War is the Fourth Planet from the Sun

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War is the Fourth Planet from the Sun

by hanktalkin

Summary

Demo stumbles upon an enemy Soldier, beaten and tortured by the Demoman's team. The right thing to do is leave him. The right thing to do is turn around and pretend he saw nothing at all.

Chapter 1

No man's land just got uglier by the day.

Scarred didn't cover it—mutilated was a better word, one that captured how the wounds upon the earth were still fresh, still a work in progress as bombs and rockets churned up new earth before the dust ever really settled on the old. There must have been buildings here at one point, what with the concrete and rebar exposing themselves to the sky like the ribcage of a giant animal, but that was long before Demoman's time. In the year since he'd joined up, he'd seen the battlefield change guises a dozen times, but never become more than what it was. Which, in Demo's opinion, was a demented place to spin out one's boredom.

The mercenaries on the other side of the border could always be counted on for a fight—those fights being the actual reason Demo had taken a bilateral contract in the middle of New Mexico—but despite the constant threat of death looming on the horizon, your greatest enemy tended to be the long days of absolute monotony. For every hour of skirmish where his blood pumped and he skirted the edges between ecstasy and pure self-destruction, there was a week of emptiness to follow, where RED did nothing but sit on their hands and argue the next optimal teamfight. It was enough to drive a man mad, let alone a demoman, and Demo found himself wandering the badlands more and more if only for the faintest promise of a brawl.

As he crested the top of a crumbling, concrete mound where bits of grass had been foolish enough to try to grow, he reminded himself that he was being outrageously stupid. His wandering about was risking life for no reason, as any man caught alone out here—even one armed with a grenade launcher—was as good as dead if he ran into more than one enemy combatant.

There was also the fact that the BLUs were depraved sons of bitches.

Where RED had the decency to execute its prisoners, Demo had heard enough horror stories about mercs being dragged off to BLU base to be tortured for who knows how long, never to be heard from again. Scout had an endless bouquet of gleeful anecdotes lined up about some lone survivor of a BLU ambush having his teeth ripped out or his thumbs poked with screws until he was *begging* for death. Demo had asked Scout once that if, supposedly, all these poor RED bastards were never heard from again, how Scout knew what had happened to them? All he'd gotten in response was an eyeroll.

Still, it was enough to put a seed of worry in Demo's gut. As he gazed across the urban remains of the desert town, he decided he'd had enough adventuring for one day.

That is, until he spotted an unattended red sentry overlooking the border.

Demo searched his memory, trying to recall if Engineer had said anything about posting up in the middle of the warzone today. It wasn't that uncommon: sometimes small groups of REDs would split off for days or even weeks at a time if the were a point of interest they decided they just *had* to hold. What was odd was that there was no sign of the Engineer himself, just a

dispenser and a sentry in the remains of an exposed two-story. It was dilapidated, yet still the highest point around.

The sentry beeped cheerfully at him as he approached. If something had happened to the Engineer, his sentry would have followed suit shortly after; its presence meant he had to be kicking around *somewhere*. Demo searched, and eventually found what used to be the south wall of the structure, now flattened into a relatively walkable angle and descending into a trench below ground level. At the bottom were Engineer and Sniper, passing a few beers and standing over a bleeding BLU.

It was a Soldier. RED had had a Soldier once upon a time, Demo recalled. He had liked the man, right up until he'd taken a risky rocket jump and ended up with a Sniper's round through his head. That had been in the early days of Demo's deployment. RED had still yet to replace him.

This Soldier was similarly dressed, only blue and sporting a slightly more gelid helmet. He was on his side, retrained, and looking like he'd been through hell and back. If Demo were to guess, the broken leg twisting the wrong way under him was how he'd gotten into this situation in the first place; probably a misaimed jump, likely to avoid the sentry Demo had just walked past.

Demo didn't want to guess about the rest of his state.

"Ain't no body's gunna- *shit*." Whatever Sniper was chattering to the Engineer about was cut short as the two of them finally noticed Demo walking down the hill. Sniper reached for his machete.

Demo rolled his eye. "Burgundy turtle," he repeated the week's code phrase tiredly. "It's me. Now what the bloody hell is going on here?"

Satisfied he wasn't a Spy, Sniper shoved the machete back into his belt and grinned. "Interrogation."

"Interrogation?" Demo snorted bitterly, looking over the injured BLU on the ground not too far away. "What's he going to know that we don't already?"

Demo doubted BLU was giving any more information to its mercs than RED was to its own, and Demo knew that if *he* were ever grilled for information, his captors would be sorely disappointed. Anything of any import was kept in the briefcase, locked tight in the base's intelligence room.

"That's what we're going to find out," Engineer said, also smirking.

"You will get nothing from me." The Soldier spoke up for the first time. His voice was exhausted, full of the same fervor that Demo had heard from his own Soldier in their brief acquaintanceship but missing the polish, and Demo felt a deep pity stir in his gut. It was the contrast between the defiance in his words and the fact that he'd looked he'd been...well. "*Nothing*."

“Shut up,” Engineer said, delivering a quick kick to his stomach. The wind went out of the Soldier and he fell back on his side with a wheeze. “We weren’t talking to you yet.”

“You’re just in time,” Sniper proclaimed cheerfully, either ignoring or delighting in the Demoman’s disgust. “Want one?” He offered up a bottle of Red Shed from the case near his feet, a few empties on a flat plane of concrete the two had apparently been using as a table.

Demo wrinkled his nose. The stuff was so weak it was practically lemonade, and disliked it on principal for the fact that his teammates drank nothing but the stuff. “I’m good,” he said tersely.

“Well hell must be freezing over,” the Engineer chuckled scathingly. “Demo turning down a drink. Sure you’re going to able to walk if you ain’t three bottles deep?”

Yet another reason he left base as often as he could. He couldn’t get an *ounce* of respect from these gits, and he had reason to believe it was more than just his preferred method of sating his thirst. Demo did nothing but purse his lips.

That just made Sniper and Engineer laugh harder. “Ah don’t look like that Demo,” Sniper said. “We’re just having some fun. If you don’t like it, you can head back to base.”

“That’s *Demoman* to you,” Demo said. Nicknames were reserved for people who weren’t reprobates. “And I’ve got a better idea: kill him and be done with it.”

“Ha!” Soldier barked feebly. “Good. At least one of you maggots has some *honor*.”

“I don’t think you quite understand the point of *interrogation*, boy,” Engineer replied darkly. “We don’t get anything out of him if he’s dead.”

“Oh I bet you’re *getting* something out of this alright,” Demo snarled right back, stepping until and Engineer were nose to nose. “And that wasn’t a suggestion. You’re you going to finish with him, go back to your bloody camping nests, and *kill BLUs like you’re fucking supposed to*.”

The goggles shinned menacingly up at him, pitiless black reflections that were as bottomless as the soul they concealed. The moment hung on and on, ice between the two men even as the sun beat down hot on upturned pavement.

“No,” Engineer mused. “I don’t rightly think I will.”

“Fine,” Demo said, turning toward the Soldier. “I’ll do it myself.”

He intended to, fully, and took the first step toward the pitiful mess that had once been a Soldier. Behind him, there was the sound of a safety clicking off.

Demo, who already had his hand on the neck of his scrumpy bottle, reacted with the sharpened reflexes of an overly itchy trigger finger. He spun, catching the Engineer hard in the side of the head with the full force of the bottle, stunning him before he could fully draw his pistol. The glass shattered. In one more motion, Demo thrust the now razor sharp end forward, digging hard into the stomach of a man still reeling.

There was a pause, then the Engineer slumped, falling off the end of the bottle and into a heap. Demo turned to Sniper.

The Sniper, who'd been reaching for his machete, saw the attention fall on him and quickly put up his hands. "No problem here, alright?" he said hastily. "Totally justified, he was 'bout to shoot you in the back."

"Aye," Demo breathed heavily. "That he was." He stepped forward and jabbed Sniper in the neck.

It was messier than the Engineer. Sniper gaped, falling to his knees and scrabbling at his throat as he tried in vain to stop the blood spurting through his fingers. It took him a good fifteen seconds to die, Demo standing over with his twice-bloodied bottle and making sure he wouldn't be getting back up.

When it was done, he was surrounded by two dead teammates and a dozen empty bottles of beer. There was only one set of eyes left on him now, and when he looked at the Soldier they met his own.

The BLU thought for a moment, then spit. "Good fucking riddance." The glob that hit the dirt looked to be more blood than saliva.

Demo exhaled, the full weight of what he'd just done bearing down on him. But he didn't regret it. Some men just don't belong in the world, regardless of whether they were on his team or not. He stepped forward, no bastards to stop him this time.

The Soldier saw him approaching and laid his cheek down on the ground. That was all. No last insults, no bitter words; in fact, before the Soldier closed his eyes, Demo swore he saw the briefest flash of relief.

He hovered over the prone captive, catching in detail the bruising and the way his uniform had been ripped. As if that weren't enough, someone had been breaking his fingers, starting with the thumb and moving all the way down to the pinky, which had yet to be turned into a mass of mismatched bone fragments poking under the skin.

His scrumpy bottle suddenly felt like an obscenely brutal way to go. There was no way to do it neatly, no matter where he shanked it'd still leave the half-dead man's last few minutes in miserable and unsightly. It might even be longer if Demo failed hit an artery. So there Demo was, knuckles clenched firmly around glass neck, trying to force himself to just *do it*. He needed to finish up and get out of here before someone could pin the death of his teammates on him, but to do that he needed complete what he'd set out to do in the first place. His goal to put the damn Soldier out of his misery. To make this morning a fucking hat trick.

"Fucking hell," Demo muttered.

There was slight movement from the Soldier. He looked up at Demo with the barest hint of raised eyebrows beneath the helmet, resignation and confusion.

“Hell,” Demo repeated. Then he leaned down and used the jagged edge of his scrumpy to cut the binding around Soldier’s arms.

“What are you doing RED?” Soldier coughed as Demo tossed the bottle aside and lifted Soldier under his one good arm.

“Do you want to ask questions, or do you want to live?” Demo demanded. “Can you walk if I hold you up?”

“…I think so?” the Soldier admitted.

Demo didn’t have time to explain an entire guilt complex, so he simply said, “alright. C’mon, there’s a dispenser inside the building.”

Hopping up a hill one-footed was not an easy task, even with a sworn enemy holding you under the arm, and the going was so slow that Demo’s jumpsuit turned sticky with sweat as they marched under the noonday sun. At the second story, he finally set the Soldier down, and went inside to deal with the sentry.

“Sorry,” he told the thing as he rolled a few stickies underneath it. Poor machine was just doing its damn job.

When it let out its last agonized whine, Demo helped Soldier up against the dispenser.

The BLU hadn’t taken his eyes off Demo the entire time, trying to uncover what sort of secret motivations had led him to turn on his team just to save the life of a man that would probably kill him as soon as he was patched up. If Soldier found any answers to those questions, Demo hoped he would let him know; *Demo* certainly didn’t have any idea.

When a few seconds passed without the dispenser making any effort at all, Demo said, “ach, hold on.”

He came back with the Sniper’s jacket, and dropped it over Soldier’s front. Recognizing a friendly, the device finally whirred to life. Miracle of science that it may have been, watching bones set themselves back in the right place was still unnerving, each little fracture healing with a sickening snap as a leg became leg-shaped again. Even if dispensers and mediguns couldn’t bring back severed limbs (or missing eyes), they still never failed to amaze him.

Soldier wasn’t as enthralled. He didn’t even notice the magic happening to him, his own flesh moving under skin, and kept his attention still locked unwavering on the Demoman. To distract himself—both from the ogling and from the awful sounds—Demo got up and began to search around.

“Here,” he said, a half hour later, depositing weapons into the lap of the now fit Soldier.

Soldier’s hand darted forward, and Demo tensed, thinking he knew what was about to happen. But instead of reaching for his shotgun, the Soldier instead grabbed the shovel out of the pile, snapping it open and giving it the saddest look Demo had ever seen thrust upon a mêlée weapon. After a moment, he folded it back up again, and got to his feet.

Demo waited. He wasn't sure for what—for Soldier to say something? For the other shoe drop? But there was nothing crashing to meet his expectations, only lolling waves of not-being-murdered as the Soldier clipped his rocket launcher back onto its sling.

"You should go," Demo said finally when it was clear there was literally nothing else to do. "I have to ah…get out of here. Before someone finds them." He jerked his thumb down the hill.

Soldier looked at him, that slightly off-shade helmet as blank as the set mouth beneath it. "Okay," was all he said.

As Demo left down the stairs, back the way he'd come, he heard the unmistakable sound of rocket jump, then another more distant. And then that was that, and he left the horrid place as quickly as he could without outright running.

As unsettled as he felt, Demo had to admit he'd gotten away with it fairly easily.

