

# chapter 1

**Stray**

**by Dahne**

The becomings link into each other. The one present in one second becomes the one of the next, the change infinitesimal but indelible. Constant motion, the tide, with no choice but forward and so many ways to make it. They nest, inextricable, the waters that can be sieved over and over with no division into their components and no way of plucking out one to see where it started.

*Time flows like a river...*

It will not wait. It will not repair. It will not relent. It has no color, shore, or mercy. The space between fingers is enough for it, no matter how hard they clench. It erodes, moment flowing into moment, and makes the shape it makes. It has its law, and that is the thing that never breaks. The torrent slows where it cares to, falters to its own design, and the dams are always brittle. The edges hold strict with mortal rigor, unbending, unyielding, deaf.

But there are currents...

And wherever there is a border, there is a door.

*What can change the nature of a man?*

This eBook was generated by the [FanFiction Recommendation Engine](#)

This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge

**Original Source:** <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/1/>

# chapter 1

**Stray** by **Dahne**

The becomings link into each other. The one present in one second becomes the one of the next, the change infinitesimal but indelible. Constant motion, the tide, with no choice but forward and so many ways to make it. They nest, inextricable, the waters that can be sieved over and over with no division into their components and no way of plucking out one to see where it started.

*Time flows like a river...*

It will not wait. It will not repair. It will not relent. It has no color, shore, or mercy. The space between fingers is enough for it, no matter how hard they clench. It erodes, moment flowing into moment, and makes the shape it makes. It has its law, and that is the thing that never breaks. The torrent slows where it cares to, falters to its own design, and the dams are always brittle. The edges hold strict with mortal rigor, unbending, unyielding, deaf.

But there are currents...

And wherever there is a border, there is a door.

*What can change the nature of a man?*

This eBook was generated by the [FanFiction Recommendation Engine](#) | This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/1/>

# chapter 2

**Stray** by **Dahne**

*Betrayal can change the nature of a man.*

It would be a lie to say that Ocelot did not enjoy spying. This would make it easier. Lately, he'd found that before he said something that was actually true there tended to be a long pause. Few noticed this trait, as it was displayed very rarely. There were times when he enjoyed all the business of chasing people around with guns and keeping a straight face while telling the most powerful men in several countries that yes, he'd meant for that to happen, that he almost forgot that some aspects of the job were a monumental pain in the ass.

For examples, retrieving documents. More precisely, combing through them to see which documents were worth retrieval. He liked his work, but not when it was boring. Granin's office had enough paper in it to construct a workable scale model library of Alexandria, and it stank of new shoes and liquor. Ocelot flipped viciously through a stack of unintelligible documents. This demanded no subtlety, no cunning, and offered absolutely no opportunities to show off at all. Worse, it gave him time to think.

Ocelot understood bullets. He liked the artful way the machinery was arranged, the unapologetic singlemindedness of it. He liked the contradictions, the absurd delicacy of the tiny mechanisms like the careful inner colonies of a antique pocketwatch and with the power to stop a heart. And yet, it could do nothing on its own. Cordite, hammer, trigger; it was he who was the true catalyst. Direction was everything. It was all in the guidance. His was the choice, and it was always "yes." The moment when perception and action became simultaneous was where he lived. Death was always a possibility, lurking behind him. He preferred it to keep its hands where he could see them.

Useless! It was all useless. How the hell had this man ever run a design bureau? Sokolov had been a pathetic coward, but at least he had interspersed his sniveling with bouts of being useful. Leaving one's affairs in this disgraceful state was an outright insult to the clandestine operative who'd have to rummage through them. That the engineer was somewhat unlikely to have taken this into account made no discernable impression on Ocelot's rapidly mounting frustration. He shoved aside a stack of stained schematics. Nothing but paper. Wasting the keenness of his vision on things that were already dead made his jaw clench with impotent indignation. In the entire mess, he had found a total of two things that were of any interest whatsoever. Of those, one could easily have some fatal flaw that someone more knowledgeable about engineering would spot immediately as rendering it a futile effort, and the other was a cache of vodka.

It was the lack that got to him. Ocelot hated being still. Whenever there was nothing demanding his attention he'd keep his eyes busy looking, noticing things and tracking the arcs they made in the air. In the times when the objects in motion had all finished their trajectories and hung there, patient, he could think things. About how it hadn't felt good to kill a comrade, and how one of these days it might.

Next stack. Illegible. Incoherent. Worthless. He thought about what Snake...John might be doing right now. Wondered if he was doing the same thing. Sifting through the wreckage of someone else's mess. The perfect soldier. The kind of man he'd used to think he wanted to be, before he found out there was no such thing. He'd bested every test Ocelot could give, even the invisible, impossible ones. He had watched, waiting for Snake to fail him, to break or twist or run away, for the chambers to line up so that he could pull the trigger and drink the agony as it tore through and murdered that last

bit of weakness. But it hadn't. He was too strong. Honorable. Virtuous. Ocelot wondered how long it would be until someone shot him in his sleep.

Files. More of them. He tried to force himself to focus. There were advantages to everything, if you knew how to look for them. At least it kept him away from Raikov. Avoiding him was worth even having to sort through this mess. If being willing to sleep with Volgin wasn't evidence enough of lunacy - and it was - one of Ocelot's most reliable witnesses swore to having seen the disturbingly pretty major shoot a snake and *eat* the damned thing. As Ocelot had come to know very well, there were two distinct kinds of madness. In some cases, it meant that the process of deciding in which way to act was as logical - and thereby predictable - or more so than that of an average mind, and only the action itself that was exceptional. Instead of Input A equals Output B, it was Input A equals Fry The Hell Out Of Whoever Happens to be Annoying You And Punch Through His Skull For Good Measure. Utterly knocked, but perfectly logical for all that. Raikov was the other kind. His was the kind with no rhyme or harmony whatsoever, even the sort where "suspicion" rhymed with "throw him around in a barrel until there's not much left to be suspicious of." His was the kind that you expected to find standing in the center of the wreckage, his hands folded behind his back, as the ashes drifted down and the guttering embers cast a lurid glow, blinking innocently and saying, "What?" The two of them complimented each other, he supposed. Like oil and fire. Or potassium and cyanide. God only knew what Raikov would be like now that the colonel was dead. The idea of Volgin as the stabilizing influence in any relationship was terrifying on a deep, fundamental level.

Volgin was dead, now. No surprise there, hard as it was to fully wrap one's mind around the concept. The colonel was the sort of man that it was impossible to imagine dying, even as you knew he couldn't grow old. Ocelot wondered if he was like that himself, yet.

It all came down to words and paper. The red leather of his gloves snatched at a sheaf of diagrams. Was *this* what it was all for? Flat dead things that didn't mean anything until someone decided they were worth killing for, bleeding for, dying for? Was *this* the wisdom to give an eye for? Ocelot held to no comforting lies, and despised anyone who did. He knew that when it happened, when his luck finally ran out and he was face down in the dust, choking on heat and pain, trying to hold the warmth in with his fingers in the way that he had seen so many men do because in the same way that you knew it couldn't do any good you knew you had to try, paper was what he would be, a report passed glibly from one hand to another, maybe a crossed-out line on some master list of available resources. So was everyone, in one way or another. Funny, how it was only while he was out where the possibility was breathing ragged on his face while it whispered that the only things between them were his wits and his skill that he could really forget that.

There was nothing for him here. He should have been out *doing* something, not pawing through the leavings of some old fool drunk or stupid enough to leave critical documents lying between diagrams that were obviously worthless even in their half-finished state and a robot figurine.

Wait.

Ocelot should have noticed that. Ocelot *would* have noticed that. He made a career of seeing what other people didn't. The idea that anything as odd as a tiny, grey-green robot with a button on its base could have slipped beneath his attention was laughable. And yet, there it sat, calmly existing at him.

Ocelot did what any reasonable person faced with a mysterious red button in the middle of a weapons research lab would do.

He pushed it.

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/2/>

# chapter 3

## Stray by Dahne

(Author's Note: Belated props to **amethystwolf** for providing the whole idea in the first place, and to Planescape: Torment for providing the running theme, which is readily apparent if you've experienced it, and if you haven't...well, you really should. Ten bucks in the Best Buy bargain bin. Come on.)

---

*The world can change the nature of a man.*

Ideas are the obnoxious adolescent of the mind. They sit sullenly at the edges, refusing to respond to society's polite proddings, letting it be known to all and sundry that there is something hidden beneath the blank facade and like hell are they going to share it. Then, when one's back is turned, there is a heavy tap on the shoulder and a low, aggrieved voice imparting what may either be unparalleled wisdom, utter lunacy, a complete waste of time, or perhaps parts of all three, and it is only long after the initial moment that it is possible to tell the difference. Often, they knock at the doors of perception and flee as soon as the call is heeded, leaving only a glimpse as they retreat into the uncharted wilds of mental suburbia. How to respond to the intrusions is left to the discretion of the individual. Some jot down a vague description and leave it for a future moment when it may become pertinent. Some ignore it and wait for the nagging noises to find someone else to bother. And some pursue.

Hal Emmerich fell decidedly into the latter category. This had presented some problems around the course of his life; when what one's superiors wanted was a walking nuclear equipped battle tank, they are often unimpressed by protests concerning one's sudden bouts of inspiration. Thus, his newfound freedom had, along with obliging him to help destroy his less well thought out creations, also freed him to pursue whatever muse chose to alight and tug unsubtly at his brainstem.

That was the underlying problem, really. It was possible to become so engrossed in the manipulation of trajectory and delivery that it was easy to forget that what it was delivering was a nuclear warhead. Sometimes he was so fascinated with a problem that he forgot it was one better off not solved. That the Metal Gear project had begun as an absentminded sketch in the corner of a plan for a new type of hydraulic engine was something he was continuously aware of and never mentioned.

"Hal."

He knew that tone. It was measured, patient, and almost always preceded a conversation that began with "why?" and ended when somebody gave up.

"Yeah?" Otacon answered.

"Why is there a time machine in the garage?"

This was going to be one of those.

Otacon looked up from a page of cryptic notes to see that Dave's face matched his voice.

"A time machine?" he said, grinning as he wondered where stoic Snake got such a bizarre idea. "Granted, there's a lot of old projects out there, but why would you think one's something like *that*?"

Dave's arms were crossed, and his eyes and voice were equally even. "There's a label on it that says 'Time Machine.'"

"Oh." Otacon contemplated this for a moment, sifting through the flour of thought for the skittering weevils of sustained memory. Soon he caught it. "Oh, right! That's from back when I got this

idea about temporal fluctuations and how it might be possible, under the right conditions, to manipulate them out of their habits. It's sort of like changing the course of a river, except only for a certain part of it, so you'd leave most of it where it was, just with that one part out where the rest of it *might* have been. I wanted to see if it could really work. I got pretty far, but there were a lot of problems. For one thing, no matter how you configure it, the first contact has to be made from the destination point, which is sort of like unlocking a door with a key that's on the other side, and of course that's impossible unless you've already gone back to place the object that contact is initiated *with*, so there's a paradox there that's more or less insurmountable since..."

Dave gave him a look that said he could wait all day if he had to.

"No," he summarized. "No, it couldn't."

Dave nodded, satisfied.

"You can get rid of it, if you want," Hal said, scratching out a line of measurements that he recognized as being theoretically sound, but slightly flawed in the details. It was odd, how time, even short periods, could have such a change on perspective. Often, after a late night, he'd find himself looking at things he'd written in the grip of inspiration as though they had been scrawled by a stranger; sometimes he was struck by the unexpected insight in the midst of routine, and sometimes he was surprised to find that what had felt as though it seethed with frantic urgency turned out, in the light of day, to make absolutely no sense. What in the hell was "LCL HCL i am i 0-9" supposed to mean?

"Tried that," said Dave. "It won't move."

"Oh, yeah," Otacon said. "I had to bolt it down. There's a lot of excess energy generated in the process, at least the way I'd envisioned it, and if the machine shifted you might end up with an arm fifty years away from your body, which wouldn't be very-"

"Hal."

"Yeah?"

Dave was gazing at him levelly. "I don't care."

"Oh. Right. Guess I might as well go and dismantle it, then." Otacon swept the layer of diagrams spread across the table into an abstract pile design. He had been thinking of something like a metal Gear, but much smaller and more maneuverable and with a camera attached, but he realized that that was just silly. "I'm not making a lot of progress with this anyway."

Living and working together for as long as they had, Otacon mused as he shoved the schematics somewhere that he'd think about when he needed them again, the two men had come to a kind of understanding. They were both introverted enough by nature to provide companionship without driving each other crazy. When it had become apparent that they would be working together for a long time, it was only practical to move in together. Hal had expressed trepidation, reluctant to intrude into Snake's private life, but Dave's eyes had clouded and he grunted something about having had enough of girls for the foreseeable future. A part of friendship was prudence, and Otacon knew better than to ask. They provided something of a counterpoint to each other. Such as in the matter of the dogs, one of which followed Otacon with proprietary curiosity as he gathered up a few tools and headed out to the garage. Being a sentimental soul, one of the first things he had done after becoming acquainted (a process consisting primarily of withstanding an onslaught of a few dozen incarnations of fifty-pound animal, the survival of which appeared to raise his estimation several notches in the eyes of both dog and Snake) was to inquire after nomenclature.

("Don't have any.")

"Why not?"

A shrug, and a halfhearted, "After a week on the battlefield, nobody has a name."

"Huh? Then how do you pass around orders and things?"

"Metaphor, Hal."

"Oh.")

Thus names were left to Otacon. The dogs seemed to like them, though that could have just been projection on his part.

Cold as it was, he left the door partway open, so that he wouldn't be interrupted by a scratching at it if Asuka took it into her head to leave. The machine – Hal was always vaguely embarrassed to think of it as a 'time machine'; it made him feel as if he were acting out a scene from one of those sci-fi novels from the eighties with the title in metallic foil on the cover above a drawing of an inexplicably buxom alien woman – loomed near the far wall, but it did not, as he had taken care to assure, lurk. It wasn't terribly impressive, unless one was unaccountably taken with plain metal archways. Otacon tended to like them better, the outwardly unassuming things. He hadn't had many good experiences with the other sort.

At a soft sound from the direction of the doorway, Otacon glanced up sharply. It was only Motoko, slipping through the door to settle in a corner and watch him with implacable canine serenity. Hal laughed sheepishly at himself.

"I'm edgy today," he told her. "Must be something in the air, huh?"

She stared blandly at him, before turning her attention to a resilient spider whose architectural efforts in the area of real estate where the apex of the machine arched near the ceiling were apparently more interesting than he was.

With a last roving glance to confirm that the real world could operate without him for a while, Otacon set to work. This could take a while.

---

A word, now, on foresight.

Some things are easily foreseeable. They seem to place their mark on time ahead of them, casting a shadow before their tread, and can be perceived by those properly attuned to the possibilities. Many accompanied by what are in retrospect clear harbingers are allowed to slip up and take their victims unawares. Some warning signs are missed because the attention they would demand is occupied elsewhere. Some are missed because of negligence, or pride. And some are missed because they are so wildly unlikely, so beyond the normal range of experience that, were someone to predict it, his warning would languish unheeded, for by the very act of giving it, he would be deemed, by all available modes of judgment, god damned insane.

This was going to be one of those.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/3/>



# chapter 4

**Stray** by **Dahne**

*War can change the nature of a man.*

Consider the direction in which an electron spins.

This is impossible, as this is a direction that does not exist until it is considered.

Consider following the arc of this direction, sighting along its pathway until it comes to its eventual endpoint.

This is also impossible.

Consider moving in this direction.

And tripping.

It felt something like that.

This was what memory looked like, inside-out and sideways and shaken for good measure.

He did not move, and there was nothing but motion.

It stopped.

Orienteering oneself to a strange environment can be difficult enough when only three dimensions are involved. Often, the best thing to do is to assume that anything out of the ordinary is a purely fleeting illusion, and, above all, rely on what you know.

---

Otacon enjoyed his work, even if it was only dismantling previous work. It was easy to lose himself in it. The rhythm of practiced, unhurried motion. The predictable reflection of light off metal. The comfortable logic of the pattern of construction, in reverse. The gentle clink of tools. The muffled crackle like distant lightning. The padding steps of a dog's departure. The gun barrel jabbing into the small of his back, and the man's voice snarling at him in Russian.

Wait.

Otacon set down his wrench and stood up.

"Oh no," he sighed, turning and placing his empty hands in full view. "Not again."

Otacon had a good memory for faces, especially ones behind a gun that was pointed in his direction. It was strange, then, that the cruelly handsome features of the blond boy should seem familiar, even as he knew for a fact he had never seen him before. There was nobody in the world who could forget a face like *that*, though he had a sinking feeling that a lot of people had seen the expression it wore right now only once. Right before a bang.

Clearly this was not the response the boy was used to getting, though the set of his posture suggested that he was familiar with providing the stimulus. He recovered quickly.

"Who are you?" he demanded, in lightly-accented English. The hard green eyes flicked across the room, taking a tally and growing steadily less focused as the numbers persisted in adding up incorrectly. "What is this place? Where's my hat?"

"Over there," said Otacon.

Keeping his eyes and gun trained on Otacon, the boy backed away a few clinking steps to snatch up the errant article and return it to its place, completing what looked to be a Soviet military uniform,

and not a recent one. For his part, Otacon stood perfectly still and endeavored to look innocent. This was not difficult, as he was pretty sure that, for the time being, he was. The clinking, he noted, was made by an idiosyncratic pair of spurs on the boy's boots, which caused something in the back of his mind to start jumping up and down and waving its arms for attention, which he might have provided had he not had more pressing concerns.

The boy's eyes flickered when Asuka began to growl low in her throat, but his attention remained focused. He had experience, young as he was, enough to successfully fight off civilian instincts. There was cover a few feet to the rear; if Otacon moved quickly, it would take less than a second to get behind the machine. This was about half a second more time than it took to pull a trigger, so he stayed motionless for now, as he tried to think of what to do. Otacon didn't know how the boy had gotten here or what he wanted, but, interestingly enough, judging from the rapidly-surfacing look in his eyes neither did he. He hadn't pulled the trigger yet, though. That was a positive.

Fear, Hal had come to understand, was like a perpetual odor- no, more like cold. After dealing with it for long enough, it faded to a vague irritation, and eventually it stopped registering on your senses altogether, until you lost a few fingers to frostbite. All it took was a few years of deliberately annoying terrorists and militant government agencies for the direct threat of immediate, violent demise to go from inspiring paralyzing terror to just making him tired. Granted, this time it came from a mysterious but clearly human source with a gun and not a cyborg ninja with a katana, and although Otacon didn't know if this should have been comforting, it wasn't.

"All right," Snake said wearily over a leveled SOCOM from the shadows by the doorway, "Drop the gun."

Somehow, Otacon knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

Weapon steady in his outstretched fist – a revolver, Otacon noted, with a flash of redoubled protest from the thing in the back of his mind and a wave of mingled amazement and exasperation that he had adopted a lifestyle of the sort that he knew these things – the boy stepped back, widening his range of vision to include both Otacon and the new threat.

"Move," he declared, challenge writ large in every stubborn line of him, "and he dies."

"I'm really getting tired of hearing that," Otacon said mournfully. He ducked and rolled.

No gunshot. That was good. It either meant that the boy had been bluffing, or that he wasn't willing to waste any time before switching his focus to the real threat. Otacon thought it was the latter, which he supposed was symptomatic of a somewhat cynical worldview.

By the time he was rightside-up again, the skirmish was over. The boy's hands were pinned behind his back, the revolver was on the ground, and the SOCOM was jammed unsubtly underneath his chin. The only way a person in that position would even think about trying to fight his way out of it instead of surrendering would be if he considered his pride to be worth a hole in the head. The total exchange had taken around three seconds. They'd really had a depressing amount of practice at this.

"Start with the basics," Snake growled. "Who are you, and how'd you find us?"

The boy jerked in an effort to throw him off. The only effect was the tightening of Snake's hold, which Otacon could guess wasn't terribly gentle in the first place, and the gun making a small, admonishing motion against his neck.

For a moment, Otacon wondered if the boy was going to refuse to answer, just on general principle of being difficult. But finally, after visibly considering his other options and coming to the unavoidable conclusion that he didn't have any, the boy grudgingly grunted,

"Major Ocelot."

And suddenly, it all made sense.

"You," Snake groaned, "have *got* to be kidding me."

---

## Notes:

-Yes, I know I'm not deviating from the original short story much yet. That shall come later. Some rather major ones, too.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/4/>

# chapter 5

## Stray by Dahne

*Fear can change the nature of a man.*

Though it had been short by most reckoning and at this pace might not get that much longer, Ocelot's life had included many instances of tempting Fate. After that had gotten familiar enough to inspire a contempt that would likely sooner or later prove unhealthy, he'd moved on to mocking Fate and thence to downright badgering it. Giving someone holding you at gunpoint and demanding information your codename – one of them, at least – fell, he figured, somewhere about the middle of the spectrum. He hadn't pulled the trigger yet, though. That suggested that getting what he knew out of him was more important than eliminating him as a threat, and that could be worked to his advantage.

By the reaction just invoking his code name had evoked, the situation might not be quite as bad as he had thought.

"Ah," he said, "so you've heard of me." There are very few people in the world who are capable of smirking with the barrel of a gun lodged beneath their jaw. Ocelot was proud to count himself among them.

"Something like that," said the one he had initially approached, coming out from behind the column of metal that had been sheltering him and looking unaccountably depressed.

Something in the way he said it made Ocelot look at him sharply and ask, "What do you mean?"

"You're a long way from home, kid," the man holding him in such an awkward position that presented so few opportunities rumbled.

Ocelot didn't like having his questions left unanswered, especially if it was in favor of pronouncements that made even less sense than the preceding. "What are you talking about? How far?"

It was the skinny one with glasses who gave him an answer.

"About fifty years."

It is hard to convey the degree to which this offended Ocelot's sensibilities. Just as Rodin would cringe to see a layman flailing convulsively at a block of sinless marble, as Rembrandt would shudder in horror at the sight of his paints and canvas egregiously purloined and transmuted to portray stick figures run rampant, so did bearing witness to such an artlessly ludicrous lie fill Ocelot with aesthetic outrage.

He snarled, "You can't possibly expect me to believe-"

"Otacon," the man behind him said tersely, with the sort of voice that did not have to be raised to cut right through his, a sort he had encountered before, "you said that thing didn't work."

"It didn't," the small one said mildly. He wore a fine patina of dust and several grease stains that suggested he had been working for some time before Ocelot's interruption. "I'd have to know more before I could tell you exactly what happened. The parameters were set to the Soviet Union about fifty years ago... Maybe it has something to do with sympathetic references, and it was set off when someone with a connection to us came into the destination area."

An advantage to being the one holding the gun, Ocelot thought, was that no one ever ignored you.

"Destination of what?" Ocelot said.

"Don't tell me," the man behind him said, "you think it's actually him?"

"Actually *who*?" Ocelot cried.

The small one was coming closer, caution falling back rapidly before a curiosity that made Ocelot feel as though he were a sample of some exotic virus, pinned between two panes of glass and held up to the light.

"It could be," he said, the fascination in his voice unnerving Ocelot in a way the gun at his throat did not. "Russian military, with the name, the spurs, the weapon... There's a resemblance, too, if you look closely."

"Resemblance to who?" Ocelot said.

"The world's got a lot of Russians," said the man holding him.

"But it makes sense," the one with glasses said, without modulating the intensity of his gaze.

In the part of Ocelot's mind that observed everything, from the timing of a guard's patrol route to a lingering scent of motor oil, he took note of the uniform cruelty of a world that would have a man staring raptly at his features, a habit he normally did not mind at all, only to compare him to whoever the hell it was they were talking about, at the same time that it kept pressing him up against attractive men only while they were engaged in a life-or-death struggle.

This brought up the question of how he knew this man was attractive.

He had just...assumed it.

Ocelot did not make assumptions.

Not without a basis.

"Your idea of 'making sense' must be a lot different from mine," the man was saying, in a voice that, if he was paying attention instead of trying to think of ways to reclaim the upper hand, sounded very much like-

"Snake!" Ocelot shouted.

The grip holding him went rigid, and he twisted out of it. For once, however, his goal was not the revolver on the ground, but a good look at the man behind him.

He would know that face anywhere.

"It *is* you." He reached one red-gloved hand to the features time and memory had not yet had the chance to blunt. "But you look...different. Thinner, and older. A glass eye?" He poked at it curiously with his thumb.

"Cut it out!" Snake growled, striking his hand away. "The hell is with you, kid?"

No. Definitely real.

"How did you..." Ocelot stared at him, feeling his own eyes grow wide and glassy, conflict forgotten, gun forgotten. "It's impossible. You can't have... I was there. I was the one who..."

Ocelot knew how things fit together. He was the one who watched them form, observed the patterns, applied pressure at the right angle to make them fall in place. You either understood or you were dead. He knew the terms. He had accepted them.

Ocelot didn't understand.

"Wait," the other said excitedly from behind him. "You've got it wrong. Snake's not Big Boss."

"Damn right I'm not," Snake – Snake? - grunted, though he seemed slightly lost as well.

"I saw you get the rank, you can't have lost it already," Ocelot snapped. The moment of doubting his sanity had worn his patience thin.

"No," the other man said, moving into his field of vision as if he had forgotten about being threatened with a deadly weapon moments ago and speaking soothingly, as if he were trying to calm an animal that had been backed into a corner, "Snake is Big Boss's son."

"That's the simple way of putting it," Snake grunted.

"No," Ocelot corrected, feeling himself for some reason calm incrementally. "Snake was *called*

The *Boss's* son."

"Who?" said Snake.

Ocelot gave him a look. "Your mentor. Woman you killed in the flower field at Rokovoj Bereg."

"Big Boss killed his mentor?" Snake said, looking surprised.

Ocelot rolled his eyes. "He didn't *want* to, obviously. It was under ord- why am I telling you this? *You're* the one who did it."

"No I'm not," Snake said. Stubborn bastard.

"He's really not," said the other one, before Ocelot could argue further. "Big Boss died years ago. Snake was cloned from his DNA a while before that."

"And now we've gotten into the cloning thing," Snake-but-not-Snake groaned.

Ocelot forced his eyes to harden and glared. It was all too easy to listen to this man and take the things he said for granted, no matter how outlandish. "You're wrong. No matter who this-" he gestured at the not-Snake, who took being a visual aid in stride, "is, I saw John alive less than a week ago."

"A week," the man with glasses said helpfully, "that was fifty years ago."

"John," the doppelganger murmured. "So that was his real name."

"And who," Ocelot shouted, seizing upon an outlet for his frustration, "the hell are *you*?"

"Otacon's the one who built the time machine," said Snake.

The smaller man – Otacon? Odd code name, though perhaps a Russian carrying the moniker of a South American animal was not in an ideal position to judge. Or that of a Biblical innocent, which was even less appropriate – rested his hand against the column he had hidden behind. Ocelot, who had not had much chance to take stock of his surroundings besides to note that they were dark, cold, and rapidly filling with dogs, could see now that this column led upwards into a curve and met another to form a gateway to nowhere.

Ocelot was beginning to understand. Nothing like this could happen in the real world.

Therefore, this was not the real world. He was just having a psychotic break. Everyone was entitled to one or two of those along the course of their lives, as long as they came back eventually. He could consider it a sort of vacation. At the speeds his thoughts tended to travel, most likely he would be back before more than a few minutes had passed in reality. *He* was not insane; he was just going through a brief period in which everyone else was.

Ocelot was an excellent liar, and knew well the therapeutic benefits of lying to himself.

"Time machine," he said blandly.

It was just a normal case of letting people believe what they wanted to believe, which nearly always included believing that you bought it.

"At least now," said Otacon, blushing slightly, "we know that it works."

Snake had not made any move to re-apprehend Ocelot, though from the look in his eyes, he was ready to at any moment. "Good. Now that that's all straightened out, we can shove him back through."

"Like hell you are!" Ocelot cried defiantly, on general principle of being difficult.

"Wouldn't work," Otacon said. "The machine's not finished. Half the parts it needs aren't even installed."

"Then install them," said the not-Snake, "and *then* we can shove him back through."

"That takes *time*, Snake," said Otacon with a trace of impatience. It struck Ocelot, how quickly they seemed to forget he was standing there even while he was the topic of conversation. "A few weeks, at the least. In the meantime, who knows what will happen, with two disparate instances of the same person in one temporal location."

"Two?" said Ocelot.

He did not say it loudly, and it was merely a thoughtful repetition, not a demand for information. Perhaps that was why they both fell silent, and turned to regard him in a way that felt suddenly very ominous.

There was a malicious glint in Snake's eyes as though he had just thought of something nasty, but his voice was solicitous when he said, "If you can behave yourself-" he nodded significantly at the revolver on the ground- "we could show you."

"You have my word," Ocelot promised.

There was a blur of motion, and he was pinned to the cold cement floor.

"Now what?" he complained.

"Sorry," said Snake, knee planted firmly in the middle of Ocelot's back and sounding not sorry at all. "We know you pretty well."

"What is *that* supposed to mean?" Ocelot demanded, well aware that he was, for the second time in the past ten minutes, not in a position to make demands of anyone, an irksome fact whose effect on his mood was not improved when a dog licked him, or when the man called Otacon's scolding murmur of "Toboe!" at it sounded suspiciously as though he was trying not to laugh. "Get off me!"

Snake obliged, none too quickly. He gave Ocelot a strange look as he stood up, but all he said was,

"Just that old habits die hard."

---

## Notes:

-Geek confession: I first heard of Rodin from Stranger in a Strange Land.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/5/>

# chapter 6

## Stray by Dahne

*Knowledge can change the nature of a man.*

Otacon had a bad feeling about this.

He didn't know if there were laws about these things, but he was pretty sure that that using the codec recordings stored on his laptop to show Ocelot's actions to...Ocelot broke most of them. However, he was at a loss for any other ideas, and at least it might stop him and Snake eyeing each other warily for a while.

As Otacon dug through the files, he felt a nudge at his knee and reached down to pat Hoppard reassuringly. The poor dog likely didn't know what to make of the strange human and palpable tension suddenly present in his home.

"All right," he said, pulling up the parts concerning the transdimensional entity in question. "Here it is."

The boy's...Ocelot's eyes lit up with a combination of curiosity and anxiety that made Otacon's stomach clench in a sudden pang of sympathy. He didn't want to do this. Too late now.

The playback began.

Snake stood to the side, disinterested. After all, he'd already seen it.

Ocelot's eyes narrowed.

"That is *not* me," he said flatly.

Otacon turned to him, startled. "Well, sure it is. There's the-"

"No." The young man cut him off with an imperious gesture. "Absolutely not. The mustache is a remote possibility, if it's *far* in the future, but the ponytail- No. There's no way."

Otacon couldn't help but start to feel sorry for the boy, the harsh lines of his face set and adamant even as a spark of worry smoldered in his eyes. It couldn't be easy, finding out that you were destined to turn into Ocelot, even if you were Ocelot already and therefore probably deserved it.

"Believe whatever you want, kid," Snake said, shrugging. Having never needed polite fictions, he had little patience for them in other people.

"*Special operations FOXHOUND*," said the man onscreen. The voice was different, the purity of its arrogance coarsened by age. But recognizable. His gun twirled in the air, too quickly to follow. Otacon glanced over his shoulder to watch the boy's eyes track it.

"*Revolver Ocelot.*"

The boy's jaw tightened.

"*This is the greatest handgun ever made. The Colt Single Action Army.*"

The boy's hand went reflexively to the holster at his hip, and clenched around the emptiness it found.

They watched the battle under a steady current of recorded footsteps and quick breathing and gunshots that Otacon had long learned not to flinch at that deafened like silence.

"*I love to reload during a battle.*"

Whether it was due to experience he had gained or just how hard he was looking at the screen in order to keep from looking behind him, Otacon noticed things he hadn't before, like the way Ocelot's arm twisted every time he fired off a shot. He must not have been looking hard enough. The boy's lips were pressed into a thin, white line.



*"Just what I'd expect from the man with the same code as the boss."*

Otacon winced as the ninja's katana sheared through bone. The boy did not.

The distinctive beep of a codec, and click as it was answered.

*"Revolver Ocelot is a former member of Spetsnaz..."*

*"He's a gun fanatic..."*

*"He's also something of a sadist...he learned the most advanced torture techniques..."*

*"Yeah, he had plenty of practice. The Lubianka Prison is located right there inside KGB headquarters."*

And suddenly Otacon found he couldn't look.

"Can't be true..." A voice from behind him.

The recording flickered, skipping ahead several hours in time. Dread coiled in Otacon's stomach as onscreen appeared the lights of a familiar ceiling. Some of it still made no more sense to him than it ever had, things about auto-fire and saving that referred to something he knew nothing of, but the undercurrent of sickening, cold glee was unmistakable.

*"We're going to play a game, Snake. And we'll find out what kind of man we really are. When the pain becomes too great to bear just give up and your suffering will end. But if you do, the girl's life is mine."*

The boy's face had gone very pale.

*"I was trained by the Russian GRU. I am not like one of those KGB slugs."*

"Can't be..."

*"I'm going to run a high voltage electric current through your body. If it's just for a short time, it won't kill you."*

"...lightning..." the boy said weakly.

The echoed voice carried a surreal resonance.

*"To me, this isn't torture..."*

*"It's a sport."*

*Click.*

That was enough. Otacon reached out to put a stop to it.

A red-gloved hand wrapped around his forearm, strong fingers gripping hard.

"No," the boy said. "I have to see the rest."

He watched until the end, and stared at the blank screen for a long time.

There was more, of course; Liquid's arm, the betrayal on the tanker, Fortune's death. Neither he nor Snake felt the need to mention it.

The boy sat down heavily and buried his face in his hands.

Otacon's heart went out to him. He knew the weight of having done something irretrievable. He imagined that it being something you hadn't done yet didn't make it any easier. Seeing that would be pretty devastating to anyone's self-image, and it would take the boy time to reconcile it.

Approximately thirty-four seconds, as it turned out.

"All right!" the boy declared, standing and slamming his hands down onto the table decisively. "How do I get back?"

Otacon blinked at him. "Back where?"

"Home. I need to fix..." His lip curled distastefully. "...*this*."

Didactic was easy. "Getting you back is just a matter of completing the machine – I still don't know how you managed to get here with it – but the other part..." He dropped his eyes regretfully. "You can't. I'm sorry. The sequence of events is already set into the temporal fabric, and there's no

evidence that an attempt from within to drastically alter the pattern would have any effect but to be overridden by the greater continuity of..."

Snake and Ocelot looked at him. It was strange, how two such different faces could wear exactly the same expression.

"I need to complete the machine," he said.

The boy nodded, glinting with determination. "I can help you."

"No, you can't," said Snake immediately. Then he sighed, and said – and you'd have to have known him a long time and under dire circumstances to spot it, but he seemed almost apologetic –

"Look, kid, you can't expect us to trust you."

There was a long pause.

"I need you two in order to return there," the boy said finally. "Besides, I have no reason to kill you."

"Sounds like you've given this some thought," said Snake, arching an eyebrow significantly.

The cruelly beautiful face clouded with anger. "Are you suggesting that I have no-"

There was a moment of pained realization.

He concluded morosely, "You may be right."

---

## Notes:

-I'd like to link to the script and text dump that were extraordinarily helpful for this chapter, but FFnet's formatting invariably eats URLs. They're on GameFAQs, in the expected section.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/6/>

# chapter 7

## Stray by Dahne

*Regret can change the nature of a man.*

Ocelot knew the soldier's laws. Sleep, like a woman, was to be seized upon whenever the opportunity was presented, and never held close enough that you couldn't let go when you needed. He dozed lightly and did not dream.

As always, thanks to a life wrought with transfers and a contempt for the banality "Where am I?" his first action upon waking was to confirm his location. Memory drifted in with the smell of the place and settled firmly around his shoulders. If this was a hallucination, it wasn't the sort that went away.

It was voices that had woken him, when the light was gray and he could smell the morning. An argument. A short one, surely; the smaller man, the engineer, was far too timid to put up much of a fight before surrendering. Ocelot was still trying to identify the relationship between the two. Initially he had assumed it to be the usual case of coercion, but it seemed as though they knew each other too well for that, and there was a sense of equality that was unlike the way a few of the scientists at Groznyj Grad had eventually become docile and cooperative. That created the possibility that some outside influence was controlling the both of them, but he had too little background on either to say exactly what they were being forced to do. He reclassified the exchange as a potential source of information and listened.

"You have to go." The lighter voice, oddly nuanced.

"No." The one called Snake, so unlike his Snake, pitched low but for finality.

"All the plans have been made for tomorrow." Plans?

"Plans change." The same tone, aware that it hadn't worked the last time but choosing to ignore it.

"You know how long we've been preparing for this. If we don't go through with it now, there might not be another chance." There was a note of habitual strain in the small man's voice that had not been present the previous day, when he had spoken of temporal causality and other such things that apparently made sense to him.

"Too bad." So, there was at least some aspect of choice to whatever it was they were doing. From the sounds of things, it was the Snake who held the ultimate power of decision. No surprise there.

"It's too much for Jack to handle on his own. We need you." In the vault of his mind, Ocelot created a new category. Jack.

"I'm not leaving you here." He was almost as stubborn as the real Snake.

"Mei Ling's better with the Soliton system; she's the one who invented the thing. I'd just get in the way. Besides, I've got too much to do here; the prevailing theory says that the timestream's powerful enough to absorb just about anything, but putting off the job would be pushing our luck. " Mei Ling. Soliton.

"That's not what I meant. It's a stupid risk to take. " A risk?

"With you and Raiden watching each other's backs," -another person, or an interchangeable reference? Code names really could be a pain in the ass sometimes- "there shouldn't be much danger of-".

"*I'm not leaving you alone with him.*" The subject was unnamed, but Ocelot could hazard a guess.

So that was the issue. Hah. This Snake gave Ocelot so little credit, to think that he would wreak some sort of havoc when he had nothing to gain by it and, as far as he understood it, something to lose. Or so much, to think that he was devious enough to find a way. Both were disconcerting. While he had his pride, Ocelot had gotten used to the luxury of being underestimated.

"You've got more important things to do than babysit." So he, at least, wanted this done. Enough to brave the unknown element without his guard dog.

Well, one of them.

"There's a difference between babysitting and keeping an eye on the enemy." Ah, he rated 'enemy,' then.

"He's not 'the enemy.'" Interesting. He'd figured that one would be sympathetic.

"He's *Ocelot*! What the hell *else* would he be?" Ocelot frowned behind closed eyes. It would have been offensive, if it weren't justified.

"I'll be fine. I did manage to survive on my own before I met you, you know."

"Yeah, but that was the part of your life that had a lot fewer gun-wielding maniacs in it." Bastard. He wasn't a maniac *yet*.

"He's not a maniac." An absurd pang of gratitude.

"You know what he is." Was. Could be. Might be.

"Weaponless, for one thing. I've got *this*." So *that* was where that had gone.

"Otacon, do you even know how to use that thing?" The Snake's voice was rife with amused exasperation.

"I know enough. And even if there was a risk, destroying the prototype before it goes into production takes precedence." So it all had to do with something that it was important to destroy.

"Over you getting a bullet in the skull?" Incredible. He really believed Ocelot capable of that kind of random, unnecessary brutality. For God's sake, he wasn't *Volgin*.

And there it was. He had been running so hard to get away that he fell right in.

This repulsive creature, that vile old traitor that they knew, was someone he recognized. Albeit much smarter, granted.

It was amazing how little comfort that was.

He could feel it, that was the worst part, he could *feel* it happening, that little pulsing part buried deep where it could reach up and out and dig down in and coil around and twist, twist, twist, saying you know I'm in here, you know why, perpetrator's the only choice you've got kid cause the world's the way it is and you're nobody's victim, he knew it, he felt it, he could lie all he wanted but no one was *that* good, it was like quicksand or slime that pulled him down, that the more he kicked the farther he fell, but it wasn't real none of it was, couldn't be real, it was someone's sick fantasy only a dream and the vertigo pulled at him...

Ocelot opened his eyes.

A dog looked at him.

Dogs were real.

What kind of idiot would have a psychotic nightmare with dogs in it?

Especially large gray and white dogs that kept nudging at your hands in hopes of getting a scratch.

Whatever was happening now, even if it were only sitting up to take off his gloves and grant the dog's unspoken wish, it was real to him. The vertigo was there, but it was at the edges, and if he kept

a hold of himself he was strong enough to hold it off. Everybody had moments like that, when there was something pressing down and they let themselves go for a minute, or they were alone in the dark of night and thought they could hear dead people arguing over card games. The important thing was to stay centered. Even if this wasn't *the* reality, it could be *his* reality. And as long as there was *a* reality, there was something he could do. That was good enough.

He realized, as he tucked the gloves behind his belt and the dog heaved a heavy sigh of contentment, that the question that had sent him off was about to get its answer. His mouth quirked up. That was it, then; reality was what kept happening even when you weren't paying attention.

"Yes."

Ocelot went still. He could *hear* them staring at each other.

Then:

"Please, David."

Ocelot had an excellent memory for voices. He had heard men told how deep the wound went, whether the bullet had lodged, what could be done, and their murmurs that yes, they understood. He had heard the men who had come under Volgin's suspicion and received the colonel's idea of justice. He had listened in the stolen moments while one woman told another what she had done, and what she had to do.

He had never heard anyone sound so tired.

There was a long sigh, as universal as a white flag.

"Promise me one thing." Just setting terms now.

"What?" He knew it.

"That if it comes down to it, you won't hesitate." Hesitate to...oh. The fingers of Ocelot's free hand slid against the empty holster.

"Hesitate to wh...oh."

Impatient with the continued lack of motion, the dog pushed against Ocelot's hand and whined. He scratched absently to keep it quiet and listened.

"It won't come to that." Calm, reasonable.

"What if it does?" Such suspicion, this Snake had.

"It won't." At least one of them trusted him. Or at least, distrusted him less actively.

"Just promise me."

Hesitation, a moment's worth. "A...all right. If it means that much to you."

"Yeah. Okay. Be careful, all right?"

Ocelot shook his head, amused. This Snake had none of the other's guilelessness: he lacked the credulity to really believe such a meek man would keep his promise to kill him, no matter how pressed, as well as the naivety to simply trust his co-conspirator's judgment. Either this objective they were after was important enough to take a casualty, or there had never really been any question of not undertaking it in the first place.

Ocelot had learned a good deal about his hosts' intentions. One, they were part of a larger group, though likely not much larger. Two, his own appearance did not figure into their plans, having possibly been an unintended side effect. Three, their goals involved sending a man of obviously substantial military experience to destroy a prototype of something. An act of terrorism perhaps. Whatever it was, they didn't want Ocelot to know about it. Granted, that didn't narrow it down much, but all in all it wasn't a bad bit of reconnaissance, for not having gotten up yet.

Gradually, Ocelot became aware that he had been sitting there for some time after the two had reached their agreement and gone on to whatever it was they did. Had he fallen asleep? The dog, head

resting on his leg and eyes closed in contentment, indicated not.

"Heh, Kaworu likes you."

One of the laws was that you never let yourself get so absorbed in thought that someone could sneak up on you. Standing in a doorway and smiling disquietingly at you might not precisely qualify as sneaking up, but it was enough to make Ocelot angry at himself, as well as dimly aware that this was the first time in a very long while that he had not been, in more than one sense, on the front lines, and that he could not, at the moment, remember the last.

Holding no illusions as to where its loyalties lay, the dog stood and padded across the room to meet him, tail waving languidly.

"They're all pretty friendly," the one called Otacon said, leaning over to pat it companionably. "Don't get a lot of chances to meet new people, all the way out here. But I guess I assumed you'd be more of a cat person."

*You don't know me*, Ocelot thought.

His mind must have been reflected in his expression, as the other man's smile faded and he grew more businesslike. Ocelot knew the harsh angles of his own face well, their natural habit of falling into a pattern of anger or cold disdain that often made it more sensible to simply let his emotions follow in their stead.

"Come on," he said. "We might as well get started."

"Where did...Snake go?" Ocelot asked conversationally as he stood up and followed him out to the place where his inadvertent entrance had occurred. It was easy to tell that this man had no skill as a liar; he might let something interesting slip. The chill air reinforced him. It was a good thing, a home thing.

"A mission," he said, eyes dropping. "To destroy a weapon that shouldn't exist."

"Weapons are weapons," Ocelot said, hiding his surprise at getting an actual answer with a shrug. "Whatever it is, soon someone will come up with something worse."

"Not this time." There was an odd note in his voice. Ocelot quirked an eyebrow at him.

He explained.

"So Granin *wasn't* an utter idiot," Ocelot murmured, bemused.

"Granin?"

Out of force of habit, Ocelot opened his mouth to let the lie spool off his tongue. He stopped himself. If this was the real world at all – a supposition still firmly in doubt, presence of the dog preceding them like a messenger through the snow notwithstanding – any information he had was a good fifty years out of date. What did it matter?

Amazing how...freeing that thought was.

"Aleksandr Leonovitch Granin," he said simply. "Headed a Soviet design bureau for a while. He designed something like that."

"Oh, really?" said Otacon, blinking owlishly.

"He was trying to convince anyone who would listen to give him the money to build something like that, but he died" -of some very unnatural causes- "before it came to anything," Ocelot continued. "I suppose some poor bastard took his plans and built them into something workable?"

"Er, yeah..." Otacon mumbled.

Ocelot snorted softly. "Must have been a hell of a job."

"Not really," he said absently. "The hard part was figuring out how to balance the..." He trailed off, noticing that Ocelot had stopped abruptly. "What?"

Ocelot looked at him. Only that. He had a feeling that it was a hell of a look.

"You can't possibly be saying that *you* had anything to do with it," he said incredulously.

"Um..." The gentle gray eyes averted from his to find something that wasn't staring at him quite so intensely. "...yeah."

"What, exactly?"

"I, er..." He seemed to find the ground directly in front of him of sudden and absorbing interest. "...kinda built most of it, actually."

In his familiarity with his own features, Ocelot was also aware of their capacity for eloquence. Right now, though he could not see them, he could imagine clearly the opus they were composing, under the tentative working title of *You're shitting me*.

"You," he said flatly.

"Uh-huh." His shoulders bowed as though bearing something heavy, making him appear smaller, though he had never been large to begin with.

"Designed a weapon capable of launching a nuclear strike from any terrain at a moment's notice."

When the man with the strange code name spoke, it was with an echo of the exhaustion Ocelot had heard before. "Yeah. It was me."

Presented with a chance to get a better look at this man, Ocelot's mind took inventory. Slight frame. Hair beginning to show signs of going to gray. Lines of weariness settling around the eyes. Habit of biting at his lower lip when attention was focused on him.

He snorted, not so softly this time. "No it wasn't."

As though startled, the other looked up, eyes unnaturally large behind the glass lenses. "Huh? Sure it was."

Ocelot rolled his eyes, surprised at his glint of disappointment to be back on secure ground. "Start with something easy," he advised, out of professional sympathy. "Try to leave 'you traveled through time' and 'I singlehandedly constructed the defining artillery of the century' until you have a little more practice."

"Not 'singlehandedly.' Like I said, I-" He cut off abruptly, taking on a tone of offense. "Hey, you mean you don't believe me?"

"That was the gist, yes," said Ocelot generously.

"Why not?" he demanded, with such indignation that Ocelot wanted to laugh.

"Deranged lunatics create war machines," he explained, as they resumed their pace. "Fat fools with delusions of being a hero of the motherland create war machines. People like you..." He shook his head, smirking slightly. "No."

"I did, though," he protested, the banks of truculence being undercut as though each disbelief were an accusation, soon to tumble into the river of regret if he had to keep it up.

"All right," Ocelot conceded. "Fine. Say you *did* build it. If you were just going to send someone off to destroy it, why bother building it in the first place?"

"It was a mistake," he said, reasonable if slightly querulous.

"You accidentally constructed a bipedal battle tank?"

"Not so much accidentally as..." He cast about as he opened the door of his workshop and motioned for Ocelot to enter, settling for letting the fish of the prior thought go in favor of the crawdad of a caveat. "It was supposed to be strictly defensive."

Ocelot eyed him skeptically. "And you *believed* that?"

"That," he sighed, with that tiredness that Ocelot was beginning to find irrationally irritating, "I guess, is the whole problem."

It was a good thing that he didn't seem to want any sympathy, since he wasn't going to get it. People who kept their eyes closed deserved it when they walked into a few walls.

*What does it matter, if people with clear eyes can lose them?*

Old habits die hard.

This eBook was generated by the [FanFiction Recommendation Engine](#)

This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/7/>



# chapter 8

## Stray by Dahne

*Doubt can change the nature of a man.*

Consider the endpoint.

Even that which is ever shifting must be, at any given moment, somewhere. The stream of time deposits silt and debris like any other. Movement cannot exist without a destination, though not always the sort designed to be reached. Like calls to like, and the castaways have their home as does any other, the promised land where odd meets end, bric unites with brac, and curio embraces curiette. The forgotten and the unwanted, this which outlived its purpose and that which was never meant to be - as surely as there is a circle of Hell for their creators, there is a sanctuary for them.

The inside of the time machine, exposed by the half-removed metal casing, looked something like it.

Otacon was aware that, from an outside perspective, it might appear to be a somewhat methodless mass of microchips, wires, and metal subunits. It all made perfect sense to him, since he had the firsthand knowledge that it had been crafted along the dictates of a meticulous plan.

Sort of.

It'd been in a fit of inspiration, after all.

The young man beside him did not share his assurance.

"Just how long," he said, pursing his lips distastefully, "is it going to take before this thing is capable of- anything?"

"Don't look so skeptical," Otacon said defensively, wounded on his creation's behalf. "It already worked once. I mean, you're here, after all."

"Huh." The boy crossed his arms and eyed him dubiously. Inspiring confidence was one of those abilities you either had or you didn't, and Otacon held no illusions about the extent to which, in his case, the latter applied. "Do you mind telling me how, exactly, that happened?"

"That part," Otacon admitted, "I'm not so sure about."

The cold green stare was relentless. "How long?"

"Well, it depends on how..."

Stare.

"If the measurements are correct, I might have to-"

"*How long?*"

"Three weeks, at the least," he confessed. "Maybe more, depending on if I have to readjust some calculations. Six at the most, if everything that can go wrong does."

He wanted a better answer, Otacon could tell that much, but it would have to be enough, for now.

*Already a good interrogator*, Otacon thought, and was ashamed.

"Here," he said, kneeling by the base of the left side of the archway. "To start with, we just have to reconstruct the parts I was dismantling when you came through."

"You were taking it apart?" the young man asked, after Otacon had shown him what needed doing and gotten him started on doing it. At his confirming nod, he said, "Why?"

Otacon, returning from the other side of the room and depositing an armload of what proved that, though even the most prideful of humans had long relinquished the claim that theirs was the only

species that employed the use of tools, they were secure in their position as the most riotously inventive in the creation thereof, answered, "While I was looking over the plans I put together, I kept getting the nagging feeling that the whole thing was impossible. Later I went over them again and figured out that I was right."

The young man, in the midst of reaching out to gather a handful of frayed wiring, stopped.

"Are you sure," he said deliberately, "that you know what you are doing?"

"Of course I am!" Otacon said, stung.

After a moment, being a fundamentally honest person, he added, "Mostly."

On the scale of things one does not want to hear from someone with whom a delicate and risky undertaking is being undertaken, this rates a solid 6, slightly higher than "There's nothing to worry about" and still a few steps below "I'm pretty sure it's supposed to do that." Though he was unaware of this hierarchy, Otacon was nevertheless destined to, before the project was completed, utter the undisputed occupant of the supreme position. This will be pointed out in due time, so please feel free to forget about it until then.

Otacon began to work. Slowly Ocelot followed suit, touching the components gingerly, as though half-convinced contact would provoke it to tear his composite molecules asunder and send the hurtling through the warped places in the universal fabric, or perhaps explode. Otacon could have told him exactly why nothing of the sort was (probably) going to happen, but when he'd tried earlier to expound a few of the functional theories in fuller detail to the boy, he hadn't met with much success. Funny, how those eyes could stay piercing even as they were glazing over.

The central concepts were fairly simple, really, but one of the things Otacon had learned from working with Snake, besides how to identify the weapon being pointed at him and when to get the hell out of the way, was something about the way a certain set of people's minds worked concerning technology; they figured that if it was simple enough that you could explain it to them, it wasn't complicated enough to work. When he had first discovered this, Otacon had tried to explain that that wasn't right at all, it was often the mechanisms with the simplest concepts driving them at heart that required the most elaborate apparatus to bring into practice, that the principles that governed the more mutable aspects of reality were easy and it was getting reality to believe it that was the hard part, but before the first sentence was out of his mouth he had started to feel as though he were in a deranged anti-motivational poster labeled "Futility" and so gave up in favor of going to mop up the last stubborn puddles of green goo from when he'd had that interesting idea about coolants.

One of the things Otacon liked about his work was that it gave him the chance to think.

Otacon had read something once, by one of those writers who could very well have been, if not utterly divorced from reality, at least undergoing a trial separation, but wrote good stories in the process. It had been about someone who had been yanked forward in time by other people for their own purposes, on a temporary basis. While he was there, he ran off from the tour so to speak. Captivated by the idea, Otacon could easily imagine himself doing much the same. He entertained wry visions of wandering entranced through electronics stores, fondling things in wide-eyed fascination as the delicate web of causality collapsed behind him, though come to think of it he never could remember exactly how the story ended. Curiosity was stronger than fear; reason didn't stand a chance.

Apparently, the young Ocelot was stronger than all of them. In the few days he had been here – now? – he had displayed no interest at all in modern technology, beyond surreptitiously poking at the microwave a few times. Otacon could understand that when he was initially introduced to, say, Codec communications and all the implications thereof, he had more pressing things on his mind, but even since he hadn't asked a single question about it. 'Incurious' definitely didn't fit what Otacon knew

about him, though it had recently been brought to his attention just how little that was.

That was only natural, really. The things he did know about Ocelot – the other Ocelot, not this one – that is to say, the one in this time – the one that was *supposed* to be in this time – Otacon's thoughts continued on in this vein for some time, during which period he was able to reroute the first and third Odic intake modulators and create a good starting point for the second, until finally he got to "the scary old one" and stopped himself there – weren't the sort that made him eager to know more. That kind of person lived in a different world, one he didn't like to think existed. And Otacon was, he thought with a muted sigh, excellent at ignoring what he didn't want to see.

A small scratching noise made him look up. It was only the spurs on the boy's boots, scraping against the concrete floor.

Ocelot.

Ocelot's boots, Ocelot's spurs, Ocelot's *self*, minus fifty years and whatever it was that had made him that way, if it could be said that any *thing* had done it and that it wasn't just who he was, the way he would be no matter what. Encoded in his genes? Otacon knew how little *that* meant. Encoded deeper, maybe, in the same way that Snake would be Snake no matter what and Otacon would be Otacon, no matter what had happened, no matter what he'd done, no matter where he'd been or what he'd seen.

Wouldn't he?

No. He knew better than to start thinking like that. There may not be any such thing as fate, but there was such thing as history, and once it got to that point it was too late by a long shot. Closing the barn door after the horse had gotten out, inputting the cancellation codes while the bomb was over Warsaw. He had too many of his own unerasable mistakes to try to fix anyone else's.

*That's it, isn't it?* he thought. *If there's hope for him, there might be hope for me. How pathetic.*

There had been too much of that. Too many nights spent thinking what he could have done differently, what he should have done, what anybody with one god-damned iota of sense in his head would have done. It as Snake who snapped him out of it, of course; told him that was what was done was done and there wasn't anything you could do but deal with it, which made him think of all the things *Snake* had gone through and gotten past and made him ashamed, until he realized how stupid *that* cycle was and made himself get over it. He had made a sort of peace, an uneasy one with lots of raiding across the borders and the occasional barricade-infested revolution, and he knew that now he was doing what he could and if there was a special Hell for idiots at least he wouldn't lack for company.

There was another reason he knew the time machine would never work, even as he had set the framework and cannibalized any electrical device he could find in the furor of inspiration (David never had found out where the toaster went). The past left no room for adjustments. Though he felt something of a moral obligation to keep trying to take all the precautions he could think of, Otacon really wasn't all that afraid that some sort of paradox would ripple outward from him through the universe. It wouldn't have been much of a universe, if something as little as him could wreck it. Even millions of years ago, a butterfly was only a butterfly, dead or alive, crushed by a boot or caught by a spider. How many butterflies did it take, to change history? How many spiders?

Wasn't he doing the same thing? Trying to change his future, trying to erase his sin?

Maybe the only difference between their futures was that one hadn't had it happen to him yet.

"Gnnrgh."

Otacon looked up. Statements without vowels tended to indicate issues of the safely fixable,

physical nature.

The- Ocelot. Ocelot, damn it. That was who he was. Would be. No matter how different (very – it was amazing how much of an effect a mustache, ponytail, and half a century, or more precisely lack thereof, could have) or innocuous (not really – there was that dangerous grace there, the look of a man who had seen a lot of people die and knew how to make sure he wasn't one of them) he looked. Ocelot, with all that meant, all the things he'd done and people he'd killed. Would kill. Would have killed.

The boy presented problems, and not just with tenses.

Ocelot was in the midst of a struggle with a bolt, none the less valiant for all that he was losing. It was so strange, the contrast of someone with "Soldier" written on every fiber of him thrashing at the nests of wiring that kept assaulting him and trying not to sneeze in the dust his efforts raised. Otacon, unable to keep from smiling and glad that the boy couldn't see it, went to lend a hand.

"Here," he said, crouching beside Ocelot and reaching out to guide his hands to a different grip. "Like this."

Ocelot glanced down at the hands on his, then followed along with them and corrected his mistake. He gave Otacon an odd look.

"Aren't you at all worried?" he said.

Otacon looked at him, puzzled, face close enough that he could track the motion of the boy's eyelids when he blinked. "About what?"

"About-" there was no pause, but Otacon sensed that he had been about to say something different, "-messing around with this."

Indeed, now that he thought about it, being near the machine seemed to make Ocelot slightly nervous. A sort of technological superstition, maybe. Soldiers had those. Snake, for example, would never get any closer to Otacon's creations than he absolutely had to, even though they hardly ever exploded without a good reason.

"It's okay," Otacon said, doing his best to be reassuring. "the time-space continuum has been around for a long time. It's had to deal with tougher things than an engineer with a pile of scrap metal and an idea."

The look on Ocelot's face as Otacon let go and went back to the other side of the machine told him that this probably wasn't the best way to describe his only chance of getting back home. He looked away quickly and said only,

"So you think, when I go back, it will be as though none of this ever happened?"

"That's a possibility," Otacon said, nodding, though he knew Ocelot wasn't looking at him. "There has to be some sort of way of taking care of this sort of thing. Anything that can't adapt dies. Obviously, that hasn't happened, since reality is still around. It's not as if whenever there's some sort of problem everything can just freeze up. Abhorring a paradox doesn't do you much good if you can't deal with it."

"A possibility," Ocelot murmured, voice rich with connotation.

Like a frog in a pot on a stovetop suddenly comprehending the significance of the way the water was growing steadily warmer – and it would; the idea that it wouldn't was just an urban legend, though he hoped no one had ever actually tested it, poor froggy - Otacon reached the breaking point of realization. Here he was, blithely prattling on as though it were just theory and not someone's life.

"I'm sorry," he said abruptly. "I shouldn't..."

"It's fine," Ocelot said curtly. Of course. He must have been thinking about it the whole time.

"I mean..." Otacon kept his hands moving rhythmically, steadily, as though his mind might follow

their example. "It's my fault you're here at all. That you got mixed up in all this. That you had to see..." He trailed off helplessly. "I'm sorry."

For a time the fabric of the silence was patterned only with soft metal sounds.

Ocelot said, "It's better than not knowing."

Otacon loosened the bolts that held the casing of the flux capacitor in place and tried to believe him.

"Besides," the boy continued, voice regaining some of its arrogant force, "This gives me the chance to fix it. You've done me a favor."

"That's assuming that you *can* fix it," said Otacon. He wasn't cruel enough to let this boy hold onto false hope, Ocelot or not. "That's not even likely enough to call it a remote possibility. It's just not logical. If it were, the entire world would have to be rearranged every time something like this happens."

"How many times," said Ocelot, "has something like *this* happened?"

The small fish of sarcasm flashed its scales and was swallowed whole by the coelacanth of sudden thought.

Otacon did not move.

"It hasn't," he said.

"That was rhetorical."

Otacon wasn't listening. His mind working furiously, his eyes locked into a stare straight ahead. The wall, shy by nature and unused to such attention, tried to be grayer and less interesting, which was also, by sheer coincidence, on the improbable end of logic.

"Never," he said, the jostling of thoughts causing the heaviest to flow downward and escape through his mouth. "Not once, in all the things that've been done. Reanimation by cyborg implant. Transplantation of a dead man's limb into a living host. Autonomous flying security cameras. But not this. It's never even been attempted." The words poured out more and more quickly as he spoke, as though each word had had something valuable stolen by the previous one.

"Or it has," Ocelot interceded reasonably, "and no one has ever admitted to it."

"No one has ever even tried to do something as simple as this."

If there was a significant conclusion to be drawn from this, Ocelot did not see it. "Simple?"

"It's such an old idea. Time machine...It's been around since H.G. Wells, if not before."

Ocelot said, "Who?"

"Why hasn't anyone tried it before?"

"That probably has something to do with it being impossible."

"It's obviously possible," said Otacon, in unintentional echo. "There must be more than one way to do it, too. All it takes is the effort, and the proper technology. It doesn't make sense."

"Let's not start on not making sense."

"Every possibility that isn't neutralized is eventually realized. The only effective determining factor is time. No one ever proved it *couldn't* be done, so why didn't anyone ever try to prove that it could? Everything I needed was right there. And you came through even when I'd given up on it, which could mean that- I see my mistake now. I was thinking of it as if... Did *it* provide the catalyst itself? That would mean it *wanted* this to- but why?"

Otacon's ideas had set stages of progression. In the midst of minding his own business, suddenly something would strike him, and instantly he would be shifted from his default unengaged state to Stage 1, Initial Impact. This brief space of thoughtless quasi-Zen clarity would soon, as if clearing the landing area, give way to the onslaught of raw quandary and observation, which was often vocalized

into a steady rush of what, no matter what he happened to be pursuing, succeeded admirably in proving the uniqueness of perspective; specifically, that what is from the inside a riot of interlinking chains of illumination can appear, from the outside, as lunacy. Fortunately, by the time associates (or passers-by, in a few of the more poorly timed instances) were getting around to pointing this out, he had moved on to Stage 3, wherein the rush of information overwhelmed the capabilities of mortal mouth and he stood in the eye of absolute stillness and let the storm roll through him. There were more stages later, among them Construction and Eventual Abandonment, but this was the delicate one, the one in which a single interruption could cause the entire delicate ecosystem to collapse, ripping holes through the fragile ozone that kept the inspiration from spinning back into the voids from which depths it had hailed.

"What's wrong?" said Ocelot.

"Huh?" Otacon blinked. "Wrong with what?"

"You." Otacon had often wondered why he kept asking that when he always got the same answer. Ocelot continued, "You were babbling about wells and cyborg reanimation."

"Oh. I was?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

The moment gone, Otacon pushed at his glasses and picked up a wrench.

*Oh well. It probably wasn't important anyway.*

"That last part I can explain, at least."

"You can?" said Ocelot.

It was easy to keep this one simple, since he didn't know much about the mechanics of it anyway. His expertise ended where the human variable began. Though the concept was understandable enough; after all, machines never died. They just powered down.

"There was a man named Grey Fox, who died – oh, years and years ago, now. They implanted some cyborg equipment in him to bring him back to life. It worked, sort of, but he got killed again, and anyway the whole thing made him pretty crazy."

Otacon pulled out a few of the innards from the small device he held and began rewiring. He noticed back when he'd initially been working on it that the output needed to be stabilized, but he'd given up before getting the chance to do it. The other side of the arch emitted small, productive clunks.

"I don't think," Ocelot said conversationally, "that I'm going to bother not believing you anymore."

Otacon laughed. "I can't blame you for being doubtful, Ocelot. I wouldn't believe most of it either, if I hadn't been there."

Having cleared enough space in the machine to fit his upper body, Otacon leaned inside to get at the secondary paracelsian subcore. Being scrawny could be useful sometimes. This part needed a good deal of work, as it had been thrown together and pitched in somewhat haphazardly. Getting it out was the first obstacle. It appeared to have gotten lodged behind something pretty solidly.

"Adamska."

"Huh? Ouch!"

Scrawniness, as it turned out, did not buy him sufficient room to sit up. In the ancient melee of man versus cramped location full of metal things, piping claimed another victory.

"My name is Adamska."

"Oh." Otacon backed out – carefully – and smiled, rubbing his head. "Mine's Hal."

Adamska made a noncommittal noise and kept working.

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/8/>

# chapter 9

**Stray** by Dahne

*Pride can change the nature of a man.*

There are laws to everything.

The trick is knowing how to break them.

Not, of course, the operative "how" - the exact means, the method, the mechanical arts – but the quantitative "how" - when, how much, and which laws were worth it.

Ocelot's first reaction, upon hearing the word "can't," was to know that it *meant* "shouldn't." And that meant nothing, really.

There were layers of lies, hundreds of them, all with their respective levels of truth. At the heart was the one real law, the one that gave him his power by the degree to which the others chose to ignore it;

Do what you will, as long as you don't get caught.

He'd had a deal of practice at mouthing the words others wanted to hear. Loving the motherland and hating foreign dogs was as ridiculous as the other way around. There were only two kinds of people, when it came down to it; those that called themselves his enemy, and those that didn't know it yet. The world could be anything, depending on your view of it. If you had brute strength, you could get other people to believe yours. There was power in that. But if you were clever, you *used* them, found the cracks in between perception and reality and slipped through unnoticed, learned how to make them *want* to be deceived, because the one time you knew for sure it was safe to go behind someone's back was when they had turned of their own volition. Ocelot had heard someone say once that in the north, where the cold could creep into your nerves and steal away your senses, when the wolves grew too many and too bold, hunters would grease knives and stand them in the snow for the animals to lick at the edges, until they died of cleverness and the cold and greed. Ocelot believed it as much as he believed anything he heard. He had thought little of it initially besides to loathe hypothetically that sort of coward. The image had stayed with him, however, and he had prodded at why until it unraveled that his was the same sort of betrayal, but with humans, who deserved it. Keep them happy doing what they wanted, and they'd never realize that it was your ends they were serving. This was the same.

*"Yebany v rot!"*

Except that it wasn't.

"Careful with that one. Your hand'll get caught in it if you don't move fast."

"I know that *now*," Adamska muttered darkly. But he didn't approach. Good. Ocelot didn't need his help. Didn't want his help. Didn't want to look down and see where his sleeve pulled up to show the bruise, dark and perfect in the shape of four long fingers.

The feel of the metal had almost surprised him, when he had first forced himself to touch it. Two parts removed, in a matter of days – the gloves he always wore, and the gun that rested in them and ensured people thought long and hard about making any smartass remarks about catching no mice. Now that they had grown used to this sort of motion, the creation of machinery rather than the use of it to dismantle someone, it was as natural as breathing, as much an orderly channeling of his erratic energy as gunplay. Freeing his hands to their own devices and glancing over his shoulder from time to time for a look at him, Ocelot set his mind to work at the problem.



The man did not make any noise as he worked besides the requisite material patters. He did not hum or whistle through his teeth as some were given to when employed and with no worries of a sadistic electric giant whose attention errant sound might attract. It had been some time, Ocelot realized, since he had been in the company of someone who did not have that particular threat hanging over his head, or looming a few feet behind him. There was a greater difference than that, however.

Obviously, the man was mad.

Oh, he wasn't the sort that gibbered; nor the kind that raved; certainly not the violent type. In fact, after prolonged observation, Ocelot was forced to concede that this man's madness may be of a variety completely new to him. This was something of an achievement.

Madness was common, endless as its incarnations might be. It was nothing terribly interesting. He was already doing what Ocelot needed him to do. He would assist in completing this machine, go home, repair his life, and never encounter him again. He would serve his purpose and be forgotten. That was all. He was so easy to decipher; simple motives, simple mind. Even his mannerisms were simple. Like the way he pushed his glasses up on his face every now and again.

"What?" said Hal, shifting self-consciously.

"Nothing," said Adamska, looking away.

It bothered Ocelot, as obvious solutions always did. The sheer counterintuitive straightforwardness of it nagged at him like a hornet sting. At first he had thought it was a simple case of self-inflicted blindness – that this man chose to ignore the suspicions that any reasonable person would have, in light of the evidence and the entity that shared his name. But there was no doubt that this was not true. Just as in the contradiction of his simultaneous intelligence and idiocy, it was perfectly clear that he was honest with none of the willing blindness that honesty required.

Initially, Ocelot had thought it was fear that had made him take so long to turn, on that first day, when the muzzle had jabbed at his back. Much longer than it should take (Ocelot had a substantial amount of data to corroborate this). The first line of defense, the mind claiming, "this can't be happening," in the hopes that saying it might make it true. Ocelot, however, was coming to suspect that the reason for the long seconds elapsed between the revolver's kiss and the reaction was that he had not noticed.

Still he took no precautions, acted as though trusting Ocelot was as natural as breathing rather than a threat to its continuance. It was incredible; that a man who could build such a terrifying machine and treat it as though it were- a *pet* could be such a fool.

Ocelot was afraid of very little. This was not a boast, any more than gravity could boast that it made things fall downwards. His wits and abilities were such that he could hardly imagine anything that could harm him, and in the rare, rare occasions he was faced with with such a thing, for the most part he was just impressed. This, however, was different. He did not understand this, in the sharp straightforward way he understood all the tools and people that could attempt to kill him and all the ways to exploit their inadequacies. If this chose to attack, he had no way to block it. He had no way even of knowing whether or not it would, no way of influencing its choice or even predicting it. It loomed over him, even when he could not see it, the cold construct of metal and lightning that he could never control. The naked physical threat of it leached the dexterity from his hands and the color from his mind.

There were few things Ocelot despised, that inspired not cold disdain but true hatred; Things he could not change, and things he did not understand. Even as he felt the metal under his hands he could feel it, the dark red acid seething in his stomach, lapping in frothy waves at the hard lumps of terror. Feel the corrosive poison of it eating at his spine. It took concentration to touch the thing without

flinching. Adamska almost wondered why he bothered. There was no one here to see, at least no one worth hiding anything from. The only other man here was, as previously established, nothing but a fool, if an unusually complex one. He, unlike his creation, posed no threat in the least. Ocelot could have dropped his guard entirely and risked no ill effects. After a life of scraping away the layers of people to catch a glint of the truth of them, here was a man with his character written on his forehead. Really, it was almost too good to be true.

Unless...

In the half-light, Ocelot felt his pupils dilate.

A man who with a pet could tell it when to attack.

Such a neat little scheme. He could admire the setup, if it weren't so obvious. Of course. Of course this innocence, this disarming naivety that obviously could not have sprung from mere stupidity as the like so often did, had a motive behind it. That was what Ocelot's mind had been trying to tell him. The dissonance that made the man linger in his thoughts was nothing but a petty deception. Even as the heavy fog of relief settled around him, comforting as the smell of cordite, the fear reared up and splashed at his liver. The unparalleled *balls* of it - getting him to participate in his own destruction. He almost had to respect them. After all, Ocelot couldn't blame them for trying. Killing him out of hand was unacceptable because it *would not have been enough*; he now existed, as he understood it, in more than one place at once. This man's ludicrous goodwill was an affectation to lure him into conspiring in his own demise. This machine was the key to destroying him, every facet of him, obliterating every possible him that had been or ever would be, and this man was...

His spiraling thoughts were interrupted when Hal coughed in a swirl of dust, raised by some effort to shift aside enough components to make room for another.

As simply as that, the great cow of doubt was skeletized, horns and all, by the piranhas of reason. Ocelot snorted softly to himself. If he was going to doubt his judgment in this obvious a case, he might as well give up on himself altogether.

No, his first instincts were correct. Mad the man may be, but it was a quiet, self-contained sort of madness, harmless and less of a threat than most kinds of sanity. Harmless to the point of absurdity. Killing or manipulating him would be so easy it almost wasn't worth the effort. Look at him, singlemindedly industrious as a squirrel in a wheel, serene and unprotected in the presence of a proven enemy.

An idea stirred in the back of Adamska's mind.

"Do you really believe," said Adamska abruptly, "that there is nothing I can do?"

He looked up, as though surprised. The idiot had not been paying the least attention to him, not even cursory corner-of-the-eye surveillance. It was infuriating.

"It's not a matter of believing," he said tactfully. "It's..."

"Do you," Ocelot growled, "or don't you?"

"...yeah." His eyes dropped, as though it had anything to do with him. "It's just how it is." And adding, as if it made a difference; "I'm sorry."

It was more than Ocelot could bear. This man! This preposterous fool! He was not merely mad, no, Ocelot knew that. He claimed to believe that...the other was something so fixed in him that nothing could change it, some sickness with no cure, that *that* was who Ocelot was, now and forever. And yet he was so guileless. He was so blind.

He was so...

...careless.

Yes.

Careless enough, as he stood to survey his progress, to let the light coat he wore flutter back. Only for a moment.

Ocelot's stomach, corrosive contents seething, gave a hard sideways lurch at the sight of silver. Without knowing how he had gotten there, Ocelot was on his feet.

"There," he was saying. "that should keep everything grounded. Now the..."

Ocelot could have counted the separate atoms of air as he brushed past them. Could have plotted the mad little waltzes the clack of spurs made them dance in. Given names to it all, doubt and fear and anger at himself for being so weak, as it fell away. Measured the millimeters the soft gray eyes widened, the long seconds it took for them to rise from puzzlement to the final fear. Traced in white chalk the steps he took, no pauses and no regrets, until he was close enough that all he had to do was let his hand fall.

It was always like this, when the bullets were about to fly.

"I don't like," Ocelot murmured gently, "being lied to."

It was now that he could take back what he never thought it would have been so easy to forget. Could curl instead the length of his fingers around a grip more familiar than gloves. Caress a texture that felt like home.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/9/>

# chapter 10

**Stray** by **Dahne**

*Nothing can change the nature of a man.*

Otacon's mind beat like the wings of a hummingbird in a vacuum.

*Shooting me won't change it*, he wanted to say.

He was afraid Ocelot already knew.

Time covered its eyes.

A half-heartbeat that fell through stillness, Ocelot pressed sinuously up against him to reclaim what was his. The dead gods and abominations that waited on the Cyclopean seafloor shifted restlessly in their dreams. Eternity entered a feedback loop.

Only after it had imploded and reformed itself according to its best recollection did time peek through its fingers to see Ocelot pull the revolver free, a gesture like caress reversed.

The reasons Otacon would make a poor soldier were manifold. Not the least was that his instincts were, for whatever reason nature chooses to bestow varying favors upon her creations, immutably those of prey.

He froze.

In moments like these, all he could do was watch. Through his head flashed the thought that this would, at least, guarantee him a spectacular panorama of his own demise.

His mind went white again when he realized that might be now.

It looked like something foreign, the revolver and its Ocelot, pale skin and cold metal. There was no segue, no zone where one faded into the other. Just flesh, and then metal, like a serpent twined around a branch. They didn't look like things that belonged in the same world, let alone right next to each other.

Another reason he would never be a soldier was that, in moments like this, he noticed these things.

It was a lie, when they said your life flashed before your eyes when you were about to die. At least, it wasn't true for him. Not usually. Every once in a while he'd see bits of those times when he'd had a choice that might have led to not knowing these things from firsthand experience, but those didn't happen often anymore. No, for him, what he saw was now.

Most of now was Ocelot.

Ocelot's uniform, grease-stained now and torn in places. Ocelot's eyes, gone flat and cold as anything did when it was left away from the warmth for too long, not its fault, just how things were. Ocelot's hands, somehow immaculate. Otacon could have wondered at the mystery of those hands even as they pulled the trigger. It was the hand he watched, not the grip it ran over, the beautifully engraved barrel it slid down.

Time leapt forward, as though struck from behind in penance for its earlier sloth. In the moment it takes a snowflake to melt on a wolf's breath, Ocelot's hands had flown. Taken Otacon's under their command, prehensile predator strength. Molded them around the handle. Lifted them, as his body fell back only enough to allow it, level with the place any fool knew had "fatal" written a few inches below the skin.

"Kill me, then."

Otacon didn't understand.

Then, all at once, he did.

*It's backwards*, he thought inanely. The rabbit-mind leapt in him, and he tried to pull away.

*Backwards, not me, let me drop it, I can't carry this, I can't, don't put this on me*

He could have drowned in it, had he been allowed to, the tide that rose up when he realized it would never be that easy, his bones gone weak with the knowledge of it.

The green eyes held him flat, and the hands were not going to let him go.

"Adamska..." he said desperately.

"Now!" The word came out in a half-strangled snarl. Otacon flinched back, or would have, but the grip holding him only tightened its clutch, a hard yank pulling him closer. "This is your chance. You won't get another."

"Let go of me," Otacon said. The hands over his held him steady, when all he wanted to do was shake until he fell apart.

"Then tell me how to fix it," Ocelot demanded, with as little rancor as pity. "Tell me what I have to change."

Anger, but controlled anger, calm. How could he be so calm?

Otacon's eyes dropped.

The boy pulled him forward savagely. Otacon could feel the barrel of the gun grind against his breastbone. *"Tell me!"*

He met his gaze, dilated to rimmed black coins surrounded by a lake of stark white. For the first time, like picking out a strand of melody that had been playing for so long and only now the ear caught it and gave it a name, he saw the fear.

Lies collapsed into eggshells before they could be half-hatched.

"Nothing," he said. "There's nothing."

What a time to find courage.

The shoulders sagged. The grip did not loosen.

"Liar," he sighed.

"But it's-"

"No." The evenness of his measured tone was nearly as frightening as the desperate anger. "You don't believe it."

"But it's true."

"That's not what I said."

*I can't save you, I can't save anybody*

"Adamska, it is true." *I can't lie to you, not about this* "And I do believe it."

Clenched like a drowning man on driftwood, or a half-starved lion on the last gazelle.

"Then kill me."

Otacon hated himself for never being strong enough to do anything but run.

*I'm sorry you have to bear it but I can't, I can't take it, just let me*

He couldn't.

The boy, mutable metamorph, lost boy wearing his anger like a kind of serenity or creature of this cold calm that smelled like blood, or something else, something yet to come, and he could see it now, with this expression that he held onto so hard now and the flat cold raptor eyes, how it would settle into the lines of his face and meld down with whatever it was trying to hide until there was nothing else and his heart almost broke for the helpless incontrovertible idiot sick tragedy of it, no matter what the change he wouldn't let go and he couldn't run.

"If that is what you really believe," Adamska said softly, "then end it now."

Otacon swallowed hard. "It won't work," he said.

"Don't make excuses." In Adamska's voice, seamlessly controlled as a human's could be, the discordant note of fear rang loud. How had he never heard it before? "Choose."

*Is he really afraid I'm going to shoot him?*

It was then he realized that wasn't it at all.

Ordering his body to stop trying to escape and without the attention to spare to be surprised when it obeyed, Otacon shifted forward, let his hands fold around the strange feel of a weapon's handle, and took up some of the revolver's weight.

"No," he said.

Adamska's eyes narrowed.

"Then you don't believe it," he accused.

"Maybe not," said Otacon.

"Tell me how to fix it!" the boy cried.

"I don't know."

"Try! Just..." His eyes slipped closed, as if chasing something written on the inside of the lids. Some of the iron in his grip melted and flowed down, to wherever things no longer needed go. "...try." His eyes opened, and maybe they had found it, because there was less brittleness to their strength. "Only a coward gives up before the battle is begun."

Otacon declined to mention how well that described him.

"I can't promise I'll find a way."

"That's not what I asked."

Otacon decided.

"Whatever I can," he said, "I'll do it. I'll find a way, if there is one. I won't give up." It sounded like so little.

Adamska scrutinized him with such naked incredulity that it was only the gun in his hand that kept him from laughing. "Will you?"

"Yes."

"And if there isn't..." The idea didn't seem to affect him the way it had a moment ago, even as he tapped his finger against the barrel, rich with significance. "You owe me."

Some promises Otacon couldn't make.

Adamska rolled a shoulder dismissively at his silence. "We'll deal with that when it happens."

"If," said Otacon, automatically.

In the normal course of things, Ocelot did not smile; any curvature of his lips was rerouted to a smirky or scenically sneeresque detour – if the expression was going to happen, it was going to be on his damn terms. This one was different. Adamska smiled as though the two of them shared a joke no one else in the world would ever know, and each held one half of the punch line.

The gun spun out of Otacon's hands, dispelling the illusion that he had ever held any real control over it, and slipped with glib martial grace back into his waistband. Otacon regretted the brevity of the weirdly graceful display. It was amazing, how he could handle that gun.

"Keep it for me," he said.

Of its own accord, Otacon's hand followed to hover on the handle, even as the boy pulled back and turned the unreadable look in his eyes away. It felt odd there, even though after a few days he had hardly noticed it, the weapon secured absurdly to his side as a promise to a friend. People can get used to anything. It felt different now. Maybe because he had been given it, by the boy now brooding with his back turned to him. It was a strange kind of trust.

This probably wasn't high on the list of good ways to get to know someone, Otacon thought as he lifted his palm away from the feel of warm metal and watched the pattern of the back turned to him. In an odd way, he felt like maybe he understood.

"Who did the engraving?"

Adamska's head jerked up. "What?"

"The engraving. On the gun."

"Oh." He glanced into the shadows as though tracking the shapes of mice. "Me."

"It's pretty."

Adamska gave a grunted, "Huh."

Averted, the boy raised one hand, looked at it, curled it into a fist. He dropped it again, as if in remembrance.

"Thanks."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/10/>

# chapter 11

## Stray by Dahne

*Courage can change the nature of a man.*

Ocelot was satisfied. Sometimes you had to let the claws slip into the open a little. Remind them who they were dealing with. Keep the balance of power tipped in your favor. You could be secure in the knowledge that a promise would be kept, as long as you had ensured that there was a proper incen-

Wait.

"That," Ocelot growled, turning back to his opponent with his body instinctively on guard, "was too easy."

"Huh?"

"Why did you agree to help me?" Ocelot demanded.

Hal blinked like a cat honestly unaware there ever had been a canary. "Why not?"

Ocelot calibrated his glare to Full Contempt and said, "I. Could. Kill. You."

He hated having to spell it out. It felt so crass.

"Oh." He turned and knelt by his neglected tools. "Are you going to?"

"*That's not the point!*"

"Then what is?"

"I don't know!"

There had been times, between the end of one plan and the beginning of another, when no one needed to be shot or bribed or threatened or silenced, and Ocelot had had a moment to himself. These were rare and he wasn't sure if he liked them. Often, he would take the opportunity to take stock of himself. The conclusion he always reached was that the world was a terrifically unfair place. As immediately followed, he would be forced to conclude that it was honestly astounding in the degree to which it was unfair in his favor. Not only did he possess unmatched intelligence, innate skill at anything he cared to attempt, looks that meant he had received an impressively thorough education on the sheer number of ways to proposition someone by the time he was sixteen, and, yes, good senses, but he also seemed to have been given a free pass on many of life's less flattering inevitabilities. Even throughout adolescence, his voice never broke.

It broke now.

It might have been to cover the echoes that he said softly, to a vision full of gray and darker,

"I don't know."

Ocelot felt a curious calm, now that it was about to happen. He would ask, and that would force him to turn and look it full in the face. With an odd detachment, he knew he couldn't take it. The eggshell he had been holding together by sheer will would crumble. He used to wonder, sometimes, before he knew better, about men who had died by falling from great heights. After you'd held on, for the forever that might have been a minute, after you felt the last strength drain from your hands – and it would have to be the last, or else you didn't deserve to have been alive at all – was it a relief, to finally know that in the end there was nothing you could do but let go?

Hal said, "Nevermind."

It was, Adamska decided, like consistently having a chair pushed where you thought you were going to fall. He shook his head at himself. Weird little bastard.



This man was less of an enigma than a persistent annoyance. A scab that Adamska could not stop picking at. It wasn't ten minutes ago that he'd felt his terror, met it in the way you greeted an old friend as you counted out how long he had to live. And yet there was nothing in the voice that instructed him but a fine layer of distraction. Ocelot could almost believe that the previous encounter had been nothing but a delusion.

"Need any help?"

Clearly, only one person was delusional here.

"No. I'm done with this." "This" was a series of a dozen multicolored wires that hooked from just inside the base of the right pillar. The outer panels had been removed, exposing a cavern of foreboding blackness into which the wires vanished.

"Here." Without looking to confirm the report, Hal threw an object over the pile of assorted parts (some of which appeared suspiciously domestic), too quickly to identify. Adamska caught it, which didn't help.

"What's this?" he asked without thinking.

"That's the aurum potabilation-"

"What I meant was," he amended, "what do I do with it?"

"Oh." Hal gave an abashed grin. "Just hook it up to the inside. There should be a group of ports on the back wall."

Adamska looked at the gap. It was, now that he thought of it, just big enough to fit the upper body of a man, should he want to enter. Should he need to enter. Should he be forced to be enter.

"Should be," he said.

An unconcerned, "Yeah."

Adamska gazed into the abyss. It didn't gaze back, but only, he suspected, due to a malevolent desire to be contrary.

"On the back wall," he said.

"Yeah."

The pit lurked and radiated blind malevolence.

*Don't be a fool,* he said to himself. *There's nothing in there.*

He made sure not to listen when his self whispered that that was precisely the problem.

There are laws to everything.

One was;

Never show weakness.

Ocelot had always thought it rather convenient that he had none to show.

Ocelot had no patience for claustrophobia. Fear was for the weak; fear with no logical basis was for the weak and stupid. It wasn't fear. It was only an ingrained aversion to small, confining spaces, as agility was one of his greatest assets, and they gave him no room to maneuver. To negotiate. Escape.

In Ocelot's mind, if there was only one possible direction offered, it was, by default, wrong.

The law;

Never hesitate.

"Is something wrong?" Glasses were supposed to conceal a person's face, interrupt the flow of lines until the whole was nearly unrecognizable. Not sharpen the features, make his eyes appear large, disorienting.

"Nothing."

The machine was larger than it had been. The shape was a basic arch, and yet it confused the

eye. It was difficult to get an exact idea of the dimensions. He had been putting things in and taking things out of it for days, and the darkness conveyed a sense of being utterly empty, or, no, containing something in the emptiness. Something that would rip down into him, should he let it touch. Nothing so ordinary as metacolloidal processors, or priscasapiential conduits.

The last thing Ocelot needed was a reminder of just how many things were wrong with his situation.

The fear had been sleeping lightly as a panther awaiting the hunter's mistake. It woke hungry.

He was taking too long. His fingers ran erratic relays against the component in his hand.

The choice was to do it, or to confess that he did not want to.

Which was, of course, no choice at all.

Weighing the emptiness of the holster at his side, forgotten primate memories forcing his toes to grip uselessly at the ground through his boots, Ocelot sank to the ground and ducked into the shadows.

It was as though his eyes were closed.

They said fear was an enemy no one could fight. Ocelot knew better. You fought fear the same way you fought anyone else; you found the exact opposite of what he wanted, and then you did it. When fear told him to flee, he stood his ground. When fear told him to hide, he charged straight into the center of the maelstrom. Fear, possessing like any other creature the slit-eyed intelligence of survival, soon divined the pattern and stopped bothering to show up at all.

This was different.

Adamska was inside of it now, with...

Two things cannot occupy the same space.

Ocelot was afraid.

There is nothing more important to a soldier than his eyes.

He trusted his eyes, and Ocelot's were lying to him. They told him there was nothing there and that he was alone. When he could feel it

The eggshell fractures were spreading, he could hold them together by sheer will for only so long.

It was spilling into his blood, the poison of it, rage jagged ice splinters stuck crosswise in his veins, the seething welling mass of it, boiling as though in reaction to some foreign thing dropped into it, churning in some synthesis he couldn't bear, he could see through the vertigo his hands shaking, his *hands* were *shaking*, his body wasn't his, the damp sullen heat and the darkness was vertigo and there was the Thing, he was pulling apart not at the seams but right at the center where it should have been strong and the edge he was balanced on or already fallen or already dead or already broken something was chained up inside him and the two were overlapping now there was a delay a divide an echo in the gap of both and he was searing at the brink of no he couldn't it would destroy him or else it would no not breaking but something worse someone no he needed he had to or else he

Ocelot was never afraid.

*Go forward, you coward!*

He couldn't *see* only one way to go no way but forward he knew what was forward it was waiting for him the Thing was there had to find another way turn it aside sneak past face it down but he was on *its* ground now he couldn't lie anymore there was no light left to hide in he'd done it right he was the best he'd done everything right and now

he

was

here

*Are you going to whimper like a dog, or are you going to move*

A bullet is what it is because of a sequence of change. Trigger to hammer to primer to propellant. Each a link in a chain reaction that begins in metal and ends in blood.

Ocelot knew that.

The hammer was up, and here, with his eyes straining for light and his muscles tensed to hold them back from tearing themselves apart in desperation for an escape that was not there, it would fall.

Ocelot had, he had many times, aimed his gun at men who had, in the last moment, by some irresistible flicker of futile instinct, cried out, "No!"

They were always wrong.

He had good senses, and he sensed that he was not alone.

There were only two ways to go and he couldn't see either, it was pressing down on like a mountain on coal and he knew what would happen when he crumbled, if, *if*, there had to be a way, it was waiting for him and he couldn't *see*, he'd given his *weapon* away, he knew how to kill the fear but something else would die too he could feel it in him reaching changing and he was afraid, he was afraid to die nothing survives stasis nothing can hang and wait (*ruin him*) and he was afraid to lose, he was afraid of what was in front of him and he was afraid of what was inside him, telling him *Go on, you know how to kill it, you know how easy it would be, but you know that something else would die too, wouldn't it?* He couldn't let it *Every battle has its casualties* he wasn't going to be *Just take it by the neck and squeeze* the blackness and the metal *This is war, Major* he was himself *You're he*

*There cannot be two-*

Ocelot moved forward.

The first time he had been shot, Adamska had made no sound, walking onward until a comrade had noticed and insisted he get treatment. Adamska would have preferred to go on saying nothing indefinitely. Admitting mortality was tantamount to accepting an insult, and it was easier to lose blood than face. Back at the base he had kept his silence, stoic and grunting complaints at the continuing refusal to let him be. Then he was down, torn calf muscle laid bare (idiotically, the first fangs of panic sank into his skin when they cut away the leg of his pants), and though he was numb by then he refused to look away and when the edge held in a steady hand was on him he understood what people meant when they said they wanted to scream.

The law;

Run or fight.

Live, or don't.

It was all so simple, in the end.

Ocelot reached into the darkness.

It bit him.

"Son of a *bitch*!"

"You okay?" The call seemed to come from a distance.

Adamska discovered, an instant later, that this estimation was incorrect.

The momentum was impressive, when the small amount of space he had in which to generate it was taken under consideration. Backwards, no less. His trajectory was at its height arrested by something firm, yet soft.

"Your machine bit me," Adamska accused the ceiling. His eyes felt strange, back in the light.

It was still here, even when he hadn't been watching.

"I'll admit that there's a lot about it I don't have a total grip on," Hal's voice said reasonably,

though it spoke from beneath him, which seemed, to his stalled mind, not reasonable at all, "but I'm pretty sure it doesn't bite."

And he was here.

"It did," Adamska said stubbornly.

"Here, I'll take a look at it."

Despite this plan of action, there was a pause.

"Mind, er, getting off of me?"

"Oh. Yes."

The process took longer than Adamska, had his mind not been in an odd state of quiet stillness, would have predicted. His spurs were a hindrance. Every time he thought he'd gotten them free, they tangled in something else.

"Don't know why I bother with the damned things," he muttered.

With the aid of Hal and some additional judicious cursing, with a clink like rattling chains he extracted himself and pulled the other man up behind him. Before he could think of a way to fend him off, there were hands on his wrist, arms concealed but for a momentary glimpse of pale flesh tones and fading yellow-green.

"You're fine," he said, as if there were no great reason to be otherwise. "Didn't break the skin, see?"

"Yes," Adamska said. He stared at his hand, as though half-expecting it to act on its own.

He hadn't noticed the warmth around him until it was withdrawn. Hal knelt by the exposed recesses of the machine and, without hesitation, vanished inside.

Adamska was reminded why many people historically had chosen to name themselves after an animal; there was something about a creature, possessed of no conscious rationality but operating only on an intricate web of instinct and perseverance, that awed and resonated within the mind of a soldier. Especially when it was within inches of his unprotected flesh and probably rabid.

Adamska had only begun to imagine why he would do this – there was courage, and then there was idiocy – when he emerged, whole and bearing a lump of something in his hands. Whatever the thing was, it was unhappy, and the only thing sparing Hal a great deal of blood was that its viciousness seemed limited to the air around it and any bits of itself that got in the way.

"A rat," said Adamska coldly. A stupid one at that. Its efforts were clearly focused on breaking the careful grip Hal held it in, although not focused terribly well.

"It's not a rat," Hal said. He lifted the creature to give it a dubious examination. It repaid the attention with a haphazard attempt at ocular surgery. "Rats aren't orange."

That could be said for the creature. It was, indeed, orange. That was where description ended, at least of the flattering sort.

"You didn't have to go in after it," Adamska said, almost as an afterthought.

Hal shrugged self-consciously. "It was stuck in there."

Adamska wondered, for a loose moment, about an animal, couched in warm grinding gears and so careful not to let itself be caught up in them.

In Hal's hands, the creature calmed enough to resolve itself into a more recognizable state, though a no less disagreeable one.

"That," said Adamska, "is the ugliest cat I have ever seen."

"Heh," said Hal. He set it down gently down, for which it displayed its gratitude by sprinting beneath a pile of scrap metal and hissing furiously.

"We'd better just leave her alone for now," said Hal. "She'll come out when she feels like it."

*We?* thought Adamska.

Hal set Adamska to another task, apparently having forgotten about the component whose installation the machine's denizen had interrupted. That was all right with him. His fear was gone, but he needed some time to think. There was no real reason for it, but he felt undeniably different. It was as if something horrible had been looming up, as if some terrible pain had been growing steadily and, just as it grew so unbearable that he thought he'd go mad from it, for no visible reason, it stopped. He was unsure whether to dare to be relieved.

Wait.

He'd never been afraid.

Had he?

Adamska shook his head in chagrin. Afraid of being afraid. How precious.

The whole thing was beginning to strike him as ludicrously funny.

Stretched out on the floor, Adamska extended his legs as counterbalance while he leaned around one of the arch's pillars. When he sat up, what he would call, for the sake of argument, a cat was attached to one. It slitted its eyes at him and purred viciously.

"She needs a name," said Hal.

"Hmph." People and names. "She's scrawny, of no use to anybody, and alternates between true love and attempted murder." He twisted his elbow to finish off a screw and picked up another. "We'll think of something."

They worked late into the night, making a good deal of progress and, on Adamska's part, learning rapidly how to minimize the incidence of feline-related lacerations. He fell asleep to the unobtrusive chant of gears turning.

Adamska dreamed of walking through an endless town, somewhere back at home. He was looking for something. He would remember what when he found it. He was in no hurry and wandered aimlessly for a long time, never seeing the same person twice but for an old woman who kept trying to give him an onion.

---

## Notes:

-There are times I almost hope Google really is being monitored.

"gunshot wound"

"treating a gunshot wound"

"removing a bullet from a gunshot wound"

I kept expecting to get an anonymous e-mail saying, "Dude, just go to the hospital."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/11/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/11/>

# chapter 12

## Stray by Dahne

*Suffering can change the nature of a man.*

Otacon didn't mind so much messing about with fate. It was one of those things, like true love, or aliens, that existed for other people, if it existed at all. He certainly wasn't about to exert any sort of influence over anybody else's life. It was hard enough to influence his own. If anything, in the halls of providence he was the one at the back of the line, getting handed the leftover bits and pieces with a perfunctory, "Well, guess that's yours then," before the arbiters of destiny went on to more important things.

After seeing what fate did to people, all he knew for sure was that he didn't want one.

Otacon had never been an outcast so much as no one had ever remembered to invite him in. That was all right with him. He was comfortable with the fact that the only thing that made him unusual was how utterly unexceptional he was.

At least, before the whole 'not-quite-terrorist anti-nuclear-death-machine faction' thing had gotten started. And that had been more a matter of bad luck, bad timing, and some really bad decisions than anything.

This set of circuit boards was almost done. There were a lot more sets to go, since it was only a piece of the whole, but still, it was satisfying. In the corner of his eye he caught a flash of orange, like iron that had been left out in the rain so long that pressure wouldn't make it shatter so much as crumble.

"Tanya! Get out of there!"

Otacon reached out as she passed by. She issued a long, well-aimed swipe without so much as slowing down. Amazing things, cats.

Adamska gave him a Look. (Otacon thought the capital came from something about the eyebrows.)

"Why do you keep doing that?" he asked, taking the boards Otacon had just finished and beginning to wire them together. "It's only going to scratch you."

"That just how she is. Probably doesn't have any reason to like people much, if somebody abandoned her all the way out here. Besides, maybe sometime she won't."

Otacon figured it was probably good he didn't speak any Russian. Things said under one's breath that way were rarely flattering.

This was, by coincidence, the second time that day he had had occasion to think of the difference in native language. Adamska's near-perfect speech was belied only by a trace of accent, roughening the edges of his words when agitated and normally giving them an interestingly cross-hatched shading. It was only times like this, or that morning, when he had woken up with a stream of clear but unintelligible words, that Otacon was consciously reminded that he was not, so to speak, from around here.

Unbeknownst to Otacon, had he been able to decipher the earlier, he would only have been left wondering why in the world the boy would say, "All right, I'll take your damn onion," and so exchange one mystery for another.

Otacon tried to think if Ocelot, the old one, had had an accent. He found he couldn't remember. That is to say, by the 'old' Ocelot, the newer one. Though this one here was newer, to him.

Problems. Tense, nomenclature, and another. One that it was getting harder to pretend not to notice.

There are people in the world with a physical and aesthetic appreciation for aspects of beauty without regard for strict separation in terms of form. Otacon often wondered if he was one of them, or if he just took anything he could get. No matter which, he was comfortable with the plain fact of it, in the way that he was comfortable with anything about himself; while it didn't bother him as such, if it ever came up, he couldn't help feeling that he should apologize. It wasn't so much a secret as that no one really took enough interest in him to ask. Fortunately it didn't come up, except when, say, he happened to get careless and leave something around with text that could be most accurately described in a phrase that ended in "...imi nashii" and illustrations that were described by Dave as "what the hell...?" His own expression must have been fairly easy to read, because after a few moments long enough to construct a chain of progressively worse and worse predictions, Dave had burst out laughing - "For Christ's sake, Hal, I don't *care*" - and eventually given him a companionable smack on the shoulder and the advice that he just try to restrain his affections from people who were trying to kill him.

Come to think of it, that might not be going so well.

Anyway, there was something he was going to have to face.

Adamska was beautiful.

There. Done.

Involuntarily, Otacon looked up. He was sitting with his legs folded beneath him, eyes narrowed and tongue just slightly sticking out of the corner of his mouth as he negotiated with a particularly stubborn bolt. The hat had been discarded some time ago when he hadn't been paying attention, since it would only fall off or get caught on things. The hair it had covered was pale gold, short enough that it would probably be soft and fuzzy if you...ran...your...hands...

Okay, maybe it wasn't going to be quite that easy.

The extreme nature of his looks actually made things easier. They weren't the sort you would find on a statue – the very excessive perfection of his features made his face as foreign to the eye as one that had been drastically misproportioned. The effect was dulled, a little, enough to make it bearable. Anaesthetic. It was hard to believe that the genetic lottery could produce anything like that. It went beyond normal beauty to surreality, so that, at least if you weren't used to it, it could go right above normal perception without any effect but a sort of detached, intellectual awe. Like ultraviolet light. Otacon wondered if excessive beauty gave you cancer.

"Why are you staring at me?"

"No reason," he said quickly. As soon as it turned to him, Adamska's face had taken on that habitual look that could have made a bull in the streets of Pamplona consider the wisdom of a detour.

Adamska shrugged. "Suit yourself."

At least, if these moments were easy to fall into, there was a certain way to fall back out of them. More than once he had caught himself just in time, the memory of who he was looking at crashing into him complete with vivid illustration, making his stomach fold in on itself and huddle shuddering at the back of his abdomen. Sometimes it would swoop down on him like a hawk on a fieldmouse, spinning his inner equilibrium around so fast he could feel it sloshing.

Somewhere Hal was convinced that there was a level where people made sense, if only down at the most basic. 10 live, 20 sleep, 30 GOTO 10. He kept finding himself staring at Adamska, trying to puzzle out just how he was related to...himself. It was as if some devastating event that took place at some later point in his timeline that utterly destroyed the graceful, determined, proud boy and

replaced him with something that had no connection to who he had been.

Otacon wished he was a good enough liar to believe it.

Because he could see it, if he let his eyes unfocus a little. Make the mouth a little less sullen and a little more cruel, the bones of the face a little less defined, the sharp edges of the intelligence a little better hidden. Just a little. Slowly, he could reconstruct it, building up layer by layer. Speculating about where the materials would come from filled him with the contradictory urges to embrace the boy and run away very fast. So, like always, he stayed still.

There was that look to his eyes, the look of somebody who'd seen everything and shot most of it. Snake had that, too. So had Liquid, though his had been diluted with more than a fair share of Crazy. And so had she...Better not to think about it.

He wasn't going to let himself think like this. For all the world's perversions, he doubted there was one for liking someone who was going to torture your best friend to within an inch of his life, not to mention probably orchestrate the terrorist attack that got your sister killed, and he'd be damned if he was going to let one be invented on his account.

Just let the boy be who he was. Beautiful, there was no use denying that, but separate. Removed. Not of his time. Not, frankly speaking, of his world. Entirely out of his league, in every possible way. Like a story about someone who had died a thousand years ago. It was possible to deal with him, as long as you never let yourself think of him as real.

"If you have something you want to say," Adamska said, without looking up, "say it."

Otacon had his own talents, he had to admit. Who else could be transparent when you weren't even looking at him?

At least Adamska sounded a lot calmer now. For a while, it had been almost as if he were standing at the edge of the deep end and only waiting to see if what was coming up behind him was worse. Like he was just about to set out into the multiple-exclamation point part of the waste land and come out on the other side, somewhere he could fortify and no one else could reach.

Otacon wanted to be able to look at him without feeling like he'd lost something.

"It's nothing."

It was a good thing, Otacon thought, that Adamska lacked the interest to pursue the topic further. He had a feeling that he would say everything, if the boy only looked at him and said, "Tell me." There was something about him that made it obvious that he was used to people doing what he said, without letting the process of thought getting in the way. The military could have had something to do with that. Otacon didn't think so.

Maybe it was those words themselves, and the way they cast shadows of what might happen to you if you didn't.

No. It was something about him. Some kind of aura of command, of competence you could put your faith in. It was, in a way, related to what Snake had. A distant relative, the kind you forget about until you find out they'd died in the Alps somewhere. But where you knew Snake would get through anything in his way if he had to dismantle it brick by brick, this kid was an erratic, unbalanced mixture of things that should have been mutually exclusive. One said he'd get through it if he had to bash his head against it and see which one of them gave up first. And the other said he'd find the cracks and slip through them and eat away at the core, until all he had to do was push just a little at the right place and watch it crumble...

That was the one that scared Otacon, a little. Because someone who could do that could do it to people, too.

Did it come from rank, that confidence, from having people follow him? Or did they follow him



because of it? Cause and effect. Such a contradiction, this boy, and yet it was hard to imagine what else he could be. He was himself strongly, and not just, like Otacon, by default. Contradiction, feedback loop, serpent swallowing its own tail...

"You said this was not operational," Adamska said abruptly.

"It's not," said Otacon. He explained absently, as he attempted to catch the remnants of whatever it was he had been thinking about. "We haven't even gotten started on the power supply yet. It's one of the most complicated parts, since it's a kind that's never even been attempted before, to my knowledge. Why?"

"I heard something." His eyes were narrowed and intent, listening. His face relaxed, and he shook his head. "It's gone now."

"Not much chance of anything going on inside, without the converter installed. The ether – well, the idea of it, not ether itself, obviously, that was disproved a hundred years ago – has to pass through a series of relays until it becomes real enough to put to actual use."

Adamska was silent for a moment.

He said, "What?"

"The name's misleading, I know," Otacon explained. He stretched up to grab a coaxial cable that dangled down from the top of the arch and winced involuntarily. He kept forgetting to favor his left leg, inattentive movement making pain flicker across the long, shallow gash that had run along the front of it since yesterday. Spurs were dangerous things to flail around in. "To tell the truth, it's not really anything. It's easier to just call it ether."

"Do you mean to tell me," Adamska said, in the familiar tone of one who is looking very hard for a rational explanation and senses that there is not going to be one, "that this machine runs on nothing?"

"Not nothing – just not anything in particular." Otacon crouched down, pushing his glasses further up on his face. "See, ether is the idea of something where there's nothing. But that's contradictory, see, because now where there's nothing there's at least the *idea* of something. There's a lot of power in paradox. These relays we're putting together now – here, put this between that and those – distill it, taking that tiny shade of doubt from the thing about its own existence and then repeat the process, passing it from relay to relay, getting it stronger each time, until it's real enough to serve our purposes."

Adamska radiated the skepticism of one who had just had his suspicions that the Loch Ness monster was a large dog draped in a green bathtowel confirmed.

"I don't believe it," he said, less in reply than to remind whatever forces may have taken it into their heads to orchestrate his situation that he wasn't falling for it and furthermore it wasn't funny.

"Don't worry," Otacon said amicably. "You don't have to. All we have to do is make it want to believe in itself." He turned to smile reassuringly. "Don't worry. It should all work out."

(Adamska had heard more disquieting things in his life. Most were along the lines of, "I know he's around here somewhere," "Just trust me," and, "Right behind you.")

"How did you think of all of this?" Adamska asked, with inattentive curiosity.

"I...huh." How had he thought of all that? "Ever have those times, when you're not quite sure what you're doing, but it feels right, somehow?"

Adamska thought.

"No."

"Me neither, honestly. But with this, I could almost understand what people meant when they said that. It was almost as though, instead of coming up with an entire concept, I was just discovering something that was already there. Like the idea wanted to be put to use, and I was the most convenient

person available. Then I started really thinking about it and all the flaws inherent in the premise, and kind of gave up on it for a while."

"For a while?" He was only half-listening, which always put Otacon more at ease.

"I figured I'd pick it up again sometime, when I got a good idea, even if I had to rebuild it from scratch," he said, adding sheepishly; "I, uh, tend not to give up on anything for good." He pushed a rank of diodes into place. He wasn't quite sure how best to configure them, but he was on to something, he could tell. "But then..."

"Me."

"Yeah." Otacon shook his head in wonderment, then had to pause to push his glasses back up. "I still don't have any idea how it happened. A couple of the aspects make sense, but there's no way anyone should have been able to go through, no matter where you start."

"It always comes back to that," said Adamska.

"Yeah..." Otacon's movements slowed, as though something he had thought lost was coming into view at the corner of his eye. "It does..."

Adamska, if he noticed, dismissed this as a general habit of odd behavior. Which, to be honest, might have been correct. "You keep going in circles. If you don't solve that part, you'll never get anywhere."

Otacon's eyes sparked like flint's first affair with steel. "Go on."

"Hm?"

"Keep going. Say more things."

"What? That you run into the same problem again and again?"

Otacon stared into the empty space between the pillars, watching as things fell into place. He kept his tone calm and measured, so as not to scare it away.

"Nothing ever happens once. There's no such thing as coincidence. Everything's cyclical, no matter where you go everything's connected. Casualty of yesterday's war becomes today's cyborg ninja, who makes a place for today's adversary to be reborn through tomorrow's. It all hooks together, but it can't be perfectly constant. Present touches both past and future, but what the present is depends on our thoughts, our actions. History is already in a state of flux, there's got to be a way to discharge the excess energy."

There was an audible whirring.

"But simultaneous change in all states of itself isn't something any living organism can endure. There has to be some way to both minimize and absorb damage."

The thoughts flowed in smooth, unhurried waves, breaking with a soft hiss.

"Time is not alive," said Adamska.

There are some phrases that, in the way that lightning signals thunder, herald disaster. They slip out through unguarded lips unaccompanied by conscious thought, rats fleeing the ship of language a moment before the iceberg strikes the hull. They are the vocal harbingers, embedded in man's collective consciousness before his means of expressing it grew beyond "mammoth" and "rock." Some have said that they are a crude variety of precognition, and will someday evolve to the point where the disaster in whose vanguard they march can be, with skill, avoided. The more popular theory is that fate has as sick a sense of humor as anyone.

Whatever the reasoning behind them, as the intensity of his stare provoked Adamska to get up to try to see what he was looking at, Otacon spoke their penultimate.

"Huh. That's funny..."

Grabbing him with the speed of a soldier's instincts, Adamska ducked.

This may not have been strictly necessary. The spiraling coil of blue-gray energy that slid with speed that forced the eye to reconsider a lifetime of more-or-less accurate judgment might have been perfectly harmless, and full contact with it might have resulted in nothing but momentary disorientation.

But then again, maybe not.

Color was gone. Motion had never existed.

What was color?

The gray, rogue fog gone solid, and the red of his tear.

Adamska who had not moved was standing, too far to reach had he been able to remember how to.

The gray shape, grayer than the gray that was the rest, grayer than Adamska whose color and motion even when pale and still was such him of him that this here and now was not a shadow of a memory in low resolution, not so much moving as making the world forget where it was and waiting in the air in a straight line, until Adamska's eyes which could have moved but couldn't vibrate the lack between them, and he could see his face beside his face in the classic vase-line profile, and his face was like something that would have been fear in someone else, and below the red tear he was smiling. If there was such thing as time he would have taken some to understand that he in himself felt less fear than s

"Time"

said the gray shadow kindly,

"is not dead."

Floated in that unmovement, suspended by disbelief, back enough to be gone.

Left them in between atoms of breath.

Let it—

energy gray-blue of coil spiraling the

ducked Adamska instincts soldier's

gray red tear of color motion Adamska world forget memory resolution Adamska motion shadow—

"Yeah." Otacon shook his head in wonderment, then had to pause to push his glasses back up. "I still don't have any idea how it happened. A couple of the aspects make sense, but there's no way—what's wrong?"

Adamska was staring at the space between the machine's arches. He said, sounding distant, "What?"

Otacon said, "You look like you've seen a—"

"Don't say it!" The blond head snapped up, urgency in his eyes a good deal beyond what the situation called for.

But something did feel odd. As though there had been a moment of lag, and the server and client had just now returned to speaking terms. As though something that hadn't happened had come between the last couple things that had. As if, for just a moment, two plus two had equaled regret.

Otacon had been doing far too much thinking about space-time anomalies lately.

Then the feeling was gone, and he was back to Earth, in a garage full of shadows and debris with a half-finished time machine and a beautiful, likable boy who was going to be one of the most terrifyingly twisted people he had ever met. Which was saying something, considering.

No wonder he was having trouble.

Sometimes you just had to say to hell with doubt and accept that any time you weren't on top of a

giant robot disguised as an environmental recovery facility worrying about bombs planted by a fat man on roller skates was a good day.

"Are you okay?" asked Otacon. Adamska had a strange look on his face, as though he'd thrown open Pandora's box and found an I.O.U.

"Yes."

Then, steadier;

"Yes."

"Oh. Because, I just got this really strange feeling, like..." What had it been like?

As Otacon reached into the amiable chaos of his mind – they say an organized psyche is a good thing, but if he ever got it straightened up, how would he find anything? - he caught the thing that had been just out of reach the whole time.

"Everything is connected," he said.

"No," said Adamska, kneeling down to the panel of inputs he had been affixing, "I need to put together a few more."

"That's not what I meant," said Otacon, wanting to laugh with the joy that came from knowing something. "Time's not a line. It's-" he never knew if his gestures were all that useful as an illustration, but he couldn't help making them- "loops, all interlocking. And where they intersect..."

"How is it," said Adamska, eyes alight, "that I have no idea what you're talking about, but I think I know where you're going?"

"It's survived this flux because it's always in flux. It can break, but what's more likely, what's much more conducive to survival, is that it will bend."

Otacon could see Adamska' mind racing, gears clicking into place and opening new routines in possibility. "Do you mean that-"

"Yeah." Otacon beamed. "It's not impossible. Just *almost* impossible."

"How," said Adamska, "do you make that sound like such good news?"

"I mean, I still don't know if it's possible on a human level, but on a cosmological one..."

"Does this mean that nothing I do will cause the universe to collapse?"

"Yeah." Otacon thought of something, and hastened to add, "But it's all theory, and there's got to be a limit point somewhere, so don't, you know, commandeer a giant robot and try to take over the world or anything."

An eyebrow lifted in curiosity. "Does that happen to you often?"

"You'd be surprised," Otacon sighed. He brightened immediately. "But this means that causality might not be as one-sided as I'd thought."

"And what does that mean?"

"That it's not hopeless."

Adamska snorted like a thoroughbred sighting the finish line. "I could have told you that."

This eBook was generated by the [FanFiction Recommendation Engine](#) | This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/12/>

# chapter 13

**Stray** by Dahne

*Hope can change the nature of a man.*

Ocelot did not run away. On occasion he might fall back to regroup, or reevaluate his position. A strategic necessity. It had nothing to do with running away. It was a concession to the reality that sometimes, the best place from which to observe a situation was somewhere very far from it.

Cowards were often fools, but it was possible to be a fool without being a coward. In the face of impossible odds, a coward ran. A fool faced them head-on. A smart man hung back until he found a way to make them impossible in his favor.

In a calm space within himself, Ocelot began to regroup. Early in the phase, the operative principle was to take stock of your casualties, count your gains, survey your losses, and figure out which was which. Though composing a full report would need a deal more time - something, he noted with mild surprise, he had in abundance - the initial conclusion was this:

Ocelot had had enough.

Enough doubt. Enough second-guessing his own instinct. Enough questioning his sanity. He'd done as much and more of that as any sane man would, so now he could be done with it. Whatever it was that had been simmering and boiling in him could go on doing it without his supervision. If his mind was bound and determined to lose itself, then let it. Whatever parts wanted to go mad could go ahead and do it, as long as they didn't bother the rest. If the universe was going to be this obvious about conspiring to destroy his reason, he would be damned if he was going to give it the satisfaction. So it was going to play dirty? Fine. He *knew* dirty.

They ate in companionable silence, Ocelot not lost in thought so much as surveying. There was a curious calm in him, as though a storm whose winds he had been leaning against had, for the first time, and without cause or warning, stopped. Peninsulas were submerging and others were rising up, under the change of weather patterns that came from knowing how little he had and what that meant when it came to how much he had to lose.

*Maybe you've finally have gone mad*, he thought. There was a satisfaction in letting the lie tell itself, and in being able to fully ignore it.

Ocelot disliked when his instinct and reason disagreed. He knew the scope of his intelligence well enough that it felt unwise to go against it. Reason told him the only possible explanation for this was insanity; instinct said otherwise. He had expected, in a way, to have it come down to a fight between them, inevitable though reason told him, even as it primed the pistol, that if he hadn't been mad before he would then. Now that they had both accepted being out of their depth enough to settle down to a truce, or at least a ceasefire, he could hear instinct make its case.

He had reached an equilibrium. He was still there, when no one was looking. Whether it would last was anyone's guess, but for now, he would take what he could get.

Experimentally, he brushed against the parts of his mind where the "Off Limits" sign had been freshly removed. Each by each he ran his fingers across them, took in the texture and returned whole and unchanged.

Something had tried to contact him. He was sure of it. His intuition told him so. In the same way it told him that the message, while far from insignificant, was not important in the same way that, say, the distinctive soft plink of a grenade was important. All there was to do was set it in the cool dark

places of his mind and let it ferment. Ocelot had intuition in the same way that some men had religion. It proved far more reliable in the end. After all, what could a man put faith in, if not his own mind?

A mind that had no mission. No one to report to. Nothing to hunt after. Nothing to watch but Hal across the table, careful to avoid staining the papers he pored over, plans for whatever it was they were doing next. Nothing to do but listen to the wind howl, feel the change in the atmosphere as the concentration of dogs in the house approached something like critical mass.

These observations connected, and Ocelot looked out the window.

Ocelot knew about storms. Some of them built up over days, palpable gray dread that made him want to shout at it to get the hell over with itself until it did. Some of them threatened and threatened and never came, existing only in the negative space of unfulfilled promise. Some of them came from nowhere and left before anyone had the chance to curse them, leaving behind remnants out of all proportion that lasted until they mingled with the next and for all you knew it might never be gone.

"Guess we're stuck in here for a while," said Hal, gazing dolorously at a landscape that could be faithfully replicated by painting the inside of one's eyelids white and closing them.

A stir passed through the huddling dogscape as what they were calling, for lack of a more appropriate term, a cat stalked through, answering the curious stares with a glare that made it clear that, as far as she was concerned, size and a fifty-to-one advantage just meant more targets. Hal frowned at her, clearly unhappy at the postponement to Ocelot's departure, though to be fair it probably wasn't her fault.

He was part of it. If Ocelot could suspend his disbelief long enough to entertain a nightmare hallucination that could hold this many dogs and an inexplicably ugly cat, no matter how he tried, there was no way he could stretch the fabric of plausibility enough to accept that any sickened, fevered mind could fabricate someone like this. Nightmare creatures, yes. Monsters, yes. Lurid hellscapes, quite possibly. A shy, awkward man whose demeanor hinted at a burden of old sorrows (s— no, it was nothing)...no.

It was disturbing to think that, of the two realities he had known, this one was shaping up to be the more feasible.

"It's as good a time as any," said Ocelot, the resolve in his mind kept out of his voice. "Tell me what happened."

"Hm?" Hal hadn't been paying attention. Ocelot wasn't sure if the man's guilelessness annoyed or amused him. If forced to tell a lie, he might actually stammer.

"I only got...only saw parts of the story." Now or never. "Tell me the rest."

Brows arched over eyes already too large. "All of it?"

"All of it." Now. Before his mind had a chance to find the smashed locks and change them. Salt the wound while it was open.

Ocelot had little gift for metaphor.

Hal frowned like someone who had been asked, "How poisonous is it?" and was trying to find a phrasing that wasn't in terms of seconds. "It'll take a while."

Ocelot nodded sardonically toward the window. The snow leaning with unsullied abandon against the glass made the idea of anyone else existing in the world academic at best. If there were roads here, they wouldn't have to be salted so much as napalmed. "I have time."

"But, I want to hear your story, too." Eyes widening with a spark of that disquieting intensity, he sounded almost eager. "There must be a lot of things you saw, that we could only guess—"

"Fine." An exchange? That was standard. "You'll go first."

"A, all right." Pushing up his glasses, Hal rubbed at the bridge of his nose. He had a habit of

doing that. Annoying. "I guess," he said, reluctantly, as though imparting something that belonged to a group Ocelot was not part of, "the easiest place to start is with Liquid. He's- er, was- Snake's brother. Sort of. They're Big Boss's sons, so to speak. They-"

"Wait," Ocelot said. He had forgotten something important. He rose and walked out of the room. A moment later he returned, two small glasses in one hand and a bottle of vodka in the other. Hal examined them curiously. "Where did you get that?"

"Don't get worked up over the details," said Ocelot.

He flicked one glass into the air, sent the other into a swift arc above it, caught and slammed them both down in a grandiose tempo. With regal gravitas, he poured, and explained the rules.

"All right." Ocelot sat, ready. "Start again."

"Er, okay." Hal shifted, leaned forward a little. "Liquid and Solid Snake are twins. They were cloned from Big Boss in a government project to create the ultimate soldier."

"When I knew Big Boss," said Ocelot, looking him straight in the eye, "he fought off a small army to destroy what was meant to be the greatest piece of mobile artillery ever devised."

Staring. Silent judgment.

Ocelot drank.

He'd lost the first round, but he was holding back, at this point. Always save something.

Pour.

His turn.

"My unit," he said, "was stationed at the Groznyj Grad, where the weapon was being built." He skimmed lightly over the background details, the interlocking circles of intrigue and betrayal that made the fortress home. The missions; his, the Boss's, John's. Hal never interrupted or asked for clarification, only nodded or emitted small sounds of understanding. Ocelot would not have named him as someone with experience in the field, but it was possible. There were two sides to betrayal, after all. Ocelot was used to an audience that took the information he gave to slot into the spaces of what they knew and route their actions accordingly. Not just- listened. It was disquieting, the look of absorption in the eyes tinted a fair shade above gunmetal, like trying to fill a lake by throwing sponges at it.

"...so Big Boss killed her, along with her comrades." Ocelot's hands flexed, in remembrance of a bowgun's weight.

"Oh," Hal said distantly. Of course. He wouldn't have known any of it. The cause is less relevant to your attention when you're staring down the barrel of the effect.

Then he looked up, a fish rising to the bright pellet of challenge. "I was building something like that. On an island in Alaska, Shadow Moses. Secret weapons lab." He grimaced, half-amused chagrin. "I never was all that good at keeping secrets."

Idly Ocelot wondered if he recognized the lie.

"Ours was built by a hostage, under force of threat." He shrugged languidly. "Not that many had to be spoken, with Volgin around."

In the regiment of startled curiosity life as a whole seemed to continually inspire in Hal's face, curiosity moved to the vanguard. "Volgin?"

Ah, Volgin. Ocelot felt a wave of affection toward the bastard. He was going to win handily.

"He was the commanding officer." Was. Hah. He was even more dead, now. "Two hundred centimeters tall. Had some sort of power over lightning, no one ever really knew why, or much about it except to stay away."

Startlement was sending for reinforcements. "Really?"

"On second thought, no." Ocelot pursed his lips and thought, letting the monstrous shadow loom in his memory. It didn't have much choice. Volgin was the only person he had ever met who could loom sitting down.

"Oh." Hal sagged a little, then let out a small laugh. "I didn't think-"

"It was closer to two fifty."

The look on his face made Adamska want to laugh out loud. He handed him a glass.

Hal swallowed with a wince and thought. Unexpectedly, his brows drew down into an expression of earnest determination that might have, on any other man, looked severe. This one it gave the look of a recalcitrant puppy. "Snake got some help from a cyborg ninja."

"You mentioned that before," Ocelot accused.

"Yeah, but I didn't say that he was Snake's friend."

"So?"

"Who he killed two years beforehand."

Adamska looked at him with something like respect, and drank.

Poured, an easy motion that knew when to stop.

"I haven't told you about Volgin's lover," Ocelot said archly, flicking a shrewd glance at him over the bottle.

"Oh?" Undisguised interest, refreshing, like his mind, in its simplicity. "What was she like?"

Ocelot crossed his arms on the table and gave him a significant look.

"Oh." He hadn't imagined it could ever be that easy to make someone blush. "*Oh.*"

At least no one could say he didn't pick up on things quickly.

"Raikov," said Ocelot, painting the name in the unique palette of bemusement, incredulity, and grudging respect it demanded, "was..."

...difficult to describe. For one thing, describing anything he did was tacit admission that he had actually done it. It was an unspoken pact among the unit that whenever a member who looked deeply traumatized was asked why, the answer would be given as "Raikov" and left at that.

The look on Ocelot's face as memories rose unbidden (That peculiar innocent lilt, that almost had you agreeing before it sank in that what he had said was, "*Just a little debauchery? I'll do most of the work.*") must have been enough. Hal drank.

In a haphazard but thorough manner, they made their way through their respective narratives. Somehow they moved from table to couch, as the contents of the bottle sank. Ocelot concluded,

"...covered in hornets."

They sank slightly more.

Hal frowned in concentration. "Did I tell you about the cyborg ninja?"

"Yes."

He flopped backwards against the cushions. "He died again, before it was over. I wonder if cyborgs get to dream of electric sheep, too." Wistfulness filmed his eyes. "I hope so."

"What's dead can't come back," said Adamska. It was turning out fairly even, to his surprise, but he had the better tolerance. He leaned back, the steadiness feeling good. The rough-hewn logs of the ceiling were unfamiliar; Ocelot was used to temporary structures meant to last only until they fell over or those meant to stand up to artillery barrage, and little in between. It drifted slightly.

"You'd be surprised." Hal sounded thoughtful. "People keep doing it. Liquid, even."

"Another..." Adamska shoved some last bastion of logical pride into the back corner of his mind, where it wept softly- "...cyborg ninja?"

A large dog, face scrawled heavily with black up through the wide space between its ears,



nudged at his dangling hand, and whined.

"Hush, Tetsuo." Hal lolled back, looking up at the ceiling as if he found something familiar. Maybe he was one of those made introspective by drink. He held it better than Adamska had expected.

"You know," he said, "I've never told this to anybody before."

Ah. So he was *that* drunk.

"When I was getting out of the base, after everybody else was gone-"

"They left you behind?" It satisfied something visceral in Ocelot to know how easily he was betrayed.

"No." He began to shake his head and forgot what he was doing halfway through, leaving it resting on Adamska's shoulder. He either didn't notice or was too far gone to care. "I stayed. Somebody had to take care of security along the escape route."

Ocelot frowned at him doubtfully. "*You* disarmed security?"

"Not *manually*," he laughed. "Computers. I understand computers, y'see. I make them do what I want. But the missile launch got called off, so-"

Ocelot began to sit up, then stopped himself. "There was going to be a missile launch?"

"Yeah." Eyes, the glass in front of them too clear to hide anything. "Didn't I mention that?"

"You didn't."

The gray in his hair was plentiful, up close. He didn't look old enough for it, unless you looked around the eyes.

"They were going to launch a missile at the base. Destroy all the evidence, and all that."

"I'm familiar with the strategy," Ocelot murmured.

"But they didn't. Got called off." He laughed, unsteadily. "The one brave thing I ever did in my life, and they had to go and ruin it. Do you know, I was actually kind of disappointed? It's crazy. But I think I was. Doesn't make any sense, I know. *I'm* crazy. Must've been."

"No," said Adamska, thinking of fire and pursuit, crumbling monstrosities and weight destroyed before it could fall, "it does."

