THE POWER OF WISHFUL THINKING

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THE POWER OF WISHFUL THINKING

by hanktalkin

Summary

A Homestuck/Overwatch fusion, specifically a Trollstuck crossover centering around the Aspirant Aleksa Zaryan and her friends. Puts most of the heroes in a blood color based on their in game hex code. Not chronological.

Chapter 1

“Aspirant.”

“…Legislacerator.” You wipe the blood at the corner of your mouth and cast your gaze up up up, up at they whom has become your pursuer. Their figure is familiar yet not, the triangular rods of their horns now molted into deadly points, eyes glossed over into featureless auqa; they are everything you should have feared yet not cautious enough to prevent.

Shaking, you push the body of an assassin off you, and rise to face your runation. The corpse lands among its fellows with a soft *splap*.

As you rise, you realize you’re taller than them. Of course, of course you are, but knowing and seeing are different things, and witnessing the most illustvicious of the Empress’s lawkeepers shrink in front of you sits wrongly in your vision. Still. It won’t take much. The assassins’ victory is a painfully present work in progress; the tip of a spear has broken off in your ribcage, penetrating shallowly enough that there is still a decent chunk of jagged metal big enough to put a fist around. Poison flows through your veins, the malignant coating capable of killing seadwellers within minutes, carefully crafted to swell lungs and paralyze muscles. For Royalty? Without reaching a medicalizer, you have hours. All someone needs to do is slow you down.

“It appears you have done well for yourself,” you comment. True, if relative.

“I, unfortunately, cannot say the same for you.” They look at you, maddeningly, intoxicatingly impassive, just as they have always been. “Your struggle against Her has always been ill-fated, Aspirant.”

The wind blows on this alien planet you can’t bother to remember the name of.

“I did warn you.”

They did. They don’t sound happy to be right. For the ages that have passed between you, you have never seen them happy at all—if there was ever someone who could understand the troll before you, it is not you.

You grunt. You have no more words to give. If there is a chance, you’re going to fight, and it won’t stop until there is another body lying on the dry dirt of a place too far from home.

Knowing your luck, it will be more than one.

You wrap your fingers around the spear and pull.

-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

SC: You have left me.
SC: Again.
SC: ~relax sc~
SC: ~youre a big girl~
SC: ~you can take care of your~elf for a little while without my constant and dazzling ~upervi~ion~
SC: It iz continuingly perplexing to me that you continue to invite me to theze eventz, only to ditch me mere minutez after arriving.
SC: ~i didnt ditch you~
SC: ~i just went to meet up with ~ome friend~~
SC: Ah yez.
SC: The mysteriouz friend group.
SC: No doubt you will imprezz them today with your ztudiouz knowledge of galactic cyber zecurity.
SC: The topic of which is zo mind numbingly interezting to anyone who iz not you.
SC: Why, again, doez meeting them preclude abandoning me at a hacking convention I care nothing about?
SC: ~aw zar~
SC: ~if you were jealou~, you ~hould have just ~aid so };)~
SC: Iz that what all thiz iz?
SC: Zome roundabout attempt at black flirting?
SC: ~ha no~
SC: ~you just need to get out of the aquarium every once in a while~
SC: ~im nothing if not altrui~tic~
SC: I zee.
SC: Of course.
SC: And your habitual ditching is also a symptom of blatant zelflezznezz?
SC: ~nah~
SC: ~i just cant be seen with you lol~
SC: ~like i said ~i~ you are one big girl~
SC: ~im already struggling to keep up with normal clown~ ~ize wise~
SC: ~i ~tart walking the floor with you, my personal e~teem globe~ are going to ~hrivel up right there~
SC: ~it aint ea~y being a wiggler in a murder cannibal world }:(~
SC: Even when attempting to illicit zympathy, you ztill manage to blood prezzure to rize.
SC: ~ha yeah~
SC: ~im good at that~
SC: Zo what do you zuggest I do in this horrid place while waiting for you bring back the keyz to your zcuttlebuggy?
SC: ~i told you zar~
SC: ~relax~
SC: ~vi~it ~ome of the booth~~
SC: ~maybe watch a panel or two~
SC: ~in the meantime the three of u~ are just going ~traight chillin~
SC: ~!~o unclench your nook and enjoy the con!~
SC: You cannot zeriously expect to rub arm nubz with theze
SC: Zombra you better not have muted me.

SC: ZOMBRA.
SC: Guh.
SC: Why muzt theze thingz happen zpecially to me.

-- striationedCyberian [SC] ceased trolling sucroseCranium [SC] --

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-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling lynxSeventeen [LS]--

SC: There iz no moral way to juztify handing over the care of wigglerz to zelf-zufficient, non-dizcerning automatonz.
SC: Removing jadebloodz' will make worze the flawz within the breeding zyztem, not get rid of them. Also, it iz repugnant. Your argument haz so many holez it iz like you are becoming zome zort of breathing ztraw man.
SC: Alzo
SC: The idea that dronez are not only a necezzary evil but the natural troll zociety goez beyond propaganda into zheer ztupidity.
SC: Alzo
SC: Your claim that dronez can never be hacked? Blatant falsehoodz. I have KNOWN trollz who have done zo, and one must bury their head in the zand to have never heard ZOMETHING from a non-imperial newz zource. How iz it even pozzible for one perzon to hold zo much claptrap inzide their head?
SC: Zimply
SC: Inconceivable.
LS: Are you qui7e finished.
SC: …
SC: I zuppose I am. For now.
LS: I must say, of a11 the fan mai1 I have ever received, 7his is by far 7he most fascina7ing.
SC: Thiz is not fan mail. I am not a fan.
LS: Qui7e.
LS: And ye7 you have a reasonab1e fami1iari7y with my common 7heses. S7range how 7ha7 has come 7o pass.
SC: I zaw your panel at the hackathon. The entire hour was zo abzurd I could not believe any would buy your oinkbeaztwash.
LS: You'd be surprised.
LS: But it is my guess 7hat someone as readi1y disp1aying of such menta1 acumen as yourse1f was not ac7ua11y at my pane1 of 7heir own vo1i7ion. More 1ike1y you were 1ooking for 7he Gratuitous C1eaver Murder Rumb1e that was happening a few rooms down.
LS: Or if you 7ruly do fancy yourself a scho1ar of cyber-po1i7ics, maybe 1 am no7 7he one who needs to 1if7 7heir head above 7he sand.
LS: Or waves as i7 were.
LS: Bu7 no ma77er.
LS: I do be1ieve we missed 7he par7 of 7he conversa7ion where you 7old me your name.
SC: …
SC: I am Zarya.

LS: And I am 1ynx.
LS: Now Zarya, do 7ell me how you go7 a hold of my Skorge hand1e?
SC: Wait, what waz thiz about wavez?
SC: I did not zay I was a zeadweller.
LS: Oh, my mis7ake. 7hat smug sense of superiori7y must have been waf7ing 7hrough my window ins7ead of radia7ing off 7he fuchsia 7ext of an inf1a7ed Empress Role-p1ayer.
SC: I
SC: Never mind.
SC: Zombra gave it to me. Zhe knew who you were when I azked.
LS: Ah, I see.
LS: Should I be honored 7hat you were so enamored wi7h me you hand 7o ask for my number?
SC: You zhould not.
LS: So you know: my pane1 was ac7ua11y an hour and a ha1f.
LS: Perhaps 7he ha1f an hour you missed migh7 have con7ained some7hing 7ha7 swayed you 7o my side?
SC: I highly doubt that. And you ztill have not rezponded to my original point.
LS: Ah. Yes as much as I would 1ove to si7 around so you can des7roy me with fac7s and 1ogic, my 1eaff1uidke771e has jus7 started to whis71e. I'd 1ove reconvene af7er 1unch, if that sui7s your schedu1e?
SC: What?
SC: No
LS: Exce11ent! See you in a few.

-- lynxSeventeen [LS] ceased trolling striationedCyberian [SC]--

SC: You cannot weazel your way out of thiz, I demand you
SC: You
SC: Baztard.

-- striationedCyberian [SC] ceased trolling lynxSeventeen [LS]--

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-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

SC: ~so~
SC: ~did ~wimming with the ~icke~t ~quad in we~t alternia live up to all the hype?
SC: Conzidering there waz abzolutely no hype, I zuppose it did.
SC: ~haha ~c you wild~
SC: ~but im right right~
SC: ~theyre ~uper cool~
SC: I will allow they are an interezting bunch.
SC: Very ztrong.

SC: Undeniably dangerouz.
SC: ~!yeah!~
SC: ~it wa~ rough getting them to get along but i managed~
SC: ~were a real ~quad now~
SC: ~team talon at your ~ervice~
SC: Team Talon? Iz that not the name of the zmuggling crew?
SC: ~!you got it!~
SC: ~their leader ha~ been alive for ~weep~~
SC: ~he~ thi~ bronzeblood and everyone want~ him dead becau~e but they ju~t cant catch him~
SC: ~were going to join up with him once we get off planet~
SC: I
SC: Zee.
SC: ~what~
SC: Nothing. I zaid, “I zee.”
SC: ~there wa~ an awful long pau~e in between tho~e eye~ and ~ea~~
SC: My luzuz was azking me zomething.
SC: ~hmmm okayyyy~
SC: ~you know you can never hide anything from me zarya~
SC: ~i got a no~e for ~eeeeeecret~~
SC: Yez I am very aware. However, there iz nothing to hide, I was merely diztracted.
SC: ~haha ok };)~
SC: ~!oh!~
SC: ~i forgot to a~k while you were top~ide did you ever me~~age that tealblood you were hatecru~hing on~
SC: Uhg
SC: Don’t remind me.
SC: ~lol why~
SC: They are the zingle most irritating being I have ever had the dizpleazure of meeting. Every word they type iz a parade of aquamarine zeazicknezz acrozz my vision.
SC: They have beaten the word zmugnezz zo thoroughly they could wear it az a coat.
SC: In the pazt three weekz they have managed to dodge every one of my counterpointz
SC: Refuzed to honor even the zimplezt of debating customz
SC: And overall have been a massive twit.
SC: ~ooooh ~omeboys in haaatteee~
SC: Ztop that. I am nothing of the zort.
SC: Not to mention they keep zprinkling in azinine crypticismz purely because they know it annoyz me.
SC: ~haha what~
SC: ~like what~
SC: Like
SC: I do not know. It iz hard to explain.
SC: Like about how we have now “tied our fatez permanently”, and that we’ve “begun our forward zpiral towardz our inevitable concluzion”
SC: And other zuch nonzenze.
SC: ~wow i know i ju~t used the word wild but wild~
SC: ~i never would have expected that~ what theyd be like in real life~
SC: ~but i gue~~ weird riddle whi~pering isnt a per~onality trait youd pick up from

~omeone~ work~
SC: Do they actually have zome rezume of hacking zkillz or iz everything they ~ay just ignorant cyber-politicz?
SC: ~lol are you kidding~
SC: ~theyre probably the bigge~t expert on remote drone reprogramming~
SC: ~wrote the book on it~
SC: ~literally~
SC: ~getting a copy is ~uper illegal btw~
SC: ~but yeah theyre probably the be~t hacker in the world~
SC: ~~ave for your~ truly of cour~e };)~
SC: You can’t be zeriouz.
SC: ~i can when i want to be~
SC: But everything they zay is zo pro Empress.
SC: And I mean EVERYTHING.
SC: They are the embodiment of everything wrong with the apathetic upper classes
SC: ~uh~
SC: ~yeah~
SC: ~that~ kind of the point lol~
SC: ~its like ~atire or some ~hit~
SC: But
SC: No, it iz too concize. And not funny in the zlightezt.
SC: ~but that~ the big joke tho~
SC: ~~~pau~e for honk~~~
SC: ~it~ like really obviou~ if you just li~ten~
SC: ~and ignore all of the “prai~e the empire” and “for the glory of troll~” ~hit~
SC: ~all that~ left is a really pretty picture of why them kid~ are all fucked up my dude~
SC: ~rever~e mad lib~~
SC: ~where you gotta blot out the garbage and read in between~
SC: I don’t believe it.
SC: ~believe it ~i~ter~
SC: ~why do you think all their follower~ are lowblood~~
SC: ~let me gue~~~
SC: ~you were the only ~eadweller in that crowd werent you~
SC: ~or I gue~~ royalty pretending to be a ~eadweller~
SC: I
SC: Perhapz I waz. I do not recall.
SC: ~yes you doooo~
SC: ~i know when youre lying to me zar~
SC: Zhut up.
SC: I need
SC: Zome time to think on this.
SC: ~okay lol~
SC: ~lmk when youre done with your cri~i~~
SC: ~we can play culled by daylight when youre done~
SC: Goodbye Zombra.

-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling lynxSeventeen [LS]--

SC: I cannot believe you lead me on thiz ridiculouz charade or az long az you did.
SC: Was thiz really ZUCH a good way to zpend your time that you let it perzizt for four perigeez?
LS: Despi7e 7he evidence 7o 7he con7rary, I do some7imes need con7ex7.
LS: Wha7 are you on abou7 Zaryan.
SC: You are a revolutionary.
SC: All of you, everything you have ever written.
LS: How dare you. I happen 7o 1ove and adore our 7yrannica1 over1ord.
SC: Zee
SC: There it iz again.
SC: And you let me prattle on at you for agez when the whole time you agreed with everything I was zaying.
LS: I wou1dn’7 say every7hing.
SC: So why do thiz? What waz all thiz for?
LS: Zarya, I unders7and i7 must be difficu17 for you 7o imagine 7ha7 peop1e have mo7iva7ions 7ha7 don’7 revo1ve en7ire1y around you.
LS: If 7he purrbeas7 is en7ire1y ou7 of 7he bag a7 this poin7, and you have somehow go77en pas7 a11 my in7rica7e1y 1ayered sub7ex7 7ha7 mus7 have 7aken you eons 7o crack, 7hen I wi11 admi7 7ha7 a7 firs7 I simp1y 7hough7 you were a ra7her poor imperia1 spy.
SC: A what
LS: 7hen, I rea1ized 7ha7 even a poor spy wou1dn’7 be 7ha7 obvious.
LS: And 7hen I began 7o wonder if maybe you were ac7ua11y a *fan7as7ic* spy and were ac7ing so b1a7an71y obvious 7o make me be1ieve you were a poor spy in order 7o 1u11 me in7o a fa1se sense of securi7y.
LS: However, wha7 u17ima7e1y convinced me of your au7hen7ici7y is 7ha7 a spy of any reasonab1e in7e11igence wou1dn’7 bo7her pes7ering me for weeks on end, when 7hey cou1d jus7 simp1y send a few drones af7er me if 7hey had even a passing suspicion.
SC: You believed ME to be the imperial lout?
LS: Of course.
LS: Why wou1d a 7rue revo1u7ionary be so b1a7an7 7o a comp1e7e s7ranger if no7 for 7he purposes of ou7ward appearances?
LS: Gran7ed, 7his 1ine of 1ogic does no7 accoun7 for 7he fac7 7ha7 some 7ro11s jus7 7ha7 s7upid.
LS: How you have managed 7o survive 7his 1ong wi7hou7 being cu11ed is u77er1y unfa7homab1e 7o me.
SC: I am not stupid.
LS: No?
LS: You con7ac7ed someone who you be1ieved 7o be a 1oya1 boo71icker pure1y 7o shou7 a7 7hem abou7 how wrong 7hey were.
SC: But you were being zo

SC: Uhg, thiz iz ridiculouz.
SC: You ztill continued your charade even after you knew I waz no zpy.
LS: Hm?
LS: Oh yes.
LS: 7hat is because I 7hough7 i7 was very funny.
SC: UHG. You are IMPOZZIBLE.
SC: I cannot believe I wazted all thiz time on zomeone zo utterly up their own nook they could not honeztly zit down and dizcuzz the future of our galaxy.
LS: Hm, now 7here's a sen7ence.
LS: Bu7 I'm no7 7he on1y one who's been hiding 7heir 7rue mo7iva7ions behind 1ayers of de1ibera7e omission.
LS: Heiress.
SC: …
LS: I'm sure 7ha7 is a7 1eas7 fac7ors par7ia11y in7o why you have no7 been execu7ed ye7 for your ra7her b1a7an7 7reason.
LS: Her Imperia1 Condescension does 1ike 7o wai7 un7i1 her sis7ers are a bi7 7a11er before forking 7hem.
SC: You give her too much credit.
SC: I am off the grid currently. Zombra has made sure I cannot be tracked through Zkorge.
SC: Otherwize I would have been killed a long time ago.
LS: Your version of "off 7he grid" has pu7 you ridicu1ous1y ou7 of 7ouch wi7h 7he res7 of A17ernia.
LS: And rea1i7y.
SC: It iz hardly my fault I do not get on land much.
LS: Ah yes. 7he sea. She'11 never 7hink 7o 1ook for you 7here.
SC: Thiz iz entirely irrelevant. Regardlezz of my zuppozed obligation to challenge Her, I dezpize the conditionz on thiz godforzaken planet az much az anyone.
LS: Ye7 you are 7he one 7ro11 on 7he p1ane7 wi7h 7he power 7o s7op i7.
SC: I can't.
SC: If I begin to take an active role on the planet, the Condezce will take notice. After then, it iz a countdown until zhe decidez I am too troublezome.
LS: So you are biding your 7ime 7hen? P1anning some g1orious over7hrow?
LS: Is 7ha7 why you spend your nigh7s si77ing in your hive and picking figh7s on 7he in7erne7 whi1e hiding behind your more compe7en7 friends?
SC: You do not to get to judge me. At leazt I am preparing for the future.
SC: Not writing pointlezz zatirical bookz undercut with zelf-gratifying amountz of nihilizm.
LS: I was no7 judging.
LS: In fac7, I ac7ua11y empa7hize wi7h your si7ua7ion.
SC: But you just zaid
LS: I7 was mere1y an observa7ion.
LS: In ac7ua1i7y, I can see no c1ear mora1 ou7s for you.
LS: Begin 7aking an ac7ive ro1e in p1ane7ary affairs, be77ering 7he 1ives of 7ro11s in 7he 1ower cas7es: 7he Condesce sees you as a weak and unwor7hy cha11enger, and f1ies back 7o cu11 you.
LS: Begin ru1ing wi7h an iron fis7: 7he Condesce sees you as s7rong and a 7hrea7 7o her 7hrone, and f1ies back 7o cu11 you.
LS: In 1igh7 of 7he a17erna7ives, I unders7and choosing se1f-preserva7ion.
SC: I

SC: I am not zo zure. It zeemz zo pointlezz when you put it like that.
LS: 7ha7 is wha7 choosing no7 7o choose of7en is.
LS: I7 does no7 seem 1ike you've had much oppor7uni7y for se1f-ref1ec7ion in your 1i771e 1ife of ado1escen7 rebe11ion. Which isn'7 unsurprising; forming ones opinions isn'7 as easy we firs7 7hink.
LS: If you wou1d 1ike, I wou1d be happy 7o do away wi7h 7he fa1se personas and obscured b1ood 7o begin our discussion again.
LS: Despi7e previous impressions, I am ac7ua11y qui7e happy 7o exchange views on ma77ers I consider impor7an7 7o 7he co11ec7ive 7ro11 experience.
SC: Why do I feel by zaying, I am opening up myzelf to yet more znappyz inzultz about my failure az an heirezz?
LS: Oh mos7 assured1y.
SC: Uhg.
SC: Well.
SC: At least it won't be any worze.

-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

SC: ~yo~
SC: ~you back from vacay yet~
SC: Yez. I arrived home thiz morning.
SC: ~!awe~ome!~
SC: ~how wa~ ~outh alternia~
SC: It waz
SC: Pleazant.
SC: The seaz there are much warmer.
SC: ~and I bet the company is too };)~
SC: Make no miztake
SC: Lynx Zeventeen iz ztill a dreadful and inzufferable prick.
SC: Regardlezz if we are the zame page ideologically or not, they are far too high up on their hoofbeazt to engage in anything outzide of a profezzional relationzhip.
SC: ~yeah right~
SC: ~if I had known all it would take to get you thi~ pitched I would have been making ~oapbox ~peeche~ ~weep~ ago~
SC: No you wouldn't have.
SC: You dole out blackroom flirtationz like zweet grubz on Harfezt.
SC: ~yowch haha~
SC: I mean it.
SC: The pozzibility of you actually acquiring an actual kizmeziz would require zuch mental gymnazticz I could easily become a competitor in the trolyipics if I considered the notion.
SC: ~lol little har~h don't you think~
SC: ~i mean no need to kick a girl while ~he's down~
SC: At thiz point I am ztarting to believe you are incapable of legitimate hatred.
SC: Zufferer knowz everything you've plied me with haz been az empty az the rezt of your relationzhipz.
SC: ~…~

SC: Anyway.
SC: Lynx and I have been dizcuzzing the philozophical purpoze of an Emprezz in troll zociety. Whether a collective governing body of zuch vaztly different troll caztez could function without a central authority keeping them in line.
SC: Or if there had to be zome zort of compromize between thoze two optionz, would that central authority necezzarily have to be the Emprezz?
SC: I zuppozed without the conztant cycle of inheritance and azcenzion, the fuchzia bloodz would ztart to pile up
SC: But it iz interezting to think about.
SC: Zombra are you ztill there?
SC: ~hm~
SC: ~uh yeah I gue~~~
SC: ~actually I ju~t remembered I gotta church thing I gotta go to~
SC: Oh. Well have fun at that. I can continue to fill you in on my “vacay” once you return.
SC: ~right~
SC: ~ok~
SC: ~bye~

-- sucroseCranium [SC] ceased trolling striationedCyberian [SC] --

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-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling lynxSeventeen [LS]--

SC: I waz conzidering how to handle prozpect of planetary defenze, zhould thingz come down to it, and I think I have an idea.
SC: It involvez the commandeering of zeveral key Z grade battle cruizerz, but iz theoretically pozzible.
SC: Of courze, the ideal zcenario involvez mozt fighting occurring far away from Alternia
SC: But the zcenario will be good to plan for.
LS: I do love when you start a conversation right in the middle. Very efficient.
SC: I am zeriouz.
SC: If we are to zucceed, we will need to have a practical plan, rather than juzt an ideological one.
LS: No7hing wrong wi7h considering one’s fu7ure, I suppose.
SC: Exac71y.
LS: …
SC: But yez the cruizerz. Getting them iz a problem to be zolved, but zo long az they deterer precizion mizzile attackz, they would more than pay for the trouble.
SC: Zhe would never totally wipe the planet, not zo long az the mother grubz remain here.
LS: You seem awfu11y gung ho a11 of a sudden. Has 7he big squid fina11y prodded your 7hinkpan a 1i771e 7oo hard?
SC: No?
SC: I have told you, my pzychic connection with Gl'bgolyb iz zubztantially weaker than that of the Condezce.
SC: My luzuz talkz more to me than zhe ever doez.

SC: You are being unuzually cagey about thiz, even for you.
LS: Am I?
SC: Do you fear the fighting?
SC: If zo you needn't worry. If we develop our alliez well, you needn't fight if you do not want to. With any luck I won't be the only zturdy highblood on our zide.
SC: All I waz trying to zay iz that we need to begin confronting the fact that our time iz limited. That unlezz we are prepared, we all may die before getting off planet, let alone before enacting any real change.
SC: It iz time we zettled on a three-zweep plan. Gathering planetary and interplanetary alliez, conzidering how bezt to avoid pzychic influence.
SC: I wizh to ztart looking at adultz who may be zympathetic to our cauze.
SC: Or at leazt, are anti-Emprezz.
SC: What say you? Have you thought any about the immediate future?
LS: 7ha7 a11 sounds very appea1ing.
LS: I wou1d 1ove 7o join you, if no7 for 7he fac7 7ha7 in 7hree sweeps I wi11 mos7 1ike1y be 7oo busy s7udying for my bar 7o par7icipa7e in open anarchy.
SC: Wh
SC: What?
LS: 7he 1egis1acera7or exams are qui7e grue1ing. Oh 7rue 7ha7 a more bureaucra7ic posi7ion wou1d be more sui7ed 7o my ski11s, bu7 I be1ieve 7he pres7ige and essen7ia1i7y of 1egis1acera7ora7ing brings wi7h i7 much 1ower cu11ing ra7es.
SC: A legislacerator would
SC: Oh
SC: I zee. That waz a joke.
SC: Well haha to another one of your ztupid attemptz to incur my annoyance. Well done I zuppoze
SC: But I really wizh you would take thiz zeriouzly.
LS: …
LS: I suppose a77emp7ing 7o hide wi7hin my own wi77icisms was no7 a wise choice.
LS: Zarya. I won'7 be joining you in your rebe11ion.
SC: What…what iz that zupposed to mean?
LS: Exac71y wha7 i7 sounds 1ike.
LS: When 7he 7ime comes I wi11 be joining 7he res7 of my fe11ow gradua7es in 7he imperia1 f1ee7.
SC: I
SC: I do not underztand? You are zubmitting to them?
SC: YOU of all people? You have written pagez, ezzayz, BOOKZ on how imperializm and military expanzion in general have deztroyed our galaxy—have cruzhed itz own citizenz under foot—and you are walking over to their zide without a fight?
LS: You are righ7.
LS: I have spen7 my who1e 1igh7 knowing some7hing was wrong.
LS: I have dedica7ed, hypo7hesized, poured over every revo1u7ionary 7ex7 7ha7 hasn'7 been des7royed in 7he sweeps since someone 1as7 7ried 7o wre7ch our co11ec7ive heads ou7 of 7he mud. I am perhaps 7he on1y surviving exper7 in 7he fie1d of socie7a1 decay, 7he res7 driven ou7 or driven down.
LS: I have seen every possibi1i7y, I have ana1yzed every choice. I have spen7 my who1e 1ife researching, 7o 7he poin7 where I can say 7his wi7h 7he upmos7 confidence:
LS: I7 is a11 poin71ess.

SC: No, no it iz not.
LS: I7 is Zarya.
LS: 7here is no s7ra7egy you can concoc7 7ha7 wi11 over7hrow a being mi11ions of sweeps in 7he making. 7here is no possib1e series of even7s where we save anyone, excep7 possib1y ourse1ves in a momen7 of doub1e suicide 7o avoid 7he ex7ensive 7or7ure we wou1d face when we were fina11y hun7ed and cap7ured.
LS: We wou1d be doomed 7he momen7 we said 7he word “freedom” a1oud.
SC: I…I do not believe thiz?
SC: All thiz time you…
LS: …
LS: I am sorry.
LS: I did no7 mean for 7ha7 7o be some sor7 of dire reve1a7ion. I7 is jus7 I spend a grea7 dea1 of effor7 7rying no7 7o appear hope1ess.
SC: Thiz iz you not being hopelezz?
LS: No, this is me not *appearing* hopeless.
SC: I ztill cannot
SC: You are no coward. I know thiz.
SC: There iz ztill a future out there for uz Lynx Zeventeen. We know thiz iz not how thingz zhould be, and it iz our duty to do zomething about it.
SC: We MUZT.
LS: Maybe you mus7.
LS: Maybe your ro1e in 7his sys7em is 7o be raised up. 7o cha11enge her.
LS: And I wish wi7h every fiber of my being 7ha7 I cou1d be1ieve you are righ7.
LS: Bu7 I know 7he way 7his ends. If I mus7 choose be7ween 1ife and dea7h, I wi11 choose 1ife.
SC: You cannot give up. I will not let you.
LS: …
LS: 7his is ge77ing qui7e heavy. Perhaps we shou1d 7ab1e 7his discussion for now? I am sure we wi11 be in a be77er p1ace wi7h a good day’s s1eep.
SC: Lynx pleaze.
LS: …

-- lynxSeventeen [LS] ceased trolling striationedCyberian [SC]--

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-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

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-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

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-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

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-- widowMaker [WM] began trolling striationedCyberian [SC]--

WM: Hello.
SC: Er
SC: Hello?
WM: Is this Aleksa Zaryan?
SC: It iz juzt Zarya. Who are you? And how did you get my handle?
WM: My name is Amelie. I am one of Sombra's friends.
SC: Ah, wait.
SC: I remember now. The zeadweller.
SC: You are the one who iz alwayz hanging around Zombra and her
WM: Moirail.
SC: Moirail.
WM: So it would seem.
SC: Jegus Christ.
SC: Every detail revealz even more of a mezz. I almozt feel bad.
WM: Mmhm.
SC: Zo why are you contacting me?
WM: Sombra has received several attempts at communication from you over the period of the past half a sweep, none of which she has reciprocated.
WM: She has prefaced these with the statement that she is "~uper bu~y", but I find that unlikely.
WM: What exactly have you been trying to tell her?
SC: Why do I get the feeling you have already znooped through her mezzagez and are merely doing thiz to tezt me?
WM: Ridiculous.
WM: I do not snoop.
SC: Hm.
SC: Dubiouz.
SC: But if you muzt know I waz looking for camaraderie. I have recently learned that a
SC: Friend
SC: Of mine, haz zome ideological differencez from me.
SC: We have tried to maintain correzpondence zince dizcovering thiz, but it iz juzt not the zame. I had hoped Zombra might offer advice.
WM: I see.
WM: Quite the woeful predicament.
WM: My curiosity is sated then.
WM: Which brings me to the reason I contacted you:
WM: You should probably frighten me. I am aware that should you choose, you could order your drones to shoot me & put my head on a bloody pike & parade it around the town square. I keep this all in mind when I tell you:
WM: Back Off.
SC: Excuze me?
WM: I do not care who you are, but if you attempt to contact Zombra again, I will zwim

down there & rip out your zpine.
SC: I…What? What is all that supposed to mean?
WM: You have been Sombra's friend for an exceedingly long time. & yet, you seem very dismissive of all she has done for you.
WM: You would certainly be dead by now if it were not for her.
WM: Perhaps the world would be better off.
SC: Now hold on
WM: I admit she is irritating. Nosy. All around insipid.
WM: But you owe her the bare minimum of appreciation. Or at least an attempt at being a worthwhile friend.
WM: So if she has decided to cut you off.
WM: Then back off. Or else.
SC: Really? That iz what thiz iz? You pin thiz on ME?
SC: Well fine then.
SC: If I am zuch a terrible friend, them zhe can go ahead and abandon me too.
SC: It iz hardly zurprizing. Zhe'z obviouzly moved on to bigger and better thingz.
WM: I cannot pretend to know what you are on about.
SC: Oh no, mizz prezident of the Zombra fan club? It iz no zecret zhe much preferz you over me.
SC: I appreciated her. Maybe I didn't zhow it well enough, but I did.
SC: But it's over.
SC: You all are running off to the ztarz together. And I will be here. Alone.
SC: Inevitability haz dictated it to be zo.
SC: Zo go take your jealouz azhen bitching zomewhere elze. I have no patience for it.
WM: Wait.
SC: What?
SC: What iz one good reazon not to cloze thiz chat window?
WM: Perhaps all of us are feeling distanced from one another.
SC: And?
WM: & it does not have to be that way.
SC: We are going zeparate wayz. Fabric torn right down the zeam. Meteorz pazzing in the zky, whatever metaphor zuitz you.
WM: People are easier to fix than clothes or rocks.
WM: For one, speaking with one another seems to help.
WM: If you would like, I could talk with Sombra.
SC: …About what?
WM: I think you can guess.
SC: Well
SC: Then why?
SC: Why would you do that for me.
SC: A moment ago you threatened to kill me.
WM: Oh like you have not heard worse.
SC: …Granted.
SC: I zuppoze…no one iz very good at thiz whole "people" thing.
WM: Not in my experience, no. Not even the ones who try to pretend to.
WM: At the end of the night, all you can do is be truthful, both with them & yourself.
SC: I
SC: Thank you Amelie.

SC: I think I
SC: I juzt realized I need to go do zomething. Now.
SC: Thank you.
WM: No trouble at all.

-- striationedCyberian [SC] ceased trolling widowMaker [WM]--

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-- striationedCyberian [SC] began trolling lynxSeventeen [LS]--

SC: Lynx there is something I must tell you.
LS: Oh.
LS: Oh dear.
SC: Pleaze do not mute me, I promize thiz iz not another one of my bullheaded attemptz to zay the right thing only to trip and fall on my zneezeport.
SC: I have juzt come to a realization and I think I need to zay it before I
SC: I do not know.
SC: Loze my nerve?
LS: If you are abou7 7o say wha7 I 7hink you are abou7 7o say…
LS: 1ook, now migh7 no7 be 7he bes7 7ime for 7his.
SC: Now might be the only time.
SC: Lynx Zeventeen you are deplorable. You everything I try not to be, with your znide remarkz, and your zmug face, and your ztaunch refuzal to ever get to the point.
SC: Ever since we met you have spent every second under my skin.
SC: Maybe you juzt think I am trying to convince you juzt becauze I need a tactician but
SC: It izn't that.
LS: 1ook if 7his were any o7her 7ime i7 wou1d be fine bu7 righ7 now a7 7his very momen7 I am begging you 7o s7op.
SC: Please Lynx
SC: What I'm trying to zay iz
LS: Zarya I'm leaving Al7ernia.
SC: Iz that
SC: Wait.
SC: What?
LS: 7omorrow. I have a11 my paperwork in order, and 7his 7ime nex7 week, I'11 begin my 7raining for a 1egis1acera7ive posi7ion.
SC: You
LS: I mean7 7o 7e11 you ear1ier bu7 7hings have been so wi7h busy ge77ing ready 7o 1eave and. I needed an en7ire ear1y 1ife record for c1earance I've been doub1e and 7rip1e checking every7hing.
LS: 7here was so do I jus7 cou1dn'7 say i7 enough in advance 7ha7 i7 wou1dn'7 come as a shock.
LS: And 7hen i7 was 7oday and I jus7. Didn'7.
LS: Bu7 I rea11y wan7ed 7o 7e11 you 7o. 7o say goodbye.
LS: And 7his is so much harder 7han i7 has 7o be a1ready.