At the time he'd been so worried about the BLU turning on him and the ethical implications of helping someone who was hell-bent on grinding you and your entire mercenary company to the dirt, he had failed to consider that teamkilling was a far bigger stain against his honor. Even if Sniper hadn't been a part of the equation, *self-defense* wasn't adequate insurance when justice was delivered in trial by mob. If it had come down to his repute against his crimes, RED's opinion of him was so dismal they would feed him to the lions any day of the week. The court of public opinion was almighty when you were among your fellow monsters.

So when someone had eventually stumbled on the bodies, it hit Demo how perilous the situation still might be. He did his best to act surprised as everyone else, and washed his hands extra hard under the cold of the rusted tap, just in case blood was somehow still under his fingernails.

But although the lack of structure outside of their little base meant there was a singular judge, jury, and executioner, it also meant that "detective" wasn't an occupation filled by their mini society. When you find a dead co-worker, you don't even register the question, 'what happened?' You just think to yourself, 'well. damn.'

Within a few hours of discovering the brutalized sentry nest, everyone had cursed the BLU attack and moved on. (Not mourned, just cursed. *Mourning* implied the two dead were popular enough for anyone to be moved by their passing.) Medic had declared it tragic, everyone had shrugged, and then they put in a request to RED for two more class replacements.

Demo was free to go back to thinking about the BLU Solider. He wondered what the man thought of him, if he would explain his miraculous survival to the rest of the team. Demo hoped BLUs wouldn't expect mercy from him now; lobbing bombs at hapless nobodies was one of the only perks of this job. If they were expecting pity, it'd take all the fun out of it. Already he felt like he'd betrayed some sort of trust.

This anxiety manifested itself not on the battlefield, but as a knock on the Demoman's door one night.

"I'm coming, I'm coming- Spy?" Demo blinked blearily at the RED before him. He knew Spy was up at all odd hours, but Demo had never had his sleep disturbed like this before except when they were under attack.

"Demoman," Spy replied evenly. "I am in need of somewhere to stay for the moment. Might come in for a few hours?"

"Er…no?" That was by far the strangest thing he'd ever heard Spy say, considering they barely had a working relationship, let alone one where they would willingly exist in each other's space. "'M sleeping, go away."

Spy fleetingly glanced over his shoulder. "I assure you, it is of the upmost importance that I am *not* in this hallway in the next few minutes. I will owe you a great favor."

It struck Demo in his drowsy state that there was a rusted edge in Spy's voice: he'd gotten into some sort of trouble, the signs written into every inch of his posture. And if it was *Spy's* sort of trouble, Demo wanted no part of it. "I don't want you to owe me any favors. This is- whatever this is, I can't help you." He tried to close the door, despite Spy's foot.

"Fine," Spy frowned. "I will tell you why you should help me, and that is because last week when I discovered the bodies of the Sniper and the Engineer, they had sustained wounds that did not match the weapons of any known BLU class. There were shards of glass in the Engineer's stomach. A bottle of your favorite brand of whiskey was broken and covered in blood, rolled to the bottom of the hill. *Now* might I come in?"

Demo felt like he'd been stuck upside the head. The bottle, how had he not went back and grabbed the bloody bottle? But now he was caught, and all he could do was swallow and nod, letting the Spy into his dingy little room.

"Thank you," Spy said curtly, as though this were a perfectly mutual exchange. "If anyone comes looking for me, you have not seen me."

"*Why* would someone be banging on doors in the middle of-?"

"*Shh!*" Spy held up his hand suddenly. Then, he flickered to invisibility.

Demo halted, and it took him an extra second before he heard it: footsteps coming down the hall, swift and determined. Demo waited with baited breath, hoping that this was all some sort of paranoid miscommunication.

His hopes were dashed with an abrupt knock at the door. "*Herr* Demoman?"

With a sharp intake, Demo reached for the knob only, to freeze as he realized what he was doing. Cautiously, he tiptoed back to bed, then made a much bigger racket as he pretended to roll out and storm to the door.

“Cannee help ya, doc?” he mumbled, doing his best impression of a man who just woke up, even though that man had been chased out of Demo’s consciousness with a broom.

“I am looking for the Spy,” Medic said, a twitch in the corner of his eye. “Has he come by this way tonight?”

“Cannae say ‘e has, nooo,” Demo slurred. He hoped that if acted as drunk and unhelpful as possible, Medic might just go away. It was usually a very successful deterrent. “Why ya lookin’ fer ‘im this time ‘o night, lad?”

“Someone has…tampered with one of my experiments. I was hoping Spy might be…helpful in figuring out what happened.”

“Ach, s’ sorry tae hear tha’ doc.” Demo knew he was laying it on thick at this point, but his heart was beating so fast he hoped his rambling would cover up the sound of its pounding. “Ah hope everythin’ turns ou’ fer ya.”

Medic shot him a look of such open distaste, Demo was shocked to think Medic might honestly look at him like that every time he thought he was too drunk to notice.

“Thank you, *Herr* Demoman. Sweet dreams.”

Demo spent several moments with his ear against the door, making absolutely certain the doctor was gone before spinning back on the room.

“So,” he asked of the now reappeared Spy. “You going to tell me what that was all about?”

Spy removed a cigarette from his disguise kit. He took a long, long draw, but finally Spy admitted, “it is like he said. I interfered with something he was amusing himself with.”

“Now why would you go and do something like that? The man’s a lunatic, he’d going to grind you into little bits and decorate a cake with them.”

Spy smoked for a moment longer. “Several days ago, we captured the BLU Scout. Alive.”

“Oh.” Demo wrinkled his nose. “I didn’t know that.”

“Indeed. Medic wanted it kept quiet, he claimed he could learn more about countering the BLU’s ÜberCharge by examining the Scout.” Spy took another drag. “This was a lie of course. The Scout has been kept in a state of continuous agony as the good doctor proceeds to perform unrelated experiments on him.”

“Jesus…” Demo muttered. “And you, er, *tampered* with that?”

Spy puffed. “…The Scout is no longer in any pain.”

“I see. That’s good then, I guess.” Demoman eyed his unintended guest. “You know, if anyone keeps looking for you, they’re going to take one step in this room and sniff out that you’ve been here.”

Spy looked down at his cigarette and frowned. Sighing, he flicked it away and crushed it under his heel. “I suppose you are right.”

“So what happens now? You just live in my room forever?”

“No, I think a night will do, if only to ride out the initial round of questions, and Medic’s annoyance.” Spy turned to Demo. “However, if I ever need to hide in the future I may ask for your compliance again.”

“Bloody great. Blackmailed until our contracts are up, so glad I have something to look forward to.” Demo glared. “Aren’t worried I’ll kill you just to cover it all up? I’ve carved my way through two REDs already, who’s to say I’ll stop?”

“Unarmed in close quarters? No, I very much think I could take you.” Demo grit his teeth, but despite the nonchalant way Spy was now leaned against the wall, he had seen what those hands could do with a butterfly knife. He might have a chance against the Spy, but very slim one. “Besides, the Sniper and the Engineer? I’m sure you had your reasons. They were not very good men.”

“None of us are good men,” Demo reminded.

“True.” Spy looked at the door, though his gaze was a long way away. “Though some worse than others.”

Chapter 2

Despite the parallels to his own situation, Demo didn't elaborate to the Spy on why exactly he'd done it. It felt personal, private, he wanted hold close to his chest the look in Soldier's eyes as when he'd crossed that second line. Spy didn't need to know exactly what sort of man Demo was.

It was those thoughts in his head that kept him wandering into no man's land again, late at night when he was supposed to be resting up for another tedious day of patrolling RED's territory. Instead, he found himself roving closer to the imaginary border between RED and BLU, the one that never seemed to move despite the alleged gains each side made in one conflict or another. Occasionally one side would make enough ground to mount a full attack on the enemy's home base, but even with all their progress the bases themselves were just too defensible, and it always ended in disaster for the attackers. Demo himself had been recruited shortly after one of these massacres, and now having heard the tales of what went down, he dreaded the day RED attempted another one.

He stopped short on the border. He must have subconsciously been drawn to this place, returning to the scene of the crime that hovered on the horizon, but just skirting the edges of BLU territory. He knew he should head back, but something itched at the back of his mind—he searched the skyline, once, twice.

Then he saw him.

Whatever had brought him here drew him forward again, until there was no doubt he was walking *toward* the man sitting with his back against an overturned car.

The BLU Soldier saw him coming. It was nearly impossible not to, Demo made no move to hide himself as he ambled at a steady pace closer to BLU lands. He could see Soldier tensing his hands around his rocket launcher, and Demo realized he was doing the same, flicking his thumb outwards against his sticky launcher's trigger. Forcing himself, he managed to get his hands to steady.

"Probably shouldn't have come back here, mate," Demo noted as he stepped into speaking range. It felt again like some sort of invisible barrier he had crossed, still on his own side but now dangerously close to the BLU.

"Could say the same about you," Soldier said. "Take it they didn't court martial you then?"

"Nope. They didn't."

The air between them was static charged, despite the lack of proper electricity for miles. Demo found he didn't know what to say, how to bring closure to the situation he'd found himself in.

"You've been coming out here since then?" he wondered aloud.

The Soldier looked past him, at the building where it'd gone down. Demo saw him absently rub his left hand. "…Yeah."

"Well. Guess whatever you got I caught too." With that, to the shock of the Soldier across from him, he sat down on a piece of convex concrete that provided the perfect stool.

"Are we not killing each other then?"

Demo shrugged. "Hey, you're a BLU on your side of the battlefield. They don't pay me to go chase you down unless I got a reason to."

"…That why you didn't kill me before?"

Grunting, the Demoman massaged his face. "That…I don't know about that one. I think when I saw you I just…figured you'd had enough, you know?"

"I was ready," the Soldier stated, and it was so straightforward it twisted something in Demo's gut. "We've all got to die someday, RED."

"Hey, I know that better than anyone, lad," Demo scoffed. "Keeping that thought between my ears every day of my damn life. But the *way* it ends should matter too. I always hoped I'd got out with a kablooie, taking as many two-eyed gits down with me as I could, a good one-liner too if I can mange. I don't want to die to a backstab, or slip on some rocks and fall down one of these damn trenches."

"They are a hazard," Soldier nodded sagely. He gazed again to the building barely visible on the horizon.

"So that's how you should look at the ending. But the time before the ending…ach well I guess everyone's always worrying about that part anyway." Demo rubbed his face again. "Ach, look at me, discussing the meaning of life and crap to the enemy. Sorry sack of shites my team is if I'm seeking *you* out for company."

"Ha! You think your team is bad? Our Sniper collects peoples ears."

"Eugh," Demo recoiled, making a mental note to avoid the man at all costs. "Can't compare to the lunatics rooming with us, though. I just found out that our Medic was keeping the BLU Scout open on a slab for days, just running experiments on him. Man's a nightmare."

"Scout's alive?" Soldier perked, and all the warmth went out of the conversation.

Demo had honestly forgotten who he was talking to for a moment there, how that news might hit different in present company. Not to mention the fact that anything behind base doors was classified, yet he'd just offered up the information free of charge. Loose lips sink ships indeed.

But hell, he couldn't half ass the news now. "Er…no…I'm sorry. He was in a lot of pain and Sp- someone. Put him out of his misery."

“Oh.” The Soldier visibly deflated. “I understand. I’d hoped…guess it’s just a shame that someone didn’t give him the same chance you gave me.”

“I’m sorry.” Then, because it seemed the right thing to say, Demo asked, “were you two close?”

“With Scout? No, he was a damn hooligan, he just-” Soldier stopped sharply before explaining, “evil has always lurked in the hearts of REDs. It is our god-demanded American duty to stamp out wickedness where it arises unchallenged.” What looked to be the windup to a full-throated patriotic speech died, softly concluding with, “I just think evil might lurk other places too.”

“…Aye. You’re right about that much.” Demo thought for a moment. “Always lurked in RED, huh? Is evil dancing around in my heart too?”

“Of course,” Soldier declared. “That is why we must fight! And that is why we must win!”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night, BLU.” Demo uncorked his scrumpy bottle. “Me, I always figure that in professions like ours, there’s no use convincing yourself the other side is any better or worse than the men next to you. They blow up just the same, and when it comes down to it, had the dice been rolled differently you could have wound up on a different side all together. It’s all who’s hiring, who’s paying, and who needs killing.”

Demo thought Soldier might have something contrarian to say to that, but to his surprise the BLU remained silent. When the Demoman finished his swig, he looked over at Soldier to see the man staring at the stars in silent contemplation.

“You are-” the Soldier grunted, “-good to talk to, RED.”

“Tavish,” Demo said. When Soldier just looked at him, he repeated, “name’s Tavish. If you’re going to call me anything.”

