Quicklime

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by hanktalkin

Summary

The Voice in the TV said if he didn’t cooperate, she’d take him out to a gravel pit and have him shot. She makes good on that promise.

The trunk's lining smells like fear and caked blood.

My heart beats fast, far too fast, and I can empathize with that fear-scent because the dozens of people who have lain in this trunk before me must have known exactly how terrifying the dark is. There is a blindfold snared across my face, but even without it, the light deprivation would be absolute. Behind me is something heavy and unmoving—no doubt more bags of quicklime like the ones that keep me from fully extending my legs. The walls fold inward, crushing me down into the smallest manageable shape.

They'd raided my apartment with more mercenaries than I could handle, but only now—when I'm stripped of my ability to fight—do I finally feel the fear I've been keeping at bay.

I fantasize about sawing off the bindings around my wrists, of finding a spare shovel or torture device someone had carelessly left in the trunk, but I know the Administrator's too smart for that.

The road rushes by. The throbbing of the lump on my head is my only company, the pounding of blood and the patter of desert road my only companions as I am taken far away from where anyone will hear my upcoming execution. I am alone. I've chased everyone away and the only one I can thank for that is myself, the decisions I made, the sacrifices I failed to take.

It is six months earlier and I wake up at five am sharp. I take a three minute navy shower under ice cold water (the boiler's been out for months and I have neither the know-how nor the will to fix it) and shave in my toothpaste-spattered mirror. I wipe the lather off, check over my reflection, and determine everything to be satisfactory. My reflection salutes me back.

Breakfast is spam, freed from its metal prison with an army knife and dumped onto a griddle layered with grease. I'll wash it some other time. Maybe when I remember to buy soap.

Morning drills. Uniform. Then the half hour walk to the end of my drive.

A rumble heralds the blue pickup truck, ancient but well cared for, wooden slats cadging its exterior so nothing will fall when transporting from one place to the other. It'll hold until we get to Swiftwater.

"Hey there Sol," Engineer greets as I clamber into the back.

I grunt in response.

To his credit, Engineer's smile never loses his glamour, even when sticking out his self imposed task of talking to me. He glances to his right and offers amicably, "hey Smokey, why don't you let Solly sit shotgun today?"

Pyro, half a box of the day's matches littered around the passenger's side, lifts their head and keens. The matches are black and curling, burned all the way down to the end as they'd let it

caress their orange tipped fingers, chewing through them the way Spy decimates a box of cigarettes.

“I *know* you called it,” Engineer rebuts, “but wouldn’t it be nice to let someone else have a turn?”

More grumbles that I will never be able to parse. Engineer understands though, and he prods, finally making the other mercenary step voluntarily down from the cab and around to the back. I take their place next to the Engineer. It still smells of scorched phosphorus.

“So how was your weekend?” Engineer asks sanguinely, the long drive setting into my tailbone as the truck makes its journey over rougher and rougher roads while the mountains climb in front of us. “Didn’t get into any trouble at that convention, did ya?”

Inside my jaw, already clenched, frozen in its perpetual frown, my teeth grind. There are prices paid for a free ride into work every morning, and mine is that nine times out of ten Engineer treats me like a brain-dead geriatric. Like I’m *Pyro*. Thinks I’m one fig short of the whole tree and every minute detail is something to fuss over, thinks he has to watch over me the same way he babysits that idiot in the back of the truck who keeps lighting matches and then whining when the truck’s slipstream blows them out. That doesn’t stop them from lighting another one, nor bemoaning when the wind takes that one too.

“It was fine,” I grunt.

“Really now. Have a good time then?”

I almost want to say it. I almost want to tell it straight to his face that yes I damn well did, and that I met someone while I were there. That this someone isn’t like him, isn’t like *anyone* on BLU, who’s more fun than all of those bleating rubbernecks combined. Who doesn’t think of me as insane or a burden, but an honest to god *friend*, and has glimmer in his eye like he actually wants to hear what I’ll say next.

I want to say all that, but REDs and BLUs aren’t friends, and the brief, bitter satisfaction won’t make up for the broken contract lying in tatters at my feet, scrapped like the shriveled matches. Besides, the Engineer would be the worst person to tell. He’s more tied with BLU than any of us; no, this is something I have to keep close to my chest. A secret even. A good secret, one that the tighter you hold the warmer it makes you, the memory that I’m going to be seeing him again tonight glowing like a cigarette burn on my chest.

“Yeah. Real good time.”

I smile. This, I can tell, puts Engineer ill at ease.

The Red meets me outside a casino with a smart looking button-down and an even smarter grin. I could grow to like that grin. He throws an arm sideways across my shoulders.

“Got you good today, didn’t I,” he says by way of greeting, half a second to squeeze tight and then fall slack again, and it’s surprising how little that bothers me.

“And I got you back Cyclops, don’t forget it.”

We should be more pissed at each other. Blowing someone to gibs and then those gibs to gibs should warrant retribution, not reconciliation, not lingering warm where his sleeve is still pressed to my uniform as he prattles on. The casino ends up not letting us in that night. We don’t mind, especially when the words *we could blow them up* fall out of my mouth so easily, and the Demoman stares at me for one blinding second before a grin crawls up the sides of his face. I was right about learning to like that grin.

“You’re barmy,” he says a little breathlessly.

“I didn’t hear a ‘no’.”