LS: So p1ease jus7. S7op.
LS: Jus7 1e7 me say goodbye.
LS: And have 7ha7 be i7.
LS: …
LS: Goodbye.
LS: I’m sorry.

-- lynxSeventeen [LS] ceased trolling striationedCyberian [SC]--

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The spear lands on the ground with a clatter. The ringing is a herald, and it only takes long enough for the sound to disperse before you realize how monumentally bad of a decision that was. You fall down on one knee, pressing a hand against the gaping wound in your side.

Lynx looks down at you with what could only be described as pity.

You realize this is how you die. Not even the dignity of a final fight between you and your enemy turned friend turned…whatever they think of you now. Whatever made them choose to take your assignment. Whatever gravitational force kept holding you the two of you together.

“I really have made a mess of it,” you note absently.

“If anyone could have done it, it was you.” If you didn’t know any better, it would almost sound like they are trying to comfort you.

You wondering if they’ll strike you down. If they would risk getting close enough to return the favor.

“Maybe. But I did not.” You look down at the slick on your hand. Under a red and dying sun, it almost looks like melted bubblegum. “I suppose I needed you after all.”

You laugh. It’s not funny.

The wind howls louder, and there is a soft second, where both of you are breathing in tandem, where you swear you can hear it as though they were right up against you.

“I know,” they say, as clandestine as ever, “that is why I have come to join you.”

This, somehow, is the part of the dance where you slip up.

“Join?” Join you in death? Somehow, in all their melodramatics they never seemed the sort. “Gotten that tired of her have you? It didn’t take long. Did you not pick your side eight sweeps ago?”

“Yes.” Their eyebrows crinkle ever so slightly, and you are struck by the unprecedented emotion on their face. “And I have regretted it every day since.

You look at them like they’re crazy. You think they are.

There is something you don’t understand here, your mind trying to parse what is always layers and mousetraps of intricacies with this one, stuttering all over one another as you glance up in riveted shock. Yet, they reach down and offer you an arm up. Despite the hesitation, the sheer disbelief still coursing (and spilling out of) your veins, when they haul you to your feet you feel like the action is complete. Like you have finally stepped out a cycle and can begin anew.

“Lynx…” you start.

“Hush Zarya,” they say with the most dismissive of waves. “Always so much talking. Come along, it’s time we got you to a doctor.”

“I still don’t…”

They turn from you, and for a moment you swear you see shame in the downcast of their eyes. They move, practically dragging you along as the poison makes it to your veins, and for sure you think you’ve died in this moment. And, in the muddied logic of your brain as your fingers find their way through Lynx’s, you are perfectly fine with that.

Chapter 2

Years in the past

Beyond the rip current, a shoal of seadwellers play just within your line of sight, kicking sand on each other on a beach under moonlight, ignorant to you and the rest of the world. You watch them with vacant eyes, bobbing in the waves as the surf takes you wherever it wants. You feel no need to get closer. You feel no need for anything.

The attention to which you pay them could be mistaken for interest, if not for the lifeless way the image reflects off your eyes. Thinking upon your situation, you wonder if this is some sort of subconscious demand for companionship, the misaimed attempt of a repressed adolescent impulse genuinely in need of the comfort of other trolls. You don't know. Either way, it brings you places like this, watching strangers from afar as your legs churn bubbles in saltwater.

But being this far away, this removed from others, it gives you a perspective. You are able to notice what they do not; namely, the fact you are not the only voyeur on this beach.

After a moment of contemplation, you go to investigate.

You swim closer, abandoning your previous occupation and getting a better look at the troll nestled between the razored rocks at the beach's border. It's a clown, her ears pricked to the revels as yours was, but her face frozen in pure Duchenne, upper lip raised to reveal the small teeth tucked beneath. They are fangs; canines surrounded by smaller, flatter ones, but the delicate mania across her cheeks does not match that illusion of harmlessness. Her facepaint is frayed like it hasn't been removed in days, cracking around the edges, save for where the salt spray causes it to melt.

The jetty forms a canopy above the water, shelter where you can slide beneath her without being seen. You are impressed that she has managed to find purchase at all, the rocks jagged and hungry for the cut palms of anyone who dares the attempt to roost in them.

Her pupils are dilated down to mere pricks, fixated on the scene unfolding on the beach. Despite the way she has trapped your attention, you turn, watching as a violet tackles one of his companions. You do not know what holds her interest at first. Not until you see the break in form. A seadweller, the only girl, slips from the others and checks her palmhusk. There is a quiet moment, one where you cannot read her expression from this distance, but somehow you know what's about to happen before it happens. The violet girl starts to scream, drawing the attention of the others as her howls direct themselves at one boy in particular. You glance up at the clown.

Her smile has draw back more, and you can't help but marvel at her small teeth, her gill-less face, so different from your own. You've never seen a landweller so close before, near enough to study the shape of her paint; white shaped around dark eyes, like a mask, like a skull.

Back at the party, the screaming has gone to blows, wisteria spilling over white sand. They are, like you, of ocean and storm. Things will not deescalate.

“If any survive, they’ll find you,” you say.

She looks down at you, in what later you will come to realize is shock. But for now, you do not know her, and to you her unchanged smile and raised eyebrows make it look like she’s known you’ve been here all along.

“Heh,” she says, like the laugh is caught in her throat. “I doubt it. I’m very good, you know.”

She tilts her head in examination. You know how must look; chin sunk back into the water, hair floating around you like kelp, or perhaps a grim halo, only eyes visible above the surface. You are reminded of movies where the lonely seadweller drags their victims below, snatched from the shore and held under until they’ll keep company for all time. You fantasize of putting claws against her throat.

“You’re not going to tell, are you?” She grins it out.

“No,” you say.

But you have a feeling she already knew that.

She seems confident. Too confident. To you—at this point—it is unearned, dangerous, and the first time you ever feel something that could be generously described as concern.

“Why do this?” you ask. Bait swallowed.

“Why not?” She pulls on the line. “You got a better idea on how to kill some time?”

Months in the future.

“Sure you want to go with something this mainstream?” Sombra doesn’t have to raise her voice over the music, diluted as it is in the cavern of the empty dance hall. She does anyway.

“Of course.” You extend a leg out, stretching across the floor with the pad of your slipper, dragging bits of dust and land-dirt along the way. You breath in, then out, sinking into the fire of the stretch. “‘In Which the Lead Lowblood Female Is Transformed into a Longneckbird, Only to Be Unenchanted by the Empress in so That She Retains Her Troll Form By Day, Proceeds to Make a Flushed Connection With a Male of Royal Blood, Who Betrays Her at the Behest of His Kismesis’, is classic tale.”

“Yeah, I’m sure it is,” she snorts. “The most classic. So classic its title is only like, three sentences.”

“Was this not your idea to begin with?” you ask, rising from the floor and settling into a *plie*.

An attempt to get you out of your hive. Sometimes you think you spend more time on land than not.

She taps something out on her palmhusk. “Thought you’d do something a bit more out there, ya know? Like ‘Beautiful Women Representing Spring Dance Voluptuously-”

“Ballet is an art of tradition,” you interrupt. You’d rather not hear any of what she considers good theater. “People will come to see what they are familiar with.”

“You’re violet, love,” she says with all the care of a collapsing lung. She smiles, fangs parting the white paint on her lips. “People are going show up whether they’re familiar or not to see a fish dance.”

You turn, pretending the dip upstage is part of your routine. Often you think she’d do better to say less, to listen more. She wears trouble like a cloak, breeds discord until it sticks to her like bubbles on the skin.

It is this quality that irritates you; that, and the fact that, for some reason, you still stick around. In that way, you and the trouble are much the same. It bothers you, the idea that this is not a coincidence.

You resume practice with staunch indifference.

Months in the past.

She brings you to her hive.

This surprises you, of course, and you are primarily expecting to see a sea of grinning purplebloods cloaked in hoods and blood waiting for you as soon as she opens the door. Instead there are plush and pillows, screens and loose cables, all awash with that faint plum glow. She sits cross-legged on a cushion and offers you a bag of chips.

It is more modest than you would have expected—certainly for someone of her blood status—though the sheer value of tech in the room could more than make up for it.

You see no sign of a lusus. You make no mention of it.

She brings you snacks that aren’t poisoned, and the two of spend that first day as friends sitting in her respiteblock talking until the sun rises over trees. Well, she talks for the both of you. It is near impossible to get her to stop, as you will learn as time goes on. You marvel at her openness, of inviting a relative stranger into her hive and casually striking up conversation. Perhaps it is landweller thing; you have hear that the lower castes don’t try to kill each other nearly as often as your ilk. You wouldn’t know. You’ve only met the one.

When you tell her this, she laughs and laughs.

There are many things that surprise you about Sombra. You ask if hacking is not more of a goldblood hobby, and she says you'd be surprised. You ask why she lives in such a place and she says she likes her privacy. You ask—delicately—what purpose she had in inviting you here. She tells you you need a friend.

There is a stuffed toy lusus sitting against a beanbag chair. This, you also make no mention of.

Still, place is not without its stereotypes—she is obviously religious, the paintings of acclaimed minstrels staring down at you from all walls. Charts, those drawn by a madwomen, cross from screen to paper printouts to screen again, connected by fine purple wires escaped from their cables. Bottles and bottles of that horrid clown soda roll around on the floor, and your stomach lurches when you think of what's inside them. At the very least they're cancerous, poisoning the many who imbue them by the gallon with each of its chemical components. So then, you don't even think when Sombra reaches for one and your claw snaps around her wrist.

She looks at you, and for the first time since you've met she seems unsure. Her eyebrows arc high, blinking obtusely up at you as you hold her arm in a death grip. Then she laughs, a reactionary chuckle—as though you've just told some sort of wonderful joke.

She pulls her arm out of your grasp, still laughing. You stare back. If nothing else, then to not reveal you're just as surprised as she.

She twists open the bottle. You sink back into silence.

Years in the future.

It goes on like this:

She grows up. You two make friends. Life never seems half so lonely when you follow the shadow like a shadow. She has a way with people, and a way with places, able to get you both in wherever you want to go. The later you think has something do with her particular brand of chucklevoodo; some facet of her that makes eyes skip by and psionics discount.

There is always some place to go or something to do with her—never a moment where she isn't looking to sneak onto some nobility's porch and rig their awning to fall. You follow her, of course, and say very little. She winds her way through gangs and congregations, trying to find the shoes that fit. Nothing ever seems to satisfy her, and she settles down only ever long enough to buy new trinkets. She takes up scrapping. She makes friends with an heiress. A bounty ends up on her head.

Again: you follow, and say very little.

Often she bites the hand that feeds her, in that she needles you often that you are still with her despite all the mounds and heaps of reasons not to. You always have something dry to drawl

back, and she'll laugh, mocking you for your painfully blatant flushed crush. An exhased *hm* is the only response.

Sombra flirts like it is going out of fashion.

By the time you are five sweeps you know what she is to you, although somehow Sombra has retained a complete and impenetrable shield of obliviousness when it comes down to the conciliatory.

Sombra gives you plenty of opportunities, entering into half-hearted caliginous relationships whenever it strikes her fancy. The cerulean girl, the one who built little machines only for Sombra to break them, lasts the longest, and you mediate spectacularly with all those sweeps of practice under your belt. But she eventually grows bored of Sombra's empty games, sees the kismesisstude for what is and realizes it is going nowhere.

Even Sombra is not immune to childish relationship drama.

Once, as desperate as you were, you even tried to auspisticize between her and her solitary red fling. The tragedy was made even more embarrassing by the fact that Sombra still attempted to fire up black sparks that weren't there, to your continuing mortification whenever you hung around them. The rustblood boy had been more kind than Sombra deserved; you admire him for that. His patience lasted long enough for you to realize that as harshly as you may judge Sombra for turning everything into a contest of pitched throes, whatever can be said about her goes doubly true for you.

The small church dots the countryside in as much a picture of alternian tranquility as any monument to the Mirthful Messiahs can be, burying within the bloodstains, dried puddles of soda, and—for the night—you. You've felt the lethargic stares of the highbloods all through the service, and paid them exactly as much mind as you pay any other non-Sombra landweller; which is to say you pretend like you are very far away and enjoying a nice glass of wine.

It is a rare moment of silence now; a gap in-between different mistrals speaking slow and plodding drivel. None of it makes a lick of sense, but between the drinks you earlier declined to imbue, you think wordcrafting isn't the point. Your head is lifted to the ceiling, eyes closed while the congregation takes a moment of silence. Sombra has never asked you to come before tonight. It is because of this sheer idiosyncrasy that you agreed.

Without moving your head, you crack your eyes open, and glance down far enough that you can see her out the corner. Her usual facepaint is gone, replaced by a more elaborate skull design, with swirls and starbursts decorating the contours of her face. She has her head down in prayer.

It is strange to see Sombra subdued, and you wonder why this place somehow touches someone like her, a girl who seems to believe in nothing.

The silence breaks. Sombra shuffles to wakefulness, and you close your eyes and let the light cast a rainbow from stained glass onto your lids, drifting off again as another sermon begins.

In a few minutes the tension in the room will come to a head. You are not all together unaware of it, but you have no idea what *faux pas* Sombra has committed, or understand the extent of what she has done. All you know is that, intent to follow through or not, you will not abide threats made against her life.

So let's cut to the chase then, shall we?

You slam the last of the clown's to the floor, your grapplekind strangling his breath from his neck. He slumps, and you are left in the now—mercifully—empty church, dark purple running rivers to mix with the other kaleidoscope of stains. It was a close thing, this fight, for they were many and you are few, (One. Just you, Sombra stood too stark still as you tore through her brothers and sisters in a fury of tooth and claw, eyes wide and paralyzed), but it is you who stands victorious, chest heaving and ignoring the mace-fracture in your hip. Your eyes dart around for more, for other enemies that aren't they, a line of amethyst dripping from your lip.

Sombra feebly grasps the reigns on her composure, and looks around the massacred church. "Woah, haha. You can really tear shit up when you put your mind to it, can't you?"

Where, where, your brain is still asking, instincts not letting you accept that a battle is over with no consequences, no call back to the stage. You can hear her swallow from where you are. A limp arm drops from a nearby pew onto the floor.

Then, with your gills still flaring and your grapplekind tight in your hand, she takes a step toward you. Slowly, as though even she isn't sure what she's doing it, she appears in front of you and strokes a finger down your nose.

At first you stiffen, but Sombra is good, Sombra is not your enemy, and hesitantly you relax as she draws a palm down the side of your cheek. She fumbles through a few croaking *shoosh*es, as her unpracticed hands rain awkward paps on your face.

You lean into her touch. It is your body betraying you, because although the soft caresses along your cheekbones drag you down from your murder-high, it doesn't change the fact that it feels wrong. The quake in Sombra's hands reveal just how unsure she is, and after only a minute you draw back sharply.

"They were a poor influence anyway," you say, sliding your weapon back into place. You turn and walk to the sealed double-doors.

There is a brief sputter. "Ha…yeah. You're probably right."

And then she is beside you. You feel as though this is something you will not talk about again. But now she is coming after you instead of the other way around.

Years more in the future.

“How much longer?”

You sit in the tide pool below her, casting eyes up to where she’s jammed an umbrella into the rocks as to avoid the mid-morning sun. The shadow graciously falls onto the water, protecting you as well as you tread safely within the jetty. Still. The water is a bit too warm for you liking.

Sombra is decidedly more comfortable than she was the last time you two visited this barren beach. She leans out of her lounge chair and lowers her shades. “Why? Got somewhere to be?”

The two of you have known each other long enough that you can follow this dance with your eyes closed. She twists the baton, and you follow the motion.

“Having prior arrangements has nothing to do with preparing oneself mentally for an unpleasant situation.” You splash slightly in the stagnant water. “Also, this place smells like grub piss.”

She laughs, ever the predominant voice. And she will always be, the wind in your sails that takes you where you need to be, even if it is not where you want to be. Without whom you would simply be stuck. Adrift. Left to your own devices you would still be watching the world turn from beyond the waves.

She returns to her palmhusk, lazily waiting for another one her clients, buyers of flagrantly illegal tech. “Relax, you’ll like him. He’s kind of a btich.”

“Like me?” Your mouth makes a hard line.

Hers, forever soft, does not. “Like you.”

So you resign yourself again to patience, perched in protection from the sun, waiting for another passing face.

Chapter 3

sucroseCranium [SC] opened memo on board ~!gabe~ back!~

SC: ~wiggler~ and troll~ thi~ i~ your captain ~peaking~
SC: ~the galaxy~ greate~t di~appointment ha~ officially boarded~
SC: ~plea~e welcome him with applau~e and perfectly good wine bottle~ ~ma~hed again~t the hull~
SC: ~no fla~h photography~
SC: ~he ~tartle~ ea~ily~
horridHarbinger [HH] responded to memo.
HH: **DON'T.**
SC: ~no body like~ a bitch gabe~
SC: ~~ay hi ~
HH: **HI.**
SC: ~wa~ that ~o hard~
HH: **TO PLAY NICE WITH YOUR DEGENERATE FRIENDS?**
HH: **YES ACTUALLY.**
lynxSeventeen [LS] responded to memo.
LS: I do be1ieve my sound cana1s are burning.
widowMaker [WM] responded to memo.
WM: You are not meant to smash the bottles against spaceships, Sombra.
SC: ~?no?~
WM: That is sea faring vessels.
SC: ~cmon widow u~e your imagination a bit~
SC: ~imagine were back when thi~ ~hip wa~ new~
SC: ~and we hang off the ~ide and wave our handkerchief~~
SC: ~quivering in trepidation for our voyage to claim un~een ~tar~~
SC: ~knowing that out there there are no rule~~
SC: ~no ~illy little ~ocial more~ holding you back~
SC: ~we drink all that extra wine and ~uddenly our loin~ are now aquiver too~
SC: ~the impermi~~ible become~ permi~~ible~
SC: ~we pail with janitor~~
SC: ~walk around without our ~hoe~ on the railing above the power core~
SC: ~~lip the band credit~ to play bawdy ~ong~ from our youth~
SC: ~and dance the night away~
HH: **WOW.**
WM: I agree, wow.
WM: That was really quite difficult to look at.
LS: I 1iked 7he par7 where we co11ec7ive1y pai1 wi7h Jani7ors.
WM: You do realize that before the Successor comm&eered this vessel, it was used for subjugglating various sub-civilizations, not highblood pleasure cruises?
HH: **PLUS, BACK WHEN THIS HUNK OF JUST WAS "NEW"**
HH: **WE WEREN'T EVEN A QUIVERING BULB IN THE SLURRY**
HH: **HARD TO GO ON A PAN-CLASS ADVENTURE WHEN YOU DON'T EVEN HAVE A NERVOUS SYSTEM.**

SC: ~you guy~ are no fun~
WM: What did you expect gathering all the people desensitized to your bullshit in one place?
SC: ~well excu~e me for thinking it wa~ a good idea for gaberl to actually meet the people were having thi~ little rebellion over~
HH: **WHO NOW**
LS: 7ha7 wou1d be me.
HH: **GREAT. MORE HIGHBLOODS.**
LS: An unfor7una7e side effec7 of s7a7is7ics.
LS: 7hough if highb1oods aren’7 7o your 1iking I have some bad news abou7 7he person we’re ac7ua11y having 7his ”1i771e rebe11ion” over.
LS: Speaking of
LS: Is Zarya invi7ed 7o 7his memo?
SC: ~bleh i ~ent her an invite like a half an hour ago~
SC: ~where i~ that fi~h~
WM: Perhaps in the middle of more frond muscle curls.
WM: Which at this point seems
WM: Unnecessary.
SC: ~hang on a minute~
SC: ~im ju~t going to go acro~~ the hall and throw a foot ba~ket at her~
WM: Well as long as that headache is out of the room
WM: Reaper, you should know that I have a spare punch card I think will work with your fetch modus.
HH: **REALLY?**
HH: **WOW.**
HH: **I CAN NEVER FIND SHIT FOR GUESS WHO.**
LS: 7ha7 seems fi77ing.
LS: Bu7 before we ge7 7oo away from 7he subjec7, may I ask
LS: ”Reaper”?
HH: **YEAH? IT’S MY FUCKING TITLE.**
LS: Ah. Forgive me. Hanging around Sombra 7ends 7o erode your sense of norma1cy.
HH: **THAT’S PUTTING IT ONE WAY.**
HH: **WHO ARE YOU THEN?**
LS: My name is 1ynx.
LS: I wonder if I shou1d be offended Sombra hasn’7 men7ioned me or re1ieved.
WM: I would go with relieved.
HH: **WAIT**
HH: **I HAVE HEARD OF YOU.**
HH: **YOU’RE THE ASPIRANT’S KISMESIS.**
HH: **STRATEGOI OR SOMETHING**
LS: S7ra7egos, bu7 yes. Here I was worried my repu7a7ion hadn’7 preceded me a11 7he way ou7 in7o empire con7ro11ed space.
HH: **ALL SPACE IS EMPIRE CONTROLLED SPACE SLIME FOR PANS.**
HH: **AND YEAH IT SURE AS FUCK HAS.**
HH: **YOU WERE ALL THE FUCKING RAGE WHEN YOU HOPPED SHIP TO GET ON THE ASPIRANT’S BULGE**
HH: **WHILE SLAPPING THE EMPRESS’S ASS ON THE WAY OUT.**
HH: **TALK OF THE FUCKING GALAXY.**
HH: **COULDN’T GO FOR A DISCREET FUCKING DEFECTION LIKE THE REST**

OF US, COULD YOU
HH: **HAD TO JUMP INTO AN ESCAPE POD WITH BOTH MIDDLE DIGITINDICATORS UP OUT THE WINDOW**
LS: I suppose I did par7icipa7e in a 1i771e spi7efu1 fanfare on my way ou7 of 7he ga1ac7ic war machine. 7ha7 bi7 wi7h 7he gian7 rainbow-drinker 7hemed 7ower of wine g1asses suppor7ing a 1ifesized bronze s7a7ue of 7he Empress was 7oo good of an oppor7uni7y 7o pass up.
LS: 7hough I do find i7 ra7her bur1esque 7ha7 you shou1d accuse me a 1ack of discre7ion.
LS: 7ha7's a ra7her in7ensive quirk. 7e11 me, have you made a bind for 7ha7, or do you have 7o 7ype ou7 7he s7rong 7ag every 7ime you speak.
HH: **FUCK YOU.**
LS: Ah, 7he 1a7er 7hen.
striationedCyberian [SC] responded to memo.
SC: I am here, I am here.
SC: What iz big hubbub?
SC: ~oh nothin i ju~t wanted to get u~ all together ~o we can get acquainted~
SC: ~gabe thi~ i~ zarya~
SC: We've met.
SC: Once, anyway.
SC: How are you, Reyezz? Zombra hazn't told much
HH: **WELL THAT'S JUST FUCKING PEACHY**
WM: You're probably better off if what she's said about me is anything to go by.
LS: She does have a habi7 of misrepresen7ing
SC: And dizparaging
HH: **AND LYING.**
SC: ~guy~ im ~till here~
HH: **NOTED.**
WM: What Reaper means is that he is happy to be here.
HH: **I DIDN'T SAY THAT.**
SC: ~gabe chill~
HH: **NO FUCK YOU I AM NOT IN A STATE OF CHILL. YOU THINK I'M HAPPY TO BE HERE WITH THE REST OF THE GALAXY'S REFUSE?**
HH: **JUST CHUMMING IT UP WITH A BUNCH IMPERIAL WASHOUTS THAT ONLY GOT MISSED IN THE CULLING RITES BECAUSE THEY WERE FACE DOWN IN THE DIRT?**
LS: Ah, my ego. I7 s7ings.
HH: **I'M NOT JUST TALKING ABOUT YOU, LAW SCHOOL DROPOUT.**
HH: **EVERYONE ON THIS SHIP.**
HH: **THE LOBOTOMIZED HEIRISS, THE SMUGGLER WHO LOOKS OVER HIS BARELY FLYING SHIP LIKE HE'S THE EMPORER OF THE WORLD'S GREATEST PIRATE BAND INSTEAD OF A RUSTBUCKET FLOATING THROUGH SPACE.**
SC: ~and now that include~ you }:)~
HH: **DON'T FUCKING REMIND ME.**
HH: **I WOULDN'T BE HERE IF I HAD ANYWHERE ELSE TO GO.**
SC: ~aw hh~
SC: ~here i thought you came to vi~it your old friend~~
SC: ~and to reignite our pale throe~~

HH: **AND YOU.**
HH: **YOU'RE THE FUCKING WORST OF ALL.**
HH: **TREATING THIS LIKE A VACATION WHEN ANY NIGHT WE COULD BE SPOTTED BY A PASSING CURISER AND**
HH: **ZAP**
HH: **THAT'S IT, REBELLION OVER, REFUNDS OFFERED AT THE CONCESSION STAND**
SC: ~~omeone had a bad time at baggage claim~
HH: **ARE YOU LISTENING TO ANYTHING I'M SAYING SOMBRA**
HH: **THIS ISN'T A FUCKING CRUISE.**
HH: **WE'RE HAVING A SNIPPY LITTLE GROUP CHAT WHEN WE COULD LITERALLY DIE AT ANY MOMENT.**
SC: ~?hey you know what?~
SC: ~youre right~
SC: ~~marter to join up with literally the mo~t evil force in the univer~e rather than do ab~olutely anything el~e~
HH: **BETTER THAN DYING.**
SC: ~?i~ it?~
SC: ~it may not be a vacation but im happier than i ever wa~ trying to find clown purpo~e~
SC: ~and you are too~
HH: **IS THAT FUCKING RIGHT**
HH: **YOU WANNA TALK HAPPY? I WAS HAPPY WITH A STABLE JOB AND A GUN IN MY HAND. THIS IS NOT THE PARTED GATEDS, THE DARK CARNIVAL OR WHATEVER THE FUCK**
HH: **THIS IS A DEATH SENTENCE.**
SC: ~!~o~ being a ru~tblood in the middle of the imperial fleet!~
HH: **OH BECAUSE IM RUST I SHOULD BE GRATEFUL TO YOU? WELL LA DEE DAH LET ME JUST FALL ON MY KNEES AND GROVEL IN YOUR INFINATE MERCY**
SC: ~that~ not what i meant~
HH: **OH SOMBRA, THANK YOU SOOOO MUCH FROM SAVING ME. NEVER MIND I HAD TO COME CRAWLING HERE. NEVER MIND YOU LOVE COLLECTING PEOPLE WITH NO OTHER OPTION**
HH: **YOU NEED TO FEEL NEEDED. YOU'RE NOT HAPPY UNLESS SOMEONE DEPENDS ON YOU.**
SC: ~new~fla~h a~~hole i wa~ al~o fine before you came back into our live~~
SC: ~id buried you in the ~and where you belong after you left u~ to go live out ~ome ~oldier boy fanta~y~
SC: ~we made promi~e~~
HH: **WE WERE KIDS.**
SC: ~im ~tarting to think you were the only one who wa~ ~till a kid~
SC: ~you oink-bea~theaded, overdramatic,~
HH: **CONTROLLING, EGOTISTICAL**
SC: ~edgelord~
HH: **PRIMADONNA**
WM: Enough.
WM: Both of you.
WM: I also happened to be looking forward to this reunion, but when you refuse to meet in

person, the only thing it is going to turn into is a pissing match.
WM: I told you to meet at the cargo bay, but did you listen? No, because you obviously know how to h&le your emotions better than I do.
WM: Reaper, you left us. & it hurt. The least you can do is apologize.
SC: ~!yeah!~
WM: & you!
WM: Gaberl lost everything in less than a sweep & you dare to bother him about crew moral? You should be ashamed.
WM: I am sick of typing. We will meet up tomorrow, & the both of you will talk like proper adults. Is that understood?
HH: **…ACKNOWLEDGED.**
SC: ~yeah fine i gue~~~
WM: Good. I am glad that is settled.
SC: ~im~
SC: ~uh~
SC: ~looking forward to it~
SC: ~~eeing you again in per~on~
HH: **MM. SAME. I GUESS.**
WM: ?
HH: **I DID MISS YOU. BOTH OF YOU.**
WM: That is not an apology.
HH: **I KNOW. I'LL WORK UP TO IT.**
SC: ~we mi~~ed you too bo~~~
HH: **HM. YEAH.**
SC: ~<>?~
HH: **…**
HH: <>
SC: ~}:)~
SC: ~~ee you guy~ tomorrow~
HH: **YEAH. BYE.**
[SC] ceased responding to memo.
[HH] ceased responding to memo.
SC: …
SC: Wow.
LS: I agree, wow.
SC: We're not that bad, are we?
LS: Sufferer I hope no7. If we were, sure1y everyone around us wou1d die of secondhand embarrassmen7.
SC: Thoze pet inzultz, bleh. It'z zomething ztraight out of a zickeningly zardonic romance, like they never learned how to hate properly. I mean they were bad az adolecentz but
LS: 7his is qui7e some7hing.
SC: Indeed.
LS: Are you on for 7he res7 of 7he nigh7?
SC: Unfortunaely no, I have to get zeveral more frond muzcle curlz in before morning.
LS: hkqpdo,xc./.;
SC: What waz that?
LS: No7hing. Enjoy your workou7.
SC: You will hear about thiz later from me Zeventeen.

[SC] ceased responding to memo.
LS: Widowmaker, I know you’re s7i11 7here.
WM: Hm. Well. Merde.
LS: Hoping we had forgo77en abou7 you?
WM: In much the way I had forgotten the two of you, yes.
LS: 7ha7 was qui7e we11 hand1ed back 7here.
WM: It was nothing. I simply said the things I thought needed to be said.
LS: You have qui7e 7he na7ura1 7a1en7 for i7.
WM: Hm.
LS: I mus7 ask
LS: A7 risk of ruining 7he joke
LS: Why aren’7 you auspis7icizing be7ween 7hem?
WM: Sombra & Reaper are not pitched.
LS: And ye7.
WM: & yet?
LS: And ye7.
WM: They aren’t.
LS: If 7ha7’s 7he on1y reason you have I mus7 imp1ore you 7o 1ook a 1i771e deeper. You may find happiness in 7he p1aces you did no7 7hink 7o exp1ore. Ang1es 7o someone or someones 7ha7 cou1d be rea1 if you were on1y 7o ask 7he ques7ion.
WM: Is that how it came between you & Zaryan?
LS: My. You’re qui7e insigh7fu1 in a wide manner of 7hings, 1croix.
WM: Was that a jest?
LS: No7 a7 a11. I 7hink you’re a very percep7ive 7ro11 when i7 comes 7o 7hings 7ha7 aren’7 your own fee1ings.
WM: Have you been learning from Sombra these things that sound like compliments but are actually not?
LS: Oh no, I 7augh7 myse1f 7ha7 a11 on my own.
WM: They would not want me to auspistize.
LS: Have you asked?
LS: 7ha7’s wha7 I 7hough7.
LS: Bu7 anyway, 7ha7 is jus7 my opinion on 7he ma77er. You are free 7o do as you 1ike.
WM: “You are free to do as you like” is one of those things pretentious trolls say when they want you to do what they tell you & will think you’re very stupid otherwise.
LS: Again, a very percep7ive 7ro11.
LS: We11, I wi11 be 7urning in 7hen. Good 1uck 7o you.
WM: Yes. Good day.
[LS] ceased responding to memo.
[WM] closed memo.

Chapter 4

There must be some sort statuale ordinance that ships constructed before 12069 are legally required to have at least one leaky gas valve per hallway that spurts out mysterious white steam into its neighboring exposed conduits. The one above your head rattles, spilling into the hall and joining its siblings in cacophony of background noise, a white hum that assaults your sound canals no matter where on the ship you go. You reach up and adjust Zarya's collar.

"Do not look at anyone beside the Successor," you remind her.

She spares you an irritated look. "I *know*. I heard you the first three dozen times." Still, she lets you pull the cape into place.

The fur is soft and white underneath your hands; it reminds you of your lusus's fur, the way it would stick to your palms even as you patted it down. Back when you were young and had everything to lose, you could spend all night sitting with them, combing through it, their purr thrumming into the corners of your apartment while you stared at the shelves of books set into the wall. What had you spent all your time doing back then? When you were an adolescent, it felt like all you did was think about the future, mulling it over and over again in your mind until you could see all possibilities, every sterile timeline stretched out before you. Try as you might, all you can remember from your grubhood is one long stream of rumination, sometimes dotted with reading or hacking or the writing you would take to with mania. You'd never seen the point of emerging from you shell. Introspection is a self-fulfilling malady.

That was before Aleksa, though. The last sweep you'd spent on Alternia was so startlingly different than the rest, you felt it deserved to be seen as a separate chapter in your life's story. How much would be different if your lusus had never encouraged you to begin hosting those panels?

She shifts on her feet, looking from the door to you before again looking quickly away. In many ways her life of relative isolation has left her without a decent dictionary for social interaction, but occasionally that can be helpful. For instance, if she is to confront a potential enemy in the seat of his power, a stopgap between emotion and facial expression can make for a wonderful poker face.

"Don't mess this up," you say softly, trailing hands down the outer edges of the cape, absently wrapping it around her.

This time, her ganderbulbs stray from the sealed door of the throne room, landing on yours and reading more than they should. "I know," she repeats. She won't, you decode.

The door, sensitive to gravitas as all doors are, retracts to all four of its corners. There is a rush of steam. Of course. You'd be disappointed if there weren't.

She allows herself a hesitation, the barest steadying breath, a brief close to her eyes. But then she marches inwards, you trailing behind as you go to face the court.

A hush falls over the illustrious pirate band as you make your entrance. They are mixed and wretched, most missing arms or eyes or both, patched together with wire and cybernetic light. They share this trait with the room itself, the wear of sweeps showing through lugs and spare parts fashioned where they shouldn't be. The ship is disjointed and the crew is motley and the two of you appear at the far end of the hall like the red death itself.

Few have ever seen a seadweller before. None have seen royalty. You know it startled you how much taller she had become since you were adolescences, and you can see the guarded looks in their eyes as she wades through and ignores their collective flinch. Her russet cape swings out as she walks, and yours follows suit. They were your idea, chosen in a careful play that may prove to be absurd if it turns out you're thinking too many moves ahead. It wouldn't be the first time. The matching display ceases when you stop halfway through the room. Zarya continues onward.