Ocelot didn't notice being cold, any more than he noticed having skin or the weight of his gun. Its edge was dulled by knocking against the walls, though he had no idea how they got heat; there was no need to see the great map of Nowhere to know that this little cabin was at the middle. Cold was easy to forget until he lost it, under the combined assault of vodka from within and what was less a pack of dogs than a moving pile from without. One of them, the one with just enough gray in the white to contrast against the space pressing against the windows, drifted up onto the couch and settled down as though invited.

"On the way out – I went the same way they did. Even if there'd been any other options, I could've told they'd been there just by the bullet holes in the walls." He made a sound half between a hiccup and a laugh. Liquid's many defeats and subsequent refusals to stay down had made him more than a little headway in the competition. "When I came out-"

---

---

*Twilight, weak sun held by the snow's surface, not gray but the no-color between white and not-white. Bright enough after the tunnel's dimness that it dazzled him, so that he had to pick it out shape by shape, Jeep and another, overturned, and a mirage born from exhaustion that should have deadened fear. The reality of the corpse hammered his heart until he could hardly hear his mind insisting no, it was*

*too stupid, not after all this, not now. The moments it took were measured in centuries, instinct babbling myths about how it couldn't be Snake and if it could he wouldn't really be dead until Otacon saw it. Until he got there and he saw it, blond on ruined snow, gun in hand but no blood, and the relief that it was Liquid, only Liquid, only poor homicidal suicidal doomed crazy Liquid, made him stand there for time on time, hardly daring to believe that Fate had such a spectacular opportunity to tear at him when his back was turned and had passed it up, so that he didn't realize the morbidity of staring and wanting to laugh for joy in the face of a corpse until it opened its eyes and closed them again in the opposite of a long slow blink.*

*"Go away," said Liquid's body.*

*The numbness of Otacon's mind formed "What?" before it realized there could be no good answer.*

*"I'm dead," the corpse repeated patiently. "Go away."*

*"But...you're..."*

*"Haven't you ever seen a corpse before?" The voice was heavy with weariness. At the border of the mind where logic sector melded with the part more given to giggling and gnawing the walls, this made sense. "Go on. The show's over."*

*The gun had fallen a few feet from his hand. If Otacon was quick, he might be able to grab it-*

*"There's no point. I'm already dead." The snow where his breath would fall was pristine, unmelted.*

*"You can't be."*

*"Of course I can. It's a god-given right. The dead rest in peace. You're interrupting it."*

*Otacon said, "Sorry."*

---

"So I left. Not much else I could do." Reading the patterns of woodgrain above. "I never said anything about it to Snake. He had enough to worry about, and besides, it wasn't important. Didn't mean anything." In the lines beside his mouth wound the patient, plodding comprehension of the bland and stoic impenetrability of life. "It's just this weird thing that happened."

"It's nothing to worry about," said Adamska. "Dead people do that sometimes. It's no use arguing with them."

Hal frowned, pushing a boulder up the hill of thought. "They're...not supposed to."

Adamska made a gesture that would have been expansive if it hadn't run out of space and into dog. "When has that ever meant anything?"

Comparative silence, punctuated by canine exhalations and the hissed rebuttal of a unwisely attempted approach, flowed around them as both attempted to think of an answer.

"Kaji, leave Tanya alone," Hal murmured muzzily. At some point his eyes had slipped shut, as though Adamska's shoulder were a perfectly decent place to rest. Ocelot swayed, slightly. The movement must have been taken as a reminder. Hal sat up, blushing noticeably.

"S, sorry," he said.

*You apologize too much.*

"Tell me something," said Ocelot abruptly.

"Yeah. Sure." Hal relaxed incrementally, back against the arm of the couch, a step further away.

"The machine of yours-"

"Metal Gear Rex."

"That. Yes. If it was so strong, how did your Snake destroy it?"

"The radome is the weak point," he explained, with the ease of familiarity. "Hit it with a few missiles and the pilot has to open the cockpit to navigate, which makes him vulnerable." He talked as though it were a pet.

"If you knew that," Ocelot accused, "why didn't you fix it?"

"Nobody's perfect."

"You didn't realize the implications until it was too late?" That would be like him.

"Oh, no," he said dismissively. "Nothing like that. What I meant is, it was supposed to be that way. Sort of, you know, a character flaw."

"You weakened your weapon intentionally?" In Ocelot's internal scoreboard of this man's traits, the chalk hovered for a moment over "Stupid" before marking another tally in the column of "Crazy."

"That's not it," he said, hunching defensively. "See, everybody has flaws, right? Sure, you can try to cover them up, but not forever. It spreads the strain all over, so that eventually the energy to hold it all together is too much and it's got to crack. Then it all falls apart. But if you give it an outlet, then you at least have some kind of control. Sooner or later, everything breaks. But if you know *how* it's going to break, then, that's the first part of getting it fixed." His stare was nothing but wholehearted earnestness. If a little glassy.

Commanding his limbs in clear, direct tones in order that they have no excuse to pretend to mishear, Ocelot sat up. He gripped the bottle, poured out a precise measure, and handed it off. Hal drank, set it down, and remembered that something had been missing from the process.

"You didn't say the thing that happened," Hal pointed out.

Adamska said, "I met you."

Hal began to frame a reply and broke off, with the inward-facing air of a man interrupted by his own thoughts. His shoulders sank, elbows perching heavily on his knees.

"I feel sorry for him, you know," he admitted softly.

"Who?" said Adamska, irked at being left out of the conversation.

"Liquid."

"The one behind the terrorist attack you just spent a good..." -Adamska, being in possession of an excellent sense of time, never relied on clocks- "...length of time describing?"

"Yeah." Hal nodded, pensive.

Ocelot's tally was going to need more room.

"You really *are* crazy," he said, amazed.

"Not really," Hal contradicted mildly. "It's just sad, that's all."

He rested his chin on steepled fingers, eyes heavily hooded, picturesque as the world's least intimidating gargoyle.

"He really thought he had no choice. That that pointless fight had to happen, that it was... fate or something. It's what he lived for." The phantom of a crooked smile. "Maybe that's why he doesn't ever stay dead. But still— For him, believing what he did, the whole inferior an' superior gene thing—" that had cost Adamska a bit of headway, as well as eroded some of what he thought he had known about biology- "It meant a lot to him. Everything. Which is...what's sad, really. Cause, for him, Shadow Moses was one long suicide."

"It doesn't mean he survived it," said Adamska, glimpsing in the shadow of the word "fate" an unwelcome topic. He doubled back along the verbal trail in hopes that it would get bored and wander

off. "The dead are not always as silent as they should be. It's no use arguing with them."

"That doesn't sound quite right..." He had never learned how to properly control his facial features. It was the novelty of it that fascinated Ocelot; he had grown used to the stoicism of men well attuned to the possibility of being grabbed in the *muda* just for the sake of seeing what they'd do about it. Watching hindered concentration shift to sudden realization without having to decode the mask it happened behind was a rare experience. "Oh! I know! S' because Liquid's not dead."

"Hm?" said Adamska, as he attempted to devise a strategy for claiming a greater portion of the couch without having to dislodge fifty pounds of dog.

"I mean," Hal explained, "not anymore."

Adamska nodded.

Adamska stopped nodding, and thought.

"That," he mentioned, "doesn't help at all."

This failed to inspire the proper elaboration.

The best recourse, Adamska concluded, was to accept the dog as an essential aspect of the immediate future. As he made his gradual descent, the white head lifted with angelic benevolence, and it shifted to make room. A little compact, granted, but altogether, not bad. Warm.

"I didn't want to tell you this," said Hal.

Adamska slitted open eyes he hadn't realized had been closed. Warily, and knowing full well what he was getting into, he said, "Tell me what?"

"You're going to lose your arm."

"Hmm," said Adamska. "Right or left?"

"Right."

"Ah." Really, there was no reason to sound so disconsolate about it. People lost things all the time. "Better than an eye."

"Yeah." The invisible sound of deliberation. Abruptly, as though pushing it out before he could reconsider, he added, "That's not all, though."

"Oh?"

"You get another one."

"Is that right?" said Adamska, half amused. "From where?"

"Liquid."

"Hmm," he said, over the sound of everything he knew about physiology resigning out of protest. "And it works?"

"That's the thing," Hal said despondently.

He explained.

Quiet spread, soft as snow.

"Huh," said Adamska.

"Yeah," said Hal.

Adamska stared gravely up at the ceiling, heavy objects sifting through the layers of his mind.

"Would that be yours, or mine?"

"Huh? Oh. Dunno."

"Both," Adamska decided. He sat up. He poured two glasses, took one, and handed off the other. A solemn clink. A moment. Two small hollow thunks.

As Adamska sank back down, he found that he was followed. The other must have leaned in the wrong direction, accidentally. No reason to protest. Warm. Not bad.

"I hope Snake's all right," said Hal, revealing the source of the ever-present cast of worry that

Adamska had almost begun to think was for his sake.

"He is," Adamska said, with natural confidence.

"How do you know?"

"I know."

"Funny," said Hal, "That actually does make me feel better."

There was a rhythm to it, if you listened. Snow susurrus, more felt than heard. The sense of an impossible pocket of human shelter, a core at the center of a hollow planet. Even breathing, and dog's dreams. A bird could fly through this room, that moment of heat and light before being back in the dark. A sparrow. When it fell, who would notice? Would he find out why?

"There's something I want to know," said Hal, scraps of breath clinging to the words as if reluctant to let them go, words that slunk out of caverns when the sun went down, sad shadow words.

"Ask me," said Adamska.

He was lying against him, nearly all of him, so that Adamska could feel the tremors when he spoke. It was too late in the day for modesty. Head just below his, so that he could look down into inversion and watch the shadows under his eyes and the gentle way they swayed. Not pulling away, like whatever it was that would ruin him was catching. Maybe one of them could forget.

"Why does it bother you so much?"

Or not.

Adamska felt himself go stiff, cold marrow reaching from the inside out.

*How dare you*

Always could take comfort in analgesic anger, oh that gift he had.

"I mean," he said, as though he could explain, "the worst thing he does is kill people, and you do that, too."

Ah.

And it flowed away, solid and impermanent as a glacier on the sun.

He could have forgiven him anything, just for that "he."

"There are many different ways to kill people," Adamska said, seeing now what he needed to make him understand.

"That I know." The rich deprecating irony of having known some of them up close and from the wrong end.

Adamska went on.

"That is to say, there are many kinds of killer."

"I know that, too," he said, softer than before but for the same reason.

"This is how it is." Stronger, wrapping his fingers around the solidity of his resolve. "No matter what you do, you take some *pride* in it. You have some fucking *standards*, even if it's the kind no one else would ever understand." It came out through gritted teeth. "It's no matter how dirty the job is as long as you keep some part of you clean. If you can't do that much, you're not worth killing." His jaw ached. "There is a— a *nobility* in everything, in the basest thing, and if you lose hold of that—" He ached. "You have nothing. You're *nothing*."

Hal said, "Eerk."

Adamska looked down. His arms were clenched in parallel bars low across a stomach that was not his. The knuckles were white.

He released him as though burned.

The gasp felt like a blow to the temple.

"I...don't really follow," the smaller man said, and the breathiness in his voice made the

accusation complete. "I mean, killing people's killing people, right? Do the details make that much of a difference?"

Adamska remembered reciprocity. It was all right to enjoy the thrill of taking someone's life, because you gave him the chance to take yours. Even if he wasn't armed at the moment. That was his own fault. There were men who were good enough to get out of anything; no one ended up on the end of his gun without making the decisions that got him there. That he could have gotten you a thousand times over made up for if you got him the one time it mattered. Luck saw every man the same, and eventually his would run out too, so it was all right. Eye for an eye.

"Yes," Adamska said.

The dog clinging to the edge of the couch lifted its head and whined.

"Heh. I guess it makes sense to Kawo—" He stopped. His eyes went dark, and his face went still.

He said, "Oh."

Hal withdrew into silence, giving Adamska room to think.

The warmth was soaking in, dissolving the tension that held his body straight. A physical drowsiness stole along the length of him, leaving his thoughts free of kinetic urgency. Luck. He liked luck. The bad kind too, maybe because nobody else did. Or maybe because nothing ever hurt so much as the pain you were expecting. Most people went through their lives and never realized that what they hated wasn't death but inevitability.

"That is the problem," he murmured. "The ponytail is just added insult."

Adamska moved a little, getting into a more comfortable position. Hal looked down.

"Your spurs are gone," he remarked inanely.

"Hm. I took them off." As if he could have forgotten. "They were getting in the way."

"Oh."

He weighed so little. Likely only ate when he remembered to. One of that sort. Could hold the entirety of modern physics - and metaphysics, apparently - in his head without effort but forgot the basic rules of staying alive. An idiot. He could have pitied him.

"In any case," Hal said, as if he were picking up something he had let drop, "I don't know that it's such a good idea. Trying to change the past."

"Future," said Adamska, automatically.

"Yeah. That." His head rolled to one side, impartial gravity pressing his cheek to Adamska's chest. "Trying to change it might not be a good idea."

"I thought you said it was not so easy to destroy?" said Adamska, distantly alarmed.

"Not that. What I mean is, what if you do something, and it just, it makes things worse?"

"I don't see how that could be," Adamska bit off, stung.

"No, I mean, see..." He shifted, causing Adamska to notice that the hands resting atop the loose shirt were, again, his. Sneaky bastards. "There might be consequences, you know. Some kind of...exchange, or something. If you can do it at all."

*Stop saying that.*

What he said was, "What makes you so sure?"

"Nothing. Intuition, I guess."

"Huh," he said contemptuously. "That."

"And logic. There ain't no such thing..." His voice faded to a mumble. Instinctively, Adamska leaned in to catch the end.

"I don't see what lunch has to do with it."

Hal only laughed, in a small, unselfconscious way. Adamska let him. It was like dealing with

Volgin, in a way; all you could do was keep yourself grounded.

Something occurred to Adamska, and he said, "You can't tell me you don't believe in second chances. Not when you've seen a man come back from the dead."

As quickly as that, his eyes were stained with sorrow. Adamska had seen that look before, in men who had never learned how to watch a man die. Admittedly not often from quite this angle. The back of his head rested just below his collarbone, effectively pinning his left side. That is, it would have been, had the culprit possessed the heft to pin so much as a butterfly. In this case, though whole and solid, it was about as much real impediment as a cat, or a thought. And with far less claw.

"That's just it," he said. "Grey Fox's second chance didn't do him much good. Something about the process...it broke his mind. All he could do was fight. Killed a lot of people. I was almost one of them, actually. Something of him must've held out, but in the end he was dead again anyway."

Adamska had not thought his mind possessed any more dark halls to open. "I'm not going to die," he said.

"We all are."

"I mean, not immediately."

"That too."

Having someone in close contact without having to worry about breaking his skull was an interesting change. Nothing wrong with variety, now and then.

"I won't end up like him," Adamska said. *If that's what you're worried about.*

"How do you know?" Warily.

"I know." The confidence of fact, with no need for extraneous things like corroboration.

"I...hope you're right," he admitted.

He felt him like the alcohol in his blood, almost enough to let him forget that none of it that was important. At the moment, he couldn't think of why.

Petulance twisted Adamska's lip. "Of course I am."

"Something the way you say things makes it hard to believe there's anything you couldn't do."

"There's not."

"Yeah. Like that."

He had a beautiful smile. He was weak and a fool and it would be so easy to destroy him and he had a beautiful fucking smile.

It vanished slowly, as though rubbed away by a careless thumb into the fabric of his features. "Personally... Second chances have a bad track record."

"Is that right," Adamska murmured.

"A while ago, I got the chance to see my stepsister again, for the first time in ten years."

"That's not so bad."

"She died a few hours later. Stabbed by a vampire."

Adamska examined his face very carefully.

As though under its own power, his arm reached out, grasped the bottle, and lifted.

He drank.

Sorrow forgotten, Hal's brow furrowed, perhaps in puzzlement that Adamska could do this while remaining horizontal. "That wasn't..."

"I know."

They floated in an enclave of time, resting against each other. Maybe this was how the moon felt, when no one was looking at it. They had no obligations, and owed appearances to no one.

"You're a fool, you know," Adamska said indulgently.

"Huh?" Offense buckled under curiosity in record time. "...why?"

"You shouldn't have told me that."

"Why not?"

"There are things it takes a fool to tell anyone about," he said laconically. "Old pain, or what you're afraid of."

Quietly: "You told me."

"You don't count."

A snort of ironic laughter. "Thanks."

"You know what I mean."

"...I kind of do, actually."

The visible world was made of softly rocking motion, the ease of the night breathing in a field of white and black and grey below, and warm wood colors above.

"Something strange happened today," Hal said.

To cover the rumblings in the dark corners of his mind, Adamska said, "How could you tell?"

"Stranger than usual, I mean. For one thing, I can't remember what happened. Only that it did."

"Good." Adamska made a minute movement, noticed dimly that the figurine in his pocket was sticking into his hip, and forgot it again.

"No." He frowned like a child denied. "Tell me."

"Why should I?"

"You remember, don't you?"

"Of course I do." Adamska had an excellent memory. In situations where it could not be trusted to keep a faithful record automatically, he would mentally replay each moment over and over again as it occurred, tracing the lines over until they were pristinely written even when he was working with diluted ink.

"Then tell me."

"No." Even so, this was...strange. He had to fight for what scraps of it he retained to rise to the surface, and what he won made him uneasy.

*Black. Still. Tear. "The past is not—"*

"Do you remember?"

"I said I did."

"If you do, then tell me."

"No."

"Why not?"

"I don't want to."

He could hear the ellipsis as it was measured out in clean air. "...you don't remember, do you."

"I told you, I do."

"You don't remember!"

"Yes, I *do*."

"If you did," he said slyly, "you'd tell me."

"I said, I—" Slyly.

The significance took a moment to sink in, but released a chain reaction once it got there.

The dog's head rose to turn and fix a cold, even stare on the one disturbing its rest. The look Hal gave him was much the same.

"What's so funny?"

"You—!" It was too much. "Did you honestly...It's the oldest trick in—! No. It *predates* books. It



predates written language!"

His breathing calming somewhat, he added, "You're about as sly as a marmot."

The look on his face set him off again.

The dog laid down its head, resigned to living with what it couldn't change.

After a while, Adamska linked his wrists over the sullen figure in his arms and said, "Come on, don't sulk."

"I'm not sulking." After sulking a moment more, he muttered, "You didn't have to laugh at me."

"It's not as though there is much to tell. It's there, but...mixed. Images that don't connect into motion. Grey. A presence. Something..."

"It's like," he said, slow with the effort of memory, "something strange happened to time."

"Time," Adamska said slowly, "is not dead."

The two of them were still, separate in thought.

Hal yawned. "What were we talking about?"

"I'm not sure," admitted Adamska.

"Must not've been important." The phrase set alarm bells ringing in his mind. Adamska threw things at them until they stopped.

Sleep was approaching, blurring the light into smooth haze. A murmur, a slight turn, and Adamska brushed against the weight of metal. Did he have it, still? Something low in him wanted to laugh. Arming him. It was like giving a frog wings. He wouldn't know what to do with it. It had been a long time since he'd felt the weight of it in his hand. That constant energy, motion, the desire for elegance on the battlefield, where anything beyond the base necessary was extravagance. Perpetual motion machine. He wondered how long one could break the laws of physics until the enforcement caught up with him. Now the feedback was taken out of the loop, put into a straight forward line. His hands were beginning to understand why technology was called "progress." Machines were for a purpose. Every act of them and to them was a moving forward to the purpose. New purpose. All guns did the same thing, and the beauty was in the how of it. Endless variety of the how of it. Made for one thing, that was the always, reliable as air or nihilism.

"Should probably go to sleep," Hal said.

Adamska murmured assent. He had a natural aversion to sleep. Stillness meant giving other people the chance to catch up. Besides, it was such a waste of time. What did he have to waste?

Watching Hal get up was an education in spatial relationships. While getting one section of his body vertical was simple enough, problems arose when the attempt was extended to more than one at a time.

He landed back on Adamska's chest, hard enough to elicit a muffled grunt.

"Guess I'll just stay here, then," he observed.

"Hmm." He was warm.

"I mean, umm, if that's okay." Good god. Staying self-conscious in the face of that much vodka was an achievement in itself.

"It's fine." He was warm. "Careful of your leg."

The sense of embarrassment, as though having being unfortunate enough to be in range was worth being ashamed of. "You noticed, huh."

"I can feel the bandage." Adamska thought of the mad backwards retreat, the unforeseen impact and the wait for shock to unnumb into pain, the catch against spurs as he yanked them free. "You were standing too close."

Hal smiled in half-dreaming and murmured something, as though sharing a secret with himself.

Adamska sank into warmth and wondered what the hell hedgehogs had to do with anything.

---

## Notes:

-I *will* stop using the dogs to make stupid anime jokes.

-Someday.

-If *muda* is the nominative plural, then logically the word must belong to the neuter classification. My Russian teacher would be so proud.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/13/>

# chapter 14

## Stray by Dahne

*Weakness can change the nature of a man.*

Otacon awoke to an evil taste in his mouth and a sluggish haze in his mind. There was a pressure from the inside of his skull, but it wasn't insistent, since it was going to be around for a while. Wherever he'd ended up, or, more accurately, passed out - funny, that the term could apply to things other than getting hit over the head - it was comfortable enough to make him profoundly grateful that he could think of nothing that merited getting up. Someplace nice, then. Also unexpected. Otacon had yet to wake up in a bare room with a man who looked like he was being paid to do personally violent things he might have done pro bono and a table set neatly with paper of a conveniently perfect size for a full written confession but, according to every law of narrative convention, someday he was going to have to.

He definitely wasn't in his bed. For one thing, he didn't have any blankets this heavy. Or furry.

Dogs, while not renowned for their contributions to the physical sciences(1), have nonetheless an admirable understanding of thermodynamics. Over the course of the night, successive layers of husky had built up, assuring optimal conservation of heat. At a point in the future growing rapidly more distant, Hal would not have to get up so much as excavate himself.

Hmm. Something appeared to have crawled down his throat and died. He wondered if the live thing laying on his face had been a friend of its.

No sooner had he thought of moving it than he was answered with a purr of quiet menace. Ah. That was one mystery solved. On to the next.

There are questions that should never be asked unless it is certain the answer is truly desired. "What could possibly go wrong?" for one, "Is it supposed to tick like that?" for another. And,

*What happened last night?* Otacon thought.

Fortunately, despite the weight of sour dread curled low in his guts, the deck of memory turned up no excessively atrocious cards on the preliminary shuffle. He'd - well, he'd opened up more than was probably wise, that was true. He thought of a green stare gone softer at the edges and found he couldn't regret it.

Otacon was, on further examination, lying on his back. Which was odd, because he seemed simultaneously to be lying on someone else's stomach. It was definitely too warm and full of interesting curves and angles to be the couch. Who was it? For some reason, the dread got heavier as he tried to remember. Warm breath was tickling his ear.

Oh, right. It was only Adamska. Heh. Hadn't gotten far, had they? Either of them. That was another reason Otacon usually knew better than to drink much. He tended to get...affectionate. Get a little too close to people. Or maybe, forget to stay the right distance away. Adamska hadn't seemed to mind, though. What a strange miracle.

In his darker times, Otacon had done his share of throwing out prayers to any deity who might be receptive. Could be that one of them, probably one of the ones with goat feet or something, had picked one up, dusted it off, and scattered some luck his way on a whim. Or maybe a fox *kami*. He smiled to himself.

---

(1)In the sake of fairness, this could have less to do with natural aptitude than a hostile environment. Progress in the lab is continually hampered by psychologists who keep ringing bells at them.

---

People had an undeniable habit of being human. Even when you were determined, for some reason, not to let them. What had he ever had against the kid? And he *was* just a kid, when you got right down to it. Poor kid. He had the look of somebody who'd seen one too many gift horses turn out to be full of armed Athenians. So now he burned them all. It must have been hard, the kind of life where seeing things in black and white meant you might as well be blind. But it didn't always have to be that way. Maybe all he needed was somebody to show him that letting your guard down didn't always have to mean surrender.

The cat slunk off of his face, for arcane feline purposes of its own. Otacon drew in a deep, cold breath, redolent with what he assumed was dog and suspected was at least partly him. A shower was going to have to occur before he did much of anything else. Not immediately, though. It was too nice here to think of getting up or doing things in a non-hypothetical sense. Probably he should just go back to sleep for a while. Sooner or later the thing shouting for attention from the back of his mind would get tired, and the feeling of ominous portent in the pit of his stomach would go away. At least, he thought it was portent. It might have been nausea.

Otacon slit his eyes open to judge the light. Ouch. Little on the bright side, in his opinion, but it was still fairly early. He should have figured as much, since the dogs weren't complaining about breakfast being late. In fact, they were sleeping soundly, packed over and around the two humans like, well, snow. That grey-and-white blob in his left peripheral vision must be Kaworu. There was Kaneda, sprawled across his hips, furry side rising and falling in slow rhythm. Further down Batou and Dominique shared the rest, and a black muzzle with two diagonal white stripes was all that was visible of Gendo, wedged in the corner.

Hmm. His glasses were still on. Otacon reached up.

That is, he tried to. There turned out to be someone's arm on top of his.

"Ngrmrrg," said Adamska, in the vowelless and vulnerable tones of the woken.

Otacon levered himself up and twisted, just enough to look at him.

*God...*

It was one of those things that memory softened the impact of, even if it was only the memory of a few hours ago. Seeing it was a shock every time. Or it would have been, if he hadn't been trying to ignore it, only see it from a distance darkly, like the sun during an eclipse. Why had he done that? Why had he been trying so hard to hold himself so far away? And now there was nothing between him and that mouth stained with the dregs of dream, those long dark lashes lifting over clear green eyes luminous with lack of malice.

Adamska smiled like a boy on Christmas and said, "Kiss me."

He was halfway there when he remembered.

Dogs flew like shrapnel as his back slammed against the wall, with no memory of how he had gotten there, feeling his muscles strain for every possible millimeter more of distance with strength born of panic.

Far away but much too close, Adamska yawned and shifted. Cautiously removing a dismayed

and flailing Kaneda from his torso, he sat up and examined Otacon with undisguised puzzlement.

*OCELOT he's ocelot I almost OCELOT ohgodohgodohgod*

"What..." he began.

Then:

"Ah."

And the cold in the afterimage of the hard flash of pain showed that he understood.

"So," said Adamska, and the word fell like a pit around him.

With the slow deliberation of intent that came from looming at the center of the world's attention, he stood. His steps, arrestable as a glacier, tapped like iron nails and rang resonant with the shadow of clinking spurs.

He reached for the gloves tucked into his belt and, never breaking eye contact, never stopping, pulled them on, one by one.

"So." Hissing like a warning it was too late to heed. "Is that right."

Back against the wall. He'd run straight for where there was nowhere else to go. Oh, that was brilliant. Whenever something went wrong, he immediately did the one thing guaranteed to make it worse. Sometimes he wondered how anybody like him had ever slipped through evolution's quality control.

Terror and guilt and sick regret sloshed luridly in his stomach, and Adamska bore down like vertigo.

"That," he said, coated in smooth menace as his eyes glinted with an eagle's madness, "is how it is, is it?" He placed his hands on the wall with brutal delicacy, trapping Otacon between them. "Making promises you don't intend to keep."

Finally Otacon was capable of speech, if only the one hopeless phrase he found himself using over and over again. "I, I don't underst—"

"*Yes you do!*" Adamska's hands slammed against his wrists. Taut with coiled violence.

His voice took on a silky, cajoling tone, in a way more frightening than outright fury.

"But it doesn't matter."

Otacon could feel his grip quiver with rage.

*Oh god what did I*

"What's wrong?" His eyebrow rose, in mocking solicitation. "Are you-" he bore down- "*afraid* of me?" His mouth twisted at lewd angles like a broken limb.

"Stop it," said Otacon. He felt the lines of woodgrain through the skin of his back, cutting in deep.

*This isn't you except that it is but it's it's oh god Adamska*

"What are you afraid of? What do you think I'm going to do?" His breath came short and fast. His pupils were dilated.

*Adamska Adamska*

"I can be what you think I am." He leaned into the perverse mockery of embrace. "Maybe I should start now. Save time."

He was so close that it was hard to breathe.

"You're not real, anyway," he murmured intimately, and the throb of his voice pulsed like blood from a wounded animal. "I wonder which is the one dreaming, you or me. There are ways to find out. But I don't think you'd like them."

*How do I tell you how do I make you understand*

Otacon watched, grotesquely rapt, as Adamska forced his features into cool detachment around

eyes that burned desperation like phosphorus. His did not tighten his grip or let go.

"I could cut you open," the boy suggested, stroking the words with fascination. "Read your entrails like a chicken's. When you wake up, will it end? I could crush your throat and we could find out. Don't feel bad, either way I'm gone, so you win in the end. Do you want to try?"

*What can I say to you*

"Did you know," he mentioned conversationally, "there are a hundred ways to kill a man from this range, using only your right hand. I could show them to you. All of them."

*You're trying so hard but*

He leaned close to almost whisper, as if to share a secret with a lover. Tension steamed from his skin. "It doesn't have to be now. You leave yourself open all the time. I could tell you this much and let you go, knowing that the possibility and the slipping away of time conquers every corner of your mind, and leave it until the second you forget. That's one game. There are hundreds of them, do you know? Human beings spend all their time when they run out thinking of new ones. There are ways to keep them alive for *days*." His hands pulsed, like mutilated caress. Twitches of remembered pain. "I have seen them. Over and over again."

*Don't do this to you*

His breath rasped in his ear, above even the frenzied heartbeat. Close enough that he could feel it.

"Shall we begin?"

One endless instant of naked time.

And in Adamska's face the calm cold madness fell, broke like ceramic, and was shoved aside, for the true one, howling unfrozen like something someone hadn't had the mercy to kill.

"Is that what you want to hear?" said Adamska. "Would that make you *happy*, evidence to know *exactly* what I am? Am I a *curiosity* to you?" He shook him hard, the sudden violence rattling his skull. "*Answer me!*" Madness, or desperation. "What do you *want*?"

And, for just a second, in the last word, his control slipped, and Otacon could hear, like naming dissonance, the note of despair.

Otacon wondered blankly when someone had found the time to jab his hand through his back, and wrap his fingers around his heart, and squeeze.

"Don't," he said. His lips were dry. "Please. Don't."

How could he tell him, that the only thing that hurt more than when he acted like Ocelot was when he didn't?

*Adamska I'm sorry*

"Not good enough."

Adamska jerked forward spasmodically, stopping so abruptly that for a bizarre instant Otacon thought something had stuck him.

His eyes flicked to the side. They glazed with something like fear. Then the rage returned in force, and his lips twisted into a rictus snarl like a wolf protecting its kill.

"Get away," he growled, and Otacon cast frantically for how to respond until he realized that it was not him he was talking to. "This has nothing to do with you!"

And there was no time to wonder before the mad green eyes were back on him, and it was hard to remember that there had ever been anything but fear, and him, and him.

"Coward," Adamska hissed. "*Coward.*"

Except that he remembered...

...that the fear was not all his.

*No. It's not, am I afraid of him.*

*It's...am I afraid of him?*

Otacon had seen people at the brink of collapse, a breath away from the mind tearing itself apart and reconfiguring until its motions were nothing but the perpetual spasms of dying tissue. He'd been close enough to his own kind, himself (*light off snow unbearable "all right hero" hands not strong enough to hold it out why*), that he knew something about the topography. The ways to get there, pain or exhaustion or fear that wouldn't let you breathe. The ways to stay back. The ways other people could hold you back.

Or not.

He could see it. How easy it would be. Like some sort of drug, that showed him the juncture of every weak point in narcotic clarity. The cracks that ran down to the foundation. Could see how, with just a push, the barest touch along the fault line, would set off a tremor, and how after that there was nothing to do but watch as the whole construct crumbled under the weight of its own psychotic inertia.

How could he bear it up, alone?

"I'm sorry," Otacon said softly, "that this is how it is. It's not fair that I know so much about you." It felt intrusive, obscene. Like going through someone's wallet at a morgue and having him open his eyes and demand it back. "You could know everything about me, if you want. Try to make it a little more even." Fair. He almost hoped Adamska would laugh at him. "But I can't— I can't pretend like I don't know."

*Or what it would mean if I didn't.*

"Adamska..." He let his eyes drop.

"*Look at me.*" Rough dry texture grabbed his chin and forced it upward. He stared into black and green and smelled leather.

Feeling as helpless and pathetic as he knew he sounded, he whispered shamefully, "I'm sorry. There are some things, you can't..." —crouching in the shame of safety, listening to the cry like an animal in pain and wishing so hard that it would stop that his heart almost froze when he realized what that stopping might mean— "I...he...if it was just *you*—"

"*Shut up!*" Adamska cried, as his face flashed in the illumination of the burning remnants of hesitation. Speed felt more than seen, he struck, and crushed his mouth against his.

There was nowhere to look but Adamska's eyes, wide as though with fear or exhilaration. The red glove pulled at him, as if he had anywhere else to go. The texture left tracks that burned. Adamska pressed forward. Teeth ground against his, harsh unheard vibrations. A shock of copper, smell and taste indistinguishable. Someone's lip had split.

*What are you doing?*

Motion without sense, action without thought or consequence, catalyst without reaction. Parts with no sum. His tongue jabbed at his teeth insensibly. His lips were rigid, stretched in a snarl.

Adamska jerked away as though bitten. Eyes glazed as though with fever, he stumbled back. With the back of his hand he scrubbed the blood from his lip, and looked down at the red leather as though it were a foreign creature.

Otacon's hand, made half-animate by curiosity, raised and touched his lip. Came away, stained with someone else's bright blood.

"Adamska..." he said. He moved forward.

"*No!*" His hand came up and out. Arm muscles tense, standing out stark where his sleeve slipped up. It would have thrown Otacon back, if he hadn't been a step out of range.

Otacon knew something about how soldiers thought, even if it was from a remove. There was a

physicality to it. Body, as much as mind. How Snake had times when it was laying heavy on him, though of course he'd never say anything, and he had to go run the dogs for a few days, until he'd beaten it, or at least tired it out for a while. Counterintuitively needing challenge, outward pressure, to keep the structure steady for a little longer.

How easy to collapse that Escher sketch of a mind.

As unthreateningly as he could - which was, a part of him noted, finally something he had some skill at - Otacon approached him, as he would a wounded animal. Trying not to think of how they usually ran, or bit him. But the hand stayed firmed as it touched his chest. Irregular tremors that the gloves had hidden. In Adamska's face, there was only the slow trickle of blood.

Like an iron spring wound tight, tighter, so that one way was the long, painstaking, agonizing uncoiling, and the other-

Just a touch.

It wouldn't be hard. He just couldn't let himself think until it was over.

*If you can't overpower them-*

he thought with mad clarity.

He leaned against the pressure, and said, "No."

*-underpower them.*

"Like *this*."

For a moment he thought he wasn't going to let him, until he did.

The pressure slackened, inch by inch, until he was leaning far enough. He noted that, with most of his weight supported with one arm, Adamska showed no noticeable strain.

Then he had to be very careful not to think.

He had no idea what he was doing. Even less of what he *should* be doing. Only that, if he was wrong, he'd picked a very embarrassing way to die.

Too late now.

His lips were softer, this time.

Otacon shut his eyes.

Don't think. Just think of here, now. Not even that. Just think of giving him what you can, to make up for what he needs. Your world holds nothing like him. So hold on to him. As long as you can. Think of him responding like a shy boy, a blind man feeling his way in the light. Think of how his flat palm clutched into a fist, not pushing you back or pulling you forward. Just be there, right now. Where he is. Just hold on. Just a little longer.

He could feel the careful stasis of his mind begin to waver. He pulled back. Took a long breath. The rabid terror in Adamska's eyes had given way to distance, and a vague confusion.

It was a start.

A deep, steadying breath did no good at all.

"I'm not your enemy," said Otacon.

What a cruel joke, that the most magnetic thing about the boy was his potential.

Adamska said, "How do you know?"

*Because I may be the worst judge of character who ever walked into a military base but I can see the good in you, in the same way that I know the worst thing I could ever do is tell you so.*

Otacon said, "Trust me."

*Don't look away.*

After a moment, he picked up his voice from where it had fallen and continued. "I've tried to find an answer. I really have." Late nights with numbers for company, trying over and over from every



angle, papers full of figures thrown in the fireplace even though he was the only one who knew what they meant, ashes of answers that made no sense born from the invariable fatigue and misinterpretations and idiot novice miscalculations mingling with the one that came up over and over just to remind him that it was always someone else who suffered for his mistakes. "But..."

With the lines of his face and the set of his jaw, Adamska dared him.

Potential, like a living thing or better yet undead, hanging on his shoulder with its gap-toothed demon grin.

The shades of what he wasn't magnified was he was. Otacon felt like an ant, caught beneath sun and glass.

Otacon breathed out his hesitation.

"It all depends on you. That's the only answer I can give."

What he wanted was to be a good enough liar to tell him that everything was going to be all right.

He wanted to tell him to have faith in himself.

"Me," said Adamska, blank as snow.

"Somehow, everything depends on you." Exhausted beyond reason, Otacon stepped back, slumped against the wall, and confessed, "That's all I know."

He confessed, near a whisper, "I want to help you."

There was always a choice.

*He already made it.*

And there was always consequence.

If you reversed the order of cause and effect, would changing the cause make any difference?

The longer he held onto hope, the worse it was going to be when he let go.

Adamska turned his back on him, as though he had something to hide.

"Tell me," he said, inflectionless, "how he died."

"Huh?" Otacon blinked, taken unawares. "Who?"

"Big Boss." And now he could hear the teeth gritted. "He's dead, isn't he?"

"...yeah." Eyes dropped, though he couldn't see him. "It was...it was years ago. Outer Heaven. He said...that fighting was all he knew. So he'd create a world that was always at war." Breathe. "Snake killed him in the end."

In the silence, Otacon heard him turn. Dread coiling in his stomach, he forced his gaze up to meet his, blazing with furious—  
—puzzlement.

"No," Adamska said, as though he'd been given the incorrect time of day.

"But," he said desperately, "it's true, they fought there and he—"

"I don't doubt that," Adamska said, waving a hand in dismissal. He was pulling off his gloves. "Only that your information is wrong on the motive. A cover-up, obviously."

In the interest of saving time, the sparring ring of Otacon's mind called the fight in Curiosity's favor before Good Sense could take its robe off. "How do you know?" he asked.

Adamska tucked the gloves into his belt, in easy reach. "A true soldier doesn't think that way." He snorted to himself, contemptuously. "Creating a world of constant war."

So a soldier could have a humanitarian side, too. "Really?" said Otacon, feeling as though for once he understood.

"Of course." He shook his head at the idea. "It would be redundant."

"Oh."

"In the world, there is always a war, somewhere." He gave Otacon a sideways glance, sharp and sardonic. "Unless that has changed?"

"No," Otacon admitted.

"You see? A waste of time." He spread his hands in a gesture of presentation. "John had more sense than that."

Before he could stop it, Otacon felt his mouth quirk up. "So you do believe in somebody."

Later, he would think that maybe this was proof that his instincts were smarter than he was.

"Of course not," said Adamska, insulted. "I only know him too well."

"Same thing."

Adamska grunted.

A moment later, he said, like an admission, "I would have guessed he would have died in the war."

"He did, it was at— wait, what war?"

"Between the United States and Russia," he said, staring at him as though he were being purposely dense. "The one the Cold War was prelude to. I don't know what you called it."

"Oh, that?" Of course. He wouldn't know. "Didn't happen."

Adamska made no visible reaction.

"Anyway," Otacon said awkwardly, "we should probably feed the dogs."

Somewhere to the right, Asuka whined as if in agreement.

Green eyes stared. For a moment, Otacon had the strangest feeling that Adamska was going to laugh at him.

All he said was, face held unreadable, "Right."

In the interests of common courtesy, Otacon waited until the blond boy's back was turned before letting the shudders run through his spine.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/14/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/14/>

# chapter 15

**Stray** by Dahne

*Anger can change the nature of a man.*

*I don't understand him.*

It was easy to let his hands move over metal while his mind was elsewhere.

*What does he think he is doing?*

Adamska knew what he would say if he asked: "Calibrating the (incomprehensible) unit of the (unintelligible)." Like the man himself; simple, straightforward, and no help at all.

What the hell was he smiling at? Adamska made himself stop it.

Once, when Ocelot was a child, he had asked one of the older soldiers why people were such fools for each other. Ilya had shouldered his gun and said, "Because human beings are all mad. We might as well be mad for each other." Then Sasha had come up behind him and cuffed him, laughed over his curses, and said, "Yes."

The problem with having a flawless memory was that you also remembered the stupid things.

He used to ask stupid questions like that, or "What did you die for?"

*What do I think I'm doing?*

That was easy. He was constructing a composite...thing out of other things.

Good god. It was rubbing off on him.

Adamska jabbed at a part that was refusing to fit right. He was having trouble understanding his own actions. Why had he...? He scowled at the part and, when this failed to make any noticeable impact, jabbed at it again.

"Here. Like this, see?"

There had been no point to getting angry at *him*. Where was the fun in pushing someone who he knew would never push back?

John was dead. Of course he was. Adamska had held no hopes of having that particular assumption refuted. None at all. This wasn't a world where someone like that could live long. What was it the Boss had called him? "Too pure for us"? Yes, that was right. Nothing pure lasted.

Except even he wasn't pure, in the end. Sooner or later, everyone got caught up in it, whether onstage or behind the scenes. Or making the props. He could at least have had the decency to die in a less stupid way. It should have satisfied Adamska, how universally his expectations were lived down to.

*Is this how it is?*

The first things he had thought of, and the last he had wanted to ask. The answers were...as he had expected? No. Not quite. One he had almost known already, and the other he should have. John was dead. Where had the— other him been? To have let him die, by someone else's hand, without so much as standing witness or killing the other. His fingers on the wrench handle whitened.

The only man whose every word and action he hadn't been able to predict within five minutes of meeting him. The only man who hadn't bored him to death by being so easy to *understand*. The only man who had ever challenged him (*beaten him*, murmured an incautious part of his mind. It was found floating face-down in the cerebrospinal fluid the next morning). The only man who hadn't crumbled at the first blow. The only man who had, hanging bloodied and suspended by his wrists, been shown the core of him and looked at it with something other than ignorant, insipid loathing.

What frustrating boredom abysses would face, if no one had the courage to look back.

To the side there was a tiny bright light, a high hiss, and the smell of solder.

There must be some mistake.

The war, he should have known. In the undermind places for concepts without the sustenance of attention, he had reasoned that this place was too remote to have seen any deaths, let alone recent ones. Isolation was a drug; here, it was easy to imagine that there had never been anything but dogs and the two of them.

Out of the corner of his eye, Ocelot sensed a presence creeping into range, making the low-to-the-ground whisper of something that did not want to be heard. It bit him and ran away.

And the fucking cat.

The hissing ceased. Hal set the soldering iron down on top of various other equipment, near where Tanya crouched.

"Here," he said, handing Adamska a circuit board. "Attach this along the top outside curve of the left pillar."

Adamska took it, giving him a long, hard look. Hal went on to something else and did not appear to notice.

Mistakes meant death.

Adamska lived because he never made mistakes.

He had been a fool. Leaving himself defenseless. What had he *thought* was going to happen?

The designated section was one of the few still covered by metal sheeting. Adamska reached into the pile of tools, got a screwdriver and a set of long scratches, swore at Tanya, and stretched up to begin removing the panel.

He acted as though nothing had happened. No; that it had, but that it was of no consequence. No... It was as if that mien, that sense he gave of being able to accept things, were in some way a true representation. Even when he was there, instinct trying to pull his skin in closer and reeking of his fear. Using force to blank his mind made him think well.

Adamska's mouth tightened. That look he had had, the fascination ignorant of its morbidity, not the boy who poured salt on slugs but the one who came after his back was turned, who watched and wondered the obscene *why* and *how*. Adamska had seen the inside of that expression, once.

With his teeth he worried at the triangular scab forming on his lower lip. It itched.

At a shuffling noise, he looked over his shoulder and nearly rolled his eyes. He was reaching out to the fucking cat again, hand outstretched, while she crouched behind the pile of tools, ears flat to misshapen skull, and hissed at him. It could not have been a better portrait of the perfect fool if he had been gazing at a butterfly while wandering over a cliff.

Adamska was about to tell him to stop kidding himself when, tail twitching as though electrocuted, Tanya stalked cautiously toward him. At the last foot, she flung herself forward and rubbed her head against Hal's hand, purring lasciviously. He smiled, and leaned to pet her. She bit him and ran away.

Sooner or later, one of them was going to have to murder the fucking cat.

"D...damn it!"

"I told you not to bother her," Adamska said.

"What do *you* know?" said Hal bitterly.

The lower left screw was being difficult. Adamska wrestled with it, and got it out. He began to move to the next. Then his mind caught up with him, and he stopped. He looked behind him.

When the kennels at Groznyj Grad had first been put to use, the dogs had escaped almost

immediately. It had been left to Ocelot, cursing and grumbling, to lead the expedition to track them down. It was an excellent opportunity to practice radiating cold fury, and using a tone that left the "or else" unspoken. The days of frantic battle were interspersed with those of hideous boredom, and the only thing more entertaining than a band of soldiers trying to corner a half-trained dog gone ecstatic from attention were ones that were intimidated enough to screw up a lot.

When the others had gone to return the ones they had recaptured and make sure to lock the god-damned gate this time, Ocelot had turned a corner into a long hallway to see the final escapee lying peaceably near the other end. And beyond it, approaching in long, portentous strides, Volgin. Too late to say anything and lacking any idea of what to say if he could, Ocelot could only watch, behind a mask of instinctive impassivity, as Volgin bore down.

And, as it turned out, failed to do anything at all.

Such as notice.

Either the colonel had something important occupying his mind, he was a far better actor than Ocelot had given him credit for, or the ground was simply too distant to register on his attention. Ocelot decided immediately in favor of the latter. By luck of his stride, a heavy boot caught the dog precisely in the flank, sending it skidding with a startled whimper several meters to the side. The creature recovered with admirable speed and, moreover, narrowed its eyes and resolved to get back its own. With every ounce of its utterly insignificant strength, it had attacked.

At this point Ocelot passed, exchanging a perfunctory salute. As long as the colonel could ignore the weight of a small, vengeful animal attached to his foot, so could Ocelot. The moment he reached the end of the hallway, Ocelot made an about-face and set out the way he had come, mission in mind.

For the next few hours, by pure coincidence, the young major happened to continually have business in the same general area as wherever Volgin was. It had been interesting to find out just how few people had the courage or lack of instinct for self-preservation necessary to point out the colonel's softly growling burden. Ocelot, being in shameless possession of a different kind of sadism, refused to make any sort of acknowledgment as well.

Thus, he was witness a few hours later, when Raikov had come to deliver a report. The silver-haired major made it halfway through his immaculately formal presentation before glancing downward. From across the hall, Ocelot could see his eyes widen.

The fortress had rung with the shout of, "PUPPY!"

Ocelot had left, then. You could only take so much.

If Ocelot had gotten a good look at the animal's face as it sprang and solidified its determination to face its oppressor head-on, he imagined it would have looked something like this.

It was disconcerting. Like being assaulted by dandelion fluff.

Adamska said, "Eh?"

"You— you!" Hal stood, glaring fiercely. Pity that how large the glasses made his eyes somewhat ruined the effect.

"I what?" said Adamska mildly. He let his hands fall to his sides and hang loosely.

*Has it finally occurred to you to be angry?* he thought, amused.

"You..." Adamska watched with interest as Hal's face shifted through several successive emotions. "Do you even *want* me to help you?"

"I don't need your help," said Adamska coldly, suddenly no longer amused.

"See?" he cried.

*What can you do about it?*

"Not only you," Adamska explained, with worn patience. Did the fool have to take everything so

personally? "From anyone."

"I mean—" he opened his mouth, closed it, and started again. "You can't just— just *threaten* me, or try to get me to kill you or try to kill me or or or try to get me to think you're *thinking* about trying to kill me whenever you— whenever you want!"

*Comfortable thing, isn't it, anger?* Adamska thought. *As though everything that comes toward you has to get through it first, and if it's strong enough it can just swat it down. Too bad you can't sustain it long. It might have helped you.*

And, more heard than thought; *I don't threaten. I promise.*

"I don't know who you thought I was this morning," said Hal, rushing out strident as a machine's steam release, "or who you *ever* think I am, but I'm *not* your enemy. And I'm- I'm tired of getting treated like one!"

His face was flushed. His eyes were wide in a combative stare, and his breath came slightly fast.

"You're not very good at this," Adamska pointed out.

"*I know!*" He curled his hands, slender for fine work, into fists that did not suit them. "But you— don't you get it? You can't change the future."

"I've told you before," Adamska said coldly, "I don't care if—"

"*You don't get it!*" Thin and strident, but it cut. "Changing the future doesn't matter. It's not a thing, it's not alive, it's not *there*. Even if it *were* possible, it wouldn't matter. What you have to change is *you*." Broke, and quavered. "And you *won't*."

For a moment, the silence smelled of burnt hair and ozone.

"So," said Adamska, in exaggerated lament, "you save your courage for when it doesn't matter. You missed your chance." He shrugged. "Too bad. There won't be another."

"What are you talking about?" His tone burned challenge.

*I don't like those grey eyes of his*

"Don't pretend you've forgotten!" There it was. Cold comfort. "Don't you *dare* lie to me!"

"I've never lied to you!"

A moment after he heard it Adamska realized it was true.

He counted.

*One. One other.*

What did it mean, that one was here and one was gone?

*What do you want*

"This is what I'm telling you 's *obvious*." Hal's tongue curled bitterly around the word. "You have a choice. And you keep making it. Over and over. Do you think hurting everyone before they can get to you keeps you *safe*? The truth is, *you're* the coward. And you know it."

*Coward. Coward.*

But now, it was a matter of law.

It would take hardly any time at all to get to him, to where he knew the revolver was. Draw it out, lay it against his stomach. Pull. A second. Less.

Adamska's thumbs flicked, out of habit.

"You know," he said, sounding bored, "it would take me less than a second to—"

"*Fine*, then!" Hal cried. "Go ahead and do it already! You'd just prove me right." His eyes fell, just to the level of Adamska's empty holster. "It's exactly what *he'd* do."

*Days. I have seen them.*

Adamska's hands were still.

"Oh," he breathed, running his mind in bitter astonishment against freshly blooming patterns of pain. "Oh, that's *low*."

"Doesn't make it any less true," Hal muttered.

Law.

Equal to equal. Pain to pain.

Eye for an eye.

Adamska remembered leaving the room with its smell of char and ozone and death kept waiting and the feel of his blood still on his gloves, the imprint on his fingers beneath them of the bit of metal and wire that might have been just an excuse to get that blood on him. Remembered going back to where there was no one but himself to witness. Taking out the serrated survival knife, the crude thing he never used, because the flat heavy heft of steel was too direct and too sincere to not make his fingers shudder. Staring at the reflection that stared back, distant and focused. Picking it up, tossing once, twice, three, until the weight was a thing he understood. Closing one eye, and then the other, measuring the coming apart of distances. Holding it steady, up, toward him, to the left and once thought caught up a few inches right. Staring. Staring. Equal. Equidistant. Thinking of blood and impact and the undersound that might have been imagined if he hadn't known it wasn't, ripping like cloth made of wet meat. Lowering it, and looking again. Staring a challenge to the reflection in case one of them was a coward. Feeling his hand make the decision to reach above the table surface and throw, watching it flip like a coin in a high straight line. Luck for *him*, and so luck for him as well. Equal. Feeling and hearing before he saw the dull blunt thud, the imperfect angle of landing, as the handle struck wood. Looking at it while it settled and stayed. Weighing the talisman in his mind's eye. Taking it with his fingers on the blade, flicking it into its sheath, and thinking no more.

"*He*," said Adamska, delicate as piano wire, "is not here."

"Who the-" Hal's eyes came up, the grey venomless eyes, his face forced into a parody of a snarl. "Who the hell do you think you're kidding? There's no *he*."

*You're the one who said it*, a corner of Adamska's mind thought inanely.

"There's only you. And- and every time I start to think I can forget it-"

*when no one was looking*

He slumped, and his voice dropped, as though he lacked the energy to sustain it any longer.

"-you show me again."

For a moment Adamska thought that he would fall into melancholy, and it would be over, with no one having to die.

Strength gathered, Hal continued.

Funny, how some people liked to measure out their own coffin nails.

"If you're not strong enough to change it, fine with me. Just don't- don't keep trying to pretend that you are. You can't get something for nothing, no matter how much you want it. Don't try to run away if you don't even have the courage to admit that's what you're doing."

*What do you think you're doing?*

Sparrows had to fall. It was important.

"Last warning," said Adamska cordially. The muscles in his calves tightened.

His eyes came up, with no room for regret.

"The Ocelot I knew," Hal said, deliberate as counting the fibers in his noose, "was sadistic, soulless, and a traitor to anyone who ever put faith in him."

The clear eyes never wavered.

"But at least he wasn't weak."

Eternity folded into a moment, ringing with the knowledge that he had to die.

Adamska sighed. It was out of his hands, now.

"I never really wanted to kill you," he admitted, out of the sense of civic duty, that everyone should have conversation to keep them him company to his grave.

"Oh, just hurry up," Hal said dully.

If there was anything Adamska hated more than doing something he didn't want to, it was doing what people expected.

A cluster of neurons fired backwards, and it struck him like lightning.

Why should he?

There was no one to impress, here. He had no obligation to prove himself to this man. There wasn't much point in showing off if it meant the only audience would be too dead to appreciate it.

Adamska was sick of being a conduit for things that had to be done.

To hell with it.

The tension in his body faded like an inept song.

"Eh," he said, privately amazed at the magnitude of change in his voice, "Why bother?"

Hal's head snapped up. "Huh?"

Hah! Let *him* be the one caught off guard for once.

"Think whatever you like," he said, kneeling down to reclaim his tools and luxuriating in a cool wash of relief.

For perhaps the first time in his life, he was free from the burden of double negatives. There was nothing he couldn't not do.

No one could force him, by strength or by weakness.

Every choice made was ultimately his.

Adamska set the thought aside to be terrifying later.

"It's not *your* problem."

Before Hal could contradict him, he stood up and said, "Come help me with this, will you?"

Adamska loosened a few screws, then turned to look at where Hal stood unmoving. "I'm not going to assault you," he informed him.

"Oh." A few hesitant steps. "...are you sure?"

Adamska rolled his eyes. Such a *child*. "I promise."

Apparently, he chose to ignore the irony.

The panel came off easily, with a person to support each side. Moving in awkward, halting concert, they set it down, a rattling, scratching thud resounding despite their best efforts.

A shadow flowed from behind a pile of junk that seemed eerily as though it might possess its own discarded sentience. Hal reached out. Adamska said nothing.

Tanya allowed her head to be scratched, placid enough to be mistaken for a natural creature, and not the devil in feline guise at all.

"It must just be a test of luck," said Hal, laughing a little.

Adamska said, "I think you passed."

---

## Notes:

-If you ever feel the random desire to win a special corner of my deranged little heart, all you have to do is draw this chapter's Volgin. And I will love you for ever and ever and ever.



Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/15/>

# chapter 16

**Stray** by Dahne

*Curiosity can change the nature of a man.*

From the time he was a child, it was clear that Otacon had a scientist's mind. The diagnosis, like many, sounded good until you knew exactly what it meant.

His was the kind of mind that would leave no stone unturned. Meaning that, over his youth, he gained a whole gallery of vibrant bites and stings from various fascinatingly multi-segmented creatures until he learned to stay a fair distance back from the ones with pincers. It was a mind utterly incapable of leaving a mystery unexamined, a hypothesis untested, or an assumption unchallenged. Taking things for granted without testing its veracity for himself, say, "This is highly flammable," \* was a foreign idea to him. He belonged to the great brotherhood of nature's born experimenters, explorers, and pokers-with-sticks. What made him unusual among their number was that one of the things he discovered had yet to be how to get a new and interesting kind of cancer. Also, that he still had his eyebrows. What he shared was an inability to leave a paradox to itself until he had separated it out satisfactorily into each component dok. He was utterly incapable of giving up on a mystery.

It was a good trait to have, because some questions needed to be asked.

It was a bad trait to have, because one of those questions tended to be, "I wonder if it will explode if I do *this*?"\*\*

Had Otacon been born in another age, it is entirely possible that he might have attended a witch burning in order to present some observations indicating that the accused party might have been on to something after all.

All of which meant, more simply, that he couldn't leave well enough alone.

*Why did you build it?*

It was a fair question, Otacon thought. It was easy to get caught up in what he was building it for *now*. Odd to think that its purpose had ever been something else. With a stab of guilt, he realized that he couldn't remember when last he had spared a thought for the old purpose. Or, for that matter, spared much attention at all for Snake's welfare, beyond the usual background of anxiety humming like elevator music. Granted, he didn't need to feel *too* bad about that, since he had spoken to Snake just the other night, when it was clear enough for the Codec to function. It was fine, he was fine, Jack was fine. The only setbacks had been the kind that could be solved with time. Otacon should have known; after all, for every lunatic terrorist organization they had to face, there was one of the kind where getting caught would mostly just be really embarrassing. In fact, things were going well enough that Snake could spare the attention to be uncomfortably perceptive. "Don't get attached." Otacon had protested to knowing better in a way that, in retrospect, might have been a little too affronted. It wasn't as though he could—

"I said, why did you build it?"

"Huh?" Otacon looked up at where Adamska sat, serenely fitting gears into a sequence on the other side of the power generator. More precisely, what would be the power generator. When it was finished, it would be a cube about two feet on a side full of moving parts that could harness enough potential energy to connect two separate locations in time. At this point, it looked more like an internal combustion engine that had committed seppuku.

"Oh. To be honest, I don't really know. To see if I could, maybe." He tried to smile. "I guess

thinking about the impact of things before I make them isn't exactly my strong suit."

"Hm." Adamska leaned a rod against his knee and slotted a sequence of gears onto it. All in the right order, too. The boy had an amazing memory; he never had to be shown anything more than once, and he seemed to have a natural feel for what went where. "What were you planning on doing with it?"

"I was never quite sure."

"You must have had ideas," Adamska said, idly filling in areas where he must have speculated.

"Er...I was hoping to make contact with Big Boss, actually."

"Oh?" He remained focused downward, voice disinterested. The response came a half beat too slow.

"Yeah. His genetic material, actually. The government'll do anything it can to keep his remains out of the hands of people like us, but there's no way to keep us from going straight to the source. FOXDIE's not a problem anymore, but... it's an imperfect science, cloning. Especially from that long ago. There're a lot of things Naomi might be able to do something about, with Snake, if she just had a blueprint to work from. Anyway, I didn't worry about that part all that much, since, considering the odds, I didn't think that having to figure out what to do with it if it worked was ever going to be a problem."

"So you wanted to help your friend." The neutrality of his tone could have meant anything.

"You could put it that way, yeah," said Otacon. "But mostly it was just curiosity. Sometimes ideas won't leave me alone until I get firsthand proof that they won't work. Not a good quality to have, honestly," he sighed. "Half the time all it does is blow up in my face."

Adamska's fingers plucked a tool from the bottom of the pile without disturbing any of the ones on top. "You mean metaphorically."

"No, I don't," said Otacon, dejected.

There was the scrape of claws on cement as Motoko padded through the door, Kaworu and Amuro drifting behind her. They sat by the wall, to watch with still golden eyes as the humans pursued their inexplicable human business. It all must have seemed very strange to all of them. A human who came from nowhere, wove into the pattern of their life, and soon would be gone. But then, that was what all humans did, as far as they knew. Maybe dogs got used to it.

"There's not," said Adamska, delicately indomitable, "anything you would want to change?"

"I didn't say *that*," Otacon admitted ruefully. "It might even be possible, for all I know. But it's not a good idea."

"Why not?" Adamska asked, with genuine curiosity. "What do I do with this?"

"Line it up with those, and screw it in *there* and *there*."

Otacon had to remind himself to stop watching him. The careless ease of his dexterity reminded him vaguely of the mechanical. Precision too perfect to be quite human.

"There's a lot of things I wish I'd done differently," he continued, settling back to his own assembly, "but they're all decisions I already made. Even supposing there's not some sort of safeguard against it, or at the opposite end of the spectrum, a weird backlash where things change out of all proportion, once you start, where do you stop? You'd end up spending your entire life trying to get everything right."

"You've thought about this," Adamska observed.

"Guess I have." Otacon laughed ruefully. "Guess it's easier to think about what you won't do than what you will."

After a moment, he added, "Can't say I wouldn't be tempted, though."

If he had only... Or if only he hadn't... No. He knew where that kind of thinking led.

"Then there's all the usual problems," Otacon went on, interrupting his thoughts. "It's a paradox every step of the way."

"There are a lot of things that are paradox and happen," said Adamska.

He was fitting the gear shaft into place, eyes narrowed to focus. There were spots of grease on his hands.

"That's true," Otacon said. "And then, there's all the problems of being in two places at once. What would happen if you tried to go back to something you did and change it? Could you interact with yourself? Would the two absorb into each other?"

Adamska leaned around a protrusion to affix a screw and said, "At least we know that last isn't the case."

"Huh? Oh. Right. I forgot," Otacon admitted sheepishly, and tried to ignore how hard the glance Adamska threw him was.

In his head, the thought continued.

Would you have some sort of connection to each other? Would you share each other's thoughts? Memories?

In the theater behind his eyes (was it really just a few hours ago?) he saw himself and felt the wall against his back. Saw the shape of the boy with the snarl on his lips and the fear in his eyes waver and snap into sharp definition under white that made his eyes ache, heard the long leather coat sigh across the ground and the spurs clink, felt the grip like vulture's talons on a rodent skull, felt the pressure shift and twist and heard the *crack*...

Otacon had the sudden impression someone had poured a sackful of ants down his back.

*Oh god. I did. I forgot.*

Adamska said, "Is something wrong?"

The crawling slivers at the edge of his voice made it clear that he didn't need the answer.

"Your situation is different," Otacon said, wrenching his mind from semantics to mechanics. "Your change will be internal, instead of external. Nobody's ever even made any conjecture about that."

"Good," Adamska said languidly, the hints of threatened tension melting from the movements of his hands. "There's nothing to prove wrong."

"There's a lot of maybes and what-ifs," said Otacon, disliking as always the possibility of false hope. "For example, will you even remember being here? If what the timestream 'wants' is to avoid change - and honestly, we don't even know that for sure - it seems like the easiest thing to do would be just to have you not be able to remember any of this ever happening, since then, from your perspective at least, it *wouldn't* have happened. Makes you wonder, you know? Makes you..."

"Curious?" Adamska suggested sweetly.

Otacon's head jerked up like a startled bird. Adamska's gaze was held steadily down. He might not have seen him wince.

"It makes it easier," Otacon said softly. "Thinking of you as a variable."

*I have to cancel out variables all the time.*

"Huh," said Adamska, and fell silent.

Otacon spent a while not saying it. Instead, he tried to remember just how he'd set up this wiring scheme. Was it blue to green, or blue to black? Usually he configured it in some way that seemed logical at the moment, but lately he could never quite seem to get the same things to be logical from one moment to the next. Certainly not himself. Starting things any idiot would know better than to fool

with. Getting angry at things for being like they were. You don't shout at a cat for biting.

He realized that not saying it wasn't doing any good and said it.

"I'm sorry," said Otacon. "About what I said. Earlier."

"It's fine," said Adamska shortly.

"No," he said, knowing he was pressing, "it's not. I shouldn't have...well, I just shouldn't have. I'm sorry."

"Don't keep saying that." There was enough irritation in Adamska's voice to warn him to keep his mouth shut for a while.

A few small metal sounds later, as though taking pity;

"You should have said something," Adamska said between grunts as he wrestled with a stubborn gear. "Holding things in too long will give you a stomachache. Just remember that you don't know anything about me."

"All right then," Otacon said decisively.

"All right what?"

"I'm listening."

"You are, aren't you," Adamska said, with a note of irony.

He looked at him, for a moment. Then back down, relaxed and dismissive.

"But what's to tell? Was born, fought, haven't died yet."

It was the "yet" not of "the sun has not collapsed into a white dwarf yet" but of "the sun hasn't set yet."

"Er...A lot, really," said Otacon. "All the parts in between."

Adamska shrugged without interrupting the motions of his hands, which took some talent. "Fighting. Spying, mostly meaning trying to be in the right place when something happened. Waiting to fight. Listening to talk about what we were fighting for and trying to keep a straight face. Like I said, not much. Now what?"

"Hook that up to the subrelays."

"The what?"

"Those things. Red to that one, black to that one, and white to that one."

"Ah." Adamska twisted and lay on his back for a better vantage.

"It's a good thing," he mused, "that the war never broke into full aggression." He snorted. "What a stupid way for the world to end. It was a stupid fight to begin with. East against west. You can't kill an idea."

"I've seen lots of ideas die," Otacon said ruefully, glancing at the husks that lurked half-heartedly in the shadows. "Not always the ones that should."

Something occurred to him.

"But you fought in it. Even though you thought it was stupid."

"What, you think I had a choice?" Adamska's laugh was not bitter. "No one did. The entire thing, it was people making decisions because they had no option not to. That's what made it stupid. It was fun to watch, once you accepted that none of it was for a reason."

Otacon tried to wrap his mind around the idea. "But- you were going to die for it."

"Yes," the boy acknowledged, "sooner or later. That's what made it fun. When nothing matters, you can do whatever you want. You learn that everyone dies. Makes things easy. Hah. That's what surprised me, learning that I might live this long." After a moment, he amended, "That, and the ponytail."

"That's...awful."

"It does look stupid, yes, but I'm over— what?"

"That's really awful." Otacon blinked rapidly.

Adamska eyed him with mild curiosity. "What are you getting upset about? It's not important."

"Yes it is!" The vehemence in his own small, thin voice surprised him. "Knowing what you're fighting for— it's the most important thing there is." Otacon pulled off his glasses and quickly ducked his head.

"You're strange," said Adamska, not unkindly.

Otacon gave a small laugh. "So are you."

"Not so much as you would think," said Adamska. "No one actually believed any of it. The closest were the ones who were insane enough that it didn't matter. Raikov, Volgin... They might even have been enjoying themselves." The corner of his mouth twisted in disgust. "As long as they had someone to terrorize and each other to fawn over, they would have been happy."

"You envied them, didn't you," said Otacon quietly, replacing his glasses.

The sounds of tools and motion could not make any impact on the silence.

"Do you know," said Adamska thoughtfully, "I could have given that same sequence of information to a hundred people, and not one of them would have drawn that conclusion?"

Otacon thought of how many ways there were to say something without having to say it.

"I suppose," the boy continued, "In some ways Volgin was enviable. Life must be easy, when the worst thing that can happen to anyone in your vicinity is you. It doesn't matter. Volgin was dead already, and Raikov is dead by now." His eyes darted from side to side, as if surreptitiously sweeping the shadows. "He must be," he muttered.

One mystery at a time. Otacon's mind would never let anything rest until he understood it as fully as possible.

It was amazing just how much trouble a person could get into under the influence of this trait alone.

"Why would you fight in a war," he persisted, "if you didn't even care about the reasons for it?"

"Why?" Adamska laughed again. "War doesn't have 'whys'. It's a constant. Like putting one bullet in three guns, and pulling a trigger six times. It will always fire on the last shot."

"That's...mathematically unlikely."

"Probably. But true nonetheless. Asking why a war began is like asking why the earth began."

"Well, solid matter formed together out of an interstellar gas cloud, then it—"

"What I mean is, there's no answer. There's no point in thinking about it."

Otacon knew a viewpoint that couldn't be impacted by little things like reality when he saw one.

"I guess I should know a thing or two about how wars start," Otacon said ruefully.

Adamska made an amused agreeing sound. "I still don't see how you couldn't have predicted that a bipedal tank would be used as a tool of aggression."

"I didn't predict," Otacon said, a shade defensively, "that Snake's cloned brother would take over the facility and use a psychic to get the launch codes."

"All right."

"All right what?"

"That, I can see how you didn't predict."

One mystery at a time.

Not thinking about it wasn't working, either.

The night before, the morning, and the day were all a chain of unlikely events. His brain had been handling them like any other dangerous beasts, by trying to keep out of range. Otacon's control,

however, was not as good as some people's, and he knew that the longer he kept things penned up, the hungrier they would be when he opened the gates. Sometimes his mind had a mind of its own.

One at a time.

The most immediate and coincidentally most unlikely of all the things was that Otacon would be alive at the end of them. That one continued to hold out in the face of all logic, so so far so good.

Secondly; he had shouted at Adamska. Shouted...horrible things, too. Otacon felt his skin burn with shame. How could he have thought— How could he have *said*— Oh, he was one of nature's born pressers of big red buttons, that was for sure. What had he been trying to do, by digging up the worst aspects of this whole mess and throwing them straight into Adamska's face?

Except he hadn't been trying to do anything. He had just been angry.

And Adamska didn't seem to hold it against him. Not that his judgement was any good at the best of times, and the only person he had ever met who might be able to reliably tell what *Adamska* was thinking wore a gas mask and telekinetically threw office furniture at people. But there had been that moment, just after he could see his obituary being written in his eyes and he was sure that this was it, this was where his luck stopped kicking in and just stood back and laughed, when suddenly it was gone. And there was this...disinterest. As if all of a sudden he had realized that it wasn't worth the trouble. Too minor to bother with.

It should have been a relief. He of all people should know how dangerous interest could be.

Otacon tried to lure his mind onto a tangent about the best way to configure the Idra-Rabba modifier, but, as usual, it went straight for the difficult part.

*It wasn't a kiss.*

*Well, not a kiss kiss.*

*It was just— a way to distract him. That's all. And it was just copying what he did, which made no sense in the first place. And before that, when he said— god, he said—*

*A lot of people are disoriented right when they wake up. Especially if they're hung over. He was thinking of somebody. Somebody he's used to waking up next to. Some soldier back home. God, I don't even know if he has somebody back home he wants to see again. He must. He draws people to him, you can feel it. Maybe that's what he's thinking of, when he looks down at something in the same that other people stare into space, or when he's moving so that you can almost see his mind working. This whole time, he could have been thinking of who he's left behind. I never even asked. Never even thought about it. Well, I couldn't just ask, you'd have to be an idiot to do that.*

As soon as he thought it, he started counting.

"Do you have somebody you left behind?" asked Otacon. Eight seconds. "Back home?"

"No," said Adamska. He fastened a bit of wiring with quick flickers of his wrist, the practiced ease of something he'd never done before.

"Oh."

There had to have been *somebody*.

"There had to have been *somebody*."

"No."

If he wasn't going to tell him, pressing the issue wouldn't help. But he didn't sound annoyed. That was one thing about Adamska; if he was annoyed, you knew it.

"What are you smiling at?"

"Nothing," said Otacon innocently.

There was the sound of metal, and Adamska thinking.

"I would have had less of a problem being part of a great machine," Adamska said, apropos of nothing, "if it had at least been a well-working one."

Otacon said, "?"

"All cogs in the war machine," he said in an odd even lilt, like a child saying his prayers. "Cheaply made, falling apart, parts jammed where they don't fit. Rust down to the core. Oh, not Volgin's unit. Practically infinite resources have a way of keeping things running smoothly, with more than enough to buy tolerance for his little— amusements." While his eyes and hands stayed steady, revulsion thickened his voice. The last word twisted in enough directions to warrant the creation of a new spatial dimension.

Murky memories of hints at the details of these 'amusements' rose toward the surface, then decided it was sodden enough with trauma as it was and decided to stay down.

"People...do what they have to," Otacon said delicately.

"That's it," said Adamska, with sudden vehemence. "That's it entirely. Volgin didn't have to. He could have intimidated anyone into whatever he liked by existing at them. And his was an *exemplary* unit." Adamska laughed bitterly. "Most of the rest were so bloated with corruption they couldn't have fought off an empty box. I used to know a man who delayed enlistment for a year by bribing the military commissar with sheep. The next year the price was raised and he didn't have enough sheep to pay it, so he went."

"Why did you join?" Otacon asked.

"I didn't. I was born there."

That was a good way to put it. He certainly seemed as though he was made for battle. That assurance, those lightning reflexes, those eyes that never missed anything, no matter how minor. "If things were so bad, why didn't you leave?"

Go home. Live somewhere peaceful. Start a life. Have a family, maybe. Find a girl who could make him laugh. Who could make that cold, suspicious sheen over his eyes fade a little, teach him how to talk without that unspoken "or else." Go somewhere where he didn't have to be defending himself all the time. Somewhere he and the world could cease hostilities for a while.

"And go where?" Adamska said languidly, as though he'd thought about it, but only as much as most people needed to think about whether poking a sleeping bear with a stick was a good idea. "It's not as though I had a place to go back to, or connections to anyone."

*Wherever you go, everyone is connected.*

"Besides, to know that important things were happening when I wasn't the one to do them..." He gazed off into the middle distance, then shook his head firmly. "No. I couldn't do it."

"Guess you'd be bored," Otacon agreed.

*Of course he'd be bored. Like he is here, or he would be if—*

*Okay. Stop trying to avoid it and just think about it.*

If hit long and hard enough, anything would succumb to logic eventually. Otacon held steadfastly to this view no matter how many times it was proved absolutely wrong.

*Putting the facts aside - like that you're a skinny, awkward guy twice his god damned age and he's, well, him - in a universe where all the complications were gone, it still wouldn't work. Even if he could ever have any interest - which he couldn't - it wouldn't last five minutes. You'd bore him. And he's not the kind of person who puts up with being bored.*

"Not that, quite..." The sharp lines of his face turned downward, pensive. The flat blackness of the shadows cast by his features and the metal that loomed around him made it look as though he were half gone, left as an abstract collection of segments selected at random. "It wouldn't be right, to let



someone else do it."

"Do what?"

"My job."

Silence, for a while. Otacon frowned downwards at a tangle of chips and colored wire. This connection was going to be complicated.

"It shouldn't have happened," Adamska said. His tone was carefully neutral, the mark of something that had to be smuggled covered in blankets past the border guards of his mind.

Some people, Otacon knew, thought in loops. It made sense that they would speak the same way, when they weren't making an effort not to. If you stayed out of the way, eventually they would cycle through to the beginning. Sometimes looking at things backwards helped.

"The heat was a relief, at first. That far into the southern provinces spring isn't as reluctant." He snorted softly in disdain at the global climate's lack of discipline. "It was good to see something other than snow, almost as good as it was to be doing something other than listening to all of them complain about the boredom. At least in the field I didn't have to hear Lyosha try to teach magic tricks he'd learned from some uncle to anyone who would let him."

He sank down and twisted to a better angle of access. The length of him was partially blocked by metal projections, nearly perfectly bisected.

"It should have been easy. It *was* easy. They had no idea they'd already been caught out, and that anyone knew the real reason for their 'Great Leap Forward.'"

It took a lot of skill to be able to pronounce quotation marks around something's name. To Adamska it came easily.

"They thought they had the Philosopher's Legacy almost in grasp - ha, and it wouldn't be the last time for *that* little delusion - and they were trying to build up the kind of industrial capabilities they'd need to get any real use out of it almost overnight."

By 'real use,' he meant weapons.

"We had gotten word that this little group was getting much closer than they were meant to. Their mistake was hiding in that isolated little compound, keeping the guard light to try to avoid notice. Volgin had one thing right."

Not much more than that, in Adamska's opinion.

"It's better to be big enough to deal with a threat head-on than to be small and try to escape notice. One will come up sooner or later."

Sitting up, he shook his head, and, for a moment that might have been a trick of the light, looked tired.

"A child could have gotten in. It was no challenge. Figures, that Lyosha would manage to get himself shot. All he would say was that he should have been watching where he was going, and they all laughed like idiots. It was a gash across his right forearm-" his fingers crept up and touched his sleeve, unaware- "hardly worth looking at. The bullet had gone right through, which solved the only problem there might have been. You can't exactly stop fighting and dig it out with a knife.

"It was one tiny, stupid fucking mistake. His gun jammed at the worst possible moment, and he was a second too slow on the move. I chewed his ass out for it and all the time he stood there, grinning like an idiot. He wasn't an idiot, either. Lyosha knew what he was doing. Otherwise he would never have been with us. Idiocy would have been some excuse. He was one of us, and we don't *make* mistakes."

Silently, Kaworu rose and padded over to lie at Adamska's side. The boy's free hand drifted to rest on the dog's head, unnoticed.

"The facilities were a network, all adjacent. They were smart enough for redundancy, at least. They had to all be taken out quickly, before anyone knew the difference. Once we hit the first it was too late to stop, and there wasn't any reason to. You can't get complications from a scratch. The knife cut Fedya took was much worse, and he healed fine. No one gets septicemia from a wound that minor.

"After a few days Lyosha wouldn't let anyone see it. He laughed. Sometimes he looked worried, when he thought no one would notice, but I thought it was my imagination and after a while it stopped and he only looked like he'd— accepted something."

The shadows hid his face.

"I would have known, later. When I'd seen it more. Should have known.

"He was still talking about how the scar would impress girls when he died.

"Later I found out more. That the Legacy had never been in any danger. Should have known. Their equipment wasn't nearly sophisticated enough to have surpassed our reconnaissance, and at that point even we were far out of reach. It was a fucking field test, for a new kind of light assault rifle. Eventually the model was scrapped." He slid a wire into its port and grunted. "Jammed too much."

Adamska's teeth clicked like an empty chamber.

As if remembering his lines after having lost his place, he went on.

"Like I said, I should have known.

"Even then there was an attempt on the whereabouts of the Legacy every other day, years before it was actually recovered. And when it was—"

He made a choked sound. It took Otacon a second to realize that he was trying to laugh.

"The secret was given away. In the middle of an *interrogation*, for god's sake. There were times when Volgin was so stupid it was actually painful."

"I'm sorry," Otacon said softly.

"Hm?" Adamska looked up, as though remembering he was there for the first time. "For what?"

"That you lost your friend."

"He wasn't a friend," Adamska said. "Just a comrade."

"What's the difference?"

"Comrades die all the time." His voice was blithe. "I don't bother remembering their names anymore."

Otacon understood. You'd have to deal with it somehow. He supposed denial was as good a technique as any.

"Must be lonely," he said.

Over the top of the powersource-in-progress, Adamska raised an eyebrow at him. He was good at that.

"You're one to talk, here in the middle of nowhere with them—" he freed one hand to indicate Motoko's entourage— "and your other guard dog."

Otacon had to laugh at the thought, though he didn't think Snake would have appreciated it much. It wouldn't help that he had never liked Adamska much to begin with, not that he didn't have his reasons... There were times when he really did look like a big, taciturn mastiff, charged with protecting a kid from bullies. Except their bullies usually had AK-47s and elaborate plans for world domination. At least, that was what Otacon assumed they had been planning. He'd started tuning them out about halfway through the monologues a while ago. One of the consequences of taking up troubles against a sea of arms; it had a weird effect on your attention span.

"It's really not that bad," he said.

Adamska flinched. Must have caught himself on something.

"Careful," Otacon advised. "Some of those are sharp."

"I know," Adamska muttered.

"Anyway, usually there's more people than you'd think. A whole organization, actually. This is sort of our base of operations. When most of the countries that acknowledge your existence only do it to say they don't like you, the farther you are from anything, the better."

"You don't have any patronage? No sympathizers?"

"It's surprising, really. There aren't many things you can do that at least *one* country doesn't agree with you. Turns out destroying their superweapons is one of them." Otacon considered. "Well, that's not entirely true. We do get offers of help sometimes when we're going after somebody's enemy. Problem is, it turns out they're not so thrilled when we get around to *them*."

Adamska snickered. "Must be fun."

"Actually," Otacon realized, "it kind of is. Like taking toys away from a kid who keeps breaking other people's. Though," he sighed, "I'm the one who gave it to them in the first place."

"No you're not," Adamska said.

"But I—"

"It's an old idea. It goes back to my time. If you hadn't done it, someone else would have. Were you even the first?"

"No," Otacon admitted. "But REX was the one whose plans got sold by— got sold, and I'm the one who made it. That means I'm responsible."

Everybody had their sins. Otacon wished people would stop trying to use his for a nuclear missile launch.

"No," Adamska corrected, "that means you're stupid. Whether a person decides to take advantage of that or not is his own choice. Trying to shift blame onto you is cowardly."

Insight threw off its bathrobe and flashed across Otacon's mind.

*You never do that, do you?* he thought, staring at the shadow-cut profile.

*You never try to avoid it. Whatever you do, you accept full responsibility. Whether something's right or wrong, that doesn't matter to you, and you don't try to justify it or make excuses to anybody.*

*No wonder he goes crazy.*

Maybe that was part of what made him so hard not to like, even for someone who should know better.

*Besides, when has knowing better ever stopped me before?*

Adamska caught him staring. For a second, Otacon thought he was going to be angry. But all he did was smile, furtive as a message passed between coconspirators.

*He's probably more used to having those than, well, whatever I am.*

"This isn't fitting right," Adamska accused, glaring down at a wire. It lay meekly in his hand and tried to look innocent.

"Here." Otacon reached out and took his wrist, guiding his movements. "Like this, see?"

Adamska caught on quickly and snapped the wire into place, with a "ha!" in the minor triumph of a thing working as it should. Otacon's attention was drawn momentarily to the cruel arch of his brows, the deceptive softness of his mouth, the sharp jut of the nose that seemed to dare anyone to get in its way, the green eyes and their stubborn, invincible pride. He let go a bit too quickly and hoped Adamska hadn't noticed.

Either he hadn't or he didn't care, because he wasn't angry. Not even the habitual veneer of anger he always had, the web of tape printed in bold, unmistakable letters; WARNING: DO NOT CROSS.

It was something different. Carmine serenity, from a boy whose emotions came in shades of red.

Otacon wondered if there was a special wing in the psych ward for people who thought of Revolver Ocelot as sweet.

The name and the realization didn't cause the sick lurch they once had. He figured that was proof that people could get used to anything. It had gone from a series of sudden stabs to a low, deep ache. Otacon told himself this made it better.

He still couldn't get used to his face.

*I never really wanted to kill you.*

It said something about his life, that that sounded so much like a compliment.

Maybe it was that they were from such different times. Different places, too. The closest Otacon had ever been to Soviet Russia was some old code he had worked with, once. That had been a pain, though a weirdly fascinating one. Numbers never needed translation, but the format had to be reworked a dozen times until he found a filetype that was compatible. It'd taken him a long time to make any progress at all, since at first he kept trying to follow the ordinary rules of how to do things, but once he gave up on that and just followed his intuition it'd stopped being frustrating and actually started being sort of fun, like figuring out a puzzle. Otacon liked the feeling that, through knowledge and effort, he'd been let in on a secret.

"What it is?" Adamska said, sounding more curious than angry. He'd been staring again.

Otacon said, "You're a mystery."

---

\*Answer: Yes.

\*\*Usually also yes.

---

Notes:

-Hooray! I'm using things I learned from my Astronomy textbook!

-And from Battle Royale!

-The sheep-bribery bit is actually true, according to a book called *The Threat: Inside the Soviet Military Machine*, by Andrew Cockburn. It has some great stories. my favorite is either that one or the one about how sometimes, to recruit, they'd just take helicopters into the mountains and pick up anybody who looked about the right age. Apparently one of the guys picked up that way turned out to actually be Iranian, which they found out when they were looking at a map for something and he happened to mention, "oh, there's where I'm from." I love the school library.

-If I managed to screw up Chinese history even more than was intentional, I heartily apologize and blame the American school system.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/16/>

# chapter 17

## Stray by Dahne

*Corruption can change the nature of a man.*

"Okay. One-

"Two-

"Th- Hold it!"

"Agh!"

With an impact that made him wince, the edge of the Kun- the Kunrathian meta- metacolloidal- the large, square device slipped from Adamska's hands. The crash resounded throughout the enclosed space, making the unstable metal shelving rattle alarmingly and having no visible effect whatsoever on the dog who lay serenely across their path. With what Ocelot refused to believe was anything other than deliberate malice, the ash-colored beast waited a full three seconds before opening a baleful black-ringed eye to acknowledge the mass of metal that had landed scant inches in front of it.

"Come on, Chapel," Hal chided, "get out of the way."

Point proven – that his species were perfectly capable of slipping unnoticed into highly inconvenient positions – the dog got to his feet and slunk off, slowly enough to announce that this was a result of his own whims and not Hal's admonishments.

"Sorry about that," he said sheepishly, pushing at his glasses in the nervous way he had.

"It's fine." Adamska bent down and grabbed the edge again.

More success, this time. It wasn't that heavy; Ocelot could have carried it on his own, though it did help to have someone else there to balance the weight.

They set it down to the left of the machine, in the remnants of dust that had somehow survived weeks of activity. Weeks. How long had he been here?

It would be all too easy to get used to this place.

Time was as academic a notion as other people. Its only measurable effect was the gradual materialization of the machine's structure, as its skeleton filled out in defiant anti-decay.

Some things only really existed in the negative. The absence of something that had never been noticeable. Tension, or the soreness in his neck from watching his own back.

Hal reached into a nearby stack of random debris and pulled out a handful of thin multicolored wires, which Adamska was fairly certain had not been there before he reached for them.

"Here," Hal said, shoving them into his hands.

Ocelot glowered at them distastefully, as though he had been given charge of a pile of dead reptiles.

Standing back, Hal gave the machine the stare of intense interest he usually reserved for Adamska. His scrutiny was directed at an area halfway up the column where a large panel had been removed, revealing a multicolored panoply of inputs, outputs, and...twisty things. Many looked as though they had been scavenged from anything that held still long enough.

Early on, Ocelot had stopped voicing these suspicions, due to the depressing frequency at which they turned out to be right.

"This is the hard part," Hal said, taking his glasses off to rub at his eyes. Odd, that the magnifying effect hid the deepening of the lines at their edges, rather than emphasizing. "The sequence has to be precise, and if you mess up you have to start all over." He smiled in a way that moved his

face without touching the patterns etched into it. "But you probably won't mess up, huh."

Everything alive makes mistakes.

Adamska shook his head sharply, then allowed the corner of his mouth to quirk up a little in return. "I can do it."

His confidence turned out to be well-placed. He absorbed the information easily, nodding now and then and letting the mind in his fingers map out the path of it. Another mark of time; it came more easily than it once had. He must have gained enough of the sense of the patterns that this one felt natural, as though he were only confirming something already encoded in his bones.

"What you're doing," Hal explained once the briefing on the details was complete, "is coordinating the current into a compatible pattern with the generator's harmonics. At first I was working just under the precepts of Newton's Sixth Law, that is, that everything that doesn't happen exerts a force on what does as well as the other things that don't, though the exact calculations are tough. Almost impossible, actually. That is, until I remembered to apply Niven's Twenty-First, which is that if what you're trying to create has ever been in a sci-fi novel you're beyond all help anyway and you might as well go for broke. Then I remembered Dalton's Law – well, the first part, the second is just theory about how everything is better if you put wings on it – which is that the total pressure exerted on the flow of time by people in combination is greater than the sum of the partial pressures exerted by them alone, though exactly how much greater or what effect that pressure might have isn't clear, since near the end of his life a lot of his writings were just sort of overzealous nonsense about blackbirds and little black holes leading nowhere, but..."

Ocelot watched as he went on with interest. And no little amusement, that *he* could call anyone 'overzealous.'

He'd gotten used to his way of talking. When an ordinary man babbles, it is because his mind has been, in most cases temporarily, separated from his mouth. It then wanders around lost for a while until the two are reunited. Hal's brain, however, when under the influence of technical detail, sprinted in exuberant diagonals, across open fields. The most practical course of action was just to nod and wait for his mouth to catch up, while his mind bounded like an overexcited puppy. Interrupting would have been like kicking it.

For a moment, behind the sweeping, erratic gestures that were evidently meant to illustrate the principle of the Mass of Conservation – something about how everything that has ever happened is accumulated in the form of an invisible and otherwise undetectable weight, which is balanced by that of what has ever *not* happened, and oh god was he actually listening to this? - the animation in his face seemed to make the shadows under his eyes fade a little.

Adamska was sometimes curious whether, given the right topic and under the right conditions, and nothing to slow him down, he might just keep going indefinitely.

He understood the urge behind the monologue, if not the exact details themselves. Where was the joy in having an ingenious, undetectable plot if there was no one to tell it to?

"...to the semiconductors that are kept below negative five degrees Kelvin, which would normally make them worse than useless, but we've got them suspended in a negative conductivity field, so..."

What could be worse than useless?

"...and while you do your part, I'll be making the corresponding arrangements in the transceivers over here, since the signals need to be more or less synchronized. Got it?"

"Of course," said Adamska.

Another of those smiles, sincere as a corroded mirror. "Right."

Ocelot didn't notice how close he had been until he moved away.

"Ready?"

Taking the wires in hand and matching the diagram in his head to the panel in front of him, Adamska nodded, remembered he couldn't see him, and said, "Yes."

"Okay. Start...now."

Selecting the appropriate set of wiring, Ocelot anchored them to the middle post and fed them upwards.

It was not difficult. Only methodical, riddled with small details. Constant, steady motion. Every day it was easier.

"Strange name for a dog," Ocelot commented.

"What? Oh." He did not have to look up to see him color, the stain like wine muffled by soft cloth. "Dogs should have names, and Snake didn't want to come up with fifty of them, so I did. Just grabbed them from anywhere I could think of. He drew the line at 'Fuyutsuki,' though. Kind of silly, I think, since it's really not *that* hard to say. It fits pretty well, too..."

Maybe some would have called his prattle irritating. Maybe some would have found it charming. At least it was easy to listen, since Ocelot knew he wasn't expected to. What *did* he expect of him? Maybe he took what he could get.

Adamska knew how to let words flow by his conscious mind to be distilled by his hindbrain for anything that might prove useful. With absent surprise, he noted that he was not currently doing this. Neither was he precisely paying attention. It was as if the steady flow of sound were lulling him, dampening his alarms, pouring oil on the hinges of his heart. It was as if he could...

Adamska shook his head to clear it. He was immediately reminded of the reason he had always privately wondered why people do this, as the effect was that the wiring slid from his grasp and his thoughts remained the same, though slightly dizzier.

Swearing under his breath, he grabbed at the wires, finished the first step, and pulled them farther upwards.

Adamska couldn't take it much longer.

It kept encroaching on him. Hazing the edges of his thoughts. Stealing the sharpness from his eyes. It snuck up on him no matter how tirelessly he scanned the horizon, fled out of range no matter how quickly he turned, lurked where he couldn't dig it out, God knew he tried. He scanned and purged and scoured, and still it refused to leave him be- this traitorous sense of safety. It floated like a butterfly, and whenever he grabbed for it flitted away.

It should have been gone. Those little reminders of Adamska's true nature should have served to dispel any illusions he might have held. It wasn't the mad obliviousness he had known in the surreal form of Raikov, impervious to intimidation by means of being impervious to reality; this one was aware of how badly outmatched he was, hah, he'd made *that* clear, and yet... he didn't care.

Even such a ridiculous creature could hardly remain blissfully ignorant, with the beast's fang pressing against his side. Adamska had, he decided, left it with him as a warning. The least he could do was have the fucking decency to heed it. Even rabbits had enough sense to flee gunfire.

His hands wrapped the wires into the proper position, and yanked them back down.

That the default contempt he felt for anyone incapable of killing him - in other words, everyone - was warming to a grudging acceptance - that didn't bother him. He could learn to live with that. In fact, he could deal with letting himself be forced to like the man.

The problem was that it was showing no signs of stopping there.

*Hah*, he laughed scornfully in the shelter of his mind, face blank. *You've never felt affection for*

*anyone or anything. How would you even know?*

He'd never really wanted to kill him. There was a word for that, wasn't there? Not wanting to kill someone. The feeling that something would be unfinished if he died. With John, it had been easy. Finally, he'd had an enemy whose every move he couldn't predict. Who provided a challenge. Who wasn't so pathetically, unrelentingly easy to understand. Who gave him that *tension*, a feeling other than that uneven mixture of fear and crippling boredom that choked and stifled him so that feeling anything else was a such a relief he hardly dared to breathe. Anything at all, just to feel something else, whether tension or anger or peace.

Adamska wasn't entirely sure he would recognize the last one.

He hated being lied to.

There was a certain class of lie that he'd gotten pretty well accustomed to. The category of the efficient, careless untruth that all of what his superiors ever told him fell into by default. Those, he didn't mind. Just a part of business, after all. He didn't mind at all when people lied to Operative ADAM. That was what he was made for, after all.

This was different.

This was personal.

It was the class of lies that, maybe just by contrast, rained down where the rest had slid off smooth, and stuck.

Lies like, "It's going to be all right."

Or, "You won't feel a thing."

Or, "It's really not that bad."

Ocelot had almost forgotten how much he hated them.

Winding the wires down, again. They'd grown warm from his touch.

He'd been out of battle too long. In his mind, he could feel the guard dogs yawning and turning in compact circles. He kicked at them viciously. He couldn't let them rest. He couldn't succumb to this grating, infuriating *peace*, the reassurance and fucking *safety* that poured off of this man in waves no matter what kind of breakwaters he built.

He couldn't let his guard down, not for the least part of a second. He couldn't afford to. Because if he did, then...

Then what?

*You'll die.*

Now to the left, guiding the filaments and-

With a great effort, Adamska kept his hands from going still.

He was used to rhetorical questions. What he wasn't used to was having them answered.

And not by a voice that he recognized.

It had never had a voice, before. It had never, for that matter, been an *it*. What use had there been, to differentiating parts of himself? There were plenty of people more than willing to cut him into pieces at the first chance anyway. It was a spot of a slightly different color, perfect as a bruise, below breathing and his gloves in the pecking order of things he bothered to notice.

He reached after it, the sense, the feeling like cold water swallowed into a warm body and then the memory of the feeling, and an inch from his grasp as if to torment him it faded. A shade, and the smell of cordite...

*You're imagining things*, he told himself, and imagined he believed it.

Back to the right, one at a time, careful to keep them from tangling.

The pattern was nonsense, with its arbitrariness and doubling back and that absurd feeling that it



echoed somehow in his very cell structure, down at the same level as the law. But then, Ocelot was doing the same thing, wasn't he? Moving in random directions in ragged jolts, twisting around whatever was in reach before moving on to some arcane destination. Steps equaling each other out. Moving to end up in the same place, but reaching back in that nonsensical tangle. All he could do was trust that whatever direction he was ultimately being led in was the right one.

It was unusual, to work for someone who knew what he was doing. There was a simple equation for how much any person whose orders Ocelot was supposed to be following really knew; half of what he thinks he knows, two thirds of what he's supposed to know, a tenth of what he'd like to know, and about three-sevenths of what he gives the impression of knowing. Weight inversely according to his sense of his own importance.

It had been perfectly reliable, before. All of his mechanisms had been. The issue was that he could not get any solid numbers on this man.

Most people had numbers. Parameters. The exact distance they could cover, angle they could see, amount they could take. Length of time their luck would hold. Only numbers, once you knew. Only an aspect of the great vast construct. Most people were.

That node was complete. To the left.

There had been no point to telling him. It was an example, only. Of how things went. How easy it was. There had been no reason not to tell him. It wasn't as though it were some kind of secret. People died. For stupid reasons, sometimes. People died, and then they were gone. Sometimes with hardly enough time for a, "What was *that* for?" and a, "Sorry, just business." He hardly bothered with the second part these days.

People can get used to anything.

The litany was encroaching and he lacked the will, for once, to try to fend it off.

Winding the wires down, again, as his mind told the names like rosary beads.

Mikhail Semyonovich, who had roared like a bear as he went down. Ivan Antonovich, who shrugged off the bullet he took in the hip until he took the next in the heart. Pavel Ivanovich, who had shouted at them all to go on and leave him there as he died. Stepan Bogdanovich, who hadn't. Mikhail Alexandrovich, his head nearly severed by machine gun fire, the ludicrous and obscene hole in his neck dripping, ragged. Vasily Stepanovich, his eyelids fluttering like a swallow's wings. Ivan Savelyevich, him and his fucking curiosity, that he couldn't stop sticking his nose where it didn't belong no matter how many warnings he got. Kifa Mokievich, who'd given Adamska one good night. Semyon Ivanovich, whom Adamska had given several. Ivan Ilyich, who seemed to have been born to die and eventually got his wish. Andrei Ivanovich, who was lucky. Aleksandr Petrovich, who wasn't. Fyodor Ivanovich, there and gone before anyone could learn his name. Fyodor Fyodorovich, barely older than Ocelot, who had looked up to him with a childish devotion that he simultaneously accepted as his due and wanted to smack him for. Aleksandr Dmitrievich, who wore his balaclava more than was necessary, dead before anyone got the chance to ask why. He hadn't even been that ugly. Pyotr Petrovich, killed by The Pain's fucking hornets. Platon Mikhailich, by a terminal case of wrong place, wrong time. Konstantin Fyodorovich, by a downed enemy they'd all thought dead until he pulled a trigger and proved them wrong. Nikanor Ivanovich, those few long last seconds spent staring at Ocelot like there was something he should have done about it. Aloisy Mogarych, less blood than you would think trailing from the hole in his forehead, just barely to the left of center. Timofei Kondratyevich, bled to death. Afanasy Vassilievich, throat slit. Aleksei Sergeivich, septicemia.

Even when they were gone, the dead had a way of never shutting the fuck up.

His fingers twitched. Magic tricks. Idiocy. Muscles had no discernment. They remembered the

stupid things, too.

Adamska pulled the wires to the right and thought of dying.

He knew that he would die. It was the great unspoken contract, his oath and benediction, his comfort and the shield that kept him safe.

When the worst that could happen was promised to him, what was there left to fear?

He remembered his first day under Volgin's command, years ago he didn't bother counting, neck aching from tilting back and jaw aching from jutting out to show how afraid he wasn't. The colonel had looked down at him until Ocelot had wanted to snap at him to get on with it, he was tired of staring at his ugly face, just say it and be done already. And after much too long, he had turned around in dismissal, saying only, "Get in the way and I'll kill you."

Adamska was almost as grateful to him for that as for being so easy to hate.

Now. Before he had time to think about it.

Now or never.

Knowing like a bullet's trajectory that he was as prepared as he ever would be, Ocelot allowed himself to consider the possibility that, in the next second, he was not going to die.

Huh.

So that was what that felt like.

He could almost wonder why he had been putting it off for so long.

He was here, and he was not going to die.

He was grease-stained, squinting, and had spent the past weeks working on what for all he knew might turn out to be the world's most elaborate lightning rod, and he was not going to die.

The only thing within a hundred miles was animals, snow, and a person who didn't want to kill him, and he was not going to die.

He was working under the direction of someone who could process logorhythms capable of warping the fabric of time and space in his head but would respond with the ultimate in blank expression to "Where are you right now?" and he wasn't going to die.

"Is something funny?" Hal leaned out from behind the pillar opposite to blink at him in curiosity. His hair, Ocelot noted with some amusement, was reaching out above him like the antennae of jubilant insects.

Realizing that he was laughing quietly, Ocelot said, "Yes."

"Oh." Blink. "Are you going to tell me what?"

Ocelot grinned wolfishly at him. "Maybe."

There, with his magnified eyes wide, brows high in innocent confusion, he was- he looked almost-

*Cute*, murmured a courageous corner of his mind, and immediately resolved to avoid dark alleys for a few days.

Oh, fuck all of it.

He was cute. There was nothing wrong with admitting that. No law against it. He was cute, and Ocelot could say he was cute, and that was all there was to it. What was wrong with that? If it meant he was going soft, then so be it. There was no enemy to defend himself against here; Adamska was almost beginning to comprehend that idea, like someone who'd never left the desert coming to terms with drowning. Being woefully unprepared for an ambush was no crime, hardly even qualified as stupid, if there wasn't going to be one. There was no one to see, and even if there had been he could go fuck himself with a sawed-off shotgun as far as Ocelot was concerned. There was no rule against stating the obvious, and if there had been he would just break it anyway.

Ocelot nearly laughed out loud. They'd nearly done it! Now that it was too late, they'd finally almost found a way to keep him from doing whatever he wanted. All this time, he'd been fighting so hard against letting anybody control the way he thought that they'd almost got him running away from the carrot when there wasn't even any stick.

"To hell with that!" he murmured jubilantly to himself, softly enough that Hal only snuck a curious glance at him out of the corner of his eye.

Not only was he cute, but fuck it all, Ocelot liked him. Why shouldn't he like him? Oh, he was a fool, yes, but he was simpleminded in such deliciously complicated ways. Clever enough, no doubt, to devise a way to neutralize Adamska as a threat, but stupid enough not to try.

Ocelot had a fondness for incongruities. You didn't survive an assault by rampaging battle hornets without a healthy appreciation for reality's occasional breaks with logic. That was what Hal was. An incongruity. Elegance on the battlefield. A component misplaced, that made the whole thing work better than if it had gone where it was intended to. The way he moved, spoke, acted- his shameless acceptance of his own lack of appeal made him appealing.

All he had done to Ocelot was rob him of the pursuit of a glorious death. As it turned out, he wasn't going to get that anyway.

His fingertips brushed against the scab on his lower lip.

"I'm done," Adamska pointed out mildly.

"Huh? Oh!" Hal's head ducked down with a speed that made Ocelot's lips curve into a smirk. He didn't mind being stared at, if it was for the right reasons.

Maneuvering around a box-like component Ocelot hoped was not supposed to be inside the machine already, Hal circled to the near side of the far pillar and crouched there in the shadow of the ominous arch.

"Okay," he said, sliding a panel aside, "Here goes. Hold on for a second, I've gotta hit *this* and *this*...okay, now you flip the switch on your side, and...!"

His hands moved, like rolling dice.

With a few flashes of red light like eyes in the underbrush and a sound like waking, the machine came to life.

"It works!" Hal cried, springing up as if he were the one the power was flowing to.

"Don't sound so surprised about that," Ocelot muttered. He got to his feet and went to stand by him and survey their handiwork.

It was singularly unimpressive. Half the panels were still removed, and few of the ones that were in place matched. It was a patchwork of a dozen shades of metal, interspersed between gaping abscesses that revealed swathes of wiring like tendons. The process felt less like construction than an autopsy in reverse.

"This is just testing the power supply, of course," Hal said in answer to the unspoken question. His voice was pitched to carry over the low hum the machine emitted, like the growl of a panther deciding whether or not to become seriously annoyed. "We've still got a lot to do before it's fully operational. Anyway, it's a relief to have this part done."

He went to the side of the machine and flipped another switch. The light and sound died.

"From here on, it's all easy."

The hairs on the back of Ocelot's neck settled down. That is, they would have, had they not been too short for standing up to make any difference. The sentiment was the same.

"Easy," he echoed, looking at it.

"Yeah," Hal said, with a degree of obliviousness to irony that would have been astonishing to

someone who hadn't been expecting it. "The only tough part is keeping the core temperature stabilized at below-"

"Negative five degrees Kelvin," Adamska completed absently.

"Huh?" Hal looked optimistically bemused, like someone who had thrown a stick to a dog watching it return dragging the whole siege engine.

"That's what you said, before," Ocelot elaborated, oddly defensive under the awed quality of his gaze. "You explained it all."

"Oh. I did?" His eyes slid to the corners of the room as though in embarrassment. At this angle, the shadows under them were pronounced.

"Yes." Ocelot scrutinized him. Frowned. "At length."

Wandering mind, unsteady eyes, clothes that fit well enough with his general air of amiable unkemptness that it was difficult to recall precisely how long he'd been wearing the same set. Shit. Besides the other night (*snow on the windowsill, their own enclave in the white silence, warmth and voice and weight*), had he been sleeping at all?

"Eheh...Sorry about that," Hal said, rubbing the back of his head in embarrassment. "I tend to get a little carried away."

The scientists Ocelot had known never got carried away. That is, Sokolov had, but that was by GRU operatives and at gunpoint so it didn't count.

"It's fine," he said. "Kind of interesting, actually. Most of these things-" he nodded at the debris of half-assembled components- "I've never so much as heard of before."

Ocelot had a habit of listening, especially when he was taking pains to appear otherwise. The conscripted force working on the Shagohod had dropped their share of names. Even considering that a good half of them were "Volgin" (in the context of, "Look out, - is coming this way") and "Raikov" (as in, "oh no, not - *again*"), engineering concepts made up a fair share of their parlance. Adamska also had a habit of remembering, even the useless things.

"That's understandable," Hal said offhandedly. "Half of them I invented, anyway."

"Did you?" said Ocelot, slightly surprised.

"Well, made up might be more accurate."

"Ah." Ocelot gave the possible answers to his next question due consideration, and asked anyway. "Exactly when did you develop them?"

*He won't say "just now,"* a part of Adamska's mind promised.

"Just now, mostly," Hal said. "Whenever we needed them."

*Oh for God's- That's it. I quit.*

Inside his head, there was the sound of feet rapidly descending a staircase, and a door slamming shut.

Fine. He hadn't liked that part much anyway.

Hal's face had grown suddenly thoughtful, with a somber cast he had never seen before. The smaller man's arms crossed, and he tapped a finger against his lower lip.

"Based on the readings I'm getting here," he said, "I've got a good idea of how to align the qliphoth-negation convergence, but..."

Ocelot considered the machine's blank metal surfaces and thought, *Readings from what?*

"But...?" he prodded, interest piqued.

Hal swept the mottled masses of bent metal, frayed wire, and twisted plastic that haunted the room with troubled, mournful eyes.

"I..."

He breathed deeply.

Ocelot felt a strange mixture of satisfaction and disappointment. Here, finally, there was some complexity beyond this man's bizarre, erratic genius.

"...don't remember where I put it," he finished sadly.

How convenient, Ocelot reflected as he rooted through scraps and discards and the occasional flash of movement he decided was in the best interest of all concerned he ignore, that even as he lost his mind piece by piece he was discovering how little he might miss it.

Ocelot said, "I'll never understand you."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/17/>

# chapter 18

## Stray by Dahne

*Isolation can change the nature of a man.*

The sun was setting now. Or it had already, Otacon didn't know. A few of the dogs had come in just now and looked at them the way they did: "Humans doing something. Probably pointless. Might as well take a nap." That didn't mean anything. Maybe it already had.

Adamska was beside him. Filling the empty spaces with ranks of chips. Fine, delicate work. His hands were sure. Chips, sand, silicon. His hands weren't so clean, anymore. For a while it was like nothing that touched him could stick. Sooner or later everything came down to dirt. Otacon had told him what to do, at some point. He couldn't remember. He must have. The boy was all focus and concentration. His whole mind aimed at getting it done and going home. Turned down or up, his was a face that cut through. No mercy in a face like that. It couldn't take it. Otacon was doing something too. He didn't remember what. He put his trust in his hands. Days and nights of plans, schematics, mapping out ideas and tracing down trajectories. They knew more than he did. Leave his fingers to find the loophole.

His eyes were less trustworthy, lately. Things blurred where they weren't supposed to. Rubbing them helped, a little. Adamska looked at him.

*It's nothing*, he thought.

He wanted to know Adamska. He wanted to know how something that was itself so much could ever become anything it wasn't.

The reason Otacon took things apart was because if he could understand why it was broken he could fix it.

In a room full of broken things he still believed it.

Otacon wanted it to be just that he was beautiful.

Beautiful things could be ugly, too. Empty underneath the skin. To the center nothing but rot, or hollow. Poison in the shiny apple.

That was how Adamska was. He was beautiful because the world had such a love for its nasty little jokes. Carving clean, high lines that could only be sullen or cruel, radiating pure and perfect bones around cold dead-thing eyes. Beauty to try to hide the corruption, fine motion for the killer's hands like dancing, silk over an empty sadist's soul. He'd wanted to do those things he'd said, awful things (*shall we begin?*) and he would have, he could have done it and he'd wanted to, but Otacon was useful for a while yet, or maybe just not worth killing, he needed him for now for the return trip to his then. He had no mercy or compassion, if he'd ever had the potential it was burned out back before any machine could reach. The colors in that spectrum were blind to him. Otacon was kidding himself when he thought there was anything else. It was the beauty that made him project and see something in him that was human. There was nothing in him that wasn't twisted ruined angry sick, no way it save it and nothing worth saving. He wanted to help but there was nothing he could do, all there was was to stand back out of range in the shame of safety and watch because that was what he wanted, leave me here leave me here leave me alone don't come closer not any more do not leave me alone do not resuscitate there was nothing for him it was no use, some people weren't worth it, it was no use mourning when he was already dead.

The worst part of being a bad liar is that you can't lie to yourself for long.

Because Adamska was human and Ocelot was too, because his face was a lie but no more than anybody else's, because he'd seen him sleeping and he'd seen him hurt. Does not a Russian bleed? He was thinking stupid things now. Everybody bleeds. That was the whole point of it. Bleeding.

Coward. Sad and tired, pathetic coward. Face it.

*(I mustn't run away I mustn't run away)*

Outline of his face against the shadows, silhouette inverted. Hands, motion, steady as metal, mind turning like gears. He wasn't a saint and he wasn't a monster. Not all cruelty, but not enough mercy to do him the favor of being one or the other. Hands, with long strong fingers. Thoughtless kindness or the precision and grace of studied brutality. Otacon had felt them both. His arm, the bruise had faded a long time ago. From when he first learned. Poor boy. Poor boy. The cut on his leg was shallow, from later. Wounds heal. Even odds that he would have a scar to remember him by.

As if he would be so easy to forget.

Even the odds have scars, remember.

Would he remember, being here? Would this be a scar, or a mistake?

Everything about him said something. He moved like he'd invented it. His hands snatched things up as quickly as they let them go, like it burned.

His skin was too flawless to hold scars. They'd slide right off. He'd remember. How could he could ever have thought he would die?

He's protected him, once. He wondered why he never thought about it, that moment floating in hazy memory when he'd pulled him down, out of danger, out of the way of something. Something. Like a reflex he'd slipped and forgotten to repress. Like flinching. Black and red. The world in grayscale. Red. That was important. He wasn't always cruel. He made mistakes.

*Hope*

"You're staring at me," Adamska accused mildly.

Otacon started. He blinked rapidly to clear the haze from his eyes. Mostly the result was just that the haze moved a little, but it helped. He realized, with chagrin, that he'd fallen into a kind of trance. Luckily he wasn't working with anything volatile.

And he was still staring at Adamska.

Well, nothing *chemically* volatile.

The boy growled in irritation, and said, "What is it you want to know?"

There was a touch of wryness to the usually accusative voice. It was the way he talked. Like he always assumed that he was going to be contradicted. That he would have to fight for every inch.

"What was he like?" Otacon asked. "Big Boss?"

The thread, who held them all together. The eye of the needle.

In the long pause then, Adamska's mouth pensive and eyes shaded by memory, he wanted to kiss him and he wanted to run so he waited.

"John was," he said, his tone measured even and scraped level, "the only man I have ever met who was worthy of killing me."

*(held fast no mercy "Do it" arm outstretched I can't but you're afraid "Do it, if" but I)*

*You would have let me*

"But he didn't," said Otacon, hesitating a moment. It seemed significant.

"No," he said, and why was he angry? "he didn't."

What bitterness made his mouth twist up?

*lips that would kiss form prayers*

He was alive. He had a future, if he chose it.

*hope is the thing*

Everyone deserves a future.

What had he done, to deserve this?

Did everyone deserve a present? It was the one thing they all got.

"'Revolver' Ocelot, did you say it was?" Adamska asked, with a casualness that felt less forced.

A tone that said it was all a joke he had decided to play along with, for the time being.

Cruel thing to bring up. Not that it ever went down.

"Yeah."

"He's the one who gave it to me." Big Boss did? "He gave me that." He nodded toward the gun, in plain sight where it was hidden beneath Otacon's shirt. "He showed me that there was another way to fight."

"You sound grateful," Otacon thought, and realized that he'd said it.

"I was," he said. "I am." A film not quite opaque laid over awe like religion. His hands moved without pausing. He was more honest, when he didn't have to look at you.

"It was easy," he said, picking up a bolt, deft. "Everything was easy."

Of all the things to die of, had his been boredom?

"I never even had to pretend to be anyone I wasn't." He was picking up the thoughts and looking at them like bolts, or wires. Worthless until they had their place. No tragedy to discard, because there were so many like them. "No one asks questions."

"They don't?"

"Not if you do it right." Adamska's eyes and hands stayed steady, focused. His voice was distracted. "It's possible to be two things at once, if you know how. That everyone else thinks it isn't just makes it easier."

Otacon nodded mutely. Singleminded doublethink. Sometimes it seemed like the boy was constructed entirely of paradox. Interlocking chains of them.

How much energy it must take, to hold them all together.

Riddles and paradox.

They were never complete until they had an answer, but the whole point to some was impossibility. There had to be a solution somewhere, or else they were meaningless. Symbiotic. Questions with no answers were only cruelty, and answers with no questions were only words out of context.

That was what Adamska was here, though the grease on his hands and their clockwork motions made him seem less so. Out of context.

"You're sleeping with your eyes open," Adamska observed.

"Huh? Oh!" Otacon forced his back to straighten and rubbed his eyes. Damn it. He couldn't keep dozing off like that. He had work to do.

"Talk to me," Adamska ordered, slotting in another chip in studied sequence. "It'll keep you awake."

"Okay." He thought. "Er...what about?"

"It doesn't matter." He didn't look up. "Whatever you were thinking about, just then."

And it didn't matter, really. Whatever was said, he would, out of kindness, pretend not to listen.

"I was just remembering something that happened, a long time ago."

It was good that their proximity meant he didn't have to speak very loudly. His energy reserves were more or less tapped. At this point, he wasn't sure if there was anything keeping him going besides inertia.



Adamska nodded, absently signaling him to go on.

"Back when I was in school, actually. College. There was this girl – can't remember her name – I happened to walk by while she was telling some old riddle to her friends. Wait, let me see..."

He tilted his head back and closed his eyes. After a moment, he recited,

"Alive without breath

As cold as death

Never thirsty, ever drinking

"-and that was as far as she got before she got interrupted. Somebody calling to her for something." He looked back down and picked up where he'd left off, then admitted, "I spent the rest of the day following her around, trying to work up the courage to start a conversation." It was hard to be surreptitious when it seemed like your creator had tried to make up for your lack of physique with a gift of extra knees. "Finally she noticed and cornered me. I was so relieved she wasn't mad that I wasn't really listening, but I knew her from class a little, and we ended up talking for a pretty long time." She'd been pretty. Long brown hair. Nice smile. What was her name? "She laughed a lot. I actually relaxed enough that something or other got my attention and I started thinking. So I wasn't really paying attention, even that her voice was starting to sound like she was talking about something serious. But you know how ideas are, and right when she paused, like she was expecting something..." It had been long enough that he could laugh with just a little bitterness. "I blurted out the answer to the riddle."

He shook his head, like a slow, ponderous tortoise.

"Something about me really makes people angry."

Adamska gazed at him unreadably for a long time.

He said, "Well?"

"Well what?" said Otacon.

"What was the answer?"

"Oh. Fish."

"Ah." He nodded, as though this satisfied him somehow.

Suddenly, and for no reason, Otacon noticed that he was close enough that he could sense the rhythm of his hands like a heartbeat.

In the shadows somewhere, a dog sighed.

It would be tough, doing these things alone again. He'd gotten used to the help.

No. Be honest. He'd gotten used to him.

That wasn't quite right, either. Adamska wasn't exactly someone you could *get used to*.

That was part of it, maybe.

Otacon wanted to know...everything. What he thought about. Where he'd come from. What he was hiding.

*What happened to you?*

He had a sudden, absurd vision of someone climbing up a tree to try and rescue a panther.

One thing Otacon had learned, over the past few years, was that there were people in this world with absolutely no good in them at all. What he hadn't expected was to find out how few.

Adamska wasn't one of them.

Knowing that he would be gone ached in all the shades of an unfulfilled promise.

That was why he had to finish it. He had to keep forcing his eyes focused and his hands into motion, his mind onto the task at hand.

Because if he didn't, he might unravel it all in his sleep.

What it came down to was simple; Adamska didn't belong here. No matter how much it might feel like it did. Instincts weren't always right. Keeping him here...it would kill him.

A wave of guilt rose up, that he couldn't stop wanting to. Otacon had no right to toy with the course of somebody else's life.

Even though he already had.

In the harsh light the oil slick on the floor he'd forgotten made a rainbow, and his reflection.

He looked at him and couldn't regret it.

Otacon couldn't wish he'd never met him. But he couldn't pretend that being trapped here wouldn't kill him. Murder him, slowly, over time. Days.

There were old horror stories, about people, sick and obsessed, falling in love with someone and murdering them so that they could never change. Otacon hated horror stories. Wasn't the real world bad enough? That's why people told stories in the first place. He didn't understand the other kind.

Blur crept into his vision, and he shook his head. Stop that.

He couldn't ask that of him. Even if how a fire burned made him afraid, of or for, he had no right to snuff it out. It wasn't his choice to make.

So he kept going, with his slow dull fingers that fumbled and eyes that had never been anything but saboteurs. Because it was a choice he had to keep making over and over again, and every time it got harder.

Paradox. Like that Adamska, the boy sitting there so close he could hear him breathing, was a part of history. His whole life that was ahead of him was already past. It went beyond inevitable and into the great eternal record of things that there had been a failure to avoid. He tried not to look at him, again. Focus on the machine. What has to be done. Failure. It never stopped. What could he ask of him? Born on the battlefield. Had to survive somehow. Can't blame him for learning too well. Inevitable, and even if it hadn't already been decided trying to evit it might not have done any good. It was over. History.

The three beats. War, peace, and revolution.

How crooked a waltz, if you'd only ever heard one.

Things survive however they can, Otacon knew. All you can do is try to stay out of the orchestra pit. Some survived by becoming strong. Some survived because they ran. Cockroaches, and him.

At the bottom of the ocean, where it was dark and cold, there were living creatures. They'd adapted to the dark so well that if you took them out they wouldn't know what to do but die. As cold as death.

Keep moving. Hands over metal. Can't stop now.

And peace and safety, stasis, that would be poison to him, sure as arsenic. Or removal of the antidote. Absence of something can be as deadly as the presence. God, his brain was quoting *Dune*. What was *wrong* with him? Had no right. In a well, would die without sunlight soon enough. The absence of anything else we're addicted to.

*hope is the thing with talons*

He kept looking for an answer, feeding in numbers, all the ones that he could think of – how to translate this, into something a computer could understand? - but the answers never made any sense. Except for, sometimes, some of the more reasonable equations, the ones he was most confident of. And what they said was...no. Just, no. Can't be done. Not the prayer of a ghost of a chance. No. But lately it was hard to even get those to show the same answer twice. He must have been making some mistake. It was complicated, and there were a lot of places to do that. But that meant that maybe the

first answer was a mistake, too, so that was hope again. Lately it was hard to get even the solidest equations to give an answer that wasn't total nonsense. Must be too tired to keep the numbers straight. Human error.

*and never stops at all*

In the corner of his sinking eye, a shadow shifted.

"Get the hell off me!"

With an odd feeling, like waking from a dream he'd died in, Otacon looked up.

Heh. Looked like Tanya could be stealthy.

And quick. Already she was fastened onto Adamska's thigh, purring malevolently as he pried at her. It didn't look as though there would be much chance getting her off, unless he was willing to part with some chunks of flesh in the bargain. Eventually Adamska gave up and settled for acting as though it were his idea.

"As I was saying, before," he said, sweeping a gracious hand toward the animal in illustration.

"Two things at once. Cat, and Antichrist."

Otacon laughed. The way he insisted on ascribing antagonism to her was cute, when she obviously adored him. She just wasn't quite sure how to express it.

Adamska glowered at him. "Shut up and tell me where to put these."

"These" were the next set of chips, the same kind as the ones he'd previously been installing, but with slightly different subroutines. At least, Otacon assumed as much, since they were a different color.

"Wait...Let me see."

He got up, went over to where he'd left his laptop and brought it back, entering a few figures. Sometimes Otacon wondered if all the energy that was meant for developing gross motor control had instead gone into the (admittedly useful) ability to walk and type at the same time.

"This is the third set, in the fifth tier configuration, so...huh."

"Huh?" mimicked Adamska, eyeing him.

"Strange," Otacon mused. "Must be an error somewhere. This isn't my main laptop; to be honest, it's not much more than a graphing calculator." That could run *Planetfall*. Otacon was rather fond of it. "In theory, that should mean that there's a lot less that can go wrong."

"In theory," Adamska sighed. Otacon ignored him.

"I must have made a mistake somewhere," he murmured, half to himself. "This answer makes no sense."

Otacon frowned pensively at the small screen. Being pensive must have occupied him for longer than he intended, because Adamska prompted,

"What does it come out to?"

"Inveterate blue," said Otacon.

Adamska's hands stopped. He straightened, turned to face him fully, and said deliberately, "What?"

Otacon shrugged helplessly. "That's what it says."

"Let me see," Adamska ordered.

Otacon knelt down and showed him.

Adamska examined the figures with a taut, suspicious air, akin to that of a man being fed something he wasn't quite sure was dead yet.

"All right," he said crisply. "Now tell me which part is the answer."

"That," said Otacon, pointing. "There."

Adamska's eyes moved as he read it. And read it again.

"That is," he was forced to admit, "what it says."

"It's funny," said Otacon, turning the screen back to himself. "The program's running normally.

There were a couple of smaller equations I had to do first, and those worked out fine."

"Try them again," Adamska suggested. The sharp angles of his face were slipping from the familiar dubiousness into interest.

"Good idea." Otacon entered a comparatively short sequence of numbers. "When I did it before, this one came out to one thousand, three hundred and thirty-seven."

"And this time?"

"A doorway lightly."

For a moment silence hung in the air, not quite sure what to do with itself.

"There is a thought," Adamska said, "that passes through my mind now and then. It is in exactly the same words each time. I think, 'there is no way at all that this could become any more bizarre.'"

He leaned forward slightly, resting an elbow on the knee not occupied by cat.

"But," he continued, "there's something I should have learned a long time ago:

"I can always count on you to prove me wrong."

"Er," said Otacon awkwardly. "Sorry."

"Did I say it was a bad thing?"

The quickdraw grin might have been a figment of his bleary imagination.

Otacon reached out to snare it in memory and caught an idea instead.

He stood up and backed away, the keys clattering in machine-gun bursts.

"Hmm."

He backed away slightly more.

"Huh."

A few steps closer.

"Haah..."

Without warning, eyes still fixed on the screen, he shoved the device to within a few inches of Adamska's chest.

"Hm-"

"*What?*" Adamska cried.

Tanya emitted an annoyed mrowl and stalked off in search of a comfortable surface that didn't ask so many questions.

"It's you," Otacon said simply.

"Me?" The boy raised his hands up and studied them, both sides. "What did I do?"

Something about the thoughtless ease of the gesture and the question struck a note in Otacon's mind. This was new.

What kind of life would you have to lead, to think that a feeling as vitally human as curiosity was something you needed to hide?

"It's not something you did," he explained, sitting back down in front of him. "It's what you're doing. Or, what you are, really. Look." He turned the display toward him. "This is from when I was farther away. Adds up normally, see?"

"Hmm," said Adamska.

"The problems only turned up again when I got within a certain distance of you. Like you're emitting a field or something, and inside of it numbers don't work like they should. I can't tell exactly how large it is without testing it some more, but I think it might be gradually getting bigger. And, it

might not just be your proximity. Running calculations that are directly concerned with you might have the same effect." In his eyes, he could feel the physical burn of weariness being joined by the metaphorical burn of inspiration. "That would explain why the other equations haven't been working out right. I've been getting the exact same kind of thing. Which means that the ones that I *do* get a solid answer for must be too far removed from you to be affected, which means they must be wrong, which...see, I was starting to think...god, what a relief..."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Adamska said, staring intently at the laptop screen, "but two plus two has no right making 'exuberance.' Is something wrong?"

"No," Otacon said, aware that the thinness of his voice was unlikely to inspire confidence. With the burst of energy that had sustained his explanation wearing off as suddenly as it had struck, he was beginning to realize just how tired he was. How long had it been since he last slept? Days? "Just...got a little carried away. Are you done with those?" He indicated the rows of slotted chips, half-forgotten at Adamska's side.

"These? No, not yet." As he returned to it, he happened to glance to his side. "Are those wires supposed to be unattached?"

Something about the wires in question itched at the back of Otacon's brain. "No, they're supposed to be twined together, like th-"

*Fsszzzhhtt.*

Oh. Right.

It got dark very fast.

"-I? Hal? Are you all right? Hal!"

"S'okay." His voice sounded as though it were coming from a long distance. He batted at the hands shaking him. "Stop 't. 'm alright." They stopped.

Sensation was returning, bit by bit. He wasn't sitting up, but the floor would have been colder. He was leaning against Adamska. Sort of in his lap, actually. How did he get there? Must have fallen. Not a bad place to end up, all in all. The numbness was receding. Kind of nice.

"Whaddya look so scared for?" he mumbled. "'s jus' electric shock. Happens all the time." He had nice eyes. Pretty. They shouldn't look so afraid.

"I'm sorry," Adamska said.

"Really, I'm okay. But I've gotta- I've got-" Otacon tried to get up. Things to do.

Trying didn't seem to do much good. After a minute he noticed the arms around his waist probably had something to do with it.

"Or I could stay here," he conceded, melting bonelessly backwards. "Just need to rest my eyes a little. Is that okay?"

Adamska said, "Yeah."

As Otacon let his eyes slip shut, he heard echoes of the thought *he's not an anglerfish* and wondered why it made him smile.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/18/>

# chapter 19

## Stray by Dahne

*Temptation can change the nature of a man.*

Dreams were not necessary. Oh, it was said that the replay of random imagery during sleep was the brain's way of organizing recent thoughts and experience, but Ocelot was perfectly capable of doing that manually. By definition they were meaningless, and easily forgotten.

Ocelot never forgot, and he never dreamed.

But then, he never woke up with metal at his back, dogs to either side, and a sleeping man on top of him, either, so it figured.

In no hurry, he let his eyes laze open, just to look. Light filtered in through the few high-placed windows, enough to soften the usual artificial glow. Morning smelled the same everywhere. He felt a touch of comfortable annoyance that, when allowed to sleep past a certain hour without being kicked, shouted around, or shot at, his body awoke on its own from the sheer novelty. In terms of comfort, leaning against the machine's column wasn't ideal, but he'd live.

Leaning against Adamska's chest could hardly have been much better. Not that the man doing it seemed to mind. There was no danger of him waking up anytime soon; Adamska had seen men sleep like that before. Usually after a few solid days of avoiding being forced into the permanent version.

