing dangerously.
“My employers want to know everything that happens on this island,” said Fyers. Strangely, he hesitated, glancing at Lian. Oliver looked over at her; her face had gone rigid. Slade, in contrast, had transformed into dark fury incarnate – but before he could do anything, Lian shook her head. Fyers whimpered; Slade had cut right into his neck.

“Everything, hm?” said Lian, softly. Her voice alone sent shivers up Oliver’s spine; for someone so nice ordinarily, she could sound pretty damn lethal.

“I’m sorry,” said Fyers hurriedly. “I can’t control the men as much as you’d think – they needed –”

“You’re going to die here, Fyers,” said Lian. “But it’s up to you how long it takes. So. How are we getting home?”

“I’ve told you, it’s not that simple!” Fyers locked his attention on Slade’s blade, the cut on his neck now slowly dripping down into his collar. Oliver tried to smother a smile; the man was completely changed from the last time Oliver had seen him, with his neat hair and clothing, and that smug smile, those bland eyes.

“Start talking,” said Slade, smooth like the edge of his swords. Fyers swallowed, eyes flicking across each of them in turn; finding no mercy, he finally gave in.

“My employers monitor everything that happens on the island,” he began. “I don’t have any proof of course, but it stands to reason. When we were having…difficulties tracking Yao Fei, for example, a boat showed up – radioing with my private code words – and delivered Yao Fei’s daughter to us as leverage.”

At Yao’s growl and Shado’s angry noise, Fyers added, snippily: “Well how do you think we got her here? FedEx? I was having enough difficulty sourcing men for this mission, let alone track down a daughter I didn’t even know he had.”

“Who are your employers?” asked Slade. Fyers threw him a disparaging look.

“Obviously I don’t know,” he said. “As if they’d tell me – I’m a sell sword, they’re not going to give me that kind of information. In any case, the less I know about my employers the better – it gives them fewer reasons to kill me after I complete the objective.”

“Of course,” said Lian. “Because what a pity that would be.”

Fyers tried to glare at her, but obviously realised what a terrible idea that would be as Slade brought his other sword down.

“Keep talking,” said Slade.

“All right, all right!” Fyers swallowed again, deeply, eyes wide. “My employers have probably already been contacted about this mess, although there’s a chance that whoever the informant is could have been killed in the explosions and fighting. I –”

A screech came from his clothing. His eyes widened further, but he was prevented from moving by Slade. It took a second for Oliver to figure out what the noise was; Fyers’ handheld radio, strapped to his belt.

“Don’t answer,” said Slade.

“I have to,” said Fyers, eyes on his radio. “I’ve already given the order to open fire on the plane. And if I don’t answer, they’ll start to look for me; we might be out of their range now, but a little closer
and you’ll never be able to stop them in time before they shoot both you and the plane.”

“Let him answer,” said Yao. “Wilson. He has to call off the plane.”

“He’s lying,” Slade bit out, but Oliver’s stomach twisted. He looked to the sky, but couldn’t see any plane lights in the pure black sky.

“What if he’s not,” said Oliver, quietly.

“Shut it, kid.”

“Slade.” Oliver hissed. “What if he’s not lying?”

Fire seemed to fill up Slade, and his blades crossed in front of Fyers’ throat. “So much as twitch wrong and you’ll be swallowing your own blood. Got it?” At Fyers’ nod, Slade exhaled noisily. “Good. Now call off the strike and tell your men to assemble at the bottom of the tower. You’re going to get us home tonight, one way or the other.”

The radio screeched again; this time, Oliver could pick up the words inside the sound.

– so peaceful shalt thou end thy blissful days, over –

Fyers carefully extricated his radio, pressing the button for his reply. “Copy. ‘And steal thyself from life by slow decays’. Over.”

Then he dropped the radio, grinning triumphantly. It screeched once more.

– orders received. Begin launch. –

Slade roared; Yao and Lian had to jump in to stop him from cutting Fyers’ head off his shoulders. Fyers was shouting, still on the ground, hand out and eyes wild.

“Whatever you do to me, it won’t be worse than what my employers would do!” he shouted. “I’ve seen what they did to a few of my mutinous men! They’ve tried and failed this mission before, I can’t fail!”

Before he could continue, Shado darted forward and knocked him down; he was severely dazed, with blood coming down his temple, but he remained conscious, if only just. Oliver stared at the man, head whirling with dread as Slade was eventually borne to the ground, snarling but disarmed.

“We don’t have time,” said Oliver, half to himself. He shook his head, trying to clear it from the cloud of panic that was descending over him. “Slade! We don’t have time! We need to get to the tower!”

Slade snarled swearwords as he wrestled himself to his feet. “Kid! Yao! Let’s go! Shado, Lian, watch that slimy sonovabitch, make sure he stays put. And take his damn radio!”

With that he bounded away towards the tower. Oliver and Yao followed as fast as they could, covering the distance within seconds; Slade was already striking down mercenaries right, left, and centre, trying to hammer his way into the tower, an unstoppable force of nature. Yao had his bow out, shooting would-be snipers who ran out of the few tents erected around the tower, and Oliver… faltered. He had his gun, a knife, but it felt like his only experience was in screwing things up. Back in the camp he didn’t have time to think, there was only him or them, and then they were running, but now he was stuck running towards a landing strip with two fighters taking down every mercenary they could see and Oliver was so much flotsam drifting in their current, the kid, the
baggage.

If he hadn’t insisted that Fyers should answer the radio…but he shook himself, berating his self-doubt. He didn’t have time for hesitation, peoples’ lives were at stake. If he wanted to be of any use to anyone, he needed to up his game, focus. Jumping over fallen bodies, Oliver tried to help Slade ram open the door of the tower, putting all his weight into striking the door. He got sore shoulders for his troubles.

“The bloody thing’s reinforced!” Slade said, eyes wild. He kicked it, snarling at the opposition. Oliver’s head spun; he could barely think amidst the urgency and gunfire.

“There must be something else we can do,” he said, heart and thoughts racing. “Something – they’re not firing from the tower, the tower is just how they’re firing. The weapon is somewhere else, maybe we can stop the weapon –”

Oliver ran out the side of the tower, operating solely on some deeper instinct that hadn’t yet filtered up into his consciousness, darting back for cover when a peal of gunfire ripped up the ground at his feet. But it told him something very important; deep in the cover of the shadows and the night’s darkness, was a large and bulky object, surrounded by mercenaries. It was instantly recognisable only by virtue of countless nights spent with Tommy growing up, bunking off school when they were teenagers and having impromptu sleepovers when one or the other simply stayed over too long to justify waking their chauffeurs. Popcorn, surreptitious beer, way too much pizza and candy, watching Rambo, Die Hard, Mission Impossible – osmosis was an amazing thing. He could identify the purpose of a weapon without ever having seen one in real life.

“Oh my god,” he said. “It’s a missile launcher. It’s a fucking missile launcher!”

Unbelievable! Who the hell carted in a missile launcher to a semi-deserted island to take out a passenger plane? How do you even get a missile launcher in the first place? Despite the situation, however, Oliver actually felt a thrum of excitement beneath his ribs. He had dropped out of like four colleges, but he’d taken computer classes in each of them. And thanks to the nights spent watching action movies and violent tv shows, he knew that something as big as a missile launcher had a computer telling it what to do. Long story short – he might actually be able to do something about the launcher.

“What?!” snapped Slade. “I thought they’d be using a manual launcher – the lower tech ones are easier to get a hold of instead of a piece of heavy-duty machinery like that! How in the hell are we supposed to stop a fucking missile launcher?”

“It’s easy!” said Oliver, flinching when more gunfire pelted the ground. Slade pushed him against the wall, shielding Oliver with his own body as he rounded the corner with his gun and returned fire.

“What do you mean it’s easy, kid?” he snarled, firing at the unseen enemies. Gunfire was returned and the other man swore at the mercenaries, seemingly unable to control his volume or anger. Slade’s shouting so close to his ear made Oliver wince, but he did his best to make sense of the mess of thoughts in his head and explain to Slade what he meant.

“It’s not easy, exactly, but it’s straightforward,” he said, speaking directly into Slade’s ear. The other man was still firing intermittently at the enemies around the corner, brow drawn tight with focussed fury. “It’s not just a big gun, it’s a computer. That means it can be reprogrammed.”

Slade looked sharply at him; this close Oliver could see the smears of smoke and sweat along his hairline, the thick stubble across his cheeks. His dark brown eyes were wide with disbelief. “Are you fucking telling me that you can reprogramme a missile launcher?”
Oliver swallowed. “Better,” he said. “I can stop it from firing. All I need to do is take out the piece that makes the computer work. I do that, and it can’t receive transmissions – it can’t fire.”

Slade stared at him just long enough for Oliver to start to feel nervous, throat drying out and fingers clenching in and out of his palm; it didn’t dissipate when Slade grinned at him fiercely, all teeth and death – if anything, the feeling got worse. Stronger, trembling. Slade smiling was terrifying and amazing, all at once.

“I’ll cover you,” said Slade. “Get that launcher.”

Oliver nodded, and when Slade shoved him out from behind the tower Oliver ran full pelt, trusting – and hoping – that Slade could pick off the remainder of the mercenaries guarding the launcher. And his faith wasn’t misplaced; before Oliver even reached the launcher, the three remaining guards fell from the platform, hitting the ground hard without having managed to fire off another shot. Oliver jumped up and ripped open the panel hiding the circuit board – finally, those useless years in college would actually mean something. He easily recognised the circuit board, reaching in to pull it out – there was really no time to lose; already the launcher was humming and shifting, preparing to fire.

Abruptly he was yanked to the side, off the platform and to the ground, a beefy arm constricting around his throat – a mercenary had been hiding on the other side, unseen and away from Slade’s bullets. Gasping for air, Oliver reared his legs up, managing to throw his attacker off balance. The next three seconds were nearly automatic; heart in his throat, blood pumping in his ears, muscle memory doing most of the work, Oliver threw off the mercenary’s arm, turned around, clocked him in the chest and quickly pulled his gun out, firing at close range.

Blood spattered across his face. The man’s dead body fell, a hole in his throat. Sound raced back in suddenly, clamouring in Oliver’s ears; gunfire spitting, Slade and Yao shouting, the sound of dying men and the whine of machinery as the launcher locked onto its target. He gasped, stomach unravelling, and hands shaking pulled himself back up on the platform, fumbling for the circuit board. He looked around, half-dazed, not really seeing anything, until he realised that the fire in the main camp was dulling somewhat. Somehow, this penetrated everything.

“Wait,” he said, not speaking to anyone. Thoughts filtered in like molasses, disconnected from his consciousness. He looked down at the computer, dimly glowing green in the darkness, and made a quick decision, punching a sequence into the screen, long–since learned computer commands flowing like water out a drain pipe, easy and smooth.

“Slade, get down!” he shouted, voice hoarse as he entered the final command. The launcher, already in the process of firing, suddenly paused before turning entirely around. Oliver vaulted himself off the platform and ran to Slade, who was leaning against the side of the tower. Yao was right behind Slade, bow and arrow in his hands. Oliver dived for Slade, bringing them both to the ground behind the tower. Slade screamed when they hit the ground but Oliver didn’t have time to note how unusual it was that the man wasn’t even swearing at him; just lied there with his eyes closed, his forehead creased and sweating, his teeth gritted.

“Kid!” he snarled, but his voice was just as hoarse as Oliver’s.

“I reprogrammed it!” blurted Oliver, trying to return Slade’s favour earlier and cover the other man’s body, arms over his head, chest to chest. “It’s gonna fire on the main camp – it’ll clear out the rest of the mercenaries. But we have to stay down!”

Yao gasped something in Mandarin and turned to run – back to Lian and Shado, probably. Oliver had to hope they’d be all right, that they were far away enough from the camp, that they recognised the sound of the missiles for what they were and hit the ground as quickly as they could. There were
fifteen seconds until it fired, give or take, and so long as they stayed within cover it should all be over soon. Then Slade groaned beneath him, deeply, chest vibrating against Oliver’s and Oliver started away, alarmed.

“What–?” Oliver saw that Slade’s eyes were not just closed but pinched shut in pain, face sweating and much paler than it should have been even in the darkness.

“Kid…” said Slade, weakly. Oliver was instantly anxious, searching Slade for injury; he’d never heard such a tone from the other man before. He’d heard Slade tired, of course, or annoyed, angry, sarcastic…but it sounded like he could barely manage to speak. Oliver’s heart hammered in his chest.

“Slade – what happened – where are you hurt?”

“Oliver, believe me, I’m glad you proved useful after all,” said Slade, his eyes sliding shut. “But I – I need –” He trailed off, his head sliding to the side. Panic rose in Oliver and he tapped the other man’s cheeks, trying to elicit a reaction from him.

“Slade? Slade!”

He actually managed to forget about the launcher in his efforts to wake Slade up; it fired, the noise indescribably loud in such close proximity. Oliver ducked down, covering Slade and squeezing his eyes shut, waiting for it to be over. The missiles roared above him, firing directly on to the main camp. The explosion itself was enough to shake the earth, enveloping the entire camp. Oliver couldn’t tell if people were dying or if there were any other enemies around; his head was spinning, his ears ringing. Beneath him, Slade was still silent and unmoving, eyes closed. Oliver watched the fires from the main camp for a few moments before turning his attention to the other man, examining him through his mental numbness and the dim light. Slade looked fine – generally speaking, considering the hell they were going through. It was only when Oliver went to move away that the problem identified itself.

He had pressed down on Slade’s thigh by accident, trying to regain some balance, and it had come away wet with blood.

“Oh, god,” said Oliver.

Slade had been shot. Very, very badly.

“No, no – no, no, no, no – Slade, wake up, wake up, wake up –”

Slade was completely unresponsive to Oliver’s begging, his gentle shaking and patting. The other man was breathing, but otherwise showed no sign of returning to consciousness. Oliver cursed himself, tearing off a strip of his shirt and hastily tying it around Slade’s leg. He had only the most basic idea of first aid, but he had a vague notion that the bleeding had to be slowed with a tourniquet, otherwise the leg would just keep bleeding. So he tore off another strip and tied that around the leg too, and for good measure tore off a sleeve, the well-worn cheap material tearing easily at the seams even when it was being pulled from underneath a sweater. Oliver hastily pressed it against the wound, hoping against hope it was actually doing some good. In his panic he put almost all of his weight on the leg, and his heart leapt in his chest when Slade groaned, face crumpling with pain.

“Fuck,” he breathed, arms coming up automatically to try and force Oliver to move. “Get off, get off, what are you –”

“Slade, please, you’ve been shot,” said Oliver, still pressing against Slade’s wound. The other man’s hands were too weak to push him away properly. “Stay still. Yao and the others will come, they’ll
know what to do –”

“Ah, kid,” said Slade, head falling back again, eyes half open. It was open and vulnerable, and Oliver’s throat constricted to see it. “Don’t worry. ‘s just a flesh wound.”

“Is there another kind of wound that bleeds?” Oliver exclaimed, pressing harder for good measure. Slade laughed and groaned, slipping between one and the other.

“The others,” he said, after a minute of getting his breath back. His arms had fallen splayed out to the side, his eyes closing again. He looked like he was getting ready to sunbathe or something; not like he was stuck on the ground in a hell island with a bullet in his leg. Oliver swallowed.

“The others are on their way,” he said, praying that they really were. He could have cried in relief when he heard Yao shout, and Lian and Shado hit the ground next to him, both worried.

“Slade!” Lian took his face in her hands, forcing him to open his eyes. He grunted, startled out of his descent to unconsciousness, hands covering hers.

“I’m fine,” he said. “It’s just a bullet, it’s all right.”

“The area is secure,” said Shado. “My father took care of the man in the tower.”

“How?” said Oliver, surprised. “That door wouldn’t budge.”

“Ah…” Shado pressed her lips together; it took Oliver a second to realise that she was trying to suppress a smile. “…you and Wilson were trying to open the door in. It opens out.”

“Are you fucking kidding me –” Slade tried to sit up, but winced heavily and flopped back down again. He gripped Lian’s hand like it was a lifeline, skin clammy with the stress of the pain.

“What now?” asked Lian, quietly.

“The message,” said Slade, his eyes pinching shut before opening again with determination lit up behind them. “I have to get up to the command centre in the tower.”

“I will search for a medical kit,” said Shado, stepping away. “There’s always an emergency kit nearby, in case incoming plane passengers require immediate attention.”

“Thank you, Shado,” said Lian quietly. Yao appeared from nowhere, Fyers trussed up, unconscious, and slung over his shoulder. Shado stood and they began to converse quietly in Mandarin, moving away towards a little cluster of tents, lugging Fyers with them. Lian put her hand on Slade’s forehead, catching eyes with Oliver.

“You all right?” she asked. Oliver shrugged, looking down at Slade. She added, “Oliver, your face is covered in blood.”

He froze; his hand went to his face and came away smeared with blood, Slade’s mixing with the unknown mercenary’s. The image of the mercenary – faceless, nameless – rose up again and he felt his stomach heave. The sound of the body hitting the ground was violently loud in his ears, even if the gunshot that caused it was absent.

“I’m fine,” he managed, pulling his hands away from his face quickly and scrubbing them on his clothes. “Come on, we need to get Slade up. I doubt the tower has an elevator.”

They were going to send the message, and they were going to get home. Everything else could be
dealt with after that.

Still. The blood was sticky on his palms, between his fingers. And in his ears, a single gunshot, echoing.

Chapter End Notes

Hope you guys are having a nice weekend so far! I'm enjoying an awesome baked potato and some garbage tv. If you enjoyed the chapter, please consider leaving a comment, as they're really nice to get. :-) I'm also on tumblr under the same handle.

See you guys in a few days! Enjoy the rest of your weekend. :-}
While the others ran off to stop the destruction of the plane, Lian watched Fyers with narrowed eyes, two knives now out and ready if the despicable man did so much as blink wrong. He didn’t seem very interested in moving, however, simply blinking dazedly at the blood across his fingertips, smeared from the wound on his head that Shado had given him. Shado herself kept her gun up, trained on Fyers, nodding briefly to Lian before landing all of her concentration on the man in front of them. Taking a deep, quiet breath, she did the same, gripping her knives and glaring down at the leader of the mercenaries.

Abruptly, her world tipped over. She took a step to the side, eyes squeezing shut as her heart pounded.

“Lian,” murmured Shado. “What is it?”

Swallowing, Lian ripped her eyes open, trying to balance herself. The world wasn’t tilting or shaking; she was. Anger washed over her and she shook herself. But when she looked down at Fyers again, and saw him stare up at her, a smug kind of comprehension dawning across his face, she felt only sickness.

“You’re delusional,” spat Lian. “I’d never help you – you’re the reason I – you could have stopped them from hurting me. Or at least stopped it from getting as bad as it did. But you’re not just a terrible person, you’re spineless, too.”

Fyers seemed surprisingly undeterred by the name-calling. “You saw how they were,” he said, like she hadn’t said anything. “Animals. Worse than animals. It was just the way the assignment was going – there was so much failure, good help would no longer sign on. I had to make do with the dregs. And because of that, you suffered – an unfortunate side-effect, I know, but not solely my fault, of course.”

Lian knew that he was just trying to needle her, but that was all academic in the face of his self–held superiority and smothering arrogance. She snapped.