The smile grows, a little manic, a little intoxicating. “I’ve got some gear in the car.”

Later that night I’ll run from the cops with this man at my side for the second time in three days. We’ll drive out far into the desert and stall the engine laughing, and I won’t care that the only thing keeping me company during cold night in the badlands is a man I barely know whose clothes are slightly singed. I lean over and put out the fire that’s been smoldering on his sleeve.

“Fuck,” he laughs at the sky, then repeats, “you’re barmy.”

This time I say nothing, and we get high on desert air and the lingering scent of gunpowder.

That night I put extra boards over my windows. I double, triple, quadruple check the door bar and I keep my shotgun close when I move so much as an inch from my vantage point behind the couch.

From here I can see everything as long as the filthy light filtered through layers of gray curtains can touch it: the sliver of bedroom, a good chunk of kitchen, the bathroom grimy and caked with mold. No one can come at me. There is no angle I cannot see and right now I need that comfort because things have been going too well. There is some sort of *plot* afoot—I already knew the rats in my ceiling have been corroborating with the delivery man from the Italian restaurant I sometimes order from, I just need a few more months of intelligence to get my proof—but this is an entirely new plot. A plot to make me lower my guard. A plot to make me consider inviting Demo over because I heard somewhere a long time ago that that’s what you do when you make a new friend. You hold their dirt-covered hand in theirs and wrap your knuckles on the screen door to ask your mother if so-and-so can come in and she says yes and then the two of you sit on the floor of your bedroom asking each other what you want to do for an hour. That’s definitely a thing that has happened, I’m sure of it. To someone who is me.

But that’s what children do. Civilians. Not Soldiers. This is barely a *home*, it's my…bunker. My bunker with the leaky roof and the rats skittering directly above me and orchestrating their nefarious plots.

(I can hear them conversing. Dammit. Sounds like that deliveryman taught them Italian after all.)

If I sleep out here, behind the couch where I can see everything, maybe that will be a sound enough perimeter. If my base is secure beforehand then maybe…

I'll see him again tomorrow. Across the other side of the gates sure, but it'll be something. My heart beats fast as I drop my head on a commandeered pillow and lay flat on the floorboards.

"I don't get it," he says as we peer through the decal-plastered windows, glass so covered with rainbow silhouettes that we can barely see its innards.

I cock my shotgun. "What's not to get, maggot? Inside these four walls is the greatest threat to America that this country has ever seen! Actually, wait-" The building is kind of weird-shaped, with various additions tacked on to the sides of the non-descript den of depravity. "Inside these, seven, eight, nine-" I shimmy my back against the brick so that I can lean around the corner. "-Ten, eleven, **twelve** walls is the most potent sort of depravity you will ever see in your likely very short lifespan, and you can bet your knee pads on that, Red."

"And that depravity is…?"

"Disco."

Demo frowns. "Disco."

"You heard me maggot!"

"The music."

"You underestimate the mind altering powers of song, and one day that will be your downfall!" I jam a finger at the vinyl stars obscuring my scouting attempts. "Here, they play that garbage for the youth, teach them how to gyrate their hips, spread lies about our national bird!"

"Is the turkey thing still bothering you? Look, I'm sorry I called it-"

"And then," I press on. "They have the audacity to call that drivel music! It has rotted their brains to the point where I can no longer buy a decent pair of pants, so that is why we are breaking in and stealing all of their roller skates."

"…I'll admit, you've lost me."

There's no movement from inside, but that could change at any time. "Are you coming in or not?"

A second drags on, then he shrugs. "Eh, why not. Worth a laugh."

The lock in the back snaps off easily enough. The lock on shoe storage is another matter.

“Oh, so it’s a *roller* disco,” Demo muses as I finally give up and shoot the thing off, yanking open the doors to reveal dozens upon dozens of rental skates. “Aw, these look fun. Blu look, this pair has stickers on it.”

He holds up a skate splattered with cartoon unicorns and a singular out-of-place pineapple.

“Careful private,” I warn, “first it’s ‘this looks fun’ then it’s ‘certainly it can’t be *that* seditious’ then next think you know you’re trying on skates and- Hey! Stop trying on those skates!”

It’s too late. In the half minute I’d lost track of my co-conspirator, he’d been seduced by the ways of Boney M., and is now struggling to his feet on red wheels.

“Bloody hell, how does anyone move in these things?” he asks as he uses the half-wall surrounding the dance floor to hoist himself up.

“I told you! It is the hip gyrations!”

“Ah, alright.”

“No! That does not mean *do* them!”

“I think it’s working though,” Demo says as he steadies, stepping out into the rink. “Oi! This isn’t so bad…ye can like, build up speed with these things, aye?”

“I would not know and it is not in my interests to find out!”

But despite my protests, my multiple warnings to the dangers of roller disco, my friend is lost to me, escaping out onto the ten thousand square-feet of smoothly polished hardwood.

I watch him mournfully. “I should have known your civilian-grade heart was not up to resisting the pull of funk. Defeated, before we even begin.”

“Don’t think of it as defeat, laddie!” he calls, halfway around the circuit, looking like an idiot as he struggles to keep himself upright, a smile imploding his face in hitherto unknown realms of joy. “We’re using their own skates against them! Their er…tools of destruction or whatever. It’s sabotage.”