Because at the end of her journey is the captain himself, Doomfist the Successor, the bronzeblood king in all his glory. The throne is simple, flattened metal, bent and repatched to match the rest of the ship. No doubt the styling is intentional.

Because if there is one thing Doomfist has in spades it is *style*. He leans into his chair, the villainous slouch accentuating the titular gauntlet along his right arm, horns threatening to rake against the loose cables dangling above his head. As Zarya stops amidst his subject, he gazes down at her with those bright, red-yellow eyes.

You cannot read his face. Mild indifference? Feigned curiosity hiding annoyance? If it is the later, things may already be too late. You have taken great care that his idea to treat with you is just that: his own. Sombra's influence is subtle, memos misplaced here, whispers told there; the result is a gentle scalpel as compared to an indigo's sledgehammer. You look for her now, and see her right where you expected: nestled amongst the pirates at the foot of the elevated throne. Inconspicuous of course, as her chucklevoodoos have blended her seamlessly into her chosen circle, but for a mastermind she is far too predictable. You could warn her about this intrinsic flaw in her thinking, that no one is ever as smart as she, but what Strategos would you be to reveal such a potentially useful bit of information? She catches your gaze and flashes a dashing smile.

The crowd is silent now. They do not know what to make of Zarya, standing amongst them. You watch the way they look up to Successor, how they seek their cues even though he has none to give. *This* is what you need of Zarya's followers, this open reverence, and you feel a pang of jealousy on her behalf.

But no matter. That is not why you are here.

"Aspirant," Doomfist drawls, scarcely moving as he elongates her name. "Barely a descriptor for one who has drawn so much attention."

"Merely the larval state of your own name, Successor," she says evenly. "It, like myself, is nothing more than what it is."

The crowd murmurs. Good. Took you perigees to come up with that one. You're quite proud of it actually.

Doomfist waves his hand. "I did not call you here to revel in our epithetical similarities. Tell me. Why should I not strike you down when your very presence in our system draws the Condescension's ire?"

Mutters of agreement, but it is still a bluff none the less. He already has his own reasons, and if he didn't, he would have destroyed your transport ship on sight.

But the message is clear. He wants the point and he wants it now.

Zarya keeps her ganderbulbs on him. "I could speak to you of your motivations, but I think you would tire of your own thoughts spun back at you, so instead I will tell you my own."

Here it is. If this goes poorly, if you have miscalculated, it will be the end for both of you before you even get to see any alternatives. All branching paths will be cut short, stains upon the throne room floor.

The audience leans in, holds its breath. Zarya acts, an arm to throw aside her cloak, sending it free from her body. And, in one fluid motion, she gets upon her knee in front of the throne.

Every gamblignant ascends to frenzy, barely held below screeching by Successor's demand of, "*silence*." Their reaction is only natural. No doubt they were expecting some sort of duel or challenge to Doomfist's authority, some snag on his pride and what that might allow. But this? This is the last thing any sane troll should do. These may be outcasts; deserters, fugitives that the empire has lost, but despite their distance from the rest of society, they are still children of Alternia. They know you do not show weakness. You do not chance a budding rebellion by allowing your leader to embarrass herself. For most, it is unthinkable. After all, what lunatic would bare their throat to a room full of barkbeasts and expect it not to be ripped out?

(On a completely unrelated note, you watch your kismesis knell on the floor and feel your bloodpusher try to kill you.)

Zarya has her head bowed. "The Condesce is your enemy as well as mine, but you have something I lack," she begins. "You have evaded her for sweeps, in itself a victory I can only dream. I seek an alliance, one to our benefit."

Doomfist chuckles, and your acid tract flips. He rises, and his own half-cape falls over his gauntlet, catching briefly on a spire of broken chair as he descends.

"I have never heard of an Empress who needed friends to claim Her throne," Doomfist muses.

"I am not like Her," Zarya says. She continues to stare at the ground. "This is first on a hopefully long road of proving it."

Doomfist stops, his face mirthful, but there is something glinting behind that sunset hue. “Well, you certainly have already a talent for accumulating…” he glances behind him. “… *Friends*.”

No one else in the room has noticed it, but his lookstubs are have landed firmly on Sombra. The realization that *he knows* jolts you, and your expression mirrors the only other person in the room who’s noticed it: Sombra herself. Her face pales, which shouldn’t be possible behind all the face paint.

(You wonder, briefly, how he knew she was there. Perhaps, like you, he’s learned the tricks to Sombra’s trade.)

The stakes have increased considerably; now if he isn’t as endeared by you as you hoped, you won’t be the only one thrown out the airlock. Or more likely culled on the spot. He turns back to Zarya.

“You still haven’t answer my first question, Aleksa Zaryan,” he says. “You have told me why you wish to join us” He turns to his followers. “After all, who wouldn’t ?”

A cheer goes up, mixed with jeers at the bent Heiress. Again, you marvel at how easily he turns the crowd, how much Zarya could learn from him.

“So Aspirant,” he calls to her. “What is your offer? What have you to give?”

“A future.” And she finally looks up.

You watch Doomfist, the subtle changes as bronze orbs meet tyrian. He is listening.

She has caught the ear of every troll here. “You, Doomfist the Successor, are not a satisfied man. You have your ship, your kingdom, but what of it when the universe spins on such frail thread?” Dissent scuffs the airwaves but Doomfist pays it no mind. She goes on. “The Condesce has made trolls weak with her culling, as much as she has tried to convince us the opposite. The conflict she has manufactured is too sterile, our population smothered as wigglers before they can even look at the moons. We should test ourselves against each other, not these faceless civilizations that only go to fuel Her vanity. On this, we agree.”

“And what assurance would I have that you would not simply become another dictator if I were to assist you now?” Doomfist asks.

“Assurance? None.” Now. Now you have run out of foresight. From now on it is only her. You speak the Sufferer’s name under your breath. “Only my example now, should it prove in good faith.” She pauses. “Promises that are made with belief behind them can never truly be wrong. I know you have promised your people that the world you make shall be better. I only speak the same truth.”

You wince, not wishing to antagonize him now. This is no time for politics, for pressure points to be pushed, but your beloved idiot doesn’t seem to realize that. She should appeal to his greed not his pride-

“If you wish to see universe changed, I will be your only shot.”

The pack grows restless. Its leader looks down. She is stepping so far from the script-

“Live in your carved out hollow if you like. I think it is timed I ascended to the stars.”

And yet-

Doomfist laughs. The Successor throws back his head and laughs, full throated and hearty, the condescension he had radiated gone in place of a charming and charismatic leader. The trolls around you start to shuffle, unsure of what’s so funny, but they know that when the captain laughs, you laugh.

He is grinning. “You may be a child, but your fool tongue may save you yet.” He reaches down and takes her hand. When he pulls her to her feet, he lifts her arm above their heads. “Let it be known that this moment shall be written in history. An alliance struck, and an Heir acknowledged.” His attention is to the crowd, and you are sure he has found you and Sombra both. “This is the key that will burn the old world to the ground.”

What world you’re not sure you want to know. You are too busy sighing in relief and trying not to show it, at least putting on a show for the trolls closest to you as they begin to acknowledge your existence. You see Sombra, her shoulders slouching in relief. You can practically hear the *phew* from here.

And Zarya? Well, you watch as Doomfist holds her arm above the heads of the clamoring crowd, the throngs of undue acceptance alighting her face with plastered joy. But, for just a moment, she spares the barest glance back to you, and you see the shocked girl beneath.

You think this may be the last time you see that girl. You do not know why you think this, but as much as you know the failure that comes down the road for all of you, you feel that in this victory something small and personal has been lost.

Chapter 5

The grass waves around you, waist height and enchantingly fluid as you follow your morail through the path she forges. It's nothing like the plant life of your childhood: no long, knarled stems steeped with burrs, no blooms that smell of rot and will devour you if you wander too close. The nutrition stalks are tame, the lifeblood of the empire, and it is your imperial duty to care for them by the trillions of tons. Or at least, it is your duty to care for the ones who care for them.

Mercy checks her wrist, the locator pinging three times and then ceasing. This is where your summons has been emanating from.

The section of farm isn't far from the parcel's shuttle port, close enough that you decided to walk rather than take a clumsy scuttlebug through the fields. The alert that woke you indicated a mustard level incident, which fell into medium threat or higher, which means MANUAL SUPERVISION REQUIRED as the yellow text scrolling across your PDA helpfully indicates.

A dozen drones scamper about the area, humming as they wait for a troll to give them further instructions. These aren't like the military drones that guard the shuttle port or patrol the sky in sleek formations, but are smaller, more nimble, and equipped with only a modest amount of culling equipment. They are the automated processes that control the harvesting on the planet, and they buzz about you and Mercy, preparing for a possible quarantine. The planet is entirely autonomous: CC37A contains no ecosystem that is not managed by drone or engineered beetle—every surface not claimed by ocean is covered in endless blue fields. A population of a few thousand trolls in the whole world can make you feel monstrously alone.

"Sparrow, look here," Mercy says, motioning where the drone's activity is most furious.

You kneel, the edge of your leg digging into the dirt. Where she indicates, the ground is torn, roots pale and wormlike as they point into the sky.

"I thought the alert indicated a disease," you say, examining the torn stalks.

"As did I," she says. That is her specialty after all, why she left her assigned parcel in the middle of the day to examine this remote anomaly nearly two hours south. Organism decorruption is not a glamorous job, but its better than being strapped to the battery of a ship, her feeble psionics drained for all they're worth. It's safer here, no battles, no conquering. That's why you've followed her out here to the rim world, why Pharah left a well-stipend position as a captain: it may be as close to paradise as you'll ever get. "Perhaps they don't have a protocol for recognizing physical damage, and infection was the closest their analysis would allow for."

"It looks like a lusus did this," you note.

Her eyes narrow further. "A reasonable explanation, if not for one thing." She stands, brushing dust off her uniform. "There are no Lusii on Cici."

“…A drone with a malfunctioning navigation?”

Instead of responding, she looks southward, spying something beyond you. “Come on. There is more damage this way.”

Again you follow her, nutrition stalks parting around you. It dips into the uncanny valley, this off-color of the palette; the sea of grass that should be purple, but instead is ultramarine set against yellowed sky. To think, when willfully spread across the galaxy as they have, these plants must be the singular most populous species in the whole universe.

The broken stalks lead haphazard through the field, sometimes visible from the last bit of crushed vegetation, sometimes bent inward to hide the damage. The buzz of the drones fades behind you, and intuition heightens your senses as you spiral further away from the origin of the incident. It looks like something large was staggering through here, and despite the fact you *know* nothing could get through the planetary defenses, your mind wanders to the only time you’ve ever seen a cholerbear, the way it’d battered its way through the jungle near your home, slaughtering in its path while you and Hangzo hid in the trees. A shiver runs down your spine.

“Something is wrong,” you tell Mercy as you kick aside a trampled pile of nutrition stalks.

“I know. We’re finding out what.”

There are no drones for miles now. No one knows you are here except she and you. Every second you resist the urge to brush your hand against your swordkind, feeling like the docile plants around you may turn at any moment. The unease burns you until you reach the end of the trail.

You stand on the edge of a massive shape dented into the grass, strands ruined and bent. Food enough to feed your whole parcel for a year, obliterated completely. There is no time to mourn as you feel your limbs locking, saved only by the instinct to stop short before the groaning noise begins.

It is the roar of a ship, cacophonous and unmistakable, and you lift your visor to see it descending on you. Within seconds it is hovering in the center of the clearing, its engines pushing grass outward into a distinctive shape. It settles: a perfect fit. It hits you then, too late, that this ship has been here before.

There is no point running; a ship like that would pursue you planetside just as efficiently as it does chasing a wounded enemy through space. The design is sleek, not for military use but not a pleasure cruiser either, some sort of unique model that can only mean it is here to bring about some yet undetermined trouble. At least, it *was* undetermined until the landing struts extend, lowering a form from the white glow of the inner ship into the sunlight.

Her shoulders are pressed back, hands tucked behind her as she surveys your planet with mild curiosity. The uniform of an imperial geneticist clings to her form, sleek and star-studded as her sleeves hang past her waist, daring any to challenge her presence wherever that may be.

“Moira…” Mercy whispers.

That isn’t your first thought.

The whirr from the ship cuts, and the stalks surrounding the clearing cease dancing. Moira O’Deorain turns her head each way as though checking the endless expanse of uninhabited farmland for witnesses to whatever it is she’s here for. And, as she takes her first step down the loading ramp, you have an idea what that might be.

Whatever this is, it is not a pre-notified meeting. They did not clear it through bureaucracy, they did not alert any of you. Moira is, as always, here to disturb the status quo.

Your swordkind is in your hand and your body is in front of Mercy’s.

Moira stops, her strutpods now resting on firm terrestrial soil. She seems taller, somehow, even with the heights she stretches in your memories. “Sparrow. I cannot say it is a pleasure to see you either, but certainly that isn’t necessary?”

You don’t move. It may be your place to stand aside for a seadweller, to never question no matter what her request might be, but it also your duty to protect Mercy, but beyond all that she is your morail and you did *not* work this hard to carve out a relatively not-horrible life for yourself just to see Mercy dragged away by some stupid fish.

“Sparrow,” Mercy warns from behind you.

You don’t care. It seems very likely you’re about to die for brandishing a weapon at an Oasis scienterrorist, but there is no way back now, and you will at least draw blood if you must die here.

“Genjii,” she insists. She steps up and places a hand on your shoulder—under pretence to hold you back—but it brushes against your faceplate on the way down. The barest suggestion of a pap loosens your shoulders. “She lured us out here for a reason. One outside of bureaucracy notice.”

Moira is still staring at you, making no move to knock your weapon aside. A self-satisfied smile twists her lips, and since you feel you should surely be dead by now, you agree that there is something here you’re missing. You tuck your blade away.

Her gills flex with amusement. “Well, now that is over with. Angela darling, how have you been?”

“Alive.” Mercy’s eyes bore into her. “Are you here to change that, Docterror?”

“No.” Moira smiles. “Merely visiting an old hatefriend, and delivering a message.”

‘Old hatefriend’ may be a loaded term. You can feel the disgust radiating off Mercy in waves, hatred you would be surprised she was capable of if you hadn’t known her while she and Moira were together. Now it is your turn to shuffle behind her, pressing as close as the points in your shoulders will allow.

“A message,” she repeats with disdain. “From who?”

Moira's smile grows wider. "From the Aspirant to the imperial throne."

Your blood runs cold. That's why Moira brought you here, separated you from your drones, isolated you on this plain. She no longer works through the bureaucracy, she's stepped over that line she's always been toeing: she's turned traitor.

"I have no interest in helping a coup," Mercy replies stiffly, coming to the same conclusion as you.

"Do you think this some sort of test?" Moira asks, her sleek, eyebrowless face conveying how little she believes that. "You've never had love for the empire, any more than I. In fact, *less* than I considering…circumstances."

There is another troll behind Moira in the ship, her pilot maybe. He stays in the shadow of the exit ramp, watching all of you with unreadable eyes.

Mercy doesn't seem to notice. "What ill-advised game are you playing now? An Heiress doesn't go requesting help from sustenance planets. You should start thinking of better lies, O'Deorain."

"No lies." Moira begins to walk toward you. You tense, reaching for your blade once again, but she merely passes you to stare stoically at the cobalt horizon. "I was asked if I knew anyone who would be receptive to our cause, and I truthfully said I knew a goldblood who may be…sympathetic."

A goldblood psionic that has stayed under the radar this long. Helpful, if you plan to go against the empire's own army. The picture is starting to come together.

"If the Aspirant is recruiting the likes of *you*," Mercy hisses, "her uprising is something I want no part of."

"She has few options," Moira says, too quickly it almost seems, as though she honestly believes her own line. "But whether I'm involved should mean little to you. This is a royal invitation, an opportunity to join what I know you have always been keeping your little fantasies about."

"To go flying off to the stars and join a doomed uprising?" Mercy scoffs. "I am perfectly happy here."

"Happy? Maybe." Moira turns from the setting sun back to you. "But satisfied? Never as long as I have known you."

"You will not kidnap her from here," you interrupt, because this is beginning to drag on. Every minute you stand here is another chance for a passing drone to take notice. "You try, and I will stop you. It will cost me nothing to end a rebellious former minister."

Moira's ganderbulbs shift from Mercy to you, going from a spiteful sneer to dispassion in a moment. "I would never dream of forcing her. The uprising is only for those committed. Our Aspirant has made that…" her voice hangs on the word. "…*clear*."

“I hardly consider myself committed.”

“Not to anything, it seems,” Moira says idly. “Tell me Angela, is this how you expected your future? Putting bandages on plant boo-boos? Trapped on a plant so …*sterile*?” By the way the corner of her mouth turns you suspect the disgust for this place lays less with Mercy than with the minister herself. The moment is short lived, and she rolls her shoulders. “So. I have delivered my ultimatum.”

“My help would hardly make a difference,” Mercy replies tightly.

“It never does,” Moira says, and you feel Mercy stiffen beside you. “But I did as I was asked. You get your chance to witness change, Angela. Just the one. Otherwise, continue to wait here until the sitting Empress takes notice. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time until you slip up.”

For the first time, Mercy is quiet. Then, “…I have my quadrantmates to consider.”

“Bring them with.” Moira motions dismissively in your direction. “More bodies are better than less.”

“I’d need to talk to my matesprit.”

Your bloodpusher jerks, and you lean in to whisper, “don’t tell me you’re actually *considering* this?”

“I just need to think,” she says hastily.

“Well then,” Moira says with a clap of her hands. “My work here is done. Goodbye Angela, hopefully not for the last time.”

With that, she walks back to her ship, missing the snarl on Mercy’s face. That, you remember, is what she said last time too.

The pilot is waiting for her, giving you all one last look before disappearing back to the cabin. Moira pauses, and says as an afterthought, “don’t take too much time though. We can only stay in empire-controlled space so long before attracting attention. Meet back here in exactly one wipe, if you’re so inclined.” With that, she’s gone, the landing ramp retracting back into the bowls of the ship.

The wind whips you as the ship rises, threatening to send you as flat as the grass. But then it shoots into the sky with a wink, disappearing just as covertly as it arrived, leaving you nothing but the feeling in your acid tract. As soon as it’s out of sight, Mercy lifts her chin to the sky, closing her ganderbulbs as the sun beats down on her face.

“…I can never get away, can I?” she asks.

You feel like you should say something, but nothing comes to mind. Instead you cast an arm over her shoulder and offer some a gentle *shoosh*.

When she finally opens her eyes, she looks down at the dirt pulverized underneath your shoes. “Come on. We need to go talk to Pharah.”

Chapter 6

You land. It’s an impact that would shatter another troll’s bones, but you roll the strain off your ankles and translate it into motion, leaving behind the roof and the sound of approaching drones. They reverberate in your sound canals, hollowing out a place in your pusher cavity and despite the whirring of engines, you allow it to stay. It is welcome, the should-be fear; as familiar as the weight of the gun on your shoulder.

But it does not burn as freshly as it once did.

The beginning of a hobby is hard to pin. What series of events conspired to make the thrill of something just so? What fault of personality did you have that made a single slip the dawning of something greater? It is fate surely. This is what you were meant to be, and you never had hope of being something different.

Months in the past.

It’s an accident. An accident of fate, an accident of hands. You are fiddling with Widow’s Kiss, the newest present from your lusus, checking over each exoskeleton to see how it works. It is an appropriate gift for someone of your blood status. There is no reason not to let you play with your new toy unattended at the edges of the closest landweller town.

You aim down the sights, seeing trolls flitting between their hives and the winding streets beneath. To practice, you trail them in your scope. It is fascinating how the smallest change in your arms sends your view blocks away.

But your targets move too fast for you, and when your unpracticed hands try to follow them through the warped glass, you end up overshooting and clumsily trying to focus back. They bore and frustrate you, and your sightline wanders until it spies a lone troll picking at the beach, sorting through debris washed and submerged in muck. He’s slow, plodding, easy to keep the faint dot on his head. You follow him, and mouth the word *bang*.

Your pantomime, as it turns out, is too good.

The Kiss presses its lips against his temple and says goodnight, and he collapses before the sound even reaches your ears. Heads on the street look up at the sound of gunfire, but most move on within a few seconds, and no one is there no notice as you fall backwards in your cross-legged position, deafened and disoriented as your back hits gravel. There is no one to see as you rise, rubbing the violet ring around your eye, and stare across a beach that’s turned into a misshapen haze. You freeze. Your heart is pounding, ice in your veins that leaves you immobilized as terror creeps into you even though you don’t yet knew why. It takes all your will power—clenching one hand and then the other—to break from your daze and scramble to the edge, craning your neck to catch a glimpse at the now distant shore. You don’t pick up Widow’s Kiss to look. You act it like it might bite you. Instead, you slide down the side of the

East Alternian Comic shop you climbed at the beginning of the night, nearly falling off entirely more than thrice, and find that the journey back is so much harder than the journey to. Years in the future, you will think this very profound.

The run takes eternity and more. With slipping, jittery strutpods, you finally stand in front of him, sand sticking to his clothes as russet washes over dampened particles and draws him in to his own viscous cocoon. You are two sweeps old and don't quite understand what makes things stop ticking but even you can comprehend that this boy won't be getting back up. His head is no longer a head and this isn't like when you break a toy and it must be fixed. You realize, intrinsically at the very least, that you have done something *wrong*.

And so, you do what all guilty wigglers do. You run hiveward.

You retreat to the hive in the lake with the empty rooms stretched tall to catch the morning light. Your lusus wraps her neck around you as you sit in your recuperacoon with your knees to your forehead, but even the gentle honks that are usually so comforting do nothing for the aching maw in your stomach. Fear, but fear of what? You don't know shame yet, don't have perspective. All you know is it hurts and you want the bad feelings to stop.

He's not going to stand anymore. Will his friends be mad? Will they come looking for you?

Will anyone care?

The answer to the last one is, of course, no. A rustblood dies and there are no repercussions. No one knows it was you, they wouldn't care if they did—the list of justifications goes on. You never learn if anyone ever picked up his body or told his lusus, and for a while, you keep it that way. Ignorance a flimsy comfort.

But it gnaws at you. Gnaws and gnaws but, the thing that's chewing, the thing with teeth on your insides, it no longer feels like shame. It morphs, blossoming its putrid petals, transforming until it becomes exuberant and is this: the realization that you got away with it.

This is of course due to no effort on your part, and merely the effect of violet in your arteries and the russet in his. But, to a mind so small and who has just experienced her first taste of thrill, it doesn't seem that way.

Weeks in the future.

This time, you have a target. One could argue against your character that you were able to come to this decision with such ease, to do things because you want to and no reason more, but if there was someone who would make that case, they don't live on this planet. The bronzeblood lives close to the beach—already you are beginning to repeat yourself, an amateur mistake, but forgivable considering an amateur is what you are. You watch him leave his home, falling into the groundwork of a routine that you will tamp out into technique wipes down the line. Observe, trail.

Eliminate.

This time, when the body falls to the ground, you don't hurt yourself with the kickback. Your arms still shake for hours though, and you sit in that same spot, staring at the dead troll a few feet from his hive. You've never felt like this before but by the Empress, you'd do anything to feel like it again.

Months in the future.

When the buzz doesn't stay with you as long at it used to, in a fit of rabid denial you decide that this is because you do not have enough of a challenge. You've been hunting the rust colors exclusively, only daring to stray into olive territory within the past wipe. It doesn't satisfy you the way it used to, the "murder-high" as the church would say is cheating you out of what should be a perfectly beautiful death. But your desensitization can't be the culprit, no, it's because there is no fear anymore now that you know that you won't be caught even if you swing your rifle around in broad moonlight. It has to be the challenge, that must be it.

Jades. *Jades*, you think. So difficult, so out of reach. You consider briefly on succumbing to poison, to creeping into the cavern with hidden blades, but as soon as the thought crosses your thinkpan it revolts in disgust. You are not an *assassin*, no matter how much the films may try to glam the occupation. You are a gun. You are death herself. You are more than the results.

The jade problem persists. It is after many tries, many notes passed and cryptic messages sent through Skorge that you manage to lure one out of her burrow with promises of a rare print of a *Magical Commander Yukino Vol32*. Her blood is so beautiful as it splatters a nearby storefront.

Doing it again and again becomes a sport. You begin to talk with some mercenaries, finding that they already have their own intricate network that involves luring people where they'll be at their weakest. They are confused at first; who would gain grudges against a jade, after all? But when they meet you in person, the fact that you are barely more than a wiggler is made moot by the flaring gills along your neck.

They help you get your jades. And, in a twist of irony, destroy you as well. Because as soon as things become *easy*, as soon as you've racked as many jades as olives, the thrill dies, and you are back at the beginning.

Consequences, that's what you desperately think. There must be a real threat of danger, and then the deaths will *mean*something.

Teals you try, and their blood dries quicker than the jades. Ceruleans, blues, clowns, the bodies pile up and you feel nothing, which brings you to the now as you flee the scene of your latest homicide. The church will no doubt be delighted in your latest show of violence, helping along members to their dark reward, but the drones hardly see it that way. You don't know if that, when they catch you, they will not simply see the violet sign tucked under your

disguise and let you go. You pretend they won't, that the pursuit behind you will end in your death if you are caught. It is the only thing that makes you feel alive.

It is when you are at your hive, three hours returned, slamming your desk in frustration desperately trying to figure an augmentation that will allow Widow's Kiss to fire underwater that you realize something.

The light off your immaculate barrel reflects something, something bright pink as it flits outside your window and over your private lake. You wander aimlessly over.

It is the drones, of course. They're abuzz in the air, as they always are, visible from you home as you press your face against the glass. You are the only seadweller you know that has a home above the waves, though you are still surrounded by water on all sides. This is a view that many of your kind are not used to. You spend so much time despairing over trolls, but it was not *them* you have been looking to impress. No, no not the drones either; you could shoot at drones all day and experience nothing (and you have, when you feel your practice needed to be sharpened.) So then it is not the drones, but what they represent.

You practically stumble your way to the grand hall as the epiphany hits you, and oh how wild you must look when you finally stand in the massive archway that serves as its door. There. You look upon it, the object you have forgotten. It is where it has always been, standing watch over the blessed pool that serves as your recuperation, matron and tyrant in equal measures.

The massive painting of the Empress gazes down at you, her teeth pricked into a smile.

It's obvious, isn't it? This is your trajectory, what you have been aiming for all along. You have been climbing the ladder but it has all been a distraction, *she* is the ultimate reward, the final tests for your skills. After all, what greater kill than that of the troll who will not die?

The realization humbles you, leaving you knee deep in sopor slime as you stare upwards into those glorious eyes and try not to cry. Your hands come to rest over your blood pusher, your tiny little vascular bladder beating in rapid flits. There is no need to suppress what has come over you. You have finally found something to do right.

Years in the future.

Violets float around you, their movement long stopped but their bodies still providing the surrounding saltwater with new fluid. They sway like seaweed, leaking lavender into the light stained water as you tilt you head upwards to stare directly into this planet's sun, the motion a long held habit that has morphed into an anchor. Zarya treads beside you, visibly uncomfortable with your inertness, but it is not your job to make the Aspirant feel comfortable. It's not anyone's job actually, which is probably why she spends so much time polishing herself past the point of ineffectiveness. The majority of the kills belong to you, a fact that bodes poorly for an aspiring Heiress—that is what her leery followers would think, anyway, but you are of the opinion that it reflects more on you than it does on her.

You stare up into the most powerful energy source in the solar system, legs spinning idly, and you say, “I want to kill Her.”

“Er…who?” she asks, because although she is no fool, Zarya is still bafflingly slow.

“The Empress. When the time comes, you will let me have the right.”

She hesitates. After all, no ascension is complete if the challenger does not rip the enthroned one from the chair herself. There little more illegitimate in the eyes of the Empire than a adulterous job.

But, like you have said, Zarya is no fool. She will not deny you this now, not while you swim surrounded by the corpses you have made. She nods, a movement caught in the corner of your lookstubs. “Very will. You may have the claim.”

Your gills release bubbles that could have been inside you for a thousand years. “Good.”

Maybe the promise is empty, maybe she is already planning on how to quietly get rid of you. That would be the wise thing for her to do, after all, what *you* would do. You have revealed your hand, sown the seeds of doubt shown that you are far too dangerous to keep around—but for the moment you don’t care. You feel you are one step closer. You are coming for your promised reward.

Chapter 7

bastLives [BL] opened memo on board grumpy threshecutioner therApy corner

paterHelices [PH] responded to memo.
PH: Can’7 you a7 leas7 change 7he 6oard’s name for 7his.
PH: He’s no7 going 7o 6e happy seeing some cu7e-ass name you made up 7wo sweeps ago.
BL: he’s not going to be hAppy no mAtter whAt we do, the nAme doesn’t reAlly mAke A difference
PH: Yeah 6u7 do we really need 7o give him more ammo? He’s already go7 an ass high pile of 6ullshi7 grievances, and you know how cranky he ge7s over 7he smalles7 s7upides7 de7ails even when you’re 7rying 7o 7ell him some7hing impor7an7.
PH: You know I 7ried. Las7 perigee.
PH: Jus7 real su67le, floa7ing 7he idea 6y, and do you know wha7 he said?
BL: .(
PH: Do we really have 7o do 7his.
BL: you know why we hAve to
PH: I know I jus7.
BL: wish we could run from our problems And leAve someone else holding the bAg?
PH: No7 7he way I would have pu7 i7 6u7 yeah.
BL: you know they sAy A personAlity is just A series of behAviorAl pAtterns repeAted over And over until they become hAbits
PH: 7akes one 7o know one lady.
BL: .(
BL: i’m not chAnging the nAme
BL: if it mAkes you feel better, this is the lAst time we’ll ever use it
PH: Funnily enough i7 doesn'7.
horridHarbinger [HH] responded to memo.
HH: GOGDAMN. WHAT THE FUCK WAS SO FUCKING IMPORTANT YOU HAD TO CALL AN EMERGENCY CONCILIATORY MEETING AT TWO IN THE FUCKING AFTERNOON.
PH: We in7errup7 your 6eau7y sleep?
HH: NO. THANKFULLY FOR YOU CHUCKLEFUCKS MY COMMANDER HAD ME RUNNING DELIVERIES FOR HIS MORAIL UP ON DECK THREE, OTHERWISE I’D BE WAY MORE PISSED WITH YOU THAN I ALREADY AM.
PH: Oh 6oo hoo, someone had 7o do his jo6.
BL: jjAAkk
PH: Righ7. Sorry.
BL: gAberl there is something jjAAkk And i hAve to tAlk to you About
HH: OH GOG.
HH: I AM PRESSING THE BRIDGE OF MY CARTILAGINOUS NUB SO HARD RIGHT NOW ITS LEAVING LITTLE YOU SHAPED MARKS TO METAPHYSICALLY ILLUSTRATE HOW ANNOYED I AM RIGHT NOW.
HH: FOR THE LAST TIME I’M NOT GOING TO THROUPLE’S MINI-GOLF WITH YOU.
PH: Oh for fuck’s sake.

HH: I AM SERIOUS, YOU TRY TO BRING ME UP TO DECK TWO I WON'T EVEN BOTHER WITH THE AIRLOCK YOU'RE GOING TO SEE A REAPER SHAPED HOLE ALL THE WAY THROUGH THREE FEET OF TITANIUM EXOSKELETON FOLLOWED BY THE DISTINCT LACK OF SOUND IN SPACE AS I FREEZE TO DEATH AS FAR AWAY FROM THE MINI-EIFEL TOWER OF HUMILIATION AS TROLLIANLY POSSIBLE.
PH: I can'7 do 7his.
BL: you're not leAving
HH: WELL I AM.
BL: not you either
BL: this isn't About pocket sized club bAll
BL: or Ashen fAygo And pAint night or Anything else we're just
BL: gAberl, we don't think this is working
HH: WELL THEN TRY SOME BETTER TACTICS, BECAUSE I'M SURE AS HELL NOT GOING WILLINGLY.
BL: you're not listening
BL: the we is jjAAkk And i
BL: And the this is
BL: well
BL: All of it
HH: WHOA WAIT. ARE YOU BREAKING UP WITH ME RIGHT NOW?
PH: Well we sure as hell aren'7 asking you 7o agglu7ina7e respi7e6locks.
HH: I CAN'T FUCKING BELIEVE THIS. WHAT IS GOING ON HERE? WHAT THE FUCK IS THIS TURNAROUND?
BL: it wAsn't meAnt to be A blindside gAberl, we've both tried to sAy something before
BL: And we still cAre About you, neither of us wAnts to hurt you
HH: OH BULLSHIT. IS THIS BECAUSE I WON'T GO TO YOUR STUPID EXTROVERSION ACTIVATES? BECAUSE COMMANDER DOESN'T WANT TO GO EITHER, I JUST SAVE HIM THE TROUBLE BY MAKING A BIG ENOUGH FUSS THAT HE DOESN'T HAVE TO STEP ON YOUR TOES.
HH: YOU KNOW THAT'S ALL I'M DOING RIGHT? I'M JUST FUSSY. THAT'S NOT SOMETHING TO BREAKUP OVER, RIGHT?
BL: it's not About the Activities
HH: COMMANDER HELP ME OUT HERE. YOU'RE SCARING ME.
HH: SEVEN SECONDS AGO I JUST WHINED LIKE A WIGGLER AND CALLED MYSELF FUSSY AND YOU DIDN'T EVEN GO FOR THE THROAT.
HH: I KNOW YOU'RE STILL THERE I CAN SEE YOUR LITTLE BLUE ORB AS ACTIVE AS A DRONE DURING FILIAL SEASON.
PH: Reaper, I 7hink Ana's righ7.
HH: WHAT THE FUCK.
PH: I7 was nice. Well no7 nice I guess 6u7 i7 was media7ed and i7 made 6eing around you 7olera6le. 6u7 like she said 7hings aren'7 working anymore and I 7hink we're jus7 no7 compa7i6le as an auspis7icism.
BL: it's not thAt you did Anything wrong, gAberl
BL: it's more thAt jjAAkk And i Are At different stAtes in both our lives And imperiAl stAnding thAn you And it doesn't seem fAir to put thAt sort of strAin for the sAke of An AlreAdy contentiously vAcillAting relAtionship
HH: OH, SO WE'RE GOING FOR THE OLD, "IT'S NOT YOU, IT'S ME"?