“What the hell do you mean?” she snarled, stepping forward. “You’re the –”

“Oh come now, Lian, you didn’t think your plane cut through this airspace by mere accident, did you?” he interrupted, smiling like she was some stupid child in a schoolroom. But the comment made no sense to her, and it smacked her like a chilled cloth, swirling with uncertainty in her mind.

“…what…what on earth –”
“It’s not like we shoot down every plane that comes across this island,” continued Fyers. “That would be both a waste of weaponry and a terrible idea; it would draw far too much attention to the operation. No, your plane didn’t fly across this island by chance, and we certainly didn’t shoot it by accident. Our camps are well-hidden, and this assignment was long term – blowing up planes wouldn’t be conducive to a stealthy operation.”

“What the hell are you implying?” asked Lian flatly. What he was proposing was absurd. Insane. That someone had planned for her to get on a plane that just somehow chose this particular flight plan? It was feeble grasping to make sense of chaos; Fyers had seen her weakness and was now exploiting it, because he was a sociopath and an asshole –

“We were hired to shoot down your plane and kill you, Lian,” said Fyers, disgustingly smug in the face of her shock. “Not that I gathered your name or anything, but it was a bit of extra cash we were in dire need of a few months ago, and even if you didn’t die in the crash…well, you would have died sooner or later anyway.”

Her stomach heaved, but her mind drained itself of confusion and curiosity both; now anger began to fill it, drop by drop.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked. “You must know I’ll never believe a damn word you say. And I’ll certainly never accept the help from a loathsome man like you who stood by and let me get raped by his slavering bunch of henchmen.”

Shado glanced at her, clearly shocked at her forthrightness and sheer fury, but Lian channelled it outwards, directing all of it towards Fyers. But the man was still smirking, uncaring of Lian’s anger, of her pain.

“You’ll help me,” he said, confidently.

“Oh?” Lian spat at the man, figuratively, then literally. “Go fuck yourself.”

“I know their names,” said Fyers. “In fact, I believe their exact words were: ‘The grandfather is dead. She’s all that’s left of the bloodline. Kill her and you will receive compensation.’ Do you want the names of the men who murdered your grandfather, Lian? Who put you on that rickety plane and lured you from the safety of America? After all, I’m just the means of your agony – they’re the cause.”

All sanity deserted her. There was only a roaring in her ears, her heart against her chest, her legs readying to spring forward and cut the slimy bastard from gut to gullet and hurt him, hurt him. Her knives were ready; she saw with pleasure the exact moment Fyers realised that – lie or not – he had finally pushed too far, and he was going to die.

Distantly, through the haze of fury, Lian heard frantic shouting, getting closer and closer. Shado gasped suddenly and dived for her, knocking them both to the ground, hard. They both cried out from the shock of the landing, Lian ready to shout at Shado, when Yao of all people landed on top of them. Then she really did shout, struggling to get away.

“What in the hell –”

Yao yelled something in Mandarin, clearly too distressed to manage English, but all Lian could focus on was the fact that Fyers, taking advantage of their distraction, was now standing above them, face contorted with rage and a gun pointing right at them –

There was a whistling noise, almost too loud to comprehend, screeching overhead. Then the camp
exploded, hard enough that the ground rattled with the force. Yao forced her and Shado’s heads
down, the blaze strong enough that she could feel it across her cheeks and the exposed parts of her
limbs. The explosion was so violent that debris clattered to the earth nearby, even at the distance they
were, and she shrieked when chunks of metal – probably the only remains left of jeeps or weaponry
– littered their surroundings. Fyers was screaming – she didn’t think there were any words, just rage
and horror like she’d never before heard from another human being. Then – a horrible chunk.
Looking over, she saw Fyers prone on the ground, a piece of debris, still on fire, rolling away from
his body.

“Oh, fuck,” she whispered, laying as still as possible. Shado, however, began to struggle, calling out
to her father, first in Mandarin and then, in sheer frustration, in English.

“Father, move!” she exclaimed. “We need to get further away.”

He moved, finally, and went straight to Fyers’ body, pulling it across his shoulder. He spoke to
Shado as he did so, face drawn and pale. After a brief conversation, Shado also paled, turning to
Lian with wide eyes.

“Your friend is injured,” she said. “Slade Wilson. We need to go.”

Lian’s heart froze in her chest, and she ripped her eyes away from the blazing camp. There were no
survivors there, no chance, and so there were no people coming after them. She’d never seen a fire
so strong, its heat almost blasting her face, but inside she was cold as ice.

Slade.

She broke out into a run.

~~~

The idiot was alive. Practically delirious with pain, but alive.

Lian almost swallowed her own heart as she watched him talk to Oliver, instructing him on
tourniquets and re–bandaging the emergency wound. She kept one hand on Slade’s forehead,
wondering if she was, at any point, going to move it away. The same could be said for the hand still
gripped in Slade’s fist; was he going to let go? Sweat beaded his skin, his jaw was clenched, words
needing to be forced out. Mid–sentence, he caught her looking down at him, and something
happened to his face. She thought it looked a bit like confusion, but there was something else behind
it, something that didn’t look quite right on his normally serious face. The corners of his eyes
loosened, his mouth was left open for a moment too long. His hand tightened on hers, went slack,
then tightened again.

“You’re hurt,” he said, lifting his other hand. He couldn’t quite lift it properly, falling against her arm
instead. Her own hand went to her face, pulling away from Slade’s forehead, but she couldn’t feel
any cuts or blood. Yao and Shado had kept her pretty well covered when the missiles had hit the
camp, and she didn’t think even adrenaline could have blocked metal or searing hot rubber hitting
her body, no matter how small the pieces might have been.

“I’m all right, Slade,” she said, putting her hand back against his forehead. He frowned.


She rolled her eyes. “I have four knives and a gun, Slade,” she said. “For heaven’s sake, if someone
upset me, they’d know about it.”
He grinned then, all teeth. “Thaaat’s my girl,” he said, letting his head fall back. Lian’s stomach flopped as she looked down at his relaxing face; his hands hadn’t moved from either its grip around hers, or where the other rested against her arm. Oliver finished with bandaging Slade’s leg, throwing them both a sort of sly look, his grin genuine albeit seeming somewhat off beneath the blood spatter. Thankfully, before he could say anything, both Shado and Yao Fei returned, Shado carrying three separate first aid kits strapped over her shoulders, and Yao unburdened from Fyers.

“Where did you leave him?” asked Lian sharply.

“Secured in a tent – gagged and blindfolded,” answered Shado. “He received a bad blow to his head, I’m not sure he’ll wake up again.”

“Good,” said Slade shortly, opening his eyes again. “Get me up. I need to send out the message. Now.”

He didn’t wait for help, letting go of Lian to put both elbows on the ground and beginning to struggle his way up. His leg was clearly going to be a problem, but there wasn’t much they could do about it; Slade was right, they needed to get the message out as soon as possible. Lian caught Shado’s eye; the other woman was watching Slade’s leg like a hawk, nodding sharply at Lian and gripping her med–kits tightly. Shado went ahead, holding the door open for them, and Yao stayed at their backs, covering them from any potential enemies that might pop up – although Lian seriously doubted there was a single soul left alive aside from themselves within a few miles radius of the tower.

The climb up the stairs was clearly excruciating, even with her and Oliver supporting most of Slade’s weight. He was sweating excessively less than halfway up, eyes closing more often than not, wheezing with each step. Lian watched his leg, worry growing; how much blood had he lost? Oliver, to his credit, was practically carrying Slade, his own face growing redder with exertion.

“Come on,” said Lian, gathering herself and readjusting her grip. “We’re nearly there.”

“Liar,” panted Slade and Oliver in sync and she turned her face into Slade’s chest, covering her laugh. His hand tightened on her arm, glove rasping against her sweater. Step by exhausting step they rose, Shado darting up and down ahead of them, hand outstretched but never quite touching any of them, watching Slade carefully, encouraging them without speaking a word. Yao kept his bow and arrow ready, covering their backs. Finally – finally – they reached the top landing, Shado shoving the heavy metal door open and Oliver bowed over with Slade basically half–draped across him. When Lian glanced back for Yao, she caught him looking darkly at the stairs; drops of blood had trailed after them. He glanced over at her, nodding once, and she turned back, helping shove Slade over the last few steps, onto the landing. Behind Shado, the reinforced metal door was marked out with a white placard: COMM ROOM.

Her eyes closed briefly. They could do this. They could do this.

“Come on, Slade,” she murmured. And they finally stepped onto the landing, facing their way home.

~~~

Slade groaned when they reached the top of the stairs, this time with pure relief. He struggled away from Oliver and Lian the second he saw the radio – he could have sworn it was glowing somehow, like it knew it was their way home – and immediately almost tripped on the dead body lying on the ground. Shado was pulling out and wiping her father’s knife on the corpse’s leg and she glanced up at him, showing faint concern at his lack of coordination. How in the hell had he missed that..? Of course there was a body, Yao had taken care of – didn’t matter, didn’t matter. Slade swiped away
hands reaching out for him again, and forgot, for a whole second, that he wasn’t supposed to put pressure on his leg. Blood loss and imminent freedom must have been dulling his senses, and as punishment pure lightning agony shot up his body and he gasped, falling against the nearest wall.

“Slade, I will punch you if you don’t let me help you stand up!” snapped Oliver, reddening. Slade stared at him, and Oliver stared back, defiantly, grabbing Slade’s waist and arm as Slade swayed against the wall.

“All right, all right,” said Slade, surprised despite himself at Oliver’s insistence. He allowed Oliver to keep a tight hold on him, inwardly grateful at the help; it was becoming more and more difficult to filter away the pain so he could concentrate on operating the radio properly. Hell, he could barely breathe without wanting to pass out; he only managed to keep himself upright by sheer force of will – and, of course, with the help of Oliver, who really couldn’t seem to leave him alone. Slade fumbled the controls, finding the frequency, and belted out his message when the radio screeched to life.

“This is Slade Wilson, ASIS, calling for immediate team extraction and medical, please respond, I repeat, Slade Wilson, ASIS –”

“Agent Wilson,” said the radio. It was woman’s voice, scratchy and barely recognisable as human – but it was an Australian accent. “Please respond with Level 8 permissions.”

Slade could have groaned at the bureaucracy of it all, but rattled out his codes as requested. He appreciated the need for certainty, but his leg screamed in protest at the delay.

“Agent Wilson,” responded the woman once the codes were given. “Please remain where you are. An extraction team is on its way to your location. ETA twenty–two hours or less, depending on the weather.”

“Medical, too,” said Slade hurriedly, gripping the edge of the table. Oliver’s hand tightened and Slade realised suddenly that he was sagging. Blood was steadily leaking from his leg, and Shado looked ready to knock him unconscious if he tried to put off digging out the bullet any longer.

“Medical is already assigned,” replied the agent on the line. Then, softer, like she was breaking a role, she added: “Please take care, Agent Wilson. You’re coming home.”

The line cut out and Slade slammed the mic down on its handle, unintentionally hard; he was beginning to shake. Yao and Lian came up behind him, and Slade finally allowed himself to be lowered to the ground, unable to stop himself from gasping at the pure pain of the wound. Oliver’s face hovered above him like a little sun, gold hair and tanned skin, worry slowly being eaten away by relief and excitement.

“We’re going home,” said Oliver, quietly, and he beamed. The blood across his face was startlingly juxtaposed to his youth; when had Oliver gotten injured? No, no, that was gun splatter; Oliver had killed a man at close range. When had he done that? Back at the camp? Slade had turned the college boy into a killer, a survivor, and now they were all going home, back to reality. There was pride there, but anxiousness, also; what would that be like for the kid? For all of them? But they were going home, they were going home…

Oliver had become worried again, relief fading away. “Slade..?” he said, pressing Slade back onto the floor. “Are you all right? Hold still. Your wound –”

Slade’s head was spinning. He closed his eyes but that only seemed to make it worse; he had lost a lot of blood, of course. Lian and Shado were delicately examining his wounded leg, with Shado gently prodding the injury and Lian rubbing a hand against the back of her head.
“We’ll have to cut the pants to get at it,” said Lian, voice and face filled with anxiety. Slade groaned and a bit of exasperation filtered into her expression. “Honestly. Oliver, go find a spare pair of pants, would you? From a mercenary or something. Thanks. All right, Slade, hold still, we need to get that bullet out. I’m going to start cutting.”

“There are easier ways of getting into my pants, Worth,” said Slade. His words managed to swing their way back to his brain after a second, hitting with all the force of a brick dropped from height onto a car roof. His mouth dropped and he looked to Lian, mortified. She was just staring at him, utterly dumbfounded.

“Oh, god,” he said.

“We can’t even blame that on the anaesthesia, Slade,” she said, her bloody hands still holding the knife she’d been using to tear open his pants leg.

“There is no anaesthesia,” he said, miserably. He wanted to put his hands over his face, but the thought of moving sent fresh streaks of pain up and down his injured leg. He’d been shot before, but there was always adrenaline to keep him going; not that it ever got easier, of course. There were few things more painful than a bullet wound; it burned and lanced lightning–sharp pain no matter where they hit.

“Rude boys don’t deserve anaesthesia,” said Lian, but she didn’t sound angry. Mostly bewildered. He didn’t know whether to count that as a positive or not. He at least managed to close his eyes as she began to cut up his leg, Yao and Oliver finally returning with medical supplies and pants both. Shado, so far, had refrained from commentary. He really hoped that her English wasn’t as good as her father’s. Shado, thankfully without comment, took over the treatment, re–tightening the tourniquet and setting about the excruciating business of digging out the bullet, stitching up the wound, and wrapping his leg.

It was like a fresh round of torture without anaesthesia, however. Embarrassment was far away in his mind as he tried to focus past the pain, vaguely aware through the haze of agony of Oliver and Lian hovering worriedly above him, trying not to crowd either him or Shado as each stitch went in.

“Oliver, help me wrap,” said Shado, nodding to the bandages. Oliver immediately went down, gently keeping Slade’s leg off the ground as Shado wrapped thick bandages tightly around the wound. It didn’t matter how good Oliver’s intentions were, though – his entire body coursed with pain, his leg in particular feeling like it was on fire. He must have been groaning – he was sure he’d been groaning – and his vision started to blur, little black dots swirling around the edge of his eyes. He didn’t want to pass out, despite the pain he was in – it was time wasted in a dangerous place – and he fought for consciousness.

He didn’t know when Lian knelt, but he was aware of her hand, still soft after all the weeks on the island – or maybe they were just soft in comparison to his years–worn and sword–callused palms – slipping in between his clenched fingers, gripping his hand. It was suddenly like he’d been handed an anchor amidst the most awful storm of his life; he couldn’t see her, so he thought his eyes must be closed, but she radiated warmth from that single spot, clamped in his fist.

“All right, Slade,” she said, voice filtering in through layers of disorientating brain chemicals and awful nerve endings. “Just a bit longer now.”

“I found some Benzodiazepine,” said Shado, speaking suddenly now that she was finished dressing the wound. “Not ideal, but this seems like an emergency.”

There was a short conversation in Mandarin as her father queried her; Slade was too dazed to follow
it properly. He groaned again, involuntarily, trying to grit his teeth against making any noise. He’d had worse, surely? One bullet wasn’t as bad as the three in the shoulder he’d gotten in Antigua about ten years ago, right? Then again, he’d been high on adrenaline, then knocked out from drugs. And his body hadn’t been trying to cope with healing over deep scarring wounds, either. He’d at least had access to painkillers…

“Give me the benzo,” he hissed. “Now.”

“She already did,” said Lian. “Try and pass out, would you? It’ll be better when you wake up.”

“Can’t,” he said, breathing through his teeth, slow and steady. “Not safe.”

“We’re as safe as we’ll ever get, Slade,” she said. “What happens if we get ambushed? You’ll protect us all with one leg and no brain?”

“Funny.”

“Hilarious.”

Slade finally managed to breathe again as his leg was rested on the floor of the tent. He tried to organise his thoughts, but they got muggier and muggier as each second passed, drawing out longer and longer. He only realised that he was still holding Lian’s hand when she pulled to extricate it and he couldn’t loosen his grip.

“Ssh, Slade,” said Lian. Had he been talking? He didn’t think he’d been talking.

“Is he okay?” Oliver’s hands still lingered over his leg; Slade could feel the tension the hovering caused, close to the skin and brushing over the bandage.

“It’s just the Benzodiazepine,” said Shado. “And the shock. But mostly the drugs.”

“Should he be passing out?” asked Lian.

“With Benzodiazepine on its own?” Shado paused, thinking. “Not necessarily. But in combination with the shock…I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“I can carry him,” said Oliver, quite gallantly, actually, and Slade started to laugh, insofar as he could make sound travel past his dried-out oesophagus.

Oh, god – he was getting delirious.

“Just pass out, Slade,” said Lian, exasperated.

“I can’t just do it on purpose,” he said. Well, he thought he said it. He might not have, actually, because everything started to go even blacker and duller than it already had.

Oh, he thought. And he finally passed out.
everybody's week is going good. :-) If you guys enjoyed the chapter please consider leaving a comment as they're really nice to get, even just a short one is really uplifting! Thanks for reading and I'll see you guys again in a few days. :-) Enjoy the rest of your week! :-)

They stared at Slade’s unconscious body for a moment before Oliver sighed, scratching the back of his head.

“Aaand now we have to carry him back downstairs,” he said, grinning ruefully at Lian. She knew her eyes were tired and anxious, but he seemed relieved when she let a faint smile tug at the corners of her mouth. She rubbed a hand wearily against her temple, her other hand still holding Slade’s. The other man was breathing softly in his sleep, forehead uncharacteristically smooth, no trace of frown across his lips. He looked peaceful. Like he was sleeping anywhere else except this island.

“Yao,” she said, turning her head to the other man. “We need to get somewhere safe. Do you know someplace close by?”

Yao looked at her thoughtfully before glancing out the window. Oliver jolted, staring at Lian.

“Wha – but why?” he exclaimed. “The rescue will be here.”

“Yes, but the island isn’t safe yet, Oliver,” said Lian wearily. Thoughts were running through her head – about shelter, supplies, how fast they’d have to move. Even though Slade was unconscious it seemed like his paranoia had rubbed off on her hindbrain; her instincts were telling her to move.

“There are still mercenaries around the island, not to mention there’s a chance the fire from the main camp could spread here. We’re sitting ducks.”

Shado stood, tossing aside a stretch of cloth she’d been using to wipe her hands; it looked to be a piece of undershirt torn from the corpse of the fallen mercenary. “I’ll check for more supplies,” she said, shrugging on her medkits. “I saw a jeep parked outside of a tent; with any luck it’s still working.” She spoke to her father in Mandarin, and he said something back. Shado nodded once, and with a quick glance at Slade, left to go foraging.

“I know where the tent is,” Yao clarified. “I will help you get Slade there.”

“All right.” Oliver sighed. “I’ll get his chest. Yao Fei, you want to get his legs? Lian, it’s okay – the stairway is too narrow for more than two people.”

“Will you be all right?” asked Lian dubiously. Oliver just grinned at her, enthusiasm restored now that there was the prospect of going home before them.

“Yeah – you can go find supplies with Shado,” he said, already gentling pulling at Slade’s arms. The other man was definitely out cold, his mouth slightly open. Lucky for all of them, or they’d have an almighty fight on their hands during what was sure to be a thoroughly undignified trip down an awkward stairwell. Lian shook her head, half the movement just to clear it.