“Tavish,” Soldier said, trying out the name on his tongue. It took another moment, but he looked back at the stars. “I will call you that.”

Demo knew he shouldn’t go back. Once was a mistake, twice was foolhardy, and three times was just plain suicide, or so every logical part of his brain told him. Yet, the logical part of his brain was strapped into rocket seat like poor Poopy Joe, completely divorced from the controls as the pull of gravity brought him right back to his doom.

The Demoman’s doom was the spot on the border, far from the electric spotlights that kept areas in the badlands navigable, squashed between two superpowers that were equally as likely to kill him.

Soldier swallowed—Demo could see it as he got closer, the bob of his Adam’s apple. Likely wondering if the RED appearing a second night in a row had crossed the line from happenstance into design.

“Brought beer,” Demo said, dropping the box and shoving it over with his foot. There was a subconscious aversion to the border, as though it might shock him like an electric fence.

Soldier plucked out a bottle. “Red Shed,” he derived the name off the label. “Sounds terrible.”

“It’s ungodly,” Demo agreed. “But it’s cheap and we have it in buckets. I’m not digging into my personal whiskey, I don’t like you *that* much.”

The BLU laughed. For some reason that caught Demo off guard, like he’d never heard another human being do that before. And, well, maybe that wasn’t too far off, since it’d been an awful long time since he’d been met with a laugh that was actually *happy* instead of filling the nearest bystander with dread.

“So, what do you think?” Demo pressed as Soldier took his first sip.

“You know,” Soldier said, swirling it. “Tastes a lot like Blu Streak.”

“Which is?”

“Horrendous.”

And if Demo was surprised to hear uncompromised laughter come from someone else, he was even more shocked to feel it reverb from his own chest.

“Ah,” the Demoman grinned. “Just like RED and BLU: same pile of shit, different coat of paint.”

“That goes for the men fighting for them too,” Soldier remarked.

“Ah. So you’re adopting my philosophy then?”

“It makes sense I guess. But I don’t know. Can’t be all right. Things aren’t just a bunch of random dohickies running about smashing into each other. We’re here for a purpose, and that purpose is the kick the crap out of each other.”

“If things had been a bit different, we might have been on the same team,” Demo pointed out.

“If we were on the same team, I’d be dead.” Soldier sipped his beer. “Or worse.”

Demo, who’d had his eye locked on the out of reach mercenary this entire time, found he had to look away. “Ach, don’t say that. Maybe ah…someone else would have found you. Got mixed up instead of me. It’s not like you were far from the border.”

Gravely, Soldier clarified, “if it had been much longer, I would rather have been dead.”

“Oh. I- ah. Oh.” Demo swallowed thickly. Then, because he felt it needed to be asked, he said, “are you doing alright? After...what they did.”

Soldier clenched a fist around his bottle, staring down the neck like it had the secrets to the universe. “You should ask me something different.”

Demo could take the hint. They lapsed into silence, stilted, tense, still not sure what the fuck either of them were doing, how big the hole they were digging themselves into would get.

“I will continue to kill REDs!” Soldier barked suddenly. “If you think after this I will not-”

“I know,” Demo said sadly, wondering if he had traded another year of Soldier’s life for the end of a colleague’s. “I wouldn’t ask you to give up the whole paycheck for one bad day. And killing people for money is what men like us were put on God’s green Earth to do. Well, God’s brown barren wasteland to do.”

“You will not guilt me!” Soldier snapped.

“I wasn’t trying to!” Demo said. “We only leave this blasted war one in one direction. Either RED wins or BLU wins, but either way, that doesn’t happen until the other team is completely off the map. Unless *you* happen have to have a stipulation in your contract that allows you to get cold feet?”

Soldier’s expression gave him answer enough. The BLU was staring at him like he was seeing him for the first time, as though the inevitability of lonely, grueling warfare had just set in.

The long, melancholy quiet reared its ugly head again, and the two of them split the last of the awful beer in silence.

“They offer you a bonus for winning?” Soldier spoke up when it had almost seemed total.

Demo cracked his neck, sore from leaning against a wall of solid stone for so long. “Aye. Enough to buy a mansion in Granada.”

“Us to.” Soldier was looking up at the stars again. Demo noticed he did it quite a lot; and he probably had the right of it. It was so much better to look up and pretend you were floating away than coming to terms with the desert around you. “I hope one of us lives long enough to get it.”

“Aye, I’ll toast to that.” But Demo realized his bottle wouldn’t make it across the gap to its sibling, and he scooted the last few filthy feet to reach over the border.

This, somehow, felt like the most dangerous thing he’d ever done. The space between him and the BLU narrowed to nothing, the barest inches as Soldier hesitated, then raised his own beer in a clinking of glass. It lacked *umph*, and their fingers more brushed than collided.

It was the closest Demo had been to the other man since they had met, and he noticed so may things he hadn’t before: the slight underbite, the light skin turning tanner further from the helmet, the gentle scar all the down from his chiseled jaw into his shirt. It all hit him, and he drained the last of the alcohol. He didn’t return to a safe distance.

“Are you sure you don’t want a pillow or something?” Demo asked as he propped himself on an elbow. Having an invisible man skulking around his room in the middle of the night made it difficult to slide off into a dreamless sleep, and it made him twitchy enough that he tried to fill the silence.

“A Pillow? Do think about that for a moment,” Spy replied from somewhere in the dark. “If someone were to enter your room and find a solitary pillow on the floor, what would be their first presumption?”

Demo rolled his eye, despite knowing full well Spy wouldn’t see it. Spy had been commandeering his room on and off for months now, and although he wasn’t gracious about it, it was enough like having a houseguest that Demo had grown some sense of propriety.

“Fine. But one of these times you should take the bed or something.”

“How gentlemanly,” Spy hummed. “But again I must point out, if someone walks in to see you sleeping on the floor next to a perfectly serviceable bed, they will most certainly put two and two together.”

“No one’s going come in here Spy,” Demo huffed. “The door’s locked, Medic never asked for you again, and I got a spare ‘nade launcher tucked under the bed.”

“Concerning.”

“What I’m saying is, nothing’s going to happen to you while I’m here.”

“Again, very chivalrous,” Spy said with the air of a wearing conversation. “But as I have said, I am able to handle myself without your intervention. You would be more a hindrance than an asset.”

“Oh fine!” Demo finally snapped. “Useless bloody Demoman, haven’t heard that one before. You know what, forget it.”

With that, he rolled over to confront the splintering wood of the wall, tired of talking to the void.

Spy wavered, oddly penitent. After a moment, he assured, “I do appreciate your help Demoman. My efforts here would not be progressing nearly as quickly without your assistance.”

“Wouldn’t be helping you if I had a choice,” Demo reminded him with a grumble.

“…Of course.” This second bout of silence stretched longer, and Demo could hear the telltale sign of someone hesitating before a confession. “Demoman, since I am already in your confidence regarding your secret altercation on the border, might I ask: what actually happened?”

“You can ask all you like.”

Demo waited in silence for Spy to take the hint, but when he didn't relent, Demo sighed, pulling the blanket tight over his shoulders.

"Same as you. Found them...playing with their food."

"Ah," Spy replied softly. As if that explained everything. Maybe it did.

He didn't need to know anything more than that. The nightly forays into no man's land were for Demo's knowledge alone, him and the BLU Soldier. Just as he'd feared, a bad habit had become a pattern, serendipitous, and comfortable. Most shockingly of all, it revealed how much he had been missing, that somehow in all this he'd forgotten how to just shoot the shit. Talking to Soldier over a carton of beers was so much *easier* than it should have been, certainly better than the half-scrounged small talk most of RED tended to give him before fleeing his company, and *leagues* above talking to an ineffable man who was blackmailing him while in his pajamas.

It was an especially distinct comparison when Spy kept flicking his lighter like that. At least, Demo thought it was a lighter, with that soft *click click click*, but the longer it went on, the more Demo realized it wasn't quite snappy enough, that the gentle clicking was more like dice being rolled across the table.

"Demoman," Spy cut in suddenly, and the clicking stopped. "May I show you something?"

Demo hesitated, a certainty that he didn't want to know bearing down upon his shoulder blades, but with no way to justify his intuition he said, "what, exactly?"

The sound of Italian leather shoes clipped over to the wall, and the single light switch in the room. Demo turned over to see Spy in the processes of manifesting, substantializing himself underneath the blub. He had entered Demo's room already cloaked, so when Demo let him in he hadn't known that he bore singe marks on his sleeves.

Or a briefcase in his hand.

"Holy shite," Demo gaped, swinging his legs off the side of the bed. "Is that the intelligence? That's- that's supposed to be down in the vault." Demo whipped is head around in paranoia, suddenly afraid a BLU would materialize and snap the unprotected intel right up.

"That it is," Spy said, depositing it on the nightstand and disturbing the empties from their own slumber.

"Why do you *have* that?" The cogs rotated in the Demoman's mind. "And how did you get it?"

"Through tremendous effort. Many days of studying the vault, more wasted exploring possibilities of tunneling underneath. In the end, espionage is my profession Demoman, let us leave it at that." Spy paused, hand resting comfortably on the beveled corner, his black gloves having never lost contact with its blushing surface. Languidly, his thumb caressed over the number dials. "…Would you like to what is inside?"

Demo's breath caught in his chest. Forget teamkilling *this* was a crime tantamount to treason. If this intel fell into the enemy's hands, RED was as good as dead, the whole war up in smoke if a competent Spy got hold of building plans or mercenary profiles. Demo looked down at the shiny little case. There was probably a file on him in there.

His self-preservation still strapped to that rocket ship, he nodded.

Spy scrolled down to the code, then the second release on top. Then the lid popped open, revealing inside…

Nothing.

Sheets and sheets of blank paper, some of which floated out at the briefcase's opening like they'd been spring-loaded by a jack in the box. Demo leaned over and lifted out a sheet. "Invisible ink?" he asked.

"I have put it through every rigor in my extensive catalogue of techniques, and was able to find no such hidden messages," Spy refuted. "No, I think it is as it appears: this war is far more than we've been lead to believe. Or, more accurately, far less."

"I…" Demo shifted through the papers, feeling for a secret bottom, anything that would prove something to him.

"I had my misgivings before joining, of course," Spy continued, watching the display in front of him. "They did not abate when I touched boots down, so to speak. So, I set about to see if I could find my own answers."

"I don't get it," Demo said, shaking his head. "Why go through all the trouble?"

Spy stepped away fluidly, making a move to light a cigarette and then thinking better of it. Instead, he held the unlit smoke between his fingers and gestured dismissively. "Tell me, who is the longest severing mercenary here?"

"Er…Medic I think," Demo guessed, not sure where this was going. "'Round about three years he's said?"

"Three years." Spy rubbed a thumb against the filter. "Yet, when he first was recruited, he himself was a replacement for the old Medic, and joined a team of which, by virtue of our being here, not a single man has survived to this day. They have each been replaced, one by one, like a willfully homicidal ship of Theseus."

"…So who's to say the same won't happen to us? To all of us?" Demo finished the thought.

"Precisely." Spy turned on him. "RED does not *want* us to finish this war, they want just enough people here to keep a stalemate while they continue on with whatever their real goal is. There is no winning against BLU, that carrot of a victory bonus is never coming. We are all going to die out here."

Demo looked at Spy, then back into the briefcase, futility settling in like a hunk of uncooked lamb in his stomach. Slowly, he began to gather the papers, and tuck them back in their nest.

“I, of course, am attempting to avoid that,” Spy finished, almost falteringly. Demo ceased his shuffling. “I have been able to send a few discreet correspondences outside the badlands, and gotten in contact with various parties that do not mind angering RED and BLU. They paint a pretty picture: transport off the battlefield, new identities when RED eventually comes looking. For a hefty price, of course. In this case, information.”

“Well, they’re going to be right pissed about this then.” Demo indicated the briefcase.

Spy scoffed. “No, not that. What they desire is immensely more valuable than that detritus. And more closely guarded.”

Demo couldn’t imagine something more guarded than a three-foot titanium vault, but he had more pressing concerns. “Spy, why are you showing me all of this?”

Again, Spy faltered. At first, Demo thought he might brush him off yet again, but after a hesitant pause Spy said, “it would be easier on me if I were not alone in this endeavor. When I first asked for your help, it was not only because I thought I had decent enough blackmail to twist your arm: you are hardly the only person on base who falls into that category. Rather, I looked at all my possible options, weighed the pros and cons of every murderer in this building, and decided you were the one with the most integrity.”

“Ph,” Demo huffed out. “Damned by faint praise.”

“Still.” Spy adjusted his tie. “Let me start again. I believe I may need assistance, true assistance, in the near future. An accomplice that I can depend on, instead of one made under duress. If you help me Demoman, I will see to it that you are reserved an additional seat on the flight out of here.”