HH: WEAK.
HH: CAN’T EVEN GIVE ME THE DECENCY OF A REAL REASON.
PH: 7ha7 is our real reason.
HH: IS IT? OK HOTSHOT, TELL ME THE REASON, RIGHT NOW **IN YOUR OWN WORDS** AND NOT THE VERSION CAPTAIN COACHED YOU ON.
HH: GO.
HH: AAANNND SIX MINUTES WITH NO RESPONSE. MOVING ON TO SUSPECT NUMERO DOS.
HH: IF THIS RELATIONSHIP WAS GETTING SO MESSED UP WITHOUT ME KNOWING, WHY DIDN’T YOU DO ANYTHING O GLORIOUS FASCILITATOR?
HH: ISN’T THAT SUPPOSED TO BE THE AUSPISTICE’S JOB?
BL: i Am doing something
BL: And this is it
HH: AND WHAT AM I SUPPOSED TO DO NOW? UNLIKE FUCHSIA-STAR WINNING HERO-BOY OVER HERE, I DON’T HAVE A BACKUP MATESPRIT TO FALL BACK ON
BL: i know you’ll figure something out
BL: we still love you gAberl, we just cAn’t be responsible for you Anymore, unless you
BL: chAnge
HH: PASS.
HH: WHAT ABOUT YOU, APPARENTLY FORMER KISMESIS? GOT ANY EMPTY LOVE CONFESSIONS YOU WANNA GET OFF YOUR TORSO PILLAR?
HH: THAT’S WHAT I THOUGHT.
HH: GOODDAY EVERYONE, AND GO FUCK YOURSELVES.
HH banned HH from responding to memo.

You whistle low and long as you reach the last line of the chat log. Then you read it again quickly and whistle even longer.

“Yeah,” he agrees.

“Damn,” you say, propping yourself up slightly on the loungeplank. “And I thought the way you left *us* was cold. This is like the double slam breakfast of vague breakups.”

From the corner where he’s only half paying attention to you, you can see his profile flinch. It’s not as visceral of a reaction as it used to be, which you feel you can pat yourself on the back for. You’ve always belonged to the school of thought that any significantly painful point can be numbed by prodding it enough, which you apply as equally to other people’s buttons as embarrassing things you did when you were six.

“What goes around comes around, I guess,” he says, and turns until all you can see is his back. He’s been trying to fix the leak in his quarter all morning, but if there’s something the *Talon* is known for, it isn’t prompt maintenance request responses. For now, he’s tied a handkerchief around the leaking pipe and shoved a bucket into the middle of the slowly expanding pool. You’ve already exhausted all the jokes you could make about that, and when he saw you were getting restless, he shoved his palmhusk into your hands so that you would leave him alone.

“I still can’t believe you were triangulating off with a pair of bluebloods!” you say, scrolling up to try and glean more about the other members of Reaper’s failed relationship. “And old-ass ones too. Who still says ‘agglutinate respiteblocks’?”

“I’m not exactly young either, anymore…Starting to rust.” A wrench appears from his fetch modus and he tightens a coupling. If you didn’t know him better, you’d swear he just made a joke.

“So that’s the end of the story?” You wave the palmhusk around. “The Incident occurs, and you never see ‘em again?”

“No.” The smile you imagined on his face is gone now, and the mood in the room drops until it’s on par with the physical dampness. “It ends before I even got court marshaled.” He’s not even turning the wrench now, just making a show, pretending like his hands are busy. “They were assigned to a mission less then a wipe later, first one without me. It went south. Some fight with a bunch of rogue gamblignants. No one made it back.”

“Oh.”

The bucket is almost full now. Every now and then cold condensation drips from soaked fabric into the waiting maw below it, filling the room with the steady *drip drip drip* of a ticking clock.

“So, you’re saying if they hadn’t ditched you, you’d probably be dead too?”

Reaper says nothing.

You get up off the loungeplank, and make your way over to him. You pap him on the side of the face and tell him, “aw, it’s alright buddy. Not your fault or nothing.”

It’s not even a pap really, just a blasé pat against his cheek as you stand on your toes to reach him. He stiffens, but other than that, doesn’t react, so you give up and peel away. You’ve always been told your shoosh-pap game is garbage (mostly by him) but that’s still remarkably unresponsive even for him, you so you decide to saunter back from whence you came.

“Besides,” you say, sashaying your hips as you do so, “they seemed like a couple of bulge scrubs. Got what was coming to ‘em.”

Suddenly, there’s a constriction on your arm, and you barely have time to register it before Reaper spins you around to face him. “They did *not* get what was coming to them,” he tells you in no uncertain terms.

Damn he closed in on you quickly. He’s hauling you upward, his face mere inches from yours, hostility flickering in the deep maroon of his eyes. The short spikes of his horns are so far forward on his scalp they nearly sprout from his forehead, and if he leaned down further, he would be butting them right into you.

You suppress a gulp and instead offer a grin. “You still holding a candle for them after all these sweeps, Gabe? C’mon Boss, you deserve way better than those bozos.”

His hands are cold and wet. When he shoves you away, he leaves a print on your arm.

“They are not bozos and they are not bulge scrubs, or anything else your ignorance tunnel can come up with.”

You can’t tear your glance nuggets away from him. You want him to keep looking at you like that, want him never to stop. That means what you think it means, right? That you want to infuriate him, want to be the object of his contempt.

When you say nothing, he turns, and you do the only thing that makes sense: you reach forward and hold *his* arm in place.

“I’m series Boss. You deserve waaayyy better,” you tell him, chipper as you can be while you sink your claws into the black mesh.

He tries to jerk away, and he may be strong but you’ve got laughsassin blood in your veins. You hold steady and he demands, “oh yeah? Better how?”

“People who won’t die on you,” you say through sharpened teeth.

Without warning, the tension between you reverses, and Reaper comes flying at you with murder in his eyes. You manage to pull him off balance, send his weight past you instead of through you, but your arms are still intertwined and he brings you down with him. You clatter on the loungeplank, his fangs bared and your hand around his collar. You knee has landed between his legs and the two of you are locked in and inescapable standoff as he looks at you with pure hatred. When will he learn? When has he ever opened himself up to you and been better for it?

You want to make him regret it. You’re leaning forward, breathing heavy, watching the way his lookstubs flick to your lips, suppressing every part of you that knows this is a mistake-

Chapter 8

WM: Lynx. Are you awake?
LS: Good evening Widowmaker, you're up awfu11y ear1y. 7o wha7 7o I owe 7he p1easure?
WM: I did not sleep.
WM: & it is not exactly a pleasure. I have something I need to tell you about.
LS: So do I, as chance may be, bu7 I'd 1ike 7o reve1 in mine for a bi7 1onger, so I'11 1e7 you go firs7.
WM: An incident occurred yesterday. & after deliberation I am starting to think I h&led it rather
WM: Poorly.
LS: You? Making a foo1 of yourse1f?
LS: Do go on.

She storms into your quarters her heels hot and her fists clenched. Her slipstream could burn you, and you get to bare witness to one of these rare celestial events the only come once each thousand years: Sombra is too angry to speak.

The fact that she still needs to yell at you though is the diametrically opposed force that leads to *you* following *her* to your block, and produces intermittent growls of frustration as she tries to form words but can't. Somehow, you are back here again, still trailing behind, reverted to an adolescent once more. The sullenness from your friend clown might as well be the admonishing honks of your lusus for all the sense of indifference they invoke in you.

Because, at the moment, you are unrepentant. You are the stone that the river parts around, at least outwardly, and you can only hope that if you exude an aura of disimpassioned self-control, you and the mask will eventually become one, and the confusion fluttering in your chest will subside until there is no reason at all to fear that Sombra might see it. If you wish to soar with the eagles, you must pretend to be one. A wise troll said that once.

She's still too pissed to glance at you for more than a few seconds. Instead she groans, spreads her arms, and falls backwards into your recuperacoon.

The slime is far too viscous to splash over the edge, but it does jiggle when the clown deposits her meager body into its contents, sopor quivering over its shallow bottom as it allows her to sink the remaining few inches. This and Widow's Kiss are the two luxuries you've allowed yourself in your life as an imperial exile. Your first day as a pirate, liberated under the glorious leadership of Doomfist the Successor, you shivered through daymares in the spare cocoon you'd claimed, huddled as you were among dozens of sleeping trolls. There is no hemospectrum among Talon, at least outwardly—rank is garnered by killcount and living long enough to survive to the next night. So new recruits, runaways not long from Alternia, would cluster together in the hull until the most dangerous profession in the universe took the few wipes it needed to whittle you down. That first day you longed for your old hive, for the indent of sopor in the floor you could sink into and breath in comfortably—

instead, you had the rattling snore of Sombra beside you as she blew snot bubbles in her slime.

Now, she throws her arms over her eyes. She can't be *that* mad at you—otherwise she'd be back in her own block instead of yours—so you wait, facing as much of the wall as you can while still keeping her in your sights. She has always been your anchor to this place and, for a very long time, your only one. You do not know how to manage her animosity, nor the confliction inside you: the regret that seems to be overpowered by the satisfaction. She throws her arms in the air, unrest causing her to thrash upwards, glaring at you as she says-

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LS: I am wai7ing 1croix.
WM: Sorry, I am having difficulty figuring out where to begin.
LS: How abou7 a7 7he beginning? A1ways seems 7o work for me.
WM: I am starting to see why Zarya hates you.
LS: F1a77erer.
WM: The "beginning" is not as easy a place to pinpoint as one would think.
WM: I don't know where it began, or became out of control. I believed I had a h&le on things.
LS: Rea11y? I didn'7.
WM: Shut up.
WM: Besides, you do not yet even know what I am talking about.
LS: I can 7ake a guess.
LS: Why don'7 we ro11 back 7he 7ape. Wha7 were you doing yes7erday morning?
WM: That's not as far back as you'll need if you actually want to underst& what is going on.
LS: Ame1ie dar1ing, I've been fo11owing 7his drama for sweeps.
LS: So. Yes7erday morning?
WM: Uhg. Fine.
WM: I was looking for Sombra on the lower decks. When she doesn't want to be found there is no hope of it, but if she's merely out causing trouble she's not too hard to spot.
LS: Wha7 did you wan7 wi7h her?
WM: You know, I don't even remember.
WM: It seems so trivial in retrospect.
LS: I 7ake i7 you found her 7hen? 7his wou1d be a very shor7 s7ory if no7.
WM: I did. I thought to look in Reaper's room, since bothering him is one of her go-tos when she's bored.
WM: I wasn't even thinking. I just
WM: Went in.

"I can't believe you-! You-!" She slams her fists down in the slime. It slowly creeps back over her hands, cautiously returning to its natural shape. "What even was the point of that? There's like, literally nothing to be jealous of!"

You stare at her, uncomprehending. But then the line is made in your thinkpan, one dot to the other, and exasperation to the point of disgust wells in up inside you. She still thinks you're *flushed* for her. *Still*. You have known each other since you were *six* and she still thinks-

If not for the lingering thrill and your undecided qualms, you might be able to muster up the strength to be disappointed in her.

“Sombra,” you tell her, for not the first nor the last time, “you are an idiot.”

WM: & I was greeted with the sight of Sombra & Reaper a hair’s breath away from fucking each other.
LS: Oh.
LS: Oh shi7.

“*I’m* an idiot?” she scoffs. “I’m not the one who can’t tell the difference between horny and hatesex. And even if we *were* going pushers with each other it wouldn’t *matter* because you and I aren’t even-! You never-!” She throws a glob of slime at you. It doesn’t take much effort to dodge it. “Uhg! Why do you do this *now* when things are going so well?”

“You’re not pitched for him Sombra,” you say, and you’re surprised at how calmly you say it. You can feel the precipice of change, that you are approaching something and you have to hold back to not get too excited.

“What do you know about that?” A snarl twitches at the corner of her nose. “Okay so we’re morails, big deal. Quadrants change. It’s not like I’m moving in on someone else’s turf, Boss is as cloistered as an adult jade.”

“You’re not pitched for him,” you go on. “You’ve never been pitched for anyone.”

LS: How c1ose are we 7a1king here? Was 7here a pai1 nearby?
WM: About that.
WM: But to answer your question, pretty damn close. I don’t think it was planned though, more a heat of the moment you’re-annoying-me-so-bad-I-need-to-fuck-you-right-now-otherwise-I-might-just-kill-you soft of thing.
LS: 7ha7’s odd1y specific. Have you been 7hinking a 1o7 abou7 7his?
WM: Of course I fucking have, think before you speak.
LS: Ah, righ7.
WM: They were just…all over each other, practically out of their pants & I was just so gogdamn pissed.
WM: After everything I did to sort things out after the reunion, getting them to a point where we could actually be all in the same room again, & they were going to ruin things with some fucking quadrant-kitty-corner one night st&.
WM: She doesn’t hate, she just wants to be hated. You know that right?
WM: & I knew if I let them go through with it, they’d try to validate it with a relationship & then everything would just be
WM: Over.
WM: It’d fall apart just like she always lets it do.
LS: So wha7 did you do?
WM: Pervert.

LS: May I remind you 7ha7 *you* invi7ed *me* 7o 7his 1i771e advicoria1 ar7ic1e recep7or.
WM: I know I
WM: It was just so. Stereotypical.
WM: It's the sort of thing a five-sweep-old makes up when fantasizing about breaking up an unstable pair.
WM: Remember I mentioned there was a bucket? It wasn't for pailing. It was full of water, I think someone had put it there to stop a leek.
WM: I wasn't really thinking tactfully at the time, may have been seeing a little fuchsia.
LS: Widowmaker.
LS: You didn'7.
WM: It appears I did.

It only takes a moment for the hurt on Sombra's to morph into fury. She rises, hair still dripping, water running from her scalp and tearing through her paint where she's forgotten to seal it. She jabs a finger at you. "And what the *fuck* would you know about that, Amelie?"

It's a question she asked you a mere minute ago, but now with so much more venom to it. For some reason your ignorance tunnels sees fit to keep opening itself, and the premade words are reveal themselves, fresh and ready to be served.

"We have known each other nearly our whole lives," you say, because the truth has never hurt anyone, right? "You're always aiming for the spade, Sombra. It's like you have an addiction. I know you cannot see it from where you are, but I have been arbitrating these one-sided relationships since I found you on that beach. You may think you want to hate people Sombra, but you don't."

There. That's as clear as you could ever make it. How long have you wanted to say it, how long have you been drudging behind the scenes, trying to make her happy?

You're not sure it matters, since she's certainly not happy now. She walks forward, tripping on the pool's raised lip. The first thing you did when you earned your own block was drag up that little kiddie pool, dumping in as much sopor as possible and not caring about volume-displacement as you finally sunk in. The warm embrace felt like coming home. That's what you'd always liked about your pool, the ability to pretend you were underwater, the privilege to sit back and just breathe. It was an old comfort, like your gun, like Sombra. But the Sombra you have now isn't yours anymore, not really.

She jabs a prong in your sternum. "You think because you admit to stepping on my life that makes you some kind of expert? It makes you a quadrangular glass nose-pressing creep!"

You flinch. It surprises you, and your back is suddenly against the wall. "I am trying to help Sombra. For once, listen to me: you have an inability to maintain or even properly begin pitched feelings-"

"*You think I don't already know that?*" It's nearly daylight by the according to the ship's suncycles and she *must* be waking your neighbors by now but for some reason you're suddenly more frightened than concerned. Not *of* her but- "You think I don't fucking notice?

I’m inside my own gogdamn head Widow, I *know* I’m fucked up, I *know* I can’t make anything work and I don’t need *you* telling how I’m so broken I can’t even have feelings.”

She slams her fists against your vascular cage. It might hurt if you bones were not made tide and trench. You are close enough to her now to see it’s not just the afterimage of pipe water making her face wet.

“That’s why this had to work!” she says, punctuating each word with a forceful punch to your chest, turning the ineffective strikes into a steady tattoo. “Because if it was going to work with anyone it was going to be with him. Don’t you see? He’s the closest I’ve ever come to it and you just went along and-”

She cuts herself off with a sob. Slowly, her pounding turns feeble until it comes to a stop entirely, and she presses her forehead against your chest. You think you’re starting to see now. It may be you she’s hitting, but you’re not the one she’s fighting.

Stiffly, you try to close your arms around her. Despite your long friendship and apparent closeness, you don’t think you’ve ever hugged her before. She’s gone silent again, shoulders jerking in a rhythmic and identifiable motion.

“You don’t…” she says, barely intelligible with her face shushed against you “You don’t think I’m busted, right?”

Even you—famous serial killer of the Outglut who just spent the past few minutes dumping on your friend for how rough her loathelife has been for *you*—isn’t cruel enough to push on now.

“Of course not,” you say, awkwardly smoothing down her sopping hair. “Of course not Sombra.”

You have never hugged anyone, actually. Never had to comfort a morail, never even held a matesprit after a long night. It makes you wonder what authority you have being anyone’s auspistice; if relationships require job experience, you might as well hang your hat now.

LS: We11 7ha7 is qui7e 7he confessiona1.
LS: Why do you fee1 you hand1ed i7 poor1y 7hen? 7ha7 sounds 1ike every auspis7ice’s we7 dream, no pun in7ended.
WM: That isn’t what I have regrets about.

She kisses you. And you wish feeling were hats because then you could just toss yours out the airlock and not think about them until it’s all over. But they are not hats, and you spend every minute of the messy kiss hating yourself and the mistakes you’ve made. But you let her. She presses up on her toes and you’re trapped between her and the wall while she draws her arms around your neck. You’re petrified and you keep on letting her until she presses against you so vehemently your thinkpan snaps back to reality.

You push her back. Too forcefully, and you immediately regret it even though your body is already compounding in relief. Because it takes a second for the surprise on her face to twist into rejection, and in that second you think you may be the worst person in the universe.

“Sombra,” you say, to parlay, to mediate between her and your inability to find something to follow it as she heads toward the door. “Sombra you can’t just replace him with me.”

“Yeah,” she says, scrubbing tears from her cheeks. “That’s pretty obvious.”

And then she’s gone.

WM: I’m not as good of an auspistice as I claim to be. When we left Reaper’s block she was
WM: Quite distressed.
WM: I attempted to mediate back in my quarters but she wasn’t receptive. We fought for a bit.
WM: I just want to make it clear that I have never wanted to hurt her, or damage any of her relationships beyond repair. I just don’t want to see her unhappy.
LS: Yes yes you care abou7 her so on and so for7h, basic ashen p1aybook.
LS: I’m wai7ing for 7he s7inger, 1croix.
WM: She kissed me.
LS: Oh fuck.
WM: I could tell she was in a bad place so I didn’t stop her, but then she tried to take it further & I had to put my foot down.
LS: Sufferer 7his no7 where I 7hough7 7his was going.
LS: I
LS: Hm
LS: May have some7hing 7o share wi7h 7he c1ass.
WM: I do not know her whole claim to my flushed crush was some sort of abstract “I’m rubber & you’re glue” psychological trick she’s been peddling for sweeps now, or if she really was rebounding that hard. One of those options is decidedly less cataclysmic than the other, but with indiscernible mind of Sombra who knows.
LS: We11 I may be ab1e 7o shed some 1igh7 on 7ha7 mys7ery.
LS: I s1ep7 wi7h Sombra yes7erday.
WM: I am very much not in the mood Seventeen.
LS: I’m no7 joking. 7ha7’s ac7ua11y wha7 I was going 7o 7e11 you abou7 when you firs7 messaged.
WM: What.
LS: She 1ef7 righ7 before you rang. I was a 1i771e surprised she s7ayed for breakfas7, bu7 now 7ha7 I’ve heard 7his who1e accoun7, i7’s s7ar7ing 7o make sense.
WM: Lynx Seventeen if you are fucking with me right now I am going to kill you. Actually, I am going to kill you even if you aren’t fucking with me.
WM: Especially if you aren’t fucking with me.
LS: Af7er hearing abou7 a11 of 7his, I’m rea11y ra7her gra7efu1 she c1eaned up 7he s1ime before coming 7o my door. 7ha7 wou1d have pu7 qui7e 7he damper on 7he mood.
WM: Where are you Seventeen? At this moment? I am coming for you.
LS: Have you swapped off Reaper so quick1y? I 7hough7 you had equa11y s7rong conci1ia7ions for him.

LS: Or is your ashen passion for Sombra 7ha7 pungen7 7ha7 whoever she foo1s around wi7h i7 jus7 sor7 of s1ops on7o 7hem as we11?
WM would like to know the location of LS
LS: Good 7ry.
WM: But why??? Why would pail with Sombra??
LS: If I'm being hones7? For 7he same reason you didn'7.
LS: I cou1d 7e11 she was upse7 abou7 some7hing, wha7 wi7h a11 7he 7ears she was doing a poor job of hiding.
LS: You rea11y did a number on 7he poor 7hing, you know.
WM: There is a spare palmhusk next to me I have just strangulated into a pile of grubslurry while imagining it was your neck.
LS: And I didn'7 fee1 i7 wou1d be good for her 7o be a1one. So I provided some comfor7.
LS: Gran7ed I probab1y wou1dn'7 have if I'd known she was suffering 7ha7 par7icu1ar series of emo7iona1 vu1nerabi1i7ies. S1eeping wi7h her af7er she'd jus7 been ji17ed by bo7h her hear7 and her spade wou1d have been a bi7 7oo scummy, even for me.
LS: Migh7 I a1so remind you 7ha7 I didn'7 ac7ua11y *know* 7he even7s of yes7erday un7i1 our 1i771e ha1f-hour conversa7ion here.
WM: You think that lets you off the hook?
LS: Perhaps no7. Bu7 before you s7ar7 invo1ving yourse1f be7ween mine and Sombra's priva7e affairs, perhaps 7here is a differen7 pairing you shou1d sor7 ou7?
LS: Wink wink nudge nudge.
LS: And proper1y 7his 7ime: no ambigui7ies, shame g1obes 7o 7he inside-ou7side divider.
WM: Didn't I just try that?
LS: Wi7h a singu1ar par7ner. I7 7akes 7hree 7o make an auspis7icism work.
WM: Fine. I see your point.
WM: Though I am still going to find & kill you later.
LS: Widowmaker, every day you bring me a new de1igh7. P1ease never s7op.

Chapter 9

The thing is, when they say all a rust can do in the Empire is the dirty jobs—the butlers, the janitors, the hoofbeast shoe scrapers—that's a bit of a misconception. When they say *dirty*, what they mean is the jobs no one else wants.

"Hey there," you say politely, tilting your hat to the port authority. "Name's McCree. Imperial investigator."

The blueblood behind the counter looks you up and down, from your eyes to your poncho to the caste sign around your belt, and then back up again, trying to put several pieces of incompatible information into something they can process.

You decide to be helpful, and place your documents on the arborite in front of them. (Not entirely out of chivalry though, you've had a highblood think you were making a none-too-funny joke when you played around too long, and you've learned enough not to make that mistake a twenty-first time.) "Here's the official request to open my investigation."

They stare down at it, not opening past the first page. It's got the cerulean mark of your superior officer, but it doesn't matter if that's a rank lower than them when the paperwork is definitely bureaucracy official.

You wait patiently, unhurried smile on your face. Finally they look up and say, "I wasn't informed of an investigation."

"'Course not!" you reply jovially. "Wouldn't be much of an investigation if anyone knew ahead of time. No offense or nothin' friend, I'm sure you can keep a secret, we just can't be sure *who's* going let something slip to the rank and file."

(Even though you'd love to keep going, you cut yourself off there. You've had your target become so irate by your prodding that they've decided to cull you on the spot, paperwork be damned, and you're not going to make that mistake a thirty-eighth time.)

They look down at the documents, and back at you. "Why don't we save some time. Our facilities are at maximum efficiency-"

"Oh no," you chuckle. "I'm afraid there's been a mixup. I ain't no inspector. I'm here to investigate the disappearance of two of your decorruptors."

The *job* part of *dirty job* is completely relative. If you're on a battle cruiser, there'll be a thousand openings for toilet scrubber; if you're planet side, they need replacement foot soldiers perigeely. But, if you're a lowblood who just so happens to find yourself assigned to a legislacerator tribulation center, suddenly the one thing no one wants to do is investigate dead-end cases.

Your name is MCCREE and you specialize in unglamorous inquiries that will never result in an arrest. You excel at cases that keep discreetly sliding to the bottom of the pile because the

amount of effort to fly to a rim world, discover there's no witness, crime scene, or evidence, and then fly back just so you can put a little red checkmark on the folder and dispose of it is way more effort than any self-respecting teal would ever *not* shirk off to a subordinate. But, if there's one thing that sets you apart from all the other bronzes and burgundies shuffling about under the oppressive weight of grunt work, is that you've never not damn well tried. Sure you have no resources. No warrants, no authority, no clearance. Sure even if you were somehow to stumble upon an actual miracle that paints the perpetrator red-(or orange or yellow or green) handed, Symmetra would probably never take the time to do what essentially amounts to a slap on the wrist. But despite all that, you've always done your damn job. After all, it's not like you have anything else to do.

Lowblood disappearances are the sort of thing that can't entirely be swept under the rug. Highblood victims, no matter murders or more ambiguous matters, always end up drawing crowds to the courtblocks, the huge spectacles subjugglators delight in. A lowblood murder is almost always justified, and unless it's both very public and committed by another lowblood, there'll never be anyone to hang. But vanishing? Ironically enough, can't be ignored. Nine times out of ten (by your guess. Like you've said, any statistics that would back you up are systematically incinerated) it's a culling, and the perpetrator is just having a little fun with whatever's left. But, there is the slightest chance a troll has defected, and that is the sort threat to the hegemony that at the very least the civil servants have to *say* they've looked into.

A knock at your. The port authority, who you'd come to know as Quartermaster, had blanched as they'd shown you to your temporary office, obviously disgruntled about giving a rust private corridors, even it was just an old broom closet. You'd set about work immediately, making a lamp out of a mop and a ration bar, and pushing crates together until you had a surface for files.

"Come in," you call.

You look over your shoulder as he enters.

"I was told to come here." The question he is asking is apparent enough: *why?* and *who gave you the right?*

"Hanzo," you grin. "Pleasure to meet you. Name's McCree, I'm investigating a pair of disappearances here on CC37A."

Olives range from sprite-like things to downright hulking, their temperaments just as wide-ranged. It's unfortunate: unpredictability never bodes well for a case. It's not all bad though, since the troll that stands before you has obviously delicately honed the physiology the slurry has gifted him, whittled down until the only thing left is muscles on sinew in a form quite pleasing to the ganderbulb. Farm life has its benefits, obviously. But the long and the short of it is, if you're going to be spending a lot of time together over the next few days, at least he ain't bad to look at.

"Those occurred on parcel 11.99° 2.15°," he sniffs. "I am stationed nowhere near that."

And there's that temperament you were talking about. One shade too close to middle-class and they'll look down on whoever with that slimy air of self-gratification. Well. You're never

cowed that easy.

You smile, real polite-like, as you always do. “I wasn’t aware they were public knowledge.”

He stiffens. Got ‘em.

“Now,” you say smoothly. “If you’ll let me talk, I’ll get around to asking my questions, and then you can back to your own business. Was looking through the personnel manifest, found your full name was Hangzo Shmada.”

He clicks his tongue. “And?”

“No need to get testy now. Plenty of folks get their titles from their childhood name, me included,” you inform him plainly. “But that wasn’t what caught my eye. You see, it seems like one of the victim’s names was named Genjii Shmada. On a planet with a population of twelve thousand fifty-two, that’s a mighty big coincidence.”

His arms fold across each other, covering the impressive span of his chest. “It is a common caste name.”

“See now,” you say, swinging around a chair so you can saddle it, “right there was your chance to be honest. Had real plausible deniability up until then, but even if I hadn’t done my research ahead of time, it wouldn’t take me more than a few seconds at the registrar to fine out it *is* a common caste name, but it certainly ain’t for olive.”

His eyes go wide, and you can see his squawk blister bob. That’s the thing about imagined security, it only takes one little kick at the struts to send the whole thing toppling down. You don’t relish reminding him where you both are in the world though, even if he does need to be taken down a peg.

You soften your expression. “Don’t worry, I ain’t accusing you of anything. I just want you to talk to me, and tell me your connection to the Sparrow.”

He doesn’t speak, talk blaster a fine line, obviously struggling on whether his fear of retribution overrides his distaste for you.

Using a strutpod, you drag over a spare chair. “C’mon, have a seat. Want something? I got…” You look around the amenities Quartermaster provided you, then admit, “…water?”

Again, he sniffs. You could really learn to hate that sound. Then, finally, he says, “I will have some, if you warm it first.”

And that’s how you get the two of you to sit down, no desk or notepad between you—not that the desk would have fit with both your chairs anyway. He stalls for as long possible, swirling his chipped mug of hot water while he comments on the draft in the north wall.

“The sooner we talk, the sooner you can go,” you point out.

He sets the mug in his lap. “Genjii and I are brothers.”

“Brothers? Ain’t that a-” You stop yourself.

He narrows his eyes. “Go on. I know what you are going to ask, so just do so.”

“…Clown thing?”

He sighs, irritated knot at the corner of his nose. “Genjii and I had no lusus. We were taken in by the Church when we were wrigglers, and raised for purposes you can probably imagine. Our primary…*benefactor*…insisted we had the power of dragons inside us, but he was, obviously, insane. He grew to believe that Genjii was too weak for the dragon’s power, and had me cull him.”

“And you refused?” you ask.

“I did as I was told,” he tells you flatly. “It was not until after the deed was done that I realized how far Sojiro had fallen. He had even been mad enough to deny the Condescension’s will, which brought his doom. Imperial forces came, slaughtered his flock, and subsumed me into the bureaucracy.”

Sojiro, not a figure you recognize, but a rogue Church cell certainly explains the purple caste name.

You link your fingers together, elbows resting on your knees. “Considering I have reports that Sparrow didn’t go missing until about a wipe ago, I take it you didn’t actually kill him?”

“I thought I did.” His jaw is tight. “At least, I was under that impression until he was taken from where he was left and brought to Oasis.”

“The research station,” you mull. “They, what? Experimented on him?”

“More than that. To my understanding, he is now primarily cyborg.”

You whistle. Cyborgization, all for an olive. Of course, you have no way to verify that, but you’ll give the benefit of the doubt for now. “You said ‘to my understanding’. As in, you weren’t there for the operation. You haven’t had contact with him since you killed him, have you?”

He looks out your non-existent window. “He does not know I am here. I received a tip shortly after he transferred out of Oasis, and was able to secure a position on the same planet. Here, that is.” His thumb rubs circles on the polished mug handle. “I wished to see him again.”

“And how long have you been here without making contact?”

He does not deny the accusation. “Four sweeps.”

“I see.” Well, that’s a real spleenfowl of a situation. It’s a dead end if he’s telling the truth, and a likely second attempt if he isn’t. “Just want to clarify things. The folks over at Oasis went through an extensive operation on some wiggler they found during a zealot raid?”

“So I am lead to believe.” His voice is terse again, defensive.

“And whoever was running that raid went through the trouble of putting both of you, one who was half-dead, through customs instead of culling you along with the rest?”

“*Yes.*”

His eyes might very well have the power of dragons with how he’s searing you with them now. That’s all you’re getting today you know, so you stand up and offer your hand. “Well, thanks for your time Hanzo. That’s all I’ll be needing for now.”

After a offended hesitation, he shakes your hand. It’s brief, and he slinks to the exit. You return to your desk, only to realize the door still isn’t clicking closed, and you raise your head to see him paused halfway out. Before you can ask, he looks away from you and says, “please. Do what you must to find my brother.” And then he’s gone, for real this time.

You shake your head. This one’s going to be a tangle.

The stalk ruptures in your fingers as you hold it to the wind, seeds spreading and cast as far the breeze will take them. CC37A’s barometric pressure is unnaturally heightened, winds increased to allow for maximum pollination across the planet. The nutrition stalks stand hardy, but it threatens to take your hat every few minutes.

Although the last known location of your missing persons was back at their own bunker, less than a wipe before their disappearance they both answered a distress call down to this parcel. When you asked, Quartermaster seemed to think it was nothing out of the ordinary, but you aren’t so sure. An apparent false alarm, and the first responders go missing within days? Still, unless you’re going to charge them with corruption, no one’s going to have a better explanation.

You sigh, and begin to pace a radius out from the marker you’ve set yourself. As you walk, you admit this case is turning into a real headache. Your key witness is also your key suspect, and though you’ve had a few more chats with him, you’ve gleaned little more than the fact that he makes positively irritating company.

Shaking your head, you tell yourself to slow down with that train of thought. You’re only here for a few days after all, not enough for anything to happen.

When you’re twelve clicks away from where you started, you give up and walk back. You’ve found that the growth here looks newer, not quite the azure of the surrounding stalks, but an immature powder blue. They’re still in neat rows: drones would have been on the scene as soon as it was deemed clear, and within a perigee, there will be no evidence at all.

This place gives you a bad feeling, a tickle at the back of your chug column. Something is wrong here, anomalous, like setting one foot in this circle of plants set your decorruptors mad. You wish could just turn back the clock and see what they saw, know what is wrong with this whole picture.

But feelings, (for any caste lower than cerulean) aren’t admissible in court, and it’s clear this is another dead end. You gather up your few belongings and head back to the spaceport,

ceaseless wind tugging at your poncho all the while.

“Are you aware of a troll by the name of Captain Pharah?” you ask him.