“Okay – Yao, I’ll see you by the jeep with Shado.”
By the time she got to the door, they were already arguing about the logistics of getting Slade out of the tower. She rolled her eyes.

Boys.

Outside was still dark, but the roar of the fire spread out like a curtain of sound, and the blaze of it lit the surroundings better than the moon. Lian wondered what the hell that camp was even made of; just how many bombs and weapons were there that made it so flammable? She breathed in deeply as she watched, and her chest loosened a little.

There were a lot of dead men in that fire. Had she heard that most of Fyers’ force had been gathered in the camp, or was that just hope masquerading as fact? Tonight was meant to have been d–day for his plans, after all – they would have all been expecting to get on a plane and leave, probably the next day, if not immediately. There were only dregs left, spread over the other camps, cleaning up and moving out. The man she had killed suddenly flashed across her mind’s eye; young, and so very surprised. She’d been quicker than him, better than him – and now with just five people, an entire camp of nearly a hundred men lay in ruins, the leader captured and all forces decimated.

And they were going to go home.

She didn’t realise how hypnotised she’d been by the fire until she heard soft footsteps behind her, Shado tactfully clearing her throat. The younger woman came to stand by her and they watched the fires reach high into the black sky, burning red and yellow and white.

“Did they hurt you?” asked Lian.

“Not like that,” replied Shado. She cast a side look at Lian. “That was you, wasn’t it? Earlier. With a grenade.”

“Yes,” said Lian. Providence only had allowed her to regain consciousness, at exactly the right moment when no-one was looking at her, and she could quickly pull a grenade from her bandolier and toss it at the radio set up. Things would have gone very differently if –

Her stomach churned. Shado put a hand on her arm, squeezing gently.

“It was how it was,” she said, comforting. “There was no other way it went. Don’t waste time being afraid of what might have been.”

“It’s kind of hard to let go of fear,” said Lian, through gritted teeth. It seemed like the fire was reaching out for her, but it was only in her mind, she knew; there was no way she could actually feel it burn her from this distance. Could she?

“Don’t let go,” said Shado. “Go through.”

Lian inhaled deeply, trying to dissolve the anxiety that was building in the base of her spine. The mercenary she’d killed flashed in front of her again, shock frozen in time; but after a moment she realised she wasn’t feeling anything in particular with regard to the image. No guilt, no fear. It was just her mind being unable to comprehend what death really meant. It couldn’t absorb the fact that sometimes…death meant nothing at all. Death just happened. And it hadn’t happened to her.

“You’re awfully young to be giving out that level of wisdom, Shado,” said Lian, squeezing Shado’s hand in return. The younger woman smiled, a little awkwardly this time.
“My path in life has not always been peaceful,” she said, letting her hand slip away from Lian’s arm. “I could not rest without knowing what had happened to my father. This led me to…not so safe places. But I wouldn’t change anything. My sister, unfortunately, would change many things.”

“Oh?” Lian followed Shado as they began to make their way back into the camp, going into each tent, one by one, and gathering what they could. Shado hedged her answer for a few minutes before finally sighing.

“She is a painter, an artist,” said Shado. “She is good and kind, but very naïve. She believes that the government truly knows what is right. I don’t believe in such a thing. I saw my mother mourn my father until it killed her. I have a tattoo –” She touched her shoulder – “I got it from a Hong Kong crime syndicate. A small group, but not without resources. They said they would help me find my father, and in return, I give them medical assistance. Mei worries about me, like Mother worried about Father. But sometimes the world is not kind, and we must do what we can to make our own path, despite the hardships in front of us.”

“That’s…very hardcore, actually,” said Lian. “Although it does explain a lot about you.”

Shado laughed. “Like what?”

“Like how you knew how to use a gun, how you speak perfect English, and how you haven’t hardly blinked at everything that’s been happening,” said Lian. She kicked open a storage locker; porn magazines and an empty bottle of whiskey fell out. “Ugh. We won’t be taking this blanket.”

“Lian,” said Shado from the far corner of the tent, voice hushed. Alarmed, Lian went over to where the younger woman was crouched. She had a tin box open on her lap, and inside –

“Oh,” said Lian. “Oh my god.”

There were four large bars of Lindt praline milk chocolate inside, the mere sight of them instantly intoxicating both women. Stereotypes of women and chocolate be damned – Swiss chocolatiers didn’t fuck around.

“When was the last time you had chocolate?” asked Shado, still very hushed.

“I had gestational diabetes,” said Lian, dazed by the sight. “My tests were cleared, but I was still trying to lose weight after Michael.”

“Michael?” asked Shado, and Lian startled back to reality.

“I –” She hesitated, trying to settle on the simplest version of events. “I had a family, they – died. David, and Michael.”

Shado’s eyes went round with shock. “Oh!” she exclaimed, guilt passing across her face. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right,” said Lian, repressing a sigh and standing back. Shado frowned.

“Is that what he meant then?” she asked.

“Who?”

“Fyers. ‘She’s the last of the bloodline’, or something. Is that what they meant?”

Lian paused. Fyers’ mocking voice circled in her head: *did you think it was an accident?*
“No,” she said after a moment, but even she wasn’t entirely certain which question she was answering. She shook herself; conspiracy theories and manipulation, that’s all it was. How dare anyone try and use what had happened to her –

She shook herself again.

“Well, we’re taking that, at any rate,” said Lian, patting Shado’s shoulder. The younger woman grinned, tossing the chocolate into the centre of the bed and pulling the corners of the blanket together to make a bag.

“The jeep is just around the corner, we can put everything there,” she said.

"Where's Fyers now?" asked Lian, leading the way out of the tent and into another. This one yielded more success; they canvassed it quickly, picking up a couple of rucksacks, a nearly full 10 litre barrel of water, and – best of all – a glass jar of instant coffee. Lian, ever diligent, rooted around to find a little tin and hotplate the previous owner must have used to make his cup of coffee in between duty.

"He's in the tent next to the jeep." Shado paused in the middle of shoving four emergency blankets into a rucksack. "On hindsight we maybe shouldn't have put him next to our only means of transport. But I really do doubt he'll recover consciousness any time soon; whatever hit him dug right into his skull. Most likely he has brain damage."

"Good," grunted Lian. She was perhaps a little more vehement than she needed to be when she zipped up her rucksack. As an afterthought she grabbed a pillow too, and heaved up the water barrel to balance out her arms. She glanced over to Shado to see herself being watched carefully by the other woman.

"Perhaps this isn't the best place," said Shado slowly, shrugging on her rucksack over her bundle of medkits. "I know I'm only pre–med, but...work with my organisation has provided me with a lot of experience in different injuries..."

"Oh..." said Lian. She watched as Shado grew more embarrassed, then determined.

"You've been on this island for several months without medicine after surviving a terrible event," she said. "I can provide medical assistance, if you require it."

Lian blinked. Shado ploughed ahead before she even got a chance to properly react.

"We will be home soon, I know," she said. "And I don't propose an examination without proper equipment. But if you need someone there you can trust, I have training. And I can bring you to my clinic. It's very discreet, and very private. No–one would ask you any pressing questions, beyond how it related to your treatment."

Something was happening inside Lian's chest; warmth bubbled, then turned acid–hot. Tears stung her eyes; her throat ached.

"Thank you, Shado," she managed, turning quickly away. The tears didn't force themselves out; once she inhaled a few deep breaths of cold night air her insides settled and the flush that had crept up her neck cooled down.

"I wasn't without treatment," she added, after a few minutes silence. Shado had led them to the jeep in the meantime, and they deposited their loot before going into their last tent; Fyers was in the actual last one, presumably out cold and securely tied. Listening for a minute she picked up the faint sounds of Oliver complaining and it brought a smile to her face; obviously they had somehow managed to wrangle Slade down and out of the tower.
"What do you mean?" asked Shado. She was rummaging through a crate, pulling up spare rounds of ammunition mixed with bags of trail mix and ration bars, a veritable treasure trove of supplies.

"Slade had a med–kit with some anti–bacterial cream in it," Lian explained. "Stung like a bitch for a while, but it helped with the soreness eventually. And your father – helped. With..."

Lian trailed off, forcing her hand away from her lower stomach. But Shado caught the motion and Lian looked down, shame welling up. Anger followed swiftly; why should she feel shame, at all, about anything? She'd done the only thing she could have done in the circumstances, hadn’t she? No–one had any right to make her feel ashamed at the choices she’d needed to make for herself, no–one. No–one –


David was just learning his words, and Michael still so small and soft, but growing so quickly. Firecrackers, both, and so like their –

– father –

She covered her face with her shaking hands; now the tears couldn't be held back. Shado came beside her, hovering and uncertain, and so, so young. But not so much younger than Lian, surely? Lian, who had gotten married out of high school as soon as she could, who took up cooking classes and blossomed with wholeness the moment she became pregnant, the gap of loneliness within her filled up the second she felt the first kicks, heard the first cries.

"I was meant to be a mother, that's all," she whispered. "That's why I'm upset. That's all. It wasn't meant to be like this, I wasn't meant to keep losing my children. This world is such an unsafe place..."

Shado's arms came around her, holding her tightly. Even unwashed, the scent of a woman was so *unutterably* different to a man's – she’d eventually gotten used to Slade, to Oliver, but there was always that *reek* in the back of her nostrils that kept her uncomfortable. Shado in many respects smelled the same – body odour, unclean teeth, dirty hair – but there was something in her skin that was fundamentally different, and that something brought a whole new sense of calm to Lian, a feeling she couldn't quite place.

So she let herself be held by the other woman, rocked gently. The tears had dried up, just leaving her tired, again, and she sucked in a breath.

"Thank you, Shado," she said, for what felt like the umpteenth time. Shado just shook her head, smiling wanly and slowly releasing Lian.

"Do you know what my father gave you?" she asked quietly. “For the…abortion?”

Lian shook her head.

"I wouldn't have known what it was even if he had told me," she answered. "I just took what I was given. He gave me something for infection, for sleeping, and for the pain. I've been feeling more like myself these last few days thanks to it."

"You've been sleeping regularly?"

"As regular as sleep can get here," confirmed Lian. She leaned in conspiratorially. "Although there's really only *one thing* that will truly get me back to normal."
Shado looked at her, curious. "Oh?"

Lian held her gaze, very serious. "Yeah – *soap,*" she said. "And a real good *shave.*"

Both women burst out laughing, struggling to stand upright after a few moments. Eventually it died down to giggles, and probably would have dissipated entirely if Shado hadn't added: "I *really* need to trim...you know."

The effort of holding in the laughter made both of them snort it out in ungracefully long peals through their noses.

"I *really* miss deodorant," Lian managed. Shado struggled to even her breathing.

"I don't know *how* you did it!" she moaned. "Your friends *smell!* I mean, you smell too, and *I* smell, but they really, *really* smell!"

"I know, I know!" Lian tried to calm down, but the giggles had gotten them both, somehow. Shado turned fully away, going to the opposite side of the tent and rummaging through a bedside locker in an obvious attempt to stop laughing. Lian shook her head, shoulders still shaking in an effort to restrain her laughter; it cut off as she startled when Shado abruptly gave out a short gasp and pulled her hand out sharply, peering into the locker in disgust.

"Are you all right?" Lian asked, concern melting through the good humor. But Shado just rolled her eyes, standing up.

"You do *not* want to know," she said, wiping her hand on her pants leg. "We won't take this guy's blanket either. Men."

Lian wrinkled her nose, but laughed and shook her head. "I can't wait to shower," she said, following Shado back to the jeep. The other woman sighed, obviously lost in a blissful dream of hot water, plenty of soap, and safety razors. Oliver and Yao were by the jeep, finishing up with their corralling of Slade's unconscious body; Oliver looked over at them curiously, face red and sweaty with the effort of lifting the much denser man.

"Were you guys laughing?" he asked. Lian smiled at him in response, swinging their findings next to Slade. The poor man was dead to the world, slumped to the side and tied tightly to the metal bar jutting over the sides and top of the vehicle. Yao began to speak in an undertone to Shado, leading her away into the tent Fyers was in.

“Girl stuff,” she answered, purposefully vague, and laughed at the sight of Oliver scrunching up his face.

“Oh, gross,” he said, and she laughed again.

“What are you, twelve?” she teased. “Honestly, Oliver, it’s completely natural.”

“And gross,” he replied, pulling at the cords securing Slade, testing their strength. Lian rolled her eyes at him, climbing into the seat next to Slade and settling herself in – oh, it felt good to sit down. She couldn’t wait to dig into that chocolate…

“I forget how young you are sometimes,” she said, tilting her head back. The cold air tickled her neck, but the rest of her body was relaxing, at last. They’d get somewhere safe, patch themselves up a little, and get rest. Even though there were still mercenaries wandering around the island, the troops would never get to the main camp in time to catch them – and soon enough, there’d be a rescue team arriving, and they’d go *home.*
Oliver clambered into the jeep, rocking the vehicle slightly with his enthusiasm, and Lian opened her eyes to see him pulling a face at her.

“I’m not that young,” he protested. She smirked.

“Oliver, once you hit the late twenties, everyone younger becomes a baby – trust me,” she said. “Just do yourself a favour and get over the whole female body functions squick. You’ll impress more girls that way.”

Oliver heavily rolled his eyes at her. “I don’t have to impress girls,” he said, half-bragging, and she scoffed at him.

“Oh? All right. What do you do to impress the boys, then?” she asked, and had the pleasure of him turning red – not with real anger, it looked like, but with bravado masking as indignation.

“I don’t have to impress guys either, Lian!” he exclaimed.

“Right, right – you just exist, do you? And they all just come to you?” She smirked again when he turned his back on her, clearly in a fake huff.

“I bet if I was back in Starling I could have bought you a drink,” he grumbled, and Lian had to withhold a shriek of laughter.

“Oliver, if you were back in Starling, I’d be in Gotham with two kids and a husband – and you wouldn’t want to mess with my husband!” she said, letting go and outright laughing at him.

“Besides, you’re not my type.”

She instantly became wary when he half–turned to her, a sly expression on his face.

“Really?” He was nearly purring; it was an odd and devious sound to come from the otherwise easy–going young man. “And what is your type? Dark? Brooding? Totally crazy? Sarcastic asshole? Australian?”

“Shut it,” she snapped, but the heat wasn’t behind it and he could tell. But he turned around anyway, letting the subject drop – albeit with a massively smug grin on his face. She couldn’t resist leaning in and muttering into his ear: “My type certainly doesn’t include frat boys with more hair than sense, at any rate.”

His faux outraged cry was cut off when Yao and Shado returned, with Shado opening the back of the jeep and Yao depositing Fyers’ body in the trunk. Lian and Oliver turned to watch them work; Fyers looked bad, all grey pasty skin and blood covering his head. Lian almost felt bad – and then she didn’t. At all. It didn’t feel good to shove the man into a trunk, but it didn’t feel bad either. He’d pay for his crimes, and his life would mean nothing at all, because she’d recover and be stronger. All his mercenaries and sponsorship, and he was still defeated.

“But of course he was,” she thought, allowing a glimmer of pride to warm her from the inside out. He didn’t have my friends in his corner.

There was a brief tussle between Shado and Oliver between who would drive, with Shado winning and Oliver being relegated to the backseat. He did so with much grumbling and dark looks before slotting himself into the little space there was in between Lian and the side of the jeep. She abruptly found herself crushed between two men; Slade, who was so unconscious it was almost hilarious, and Oliver, who had his arms crossed and looked like a Labrador puppy who’d been tossed a fake tennis ball. There was muscle pressed against the whole length of her body and the smell of sweat, blood and gunfire wafting around her; so she closed her eyes and waited for the inevitable dizziness and
panic that was surely to come.

Minutes passed. Yao settled into the front seat next to Shado and they began to converse in Mandarin, clearly talking about the route. Oliver shifted slightly, uncomfortable. Slade – Slade was snoring a little, barely audible but definitely there.

Lian opened her eyes, looking from side to side. Just Slade, and just Oliver – stupid boys that she cared about more than anything. And in front of her, Shado, and Yao Fei, who despite only recently meeting his daughter would obviously walk backwards over coals for her.


And Lian felt so light, she almost began to laugh.

“What’s so funny?” asked Oliver. “You’re smiling like we’re already home.”

“Nothing,” said Lian, and moved a bit so that she could rest her head on his shoulder. He smiled down at her, a little baffled but happy to oblige. Oliver, so young, and Slade, so loyal. Shado, kind, and Yao Fei, patient.

She might have been far, far away from being anywhere close to healthy but – for now – she felt…at peace. And for the first time in months, she wasn’t afraid of anything. So the smile remained on her face, and she closed her eyes again, and just…rested.

Chapter End Notes

Hope everyone's enjoying your weekend! Today I actually managed to get some shopping done, and I baked a lemon meringue pie! So it's been pretty productive so far :-) If you guys enjoyed the chapter please consider leaving a comment, as they're really nice to get. Enjoy the rest of the weekend, and I'll see you guys in a few days - just six more chapter to go! :-)
Yao directed them through the forest, following a path that led them out towards the sea. The smell of the saltwater was almost alien to Lian, who had never been to a beach in her life, but the sound was pleasant and soothing, like someone hushing them to be quiet, to sleep. Oliver didn't seem so happy to see the water, however, and he shifted restlessly in his seat. On the other side of her Slade groaned, also beginning to move around; she put a hand on his forehead, but he didn't seem to be feverish. Likely the cold, pain, and rough trip in the jeep wasn't doing his rest any favors.

"Are we camping here?" asked Oliver, surprisingly irritable. Yao shook himself, the sea apparently captivating his attention entirely.

"No," he replied. "We get rid of the jeep here. There are caves further in the forest, underneath older trees. We can rest there tonight."

"Caves underneath trees?" said Oliver, bewildered. Shado spoke up, carefully pulling up the handbrake of the jeep. Below, the sea thundered against the cliffside, and a salty, bitterly cold wind picked up. Lian shivered, tucking herself in tighter between her two men.

"Islands like this are ancient," Shado said. "They were once connected to China mainland, thousands of years ago. But the rock isn't strong, and eventually broke apart. The weather and trees began to hollow out the land, and now there are caves everywhere."

"Wait." Oliver stared at the ground, eyes widening in panic. "Are you telling me we've been living on an island that's falling apart?!

Shado snorted. "You would have to live a thousand years more before it would become a real concern, Oliver."

The younger man relaxed somewhat, glancing back down at the sea. Yao made no comment, simply exiting the jeep and pulling out the bags of supplies.

"We take everything," he said. "Oliver."

"Right, right..." Oliver pulled out another rucksack, handing it to Shado, and stood, holding his hands out to Lian. She smiled at him, allowing herself to be pulled up and helped out and down the side of the vehicle. Then he busied himself untying Slade and trying not to jostle the man's leg too much. Lian watched him for a few moments before shaking herself and collecting the rucksacks from Yao, who then went to help Oliver. Shado was staring off into the distance, med kits and supplies strung around her body, the sea and sky blending nearly perfectly into shades of blurred silver–grey along the horizon.

"What are you looking at?" asked Lian quietly, once she adjusted her own packs. Shado shook her
head, turning her back on the sea.

"Just beyond the line of the sea is China," she replied. "Home. So close and so far, far away."

Lian put a hand on the younger woman's shoulder, trying to project comfort through her fingertips. "We're nearly there," she said. "Just a bit more, Shado."