“Better sabotage would be taking all these skates and throwing them in a lake. Or a volcano! Or a lake inside a volcano!” I say. “And their damn music too!”

“This music?” he asks. There’s a radio resting on a bench just outside the rink. There is suddenly no longer a radio on the bench as the Demoman zooms by and scoops it up. “Well would I look at this mate! They left one of their tapes in!”

“Do not push that button, Red! Do not think about pushing that button! Do not even think about *not* pushing that button!”

He slams the green triangle with his full fist. Immediately the barely lit amphitheater becomes a testament to the powers of Earth Wind & Fire, the disco music oozing in toxic

waves from the now-in-motion radio, hitting me with its salacious shock wave.

“Noooooo…the unamericanness of it all…powers…weakening……”

“Don’t be such a baby,” Demo whizzes by, a fast learner of the ill omened. “You know what your problem is? You don’t know how to vandalize private property properly. It’s supposed to be fun!”

“I will have fun when you turn that racket off!”

“You want this?” He holds up the radio, fist around the handle, dangling it in a taunt if I ever saw one. “Come and get it.”

He scoots away on his stupid little shoes.

I will not let this Red beat me. He’s toying with me now, that maddening smile lighting up his whole face; it’s a bit crooked and I hate what it does to the warmth in my face and the pace of my heart. He shouldn’t be doing things like that to my ticker. I have a condition.

“You.” Each word comes out trodden and growled, forced through gritted teeth so he knows exactly how much he’s going to regret this. “Are going to regret this.”

I walk over and arm myself. Leg myself. Dammit, *whatever*, I put the stupid shoes on.

“CHAAAARGE,” I scream as I barrel onto the floor, my newly acquired skates immediately shooting out from under me and sending me sliding forward on my ass. “Dammit! Red! Reveal the secrets to these things at once!”

“Gotta find a rhythm, laddie,” he says as he slides past, going backwards now, the showoff.

I’ll never catch him at this rate. More delicately this time, I get to my feet, holding out my hands in case the treacherous footwear decides to turn on me again. Demo skates circles around me, the music yet playing, joy on his face that’s making my heart pump in time to the beat. With a battle cry, I lunge at him, but he only steps aside, and I go skittering past. Like a bull against a matador. A bull who is also on rollerskates.

“Try to stay upright before going forward,” he says. “Here.”

Here is all the warning I get. In the brief lapse of seconds, an arm loops under mine from behind, and I am helped to my feet as he chuckles in my ear.

I should make a grab for the radio. I should, but he’s the only thing holding me up and suddenly I don’t care as much about the stupid music box as I did a moment ago. Not when my skate keeps slip-sliding in-between his and it brings us chest to chest.

“Careful. *Careful.* There you go, nice and steady.” His arm is firm around my waist, and though I’m steady I’m finding it difficult to concentrate when his amused snort blows warm air on my neck. “Can I let I go?”

No. “Yes,” I grunt. “I am aaah-” Balance gone, quickly regained. “…I am fine. I have mastered your infernal sport. I am the supreme champion of roller disco.”

“Well looky you!” he snickers and I should use my shovel to smack that sarcasm out of him. “We should have ourselves a wee race then, if you’re so cocksure!”

“You’re on, Buster!”

But he’s off already, and maybe I’ve been hustled because there’s no way he can be this good when he’s lapping me, two, three, four times by the time I make a single revolution of the neon splattered auditorium. He’s left the radio on the red star in the center of the floor and whatever space-drugs they deal in this place must have lingering fumes because I don’t even want to go kick it over. I want Demo to keep shouting useless hints at me. I want him to run into me every now and again as he tries to help my posture and end up knocking us both over.

Somehow we’re back in the center again. He nearly falls over and this time it’s my turn to snicker, a meandering rumble that won’t stay in my chest even as I close my lips to it, and eventually I give up and laugh outright. He does too. His momentum comes towards me and mine towards him but instead of crashing the two of us catch each other, spinning around in opposing velocities, skates scratching half-moons in rubber.

So I keep laughing. I’m not even sure what about anymore. We're in orbit.

He presses his forehead against mine. I hold him more than strictly necessary. It’s hard to breathe, and Demo must not know why he’s laughing either because he keeps doing it. The music thrums, perfect and joyous, and I keep spinning.

The whirr of distant police sirens cuts through the din.

Demo pulls back. “Guess that’s our cue.”

“Always is.”

I didn’t manage to destroy any of the skates but, who knows. Maybe there’ll be a next time. It doesn’t seem so important now as Demo’s car makes the long journey up my driveway, my heart thumping away the giddy adrenaline while my head becomes clearer in direct relation to my distance to home. I’m painfully aware of it as I stand there at the stoop, needles on my skin, broken filaments winding their way around my fingers. Raw, weeping, shockingly aware, but still I ask anyway.

If he wants to come in.

He does.

I show him my magazine collection, my seven unique army knives (for opening breakfast each day of the week, so by the time I come back around to Monday Knife all the dried meat has flaked off), my various recruitment posters that the pawn shop was just going to *throw away*—treasonous bastards. There are medals on my mantel. I take them down one by one

and explain what they're for, but halfway through I notice how he's stopped looking at the medals and is looking at me instead.

I stop talking. He keeps looking.

