Progenesis, Ninefold

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by hanktalkin

Summary

The first time each of the mercs ever killed another person. Additional reading is included.

Notes

This work portrays several dark themes, including violence, bigotry, and historical references to real world events. Please check tags before continuing.

Credits:
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Chapter 1

1934, Ullapool

They should not have left him there alone,
Alone, that is, except for the cat.

1935, Hancock

Jane knew he wasn't supposed to be in here. He knew it not only at the forefront of his mind where the rules of home were scripted, but also in the way the memorabilia leaned down on him, threatening him with their clear and present *this place is not for you*. Still. He dragged over a chair, marks in the carpet, sloppy, and scrambled up so he could get a view of the photo mounted on the wall. Pa's company. All lined up, all filthy; helmets covering their eyes as the faded background dulled to an indistinct sepia, leaving only the men in front as identifiable behind the glass. Jane thought he could make out Pa. There, second from the left.

"Jane," Elle begged. "Jane please let's go."

"Quiet you!" Jane barked. "We are investigating. Do not abandon your post!"

Elle—seven years Jane's junior and the only reason he'd learned about birds and bees because Peggy kept muttering *accident* under her breath—squatted over her ankles and whined. But she didn't leave her lookout by the door, so she was a good enough soldier in that regard.

Jane climbed higher, now on his tiptoes on the back of the chair. What he really wanted to get at was the guns, but they were far too high, so he was left with…here, a medal. Safe in its purple-velvet box, softly held, Jane's breath fogging the glass.

"Jane," Elle hissed.

"Not now private," Jane mumbled, just wanting to get a closer look.

"*Jane*," came the pleading reply, but it was too late.

"What the *fuck* are you two doing?"

Now claiming the doorway was Peggy, eyes furious, shadow huge as her body blocked the light from the hall since Jane hadn't bothered turn on the single green lamp in the office. Elle shrunk beneath her. Cowardice. She'd had *one* job.

Peggy stamped forward, grabbed Jane by the arm and pulled him backwards so hard he tripped off his precarious place on the chair. He never hit the ground, though, Peggy's grip strong enough that he was hanging, suspended as she began to pull him out the office. He

tried to kick her, fantasized about hitting the wall so hard that one of the guns would fall off and go *bang* right in her stupid head.

Peggy got her other hand around Elle's wrist and dragged them both bodily from the office. "Peggy," Elle whined, "Peggy stop, you're hurting me."

Jane didn't bother with any of that liver-bellied griping. Instead, his fist landed ineffectually against her side, once again proving that the difference between eleven and thirteen might as well have been centuries for all the damage he could put in his sister. Jane struggled, Peggy dragged, and eventually all three of them were deposited far from the house on the edges of the potato field.

Jane managed to do something at last, because when Peggy finally dropped him, it was with an, "oof! Dammit! You ungrateful little shit, gotta cart your stupid ass outa trouble again. Messing around in Pa's room! Grade A medical moron."

"The door was unlocked!" Jane protested. He would know: he had been checking it every day for his entire life. "It was our duty to investigate."

"Investigating!" Peggy barked. "If *I* hadn't found you *he* woulda, and he woulda killed you. You hear that dumbass? He woulda *killed* you, and you woulda gotten Eloise killed too you fucking defective." She shoved him so hard the clay pot he'd been using as a helmet fell off his head. "You're *lucky* you got me around."

"Ha!" he said. "Lucky? I am *saddled* with your lack of gumption! Henry Leveson says the only thing older sisters are good for is swallowing their gum and covering their own asses, and no truer words have ever been spoken!"

She shoved him again. "Yeah? Well the only thing middle sisters are good for is going mental and licking Pa's boots."

Jane wanted her to stop shoving. He wanted her to stop shoving because Peggy was always shoving him around, all too tall and shooting out of her dresses faster than Jane could put them on, growing at a rate he could never catch. He bared his teeth, and socked her one.

That only made her mad. It only ever made her mad these days, because now she was hitting him back, and hitting him hard, slamming them both to the ground with her knee in his stomach. He tried to return the favor but all his rage and his thoughts and *the medals so shiny if only he'd got to look a bit longer* didn't mean jack when his opponent was twice his size. A tooth gave way. His nose didn't feel too great either, and now there was a lot of blood all up and down him.

Her long black ponytail was swinging down into his face. He couldn't see anything. She picked him up by the front and smashed him into the hard dirt of the potato field.

"Peggy!" Elle was screaming. "Stop it stop it! You're going to kill her."

That was what got her to stop. Elle could do that, sometimes, get Peggy to stop if she just whined enough. Jane experienced his sister's absence by air in his lungs and blood in his

mouth, and he rolled to his side to watch her clamber to her feet. Her dress was spotty with Jane's blood.

"Idiot," Peggy murmured, but now it was mostly to herself. "Going to get us all killed."

Jane lay back down, and stared at the sky rolling blue above him. "Jane?" Elle asked him, shaking his side. She had shiny tears at the corner of her eye. "Are you going to be alright Jane?"

"I'll be fine private," Jane coughed. His tongue was bitten and the words scorched something fierce along his throat. "We fight another day." Elle said she didn't know what that meant, but Jane didn't feel like explaining.

1936, Rottenburg

When he entered his family's home one evening's visit, he found the front door unlocked, and it only took a moment to realize why. In the middle of the sitting room was his uncle, arguing heatedly with Ludwig's parents, and Ludwig cringed internally at the idea of wading into that mess. Instead he took the long way to the kitchen, winding through the dining room to find with surprised delight that there were a few of mother's gingersnaps left.

"<Ludwig?>" A voice from the sitting room.

Ludwig swallowed. There is a specific feeling in one's life at being caught with a face full of crumbs and a hand on a third cookie, a guilt that apparently never goes away no matter how old one gets.

His mother swept in. Her face was pinched in a way he had seen only a few times ever in his life, mouth worried until it was swollen and red. "<You have come to visit. That is good, I was going to write you, to tell you that we must go, your uncle won't listen.>"

"<Go?>" was all Ludwig said, his face still awkwardly crammed with gingersnap. His mother rushed up to him, gripping him by the forearms.

"<Your father either, they will not *listen*.>" Her voice was thin with distress.

He managed to tug his sleeves away, putting his hands over hers in an attempt to stop them shaking. "<*What* won't he listen to, Mother?>"

Her eyes darted to the kitchen window, the birdbath outside sparkling as a pair of swallows shook themselves in droplets, chirping in the spring air. They had no care for anything, only that it was warm and they were safe, and that the woman of the house left out enough seed to get them through the day.

Mother's eyes lingered.

"<Mother,>" he prompted her. "<What is going on?>"

She turned with no resolve. “<We must go. Leave Rottenburg. The whole family must, everyone we can convince. I have an aunt in Paris, she will help us, I have been sending her letters…>”

“<Paris!>” Ludwig said aghast. “<Don’t you think that is overreacting? Our family has weathered times like these before, if we all sit and wait for this to blow over…>”

“<Damn you!>” she sizzled, smacking him sharply in the forehead with the heel of her palm. “<You men are all fools! So confident in the world and your position in it, you will not even lift your head when the danger throws rocks at your back! *Yes* we have weathered, but that only means I know when things have gotten worse than they have ever been. We must leave, before we cannot.>”

Ludwig frowned. He thought of his little apartment by the university, the walks around the park nearby, the associates he had made when first stepping free from his hometown. Maybe things were growing tense elsewhere, but in Stuttgart he’d never been more content.

He tried, “<I *can’t* mother. Maybe I’ll come stay with you in Paris some time, but I am so close to finishing my studies->”

“<Ludwig *listen*,>” she pleaded. “<There will *be* no more studies, they will not let you. Things will only get worse.>” Her eyes became distant. “<They let your father go from the firm.>”

His head whipped to the sitting room where, without his mother’s presence, his father and uncle had fallen to a muttered debate. Father’s hair was mattered, such a wild, ungodly departure from its usual neat part that Ludwig felt his gut sink.

“<They *what*? But he has worked there for twenty years! They cannot just fire him because some *idiots*->”

“<Those idiots are many, my child,>” Mother said softly. “<Please, Ludwig.>”

“<I…>” Reality felt like a dark tunnel, slowly narrowing before him. “<I suppose I can get my credits transferred. There are many prestigious medical schools in Paris…>”

The relief was palpable on her lined face. “<Thank you. Thank you my son. We will convince your brother, he can bring his family and we can all find a good place, a safer place.>”

Ludwig frowned. “<Raimund won’t come, not with the baby just born.>”

“<We will convince him,>” Mother repeated. “<It is for his daughter’s safety he must come.>”

The doubts were already sweeping upon him again, but Ludwig did not press. “<And Father? Uncle?>”

She shot a look at the open archway, the two brothers speaking softly. “<Stubborn, stubborn men. Aby will not leave the pharmacy, your father stays to help him.>”

“<…We will convince them.>” It felt like a prayer rather than a promise, but her look of relief almost made it worth it.

“<Thank you Ludwig. You are such a good boy. Your mother is lucky to have you.>”

He smiled wanly. Many, many things troubled him, and he did not even know where to begin. Instead, he fell back on the old staple of staring out the kitchen window and watching creatures that had far fewer woes than him.

1937, Ullapool

The damp salt-smell kept his senses sharp as he walked along the beach, necessary when the cliffs could go from troublesome drops to deadly plummets with only a few paces between. Tavish didn’t tempt fate this morning, keeping a respectable distance from where the wet grass turned into crumbling gravel.

However, since he was so keen to his surroundings, he did notice something was missing. He looked around, frowned, put two fingers between his lips and blew.

The whistle rose keen and singing across the moors, and to its answer Pepper came bounding over the nearest hill, ears pricked in eager delight to see why her master had called.

“There you are!” Tavish told the terrier. “Dinnaye tell you not to go wandering off?”

Pepper *arfed* in reply, as though to say, *yes! Here I am!*

“Come on then,” he beguiled her as he began to walk again. “We got important work to be doing.”

Important work, but only one of them seemed to be taking this seriously. She made him nervous whenever she strayed too close to the cliff’s edge, threatening to trip over her big puppy-feet, skirting danger and not realizing how close she came to disaster. Tavish felt that danger a lot these day, a lurking thing that no one but him wanted to see. He was the only person in Ullapool with a firsthand experience with magic; to the rest it was all just stories, things to worry about only when tucked in your bed at night. So then, if no one cared to see, he’d have to deal with things himself.

The faery circle crested the opposite hill, approaching swiftly even though he was the one moving, plodding along at his own pace. The mushrooms had sprung up when the hens started dying, when the nets all came back empty, and everyone else in the village could chalk it up to foxes and the bad weather, but Tavish knew better. He sat down his beaten school bag.

“Oi! Don’t go *in* you daft poodle!”

Pepper, who’d begun to sniff at the cluster with one foot raised, whimpered as if to say *I wasn’t, I wasn’t!*

Tavish scoffed. You'd think animals would know better than to mess with magic. He wondered if things like deer and rabbits and other creatures too foolish for their own good got whisked off to the greenlands just for wandering inside. Probably not as wicked a kidnapping if the victim in question couldn't tell the difference between this world and the other.

He set to work. Salt ring, right on top of their heads (probably would smell wonderful if a forest fire started right now.) A few pages read from the Bible (Mum would kill him if she knew he'd borrowed hers, so instead he read aloud some lines from his schoolbook, which were in Latin so it counted.) And, for extra safety, a daughter offered as bride to the King of the Mound (Tavish didn't have any daughters, but he did have a little dolly that Mum had made for him a long time ago. He hadn't played with her in years, so he didn't mind sending her away to be married. He hoped her and the King got along well.)

"There," Tavish said, after a *grueling* quarter hour of demystifying. "That should do it!"

Pepper put her paws on his trouser leg and barked, as if to say *good job! Those ungrateful numpties will thank you eventually! And if they don't, well sod them. You can keep protecting this village all day and all night if you have to, whether they appreciate you or not.*

Or maybe was just her being hungry and ready for her supper.

As Tavish shouldered his school bag, he made sure not to glance back at the circle. He didn't care for magic, not a lick, but this was something that had to be done. Everyone else…they were still safe from its clutches; once it touched you, you were forever different, marked. People knew, they would shy away, always able to sense that you weren't quite right no matter how you tried to fit in.

Better to spare someone else that fate. Better to keep the catch good and the doors locked at night, and if that meant Tavish had to put himself in between dark forces and the rest of the world, then he would do it. Better him than someone not yet twisted up.

Pepper nosed his leg. He hadn't been moving, just staring out at the sea, and she was whining with impatience. Nervouslike, like she could hear the drowning thoughts storming in his head.

He shook himself and walked the way back home, reminding himself that dogs only thought about dog things and nothing else.

1938, Kez

"<You are too picky,>" he told her as she refused to take the bread for the third time. "<Come Zhanna, it is a long walk.>"

But Zhanna just turned her head as he thrust it at her, lips pursed in a stubborn scowl. He knew where she had learned that stubbornness, the same place Mikhail had, but now he was old enough to listen to others when they knew better than he. Zhanna, in her wet-eyed, jutting

lip obduracy, had yet to learn that, and walked mulishly through the snow with her nose held high.

“<Do not waste breakfast,>” he warned her. “<Mama made this just for you, you won’t last until lunch otherwise.>” And lunch at school was always thin, watery porridge or unidentifiable stew. It was best to take what you could when you could.

“<I want kulich,>” she huffed.

He sighed, but didn’t blame her. The borodinsky he handed her was dark and sour, made from whatever Mama could purchase at the time, and it felt like a rock in your stomach when compared to sweet, fluffy kulich. But now even the borodinsky was becoming sparse, and Mama had to find ways to make the same amount of bread with less and less flour, (and soon Yana would be walking to school with them as well, and Mama would need to stretch it out to even more food, and the lines in Papa’s face grew deeper and deeper as he stared out the window-)

He tried not to think about what Papa might do, not to think about the people he met and spoke with in hushed voices. He tried not to think about how hungry he was, that maybe he could let Zhanna win just this one time, take her loaf that smelled so good despite its bitterness. His own breakfast had been gone in seconds, scarfed down as his boots made the first tracks from their front door. No, he shook his head, no that was a selfish thing to even consider. You do not take food from family.

“<Two more weeks,>” he told her, a plea. “<Two more weeks, then Mama will make kulich for Easter.>” When she only pouted, he added, “<and two weeks is a long time, maybe you will grow taller by then.>”

At that, Zhanna ice crusted eyes grew wide. “<Taller than you?>”

Mikhail chuckled. “<Hm, *maybe* even bigger than your Misha. But you have to keep eating if you want to keep growing, right?>” He handed the bread to her.

This time she took it, though it was cautious, sensing that she had somehow been tricked. Still, it was a good thing to watch her nibble at it, and Mikail felt a swell of relief. Not a crumb would go to waste. They could all get through this if they took care to.

1939, Vittel

The boy shrieked as his arm was twisted, dropping the bag into the muck beneath his feet.

“<That does not belong to you,>” the man holding him said, plainly, easily, as though dangling the struggling child was no more a nuisance to him than strangling a writhing snake. And why would it be? The boy was not very old, nor very strong for his age even when he *hadn’t* been starving.