Shado shook her head again, offering up a wan smile. "I don't know how you did it," she said, speaking in an undertone. Lian glanced at the men; they were busy arguing over how best to manhandle Slade's unconscious body and weren't listening. Shado caught her glance and hurriedly added:

"No – I mean living on the island, not –" She paused, then leaned closer, her voice even quieter. "Does...Oliver know? About...what happened to you?"

Lian kept her eyes on the jeep. Slade would really have had an aneurysm if he had been conscious – he was now upside down, Oliver standing outside the jeep and holding onto his torso as Yao fed his legs over the side.

"I don't think so," she replied, just as carefully quiet. "I've never said anything outright. He's never really connected the dots, either. And Slade always shut him down if he began to ask personal questions. So, no. I don't think so."

Shado hummed, but offered no further comment. Eventually they managed to get Slade out of the jeep – a massive success, excepting the fact that at the last moment his boots slipped out of Yao's hands and knocked hard against the ground. Slade woke with a startled howl and immediately began to struggle. Oliver yelped, nearly dropping the other man and they fought each other, Slade incoherently swearing the whole time. Yao sighed loudly and just collected Fyers out of the back of the jeep, the other man causing far less fuss as he was still pasty, bloody, and totally out cold. Then Yao reached into the front seat and simply disengaged the hand brake, hopping easily out of the way as it began its slow descent off the cliff.

"This way," he said. He left Fyers where the man lay, slumped on the ground like a loose sack of potatoes.

Yao drew them further into the forest, stopping at the roots of a truly ancient tree, roots gigantic and terrifyingly gnarled. Shadows bled out from beneath the roots, hinting at dark unfathomable depths of broken, time-smoothed rock. To call it an unwelcoming place would have been a gross understatement; it was actively and almost aggressively threatening, practically exuding the promise of monsters and awful death. Tim Burton would have probably fainted with joy at the sight of it. The sheer size of it was enough to make even the brave faint-hearted, and the faint-hearted faint away entirely.

"No wonder the island broke up," said Lian, awed.

"Tha'ss a big fuckin' tree," slurred Slade, half falling over Oliver, who was beginning to look a bit hard done by. Lian's eyebrows went up and she glanced at Shado, who was biting her lip – from worry or humour, it was hard to tell.

"Benzo?" murmured Lian. Shado shrugged.

"It could have been laced with something," she replied. "Unlikely, though. Probably still the shock, pain, and the drug – he hasn’t had so much as paracetamol tablet in months, as well as probably suffering from dehydration and malnutrition. But he should be fine in a few hours."
Lian had to be satisfied with that. Yao was now leading the way through, carefully stepping in between the great grooves of the roots. Then, abruptly, he disappeared. Lian started forward, already panicking, when he reappeared again, signalling for them to come closer.

"I found the pathway," he said. "It will lead us under the earth, and it is dry and away from the weather. We can even make a fire."

Shado nodded to Lian and both women went in together; Lian hadn't factored on travelling in complete darkness, however. There was something strange and otherworldly about it – the rasp of their hands and feet against the stones and tree, the slight sound of panting, the hovering expectation that each footstep would be the one to bring her crashing down. Eventually she bumped right into Shado, who startled and began to speak snappishly in Mandarin.

"What?" asked Lian. Shado just made a grumbling noise.

"Nothing," she said, and there was the sound of several packs being dropped to the ground and a good deal of rummaging around. "I'm just complaining. Although I should have thought to first get the light out of the bag."

"Ah," said Lian, and blinked hard when Shado finally managed to click on an emergency flashlight; it was an extra–large, long life kind, so it immediately flooded what was revealed to be a chamber, long and with a high roof, smooth stone broken in places by encroaching tree roots, which created loops and curves big enough to sit on. There was a faint breeze coming from the far end, and it was dry and even a little warm. Shado said something to her father that sounded a bit cheeky, and probably was, if Yao's unimpressed glare was any indication. Yao left after a few moments, leaving Shado and Lian to unpack and organise the supplies.

"Oh – military grade. These will last for at least ten hours," said Lian, kneeling next to the light. The light was white and clearly artificial, but it was a welcome contrast to the previous hours of the night, spent in alternates of pitch black and blurry shades of dim colour, lit only by patchy electrics and blazing fire. The best part wasn't even the battery life – the strength was adjustable, so when they wanted to sleep later, they could dim it further.

"And I have four more," said Shado, smirking as she emptied out a rucksack. Blankets, rations, medicine, water – they organised everything quickly, setting out the majority into a neat pile. By the time the men came down – long–heralded by Slade's swearing and Oliver's complete loss of temper – both women were picking the wispy bits of dried up roots to use as tinder for a small fire. Odds are they wouldn't need it, but Lian really wanted to see if the coffee was any good.

"I can walk, goddammit," Slade rasped, while Oliver rolled his eyes and practically dropped Slade inside the cave, slotting him against a thick root and resting his back against the cave wall. Slade wheezed, catching his breath, eyes closed and mouth half–open, head leaning back against the wall.

"He'll be fine," murmured Shado, coming behind her. "I have another dose of benzodiazepine; I can give him it in the morning."

“What about your father’s herbs?” asked Lian, equally as quiet. Both women went to the pile of supplies, making a show of sorting through the contents while they talked in undertones about the men.

Shado shook her head. “He isn’t carrying any I can use at the moment. And anyway, pain–relievers can thin the blood – his body needs to work to heal the wound and clot the blood. I don’t want to mix herbs with the medicinal drugs. The important thing is to get him to eat, even though he won’t want to.”
“Leave it to me,” said Lian resolutely, already lining up the ration bars and snack packs of nuts. Shado smiled.

“I thought the mercenaries were intimidating,” she said, gently teasing.

“What are you guys plotting over there?” called Oliver. He was sprawled between two roots, legs spread in front of him, young face red and sweaty with the effort of corralling Slade through a narrow pathway. Lian just wagged her eyebrows at Shado, and turned around quickly, waving the bars of Lindt chocolate like a fan. Oliver actually vaulted to his feet, shouting with surprise. This, however, jolted Slade into wakefulness; he half-forgot his leg and tried to get up as well, already reaching for a weapon. It ended badly, with another shout of pain and an absolutely furious look directed at them all.

“What the hell are you shouting for?” he snapped. Lian had never heard his voice so raspy, but it was hard to be intimidated by a man that was stuck off his feet, especially when she was holding delicious bars of chocolate in her hands.

“All right, all right, sit back,” she said cheerfully. “We’ve got food, shelter, and a trip home in less than twenty-four hours. And best of all, for Slade?”

He grunted, opening one eye and turning it balefully on her. She smiled sweetly.

“More painkillers in about five hours,” she said. He just grunted again, bad-temperedly, and closed his eyes.

“But we’re having the chocolate now, right?” asked Oliver hurriedly, eyeing it up. Lian rolled her eyes.

“Yes, as soon as – where’s Yao Fei?”

Like it was a summon, Yao stepped through the entrance, carting Fyers over his shoulder. Lian’s blood ran cold; she’d forgotten about him. Yao didn’t offer any explanation, simply crossing the length of the cave and dropping him unceremoniously to the ground. They all watched for long moments, but Fyers didn’t give any reaction – in fact, he barely looked alive. After long seconds, Lian relaxed, and the tension drained out of everyone once more.

“All right,” she said, a little tiredly. “Food.”

"First thing though – we need to discuss what we're going to do in the meantime," said Slade, suddenly piping up from his corner. Lian turned to him, confused.

"What do you mean, what we're going to do?" she asked. "We're staying here, where it's safe. We're going to rest, eat..."

She trailed off, noticing Yao's slight shake of his head.

"I have to go back to the cave," he said. Lian, despite herself, was startled.

"But it's not safe out there," she blurted. "Everyone's in one place, we're hidden, we have supplies -"

"There are things I cannot leave behind," he interrupted. Then, with a faint note of apology in his voice, he added: "I need to go back. Just one more time."

"But what could be so important -"
"There is my father's box," explained Shado, stepping forward, one hand going to her father's arm. "There are mementos there, and medicines."

Medicine. Lian glanced at Slade, at Slade's leg, and she swallowed. He saw her looking, of course, but only frowned down at the offending appendage, eyes sliding shut after a moment, his face turning away.

"Well...it's not like you have to ask permission," she said lightly, giving them a smile. “Oliver, you should go with them. Slade and I will be fine here –"

“But Fyers –” protested Oliver, but Lian cut him off with a sharp shake of her head.

“Shado has said more than once that he probably won’t wake up,” she said. “We’ll be fine here. We’re well hidden, and Yao could use the back up. I just…want you guys to be safe, that’s all. There are still mercenaries out there, and I’d feel better if you were watching out for one another, all right?”

Oliver hesitated, glancing at Yao and Shado, but eventually he reluctantly nodded. She nodded too, putting on her bravest face – they saw through it, of course, and Shado crossed the room to stand before her, hands taking hers.

"We won't leave until light," she said. "So we'll rest. We'll be fine, Lian - without the need to avoid patrols or stay quiet, we'll make the trip in no time - it's really not that far, not with strong legs. There’s nothing to worry about."

"Honestly, you're such a mom," laughed Oliver, flopping down to the ground and rummaging around in the supply pile, whooping quietly when he found a packet of beef jerky. Oh, the cockiness that came with youth…Lian glared at him and he faked contriteness - something that must have worked wonders on his actual mother about a decade ago, batting his blue eyes and flashing a thousand-watt, butter-wouldn't-melt smile.

"Sorry, sorry," he said meekly. "I promise from now on I'll remember to respect my elders."

Lian lunged for him, shouting, and he yelled, jumping away.

"You cheeky little shit!" she exclaimed, catching his hair and pulling him back into a chokehold - he could easily break it, but he played along, shrieking for mercy. "I don't know why I bother worrying about you, you're far too much trouble for any mother!"

Even Slade was suddenly laughing at the sight of Lian, furious and fake-strangling a totally unrepentant Oliver. Shado actually had a few tears leaking down her face as eventually Lian tripped him up and he landed with his face in the dirt, an effective arm hold making him beg for actual forgiveness.

"Oh god, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!" he yelped, still half-laughing as he spat out dirt.

"For what?" demanded Lian. "You're sorry for what?"

"I'm sorry for being rude, Island Mom - ow OW - worth it, woRTH iT -"

"Brat," she told him, slapping the back of his head. "After all I've done for you!"

"Yeah, but what have you done for me lately, though?" he asked, rubbing his head as she let him back up. Oooh. Mistake. She sent a loose kick into the centre of his back and he sprawled face down in the ground again.
"All right, all right, break it up," said Slade, chuckling at them both. "Lian, leave off Oliver - much as I hate to say it, I'll need his legs tomorrow night. And Oliver - get the chocolate. It's the only things that's gonna save you when I eventually fall asleep tonight and can't protect you."

"Worth's Wrath," muttered Oliver, rolling over and giving Lian a wide berth before darting in and snatching the bars right out of her hands. He retreated to another corner, slipping them over one another like he was shuffling a deck of cards. "Say that five times fast."

"I get a whole bar, just for this shit," declared Lian.

"Oh, in that case, me too," said Shado. Oliver turned an incredulous expression on them both.

"What?" he exclaimed. "No! Bullshit. We'll split it five ways."

"I do not want any," said Yao. "I have spent twenty years on an island without any chocolate - I think it will only make me sick now."

"I'm more of a savoury kind of person, anyway," added Slade, from his spot on the floor. He was watching the goings-on with a gentle kind of amusement, the closest to relaxed Lian had seen him in days, if not weeks - hell, if ever. She frowned.

"You'll still have some, though," she insisted. "Just a bit. It's a celebration; we're going home in less than a day."

"I'll wait," he said. "There are milkshakes in my local that'll blow that fancy Swiss shit out of the water - I'll take you there, you'll see. Give me some of that jerky instead."

"I will take some as well," inserted Yao, and Lian rolled her eyes at both of them, trying to project disgust.

"Jerky is *not* the same thing," she huffed, but caught the packet Oliver tossed and handed it over to them. The heavy, salty smell filled the air as soon as the packet was cracked open and it was joined shortly with the heavenly scent of praline chocolate; sweet, heady, nutty, rich. It was like another universe had opened up inside their cave, one separate from the fear, the pain and blood and suffering that had followed them for so long. Her own chocolate bar was unopened, still, and she stared down at it; the crisp white cardboard, the golden, curling calligraphy, the pretty illustration of chocolate squares, a milk jug, and pecans.

"You know, I can make praline," she said, half-to herself, slitting open the bar and tearing the thin silver foil. Inside was a sheet of milk chocolate, artfully lumped with titbits of sweet praline. She brought it to her nose and *inhaled*, the smell transporting her to work experience she'd had in a French-style cafe, back when she was still in high school – oh, twenty-odd years past. The smell of baking sugar would always be associated with the stern but fair sous-chef, who'd taught her and four other interns about choux pastry, caramelisation, and meringue - she thought she was probably the only one who'd been taking notes, however; the others were blindsided by the chance to get free sweets. The sous chef had given her his recipe for pecan tarts, in the end; maybe she'd have a job when she got back, if he even remembered her. If she could even face Gotham again, after everything. If, if, if.

She opened her eyes and, catching the others staring at her, lowered the bar quickly in embarrassment. But they hadn't been staring at her smelling the chocolate - it had been her statement that had caused the silence.

"Wait - you can just...*make* praline?" Oliver exclaimed, gobsmacked. Shado's eyes were wide as
saucers, with Slade just looking at her good-humouredly, clearly enjoying her discomfiture. She huffed and took a bite - just a small one, off the corner - of her chocolate bar.

And she had to close her eyes. Ohthattastedsogood.

"Lian," whined Oliver. She opened her eyes, just to make sure he properly understood that she was heavily rolling them specifically at him.

"Well of course, Oliver," she said, amused. "What, did you think we just dug it out of the ground?"

He just grumbled, slumping against a wall and taking another chunk out of his chocolate. His bad mood couldn't last long with the taste of it, though, and he soon smiled down at it again. Shado stepped forward, her own bar already half-gone.

"How do you make it?" she asked, hushed. "Is it hard?"

She smiled, and they all sat together in a semi-circle around the flashlight, wrapped in blankets and passing around snacks and water like it was a slumber party instead of their last night of captivity, stuck inside a cave. Sooner or later, they'd have to sleep, but for the moment? Lian just enjoyed the sight of their faces as she described the way she made praline caramel, and salted toffee, and peach ice cream.

Not a bad way to finish up their time on the island; not a bad way at all. And there were certainly no better people she could think of to spend it with.

Chapter End Notes

hooooolyyyyy shiiiit I am so tired. Gonna go to bed right after I finish updating this, and then REST. Feels like I haven't slept in days, which is ridiculous.....but I got some ironing done, and went out to dinner with my hubby, so life ain't too bad.

We're getting close to the end now! If you liked the chapter please consider leaving a comment, as they're really nice to get. :-) Hope the week has been treating you guys well so far, and I'll see you in a few days! :-)


Chapter 26

Oliver slept deeply for the rest of the night, totally dreamless for the first time since he had washed up on the island. When he woke, a piece of jerky still clutched in one hand and his body a semi-circle around the flashlight, Slade was still slumped over to the side with Lian curled up like a cat on one side of him – not so close as to be in any risk of touching, but close enough that her resting there definitely wasn't an accident. Yao was already silently moving about the cave, making up travel packs, and Shado sighed herself to wakefulness, stretching out beneath her blanket. Yao knelt by her, offering a small tin cup of water to drink and they spoke softly to each other in Mandarin. Oliver smiled to himself at the gentle look on Yao's face, until he glanced over at Fyers – still unconscious, still whey–faced, still tied up in the farthest corner of their cave. A little pool of blood was collecting underneath the man's head, and Oliver's face twisted. He didn't want to be glad that another human being might die in front of him – but he didn't much feel like being sorry about it, either.

After a bite to eat – and a near–silent goodbye to Lian, with promises that they'd be back in a few hours, and a quick jab in Slade’s leg with the second dose of Benzo – they set off for Yao's cave at first light, cutting straight through the forest now that they knew the main force of mercenaries had been blown up and killed the previous night. Not having to circle around troops rotations or fake landmine sites thankfully cut down on their time, although Oliver couldn't count how long they actually spent walking; he was lost in thoughts of home and finally relaxing a little now that the island was mostly – like, 99.9% – free of mercenaries. Just a quick pick up, back to the cave, then that night get on a plane and go home. He was practically cheerful, an emotion he hadn't felt in what seemed like an eternity. They were just cresting over the side of a slope, the entrance to Yao's cave in sight, when Shado finally asked him what he was thinking so heavily about.

"I can't wait to get back home," he sighed. "I miss Starling. Jeez, I miss America, full stop."

"What's it like?" asked Shado after a minute, fingering the strap on her med–kit. Oliver paused.

"Oh man – you've never been to America? Hey, you can just come back with me!" said Oliver, looking over at her and throwing her one of his old looks, the flirty one, with the eyebrows. She just rolled her eyes – but there was a smile there, so he counted it as a win.

"No – it's rather difficult to leave China to go to America unless you're with a larger University, or have the money to travel," she replied.

"Well, I have money," said Oliver, only half–way bragging. "You could come to Starling. There's this amazing steak house – oh man, I've been dreaming about their double cheeseburgers –"

Shado snorted, shoving his shoulder. "I've eaten double cheeseburgers," she said. "We have McDonald's, you know."

"Noooo, no no no –" Oliver shook his head, faking disappointment. "You haven't lived until you've tasted Chef Declan's double cheeseburger – it's got like this smoky bacon sauce, and two kinds of
cheddar, and it's like, THIS big –"

Shado laughed as he exaggeratedly spread his hands out to depict just how big the burger really was.

"No wonder all Americans are fat," she teased, and Oliver put a hand over his heart, faking offense.

"It's not our fault our food tastes so good!" he exclaimed, nudging shoulders with her. He grinned wider when she didn't move away, and was about to tease further with more descriptions of meals back in Starling – Thanksgiving, and Christmas, oh god, Christmas with its twelve courses – when Yao cut in sharply.

"There is just one thing," said Yao seriously, and Oliver froze. Riiiight...Shado was his daughter...but then Yao hesitated, and Oliver and Shado looked at him, surprised by his reticence. Gruffly, Yao finally asked: "What is a double cheeseburger?"

Oliver and Shado stared at each other, their eyes as round as saucers, before they both burst into laughter. Shado tried to explain in shaky laughter, switching between English apologies and what Oliver assumed was Mandarin explanations, if the hand gestures were any indication. In the end even Yao was cracking a grin, if only because their good humour seemed infectious, and they laughed together, each of them ducking their heads as they entered the cave.

That was when the shots rang out.

Bullets sprayed the ground at their feet and instinct made them dive to the side. But one stray bullet was all it took – Yao was hit, right in the gut, and he went down with a sharp grunt of pain. Shado screamed, and Oliver's mind whited out.

The world slowed down. Two mercenaries, previously hidden by the stalactites, came out of the back of the cave with their guns up, and Oliver dived for one of them, pulling the arm down, flipping and disarming him. He used the momentum to bring the other guy down too, crashing one into the other and pulling the guns away. Then he knocked them out against the rocks, and when they stayed down, the world came rushing back in.