I take his wrist. He doesn't pull back, doesn't press forward either, just looks at me with a tilt to his head. There is no skate-induced orbital momentum pulling us together this time but still my forehead brushes against his again and my breath falls from my lungs into his. It's no longer jittering, no longer giddy, and he is leaning further to get as much surface area of me as possible. My chin, my lips; but he makes me be the one to make that final plunge into the abyss where our mouths connect.

Pyro wouldn't know if it hit them upside the head, but Engineer catches on right away. I'm smiling too much. It feels weird and foreign on my face but I can't help it, even when he shoots me looks for the next four months on morning drives and rides home. I don't care. BLU, the Administrator, the whole damn world—I don't care about any of them. Sometimes the bond between two men who steal roller skates is an indescribable thing, and no one can take that away from me. We can chuck grenades and fire artillery at each other as much as we please, him standing over what remains of me in his detonated stickie trap and giving a smart little two-fingered salute, and it won't mean anything. I grin, blood on my teeth and dripping out my mouth, and I tell him I'll get him back.

"We could blow them up," I say.

"Sounds like we're repeating ourselves already."

"I didn't hear a 'no'."

He grins, that delighted, awe-inspiring grin that I love, and kisses me brusquely on the mouth before heading to the car. It's a wonderful, steady rhythm we have, and he loads explosives into my arms until I can barely move. Tavish knows the most efficient places to kick out structural supports, wisdom laid out like a map on the back of his hand, says that he used to do normal demolition work a long time ago, between jobs or when the work itself slowed to a *drip drip drip.* The faucet in my apartment does that sometimes. All the time. It lets me know that the water's still there, that it hasn't been replaced by Feds with something worse.

The Feds haven't bothered me of late. This occurs to me as I'm retreating to a safe distance, behind some cars near the soon-to-be-leveled autopark. My employers don't take issue with my extracurricular activities—legality is a case of not throwing grenades in glass houses—but tangoing with law enforcement can sometimes get hairy. Maybe someone else is on my tail then. Nazis, or Commies, or Commie-Nazis-

I gasp. Men in coats—coats and red hats!—are entering my targeted location. Every suspicion confirmed! Those commies are on to me. Who else would be wearing red hats but them?

I will need to intercept them immediately. Quickly, I dive from my hiding spot and sprint after them, already running through scenarios on how I'm going to squeeze information out of them, twisting their arms until they tell me *exactly* how they found where Tavish and I were planning to-

There's a sharp crackling to my left, just inside the garage's door. It hits me suddenly that this might have been a bad idea.

"Crap," I say.

The first detonation knocks out the office from where I came, and I don't give it a chance to catch up to me. I slam into the emergency exit, back between rows of metal shelves, only familiar to I since my foray brought me through here less than an hour before. Another few feet is all I'm able to cover before the shockwave ripples out, heat catching out from under me and flinging me forward into the pavement outside.

I get some nice skid marks on my face. Not fatal, but I groan as I push myself up.

The autoshop is in ruins. Great, fiery ruins that resemble more a burning oil pit than anything a human could inhabit. I watch it, for a while, maybe just maybe getting why Pyro keeps lighting those matches only to let them go out.

"Jane! Jane, please, oh god *please*, Jane *where are you*-"

I've never heard Tavish sound like that before. Pain, pain I've heard, I've felt, I've caused, but the screaming skirting the edges of the fire is terror like I've never been witness to. I call out, because of course I don't want him to be worried, I'm just fine after all, but then that call is filled with more coughing than I thought there would be.

I try again. "Tav…" Then dissolve into another fit.

"Jane!"

Now he's closer, finally scrambling into view, and my ears did not deceive me because pain is exactly what his face is too. He runs at me full tilt, crashing down beside me and practically hauling me into his arms. It's a rough way to be returned to a sitting position, but I don't have enough strength to do more the lean my head against his chest.

"Fuck. Oh *fuck*, Jane I- oh god I thought I did it again, *Jesus*-"

The crying I've heard too, but mostly when he's drunk, long and bemoaning and a few firm hugs will usually get it out of him. This is not that, nor intemperance—more like he keeps forgetting he's crying at all, tears only flowing out in between the gaps in the panic. It feels a bit much. Sure I'm a little singed, but not enough that he needs to squeeze me like he's going to keep me from being dragged off to hell himself.

"I saw you running back in, but by then the fuses were already lit and I- Fuck," he hisses. "What in the bloody hell was that about!? Why on Earth did you go in there?"

“Saw some Commies,” I explain, now that he’s not holding me so tight and I can breathe a bit better. “Followed them. Needed to figure out what they’re doing here, how much they know!”

“…Commies?”

“Communists! Ruskies, Tavish. Those men that went in with the red hats!” This is followed by a cough.

“…The firefighters?” The pain is melting, something uglier underneath as Tavish leans back and grits his teeth. “You ran back into a building rigged to explode because you thought the firefighters were communists?”

“I did not *think*, I know!”

“Damn right you didn’t *think*.” He gets to his feet, pacing around I and tearing off his beanie one-handed so he can rub his nails along his scalp. “Goddamnit Jane I thought I-” He lifts a hand in my direction as though to make some elaborative gesture, but none comes, and he lets it fall back down to his side. “Damn you.”

“I do not know why you’re getting mad at me. I was doing my American duty.”

His silhouette against the crackling building is inscrutable and everything smells like extinguished dynamite.