The boy was dropped. Abruptly. He got to his feet and rubbed his bruised tailbone, but didn't try to run as the man collected the bag that had been his prize a moment ago. What would be the point? The stranger with the jacket too heavy for the spring heat had already proven that his reflexes were faster, that he could catch a boy that tried to run out the thin alleyway.

Taking a leave of all his senses, the boy bit back, "<it doesn't belong to you either.>"

The man blinked down at him. A cigarette appeared in his fingers where there hadn't been one a moment ago, and stared until the boy well and truly regretted his decision to say anything.

"<I suppose it doen't,>" the man said eventually. His eyes caught along the silken tendril of white rising from his cigarette, watching it twist like a monkey's tail. "<You're quite talented with that knife.>"

The boy breathed heavy, glaring. He was good with the knife because he had to be—cutting open pockets or purse straps before their owner noticed—because it was the only way to stay alive. There were other uses for the knife, he knew, but he had never thought to employ them. Not until today.

Whatever this stranger wanted from him, he would have to say it. If was going to hand him over to the local *Ortskommandanturen* then he could just go ahead and *do it* already.

"<…I suppose I should be embarrassed,>" the man went on eventually. "<Usurped from my contract by a mere boy. Still, fair is fair, and it is only right I pay you for your work.>"

The hand inside the jacket moved, and the boy caught what was thrown at him before he fully processed that he was being rewarded. It was some sort of patty, meat and bits of green smashed into a flat shape, and it was just recognizable enough to register as *food*. Logical thinking after that realization ceased. *It could be poison, you look like an animal, don't trust this man*, all of it sucked downward like bathwater out a drain as the child tore ravenously into the paper wrapping and swallowed the patty in great guzzling bites. It was old and grody but he didn't care, letting the cold grease run down his chin.

It was only when he was sucking at his fingers that he glanced at the man again. He now leaned against the alley's wall, still smoking, still studying the shapes he made in the air. The boy felt a small pebble of shame thinking about his display, tearing at a piece of meat like a wild dog, but the shame was nothing to the unclenching of the muscles in this stomach.

"<Interesting,>" the man mused. "<Not a drop of dignity to be had.>"

"<I take it you've never gone hungry,>" the boy retorted. He did not know where this dangerous tongue had slithered up from today, but the feeling of fullness had only emboldened him.

The man shrugged. "<Maybe. But I have known pain, and I know that even the sharpest knife can be weathered if one remembers to hold onto his pride.>" His eyes, glittered and shaded by his hat, slid over to his former captive once again. "<It is a skill one can learn, if he is willing.>"

A warning, piercing like the bombs sirens, cawed in the back of his mind—but there was still a bit of grease coating his tongue, reminding him that there could be more where that come from. “<That so?>”

“<Indeed. Your outer face is the most important thing about you, more so even than the weapons you keep tucked away. For instance, I stated that I was being contracted for this bag’s collection—presumably for much more money than a single meat-cake is worth—yet you didn’t ask for more in payment.>”

“<Not exactly in a position to haggle, am I?>”

“<True,>” the man allowed. There was something off about his voice, his consonants curling in odd ways, but for as long as he had been speaking the boy couldn’t quite place it. “<It is wise to know one’s limits. Still, instead of taking your prize and running, you ate it immediately. Both these things tell me you are desperate.>”

“<I think anyone can tell I’m desperate.>”

“<That is the *point*, boy,>” the man insisted. “<One mustn’t let their outer face slip, no matter the circumstances. But that can be taught. Fast legs, innate skill with a blade, *these* are all things that one must have to begin with.>”

The boy was tired of being talked at. “<What exactly do you want from me?>”

It was only a moment’s pause, where the stranger’s face flickered every so subtly in its provided shadow, but then it was gone once again. “<I need a message delivered, beyond German lines. It will be small, inconspicuous, and I will show you how to sew pockets inside of your sleeves. If you do so, the recipients will feed you a good meal as thanks. Additionally, if you make it there, return here with their response, and find me again all without losing your life, I will consider training you for other jobs like this one.>”

A job for a meal. It was so tempting a thing the boy almost chose to ignore the risk to his own life that came nailed to its back. But… “<What does it even matter to you?>” he asked. “<Shouldn’t a Spaniard be on *their* side?>”

He pointed off down the alleyway, back to where the German he’d shanked was probably still wailing about in the street, missing what the boy now knew to be a *very* important bag. A bag that many people must want, to send this stranger with the odd thing in his voice the boy had finally identified.

The Spaniard smiled. It was unnerving: intrigued rather than defensive. “<I believe you are mistaken, my friend. I am a Frenchman, through and through.>”

The boy balked. Not only had the accent disappeared, but the Spaniard’s voice was warped anew, as though it belonged to a completely different man.

The Spaniard chuckled, and his voice slid back into its true register. “<A simple trick.>” It switched again. “*Wie ist dein Deutsch*?” The boy shook his head at the jumble of words now

spewing from his mouth. “*Hm. Italiano?*” When his student still didn’t react, the Spaniard waved a hand. “<No matter, we will teach you.>”

“<Hold on now,>” the boy said. “<I still haven’t agreed to this.>”

“<Haven’t you? You are not running, screaming for the hills as many fairer souls in your place would.>”

He grit his teeth. The man was right; he’d already seen how desperate he was, hadn’t he? The boy had nothing left to barter with. “<Alright. Say I do this…>”

“<A promising start, boy.>”

“<My name is not *boy*, it is->”

The Spaniard held up a hand. “<I do not want to hear it. Names are dangerous things, and we will call you what is useful for the moment. For today, you will be Vance.>”

Vance wrinkled his nose, but did not protest. He hadn’t wanted the man to know his name anyway, the one his mother had given him, who’d called him from her rocking chair and never would again.

He would not think about his mother anymore. Instead he asked, “<and you?>”

“<Raul will do. For now.>” Raul’s cigarette had finally burned down, and he stamped it in the street, shouldering the bag he had mostly cleared of mud. “<Come boy, we’ve lingered near the scene of the crime for long enough. Let us get you fitted for travel.>”

The possibility that there might be a chance to sleep in a bed, or that he might be able to change his clothes, pulled Vance along like a tether. He was so hopeful, caught on the strings of promises and forgetting, that he didn’t realize Raul hadn’t answered his question.

1940, Paris

A dog would have been a different thing,
But what they did was leave him with a cat.

Chapter 2

1941, Chapayevsk

He hated that cat; he watched it sit,
So he took Daddy's stick and he hit the cat.

1942, Hancock

It hissed, black flash, to a hiding place
And he followed the grin on his new-made face

1943, Onville

“Good work men! A fine day’s march!”

And that it was. A whole twenty-four hours of good marching! They were going to give him a medal for this when he got back home, but in the meantime he’d cobbled together one on his own which would serve for now: pinned to his chest and gleaming in the setting sun. Next to it was one for ration eating, another for shotgun cleaning, and of course one for gibbing (that one he had awarded himself after he’d blown up his twentieth Nazi-sonova-bitch in a row, wiping a bit of intestine off his newly commandeered bazooka and deciding this deserved a celebration. He awarded the bazooka a medal too.)

“Now everyone, rest up,” he told his non-existent company. “You’re back on your feet tomorrow.”

No one joined him as sat down on a convenient stump. That was fine, those idiot recruiters were a bunch of shortsighted morons not to let him join up in the first place. He could do it himself, George Washington as his witness! He was a one man army! Once he came back with one hundred Nazi scalps, they would have to posthumously give him a rank.

He paused the polishing of his gun. Posthumously? Was that the right word? *Whatever*, he shrugged; it didn’t matter. What *mattered* is that he was fighting, right now, just like he’d always wanted, and he was damn good at it too. *That* was what made a man a Soldier.

The gun was spotless, cleaned to a satisfying and sparkling shine, and he was about to give it his Proud Grunt of Approval and move on to the bazooka when he heard the now-familiar sound of a battle. It caterwauled from the forest within, echoing up to his resting spot, the horrid sparseness of a close range fight with few combatants. Jane frowned and shouldered his weapon.

The crumbling earth made a soft overhang, a vantage for the scene below. A teenage boy was being beaten senseless, occasionally screaming something in French out into the trees—as though signaling for backup that would never come. What some liver-bellied, white pantaloon waving *Frenchie* was doing in the middle of the Polish wilderness Jane couldn't imagine, but considering his captors kept asking him questions in German and boxing his nose when he wouldn't respond, he wasn't having a good time of it.

Jane had seen all he'd needed to. He leapt from his perch with a war cry: "SCREAMING EAGLES!!!!"

The two officers stood no chance. Mostly because the first one was immediately crushed to death under Jane's bodyweight as it landed on him from a two-story drop, and the other one was so shocked to see a whole human appear from seemingly nowhere that he failed to draw his pistol in time. Jane hadn't wanted to accidentally blow up their prisoner—which he'd done the last time he'd tried to help a civilian—so instead he'd brought his trusty entrenching tool to this gunfight. It cleaved the enemy soldier's head with ease.

"Oorah," he told the desecrated corpses. His knees hurt like hell from the drop, but otherwise he was doing well. The kid looked at him in abject horror. "No need to thank me, son. Just doing my American duty."

"Where did you…?" The kid asked, looking around. He was speaking American, which was good; Jane didn't have time for any of that *hon hon hon* nonsense.

"I could ask you the same question, civilian!" Jane barked. "Don't you know there's a war on? Shouldn't you be back home in France quivering with the rest of your useless army?"

Now that the teen had gotten to his feet, he had regained enough of his wherewithal to give Jane a distasteful look. "We are *in* France, imbecile."

Jane looked around and the forest, leaves amber with the onset of autumn as well as the dying light. "That can't be right. Just look! We are obviously hundreds of miles deep into the Polish wilderness!"

"We are *not*," the kid replied dourly. "Onville is a kilometer that way." He gestured vaguely to his left.

Hm. That definitely didn't *sound* like a thing the Poles would call a place. "…Huh. Then I better get moving if I want to get back in time! Poland isn't going to clear itself out of scum." With that, he marched off in a direction that was probably Poland.

"Wait!" The kid's skinny little baby-hand clamped around Jane's forearm. It was also slightly bloody, but that would buff out. "Are you insane? That's a three-week hike through the *entire German army*. You'll be slaughtered before you make it to Stuttgart."

"War involves risks son." Jane peeled the hand off him. "And if that risk is my death than let us all pray to God that it will be glorious! And bloody! And *painful!*"

"…Ah. A death wish. Isn't that just wonderful." The kid pinched the bridge of his nose, an obviously practiced habit to make him look older than he was. "I suppose I can't convince you to *not* go wandering off into your own grave?"

"Why so clingy, maggot? Wait…" Suddenly, Jane smirked. "Aha! I see what's going on here: you afraid if I leave, you will be captured again! Well don't worry son, I'll escort you back home, no Nazi maggot will get you while I'm around."

"No!" the younger man groaned. "No, having you follow me around is the exact opposite of what I want."

Jane held up a hand. "No need for reverse psychology, baguette boy, you've got me convinced."

The kid looked about to say something, but thought better of it, snapping his mouth shut and heading toward the city he had mentioned, of which Jane had already forgotten the name. Jane trotted after. His ward looked over his shoulder and sighed. "Fantastic. My month is going just splendidly, isn't it? First a crazed German, and now I've been accosted by a mad American woman as well."

"Sounds rough," Jane said sympathetically. "If either of them bothers you again, you let me know."

The teen stared back blankly for a few seconds to determine if Jane was joking. He rubbed his face. "Fine. We'll head back to Paris then. I have a friend who might be willing to take you off my hands."

That sounded alright to Jane. From what he'd heard, there were plenty of Nazis in Paris too: he could always circle back to do a few more tours of Poland later. War was never-ending, after all! He loped along after the kid with glorious purpose.

1944, Viren

A wide-eyed, frightened snarl of a grin,
And he took the stick and he thrust it in

1945, Paris

There was a knocking at Ludwig's door, the distinctive and telling rap of 'shave and a haircut', which would set his mind at ease even if he hadn't been expecting someone. However, he still hadn't quite sopped up all the blood on the front of his shirt, so he asked, "Sergeant Doe? Would you mind getting the door?"

"Affirmative!"

From the other room, the staircase creaked as Jane ascended it, a rickety little thing that was the only exit to their basement ‘apartment’. The women who had once offered it to Ludwig and his mother had not been seen since that day years ago, and honestly it was probably better for everyone that way. If she noticed or cared the strange comings and going from the singular door sunk into the Parisian street on a nondescript corner of the district, she made no mention of it, and Ludwig thought it most likely she was dead. Oh well. Couldn’t be helped.

Jane flung the door wide open. “Marcel! A sight for sore eyes! C’mere!”

Wiping his hands on a towel, Ludwig stepped into the stairway to see Jane firmly embracing a young man. Marcel, although Ludwig was aware that wasn’t his real name (or even the one he used most commonly in this corner of Paris), wheezed and attempted to extract himself from Jane’s clutches.

“Bad luck to linger at the door,” Ludwig reminded. “Also impractical in the current environment. Come, let him inside.”

Jane obliged, shutting the door behind them both, and Marcel huffed several times before regaining enough air to summon a reproachful glare. “I wasn’t aware you had acquired a doorman.”

“You were the one who introduced us,” Ludwig shrugged. “Sergeant Doe, if you would like, I found no need for the severed head. You can have it, if you like.”

Jane’s face, half covered as it was by the overlarge helmet, lit up as best as it did, a smile of pure glee tugging at the right half of his face. “Fantastic! I’ll put it with the others!”

“Metal bucket, left side of the operating table,” Ludwig informed him. “Dismissed, Sergeant.”

At the switch to a military address, Jane snapped to attention, giving a curt salute to both before disappearing into Ludwig’s operating theater.

“…I have never seen that man before in my life,” Marcel said, staring after the American’s back. “You say I introduced you?”

“Yes! I must say, I’m quite proud of my work if even you didn’t recognize him,” Ludwig beamed.

Marcel gawked at the now empty doorway. “…Is that…Jane?” When Ludwig gave a bright nod, he pinched the bridge of his nose. “*Mon dieu*, I cannot *believe* you are feeding into her delusions. Is there no ethical floor you will not stoop to?”

“I don’t see the problem,” Ludwig shrugged. “He’s happy-”

“You did hear me say *delusions*, yes?”

“-And I was given a marvelous opportunity to try some things out. Plus, he is good company, very helpful around the operating ward.” Ludwig tapped a finger to his lips, (perfectly sanitary since he’d gotten out most of the dried blood from under his nails.) “Though he does

wander off every few months. He says he's been in Poland but…No matter, it keeps him occupied."

Marcel sat on the couch that had lived in the damp basement longer than Ludwig had. "And what's all this 'Sergeant Doe' business?"

"Ah, well you know I do like to keep good patient records, and he wouldn't give me a last name so…" Ludwig was well aware that he was not terribly good at 'smiling sheepishly' and his attempts always turned out a little self-satisfied and manic. "A Jane Doe, if you will."