He looked around. Shado was sobbing over a limp Yao, speaking rushed Mandarin and pressing down on the wound. She looked up to Oliver but didn't seem to see him. Heart pounding, Oliver glanced down at the mercenaries and went to his pack, pulling out a couple of reams of rope, things a lifetime ago they intended on using for the remains of Yao's belongings. He dragged the bodies out, binding them quickly and tightly against a couple of trees, hands flying over knots learned a decade ago in a failed foray into boy scouts. Then he dashed back into the cave, stumbling to his knees next to Shado, hands hovering helplessly over the mess of Yao's tunic.

"What do I do?" asked Oliver, urgently.

"The wound needs to be cauterised," said Shado. "I need to dig the bullet out!" Her voice was shaking hard, eyes filled with panic. Oliver flew to Yao's box, scrambling for tinder and spark rocks, making a flame as quickly as he could with his fear–stricken fingers. Yao's front was covered in blood, the stain spreading far too quickly, and Yao's face was shifting constantly, trying to disguise his agony.

"It's going to take too long," said Oliver, desperately watching the tiny flame grow. It was too small, too orange – far too cool to be used for a fast cauterisation, even he knew that.

"It's the only hope we have," said Shado, face now set with determination. But her hands were covered in her father's blood, and fear lingered in the corners of her eyes. Yao turned his head,
mouthing something. Shado hushed him, but he became more insistent, trying to move his arms too, groaning with effort.

"Father, please stop moving!" cried Shado, tears forming. Oliver glanced over, and in a rush, realised that Yao was trying to reach to box. He left the fire, hurriedly rummaging through the box, not even knowing what he was supposed to be looking for. He turned, and saw that Shado was leaning close to her father, ear to his mouth, and her eyes widened.

"A grey tin, Oliver!" she said, sitting up. "Father's had to cauterise his wounds before – he has a paste mixed with herbs that will help the fire burn hotter, faster, but not for long. Coat it on the knife!"

With his own hands shaking, Oliver practically emptied the box in search of the elusive grey tin, each second both an eternity and ticking by far too quickly. When he finally found it he nearly shouted with relief, smearing it on the edge of the knife and sticking the blade into the tiny fire he'd made. Both of them shouted with surprise when the fire latched onto the knife with a small bang, like a firework, the fire searing the edge white-hot within seconds.

"Holy shit," blurted Oliver, starting when Shado yelled at him.

"Give me the knife!"

He did so, watching as she sent her eyes to the heaven before she –

Oliver had to look away, grabbing onto Yao when the man nearly vaulted off the ground, pain rendering his movements involuntary. Shado was yelling in Mandarin – curses, orders, or pleadings, only she and Yao knew – as she cauterised her father's gut as best she could before flinging the knife to one side, cleaning the wound with disinfectant and starting in on the stitches. Yao was openly weeping with agony and Oliver could barely keep it together as he leaned on the other man's torso, trying to keep him level on the ground. Shado finished her work in record time, rinsing the wound again before patching it up and rinsing her own hands with the leftover, drying them off on her vest and pants as best she could.

"Oliver, help me bind his stomach," she said wearily, and they worked together then to tightly wrap Yao's abdomen, using up an entire roll of bandages.

"There's something for infection in his box," said Oliver desperately and Shado nodded, pushing back loose hairs with the heel of her hand.

"Look for a red dried herb mixed with brown," she added, looking down at her nearly unconscious father. Oliver did as she told without asking why, desperate to do anything he could to help. After minute, without prompting, she added: "It's to help with the pain, and to help him sleep. There's a danger it might thin his blood too much, but his body needs to sleep off some of this damage."

"Okay," said Oliver, trying to focus on the contents of the box. Tears pushed up his chest and tried to worm their way out of his eyes, and he clenched his teeth, anger suddenly washing over him. They were so close, SO CLOSE. Why did this have to happen?

"And we need to decide what to do with those mercenaries," Shado said, quietly. Anger and grief and fear hardened inside his chest, becoming something sleek and cold.

"I'll deal with them," he said. Finally the two little bags of herbs were found and he passed them to Shado, who mixed them up with a little water and fed them to Yao, sip by sip. While she was focussed on that, Oliver slipped back outside, to where he'd tied the men. They'd regained
consciousness at that point, and were speaking to one another in undertones; the second they caught sight of Oliver, however, they cut off.

Oliver felt...strange. Detached, almost – calm. Like he was swimming above his body in a haze of golden certainty. Slade had trained him hard, even if it was for a short amount of time, and the island had taught him even more about strength, death, and the will to survive.

"How many of you are there?" he asked. He felt strong. Resolute. He saw these men for what they were: just men, like him, no better. They weren't bogeymen or monsters, just hired guns, replaceable and replicable. He'd seen worse monsters in his dreams, and these men held no power over him. And then he figured it out, what was different about him: Oliver, for the first time in months, wasn't afraid.

One of the men spat at Oliver's feet, and the other sneered.

"Like we'll talk to a brat like you," said the first man. The balaclava hid his age, but he was American, white, with a midwestern accent. One of a million, the kind of man Oliver, at any other point in his life, would have walked right past.

"You're going to answer my questions," said Oliver calmly, because he knew they were going to answer his questions.

"Oh?" said the other man, still sneering. This guy wasn't American; he couldn't place the accent, though. Polish, maybe – or Russian? Another one of a million, unremarkable but for the pure, arrogant malice in his eyes. "And if we don't?"

"Then I'm going to kill you," said Oliver, knowing it to be true, and being completely undaunted by this truth. The island had taken too much from all of them, and now, at the final hurdle, it was trying to take again. Well, Oliver had death to give back now, instead of the life it was always grasping for.

Both men burst into laughter.

"This little puppy!" howled the American. "This little bitch thinks he's gonna – hey –!

While they had been busy laughing, Oliver walked behind the man and secured him in a chokehold. It was a movement Slade had taught him time and time again – simple to execute, in every sense of the phrase. Squeeze for too long and you'd suffocate your victim – too hard, and you might break their neck. Oliver exerted his whole strength; the bits he'd built up himself in the gyms across Starling, as well as the gruelling regime Slade had set.

The man struggled, but couldn't do much; he was very securely tied to the tree, and the angle of the chokehold meant that it was even harder to catch his breath. And while he suffocated in Oliver's arms, Oliver kept his eyes locked with the possibly Eastern European man, who started out shouting filth at Oliver but ended up just staring, wide–eyed and open mouthed, as Oliver slowly – excruciatingly slowly – choked the life out of his partner.

When the man was dead – and it was easier than Oliver thought to discern whether the person had died or not – he stepped back and watched the other man do some quick mental arithmetic.

"Imagine how much quicker that could have gone," said Oliver evenly. "If you had just given me what I wanted."

"Fuck you," blurted the other man. Oliver sighed and took a knife out of his leg holster.

"Have it your way," he said, only stopped when the other man began to beg. It was almost like a physical rush released through his body – these mercenaries were nothing. Oliver was strong, he
could dish out whatever they could and then some. Power wasn't exclusive to the ones with the guns and the troops; it was mental as well as physical, and here, Oliver was powerful. He could do anything.

"I don't know how many!" The man was strained against the bonds tying him to the tree. "We were all ordered back to main camp, that was a day ago. Only two of us were left, and we ditched the camp, we didn't want to be stuck with clean up!"

"You left behind all the gear?" Oliver let his face show he didn't believe a word the guy was saying. But the man insisted.

"No, no – it was just tents and some rations!" he said. "They took all the radios and gear and shit in the jeeps and headed out. We were expected to pack up a couple of tents and march all day back to the main camp."

"Why didn't the jeeps carry the tents?"

"There weren't enough! This op is bullshit, it's bullshit, there's not enough tents, food, gear – we figured we'd just camp out here, it's better than a tent – and we'd then head over in time for wheels up, pretend like we loaded up the gear, nobody'd notice. We weren't being paid enough for that bullshit, they promised us action and good money and we got a wet island with bugs and no food, it's bullshit –"

"So there's no-one left?" Oliver cut in. The man shook his head hurriedly.

"No, everybody's gone. All the other camps are the same. There's only about ten of us left across the camps, and the others should be there by now – we slept in, we were gonna head over first light. We heard the explosion last night, that means mission accomplished, right? So we're going home."

"We are," agreed Oliver. The man read his intent in his eyes, and tried to shove himself away.

"No no no no – come on, come on, come on, man – please, PLEASE –"

Oliver put his knife away, wrapped the shrieking man in a chokehold, and tugged. Like Slade had shown him, like he'd practised with a quarter of his strength countless times before. The crack of the mercenary's neck vibrated up his arms, and the body went limp. Oliver let go and breathed in deeply, suddenly aware of his heart beating too hard, his blood rushing up to his head, and he stumbled back, back into the cave and landed on his knees next to Shado, who was gently washing the blood from her father and herself with a spare water bottle. She glanced at him, then stopped and really looked – but he turned his face away, throat dry.

"The mercenaries?" she asked, quietly.

"It's taken care of," he managed, then straightened his spine. "How's he doing?"

Shado's face hardened as she looked down at her father. "Better than I thought," she said, placing both hands on her knees. "He almost certainly has internal bleeding, but if our rescue lands on time we should be able to get effective treatment. That kind of thing doesn't kill quickly, especially since the wound was small and he didn't exacerbate it overly by moving too much. The herbs will stop infection, so really, it's the blood loss I'm worried about. There was – a lot of blood –"

She stopped, turning her head away. After a moment she pressed the heel of her hand to her cheek, like she was checking her own temperature, but Oliver knew that motion from seeing Lian, in her quieter moments, try to bottle up whatever emotion she didn't want to feel – only for it to swallow her up sooner or later and manifest in shaking shoulders after they'd all gone to bed. He was pretty
sure both Lian and Slade thought he'd never seen their private conversations either, or the looks they'd give one another across the fire at night, after a hard day's training. Or the way Slade had singled her out before they had hit the main camp – even the absent moon couldn't hide the way they looked at one another. Like one was the other's linchpin. As obvious as a brick to the face, unless you were Lian or Slade, apparently.

When it came to Lian, Oliver usually followed Slade's lead. Maybe they'd only known each other a few months, but there was something about the subtle way Slade looked at Lian – and the way Lian looked at Slade – that even Oliver could pick up on. Something dark and painful, but edged with hope and anger. So when Lian got upset, Slade watched, and spoke with her the next morning – but never touched. Was that something to do with Slade, or something to do with Lian? Or both?

But Shado wasn't Lian, and she didn't have a built-in rapport with Slade that meant that Oliver didn't feel comfortable sitting closer to her and taking her hand off her cheek and clasping it gently in his. Shado looked to him, her eyes shining with tears but her brow drawn down and her mouth tight with resolution. She looked ready to take on an army single-handed, and Oliver's chest ached.

"Hey," he said. "It's okay. It's going to be okay."

She shook her head; more to clear it than in disagreement. "It just happened so quickly," she said, turning her eyes back to her now unconscious father. Oliver just swallowed. He knew a thing or two about how quickly a bullet could rip away a loved one, after all.

"I know," he said, instead of explaining the mess inside his heart and head, because the thought of explaining all that hell sent a cold gush of torment up his ribcage. He put his arm around her instead, pulling her close. She sighed and leaned her head against his shoulder. The position was a lot less comfortable than it probably looked, but they stayed that way for a few moments, letting the mental dust settle.

"We can't move with him like this," said Shado quietly, after a few moments. Her voice sounded steadier. "We can't go back to the cave today."

"I can go back –" began Oliver, but Shado froze.

"No," she said quickly. "Don't leave us here."

He held her tighter, squeezing her arm. "...I won't."

She relaxed, covering her eyes with the fingers of one hand. "Sorry, Oliver, I just –"

"It's all right," said Oliver, pulling a smile from somewhere. "I understand. And it wouldn't be smart to leave you. Here's a plan – we leave it for as long as we can, and start to head straight to the runway. When we're nearly there, you and Yao hide somewhere and I go back and get Slade and Lian. We can all meet up just outside the runway. Sound good?"

Shado nodded, sighing. "Yes. And I can keep watch, too – the remaining mercenaries are probably there by now."

"Right. Okay." Oliver squeezed her arm again and his heart actually skipped a beat when she relaxed fully, letting one arm fall behind his back to rest around his waist. Then he realised that her eyes had closed.

"Thank you, Oliver," she said. He turned his head to rest against hers, and, just for a few moments, he let his eyes close.
"Nearly home now, Shado," he murmured.

Please. Please, just let them get home.

Chapter End Notes

Phew, got this one out in time...it's been a busy week and a busy weekend! Hope it's treating you all well. We're getting close to the end now! If you enjoyed the chapter please consider leaving a comment, as they're really nice to get and it means a lot. See you all in a few days! :-(
Chapter 27

Chapter Notes

Please be aware of author tags. Updated Tuesday 7th February 2017. Please enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Slade only woke early in the morning, when the others were heading out – Shado jabbing him in his very tender leg turned out to be a very unpleasant wake-up call. He did manage to fall asleep again, but it was in the way sleep sometimes came to the very tired, in that he didn’t realise he’d fallen asleep until he woke up. As far as he could tell, he was still in the cave. But Lian was gone, Fyers was gone, everyone was gone. It was pitch, and he was lying down, unable to open his eyes. He became aware of a faint whisper of air brushing across his skin and he sighed internally, almost comfortable.

It was strange sensation; like swimming without moving at all in a sea of black silk, folds rustling against each other as they gently moved with unknown winds. His body was being slowly pulled beneath it, the cloth warm as it brushed his collarbone, the underside of his jaw, soft like fingertips that had never held a weapon. Beneath the folds, Billy was swimming unseen like a shark. He knew Slade was there, but couldn't find him – he would though. Billy was circling closer and closer, and the feeling of the silk lazily pulling across his chest grew colder, like wind whispering over his skin. It started to creep up his face – he couldn’t open his eyes. Billy was getting closer; Slade was vulnerable, naked, only held up by the will of the silk streams. His mouth was open to breathe, but the darkness slipped inside, stealing down his throat, suffocating him in cloying increments. It started to pry beneath his closed eyelids, seeking to gouge out his eyes.

Billy finds him. His hands glide up the back of Slade's calves and abruptly the fingers dig into Slade's skin, sending pain arching up through his body. He's dying. He's being killed, slowly, by the silk and by Billy's hands, creeping up his body, drawing blood with every imprint of his finger.

Slade knows he's dreaming now. It doesn't help.

"No."

It came out at almost normal volume instead of the shout Slade was expecting to give. Next to him, Lian started, waking immediately.

"What?" she said. He couldn't make out her face very well – she hadn’t adjusted the brightness of the light after the others had left, clearly opting to go back to sleep instead – but her voice betrayed nothing of the tiredness she must be feeling.

"Nothing," he said, trying to shift a little. The Benzo was wearing off; it was probably what had caused the dream in the first place. His body had been trying to fight off the pulsing agony, but it was too much stress. Lian shifted a little, a sliver of dim light from the flashlight revealing a slice of her face. Her eyes glittered darkly underneath the faint silver glow.

"Don't lie," she said.
"I'm not lying." Slade grunted, trying to mask a groan as he put both hands underneath his thigh, trying to alleviate the pain. As far as he could tell Shado's stitches were holding, and she must have put something around the skin because the area was a little numb, and not just because even his body was sick of feeling pain. If only the Benzo would last a bit longer. As if that wasn't enough, he could only hope that the bone hadn't been hit; he might be in serious trouble if that was the case. He supposed he should at least consider himself lucky that Shado was pre-med, instead of the hack job it might have been otherwise. He snorted, thinking of Lian's filleting skills; maybe it would have worked out after all.

"Are you laughing at yourself?" asked Lian, moving closer to the light. The damp cold was starting to filter in now that the others had left for a few hours, and she began to paw through the supplies, gathering up the spare blankets and some food.

"Nah," he answered, only half-watching her. "Pretty sure if there's a god he's doing enough laughing for the both of us."

Now Lian snorted. "So dramatic," she said. "You should retire, become a reclusive author."

Slade tipped his head against the back against the wall of the cave. "You know, after all this hell, the crazy part is I think I would actually just get lonely," he said, half-smiling at himself. He wouldn't have called himself a social man by any means or description – Billy had been the only one to stick it out of over two decades of service – but this ramshackle team of two-thirds civilian had grown on him, somehow. Not that he'd ever admit it. He didn't really count Yao Fei among that number – he still couldn't really stand the man. Shado, while a relatively unknown variable, was interesting, though. For a college student, she certainly knew how to kill a man and handle a gun.

"You'd miss us," said Lian from the supply pile; her voice lilting faintly, like she was trying to work some teasing into the words and she snapped open a foil bag of jerky, sending the meaty, spicy scent through the air. Slade craved it even as his stomach tried to furiously reject the concept of eating, and he watched her pick through it, delicately separating long strips into strings. He glanced at the far corner of the cave; Fyers was still unmoving, trussed up and drugged deeply like a stray dog being sent to sleep. The warmth from Lian’s presence at his side was beginning to seep away, and Slade's leg ached and ached.

"Yeah," he said, quietly. "I'd miss you."

Lian smiled faintly, pulling over the spare blankets, the jerky, and some water, settling them down like it was a picnic. He picked at the jerky, swallowed a gulp or two of water, but had to sit back, exhausted.

"You should eat the beef," said Lian.

"I should do a lot of things," he replied. The light, dim as it was, was beginning to hurt his eyes. He pinched them shut and turned his face away, trying to find a comfortable spot on cave wall for his back. Lian snorted, but it was subdued, as though the inside of the cave had somehow become a library where all noise was sacrilege.

"...the others aren't back yet," she said, finally. He didn’t move from his spot.

"They’ll come back," he said. "It’s only been a few hours. Rest, Lian. It’s not just me who needs sleep."

There was silence for a few moments, and then a shuffling noise as Lian tried to make herself comfortable next to him, as best she could in between rock and wood. After a minute or two passed,
she spoke again.

"Were you dreaming?" asked Lian. She was still facing the flashlight; Slade opened his eyes again and did his best to peer through the glare.

"...yeah," he said eventually. "Dunno. Just felt like I was suffocating. Can't really remember." That was a lie, but only a small one. He could remember, but when he tried to put it into words he found himself unable to articulate the bone-deep terror of his helplessness, his immobility. Even awake, and knowing that his sword had gone through the other man's skull, he still felt that Billy was circling him somehow, circling and circling, searching and searching. He’d had this same sensation on missions, the bad ones, the dangerous ones where only one or two people made it back, where sometimes it was nearly him heading home in a body bag. If a bullet had gone left instead of right, or if a guard had glanced even for a split second out a window or looked up. He felt it in his bones, in his blood, in his gut, in every part of his being.

Something was nipping again at Slade's heels, breathing hot over his shoulder. He thought it might be his death, at last, and he'd be ready for it now – if only it wasn't for the woman beside him, and the blue-eyed kid out in the forest, being guided by a man he didn't fully trust and a new face he couldn't categorise. His mission was self-assigned, but no longer deniable; he wanted them alive, off this island. Death would come on its own, in its own time. He wasn't finished yet.

He carefully didn't move – didn't freeze, didn't flinch – when Lian gathered her limbs up, straightened out her blankets, and shifted much closer to him, close enough that their arms were lined up with one another. Cloth pressed against cloth; her arms were strong and wiry with muscle beneath, so warm.

"Do you need a blanket?" she asked. A blanket actually sounded pretty fucking amazing, so Slade nodded – throat too thick to speak – and Lian shifted again, pulling loose a blanket, soft on one side and waterproof on the other. She flicked it in the air and let it rest over him; it was still warm from her resting in it.