It was...odd, watching someone like this. Adamska had always considered sleep somehow vaguely embarrassing. He would be more comfortable caught beating off than he would caught napping. For one thing, he hated the idea that anyone could ever look at him without having to consider the possibility that he was looking back. And for another, well, there weren't many superior officers who considered jokes about 'catnaps' sufficient grounds for immediate, messy execution.

Well, Volgin, maybe.

Damn. He'd never get the chance to find out, now that the old bastard was dead. (Volgin was dead. Ah, yes. Made him smile every time.) Now that, where once there had been the constant risk of discovery, there was only peace. Not that there had ever been much real danger, with someone as dense as the colonel. The greatest challenge had been keeping himself from rolling his eyes. Now that instead of looking up at that repulsive, scarred scowl – or, worse, grin\* – he could look down into this mask of still serenity. The perpetual look of innocence wasn't so annoying, right then, since it wasn't his fault. It was just a part of him. Something he couldn't help, only let happen. Like his heartbeat. His breath, in and out like a slow sigh. His back, pressed to Adamska.

---

\*Volgin's smile was infectious, in the classical sense; whenever it was around long enough, somebody ended up in the hospital.

---

This was a different kind of challenge.

Ocelot's arms were still wrapped around him. And why not? he thought, a little smugly. He could embrace whoever he damned well pleased. It wasn't as though he was going to report it to anybody. Whatever happened here was nobody's business but theirs.

The one of them that was conscious, that was. The fool had worked himself past exhaustion, trying to get it all over with a little sooner. Well, too bad for him. All his efforts had done was put

himself right where Adamska wanted him.

*Caught you*, he thought, judiciously ignoring that it might not count as such when the quarry fell willingly into the hunter's arms. Semantics. *And if you think I'm going to let you go without a damn good reason you've made a sore mistake*. He grinned ferally to himself.

The dog beside him, the white one Hal called Kaworu, lifted its head and stared at him with implacable gold eyes. It nudged him with its head and made a polite, low noise meant to imply that, if he was awake enough to grin ferally at things, he was awake enough to scratch it.

Adamska's hands, however, were otherwise engaged. Acting on an odd curiosity, like wanting to know what one's limb looked like when attached to another person, he let the fingers of the nearer hand wander, downwards and leftwards, searching...

There. Tucked into his waistband, still. For safekeeping. There was an illicit sort of thrill in so shamelessly tempting Fate. He found he rather liked the idea of having a part of himself carried by this man's side. Always. He slipped beneath loose fabric to stroke the handle. The metal was warm from his skin.

It wasn't a lie to say that, asleep, he looked innocent. Obviously. He *always* looked innocent, or curious. As if watching someone play a joke, and not understanding well enough to know that it was on him.

Except that he was not innocent, quite. No more than he was a fool. He had been hurt, and he had been betrayed. It would be obvious even if he hadn't said as much. He might have scars, underneath his clothes. And it was not unreciprocated; he had given away the secret of his own creation. If there was a more perfect betrayal than that, Adamska would have known of it.

Adamska knew that holding on to innocence after that was impossible, and he resented the implication that it might not be.

He wondered if in his own sleep he looked innocent. If anyone ever saw, before killing them he'd have to ask.

Adamska adjusted the angle of his shoulders. Metal and concrete wasn't soft, but it was more comfortable than the rocks in the ruins of Rassvet. He had been watched there when he woke up, rubbing at his eyes and swearing at the chunks of crumbled brick adhering to his gloves, but not by anyone alive enough to matter. It was the first time he had ever known that, by all rights, and by all laws, he should have been dead.

"Ggrrrrhrrmmmm," murmured Hal, a low throaty noise, without opening his eyes or mouth.

Adamska's hand withdrew from the metal, perhaps drifting a hair too close to the skin beside it. Perhaps lingering a moment too long, or taking a detour over the soft, subtle curve of the lower stomach that was not, strictly speaking, necessary. Perhaps.

"Don't panic," Adamska said, not desiring a repeat of events the first time this had happened. It had been...unpleasant.

Mostly.

He disliked that the texture of his voice betrayed how recently he had awoken. It would be an unmistakable sign of vulnerability, if he were the type to be less capable of clear thought for a while after waking. He wasn't.

The scab on his lip was nearly gone.

"Wha?" Hal's eyes opened and rolled up, puzzled and clear. "...oh." Adamska's expression must have told him.

Two eyes. You needed more than one point of perspective, to see things as they were.

*You're going to run*, Adamska thought. He was holding still too long. *Don't you dare run away*

from me.

In his arms, Hal smiled.

"Good advice," he said.

Releasing a tension that had been invisible until its absence, he let his body fall back.

"Stay here," Ocelot said, linking his wrists in front of the smaller man's waist. "Like this. Just...stay."

"Kay." His eyes were closed again.

Adamska felt like the arsonist of art who had first burnt umber.

It was all right. This was what he had always done; taken the parts that worked and thrown away the rest. His self control was perfect, or at any rate as perfect as it needed to be. The part of him that fought, that killed or held back or sabotaged as his orders decreed, was of no use right now. There was no need for it to enter into his thought process at all. The same went for any part of his mind that might take issue with having a man dozing on his lap, and enjoying it. There was no one watching, he had no mission, and he could enjoy whatever he damn well pleased.

As for the- other problem-

In retrospect, it was ridiculous that he had ever been worried at all. The idea, that he would ever become-

*that-*

Well, he didn't need euphemisms anymore, if it wasn't going to happen, now did he? He could think about it in as clear of terms as he liked.

In clear terms, anyway.

He backed up, feeling the reassuring weight of Hal's back against him, and tried again.

The idea, that he would ever become-

-a soulless, sadistic professional traitor with a ponytail and an electricity fetish-

There. That wasn't so bad.

*It's really not that*

-was ridiculous.

Ludicrous.

Laughable.

He was spared the necessity of forcing himself to laugh by the possibility of waking Hal. He was sleeping again. Ocelot could feel the long, slow rise and fall of his breathing.

All right. Maybe it could have been possible, once.

Adamska had taken pride in the fundamental forthrightness of his dishonesty. He shot people in the back, yes, but only ones that should have known perfectly well that he had no qualms about shooting them in the front. If they hadn't been paying enough attention to realize that, it was their own fault. There was a degree of removal from it all. It would never do to invest oneself too much in one's work. God knew the only thing keeping half the spies at Groznyj Grad from ratting out the other half was professional courtesy.

It took skill. It was easy to get caught up in the game, to the point you forgot where it left off and the player began.

But not when you knew exactly what to avoid. Not now that he was forewarned. Forearmed. That was all it took, a little precaution. He would not forget.

Now, Adamska knew what he had to avoid. If anything like it ever turned up, he would recognize it immediately and terminate it. It was not going to be a problem. Now that he knew what it was, and where, he could cut it out whole. Burn out the infection, and cauterize it clean. He'd seen that done.



There was a lot of noise, it wasn't pleasant, but it worked. Most of the time. When the wound wasn't too close to the heart, or the lung, and the infection hadn't already spread too far to stop.

All right. Bad metaphor. Didn't mean anything.

What mattered was that, right now, he existed in a place with no enemy.

The thought passed as he shifted into a more comfortable position and he forgot to be terrified.

There was something almost pleasant about such close company, even if it was only a skinny, softly snoring engineer. Made difficult things easier to think about, somehow. It was the distraction of contact, he decided. It had been a long time, back in the real world, since he had held someone against him. Not counting when it was part of the process of trying to smash someone's face in. Humans craved this, for some reason. It didn't do anything useful, except maybe conserve heat. Nonetheless, it was nice. A human weakness. He could allow himself that much.

He couldn't quite decide what he smelled like. Machinery, a little, but something else too. He would have to think about it.

Ocelot had a good nose. Before he knew someone by name, he knew them by scent. Everyone had their own. The men in his unit, because he insisted they take proper care of their equipment, smelled like gun oil. John smelled like...John. Leather. Cordite. Whatever the hell it was he'd been crawling through lately. Raikov's physiology had taken one look at its barren, industrial surroundings and decided inexplicably to smell like chrysanthemums. Volgin had (Past tense. There was that smile again) reeked of ozone and hot metal. Ocelot would have been able to name the strange scent on the woman much earlier if the colonel's hadn't clung to her.

The timing of that had proved fortunate, almost; it had been the perfect opening to unmask her, and at the perfect time to draw attention away from John and onto someone more expendable. Come to think of it, Volgin had never said a word about Ocelot having been right. Bastard.

Of course, he'd known that she was the traitor- well, one of them- almost from the beginning. The setup was just too perfect. The heretofore-unheard of, tactically useless captive who just happens to be pretty enough to end up in the colonel's possession, and *just happens* to be carrying disguised weaponry? \*\* Honestly. It was as if she wasn't even trying. Dodging through the crumbling ruins of the fortress and evading stray bullets, all he had felt was cold fury. What kind of an idiot thought a pair of glasses and a different hairstyle constituted a disguise?

Volgin had given the damn lipstick back to her. What kind of idiot arms the enemy?

---

\*\* And Adamska knew just how hard that was to get hold of. It had taken him ages just to get a set of sleep-gas dispensers shaped like cigarettes, and the damn things had gotten stolen within the week.

---

Someone was laughing, softly. Ocelot realized it was him.

"Hmm." Hal stirred. "What's so funny?"

"Everything," said Adamska. "My life. Do you know what it was all for?" He released one hand and turned up the palm, fingers cupped. "Something the size of this." He let it fall back. "Human beings. Always, we make things so complicated."

Broad philosophy might have been a futile aim, at the moment. He tried to think of something more important than being here, surrounded by dogs and quiet and the scent of snow, and had trouble.

"Yeah," Hal agreed. "Keeps things interesting."

Adamska murmured amused assent, his hand running over a smooth, familiar shape.

And freezing.

Shit.

Idiot! He was fondling the goddamned *gun* again. That was the last thing he needed to remind anybody about.

"Oh." Hal blushed slightly, as though he had been the one to make the mistake.

"Keep it with you, do you?" said Adamska, deciding in retrospect that he'd done this on purpose and resuming his caress. A smirk touched his lips, and his voice dropped near to a whisper. "I like that."

"You can, er, have it back, if you want." His face looked younger, with more color to it.

"You can't do that. I'm dangerous, remember?"

His tone was light, and Hal laughed, and he could have loved him for how nervous it wasn't.

"If you'd shot me with this, like I asked," Adamska confided, metal smooth under one hand and body warm under the other, "it would have been suicide."

"Is it that important to you?"

"Yes." Feeling expansive, he elaborated. "It's a good weapon. It's mine." *Mine*. "Because of it, I stood up to a full lightning blast from Volgin and survived. No one else can say that." He reconsidered. "Maybe one."

"Big Boss?"

"Yes." His waist and stomach were rather nice. Slender, maybe a bit overly so. Easy to get a good grip on. As if they had been made to fit the curve of Adamska's arm. "He's the one who got the privilege of killing the bastard." Adamska sighed, with true regret. "It's too bad. I never got the chance to laugh at him about it."

"Who?" said Hal, dozing.

"Volgin. I knew I might not get to kill him personally – I had more important things to do, and anyway there was a lot of competition – but I always hoped that I could take a minute to laugh in his face while he was too dead to do anything about it."

"Oh." Hal nodded, and thought this over.

He said, "What?"

"True," Ocelot conceded, "A personality with that kind of mass might linger long enough after death to get annoying. Still."

"Wait. A- after death?"

Hal wasn't dozing anymore. His eyes were open wide, as he twisted to stare at Adamska.

"Yes," said Adamska, feeling a twinge of irritation. There was no call to sully the moment with stupid questions. "What's the point of mocking someone for dying if he hasn't done it?"

"You mean...his ghost."

"Yes, his ghost." Annoyance crept into his voice and set up camp. "You don't have to look at me like that. Just a little payback for all the shit he put me through. Is it that sadistic an urge?"

He was still staring. "You talk to ghosts."

"No, not often, unless they have useful information," Adamska said, hating being stared at as if he had committed some terrible social faux pas. For all he knew, he had. The future was another country. Things could be different, give or take a few thousand miles and fifty years. The subject could fall under some sort of ridiculous taboo. "What, do you ignore them?"

"I, uh, don't have to."

Adamska was getting fed up with his evasiveness. "So what do you do, when you see one?" he demanded.

"Er..." For god's sake. The man had been in the middle of a terrorist uprising. He'd seen dead men before. There was no reason to act squeamish. "Most people can't."

"Then too bad for them," said Ocelot firmly, closing the issue. He had more interesting things to think about. Like the way warm metal contrasted with warm skin, or...

He stopped.

He leaned forward, to give Hal a long, searching look.

He said, a shade disbelievingly, "They can't?"

"Nope. Some people don't even believe they exist."

Adamska tilted his head to the side, examining Hal's face and voice. He found no trace of mockery. Open and honest as ever.

He asked, "Do you?"

"Well," Hal said logically, "they must, since you've seen them."

"So..." Ocelot mused, turning the idea over in his mind, "When someone dies, what do you- 'most people' see?"

"Nothing. That is, just the body, lying still."

"Then that part of the remains is visible, to them?"

"Well, yeah," he smiled crookedly. "It's not like it disappears or blows up or anything."

The smile faded, leaving him pensive. "It must be strange, talking to ghosts."

"It's not. You've done it. You told me."

"I have? Oh. Right. No, that was just Liquid. He's kind of a special case. Being dead didn't really take."

"In the normal cases," Ocelot said slowly, "when you see someone die...that is all? It's over? Nothing rises from it, lingers for a while? You hear nothing?"

"Normally, no. Not a thing."

"And this is- common?"

His hand had stilled on the revolver's hilt.

"Yeah. It's seeing them that's rare. Actually, you're the first person I've ever heard of that can do it. Er, not counting some people on TV late at night, but they're frauds."

And tightened.

"Even if it's someone you've killed yourself?"

"I wouldn't know firsthand, but it's safe to say, no."

"You mean..." If his tone of voice had dripped, it would have burned tiny, smoking craters into the concrete. Adamska swallowed hard and made an effort to calm himself. "You mean to tell me that there are people in the world who can kill whoever they like and *never have to account for it face to face*?"

Hal fidgeted slightly. The gun did not move.

"Well," he said carefully, "I guess you could put it that way..."

"People who can walk away," Ocelot said through numb lips, "and pretend nothing ever happened."

There was nothing he could do, now.

Like the accentuated darkness after a lightning strike, his righteous outrage faded to an afterimage. He was out of anything it could ignite. He slumped forward, head hanging over Hal's shoulder with all the physicality of a ragdoll. His laugh rattled dry and hollow.

"Adamska?" Grey eyes observed him from an odd angle. "What's wrong?"

"The world," said Ocelot, "is not fair."

"It's not," Hal agreed quietly.

Sometimes, you had to laugh.

With a twinge of regret at leaving the excellent vantage point the position gave him for examining that not-quite-placeable scent, Ocelot sat up. He skimmed through his memory in the light of new knowledge, starting from the front.

"There is a lot this explains," he said. "Once, out on the field, I was with a unit that was running on low ammo. Ran into more resistance than the commander had expected." A lot more. He'd gotten a few of the more impressive scars, that exercise. "I shared some information I'd gotten about a hidden cache. One wanted to know who'd told me, so I told him." Youth was an excuse for not knowing any better. "All he would say is, 'Misha's dead.' Tch." He grimaced in distaste at his foolishness. "I always wondered why he gave me that look, when I asked him if he had a point.

"It was around then I realized it wasn't worth telling adults much of anything."

Adamska didn't mind being feared, as long as he knew what it was for.

Not believing in ghosts. It was like not believing in a chair. Why bother?

"Um..." Hal's eyes darted from side to side, picking at the room's shadows. He drew back, pressing closer to Adamska. "There aren't any ghosts here, are there?"

"No," Ocelot replied dismissively, and, on consideration of the further actions a lie might have inspired, immediately wished he hadn't. "Unless someone's died here within the last day."

"Definitely not." Hal blanched. His eyes moved to stare into the middle distance, apparently finding something there more interesting than Adamska's face.

The hilt of the gun was as welcoming as it had ever been. The grip seemed to mold itself to his fingers, receptive to his touch. Always waiting for him. He could take it back whenever he liked, and it would be as though it never left.

Hal's glasses rested on fine wisps of graying hair, like down. Adamska experienced an absurd impulse to play with it.

"It doesn't matter," he said. His fingers slid gently along the edge of the revolver, back and forth. "They hardly ever say anything important. It's only ghost babble. Virtually no importance to the mission, in reality. No substance to them. There's nothing to be afraid of."

(Adamska was never afraid himself; he only recognized that a situation had potential to terrify in order to gauge precisely how afraid not to be.)

"Must be hard," Hal murmured, as if he hadn't been listening.

Ocelot reflected that he had almost become used to having things challenged where they had once been taken for granted. It might have helped, that he had never much wanted them. You take what you're given.

"You learn to ignore it, after a while," said Adamska. People can get used to anything.

Even here, there had been one, hadn't there? Yes. Now that he thought of it. The same one, twice. He had lied without intending to. But it was an odd one. Appearing just long enough to say something cryptic and vanishing, instead of dissipating and going on to wherever it was they went. There was a feeling of age to it, too, as though it had been doing this for a while. Maybe being dead was something that improved with practice. In any case, the old smiling man was none of his affair, and he was none of its. He'd told it so. Get away. This had nothing to do with it. Hadn't seen it since. Maybe it had listened. Good riddance. All it had done, floating there with its smile as it watched him pin the other living man against the wall, was say, like it had died of curiosity, */Do you want to/*

The problem with ghosts was the same as with people. Some of them were bastards.

"Ghosts," Hal repeated to himself, as though in awe. "I never knew that about you."

"You do now," said Adamska, a slight edge to his voice. He didn't like when Hal implied that anything he knew about the other, the man with the stolen name, had any relevance to Adamska himself.

"...Sorry," Hal said meekly.

Adamska glared.

"For passing out on you like that."

"Oh." He relented. "That's all right."

But not without a disapproving flick of his gaze over Hal's disheveled appearance. From the looks of things, it had last been properly sheveled lifetimes ago, if ever.

"You're exhausting yourself over this. Why?"

A stupid question. Forcing him to say it wasn't going to change anything.

*You want me gone.*

"We don't know what kind of effects you being displaced might be having on the space-time continuum. The longer you stay here, the more chance there is of something being damaged-"

"No. Tell me why."

Ocelot gazed at him steadily, prepared to wait as long as it took.

Not long at all, as it turned out.

"It's..." Hal's gaze dropped, as though he were embarrassed. He began again. "There's a promise I made to myself, a long time ago. When I first started building things."

Patience came easily. He didn't need prompting.

"That, if the universe ever ended, it wouldn't be directly related to something I did."

Or maybe Ocelot didn't know as much as he thought he did.

Adamska laughed. "Is that all?"

"Some people would consider it pretty important." He was smiling.

"If more people thought that way, my life would have been much simpler." Ocelot's arm drew him closer. "You have nothing to worry about."

It was easy to imagine staying here. Oh, not *here* here, of course. He had things to do, after all. Futures to change. There was no escaping that. Just...here. For a while. In one hand the comfort of a familiar friend, a warm, living body in the other. Yes. He could get used to this. This was, he realized with amusement, the second night in recent memory that he had woken up not alone.

He was at a loss to remember the last before that. A surfeit of fortune. Whatever had he done to deserve it? The beggar spending all his time grasping for pennies when there were riches in arm's reach. He may not get to keep it, but it was nice to have nonetheless.

For a very long time, the world had been divided into a) people actively trying to kill him, b) people who were a few vital pieces of information away from classification as a), c) animals, and d) inanimate objects.

Some days he wasn't entirely sure about the last one.

Ocelot would have to take care to remember, when he got back, what it felt like not to have an enemy. It was unlikely he would get such an opportunity again. He smiled to himself. No, it wasn't common, someone recklessly lounging in his arms. Maybe that was another thing he should find a way to change. He found he liked the feeling of another man's back against him. Languid and free of tension, like a cat at rest. A normal cat. Not the one that kept trying to shred him into a fine mist.

*It's almost as if he trusts you.*

His hand released the revolver's hilt as though burned.

If it hadn't been familiar, Adamska might not have noticed that the voice his mind spoke with

was not his.

In broad, board tones, he composed the thought that schizophrenia had chosen a poor moment to finally make an appearance.

*It's not schizophrenia if what you hear is real.*

Adamska was not paranoid. He was the cause of paranoia in other people.

*It's not paranoia if you really are out to get them, is it? And you always are. Even if you don't know it yet.*

Here, Adamska had no enemies or vendettas. Not so much as a target. There was no one to get.

*When was the last time someone came this close to you without paying for it?*

There was nothing wrong with enjoying this. It was nothing personal. Only physical.

*Ah, that's right. No one ever has.*

This was different. That part of himself was safely locked away, to wait for when he needed it. And he didn't need it right now, so it could shut the fuck up and leave the two of them be.

*Which is it going to be? You have more weapons than you know what to do with. It doesn't have to be the gun. You'd hardly have to move at all to snap his neck.*

"Hal." Adamska was aware that his voice was low and strained.

"Mm. Something wrong?"

*Even now, the fool trusts you utterly. If he had any idea what you were thinking of...*

That damned *influence*. He knew it. He'd felt it before. That red-black suggestion coiling, whispering *why not, why not, why not*. He'd heard it. Heeded it.

Except that now, it had a name.

"Get off."

"Huh?"

Shapeless fears were nothing, compared to the ones that had found a shape.

Adamska forced his voice to remain casual. Unconcerned. "I said, get off."

"Oh. Um. Okay."

Still there, maddeningly and impossibly *there*.

"I told you," Adamska said, calmly, evenly, not panicking, "to get off of me. Now."

He didn't have the denial to spare to convince himself that the last word had been completely free of fear.

"Umm..."

And still he stared. Did the fool not understand simple language?

"You're holding me."

Adamska looked down. His arm was around the other man's waist, fastened securely.

As quickly as he could move, he let him go.

Hal git up, sleep slowing his limbs to resemble reluctance. Finally he was out of range, and with the danger of his scent removed Adamska could breathe. He slid his feet under him and rose, trying to shake the feel of him off his skin.

*Ranged weapons are your specialty. You were never any good with a knife. You always got the wrist movements wrong, so that it hacked and tore and wasn't quite fatal. Such an embarrassment.*

"Stay away from me," Adamska muttered, not looking at him, "you understand?"

He looked down at his hands, and saw them moving without his volition. Tiny, constant twitches.

*It's fun, isn't it? Hurting him. And you're quite good at it, already. You don't need any weapons. You don't even have to move. Imagine, what you could do with practice...oh, but you don't have to, do you?*

It had been a mistake. Only a mistake, and he was done. No more.

*Good. Too much at once dulls the sensation. Letting them rest for a while, now and then, is good. Keeps it sharp.*

"Stay away," he said again, too low for anyone to hear.

He would not let him get close enough. He'd keep him out of range. He would be gone anyway, soon enough.

*Yes. He felt it smile. Just like that.*

"Adamska."

His head jerked up. There he was, just a few steps away, face painted with concern.

*Concern? For you? You're the proof of a theorem, to him. A glorified lab rat in a flawed experiment. That's all that saves him. If he saw you as a man, he'd see what kind of man you are...*

"Are you okay?"

A reasonable enough thing to ask. He would feel an obligation to return the things he'd borrowed from another time in working condition.

"I'm fine."

Adamska despised framing such an obvious lie, but Hal would be content with it.

*He cares more for the heap of metal you're backed up against than for you.*

"No." He was *looking* at him again, that same way, like the first day when he'd been held down, like he was some fascinating creature, he would cut him open to see why- "You're not."

He was coming closer.

"Adamska." Looking at him, large eyes, curiosity and concern- "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Stay back.

*He'll die, before it's over. It tilted like the narration of some sick documentary. How will you do it? The gun would be nicely ironic, but using your bare hands has that...personal touch.*

He posed no threat, in any conceivable light. Even if Adamska had told him too much, at this date the information could hardly be of anything more than academic interest. Adamska was under no orders regarding him. They were working toward the same goal. Killing him would be counterproductive.

"Don't lie. You're acting different."

"No I'm not."

*Precisely. It was leaning forward. Eager. There is no reason. No mission, no orders to hide behind. You'll do it for the sheer joy of breaking something that doesn't belong to you.*

His breath was coming too fast.

Head tilted quizzically and hand slightly raised, as though arrested in the motion of reaching out, Hal looked like a kind of odd, white bird. Would his bones be hollow?

"Did something-"

*"I'm. Fine."*

Hal flinched.

All Adamska heard was laughter.

Sighing, he let his shoulders drop.

Because he was the sort of person who always kept playing for two moves after the game was lost, he said, "Just...stay away from me."

He wanted to say more, but he knew from experience that nothing made even the most obedient creature more likely to disobey an order than knowing that it was for his own good.

Hal looked at him, kindness keeping him from voicing the questions in his eyes.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay."

Adamska nodded vaguely, staring down at the cracks in concrete like a spider's web.

It wasn't the voice that frightened him. Over the years Adamska's mind had served him well, keeping him from harm, and he wasn't about to start doubting its soundness now. Plenty of people regularly described voices in their head, though it was likely they were merely personifying conflicting aspects of their personality. In the depths of a forest night, it was common for soldiers to hear any of a wide variety of irrational things, real and distinct as a whisper in the ear. They were all, to the last, nothing but illusion. A shadow. A sound. The inescapable dread that there was *someone there*. Human minds were more than capable of constructing elaborate fabrications from nothing, if they doubted their own perception. It wasn't something Adamska had ever personally experienced. But it happened. It had no power except for what you gave it. They were only fears and words, no matter what they said, and words had no power. All you had to do was ignore them.

The frightening thing was that there was a part of him that wanted to listen.

---

Notes:

-This one ended up way too long, so I've split it into more manageable chunks. Part 2 is forthcoming.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/19/>



# chapter 20

## Stray by Dahne

They went to feed the dogs in silence. Adamska ignored Hal as best he could. The man remained blessedly quiet, but the aura of hurt bewilderment he radiated made Adamska's fists clench. Salt in a wound, or blood under a shark's nose. At any rate, an irritant.

*Poor thing*, it simpered mockingly. *Why don't you put him out of his misery?*

He'd had plenty of opportunity to kill him. Sometimes even something qualifying as an excuse. And he hadn't.

*Do you know why?*

Because there was no reason to.

*Because killing him now would be a mercy. You've always prided yourself on not having a shred of that.*

Adamska was not, as it might appear to the novice's eye, an undiscerning killer. He'd never shot a man who wasn't already part of the game. They'd known the rules when they got into it. That they'd lost was nobody's fault but their own, and luck's. Shooting an unarmed man was one thing. Shooting a man who only knew which end of the gun fired because it was the one people pointed at him was another. There was no sport in it.

He knew the thought was a mistake as soon as it formed.

It echoed off the sides of his skull and came back to him, vibrating shades of volume and timbre that built to deafening, twisting the influence and the memory into vertigo so that they became one voice.

*To me, this isn't torture. It's a sport.*

Adamska experienced a sincere and fervent desire to retch.

Hal was avoiding him. As much as one could, in a domain bordered by teeming animals. It was more than he would have expected. Avoiding eye contact. Putting as much distance between them as was possible, without looking too much like that was what he was trying to do. And he drew into himself in a way that Adamska couldn't remember ever seeing before, but that seemed somehow worn with habit.

It was, like a teaspoonful of cyanide, not much.

The cold helped. Adamska found that, if he was careful, he could keep his mind blank. Clean as snow.

Before the pair of dogs rolled into it, snapping and growling at each other.

Damn it. The world went out of its way to ruin his metaphors.

"Amuro! Asuka!" Hal cried, with something like relief at having somewhere to turn his attention, and waded in to separate them.

Dogs. They fought on the flimsiest of pretenses, at any time. One moment they were trotting next to each other, the next they were trying to sink their teeth into the other's throat. And the rest would follow along, stupid animals that they were. In compact enough conditions, a fight could progress in less than a minute from duel to brawl to Ragnarok. Once it was over, the participants might never turn so much as a sidelong glance to each other again. Once some esoteric point had been proved, with fangs and claws and whole-bodied lunges. And here was one man, trying to stop it by standing in the middle.

He would rather face them than Adamska.

*You told him to stay back. For his own good. Aren't you happy to have him following orders? At this rate, someday he might make an amusing pet. Perhaps you could train him to lick your hand.*

Or he could lick his, a swift swipe across the palm, and then a nip at the sensitive skin at his wrist, drinking in the chorus of his whispered name ascending, watching his fingers flex helplessly, trail his lips up his arm like tracks melted into snow and at his shoulder pause to tease, taking his time until the needy whimper made him smile and then taking his-

...where had *that* come from?

Whatever. It wasn't important.

The dogs were taking the barrier in their midst in stride. They snapped and lunged at each other over and around him, seeming to consider Hal a topographical feature of some strategic importance. For the man's own part, he was discovering one of the laws; the amount of force required to stop a fight is exponential to the force needed to start it. Also that, when pitted directly against two enraged creatures equipped with the arsenal nature so generously handed out to quadrupeds, opposable thumbs didn't feel like such a great advantage.

A particularly vicious pop of closing jaws made Adamska wince. A few inches to the left and Hal would have half-lost the advantage of having ears.

Sensing that the date of armistice was penciled in for "when we're good and ready," Adamska stepped between the combatants. In one swift motion, though not quite swift enough to avoid taking a few bites for his trouble, he grabbed the bitch by the midsection and hoisted her to hang a foot above the ground.

Abruptly bereft of an adversary, she watched with upside-down interest while it slowly dawned on the other that the only hand in range to bite was the one that fed him.

With little more than that, diplomacy was restored.

As he leaned over to set the dog down, Adamska felt more than heard something fall into the snow.

Instinctively his hand went to where once had been a full holster and was now an empty pocket. Moving like lightning, he snatched up the robot figurine and jammed it back into hiding.

*You haven't told him about it. Why?*

It was nothing important. A memento, no more. It had nothing to do with this life.

"I don't know what got into them," Hal said, slapping at the snow that clung to his clothing.

*If it's not important, why hide it from him?*

Adamska hated being asked questions with predetermined answers.

"They're dogs," Adamska said, straightening and observing that his action had not been noticed. "Dogs fight."

*He would want to know. It was how you got here, after all. It might hold the secret to getting you back.*

"Thanks for helping me out."

*Aah. That's it, isn't it? You don't want him to know just how close to his goal he might be. In fact, you have a feeling that if you used it, right now, you would go back. To the very moment you left. Granin's office. You remember. And none of this would have ever happened.*

He didn't know that.

*No matter. Its smugness infuriated him. You won't try it. Why would you take it upon yourself to spare another pain?*

"It's a good thing I did," Adamska muttered. "You nearly lost an ear."

He had rather cute ears. It would be a shame for Adamska never to get the chance to trace the tip of his tongue behind one and worry at the lobe with his teeth, blow lightly and watch him shiver...  
...the hell?

Shaking off weird thoughts, he confirmed that the dogs were indeed behaving as though they had never showed any interest in testing the other's edibility and followed Hal into the storage shed.

Was he attracted to the man? If so, he was at a loss to see why. Oh, he was cute enough, yes, but he'd had better, and never been afflicted with this particular...crawling sensation. Not in the sense that one's skin crawled, but more of a prickle beneath it. The beginnings of a shiver that never broke.

Obviously. It was cold out here. Especially if you were in a shed that appeared to be held together mostly by habit, crouching by a portable stove and filling a bucket with chunks of seared meat. Probably moose.

But no. It wasn't the same as cold. Hell if he didn't know what that felt like. Not a longing for warmth in general but longing for a particular warmth, to see what it was like if those skilled hands were set to something not mechanical but ideally tactile...

"You all right?"

Adamska's attention came back with a nearly audible snap to Hal standing a few steps away, a full bucket dangling from his hands. He gave his head a hard shake and tried to recall what had been occupying it for the past minutes. It disturbed him that he couldn't.

"It's-"

""-nothing.' I know." And Hal grinned at him.

Then he turned, lugging the bucket, and threw open the door, his entirely superfluous injunctions to "Come and get it!" buried underneath the din of ecstatic barking. Dogs, again. They acted as though something as prosaic as food were such a miracle it was hardly to be believed.

Adamska followed, hopping lightly over the foot-wide gap that separated the shed's rough plank floor from the ground. It had tripped him up, in the first days, once leaving him nearly sprawled on his knees, Hal trying not to laugh at him as he swore.

The impact of landing made something fly at the edge of his vision. He followed it with his eyes, and swore in the same words and a lower voice at the bright drops of red on the snow.

There was the clang of the bucket being set down, a pause, and rapid, muffled footsteps.

"Hey!" Hal was beside him. "You're hurt."

"It's n- a scratch," said Adamska, shaking him off.

Too late – his arm was already taken in a firm, businesslike grip. Hal made disapproving noises as his maneuvered the rents in the sleeve to survey the damage. "This is pretty bad."

"Dog bite," said Adamska, pulling his arm back and growling in dismay when Hal followed it. "I'll live."

"Come on." He recognized that tone. It was the one that meant that he might as well just go along with it. He nodded grudgingly, and Hal motioned him toward the house.

Adamska walked straight ahead and tried not to think.

*You'll murder him the first chance you get,* it murmured in his ear, obscene parody of seduction. *For no reason other than the pleasure of watching him die.*

There had been plenty of chances.

*Yes, and you came so close to taking them...* it reminded him with delight. *But no. You're going to wait. It's not quite right, yet. The opportunity is not quite perfect. You want him to trust you. Like you.*

So what if he did?

*You want to see the look in those sweet, gentle eyes turn from curiosity to confusion to fear. You want to know what it feels like to see him understand that any pathetic, grubby speck of humanity he ever saw in you was a lie. That he ever saw it at all only proves what a magnificent liar you are. Indeed, you almost fell for it yourself. He wants to help you, he said it. When all you want is for him to know how stupid he was when he dies.*

What he thought couldn't matter less to Adamska. Either way. It was superfluous. As soon as he left, neither of them would so much as dream of the other again.

*But some people just don't learn, do they? You have to grind it into them. He could feel it. The lascivious way it licked its lips. He'll know, by the time you're done. And you won't be done for a long, long time. You're nothing if not thorough.*

"It must be pretty bad," Hal said, looking over his shoulder as he opened the door. His brow creased with worry. "You're pale."

Adamska flexed his fingers and said nothing.

Hal gave him a searching look, and said only, "Come on."

By the threshold Adamska paused a moment, letting himself acclimate to the shift in temperature. Madness could not stand up to reason. If he applied logic, it was obvious that everything he heard was a blatant lie designed to confuse him. That so much as thinking of...the things it suggested caused him distress at all was proof enough. No true sadist faced any inner conflict where pain was involved.

*Do you remember the first time you saw a corpse? You were sick, on your knees on the ground. You told the others it was the smell, but still you could see in their eyes that to them you were a child. Transcendence of the base instincts takes time and discipline. When you have him in your arms, slick with blood and sweat and reeking of fear, the animal will recoil, but the man will rise above petty weakness and see the beauty in his agony.*

Adamska thought of him sweating but not from pain, clutching hands and fingers digging into his shoulder blades, rasping rhythmic gasps, face flushed, eyes shut, lips parted...

Adamska blinked.

This was getting very strange.

As Hal hunted through a cupboard, fending off assistance from the dog called Motoko, Adamska decided that this new data called for further examination, before it got out of hand.

Nameless frustration curled low in his belly. He gave it a metaphorical kick, but all it did was curl up tighter and make itself comfortable. And still he didn't know why. That was always the worst, the not knowing. If he knew where it came from he could rip it out by the roots.

The most obvious conclusion to draw, ludicrous as it might be, was sexual attraction.

Silently thanking the dog for providing him with a few seconds of cover, Adamska gave it a try.

He allowed his mind to construct an opportune moment. Imagined shoving him up against the wall, like before, but this time not backing down like a coward. Crushing his lips against his mouth to keep him quiet. Letting go with one hand – not much he could do with only one arm free, if it even occurred to the idiot to struggle – and shoving down the front of his pants. Grabbing him, and moving, until hormones and friction battered down his sensibilities and he twitched and groaned like he wanted him. Snarling silently, he broke off in disgust. The vision left him angry and unsatisfied.

"Aha! Here we go." Hal's head and arms reappeared from inside the cupboard. He stood up, flourishing a bottle colored an ominously medical brown in one hand. "Give me your arm."

Adamska wondered fleetingly why the hell he'd bothered to say anything if he was just going to

grab it. "I can do it myself," he said, watching Hal roll up the sleeve.

"Hold still," he said nonchalantly. Adamska recognized it as a warning a second too late.

Involuntarily he hissed in pain. Whatever was in that bottle, the shit *stung*.

"Sorry," Hal said, looking genuinely contrite. "But it's better than dealing with an infection." He grabbed a towel from the counter.

Unwilling to get caught unawares twice, Adamska braced himself.

He nearly flinched in surprise when the hands dabbing at the mess of blood and disinfectant were deft and gentle. He'd almost forgotten. This was not a person who enjoyed inflicting pain.

*Not like you.*

All right, he'd set himself up for that one.

Hal clicked his tongue sympathetically, peering at the cleaned wound. "She got you pretty good."

"Goddamn bitch," muttered Adamska, with little enthusiasm. The dog barked happily, as if familiar with the appellation.

"She's sweet, once you get to know her."

*You see? He can put faith in anyone, no matter how little it might be deserved. You're nothing special. All it means is that it will be easier for you. And taking prey alive is usually such a chore. He'll walk right into your hand. How long will it be, do you think, before he realizes you're serious? Before he starts to get scared? Such a lovely crescendo, once they understand that it is going to happen, and there is nothing they can do about it. The absolute helplessness...and, of course, of what value is anything if you don't bleed it to the last drop?*

By will alone, Adamska kept himself motionless. Hal had pulled a box out from somewhere and was digging through, murmuring to himself under his breath.

He would not hurt him. He needed him. He needed him to get home.

*Certainly. You will have to be patient, until everything is complete. His usefulness will come to an end, soon. How long will you let him outlive it?*

"Ah, here we go." He pulled out a roll of bandages and took Adamska by the wrist.

*How long, do you think, before the last speck of hope dies? Before he stops believing, with that foolish corner of the heart that can't help but believe, that there must be some kind of mistake? Before he understands that this is what you have been waiting for, longing for, from the moment you met him?*

Motionless. There was nothing wrong. Let him see nothing.

If, at this moment, he asked...

*You planned on shooting him in the stomach, when he made you angry.*

But he hadn't.

*Do you know why?*

Beginning at his wrist, Hal wrapped the bandage tightly up his arm.

"You're good at this," Adamska observed. His voice sounded strange and distant.

"I've had practice," said Hal, the corners of his lips curving slightly.

*It's because gutshot wounds are a slow, horrible way to die. You've seen it.*

Stop it.

*It can take hours.*

He was so close.

*Days.*

Adamska could not remember how to blink.

*But it would only be minutes until he was begging you to end it. Hands clutching to hold in*

*the blood or the pain - you know how people can never help but try - face pale and wracked with agony, trembling lips, "Please, Adamska, please—"*

"Shut up," Adamska hissed. "Shut up, shut up, *SHUT UP!*"

"I didn't say anything." His eyes were clear and mild.

And all at once he understood.

"It's you," he said.

Hal regarded him with owlish incomprehension. "Huh?"

Yes. That had to be it. He could help him, whether he wanted or not.

"There is something special about you," Adamska said.

The click of things falling into place was like music. Adamska felt as though his skin were gleaming with potential. He understood, he had it, and it was all his.

"Er...thanks?"

Adamska was amused that, hurried though he was, Hal still tied the bandage off neatly before he pulled away. Tried to. Adamska's hand caught his wrist before he could withdraw.

"What are you looking so nervous for?" he said, leaning forward, just enough to stir the edges of the corona of his heat and scent.

"You told me to stay away," Hal said blankly.

"I was wrong," Adamska told him, with a shock of joy at being able to say it. "Perfectly, absolutely, and exactly wrong."

All this time, his mind had been trying to tell him.

The secret of strategy is to find the opposite of what the enemy wants, and do it.

There is such thing as a perfect opposite to giving someone pain.

"I don't understand."

"You don't need to."

There it was. That stubborn spark of determination in those gray eyes. Adamska couldn't help but smile. He understood wanting to know everything.

He revised it to, "You will."

Hal took one step away, lurching as his back struck the corner where the counters met. Adamska followed at a leisurely pace. Cornered though he was, there was still room to run. If he had been anyone else, there might have been the possibility. And yes, there was fear. Who could blame him? Adamska had done his fair share to earn it. But, there also- curiosity.

Adamska knew which one would win.

"For now, all that you need to know," he said, "is that you are stronger than it."

Hal leaned back, steady, though unsure. "Than- what?"

Adamska faltered.

Having felt- this, whatever it was, even diluted by fear and misunderstanding and distance, this warmth, like the half-grasped memory of a thing he hadn't known he had been searching for...

He didn't know if he could bear to block it out with a lie.

The truth was, as it was so often, not an option. Even someone capable of forgiving anything can have trouble when it comes down to specifics.

In the corner of his eye, he sensed white and gray motion; a dog, settling back to watch them benignly.

His grip on the slender wrist tightened, to remind him of solid things.

The middle ground. Putting voice to fears was dangerous, almost so much as hopes.

"There has...been something, lately," Adamska said awkwardly, fumbling with the syllables as

though they had been greased. "In my- in my head."

"What kind of something?"

With bitter humor, Adamska noted that curiosity had now gotten the upper hand.

Taking care to control his breathing, he chose his words. A single misstep was more than he could afford.

"Do you remember, saying that you didn't know what effect having him and- having more than one of me in the same time period might cause?"

"Yeah." That shy, self-deprecating smile. "I still don't."

"You mentioned..." Breathe. The hand was solid. Warm, and real. "That the two minds might interact."

Absorb.

"Well, yeah," said Hal, appearing to be performing calculations in his head, where there was less danger that they would come out to 'ambivalence,' "it would make sense for them to sort of bleed into each other, though it would depend on..."

His ears, mouth, and brain arrived at the rendezvous point simultaneously.

"Oh, god..." he breathed. "Oh, *Adamska*..."

"No, no." He shook his head in disapproval. Even now he could feel it, crouched low, a stain on the lowest levels of a pristine mind...no. He was stronger than it. "It's not important. It's gone. You're here. And you..."

He felt himself break into a brilliant smile. The answers always seemed so *simple*, once you had them. Why hadn't he seen it before?

"You're the key. It all comes back to you. You're what I need."

The eyes behind glass, round and puzzled and not afraid. "Need for what?"

"No." The smile twisted into a wicked smirk. He leaned forward, releasing Hal's hand so that his arms could rest on the counter to either side. No way out, now, but through him. Not that he would want one. "*Need*."

How fortunate, that he was the target it chose, through a simple dearth of alternatives. This was certainly not going to be a chore.

"I...don't understand." Meaning that he did, and was afraid that he was missing something. Paranoia didn't suit him.

"Then let me show you." Adamska's voice grew lower, and more focused. He hardly recognized it. "As you did for me, once. Tell me if I have it right. Like...this?"

Closer. Slowly. Let him know what to expect. Give him time to properly anticipate.

Their lips met with no sound, but a soft, drawn-out sigh.

Yes.

Every nerve and moment of that strange, unfathomable attention belonged to him.

Incredible. This tension. This potential of energy, wound taut in his stomach – yes, his hands were free now to wander wherever they cared to – waiting for skill to coax it to life, awakened by his touch. No short-lived lusts, thoughtless and soon forgotten. The most exquisite instrument longed for an equally devoted player. The depths of passion this man possessed! In this world, anything worth having was hidden. Adamska knew now he'd caught only glimpses of the threshold. How rewarding, to be the man who explored it in full, inch by inch... A simple brush of lips, and already Adamska's body was crying out for more. His tongue stroked the seal of the other man's lips, and they parted in gasp and invitation. Yes. Like that. Holding back, teasing, until he rose to him in answer. Every sensation worked to a fever pitch before progressing to the next. He would give freely, all that he

could, but the right to take it must be earned. Adamska's body was taut with the unbearable delicacy of it, the perfectly balanced paradox of the swiftly mounting urgency of his need and the knowledge that every second must be sounded and sung to its full potential, its intricacies savored in full as the both of them were surrounded in air that keened with sweet tension.

Reloading in battle was nothing.

Kissing this man was an art.

Adamska looked forward to being counted among its masters.

When they broke, Hal's head dropped, to press his forehead to Adamska's shoulder.

"...wow," he summarized.

"You like?" Adamska inquired innocently, one hand idly stroking his back.

It was nice, sometimes, to be able to ask a question in the firm certainty that you already knew the answer.

The murmur of emphatic confirmation was deeply satisfying.

"But..."

A specter of dread slipped through Adamska's mind.

"But what?"

"This can't possibly be happening."

Adamska snorted. Was that all?

"Things that can't possibly happen," he informed him, "happen all the time."

Hal laughed quietly, his breath puffing against Adamska's chest. "You know," he said, "it wasn't all that long ago that I was terrified of you." Sighing contentment, he leaned into the embrace. "Things change fast."

"You're mine," Adamska purred, bending his head so that his lips nearly touched the strands of mingled gray and brown that fell across his ear. "That will never change." And he trailed down to Hal's neck to impart some serious kissing.

Adamska's hands, having similar ideas, slid down. They gave an experimental squeeze to an ass that was, as it turned out, eminently squeezable. This turned out to be absorbing enough that it took him some time to notice that something felt off.

The body in his arms – the slender, lovely body – had gone stiff.

Adamska frowned. A misstep, then. Ah, well. That would have to wait. Directing his hands to turn their attention to, say, the hips instead, he resumed tending to the neck with doubled efforts.

"Don't," Hal murmured. "No. Stop."

Adamska's hands dropped. Confused, he pulled away, searching Hal's face. While he was fairly used to hearing, in this context, the words, 'don't,' 'no,' and 'stop,' they were usually arranged so as to convey precisely the opposite sentiment.

Hal wouldn't meet his eyes.

"Tell me what you don't like," he offered. "I'll do something else."

"...s not that..." His voice was barely audible.

"Then..." It was possible. He had to ask. "Physically, I am repulsive to you?"

"No!"

The vehemence salved his pride, slightly.

"It's...it's just..." He was backing away what little he could, as if there were something vile between them.

The obvious and unwarranted distress bothered Adamska. He reached out to touch his arm.

The response at the moment of contact was minute, and immediately suppressed. Some might not



have noticed at all. But he had good senses.

"You flinched," he accused, sick with dawning horror, stumbling back in an arrhythmic burst. "You *flinched!*"

"Adamska, I-" His eyes came up.

Fear.

Revulsion.

Pity.

Adamska's back struck the wall.

"I won," he rallied desperately, like a man clutching at ice while the current pulled him under, knowing he was pathetic and hating it, knowing and hating all of it, "I beat him, don't you understand? There's nothing to be afraid of. It's over."

*It's not over yet.*

Hal moved toward him. Small steps. He was forcing himself. "I..."

People looked at Volgin that way.

*It's never over.*

"No," he moaned, sinking, hands clutching his head, "no no no no no..."

"Adamska-"

*Now you understand,* it crowed. It was back and strong, *strong*, deafening in his ears his head and the blood rushing no no no. *You see why we are what we are. We're a product of our environment. Who could expect you to be anything but a monstrosity? But so is everyone. We are necessary. We are nothing but the refinement in technique of a universal urge.* Grinding, mocking, laughing at him taunting pulling red-black of its vertigo. *You see, in his own sweet and gentle way, he wants to hurt you too.*

"Adamska." Hal was kneeling by him. When had he gotten so close? He hadn't seen him move. "Hey. It's all right." Talking like to an animal, a wolf. One leg in the trap half gnawed through, starting in on the bone. "C'mon. Stand up."

Stand. He could do that. Easy. Let him guide. Stand.

Standing, Hal sighed, and buried a hand in his hair.

"Look..." he said, "I'm sorry. I was surprised, that's all. It's okay now. See?"

He descended, jerking like an ill-made puppet, and kissed him.

Trembling, yes, that was what those movements were, the tiny minute motions not felt but seen. Adamska's hands spasmed and clutched and false-started up to the other man's chest. Fisted around handfuls of fabric.

Loosened.

Relaxed, flattened.

Shoved.

There was an instant of wide eyes in close perspective. Then the rush of breath as his back struck the counter's edge. And for a moment the pain in his eyes drove off the rest.

Control. That was all.

"I don't need your charity."

He would fight on his own. He'd done it before. Always. All he needed was control.

Hal looked at him, with those insufferable innocent eyes.

"Adam-"

"Save it." With one curt gesture he cut him off, and turned away.

No more weakness.

---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/20/>

# chapter 21

**Stray** by Dahne

*Failure can change the nature of a man.*

An amateur would have said that the machine was nearly complete.

An expert, had there been any in their particular field, would have disagreed. There was still much to be done. Calibrations to be taken, measurements to be confirmed, pieces to be attached and mistakes to be removed, parts essential but easily forgotten to be remembered and integrated, connections to be made, loose ends to be soldered, circuitry to be installed, conduits to be routed, wires to be interfaced, outputs to be calculated, likelihood of success to be projected and ignored.

In short; the machine was nearly complete.

Otacon didn't know how to feel. The scope of human life was such that nearly every possible subtype of interaction between two people had been cataloged, in one form or another. There was almost always something to go by. He'd tried all through the morning, and he couldn't think of any precedent for this.

This morning, he hadn't had much else to think about. Ever since the...kiss that had made him so angry, Adamska had fallen completely silent. Otacon might not have been the most perceptive of people when it came to subtle cues, but a blind harp seal could have picked up that the boy wanted to be left alone.

Otacon wasn't so sure about himself. Usually the period near the end of a project was straightforward. Elation at seeing his creation finally come to life, mixed with, if it was a professional assignment, nervous hope that no one would notice any of the more personal touches. That, say, if introduced to a certain simple-to-make but fairly esoteric compound, the corrosive agent contained in that new kind of Nikita missile would decay upon impact into harmless orange goo. (Not that it would ever matter. They were for use as sabotage against tanks, fighter planes, and ordnance, not a weapon against human beings, though they had a similarly nasty effect on both. People just had more decency than that. Right?) And this was one of his most ambitious projects to date. More so even than REX. New tanks were constantly developed, but no one had ever created a real, working time machine before. No one had ever even gotten close. And he had nearly, and almost single-handedly, done it.

And yet, if there were butterflies of anticipation in his stomach, they had been swallowed by the fat iguana of dread.

It was so stupid. How could it hurt to lose something you didn't have?

Indulging himself, just for a second, he snuck a glance over his shoulder at the boy. The blond head was bent and the eyes were narrowed, focused on the pattern of tiny bolts he was fastening into place. Everything where it belonged. Otacon didn't need to worry about being caught looking; the boy was oblivious to anything around him, including the cat who was absorbed, in turn, in headbutting him in the small of the back.

As Otacon watched, she gave up on this and stalked around her target in circles. She settled for leaping at him and, in her dialect's form of a greeting, biting him hard on the hand.

When he continued to fail to notice her presence, other than as a small weight to compensate for in his movements, she gave up on him altogether and stalked over to Otacon instead.

Absently, he scratched her head with one hand while the other tended to a bank of diodes, and

both eyes watched Adamska.

It had been hitting him in waves all day. Here came another.

He had kissed this boy. He had kissed Ocelot. Ocelot had kissed *him*. Ocelot had held him as he slept, with no vodka or temporary insanity or anything as an excuse this time, Ocelot's fingers had stroked his back, Ocelot's hands had- oh god, Ocelot's *hands had been on his ass*, Ocelot's lips had been by his ear and Ocelot had whispered into it "you're mine," and for a second he had been-

When it came to religion, Otacon considered himself a member of the informal agnostic sect that operated under the doctrine, "Hell if I know." The doors of the cathedral in his heart were so coated with theses that attempting to open them would be a condemnation to death by papercut. But there are times when everyone, regardless of faith, has to pray. For them, there is a litany. Otacon said it now.

*Ohgodhogodohgodohgodohgod.*

But he hadn't been complaining, had he? Not until the end, when he finally realized. Well, of course not. When somebody like that starts talking about wanting you, you don't ask questions, other than what it was you did to make the universe suddenly start being bizarre and inexplicable in your favor. No good came of kicking a gift horse in the mouth, or however the saying went. You grab for it until reality kicks you.

But he had stopped, hadn't he? When he said to. If it had been- oh god- if it had been the real Ocelot, he never would have done that. If anything, it was probably what he liked to hear.

There were so many things wrong with all of it that Otacon couldn't see where they ever ended.

If there was anything Otacon knew, it was that he was clueless. When someone put a sign in his path, it was in the firm knowledge that he would miss it. Hints thrown with the force of a hurled brick sailed right past his head. A thousand years in Hell would be no trial for him, as it would take him until the end of the first five hundred to start wondering why everyone looked so unhappy all the time.

When he looked at Adamska, even he knew.

The boy was desperately in need of love. And Otacon couldn't bring himself to give it to him.

"Don't look at me like that."

Otacon's vertebrae made a game attempt at jumping out through his skin. Tanya, probably used to sudden movements being accompanied by projectiles, sprinted hissing into the shadows.

"How do you *do* that?" Otacon said, trying to get his heartrate back down to something less suitable for a terrified gerbil.

"Oh, did I forget to tell you?" Adamska continued fixing bolts into place. "I can see in seven directions."

Otacon stared.

Finally Adamska looked at him, exasperated and- amused, actually. "I heard you stop moving," he explained patiently. "You only do that when you're looking at me."

"Oh."

Abruptly, Adamska made a noise that sounded strangely like a laugh. "God, did you believe me?"

"Of course not!" said Otacon, affronted. "Er, well, maybe for a second..."

Definitely laughing. "You're-"

He cut himself off with a look that, for all its transience, might have been of pain.

"Never mind." He shifted his grip on his wrench. "Just stop looking at me like that."

"Like what?" Otacon bit down on the last syllable, horrified. In the eternally recurring race, his mouth had handily defeated his brain yet again.

"Like..." Even when they held no rancor, those eyes hit like a fist. "...that," he sighed. "Like you

think I'm some sort of dangerous child who can't be trusted not to throw a tantrum if he has to deal with something unpleasant."

'Unpleasant.' Looked like the Bureau for the Award of Largest Understatement could adjourn early this year.

"Earlier," Adamska said, "there was a temporary lapse in control." His voice was free of its usual hints and catches and interestingly curved places, flat as featureless steel. "It happens. It has nothing to do with you."

And returned his attention to his work, as if that was the end of it.

A fluke. Yeah. The kind with the shadow of a whale underneath it.

Otacon knew something about armor.

The thicker the steel, the weaker the thing it hides.

The boy was kinetic. Did he even realize, how much the way he moved said about him? As if a mind that moved that fast had to exist as pure energy. As if his thoughts were rerouted directly to his fingertips. He could steal somebody's heart out of his chest without leaving a mark.

*Bad metaphor, Hal.*

Eyes, voice, hands.

The steel on each of them was very thick indeed.

Right now. If he wanted to do it, it would be now.

It wouldn't take much. It would be easy. A few words, an innocent gesture, a touch. He could feel it, like tonguing a sore spot on the inside of his lip. The boy was walking on a razor's edge, cutting him deeper each step. A little pressure, just a touch, and all that brilliant, dangerous energy would turn inwards, rip itself apart... And the danger would be gone. It would all be over. So easy. No more Ocelot. Everything he had ever done would be unraveled, in one moment. This horrible, unbearable suspension and the worse hope would be gone. Yes, there would be the old problem, the old ~~then-he-wouldn't-be-there-to-be-him-and-none-of-it-would-ever-happen-including-the-thing-that-made-it-never-happen~~, but Otacon had gotten tired of that paradox weeks ago. So easy, and it would all be over. All it would take was a push.

No.

There were few things that Otacon could let himself think of as 'sacred' without feeling vaguely embarrassed. Some things couldn't be forgiven or justified or excused. Torture was on the list, one step below violating someone's mind.

Part of curiosity was wanting to know what beautiful things looked like when they were broken.

What a twisted godsend, that he knew so well what happened when curiosity got its way over common sense. Or common decency. If temptation was a chainsaw, that knowledge was the steel spike in the redwood. There was no way to stop from asking "why not?" The trick was being able to listen to the answer.

When Otacon paused to pick up another handful of screws, he noticed it. The room had been quiet for some time now, besides an irregular shuffling noise.

"Now you're looking at me," he said without thinking.

"Am not," said Adamska, in the automatic way that meant he had been.

"What is it?"

"I..."

Something about the way he said, the bare tracteries of hesitation so foreign to his voice, made Otacon's heart constrict painfully in hope, or fear. Same thing. Out of courtesy, he pretended not to pay attention, while listening as hard as it was possible to without rupturing something.

"...want to know something."

Must have been his imagination.

"Sure. What?"

"This 'Outer Heaven.'" The words were simmered in scorn and served with a light sauce of derision.

"What about it?" Otacon asked.

"Why didn't he die there?"

Curiosity about the past. That he could handle.

"To be honest," Otacon said, "no one's really sure how he made it out. Let alone how he gathered the resources to try the same scheme again. In fact, nothing about Zanzibar Land is all that clear. I thought it was just that the government was doing its usual cover-ups, but even Snake acts like he hardly knows what went on, and he was there. The nanomachines he was wired with were still prototypes in those days, so my guess is they created some sort of interference with the storage and creation of long-term memory. I've tried to see if I can fill in the gaps, going by what he's told me, but according to the records there's never been anybody in FOXHOUND with the codename 'Poison Hamster,' and there's-

"No," Adamska interrupted. "Not Big Boss. The other one."

Otacon glanced up, the "Who?" on his lips.

When he saw the look on Adamska's face, staring at the machine as if he could melt the steel with his eyes, he no longer needed to ask.

"He wasn't there," Otacon said, taking diplomatic care to try not to sound careful.

He always forgot how quickly Adamska could move until he did it, even if it was just a jerk of his neck. "What?"

"Oce- I mean, Revol- that is, he- I mean, the..."

"Say it," Adamska ordered. He stared straight ahead, eyes firm and stoic. His wrench flew from hand to hand, light glinting off of it like lightning on each pass.

Otacon took a long, controlled breath. "Revolver Ocelot," he said, feeling like a kid testing how many times he could say 'Bloody Mary' before the mirror said something back, "didn't join FOXHOUND until after Big Boss died."

"That makes no sense," Adamska said flatly.

"Why?" Considering how obviously he idolized the man, it did seem a bit odd that he wouldn't have pursued him, but Otacon could think of a lot of things about him that were odder. "Were you going to follow him?"

"I did."

The flintlock focus in the boy's eyes softened. The wrench returned to his right hand and stayed, tossed rhythmically into the air, then joined by a bolt, describing slow, precise loops in each other's orbit.

"I saw him among his comrades, when he went back. Watched him receive his rank. 'Big Boss.' Even a title like that had its own kind of dignity, when he wore it. Of course, I didn't know it then. I was outside. Couldn't hear anything. Only see. I didn't have to listen. I know what the speeches sound like. The same in any language, the same ones giving them. Fat men in dark suits."

The subtle invective curled in the few words was muted and profound, and ran deep as still water. It spoke of a loathing lovingly handcrafted over years.

"I saw him in the middle of all of them, the smiles that could be real because they hadn't been there. Right in front of him, was one man who'd had a hand in building it all. He knew that as well as I

did.

"He'd lost his weapons, all but one. The revolver. He'd been in the field too long not to keep it with him, and loaded. One is enough, though there were three, to begin with. One is at the bottom of the lake by Rokovoj Bereg. One went to him. One is with you.

"I saw him through glass, darkly, and how their petty lies fell into silhouette against him. Watched him watch them, and endure.

"I had thought surviving Volgin to be impressive.

"I saw how clearly he knew that he had been their pawn. And I saw how much more he was worth than any king."

The spinning glints of metal pulled up, drifting into ever longer, widening arcs.

"Already, I knew that I couldn't afford to approach him closely. They would keep an eye on his trail for a while yet. But at that moment, watching his back as he walked away, I vowed that I would not face him again until I was his equal."

For a moment that must have felt longer than it was, there was no sound but the soft, steady impact of metal against the boy's palm.

He said to himself, "I wonder when I stopped hating him."

He had forgotten that he wasn't alone. Otacon, unwilling to break the illusion, stayed quiet.

"Killing him was never part of the plan, though at first I wanted to. When we fought for the first time, because of an accident...no. Because I made a mistake, he won. As an added insult, he left me alive. For that more than anything, I hated him."

A spanner joined the wrench and bolt. Adamska paid it no attention.

"We had a real battle, when he came back. When it really began. Even in the middle of it I didn't understand." The corner of his mouth twisted. "He shot a hornet's nest down on my head. I hated him for that."

Otacon pulled his voice out of hiding. "Because it was a dirty trick?"

"Because I hadn't thought of it first. Even that fight didn't get a proper conclusion. The Pain made sure of that. I'll never know what the hell that was supposed to accomplish. It took me a minute after they cleared to realize he'd jumped into the god-damned ravine. I did the basic field test, to check for depth, see if he might have survived."

"What's that?"

"Kicked a rock into it."

"Oh."

"While I was standing there, waiting, I had a...strange thought. He would live through it, and he would make it out. It wouldn't matter that it was impossible. I had a feeling: that it might have been my mission to keep him alive long enough to complete his, but whatever was protecting him, it was something...greater than me."

The veiled awe in his tone suggested it was the first time he had ever imagined such a thing might exist.

"If there were such thing as destiny, he would be the kind of man to have one. When he died, if he died, it would be for a reason."

The boy's voice had fallen into parallel with the movement of his hand, as though animated by a strand of the same energy.

"I won't let it happen this time. Somewhere, there was a mistake. I'll get the truth from him. He owes me that much. A soldier's paradise...hah. He would thrive, in a place like that, but it would never occur to him to create one. That's civilian thinking. A civilian can wonder what happens to the

soldiers when the war is over. A true soldier knows that the war is never over. And he..."

Adamska's voice grew softer. Reverent.

"...was a true soldier.

"He survived the fall. Along with many things no one should have been able to survive."

On its downward slope, the bolt arced too far to the right. Without looking, Adamska's hand darted to the side to grab it and pull it back into the pattern.

"And his eye. Do you have any idea what are the odds, that a bullet would pass by at the perfect angle to destroy it without killing him, or causing any other damage at all? If I was aiming intentionally, I might get it three times out of five. Luck bends around him. More than that. He- made it seem as though it all meant something. Anything that happened to him. Even then, especially then, even reeking like nothing but blood and ozone and doing nothing but staying alive."

The objects above his hand were moving faster. The trajectories were slightly erratic. His eyes shone glassily, like a cat's in oncoming headlights.

"It was a privilege to be there, a joy to watch, he was above all of it to begin with and now nothing could touch him, everything taken away so that all he had left was what he was and I could see it just to watch it was beautiful-"

There was a sound like the apocalypse of a microcosm.

Two of the spinning objects had collided. Something went flying off into the shadows, a silver glint.

Tanya, who lived under the permanent assumption that anything mobile was either a toy or something to kill, darted after it.

As though he had been awoken, Adamska lurched swearing to his feet and went after Tanya.

Otacon stared at the floor and listened to himself think.

He had no idea what the boy had been talking about. Something had given his voice that frantic cast, made his eyes gleam like a hyena's. With every passing second, Otacon was more sure he didn't want to know.

Adamska was kneeling motionless behind a long, low crate. Otacon couldn't for the life of him remember what was in it. One of these days, when he had more time, he'd have to go through all the old junk out here and see if there was anything worth salvaging, or at least breaking down for-

Why wasn't he moving?

The boy was hardly ever truly still. There was too much life and energy in him to hold in stasis. Usually the movement was so small the only way to notice it was if it stopped.

"Adamska?"

No answer.

Suppressing a slosh made of equal parts irritation and foreboding, Otacon got up and crossed the room. Funny, that there were no dogs around. Usually at least one was there all the time. As if to keep an eye on them.

"Adamska?"

His was staring at something, his back half bent. It might have been the lighting that made his face look pale.

The foreboding gave a sickening lurch. Otacon set his hands on the crate and leaned over it to see.

It was only Tanya. She'd gone after the bolt and found something more interesting.

"Heh," Otacon said, relieved, for all that he wasn't sure what he'd been afraid of finding. "I keep forgetting there are mice around here. She must have been living on them, before we found her."



In a second the boy would mutter, "Before *I* found her," get up, and walk back with him, probably saying something about her being so inept that the rodent would die of one of the thousands of diseases he insisted she must carry before she ever caught it.

No response.

"Adamska?" He wasn't moving. "You okay?"

As soon as it was out of his mouth Otacon winced. Brilliant as always.

Luckily, he didn't seem to notice.

Actually, now that he got a closer look, Tanya had already caught it. As he watched, she settled down flat, like a sphinx whose sculptor hadn't quite got the idea, gazing speculatively at the tiny creature between her paws. Her riddle was the same as any cat's ever was:

*What do you do now?*

"Run away" was a perfectly wise answer. Too bad it never worked. The mouse barely made it a step before a heavy paw descended, trapping it neatly. Tanya's tail twitched. She lifted her paw, moved it aside, and began watching again.

"Why do that do that?" Adamska said softly.

"What, play with mice?" said Otacon. Looked like it was going to give running another go. "Nobody really knows. It's just what they do. It's not that they're nasty or cruel or anything like that. Animals don't have empathy. They're alive, so they die, but they don't understand death. They're just curious."

"Curious," Adamska said, with no tone at all.

As predicted, the mouse considered the limited range of its options and decided to bolt. As if waiting for the cue, Tanya pounced, rolling over and around it as though trying to wrestle with an opponent a fraction of her size and strength. She rolled onto her back and threw it into the air, caught it and rolled again. There was a pitiful squeaking noise.

Adamska's movement was a blur and an afterimage.

The backhand blow flung the cat against the wall.

She slid down to the floor, more indignant than hurt. Felines are designed to bounce. Gathering herself with impeccably injured dignity, she turned, hissed with every fiber of her ragged being, then sprinted for the shelter of some far-off corner less accessible to inexplicably aggressive bipeds.

The mouse sent a silent prayer to rodentia's pantheon and scurried off to find a hole in which to think long and hard about its life.

Adamska was shaking visibly.

Moving like that again, the way that said whenever you could follow him with your eyes he was humoring you, he was on his feet, grabbing Otacon by a fistful of shirtfront and hauling him up.

A part of Otacon's mind reflected with bemusement that he really must be light, if he was this easy to lift.

"Don't say a word," Adamska snarled. "Don't you dare say a fucking word. Or I'll-"

A strange, terrible look washed across his face.

He let go and spun away. Otacon settled on the ground with a muffled grunt of surprise. His shirt followed, more slowly. The imprint of a fist remained.

Adamska sat like half-controlled collapse on the crate and buried his face in his hands.

Kissing him had worked, once.

And then it hadn't.

He was almost willing to risk it.

So he settled for sitting beside him, and trying not to say anything that would make it worse.

*Just...stay.*

"Promise me something," the boy said. His voice was hollow enough to echo.

"Sure."

"The gun."

Of course. It was his talisman. Probably it was the only thing that kept him grounded.

"Yeah," Otacon said, reaching for the hilt.

Adamska looked up through the lacing of his fingers. His eyes were dry and clear. "Promise me, if it comes to that, you'll use it."

Otacon's hand froze an inch from the metal.

"You can't tell me-"

Clear eyes. "I'm asking you."

*You owe me*

Otacon had never been any good at staring contests.

"Yeah," he said. "Okay. Sure."

Adamska's eyes slipped shut, as if in relief.

"Liar," he sighed fondly. "But thank you all the same."

"Come on," Hal said gently. He got up.

"Go on." Adamska didn't move. "I'm coming."

Halfway across the room Otacon could still hear him murmuring to himself.

"A few more days. Just a few days."

Over and over again.

Otacon thought of those eyes, bare inches from his.

Angry.

Afraid.

"...few more..."

At this rate, he might not need a push at all.

# chapter 22

## Stray by Dahne

*Perspective can change the nature of a man.*

There were, as Snake saw it, a fairly balanced set of advantages and disadvantages to living out in the ass-end of nowhere. It made you inconspicuous and tough to find. When the odds were that being found meant staring down the business end of an AK-47 and some pointed questions, those felt like good qualities to have whenever possible.

It also made it a pain in the ass to get to.

Snake had spent the past few weeks crawling through air vents, dodging security, rigging explosives, and waiting for people to clear out so he could set them off. (From where he stood, anybody with a job putting that class of weapon together knew the risks when they took it, but not everyone else was of the same opinion, and it wasn't worth arguing.) He hated the disorientation that came from changing time zones, and no matter how many times Otacon swore the fakes were perfect he hated having to show ID. It went against his nature. He wasn't the kind of person who could ever be comfortable giving just anybody a name to attach to the face, even if it was an imaginary name that belonged to nothing more real than a set of statistics. Age and height and weight any of a dozen similar figures. Birthplace Atlanta or Anchorage or Chicago or New York. Snake supposed any of them were more believable than "a jar in a lab somewhere." As always he tried to keep track of the hours and the connecting flights, and as always the only way he knew he was getting close to home was that the plane held eight people and a key part of preparations for takeoff was chasing a moose off the runway.

If his cells hadn't been breaking down like a failed sixth grade science project, Snake would still be getting too old for this shit.

At least he didn't have much in the way of luggage. Most of the important stuff was taken care of by a small, conveniently amoral shipping company they'd discovered a while back. The company usually worked for larger, more prosaically illegal groups, and had earned a reputation among them for not asking inconvenient questions, like "Is white powder supposed to be leaking out of that?" or "Why does this one have air holes?" Slipping a few weapons across the country was cake. A good thing, too. Snake had sworn off on-site procurement permanently ever since he'd ended up having to get through that laboratory complex with nothing but a crowbar.

He'd gotten inside the house and set everything down before he noticed nobody was there.

That didn't have to mean anything. Snake should have expected that they'd be out in the garage, working on the time machine. Getting a few steps closer to having the second Ocelot out of their lives for good. As if one weren't too many enough. He knew that.

Getting a SOCOM from one of his many caches – hey, it never hurt to be prepared – made him feel better all the same.

Snake headed out the back door, plan taking shape in his mind. He'd move in quickly and quietly, weapon ready, and take stock of the situation. Just in case.

That a herd of ecstatic huskies made this only slightly more difficult to carry out bore testimony to his skill.

No sound, as he made his way along the track of foot- and pawprints in the snow. That could be good. Or bad. Depending.

The door was open. For the dogs, probably. Or, when Ocelot had broken Hal's neck and taken off, he hadn't bothered to close it behind him.

Snake slipped into the shadows beside a stack of boxes and waited for his eyes to adjust.

In the light from the open door, something flashed.

Snake brought his gun up to bear.

And lowered it.

"That," he declared authoritatively, "is the ugliest cat I have ever seen."

"That's what I said," replied a pair of legs lying near the center of the room.

These turned out to be attached to someone half inside of the machine. Perfectly easy to recognize, but something was missing. It took Snake a moment to get it.

*No spurs.*

"Oh, you're back!"

There he was. On the other side of the near pillar, by where Ocelot's torso must be. He set down a wrench, wiped his hands off on a rag, and stood up, smiling. "I see you've met Tanya."

"Yeah, she's real sweet. How the hell do I get her off me?"

The cat had taken advantage of the high ground to drop down and investigate whether or not Snake's ear would prove edible. Early results were negative, but some creatures didn't have it in them to accept defeat.

Managing to get a handful of the scruff of the cat's neck, Snake pried her off, one claw at a time, and set her gingerly on the ground. She hit it running and vanished behind a pile of...something. Snake didn't ask, and he didn't want to know.

"Like that," Otacon said helpfully.

Sometime while Snake had been distracted by trying to keep his scalp more or less intact, Ocelot's legs had been joined by the rest of him. He was younger, yeah. His hair was different, his face was different. Grease-stained, for one thing. Even the way he moved was different. But it was Ocelot. You could already tell he was the kind of guy who wouldn't age so much as fossilize.

Even without the mustache that went with it he knew that smirk.

"Otacon," Snake said. The holster at Ocelot's hip was still empty. That was something of a relief. He'd been half afraid Hal might give the damn thing back. "A word with you?"

"Yeah," he said agreeably, "sure, Snake."

The smirk slipped at the last word. Must have been disorienting, somebody with the same name and face as an old enemy. Finally, looking like Big Boss was doing him some good.

"Outside." Snake jerked his head back toward the door.

"Oh." Hal said. "Okay."

What the hell was he looking at Ocelot for?

But all the kid did was duck back into the machine, dismissing Snake as a threat – Snake was tempted to toss a few rounds from the SOCOM in his direction just to prove him wrong – and say, "I'll finish integrating the..."

The rest was lost in echo and distortion. Snake had a feeling it would have been lost on him anyway.

Snake's eyes narrowed. He knew what enemies under a temporary armistice talked like, even in a short exchange, and it wasn't like that.

It had been futile to hope that Hal might be able to keep the fact that the kid was a dangerous lunatic from slipping his mind, but something about the way he moved as he put his tools down and wiped his hands off on his lab coat suggested that he'd kept hold of some of it, at least. Enough to

maintain some kind of barrier between them. Get pulled from sinking wreckage in the middle of a storm by a guy and you get to know him pretty well. Snake could tell that he was keeping the kid at a distance. Not as much as would be ideal – a few countries, an ocean, maybe a planet or two – but some.

Nodding absently to Ocelot, who couldn't see him, Otacon got up and headed toward the door.

Once they were outside, Snake started talking.

That is, he started to start. Halfway through he stopped. He shot a glance at the doorway, and the darkness beyond it. He motioned Otacon further from the building. Shrugging, the smaller man obliged.

As soon as he judged the distance to be safe, plus a few more steps for good measure, he whirled and grabbed Otacon by the shoulders.

"Has he attacked you?" Snake demanded. "Did he try to contact anybody? Has he done anything suspicious? No," he retracted, "this is Ocelot we're dealing with. Better just list everything."

"It's not like that," Otacon protested, trying to shake him off. "He hasn't done anything."

"Nothing that you know of." But Snake let his arms drop, and relaxed a small degree. No overt hostilities, then. Not that covert was any less dangerous, but it meant they had some time.

"You worry too much," Hal said, grinning lopsidedly.

"No, I don't. This is exactly the right level of worry. If I knocked him unconscious and tied him to a tree, *then* you could say I was worrying too much." He considered. "Maybe."

"Snake." The exasperated sigh was as familiar as the snow.

Out in the light, Snake could get a better look at him. His story checked out. No broken bones, no bruises, no limp. He hadn't been eating or sleeping enough and there was a shade of harried gauntness to his face, if you looked at the right angle, but that was true for most of the time. Snake was forced to conclude he hadn't been injured. Visibly.

As soon as his survey was done, Snake saw that Otacon had been running the same inspection on him.

"How did the mission go?" he asked.

"Easy. Routine stuff." They'd managed to catch this one in pre-production, when it was still a matter of destroying plans instead of prototypes. "Just a pain in the ass, making sure we hunted down every copy. Got the next one lined up?"

"No leads, for the time being. I've been checking whenever I get the chance, and there hasn't been anything solid. There's an Okinawan company showing some suspicious activity in the past few months – I mean, come on, one of the investors is listed as the Marduk Institute, they're not even trying – but there's no way of knowing this early if it has anything to do with us. I hope not. Raiden refuses to go back to Japan until somebody tells him what a 'bishounen' is, and I've been putting it off. Anyway, I'm glad this one went all right." Hal's shoulders sagged with relief. "I'm always afraid it's gonna turn into another tanker fiasco."

"As long as Ocelot's not around, it won't." Snake flicked his eyes significantly toward the garage. "You get any ideas about what he's trying to pull?"

That he was trying to pull something went without saying. In certain ways Ocelot was very dependable. Not much chance that he would screw up and let something slip, but this was a younger, less experienced version, and Hal was a tough guy to keep your guard up around. It was like holding shore fortifications against an invasion of sea turtles. You could man the stations as long as you wanted, but sooner or later you started feeling ridiculous.

Otacon sighed, as though he was the one being perfectly reasonable.

"Snake, think about it. What could he do? He's alone here. Even his country's gone. There's no Temporally Displaced Soviet Agent Hotline to call. Anybody he knows is on the other side of the world, and, if they're in the same line of work, probably dead by now. Even if there was somebody to contact, and they believed him, what could they do about it? Anyway, he hasn't tried."

"How do you know that?" Snake demanded.

"I tweaked security a little. Any transmission in the area without the nullification code attached gets intercepted, and the time, location, and intended recipient gets sent to me."

Snake looked at him.

Very slowly, he grinned.

"Looks like you're starting to get the hang of being a suspicious bastard after all," he said with approval.

"Heh." Hal rubbed at the back of his neck uncomfortably. Never was any good at taking a compliment. "But, like I said, there weren't any. All he wants is to get back home."

"Yeah, so he can get back to work. GRU must be missing him. We don't *know* what he wants, Otacon. 'Us dead' is a good bet. There doesn't have to be a reason. With Ocelot's type, the only way you see it coming is if they want you to."

Otacon said, "Adamska's not like that."

"For all we know, he's a- who's Adamska?"

"That's his name."

The round peg of information hit a square hole in his mind.

"He told you-" Snake began. He stopped, rerouted, and tried again. "You're on a- Otacon, that's not even a real name."

"Sure it is!" Hal rejoined stubbornly. "I think. It could be."

Great. A name. Now he'd want to keep him.

"You still got the gun with you?"

"Yeah." He showed him the brief glint of incongruous metal. "I feel kind of stupid, though. It's not like he's dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Snake rolled his eyes up and considered. "Oh, yeah, definitely not."

"Exactly."

"'Dangerous'," said Snake, "implies a chance something might *not* go horribly wrong. This kid's a sure thing. That nothing's happened yet is a goddamned miracle."

"...yeah..."

Otacon's eyes were shuffling sideways.

"Otacon."

"Yeah?"

"Nothing happened," Snake said. He calibrated his glare to Cut The Bullshit. "Did it?"

"N, no. Nothing."

Well, he hadn't gotten any better at lying, that was for sure.

The glare turned up to One Of Us Is Going To Spill His Guts, And I Have A Feeling It's Not Going To Be Me. "What happened?"

Hal had stopped avoiding his eyes. "I told you. Nothing."

"Don't fool around." Now at the point where he could almost feel the smoke rising from them, Snake's eyes said, I Mean It. "What did he do?"

"Nothing."

Hal's eyes said;

So Do I.

The glare wasn't working.

All he could do was trust Hal not to keep a secret that could get him killed.

"The hell are you defending him for, anyway?" Snake growled, switching tactics.

"He's not a bad person, Snake."

In the silence, a dog howled.

Round peg. Square hole.

Snake said, "What?"

"He's just a kid. He never meant for things to turn out how they did. It all-"

"Naomi must have forgotten to mention these drugs having hallucinogenic side effects."

"Who he was and who he is are different things, Snake-"

"Cause, I could have sworn I just heard you say,"

"He wants to change it-"

"*Revolver fucking Ocelot*"

"-won't let it-"

"*is not a bad person.*"

Otacon stood his ground.

"He's not."

"Well, that's good to hear," said Snake, shrugging diplomatically. "At least now, no matter what happens, you've made a new discovery; 'fucking insane' is contagious."

Hal's voice was soft. "He's just a kid."

"Kids grow up."

"This isn't the same Ocelot. You don't know him."

"And you do."

"I've talked to him."

"There's your first mistake."

"A lot."

"So he lied to you a lot."

"Snake, *listen* to me."

Damn it. If he was going to pull the puppydog eyes, it would save time to just humor him.

"Fine." Snake crossed his arms. "I'm listening. You talked to him."

Unbalanced by the abrupt absence of argument, Hal said, "Yeah."

An eyebrow cocked. "You tell him about the arm thing?"

Hal nodded despondently. "Uh-huh."

"How'd he take it?"

"Pretty well, actually."

"Huh."

Snake's eyes followed a pair of dogs chasing each other into a snowdrift.

"You think he's really gonna change the future?"

"He'll try."

"You plan on letting him?"

"It's his future." Otacon shook his head, as if clearing out things that had accrued in back of his eyes. "I just get this weird feeling. Like he's let me get closer than he's ever let anybody before."

"Good. You can put a bell around his neck."

Otacon gave him a sullen glare.

"Look," Snake sighed, giving up on trying to appeal to Hal's worse nature, "don't feel bad about getting taken in. Manipulating people is his job. He wouldn't still be alive if he wasn't good at it."

"He's not-" Otacon protested, as if he were being insulted.

Snake cut him off. "You know what he is."

Damn it. He hadn't meant for it to come out quite like that. That rough, or that loud.

Every minute of Shadow Moses was too clear in his memory. Every time he got a static shock his bones still tingled.

"He's gotten a lot of smart people to trust him, over the years. They've got a lot in common. Like all being dead. Remember Sergei Gurlukovich? They fought wars together. They were comrades."

Snake knew what it was like, being betrayed by a friend. But never quite like that. Fox had believed in what Big Boss was trying to do, the poor bastard. He'd had a case of misplaced loyalty that turned out to be terminal. In the way of the whole backwards game, Frank Jaeger had betrayed him out of honor. And then, when his body was ruined and his mind was gone, and all he could do was fight, he'd tried to protect him, because he always fought for what he believed in.

If there was one thing Snake knew, it was that Revolver Ocelot was no Gray Fox.

"All I'm saying is," Snake said, "you should know better than to put much faith in somebody you met on the other end of a loaded weapon."

"But..." Otacon blinked guilelessly. "That's how I met you."

Damn. Trust him to remember that.

"Look," he said again, as if it would make him. "Do you want to know the real reason you'd make a lousy soldier?"

Otacon scowled. Tried to scowl – on his face it looked more like somebody had just kicked him in the kneecap. "What, being a coward, nearsighted, and hopeless with a gun isn't enough?"

"No," said Snake, inexorable. "It goes beyond the physical."

He pulled a cigarette out and lit it, taking slightly guilty satisfaction in being able to justifiably call any complaints an attempt to change the subject.

"Damn it, Hal, you don't have the *heart* for this business."

Otacon on the battlefield. God. If he could keep himself from taking his gun apart to see how it worked long enough to shoot somebody, the next thing he'd do was run up and ask him if he was okay.

"There are people in this world," Snake continued, "who see empathy as a weakness, and they're the same ones who make their living exploiting every weakness they can. Reach a hand out to them, and if you're lucky they'll ignore it and if you're not they'll bite it off. A soldier can't afford to ever trust anybody, if he wants to stay alive."

"You trust me," Otacon pointed out mildly.

"You don't count."

Otacon stared down at his feet. Suddenly that glaze in his eyes, the one that showed up whenever he was only sleeping when somebody reminded him to, was very apparent.

"You might be right," he said, in the tone that meant being right wasn't going to do one damn bit of good, because whatever this was about now it wasn't about right or wrong anymore, "But this isn't the Ocelot you knew."

If there was one thing Snake knew, it was a losing battle when he saw one.

"Just try to stay alive until you finish that thing and we can get rid of him. Which is soon. *Right?*" He emphasized the last word with what he knew from experience was a piercing glare.

It turned out to be entirely wasted. Hal's eyes were fixed on the snow.

"Yeah," he said dully. "Soon."



It is a widely-held belief that the universe has no animate will of its own. It is neither good nor evil; occurrences that can be taken for one or the other are, in truth, only the result of natural law. The universe, the means through which these laws act, is the ultimate neutrality.

Otacon knew this.

He also knew that, logically or not, the universe was undoubtedly in possession of character traits. He had first-hand experience with its sick sense of humor.

Otacon knew that there were many natural laws that, despite resisting official confirmation, were nonetheless true. So there was a question he had been very careful never to ask:

*What could be worse than having an Ocelot double around who wants to murder me?*

He'd gotten an answer anyway.

---

On his back in the darkness, Adamska listened to the footsteps recede.

It was no great ordeal, being under observation. He was used to it. Expressions had always had to pass through a checkpoint before winning access to his face. It hardly took effort to maintain it any more.

He was always surprised at the relief when he could let it fall.

There was a chance that the other two men had stayed close enough that it would be possible to eavesdrop with little effort. Adamska found that he lacked the energy to care.

He let his arms drop down, his head loll to the side. Inside the thing that had once paralyzed him with fear, Adamska felt almost safe. He set aside a moment to appreciate the irony. Such a shame, when irony went unappreciated.

Especially when it came in such abundance.

Now that he knew how not to fear pursuing what he wanted, he learned that the one thing he wanted more than the world was just another thing he could never have.

He remembered the first things he had been taught:

Guard your back. No one else will.

Attachments will be broken. Do not make them.

You are expendable.

They would have said it was his own fault for forgetting them.

He had forgotten the real power of laws. It wasn't that they couldn't be broken. It was that they broke you back.

In any other circumstance, there would have been nothing standing between them, and it would have been possible. And, if it had been any other way, Adamska would never have given him a second glance.

But that wasn't the best part.

The best part was that what made him unique – that idiotic kindness, the battered innocence, the paradox of stupidity and brilliance that made it so difficult to tell one from the other and could have fascinated Adamska for the rest of his life – were precisely why he the best he could ever ask from him was pity.

And now he understood. What this was, and where he had felt it before.

He could see the same look in their eyes, one or two, when he closed his.

What a joke, what a spectacular hideous joke, that two people in utterly opposite directions

could both be perfectly out of reach.

Alone and in silence, Adamska let laughter flay his throat raw.

---

The SOCOM didn't really need cleaning, but Snake needed to think.

Two days he'd been back. Two days of debriefing, follow-up, clean-up, Codec calls...In short, all the usual post-mission crap to keep their collective ass covered. Two days, and if Otacon had been telling the truth and nothing had happened, it had kept happening.

Snake's suspicions had been growing by the minute. At this point, they were ready to grab a blonde woman and climb the Empire State Building.

Snake knew Ocelot fairly well, or as well as you could know a guy you'd chased in a few circles around a hostage and a pile of explosives, but more than that he knew Ocelot's type. Some people were born to sociopathy and some had sociopathy thrust upon 'em, and maybe the second one could be sad if you cared but Snake didn't. He could have his reasons and he could have his past, but that didn't change the fact that some people plain needed killing. Which was what people like Snake were for. Every time he looked at the kid he got the itching feeling that he wasn't doing his job.

But Otacon didn't see things that way. Of course not. He was the kind who'd take in an injured animal no matter how bad it was foaming at the mouth. People like Snake existed so that people like that could exist. The threat was never supposed to get into range of them. Nothing killed pure-hearted belief in the fundamental goodness of humanity like a few .9mm rounds to the temple. Not to mention taking care of pretty much everything else.

But that was the thing. Otacon might *still* not get it. If there was anybody who could take a knife in the back and try to explain why the guy twisting it was a perfectly nice person when you got to know him, it was Otacon. When it came to people, the man had rose-colored glasses that could withstand the apocalypse. It was a source of constant exasperation. Snake had always known of those who could never expect the worst - by reputation, mostly - but he still didn't see how the guy could keep that up when people kept doing it to him.

But then, somebody who could feel sympathy for hypothetical frogs would have no problem making excuses for a sociopathic cat.

Footsteps, from the back door. Heavier than he was used to.

Snake would never be thrilled about letting Ocelot wander around free, but in this case, his timing was perfect.

Without looking up he watched the shadow slide through the door.

Snake said, "Hey."

The boy turned sharply toward him. "Yes?"

There might have been a microsecond between call and response. Hah. He hadn't yet learned the trick of artificially dampening visible reaction times. The problem with showing off the limits of your abilities is, then people know them. And no matter how high they are, there's always somebody else's that're higher.

There were lots of tricks like that. Like keeping your hands busy, so the enemy would only see half of your attention. Nobody could maintain full guard in front of somebody who was more interested in the gun in his hands. It put them off balance.

The other theory was that it just irritated the hell out of them.

Either one worked fine for Snake.

"You've been here a while," he said. He let just enough emotion enter his voice to make it clear that this wasn't a development he was thrilled about.

"Yes." He was standing with his feet apart, hands behind his back. Fucking parade rest. Kid, you're too much.

It took some effort to keep his muscles from tensing at the voice. The echoes in it had bad associations. Clinking spurs. Gunshots. Semtex detonating nearby. Or an unassuming little click.

Snake's thumb tapped against the trigger guard.

"According to Otacon," he continued, "he doesn't really know what would happen if somebody killed you. The present version might disappear. Anything you've done in the past fifty years might reverse itself. The universe might implode. Then again, might be nothing happens at all. No way to know."

"That is what I've been told, yes." Smooth as if he held audience with gun-wielding maniacs every day. For all Snake knew, he might. He wasn't interested in the life story, except for maybe how it ended.

"Here's the thing." He held the reassembled SOCOM up and sighted along it to the right. Then forward. Looked him straight in the eye.

"I don't care."

The kid's stance didn't change. "You're threatening me." He sounded amused.

Great. One of the little bastards who thought he was invincible. It took some people a long time to figure out that anything alive could die and they were no exception. Maybe he should try this with a rocket launcher.

"Good observation." Snake lowered the gun. No use in overstating the message. "But it's more of a contract. Any stunt you pull will be matched in kind. So much as a dog gets hurt, and so do you."

"I am unarmed," the kid mentioned. Something was written on his face, but in a language Snake couldn't immediately translate, though he had a feeling that it shouldn't have been there. Disregarding that the face itself shouldn't have been there either.

"Stay that way, and we'll get along just fine."

"Of course," Ocelot lied smoothly, bowing his head in mock-gracious acknowledgment. "I intend no harm to either of you."

He lost a little of his poise when Tetsuo headbutted him in the back of the knee.

"Or them," he added.

Snake leaned forward, hands resting comfortably around the gun handle. "I don't know how much you've figured out about the past fifty years. Suffice to say, they would have been a whole lot easier if you weren't in them. But everybody's entitled to a couple second chances.

"You get one."

About then, while he was letting it sink in, Snake recognized that what looked so foreign on the sharp edges of that face was relief.

Ocelot said, "Good to know."

---

Morning over the Sudan. The sun would rise before long. Poor visibility, in uneven gray sand. An advantage or a disadvantage, depending on how you fought it. Like anything. The tinge to the sky promised heat like the devil's breath, though the air that leeches through the Kasatka's windows still carried the cool decedents of a desert night. To Revolver Ocelot, it mattered little. Heat and cold had stopped affecting him a long time ago.

He told the pilot, "Set down here."

A nod and no questions, though there was nothing in sight but light and sky and sand. For the routine as much as anything, his employers knew better than to send a man who cared for anything beyond getting the job done. Someone had sabotaged the digital clock set into the cockpit so that it declared the hour to be 'deft autonomy.' They hid anything they couldn't control, and even the Patriots held no sway over time.

As the ground fell upward, Ocelot reached into his mind for the pertinent file and flicked through it without haste. More fools buying their way into the game, maybe never to find out that it had been as pieces. Another maze for another rat. Another transaction. Venerable REX, into the hands of another looseknit mob. Ocelot could almost feel sympathy toward the thing.

The helicopter set down and he stood. The hatch opened to reveal gray, in concentric circles of sand rippling outwards, and a patch of darker gray that was gone.

The clink of the spurs on dismount was audible below the throb of blades rising again against the air. The reasons he had first put them on – symbol or affectation, perhaps for nothing but a whim or the sound itself – were lost to time. He kept them perhaps out of habit, perhaps in ironic deference to the past. Perhaps in defiance of the polite lie that there might be nothing nipping at his heels. He had always held an appreciation for incongruity. They were as much of an anachronism as he had been, in those days.

The Kasatka rose higher and was gone, leaving the pre-dawn was silent. His escort would arrive soon, a formality to let them think that their location was concealed. For now, he was alone.

As close to alone as he ever was, these days.

"Go away," Ocelot said to the man in black behind him.

If he let his senses, crippled by ignorance and atrophied from disuse, stretch into the space, he could nearly hear it.

*"You are not dead."*

He continued to ignore the presence until, obligingly, it vanished.

The past haunt- shadowed him, as of late. As did the future. A sense of foreboding. A shade painted between dread and anticipation. Strange. Apparitions as a whole and this one as itself meant nothing, in all their persistence. And yet, the sense was growing stronger, inappropriate as it was for common piecework such as this. As though, soon, in a way that none of them who lived in certainties and calculations could predict, everything was going to change.

Ocelot snorted. Old men in the desert always had been the classic locus point of superstition. He would be feeling his mortality, with such a uniquely vivid reminder of it on hand. Curled sullenly in the back of his mind. A particularly apt memento mori. There was no such thing as miracles or the supernatural, no matter how the empty air, the stain in the sky, and the clawing boredom of petty strife conspired to convince him that there might be such thing as something new. Hah. A beginning, at this stage. Boys dreamed they held power like that, latent in them. Before they learned that their efforts were as meaningless as anyone else. Not just resetting the pieces, but smashing the board... Somewhere. It might not be him who was doing it, but it was happening, somewhere...

He shook his head. Having a poltergeist in his arm was making him paranoid.

Shading his eyes for the breaking light, Revolver Ocelot turned to the east and waited, ready.

# chapter 23

## Stray by Dahne

*Time can change the nature of a man.*

For the first morning in many, Adamska woke with no dreams. He took this for a good sign.

It was out of habit that he went to help feed the dogs. When the shed door opened to reveal two shapes hunched over the racks against the rear wall, there was a moment of disorientation, as though he had taken too long and his body had gone on without him.

The Snake native to this time glanced at him, but said nothing.

Adamska moved forward and fitted himself into an empty space as though he had expected the presence of another human. The dogs still outnumbered them, though now only by forty-seven. He let the practiced motions occupy his hands and thought.

It was too bad he couldn't thank this Snake without incurring more suspicion. After the previous day's conversation, the threat folded around Adamska like a comfortable old blanket. This man, unprompted, had given him the promise Hal could not, with the willingness and skill to keep it.

Not long ago, acknowledging that a man was capable of besting him in combat would have driven him senseless. Now, it could be the only thing keeping him sane. If the cold hadn't gotten into his lungs, he could have laughed.

The dogs acted different, when the door was opened and they poured toward the humans like a sentient avalanche. Where once they had leapt at Adamska, tangled in his legs, and generally made themselves obnoxious, they passed him by without a second glance in favor of swarming the Snake. Disloyal bastards. And a change came over the man, as well; the timbre of his voice was unfamiliar as he laughed and called them by their strange names. An affection for the animals was apparent, even as he waded through them to pull apart two who had begun to fight. Batou, and, what was it? Menchi. Right. He was not John, after all, try though his appearance might to suggest otherwise. Adamska had been aware of that. This confirmed it, and quieted the lingering, nearly subconscious suspicion that his interest in the dogs might be culinary.

Adamska was trying to distract himself from the other member of the menagerie and knew it.

He tried to think that Hal was acting no different, but had lost somewhere the energy to lie. He was smiling, talking to the other man, animated and at ease as Adamska had rarely seen him.

Something pulled sharply at the wound on his arm. He looked down and saw that his fist had clenched.

They were saying things to each other, he could hear them, but it meant nothing to him, as though they spoke in a language not among the several he knew fluently, or his mind had lost the ability to process sound into meaning. Snake turned to him with a long, cold stare and said something, and as he walked away Adamska could not reach back and understand what it had been. As though a filter had been switched on that interpreted everything as white noise, until something broke through.

"Adamska?"

The illusion shattered, and it was only an illusion. He was not alone.

Hal was looking at him expectantly.

He nodded vaguely and followed him.

Adamska let routine guide him. His hands knew what needed to be done. Tools, wire, metal. If only his mind could say as much. Sometime when he hadn't been careful, numbness had spread

through him, dulling his eyes and making the chill of the air against his skin more acute. He let the instructions Hal gave run down to pool in his muscle memory, touching little else on the way.

His voice should have been enough. There was no world where it and madness could coexist. If that voice ever appeared in someone's head, it would cough and excuse itself. Maybe it would have been enough, in time. Adamska could imagine that. Whenever he felt the balance slipping, taking him in his arms, and saying, Talk to me. No way of knowing now. It was a point of pride not to gamble with someone else's stakes.

Once he had sat down and made enough of a beginning on the intertwined wires to know he wouldn't stop he said it.

"This is the last, isn't it."

Hal said, "Yes."

It was good that he didn't look at him. If he had looked at him, he might have asked if he was all right. And if he had asked, Adamska might have answered.

*I'm fine, he thought. I'm not dreading leaving at all. There's nothing keeping me here. I'm not starting to think the real world is something I could live without. There's nothing to suggest that not being shot at and suspected and betrayed and counter-betrayed is something I could get used to. I won't miss the dogs whose names I've just learned, or the look on your face when something goes right, or the fucking cat. The thought of never seeing you again does not feel like someone sticking his thumb against the hollow of my throat and pressing down. Hard. No more than knowing that if you ever think about me again at all it'll be as just another mistake feels like shoving a rusty knife in my guts. And there's no reason why it should.*

They worked together in the silence of having too much to say.

*Look at him, the influence lurking in his mind whispered with mocking sympathy, as if unaware that the game was over. He's trying to hide it, but you can see. How out of sorts he looks. You quite literally make him sick.*

And now, now that it was too late, it was easy to ignore. Once you'd been stabbed a few dozen times, what was a papercut? Besides, it wasn't as if it were telling him anything he didn't already know.

*He would have given himself to you completely. There is no room in that clockwork mind for insincerity. That is, if you were good enough. But when have you ever settled for being good enough?*

Adamska glanced over his shoulder. In reality, the man looked no worse than usual. Too thin, the suggestion of circles beneath his eyes, clothes hanging off of him as though he were trying to hide in his own body. Absorbed in his work, enough so not to notice the orange blur that leapt over his knees and past Adamska en route to darting behind a tall stack of crates.

(Though half of the cavernous room was taken up with boxes, most were made of plastic, metal, or cardboard. The few traditional wooden crates seemed incongruous. Early on, when Adamska had first begun to comprehend the number of things he was, sooner or later, going to have to ask, he had asked about them.

"We're kind of Philanthropy's unofficial ammo storehouse. Just about any kind of gun you can think of, we've got bullets for it."

Adamska, taking this as a challenge, had named a few, and been matched successfully until the last. He had, come to think of it, never confessed to making that one up.

Then he had said:

"But why crates?"

"Dunno," Hal had admitted readily. "Just feels right."

The oil drums, as it turned out when he voiced similar curiosities about their use, had been on sale.)

Adamska recognized an opportunity.

With a quick glance to confirm he was still unobserved, he slipped his feet beneath him and followed, stopping just short of the hidden area. Tanya skulked at the end of an alleyway of debris, eyes flashing back shards of reflected light. Her ears were held back as straight as they could go, considering that they had both seen better days and part of the right one had seen the teeth of something angry. She hissed and bared her claws, as though they and Adamska's skin had not already been intimately acquainted.

Glance to the right. Still absorbed.

Adamska sank into a crouch, and stretched out his hand.

"Come here," he ordered, keeping his voice as low as he could.

The cat responded with a stream of curses in its native tongue.

"Come here," said Adamska.

The cat cast aspersions on his mother's reputation.

"Come here," said Adamska.

The cat began to tell him what his apologies would buy, where he could take them, and what he could do with them when he got there, when she stopped to consider that he might be serious.

Adamska remained still, and waited.

Cautiously, wary of traps, Tanya slunk toward him. Adamska did not move. It took some time, checking every step and stopping to eye him at intervals as she did, but eventually the cat made it to within range. She sniffed at his fingertips, once, twice. Gradually, smoothly, Adamska lowered his hand and scratched her behind the ears.

The cat closed her eyes in feline bliss. She arched up, purred extravagantly, and, just for old time's sake, bit him and ran away.

Satisfied that all that needed to be said had been, Adamska turned to go back to his post.

Hal was watching him, smiling.

Adamska said, "Fucking cat."

"Yeah," said Hal.

Adamska grunted, and returned to sit beside him.

When a few seconds had past and he felt his eyes still on him, he said, "What?"

"Nothing."

Adamska raised an eyebrow at him. They knew each other too well for the formality of keeping secrets.

"It's just that, sometimes I forget how young you are." Hal shook his head. "God, you can't be over seventeen."

"I'm twenty-three," Adamska said tartly.

Hal said nothing.

"Twenty-two."

Silence. A metallic clink.

Adamska held his gaze a moment longer.

"...twenty."

Hal nodded. He looked distant.

"It's not as though it matters," Adamska said, forcing his voice to reclaim its aggressive edge.

"I've had more field experience than men twice my age."

"Yeah," said Hal, his eyes unmistakably darkened with sorrow.

He looked up when he felt a hand on his knee.

"That," Adamska explained patiently, "is supposed to impress you."

"Heh." Hal gave him a tremulous smile, for a second. "I guess it is pretty amazing. But..." He sighed. "It's just sad, thinking about a kid out there. Growing up like that."

*I could show you how much of a man I am*, a part of Adamska's mind, in the swamps near the back, insisted with inane bravado.

Adamska removed his hand from his knee and set it to honest labor, as though that would make him want to kiss him less.

"They always said that I was young," he said to the steel plating in front of his eyes. "Too young, usually. They were wrong. I never felt like a child. Not even when someone treated me like one. Some of the other soldiers had left little brothers behind. I suppose it amused them to see me as a proxy. At least until I started outscoring them on the shooting range. Calling me *kot* for always being underfoot. I let them. They gave me things, sometimes." His instincts had been unfailingly mercenary from the beginning. "Sweets. Once, a picture book. Some ragged, third-hand thing about Ivanushka going to kill the ogres or some such. I had it memorized within the day." He barked a harsh, deprecating laugh. Everyone had things in his past he'd just as soon not admit to. "Something about the triviality of the thing made it precious. Its ordinariness. Like holding evidence of something you've never quite believed in. That there was someone, somewhere, who'd never had to learn how to wrap his hands around a trigger guard, or dealt with recoil made for a stronger arm. I knew that I pitied them, and held them in contempt, but in a way I was almost jealous. I knew I couldn't live like that. Once or twice, when it was dark or cold or both, I thought I might not mind trying. Just for a day.

"I don't remember what it was I did. Some petty rebellion, probably. Maybe it was just that I'd gotten attached to something and hadn't hidden it well enough. I must have thought I was in a position to bargain. Before I learned that they always got what they wanted."

"They?" Hal kept his eyes down, feigning inattention. Adamska recognized the ruse, though he appreciated it all the same.

"My-" He searched for the appropriate word, and snorted when he found it. "-handlers. They sent one in to say what a shame it was she'd have to burn it."

His mouth tightened with grim satisfaction at the memory. Futility could be rewarding in itself.

"I let her stand there and wait while I tore it into pieces.

"I learned to hold hard to the token victories."

Adamska showed a bitter smile to steel was too dull by a shade to hold his reflection.

"I'd rather destroy something precious with my own hands than give someone else the pleasure of taking it from me."

Hal nodded down at his hands, and gave no indication that he understood.

He said, "What about the soldier who gave it to you?"

Adamska shrugged, knowing he would feel the motion if not see it. "He was gone, soon enough. Finished his two years and went home. Or died, maybe. Soldiers do that."

Hal said, "Oh."

He didn't ask, *Why are you telling me this?*

*No reason*, Adamska thought. *Only that it's hard to tell. One last little bit of masochism to remember me by. Or-*

"See?" he said, baring his teeth in a grin. "There's a difference between me and the other one."



We have the same memory, but he would never admit to it."

"I know you're different," Hal said quietly.

"I could prove it to you!" The words burst out together in an unexpected rush. "If you gave me...time..."

"It's not mine to give."

The regret in his voice made Adamska ashamed. He glanced down.

The progress he had made already horrified him. It was coming too easily. It was all falling into place, with little need for thought or direction. His hands understood gears and wires, now, the same way they understood bullets.

A manic thought struck him.

*they go where I want*

Well then, why not try it? It wasn't as though he had anything to lose, that wasn't already gone.

With each flick of his fingers, he told it what he wanted.

Thoughts to fingertips, where they belonged. Moving in synchronization. Tapping out the code necessity invented. Picking up the pieces with their flashes like fish scales, from the top of the pile to the belly of the beast.

Adamska didn't recognize the trance he had fallen into until he woke from it. His fingernails brushed concrete.

*It can't be. No. Not yet. I won't allow it...*

"They're gone," he heard his voice say. "It's finished."

"Good timing," Hal said. He leaned forward, fastened the last panel onto the base, and it was done.

The two men stood in unison, and took a step back.

It looked no more impressive than it ever had. A blank metal arch, enclosing empty space.

Adamska knew, now, that there were things his eyes could not tell him.

"Just one more thing to do," Hal said, looking and sounding as though he would collapse when his strings were cut.

The nondescript, meek-looking engineer moved forward, lifting a removable panel on the right side to reveal a bank of inputs.

"Ready?"

Adamska knew better than to allow himself time to think while crafting such a monumental lie.

"Yes."

"All right." Hal pushed a button. Something began to hum. "All systems on."

"Right," Adamska said. He knew this. A part to play, to the last. He went to the left column and let the motions carry him.

"Begin energy transfer."

"Got it."

A low, mechanical whine.

"Power to full."

Resisting with every ounce of his willpower the urge to shut his eyes, Adamska did as he was told.

*Click.*

Together, they stood back.

On close inspection, the space between the pillars was wavering very, very gently.

"It went click," Adamska said.

"It's supposed to go click," said Hal.

"Are you sure?"

"Not really."

"Oh. Good."

Breaking his stare with the slowly shifting void, Adamska turned to him.

"I won't say goodbye," he challenged.

The other man smiled sadly. "Then I won't, either."

The slender, long-fingered hand, with its patterns of calluses that would have been easy to memorize, slipped down to his waist to draw out the revolver.

"Here," he said, holding it out in front of him with both hands like an offering. "You might need this."

Adamska stepped toward him and reached out to take it, and paused.

He wanted to leave something behind more tangible than memory.

He reached up to the small, familiar shape hidden beneath his shift and gave a short, sharp tug.

"Here," Adamska echoed. He took the gun, but held the hand that had offered it open. With the other, he dropped the bullet and chain into the empty palm. He closed the fingers around it. "Keep this."

Hal looked at him, eyes steady. "All right."

He wouldn't recognize the significance, but that was all right. Better, maybe.

"And do one more thing for me."

"Sure. What?"

He kept hold of his wrist, loose enough for him to break and strong enough to hope he wouldn't.

"Kiss me, once."

"Adamska..."

One finger held in midair forestalled him.

"Just once. Just me."

It didn't take him long at all.

For that moment, it was only them.

It had to break, too soon, before it was broken. Adamska held it for one greedy second longer, and slipped to the side, to whisper a last something in his ear.

A regiment of words marched to the forefront of his mind, in units of three.

*I'll remember you.*

*I'll change it.*

*Don't forget this.*

*Wait for me.*

*Trust in me.*

*Don't give up.*

*I'll fix it.*

*I'll find you.*

*Don't forget me.*

*I trust you.*

Adamska said three words.

He didn't know where they had come from, but, he found, he couldn't make himself call them back.

Facing the wide gray eyes and taking one last look like a vow, he let Hal go, for the time being.

Ocelot turned, revolver at his side, and went to find his future.  
*Click.*

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/23/>

# chapter 24

## Stray by Dahne

*Risk can change the nature of a man.*

It would be a lie to say that Ocelot did not enjoy spying. This would make it easier. Lately, he'd found that before he said something that was actually true there tended to be a long pause. Few noticed this trait, as it was displayed very rarely. There were times...

Wait.

There was the sudden feeling of having been divided by zero.

Ocelot stopped everything.

He coughed and remembered why it was generally not a good idea to stop breathing.

Keeping everything else as still as possible, he examined the room.

Granin's office. Right. Exactly where he was supposed to be. He'd been going through the papers, for anything that might be of use.

Had been?

Before what?

Before getting lost in thought. There wasn't much chance that he would turn up anything good, but he'd already found one set of plans that might, with some tweaking, turn out to be-

Ocelot never got lost in thought.

Something was seriously wrong.

In the back of his mind, something itched, and, in a quiet, surreptitious way, ticked.

There was something he needed to do. Something important. Something he had to find...

With haste and agitation completely unsuited to routine clean-up work, Ocelot's hands dove into the pile of documents that coated Granin's desk. A moment of near-frantic search for whatever it was that kept trying to slip out of memory's grasp gained him nothing more enlightening than a few papercuts.

Wait.

When had he taken off his gloves?

Ocelot never took off his gloves.

He stared straight ahead, and felt his hand move to his belt.

Ah. There they were. Reliable as the weight of the revolver at his waist. He would never be caught without his gun, his gloves, or his h-

Where was his hat?

He'd set it aside somewhere. It was always getting knocked off, and even though it wasn't alive the fucking cat kept trying to kill it.

What fucking cat?

Ocelot's eyes darted across Granin's desk. There was something that was supposed to be there. He remembered noticing it, because it wasn't supposed to be there.

It wasn't there.

Because it was in his pocket.

Very slowly, Ocelot reached down and drew it out. He held the object up to eye level. A small, gray-green robot model, with a button on the base.

Ocelot held his mind very blank, and let the voice play.

*...seems like the easiest thing to do would be just to have you not be able to remember any of this ever happening...*

From the first day he'd picked up a weapon, Adamska had known that, someday, he would be defeated. It was inevitable that, sooner or later, he would be outnumbered, outmaneuvered, or simply out of luck. Then he would be dead. He accepted that, on one condition:

He would never, ever, let it be easy.

The memories were *his*, goddammit. Omnipotent will of the timestream or not, he'd be damned if he was going to let anyone touch what belonged to him.

If silence could speak, the one inside Granin's office and Adamska's head would have said,  
*Fine. You want it, you take it.*

Like a train running sideways, it hit him all at once.

*"fifty years"*

*"Revolver Ocelot"*

*"tell me how to fix it"*

*"everything is connected"*

*"It all depends on you"*

*"The Ocelot I knew"*

*"I want to help you"*

*"somebody you left behind"*

*"I won't let it happen this time"*

*"promise me"*

*"I won't say goodbye"*

*"Kiss me, once"*

*"I love you"*

A man who could have loved him, if.

Adamska moved.

---

There wasn't much time. Hell, for all Ocelot knew, there might not be any. He'd already had to fight just to keep his memory. No matter what he had to face he didn't plan on losing, but he wasn't eager to write out any invitations.

Half-measures didn't suit Adamska. He would do as much as he could, and from there what happened would happen.

His eyes scanned the room for a sign of where to begin, and fell onto his prior excavations from Granin's research. It felt like he had set them aside a very, very long time ago. In reality – this reality, at least – it had been about ten minutes. But those ten minutes had been a few months long.

The plans were dry and dusty from sitting dormant at the bottom of a drawer, beneath sheaves of other doomed aspirations. They burned nicely.

As soon as he was sure there was nothing left but ash, Adamska hit the ground running.

The blood pounding in his ears in time with his boots pounding against the metal floor was familiar. The fear was not. This was not a normal battle, with his life balanced between luck, skill, and tension. This time, he had something to lose.

He had one chance, and there was no telling what would stick – he might as well do everything he could.

The same luck that always put the bullet in the last chamber was still operative. It took him ten

minutes to find the right soldier.

"You!"

The soldier turned, eyes widening, to see what he likely thought would be his last few moments of life before being run down by a deranged Major.

He wasn't far wrong. A foot to the left, more precisely.

"Tell your son never to go to Alaska," Ocelot managed in one breath, without slowing.

"Er...yes, sir?"

He was already gone.

---

Adamska planned rapidly as he ran, potted plants, soldiers, and less identifiable small green things flashing by in his peripheral vision. He had a good cache of favors to call in from over the years, and he'd already looked up his target's location back when he was in the US the last time. If his luck held, he could be there by...

The footfalls were not only his.

There was someone was running next to him.

"Headed somewhere?" Raikov asked.

Ocelot glanced to the side. "Yes," he said briefly.

Something about Raikov was...strange.

More so than usual.

That this could be possible disturbed Ocelot enough to send him into a quick review of the silver-haired man's (relatively) recent behavior.

Ocelot had barely taken any notice of him that week, once he returned from his self-imposed, aborted mission overseas. As long as he had known him, walking past Raikov without taking proper evasive action had been an open invitation for physical acquaintance of the unpleasantly (or pleasantly, if you were into that sort of thing) forcible kind. Seeing him at all during the period in question had nearly slipped Ocelot's mind. Raikov hardly qualified as Raikov without some kind of attendant mental scarring. Perhaps he simply hadn't noticed Ocelot, either.

Now, however, there was no question. It was too late to throw him off, not without incurring unacceptable delays.

Without breaking stride, Ocelot braced himself.

Raikov looked at him.

No sudden movements.

No punch to the face just to see what he would do.

No physical greeting on a level of familiarity inappropriate for...well, anyone.

No glint to the eyes that any veteran of his company knew was the only warning he would get.

Nothing.

He, too, had lost something.

In the time it took to pull a trigger, Ocelot gave him the only thing he had.

"Time travel," he said. "Fifty years in the future. To find someone I love."

Raikov looked at him.

Underneath the pulse of urgency, Ocelot could feel the texture of his mind sweeping methodically over the statement, tracing it word by word.

As slowly as an ice floe breaking, or forming, Raikov grinned.

"Kinky," he said approvingly.

Ocelot turned left at the end of the corridor, and heard a muffled thud.

As he ran through the list of running debts owed him that could be paid in rapid transportation, Adamska reflected that anyone who closed his eyes when he smiled should know better than to do it while not standing still.

---

It had taken a day to sink in.

The Boss was dead. He'd been the one to kill her. And it'd all been over some- some *game*. People like him weren't supposed to understand it. They were just supposed to take their door prizes – Big Boss? Christ, did the guy who came up with that one even speak English? - and sit quietly until they were called up to bleed and die for the next round. At least he could take some visceral satisfaction in knowing that they hadn't gotten their lily-white hands on what they'd been after. That'd gone elsewhere. The very first night back, when he'd gotten both fucked and fucked over by his erstwhile ally, the double (triple? He'd lost count) agent from – China? The hell had *that* come from? And he should have known. He should have god-damned known.

First, he'd tried getting angry about it. That worked for a while. But then, he had to figure out exactly who he was angry at. Most of the people involved, hell, even Volgin, had just been doing their job. No questions asked. Not all that different from him, when it came down to it. When he tried getting angry at the upper ranks, he started wondering about the kind of mentality that would set this whole thing up, and then he just got confused.

Then he'd tried getting depressed about it. That hadn't worked at all. He didn't know exactly how to do it. Whenever he tried, he ended up pacing and trying to think of something else.

He considered getting even for it. That had held some promise. Gather up as many people who had been used by the machine as he could, then turn around and throw as many wrenches into it as possible until it put a stop to them. But it wasn't the kind of thing that could get beyond a two-bit revenge fantasy. Not even, he had to admit, an especially well thought out one. He wasn't the guy you got the plans from. He was the guy you gave a knife and a target.

For a minute, he'd given due consideration to going crazy over it. But then, for a while there he'd kept seeing a floating dead guy every once in a while, so he couldn't imagine there was all that much territory left to cover.

After long thought, he settled on getting drunk about it.

He grabbed a bottle, grabbed a glass, poured, and watched the door slam open.

"You're going to be cloned," Ocelot said.

John said the first thing that came to mind.

"What?"

He thought it was fairly good, given the circumstances.

"You're going to be cloned," Ocelot repeated patiently.

John said the second thing that came to mind.

"No I'm not."

"Yes," said Ocelot, "you are. Several times, in fact. There will be a set of twins. You'll tell the blond one the other is superior, and he'll go crazy and stage a revolt from a weapons development lab in Alaska."

John said, "Why are you in my house?"

"Because it all seems to start when you take a band of mercenaries out into the middle of nowhere and declare yourselves a country, for the sake of finding people to fight with. A waste of effort if you ask me. It's not as if there's ever a lack of aggressive little countries with nothing better to

do. But I have it from a-" -a fog came over his eyes, momentarily- "reliable source-" -and was gone- "that that's how it happens." Ocelot glanced around him, as though noticing where he was for the first time. "You know, you really should keep your door locked."

"I'm beginning to realize that now," said John.

"Where was I? Ah, right. You're going to call the country Outer Heaven, and you're going to get yourself killed there by one of the clone twins."

"No I'm not." Upon further consideration, John added, "You're crazy."

"No I'm not." As soon as it was out of his mouth, Ocelot held one hand in the air, finger upraised. "Wait. You're right."

"About you being crazy?"

"No, the other part. You don't die until a few years later, when you try the same thing again, with the exact same result, except that you stay dead that time. So does a soldier named Gray Fox, but he's brought back to life much later as a cyborg. Incidentally, he cuts off my arm, so that it's replaced with one that belonged to the twin clone. Not the one that kills you. The other one. The one you should make sure never to say anything at all about genetics to. Apparently he got all of your recessive genes and the other gets the dominant ones – the more you think about it the less sense it makes, so don't bother – and that makes him angry for some reason. Or maybe it's the other way around, I'm not sure. Just avoid the subject. Anyway, I'm there when he dies but by that time I've gone as mad as Volgin, so try to prevent that. That is, if there's another one of me in this time period. This one," he said, waving a hand at himself, "isn't going to be here for long. Things to do. But if there is one, keep an eye on him, would you? Or kill him. Killing him might work."

Jack eyed him. He only had the one eye to work with, so it took twice the effort. "You've been eating the mushrooms from Svatogornyj, haven't you."

"No, no no! You've got it all wrong."

Jack found it more than a little unfair that Ocelot was the one acting frustrated.

"Here," the boy said, "I'll make it simple for you." He ticked off the points on his fingers. "One: keep your offspring close, cloned or otherwise, and don't pit them against each other, no matter how amusing it might seem at the moment. Two: don't start any wars or found any sovereign nations. Three: don't commission any nuclear death machines. Four: if I grow a ponytail, shoot me. Do you want to write any of this down?"

"Look," John sighed, feeling suddenly very tired, "I just finished getting used for one Machiavellian plot. Can you leave me alone for a couple days before the next one? It'll give you time to come up with a better story."

"No, no." Ocelot shoved a hand through his hair. Which looked, oddly enough, a lot longer than one week's time could account for. "It's all true. I know how it sounds. Believe me."

Figuring that, whatever the kid was up to, it didn't merit changing his immediate plans, Jack picked up his glass. "You lost your hat," he pointed out.

"That's not important."

Halfway to its destination, the glass stopped.

Tiny ripples stirred along the surface as John set it down. He leaned forward, arms crossed.

He said, "Start from the beginning."

Eventually, he stopped interrupting or telling him he was making no sense and just listened.

The kid was waiting, perched on the edge of the chair John had finally gotten him to sit down in so he'd stop pacing. John could almost see his tail twitching.

"I'm pretty sure," John said finally, "that's not what 'phantom limb syndrome' means."



Before the kid could jump up and start pacing and ranting again, he held a hand up to forestall him. He was getting to it.

It was a new kind of eerie, hearing somebody he'd last seen trying to kill him tell him how he was going to die.

"Outer Heaven," John said, half to himself. The name had a sort of resonance. "So that's how it ends." All in all, it wasn't much different from what he had assumed, except for him being the one in the middle of the fortress and not a nameless grunt watching himself bleed in the field. A fortress, and a machine. The idea sat uneasily in his stomach.

"How it could have ended," Ocelot corrected. "I'm depending on you to change it."

"Do it yourself," John said, downing the whiskey in a long gulp. He was tired of people depending on him. "It's your future too."

"I can't." Ocelot looked almost regretful. "I have..." -that weird haze to his eyes again- "...someone to find." He shook it off, and gave a steady glare that nearly made John grin from nostalgia. "In any case, you're the one it all centers around, so you're the one who's going to have to stop it. So it's up to you, and this."

Ocelot's hand moved, and for a second John wondered why he had bothered to come up with all that if he was just going to shoot him anyway. The hand went past the holster and into his pocket. He drew something out and held it up, like an artifact.

"Adamska, that's a robot," John said wearily.

"No it's not," he said, and went on before John could argue. "It's the key to the whole thing."

John gave him a long, level look.

Ocelot glanced down at the tiny, plastic thing in his hand, and, for the first time, looked unsure. "If it works."

He straightened, looking like a man who, at four thousand feet, is about to find out whether he what he has is a parachute or somebody's laundry. John had been on the other side of that expression enough to know that he was saying a prayer too brief to fit into words and forcing himself not to close his eyes.

Ocelot pushed a button.

*Click.*

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/24/>

# chapter 25

**Stray** by **Dahne**

*What can change the nature of a man?*

One confronted darkness, boundless and immeasurable. The shadow loomed over it, vaster by many times than the shape it threatened to engulf. Motionless depths that swallowed motion, angles that deadened light. One stood at the mouth of the abyss, gazed into it, and hissed.

"There's nothing in there, Tanya," Otacon said wearily.

He threw another few bolts into the box, lugged it over to the shelves against the back wall, and shoved it into an empty spot. Tanya followed at his heels, mewling.

"Don't know what to make of it, huh?" Otacon looked down at her with sympathy. "People vanishing into thin air on you. Just when you were getting along, too."

The cat headbutted his calf as he as he reached up to grab two other boxes, labeled in fading pencil as 'Circuitry' and 'TTIDKWTa,' respectively. He turned around, narrowly avoided tripping over her, and went back to the center to continue to collect debris.

Crouching down, he started going through the various piles. Construction always left a lot of effluvia in its wake, and Otacon had figured that now was as good a time as any to try to clean up a little. He wasn't quite ready to go inside and confront Snake. Not that the soldier would actually say anything, but he had a way of not saying anything very loudly. Anyway, it was better than watching Tanya stalk around the space between the machine's pillars, yowling and hissing and sometimes just mewling in a lost, lonely way, like questions she would never get the answers to.

"I can still remember," Otacon told her as she paced in front of the boxes. "I didn't forget. That's one theory down, at least." He felt his mouth try to smile. "But..." He sighed. "That memory could be it. It's weird, you know? Hardly an hour's gone by, and already it seems like it might've never been real at all..."

Otacon leaned forward to pick up an item. Positively identifying it as a Thing That I Don't Know What It Is, he sat back on his heels, dropped it into the second box, and felt something swing and knock lightly against his chest.

He wrapped his hand around it, the bullet feeling cool against his palm. His thumb slid against the smoothness of worn metal, darker where it was streaked with powder, up to the the chain, lumpy as though often broken and often mended. Before he could help it, his eyes were closed, and he was remembering.

*Cool fingers, bending his with a firm touch. "Keep this." And another thing...*

"He didn't mean it," Otacon said conversationally, giving his head a hard shake. He swallowed a few times, throat dry. Must be the dust. "He was just...screwing with me. Or, maybe he thought he meant it. He's young. Ow!"

Tanya glared at him over a mouthful of his arm. After a little longer than was really necessary, she let go, turned her back, and began washing herself furiously.

"Yeah, I know," Otacon admitted. "I'm being stupid."

Though the cat didn't pause, he sensed a general mien of agreement.

"Anyway," he continued, disengaging a handful of small circuitboards that had somehow become entwined in a coil of wire while it was doing a reasonable impersonation of a tumbleweed, "it was all just a weird thing that happened. That just makes it a...weirder thing."

Things like that weren't meant to happen. It wasn't right, for somebody to know more about someone else than he did himself. It felt indefinably obscene. Like looking at a dirty magazine of some alien lifeform, without knowing which were the parts that were supposed to be covered. It would have been weird enough if it had just been some random soldier, who'd wandered here from someplace and sometime back when they still had mistranslations saying that the first nuclear reactor had been built in a pumpkin field. And not who it was.

Otacon stared down at his hands and whispered, "Why him?"

Thinking about it wasn't getting anything done. It was over with, anyway.

Otacon did his best to untangle a few of the wires, while he was at it. Maybe these had been meant to serve a purpose, in some stage of his haphazard planning. No use now. Safe to box it all up and put it away, until inspiration struck and he began another project. Otacon didn't think that would happen for a while.

Apparently aware that nothing she could do to her fur as going to make it stop sticking out like that, Tanya had given up on her grooming and gone back to sniffing around the base of the machine.

"It's no use," Otacon told her, picking a few circuits free and depositing them with the others. "It's never going to get used again. People shouldn't mess around with that kind of thing. I should have known that." He grimaced to himself. "I'll take it apart, as soon as... as soon as I have the time. Maybe in the meantime more people will come through." He laughed, a little unsteadily. "I might get a chance to meet Big Boss after all."

There was a small ping. Tanya, batting at the machine's base with her forepaw.

"It's not like it's a disappointment or anything," Otacon said. "It was impossible in the first place. If anything was going to happen, it would have happened already. There wouldn't be any time lag between the past and its effects on the future. Unless..." His hands stopped moving. "If Fiona's Principle provided terrafractal distortion, and..."

Caught in the grip of sudden inspiration, he fumbled for a calculator and input numbers furiously.

"...when you factor in the square of Cyrus' Constant, and the Tertiary Toma Variable, and lean it toward certain quantities of presence/absence..."

His fingers moved faster.

"...bridge it with the Zenan Theorem, and you get...!"

Otacon paused.

Brows arching quizzically, he frowned down at the display,

He read, "'Disingenuous entropy'?"

A noise made Otacon look up, annoyed. Not only had he been talking to a cat, she wasn't even listening. Instead she was in front of the arch, ears back, legs splayed, orange fur spread out like quills at all the angles it could think of, as though prepared for some great universal feline battle royale. She resembled a small, misshapen, and very angry traffic cone. Issuing from her throat, growing incrementally louder by the second, was a long, low growl.

"There's nothing *there*, Tanya," said Otacon, exasperated.

He got halfway through the sentence before it stopped being true.

In the center of the arch, here was a smudge of white light.

Otacon took off his glasses. Carefully, he cleaned them with the edge of his shirt. He put them back on.

It was getting bigger. And brighter.

Tanya was scrambling backwards on stiff legs, her voice rising in pitch and intensity. The light must have been heavily concentrated; as it grew, the parts of the metal frame it covered seemed to

vanish altogether. It was moving faster.

For an instant, it stopped.

"Huh," said Otacon. "That's funny..."

It melted outward in a clean, soundless explosion.

Otacon watched the world come undone and wondered why he was not afraid.

---

A lifting and a separation, oddness on the brink of pain, as though half of his atoms were sifted apart and drifting, only to condense...

Adamska didn't know how long he stared into the white darkness, wondering what had gone wrong.