Marcel groaned. "Yes, yes, you're very clever. But I've had quite enough cleverness for one year: get me a bottle opener would you?"

It was only then that Ludwig noticed Marcel had appeared a bottle of wine onto the table. Where he had been hiding it he had no idea, but Marcel was like that with his litany of pockets and secrets alike. Ludwig found himself intrigued.

"What's the occasion?" he asked, returning with the opener.

"My birthday," Marcel said as poured. "And I thought, since I only have one true friend in this entire fucking city, I should spend it with him."

He passed Ludwig the first glass, whose eyebrow was cocked and waiting for the punch line. Marcel was not the sort of person to give out personal information so easily, but what reason would he have to lie?

"And so," he continued, filling his own glass with more than was practical for keeping it off Ludwig's floor, "I have reached the age of majority. Rejoice Docteur, I am now, in the eyes of the Law, an adult."

He said it so wryly, Ludwig tilted his head. "You have been living an adult's life, and carrying an adult's burden, for quite a while before this."

"It does seem that way, doesn't it?" Marcel eyed his glass. "However, I can drink now. So, to me: salut." He downed it like a man who had been doing so for years.

"Salut," Ludwig agreed. It had been a long time since wine had made it through the cracks in the war to his little basement sanctuary; the flavor dried his tongue. "Though I thought drinking began at sixteen in Spain?"

"I am not Spanish," Marcel shook his head.

"French then? Forgive me, I've always found your accent to be…"

"Muddled? Yes, I get that quite a lot." He poured himself another glass, this time of reasonable size. "My…mentor…was a Spaniard, trained me a young age, I acquired many of his quirks. But mixed as it is, it is not a terrible thing. In my line of work, it is good if friends and enemies alike cannot determine who you are exactly, cannot read your words and find precisely which insignificant little village you come from." Marcel grew quiet.

The question was on the tip of Ludwig's tongue—his bloated, wine-addled tongue—but he refrained at the last moment. He'd already learned more about Marcel during this visit alone than he had during the entire rest of their acquaintanceship.

"Am I truly your only friend?" he asked instead.

Marcel opened his mouth to reply, but they were interrupted by the return of Jane, who needlessly kicked down the door in order to declare, "a fine specimen! It is already getting along with the others fantastically."

Ludwig raised an eyebrow at Marcel.

After a moment, he sighed, and motioned to the bottle. "Would you care to drink with us, Sergeant?"

Jane looked at the bottle dubiously, then at Ludwig who assured him, "consider yourself off duty. Come, join us!"

"Acknowledged! Celebratory spirits will now commence."

As Jane sat amongst them, Marcel looked slightly pained, but not as much as Ludwig had feared. The bottle would be gone shortly with the three of them all draining their cups, but as he watched his friends indulge in light conversation, he thought that was perfectly worth it.

1946, Boston

"You alive down there honey?"

A good question. Was he alive? The man currently bleeding out below the fire escape—today he was Louis, though at the rate he was going he wouldn't be *anyone* for much longer—pondered that. Certainly he was more alive than the man who'd been tailing him from the airport, but that didn't make him particularly *lively* at the moment. He felt quite leaden, like a sack of potatoes left here in this alleyway to slump against the wall until someone remembered to come pick him up.

"Aw jeez. Now what'd they do to you?"

Apparently he'd taken too long in answer the women's question, since she'd abandoned her apartment window and had gone down all three flights of stairs just to stand in front of him with her hands on her hips. That had all happened in less than a few seconds, how had she done that? Or was he really so gone that whole minutes were slipping away from him?

"A rather presumptuous question, mademoiselle," he posited. "How do you know *I* was not the aggressor in this situation?" He gestured at his current state.

"You don't got the look about you," she said. Her frown was so unfazed that Louis briefly wondered if his oxygen-deprived mind was conjuring her up. This he dismissed though; there

was no possible way he could fabricate that accent. “Alright now, I’m gunna lift ya. Don’t squirm too much.”

“That is quite alright,” he said, holding up a hand—new gloves, black, shiny, bloodstained—in attempt to ward her off.

It was not alright. He was very much aware he needed to seek medical attention, but he was just so tired…he’d go in a few minutes…a little while longer in the cool gap between buildings where he could look up and see the barest sliver of the moon.

“Are you kidding? I gotta take the trash out tomorrow, and I can’t do that with your corpse blocking my dumpsters.” A—surprisingly strong—arm wrapped around his waist. “Now c’mon.”

Physically, he did not resist, and he didn’t have the mental energy to do so either. “Ahg! F-fine. But no hospitals…” That was the first place whoever had sent that tail would check, plus he had some *very* illegal tools of the trade upon his person at the moment.

“That’s fine honey,” she replied with the nonchalance of someone who did this quite often. “No hospitals.”

She was true to her word. Several cycles of in-and-out consciousness over the next hour found Louis sitting somewhat comfortably in a kitchen chair, wounds disinfected, a mug of hot soup in front of him. He was beyond caring what kind it was, only that with every sip he could feel humanity returning to his toes.

“I thank you for your kindness, mademoiselle,” he told the women as she hummed something over the big pot on the stove. “I wish I had something to repay you with…”

The apartment was small. There were cracks in the drywall and the pipes rattled as he’d walked through the halls. Many children and one woman crammed into a very small space yet she was still offering food and stitches when it was obvious she had very little to spare. He himself wasn’t much better off. *Soon*, he had promised himself. There was good money for his skills in the post-war world and *soon* he would have funds for finer things, for niceties, for respectability. Soon his suit wouldn’t be some shabby brown tunic that he’d bought second hand. Soon he could return kindnesses when they were given to him.

“Don’t even worry about it,” she dismissed it all so easily, a hand waving as she continued to interrogate the soup. “Can’t go turning a blind eye to that sort of thing. Maybe that happens in South End, but not up here, no siree. I won’t let this part of the city go like that.”

“Local pride?”

She turned her head, nose scrunching as she smiled. It was quite a charming feature on an already beautiful face. “Guess so. How ‘bout you, Frenchie? Where you from?”

“Paris,” he lied easily. No one cared about some trivial village in eastern France, agrarian and simple while it had existed, and mounds of earth when it no longer had. Americans always

wanted to hear about *Paris*, the city of lights, the place that made his rescuer's eyes shimmer in excitement.

"Paris!" She abandoned her cooking to the simmer, slipping into the chair across from him. "Oh I've always wanted to go. Is it as wonderful as everyone says?"

And hadn't he heard that exact sentiment from every American woman he'd spoken to? But strangely enough, from her it didn't sound overused or clichéd; from her, it was a bright fishing line he only wanted to tug on.

"And more," he said, hoping he wasn't overdoing it, wasn't making himself a fool. "At night the whole skyline sings, more individual lights than there are stars in the sky."

Never mind that for the majority of his life the Eiffel Tower had bore a giant steel swastika, that he'd hardly seen *lights* from inside basements and bolt holes. She didn't need to know that. He could spin her something warm, something to bring her comfort in this tiny apartment where her good nature made her rescue useless tramps who didn't deserve it.

She rested her chin in her palms as he spoke, watching his every movement. The soup left the kitchen warm and fragrant, familiar in its comfort. He could almost feel *home* seeping in its vapors…

"Ma?" A boy was standing in the hall, one fist clutching a stuffed rabbit and the other rubbing at his eye. "Who you talkin' to?"

"Lou it's three in the morning!" she chided the boy who must have been—five? Ten? Louis knew very little of children—and waved him out. "What are you doing up?"

"You were making noise," the boy complained.

"Just got a friend over. You go back to sleep, alright?"

At the mention, the boy fixed his mother's 'friend' with a serious glare that was far too solemn for his young face. If he didn't know any better, Louis could have sworn he was being sized up.

The confrontation passed though, with the child heeding his mother's words and disappearing back into the room packed full of boys.

"Lou?" Louis mused. "Funnily enough, that is my name as well."

She laughed. She snorted when she laughed. Louis found he quite liked it. "Isn't that something! I'm glad you told me, that means I don't have to keep calling you 'Frenchie'."

"What a relief that is to hear," he said, but not without a bit of reflexive regret. Why had he said that? He should have come up with a new name, one he could wear in front of this woman and then discard later, like a second skin, like his cheap suits, like the masks he wore just to slid into another. "I…" Guilt crashed over him suddenly. "I am sorry mademoiselle, in all my talking tonight I may have led you to believe I am someone I am not. I am afraid I am not quite so glamorous a person as I've tried to appear."

“Glamorous?” she laughed. The smile. The scrunch. “Honey I found you half dead in some trash. I know the sorts of trouble people get into—honest to God you can tell me as little or as much as you like about yourself. The important part is that you make good conversation, and you pretend to like my cooking.”

“I *do* like your cooking,” Louis balked.

“You’re sweet.”

She went back to putting the soup away, closed capped cups so her boys could bring them to school, tucking each one carefully in the fridge, and Louis stole the moment to think. It was nice to be wanted for once. Wanted not for what he knew or what he could do, but because someone found him enjoyable. When was the last time he’d had that?

When she sat back, he let a smile twitch the corner of his mouth.

1947, Bee Cave

The day they put his mother in the ground was the also the last day he saw his granddaddy.

Granted, that was the *first* time he saw his granddaddy too, and boy howdy did he make an impression. He was at least a foot above the tallest Conagher (well Conagher-Goryl, but most of Mom’s side was up in Kansas and hadn’t been able to make it down to the funeral) and parted through the sea of mourners to reach where Dell was comforting his father. Dad hadn’t stopped crying, not for three days, not even in his sleep when Dell could hear him sniffling in the now half-empty bed. In the morning’s service alone he’d rendered his hankie unusable, and Dell wordlessly handed him his own.

The approach of the giant, everyone-knew-something-had-gone-wrong-with-his-work man was apparently the only thing that could snap Fred Conagher out of his stupor.

“Dad?” he hiccuped, half in awe and half in disbelief. “I mean, I didn’t know you were comin’.”

“I have,” Granddad replied.

Dell pursed his lips, but said nothing. Unconsciously, he’d been moving a hand over his father’s shoulder, a small protective gesture that would do absolutely nothing.

Radigan Conagher was pushing ninety, or so they said, though you wouldn’t know by the sharpness of his physique or the way his gaze tore through the people below him. His habit of disappearing for decades at a time had earned him quite a reputation, that and the disposition of few words meant he was as much of a mystery to his grandson as he was to everyone else. Dad didn’t need mysteries right now.

“Thank you,” Dad said eventually. “Gloria woulda…woulda been glad you…”

Dell thought Mom would've kicked the crap out of him if she'd known he was showing up now, but that was neither here nor there.

"Your son," Granddad nodded toward Dell. He didn't phrase it like a question. It was more like he was sizing Dell up, measuring him out on a scale, marking just how many centimeters to make the cut on.

"Yeah, yeah my boy," Dad said anyway, either not noticing or just used to the lack of warmth in any of his father's words. "Outta high school early, already got a few credits under his belt. Got your smarts, alright."

His granddaddy was a genius, folks said. His son may have been smart, a good Engineer, but 'ole Radigan there was *brilliant*. Had a spark. As Dell watch Dad sputter around his words as his father stood over him and barely said a thing, he wondered if it was worth it.

The other mourners gave them a wide berth. Dad just kept going, chatting, talking away right until the last of the folks left for the wake.

Granddad shattered the thin peace with, "all that true, boy?"

The question was not at Dad but at Dell. He met the ancient, looming man's gaze with a glare of his own. "I reckon so."

Dad, now lost as the tension of the conversation skipped over him entirely, looked between the other two generations. Neither of them spoke, just kept looking and looking, until eventually he said, "you comin' to the wake, Dad?"

"Got somewhere to be," was all Granddad offered. His eyes finally broke from Dell's.

There was a hurried goodbye from Dad, but that was that, and suddenly all Dell could see was Granddad's back as the brown coat moved further into the cemetery. If there had been one good thing about him, it was that he'd distracted Dad for a time, but that was fading like the wind he'd brought with him, and Dell heard his father start to sniff again.

"Alright Dad, 'nuff a that," he said, directing them toward the car.

As he did, he couldn't help but glance over his shoulder, and wonder why the retreating figure's gait was so off.

Chapter 3

1949, Somewhere that was a lot easier to remember a few drinks ago

“Aye! Another drink for my friend here!” Tavish didn’t speak a lick of the local language, but a bar was a bar was a bar, and any patron yelling with the appropriate arm motions was going to get what he wanted.

“I do not need another.”

His friend here was being a right downer though, not at all in the spirit of a bar is a bar is a bar. He’d been putting away his drinks nearly as fast as Tavish, yet the absolute bear of a man was barely tipsy, even in the face of Tavish’s total inebriation. It proved that Tavish still had a lot to learn in the art of getting pished, which he mournfully lamented as he leaned (perhaps over-affectionately) on Mikhail’s arm.

“*Needin’* doesn’t factor intae things when someone else is buyin’, boyo,” Tavish helpfully educated him. “Make that two!”

Mikhail was a good man, they’d known each other for a few weeks now after falling in with a mutual employer, and had both been drawn to the city for the same thing: in times of chaos, someone was always fishing at a gun for hire. Well, maybe not gun in Tavish’s case, but he certainly pulled his weight. This city was growing increasingly unwelcome for foreigners, but for as long as tensions held, he could always find the sort of ‘lowlifes’ he figured a mercenary was meant to rub elbows with.

“To a job well done!” Tavish toasted once they had their drinks.

“Job is not done yet,” Mikhail pointed out. Despite his protests, he did take to his drink.

“Ah but we’re *going* to do it well. That’s a promise.” He slapped his open palm on the counter. “So many blood years of apprenticeship ‘n I’m going tae slaughter this thing, aye? *Slaughter* it!”

His first solo job, he could hardly believe it. (Well, not exactly solo, there was Mikhail and the rest of the hires,) but his first job as a full Demoman. It was a dream come true! And tomorrow they wake up, march down, set up some bombs and…

Alright, he couldn’t exactly remember what the job was, he was real drunk right about now.

“The important thing is that it’s happening,” Tavish finished with conviction. Mikhail wasn’t bothered by the fact that he hadn’t been privy to the first half of the sentence.

Tavish might have gone on to relay it to him anyway, but he finally caught wind of a voice that had been shouting over the live music for around two minutes now: “*DeGroot! DeGroot! Phone!*”

“Ah shite,” Tavish muttered, noticing that the bartender was holding his hand over the bar phone’s receiver. “Suppose that can’t be anyone but me…”

Couldn’t have been too terrible, unless his employer had somehow caught wind of him drinking the night before the job, but then they’d be hassling Mikhail too.

“Should just be a min,” Tavish said, rising from his seat. His companion only grunted.

It was many, many minutes. When Tavish sat down again, it felt like it had been days, years since something vile and astringent had eaten into his heart and rooted there, pumping acid into his veins with the sheer unnaturalness of it all. It didn’t feel real. His body, this place he was floating in, it couldn’t be real.

“I have to go home,” he said numbly. It didn’t feel like he was talking to Mikhail really, just that saying the words would make them meaningful somehow.