"There’s instant coffee in the pile, you know," she said, letting out a surprised peal of laughter at Slade's unexpected groan of longing. Hell, he didn't even mean to make a sound, but – coffee. When was the last time he'd had a decent cup of coffee? Another thing to put on the list of what to do when they got off the island.

"I'd eat it with a spoon at this point," he said, hungrily eyeing the miscellaneous pile. Lian laughed again, softer, settling in next to him.

"A spoon?" she said, pulling the blanket up to her chin. "Ooh, la. Now look who's a madam."

He chuckled softly, and like a coward, waited for her to move away. When she didn't – when her warmth had thoroughly seeped out from the blanket and had reached his side, he reluctantly spoke.

"You don't have to sit next to me, you know," he said. She blew air out of her nose, shifting in her seat.

"Oh, shut up, you," she said, irritably.

He tried again. "I just mean –"

"I know what you mean," she interrupted. "I'm not forcing myself to sit next to you to prove I've got nothing to be afraid of. I'm cold. I trust you. Sometimes things are simple."

He kept his sigh in his mouth, letting the sound roll in his throat instead.
"Besides," she added. "You look like a man who's never had a hug in his life. I'd probably get punched if I thought about cuddling you. So relax."

He started, offended despite himself. "I am not – I wouldn't punch you!"

She sighed, half-groaning. "Slade, I'm joking. I know you wouldn't hurt me."

"I wouldn't," he said firmly, settling himself back. Then, lower, after a moment: "I wouldn't hurt you."

"I know," she said, quietly. A few seconds passed, and Slade’s heart rammed inside his chest as she turned over and gently slotted her hand through the space between his arm and his side, latching on to his bicep and the ratty cloth that was still dirty with blood and mud and smoke. His own hands, still trying to reduce the pressure underneath his thigh, didn’t move from their spot; the simple relief they provided was enough to stop him from reaching out and covering her fingers with his. That, and he was suddenly so dizzy with blood rushing around his head that he could hardly think, let alone move and actually touch her. It was like he was a teenager again, but Adelaide had always given twice as much as she got, and their touches had never been so loaded with the potential to irrevocably damage.

"God, I don’t want to hurt you," he said, weakly.

"Do you trust me?" she asked.

Immediately, he answered. "Yes. Yes, Lian, I do." His lungs constricted when she pressed her forehead against his arm, rubbing it a few times like she was trying to think.

"Then trust me to take what I need, and let you know when something is too much," she said. "This is all right. I need this."

"You can have whatever you want," said Slade, quickly. He couldn’t bend his head and look at her; her legs were curled underneath her blanket, her shoulders around her ears. Beyond that, her expression – her eyes, her mouth, was her brow drawn or easy? It was a mystery.

Lian’s laugh was just a faint breath of air. “Don’t make those kinds of promises.”

He’d fucking make her any promise he could. He’d lasso the fucking moon – he’d find a way. But still he hesitated. “Lian…I…” He swallowed, trying to form the words. “I don’t want to upset you….”

“Hm?” She moved her head again, just a gentle pressure against his arm. He tried to think through the sensation.

“I just – need to know. Your husband –” Instantly he knew he’d made a misstep. Her body froze, hard like a flinch, and her fingernails dug into his arm. He flinched too, less from the pain and more from the familiarity of the sensation; it was the same as what Billy had done to his legs in the dream. But that was just transference, from the bullet wound. He knew that.

“I don’t want to talk about him,” said Lian woodenly.

“I know,” he said, something like desperation welling up inside him. “It’s not – I don’t need to know – I just –” But his throat dried up on the words, his tongue glued itself to the roof of his mouth.

I don’t want to be second best. God, he didn’t want to be ‘just good enough’. He didn’t want to be a distraction. Lian saw him, didn’t she? Was he misreading everything? Was he just inventing the way
he felt – how did he even feel? He was some dumb kid instead of a veteran agent with enough blood on his hands to drown a city. What the hell was he doing?

Then Lian lifted her head and pressed a kiss against his jaw, right where it met his ear. It was far too hard, and lasted far too long to be misinterpreted as anything but incendiary. And Slade embarrassed himself by groaning, deeply, unable to resist the sensation, her lips so soft against his scratchy stubbly skin. Lian withdrew immediately, tucking her head into her blanket.

“Sorry,” she said, sounding nervous. Slade tried to get his head back into the moment, instead of the mess of chemicals and electricity it was stuck in. The sharpness, combined with the pain, almost made his stomach turn; nausea hit him unexpectedly and he gasped for air. Lian backed away, alarmed.

“Slade? Are you –” She scrambled away, towards the pile of supplies. “Hold on, I’ll find some water. Do you need to eat? I think there might be something for the pain –”

“Lian,” he said. After a minute’s breathing, his stomach was under control, but he definitely didn’t want to eat. He cracked an eye open, seeing her nervousness in every line in her body, as she stood awkwardly with a water bottle in her hand.

“Lian, it’s fine,” he said. Her lips pinched, she began to look distraught.

“I – I just –” She swallowed, passing the bottle between one hand and the other. “It’s, uh –”

“It’s okay,” he said. Her face creased; tears welled up in her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” she broke out. “I’m just so – I can’t – I want – god, I’m so embarrassed –”

“Lian, please,” said Slade, opening both eyes. God no, don’t cry. “I don’t…expect anything. Whatever you need, it’s all right, it’s fine, Lian. I swear.”

She stepped closer to him, kneeling by her blanket as she twisted the cap off the bottle. “I just – for a second –” She shook her head and sat next to him, pulling the blanket around her. “Just for a second, I think – I can – I’m all right, but then I think about it and –”

So don’t think about it, he wanted to say. If his leg wasn’t wrecked, if they were warm and dry and clean and somewhere safe, he might have done something – he would definitely have done something, who was he kidding – he’d show her the whole fucking world and every skyline in it, bring her to every fucking restaurant she’d ever dreamed of eating in, a different hotel every week, a different city, she’d fly free of this place –

“I’m just – frightened,” she said, quickly, the words clearly hard to say. “I’m afraid – they – ruined something good, something I enjoyed –”

“They didn’t,” said Slade, slowly, carefully forming his words. “You’ll get it back. You’re still alive. While you’re alive, things can change. Hell, I’m living proof. Nobody back home ever thought I’d be good for anything, let alone come out the other side of special ops training.”

Lian laughed, wetly, clearly pressing back tears. “I just don’t feel good,” she said, rubbing at her face and coming to sit properly next to him. Her head turned to Fyers before turning back in towards Slade. “Especially with him here,” she added sharply, folding her arms around herself. Slade had to agree. The other man’s presence was an aggravation, one he’d love to stick on one end of his sword. But Fyers was tied tightly and heavily unconscious; what he represented was more of a danger than his actual self.
Slade gradually removed a hand from beneath his leg and carefully slipped it underneath Lian’s palm, slowly, finger by finger, until her hand was resting on top of his.

“We’ll get out of here,” he said. Lian’s hand didn’t move.

“Promise?” she said, quietly.

“I swear,” he replied. “We’ll get out of here, and you’ll get better, and I’ll eat whatever the hell you put on the table.”

“Oh?” said Lian, laughing.

“I swear,” he repeated. “And don’t worry about me. Take care of yourself. I’ll always be here.”

She moved her head from its resting spot against the wall, closer to his shoulder; him looking down at her, her looking up at him.

“Promise?” she asked.

“I swear to God, Lian,” he said, and he meant it. Her face was so close, her eyes flicked down to his mouth. Was it too much? Should he wait, should he move forward, was he already moving down towards her, was she moving towards him?

“We haven’t brushed our teeth in months,” Lian whispered, all monotone.

“Didn’t think I’d have to be the romantic in this, Worth,” Slade replied, and leaned in the rest of the way, taking her hand in his and lifting them both so that their knuckles touched just underneath her chin.

And he kissed her then, gently, hyper-aware of his stubble and his sweat and the way her pulse was jolting but her thumb was rubbing a line up and down his palm – *how* had he not realised he’d wanted to do this for months? How had either of them not noticed?

When the kiss broke – just lips pressed against lips, for no longer than a few seconds – Slade dared to rest his mouth ever so briefly against her forehead before she relaxed against his arm. Somehow the bullet wound was taking a backseat while his brain was distracted by the mess of glory that was careening around inside his head, and he was grateful for the respite, however short it might turn out to be. Lian was curled up against his side, mindful of his leg, with blankets pulled up to keep the chill at bay.

“Worth?” he said.

“Hm?”

“...goodnight.”

She laughed. “It’s not night time!”

Just for good measure, he kissed her forehead again. “Doesn’t matter. You know what I mean, don’t you?”

He felt her smile against his arm. “You know, I think this is the first time you’ve ever said goodnight to me,” she said. He tried to think of an instance to prove her wrong, but couldn’t.

“Huh,” he said.
“I know. Rude. Hey, don’t pinch me. Slade?”

“Hm?”

“...goodnight to you, too.”

Slade put his head to the back of the wall and closed his eyes.

He did manage to sleep, despite the pain and uncomfortable position. And to his surprise, he didn’t dream at all.

Chapter End Notes

Such a mushy chapter............heheheheh.......even though I love slow-build romance I get so embarrassed when I write it. But I gotta write what I wanna read, or else I'll never read what I wanna read! :3

The days just seem to be slipping by faster and faster. I'm still trying to manage a work-life balance - work has really intensified, leaving me exhausted by the time I get home, with no mindset or energy for writing, and then the guilt starts to set in, because I've set myself goals and I'm not reaching them. My Suicide Squad fic is...okay to post as-is, but I feel like it's just 'okay'. I wanted to add a whole other chunk to it and it just wasn't coming out right, and now I feel all stressed and pressed for time. Even though these are deadlines I've set for myself. I think I need to be a bit kinder to myself - I know I'm working hard, and it does me no good to exhaust myself even further. I'm still acclimatising to an increased workload, and personal obligations. So I just...need to breathe for a bit. I'll do good by myself for this fic, then the SS one, then the LOT one, and in between I'll work out more solid ideas for this story's sequel (got a general plot and some scene ideas already!). And in between all that, I'm writing my own story - so really, I'm putting a lot of work on myself! And it's a lot to do, but it's all stuff I WANT to do, so I just need to both pace and push myself. Delicate balance.

There are just three more chapters (technically two and an epilogue) after this chapter...hope you guys enjoy! And if you did, please consider leaving a comment - especially coming towards the end, it's really nice to hear how people feel. See you all in a few days! :-)
Looking back, Oliver wasn’t sure how they did it. It was its own form of hell, watching and waiting to see if Yao succumbed to his injuries, all with the knowledge that Slade and Lian were back in the cave, wondering why they hadn’t returned yet. Early morning passed into late afternoon and the evening drew on, darkening until the stars could be seen, whenever the clouds drifted apart. He hoped that Lian was staying calm, and that Slade’s leg was doing all right; he hoped they hadn’t left the cave. Finally, he couldn’t wait any longer.

“Shado,” he said, softly. She didn’t respond from where she sat next to her father; she had hardly moved throughout the day. But whenever Oliver had sat next to her, she’d leaned into him, and let him take her hand. So he moved to her again, gently touching her shoulder.

“Shado, we have to move,” he said. “I’m sorry, but we need to go now.”

She inhaled, shakily, but uncrossed her legs and pressed her hand down on her father’s shoulder. Yao groaned, but opened his eyes, face contorting with pain and resignation. He spoke a few hoarse words and Shado fed him some herbs before she returned the pouch to Yao’s trunk and locked it securely. Oliver went to take it from her, to sling it on his back, but she shook her head sharply and took it herself, tightening the strap with determination.

“We’ll go now,” she said, voice tired and hushed, and her face stiffened as she watched her father struggled to get on his elbows. But they had tied the bandages as tightly as they could, and Shado had given him as much herbal painkillers as she dared. The only thing that would save him would be to get him to the airstrip as quickly as possible, while he was both rested after a day and half a night, and freshly medicated. This they did, in time Oliver couldn’t recall later; just tense green darkness, filled with darting shadows and the crackling noises of animals and potential enemies.

They found cover by the airstrip easy enough - the same spot that they had agreed as a rendezvous the last night and about a hundred years ago. Once Yao was settled - as gently as they could make the ground with torn bracken and grass and Oliver's folded flak - Shado remedicated him with more herbs, gently rubbing circles into her father's temples. The bandage, to their enormous relief, was still white when it was checked again; his wound hadn't reopened despite the strenuous walk. Oliver placed a comforting hand on Shado's shoulder, smiling tiredly down at her. At least they didn't have to worry about any mercenaries - the rest should be down by the camp already. Speaking of...

"I'm going to go scout," Oliver murmured, putting his hands, palms out, at chest level when Shado immediately turned to him with a wide-eyed, worried look.

"I won't go too close," he reassured her. "I just want to see if there are any mercenaries around. I'll come back here and then head to the others."

"You're sure you can find your way?" asked Shado, also keeping her voice low. Oliver threw her a
"Follow the coast until I hit a big-ass tree," he said, happy to see a faint smile flicker across Shado's face. "I'll be back in five."

"Take these!" said Shado quickly, and she dug around in her pack and pulled out a small pair of collapsible binoculars. She tossed them over and he caught them easily, tipping them to his temple as a kind of cheeky salute. They shared a grin, and then he turned to head towards the camp.

He was actually quite proud at how quiet and alert he was being; it may have only been a short time, but Slade had really hammered in his lessons well. Oliver hoped the other man was doing all right - and that Lian wasn't worrying too hard - and that Fyers' hadn't woken up - and that Yao would pull through -

He shook his head. Slade had already told him that concentrating on his surroundings required a calm inner mind, so he breathed in and out, trying to even out his emotions as he approached the treeline that edged the remains of the camp and the airstrip. He stopped, well-hidden in the overgrowth and thick trees, when he thought he saw movement; the binoculars had been a good call.

There were mercenaries walking along the airstrip. Oliver's guts turned to ice, and he watched them - no more than ten left - mill around the airstrip. Then he heard it; softer than a normal plane, but definitely some kind of engine. Like it appeared out of nowhere, a small black plane - really, really hi-tech, like it was out of a movie or something - circled the airfield and desiccated camp once. It landed then, as soft as a feather made of steel, and began to cool down, the hatch at the back opening to reveal a team of about twenty soldiers, wearing only black clothing and carrying extremely heavily artillery. Oliver had to bite his tongue; were these more mercenaries? More back up?

The apparent leader greeted the mercenaries; his face was mostly covered, but neither seemed to be overly worried about the other. A short - and apparently friendly - conversation followed, with the mercenaries relaxing more as every minute passed. But Oliver was mostly watching the new arrivals, who didn't take their hands off their guns, and weren't moving at all. He turned his attention to the two men speaking; the man in black seemed to get annoyed, shaking his head, and the head mercenary became visibly angry, jabbing his finger at the other man and wildly gesticulating in the opposite direction.

The man in black turned away, putting a fist in the air. And his men opened fire on the remains of the mercenaries, killing all of them.

Oliver stared and stared, trying to understand. Friend or foe, friend or foe? If they were friend they why were they laughing with mercenaries? If they were foe, why did they kill the others?

Sudden clarity came when the soldiers pulled out a bag from inside the plane. One of them began handing out visibility vests - even with the distance and the bad light, Oliver could read the writing: A.S.I.S. RESCUE. But they clearly weren't part of their normal uniform. And they were all carrying serious guns, not rescue equipment like medkits, blankets, stretchers - anything except exactly what was strapped to their bodies.

These were enemies. They were initially friendly with the mercenaries because they needed info - then when it was clear the mercenaries were useless, they killed them. Now they were hunting out Oliver and the others, pretending to be friendly - like they had with the mercenaries - and then they'd open fire. No witnesses. Pretending to be ASIS. Hi-tech gear - expensive - knew their location -

Fyers' employers. Hadn't he said he was being monitored? Slade's message had never gotten through. Slade's message had never gotten through.
Oliver tried to breath. He tried. But the world was closing in on him and suddenly the open air had walls that were coming down, down, down. How were they going to get through this? How were they going to -

Wait.

Oliver pressed the binoculars against his eyes, hoping against hope he wasn't seeing things. The soldiers were breaking up in formations of four and all heading in the same direction - the opposite direction of where Shado and Yao were hiding, of the great tree where Slade and Lian waited. Maybe they were taking a roundabout way back to the fuselage, maybe the mercenaries had given them bad info, but they were going out and searching for Oliver and the others. They were a couple of hours early, after all; maybe they were just trying to get ahead of themselves.

Hope reared its glorious head inside Oliver's chest. They didn't have much time. An hour, less than that? He had to move, he had to move now. Shado was exactly where he'd left her, and she wasn't happy when he told her what he'd seen.

"I can get my father closer," she said. "Did you see the overhanging closer to the airstrip? Meet us there."

"Yao's box -" he started.

"I can carry it - there's no time to argue, Oliver," she interrupted. "Get to the others. Go. Go!"

Oliver left them; he ran, as quickly and as quietly and as carefully as he could, following the coastline, back towards the great tree, heart in his chest, pounding with anticipation, anger, fear - but most of all, savage determination.