The swirling whirlpool Demo had been descending into slowed for the first time since Spy had popped that case open. It was just too much to admit that he’d managed to screw himself over, that the endless days of nothing happening weren’t normal, that his gut had been right to begin with. And now Spy was offering him a way out.

It seemed to good to be true. And, in Demo’s experience, things that were too good to be true often were.

For one, he had no way to verify the briefcase Spy had brought him was actually real, he’d never seen it in person before. Additionally, to introduce an absolutist worldview and then present yourself as the only option was a classic manipulation tactic, Demo wasn’t stupid.

“It sounds like I might wind up dead just for hearing you out, whether I help you or not,” Demo accused. “Why tell me? Now that I know, I’m just as dead as you!”

“You were already dead, my friend,” Spy said sadly.

Despite his still mounting doubts, it twisted something in Demo’s chest. ‘My friend’ sounded so damn genuine that it didn’t really matter if it was an act, it still provoked a pang of regret. “Spy I…”

When Demo didn’t finish, Spy clenched his hands. “I understand. It is a lot to digest.” He walked over and snapped the lid of the briefcase shut so powerfully, Demo jumped. “Perhaps sleep on it.”

He didn’t give Demo a chance to respond, flicking off the light switch and, by the faint sound of air warping, cloaking himself again. Demo was once again left staring at the darkness, more uncomfortable than he had been. As he laid down, he thought that if sleep wasn’t coming before, it certainly wouldn’t be now.

“Are you alright?”

The question snapped Demo to a present of intoxication and uncomfortable stone, the Soldier looking at him with concern.

“I’m fine,” Demo said. Then thought for a moment. “Actually, fuck that. Everything’s fucking terrible.”

The pivot startled Soldier, who—if Demo was remembering the past few minutes through his haze correctly—had been talking about a new rocket launcher he’d assembled out of scraps. Not about this whole shitshow. Not about two opposing forces that kept pulling them apart at the seams.

“Bloody pointless is what it is. And not just the regular sort of pointless—I’ve been hauling *that* for thirty-five years.” Demo took a swig of his scrumpy. “Lord Almighty’s gone downright *vindictive* against me, I’ll tell you. Wasn’t enough I’m stumbling through life as a bloody monster, a goddamn freak no matter what I do, but even at the micro level it doesn’t matter. Nothing *fucking* matters.”

A wheeze, too dry to be a sob and too pained to be a gasp, escaped him. He had not come here to break down, had been warding away the panic like a man with a flaming torch as he beat back wolves. But his handle on it all had slipped fully, and he dropped his head into his hands.

And once he did that, it was only a matter of time before the alcohol made him weep offensively, no way of hiding it no matter how far he buried his face. He wept like he hadn’t in years, not since he’d taken steps to break the habit, exhausted from pitying stares for a man alone at the bar.

A night was all it had taken for Demo to concede that Spy was right. This place was as remote as they came, if he made a break for it, he’d just as likely die in the Mojave as here in the warzone. And Spy’s offer…even if freely given, how could he go ahead and take the word of a man called *Spy*?

There was no way out of this one. He’d gone and gotten himself involved in something way over his head at the promise of a few extra zeros. God he was so *stupid-*

An arm dropped over his shoulders.

Demo jerked, the unfamiliar yet distantly recognizable touch of another human being shaking him from his stupor. Soldier was next to him. Soldier was next to him on the *RED side of the battlefield*, patting him uncertainly with his free hand.

“There there, Tavish,” he grumbled, as though the words were just as foreign as the touch was to Demo. “Uh…do not cry?”

Demo blinked away the bubble of tears that had congealed in his eye, slowly recognizing that he had been called by his name. “How did-? Oh. I forgot I told you that.”

Soldier’s neck arched slightly. “That’s how I’ve been thinking of you. Uh, thinking of you *as*,” he corrected quickly. “Should I not have?”

“No, fuck that, you keep calling Tavish as much as you damn well please.” Tavish wiped at his eye with his sleeve. “I’m so *sick* of being the Demoman. Before this I just to just got to be DeGroot, *a* demoman, but once you get out here that’s all they let you bloody be. They take away the little of what’s left of you until all that remains is the stupid class.”

The anger helped a little, stopped the tears from flowing. He could now feel more precisely the weight across his shoulder, the Soldier trying in vain to sooth him.

“Okay Tavish,” Soldier said softly. Then, after a great consideration, he said, “my name is Jane.”

“…That’s an interesting name laddie,” Tavish told him, still out of sorts enough that he didn’t have much more to say.

Soldier had crossed the one barrier they had left, the line in the sand where they passed bottles and swapped stories. There was a BLU in RED’s territory and those pathetic little rules were still pouting and stomping their feet that he should *deal* with that.

“Shit Jane,” he lamented. “I don’t want to do this anymore.”

Soldier stiffened beside him. “There is a war on, private.”

“Ha. Sure is.” Tavish swilled. “I don’t want to kill any more of you bastards. I don’t know- I don’t know if I even want to go back to doing normal mercenary work I’m just- I’m just tired. I want to go home.”

“Dear god man, do not say crap like that!” Soldier jostled him. “You just need a furlough. Maybe…RED will let you submit a request, and then when you’re back in your right mind, you’ll be back blowing up maggots to kingdom come!”

The fact that he didn’t even acknowledge he would be one of those maggots sank Tavish’s heart into his stomach. He was arguing this with the wrong person. For all intents and purposes, Jane *was* Soldier. Trying to imagine a life without war would be like asking a canary not to sing.

Or, Tavish supposed, like asking an eagle not to fly.

“Sure. Maybe.” Tavish knew there would be no solace here. He’d joined this profession of his own free will, let it change him inside and out, and he couldn’t tear the roots out just by wishing. “God help us.”

Chapter 3

Only just recently did RED remember the Demoman was meant to be a defensive class.

Tavish blamed the new Engineer, who built his sentry practically inside the base, so cautious that any BLU who actually made it this far would certainly be pumped full of lead by Sasha before the sentry got in edgewise. Not that Tavish was sober enough to say anything about it. He wasn't in the business of telling other people how to do their jobs.

What he *was* in the business of was, apparently, helping Engineer babysit his nest. Engie insisted that sticky traps had a use beside jumping, and that use was hiding them in damn near every corner of RED base, just on the off chance some suicidal idiot mounted a push there.

Tavish couldn't find the grounds to argue. While he'd gotten used to spending his days doing whatever the hell he felt like, he did, technically, have a job to do here.

It also helped that the Engineer was, well, *nice* about it. He seemed genuinely excited for BLU to try and take their nigh-impregnable tower, just so they could, 'send those city-slickers running for the hills'. He greeted Tavish jovially with a slap on the back whenever he came in from his rounds about the ramparts, and was blindly optimistic about collecting that final bounty when they ran BLU out of the badlands.

It was hard to be irritated with him. Tavish tried to remember if he had been like that when he'd gotten his first gig, so damn excited just to blow some aresholes up that he didn't notice the vinegar running through every crack in his associates. If he had, it must have been a long time ago. He'd arrived at RED already as he was now: worn, wise to the idea that he was an investment with diminishing returns.

The new Sniper, on the other hand, was somehow worse than the old. It was hard to put his finger on, but something in Tavish's gut just *writhed* around him, and based on recent events Tavish wasn't in the market for ignoring his instincts. There was just something in the way the man *leered*. Like he was just one moment away from going feral.

So his time roaming the battlefield was relegated to nights, and his days were spent sitting with Engie, only getting up to stretch his legs.

Which was where Spy found him, gripping his arm with all the urgency that his smile did not convey. "Demoman, a word?"

"What is it?" Tavish lowered his voice. "Shouldn't we be having this conversation back at the room?"

"There's no time," Spy belied. "As long as you keep your expression *merry*-" The word came out through a fog of heavy connotation, "-we are just two friends having a conversation."

Tavish did his best to steady his breath, preparing for the worst. "What's going on, Spy?"

“We need to act quickly,” Spy said, as though talking about the weather. “Unforeseen events have forced me to move our timetable ahead drastically. To today.”

“As opposed to when?” Demo asked tersely. He didn’t remember receiving a memo on what exactly this grand plan was.

“Some time in the indeterminate future,” Spy waved away. “The important part is we must act before tomorrow, or we may not get another chance. I know you had your doubts, but you must decide if you wish to escape with me, and you must decide *now*.”

Tavish swallowed. He thought of the foolish, naive Engineer, who’d probably be humming contentedly away until he got himself killed. He thought of the enemy Soldier, who was *aiming* to get himself killed, no mater what Tavish did to stop him.

Then he thought of his mother, who he hadn’t written to in months, who the last thing he’d said to was that he was heading out for another job.

“Alright Spy,” he choked out. “You got me.”

Despite the practiced expression Spy had ironed his face into, the relief was overflowing in those blue eyes. “Thank you. You have turned this from a slim chance into nearly good odds.”

“Well doesn’t that put shine to my shoes,” Tavish grumbled. “What do you need me to do?”

“A distraction. Anything loud enough to draw the base. I will do the rest.”

Tavish already had the parts of an idea forming in his head. “Aye. I can do that.”

“Thank you,” Spy said, with desperation tingeing every inch. His composure was almost gone, and then he repeated, “thank you.”

And he leaned up and pressed his lips against Tavish’s.

It was shocking how soft they were, how little they tasted like cigarette smoke. Tavish barely had time to register them before they were gone, along with the Spy and the fading call of, “good luck.”

Tavish stood there, struck as still as if he’d been backstabbed. It was a long, long time before he moved again, and then it was only because when Spy had kissed him, he’d slipped something heavy into Tavish’s hand.

It was a pocket watch, old and faded where countless thumbs had worn its center to a brilliant shine, all while the edges were bronzed with age. Tavish clicked it open.

Inside was a note:

North most side of no man’s land, 1645, January 8th.

A date and a time. Tavish inhaled. He had a date that would take him out of here, forever, and he forced himself to control his breathing. Aggressively, he managed wrangle the scrap of hope that dared to rise in his chest; he had a job to do after all.

At request, the explosion rocked every inch of the base, collapsing in a sonic boom that shattered windows. Immediately, he heard Soldier's, "WE ARE UNDER ATTACK!" reverberate nearly as loudly.

Soldier, Pyro, and Scout rushed on to the scene of the crime within seconds, Heavy lumbering after them with his gun spinning. Instead of being greeted with a breech in the wall and the mercenaries of BLU team pouring through, they instead found their inebriated demoman, holding a bottle of scrumpy while staggering over a scorched hole in the courtyard.

"Ach, sorry 'bout that lads," the Demoman slurred. "Case 'o nitro was a wee bit slipperier than ae thought."

"Nitro!" Scout practically screeched. "As in nitro-freaking-glycerin? What the hell is wrong with you man!?"

"I WILL TELL YOU WHAT IS WRONG WITH HIM," Soldier bellowed. "HE IS A DRUNKEN WASTE OF SPACE THAT IS GOING TO GET US ALL *KILLED*!"

"All hell," Engie said, finally arriving on the scene, likely because he debated so long on whether to leave his nest or not. Similarly, Sniper crept into view, looking down from the third story to watch the mess unfold.

Despite every eye on the building bearing down on him, Tavish gave his best, 'what are you gunna do?' expression.

Soldier was not having it. He stormed down and grabbed Tavish by the lapels. "LISTEN HERE YOU INCOMPETENT ENGLISH SISSY, IF YOU *EVER* SOUND A FALSE ALARM AGAIN, I AM GOING TO TAKE YOUR FRILLY LITTLE WINE BOTTLE AND SHOVE IT SO FAR DOWN YOUR THROAT IT WILL TOUCH THE PLACE WHERE YOUR LIVER *USED* TO BE."

The part of him that still had spine wanted to snap out of it, shove the Soldier off him and sock him one in the jaw for good measure. Drops of spittle flew in his face as Soldier hurled vulgarities, and Tavish couldn't help but miss the old RED Soldier. He had been brutish, but in an almost charming way, one where you thought he was more a danger to himself than to the people around him. Tavish would trade anything to have him here instead.

(He would trade anything to have Jane here.)

Soldier kept going. Tavish hoped this was taking long enough that Spy could do whatever he was up to, because he didn't want to spend a minute more shouldering the burden of scapegoat. "Said ae was sorry," he muttered.

Soldier made a noise of disgust, and dropped him. It was forceful enough that even if Tavish weren't playing the drunken fool, he wouldn't have been able to catch himself, and he fell so hard enough against an overturned bench that it hurt his ribs.

"Un-fucking-believable," Scout said, and turned to go. The others slowly followed, one by one, shooting him looks that were pitiful at best and repulsed at worse.

Finally, Heavy scoffed, and Tavish was left alone with the crater he had fathered. This was him then. He had, after all, become the freakish drunkard they all thought he was, and would probably prove them right again now and in the future. He scooted himself against a wall and took a drink.