"I'm sorry." The voice came from behind him. A man's voice, in unfamiliar clarity and a well-known tone of gentle admonition. "But, you can't have thought it would be that easy."

"You know," Adamska admitted without turning, "for a minute there, I did."

There was no need for motion. The man in black stood in front of him, boots a few centimeters above where the ground would be if there had been a ground, the focal point of endless white. Adamska was unimpressed to see that he cast no shadow.

"You," he said.

"Me," The Sorrow agreed.

Adamska found it something of a relief to be able to look at him without the annoyance of his ectoplasmic sneaking around. Grey, black, and white, a monochromatic man. His glasses were broken. They did not magnify his eyes. He was smiling as though at a joke everyone knew and only he understood.

"You don't look all that sorrowful," Adamska said critically.

"Everyone has his way of mourning." The smile did not move.

"I'm dead, then." Adamska shrugged. "That's acceptable."

"This is not your death, though death is, as always, a possibility." The man gazed down at him with unwavering benevolence. It was irritating. "This is where you choose."

"I've already made my choice."

"There is always a choice to make, when ushering someone across the line between life and death."

"I've done that before." The revolver hung heavy at his waist, silent reassurance. It was real, therefore so was he.

"Yes," The Sorrow said, as though he had known as much already. "But not in this direction."

Adamska's eyes narrowed. He had little patience for people being cryptic, unless it was him. "Get to the point. I'm half-dead. Now what?"

The Sorrow murmured a soft, laughing sound. "A border, yes, Life and death? Perhaps. Say rather, being, and not being. Through your own will, you have created a nexus. A locus point of possibility. All that's left is to decide what it is you want."

"Done," Adamska said. His eyes cut across the expanse of white that felt like blindness pressing from the outside in. "Where is he?"

"That," The Sorrow said, the smile for the first time reflecting the name, "is also up to you."

"I don't understand you," Adamska said with cold caution. His hand was on the revolver, and he held his mind very still. "How do I get out of here?"

"You want to change the world," The Sorrow said.

"Yes." The world as it had been was not satisfactory.

Tension gathered at the back of Adamska's neck, though he refused to let himself turn around. He wanted to be done with this place. There was the unmistakable crawling-eye of being watched. More so; as though he were surrounded on every side by things he couldn't see. If he moved the width of a breath, he might feel them touch his cheek...

"If you would change the world," The Sorrow said, fading into the distance while staying still, in the annoyingly metaphysical way he had, "you must let the world change you..."

---

There was nothing.

It vanished.

---

They call the boy *kot*, because he eyes them like a stray before snatching the bread from their hands and backing away fast, making it vanish before they can change their minds, young but hard and scraggly and glaring at them with pure mistrustful eyes. He doesn't answer where he came from and they know better than to ask anyone who might know.

They tell him to stay off the firing ranges, but he trusts in his luck. He watches them, and learns their mistakes.

In the long nights, they invent stories. He is a wolf who took a boy's shape to act as a spy. He escaped from Baba Yaga's hut by climbing down the chicken legs. He is a ghost or a spirit, a transformed fox or a minor devil.

A young soldier suggests that he is an orphan or a runaway, who stays here because he has nowhere else to go.

They watch him from the creaking barracks steps, and this seems least likely of all.

He gets in the way of the wrong man, once, and is sent flying with a savage kick, the boot sketching a broad black arc against the snow. His ribs are bruised, but he heals quickly.

Four days later, the soldier's Makarov explodes in his hand.

Out loud they call it luck, and they tell no more stories.

The boy himself learns silence.

He likes knowing something they do not, even if it is only that he has a name. He knows already that he is different from them. They were not born here.

The first time he is given a gun, it takes him long minutes to understand. The shape familiar to his eyes is foreign to his hands, the slow recognition of discovering something one has heard described a thousand times. His first shot is far off, from the onlookers' standpoint, if aiming had been his purpose. He wants to understand a thing before he would use it. His handlers would not follow the logic. By idle turns, he considers which of them to turn it on. His eyes flicker and one begins a crafted speech on why he would best hesitate before trying anything foolish. The boy isn't listening; he has heard much the same before. He finds with interest that the most charming image is that of turning it on himself.

The child understands that what he holds is the power to destroy himself, on a whim if he sees so fit. It makes him happy.

As long as he has this, he has at least one choice.

They stood in the snow, watching, unseen. The soldiers lived around and through them, unconcerned. They were no obstacle.

Adamska let them pass. They had nothing to do with him.

"Why are you showing me this?" he said, when he couldn't stand it any longer.

"This is what you remember." It could have been a question.

"Yes." Adamska did not have to look to know what he would see. His feet were buried to the ankle in

snow, while the other man's floated smugly above it.

With something like relief, he let anger burn the threat of chill away.

This stranger dared to look into his past.

"This has nothing to do with you," Adamska said, refusing to confer the dignity of looking at him.

For all the good it did. He only rearranged the molecules of space so that there was nowhere else to look.

"This is when," he said, smiling, "you learned that the only thing no one had more control over than you was the moment you would die."

"What does it matter?" Adamska could see the silhouettes, running in patterns that had seemed to have reason once, behind the shape of the gray man. "Regret can't change anything. I wouldn't want to. It's no use to pretend someone's past doesn't affect who he is." He tucked his fingers under his arms and stamped into the soft snow. "It's cold."

"Is it?" He was laughing at him, behind the smile. Red gathered in the inner corner of his eye. "Then let us go somewhere warmer."

---

Heat sings through his limbs, vision narrowed to the need not to let him out of his sight. The impact sounds of boots against shallow water, fast breath against throat, leather against gunmetal, follow him but can't keep up with the speed of his exhilaration. The light is in front of him. The others are behind.

*You wanted it to last forever.*

The dogs are at his heels, nearly as eager. They understand the intensity pounding through his veins, the transient and perfect joy of becoming for an instant something transcendently mindless. The light dazzles eyes grown accustomed to shadowed places and holds one dark shape hazed against its halo, the mechanism of beacon inverted.

*Is this what you want?*

The light is a lie. There is no escape. They both know it, they the only two that matter, and they give everything they have to running.

He luxuriates in the gift the moment gives him, the glorious suspension of disbelief that, if he can catch him, the one he pursues will be his.

*Is this the purity you longed for?*

He feels alive, here in the moments when it can so easily fall apart. He cannot not kill him. It is not permitted. There will be a standoff, and there is no way it can end without the death of one or both but he knows it will. He will force a miracle, the grace the other pulls down knowingly or willingly or not shall pass to him through mere proximity, and it will be his miracle as well.

*What does it preserve, for you?*

He wants it to never end.

*Is this what you want?*

Water displaced by the passing soldiers washed over the tops of Adamska's boots. His lips twisted in a grimace of distaste.

"No."

He stood on one of the walkways that flanked the chase, conventional shadow to his left and sentient version to his right.

Adamska's eyes tracked the pursuer and the pursued. "With no conclusion, it doesn't mean anything."

"You did not want it to end," The Sorrow said, watching them all and smiling at nothing. "That wish could be granted."

"It's a memory," said Ocelot, waving his hand with artificial nonchalance. "Let it stay one. Nice place to visit, but I wouldn't want to live here." He scowled at the shadows. "I can't see a damned thing."

The Sorrow nodded gravely. "Then let us find a brighter place."

---

The air stinks of blood, ozone, and pain.

The last echoes of a hoarse scream fade into walls built to absorb it, in pitiless light that casts no shadows. The heat and stench are calibrated to oppress fragile senses. In the lovingly crafted scenery of hell, Ocelot feels, finally, as though he belongs.

The man in the center, idol and sacrifice, pants raggedly, hanging in chains. He stinks of scorched hair and fear. The burning is internal, charred invisibly into the patterns of his flesh. One wound is clear. The right eye is a tattered mass, leaking a steady stream of bloody tears in ghoulish near-comic melodrama. The pride in Ocelot is heady, that he has had a small part in ruining this man.

Ocelot has never loved or wanted to destroy anyone more.

The Boss is strong enough to fire her Patriot one-handed, and she puts her full arm into the blow. Ocelot turns with the force but does not feel it. He sees her speak but does not hear it, does not follow the answering rumble of the Colonel's voice. He hears the pulsing of blood that is not his. A shard of metal cuts into his hand. He needs to be closer.

The stone Adamska pressed his back against as he watched was barely cooler than his skin. He realized dimly that he no longer cared about letting blood get on his clothes.

The sound he made was more laugh than sob, by a soft margin.

"Here," he said dully, sliding down the wall until solid ground made him stop. The renewal of the months-old pain made him smile sadly. "I should have known." Adamska shook his head and laughed. "So you're a sadist too."

"There is such thing," said The Sorrow, above and beside him, "as necessary pain."

They gazed together at the other ones, the ghosts or memories or hallucinations, suspended in midstep or mid-cringe or midair. Perfectly frozen, still as a splaylimbed dead thing.

"Why did you bring me here?" Adamska said, with the carelessness that came from expecting no answer.

The Sorrow smiled. "What makes you think it was me?"

Adamska did not appear to be listening. He looked only at the bloody man and, slowly, stood. Bare hands crawled like spiders for support against the wall.

"Why do you keep returning to this moment?" The Sorrow said, as though it were of academic interest. He treaded air just beyond the edge of Adamska's vision. Adamska was moving forward. "What is it that keeps you here? You keep looking for it, even when you can't let yourself find him again, for fear that the unbreakable thing has broken. From here, you never stop searching."

"No," Adamska said, but he spared little attention.

Adamska let himself be carried into the center, pulled forward by instinct and will. He stepped

into Ocelot's skin and feels time settle around him like an unheeded glove.

The bit of metal rings against the floor. He does not need it. He will find him, again.

Adamska leans forward into the vision of his untouched eye, touches his shoulder with no excuse, and says,

"Pain cannot change the nature of a man."

---

"Come on," Adamska said, sliding out of the husk like a ghost leaving its body. He took the force of animation with him, leaving the memory to solidify itself unchanging, in the stasis of a discard. The bright blood on the walls was fading, like a poorly preserved photograph. The obsession that had sustained it was flowing away, stealing strength back to the source. Adamska turned his back to it and strode to the door. He found he liked the sound of boots without spurs. "Whatever's next. I'm done here."

The Sorrow smiled.

A hand reached for the handle. It paused, like a cautious bird.

"What's behind the door?" Adamska said, tossing the words over his shoulder.

"Possibilities."

His smile could have meant anything.

"Ah," said Adamska, and nodded sagely, as though this were an answer.

The door opened and shut.

*If...*

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/25/>



# chapter 26

## Stray by Dahne

*What can change the nature of a man?*

Nothing but white.

The soldier could remember a time when he hadn't hated white. White ground, white horizon, white sky. He'd never known that a landscape could be so featureless, outside of a nightmare, without so much as the tip of a mountain to promise there might be an end to it. The white is saving him. The snow that had fallen two days after the battle. The white that holds the footprints of his unit. The soldier should be grateful.

The cold, at least, holds no fear for him. He has all the heat he needs flowing from the warm, secret place beneath his ribs where the bullet is lodged. If it all flows out he will be cold, so he keeps his hands over it tight. They stay warm, too, though his gloves are wet. If he turns back the little red drops along his path would relieve him from the ache of white and light, and he would see if anyone was following him. The soldier does not turn back.

Footprints. They will lead him, though the men who left them are gone. Footprints have to lead somewhere. Anywhere other than this endless white. It's his own fault for falling behind. They couldn't afford to wait for anyone, not when for all they knew the enemy was on their heels. Retreats were like that. Half of them were injured, some worse than him. Along the way he'd met a few. He'd had to step over one.

The soldier reminds himself that pain is good. Pain means he is still alive. Someone had told him that once. Scarred man? No. Maybe. Didn't matter. He repeats it in his mind, over and over again in time with steps he refuses to let stumble, over the part of his mind that wants to remember that this kind of mental echolalia might be a sign of how bad things are getting. Pain is good. Pain is good. Pain is good.

The footprints are his onus and his salvation. As long as they keep going, he has to keep going too. He can't lay down and rest. Even just for a minute. Just til he hurts a little less. No. He can't, even if the enemy isn't behind him. They might not be. They might not be able to afford to hunt down the last, tattered remnants of a pathetic little battle. Or they might not be able to afford not to. The soldier doesn't know. The man who shot him hadn't had boots. Strips of cloth, tied around his feet. The war has gone on too long. Up close, the enemy is as desperate as they are. The soldier wants that to be more satisfying than it is. The man who shot him was dead now. Lying in the snow, looking so surprised, as though he'd thought his target wouldn't shoot back. The soldier should feel disgust at being wounded by an inept fool, but he feels little beyond the soft, spreading core of numbness...

No. Pain is good.

The soldier can see one footprint at a time. It isn't worth the effort to lift his head, when he knows that all he will see is more. He doesn't need any more than one. One foot to follow. And it is there, always always there, even if it's going soft and blurred at the edges and he shakes his head and that doesn't help, always always there. He has them, and they will lead him out. Away from this directionless horizon and monochrome sky. That they continue, straight on never stopping, is the only way to know he isn't walking in a tiny circle, a universe self-contained. They're getting harder to see. He forces his eyes to focus and that doesn't help. Something cold brushes his cheek. He looks up.

Snow is falling.

The soldier topples heavily onto his side and laughs the white black.

---

Hell is softer than he had expected.

Warmer, too. That is, the flames are not meant to crackle invitingly, and spread welcome heat into marrow he had thought iced over for good. The darkness is not said to shelter and comfort, or to be scented faintly with the odor of wet dog. Ah, well. Propaganda is often wrong.

There had been, he knows dimly, an appropriately hellish journey through the darkness, half-aware. The memory in his body has preserved a sense of being dragged through cold that scrapes at his skin, something jostling him and pulling at his pain, relentless, a voice worrying the edges of his consciousness that would not let him rest.

"...*nna be okay...*"

The tormentor is gone, now. It has left him, perhaps by mistake, somewhere wonderfully warm, and soft, as he could hardly remember places had the potential to be. He has, he decides, been granted one last, lovely dream before dying, not in image but the tactile sense of safety and a sound of snow falling somewhere that is not onto him...But the pain is still there, though its fire is now contained, no longer spreading in a wet pool across his stomach. In its place is a solid, tangible warmth, resting against him. Close, but he wants it closer. He takes it in his arms and pulls it there.

"Oh!"

The warmth is, on further consideration, man-shaped.

It says, "Guess you're awake, huh?"

The soldier opens his eyes, just enough to see if he is right.

There is shadow and flickering, red-gold light, the dilations of its brightness corresponding to the rhythm of hum and crackle. He is in someone's bed, his back to the fire. Light leaks across him to give a charcoal sketch of a face and wide owl's eyes.

The man stares at him and stammers.

"I- I'm sorry. I didn't mean to...I mean, you were hurt, and cold- that is, you still *are* hurt, and- You were half-frozen, and it seemed like the best way to... I was just trying... Sorry."

His accent places him, but the soldier's instincts know without being asked that this is not his enemy.

The man turns to get up. A hand on his wrist stops him, and makes him look back.

"No," the soldier says. His English is rough, but it will do. His uniform has betrayed him already. "Stay with me."

A pause. "Yeah." He settles back. "Yeah, okay." The bed creaks, and the warmth returns.

The soldier lays his head against his shoulder and sleeps.

---

He wakes again to the chill that means morning.

For a while, he watches the stranger, crouching in front of the fire and adding more logs under the supervision of a large white-and-gray dog. For the first time in many weeks the soldier has lost the urgency of movement, and he is in no hurry to reclaim it. The stranger turns around, sees him watching. Smiles.

"Awake, huh?" He stands up, brushing soot off his hands onto pants already stained by the habit. "Feeling better?"

The soldier sits up and nods cautiously.

"Good." The man's voice breathes relief. He pushes the pair of glasses perched on his nose up

with the smoothness of habit. "I was getting worried, for a while there. You were in bad shape."

The soldier gives him a long look. "You saved me." It could be an accusation.

"Well, sort of." He looks down, as though abashed. "Really it was Sam who found you." He indicates the dog that stares at the soldier, its blue eyes radiating seraphic serenity. "Anyway," -as though the subject embarrasses him, "you're probably hungry."

"Yes." The soldier moves his feet to the floor, shifting his weight in small discrete units. He sees his shirt hanging neatly to dry on the back of a chair near the fire and notices for the first time that it is not on him. His hands and eyes examine the bandages in its place, clean white and wrapped with an expert touch.

"Had to patch you up a bit," the stranger mutters to the floorboards in explanation.

He gets up, and at his gesture the soldier follows. He speaks of inconsequential things, as the soldier eats and listens to his voice and the slow, steady beat of loneliness. He gives him food, and talks, and does not ask his name.

There is something odd about the man. Some familiar ache about the sense of inwardness that surrounds him, an air of quiet pulled too close to be dispelled by words. The soldier had been unable to distinguish the ache of hunger from the other ache in his gut, and ate, saying little beyond an occasional grunt of acknowledgment. Unspoken questions crowd the back of his mind, and the answers that might lead him back to his allies or might leave him stranded here indefinitely. He asks where the man had gotten the dog.

"Oh, I've always had Sam." He gestures vaguely and knocks over the salt.

Soon, the soldier is something else he has always had. He falls into the patterns of the stranger's quiet life. With no battles to bookend it time loses focus, hazing into long expanses of sun or firelight, little to mark its passing but the gradual lessening of pain. Observation is in the soldier's nature, and he watches the quiet man closely, unsure of what he was looking for and finding it in the earnest, unsure face, the shy eyes that will meet his if he is careful, the gentleness of his hands as he changes the bandages with studied circumspection, as the soldier watches and lifts his arms or turns as he directs. He smells like something the soldier has forgotten the name of. The nights are the same, sitting on the low, rough bed in front of the fire talking of nothing, listening to the dog make muffled barks at its dreams. Until the night when at the dying embers' signal of the late hour the quiet man stands, and feels the soldier's grasp at his wrist.

"No," he says. "Stay with me." And kisses him, to say the rest.

He falls toward him as though gravity has realigned and sighs into his mouth, feathering his shoulders with light-fingered caress. When he brushes the bandages he pulls back, says, "You're-"

"No." The soldier takes his hand and guides it to press against where the wound had been, just below his ribs. "Gone." And kisses him.

They make fervent, needful love under the shifting drape of the last firelight and the sound of snow settling on the roof. The soldier gathers up his cries like fragments of polished glass and locks them away, hidden in the safe part of his mind. He takes it out again and adds the arch of his back and the heat of his skin, his deep ragged panting and the scent of him sated, the lingering of his hand on his cheek and the play of a lazy smile on lips dyed deep red with his kiss.

After that, time means nothing at all.

It must be morning when they find him, because he stands with his back to the sun and his shadow points their way, toward uniforms stark against the encompassing white. There are five of them, perhaps more; he ducks into the house too quickly to be sure.

He pulls on his clothing with strictly controlled urgency, telling the quiet man's puzzled gaze all

that he can. He has been followed, though he does not know how.

"No, you weren't."

Expressing his confusion does not require him to slow.

"I...I'm a doctor." He hangs his head, hiding his eyes behind his hair as though frightened or ashamed. "In exchange for leaving me alone, mostly, they... I help them, sometimes. When they're hurt."

The soldier can hardly help but laugh, to think that he thought he would care.

He has grabbed all he can, enough to survive for a few days. He has lived through worse. His sense of time tells him that they are drawing near. He reclaims his belt and fastens it with fingers that have not forgotten, revolver hanging back at his waist. He takes the quiet man in his arms and kisses him fiercely.

"I forced you," the soldier tells him. "You know nothing."

He smiles crookedly. "I really don't."

"Good."

'Goodbye' had been one of the first words taught to him. He does not say it.

They are moving slowly, with a wounded comrade, and he has a good head start. It is two days before they find him.

His boots leave crisp tracks in the new, clean snow.

There are four of them. The wounded one must have stayed behind. The revolver finds two before falling to the ground from a grip gone slippery and red. One more impact shatters the fragile silence, followed by the small, basso whisper of a body that has forgotten how to stand. The snow half-buries him, but the soldier does not feel cold.

---

*It's not real.*

*Who's to say?*

*I say.*

*You're the one who created it.*

*Does it have to be this way?*

*Perhaps. Shall we see?*

---

Underneath the din of industry, grating creaks. Footfalls drop like heavy stones, the long interval between each creating the illusion that what produces them is moving slowly. The roaring furnaces fail to drown out the watery noise of rubber curling in upon itself. Harbingers operate on a separate level of sound.

Ocelot sometimes wonders if Volgin makes a deliberate effort to be ominous, or if it just comes naturally.

There's a lot of time to wonder on these inspections. Predictably enough, the colonel insists on making a full stop behind every man and examining his progress at leisure, periodically uttering grunts that could just as easily mean approval, indifference, or lethal displeasure, until the precise moment of imminent nervous breakdown. Whereupon he gives a muttered, "Huh," turns, and proceeds to the next victim.

It's amusing, the first dozen times. A few weeks of being expected to tag along on these sorts of little errands whenever he lacks a good enough excuse noticeably dims the novelty. At this point, Ocelot is beginning to think that, were the KGB or the Americans to launch a sudden assault on the fortress, he might die of sheer gratitude.

It seems there is at least one person who has managed to be deaf to both the sounds and aura of palpable dread that precede the colonel. As they approach the Shagohod's base, the engineer standing in the slightly sunken service well that runs beside its treads does not look up. More tellingly, he does not make the reflexive, aborted half-turn of someone who does not look because he knows what he'll see and that it's not going to be good.

Ocelot is willing to wager that it's more because of this than out of any actual knowledge of how construction should be progressing that Volgin growls, "What's that?"

Something about the engineer seems familiar, which is strange in itself. The bevy of cringing scientists that skulk through Groznyj Grad have never warranted Ocelot's attention. From this vantage point above he could see little but the man's hair, brown streaked with gray. Of course that would seem familiar. If any of the engineers 'volunteering' on Volgin's special project hadn't been graying to begin with, they were now.

The engineer still has not turned around.

The colonel is not used to being ignored.

Despite it all, Ocelot finds he is beginning to enjoy himself.

At the third attempt, as the rest of the hanger's occupants shuffle unconsciously closer to the nearest well-grounded object, the engineer turns, blinks owl-large eyes, and says, "Huh?"

Something in the pit of Ocelot's stomach lurches. The major tells himself it's relief that he's not the one who's going to have to clean up the mess.

"That," Volgin says, with the tone of patience calibrated to suggest how little of it is left, "was supposed to be completed three days ago."

"Oh, that?" The engineer adjusts his glasses and peers at where the thick, gloved finger points. Ocelot gives consideration to handing over his gun and instructing him on how to save them all some trouble. "Yeah, we're a bit behind schedule, er, sir. The treads have this problem, see, where if they get a good impact, like from a grenade or a rocket, they lock up. It's just for a minute, and it's not really likely that anybody would get close enough to do something like that, but I think I might be able to figure out a way to fix it with a little more--"

After staring through most of the engineer's babble with the scowl his face defaults to, Volgin recovers enough to snap, "Get on with it, then," and strides off.

Ocelot makes to follow, and stops midstride. Carefully casual, he glances back.

His caution is unnecessary. The engineer is already reabsorbed in his work.

---

Ocelot feels the familiar restless stirring in his blood and knows that hunting for sleep will be a waste of time. Instead, he shoves on his boots and walks.

Groznyj Grad has been his base of operations so long he could walk it in a dream. Three wings, main, east, and west. Not that he went into the latter without damn good reason. God only knew what went on in there. Ocelot certainly didn't want to.

It's late, and discounting the meager night guard the halls are empty. Ocelot lets himself wander, listens to his spurs chime against the ground, and thinks about very little at all.

He is not terribly surprised to find himself in front of the Shagohod's hangar. The beast takes up most of the wing. It's as good a thing to stare at as any. He enters.

The cavernous space is deserted, the silence a stark contrast to the day's cacophony, empty but for the hulking mass crouched in the center. How appropriate for Volgin, that his pet project be an overgrown, brutal colossus of a machine. As subtle as a sledgehammer to the face. And, if the stories

are true, as effective. There is much the right man could do with such a machine... Surrounded by reinforced armor, out on the front lines of battle and safe as a turtle with its head drawn in. Feh.

Ocelot hears something.

Sounds like- voices. A voice.

Limbs flowing into tense readiness, Ocelot draws his revolver and stalks forward.

The voice stops before he can hear it clearly, but its source, though hidden by the service well, is amply betrayed. Ocelot hops lightly over the railing and, sights aligned perfectly on the threat, growls, "Freeze!"

"Gaaah!"

Dropping something that lands with a metallic clang, the engineer jumps to a height usually reserved for feline species and whirls around to face the aggressor.

"Oh." Ocelot lowers his gun, categorically refusing to be embarrassed. "It's just you."

The engineer sags against the Shagohod's metal skin, his eyes even wider than they had been earlier that day. "W, *warn* people when you're gonna sneak up like that!"

"That would defeat the purpose," Ocelot points out reasonably, spinning his weapon a few times before returning it to the holster.

"Oh. Yeah. I suppose so. Er. Sir."

Ocelot waves the last part away. The man was awkward enough when he wasn't tripping over appellations. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

The engineer pushes up his glasses. "Oh, is it night? I was wondering why it got so quiet."

Ocelot sighs and tries again. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to fix these treads. Same as before."

"That," Ocelot says, deliberately, getting the sneaking suspicion that one of them was missing something and trying to think of any way it might be him, "was twelve hours ago."

"Oh." He bends down to retrieve the tools he had dropped. "Was it?"

Deciding that this line of inquiry has borne all the fruit it is going to, Ocelot tries something else. "You were talking to someone."

"Er." A pink stain spreads over the engineer's face, starting in the center and creeping outwards. "Not really."

"Yourself?" He wouldn't be the first. A fair number of the scientists are half-crazed from exhaustion and fear and have taken to muttering gibberish about little green frogs or reciting random bits of the Japanese alphabet under their breath. Some of them twitch.

"Um. No." He pats the machine's side, almost affectionately. "Her."

Ocelot's voice is flat enough to exist in only one dimension. "You were talking to the Shagohod."

"Well...yeah."

"In the full knowledge that I may live to regret this: why?"

"See..." He stares up into the shadows by the Shagohod's central turret. "When you work on something long enough, you start to get a feel for it. You get to know its moods. It's hard to describe. You can't put that much of your life into something without feeling like it's, well, going somewhere, you know? Like, when you take a bunch of gears and springs and metal and put them together in the right way, it turns into something more than that. You can only spend so much time with something, getting to know how it works, how it moves, what it needs, everything about it, and not start to think of it as conversation. It's not just a tool, or a weapon. It just has a...different way of being alive."

"Ah, I see." Ocelot nods sagely, following his gaze upwards. "They keep you drugged."

"Yeah, th- Hey!"

And this time Ocelot does laugh.

"Oh." His shoulders slump out of their defensive posture, and he smiles sheepishly in a way that makes him look much younger. "Anyway, people talk to plants. It's the same kind of thing. Except, er, bigger."

Watching him gaze up at the thing as though it is some kind of pet, Ocelot is beset by a sudden curiosity. He leans delicately forward and plucks the engineer's glasses from his face.

"Huh? Hey, what're you-"

"Hold still," Ocelot orders.

His eyes are gray, and just as large up close.

Perhaps he overbalances, and instinctively seeks for a way to make it look intentionally. Or perhaps he just wants to kiss him.

He makes it long and slow, and is surprised at the bright jolt through his blood when he begins, tentatively, to kiss him back.

Ocelot pulls away slightly before he's done. He takes a step back and nods crisply, as though confirming something.

"Well," he says, "good night."

He turns and climbs briskly out of the service well, leaving behind a pair of gray eyes, larger than ever.

On the way back to his quarters, Ocelot considers that, if word of this should get out, all he will have to do is claim to have simply been fucking with him out of boredom. He has a feeling he won't have to.

---

Mikhail Osipovich Zinovy wants to know why he is the only soldier in the world who can head out to the rifle range without his god-damned rifle.

He makes his way through the halls, trying not to look like he's hurrying. He succeeds, to the extent that he looks as though he's trying to wipe frog guts off his boots instead. If he's quick, he's hoping he can grab the rifle and get back before anyone notices anything more than that he's a bit late, which is common enough that no one should notice it. He doesn't need anyone to hear about this. He's still getting shit from back when he threw a grenade at the enemy without pulling the pin first.

As usual, Mikhail has picked the worst possible moment to be absentminded. Lately, everyone in the Ocelot unit has been tense, ever since the Major started acting...odd. He has been making excuses to go down and stare at the Shagohod a lot, these days. It's the sort of thing Volgin does, and that's enough to put anybody on edge. Even when he'd ordered additional arms practice, saying that the lot of them would be lucky to hit a man standing still, no one had complained. Well, much. As much as they might have.

He makes it to the locker room with little time to spare. He goes to his and pulls it open.

If Mikhail had been paying more attention to his surroundings than to being late, he might have gotten warning. But then again, probably not.

His rifle is going to present a problem.

Well, not the rifle itself. It leans innocently in the corner where he had left it. The problem has more to do with the two men in front of it.

He's not sure what would have helped, only that the fact that one of them was the Ocelot Major – who was the other one? A scientist, going by his clothes. Mikhail doesn't think he's seen him before, but he's terrible with faces, and if he's seen this one before it's definitely not while it was wearing

*that* expression – and that he was sucking rather enthusiastically on the other's neck didn't.

For a moment, Mikhail thinks he might be able to slip away unnoticed. He'll go, find someplace private, curl his knees up to his chest and give some long, hard thought to his life.

He should know better than to think he is that lucky.

"Hmm?" the Ocelot commander says. One eye slits open.

Sometimes, when Mikhail was younger, he would stand on the hillsides not far from home, watching the shadows of hawks glide across the long grass in the valley and wondering what the rabbits felt like.

Now, he knows.

"Oh. You."

Mikhail's scurrying thoughts can't seem to accomplish anything more useful than to wonder how someone can keep doing that and talk at the same time. The other man is making soft mewling noises.

Without breaking his concentration, the Major extricates one hand, reaches to the back of the locker, and hands out the rifle. "Here."

Mutely, Mikhail takes it.

The Ocelot Major flicks his hand in clear dismissal, reaches out, and closes the door.

Mikhail is very late to the shooting range.

The first comrade to see him arrive opens his mouth to tell him to stop cunting off and get into position.

When he gets a good look at his face, he stops.

The other soldier takes Mikhail aside, sits him down, and hands him a cigarette. Mikhail lights it gratefully with unsteady hands.

Possessing, like all young people with something they're supposed to be doing, an unerring instinct for something else to do instead, the unit gathers around them.

"What happened?" says the one willing to say it first.

Mikhail takes a long drag. He exhales, and watches the fragments of smoke rise and drift apart.

"All I can say," he intones blankly, "is..."

"What?" his restive audience prompts.

"When you open your locker..."

"*What?*"

Mikhail closes his eyes and tilts his head toward the sun, as though its purity can burn deep into the recesses of his shadow-marred brain.

"...knock."

---

Over the next few weeks, this will prove to be very sound advice.

---

Ocelot steals kisses and fucks him in lockers and tries to pretend that it will always be enough.

In the hot darkness with the sound of his coat sliding off and the tautness of him stretching up into the kiss and the pressure of his thin hands gathering fistfuls of Ocelot's uniform, it feels like it could be.

Until he realizes that it isn't. Until Ocelot gets sent off somewhere, and he forgets about him except as a good fuck. Until he does something, says something, that snatches away Ocelot's pathetic scrap of self-delusion that he agrees to this for any reason other than it sounds like a good idea at the time.

For the first time in his life, it occurs to Ocelot to regret that he's the kind of person it's hard to



say no to.

But this is the moment, when the moans begin to drown out his thoughts, that he can forget that...

Blaring alarms, however, have an annoying way of bringing back reality.

"Damn it," Ocelot mutters. "This had better not be Raikov getting curious about what all the buttons do again." He indulges in a last quick kiss. "It's probably nothing." Something makes him add, "But stay here."

"Why?"

"It might be something."

"Oh."

"Wait for me. I'll come back."

"Right." He straightens his glasses. They are slightly fogged. "Just...be careful, okay?"

"I will," Ocelot promises, to humor him.

He opens the door and steps out, shutting it behind him.

The radio reports intruders at the East Wing entrance. Ocelot sets out at a trot, barking orders all the while, fighting down elation at the appearance of an actual emergency. Not that the previous hadn't been; though the more advanced weapons systems had several safeguards that had to be overridden, it turned out that pressing lots of things at random was one of the methods of doing so. But that sort of thing isn't in Ocelot's jurisdiction, though he supposes it would have had some repercussions that might affect him. Sooner or later, someone would probably have noticed the Ukraine was missing.

By the time Ocelot has made it halfway, he is beginning to wonder if he should worry.

When he gets there, he finds that he doesn't have time to.

They must have been planning this for months. A single, concentrated, massive strike. It's almost impressive. Apparently they hadn't let facts, like how impossible it is to get that many men up the mountain without being seen, get in their way.

Ocelot has been waiting for this for a long time.

He makes a spectacular stand. He vaults from the catwalk and lands on his feet, aiming as he falls, firing and moving on in less than the time it takes the last man to know he is going to die. He empties the chambers and dodges behind an outcropping in the wall to reload, tension thrumming through his body. The second the last bullet slides home he darts out and is alive again. The air throbs symphonic with blood and cordite.

They keep coming. Another, stepping over each one he or his men puts down. It draws on in the time-lapse battles have, morphing into the hysteria of nightmare or macabre comedy, where while no one is watching the fallen actors rise and file to the back as new men. Ocelot realizes that he is already laughing.

No one could ask for anything more.

He's not sure whether the bullet he feels is the first. Adrenaline can be tricky that way. There could have been several there already, and it's just that this is the one that matters. When had he gone to his knees? His arm isn't working. He tells it, lift, aim, shoot, but it doesn't. Only lays there on the tile with red lapping lazily over it. Ocelot wonders how much of the blood is his, and if it matters.

He feels the bullet as a bright point between his ribs, a few inches off from the heart. Fucking KGB. Couldn't they do anything right? But they'll want the Shagohod. They always want whatever they can get. Everyone does. Too far along not to complete now. But need the people. The ones who know it best. Can't replace them, not now. Even they aren't that stupid. Need him. He'll never need them back. Knows better. Will go on, when he's done. No way to ask him not to. And Ocelot won't have to see it. So much easier, this way.

Ocelot watches himself shut down and in an odd way he's happy.

---

*Ah. Again. Such a morbid mind.*

*Pots and kettles, dead man.*

*Is this what you want?*

*It's not real.*

*That's not the question I asked.*

*It's the answer you'll get. I've had enough of this. Get me out of here. You've made your point, whatever it is.*

*I'm not making anything.*

*Call it what you want. Just stop it.*

*What about this?*

---

The colonel surveys the group of scientists dispassionately, as he listens to the steady stream of the status report and mentally boils away the technical jargon to reduce it to what he needs to know. He's gotten quite good at dispassionate surveying, in the past two months. Idly he wonders how these five were chosen as representatives. Luck of the draw, most likely. These would be the ones with the short straws.

It's amusing, how terrified of him they are. (Four of them – the fifth wouldn't have taken any notice if it were the devil himself staring exaggerated ice into those pretty gray eyes.) He has discovered that what he lacks in exceptional stature can be easily made up with force of personality. Part of the ease with which he has consolidated power in Groznyj Grad can be attributed to this, though doubtless much comes from the advantage of being stocked with underlings who are well acquainted with the alternative.

Yes. He has been left quite a legacy by his predecessor, one he has had little trouble living up to. Down to the more unsavory details. He must admit he had learned much from the old fool, and it has all seen good use. Some traditions persevere. Like the room in the prison block that smells of blood. He knows that there are rumors, and has seen men he has fought beside for years turn their eyes blank at his approach. He doesn't see why it should matter to them. It's only the enemy, and only the ones who interest him enough that he wants to see how they break. Let them talk. The one man whose opinion matters doesn't care, so neither does he.

"Good," the colonel says when the report concludes. Everything is going as planned. "That will be all. Dismissed."

Trying rather unsuccessfully to hide their relief, the four scientists headed quickly for the exit, the fifth trailing absentmindedly behind.

"Not you, Emmerich. I need to speak with you."

"Yes, sir," the engineer says promptly. He stops and stands at the other side of the room, back stiff, until the door clicks shut.

Ocelot drops into the commander's chair like a sack of well-coordinated cats. "Hah!" he sighs extravagantly. "All that, just to say the damn thing's on schedule. I'll never understand these scientist types. Present company included. But you knew that."

"Yes, sir," Hal says.

Ocelot snorts rudely. "Don't you 'yes, sir,' me. Just get over here."

"Yes, sir," he says, and laughs when Ocelot rolls his eyes.

His laugh turns into a surprised exclamation when he gets close enough for Ocelot to pull him

into his lap.

"Much better," Ocelot purrs. "It's been hard to get you alone lately."

"I know," Hal sighs. Shyly, he reaches up and winds his arm around Ocelot's shoulders. "It's the Shagohod. We're entering the first stage of completion, and I've got to-"

"*You* don't have to," Ocelot points out. "There's plenty of others to do the grunt work."

"Yeah, but..." His eyes lower. "Thing is, the more I work, the less time I have to worry."

Ocelot's eyebrow arches like a caterpillar preparing for a sprint. "What is there to worry about?"

"This." Hal gestures expansively with his free hand. "Everything. What we're trying to do. Whether or not it'll work."

"Is that right." Ocelot's voice grows thoughtful, his thumb running absently along Hal's collarbone. "The ultimate weapon, an invincible fortress, practically limitless resources... yes, I can see how you would be concerned."

Hal glowers at him, but judging from the tiny creases at the corner of his mouth his heart isn't in it. "You know what I mean. It's just, well, Volgin had all those, too."

Ah. So that's what's bothering him; the thought that history might repeat.

"Volgin also had you and me against him. An advantage our enemies don't have."

"If you say so." Hal is not convinced.

"Don't tell me you feel guilty," Ocelot says, with a hint of incredulity. "He had it coming to him. We just helped it get there."

With the assistance of some creative tampering with the security systems and a bullet to the back of the head. An exit wound had greatly improved the late colonel's looks. It had been a lovely little coup, if Ocelot said so himself. He considered it a particularly nice touch that it had been Volgin's own money that had bought him the promotion to his place. Money is power. And with enough power, you can do anything. Ocelot plans to.

"No, it's not that." Inwardly, Ocelot grins. So even Hal's sympathy has its limits. "I...I don't know if we're doing the right thing. Starting a war."

"Starting? This war's been going on for years. We'll be ending it. One swift, decisive strike and we can win, before it's too late and everyone obliterates each other."

"I know you're right, Adamska," Hal concedes, and as always the rarity of hearing his name runs a thrill up Ocelot's spine. "It's just strange to me, I guess." His mouth twitches crookedly. "I never thought I'd be helping somebody take over the world."

Ocelot smiles, leans down to him, and confides,

"It's already ours."

---

Ocelot watches the red stain spread across his shirt and can say only,

"Impossible."

Snake doesn't argue. The pistol smokes gently at his side.

Ocelot stumbles, but refuses to fall. One lone hero, against everything he had. Such an arrogant, ludicrously American thing to do. As though one man, no matter his genius, could penetrate into the fortress past a full complement of soldiers and shoot him down.

How had he done it?

It had been glorious. Days of glorious battle. Hunting him, chasing him, near misses and quickdraw luck, putting him in chains only to lose him through some means he would never know. It was a man like that whose hands brought the end.

It is everything he could have ever hoped for, almost.

Long ago, Ocelot had vowed to die on his feet. He had forgotten that falling was an essential part of the process.

He feels his legs give out, and before he feels the ground he hears his name.

Someone catches him.

"...impossible..."

"You keep using that word."

It can only be him.

Ocelot forces his eyes to absorb light to see him. He feels time flowing past, catching on his clothes like coarse water. Talking hurts. "What are you doing here?"

"Idiot. You didn't really think I'd leave you behind, did you?" Hal smiles but his eyes shine like glass.

"Told you to get out of here." His head rolls to the side. It is very heavy. Hal holds it up. He's stronger than he looks. "'never do what you're told."

Breathing hurts, too. That's all right. He won't have to put up with it for long.

"You're gonna be all right," Hal is saying, as he reaches his arm around and fumbles with the buttons on his shirt. "Just hold on. I can-"

"Don't." Ocelot's hand stops him, wrapped around his wrist. "Don't want you to see me like this." He cracks a smile, feels a trickle at the corner. "Foolish thing, pride, when you've already seen my heart laid bare. Not much you can do, anyway. I'm lung-shot."

He hears a rough gasping sound that puzzles him. He touches Hal's face and feels warm wetness on his fingertips.

"You're crying for me," he says, mystified. "You...would cry for me?"

"There has to be something I can do-"

"Stay with me." Ocelot won't let his vision dim yet. He winces as the pain asserts itself. "It won't be long."

"Don't say that." Tears run unchecked down his face. Ocelot is fascinated by them. "Please don't say that."

"I've always been alone," Ocelot says. Inside him he felt all the things he had wanted to say but couldn't, flowing out like the blood. "Always fighting. Anything, anyone I had could always be taken away from me, so there could never be anyone I couldn't afford to lose. I don't know why I let you change that. Maybe I didn't have a choice. But I'm glad."

"Do you remember when I first saw you? You were working on the Shagohod. It was just a skeleton, then. You dropped something, and I shouted at you, to hide how charmed I was."

"I remember," Hal says quietly.

"I didn't understand what I was feeling, and I was furious at myself for being so weak. The pull got stronger the more I fought it. I was terrified, do you know that?" The nostalgia makes him smile. "It was something I couldn't control. Wouldn't mean anything, if I could. Every day I waited for you to realize exactly who it was you'd let near you, and hate me for it."

Hal says, "I could never hate you."

"I thought I could hide it from you. Thought I could only show you what I wanted..." Fluid is rising in his throat, trickling up like the limbs of hot spiders. "...wanted you to see. But you saw me. Coming out of the interrogation room that night. Covered in blood. God only knows what I looked like. Some demon come to tear out your throat. When I saw you there I froze. I expected that the last I would ever see of you would be your back as you ran for your life."

The arms supporting him do not waver. "I know you'd never hurt me," Hal says.

"You could have destroyed me, at that moment. A single second of fear, or pity, or revulsion. I stood there with the blood drying on my skin, waiting for you to break me in half." His weak laugh sounds tinny and distant to his own ears. "It was as though I were a child caught playing in the mud. You tucked the blueprints under your arm, pulled me aside, and used the edge of your shirt to clean the worst of the blood from my hands. Around then I stopped waiting for it and just trusted you. Even with the worst. You know everything about me. With you, I have no secrets." Ocelot's hand cups his cheek. "It's the only thing I've ever been afraid of. You know everything I've done. Who I really am."

"You're you. That's all that matters." Those eyes would never learn how to lie. "Nothing you could ever do could make me stop loving you."

"It's something I-" Choking, Ocelot turns his head to the side and spits blood, annoyed at the interruption. "-something I'd never dared to hope for. The chance to die in the arms of the one I love."

His voice thick, Hal says, "I love you, Adamska."

Ocelot pulls with hands grown weak, and Hal kisses him, gently, one last time.

He won't die alone.

"All right," Ocelot calls, though it bends near a croak, to the half-forgotten soldier who watches them in silence. "Finish it, hero."

It seems like a long time after he hears the bang that Ocelot feels the bullet pierce his heart.

---

*Ah. So here it is. Your most secret and shameful desire.*

*Stop this. Stop it now.*

*Is this what you want?*

*You...you dog. You sadist, you bastard, you voyeur...*

*So much sadness, and so much anger.*

*The hell do you think gives you the right? Get out of my head!*

*I'm not here to torment you. Only to show you what might have been. What might be.*

*Stop- stop LYING to me!*

*It could be real, if this is what you want. Anything can be true. The choice is yours.*

*I told you. Stop this.*

*You possess ultimate control, and the will to express it. Would you give that up?*

*Yes.*

*For what?*

*Something real.*

*Such as...this?*

---

## Notes:

-If you're up on both your Evangelion and your angelology, the dog's name is very funny. You're probably not, so just take my word for it. It's hilarious.

-Protip: Having stacks of Russian literature next to the computer can be very helpful when you need a random Groznyj Grad soldier name.

-Yeah, Ocelot's deepest, darkest secret is that he wants his own cheesy death scene. Hey, everybody *else* in MGS1 got one.

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/26/>

# chapter 27

## Stray by Dahne

Warmth and safety, pressing against him like the snow on the windows.

"I remember this," Adamska murmurs to Hal, without pretending not to pull him close.

"Yeah. So do I." He sighs, and wriggles into a better position. "Felt nice."

"Yes." Adamska breathes slow and deep of the scent he cannot name, and his hand drifts to Hal's face to stroke his thumb along the jawline. "Would you kiss me, this time?"

"Yeah," he says, and smiles.

"Even...?" Still, Adamska doesn't know how to say it.

"Even." His jaw sets, firm. "You have a good heart. It was my mistake, letting anything get in the way. The present is what matters."

"So willing to be a sacrificial lamb," says Adamska, amusement in a minor key.

"Would you have let me help, if I had found a way?"

The subtle, anchoring weight, a center to things meant to fall apart that holds them in loose shape with its own unassuming gravity.

"Of course."

"Really?"

"Maybe." He lets the thought wander the corridors of habit, trail its fingers in the dust. "If I trusted you."

Hal asks softly, "Did you ever trust me?"

"More than I ever trusted another human being."

Hal laughs, and Adamska can feel the vibrations along the length of him. "Somehow I get the feeling that's not saying much."

"True," Adamska concedes. "Put it this way; if that machine of yours had been designed by anyone else, I would never have set foot through it."

The scrape of a paw and click of nails on wood, a dog pursuing with whole and honest ardor some imagined hunt.

"The machine..." Hal muses to himself. "I must've screwed something up...didn't plan for any, er, metaphysical side effects..." Adamska's words trickle through, and the brows that are always at curiosity's verge arch above it. "Really? Never?"

Adamska considers.

"Maybe if I pushed him through first, and he said it was clear. Then I would know the ambush was coming."

There is no harm in knowing. The snow lies heavy around them, and he can tell him all his secrets.

"I always wondered," Hal says sadly, "what kind of life you had."

"The short, violent kind."

"Oh." Hal's hand moves to cover Adamska's where it rests on his stomach. "Is that what you wanted?"

The steadiness of his heartbeat.

"What I want has never made any difference."

"Adamska..." Hal sighs, and it's enough.

As a seasoned soldier never does, Adamska lets himself sink into the warmth, and the drift of thoughts wrapped in feathers of half-dreaming. He is tired of fighting.

"That night..." Hal murmurs. "I can't remember the last time I felt so safe."

"You shouldn't have," says Adamska.

"That's what I would have thought, logically," Hal admits. "But I would have been wrong." He gives a slow, lazy smile. "It was as though the only thing in the world that mattered was having you nearby, and that was already taken care of."

A tiny island of warmth in the snow.

"You were drunk," Adamska reminds him.

"Still," Hal argues, and wins.

Adamska runs his hand down his hairline, his cheek, his jaw. His skin is rough, where stubble is coming in. Hal leans into the caress and sighs.

No one but them in the world.

"Do you think," says Hal, looking up at him with hopeful eyes, "that we could stay here?"

"No," says Adamska, putting aside regret. "We can't."

His mouth tightens with determined petulance. "Why not?"

"Because this isn't you," Adamska says, running his thumb lightly over the hollow of his throat.

"Huh?" He blinks, lashes and movement magnified by glass. "What do you mean, not me?"

"This-" Adamska runs his hand down the slim chest and flank- "is a copy, made up of my memories and what I want. It can't say anything other than what I want to hear."

Adamska lets his hand linger on the curve of his hip and says, softly, "You're not real."

"Sure I am." The stubbornness a puppy had, its vision free of the scope that would frame its goals in their fundamental impossibility. "Here, I can prove it."

"How?"

"Ask me something. Something only I would know."

"All right."

Adamska thinks, and finds it.

"Why hedgehogs?"

"Oh." He has a cute way of blushing. "It's, er, an old story. The hedgehog's dilemma. It's a metaphor, sort of. They get lonely, like anybody, and they don't want to be alone, so they try to come together. But they have spines, so they can't. That is, they can, but-" He breaks off, flustered as though watched by someone who cares about his mistakes. "Oh, I'm not telling it right."

He flinches with embarrassment, and Adamska embraces him and tells him, "Go on."

He relaxes, chest rising and falling steadily under Adamska's arms.

"The point is," says Hal, "the closer they get, the more they hurt each other."

And Adamska laughs and laughs.

---

The two men talked still but Adamska was no longer listening.

"Don't you dare," he hissed, glaring down at the image of himself and the other as a sluggish rush of fury seared the numbness from his veins. "Don't you *dare* tease me like this."

"I'm not," said the smiling man. He floated behind him, gazing over his shoulder. "You could stay here, if you like."

"Shut up," said Adamska flatly.

"The choice is entirely open. A single, perfect memory. A world of your own devising. Anything you can think of. Anything you like."



"Are there maggots in your head, or were you always an idiot? I said *shut up!*" Adamska spun toward the ghost, infuriatingly aware of how long past the expiration date even the most inventive threats would be. "Is this what you're offering me? A child's storybook? A puppet and a wooden world?" His eyes narrowed. "No. I refuse. I won't see his face painted around a doll's eyes. They deserve better than that. All of them. Even Volgin."

Adamska's arm flew out, encompassing the two figures, the room, and the clean white that enclosed it.

"I don't *want this*. I don't want any of it. None of these lies are worth my time. The real world is ugly and senseless and unpredictable and for all I know I made it worse and I *want it back you bastard*."

The Sorrow said, "Really?"

"Yes!"

"You wanted to change the world. That's what you went back for."

"I wanted to change myself." Adamska's face twisted bitterly. "Don't I have the right to that much?"

"And if it is ugly?" the floating man asked, as though out of idle curiosity. "If you have made it worse? Will you go back, try again?"

"No," said Adamska, unaware of his decision until he heard it. "One chance is more than most people get. If it didn't work, nothing will."

"And if you regret it?"

"Then I regret it." Adamska faced the ghost head on, falling unconsciously into a gunfighter's stance. "The only way I'll ever know is to go there. So let's get moving."

The Sorrow gave him a long look. Then said, in an odd, gentle way, "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

"So you are," The Sorrow said. "I was afraid of that. It seems we have one more place to go."

"Where?" Adamska demanded, suspicion making his hands itch. "Why?"

The man with blood trailing his eye straightened in midair and fixed his glasses, a foreign variation on a familiar theme.

"You see," the gray man said, "of the two..."

The memory of color leached from the room.

"Changing the world..."

The edges blurred.

"...is much easier."

The room vanished, The Sorrow vanished, and he was left at the core of endless time.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/27/>

# chapter 28

## Stray by Dahne

*Who is the third who walks always beside you?*

*When I count, there are only you and I together*

*But when I look ahead up the white road*

*There is always another one walking beside you*

*Gliding wrapped in a brown mantle, hooded*

...

*-But who is that on the other side of you?*

-T., "The Waste Land"

*What can change the nature of a man?*

The center of somewhere still, and empty. The eye-aching white surrounded him, offering not so much as a horizon. Adamska could not say precisely when the sense of being followed by someone, watched by invisible eyes, had gone away. Its absence brought no comfort.

If there was distance here, in the place where the rolled-up edges of the map of Nowhere met, it was in the form of separation, a vast and impassable gulf between him and anyone that existed, living or dead. Any direction Adamska chose, he could run in it for a thousand years and never get any closer. There was no one but himself.

In the near distance, there was the clink of spurs.

*Behind!*

With the speed of reflexes that had never failed him, Adamska spun.

The chain of small, metal noises were slaved to a man's step.

Camouflage, the pattern amplified by darker shapes that might have been the memory of old blood.

Hair pulled back, white as the mustache that made no attempt to hide the creases by his mouth where cruelty had calcified.

Long leather coat that hid his right hand and its red glove resting on the hilt of a revolver.

"So," said Revolver Ocelot.

To hear his voice directly was different. There was no distortion, no ambient sound, none of the protection that comes with knowing that what transpired was long over with and done. Now it was point blank.

He gave Adamska a long, slow look, up and down. And raised eyes that knew what it was like to raise a legend just to watch him fall. Not a cat but a wolf, who knew that the sun and moon would never fill his hunger but would devour them anyway, just for the perverse unbearable pain of it.

Adamska stood his ground.

"So, proud boy." Glove leather tapped in chalkboard-claw staccato. "How does it feel, to know that everything you've done has been for nothing?"

"I wouldn't know," Adamska said. "On your way out of existence you'll have to tell me."

"Oh, no." Teeth bared in the yellow of jaundiced bone. "I'm afraid you've got the wrong idea. We're going back together."

"Sorry," said Adamska, smirking and tapping his temple with his forefinger. "But you've got no control over me. The bleeding over's gone. You're not in my head anymore."

"Ah, yes." Crafted out of hard, cracked clay, movements bitter parody of life. "An interesting theory, that. You were quick to jump on it as the explanation, as I recall. Too bad you already knew the truth."

"Go on, old man," Adamska said, confidence straining over the rift in his gut, invisible hemorrhage bleeding black. "You're dead and buried."

Adamska had seen death many times. He had seen the moment when the dark place in the underbrush heard them coming and burst into black specks that hummed in a scream and ate his field of vision, and the corpse they left behind. He had watched the look of surprise in a man's eyes solidify, frozen by the gun whose muzzle had been hardly felt. He had seen men as they looked at the body and looked at him, called him 'comrade' and said, "Why?"

He would have watched them all again to never have to see the old man's smile.

"You still don't get it, do you?" he said with vicious care.

"What are you talking about?" Adamska demanded, forcing his voice steady as though his eyes were steady. "There's no place for you in my future anymore. You have nowhere to return to."

"I think you'll find," -the old man didn't blink. Everyone has to blink. Why the hell didn't he blink? - "that I'll fit very nicely where I've always been:"

It was cold. It was very cold, why hadn't he noticed before, it was cold, and on the back of his neck Adamska felt the three drops of sweat trickle down.

"In your head."

As clear and as cold and solid and relentless as his smile, the yellow smile, he was *enjoying* this he was freezing him into glass to drop stone words and hear it shatter and his eyes were painted in shades of vertigo

"Liar," Adamska breathed, instinct quick as twisting away from pain.

"No."

Voice like sarin mustard gas blood and ozone, smile with edges that cut-

"I'm a part of you, boy."

-liquid that solidified in the lungs-

"Did you really think you had gotten this far on your own?" Teeth, yellow teeth even from this far but he was getting closer- "You owe me gratitude."

"No," said Adamska. There was a thin thread of whispering in the back of his mind.

The sweat turned to ice as he recognized words not thought since he was a child.

*the dead ones can't hurt you the dead ones can't hurt you the dead ones can't hurt you*

"You've felt it, haven't you?" The old man's hand stroked the gun handle like a litany. "The dark part of your mind that always knows where to strike. The will that guides your hands when you would succumb to cowardice. You created me a long, long time ago. All you have done now-" Hand in its red glove over his heart, one of them, the other on the gun still always on the hilt- "is give me a name."

Beneath the one refrain ran another. The click and rasp of a transmission, recorded and played to him to introduce the stranger they said he would become.

"You're nothing." Lies, he was a liar, there was nothing like that in him, he had done what he had to do and this was only another lie, another illusion game- "You can't be here."

*The muzzle velocity of a bullet fired from a revolver is slower than one fired from an automatic.*

"Such an excellent liar you are." A footstep clinked. "But I always know."

Adamska said, "You don't know anything."

*That's bad for you.*

"I know all your secrets." Progress forward relentless as decay, pleasure livid in the cloudshape of a bruise. "Shall I share them with you?"

*The slower a gun's muzzle velocity, the more damage it does.*

"I don't want to hear any of your lies." Closer. Adamska would not allow himself to step back.

"Yes. I think I will." Rust flaked off the edge of his smile and he twisted deeper. "Watching you squirm to delude yourself was amusing for a while, but perhaps the time has come to put you out of your misery."

*That's cause the bullet will tend to lodge in the body instead of going right through.*

"I destroyed you. You'll never exist." He would not show weakness to the enemy.

The creased lips writhed into a smirk that washed over Adamska like acid. He had known that expression, before. From the other side.

He tapped his words like coffin nails, enjoying every second of screams from the man inside.

*Those kind of wounds take a long time to heal. Sometimes they never do.*

"I know what you saw in that room, so long ago. Why you hold it in your heart even now. You'd caught hints of it before, when the Colonel was at his games, but you had always been able to turn away. I know what it was that kept you from succumbing to that weakness, and the craving that woke at the scent of his fear."

*I think that's part of the reason he likes that gun.*

"Is that all?" Showing fear to the enemy meant death. No middle step. Adamska snorted, air tearing the back of his throat. "You're just a pathetic copy of Volgin."

"Oh, I'm much more than that." Hissed like white-hot iron an inch from bare skin. "I understand pain in a way Volgin never could. The colonel," he said, caressing the words with the jagged shards of his voice, "was an amateur. Brutality gets you only so far. His weapon was something he was born with; *it* used *him*. He never sought it out. He never understood the secret of our art."

*He's a real sick puppy, that Ocelot...*

The grin of knowing that the prey cannot escape, and that the true game is about to begin.

"What a lucky boy you are. I'm going to tell you."

Adamska's fear took him by the throat.

Ocelot leaned forward, eager that he shouldn't miss a word.

*"Love."*

And squeezed.

"That's what you learned, so long ago. You didn't know the name, and wouldn't have said it if you did. You loved him. You denied it, and tried to destroy it, and instead..." Arms spread, as though in welcome. "-created me."

The old man settled back on his heels, allowing Adamska time to ravage his brain and know that nothing he could say would make him stop.

"The second the lightning touched him you felt it as if it had arced straight to your very soul. It reached to a place you kept so carefully hidden, as though to a limb you never knew you had until ever bone in it was shattered. It was as though he screamed your name. It was your love that allowed you to share the gift of such exquisitely unbearable pain."

The old man licked his lips, shivering in remembered ecstasy.

"Stop." Adamska's voice was uneven. Forcing it made it worse. "Stop it now."

"Of course, it's never quite the same again. A man like him falls into your hands once in a lifetime. Or is it, twice?"

Eyes glittering like glass, smirk with edges that would heal slow (*sometimes they never do*) and leave a long long scar.

"But you love them all, down to the least and pettiest. When you can keep a man alive where there is nothing in his world but pain, you see who he truly is. You feel every touch of electricity that runs along his nerves greater than if it were your own, amplified by distance and the gap of power between you. You love who he is in that moment, all control given up, fighting against restraints he knows he can't break, sweating no matter how cold the steel walls make it. When he arrives at the place where fear is gone because no imagining could be worse than what is already the truth, you want to be there to welcome him and prove him wrong. After all, what value is there in a man being at your mercy unless you have none?"

His steps rang.

"And when you first learn what silence is from the contrast with his screams, you want to go close to him, you want to touch his shoulder like a friend, hold him close, your face pressed against the sweat of his suffering, and tell him everything's going to be all right, he can do it, just hold on a little longer, don't give up."

Teeth flecked like a ghoul's as it fed.

"And you turn the voltage a little higher."

A long time ago, when there had been such thing as time, Adamska had wanted to know the mind of an animal that would toy with its prey.

Now, he knew the mind of the mouse.

Sneer on the mouth that should have been stitched shut with stiff black thread, cadaver and necromancer sharing one skin. "But you already knew that, didn't you?"

"That's you, not me," said Adamska's fear.

"You know better than that, boy. Where do you think it comes from? They're *your* thoughts." He twisted the word into Adamska's flesh. 'The purest form of expression.' You saw it all back then, the man whose world was only one thing, and the only thing that could have made you happier would be if you were the one at the center. Because then, his world would have been only you."

"You're wrong," said Adamska's pride.

"There's nothing you can hide from me." He would not stop. "I *am* the hidden places. I know your heart, and I know that's the one thing you're afraid of. I know the reasons behind everything you have ever done."

"I did what I had to do," said Adamska's regret.

"Oh, you did your job, yes. You did it because you wanted to. You *liked* it. So kind of them, to give you such a beautiful excuse. Never once did you have to take responsibility for any act you committed. You never even had to take responsibility for enjoying it. After all, what harm is there in taking pleasure in one's employment? You are the greatest tool they will ever have, because you *want* to be used. It lifted you to a higher plane, where you could see the pieces laid out in their neat rows and never have to face that you are part of the game."

"I am no coward," said Adamska's courage. He had taken responsibility. Face to face. For every one.

"And what have you to fear from mere pawns?" Movement without human grace, fingers pulsing bitter mockery of animation. "You rank a bishop at the least. But one tier of the game is for mere survival. If they can't manage even that much, they deserve whatever comes to them." Corpseleather tongue at the juncture of scar-seamed lips. "Whatever we like."

"The game is over," said Adamska's anger. "I'm done with using and I'm done with being used."

"There's only one thing I don't understand." Questions with no pattern, that was one of the tricks, use it to break them down flay them raw

"You could never understand me."

"Of all the men in the world, you pick such an insipid thing for a toy. Where is your taste?" Mouth bent in grotesque petulance. "When you get tired of him and give him to me, I'll get hardly any fun at all out of breaking him. The weaklings are never any good. But who knows?" Ocelot shrugged, languid as poison slipping through the bloodstream. "Looks can be deceiving. It might be as much as five minutes before he starts begging."

"You'll never touch him," said Adamska's love.

"Ah!" the old man barked, seizing it as though he had been waiting. "That is where you're wrong. I'll have him from the very first. Whenever you touch him it will be with my hands. It will be my lips that take his, and my teeth that mark him. You'll never dare to hold him close, because when you feel him shudder, he won't know why but *you* will. And no matter what name he thinks he's screaming, it will be mine you hear. He was fool enough to let you get close to him. That means he's already mine."

"You'll never touch him," said Adamska's love. It might not impress in terms of argument, but on the field of stubbornness, it would never know defeat.

"He has such lovely memories of me. All you've done is do me the favor of making them stronger. You might get him to fool himself, but down at the heart he will never forget who you really are." Point-blank range. He was close. *sometimes they never do*

"You don't know anything about the real me," said Adamska.

Anger like thunder, tiny jagged bolts of it to flay meat into char ruin ashes. "I *am* the real you, boy." Twisting deeper, to find out how clear blood could run. "You? You're a facade. A pretense. You're a pet identity, a necessary invention, an amusing tool be used up and thrown away. You're nothing."

The soldiers who lived long enough learned to aim for the point of weakness. The place with the most repairs, the lightest guard of the worst terrain. The fence much mended. The bone once broken.

*he's a sick*

The old man looked at him, glinting with the cold that burned away hidden things. He said, "You are a lie."

*he's*

Adamska said, "I'll make myself true."

"Know this; no matter what you do, you'll be trapped as surely as you were before. All you've ever done is change your cage."

*sick*

"That," said Adamska's suffering, "makes all the difference."

"Why struggle?" A devil's sympathy. "We already know which one of us wins."

"Not this time." Adamska's feet were stumbling backwards.

"I am your nature. Nothing can change me."

Adamska wanted to break those teeth, shatter that sneer, rip away the cold power in those eyes and replace it with agony or terror.

"Everything can change," said Adamska's pain.

*I don't like those*

"Poor, foolish, ignorant boy."

*eyes of his*

Leather between metal and hands that crawled like maggots

"You can't control me."

Adamska was losing his footing, the ground that wasn't there shifting beneath him, crumbling under the assault of the hacksaw voice.

"I *am* your control."

Something struck his back flat as stone and his shoulders were nailed, pinned like a malformed butterfly with its wings being pulled off torn away ripped to pieces by some child who hadn't learned the word for cruelty

"I *am* your strength."

The old man was close, bearing down like vertigo, and he slowed his steps to make it worse and he

smiled

"I'm the only reason you're even alive."

As long as he was alive he would fight he would never let it be easy but he couldn't

"How many times would you have died, if I hadn't been there?"

He should have died and he would have died but he couldn't he didn't know how to everyone survives the way they can

"How many bullets would have gone between your eyes, if you hadn't put one in someone's back?"

He did what he had to do that was all he had never wanted to kill any of them he had never enjoyed it

"I am your courage and your will, the source of your power and the arbiter of your impulse, your master and your benefactor."

old blood, cold blood, crusted and made manifest, dry as bone that cracked and sprayed powder white as the whites of his eyes

"Stop," Adamska breathed, pinioned flat by his neck to a wall that was not there, watching him draw closer, feeling the skin try to crawl off his bones but he was already naked and bleeding

"You are nothing without me."

His eyes his face his sneer a weapon but barbed, that couldn't be taken out without ripping flesh apart, the feel in his wrist of the heavy knife catching on soft organ walls and ripping free, the smell of blood and the sound of spurs

"Please." Adamska could not close out the sight of the white and him long enough to blink. "Stop. Please."

The old man's eyes glowed maggot-white in obscene rapture. "Oh, yes, yessssss...Such a lovely sound. It has been too long since I heard it. Just for that...Yes. I think I'll give you a gift."

Nearly within reach he paused, drinking in the twitch of muscle that Adamska could no more stop than he could flee.

He could nearly smell the rot, face muscles maggots under thin leather twitching.

Revolver Ocelot said, "I'm going to make him my masterpiece."

The last, desperate flare of Adamska's hatred was smothered by fear.

"And I'm going to let you watch."

In the ashes, something shifted.

A green spark drifted like foxfire in a rainstorm, and Adamska said, "No."

"Oh, yes." The old man's unblinking eyes closed in bliss. "It will be a singular challenge, keeping death away from one so frail, but close enough to make him beg for it. I will transform his weakness into a thing of beauty. I had planned to kill him quickly, after a little fun, but with care..."

His step stuttered to let obscene ecstasy run along his spine. "Not days. *Weeks.*"

The ring of his step echoed, and Adamska remembered what spurs were for.

"You've admired those long, clever fingers of his many times, haven't you? I'm going to start with them. I'll begin by tearing the nails out, one by one. A minor wound, in the grand scheme of things, but he'll make pretty noises, nonetheless. There'll be no...specialized tools to make use of, but it's fascinating, the possibilities offered by the simple things. A pair of pliers, perhaps. After that, I'll set them in the fire, and watch him as he watches them turn from red to white. Then I'm going to spread his fingers, while the wounds are open and weeping, hold them steady as they tremble, and cauterize them."

Goaded a beast. Biting into its flank, striking its mind aside so that it would never see that the direction it leapt in was the one he chose. Warping the basis of its will to his purpose. Twisting its head to his goal. Sharpened to stilettos in deference to the foundation formula; the greater the pain, the greater the control.

"You won't hurt him." Sparks sang through Adamska's bloodstream, as though each atom of his body were transmuting to pure, sublime energy. Sensation was returning to his limbs. Couldn't he see it? "You'll never hurt anyone."

The sickly sulfur aura, drawing sustenance from decay.

"Oh, don't worry. I'm not so cruel as to steal him away from you entirely. I'll let you go to your little toy and comfort him, hold him in your arms and wipe away his tears and tell him everything will be all right. I'm going to let you murmur over his hurts, gently clean and bandage his hands." Delight congealed luxuriantly across the dessicated features. "Then, I'm going to break every bone in them."

There are places beyond pain.

"You will not."

The old man moved forward, metal ringing dully as though against stone. "Who is a puppet like you," he said, "to say what I am capable of?"

With sensation came memory.

"You have a dead man for an arm!" Adamska cried.

*"Who told you about that?"*

Then the eyes returned to flatness, and he smirked again.

Only for a moment. It had been covered, and skillfully. Only someone who knew him as well as he knew himself would have seen it.

The surface had cracked, and he had shown that he was alive.

*You're the one who taught me how to see fear.*

"No matter. Know this," said Ocelot, with the eyes of a madman and the stance of a prophet. "Even if you had a way not to lose I would win. We share a life, you and I. Nothing separates us but your weakness. I will be here, no matter how far you try to run."

Adamska said, "I don't run."

Some weaknesses were more powerful than strength.

"Hollow bravado is useless. You can't win."

"Maybe not," Adamska said. "But I can make you lose."

"Don't act as though I offer you nothing. In the heart you struggle so uselessly to deny, this is what you want. I will burn away your weakness."

Adamska said, "I refuse."

The grin that came not from mirth but from the skull left out in wasteland dry places until the hide cured and stretched and exposed the rictus underneath. "You speak as if you had a choice."



Adamska said, "There is always a choice."

He reached for his revolver.

"I wouldn't do that, boy."

The latent promise in the old man's voice froze his hand before it touched the hilt.

"Do you understand nothing? The two of us are one and the same. Destroy me and be destroyed. And you won't do that. I know you too well." The old man's eyes glinted with the confidence of the immortal. "You've got all the self-sacrificing virtue of a cockroach. You won't kill me, not if it means dying yourself. I will live. And so will you. You wouldn't trade an eye for wisdom, and you won't snuff out your life for a worthless fool and a childish ideal. Because that,"

-the last three steps-

"-is who"

"-you"

"-are."

"I disagree," said Adamska, and shot him.

---

For one, perfect moment, his face was slack with shock.

His hand, the withered, scarred hand, went slow as grave mold to his chest.

The laugh was strung on hell's lower frequency.

"Fool," the old man said, almost indulgent. "Do you really think there's anything left for you to save?"

Adamska had made tougher shots at twice the distance, and with a moving target.

Head.

Heart.

Right lung.

Left lung.

The bullets flew through him like a sparrow through a lighted room.

"Nothing you do can touch me. You're powerless, boy." His teeth glistened like rotted meat. "But don't be afraid. You'll never be alone."

Adamska stared at the weapon that had betrayed him.

His senses flowed down over the gun. The hilt that had imprinted the inverse of its raised grip on his palm. The trigger guard he had felt spin along his finger until he could navigate the motion blind, or sleepwalking. The engraving along the barrel, known to hand and mind's eye long before becoming consigned to reality. It was a message, Adamska saw, and realized that he had learned how to read it. It said this:

Even in the moment of death, a heart can take comfort in beauty.

Maybe this was what he had meant by 'tactical advantage.'

"Oh," Adamska said. "My mistake." He lifted his hand.

The barrel fit nicely between his lips as he gave a contented smile.

The familiar tiny, isolated movement had never been so easy.

*Bang.*

# chapter 29

## Stray by Dahne

*God does not play dice with the universe: He plays an ineffable game of His own devising, which might be compared, from the perspective of any of the other players i.e. everybody, to being involved in an obscure and complex variant of poker in a pitch-dark room, with blank cards, for infinite stakes, with a Dealer who won't tell you the rules, and who **smiles all the time**.*

-Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, *Good Omens*

---

Otacon hated when people reacted to waking up somewhere strange by asking, "Where am I?" The way he saw it, it was almost always perfectly possible to figure out one's location with a little thought, observation, and simple deduction, based on where one had been recently. Asking was just lazy.

As soon as he could get someone's attention, Otacon was going to have to ask.

It might be a moot point. He'd been wandering through the crowd ever since he'd gotten...wherever this was, and he was no more edified than when he had left...wherever he had come from. All observation told him was that there was an endless white too monochrome to be sky above him and people on every other side, some of whom almost seemed familiar and all of whom were arguing with each other. It was difficult to get a good look at anyone, as they were milling constantly in the state of puzzled and directionless irritation that characterizes any group of people with no idea what has just happened.

Otacon stumbled aimlessly through them, feeling more lost with every passing second. Deduction wasn't helping, either; with all the noise and confusion, he couldn't think clearly enough to so much as remember what he had been doing five minutes ago. Clanking metal, creaking leather, shouting voices at every end of the aural spectrum. At one point he could have sworn he heard a parrot squawk.

"Er, excuse me," Otacon mumbled as the crowd surged and nearly knocked him off his feet. Though this place hardly seemed to have anything as conventional as direction, gravity worked well enough. Fortunately, the woman he'd bumped into was too deep in conversation to notice.

"-and I had just gotten a good hand. Has this ever happened before? I consider it unprofessional."

Something about her voice caused a tangle of emotions to well up in Otacon, and sent him tracing through his memory for the source.

"Not that I know of," said someone else. "As far as I can tell, the only one who has any idea what's going on is the pushy American-"

At this point, he found it.

"Wolf!" Otacon cried.

The woman turned, a response dying on her lips.

"You." Shock was new to her features. Almost immediately, she broke out of it, and grabbed Otacon by the arm with an urgency that frightened him. "What are you doing here? Are you dead?"

"I, um, hope not," Otacon managed, fully cognizant that he was gaping like a fool. "Wolf..."

"Who's this?" The man Wolf had been talking to leaned out from behind her shoulder to regard

the newcomer curiously. He wore archaic fatigues, and had a balaclava hanging around his neck like a flat, forlorn sloth dangling from a tree trunk. Otacon, with some relief, failed to recognize him. If he was going to have to deal with ghosts out of his past, he preferred it to at least be on a one-at-a-time basis.

"An old friend," Wolf told him, without moving her eyes. If her face was readable, it wasn't in any language Otacon knew.

"That so? He must be... Hey." The soldier – at least, that's what Otacon guessed he was – or, had been – peered at him, as though matching something against a mental checklist. "I think this may be who we're looking for."

"M, me?" Otacon hadn't been aware they were looking for anybody, and wasn't sure how he felt about the idea of it being him.

"This way."

The man plunged into the crowd, clearly expecting them to follow.

"Come on," said Wolf. She started toward the clear area left in his wake, a temporary passage between the ranks of- good lord, was that guy carrying a flamethrower?

"Wait."

Wolf paused, looking back expectantly.

Otacon found himself, as usual for moments when he desperately needed a sudden gift of temporary eloquence, at a loss for words. With all the effort he had put into accepting that he would never see her again, doing it caught him utterly off guard. He wondered if there was a step in the grieving process for this.

"Wolf...I..."

Its immediate repertoire exhausted, Otacon's tongue abandoned him to stare speechless at the woman he had once loved.

Wolf glanced from side to side. No one was paying the least attention to either of them.

She leaned forward and kissed him on the forehead, quickly as pulling a trigger.

She said, "I know."

Turning, Wolf located her companion waving to them over the head of what appeared to be an old man in a wheelchair and headed toward him. He was telling something to a woman with a headset over her shoulder-length brown hair who held a clipboard in her hands and a look of indefatigable optimism on her face. Bewildered, Otacon trailed behind. Living or dead, he'd never understand people.

---

Dying was so simple he wondered why he had fought against it for so long.

The answer being, of course, that he hadn't. Every day of his life the invitation had been open, and every day it had been left untaken. There was a contentment that came with having taken it into his own hands. He was tired of luck. Here, he was out of its reach. Here, he was safe. There was no one to hurt him, and he had nothing that could be taken away. Now he was free to float in cool shadow, dark as the inside of a black cat's eyelids, and rest. There was no light and no direction; only him without form, and void. Each of the stories he had been told, he noted with a shadow of amusement, had been equally wrong. No eternal judgment, no divine tribunal, no omniscient being handing out to each man the fate he had earned by his actions. So there was such thing as mercy after all. Freed of the burden of a goal, he walked, seeking only to lose himself in dream.

It would have been easier if whoever that was would shut up.

*"... 's a good thing this doesn't happen all that often. The whole place is in an uproar. I'm*

*basically acting as triage, since- I'm sorry, you're going to have to go to the end of the line, I've got to- Wait, not you! Get back here!"*

*"Me?"*

There was nothing left to react to the faint suggestion of a voice. He was nothing, and he was returning to nothing, just as he had never known he had wanted. There was no reason to hesitate.

*"...oh, wow, then you're really the one, aren't you? Did you really make it all yourself?"*

*"I had help..."*

He did not need help, and he did not want it. This was where he belonged. There was nothing to hold him back.

*"...a time machine? Oooh, were there Morlocks?"*

*"Nothing like that..."*

It had nothing to do with him. None of it would ever have anything to do with him. He was tired of control. He was done. Done with sorrows, done with control, done with anger and tension and learning that love was just another kind of pain. He wanted it to be over.

*"...and what if more than one person went in at a time? It would be like The Fly!"*

*"Er, no, not really..."*

With a concentration of will, he could shut them out. In the depths he longed for there was no room for will, and the effort shot him away from the empty peace with terrible speed, forcing him to drop the barrier.

In time, they would be gone. Everything would be.

*"...looking for someone. Do you know..."*

There was nowhere to look and nothing to find, not so much as a flash of denied pain that numbness was as close as he would ever get to peace, and all it took was knowing how much it cost him to hold his shape together to know it wasn't worth it.

*"...too far gone. When someone really acts to destroy...of his own free... not much anyone can do."*

*"But why would he..."*

There was the nothing he could drown in, nearly within reach, if only they would let him. All he wanted was to sleep. Surely he had at least that right.

*"...can bring him back. He doesn't want to anymore. I'm sorry."*

*"You don't know him like I do. He won't go easily."*

He was *trying* to, god damn it.

*"He doesn't give up."*

It only had to happen once.

*"...nyway, you'd better get going. We've got a lot to sort out here, and it's going to..."*

*"I can't just leave him- wherever he is!"*

It was no use arguing with that tone. As far as he was concerned, it was no use doing anything.

*"Not harm in trying, I guess."*

And he would never have to, never again, if he could only let go and fall-

*"Adamska. Ocelot? Adamska, can you hear me?"*

The first thing the true dead lost were names. They had no substance through which a name could evoke a chill of recognition, no unwanted shadows of memory for a voice to cast.

*"Adamska, it's me."*

There was something tugging at him. Something familiar.

He should have been beyond curiosity.

*"Don't go. Not yet."*

There was something...something he needed to do. Was he moving toward it, or away from it? Did this direction mean anything?

*"Come back. Please, Adamska, just come back..."*

Go back where? There was nothing but darkness. As far as he knew, there never had been. He did not want to know otherwise. He wanted nothing.

*"I know you can hear me."*

Of course he could hear him. He wouldn't shut up.

*"I...I don't want to leave you..."*

It would be easy to let himself disappear, disintegrate into motes that would fade and leave nothing, the memory of nothing, ignore the undercurrent of urgency screaming at him, the mind's muted desperations that no longer had relevance...

*"I don't want you to leave me."*

Did it?

*"I know I can't force you to. But you're too strong to go this way. Not when you've gotten this far. So I'm asking."*

In the featureless darkness in front of him, where he had to strain to see, there was a tiny, bright speck.

*"Come back..."*

The darkness was there around it, cold comfort that asked nothing and expected nothing and gave nothing. There would be more if he turned away. He could always turn away.

*"I need to tell you something..."*

Of all of it, all that he had left behind, hope was the only lie left that hurt. Ached like the pinpoint of light that should not have been able to be so strong.

One way lay emptiness, bottomless and waiting. The other lay a promise.

A force pulled him back. And a force pulled him forward.

*"I guess I thought that saying it couldn't do anything but hurt."*

He could move, if he tried.

*"But I have to try."*

All he had to do was try.

*"Adamska, I- I love you."*

And there was a reason.

*"I didn't know how to say it before."*

He began to run.

*"Please, don't let it be too late..."*

The speck grew larger, like a poorly-patched hole in the fabric of the universe.

*"Your life is your own choice to make. But I want you to know that I'm waiting for you."*

The white tear in the black void filled his vision.

*"Please, listen to me..."*

Smudges were visible standing against the white. Whatever they were, they had best get out of his way. It was too late to slow down now.

*"Just...come back..."*

Adamska tore free like grapeshot from the cannons of nowhere.

He barreled indiscriminately through the multitude, scattering anyone in his way out of it to a chorus of shouts and curses and what sounded like a swarm of irritated insects, then felt the strength

gather in his legs and pounced.

Hal turned just in time to find himself flat on his back and furiously kissed.

"You're alive!" he cried, over catcalls that Adamska couldn't even care enough to murder the producer of, and god it was strange to hear that said by someone who was happy about it.

"I don't die easy," Adamska said, aware that he was grinning like an idiot but not aware enough to care.

"I was afraid I'd never see you again-" Hal broke off, looking so honestly distraught that Adamska touched his face in amazement.

Things might have progressed from there, audience or no, if a polite cough hadn't brought them back to, for lack of a better word, reality.

"So you found your way," a soft male voice said.

Glancing to the side, Adamska saw a pair of black boots floating in midair.

He hopped to his feet, pulling Hal up behind him, and hooked an arm over the engineer's shoulders. They stood facing The Sorrow in a small clearing in the middle of what was, now that he saw it in less percussive detail, an astonishing variety of people. The Boss, hair held back with a green bandanna, stood at the grey man's right hand. He held a small cardboard sign in his left.

Hal tipped his head to the side and squinted. " '*Necessità 'l ci 'nduce, e non diletto?*' " he read. "I don't get it."

"No one ever does," The Sorrow sighed.

"That's because it's not funny," opined a tinny voice from behind him.

Even dead, The Fury still carried his flamethrower and wore that ridiculous spacesuit. Some people, Adamska mused, just didn't know how to let things go.

"No one has any acquaintance with the classics anymore," The Sorrow said dispiritedly.

"All right," said The Boss, ignoring her comrades as if from long habit. "You two need to get out of here. It's going to take a long enough time to sort things out as it is."

(Behind her, the conversation continued;

"Hey, I read *The Inferno*, you know."

"You read the first canto. Then you set it on fire."

"That counts."

"And you wonder why no one lends you things.")

"Um..." Hal said nervously, shifting unconsciously closer to Adamska. "And 'here' is, where, exactly?"

"The afterlife," The Boss replied. "A part of it, at least."

"We're— dead?" Hal squeaked.

"Keep asking stupid questions and I'll see what I can do."

Hal paled, and she relented.

"No, you're not dead. That's why you need to leave. You don't belong here."

("You could've at least picked something more recognizable."

"Would you prefer, '*Lasciate ogni speranza, voi ch'entrate?*'"

"Huh?"

"Oh, never mind.")

Adamska shrugged carelessly, a giddy feeling of freedom coursing through his spirit like electricity. "Whatever you like. There's nothing we need to do h—"

He stopped.

Something had occurred to him.

Adamska said, "Wait."

Momentarily releasing Hal, he turned slowly, scanning the circle of onlookers until his eyes alighted on what he sought.

Given that it stood a good two and a half meters tall, it wasn't terribly difficult.

"Hah!" Adamska cried triumphantly. "You're dead!"

"Go to hell!" Volgin growled, blue sparks crackling across his fists, as the silver-haired man next to him smiled indulgently.

"Oh, wow," Hal said. He adjusted his glasses and stepped closer for a better look. "How do you *do* that?"

"I think they'd better leave *now*," The Boss told The Sorrow under her breath. He nodded and floated forward.

"Oh, is this who you were talking about?" Raikov said to Adamska, as Hal stood in front of a momentarily dumbstruck Volgin, lifting one enormous hand to examine it and babbling questions all the while.

"Do you just control it by thought, or do you have to adjust it somehow? Is it hereditary? Is it just something you've been able to do all of your life, or did it manifest at some point?"

"That's him," Adamska said, with some pride.

Raikov said, "He's adorable."

"That's assuming it's natural, of course- or is it some kind of cybernetic implant? Either way- oh, do you have to recharge somehow? And, is there a limit to how much you can produce at a time? Does using too much of it cause any kind of physical fatigue? What about-"

"Ahem," said The Sorrow.

Hal and Adamska turned, and attention refocused.

"Are you ready to return?" the gray man asked.

Adamska raised an eyebrow in suspicion. "Return to what?"

The Sorrow smiled. "Yes, finding out will be interesting, I expect."

"Then..." Hal stared at Adamska, eyes wide. "You changed the past?"

"Yes." Adamska gazed at him steadily. "And I came back to find you. This," he said, waving at the assemblage and lack of landscape around them, "is just a detour."

"But that means..." His eyes dropped. "For me, none of this will have ever happened. I'll never have met you. I might not even be the same person."

"Some things," Adamska said, "don't change that easily." He put a hand on Hal's shoulder and faced him squarely. "We are who we are, both of us. It won't be gone, even if the memory of it is; it will still have existed, all of it. The things we've done. The places we've been. The people I've killed."

"No hard feelings," someone called from the back of the crowd.

"Whatever happens," Adamska continued, memorizing every facet of the soft grey eyes, "I *will* remember you, and I *will* find you. You can count on it."

Hal smiled at him, and said, "I know."

The Boss cleared her throat. They looked up expectantly.

She said, "Are you ready?"

"Yes," said Adamska.

"Er, not really," said Hal.

"Too bad." The Boss reached for the bucket of water that sat by her feet.

*Though you've won, he may not be gone.* The Sorrow's voice waded into the shallow end of

Adamska's mind. *You may have to fight him forever.*  
(Hal's voice: "That wasn't there before.")  
Adamska stared down the dead man's smile and thought, *I know.*  
("What, do you expect us to walk to the Lethe? It's scenic, but we don't have that kind of time.")  
*It won't be easy.*  
("The what?")  
*When did I say anything about easy?*  
Adamska sensed motion and his fingers tightened reflexively on Hal's shoulder, but he never had the time to wonder why The Boss was throwing water at them.

---

## Notes:

-For some reason, I have decided that The Sorrow is a classical literature aficionado. The work in question, at least, can certainly be assumed to be required reading. Professional research, as it were.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/29/>



# chapter 30

**Stray** by Dahne

*Time can change the nature of a man.*

Hal Emmerich liked his work, even after the secret places of his heart were truly, though perhaps belatedly, disabused of the notion that giant robots solved everything.

In fact, they'd caused him a good deal of trouble. That was impossible to deny, what with the patrols clomping by behind him twice as often ever since the last attempted coup.

Hal was getting tired of those.

(The coups, not the patrols.)

Apparently, being located out at the crossroads of Nowhere and Even Less of Anywhere, as well as having all sensitive data surrounded by so many security programs and layers of encryption that even he might have some trouble getting through, wasn't enough to deter a few radical elements with a band of mercenaries and not much to lose.

People waving guns in his face and shouting at him was getting to be depressingly routine.

On the plus side, Hal now knew the words for, "Don't move," "Hands on your head," and, "I *said* don't fucking move!" in Russian, Serbian, and two dialects of Farsi.

As he made some adjustments to one of the trickier parts of the left leg joint, Hal wondered why the thought of having it finished wasn't more reassuring. Once completed, REX would be perfectly capable of taking care of herself. It would be the ultimate deterrent; against a Metal Gear, tanks and conventional weaponry would provide about as much protection as a tuxedo. There was absolutely nothing to worry about.

Unless, of course, it wasn't the people up *against* REX he was concerned about...

And that, Hal thought firmly, as he measured out the tension distribution, was ridiculous. This was the United States military he was talking about, not a gang of terrorists. More specifically, these were his friends.

At first, he'd been a little afraid of them. Hal smiled ruefully at REX's pistons. Terrified, actually. And these weren't just soldiers; they were special forces, elite of the elite. He'd been more than a little intimidated. But that was before he'd known that Sniper Wolf was kind to dogs, or that Raiden was just a kid really, or that a good half dozen of the soldiers and scientists he was acquainted with were Decoy Octopus, or that Gray Fox had a sister he'd rescued from Rhodesia, or that if Vulcan Raven had his way he would have preferred to spend most of his time standing absolutely still and covered in birds, or that Solid Snake had secretly named the cat that'd snuck into the base Tanya, or that sometimes when Liquid Snake got drunk he'd start talking about being glad he wasn't someone's zombie limb, then look confused and throw up.

Psycho Mantis, admittedly, was still pretty scary.

True, they all had things it was wiser not to bring up with them, whether logical, like their past, or not-so-logical, like the cold, thousand-yard glare Snake would give anybody who spoke ill of the first two X-Men movies. But, directly or indirectly, they'd all saved his life more than once.

Honestly, Hal didn't mind living out here, even though you couldn't get much more isolated than an island off the coast of Alaska. It was sort of like a small, self-contained community, except with more decommissioned nuclear warheads. Definitely no lack of interesting people. The most surprising thing was that he'd ever ended up working for the military in the first place, but it turned

out that they were unique, in that they'd give him clearance to make just about anything he wanted as long as he made sure to point out that they could attach lasers to it.

It all felt...*right*, somehow. Like this was where he was supposed to be, doing what he was supposed to do. Machines often made him feel that way, but never quite so strongly, before. And at the same time, the feeling that he was making some horrible mistake kept bringing him back to check everything he could think of, again and again. Maybe that was why he felt conflicted about being finished; the simple fear that a thing he'd put that much of his life into plain wouldn't work.

As a theory, it made more sense than, say, a weird, vague feeling of portent, one that wouldn't go away despite repeated efforts to shake it off. Hal didn't care much for superstition.

Maybe it was only that he'd been working on REX so long it was hard to imagine doing anything else. Over the past few months of absorbing the greater part of his attention, she'd become something of a friend. It would be odd not to be cycling through her subroutines in his sleep. Exactly how long *had* he been working on her, anyway? Hal found he couldn't remember. And if you included how long it had taken him to convince anybody that it even could be done... Nobody'd ever attempted anything like it before, not so much as a prototype sketch or an aborted design. It was a minor miracle he'd ever gotten funding at all, though it wasn't as if, as he had often thought with a tinge of resentment, they didn't regularly take on projects that were twice as unrealistic. For all he knew, once REX was finished up they'd have him try to do something like individual flying platforms again. Completely impossible, of course, but it had been fun messing around until they figured that out.

Anyway, it was natural to be a little nervous when things were changing. It didn't mean anything. And it definitely shouldn't make the back of his neck itch as though he was being watched by an army of black cats.

Hal tried to ignore it. It wasn't too difficult; allocating the weight across the joints was one of the most interesting conundrums REX presented. The problem was, in fact, what was usually immediately cited as the foremost reason why a bipedal tank could never realistically be created.. It had been tremendously satisfying to solve it. The answer was obvious in retrospect...

His thoughts drifted along this heading, dispersing as they went, until he was lost contentedly in the intricacies of pivot and stabilizer, weight and counter-weight, piston and bearing. He liked them; the delicate and seemingly random shapes that could, when placed in the right configuration, lift a mountain.

The conscious part of him, the bit that made sure he wasn't mumbling any of this to himself, was pulled up partially out of the trance by the dissonant sound of approaching footsteps, too slow and patient to fit into the background noise of passing guards.

"Yeah?" Hal called absently. "What d'you want?"

The depth and scope of the pause made him look up.

And suddenly, the phrase "devastatingly beautiful" made sense.

"You," the cruelly striking boy said, made the distance between them vanish, and kissed him.

When it came to personal philosophy, Hal held to a strict, eternal optimism, aware of but unable to accept the fact that nothing would ever be quite perfect. He had never been able to sway himself from the belief in the unreachable, and perhaps only theoretical, ideal; that, no matter how good something was, there was always the possibility of the existence, somewhere, of something slightly better.

This was it.

His senses ebbed back slowly, eventually informing him that he might have been gaping like a fish for the past few seconds. Fortunately, the boy wouldn't have noticed. His forehead rested against

Hal's shoulder, and he was murmuring, over and over again, "I found you. I found you."

"Don't get me wrong," Hal said, "but have we, er, met?"

The boy looked at him with something like surprise, and the less moral part of Hal's mind called him more synonyms for 'idiot' than he had known it had access to. If it was a case of mistaken identity, what was the harm in letting it go on a little bit longer? But the boy's sharp features relaxed into a smile.

"Of course," he said. His voice had a light Russian accent, and lots of interesting shades and nuances and curved places. He wore military uniform, vintage by the looks of it. His bearing made it hard to see the grease spots and torn places. "You wouldn't remember. Believe me when I say we know each other." His grin flashed wickedly. "Very well."

"But..." Hal managed. Trying to think but *what*, exactly, was hindered by the presence of a stranger's young, strong body pressed up against his. Young, strong, lithe, warm...  
...wait, what had he been thinking about?

"I'll tell you everything, but it will take some time," the boy said, smiling lecherously and linking his hands around Hal's waist. "It can wait for after I make mad, passionate love to you."

Hal wondered where his English had come from, that he'd pick up *that* particular phrase.

A moment later, he learned that soft lips pressing urgently against his neck had a remarkable dampening effect on his curiosity.

"...shouldn't..." Hal mumbled.

"Why not?" said the boy. Hal felt the words dance a ghost waltz on his pulse.

The question bounced through his brain, meeting little opposition, until it rolled to a stop against a barrier.

"You don't even know me," he protested.

"Your name is Hal," the boy said, hardly interrupting his mouth's previous engagement and not slowing his hands at all. "You're an engineer, you take in stray cats, and you are very cute when you blush."

He tried, "I don't know *you*."

"You will." The confidence of a simple fact.

There was some reason, he knew there was... "I'm too old for you."

A blond eyebrow quirked petulantly. "I *like* older men."

"But, I don't...hold on, that unbuttons the other way, like this, see?... even know...your...name..."

As a few important subsections of Hal's brain switched over to a purely nonverbal mode, two thoughts struck glancing blows across its surface:

One; that, while this seemed to be a terribly inefficient way to take over a base, he'd leave it to someone else to complain,  
and

Two; a silent mental sigh of exasperation that he could immediately identify that *click* as the sound of a submachinegun's safety being flipped to "off."

If the second had not taken some time to filter past various distractions – two of them, to be specific, currently creeping steadily southwards down his back – it would still have been too late.

"Hands off the tech, and turn around slowly."

Solid Snake stood at the other end of the walkway, AK leveled in the pose that meant, internationally, business.

Hal remembered why one of the other phrases he knew several forms of was, "What do you mean, the patrol isn't back yet?"

With a disconcertingly sly gleam to his eyes, and an ease that suggested practice, the boy complied.

"Can't you see I'm busy?" he said, with an audible smirk. His voice had transformed, acquiring a smooth veneer of opaque arrogance that slipped around it like a pair of comfortable old sneakers. "Come back in an hour." He threw a glance at Hal over his shoulder. "Or two."

"Who are you," Snake demanded, in the forthright way men holding guns are entitled to, "and what are you doing here?"

The boy spread his hands, professing innocence. "What does it look like?"

"It *looked* like-" Snake gave his head a hard shake. "It doesn't matter what it looked like." He jerked the gun significantly, as a reminder that, not only did he have the upper hand in the conversation, it was loaded. "Identify yourself!"

The boy laid a hand on his chest in absurdly genteel affectation. Hal was reminded, for no real reason, of a magician reciting his patter. Always watch the other hand...

"Revolver Ocelot."

"Huh," said Snake. "I'm not sure who you're expecting to believe that, kid, but I'll tell you right now you might wanna change your story before Big Boss gets here."

Revolver Ocelot...where had he heard that name before?

"Ah," the boy said, sounding of all things relieved. "Something went right, then. Big Boss is still alive."

It must have been back when he'd first started working with them. That thing everybody had been talking about, but not often and never loudly.

Snake's eyes narrowed, and he took a step closer. "Got any friends with plans to change that?"

"Oh, I'm on my own, don't worry," said the boy. "In fact, I'm no threat at all."

He had been curious, at the time, but he hadn't known anybody well enough to ask, let alone when it obviously wasn't any of his business.

"Yeah," said Snake. "Can't imagine why I'd think a guy who crawled through the vents into a secret weapons lab might have anything unsavory in mind."

"Oh, he can't have come in that way," Hal said without thinking. "I rigged up alarms in those ages ago."

It took him a minute to notice that the standoff had been relegated to secondary status, following the higher priority of staring at him.

"What?" said Hal, blinking. "People *always* sneak in through the vents."

"What's this?" An amused voice came from above them. "One of the Russians, a few months late? I'd have thought even Gurlukovich would learn."

Liquid stood on the catwalk that ran across the far wall, leaning against the railing, AK trained with lazy expertise on the middle of the boy's chest.

Hal thought of the term "dead center" and wished he hadn't.

"Ah," the boy said, no more discomfited by two looming possibilities of messy and unspectacular death than he had been by one. "This must be the evil twin."

"We alternate," said Liquid. "It's his turn this week."

The boy craned his neck, examining him critically. "Good," he concluded. "You don't appear to be insane, sociopathic, or anyone's arm."

"Don't go jumping to conclusions," Snake muttered. Then: "Wait. Arm?"

"So we've got a lunatic." Liquid shrugged fluidly. "That's nothing new. They're like rats, only harder to spray for. I don't see the need to get the old man involved."

If a shock of rigidity had gone through the boy's body, he hid it well.

He said, with far more nerves than it warranted, "What old man?"

"Big Boss," Liquid clarified, ever helpful. "One eye. Looks sort of like Sean Connery."

"Huh," said Hal, who knew the man mostly by reputation, which was enough to tell him to keep his distance. "You know, he kinda does."

Snake said, "The other option is to just shoot him and call it a day."

"No," said Liquid reluctantly, "not yet." Under his breath, he added, "I *hate* being the good twin."

"If there's one thing," the boy said conversationally, his stance replete, at close range, with the peculiarly slack tension that could be a symptom of trying to hide either fear or preparation, "that I hate more than being interrupted, it's being—"

Hal always made sure to watch the other hand.

And he always missed it anyway.

There was a blur.

Where there had been two guns, there was now one more.

"...underestimated."

The new combatant was an old-fashioned six-shooter. From his vantage point, Hal could make out the detail that made it unique, from the elegant engraving that ran along the barrel to the chambers.

He didn't know whether to hope that the two Snakes could or couldn't see as well.

"Nobody's underestimating you, kid," Solid Snake said, voice guarded and blank. His front foot slid forward, and his hand shifted.

"What's going on here?" a young man's voice called over a light patter of running feet. Hal considered it rude that no one answered, but they were all too busy threatening each other.

"You can bring as many friends as you like," the intruder said, moving the muzzle of his revolver to account for the form loping through the shadows toward them. He grinned as though standing in Tiananmen Square with the knowledge, secret and incontrovertible, that the tank was going to lose. "Just means more for me to ki— *Zaebis*!"

"Huh?" said Raiden, stumbling to an uncertain halt in one of the patches of light between looming metal constructs.

As though forgetting the twin Snakes, the boy whirled to focus his attention and weapon entirely upon the newly arrived soldier. Hal, who had been previously working on conjecture based on voice, stance, and the back of his head, was given an excellent vantage of his profile, and the expression etched upon it.

Abject terror.

"You..." The revolver shook. "You're... How did you... *Stay the hell away from me!*"

The last, shouted word died away. The echoes of mad panic lingered.

Hal resisted the urge to shut his eyes.

This was where it always got bad.

"The hell...?" said Raiden. He squinted curiously and took a step forward.

"I said *stay back!*"

There was definitely more than one exclamation point in the demand.

Oh, *no*.

"Last chance, kid," Snake said, voice making one final stop in customs at Warning before entering the country of Promise. "Drop the gun."

Hal got the feeling he'd have more luck asking him to drop his right arm.

"Not a chance," the boy snarled.

With a sinking certainty, Hal knew what was going to happen now. This was when the bullets flew, even when he knew it was coming it always made him jump, this was when the boy would die, alone and outnumbered and they'd never know why, this was none of his business except in some weird way it was all about him and there was nothing he could do, and Snake's hands were moving and there was never anything he could do—

"Don't!"

When the world resolved, there were, as before, two endpoints to the line of fire.

Also, as Hal discovered with horrified triumph, him.

He felt a degree of resentment that his body would carry him this far, then leave him to fend for himself.

All right. The hard part was over. All he had to do was not move.

And, preferably, not get shot.

Hal was beginning to sense, as a trickle of cold sweat ran between his shoulder blades, that these two goals might very well be mutually exclusive.

"Get out of the way, Hal."

And it was a great time to realize that, what with saving his life on a fairly regular basis and the almost instantaneous feeling, on meeting him, that they had been friends for years, Hal had never been properly scared of Snake.

From the shadows beneath the catwalk, there was a streak of motion. Every gun in the room jerked in lethal unison, fraught with the promise of breaking the fragile bonds holding bloodshed in check.

Upon the realization that the interloper was in fact a cat, and that its goal was to attach itself to the boy's leg with tooth and claw and growl ecstatically, the previous, precarious balance of power was reasserted.

"D, don't hurt him," Hal pleaded, fumbling desperately to stall for time and more desperately for an idea of what to do when he got it. The catwalk continued behind them; the boy could make a break for it—

He turned at the sound of boots pounding on metal, and clicks that spoke two volumes, labeled, respectively, Lock and Load.

Three guards blocked the way, all kneeling in the pose known for conveying one very specific message: "If you are among those persons who dislikes having their internal organs dynamically aerated, moving would, at the moment, constitute a serious lapse of judgement."

They, Hal knew, fear flopping like a mortally wounded salmon in his guts, were just to get your attention.

A shadow moved behind them.

He didn't have to move fast. The long leather coat sighed behind measured steps, confident in the knowledge that whatever it was they were approaching they'd faced down worse. His hair was short and white as scar tissue above a face that looked as though it had been beaten against a rock until the right shape was achieved. At first, the dark place that was his right eye appeared to be a trick of the light, until the mind adjusted to the idea that it was cloth covering an eye that would never be tricked by anything again.

There were stories about how he had lost that eye, gaining steadily in unlikelihood as any night where people were drunk enough to begin relating them wore on. According to Snake, there was no point to asking, since all he would do was mumble something about cats' games, then sit and brood

for the next hour. According to Fox, it was the legacy of a knife fight in the back alleys of Baghdad (and they should see the *other* guy). According to Octopus, it had been cut out by Chinese guerrillas to prove his loyalty (it hadn't worked). According to Raven, he had plucked it out himself, to exchange with the gods for wisdom. According to someone who had turned out also to be Octopus, it had been clawed out by a furious parrot. According to Liquid, it had been clawed out by a vengeful woman in the throes of passion. According to Wolf, it had been given as down payment to a demon in exchange for invincibility in battle, and the day it came back for the other was the day he would die.

Halfway through the eternity after Big Boss drew to a halt, remaining eye prying at the boy's face as though it would come off, Hal could have believed that someone had shot it out just to make it stop staring at them.

"I don't know how you're doing this, Octopus," Big Boss began, with a level of menace that should not have been able to be achieved by anything without scales and a rattle at the end.

"Doing what?" said the soldier on the left.

The boy took the opportunity to shove Hal behind him and retarget. He was obviously under the terribly mistaken impression that training his gun on Big Boss was a good idea.

"You," the boy said, soft in a way that pierced. "So you're still alive."

"Yeah," said Big Boss. "Too bad I can't say the same for—"

He broke off and looked at Hal, though the engineer was doing nothing at all, unless you included straining very hard to give the impression that none of this was his fault. The grizzled old man sighed.

"Kid," he said, "I don't know if anybody ever told you this, but the human shield is supposed to go in front of you."

The boy ignored him, another entry very low on the great cosmic list of Wise Things to Do. "Call off your dogs," he demanded, gesturing imperiously with the revolver.

Only someone who knew him very well would have been able to recognize the false bravado.

"Sorry," Big Boss said, eyeing him with impenetrable calm, "but it's standard procedure when it comes to people breaking in and taking hostages."

"I did not break in!" the boy protested. "And he's not a hostage."

"That's what they always say," Hal said glumly.

"I'll make it up to you later," the boy murmured over his shoulder, eyes and voice for a split second rich with a promise that Hal wasn't sure he was understanding correctly but that made a blush begin to creep up his neck nonetheless.

"It looks to me," Big Boss said, eye on the boy's face unmoving, still enough that it could have been made of ice or colored glass, "that we both have things we want. You want to get out of this. I want to know what in the unholy hell is going on here." His tone was smooth and unambiguous. "Put the gun down and come with me."

Stance open and aggressive, the boy made no move to comply. A bead of sweat trickled down through the fine, pale gold hair at the back of his neck.

Belatedly, Hal realized that this was what exhaustion, the kind that came after the adrenaline faded and before you noticed its last vestiges had been the only thing holding you up, the kind that came from the conflict between the irresistible urge to run and forcing yourself to admit there was nowhere to go, from having fear pulse at the base of your skull until it was reliable as heartbeat, looked like from the outside.

"And why should I trust you?" the boy demanded, in a way that suggested that, much like, "Why are there puddles of acid on the floor?" or "What do you mean, neutralize it with chocolate?" this was

a question to which there could be no good answer.

"I don't see where you've got much to lose," said Big Boss.

Hal heard a radio crackle behind him, issuing something unintelligible. A voice murmured in response.

"You've got a cat on your leg," Big Boss mentioned.

"I know!"

"Sir!" Raiden called, thumbing the transceiver's switch and trotting toward his commanding officer. "Patrols report no evidence of any other intru—"

*"I told you to stay away!"*

With speed that made Hal dizzy just to watch it, the boy had whirled, gun trained on Raiden and a sheen of madness glinting over his eyes. Raiden skidded to a halt, caught unexpectedly in no-man's land.

Big Boss's eye moved from the boy to the silver-haired soldier, and back again. And narrowed. Appraisal.

"Hold your ground," he ordered.

Raiden nodded, shifting his grip on his weapon.

If it was meant as a threat, it was wasted. The boy's eyes never left his face.

"He does what I say, you know," Big Boss mentioned, calculatedly conversational. "If I give the word, he'll stay right there. Won't move another step. Or—"

His voice held looming menace beneath a friendly veneer, like a plush toy stuffed with asbestos.

"— I could let him do whatever he wants."

"You wouldn't," the boy breathed. He stood frozen, horror spread across the pitiless perfection of his features.

"Wouldn't I?" said Big Boss.

Hal's head jerked back and forth, from the merciless glitter in Big Boss's eye to the baffled perplexity in Raiden's, as the latter decided the best course of action was to keep the boy in his sights and look as vaguely threatening as possible.

"You bastard," the boy said, with feeling.

He pulled the gun back.

Big Boss nodded once, slowly.

"You," he said to Raiden, "take them—" he indicated two of the soldiers still in a combat-ready crouch and probably beginning to feel fairly silly— "and get a search started. Make sure he doesn't have any friends. Octopus, get me anybody you can find who has a lot of experience with crazy. You two—" He turned his eye to the Snakes, then brought it to bear, pupil burning black, on the boy. "Bring him."

With that, FOXHOUND's leader turned to walk away.

Within moments Snake was at the boy's right, and Liquid, either because the stairs would take too long or just because he felt like showing off, had leapt down from the upper catwalk to take his left.

"No!" the boy cried, jerking free and wrapping an arm around Hal's waist with fervent speed that surprised a somewhat undignified squeak out of the engineer. "Not without him."

"Fine," Big Boss called, waving over his shoulder. "He can come, too. Bring all the techs you want."

Holstering his gun with exaggerated grace in one hand and tightening his grip on Hal with the other, the boy condescended to let the Snakes flank him and lead him forward. Hal was, perforce,



carried along. It was a tentative enough truce as it was; he wasn't going to be the one to break it. Besides, as the more mercenary part of him pointed out, this at least ensured him a good vantage point.

The soldiers said nothing, though Snake shot him a somewhat rueful glance and Liquid a speculative one, as though he might really have something to do with all of this. Hal returned both with a blankness that was not at all feigned.

He expected dread to make the journey interminable, but found that trying to ignore the graceful interplay of lean muscle beside him made for a surprisingly effective occupation for the greater part of his attention. Most of the rest was dedicated to not stepping on the cat who wove between their feet, purring like a tiny orange lawn mower.

Under suspicion, surrounded by armed men, and in the grip of someone who he doubted was anything as simple as a terrorist, Hal felt safer than he had for a long time.

*Congratulations, Hal. You've just contracted the world's quickest case of Stockholm Syndrome.*

He had enough cynicism to think it, but not quite enough to believe it.

When they got to the office, Raven and Mantis were already there, looming and floating, respectively, to either side of a large desk. Big Boss sat behind it, leaning forward, hands folded, in a manner that suggested he was either going to send his son out to fight monsters in a giant robot or make someone an offer they couldn't refuse.

"Dismissed," he said to the Snakes.

They departed without argument, likely mostly due to confidence that, as soon as Hal had any idea what the hell was going on here, he would tell them.

It was starting to look less and less like that would be anytime soon.

In any case, there was always something disconcerting about having all three of them in the same room. They doppelganged up on you.

Big Boss was pulling things out of drawer, as though looking for something. His desk was heaped with a growing pile of discards; a small statue of a frog, a packet of ramen noodles, a tangle of spare eyepatches, what appeared to be a dirty magazine in Russian, and a plethora of other things Hal's brain couldn't spare the neurons in the Weird lobe to categorize. He retrieved a bottle of whiskey, ignoring the cat that considered the newly vacated space to be the perfect size for curling up into a blissful orange ball. He took a long pull, then set the bottle down hard and looked squarely at the boy.

"You're dead," Big Boss said.

It wasn't a threat.

Odd way to start a conversation. The boy seemed to have been expecting it.

"No I'm not," he answered readily. Hal considered his confidence justified; after all, the weight of evidence was with him.

"You died," said Big Boss, unwilling to concede the point, "three years ago."

Some aspects of reality are transient. Subject to the capricious whims of matter, their aspect is altered in order to coexist with fluctuations in environment, shaped, as it were, by the shifting forces that, directly or indirectly, dictate the lay of their properties.

And some things never change.

Hal said, "He got better."

"Three years ago..." the boy repeated softly. He raised his eyes as if to renew a challenge. "No. It should have been long before that."

"See?" said Hal, aware that he was inching swiftly toward hysteria but mostly just glad no one was paying any attention to him. "He feels fine."

"Just over three years, now," said Big Boss, as if putting someone he thought was dead ill at ease made him glad somehow. Shadenfreud. "So there's no way you can be here. Especially not looking like that."

The statement, like many that put logic and reality at odds and find both wanting, was followed by another swig from the bottle.

For the first time, the boy looked worried.

"John," he said, and it had never occurred to Hal to think that Big Boss might have a real name, "what happened, after I saw you fifty years ago?"

"Uh-uh," said Big Boss, with a firm shake of his head. "It's your turn, first."

Hal didn't understand why he bothered to ask, when Mantis was sta— floating right there. But he didn't know much about the physics of psychics; maybe asking made the relevant information rise to the top, so to speak. Or maybe Big Boss was just curious what he would make up.

"The short answer," said the boy, "is time travel."

"Tell me," said Big Boss, letting out a sigh that sounded like it had been kept in for a long while, "do I even want to know the long answer?"

"That depends," said the boy. He seemed to be gaining in intensity by the second. "The way I know it, I found you fifty years ago and told you how to set it right. Then I left and came here. To now."

"Oh, good," said Big Boss. "And here I thought this was going to be complicated."

"You called me crazy then, too." The boy's face was stoic. "But hasn't it all happened as I said?"

"Not all of it." Big Boss's eye was on something in the pile on his desk. "That's what you always said you were trying to make sure of."

"But this is the first time I've seen you, since that day," the boy said firmly.

"See," Big Boss said to no one in particular, "that's where I don't follow. Why would somebody go to all the trouble of copying Ocelot down to the least detail - looking like him, moving like him, acting like him - without bothering to find out what he'd been up to for the past fifty years?"

"I told you," the boy insisted, "I haven't *been* here. I *left*. I can't have been 'up to' anything. Unless..."

His face went still.

"Look," Big Boss sighed, as if taking pity. "Here's what I saw: you came in and made your speech. Then you brought out that little robot toy thing. Acted like you thought something was gonna happen, or you were gonna go somewhere. Then—" He rubbed at his forehead with the heel of his hand. "You went kind of— weird. Thought I saw...anyway, my depth perception's not what it used to be. After a second it was gone, and there was just you, giving me a funny look."

"But that's..." The boy's eyes were wide and staring. "...something left behind...no. Can't be... I *felt him die*..." His head jerked up. "What did he do?" he demanded. "Did he attack you?"

"I suppose you could say that," Big Boss said. "In the same sense they say you attacked him." He nodded significantly toward Hal, who wondered fleetingly if a color sample on his skin would come up 'cardinal' or 'vermillion.'

"Of course," he added, "that's not to say that I believe you."

"He's not lying," rasped Mantis, voice made harsh and startling by filters and metal. With the gas mask - and maybe without it; who would know? - his voice was reminiscent of segmented steel coils sliding through a sieve.

"Right," said Big Boss. "Well, he's still dead."

"No," said Raven, who had the habit of standing so still that you forgot there was an enormous, shirtless Inuit with a cannon on his back in the room, which made it rather unsettling when he reminded you. "He is no spirit."

"I could have told you that," Mantis said sullenly, as under his breath as he could manage while under a gas mask.

"Neither," Raven continued, pretending not to hear him, "is he entirely of this world."

The boy cocked an eyebrow. "You're calling *me* not real?"

He'd certainly *felt* real.

"Let me see..." said Mantis.

As though anybody could stop him.

"See wh—"

A change came over the boy's face. Hal winced in sympathy. It was a uniquely unpleasant feeling, having your mind leafed through, thoughts brought forward at someone else's whim. No one could like the feeling of having his mind answer to someone else's control, though, Hal thought wryly, it wasn't as though he ever had much control over his anyway. He'd experienced one of Mantis's "readings" back when he'd first been hired, as something of a security check, but only briefly; it didn't take much to confirm that he was exactly as he seemed, and of no danger to anybody.

"Interesting," said Mantis. He sounded cautiously pleased, like he'd just gotten the first side of a Rubik's Cube lined up. "The pattern of his memory is...odd."

"Odd how?" said Big Boss.

"He is who he claims. And he has... hmm. Interesting. Yesss, that would explain quite a lot. ...hmm... what's this? Not a psychic block, but an unnatural area, blank and white—"

"Get out of there!" the boy cried, jerking like a still frame snapped back into motion.

Mantis made a movement that, had his feet been on the ground, would have been a stagger. Besides a minute twitch of an eyebrow, Big Boss showed no surprise that one of the world's most adept psychics had been thrown involuntarily out of someone's mind. Hal supposed that, once you bore witness to six impossible things before breakfast, there was room for a dozen improbable ones after lunch.

"Now, let's see what the other one has to say..."

Hal didn't get a chance to brace himself, but it wouldn't have helped anyway.

The sensation of having your brain turned upside down and shaken to see what would fall out was always disconcerting. He tried to reassure himself with the thought that Mantis, having worked with serial killers and the like, would have seen much worse than what resided in the dark corners of his mind, and wasn't terribly surprised when it didn't work.

*Oh, yes. Much, much worse.* Amusement rang through his head, shapes and thoughts and emotions that were not his. It was like finding a stranger in your home. Or your mirror. *Would you like to see?*

*No!*

What was this mind? This dark mind, twisted thing, cylinder spiral of boiling black concrete, twisted thing hating and cherishing its twisted body, and even in its mockery its loneliness it had wanted him to say "yes" and in showing him it would be less alone, hating and cherishing all of them and their easy cares and closed worlds, revulsion and hatred and envy and contempt that was all a part of a strange, sad pity...

*Yes. Exhibitionism, you could call it.* That dark, resigned amusement, like the dregs of bitter

coffee. *A deep reading is, by necessity, somewhat mutual... I've shown you mine. Now, you can show me yours—*

As though the inner vision doubled, crossing the eyes of the second sight—

A clockwork city. Gears that shone and ran, gummed and corroded gears that ran, gears held together by tape and string and hope that ran (and the broken parts, the cracked that would never fit, taking on new life in engines built to cradle the deformity, pressed makeshift into service that grew around them like oak galls until without it they could not be they, nothing left to waste and nothing left behind) Sky alive with pulse-shocks along invisible wires, lights like circuitry blazing hot aurora star-trails to a next nexus to explode like impulse neuron spiderwebs, and everywhere nothing was still, everywhere it moved—

*Ahh— Such lovely architecture...But I'm not here for a tour.* And there was regret, he could feel the real regret. *Come, we have memories to search.*

And now images and sights and smells, the feelings of years ago as though he'd never left them, flashing by, from when he was just a kid playing Suikoden or Castlevania to the first things he'd made work or made not work in an interesting way to—

*Ah. Yes. Here it is.*

An aberration. A blank island of oil in the waters that parted around it untouched. It was difficult to focus on, it slid, wasn't worth the effort, not important, nothing to see here move along but control was not his own, the unsurpressible instincts that turned him were not his, and he moved closer and the edges peeled back to show a woman in the snow no a man in his arms dying he was dying she no don't please don't (hero) I love

love in the firelight, the soldier he should have never seen (stillness in the snow, half-buried, given away only by the irregularity of slope) who would be lost to him holding him close as though soon he wouldn't be so soon he would be gone

hiding, he was no soldier he was the one who hid, in the darkness safe and dying because he could hear it, there was no way to block out the scream, nothing to do but pray *Snake please be okay please be*

the fear that became a friend, let him know he wasn't dead yet, the whole base hadn't crumbled he wasn't another corpse he wasn't a spirit wandering unable to leave lost and never knowing

wondering when he would see him again, the strange boy Major, when he could forget he was a game to him a momentary diversion, when he would smile at him across the others like a secret shared and it would stop mattering

watching her life bleed away, (the man was dead but the knife had had its last whisper) Emma his E.E., found her finally found her and losing her while the sun set

building, peace but not alone, in his hands things he understood, connections and moving parts. Beside him the boy he didn't understand (it could only make it worse, he wanted to understand), watching him when he thought he wasn't looking

waking on a cold floor, held in warmth and strong young arms, trying hard not to remember and when he failed that trying just for now just for him not to care, because nothing scared him so much as how much he'd been able to hurt him

Adamska Adamska

the katana cleaving through flesh with as little thought as effort (not him yet but he was next) arterial spray almost stylized no time to scream no time inhuman paralysis and the one red eye and of all the ways he had never thought this would be the way he would die

it had all been a weird mistake and if he'd been smart he never would have built it, it wasn't meant to be, he never should have met this boy who fought the future but he kissed him, once, and he wouldn't say goodbye and he couldn't regret it

stop it

please

(Far away, there was a choked, pathetic sound, and someone shouted, "*Stop this!*")

and it stopped.

And though he reached for them with the instinct that hated to lose old dreams, the memories, and the memories of the memories, were gone, and forcing his mind to turn toward them brought only blank and white.

*Fascinating. This is nothing like mere repression. Not damage or unpleasantries sealed for self-preservation but, let us say... information that has become invalid.*

*Glad...to be educational... think next time, you could just ask?*

That flutter of amusement, strange, dark and delicate. *Don't worry. I've found what I came for, between the two of you.* A pause, like the wingbeat of that butterfly that keeps causing hurricanes. *You're linked, did you know that?*

A wave of thought, chemicals, and electric impulses took the form of, *Huh?*

*You and the boy. Both of your minds show the effect of the other, though yours is unaware.*

Through the undergrowth of confusion, tendrils of curiosity crept into the light. *What...is he like?*

*You would know better than I.* And when he did not understand, a quiet laugh. *Here. Let me show you something. In...payment, for things taken.*

and

motion, and an *elsewhere*, no, a perfect crystal picture of it in impossible definition, preserved like a ship in a bottle.

*Yes. I have a good memory for minds, as you see. This is what I found—*

Quickly, hardly more than a blur, a feeling of strict and terrible *confinement* that would have been unbearable if it hadn't been breaking at the edges (as though dissolving in slow warm water), stairs and vaults and passageways infinite but twisted in and echoed inward so that if you fell you'd keep on falling—

guided past them, drawn past all of them, into the center of the secret place the hidden heart and he wanted to let go because he was afraid so many shadows he didn't want to see the darkness or worse emptiness that must be—

Peace.

A small, lighted area. An island of undemanding silence in the dark, looming shapes surrounding kept at bay by soft, mechanical sounds. Patterns, patterns to be lost in, patterns to satisfy the mind in his hands. And a soothing, an appeasement of the great human weaknesses; the desire to create as well as destroy, and the desire not to be alone. Both given, and nothing expected in return, by the presence that kept the dark away. Reality may be spiked with the bitterness of what would soon be gone, the taste that let a man know he was dying of starvation, but here it could be kept, buried, in perpetual safety.

*The dirty little secret - that he, too, is human.*

*I don't understand. Is that— me?*

*Who else?*

And he wanted to know how and why but all he got was a ripple of laughter as he was pulled back, and suddenly he could see with clarity the subtle serrations at the edges where it broke into

petals manifold with a sort of odd and cynical sympathy, that the rote programming of the selfish instinct that sought after love was present in the both of them, him and the boy, but in a form that would do their genes no good at all.

And it was too late to ask why because he was being pulled back, too fast, no time to put the levels into focus as they came before they were gone, pulling back and away until his blinking smeared the disorientation and he realized the colors he was staring into were the boy's eyes, and he wanted to tell him that it was all right and he wanted to ask him who he was and why he was and what came out was, "Guh?"

After a moment, Hal was able to gather his thoughts, with a decent degree of certainty that most of them were his, and deal with enough of the YES/NO switches in his head that were set to MAYBE to say, "Huh? Oh. Yeah, I'm fine."

A flash of panic fading from his eyes, the boy, who had been half-standing, sat back, but kept his hand on Hal's arm. In the real world - whatever *that* meant - only a few seconds had passed.

"Boss," Mantis said, and it felt strange to hear his voice as a physical thing, filtered by the mask and without the eddies of nuance and chains of interlinked emotion, "I think you're going to want to hear about this..."

"Fine," said Big Boss, and he hadn't been able to hear it before but it was like he was barely paying attention. "You two, get out of here. This room's going to have enough crazy in it as it is."

"B-but..." Hal managed. "What about..." He shot a glance at the boy.

Big Boss shrugged. "He seems to like you. Keep him."

And that looked to be all the help he was going to get.

"Come on," the boy said, and Hal found himself pulled along.

The door closed behind them, just as Hal finally made out that what Big Boss was staring at was a mousetrap.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/30/>

# chapter 31

## Stray by Dahne

*and his heart was going like mad and yes I said yes I will Yes.*

-James Joyce, *Ulysses*

*Love can change the nature of a man.*

There are laws for everything.

Volumes of them in neat stacks, with thick leather binding and dry pages that rustled like clinking chains. They were kept in a room at the center of Adamska's mind, and often consulted.

The first, the foundation for them all, is that nothing can be changed. Your situation is permanent. There are boundaries; within them, do as you like. Fighting them brings no change but pain.

The day hit him with cold clarity like a closed blue fist. There was a bite to the wind that felt viscerally satisfying, like a slap to the face of someone who deserved it. It seemed as if years had passed since he had last seen snow and sky. To see white with dimension, feel air curl against his skin, filled him with an absurd tactile wonderment. It was as though he had died in a shadow world and been reborn into another that had reformed itself along the dictates of the unreachable ideal.

The law: your environment will change. People will change. They have significance only in their bearing on the mission.

Hal kept turning to him, and opening his mouth to ask. The questions competed for airspace and spent themselves against each other, and his mouth would close again.

Adamska made a game of seeing how long he could go without taking him in his arms and kissing him senseless.

The third time his face turned, striking in its open curiosity, Adamska couldn't help but laugh.

"What's so funny?" Hal protested, and finding out that he could resemble a recalcitrant puppy as much as ever made Adamska laugh more.

"Nothing," he said. "Only that you used to give me that same look before, too."

"But...I've never met you before."

"You have," Adamska said, striding forward confidently. "You just don't know it."

Hal pushed at his glasses, hurrying after him. "That's...kind of impossible."

Adamska threw back his head and laughed out loud. "Yes! Exactly! Impossible. Everything that has happened is impossible. That's what makes it fun."

Hal relented to a shy half-smile. "Somehow, you seem like the kind of guy who would think that way."

"You see?" Adamska gestured expansively at nothing in particular. "You know me, too."

"Er, except, that's the thing. I don't."

Adamska smirked fondly at him. "You will."

The cabin was much as he remembered it. It loitered near a stand of evergreens, hardly distinguishable from the trunks but for a regularity of angle beyond the attention span of even the most assiduous of natural flora. A group of black birds shouted at each other above it, discernable as bursts of rustling feathers and irascible silhouettes among the branches. Adamska had no viable basis for telling the difference between a murder of crows, an argument of ravens, or a grievous bodily injury of magpies, but then again didn't much care. The trees smelled clean.

Adamska reached for the door, amused when his supposition was proved correct and it was

unlocked.

The law; the only reason to try to get close to you is to hurt you.

His amusement lasted up to the moment something grey, furry, and at high velocity hit him in the chest.

He landed on his back in the snow, the dog ignoring his curses and shouts of, "Get off, Kaworu!" in favor of attempting ecstatically to lick him in the face.

"Wow," Hal said, from a safe distance, and Adamska would have been more receptive to how pleased he sounded if he hadn't been contending with a facefull of ravening hellhound. "He doesn't usually take so well to strangers."

"Well, I'm not a stranger, am I?" Adamska grunted, nearly earning entirely the wrong tongue in his mouth for his efforts. "*Get the hell off me!*"

With some - belated, in his opinion - help from Hal's quarter, he managed to pry the beast away long enough to get up, favoring his left side slightly. His liver was going to have a paw-shaped dent in it for the rest of his life.

"Sorry about that," Hal said. "He's usually not that, er, enthusiastic. Was one of Dave's, actually. He kept wandering over, until Snake said I might as well keep him. Said he had too many dogs anyway."

"Looks familiar," Adamska said, following Hal inside and shutting the door behind him. His eyes swept the room's corners; his physiology might never be capable of taking the absence of an ambush in the shadows on faith.

"Does it? I haven't changed much since I bought it- well, except for taking out the bearskin rug, that's just tacky-"

He was babbling, and knew it. Adamska held up a finger to stop him.

"Not as familiar as you," he said, feeling the corner of his mouth twitch up.

"But that's just it, isn't it?" Hal said, as though despair had been pent up and patiently waiting its turn. "That was a different world. Maybe it was a- different me..."

The law; the only choices you have are whether you will hurt them first, and when you will die.

The empty place in Adamska's memory rang like a struck tuning fork, and he said, "It's not so easy to change who you are."

The questions were written plainly on Hal's face.

Adamska tried to find the words to explain.

All at once, he felt acutely the weariness that had been lurking behind adrenaline and the exuberance of pretending he knew what he was doing. There was an indefinable sense that his body should by all rights be battered and bloody, and that very soon it would all come crashing down on him. It reminded him of the time, long ago and long ago, he had fought behind enemy lines for what later turned out to have been a good seventy-two hours until, under cover of night, he made it back to the camp, delivered a stack of only slightly bloodstained plans into Volgin's hands, and promptly collapsed for two days.

The jump across the intervening years, the gulf from Then to Now, had not been instantaneous. Adamska could feel it, as surely as he could feel strained ligaments or the throb of a bruised rib. Something had worn his mind and body to the breaking point, and no one had done the courtesy of telling him what.