This time, your desk is between the two of you, all of the evidence gathered during your stay here spread out onto the splinter-inducing crates.

“I have not, no.” He has another mug, though this time you’ve made him some tea. “Should I?”

“She was Mercy’s matesprit. Not just for bucket season either, but by all accounts they seemed genuinely fond of each other.” You pass a photo to Hanzo. “She, Mercy, and Sparrow all transferred out of Oasis together. Then, a few weeks after the other two went missing, she requests *another* transfer, out on the frontlines.”

“Is she your next suspect?” he asks, passing it back.

“Well, no actually. Officially she’s dead.” You meet Hanzo’s raised brows with a shrug. “Gamblignant attack, few days after leaving Cici. According to records, there were no survivors.”

“I see.” He’s staring hard at the photo now with that deep, brooding gaze, as though Pharah might spontaneously pop out of it and give him some answers. You sympathize. You’ve definitely wished the same on some of the rougher cases.

“Are you sure you don’t know anything about her?” you press. “Anything at all could help.”

“I have told you what I know. If you do not care for it, I will not repeat myself.” And damn if that doesn’t make your blood boil. You have to remember the promise you made to yourself in order to keep your cool.

You exhale, lower your eyes, and begin scraping up your files. “In that case, I think you should be going. My transit’s in an hour and they’ll leave without me whether I’m in a shootout or the ablution block. And they’ve done both: had to pay a pretty hefty bribe to make it back on time and avoid a punctuality culling.”

Hanzo’s eyes widen. “You are leaving? But what about-”

“The case?” You wave the folder. “That’s all that there is. I’ve followed every lead to the best of my ability, and compiled a list of details for my superiors. If they think it’s suspicious enough, they’ll send a real investigator down here to deal with it.”

For the first time, something besides haughty discomfort crosses Hanzo’s face. You suspect you would have seen it too if you’d caught a glimpse of him the first time he’d lingered at your door. Your frown softens.

“I’m sorry pal. It’s probably better this way. If one of the teals in your jurisdiction was sent to deal with it, they’d probably only grab what they needed for a trail and then be done with it.” And of course, you both know who’d end up swinging.

Hanzo, unsurprisingly, is not comforted by this. “Your uselessness is surprising, even with how little I expected. May you ship burn on exit.”

“Well, I guess we’re two peas in a pod, ‘cause you ain’t exactly been helpful either. Now, thanks for your company and all, but get the hell out of here before one of us says something a little too heated.”

He glares—disappointment, antipathy, and a little of something spicier all rolled into one smoldering gaze. But then he takes your advice, and vanishes without a word. For the best, probably. It’s all just for the best, isn’t it?

Symmetra takes your report wordlessly; filing away the digital versions while the physical one disappears into the incinerator before your very eyes. Her cold indifference makes you long for even the barest hint that someone might genuinely dislike you.

You slip out, scent of burned paper stiff in your nose. Who knows. Maybe someday some junior legislacerator would sort through the other thousands of unfinished reports and stumble upon this one, running off to CC37A to continue the hunt. Even in your imagination’s eye, hundreds of sweeps in the future, the planet remains unchanged.

Chapter 10

Your first form is simple.

You are forged from the hearts of stars, metals from a thousand stolen worlds, bent and folded and compressed into the beating heart of a people. The architect of your nascency bleeds drops of ocean blue on a forge that vaporizes them before they even make contact, tears and sweat not only expected but demanded by the one who calls for your creation. Your first father bleeds and works and bleeds, until he can do none of those things, and you claim your first life with his body crumpled over your infancy.

But your commissioners are patient. The hundreds of sweeps it will take to make you are grains of sand in the desert to them, and this desert is hotter and deader than any other you will ever see as it denudes itself to the sun in all its irradiated glory. The forge is an open flower under an unsetting star, and your first mother comes to continue where her predecessor failed.

She understands the power of elegance. Bands of metal for the wrists, jagged edges to trim the knuckles, her ideas give you shape if not yet strength. So then, when she is old and feeble and lays down to rest for the last time, your nearly completed forms watches her dry into preservation.

It falls to your last parent to complete you. This is how you gain your gears, your complexity, the ability to level mountains. Another rivulet of blue joins the first two, and then you are finished, their hands cradling you in awe. But you are not theirs to keep.

Your maestro looks down at you for a time, and then places you on his fist. You subsume him, and he you, and he screams in agony as the ritual binds the two of you together, and annoints you in your last creator’s blood.

//So Enters The Savior//

Three smiths, three victims, and he will claim so, so many more. Entire planets are leveled, the violet prince who destroys all in his path, the jewel in the eye of the Empress. You cannot be broken, or defeated, and you embed yourself in his flesh to remind him that he is nothing without you. There are two pistons, one through the forearm, one through the wrist, and when the flesh grows back it is around and over, until the nerve endings are familiar enough to you that you can mistake them for your own.

His passion is legendary, his myth boundless, and because he is beloved he gets away with much. There is a teal lover is at his side through all battles, just as vicious as he, and The Saviors elevates him in ways that would earn him enemies if any nobility even dared to think such things. His matesprit seeks justice not just among the weak and pathetic of lesser species, but among the ranks of the complex, vicious but untouchable as he slaughters his way through what has not been purged in a decade.

//So Enters The Scourge//

It is not enough for him. All can see that, even you with your lack out outward sense except that of pain. His eyes see corruption everywhere, and though he clings to the safety of your wielder's title for as long as he can, the betrayal comes eventually, poison pressed against lips.

//The Savior Exits Stage Left//

Treason! Murderer! They are no free to declare what they like, but for some reason The Scourge does not fall as easily as they thought he would. No ship and seemingly no allies, he continues his crusade against those he sees unfit to lead.

He figures out a way to remove the clamps from inside his flesh. For this, you hate him.

He moves through circles, the wars along the edges of the empire forgotten. Each planet he arrives at suffers, and he begins to notice the faults not in just the aristocracy, but in their subordinates. He begins to slow, bogged down in minor trials and vigilantism as each sin is swept clean from his path. And here, here is where he gains his competition.

//So Enters The Successor//

A pirate should be tried, a pirate should be hung, and pirate should be brought before His Honorable Tyranny and devoured in front of a watching empire.

But this one, he eludes, this bronze who shares his hue with your coat. The rivalry springs into something, where they each grow so close without killing the other, nose to nose and then more. The pirate escapes with haul from a successful raid, but the avenger is hot behind, stowing away on his ship.

The cycle repeats, lulling all into a sense of safety, of routine. This is what makes it easy for the one-armed gamblignant. When he is ready, he takes what he wants.

//The Scourge Exits Stage Left//

This one, he modifies you more than any other. You become a replacement for the Successor's missing limb, elongated and jointed and spiked with wicked curling appendages. His followers take it as a sign, this lowblood who wields the power of a conquer, the true heir to a prince's savagery. Word spreads wide; to the fleet, to the inner worlds, to Alternia. Trolls flock to him and he accepts all, traitors found quickly where the faithful stand.

Not all believe. Some are disgraced highbloods, some are frustrated with the laws that keep their violent urges in check. Others just want to see what will happen. It does not matter. Within sweeps, the fleet is larger than it has ever been, greater than even under Marquise Spinneret Mindfang, though there is none who remember the name. They are terror for hire, and you have never been more bloodied.

Three smiths, three wielders, and yet your work is not done. You can feel there will be a next, and that her time is approaching, understanding bleeding through into each lesson. Thee smiths, three doombringers, one gauntlet. Only you. You, and things yet to come.

Chapter 11

Your name is WIDOWMAKER and, theoretically, your chosen occupation is not feudalistic.

Yes there are captains, each vessel in the fleet a nation and all that, but loyalty to the Successor is absolute. Ships fly and attacks are made at a captain's discretion, but there are few gamblignant left in the galaxy that have not flocked to Doomfist's banner, where the safety of the herd is well-worth the small tithe they pay. There are those close to him, but this collection demands no lip service, holds no title of ensign, lieutenant, or commander. Factions do not spring up where his attention falters. Why would they? There are no ranks to climb: if they want to claim *Talon* for themselves, they will have to stand up and fight him for it in open battle, to which he will accept any and all challenges with a soft smirk. The Admiralty is up for anyone who is strong enough to claim it. A wilting meritocracy, where status is determined by how many caegars you can grab in a given run.

So then, where does this assembly leave you?

Whatever the unspoken galitime law of piracy supposedly is, allegiances have formed, and they appear to have done so with his blessing. For instance, he could have easily drawn Sombra back to his side once she'd gotten what she'd wanted out of her own schemes—her skills are not so common that she is a dispensable ally. But, he let her go without a fuss, merely that knowing smile of his as she drifted back into her friendship with the Aspirant. When he calls his inner circle, as he has now, the lines in the sand become clear: Sombra lounges near Zarya and Lynx, pretending like she isn't. (As you catch sight of Lynx, your eyes narrow. You still have business with them, but that will have to wait until later.) You and Reaper, of course, ruin her air of nonchalance further by crowding her space.

On the opposite side, though not far enough away to clearly divide between audience and exhibition, Doomfist sits on his throne, a handful of trolls milling at the foot of the stairs. New recruits, as you'll learn, but there is no need to inaugurate every wayward soul that ends up as a mercenary. He is plotting something.

Reaper hasn't taken his eyes off the cerulean. You have known him to stare sometimes, a form of intimidation, but now he isn't even shooting passing glares at the other two, his sole attention focused on the armored one.

"What is it?" you ask, low enough that Sombra will not hear.

He doesn't seem to either. The room is barbed with something, so potent that even Zarya in all her density can sense it, though she doesn't notice the way Doomfist is studying her like a curious lab specimen. He is clearly reveling in the room's frustration, amused by our desire to begin whatever fool meeting this is meant to be.

So he starts. He introduces each troll one by one, and you watch Reaper watch. It is all inscrutable until-

“And this,” he says, and gestures to the shadow emerging from behind the throne, one that must have been there all along but somehow still escaped your sniper’s eye, “is Docterror Moira O’Deorain, one of my oldest and most loyal friends. She has done us a great service, securing more…volunteers…that are willing to aid us in our goal.”

Then everything—Reaper, Zarya, even the speech—leaves your thinkpan because the figure that steps down from the plinth is, unmistakably, a violet.

You have not seen a seadweller since you were a child. There is a strum of vengeance in you, the immediate flicker of territorial defensiveness because this creature is not only of your ilk, but she is *old*. Piracy is a young trolls game, more so because it draws in fast and kills early, but no troll this can become ancient without clinging to the empire with tooth and nail, clawing her way to the top and disposing of anyone who gets in her way. This is a woman not to be trusted. Her imminent betrayal is written in the thickened crown of her gills, her unscarred flesh, the ancient growth of her spiraling horns: here is a troll who has lived thousands, maybe tens of thousands of years, and has always struck first.

But she must also be powerful. Duplicity is a trick that runs out fast, and can only be one that tips the scales in your favor, rather than providing actual scales in your defense. Something about her makes your teeth gnash, her pure aura exuding aplomb in spares. That inexorable ooze of arrogance drives you crazy, because you know it is deserved.

You’re lunging at her before you have conscious thought.

If were asked, and you will be, you would say it was defensive. The only people who matter to you in the entire galaxy are in this room right now, feet away from what you have come to be absolutely certain is a threat. You’ve killed for less. But those days are long behind you and the last time this impulse struck so strong you slaughtered all of Sombra’s coadjutors in less than twelve minutes. Now you are fangs bared, claws aimed for a quick blow, giving her no chance to anticipate the attack. There is pain in against your sternum.

You are on the ground.

Her boot is on your throat and you scrabble, panic and bloodlust both flaring as you air leaves your body. She reacted before you even got to her, before you could even *think*-

She is smiling down at you. The pounding in your ears has deafened you to the commotion, but now only the eerie silence lets you know that shouting rang through the chamber not a moment before. Straining to gain control of your panic before it overwhelms you, you blink the lilac from your vision and see what has unfolded.

Reaper has his shotgun pressed to the Docterror’s temple. She is unfazed, and part of you realizes that she could knock if from his hand before his finger could even caress the trigger. Not only that, but the goldblood has her pistol raised, pointed at Reaper’s back, a look of fury on her face that seems impossible with lissomeness she had exhibited just a moment ago.

Beyond them, only barely within your line of sight on the cold and rusted ground, Sombra has gun pointed at the floor, barely suggesting its previous intention. The olive’s blade is at her throat.

Silence rings in the room, oppressive, the tableau unmoving. No one dares. Zarya and Lynx are there, as helpless, as useless as the rest of you, just standing while a dribble of purple slides down Sombra's neck. Zarya's eyes keep bouncing in-between. If you turn just right, you can see where Reaper has his second gun trained on the goldblood, and her cerulean friend is hefting a rocket launcher at him.

A rocket launcher, of all things. It's almost funny. You don't have enough oxygen to laugh.

Instead, the moment goes on, until finally, finally, Doomfist says, "well I think that is enough of that. Moira, would you let her up?"

She smiles, keeping her triangle teeth hidden neatly behind her lips. "Of course." She steps off your neck.

You get to your feet, slowly. The other trolls do not relax: only their arms lower, or their swords withdraw. There is mistrusting looks in the corner of everyone's glance nuggets, and as you slither from Moira, never taking your eyes off her, the volatility of a fully charged FTL core remains.

"Excuse my Aspirant's friend," Doomfist placates, voice warm and tinged with good humor that you do not feel in appropriate. "You know seadwellers, they tend to run a bit…hot blooded."

"Of course," Moira agrees. "Or natural propensity for violence is what has brought us to the top of the spectrum in the first place."

He laughs. No one else seems to find it funny. "If there were any proof of that, it would be you, Docterror." He claps his hands together, flesh ringing against bronze. "Well, that was quite the series of introductions. You are all dismissed."

We look to one another. He stares, but does not repeat himself.

I slip away, first to escape out the door, but still slow enough to hear him say, "except for you, Aspirant. I would like to speak with you."

Your name is ZARYA and you know exactly this feeling as Doomfist summons you back into the throne room. Long ago, what feels like a lifetime, your lusus burbled reverberations through your hive until you sheepishly slinked into the rumpusblock. She pointed one webbed claw at a shattered vase, decorum that had survived three hundred years of Heiress assassinations, yet for some reason low lay broken before you. You said you didn't know what happened. She pointed her claw harder.

That shame is grating on you now, and it takes all your accumulated pride to lift your head and lock ganderbulbs with the Successor.

"I must say," he says, an even voice, one he reserves for private conversations, "I'm a bit disappointed with that display."

“Widow is-” Erratic, fiercely loyal. A dozen descriptors, but all of them sound like excuses.

“I was not talking about *her* actions,” he drawls. “Violets need one another to work off their aggressions, and Widow has been among her lesser for far too long. This was expected.”

You brain flicks to the way his eyes followed you not ten minutes before. “You. Planned this?”

At once you berate yourself. Of course he planned this, you should have presented it as a statement, not a question. This is why you have Lynx coach you on such things, you are no good at these games of power.

“Yes,” he affirms what you both already know. “I arranged it as a test. I wanted to see what you would do when negotiations fell apart, how you would handle infighting amongst your crew. You fell short of my expectations.”

“And what gives you the right to test me, Successor?” It takes no effort to summon up the required offense in your voice. In fact, it is almost more difficult to keep the rest of it down.

He stares at you, down the zigzag incline between you. “You thought you came to me as an equal, but you were sorely mistaken.” He holds up a spiked hand before you can retort. “That is not your fault. Alternia is meant to cull the weak, letting only the strong arise and join their brethren amongst the stars. You spent your youth wrapped in theory, hiding from your sister, too reliant on your Strategos and other friends. If you cannot control your people, you will never be my equal, let alone the Empress’s.”

That shame comes back, and you can’t help but glance away. He says things you know, that you aren’t a good leader, that you’ve arrived here on the skills of others and sheer dumb luck.

“But-” he says, and you’re able to look up again. “That can change. There is still potential in you Zarya, that you do not deny your failings has cemented my decision.”

“What decision?” Control yourself, no suspicion in your voice, completely neutral.

He knits his fingers together. “Tomorrow night, your training will begin. I will grind you down to your barest essentials, your mind, your body, your essence, and build you again. In time, if you commit, you will shed your old weaknesses behind.”

You can imagine it, what training the Successor will entail. Your bloodpusher beats a little faster. “And what do you gain from this no-longer alliance of equals?”

His fangs glint, as long as any purpleblood’s. “You will be the sword that pierces the Condescension’s heart, and I will be its smith.” The voice that comes from him seems to ring of a thousand dead, and a thousand more to come. He sits back. “But that will be all, Zarya. Return here tomorrow, nine sharp. We have much to do.”

So you are dismissed. You flee from the room, knowing whatever game has just been played, your loss is coming faster than you think.

Chapter 12

While the room is quite nice for a treasonous band of murderers living on the fringes of civilization and you are oh so outwardly grateful to the Successor for the accommodations, compared to your hive on Continent 14, it's a bit shit.

Mercy sets down her bag and collapses onto the loungeplank. "Well. That certainly could have gone better."

"Indeed." Sparrow likewise slides his white leather duffle under a recuperacoon, the cylindrical form fitting perfectly into its storage compartment as though it was made specifically for imperial stows. You wonder briefly who inhabited these quarters before you.

There are three recuperacoons, sectioned walls to give the illusion of privacy, and a single ablution block, all with the rustic charm of a spaceship barely holding together. You've never had to share a hive with anyone before, but Sparrow and Mercy are your crew: if you can survive living with anyone, it's them. For now, you're happy for their company, the ring of their familiar chatter a comfort when you look at a half-free screws and try not to think about the structure under your feet falling apart at the seems.

At least you're not expected to share with O'Deorain. That would be a quadrant tic-tac-toe no one would benefit from.

"I'm going to secure the perimeter," you tell them.

By now they've shuffled together onto the loungeplank, Mercy with one of her books pulled on her reader and Sparrow with his head on her shoulder. She looks up, not dislodging her morail. "By that you mean you're going to poke around the ship?"

A smile tugs at the corner of your mouth. "Guilty as charged." She grins back, and you circle around the backrest to plant a parting kiss on her upturned face.

"Be careful of Inner Circle," Sparrow says as you depart. "There is no doubt there will be some sort of retaliation."

You sigh. "Less than hour aboard, and already there's a clusterfilial. Why am I not surprised."

"I hate space," Sparrow and Mercy say in unison.

They return to their book, some vacillation-based romance of hers no doubt, practially piled with the blankets stuffed around them. That's, of course, when it bites at you again. An increasingly familiar spike of jealousy rushes out of nowhere, and the smile you'd meant to throw them wavers. These new, stupid, selfish thoughts begin to plague you, and you slip out the door before you can start to stare.

Why are you getting like this? You have a perfectly stable matespritship, and now you've gone and ruined it be developing…*other*…feelings. The walk is meant to clear your head, but

instead of getting a lay of your new position in enemy territory, your mind keeps wandering, catching on them when they've done little shooshes in the long journey to this distant nebula. Usually those things are kept behind closed doors, but your close proximity in the past few wipes has made you privy to things you'd much rather ignore.

You don't want to give up on being matesprits with Mercy. You love what you have, being able to wrap an arm around her waist or plant a kiss on her neck. And even if you did decide you wanted to flip, how would she see that? Certainly she wouldn't end things with Sparrow, they were wrapped in each other's pity more than a sleeksqeaker trapped in a net.

No, you know exactly how she'd see that. She'd think you were being greedy, and she'd be right. You pick at you gloves and again reaffirm the only thing you can do is shove these newly developed pale aspirations back into the dark corner of your being where they obviously originated from. So busy and successful are you at doing this, that you nearly trip over the pitched couple rolling around on the floor.

"Shit!" You jump back.

Unfortunately, they're not even engaged in the interesting sort of caliginous entanglement, but instead are trying to beat the shit out of each other. Or at least, the violet is trying to beat the shit out of the teal, her hands wrapped tightly around their chug column as they kick out uselessly at her stomach.

"I told you I was coming for you, Seventeen."

"*I thought you were kidding!!!!!!*"

You have just enough wherewithal to recognize these two from the incident in the throne room, when another figure you desperately don't want to meet alone in a dark ship alleyway comes barreling around the corner.

You've never seen one this close. In fact, until today you'd never seen a fuchsia at all, save for artists renditions or on public broadcasts. Not only is she a rarity, but if you were asked if you were to ever see a fuchsia in your normal lifespan, you certainly wouldn't expect an *Heiress*. There hadn't even been an Heiress on Alternia when you were growing up, and you'd only seen pictures of the one who'd been hatched after you left.

But the troll in front of you is not digitized or represented in a very awkward East Alternian Animation; she is here in the flesh and then some. She is raw power, muscle upon muscle, clearly beating you in width as well as height. Her hair is nothing like the billowing mass of the Empress's, and instead of adorned bangles, she has a tattoo carved in one arm. All this you had only caught glimpses of before, no matter how openly you had stared.

She looms over the scuffling pair. "What is going on here? You know, I have just realized I do not care."

With that, she reaches down and extracts Widowmaker from the tangle of limbs. The seadweller hisses, but does not attempt escape as she is encased in a truly massive arm, reaffirming your assumption that this is all some sort of pitched exercise. Does that make the

Aspirant their auspistice? Now *that's* something that would make some truly bohemian literature if it were ever allow into publishing circles.

None of them seem to notice or care that you're there. Exhibitionism? Perhaps but-

"Lynx Seventeen is fucking Sombra!" Widowmaker shouts.

Okay! Wasn't expecting that! Exhibition or no, this is getting way too interesting to dip out now.

Zarya's grip loosens somewhat. "What?" She then turns to her Strategos. "Really?"

They stagger to their feet, massaging where aqua bruises are already forming on their swallow pillar. "Yes," they cough indignantly. "And I see no reason why anyone would need to strangulate me for it."

Widowmaker snarls, "I told you-"

"We all threaten to kill each other, Amelie!" Strategos, or Lynx apparently, throws their hands in the air. "All the time! It's a cute little banter we do, skirting the customs of what is acceptable ashen facsimile."

Zarya is still dumbstruck. She blinks at Lynx. "Sombra? Really?"

They massage their nub link. "Yes Zarya. Sombra."

She thinks again for a moment, then reiterates, "*Sombra?*"

"*Zarya.*"

"Right, right, sorry." She scratches the back of her head with her free hand, apparently only needing one to hold the furious violet. "Flushed then?"

"No, pitched," Lynx says drily. "My adulterous ways have finally been revealed."

Wait what? You'd broken out the metaphorical popcorn because you thought you were going to see some juicy double reacharound drama, but the teal and the *fuchsia* are kismesises? And a moment ago you swore Lynx refer to themself and Widowmaker as ashen, but at the time you'd assume that was exaggeration for comedic effect.

The pure illogic of the situation makes you garble a very audible, "huh??"

Three sets of lookstalks turn to you. The Aspirant raises her eyebrow in your direction. "Pharah, yes? My apologies for my associates, I am aware we have not made a very good first impression today. We are usually not so quarrelsome." Widow scoffs under her breath. Zarya ignores her. "It appears we are dealing with some interpersonal issues. Very, very strange interpersonal issues."

Lynx puts a hand on their hip. "*Why* is this hook so hard for you to swallow, Tilapia?"

Zarya shrugs. “I am used to you expressing your standards.”

“May I remind you,” Widow cuts in with a growl. “That that is my clover you are referring to.”

“She is *not*!” The bellow from the usually composed Lynx makes you jump. “You three are not dating, she is not in an auspisticism with you, and that is the whole damn problem. If you had sorted this out sweeps ago we wouldn’t be in this fucking mess, but instead you’ve dragged your childhood drama out for so long you’ve convinced yourself it can’t be solved!”

Widowmaker’s cheeks are a bright lilac, hot with rage. “I tried-” Her whine is cut off again.

“Sufferer’s bruised balls Lcroix I am tired of repeating myself.” They storm over, getting right in her face, which you think is a monumentally bad idea when she’s only partially secured by the entralled Aspirant. “Deal with you shit, and stop taking it out on the rest of us. I want you to march over to them, get them in the same room, and talk things out. Do I make myself clear?”

She breaths out hot through her nose, bottom lip curling up in indignation. Zarya looks between the two of them. Finally, Widowmaker lets out a “fine.”

Zarya lets her go. She doesn’t attack, merely straightens her spine and wipes non-existent dust off her purrbeastsuit before marching past you without a glance.

She reaches the end of the hallway, where she turns on her heel, getting her last word with, “you will still stay away from Sombra-”

“Widowmaker!” Lynx’s voice is nearly a shriek. “Go! Figure out! Your triad!”

Widowmaker’s cheeks puff up. Then she spins again, disappearing around the corner.

As soon as she’s gone, Lynx leans over their knees. “Empress alive. This has been going on for way too long.”

“I see you’ve gotten a bit closer than usual to the disaster omniscuttlecaravan,” Zarya notes unsympathetically.

“…I may have gone a little deep in the pudding, so to speak,” they admit.

After a moment, she asks, “do you really like Sombra?”

“Good in the sack.”

“You’re an embarrassment,” she says, and there, that is something you can recognize. Just some good, old-fashioned, potent arch-rivalry. It’s like a lifebuoy thrown in a hurricane.

The sense of normalcy gives you the confidence to find your voice. “Well,” you say a bit loudly, drawing attention to yourself yet again. “I must be getting back. It was nice to meet you all. Again.” And you make your escape.

From behind you, not entirely sure if you're imagining it, you hear the Aspirant's voice smugly say, "I'm sure it was."

Yeesh. All you want to do is return to your cabin. Suddenly, a pale-flushed flip-flop don't seem that bad.

Chapter 13

You miss Reaper by eleven minutes.

How agathokakologically predictable that he works off his frustration by throwing himself into raiding parties instead of sulking somewhere dark and damp like a normal fucking troll. That, at least, keeps everyone well and accounted for.

Or maybe not. Maybe brooding is reserved for your ilk, and Reaper has the right of it by dropping off the face of the ship to go have fun harassing fleet cruisers. It at least saves him from stewing in what has become the oppressive atmosphere of the *Talon*.

The unspoken agreement that you have all come to is, surprise surprise, that you're not going to talk about it. Sombra fucked Lynx, decided everything was hunky dory, and because she decided it will become so. She elbows you cheerfully as you grab trays in the omnigrubacquisitionhall, and the affection is so outwardly genuine, you wonder if the mask has gone so deep she's forgotten why she needs it.

The nights tick by. You need only dodge her for a little longer.

You have avoided this conversation for so many sweeps, convinced that the pieces should fall into play naturally, not to be pushed. So afraid you are, certain one wrong word would undo all you had worked for. Yet, the moment you set your mind to this meeting, you begin to long for its arrival, if only that it will be over. How funny that what we dread changes on a caegar.

For instance, all those other fears seem trite in comparison to what you feel when you burst through the medbay doors and nearly claw Moira to death when you think she's going to stop you from seeing him.

"How base," she says as holds your wrist in an iron grasp. "It is truly a shame you've grown here, in such uncivilized conditions. If you wish to visit him, you need have only asked."

Stars you hate her. You want to gnash her throat out right now, but the marks she's leaving in your frond remind you what a horrible idea that is, and you settle for snarling at her. "Let me through."

She sighs. But not the long-suffering sigh of an overworked docterror, she has lived here too fleetingly, caused too much fear to be henpecked—no, this is an act, a charming display of playful condescension. She releases your wrist. "Very well. Allow me a moment to stall the dehumidifiers. They're torture on the gills."

"Dehumidifiers?" you falter out. You know she's done something to Reaper. He returned hours ago and only now are you arriving at his recoveryblock, news slow and thin, disjointed with some reports telling you he's come back in pieces, or not at all.

But Moira presses her fingers against the doorhusk, its legs wiggling in a coordinated shiver of compliance. A black sheet of glass that you did not realize was a window clears, its

apparent opaqueness actually the presentence of rolling black smoke amassing on the other side. Moira barely steps out of your way as you charge in.

“Crap,” he hisses as he catches sight of you.

Although, that’s difficult to tell with how many tubes are clinging to his face. Nearly every inch of skin is covered by strange suction cups, the few bare areas burned black and patched with sensory nodes.

No, not burned. As you move closer, you see that his skin is moving, swirling like its gaseous, occasionally sliding to reveal the grey underneath.

“Gaberl, what *happened*?” You’re almost afraid to move closer. “What is she doing to you?”

“Widow, if you could wait until I’m passed out to start squeezing my shame globes, that’d be just peachy.”

He preempts you. You were, in fact, just about to lay into him for going off on unnecessary escapades, but the scene in front of you now is far mor pressing. You fold your arms. “I’d be happy to, if you’d describe to me the exact details of…this.”

“Jegus,” he groans, but he knows you’re not budging. “Fine. The Doc’s testing out some cell regeneration. Check it.”

With one hand, he scrabbles at a pen on his side table. Then, holding it firm, he stabs it through his other.

“Reaper!” You lunge forward, trying to stop whatever he’s doing, grabbing hold of his injured hand lest he try to impale himself again.

It is inconsequential. The pen sticks out both sides of his palm. As you hold it, his hand in both your own, restrained but supported with all your strength, the squid fluid instrument convulses out of his flesh with a **pop**.

He stares at you, two circles of reflective glass concealing his ganderbulbs that still shine shock. The cycle of confusion-revelation-embarrassment is as clear as though the medical apparatuses were not there at all.

“So, uh. Yeah. I can do that now,” he says, in a failing attempt to continue the conversation while your hands are still locked together.

You don’t have the wherewithal to snatch them away. Instead, they come apart like a pair of magnets, jerking like a claw machine around scalemate. “I…” you say, desperate to explain yourself, the plans of whatever you’d been meaning to confess here tonight falling away.

You are saved, (damned) by the one clown who has made every moment like this an agony.

“Reaper holy fuck!” Sombra says, kicking down the panel of the recoveryblock. “Renvif told me you dragged half an asteroid field into like, fifty hijacks. You have *got* to fill me in.”

“There were ten,” Reaper says distantly, the barest dash of annoyance returning to his voice, yet another way to remind you how deep in this club you are. “Don’t you know better to listen to Renvif by now?”

“They tell me what I like to hear,” she waves him off. As she crosses to his medicoon, she says with utterly believable nonchalance, “‘sup Amelie.” Like nothing has happened. Like the breaking point is not barreling toward you all. You still feel the ghost of Reaper’s hand within your grasp.

“Some thing *has* happened,” you insist to unspoken denial.

She freezes. She knows what you meant. “Well *obviously*,” she chooses to misconstrue, “I doubt he’s horizontal and missing half bodymeat because things all went according to plan.”

“We must talk,” you reiterate.

Reaper stays silent, eyeing you both, positioned on either side of him. A configuration decidedly not the providence you desire.

She blows air to flip her hair out of her face. “Do we really have to do this now?” She glances at Reaper. “Look, everything’s fine. It was a mistake, we regret it, let’s move on eh?”

“It was not-” The words you’d been hoping for won’t come. They don’t fit right in your mouth and the two people you love most are here and Reaper nearly died and you still can’t- “I made you think I bear no feelings, but this is not the case.”

“Okay, I figured, you’re in diamonds or whatever-” (She picks at the edge of her gloves, the hoplelesness spilling out in ways that she always tries not to) “-but not here okay?”

“You idiot.” The voice that speaks up is so sudden, so rare you both jump. “I can’t fucking believe you,” Reaper says. “She’s *ashen* for us, dumbass.”

You lungs freeze. Sombra looks like she’s been struck, and her gaze flicks to you for confirmation but all you can do gasp like slaughtered fish.

(Haha. Lynx will get a kick out of that.)

“Good one,” she laughs nervously as though desperately still hoping this is a joke. “Nice to see getting the shit kicked out of you to the hoofbeast nebula and back hasn’t wrung it all out of you.”

“You seriously didn’t notice,” he says dully, whether the conversation or the exhaustion getting to him you can’t say. “Come on Sombra, just look at her.”

She does. There are two spotlights shining on you and now, now you should say something, but it feels like you’ve been flayed, every thing you are stripped bare. “I…”

You swallow.

Both of there are watching you, your friends that have put their roots into you and never let you go entirely free, no matter the distance. The people that you have never felt right without. Stilling every particle of your being, you reach forward and take Reaper's hand in one of your own. The place where he impaled himself meets your thumb.

"I care for you both," you admit. "I had always hoped that…things would simply be. That we could maintain without me asking for it. But I am done with that. Now I am asking."

"You…" She looks at Reaper and you. "You really want to auspistice us? I mean…*us*?"

Finally, a truth that does not hurt to say. "There is nothing I want more."

Sombra stares for a moment more, as though the concept could ever even begin to cross her mind, and you will not pretend you understand her. You are done predicting what she will do, done thinking you know best. Instead, you offer your other hand, and let her make her own choice.

Almost without warning, she darts to the other side of the bed and takes it. "Sounds like a good deal," she says, breathless as though crossing an ocean rather than a few meters. "I mean, Minstrels know you and I need it, right Boss?"

"Oh fuck off Sombra," he scoffs. "A minute ago you didn't even remember there was fourth quadrant."

"Of course I did!" she beams confidently. "I was just waiting for one of you to say something."

Reaper barks something back, but you are too distracted by the warmth in each of your hands. The bickering turns into familiar background noise, like the hum of the ship around you, and it feel so right to allow it to go on. You have each of their bloodpushers, and you squeeze them both.

Chapter 14

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A young troll looks out from the mouth of the caverns on purple grassed plains below them, stars spinning about at millions of miles per hours, moons spiraling just as fast. It is cold, and the breeze rustles their skirts as it collides with the warm air that bellows within Alternia. There are no winds within the caverns, only stale and stagnation, and the great shuttering breaths of the mother grub one could mistake for breeze if one got too close. This troll is not close. They are looking at the surface world, longing, missing like they have been since they were forced away.

Though it was ten sweeps ago this troll was given life, only today will they be given a title.

> Enter title.

Enter title: SST Laboratories Automaton E54.

> Don’t fuck with me now.

Enter title: Bastion.

> That’s better. Let’s move on then, shall we?