No one had wanted him around, so he'd left for the border early. He was shocked to see the BLU Soldier already there, and told him, "well, aren't you a sight for sore eye. How early do you actually get out here?"

Soldier shrugged. "Whenever I finish my patrols."

"Don't you write up your own patrols?"

"Affirmative."

"Lucky you," Tavish said, sitting down in his usual place. Soldier had never come to his side again, and Tavish had done his best not to hyperventilate anymore and give him a reason to. Something about that night had felt dangerous, and not in the way he normally felt doom poking at him all the time these days. "All the fun of war, but all the joy of being your own boss."

"Negatory! This here is still a military outfit!" Soldier puffed himself. "I just happen to occupy every rank."

"Oh, my mistake Private-Sergeant-Major-General Jane," Tavish chuckled.

"You forgot Corporal."

"Bollocks your Corporal."

"You will do no such thing to my Corporal!" Soldier said aghast.

That got an off guard snort from Tavish. He was amazed how quickly the ordeal from earlier that day was fading from his mind after just a few short minutes with Soldier. Like water draining from a barrel. "Do you even know what bollocks means?"

"I connot be expected to know every crazy Scottish word that comes out of your mouth."

"You're one to talk!" Tavish laughed. When Soldier still glared at him, he said, "ah don't give me that look. Besides, you won't have to worry about me and my crazy words much longer."

"…What?" Soldier blinked.

Working on the cork of his first scrumpy of the evening, Tavish said, “I think I might die soon.”

“Do- do not die!” Soldier yelped so sharply Tavish stalled.

“I’m not *trying* to,” Tavish said, not thinking he would need to clarify that. “Things have just been getting worse and worse over at RED, and I don’t think I’m going to live to see the end of it.” Or he might make it out of here, might be one of the few to escape. But that hope was still too fragile, he wouldn’t nurture it just yet.

“Oh.” Soldier sat rigid for a moment. “When you said…I thought you were going to…”

“…Ah.” Tavish found he couldn’t look at the Soldier, and instead drank while staring at the BLU wilderness. “Nah. Not this time around.”

Silence lapsed between them, and the faint pink of sunset brought out the first stars of the evening. With his head turned like this, Soldier was nestled in Tavish’s blind spot, so it was hearing rather than seeing the man get to his feet that made Tavish turn his head.

Haltingly, Soldier crossed the barrier once more, and sat at Tavish’s side. “I do not want you to die,” he all but whispered. “Ever.”

It wasn’t fucking fair. Soldier wanted too much from him, he wanted him not to die but he also wanted him not to leave. “We all have to die sometime, lad,” he said sadly.

“That is quitter talk, maggot!” Soldier huffed. “I will make sure you live forever! I will break whoever kills you, do you hear me?! If they so much as *think* of killing you I will take that part of their brain that thought that thought *and shove it up their ass*!”

Tavish started laughing. He started laughing so hard scrumpy came out his nose, and then Soldier had to slap him on the back until he stopped choking.

Wiping away a tear, of mirth this time, Tavish said, “thank you Jane.”

“You are welcome.”

“No I mean-” Tavish took a breath. “Thank you. For always doing these things you do for me.”

“You saved my life.”

“And you’ve saved my life every day after.”

Soldier said nothing. They were now facing the same direction, both looking ahead instead of across from one another. Their shoulders pressed warm spots into each other, all the way through their jackets.

Tavish woke up late that morning. He’d spent a long time out in the desert, longer than he ever had before as he and Soldier watched the moon climb over the horizon until their bones

grew cold. When he got back, Spy still hadn't returned. Tavish had spent a good while hissing, "you there lad?" and smacking random corners with a pillow to no avail. There was no getting around it: the man was missing.

It took practicing every positive thinking technique Tavish had ever known to keep himself from jumping to the conclusion he naturally wanted to go to. If Spy simply had meant to use him and run, he wouldn't have passed the note, he wouldn't have…

It was best not to think about. Instead Tavish awoke and thumbed over the pocket watch while putting on fresh clothes. First he had assumed the humming bird timepiece was some sort of invisi-watch, as was Spy's modus operandi, but try as he might he couldn't get it to activate, and his button mashing only managed to set it forward a few minutes.

So he went to breakfast with the little watch pinned inside of its namesake, all the while thinking about the Spy…

And then seeing the Spy.

The old grain mill RED base might have been had odd bits of wood hanging off in all places, blown from their rightful shapes into abnormal parodies of usability. Spy was hung from one, moving pathetically in the faint wind, arms outstretched like some sort of demented crucifix as his weight pulled on the cords that had tied him there. His tongue lolled from his mouth, fat and blue like an overlarge slug, coated in blood that had come to wash over his entire face. Someone has slashed his stomach so that his intestines rained down in a gory cascade of streamers.

"Ah, *Herr* Demoman," Medic said cheerily as Tavish found himself underneath a body that was slowly wearing on the bonds that held it in place. "You just missed the ah… *demonstration*, ahaha."

If that laugh was bone chilling before, it was nothing to what it inspired now, this feeling of absolute despair as Tavish looked up and knew that horror was still alive in the world. "Demonstration…" was all he could say, his voice barely above a whisper. He did not remember walking into the courtyard, it felt as though he had simply materialized here and been nailed to the spot.

"I have finally caught him in the act! It turns out he was the one killing my test subjects," Medic continued cheerily. "Among other things."

At that, Sniper snorted into his mug of coffee. He was seated, leaned over an old newspaper like the martyred corpse above them was background entertainment.

Tavish felt numb. Cold all over, not sure what he should say, how to keep from vomiting at the sight—he wanted to flee but also to tear Spy down from his humiliating spot and hide him from onlooker's eyes. Yet he couldn't. He couldn't even find it in him to yell, let alone take action. Not when he knew his crime would net him Spy's fate.

It was one thing to know what the price of betraying RED was, it was another to see it.

Medic took his silence for indifference. “A shame, however,” he noted. “It is not good to be down a man before an important battle, but I suppose having an imposter among us is worse than having no Spy at all.

“Battle…?” Tavish felt lobotomized, reduced to repeating the words placed in front of him without understanding their meaning.

“Hm? Oh yes, did no one tell you?” Medic carried on their conversation, light as air. A drop of blood landed not five feet away in the chalky soil. “We killed BLU’s Heavy and Medic last week. With their Sniper also dead, it will certainly be enough to push our advantage to their base. But! Speaking of that, I must be off. Much to prepare for today’s attack, *ja*?”

And then he was gone, tailcoats flaring out behind him, evil cruising in his wake.

Tavish was left to stare up at Spy, truly alone, truly seeing what horrors men were willing to bring on each other. Spy didn’t deserve-

No he couldn’t even finish that thought. This was beyond deserving and not deserving, this was sickness in its truest form.

Sniper caught him looking and snickered. “Was just waiting for something like this to happen. Wanker had it coming.” Then he took his paper and left.

How long had Spy been here? Hours? A few minutes? The question churned in Tavish’s mind until the most pertinent one arose: had he failed? Did his distraction fizzle so poorly that even when doing the one thing he was meant to be good at, he had killed the only person in the world that depended on him? If he had been here instead of spending so long with Soldier...

He didn’t know, couldn’t know. His hand clutched the pocket watch and he tried to make himself think about something else, *anything* else as Spy’s once lively eyes stared down at him.

Like how he was alone now. He didn’t know what Spy’s leverage was supposed to be and now he never would. Even if he made it to the rendezvous, he had nothing to pay his way out of here.

Not that he would make it. Because apparently they were now storming BLU base, today of all days, a downright suicide mission.

He thought of the panic in Spy’s eyes. He must have known about the attack, that’s why he’d moved his plans up, but that didn’t explain why he *hadn’t bloody told Tavish*. Hadn’t told Tavish anything, not about his plans, not even what he was supposed to goddamn *steal*.

You’d think a mercenary’s life would prepare you for death. It’s always a risk, but never a certainty, and that’s an arrangement that will draw a lot of men in. But realizing it was a setup, *that* was what filled Tavish with a burning hatred for RED, for BLU, for every idiot in this place. He wanted a choice when he went out.

But he was back at square one. Alone, without allies, without a clue, and surely as dead as the man above him.

BLU base loomed.

In all his time, Tavish had never been on this side of the battlefield, never crossed that deadly threshold that changed possible fights to inevitable ones. What this place used to be he couldn't imagine, its sleek metal and concrete a far cry from the splintering ruins that RED called home, and its machinery so derelict that one can only guess what it was once used for.

They approached from the west; from the setting sun whose glare would blind any scope pointed their way. Not that they had to worry about that. The BLU Sniper was long dead.

The closer they got to the center of BLU territory, the better conditions the buildings were in. Sometimes Tavish could almost recognize the after images of humanity: an old fountain with a charging horse, a library, a phone booth with its red peeling off and door dangling from his hinges. It made him wonder what this place used to be, how it had gone from being full of life to wiped clean off the map.

Assuming it was real in the first place. Assuming it wasn't just some stage, put together by whoever was conducting this stalemate, crafted for their little war to play out on.

It was getting too difficult to think about. There were BLUs to kill, after all.

I don't want to do this anymore, Tavish had said. What a laugh. Now he was chucking bombs over the wall while Heavy screamed a charge, RED flooding to the porus openings of the outer base. Their momentum wouldn't last long. They would reach that first courtyard and-

Tavish found himself alone. All those promises to himself and he was still back in his old habits, back to a life of mercenary work and skirting death like chasing balls at the edge of the cliff where he used to play as a lad. He placed a trap to cover his flank, but then went back to lobbing pills into the fray from the apartment window.

He wondered if Soldier would hold back. He prayed to every god, every spirit, every fey king he could think of that they wouldn't meet, because if they did Tavish himself wasn't sure what he would do. If Soldier hesitated then, well, that just meant that a rocket intended for him would wind up aimed at one of his teammates instead. Maybe one of the lives RED had already lost should have been his own. His life exchanged for one of theirs.

There had been no sign of the sentry yet, but when there was, someone would expect him to move up. They'd retrieve him and then-

He heard footsteps rushing up the stairs. He spun, but failed to fire his trap as he saw the man flanking him was already beyond its reach.

"Whoa, whoa!" Scout said. "It's me! Ch-cherry Kangaroo!"

Tavish forced himself to relax, taking his finger off the manual detonator that wouldn't do him any good now. "Ah, fine, fine. News?"

"Medic says he wants you south side, above axel. They're getting ready to push."

"…Good to know."

Scout made a move to leave, but when he saw Tavish wasn't following he demanded, "yo you coming?"

"Aye, just give us a minute." Tavish turned, checking out the window, silence in the surrounding area but carrying the echoes of a battle not far away. The motion was executed as casually as possible, a simple look around and nothing more. His shoulder was turned just enough, leaned slightly askew from the man behind him.

In short, too good of an opportunity to pass up.

When he spun around again and shoved the end of his grenade launcher into Scout's stomach, the knife aimed at his back froze mid air.

He pulled the trigger. The BLU Spy went flying backwards, landing against the wall with a splatter as the point blank detonation rocked the small room. Flames leapt up Tavish's sleeve, but the Spy had certainly gotten the worst of it, now twitching helplessly and gargling out his last pained breaths.

"It was a good attempt mate," Tavish said. His voice sounded dead to his own ears, the ability to gloat long lost to him. "Might have worked too, if I hadn't seen Scout get a mouth full of lead not half an hour ago. He's dead in the old bar."

Spy was not able to respond. In fact, Tavish severely doubted he could even hear him by now, with how much of his ribcage was poking at the sky.

Tavish sighed. Or he tried to. It seemed he didn't even have enough in him for that, so he skipped that step and walked over to snap the Spy's neck. It shouldn't have been as easy as it was. When he pulled his hands back, the disguise finally failed, and Scout melted away to the BLU uniform underneath, which only ached Tavish's conscience wider. He wondered how many more promises he'd go back on today.

He wandered from the apartments, back toward the sounds of battle. The Spy had been trying to lure him to the south, so whatever was that way he wanted to avoid. Most likely a trap, or a handful of BLUs waiting for whoever Spy could manage bring down.

So north. And the reverberations of death throes just grew louder and louder, calling him, Soldier's scream before being sharply cut off, the pained murmurs of the Pyro somewhere in this madness. The beep of a sentry.

Tavish blinked as the noise he'd been looking for finally reached him. That was his goal. His only goal. He'd probably be blasted to smithereens without and Über to back him up but that seemed so trivial now. What else was he meant to do?

So he rounded the corner to take the thing out-

His last thought was *ah. It makes sense they'd have a Demoman too, doesn't it?* Then the world went red.

Tavish was not conscious. He was gone, out, long for this world. Yet, somehow, he was aware enough to feel himself being dragged away, a hand on the back of his collar as he was pulled into the bellows of BLU base.