Tavish is silent as he drives me home. It’d dark inside, out later and more disastrously than most of our excursions. Tavish reaches for the light switch, but I bark at him, “are you crazy? Keep those that damn things off! Do you want to give away our location to every sniper in the closest mile?”

“*Me?*” And crap, I knew this fight was coming, could taste it like copper on my tongue. “I’m the *crazy* one? Bloody hell Jane, what in the hell were you thinking out there? You could have- I almost-”

“I don’t see what the big deal is,” and maybe I don’t. I fold my arms. I don’t look at him. If I could see it, I choose not to. “What’s done is done maggot.”

“Oh really? Something like that’s never going to happen again? Never happened *before*?” He throws his arms about wildly. “Jesus, I never minded, you know. All ‘o this. It was even fun at first.”

“Oh it was *fun* was it?” I snap. “When it’s all explosions and minor property damage it’s *fun*, but as soon as the going gets tough I’m *too much* for you, private?” The words spit like acid, too real--I was never good at clouding in metaphor, hiding what I wanted to say even as it stings leaving my lips. “Go on! Say it! I have heard it a thousand times and once more from your sorry excuse for a pie-hole won’t make a difference.”

“Don’t you *dare* try to make it about that,” he snarls. “I had to watch. I thought I killed someone I love *again* and-” He sputters to a stop. “I...I make it worse don’t I?”

“The hell are you talking about?”

“You. I encourage you. I make it worse.”

“*This is not about you.*” But he’s already withdrawing. I can see it in his eye that I’m losing him. I know that if I don’t say something now it will all fall apart.

Instead, I do the worst thing imaginable: I cough. I keep coughing.

He looks away in shame. “I don’t know if I can keep doing this.”

It feels inevitable. A blade moving slowly toward you that you have no power to stop, but tears into you all the same. The hurt is so strong I file it into a fine point of rage and stare it into him.

“Figures.”

All of him withdraws. “Jane…I need to…take some time.”

“Just go.”

“I...I don’t want to end things but I need-”

“Go,” I repeat.

He does. The apartment is empty. The way I always wanted it.

“Something the matter, Soldier?” Engineer asks, too delicately, too everything, and it makes me want to reach over and strangle him.

I curl my lip at the dashboard, and say, “I’m going to sit in the back.”

He doesn’t utter a word as I open the cab door and drop onto the packed badlands sand.

No reply when I clamber into the truck bed either, from he or Pyro, a thick rumble of the ignition turning over as his response. I should talk to him. It could help, maybe with the guilt, maybe with the questions that chase each other around inside my head—but I can’t bring myself to, not even when it looks like things are over. I’d have to explain I’ve been cavorting with a Red, and I can’t sink to that sort of betrayal. Of myself or of Tavish.

So instead I sit, silently existing next to a squirming rubber suit as the truck takes the three of us into work. Today Pyros has a lighter rather than their matches, and they can keep it lit for around fifteen seconds at a time before the wind takes it away.

They’re awfully quiet. I’ve always thought that, but it’s not exactly true, not between their joyous coos and their equally despondent wails when the light finally goes out. It’s just that they don’t have a lot to say, at least not that anyone besides Engineer can understand. They depend on him to translate; they depend on him for most things, actually.

“How do you stand it?” I ask them.

Pyro, having not actually engaged in a word of conversation with me before this, looks up from their lighter. They tilt their head, noise of confusion tumbling through the mask.

“Engineer. Always having him…*fuss* over you. Drives me goddamn crazy.”

They shrug, humming something happily, cheerful even though the flame has gone out. They know they can just light it again.

“It doesn’t bother you that he thinks you’re too incompetent to be left on your own?” I don’t mean it to sound so bitter, so *projected*, or to reveal that’s what think about them too too.

The string of words is accompanied by a shake of their head. I even catch some of them, something along the lines of *not like that. That’s what friends do.* They tug on my elbow slightly.

“*Me?* I don’t need anyone looking out for *me*, Smokey. I already have a friend, and it’s not like *that*.” I stop, a tightness in my throat. “*Had* a friend.”

The *oh noooooo* is clear enough to anyone, especially since Pyro has a habit of over-emoting —I’ve never been sure if this is compensation for the mask, or if they’ve always been that way. The tugging on my arm increases to practical shaking. They want to know what happened.

I intake through my nose. It’s still inside of me, the confusion, the knowing that something’s gone wrong. It all wants to come out but…

Pyro’s quiet. If anyone can keep a secret, it’s them.

“Alright here Pyro, this conversation does *not* leave the back of this truck.” I glance furtively through the rear window, but Engineer’s eyes are locked firmly on the road. “I have been… fraternizing. With a Red.”

They put both hands to their face and gasp in horror.

The whole sordid story comes out. I talk until my mouth is dry, which is an accomplishment because usually I can spend a whole day shouting myself hoarse with no ill effects, but some time during the telling I find that my throat has swollen up.

“I wish that…” I stop myself. Wishes are for children and hippies and I am neither. Not some snot-nosed kid anymore. “I…want whatever it was before. When shit made sense and there weren't these damn...*questions*.”

Pyro murmurs in agreement. Before I have a chance to stop them, they wrap their arms around me with the force of a train.

“Oof,” I say.

In response, they reply something to the effect of *you still have us*.

“We are not *friends*, cupcake,” I say.