But Mikhail was listening, for the first time maybe, leaning forward on his chair as he realized tears were streaking down the Demoman’s cheek.

Tavish wanted to turn from him, but he didn’t have the energy. “My Da’s dead. Just happened. He…he was real sick all of a sudden and before anyone knew it he was dead and…” He looked up at Mikail, unable to keep the wash that was pouring from his eye. Mikhail wasn’t that much older than him, but he was taller, and at the moment Tavish just needed someone to look up at and demand answers from. “It can’t happen like that, right? It doesn’t happen that fast. Like when people get sick it takes them days to die and you can go and you can say your goodbyes and…”

The last words were more a muffle of sobs than anything, buried into his arm. There was a warm hand on his back.

“Sometimes not,” Mikhail gravely voice delivered unto him. “Sometimes is very fast.”

“Christ this…this can’t be real,” Tavish muttered. “I just talked to him a month ago we…”

A month ago. Years of love and lessons and Tavish hadn’t called in a *month*. He should have gone back at some point. If he’d stopped at home, if he’d quit early, if he’d just…

“I wish I could have said goodbye.”

The hand found his shoulder and squeezed lightly. “Go back home. I will explain things.”

“You’ll…” Tavish lifted his head.

“Cover for you,” Mikhail explained. “Be home for this. It will be good to be with family.”

It was the excuse Tavish needed and hadn’t known, the nudge of someone saying it was okay to just drop everything for once.

“Thank you,” he stumbled over his words and his chair as he rose from the bar. “Thank you for this I’ll…” He tried to convey all the gratitude he could into the collapse of his shoulders,

but it still felt it would never be enough. “If you ever need anything, you call me, aye? I’m good for it.”

Mikhail nodded. In acceptance or indifference Tavish didn’t know. “It is all fine. Go now. Airport will be open for a little longer.”

Tavish couldn’t waste more on pleasantries, not when his very heart was thumping to be *home, home* to be with his mother… He squeezed the hand on his shoulder once, and then he was off, darting through crowd like the devil himself was on his heels.

1951, Wallaroo

Mick thought no one would find him up here. Why he thought that was anyone’s guess: there were only so many places to hide on a farm with only two buildings.

“Mick? You up there?” his father called, soft voice already halfway up the ladder.

He could tell the truth: yes he was up here. Yes he was pretending to be very small, like a hopping mouse or a little bat. He could say that he liked the quiet and the hay wasn’t so itchy when you got used to it, and that the smell was a good sort of familiar.

He could lie and say no. That wouldn’t do much good.

Instead he did neither, and his father climbed all the way to the top, Mick with his head in his arms as he listened. He heard the pause when Dad saw him, and then felt the soft *squeak* as he moved across the loft’s boards and sat at Mick’s side.

“Somethin’ happen at school?” Dad guessed gently.

Mick couldn’t take his head off his knees. He tried to nod best he could without.

“Was it something someone else did?”

Nod nod.

“Kid or grownup?”

“Everyone was calling me names,” Mick manage to squeeze out, the air going through his throat serrated by sharp, choppy bits that just made the words angry.

“Kids’ll say mean things Mick,” Dad said. “They’re just words, you know.”

They weren’t just words. Mick didn’t know exactly how but he knew they were extra bad words and if he repeated them to Dad they might just become true.

There was a lot of wet on his face. “Everyone’s always looking at me all the time.”

Because he was a runt, he was scrawny, and he just wasn’t right like everyone else. They’d just *look* at him, and *see* him, and he *hated* it.

His father hesitated. Gingerly, he reached up and swiped the aviators propped on his forehead, turning them around and setting them on Mick’s face. “There,” he said. “Now they can look all they want, but they won’t see nothing.” There was another pause. “That help?”

They were too big for him, but maybe that was a good thing, more of his face covered meant no one could see how his eyes darted around so much. “Is it that easy?”

“Can be,” Dad shrugged. “We’ll see.”

Everything was an orange tint but, maybe it could work out. Could be that easy. He wiped at his face and leaned into Dad’s side.

1953, Bee Cave

Shot for the door that wasn't quite shut,
But the boy, quick too, slammed fast the door:
The cat, half-through, was cracked like a nut

1955, Boston

Then the boy was suddenly terrified
And he bit his knuckles and cried and cried;

1957, Chaparral

Where it's been for years, and though it died
It's grown in that cupboard and its hot low purr

1959, Early

All those years. All those years of saying he’d never work for BLU and here he was, back in their web. At least when he’d been a kid, he’d just been a bystander for all that nonsense, watching it steal his Daddy back away from him and churn up anyone else that got in its way; but now *he* was the one wading waste deep in the muck.

“You’re very lucky,” Miss Pauling told him with an amount of genuineness that felt rather inappropriate. “She doesn’t want to meet just anyone in person.”

“Lucky’s certainly a word,” he grunted. “I feel like a better would be-”

Every light in the room switched off. Dell jumped, but just as quickly a small TV flicked to life, bathing everything in a penetrating light. By the time his eyes had adjusted enough that he could lower his hand, an image had appeared on the screen.

In person my ass, but he kept that thought to himself.

“Mr. Conagher,” the woman inside the box said, sharp and purple in more than dress. Something in her voice asserted *spikes* just as much as her shoulder pads. “I detest small talk, so I’ll get straight to the point. We are looking for a way to re-engineer the RED/BLU conflict and have been lead to believe your skills will be necessary.”

“I’ll also cut the bullshit, ma’am,” he replied. Maybe he was pissed enough to start using some more colorful language, but he was raised too Texan to drop the manners, even for people like BLU. “I’m only here because I was offered a chance to continue my research while I’m under your employ. Were they lyin’ about that?”

She smoked, sucking like she could slurp up the whole world with that cig holder as a straw. “They were not.”

Well, there it was then, no mincing or pretty words about it. *That* was the sort of opportunity he’d never had while working the oil fields, the hunk of meat stuck in his teeth that he’d been gnawing at for over a decade; a chance to go back to school, to look down all those tantalizing paths he’d given up after Mom’s death. He’d been so interested theoretical physics and then just…reality all at once.

But he wasn’t resigning himself anymore. “Welp,” he hummed. “That sounds pretty cut and dry. I’ll be given the free time I need while I work for you?”

“Plenty,” she waved her hand dismissively. “Attend wherever you wish. Hours, location, it is all flexible, as long as we are clear on this: the Respawn system will be done.” As she said it, she leaned back, sliding into the dark where her overhead lights couldn’t quite reach, eyes orange like the coal at the end of her cigarette.

Dell knew the name. That would be quite the project then. A commitment, years of his life. He knew the sort of pay BLU offered, didn’t have to ask, and if he could keep up his studies then…

“Fine then,” he huffed in the dark with only the screen and Pauling bouncing quietly in excitement for witnesses. “I’m your man.”

1961, Rancherías

There was wind today. Martia liked the wind, liked when it came down from the north areas and shook the agave like they were afraid of something, kicking up dust but not so much that it would get in the eyes. It was nice and sickly-sweet, the sort that made you forget about the sun making your skin itch.

They wandered through the side door near the kitchens. One of the cooks looked up at them, but then returned to the rice that was turning soft in the pot, paying them as much mind as the breeze that had brought them in. Papa's house had few doors on the outside—things were in the old fashion, and Martia knew their family's lifestyle was a fading one, that most people worked on the communal farms now, but Papa's was one ranch that still hadn't gone. It was all they knew, really, just the breezy home with its glassless windows and arches with no doors. Their bare feet walked them through the courtyard (*shoes, Martia*, Mama was always telling them, *you cannot walk around the house like some sort of mud creature*) where their toes spread across the white tile, blue and red designs marking it as the most exquisite room in the house.

It was about time they found the little ones. They stood in the center of the Saltillo and called.

Dinner was ready within the hour, and Martia had managed to wrangle everyone so they wouldn't get yelled at. Their brother was too small to sit alone, so he sat on Martia's lap as they broke off the small pieces of carrot for him to bite. Their sisters (they were really Papa's cousin's daughters, but so many of the family lived on Papa's ranch to help him watch the farmhands that it was usually best to call someone by the simplest name you could) were close by and digging into their rice with gusto. Martia leaned over and picked a few grains out of Chofa's hair.

There were other brothers and sisters too, none as old as Martia still at the children's table, but the smallest three were their responsibility. All the others would leave every now and again, to go into town, or learn to cook or do numbers from their own mamas and papas, but not Martia. Martia stayed home. Martia minded the children.

Simple work for the a simple mind, Chofa's mama had said once, which although hadn't been meant as a cruel thing, Martia still didn't think it was fair. Minding children was hardly *simple*: sometimes all three of them wanted to play something different. Sometimes Ramon would wander off and Martia would have to go chase after, and by the time they got back the sisters had gone missing too. Sometimes Jamie would fall and get a big cut in her knee, all gross and gravel covered, and the other two would start crying because the blood was over everywhere. *Simple* their foot.

As they thought it, they looked to where the adults were eating. Chofa's mama wasn't there; she had been sick for a very long time and-

(Maybe everyone thought Martia dumb, but *they* knew she wouldn't get better. No one would say it, but Martia knew.)

-and there was an argument between Papa and his brother.

"<They won't take this lightly,>" their uncle was saying. Martia looked down at their plate and pretended they weren't listening. "<You've insulted them. Can you not be happy with the land we have?>"

"<Every acre we have is one more insurance against bad times.>"

"<You are too prideful,>" Uncle bit. "<It will be the death of us.>"

“<Is it prideful to want our family to flourish?>”

Martia thought that sounded wise. Papa always sounded wise, and they nodded quietly to themself even though they definitely hadn’t been eavesdropping. They knew Papa would keep them safe through bad times.

They told the children this as they Chofa and Jamie into bed, but the girls didn’t find it as moving as Martia did. Instead they just rubbed their eyes, yawned with missing teeth, and said goodnight as Martia and Ramon walked to their own room.

The soft wind rolled the white curtains, in and out, in and out like breathing. Martia watched them as they listened to Ramon fall asleep, in and out, in and out.

In the morning they ate eggs, Martia made sure Jamie ate *all* of hers, and then it was time for schooling.

Everyone had a bit of chalk in hand, and paper lessons spread out on the floor before them. Everyone Martia’s age was already done with their schooling, had gone on to help with the black books, with working in the fields, or even gotten married and moved off to their new family’s ranch. But Martia was still here. Still taking lessons with the children.

They stared down at the paper before them. Once upon a time, before everyone had decided that Martia was *simple*—which had come one slowly and then all at once, as though the more people said it the truer it became—Mama had wanted them to help with the books. But try as they might the numbers never made sense to them, and Mama’s infinite patience had worn down little by little until snapping all together. Letters were no better. Here Martia was, with the same sheet as Jamie set in front of them, but trying to copy the sentence onto their chalkboard always came out wrong.

If only they had been good at something else around the ranch, anything to be useful. But no, they weren’t good with the farmhands either, and Papa said they would never manage a thing if they didn’t learn to be *firm*. They weren’t good at firm. Yelling at people only made them anxious, and no one took them seriously anyway, not when they thought Martia was wrong in the head.

The chalk had somehow become a drawing of a lollipop.

It was a relief when schooling was finally done for the day. For midday was a little snack of warm bread, and after that they could do something fun. Martia brought out the papers and paints, and they laid them on the tile floor, fingers dipped in jars and swirled until the colors were just as beautiful as the ceramic blow them. Paints weren’t cheap, but Martia hardly ever asked for anything, so when they begged Papa with big eyes and a promise it was for schooling, he had allowed them this.

“<You’re so good at this, Martia,>” Jamie said wistfully, tracing the whorls of paint with her eyes.

Martia puffed with pride. It wasn’t good to be bigheaded like that, but they couldn’t help it, not when they *knew* it was true. Still, it wasn’t polite to brag, so instead they said, “<so are

you! I love your unicorn.>” They tapped two fingers against Jamie’s paper.

She smiled, missing teeth wide in her mouth. “<That’s the Mayor! He’s a good friend.>”

The Mayor was round and pink. Martia thought he looked like a balloon. He made them happy, just like the rainbows they drew, like the cool breeze, like the baptism candle they let burn in their room at night. If they had enough paint to last it, they could have kept themself happy to the end of the world.

“<No!>” Chofa yelled, starling Jamie and Martia both. “<I don’t want to do paints anymore!>”

Martia looked up just in time to watch Chofa knock the purple over with one furious kick.

The jar turned over completely, washing a cascade of pigment across the floor, seeping between the beautiful tiles and into the grout between where it would no doubt stain. The wave crashed over Ramon’s paper, and he began to cry as his hand smudges of green and yellow were wiped away.

“<Chofa!>” Martia gasped, springing to their feet.

“<I don’t like paints!>” Chofa repeated. “<They’re boring and I hate them!>”

They rushed over, but it was too late; there was no saving the purple. There was no saving Ramon either, who had been lying on his tummy and now was completely covered, messing himself even further as he wiped at his teary eyes.

“<Chofa you are being very bad!>” they told her, their throat empty of anything else, but that was all they could say.

Someone had once said that because they were no good at yelling that would make them good with children, but Chofa was just like the farmhands, and never listen to them either. Now they would have to ask Papa for more paints, and when he learned what happened he would say no and then he might even take the remaining paints away-

They shook their finger at her. “<You are a bad little girl!>”

“<I don’t care!>” She stamped her foot. “<I want to do something else!>”

The paint was all over and the children were so loud and Jamie had her hands over her ears to block it all out. Why was this Martia’s job? Why couldn’t someone else do it and Martia could be left alone to find something they were good at instead? An angry little viper reared up inside them. They wanted to make Chofa behave, but they cared about the paints more, so instead they went over and scooped up the ones that still had color inside.

“<Where are you going?>” Jamie asked as they wrapped them in their long arms.

“<I am putting them away,>” Martia sniffed. “<Art time is over, until you decide to be good again.>”

Jamie protested, but Maria had a fast walk, and they were out of the courtyard before they would even let themself listen. They knew, *knew* they were being unfair, that it was only Chofa who was being a bad girl, that Ramon was just sad because his painting got ruined, that all the crying and the kicking was part of being a child. But they didn't care. They just wanted to be angry, to feed that vicious little serpent inside them that hissed to see all that good paint go to waste.

Normally the paints would be put away in the cupboard near the kitchen, but an overwhelming protectiveness urged them outside, up the hill and across to the house on the overlook. Some of the family lived there, the ones who didn't sleep in the big house, but the most important part is that in the overlook there were no children allowed.

The wind picked up as they climbed, up the path where crops turned to the hardier grass that could live at the incline. You don't plant growing things on a slope—they could remember that, from lessons long ago, back when their parents were still trying to teach them. If you planted them at an angle, all the water wouldn't get to the roots, and would just fall down the hill.

So they climbed, and huffed, letting sweat bunch under their arms as they hauled the paints upwards, taking in the long day through their mouth and not noticing the taste of smoke on the wind.

It was only the noise that made them stop. They froze, poised at singular spot of level ground, straining to hear over the sound of their own breath as they glanced around their father's land. The light on the agave was very bright, glancing in beautiful turquoise. It was perfectly still, perfectly peaceful, until the sound came again.