Chapter 4

It wasn't so much as waking as things slowly became more real to the flayed mess that was his senses. There was a surface under him, light above him, but more than that arrived on him too gradually to be of any use. What came more readily was the panic. It was onset by confusion, the fact that he didn't know where he was or the vaguest idea how he got there as he lay on his back under the indistinguishable light. Being towed along the rubble crusted ground—he remembered that—but what else? Before that what was he doing?

The line of questioning was short as the pain lurking on his periphery realized he was awake and decided to pounce. A strangled cry erupted from his parched throat as tendrils of fire shot up his leg, forcing the world to snap back far more rapidly than it was meant to. He tried to sit up only for gravity to be one of those pesky little things that suddenly applied again, and floundered on his back while spots danced across his vision.

Panic threatened to take over. BLU base, the attack, Spy, the *other* Spy-

Turning a corner and planting one foot into a mesh of stickies, their little spikes clinging to the dirt like prickleweed burs tossed in the wind.

Wincing, Tavish rose more carefully this time, and got one of his elbows underneath enough to examine himself. His left leg was gone. It was surreal, seeing a tied-off pants leg where more shin was meant to go, empty blanket lying next to his other foot. Maybe it was the shock of seeing it or simply just the act of sitting up, but Tavish fell back with a spasm, blacking out for several seconds. When he woke, he didn't try to look again.

He felt nauseous, the kind brought on by vertigo. Head trauma maybe. Now he could remember being thrown against the wall in the initial blast, the shrapnel flying by as heat singed his skin. Definitely enough to give him permanent damage.

But he wasn't in the base anymore, at least he didn't think. Not lying while waiting for some BLU to finish him off, just lying in general, and he squinted in an attempt to parse his surroundings.

The walls were concrete, which gave some clue. There were mason jars stacked about, and no ceiling bulb that he could see, but several high windows that let in a midday light. A plate of stretched crocodile skin hung from the wall.

Tavish's heart skipped several beats as he realized where he was. The terror of not knowing what had happened was replaced with the terror of certainty, certainty of being trapped in the BLU Sniper's domain. Lying on a sheetless mattress. He would rather have died in the explosion than find out what would happen to him here.

Jerking to action, he rolled over on his side. Third time's the charm after all, and he managed to accomplish his task for the small price of a blood-curdling scream escaping his lips. He lay there, gasping, doing his damndest not to pass out again. Step one, accomplished. But from

sideways to vertical was something else entirely, and the only thing keeping him going was that he *had* to get out of here before the Sniper came back.

He landed on the floor. It wasn't a far fall, as he'd been on a mattress only a few inches off the ground, but it was nearly face down in a way that pinned his arm underneath him. It should have been easy, to just push his bodyweight up like he had when he still kept himself fit, but a wave of nausea hit him as soon he tried, and there he dropped on the tile floor.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs outside. The dread it sparked in him gave Tavish one last drive of conviction, but that too failed, and he was now at the mercy his own failing limbs.

Somewhere, a door opened. "…*Shit*."

Although it was barely above a whisper, the voice was not the one Tavish had been expecting, even through his grogginess. It was ringed by worry, and the footsteps that clamored over to him were heavy with combat boots.

"Dammit…"

A pair of hands turned him over, helping him back onto the blanket-covered mattress. His voice ached, muzzy and displaced, yet he managed the faintest, "…Jane?"

The Soldier didn't say anything. His face was hidden even more than usual, only the firm line of his mouth to reveal the apprehension he was so obviously hiding. He arranged Tavish's limbs until they were back where they'd started, and then pulled a rolled blanket under Tavish's neck, supporting him until he was comfortable.

"Jesus Jane I thought-," he mumbled. "I thought the Sniper…"

Soldier's frown wrinkled slightly. "Sniper's been dead for a month."

Right. Tavish had known that, it had been half the reason RED had mounted their push yet it'd slipped easily between the tracks in his train of thought. "Oh. I- I can barely think straight right now. Why exactly am I here then?"

"This was the most out of the way place I could think of," Soldier explained. "BLU didn't send a replacement, and nobody wanted to deal with whatever Sniper was hiding in here so they just stay away. Turns out it was a lot of nail clippings. And jars of urine."

"…You dragged me up here. Out of the battle."

Soldier didn't look at him.

"That was…thank you."

"Just so you were out of the way," Soldier went on. "At first. But then RED retreated and didn't take you with and I knew that if anyone else got a hold of you then…"

He didn't have to finish the thought. Tavish tried to settle himself in a better position, not exactly seated but no longer lying down either as he shoved the makeshift pillow behind his

back. His missing foot throbbed with every slight jostle.

“I suppose I don’t know what to say,” Tavish admitted.

“Hm,” Soldier grunted. “There is nothing that needs to be said, private. We all do our duty. You will stay here until you are healed, and then you can go home.”

“Healed?” Tavish practically choked, the horrible reality setting on him again. “Are you looking at the same thing I’m looking at? *They blew off my fucking leg*. I’m- I’m a *cripple*, just fucking- *fucking look at me*.”

The foot wasn’t going to come back. Not even Medic’s fancy new Medigun he’d been churning up plans for could bring back what was blasted to smithereens-

(And Tavish didn’t want to think about Medic, didn’t want to be touched by him,

(Spy’s bloated corpse leaking his own entrails, made an example of and no one had even cared)

especially didn’t want to see what new horrors the doctor could unleash if he was at the man’s mercy.)

He was alive but lesser, somehow even more of an aberration than he had been before.

“Should I fucking *walk* back to base?” He laughed, a bit of hysteria creeping in. Then he slumped, the past day washing over him. “Maybe I should go back. I’m not any better than them, am I? Been trying to lift my own self-righteous corpse out of the mud, but I’m just as much a monster. Rotten inside and out.”

“You are- no, I just meant-” Soldier stuttered. “You just can’t stay here. There’ll be another Sniper eventually.”

The words penetrated Tavish’s skull, but he couldn’t find it in him to care about that right now. Instead, he took to wallowing, aching for a drink that probably hadn’t blessed his bloodstream in hours.

When he didn’t respond, Soldier shifted back and forth. “I uh, found something. There’s good stuff int the ruins, and I though it could help.”

Again Tavish barely noticed as Soldier came and went, only raising his chin off his chest when he returned with a black-rubbered toilet plunger. “How in the world is that supposed to help?” he asked tiredly.

“I thought you could make like a peg-leg out of it,” Soldier illuminated helpfully. “And then when your leg was better, you could. You know.”

For a long, agonizing moment, Tavish didn’t put together what Soldier was saying. It was a minute of vacuum, a lull before that inevitable firestorm when what Soldier was implying finally hit him.

Voice dark and dangerous, he demanded, “is that supposed to be *funny*, BLU?”

“Uh, no,” Soldier said as he lowered the cleaning implement he’d been offering hopefully. “Not funny, just fitting.”

Tavish threw a jar at him.

His aim was pitiful and his arm was still weak so it shattered several feet short, but the Soldier still jumped. “Get *out*,” Tavish growled at him. “You *bastard*, get out of my fucking sight.”

Soldier swallowed visibly, but he obeyed without delay. Tavish was left to mercifully mourn alone, throwing his arms over his face and screaming into his own embrace.

The Soldier didn’t stay away for long. Which was fine, since Tavish couldn’t stay spiteful for long either, not when his own despair kept numbing him to it. Whatever defects or insensitivities Soldier possessed, he had repaid his life debt, and there was nothing in this dreary murder den that came close to bringing Tavish comfort besides Jane’s cautious attempts at succor.

He’d never had time to fully process’s Spy’s death, and in the days lying on the mattress while Soldier brought him smuggled rations and bottles of water, he felt he was grieving for them both. For Spy, the man, and the more abstract future he had promised.

Because there certainly wasn’t any of that future any more. What was he meant to do, go back to RED and feel inevitability coming at him far faster than he knew it had any right to? Return to living like he had before, a vagabond in his own team, despised at every turn? Here at least there was Soldier, who was oddly soft-spoken, oddly gentle as he re-bandaged Tavish’s leg with stolen dressing from the infirmary. Who’d accepted Tavish’s apology for the broken glass with a quiet, “I understand,” and nothing more. Who was maybe the only thing worth fighting for in this godforsaken battlefield.

No, no he couldn’t pin all his hopes for salvation on Soldier. That was an even worse idea than when he had pinned them on Spy. They held tragedy for each other in the palms of their hands, yet neither of them could quite fully turn away.

So Tavish would soldier on. Bitterly, he asked himself when he had ever done anything *but* soldier on. When had he ever actually been proud to be living?

As the weeks wore on—the threat of an incoming Sniper eventually joined by the realization that there would be a Demoman replacement he’d have to beat too—no better alternative for a prosthetic leg presented itself. Despite the humiliation of it, Tavish had to admit Soldier had actually showed some ingenuity with the garbage lying around, and he began to modify the plunger into something workable.

He shortened the shaft until it was just the right height, then got the rubber to stay on his stump thanks to some buckles that could be loosened if need be. The rickety contraption

turned out to be fairly easy to make, even for a man more used to building bombs than accessories.

The impossible part was walking.

He was running out of time. Every day he would practice, tottering across the small room that overlooked the entire BLU territory with jittering, stilted paces, blind to the life that was still churning outside these four walls. Soldier would bring him news, who had survived the battle and who had not, but Tavish was too focused on his undertaking to really care. Nubile, callow movements on untested feet. He usually only ever made it a few steps before collapsing.

There had been significant damage to his back muscles as well during the explosion, injuries not as obvious to the naked eye but no less debilitating, holding him back until even the most straightforward motions required effort. He would make it a few steps: fall. Then he would get up, make it a few steps: fall again. Ad nauseam. For hours. For the days he filled with those hours.

What had once been an abstract deadline was now bearing down on him, hot breath on his neck as he tried to perform the simplest of tasks. Soldier could rocket jump him halfway there, but he had to make the final mile to RED base under his own power. He had to do this.

Up, step step, down. Up, step step, down.

He wore himself to exhaustion. Soldier couldn't make him stop as he was not a man who would tell another when he was past his limits, but he would watch with those eyes, the ones that seemed to glisten as though Tavish were doing it to him instead of himself. Those eyes that wanted to say something-

Up, step step, down. Up-

He didn't even make his first stuttering step this time before falling, before crumpling to the ground as he lost the fight against his own body. Giving up implied a choice but there was no choice here, only coulds and could nots. He couldn't move forward anymore.

But nor did he hit the ground.

Meeting the chipped green tile had grown so commonplace that the various shapes and stains had become like old friends, and to suddenly be halted from its greeting startled something in the Demoman. He looked up to the arms holding him, to Soldier who was now supporting him entirely, lowering him off his ineffectual, cobbled legs and holding him until they were both sitting.

Tavish buried his face in Jane's neck and sobbed. This was weakness gone to rot, but he no longer cared, he no longer wanted to just keep pushing on. He wanted to lie down, he wanted nights under the moon with Jane and none of the events that had brought them there. He wanted the warm hands rubbing his back in circles and the voice in his ear saying, "Tavish, Tavish it's alright, I've got you. We're going to be alright. I've got you."

Tavish pulled back from the slowly damping collar of the blue uniform and kissed him.

The hands on his back turned to fists, digging into fabric and stretching it taunt, ever tighter as Jane pressed forward into Tavish's mouth. It was desperation, like Tavish was still falling, waiting to land, and the only thing in the world keeping him from it was this man that was more human than any person Tavish had ever known.

"Jane," he gasped desperately, pulling back because the kiss was wet and salty and the air had all been sucked from his lungs, but also because he wanted to say Jane's name in the way Jane said his. "Jane, Jane, fuck this, fuck all of this. Fuck everything that isn't us."

Jane pressed his forehead against Tavish's, meeting his beanie with a softness that should have been impossible for a man who'd killed as much as him. Who'd killed as much as either of them.

"You are not a monster," Jane said softly. Tavish didn't know where the helmet has gone and he didn't care. "If I tell you anything, I want to tell you that. You are the most magnificent son of a bitch I have ever known, better than every one of the goddamn nancys, RED or BLU. Never let me hear you say otherwise again, private."

Fresh tears welled in Tavish's eye. There was damp on Jane's cheeks too. He choked out, "it's not fucking fair Jane. It's not real. Everything that's happened isn't real."

Jane leaned back, blinking at him with unsheltered eyes.

"The war's a whole bloody fake," Tavish sputtered out. "Neither side wants it to really end. There's no outs in our contracts because there's not *meant* to be, no retirement in case we talk about the hell here and hurt their future recruitments prospects. They want us to kill each other Jane, they want us to kill each other so *badly*."

"What…" Jane struggled for a question and came up short, his jaw moving soundlessly as he began to process a new confession instead of the ones they had been imposing on each other before. "I mean, how can you say that…?"