It was almost as if he had not skipped fifty years, but lived them very quickly.

Or been dead through them.

Now there was an odd thought. It brought an eerie feeling to the inside of Adamska's skull, but



one that was quickly dispelled. It was not nearly so difficult to imagine visiting a world beyond the grave as it was to believe he would have been allowed back. Future crimes undone or not, if there existed such a thing as an omniscient entity that administered justice to the souls of sinners, it had reason to be less than thrilled with Adamska.

Here, now, with a dog headbutting him affectionately in the knees and Hal tilting his head like a quizzical bird and looking at him with those large, curious eyes, it was hard to believe in death.

Altering the course of fifty years of history had simply made Adamska tired.

Before he could reconcile the past, he had to know if he had a present.

"I need to ask something of you," Adamska said.

"Sure. What?" In the wrong order, as always.

"Accept me as I am, for now," he began, and stopped. His throat had gone dry.

The law; those who trust die of their own stupidity.

Something no one had ever given him, and he had never asked for.

"Trust me."

Hal nodded and said, "Sure."

It took Adamska a moment to realize that he was waiting.

The favor was so easy for him to grant that he thought it the prelude to a greater one.

"Er...Ocelot, was it?"

The law; the name we give you is your only name.

An indulgent smirk into guileless grey eyes. "Adamska, to you."

Hal smiled brilliantly, someone who had worked long enough alongside code names to understand what the lack of them conveyed. "Adamska. Right."

Adamska decided that the game was stupid and he didn't want to play anymore.

The law; someone is always watching.

Moving more quickly than he could run away and knowing in a kind of joyful delirium that he wouldn't want to, Adamska pulled the strange, inconceivable, confusing, incredible man into an embrace and kissed him.

With the battles Adamska had fought, distance he had traversed, and impossibilities he had battered into existence through sheer force of will to achieve this moment, if it had been of anything less than breathtaking dimension, he would have been left looking very foolish.

Adamska never looked foolish.

Hal stared at him as his lips drew away, close enough to feel his breath, eye and iris and pupil forming perfect concentric circles. "I don't understand."

Adamska said, "Do you need to?"

His eyes followed Adamska's hand down the curve of his hip. "Maybe not right now."

This time when Adamska kissed him, Hal's hands moved hesitantly, then, as if decided, settled on his hips, taking him by surprise with the sparks the simple touch sent flowing down his back to detonate at the base of his spine.

"Bedroom?" Adamska suggested into his ear. The silvering hairs were there behind it, as much a temptation to play with as ever. He could play with it, if he wanted. There was no reason not to. He could do whatever he wanted.

Adamska's body was undergoing something of a revolution. A long-reigning, ruthless dictatorship had been overthrown - in a bloodless coup, moreover, however *that* worked - and the formerly subjugated demesne was swept into heedless celebration. The populace was sitting on the ruins of barricades, drinking toasts to the endorphins that ran like wine in the streets. Several were

setting fires. It was altogether giddy and chaotic and ridiculous and Adamska never wanted it to stop.

"Over there," Hal said, turning toward the back of the house. "This— oh!"

Adamska's arms had made the compelling argument that the process of walking and kissing at the same time would be greatly expedited if he simply picked Hal up. There was fortunately little to trip on; the dog had retired to a corner, sensing it would be the recipient of little further attention.

His body felt light as a bird's. Maybe his bones were hollow. Maybe he could fly.

They moved in a soft-edged delirium, accentuated by murmurs of enjoyment and a small thud.

"Sorry," Adamska said, making a second attempt at the doorway. "Distracted."

The room was small and bore the signs of someone who spent too much time focused inward to spare much attention for outer details, such as where he was at the moment. The bed was likewise narrow. No matter. Adamska had shared narrower. (Granted, usually only until it occurred to him to ask, "Why are you still here?" Or, on one memorable occasion, when he had been exhausted enough to fall into a bunk, realized too late that it wasn't his, and had to spend the rest of the night pretending he'd meant to do that, but that wasn't important.) He dropped Hal onto it and followed closely, kneeling over him on his hands and knees and bending his head low to kiss him. Hal's lips hummed with quiet, unconscious sounds.

It was as though Adamska's mouth, in the midst of the warmth and slick softness and teasing flicks of his tongue, had sent out a message that hypersensitization was rather nice and the rest of his body really ought to give it a try. He felt everything in florid, extravagant detail. The delicate distribution of subtle pressure in the hand that pulled lightly at the back of his neck. The radiant warmth in the air between them. The rhythm of his breath roughening to a quicker tempo.

Adamska had never given much thought to necks, in and of themselves. They were unremarkable things; useful in the turning of one's head or as a target at close range, but not terribly exciting. As he kissed the curve of Hal's, he noticed that he had begun to feel differently. A long time ago, during the endless wars, Adamska had borne stoic witness to innumerable instances of the sort of wistfully obscene talk of women that invariably sprouted in any environment where there weren't any. There had been one of the men, an older one, whose stories had an inner anatomical consistency that suggested they might be true. Just as the flagrante of the narrative was drawing near to delicto, he would regularly disappoint his audience by leaning back, eyes dreamily hooded, and waxing eloquent on the subject of a certain woman's calves. (It was unknown how long he could do this, as he had only ever stopped when someone hit him with something.) With wounded dignity he would reproach them, as they presented the universal agreement that there were many far more interesting locations on which to focus his attention, with the response that, yes, on the common woman, there were.

"Ah, but this girl," he would sigh. "This girl!"

Then, Adamska had ignored them as he always did and thought nothing of it but to marvel, as he always did, that any idiots could be so naive as to let anyone else know what they wanted.

*This man*, he thought now, feeling the pulse quicken beneath his lips. *This man!*

The law: the easy road is only easy because the enemy wants you to take it.

The law, the basic one that hardly needed articulation: everyone is the enemy.

Adamska let himself linger at the hollow of the throat, then, remembering something, pulled away and sat up slightly.

"What are you doing?" The breathy thread in Hal's voice was gratifying.

Adamska's hands stilled on the lapels of his lab coat, fabric running between thumb and forefinger.

"I want to kiss you more," he said.

Hal said, "Oh."

He let Adamska slip the coat from his shoulders and toss it aside to fall with a prudishly disapproving rustle. Adamska pulled the shirt up, forgetting about the glasses and experiencing a subsequent moment of surreal fear that he might have cost someone else an eye, until they were extricated and placed out of harm's way. Shirt joined coat on the floor, where they commiserated long into the night on the injustice of the casual abandonment of a loyal garment.

Straddling Hal's hips, Adamska sat back on his heels and took a good look. His previous experiences had been highly nonvisual affairs, conducted under cover of darkness and frequently hissing injunctions to shut up at one another.

Now, however...

Adamska had, he realized with a slow, wicked smile, all the time in the world.

His body attempted the casting of an orderly vote, soon devolving into shouting factions. Adamska's eyes were perfectly content with things as they stood. The upper half of his body was compiling an extensive list of likely territory to be touched and nipped and kissed, while the lower was engaged in the composition of a series of treatises on the inherently superfluous quality of pants.

He was halfway back down before he noticed it.

Leaning his weight on his left hand, Adamska used his right to lift the bullet from Hal's chest and examine it more closely. He knew the notch by the base, the lumps in the chain where it had been broken and inexpertly repaired, by feel as much as sight.

"You still have it," Adamska said, amused at what a triumph the small, unknowing gesture felt.

"It's a good luck charm," Hal admitted sheepishly. "I've had it a long— whaddya mean, 'still'?"

Adamska took the liberty of ignoring the question. "Where did you get it?" he asked. "Do you remember?"

"Of course I remember. It's from when..." Hal trailed off.

When next he spoke, it was with the distantly awed tones of one who has, after weeks of persecution by nightmares and guilt and phantom heartbeats, torn down the newly-bricked wall in the cellar to find nothing but a nicely preserved cask of amontillado.

"It was in remembrance of something, one of those things you know you'll never forget. It was something sad. There was...so much regret, even though there's nothing I could have done differently. It hurt too much to think about it, so I tried to forget." He gave a small, bewildered laugh. "Guess I succeeded."

Adamska drew the chain off his neck and set it on the table beside the bed. Then he wound his arm behind Hal's back and pulled him into a tight embrace.

"It was mine," he said, and kissed him when he opened his mouth for the "How—?"

Control. That was the secret. If Adamska had perfect and absolute control over himself, then no one would ever have control over him.

Adamska was sick of control.

He kissed him everywhere he could think of, everywhere within reach. The gasps inspired him, and he moved lower, closer, settling his body so that they fit together like the joins of something well-made. He took his time, discovering that something as prosaic as a shoulder could be fascinating at maximum magnification. Adamska's lips had taken control in a quiet coup with little resistance and now set out in heady glow of victory to declare a great age of exploration, beginning with the unconquered territory along Hal's inner arm. Brief, brushed kisses against his wrist, then a long, slow one to the center of his palm. Then the fingers, the long, lovely, clever fingers that straightened and curled as Adamska kissed each joint and sucked lightly on the tips, and the semi-autonomous republic

of his other hand wandered across Hal's stomach.

"H, hey."

"Yes?" said Adamska, not pausing.

"How crazy are you trying to drive me?"

Adamska smirked. "Just enough."

The law: what you take by force was all he will get. If something is given freely, take it before the mistake is discovered.

Perhaps he was accustomed to former lovers, those who were habitually in more of a hurry. *Duraki*. There would always be fools who slugged good vodka, took poor care of their guns, and rushed what deserved to be savored.

Adamska could not say he had been an exception. Mutual friction between comrades. No pretense otherwise. The risk would have been intolerable.

They would spend half the night talking about women, apparently under the impression that volume and detail functioned as some kind of proof, and the other half pretending not to hear each other's muffled grunts and bare feet on the barracks floor.

Adamska had met very few people whose words, thoughts, and actions had any bearing on each other at all.

He wanted to find out for himself if the risk could be worth it.

Granting his hands leave to pursue whatever routes they judged promising, Adamska charted it all with his fingertips; Here, The Place Beneath Where The Ribs Meet That Is Excellent For Kissing, one sigh's journey northwest of Area Where The Right Hip Turns Inward, marked with the symbol that signified Wonderful Little Noises Evoked Here. The expanse of skin, softly curving across his stomach and warm, growing warmer, was abruptly interrupted, reminding Adamska that they were both wearing pants.

This would not be tolerated.

The law: everything you wear is armor, and everything you hold is a weapon. Drop them and you will regret it.

Adamska had resolved long ago never to regret.

He sat back on his heels and overruled his lips and hands, which were perfectly happy with things as they were and had lots of interesting territory they'd hardly gotten a start on yet, long enough to solve the issue.

The shirt, camouflage patterned and marked at the shoulders with a major's stars, had been through more than most. It had been grappled with, slammed up against the walls of a WiG, soaked in sweat, mud, blood, and lake water. It had been torn, stained with grease, aggressively manhandled and viciously cathandled. Its weave had passed within inches of sparks of synthetic electricity, swarms of uncanny hornets, and bullets innumerable. Its stitching had existed in more than one contiguous period of time and what it suspected was more than one dimension. It had done more service than any standard issue garment could ever be expected to, far above and beyond the call of wardrobal duty.

And now it was forgotten.

It was however, not long to be alone; soon it was joined by several other articles, including a gun belt that landed with an ungraceful thud and a pair of long-suffering pants. They and the shirt had long fought alongside one another, and they spent the night in an impromptu memorial service for the hat, recently lost, that had been a beloved comrade.

Adamska took a personal pride in the rapt attention his every gesture garnered. The constant

knowledge that one was stunning, comforting as it might be, could not provide quite the same satisfaction as watching someone else be admirably stunned.

"God— you're..." Hal's tongue flicked across his lips. "...wow."

The unconscious gesture and well-earned flattery were too much of a temptation, and Adamska leaned forward to kiss him. He noted with pleasure that the other man's movements were growing bolder, taking less teasing to evoke, as though he were thawing from a habitual paralysis. Each kiss tasted less of fear.

Adamska kissed from his jawline to his ear, and whispered, for no reason at all, "I'm yours."

The grey eyes that had been hooded eclipsed, replete with a pure and unexpected confusion. "What?"

His eyes were the color... His eyes were the color of his eyes, and that was good.

"You heard me." Adamska didn't want to explain. He didn't know if he could. He wasn't sure what he meant; only that he meant it very much.

Instead, he decided to do something he did want to do.

The law: the adequate hide who they truly are at all times. The best forget it.

The lower half of his body had composed several spirited and convincing theses to the effect that underwear was an unjust burden endured by the common worker.

Adamska hooked his thumbs into his waistband and, keeping Hal's gaze locked to be sure he had his absolute attention, slid his underwear down his hips, sultry and achingly slow. The effect was somewhat mitigated by the unforeseen difficulty of completing the action while straddling a man, but, after hearing the noises a few of the more vigorous gyrations evoked, Adamska decided this had been his intention.

As the state of nudity was never as much fun explored alone, he extended to Hal the standard invitation to come along.

An instant before yanking his pants off and making sure it was too late to argue, it occurred to him that the situation might call for a touch more delicacy.

A sudden looming of malingering doubt rose in Adamska's mind, from the beady-eyed depths of the reptile hindbrain where the things that cast long shadows slept. He stilled his hands and stilled his thoughts. Like the prayer of jungle-bred prey, that the play of light's variant filtration through variegated canopy will mask and make the cradle of its vulnerability a place of safety, single mind loud in the stillness of its concentrated *pass me by pass me by pass me by*

The law: things are given for one purpose, and that is so they can be taken away.

The law: never be so naive as to think your mistakes will be forgotten.

The law: the only reason anyone will ever touch your heart is so they know exactly where to put the knife.

A twitch of his hips broke them all.

"C, come on," Hal pleaded, or demanded.

Adamska discovered, with some surprise, that his inner temperature rose when he considered it the latter. The idea of being given an order and following it without question, without thought to consequence or how to twist it to his advantage, merely for the sake of giving pleasure to the man who gave it... Willingly surrendering control, to a man like this... The reversal of the natural pecking order was intriguingly perverse.

In one smooth motion, Adamska removed layers at once, and there was only them.

Adamska's eyes won the sympathies of the masses, and he sat back on his heels to look.

It must have been some time later that Hal squirmed uncomfortably beneath him and said, "Are

you done?"

"No."

But as entertaining as making him blush was, the mob was growing restless.

Every atom of Adamska's skin ached to be pressed against his, to taste him and caress him and know he was real. He was forced to admit this might not be possible to do all at once. But he appreciated a challenge.

Adamska pressed his chest against his, kissed him deeply, and ran his hand in a long caress down his flank to linger at the curve of his hip. Adamska's hands, tired of sending polite petitions to the central neural network, decided to hell with it, they'd do what they wanted. They wanted, as it turned out, to squeeze Hal's ass. The timing was good; Adamska's lips had moved on to consider his chest for annexation, lingering at one nipple and then the other out of an inherent dislike of asymmetry, so there was no barrier to the issue of several fascinating appreciative noises.

God, but the man could moan.

The law: you'll never know anything about anyone but what you can surmise from the lies they tell you.

It was strange, how acutely Adamska felt the other man's every quiver and twist and catch of breath. As though in their closeness whatever gap remained could be leapt by sparks of pleasure and anticipation, originating in one body and arcing to the next with no loss of sensation. Adamska marveled at how sharply he could feel Hal's eagerness, as though what they had experienced together had forged a bond between them stronger than memory that no mere reality could erase, until he noticed that it was poking him in the hip.

"Bedside table," Hal gasped. "Top drawer."

Adamska underwent a moment of considering this very odd pillow talk before he understood.

He reached out blindly, unwilling to relinquish his hold, though it was difficult to remember why his right hand was groping through a drawer while the groping his left was engrossed in was demanding his attention. Finally his hand closed around a plastic tube, and he smiled.

As Adamska's deductive reasoning skills were slowed at the moment, it was with awkward timing that something occurred to him, and he paused.

"No," Hal moaned, "don't stop..."

Then opened his eyes, and read the seriousness of his gaze.

"You...have someone?" Adamska asked, because too much of him didn't want to know.

"Not for a long time," said Hal, and there was the memory of pain in the lowering of his eyes.

Adamska kissed him, and made him forget.

The law; if you're stupid enough to believe that anybody will ever care about you for any reason other than you might prove useful, you've already lost.

Dry, crackling paper.

He was beautiful, and the ragged twist to his breath was sweet, his skin was soft and his eyes were clear, he was innocent and trusted so easily—

No.

Adamska touched him, and looked at him, and finally understood.

It had never been easy.

He wasn't an idiot. He wasn't blind. He was perfectly aware of how devastatingly he could be hurt. Because he had been. Adamska could see it, in the same way that any species could recognize one of its own.

And Hal trusted anyway.

Hal trusted *him*. He looked at him, and opened himself to him, and wanted him.

He left himself utterly open, knowing what it could cost. And if he was hurt, he would accept that pain.

Adamska hadn't known there was anything left in the world with the power to make him afraid.

Because the only way to accept it was if he did the same.

Forcing himself to make the choice was the hardest thing he had ever done.

Loving him was easy.

From the towers where they hid in the most heavily fortified territory of Adamska's heart, overlooking the waterfall that fed into its own source, the last loyalists to the old aristocracy said to hell with it, threw down the torches, unbarred the doors, and ran outside to join the party.

Hal's fingers tightened on his shoulders, and the grey eyes were hooded, and he whispered, as if half-conscious of it, "Yeah."

The laws:

How beautifully they burned.

And then the fire caught and spread to Adamska's blood and burned him clean, and Hal was gasping with his whole body and those lovely hands were grasping his shoulders and he was breathing his name as if he hadn't just learned it, and the barricades were down and the soldiers were up against the wall and the streets were red with rioters under white ash through the air like snow and he didn't know if his voice had been delegated to babble *I love you I love you* or if that was just the denizens of his mind and heart shouting it in unison, and his legs were wrapped around him and his low moans built to sweet cries that shook something loose in him, he was wanted all of him was wanted and he had him and he was his and *he* was his and he was crying out and the warmth and the cessation and *viva la revolucion*.

---

Softly, so as not to make a nuisance of itself, time began.

Reality coughed politely.

Cautiously, Adamska peered at it from a distance, and let himself drift back when he saw there was no reason to stay away.

Reality was lying prone across Hal, forehead resting in the curve of his neck, listening to their panting in counterpoint like the waves of a small staccato ocean. Gravity pressed them limp against each other, sealed together with the slickness of mingled sweat.

Soon, they would be sealed less comfortably.

Adamska got up – carefully, though still evoking a wince that was not hidden quite quickly enough.

"Been awhile," Hal said, as if it were something to apologize for.

Adamska attended to cleaning up. There was always business associated with pleasure, though providing an excuse to touch him might qualify it as both. "Afterglow" was an interesting word for the aftermath of sex, one whose meaning he would not mind becoming more personally familiar with; "sticky," less so.

He threw the towel aside, where it was met with wary acceptance by the commune of discarded garments, and lay back, arms folded behind his head.

Adamska enjoyed a good six seconds of self satisfaction before noticing that something was wrong.

Hal was as far from him as it was possible to get before running out of bed, body stiff in the way of one that is being forced not to curl into a defensive huddle.

As though the shared closeness could be so easily lost, and he did not want to be the one who expected it would remain.

As if he expected that the gift of intimacy he offered so freely would be, if ever acknowledged, thrown back in his face. As though the acceptance were a fleeting and temporary thing.

*What did someone do to you?*

Adamska knew the patterns of pain better than to ask.

He said instead, "What are you doing?"

Hal jerked, as if someone had tripped over a string tied to his spine. "I...er...nothing."

Adamska rolled his eyes and waved an arm insouciantly. "Get over here."

In a small, cautious way, Hal smiled.

When he moved too slowly, Adamska helped, pulling him over and arranging them until he was comfortably ensconced, head resting on Adamska's chest.

Adamska linked his arms around him loosely and closed his eyes, drunk on the nameless scent of a new reality.

At least, so it seemed.

Adamska's eyes opened.

He had the feeling that reality had done much lately to earn his suspicion.

"Hey!" Hal yelped. "What're you poking me for?"

"No reason," said Adamska, but was greatly relieved.

Hal grinned sheepishly. "Well, cut it out."

Adamska's mouth quirked with a touch of slyness. "Ticklish?"

"No."

"Liar."

"Yeah."

Adamska laughed low in his throat. He let his muscles melt against Hal's body, and mumbled into his neck, "I had to make sure you were real."

"Course I'm real." He sounded perplexed.

"Stay that way," said Adamska firmly.

"Says the guy who appeared out of thin air." A hook in the thought seemed to catch, and he said, trying in his charmingly clumsy way to hide the thread of anxiety, "You're...not going to do that again, are you? In reverse. Disappear, I mean. Like some weird sci-fi story. Some race of impossibly beautiful aliens who come to Earth for some reason to find a random human for one night of incredible sex, then the next day they're gone and there's no way of telling they were ever there cause nobody else remembers, so all the human has is the memory except even he's not sure if he didn't make it up, then he finds some object that the alien left behind (even though it probably wasn't supposed to), something that wouldn't mean anything to anybody else in the world but when he sees it he knows he's not alone. There's probably a story like that, I must have read it somewhere, sounds like the kind of thing they print in one of those magazines with all the girls in black garterbelts—"

He stopped talking when he was kissed by Adamska, who was willing to overlook being called an alien for the sake of the "impossibly beautiful" part.

Yes. He had been hurt before.

Adamska had been told once, that he could not afford not to lie.

Who the hell were *they* to tell him what he could afford? He could print his own damn currency.

"I won't leave you," he promised Hal. "I've done too much to get here." He smiled, for once without irony. "Trust me."



"Yeah," Hal said, and that was all it took. "Okay."

Adamska had been taught, once, that all emotion was on some level artifice. It was leverage, tools used to evoke a predetermined reaction from the target, or subject. Adamska disdained them; if there was an advantage to be gained by looking weak, it was an advantage he would do without.

The secret they had taught him was that everyone had something they wanted, and everything they did was part of getting it. All sincerity meant was that they were putting in more effort.

They had come very close to ensuring that he would never know otherwise.

Pain was the language understood by the simplest of things, down to animals or children. It was a tool, for those who knew how to use it. It was with a small sad stirring in his stomach that Adamska remembered how easily he could have learned. Because they had used it to make him, and he wanted to find the men it could not change.

At a remove, now that it was abstract and not alive to him, the one great secret of them shone at him like sunlight reflected off a fish scale.

"Whas' so funny?" Hal drawled sleepily, turning slightly in his arms.

"The problem," Adamska told him, "is that we become what we hate."

"Yeah?" He curled closer. "Whas' the solution?"

Find what your enemy wants you to do, and do the opposite.

Adamska smiled into his shoulder. "Find something to love."

Stroking Hal's hair, Adamska closed his eyes, secure in the incontrovertible proof that everything he had ever been told was wrong.

---

## Notes:

-I could have done some very interesting research here, though I doubt it would have been very successful.

*Dahne: "Okay, if there was a guy in the sixties, and he was in the Russian military, what kind of underwear would he be wearing?"*

*Librarian: "Please stop calling us."*

- This chapter was an interesting challenge. It was meant to be porn, though it may not have quite come out that way. But sex is something that is written very often, and I hate saying anything in a way it's been said before, because I know I'll end up with a poor imitation. So the attempt was to remain vague enough to avoid "tab A goes into slot B," and yet specific enough that it's still possible to tell what's going on. Whether you think I failed or succeeded, please do let me know

There are people who can write hot, aggressive, intense, and, well, sexy sex excellently, and without becoming at all derivative, but I doubt I would be one of them. And badly-written sex, like badly-written poetry, is very, very bad.

Plus, I can't type "cock" without giggling.

-Tee hee.

-This monstrosity hasn't lumbered to the finish line quite yet. There remains a whole 'nother plot arc demanding to be written. As Vonnegut says, since we've got a reference to him up a ways already: Keep your hat on. We may end up miles from here.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

# chapter 32

## Stray by Dahne

*Fortune can change the nature of a man.*

Hal's dreams were in a different color than usual.

They were deep dreams, and as he rose up to the shallows he remembered little. Color, impression, and a vague, untroubling sense of being reminded that, perhaps, somewhere long ago, he had died.

Hal opened his eyes, and the difference was he was not alone.

Next to him in his bed was a boy with a face that was frankly unrealistic. From what was visible of his chest and shoulders above the blankets, whatever karma arbiter was responsible for making sure no one person got a disproportional amount of physical perfection hadn't been paying attention that day.

"Wow," said Hal, blinking through the film of half-dreaming. "I didn't think I'd been *that* good."

"Grrmph," said the boy.

Without opening his eyes, he slung his arm across Hal and pulled him up against his body. Which was, on closer observation, very naked.

"*Hezhnaya*," he mumbled.

Apparently this was Russian for, "I'm going to squeeze your ass for a while now."

When consulted, Hal's mind could only offer one of two explanations:

a) There had been, in the recent past, some sort of enormous and terrible mistake  
or

b) Hal had dedicated the entirety of a previous life to rescuing drowning kittens.

"Er, morning," said Hal, unsure if there was an etiquette he needed to be following and with the harrowing suspicion that he wasn't doing it.

"Good morning," the boy breathed in his ear.

He felt better than he looked. How this could be possible occupied Hal for some time, until it was eclipsed by a greater mystery.

"Um..." he said, shifting in a way that would have been uncomfortable if it hadn't created friction in some interesting places. "Who are you?"

The boy laughed softly, as if he was asked this by people he woke up next to all the time. "Adamska," he said, opening his eyes in no hurry. "Or should I remind you?"

While Hal stumbled for a response - the name did sound familiar - the boy kissed him.

Apparently no amount of being gorgeous could make one immune to morning breath, but it was perfectly capable of keeping Hal from caring.

*Orphaned* kittens.

"Oh," said Hal, searching his eyes for answers while they were close and finding that he had pretty eyes. "Adamska. Right."

Yes. Of course. He'd broken into the base somehow, then people had pointed guns at each other (including, Hal recalled with amazed horror, him), then Big Boss had been nonspecifically terrifying without really seeming to do much of anything, then Mantis had reached into his head and swirled things around a little (or a lot), then they'd gotten thrown out of their own interrogation, and then he'd taken the boy home and they'd had sex.

Very much so.

Well, that meshed with waking up naked next to him, all right.

Hal's memory, whose insistence on the point but been shouted down by logic for some time, gave a smug I-told-you-so smirk.

"Ah, right," said Adamska, with an exaggerated affectation of recalling something. "Also, I love you." He grinned slyly. "Anything else you need to know?"

"Er..." said Hal, the suspicion that something had been cosmically added up wrong becoming a certainty. "A lot, really. Like where you came from, or anything about you, or...why..."

Pretty as they were, Hal found he couldn't hold the gaze of those eyes anymore. He didn't want to see the look in them resolve to disgust. He kept his eyes averted while he waited to be shoved away.

*You're so pathetic. Can't you act like a man, for once in your life?*

Adamska laughed. Soft and deep and rich. Not mocking, somehow. His hand stroked Hal's back. "I should have known. I said I'd tell you everything, didn't I?"

He tilted Hal's chin up and rested his forehead against his, eyes darkening with significance, cruel mouth acquiring a lecherous twist.

It hadn't *felt* cruel...

"But it could take a while." A pale gold eyebrow quirked, and his hand wandered downward to run the thumb along Hal's collarbone. "Did you want to get started right away?"

Hal, as it turned out, didn't.

---

"See, there's your problem, right from the start."

They were seated at opposite sides of the kitchen table, both dressed. This was something of an accomplishment. No sooner had Adamska pulled on the battered, stained fatigues, fabric distressed to the point of outright despair, than Hal would catch himself watching and thinking that he needed new clothes, which led to catching himself thinking that he would stay. Then Adamska would turn too quickly, and look at him looking at him, and he'd laugh a little for no reason and kiss him and soon they'd have to start all over again.

Not that it wasn't pleasant— or, frankly, flattering. Hal hadn't had so passionate or consistently enthusiastic a lover since...ever. He wished he would stop talking about loving him. It made it harder to just appreciate the moment for what it was, like he'd resolved to a long time ago. Whenever people said that enough, sooner or later he started to believe them. It wasn't anybody's fault. They just meant something different than he thought they did.

"I mean, time travel?" Hal shook his head mournfully. "It's just not feasible. Even if you ignore all the problems with paradoxes and all that, who would build it in the first place? You'd have to find somebody who had enough mechanical knowledge to put it together, but who was gullible enough to think it would ever work, not to mention completely free of common sense, and it was me, wasn't it."

Adamska nodded.

"Huh." Hal took a sip of coffee and sank with dejection. At himself, not the coffee; it was good, and he'd been craving hazelnut since the past day. Then the implications struck, and he brightened. "So it worked?"

"You could say that. Not quite as you intended." The boy smirked, but with something odd at the corner of his eye. "For one thing, I was the last person you would have wanted to come through."

"You?" Though his viewpoint was admittedly biased, Hal was having a hard time imaging a world that would not be improved by having more of this boy in it. "Why not?"

Adamska's eyes flickered. Though minute, the variance in the way he kept his stance easy and

open was revealing.

This was a topic he wanted desperately to avoid.

"Who knows?" the boy said with seamless indifference, shrugging like a panther throwing back its shadow. "It was happenstance. I was in the right place at the right time. Your real target was Big Boss. Something about clones and genetics."

He was trying to change the subject. Like distracting a crow by flashing something shiny. Hal would have been insulted, if he hadn't been aware that usually it would have worked.

"What did you mean?" Hal pressed, because things were only hidden when they were important. "Why not you?"

"I didn't—" Adamska began.

The beautiful, expressive features seemed to crumple in on themselves, like poorly-folded laundry. Hal felt the same wave of profound guilt experienced by kickers of puppies. At least, being someone who would never cause intentional harm to anything remotely vulnerable, innocent, or otherwise puppylike, like what he imagined they must feel.

"I didn't want to tell you this," Adamska said softly. "But it's as good a place to start as any."

His eyes were fixed on the table's surface, while his hands clasped and unclasped, unnoticed.

"It was a mistake, like I said. From that day, fifty years ago, I came to here. A different 'here'. The same place, and the same time, but...very different. In the place where I first met you, Big Boss was long dead, and I— the future incarnation of myself— was still alive."

The boy paused and swallowed hard. His muscles were taut, knuckles white.

"The FOXHOUND soldier," Adamska said, haltingly, as if every word came out only after he'd given up the search for a better one. "That Revolver Ocelot. Who died, here, three years ago." Adamska looked Hal in the eye like a dare. A dangerous one, that he knew he was going to lose. "That was me."

Hal said, "Huh."

Resting his chin on his hands, he let the information in his brain organize itself to the best of its ability.

Adamska's eyes narrowed, and he said, as though he suspected he was missing something important, "What?"

"Well, you have some connection to Big Boss, right? You said he was who you were with when you left that point in the timeline. It makes sense that when you left to come here, there would be some connection between him and the part of you that stayed behind. That you would be a member of FOXHOUND is fairly logical."

Adamska said, "What?"

"I know it seems complicated, but it makes sense, really. If you'd just vanished completely from those fifty years, there would have been, say, a you-shaped hole left behind. So you divided, or doubled, maybe, and part of you stayed behind and progressed normally, in order to ensure the least possible amount of disruption. Time, y'see, 'wants' to stay constant, in the same way an atom 'wants' to have eight valence electrons. But it has to account for the random and chaotic actions of living creatures, so there's some leeway, it's not rock solid. Instead of wasting its energy trying to keep everything perfectly stable, and stop things from happening, it works them into the structure of its flow."

Adamska said, staring at him with more intensity than most people did whenever he got going on a topic like this, "Did you know him?"

"Of course, this is all purely theoreti— know who?"

"Revolver Ocelot." The boy's muscles were tensed, as though he were waiting for a signal.

"A little," said Hal, slightly confused by the shift in topic but doing his best to remember. "By reputation, mostly. A soldier who died in the line of duty. There was something a lot of people were angry about, I think having to do with how the body never got recovered. It all happened a little before I was hired, so all I know is the more public stuff, like how they say he was one of the world's greatest gunmen."

A few beats after he should have, Hal noticed the distant look on the boy's face, and flushed.

"Sorry," he apologized, sheepishly rubbing the back of his neck. "It must be bizarre, someone talking about you in the past tense."

"Not really," Adamska said absently.

After a moment his eyes refocused. Setting his palms down flat against the table, the boy leaned forward, a note of suppressed intensity underlining his voice.

"Is that all?" he demanded.

Hal blinked. "Well...yeah. All that I know, at least."

"Everything?" the boy pressed. "Soldiers gossip like old women, especially about someone too dead to cause trouble. No rumors? No dirty little secrets?"

"Come to think of it, I did hear..." Hal trailed off too late. He felt color creep into his face. "But it's completely unsubstantiated. I mean, there's no way it's actually true or anything, I don't know how anybody even got the idea..."

"Tell me." Adamska's fingers were trying to dig into the tabletop.

"Er..." said Hal, trying to find a good way to put it and with the wretched feeling that there wasn't one, "some people say... just a couple, once or twice, and they weren't being serious... Ocelot would... that is, they say he was..."

The boy was half-risen, poised as if to fight or flee. "*Tell me.*"

"...r," Hal said to his hands, unable to meet Adamska's eyes.

The boy strained close. "What?"

"Big Boss's lover," Hal repeated.

When he dared to look up, Adamska was still staring at him.

The boy fell back into the chair, and turned his face away.

"Is that all?" he asked, voice devoid of expression.

"Yeah," Hal mumbled miserably, thinking that if someone had taken a sample of the color of his skin at that moment, it would make a lovely shade for house paint. They could call it *Idiot Who Can't Keep His Mouth Shut*.

He heard nothing, for a long moment.

Then, at the edge of hearing, a strange sound.

Adamska sank back and laughed like he was making up for a lifetime's worth all at once.

"I did it!" he gasped. "I really changed it all!"

"Changed all what?" said Hal, mystified and slightly alarmed. And, soon, pulled to his feet and kissed.

Which brought its own mysteries. Such as, why he ever did anything else.

And eventually they had to start all over here, too.

---

"A different world," Hal said in awe. His mind tried to grasp the concept, but it kept slipping away from him and rolling under the couch.

"Not entirely," said Adamska. He had taken an apple from the bowl on the table and was tossing it idly in the air, keeping time with his narrative. "Only different history. People were the same. Some of them. There was your Solid Snake."

"Snake?" Hal couldn't resist a wisp of curiosity. "What was he like?"

"He was..." The boy seemed to search. "The enemy of my enemy," he concluded. A smile touched his lips. "More importantly, there was you."

"There's still so much I don't understand." Hal felt the gears in his mind whir, processing the enormity of the concept. "The whole idea, it all touches on these theories I've had, but never even tried to put into practice. There was always something more important to work on, and no good reason not to leave well enough alone."

"I don't understand it all myself," Adamska admitted easily. With the hand not occupied juggling fruit he scratched behind Kaworu's ears, the dog having doted on him since his arrival as though he'd been born to meet him. "About this world's Ocelot, I know as little as you do. But I'll tell you anything I can."

An idea ambled on shaky legs out of the depths of Hal's mind, like a young gazelle wandering out of the Serengeti. He lured it near, tagged it humanely, and released it back into the wild.

"After you went back to past," said Hal, readily taking up on the offer, "why did you come, er, back forward? It seems to me, whatever you wanted to change-" -he'd been a little fuzzy on the details of that- "the best way to be sure that it got done would be to stay there and do it yourself, since you'd be the one to know exactly where things went wrong. Work from the inside, so to speak. Why leave?"

"You, obviously," the boy said indulgently, as if to someone who could calibrate the trajectory of nuclear warheads with a pencil and paper but always pulled on doors marked PUSH. "I'm not patient enough to wait fifty years without trying to find you. Besides, by then I would be-" -his mouth twisted with distaste- "*old*."

Hal had to laugh. To think that this boy, with his grace, his passion, his intensity and his strange sort of kindness, could be affected by anything so simple as age. "I don't think getting older is something you can avoid."

"Maybe not," Adamska said, snatching the apple from midair and taking a bite before tossing it up again. "But it's not something I have to worry about anymore. You'll keep me honest."

Hal would have wondered what in the world *that* was supposed to mean, but there was a more pressing mystery petitioning for his attention, one he found himself oddly reluctant to address. "But... why me? What do you need me to do? For whatever your plan is that's worth all this running around in time for, god, please tell me it's not another one of those take-over-the-world things, I'm so tired of those--"

The apple landed on the table with the same dull thud as on the shady grass of Eden.

Adamska was staring at him with stark incredulity.

He said, "*I love you*, you idiot."

"No, it couldn't be something like that," Hal mused, half paying attention. "There has to be more to it..."

"Well, yes, I'll admit, my motives weren't entirely selfless- what do you mean, 'it couldn't be'? I'm the one who changed history, I'll have done it for whatever reason I wanted to!"

The boy was flushed, eyes dilated. Agitation made his accent roughen, coarsening the edges of his smooth voice. His hands swept out as he spoke in forceful accompaniment.

People who were this sexy when they were angry should not be allowed to enter arguments.

As if running out of propulsion, or perhaps misinterpreting Hal's transfixion, Adamska stopped

in mid-gesture, and let his hand and eyes drop.

"I think it's a good reason," he muttered.

Hal didn't know what to say, so he went over and kissed him instead.

He tasted like apples.

"I just... don't understand, that's all," Hal said, letting his hands stay on the boy's shoulders, since they hadn't been shrugged off yet. "It's not easy to believe."

Adamska raised an eyebrow at him. "And yet, the time travel you have no trouble with."

"With that," said Hal, "I just need to fill in the details."

"Why bother?" the boy said, as though bored with the topic. "I'm here, you're here, and he's dead. Temporal mechanics can go hang for all I care. Fuck the ineffable. We may never know."

"Then again," Hal said as the idea returned, now confident, full-grown, and at the forefront of a respectable herd, "we might."

---

## Note on Fangirl Russki:

*Hezhnaya* means "soft, as in something pleasant, i.e. 'soft skin'" assuming that the online dictionaries are accurate and it doesn't actually mean "my hovercraft is full of eels." If the form is incorrect, I apologize; I couldn't find the word for "ass," and I didn't want to ask anyone.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/32/>

# chapter 33

**Stray** by Dahne

*"You know pain is something man must endure in his heart, and since the heart feels pain so easily some believe life is pain. You are delicate like glass, especially your heart."*

-Neon Genesis Evangelion

---

*Memory can change the nature of a man.*

It looked something like the offspring of a computer that had engaged in an ill-advised affair with an oversized hardcover book, resulting in issue that would meet a cold welcome in either household.

Adamska regarded it with some suspicion.

"You said this was a computer program," he accused mildly.

"It is," Hal maintained in the face of the evidence. He sat in front of the thing, unfolded it, and pressed keys set in a bank on the bottom half in an arcane sequence that drove the other side to stir into green-lit life.

It was not connected to anything.

Adamska had spent the greater part of his life among both state-of-the-art military technology and the spirits of the wandering dead, under the supervision of "teachers" who responded to questions with a fist on good days and a boot on bad ones. The setting was, in a way, perfectly conducive to the development of an incisively scientific mindset. Observation was the only reliable source of information. Circumstances demanded frequent experimentation, most often of the sort that, when performed, resulted in an explosion, and, if performed correctly, aimed the explosion at someone else.

The margin for error was slim.

Personal experience had mixed with that grain of superstition evolution's scaly feet could never stamp out to create a precarious balance, defined by precise boundaries. While Adamska had no trouble accepting the possibility of there being, sometime in the distant future, a computer sufficiently advanced as to win at chess three and a half times out of five, anything that functioned without cords fell squarely into the domain of witchcraft.

"I wrote this program a while back," Hal explained as occult symbols flashed by, white on a black field. "When I was messing around with temporal mechanics a little. By the time I'd gotten all the bugs worked out, I forgot exactly what it was I'd meant to do with it, and then, well, there was something else to do. I never did get back to it. In fact, that might've even been when I started working on REX, come to think of it. Anyway, it should at least be able to tell us some more about the fluctuations in the timestream you were describing."

Privately, Adamska considered this a lot to ask from a machine that could hardly hold a dozen vacuum tubes.

"Now, let's see...where did I put it...ah, here we go."

The screen blanked for a moment, in what the mystics in the undeveloped swamps of Adamska's soul insisted on associating with blinking. It flashed to a dark blue, marked with neat rows of grey text.

"Sharp words between the superpowers," Adamska read over Hal's shoulder.



For some reason, Hal blushed. "It's, er, easier to work within the parameters of a preexisting program than to create a framework for the interface from scratch. It's just a matter of configuring the input to an alternate engine and rerouting the—"

Adamska held up a hand in self-defense. "I believe you."

"Oh. Anyway, I need a few details..."

He proceeded to ask a bizarre variety of questions, until Adamska stopped trying to see what purpose they could possibly be driving towards and just answered as best he could. Obvious things, like the beginning and endpoints of each of his sojourns, and how long he stayed each time. Then the less obvious, like who he had seen each time and if they had changed. Finally the frankly bizarre; whether or not anyone had mentioned dolphins, or if he'd come into contact with any clocks, or what the weather had been like.

Adamska soon got tired of trying to correlate the relation between his answers and what Hal was typing. He was about to suggest they give this up and go find better uses for their time when Hal uttered a small, arresting, "Ah."

Adamska followed his eyes, but could make nothing from the blocks of text. "'Ah' what?"

"This is starting to make sense."

Aware that Hal's definition of sense could be somewhat unique, Adamska said, cautiously, "Tell me."

"See," Hal said, twisting to face him and lighting up with the animation of explaining an obscure concept, "if you look at time as being like a river - I mean, it's not, but if you think of it like one for now, and ignore that it's relative and things like that - we can say that, when you went ahead into the future the first time, it was all flowing down a certain path. Then, when you went back, upstream so to speak, and applied the knowledge you'd gotten, you changed the river's course." His hands drew away from the keyboard to steeple beneath his chin, elbow's resting on the chair's arm. His eyes shone with thought and the reflection of light and glass. "The question here is the same thing that stopped me ever trying to make that kind of machine in the first place; if something is important, why would you be allowed to change it?"

"You say time is relative," Adamska said absently, paying more attention to the smooth curve of Hal's throat than the sounds it was producing. "Maybe importance is too."

"You know, you might be right." Hal's teeth worried his lower lip. Long fingers tapped against one another. "I'm thinking in terms of human events. But who knows what the forces that control time would think are important?"

"Forces?" Adamska laughed low in his throat. "Have you caught religion?"

"No." Hal laughed too. It was good to hear. "I mean as in natural laws. Physics, thermodynamics, or whatever the equivalent would be. Everything has rules, you know. Even if they're sets we can't completely understand yet."

"Yet?" It was fun, egging him on. Watching how his demeanor changed, when he was in his area of expertise. "You think sometime you will?"

"Well, yeah. If it can be done, then sooner or later people will do it. And the more people do it, the better grasp they'll get of the underlying concept, until it's all common knowledge, and they go on to something else. It wasn't that long ago that genetics, or even robotics, was mostly a mystery. But the puzzles always get solved eventually. Nothing can stay a mystery forever."

"Hmph. That's no fun," said Adamska, who had been listening despite himself.

"Yeah," Hal agreed, surprisingly. "It kind of isn't. But it's impossible to always keep things to yourself. People will always build and expand on each other's ideas. It's how we advance as a

species. Learning from the past. Though, most of the time, we don't."

He stopped, and threatened to look pensive.

"What does all this mean?" Adamska asked, waving at the gibberish onscreen. It was strange, not having to resist the urge to ask questions, even though it revealed that the answer was something he didn't already know. He peered more closely. "And what the hell is a gnomon?"

Hal brightened immediately, and sat up. His fingers on the keys made the sounds of a miniature machinegun that had been wrapped in cotton. "Hold on, I've almost got all the results. Just let me do a couple calculations...huh."

"What's wrong?" asked Adamska, who had a suspicion.

"I'll admit this is a fairly complex logorhythm," Hal said, "but I'm pretty sure it should come out to an integer between thirty-five and seventy-nine."

"What did you get?"

"Vermillion diffuse."

Adamska nodded to himself, and walked a short distance away.

He leaned against the wall and said, "Try again."

"Okay, but I don't see how— huh." Hal resettled his glasses on his nose. "Now why in the world would *that* happen?"

"Call it something of a side effect," said Adamska drily.

Hal entered a few more things, and said, "Okay, now let's see..."

Adamska came back and leaned over his shoulder to squint at the screen, for what little good it did him. "What does all that mean?"

"To tell the truth, I'm not entirely sure. It's the kind of thing that's not always clear at first glance. What it seems to be suggesting sort of goes along with one of those alternate theories some people have, about time being essentially unified. The theory goes that time, instead of a continuous flow, is one permanently existing instant. There's no such thing as past or future, only one united moment of oh!"

This last was in response to Adamska recalling that another thing he didn't have to resist anymore was temptation.

He kissed Hal's neck, arms slipping around the chair to enfold his slender frame. It felt good to let his hands touch him. Physical assurance that he would not evaporate, that it wouldn't all dissolve into the space of a well-remembered dream.

"Go on," Adamska murmured, drinking deep the scent that was like clean live machinery and something unnameable and the terrifying, crippling joy of not being alone. "I'm listening."

"Er, well," said Hal, making game attempts to focus, "if this is anything to g...oh... to go by, then it upholds a theory I like – ahh, yeah, like that – The theory that actually, time is both. Like how light is...mmm...both a wave and a particle."

This was obviously nonsense. Light was clearly neither. For the one, it would have to be squiggly, and if it were the other, you would be able to see gaps between the bits of it. Adamska saw, however, no need to belabor the point. Hal was doing remarkably well, for a man with someone sucking on his neck.

"If it's only half a river, how did I change the course?" said Adamska, who had always found it easier to think when he kept his hands busy.

"That's the thing," said Hal, and Adamska noticed with amusement and satisfaction that he was, whether he knew it or not, letting himself settle back to enjoy the attention. "Seen... ooh... this way, you didn't 'change' history. That is, in the sense of destroying what had been going to happen and

making it rebuild itself from the moment of change onwards. Instead, you could say that the essence of the other present kept existing - you just made it rearrange itself into the shape of this one. All the same variables are here, just in a different configuration. It's like the Conservation of Matter. It's all the same base material, nothing was added to or destroyed, but with adjustments made, depending on..."

"...how they were affected by the new history," Adamska finished for him, fingers tracing the hollow beneath the curve of his ribcage.

"Yeah!" It was unclear whether his enthusiasm came from the reception of touch or the unaccustomed luxury of a student quick enough to follow his train of thought. Adamska decided to consider it both. "Things didn't change so much as they... rearranged. Including, from what you've told me, people moving across the border from dead to alive, and vice versa."

"Then that makes me both," said Adamska, amused at the concept.

"Right!" Hal exclaimed, inexplicably excited. "Like the cat in the box."

Adamska let his mind run this through a full meaning analysis, and, when the results came back negative, said, "What?"

"It's this old experiment," Hal explained. "Or, more of an idea, really. See, theoretically, what you do is, you take this cat, and you put it in a box, with a lid on it, so you can't see what's going on inside. There's this machine inside the box, too, that's hooked up to a variable and a capsule of poison gas. One you put the lid on the box, it measures the variable. If it goes one way, the machine releases the gas, and if it goes the other, it doesn't. It's a fifty-fifty chance."

Adamska's eyebrows rose. No wonder the man was afraid of people, if the ones he knew sat around and talked about methods for tormenting trapped animals.

"The point is," Hal rushed, sensing that he was losing his audience, "until you open the box and see what's happened to the cat, it's in a state where it could go either way. It's alive, but at the same time, it's also dead."

Adamska gave this a degree of thought.

"That," he concluded, "is impossible."

"I know it's hard to wrap your head around at first," Hal said. "It's one of those quantum physics things, about the moon only being there when you look at it—"

"The cat would leave."

"Einstein didn't believe it, either— Huh?"

"It would break out," Adamska said authoritatively. "Have you ever tried to put a cat somewhere it doesn't want to be? It would break the box and run away. The smart thing to do, when there's a cadre of sadists trying to find interesting ways to murder you. There'd be a window open, if they were going to have boxes full of dead animals sitting out. The cat could run past them and jump out of it. Scratch the hell out of one or two on the way, for good measure."

"No, look," Hal protested, "It's not a real cat. It's all hypothetical—"

"A hypothetical cat would do the same thing," Adamska said firmly. "Hypothetical cat is still cat."

Various expressions crossed Hal's face, as if beginning attempts to argue. Soon it settled into a sheepish smile.

"You know," he admitted, "I always kind of felt bad for the cat, too."

"You would," said Adamska, and kissed the corner of his mouth. "But you were saying...?"

"Hmm? Oh. Right. See, what you did didn't affect anyone's freedom of choice. But it gave them different choices, and different information to make them with."

Freedom, Adamska thought, as his hands roamed Hal's stomach. To do as one wished, and live as one wished. What an odd idea.

"Even that other Ocelot," Hal continued, head tipping back, eyelids at half mast. "He was reabsorbed into the flow of time, to interact and develop normally. Only one person wasn't."

"Me," Adamska surmised, and nipped at his earlobe.

"Uuh. Yeah. Exactly. It's like you're— I guess, a wild card value, you could say. You're the locus point of the change. I don't know which is cause and which is effect; whether it's because of what you've done, or if you were able to do what you did because of *it*. Time doesn't quite know what to do with you. Apparently," he added with some bemusement, "neither does mathematics."

Adamska kissed across the line of his jaw. Patches of errant stubble lent his skin an intriguing roughness. "I like to keep one step ahead."

"The thing I don't understand," said Hal, head lolling slightly, "is why you were allowed to come here at all. It seems like you going back to your time was a perfect opportunity for you to be seamlessly reintegrated. That is, unless there was something here, say, some sort of attractive force pulling you toward this time."

"Like loving a man?" Adamska suggested, drawing his hands up in parallel courses along Hal's flanks. He grinned. "You're certainly attractive."

"Yeah," said Hal, smiling. "I think they call that the theory of Gravitation."

Adamska had the irritating feeling that he wasn't being taken seriously.

"But then," Hal went on, with the pensive gleam his eyes got when he'd caught the thread of an idea that would demand unwinding, "there must have been something holding you to the past, too. Part of you, at least. Or, maybe just something you wanted to leave behind..."

"You're just making this up as you go along, aren't you," Adamska accused affectionately, seizing upon a dark suspicion that had slunk into his mind and ejecting it with satisfyingly excessive force out through a window. He wrapped an arm across Hal's chest, to hold him firmly.

"Hey!" Hal protested, while his fingers drifted to Adamska's arm, stroking it softly, like the motions of a tidepool creature waving in the current. "Only some of it." Such soft hands. "And it's not as if we have a whole lot of ideas, when it comes to exactly what's going on here."

Uninvited, and oblivious to being obviously unwanted, the suspicion was back. With friends. "I'm here," Adamska said. "You're here. He's dead. Nothing else matters."

Except the things that did.

Hal leaned into the crook of his arm, and smiled. "Yeah."

Some things, Adamska thought, no good could come of revealing. It was all he could have asked for. If the other had ever clawed his filthy way into this existence, he was long gone and forgotten, leaving no trace in the one memory that mattered. Over and done with, and no need to mention it. There was a difference between lies and prudence.

How much less work both were, when you were trusted.

"You know," Hal mentioned, "it's funny. I just met you, but I feel like I already know everything I need to."

And Adamska couldn't do it.

"There's one more thing you should know."

The gravity in his voice made Hal look up, curiosity luminous in his magnified eyes.

"I..." Adamska began.

Neither could he say it.

"It..." He couldn't hold his gaze, and his eyes fell to the carpet. "...would be easier to show you."

He was not a coward. "Look up the other Ocelot. I know you can. See it for yourself."

"Hmm? Er, okay then, if you want." Hal smiled sheepishly. "I was kind of curious, anyway. Even though I know he's not *you*, really."

Adamska muttered something dejectedly affirmative.

With quick, precise movements of those lovely hands, Hal set the screen to flashing and boiling with strings of nonsense syllables. *The gnomon: Taken, The piece of paper: Taken, The bag of crumbs, small coin, broken perambulator. TEMPUS EDAX RERUM.* Eye of newt and tongue of rat. Everything had its modern incarnations. Much to the relief of the newts and rats.

Adamska found that he was thinking of nonsense in order not to have to think of what was going to happen, and couldn't find the wherewithal to care.

He thought instead, as the keys clicked staccato as a tap dancer over a telegraph, of the details, things thrown suddenly into relief by the clean light the snow reflected through the windows. The way the fine musculature in his arms twitched in response to his fingers, energy smooth with the thoughtlessness of skill. The tiny rip in his shirt, low down on the back where he might never notice. The isolated threads of grey in his eyebrows, like foreigners lost in the wrong part of town. The focused rhythm of his breathing, and the way his heartbeat resonated at Adamska's right wrist.

The smart thing to do was to let go. Let go and back away, to make it easier to forget. Soften the edge of revulsion with what little distance a few seconds could provide. Better than nothing.

Adamska couldn't act as though it were true, any more than he could pretend it wasn't.

It wasn't certain, the horrible little bird of hope chirped, as it always did, no matter how many times he had it shot and stuffed and mounted on the wall. The one left behind could have been as profoundly changed, no more the other than he himself.

*Then why would it stay?* Adamska snarled internally. *Volunteering to preserve my place, out of what? Some sense of duty?*

He knew how easily that could be twisted.

Or maybe he could earn it back. The way he had wanted to earn it before. Show him, little by little, that they weren't the same. He had all the time in the world, now. He could scrape back something, though it would never be enough.

"Hmm," Hal said. "The military records have plenty of files on FOXHOUND members past and present, but they're surrounded by the best protection they've got, and under more than one layer of pretty advanced encryption."

"You mean to say, you can't get to it?" Adamska asked, as the detestable avian went into a positive cantata.

"I mean it'll take a minute."

If one little minute was all there was, Adamska would take it for all it was worth.

He could be destroying everything he had worked for. But he had to know.

Perfunctorily, he tried to console himself with the memory that, no matter what happened, no matter what they found, he had had that one night. What he, by all rights, should never had gotten. There had been one night with nothing, nothing in the world but the two of them. If he remembered that, he could survive whatever came next.

The surprising thing was that it worked.

Adamska held him in his arms and wondered why he felt no dread.

"Okay," Hal said with satisfaction, "I'm in."

Adamska felt the new, strange, subjective senses recently awakened in him mourn that these few, fleeting moments were far too brief, it could not be done already. Oddly, he felt the old, subtle,

objective senses honed by years of clandestine deployment as a spy agree.

"You," Adamska said, voice purposefully blank, "broke through the highest levels of government security to get access to classified military information. Already."

Hal flushed, but looked pleased. "Not exactly."

Adamska was about to say something about having thought as much when he stopped himself, and waited.

"Second- or third-highest security level, at most."

Adamska laughed, and when Hal tilted his head back and opened his mouth to ask why took it as an invitation and kissed him.

"You're incredible," Adamska said. "Has anyone ever told you that?"

"Well, yeah," said Hal. "But usually it's while they're putting out the fires, so it's kind of more sarcastic."

He tapped out a sequence that set lines of code blooming, no longer words but a seemingly random mash of symbols. His eyes darted back and forth behind reflections of blue and white and grey. Adamska forced his arms not to tighten around him when he said,

"Here's the file."

Hal paused, adjusted his glasses, and looked up.

"What exactly is it I'm supposed to be looking for in this?"

Adamska said, "Just look."

He understood the tone, if not the reason for it.

"These are structured strangely," Hal said, intently doing...something. "Name, date of birth, blood type... Can't find them anywhere."

"Not important," said Adamska.

"Okay, let's see..."

There was a long moment of silence, punctuated by the tap of keys and the nearly audible strain of Adamska's eyes as he attempted to bend the streaming code into a semblance of sense by sheer force of glaring.

"Ah," said Hal. "Here we go."

Though none of the symbols onscreen combined to form decipherable language, he began to read, skimming as the display scrolled and his hands flew.

"...Russian... well, I figured that, from the cute accent... Expertise: revolver... obviously... Proficiencies: ...wow, I didn't know there *were* that many kinds of gun... infiltration, hand-to-hand combat (CQC), whatever that means... Per— ...hm."

"What?" said Adamska, who did not have an accent but would remember to acquire one.

Hal said, softly, "Personal History and Psychology."

The cat is both alive and dead, until you look.

As long as he didn't look, it would be dead, and no trouble need be wasted on a dead thing.

And as long as he didn't look, it would be a little alive.

Adamska said, "Go on."

"Are— are you sure?"

But he was not yet pushing him away.

"I can't read it," Adamska said. The patternless mash of symbols and numbers might as well have been runes scratched by ancient Nordic chickens.

"It just doesn't seem right," Hal said, slumping in his grasp. "Me prying into your life, when I hardly know you."

"You already know all my secrets," Adamska said, and touched his hand. "It's all right."

And it was all right, and Adamska knew that the reason he had wanted the world's greatest soldier was so he could look down the barrel of his gun and feel this peace, knowing that he had done everything he could.

Taking a long, slow breath that Adamska could feel, Hal read.

"Product of behavioral experiment 2288 aka BEZDOMNY. Project goal - create ideal operative by means of artificial instillation of controlled elements of sociopathos, i.e. ensure nondivision of loyalties by allowing subject to develop none ("Recommended basic methods include isolation, extreme unpredictability of authority figures, physical punishment as response to low or null provocation, etc," cf. Report 4646b, section a). Consolidation of projects (see: Funding Registrar N3-31) suggests combination w/ project to train interrogation specialist. Supervising psychologist L. Bedev reacts w/ enthusiasm, places subject under command of Y.B. Volgin..."

Adamska's mind clicked like a lighter on the last gasp of fuel.

Absolution.

He was innocent. He had had no choice. It was all as they had meant it to be. The other had been synthetic to the core. A doll set in his place and painted with his features, that walked as the twitches of their strings directed. A golem with their lies scrawled on its forehead. The old man had never had anything at all to do with him; it had been *their* creation. Their creature. Their sin. There was no way a child could have resisted them. Did anyone blame raw metal for the shape it was beaten into?

He was as his life had forced him to be.

Nothing, nothing, had ever been his fault.

It was all so easy.

"Is...is this true?" Hal asked, catching at him with wide grey eyes that wanted to be told it wasn't.

But incomplete reasoning was not Adamska's weakness.

This man, the real and solid man he held in his arms, had lived a different life from the man he had known before. Exactly how different he might never know, but anything was enough to change him, if anything could. A day, a moment, the accidental crush of a spider or a butterfly. And he knew, with the mind in his hands that could not lie, that this was the same man.

Ah, well. The easy ways out were usually dead ends anyway.

Adamska's laugh was a short, sharp bark.

"So that's what they were up to," he said, readjusting his arms to a more comfortable position. "I should have known they had some scheme. What else does it say?"

Hal twisted to stare at him. "You... knew?"

"Not in so many words," Adamska admitted. He flipped through sheaves of memories from the new perspective, and penciled in 'L. Bedev' at the bottom of the list of people to kill someday. "Huh. So he had a real name, after all. They always called him by a different one, every time he came. Sometimes they tried acting like he was someone else entirely, or putting a different person in his place. The idiots never caught on that the tic by his right eye gave him away, every time." He snorted. "Such stupid games."

"Purposefully *making* someone..." said Hal, who had not been listening. He closed his eyes, and leaned into Adamska's arm, causing the soldier to marvel once again at the incomprehensible luxury of being able to provide him comfort. "It's sick."

"You can't make someone into anything they aren't," Adamska said firmly. "If it had worked, it would have been my own fault. The game being rigged is no excuse for losing."

Hal said softly, "What did they do to you?"

It was puzzling that he would ask when he could easily look it up himself.

"Like I said. Stupid games." Adamska's lover had a gentle heart; there was no need to trouble it over trivialities. "What else is there?"

Hal gave him a look that he probably thought didn't telegraph his intention to remember this, but left well enough alone for now. Good enough. Poking a dead cat with a stick never got you anything but a bad smell.

"Hold on a sec." All professionalism. He slipped into confidence, when he wasn't paying attention.

A burst of typing. The symbols slid faster, like rainfall in reverse.

"Contact broken by subject shortly after joined FOXHOUND on orders. Agents sent to resume; returned in boxes (see Shipping Costs Invoice 13312). Attempts to artificially terminate met with similar results. Experiment declared failure."

"Hah!" Adamska felt himself give a feral grin. "So he slipped his leash. In this world, at least. I must have done better than I'd thought."

Hal looked at him curiously, but at his gesture continued. "Death by bullet trauma during Moses Incident 732...huh."

"He's dead," said Adamska.

"The rest is— huh?"

Adamska was distantly aware that he was smiling like a fool. Or like someone in a mineshaft who had found out that the canary was just taking a nap.

"He's really dead. I won."

"Well, yeah," Hal said, "we knew thmmff!"

It was probably rude to interrupt someone by shoving your tongue into his mouth, but Adamska wasn't hearing any complaints.

"I won," Adamska whispered, and finally let himself believe it.

"But it's strange," said Hal, blinking the glaze from his eyes. "These aren't supposed to be modified, except to add to them. But the code on this one is choppy, like a lot of things've been taken out. And there's a lot of detail missing, especially about how he died. There's not even a definite date there."

"Maybe they had an intern write it," Adamska suggested with a touch of giddiness, high as a kite on the fumes of relief.

"No, it's definitely been censored. See, look here." Hal typed something in, and pointed at the result.

Adamska looked.

"I have no idea what that's supposed to be," he mentioned.

"Oh. Right. Well, it's not supposed to be that."

"I believe you." Adamska laid his head on Hal's shoulder, watching the screen move like abstract patterns in water. Fragments of legible text were now interspersed with the code, though there was no telling what in the world a floating white door had to do with anything.

"I don't even know how high clearance somebody'd have to have to tamper with these," Hal said, leading the machine through more paroxysms of numbers. "It's the core files; any higher on the chain of secrecy, and Big Boss himself wouldn't have access to them. But it's *your* past; you've got a right to know it. There's got to be something behind it. Nothing's hidden if it's not important."

Hal frowned pensively. It was, Adamska noted, a remarkably cute way to frown.

"Huh," he said. "This doesn't make any sense."



Looking at a line that read *The water is unnaturally dark and still; ribbons of mist coil across its surface like ghostly fingers, obscuring what lies beyond*, Adamska said, "Really."

"Yeah," said Hal, alight with earnestness and invulnerable to sarcasm. "There's some coordinates here that look like they're...wait." He typed something beginning with an arrow-shaped glyph, sending the screen into frenzied activity. After scanning it a moment, he said, "They are! They're inside the Shadow Moses base."

Long fingers danced across the keyboard like an epileptic trying to stomp on a spider.

"...but...huh. None of these match anything on the maps I've got. That is, they do, but— like this one, it's right inside a wall. And the building this is supposed to be in, it's not shaped right for it to fit inside."

"Maybe your map is wrong," Adamska said.

"No," said Hal, in a way that gave Adamska the unfamiliar sense that he had suggested something that had already been considered and discarded, "that can't be it. The girl who made them was brilliant with radar tech. It's really too bad she went off and married the President a while ago. If that's where her Soliton map says it is, that's where it is. "

"Soliton?" said Adamska, in a move that could have been called unwary if he hadn't known perfectly well what he was getting into.

As expected, this sent Hal off into a full description. It was interesting in that Adamska, who had lived in the constant company of spies, soldiers, and other inveterate inventors of jargon, could not follow a word of it. Soon he abandoned the attempt and focused his energies on the question of how long it would take to make Hal trail off into sighs and soft moans.

Not long at all, as it turned out.

"But..." he managed, to fully close the subject of reality, "it's not a...ahh... a total dead end. It...mmm... looks like there might be more... ooh, more... more information at the base itself... if we... went down...and..."

"Whatever you like," Adamska purred.

"No, I mean, really..."

"That too."

"Oh."

---

## Notes:

-Thank you, this has been Quantum Mechanics, Very Abnormal Psychology, and Temporal Exposition 101. Be sure to study for your midterms. Gunwielding Russians and otaku who look increasingly like Hideo Kojima will be provided.

-The idea of Ocelot being raised by the Patriots specifically to be a cold, sadistic son of a bitch was first explored in a story called Pawns in the Game, by the elusive and astonishingly talented Ever A Mystery.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/33/>

# chapter 34

## Stray by Dahne

*"What are we living for? What are we fighting for? Well, whatever, it's probably okay."*

-Makai Kingdom

---

*Persistence can change the nature of a man.*

Mid-morning found them ensconced on the living room couch, saw that they had no wish to be disturbed, and withdrew politely away to a discreet distance.

This was not a couch of pedestrian genus. It was a behemoth, the sort that dined on the fresh remains of divans and terrorized herds of footstools. To humans, it was perfectly safe and outrageously comfortable, though there was no denying the vague sense that its innocuous, faded floral pattern concealed the desire and ability to devour its occupants whole.

Adamska, confident in his ability to fight his way free of any threat, lay on his back in its embrace, in turn clasping Hal in his.

Whenever he was faced with a mystery that seemed impenetrable, Hal faced it by breaking it up into little pieces and taking them one at a time. Even if he didn't find the solution, sooner or later he'd hit on something that would send him off in a new direction. While it might not be what he'd originally been after, eventually he'd be left with something. And, if the problem was mechanical, lots of little pieces.

No matter where he started, he couldn't understand any part of this boy.

"I think," Hal said, having had time to mull it over, "this might be the most unlikely thing that has ever happened to me."

Adamska held up his hand and squinted at his fingers, folding them down alternately.

"Third most unlikely, for me," he concluded.

Hal laughed. "What're the others?"

"Granted," Adamska allowed, "Volgin and Raikov screw up the ranking."

"The guy who... the one from the records?" Hal asked. He squirmed slightly, trying to get into a more comfortable position without elbowing or kneeing the boy in anything important.

"Yes. Don't bother being delicate, I won't break." Adamska hooked his arms around Hal's waist and pulled him up. "There."

"Mm. Much better." Hal relaxed, letting himself melt into the body beneath him. "Who was he?"

"Volgin? An old commander." The smirk was audible. "Dead now."

"What I mean is, what was he like?"

There was a long moment of silence, Adamska's fingers tapping thoughtfully against Hal's stomach, until it seemed he wasn't going to answer.

"Have you ever known," he said finally, "someone completely unassuming? Small, shy, quiet, but in somehow a benevolent way? Thoughtful, rational? Would never hurt a living creature, and might make allowances for plants? The gentle sort, who can't stand to see anyone in pain?"

"Yeah," said Hal. Not recently, but yes.

He felt Adamska nod to himself.

"The exact opposite of that."

"And that's Volgin?"

"More or less."

After a moment, Adamska added, "He was also two and a half meters tall, and shot lightning from his hands."

Hal laughed. "Now you're just making things up."

"I am not." Adamska's thumb stroked up and down his ribs, like someone tuning a slightly offkey xylophone. "Do you know the boy from yesterday, the one prettier than any man has a right to be?"

"What about him?"

"That's Raikov."

"No, Raiden— oh. You mean he looks like him."

An odd coincidence, that they'd have both similar names and similar appearances, but stranger things had happened. Hal was lying on top of one.

"The resemblance is... uncanny." His tone painted it in vivid hues. "And Raikov was always the type who took sanity more as a suggestion. Volgin's madness you could set your watch to, but him— There's no telling what would happen, if he moved forward in time."

Adamska trailed off darkly, then concluded, in a more normal tone, "That's what unnerved me, yesterday."

Terrified, more like. But it probably wasn't prudent to mention that to someone whose lap you were occupying. And whose hands were steadily creeping under your shirt.

"So that's numbers one and two, respectively."

"They were lovers."

There was a moment of stillness while Hal's imagination rolled up its canvas, turned off the lights, and went home.

"Oh," he said faintly.

"Exactly."

The part of Hal's mind that couldn't see a big red button without asking, "What does this do?" couldn't resist.

"How did that happen?" he asked.

"No one knows," Adamska said. "No one ever wanted to ask. Most likely it was madness calling to its own. But they were odd, in more than one way. Volgin..."

His voice dipped thoughtfully.

"You could have set rabid dogs to tearing out his guts and he'd laugh in your face. But threaten to touch one hair on that pretty head and he'd give you anything you asked."

"Really?"

"Assuming you had a way to keep from being turned into a greasy smear on the ground, yes." Adamska hmphed and adjusted his grip. "I thought it was a ruse, at first. I should have known the bastard wasn't clever enough to lay a false lead."

"So even a man like that could love somebody," said Hal. He had gotten a rough sketch of Volgin's characteristics that didn't really need the details filled in.

Adamska laughed. "I suppose no one's immune."

"A few people are," said Hal, the watcher at the gate from his brain to his mouth asleep on the job yet again. "Just a handful in the world. People who don't care about anybody else but themselves, don't feel any kind of meaningful emotion towards anyone. Who can't. Like they tried—"

The belated guard sprang into action, and he managed to bite the sentence off.

"It must be a horribly lonely way to live," he concluded.

"And you feel sorry for them."

If he hadn't known better, Hal would have said Adamska was still laughing.

"Well, yeah," he said, feeling as though he should explain himself. "I mean, I know they're terrible people, even serial killers sometimes, but, being so completely alone like that..."

His voice dropped.

"I wouldn't wish it on anybody."

He wasn't sure, but Adamska's arms seemed to tighten around him.

"You were going to say, like they tried to make me, weren't you?" he said, not sounding angry.

"Yeah," Hal admitted, since it wouldn't help to lie.

"It is lonely," the boy said. His hands played along Hal's sides, as though forgotten. "But safe. When you're the worst that can happen, what is there to be afraid of?"

"There's always something," Hal said softly.

Adamska laughed, and nibbled at his neck. "What could you possibly be afraid of right now?"

"Well..." Hal owed this boy the truth. He deserved to be fully informed, to know exactly what kind of person Hal was. It was no use holding anything back. And he couldn't. Not with someone who trusted him this much. "You, for one."

"Me," said Adamska, a featureless plastic lump of a word. His hands went still.

"Yeah," Hal said, wondering if he hadn't ruined it already and joined the ranks of people who used Occam's Razor to cut their wrists. "Things like this just don't happen to people. Beautiful strangers don't just fall out of the sky and declare that they're in love with you. There's got to be a drawback somewhere. It's in the laws of physics. An equal and opposite reaction. I'm just...kind of scared of what the reaction's going to be."

"Not the sky," Adamska corrected, folding his hands over Hal's stomach. "A time machine."

"Same thing," said Hal, laughing despite himself. There was something about being held in a gorgeous young man's arms that made it difficult to stay out of a good mood.

"It isn't," Adamska said, and Hal recognized the tone of someone who had a new thought tapping him on the shoulder. His hands slid downward to trace Hal's hips. Apparently that sort of thing aided his thought process, though it did very little for Hal's. "Haven't you thought that this could be the reaction to something else?"

"Like what?"

"The you of the other world. The other future."

Right. That.

"That's the thing," Hal sighed.

It had come up before, but Adamska hadn't wanted to listen. Would could blame him? To go through all that, only to find out that it was all for nothing... Hal wouldn't have wanted to hear it, either, if it'd been him. There was always that protective layer of denial to get through, when it came to bad news.

"That... whoever it was, it wasn't me, Adamska. The whole world changed. I must have, too. Whoever you knew before... is gone. There's just me."

"Exactly," said Adamska, sounding too happy to have understood.

"You don't get it!" Hal cried. Damn it, if the universe had to tease him, did it have to be so persistent about it? "I'm not who you think I am. And I can't just let you believe it. Not when I know it isn't true. It's... it's too cruel. It's better to face it now. Even if you don't want to. Or we'll just end up hurting each other, like... like..."

"Hedgehogs?" Adamska supplied.

Hal twisted to stare at him.

The boy's face was serious, if with a slightly distant cast.

"How did you..." Hal managed.

That was as far as he got before Adamska hugged him tightly, and whispered, over and over, "I found you. I found you."

---

"Do you really need to bring it?"

Adamska paused, and gave Hal a Look.

He was good at that. The habit of constant, irrepressible motion that might have been part of what made him seem alive on an entirely different scale from the ordinary was only really noticeable when he stopped. Especially in midmotion, gun belt half slung over his hips. His motions were unfailingly practical, kinetic fires never burned without reason. Even the most banal of his actions were somehow extraordinary. The spareness of them. Never wasting a motion, so everything he did was that much more valuable. Any of them could have executed solely to showcase how beautiful he was. Blond hair, kept efficiently short, blue eyes, body that looked like it was used to chasing down and wrestling jungle cats.

The extremity actually made it easier. Of course the kid was out of Hal's league - he was out of everybody's league. Most likely he had his own. Hal was still trying to figure out the rules.

One of the few he was fairly sure of was that it was all right to stare.

Which was fortunate.

"I mean," Hal said, leaping onto the last car of his train of thought as it was pulling away from the station, "it'll be a lot easier to argue that you're not an enemy if you're not carrying a weapon. Besides," he went on, when the boy didn't move, "what's the worst that could happen?"

And there was a look in those electric eyes that said he had some answers.

But the boy said nothing as he buckled the gun belt's clasp.

He pulled the gun out to look at it and, from the corner of his eye, caught Hal watching. With startling speed the revolver was spinning, flying between agile hands, a silver blur glinting with flecks of reflected light. It fell from a long arc into Adamska's hand, and with a few more revolutions was set firmly back into its holster.

As though satisfied, Adamska nodded to himself, and strode firmly across the room to pull Hal close for a kiss.

"I won't let them take you from me," he said, with an intensity that could have been frightening.

---

Of all the techniques spies throughout the decades had devised, one of the most effective modes of infiltration was to sneak into somewhere you were supposed to be in the first place.

"No one's paying any attention to us at all," Adamska muttered from the side of his mouth, hand straying to the hilt of the revolver.

Hal had had enough experience with people who would sooner leave behind their foot than their weapon to refrain from further argument.

Much, at least.

"Why should they?" said Hal, nodding to a guard with what he hoped could be mistaken from this distance as nonchalance. "I work here. And you... well, they're used to strange people, by now."

Hal had made a lot of very solid arguments against Adamska's coming along at all. No one would glance twice at him, if he was alone, and it wasn't the sort of job a soldier would be much help with. After all, it wasn't as though it were dangerous. Hal went there nearly every day.

These were all excellent arguments that Adamska could not refute. He won by simple expedient

of nodding at every salient point, and coming along anyway.

It was clear that nothing short of getting tied up was going to prevent him. Even discounting the fact that Adamska was strong enough to snap his spine into bite-sized pieces, Hal couldn't imagine any scenario of a struggle with rope involved that didn't end in both of them getting distracted.

The boy was oddly unwilling to let Hal out of his sight. It was as if he thought that, as soon as he let go or turned away, Hal would vanish into thin air. It was strange. Almost as though, bewilderingly enough, he didn't want to give Hal the chance to run out on him. For one thing, who would be that stupid? And for another...

Adamska acted like he trusted him.

It was implicit. And just as confusing as anything else.

Hal had gotten to know soldiers pretty well, after getting held hostage, or rescued, or shoved out of the way of a clear shot by them on a fairly regular basis for the past...had it been almost two years now? He'd gotten used to their habits of movement, the constant threat assessment. Adamska did it too, down to the last detail, except for a blind spot shaped like Hal.

There were probably rules to this, too. Hal wondered if sneaking into a weapons base with someone meant you were beyond a one-night stand.

"Who are you calling strange?" Adamska said, shooting him a glare that was somewhat perfunctory.

"Just act like you belong here," Hal told him, and palmed his access card. The door shifted politely out of the way, and they went warily in.

Their unease, it appeared, was superfluous. No one gave them a second glance. Few bothered with a first.

Though Hal was unaware of it, they were protected by an odd but powerful quirk of human nature. No one took any notice of them, because no one was taking any notice of them.

The peculiar mindstate of guarding brings with it a selective but acute grasp of probabilities. Each man they passed, at a discreet distance, was capable of instantaneously calculating the odds; that someone they were occupationally obliged to shoot would walk calmly in through the front door, furthermore in the company of a familiar engineer who was clearly not a hostage, against the existence of perfectly clear extenuating circumstances which the soldier would have known of, had he been paying proper attention.

"Typical," said Adamska, once they were a few steps in. He relaxed slightly, which meant that anyone who snuck up on him might have a second to regret it before being garroted. "No one wants to be the first to fire a shot."

There was something about the boy that made Hal suspect this was not a problem he sympathized with.

Looking at Adamska in this environment, with his shoulders set in the demeanor that said *I Have A Right To Be Here And Don't You Hope You're Not The One That Says Otherwise*, it was easier to see the predator's grace. It was something about the way he moved, boots tapping the floor with businesslike precision, eyes that seemed set in a spectrum above the one everybody else's got access to, tracking constantly back and forth. Like a spectator at a tennis game who was planning out everything two moves ahead.

Something about it spoke directly to Hal's neurons, an archaic cluster down near the brainstem. The ones that told him to find a nice hole between some tree roots and stay there until the bad things went away.

Which didn't make any sense at all. Adamska hadn't done anything even remotely threatening

since he'd been here. (At least, not toward him. And anyway, Hal was starting to think that armed standoffs were just how Snake and the rest met people.) That is, unless there was a phobia for gorgeous men dropping out of nowhere, declaring they loved you for some fantastically implausible reasons, and then compounding the time travel issue by fucking you into next week. Which Hal was pretty sure there wasn't.

Something about the base seemed different, the way anything accustomed did when viewed from a slightly different perspective. Hal had grown used to it, and took it all for granted. For one thing, he'd never noticed how many convenient things there were to hide behind.

At the sound of approaching footsteps, Adamska pulled Hal behind a crate.

"That's not really necessary, you know," Hal whispered, as the shadow of a guard passed by.

"Force of habit," said Adamska.

He peered out from behind the crate's edge, then motioned Hal onward when he saw the way was clear.

"The less we're seen, the better. I don't care much for armed guards, unless they're mine."

"They don't seem to bother you much," Hal remarked, leading toward the back of the building, to the lesser-used wing his investigations had indicated.

"Should it?" said Adamska, noticing the inexpertly hidden catch in his voice and throwing him a glance.

"Well, it's just, see..."

A tongue flexible enough to tie itself into such complex knots should have had an easier time forming simple sentences.

He settled for a desultory, "I'm no soldier."

Adamska nodded absently, eyes roving the hallways. His hand performed a strange dance with the gun at his waist, hovering near it and pulling away again, as though it were an electromagnet that kept getting shut off midway.

"People..." Hal began as they approached a doorway, "they don't expect somebody like me to be here, working on a project like this. And, the other way around, they don't expect somebody here to be, well, like me."

He laughed slightly as he entered the passcode on the door's keypanel, and nodded with satisfaction when metal slid obligingly aside.

"Either way, I'm always kind of a disappointment, to most people."

"Understandable," Adamska agreed, following him through and betraying himself only with a slight flicker of his eyes when the door closed behind them. Hal could sympathize; he didn't tend to trust doors much, either. They were always opening to the wrong people. "Most people are stupid."

Confident that they were far enough out of the heavily trafficked areas to have some breathing room, Hal pulled his laptop from the case that hung patiently at his side. He opened it up and pulled up some programs he'd arranged beforehand.

"What are you doing?" Adamska said, sparing a glance at the whirring computer between suspicious glares in every direction.

The boy had an incredible depth of curiosity. On the way, he'd asked about everything, simple or complex, especially mechanical or technological. Hal understood; if he'd been transported fifty years into the future, he'd be poking things and fiddling with knobs until he'd found out everything he could, or at least until something exploded. What was more, he was tenacious; more than once Hal had come out of a daze, when he'd been babbling on about the inner workings of something, and then realize that Adamska had actually been listening.

"It's the program I was running earlier," Hal said. "The Soliton works best with proximity. It'll tell us where we need to go. Like— this way."

He made an abrupt right turn, and walked a little ways down the corridor to a battered steel door. It opened onto a steep concrete staircase that descended into gloom.

"Oh, I get it!" Hal said, gazing down and trying to chivvy his eyes into adjusting. "Another underground level. No wonder the coordinates didn't match up."

"Hal," said Adamska.

"Yeah?"

He turned away from the stairwell. The boy was staring at the door.

"There are bullet holes in this," Adamska said.

"Oh, are there?"

Was that all? From the tone of his voice, Hal had almost started to worry it was something serious.

"Those are all over the place, around here. There's always somebody trying to break in and take over, every few months or so. Not sure why they'd bother coming all the way down here. Must've gotten lost."

"Hmph," said Adamska, but followed, after giving the door a glare it really hadn't done anything to deserve.

The stairs went down a few flights before ending in a landing, as cold and grey as the rest of it. An ad for the real estate beneath the stairs could have read, "IDEAL FOR THE LURKING ENTHUSIAST." It all bore an eerie resemblance to an old, grainy black-and-white film. Adamska was the only spot of color. There was another door at the bottom, painted the color of green that had given up. Otherwise it was nearly identical to the last, though fortunately free of any ballistic embellishments.

When Hal stepped forward to open it, Adamska's forearm forestalled him.

"Wait."

The soldier flattened himself against the wall by the door and eased it open a fraction an anorexic garter snake couldn't have wriggled through. He peered through, light from the other side making his hair into a fuzzy strip of halo. Apparently the coast was clear; he slipped through, and a moment later his arm reappeared to beckon Hal onward.

They were in a grid of straight corridors, all alike. The walls were flat white, broken only by doors at regular intervals, the starkness of them emphasized by fluorescent lighting that didn't deign to permit shadow.

Hal checked the laptop display, and headed straight forward. "This way."

His voice bounced eerily off the walls, as though they were unused to human elocution and didn't much care for it.

"It's okay," he said to Adamska, who was stalking ahead to where the halls intersected and peering down them as though he suspected men to jump out and attack from around every corner.

Adamska headed back toward him, though not without a last good scan of the area.

"Nothing but dust and a bad smell," he reported, lip curling with distaste.

Hal sniffed experimentally. He didn't smell anything. "You can relax. This wing hasn't been used in years. If anybody's waiting here in ambush, they've been waiting a really long time."

Adamska's eyes narrowed at Hal's laptop.

"Then why is that thing telling us to go this way?"

Hal opened his mouth to explain that it wasn't telling them to do anything, it was just processing



the variables to match the signal resonance with the patterns of suspicious interference he had found before to trace the most likely source, then decided to cut to the point.

"I'm not sure. I guess we'll find out when we get there."

Adamska looked less than pleased with the assurance, but followed without comment.

Though the boy had stopped prowling ahead like a leopard that wasn't sure whether it was on the right side of the hunt, Hal found that a sense of creeping anxiety was infecting him as well. It was the emptiness of the place. The halls were bare, without the relief of so much as dust or a pile of cardboard boxes.

"It's a big base, out in the middle of nowhere," Hal answered uncomfortably. "It makes sense that there'd be lots of unused space."

Adamska said, "I didn't ask."

"Oh. Right. Well, anyway, there's nothing to be nervous about."

"Who's nervous?"

"What do you call that?" said Hal, nodding at the gun that had somehow made its way out of its holster.

The boy glanced down at it, mildly surprised, as though his hands had acted independently.

He looked up and said, "Prepared."

Smiling sheepishly, Hal confessed, "Actually, it makes me feel a bit better. Something about this place gives me the creeps. Like it's full of ghosts."

"It's not," said Adamska, without so much as laughing at him.

They advanced, winding through the halls at Hal's direction. More at the program's, really; all subjective sense of heading was soon lost. Walls and doors streamed on no matter how they turned, endless, until Hal would have welcomed the sight of a few bullet holes to break the monotony. He might have thought he'd wandered into some strange purgatory, if it weren't for Adamska's presence.

"Two more rights, then left at the third intersection," Hal said, entering a string of commands into his laptop.

Adamska. Back straight, eyes roving, gun at the ready. Walking to the right and a little ahead of him, though he was the one who knew where they were going (or, had something of an idea, at least.) It was almost like all the other times he'd worked with a soldier; getting Liquid around the back of the defensive perimeter Gurlukovich's group had managed to set up, or rigging the autolocks on the doors to split up the Iranians so that Snake could get to their leader.

Except that this cold, efficient soldier had taken him in his arms, kissed him, told him that he... It was too strange.

He hadn't stopped particularly suddenly, but Hal ran into his back anyway. As soon as they'd disentangled, he saw why.

The corridor they had turned into ran a few paces before ending abruptly. At the end was a door. It looked like all the others, but for the placement, and for having the top half of a broken sign nailed to it. The sign warned,

## **BEWARE OF THE**

"Locked," Adamska said, unnecessarily. The large, official-looking console affixed to the wall beside it spoke for itself. Mostly, it said KEEP OUT.

Hal couldn't resist smirking a little. Like that was going to work.

"Whatever it is we're doing here," Adamska said, grip shifting on the gun and eyes never still, "let's get it over with and get out. This place stinks." His nose wrinkled like a cat's. "What do they do,

mop the floors with formaldehyde?"

"This shouldn't take long," said Hal. He knelt by the panel for a closer look.

Hmm. Access code, cardkey, and retinal scan. He was going to have to resort to more advanced methods.

Hal reached into his bag and pulled out a screwdriver. With a little jimmying, the access panel came loose, exposing the true heart of the thing.

The best thing about technology, Hal had always believed, was the sheer variety of ways it could go wrong.

Technology was one of the few things in the world that was entirely unbiased. A circuit didn't care whether it was protecting the President's deepest secret, a Russian nuclear launch code, or somebody's briefcase. They all, for mysterious metallic reasons of their own, sometimes decided not to do what they were told. And all in exactly the same ways. People could change the numbers and sequences of the ways the laws were enacted, but they couldn't change the laws.

"All any electronic device is," Hal said, partly because he had a tendency to talk while he worked and partly to keep himself from wondering just what kind of thing would need this much security, "is a nervous system. And a nervous system is just a way of getting information from one place to another. All of these," -he nodded toward the inputs someone who was going about this the legitimate way would be concerned with- "are sensory organs, and they all work differently. But they all have to speak the same language, in order for anything to get done. Anything a machine does is just its way of talking to itself."

"And what are you doing?" said Adamska, in the somewhat unfamiliar tones of someone who really wanted to know.

Hal grinned at a tangle of exposed wires.

"Giving it some voices in its head."

It wasn't difficult. He'd done similar jobs before, and Hal had a knack for these things. Wherever his head was unsure his hands took charge, acting as if they'd done it a thousand times before. The problem he ran into was that there were only two of them.

Hal contemplated the two wire ends needing attachment held in his right hand, and the two held in his left. He had, as usual, failed to fully think this through.

"Here."

A hand covered his, callused and strong. Hal dropped the wires, surprised. Deftly, Adamska took them up before they could fall.

He must have been watching, which was strangest of all. Hal had been told, more than once, that no one else was very interested in seeing someone mess around with the inner workings of things. He wouldn't have thought that Adamska would be the sort to have the patience for it.

So many things about this boy were unexpected.

It was amazing, the difference another pair of hands made. Adamska was as effortlessly competent with the circuitry as Hal suspected he probably was with anything, and needed hardly more than a minimum of instruction. Soon, they were rewarded with the sound of the lock disengaging, a distinctive and eloquent click.

"There," Hal said triumphantly, his hand brushing against Adamska's as he pulled free of the tangle. He hoped it wasn't noticeable that the simple contact had, for some reason, sent a jolt of warmth up his arm to pool serenely around his midriff. He turned away to put his laptop into its case, also conveniently hiding the color that was rising to his face.

"Nostalgic, isn't it," Adamska murmured.

"What?" said Hal, half-hearing.

Adamska was still gazing at the nest of exposed wiring, a distant look on his face, like a reflection in still water.

"Adamska?"

The boy threw a sharp glance at his voice, as though returning to reality.

Before Hal knew it, Adamska was pulling him close, kissing him deeply.

"Whatever happens," he whispered, breath harsh against Hal's ear, "I won't let them take you from me."

"Gnih," said Hal, his vision full of fierce, clear eyes. He swallowed and tried again. "Er, okay."

Hal had the familiar sinking feeling that there was probably a right thing to say, and he probably hadn't said it.

But Adamska only flashed a grin at him, as though they shared a private joke.

The soldier stepped back and nodded at the lock, now happily caught in the endless loops of electronic schizophrenia.

He said, "Ready?"

"Yeah," said Hal, deliberately answering before he could tell if it was going to be a lie.

Weapon at the ready, Adamska opened the door.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/34/>

# chapter 35

## Stray by Dahne

"*Mistah Kurtz – he dead.*"

-Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness*

---

*Death can change the nature of a man.*

The smell hit him first. The antiseptic stench of things that hadn't been left to rot with proper dignity. Death soaked in oil and hidden behind boiled metal.

In the back of Adamska's mind, where he kept the memory of more pleasant things, he realized that the scent he had never been able to place was the precise opposite of this.

Adamska stepped inside, wary, reaching into his memory to stroke the image and sensation of slotting the six clean bullets into the revolver's chambers so long ago, before the first step out of his world, before time had become a pliable thing.

It was a laboratory, or something that looked like one. Large, and fastidiously arranged around a central point.

Adamska kept his weapon raised. The neater the laboratory, he believed, the darker the chaos in the mind of its curator.

He was, incidentally, right.

Victor Frankenstein labeled his jars in precise block print. Dr. Jekyll kept his glasses on a hook by the door, to be picked up by Mr. Hyde in the morning. There was never a more dedicated fane to Dewey's laws than the library of Dr. Faustus.

The room would have met the standards of any of them.

Rows of tables stood laden with tubes, vials, microscopes, and containers of murky liquids with the tops screwed on tightly. A brief survey showed there to be no human inhabitants, at least at the moment, though Adamska had known that from first glance. A living being, or so much as the spirit of one, would have stuck out like an evergreen in the Sahara. Another door, leading deeper into the complex, was set into the far wall, next to a small red box with the conspicuous look of an alarm. A row of machines filled the center, humming a quiet grating chorus of electric malediction. The edge of a low metal table showed from behind them, a series of cords running to it. Whatever was on it was blocked by the machines.

Adamska moved forward as though compelled.

Hal was a step behind, having turned to close the door, but it was already too late to tell him to stay back.

Apparently, whoever was in charge here had left in the middle of something.

An autopsy, to be exact.

On the table lay a man's body, or what was left of it. With a bit of time, that would have been easy to catalog; it was in a perfect state for inventory.

"Oh god..." Hal gulped. He lurched back, turning away, half-falling against the wall.

Adamska went to his side without sparing the slaughtered thing another glance.

Damn it. He'd *known* he should have knocked him out, stashed him somewhere safe, and gone in alone. Locked doors rarely had pleasant things behind them.

Personally, he was relieved that it was only a corpse.

Hal's distress was understandable. Though corpses were by definition harmless, they had an adverse effect on people not used to them. Especially the sort with the most especially dead parts on display. There was something uniquely wrenching about finding a ragged splash of lurid pinks where your mind expected cool flesh tones.

He laid an arm on Hal's back and steadied him while the smaller man made dry, choked retching sounds.

When he had gotten hold of himself, Adamska turned him a step toward the table and said, "Look at it."

"Uh-uh." He shook his head fiercely, pulling back as though the wall offered some sort of talismanic protection. "No way. You can't... I won't."

Adamska stood still, not fighting, not letting go.

"It's better if you look," he said. "Gives your imagination less to fill in."

Hal saw the reason in that, enough to swallow hard and let Adamska coax him forward. Perhaps he'd had his share of those nightmares that took a special pride in embellishing on unclear details.

Adamska would not be the cause of any more of them.

"It's just a dead man," he said, navigating them toward the table, slowly. "Only an object. Nothing worth fear. It can't hurt you. There's no power in it. Information. That's all it is."

"Hey," Hal protested weakly. "If I have to look, so do you."

Adamska's tart response that he *was* looking was interrupted by the realization that his eyes were still on the floor tiles. White, flecked with grey. Clean.

"I will," he said.

They looked.

A glint caught the corner of Adamska's gaze, pulling him downwards, as good a place to begin as any.

Huh. No wonder something had seemed off about it.

The corpse's feet were encased in something like a cross between plate armor and circuit boards. The covering continued up the legs, following the contour of muscle like a carapace welded onto the skin. Some of the wires from the machine led into it, disappearing into hidden sockets. Solid metal ran up to the opened cavity in the torso, a bizarre concession to the modesty of someone who could not physically have been more naked.

"Yeah," said Hal, a breath of tremor in his voice but regaining balance. "It's not that bad. At least they closed his eyes."

Adamska's eyes would have roved impatiently past the chest, inside-out as it was – seen one, you've seen them all – but for another glint that demanded his attention.

"Wait."

Hal had seen it as well.

"What... what *is* this?"

"I don't know," said Adamska, in all honesty.

Bordered by the neatly pinned back flesh, the chest cavity glinted with a wet shine, like an oil slick spilled on a black-tarred runway. All components were present and accounted for, in their proper place. That might have been what made the abnormality difficult to place, at first. While Adamska had seen these things before, they had always been much farther from working order. And usually not all at once. Circumstances tended to ensure that they were a little past their prime, naturally.

Nothing about this one was natural.

Adamska wasn't well-versed in the care of bodies after death – at that point, his job was finished – but he felt a instinctive surety that even the most modern of preservation techniques were not supposed to involve this much metal.

Some had more of a share than others, but no visible surface was completely free of it. If the heart had been beating, no sign would have escaped the thick layers of the shell that surrounded it. Wires ran between them, dozens of them, beside or in place of veins, or linking to the machines like a puppeteer's threads, garish synthetic reds and whites and yellows that the eye refused to accept. Even the ribs were plated with steel and circuitry, curving like mismatched talons above the angular blocks that hid the lungs. Sparks of light flashed off scattered silver points, as though the blood had dried up and left behind flecks of mica for silt.

Adamska knew better than most that human remains had no special significance. Whatever soul had resided here was long gone by now.

As many times as he might remind himself of that, there was something viscerally repulsive about such a systematic desecration.

Whatever they had done, it was an excellent preservative. The body stank of metal and formaldehyde, but not a trace of rot.

"What are they trying to do to this guy?" said Hal. From the fascinated horror in his voice, there was no more danger of looking away.

"The fuck I know," Adamska said, irritated. If he'd wanted to find nauseating abominations never meant to sully the earth, he'd have gone digging through Volgin's closet. "Forget it. This is a waste of time. Let's get out-"

He cut off and went still.

"There's got to be some mistake," Hal rattled on blithely. "I must've miscalculated the coordinates, or gotten turned around somewhere. Whatever it is that's going on down here, it's definitely got nothing to do with you."

Adamska didn't have breath to spare for how perfectly wrong he was.

The dead man's face was smooth, clean-shaven, beneath a crest of short white hair. Time had worn down the edges of the features, robbed the planes of their angularity. Wind, sun and snow had tanned the skin to thin leather, seamed the lips and softened the bones.

At least they had closed the eyes.

Adamska heard himself say, "This is me."

"What?" Hal tried to stare at both him and the corpse at once. "But this is- It's just some old man. Poor guy probably donated his body to science. Or something."

"Not *me*." The face had not been touched. Flawed and organic as the day he died. "This world's version."

Hal struggled through several possible responses, and settled for rationality.

"There's got to be some explanation for it, Adamska. Nobody would do-" -Hal gulped, grip shifting on his composure, but maintained it- "this without a good reason."

Adamska's gaze had not moved from the dead man's face. The unreal, alien familiarity of it. A set of features he was not inclined toward sharing, though it wasn't as though anyone had asked his permission. How had he died? Shot, probably. Appropriate. The fight would have been glorious. He would kill the men who had robbed such a thing of its dignity. No matter what manner of man this one had been. A decent death was something all soldiers deserved. It was the face he had seen through glass in another world, the same raw materials, but one that had lived a different life. Would the man behind the face have been anyone he recognized?

Ah, well. Too late for questions now. Gawking at it wasn't doing anyone any good.

"Looks like we found what we came to see," Adamska said. "If you're done looking, I'd say it's about time we got out of here. I've got a few questions for Big Boss."

As he was turning away, Hal trailing behind him, the corner of Adamska's eye caught on another species of shine.

He paused and glanced back.

It was difficult to fix his eyes on them. The fundamental levels of logic below thought had discarded it, classifying it as meaningless visual noise, an anomaly.

Around the body's wrists and ankles were bolted bands of heavy steel.

Restraints.

A word, now, on "if."

If time can be seen as a river, branching, at necessary junctures, into multiple possible futures, the possibility arises that both are equally valid. The idea has been considered that time is rife with thousands of branching points, split along the fault lines of every "if" into innumerable coexistent parallel universes. The validity of the idea is irrelevant. Only that it is an idea.

If Adamska had not looked one moment longer, he would have missed the opening of the dead man's eyes.

He waited for it to pass, the phantom born of fear and chemicals and death in the air, heard the sharp intake of breath beside him and knew that it was real.

Eyes he had met in a place that was not dream.

The sound and traces of motion were not all machine.

Beneath the pair of eyes that paralyzed, the iceberg blue of the hidden dark parts eaten away and pitted by salt and storm current, he saw, hideous out of context in this grey black and bloodscale red place, the ravaged empty space where the chest had been rise as if taking breath.

The maggot-pale lips were working, quirking, minute spasms, infinitesimal as surface soil shifting for inch-deep insects, dust touched by dust touched by dust touched by something living, carrying rumor of tremors to the sixth generation.

The dead man stole breath from the living and spoke.

"You..."

And all Adamska could think was that it wasn't fair.

The eyes held like iced metal on bare skin. The cold that burned down to the bone it couldn't touch. Sawed logic, seared sense into whispering blue ash, and Adamska didn't want to know which was the abyss and which was what looked back.

He looked down at the pieces of the destroyed thing and whispered, "No."

It was a mistake, because it caught the reverberations of voice left in the word that was half air and half metal, and to cover the echoes all of the echoes of the sound that wouldn't *die* he shouted,

"No!"

He felt his hands tight on warm metal, pulsing with the pounding blood, to burn his fingerprints into the grip and melt the metal to flow over his skin and burn him and make him safe.

Felt it and didn't see it, because all he saw was the eyes, the cold eyes the mad eyes the blue blue eyes that he'd last seen in a mirror or somewhere before.

"You can't be here."

The air forcing itself through his throat, rushing out in words, and he *looked* down at him.

"You have no right!" Adamska shouted.

Eyes past madness where the hellbound go, eyes that reflect pain and pain, past the unendurable

past the human and kept going.

"This is *my* world," Adamska said.

He had faced those eyes before.

"I fought for it. I bled for it."

And he had won.

And Adamska cried,

"You *lost*, old man!"

And Adamska said,

"I *felt you die*."

He'd felt it ripped out, thought he would die as well. It would have been worth it. It was still worth it.

But there was radiant heat beside him, tenuous motion, and he had good senses.

He was not alone.

Hal had seen it all.

"W-who...why..." the gentle, squeamish, softhearted man babbled. Adamska didn't need to turn to see his face. He didn't need to see it again, that horror and revulsion directed toward-

"What have they done to you?"

-whoever had done this to him?

The eyes swivelled in sockets slick as oil.

"It was you," the dead man whispered, the voice that wasn't his, because whispers could make wounds that cut deeper than a scream, to linger, sticking to the skin like napalm. "You said...my name."

Over the rush of the blood in his ears and his eyes Adamska could hear it.

*You'll never touch him*

He had promised.

"So," said Adamska, like a step onto the wooden bridge over the chasm at the eye of the storm, "you found a way to keep yourself breathing a little longer. Too bad all your efforts are going to waste."

His hands gripped the hilt of the revolver, solid and real.

"I'll kill you as many times as it takes."

The creature would laugh, taunt him, twist into his gut with all the weapons it held, but Adamska could face it, and win.

There was a sound like a long, soft sigh.

In silence, on another underlevel of sound, muffled by bands of steel and silicon, it was possible to hear his heartbeat.

Adamska could have reached down and torn it out.

No. This kill would be clean.

His hand was steady.

"Good," it said, and the eyes fell closed. "Just one more."

The corpse lay still.

Onto the raised edge of the table came to rest the long fingers of a thin hand, made for delicate work and fine details, settling like a visitor at the bedside of a sick child.

"How..." Hal's voice came out in a tremulous register. Adamska could hear him swallow hard. "How could this happen?"

"Hah." Bitter air released between halves of a stiff sneer. "Almost sounds like you pity it."



Hal said, "Don't you?"

And he was sincere.

He fucking meant it.

"You pity him."

Acid laughter burned the back of Adamska's throat. He whirled to face Hal, arm striking out toward the half-embalmed corpse.

"Do you have any idea who this is? Do you know what he's done?"

Now Adamska had done it. The man could barely stand the sight when they had thought it was nothing but a common cadaver. When support turned to opposition, he would crumble.

Hal kept his gaze steady with pity in his eyes and said, "Does it matter?"

To him, it didn't.

It was a pebble dropped into the gears of Adamska's mind.

"God..." said Hal, looking down over the display. The window to the mechanization of the inner man. A cross-section that had started in the center and never gotten to the edge. Adamska noticed, for no reason at all, that the metal and circuitry were held in place with hundreds of tiny screws. "He's alive. He's been alive, through all of this."

He shuddered, the way that men do when their eyes have transmitted too much data the brain can't accept. Adamska had seen this. It was prelude to shutdown, self-defense by temporary retreat from a reality that had become the enemy.

Hal took himself in hand with a force that was visible, and didn't look away.

"Whoever he was," he said like a mourner, "he didn't deserve this."

"He deserves to die," said Adamska, and leveled his weapon to make it so.

In the special quality of the silence that precedes a single shot, there was a hoarse, coughing, scratching sound.

The dead man was laughing.

When the sounds of meat hitting meat had gone on beyond what should have been possible, punctuated with Volgin's demands or more often wordless grunts, the smell of burnt hair and the crackle of lightning, when the battered broken man had nothing left and knew it was over but knew, through a word not said or a wrong question asked or the wrong questions altogether, that in some small, esoteric, irrevocable way that would not save him, he had won-

Yes. Adamska had heard laughs like that.

The eyes were open.

Adamska had been right about one thing.

They saw the place beyond the madness beyond pain.

"Tried that, once." A rasp, like air across a file, or the sound rats' claws made on wire mesh before the last experiment. "Do better, this time. Make sure it's a...thorough job."

"You can't be here," Adamska said, knowing that it was a child's insistence. "I killed you."

"Could say that." Like a weak whisper through metal grating. Prisoners sharing secrets through the ventilation. "You were always...with me. To the end."

"Who are you?" said Hal, lost but not lost enough to fail to understand the only possible answer.

The dead man whispered, because no matter your pride or your honor after long enough everyone screamed, couldn't stop it any more than a mouse could suppress its squeaking.

"Revolver Ocelot."

Sibilant whirring gnawed at the shreds of silence.

"B-but..." Hal's voice carried a strain of stridency, thin with the effort to orient himself by some

sort of sanity. "Ocelot died two years ago."

"Yes." The surfaces not shrouded in silver glistened, obscure pulsations in time with his ravaged voice. "And this began. They...weren't done with me yet."

"They brought you back," said Hal, barely more than a whisper himself.

Ocelot's effort was visible, though there was no chest to watch rise and fall. "No one likes to have his toys...taken away."

Slowly, as though falling gradually back into gravity's grasp, the revolver lowered to Adamska's side.

His left hand curled into a fist, nails biting four hot crescents into the palm.

"How?" he said thickly. "Why aren't you dead?"

"I was free of them." The mouth was all that moved in the pale face, but for where patches writhed, now and then, in independent spasm. "So I thought. Maybe they were biding...their time. Should have known. Was never meant to be easy. Thought it was all over, with that one mistake - yes, *your* fault. Running in front of him, as if anyone besides us has ever...pierced that invincibility...No. I don't blame you. Would do it again. As many...times as it takes. Gone, yes, was gone, but they found me. Thought it was over. I woke-"

The tendons that stood stark against green and blue wires seized, jerked and twitched against the restraints, eyes rolling upward until they displayed a blank surface the color of a boiled egg.

Adamska didn't know where the twisted, eviscerated creature got the strength.

"*Krasnui!*" In a rasping gasp like the scrape of flint on steel when the dark is closing in. "*Chornaya krov'— serdtse molnii—*"

"God..." Hal's voice sighed across the twitching form, as the ruined throat dropped into soundless convulsions. "Who would do this?"

He pitied him, because he was...

...pitiful.

No monster. No composite demon, fitted together from the ivory shards of skeletons in his closet. No deathless Koshchei, soul torn out and hidden in the eye of a needle.

Only a man never permitted to finish dying.

The convulsion passed, and Ocelot's eyes closed, heavy-grained wooden shutters to shield out the storm.

"You're not him," Adamska said softly.

"Yes," Ocelot said, nearly indistinguishable from a wordless exhalation. "You took... him with you. Where he died."

"What are you?" Adamska's left hand clutched the lip of the table. "Why did you stay?"

When the blue eyes opened, they held something near to sanity.

"Someone had to," Ocelot said. "To keep an eye on the Boss."

"The Boss?" Adamska echoed.

"Someone had...to make sure. Couldn't leave...anything to chance. Had to keep him safe."

Between one rattling breath and the next, Ocelot's eyes lit with ferocity, a grasping tendril of desperation where emotion had been seared barren.

"Tell me." His struggle to speak was illuminated, visible in the phantom pulses of plasma. "Is... he alive?"

"In this world," Adamska said, staring down at the white of his knuckles, "John still lives."

There was a long sigh, like the release of a tension long treasured.

"Good," said Ocelot, a word outlined in the ghost of metallic reverberation, like the path of a

flashlight beam through fog. "Then there's no more to fear."

"You're really not him." Adamska's lips moved numbly in unison with his mind.

"Someone had to stay," Ocelot said, falling into a rasping mumble that was almost hypnotic. His bare upper lip twitched, as if shot through with diffusions of electricity. "Watch over him. Be his eye, for the one we took. Couldn't let him fight alone. Two doesn't make the odds any better, but it's...a start. The first mistake the other one made was...letting him out of our sight. The eye that could shatter like glass... Not right, to get pulled out of hell alone... John... I know... *yaznui glaza... ne adin...* I won't let..."

He mumbled it like a child's half-remembered prayer.

Hal said softly, "You loved him, didn't you."

"Obvious, is it?" Metal stole the warmth from his laugh. "Done all I can, now. Kept him clear of land and heaven. Found me...the best death a man could ask for. Not his fault, what happens after."

And the eyes fixed on Adamska, as though prayerful but not pleading, seeing him with all the clarity of a perfect illusion.

"You were always with me."

And the eyes, luminous beneath the netherworld membrane, went to Hal.

"And you... were a good memory."

And the eyes were, for a moment in the wasteland place, the color of cool water.

"Always hoped I'd see you, one more time."

"He was right here," Adamska said. The underside of his eyelids burned. "Why didn't you try to find him?"

"No need."

Some invisible thread kept him sentient, clinging to the pieces of some hideous strength.

"He was yours."

A scraping sound, a cough drowned in oil and tangled in wires.

"They say the boy is father to the man. You were father to...all of us. He died, that day, fifty years ago. Now all that's left...is you."

"I don't understand," Adamska said numbly.

"Not much of me—" A paroxysm crossed his face, sparks from neurons crossed and tangled and yet firing in idiot profusion. It stilled and joined the tight lines of old pain. It was a parched arroyo of a face, carved by the erosion of relentless rain.

The intake of breath was dry, soft thunder, to fuel words that struggled into coherence like drowning men clawing to the surface, expelled from the wracked body by sheer force of will.

"Not much of me...is left. Can't hold out much longer."

And Adamska knew, with the ludicrous and undeniable surreality of the firsthand, that making the admission stung.

"They...don't stop. Not until they have what they want. Not unless you...take it away."

The dead man looked at him, with something like hope.

The matter behind Adamska's eyes was as immobile as the body in front of them. Gelid chunks of dismembered meat, floating apart, suspended in stasis. Inanimate components, inert vegetation, circuits with no current. Blanks and empty chambers.

All he understood was what he was being asked.

He'd done it for comrades before. Enemies, too. (That KGB soldier, stumbling in a punch-drunk marionette dance, until the report and the hot smell of gunpowder and the cut of blood at his neck.) Mercy, some called it. Not as many as you might think. Most knew it as finishing the job. (Kifa, sitting

with his back against a tree and his hand on his stomach, shadow of a forced smile and those damn green eyes. "One favor, comrade, *da?*" He had been fifteen.)

"Finish it, boy," Ocelot whispered, the raw hiss of the ruined remains, a prayer to be overwritten with the scent of cordite. "Do it and get out of here, before they find you."

The revolver raised.

There was a sound. Singular, but made of small separate units.

Six spent shell casings, ringing hollow requiems on the blank white tile.

"The bullet around your neck," Adamska said, eyes fixed. He would not look away until it was done. "Give it to me."

"A-Adamska..." His voice was querulous, but there. "Are you sure?"

"Yes," he said, heard the sigh of the chain and knew that it was possible to love him more for asking.

Laden hand clasped his, longer than it needed to but no longer than they needed. The bullet had absorbed his warmth. Fallen under its influence. Taken on the resonance of a sympathetic frequency.

Adamska broke the chain with a twist of his fingers and thumbed the bullet home.

"There will be justice," Adamska vowed.

"No," said Ocelot. "Please. Never that."

The cylinder fell back into place with a click, and the muzzle pointed blankly at the metal heart.

"Not there," he whispered. "That can be... repaired. The head. They can't fix that. Not yet."

The revolver moved to hold steady as selective paralysis, a weakness harnessed and forced to serve, between eyes that held, already, a terrible relief.

"I did what I could to protect mine," Ocelot forced out, against the thick spiderweb of steel that would hold him silent. "Protect yours. Never...never be alone. Never stop fighting..."

Ocelot had never expected much of a eulogy.

Because these were the moments when the courtesies mattered, Adamska said, "Are you ready?"

"Yes..." Ocelot sighed, like a tired old man at the sight of home. "Thank you..."

The bang never stopped being startling, no matter how much it was expected. Adamska's muscles were too well trained to jump.

The body hadn't had the strength to jerk.

Life fled from the eyes as though it had been waiting. Between them unsure blood, like an afterthought, trickled from the perfect, round wound.

Give this to the man. He didn't whimper.

Time swallowed its own tail, until its jaws were prised apart by a hand on his shoulder.

With an invocation of conscious will, Adamska put the revolver away.

Hal's other hand reached over the chest cavity to close the corpse's eyes.

"Let's go," he said softly.

They turned away.

The machines hummed their senseless susurrus, heedless of the futility. Adamska felt a fierce urge to smash them, soon routed by the aching, implacable need to be gone. It was better not to leave it to imagination, but you could only look at your own cadaver for so long.

Out of this empty place. Its death smell, and its humming machines.

There was something else.

Adamska froze, hackles at full mast.

If his senses hadn't been good, he wouldn't have caught it.

"Wh-" Hal began, before he heard it too.

A baritone voice, in the distance. Carving clearer, note by note.

*"Maybe  
You'll think of me  
When you are all alone..."*

Singing.

Flowing like the freon in his veins.

*"Maybe the one who is waiting for you  
Will prove untrue  
Then, what will you do?"*

The approach was unmistakable now. Eyes followed the source unbidden, tracing its tracks through the wall, toward the rear door.

*"Maybe  
You'll sit and sigh  
Wishing that I were near  
Then maybe you'll ask me to come back again  
And maybe I'll say,  
'May—'"*

"— who the hell are you?"

He was a man in his fifties, balding. A repugnant black mustache dripped thickly beneath a nose resplendent in broken veins, curved in the double arch of a distant vulture's silhouette. He wore a dingy, grey labcoat, impeccably pressed, vaguely pink in cloud shapes at the lapel. His weight leaned against the door to prop it open, as his hands were occupied with a tray full of tubes and scalpels.

Needles.

Wires.

Knives.

Adamska's pupils dilated as though the world had gone black and no one but him knew the difference.

"Ah, you must be assistants!"

The invader's voice was bright, the same glint as the flat of the knives. Germanic inflection gripped his tongue like wires.

"Finally, they listen to me, Clark and his bureaucrats with their ledgers. I need more hands again, I said. Strong hands and strong stomach, I say I need, but do they listen? These children you send me, they come, they go, no reliability. Say the noise, they don't like it, it's too much, hah-hah. You two, maybe you are not so squeamish, yes?"

Here was the spark of a new kind of madness.

"You." The word left him in a cloud of phosphorus into the pitiless illumination of the void.  
"You did this."

The old man sniveled in annoyance, stepping into the room and letting the door slam with portentous finality. "Yes, so much work, and nearly all alone as I say. So little support they give their pet projects, and yet always they are expecting results. I learn to do what I can. Ingenuity, yes?"

He was moving inwards, closer to the table and machines and farther from the exit.

"Now, the shoulder circuitry is going to be difficult. Twitchy work, hah-hah."

He pronounced it two separate words, in staccato cadence. Hah. Hah.

"Many fiddly tendons to reconfigure and replace. Terribly messy, I fear. Oh, and he's not going to like it, I tell you that! Much shouting, much thrashing, and restraints can do only so much. So much

to be done! What are you standing there for? Come, we have..."

The intruder stopped.

Leaned forward, squinted.

Went pale as the corpse.

"Ah, no," he said, somewhere between whimper and sigh. "What have you done?"

The soldier met his eyes.

The loss, pain, fear, and confusion that sullied his resolve evaporated into red mist.

Blindness of his obscene normalcy dispelled, the fat man fled to the alarm like a sinner toward salvation.

He made it two steps.

*I'll kill you*

Ocelot didn't feel the motion but he felt the impact, every thread in the weave of the shirt collar yanked and twisted with glorious brutality to face him, the steelshudder shattersoft sound of the tray crashing to the floor and scattering its weapons like the gunshot of an icicle breaking from the eaves and splintering on frozen ground, and the terror in those mad beady eyes would make it all all right.

Felt the impact in his blood in striking like a cobra uncoiling, the give so easy between forehead and cracked cartilage, fine bright pleasure blooming in the hothouse of the vicious jab and the viscous liquid splash sweet on his cheek. The purity of satisfaction expressed in the simple act of breaking his nose.

*I'll tear out your throat rip through your lungs pull out your guts in front of your eyes*

The mad doctor, the fetid Mephistopheles, the repulsive insect at his game of God, fell like a cockroach onto his back, the knee in his gut serving admirably as a pin.

"You're the one who did this," Ocelot hissed, rage saturating his senses like a wall of water.

"The one behind all of it is you."

"Oh, not all, not all," the mad little man gibbered humbly. Staring with the small glass-shard-gleaming eyes beetleback black. "Only execution, not design. Clark's mind, Roteshemd's hands, hah-hah."

Both timing and control were poor. He failed to suppress a glance to the side.

No matter. It would have been visible in any case, the motion of fat fingers inching toward the scalpel among the shrapnel on the ground.

If slugs had had bones to crunch, crushing them beneath his boot heel would have felt like this.

The German yelped like a dog.

"Do I have your attention?" Ocelot snarled.

But a good idea was a good idea.

Keeping his weight balanced evenly, his hand reached out, and closed around cool metal.

The doctor's fingers twitched, and he pressed down slightly - so very, teasingly slightly - onto the crushed palm with his heel, and was rewarded with a strangled yip.

"You're—" the man squeaked, like a silverfish twitching its feelers. "Who are you?"

And the first scrape of fear across those black rodent eyes was ambrosia.

The scalpel gleaming between his eyes like a monofoliate diamond, the soldier smiled.

"I'm Revolver Ocelot."

Roteshemd's pupils darted like little cornered rats, the eyes so black there was no iris even this close even this wide stark and fragrant with fear, but an ocelot never let his prey escape.

"No, no," he babbled, the native edge of hysteria sharpening to radiance. "Much too much dead that one. Noisiest dead ever I meet, hah-hah, but even that no more—"

"Three years," the soldier hissed. He drove his knee into the worm's soft underbelly. "That's how long you've had him here."

Sudden, startling laughter broke from Ocelot's taut throat, bubbles in sticky red champagne.

"You sick little puppy!" he cried. "You didn't have to worry about keeping him alive, because he was already dead! So you could play as long as you liked. You pathetic little excuse for a sadist."

"Oh, not at all," the madman demurred, mouth twitching like the death throes of fat grubs into an obsequious moue. "It is a thing, only a thing that must be done. A job, yes? Not so pleasant, but the decision, it is not mine. You are soldier, you understand such things."

That mad, virile hope. As though he thought there was a way he might escape. Aiming for the lowest flames as he dove into the sun.

The mouse that is pinned between the cat's two paws, and always, always runs.

"No," said Ocelot, despising him for clutching to that easy and meaningless absolution. "You did it because you enjoyed it. They always do. You liked the power. Knowing that every scrap of his being is focused on something he can't control no matter how his bones snap reaching for it and that you could stop with a flick of your finger. But you don't. That would ruin the game. That's all it is, isn't it? A game to you. Some sick kind of sport. Counting how long you can hold a man's head under hell until he has to come up for air, so that you can do it again. Oh, yes. I know your kind. And I know the kindest thing a man can do for a sick dog is put it down."

Ocelot had always wondered why Volgin would put a bag over a man's head, just to take it off later. It seemed indecisive. Sloppy, like the colonel so often was. He had suspected the brute liked to see the fear on his victim's faces (but never fear so pretty as this, never so rich so deserved, blood trickling down from the ruined nose like a clear silverspined snake), and it must have been so, but that and more. It was for the other, too.

Because the only thing worse than thinking you're alone is knowing that you aren't.

"Killing me, it will do nothing for you," Rotesemd pointed out, that stunted parody of reason. Even as eyes skittered down the scalpel's edge. "I am a flunky only. It is Clark you want."

"Oh, you'll die," Ocelot assured him sweetly. "But don't worry. It won't be anytime soon."

"N-not all of it," the creature babbled, the tiny mouse's mind finally understanding that the fangs overhead weren't for show. "I did nothing wrong. I have done nothing to you."

The blood was pounding in the soldier's ears, but now it beat as he conducted.

"Tell me what you did," he hissed.

But he didn't need to talk. Ocelot could see it in his head, clear as a burn scar. The table, with its heavy metal cuffs welded on. The tools laid out like the first bodies into a mass grave. The man, the fat fool chattering oaf buffoon impure unworthy piece of filth, ripping him open not even with the honesty of anger or gunshot or explosion or poison or any of the thousand ways he had agreed that he would die, eyes rolling blind and unmoored as they pick at him like vultures and it always grows back so it never ends. And no matter their pride no matter their resolve sooner or later they always scream—

But he could drown it out with someone else's.

The loathsome creature wet his lips. "I only—"

"Shut up!" The boot pressed savagely on his broken hand for emphasis. "No. You've done some sick things in your time, little doctor."

He felt the rictus leer twist his face with the distance of a god looking down on mortals.

"Not me," the putrid insect was puling, "it was not me, I do as am bid, not me..."

"If you don't shut up," Ocelot said conversationally, "I'll chop off your fingers and shove them

down your throat."

Blood flailed at the walls of its prison, and the purity of righteous wrath twisted through him like a snake.

"And you won't even take responsibility," he sneered, an ecstasy of disgust. "Slugs like you never do. Sniveling coward. You should be grateful. You'll going to have the privilege of seeing justice."

The scalpel, held close enough to the fleshy face to feel sparks of light glitter from the surface.

"An eye for an eye, Herr Doktor."

With good senses heightened to celestial omniscience, eyes and mind and claws of an eagle at the apex of its stoop, he saw the last remnants of vestigial reason flee the madman's eyes.

"That's what I want to see," Ocelot said. "Scared yet? You should be."

He rolled the handle of the instrument slowly between his fingers, each atom of his skin reveling in the weight and texture.

"Fascinating thing, this," he commented. "Much less heft than a knife, but much more precise, and allowing such greater degree of control. What could someone do, with a thing like this?"

His eyes narrowed at the flash of inspiration.

"But we already know the answer to that."

Yes. *Yes*.

It was almost too perfect.

Ocelot let his voice become warm, caressing. He was a man of action, yes, but there was a pleasure in a well-formed plan. He resettled his knee into the revolting man's gut, fixed the quivering eyes and jowls with his full attention. The man gasped and gaped like a fish on a tabletop. No dignity at all.

"How would you like it, if it's you under the knife? You being cut open, skin peeled back, tendons snapped and patched with wires so that every heartbeat is lightning and agony... Yes! It's perfect!"

He laughed, a wild, irrepressible howl.

"You can be my plaything, like he was yours. I don't have the skills you do, but I think I can improvise. Isn't that a wonderful idea? It's the purest form of justice! And, do you know the best part?"

Placing his free hand delicately on the floor, beside the neck that was pinned there like a chicken's to the chopping block, Ocelot leaned forward, just enough to let a drop of his brimming joy spill over.

"The best part is," he whispered, "You deserve it."

"I can do anything I want to you, and it's not so bad."

Funny, how such an ugly face wasn't so bad when it was dead white. The smashed nose was rather an improvement, too.

"Now, where should we begin?" He smiled down at his captive prey. "Not feeling so talkative anymore, eh? Don't worry. You'll tell me everything, soon enough. The ones like you never last long. You never stop to think that someday it might be you on the receiving end. More's the pity. I could live for days on the fear alone."

There was a shrill edge to Ocelot's laugh, but it wasn't metal and it didn't gleam.

"You should be happy, you know," Ocelot informed him, leaning casually forward on his knee. There was some sort of mumbling in the background, beneath the blood in his ears and the antiseraphic chorus of machines. "As long as you might tell me something useful, I won't cut out your



tongue. That still leaves us lots of options, though. There's limitless potential for scientific exploration. You're a blank canvas.

"Well," Ocelot amended, grinding down with his left boot a little, "almost blank."

"You won't dare," the little grub of a man babbled, a note of desperation making an exquisite chord with the harmonics of fear and waning disbelief. "There is too much I can tell you, this Revolver Ocelot, Clark and his projects—"

"Oh, I don't care about that," Ocelot said, sitting up to give him a desultory backhand across the face. He liked the quick, sharp impact, and how it threw exciting red drops across the floor, so he did it again. "I already know everything I need. He told me himself. Now, listen."

His joviality dropped, and he leaned in close to the piggy little eyes.

"I'm going to cut you open," he breathed. "Just like you did him. I'll peel back your skin like peeling an orange, and pull out all of your insides, one by one. People can survive an astonishing amount of punishment, you know. The colonel used to show me. He deserves almost as bad as you. No, not even him. At least he had the decency - hah! Volgin, decency. Remind me to hurt you more, for making me say that - to let a man die. You'll know the value of that before the end. I'll have my fun with you, before you die. But that's an eternity from now, for you at least. You're pathetic. But don't expect any pity from me."

The fool was twitching, making feeble efforts to struggle. Ocelot let him. There was never anything wrong with a little more helplessness. Besides, he would be thrashing a lot more, soon.

"I don't like those beady little eyes of yours," Ocelot observed. "So I'm going to cut them out."

A darting gesture of menace was all it took to cut the shrill, terrified whine short. How wonderful, the way the least movement of the blade entranced those eyes.

Ocelot frowned, petulant.

"But it's no fun if you can't see what's going on."

And how powerless he was to stop it.

No fun at all.

"But then again," he realized, "you don't need both for that."

He smiled. The scalpel whirled, a flashing, spinning circle, and came to rest in classical dagger mode in his fist, just a little higher than before, and to the right.

"Let's make a compromise."

His breath was coming fast. He could feel his heart racing, anxious to see the splashing red evidence of its comrade. The little beady mad doll's eye stared at the point, the sharp glinting silver point, inches above it, daring not even to blink. In the midst of fractured white like flawed crimson-veined marble, concentric circles, black on black, centered on that perfect focus, the lever to move the world. Mumbling what could have been prayers or pleas, for all the good that would do him.

"You're all alone," Ocelot whispered, because the right whisper sank straight down to the bone, to boil marrow into rustred vapor. "No one's going to help you."

He raised his right arm, only by an inch or two. This was not going to take much momentum.

His was power, his was justice, the transcendent resplendent and ultimate will, kneeling above the supine anatomy of his triumph, and the amphora would shatter and pour crimson to sanctify it all, the exaltation of the violence lost in his soul and the whole of it and the totality was glory, glory, glory.

Ocelot showed his teeth, and said,

"You're mine."

Severing the last weak link to mercy, the gleaming blade struck down.

*"Stop it!"*

Something hit Ocelot from the side. The world tilted to hit the other.

His arm vibrated with the resonance of metal shrieking against the tile floor.

And he realized what that murmuring behind him had been.

"Stop it," Hal whispered from on top of him, arms wrapped around him, eyes tightly shut. "Stop it. Stop it."

He was holding him down.

Holding him back.

"Get off of me," Ocelot hissed.

*traitor*

It had been perfect, and now it was *broken*.

"Stop." Rivulets leaked from the corners of the small, frail man's eyes. "Please. Don't do this."

He was pinning Ocelot's arms down.

*how dare you*

Anyone else would have died for the insult.

But he was special.

He got a warning.

"Never get between an ocelot and its prey," the soldier snarled.

Hal shook, and did not move.

Too bad. Later there would be time for apologies. Some things had to be done, and some people didn't belong on the battlefield.

Cleaving to him with all of his strength, the slight, foolish man weighed as little as a bird.

It took barely any effort to throw him aside.

There was a muffled impact, and a short, sharp cry.

"Sorry," Ocelot said, rolling to a crouch and glancing at where Hal lay in a crumpled heap by the wall. The scalpel, he noted with pleasure and mild surprise, was still in his hand. How convenient. Probably a little dull, now. Even better. "Can't have you getting in the way. In fact—"

He looked down at the odd weapon in his hand. The flat of the blade was reflective, and showed him a slice of a sentimental little smile.

"You might want to leave, for this part. It's going to take a while."

Roteshemd was right where he had left him, too busy mumbling prayers or talking to an invisible friend or something equally useless to take advantage of his one chance for salvation. There was a moral in that, somewhere.

The grin could have cracked the soldier's face.

"And it's going to be messy."

Ocelot got to his feet. Interruptions were an irritation, but he'd get over it.

"Don't worry," he said over his shoulder. "I'll be back for you."

*Just give me this.*

No. None of the uncertainties of that. This was a thing to be taken.

It was nothing as definite as metal that made him turn back one more time.

Maybe only for the contrast. The artist's aesthetic appreciation for the difference between dark and light, condemned and living, worthless garbage and precious things. Maybe he had made a sound, made the predator's sensitive hearing flicker to his frequency. Maybe it was an influence run rampant, flinging itself against deadened neurons to find one that would stumble forward to carry its message.