They'd never heard gunfire before. They still knew what it was.

Over, on the other side of the outlook, people were running through the lines of plants.

"<The fields!>" one of the farmhands screamed in warning. "<They're burning the fields!>"

Every one of the jars smashed as Martia dropped them, feet halfway down the hill before the liquid even hit the ground.

A tranquility that had once stretched for years now unraveled in minutes, Martia's run joined by others as dozens of people began to flee the south fields like fleas abandoning a bathing dog. There was screaming and warnings, telling Martia or whoever to run, run, and now the scent of smoke was too strong to ignore. That once beautiful breeze had turned on them, bringing the fire home.

"<Ramon!>" they screeched as they came flying into the house. "<Jamie! Chofa!>"

Not in the courtyard anymore, just an oozing, ugly bruise of purple that could have occurred only twenty minutes before.

"<Ramon, Ramon! Anyone, where are you?>"

They could *see* the fire now. Out the window. And logically they knew it could move fast but it still seemed impossible how quickly it had closed, how hungrily it ate every scrap of life before it as it darted across the ranch.

“<Children? Please, if you can hear me->”

They slammed open the door to Jamie’s room. The three of them were there, huddled into a corner, Ramon in the middle and sopping like someone had tried to wipe the paint of with a bucket over his head. Martia didn’t care about any of that.

“<Hurry, hurry!>” They rushed forward, scooping Ramon into their arms. “<They are burning the fields, we have to leave.>”

“<Who’s burning?>” Jamie whimpered. She hadn’t stood when Chofa had, refusing to move from the corner.

“<I do not know,>” Martia said, and it was God’s honest truth. The house creaked around them, groaning where the flames fed. “<It does not matter. Hurry!>”

They fled. Out the back, opposite of the way Martia had come, but the great fire had already begun to devour. The tower, the great one in the center of the big house whose bell chimed every day at noon, gave off a terrifying scream.

Martia didn’t look at it as it crashed behind them. They didn’t look until they saw Jamie was no longer with them.

Chofa hadn’t noticed. She needed three strides for every one of Martia’s, and was running, heaving, and didn’t yet see that her sister wasn’t there. Ramon was too busy crying into the front of their shirt. There was no time to go back. They turned toward the north and ran.

Gunfire was to the east. They could shy from it, but that would turn their path across the field diagonal, putting them in the fire’s wake for much longer…But as they thought it, the rapid *pop pop pop* echoed from black blots in the distance. Martia grabbed Chofa’s wrist and said, “<this way, this way!>”

The flames roared like towers, like waves, like an entire forest. It was nothing like Martia had seen before, not like the little flame they kept alive at night, not like the ovens that burned at the cook’s careful touch. It was calling for them. It wanted them so badly and they had never been more terrified in their life. It was alive. It wanted them to join it.

Chofa stepped in a rabbit’s burrow. Her leg went with an awful *snap*.

She howled, and it was somehow a more terrible sound than the fire’s roar, but only just. The smell of burning plant matter left streaks down her cheeks and she yowled, “<Martia! Martia help me!>”

They rushed to her. Some stupid, stupid rabbit and their stupid, stupid hole and there were white bits poking out of Chofa’s skin. Smoke was heaving in all their lungs. Ramon had stopped crying, and could only cough.

“<Martia, I’m scared, I’m scared, it hurts,>” Chofa whimpered. “<Where’s Jamie? Martia please it hurts->”

Martia put one arm around her and pulled. Even as they did, (and Chofa *screamed* so viciously that it knocked their insides loose) they could tell it wouldn’t work. They couldn’t carry her with only one arm. They would have to put down Ramon down, and Ramon couldn’t run, not with his little baby legs, and already he was barely moving in their arms aside from the feeble coughs.

They shook their head. “<Chofa I->”

As they stood, Chofa’s eyes opened wide in the black air. “<No! Martia carry me, please.>”

“<I’m sorry I can’t->” They shook their head again.

The fire was coming now. It leapt onto Chofa’s sleeve and she screeched, pulling herself across the ground in an attempt to get away from it. Martia stepped back so it wouldn’t catch them too.

“<Where are you going?>” Chofa begged. “<Please, please don’t leave me, I’m sorry, I’m sorry. I’ll be good okay? I won’t be a bad little girl any more I promise->”

Flames had caught her hair. Martia turned and ran.

“<Please! Martia I’m sorry, please don’t leave->”

They could still hear her dying screams long after the fields disappeared behind them.

They didn’t know how far they ran, or how long they walked when they could no longer run, the extra weight around their chest heaving and debilitating. There were still men with guns, people who had come to hurt Papa, to hurt them all. Were the family all dead? Dead like Jamie and Chofa and the other corpses they’d seen burning while they’d run past? The men with guns had been shooting people who could still scream, and even some of the ones that couldn’t, and Martia knew that if one of them caught up-

A slope appeared before them. It was sudden, unexpected, they had never gone this far from the ranch before after all, so the uncharted landscape snuck on them and they went spinning down the hill. *Crunch* went everything and they landed at the bottom, terrified, breathing heavy as they stared at the burnt orange sky.

They were dead now, surely. They had broken a leg like Chofa had, as punishment for leaving her, for killing her, and now one of the men would catch up and shoot them.

After a few minutes of lying in frozen panic, they realized they couldn’t hear the guns anymore. They couldn’t hear anything but the slow encroach of night. Crickets. The rustle of grass. The men had chased them into the wilderness and they were alone.

Their legs weren’t broken either. Everything hurt, yes, but they could move, and they clutched Ramon close.

When the sky finally turned black, they noticed he’d stopped coughing.

Slowly, they peeled his frail form away, and looked down at their brother. How long had he been silent? Had Martia killed him, crushed him when they’d gone spinning down the hill? Or had they been holding a corpse for hours, his lungs too small to withstand an entire agave field of smoke?

As they thought it, they coughed sharply. Breathing hurt. When you run you’re used to your lungs throbbing, the shortness of breath, but lying here in the foreign fields it ached just as badly as running had. There was wet along their cheeks.

There were rocks at the bottom of the hill. Martia piled them on top of the body until they couldn’t see him anymore, and made a cross out of sticks and grass. They laid next to him, and hummed feebly. Maybe the smoke would kill them too. They didn’t know. They would see in the morning.

Chapter 4

1963, Cloudcroft

When the cupboard swells and all sides split
And the huge black cat pads out of it.

1964, Stuttgart

“Something’s the matter,” Mikhail stated.

Although he found difficulty expressing in the language (for anything more nuanced than some creative battle cries), most of their conversations ended up in English. Between Ludwig’s poor grasp of Russian and Mikhail’s worse German, it was honestly the happiest medium, though that didn’t keep the two of them from nobly trying to brush up on the other’s native tongue from time to time.

“Hm?” Ludwig said, feigning distracted nonchalance. It might have convinced they layman, but Ludwig so often said things with distracted nonchalance that Mikhail was wise enough to know the difference. “Nothing’s the matter, mien friend. Just thinking.”

“Have been ‘just thinking’ for two weeks now,” Mikhail pointed out.

“Two weeks? An odd timeframe to choose. I should hope I’m *always* thinking.” Ludwig looked up, hands on both sides of his desk, and smiled like he hoped Mikhail would accept the jest and drop the point. Not this time. This time he was prepared.

“You did not burn last letter. I looked at this one. Why is Doktor ignoring job offer?”

Ludwig’s smile froze on his face, sliding after a half second into a wrinkle of defensive annoyance. “You looked through my mail? Have you no sense of privacy?”

“You are one to talk,” Mikhail snorted. “Doktor is avoiding question. Who is Marcel?”

His spine was stiff, that twisting frown that showed more often than not these days back on his face. It was the one that curled up whenever another a letter came in, whether another bill or, more likely, a warning from one of his various friends that the authorities wouldn’t tolerate his presence for long, not the least because of his large collection of stolen birds. Mikhail didn’t like that frown. He’d do much to see nothing troubled his Doktor again.

Finally, Ludwig’s shoulder sagged. “An old friend. An old, *persistent* friend.”

“If is friend, should be happy to look at job.”

“Gah, you don’t understand.” Ludwig threw up his hands. “He’s thrown his lot in with Builder’s League United. Their contracts are ridiculous, ten years minimum; amazing

salaries, but once they get their hooks in you, they never let you leave."

"Doktor *promised* Mikhail he would start looking for work," Mikhail reminded him. Sometimes Ludwig's perfectionism was the equivalent to a stone in Mikhail's shoe, especially when trying to get him to agree on a course of action. "You know we cannot stay here forever."

Although being Russian on this side of the wall was tolerated, that didn't make it easy. Not to mention that incident with the President's wedding last year, which had *really* put the pressure on to leave Germany.

"I know, I know," Ludwig said, pacing around his desk, close enough that Mikhail could reach out to him if he wanted. He refrained. "I just hoped…I've really been away from home so long, and I just got here. Certainly we can put off moving, just a bit longer, ja?"

Although he'd first began to work for the Doktor as security and nothing more, Mikhail had found that he'd grown to like the affable, if odd, man. Mercenary work did not leave room for many friends, but after several less than legal excursions where they had split profits fifty-fifty, he discovered he enjoyed having a partner as opposed to a faceless employer. So, for that, he pushed down his instincts and placed a hand on Ludwig's shoulder.

"Mikhail understands," he said truthfully. "But more days will not make less homesick. Might make more dead though."

Ludwig glanced out the window at the half-gutted ambulance waiting for them on the street. After a moment, he sighed, and placed a hand over Mikhail's. "I know, I know. I will…I will write him back. Or call. No, write, I have no interest in paying for that bill." He turned. "Since you're so sure of this, I should ask: is this something *you* would want?"

"We kill bad men, get paid," Mikhail shrugged. "Is good. They will let Mikhail come, yes?"

"Oh absolutely," Ludwig said dryly. "They were nearly *begging* for referrals in that first letter. Which, since apparently you've convinced me, is probably something we should look into more. If they are assembling some sort of company, it would be good to know more of the men we will be fighting with."

"Da?"

"I have a few people I could get in contact with," he mused, and it was good, very good to see him like this again. With a new idea to pick at, a twinkle in his eye. No longer resigned. "How about you? Do you know anyone who might be good to call?"

Mikhail thought about it for a moment. "Someone, yes."

1965, Bushland Beach

"Piss off!"

To the stranger's credit, he didn't flinch as the kukri stuck into the wall less than an inch from his ear.

"I would be happy to," he drawled in thick European accent, though Mick couldn't make out what kind. "Though I am under contract to at least deliver my message before departing."

"Yeah?" Mick growled, inches from the other man's face. "Message that ya couldn't leave on a little love note under the door?"

"Don't be so dramatic," the stranger said and, to Mick's utter bewilderment, flipped open a cigarette case and pulled one out. "Do you respond to all job offers with such unnecessary antagonism?"

Mick scoffed. "What sort job offer involves stalking a man's motel room for two days?"

"So you *did* notice. Good. I'd had quite a low estimation of your skills up until this moment." The stalker lit his cigarette with a lighter that hadn't been in his palm a moment before. Mick had half a mind to knock them both out of his hands. "To answer your question, the kind of offer that involves scouting and observing before a decision is reached."

"And what sort *decision* you land on, show pony?"

"Me?" He raised his eyebrows, hidden behind the blue balaclava that much have itched terribly in the Australian heat. "I think you are a waste of resources. You're disgusting, inelegant, and there are far more experienced assassins we could get with the sum we were planning to offer you. However," he blew a ring of smoke into Mick's face, "the final say is not mine. My superiors would like to hire you as our Sniper."

Mick didn't look his age, and he liked it that way. The more anybody knew about him, the less likely they were to respect him, to see him as just some kid they could underpay and take advantage of. He'd never liked the taste of that. He inhaled the stranger's smoke through his nostrils and held it in his lungs.

"Which are who, exactly?" His voice was soft, a growl, and he wanted to make this scoundrel flinch.

"Have you heard of Builder's League United?" Silence was all he got. "No? A very wealthy company, currently locked in a several hundred acre land dispute in the southern United States. For some reason they want *you*, and for some reason they want *me* to be the bearer of bad news. Well, good news for you, I suppose."

The BLU smoked again. Mick leaned back slightly. "And you had to follow me down six blocks into a dark alley just to tell me that?"

"I wished to see where you were going," the BLU shrugged. "Why *are* you behind a sushi place, by the way?"

"Wanted to see if you'd be dumb enough to follow me somewhere where I clearly had the upper hand." To emphasize, he ripped the kukri out of the wall and brought it close to the

BLU's throat, threatening to split the fine fibers in the mask.

To Mick's chagrin, he only smiled. "Well, then it seems we are both the curious sort. Would you want to discuss terms here, or back at your motel room?"

Mick stood there, waiting, *waiting* for him to flinch. He never did. "Fine," he finally snarled. "Talk."

1966, Boston

There weren't a lot of places she could go to swing her bat anymore. Nowhere that some new group of kids hadn't claimed, nowhere that the developments hadn't plastered over in the slow encroach of the city as it ate up every park, empty lot, and baseball diamond drawn in chalk. She'd taken to grabbing a singular baseball and her Sandman™ and heading out to the brick buildings behind 92nd, shooting the shit there for hours at a time, long after her arms were tired. She'd toss a ball, hit it *thwack* down the long alley into the wall at the end, and pick it up again. Perfect hit every time. Over and over again.

She could still run, too, if she wanted. Lou needed runners for the work he was doing, fast people, ones who could move stuff in and out with no one else seeing. She could do that, but Ma would always know when she'd taken one of Lou's jobs; it must have been that ugly, guilty air about her whenever she walked in the door. Or Rex was right and being a mom just gave you superpowers for knowing when your kids were up to bad shit.

So she could run, and she could swing, but it was wasn't the same. Fuck it wasn't the same.

She peeled her cleats off quietly. They were filthy, and she cringed thinking how Ma would give her an earful for that, but her arms were sore and she didn't want to take them to the tub and wash them out. They always took forever to dry when she did that, and smelled awful unless she put them on the fire escape. And if she did *that*, then it might rain, and she wouldn't have any shoes for tomorrow.

On socks stained dirt-brown around the ankles, she padded to her room.

Just her room, now. It was only her and Ma in this place that used to have seven others, and what once had been like a sardine can was now impossibly empty with its rooms stuffed with whatever. The guys came back from time to time sure, but it wasn't the same because *they* had lives out there. And she was still here. The baby. No place yet for her own and Ma would get this *look* on her face whenever she talked about it—lips pursed, one second away crying. She'd only ever get a few seconds in before losing her nerve and saying, *never mind you know, never mind*.

It wasn't the money. She did enough jobs for Lou, Rex, Donny—whoever—to have enough saved up, it was-

So the thing is you can't become a professional baseball player just by being good.

You got to go to college, and then from there someone might scout you for the minor leagues, and then from there, *maybe* you go big time. She knew that. Everyone knew that. Yet when she'd been a kid she hopped…aw whatever.