They giggle, and I don’t pull them off. Engineer shoots the two of us a look when he finally gets out of the truck, but all I manage to is sigh. He chuckles empathetically.

And, well. I do feel better. I’m still not sure…if Tavish is ever coming back. Maybe he shouldn’t. Maybe he was right. Maybe I’m too far gone, and fellow lunatics are all I deserve.

The Voice shows me a video that proves beyond the maybe.

“A fraud,” I seethe. “How dare he. How dare he, I’ll-”

It’s not his voice. Even I know that. I know lots of things, rattling around in there, but they’re like old knick-knacks in the back of the garage. Knowing how things should be or how I should act do not weigh the way they should, and rage is a far more powerful shaper of a man’s actions than the things he has shoved away.

“I will rip him limb from limb! I will string him up by his own intestines! I will tear off his head and beat him to death with it, he *promised* he-”

She is pleased with the barely intelligible tirade as I pace about. The TV man does not leave.

After a while it occurs to me that she’s waiting for something.

I turn. “When.”

“When what, Mister Doe?” She is now less pleased.

“When did he say that. When is this video from.”

She wasn’t expecting me to ask that. One of the little things rattling around in my head tells me that much.

“Does it matter?”

A man who left rather than think he was hurting me, even indirectly. When would he have said that. What would have prompted it.

The Voice is like the rest: she thinks me one short. Barely worth the effort. Someone who dances to her tune with the barest of prompting.

“...It doesn’t matter what he said,” I conclude, and the background voices cheer. “I won’t do it.”

“I assure you Mister Doe,” the woman inside the little box attached to the scrawny civilian says. “This man has taken a contract on your life. Your choices are to defend myself using the weapons we provide you or-” Her eyes are cold, even through the screen. “-We will do his work for him.”

He said he never wanted to hurt me. I never wanted to hurt him. I snarl in her direction. “I’d like to see you try, lady.”

In the end, there were far too many of them. I valued my bunker for its difficulty to locate rather than its own merits, and though that had served me well for many years it was never meant to be unassailable. I killed seven of her men before someone brought a baton hard across the back of my helmet.

I can still feel the welt.

It throbs in time with the car’s engine, close as I am with my cheek pressed against the fuzz of the lining, thinking about my missing helmet, my smashed medals on the mantle. The apartment that I’ll never see again. The Demoman that I’ll…

I’ve never been a quitter, but it’s hard to see a way out of this one. I chose my side and my side was not betraying my best friend—this is my prize for that. If only her people been as lazy with the bindings around my wrists and ankles as they had been with the gag that now hangs around my chin, damp and tasting vaguely of motor fluid, but they know where to put their priorities. I don’t bother screaming for help. I can tell from the long stretch of straight road that I’m far outside of civilization. It won’t be long now.

“God damn it,” I say, words so bitter I want to sandpaper them off my tongue, scrub my eyes until the shame behind them goes away. But I don’t have that ability, so I hiss quietly to my audience of no one.

Which is what I think until the bags of quicklime behind me move.

There’s another person tied in this trunk with me. My heart hammers as the jolt of dread forces itself into me like an ice pick behind the eye, because the only person in the world they would bother executing at the same time is-

“Tavish?”

The object behind me, halfway through the process of waking from its own concussion, pauses.

“Hmmn?” it groans.

The shame I’ve been trying to hold back reigns victorious.

“*Fuck*,” I say, grieving the single word.

It takes some minutes in the dark trunk, but try as we might there is no space to turn around, no way to angle ourselves to get at each other’s restraints. Some friction and a few banged skulls, and Tavish manages to get the gag out of his mouth.

The only thing that follows is long seconds of silence.

I'm painfully aware that we have precious few of those, and I feel them slipping away like sand down an hourglass. I can't break the silence, though, not with how his breath is shaking, not when I know too well what trying to hide tears sounds like.

When he finally speaks, it's with his face pressed against the PVC while he says, "I'm so sorry."

"What?" I ask, because it's the last thing I expected him to say now.

"I had these photos. I just wanted some memories of us, but I kept some of those photos of two of us together, and they must have found them, I'm so *stupid* I-"

"Tav," I say. "Shut up."

He hiccups into silence.

"I'm not letting you blame yourself for this too," I tell him. "We've both been careless as shit, and- fuck- I never got to say sorry either. For running into that building. I know I'm not…all together sometimes but...thank you. For coming back for me."

I want nothing more than to put his hand in mine.

He's crying. Quietly, but there isn't much room that he can hide it from me. After more seconds and more sand he says, "we're really going to die, aren't we?"

"Yeah. Seems like it." I swallow. "So. They offered you the same deal, huh?"

"Looks like. I thought something like this would happen, but when I heard what they were asking me to do I just…I couldn't."

"…Is your Mum alright?"

He breathes in sharp. "I-I dunno. They got me good and I don't know if…"

I regret asking. I regret more not being able to bury my face into his chest. "She's fine. I'm sure of it. She's a tough old lady."

"…Aye. That she is." And there's no use worrying otherwise, not any more.

More silence, thrum of an empty highway.

He says, "maybe we should have just said yes."

"Really?" I ask.

"Aye. Knowing what we know now, don't you want to go back and take the deal? We'd probably tear each other to bits, but at least we'd still be alive."

"I don't think I would," I say after a while. "I love you Tavish. I wouldn't trade that for the world. It was all worth it, in my book."