Your name is BASTION. As previously mentioned, you have been drafted and reassigned to the GLORIOUS COLLECTIVE AUXILIATRICES, the primary role for your thinly populated bloodcaste. Here, you and your fellow jades hold the FUTURE OF THE EMPIRE in your hands, where it is your duty to care for the creature that facilitates the mixing of genetic DNA from less than willing volunteers in order to produce new trolls for THE EVER MARCH FORWARD IN TIME. It falls to you to cull weak or abnormal grubs before they reach the age that they can add to the slurry themselves, and thus, this is not a job for the faint hearted.

Not that the faint hearted aren’t dragged here anyway. Jades do not belong on the surface. They are raised in the caverns, or torn away from the lusii that have selected them as soon as they can walk.

You’re different from the others. You were out there too long before the drones caught you, where you still spends nights at the mouth of the cave staring longingly out at the plains brimming with danger. The others whisper at among themselves that you’ve gone sun mad, that you’ll never make it to adulthood.

But yet here you are. Despite the odds you have ASCENDED, and from this night forward you shall have greater duties, maybe even young jades of your own to be responsible for. Yet, you still yearn. You think to yourself, one last time. One last time to go see her, let her know you’re alright, that you’ve made it to ascension day and you’ll be safer from now on. No one

ever told her that you survived. You don’t think she even knew what was going on when the drones took you.

So, just for one night. You still know where your hive is. You put one foot forward into the swaying grass.

> Be the other one.

What? You can only ever be yourself.

> Fine, be you in the future.

You are yourself in the future, distant temporally, close physically as you stand once again at the exit to the caverns, escape feet away. This time the full weight of your disobedience weighs down upon you, for now you are not just some delinquent newly ascended whose greatest crime is a little truancy. The terror of what you are about to do has your strutpod locked, your chug column swallowing over and over again as your mouth remains frustratingly dry.

The grub tucked in your arm squirms. You freeze.

You pray, you pray to the Minstrels, to the Demoness, to anyone who might be out there listening that she doesn’t cry out. If she cries then you are both dead because you are harboring a disease, a newly declared blight, the words painted candy red across every screen.

The Summoner has caused more fear, cracked more foundations than none but the Sufferer before him. A sweep dead and still his shadow hangs over the empire, spurs the Empress into violence, to impulsivity. No one would say it aloud, few would dare to think it even in their own heads, but many see She is afraid. The propaganda spins it into a crushing defeat over a heretical degenerate, but anyone who hasn’t replaced their memories of the revolution with empire schoolfeeds realizes how close the Summoner came. Some say one of his beasts left a scar across her chest.

So the purging of the bronzes feels sloppy, hasty, like it might be rolled back any day. The highbloods have gone paranoid; what they once thought was a little parlor trick, a version of psionics for traipsing about the wilds and playing with barkbeasts, has turned into something far more threatening than the could have ever imagined. The Cavalreapers were all but decimated, the proximity of the troll population to so many lusii called into question. All around you, whispers of reforms threaten what it means to be a troll.

It could be over speculation on their part, it matters not to you. Nor toward the waves and waves of bronzes culled in the caverns below you, the number only growing as fear of empathetic psionics increases.

You were shaking. That’s all you can remember now, the shaking. You’d culled before, of course you had it was—is, was—your job yet there was so *many* and the floor was stained and the copper color was all over you. There is—was, is—a tiny window. The smallest gap

between when the mandate goes from an *un*official decree to an official decree, when every bronze on the planet will be killed, where the line might be wiped out all together. And it shouldn't have made a difference. One more little wiggler body to add to the pile. But the drones weren't looking and your superiors were arguing and there was this tiny little grub, just on the floor, helpless as she mewled for something to eat.

You grabbed her and ran.

It doesn't make a difference, you've only made it so you'll both be culled. It does nothing when all you grabbed was this one, this one, singular little body when her hatchmates are painting the walls. You could have grabbed others, but you could only really carry the one, and it makes no difference now anyway. They're long dead.

So it's just you, and her, snuggled in the crook of your frond rotator. You are a fugitive, and you'll have to take your first steps out there, into the world that hurt you so badly the last time you ventured out. On the run from the empire, something you couldn't escape from before, and you doubt you can now, but you have nothing to do but attempt.

You have no prospects, but you do have a plan. There are people you can take her to, your little grubling. Can you say that? Is she yours? No, she is no ones. Neither of you belong to anyone. You are simply her vessel, her ship that might take her to a place where she can have hope.

You put one foot forward into the swaying grass.

> Be you in the past.

You cannot open your eyes. They are too…sticky.

You are hurt, hurt, hurt everywhere and oh so very stiff. You can barely tell what is a part of you and what is not, if the horizontal you are lying is soft or hard or somewhere in between.

There is light, you are sure of that, but only after minutes—hours?—of agonized searching. Color should be next you tell yourself, and think you're probably right. Then shapes. Please let there be shapes.

There is sound too. The shapes, they're a troll, horns poking through a blue hood, distinct when all the world around you is white and grey.

"Now, that can't be right." The voice speaks. The voice should belong to the troll, and you think it does. She comes closer to you. "You need to stay down, child. You won't heal like this."

You think you already are down. You role on your side to tell her so, only to have her face so close to yours that you can see all the shapes you were looking for and more.

Her right ganderbulb is warped. She has four pupils, three elongated, stretched to form a triangle, and one in the center. As soon as you look at them, you can feel them digging straight through your mucus membranes and into your soul.

“*Sleep*.”

> Sleep.

To think, you had spent nearly your whole life on the planet’s surface, fighting for your life, small and rare blooded with a lusus not strong enough to protect you. You’d learned how to steal, and more importantly to hide, but the greatest lesson of all was that much could be avoided if you were simply unnoticeable. Yet, despite all that, of maybe because of, you had grown confident in your assessment of the outside world. Memories had faded from learning experiences to facts, safely tucked away in the back of your mind where you would never have to take them out and reexamine them again.

Maybe because you were now too large or too confident or some combination, but you could not slip by unnoticed as you once could.

A group of adults found a lone jade so so far from their caverns, and thought it was the funniest thing they’d ever seen. It must have been funny, with how much they’d laughed, and kept laughing, and maybe your eyes had filled in and your second molt had come upon you but you’d never see adults as anything but an *other*. Far more powerful. Inescapable.

When they’d had their fun with you, you were gone and did not sleep, for not every dark pass into unconsciousness is sleep. When you awoke (for one can still awake even when not asleep) everything was crusted and sticky, broken, bruised. You tried to look, to see if it was still night, but to your rising panic you could see nothing, no light, no dark, no moons. They’d blinded you, they’d blinded you and you squirmed about on the ground like a newly hatched grub, desperately trying to *see*.

You wanted to go home. You wanted to go home now, and tears couldn’t come but you tried to haul yourself forward, panic burning your blood pusher cavity and you began to crawl. There was no way to know if it was the right direction. You could not see. You only knew that home was not *here*.

Looking back, you are not sure if you were even trying to get to the caverns, or your hive.

The third time you awaken, there is no cerulean here to great you. Instead, there is a different troll, rusted, short, humming to himself nearby as you try to blink yourself to consciousness. You can see, you were not blinded after all, but something is still not right. Your vision is… distorted. Wrong. Like things have been all been narrowed to look down a long tunnel. Reaching up, you feel where your right eye should be, and your point stumps only come across lumpy flesh, a scarred over sore.

“Hey,” the rustblood barks, and you jump so hard you knock something around inside you and the pain blooms fresh. “Don’t mess with that!”

You tell him you’re sorry. It’s over several gasps of pain as you try to right yourself, but your balance is gone too, and suddenly a horrid memory of that night surfaces. They ripped at you as you screamed. One had torn your arm off, blood dripping from her jaws, jade mixing with her facepaint as she’d taken a bite out of it and chewed.

You don’t want to look. You don’t want to look but you do, and see that your right arm is gone, some sort of splint in its place, white metal fused in your skin. There’s just synthetics, poking out of your flesh, and your bloodpusher is beating too fast for you to breathe. You scrape at it, like you might be able to dig it out, your digits making gashes in your flesh.

“Minstrels,” the rust swears. “Ana, get in here! Your patient is having a meltdown.”

“*Your* patient,” and suddenly the cerulean is here, the one with the psionics, sweeping in with her cloak trailing behind her. She takes on look at you and says, “oh now lets not do that, child. Why don’t you sleep for a bit?”

No! No you don’t want to sleep. You want to be OK. You want to back, you want to go back!

You start crying. It hurts more than it used to, as tears bubble in your left eye until they’re forced to fall, stinging as they race down your cheeks. You stop clawing at your arm and put your head in your hand, weeping like a wiggler, emerald tears leaking out of you.

Out of the corner of your eye you see Ana and the other troll exchange a hesitant look. She comes close, putting an arm around your shoulder and saying, “it is alright, habibti. You’re going to heal up nice, and you’re going to be alright. Okay?”

You sniffle. Despite not wanting to sleep, you do feel tired already. You want to lie down.

“That’s fine,” she says. “Go right ahead.”

There are pillows on the back of the lounge plank that let you lie sort of horizontal while still looking at the trolls around you, the burgundy now fussing with some tool bench. No wonder you feel so sick, who knows how long you’ve been lying here without sopor?

Even as you think it, you see a tube tied tight into your missing arm feeding a stream of green slime into your body. Oh, okay, that’s not so bad. You’re okay, you’re not going to die. Maybe these people are just fixing you up because they’re going to eat you too, but that doesn’t seem as likely as it did before with all the trouble they’re going through.

What happened? How did you get here?

“Well, Torbjörn found you a little ways outside of Gutterclaw,” Ana says as she indicates the troll behind her, still pretending to look busy. “He thought you wouldn’t make it, so he brought you back here to fix you with some spare parts. Though it’s a good thing I was visiting, otherwise he probably couldn’t have gotten them to take. Might have just killed you by infection.”

“I’m an *engineer*,” Torbjörn grumbles. “Not some docterror, or whatever it is you’re sunlighting as these days.”

Spare parts?

Ana nods. “Your new arm there.”

When you look down at the splint jammed in your stump and just stare at, Torbjörn sighs and comes over. “It’s a prosthesis, repurposed drone parts. I would’ve given you something more dexterous, but I design military grade, so that’s what I got. Didn’t want to slap you with one of the big guns, that’s a culling offense for anyone lower than cerulean.”

With more care than you would have guessed from his brusque attitude, he gently takes your —new—arm in his hands. And…you can feel him as he does it. No, *feel* isn’t quite the right words, it isn’t what you would sense if he was doing the same thing on your skin. This is more that you can detect, detect his fingers and where they are in relation to this stick of metal. It’s downright terrifying.

“Try extending it,” he offers.

You don’t know how to do that. You can sense from it sure, but it doesn’t feel like *you*, not in the normal sense. But both your rescuers are looking at you now, so you know you have to at least try. In the end, you think, *I want to flex my elbow*.

To your surprise, it’s as easy as that. The arm extends, dangerously thin now that it’s not folded up. Before, it went about to where your elbow used to be, and it’s proportioned that when at full length it ends at the approximation of a hand. The drone arm appears to be some sort of medical needle, or perhaps a prong for fine electronic work.

“It should be a few more days before all the nerve endings are set, but it’s the better of the adjustments,” Torbjorn admits. “We could only save the one eye.”

You swallow. Right, the eye. You wonder if you could have a mirror.

Ana brings you one and you spend the next twenty minutes staring at your reflection, seeing the new face looking back at you. Your right ganderbulb is completely gone, shredded to bits, skin healed over what Ana says is a prop to keep the socket from collapsing. The left, however, isn’t even recognizable as a troll’s—it’s verticle, a long yellow pupil surrounded by white and grey metal, stitched into your face like a patchwork doll. You touch it lightly.

“So, that’s how you got here,” Ana says when you set down the mirror. “Now that you know a bit about us, mind telling us your name?”

> Share title.

“I see. You’re a long way from the caverns, child. Ah,” she says suddenly. “That reminds me. I think someone has been trying to see you.”

With that, she goes to the window and opens it. A tiny white lusus flies through, and your bloodpusher flips right over itself as she hurls herself at your head.

You start crying again, tear ducts patched over smooth metal wetting it once again as Ganymede flies circles all the while, tweeting wildly, darting away as you try to catch her. Finally, she lets you nab her in both hands and pull her close to your face.

“She showed up a few days ago, absolutely twittering mad,” Ana says fondly. “I figured that being right after we got ourselves a stray was too much of a coincidence.”

It’s been a very rough night. You sob as you pat her little head with a finger, trying to communicate how much you’ve missed her in as few words.

You thank your hosts. You hope its enough, when you don’t have caegars for repayment.

Torbjörn scoffs. “You can repay us by staying out of trouble in the near future.”

“Torbjörn, that’s no way to talk to them after they were nearly culled,” Ana scolds.

“I’ll talk to them however please,” he shoots back. “My hive, my rules, and that goes for you too Anaana.”

“I remember things a bit different when you were practically *begging* for help last week.”

“I did not beg-”

Please, please don’t argue on your account. You promise you’ll stay out of trouble.

Ana smiles at you, a sweet but condescending smile as she smirks at your sick bed. “Oh child, that’s adorable for you to try, but really, it’s not like that at all.”

You blush suddenly. No, no that’s what you were doing. You weren’t trying to mediate, honest. Sorry if it came out like…sorry.

Ana laughs, and you flush harder. After a moment, your curiosity overcomes your embarrassment, and you ask that if they’re not together, what is going on between the two of them?

“I’m her matesprit’s kismesis, whatever that makes me,” Torbjörn huffs.

“What it makes you is a pest,” Ana declares. “Now, go play with your robots somewhere else. Our guest needs a breather.”

> Rest up.

The next wipe is cotton balls in your acid tract and stitching ribs. You spend your nights horizontal, cuddling Ganymede and thinking about what will happen when you go back to the caverns. You will be reprimanded most assuredly, but they will not cull you. They will take one look at your half-stitched body and realize someone has done the work for them.

You quietly entertain the idea of staying. Just staying here. The time you are brave enough to say it aloud, the stony silence you get is all the answer you need. They have their own duties to keep after all, Torbjörn makes weapons for the empire’s war machine, and his matesprit takes credit since an indigo’s creations will always attract more eyes than a burgundy’s. You don’t blame her though. She’s nice, she brings you glasses of water and puts the back of her hand against your nugbone while asking how you are. It’s always the same, *how are you tonight, how are you tonight*, but the pattern becomes almost soothing, a routine to fall into.

She also makes you grubcakes. You have no idea how long it's been since you've last had grubcakes.

Ana…well you don't know what Ana does. You think she is some sort of elite operative within the nanonbiters. Ana's matesprit doesn't come by at all, even though he has more reason to visit Torbjörn then Ana does. You don't ask. It's probably some sort of wrap-around passive-aggressive pitch battle they have going on, the hormonal jades get into those sorts of things sometimes.

So you stroke Ganymede on the top of her head and explain to her that you won't be coming back this time. You bones knit and they stick you with mediculizers, and finally you limp back to the caverns. Halfway there, it strikes you that you didn't look back. That you were there and then you left and you didn't realize how profound it was that you had felt safe for the first time in your life until you're standing waist deep in the plains. And it stabs you so hard you cry, alone and pathetic in the middle of the wastes.

> Be you in the future again.

You are now a fugitive once more, another three sweeps older, which you will remain for the rest of our story. The bronze has awakened now, mewling for food, ravenous in the hours since her last meal. You set her down and dig around in the dirt for grubs.

Insect grubs that is. You'd have to dig a lot deeper to find more grubs like her.

You claw manages to bring up a few fat ones over the course of a half hour. The wiggler slurps them up and bawls for more.

You drape yourself on a nearby rocks, exhausted and disappointed. You'd been hoping that you could scrounge a few bugs for yourself when she was full, but you've already wasted so much time it can't be worth the effort. Your think pan buzzes with an Auxiliatrice's training, running over how long a grub can survivor without food, how many days until their first molt. It's all so much to carry around in your head when fatigue also weights down your slowing limbs.

It's difficult with only one arm. Most times you spend with her nestled securely in it, your needle there for simple tasks but not much else beside electronic manipulation. There had been a close call with a drone a day back, and your delirious thinkpan had entertained the idea of trying to hack it with your needle it in some daring escapade. Stupid. You don't know the first thing about hacking, or drone work, no matter your cyborgization. Instead, you'd tucked you and your charge into a narrow burrow and waited for the danger to pass, just like you'd manage every previous time.

More than anything you require water. You find your thinkpan hurts on more minutes than it doesn't, dizzy spells and mind plunges. More than once, you've shaken it out to realize you've been going the wrong direction for hours, losing more than half a day's progress all counted.

You need to find somewhere to lay low for a while. You have day cloaks for both you and the wriggler, but they prevent shriveling under the sun, not protection from the heat itself. Your

insistence to push on through Alternia's radioactive day cycles leaves you staggering, sweltering under the coat of leather. Your grub needs food, and you need some sopor slime—you haven't slept since leaving the underground and it's only a matter of time until your foggy state leads you to a fatal slipup. There must be *somewhere* you can hide from the drones, at least for a night.

On your journey you've seen remote hives dotting the land, but you've always taken care to avoid them. Even with your cloak to hide your replete eyes, the strange bundle at your side would jog anyone's suspicion. Or appetite.

But you're running out of options. Water, slime, shelter, food. Just to recharge. To restock.

So the next time you come to a towering building out on the savannah, alone, not even a road to lead anyone here, you approach rather than shy away. Your hopes are high: there is no skuttlebuggy in the drive, and the windows are dark.

The door is locked, but thankfully there is at least one thing your prosthetic arm is good for. After more jamming than picking, it pops open, and you make your way inside.

The relief is immediate. The most important part of a hive is shelter from the day, and cool air caresses you as if the sun had already set. Quietly, you shrug off your cloak and set the grub on the meal plane. She gurgles in complaint to be out of the comfort of your arm, but you shoosh her as you make your way to the thermal hull. Tubs of churned dairy product, vermillion spheres…there. Milk. Actually, an unreasonable amount of milk, but you're not going to look a hoofbeast in the aural receptors.

You pour some milk into a bowl and place it on the meal plane. The grub scuttles over immediately, and you wait a minute to make sure she won't fall in and drown herself before going to find something for your own person. You settle on a can of fart nibblets, and sit down to eat.

If the air's relief was welcome, this is a blessing. But having a full digestion bladder only reminds you how exhausted you are, and a few times you almost nod off in your chair and land face first in your nibblets.

Should you risk sleeping here? The denizen could be home any minute, technically, and you'd be at a great disadvantage if they caught you unawares.

But, as you nearly fall asleep for the fourth time, you realize you won't be able to put up much of a fight anyway. You promised yourself you'd get some sopor, and damn well you're going to get it.

> Ignore your better judgment and explore the dark creepy hive.

The halls are gloomy and narrow. There are scuff marks in the carpet, one that's green and thin, like it's been worn down to its barest fibers over many sweeps. As you withdraw from the out walls, the hive only grows blacker and blacker, and unease coils deep in your gastric evacuation gland.

You're alone in your disquiet. Full and happy, the grub has dozed off. You are trying keep her rocking gently when you hear something behind you, scraping on the threadbare floor. You whip around.

It's a lusus. You freeze in fear, clutching your grub close to your chest as the creature takes another step toward you. It's a centaur, its white coat glistening even in the half-light, and the spheres in the fridge jump to your mind. Of course there's no scuttlebuggy: this place belongs to a child.

A child and their custodian.

The centaur snorts, scraping its hoof on the carpet at is takes in you both, tilting its head and deciding whether to charge. There is no escape except backwards, and you know you cannot outrun this sort of lusus. They are famously strong, and no doubt just as fast. Your only hope is to stay here, and hope you don't look threatening.

The lusus looks at you. You look at it. The two of you stay locked in visual combat while the grub sleeps on.

"Adawe? Where did you go to?"

An exhausted looking troll child appears at the centaur's side. It immediately loses interest in you, and snorts in her general direction.

Somehow, this does not relax you. When the troll—an olive, only discernable by the rectangular sign on her headpiece—notices you, she says, "oh, did Adawe let you in?"

Cautiously, you consider options. Then, very slowly, you say yes, yes she did.

"Okay, that's alright then." The girl tilts her head, her vaguely sleepy eyes blinking at you. "I'm sorry, I can't have guests right now. I have a big experiment I'm almost finished with, but I can talk later."

Is she really not threatened by you? Perhaps she is very sheltered, living so far away from any civilization, but even then she should be at least a *little* put off. When you were her age, you'd been *terrified* of adults, and the idea of finding one in your hive would have sent you running to the nearest green trash receptacle for shelter. Then again, maybe if you had a lusus like *that*, you wouldn't have been nearly so intimidated.

It's quite alright. You can just…sit for a little while.

The olive nods. "Okay. Adawe can get anything for you, if you like. I'll be in the subterranean block." And with that she was gone, and you had tactfully refrained from saying you had already raided her storage cubes.

At first, you were still nervous about the strange troll and her lusus. What if this was some sort trick to lull you into a false sense of security? Sure you thought you were playing along with the whole "guest" thing, but if this olive was some sort of serial murderer who kidnapped anyone who wandered to this corner of the plains?

Well alright, that probably wouldn't have been very lucrative. Sill, you were on edge, and you had to remind yourself that the best opportunity the centaur had to run you down would have been in that hallway.

You cautiously ask Adawe if there is a spare recuperacoon around, and she leads you to a room on the second floor with a melting window. When you're sure she's gone, you scoop out a bit of sopor slime for the grub and put it in a little bowl, also provided by Adawe. Still, it takes your last bits of courage to disrobe and submerse yourself in the liquid. When you do, you're out before your toes touch the bottom.

> Figure out what to do with yourself.

Once again, you've found yourself a guest. Perhaps that is not such an unusual thing to be, but jades aren't usual trolls, and you are not experienced with being in places that don't belong to you. When you wake you find yourself not dead and your grub not eaten and your cloths where you left them. By the setting sun, it's been almost a full twenty-four hours.

You set off exploring. At first, you keep your route looping back to the grub every few minutes, making sure she's eating her elongated water vegetable, exploring only a room at a time. But eventually you grow bolder, and find yourself lost in not an unpleasant way. You think it's the walls with their windy nature and not quite level floors, awakening some distant memory of the caverns like a comforting hand on the back of your neck.

Slowly, you regain your strength in the strange house on the plains. You hadn't realized how weak you'd become, too busy trying not to die to notice that you would have expired of exposure no more than a day past this place. The sun madness will do that to you.

But now you're much better, and after half a wipe, you still haven't seen the olive girl again. She spends all her time subterranean block, where at all hours you hear strange noises emanating from. Perhaps she has a touch of the madness as well. It would certainly explain her lack of concern for you.

At first, it is only haunting. Strange bangs and clangs of machinery are the orchestra that sounds during dinner, are what sends you to sleep at daybreak. But, as time goes on, apprehension turns into wonder, and then to the dangerous emotion of curiosity.

When does she sleep? What is she doing? Does she subsist only on the meals her custodian brings to her and nothing more?

It is only a few days more to reach Torbjörn and Ingrid's hive. You could have reached it in an afternoon, bought an omniscuttlebus ticket and wandered barefoot to the station as you had when you were younger, but all main thoroughfares are inaccessible with cullbait tucked in your arm. Now it's a long journey by foot, and it scares you how close you came to failure without realizing it. The scare has put the doubt back in your bones, and now you're loathed to leave this place of safety and set out alone again.

Your decision is made for you when you walk your respiteblock one morning to find a small cocoon has been stitched into the ceiling, slathered with hardened mucus and pulsating with a faint orange light. You sigh. The delays have now cost your charge's grubhood, easily the

most manageable stage of a troll's life cycle. When she emerges from her molt she'll have fangs and claws and legs with bones, and be that much harder to manage. Additionally, you are now stuck here until she's out—you did not sit through the Abbess's thousand speeches to move a grub while it's cocooning.

You drop into the swaychair across from the cocoon. For long minutes, you stare, and stare, trying to summon some feeling within you that isn't overwhelming defeat.

And, all the while, the banging from belowincline gets louder. You do not know if you are going crazy or if the last of your nerves has finally eroded, but over the past day the cacophony has only seemed to grow more an more frantic. You stare at the glowing glob of spit. It beats in time to your blood pusher, filling your aural receptors, your very hate glands, combining with the awful racket below. You stand you send the swaychair flopping. You're going to go find out what the hell is going on down there whether your host wants you to or not.

Adawe is nowhere to be seen. When you push open the door you see why: she's standing by the olive, who's bow bend deep in some sort of massive machine that's crouching in the center of the block. The lusus looks up, briefly snorts, and then goes back to watching her charge wield a blowtorch inside the monstrosity.

As your feet creak down the wooden zigzag, the eyesore comes into focus. You don't even care if your host notices you anymore, so in awe of this thing. It looks positively *alien*, with its odd blend of insectoid based technology and more primitive electronics that seem to be at its center. Upon closer inspection, you realize that the more familiar grubnology that you've grown up with is actually some sort of addition to its natural state, one that the girl is using as scaffolding to dig into the massive lotus closed at its center.

She finally notices you as you stand in front of the nyctinasty in awe. "Hello," she says cheerily, all of the exhaustion from her voice wiped away, though the bags under her eyes are not. Minstrels, she really could only be five or six sweeps old, far to young to be looking like that. "I forgot you were still here. You have good timing! I'm almost finished."

It certainly sounds like it. Down here, what was once drowned out no became a dull roar, the horrid buzz of something groaning to life.

What…*is* it?

"I don't know!" she says with delight. "I've been trying to figure that out for *ages* now. But I know it's very old, likely pre-ascendancy."

It takes you a moment to realize she is not referring to personal ascendancy, but *special* ascendancy. That would be…you can't even wrap your mind around how long ago that would have to be. Trolls have been a spacefaring civilization for *eons*.

She hops down off the lotus's organic frame. The flower's base is made of carved stone, painted with must have been green thousands of years ago, but now only survives in cracked smears. She equips a crowbar from her specibus, and begins pulling at a panel of stone until it pops, landing with two of its edges still hanging from the machine.

“Hmm,” she says to you or maybe to no one. Then she’s gone again, scuttling up the framework around the machine to pick up her blowtorch again. “Almost there…”

The honkbeastflesh on your arms can’t stop you from wandering closer. Nothing can stop this strange thing’s pull, even as dread wells inside you. You look at the corner of “stone” the olive has pulled apart. There’s a screen underneath.

The girl keeps firing. You try to tell her about the numbers on the screen but she waves you away with a, “I’ve almost got it!”

You read the numbers again. They’re changing. With your blood pusher dunked into icewater, you realize that it’s a countdown. You raise your voice again.

“Aha! Look!”

There are seconds left. She brings her crowbar down on the tip of the blossom and the resounding clang drowns you out.

The countdown hits zero. The lotus cracks open.

With the loss of the structure supporting it, the whole outer carapace of the machine goes crumbling, the olive girl falling with a shriek. You do not see where she lands, too busy throwing yourself backwards in order to avoid the splash of falling bug juice, scrambling toward the corner furthest from the bloom.

By the time you right yourself, the lotus has fully opened. Each petal lays delicately on the base, as though they’re as dainty as a true flower and not larger enough to crush a troll flat.

In the center, where each successive sepal had once been wrapped around it, floats a glowing ball, bright white, hanging like an ornament from a kringlefrond. But its exposition is still not over. There are shapes within the orb of white, tessellating, and the movements only grow faster. Wide, curved arrays blur right before your ganderbulb, and suddenly it grows nearly twice its original size, forming into an abnormal shape.

At this point, it becomes too bright to look. When the flares of white have faded from the subterranean block’s walls, you turn and gaze back upon a troll standing in the middle of the flower.

There is a clattering. Adawe has finally pulled her charge from the remains of construction, but the troll girl doesn’t seem to care. She wriggles free from Adawe’s grasp, and runs right up to the troll that did not exist a moment before but now does. “Hello! I am Efiola!”

The adult—for she is an adult, tall as she is, muscles as thick around as your waist, horns jutting forward menacing like a rhinoceros beetle—turns to Efiola. “Greetings! I am OR15A, and it is very nice to meet you!”

You scramble further backwards, trying to make yourself as unnoticeable as possible.

OR15A takes a knee, and the whole ground shutters. She asks Efiola, “are you the one who awakened me?”

“I am, I am!” Efiola is practically bouncing. “I knew something amazing was inside, didn’t I say? Look, look didn’t I say?”

The last she addresses to you, and to your horror the apparition turns her attention in your direction. You try to shrink away even though there is no more space left because the troll before you is very, very wrong. What you thought at first were olive eyes don’t quite catch the light right, nearly iridescent, yet they are not gold either. Your brain snaps between trying to put them in either category but fails every time, and slowly you are forced into a conclusion you desperately do not want.

This person is a mutant. She is a mutant and you are an Auxiliatricer and she must know what that means about you and her.

She waves. “Hello! And who might you be?”

> Share title.

You keep your lips pressed tight and shake your rattlenogin.

She squints sadly, her brow going furrowed around her strange mutant eyes. So she goes back to Efiola, “I cannot share my appreciation enough for activating my capsule. Now that you have, I must surely have a prerogative here to uphold. Please tell me: when am I?”

Efiola tells her as she rocks on her heels.

“Forward then!” OR15A says, pleased. “Delightful! Thank you again for opening it on such a fine date.”

But…but there was a countdown.

Efiola and the mutant both look over to where you’ve apparently found your voice, a feat that you regret immediately. But every thing is just so topsy turvy that you *have* to say something, like how the pod was going to open anyway with or without all the hammering.

OR15A chuckles. “Of course it was! But that timer was only set because the pod would be opened, and thus it was set to the time it would be. We didn’t know one before the other, and thus we had to know them both simultaneously.”

You have no idea what that is supposed to mean. Who’s we? Other mutants?

“Mutants?” She tilts her head. “What an odd thing to say.”

“Not to be rude,” Efiola says, dashing around ever inch of OR15A and examining her dimensions, “but your eyes are very abnormally deviated from natural hues.”

As she says that, the mutants eyes go sad again. “…I see. So they truly have done as they promised. I feared as much when I said goodbye, but I had always hoped…are there truly no limebloods left in the genosphere?”

When both of you give her looks of confusion, she sighs, and casts her ganderbulbs to the water stained ceiling.

This is making your thinkpan hurt with all this talk of expected causality and gene slurries. You've found a little strength to wobble to your feet, still unsure whether this "limeblood" might yet become a threat. But you're also curious again, that damned instigator once more, and it's slowly tamping down your urge to flee.

"Hm? What is a limeblood?" she says in response to your question. "I suppose then none would know anymore, not even a revered brooder. Of the twelve castes, our psionics were the strongest, greater than even the gilt. For this, we were deemed a threat, and a purge began of our caste began not long after I hatched. When I left, there were few left who were still known to us, but I still thought…" She trails off into silence.

The words send a sickening wave of déjà vu down your gullet. She had said twelve castes, not the holy and honored eleven. The very structure you have been taught to venerate where every troll has a duty and a status has not always been.

If she is to be believed, her entire hemocaste was cleansed, expunged entirely from history. And now it is happening again.

She shakes herself from her melancholy daze. "Well, that is then and this is now. For since I am here, there must be some duty I am meant to perform. Tell me, is there any great task you are intending to accomplish?"

"You could let me study you!" Efiola piped up immediately. She ran back into her collapsed piles of junk and withdrew a husktop, sitting cross-legged on a broken beam. "This is probably the greatest find of the millennia. Everyone on the museum forums is going to be so excited!"

OR15A chuckles. "It would be my pleasure to help you, dear awakener. And how about you, my friend?" she suddenly directs to your coward corner. "I do feel bad for startling you earlier."

You flush darkly. Maybe it's her antiquated speech, but 'feel bad for startling you' is only one word away from 'feel bad for you', an expression so blatantly saccharine you can't help the warmth at the back of her neck. You assure them both not to pay you any mind, you were just going to leaving. In fact, if you just go grab your grub, you can go right now.

"A grub?" the lime blinks. "Is such a thing now routine that a jade must transport grubs from one location to another?"

Not exactly. Lets just say *none* of you should be found by the drones right now, so it will be better if you split up.

"Drones?" As soon as she asks it, Efiola leans up and whispers in her sound dish. "Ah, I see. That is most terrible, but I believe your assessment is incorrect. It would be better if I went with you, we could better protect each other that way."

Expertly, you lie and say its cool and you've been doing just fine on your own.

She must know it, for she smiles warmly. "It is alright, my friend. For if Efiola has no need of me to go anywhere, then *this* must be the protocol I was sent to fulfill."

"If you're going, I'm coming with!" Efiola declares. "There's no *way* I'm letting this slip through my fingers, it's been my life's work!"

You'd like to point out that a life's work for someone of her age is a paltry sum, but aren't feeling *that* callous. You feel the advent of social pressure mounting upon you, just like all the times when the other Auxiliatrices cliqued together to whisper words behind hands and you'd find yourself outvoted.

OR15A grins at you. "Go, grab your grub. We will be with you to travel on the morning."

> Go grab your grub, simp.

Somehow, the air is even hotter than it was when you first made your break for the surface. You're now travelling with a small group instead of (effectively) on your own, and the feeling of a dozen mechanical eyes that may or may not be watching you from a distance makes you itch.

The newly molted wriggler is fussy, for one thing. Her legs are far too short to keep pace, so you still have to carry her, but now she kicks and spends most of her time either trying to climb your horns, or escape your embrace all together.

Efiola rides Adawe near the bark of the party, laden with supplies and constantly asking OR15A—who Efiola has simplified to 'Orisa'—endless questions about the world she came from. Orisa take them all in stride, willing to talk for the hours it takes to get from one night to the other. She's come from a time with no ships, no ascension, no drones and no husks. You ask how her people were able to build such an elaborate time machine while still pre-technological, and she had laughed. You'd misunderstood, apparently. The lotus was not created, but gifted, and on that she would say no more.