She lay on her bed and threw her arms over her face. She could hear Ma in the kitchen, talking on the phone, and all she wanted to do was succumb, to lie here forever and listen to the sound reverberations through the wall and never do anything with her life, *just stay here, just take care of Ma*. She peered out the thin gap between her arms, frowning at the sky as though the Sammy White poster plastered to her ceiling could tell her what was wrong with her. Where she'd gone sideways. Who she was supposed to be or what she was supposed to do with her life.

Okay, well, she did have an *inkling* of what was wrong with her. Had come to some ugly, begrudging conclusions about what she hated about being Jeremy pretty young. She hadn't made her peace with it yet. It was better to think about baseball.

And baseball was only a small part of it.

She'd gotten up because she was hungry and *maybe* she was going to try and talk herself into cleaning her shoes after all when she heard her name coming out of the kitchen. Immediately she flattered herself against the wall, listening hard as Ma talked circles around the phone.

"And I just know," Ma was saying. "I just know any day now the recruiters are gunna come and-"

Her heart sank. That didn't mean league recruiters.

"And he's my baby I can't…I can't lose him. They went up and drafted Andrew too and *he's still over there* and…and I can't loose him too alright?"

The phone chattered.

"*You* could find him work, work like yours," Ma said into the receiver. "Just something so he's not around when-"

Scooting closer to the door, chewing the inside of her lip. A grumbling on the other end revealed exactly how popular that idea was.

"I don't care if it's dangerous," Ma said. "Not as dangerous as where they're sending all my boys. And it pays well, don't try to tell me it doesn't. *Please* Louis. For Jeremy's sake."

The voice went quiet. Ma listened with one hand on the kitchen table, head bent, her youngest peeking around the corner to watch as her mother quietly cried into her hand. The conversation picked back up again, but she hardly listened, almost too late realizing it was about to end. Just barely preempting the receiver's click, she managed to sneak back down the way she'd come.

By the time Ma's hand had pulled back, she was strolling through the kitchen on clomping feet, obviously just come in from a long day. "Yo Ma. Who was that?"

“Oh honey,” Ma blinked, tearing her gaze away from the derelict phone, seafoam green and gleaming in the kitchen lights. “How long have you been home?”

“Couple of minutes,” she shrugged. Maybe it was better that her mother hadn’t answered the question. “You alright? You ain’t looking so good.”

“I am good I’m just…oh honey.” Ma rushed forward, pulling her into her arms. “I love you so much baby. Don’t forget that.”

She let it happen. She didn’t know what to do anymore than Ma did, but still she said, “I know Ma. I won’t.”

1967, Bilious Gorge

This was bad. This was really, really bad.

Martia had come to this place because there weren’t supposed to be any people! They’d been avoiding people ever since they’d been run out of the factory, when the managers had started putting two and two together about all the accidents going on. They were pretty scared of people now-a-days, and people sure as shit were scared of them too, so in the interest of everybody they’d wormed out a little hole for themself where they had hoped they wouldn’t be noticed. The ravine had been a perfect discovery: nobody around, but plenty of fresh water flowing through the cracks in the rock. Food wasn’t a problem either with the powerhouse nearby. Martia had gotten good at sneaking, and if they went into the canteen at just the right time, they could stuff handfuls of food through the loosened suit filters and be gone before any of the workers spotted them. It wasn’t the most satisfying way to live, but it wasn’t starvation. They knew starvation, intimately, knew the way it made their ribs like great hills along their abdomen, knew how it could drive anyone to do horrible things.

They’d do anything to keep from that again.

Who were these strangers? They didn’t look like the workers: the man was dressed in blue overalls and the woman in a simple purple dress. Inspectors? The woman had a clipboard, and her friend was certainly poking all over the place.

“Think it’ll be a good test ground?” she asked him as he lifted up one of pallets, disturbing the family of chipmunks who’d been living there. That wasn’t fair. Martia had been feeding the chipmunks for a long time and now the man had just gone and made them homeless.

They hoped he wouldn’t make *them* homeless. That could go very very bad again.

“Sure, good as any,” the man in the overalls grunted. “Though I thought you were fond of 2Fort?”

“The Administrator is,” she said, tapping her pencil. “I have some personal reservations about…the surrounding area. But! Doesn’t really matter, right? They’re all going to be up and running the new system eventually. How long until it’s ready?”

“Beginning of next year,” he reported absently. He seemed more interested in one of the discarded tarps than the question. “At the latest.”

“Wow,” she hummed. “That’s almost ten years. And it’s finally becoming a reality.”

“…Mm-hm.”

A lump lodged itself in Martia’s throat when they saw what had caught his attention. That tarp had one of their fires under it—the ashy remains, bits of dark and charcoal they’d left behind when they’d just gotten so agitated this morning and decided to do something about it. Stupid. They fire was *always* hungry, it could have waited its turn, waited its turn for a day when strangers weren’t going to show up randomly. They should have *known* not to indulge it.

The man flipped the tarp over. He looked over his shoulder at the purple-woman. “Anybody been down here before us?”

“No, no the Gorge has been clear for months.” Her lips pursed in a dangerous worry.

They crawled further into their hiding place. The strangers wouldn’t know they were here, couldn’t know.

As they scuffled backwards, their boot kicked on of their lighters.

The two inspectors tensed. The man pressed a single gloved finger to his lips, and the woman nodded, reaching down to where they could now see a pistol was strapped to her thigh.This was bad, this was very bad, and Martia could barely think as the pair moved closer to the outer wall. They were well hidden. There was no way they’d be found. Unless they moved the panel. Which the man did. And then suddenly there was far more light than the meager peephole had allowed, and they were blinded them to the figures in front of them.

“Well I’ll be.”

“Is that a…person?” The woman leaned further in.

Martia withdrew further from the strangers, despite the fact that there was nowhere to go. They’d run out of runway.

“I think so.” The man crouched, even with where Martia was curled on the floor. “Hey there little fella. What’re you doin’ in there?”

“Dell, be careful. We don’t know what sort of person-”

“I’ll tell you what sort of person Pauling: a frightened one.” Dell turned back to Martia. “It’s alright partner, we won’t hurt ‘cha. Just want to ask you a few questions.”

Martia recognized that voice, the way he held out his hands and twitched his fingers. It was the same sort of voice they used when they wanted to coax a chipmunk to eat, to convince a raccoon to come a little closer. They weren’t some animal. Maybe they looked it with their

big bug-eyes they caught reflections of in shiny surfaces, but they *weren't*. Hunger had made them an animal, and they wouldn't be that again. They crawled out without Dell's help.

"Thanks partner. That wasn't so hard right?" His grin was soft and friendly. He had shiny bug-eyes too, though his were a pair of goggles and not built into his face. "Now, can you tell me why you were setting fires all over the bottom of the ravine?"

That was an easy one. "<The fire gets angry sometimes. You have to feed it when it gets angry, otherwise it'll come back, and it could hurt you or somebody else.>"

The soft-friendly grin soured, the burning lines of confusion Martia was all too familiar with. "Sorry, didn't catch that."

They tried again, their English thick and muffled when coming from the muzzle. "The fire's hungry. It's my job to feed it."

Dell still just shook his head. "Can't understand a word you're saying partner. Mind taking that mask off?"

"<No!>" they stepped back clutching their face, shaking their head over and over again. If anybody looked they'd be chased off, Dell and Pauling would throw rocks at them, they'd have to *run run run*-

"Whoa, whoa, easy now," Dell soothed. His hand was on their shoulder. Calming. It was like he wasn't even afraid. "You don't gotta if you don't want to. We don't gotta know about the fires, but we do gotta clear everyone out of here; some fighting's going to start down in this area soon and we can't have any civilians who might get hurt."

That was…that was not a *great* thing, but they knew the word 'civilians' meant 'war', and if Dell was telling the truth then they supposed they should listen. They nodded.

"Great!" He patted them on the arm. He didn't come up very high, his head even with their shoulder. Looking at Pauling, he added, "that wasn't so hard, was it? We'll just take him into town and-"

"Wait," Pauling said. "I have an idea." She hadn't really been looking at them while Dell had been talking, instead gathering an intense scan over the multitude of fires. There were at least thirty burns in various stages of cleanup from this vantage alone. "There *is* a historical precedent for a Pyrotechnician as a part of full nine-merc company."

"You can't be serious," Dell retorted, deadpan. "Critter's scared as all hell, you can't expect him to get involved in *mercenary* work after we just dragged him out of his burrow."

Pauling shrugged, but ignored him for the most part. She addressed Martia. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

They'd never been asked that before. The bald-faced strangeness of it shocked them into nodding their head.

"Hold on now-"

“Would you be interested in killing people for money?” Pauling went on over Dell’s protests.

Money was good. When they had some money in their pockets, they didn’t have to steal when they wanted candy bars. And well…

They weren’t a ‘critter’. They were a person. And Pauling was more interested in treating them like a person than the man who wanted to ditch them in some town.

“That’s great then! I can start writing up a contract immediately. Car’s this way.”

They weren’t sure it was a good idea, but if they were being made to leave the Gorge, they didn’t have a better one. The lady was promising a job—they hadn’t had a job, a real, honest-to-goodness *purpose*—in so darn long, and the thought of staving off the hunger for another few days sounded good to them. They followed her toward where they knew the lift to be. Dell began to walk along too, and they noticed how stricken his face had gotten.

Chapter 5

1934, Ullapool

The water will always be red in his nightmares. Red frothing when he tries to swim out, the smell of brimstone thick in his sinuses.

It wasn't of course. The loch was still that day, and the only frothing was from a young boy, trying again and again to head out to where he'd last seen the rowboat disappear to, where he'd heard that great boom across the water. He'd swim, nearly drown himself, crawl to land until he could breathe, and then wade out again.

He did that until some passing elderly couple made him stop, held his tiny little wrist until he screamed, crying that he was sorry, that he had to go, he had to see if they were alright. Later, when there was a blanket over his shoulder and something warm in a mug nestled between his hands, the screaming would turn quiet, and there would just be the sobs.

But in his nightmares, the water would always be red.

1940, Paris

There was nothing to be worried about in that first week. More concerning were the boots overhead, the checks that failed to notice the door that led to their technically-not-legal apartment, the voices above speaking their native tongue to whoever opened the door. Ludwig's attention was on the fact that food was now being rationed, and his best bet for supplying the two of them were the scant resistance fighters still in the city. Few and far between, extremely cautious, but between dabbling in reports on the occupation they would also occasionally smuggle supplies for those who needed it.

So he had plenty to occupy his mind in that first week. Besides, respiratory infections could last as long as a fortnight, so he'd trouble himself then.

After a month, Mother stopped breathing all together in that damp basement that might as well have been a tomb.

Not that that kept Ludwig from trying, of course. He did everything in his power, pouring over books, cutting and re-sewing, tearing his hair out and growling because one of these *stupid* academic tomes had to have something that would help, anything, please…

He wore himself to exhaustion, his mother's body cold and uncaring on the operating table. He had failed her. He had studied, he'd studied for years in research books piled high, all that time as a resident and he was nothing when it came to something that matted. A common infection. And he'd let it take the last person he had left.

He hadn’t left the apartment in months. If he was being honest, he didn’t remember leaving it this time either, only that suddenly he was standing in a street he didn’t recognize with rain pattering on his shoulder. It dripped down the remains of his once-white shirt and pooled Mother’s blood at his feet. It was out here, yes, and dangerous, but no longer did he care, and he merely stared up at the pouring rain until his glasses were nothing but a spattering of droplets.

“<You there! It is curfew!>”

Ludwig didn’t turn around. There was simply nothing left that could be afraid. What more could he fail? What more could he lose?

“<I said it is curfew! Come here!>”

It seemed the lone soldier had confused him for a French citizen, no doubt would ask for his paperwork. Ludwig considered responding in German, just to hear him jump, but he couldn’t find it in him.

The footsteps splashed through puddles, storming to a lone man staring at the rain, a lone man lost. In the dark, the soldier couldn’t see how much blood covered his suspect. He couldn’t see the bonesaw clasped in the doctor’s right hand.

“<You there! I *said*->” The last words were a burble as Ludwig turned and slashed him across the throat.

He didn’t stop there. Even as the soldier gasped over the blood spilling out of his mouth, Ludwig jammed the bonesaw forward again into his stomach, over and over, until he was dead as a man could be. He didn’t know where the fury came from, the desire—no the *need*—to hurt, but he just kept hacking as the rain came down.

When it stopped, Ludwig blinked at the corpse of his countryman.

From this angle, it wasn’t really different from all the cadavers he’d practiced on in school. More gruesome, yes, but ultimately empty. The resemblances to humanity shaved away.

So useless. A waste.

He hauled the body back to the basement. In a single halfhearted endeavor, he attempted a lung transplant, but it was as successful as he thought it would be. Maybe if he hadn’t waited so long after Mother’s death, or if he hadn’t brutalized the other patient so…

Ah, but that was neither here nor there. Ludwig had discovered he much preferred working on the living than the dead; though maybe certain people should wind up dead when all was said and done. In the meantime, he shook himself from his grief. Mother had said he was a good son to her, but yet he had left her alone for a ridiculous amount of time, failing her once again as she was defenseless on that table. Careless. He went across to the apartment’s lone mirror and threw a blanket across it, cursing himself for his selfishness, for his wallowing. Mother would need to be washed and prepared—there were many things he couldn’t do by

himself, but he would do his best. He owed Mother that. And if he could keep himself from being more of a waste, well, that could come later.

1941, Chapayevsk

There was an older woman who sometimes shared her meals with the girls—just the tinniest bit, a mouthful maybe, but Mikhail was grateful for it all the same. His sisters didn't remember their grandmother, but she, her name was Biserka, was just like Nana with her kind face and kinder words when the day was long.

She was too old to be working. They made her work anyway. She died two months after their family arrived.

Mama cried often these days, but she cried much when Biserka died. The extra food had helped Bronislava stay strong, and now without it the littlest of them might shrivel away entirely, so small as she curled to Mama while the cold chewed away at them all. He watched them both fall asleep, exhaustion claiming each pair of eyes in their sleeping room.

It was his job to watch now. Papa had gone and gotten himself killed and it was Mikhail's job to watch his family. He would not let them die. They had been sent here to do just that, but Mikhail would not let them.

Zhanna had too much spirit. She talked back and the guards beat her often, and it was just so much like Papa's brand of stupid that Mikhail couldn't sleep for how much his heart ached for her. He found her, once, after a particularly bad one. Zhanna was almost thirteen and never cried anymore, but here he found her, pressed against one of the walls as blood, tears, and snot leaked out of her in equal measures.

If she were a bit older, the guards would do much worse to her. He'd seen the way they looked at the other women in the labor camp, and he know there were evil things that went on here where these men controlled everything: their food, their blankets, their very lives. He wrapped his arms around his sister and let her cry. Mikhail was fifteen and never cried anymore either, but salt-wet spilled out of him onto the top of her head.

It was three months in when they tried to separate him from Mama and his sisters.

They shouldn't have left their baton where it was so easy to grab. They shouldn't have underestimated him—he was fifteen, but when he peeled back the slouch that had hung around his shoulders for the past three months, he felt a gleeful satisfaction at the terror on their faces when they realized he was taller than them. They should have sent more than two men to try and take him from his family. When the second of the guards shot at him, he shouldn't have missed.