“Oh,” he says. The sniffles get louder, then slower again, rising and falling like a tide. He croaks, “I think you’re worth it too. And if…if we’d had more time, I would have tried harder. For us.”

“I would have tried harder too.”

When the Administrator’s men finally lift the lid of the trunk, we both have to quell tears before facing the woman on the screen.

It’s a gravel pit, just like she promised. People I don’t recognize—dressed like the ones who raided my apartment with their purple jumpsuits and black masks—surround us as white light and grey gravel fill my vision. We’re not even given the dignity of standing up, simply grabbed under an arm on each side and hauled bodily into the waiting pit below. Another man, another TV screen. We’re thrown on our knees before it.

“Mr. DeGroot. Mr. Doe. I would like you to know it is a *vast* understatement when I say this outcome is…*disappointing*.”

Her expression is just as chilling as it was a few hours ago, leaned over her switchboard like she could reach through the screen and strangle me with her press-on nails. I’d like to see her try. If there’s one thing I could out-strangle it’s a single arm coming out of an idiot box.

“Our mercenaries are expected to maintain a certain standard of conduct,” the Administrator goes on. “Of *loyalty*. And yet here you are. You have both betrayed me *and* your employers with your open disregard for self control, with your *friend-making*. The only glimmer of salvageable material from your foolish breach in contract is that when your long and *excruciating* deaths are complete, your coworkers will learn from your example and think before toeing the line in the future. You could have *listened to your conscious*-”

“Jesus lady,” Tavish cuts in with an exhausted eye roll. “You’re jealous, we get it.”

I snort. And why not? It’s not like I have anything else to lose at this point, why not get in a little gallows humor. Tavish shoots me a grin that lets me know that jibe was just for me.

The Administrator is less amused. “Shoot that one first.”

The man closest to Tavish lowers his shotgun, and in less than a second after the order the Demoman jerks as a shot louder than a rocket reverberates through the gravel pit. I can’t even flinch. All I can do is stare as Tavish crumples to the ground, groaning as blood and worse flows from his abdomen. Just like that. Snap of the fingers, and the smallest victory turned back into a nightmare.

“If we can continue,” she says. “As I said, your *gross* insubordination will be-”

My mouth works silently. She keeps going with her petty, nearly childish speech, but I can’t hear it. Too busy staring at Tavish’s prone form, watching as he tries to clutch his stomach while his hands are bound around his back. All he can do is bring his knees close to his chest as he spills blood onto the gravel. I’m pulled from my shock enough to try and squirm feebly toward him, but the hand on the back of my neck holds me firm and all I can do is *watch*.

He looks up and tries to find my eyes. Then a wave of pain rolls over him and he whimpers, curling in closer until I can't see his face.

"-the lack of respect for ones employers-"

"*I am going to kill you*!" The certainty of those words finds me, and through them my voice shakes loose, reality tossed to the side as rage takes his place. "I will not die here, do you hear me you pathetic, *maggoty* little crone? I am going to find you and tear your throat with my teeth! You can take every single weapon from my hands but that will not protect you *useless, shit-eating,* ***worm***."

My lungs wheeze just from that effort. She blinks tiredly in my direction. "Beat that one until he stops talking."

A boot takes me in the side of the head.

I don't stop shouting though, and if they're going to beat me until then, it's going to be a while. The need to go to Tavish is overridden by the desire to tear every single one of them to pieces, to a pile of human remains their mothers wouldn't recognize. They throw me to the ground, raining down far worse than what I received at my apartment, worse than I've ever received. Ribs shatter like glass light bulbs, splitting open and lodging themselves in my insides as a blow to my head is joined by a dozen more. They kick my groin, and when I curl up defensively they instead go for my spine, digging steel-toed shoes until I can barely feel at all.

I only stop yelling when breathing becomes more important. By that time, my nose is too much snot and broken cartilage to use, and my mouth is too much smashed teeth.

Briefly, I catch sight of Tavish, when my face comes to the ground and the two of us am at eye level for once. He can't see me anymore. His eye is open, dead and glossy, and a new wave of anger and grief wells up inside of me and *I will kill each and every one of you. You will all goddamned pay. How dare you, how* ***dare*** *you.* In a second I will stand up. I will avenge both of us. I will make them pay, I will kill them for ever having made us hide in the first place.

But I can't. I'm going to die. All that working on breathing and it's just getting slower, a hand on the back of my neck picks me up and slams me down again, and me and…

Couldn't save him, just like he couldn't save me from myself.

No one will even know. Miles from civilization, from water, from anything, the only thing I had was him and no one will remember me. As the darkness closes in on my vision, I think that there's no one out here but us and our executioners.

So then why's the sound of a car getting so loud?

It takes exactly four seconds for everything to change. One moment I'm lying face down while a knee presses into my back, the next the engine's thrum becomes an ear splitting roar as a blue flatbed truck comes fuming overhead, clearing the pit as it goes tearing through

space. Well, mostly clearing. It clips the man holding me, missing me by feet and tearing him off me. A second later the truck lands, taking out the farthest men and splattering them like particularly mushy bowling pins. The air is screaming. My nostrils fill with engine oil. I lift my head in sheer incredulity.

The entire gravel pit jumps to action as the mercenaries now have something much more pressing to deal with as a blue-suited maniac jumps out of the passenger seat and shakes a flamethrower over their head.