They had left the plane wide open. And Oliver had a plan.

~~~

"Look at you."

Lian huffed a breath of laughter and shook her head, turning slightly from the organised pile of supplies she'd been spending the last few hours on. Both she and Slade had woken in the early hours of the afternoon, and aside from a short reprieve for ablutions, had remained down in the cave, waiting for any sign of the others. They couldn't train, exercise, or even sleep, so Lian had taken to the supplies instead, organising and reorganising while occasionally haranguing Slade to sleep. It was nerves, she knew, and a total lack of anything better to do. Naturally, of course, the moment she'd decided she was finished and happy with her sorting, was the same moment that Slade decided to rouse himself and try to tease her.

They hadn't quite talked about the previous night, and that gentle kiss. But Lian had woken with a clear head and a calm stomach, and was riding the high of nearly being home. So things were going well, surprisingly well, aside from the unavoidable fact that the others had yet to come back – a fact neither of them could do anything about, besides sit tight and wait. That, and Slade’s smartass–ery.

"I'm going to ignore that," she said. "Instead, I'm going to be a good person and ask if you need anything to eat or drink."

"Nah," he replied, shifting himself with a wince. She went over to him, standing close by, but he shook his head and gave her a sharp grin.

"I'm fine," he told her. She tried to convey as best she could how unimpressed she was by his
bravado, but he didn't seem to be getting the message, so she told him straight out instead.

"Yeah, right," she said, flatly. "Last night you had a bullet dug out of your leg."

He grimaced. "I know, I was there," he groused, rubbing one shoulder against the rock. "Anyway, that's not what I meant."

She hovered, but there wasn't much else she could do – the supplies really had been sorted to death – and with a bit of a chill slipping down the tunnel from outside the blankets were looking more comfortable by the minute. So she slid to the ground next to him, pulling a blanket over her shins and fingerling the edge. "Hm. All right."

He shoved her slightly with his shoulder. "Hey. Don't be like that."

"Like what?"

"I don't need looking after." He paused. "I mean, yeah, medically. But you don't need to take care of me. I'm a grown man, and I've been through much worse, I promise you that. This –" He waved a hand at his leg –"Isn't gonna kill me."

Lian just hummed noncommittally. She went back and forth in her head – his shoulder was right there, should she put her head on it? Could she? Was it too affectionate, or – then she shook herself chastisingly and pulled her blanket up around her shoulders. She wasn't a damn teenager, for heaven's sake, and with that thought she took the plunge and put her head on his shoulder. He stiffened imperceptibly, and she moved away immediately, cheeks growing hot with embarrassment.

"No – no, it's fine," he said hurriedly. "I was just trying to stay still. Go back."

She couldn't help it – she snorted at herself, one hand going to her face. When she glanced at Slade through her fingers she saw him staring at her, confused. But she hardly knew how to explain herself – where did she begin? With how stupid and nervous – but good nervous – she felt?

"It’s just –" She waved a hand in the air –"This is crazy, right? All of this. And what’s – whatever the hell it is that we’re doing. It’s just…crazy, right?"

Slade grinned wolfishly, humour glinting in his eyes. “Darlin’, you’re asking the wrong man.”

His eyes flicked down to her mouth, which decided to immediately dry. She waited for fear, for nausea, for discomfort of any kind. Hell, she even waited for the fact that she could taste how bad her breath smelled to come crashing in, but it never came. She ached, instead, in a way she hadn’t felt in months and months, and her heart crashed around in her chest. Best of all, he didn’t move. Not an inch, not a millimetre. His gaze wandered around her face, his own breathing quickening, his tongue – oh god – flicked out to wet his lips, but always his eyes returned back to hers, holding them, asking.

“What’cha lookin’ at, Worth?” he asked, voice low and gravelly.

“You,” she replied, breathless, and leaned in, gratified to see his pulse jump once in his neck as his eyes widened and he quickly leaned in again, all stubble and brown eyes and pink mouth and –

– the cave opening clattered with the hurried and ungainly entrance of, as it happened to be, Oliver. Because of course. Of course they’d return at that exact moment, after literally an entire day and evening of not showing up. She honestly could have punched him at that moment, especially when his harried look turned to shock – then comprehension – then, malicious, smug delight.
"Kid..." Slade growled, like a bear; she'd never heard him so threatening.

"Well, think of it this way," said Oliver, smirking and thoroughly unrepentant. "At least you both know you're on the same page."

Lian sighed – more of a frustrated groan – and looked behind him, into the dark, winding tunnel that led out into the surface. There was no sign of Yao or Shado following, which immediately put her on edge.

"Where are the others?" she asked. Her certainty that there must have been a reasonable explanation plummeted like a rock when Oliver's face darkened with seriousness, as though a light switch had flicked off behind his eyes.

"We need to go," said Oliver urgently.

"What happened, kid?" Slade demanded, struggling to stand up. Lian put her hand on his arm, trying to get him to stay down, at least until they figured out what was going on.

"There were two mercenaries at the cave," Oliver replied, stepping forward. He caught sight Fyers' lying in the back and his eyes narrowed, face twisting. "They shot Yao."

"What?!" It was Slade who had shouted; Lian's hands had gone to her mouth as it gasped with shock, but she couldn't speak otherwise. Fear, which had been absent for so many peaceful hours, returned with sickening force.

"Is he okay?" she managed, speaking through her fingers. The worry assaulted her from every angle; her chest, her stomach, her eyes. "What about Shado?"

"Shado's fine," said Oliver, his face somewhat clearing. "She managed to get the bullet out and cauterise the wound. But she says he's got internal bleeding and we need to go, like now, straight away."

"I'll be fine, kid," said Slade. Lian didn't try to stop him as he began to inch his way up a root. "We've got the transport coming –" He cut off at the sight of Oliver's face.

"No," said Oliver. "That's why we need to leave. The transport is a trap."

Silence, disbelieving, horrified silence rang out. Lian shook her head, trying to understand the words, but no meaning could be found. There was nothing about that sentence that made sense. It couldn't be. Who was there left to try and stop them – who was there left to want them dead? They stopped Fyers, they stopped the mercenaries, they were supposed to be going home.

"What the hell are you talking about, kid?" asked Slade, low and dangerous. He was frozen, half–draped over a large root, and in other circumstances he might have looked ridiculous. But somehow now he looked like a predator, ready to pound and tear apart whoever was unfortunate enough to get in his way. Oliver could only shake his head, clearly frustrated.

"We went to the landing strip," he said, voice nearly trembling with suppressed anger – and fear. “The plan was that we’d get Yao there as soon as possible and hide them from any mercenaries that might still be around – then I’d come back and get you, and we’d wait for the transport. But soon after we got there, a plane arrived."

“And?” growled Slade.

“And they were acting all buddy-buddy with the mercenaries!” snapped Oliver. “I saw them! The
mercenaries were just walking around and they received the plane. They were all friendly and laughing, then the leader of the new group ordered all the mercenaries to be shot. Now they’re searching the island – they’re looking for us. They don’t want any survivors! They don’t want anybody to know about this island!"

“But who are they?” said Lian. “Oliver, did you see any insignia, hear their voices?”

Oliver shook his head. “They were all in black. I couldn’t pick up any accent in particular. But it was a small plane, definitely not the kind used for rescuing civilians. It’s basically a jet. And it’s totally in black as well.”

“Did you see a reg number?” asked Slade, and made an angry noise when Oliver shook his head again. “Dammit. Dammit!”

“Look, we don’t have time to get upset, all right!” said Oliver. “We need to go now. They’re looking for us and it’s only pure chance that they’re searching in the opposite direction first. I ran here as quickly as I could, and if we hurry we might just make it.”

“Make it where?” said Slade, fury rising. “We’re trapped like damn rats in a –”

“We’re gonna steal their plane,” interrupted Oliver. “As far as I can tell they left it unguarded. We can take it.”

“They left their plane unguarded?” exclaimed Lian, in pure disbelief. “That has to be a trap.”

“If it is, it’s a pretty obvious one,” said Slade. “And even if it is, we can take whoever’s guarding it.”

“What if there’s a sniper?” Lian protested.

“There isn’t,” said Oliver immediately. “None of them have sniper rifles – and no boxes, either, so nothing that could be pulled apart and put back together. Just ordinary guns and knives.”

“Well done, kid,” said Slade approvingly, finally managing to struggle to his feet. His face greyed and he leaned heavily against the wall, but he made no complaint. “That’s a good eye you’ve developed there.”

Oliver preened, but seriousness came down quickly. “They’ve already been gone a while,” he said. “It’s getting darker now. We need to go while there’s still an opening to steal the plane and fly it out before it’s too late. Slade, you can fly a plane?”

“Yeah – it might be a different model, but I’ve had training,” replied Slade. Oliver nodded.

“Good, I can be your co-pilot then,” he said, and grinned at the looks on their faces. “I’m rich, remember? I can sail a boat, fly a plane, and drive a race car.”

“This is all well and good,” said Lian, and how she hated to be the bearer of bad news. “But we’re all forgetting the elephant in the room.”

And she pointed to the farthest corner of the room, where Fyers lay unresponsive. They stared at him silently for a few minutes before Oliver cursed, harshly. They couldn’t take him with them – Oliver would need to focus his strength on helping Slade walk, and Lian would carry the bags – but neither could they just…leave him in a cave, to die of starvation. After a moment, Slade closed his eyes and growled deeply, fumbling for his sidearm. Lian gasped and grabbed his hand, getting a fierce glare in return.
"Slade, no," she said. "We can't just –"

"We sure as hell can," he snapped. "Let me go, Lian."

"I want him dead, yes," she said, not letting go of his hand. "I'm not ashamed to say it, and I'm not guilty about it. But he's unconscious, his head wound is only getting worse –"

"Exactly!" he exclaimed. "So what's the problem? There's no difference between leaving him here to die of exposure and cutting his throat right now. Would you feel better if the starvation killed him? Because he is going to die, Lian!"

"Don't you think there's a line we shouldn't cross?" she asked. "He's tied up, unconscious, and of absolutely no threat. There's a difference between executing someone and killing for defense, and it just feels –"

She cut off when she heard a thick, wet sound, and Slade sucked in a sharp breath. Dread filled her stomach, rising up into her throat, and she turned, slowly, to where Fyers had been lying.

Oliver was kneeling over the man. Young, proud, brave Oliver, too good for this place, too kind. Alien darkness had come over his face, blending with determination and a hint of apology when he caught eyes with Lian and pulled his knife free from the base of Fyers' skull with a sickly sharp noise.

"We don't have time," he said, quietly, wiping his blade on Fyers' cooling body. "We need to go, now."

"Oliver –" said Lian, horrified.

"We couldn't have brought him with us," he interrupted, standing to move closer to them. "He was a dead man the second we laid eyes on him. And I'm not afraid to kill someone, Lian, I'm not. Killing Fyers doesn't make me the same as him."

"It doesn't make you better, either, Oliver," she said.

"So? What does it matter? He hurt you!" Oliver burst out. Lian stopped, shocked, and he pressed on.

"D'you think I'm stupid, Lian? Come on, I'm not blind," he said, shoulders slumping. "I know that something happened to you, and I know that he's a part of it – he hurt me too. I…I don't know what exactly he did to you – and you don't have to tell me – but I'll put together the pieces eventually. Killing him isn't the same thing as just...assassinating somebody. I'm sorry, but it's not. His death means others are safe from him. It means justice for everyone he's hurt."

A chill came over Lian. She funnelled that out through her expression, her eyes, her voice, watching him hesitate when he saw it.

"You don't tell me when I've gotten my justice, Oliver," she said. Slade gripped her hand briefly, drawing her attention away, the ice melting under his weary expression. There was hardness behind his eyes, though, something that spoke of lessons long since learned in blood and fire.

"I know you want us to retain our humanity, Lian, and that's admirable," he said, letting her go and accepting Oliver's help to stand away from the wall. The glancing expression of regard that passed over his face when he looked at the younger man didn't go unnoticed by either Oliver or Lian; her stomach flipped, the dread swimming around like a snake under water. Slade looked down at her and she stood abruptly, going for the supply packs she'd prepared.
"There are dirty things we need to do to survive," he continued. "Bad choices we need to make, bad things we have to do. Clean options are rare."

"You wanted him dead, too," added Oliver quietly. Lian spun around, lips pressed together.

"I just want to know that you get the difference," she said, voice shaking. "I want you to know the difference between just cutting someone's throat and killing to survive. I want to know that you don't see death as the only viable option just because it's the easiest one. Because I don't want to look over my shoulder one day and see a couple of strangers I can't trust with my soul. Do you get that? Oliver?"

"...yes," he replied. His boyishness had returned, and his shoulders were slumped, eyes cowed and turned to the ground. She looked to Slade too, and he held her gaze, nodding seriously.

"Sometimes the end justifies the means, I know this," she said to him, quietly. "I just don't ever want that to become the excuse. Understand?"

"Yes, Lian," he replied. His eyes held steady with hers, and she knew he was making her a promise. So she nodded, and collected the packs.

"All right," she said. "Let's get moving."

Chapter End Notes

Slept for most of the day today, and tried to write a bit of my other stories but I seem to be hitting a block. I'll keep pushing through it though - I like writing and I like creating things. I just need to press on. I'm just - so - tired! Think I'll go to bed soon. Hope everyone's weekend is going well.

If you enjoyed the chapter, please consider leaving a comment, they mean a lot. We're nearly at the end of the first part of our journey now......stay tuned! :-)

Later on, Slade wouldn't remember much about his journey to the rendezvous point - it was filled with bad light and piercing pain, exhaustion and nausea. Oliver at first just lent him an arm, but by the time they reached Yao and Shado the kid was almost fully carrying him, with Lian on the other side trying to make up for his failing injured leg. He'd been shot before, he knew he'd been shot before, but somehow this wound stung worse than all of the others combined. He'd never realised before, but even with the agony the other bullets had caused, he'd still had some kind of treatment for it - adrenaline, or painkillers, or even blissful unconsciousness until he'd woken up in a hospital, drugged to the gills. The only positive he could pull from the situation was that he hadn't been poisoned - that, at least, would have been very obvious, very quickly.

Still, it slowed them down, although thankfully not by much. Oliver seemed to have endless energy, the proximity to their ticket home lighting him up inside like a bush fire. He didn't seem to care about his sweat-drenched hair or aching lungs, simply focussing on putting one foot in front of the other as well as keeping an eye out for possible enemies. Lian was the same, with her two rucksacks and tightly-drawn face, both arms straining to keep Slade upright, yanking him up by his sword belts occasionally when he began to veer too much to one side. He'd never been happier to see Yao's face than when they finally reached the pair, even with Yao nearly unconscious with pain and Shado just as fraught with worry and determination as Lian. They all greeted each other in near silence, the tension racketing up a few notches once they'd settled in beneath the cover. Lian tried to get him to sit but he shook his head sharply, leaning up against a tree trunk - if he sat down now he'd never get back up.

"All right," he said, keeping his voice in an undertone so that it wouldn't carry too far. "Who's fucking ready to go home?"

This got a few smiles at least - hell, at this point they'd be ready to smile at anything. Shado blinked suddenly, looking behind them, frowning slightly with confusion.

"Wait – where's Fyers?" she asked, but Slade just shook his head sharply and she subsided without further questions - she was a quick one, that was for sure. Her question didn’t even so much as make Oliver blink; if anything, the kid became more grim and serious, his face almost unrecognisable as he drew himself up, straightening his spine.

"All right, kid," said Slade slowly, side-eyeing the younger man. "What've we got?"

Oliver handed him over the binoculars, speaking as Slade examined the airstrip.

“Here’s the plan,” Oliver whispered. “It’s dark now. The – whoever the hell they are – will be using lights and calling out friendly things, so we’ll know straight away where they are. It’s still way too
early for our rendezvous, so they shouldn’t be expecting us. We get on that plane as quickly and as quietly as we can, and we get the hell out of here.”

Slade looked as hard as he could, trying to find any sliver of an indication that there was someone hiding out or standing watch - a flash of metal, a shadow that didn't quite look right - but couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. He lowered the binoculars and looked to Oliver.

"That's the whole plan?" he asked. "Run for it?"

Oliver nodded. "I counted them when they came out - there's twenty guys and they all left."

"None returned, as far as I could tell," interjected Shado. "And a plane that size - even I can tell that it would only fit two to pilot, at most."

"So even if there are people still on board, we can easily beat them," finished Oliver. He hesitated in the face of Slade's reticence, but rallied. "Look, we don't have much of a choice, do we? It's now or never."

"They're not likely to have booby-trapped their own planes, Slade," said Lian in an undertone, and he had to admit the truth of that. It was time to bite the bullet - so to speak. Oliver was right - they had to make a run of it. At least as plans went, it was nice, simple, and quick.

"All right," he said. "Oliver, you go with Yao and Shado - carry him if you have to. Lian, give me a hand. We'll go now. No sense in waiting around."

They arranged themselves as best they could - there was a brief spat with Yao's box, which Shado predictably won, and in which Yao ended up half-draped over Oliver, both of them white-faced and grim-mouthed - and Slade eyed their route, leaning heavily on a steady Lian. One hand had snaked around his back, tightening imperceptibly as she grew more certain that he wasn't about to elbow her, and another hand braced itself on his chest, fingers splaying across his solar plexus. He could feel the bones of her palm press firmly against the remains of his flak, and could feel the steel certainty in her muscles that if he fell or tripped, she'd catch him. Good thing, too - his leg was on fire with pain.

"We good?" he asked, and waited for everyone to nod with determination. Four pale faces waited for his orders, so he gave them, straightening up as he spoke.

"We head straight for the plane," he said. "Make as little noise as possible, run as quickly as you can. Watch your feet. If you break your leg in a pothole, just keep moving. Oliver, you and I go direct to the console - the rest of you, get as deep as you can within the plane and don't make any noise. We want to give ourselves as much of a chance as possible between getting onto the plane and getting it off the ground."

They nodded again, and, with a round of deep breaths, started running.

It was less than ideal. They must have made a ridiculous group - hardly running, mostly hobbling - as they made their way down the slope and across the dirt road that constituted the runway. It seemed like an impossible distance, but they whittled it down bit by bit; wheezing from their efforts, sweating with pain on Slade and Yao's parts, Lian and Shado half-dragging their men towards their salvation. The open gangway of the small plane was like a black hole; darkness in the middle of darkness, pulling them closer and closer. It was even open in their direction; not providence exactly, Slade knew, as the direction would have provided the occupants cover from the mercenaries on the ground as they dismounted. Still, it was in their luck all the same. And if it wasn't lucky - he had his gun. Hell, they all had guns. It was any soldier within whose luck had run out.
Completely out of breath and a stitch piercing his side, Slade made it to the gangway two steps ahead of Oliver, who was looking like a red-faced, sweating Atlas with Yao on his back. Shado was helping to brace Yao, her expression drawn tight with fear masquerading as anger. The clang of their feet seemed to echo and echo in the clear night air, even though he knew it couldn't have been all that loud. Still, he was glad when they were all inside, deep within the plane and out of sight of anyone who might have been watching outside.

Lian brought him straight to the flight console, settling him down into one of the chairs; all the controls were shiny and fresh, the plane clearly a new model. Still, they hadn't changed overmuch from the last time Slade had flown, and he could recognise enough to get it off the ground and far, far away from this thrice-damned island. Before Lian could head back to the others, Slade grabbed her arm and pulled her close, murmuring into her ear.

"Make sure you strap down well," he said. "And the others, too. All right?"

She nodded, turning her head slightly to leave a kiss on his temple before she left. And now that he was completely fucking invincible, Slade turned his entire focus to the console, only pausing to return a nod to Oliver as the kid sat down in the co-pilot's chair and strapped in.

"Ready, kid?" he asked. Oliver, still red-faced and breathless with his efforts, simply nodded again.

"Think you can work this console, kid?" asked Slade. Oliver just snorted and rolled his eyes, securing his seatbelt. There was a knock behind them and Lian poked her head in.

"We're ready back here," she said. "How do we close the gangway?"

"I'll do that," Slade told her. "Just get strapped in."

She disappeared and Slade got started on the plane. The newness made everything even easier; there was barely a second in between flicking the switches and the plane coming to life; smooth as anything, Slade got it to pull up the gangway and roll into speed down the runway. If anybody was noticing the take-off, it was already too late - gravity tugged at the metal bird, but within a few minutes it was in the air and travelling away from the island.

Slade waited for - for anything. For alarm bells to start screaming, for the plane to explode, for a rocket to come out of nowhere and blast them straight to hell. Anything.

But nothing happened. They rose like silk caught in a sea wind, whipping up into the air, streaking up into the clouds and across the ocean, leaving the island behind like the bad memory it was.