Her world seems untamed, barbaric, but just as dangerous. You and Efiola listen as she tells of the lime's ventures into hiding as the Empress turned them into worse than gutterbloods, where there death was not just prescribed, but demanded. The Empress of her tales may not even be the one who rules today, one who Orisa calls The Imponderable Superciless. It all sounds of fairy stories your lusus would read with you on morning's light.

Despite the tales and the provisions, the journey wears on you. You keep walking and walking as grasslands turn into straight up desert, and you hope you are approaching Gutterclaw by now. In the middle of the day when the sun cloaks seem to do nothing, Orisa points out a great structure shimmering in the distance and suggests you stop there for some shade. You disagree, but once again with Efiola's endorsement, you are out voted.

Below the great ruin of metal, you let the wriggler to the ground and watch her toddle about on the sand. Immediately, she begins to dig, and within seconds has found a snake and bitten it clean through the neck.

“A strange tower,” Orisa remarks as she approaches you.

You try to hide your discomfort. Despite the fugitive and traitor that you are, her mutantness still triggers a deep-seated unease in you. Instead of focusing on that, you look at the statue that blocks out the worst of the sun. It is of a troll woman holding a torch aloft, and her once beautiful exterior has been turned teal by the desert’s rays. Despite its craftsmanship, there is still something undeniably shitty about it.

“Do you wish me to hold the troll-ling for the next part of our journey?” she asks. “It seems as though it is difficult for you.”

You look at your feet and try to summon some indignation to muscle out your embarrassment. It’s really fine. She doesn’t have to do that.

“This is my directive,” she insists.

She keeps saying that, but you don’t see how helping two cullbait morsels complete their doomed mission can be any sort of great purpose.

“Ah, I cannot say for certain, I am actually quite new at this. But I can guess.” She takes a seat in the sand. “Some time in the far future, as distant to you as you are to me, there will be a game played for the fate of all trollkind. It is important that each shade plays a role in this game, including this one’s.” She reaches out and brushes sand from the wiggler’s hair as she begins to devour her captured prey.

That seems all sort of farfetched. And dumb.

“Oh it is *very* dumb,” Orisa agrees. “Dumb, but true. Even one of my own line will reach this game, though not as directly as this one here. So, that is why I think she must live. Live and reach these trolls you believe will keep her safe.”

You drop into the sand next to her and draw your strutnubs to your chest. Even that you are not so sure of anymore. Torbjörn wouldn’t even take in *you* when you’d asked, what makes you think he’d put his crew’s life on the line for an illicit wiggler you’ve dumped on his doorstep? You’ve been a terrible revolutionary and an even worse custodian. You should have just tried to pawn her off on the nearest lusus as soon as you got free of the caverns.

To your surprise, as you sink your head further on to your knees, you feel a large hand on your back. You blink in surprise as you look up into Orisa’s smiling face. “You have been a good custodian. You have risked your life for this wiggler time and time again, and as long as she still draws breath, there is hope for us and our future.”

You take a breath, then another, just as the Matrideas taught you to do when the air inside the tight tunnels became too much. You breathe, and watch the young troll spit out squeaky clean bones into the grit.

“But please,” Orisa adds. “Let me carry her for a while.”

Your own vertebra snake has been aching for the past many kilometers. You cautiously agree.

> Get where you're going, for the love of Pete.

You are more comfortable walking near Orisa now, and you arrive shoulder to shoulder (well, elbow to shoulder) over the ridge that leads into the Lindholm valley. You'd only seen it once from the outside, but you'd never forgotten the site.

Nearly tripping on the way down, you scramble over the hill and slide filthy in front of the little red door. You knock hurriedly, and hear nothing at first. Of course you don't, it's the middle of the day. You knock again.

Finally, movement from inside. The door comes open, and in the frame is Torbjörn, shielding his lookstalks from the sun. He takes one look at your forlorn face, then at Orisa, Adawe, and Efiola just coming up behind you. Finally, his gaze falls on the bronze in your arm, grub scars still reflecting with metallic light.

He takes one, large, regretful sigh and says, "alright, alright, come in."

You're so relieved to have finally made it, you fall asleep as soon as your cheek touches the loungeplank cushion. When you awake, it everyone else seems to have sorted themselves into other corners of the hive, Ganymede has made a nest in your hair, and Torbjörn is across from you, reading from his husktop.

You ask him where is everyone. And then you notice that most of his and Ingrid's things are stashed into boxes, some half packed and some not, but everyone in far more of a state of disarray than when you left it. Then you only want to know what is going on.

He shakes his head. "Did you not hear about the decree?"

The bronze genocide? That's why you'd some here.

He shakes it again. "Not that. That never became official. What is official is that starting next sweep, all Ascended will be required to be extraplanetary. Permanently."

You can tell just by the way he says it, gruffly, with just a bit of anger that he's saying what he means. Every adult? Off world?

"Yeah. This time next solar rotation, Alternia will belong to the children." He looks through the kitchen door, where you can just see the edges of Ingrid talking with your travelling companions, and bouncing your grub on her knee. Or, you suppose, now her grub. It burns a sad cigarette hole in the fabric of your heart, but burns warm all the same.

She notices you watching her. With a smile, she lifts the grub into her (two) arms and carries her into the rumpus room.

You ask her if she and he are just going to get up and leave.

"Stars no," he scoffs. "We're heading for the most remote part of the planet we can."

Ingrid smiles. "You're welcome to come, if you like."

You look at them all gathered there. Efiola seems to have lost all interest in Orisa, now enthralled with Torbjörn's machines. Unconcerned with the fickleness of the whims of the young, Orisa pleasantly says, "I, for one, will not be. I will have another directive to complete, and I must get to my next pod to find where it will send me."

"Aww," Efiola says. "I was hoping you'd come with us to South Sea."

Oh, so she is going too. Things certainly were discussed while you were out. Things need to get discussed and they went out and discussed them. Great.

You think about South Sea, about being free again. Hunted, yes, but you've always been hunted, it will be nothing new. You could live out your natural life discretely while your companions died one by one until there was only Ingrid to outlive with you. It could be nice.

Yet, despite all odds, you have ASCENDED. Somehow, that must be worth something, broken little sun mad renegade that you are. You once had run you whole life, but in a cage you, had still accomplished something.

One last time, you look around the room, but when your gaze finally falls, you ask Orisa if it might be possible to go with her.

"Are you sure, Bastion?" she asks, obviously surprised. "There is no telling where we ill end up. Very likely you will not see your friend again."

That's not so new. You tell her you're sure.

She smiles softly. "The capsules can transport much greater volume than their dimensions. It is very possible. And, I think, I will enjoy the company."

You grin stretches all the way to your ears, and Ganymede titters. You assure her that of course she can come along.

Torbjörn scoffs, though you've known him well enough that's he's not truly irritated. "Well. You don't get to come by, drop a smuggled kid on our entryway incline and not help us pack. Get your ass off that plank."

Obediently you do, and go to help your friends, as content as you think you'll ever be. You put scarves into bags and robots into parcels and think about the future honestly for the first time in a very long while.

Chapter 15

“You’ll be meeting with Overwatch directorate. We organize by assembly, so if you’re looking to make accords you’ll need to prove to each of the ranking officers that this is a worthy alliance. Considering the gamblignant’s…role…that may be difficult. Overwatch is motivated solely in taking down the Empire, they’re less than pleased with a the fleet’s sordid history of piracy.” All the while your goldbooded guide tells you this, a twisting whirl of psionics keeps him several feet off the ground. Just. Floating.

You lean into Lynx’s ear and whisper, “he always do that?”

“Not while we worked together, no,” they say idly. “We all pick up new hobbies, it seems.”

“So you two were like, what?” you mutter. “Assassociates?”

“Matesprits, actually,” Zenyatta corrects, and you jump a little. He’s stopped in front of an impressive set of double doors with the distinctive sealant of a pressure locked room. He’s still just floating. “Can I offer any other advice before you meet the officers?”

“You have already been very helpful Zenyatta,” Lynx assures. “Thank you. And its good to see you on the far side of the white woodspike containment.”

Zenyatta shoots an absolutely dazzling smile at you all. “As to you, Lynx Seventeen. Good luck you three.”

The last of the aforementioned three lifts her head from the papers Lynx had previously shoved in her face and says, “uh, yes. Good luck to you too.”

This time his smiles is more of a smothered chuckle, and he nods one final time before gliding away on flickering charges of psychic power.

“Matesprits?” you ask, this time making sure Zenyatta is out of earshot. “Really? You’re meeting up after sweeps without seeing each other after both independently defecting from the Empire and all the angst you got for me here is water cooler conversation?”

“You were a member of the bureaucracy too, once upon a time,” they remind you. “You of all people should know the importance of concupiscentions born of necessity?”

You shuffle uncomfortably. In the way this little revolution has played out, it’s become apparent that you and Lynx Seventeen are the only true defectors. Everyone else left Alternia as fugitives, or never had the option to join up in the first place. Lynx is probably the only person on the *Talon* with your shared experience, but yet they’re the one troll you feel most distanced from.

Well, you suppose Moira shares that experience too, in a fashion. But Widow bristles every time you try to hang around her, and when even *Sombra* has found someone she wants to avoid, you know better than to press both your leaves’ limits.

Shrugging, you say, “I guess. Was that really all there was to it?”

They tilt their head. “When one finds someone they can tolerate, drumming up the barest minimum of flushed feeling is perfectly attainable when one’s survival is on the line.”

They make it sound so simple, when your dealings with quadrants have been anything but. The idea that someone could just *choose* to feel sounds improbable. As unlikely as choosing *not* too feel.

When you realize you’re probably holding up these Overwatch representatives with your chitchat, you lean over and snap your fingers in front of Zarya’s face. “Hey, Aspirant. We going to this meeting or what?”

She blinks at being disturbed from her reading, no doubt pages of homework Lynx has compiled so she has at least a general idea of who this strange group of freedom fighters is, and why they’ve reached out to the rebellion. You skimmed it, briefly. It’s a good amount of knowledge for an organization no one knew existed until last perigee. That can probably be thanked to Lynx’s inside man. Thanks weird floaty mustard.

Zarya nods. “Of course. The negotiations.”

Planetside architecture is always baffling to you. Stone or wood instead of metal, where those materials are abundant and you don’t have to worry about taking hull leaks into mind. Still, it’s more the fact that you’re on world at all that has you nervous: there’s only so many habitable planets in the galaxy. Living on a hunk of rock instead of the statistically more plentiful empty space paints a big red target on your back. Still, you’re not going to tell them where to put their base.

You have no idea what to expect, except that you (probably) won’t be backstabbed as soon as you walk through the door. Illicit reports hacked from the latest frigate the *Talon* took indicated that this group *has* been wanted by the Empire for a while, operating against their interests and in line with yours. Now it’s all about whether they want to be friendly or not.

That’s why you’re here, you guess. Officially you’re a “bodyguard” but if anyone needs your impotent protective instinct is certainly isn’t Zaryan. The fuchsia might as well be made of pure titanium for all she has to fear from a bunch of imperial washups. No, it’s more the intimidation factor. Ever since Moira reconstituted your entire body into a mixture of self-crystallizing nanodes you’ve been wearing this sick new outfit to keep them all inside, and you’ve got to admit it’s pretty terrifying.

When the doors finally slide open, you are greeted to a round table of staring masks, each director dressed down until their caste is indiscernible and their motivations more so. Lynx and Zarya stream past to join the table, their matching capes flaring out behind them as they part around you. You know the capes were probably going for “refined,” but you think Sombra had the right of it when she referred to them as “adorable.”

So you are left to stand guard at the now closing door, a stoic watcher with your arms folded and your face hidden. A good plan. However, any aspirations of stoicism are dashed by the fact that there is a giant fucking lusus in the room. You’re a little gobspacked.

You are even more gobsmacked when the lusus open it's mouth and says, "Overwatch welcomes you, Talon. Please, take a seat."

The delegates, no questions asked, leaving you standing here like a nugbone while no one can see your mouth flapping open under your mask.

"We appreciate your hospitality," Zarya says, discreetly peeking at her papers under the table, "…Winston."

Winston rumbles appreciatively, except that name is vaguely familiar and you do *not* remember the briefing mentioning the invitation was sent by an ape lusus. That's the sort of thing that, you know, sort of jumps out at you. Then again, you were reading it while Widow was fussing with your new armor and Sombra was putting it back out of place every time she turned her back, so maybe you were a *bit* distracted……..shit.

Winston smiles genially. You didn't know an ape could do that outside of cartoons. "This is the first time we've had an opportunity to make progress, or even *contact* outside our organization in…ever." All the chargebeast excrement formalities sour immediately as his next words form in his mouth. "Of course, as grateful as we are for answering our call, we're cautious about offering a full alliance considering-"

"Cut the shit," the troll at the far left of the table barks. "Are we going to sit here complimenting each other or are we actually going to start issuing ultimatums?"

Soldier: 76, you deduce. You remember that much at least, and it appears he has just a low tolerance for posturing as you are. You hate him already.

"I actually *was* hoping to see who could boost the other's ego the largest," Lynx says as they rest their chin on their hands, "but if *you* have a more pressing matter…"

Winston clears his throat. "What Soldier means to say," Winston shoots the visor-clad troll of indeterminate hue a piercing look, "is that there's a bit of an elephant in the room."

"We're not working with Doomfist," Soldier bites.

Zarya immediately stiffens. "The Successor is our general and tactician. He is not- you cannot negotiate individual *parts* of Talon, nor of this revolution."

"Not really a revolution though, is it?" the troll to Winston's right pipes up, though not nearly as bitterly as Soldier. And unlike him, her eyes can be seen shining through the goggles fitted over her gas mask. This one's Tracer then, infamous in every imperial report you've gotten your hands on, known for having a drone killcount in the thousands. "Just sort of playing pirates, no major tactical raids or anything. Overwatch had big goals, and we want to know you're er…Well, it doesn't seem like you lot are really serious."

Through this, the Shrike has said nothing. The last member of the Overwatch directorate poses as Lynx's mirror: hands folded, chin resting atop, her featureless black mask staring blankly at the proceedings. Except, now that you're looking harder, you realize it's not

actually all that featureless. The Shrike has permitted a single aspect of anonymity, leaving her sign as a projection across her face, which watches in lieu of her invisible eyes.

The longer you look the more you see. There's something familiar about it, you're sure you've seen it somewhere…those three unconnected lines with the dot in the center…

Oh fuck.

The dickering of moral grandstanding is cut short as you rush forward and flip the table.

There is a brief commotion as you bring the mealplane up in the best cover you can while Zarya demands, "what in Sufferer's name are you *doing*?"

"This whole thing's a trap!" you shout over the sound of Overwatch scrambling to their feet. "The Shrike, she's an Imperial Captain, and we've walked right fucking into it."

Zarya affixes you with a blank stare as she processes that, but you don't get to see whether she believes you since in that moment Soldier: 76 comes barreling around your half-erected cover and tackles you to the ground.

"Reaper!" Zarya barks as the two of you go skidding across the room.

Soldier freezes mid-pin, but you don't let him recover from his hesitation before kneeing him in his biliary gland and standing up past him. The lusus—Winston—has climbed over the table and this *really* isn't a fight you can win without guns especially since neither Lynx nor Zarya seem to want to actually *help* you as they gawk at the proceedings-

"*Stop it. Both of you.*"

The familiar wave of Ana's psionics hits you right in the sleep bone. It doesn't knock you out cold, but you wobble until your knees hit the carpeted floor and exhaustion threatens to overwhelm you.

76 swaggers to stand over you. "So you remember Ana but not me. I'm hurt, *Reaper*."

He says your name so bright and poised that sweeps of memories inside a tin can floating through space come busting through for the second time in as many minutes. "*Jjaakk*?" you hiss in disbelief.

But he's already gone back to treating you with that self-righteous indifference, as familiar as Ana's consciousness in the back of your pan. He turns to Zarya and says, "it appears there's been some confusion, Ma'am. This one," he jerks his thumb at you, "is the real imperial loyalist. Shrike and I used to work with him before we defected."

"*Me*?" you bark through your fogging mind. "You two are so damn loyal you *died* for the Empire. Or didn't, it turns out. Mind explaining that one to me?"

This time Soldier just ignores you. Ana comes forward and says, "*sleep* Gaberl. We'll sort all this out."

She takes another stab at your psyche, but still you resist the yank into unconsciousness. She can’t make you go there anymore. You’ve learned all her tricks.

The table has fallen back into place, and the other two members of Overwatch look as uncertain as your own supposed allies. Zarya glances between Soldier and Winston before saying, “it appears we have some previously unknown interpersonal issues that have affected our diplomatic relations. Again.” She sighs. “If you will forgive us, I think we should end the proceedings for the day here. It might be best if we sort this out…not in person.”

Winston rumbles, “yeah. I think you might be right.” When nothing happens for a moment, he glares at Ana.

She withdraws her sleep psichosis, and the pressure on your mind finally lifts. Lynx carefully helps you to your feet, but you can still feel her and Soldier glaring daggers at you through their respective disguises. Talon might be retreating for the moment, but you aren’t done with them. Not by a long shot.

Chapter 16

You don’t dodge his next attack.

The flat, rippling planes of his flesh fist catch you in the gobble hinge, and you topple, only righting yourself in time to not be KO’d by his next hit. He has yet to strike you with the gauntlet. You could survive, you’re sure of it, enough that you’d claimed as much so confidently an hour before and he’d grinned at you with that tiger’s smile. Now he doesn’t even bother as a single-armed strike across your back brings you to the metal floor.

“Up, Zaryan,” he tells you when you do not immediately rise.

“I…will…” you wheeze.

You should. You will.

You stagger, dizzy, both fists raised to his one. He smirks, casting a glance over his shoulder at the Captain and tells her, “a bit more pressure, Ana. You go too easy on her.”

The Captain’s eyes narrow. At first, there is nothing, but after a moment’s hesitation the pressure at the back of your pan increases from a thrum to an ache, and you nearly fall again.

The only reason you don’t is because the Successor is darting forward, a clean right hook that you block and a knee to your gastric sack that you don’t. You fold, stumbling before Doomfist as he shakes his head.

“Up. You have spent too long too soft, Aspirant. The Condescension holds within her claws ten times this strength.”

“The sleep psionics…” you mutter out through a mouth full of blood, even as you know it is a foolish thing to say.

Disappointment clouds his eyes. “A fraction of what you will feel when you face her. Think, Zaryan. The Empress is you: of your blood, of your lineage. She is you and you are her but only in her most larval for, at her lowest point. She has had hundreds of thousands of sweeps to hone what her DNA has given her, stretched her psionics abilities to their physical limits, fended off death itself for those around her. You wish to overthrow her, to tear her from her throne, yet you cannot face *me*? ***Up***.”

You get up. Within eleven minutes you are on the ground again.

He shakes his head. “That will be enough for today. Someone get her some juice.”

The world feels like cotton around you, fuzzy at the edges of your skin as you’re moved about like a doll. The Captain says things to you, at you, in your ear as she tenderly and calmly patches you up. You ignore all of it. You suck down the rejuvijuice that is shoved in your hands and let yourself be hauled toward the medbay. It is only when you pass by a portal

to the outside, the vast canvas of stars, your own pale reflection floating translucently along its surface, that you realize that the arms supporting you are not Ana's.

"Lynx," you mutter.

"No other."

"I did not tell you where I was going."

"I am your Strategos, it is my job to know the goings on in this ship. Now, be quiet, your lifeblood's going to fall all out of your mouth if you keep doing that."

So you quiet, and the two of you drag along, foot by foot, the portholes sliding by like rare glimpses into the future if the future were nothing but void. Your reflections chase you, a pair of trolls stretched long by time and obligation.

"It is necessary," you say.

"I'm sure you think so."

"You disapprove."

"Of course I disapprove," Lynx scoffs. "And you know I disapproved before you asked. That is why you hid this from me."

You don't deny it. "I am not ready to face her. I must undergo the training she has, a millennia packed down to a few decades. Doomfist understands this."

"You are, and always will be, awfully big headed Zarya," they snort. "If you ever face her in single combat we've already lost. The whole point of this revolution is that it is not only on *you*, you know. That is what makes us different from her."

"Are we truly so special?" you ask bitterly. "I am just Her, after all. Her again and again, over and over as the cycle repeats."

The silence hangs heavy between you.

Quieter, much quieter, you say, "I am not Her."

"I know," they tell you.

The doors of the medbay rise up in front of you and you have a heartache that cannot be summed in words as you feel the pressures of your wounds and your misery and your ribs that were so fruitfully kicked in. The flesh on your face is tender and Lynx's grip under your arm jerks discomfort, yet it is the only thing holding you up. Shouting comes to a blundering halt as you enter.

Moira acknowledges you first, and offers a dismissal to her verbal sparring partner. "Another time, Widowmaker," she says evenly, too smoothly, sea before a storm because Widow turns to the waves and snaps back, "*no*."

“What is-” is all you say, for Widow begins before you can end.

“No, this is not a debate, I will not come back another time, and *you will not go near him again.*”

Reaper is lying on a plank between them. Since he’s acquired the mask you have become much worse at reading his expression, but the way his head flips between the two women reeks of a deeply saturated discomfort.

“It will be very difficult to treat him without *going near* him,” Moira says with every shark tooth in her pharyngeal jaw.

Widow looked like she might jump right then, wrap her grapplekind around the docterror’s throat and try like she has so many times. “*What is going on here?*” you bark again.

“O’Deorain is going to stop experimenting on Reaper,” Widow says through clenched bone nubs. “Right. Now. Or her desecrated floater is going to splattered over the hull come tomorrow evening.”

“How many times must I say it my dear?” Moira sighs. “It is not an *experiment*. I am treating him. His condition is…most unstable.”

“*Liar*,” Widow bites.

The altercation unfurls before you, again, a call back to the ring and you once again are stuck between those indecisions. Why does it always come to this? You have your theories, your ambitions, your plans, but in the heat of the moment you freeze. A small hand presses warm into your side. In reassurance or in restraint you are not sure.

“Reaper has volunteered for this,” Moira deflects easily. “Together, we are making so much progress.”

You think you hear him swallow. “Look Widow, without Moira’s help I’d be dead-”

“-And that does not mean you owe her your life,” Widow finishes. She has not taken her lookstubs off Moira. She may never. It may be the last thing she sees and for one blinding moment you can see a possible future sweep out before you, where the ancient seadweller culls a mere guppy with barely a sweat. Where Reaper deteriorates. Where Sombra fades once more because she uses pain as an excuse to pry herself away and always has.

“Enough,” you say, and in this moment, you are not Aleksa Zaryan, you are not Doomfist’s prodigy, you are not the tenderized bit of meat that wobbles in the middle of the infirmary. You are the Aspirant. You are their Heiress. “Moira, you will cease your experiments.”

Her head moves to you. Surprise lifts her brows, but more than that is condescension, as though she is used to minnows that think they can swim so close to her mandibles. “Like I said, they are not *experiments*-”

“I did not ask,” you say. Her jaw locks. “I do not care whether Reaper has agreed or not: you do not have permission to make contact with my crew. I have given you an order, and I will

hear no more on it."

You stare her down. There is a challenge, a *dare* to bring up the Successor's name, to use him as a shield, a captain to go over your head to. Your eyes openly invite her to take it.

After a moment, she drops her chin. "As you say, Aspirant."

"Yes. As I say." With the remaining authority in your voice you tell her, "now, I am in need of medical attention. This is now your focus."

"…Of course, your grace."

You are sat upon a spare recline. Moira busies herself, a state you have not observed before, and wonder if for the first you are seeing her put off her game. Widow watches you, for a moment, standing still in time as the scene moves on without her. The two of you lock eyes. There is the slightest shift to her, a tilt to her head, what might be a nod of acknowledgement or—dare you think it— respect. The bow retracts once more, and then she is gone. Reaper slinks out in the gaps between those moments.

As the docterror finds what she needs, a body joins you at your place of rest. "You are not Her," Lynx tells you. "The difference is in the choice."

"Which choice," you ask as you look directly ahead.

"Mine. And who I've followed, in the end."

Chapter 17

The totality of the Empire's jurisdiction is greatly exaggerated.

Or maybe that's not an honest way to go about it. More accurately would be to say that the Empire's ability to subjugate a planet down to the smallest microorganism is well within their purview, but to actually go about it is real boring. Every troll, from the lowest rust to the most vibrant purple, likes it when things are interesting, when things are still untamed on the worlds they claim if only for the spice of life. Alternia has left generations longing for solid footing underneath their boots, for fauna that tries to kill them, for flora that…also tries to kill them. However, it should be noted that "untamed" is only viable in the most literal sense; there are no pockets of calm forest, beetles and bugs allowed to thrive in stagnant pools left behind by the war machine. No, like everything in the bureaucracy, even the wild is meticulously intentional.

Which means the only things alive are those creatures deemed the most essential by the Empire. More concisely: anything that can tear you in half without a second thought.

You fan your gun, sending a whole clip into the insectoid's head. It rears up, waving its multitude of squirming legs, looking like it might just try to crush your with its dying breath. But then it falls in the wrong direction, tearing through the underbrush and landing with a mighty slam.

"Well," you say, pushing up your hat. "Ain't that a nice 'welcome home'."

The path from Symmetra's office to the main campus of Slopnest is neat yet winding, cutting through the deadly forest within the pockets of the city, intending to keep folks on their toes. Well. On your toes you are. You wipe a bit of slime off your poncho and step back into civilization.

The Mirthful Tree towers thirty stories tall in the center of the main plaza, named for the purple hue of its leaves and kept standing for their propensity to come loose in times of great wind. They're sharp as razor blades, and a storm could very well chop an unlucky troll to pieces if they were caught out in it, so the small pocket of church that resides on JS71C thinks the stupid plant is about the funniest in the world. Folks make it a point to pretend like they don't care, passing through the sprawling park with their faces in reports, ignoring when a stray leaf comes and scrapes a line of teal along their cheek. You don't got nothing to prove though, and you take the stone path around.

"Miss me already?" you ask as you pick up the message already waiting for you on your squackcatcher grub.

"There is no need to be crude," Symmetra's drawl responds, already tiring mere words in. "I am calling you as a favor."

"Favor?" You lean against the wall dividing your meal block and quarters, less than six frondspans between the two rooms. "Since when do we deal in favor?"

“A friendly notice then. On someone you like to keep a keen ganderbulb on.”

You exhale, pinching the bridge of your nose. “Well. Lay it on me then.”

“Three clicks north of Slopnest.”

“She in trouble?”

“Do you even need to ask?”

Which is how your welcome home is cut short. Barely a minute to set down your bag, no time to change your clothes which wrinkle with space air at every movement, only a moment to recharge your piece and then you’re on the road out of there, leaving the brief reprise of the city for the wilds once more.

The Mirthful Tree’s squatter and pissier cousins have taken over this north grove, clipping at your face coverings and suspiciously seeming to aim at your eyes. Speaking of squatters, the natural inhabitants of these trees are apparently a type of brightly colored primate, skin sleek with bioluminence and also poison, and boy howdy to they got a bone to pick with you.

So that’s how you see her, rifle in hand, hollering up a storm at any of the stupid monkeys that dare to come near the hill she seems dead set on dying on. What remains of her squad isn’t much, and you wonder what they were doing out here in the first place. Symmetra didn’t say. Only it seems to be a mighty ill-fated cause with the rivers of rust staining the forest floor and the team’s only working drone barreling off into the trees in a murderous rage, hot on the tail of the creature that had dared insult his mistress.

“B.O.B!” Ashe hollers. “B.O.B get the fuck back here you-”

If the killer windstorms aren’t enough, you also have to suffer the rain of fruit being pelted at you from above. Oh, and the fruit is *also* poisonous.

Hat pulled down to shield you from the worst of the acidic juices sloughing from the spherical artillery, you sprint your way through the crossfire, back slamming beside hers and you both press yourselves into the meager cover a fallen log allows.

“Don’t we keep meeting in the strangest places,” you say.

“McCree-?” She shrieks as a pool of corrosion lands near her custom-made headburrybird boots. She aims up at the offender and blasts, but it only gets the branch underneath, and the monkey leaps away with a hoot. “Gogdamn! Y’know what? I don’t even care. You help me kill these gogdamn varmints and I won’t even ask what the hell you’re doing here.”

You grin. “Now that’s what I like to hear.”

The log provides adequate leverage for the point of your elbow. You scan, finding a single target leaping through the branches, trailing it with sweeps of trained precision. You fire. The creature falls into the underbrush with a crash.

“Showoff,” Ashe tells you.

“You know,” you say as the two of you begin trading fire with your assailants, blaster shot right after another, falling into an ages old rhythm, “I’ve missed this. The two of us, barely one step away from killing each other, settling for killing everyone around us instead.”

“Uh-huh,” she says as she turns a monkey’s head to goo.

“Fifteen sweeps we’ve known each other now. Makes me wonder. Why ain’t we ever made it official?”

“Kismesisters? With you?” She lets loose one of those high, grating laughs that you despise and yearn for in equal measures. “I got more people that hate me than I know what to do with, get in line Jessse.”

“I’m talkin’ about ashen, Ashe.”

If her laugh was offensive before, it’s even more annoying now, and the not-quite-hate bubbles up in you. She jeers, “why would I *ever* let you mediate something for me, cowboy?”

“Try again darling.” You aim a shot over her shoulder, shooting a fruit out of midair and turning the resulting explosion painful instead of deadly.

The wheels turn in her head, and she glares. “Me? You think I’m going to roll over and auspistize *you* like some yellow-bellied-”

As she growls and chitters and bemoans, your grin only grows wider, even as your comrades fall, as the forest closes in around you and killer leaves swirl in for another strike. The call you asked Symmetra to make thrums in the back of your torso column and you know that at any moment-

The sky splits open.

An indigo-grade ship tears through the sky faster than the speed of sound, its sonic boom sending the monkeys into an uproar and turning every troll face to the heavens. Ashe stops mid-rant and her jaw hangs open, the familiar ship swinging around and pulling into view.

“Is that…” she asks.

Frozen in mid-air, hovering perfectly over the canopy, the sleek white ship opens fire, it’s grav-joined joints letting it move perfectly, with grace beyond what most planet-side tolls can even imagine. The whole forest is ablaze, hostiles dropping with perfect holes in their skulls. The bastard of a tree at the center alights with a great *FROOM*.

“Well I’ll be.” Ashe pushes up her hat, an exact mirror of you as the pair of you watch your savior settle amongst the burring wood, its pilot emerging from within.

“McCree,” Echo greets you with the tightest of hugs.

“Well ain’t that swell,” Ashe rolls her eyes. “They order backup, but poncho boy gets out here first? Tell Sym to just send the ship next time.”

“Didn’t hear you complaining when I was saving your hide,” you point out.

“Hah! You’d be dead if I hadn’t killed that dang varmit that had you ‘round the neck.”

“And if I hadn’t pushed you out of the way that fruit bomb would’ve eaten clean through your carapace.”

“You didn’t *push me out of the way*, you dang *tackled me*, look at all this dirt on my vest you-”

“Damn ungrateful-”

“My friends please,” Echo places a hand on each of your shoulders. “It is good to have you home, McCree. Ashe, I am glad you are alive. Is this not a thankful enough night that we can just enjoy each other’s company?”

The tension goes out of you. You can see it leave Ashe as well, and she looks at the triangle of arms that have now joined the three of you. She narrows her lookstubs in an amber-hued seethe. “…I suppose.”

“Wonderful!” Echo declares as you grin in victory and Ashe’s slowly twisting face. “Now come on, I have enough space to take you all back to Slopnest. We’ll certainly all be cozy together!”

The two of you wince.

Chapter 18

The cerulean fights the joystick with all her strength, but the ship is veering and there's nothing her slipping mittens can do about it. Gamblignant boarding shuttles flitter about the *Aurora* like sweatnibblers on a musclebeast, the battleship's canons swatting at them just as ineffectually as a rope-braid tail on a hindquarter. The ship bucks again under her palms and sends her flat on her spinal crevice.

"Darn it!"

It's a valiant effort to repeal the pirates, but unfortunately for her

YOU'RE ALREADY HERE

"Maybe give it another go?" her goldblood co-pilot says with gleeful pep as he helps her to her feet. She snaps her arm away immediately and harrumphs, "I can take care of myself!"

The goldblood is about to reply when the looming bronzeblood, the final threat in this section of the bridge if Jjaakk's perimeter comes back clean. He stands between the two of them, grunts an indeterminate grunt, and pulls them apart by the back of their necks. The cerulean pouts at first, but then she joins the goldblood in looking appropriately baabeastish.

But the machinations of beleaguered middle leafs are not your focus, for Jjaakk has just returned, and he's given you The Nod. You spring out behind the shield of abstracted archway cover, the metaphorical fins of this battleship meant to help its crew defend should ever a boarding party ever breach its insides, and unleash your attack.

SLEEP

You've only accomplished this in training before. Using psionics on three adult trolls is for mutants and accomplished highbloods, for those who have more than SLEEP at their disposal. But a twisting, un-trolllike part of you hopes that if the ship can be taken and spare a few lives in the process, then that is a possibility you must grab.

Blessedly—Demoness watch over you—three sets of knees buckle as you press your shrike's eye into their thinkpans like an unsubtle knife. The cerulean fights you the longest, but that is still less than a second, not enough to press the alarm under the command console. Instead, she smacks her nugbone on the edge of the platform on the way down, and the ship is yours.

"Showoff," Jjaakk says.

You smile. He reminds you of Gabe so much sometimes.

That thought leads to roads and winding paths so you simply choose not to follow it. You go to the console, and radio into the secured channel of the gamblignant fleet: "objective secured. The *Aurora* is ours."

You can imagine the violent cheer that that is happening on each individual fighter in the frothing sea of battle below you, one of snarls of and triumphant howls and fists raised high. Does it echo in Doomfist's flagship? Is the command center there silent, contemplative?

Is he even still there?