"<Go!>" he told Mama as a singular fist wrapped around the neck of the second guard. A whole fist around his tiny, baby neck. "<Let everyone know: we leave tonight!>"

He would kill every Party man in this building. He now had two guns, and he was free, and he had would kill every single one.

But first.

“<You,>” he said, squeezing slightly. “<You are the one who beat Zhanna.>”

If the man could piss himself a second time he would have. His eyes were already boggled, popping out of his head, yet somehow they managed to become more terrified.

“<Every man in Chapayevsk will spend his last moments in agony.>” Mikhail’s fist tightened around the baton, the first weapon he’d managed to grab. He pulled the sweaty face close to him, red from lack of oxygen, tongue lolling out of his mouth. “<And you. You get to be first.>”

1942, Hancock

“Ma says smoking is unladylike,” Jane said.

Like the lines in a script, Peggy looked sideways at him, fit every morsel of contempt a teenage girl could into a single sentence and said, “you gunna tell?”

Jane ignored her. “Ma says you must report for supper.”

That made Peggy move, though it was a pained, achy sort of move, the kind you did after you’ve been picking weeds out of the strawberry bushes all day. But at least she stopped leaning against the barn and smoking, so Jane had fulfilled his duty. He marched after her as she returned to the house.

“Jane,” Pa barked as soon as they entered. “Where the fuck have you been? Get me a goddamn beer.”

“Yes sir!” Jane saluted.

“And take that fucking bucket off your head, Jesus Christ.”

Jane wanted to correct him, to tell him it wasn’t a bucket but a helmet, but knew that wasn’t a good idea. It was never a good idea to tell Pa he was wrong about something. He went to the icebox to get the beer.

It was normal one second. One second for everything to change, to have his hand on Pa’s favorite brand and then to hear the yelling from the living room. Fist hitting skin. The sound of Ma screaming in pain. The sudden bellow of Pa screaming in pain too.

That last one was not normal.

When Jane came rushing in the scene made no sense because Ma was on the floor like she was sometimes when Pa hit her, but Pa wasn’t standing either. He was collapsed on the

ground, Peggy over him with a chair clasped in both her hands. Her face was horrified. The wild spite and the terror chased around each other in her expression and she was still poised with the chair as though she might hit Pa again.

He stirred, and she did.

This time it cracked loud, one leg snapping off in her hand as the wood smashed on Pa's back. He collapsed, the feeble inches he'd pushed up with his arms gone in an instant.

Peggy threw the broken chair away. "Ma!"

She ran at Ma. Elle was grabbing Ma and helping her to her feet, but Jane was still struck there, stupefied. He was staring at Pa. He couldn't stop staring, couldn't believe what he was looking at.

"Ma, Ma c'mon we're going." Peggy didn't give her a chance to argue, not that it looked like she was going to anyway. She was just as entranced by Pa's prone body as Jane was.

And then Peggy was going for the back door, the one made of chicken wire that you could watch the fireflies through in the summer, the one that led onto the porch and out into forever. She grabbed Elle around the wrist and for one fateful second she and Jane locked eyes.

Jane didn't move.

She turned, and pulled the rest of the family out into the yard. Out into wherever 'away' was.

Pa stirred.

When Hancock's only two officers, Sheriff Johnson and Deputy Miller—Miller who'd caught Jane once when he'd been stealing scrap metal from the junkyard and promised not to tell nobody if he never did it again—finally arrived on the scene, the Jane they found was more blood than person. Jane didn't remember much, not of them coming, not of them taking Pa and making him lie down until someone could bring him to a hospital. What he remembered was Pa, Pa hurting him over and over until none of his limbs worked and his jaw was all wrong. He'd never earned a beating that bad before. All that was left was meat.

The hospital smelled awful.

It was in a different town because Hancock didn't have a hospital in the first place, and it was understaffed because most of the doctors had been recruited as medics for the war. Jane was left in a bed with sheets that were always clean and some flowers by the nightstand that were always fresh. Sometimes a woman would come and visit him. She was a social worker, but he didn't have answers for any of the questions she asked him.

"Where's Pa?" he'd field her sometimes, a question of his own.

She'd try to answer him, but he knew it couldn't be the truth.

Only when he was two weeks better, his limbs working and jaw set again but still not quite right, did he ask Peggy that same question. "Where's Pa?"

She was smoking again. Elle was there this time though, and they were supposed to be picked up, supposed to go somewhere. Jane wasn't going anywhere yet though, not without answers.

"Prison," she puffed.

"You're lying," Jane countered.

"He nearly killed you. Everyone saw. It was enough this time, and he ain't coming back out."

"No," Jane shook his head. "You! You killed him with the chair! I saw you, you goddamn backstabber."

She narrowed her eyes at him. It didn't work as well as it used to: he was taller than her now. She couldn't look down anymore.

"Well then maybe I did," she said quietly. "Maybe I did kill him. Finally worked up the nerve."

"Traitor!" he pointed at her.

"She didn't Jane," Elle tried to say, but Jane wasn't in the mood for listening.

"Murderer!" he yelled. There was no one around to hear. The car that was supposed to pick them up wasn't here. It was just them. "Judas!"

She looked him dead in the eye. "One of us was going to have to do it, in the end. And it wasn't gunna be you."

This was no straw that broke the camel's back. This was a sword through the single rope holding the pulley of bricks.

He flew at her, and they both landed against the sidewalk with a smash. The force knocked a surprised yelp out of her, but that hesitation got eaten up fast, and Peggy responded the only way she ever had. The only way the two of them had ever treated each other. He beat his fist against her, and her strike came right back, fist colliding with the side of his face. He didn't care. He'd felt worse.

So, so much worse.

He picked her up and slammed her back on the concrete on the outside of the social services, hitting her again and again, ignoring every kick and punch and bite she threw his way like he was numb to it, like he was nothing but a killing machine. Pain was weakness. Weakness he no longer had. She killed Pa and he was going to kill her back.

It was a lot like that time she'd almost killed him, their squabble by the potato field where they'd been just as intent yet woefully toothless. But the difference between seventeen and nineteen is a lot smaller than eleven and thirteen, and this time Jane was the one with all the conviction. The righteous cause. The need to win.

"Stop! Stop you're killing her!"

Elle tried to grab his arm. He threw her aside and she landed in the street, and after that he didn't think about her anymore. He only cared about Peggy.

And when Peggy stopped moving, his knuckles had peeled back at the skin, and his front was covered in blood that wasn't his. He didn't listen to Elle's whimpering. He turned in a direction, any direction, and ran.

1944, Viren

A man by the name of Vance walked up ruined streets, eyes cast where the bombs had done their dirty work and left very little for the casual observer to mull upon. His shoe idly kicked a piece of rubble—light and porous, knocking white dust onto the vamp—and it went skittering off into what once might have been the town square.

He had hoped to find something domestic among the rubble, but luck was not kind enough to allow that boon. She had other plans for him, plans that would surely take him to the doors of hell and back, but such was the path he had chosen. Already, as he had arrived at the rendezvous far earlier than he had planned, he'd taken the time to walk by what he guessed to be his old home. It was as unrecognizable as the rest of Viren, but based on where he calculated the town square and the river walk to be, it was near a thing as any, and he'd wanted to see if there was anything worth salvaging. There wasn't of course. Nothing but dust, but old memories. His grandmother had had a clock, one with the softest *tick tick tick* you could ever want, and somewhere in the sharp recesses of stifled boyhood, he'd wanted to find that clock more than anything else.

There was nothing for him here. As he had suspected.

"<An odd place for a meeting.>"

Raul. For he was Raul once again, as Vance was Vance, though they'd played with many names in their long partnership. Vance did not look up. "<It is secluded.>"

"<So's the bottom of a well.>" Raul took a few strides in the direction of the river, subtly trying to insert himself into Vance's line of sight. "<I hope whatever you called me here for is important.>"

Ah Raul, always to business, except when it mattered. "<I used to live here, you know.>"

Raul had a cigarette in his mouth. By his raised eyebrows he didn't know, or he did and simply didn't see how it was relevant. "<Bit of a pit,>" was all he remarked.

Maybe he thought Vance was lying. One didn't just drop that sensitive sort of knowledge after all, not without something of equal sensitivity from the other in return. Every kernel of truth was a weakness, after all. Such was the nature of their relationship.

"<I suppose so,>" Vance hummed. He picked up a scrap of broken wood. It was not the clock. He set it aside.

More rubble. The sounds of Vance dutifully sorting through it all as the minutes ticked by. Usually Raul adored these games of social leverage, but apparently playing with Vance was beneath him. “<Why am I here, boy?>”

“<Because I asked you, I presume.>” Wires, glass. An old lamp perhaps.

“<Are you truly so strapped for productive activities that you can do *this* all day?>” Raul asked. “<It used to be we kept ourselves busy. *I* still happen to have duties in->”

“<-In Luxembourg, yes I know.>”

The corner of his mentor’s eye twitched. “<…In Lyon, actually.>”

Vance turned, leaning against the vague remains of a doorframe. “<No Sir, your business partners are very much expecting you in Luxembourg tomorrow evening.>”

Raul had nothing for that.

“<How long have you been selling to the Germans, Raul?>” Vance pressed. “<A year? Two? Since before we even met? I suppose I was the dupe in the first place to believe a man when he says he’s abandoned his national pride.>”

“<Is that what you think this is? Patriotism?>” Raul chuckled. It had no humor within, only cold and calculation. “<I told you in your very first lesson boy: if you wish to live, you must have no loyalty. None but to yourself.>”

“<I suppose you did teach me that,>” Vance admitted. “<Maybe I should have taken it to heart.>”

He withdrew his pistol from his breast pocket. In an instant, Raul’s was out faster, pointed at Vance’s forehead with no slack in its trigger. Vance raised his eyes. Some part of him had hoped, the tiniest sliver, that there would be some hesitation in the man who had raised him. That maybe Raul would consider for just a moment.

But no. Like the clock, that was too long of a shot to ask for.

Vance cocked his head to the barrel aimed his way. He did not balk, merely continued his motion, flipping open his own chamber and checking that everything as it should be. He snapped it closed and didn’t raise it. “<You taught me many things,>” he said. “<Do not confuse allies for friends. Show weaknesses you do not have and hide the ones you do. People look to the left when they are lying and to the right when recalling a memory. Always check your sidearm before a fight.>”

The pair of eyes under their heavy brow narrowed. Raul squeezed the trigger. The resounding shot cracked the tranquil countryside as the blank was let loose.

Raul lowered his weapon, holding the grim smile of a man who can’t quite find the will to be disappointed. “<I should have known not to give away all my tricks. The mistake all teachers make. It is the role of the young to devour the old.>”

“<You did always say you would never have children,>” Vance recalled.

“<No one should. Children turn out far too much like their parents,>” Raul agreed.

“<Or too different.>”

Vance leveled his pistol and fired.

1953, Bee Cave

“Dammit, god *damn* it,” Dell hissed, his voice not sure if this was a curse or a plea.

The end of the gun was still smoking, and it must have had some mighty fine conduction because all the sudden Dell felt his own temper sparking up just as hot. The dead man on the floor had a big hole in his back, blood getting all over the rug, (*Mom’s* rug, her favorite, been here since even before Dell was born), and all ‘n all being a huge nuisance. It was one of them RED fellas, a Spy maybe, Dell couldn’t tell much by the remains of his uniform.

The Spy’s intended target was cowering in the corner, underneath one of Mom’s shelves. She had a penchant for collecting little ceramic angles, hundreds of ‘em, more cherubs than anything as they loitered about with little garden hoes or knitting needles. Dad hadn’t thrown them out when she died. He hadn’t changed a single fiber in that house.

“God dammit Dad,” Dell repeated. “Get up. Just…shit. Get your sorry ass up.”

Dad did, eyes wide as he stared saucers at the body. His goggles were around his neck. Had he even been in the workshop today? Every damn time Dell came over he was just standing out in the field, staring at nothing. Might as well have come to visit a scarecrow.

Except not this time. Dell’s gut twisted as he realized if he’d been a couple minutes slower, if he’d stopped at record place like he’d wanted to, he’d have arrived to a completely different body lying on the floor.

“What the hell are you doin’ down there?” he demanded of his father. “You were a goddamn *mercenary* for Christ’s sake—some snake busts into your home and you’re cowering on the floor like a rat? Why am I always doin’ this? Why do I gotta break my back to look after a grown ass man?”

“I…” Dad shook his head, but he managed to stop gawking at the body for just a second.

“I can’t-” Dell’s voice cracked. “I can’t keep doing this. You gotta *snap out of it* Dad, or you’re gunna be dead. Find something to work on or, hell, go back to BLU for all I care. Just do something because I am *done* with this.”

Dad was gunna say something. Dell knew it, tensed for it, and despite his harsh ultimatum what he wanted most in the world was his father back. The man who’d brought him up right, the one with *drive*.

But then Dad's mouth fell closed. The moment passed. Dell cradled the remains of his crushed spirit, small and biting in his chest, and pointed his gun at the floor.

"Goodbye Dad," he said, surprising even himself how flat his voice could go. He turned and left, engine on his pickup still hot. Dad might have opened his mouth again as he left, but if he did, he still couldn't find the words to make Dell stay.

1955, Boston

"Why not?" she asked, trying to keep up with Lou's long legs.

"'Cause I said so, that's why."

She was better at keeping up, better every day. She bet that when her brothers were her age they weren't nearly as fast her, and she could've run circles around them all on account'a how much she would run just to practice. Of course, no one would take her on that bet, because the point was that they all *weren't* her age and if they wanted to go someplace without her they just would do it on their stupid long legs.

"Why'd you say so, though?"

"Because shut up, how's that for an answer?" Lou snapped. "God, d'ya ever just *stop talking*?"

She pressed both hands to her face and made a farting noise.

Everything was so dark right now, which was probably the only reason he hadn't ditched her already. Ma would kill him if he left her *baby* alone in the city at night.

(She stuck her tongue out at the thought.)

She wasn't a baby. She could do anything her brothers could do and then some, but they were always up to something, or ditching her, and when they let her play ball with them it always out in left field. No one likes playing left field. That's where you send the loser kids during gym, the ones who only want to eat grass and put their gloves on their hats.

But now she was out! With Lou! And it was exciting, she felt like the world was at her fingertips until a voice from the dark called, "'sup Lou."

It made her jump. It didn't make Lou jump because he was in high school and no one made him scared anymore, but she still saw his face go taut in the streetlight. "Whaddya freakin' want, Ricky?"

Ricky, no one she knew, all long and lanky and a lot older than Lou, crept out of one of the shadows. They were near the park on Norcoss and it was a big open space but suddenly she felt very cramped as he stalked closer to them both. And sure she saw her brothers talking to strangers all the time but…this guy put a bad feeling in her stomach.

“What do you think I fucking want?” The park was a little lower than the street and each of Ricky’s footsteps when *smack* on the concrete stairs. “Three. Fucking. Weeks. I gave you three weeks and you *still* don’t have my money.”