Slade jolted when Oliver started suddenly in his seat, unbuckling quickly with a bitten-off swear and diving under the console. Slade didn't want to take his eyes off the controls, but he managed to bark at the kid, annoyed by the hard pound of his heart in his chest.

"What the hell are you doing down there?!!"

"Just a sec -" Oliver emerged, triumphantly grinning as he pulled himself back up to his seat. "Ha. Got it."

"Got what?"

"I disabled their GPS tracker for the plane," he said, now careening towards smugness. "They're not gonna know where we're headed."

Slade stared. Then he started to laugh - the edge of hysteria seemed to dim Oliver's own proud smile.
somewhat, edging it towards concern, but Slade couldn't stop. He tried, though, when Lian and Shado came into the cockpit, worriedly staring at him.

"The kid came in use!" Slade managed, just laughing harder at Oliver's offended expression.

"Excuse you," said Oliver, huffing. "I disabled the tracker, I think that's pretty cool!"

Shado lit up like a Christmas tree. "Go to Hong Kong," she urged. "I have friends there, and it's close."

"They'll be expecting us to go somewhere close like Hong Kong," protested Lian. "Especially since you're the only one with nearby friends."

"We don't have much of a choice in that, though," Oliver pointed out. "Yao needs medical attention as soon as possible."

"My friends can help us disappear," insisted Shado. "They can get rid of the plane, too. They have connections upon connections - and we need to get somewhere safe as soon as possible."

"It's not like we can head to the US," Slade agreed, already plotting a course.

"But I can still call my family!" Oliver exclaimed excitedly, half-bouncing in the chair. "They'll send over all kinds of doctors! And provide protection!"

Slade grimaced; he glanced at Lian, who was wearing an almost identical expression. Sighing, he geared himself up to deliver the bad news.

"Kid..." he said. Oliver, sensing the dampered atmosphere, stilled in his seat, staring warily at the others. Slade ploughed ahead. "Look, kid, you can't call your family."

Oliver jolted, eyes wide and filled with hurt. "What do you mean?" he asked, sitting stiffly upright in his chair. "Why not? Why can't I call my mom, my sister - we're going home!"

Slade had to turn back to the console, half from needing to plug in rough coordinates, and half because he didn't want to face the genuine despair and panic emanating from the younger man. Of course, the kid was a kid - no matter how much he'd grown, how capable he'd proven himself, he still had something to go home to, something to lose. He wasn't like Slade, or Lian, whose families were either estranged or lost. He wasn't even like Shado, who also had family; she had gone without a father her entire life, and wouldn't experience the same kind of aching desire for reconnection the way Oliver would. No, the kid had been thinking the whole time of getting back to Starling City - to his mother, his sister, his friends - without actually considering the logistics of their situation.

"Oliver," Lian began gently, and Slade was relieved she'd broken the silence. Patience and delicacy weren't traditionally his forte. "Whoever Fyers was working for, they know we were on the island. They might not know who we are, but if they do, and we go back home straight away, they might target your family."

"Not if we make a big media event of it!" Oliver burst out. "I'll be all over the papers! We can tell everyone what happened!"

"Right - tell them that you've killed a half-dozen men?" interjected Slade. Oliver stopped short, jolting back, his mouth snapping shut.

"We need to lie low," continued Lian, after a few moments and a pointed look at Slade. "Let them think we've disappeared. Then, when it's safe, we can take you back to Starling."
"But how long is safe?" said Oliver. He looked so lost, like a dog left on the side of the road, wondering where home was.

"We won't know until it happens," said Lian. She settled next to Oliver, putting an arm around his shoulders and pulling him in for a hug; it was strongly reminiscent of a mother trying to cuddle a child freshly woken from a nightmare, an image that tugged deep inside Slade's memory, soft and warm like the light from a low burning candle. Oliver's wobbling lower lip, stiff jaw, and hunched shoulders made him seem all the more childish, especially with Lian resting a cheek on top of the matted dirty-blonde hair and gently rubbing a hand in circles on his shoulder.

"I'm sorry, Oliver," she murmured. "But we don't know who the employer is. We don't know what Fyers may have told them - our identities, our faces, how many of us there are. The first thing they'll do is try and remove us from the picture, and your family will get caught up in that. But if we wait a little while, then we can get you home when it's safe."

"But we don't know when that is," said Oliver desperately. But his face turned into Lian's shoulder, so tired, eyes closing against tears. "What difference will it make to wait?"

"We can distance the time between the island and your appearance, so it'll look like you were stranded somewhere else," said Slade. "One of the other islands, or you were picked up by a fishing boat and landed in - I don't know, Indonesia, Vietnam -"

"Cambodia..." said Lian, frowning. She looked as though she'd gotten caught in a thought, so Slade left her at it and lapsed into silence when it became clear that Oliver wasn't going to respond. There was mostly silence for a while, with Shado moving to the back and tending to Yao as best she could, and Oliver eventually half-falling asleep against Lian, who was still as a stone perched on the edge of the co-pilot's chair. She came out of her daydream eventually, though, and smiled faintly when she caught eyes with Slade.

"What's up?" he asked quietly. Their course was set and they'd reach it fairly soon, thanks to the speed of the plane. Everything was going smoothly, and for once, Slade's paranoia was leaving him alone. The only problem with that was that the adrenaline was starting to filter out of his system, allowing his leg to pulse in full force, the pain travelling up and down his body incessantly. But pain wasn't going to kill him, he knew, so he tried to focus on Lian instead. She just shook her head in response to his question, speaking after a few moments.

"It's nothing. At least - I think it's nothing. It's not something I feel like dealing with anyway, not right now. Don't worry about it."

Slade just let his eyebrows rise slowly, making her aware of his scepticism, before finally allowing himself to get comfortable in his chair. His leg was a bitch, but it wasn't like he expected life to be perfect.

"How long until we reach Hong Kong?" asked Lian, voice barely audible, hushed as it was against the backdrop of machinery and external air pressure.

"Less than thirty minutes," Slade replied, just as low. He glanced at Oliver, his supposed co-pilot, but aside from blinking slowly the kid seemed unresponsive. Lost in being upset, like a child. It got a little flare of irritation from Slade, but instead of simmering until it boiled, the annoyance just faded away. The kid had made it through the island, proving his mettle more than once; if he wanted to pout on his way to freedom because he couldn't call his mom straight away, well - there was time to do that now. It wasn't like it was something Slade could empathise with, so he just left it lie. No sense digging at a hornet's nest.
Lian made a small noise of disbelief, inhaling deeply and turning her face towards the windshield.

"We're really doing it," she murmured, looking back at Slade. Her lips curled up, softly lit up by the lemon-yellow lights of the console. He huffed a laugh, unwilling to count his chickens before they hatched, but he also couldn't deny that they really were getting away with it. Oliver had disabled GPS, so even if the soldiers had managed to rally a quick response within the few minutes opening available to bring down the plane, now they were flying too quick to catch or track. He'd find the closest clear spot in Hong Kong to land the thing, get Shado to contact her friends, possibly hotwire a truck, and...disappear. It was a system he'd used and perfected over countless missions. If they hadn't been caught by now, they weren't going to be caught at all.

He'd hold off celebrating, though, at least until he had a proper shower. That would be the true sign of freedom. Hot water, soap, and a shave.

He looked over when Lian let out a soft laugh; it was him she was looking at, so obviously he must have been making some kind of strange face as he was thinking. He snorted, shaking his head at her. Oliver chose that moment to moodily shrug out of Lian's arms, scowling at them both. The effect was somewhat ruined by his red-rimmed eyes and voice thick with the effort of holding back tears.

"I don't get what's so funny," he said shortly.

Slade just growled back at him. "There's no part of this situation that's ideal, kid," he said. "We just need to pull through a bit longer. Think you can manage that?"

"Think about cheeseburgers, Oliver," Shado called from the back. "I'll bring you to Hong Kong's finest McDonalds." It must have been a reference to something, because the kid just snorted, and cracked a weak smile, turning away to the front of the plane and curling his too-large body up into the chair as best he could.

"No thanks – smoky bacon sauce or bust," he called back. Shado echoed his snort and fell back to silence; Slade didn't have to turn his head to know that she was still hovering over Yao.

"Kid, you gonna co-pilot with me or not?" said Slade, glancing over. Lian was still perched on the side of the kid's chair, a pensive look on her face as she contemplated the dark night sky speeding past through the windshield. Oliver, thankfully, dropped his sullen mood and straightened himself, becoming serious with concentration as he properly strapped himself into the chair and focussed on the console in front of him. Lian slipped off the armrest, coming to stand in the space between the chairs, her hands lightly gripping each of their chairs.

"We should see the lights of the city soon," she said. "Light pollution in Hong Kong is supposed to be insane."

"You can land the plane anywhere, Slade," Shado called out. "I can contact my friends from the first phone we find."

"Gotcha," he replied. For good measure, he tried to up the speed a little bit; he could feel it instantly work, the pressure altering within the cabin by a few slight but tangible degrees. "You should sit down, strap yourself in," he added, glancing up at Lian. But her eyes were fixed on the horizon, growing wider and wider, mouth parting slightly and joy filtering across her face. Slade found himself caught in her expression, watching each muscle shift, each brush of her eyelashes as they blinked, the movement of her throat as she swallowed. She looked down at him, suddenly, and he jumped a little, like he'd been caught doing something he shouldn't have. But all she did was quirk a smile at him, leaning over and putting a hand on his shoulder for a quick squeeze.
"The lights," she said quietly, resting her head against his for a brief moment before she stood up. Her hand moved up from his shoulder and came to rest on the back of his neck, and in between one blink and the next, he could see the lights; the faintest glow, growing stronger and stronger with each mile the plane ate up. The bird was faster than even he had anticipated, if they were reaching Hong Kong waters so soon - but he wasn't going to look a gift horse in the mouth, not when they could still use all the luck they could get.

"Hot meals, Worth," he said quietly. She snorted.

"Hot vegetarian meals," she said. "I think I'd be sick if I had to eat rabbit one more time."

Slade grunted. "Good point. Steak. Rare, by design instead of just being under-cooked. And a warm bed. And a shower." He might spend a month in a hot shower, just getting rid of all the filth that clung to him - all the dirt, the sweat, the old blood and matted hair. A shave, some soap, clean sheets -

His throat went dry when Lian's thumb began to rub hard and insistently against the back of his neck. He tried to tell himself that she wouldn't, couldn't have known what that would do to him - especially when she could see that he was trying to fly their getaway plane - but he stopped being so sure when she lowered her mouth close to his ear and just exhaled, gently.

"Lian," he said, as threateningly as he could manage, which was pretty damn threatening. She just chuckled, and Oliver made a noise of disgust.

"Oh god," Oliver said. "It's like watching my parents make out."

"We are not making out - are you twelve -" Slade stopped himself, taking a deep breath through his nose and trying to re-centre himself. "Right. Lian, cut that shit out -" He squashed the disappointment when she actually did remove her hand with the annoyance that he felt any disappointment in the first place. "Oliver, focus on the console. I'll need your back up when it comes to landing this thing. Lian -!"

She'd ruffled the back of his head, hard, titling his head forward a little with the strength of it.

"Mouthwash," was all she said, before she disappeared to the back of the plane, hopefully to strap herself in. He shook his head, trying to dismiss the lingering sensation, and put his eyes back to the thin glow of light across the water, growing stronger with every second. Hong Kong. Freedom. Safety.

"Home," he murmured, so quiet that the noise of the plane muffled his words. Oliver didn't react, just kept his own head turned forward - but his face began to glow just like Lian's had, and he glanced at Slade, beaming like a little sun.

"We're here!" he said excitedly, and Slade threw him a crooked grin.

"Keep a cool head, kid, we're not out of the water yet," he said, but the words had no effect on Oliver's enthusiasm. The kid practically bounced in his seat, leaning forward as though his movements could encourage the plane to go even faster. The edges of the city were blurry but visible; the light pollution might have been awful for the residents, but for Slade it was the most gloriously beautiful thing he'd ever seen. Inside the warm hum of the plane, with the kid beside him and Lian behind, safe and sound, he felt something approaching peace rise up into his chest. It came from deep inside his belly, soaking into his spine and pressing up against his rib cage - his blood, trembling in his veins; his heart, beating too hard; his lungs, almost afraid to breathe.
His team had made it - he had made it. It was happening, it was really happening. At last, at last -

They were going home.

Chapter End Notes

Just an epilogue left....and then we'll see! Please leave a comment if you enjoyed the chapter :-) Sorry for the late update, yesterday was Valentine's and I had a really lovely dinner with the hubby :-) Hope you guys treated yourselves to something nice yesterday. Epilogue will be posted on Saturday! Stay tuned and see you in a few days! :-)
Agent Michaels watched the motley group of survivors gallop towards the open plane and had to admit something to herself - she was impressed. It didn't happen too often anymore, not since she'd starting working with ARGUS and under Amanda Waller, but she found herself admiring the sheer perseverance the group maintained against such drastically overwhelming odds. Not only that, but there was an extra person the brief hadn't anticipated; the woman, Lillian Worth, who had been recorded as dead in the files they'd been monitoring and decrypting from Fyers' personal cache. If it was the same woman, then Agent Michaels felt like buying her a drink. The girl, Shado, as well. It was hard enough being a female American soldier in the Middle East, let alone a civilian in the midst of merciless mercenaries, with no hope of rescue.

But a commiserating drinking session wasn't exactly what Agent Waller had in mind for either the women or the men. Agent Michaels reached for her radio, engaging the connection and speaking quietly. Her team were fanned around her, silent as the grave, crouched within the darkness and watching the group clamber into the plane and start the take off.

"Marks have entered the bird, copy," she said, waiting a moment for Agent Waller to reply. She did so in less than a second, obviously monitoring the situation through their body cameras and mikes.

"Good job, Agent Michaels," said the other woman. "Your pick up will be in less than an hour. Sit tight."

Agent Michaels sucked in a breath to ask a question, but quickly thought better of it - if Agent Waller wanted her to know something, then she'd already know it.

"Yes, ma'am," she finished instead. She nearly put her radio away when a slight sound came from the other end; like a huff of breath, almost a chuckle. But it couldn't be, because Amanda Waller never laughed, unless it was standing over a fallen enemy, shoes sticky with blood and eyes burning with the certainty triumph always lent.

"You want to know why I didn't just get you to bring them in, don't you?" asked Agent Waller. Agent Michaels didn't reply; it was a rhetorical question, and she'd long since gotten used to Waller's ways.

"I'm curious," continued Agent Waller, without missing a beat. She clearly hadn't been expecting any response from Agent Michaels. "This group is composed of mostly civilians. A former homemaker who worked part time as a chef. A young, wealthy playboy. A pre-med student, albeit one with criminal ties. The only ones who should have survived were the former political prisoner and the ASIS agent, both of whom are trained survivalists. And yet..."
"And yet they all survived," finished Agent Michaels.

"Do you want to know the most interesting part, Lyla?" said Agent Waller. Agent Michaels stiffened; her first name was rarely used, if ever. And especially not on covert missions.

"...what?" she asked, cautiously.

"Out of the whole group, the only ones who were injured were the ones with the most experience," she said. "Do you know what that implies to me?"

"Sentiment," replied Agent Michaels, well used to this thought process, at least.

"Exactly. Which means?"

"There's no better kind of soldier than a soldier with something to fight for."

"Good. And what are you fighting for, Lyla?"

The question pulled her up straight. She knew what she was fighting for - peace, the safety of her country and the people that lived in it. But somehow those didn't seem like the kinds of answers that Amanda Waller was looking for. When the other woman spoke again, piercing through Lyla's silence, it was with a sort of smug purr, like a teacher patronising a favoured student.

"You can't properly answer because deep down you know you're not a soldier anymore," she said. "You're an agent of ARGUS. And you know what that means."

"Complete the objective," said Lyla immediately.

"Good. The group will land in Hong Kong. Do not engage with them directly, but I want eyes 24/7, daily reports - what they eat, how long they sleep for, who they talk to. Their injuries, their rate of recovery, everything. They're going to need some breathing room after their experiences on the island, and I'm going to give it to them. And when I'm ready...I'll take it away again."

"...ma'am?" If that was the case, then really - why not just pull them in straight away? Let them recover in an ARGUS facility, debrief them personally. But Agent Waller was already answering the unspoken question, each word sharp as a knife.

"They ruined a two year operation, Agent Michaels. You want to know what I'm going to do with them?"

Agent Michaels swallowed, watching as the bird flew sharply into the distance, heading - as Agent Waller predicted - towards Hong Kong, towards the freedom they thought they were getting. Unbeknownst to them, of course, they were just heading deeper and deeper into the tiger pit, with little hope of ever getting out again. Agent Waller let a moment of silence fall before speaking, answering her own question, voice low with dark, simmering anger.

"They'll enjoy their halcyon days," she said. "And once they've healed up, I'm going to put them to work. There's a doctor on a cargo ship due in the area in a couple of months. We'll see how they fare then."

Agent Waller cut off the radio connection in her usual manner - abruptly, whenever it was she'd decided the conversation was over - and Agent Michaels and her team settled in for the hopefully short wait for their transport to arrive. Her insides stewed with what Agent Waller had just revealed to her, and she peered up into the dark night sky, searching. The plane had of course long since disappeared; it was a top-class piece of modern machinery, and it would take the escapees straight to
Hong Kong in no time at all. Once she got back to base, she'd engage her contacts within the city, who would in turn engage their contacts and keep a constant, watchful eye on the new arrivals. By sunrise, she'd know where they were, what treatment they were getting for what injuries, whether they were sleeping, the colour of their socks and if they were allergic to gluten. For her own peace of mind, she'd make sure they received full treatment, good food, helpful staff in whatever house they ended up hiding in, and - for their sake - encouragement to keep training. What Agent Waller had planned for them was, if anything, much, much worse than the island they'd been stranded on for so long.

At that thought, she actually felt a stab of pity for the group - the ASIS loose cannon, the spoiled partyboy, the former homemaker, the pre-med gang member, the long-term political prisoner. ARGUS had previously sent in four separate agents to infiltrate the Amazo, and they'd only ever managed to recover the bodies of two. Whoever Ivo might have been before he left his wife to suffer alone with her illness, he was certainly deep within insane doctor territory now. She couldn't help but hope that the group fully recovered whatever injuries they'd surely suffered, and that they didn't spend their last few weeks of downtime just watching tv and eating junk food.

Because once Amanda Waller decided their time was up...they'd be heading straight back into the arms of hell.

To Be Continued...

Chapter End Notes

Time seems to have really flown by since I started writing this fic. It's been an absolute journey, that's for sure! I want to thank everyone who's come along with me for the ride, and let you know that it's not over yet! I'm already working on the sequel. :-) Yes, I know, you've heard these empty promises before, but I really HAVE started working on the sequel! I don't like leaving things unfinished, so there IS going to be another story.

I started writing this story because there was a dearth of things I wanted to read. I was actually surprised by how few stories explored Slade, and those that did exist I quickly exhausted. So, like I said at the start of this fic, I just started to write one day, and this story kinda fell out. It's my first long-term completed work of fiction, and I'm very proud that I've achieved something novel-length. I know that it probably wasn't everything to all people, but I am experiencing a sense of accomplishment. I'm also feeling a sense of trepidation, because now I'm attempting to replicate the process.

It won't be easy, I know. I don't have the opportunity to write huge amounts during the day anymore now that I have a proper job. The evening times are usually when I'm most tired, and the weekends, more often than not, are packed. But I want to be a writer. I want to be dedicated. So my resolution this year is to finish what I started. And this story is only just getting started.

I've hit roadblocks. The Suicide Squad fic is complete, but it's missing a bit of a spark somehow, so I'm not happy with it and I'm not sure out to fix it (even though some scenes are really good, haha!). My Legends of Tomorrow fic is just over 14.5k in, and has no signs of stopping (it was only meant to be 10k at most!!!!). So the release schedule is messed up for those. I'm aiming for late March for at least one of them. The sequel to AtDT will be released this year, but there's no set month.
If you're interested in hearing more about my stories, feel free to follow me on my tumblr (kako-pumpkin) and ask away. You can subscribe to me on Ao3 as well. :-)

Well, that's about it. If you enjoyed the story, let me know in a comment! Thank you very much for joining me, and I hope to see you later. Bye for now! I'll be back. :-) :-) :-)

- Kako Pumpkin

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!