"…Pyro?"

My question, spoken in disbelief, is answered by a belch of flame from the thrower's end, engulfing the nearest huddle of TF mercs who've only now drawn their weapons. As they scream, another figure leans out the driver's side window and fires a shotgun shell into the closest bystander.

One of those mercs initially crushed under the truck's tire was the one sporting the television screen. I know, because as I feebly try to lift myself and comprehend what just happened, I can hear, "what is going on out there?" The screen rolls further into the pit. "Mercenaries! Answer me!"

In reply, the nearest three mercenaries scream as they're burned alive.

"Too many!" Engineer yells, a return shot taking off his side mirror. "Grab him and let's get out of here!"

I still haven't processed the truck's arrival, let alone that I'm the *him* in question. Not until a pair of strong, gloved hands are haul me to my feet, and a fire axe cuts the bindings around my wrists and ankles. I stagger. Pyro catches me.

"No, wait," I wheeze. "Give me a shovel. I will disembowel every last one of them."

Pyro *hudda huh*s in the negative. They drag me, but *will* I kill them, every last one of them, I will…

The truck revs its engine, and my heart lurches as I remember-

"No! No wait!"

Pyro's taking me away from him. Tavish is still curled on the ground, and I will not leave him, I have to go back, to stand over his body and kill anyone who tires to touch him. Pyro follows my gaze.

"Please," I say, because they know, they have to understand. "I can't leave him."

"We don't got time for that!" Engineer calls out his window as he provides cover fire, the two of us almost into the truck. I can't let them take me away-

Pyro shoves me the last few feet upward, into the truck bed. "No," I beg. "I can't-"

But Pyro, blessed, godsent Pyro does not join us. They turn around, locate the best path back into the bottom of the gravel pit, and charge in.

“Dammit,” Engineer calls. "Pyro he's a **goner** just-"

Pyro runs back into the line of fire still aimed in the truck's direction, immediately dropping to their knee and fireman-hauling Tavish onto their shoulder. The air is so full of bullets yet still they run, gravel splashing underfoot, their flamethrower offering no protection as they storm the last few feet to the truck.

They crash clumsily into the back, shoving Tavish into my arms. There is a noise in my throat —what kind it was meant to be I can’t be sure with my broken face and broken body but *oh god he’s still warm.*

“Tavish,” I breathe. “Tavish, please, oh god *please*…”

My arm is broken but goddamn if I don’t pull him as close to me as I can, burying my face in his neck, silently begging him to still be in there. My hands find his wound, putting as much pressure as I can, thinking how if I can just stop the bleeding everything will be OK.

“Go go go!” Pyro says, and the truck speeds up and over the lip of the pit in a hail of gravel.

Gunfire recedes behind us. They might follow us, but I’m pretty sure Pyro torched their rides in that first round of flamethrower-ing. Good. I fucking hated that trunk.

A minute of silent car ride passes. Then two. It might as well have been another friendly carpool to work.

Pyro scoots closer, mumbling, “*is he…?*”

“I…” I say.

Tavish stirs, fighting back to consciousness.

“Tavish,” I say. “Tav you’re alive. Christ we’re alive.”

His eye flicks open, those long lashes fluttering for just a second before closing again. “Oh. That’s good.”

I lift my head to look at the two around me, the ones I have to thank for that. People who were barely coworkers. People who maybe should have been my friends but…well, I didn’t think they actually cared.

“How did you…?” I ask, not sure how to finish. But then my eyes fix on the back of Engineer’s helmet, unmoving as he stares ahead at the road. “You. Your family.”

“Yeah *me*,” Engineer snorts derisively. “And I burned a lot of bridges taking advantage of those family connections, all just to save your sorry ass. What were you even *thinking* getting mixed up with a Red?”

My head spins to Pyro, somehow mildly betrayed even under the pain and the…everything else. “You said you wouldn’t tell him!”

“*Nuh-uh. Said it wouldn’t leave the back of this truck. I told him in the back.*”

I’m flabbergasted; not only by Pyro's blatant misinterpreting of friendship confidentiality agreements, but by the fact that I understood most of what they just said.

“Hmph,” I mutter. “Well all that bridge burning is going to go to waste if we don’t get a dispenser back here soon.”

“Can’t drive and build a dispenser at the same time, now can I?” We’re moving slow enough now that I can hear Engineer when he shouts out the open back window. “I figure we go straight to Medic. Who knows, maybe he’ll throw his life and career out the window too, just like all of us. You realize that right? That ‘cause we’re doing this for you, me ‘n Pyro are out of a job?”

“Oh, out of the job,” Tavish says faintly. “Must be real terrible for you.”

This reminder, that he’s here, that he’s still breathing, prompts me to pull him closer if that were even possible. The chuckle I want comes out as more of a dry sob. I kiss Tavish’s cheek, still not quite believing this is real. Sure we’re now fugitives from the two most powerful companies in America, but we’ve got a truck and some friends and a lot of open highway.

“I love you,” I say so Pyro and Engineer don’t overhear.

He reaches up, and pulls me down until our foreheads touch.

“I meant what I said about trying harder,” I tell him. “We’ll figure something out.”

“Aye.” His hand is warm against the side of my neck. “I think we’ve proved that we’re both too thick-headed to give up on this.”

I kiss his lips, flakes of blood falling away.

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