Hand against the wall for support, gasping as though the wind had been knocked out of him, Hal

stood, and looked at him with no recognition.

Not a variable.

Not a curiosity.

An anomaly, a fold where space-time inverted on one another to make a closed loop and nothing of sense.

Nothing close enough to human to be called monster.

Aberration, on the other side of abomination.

Ocelot held the blade in his fist, he realized, up before his eyes.

Fragmentary reflection.

One eye, or the other.

Its scope was narrow. That was how it was made.

One part. Or the other.

The partial reflection. That fragmentary self. A flat metal surface voidless staring back.

Or behind it, the unreflected. The blank wall and negative space generalizing the outline of a man who looked at him and did not know who he was.

Focus would permit only one at once.

No matter how clear his eyes.

The hand moved.

Fingers slackened.

By the time the scalpel hit the ground, Adamska wasn't listening anymore.

Ghost whispers brushed against the back of his mind.

*I know you'd never hurt me*

Stop it.

Don't do this.

Please.

Dimly, as though the body belonged to someone else who had just been letting him use it for a while, he felt his knees buckle haltingly, give out like a faulty machine, and hit the floor.

That gentle, careworn face, and those wide eyes, shadowed beneath an overlay of what he had been about to do.

And in a way he was almost thankful he'd never before been stupid enough to hope for something and get it, because this was what it felt like when it was snatched away.

Adamska's hand lifted to the wetness on his face.

Came away stained with red.

Overcome with sudden revulsion, a wave of nausea that ripped through his abdomen, he tried to scrape the spot away. Where it was and where it had been and where it wouldn't fade, he could still feel it, drying on his skin and sinking into him, even as his hands went faster rubbed harder nothing would fade, it was only smearing, there was blood on his hands, where had it all come from? so much blood, there for anyone to see, no one could ignore this much, smearing into more and more of it and no matter how hard he clawed it *wasn't going away*

The hands that touched his wrists were thin, and soft.

They pulled his hands down, and he couldn't fight them off.

"Stop," said Hal, with care and caution that it hurt to listen to. "It's okay."

"It's not," Adamska heard escape from between stiff lips. "What I did, what I almost— What I've done— You saw."

In his mind the images still played, with the veil of supreme aesthetic ripped aside. Scrape of

blade on bone, tear of tendon and snap of ligament, screams subsiding to pleas and back again, lacerations in baroque patterns blooming sluggish black blood, heart pounding like machinegun fire, electricity and evisceration, ozone and formaldehyde...

It had been as good as done.

"It's all right," Hal was saying, sounds of comfort that meant nothing. "It's okay."

Masochist and suicide to the end, Adamska looked up to face the revulsion, fear, and pity.

He found only eyes that knew him.

Even though they had to know, now, what he was.

And Hal reached up, hands that had never known recoil or powder burn or how to cut, and wiped Adamska's face free of the stain, and if he hadn't already been in pieces that gentle touch would have broken him.

And he was taking the edge of his shirt and cleaning the blood from Adamska's hands, as though he were pulling a thorn from a puppy's paw.

When Adamska opened his mouth to laugh, let it spiral out and flay him raw until he was on the ground blind and bleeding, words came out.

"Forgive me," he babbled, voice shaking or maybe just his shoulders or maybe it was both, not knowing whether the language was right or if what he said was words or the senseless sounds of an animal in pain, throwing his arms around him and holding on so that if he vanished into smoke or fog or broke into a thousand pieces maybe it would catch and he could break too, "I don't know, I don't know why, please don't be afraid, don't be afraid of me god I couldn't take it, I couldn't stand it, I won't hurt you I'd never hurt you please, don't be afraid, please—"

And he couldn't understand it, the extent of his devastation let alone the cause, couldn't see or understand anything but the arrestive force of humanity distilled so carelessly into this small, compassionate man.

And Hal leaned his head against his chest, like relief or benediction.

"Adamska," he murmured. "It's okay."

And stayed with him, like that, in the clear space between the corpse's steel table and the groans of the crippled other, strewn with tools, shards of glass, and the totality of his failure.

That was how FOXHOUND found them, ten minutes later.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/35/>

# chapter 36

## Stray by Dahne

*Habit can change the nature of a man.*

"Those'll ruin your lungs, you know."

Though Fox's voice was unexpected, Snake didn't jump. He'd gotten used to the guy completely failing to make any sound on entering a room, like a fucking ninja or something. They'd been fighting together long enough for each other's quirks to fade into the white noise of human interaction. Fox had earned the right to a few annoying habits.

Like complaining about his smoking.

Snake leaned back, leg hooked over one of the chair's arms, and spun it around by giving the table laden with banks of television monitors a desultory kick. He didn't realize he'd taken a slow, deliberate drag until he exhaled, and Fox's form got greyer.

Some part of Big Boss's genome must have been dedicated to making the bearer understatedly insufferable.

"You're the one who got me started." It was an antique argument that they unpacked every once in a while, like other people did with the good china. Snake brandished the pack. Lucky Strikes. He didn't know if they were especially lucky, but like most things with no real reason in the beginning, it was something of a tradition by now. If the day he switched brands happened to be the day his luck ran out, Snake would feel pretty goddamn stupid. "Want one?"

"Hell yes."

Fox plucked one from the pack and went to perch on top of a filing cabinet. In the low, flickering light, the flash of a lit match shone an orange corona at the oblique angle.

Fox was the kind of guy who could adjust to functioning on nanomachine overlay as soon as the injection hit his blood, but wouldn't be caught dead using a lighter.

"Anything good on?" he said, the movement of the lightsource indicating that he was waving at the screens.

"Something like that." The vertical hold on one of the monitors was slipping, making the monochrome image of an empty hallway slide like butter on a hot pan. Snake thumped the table with his heel until it stabilized. The little security station was fairly well equipped, and actually decently *warm*, unlike most anywhere else on the base, but some of the quainter analog components were starting to show their age. "Looks like our visitor's getting the tour."

"The Ocelot kid?" Initially, Fox had been a bit miffed about missing all of the earlier excitement, but he'd gotten over it. Around here, the best way to deal with disappointment over missing something weird was to wait five minutes for something else. "Is he still with Hal?"

"Yeah." Snake gestured at a screen near the right, where a pair of dark, blurrish shapes resolved, after a moment of good staring, into the kid and the engineer. "Been with him ever since they left yesterday."

"How do you know?"

"Followed 'em."

"Ah." Snake didn't need to look to tell that Fox was nodding sagely. "So that's where you've been."

"Nah," Snake said, "I didn't need to stick around long. It was pretty obvious they weren't up to

any world domination plots."

"How can you be sure?" said Fox, joking. Mostly.

Snake looked at him.

"Ah," said Fox.

He took a drag on his cigarette, leaned on his free hand, and said, "Huh."

"Yeah," Snake agreed.

"Wouldn't've figured he'd be the type."

"To what? Fuck crazy Russian kids, or fuck guys?"

"The first one," Fox answered immediately. "Please. You couldn't tell?"

"Not really, no." Not that he'd ever really given it thought. Unless and until they started shooting at him, Snake was perfectly content to let other people and their lives stay their own problem.

"Come on. What kind of heterosexual male never makes a pass at Wolf?"

"The kind who doesn't like getting PSG-1 rounds in the trachea?"

"Besides that."

The pair passed to another screen, the difference in range and angle making the transition oddly jarring to the eye.

"Anyway," said Fox, "I'm not entirely convinced the kid's crazy. There *is* something ... Ocelot...esque about him."

Despite the magnanimous sentiment, there was an underlying tension in Fox's voice. Snake recognized it, because he felt the same, a hot wire subtly tightening somewhere in his gut. Part of the unwritten code, the one that mattered too much to be stated outright, was respect for the name of a fallen comrade.

Whoever this kid was, nobody in FOXHOUND was real kindly disposed toward him.

"Maybe the old guy had a fan club," said Snake.

"Hey." Fox's voice focused abruptly, the way it did when a new blip came up on the radar screen. "Where are they going?"

"Hell if I know," said Snake, squinting at the screens and matching up their angled purviews to the natural map of the base in his head. "They're out where there're fewer cameras, at the opposite side of the base from REX."

"That's a shame," said Fox. "Why bother building a giant robot if you're not going to show it off?"

The two under surveillance went offscreen. There was a slight time lag before they reappeared. About when Snake was starting to think they had vanished altogether, he noticed that a neglected monitor in the corner, one that had heretofore shown nothing but a closeup of a placidly nondescript door, now had most of its real estate taken up by a laptop screen.

"Wait." Snake unhooked his leg and leaned forward. "You see something wrong here?"

"Yeah," said Fox, coming to stand behind him for a better look. "You have to use the icicle to cool down the meteorite before you pick it up."

"No, that door. Does it seem...familiar to you?"

"Yeah," said Fox. These cameras were old friends to all of them. There wasn't a man on the base who hadn't spent hours here, overseeing security and generally being bored out of his skull. Snake sometimes thought it was a mental conditioning thing, to make battle seem like a relief in comparison. "I've walked past it a hundred times. What about it?"

"See any marks on it? Writing? Any kind of identifying information at all?"

"No. It's completely blank."

"Fox," said Snake, cigarette dangling forgotten from his fingers, "when's the last time you saw a door around here that didn't at least have a cardkey level written on it?"

"Conspicuously inconspicuous," Fox said.

"Exactly," said Snake. "And I've never seen one person go in."

"There go two," said Fox, as the door opened and closed.

Snake's eyes flicked across the monitors, seeking to pick up the thread of motion.

No luck.

By unspoken agreement, Fox was the one to go to the station's computer and run the scan. The program was pretty basic, or so they said, but all it ever told Snake was that he'd been eaten by a grue.

"They're gone," Fox reported, amidst clicking keys and vaguely alarming whirring sounds.

"Where to?"

Fox said, "Off the edge of the world."

A second later, the map came up. Black and green, clear as ones and zeroes could make it.

A dead end.

"Hidden from the eyes of electronics," Snake said, unfolding to his feet with a sense of purpose.

"The modern 'Here Thyre Be Dragyns.'"

"And solved the same way."

Snake secured the cigarettes in one of the few pouches he could reliably remember the contents of and tightened his bandanna.

Fox pulled on his gloves. "Go in and map it ourselves."

Fresher soldiers tended to balk at calling in backup that might turn out unnecessary, but Snake was old enough to consider death worse than embarrassment.

Ducking his head against the wind and following Fox outside, Snake put his hand to his ear.

"Boss? We've stumbled on a secret that hits a little close to home..."

---

Snake considered it a gift that he wasn't much given to speculation. He saved his worrying for the time between when the bullets left the other guy's gun and when they passed through the air where he had been standing.

Whatever he had expected, it wasn't this.

Not Ocelot's corpse lying half-dissected and riddled with wires and circuitry, like some modern necromancer's science fair project, and with a bullet wound in his forehead that looked fresh.

Not a fat little man hunched by the wall, right hand cradled in his lap, gibbering in a soft, constant stream that it wasn't him, please no, not his eyes, he only did what he was told.

Not Hal on the floor in a field of scattered instruments and broken glass, holding the boy who called himself Ocelot like a broken doll.

Raiden, who had darted in first in a display of that gung-ho, youthful exuberance that always made Snake's bones ache, and who was supposed to have given them a god damn signal by now, stood stock still and stared.

The whole membership of FOXHOUND deploying into an enclosed area was about as quiet as an artillery shell landing in a canyon full of tin plates.

Hal didn't look up until the door shut with a soft click.

In the first rush of reflex, the shy engineer flinched around the boy.

As if to protect him.

There was silence, stillness like a movie that had stuck on a single frame, as each soldier tried to find a way to fit what their senses were telling them into the pattern of reality.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/36/>



# chapter 37

## Stray by Dahne

*Ах, люди, люди! (Oh, people, people!)*

-Mikhail Bulgakov, *Heart of a Dog*

---

*Fate can change the nature of a man.*

The boy, trembling without fear, looked at Big Boss and in the chipped flakes of a voice, barely more than a whisper, said,

"Did you know?"

That was all it took to break Hell's leash.

Everyone was shouting, wanting to know what this was, who was behind this, who had done this, *what the hell was going on*, men's voices and women's and Raven's tectonic basso and Mantis's rasp stripped to nothing but its distortion by the conflicting barrage of sound and Raiden had his SOCOM leveled—

"Enough," said Big Boss.

In the silence, the babble of the man in the lab coat jabbered like semiautomatic fire.

"Mostly empty but I don't dare break in," Mantis muttered, reflecting him like an aural funhouse mirror, "My walls can hold against the little rat-feet scrabbling, but if I let one in it might bring friends, hah-hah..."

The psychic trailed off, likely wandering back into the comfort of his own mind. Snake sometimes wondered if it was a relief to retreat to his own familiar psychosis. Homefield advantage and all that.

Slow thump of his footsteps made gritty by the crunch of broken glass, Big Boss moved forward, passing by Hal and the boy without a glance, to stand at his fallen comrade's side.

Even for somebody who shared most of his features, the eyepatch made his expression difficult to read.

Snake counted that as a blessing right about now.

"Who did this?" Big Boss said softly.

Apparently the fat little scientist had never learned the first lesson of warfare; when everyone around you stops, it's for a reason.

He crawled forward on his hands and knees, then, after a cry of pain, on hand and knees.

"Please," he keened, pawing his injured hand toward the identification badge on his coat as though the scrap of plastic reading H. ROTESHEMD were some kind of amulet, "stop them, kill them, they destroyed it all, all of my work, so much to be done, my orders were clear, I have done nothing wrong, it must be finished, cannot be left undone, you must—"

Big Boss drew his sidearm and shot him.

Right through the center of the forehead. You didn't get to be FOXHOUND commander for nothing.

The body made a muffled thud on the ground.

Big Boss put the gun, an old-fashioned six shooter, away.

The rest of them gravitated toward the table, as if pulled into its orbit.

For a long, long time, all they could do was look.

It wasn't as if they'd never seen death before.

Mantis would know that they all thought it. Raven was the one who said it.

"Desecration," he rumbled, the fluorescent light flickering off the cannon on his back like lightning over the northern sea. He always wore it, no matter how unlikely an impending fight was. Some kind of talisman, or training, maybe. Some people had crosses to bear. Others had tank weaponry.

"Can you desecrate something that's still alive?" the kid on the floor said, the one who called himself by a dead man's name, and it almost sounded like a real question.

Snake was reminded, for no reason at all, of a guy he'd once known who'd been shot in the stomach and spent the hours waiting for the medic to get there distracting himself by poking holes in his arm with a nail.

"What are you talking about?" Big Boss said, because wailing over the dead was for those who could afford it. Get up and get going, he always said. They'll still be dead later, when you have time for them. They can wait. First, get the job done.

The one good eye never moved.

"He's been alive the whole time," the boy said dully. "Alive and kicking."

What broke people didn't always make sense. Snake had seen a man hold up under days of fighting, constant artillery barrage, starvation, blood loss, disease, and the news that the reinforcements weren't coming, and in the subsequent, agonizing days of hacking through the jungle, he'd stepped on a butterfly and been gone.

Snake knew the look of people who'd decided that they just didn't fucking care anymore.

"Hal," Snake said quietly. "What happened here?"

He responded, though he didn't move or let go of the boy. He was tougher than he looked.

"They revived him," he said. "So they could experiment on him. Right here. From when he died, to just now."

There was only ever one "they."

"The La-Li-Lu-Le-Lo," said Liquid, hate seeping from his voice like gas from a leaky pipeline.

"This room is shielded," Mantis hissed, and Snake wondered how much of his fury was for that they'd managed to hide this from him. "This whole floor."

"Them," said Big Boss.

His voice didn't rumble like Raven's, seethe like Liquid's, or grate like Mantis's.

It didn't have to.

"The bastards let me think I was holding them off. And they were here all the while, doing *this*. I've been playing right into their hands."

Weathered, callused fingers clenched around the rim of the autopsy table, as if to rip it in half like a sheet of paper covered in yesterday's bad news.

"No more."

Nobody was ever stronger than curiosity, especially those who should know better.

Oblivious to both the scientist's fresh cadaver and the other two men, the entire living membership of FOXHOUND was drawn forward to congregate in a ring around the table, iron filings around a macabre electromagnet.

They'd all seen their share of horrible things. Something about this was different. A soldier's death was supposed to be his own. Thinking it was over, only to wake up and find yourself cut open with no way to fight back, years of utter helplessness... it was enough to turn a veteran like Grey Fox

ashen.

Ocelot had been a son of a bitch, a suspicious bastard, had spent a lot more time around Big Boss than any person with a sound mind should if he hoped to keep it, and he'd always plain rubbed Snake the wrong way, but he didn't deserve this.

Nobody fucking deserved this.

"Holy shit," Raiden breathed.

Beyond him, Octopus bent forward for a better look, and, when he'd gotten one, straightened again to regret it. He'd drained blood from people's bodies, but never forced them to accept oil instead. And he'd always waited until after they died.

"Shalashaska," Wolf murmured, bowing her head.

For a second Snake almost thought she might pray.

She cut straight to the point, as usual.

"You will be avenged."

Unlikely as carrying that out was, Ocelot would have considered it a good eulogy.

"And how do you intend to accomplish that?" said Liquid, getting angry like he usually did when people said things like that because he hadn't said it first.

"To begin with," she said, eyes narrow as a scope, "I say we clean house." She gave a unique inflection to ordinary words. Didn't hear many Kurdish accents, these days. There weren't many Kurds. "Clear the vermin from the base, and make it our own."

"Rebellion," said Raven, neither approving nor disapproving.

"Yes!" Liquid laughed, wild as a jackal's bark under desert stars. Like it was an idea he had been waiting for, and now that it was in sight he was going to grab onto it with both hands. "Let's force them, finally, out into the open!"

"They'll be ready for that," Snake said. How tempting it always was, to put things into that clean dichotomy. Enemy or ally, defined as easily as which way the gun is pointing. Kill or be killed. "They'll have tricks up their sleeve. Hell, this whole thing could have been planned."

"Ah, there's the interesting part." Liquid's eyes glittered. "It couldn't have. Time travel? Even *they* couldn't have foreseen that."

Snake kept his gaze locked while he decided whether or not the "because it's *stupid*," needed to be spoken, or if it was implied.

"That's if he's telling the truth, and not part of their scheme in the first place," said Snake.

"He's not," said Mantis. "He has no psychic blocks. It's possible to hide things in a man's mind from me, but not to hide that they're hidden."

Damn it. He needed to talk to Hal, find out what the hell was going on here. All the heavily armed people at various stages of murderous rage were something of an obstacle to communication.

If Hal even knew. Poor guy. He could deal with the realities of war, right up until somebody got hurt.

"This gives us the edge we need," Liquid said. "This is our chance to strike!"

Big Boss was making no move either to encourage or protest. Raven was as still as when he stood in the snow for hours on end, the birds of his namesake circling and perching on his shoulders. Mantis floated, indifferent. Raiden looked like he wanted to fight everything the Patriots could throw at him with his bare hands. Octopus's oddly nondescript face showed polite attention. Fox was staring down at the body, as if he wasn't hearing a word of any of it. Wolf was listening. Nodding.

Damn it, *somebody* had to be reasonable here.

"Be reasonable, brother." Liquid's voice turned softer. Persuasive. "Are you really content to

spend the rest of your life as their tool? And afterward? Do you want to end up given as a toy to another Roteshemd? I've had enough of being their catspaw." He leaned slightly forward over the table, spread his hand as if in presentation. "This is our chance for revenge for this. For him. I intend to take it."

"Huh," said Snake. "I never knew you and Ocelot were that close."

*"It could have been any of us!"*

The slam of his hands down on the table's edge made the corpse jump, rattling against the restraints.

So that was it.

Liquid was good at shouting, but not quite good enough to hide the fear.

Scraps of his hair hung raggedly over his eyes. He made no move to push it aside.

Snake had always sort of wondered why Liquid's hair was blond, while his was dark brown. Big Boss's had been white for as long as anyone had known him, and he had the kind of demeanor that discouraged stupid questions about it. It was, like the slight difference in height between them, more evidence that things didn't always turn out the way they were planned.

"Wolf. Fox. You. Me. Any of us." Liquid's hands were clutched around the table's edge. "We were born as a mad scientist's pet project. I don't want to die as one."

Big Boss said, "You won't."

The old man had a way of commanding attention.

He stood at the head of the table, like the focal point in a Hieronymous Bosch version of the Last Supper. Directly in front of him stood Snake and Liquid, then Raiden and Wolf, then Mantis and Octopus, Fox, then Raven at the far end. Like players at the world's worst Baccarat game.

Big Boss said, "It ends here."

Snake had a weird feeling. Like a current was pulling him under, and all he could do was kick.

"It won't work," said Snake. Nothing was ever that easy. If there'd been a way to fight back, they would have done it before.

Mantis said, "How do you know?"

He just knew. That was all.

How did he know?

Trusting his gut had been, on more the one occasion, the only thing that kept Snake from getting a few semiautomatic rounds in it.

His gut said this was a bad, bad idea.

If only the rest of him was so sure.

"The nine of us against everything the Patriots have seems like pretty damn bad odds to me," he said, because it sounded better, and because George Lucas had ruined the phrase "I have a bad feeling about this" for everyone.

"Not only us," Big Boss said mildly, as if they weren't talking about staging a rebellion and taking up arms against a cabal of shadowy powers-that-be whose reach and influence were still unknown, "Don't forget the Genome soldiers."

"If they agree. Which they won't." Because this was crazy.

"They will," said Liquid. "Family sticks together. It's in our genes."

"All right," Snake acknowledged, not willing just now to get Liquid started on genetics, "a couple hundred against everything the Patriots have."

They looked at him, as though waiting for his point.

"They control the world!" Snake growled. "They have every weapon there is. What do we fight

them with?"

The thing that had been itching at the back of his neck, tapping out the body's Morse code for *something's wrong here*, finally got through.

Calm.

Besides the horror, the smoldering rage, and the fact that none of them were exactly going to score in the 'normal' range on a psych test, everybody was too god damn calm. As though, somehow, they had expected this to happen.

Like they had been waiting for it.

Liquid grinned ferally.

"Everything we've got."

"Which is nothing," Snake pointed out.

"We've got a weapon."

A constellation of vastly different bodies turned as one to the source of the soft voice.

Snake had almost forgotten the two of them were there. They hadn't said a word, alone in some private shell-shocked world.

Hal was getting to his feet. Beside him the boy still huddled on the ground, miserable as a cat in the rain.

There was a moment devoted to staring.

It was broken when Liquid barked a laugh.

"By god, he's right!" the soldier cried. "What more could we need? We've got their guns. We've got their men. We've got their robot, too."

"Hal," said Snake, feeling somehow either absolved, vindicated, or betrayed, "you'd go along with this?"

"Yeah," the engineer said. "The people who did this... I almost put REX into their hands."

He looked straight at Big Boss.

"Let me fight with you."

Snake had been raising dogs for a long time. Every once in a while, there was a puppy who'd get it into his head, for one reason or another, to tackle a mastiff. And they'd keep trying, too. No matter how many times they got kicked, bit, or flung across the room. They tended to wear an expression a lot like Hal's looked right now.

The weren't the brightest dogs. But Snake had always kind of liked them.

"Even REX isn't invincible," Snake said. "It's not the sort of battle a Metal Gear can win. Their influence runs too deep."

"Does it, now?" said Liquid. His voice glinted like sun on polished metal.

Snake hadn't gotten as far as he had without being able to tell when things were coming.

Liquid moved fast, but he was moving, too.

Quick enough to feel and too quickly to see, and then they were still.

The twin Snakes faced each other over Ocelot's cadaver, arms out straight, matched weapons leveled inches from the other's right eye.

The world narrowed to the two of them.

"Does that influence extend to you as well, brother?"

Another man might've taken this the wrong way.

Snake knew him too well.

If Liquid had really thought Snake would sell them out, one of them would have already been dead.

"Liquid," he said, adrenaline shoving him into focused, cold calm, "You know me better than that."

"Do I?" His pupils were dilated, mouth twitching between a snarl and a sneer. "You seem awfully hard-pressed to keep us from turning on our erstwhile masters. Maybe they know we can win, and your job is to make sure we don't try."

"All it takes to know this scheme is crazy is eyes," Snake said. "Suicidal revenge plots look good on paper, until you're in the middle of one and it dawns on you *it's suicide*. You've seen how they turn out. That's what I don't want to happen. You know as well as I do I'm no traitor."

Liquid narrowed his eyes and hissed, "Maybe we don't know each other at all."

For the first time, it entered Snake's mind that his twin might actually mean it.

The twin he'd grown up with, shaking mice out of their boots, outdoing each other on the shooting range until it was too dark to see and arguing about who'd gotten the best long after that, when the island was theirs and the fortress was some fantastic labyrinth built for them to explore.

Being told by Big Boss, one eye just as dark and blank as the other, that they were the product of a genetic experiment, twin copies of the perfect soldier, his genes divided randomly between them. Looking at Liquid, shrugging, and saying, "So?"

Stumbling through the desert in the Gulf War, leaving a trail of blood behind them and keeping ahead of the enemy by inches.

Being told by the geneticist, her face cool and composed, that while the injection she'd made for the Genome Soldiers would help, and she was still working with the data she'd gotten from Big Boss, the odds were good that the two of them would age and die faster than any natural-born human.

Was he that afraid?

He wanted a revolution?

Liberté. Égalité. Fraternité.

He still believed, a little bit, in one of them.

"How many times," Snake said quietly, for him alone, "have we fought back to back? How many battles have we made it through, when we knew we shouldn't have? How many times have we only stayed alive and out of enemy hands because neither of us was willing to give up in front of the other?"

Half his vision was taken up by a gun barrel in lunatic close-up, the other with that identical eye.

"How many times, Liquid?"

That he didn't have an answer for.

They'd both lost count too long ago.

"*Enough.*"

Another voice. Big Boss's.

The gun in his hand and the gun in his face were gone, and Snake found himself surrounded by the rest of FOXHOUND, standing over a half-dissected body in a basement that stank of chemicals.

To his right, Big Boss finished field-stripping both weapons and dropped their dismembered components to the floor.

He caught the twins with one eye, intense as a tiny sun.

He said, "Never draw on each other again."

It wasn't a suggestion.

For a second, Snake thought he was going to bash their heads together for emphasis.

Then Big Boss fixed them all with that eye and said, "The minute we suspect each other, we've already lost."

From outside of the circle, there was a hollow, rattling sound.

It was the Ocelot boy, alone on the floor with his legs drawn up around him.

Snake knew people twice the kid's age who couldn't pack that much bitterness into a laugh.

"You're going to die," he said, with the kind of hopelessness that should have been exclusive to men trapped in caves running out of air, when the water was rising.

Hal turned to him and said something brief, lost over the distance. Probably just his name. Whatever that was.

The kid didn't seem to hear.

"You lost back when I did," he said, head lolling, a fuzzy-haired Tyresias on the laboratory floor, "A long time ago."

Big Boss said, "It's not over yet."

"You've forgotten what I told you." The boy's eyes were wide and blind. "You've already done this, and you've already died."

"I know that," Big Boss said. "You told me what mistakes I made. This time will be different."

"No, no," said the boy, as if half-heartedly chastising a child who would never do any better. "It's all the same. All I did was delay it. Nothing can change. You'll all die, and so will I." He stared at the ceiling. "It's all over."

Big Boss said, "It hasn't begun."

It was no use. The boy had drawn back, embedded in a cloud of quiet, gentle despair.

In that interval, something was clear.

FOXHOUND's commander, veteran of any recent war you could name and the hundred little, brutal wars that never got names besides a code designation in a CIA notebook, decorated enough that if he ever wore the damn things he'd hardly be able to stand up straight, hero for so long that acts of heroism were practically taken for granted, had made his choice.

"There aren't any traitors here," Big Boss said. "This isn't your mission. It's just something I have to do. It's not your duty. I won't say we'll win, or even do enough to make any kind of a difference. But for the first time, we've got a chance.

"I don't know how long we have until they notice something's wrong. I've got to make the most of it. From here on out, there's no looking back.

"They'll find a way to deal with this. Odds are good they'll kill us for what we've seen here, no matter what.

"But that's not the point.

"Point is, now's the time to walk away. Wash your hands of this mess and get out of here. You've all earned the right to that much. Cut the strings and leave. No fallout, no regrets. Nothing but a place here for you, if you change your mind.

"This isn't a test.

"It's got nothing to do with loyalty. This is not an order.

"It's a question.

"Will you fight with me?"

Never much for speeches, their Boss.

He looked to his right, first.

Liquid grinned like he'd been waiting for this.

He said, "I was starting to wonder if you were ever going to ask. I'm in."

Wolf.

The sniper tossed back her hair, following through on the same motion to readjust the rifle on her

back.

"Saladin," she said. "Where you go, so do I."

Octopus.

"Hmm?" The unassuming, vague-featured man blinked, as if barely paying attention, then nodded absently. "Ah. All right."

Raven.

With his right hand, the shaman touched the mark that spread indigo wings across his forehead.

"The difficult path leads to the best hunting."

Loosely translated, "yes."

Fox.

Frank was still staring at the body. Snake had a bizarre feeling that he hadn't been paying attention at all.

"How must it feel," he said quietly, almost reverent, "to live past the endpoint of your time, in negative existence? What was the purpose to this? Something so sloppy as just to see if they could? I wonder if he knew."

He wasn't talking about the doctor.

"There must be so much time for theorizing. Three years, looking up at those lights."

The round lights that studded the ceiling, like a family of perfectly symmetrical jellyfish clustered around a matriarch.

"Fox," Big Boss said gravely, "Will you fight with us?"

Frank looked over at him as if seeing him for the first time.

Fox's face descended through the stratum of resolution, coming to rest at cold, igneous wrath.

All he said was, "Yes."

Mantis.

"Sounds interesting," the masked psychic said. "I'll play along."

Raiden.

As soon as Big Boss's eye turned to him the silver-haired boy nodded sharply. There was a look on his face that might have been fierce if he'd looked less like one of those eerily pretty Japanese pop singers.

He snapped to attention.

"Sir!"

Kids.

And back around the circle to Snake.

Something in the back of his head was howling. Saying things like, you can't go against fate. Some things are bigger than you. It's pointless to fight where you can't win.

Snake didn't have much patience for thoughts like that. Let alone people who listened to them.

He said, "This doesn't mean I don't still think this whole thing is incredibly stupid."

They knew it was the closest to agreement they were going to get.

It was enough.

Big Boss nodded, once.

Snake glanced at Liquid, since his moues of disgust and resentment always seemed bereft without an audience.

He hadn't seen a smile like that since they were little kids.

Like he really thought Snake would turn his back on them.

And like he was genuinely glad he hadn't.



As they migrated by unspoken agreement to a more open area of the room, with fewer corpses in the way, Snake felt a hand with familiar dimensions clap him on the shoulder.

His twin said, "Welcome home, brother."

This eBook was generated by the [FanFiction Recommendation Engine](#)

This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/37/>

# chapter 38

## Stray by Dahne

*If you try to take a cat apart to see how it works, the first thing you have on your hands is a non-working cat.*

-Douglas Adams

---

*The truth can change the nature of a man.*

Out at the edges again.

Before long, Hal was lost. The soldiers spoke in a combination of acronym, shorthand, and mutual understanding that might as well have been code. Standing in a circle, heads bent, the living members of FOXHOUND deliberated, argued, or maybe only planned in the terse, precise verbiage that a conspiratorial murmur matured to when it meant business. Following would take more effort than he had to give.

The two apart were forgotten.

A grey fog numbed Hal's mind, a dense, soft thing that shielded him from thought, and let his questions sink into it and disappear. He wanted to stay that way. Just not think.

It broke when Adamska stood. Footsteps making dull, inflectionless thuds, he walked toward the door, expecting neither that Hal would follow or that he would not.

As Big Boss had said, in a brief moment of recalling their existence, they had the freedom to wander as they liked. This was, Hal knew, probably a polite fiction, the result of calculations showing that it saved a lot of time and trouble to limit the serious locks and guards to the outermost doors. Attempting to leave the base would most likely get him a polite refusal, or, if he was persistent, shot. He appreciated the courtesy, anyway.

He followed Adamska out into the hall.

The door closed behind them with a click.

Adamska stood still, the absence of his constant, impeccable energy settled on his shoulders like a pale corona.

"I'd like to go somewhere quiet," he said, in a voice with no edges.

It didn't get much quieter than these cold, empty halls. Hal knew he meant a different kind of silence than skulked anywhere in this complex, with its death and its secrets.

"There shouldn't be much of anybody around the second basement," Hal said. And, because they'd seen the reasons some sections were not often frequented; "It's just storage. Ammo and stuff."

Adamska gave a hollow laugh, and let him lead the way.

They made no attempt to keep the guards from seeing them. No point, Hal thought, in closing the gate after the horses were gone.

Charging into a lost battle.

Putting a band-aid on somebody who was already dead.

It didn't seem to take as long to get out as it had to get in. Maybe because there was nothing left to fear. In no time at all they were back above ground.

Like before, the guards took no notice. Just like before. Soldiers patrolled and talked and watched, living and thinking as though nothing was different, as though everything hadn't changed. That jarring surreality of normalcy, like when someone important to you died, and the world kept on

going as if out of spite. Oblivious.

It was clear that nothing they could do would change the equilibrium of this place.

Hal kept wanting to glance over his shoulder, though after looking once he knew Adamska would still be there. Piercing, startling eyes dim and filmed, fierce pride shrunken down to hide in the core, leaving him held upright by a thin shell of dignity. Contained, focused kinetic force replaced by motion like a sleepwalker's, or like clockwork in the last moments before it ran down.

Hal ignored the twitch in his neck and didn't look again.

B2 was a grid of rooms-within-a-room, neat rows of miniature structures, like closets that had outgrown their parents but weren't yet quite ready to become rooms in their own right. A few guards patrolled cursorily between them, pacing up and down the interconnecting corridors like placid mastiffs in a dog run.

Hal made his way toward the back, flowing with the habits of osmosis to the section where the distribution of people was least dense. Any of the rooms would do, really. All were nearly identical, the only difference being contents and the security level required to open the door. Hal still didn't see why somebody needed a higher clearance to pick up a sniper rifle than they did to get a submachine gun. Probably some soldier thing he wouldn't understand.

Picking a door at random - they all looked equally disused - Hal stopped in front of it until it picked up the signal from his keycard. It bleeped acknowledgment, and slid open.

Adamska followed him inside without a word.

As if by unspoken agreement, Adamska waited for him to input the locking code. Then they sat side by side on a steel chest full of SOCOMs and listened to the door promise to shut out the world.

Hal Emmerich had made it through life more or less intact by knowing things.

Whether it was through inner curiosity, or just nature's way of telling him that knowledge was the only kind of power he was ever likely to have, if something caught him, he stayed caught. Whenever teams were chosen for a game of Leave Well Enough Alone, Hal was picked last. His expertise was depth, somewhat at the expense of breadth. While he could, at a moment's notice, give a startlingly accurate prediction of a missile's trajectory given only the make, model number, and angle of launch, and never forgot to factor in wind resistance, it often took him a while to find an appropriate reply to "how are you?"

He wasn't sure if it was intelligence or relentlessness. Once a problem caught his mind, he stayed with it, and picked at it, until it either unraveled in his hands or he gave up. Sometimes, he'd stumble into a rare problem, that strange, complex kind, that lead neither to a solution or a dead end, but wound on, with its own kind of self-contained infinity, the kind that could be infinitely pursued and never answered without ever failing. Those were the best ones.

Hal did not intend on giving up on this boy.

Hal didn't know what to say.

He knew that he wanted to know what had happened in there. And he knew that the answer he would get, if he asked, would be, "You don't want to know."

He didn't want to think about the man on the table laid out open and bare, (like one of those little individual cereal boxes, the padded-wall part of his brain gibbered, the top flap torn off and all the little colored pieces packed in inside), invaded and colonized by metal and microchips from the inside out like an infestation of some sort of bizarre parasite, the wrenched body sung electric in the mad shrieking discord of a wretched minor key, didn't want to think about all of this happening for *three years* below him as he lived and worked and never knew—

He knew, though he didn't want to, that as bad as it was for him, for Adamska, it was worse.

There had been a moment where all he wanted to know was what had happened to his Adamska, his beautiful, sweet, and proud Adamska, who this was and why he had taken his place.

And now, all he wanted was to be able to tell him it was going to be all right.

"If you're waiting for me to justify myself," the boy said, in a dry, bloodless husk of voice, "I'm not going to."

It might have curiosity that made Hal do it, or the pressure of the small mammal's instinct to squeak before the elephant in the room stomped him flat.

"Adamska," he said. "What happened?"

As easily as something that didn't matter, as easily as opening the cage of an unwanted bird, Adamska said, "I lost."

Hal's brow furrowed, making his glasses slip down his nose. "I don't understand."

"You do," Adamska contradicted without rancor. "You always did, even back when I couldn't admit that you were right."

He gave a small, cool, empty smile at the floor.

"I could change the future, but nothing can change the nature of a man."

"Adamska," Hal said, looking at him searchingly and trying to figure out what was being said that was passing him by, "what are you talking about?"

"I killed him," Adamska said, "Felt him die. The one I thought was behind it all. Even now I can feel where it used to be, that part, that *influence*—"

His hand lifted, pressed the palm flat against his chest. Loosened, dropped.

"But it's not enough. I was allowed to do it, because it can never be enough. All that's left now is me. There's no one else to blame. I can't lie to you. Not anymore. What you saw in there is who I really am. Nothing else."

He stood up, and began idly flipping open the lockers that lined the wall.

Hal remembered the twisted, slithering caress of the voice—

- "*I'm going to cut them out*" -

the cold, relentless joy, and the eyes locked from the inside.

"That's who I was, in the other world. That's who I found. A soulless weapon who found some kind of twisted pleasure in inflicting pain. Like Volgin, in some ways. And, in others, worse."

He spoke clearly, if not loudly, audible over the rattling of objects as he pawed through the locker's contents, though his back was turned.

"Snake, that soldier friend of yours, he was there. I found out that, a few years before, I'd nearly tortured him to death. Not under orders, or for information he had. It was a game. Either he bore it, or I'd kill his woman. I got him close to death, but not to breaking. I might have kept the bargain.

God only knows what I did to her."

He closed the door of the locker and went to the next, moving as though it were a requirement to fulfill.

"You knew all about it. You'd been there. Once the recognition set in, you could barely stand to have me within arm's reach. I had to stay until the machine was fixed and you could send me back."

This one was full of small boxes, like the kind that held handgun ammunition.

"It was easy to see how the strain wore you down. You never were any good at hiding things.

"I don't know when it was I first swore to kill the man you saw when you looked at me with that pity, that fear. I was trying too hard not to understand that all you saw was me."

Adamska opened one of the boxes and took something out.

"Back then, I used to wish you'd forget. That one day I'd wake up and it'd all be gone. Nothing

left but you and me. I think even then I knew that it wouldn't be enough. That even if I could pull out that part of me that made you shudder when you thought I wasn't looking it wouldn't be all right. Slicing an apple doesn't do you any good if it's rotten to the core. I wanted to believe that there was something worth saving. But, you know, somehow, I don't think I ever did."

He swung the locker door closed and sat down beside Hal. He took the revolver out of its holster and toyed with it as he spoke, his tone light and conversational.

"I think I always knew that no matter what happened, no matter how things were, the best I would ever get is something temporary. I hoped that maybe, for a while, I could keep you from seeing what you just saw. The truth of me. Or that you would close your eyes to it. That if you knew I'd never hurt you, if you believed in me that much, somehow you could ignore the rest. But I knew you couldn't. You can't. Not and still be you. You can't be that selfish, even if I am. It was just a dream, after all."

The gun turned over and over in his hands.

"I don't think I understood until today that forcing ignorance on you wouldn't be enough. I can't lie about this. Not anymore. Not to you."

He had opened the cylinder, letting it float in midair with its six perforations like a chunk of a strange, symmetrical coral reef. He put the bullet he held into one of the chambers, spun the cylinder, and clicked it shut.

"Even though it has to end this way, I can't regret it. I did find you. If I can't stay with you, I can at least be enough of a man to keep you safe."

He turned the revolver to look down the barrel, and made small, isolated movements with his fingers. Click. Click. Cl—

"Hey!" Hal grabbed the gun, terror jolting through him like lightning. "Don't do that!"

Adamska's hands stilled obediently beneath Hal's. His face turned up.

"Don't scare me like that," Hal gasped, while he waited for his cardiac processes to taper off from red alert. "God, what if it'd gone off?"

He couldn't have said what was worse, in that look; the pain, or the patience.

"You'd have gotten over it," Adamska said tiredly. "But it wouldn't have. It's always on the last shot."

Hal ran some figures through his head. "That's...mathematically unlikely."

The boy looked down at their fingers, interlaced over the gun's hilt. "Let go."

"Uh-uh," said Hal, with a vehement shake of his head that nearly dislodged his glasses. "Not if you're gonna do that again."

"You saw it," Adamska said softly, and that there was no anger made it worse. "I would have done it. And I would have enjoyed it."

Hal said, "But you didn't."

That hollow laugh. "Does it matter?"

"It does to me."

And Adamska looked at him, like running his fingers over a wall to check for traps.

"It does, doesn't it." He laughed again. "You really are a fool."

He looked down at their hands, and the gun they lay on. Idly his thumb stroked across Hal's, as though the knuckles were thrown by an oracle and could tell him something by their pattern.

"I was right about one thing," Adamska said. "The best thing you can do for a sick puppy is put it down."

"You're not a dog," Hal said.

That soft, aching lie of a laugh. "That's right. Dogs are loyal."

"Not always," Hal argued, relieved to land on firm ground where he had a good counterpoint. "Sniper Wolf's been feeding the dogs here for ages, and a couple of them still try to bite her sometimes. And not even for any reason, I mean, she's never been anything but nice to them. Even some of the ones that usually don't, if they're in a fight and you try to pull them apart, they'll snap at anybody—"

One of Adamska's hands tightened around his. The other covered the boy's eyes.

"It's the only way to protect you." His shoulders were shaking. "It's the only way to be sure. I can't— I couldn't take it. Seeing you get hurt. Seeing me— I can't—"

He pitched forward, burying his face in his hands.

All Hal could do was hold him in his arms as he shook, and he was very young.

*Who is this boy?*

This trembling boy, shedding pain like a radioactive isotope throwing off decayed particles, holding on to him as though he was going to dissolve away.

And all he could say was, "It's okay. I'm here. It's okay."

Stupid things you said to a child who'd woken from a nightmare.

Fingers digging into Hal's shoulders, Adamska said, "I'm sorry."

This boy who had been replaced by something terrible, had been capable of ripping someone to pieces, tossing him aside in bloody chunks, with that loving whisper and obscene caress, narrowing his eyes until all that mattered to him in the whole scope of his soul was that this man die by his hands.

And had been capable of stopping.

Had fallen to his knees, this proud soldier who would never have yielded an inch to anyone who fought him for it, and looked at him like a kid who'd turned off the lights and found monsters in his mirror.

It occurred to Hal to pick up the gun from where it lay forgotten to put somewhere safe. Lacking that, he stuck it in his waistband. Luck and reflexes weren't things he put a lot of faith in working for him twice in a row. The metal was cold, but it didn't feel as awkward as it should.

He almost thought he'd been sneaky about it, until the boy waved a hand at him in permission.

"Take it," Adamska said hoarsely. "Now or later, it doesn't matter."

He was near enough that his breath touched Hal's shoulder and wreathed toward his neck before dissipating into the overwhelming volume of foreign air. The exhaustion of human exhaust.

Hal knew how to fix broken machines. You got to know them, rattled around in their workings, wished you'd read the damn manual, let them talk to you, argued with them, listened to them argue back, dug around until you found what was missing or what wasn't hooked up right, gave the problem a name, and solved it.

He didn't know how to fix broken people.

"Revolvers have a slow muzzle velocity," Adamska said, breathing in measured allotments and staring at the gun, "Bullets from them don't always pass through on contact. They lodge. Wounds like that heal slow. Sometimes they never do. They say that's why I like that gun."

His forehead sank onto Hal's shoulder, and he whispered, "I'm sick."

Hal's mind rattled an inane and staggeringly inappropriate, *The first step is admitting you have a problem.*

"I've killed men before," he said, like some would say *I've been to Paris* or *I've seen a lunar eclipse*, "Part of the job. No hard feelings. I've never wanted to... I never *wanted* to want to..." He swallowed hard. "Why do I always remember their names? Stupid. There's no point. There's never

been any point to any of this. There's no one else to blame. I would have done it."

Hal said, "But you didn't."

If the boy heard him, he made no sign of it.

"And now you know," Adamska said softly, "exactly who the man who loves you is."

Hal said, "You're the same person you've always been."

He laughed, the way you do when the joke is so bad you have to either laugh or choke on it.

"You're right," the boy said, "I've been shirking my responsibility. It needs to end here. It's all the same but the details, and that's not where the devil is. This is what I need to do. You understand."

"Not at all, really," Hal said honestly.

Adamska's face turned up. In the eyes gone flat and blank, there was a flash, like a firefly that had wandered off on its own to seek its fortune, of irritation.

Just for a second. Then it was gone.

"It's simple," he said, in that voice that couldn't manage monotony even when there was no vitality to it, "As long as I'm alive, there's a risk that I can't allow. I can't wait until the first time you aren't there to stop me. This is as far as it goes. I have to be sure."

"I didn't stop you," said Hal, the kind of person who couldn't let a factual error slip by uncorrected. He smiled wryly. "I got thrown against the wall, remember? You stopped."

Adamska muttered, "Details."

As if only now realizing where he was, he jerked away.

"That's right," he said. "I threw you aside, because you got in my way, and I went to get back to business." His throat emitted a desiccated bark of a laugh. "God! How can you stand to sit next to me? Alone, in a locked room? Any minute now you'll realize, and start scrabbling for the door. You saw it. You should already be gone."

Hal knew he didn't look like much, but that didn't mean he had to like it when people made assumptions about him.

"I was afraid," he admitted. "I didn't understand. I still don't, I guess. Whatever it is you think you are, that scares you so bad— well, you're not. Right then... Just when I was starting to get to know you, somehow, I thought I'd lost you. And then, making me think I'm gonna lose you again..."

Hal's voice had thickened. His fingers pushed beneath his glasses to rub at his eyes.

"...it's too cruel."

"You don't know anything about cruelty," Adamska said, without scorn. His hands clenched at his sides. "I plan on keeping it that way."

He held out his hand, eyes steady on the ground.

"If you knew me at all, you'd either be handing me that gun or skipping to the point and doing it yourself."

Looking at him, Hal got an idea.

Who said he couldn't be devious?

Well, a lot of people.

But they were wrong.

"You know," Hal said thoughtfully, reaching for the revolver, "you might be right."

Adamska glanced at him sharply.

The surprise on that cruel, beautiful face was almost funny, but the hope stung.

"I must not know you as well as I thought," Hal continued, calculatedly blithe.

"Because I would have sworn the man *I* knew would never give up this easily."

Adamska sprung to his feet, a snarl on his lips, eyes alive with real anger.

"How *dare* you," he hissed, rage animating every muscle, "You don't know the first thing about what I've been—"

In midsentence, his face went very still.

A strange look passed over him, like a ship in the night running aground on Atlantis.

Adamska sank down with his back against the chest, let his head fall back, and laughed helplessly.

"You..." he attempted, "You..."

He pulled himself together enough to declare,

"And that's the *second* oldest trick in the book!"

Apparently Hal's indignation was even funnier.

"Come here," the boy murmured, almost inaudibly.

"Huh?" Hal leaned forward.

Adamska grabbed him and pulled him down, kissing him ardently.

Just as Hal had slid down off the chest and started to enjoy himself in earnest, Adamska pulled away with a gasp. Hal, not being done yet, would have followed, but was kept at arm's length by a palm planted firmly in his chest.

"No," Adamska said, eyes skittering like spiders trying out their first octets of ice skates, "I can't—"

"Why not?" asked Hal, who was a little put out.

"Don't you understand?" Adamska cried, "In the other future, I *nearly tortured your friend to death*."

Hal drew his knees up to his chest and crossed his arms over them, looking up at the ceiling meditatively. "But you didn't."

Slight emphasis. You.

"Er... did you?" Hal tried to untangle it in his mind, and ended up tying himself in knots. "Sorry, I'm getting kind of lost."

"I could draw a chart." The boy's eyes flashed with a lunatic glint. "Should I draw a chart?"

"You know," Hal said, "that might help."

"Here—" Adamska got up, presumably to find something to write with.

"Wait," Hal said, with a jerk to his voice.

Adamska looked back expectantly.

It had occurred to Hal that, if there was a list of bad places in the world to be on suicide watch, a storehouse full of weaponry and ammunition was probably near the top.

"Look," he started, not sure if there was a tactful way to phrase this, "just, promise me you're not going to— try anything again, okay?"

Adamska rolled his eyes and went to search the lockers. "Fine. Not until I convince you that it needs to be done."

Satisfied that this was the best deal he was going to get, Hal nodded and started digging through some boxes stacked in the corner.

They had, it seemed, stumbled upon the base's great repository of various junk. On opening the nearest of the boxes, big enough to fit a full-grown man if he didn't mind scrunching up some, Hal found dozens of rations, neatly stacked. Another contained nothing but spare balaclavas. He'd always sort of wondered where those came from. On pulling a few old army blankets from the top of the third, he found a whole variety of things that seemed to have little in common besides all having seen better days.



"Hey," Hal said, moving aside a maroon beret to pluck an object out of the morass, "here's a *Field Guide to Alaskan Wildlife*."

"Will that work?" said Adamska. He arranged a few of the blankets, sat on them, and waved Hal over.

"Might as well," Hal replied, settling down next to him to flip through the book. Adamska's arm gathered him close, seemingly of its own volition. "Somebody already messed it up writing 'delicious' and 'terrible' and stuff in the margins."

Somewhere Adamska had found a pen with 'Rumble Roses' written cryptically on the side. He flipped over a page bearing a picture captioned both *Arctic Hare* and *Not bad w/ salt*, and found a good, clean surface.

"All right," he said, drawing a straight vertical line, "Call this the original timeline." He made a lateral mark partway up its length. "This is where I started, fifty years ago. From there, I moved fifty years forward—"

"How?"

"-to...what?"

"How did you move forward in time?" Hal repeated patiently.

Adamska shot him a baleful glare. "How should I know? You're the one who built the machine that did it."

"But I thought this was fifty years before that."

"Look," Adamska said, sighing, his hand poised over the page, "I told you I'd explain what happened. I didn't say it would make sense."

"Okay, okay. Keep going."

"The point is, I skipped forward to your time."

He traced an arc from the first point to the other end of the line, where he made a notch and labeled it *you*.

"You and that cloned Snake were there. Both of you were..acquainted with my work, over the intervening years. Snake, personally." His laugh held no humor. "Murderer. Torturer. Philosopher tool to the bone. They called me an 'interrogation specialist.' The truth is I tortured people for the fucking fun of it."

Adamska smiled with cool, bitter sorrow and wrote in *torturer* alongside the line between them.

"Snake wanted to throw me back through, as soon as he knew who I was. Can't blame him. I still don't know why he never killed me. You must have gotten him to agree. You were adamant that I had to go back so that things could be restored, for all the good it did you. But I'd come through by some fluke, and you needed help to finish the machine."

Some of the bitterness fell, like flakes of scale, from his eyes.

Extending a short, dark line beyond the endpoint, he said, "So I had a few weeks with you."

"That's not very long," Hal said.

"Long enough." His eyes were on the page, inking absently over the short line again and again. "You frustrated me right from the start. Fascinated me. How someone like you could survive. I didn't understand at all. You were... kind to me." His laugh was ragged. "It took me a while to recognize it. You were a fool then, too."

"But not so much that you would let me close. You knew me too well."

Abruptly, Adamska shook the shadow from his eyes, and returned to business.

"So I left."

He drew another arc down the other way, back to the starting point.

"Working from what you'd told me, I fixed everything I could. Mostly that meant tracking down Big Boss and telling him what not to do. I didn't expect I'd stick around to take of it myself. I must have done something right. History changed."

He drew a branch from the central point, veering off to the right, so that the chart split like a lopsided divining rod, and scrawled a hasty, inelegant X through the first line.

"I came forward in time again," he said, making one last arc up to the end of the new line, to a point he labeled *now*, "to here. But something stayed behind in my place."

He wrote in *Ocelot* parallel to the right branch.

"I don't know what it was. Half of me, or a copy, or maybe just the part of me that couldn't leave John behind any more than I could forget about you. I don't know."

"Anyway, you saw the end result. In all of that, all I really did was move this—"

He tapped the end of the pen against the word written beside the first line. *Torturer*.

He drew a line cutting across the empty space, connecting it to *now*.

"— to here."

With that, he fell into expectant silence, like a magician waiting for the crowd to notice that the pretty lady has been sawn in half.

Hal said nothing.

"Well?" Adamska demanded finally, sounding almost exasperated, "Now do you understand?"

"Hold on," said Hal. "I'm figuring something out."

He was better with numbers than people, but, when you looked at it from the right angle, everything had its own kind of variables, and they canceled each other out the same way.

"Let me see if I've got this," Hal said, holding it in his mind with the same careful tread as when he was balancing a mechanical concept on each hand and walking toward the solution, "So the problem is, you've still got the potential for—"

—that blade held above that terrified eye, face twisted with the snarl of unholy joy, ready and willing to turn it all to shrieks and a wailing cacophony of flowing blood—

No. Don't think like that. Think of here, and now, safe, leaning into his warmth, his haunted and attentive eyes.

"—that," Hal said, "When that— capability— is what made— the other one. The y... the Ocelot in the other world."

"Yes," Adamska said, "Something like that."

"But then, I don't get it." Hal frowned pensively. "If you *didn't* change what you thought you did, why was he," he tapped his finger on the timeline marked *Ocelot*, "so much different from him?" Indicating the other.

"I don't know." Adamska sounded very tired, like all he wanted to do was drop the subject and die.

As any unfortunate soldier who had ever happened to be nearby when Hal needed to talk out a problem could have told him, this wasn't going to help.

"Obviously, you must have done *something*," Hal continued. "If you hadn't, the worlds you be the same, and the Ocelots would be the same. But there's a difference between them, isn't there? I mean, I can't say a whole lot about either, but from what we know, it seems like the Ocelot who stayed in this world was— well, a pretty decent guy. At least, nothing like what you've told me about the other one."

That haggard, ravaged face, so familiar, the metallic echo of air that shaped *you were a good memory*. Those clear blue eyes, bloodless lips, asking for something he couldn't give.

Hal remembered a Chinese market he had gone to as a kid. Strange sounds and smells, crowd

pushing him along the way a river chivvies a grain of heavy sand, bunches of herbs hung in a few windows and plucked ducks and geese hung in many, the dark brick red of carrion. The strange tonal cadences surrounding him as he stared at a fish thrown into an empty tub for display, its eyes finding him and gills stretching like a bellows and then spasming into a sudden jarring flop, smacking its tail on the wet plastic. Looking at Hal, and asking him, personally, for help. And he couldn't give it. And, somehow, in the same part of his mind that always romanticized and anthropomorphized, he knew the fish knew that.

It was a special kind of helplessness.

The dying man had given him that same look.

*A good memory.*

"Then," said Hal, slipping away from the image's grip, "something must have changed. To get a different result, you have to have different variables. When one side of an equation changes, so does the other."

"Huh," Adamska muttered, listening despite himself.

"Seems to me," Hal said, "that all three have that capacity in common. The difference is that, where the first timeline's Ocelot said 'yes,' this one's - and you - said 'no.'"

"In other words," Adamska said, "no difference at all."

"No!" Hal startled himself with his own vehemence. "I mean, even if a parameter is present, it has to be set to ON, right? Otherwise, it acts just like it weren't there at all."

"So as long as I can hide it, you'll pretend it's not there?" Adamska said bitterly. "No, I know you better than that. You can't kid yourself for long."

"That's not what I mean at all," said Hal, gesturing vaguely in frustration. "Look, no matter what you've got installed, it doesn't do anything as long as it's set to OFF. Having it's half the thing, but the other half is flipping the switch. Here, come closer, it's cold."

Hearing no protests, Hal wriggled up more tightly to him.

Adamska shoved the book out of the way and wrapped his arms around him.

"Don't pretend," he said, in a weird way that sounded almost like pleading. "I can't take any more hope. Don't tell me what I am doesn't matter. Don't lie and say it's all right. I'm too afraid I'll believe you."

"Well, sure it matters," said Hal, a little surprised, "I mean, if you'd actually done it, that would be something else. Look, if nothing can change between worlds, that would mean you're exactly the same as— the other one, right?"

"Exactly," Adamska said, and his breath on Hal's ear was hopelessness.

"But, that one." Hal found himself wishing, not for the first time, that they didn't all have the same name. It made his mental scratch notes confusing. "Let's call him— Other Ocelot."

"The torturer." Talk about hammering a point.

"Yeah. What I want to know is, would he have stopped?"

The boy was quiet, as if he were picking up the question and turning it over, checking it for hooks and barbs.

Finally, the reluctant answer. "No. Not for anything."

"Then there you have it," Hal said, settling back into Adamska's arms with the satisfaction of an problem solved. It was almost scary, how quickly he was getting used to this having-somebody-else-around thing. Must've been lonelier than he'd realized. "There's an undeniable deviation, so it can't be the same thing. If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck, and meows, then you have to accept that it might not belong in the Anatidae family at all."

"I," Adamska said, voice redolent with the suspicion and dread of someone taking a midnight walk in a meadow full of bear traps, "have no idea what in hell you are talking about."

"What I mean to say is, you're Adamska."

An immaculate pause.

Adamska said, "Do you always alternate between the bizarre and the stunningly obvious?"

Hal thought.

"According to most people...yeah."

Adamska's lips alighted on his neck and lingered, like a moth resting on a windowpane.

Adamska said, "Don't change."

Outside, there was the sound of footsteps approaching. A crackle of static, a burst of unintelligible words. Footsteps reaching their apex and passing by.

"See," Hal said, the sensation of winning an argument alien enough to make him want to verify the victory, "You're just...you. Which is all anybody is, when you get down to it. You had the chance to be...not you anymore. But you didn't take it."

Long fingers caught at his chin, and turned his face to look at him.

"This could be your last chance," Adamska said, with something quietly desperate and something like hope. "Run now, or I'm going to start trusting you."

"I'm not going to run," Hal said, not sure if he was stating the obvious again, "I trust you."

Adamska stared at him for a moment. He really did have pretty eyes.

Then dropped his hands, and leaned back against the wall.

When he laughed, he almost sounded a little like his old self again.

"You don't know me at all."

Hal said, "Then tell me."

So he did.

Everything.

Eventually they ended up lying at perpendicular angles to each other, Hal's head pillowed on Adamska's stomach as he closed his eyes and let it all slot into files in his mind.

The other world, its inhabitants and its Outer Heaven.

Meeting him over the barrel of a revolver.

Finding out who he was.

Working together in isolation.

Refusing to kill him.

A cat in the gears.

Dogs, vodka, and each other's stories.

"It was more than I'd ever told another person. I told myself it didn't matter. You weren't real, anyway. That you might just be easy to talk to never crossed my mind. Or that it felt kind of nice, not having any reason to hold anything back. By the time we were done we were both drunk to the sole, and we fell asleep on top of each other."

The rumor of an unguarded smile slipped through his lips.

"In the morning, the first thing I saw when I woke up was you, and all I could think was, 'kiss me.'"

"Did I?" Hal asked.

"Almost." His voice was wry, not quite bitter. "Then you ran. But not far enough. I pinned you to the wall and amused myself by talking about ways to kill you. That's the kind of man I am."

"You were hurt," Hal said, trying to imagine.

"Yes. And I'm the kind of man who hurts people back. But..."

Adamska shook his head, bemused.

"You kissed me, and said you wanted to help me. You gave me a way out, every time I thought there was nowhere else to go. It was...frustrating. If you lied, you were good enough that I couldn't tell."

His tone placed this somewhere in likelihood between both of them sprouting wings and the ancient city of Mu rising to declare war on Portugal.

"You driving me crazy was all that kept me sane.

"I thanked you by trying to kill you again. Because you wouldn't stand back and let me pretend. You wouldn't let me believe what I wanted to. Even then, you didn't hate me for it. You acted as though I were somebody you could trust. Once, when you'd worked yourself into exhaustion, you fell asleep in my arms. Didn't even panic, when you realized. Until..."

And, in ruthless detail, he described the voice he'd heard.

"You..." Hal said, "It... doesn't still talk to you, does it?"

Adamska snorted. "Fuck no. That, I know is dead. If it weren't, nothing you could do would keep that gun away from me."

He sat up slightly, to stick his finger in his mouth and pantomime blowing his brains out. This was not, Hal thought, wincing, strictly necessary.

"But..."

Adamska spread his hands as if in surrender and fell back.

He smiled bitterly. "Do you know, for a while there, I thought you'd save me? As if anybody can ever save anybody else. But even if I could lie to myself, you couldn't. You flinched. I couldn't so much as put a hand on your shoulder without knowing you'd have to steel yourself not to cringe. I wanted to hate you for it. But when you looked at me, and saw something vile, all I felt was ashamed. Like an uninvited guest tracking mud all over the carpet. It took a toll on you, having me near, one you could barely afford."

His voice dropped, the weave between syllables loosening.

"The measure of my selfishness is that, if it weren't for that one chance to make things right, I might not have left."

"That's not selfish," Hal said. "Nobody wants to be alone."

"That's just it," Adamska sighed. His breath translated into gentle, rhythmic movement, comforting as a heartbeat. "I've gone soft. As long as I'm alive, I won't be able to stay away."

"Then don't."

"I already told you," Adamska said, with a tinge of irritation, "why that's not an option. Were you not listening? I don't want to say it again."

"No," Hal said, taking a wildlife survey of the new crustaceans the boy had released into the tidepools of his mind, "I understood that. It's just..."

Hal had always trusted his fingertips more than his eyes. Sight tended to lie, or at least to misrepresent the truth by a couple inches. He'd never been able to tell what people were thinking or feeling by their expression, and he'd never noticed how that information could be picked up by touch instead. Maybe he never got that close to anybody. Or maybe he hadn't been paying attention.

He could feel, through the minute tensions of his body, that Adamska was waiting.

"...you've been through so much."

Adamska stared at the ceiling, as if counting stars in the sky, or toys in the attic.

"You weren't listening," he said finally, weighted with leaden expectation.

"I was too," Hal insisted. "It took a minute to sink in, that's all."

From this vantage point, half his face nested in the abdominal foothill, Hal's view was mostly neck and jawline. He watched the knot of throat lift and sink as the boy swallowed.

"If you understood in the least," Adamska said, with the wary confusion of a man holding the shards of a broken KEEP OUT sign in his hands and deciding whether or not to use them to build a barricade, "one of us wouldn't be here."

Beneath Hal's neck, he could feel the layers of muscle, intricate in repose. Every inch of the boy's body was like that; ruthlessly conditioned, any imperfection hacked free.

If this was going soft, he didn't want to see what hard looked like.

Hal said, "You're wrong."

Adamska's eyes flickered down to him, almost curious.

It was a start.

"I don't care who you might be," Hal said. "I care who you are. You're strong, and sweet, and brave and kind, and beautiful, and when you smile I- I- I don't know how to say it. Maybe you're right, and I don't understand. All of it, any of it. It's too much for me. Another world, another you, the past and the future, secret conspiracies, the underground, that awful- And you can't say any of it wouldn't be here without you. The world's got too many ifs in it for you to be everybody's why. But even if it was, I'm- All I know is, I'm glad I met you."

Adamska stared at him.

Hal's mind tilted, soaring and reeling with sickness from the altitude, the orientation of his inner sky flopping lazily onto its back to wait to get its belly rubbed.

Then the non-figurative landscape spun away.

In some order, maybe all at once, Adamska had sat up, grabbed him, and pulled him into a tight embrace.

"How can someone brilliant be so *stupid*?" he said, breath rasping in Hal's ear.

His hands were spread in patches of firm heat on Hal's back. The scent of him was warm, and self-assuredly male.

"Why do people always ask me that?" said Hal.

Adamska took his shoulders in his hands and pulled back to look at him face-to-face. The redness in his eyes was fading.

"I can't lie to you," he said, "so I'm not going to try. This is me. And so was that. You're a good man. I'm not. It's a part of me, that...potential. It's never going to be all right, and it's not going to go away. The only promise I can make is that I will never let anything hurt you. Including me."

Controlled fervency coiled in his voice like a snake in a fakir's basket. A real fakir, that is. Not one that was faking it.

"And I'll never stop fighting."

"Never stop fighting," Hal echoed, thinking of the look in a dying man's eyes.

"Hah." Adamska shook his head, an odd, obscure smile touching his lips. "That might've even been what he meant."

He stood up, unfolding, limbs falling into place with soundless clicks. The white noise of his native energy crackled along his outline in kinetic bursts.

"You have every right to hate me," he said, back straight and face averted, "For all of it. For not telling you before."

"I don't." Hal leaned against the wall. "You know that, right?"

Adamska turned toward him, hands spread in a theatrical shrug. "Like I said. Stupid."

He reached down to pull Hal up. As he stood, Hal's bones creaked together to remind him he wasn't as young as he used to be, and the revolver tapped his hip to remind him it was still there.

"Oh." His hand drifted from Adamska's to the gun's hilt. He took it out and held it awkwardly in front of him. The weight of a weapon never felt quite right in his hand, once it was finished. "Here. Um."

Hal hesitated.

His hand drew back, slightly, and hovered like an indecisive hummingbird.

Adamska quirked an eyebrow, and kept his hands at his sides.

"Are you...okay?" Hal asked, unable to find a wording of *You're not going to try to shoot yourself in the face anymore, are you?* that didn't sound sort of rude.

With a crooked smile, Adamska stepped forward to lay his hand unabashedly over Hal's. He gave him a light kiss that lingered.

"We'll find out," Adamska said.

For a moment, close enough to be seen in detail, his face was wreathed in a mist of expression, as if ready, in full knowledge of the consequences, to surrender to hope.

Then it was gone. He straightened, voice changing to a businesslike key.

"We can continue this conversation later. For now-"

The gun vanished from Hal's grip and whirled into the air, spinning and leaping between the young soldier's hands before being guided home into the holster.

"-we've got work to do."

Hal blinked at him. There was something alarming about somebody throwing a firearm around like that, but somehow, with this kid, accidentally firing it felt about as likely as him putting it into the holster backwards. "Doing what?"

Hand still on the revolver, Adamska looked him straight in the eye.

"We're going to stop Outer Heaven."

"You don't want to fight?" Hal said, aghast thumb-wrestling with confused for the upper hand in his heart.

Adamska didn't move, and kept a tone only a fool would argue with. "That's not what I said."

"Look," Hal argued, "it's too late. We've been in here for ages." It felt like a lifetime, anyway. Most of this day had. "By now, they've already gotten started."

"Hardly." Adamska tossed his head in dismissal. He did that well. "They've got an army to build. An entire base full of soldiers to convert. It's not as if you can knock someone in the head and have him wake up on your side. Mass defection takes *work*. No leader with a grain of sense in his- Big Boss wouldn't declare his intentions with pockets of resistance in his own command center. Time is not an object."

"But, I don't understand." The reality of the situation was as solid a numeral as the boy's resistance, and the two and two of them kept adding up to five no matter how Hal looked at it. "You saw what they did to Ocelot. What they tried to do to you. We have to fight."

"We will." Adamska's tone and eyes were even. "But not like this. This way, you fight, and you lose."

"Even if it's impossible, we've got to try."

"It *was* worth a try," Adamska agreed. "It failed."

"Not this time."

The soldier's eyes glinted with determination.

Hal stared him down. Well, not so much down as across. Slightly up, really.

"Did I tell you," Adamska said conversationally, "how they all died? Big Boss, Grey Fox, the psychic, the shaman, the one in disguise, the woman sniper? They thought their weapon made them invincible, but all it took was one man. Snake had to kill them all. Down to his own brother. It's a shame, really. He never had anything against them. But the Patriots wanted them dead, and they made it easy. They couldn't have known any better. In that world, there was nothing anybody could do about it."

Hal's mind and stomach roiled, each acting against his will. Disobedient memory and virulent imagination fed off of one another in lunatic symbiosis until they were nearly indistinguishable. Snake and Liquid with their guns drawn on each other, a mirror image poised to shatter. The base an orange-hued, bombed-out shell. Wolf's blood on the snow.

Objectively speaking, all revenge and atonement had going for them over prevention was popularity.

"If you're right..." Hal bit at his lower lip. "But what could we do?"

Adamska buried the haggard lines at the corners of his eyes under a smirk, as if this was what he had been waiting for.

"We take on the philosophical problem and the practical one at once."

If Hal hadn't known better, he would have sworn that Adamska, torn, bloodstained, face streaked with salt, was striking a pose.

"We see if we can change the future."

---

*The truth can change.*

---

## Notes:

-The diagram can be found at <http://img406.2903.us/>, if inserting a few spaces will trick the internal demons here into letting me put up a URL.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/38/>



# chapter 39

## Stray by Dahne

*I saw in a hall an arrow pointing the way and I thought that this inoffensive symbol had once been a thing of iron, an inescapable and fatal projectile that pierced the flesh of men and of lions...*

*Cross, arrow, and lasso – former tools of man, debased or exalted now to the status of symbols. Why should I marvel at them, when there is not a single thing on earth that oblivion does not erase or memory change, and when no one knows into what images he himself will be transmuted by the future?*

*-Mutations, from Dreamtigers, Jorge Luis Borges*

---

*Nature can distract the change of a man.*

What a tangled fucking web.

Honesty made things...complicated.

There was an unbalancing surreality to it, the concept of what someone thought of you not as a function of your skill, and how well you judged what they wanted to see and presented accordingly, but as a fully autonomous response to *what was actually there*.

All of it.

It was a uniquely helpless feeling.

Tailoring the facts was a delicate art form, but one that allowed a commendable degree of control. Delivering the raw material, without so much as taking out the pins, meant that all he could do was trust him.

Adamska remembered liking work that didn't give him time to think.

Hal, who led him through the corridors with the assurance and unhesitant tread of feet on a well-worn path, was similarly occupied.

Enough not to flinch.

Not to run away.

Put a fearsome enough enemy in front of a man, and he won't have time to worry about the dubious ally at his back.

No.

Later.

For now, they had a job to do.

This time was no trek into the bowels of the structure. There was hardly any time at all before they were in front of a door, and Hal was entering a sequence of numbers on the buttons set into the square panel beside it, confirming the emerging trend that indicated Big Boss's operation was too sophisticated and technologically advanced to use a goddamn key like normal people.

The door bleeped and slid into a pocket in the wall, revealing banks of staring monitors, desks covered in ominously multi-colored controls, and one wall that was mostly window.

Adamska had an instinctive distaste for large panels of glass, at least when he was the one standing near it. His specialized eyes saw it as a loose conglomeration of a thousand tiny projectiles waiting to happen.

It did, however, provide an excellent view of the beast in the hanger.

When he had seen it before he had been hardly paying attention, being much more focused on the smaller, organic things in its shadow, many of whom had been pointing guns at him.

Here it was, as it was meant to be seen.

Adamska's breath came out laden with awe.

"Son of a bitch."

It occurred to him that he was a very long way from home.

The Shagohod had been the epitome of military technology. It had looked like a fat toad someone had bloated to enormous size and stuck armor plating on. This... was something else entirely.

This weapon was to the Shagohod as a Single Action Army was to a sack of doorknobs.

It should have collapsed under its own weight. Two spindly legs simply couldn't withstand that kind of pressure without bending, warping, succumbing to implacable gravity. Where the Shagohod was a marvel, this was a miracle. It was impossible. Yet there it stood.

Like him, in some ways.

Adamska realized that he was standing directly in front of the glass, his palm laid flat against its own faint reflection the cool surface.

"You built this?"

"Er, yeah," said Hal from behind him, sounding inexplicably embarrassed. "REX is kind of my pet project."

"One hell of a pet," Adamska murmured.

There was the clatter of typing, followed by a series of deferential beeps.

"So this is why they think they can win," said Adamska, his eyes tracing the weapon's outline, a hulking, blocky thing that achieved somehow a predatory grace. An unconventional aesthetic. It didn't take experience with this era's technology to tell that the weapons embedded in its substance were epitomes of the killing art. A Stradivarius with which to unleash a rhapsody of destruction. "I could crawl into the cockpit of that and fight the world."

"No, you couldn't," Hal said matter-of-factly.

Adamska turned to him, though not without a last glance through the glass. Comparing the man and his creation sent a spasm of cognitive dissonance through his brain.

"There's security," the small, unassuming man continued, glancing up over his glasses while his hands kept moving unchaperoned, "Launch codes. At heart, it's a basic password system. It's kind of an old-fashioned way to do it, but after one of the other guys sent in the status report about the card with the shape-memory alloy, Big Boss came around and categorically forbade us from doing anything clever."

Hearing the confidence in his voice, watching the assurance of his motions, Adamska thought of the world's three favorite lies:

*I know what I'm doing.*

*It's gonna be all right.*

*I still love you.*

Call it mercy he'd only ever said one of them.

Damn it. There wasn't *time* for this.

"Do you know this code?" Adamska demanded, forcing his mind to flicker through and discard plans, and nothing else.

"Yeah," Hal said, bent over the instrument panel. "So do about half a dozen other people, Big Boss included."

"Damn." There went the old blackmail favorite: I Know Something You Don't Know.

Deliberately, the clacking tapered off. Hal looked up.

Light flashed off his glasses.

"But I'm the only one who knows how to change it."

This was it. That old feeling. Mind clicking like clockwork, adrenaline seeping into his bloodstream. Pulse quickening to fit a new time signature. He'd felt it before, innumerable times.

He had never before been able to see the idea in his mind reflected in someone else's eyes.

The good things in life really were better shared with an accomplice.

"Perfect," Adamska said, voice tight and intent, leaning on the console in front of him and hopefully not on buttons that did anything important, "We've got our leverage. All we need is a way to slip it past that pet psychic of theirs--"

Damn it. He hadn't meant to make his face crumple like that.

"I forgot about Mantis." Hal's shoulders sank. His hands fell away from the keyboard, dejected. "There's no way to hide it from him. I don't have any psychic blocks. Guess they figured that it wasn't worth the cost, since I'd break under conventional questioning in five seconds or so."

The barb would have stung, had it been intentional. As it was, it only served as a reminder of the drawbacks and advantages of singlemindedness.

Later. No time to think about it, now.

"What if," Adamska said carefully, "it were in my mind, instead?"

Hal shook his head. "I could set it up so that you could enter it, but it wouldn't do any good. As long as he's in the same place, Mantis can read the mind of any unshielded human being. There's no way to keep him out, unless you're a psychic or something."

"Or something," Adamska echoed, staring into nowhere.

"And even then-" Hal broke off, and gave Adamska a quizzical look. "What is it?"

Human emotion was one of the things the Ocelot major had spent most of his life trying to ignore. It had never occurred to him that the other might come in handy someday.

"There may be a way," he said, delicately, "to get around that."

"Oh?" Interest lifted Hal's eyebrows. "How?"

Figuring he might as well forgo physical decorum while he was at it, Adamska hopped up to sit on the instrument panel, putting Hal in arm's reach, and wondered how it could still be difficult to phrase things he'd thought he would never tell anyone.

"There's one thing I forgot to tell you about me..."

# chapter 40

## Stray by Dahne

*The nature of a man can change substance.*

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

"I'm not sure it won't."

By some standards, this was good odds.

From the viewpoint of the man seated in front of the central monitor, and perhaps that of the engineer leaning over his shoulder, this was as good as the odds were going to get.

"What, exactly, is it you have to, er, do?" asked Hal, on whom the main effect of the revelation seemed to be a pressing desire to stay as close as possible, which Adamska didn't mind, though it failed to make concentrating any easier.

A man with a sufficiently agile mind could think of any number of things at a time like this.

"If I knew that, we'd be done by now," said Adamska.

Hal's eyes darted from side to side like lodestone filaments having trouble deciding which way was magnetic north. It was more interesting to watch than the computer screen, which merely sat there, humming bluely at him.

"Do you need a bell, a book, and a candle? Or is that for summoning demons?"

"Don't be stupid. There's no such thing as de—" Adamska began, then remembered he wasn't in much of a position to make judgments. He considered. "You know, it might help."

Hal nodded firmly. "Right."

At least, rummaging through the cupboards beneath the workstations gave Hal something to do. Having an audience wasn't making this any goddamn easier.

There was no trigger to pull, but he'd done it too often for it to be impossible. There was nothing frightening about it, or even exceptional. He'd only gotten into the habit of avoiding it because it didn't have any practical applications. Just a distraction. Now it was needed. So he would do it.

He had good senses.

Rather more, he was forced to admit, than five.

"I think this is the best we're gonna do."

Hal's head appeared from behind a console. The rest of him followed, arms laden. With dubious ceremony, he set three objects in front of Adamska.

"I found a cell phone, a dirty magazine, and some cigarettes."

Adamska nodded. "That'll work."

"Really?"

"Hell if I know."

The objects and petitioners in place, Adamska closed his eyes to concentrate.

Soon he realized that what he was concentrating on was trying to think of a better incantation than, *Come on, you translucent bastard.*

"Aren't you supposed to do this in the dark?" Hal said nervously, either afraid it wouldn't work or afraid that it would, "With, like, candles and stuff?"

"Fuck off," said Adamska.

A silent moment passed, alone behind his eyelids.

Adamska said, "Try turning off the lights."

He heard shuffling footsteps, and a muted click.

It did seem to help, actually.

The warmth returned behind him as Hal retook his post.

Hal said, "Are you sure about this?"

"Trust me," said Adamska.

Forcing himself still, he focused.

Humans had hundreds of processes running in them at once, most of them never given the least attention. Breathing lungs, beating heart, blinking eye. The thousand threads of tensile thought. This was only another. Pick it out. Lift it free. Focus.

*Come on.*

A trickle of sweat banked its way down Adamska's spine, though the room was cool.

There was a way, he felt it dimly, could smell the sense of it like the scent of a stream. It was there, in the distance, shimmering candle in the fog. Instinct guided him, and instinct barred his way.

The warning whispered, This way lies danger.

Some roads had tolls, and some had requirements. Not a tithe asked, but a necessity demanded. They said even Thor had to leave his hammer behind before crossing to earth, lest the brittle bridge crack beneath its great weight.

The thing Adamska had to drop was his guard.

Of course. That was the reason, wasn't it? That was why he had always shoved this aside without thought. Not fear. Practicality.

The warning whispered, You'll leave yourself open.

Adamska survived on soldier's sleep, the light doze that left little leeway for dreams. He did not leave his back unwatched, and there was no one qualified to watch it but him.

The hollow spaces of his mind echoed, Trust me.

Adamska listened to the small sounds of Hal's attempts to be absolutely silent.

Concentration made the warmth at his back solid and real.

Slowly, deliberately, Adamska let his defenses fall.

Layer by layer he stripped them off, down to the less and less conscious, the debris thrown together into makeshift barricades. The things that kept his mind cleanly his own. Systematically, he pulled every last shield down.

He would have felt less exposed standing stark naked in the middle of a battlefield and firing off a flaregun.

The presence behind him, keeping watched, glowed like a bonfire.

Adamska reached outward.

It was an odd feeling, like flexing a limb that you had been ignoring in the hopes that it would go away. Wagging your vestigial tail.

*I know you're there. You're always there, just out of sight. You've given me enough shit, skulking around behind my back. Time to make yourself useful.*

Adamska suspected you were supposed to beseech spirits, not badger them. He didn't have a lot of practice at beseeching.

He hated asking for favors.

*I don't know why you keep following me, and I'd bet I don't want to. However you usually decide you want to show up, this time, make it now.*

His eyes slitted open slightly, in case he might already be there. Adamska imagine he would feel the difference, but he wasn't willing to wager looking really goddamn stupid on it.

Darkness, marred by smears of primary-hued glow from the instrument panels.

*Son of a- Look.*

Adamska drifted through waves of some kind of energy, dipping into it like panning for gold.

*I...*

The warmth at his back was a far-off constellation.

*I need your help.*

Adamska breathed out, and reached.

*Come on.*

It was a change in the current of the air.

(( So sad... ))

Adamska looked up.

As if shadow poured into a mold

As if the ungrudging absence of heat and light

Between air and water

Sleep and memory

A dark shape moved forward.

His footsteps made no sound.

A sharp intake of another's breath, expelled as, "H, holy...!"

So he could see it too.

(( Lives ended are never gone. ))

Adamska faced where the shadow was thickest.

He said, "I know."

Beneath the hood that glistened in the impure light as if with rain, a smile.

(( Yes. You do. ))

The hum of machines was muted, as if through water, distant through cold air that tasted of salt.

(( There is nothing to fear. ))

Untouched by matter, too easily for anything real, sliding against the assumption that it might be real, the hood fell back.

And Adamska saw

the sorrow.

There was...no fear.

Were he not connected to the ground by strips of shadow, a conscientious objector to gravity's conscription, there would be still no mistaking the spirit for a living man.

No fool would fear him.

A silent, spectral energy that wreathed his mind, like an antique scent, impetus to poise on one's toes at the brink of memory...

A soft, murmuring sadness.

The moon-shaded darkness that brings relief from light.

The quiet after gunfire, the mellow voices of comrades that came through and the hushed space of those who did not. The scar of grief that lent texture to the exhilaration of not being among them.

The sadness that numbed agony and rendered terror obsolete, that lingered past oblivion, eased past rage and gave joy meaning. The restful melancholy that drifted in dream to take the place of loss. The reverence for death that made killing bearable, and living permitted.

His hair was white, skin pale beneath the pigment of weak light, and he smiled like an icon's reverse. Sorrow, soldier saint.

"W-w-who *are* you?" Hal said. His hand shook, clutching the chair back. How strange. There was nothing to fear.

The spirit floated before them, suspended in gelid time.

(( I am the one who was called. ))

Within himself Adamska glimpsed a pang of far-off irritation. That was no answer at all.

"You're d-dead," Hal managed, keeping his voice even with effort.

(( In a way. Yes. In, some would say, the most important way. ))

"You're the one who's been following me," Adamska said, with only a hint of accusation.

(( It could be said that you were following me. ))

Hal, focused and diligent as ever, said, "Why would a ghost need glasses?"

The laugh was an aural mist, like breath in cold air.

(( Most don't. Only me. ))

"Wait, so are you..." Unable to help himself, Hal stuck out his hand, before Adamska could stop him. His reflexes were fast, but they weren't quite up to the speed of stupidity.

Hal's hand passed through the man's chest without resistance.

"Oh, wow," Hal said, with a childlike wonderment Adamska couldn't decide was mortifying or endearing.

And he *would* start waving his hand around, wouldn't he.

"It's like there's nothing there. Just sort of cold-"

(( Ahem. ))

"Huh? Oh!" Hal's hand flinched back, quick as a lizard darting under a rock. "Er. Sorry."

The ghost only smiled.

As amusing as it was to track how quickly curiosity could triumph over fear, there was no telling how long this visitation would last.

Though it made his teeth ache, Adamska forced out, "We need your help."

(( So you said. ))

Hah. Then he *had* heard him.

"Will you help us?" Hal asked, apparently remembering they had things to do besides muck around in ectoplasm.

Expression unchanging, a tear fell from the specter's eye, tracing a line down his cheek. Adamska was hardly surprised that it was red and opaque.

(( Yes. ))

Adamska was almost disappointed. So much for cryptic mystery.

Come to think of it, none of his plans had included the possibility of this one working. Now that he was staring the man and his sad smile in the face, Adamska had no idea what to do next.

Had circumstances become dire, he might have been forced to admit it.

However, Hal saved him, dizzying him with the rush of affection the unwitting gesture provoked from his heart.

"Hey, I've got an idea..."

---

"Are you sure this is going to work?"

"Why wouldn't it?" said Hal, looking innocent. Not that Adamska could see him through the handkerchief tied over his eyes, but he would have bet a hefty chunk of the Legacy on it.

There were too many good answers for that, so Adamska said only, "All right. Let's get this over with."

"Okay." He felt Hal lean over his shoulder, heard him punch in a sequence of keys, and the whir of the mainframe as it tried to keep up. "There. From here, all you have to do is put in the password and hit enter."

He wasn't talking to Adamska.

When he spoke again, the direction and timbre of his voice suggested that he had his back turned. "Ready?"

Glad that he hadn't completely lost his talent for lies, Adamska said, "I'm ready."

Having no real operative clue as to what to do at this point, he settled for his first instinct and stilled his mind.

For a moment, he felt nothing but the creeping sense that he must look profoundly stupid.

Then...

A lack of heat that was not cold, flowing over his hands and arms.

How...strange.

From there, it was a matter of brawling with his instincts. The tendons in his shoulders twitched with effort, held taut to keep from wresting back control. Like tracing the path of a fish by ripples on the surface, though his hands were numb and alien, it was possible to feel the minute effects of their movements by the indirect reports from the parts of his body that were still his.

It was not a comfortable sensation.

He was about to risk diluting his concentration long enough to tell the ghost to hurry the fuck up when it was over.

The presence withdrew amid a chorus of mechanical rumination, leaving Adamska with a tingle in the back of his mind and an itching urge to rub his wrists.

(( It's done. ))

"Okay," Hal said, only slightly unsteadily. "It's gone through."

He could tell by sound alone. Talented man.

Uneasily triumphant, Adamska reached up to pull off the blindfold.

The chill grew sharply stronger.

(( Take care of yourselves. ))

-and was gone.

When Adamska could see again, the room held only two.

"Thank you," Hal said softly, to no one.

Adamska said, "Huh."

He was still, for a moment, as if drugged by the residue of that kindred aura.

Thinking in terms of 'auras' was plenty of evidence that he'd had more mucking around with the metaphysical than one person should be expected to put up with. Adamska gave his head a sharp shake.

"That's over with, then," he said, tying his handkerchief back into its proper place and standing up.

He stayed upright long enough to wonder why the rest of the lights were gone.

---

"Adamska? Adamska!"

Blank expanses of sound and vision resolved into the shape of Hal's stricken face.

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Adamska mumbled, pawing vaguely at his arms. "You don't need to shout in my face. And stop shaking me."

"Oh," Hal said, retreating a bit.



They had gotten somehow from an upright position to sprawling on the floor against the base of a console without any of the passing through the space in between that was usually required. Maybe physics was loosening its demands.

He smiled with sheepish relief. "You scared me, collapsing out of nowhere like that."

Adamska slapped his forehead to get its attention and badgered his limbs into a more dignified configuration. It was disorienting to emerge from unexpected unconsciousness without hearing, *"Shit! This one's still alive!"* Or, at the very least, *"You worry too much. The Lieutenant says he oughtta stay out for hours."*

Not that he was entirely unfamiliar with the idea of someone taking a personal interest in his health. Corpses couldn't talk, after all.

Which brought to mind another greeting, one he had never personally received, and that he would never fully stop expecting.

*"Good morning, Major. We have a few questions for you..."*

As brightly as Hal's solicitations made the slow burn of loss flare, Adamska considered this preferable.

He was saying something. Adamska recognized the timbre of speech produced not for information but for the reassurance of human vocalization. Sometimes the idiosyncrasy of his sincerity drowned out his words. Adamska nodded at appropriate intervals, and watched.

He...didn't look afraid.

Gesturing animatedly, eyes sparking with intelligence, inflection rising and falling like waves lapping at the edge of a pond.

He didn't have to love him.

Maybe he could...just let him stay. Let him dig his fingernails into the cloud beneath him and hang on. Do the dirty part of the job for him. Hold up tinder to those sparks and make sure he wasn't the one who got burned. Ocelot had played the dog of men he despised for long enough. He wouldn't mind a chance to be guardian mastiff of his own choosing.

With reverence and a degree of awe, Adamska realized that it was, against all logic, enough.

For now, it would be enough.

Upturned, expectant eyes made a word swim into his conscious purview.

Hal stood with his hand on the pad of buttons that controlled the door.

"Ready?"

Adamska nodded.

The door opened and they rejoined reality, already in progress.

Idly, Adamska wondered when hope had stopped hurting.

# chapter 41

**Stray** by Dahne

*Wherever you go, everyone is connected.*

-Serial Experiments Lain

---

*Men can change the nature of a war.*

Snake hated this part.

Making plans meant, by definition, going out of your way to think about all the things that could go wrong.

Not that it called for much of a detour, in this case.

The actual combat was easier. Then, you knew that it was as bad as it was going to get. Once you were hip deep in shit, you could set yourself to shoveling. And that was an area where he had plenty of practice. He had no problem dealing with it in the present tense. It was the "what if's that got to him.

Snake was as used to the idea of dying as a living person could get, but that didn't mean poring over the exact details of how it could happen wasn't just a little bit macabre.

It didn't help that the few signs anybody else was showing were all of excitement.

Hell, Liquid was practically jumping up and down like a puppy.

Snake couldn't shake the feeling that, as anxious as he was to get this over with, Liquid was anxious to get it started.

Thing was, it was...infectious. That humming tension gathering low in his stomach, the first pangs of that sensation of being some other, purer kind of *alive*. That old blood drug.

It didn't make the nagging sense that something here was very, very wrong go away, only mixed with it and gave him indigestion.

What made it worse was that, between all of them, every objection and possible weak point he put forward met with a decent solution. Hell, he came up with a couple himself. He was starting to think that this might actually have a chance of working.

That terrified him most of all.

Because it meant that whatever delusions Liquid and the rest were laboring under, they were spreading.

He couldn't blame Big Boss. Years piled up like rubble, and with enough of them any mind could start to bend. The stronger it was, the harder it snapped. Under this...they were lucky he hadn't started frothing at the mouth and raving about destroying everybody. Either the brain behind that eyepatch was still more or less in one piece, or Big Boss was the kind of guy who even went nuts better than other people.

But hell, after all this time, the old man had earned the right to want something as stupid as to go out in a blaze of glory.

Liquid, though – damn it, Liquid should have *known* better. He shouldn't be all but bouncing around, eyes glinting like pyrite while he came up with ways to guard against missile attack. He shouldn't have been acting like this was what his whole life had been for, like if he died here it would be some kind of honor.

And Snake shouldn't have understood.

If he was smart, he would back out now and go out to a cabin somewhere and drink til it was all somebody else's problem.

He was surprised to realize that he'd never considered it a real option.

The only excuse he could think of was that they'd be hopeless without him. For one thing, he seemed to be the only one willing to point out that a plan involving certain death was something of a drawback.

Anybody who'd ever touched a trigger knew that death was a possibility, but everybody - they kept acting like the notion of living through this kept slipping their mind.

And, yeah. He was ready to die for it, too. But not for lack of trying.

Personally, Snake suspected that the whole idea of going out in a blaze of glory might've originated from the people who considered the survival of soldiers past their use-by date to be inconvenient. The only blaze *he* would be satisfied to go out in would be caused by falling asleep with a lit cigarette.

What the hell was the appeal of certain doom?

It hung in the air like an opiate, heady as lilac wine.

Nobody needed Raven to tell them that something spooky was going on here.

Snake was no stranger to the odds. He knew that any bookie worth his archetypal visor would put "goes down fighting" right at the top of his chart. That, however, would not be his own personal first choice. He'd prefer not to go down at all. And the key step to getting a choice is acting like you already have one.

Whatever this feeling was, by the time they'd gotten through the first stage of planning, Snake was determined not to let any of them die just to spite it. With his own hands, if necessary.

He attacked every weak point he could find, in part at least to distract himself from wishing he knew whether his efforts were for hope that they'd give up or hope that it would work.

Finally he was at a loss. He'd been able to make a lot of solid arguments, but for every hole he'd poked they'd patched it up stronger. He got the odd idea Big Boss had been thinking about this for a long time.

And, despite every act of sabotage his gut undertook against his brain, despite every logical argument he could come up with, Snake was convinced.

Now all they had to do was spread that conviction.

It wasn't as though they would be going at this completely alone. Shadowy entities clutching the world in an iron grip had a way of making enemies. To have a fighting chance, they'd have to pull together as many of them as possible. Dead Cell, the anti-terrorist squad, was first on the list; none of them believed for a second that their leader's death in jail had been suicide, and they had plenty of reasons to want to strike back. They were natural allies. They'd worked with FOXHOUND a few times before, though it had always been while Big Boss was elsewhere on business.

Before that, they had closer concerns.

There were a couple hundred soldiers in the base, last time someone had taken a count. Living, working, worrying about their families, worrying about themselves, everything that people did when to keep themselves occupied. It wouldn't be easy, getting them to turn against the country and government they'd enlisted to be tools of.

That is, if they didn't take one look at that one-eyed stare that made it so hard to think of doing anything but what it said and fall right into line.

It was the reputation that did it, more than the rank or even the ability. There were too many goddamn *stories* about the guy. Even when you knew that legends were half embellishment and half

outright lie, and how everything always grew in the telling and with as long as he'd been a soldier there'd been plenty of time for the grain of truth to mold over until it was all but unrecognizable, you still couldn't look at him without thinking about the time he'd broken out of a Soviet prison block with nothing but a pack of cigarettes and a fork. Legends run deeper than logic.

They'd decided it was safest to go with a few at a time, at least until they could get a good idea of what the general reaction was going to be. One eloquent, outspoken guy who was less than thrilled with the idea of high treason could ruin the whole barrel.

In order to keep it all as quiet as possible for as long as they could, they'd gathered in the central entrance hall and assembled all the soldiers who'd happened to be in the area, about twenty-five in all. They gravitated to the center, and the old man started talking.

He told them-

-the truth.

What they knew of it, anyway.

Snake practically took it for granted that anybody with any real control over a mission would lie about anything they could and cover up the rest.

Big Boss wasn't like that.

He was too used to being the one told lies.

He wasn't the kind of man to give somebody a choice to make without telling him exactly what that choice was.

Even the humiliating parts, like what had been going on right under their noses.

It was the exact opposite of what the enemy did. That was satisfying, somehow. Felt right.

He told what had happened to Ocelot briefly and dispassionately, face showing no sign but the speck of rage that glittered in his eye, cold and hard as a comet.

Snake didn't know whether it would be right to admire that kind of restraint.

"Go or stay," he was saying. "There's no orders anymore. This is your battle, but you don't have to be the ones to fight it. You've got the right to it, as much as you've got the right to walk away. We've met the enemy. He's not you. He's the one using you. We've had enough. That's all."

The Patriots were the kind of people who put a lot of stock in skill at stump speeches. Maybe that was why they'd never considered Big Boss a threat worth neutralizing.

The more fool they.

In the vast, echoing hall, the silence morphed into a bad Zen koan.

The sound of one man clapping.

A large, odd number of eyes swiveled up to the second level walkway.

The kid who called himself Ocelot made as nice a target as anybody could ask for, outlined against the gray, null-colored walls.

The last time Snake had seen him, the boy'd had all the spark and raw vitality of a ragdoll. Now he looked as though he were carrying around his own personal spotlight.

Which was his natural state wasn't hard to guess.

"Stirring sentiment," the boy said, voice carrying without any apparent effort on his part, an effect that was famously difficult to achieve, "Too bad it's not going to work."

Hanging back a little, almost lost behind the flare of showmanship, was Hal.

What the hell was going on here?

"Ocelot," said Big Boss, without missing a beat. "Did you come all this way to fight me again?"

"I didn't," the kid replied, as if it would have been a perfectly reasonable motive. "Good guess, though. No, I came here to stop some mistakes, not the least of which is yours."

"I know exactly what I'm doing." Big Boss's voice was more tired than boastful.

"As you should. You've done it before." The Ocelot kid waved a hand, like shooing off a fly.

"We can deal with the temporal mechanics later. Suffice to say, it doesn't work. You die. And so," -he nodded at the assembled soldiers, "-do most of them."

"Is that a threat?"

"It's a fact."

Across the altitudes, they stared each other down like duelists at dawn. Anyone else in the room was long forgotten, if it had ever been noticed at all. With a group that tended to impress itself on the psyche as much as FOXHOUND, that was no mean feat.

Under the dictates of an unspoken consensus, nobody moved.

"Who are you," Big Boss said, voice low and dangerous as a claymore silhouette in the grass, "and what are you trying to do here?"

"I'm exactly who you think," replied Ocelot, as unperturbed as any of the better class of psychopath, "and I'm doing you a favor."

"Funny, I don't remember asking you for any."

"Too bad. Consider it free advice. Stop this."

"Sorry," said Big Boss, honestly. "This isn't a choice anymore. It's something I have to do."

"Yes," the boy said quietly, as if he were alone, eyes drifting downwards. "They always make it seem that way, don't they?"

He looked up, voice hardening back to its previous timbre.

"You're not the kind of man who takes advice, no matter the spirit it's offered in. So we went to the trouble of setting up a little precaution."

We?

Snake's brain blanked for a moment, before sliding into a steady *oh, shit* spiral.

*Hal, you idiot.*

The other man on the platform stepped forward.

He said, "REX's launch code has been changed."

It took Snake physical effort not to groan.

*Just because we were going to take on a suicidal, tilting-at-windmills operation didn't mean you should, too!*

It figured that the guy who could engineer cutting-edge military technology would be the one reading in the back of the room on the day common sense got handed out.

Big Boss sighed.

"Mantis," he said.

"Won't work," Hal said, with a thread of manic cheer, even as the psychic was drawing a bead on him. "It's hidden. Eerk..."

"He's right," Mantis rasped, lowering a black-gloved, clawlike hand. (Not a minute too soon, either; paranormal powers or not, from the looks of it, Ocelot was about to jump over the railing and start beating on him.) "It's not there."

Another gesture. Another cut-off gasp.

"Not in his, either."

Even when it involved an enemy – or whatever the hell this kid was – all things considered, Snake would have felt a whole lot better about Mantis's powers if he'd bother to ask permission now and then.

The psychic looked questioningly at Big Boss.

Most everybody was doing that, right about now.

"Shall I, Saladin?" said Wolf, slinging the PSG-1 off her back with the thoughtless ease of reaching into a handbag for lipstick.

"No." The eye struck at the boy like an iron hammer, enough to make the devil cry. "Not yet."

"I'd advise against killing us," Ocelot advised, making sociable gestures over the railing like it was a white picket fence. "It would be a shame for such a pretty toy to stay locked up."

The silence that followed was eloquent. Unlikely as them finding some sort of psychic workaround was, it was more believable than Mantis letting a chance to show off pass by.

"Hal," said Snake, the second time in a day he'd had to talk to- a friend like this, and irrationally wanting to hate Ocelot for making it necessary. "Give us the code."

"I'm sorry, Dave. I can't do that," said Hal, because probably he'd always wanted to.

You would think someone so versed in physics would be more familiar with the laws of inertia, and what they boiled down to:

*Don't get in the way of something bigger than you.*

"So that's it," Big Boss said to Ocelot. "You're working for them. This is all just part of their game."

He sounded almost disappointed.

Granted, building a plan around faking a young version of somebody who'd died years ago wasn't something Snake would put past them. But...

Damn it, did he *want* to believe this kid?

Hal trusted him.

Hal would have trusted a guy harvesting organs in a back alley in Taiwan if he'd said he had a health care license.

"No," Ocelot said, his eyes narrowing. "I know the Philosophers-"

Hal hissed something to him.

"-Patriots better than anyone. They want you to attack. It's the perfect way to get rid of you."

"I'm not going anywhere without a fight."

"You think they don't know that?" The boy sneered. "Face it. You're playing right into their hands."

He *did* look like Ocelot. More than a little bit.

"You saw what they did," said Big Boss, and Snake realized that he'd never seen him really angry. "We have to fight."

Ocelot smirked like a man at a poker game holding five aces.

"Didn't say anything about not fighting."

"You think like soldiers," Hal put in, for all the world as if they'd rehearsed it. "They knew it'd only be so long before you struck back. A full-out assault is what they expect. It could be they meant for you to use Metal Gear all along."

Big Boss shrugged, like none of it mattered. "It's what we've got."

"No," said Ocelot, "You've got something better."

Hal adjusted his glasses. Snake would've sworn they gleamed.

"Information," the engineer said.

This time Snake nearly did groan.

*That* was their plan?

"A threat to reveal their existence is the first thing they'll expect," Big Boss said.

"I didn't say anything about threatening," said Hal calmly. "Secrets are their weapons. We can

take that away from them."

"What would that accomplish?" said Big Boss.

Ocelot said, "It's the last thing they would want. We take the fight to their level, our way."

"You can't stop the signal," Hal said brightly.

"And that'll bring down the Patriots," said Big Boss, tone marking his location as a couple hundred miles from convinced.

"No need," said Ocelot, looking like a gold medalist at the International Clever Bastard Championship. "That's just to buy time while we find the other half of the Legacy."

---

## Notes:

-You just *know* Hal has seen *Serenity* eight times.

-I'm sorry. I really don't know how all this *plot* started to happen. It wasn't supposed to, but neither Big Boss nor Snake are all that agreeable to sitting quietly in the background. Please bear with me.

-While I'm at it, I might as well confess to something else; this was meant to end in two chapters or so. The other day, for some reason right after I read a Julio Cortazar story about Che Guevara that struck me deeply, I realized it's not going to. Ridiculously long as this thing may be already, there is, I think, still something to be explored between these two. You'll have to tell me whether or not I'm right.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/41/>

# chapter 42

## Stray by Dahne

*A man can change the nature of another.*

Snake figured at some point his brain gave up. His incredulity generators must've caught fire and caused the whole place to close up shop for the day. Out to Lunch. Might as well. Everybody else was.

After giving the kid a look that by all rights should have seared a blue-eyed imprint into the back of his brain, Big Boss turned and said what needed doing, and everyone was moving again.

FOXHOUND congregated to divide up tasks. It was as normal as their lives ever got. Doing what had to be done. Leading the team to go down and investigate the catacombs was going to be one of the least pleasant assignments. Snake took it. It was taken for granted that Liquid would come with him, as well as a handful of the soldiers already assembled here. No way to know how much ground they'd have to cover, or how many Patriot lackeys they'd have to subdue.

After some debate, they settled on Mantis and Raiden for the rest. The two of them made a surprisingly good team, especially when it came to getting information out of people fast. It was less of your traditional good-cop-bad-cop and more tell-the-prettyboy-what-we-need-to-know-or-we'll-have-to-let-the-floating-guy-in-bondage-gear-root-around-your-brain's-dark-places , but it worked just as well.

(When Raiden had first joined he'd had that new-kid, tough-guy swagger, the kind of tomcat affectation probably picked up early by any boy with the bad luck to be born that pretty. It'd disappeared once he figured out that none of them gave a shit for anything but results. Back when he'd still thought he had something to prove, he'd wanted to know what a psychic was doing on a special ops force, given that there was no such thing as telepathy.

Mantis had begged to differ.

"Oh yeah? Prove it. Tell me what's in *my* head."

"My powers," Mantis had said, in that weird, loud, tinny whisper, "extend so far beyond your understanding that you couldn't comprehend the least part of what I see."

Say this much for the kid. He was either brave or stupid.

Snake's money was all on the latter.

"Try me."

Mantis had stretched out his hand and drawn up into what Snake suspected was a deliberate pose.

After a few tense seconds, the psychic declared,

"A red-haired man on fire, an energy company's hired thug, a ninja, Paul McCartney, and a possessed stuffed bear."

Raiden blinked. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Exactly."

The new recruit had gone away deeply impressed.)

The rest would deal with briefing the rest of their forces, tightening security, and all the other things that had to be done. Including a decent burial.

Raven turned away.

"I have consultations to make," he said, and headed toward the nearest exit.



They let him go. When Raven needed to read seal entrails or toss runes or whatever the hell it was he did, there was no use trying to stop him.

They broke up, heading in their respective directions.

Liquid stayed behind. His eyes were fixed on the ground, unfocused. Absently, he rubbed at his right arm.

"Liquid," Snake said, under cover of the crowd trying to make up for their easier stillness and silence. Trying to cover up the inevitable sound of the other shoe dropping.

His twin looked up, with the quickness of pure reflex, the way you reacted to something before you'd confirmed whether or not it was a threat. For a second, he looked disoriented, like Snake was somebody he didn't recognize.

Which was stupid. It was practically the same thing he saw whenever he looked in a goddamn mirror.

Whatever it was, it was gone soon. Probably Snake had imagined it. Enough weird things had happened today that it would just figure his mind would start making up new ones.

"You okay with this?" Snake said, giving the jerk of the head that meant he referred to the general state of the universe. "Exposing them instead of fighting?"

For one thing, he wasn't quite sure how *he* felt about it. Not that there was anything wrong with postponing certain death for a while. It was just...anticlimactic. Like they were all in some old cheesy horror movie, and they'd beaten the monster by pointing out the zipper running up its back. Now all that was lurking in the shadows was the logical conclusion they'd have to deal with something even worse.

Liquid grinned in that way that made your eyes want to dart around the room and catalog the location of anything sharp.

He said, "I can't think of anything that would make them angrier."

For him, that was enough.

Maybe it could be for Snake, too.

The twins had known each other for a long time. They didn't need words to say much.

SNAKE nodded, and Liquid went to consult with Raiden and Mantis about the plan of attack.

Which left Snake with a second to think.

Damn it. He might as well admit that he felt a whole lot better. Less like somebody who'd been eating something that smelled a lot like history was breathing down his neck. It might've just been that his left arm had stopped itching.

For one thing, ever since the..revolt, or terrorism, or independence, or whatever it was, had been aborted, his stomach had stopped trying to digest his spine.

SNAKE didn't put a lot of stock in omens, portents, or other metaphysical phenomena, though he had the grace not to mention that too often in front of certain of his colleagues, but he had to admit that he felt a hell of a lot better now that spectacular death was back to its usual position as a fuzzy speck on the horizon.

Not all that illogical, come to think of it.

It was weird. Like the whole base had been- poised, at the brink of something. And now, all of a sudden, it wasn't. There was something kind of wrong, about that. Snake's reflexes had been conditioned to believe that long, low whistles always ended in a bang, and they couldn't quite accept that it could just taper off and go along its way.

SNAKE was no stranger to the strange. They were practically on a first-name basis. Exhaustion and bloodloss and near-death experiences that had on more than one occasion stretched out into more

of a near-death sabbatical had got him more than acquainted with the shambling shapes of the other side of reality. If he asked nicely, Raven might've written him a letter of introduction. The trick was knowing where the line was. Snake tried not to encroach on its territory any more than he could possibly help it, and he didn't like when it snuck up on his.

But, like anything, all the difference came from how you got used to it. People had their own ways of going crazy, and their own methods of keeping sane. Snake knew guys who said they'd found God in the field hospital. He also knew guys who kept all the bullets that'd been dug out of them as souvenirs. Personally, Snake didn't indulge in either. He wasn't victim to that kind of sentimentality. Besides, it was tough to find mason jars that big these days.

He looked up at the catwalk.

Hal and Ocelot were still up there. They were talking to Big Boss. The boy was angry, making wide, sharp gestures and stepping forward in a way that made Snake's hand twitch holster-ward, but Hal touched him on the arm and said something that made the kid calm down some. Then Ocelot and Big Boss went off together, and Hal went down to the main level, where he was soon lost in the crowd.

It looked like everybody else was falling back into a kind of rhythm. That was the reassuring thing about soldiery. It got so that if somebody told you to do something loud enough, you could confidently assume it was the right thing to do. It went straight into your muscles without passing through your brain on the way. There was a kind of optimism to it. If you weren't dead, and it didn't look like you were immediately going to be, you were doing pretty good.

The decision had been that, for now, it was best to stay together. They had come too close to something. Had a brush with it. Catastrophe, or greatness, or- something. Maybe what it came down to was that the base was, well, home. That agreement had stood firm. Whatever happened, no matter what it had been built or used for, now, Shadow Moses was theirs.

Already the place was transformed, alive with soldiers running back and forth or gathering in knots and basically puzzling out what was going on. The Patriots couldn't have come as all that great a surprise to anybody. They'd all been under control too long. It started to show, seep out from under the edges. All it'd needed was a name.

"Snake!"

It was Hal, standing at a security console by the wall, waving him over as if nothing had happened.

He looked haggardly optimistic, like he did when he'd spent the past month working feverishly on something and sleeping whenever somebody remembered to tell him to, just before he finished it and started working on the next stage.

"I should be able to show you what to expect down there," the engineer said without preamble, looking up only long enough to confirm he was there. "Layout, exit locations, that kind of thing. It's all got to be in the system, somewhere. Now that I have a better idea what I'm looking for I can find it. The easiest way would be to find a direct access point, but I- I don't want to go back down there..."

His focus wobbled, like a top losing its balance, then resumed.

"It won't be hard to get to from here. Now that I have the depth and the frequency, I just need to triangulate the coordinates..."

In times of duress, some people sought solace in their native language. Hal's was technobabble.

"Hal," Snake said sharply, grabbing the opportunity while he had it, "What the hell is going on here? And I don't want to hear any crap about time travel."

The engineer gazed up at him in mute appeal, grey eyes set on PuppyDog.

Snake sighed. "Come on, Hal. Tell me."

"But you said not to say anything about-"

Snake admitted defeat. "Just tell me."

"It's complicated."

"I figured that much."

Hal turned back to the console, with the comfortably normal sound of irony flying over his head.

"A- Ocelot's a good person, Snake. Just trust me on that. Me and him, we're...old friends, in a way."

Snake's eyes narrowed. "In *what* way?"

Hal's fingers tap-danced messages to the computer, which spat data up on the screen in response.

"Do you ever think about how things might've been different? Like, if you'd never known you had a brother, or if Big Boss had been killed years and years ago?"

Snake said, honestly, "No."

"Ocelot's been to a world where it's true," Hal went on, as if he hadn't heard. "That, and other things, too. All those little individual decisions that shape history... They say there's thousands of universes out there, existing all at once. The only difference is that one is active, and all the rest are *in potentia*. From what Ocelot said, it's possible that existing for a while in one potential future made it possible for him to go back and...switch the tracks, so to speak."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Snake said levelly, "but I'm pretty sure it's impossible."

One universe worth of trouble was more than enough for him. Trust Hal to go rooting around for extra.

"I told him that." Hal gave the sort of smile rarely exhibited by people who hadn't been eating funny-tasting brownies. "I think he did it anyway."

Further inquiries met with a change of subject to the more pressing one of how they were going to make sure nobody left through exits they didn't know about. It seemed like a pretty intractable problem, considering how difficult it was to ensure the security of a place you'd just found out existed. Within a few minutes, Hal had pulled a map up on the screen and done it.

Fucking geniuses.

Snake's eyes ticked over it, plotting out the best route to take to trap any other unwelcome tenants inside.

"I've engaged the autolocks on the doors," Hal said. "There's...there's a whole remote system, right there. Ready. Like they wanted to make sure that if anything went wrong, anybody in there could be closed off and left for dead..."

Damn it. Expendable. That'd mean nobody here would have any information they couldn't risk the enemy getting their hands on.

"Their own men, Snake," Hal said, as if it were hardly to be believed. "They'd abandon them, just to cut their losses."

"I'm familiar with the strategy." He'd been on the wrong end of it more than once. Not that there was, admittedly, a right end.

"Anyway, the good news is, the locks weren't already activated, so it looks like they haven't found us out yet. The records show that no unusual transmissions have been sent to or from the base in the past twenty-four hours. I've got some safeguards in place to make sure it stays that way. If the Patriots have any spies here, it's not gonna do them any good."

Hah. Maybe Snake had been right when he'd said Hal wasn't getting to be half-bad at the suspicious bastard business.

Wait. When had he said that?

Eh. It didn't matter.

"But the quicker you take care of them, and...whatever else is down there, the better I for one will feel."

One of Snake's talents was an excellent sense for when he was being gotten rid of.

But Hal had a point.

"All right," Snake said, once he was sure the map was copied into his memory. "I'll take care of my part. You take care of yours."

"Wait," said Hal, looking up as though something had occurred to him. "You're not angry, are you?"

"Eh?" Snake's thoughts pivoted sharply from ideal troop deployment. "What, over you and the kid getting in the way of us starting a war? No. It wouldn't have worked, anyway."

Then there'd been that *feeling*, like a thousand tons of pure unrefined history barreling down intent on smashing them flat against the wall, and somehow at the last impossible moment they'd dodged-

No need to mention that.

"Oh." Hal looked relieved. "Good."

A man who hijacked cutting-edge nuclear military technology and worried that *somebody would be mad at him*.

Sometimes it was reassuring to know that nothing hidden could be much stranger than what was already on top.

Snake rejoined the others and went to take back their home.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/42/>

# chapter 43

## Stray by Dahne

*What we have here is a failure to communicate.*

-Cool Hand Luke

---

*Loss can change the nature of a man.*

He had seen dead men before. Ones whose deaths had been his responsibility. A river of them. Wavering and translucent but recognizable, stumbling or whispering or just mute, looking at him, and all asking why.

Yeah. John knew something about ghosts.

It would've been easy to call the kid a liar. In fact, he'd done it, though he had the grace to be ashamed of that now.

Because it didn't do him any good to pretend that there weren't some things you can't fake.

*Desperate in a way he'd never shown framed in gunsights, holding a tiny grey-green model like a talisman, looking older than a week should count for and the closest John had ever seen him to afraid.*

Giving curt instructions to follow him, John walked toward one of the small adjacent rooms, and didn't look back until they were alone.

It was like looking straight into the past.

Abyss or not, he looked back.

*It was obvious he was expecting something, but he snapped rigid like he'd been hit by lightning (though lightning didn't do that, you twitched and thrashed all over, John should know), though there was nothing to see or maybe there was a flash of light and one of dark at the same time, and when he stared it was like he'd just gotten eyes.*

Big Boss crossed his arms and put a wall to his back.

"All right, kid," he said, voice bludgeoned flat, "you've got my attention. Start talking."

There was a bite of malicious pleasure at the temper that flared in those blue eyes. The next words out of his mouth were going to be,

*"Don't call me 'kid.'"*

*Glaring at him from inches away, and it would have been a showdown squint worthy of an old western if he hadn't been straddling John's lap, too.*

*"I'm a man. With a name."*

*"Yeah." Tasting the lilt of it on his tongue. "Adamska. Right?"*

*"And don't you forget it."*

The flash of anger evaporated, and left behind nothing but business.

The boy said, "The Philosophers only recovered half of the Legacy."

"You'll have to do better than telling me things I already know," said Big Boss. They'd told him as much themselves, or their thug had, years ago, before trying to beat the location of the rest out of him. Funny how his life had a running theme of people using electricity to smack him around while they gave away their own secrets. "Much better. Like, telling me who knows where the other half is hidden."

The boy smiled.

The bottom dropped out of Big Boss's brain when he understood  
*that the look on his face when he'd gone white and breathed "You" wasn't fear and when he sprang at him over the table like a jungle cat at the hunt's finale it wasn't out of hatred, that the cold splash of whiskey on his chest from the glass as it scattered out of the way was nothing to the hot press of his mouth, and even when all he would tell him was "It was you all along" and laugh like a kid, a real kid, he knew*

what Ocelot was saying.

"You know." The pieces clicked together in his head. "No. You're the one who stole it."

The kid spread his hands. "What do you know. You've caught me out."

Like he was accepting a fucking compliment.

But the rest of the picture didn't stop forming.

"And you never told me."

All this time, he'd thought he'd been special.

It should've been too late for any betrayal to matter.

He should've remembered that this kid was never one to be cowed by anger.

"No," the boy said, looking searchingly into his eye, "he wouldn't have, would he? He'd have known what you would use it for. He'd have known that if you asked, he'd help. There'd be no way to turn his back on you this time. And he knew that if it happened everyone involved would end up dead, either in the battle itself or to keep the secret."

"He?" Big Boss pressed, viciously incisive on the petty detail. "I thought you were claiming you were Ocelot."

"I am," he said, standing stoic, not missing a beat. "An Ocelot. At one point we were all one person, but now I'm

*joining you," he said, staring John in the face with that stolid insolence like he'd expected him to argue. "You need me."*

"I do?" John said, letting irony quirk his eyebrow. "You must think I'm in pretty lousy shape."

*Adam shrugged, looked pointedly around the room, morning light slanting onto his bare chest, with the look of insouciance only a man with sheets tangled around his legs could perfect and John suspected he was better at than most, and said, "You're hopeless on your own."*

*Putting more effort into stretching than thinking, John said, "C'mon, it's really not that bad."*

*But it didn't matter, because when the kid's eyes flew to him like throwing knives he grinned kind of sheepishly, and a second later he smiled too, knowing that it's not the same."*

And the look in the kid's eye said that he knew as well as anybody that he was Ocelot, but he'd never be *the* Ocelot.

His Ocelot.

"Then why should you think any different?" Big Boss said. "If he wouldn't hand over the Legacy to me, why would you?"

"Because you need it," the boy said immediately. "He thought he could stop you. I know better. You're not the kind of man who gives up. It's not in your nature to let things go. There's nothing anybody can do to stop you from fighting, but I can make it so that you have a chance to win. I've got the means to take the fight to their level, on our terms."

The way he stood, spoke, looked, were as familiar as the day he'd died.

And he had the fucking gall to be at ease.

"I see," said Big Boss. "It's a trap, isn't it."

The kid stared at him with what looked like actual surprise.

"What the hell would I betray you for?"

"People seem to have a habit of finding reasons. Especially the kind who show up from nowhere and start offering something for nothing.' Big Boss willed his eye hard and cold. "I'm not in the mood for games. Out with it, kid. What's your scheme?"

"No, no, no!" The boy raked his hand through his hair. "It's not like that. Look."

Somebody should have told him that affecting a tone of affronted reasonability works a lot better when you haven't been dead for three years.

The boy leaned forward slightly, eyes narrowed with intensity.

"I don't think you understand what I'm offering you," he said, delivering it so perfectly that Big Boss wanted to ask him where he'd found the time to watch every mob movie ever made but he knew perfectly well that this kid was just *like that*, "I'm giving you three of the Philosopher's own tools to use against them."

No amount of time travel or parallel dimensions in this or any other world would give Ocelot the ability to say something like that without illustrating it, three fingers upraised.

"Metal Gear REX-"

"Already mine," Big Boss pointed out, feeling that the fact merited mention.

"-The Legacy," the boy continued, slightly louder, folding down his second finger, "and me."

He couldn't say it wasn't a temptation.

The kid was good, grant him that much. He knew that Big Boss and Ocelot shared something of a weakness for poetic justice.

"So you say," Big Boss growled. "All I've got to go on is your word. Even if you're telling the truth about knowing where the Legacy is, you've got no obligation to give it to me. Try harder, kid. There are too many people in the world who want me dead to go haring off on any fool's errands, especially ones suggested by...whatever the hell you are. This has got 'setup' written all over it."

The boy scowled in exasperation, which Big Boss thought was more than a little unfair.

"Look," the kid said, as if he was the one whose patience was getting worn dangerously thin, "The past fifty years have gone on without me. I've got no connections. No allies. No superiors. I've got nothing, nobody but what's under this roof, and they've got no reason to even fucking listen to me. You don't want to go get the Legacy? Fine. I'll go myself. I'll drop it in your hands like a fucking Christmas present. Give me the means and I'll walk out the door right now."

"Fifty years, you said," Big Boss reminded him, figuring he might as well make a token effort toward playing along. "That's your story, right? A lot's changed. You wouldn't know anything about how this world works. If I *was* stupid enough to let you loose, you wouldn't make it out of the state."

"Send someone with me, then. For a native guide, and to keep an eye on me for you." He paused briefly to pick a prospect out of the air. "Say, that engineer. "

And he got the exact same look in his eye when the conversation had gone exactly where he wanted it to.

Big Boss snorted, nearly laughing out loud.

"What, so you can bribe your way into a new host's good graces with the means to their own Metal Gear?"

He shook his grizzled head, almost ruefully.

"You should've spent more time on your homework, kid. The real Ocelot was a hell of a lot better than that."

He couldn't say it was like he'd slapped him in the face, because it wasn't. If he'd done that, the

kid would've just looked annoyed and punched him back.

Not stood there frozen, his face contorting like methodical clockwork from shock to rage.

Sorry, kid. You can't have thought it would be that easy.

"You think I would *hand him over*, like a- a piece in a fucking game?" the boy snarled. "Who do you think I am?"

"I don't know," Big Boss said, biting off the words. Not a ghost. Not a memory. Not an imposter, or a misplaced shred of the past, god no. "So I've got to assume you're somebody dangerous. All I know is you've pulled a gun on my men" -*my sons*- "and you've gotten in my way. That makes you my enemy. Couldn't say why you wanting to run off with the man who designed the ultimate in mobile tank weaponry rouses my suspicions. I must be getting paranoid in my old age."

Looking at the kid made him feel every year of it.

The quiet sorrow made Big Boss a lot more uncomfortable than the anger had.

"For god's sake, kid," he sighed, irritated at succumbing to the urge to explain himself, "Why *else* would you want the guy?"

Ocelot said, quietly, "You wouldn't believe me if I told you."

"Hasn't stopped you before."

With the same stance as he slid into right when he was about to draw, Ocelot narrowed his eyes. Guardedly, the kid said, "What if I told you I love him?"

There was a stark, still moment, as the brain asked the ear what kind of credulous idiot it thought it was.

Big Boss rewound the mental tape of the past few seconds and played it again, paying careful attention.

And again.

"Skinny guy?" he hazarded, because there had to be a mistake in here somewhere.

Ocelot's glare could have frozen mercury in its tracks. "Yes."

"Wears glasses?"

"Yes."

"Has a thing for giant ro-"

"Yes. "

"Huh."

Big Boss thought.

A mad little grin made a break for his face, but he caught it before it could get past the beard.

"Congratulations, kid!" he said warmly. "Calling yourself Ocelot set the bar for Crazy high, but you just outdid yourself."

"Stop trying to pretend you don't believe me," Ocelot said, unperturbed. "You're not fooling anybody."

"Then what do you want me to do?" Big Boss cried, a little harsher and a lot louder than he would have intended, if he'd intended to say it at all, "Ocelot's dead. Nothing can"

-standing over the steel table with its thick steel restraints, all so clean and shining, the chest ripped open and glinting like shrapnel and above it the trickle of dried blood from the gunshot wound that was fresh-

"change that. Then you walk in here with his name and his face. What am I supposed to do? What the hell do you want from me, kid?"

Ocelot looked at him straight, with that exaggerated gravitas that didn't seem quite as theatric right now.



He said, "You're going to have to *trust me,*" he shouted over the gunfire, almost apologetic. The steady ratta-tatta-tat of AK-47s, terrorist, rebel, and freedom fighter standard issue, sold in open air markets next to stalls of live chickens and usually cheaper.

Nodding and following him, trusting his judgment and his skill and the twist of his arm, hearing footsteps pounding closer and flattening against the wall, the cool of the stone at his back and the heat of his comrade at his side. Waiting, channeling the anger to fuel his senses. These bastards were in his home. That made it personal.

Catching the movement and the wrench of that old soldier's instinct in his gut, grabbing for a handful of leather coat and missing by an inch (depth perception wasn't what it used to be) coming out firing and not looking back til it was over because he'd known since the first shot that the last words he'd ever hear him say were

trust me."

Big Boss said, "No."

He got the fun of catching the boy off guard. It only lasted a second, but then, most good things did.

"The hell do you mean, no? You've got to at least admit-"

He had the kind of face that gave ray-by-ray reports as understanding dawned.

Big Boss found he liked that a lot less.

"It's because I'm not him, isn't it," Ocelot said, staring at him like he was some new species of idiot, one that might be territorial.

"Not who?" Big Boss said innocently.

He didn't take the bait.

"It doesn't matter which one I am right now. When it comes to Outer Heaven I know what he knows, and we know that if I don't change it you'll- do you want to die?"

He was getting agitated. Big Boss could almost see the energy leaping around him in blue sparks. His sentences were running together, words stumbling into one another like drunk men in a desperate foot race.

"I can't change anything, not even- But you'll die if I can't change it, not in the same, not the same mistakes again, you can't give up so easily, I don't want you to die and he doesn't want you to die, don'T Give up -"

Something strange was happening to his voice. It was jerking in sudden directions, like a rag doll in two dogs' tug-of-war.

He was doing the same thing; twitching, like he was trying to throw somebody off. Something about the spasms made it almost seem like there was something flickering behind him. His eyes were fixed on something far away.

Big Boss stepped forward.

"-don't coME Clossser -"

The boy's hands flew out in front of him in a gesture of warding.

He was looking at something, but it wasn't Big Boss.

"no – I know – you'll die if I can't, you have to let me, jusT LEt me – he knnnnnnows you have to – let me – we have to – it doesn't matter, I already know, don't you understand, it's over and I *lost* – theN WHy are you still tttry – Because I can't just give – just stop – LET – wrong it's all wrong but I can't give him up, you couldn't – only once – stop it! get out! I don't know how – you don't want he doesn't – I woN'T – can't change, but I have to...have to...him...I... I give up!"

The boy's eyes rolled up in his head, and he went limp.  
He caught himself on his hands before he hit the ground.  
They did say cats always land on their feet.  
For a second, it was still as death.  
Slowly, like an unfolding, Ocelot stood up.  
John had thought he would never see those eyes again.  
The air around John turned to clear, cold quartz.

The boy's mouth worked, soundless as an obelisk aging, like a snake long sleeping trying to remember how to unhinge its jaw.

It should have been a voice like the rattling of bones dredged from a river bottom, or wind on a black-mawed night, or a thin, frayed thread of whisper.

Or only the boy's, laughing at him.

"It's been a while, old Votan."

Deeper. Coarser. As though in the seconds of silence, his throat had weathered half a century's worth of shouts, laughter, and gunpowder on the breeze.

The mouth was the kid's, but the voice coming out of it wasn't.

John heard someone say,

"Adam."

"Yes." That voice, rich with satisfaction, through the too-red lips. "It's not quite polite to commandeer somebody's body like this, but it's for a good cause. I suppose you could say I have a claim to it, in a way."

John's mouth was dry.

It was all flat and too thick at the outlines, like when he had first lost his eye, all pressurized color pressing closer to him in a single monumental dimension. He couldn't see.

His voice said, "Adam..."

"I don't have much time," Ocelot said, not unkindly, "so we don't need to spend it saying anything we both already know."

He could try all he wanted, but John wasn't much of a skeptic at the best of times. He could never stand up long to evidence.