It disturbs you to realize you don't even know. Gabe, the old Gabe, would have been back in his fighter before the sutures had been removed, but you have been increasingly aware over the past five sweeps that he has…changed. He's more scalpel than knife now. He calculates. He actually listens to his auspistices and Demoness knows you never got him to do *that* for you. It almost makes you wish…

Your fingers idly trailing along the chittering feelers of the control panel assay your wandering thinkpan, but the hard proof comes when the bronzeblood comes slamming into your back.

"Ana!"

He cracks what feels like your entire spine as he slams you into the bridge's elliptical window, a forearm as big as your waist pinning you by the throat. You were sure he was out it must not have taken entirely, and now you pay and pay again, Jjaakk's voice warbling through your consciousness as he spins his weapon on the troll holding you. SLEEP you demand, but it's so much harder while your lungs are in the process of being snuffed out. The bronzeblood picks you up and slams you again. Jjaakk's rifle fires. The combination of force and plasma and the window behind you shatters.

Space.

There's no air here, but that doesn't make it all that different than before honestly. What they never say is that it's the vacuum that kills you, the moisture getting sucked through unprotected ganderbulbs and subnegative temperature that eat your skin your digits your throat. They say the higher your caste the heartier but you wonder. You wonder, as you float further away from the change in pressure that shot you from the ship like a canon, how long an empress could survive in space. If the Condescension could be brought down in one fell swoop, would she survive out there, floating? Untethered? A queen surrounded by the remains of her greatest achievement.

It is with this image, of flakes of metal flittering around like stars, that you feel a hand close around your wrist.

It isn't Jjaakk. He was too far, you are gone, gone…aren't you? Yet there are voices, and back in through the shattered hole of glass, then finally to a section of ship re-pressurized as an airlock closes behind you. "Stay awake, Captain," he says, and you do not do as he says. Though, that only lasts for a minute and then you are

bombarded

with psionics. Though not like any psionics you've ever felt before, your own nor those you've on the rare occasion battled against. This…you open your eyes. Eye. Your shrike's

eye is woefully damaged, you can feel it, but you can still see the un-alternianly yellow light surrounding you in this tiny little airlock at least four others are crammed into with you.

Jjaakk is one. But the psionic is the one that draws all attention, the one who is glowing, who is healing you instead of turning your mind to mush. Her hair is free of its tie and there is no doubt it the light is coming from her.

Because she has *wings*.

When the light fades, and you sit up and pat yourself over, you give her a look. “Well now. I see why our aspirant is so keen on you.”

She flushes mustard in her cheeks.

The wings are a pale yellow and gossamer, just like the legends of the Summoner’s mythical mutation. Apparently there was more truth to those tales than even you realized, and you still breathed when the Summoner walked Alternia.

Jjaakk shakes his head. The others, which you are finally taking stock of, are less surprised. Mercy’s morail, you can’t recall his name, is sitting by her side, steadying her after what was most certainly an extreme exertion of psionics energy.

And there. The one who you know is called Pharah because you figured this all out rather quickly and couldn’t help but ask.

Your descendant cannot decide to shyly avoid your eye or to stare in abject wonder. You cannot but help but muse how such a thing could come to be, so soon after your own hatching, to spawn something a whole caste above your own. Yet here she is. To look in her face, there is now denying it. You reach over and pat her hand.

“There there ḥabībti. It takes more than that to kill me.”

It makes sense that your first words to her would be as such.

Cut short is your reunion. Your Royal One is boarding.

Less than an hour after being dead and you salute straight backed as the Aspirant and Doomfist come to see what you have claimed for them. (For you are of the fleet, and centuries do not change in sweeps, no matter how devoted you are to the cause.) The bridge is no longer a suitable place to receive them thanks to your little oopsie, so instead the ‘inspection’ takes place in a grand amphitheater where the grand ceiling bubbled itself upwards into the grand dome of the sky. Ships still flit about as the Successor makes great sweeping paces of the ship, and untroubled and victorious grin on his face.

He is still grinning that grin when he forms as sweeping bow to the Aspirant and offers the ship to her in its entirety.

Zarya obviously isn’t expecting it. No one in her entourage is, and if you know anything of her Strategos from the brief times you’ve met, you’d bet their mind is a bunch of little cogs

someone is shaking around in a desk drawer as they try to calculate their next move and the political ramifications of being awarded a war prize.

But spoils and political dealing are beyond you. More to your interests is that the violets are at it again, and Zarya is handling them quite well thanks to your training. You smile

The amphitheater is a mess of cheers and calls. Jjaakk still manages to sidle up and say, “showoff.”

Chapter 19

The cloister bakes itself into the pink-rocked planet in guilt, as though it know what it is and is ashamed. There is no life, no duty here as it lies dormant and forgotten, but you're no fool. You take your personal craft in with cloaks on, and kill it far from sight.

Looks can be deceiving. You hope that in this case, they are.

You flashstep close—the front door is obvious, but it's also the only way in. The Jade cloister is built into the mountainside; privacy of the upmost. No one knows what exactly off-world jades do, why they are siphoned off and bundled away like this, but whatever the secret it has kept the centuries. And if that secrecy builds places where remoteness and hostile solar flares keep their charges from escaping? All the better.

You shiver. Its been sweeps but it still pains you to think they took her here—or somewhere like here, but you hope, you *hope* this time it truly is *here*—when she was so vibrant. This places kills trolls like her. Takes what Emilly who she was and strips it for parts.

But this time it has to be the right place. It doesn't matter how many empty holes you've tripped over in the sweeps of your search, you *will* find her again.

The doorway is damp. Not sealed, just a troll-sized hole carved in the stone. Groundwater then; this place may even have supported life, if the jades required it to. You are frozen at the threshold, between the rosy desert behind and the life-giving pit below, wondering how the moisture hasn't instantly dissipate in the thin atmosphere, when another of the jade's marvels come to life.

Namely, an automatic security drone rising from the sand behind you, and knocking gravel from its rifle.

As a wriggler, it was made clear to you that other trolls talked to their lusii, and it should not have been your fault that you took this entirely literally.

Why wouldn't Winston talk to you? He raised you, and it never entered into your mind that such an essential component could be missing from the lives of the tolls you catch glimpses of over the internet. Funnily enough, what actually clues you in to how different you are is your name: Lena. Winston gave you for short, simple letters, and it was the dozenth of maybe a thousandth time someone asked you what it was short for that you began to intuit something was off.

Emilly didn't care though. You were odd, and a little stuttery, and probably cull-bait but you stumbled into a gangly, adolescent matespritship even with all that in the way. When you wrapped that blood-colored scarf around her neck, you knew the two of you could survive anything.

As if belief alone could hold back Ascension. They held you from her screaming as she was escorted onto the waiting ship, and tolerated the agony from your burning throat only so long before the adult gripping your shoulder lost her patience. She broke your jaw, and you fell to the dirt in a spatter of bronze leaking from your mouth.

When the ship was only a prick of light in the sky, you picked up the scarf. It had fluttered to the ground as she was dragged away

(oh how you wished she was dragged away. But she had known, just like you had known, and she went to her fate with her head held high)

and you knelt and clutched it with brown stained hands. Hues, yours and hers, blending together. You promised you'd never stop searching.

After a who-knows-how-long sleep in the dirt, it takes the drone whirring seconds to *ka-thunk* to life. Precious seconds, without which you would be dead for even a drone as old as this one is going to have pinpoint accuracy. You're already flashstepping behind it, your duel-pulsekind flipping from your specibus, layering a round into its back. It turns, but too slowly, creaking as it does while cascades of sand leak from its joints. You flashstep again, a little to your left of where you first started.

It lurches when your second round hits it in the side. One more pulse should do it-

But your final step is anticipated. In what may have been an attempt to trip you, the drone tilts to the side, extending one of its strutpods to clothesline your own.

You barrel into it at full force. A second later you're free, rolling gracelessly in the dirt at top speed until you slam into the cloister wall and feel every bone in your flesh prison ache.

The drone doesn't fair much better. When you finally stagger to your feet, it is sparking; interfering with a flashstepping organic generally isn't good for ones health. You wait, pistols poised, every smarting muscled tensed.

Eventually, it falls over dead.

"Woo," you say wiping your sweating brow. Touching your radio you add, "ran into a spot of trouble with the old defenses but I think…"

In the unmoving desert of pink sand, it's impossible to miss when two more mounds of dust begin to come to life.

"…I think you're bloody joking."

"Sorry chica, but I don't play those games," she told you right off the bat.

It hadn't helped.

When Sombra—as you got to know her better you would add an emphatic *Sombra? Of all people?* to that thought—first agreed to help you, you couldn't believe your luck. More like you didn't know you luck, because even in the Aspirant's greatest hacker had randomly taken in interest in the plight of an Overwatch agent, it didn't come strings free. Mainly the fact that she was a flighty broad who could drive you crazy at the slightest remark.

"I don't know what you're talking about," you'd snarled. Unconvincing, because she'd set you on edge and you were gripping the back of her pilot's chair like your life depended on it.

"This. The pitched tango. The kismesis shimmy. The caliginous can-can. You've got this mad hatred for me, and I know I'm very easy to hate, but I'd rather not lead you on."

"I don't hate you," you said, looking at that smug smile through her layer of makeup and wanting to simply *bite*.

"Suuuure taradita…if you say it enough everyone will believe it too. Just trying to be upfront is all. I've been working on it you know, coming to terms I just don't pitch the way I should. Middle leaf has been helping me through some therapy and I'm *very* in touch with my emotions these days."

"Well it doesn't matter, since I don't." You teeth hurt from clenching.

"Great," she said leisurely. "So glad that's settled. Now if you'll let me go? I can't exactly find your pretty little jade when I'm facing this direction."

You released the back of her chair. If only that had been the end, instead of a terribly painful beginning.

An hour later, you limp into the dark and damp below the planet's surface.

Every inch of you hurts; organs you didn't know you had, bits of troll you worry you don't have any longer. You trail handprints along the wall, bleeding, other arm around your middle where the wind has been knocked out of you so thoroughly it hurts to pull it back in. But you'll bounce back. You have to. Because the cloister is empty.

"Pickup," you say into your radio.

"Aw, taradita….the deserted cloister turned out to be deserted?"

As always that voice gives you flashes of a part of yourself you didn't even know you had. You tamp it down, give basic instructions where your personal craft can reconnect with Sombra's orbiting space-bound, and marvel how the universe just takes and takes. One girl forever out of your reach, one girl painfully within who smiles as she turns the other cheek.

Chapter 20

-- lynxSeventeen [LS] began trolling widowMaker [WM]--

LS: W1dowmaker. My deares7 ha7efr1end.
WM: Whatever it is, no.
LS: 1s 17 so cer7a1n 1 am abou7 7o ask you for some7h1ng? Surely 7here have been many a 71me where 1 have con7ac7ed you over Skorpe purely because 1 have some7h1ng s7uck 1n my craw and you are a rel1able source of comm1serable b17ch1ng.
WM: That may be, but I know that tone.
LS: Wha7 7one? 1'm 7yp1ng.
WM: I can see it in between the lines of simplified leetspeak & self aggr&izing aquamarine.
LS: 1 7ake offense. Surely 1f 1 was 7ruly so self aggrand1z1ng 1 would speak en71rely 1n anc1en7 lee7speak, and no7 7he s1mpl1f1ed forma7 of our modern day.
WM: Lynx my detested, normally I would love nothing better than to continue our jovial banter well into the afternight, but unfortunately I have actually been given a duty of some value.
WM: The alliance with Overwatch seems to have put a spring in our Aspirant's step. She's finally found a use for me aside from "st& here & look intimidating."
WM: I will be taking over our fighter squadrons while she's away, as to keep up appearances.
WM: They are quite a mess however. So Lynx, whatever you messaged me about, please just spit it out.
LS: 1'm glad you're enjoy1ng your new du71es.
WM: Who said I was enjoying them?
LS: 1, 7oo, can read be7ween 7he l1nes of h1ghblood wankery.
LS: Bu7 1f 1 am 1ndeed on a 71me l1m17.
LS: 17 1s abou7 sa1d Asp1ran7.
WM: Surprise surprise.
LS: As 1f we d1dn'7 spend a s1gn1f1can7 por71on of our log 1n snuff-pressed nookery devo71ng 7housands of l1nes 7o your clus7erpa1l of a quadran7 corner.
WM: Zarya is not only your kismesis, she's the cornerstone for every event on this ship. Nothing goes by without revolving around her for a few orbits & being flung off into space.
WM: She even has Doomfist's entire fascination at this point.
LS: 1f only h1s fasc1na71on d1dn'7 1nvolve bea71ng her nearly 7o dea7h every per1gee.
WM: What? He's still training her?
LS: 7he frequency and bru7al17y of 7he1r sess1ons has only 1ncreased.
LS: She refuses 7o modera7e, suffer1ng wha7ever he asks by some m1sgu1ded bel1ef 7ha7 17 w1ll make her s7ronger.
LS: 17 1s only ge771ng worse and 1f you had seen when she came back 7o our resp17e blocks 7h1s las7 71me you would also
LS: 1 can'7 make her see reason.
WM: Can you not? She listens to your advice more than anyone, even Doomfist.
LS: No, no7 me. 7h1s 1s no7 some7h1ng 1 can do wh1le s71ll
LS: 1 can'7
LS: Someone needs 7o pale her.
WM: …

WM: What.
LS: She needs a mora1l, 1mmed1a7ely. Someone who can keep her from ge771ng herself k1lled.
LS: 1 do no7 7rus7 many people whole-hear7edly on 7h1s sh1p, no7 when 17 comes 7o Zarya.
LS: Bu7 you are one of 7hose people.
WM: I'm sorry, are you
WM: Pimping
WM: For her?
LS: 17 1s necessary! 1f Zarya ge7s herself k1lled 1n a mere 7ra1n1ng exerc1se (wh1ch she w1ll) 7hen we're all dead, our opera71on crumbles before we even make our grea7 move. No7 7o men71on wha7 an embarrassmen7 7ha7 would be! W1dowmaker, would you 7ruly l1ke 7o have spen7 your en71re l1fe 1n a rebell1on only 7o have 7he would-be 7hrone-warmer acc1den7ly skewered dur1ng a dr1ll, and her whole flee7 go 7o shambles?
WM: Lynx, you're being ridiculous.
WM: You cannot orchestrate a moirallegiance out connivance.
LS: Why no7? Hasn'7 all of 7roll h1s7ory been forced concup1scen7 ma7ches 1n order 7o sa71sfy 7he f1l1al drones? Aren'7 conc1l1a71ons 7hemselves been evolu71onary necessar1ly?
WM: Lynx. You're thinking like an imperial bulgehumper.
LS: 1 spen7 mos7 of my l1fe as one.
WM: Which is why it is so hard to remember you are free Lynx Seventeen.
WM: We are all free.
WM: Loose canon highbloods needing unwilling morails for the good of society is just as constructed as arranged concupiscence. A morail is her choice to make, not yours.
WM: & if you are so worried, so desperate to make sure nothing ill becomes of her, then you hardly need to outsource pale duties.
LS: You can'7 be ser1ous.
LS: Haven'7 you had enough of p17ched-pale vac1lla71on?
WM: The two of you have already had a rather unconventional kismesissitude. Based on what you've told me, its sounds like someone haughty little teal is already halfway to pity already, hm?
LS: 1'm no7.
LS: No, 17 doesn'7 ma77er wha7 1 am or am no7, 17's more 1mpor7an7 wha7 1 can'7 be. 7he Asp1ran7 canno7 be blurr1ng quadran7s, no7 w17h so much on 7he l1ne.
WM: Do you not remember what advice you gave me, all those sweeps ago, deep in the denial of my own woes?
LS: 7h1s 1s d1fferen7.
LS: 17's Zarya.
WM: Oh Lynx.
LS: 7h1s 1s po1n7less. 1f you w1ll no7 help, 1 w1ll f1nd someone who w1ll.

-- lynxSeventeen [LS] ceased trolling widowMaker [WM]--

GM: No.

--

PH: no

--

HH: HA HA HA

--

TT: (6 sorry old friend but the answer is no 9)

--

BL: no

--

HH: HA HA HA HA HA HA

--

SS: no-way!
SS: I-know-to-stay-away-from-crazy!

--

SH: …no?

--

HH: HA HA HA HA HA HA ABSOLUTELY FUCKING NOT!

-- lynxSeventeen [LS] began trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

SC: ~ yo cariño what'~ ~pinning ~
LS: Ac7ually, wha7 7he fuck am 1 7h1nk1ng?
LS: Never m1nd.

-- lynxSeventeen [LS] ceased trolling sucroseCranium [SC]--

SC: ? um ?

"Aaaand…done! There you go hermana, as rosy as a virgin guppy."

Sombra whisks the towel away and you are bare to the whistling air of the battleship, away from its warmth and chemical smell. It is an odd loss to care about, but it still prickles the skin along the back of your neck as you stare into your new reflection, the pink shock on your head evoking something more painful than nostalgia.

Sombra had promised results and you should never have doubted her. Her own violet ombre was always exquisite, and yet part of you had thought that you'd never again…

"Thank you," you say softly.

"Eh, don't mention it," she waves away. "Seriously don't. If everyone finds out how good I am at this, they'll be a line out my respiteblock all the way to the prow, and I'll never get anything done."

She must see a wet spot she missed, for she idly begins to massage the towel through your hair once again.

"Plus," she says after a while, for you have not moved, will not move as long as this moment stretches, "I missed the pink. Reminds me of old times."

She was yours before anything, before even Lynx. You will not say it, because you know she would not want to hear it, would make her pull away from these fleeting moment where you allow each other to remember. But you hold it to your bloodpusher all the same.

"Thank you," you say again.

Chapter 21

DV: oh crap i d.id.n't e.ven look at the time
DV: i ha.ve to jump off for a scrim
DV: but i'll see you this morning, right?
TC: + Hell yeah! I actually need to clean out my lusus's pond so might be a bit on the later side, but I'm definitely making it down. >>
TC: + Wouldn't miss it for the world. >>
DV: hold.ing u to that, frog boy!
TC: + Haha, see you then! >>

-- dVa [DV] ceased trolling triadobatrachusCrossfade [TC]--

You pull a nearby throw pillow against your face and scream.

This super can't be happening. Of course it's like *great* that it's happening, but you also maybe want to crawl into a ball and die a little. No allies, no quadrants, nothing but floaters and guppies down here, has been for the past nine sweeps. You'd rather not be secretive, but the histories don't lie: heiresses stay in the deep, and the queens stay in the stars. Every now and then, a violet blood—usually younger than you—may swim close to your undersea hive with a morsel of curiosity between their shark's teeth. You never had any interest in them, a background radiation of fear even, though you'd never admit it. After all, you're D.Va! Undefeated ScarAlchemize player, head of the near indomitable MEKA network, super awesome mechanic…And yet when you see your bl0od-cousins nearing too close you flip on the automated defenses and the flashing fuchsia chases them away. Online friends are safer. Online friends can't turn on you the way the way a loyal seadweller can.

Or at least, that was the understanding up until now. But Luscio was just…so cool, and you couldn't help it, and then he asked if you wanted to be morails and then the wanted to come *here*…

You resist screaming into the pillow again. You're nearing Ascension. You have total control over your life.

You weren't lying about the scrim, so you do distract yourself even though D.Mon can tell you're not really there. After a while she calls it to your immense relief. So you wander wander wander around your hive, killing the hours until-

An alert that something wants to cross the defense line. Is he here already? He said he'd be a bit late but maybe the pond cleaning didn't take as much time as he thought…

Nervously, you deactivate the defenses. You can't see so well in the dark outside the glass bubble of a window, but you assume he rented some sort of craft to get down here. You already have a few gentle ribbings on hand—something something landweller with a frog lusus still needs a swimmerbug in order to dive—and you hold them flimsily to your chest like the single icebreaker that will smooth this all over well. The outer airlocks are groaning.

You stand in the middle of your hive, various flavors of self-assured smile crossing your face. You cock your hip and put a fist on it. You are *cool*. You are *chill*. And most importantly this is Luscio; you *know* him, and there's nothing to be nervous about.

The inner airlock opens and the Empress herself steps into your sanctuary.

The sounds you make shall not be described here; it was certainly not a 'squawk' as later reports would have on believe, and instead let it only be said that it was something very un-heiress-like. You go tumbling over your loungeplank, strupods akimbo, and panic descends on you like a cawbeast. The Empress—flanked by two violets, their combined mass in the dark making you think it was an approaching shuttle—shakes water out of her hair, and steps further into your rumpusblock. You struggle, to kneel, to scramble to a decent enough position that you can flip your pistol kind out of your strife specibus and rise shaking to point it at her chest.

As you do, you know two things:

You dinky little peashooter will do nothing, not to a full-grown seadweller and certainly not to the most powerful specimen of royalty the brooding caverns have ever produced.

The second thing you know is that the Empress does not have pink hair.

The fuchsiablood in the center raises her palms flat in surrender. "Peace little sister. We mean you no harm."

Yeah, no, this is definitely not Her. You've absorbed the propaganda reels obsessively, watching the way Her face changes with each word, the exact nicks in her gills. This stranger before you is of your blood, but that is impossible, there should only be two of you in the world-

"The old heiress," you realize suddenly. "…But you're dead. *She* killed you."

"At least little piece of propaganda is still doing its job," the violet to the Aspirant's right says. She is wringing out her own swath of black hair; an amount that *would* put the Empress to shame, if she didn't keep it in a pull-back so tight to her scalp.

"We knew it would," the Aspirant replies. To you, she says, "a necessary lie. Her Condescension needed to believe me dealt with in order to give us time to build toward our final assault. We let her believe she had killed me, so she might turn her attention to other matters."

Ridiculous. Though you cannot fake eye color, not this close. Whatever else she says, she is indeed a living royal blood.

You keep your hands steady. "That was dumb. Everyone gave up on you, and now no one ever remembers your rebellion anymore."

"They'll remember soon enough."

You do not like that grimness in her face. It speaks of cold waves you wish to never wade in to.

You shiver, but grit it down. "Why are you here? I don't have anything you want!"

"I do not think that is true. But regardless, we have something *you* want: a way out."

Her meaning comes to you easily enough. Join her rebellion. Join her, or wait for the Empress to find you instead; no doubt a day that is coming, if the Aspirant stumbled across you already. With concentration, you manage to lower your pistolkind fractionally.

"And what do you get out of taking me on?" you ask the obvious, genuinely perplexed.

"Legitimacy? A future, extremely powerful soldier? Lineage, should I fail? You said it yourself: I died, and the rebellion was forgotten. Should it happen for real, you will provide the security we need."

"How can I even trust you?" you fire off rapid questions one after another. "How did you find me? What did you do with Luscio?"

"Nothing."

"Then…?" The second worst case jumps to mind: he sold you out. He told your enemies where you were, just like you always feared the first person you let into your life would.

But the Aspirant shakes her head. "Do not blame him, he does not know we took his place when submitting our security signature. We merely monitored your correspondence, and looked for an opening."

"Okay, creepy, but at least you have good hackers." You unequip your pistolkind. "What does this whole…joining a rebellion involve, exactly?"

"Getting offworld, first of all. We can discuss exact terms in orbit; if we have found you, She will not be far behind. If you can leave with us now that would be the best option, and we can make other arrangements as we go. Do you have anyone that we must extract for you? Loyal friends, quadrants?"

After a horrible bombardment of deathly ultimatums, having an adult troll mention your quadrants is the last straw, and you blush a furious pink.

The troll to the Aspirant's left, silent up until now with her shoulders straight and hands clasped firmly behind her back, notices your stricken face. She raises one semi-amused eyebrow and says, "Aspirant, have pity on the guppy. Surely that is not the sort of discussion she wants to have in front of strangers."

"Oh, yes, of course," the Aspirants says, seemingly to genuinely not have considered this. "You can make those arrangements yourself I suppose."

You let out a breath of relief. "Y-yeah. Sure. Just…let me pack up my gaming rig."

As you bundle your worldly possessions—you'd always known you'd have to flee some day, you just never really expected you'd have a fighting chance about it—you catch the eye of the ancient looking violet. It will be nice to have one more ally. Certainly, you're going to need them.

Chapter 22

-- techTranscendent [TT] slipStream [SS] sparrowHawk [SH] and 6 others have been given access to this memo board --

SC: ? ~hitting ~ufferer i~ that everyone ?
SC: ~ zar babe u really gotta ~top adding people to your inner circle ~
SC: ~ it~ becoming le~~ of a circle and more of a dodecahedron ~
HH: WOWEE, DIGGING AROUND IN THE TOY BOX FOR THE BIG WORDS AREN'T WE
WM: Sombra is a very intelligent troll, Reaper. It shouldn't be surprising that she knows a few above second-schoolfed words.
SC: ? am i having an aneuri~m thi~ early in the day ?
SC: ? are you *~iding* w me amelie ?
WM: & yet it still is surprising, for the times she actually chooses that big brain of hers the Bgolybian Comet will have made a full sweep.
SC: ~ aaaand there it i~ ~
SC: ~ wouldnt have it any other way ;0) ~
LS: Dodecahedron 1sn'7 even 7ha7 b1g a word.
LS: 7hough 1f 1 m1gh7 prov1de some fores1gh7, 7r1decagon w1ll be 7he mos7 accura7e descr1p7or.
SS: did-we-come-here-to-get-the-details-for-the-big-assault-on-the-condescension-or-did-we-come-here-to-watch-these-goonies-faff-about? cmon-wheres-zarya-lets-get-this-show-on-the-road!
HH: WAIT HOLD ON
HH: I WANT TO KNOW HOW STRATEGOS MATHED THAT OUT.
PH: I don'7. I wan7 to ge7 our orders and march ou7 of here 6efore the Empress realize we've been sitting out in this asteroid belt with our thumbs up our asses for the past four sweeps.
HH: OF COURSE GENERAL NOOK-ON-THE-LINE, LET'S JUST GO MARCHING UP TO HER FRONT DOOR
BL: beAts sitting here .(
HH: THE FRONT DOOR WITH THE LASERS AND CRAP? THE ONE WITH THE GIANT SPACESHIP THAT'S ABLE TO PREFORM ORIBITAL BOMBARDMANTS THAT CAN RENDER A TYP III PLANET UNINHABITABLE WITHIN FORTY-EIGHT HOURS?
HH: THAT'S THS PROVERBIAL BULGE YOU'RE OH SO EAGER TO JUMP ON?
BL: its been sweeps
BL: some of us Arent getting Any younger
SS: youre-plenty-young-ms-captain! barely-look-a-day-over-five-hundred!
BL: i was talking About gAbe
HH: JUST WANT YOU TO KNOW ALL OF MY APENDEGES ARE FLIPPING OFF YOUR GROSS-ASS COBALT SPILLAGE RIGHT NOW
WM: It's true.
WM: We share a respiteblock & I can see him doing it.
WM: Even the strutpods.
BL: overwAtch has been remArkAbly pAtient considering the initial agreement

BL: we were leAd to believe the gAmblignAnt hAd A solid plAn, one thAt could be enActed before our metAllic Allies stArted dying off due to the simple AdvAnce of sweeps
LS: A few p1eces of our s7ra7egy
LS: Fa1led 7o fall 1n7o place. 1n171ally, a7 leas7. Regardless, w17h 7he spare He1ress 1n hand, we can f1nally move forward.
HH: LYNX I HAVEN'T FORGOTTEN WTF IS WITH THE THIRTEEN CRAP
LS: Yes 7ha7.
LS: 7ha7 was ano7her foreseen p1ece 7ha7 only now has appeared and agree 7o help.
LS: Funn1ly enough, l1ke 7he He1ress, 7h1s b17 of flo7sam has come 7o us also w17h a mo1ra1l 1n 7ow.
HH: THE RIDDLES
HH: DEAR SUFFERER THE RIDDLES
HH: MAKE IT END
SH: I am starting to see the truth of Sombra's initial assessment. Truly nothing but a "fraxas" xan xome from so many people with xommenting power on one message board. -|===>
TT: (6 have faith my student, sombra is well versed in the of esoteric tech. she knows what she is doing. 9)
SH: Of xourse master, my apologies. -|===>
SC: ~ nah, genji~ right ~
SC: ~ no way ~korge wa~ meant to handle thi~ many people on a ~ubnet trying to fly under the radar of a mainnet on one board ~
SC: ~ thing~ held together with ma~tication gob~ and faery dream~ ~
SC: ~ btw ~
SC: ~ dont have too many typing at once otherwi~e the whole thing might go down ~
SC: charming
SC: ! ~he arrive~ !
WM: Late again, Aspirant.
SC: apologiez. I waz in the middle my workout when I zaw all the hellizh purple azzaulting my zcreen from acrozz the gym floor
WM: Oh dear. What kind of workout?
SC: what do you care?
SC: frond muzcle curlz if you muzt know.
LS: wwlemc.dkljd,
SC: lynx zeventeen what on alternia are you doing to your huzktop
LS: No7h1ng. Absolu7ely no7h1ng. W1dow s1mply sen7 me some7h1ng jus7 now 7ha7 was very funny.
SC: ahem
SC: now that we are all here
HH: (DID SHE REALLY JUST TYPE "AHEM"?)
SC: it'z about time we introduced the key to our upcoming victory
PH: We've already met your new blood sister. She's a cute kid, but until she can psionically rip apart a drone with her mind I don't see how she's an actual tactical advantage.
SC: not her, no.
fixedJavelin [FJ] and siegeAutomaton [SA] responded to memo
FJ: That w0uld be me /_!_\

--Board ~ the big kahuna ~ is no longer available. --

SC: ~ oh youve really done it now ~
SC: ~ i told you people not to type all at once ~
SC: ~ gaahhh let me try rebooting ~

-- Board ~ the big kahuna ~ is rebooting. Please stand by. --

SC: ! aaaaand were live !
SC: ~ plea~e dont mob her thi~ time ~
SC: ~ if purely ju~t for practical rea~on~ ~
FJ: 0h deaR…1 d1d n0t mean t0 cau5e 50 much tR0uble /_!_\
FJ: 1 am qu1te new at th15 /_!_\
HH: YOU'RE NOT USING A LIME TEXT COLOR JUST FOR SHITS AND GIGGLES, ARE YOU
FJ: 1 am n0t, n0 /_!_\
HH: FUCK
HH: FUCK MAN
HH: I KNOW IT'S HARD TO TELL WITH THE QUIRK BUT THAT WAS AN AWE-FILLED AND DISBILEIVING FUCK
SH: fuck…
HH: YEAH LIKE THAT
SH: My sensei is equally disturbed by the news, it appears. He's left our bloxk, & I think it is best if I went after him. -|===>
HH: DON'T BLAME HIM
HH: GOOD LUCK HOTSHOT
sparrowHawk [SH] ceased responding to memo
SA: 01001000 01100101 01101100 01101100 01101111 00100000 01100101 01110110 01100101 01110010 01111001 01101111 01101110 01100101 00100001 00100000 01001001 00100111 01101101 00100000 01101000 01100101 01110010 01100101 00100000 01110100 01101111 01101111 00101110
SS: anyone-know-what-the-jade-is-saying?
FJ: That 15 my deaR Ba5t10n. They aRe meRely 5ay1ng that they aRe happy t0 be heRe /_!_\
FJ: And they, l1kew15e, aRe heRe t0 help /_!_\
FJ: ^u^
HH: TO HELP HUH
FJ: 0f c0uR5e /_!_\
HH: GOOD TO KNOW THE DEAD CASTE OUT OF TIME IS ON OUR SIDE.
FJ: That 15 alm05t exactly what 1 am /_!_\
FJ: Ba5t10n and 1 have tRavelled u51ng what, fR0m y0uR peR5pect1ve, w0uld be a t1me cap5ule /_!_\
FJ: The l0tu5 dep051ted u5 heRe, t0 c0RRect the t1mel1ne and help y0u 1n y0uR f1ght aga1n5t the batteRw1tch /_!_\
bastLives [BL] ceased responding to memo
PH: Crap.
paterHelios [PH] ceased responding to memo
SC: ~ yee~h ~
SC: ~ dropping like buzzchitter~ ~
WM: I don't blame them this is all a bit

WM: Much.
SA: 01010111 01100101 00100000 01110111 01100001 01101110 01110100 00100000 01110100 01101111 00100000 01101101 01100001 01101001 01101110 01110100 01100001 01101001 01101110 00100000 01110100 01101000 01100101 00100000 01110111 01101001 01101100 01101100 00100000 01101111 01100110 00100000 01110000 01100001 01110010 01100001 01100100 01101111 01111000 00100000 01110011 01110000 01100001 01100011 01100101 00101110
FJ: 1ndeed /_!_\
FJ: Ab0ve all the puR1ty 0f the t1mel1ne mu5t be pRe5eRved, a5 15 the w1ll 0f PaRad0x 5pace /_!_\
SC: ~ hey whatever divine power i~ on our ~ide ill take it ~
SC: we'll need it
LS: 7ha7 we w1ll
WM: This is what you were so excited about, Sombra?
SC: ~ i think thi~ i~ it amilie ~
SC: ~ thi~ i~ our ticket out of here ~
HH: WELL WHEN YOU PUT IT LIKE THAT
WM: How can we turn down help from such
WM: Adorable
WM: Harbingers of the end times?
HH: HEY
HH: NO HARBINGERS
HH: THAT'S GIMICK INFRIGNEMENT
FJ: 1 w0uld't dReam /_!_\
SC: then, if thoze in the chat are ztill on board?
SS: ig
LS: 7hen le7's beg1n s7ra7eg1z1ng.
SC: then let'z begin ztrategizing
LS: J1nx, 7en, you owe me a 7roll Coke™.
SC: zufferer do i wizh there waz a way to communicate how hard i am zighing right now
SC: ~ oh that~ ea~y ~
SC: ~ it~ ~
SC: ~ ~iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiggghhhhhhhhhhh ~
SC: well there we go. zombra haz zuccezzfully communicated it for me
FJ: Ba5t10n and 1 aRe Ready /_!_\
HH: GAME
WM: With you ever step of the way, Aspirant.
SC: there iz no one elze i'd rather have by my zide
SC: now
SC: letz fork thiz bitch

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