"Spy showed me a briefcase," Tavish explained perilously. "There's nothing in them, we're sitting in our strongholds defending *nothing*."

Jane just stared, lips parted so slightly and gorgeously all Tavish wanted to do was kiss them again.

"I didn't tell you," Tavish said. "I knew you wouldn't want to know."

"*I* decide what I want to know, maggot," Jane commanded. "And if I have decided that I know a thing I do not want to know, then I will damn well *unknow* it."

He was rambling. Tavish had known this would happen, had realizing this place was far more important to Jane's pillars of reality than his own.

The Soldier had dependencies, no problem holding two opposing ideas in his head if it meant he got to suit up and go to war every morning. It was how he had fared so much better than

Tavish, how he could claim to stop death itself from taking the Demoman but not realize the irony of what the gravel wars entailed.

Poking holes ran the risk of bringing everything else down with it.

Tavish's own babbling rose to meet the Soldier's. "It's true, I swear. That's why I don't want to fight anymore, not because I don't think I can win but because I know I won't," he explained. "I want my bloody third option. Spy had a plan to get us out, but RED killed him. Strung him up. Maybe they even knew someone was helping him."

A *demonstration*, Medic had called it. He had told the rest of RED it had been for sabotaging his Über experiments but Tavish *knew* it was because of what Spy was investigating. There had never been an incident after the Scout, so Medic had no reason to turn on Spy unless he realized…

No, that couldn't be right either. That had been Tavish's assumption in the days following Spy's death, but that would imply that Medic also knew about the conspiracy yet was actively choosing to stay. Soldier he could understand the compulsion, but Medic?

"Medic was the one who killed Spy," Tavish noted absently, now as lost in his own thoughts as Jane was in his. He wound his arms behind the Soldier's back to ground himself, trying to *think*. "But that means he was the one who caught him. He…he didn't come when I set off the flash-bomb."

Tavish could see it now, all those faces crowding over him, but no Medic. It didn't make sense, why *him*…

Then something Spy had said came back to him. *What they desire is immensely more valuable than that detritus. And more closely guarded.*

Miracle of modern technology that had become so mundane, Tavish had forgotten that it was even valuable to people beyond their little bubble. Something that could revolutionize warfare, or at the very least medicine; a secret Medic kept so close to his chest that he only ever let patients into his infirmary under watch.

"Holy shite," Tavish said softly. "I know what Spy was trying to steal."

Jane, who had only barely been following along, stared at him blankly.

That didn't matter to Tavish, because an even greater realization was coming upon him, one that felt daringly like hope. "The medigun plans, *that's* what he went to get. They're in RED base, I could still get them, I could still-" It hit him like a rocket blast, and he inhaled his own lungs as he moved his hands to grip the side of Jane's face. "Jane. There's two spots on that helicopter out of here."

"Out of here?" Jane balked. "Are you crazy?"

"Aye, if folks are to be believed. But you are too, and we've broken this whole thing wide open." He moved from Jane's face to claps his hands in his own. "Come with me Jane. Run

away with me."

"N-no. This isn't right Tavish." Soldier shook his head. "It's can't be fake, the war is perfect, it's *out there* that's fake. I. I don't belong anywhere else."

Tavish's heart sank into his stomach, hopes crumbling seconds after being born. He croaked, "not even with me?"

Soldier looked away. "It should be the same thing. You're the one who's leaving…running off with a damn Spy…"

"I want to run off with *you*, you daft idiot," Tavish insisted, but he could feel Jane pulling away, feel he was losing the one person who mattered nearly as soon as he admitted he did. "How long do you think we can keep going like this?"

"Your leg will get better, and then you'll go back to your side," Jane said plainly. "Then things can go back to normal."

"Normal?" Tavish begged in exasperation. "It was borrowed time, Jane. What about the next time RED or BLU decides to throw themselves against the rocks? What if the next time I go out for bevs on the border, you're not there?"

Jane shook his head, withdrawing his hands from Tavish's. "I can't…I just…I can't."

Tavish was afraid of that. Realized he had been afraid of this more than anything. He felt an ache, a gap at his side where Jane had been a moment ago and was now evacuating, getting to his feet and helping Tavish back to the mattress. Then Jane left. Tavish didn't stand up again for the rest of the evening, instead withdrawing the hummingbird watch from his pocket for the first time in a month and checking the time.

Chapter 5

January 8th had been all but forgotten since it'd first been brought to the Demoman's attention, but now it became the single most important date in his life. (Which made him realize he'd forgot his Mum's birthday this year. Shit, she was going to kill him when he finally got out.)

Despite Jane's denial, Tavish hadn't given up on him. In fact, he un-gave up on other things too. He began his regemine again, pacing himself better this time, one day on, one day off, and to his immense relief it was actually starting to work. He could make it across the lookout tower with very little trouble now; it would only be a matter of time before he went back to RED base.

Every time Jane came to check on him, he was heavy with more doubts, ones Tavish knew were natural once you started to question just how damn weird the conflict between RED and BLU was. He'd gone through the same cycle himself, not too long ago. He never was as insistent as he was the first time he'd he begged Jane to run away with him, but that didn't mean he thought their co conspiracy was a lost cause. He was done with despairing.

Maybe Jane was right, maybe he was preoccupied with a future where he wouldn't be happy either. But once in his damn life he wanted to try.

"Well," he said as he looked over no man's land for the first time in two months. "There it is."

He couldn't actually see RED base from here, it was more for the Soldier's benefit as they were both left to contemplate these final moments together. Jane said nothing though, just stared across the badlands.

"Jane," Tavish prompted softly.

The Soldier finally turned his eyes on him. "Tavish," he whispered. "Don't. Don't make this the last time I see you."

"It doesn't have to be."

Soldier swallowed.

Tavish's forehead creased, and the smile tweaking his lips was as reassuring as he could make it. "I know lad. I know the world out there hates you—it hates me too for Christ's sake—but we're not better off in this place. A damn bloody cage. I know it's terrifying but… please…"

He reached forward, two fingers on the outside of Jane's wrist, slowly pulling his arm to him until he could slip the watch in his palm. Jane blinked at his new possession, clicking it open and looking at the paper still folded inside.

“Meet me there, aye?” Tavish asked. “We can be free.”

Jane looked down at the paper. “This is today.”

"Aye."

Jane lowered his head, helmet sliding all the way forward, breathing shaky. “I don't know. But I will...I will meet you there. And then I will. Think about about it.”

The relief was like nothing Tavish had ever felt before, his pinched shoulders slackening as much as they could. "Thank you. Thank you Jane." He reached forward and held his palm against Jane’s cheek. "I better be off, then. We’re not going anywhere unless I get those plans."

And he left, his undecided no-longer-enemy behind him, but hope welling in his heart.

His final mile took more out of him than he wanted to admit. Of course he’d made the same distance walking around ten square feet of room, but the terrain of broken asphalt was more ragged than he remembered, and partway across there was a flicker in the back of his mind that realized fainting out here would be decidedly deadly.

But despite the setbacks, he made it, staggering doggedly into RED’s first floor. The reception was about how he expected.

As he hoped, the feeble remains of RED team soon grew weary of his over-inflated tales of surviving alone in the badlands for two months, foraging for scraps and fighting wolves that grew more numerous with each retelling. Even if Tavish hadn’t been leading off as many boring tangents as possible, it was clear RED was already worn down enough as it was: the survivors numbered Medic, Heavy, and Sniper who all wandered about in a state of fatigue from holding down the fort on their own. Even Medic, with his usual cheerful mania, didn’t seem all that interested in Tavish’s injuries save shooting him a couple minutes under the medibeam. It was as inconspicuous of a re-entry as Tavish could have hoped.

“I suppose we’ll cancel that order for a new Demoman,” Medic remarked conversationally, but it was clear he was distracted. With that he finally withdrew the beam. “Excuse me.”

Tavish, as discreetly as a man of his conspicuousness could, followed him.

There was no way he could steal those plans. Spy had tried and failed, and Tavish maintained no illusions that he could somehow find some secret trick that would make him a better spy than Spy. No. He was going to play to his own strengths, and if there was one thing he still was, it was a bloody good Demoman.

This time, his “distraction” nearly brought down the whole base.

“*Sheisse*,” Medic swore as a second wave pitched the floor, glass jars of indeterminate fluid landing in a cascade of rainbow glass.

There was no Soldier to declare that they were under attack, but Medic was not such a dense man that he couldn’t ascertain that for himself. Tavish watched him from the glass porthole of

the infirmary, the Medic scrabling for his medigun, swinging on his pack as Tavish deployed the last of his three detonations. The south wall would be completely gone by now.

When Medic finally dashed past the side room Tavish had inserted himself in, it was merely a matter of slipping out and pushing through the infirmary doors. Maybe destroying the base was overkill, maybe it wasn't, but Tavish had never been able to shake the idea that if he'd been a better diversion in the first place, Spy could have made it out of all this alive. This time, there'd be no half-measures.

Despite the multitudes of dangerous toxins and biohazards crammed into shelves in the doctor's abode, there was only one locked cabinet in the infirmary. Tavish stood in front of it, the sound of recursive explosions banging in the distance, light streaming down from a long-broken window in the ceiling. Spy had probably tried to pick this. It could have taken him ages.

Tavish rolled a few stickies against the door and blew the load.

The cabinet shattered wide, and Tavish wasted no time gathering the papers that fluttered out. He knew he only had a short while before his team realized it was a feint, and even less time after that before Medic rushed back to protect what was most precious to him. So he scooped everything up and ran.

It was pure, unadulterated *exhilaration*. The idea that he was leaving the base for the last time did not encourage him to look back, instead urging him onward as he burst out the north door and out into freedom. He wouldn't have to see the aftermath. He wouldn't be strung up as an example, and they could all *kiss his ass*.

Adrenaline could only carry him so far. Despite the muscles and nerves the medigun had snapped back into place, the peg-leg was not easy to run in, and he found himself slowing. That was alright. When he finally staggered to a stop to catch his breath, he let loose a laugh so joyous it would have scared wildlife running if there were any left in the wastes.

He made a steady pace to the rendezvous, lighter than he had ever been. The signs of former civilization began to peter out as he wandered further into the areas that RED and BLU had no interest in. It was amazing how one patch of barren landscape could be so worthless compared to the patch of barren landscape right next to it.

Finally, he reached what he was reasonably sure was the northern most part of the battlefield. Here was a different kind of border than he'd grown used to, one that separated tiny toy soldiers from the rest of the world. The walls of the playpen.

Now all he had to do was wait.

Although he had no way to tell time on him any more, he knew he still had an hour or two until 4:45. Plenty of time to rest, to sort through the papers and make sure he had everything.

An hour passed. As the evening grew bolder, something wormed in the back of his mind, one of those feelings you try to ignore because it hasn't been *so* long yet, *there's still time* you

wind up telling yourself. But as Tavish found himself diving into a triple check he had to confront what was plainly obvious to anyone who wasn't in denial: Jane wasn't here.

Tavish began watching the horizon he knew contained BLU base, finding harder and harder to keep his eye on the medigun papers. Soon he began ignoring them entirely in favor of scanning the badlands, willing the Soldier into existence.

Another half hour.

He wouldn't have changed his mind, would he? He had said he would come, Tavish had did everything in his power to explain why he had to leave…

Maybe Tavish hadn't been as persuasive as he'd thought, and he'd only worn down Jane's defenses rather than truly convinced him. Maybe now that Tavish wasn't there to plead his case, Jane had decided the war was more important to him after all.

No, no he needed to make sure. Nothing less than that. He had time.

What he was hoping to find in the throes of no man's land he wasn't certain, only that it was the last place he had seen Jane, and he didn't know where else to go. He wandered, wasting time, the ticking clock in the back of his mind thrumming every instance he rounded a corner and found no sign. It was a slowly mounting terror, yet one entirely different from the dread he felt when he finally heard the gunfire.

His heart pounding, he raced in the direction of the amplifying altercation. There was a sudden lapse where the firing stopped, leaving him barreling recklessly through the wreckage of old streets and long emptied fire hydrants. The silence mislead him. It was barely a minute, but when the distinctive blare of a rocket launcher rattled the surrounding area, he realized he'd overshot. He reoriented himself, and honed in on the new direction.

He crested the top of the hill to see a horrifyingly familiar scene: two REDs, standing over a barely twitching BLU.

Heavy had his boot on Jane's neck, the Soldier trying vainly to move the massive foot even an inch off his windpipe. His uniform has lost the majority of its pallet, stained red so thickly that it left streaks in the dirt as Jane writhed across it.

Medic looked up just as Tavish reached what qualified for high ground, and grinned wolfishly. "Ah! There he is!"