“You’ll get it.” Lou was looking tough. That was good. She felt better when her brothers were tough, except when they were using that tough to wail on her. But right now it was good to see, so good to see she pretended not to notice the way his eyes kept darting about for witnesses.

“Like hell I will Deramo.” Ricky spat. He pushed her aside when he got in Lou’s face, like she was nothing, random bunch of junk that just happened to be watching. “I’m starting to think you’re no good for it. That you’re a *bad investment*.”

She wasn’t used to thinking of Lou looking young, but next to Ricky he looked positively baby-faced. “Don’t start shit, Rick,” he told him.

“You don’t give orders round here.”

“Well I don’t take *your* orders neither.”

And then the knife came out.

She really wasn’t thinking straight when she saw that knife. The only thing she could think of was Lou who was screaming because in a split second the switchblade had gone in and out again, and all the sudden he air was filled with howling as the two scuffled at each other. Lou held Ricky back by his wrist and she just. Didn’t think. There was only the thumping of her heart and the blood in her ears as she ran forward and pushed.

Ricky lost his balance at the top of the park stairs. He went back, back, arms pinwheeling and it might have been funny except then he hit the first step with a lot louder *crack* than he had going up it. It went like that: *crack* all the way down, over and over again, limbs going all which way until he reached the fountain at the bottom of the steps with the loudest *crack* of all.

There was a big bloody print where his head had hit the fountain edge. She could see it from here, how red it was even in the dark. Ricky didn’t move no more.

She glanced at Lou. “He stabbed you,” she noted.

Lou stopped looking at Ricky for the barest of seconds to look down at the knife wound in his side. He put a palm over it, catching red shirt and bloody skin both. “It ain’t so bad.” He paused. “Think Ricky got it a lot worse.”

She looked down at Ricky. Ricky who was definitely a dead body now. “Yeah. Guess so.”

“Yeah,” Lou echoed. “Yo, help me out with this.”

She didn’t get what *this* was until Lou went down and started moving the body, dragging him by the legs and hauling him further into the park. “Where you taking him?”

“Harbor. Hurry up, grab his arms.”

She did. He was heavy, and the walk to the harbor was long, but Lou was bleeding heavy out his shirt so she decided she had no right to complain. (For now. She’d sure get in some good complaining later.) Instead she asked, “why the harbor?”

“It’s uh…shit it’s that *habeas corpus* thing. If they don’t have a body they can’t prove that he was murdered, so they can’t charge you with nothing. Plus, water washes all the fingerprints off and stuff, so they’re less likely to pin me with it.”

She wrinkled her nose. “You? *I’m* the one that got him.”

He looked at her, tough again. “If anyone asks, I’m the one who did it, got it?”

“What? No fair!” She’d saved his stupid life and he wasn’t even going to let her say she’d killed a guy?

“*Yes* fair,” Lou said. “You’re *nine,* I can’t let you- If they thought it was you then-” He took a deep breath. “You just gotta say it was me Jeremy. *Please*.”

She hated when her brothers used her name. It was fine being called kid, or Ma calling her baby, but being called by her first name was Serious.

But she couldn't get quite so worked up about it now; he was worried about her being in trouble. There was going to be *real* trouble and for the first time in her life someone was willing to take the heat for her. It still didn’t seem fair that her first kill wouldn’t count, but she sighed. “Fine. If anyone asks.”

“Which they won’t. Let’s get this chucklenut in there.”

With a great heave, the two of them managed to lug Ricky’s body over the railing and into the harbor below. She’d once heard that corpses float, but that must have been a load of bull because Ricky disappeared as soon as the ripples stopped forming. She looked at Lou.

“Time to get out of here,” he said, but then bit his lip. “Actually, we should try to wash the blood off the fountain first.”

“And deal with that.” She pointed as his shirt.

“…And that, yeah.”

The walk back to the park was eerily silent. She wanted to say something, but for the first time in her life she was at a loss for words. “Thanks Lou,” was all she could manage.

“Yeah, don’t mention it. Literally.”

“I mean. Thanks. For saying you’d do that for me.” She was quiet for a minute. “I know you guys don’t like hanging out with me. I know I ain’t really…”

She didn’t know what to say. She different than her brothers, but Lou was different too right? He let her hang around, and he just said he’d go to jail so she wouldn’t have to. Maybe that was it.

“…It’s alright kid,” he supplied. He put an arm around her shoulder, and she didn’t ask about it anymore.

1957, Chaparral

It shouldn’t have been that easy, he thought. Big bang boom, ‘nother wanker dead, and he was just some idiot sitting at the end of his scope.

They paid him in Australium. Thirty thousand dollars worth. He sat in his hotel room rubbing it between his fingers wondering if this time it would stick.

1963, Cloudcroft

After home was destroyed and they finally accepted they were never getting it back—even if they knew where it was on a map, even if they could name a singular nearby town, they still couldn’t have gone home without the children—they spent a lot of time wandering. Sometimes in the same direction, sometimes different, but it always forward. They could beg off strangers for a little while because they were young and had a face so ripped up by flames that mother-types would dab their why they looked at them, but eventually good will would always run out.

They weren’t sure when they found themself in America. One minute everyone was talking sense and the next they weren’t, and Martia had to adapt or stop getting their scraps. Eventually they knew enough English that when someone started shouting, “work! Work! Seventy cents per hour!” they were learned enough to be intrigued. It was a lot harder to get charity here, as some people were just as likely to yell at them as help, and a lot of the time that yelling was accompanied by insults thrown at their retreating form. They didn’t know exactly what the insults meant, just enough to gather that they were some very nasty names.

Simple, their family used to call them. But they could never quite get that smoke out of their lungs, so now they were *sick* to everyone who heard them cough. *Diseased*, people said, or *ill* but the knew that meant something different entirely.

So a job sounded real good. They’d never had a job before. They got herded into a training room with a lot of other people, watched a short video in English, and then were shuffled off to where there were uniforms.

The first time they slipped on the mask they nearly cried. Was this how people breathed *all the time*? No choking, no gasping, just the little respirators doing all the work as easy, clean air filled their lungs? It was amazing. A miracle. Martia snuck their suit out of the factory at the first opportunity.

Not only did it make breathing easier, but when they wore it, people weren't so cruel to them either. They were still an oddity, and strangers didn't know what to make of them at all, but things were much nicer after they started to wear the suit like a second skin. Everything from inside the suit had a nice color—soft, like rainbows. Sometimes they could have sworn it made the trees look like lollipops.

The license plate factory work wasn't bad either. Martia was in charge of watching the blue fire beneath the molds, making sure it didn't get too hot, that it didn't overheat the metal or get too cool and let it harden. They monitored, and watched, and when they were sure everything was good they'd pull a lever and the batch would go on.

It was not very safe. The video inside the little TV said it was safe, but Martia knew it wasn't, not by the way the fire jumped when there wasn't enough kerosene in the tanks, not by the way the flames were exposed entirely during the few seconds between molds. It was only a matter of time before something bad happened, and when it did, it wasn't Martia who paid.

The stranger should have been wearing a suit. The sign outside clearly said *Required Beyond This Point*, but either the man hadn't seen or he hadn't listened. Martia hadn't even known what he was doing there, if he was a manager or lost or something else entirely, but they never found out.

He tripped. There was a long gap between molds. He caught fire instantly.

"AAAgggh!" he was screaming as they ran for the lever to keep the next mold from running him over. "Help- oh god aaaaaAAAAAA-"

Chofa had asked for help too. They'd left her before she'd started screaming like the man was doing right now, so she'd been a lot more articulate. This man was all vowels, not words or anything, just horrid, horrid noise.

And Martia just stood there.

The fire seemed hungry. Martia knew what hungry was like, and they felt bad for it, bad for the fire. That was silly right? But here they were, just standing here, watching a man lay on his back as he was fried by the fires beneath him. The extinguisher was right over there but… was it their imagination, or was he starting to sound…happy? The screams were almost giggles now, childish in glee, and the rainbows in their vision were much brighter when they looked at the fire. Maybe it wasn't so bad? They reached out a hand next to the thrashing man, cupping their palm, watching the flames lick over it. Painless, but still hot. They wouldn't try what he was doing.

He'd stopped twitching now. Just a black husk on the conveyer belt. They dragged him off by the ankle and sprayed him down with the fire extinguisher. Later they'd have to explain, and make sad, sympathetic noises as everyone stood over the body, but in reality they weren't all too upset. They were pretty sure he'd had a pretty good time before the end.

Chapter 6

1968, Teufort

Scout was up in the rafters. Just Scout now, nobody else knew who she was before she came here, and nobody here was ever going to call her anything but Scout. Well, maybe Louis on both ‘a those accounts, but if he said shit in front of any of the others she’d kill him and then throw him off the side of the bridge so his corpse could float around in all that nasty sewer water. Which was a thing she could do now. She could kill absolutely indiscriminately thanks to this fancy new ‘Respawn’ system, (though she’d wait as long as possible to try it out for herself, thank you very much. She’d gladly help with testing it though, as long as that meant feeding bozos through its apparently immorality inducing maw.)

So yeah, just Scout now. Everyone was fine with her being herself, especially since that front payment she’d gotten had covered everything she had ever wanted an then some. It was worth the money, since while they were all in line listening to Miss Pauling give them the fast version, no one gave her any weird looks. Well, except Louis, but he just rolled his eyes and sighed, like he’d somehow known all along. Pauling said this job was a *by referral only* just to make sure they all knew how fancy it was, and Scout didn’t know what that meant exactly, but what she took out of it was that she was only here ‘cause of Louis. Didn’t mean she had to be grateful.

Speaking of, there was Louis and his pack of friends. Or, Scout guessed, ‘the Spy’ now. Jeez what a name. Couldn’t have picked it himself, could he? No way was he that self-aware.

The others moved underneath her, not looking up as they headed into the base. She got up and stalked them a little, light on her feet, trying to follow the trail of the conversation, until she came upon the last thing she expected: another person.

“Hudda.”

“Christ!”

It was a good thing she whisper-yipped it, otherwise Spy and his buddies might have heard her and looked up. They also might have looked up had she *actually* lost her balance and went falling *splat* onto the concrete below. Wouldn’t that have been a totally-not-mortifying way to try out Respawn for the first time.

“Yo,” she asked the weirdo who’d copied her hiding spot idea. “Wadda ya doin’ up here?”

The rubber-suited…*person* moved their arms in a general motion about the theater of the metal ceiling. “Hudda.”

Watching, it sounded like. Spy had stopped beneath their feet. “Huh. Me too.” She plopped down next to the stranger. “I’m the Scout.”

“Hudda.”

Scout didn't understand that, but she could vaguely remember the titles Pauling had been tossing around. She took an educated guess. "Pyro?"

"Hudda," Pyro nodded.

"You don't talk much, do ya?"

Pyro shook their head. "Hudda."

"That's fine, I can talk enough for both 'a us. But not now though. I wanted to try to hear what the old farts are talkin' about."

"Hudda," Pyro hummed in agreement, leaning between their knees to get a better view.

"…And you can all thank me latter," Spy was finishing, barely glancing at the group before him as he adjusted his cufflink. What a priss.

"Negatory!" a man who could only be the Soldier barked. "You do not do what you do for *thanks*. Grandmas and checkout baggers want *thanks*; we do what we do for the glory of our great nation! America!"

"…Yes," said the big guy next to the Medic. He had a simple name, Scout remembered. Big…Large…Big Gun Guy? Was that it? "Heavy is happy to fight. For America." (Right, right, Heavy, that was it. She knew that.)

"On a personal note," Medic said. "I will also not be thanking you."

"You have a lab the size of your old house!" Spy threw up his hands, flabbergasted. "What could you *possibly* have to complain about?"

Medic sniffed. "Transporting my birds internationally has been the single worst experience of my life."

"…You're joking," Spy said, eyes dead.

"I am allowed."

"Speaking up-" Heavy said.

"Speaking *of,*" Medic corrected.

"-We still must set up roosts."

"And get your library in order too, ja, ja." Medic waved his hand, and addressed the other two. "Be seeing you. Spy. Herr Soldier, it's good that you're not dead."

Soldier stared blankly at him.

"That's *you*, imbecile," Spy told Soldier tiredly.

"Right!" Soldier snapped to attention right away. "Hair Soldier, reporting for duty."

Spy sighed, and in the rafters Pyro and Scout snickered.

“C’mon,” she said, tugging on Pyro’s wrist as she watched everyone head their separate ways. “I wanna see what’s up with the rest of the headcases we’ll be working with.”

She could’ve just left she supposed but, hey, new Scout deserved new friends. She could get used to weirdoes. Pyro looked at the pale hand around their thick rubber glove and nodded, a noise coming from their mask that could only be described as a joyous *coo*.

They followed the Soldier first. He was just as interesting as Scout had assumed, already picking fights with the Demoman over what or was not an appropriate level of inebriation for a warzone. Scout kinda wanted to see if he’d start shit with the Sniper too, but he’d slunk off as soon as Pauling’s speech was done, and Pauling herself had a seemingly endless amount of patience. Scout wondered if she’d be fun to talk to. Certainly she was cute and all, with her little glasses, and her regular sized clipboard…

“You two! What are you doing skulking about?”

“Aw crap,” Scout mumbled.

Soldier marched up to Scout and Pyro’s (admittedly rather crappy) hiding spot, and demanded recompense. “Slinking! Lurking! These are the attributes of a *Spy*, and we already have a *Spy* on this team! You’re not *Spies*, are you?”

“Hudda,” Pyro said, which might have been *no sir* or *eat my shorts*.

“We’re just hanging out man,” Scout complained. “We’re on the team too, got a right to be here as much as anybody.”

“Ridiculous! Women do not belong on the battlefield.”

Scout paused for a moment. And then, even though it was a bad idea because it was clear this dude was jackshit crazy, she began to laugh.

“What is so funny, missy?” Soldier demanded.

“Hah, oh man, n-nothin’ it’s just.” She wiped a tear from her eye. “That’s like a combination of two different things I really wanted to hear but put together in the worst possible way.”

“…Today’s youth are indecipherable and confusing,” Soldier concluded. “If you are going to be fighting in *my* war, for the love of God at least put this on. At least that way you will not be confused for some lollipop sucking babysitter.” As he said it, he took something from around his neck and shoved it into her chest.

“Dude are these your freaking dog tags?” she asked, holding them up, watching them reflect silver in the setting light, showing a miniature of the blue industrial buildings around them. “Don’t you need these or something?”

“Negatory! I have over seventy-two of these! The least I can do is make sure you are well prepared for the horrors of war.” He rounded on Pyro. “And what bout you? Are you a

woman too, private?”

“Hudda,” Pyro replied, which might have been *yes sir*, *no sir*, or, again, *eat my shorts*.

Soldier considered this for a moment. “I have no course of action for this situation. You get a pass. For now! I’ll be watching you.”

To illustrate, Soldier marched backwards into the base, keeping his eyes(?) on Pyro the whole time.

“That was something,” Scout noted. She slid the dog tags around her neck. “I have a feeling things are gunna work out around here, y’know?”

“Hudda.”

“Yeah. You know.”

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