Not when it was staring him in the face.

Those eyes.

"It's my fault you died," he said, words gone tinny from echoing off the insides of his head these long years. "Worse than that. I let them have you down there, all this time. I never knew-"

"Of course you didn't," Ocelot said. "The ravens on your shoulders can't tell you everything. It's a fool who forgets that. In the first place it was my own damn fault, and I'd do it again. But that's not what I came to tell you."

That "listen-to-me-and-listen-good" stance.

"This one's right," Ocelot said. "You've got to trust him."

There was something at the back of John's mind. Something important...oh. Yeah.

He had to know.

"You..." His tongue was disconnected from his senses, an isolated islet of motion and vibration. "You hid it from me. The Legacy."

"Damn right I did." The throat should have been too young, too smooth to frame that harrumph he made, that vocal twist like twisting his elbow. "There's only one thing you would've wanted to use it for, and I never once won an argument with you because you never saw being dead wrong as reason

to give up."

Stubbornness fit his features like a red leather glove.

"Listen to me," Ocelot said. "You can trust the kid. He's here..."

A wisp of smile played about the borrowed lips.

"...for the same reason I am."

John looked at him with puzzlement. "To tell me about the Legacy?"

The look Ocelot gave to say that words were inadequate for the expression of how much of an idiot he was hadn't changed, either.

"Don't be dense," he said acerbically, and, after a few false starts, moved forward.

He always did believe in actions over words, Ocelot.

It was no use fighting the memories that came with the pressure of his lips.

No matter how many years passed or how hard the world scrubbed at the last stain of naivete, it wasn't in John's nature to reject a gift.

The kiss lingered, long and slow, stretching out the stolen moment into a Mobius strip that doubled back and back on itself until it was over and none too soon, because there was no pretending it wasn't goodbye.

And all John wanted to do was grab him and pull him back and not let go, and his hands burned with it, and he couldn't, because his heart was lying while his eye told the truth and all of it was just to say that yeah, this was Ocelot.

And he wasn't his.

And John didn't have the right to hold him back.

"Believe in us," Ocelot said, falling back, out of his reach as if he wasn't already, "Trust me enough. Don't give up. I'll be waiting."

The young man's hands rose, shrouded in the old man's kinetic signature, unmistakable as the lightning that hit you once before, fingers cocked to fire like memory.

"We'll meet again. John."

His image blurred, and John blinked. It didn't help.

There was a flash of blue light on a spectrum below infrared, blinding to the mind's eye. He never had lost that sense of showmanship.

It was a relief to John when his vision returned, creeping back slowly, as if anxious it might be subjected to further metaphysical distress. Losing one eye to this kid he could overlook. Two was pushing it.

The boy had stumbled against the wall, and was leaning there like a cardboard cutout. Pale, eyes closed, but breathing.

"You..." Big Boss began, then realized he had no idea where to go from there. All the familiar paths trailed off into dead drops, and damned if he could see the bottom. *You okay?* lacked a certain gravitas, and asking, *You you again?* after- that- was more than he could force himself to do in one day.

"If you say," the young Ocelot said shakily, his voice as different from the one before as a man's reflection was from his silhouette, "I look like I've seen a ghost, I will wrap that eyepatch around your neck and throttle you with it."

"Wasn't planning on it," said Big Boss. His mouth felt numb.

"Good," said Ocelot.

He opened his eyes, one millimeter at a time, like peering through the blinds when you're not sure whether the hoofbeats outside are a Forth of July parade or the Four Horsemen of the

Apocalypse.

The kid gave Big Boss a wary, searching look, but a sort of perfunctory one, with a thread of the precursor to trust or a kind of friendship in it, like you might look at something about the general shape and description of a puppy but that might be constructed of unexploded ordnance.

With that petulant twist to his mouth just to prove that being one of the world's best and most ruthless soldiers didn't mean you couldn't also be a brat, Ocelot said, "He'd better have gotten through to you. I'm not doing that again. It was weird."

Big Boss felt a sudden manic jocularity. Like he'd passed through tragedy and come out the other side, where Oedipus Rex was washing the stage blood off his eyes, Lennie was petting rabbits, and Lady Macbeth was ordering another mai tai.

He opened his mouth and blocked all the suggestions of lewd jokes the kid's words could have been the punch line to, and what showed in the blank gap left between emotion and response was the truth, and it came out as,

"Yeah. He did."

"So you don't think I'm trying to kill you?" Ocelot pressed, used to victories that metamorphosed back into defeats at a moment's notice like butterflies in reverse.

And now he couldn't help it.

"You don't have what it takes to kill me, remember?"

As soon as Big Boss heard it come out of his mouth, he recognized the statement as a forebear to yet another attempt to prove it wrong.

Ocelot slouched against the wall like a lazy kid outside a drugstore and laughed like one, too.

"You might be right," he said. "Maybe it's not such a bad thing, either."

"Glad you think so," Big Boss muttered.

The kid straightened up, drawing that hard-won arrogance, the visible garment woven of I'm-good-and-I-know-it that was as unique and unmistakable as his face, back across his features.

John had gotten so used to seeing him without it that he'd almost forgotten what it felt like to be pushed back outside.

"We work together, then," Ocelot said,

*winding his arms around John's neck and kissing him fiercely.*

*"You don't want to go back?" John asked once his pulse slowed down, half joking and half wanting to be sure, in more ways than one.*

*Adam snorted, stepping back, and emitted a long, elegantly constructed string of Russian that retained the effective part of its meaning but lost a great deal of color by reduction to the English, "Fuck 'em."*

*"I've had enough Philosopher's games," he elaborated, placing the hat on his head with a look in his eyes of clear resolve that made John forget to ask him where the hell it had come from. "I prefer action."*

*"They'll come after you, you know," John said.*

*"Let them." The revolver spun on his finger, faster than the eye could follow. "We can handle it."*

*"So you're with me?" John said, because it wouldn't mean anything unless there was room to say no.*

*The gun stopped, raised high and vertical, so that the tableau was bifurcated, half stark young face and half gleaming silver. It was a dramatic effect that John indulgently doubted was unintentional.*

*With the right half of a smirk, Adam said, "To the end."*

extending his hand.

Big Boss took it gingerly, fearing to crush the glass structure of the tentative understanding.

Warmth leaked through his glove.

A temptation it wouldn't do any good to indulge was just another name for an ache.

When his hand withdrew, it was just as empty.

"Nothing for it now but to plan," Ocelot said, and the look in his eye said he understood, for all the good it did him.

"Yeah," said Big Boss.

And he was right.

There was nothing he could do.

From then on, it was business.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/43/>

# chapter 44

## Stray by Dahne

*Yet I am not more sure that my soul lives, than I am that perverseness is one of the primitive impulses of the human heart - one of the indivisible primary faculties, or sentiments, which give direction to the character of Man. Who has not, a hundred times, found himself committing a vile or a silly action, for no other reason than because he knows he should not? Have we not a perpetual inclination, in the teeth of our best judgment, to violate that which is Law , merely because we understand it to be such?*

-Edgar Allan Poe, *The Black Cat*

---

*The world can change the nature of time.*

Evening's shadows spread on a wide path of ground swept clean of snow. Twilight was tricky, the worst kind of light to shoot in, but it couldn't hide the smell of silence, emptiness. Tracks bore testament to the earlier passage of soldiers, back and forth between the two buildings, until the gravity of habit and obedience won out and they settled into adjusted orbits. The first phase, the red blush of excitement, was over with. Now they dug in, not admitting in words but perhaps knowing, in the way a dog scented rain, how close they had come to annihilation.

Crates lined the emptiness between buildings like sentries, Easter Island monoliths carved by a sculptor who had never evolved past literal cubism. Taller than a man, they easily evicted the dying light from their territory and each stood sovereign over a square demesne of darkness, giving the area the look of a chessboard that had overgrown its station.

At Adamska's approach, the shadows burst into flight.

Ravens. Hundreds of them, he saw, as his eyes adjusted to the space between shadow and lack thereof, crouched and fluttering and pacing between the irrationally huge containers

Some people called ravens harbingers of death. Precisely backwards, as usual. People killed, or died. The scavengers cleaned it up. They were there, so people blamed it on them. That was gratitude for you.

Adamska was in a mood of frustrated morbidity that was the rightful possession of anyone who had spent the past few hours writing his own obituary.

He would be glad when it was over. Honestly, he found it all exhausting. Killing people was easy. You did it once, and then you were done. Keeping them alive was an ongoing process.

They'd made their plans, and then the aged profile he'd known not so long ago had turned half away, and in a voice like gravel at a crossroads, Big Boss had told him to get out of his sight.

Adamska couldn't say precisely when it was he had forgotten what it was all for.

They always said acting on impulse would get him into trouble one day.

Though the effect was claustrophobic, the courtyard itself was expansive. It was difficult to make out the figure halfway down, seated on a smaller crate, until he drew closer. Birds quorked irritably out of his path at each step.

Hal was watching a raven in front of him as it drew up to its full, somewhat dismaying height and cawed. There was a look of distance in his eyes and something in the hand that lay by his side. Adamska's footsteps went unnoticed. So did the blunt wingbeats of a bird as it flapped up to the crate beside Hal, to investigate, extract, and swallow the contents of his supine hand. A moment later, the

hand raised, and made an undecorous, round throwing motion. Hal's brow knitted with confusion. He looked up.

His eyes and the ravens shared the same startlement.

"Oh! Adamska."

Only for a second, before the facade of humanity intervened.

Adamska would wonder what he himself looked like when no one was watching, but it was pointless. Someone was always watching.

"The dogs are called off," he said succinctly. "It's over."

Message delivered, he walked by.

The past hours of deliberation had been good for him. Some semblance of normalcy, misguided parody as it might be, had provided some much-needed distance. Perspective. The only limit to achieving the feral, arid serenity that had been his default state – how long ago was it, now? Did time travel affect the measure? - was the way that one eye would follow him, sometimes, tracking his features with more than mere suspicion. Trying to read the look in it had made recent memory stir uncomfortably. Made something roll over in its sleep at the bottom of the murky emotional reservoir and shed ripples reminiscent of dispossession. Recalled that feeling of the *him*-ness being overridden in his own body, his sense of time and space and *self* fading into twilight grey, leaving only the vague and inarticulate curiosity if this was what it felt like to die.

Dispossession.

Yes. It had been...awkward. Not quite the ideal reunion, but what were you going to do?

It had, however, the beneficent effect of putting Adamska back into his right mind.

He had needed to be out of the engineer's presence. The man had a disregard for reality that proved infectious. Once the proper distance was restored, however, it was possible to remember how to shore up your defenses and become yourself again. It was a kind of intoxication. There was bound to be some loss of control. No point to regretting it. The trick was not to allow yourself to get addicted.

Adamska wondered, fleetingly, what he had been thinking. To go to such lengths for the sake of a man who wasn't worth his notice, let alone contempt. He'd seen Adamska naked, yes, in more senses than one, but that had been a function only of being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

That he could feel anything more than that, that there could be something special about this man, something rare and inimitable, simultaneously resilient, priceless and fragile... Ludicrous.

He was an idealist, that was his problem. He could fall in love with the shape or ideal of something to the point of blotting out the truth of how petty it really was. The realization was always an embarrassment, so of course he put it off as long as possible. Especially when the issue at hand was a stammering simpleton. He hadn't been bested. He'd bested himself. It was like what they said about the finest fencers, the ones who had been at it so long that a sword felt more natural than an empty hand; they hated to fight someone with no talent, training, or aptitude at all, because there was no way of telling what the incompetent would *do*. He'd tripped over his own feet and ended up in a parallel universe. No help for it now. He would just have to be more careful in the future.

Just because someone had his moments of savant didn't make him any less of an idiot.

Pathetic.

He stopped dead, hackles at full mast, when a hand grasped his wrist.

"Wait."

Adamska shot an avian glare that should have made the spare, owl-like man quail. Hal failed to notice, his neck craned upwards, eyes rapt with concern.

"What's wrong?" he said.

The words themselves were familiar. That they weren't a taunt was not.

Staring at him, Adamska clamped down on his self-control.

For all the good it did.

Of all the vices his mind possessed, it couldn't maintain oversimplification.

He was too attuned to the sound of lies.

"Nothing," Adamska said, mouth dry with dread that it might be true.

This man who had stuck in his head like an irritating song, until somehow, for no reason at all, he no longer wanted him gone.

Just because something was impossible didn't always keep it from happening anyway. He should have learned that much from Volgin.

It was stupid, it was illogical, and it wasn't going away.

No matter how much better it would be if it could.

Safer.

His hand was still on his wrist. Too loose and unconfining, for something so outrageously and irrevocably *there*.

"What are you doing?" Adamska demanded, because for god's sake someone had to know.

"Waiting," Hal said. "For you. Or for something to start making sense, maybe." He gave a wry, somehow apologetic smile.

"I wouldn't wait too long for that," Adamska muttered, shaking off his hand and climbing onto the crate beside him.

Hal leaned back on his hands to look up at the emerging stars, forcing Adamska to try to summon the urge to flinch away.

"Someday, it'll all make sense," he said, with more resignation than hope.

Adamska snorted. "You say that as if it would be a good thing."

"Yeah," said Hal, more interested in sky than sarcasm. "Hardly anything in the universe is really random, even when it's meant to be. There's always reasons, if you look close enough. Nothing's meaningless."

Trust him to start philosophizing without provocation.

Adamska watched a pair of ravens pick listlessly over the corridors of untrodden snow.

Thought and memory. The updrafts of the heat of battle were the only thing that could send them spiraling away and leave him free.

*Never stop fighting.*

Adamska used to make a point of not listening to dead men. Wasn't much of a point in listening to someone who didn't even know how to stay alive.

"I don't know why I'm here," Adamska said to the three-toed clawprints on the snow. His throat grated on the admission.

"You just came out of the north building, didn't you?"

"I mean," he said patiently, "I don't know why *here* is here."

"Yeah, nobody really does," Hal said. "It's kind of strange, having this big open area in the middle of the base. I think they asked the architect about it, and he said there was a reason, but he wouldn't say what. Word is he didn't speak English very well."

"No, I mean- " Adamska gave up. "Tch. Never mind."

"Hmm? Kay." Hal tilted his head farther back, unconsciously leaning closer.

Adamska rose to a crouch on top of the crate and retreated to sit on the edge of its larger cousin,



as if a meter of altitude would clear his head. He tried occupying himself by thinking ominous thoughts about what the hell could be in these things. Each was big enough to store dozens of caimans, depending on how they were stacked.

Staring at the back of his head was better than seeing his eyes.

Bulky clothing gave him the illusion of mass, if you didn't know better. Adamska did. He knew that the body it hid was slender and somehow compressed, insubstantial, barely registering on the scale of existence. But that it could come to life at a touch, if you knew what you were doing, shift to new spectrums of scent and vitality and soft, shuddering sighs, heat and slick friction and the taut, illicit thrill of letting someone-

No.

There was no rancor to the denial. Not this time. It was just how it had to be. Anger or self-pity wouldn't do either of them any good.

Not far. A little beyond arm's reach. It could be enough.

Quietly, Hal said, "What now?"

"You mean now that we've bought a little time with our futile, token protest against preordained annihilation?"

"Er, yeah."

Adamska shrugged, for the look of the thing, though no one could see him. "Go down fighting."

"Oh." Optimism was at low tide.

He made a round-backed silhouette through fading light, jacket a contrasting shade of white against semidistant snow.

"You don't have to stay, you know," Adamska mentioned, carefully turning uninivited emotion away at the door to his voice. "*You* aren't meant to die."

"Don't talk like that," Hal muttered, and that was the end of it.

The metal reached out to leech Adamska of heat. He let it. Cold was something you got used to. After long enough, the matter that made you up adjusted, and going somewhere warm enough to live in was unbearable.

How nostalgic.

Hal tilted his head upside-down to look at him quizzically. "Aren't you cold?"

Adamska shrugged. "I'll live."

"Come on. This is Alaska, you know."

He rolled his eyes. "Thank you. I hadn't noticed."

"Nobody else seems to. Except for Snake yelling at Liquid to put on a shirt sometimes."

Adamska laughed dryly to himself and said nothing.

He drummed his heels against the side of the crate, and after a moment said quietly, to splash paint on the pelt of restful silence, "Nothing has changed, has it."

Hal's brow furrowed, inverted. "What are you talking about?"

Adamska waved his hand in the direction of everything and nothing. "All of this. It's different, but it's all the same. The same men, the same conflicts, the same ideals. Only in a different order. The same end for John and his sons. The same stalemate between us. All I've accomplished is to..."

He thought of the dead, flayed man, asking for one favor.

"...commit a very complicated suicide."

"That's not true," Hal said. That same puppyish obstinacy. Some things never changed. He scrambled gracelessly up onto the crate to sit beside Adamska.

"What are you doing?" he demanded, flinching, but not enough.

"Sitting next to you," Hal said helpfully. There was never any way of telling whether or not he was doing it on purpose. "I was getting a crick in my neck. You've changed a lot of things. A lot more than I ever would have thought possible, honestly."

"You kept saying that," Adamska reminded him, traitorous mouth curving at the corner, where it thought it could escape notice.

"Did I?" He rubbed his neck sheepishly. "That must have been kind of discouraging."

"It's all right," Adamska said airily, "I never listened."

The derelict light was fading, dragging the white squares of the chessboard below them down through squares of grey. An odd, desperate game it would be, if any given piece could only ever seen a bare handful of the others.

"See," Hal continued, "people think of the space-time continuum as being fundamentally static. That is, as having very rigid rules that can only be stretched so far, if at all."

There had been a time in Adamska's life where he hadn't thought of the space-time continuum at all.

"But you don't believe that, do you," he said, examining Hal's face.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, eyes tracking a pair of ravens conducting a clandestine communication at their crate's corner, "I never really did. The universe is too weird of a place to adhere to any nice, neat rules. There aren't many natural absolutes, and the ones that are go for simple things, like how cold anything can possibly get."

Absolute zero. He'd heard about that, somewhere.

"But the universe as a whole, it's, well, gigantic. We might not even have touched the remotest corner of real possibility." His eyes shone, as if this were a personal aspiration. As it might well be. Delusional, in that strange, charming way. "Besides, we've already got proof that it's not true, in that you're here." He smiled. "That's a pretty major change, I'd say."

Adamska flicked a hand in dismissal. "Trivial."

"Not to me," said Hal, with something so much like the fervor of an affronted five-year-old that Adamska had to laugh, as uncomfortable as it made him when Hal said things like that. It always provoked something hot-blooded and hairy, about the size and general physical description of a guinea pig, to curl up in his stomach and make disgusting cooing noises.

"I mean," Adamska said, "trivial in the wider sense." He gestured expansively, noticed that his fingers were striving to match the ambient temperature of the air in some misguided attempt at solidarity, and didn't bother to put on his gloves.

"You used to say that what mattered was what time considered important."

He shook his head, bitterness curling his lip.

"There's no paradox here. The situation may have changed, but we're the same men, with the same fate. Little toy soldiers on history's board. The universe gets its way."

"Wait," said Hal.

Adamska nearly turned to see what over his left shoulder was so interesting, when he remembered that staring into space was the the incubator in which this man hatched ideas.

"Humans are used to thinking in human terms," Hal said slowly, careful not to let the equilibrium of words in his head and those outside become unbalanced, "We assume that what matters to us matters universally."

His focus leapt to Adamska, the intensity catching him off guard, as it always did.

"You said that the changes you made were allowed because they weren't important, in the grand scheme of things, right?"

"Yes," Adamska said warily, unsure what he was agreeing to.

"What I'm saying is," said Hal, his tone charging gradually with excitement, "Maybe you're right."

Adamska felt an irrational stab of disappointment.

"That is to say," Hal rushed onward, "you're not wrong."

Adamska was glad he couldn't see the look on his own face. It couldn't be pretty.

"Think about it!" Hal cried. "If what's not important can change, and nothing's important, then-"

It was as though a vulture flying overhead had gotten tired, loosened its claws, and let drop a sack of bricks.

Adamska's cold lips formed words.

"Everything can change."

Everything.

"Exactly!" Hal beamed. "Exactly."

"Then what *does* matter?" Adamska demanded.

"That's the thing," Hal said, eyes rolling up in contemplation, fingers thin beneath thick gloves tapping on his knee. "There's no way of knowing, is there? The assumption is that, since all the natural laws, at least the ones we follow, make time travel impossible, it's something nature wouldn't like very much, and so would try to neutralize through any means available. People just assume that history has to stay the same, or, I don't know, the galaxy will implode or something."

"Or something," Adamska said.

"But then, if that's true, just having one atom in a different place than it was before would be enough to throw everything out of whack. And if it's not, then it's just a matter of scale, and how would you measure that? There's no absolute objective way of saying, outside of purely human terms, how much 'bigger' or 'smaller' you being here, or taking a left turn where you used to take a right one, would be than, say, Big Boss taking over the world."

Adamska tried to imagine a world with John at the head of it, then immediately tried very hard not to.

"Of course," Hal continued, "the idea that the whole thing goes up in smoke if a molecule is out of place is a perfectly valid theory. That is, it used to be. It's not like there was any way to test it, since nobody in their right mind was going to try to make an actual time machine."

"You did," Adamska was unable to resist pointing out.

"Right," Hal conceded, with a touch of embarrassment and a touch of pride. "And now, since we still exist, that proves it wrong."

"Convenient, isn't it," Adamska said absently, watching the birds. They paced back and forth like bent-backed old men. Black birds, white snow. If it weren't for Hal, he might have thought he had lost the ability to see color. "All the answers a time machine could give you, and you don't even have to build it."

"Yeah," Hal agreed. "And anyway, seeing if it could be done at all would've been half the reason I did it in the first place."

Adamska laughed quietly, a small catch-and-release 'hah'. "I always thought so."

With some belated chagrin, he noticed that Hal had contrived at some point to lean against his shoulder, a thoughtless gesture of affectionate familiarity. Like a scavenger bird himself, Adamska thought deliberately. Throw them one piece of bread and they trail you for the rest of your natural life, expecting you to have more.

"I wonder if it'll happen more, now?" Hal said. "Now that it's proved possible. Funny to think,

huh? This may happen all the time, and we might never know. For all we know, it might already have happened. I can't be the only one to have the idea."

"No," Adamska said confidently, "I'd say you're unique."

"That's right," Hal said, with the stillness of face that was in perfectly opposite proportion to the motion of his mind. "I was the only one to ever do it. And now I haven't."

The dominant part of Adamska's brain opined that this was a fruitless line of inquiry. He was done with time travel. All it had been was a method to get him from one point to another, though admittedly with the addition of a few... rills in his memory that he was fairly sure hadn't been there before.

Democracy, however, had taken root, especially among the young, radical parts of his mind, the ones who had been born between hands and gears and wiring, or in the soft snow-enclosed night.

They made an arrangement bordering on illicit with curiosity, a rangy elder statesman with vast stores of capital and cunning, and voted to chase that spark of an idea that receded into the distance like a tiger on fire.

Another part, either traitorous or loyal to the point where it meant the same thing, whispered that anything that kept him from the real question was worth pursuit.

Hal was mumbling something, like incantation or irreverent prayer.

"The simplest code runs to a point and then stops. A perfect loop, repeating the exact same information over and over, is just another kind of stasis. A more complex one that changes as it runs will eventually hit an error and stop. But some-"

He turned his train of thought from the dark and remote territories it had been traversing and barreled it right into Adamska's eyes.

"-is self-correcting."

Adamska opened his mouth to ask what the hell he was talking about when the subcommittee of his mind handed up a memo marked 'Urgent.'

The best response to the enemy doing something you didn't want him to was to keep him from doing it at all.

"It can't be," Adamska said, in the strained way people do when they know perfectly well it might.

"The variable that had to be canceled out," Hal said, not listening, with that look on his face that made him something strange and remote, like the shadow of someone out of sight around a corner, gesturing as they speak to someone you can't see. "It was never either of us. The timestream didn't try and fail to make everything stay the same. There was something it wanted to change."

"Don't say it," Adamska said, in temporal flux between warning and the groan that came when it did no good.

As well try to stop a fish from drowning.

"Getting rid of the time machine was the point all along."

At this point, had Adamska been asked his opinion on the great, all-encompassing ultimate purpose of the universe and the many-splendored array of creation as a whole, he would have felt well within his rights to offer the hypothesis, "To annoy me."

Voice blank as snow that didn't have fucking birds rolling in it, he said, "I've been the pawn of a-what would you call it?"

"A set of natural physical laws governing the existence and deportment of synthetic warpage in the space-time continuum?" Hal offered.

"Yes. That," Adamska said, through a clear encasement of stillness.

Coils of diaphanous energy shot through Adamska's mind. Neon lit the taut cording of nerves, streaming back and forth without destination. Dull spikes of light crackled and faded, blazing out before the objects they illuminated could be seen as anything but a jagged intersection of arbitrary boundaries, devoid of context, gravity, or meaning, poised to fall into the final and irrevocable configuration.

Adamska fell onto his back, looked up at the stars, and said,  
"Fuck."

In low tones of awe, occluded by dusk, Hal said, "Yeah."

Frost held the air still, and his voice was set on a different frequency entirely from the discordant avian chorus.

"That means...there's no forces compelling the outcome of any of this."

"No fate," Adamska ventured, watching his narrow world open to dark vistas of star-scattered possibility with no limit but horizon, and refusing to succumb to agoraphobia.

No man behind the iron curtain.

"We're really on our own," said Hal.

"Yes," said Adamska.

The rules had changed.

Usually, Adamska hated when that happened. It made it that much more difficult to cheat.

There was nothing like learning you didn't know as much as you thought.

A chance to win, and a chance to lose, and a real man knew that when the stakes towered out of sight the only thing left to do was raise them.

No one to blame but himself.

"You know," Hal confessed, glancing back over his shoulder, "I don't know whether to be exhilarated or terrified."

Adamska sat up, enfolded his slight shape in his arms, and pulled him back down, to put his warmth between the cold metal and the sky. Into his ear, with lavish abandon, he whispered a secret.

"Neither do I."

Hal's hands closed over his arms, holding him there.

It hurt, like bloodflow returning to frostbitten fingertips. A good, hot hurt.

"I'm going to find the Legacy," Adamska said, delicately beginning to edge a spiral around what he had to ask.

He felt Hal nod. "I'll go with you."

A moment of silence spun like gently dizzy spider silk.

Adamska said, "You have a talent for anticlimax."

"Huh?"

Adamska pressed his lips to his neck, feeling the persistent pulse, a long, steady tapping of natural Morse code. "Nothing."

One of the secrets was deciding that wherever you ended up was exactly where you had intended to be all along.

The last remnants of false light faded, leaving them as the small mote in the center of a trackless darkness, the better to see the stars.

Hal said, "I feel... awake."

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/44/>

# chapter 45

**Stray** by Dahne

*He was rolling down a mighty corridor, a kilometer wide, full of glorious, golden light, roaring with laughter and shouting out confessions at the top of his voice. He was confessing everything, even the things he had succeeded in holding back under the torture. He was relating the entire history of his life to an audience who knew it already. With him were the guards, the other questioners, the men in white coats, O'Brian, Julia, Mr. Charrington, all rolling down the corridor together and shouting with laughter. Some dreadful thing which had lain embedded in the future had somehow been skipped over and had not happened. Everything was all right, there was no pain, the last detail of his life was laid bare, understood, forgiven.*

-George Orwell, 1984

---

*Love can bear the nature of a change.*

The heat and light were startling. As soon as Hal opened the door, it flowed out and pulled them inside, foreign particles slipping through a membrane of atmosphere.

The sound of many voices was strange, after being out there with only the ravens' tenebrous squawks and Adamska. The place was swarming, as though every soldier on the base had gravitated to the building. In fact, they probably had. It was hard to resist a certain tribal instinct, out here.

(Having their own shaman might've had something to do with it.)

When you felt the dark pressing in, and it seemed like the shadows might grab you by the ankle and pull you in to drown, something ancestral told you to gather close around the bonfire.

Or Big Boss, as the case might be. But lighting him on fire would probably be a bad idea.

"They feel it, too," Adamska murmured, eyes roving in a way that Hal had once taken for nervousness but now recognized as a soldier's equivalent of casing the joint.

"Yeah." Hal knew what he meant.

That sense that, through luck or skill or fate or the usual uneasy combination, you'd gotten unscathed out of something you might not have. That strange, almost childish joy that came from knowing with staunch physical certainty that it was good to exist, because you'd just brushed shoulders with the alternative. It was good to know anything with real surety, even if it was only that you were alive.

Everywhere there were soldiers, sprawled on crates or conversing animatedly in knots or cleaning weapons with a kind of brusque affection. The place looked like Valhalla's staff lounge.

There wasn't much hope of blending in, with practically everyone else in uniform. Well, Adamska was, too, but his was off by half a century and a couple thousand miles. They passed a group of soldiers playing cards on their left, Wolf talking to Meryl, a girl soldier who was one of the many people Hal had first met at gunpoint, on their right. It was sort of amazing, the number of people who had introduced themselves to him as, "Freeze!" then a hardly contrite, "Oh, it's just you." She had been one of the first, back when he was still scared, when the two of them and Snake had been cut off from everybody else, and she had let him help. He could have fallen in love with her, for that. But she was everybody's little sister, in a way, and by the time he could think about anything but not getting caught in the crossfire, that went for him, too. Probably a good thing, in retrospect. But she did like dogs. She threw an inquisitive glance his direction as they went by.

By the time it occurred to Hal that these were people whose communal plans for plans for violent revolution they'd recently foiled, it was too late. Or, it would have been, if anyone had seemed to care. They weren't unnoticed; the pair of them stuck out like crows in a flock of pigeons. They were just...accepted. Like they belonged there. And why shouldn't they? Soldiers were odd, in that they didn't spare resentment for people who went against them for their own good. Really, they hadn't foiled anything so much as they had postponed it, for the sake of aiding and abetting.

Hal was surprised how much better that made him feel.

All Adamska, or either of them really, merited was curiosity. They were at that state humanity so rarely is lucky enough to achieve, wherein the world contains enough enemies that there is no impetus to create more.

For a moment in time, they had all been about to die together. That made them family, of a kind.

Camaraderie. Yeah.

It felt, Hal realized, less like a political quarantine than a sleepover.

"What are you looking for?" he said to Adamska, who was looking at every feature of the architecture as though he were trying to pick it out of a lineup.

The young soldier didn't look at him. "Privacy."

"Try this way."

The base was full of small alcoves and good hiding places, probably for some sound structural reason. It wasn't hard to find one that was unoccupied, though not before running into a few that weren't, not to mention a bank of lockers that was making interesting noises.

It wasn't long before they found a suitable alcove, blocked off from general purview by the combined efforts of the angle of the walls and some stacked crates. Apparently they weren't the first with the idea; there was a nest of blankets in the corner, probably not long vacated.

Hal had to laugh. "Must be one of those instinct things. Wanting to feel alive, and all that."

"Soldiers," Adamska said. "Horny bastards."

Hal smiled. "Same thing."

The din of voices faded to a hum, here. Existing for existence's sake, contents indistinguishable, running together like tributaries. Funny to think that the whole range of human tonality could blend together until it was impossible to pick out a single strand and put a name to it.

The blankets turned out to still have one tenant, but the scrawny, violently orange cat let them annex her territory with little more protest than a glare that should have been able to maim at fifty paces. She headbutted Adamska in the small of the back, either out of affection or the desire to imprint the shape of her skull into his kidney, then stalked off, slowly enough to convey a contemptuous lack of concern for reprisal.

"Fucking cat," said Adamska.

"Yeah," said Hal, sitting beside him, and kissed him, just to see if he could.

He responded almost shyly, almost as if he were surprised or had been caught off guard, in a way that made Hal's heart twist, then leap, when he felt long, strong fingers curl around his waist.

Something about this boy made things seem real. Like it had to be, because *he* thought it was. Everything around him happened at a higher framerate, in clearer definition. It was almost possible to believe that this could work, just because he was a part of it. He'd make it work.

They would.

That strange reticence the boy had about being separated, as though one or both of them would vanish into thin air and never be found again the second they gave the world the chance, Hal could kind of understand. He told himself it was irrational, but the problem was, the parts of him that



believed it weren't the ones that cared much for rationality, being more inclined to make him uneasy about crossing a black cat's path and things like that. It wasn't losing him completely he was worried about; rather, losing that connection between them. That easy intimacy that had grown up unprovoked, and was hard to imagine not vanishing as easily. He couldn't help but be half-afraid that, once they had turned away from each other for a moment, the spell would be broken, and those piercing blue eyes would look through him without recognition.

With a quick jerk of his head, Adamska broke away. His hands stayed in place. What went for the others was true for them as well. When the status of your future was in flux, the warmth of another body was welcome. Even if he didn't want to admit it.

"We leave tomorrow," Adamska said.

"Oh. Right," said Hal, not quite as adept at abrupt shifts in topic. "That legacy thing."

"Yes," said Adamska, with that stillness his face got when he couldn't decide whether to smirk or sigh, "that."

"Yeah. Er." Hal paused. He got the feeling he really should have known this by now. "What is it, exactly?"

He didn't know why Adamska wrapped his arms around him and laughed into his shoulder, but he thought that he didn't mind, even if the joke was on him. Most of the better ones usually were.

"I forgot," said Adamska, "I hadn't told you."

He straightened, placing his hands on Hal's shoulders and looking him in the eye, with the mien that demanded the concentration of attention that most people could only have achieved by kicking him in the teeth.

"The Philosopher's Legacy," Adamska said, pronouncing each word with elaborate decorum, as though they were hardly worthy to cast the concept in mere phonemes, "is a cache of money so vast you could accurately call it infinite."

"That's impossible," said Hal.

"It's true. The Allies assembled it at the end of World War II, and hid it around the wo-"

"Either something's infinite or it's not. There's no such thing as *practically* infinite. It's a mathematical impossibility."

"The point is," Adamska said, "It's a lot of money."

"Oh." Hal shifted, rearranging the blankets beneath him. "Well, you should have said so."

"After the war," Adamska continued, deciding he hadn't heard him, "It fell into Volgin's hands, then to the Philosophers'. Through mine."

He grinned, showing canines.

"It wasn't all in one place, of course. Far be it from the Philosophers to be so careless. What Volgin inherited was a painstaking list of coordinates. Funny, how easily microfilm can be scratched or damaged. It was a miracle I got out with any of it intact at all."

His tone was arch and indulgently ironic, like the sharing of a private joke.

"Didn't they suspect you?" said Hal, eyes wide.

"Please." Adamska rolled his eyes with theatric enjoyment. "I'm too good for that."

"Why didn't you take it yourself?"

"Every currency in the world comes down to one thing." He held a finger up between them. "Gold."

"Oh." A moment. "So?"

"Do you have any idea how much that weighs?"

"Well, depending on the size of each bar-"

"I didn't have the resources to extract it. Besides, where would I- that is, I didn't have any place to put it. Thousands of pounds of gold, out where no one but the wolves ever goes. Getting it out will take time, men, and machinery, not taking into account the traps that will have to be disarmed, and smuggling it across national borders. It's not a simple thing we go to do."

There was a kind of pride in his voice. Hal wondered if this boy had ever done anything simple.

"Then how are the two of us supposed to do it?"

"We're not. We're the advance party. We find out if it's where it's supposed to be, and what kind of trouble it takes to get to it."

"Or if somebody else has got to it first."

"I was tactfully not mentioning that, but yes. Also..."

He gave his head a minute, abrupt jar, like trying to get a pinball machine unstuck. Hal could feel the paths of tension refract over the intricate muscles of his hands.

As if testing the weight of the idea in his mouth, Adamska said, "Big Boss is trying to get rid of us."

"You can't blame him," Hal said, in response to an obscure need to come to his commanding officer's defense, "We're not exactly easy to trust. Especially after what we did..."

At least it could be said for Hal's imagination that it had been behaving itself in one respect. He'd hardly imagined any of the fancifully gruesome ways that stunt could have ended.

"No," said Adamska, eyes and voice oblique and with a sense of a lapse in supervision, as though they had been left forgotten on a table somewhere, "He trusts us."

"Adamska," said Hal, some part of him nearing alarm, "what did you say to him?"

The boy's hands loosened and slipped away. "I don't know."

Hal's brow furrowed. "How can you not know?"

"I found a way. And I know what he's doing."

Cautious revelation sparked his eyes.

"He's splitting his forces."

Hal pointed out, "I wouldn't say we really count as part of his group."

"Exactly." Energy practically crackled in the air around him. "We're not one of his. If we get caught – we won't – there's nothing connecting us to him, leaving him free to act without interference from the Phil- Patriots. And... Well. They say they've got their asses covered by now, but these are resourceful enemies. I should know."

Pain put a crook in his smile, and a vicious twist to the edge.

"I used to be one of the resources. If the Patriots bore down here and there was no one outside, this place would be a tomb. No matter what happens now, he'll have two operatives loose in the world, completely unknown. We're his fallback plan."

Hal didn't follow. People made no sense sometimes. "I thought you said he didn't trust us."

"Oh, he doesn't," said Adamska, with enough relish that he might have been figuring it out for the first time himself. "That's precisely why he's depending on us. We're his gamble. He's giving himself a chance to either cheat his fate or seal it."

He gave a small, impeccable smirk.

"And here I thought it was a problem that he doesn't care if he dies. But he isn't committing suicide. He's anteing in. Either he'll be dealt salvation, or he'll be utterly, irretrievably fucked."

"I guess that makes us the cards," said Hal.

"Yes." His teeth gleamed. "Hidden aces. But this time, we make the rules."

Aces were dual-natured, weren't they? Either high or low, depending. People got out of a lot of

situations it looked like they couldn't, using that. Hal had never been very good at it. After watching the patterns a while, he would start thinking about probabilities and algorithms and environmental variables and then someone would be yelling at him to take his goddamn turn already.

"Then, once we have the Legacy..." Adamska spread his hands in the opposite of helplessness. "Nothing can stop us."

"Oh," said the despondent Hal, who had read far too many science fiction novels wherein the boast of newfound invincibility was immediately met with evidence of its untruth, usually by means of lasers or something creatively, extravagantly messy.

One raised eyebrow turned Adamska's face fascinatingly asymmetrical. "You sound disappointed."

"A little," Hal confessed, and wondered how that much irony could fit into one eyebrow. Adamska's face had more emotiveness per capita than any anime character's, even without oversized eyes. "It's just, well... the way you guys were talking about it, I thought the Legacy was going to be, you know, something really amazing."

"Money beyond the dreams of avarice," the boy said, staring at him with lopsided incredulity. "What more could you want?"

"I don't know. Like, a really great giant robot or something."

"We already have one of those," Adamska said, with the curiously light, flat inflection that Hal had found a lot of people tended to adopt in the middle of conversation for no reason at all.

"Oh. Yeah." Hal gave it some thought. He felt further argument needed to be made. "Still."

"You can use it to make as many giant robots as you like," Adamska offered, generously.

Hal brightened. "I hadn't thought of that." No budget limitations, no heavy-breathing CEOs scowling over his shoulder and making pointed remarks about deadlines, or that no, it was *fine* that the laser couldn't aim directly downwards, it wasn't as if some idiot were going to charge the damned thing on foot... "They do say that sufficiently advanced funding is indistinguishable from magic."

"Do they?" Skepticism tilted the angle of his jaw. You could call that jaw chiseled, whatever that meant, but it wasn't; if he'd been a statue, it wouldn't be the kind anyone had made. It would've stood in the center of a block of rock and made everything that wasn't part of it take a step back.

"Er, yeah," Hal said. "Something like that."

But that had been a bad train of thought to board; the next stop down the line from a man carved out was one carved open, glittering inside in lambent hues (neon lights, oh god, oh god), close too close to the face that was so like the face that twisted in a rictus and went to carve his own, the fat man like someone's funny uncle drunk on blood and eyes that glittered mad as oil drops or a doll's, and the broken boy, and how when Snake and Liquid faced each other with the guns at their eyes and when the dead man brought the shadows with him there was the same terrible relentless sense of ruin come and gone-

"What's wrong?"

The feel of a hand on his shoulder broke him out of his thoughts.

He looked up from where his hands clenched unaware on his knees, claws around fistfuls of fabric. Adamska was peering at him as though he were trying with his bare eyes to take apart his face to see how it worked.

"It's been," Hal said, aware of the din of understatement like conversation in the distance, "a very strange day."

Reaction was creeping through his system. Now that it was warm and safe, his body felt it had the right to remind him just how many times it had been in dire peril in the past twenty-four hours, and

to take the opportunity to encourage him not to make a habit of it.

"It's done with," said Adamska, pulling his knees up and leaning back against the wall.

Apparently, this was the beginning and end of his post-trauma comfort repertoire.

Perhaps because of that, it worked.

"Yeah," Hal said, glad to take refuge in words from the pictures that stained his mind, "but when you think about it, there's no such thing as an end, is there? I mean, all this, what Big Boss is trying to do, it all comes from somewhere, right? There's a past there. And, whatever we do, it's going to affect people. Or, if we don't do anything at all, that'll have effects, too. It just keeps going on and on that way. Even me, right now, I'm only here because of who my father was. We've all got these connections to the past, and everything we do might be making that same kind of connection to somebody else. What we do right now might be shaping the life of somebody we've never met. I guess that just...scares me, a little." He bent into a small, self-conscious smile. "You're the only one the past doesn't affect, since for you, it hasn't happened."

"Huh." Adamska's hands hung in repose, fingers tapping at nothing, hypnotic, smooth arpeggios of lucid energy.

"It must be weird, having all that blank space there." Hal was beginning to warm up to his subject. He was hardly thinking of ghosts or guns or the frayed copper ends of wire twisting into corded dark-rose muscle fibers at all. "But then, I guess it wouldn't necessarily be empty. You've still got a yesterday, it's just a yesterday fifty years before anybody else's. Which doesn't take into consideration how you would-"

Adamska's gaze was sober and level. "You're not going to shut up unless I kiss you, are you."

Hal reddened, stung. "You don't have to-"

It was a good ten seconds later that he understood what the boy had meant.

In his defense, Adamska's lips and tongue were enough to slow down anyone's deductive reasoning processes.

"This is sick, isn't it?" Hal murmured near his mouth for the sake of the shame he should be feeling, pulse tapping like rainfall on a tin roof.

For no discernible reason, Adamska went stiff.

"I mean," he continued, wondering what he'd done wrong now, "you're barely half my age."

Then Adamska laughed, and Hal wondered if he hadn't imagined the momentary tensing of his muscles and chilling of his eyes.

"You're not that old."

True, maybe not quite. But still. "That's not the point."

"It's not a problem," Adamska said, as if there were nothing wrong with taking advantage of some kid who didn't even know where he stood in the world.

"It is too," Hal argued. "I don't want to be one of those creepy guys. I mean, geez, you could be my son."

"I was born before you," Adamska pointed out, amusement tightening his mouth at the corner.

"Well, sure, in terms of that kind of years, but you've only personally *lived*, what, seventeen of them?"

"Twenty-fi... Twenty." He shrugged, fluid as a cat waking. "It's a technicality. Forget about it."

"Right." Hal was listening, a little. "But then, if you count age like that, what about coma patients? Or someone who's only paying attention half the time? Or..."

He could have gone on, and probably would have, if Adamska hadn't rolled his eyes and kissed him again.

Gradually he came to the conclusion that, once the situation reached a certain critical mass of complication, he had no moral obligation to care.

"It's all so strange," Hal confessed, his fingers clutching Adamska's shoulders. "All of a sudden, everything's changed."

"Do you regret it?" Adamska said. His arms were wound around Hal's waist, linking them like a strange mismatched Moebius strip.

"That's the weird thing. It almost feels like...I've been waiting. Then everything happens, all at once... And I'm part of it. It's all so far beyond me."

Adamska's mouth curved into a slow arch, a madder bow pulled by a lethargic archer. "Exciting, isn't it?"

"Aren't you scared at all?"

"Not really."

"But, what if what we're doing isn't right? What if something goes wrong?"

"It won't."

"How can you be sure?"

"I won't let it," said Adamska, matter-of-factly. Could you call it arrogance when somebody didn't seem to realize that assuming they could do anything was at all out of the ordinary?

Hal sighed, releasing the tension that kept stubbornly recurling in the middle of his stomach. "I wish I had your confidence."

"Listen to me." The boy caught his eye and held it. "You don't have to do this. You don't owe the world anything. Stay here, and I'll come back to you. Or forget it all and get out. You're not an accomplice yet."

"No," said Hal firmly, only a little surprised to find that there was one thing he was sure of. "I'm coming with you."

And it was funny, to see all the different ways one man could smile.

"And," Hal continued, since he had a running start, "I can't just run away. Not after seeing...what the Patriots are. Nobody's that much of a coward."

In fact, he was a little irked at Adamska for assuming he was. Just because he wasn't a soldier didn't mean he couldn't have *some* spine.

"I'm not running away, not if there's any way I can help, but I can't pretend I'm not scared. I just...want to not think about any of it, for a while."

Adamska looked at him like he was something strange and rare that might not be real, a black polar bear or a sunflower rooted in arctic ice. He cupped his hand around his face and traced his thumb across his cheekbone, like stroking along the grain of a brocade.

The boy said, "I can do that."

Hal knew about kissing in the same way that he knew about, say, carburetors. It went in a certain place, and if something went wrong with it you'd probably screwed up the whole thing, but, apart from a few experts who spent more time with their head under the hood, so to speak, than was probably healthy, nobody knew what it was really for. It was better not to ask.

And once you found out, you wondered how you'd never realized before.

Hal had never known that this kind of kiss existed in the world. That there was such thing as a boy like this, who could kiss like this, dragging languid heat along his lip an open invitation, tempting and teasing until before he knew it he was the one plunging forward, saying what he wanted with his mouth if not with words, and when he felt the smirk he knew he'd been caught out and done exactly as the boy wanted, and if he'd had any breath he would have laughed.

He tasted like fire might, if the burn seared blue and you could catch it and pull it to you tight, and instead of burning you raw it made your nerves light up like an overclocked LED display and all he could do was hold on. Hal melted and poured forward into Adamska's arms, the boy drawing him like the moon draws water, and as resonant with the shock of joy at touching the surface.

His arms wound around the boy's neck and somehow he'd gotten into his lap, and it would have been embarrassing except why should it be? There was no one but them here, and the concept that there was anyone else in the world at all had become academic. His hips rocked forward, and that this boy would gasp into his mouth and welcome his touch lent it all an air of surreality, like one of those French films where nothing really makes sense but then again if you're looking for it to you've already kind of missed the point. The boy's palms were flat wide warmth on his back and even if what he'd thought in those moments of vertigo and the pit of his stomach dropping out was true and this was all a great and horrible joke at his expense, for now oh, god, he'd take it.

He wondered if this was a simpler word for love, this tension and anticipation and the complete and utter cessation of being afraid.

The blankets rucked up under his knees and the wall felt cool on his palms as he braced himself against it to keep from sliding down, which turned out to be counterproductive but by the time he realized that he also remembered that it didn't necessarily have to be a bad thing. Work with what you've got, didn't they say that?

What he had was a preternaturally gorgeous blond Russian boy, kissing him with the kind of skill that definitely wasn't part of the regular Red Army curriculum, arching up against him at just the right angle to show off how you could pretty much count the muscles of his chest and stomach by feel.

Yeah. He could work with that.

Hal was startled by the wicked, magnanimously selfish ripple that rose up through him and gave his motives cross-hatched shadows. In the grip of that imperturbable poise, he wanted to see if he could unman it a little.

Hal was not, as most observers assumed, entirely graceless. It was just that, to him, grace was given in parts. His right arm, left calf, or torso, like temperamental musicians, were all perfectly competent as discrete units. It was when they were asked to perform in unison that tensions arose. While the process of walking and thinking at the same time occasionally presented a significant strain on the mechanism in its entirety, each individual component, taken separately, was well-behaved and even displayed some degree of talent.

For example, if left to its own devices, his right hand was capable of the not unimpressive feat of foraging blind into a rather crowded area and deftly disarming a foreign fly.

His mouth felt cool and strange on its own, and his tongue sulky and bereft, but it succumbed without a fight to the pure satisfaction when one look at the boy's face said that he had caught him by surprise.

And by the full attention.

Slowly, unable, as always, to completely suppress the feeling that he was going to get slapped across the face and shoved across the room any second and more filled with wonderment every second that he didn't, Hal drew his other hand down the boy's front, drinking the feel of him in through his palm. He would have to take the time to explore more thoroughly later. The thought that there might *be* a 'later' made his heart skip a beat in a way that felt a lot more pleasant than cardiac arrhythmia was supposed to. In a rare moment of setting aside their differences for the sake of the greater good, Hal's hands pulled down Adamska's pants, taking a brief detour across an ass that it would have been a real crime to ignore.

When he lowered his head Adamska made a short, quickly-muffled cry.

"*Bozhe moi*," he moaned, burying his hands in Hal's hair, "You're *good* at that."

If there was a cosmic master list of the most satisfying things in the world to hear, that right there had to be somewhere in the top ten.

To tell the truth, Hal didn't have a whole lot of practice at this. He was too awkward and hesitant to be entirely comfortable shoving his face into somebody's crotch, especially when, from what he'd be able to glean, sex was an arena where people used some immense, intricate system of gesture and signal and insinuation that no one had ever handed him the manual to.

Thing was, this kid didn't seem to care. That confidence of his, it was infectious. Like whatever he believed must be true, and that anything he was okay with must be fine. It was like being drunk, except you didn't wake up with fuzzy memories of engaging in shouted arguments about the relative merits of the heavily-censored American release of *Gatchaman* with disinterested bar patrons.

Besides, it wasn't difficult, with such a beautifully expressive subject. All he had to do was follow the way the thigh muscles tightened, and the wonderful little sounds he made...

Hal focused on what he was doing to the exclusion of all other stimuli, until the twitch of the hands in his hair and the slight shift in timbre of Adamska's voice melded into the seamless pearlescent globe of the whole, the significance floating afterward just in time to save himself from what would have been a very embarrassing way to choke.

Sitting up, Hal took a moment to just look at the boy. Adamska was slumped against the wall, supporting himself with his hands, eyes half-shut with the shameless hedonism of a cat getting its belly rubbed. It was kind of adorable, really. He was breathing in long, slow strokes, stomach lifting and falling in an old, easy rhythm.

"What are you looking at?" he drawled lazily.

"You," Hal said, since there wasn't much option but honesty, and come to think of it not much reason, either.

Adamska smile was suffused with satiation. "Good."

He pulled himself and his pants back into order and settled back against the wall, stretching his arm out to signify that it could use something to wrap around. Hal obligingly inserted himself into the space. He reached up to take Adamska's hand and pressed his lips to the palm. It felt absurdly intimate.

Adamska's eyes sideward over to him, with the mien of wary inquisition that he slipped on like a favorite pair of jeans. "Why did you do that?"

Hmm, Adamska in tight jeans...Hal saved the image to his mental hard drive.

He shrugged comfortably, leaning into his – what? Friend? Boyfriend? Partner? Co-conspirator? Souvenir from a reality that now would never exist? Ah, hell – lover's side. "I wanted to."

Adamska's laugh was light in quantity and dark in tone, like coal dust scattered over fingerprints.

"What?" Hal twisted to glare at him, though he wasn't very good at it even at the worst of times. Which, now that he thought of it, this was far from. Very far.

"You don't seem like the kind who often does what he wants."

"I thought you said you already knew me," Hal said, the corner of his mouth quirking up.

"Not everything." Adamska's face was serious, somehow stark and vulnerable. "Not even close."

He leaned toward Hal, their foreheads lightly brushing, and gave him a heated glance that made a good seventy-five percent of his higher cognitive faculties spontaneously combust.

"I could stand to know more."

The warm moisture of his breath wisped over Hal's lips, and when he pushed forward to kiss

him there was nothing like conscious choice involved.

His hands were strong, made to handle powder burns and recoil, softer and less callused than he never realized he was expecting until they touched him, tracing over the curve of his hip like a blind man mapping a maze. His fingers held the power and disciplined delicacy of a bull admiring fine china. His thumbs stroked in smooth arcs, braiding Hal's nerves into pathways of pulsating warmth.

The angular, incredible face shifted away from his mouth and down to the concave bank of his neck where it fit so well, the strikingly soft lips that startled with the existence of something so full and lush where you expected nothing but harsh angles, questing for good places to linger and suck, the lips of that face that found ways to startle even when you thought you knew what to expect .

Hal let his eyes close, and said, "Ah."

Shyness, like grace, came in patches, too. He supposed his senses were a little skewed, if he could be hesitant with somebody who had made every indication that his touch was not at all unwelcome, and, furthermore, whose cock he'd just sucked. It might have had something to do with getting used to soldiers. Certain things they were very frank about, but they might take it as an inexcusable breach of etiquette to, say, stroke their hair.

Like...this.

Like he'd been wanting to do for a long time.

The boy's hair was as soft as it looked, slipping through his fingers like overgrown velvet. A pleased noise came from Adamska's throat, a dark burl of purr.

His hands were quick and skillful, pulling the pebbly, dragging sound of a zipper out of thin air.

Hal said, "*Oh*."

Strong fingers, light, familiar, intimate motion, so much different when it was someone else. Subtle callusing, pattern of lines in relief, could have read his palm if he'd known how. The curve of his back was beautiful.

Soft lips touched the rendezvous point of his pulse.

Coarse whisper. Like snow sliding off a fir branch, that scratching sound, falling. Artful voice naked in solicitation.

"Like that?"

Tiny shivers rolled through his circuitry, tectonic ripples set by the motion of his hand.

"Yeah." His voice held to sentience with its fingernails. It quavered, faded in and out of focus, dithered into scattered dots and reformed. "Yeah."

Adamska's quiet laugh was a rumble he felt on his skin.

He had such incredible hands, the perfect control because he had let control be forgotten to wander like a dust mote in the protected air, the noise and presence of the wall-removed crowd that gave them isolation and a private layer of silence, letting him free like a trapeze artist without a net who will not fall, and the heat and the curvature and scent that was him was all that was real, and the cold and floor and blanket's antiquarian weave and noise were motes caught on its surface, abstract concepts of rocks and pitted ice, comets swinging hazed ellipses around their gravity.

His climax snuck up on him and tossed a bag over his head.

The universe condensed into the parts of it that touched his skin and then that dropped away as well, prosaic conventional senses abandoned him in the care of another, woken by lips and hands and voice and soft firm warm strong skin to split its cocoon and spread trembling, moist monarch wings in the sun.

Slowly, the blood returned to his brain from its vacation in warmer climes. It opened the door to reason gingerly and making sure to wipe its feet.



Soon, he had enough mental cylinders running to be able to tell where he was; on the floor of a military base in Alaska, watching Adamska wipe his hand on the blanket and then lick it clean of the rest.

When he caught Hal watching, he smirked, and swirled his tongue slowly over his fingertip.

"What are you thinking?" he murmured silkily.

"That you look like a cat."

Adamska's eyebrow quirked. He leaned against the wall beside Hal and pulled him close.

"I'll let you get away with that," he decided, generously.

"Mm." Hal made sure that his pants and the contents thereof were in the proper configuration, then let himself melt. "Do I get special privileges?"

"Yes." Adamska's fingers wound lazy laps through his hair. "Many of them."

"Oh." Hal's hands played over the well-defined muscles of his arm. God, he felt good. It was like he flowed into all the aching gaps of loneliness and healed them to a smooth, fine consistency. It made Hal more than a little incredulous. It would have worried him, if he had felt less complete and satisfied. "Good."

His answer was steady contact, and a rich laugh that faded into aurora lights on the horizon and mingled with the violet pulse of dream.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/45/>

# chapter 46

**Stray** by **Dahne**

*Change can trouble the man of a time.*

When Adamska awoke that morning from untroubled dreams, he found himself facing on the floor a monstrous vermin.

It was, on further consideration, a rat.

"He missed one," Adamska muttered, sleep-slurred.

The creature squeaked, twitched its whiskers, and vanished behind a stack of crates. Not terribly traumatic.

"Huh?" Hal groaned. He rolled over, or tried to. Having Adamska draped over the top of him proved to be something of an obstacle.

"Nothing important," Adamska said, resettling his arms around him and laying his face into the arch of his neck and shoulder that had, to all appearances, been made for the purpose.

The more assiduous parts of his mind, obnoxiously early risers to a man, reminded him that he had an armed uprising to fund and an international conspiracy to unravel. None of it was at all as important as laying here on another man's left side and going back to sleep.

What had happened to him?

"Mrrm." Hal pulled up the blankets, about to slide off partially. "Kay."

Ah. Right. That.

Adamska got comfortable, scratched an itch on the top of his stomach, and closed his eyes.

---

"Hey."

Adamska kept his eyes closed and resolutely ignored the voice, in the hopes it would take the hint and go away.

"Hey."

He remembered reluctantly that this voice belonged to someone who did not take hints.

A booted toe prodded delicately at his side. "Hey. Wake up."

"No," Adamska muttered, looping a leg over Hal to better protect him from persistent environmental disturbances. "Go eat rats."

"C'mon." The voice was gruff and tinged with distaste, as though to suggest that there were many, many places it would rather be than here, and the only reason it refrained from mentioning them was to leave the exact number to the imagination. "You've got a job to do, remember?"

"I," Adamska pointed out with acidic delicacy, "am sleeping."

"It's a long flight."

A pause, heavy as a fruiting branch.

"You can take a—"

To make them equals, Adamska slitted one eye open, baleful as a tiny sun.

"If you say one word about catnaps," he said, voice marinated in dire peril, "I will go back in time and steal that cosmonaut's flamethrower just to come back and set you on fire."

"Grrmph?" Hal stirred. Reflex tightened Adamska's arm around him.

"Do whatever you want," Big Boss said coldly, turning away. "Hurry up, or you're walking to

the Legacy."

The heavy, measured tread faded into the distance. The point remained.

Damn it. Trust him to ruin a perfectly good morning with reality.

Adamska levered himself up onto his hands and knees and commenced extraction from the pile of blankets.

"Wha' was that about?" Hal said muzzily. He sat up, blinking owlishly, one hand groping the surrounding area. Adamska handed him his glasses. He put them on and blinked owlishly in better focus and larger dimensions.

Adamska pulled his boots on and ran his hand through his hair in a gesture more habitual than it was essential. He kept his hair short enough that each individual constituent had little choice about what direction to bend in. It was up or nothing. "Our call to duty."

"Oh." Hal pushed at his hair in a way that made the majority of it lie in the wrong direction. His voice was blurry. "Taking over the world. Right. Can we do it later?"

"Doesn't look like it," Adamska said with regret. The concept of riding out a siege by laying around and fucking all day was a surprisingly attractive one.

Yawning and straightening rumpled clothing, Hal bore a striking resemblance to a pile of laundry someone had dropped on the fortress floor. Adamska fought down a primal urge to curl up on top of him and go back to sleep, and pulled on his gloves instead. The leather felt good, if slightly confining. He strapped on his holster and drew the revolver to give it an experimental spin. Well-balanced and loyal as ever. Muscle memory had never failed him yet.

Sensing that he was watched, he indulged in a few extra flourishes before returning the weapon home, and smirked.

All things were better with an appreciative audience.

"Do you know anything about where we're going?" Hal asked, kicking free of the blankets to pursue an errant shoe.

"Yes," Adamska said.

His eyes fell to the seam where wall met floor, identical in bland lack of color, the difference discernible only by the contrast in angle. Behind them he saw fire, and stone and concrete blistering away like the shards of a monstrous egg grudgingly releasing its prisoner.

"I know it very well."

---

Though Adamska would not condescend to regret any part of his life, it was, admittedly, complicated enough that the addition of a labcoated woman menacing him with a needle was something he Did Not Need.

"You stay the hell away from me," Ocelot snarled, keeping the harpy in clear view while he edged discreetly toward the medroom door, tensed to bolt.

"It's standard procedure," the woman trying to inject him with god-knew-what kind of diseases and microbes and tracking devices sighed, as though he were the one being unreasonable.

"So you poison everyone. How fair-minded of you."

He'd managed to maneuver around to the other side of the steel table, the one that looked entirely too much like the one he'd seen...another man bound to. The cold wall pressed against his bare back. The path was clear.

"It's a nanomachine solution," she said coldly, ruthlessness narrowing her eyes in contrast to the accent that broadened her vowels. "Completely harmless."

The woman had dark, impractically long hair, and moved as though she were taking care not to get something dirty. She bore a nametag that read 'Dr. Naomi Jaeger,' no doubt stolen from the bloated corpse of the last person she had jabbed full of virulent chemicals.

The room reeked of rubbing alcohol, sure sign of a worse order being covered up. Ocelot wanted out.

He measured the distance to the door, calculating if he should take the time to shove that syringe she kept brandishing at him down her throat before he made a break for it, found Hal, and got the both of them safely out of range of Big Boss and his corps of depraved needle-wielding lunatics. A shame to leave his shirt behind, considering how long it had served him well and faithfully, but, as Volgin would say, you couldn't punch a man in the stomach without getting some vomit on your shoe.

"Make up as many words as you like," Ocelot spat. A shadow darkened the thick glass at the door. Someone soon to get an applied lesson on the art of getting the hell out of the way. "Come any closer, and I'll break that thing in half and jam it-"

"Adamska?"

Hal. Damn it. Trust him to show up where Ocelot most needed there to be someone he could push out a window.

"Get out of here," he ordered, without making the classic mistake of taking his eyes off the enemy. "She'll come after you next."

"Nah," said Hal, walking in as casually as if there were no threat present, proving himself possessed of significantly more courage than Adamska had given him credit for. "I've already got my nanos."

Ocelot gaped at him. "You *let* this harriedan drug you?"

He really was hopeless on his own. It was pure luck he had managed to survive this long without Adamska's aid and protection.

"It's okay," Hal said, in the tones of someone trying to coax a wounded wolfhound out from underneath the shed. He shot the woman a glance that looked indefensibly apologetic. Ocelot caught movement from the corner of his eye, and snapped back on target just in time to keep the doctor at bay from making a lunge at him.

Not that he couldn't deal with it. But Hal might be upset if he broke a co-worker's neck.

"How do you know?" Ocelot demanded.

Hal sighed and ran a hand through his hair, which was utterly unfair. "It's nanotechnology. I've used it a hundred times. It's completely safe."

"So they tell me," Ocelot said darkly.

Motion in the doorway.

"What's the holdup, here?" said a taut, gravelly voice.

Big Boss.

Oh, yes. Fucking wonderful. Maybe they'd invite Raikov, if he was still alive, just to push the density of people he really didn't want here right now a little closer to critical mass.

A chill ran down Adamska's spine with the memory of that man who had looked eerily like Raikov. Not quite as bad, but far too close for comfort. Come to think of it, that resemblance had never been explained. Another clone, maybe, or-

It was a good thing that the woman didn't choose to lunge while he stood with his back against the wall, paralyzed with the thought that Raikov may have spawned.

"He's refusing the injection," the maniac with the hypodermic said, now additionally under the delusion that a staredown with Ocelot was something she could win.

"Eh?" said Big Boss. "Why?"

"He thinks," she said, as though talking about a child who refused to eat his vegetables, "we're trying to poison him."

Big Boss looked chagrined. "Why the hell would we do that?"

"People have a habit of finding reasons," said Ocelot.

The room went very quiet.

His eye was like flint beneath clear ice after the first hard freeze.

"Take the injection," Big Boss said. "No one's going to poison you."

"Damn right they won't," said Ocelot firmly.

He sighed, and rubbed at his forehead. It made him look younger, somehow.

"Kid," said John, not unkindly, "if anybody here wanted to kill you, do you really think you wouldn't be dead by now?"

It was almost reassuring, if only because that was how he meant it.

John came closer. Still between Ocelot and egress, but now also between Ocelot and Baba Yaga's night nurse.

"Listen," he said, in that tone that wouldn't have given most people an option, but strangely almost earnest. "You didn't join in the normal way, but none of us here is exactly normal. You're-Look. Kid. From here on out, this is a family operation. We don't turn against our own. We're not like them. There's nothing to be afraid of."

"Who says I'm afraid?" Ocelot challenged, meeting his eye. He may have been shirtless and backed against a wall, but damned if he was going to back down.

He tried to ignore the insinuation that he was part of this...family. Other people had those, didn't they? It was common enough. A unit assigned by luck and biology. He'd never been part of one, or particularly wanted to.

Especially one full of science projects and cannon-bearing Inuits.

It was heartwarming, in a sick-sense-of-humor sort of way.

His face looked different, with that short white hair and fine-grained weathering. Maybe that was what made it look, just for a second, like it held something like sympathy.

"Look," John said, staying at a safe distance. There was movement beyond his shoulder, but it didn't register on Ocelot's senses as threatening. "I wouldn't be asking you for this if there was any other choice. As long as you're not wired for CODEC transmissions, we've got no way to communicate with you."

"You could make a token gesture to sanity and use the fucking radio," suggested Ocelot.

"Not an option," said Big Boss. "Radio's not reliable enough anymore. It's too easy to intercept. Unless you want to spend the next month coming up with an unbreakable code – that's not a suggestion, Emmerich – CODEC is what you're using. The world's not what it used to be. Best you remember that."

As if he could forget.

"That's right," Ocelot said. "Technology can come a long way in fifty years. If you can communicate by putting little creatures in my blood, who's to say you couldn't program them to alter the chemicals in my brain and create some kind of hallucinatory mind-control?"

"We wouldn't do that."

"How am I to know?"

"For one thing, it's stupid."

Ocelot let his eyebrow ask how often that had stopped them before. It was good at that.

Big Boss only looked at him.

"No ulterior motives," he said. "Just...trust me. Take the shot."

Ocelot said, "No."

"He's telling the truth, you know," said Hal's voice.

Beyond Big Boss's shoulder, it was possible to see that the engineer had somehow managed to disarm the woman. The empty syringe sat next to a petri dish that held its ominous clear liquid. Hal was peering at it through a microscope.

He straightened, adjusting his glasses, and gestured Adamska over. "See for yourself."

Cautiously, keeping one eye on the scowling doctor, Ocelot crossed the room to his side. He bent to look through the lens, trying to give the impression he had the faintest idea what he was looking for.

Tiny, unmistakably metallic objects swam cheerful laps across the circular white background, resembling a corps of squashed flies doing the breast stroke in a bowl of leftover primordial soup.

"Just nanos," Hal said, as Ocelot watched the innumerable black specks amble in and out of sight. "Nothing to worry about. They're pretty amazing, actually. But if you really don't want to, we could probably work something else out, with time. I'm not sure what we could rig up in the way of secure short-range communications if we got split up, though."

When Ocelot raised his head, he found two and a half pairs of eyes watching him expectantly.

With reluctance, as though the words were being dragged out of him by a complex system involving twenty meters of strong rope and a few pulleys, Ocelot said, "Time is something we don't have."

His back teeth gritted together.

"I'll take it, on one condition." He pointed at the woman. "*She* doesn't get anywhere near me."

The woman's glare ratcheted up a few notches, which was satisfying in a purile way, while the invisible tension that emitted from Big Boss dropped its output by a few joules.

"Here," Hal said. With the dexterity he got when he wasn't really paying attention, he reintroduced the solution to its hypodermic headquarters, and took Adamska by the arm. "Hold still."

There'd been a time when Ocelot was a child when they'd gone through a phase of injecting him with all sorts of things, before he'd learned to leave certain things out of the daily reports they demanded. Certain people. It hadn't bothered Ocelot much. He'd kept a careful inventory of the mental and physiological effects of each, and learned to compensate. Soon he adapted to what they wanted to hear, and they decided to, as he'd overheard the woman say to his handler when they thought he was still unconscious, 'let nature take its course.'

Ocelot had never understood why some men were afraid of needles. There were so many worse things they could do to you.

She'd had the same eyes as this one, he remembered. Elongated and canted at an almost unnoticeable angle. He hadn't thought of it for years.

No one had ever looked less like any of them than Hal.

"No," the labcoated woman said grudgingly. "It has to be in the carotid."

Hal looked up. "Huh?"

"Here," Adamska said.

He took Hal's free hand and placed it on his neck. His fingers felt cool against the artery.

Hal looked at him like he wanted to ask something, but all he said was, "Oh."

When he inserted the needle smoothly into Adamska's neck, he actually winced. It bothered him to cause anyone the most inconsequential, necessary pain. How strange.

The level of liquid went down and was gone. Adamska idly imagined the horde of impossibly tiny devices gamboling through his bloodstream. Hal withdrew the needle and stood back.

Adamska tensed, then realized that he didn't feel any different.

He was almost disappointed.

He examined the assembled audience with a hint of accusation, beginning to suspect he'd been put on.

"Should I be- *Shit!*"

The small dark square in the upper righthand corner of his vision had definitely not been there before.

"The hell is that?" Adamska said, reaching to grab at the box like a disciple trying to snatch the fly from a wizened sensei's hand. His fingers passed behind it, as though the image were pasted to the surface of his eye.

As he focused on it, it grew larger. It was a diagram of some kind, full of geometric shapes and four dots, three of which had cones of yellow light extending from them, one slightly longer and decidedly narrower than the others.

"That's your map," Hal said helpfully, as if he explained deliberately induced visual hallucinations to soldiers every day. Focusing on his face made the display turn transparent, or vanish altogether if he concentrated. "It's this room, see? The dot in the middle is you."

"A blind spot," Adamska muttered. He shook his head like a dog with a hornet in its ear, before they'd learned to keep The Pain away from the kennels.

"You'll get used to it," Big Boss said, with a tone like biting down on tinfoil.

He turned and headed for the door. The long leather coat eddied in his wake. Probably the reason he wore the damn thing. Dramatic effect. As if the eyepatch weren't enough.

"Figured you'd come around, sooner or later."

His voice was lower and he was almost outside when he added, "Had to do it myself, last time."

Then he was gone. Back to work or planning or whatever the hell it was megalomaniacal militia-cult leaders did these days.

"It's a really useful thing," Hal prattled, oblivious, "as long as there isn't any electronic interference. It gets jammed easily, I'm afraid. But as long as we stay out of sight, it'll be okay. It works by-"

"Explain later, please," the woman interrupted firmly, "Preferably somewhere outside of my infirmary."

She picked up Adamska's shirt and held it at arm's length, a look of distaste on her vaguely vulpine features. It was entirely unwarranted. It was perfectly clean, dammit. Well, it had been at some point. Before the time travel. And the averting predestined catastrophe. And the spectral possession. It wasn't Ocelot's fault he hadn't gotten a chance to do his fucking laundry. He snatched the offended garment, shrugged it on, and made a tactical retreat from the harpy's domain.

They exited to the relative safety of the hall. Ocelot tracked the somewhat disorienting change of the map in the corner of his eye, like a speck of dirt that had lodged there and decided to make itself useful. He took a few steps forward and back, watching the way the area shown adjusted to his movements. It was strange to see his own position from two points of view. An interesting technology, he had to admit. It even let him see how closely Hal was watching him.

Naturally. His shirt still hung open, and Adamska held no illusions about his own appearance. False modesty was as useless as the real kind, if there was any such thing. It was only vanity if it was unjustified.

"What?" he said, arching his brow, in a tone that in someone less dignified might be called coy.

"I never noticed before," Hal said quietly. "How many scars you have."

Adamska yanked his shirt closed and buttoned it in quick, fierce movements.

"We can't all be lily-white," he snarled.

"It's sad, I mean. That you've been hurt so much." His eyes dropped. "You're still so young."

The guilty evaporation of Adamska's scowl made a sound like a sigh.

"Would it be better if I were older?"

"Yeah. Er...no. Not really, I guess." He kept his face averted, abashed.

"It doesn't matter," Adamska said. Carefully he took Hal's face in his hands, turned it up to look at him. "In this business, if you don't get shot or stabbed a few times, you're not trying hard enough."

"Oh," Hal said faintly. His lips were inviting, like a shady place in summer. "Just...try not to, this time, okay?"

A smile snuck up on Adamska from behind and forcibly commandeered his face. There was something cute about someone being concerned for his physical well-being, either the novelty or naivete.

"It's all right. All the dangerous elements have been gone from where we're going for years."

Releasing Hal, he strode down the hall to where he was told the supply rooms were located. The map was, he reluctantly admitted, a fairly useful thing, but hell if he was going to let his instinct for mental cartography get rusty. You never knew when you'd have to find your way out of one of these rat-mazes.

"H-hold on," Hal protested, hurrying after him. "What do you mean, 'been gone?'"

---

The soldier on guard outside of the storehouse nodded them through without more than a long, searching glance. Apparently the word had spread. They were not, as Hal had mentioned, terribly inconspicuous. It was unavoidable, and thus best turned to an advantage.

This room was well-stocked, and not only with the odds and ends squirreled away in the sub-basement. Shelves lined the walls, and most other available space was occupied by large cardboard boxes. Ocelot's eyes swept the room, taking inventory. Big Boss had agreed to fully outfit them for their little excursion.

His exact words had been something along the lines of, "Take whatever you want. Just get out."

Adamska couldn't begrudge him for it. He was perceptive enough to understand that whenever that eye looked in his direction, all it saw was a man-sized chunk of salt in his wounds.

"Water," he muttered. "Ammunition. Food, that's important. It might be possible to live on reptiles, but I don't fucking well intend to. A good knife. No maps or radio, that's taken care of, hah. Rope, it's always good to have rope..."

A few minutes later, Ocelot had found nearly everything he could think they would need. He was impressed. He was used to having to bribe, threaten, or cajole his way through half of the checklist, and had unconsciously figured this into his estimated time of departure. They were ahead of schedule already. That gave him plenty of leeway to hunt down...

Ah.

On a lower shelf was a neat stack of precisely what he was looking for. Either old models, or the form of this at least hadn't changed much. He should have expected as much. This was, ostensibly and in partial truth, a nuclear disposal facility, after all. He grabbed one.



Hal made a small noise, a gathering of audible tension. "A Geiger counter...?"

"Might want this, too."

Speak of the fucking devil.

Turning to Big Boss's voice, Adamska caught a glint of motion. His right hand came up and snatched the object out of the air.

It was a small, clear plastic bottle, full of bifurcated pills. Half red, half yellow.

"Turned up those in the Patriot's lab."

Of course. The first thing anyone with half a brain would do was conduct a thorough search. After removing the body. Bodies.

"They block out radiation. Had Naomi look at them, should be legit."

He hulked in the doorway, looming ineffectually. It was a futile effort. Ocelot had been loomed at by some of the best loomers the world had to offer.

Incongruity scratched at the back of his mind, and it was not in his nature to let well enough alone.

Adamska stared him down.

"For someone who wants me out of here so bad, you show up on my trail a lot," he said, with measured venom.

The familiar face, worn with age, cynicism, and no doubt far more scars than showed on the surface, was suddenly difficult to recognize, a death mask of itself.

"Finish here and get out," Big Boss said, folding a tundra into five words.

The door, run by some electronic means, was not designed to slam, but it gamely tried its best.

Adamska was turning to avoid Hal's accusing stare when it registered on him that it was a puzzled one.

"What was that about?" he asked.

Adamska opened his mouth to answer 'nothing' and heard, "He's trying to think I'm somebody I'm not."

"Oh." Hal's face took on the distant, faintly pained look of processing a foreign object through his mental mechanisms.

Adamska didn't wait for him to figure it out. "He's right about one thing. We need to hurry."

"Right!" It was surprising, how quickly he could return from wandering in thought to being again part of reality. Could be by now he knew all the shortcuts.

He gave Adamska a disconcertingly critical look. "First, we need to take care of those clothes."

Either with new purpose or having suddenly forgotten what he was doing and off in search of something completely unrelated – it was difficult to tell, with him – Hal walked off.

Adamska followed, a silvery shiver of alarm bells tinkling in his mind. "What do you mean, take care of?"

---

"I am not wearing this," Adamska said. His voice was flat enough to paint impressionistic landscapes on.

"What's wrong with it?" asked Hal, and continued on without leaving sufficient airspace for the potentially lengthy answer, "It's made of a special polythermal fiber that's practically bulletproof, but still lightweight. It's insulated against heat, cold, and moisture, and it'll even help you blend into shadows."

Ocelot looked down, in the full knowledge that this was not advisable.

"Do you have any cutting-edge technology that doesn't make me look like an idiot?"

He was covered in a substance that might have been a cross between plastic and foam rubber and was definitely an unholy amalgam of something. It shaped itself to his body in a way that was frankly disquieting, taking liberties that no fiber was meant to, state of the fucking art or not. On, it looked all of a piece, from the gloves to the boots, all a dark green that was a meager shade above black.

The overall effect was that Adamska had been attacked by swamp mold and lost.

Badly.

Mildly, Hal said, "It looks good on you."

Adamska glared past him as though the wall had done him personal injury. This was unfair, as this particular wall had never done anything but what was asked of it, suffering bullet holes, the grease of innumerable shoulders slammed against it, and many quartets of thumbtacks securing pornographic posters with quiet dignity.

The attached bandoliers, he had to admit, were a nice touch, and there were a lot of cleverly-concealed pockets. It was always useful to have pockets.

Adamska said, with graceful begrudgement, "Fine."

---

## Notes:

-Something of a half chapter, since the next part is fairly lengthy and didn't fit very well with it.

-It's time for another round of Guess Which Literary Work The Opening Is A Parody Of! Winners get a day off work and an apple to throw at things. (Hint: "traumatic" is a bit of a pun, since I checked the original German version because no two translations can agree on whether it was "anxious" or "uneasy" or whatever, and "Traum" is "dream" and oh god I need a hobby.)

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/46/>

# chapter 47

## Stray by Dahne

*Dare ni mo mirenai yume o mite*

*Iranai mono wa subete suteta*

*Yuzurenai omoi kono mune ni yadoshite*

*Mada riaru to idearu no hazama ni ite*

*Gisei no kase ni ashi o torarete mo*

*Afureru shoudou osaekirenai*

*Tsuyoku motomeru kokoro ga aru kara*

*Itsuwari, osore, kyoshoku, urei*

*samazama na negatibu ni*

*Torawareru hodo yowaku wa nai*

*Kodoku mo shiranu TRICKSTER*

*I had a dream no one else could have*

*I cast aside all that was not of use to me.*

*Feelings I can't surrender abide in my heart*

*Though still between real and ideal there's a gap*

*And my legs are caught in shackles of sacrifice*

*I won't repress the overflowing impulse*

*Because I have a heart that yearns powerfully*

*Falsehood, fear, ostentation, grief*

*All kinds of negativity*

*I am not weak enough to be caught by them*

*A trickster who does not know loneliness*

*-Nightmare, Alumina*

---

*A man of nature can change time.*

The helipad was clear and cold in the morning light, swept of snow and festooned with ravens. Ocelot could have sworn the damn things were watching him. As if the place weren't eerie enough, monochrome as the inside of an albino's eyelids, with the distant lights of the helicopter reflecting like ghosts of visible gas off the swollen, slow drops of snow.

If one of the little bastards so much as cracked its beak on a "nevermore," Ocelot was going to do some target practice.

Hal trudged beside him out into the open, a wide synthetic wasteland. Beyond the high steel crates stacked near the walls, there was no cover. Ocelot would have called it a sure setup, except that there was no way somebody would have based the entire architecture of a fortress around getting a clear shot at his back years in advance. They hadn't known he was coming.

"Snake said he'd meet us here," Hal mentioned, inexpertly scanning the horizon.

"Which Snake?" Maybe once they had their hands on the Legacy they could afford a few more code names. "The old one, the young one with bad hair, or the young one with darker bad hair?"

"Don't let Liquid catch you saying that," Snake said in a voice coarse with amusement, stepping

into sight. He'd been standing behind the crates to make a dramatic entrance.

Or for a place to smoke out of the wind. Whichever.

The similarities of face he could get used to. It was that fucking voice. It hit him like a tuning fork and made memory chime.

There it was. That old electricity. Nerves cocking to fire all at once. It didn't matter that this man wasn't an enemy. For Adamska, it was exhilarating to know that, good as he was, there might be such thing as someone better.

Their eyes met, and they nodded to one another. Professional courtesy.

There was no mistaking that this was the man who had been ready – perhaps even able – to kill him, if he saw the need. Adamska felt a lingering wash of gratitude.

But for a brief preliminary flicker, Snake kept his eyes off of Adamska's new apparel, and didn't say a word. Mark of a good man, that.

"There's a problem," Snake said, without preamble. "We can get you off the island, but not out of the country. Air traffic out of the base is too heavily monitored. Soon as somebody picked up an unscheduled long-distance flight, they'd start asking uncomfortable questions." He gestured toward the distant helicopters, the end of his cigarette glowing orange in the grey atmosphere like a flare shot off by an insect in distress. "Those go out for supplies often enough that you can get to the mainland without any trouble. Any farther, we'll have to pull some strings. Might take a few days."

"I can take care of that," Hal said brightly.

Adamska prevented himself from saying "You can?" and let the other man say it instead.

"Yeah." Hal nodded earnestly.

"Okay." Apparently Snake had also learned from experience that there were some arguments you couldn't win. "Right. Do that, then. We'll be in contact by CODEC."

The corner of his mouth may have twisted obscurely. It was hard to tell through the stubble.

"It's almost like a real mission," he said. "All you need is a code name."

"Call me Otacon," Hal said.

"Otacon, eh?" Snake considered it. "Sounds familiar."

His eyes met Hal's and a strange pall fell over them, as though they reached in communion toward a shared, elusive bond, a half-glimpsed remembrance of a common past exclusive to the two of them.

"It's a kind of fish," said Ocelot.

"Anyway," Snake said, giving his head a small, sharp shake, "We'll be here to back you up. Just don't expect any miracles. We've gotta lay low for a while. Hate to say it, and hell if I know why, but we're counting on you."

He turned to go.

"Snake, wait!"

There was a note of stridency in Hal's voice that made Adamska's eyes cut sideways. Something of appeal.

Ocelot's baser instincts, the ones with their fingers always on the trigger and who could always be trusted to get a word in edgewise, didn't like to hear that personal a tone addressed to anyone but him.

"Yeah?" Snake's eyes slitted, wary.

The look on Hal's expressive face, with its magnified eyes, was undisguised appeal.

A tiny, blue-scaled serpent twisted around Ocelot's liver and sank fangs into the meaty part.

"Could you take care of Kaworu for me?" Hal said, with heartfelt supplication.

Right. The dog.

Seeing that their services were unneeded, all organ-nibbling reptiles vacated the premises immediately.

"Yeah. Sure." Snake raised his cigarette to his mouth, cupping his hands against the cold.

"I mean," Hal said, as if consent given too freely were delicate ordinance, "since he was yours to being with."

"He always liked you better." Snake's hands fell and he looked to the horizon, to that constellation only smokers can see. "He'll be waiting for you to come back. Dogs can always tell."

Hal smiled. "Yeah."

Snake let the cigarette drop into the snow. It hissed in protest and glowed for a moment before succumbing to outside influences.

"Well," he said, "good luck." He waved over his shoulder as he walked away. "Have fun destabilizing the world's government."

While this was hardly what they were doing, there was nothing in his tone to suggest he disapproved.

Once he was out of earshot, Adamska said, "What do you mean, you can get us there?"

No need to mention that he didn't so much as know where 'there' was.

Hal pulled a device out of his back pocket. A small, flat rectangle with a keypad and screen set into one face. Adamska recognized it as what Hal had earlier called a cell phone. He would not be entirely surprised to learn that the majority of the technological development of the past half century had been devoted to taking preexisting technology and making it look more complicated. Typical Americans.

On closer inspection, Adamska realized that he had seen this specific incarnation before. He had been trying to pay as little attention as possible to the physical world at the time, so his memory had naturally stored every detail.

"With that," Ocelot said flatly.

The fucking thing was probably haunted.

Hal grinned. "Give me five minutes."

When the conversation began with "*Moshi-moshi*," Adamska figured it wasn't going to do him much good to listen in. Never one for standing still voluntarily, he decided converted some of the excess energy that sparked restlessly down his spine into pacing.

For a long time he walked, letting the snow muffle his mind. It had grown thicker, almost to a respectable fall. Grey sky, grey walls, white snow, black ravens. As though he were trapped in the center of the world's least imaginative kaleidoscope. Two things that were a constant in any world; gravity, and snow. He let it seep into his mind and sketch abstractions. Power. Love. Gold. Words that embarrassed him, or had. He wasn't sure anymore. They were only metaphors, too simplistic to exist outside of the hothouse of ideal. He only believed in things he'd had for his own. Even then, he wasn't quite sure.

Ocelot's hand caressed the revolver on his hip. Even this age's alchemists, with all of their ill-advised innovations, had known better than to screw with the location of that. It was good to have it there again, as much as the thought of placing it into another's possession carried that illicit thrill, that tantalizing promise of an unfulfilled threat, like a pair of fur-lined handcuffs.

He'd hardly been able to believe in it, to begin with. It had hardly seemed possible. A metal-crafted creature, curved and fitted to a thousand interlocking arcane processes, holding in its stillness the impossibly intricate deluge that pulsed in the infinitesimal space between trigger and impact. And

to go beyond that, to move *with* him, *as* him, as though they were a single celestial mechanism that had fallen to earth in two halves... It was almost too much.

That first day, that first shot pinging its echo against the shattered air, he had had to still every muscle, hold himself in total paralysis to keep from tearing at the joints from the joy of it, clutching his frame rigid to keep the mounting shiver from cresting unbearably and shivering him to dust. That first shot, that promise. There had always been some sense of wrong, the rejection, disapproval, sense of distaste murmured beneath cordite breath, too low to hear without good senses, and even then it faded into background noise like the collective voice of a crowd, hidden by the belief that it was inevitable, indispensable. Only to be noticed when it was gone.

The revolver, that single action that melded with his and became his, that knew him better than he knew himself and all unaware. It was a weapon that the fibers of instinct, sense, intuition, and finally conscious acceptance wove together into the shape of trust. The first thing that he had, down to the stingiest, most skittish neuron, learned to trust. And he hadn't even yet known the ecstasy of reloading in battle. What other secrets might it hold, nestled warm between cap and hammer? Cut open in cross-section, it would have his heart inside, beating red. The revolver had taught him that others might be trusted with it. Rare, extraordinary others.

All from an unintentional meeting, a man who should have been his enemy.

This was not his world. Here he was not the meticulously shaped outsider, the piece who was never truly part of the game. Or, more accurately, the loaded die. He held his own strings. He had no contacts, no leverage points, for all intents and purposes no past. All he had was what he had brought with him.

Adamska's thumb stroked the seamless curve of the handle, smooth as summer through his gloves. Savoring the unforgivable decadence of reliance. It was there, waiting for him, ever steadfast and ever unknowable. The world changed around it, but it remained. Some said steel was the only thing capable of a loyalty like that.

It was not a part of him. No, that would have made it under his control, subservient, and where was the fun in that? Its quirks, its strangenesses and talents were his to adore, its drawbacks all in places where he pushed forward. Existing as an unspoken challenge, asking if he was good enough to flow into the weak points of the design and create an invincible whole, rejoicing with the Dionysian splendor of an innocent when the answer was *Yes*.

No. Not weak points. Character flaws.

"Are you a man or a spirit?"

What would in another man have been an ineffectual jerk of surprise translated through the lens of Ocelot as a spin into an immaculate fighting stance, revolver pointing out the threat like a hunting hound.

It didn't matter how bad visibility was. Nobody should be able to stand so still Ocelot wouldn't notice him.

That his eyes could slide right past an enormous, shirtless, tattooed man with a cannon on his back was out of the fucking question.

Vulcan Raven, they called this one.

The giant purple bird plastered on his skull was something of a giveaway.

His skin was moss-dark and banded with wide purple markings, like woad left to age under the midnight sun. His form spread over dimensions more suited to small personnel transports.

All he was missing was a fucking bone through his nose.

By pure saturation value, the coloration should have stood out like a cannonball in a salt

refinery, given your eyes no excuse to slide right past. Shouldn't have been able to give the impression that you only saw him if he wanted you to.

"What do you want?" Ocelot demanded.

"You don't answer." Another thing learned from Volgin; if your voice was deep enough, anything could sound portentous. "You don't know?"

The Inuit made no move toward his weapon. There were birds perched on it.

Scowling, Ocelot spun the revolver back into its holster. There was a narrow window of time you could hold a gun on a non-hostile target who was determined to ignore it, and the end of it had been swiftly approaching.

"You telling fortunes out here? Or just playing statue?"

One of the birds hopped onto the wide plateau of dark shoulder. It cocked its head and looked at Adamska with an eye as black as the man's.

Vulcan Raven said, "I can tell yours."

Sarcasm was wasted on some people.

"I'll pass." Adamska waved a hand in gracefully negligent dismissal. If anybody expected him to be intimidated by a heavily armed man standing half-naked in the snow, they'd never stood next to Volgin in the rain.

Ocelot turned, back to the trail of footprints in the snow, shapes slowly blurring as the sky refilled them. The walls of his mind turned to inward-facing mirrors, reflecting and reflecting, tracks in the snow, clear once but fading, a cruel kind of mercy because once it was hopeless now he could rest, the battle was lost and so was he, alone with the footsteps and the snow and the pain...

"The dead are not silent."

His voice struck like a whalebone harpoon.

Adamska could almost feel the haft sticking out of his back.

He turned back, very slowly, as though taking care not to reopen an old wound.

There had been the strangest feeling, for a moment, as though he'd caught a single atom of a scent that had run rampant in his memory until it found a mate and...but no. It was nothing.

Everyone had moments of delusion. It was part of being human.

Hands at his sides, releasing each phoneme only once it was armed to the teeth, Adamska said, "What?"

A raven cawed.

"You are never alone."

The snow had stopped.

The shaman had not moved, perhaps for hours. No flakes clung to him.

The insulation of the suit was excellent, but Adamska was cold.

"No," Ocelot said. "He's gone. That's what all of this was for."

Raven watched, impassive. "Was it?"

"He's dead," Ocelot insisted, voice grating against frigid air in his throat. "I killed him."

"That is not dead which can eternal lie..." the shaman intoned.

A bird burst into the air from his shoulder, wings beating like riot police. It reached altitude and wheeled above him in a uselessly ornamental perfect circle.

"Strange aeons are coming, my friend."

"I'm no friend of yours," Ocelot said. His fingers danced toward the revolver's hilt.

"Allies can be found in unexpected places. Enemies, as well. Or those that can be both, or neither. You who walk two worlds, you carry a secret with you. Or-" something sharp glittered in his

eye like a bear's tooth- "does it carry you?"

"We all have corpses in our past." Skeletons in the closet. Strangers in the mirror.

"Yes. Some even stay dead."

Adamska felt his hand stroke the gun's handle, walking the nostalgia of its curves. "I've got more than enough bullets to kill anything that moves."

A raven's cry, loud and near, almost made him flinch.

"Yes," said Raven, in answer to something, ponderous, portentous. "Always fighting, with death in your foresight. Remember well that the law of ashes to ashes applies also to the phoenix. The terms of battle are as fluid as a cat's allegiance."

Adamska pounced onto solid ground. "Are you calling me a traitor?"

It slid out from under his feet like black ice when the shaman only laughed, silently, behind his black eyes.

"A battle with no terms cannot be won, and a man with no allegiance cannot be whole. The trick is in the setting." His teeth gleamed like narwhal tusk. "They say the best gardener is the one who learns to love weeds."

Adamska's grip was tight enough to leave a bruise on the revolver's hilt.

"I hope you don't think you're the first to tell me I'm going to fail."

White teeth stood out in the dark face like clean bones on bearskin.

"Did I say anything about failing?"

The Inuit stood tranquil as a glacier. Maybe in two thousand years he'd get an inch closer to his point.

"Fire is a prickly ally," he said, as though the conversation were a matter for a select council and Adamska hadn't been invited. "Let it command, and it will consume you to ash. Denying it is slower death. It must be used."

"The hell are you talking about?" growled Ocelot, who wanted to crouch, to bolt, to hamstring the oppressor and lope off free.

He couldn't know. No one here knew, unless Ocelot had told them. There was no sense here. Adamska wanted desperately not to understand.

Eyes on the sky, the shaman said, "A hunter does not drop his spear before the hunt is over, no matter how twisted the haft."

Ocelot's body felt heavy, as though the cold had chosen this moment to bunch itself like a hunting cat and leap through his boots and through his bones and out the other side.

"If you want to talk, talk sense," he said. "I don't have time for gibberish."

In unexpected acknowledgment, Raven inclined his boulder of a head gravely. He looked at Ocelot with eyes the color of the inside of a crow's throat, levelly, as though he were ready to stop playing fucking games and communicate something that mattered.

Raven said, "If your right hand did evil, would you cut it off?"

Unconsciously, Ocelot mimicked his stance, as if to match him stature for stature.

"If it deserved it."

The shaman stared off into the distance, as if there were anything to see in the solid gunmetal gray.

"Time has changed," he said, "but we met beneath the same sky."

"I've never met you before."

"You have," the shaman contradicted inexorably. "Before."

Adamska didn't want to know what he was talking about. He should have left as soon as he



started talking about spirits.

"What do you want?" Ocelot demanded, because once you knew that you knew everything.

"Only to give you guidance. A professional courtesy, from one seer to another."

"I'm no bone-thrower."

"You deny." He sounded as if it were incomprehensible. Like nobody could possibly have enough to deal with without having fucking dead people hanging around. "Useless. Those who can recognize the spirit world are marked."

"I don't have a bird tattooed on my head."

"A tattoo? No. I was born with my raven. The spirit world marks its own. Such ink is always visible."

Adamska didn't like the way the Inuit was looking at him. Like he could look straight through him and read what was written on the backs of his eyeballs. Made his arm itch.

As if reading that as well, Raven inclined his head upwards. As he had no neck to speak of, the movement was based at an invisible pivot point in the obscure region above his spreading shoulder pinions.

"A stone stands where the roads cross," Raven said, as though reading words etched in acid on the iron sky. "One path bends sinister, to a shadow that walks alone."

His eyes cut forward, direct as a harpoon and as forgiving. Deep set eyes, black as a midnight rendezvous on the dark side of a glacier.

"This, you have once walked."

Though Ocelot's hand had long been on it, the revolver's hilt was cold.

"There's no such thing as fucking fortune-telling," said Adamska.

His hand gripped the gun's handle like a twig of reality. He thought he could hear his bones creak. It was only leather.

The shaman made no sign of hearing.

"One path leads to a man with no shadow, and that is no man at all."

There was no such thing as fucking fortune-telling.

"One path lies between."

His eyes matched the ravens. Adamska wanted to shoot the fucking things, all of them. They were standing still around them, dozens of them, all watching. It was fucking unnatural. Birds didn't do that.

Birds moved.

"You who have been many," said the witch-man, "know already of its dangers."

*There's no such thing as fucking fortune-telling.*

"You don't know anything about me," Ocelot said coldly.

His voice fell like the warbling of an insect in a colossus's ear.

"The planets in the sky sing of synchronicity." Forehead like a rounded cliff standing in the sky. "Smashing a mirror does not destroy the image, and brings bad luck besides."

Adamska reached for fear and felt it drain through his fingers, leaving salt encrustations and the scent of the cold ocean's heart.

Like a dream he knew he couldn't be having. Dead men he'd never seen.

"You have come now, to our concourse of devils."

An accurate transcription of the shaman's voice would have had to be in runes.

"You, walker in the borderland, persecutor, solitary journeyer. Our ghastly guest. Listen well."

Ravens cawed and flapped, a croaking cacophony like waves breaking on rocks, or seals

barking.

The shaman cocked his head, as though listening.

"My friends speak of sacrifice."

Ocelot knew ravens. People said they were smart. Sometimes he had looked over his shoulder and almost worried that they might be smart enough to come to know an impending free meal when they saw one and start to follow him around. Sooner or later, they were always there. Some people tried to shoo them away, but it was no use. They always came back.

"Sacrifice," Adamska muttered. He wanted to be gone. Nothing was keeping him here.

The infuriating, unsettling amusement was gone.

"An eye to the ravens, a hand to the wolf," said Raven. "There are no lions in the North. Could be you are called Loki, doer of good and doer of evil, and it may be half-right. He who guided the hand of the blind to strike with a weapon forged of the frail mistletoe, from whom none had troubled to extract a vow. Slay no prey for sport, or the gold of the river will drown you. This they say."

"I don't take advice from birds," Adamska said. He could feel the coldness of his own eyes, like ice on the river just before it cracked under your feet.

Raven's eyes were heavy-lidded. He didn't seem to hear. In the snow around them, ravens cried.

The shaman spoke.

"This they say:

"To give an eye without wisdom is a blindness.

"To give a hand without foresight is a crippling.

"To give a heart without sacrifice brings silence."

Adamska felt as though he stood one step to the left of his body. His head was filled with weightless, vibrating particles of sand.

"You don't know," he said numbly. He found his voice, and gripped it hard. "Quit fucking around. Not even a fucking psychic can tell the future."

"Events cast shadows before them," Raven intoned, in that fucking portentous voice that made the most banal ridiculous things wriggle like little centipedes into your marrow. "Your shadow walks always with you. Take care in striking at it not to sever your own limb."

Adamska stood very still.

Wind sloughed around him, brushing flakes of snow up and scattering them onto his ugly boots. It was different from the wind of home; not so jagged, smelling more of ice and emptiness and less of blood.

He was wrong. This was a different sky.

Calm flowed down Adamska's back, smoothing the edges of him back into clear definition. His fingers tapped against the revolver's hilt, satin, solemn, certain, a personal metronome.

"You're fucking with me," Ocelot said, with the genial assurance of one newly arrived back on firm ground.

The shaman's head lowered, as though he would charge, rhinoceros-like, ridiculous purple blotch first.

"I speak no lies."

"Ah," Adamska allowed. "I see. In that case, you're just insane."

He should have figured, what with the tank cannon and the nature communion. Really, Ocelot gave people far too much of the benefit of the doubt.

"You are laughing." Some people might not have gotten satisfaction out of making an enormous, heavily-armed man angry. "Unwise, to disregard the spirits."

Ocelot shrugged. "I don't believe in spirits."

As soon as it was out of his mouth he realized his mistake.

Quick as suspicion forming and made manifest, the revolver was in his fist.

"One of them dies," Ocelot warned, in a voice moisture could condense on and turn to frost in an instant, "for every word you say about spirits believing in me."

"So be it." Raven turned his back on Ocelot. And *he* talked about unwise. "There is no more to tell."

He must have meant it.

Ocelot stood there for a moment only for the reason that he was interested in how exactly he carried that thing. The cannon was, as it turned out, slung on his back like a fucking rifle.

It didn't take long to get tired of watching somebody do absolutely nothing, no matter how much concentration they seemed to be putting into it. Didn't even move when a raven pecked at his ear.

Adamska thought of all the other times he'd seen ravens doing that. Usually, they pulled back chunks. Dangling from the obscenely curved beak.

Ocelot turned away and departed.

The scheming wind shifted, and was at his back. Long after he should have been out of range, it carried the shaman's basso chant.

*"Then, as I have heard, to that gift-hall  
many warriors thronged in the morning:  
folk-chieftains journeyed from far and near,  
from wide-flung parts, to view that wonder,  
the foe's foot-prints. His parting from life  
brought no woe to any warrior  
who viewed the tracks of that vanquished one,  
who saw how he, dispirited, spent  
in battle, death-doomed, trailed his life's-blood  
in needy flight to the sea-monster's mere.  
There the water surged and welled with blood,  
a maelstrom all mingled with hot gore,  
streaming and bloodstained as if sword-pierced;  
death-doomed he'd hid in his fen-retreat;  
afterwards, joyless, laid down his life,  
his heathen soul: there hell received him."*

Ocelot trudged back along his blurred tracks and decided to forget it all.

Strangers who stood out in the snow and accosted passerby with prophecy. Come to think of it, that was just about the only thing Groznyj Grad had lacked.

It didn't take as long to get back as he thought it would. He should have figured. Getting lost in thought was the perfect way to sabotage your sense of chronology.

It was a relief to see Hal's form come into clear definition. Distances were hard to judge, here. For a minute, he almost felt like he would walk on forever, alone in a grey, endless world. Ocelot felt a wave of indulgent disgust toward himself. Superstition was for children, fools, and the mad.

The sky was breaking in places, moved by a wind that came up from the sea, chilling and killing ambiguity.

"*Hai*," Hal was saying rapidly, talking with the contained, frenetic energy of an enthusiastic mouse running in a wheel. "*Hai. Himitsu datta no ni, sono koto o... Hai! Tasukatta yo!*"

"Find a way?" Adamska asked, when he'd – pushed a button on the phone. The term 'hung up' could well be out of date.

"Yep!" Hal grinned. "A couple old friends. They'll meet us on the mainland in two days."

There was no real need for the question. From Hal's attitude, if not the gibberish he'd been babbling, it was obvious his contacts had agreed to play along. Ocelot was more curious about his methods. As many means as Hal had available to make excellent threats, Ocelot couldn't quite imagine him making good use of them.

It had nothing to do with how cute he looked when he was explaining how he'd done something well. Even his gloating preferred the didactic. He collected information but did not hoard it. There was something odd and rare about that, like a bomb shelter made of stained glass.

"What's their motive?" Ocelot said, thumb absently stroking the revolver's hilt. If it was someone planning to take advantage of Hal's trusting nature, they had a nasty little surprise in store.

Hal laughed. "Adamska, they have their own Kamov. They're hardcore military *otaku*."

Ocelot scowled. "What's your point?"

"I told them they'd get to talk to an expert on Cold War-era Soviet weaponry."

Though he tried very hard, Adamska could not decide whether this was idiocy or ingenious.

"Don't worry," Hal assured him, possibly misinterpreting his look and possibly not, "none of it's been secret for decades. The Berlin Wall fell back in the nineties."

Figured. He was surprised it had lasted that long. Construction had been done cheaply, as usual.

"Anyway," Hal said, heading to a smaller door set into the side of the fortress, "this gives us some time to get ready."

Adamska's eyes narrowed at the other man as he thought of good ways to spend that time. Such as cataloging good flat surfaces to ravish him against. "I don't see how much more ready we can get."

"Me neither, honestly," Hal admitted with a hint of resignation. "Gotta try, though."

Something occurred to Adamska for the first time. "Are you afraid?"

Hal tucked his hands into his pockets and looked up at the sky. "You know, I'm really not."

Ocelot nodded, glancing at the fading grey in the distance. "You shouldn't be."

There was a raven perched above the doorway they approached, eyes glazed with the look of an imp's that is mentally composing a letter to its nephew. Hal waved a card at the door. It issued a desultory, apologetic beep.

"Huh. PAL's busted."

As they turned to another, less pallid entrance, the raven cawed.

Ocelot turned furtively and made an obscene gesture at it.

Fuck prophecy.

Shadow trailing behind him, he turned his back on the bird and followed Hal inside.

---

## Notes:

-Okay, he's a really well-read shirtless shaman with a cannon on his back.

-The excerpt Raven recites comes from *Beowulf*, Stanley B. Greenfield's translation.

-The epigraph comes from the first ending theme of *Death Note*. The translation is my own, heavily influenced by the various ones I've seen. There is no good equivalent to *mune* in modern English, and this makes me angry.

-As Hal is a *gaijin*, any mistakes or awkwardness in his Japanese are of course entirely intentional, and not at all a result of my own ineptitude.

-I blame this chapter on a habit of reading far, far too many fantasy novels in my youth. Sooner

or later, there's always a prophecy about something.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/47/>

# chapter 48

**Stray** by Dahne

*Nature can adapt a possible man.*

John had gotten good at not thinking about things. Call it a job skill, or maybe just another way to survive. There was a popular misconception, the idea of the dumb mercenary. Bullshit, obviously. Not that he hadn't met some dumb ones, real fine examples, but it was never what you would call a lasting acquaintanceship. No, what some people mistook for a lack of mental acumen was just another application. Live long enough where every bit of attention you can devote to the subject at hand might be the one that keeps it from getting blown off, and you learn how to deaden your nerves to the superfluous stuff.

Or else you got real good at faking it.

Big Boss didn't know how to feel about how often those turned out to be the same thing.

Everybody had things in their past they didn't really want to be reminded of. Probably most didn't have those things jump out of nowhere and start waving a revolver in their face.

John could have envied those people.

What he wanted to be do was go into his office, lock the door, and drown himself in whiskey and memories. So Big Boss was patrolling.

One of the oldest tricks was to keep moving.

It wasn't as if he were starved for distraction. There was a lot to be done, a lot of mistakes to make sure didn't get made. And he was the leader. The one who got them into this mess, whatever the "this mess" of the moment happened to be. He had a responsibility to be seen. He'd spent too long getting real good at *not* being seen to be altogether comfortable with it, but there it was. Big Boss wasn't the kind who would send somebody out to fight for him without knowing his name. Or die for him.

They said he kept his unit too close. That you shouldn't make attachments. That it impaired judgment. The commander who saw his resources not as game pieces but men, with names, was more inclined to be stingy with them, less willing to make the necessary sacrifices. So they said.

That was why that whiskey bottle was there in the first place. Desk drawer, perpetually half-full, as if attended by some minor deity of martial necessities from a lesser Greek pantheon. Nestled comfortably in the remains of requisition forms for things that had been replaced by better models twenty years ago. Warm and waiting. Didn't even need a key, though he had one. There was only one drawer that locked, and it was always kept that way, up until yesterday. Big Boss knew he'd relocked it, though there wasn't much logical reason to bother. Anybody unwise enough to rifle through his things would just figure it a sign he was going senile. Nothing there but a mousetrap and a maroon beret.

Big Boss kept moving.

He spoke to the men as he went, gathered in knots plotting or gathering things up or cleaning weapons or any of the other hundred things soldiers did because it beat waiting. All the minor crises and victories and respites that make up life, playing out in miniature. Big Boss walked among them, pausing now and then, moving along, a relic of the first generation at large among the second. Johnny Sasaki, the only man who'd never noticed that the guy who goes around showing pictures of his family to everybody he can catch is always the guy who gets shot first. He hadn't, yet.

The first time Ocelot had seen him, he'd given him a long, cold look that'd had the poor bastard practically within inches of cut-and-run, but all he'd said was, "Your father doesn't do as he's told," and walked off muttering.

Big Boss kept moving.

Sniper Wolf, still calling him Saladin, in a way the grubby Kurd girl he'd found, blood-stained and cold-eyed, in the desert years ago hadn't, a way that said she'd found out how little the word "hero" meant and that to her it didn't matter, because he would always be her Saladin. With her was Meryl Silverberg. Roy Campbell's daughter, a girl with that resolute shine that usually chipped off at the first sound of gunfire in earnest but in a few people stayed forever, no matter how many sieges they'd helped to fend off. Old Chicken Fox was retired, these days. Big Boss hadn't heard from him in a long time. Probably wanted to leave the past behind, as much as he could. Nobody liked having it stare them in the face.

John must have been getting old. Seemed like every other soldier he saw he knew as somebody's daughter, somebody's son. Or his own son.

Snake and Liquid, talking as though they hadn't been on the opposite ends of twin loaded pistols less than twenty-four hours before.

When first John had heard it, all of it about how the future was supposed to be, he hadn't thought much of the cloning part, beyond a brief, surreal mental image of dozens of miniature, bearded soldiers with eyepatches. He hadn't considered the idea of one son killing the other important. It was too remote. Now, it wasn't nearly remote enough.

They exchanged words that Big Boss couldn't hear, and he moved on.

Speaking in a weird, distended way – and how else was there to talk, these days? - a lot of these men could be called his sons, of a sort. Gene therapy. As if the past didn't repeat itself enough on its own. Now people were going out of their way to help.

It wasn't as if John could have said no. Hell, it was enough of a trick getting them to let him have contact with the twin Snakes at all. The idea that there might be more clones than he knew of secreted away somewhere was one he tried not to think about. He never could have gotten nearly this much access to any of them without help. Ocelot had pulled some strings, though he never quite got around to disclosing the details. John didn't press. Everybody had a right to some kind of privacy. To keep some things inside.

Big Boss moved-

"Um. Big Boss? Sir?"

In a deliberately imposing swish of leather, he turned.

It figured. It really fucking figured.

*Would you believe me if I said I love*

Plan your route as carefully as practically having the floorplan mapped out on your retina made you capable of, make absolute certain that your path won't take you anywhere near the one person you least want in the world to see, and that's the exact instant the one you hadn't even taken into consideration decides to un-attach from his hip. John was too old to make this kind of rookie mistake.

Granted, the man was easy to forget. A diminutive, unassuming little engineer. Slipped right out of consideration without a squeak.

*He's here for the same reason I*

"Emmerich," Big Boss said, in a politely neutral growl. "What do you want?"

On rare occasions when his half-intentional attempts at an air of intimidation had an actual, visible effect, he always almost felt bad for the guy.

"Um." He resettled his glasses on his nose. More of a collection of nervous tics held together with wireframes and a labcoat than any kind of recognizable mammal. "There's something I wanted- I needed to tell you."

As if Big Boss needed another reminder of the ridiculousness of his life.

What was special about this man? You could find a dozen under a rock in any place within a half mile of where two wires rubbed together. They practically fell out of trees. Climbed up from basements.

The worst part was that, even when you knew that it only made things worse, you never stopped wanting to know why.

Big Boss fixed him with a one-eyed glare, the same as he gave anybody stupid or persistent enough to annoy him. "Spit it out, then."

"Oh. Um."

He looked down at the floor.

Then, very quickly, as if he'd grabbed onto his courage and was trying to rush the words out before it changed shape and wriggled away, he looked up again.

"He- Adam- the old Ocelot- he wanted to know if you were all right." He swallowed quickly, audibly, then hurtled onward like somebody in Pamplona with exactly the wrong idea. "And when we said that you were, he was- he was happy."

Message delivered, he was gone.

Intuitively, John could tell that this was going to be one of those days when moving didn't help.

He stood staring at the wall for a long time.

Then, he shook himself a little, and went back to making his rounds.

Mourn later. That's what they always said. There's no time now.

This time, John could tell, later was going to come.

---

"He's going to do it. The old bastard's really going to do it."

"Yeah, Liquid," Snake said tiredly. "We know."

They paced through the corridors of Shadow Moses, past knots of soldiers whose outlines were bold and firm against walls as featureless and white as an asylum. Sometimes, when they looked up, there was that look in their eyes that he could tell meant they were thinking of the Twin Snakes, and he could never fail to hear the capitals.

"I'm not gonna say this is any kind of a good idea," Snake muttered.

"Don't be so morose." Liquid's grin was a flash of hard white enamel. "Who can stand against us? Symmetry, my brother. The only one who could defeat either of us is the other."

"That why you wanted to kill me?" Snake said, before he could stop it.

He saw it again, one eye down the barrel of a gun and one eye on his twin. He understood that he hadn't been letting himself realize that, or everything that had happened that day, all the strangeness and all the insanity, that had hurt.

Liquid's eyebrow twitched, his equivalent of a flinch.

"Don't take it personally, brother," he drawled, brushing back his coat to stick his hands in his pockets and thinking he was being casual. "This is greater than either of us. No one can stand in the way of fate."

Shit. Not that again.

"Fate's got nothing to do with it," Snake said. He stopped short and shook his head, hard enough to feel the ragged ends of bandanna whiplash behind him. Liquid pulled up beside him, eying him



quizzically. "Look. You know I'd never betray you. Sneaking around like that isn't my style. Not for *them*. Not for anybody."

"I know," Liquid said, a shadow falling over his eyes and his mouth drawing up, and Snake knew that he did.

"I'm not gonna pretend us versus the world is a brilliant plan, but I know what side I'm on."

"Do you?"

There was less challenge in Liquid's tone than puzzlement.

He stared down at the floor as though it were a memory. A strand of hair – no number of descriptions of it getting grabbed, snagged, or tangled in the gears of something could convince him to get the damn stuff cut – hung in his face, a blond fault line.

"It's strange," Liquid said, in a voice without force or direction. "Like picking through the remnants of a dream that vanished as soon as it was done. Or memory, in a dream. How sure you can be one moment, and the next, as soon as it occurs to you to doubt... That's how I know when I'm dreaming, you know. The senses can't tell. But as soon as you appear, it's obvious. You're...different. It jars the illusion free. You've never failed me yet."

Snake shrugged. He looked aside before admitting, "I do the same thing."

"We've always fought together. Always a united force. Beneath Father's command, or otherwise. Ever since we were born. We've never fought on opposite sides."

He was asking for confirmation.

"Never," Snake said.

"And yet..." Liquid broke off, and shook his head. "This will happen. We will fight. But without you, we would not win."

He said it with an eerie certainty that trickled a chill down the back of Snake's mind.

"You know something I don't?" he said, quietly.

Liquid barked a laugh, abrupt and whole-hearted, shattering the tension like a glass swan meeting concrete and gravity. "Never."

"What if it *was* fate?" Snake demanded, something gnawing at his nerves that refused to stay private. Telling things to Liquid was practically the same as keeping them to himself, anyway. "What if we were meant to fight each other?"

The question caught Liquid off guard. It caught Snake off guard a bit, too. It wasn't like him to worry about things like that. Things he couldn't change.

Liquid smiled.

"Then, dear brother, fate would lose."

---

## Dogs know things.

This is a fact known by every dog.

As with any sentient, the depth, breadth, and selection of knowledge varies depending on the individual. Retrievers know where things can be found, shepherds know that it's much more fun if you don't eat the sheep, and some little ones know just enough to make them nervous. All know the hand that feeds them, what evil smells like (a combination of harsh soap, rust, skunk, and bitter lemon), and how to find the moon.

Huskies know more than most. Living closer to the cold, wet nose of the world, gnawing sticks with the wood smell of wolf on them, they remember their ancestors. No northern husky ever looks at the reflection of its muzzle through a hole in the ice without thinking, in a rough, wet-scented canine way, of the day the first wolf followed a two-legged thing home and decided, through either a

stunning act of cost-benefit analysis or an even more inconceivable moment of sentimentality, this time, not to chew off his leg.

When Kaworu heard them, his ears flicked upright, though he had known they were coming.

Two, not one, where there had always been one (though there hadn't in another always, which was not this always; dogs have an intricately simplistic sense of time that was, in this specialized case, more correct). Kaworu was glad. He knew this one, the new-human-who-wasn't-a-stranger, the pale-furred quick-handed one who smelled of leather, sulfur, and a fear so old it wasn't fear anymore, but that had gone away. So had he, for a while, for a longer forever than humans usually did. But he'd come back! come back! come back!

And now they were back again.

He barked in a well-known voice when Kaworu jumped in greeting, paws sliding on slick material that smelled of tough plastic and was the color of pine needles when the light is gone. Small-well-loved-human-who-feeds laughed. Both smelled of anxious excitement, and snow, and change. New-not-stranger-with-the-scent-of-morning, and red hazel, and cedar about to smoke, and the place where a hawk's shadow has just passed over, barked and growled as though he were protecting meat until Kaworu expended his energy and fell four paws to the ground.

He scratched his ears, when no one was looking.

Kaworu watched them speak to each other, in tones and voices with the undercurrent of a hunting pair, two within the pack who shared kill. From time to time they pressed their muzzles together and smelled of soft longing.

Kaworu knew they were leaving. There was a scent to it that it was more than usual leaving. Longer. Farther. Dogs know these things.

Kaworu was a dignified being. He did not whine, or fawn, or whimper. He only sat, stately as Sirius in well-earned retirement after millenia of keeping Ursa Major at bay, and watched.

"I'm gonna be gone for a while, okay?" said the well-known-long-belonging one, burying his thin fingers in Kaworu's fur. His scent was like living minerals, clean snow the sun has touched, and the silence before a fox's bark. "Dave'll take care of you. Don't pick fights with any skunks, and stay away from giant robots."

"Giant robots?" New-not-stranger-also-well-loved raised the ridge of fur above his eye and smelled sardonic, a tang like cider vinegar.

"It's sort of a superstition." He patted Kaworu's head in benediction, and stood.

Kaworu watched them, until the door closed and he couldn't anymore. He laid down by the window, a silent sentry, and waited, watching the snow.

---

The ravens were restless, like things with the power of flight were. They hopped and skimmed across the snow, cawing the black pebbles of their thoughts.

Mantis followed the trail of footprints. He left none of his own.

A monolithic mind stood in the center at the locus point. His consciousness radiated outwards, in calm, smooth sweeps. The metal resting against his back, warmed to the temperature and consistency of his skin, the nearly imperceptible shift in weight as a raven perched atop it took flight. No one could reach above Raven in the art of existing.

*He walks through impure white hallways at the heart of the phalanx, and with them breaks into a run when the scream resounds.*

Hearing thought was not an effort. Most people- normal people, though Mantis disliked the

plebeian word – broadcasted, having no senses to discern their own volume, like a deaf man's shout. One couldn't help overhearing, without a special effort to block them out. Mantis rarely bothered. He liked the wash of mentalities against the shore of his mind, their banalities, contradictions, and moments of fleeting, unexpected beauty. Their dissonant chorus made him feel haughty and humbled, transcendent and profane, deific and extraordinarily alone.

*A flash ahead, the eagerness of the young wolf scenting game. One-Eye, wiser, scenting Wrong, shouting, "Stay in formation! Raiden!" Command is not enough. The leash is broken. He will prove himself.*

Unless they were one of the few who were taught, many exceptionally gifted psychics who lacked the talent to follow many lines of thought at once built deep, ineradicable barriers into their subconscious. Some went mad. A pity. But less competition.

The glaciers of the shaman's thought drifted with deliberate intent. Little surface, much below it. Raven had unorthodox methods of gleaning information.

*A stutter of gunfire.*

So many interesting things...

*The screams gutter out.*

"I would thank you," Raven rumbled, "not to do that."

He did not move, or turn. Only stood, his friends strolling on the thoroughfare of his shoulders like window-shoppers on Nevsky Prospect, like a singleminded artist's scrimshaw rendition of a deranged local ancestor of St. Francis of Assisi.

*A room, vast, sparkling with broken glass and noxious with the thick odor of blood. The altar at the heart of the minotaur maze. Each thread leads here.*

"Do what?" Mantis asked. Through a gas mask, a man never sounded innocent.

Vision lay over Raven's mind, cold morning mist. That was what he did as he stood here, appearing so inactive to the first sight; integrating. Discipline. The natural human had enough difficulty dealing with one world.

*A gun in shaking hands, stark among stillness. Near the far wall, three men. The marks on two are very small. The marks on the other are not. Blood trickles like cool honey. There is already a pool beneath them. The edges are dried. Smeared handprints, behind. They do not go far. In every direction, there are red lines on the wall. Many.*

The memory pulsed out of time with the rest of Raven's mind, its tempo being drawn slowly into synchronization. It took the patience of something willing to sieve thousands of gallons of open ocean to gather a handful of infinitesimal creatures, a great sea shadow of a mind.

*The boy's eyes are wild, mad as a wolf in a leghold trap, pale in his pale face. "He was killing him. I didn't mean to. I told him to stop."*

"That."

Mantis could never find out how the shaman could always tell. Maybe a little bird told him.

"What is it?" Mantis asked, studying the object from a distance. Curiosity ran delightful antmarch relays along his bones.

"I expect there's no point to telling you to leave it be." Resignation carried to his voice.

"None at all," Mantis agreed.

He drifted closer, against the wind.

*Blue-gloved hands finding purchase on the molded black ribcage, the boy enveloped in the distended skull. Brief, unwilling flight. Impact against the unmarred wall.*

*"What did you do?" The rough voice, the dark young incarnation of the serpent trilogy. Fear*

*in it, a great fear more than for a friend. "Kid, what the hell did you do?"*

"It is a memory," Raven said. He was gazing at the sky.

*Two bodies, a small, slender one atop the well-developed frame of a soldier, fallen with stiff arm raised in a warding gesture.*

"A memory of something that hasn't happened?" Mantis's laugh sounded like frozen steam escaping through a vent. "Some would call that psychosis, friend."

*"I didn't mean to." Over and over again. "He ran out in front of him. I didn't mean to. I didn't mean to."*

"Some would."

*One-Eye steps between them. The son falls back before the father. The white devil slips earthward, stands, sullen in unsure terror.*

*The backhand snaps his head a quarter turn. He breathes, unmoving, in harsh, short exhalations. On the pale face, a red mark forms, needless repetition of accusation. His purity is gone.*

*The cold, flat, living coal of an eye.*

*"Get out."*

The images broke, splintered, refracting into possibility. Like the memories of a night drowned in binge, moments of isolated clarity in a dread waste land of uneasy regret. Or so other men's minds had told him.

*A soldier alone. Eyes unclear, the blood is in them.*

*Refuge.*

*"..Rose? Why are you...Rose, they, all of them, I..."*

*Long, cool hands.*

*"Jack, it's okay."*

*Her voice, taut with invisible strain he will not hear.*

*"Jack, it's not your fault."*

*Red nails.*

*"You had to."*

*The numb echo.*

*"Had to..."*

*"I know someone who can help you."*

*Faster. Broken. Eyeblick flashes of a possible world.*

*The fortress in darkness.*

*A solitary shadow.*

*Blood.*

*Men who had been comrades, and now were not.*

*The man he had admired, never gotten a clean shot in but he is falling, and in the last moment his mind is somewhere else and he looks up and says through unsteady lips, "Carrier boy..."*

*One eye, the father to all of this, pupil dilated in something not far from fear, futile hand clutched over left chest. "You..."*

*Traitor. Traitor.*

*And the worst thing she can say is, "Jack, I had to..."*

*But it's too late to turn back.*

Mantis was silent, letting the images filter down through his sight. The wind tugged at his wrist like a sloe-eyed child. There were tricks to ignoring the elements. He'd learned them long ago.

He remembered a crueler wind, the slope of a hillside, watching a man's back retreat with underdeveloped eyes and feeling the tenebrous fibrous connection to him in the old, angry clot of a mind forcibly self-sever.

Mantis watched Raven's broad, dark form, and felt cold.

He asked something he never had to ask.

"Is it true?"

"All is true."

People often gave up on talking to Raven. They also often collected the terribly mistaken impression that he was stupid.

"In the...practical sense."

"Perhaps."

"Will you tell them?"

"No." A bird crab-walked sideways on his shoulder, and cawed splittingly into his ear. "It would serve no purpose. The path has been chosen. It does no good to upset a balance."

There was reason for the aversion, beyond philosophical. Unusual. "You've never cared about unsettling anyone's psyche before."

"He feeds my friends."

Feh. That was what you got for forging a spiritual connection to creatures that could be bribed with half a sandwich.

Raven turned. The birds adorning him kept their seat without appearing to notice.

The mark on his forehead seemed to glow at the edges. A trick of the mask.

"Do not speak of this."

There was no way at all to coerce Psycho Mantis into doing anything he didn't want to. There was really nothing to threaten him with. His actions or inactions were for reasons of his own. He followed Big Boss's orders out of...well. Let that be told another time. Or, better, not.

Raven knew this. He made no futile efforts to threaten. He merely stated, implacable and patient as a carrion-eater circling a sick elk.

Being in the shaman's presence had a way of turning Mantis's mind to morbid naturalistic metaphors.

"Fine," he found himself agreeing. There would be no reason to disobey but pique, anyway. Besides, Raven had unorthodox resources. If pushed, he might find a way of shutting Mantis out of these little sessions, and they were always so terribly enlightening.

As tacit repayment for his silence, Mantis solicited, "Is that what was meant to happen?"

"By whom?" Raven's smile was like a blunt cliff face. "Perhaps it is a warning, sent late. Perhaps nature is stronger than intention."

"Hmm." Mantis' exhalation sounded like a hundred boas holding a convention in a wire mesh hammock. "We'll see, won't we."

Raven was gazing high over his shoulder into the firmament. Three raucous cries sounded in succession, varied in tone and tempo, from separate black, avian throats.

"So we shall."

# chapter 49

**Stray** by Dahne

*Damage can change the nature of a man.*

Snow fell in blue shadow, slow and steady as a learned response, persistent as a futile hope.

"Adamska," Hal whispered, arms thrown around his neck, pulling upward to press tightly against him. The lights of the cold sky through the window cast him in a pale platinum blue, as though reaching him through water and ice. "Adamska. Adamska."

He'd told himself that it didn't matter.

He remembered wanting to be loved by him with the same obliterating ferocity as he had wanted to see the madman's blood.

Now it had not dulled or faded but retreated into the crevasse reserved for the irrevocable and the lost and the knowledge that changing the world hadn't been enough. Adamska wasn't made for self-pity, and there was no one else to blame. He'd made his own choice, and it was his to live with.

He could have wondered what it was all for, when this world was as mad as the last. It was impossible to believe that one world could hold the pain and the hope it had given him, that the same eyes that had looked at him as a stranger could meld into such intimacy under the silver light.

Impossible to refuse the gift of his touch, the tender ache like pressure to close the capillaries of an old wound freshly opened, raw after the poison had been cut away.

Unfathomable, the shift and settling of him as he kissed his scars. His lips were dry and uncompromising. They traveled across the unnatural ravines, mostly straight, sometimes curving obliquely, without the hesitation of disgust.

Unthinkable, that his hand could reach up to gently touch his face, tracing its contours like a blind man though the moon was bright.

Inconceivable, that he would lay quiet beside him as his breathing slowed.

Unbelievable, that when Adamska forced himself to reach for the dull ache that was his failure he would find nothing, like a weakness compensated for until it was forgotten.

Inevitable, his weight beside him, unaware and uncaring that he had no right to expect it to stay real.

Indismissable, the blunt courses of tension that stiffened the joints of his body and ran from edge to edge like sheet lighting, the dissonant abrupt unsure slide of his eyes.

Black shadow and that blue that no bruise came in, pale as the reflection of the moon in a frozen lake.

"Someone has hurt you," Adamska said, because it was not him.

"It was a long time ago," Hal said, and his voice matched the space between glass and stars.

Adamska rolled to his side, levered up on his elbow, made himself unavoidable. "Tell me."

"I didn't tell you before?" He was looking for a way to escape.

Adamska stayed above him. "No."

He looked up at him with round eyes, bleached grey-blue. Then relaxed, in the ragdoll way a gutshot man folded to his knees. The surrender of a fatal control.

"The truth is," he said softly, "I'm not the man you think I am, either."

Adamska snorted. "I know who you are."

"Do you?"

It was more curiosity than bitterness.

He shrank in on himself, as though he would rather turn away, but Adamska wouldn't allow it. Instead he closed his eyes, lashes long and black and somehow startling in the gaze of a light meant to be shed on featureless snow.

"My father killed himself," he said, in the steady tones that betrayed words that had to be spoken before they could be allowed to be thought about, "because I was having an affair with my stepmother."