By some miracle, Heavy's minigun was not in his hands, but a foot or so away, resting lovingly on a rusted park bench. Tavish could still save this, he still had a shot. He lifted his grenade launcher and pointed it down at his former co-workers. "Weapons on the ground lads! I don't want to have to do this, but I will."

"Aha, well I am already unarmed," Medic chuckled complacently, shifting his medigun easily in his arms. "But *selbstverständlich*, I am still very shocked to see you, Demoman. I knew Spy was not working alone, but to think it was *you*? Very clever on his part, such an unforeseeable choice. Someone beneath suspicion entirely."

Heavy had not released his shotgun, nor removed his foot off the Soldier. Instead, he eyed Tavish in that deeply inscrutable expression, far too well concealed for Tavish to ever know what went on the man's head.

He couldn't fire into the knot of people without hitting Jane, and from the bullet holes riddling him, he could tell Jane wouldn't survive the blowback. He tried again, "I said drop 'em, unless you want to be a bunch of gibs in the next thirty seconds."

Medic shrugged, and almost made a move to comply when Heavy said, "wait. Demoman is not firing."

"That can change," Tavish said, trying to force his voice not to shake. "Now put the gun down."

Maybe he had betrayed himself. Maybe Heavy has seen the way his eye flicked to the prone BLU, maybe Tavish had given away something in his voice that showed just how scared he was. Maybe Heavy merely had a hunch.

Either way it ended the same.

Heavy dropped his shotgun off his shoulder, pointing it downward and forcing the tip underneath the Soldier's helmet. "No," he said, eyes locked firmly on Tavish's as he pressed the barrel against Jane's temple. "Heavy thinks Demoman should put down *his* gun."

Tavish froze as Jane ceased struggling, no doubt feeling the hot metal pressing against his skull. Medic's head whipped between the two of them until it burst into a grin of understanding, saying, "collusion! I see! How utterly *fascinating*."

That little rational part of Tavish's brain realized there was no saving Jane now. It made no difference or not if he complied, they were going to kill Jane no matter what, and Tavish would end up the same if he did what they said. The least terrible of two horrid choices was to fire now, while he still had the option, finish this and still get to keep his miserable life. That's what his logic told him.

But that part of him couldn't account for the sight of Jane lying helpless, bleeding out, doing all in his power to shove the giant off him.

Tavish set his grenade launcher on the ground.

"Other one too," Heavy demanded.

Another hesitation, but then Tavish swung the sticky launcher off his back, setting it next to his other once trusty companion.

"You," Heavy commanded. "Come here. You have something that belongs to doctor."

Tavish could do nothing but follow his orders, shambling down the slope as slow as possible with his hands raised. He heard what might have been a *don't* escape from Jane, but it was so devoid of air it was hard to tell. Finally he stood in front of the REDs, unarmed and browbeaten, cursing himself for ever thinking he could escape this hell.

Medic snapped the medigun back into his backpack, striding forward until they were face to maniacal face. “Well well well. Now that I recall, it was you who caused such a big fuss the day of the attempted theft, wasn’t it? I should have realized sooner.” He grinned. “I would just like you to know that Spy was in excruciating pain when I did finally kill him.”

Tavish grit his teeth. He knew he was being toyed with but it still *worked*, and he found he couldn’t look at Medic as his rage boiled.

“And working with BLUs as well.” Medic cast a glance backwards at Soldier, who was once again struggling against his captors, even as every movement grew weaker. “How does that figure in to things? Ah, no matter. I would like my papers back now, *bitte*.” He reached forward, open handed.

And Tavish didn’t have a choice anymore, not really. Every action of obedience was just a sad attempt to buy Jane a few more seconds, hoping against hope that he could miraculously think of a way out of this situation. But now that grace period had come and gone and he was still just as trapped. He shuffled in the front of his jumpsuit, producing the folder and placing it in Medic’s gloved hand.

“*Danke*,” Medic says. “I very much wanted to avoid getting blood on these, if I could help it.” Then, with reflexes of lighting, he flicked out his bonesaw and jabbed it into the Demoman’s side.

“No!” Jane wheezed, the constriction around his neck loosened just enough to call out as Tavish collapsed to the ground.

He coughed up a glob of blood, landing in the dirt and convulsing. Medic had gotten him perfectly, right in the exposed area under the arm of his bombsuit, cracking through ribs just as the bonesaw’s namesake would imply. The world began to fade. Fast.

“Doctor does not want more example?” Heavy asked far, far away.

“*Nein*, I believe we have gotten all of the rats this time. Bring the Soldier though. I am sure we can find some use for him.”

Tavish’s eye cracked open, just enough to see Jane clawing at the ground across from him, as though trying to reach his body. When Tavish didn’t respond, he stopped, the futility causing him to slump back into the earth. Then he stirred again. As he lifted his head, Tavish saw only the briefest glimpse of his eyes, just enough to recognize the look there: that of a man who wouldn’t be taken alive again.

They hadn’t removed the grenades from Jane’s chest sling. The Soldier’s hand grasped one, thumbing the pin and looking up at his captors with such pure hatred it could have melted iron.

“Don’t-” Tavish tried to beg him, but instead of Jane, Medic was the one who heard his pleas.

“*Sheisse*,” Medic hissed as he followed Tavish’s line of sight.

He rushed forward, kicking the live grenade out of Jane's hand. Again with those reflexes, he scooped up the grenade and hurled it into the street, where it exploded harmlessly among the already abused asphalt.

"Gah, *nevermind*," Medic groaned. "He's obviously more trouble than he's worth. Just kill him."

Heavy shrugged, and with as little fanfare, shot Jane in the head.

The world jolted still as the crack of the shotgun echoed around the world and back again, landing inside Tavish's skull and bouncing around as Jane's head rocked back. The suddenness was impossible. It couldn't have happened like that. It couldn't.

Tavish tried to shout something, maybe a *god no*, but it came as a murmur, everything dark along the edges, words already too late.

Jane's body was still, his helmet now cupping what had once been his head, a mess of gore topping a limp frame. Tavish thought he might be crying, but there was nothing in him anymore, no more pain that he hadn't already shed.

"I really don't know what you were thinking." It took Tavish a moment a moment to realize Medic was addressing him. "Why involve BLUs as well? So unnecessarily complicated."

"Fuck you," Tavish hissed. He'd never wanted to kill another person more than he did in that moment, and had never been less able to do it. "You sick bastard. I hope someone takes that bonesaw and shoves it down your throat."

"One of your BLU friends might try," Medic mused. "But until then."

"Eat shit and die," Tavish mumbled. "War's all a damn lie. You're *all* going to bloody die, you goddamn snakes."

"On the contrary, mein friend." Tavish could hear the smile in Medic's voice. "I think I am going to live forever."

"We go now doctor?"

"*Ja*, let's."

And then. The strangest thing. The sound of their retreating voices was slowly joined by *another* sound, one rising in volume by the second. One that made no sense to Tavish's gradually dying brain, due to the fact it simply couldn't be happening: the whirr of a minigun spinning up.

"*You touch*-!" was all Heavy shouted before devolving into a scream of rage and pain.

Tavish forced his eye open, trying and figure out what the *fuck* was going on, and he cleared it just in time to see Heavy crumple, still wildly firing his shotgun. Medic fumbled out his medigun too late to help Heavy, instead making one last mad attempt for his syringes. He only returned a few shots, but there was no cover for him as the minigun rang, and his

succumbed with blistering curses on his lips. Although Tavish could barely lift his head, he did his damndest, searching desperately from where he thought the shots had come from.

And there, as inconceivable as it was, was Jane supporting himself on Heavy's minigun as it slowly wound down.

"Jane! You-" Tavish looked from the Jane breathing harshly to the Jane corpse less than a few feet away, the one lying still with its head bashed in-

And promptly watched the corpse wink out of existence.

"What," Tavish breathed. "Why. How."

"Beats me," Jane said, pushing himself off the bench and staggering over. He shook as he transferred his weight to his own shaking legs, but made the slow journey to where the other Jane had been a moment before. "As for why, I needed this." He leaned down, grasping Medic's shredded carcass where he got a hold of his pack, pushing the torso off it with his foot until the straps snapped.

With that, he walked over to Tavish, pointed the beam on him, and flicked the switch.

Immediately, Tavish felt his faculties begin to return from him, though the absence of pain was still a few minutes away. He shoved himself to a sitting position and looked around, trying to parse what in the world had just happened.

"Jane, how did you bloody *do* that?" he asked as Jane took a knee next to him.

"I told you maggot, I don't know!" Jane said. "I was there, then he shot me, and then suddenly I was standing next to everybody and your stupid watch was buzzing like crazy!"

As he said it, Jane pulled out the pocket watch, dangling it from its chain. Tavish cupped it in both hands, bringing it close to his face. "It *is* an invisi-watch," he breathed. "One that… saves you from a deathblow?"

"Sure. Something like that. Where'd you get that damn thing anyway?"

Tavish rubbed his thumb over the case. "Was a gift."

"Hm. Anyway," Jane grumbled. "I was standing up and they couldn't see me, so I thought, *hey. Might as well*."

Tavish grinned, and the motion felt strained on his tired face, but not unworthy. "You're a damn hero Jane. A damn bloody hero."

Jane grinned, slightly savage, slightly exhausted, but all him. He gripped Tavish's shoulder and the two of them beamed at each other.

"But," Tavish added, "you're going to be a dead hero soon though, if you don't start pointing that thing at yourself." He gently tapped the medigun with the tips of his fingers.

“You first,” Jane insisted. “You were half-fucking dead, I thought you-” Jane swallowed something. “Just. Take your medicine, private. We have time.”

“Ach, we don’t, remember? I have a flight to catch, and you're coming with.” There was no question in Tavish's mind, not after this.

Jane looked away quietly. “We don’t…have a flight anymore Tavish. Look at the time.”

Tavish glanced down at the watch in his hands, and his heart sunk as he saw it tick 5 o’clock.

“It’s my fault,” Jane admitted. “I needed to think, and I was stalling, just wandering around thinking what it would be like to never see this place again…If I hadn’t been out so late I wouldn’t have gotten caught. Again.”

His hand absently came to rest in the midst of his various wounds. Tavish silently turned the medibeam on him, and watched him sag as the bullet holes closed.

“Hey,” Tavish soothed. “It’s going to be alright. We’re going to be alright.”

It wasn’t and they weren’t, but the words were all Tavish had right now. After what he’d just been through he couldn’t take that next blow just yet, the only thing that mattered was that Jane was still alive, that he was here and not splattered on the unforgiving concrete.

All thanks to this little gadget. Tavish looked down at it, and something stirred in the back of his mind, something about the watch-

“Jane!” Tavish yelped. “We still have time!”

“What?” Jane jolted out of his stupor. “You really think they’ll wait that long?”

“Maybe not, but this thing is *has the wrong time*,” Tavish exclaimed, scrambling to his feet. “I was messing with it when I tried to figure out what it was for, and I screwed around with the dials. *The watch runs fast.*”

It took a moment for the information to settle in, but once it did Jane was on his feet as well. “How fast exactly?”

“Don’t know! You willing to go find out with me?”

Jane fixed him with a wide, promising smile, and then they were off, one last mad dash across the landscape.

It shouldn’t have been funny, but they were laughing all the while, racing each other with competing explosions. Tavish couldn’t sticky jump like he used to, but he damn well tried, only stumbling once at the very end as he landed wrong on his new foot. It didn’t matter. Jane scooped him under one arm and helped him limp that last hundred yards to the finish line.

The helicopter was waiting for them. Tavish was glad. It would have tarnished Spy’s memory greatly to find out he’d been stringing Tavish along the whole time.

“We did it,” Tavish whispered as they staggered toward their escape.

“What?” Jane yelled over the roar of the spinning blades.

“I said *we did it*!”

“WHAT?”

“Ach, forget it.”

The crawled inside, chests heaving as they slumped into the seats provided. The pilot didn’t even speak to them, just extended his hand backward between the leather seats, waiting expectantly.

“Cheery lot you are,” Tavish said, and slapped the manila folder into the man’s hand. “And! I’ll do you one better.”

With a *thunk*, he dropped the medigun itself on the seat across from him.

The pilot looked over his shoulder, then at the folder in hand. His frown made the barest effort to be a not-frown, and Tavish figured that was all he was going to get. The doors slid closed, and they were off.

It was surreal to watch the battlefield slide away, growing smaller and smaller as it began to look like miniatures of the war it was meant to represent. To think that the past two years of his life had been spent inside only a few square miles of shithole.

He leaned back in his seat. “I can’t believe it’s really over.”

“Yeah,” Jane grunted. “…I don’t even know what I’m going to do now.”

“Is that even a question?” Tavish straightened up. “You’re coming with me, laddie! I’m never letting you out of my sight again.”

Jane grinned, and it was a smile that was so sad yet so hopeful Tavish wanted to spend the rest of his life looking at it. “Yeah. That’s fair.”

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