His hands were curled into fists. His eyes were clenched shut, face turned away, in the manner of some men the instant before Raikov punched them in the stomach.

Adamska said, "What?"

"You heard me." His body was still, as though he had suppressed his breathing in sacrifice to camouflage in the shadow stasis. "He drowned himself in the pool when he found out. My little sister called for help right outside my window, but I didn't hear. I was...with her."

Hal's arms were twisted in on themselves at his sides, skewed lines of sinew stretched taut against the edges. The sheets twisted around his hips like a discarded veil.

"So you killed her for revenge," Adamska finished.

"What?" Hal's eyes flew open. "No!"

He turned his face away and closed them again. Adamska waited.

"When I found out...I didn't know what to do. I was a coward, so I ran."

Cool air pressed its back against the warmth of Adamska's body. Somewhere, elsewhere, the chord of silence was gilded with the top note of a light shuffling scrape as a dog chased dream rabbits through weightless snow.

He said, "Is that all?"

Hal swallowed as though a loop of wire were tightening around his neck. "Isn't it enough?"

"Everyone has something sordid in his past," Adamska said. "Some men turn it into a point of perverted pride. A story compare in the long nights. Borya had a saga about a Muscovite whore, a handful of kopecks, a gambling debt, and two chickens that he would have turned into a opera if he could. It's not worth being ashamed of."

"It's not-" One eye cracked open. "Chickens?"

"And that was before they started drinking."

Hal opened his mouth, then shut it and sank back into his distress.

"You don't get it," he said miserably. "It was all my fault. My father died because of- because of me, and my sister, the one person in the world I was supposed to protect... I abandoned her. She'll never forgive me."

Adamska nodded to himself. "The sister. She wouldn't have been stabbed by the vampire this time."

Hal's eyes opened, blue on blue and rimmed with stark hurt. "You're not even taking me seriously."

He was pulling into himself, motionless, as though trying to make himself vanish by force of will. An instinct passed down by generations of the hunted.

When Adamska touched his arm, he flinched.

Adamska followed, supporting himself on one arm. He wasn't going to be put off that easily. He leaned over Hal as if accepting blows from above in his stead.

There was nothing to be afraid of. There was no one here but them.

"A man dies by his own choice," Adamska said. "His own mistakes and his own weakness. You

can't claim credit for all of them."

He was aware by the reflection staring up at him that his tone had grown incisive. Adamska held little sympathy for suicides. Just like a coward, to fold when the game got interesting. A temperamental child, tired of losing, who took his ball and ran home. It was an insult to players who had the decency to accept defeat with good grace.

One of his first tests had been to track down a traitor, some pissant bureaucrat who had run off with a tidy little cache of secrets and sought to disappear, underestimating the transparency of his world. Adam had hunted him to a rain-slick alley on a night without enough light to see the moon by. The exotic tawdriness of wetworks had been fresh then. The target himself was a keen disappointment. A rancid, rat-gnawed lump of sinew huddling in a tattered overcoat. The real objective had been, of course, to provide an object lesson in what happened to those who fell out of favor with the powers that be, and to see how many of those secrets Adam could pry out of him. Bearing down in the moment that made it worth it, he had watched his target pull a Makarov from his pocket and felt the quickening of excitement die when the motion of drawing finished against the target's own temple. Adam ignored the bluff and moved quickly. The ridiculous little man had smiled and painted the wall.

Adamska traced the contours of Hal's expression with his eyes and let the taste of the night air wash the bitterness from his mouth.

"I guess so," Hal said quietly. Defeatedly.

That wouldn't do at all.

It was bewildering. He had faced...much worse...and proved resilient. He was stronger than he looked. It never ceased to amaze Adamska that a hidden strength could run to the core without making the gentleness it hid beneath a lie. Another secret he kept that Adamska, to his bemusement, would never have guessed.

"I'm sorry," said Hal, taking his silence for condemnation. "I should have told you before."

It made no sense at all. Not that anything involving this man ever did. That was part of the charm, Adamska supposed. He rolled the concept in his head, but it remained simple and opaque. Guilt, he understood. It was a common trap unschooled temperaments stumbled into. An incidental death, long ago. These things happened. Granted, it was under embarrassing circumstances, but you got over those. Nothing worth this abject detestation, or this shame that wound around itself like steel cable.

Hal's head turned to the side as though pushed by a heavy hand. His face had the blue-silver cast of metal from the moon's mines.

"If you're going to leave," he muttered, eyes fixed in the firmament straight ahead, "hurry up and do it."

That was it.

Hal thought he would care.

Gallant with understanding, Adamska said, "Do you think so little of me, that I would begrudge you one small sin?"

He wouldn't look at him. "It's not...I wouldn't blame you."

Adamska snorted. "I wouldn't care if you'd fucked them both and killed him yourself."

Something in Hal's sinking mien arrested itself. Adamska had to catch him before he curled in on himself again, tried to make the reality of himself vanish. He was hardly going to lose him to the past. Adamska would not allow it.

"I was a stupid kid," Hal said to the shadows pooled in the corner. "I was lonely. She... there's no excuse."



Motes of shadow moved in a muted delirium of hypnotic motion, like the spots on the back of a wild cat, rippling in steadfast flux.

A strain of low, throaty rage pulsed in time with Adamska's heart in an unfamiliar key. The opposite of visceral. Someone had hurt the one who was never to be hurt by anyone. Damage had been laid on him, clear as clawmarks, and Adamska had never known.

Adamska had no experience at repair.

"This woman-" Adamska began.

"My stepmother," Hal corrected, a self-infliction of sad savagery.

Adamska held steady above him. "Is she alive?"

"Yeah," Hal said, gradually climbing, despite himself, to unsure. His gaze flickered to Adamska's face.

"Good," said Adamska, pleased to settle on a decisive course of action. "Once this is done, I'll kill her for you."

Hal looked up at him with wide eyes.

"Adamska!" he cried, reproachful and scandalized and laughing. "You can't do that!"

"Why not?" said Adamska, his lips forming what could be called a pout by someone who didn't much value the teeth he said it between. "I think it's a good plan."

"Like you said, everybody makes his own mistakes." Hal's body relaxed and accepted the touch of Adamska's eyes. "It wasn't her fault I was weak."

"You admit I'm right."

"Yeah. Yeah, you are." He smiled sheepishly under the shifting blue shadows. "Except about the killing people part."

"Fine," Adamska acceded with good-natured ill grace. "Ruin my fun."

Awkwardly, letting vestigial shame fall from him like a veil in the dark, he lowered himself down against Hal, holding him as he had been held, in the cold place that smelled of formaldehyde and blood. Hal's body was warm in his arms.

"If you change your mind," Adamska murmured in his ear, "the offer stands."

The light breath of Hal's laugh warmed his neck. "I don't know whether that's really sweet or really scary."

Adamska's hand spread against the small of his back, a conduit of stable energy linking point to point. "Can it be both?"

He was the sort of man you could feel smiling.

"Before I met you, I would have said no."

Snow fell fast them in pantomime, and the meek, cursory light past the charcoal crosshatch of the windowpanes made one continuous silhouette of them all.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/49/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/49/>

# chapter 50

**Stray** by Dahne

*Acceptance can change the nature of a man.*

It was dark when they departed, haughty stars craning over the helipad with a look of recrimination.

Waking up next to someone had startled Adamska. The concept of a body curled next to his, warm and insensate, was foreign, like presenting a primitive with a set of drill bits. Sleep was as dangerous as any drug that shut off perception, but, despite efforts over the years born both of intention and necessity, an dependence that couldn't be broken. His compromise was to take it in pinches, warily, and too light for dreaming. It wasn't difficult, when you were on the ground in contested territory, or in the barracks growling at the other men to do whatever they wanted as long as they did it *quietly*. A warm bed, slightly too narrow for two if they'd been picky, in the stillness and privacy as only the farthest northern reaches of the globe knew how to provide, encased in a hazy corona of safety and, what's more, after an excellent fuck- well. That was an altogether different flask of vodka.

Ocelot had slept like a fucking marmot.

The base was quiet, as though it were hunched over and murmuring to itself in its sleep. Well-guarded, though, Ocelot noted with approval, as they made their final preparations. Balaclava'd soldiers paced the hallways beneath the fluorescent glare of the artificial lighting, made baleful by comparison with the artful blush of predawn.

Getting out to the courtyard was almost a relief, though the frost in the air made a game effort to gnaw off the tip of Adamska's nose. Cold gave the atmosphere a damp, purple smell. That much had to be said for the ridiculous outfit they'd shoved on him; it may have been ugly as a whore's heart, but it was better than seal fur for holding heat.

No birds. Surreptitiously, he turned to check the ledge of the doorframe, where a black shape had hulked before. Vacant. Adamska wouldn't admit to relief.

The only aerial creature in sight was manmade. The helicopter crouched on the landing pad, centered precisely over the H, alone but for the pilot. No one to see them off? How sad. He'd been expecting Big Boss at least wouldn't be able to resist the opportunity to get in one last jab.

The only sounds were the wind sweeping through steel struts, and Hal jabbering to his contact.

"*Aa, mada kita no ka?*" Hal was saying into his phone. As of yet it had done nothing suspicious or occult, but Adamska was keeping a close eye on it in case it decided to start. "*Hai. Hai. Bokutachi wa ima sugu dekaketeiru, soshite, chotto matte kuretara, shichiji gurai aimashou.*"

Ocelot swung himself into the helicopter. Not a model he recognized, but built along the same general guidelines as any few tons of metal that expected to get airborne. He nodded at the man at the controls, a uniformed soldier who, despite the sunglasses obscuring his eyes, bore a mien of effortless anonymity that seemed somehow familiar.

After a few more jouncing syllables, Hal flipped the phone shut and followed, rejoining his physical surroundings. He slipped away so easily.

"Where did you learn to speak Japanese?" Adamska said, partially out of curiosity and partially to distract himself from takeoff. More specifically, the sensation in the pit of his stomach that he never knew whether to call vertigo or homesickness.

"Japan," Hal said, gazing through the window as the ground fell away, a white silk handkerchief dropped from the slippering fingers of a melting ice giant.

"I meant how did you learn it," Adamska said patiently.

"Oh. Then you should have said so."

Someone who really thought that what people said and what they meant, by some law of nature, had to have something to do with each other. It was rarer than religion, nearly as frustrating, and immeasurably more endearing.

The helicopter turned in air, casting blocks of pale light sliding across his face.

"A while ago, I kind of ran into a standstill with REX. Turned out some crucial parts I needed for the control interface didn't, er, exist. Finally, I convinced them to let me go to Japan to find some."

"Of something that didn't exist," Adamska said, fitting into the flow of his erratic method of exchanging information.

"Turns out there's a place that specializes in that sort of thing. It's an amazing place, Akihabara. I ended up staying there for a while."

Below them, the endless expanses of snow had decided to allow the scintillating variety of a few scraggly evergreen trees. The foremost geographical feature of Alaska was that there was a hell of a lot of it.

"Research?"

"Er." He flushed slightly, face making a delicate attempt to match the sky framed in the window behind it. "Not really. I kind of...got sidetracked."

"And they let you?" Adamska said. Where he came from, skipping out on an assignments was an open invitation for a bullet in the back of the neck. He'd been told so, many times.

"That's the thing." Color was methodically annexing the unclaimed territories of his face. "Back then, I wasn't wired with nanos. They didn't exactly have me on radar. I kind of lost track of time."

Ocelot tried his hand at translation. "You wandered off."

"Er, yeah. I guess you could say that." He smiled sheepishly, and with a hint of a far-off cast. "Like I said, it's the kind of place you wouldn't believe. At one shop there was this guy working on all of these amazing casemods, and people doing things with the hardware like you wouldn't believe. One guy happened to come in with some computer trouble that nobody could figure out. When I fixed it, they were really impressed. I tried to explain that it was just a compatibility issue – he'd been trying to run Star Control II, and some of these newer OS's get touchy with DOS applications – but I didn't know the language very well back then. Once I fixed it, word got around, and a lot more people started showing up. So I stuck around for a while."

"How long is a while?"

His eyes drifted up in recollection. "About a month. Then some men in black suits showed up and took me back. Er, sorry about that, Octopus."

"No problem," the pilot answered good-naturedly.

"Anyway, I picked a bit of Japanese in the process. At first it was mostly '*Ano megane-gaijin omae no mono darou ka?*' and stuff like that, but it's pretty easy once you get used to the sound of it."

Ocelot said, "Teach me."

Japanese hadn't been among the languages the Philosophers had considered it essential for their pet project to know, but Adamska had a knack for picking things up fast.

Adamska discovered, somewhat to his chagrin, that their consequences for when he got something wrong provided nowhere near effective an impetus as the way Hal smiled when he got something right.

The syllables were strange, but there was a pattern to them that fit fairly smoothly into Adamska's grasp. By the time they began to lose altitude, he'd gotten a good hold on a fair handful of phrases Hal deemed might be useful.

"*Omae no aitei wa kono ore da nya*," Ocelot recited solemnly, eyes rolling upward in concentration, "*Juu o tewatashite kuretara, daremo kizutsukarenai nya. Ippo machigau* to what the fuck is so fucking funny?"

Hal was convulsing with silent, yet highly noticeable laughter.

"Your...yoursentence ending..." he managed, giggling helplessly in a way that no god ever intended grown men to be capable of.

Adamska's eyebrow writhed with wrath. "It's exactly as you said it."

"Yeah, but I didn't think you'd actually..." He sat up, getting a hold of himself somewhat. "It's so...cute."

"What is?" Adamska said, in a soft, dangerous tone that would have sent anyone with an ounce of self-preservation three miles underground for the winter.

"See," Hal said, "Onomonopoeia is different for every language, right?"

"Yes..." Adamska hazarded, low and cautious.

"Well, in Japan..."

"What?" The dangling crossbar of the final 't' was clipped off of the word by Adamska's teeth.

Hal gazed at him innocently.

"...cats say 'nya.'"

Calm and silent as a frozen ocean, Ocelot stood. He opened the door and looked out for a long time. He stepped back, picked up Hal, and threw him out of the helicopter.

They were on the ground by now, so the result was that, as Adamska disembarked with momentous dignity, his purposeful stride took him past a heap of giggling engineer embedded in a snowbank. He raised a hand in thanks to the pilot, who gave a businesslike nod and rose back into the air like a scrap of vegetation on an updraft.

Adamska stared up at the sky as the machine shrank to a speck and disappeared like a fly doing a slow-motion swandive into a celestial punchbowl. The weather had cleared to see them off, Ocelot noted with approval. They had a long flight to make, and there were few things as annoying as getting rattled around like a frog in a jar.

Hal came up beside him, brushing himself off.

"What'd you do that for?" he said. Snow clung to his hair.

Adamska grabbed him, pulled him close, and quickly kissed him. He tasted like snow. "You deserved it."

"Oh," he said, mollified. The corner of his mouth twitched up. "You're still cute, though."

Adamska growled and kissed him harder.

When Ocelot released him, his breath was slightly shorter, and he looked a deal more forgiving. The element of surprise was always an effective tactic. His glasses were askew. Adamska tilted his head, reached out, and adjusted them to a satisfactory horizontal. He stepped back, and scanned the sky.

Blue and clear, innocent as a fox covered in chicken feathers, as if it hadn't been breathing snow down the world's collective neck bare hours ago, as though it weren't waiting for the chance to turn back to gray as a sewer rat's liver. That old liar firmament. Shining like thin clear porcelain, promising with blank-eyed idiot fervency that nothing bad would ever happen again, and who would be held responsible when it broke?

"What are you looking for?" Hal said.  
Adamska squinted into the sunlight. "Birds."

---

## Notes:

-Aaaand done! In the original plan, at least. That called for this whole crazy thing to end about here, though in a slightly different setting, with a little more elegance and a lot less stupidity. Needless to say, that's not going to happen. We've got a ways to go from here. Gratitudes and gratefuls for sticking with this meandering monster so far, and here's to hoping you'll stay patient for a little while longer.

-...okay, a lot while longer.

-I have become belatedly aware that this chapter is really stupid. I'd warn you not to read it, but it's probably too late now. Sorry.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/50/>

# chapter 51

## Stray by Dahne

*"I even gave up, for a while, stopping by the window of the room to look out at the lights and deep, illuminated streets. That's a form of dying, that losing contact with the city like that."*

Phillip K. Dick, *We Can Build You*

---

*What remains can change the nature of a man.*

It was a long flight, straight over the top of the world's receding hairline. Initially, Otacon was anxious that Kenshiro and Natsume would pester Ocelot, but soon they were embroiled in discussion of the inner workings of an antique Makarov pistol Natsume had found on eBay, and it was all Otacon could do to keep up the translation. In a fleeting moment while trying to conjure up the Japanese equivalent to "muzzle velocity," he noticed that Adamska was enjoying himself.

They were good guys, with the kind of blithe intentness Akihabara seemed either to foster or attract. Otacon was surprised at how reluctantly Adamska spat out the coordinates of their destination. It didn't look like much. Forest, of a junglish sort, with mountains skulking mightily to the north.

"Here," Adamska said abruptly.

They set down at a clear space near some cliffs. Otacon got his feet on the ground, heard himself rattle off *arigatous* and *otsukaresamas*, and watched them take off, before he let himself understand where he was.

Alone in enemy territory.

No. That was ridiculous. This wasn't the Sixties; the US and Russia hadn't been enemies for decades. He'd let all the talk about military hardware in the helicopter get to him.

And he wasn't alone.

"Come on," Adamska said, heading out of the clearing toward the trees, eyes straight ahead. "We've got a way to go."

"Hey, wait!" Hal trotted to catch up. "Isn't this where we're supposed to be?"

Adamska snorted. "Of course not. You think I'd lead someone straight to the Legacy? Bad enough that they got this close."

"Kenshiro and Natsume are perfectly trustworthy," Hal objected.

"Maybe. That's no reason to trust them." His gaze was fixed on the forest. "Hurry up. I want to get under cover."

Once the shadows of the interlaced branches fell over them, he relaxed somewhat. He slowed enough that Hal could almost keep up.

"H-hey!" Otacon called, trying with mixed results to disentangle his foot from a root. "Just where are we going, anyway?"

Abruptly, Ocelot stopped. Hal stumbled into his back. It was stiff and unyielding enough that it could have worn bark.

A grid of shade and sunlight fell over him, cross-hatching his form. The suit really did make him look almost like part of the forest. And, no matter what he thought, it did look good on him. Hal didn't know why he couldn't see it.

Ocelot turned half to him, putting his profile in shadow, as if it weren't dramatic enough on its

own merits.

All he said was, "I'll show you."

At least he slowed down some.

It wasn't all that difficult going, once Hal's eyes adjusted. Rather pretty forest, actually. Couple streams running through it and everything. They followed the bank of one for a while, heading steadily uphill. Fish flashed in its depths. Once, there was a sort of goat-like animal drinking. Every now and then, Adamska would take the Geiger counter out of a pocket and look at it.

Hal was about to ask just how far this place was when, as suddenly as if nature had been issued a zoning restriction, they came out on a cliff's edge.

Apparently they'd gone farther uphill than he thought.

"There," Ocelot said dispassionately, pointing.

For a moment, Otacon thought it was some odd configuration of granite foothills, somehow relocated partway up the mountain. But a certain squareness of shape and uniformity of color, as well as a regularity of pattern, gave it away. It was black in some places, gray under a veil of green in others, a Cyclopean tumbled toy. The growth that enveloped it softened its edges, making it practically invisible from the air unless you knew what you were looking for, and revealed that whatever had destroyed this had been gone for a long time.

Ocelot stared down at it, face closed, unreadable.

"What is it?" Hal asked, voice instinctively hushed, as though weighed down by the atmosphere. Still the sound startled a flight of white birds from the trees behind them.

Adamska spread his arm in presentation, a grandly sardonic sweeping gesture.

"Welcome to Groznyj Grad."

---

From there they descended again. Their path tilted toward the mountains now, sloping steadily downwards toward the ruins at the angle of inevitability. Ocelot's eye flicked upward constantly, in the motion Hal recognized as checking the Soliton map, and his hand kept going to the revolver, as if to make sure it hadn't vanished in the two minutes since he'd checked it last. If Hal hadn't known better, he would have said Adamska was nervous. Which would have been silly. From the looks of things, nobody had set foot around here for years.

Judging from the Geiger counter, there was probably good reason.

Ocelot took to the woods like he'd been born there, leaving Hal to struggle in his wake. There wasn't so much as a trail to speak of. Hal was aware that he must be making as much noise stumbling through the brush as a steam-driven minotaur, but he could prioritize either quiet or speed, and no matter what he did he wasn't going to be winning any prizes at either. It was all he could do to keep Adamska from leaving him behind completely. Otacon concentrated on each patch of undergrowth where he was putting his feet, trying to verify that it was relatively clear before dedicating his weight. It was a lot harder than it looked, and the erratic patterns of sun and shadow didn't help. If it had been consistently one or the other, he might have been able to adjust. As it was, there was no telling whether any given spot was firm ground or just something that had fallen momentarily out of the light. Each step was comprised of equal parts careful judgment and leap of faith.

As he was about to put his foot down on a mottled patch of ground, it slithered away.

Hal yelped, overbalanced, and fell backwards.

Instantly, Ocelot was there.

"What is it?" he demanded. He crouched above Hal, revolver drawn and eyes darting back and forth like two concurrent instances of Pong.

"Just a snake," Otacon admitted, sheepishly.

Adamska's eyes caught the creature responsible, a sizable python. Reticulated. Real reticulated. It paused a few feet to the side, looking at them without much interest. Shortly, it came to the conclusion that they were too large to swallow and went on its way.

Shaking his head at its retreating tail in either relief or disdain, Adamska hauled Hal to his feet.

"Stay close to me," he said.

Hal grabbed onto his wrist to keep him from taking off again. The result was that this time he was hauled along. "At least tell me what the Geiger counter's for. Was there a nuclear blast here or something?"

Adamska scoffed without breaking stride. "Part of Groznyj Grad was a weapons development lab. Nothing should have gotten loose, but you can't be too careful."

"Oh." Hal let his hand drop, relieved.

Adamska kicked a fallen branch aside, as though it were something distasteful somebody had dropped in his way.

"The nuclear blast was miles from here."

Otacon waited for him to be joking for a second after he knew he wasn't.

Ocelot strode on.

"H-hey!" Otacon scrambled after him. "You're kidding, right?"

---

Soon, Hal fell into a kind of trance. Adamska stayed ahead, not far, and his back made a focus point. Funny, how something as simple as walking could take up your whole attention. Soon he'd found a rhythm, and it was easy not to think. The forest here was making a game bid for para-jungle status, and presented more shades of green than Hal had thought the visible spectrum capable of. The breeze off the mountains was caught by the net of interlocking branches and converted to an intricate web of motion. The subtle variations of color, filtered light, and swaying shadows, the after-rain scent that broke free as each step disturbed the soil, and the damp green susurus of insects lulled him into mobile hypnosis. He had been grabbed by the jungle and chlorophyllled.

When the sun was slanting down over the trees, and Hal was learning that all of the brush being in shadow really didn't help after all, Adamska stopped. He was scowling, tilting his head and looking in all directions, as though trying to locate the origins of a sound.

After a second, Hal noticed that there was a noise in his ear, terse triads of trilling beeps. He recognized it as his Codec, and realized that Ocelot's must be going off, too. He pantomimed how to answer it. Adamska shot him a look of mingled gratitude and of-course-I-already-knew-that.

A three-way channel opened when he answered. He and Adamska had been put on the same frequency. As much as Big Boss talked about distrusting him, he must have more faith in the kid than he would admit. That, or he distrusted Hal just as much.

Hal wasn't sure why either one was equally cheering.

- "Fox here,"- said the voice on the other end. Not too much of a surprise that Fox was the one who got thrown into the role of electronic surveillance; he had a surprising knack for computers.



Nothing like Hal, of course, but it was a talent. - "Get down all right?" -

- "Fine," - Adamska answered, as though it were a personal affront.

- "Run into any problems?" -

- "Not so far." - Adamska's eyes never stopped moving. - "It's all quiet." -

His eyes added, "too quiet," though his mouth categorically refused.

- "Good to hear, but you've still got a ways to go. I don't advise attempting the descent tonight unless you want to deal with either a broken ankle or a real angry cobra with your footprint on it." -

Adamska glanced at Hal and mercifully said nothing.

Fox continued. - "You need someplace to spend the night. There's a river just to the east of your current position and a cave about a half mile up it, behind a waterfall." -

Ocelot said, - "I know." -

They raced the twilight there. It got dark fast, once the sun ducked for cover.

A splash and darting movement in the river caught Hal's eye.

A small, brown shape had scuttled up a tiny island midstream and was gazing at him with undisguised curiosity.

"Hey, look," Hal said, pausing by the bank. "I didn't know there were otters in this area. Wait, don't-!"

There was enough light left to catch the gleam of Adamska's revolver.

The animal gazed quizzically down the barrel.

Adamska let out a sigh of irritation. He spun the weapon up into his hand and returned it to the holster.

"Vermin," he muttered, and turned his back.

Soon the dull oceanic roar was audible, though not before exhaustion had ceased to tap politely at Hal's shoulder and commenced shoving. The forest had thinned, and Hal could see a lake, dark blue and bottomless in the dying light. Stepping over a really weird-looking fat snake – he must have been really out of it, by then – he followed Adamska around the circumference, toward the waterfall. He hoped they weren't going to have to swim. It was a lot warmer here than in Alaska, but the early spring air had the bite that warned that it could go right back to winter if anybody tried any funny business. Right now exertion kept the tiny cellular furnaces stoked to a cheerful blaze, but a damp cave floor would put those out fast enough.

They stopped beside the waterfall, where the darkness was interwoven with mist.

"In here," Ocelot said, and vanished.

Indulging in a moment of irrational panic, Otacon stumbled forward, blind as a bat with its sonar in the shop. The relief when he felt Adamska's arms grasp and reorient him, guiding him forward, was embarrassingly immense. It wasn't as if they could lose each other that easily, when they were connected by Codec. Something about the sudden sensation that all of that deep, predator-rich darkness had its shrouded eyes focused on him alone hit his subconscious right in the racial memory. Perversely, it made Adamska's embrace feel all the more comforting, a warm web of safety.

*Honestly, Otacon thought ruefully, At this rate, next I'll be thinking about how big and strong and manly he is.*

He *was* strong, there was no questioning that. His arms were entwined around Hal as though he were some elusive, precious quantity. Something worth protecting. Worth dragging around through the jungle for who knows how many miles. The body pressed against Hal's back was firmly muscled, but lean and fine-featured, not bulky or overbearing. Statuesque, he would say, except no sculptor would have ever gotten away with it, because nobody was *that* perfect. He was...

Damn it.

"Eyes adjusted?" Ocelot murmured.

"Huh? Oh. Yeah." Enough light limped past the falls to outline the dimensions of the cave, once you gave it a chance.

Immediately, there was cold mist where Adamska had been.

"Stay here," he said, silhouetted for a moment against the dark blue of the sky as viewed through a sheet of moving water, and was gone.

As if he had any options. This was a good place to hole up, though. Well hidden, he could vouch for that. Didn't even show up on the Soliton radar. Once he wiped the fog off his glasses, he could make out how the cave's mouth exhaled mist, forming a natural screen.

Not that they had anybody to hide from.

Figuring that he might as well get something useful done instead of worrying about things he couldn't change, and that his laptop might as well serve some purpose to make up for hanging off his shoulder like a freeloading tree sloth, Otacon found a good place to sit and took it out.

There were satellite maps to check, but there was only so much you could tell from trees, mountains, and ruins. The verdict was that something had happened here, and he'd figured as much. With a bit of effort, he broke into the Russian government's system to try to find out what. Nanotechnology really was amazing; he was his own wireless router, and nicely untraceable, too, even if he hadn't been in the habit of covering his tracks.

Groznyj Grad, Adamska had said. Hal tried it.

Nothing.

He went to a few helpful sites to figure out just how the hell you would spell that and tried again.

Empty as an Evian factory after the deluge.

Ah, well. So much for easy.

Names changed. Reality didn't.

At least, not the geographic part.

Not on this kind of time scale, anyway.

Hal couldn't speak Russian, but he could code. With the help of a few maps and a Cyrillic converter, he put together a program that arranged files by the regions they mentioned. Once you knew where two points were, it wasn't tough to triangulate a third.

"Strange," he said to himself.

Historically speaking, the entire area was blank. Nothing for miles, no matter how deeply into the archives he went. It was like the whole place had never existed. It was patently bizarre. You couldn't just pretend something had never happened, let alone something big enough to create and bring down what looked like a pretty impressive facility.

Hal ran the search over a few more times, broadening the terms, altering his program to make it more and more inclusive, but it was no use. Nothing but a blank, black box, cursor flashing in pointless, curious expectation.

Down the memory hole.

"What's that?" said Adamska's voice by his ear.

"Just doing some snooping around," Hal said, stepping back into reality. Adamska was crouched behind him, leaning over his shoulder. "Trying to make myself useful."

"Ah." Ocelot stood and walked over to the fire. Huh. Apparently, he'd been back long enough to start one. Snake used to say that Hal wouldn't have noticed if a squad of ninja attacked while he was coding.

"You should eat," Adamska said. He'd removed the top half of his suit and his gloves. His skin was smooth and russet gold in the firelight. Something about it made Hal's heart twist. The unreality of it all set in in lurches. Suddenly, he wanted very much to know that he was real.

Wiping off his digital fingerprints on the way, Otacon exited from the system and shut the computer down. Half an hour ago he would have called himself too tired to eat, but food sounded surprisingly good.

He went over to the fire, where Adamska handed him an octagonal tin the color of snake bile. It was the heavy, dented kind that seemed to metamorphose from straight off the line into something that looked like it had been enthusiastically masticated by a hammerhead shark, and invariably contained something about as appetizing.

"Thanks," Hal said, and realized he was hungry enough to eat it. "Ugh. This stuff is awful."

Adamska grunted as he ate, without looking up. "I've had worse."

"Wow." Otacon looked at him with acute sympathy. "You really *have* had a hard life."

The sound he made could have been a laugh. "I wouldn't know the difference."

The food was probably unidentifiable and didn't encourage you to try too hard to prove otherwise. It had some characteristic that suggested meat, which was unfortunate. It was sort of sad to think that anything had given its life for this. Soon, Hal set the empty, battered tin aside.

Adamska was staring at the fire. His eyes were hooded and remote.

"You know," Hal mentioned, "Sooner or later you're going to have to stop brooding and tell me what's going on here."

Adamska's eyes flicked up, accusatory. Embers of orange light glanced across his iris and made hasty decisions about having other places to be. His pupils were very black, with the kind of fearful symmetry some immortal hand or eye had framed and hung in the lobby of Purgatory.

"I'm not brooding," he said.

Hah. Walked right into it.

"Then talk to me," said Hal, crossing his arms over his chest. Getting close to the fire had reminded him that he was cold.

Adamska sighed and unbent, waving a desultory hand like a king. "Come here."

He had a way of saying things that made you not realize there was any other option until you were halfway through doing it.

Otacon was in the process of sitting down when it became apparent that Adamska had other plans. He grabbed Hal by the waist and pulled him down and to the side, so that he was reclining on one elbow and stretched along the length of him, and there went that strong/masculine/beautiful line of thought again.

"It's annoying," Adamska murmured into his ear. "Having to shout across the room."

"Cave," Hal said dreamily.

Adamska's grunt said that he was going to choose to ignore this for both their sakes.

He interlaced the fingers of his right hand with Hal's and began kissing his neck with deliberate enthusiasm.

Hal's eyelids slipped down. His head fell back in a position that was dangerously close to lolling. "You're trying to distract me, aren't you?"

"Is it working?" He could feel Adamska's voice on his skin, reverberating like a soft, incredibly inefficient drum.

"Mmm," Hal mumbled. Adamska's scouting lips had found an area highly receptive to skillful sucking and were setting up a colony. "You're trying to distract *you*."

The hitch in his motions was brief, and smoothly resumed. He could have imagined it.

Adamska said, slightly more quietly, "It's working."

He brought their intertwined arms down in front of Hal, pulled so that his hips were fitted tightly up against him.

"But-"

There was the rumor of irritation in his tone, and almost something of fear. "Stop being so smart. Just for now."

"Uh-uh." Hal shook his head mulishly. Adamska's arm tightened around him.

"What do you mean, 'no?'" Ocelot said, in that voice that told you that it had better be good and the odds were very, very high that nothing would be good enough.

"It's something important to you," said Otacon, displaying firm resolution. 1280×1024, at least. "So I want to know."

After what felt like a long time, Adamska sighed.

"It's nothing, really."

Hal's fingers curled around his. "Tell me anyway."

"This..." He caught words in his throat like crickets in a cage, not letting them out until either they had passed a contagion test or he decided that it was worth the risk of their proving virulence later to have them gone. "You could call it my hometown."

Instinctively, Hal twisted around to stare at him. "That's not nothing."

His voice was flat as champagne left in the sun. "It should be."

"Why?" Hal was nothing if not persistent. It was a trait that alternated between serving him well and very nearly getting him suckerpunched.

"Because it shouldn't matter!"

His grip sagged, loosened.

"It's only a place. Only memories. I should be stronger than that."

His voice ran with shame, like a river threaded with indigo pigment.

Shame in feeling it. More shame in admitting it.

What had they done to this boy?

He was right about one thing. It didn't matter. What mattered was what you did with it. You couldn't control what was hard-coded into your system, no matter how inept or misguided or so plain inhumanly cruel that it made you shake with a kind of rage you didn't know what to do with. You learned how to script around it.

"Having a past isn't a weakness." Hal smiled at the shifting shadows on the ground. "Honestly, I don't think you could be weak if you tried."

"You really don't remember, do you," Adamska said softly.

"Remember what?"

"I already told you." His voice took on a very slightly brighter, tinnier timbre. Hal got the odd feeling that he wasn't answering the question. "In the other world, I told you everything that happened here."

"Sorry. Don't remember a thing."

"Suffice to say, Groznyj Grad is where I first started to learn who I really am."

Hal was confused. "But that's not a bad thing."

His voice was a braid of bemusement, regret, and relief as he murmured almost to himself. "No. You don't remember at all."

"Makes you wonder," Hal said, distant in thought. The firelight made him meditative, and his

exhaustion had evaporated in the face of rest and safety, leaving behind a mellow vintage of calm. "If there's any such thing as the past."

"Hmm?" Adamska's hand had slipped up inside his shirt and was tracing spiral patterns on his stomach.

"I mean, if something happened, but nobody remembers it, did it really happen?"

Adamska's voice was rich with amusement. "If you want to go chop down a tree to see if it makes a sound, now's the time."

"I'm serious. I mean, there's a whole history that you're the only one to know. All we've got is what you can tell us."

"You don't believe me?"

"Sure I do. It's just weird to think that there's things I've said and done, years I've lived, that I don't even know about. They say that 'everything that happens, happens,' but stuff like this makes you wonder."

Adamska said, "Forgetting something doesn't make it gone."

Hal smiled faintly.

"I used to read a lot of science fiction, and I'd wonder, what if things were just a little bit different? I never realized that, all along, they already were."

He laid his left hand over Adamska's arm, and voiced his fear, like letting a little black butterfly out of a jar.

"What if...what if it happens again?"

"It won't," Adamska said authoritatively.

"There're stories about time travelers who keep going back again and a again, trying to fix things, but people are people, and something always goes wrong. And, each time, they lose a little bit of themselves. But, even with everything that's happened..."

His fingers closed over Adamska's arm.

"I don't want this to disappear."

Voice stentorian and steady as a stalagmite formed by a thousand years of patient, calcinous water, Adamska said, "It won't."

"How do you know?"

"The machine is gone," Adamska said practically.

"Oh." Hal perked up. "Right. I forgot about that."

"More to the point, I won't let it."

"Yeah." Hal smiled, and rested his head back against the young man's shoulder. "That's good, too."

"You're damned right it is." His thumb stroked absently over Hal's, and his voice grew more pensive. "Even if the cause is forgotten, there's still the effect. No matter how quietly a man walks, he leaves footprints."

"Or ruins," Hal said wryly.

"For certain kinds of men, yes."

"Adamska, what happened here?"

There was a moment of silence, as though he were picking through words like flatware in a drawer.

"To put it succinctly; Volgin."

"Oh."

"Also, Big Boss." He thought. "And explosives, some poorly-placed fuel tanks, and the ultimate

weapon to end all weapons."

"Did Big Boss kill him?" Hal asked, fascinated in spite of himself. No one ever talked about these things. That usually meant there was a reason, and almost always meant that they were interesting.

"Mostly, or so I was told. In the end he was struck dead by lightning. I'm almost glad I didn't see it. It would have been embarrassing. Like watching Thor drop Mjollnir on his foot."

Hal's eyes were wide in the heat that played on his face like a blush. "What happened to the weapon?"

He felt Adamska shrug. "Destroyed. Just like the fortress itself. Good riddance." His voice was shaded with irony. "More than one weapon was being built in Groznyj Grad."

"Really? Like what?"

"I meant me."

"Oh. But you're not anybody's weapon."

"Not anymore."

He had long, strong fingers. It should have been a paradox, that strength and that grace. Instead, it made everything else look misguided by comparison. He could play a Mozart sonata or snap your neck. A commanding, melancholy delicacy. There was something rare and tender about it that made Hal's pulse beat fast. The discrepancy between the harsh, voluptuous cruelty of his mouth, the taut, tensile power of his hands, and the gentleness and care they held when they touched him sent an invisible shiver up and down the inside track of Hal's spine that he had nothing to call but 'delicious.'

"I know so little about you," Hal said.

"You're better off that way." The twist of wryness in his did not quite avoid reflecting the bitterness beneath it.

"That's not true." Otacon's jaw set. "I want to know everything."

Hal was surprised when he didn't argue, but only said, "I'll tell you a story, then."

Adamska's fingers flexed between his in time with the crackling of the fire.

"I was stationed here, as the Philosopher's dog. I kept an eye on Volgin and safeguarded their interests. It seemed important, at the time. Rumor is they have 'charm schools' secreted in select locations over the world. I've never seen one. I was an outside project."

He made a sound of disdain through his teeth.

"Tch. I couldn't tell you where I was raised before. Too privileged of information for someone on the bottom of the pecking order."

"God," Hal murmured. "That's terrible."

"Don't be so quick to spend your sympathy. There's worse things to be than someone's pet project."

"Like what?"

"How should I know? In any case, sooner or later, they decided I could be Volgin's problem. My first major assignment, they called it. I took it as an insult. I'd already lost track of how many times I'd killed for them."

He said it blithely, without premeditation.

Air hissed through his teeth. He had stiffened, slightly. "Damn. Forgot to leave that part out."

It took Hal a second to understand. His own body must have been more eloquent than he knew.

"Don't censor yourself on my account," Otacon said, almost apologetically. "I live around mercenaries, remember? I'm used to people who've had to fight. It's just...sad, you know? That they made you do that."

"No one ever made me do anything." His voice had metal in it. The emphasized word was like a candle that made knives glitter in the dark.

"I mean, you were just a kid." Hal gazed down at the pebbles that littered the cave floor. "God. You still are."

Something in Adamska's musculature minutely relaxed.

"It's not how much time you have," he murmured with demure obscenity, "It's how you use it."

"Don't change the subject. Tell me the rest."

Shrugging in this position was a difficult feat. Adamska managed adroitly. "What is there to tell? Fighting, spying, trying to keep a monolithic madman on a leash. It all gets tiresome."

"Your name, for one."

"I was pretty sure we'd already covered that."

"It's a strange name, I mean. Adamska."

His hand wandered across the plain of Hal's stomach, coaxing the traditionally skittish native nerve endings into mutually beneficial trade agreements. "I like how you say it."

Adamska must have felt Hal's body heat rise, because he laughed, low and soft and rich, a laugh you could spelunk in.

"The name they gave me was ADAM. Part of a team, though I didn't often work with him directly. ADAM and EVA. Cute, eh? It's the closest the Philosophers get to a joke. Then endless fakes, for the sake of assignments. I asked what my real name was, once. You are ADAM, they said. Later, I asked again. Their answer was the same, only more...emphatic."

Hal could feel the ridges of his scars against his back. They were hard to consciously notice, when you looked at him. The way he wore them, they were impossible to mistake for an imperfection. Like avant-garde tiger stripes crossing his torso.

Some of them had looked very old.

"I decided that if they could play stupid jokes, so could I. I'd take what they'd given and make it my own. I added a term of endearment, to turn their cold code into something you'd call a close friend, or a child. I'd answer to whatever designation they gave me, but to myself I would always be Adamska. It was more symbolic than anything. It wasn't as if there were anyone to tell. Snake – Big Boss – was the only one I ever gave it to."

"And me," Hal said quietly, wondering what he could have done to win this boy's confidence.

"And you."

Hal's hand traced Adamska's forearm, mapping the subtle mechanisms of slow, relaxed motion.

"Not much else to tell. Spent most of it following orders that weren't worth circumventing. Not long after Groznyj Grad blew into bits, I- left. I never knew that it would be my last mission for them. I'll never work for them again."

He said it with a sense of creeping awe, as though the concept were a painting that demanded to be gazed at for long hours as its beauty emerged.

"It's hard to imagine anybody could ever make you do something you didn't want to," Hal said. The Adamska he knew could have made parted oceans flow together again by force of will.

The absent motions of his hand paused. Then resumed, thumb tracing counterclockwise circles on Hal's stomach. Hal released a soft sigh and leaned back against him.

"We won't need to bother going to the fortress itself. They will have already ransacked the vault underneath it, where Volgin kept his pocket money. The real cache is a few miles away."

"That close, and they haven't found it?"

"Obviously, we don't know for sure. But I don't think so. Volgin is one of those special people

who is easily both over- and under-estimated at the same time. When they found less than they expected here, they assumed he was foolhardy and reliant on shipments from more remote sources. But Volgin was careful, in his own demented way. He liked to keep his valuables close to his chest. They also assumed no one would be stupid enough to keep a key repository practically in arm's reach."

Wood settled, and sparks drifted up like the sand of an hourglass in a vacuum.

"The world can change so fast," Hal said, watching the sparks mingle like tiny gold butterflies.

"It's weird to think that anything put away fifty years ago could still be the same."

"One of the selling points of gold is how well it keeps," Adamska pointed out.

"You know what I mean. That it could go all that time without being touched."

"If I'm wrong" -Adamska's tone put this in the same amusing hypothetical dimension of porcine flight capability- "and it's already been gutted, then we'll find another. I only chose this one first for convenience sake. Time is short, and I know the terrain."

Hal felt a swirl of guilt perform a corkscrew across his limbic system. "You could go a lot quicker if you didn't have me slowing you down."

"It's possible," he said, carelessly. "It would also be a lot less fun. Man does not live on mission objectives alone."

His voice dropped slightly and became less brisk, belying the studied casualness that swathed it like chainmail.

"You're better company than ghosts."

He was speaking figuratively.

At least, Hal really, really hoped so.

Hal said, "Oh."

"Also," Adamska said, nuzzling his hair, "there's another reason I chose this location."

"Yeah?"

His hand made a lateral migration. "The others don't have such nice caves to seduce you in."

"Oh."

---

## Notes:

-I'm aware the Codec format looks a bit on the retarded side, but I wanted it to have a different appearance from normal dialogue. doesn't have a high tolerance for unorthodox punctuation, and I couldn't bring myself to use plain dashes. Bite me, James Joyce.

-I realize that it might not actually be possible for an *otaku* in Akihabara to get his hands on absolutely anything, including a helicopter. don't ruin my dreams.

-I heartily recommend Norse mythology to anyone who isn't already familiar with it.

-Gratitude goes to ImreNico for serving as excellent beta for this chapter and the next.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/51/>



# chapter 52

**Stray** by Dahne

*Reciprocity can change the nature of a man.*

It hadn't all been lies.

In fact, there hadn't been one word that wasn't true. He'd only left out a few things that weren't important. It was over and done with, and there was no point in whining about it. No need to dredge up the sordid details.

No need to mention how being here, back in the mud smells of the jungle, was dipping a long stick into the murky, boiling cauldron of his mind and pulling up his psyche's dirty laundry.

Better by far to observe the silent chorus of response to his touch, turn him to kiss him, settle him solidly on his back on the cave floor. Well-padded, of course. Ocelot was nothing if not meticulous in his plans.

"Clothes off," he breathed into Hal's ear. "Now."

Then proceeded to follow his own advice, wriggling out of the pants that had intruded on his skin's territory like an overbearing family member and throwing them aside to lay in a heap the color of suicidally depressed algae.

There was a tight curl of pleasure in being obeyed with alacrity. Amber firelight ambled over Hal's skin and glanced off his glasses as he set them aside like the wall of an immaculate terrarium, touched with reverence his long, slender hand.

Ocelot moved quickly, and when their bodies dovetailed against one another Hal gasped into his mouth. His hands came up and clasped his shoulder blades, pulling him closer. Adamska wondered, kissing him, if he realized the effect he had. The way his reticence melted at Adamska's touch, and his shyness drew back like a veil. The way his body unconsciously pressed upward into his hands, silently begging for more.

Adamska broke away from his lips to whisper in his ear, "Do you even realize what you do to me?"

His eyes opened, dazed. "Huh?"

Adamska rose up slightly, straddling him, and ran his hands down his chest like rain, to enjoy the texture of his skin and the understated musculature that etched his shape. "Nothing."

He wouldn't have understood, anyway. Adamska couldn't say he completely understood it himself. Logically, it never should have happened, this strange, gentle man who logic did not apply to. It hovered above him like a duck on the surface of deep water, never quite seeing the need to dive in. Adamska had spent his life barring the doors to ensure that no one ever had this kind of power over him. And then this man had knocked.

Adamska didn't know how to feel this way, this sense like a new shape burgeoning inside of his boundaries. Almost he was afraid that it would overcome them, and he would shatter and would never again be able to bear confinement in his own dimensions. The perversity of holding someone like this, kissing him, touching him, filled him with an illicit delight, like scratching at the stitches over a healing wound but carefully, carefully.

Ocelot had had men in his time; invariably he was stationed in isolated places where few whores had sufficient entrepreneurship and indefatigability to venture, and he was nothing too terrible to look at. He had his leisure to pick and choose. At first, he had rejected the offers on a nebulous

general principle, but eventually his own reactions became more difficult to gage, and he refused to be distracted by something so trite. So he had unhooked the proverbial velvet rope from around his bed long enough to admit a privileged few, always under strict control and with the understanding that he was doing them a favor. He got off, and they got out. His attitude toward them as participants in the process was much the same as toward the *gandon*: disposable, vaguely embarrassing, slightly off-putting in its clinicality, but necessary. Not something you wanted to look at the next morning.

It had all been perfectly safe.

It wasn't supposed to be like this.

The most important thing is the world was not supposed to become how his fingers curled, or how his breath caught as though snapping the strut of a spiderweb. The tightening cords of his neck or twitch of his thigh was not supposed to start a cavalcade in Adamska's body until it was impossible to tell which was call and which response. His slight warmth should not have been enough to boil reason from his mind like water from wine.

He had no logical basis to be so fucking beautiful.

He was the antithesis of everything Adamska had been taught to want, the distillation of every verboten quantity. His blood sang with antipode.

He could have loved him just for that.

Caring for someone was a delicacy Adamska's lips had never been meant to touch. It was a weakness to be rooted out with extreme prejudice, never tolerated, let alone indulged. And here he was with the trap in front of him, strolling straight into its jaws and singing. There was a delicious decadence in the reckless abandon of each of his principles, one by one, up to the chopping block and greeted by the gleeful headsman.

There were some who said that there could be no such thing as a contradiction. A is A, so it went, that's all there is to it. Adamska knew better. A was only A when being A served its purposes. A could be two I's that had chopped a comrade in half and hung it between them, or an R that had gone jaggedly rogue, or a triangle that had pulled up its skirts in order to lure you into complacency. You couldn't take anything on faith. There was always more than what he saw, and his job was to find the rest. The truth of anything always had an element of contradiction.

Like that a man's weakness could be a kind of strength.

His hands found the tender hollow beneath the ribcage's double gothic arch, and Hal's mouth broke away to breathe raggedly, "Adamska..."

One part had been very true.

Adamska was filled with a luminously selfish magnanimity, a sweet dread of anticipation to explore this depravity to its heights and leave his flag jutting proudly on the peak of perversity. And there was an old friend waiting to meet him there, still: curiosity.

It was one of the entities he intended to satisfy.

The firelight made him look less real and feel more so, and made it feel a miracle that there would be a tomorrow.

Hal's hands came up and settled, fingers spread, like an exotic moth against his chest. A low sound issued from Adamska's throat, and he pressed forward into the caress. Hal stroked downward, with deliberate reverence that might have been embarrassing if he hadn't deserved it. At his waist their course turned, veering as though distracted to mold around Adamska's ass, as close as the suit had been but far more welcome. Adamska growled and plunged forward, landing hard on the heels of his hands, and kissed him deeply, catching his lips like scattered sunlight in a mirror. He thrust his hips forward and was rewarded with a muffled sound that he judged impeccably and undeniably cute.

Adamska said, in the hushed tones the firelight's intimacy seemed to expect, "I want to try something."

"Mm." Pinned by Admska's weight, Hal's slender body writhed rhythmically, tempered by eroticism into something taut and supple and aching open to the reception of sensation. "Whatever you want. Just hurry."

His eyes were closed to the wicked curve of Adamska's smirk.

"Whatever you say," Ocelot demurred.

He was a lovely sight, head thrown back and wanton lips parted, shadows flowing across the scape of his chest as it rose and fell in steadily increasing tempo. He debauched well.

"Don't move," Adamska said, leaning back to admire him.

"Oh- hey! Where are you going?"

Useful as a plethora of pockets was, it made it a bitch to find what you needed in a hurry. It took a deal of rummaging through ammunition, first aid supplies, and what felt like a pack of cigarettes that Adamska didn't remember having put in there, until he found it.

"Wow," Hal said, levering himself up on his elbows. "That suit really does have pockets for everything."

Then Adamska was on him, pushing him down and closing the space between them.

"I said," he purred, "don't move."

Lightly, teasingly, with barely more pressure than a breath of air rustling a silk curtain, he dragged his fingertips from Hal's collarbone down his ribcage to the curve of his hips, feeling the way he moved in response send ripples of heat soaring through him.

"*Lyublyu tebya*," he murmured, rolling pearls of liquid consonants across his lips and sending fricatives after them like a flight of exultant hornets, "Love your hands. Love your cries, your scent. Love touching you. Love making you squirm."

"H, hey." Emitting a string of staccato gasps, Hal twisted back and forth in the limited range the pressure of Adamska's thighs would allow. "That tickles."

Having performed admirably in their scouting mission, Adamska's hands rested on Hal's hips, as his mouth retraced their path. He'd never had the opportunity to simply enjoy someone. Not that he'd ever wanted to. Soldiers' trysts were brief affairs, straightforward and to the point. Perhaps they would have been that way even had necessity not demanded. The more prolonged the contact, the greater the risk of sentimentality, attachment, or, in a few particularly vigorous cases, having to come up with a really good reason why the bunk was broken. Getting too close was a risk behavior, worse than investigating strange sounds alone or showing off pictures of your sweetheart back home. On the sexual Maslow pyramid, they were lucky enough when they could reach the first level. Trying for more was simple greed. And, it was unavoidable to surmise, unforgivable.

A good soldier never exposed himself to that kind of weakness. Ocelot was the best there was.

The better you were, the more you could subvert. Any idiot could survive if he never made mistakes. Making it through with a deliberate handicap, now, *that* was impressive. A true demonstration of dominance over reality.

He kissed down the plane of Hal's taut skin, pheromones flashing a pass to the guards of his consciousness and being waved straight through to the control center.

He'd never been at all tempted to do this before, though he'd been on the receiving end more than once. There was rarely a shortage of volunteers, not to mention a select portion of the populace that seemed to have forgotten there was anything else the *banya* was for. It was an enthusiasm he had appreciated on cold nights but never quite understood. At first, he had been suspicious, wondering

what was in it for them. Eventually he had decided that they imagined to incur some kind of debt of gratitude, and that the joke would be on them when they learned he didn't owe them anything.

He was distantly bemused to find out that he was wrong.

That there was an absurd power to making him writhe, that his moans were an ovation, or that his panting and the clenching and unclenching of his hands was in a fascinating rhythm Adamska controlled, or that natural talent extended, as it were, to any number of things, and it really wasn't that bad at all. Sooner than he would have liked, before he was lost in the rhythms of affectionate, intimate obscenity, he pulled away, and the whimper Hal made was so cute that he had to kiss him.

"Why'd you stop?" he said, Adamska straddling him, pressed between the feverish firelight and the heat of his skin.

The scent of woodsmoke mixed with the scent of him, alternating like current.

Adamska said, "I'm not done yet."

Around Hal's wide eyes, shadows slid against and into one another and separated again, a lackadaisical orgy of *chiaro* and *scuro*.

Slick liquid was cool against his palm.

When he wrapped his hand around him, he made an exquisite, gasping cry.

The shadows on the wall shifted, one above the other.

"Hold steady for me."

Hal looked puzzled. Trust him not to understand something simple. "What are you- *oh*."

Sometimes you just had to demonstrate.

Privately, Adamska had wanted to try this for some time. His was a fundamentally experimental soul, and it was always beneficial to get to know an experience from every possible perspective. However, most men might have gotten the wrong idea. And he couldn't have that.

Adamska paused, acclimating. Honestly, he couldn't see why anyone made such a fuss. It wasn't so bad at all.

Hal moaned, "More..."

Adamska smirked down at him. "Make me."

He got the idea, and his hips jerked upwards. Adamska gasped in what he decided was deliberate encouragement.

Adamska was starting to suspect that it might all be part of a well-kept secret.

A slight change of angle, and he was sure.

Bastards.

Hal's hands came to rest on his hips, trembling as though tentative, but firm. Soon Adamska had inspired him to further confidence, and his movements grew surer.

"God," Adamska moaned, watched through hooded eyes as his shadow arched its back. "Yes. Like that."

He moved, and breathed, and the shadows moved with him. Cold slipped beneath the fire's heat and touched his own, ran algid fingers along sweat-slick skin but was not the reason he shivered. Beneath him, Hal moved in counterpoint. Time wandered between and lost all meaning.

Across the shadows, bright sparks flew, sweeping across his face like the feral offspring of searchlights and fireflies, glinting on the strands of hair held slick to his skin. His breath came in short, sharp gasps, as though he never stopped being taken by surprise. His body moved as if he had given it temporary permission to escape his volition and be animated by forces coiled deep in the sublime subconscious, furtive aspects of will made sovereign over a secret place only the two of them would ever know.

He was wrong. An extended family of bats was privy to the entire affair. However, when further inspection suggested the interlopers were neither a) predators b) fruit or c) delicious insects, most lost interest. One member made a long and impassioned argument that they were in fact a new species of beetle, and another related the tale of the strange being who had once attempted to eat its great-great-grandfather, but no one listened to them.

---

Disregarded, the fire sulked into embers, playing faint light over two who had mapped the lay of each other by feel and shadow.

"Not bad," Adamska said, a thread of breathiness remaining as his chest slowed and deepened its rise and fall. "For an old man."

"Brat," Hal muttered into his shoulder.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/52/>

# chapter 53

## Stray by Dahne

*Distance can change the nature of a man.*

Hal woke to the soft scraping sound of Adamska erasing the traces they had ever been there.

He sat up, yawning, and felt for his glasses, finding them perched neatly out of the way. Judging from the feel of the air and the angle of the light that swayed in drunk with refraction through the waterfall, it was an hour of the morning that Hal's senses were more used to experiencing as very late night.

"Get up," Adamska said, passing by as he disposed of the ashes. "We've got to get moving."

Hal did so, mechanically, occupied with the daily task of bridging reality as it was when he'd gone to sleep with reality as it presented itself now. It was more difficult than usual, and began, as it had for the past few days, *Who are you?*

A dark shape moved near the entrance, its head tilting inquisitively.

"Huh," said Hal.

Adamska didn't turn. "What?"

"Ravens don't usually live in this area, do they?"

There was no reply.

Adamska was crouching, very still.

The bird hopped forward, rustling its wings like a gothic gentleman adjusting his cape. It gaped its beak to let out a croak that echoed harshly in the confined space.

Adamska threw a rock at it.

The raven flapped off, cawing like an old man's laughter.

By the time Otacon was fully awake, he noticed was that he was walking, staring at Ocelot's back. He wondered how much time had passed without his permission. The chattering birds and rustling brush sounded odd in his ear.

"Oh!" he said, and Ocelot's head snapped back toward him like a snake tasting sound on the air. "Did you remember to turn your Codec back on?"

"Of course," Ocelot said contemptuously.

He stood still for a moment. His brow creased, and his head canted to the side, in the usual way people unaccustomed to the technology tended to approach the unfamiliar procedures. Until you got used to it, it felt like trying to braid your own neurons. Otacon found it easier to think of it as flipping a switch, or completing a circuit. One that happened to be on the inside of your skull.

The moment his systems went online, there was a beeping like an electronic woodpecker on amphetamines. Against the calm woods and steady footfalls it felt deafening.

- "Damn it, Otacon!" - Snake's voice carried a mixture of anger, relief, and exasperation. - "You don't shut off communications in the middle of a mission." -

- "We were beginning to wonder how you could both have managed to die already." - Liquid's voice, over the same frequency, was dry and amused. - "My wager was on crocodiles." -

- "Er. Sorry," - said Otacon. - "It won't happen again." -

- "The hell were you two do- no, never mind, I don't want to know. Just focus on getting to the objective." -

- "We're almost there," - Ocelot said smoothly. It was strange to hear him from two places at

once.

- "ETA?" -

- "Two hours, at most." -

- "Satellite shows no one for miles," - Liquid said. - "Of all the nowhere in Russia, you may have found the precise middle." -

- "Volgin was never terribly sociable," - said Ocelot, with a twist to his mouth that might have been humor and might have been disgust.

- "I'll take your word for it," said Snake. - "Don't let your guard down. And don't screw up." -

Not all that encouraging a note to end a transmission on, but he meant well.

Adamska was still for a moment after cutting the connection, as though his eyes had caught on something on the ground. He tch'd softly, lip curling like an end of cut wire.

"What is it?" said Hal, shaking a coil of vine off of his shoe. He was getting better at this, but the underbrush kept trying to wind around his ankles like an overaffectionate housecat.

"Familiar," Adamska said. He squinted into the sun.

"Oh." Otacon pushed his hair out of his eyes, unsure. "Is that good or bad?"

Ocelot glanced over at him, as if remembering he was there. A band of shadow from a branch fell across his eyes like a bandit's mask, cutting the glare and revealing their clarity, and the affection in his smirk.

"Both. Maybe."

They moved on.

Preoccupation slid across Adamska's features like cumulus clouds across a weathermap, but he moved less as though something were chasing him, and set his steps more firmly.

Every time Hal saw him he was different. Every moment separate and discrete, mutually exclusive. There was no way this man had ever been anything but remote and self-contained in absolute impenetrability.

Hal stumbled, and felt Adamska's hand at his elbow, cool and unprepossessing.

"It's not far now," he said.

And the lines of his face shifted without moving, like one of those optical illusions that's nothing but meaningless snow until something in your eye learns how to see it, and suddenly it's something so simple you wonder how you could ever have seen anything besides it before. Like the face of a man cast in shadow and firelight as he breathed with you in unconscious unison, or arched his back along the line of his shadow and said that he loved you. Or the feel of his skin and cadence of his voice, what he had told him, the questions that had never been asked.

Foliage rustled.

"Hey!" Hal called, rousing himself into motion and pursuing Adamska's retreating back. "What's a Mjolnir?"

---

The average reticulated python grows to a length of approximately twenty feet, feeds mainly on rodents and, in the case of larger specimens, rabbits or piglets, incubates at an optimal temperature of 88 to 90 degrees Fahrenheit, and lives a life entirely free from cultural enrichment.

An otherwise unremarkable example of the species coiled around a branch, gazing down at what might be called a path if the identifier wasn't a fan of high standards and didn't get out often. The python turned its head, marked with a lovely black diamond patterning on a background of rich russet,

toward an approaching disturbance. As it was in the process of digesting a flying squirrel, it was in an unusually placid and sedentary mood, and continued to observe the creatures that emerged from the brush even after it became apparent that they were too large to swallow comfortably.

"Then Loki commissioned two dwarves to make treasures for the gods," said the one whose movements declared him a fellow predator. "He promised that if their creations were judged better than the first three, they could cut off his head. They agreed."

"Not fans, huh?" said the other who walked at his side.

"Trickster gods don't earn many friends. It's part of the job."

"Why go to his enemies for help?"

"Hate is predictable and controllable. It's just another kind of lever. Anyway, Loki didn't intend for them to succeed. Once the dwarves started forging, he transformed himself into a horsefly and stung one to distract him."

These were no threat. Neither predator nor prey, but denizens of a nebulous phase that the system of fears, hungers, and instincts that governed the python assured it made them safe to ignore. The python draped itself over the branch in full sunlight, as though the old mother goddess of the jungle were tatting lace.

"That's cheating."

"Of course it's cheating. You don't expect anyone who sets the rules to play by them, do you?"

Somewhere above the python a bird trilled, joining the chorus of insects practicing their arpeggios.

"The senior dwarf made an object, put it in the fire, and left, telling the junior one to work the bellows without stopping until he came back."

"That doesn't seem quite fair."

"Dwarves were the early model for capitalist decadence. The Loki-fly bit the younger brother on the hand all through it, but he never stopped, and when the older brother came back he pulled out a golden boar."

"How could that possibly be useful?"

"It was mostly for show. The next was a ring or something that multiplied itself every nine days, with the fly biting the back of his neck, your standard mythical escalation bullshit. For the last object the fly got the bright idea of biting between his eyes until blood ran into them and the unlucky bastard had to stop slaving for a fraction of a second to wipe it away before he finished. That was Mjolnir. Thor's hammer. That moment of inattention held it at the brink of perfection. The handle was a little short, and the head wasn't quite perpendicular. Still, it was judged the best of all of them."

Sunlight filtered through the snake's skin, brightening its blood with seeping warmth. It watched the two pass by, the crest of a froth of parted undergrowth beneath its resting place.

"That doesn't make any sense at all. Wouldn't the handle be wooden anyway? Why would it be in the forge? And couldn't he have told his brother about the fly and gotten him to come swat it or something? Or-"

"It's a myth. It doesn't have to make sense."

"What about Loki? Did he get killed, then?"

"Of course not. Gods like that never die. There was some loophole about cutting his neck and the dwarves had to settle for sewing his lips shut."

"Eugh."

"I didn't say it was a *nice* story."

Emerald leaves shuffled and parted, then closed behind them with feathery, vaguely admonishing



tones, concealing them like the remnants of a shredded silk curtain.

"So, what does it all mean? Close the windows in your workshop? If you really want to cut somebody's head off, make sure to be specific? Cheating doesn't work if you don't do it well enough?"

"Meaning? It doesn't mean anything at all. Some stories don't."

"Maybe, make the most important thing first? Don't put the handle in the forge with the hammer? Don't..."

A rustle of leaves, and they were out of the python's hearing. It lay draped in the sun, watching the ground for stray signs of a rodent's movement, and thought of more important things.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/53/>

# chapter 54

**Stray** by Dahne

*Greed can change the nature of a man.*

Soon they came out onto a bare mountainside, sere and atmospherically vulture-studded. Along the sheer drop to the west, Otacon could make out black shapes that looked like mounted machine gun nests, long abandoned. To the east the mountain rose in earnest, a few degrees short of perpendicular to the ground. Ocelot led him beneath its shadow into a nearly invisible crevice.

The dust shifted.

A cobra slid free of its resting place in the fine grit. It drew back its head and coiled, taut and unblinking. Adamska kicked it out of the way.

Near the back, where the mountain united again, Adamska dropped to his knees and pawed at the ground.

Otacon leaned over and was about to ask what in the world he was doing when he caught a regular shape emerging from the sediment of years. A slab of rock, perfectly matched to the dirt-and-more-dirt paint swatch of the rest of the area's exterior design.

"Here," Ocelot grunted. "Help me get this up."

Otacon knelt down next to him and set his fingers to the edge of the rock where it raised slightly from the rest. They pulled, and, though he felt a pang of homesick longing for a crowbar, they managed to pry it up. They let it fall onto its back, where it raised a tiny salute to a sirocco.

Beneath it was a wide metal slab with a ring set into a round depression like the doorknocker to the underground kingdoms of the dead.

Ocelot clapped a grimily gloved hand to Hal's shoulder. There was a look of avarice to his eyes that had nothing to do with gold.

"Shall we?"

It was probably good he didn't wait for an answer.

With a grunt, he hauled the trapdoor open, revealing what appeared at first glance to be a hole and, on further examination, proved to be a maw. Definitely a maw. There was a ladder against one side.

Crouched beside the opening, Adamska waved a hand in sardonic presentation. "Inviting, isn't it?"

Otacon stared down, trying to see the bottom and getting the uneasy feeling that the bottom was trying to see him. "H, how far down does it go?"

Ocelot shrugged languidly. "I'm not sure of the distance, but it takes exactly five minutes."

Seeing no other option, Otacon climbed into the pit.

Cool air wound around his legs like smoke, with the mausoleum scent of atmosphere that had not been disturbed for a very, very long time.

That Adamska swung down immediately after him was reassuring.

That he shut the trapdoor was not.

The world's gamma went from full to off.

Hal froze.

"It's all right." Adamska's voice echoed above him in the enclosed space. "Just keep moving."

Otacon started downward, and began to count.

The important thing, they always said, was not to look down. As soon as he thought it, he looked. Well. That wouldn't be a problem. He couldn't see anything anyway. Progress was made entirely by feel. Fortunately, ladders are of the rare genus that, but for a few ill-conceived specimens, devote themselves to the comfort of predictability over the excitement of experimentation.

As they descended, the air temperature dropped as if in sympathy. A hesitant breeze touched Otacon's back, greeting and investigating these foreign interlopers like an aged, sober terrier.

At the count of three hundred, he groped downwards for the floor and found it.

"Huh. Whaddya know. You were right."

"Naturally." There was the sound of Ocelot landing lightly behind him, graceful even in the pitch dark. Otacon snuck a glance back to see if his eyes were reflective.

Just a warmer, denser darkness that was Adamska. Tatters of his scent stirred the calcified rarefied air, that unique esoteric scent that was almost *something* except that it wasn't, quite, that seemed so familiar, like a memory of a song that you couldn't recall the chorus to. Like cinnamon grown wild on the plains of Mongolia and used to build huts for a Khan, or the paint on the shields that Spartan warriors come home on, or the incense a samurai tucked in his helmet. It would take a more substantial sample to be sure, and every time Hal got the opportunity he found himself distracted.

Adamska said, "Stay close to me."

Otacon was about to protest that not knowing where he was might make that difficult when an arm slipped around his waist to enforce the instruction. Hal muffled a squeak and wondered if he would ever stop being surprised by the strength in that arm.

There was a rustling sound, and they moved forward, as though Adamska were feeling along the wall.

"Ah. Here it is."

There was a soft click, and a deep, grumbling, sizzling sound, like a huge electric eel being woken from a long nap.

The lights came up to reveal a square hallway cast in concrete gray.

"After all these years," Hal said with wonder.

"Volgin was something of a connoisseur when it came to wiring," Adamska said.

He released Hal, though not without a surreptitious squeeze, and strode forward.

At the end of the hall loomed a steel door, the kind that old colosseums kept either a lady or a tiger behind. There was a large, spoked wheel at the center, as though it were an air lock or something. Security cameras perched above it to either side, harmless and incommunicative as crows.

Ocelot took hold of two of the spokes and, punctuated with grunts of effort, turned it first one way and then the other. Then back to the left a half-turn, then right two turns and a quarter, pause, one turn right, two left, pause, one-half left, three right, hand moving smoothly over hand, click. The door swung inwards. Ocelot stepped over the threshold.

Hal followed into a shorter hall that was nearly identical, ending in another imposing door. This one had a keypad to the right, and its cameras had strange protrusions at their bases.

By the time Otacon recognized them as gun mounts, Adamska was at the door.

"W-wait!"

"Don't worry," Adamska said airily, entering a sequence of numbers. "They only fire if you get the code wrong."

Hal was about to say something about how reassuring this wasn't when he hit the enter key.

After a pause long enough to feel both alive and dead, the display blanked. Ocelot began to enter

more numbers.

Still unsure that his heart wasn't going to explode, Otacon said, "I, isn't that dangerous?"

"Not if you're Volgin." His fingers moved with calm deliberation. "Of course, if there's a an attempt to tamper with it, the mechanism delivers an electric shock more than powerful enough to kill a normal man."

Otacon's mouth opened and shut on a whole march of protests, but he couldn't prevent an, "A, Adamska..."

"Don't worry," Ocelot said briskly, with a hint of amused exasperation. "With all the trouble I went through to get these codes, they had fucking well better be right."

The screen cleared once more, and he entered a final string of numbers and hit the enter key. For a moment, 22884646 remained etched in black on the familiar forest green background of ancient electronics. Then a click. The door opened with a sigh of resignation.

The next room was significantly smaller. Walls and floor alike were covered in white tile, as though a a ceramicist had been given the entire space to go quietly and thoroughly mad. There was another door at the end with a larger keypad and screen beside it.

Adamska stood in the middle, gazing up at the ceiling.

"There was a room that looked like this," he said softly.

"Huh?" said Hal, tripping over the raised doorframe and coming up beside him.

"The walls weren't so white."

His eyes were focused on a vanishing point beyond the walls. His hands were still.

"They had yellow stains on them. Like rust. You can never really wash it away, after long enough. It soaks in. That much blood. It always splatters. He had his own techniques. The bullets in his fist. Like being electrocuted, shot, and punched hard enough to bend metal, all at once. So many ways. He liked to do it with his bare hands, best."

"Adamska..." Hal touched his arm.

With the invisible plink of a thought bubble bursting, he was back to reality, from wherever he had been. Back to being the Adamska Hal knew. His eyes snapped like a circuit breaking.

For an instant, he stared at Hal with a kind of disbelief.

Then, back to business.

Otacon watched over Ocelot's shoulder as he punched in a series of commands and the screen leapt to life after fifty years of somnolence. Made to last, this stuff.

"It was too much to hope that this one wouldn't still be armed," Adamska said, his eyes and fingers moving in counterpart to the display. "We won't be able to get any farther. No one knew the ultimate access codes but the Colonel himself, and they were changed on a regular basis. Paranoia can be so irritating when it's justified."

"Then what are you doing?" Otacon said, copy/pasting the flowing information to his mind and attempting to parse the unfamiliar system.

"Taking advantage of the more useful results of that paranoia. This should tell me when was the last time someone came through."

His tone made it clear that that "should" applied to the machine's own self-interest.

The march of numbers came to a stop.

"Ah," Adamska said. A wave of grin broke over his face.

"What?" said Hal, absorbed in the pattern of numbers.

With a flourish of finality, Adamska hit a few keys that sent the screen back into blank torpor.

"Mission accomplished," he declared. "No one has set foot here since before Volgin died. The

Legacy is ours for the taking."

"That's it?" Hal said, reading along the printout in his head.

"Confirmation is all we were sent to do," said Adamska, sweeping back toward the exit "Big Boss will have to find some way around it for himself when he comes in full force. We can't do *everything* for him, or he'll start to get spoiled. It's too bad, really. There's only one door after this, and I have the password for that. Ah, well. It's more important to know that the damned stuff is still here at all. Let's get out of this rat hole and share the good n-"

It was about there that he must have noticed Otacon wasn't following.

As Hal had suspected, it worked on the same basic principles as any other basic operating system. If he just- maybe- all he would have to do is- There!

"*Dolboyob*!"

Hal was beginning to turn at Ocelot's shout when a hand at his shoulder jerked him away from the panel.

He caught the end of a flash of panic illuminating Adamska's face like lightning.

"Idiot!" Adamska cried. "What the fuck do you think you are doing?"

Otacon blinked at him, a little annoyed at the interruption. "Getting into the system."

"Getting into the system," Adamska repeated, in the way of someone who needed the particular utterance to be run past again in order for meaning to be discernible through the layers of stupidity. "The system protected by an automatic defense to instantly kill anyone who tries to tamper with the control panel."

"Well, yeah," Otacon said, wondering what his point was. "I disabled those first."

While Ocelot's face went through an impressive series of calisthenics trying to decide between fury, outrage, and disbelief, there was the soft, satisfying click of a lock disengaging.

His hand loosened on Otacon's shoulder, and he breathed out like a sigh.

"See those?" Ocelot said.

There were a few discreet vents too small to crawl through set high on the walls.

A guttural undernote slipped beneath the tight control of Adamska's voice.

"When a security breach is detected, the exits seal, and those dispense gas. The initial plan was for a nonlethal paralytic so that Volgin could collect and dispose of the intruder at his leisure."

His face was blank and rigid as iron grating.

"Eventually the Colonel decided to forgo fun in favor of practicality and opted for poison."

"Oh," said Hal.

Ocelot hauled him forward until they were nearly nose to nose. His eyebrows skewed downwards, incongruously elegant slashes of wrath.

"Have you heard a word I've said?" he hissed. "*You could have gotten yourself killed.*"

"I didn't," Otacon said, stung. "I'm not an amateur."

Ocelot lowered his eyes and loosened his grip.

Otacon realized that one of the things that had seized hold of his face for an instant had been fear.

"Don't do that again," Adamska muttered.

"Don't worry," Hal said, laying a hand on his arm in reassurance. "This is what I'm good at. Have some faith in me, okay?"

The shake of Adamska's head was more solemn than refusal.

"I do," he said, with the unadorned simplicity of a sentiment that wasn't used to being formed and spoken. "That doesn't excuse taking foolish risks."

His hand tightened on Hal's shoulder with a different and less bruising strength.

"Never take anything for granted," he confided, voice pitched low. "It's not worth the risk."

He raised his head, the pieces of his equilibrium reassembling.

"The Colonel was a vicious man. He'd destroy anything precious to him before he'd let someone else get away with what was his. He's the same man no matter how long he'd been dead."

Adamska's mouth twisted.

"Constancy. Admirable, isn't it?"

When he talked about Volgin, his expressive face became dispassionate.

"How do you know all this?" Otacon asked.

"I made...friends with the man who designed it," Ocelot said, looking at Hal with a flat paucity of reluctance like a dare. "And I worked beneath the Colonel for a long time. He wasn't good at keeping secrets. Live long enough, and you couldn't avoid picking things up."

The door opened at his touch.

"It's the law of averages that some of them would prove useful."

The next room was stone again, all but for an odd grating in place of a floor for a meter or two around the entrance. Ocelot's boots clanged against it. The right wall was entirely taken up by a fantastic assortment of metal, dials, and inputs that Hal recognized as being related to his laptop in the same way that the ancestor of the common north African chimpanzee was related to Charles Darwin. There was a small console making a lonely attempt to balance it on the left.

At the far end was a door made of thick steel and finality. There was a simple input panel beside it, fitted with a tiny display. Ocelot made straight for it and began striking a sequence of keys.

Otacon was in the middle of explaining how the law of averages didn't work that way when a word appeared on the tiny screen, little larger than a pocket calculator's output, and Ocelot hit the enter key.

"OZYMANDIAS?" Hal read.

Adamska swung open the door with an wide sweep of imperious grandure.

"Look upon my works, ye mighty," he said, spreading his arms in presentation, "and despair."

Once, Otacon had heard of a metaphor for eternity, about a bird that flew every thousand years to sharpen its beak on a mountain at the end of the world. The point was something about how, when that mountain was worn down to dust, eternity would have yet to truly begin.

If that mountain were made of gold, the rubble at its foot might have looked something like this.

Otacon said, "Wow."

The vault was a pasture for gold bullion, complete with heiferion and calfion. Bars of it stood stacked in pallets like stocky, sparkling plywood in the world's most misguided lumberyard. If the sea had flooded this room, it would have become *aqua regia* by association. The stacks continued on after the eye gave up and winked in the unaccustomed light like Midas's toenail clippings.

Hal's "oh" brushed against it and echoed back as *Au*.

Adamska was grinning as though he had pulled it all out of his pocket for a surprise.

The Codec chirped like the cicada chorus of a Nagasaki summer.

Big Boss's face came up, superimposed over a stack of bars that could have bought the greater part of Mongolia.

- "Well?" -

If there was inflection in his voice, it wasn't anything Otacon could read.

- "Congratulations," - Ocelot said, with well-earned self-satisfaction. - "You're a very rich man." -

- "You found it, then." -

- "Enough to build an army, with plenty left over to retire on a pretty island somewhere when you get sick of conquering the world." -

Big Boss's grunt was noncommittal, but in the depths of the one watchful eye on the semitransparent display, two sticks struck together to light a spark of optimism. - "No sign anybody's been there before you?" -

- "Pristine as a bride on her wedding night. The defenses are good. The next time one of your messengers passes through hell, tell them to wave thanks to Volgin. He's left you a pretty prize." -

- "Any sign you've been followed?" -

Adamska snorted. - "Please." -

- "Looks like its too late to warn you not to get cocky." -

If Otacon hadn't known better, he would have said there was a thread of humor to that.

- "Next problem is extraction. You two first. Then the goods. Getting this across the Arctic Circle is going to take a hell of a relay. Might be able to get some men out there on the pretext of field exercises, for nostalgia's sake. An old man trying to recapture some of his youth." - Irony laced his tone like arsenic in a chocolate cake. - "No matter what we do, we'll need some heavy tampering with their surveillance systems to make it look half convincing. Think you can do that, Em- er, Otacon?" -

- "Possibly," - Otacon replied cautiously. - "It'd depend on the resources I have." -

- "All of them." -

- "Oh." - He brightened. - "In that case, yeah." -

- "First things (ksshht)irst." - For a moment, the one-eyed face flickered and was replaced by snow. - "Get (zzzsst) of there. We'll deal with (vrrt) when (kssskkk), just (fsshzzzztttt)..." -

The communication wavered out. The map display was nothing but snow.

Otacon attempted to reconnect.

Nothing.

Perhaps unnecessarily, Otacon said, "I think something is very wrong here."

"A malfunction," Ocelot said airily, heading back to the room with the consoles, where it was easier on the eyes and the inner sense of exchange rate. The revolver spun terse circles around his finger. "You said yourself it gets jammed easily."

"Well, yeah, but..." Otacon said as he followed, then stopped.

Instead of heading out, Ocelot had gone to the smaller console, and was fiddling with the controls.

Otacon craned over him curiously. At a glance he couldn't decipher what any of the buttons and dials might mean. Ocelot was manipulating them with adroit flicks of his wrists, as though he had intimate knowledge of the mechanism.

"Hey, what are you-"

"Shh." It was a tight burst of sound.

Ocelot's eyes were tracking through the open door into the sequence of chambers they had passed through to get here. It was as though he were trying to trace something with no presence, make out a shape that was nothing but displacement of air, or divine a shade on the low end of infrared.

After a minute, Otacon saw it.

The motion in the void. The slight, almost indiscernible waver, near invisible against the simple tessellation of tile or stone.

Stealth camouflage.

As though it had been waiting, there was the snapping, electric hiss of the cloaking device switching off.

In the doorway stood a boy with hair that looked as though he had plucked a half dozen carrion birds bald and pasted the ill-gotten gains above his eyebrows. A triumphant sneer painted his lips in broad strokes. He wore stained fatigues and couldn't have been more than eighteen.

The pistols in his fists were almost perfunctory.

"Comrade ADAM," he said in a voice like oil enveloping tar. "Welcome home."

He stepped forward.

"Duck," Ocelot said mildly.

Otacon realized who he was talking to and moved just as the invader's boot touched the grating.

There was a terrible zapping, ripping sound.

The guns went off with no direction. Bullets buried themselves in the walls. The intruder's head was thrown back as he convulsed, throat emitting subvocal subhuman grunting noises.

After a long, long time that might have been seconds, the glossolalia of electrocution cut short, and the man pitched forward to the floor, prone and twitching.

Ocelot flipped a switch on the console and said, "That."

---

## Notes:

-What? Yes, Volgin reads 19th-century English poetry! Sure he does! Who says he doesn't?

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/54/>



# chapter 55

## Stray by Dahne

"Ah, my friend, you do not know, you do not know  
What life is, you who hold it in your hands";  
(Slowly twisting the lilac stalks)  
"You let it flow from you, you let it flow,  
And youth is cruel, and has no remorse  
And smiles at situations which it cannot see."  
-T.S. Eliot, *Portrait of a Lady*

---

*Opportunity can change the nature of a man.*

"Doesn't feel right, just hacking it all apart like this."

"You'll get over it."

"Yeah, I guess. But- do we have to pull all the guts out?"

"You're the one who came up with the idea. Don't tell me you're getting squeamish now."

"I'm not. It's sad, that's all."

"It's necessary."

"I know, I know."

"You can't tell me you've never done this before."

"Sure I have. Lots of times. Just never quite this...haphazardly. Usually it's just for fun, and with ones that have been dead for ages anyway. It feels like a bad repayment for a lifetime of service."

"Not service to *us*."

"That's beside the point. Look, just come over here and help me with- Ugh! God! What *is* this stuff?"

"How the hell should I know? I'll help you as soon as I'm done here."

"Nah, never mind, I've got it. Just gotta- Oh, wow! I've only ever seen pictures of these! And I don't even know what those are."

"We can come back for some of it if the rats don't carry it away."

"All right, I think I've got everything," Hal said with satisfaction, crawling out of the cannibalized wreckage of what used to be Groznyj Grad's databanks. He stood and wiped grease off his brow. "Is that kid okay? That was a pretty nasty shock he got."

"Oh, don't act so upset," Ocelot said, finishing off a series of running knots securing the intruder's forearms. He'd known rope would come in handy. "He's not dead. That was just enough to stun him." Pause. "Maybe a little more."

He pulled at the network of webbing and nodded, satisfied. Good and tight. None of this business with a single loop at the wrists loose enough that any idiot could wriggle out of it with a little dramatic straining. Ocelot didn't put up with that kind of nonsense.

"If you say so," said Hal dubiously. His fingers were poised above the keyboard of what he insisted on calling a computer, though it didn't look anything like one. It perched atop the somehow still functioning remains like a squirrel on top of a redwood stump. A thin black umbilical ran from it into the shadows of the wreckage. "I just want to know how you knew he was coming."

"Call it an educated guess." Ocelot rose from his crouch behind the unconscious boy. The ankles

were already bound to match. "It's not like them to leave anything completely unguarded. I had to lure him into the open. The electrified floor was made precisely to deal with anyone who thought to be clever by sneaking in behind the vanguard."

He scowled down at their new problem.

"As soon as he wakes up, we've got to get what information we can and get out of here. Our cover's blown."

"Maybe not," Hal said, in a thoughtful tone that made Adamska look up and say, "Eh?"

Hal was gazing at the screen, finger tapping the keyboard pensively.

"I was checking his nanos to see if they had some way to block the pulse when he scrambled ours with that."

He nodded at the small, sleek black device lying beside the pair of pistols on the console. Out of the gaps between melted, fused buttons, a wisp of smoke drifted gently.

"Turns out, well, he doesn't have any."

Adamska's eyes narrowed. "He's not in contact at all?"

"Nope. Look like that thing works like a super-powered chaff grenade, sort of. There's no way of telling how large the blast radius is, but every nano in it has been, well, confused. I don't know when the pulse will clear, but if we can get somewhere where the concentration is lower, I might be able to use this stuff to build us a kind of amplifier. Not having any nanos to begin with is a pretty clever defense, actually. "

"So they have him on a long leash," Ocelot muttered. The revelation left him with a sour mix of relief and unease.

"It would make sense, if he's been staking out this area for an extended period of time. Nanos don't last forever, you know."

He hadn't, but there was no reason to bring that up.

"Besides," Hal went on, stuffing bales of wiring and various...things into a bag, "there was a lot of interference even before it got knocked out completely. I put it down to atmospheric disturbances at the time."

"Meaning?" Adamska prodded.

"Specifically, it blanked out the contextual information. That is, from headquarters, they could see where we were, but not *where* where we were was."

Adamska gave him a low, level look.

"Like having the center of a map, with all the edges cut off," Hal added helpfully.

The look continued into the foreseeable future.

"They don't know where we are," Hal concluded. "I was just about to transmit the coordinates when we went offline." He gave a wistful glance to the slim black device laying like the devil's severed thumb on the console. "I wish I knew how that thing works."

"We'll find out everything soon enough," Ocelot said.

He brought up his hand and watched it curl into a fist, listened to the soft red leather sounds.

"You won't...you won't hurt him, will you?"

Hal had paused at his work to look at Adamska with guileless eyes.

It had just occurred to him that the enemy combatant from whom it was necessary to extract a maximum of information in a minimum of time might come to some degree of harm.

"I know how they operate," Ocelot said, a rime of ice sharpening the edges of the words. "He would have killed you without a second thought if it would get him one step closer to his objective."

The thought sent streaks of lightning through Ocelot's blood.

"This Philosophers' dog doesn't deserve your sympathy."

"Adamska, he's just a kid."

*So was I.*

Ocelot sighed, hands raised in defeat. "It's all right. You don't have to glare at me like that. I'm not about to go roughing anyone up just because he happens to be an agent of the enemy we're out to destroy. I'll be gentle as a kitten. However-"

He raised a finger.

"Appearances are crucial. Promise me you won't interfere, no matter what I say."

"Yeah," Hal agreed, too soon, as always.

Adamska came closer.

"And..."

The frost returned. The hard one that strikes in the pockets of darkness before sunrise.

He leaned over and planted his hands on the console, bringing their faces to a common altitude.

"If he so much as twitches his eyelid in your direction, all bets are off."

The undercurrent of ferocity was less restrained than he had intended.

There was a moment of wide eyes behind glass before Hal smiled.

Lifting his face, Hal kissed him, very lightly, lingering only as long as it took a snowflake to melt.

He said, "That's sweet. Kind of scary, but sweet."

Adamska accepted it in the spirit it was offered, and smirked.

"Anyway," Hal said, glancing at the unwelcome visitor sprawled in the corner, "I don't think we're gonna get into much trouble from one tied-up kid."

Adamska shrugged away discomfort and straightened. "Just get what you need. And trust me."

"Sure."

He said it as though agreeing to a foregone conclusion.

Hal returned his attention to the computer. He treated it with a sort of affectionate condescension, as one might a beloved, but none too bright labrador.

"This is incredible," he murmured as dying machinery clicked and whirred. "I've never even seen a computer this old before. It's barely a step above punch cards."

"Don't get too absorbed," Adamska warned, a bit reluctantly. Hal's fervors of excitement over strange artifacts were cute, not to mention endlessly amusing. It entirely made up for being fascinated in something that wasn't Adamska. "We've got work to do."

"Yeah, I know," said Hal. "I don't know how much use any of this can be, but I'm downloading as much as I can before I take out the crucial bits. Looks like a lot of maps and weapon plans, mostly."

He murmured something that sounded suspiciously like, "I wonder if I could rig up Spacewar on this thing," but it was masked by a groan from the heap in the corner.

"Ah," Adamska said.

He paced deliberately to the prisoner, angled to loom.

"It looks like our friend is awake."

The boy's eyes snapped open, the green of a rusted penny.

"Don't bother hoping for any convenient sharp objects," Adamska advised, watching the captive's muscles twitch abortively in the ropes' grasp. "There won't be any."

If the boy's expectations were disappointed, he didn't let it show.

"An ambush for the ambusher," the spy said peremptorily, grogginess making the affectation of control in his tone absurd. "Just as expected from the famous ADAM."

His tongue ricocheted crisply off the capitals.

"That answers who sent you," Ocelot said drily. "Let's observe the formalities. What's your name?"

The boy struggled to his knees. A fairly impressive effort, trussed as he was. Adamska did him the favor of providing an appreciative audience.

The boy met his eyes with what he probably thought to be an expression of proud defiance. It made him resemble a petulant hedgehog.

"My designation is ESAU."

Adamska recognized the allusion vaguely. No doubt there was some convoluted primrose path that led eventually to thematic significance. He had long since ceased to be amazed that a cabal of the most powerful men in the world didn't have better things to do with their time.

"Real name," Ocelot clarified. The revolver ambled out from its holster and described a lazy rotation around his index finger.

The boy's jaw set like a phalanx of rigid quills. "Esau."

Ocelot released a small, atmospheric sigh.

"I see. So that's how you are. No help for it, then."

He pantomimed a glance to where Hal stood, back by the ravaged databanks, watching like an owl perched on a signpost.

"Sorry to break that promise so soon."

Unhurried, ominous steps took Ocelot to the control console. With a negligent motion, he pressed a button.

If you weren't looking for it, the hiss to the air was nearly inaudible.

Ocelot crouched down in front of the spy and put his face very close.

"You've got nothing to gain from bravado," Ocelot said conversationally. "And I don't have time for games."

The boy made a feeble but spirited attempt to stare him down. "Then you shouldn't waste it trying to scare me."

Ah, well. Couldn't say he hadn't given him a chance.

Adamska jammed the revolver home.

The spy couldn't completely swallow a cry when Ocelot grabbed him by the front of his shirt and hauled, deliberately angled so that he had no control over the distribution of his own weight and was forced to let it fall where Adamska willed. His limbs jerked, instincts vying for balance and failing as they always would when pitted against good knots. His heels made a dull clatter against the floor.

With a wrench of his arm and a twist of his elbow, Ocelot held the boy's torso aloft as his legs twitched for traction, suspended supine over the grating.

The crisp snicker of electricity bit at the air.

There was a tender stab of satisfaction in the disappearance of arrogance from the prisoner's eyes.

With his free hand, Adamska plucked a strand of the boy's black hair. He held it up, making sure his eyes were following. Let it drop. The agent couldn't see it, of course, not without twisting in Ocelot's not-quite-negligent grip more than his audacity dared, though his eyes darted to the ultimate edge of their boundaries in futile reflex. He had to be satisfied with listening to the sizzle.

The voltage coiled and gibbered beneath him like the hungry hordes of the damned in hell's

reservoirs.

"I don't know what gave you the impression I'm a patient man," Ocelot said, voice modulated to the frequency of the grating's hiss, "but I'm afraid you're sadly mistaken."

The boy's adam's apple was prominent beneath pale skin as he swallowed.

"I could show you a few of this system's nicer features. Adjustable voltage, for one. You stayed up for a lot longer than I expected, that first time. Resilient boy like you could take a lot before passing out."

Ocelot bent forward to put his face close, making the balance just a little more precarious.

The prisoner breathed jaggedly. His eyes were unblinking. There were darker flecks in them, like rocks studded a moss-choked pond. His hair was an oily black, too long. Stained fabric strained around Ocelot's fist, begging to be let free.

"Now, I won't say anything about there being an easy way and a hard way. I don't want to give you the false impression there's going to be an easy way. But you have a choice. We can all be comrades here, or you can be my enemy."

His arm lowered, millimeter by millimeter. The greedy clutch of gravity pulled dangling hair nearly in reach of the wire mesh that longed to make them all one perfect circuit. The wires crossed and crissed in perfect squares, a sadist's game of cat's cradle.

"I don't think you want that."

The boy's tongue ran over twitching lips.

"Would you prefer I said Isaac?" he said, the unnatural position throttling the supply of air to his voice. "My name is my name. I've got nothing to hide from you."

He hung over the grating like the sword of Damocles, suspended by the slender thread of Ocelot's forbearance.

The agent's toadback eyes jittered like flies in a jar.

Adamska's lip curled.

He heaved the boy aside.

Esau refused to give him the satisfaction of a grunt as he landed, fetching up against the wall.

Petulance. He'd grow out of it.

Adamska stood and went to lean against the control panel. Absently, he thumbed off the current. The subaudible hum was beginning to annoy him.

Arms crossed, he turned to the prisoner. Bright enough to stay down this time.

Adamska was very careful not to look at Hal.

"Start with who you're working for," Ocelot ordered. Suspicions craved confirmation, however firm the base. He would not make any mistakes.

"The Patriots, obviously."

He cultivated a tone of broad boredom. Trying to make Ocelot angry. It was either a reassurance or an insult to have an opponent who was that stupid.

A look came to his eye that might have been called shrewd.

"Or should I say, the Philosophers?"

"Ah," Adamska said. "I see the problem here."

He clasped his hands behind his back and began, with a measured tread, to pace.

"You think you've still got a choice. The sooner you give up that delusion, the easier it'll go for you. Your unit's not coming for you. If they do, well, this little bolthole is a fortress in its own right. Numbers don't matter. They'll be taken down as quickly as you were."

The insect had a laugh like a rodent.

"Sorry to spoil your fun," he said, "but I'm all you're getting. Don't you remember? Operatives like us work alone."

"All by yourself," Ocelot said flatly. "Without so much as a fucking radio."

He spun on his heel and converted momentum to the much more useful form of a kick to the agent's ribs.

His body lifted and rolled an abortive degree before being stopped by his own useless arms, like a broken-winged firebird trying in vain to flop out of the nest. Weight gave against the toe of Ocelot's boot, one sharp shock carrying a jolt up his leg from the point of contact. For one sublime slice of an instant the Philosopher dog's face was transubstantiated into the slack marble visage of a caryatid gashed by the tumbling fragments of its own pillar.

The supine spy's cry carried more of surprise than genuine pain. It was only a glancing, chiding blow. Just to get his attention.

"Quit cunting around," Ocelot said coldly, scowling down at him. "*They* would hardly send a spy out to look for the Legacy without a means of relaying the information back to someone who matters. Unless they were so confident of your failure they didn't even bother equipping you."

"No," the boy breathed. His breath was fast. "I've succeeded beyond what I could have dreamed."

"Standards have dropped while I've been gone," Ocelot muttered.

He centered himself and asked the only question that mattered. The one that had unease clinging like a sticky-footed lizard between his shoulder blades.

"What is your mission?"

The answer came readily, a lurker at the threshold waiting to be invited in.

"To find you."

"Nice try," Adamska said, with regret. Besides being entirely implausible, it really was. "I've seen the files. They gave up. Their claws were fought off, and the experiment was declared a failure."

"That one was."

The boy was nearly trembling with repulsive puppyish glee.

"The doll that held your place. The homunculus you left behind. That one was the failure, just the empty shell. I knew it. I knew the real ADAM was something else, *somewhere* else. Just like the simulation predicted. It was an incredibly slim chance, they said, zero point zero nine percent, but I knew it had to be, either that or everything I'd ever been told about you was a lie."

The lizard laved its cold tail across the nape of Adamska's neck and whispered in his ear the question he should have asked all along.

"Who are you?"

"Can't you tell?"

The enemy's smile spread pinioned wings beneath eyes mad as an eagle's.

"I'm your shadow."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/55/>

# chapter 56

## Stray by Dahne

*Good, bad, I'm the guy with the gun.*

-Army of Darkness

---

*Information can change the nature of a man.*

Ocelot had gone still as a drop of ice suspended in deep water.

He said, "Talk."

Esau struggled to his knees like a boy around a campfire, eager for his turn to tell a ghost story.

"We've been waiting for you a long time, ADAM. You're a legend, you know. You were shaping up to be the greatest operative the world had ever seen. The creator of history. The hand that moves the world."

His chest rose and fell rapidly. His eyes glinted with a glassy tint as though fevered.

"Then, after your triumph at Groznyj Grad, just as your career was about to really begin, you left."

"The simplest explanation was that you'd gone rogue, but that didn't make sense. The break was too sudden. They kept a close eye on you. They can smell disloyalty, and you'd never had the stink of it. There are some who get desperate enough to lose their wits and pick a battle they know they can't win, you were never stupid or suicidal. You couldn't have defected to a greater power; there is none. You hadn't had anything like time enough to amass the power and connections to break off on your own."

"They had several possible scenarios. I was prepared as part of the contingency plan for one of them. Most have been ruled out, one by one, in the intervening years. There had to be some explanation."

"There is," Ocelot said. He had regained his equilibrium and was idly spinning the revolver on his finger. He smirked. "Unfortunately for you, it's not one they would ever consider."

"Time travel."

The gun stopped.

"Huh," said Otacon. He adjusted his glasses and looked at the captive. "Really?"

"Oh, for fuck's sake!" Adamska shouted.

Esau looked at Otacon with a slight sharpening of attention, as one might direct to a piece of furniture that had politely inserted itself into the conversation. "Was it time travel?"

Otacon nodded. "Yep."

He had been staying back, out of the way, poised in a kind of stasis. That had eased now that Esau was fully cooperating.

Not that there had ever been anything to worry about. Adamska had promised.

"Huh." Esau leaned back, as far as his bonds would allow, and gazed contemplatively up at the ceiling. "Funny old world."

Ocelot jabbed the gun barrel at him like more ordinary men would point a finger. "They *cannot* have predicted this."

"Wait." Electrical signals waltzed across Otacon's synapses, their contrails weaving a neon web. He leaned forward and stared at Esau until he could practically see the circuits beneath his skin.

"What, exactly, did they predict?"

Esau tried to shrug, nearly lost his balance, then tried to pretend he hadn't. "How should I know? I take the orders, I don't write them. All I needed to know was that one week after Groznyj Grad was destroyed ADAM left, and now he's back."

"A direct transference," Otacon said, nodding to himself as he fit the answer into the equation of known facts. "That makes sense."

"*No it doesn't !*" Ocelot cried.

"What I never understood," the agent said, speaking rapidly, as if it had all been coiled in his head waiting to spool out, "was why you left. Why abandon your post just as you were beginning to come into your full potential? But I think I see now."

Ocelot's lip was curled and he was cursing to himself under his breath. Esau didn't seem to notice.

"It was all part of your plan. You let your own enemies fight amongst each other to fill the vacuum, let the competition take care of itself, and left that shell to win the trust of Big Boss and his cabal. You knew Big Boss might become an unstable element. Now that you're in his confidences, you've got his whole operation in the palm of your hand. You'll use them and this" -he jerked his head toward the door that led to the storeroom- "to buy your way into *their* favor. Or even into their ranks. You didn't even have to wait for your plans to come to fruition. For us, it's been a fifty year hiatus, but for you it's all been one fell swoop. It's brilliant."

"It's stupid," Ocelot corrected. "It's also wrong."

"No," Esau went on, his momentum hardly arrested. "That couldn't be all. No need to travel through time for power. You must have realized that all the power in the world couldn't protect you from time itself."

He was working himself into a lather. His eyes glistened with a manic sheen, and lean muscles strained with excitement against his bonds.

"You communicated somehow. You'll use technology to surpass your own mortality."

"Stop right there," Ocelot said, holding up his empty hand and using the other to rub at his temples, gun dangling from his fingers. "Before you embarrass yourself any more."

"Clark was working for you all along. You set him on the decoy yourself. Who better to serve as a test subject than someone with your exact physical specifications? The useless husk you left behind served a purpose after all-"

Ocelot's hand was as still as the gun it held. He gazed over the red of his glove.

He said, softly as a good garroting, "I dislike those who speak ill of the dead."

"Then it must be something even better." A shard of smile cut at Esau's lips, shivering from one corner to the other. "I have to know."

There was something about him, Otacon noticed, that was reminiscent of a wolfhound that had been fed a bit too rarely and kicked in the head a lot too often.

"Get used to disappointment," Ocelot said.

He stalked forward, closer to where Esau knelt. An invisible framework of steel flexed along his skeleton.

"You're talking too much." His tone had gone the flat, dead brown of dry grass matted above a rattlesnake's nest. "That's one of the tricks. You're hiding something."

A vicious hand raked through Ocelot's hair.

"How the hell could they have guessed fucking time travel?"

"They even knew where you would come," Esau said, placid and teeming with microorganismal life as swamp water above a crocodile's head. "I've only been waiting for a few weeks."



The stains and tears that adorned his fatigues were testimony. Dirt smudged the high ridge of his cheekbones like inept war paint. The evidence of murky water lapped at his cuffs. Where they pulled up and left his calf exposed, they revealed the y-shaped red cicatrix of a leech's affections.

"They know everything, ADAM," Esau said, gazing up at him. "Every hair on your head, every doubt in your mind. Every mote on your notebook or speck in your eye has been cataloged by them before deployment. Everything you've ever felt or seen or heard or wanted has its place in their ledgers. Their web goes deeper than any of us could ever imagine."

Before he had ended up in the middle of Alaska for reasons that had seemed like a good idea at the time, Otacon had spent most of his life in various cities. There was a few things they all had in common. For example, an area where it was generally accepted that the principle of free speech extended to being as crazy as you liked at the top of your lungs. Their popularity tapered off after the internet took on the main role of a marketplace for the free exchange of ideas about society being a mechanism for deliberately obscuring the fact that time is a cube, but a few of the most devout stayed on, ubiquitous as windblown plastic bags, preaching to a choir of passerby and pigeons about aliens or mass conspiracies or the end of the world.

That was how Otacon recognized the look of a fanatic.

"Waiting for what?" Adamska snarled. "If it was for an ambush, you fucked that up supremely."

"What good would there be to attacking you?" A smile touched his childish lips, a tinge of eldritch beatitude. "No. That's not what they sent me for at all.

"I'm here to make you an offer."

"An offer," Adamska echoed flatly, like a canyon that was losing its patience. "That's why you came in here armed and knocked out our comms. Next time you have something to say, try fucking knocking."

"Would you have taken me seriously if I hadn't?" said Esau. Tones of reason were a strain of surreality against the blank mad fanaticism in his eyes, cognitive dissonance like a puppet halting in the middle of a Punch and Judy show to recite from the journal of Charles Manson. "If there needed to be a test to confirm your identity, you passed magnificently. I had to use that"

-he nodded toward the lump of ruined metal that had enjoyed a brief life as state-of-the-art technology-

"to ensure an...uninhibited performance. We can't have your handlers butting in before you get the chance to consider it for yourself."

Adamska grabbed him by the collar and hoisted him up until his knees barely touched the floor.

"What is your objective?" he demanded.

Esau's smile shone steady as spring sunshine.

"We want you back, ADAM."

There was the silence of a clockwork orange striking midnight.

Gradually, Ocelot's arm graciously and reluctantly yielded the floor to gravity. He let Esau, still gazing at him with a kind of petitioning, benevolent awe, slide down into a heap.

Ocelot's eyes were averted to the floor, looking like the magnifying glass angled between the ants and the sun.

He still wouldn't look at Otacon.

"It's all right," Esau said earnestly. He'd regained his balance. "No one is angry. There won't be any punishment. Everyone tries to rebel, sooner or later. It's perfectly natural. Yours was just more spectacular than most. There's nothing holding you back from taking your place at their right hand. Our masters reward ability, ADAM, and you're the best there is."

"Reward," Ocelot muttered under his breath.

"Yes," Esau said, glinting eyes blind to bitterness. "You can have anything, ADAM. Real power. Every secret the world has to offer. You can be the one who knows the truth, the one who doesn't just stand by and watch but *makes*. Everything you've ever wanted. You've earned it. You can't be left to rot among the pawns. It's a waste."

Ocelot said dully, "Even the queen is only a piece."

"Do you really think there's anyone who isn't?"

Something gave the impression that all the angles of Esau's pupils would add up to more or less and three hundred and sixty degrees.

"It's all a game. That's the fun of it. You can exist above them, know every move before it's played. Do you remember what it's like, that power? They can give it back, and more."

He spoke clearly and rapidly, crisp as a speech memorized for the occasion but with the loaded cadence of the spontaneous and organic. Otacon got the disquieting impression that he thought this way.

Esau went on, nearly quivering with an almost pathetic eagerness.

"The world has changed since you've been gone. There's nothing to hold you back. The Cold War is over, both of the sides you played against the middle have moved on to better things. You have no connections, no resources, no one but one lackey under your command. You're blind, and no one can fight without his senses. We can give you relevance."

"I suppose 'lackey' is a step up from 'hostage,'" Otacon said philosophically.

Ocelot's boots shifted the width of a mosquito's sigh. He did not look at Otacon.

"Are you done?" he said.

"There's more. There's always more. They can-"

"You're done."

Ocelot turned away and clasped his hands loosely behind his back. He paced with a slow, imperious tread.

"All forgiven, eh?" he said, tone light and empty as a glass vase. "Welcome back with open arms to pick up right where I left off, plus the Legacy and a pet engineer?"

Otacon felt as though he weren't there at all, but present as a projection of himself, recording it through his own hologram.

"All as you say." Esau nodded voraciously, black bangs undulating over his forehead. If he had been wearing wristbands instead of knotted ropes and makeup instead of jungle grime, with a haze instead of the incipient madness in his eyes, he could have passed for a member of one of those bands who wore girls' jeans and talked about not being okay a lot. "But ADAM, you won't be just any operative anymore. You'll be among the archangels. The power behind any throne you can imagine. Not just the messenger but the deliverance, no care but domination, the burning sword to sear a fickle globe. There's no need for asceticism anymore. All you have to do is ask, and they'll give you soldiers, scientists, anyone you want and as many as you'd like, all serving at your pleasure. Of course, this one will have to be disposed of – unknown quantity, risk to security, you know how it is, – but you'll have the best-"

Ocelot spun.

The crack of his backhand connecting was loud in the confined space.

Kinetic force threw Esau to his side.

Otacon was on his feet.

"Adam-"

An outstretched hand held him back, like a policeman warding off onlookers from a crime scene.

"Stay back," Adamska murmured out of the side of his mouth. He was looking straight ahead.

"Trust me."

Reluctantly, pushing down the unease that quivered in his stomach like jello made with weak acid, Otacon obeyed.

He'd promised.

With steps that seemed to resonate in the space behind them, soft silver strikes, Ocelot bore down on the captive.

"They know they can't bribe me back," he said, tranquil as a well-stoppered vial of sarin gas.

"They're not stupid.

"I'm through humoring you."

His voice was a steel fist in a velvet glove that was, on closer inspection, also made of steel.

"Now, I'm going to ask you again."

There was a strange, illusory sense that the word echoed, tilted to a plane of vertigo.

*again again again again again.*

Ocelot's boots moved forward until there was nowhere to go but the fallen captive's face, then, just short of it, stopped.

"What is your objective?"

A thin, lateral trickle of blood ran from Esau's lip and made a red mark on the floor.

"I already told you," he said.

Otacon had an uneasy gut feeling that he was telling the truth.

Ocelot stared down at Esau with cold opaque eyes.

"No help for it, then," he said, tonelessly.

From a sheath on his chest nearly hidden amidst the suit's plethora of sleek protrusions, he drew a long, heavy knife.

He bent down.

The knife had wicked teeth along the flat edge, partway up the broken jaw of its body, an inch's worth of piranha sympathies ideally suited to sawing.

Ocelot's arm moved in a smooth arc.

He stood, hauling Esau up behind him. Severed rope fell from the prisoner's legs like a tumbleweed that had messed with the wrong guy.

"You're coming with us," Ocelot said.

"You're expendable garbage," he added amiably, giving Esau a shove toward the doorway. "Otherwise they never would have sent you out here. But we might as well bring you back as a souvenir. Who knows? You might prove useful."

Esau stumbled forward and twisted to shoot back an inscrutable stare, but said nothing.

"Besides," Ocelot said philosophically, coming to stand at Otacon's shoulder, "I can always slit your throat if you slow us down."

That was all the hint he needed. Moving with admirable balance for someone with his arms tied together, Esau went on ahead to the ladder that would bring anyone with four unencumbered limbs back to the surface.

"Bright boy," Ocelot said

The lower harmonies of the blitheness in his voice rang hollow.

"The pulse affected the area, not our nanos themselves," Otacon said. Disconnecting and packing his laptop away made for an excellent excuse to keep his eyes down, acceding to Ocelot's wishes out

of common courtesy. "There's a spot nearby a little farther up the mountain that should have escaped the worst of it, going by what I could find out. With some time, I might be able to use these parts to get through from there."

There was no response for a moment.

He felt Adamska's hand lay on his shoulder, oddly hesitant, as though afraid he would flinch away.

"I was bluffing," Ocelot said quietly.

"Hmm?" Otacon made a last check that he'd gotten all the data about the base downloaded – he hadn't had a chance to give it a properly thorough going over, and it might have pertinent information about the roots of the Patriots, or the other caches of the Legacy. You never knew what might turn up – and packed his laptop away.

"Oh. Yeah. I know. Just, don't do anything like that again." His voice firmed. "Or I'll stop you."

When no response was forthcoming, Otacon glanced up.

Adamska had his head tilted slightly to the side, scrutinizing him.

When he opened his mouth for the "what" there was a blur of motion and it became otherwise occupied.

Before he could regain his balance Adamska had withdrawn.

He smirked.

"A nice change of pace, isn't it, taking hostages instead of being one?" He gave Hal a companionable clap on the shoulder and strode toward the exit. "Let's not keep our new friend waiting."

"I still don't understand," Otacon protested. "How did you know?"

"I know them," Ocelot said over his shoulder. "Once they expended all the other possibilities, they would get to time travel."

"But you-"

Adamska raised an eyebrow, amused. "I couldn't let him *know* that I'd known that they knew."

Otacon's mouth shut. "Oh."

As they headed out, side by side, Ocelot glanced askance and said, "You're not bad at this."

The door shut behind them.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/56/>

# chapter 57

## Stray by Dahne

*If only you could see what I've seen with your eyes.*

-Blade Runner

*What remains can change the nature of a man.*

Hal went first, followed at a distance by Esau, hands temporarily untied. Ocelot stayed ready to pull him off the ladder by the ankle the instant he tried anything. Maybe slamming him against the wall a few times first, for good measure.

The ascent was assisted by light streaming down from the open trapdoor. The infiltrator hadn't been concerned about covering his tracks. Arrogant little bastard.

The instant he drew up into the open air, Adamska lunged up the last few feet and had him facedown on the ground. He didn't bother struggling while his arms were retied, not that Ocelot's knee, planted firmly in the small of his back, would have permitted much of that. Either he had resigned himself to the hopelessness of his situation or he was conserving his strength for a more opportune moment.

Ocelot, who had a feeling which was the more likely, was not going to let that moment come.

The sun beat down on the barren mountainside as though it had a grudge, making Adamska squint against the glare. Wind kicked up eddies of dust that snaked across the uneven ground like living things, lemmings rushing for the cliff edge in pseudo-religious ecstasy. Everything was a dull dun color, overbaked until what wasn't rock was crumbling. Here and there vultures skulked, flapping into ungainly flight when the disparate assortment of bipeds drew near, squawking in irritation at the intrusion into their long uncontested domain. One bony, speckled specimen failed to notice their approach until they drew near enough to see the bones on the lizard it was dissecting, hooked beak as scalpel, before flapping spastically away. One wingtip nearly grazed Esau's cheek. He jerked away with a grimace of disgust.

If Ocelot was feeling particularly charitable later, he might have to give them a feast.

No flame patrol anymore. That was one advantage. They could move quickly, entirely unhindered by The Fury's scions. It was enough to make Ocelot almost cheerful.

He pressed on, giving the boy a shove of encouragement whenever he slowed. The sun would set fast behind the mountains, and he was determined to get to the place Hal had indicated before darkness forced a halt. If you were stubborn enough to keep moving when visibility got bad in this terrain, you'd have a long time to regret it before you hit the ground.

An exhausted prisoner was a worthwhile goal as well. Having one's arms locked into position made balance a labor-intensive process. There might be some chance of finding out what he was really up to yet.

Little had changed outwardly. But for the absence of life - helicopters, flying platforms, maniacs with flamethrowers, all the apparatus of a functioning military base – it could have been any number of days he had walked this path. He almost wanted to search for his own footprints.

Why, then, did it feel so different?

They said you could never go home again.

The machine gun nests still stood. As usual, Volgin was admirably prepared for every kind of assault except the one that happened. When they passed nearer, the dried-blood cast of the metal

solidified, and it was possible to identify them as being held together by rust and force of habit.

Maybe that was why. The pretense was gone. Time had a way of destroying veneers. The muscle, sinew, and hide of hierarchy and organizational efficiency had crumbled, laying bare the mutant skeleton of Volgin's madness.

A monsoon of a man if there ever was one. Ocelot wondered what had become of the rest who had been swept into the Colonel's wake. The flame patrol, no longer pacing this dust expanse with their clatter and slosh and smell that warned not to light a match if you prized your epidermis. Raikov and the soldiers he had terrorized. His unit.

The wind, more annoyed by the sun than warmed by it, slapped at his face like a reprimand.

It wasn't as though it made a difference. After the fortress was eaten alive by its own spawn, the era of Major Ocelot was over. Even had he stayed they would have been left behind. There was a possibility that Hal could find them, wherever they'd ended up. Hah. Now wouldn't that be fun. Show up on a nice little doorstep and terrify some septuagenarian. They wouldn't have changed. Fedya would roll his eyes and call him a bastard. Lyova would emerge from the center of a maelstrom of grandchildren, all uniformly blond and green-eyed and sickeningly cheerful. Vladya would have grown one of those insufferable little mustaches-

It was better to let the past lie.

It took longer than Ocelot had estimated. Weren't places figuring largely in a personal past supposed to be smaller on the return? Groznyj Grad. Even the terrain refused to adhere to common sense.

The shadows lengthened, creeping steadily toward the cliff's edge like reluctant suicides. Sounds carried in the thin air. Three sets of footsteps, irregular to match the uneven ground. Hard breathing. The flap and cry of vultures. The scuff of dust. A thump.

Adamska turned back.

His heart became a faulty lightning rod.

A few paces back, Hal lay prone and unmoving, eddies of dust crawling like centipedes across his back.

The interval to his side was a numb flash of white.

Then the bright point of his steady pulse was in Adamska's hand and the world began to breathe again.

"Hal," he said. "Hal."

No marks on him. His breathing was regular, if too fast. Adamska cursed himself for a dozen kinds of specially bred, hothouse-raised idiot. Hal wasn't in any kind of condition for a forced march up a fucking mountain. Fuck, when was the last time he'd eaten? Ocelot had been paying more attention to the appearance of Esau. He'd let the Philosophers' pawn distract him. Was that their game? Let him ruin himself because he couldn't keep his own fucking priorities straight?

Ocelot was hardly about to kick him awake - in his experience, that usually led to the subject immediately passing out again for no discernible reason anyway. Spending a fair portion of his life in a weapons research lab had given him a healthy aversion to shaking things without damn good cause. There was nothing to be done but to touch his face and speak to him in low, insistent nonsense phrases. Come on. It's all right. Wake up. Hal.

After a moment, he did. His eyelids fluttered as though he'd been in the middle of a blink and lost his place.

"Eh?" Hal said, staring at the ground as though it had done something uncharacteristically rude. "How'd I get down here?"

"You fell," Adamska said shortly, relief suckerpunching him in the temple.

"Oh," said Hal, nonplussed. "Huh. Thought I was getting sort of dizzy."

"You should have told me," Adamska said. He levered him to his feet. "The air's thin up here, and you're not in any fucking condition for this." His voice narrowed to a fine point. "Why didn't you tell me?"

Hal shrugged uncomfortably, making flimsy attempts to brush the dust off himself, succeeding in smearing it down the front of him as though he had been dragged. "Thought I was okay."

"You weren't." Adamska looped Hal's arm around his shoulders to steady him, and set out for a sheltered crevice in the rock wall he'd seen not far back. He was so fucking thin. Didn't he take basic fucking care of himself? "Come on. We're making camp."

"But-" Still stubborn when he could barely walk straight.

"Don't argue."

As an afterthought, Adamska pulled out the revolver and waved it at Esau, signaling him to follow. Ocelot ignored the appraising prickle of the boy's eyes for now. Let him play at being a fucking spy all he liked. Not that he could get far on his own, unless he wanted to enlist the help of the natives. There were gavials in the swamps that wouldn't mind divesting him of his bonds, as long as he didn't mind losing the arms as well.

Ocelot had the unwelcome feeling that running was the last thing on the boy's mind.

He didn't look like the kind who gave up that easily.

It took Ocelot a few overbalanced steps to realize how heavily Hal was leaning on him.

"God damn it," he muttered, keeping his eyes on the malicious terrain. "You must have been swaying like a drunk at a fucking cabaret."

"Ssorry," Hal slurred. His head was lolling forward. When the hell had he gotten *that* fucking tired? It wasn't right. "'s th' nanos. Whatever he did scrambled them all up. M' system's too used to relying on them. Gotta...gotta recalibrate..."

Adamska gave him a sharp shake that made his sliding eyes refocus and ordered, "Stay with me."

The fucking machines. Of course. If it wasn't deliberate poisoning, it was sabotage by incompetence. The damned things must have been crawling through his blood even now, siphoning his energy to bounce an ineffective signal against the interference again and again, sapping his heart's meagre strength for their own futile purposes.

"Turn them off, then," Adamska growled. It was important to keep them talking. Kept them awake.

"Can't do that," Hal said. The opportunity for pedagogy barely revived him. His head sagged heavily, glasses hanging from his ears like mountaineers clutching cliff edges. "Manually, only...can only shut off comm functions. Wouldn't be able to do that much, if they didn't trust us. 's new. Biometrics...life signs're always monitored, for one thing."

Inadvertently, Adamska thought back to the shifting firelight, the press of blankets and hard stone beneath his knees. So they'd given a bit of a show after all, even if it was just heartrate monitors rising very quickly.

"Can't...can't just shut em all down all of a sudden."

"Why not?"

Hal smiled sourly. "Because if your body's used to them, having their support suddenly go missing takes a lot out of you."

The corner of Ocelot's mouth tightened. He kept his eyes moving. The boy followed them at a distance, obedient as a whipped fox. "You'll be all right."

"Huh? Oh. Yeah. Seeing what I can do in the way of manual override."

Hal's eyes flickered in jerks of barely visible motion. Ocelot was reminded of glancing up to the map in the corner of his own vision. In the short period it had been there, he had grown uncomfortably accustomed to making use of it. Having it gone now was disorienting in a way he didn't like. Motes in his eye shouldn't have been comfortable.

"If I can just..."

Whatever he was doing, it and watching where he was going were mutually exclusive. He stumbled hard into Adamska's side. Scree slid from beneath their feet in a cloud of dust the color of umber that had been first burnt then bleached by the same sun.

"Stop," Ocelot ordered. "You won't do anyone any good. Move, now. Screw around with that later."

"Yeah, 'kay," Hal said, vaguely.

He wasn't arguing.

The way back to the sheltered area was much longer than it should have been.

When the walls closed around them, draping full shadow around their shoulders like a threadbare, favorite bathrobe, Adamska could have breathed a sigh. The enclosure was triangular, sheltered on two sides by solid rock and open on the third to the barren mountainside, as though a wandering ice giant had swung his axe down into the cliff face just to make them a place to take rest. A ridiculous thought. Jotunheim was much further north.

Hal had fallen silent, walking as though in a dream. That at least was no great change. Everything he did was either done with an intensity of focus that made everything else seem translucent by comparison, or as if he weren't paying attention at all. It was only exhaustion. Annoying, and he should have fucking known better than to let it happen, but curable.

Adamska lowered him down to slump against the wall like a ragdoll with stiff joints. His eyes were closed when he hit the ground. The air was too cool to account for the sweat that stuck his hair to his forehead. Ocelot touched his face experimentally and scowled. Hot, as though feverish. Those fucking machines. What had the spy done to them?

He was going to find out.

He stood and turned, sharpening his mind into a tool for digging out the truth.

They wanted him back.

Esau stood at a distance of a few paces, showing no interest in testing the length of his leash. The slanting light marked the stark contrast of his coloration. Light skin, dark hair, mouth just full and petulant enough to make the heaviness of the brows ridiculous. Around twenty, maybe younger, though they should have known Ocelot would be the last to underestimate an enemy because of that. He could have fit in at a village in any number of little Eastern European countries beyond the forest, on either side of the Wall. Former Wall. Or in any number of bad vampire movies, as the brave, foolhardy youth who ventures into the castle alone, whose horrible death serves as proof that the monster is nothing to be trifled with.

The look of naked astonishment on Esau's face gave Ocelot pause and made him check the urge to look back over his shoulder.

"You care about him," the spy said, redolent with incredulity.

"Don't be an idiot," Ocelot snapped.

For all the good it did him. Esau wasn't listening.

His face transformed, as though the punchline to a marvelous joke had just broken the membrane and sunk in. He was laughing.



"I don't believe it," the Patriots' catspaw said, with genuine wonderment. "They knew you didn't care for women, but who could have guessed *that* would be your type?"

"Don't get any strange ideas," Adamska said flatly. "He has some strategic importance."

"Don't bother," said the spy, like an old professional waving away the formalities. "You can lie to me, but you weren't lying to him." He crowed another laugh. "God! They say nobody's perfect, but you...!"

"You don't know what you're talking about." There was something in Adamska's voice common to metal scraping across a whetstone.

"It's the first rule you were taught." Esau was shaking his head, bemusement or disbelief. "You know the consequences of disregarding it. I never knew. Of all the theories."

He smiled vaguely to himself, the beatific mien of the patron saint of mad dogs.

"No one ever had the audacity to suggest you might have gotten weak."

"Think whatever you like," Adamska said dryly. The child's posturing was beginning to bore him.

"Yes. It all makes sense." His voice carried a hint of breathiness, as though his mind were racing. Adamska listened with half interest for the moment it would hit a brick wall. "They didn't lose you. You lost your touch, or you lost your mind."

His laugh was a yelp of hyena hysterics.

"The simplest directive there is, and *you*, the legend himself...!"

Ocelot let his face cycle smoothly through the sneer it had begun, then ordered it to stillness. One eyebrow disobeyed.

"Legend?" he prompted, smoothly.

"Yes," Esau said, only too happy to elaborate, the sibilants stretching their necks into a hint of hiss.

He took a step forward, the unnatural position of his arms causing his torso to twist. The intensity of the fervor on his face, the suppressed aggression in his stance, goaded Ocelot to move closer to meet him.

And, incidentally, to put himself in front of Hal, who had already dropped into the levels of sleep reserved for soldiers and others exhausted beyond their means.

"You don't know?" Esau said, eyebrows raised in ill-feigned surprise. "No, of course you wouldn't. You've been gone. Everyone knows the name ADAM. How you singlehandedly stole the Legacy out from under the nose of half a dozen scheming factions, not to mention Volgin himself. How you accomplished more in your few years of service than most agents do in their entire careers. How you could clear a battlefield with nothing but an antique six-shooter. How when you disappeared you still had yet to blossom into your full potential. But I know more."

Ocelot snorted. "Aren't you special."

"I am." Apparently his senses weren't good enough to pick up sarcasm. "When you vanished, they had to react somehow. Their best operative gone from the face of the earth. It spoiled an incredible number of their plans. Ah, ADAM," he sighed, shoulders sagging, "did you ever think what you could have become?"

Ocelot said, "Get to the fucking point."

"But even then, they might have known it would come to-" -eyes like the tail a lizard left in the mud flicked over Ocelot's shoulder to Hal, and the boy was hardly able to contain himself- "*this*. In any case, no matter what had happened to you, there was a vacuum. All that power you had left behind. They couldn't just wait for you to come back and pick it up again. There had to be another.

After all, why not? After all the time and resources poured into research and development, there's no reason to disassemble the factory after a single weapon is produced. It's wasteful. And you know how our masters dislike waste. They have long memories. Every one of our short lives is just a step in their greater plan.

"ADAM," said Esau, fervency burning in his eyes like miners' headlamps. "First man. You were the prototype."

Trust them to have a half-dozen secret meanings in every code name. Honestly, Ocelot didn't know how they ever got anything done.

Esau continued, as if imparting a rich, delicious secret, "They made another."

"Let me guess," Ocelot said, growing impatient with the dramatic affectations of someone who wasn't him, "You?"

"Yes," Esau said without skipping a beat. His teeth were bared in the reddening light. Over his shoulder, far beyond cliffs high enough to guarantee fatality no matter how many things you hit on the way down, the morning star was visible as a lighter speck in the darkening sky. "They made me."

The setting sun jabbed at Adamska's eyes. He didn't squint.

The spy's tongue darted out to wet his lips. "They controlled every environmental factor, matching it as exactly as possible. Of course, they didn't have the advantage of a Volgin – a man like that only comes into existence once a century - but they found ways to compensate. They are excruciatingly thorough men by nature, as you know. They repeated it all, down to the last detail, except for the mistake they made with you. I understand now."

The raw wound of his mouth gaped a grin.

"They were too sweet."

Ocelot felt the awareness of Hal behind him like a breath of warm vapor on the back of his neck.

"So you're the new improved version," said Ocelot. "All that, just to send you out here to die."

His smile didn't move. "That's not why they sent me."

"Barely armed, alone, and with no means of communication?" Ocelot snorted. "How naive can you be? They're getting rid of you. Or- no. That would be wasteful, wouldn't it?"

His eyes narrowed.

"You're some kind of bait."

"You could say that." His smile was shameless and ingratiating, the smile of someone who desperately wants you to like them. "But ADAM, there's nothing to be afraid of. They believe you'll see reason. That's the other half of the reason I exist. There's something in you no one could ever replace. That's never been a secret. Destiny marks me as a pale imitation, at best. I'm the coin they flipped when you vanished. If you were gone forever, I was to take your place. If you came back-well. They know you can't be bought or flattered back to them, let alone threatened. Who better to send after you, to show you sense, than the one who knows you better than anyone else in the world? I had so many ideas about what I would find. But this-"

A laugh with the slime of a giggle broke behind his teeth like a wave against a breakwater.

"I have to say, there was nothing in my orders to prepare me for this."

Ocelot's hand stroked the hilt of the revolver. Gloves deadened hands to texture but heightened the sense of shape.

"You only want me to have to ask this once," said Ocelot, letting the knives hidden behind his voice's back out to glitter in the vicious light. "What are your orders?"

The spy's face held a purity of guilelessness that could only be achieved by deliberate cultivation. "To find you and bring you back."

Ocelot sneered. "So they can torture me until I agree to play like a nice, obedient lapdog." Plant the idea. He was the target. No one else. "I hardly believe they've gotten so senile as to think you could overpower me alone. What's the rest of your plan?"

He blinked as if in bewilderment and chagrin. "Ask you."

Adamska spoke the one question that an interrogator does not prepare to.

"What?"

"ADAM," Esau said patiently, as if they were discussing the matter over tea instead of in front of rusting machine gun nests and vultures, "these aren't the crude Philosophers you used to know. They made mistakes with you. They understand it now. Someone with your talents should have been left to let them grow under his own direction, not forced. I'm here to rectify that error."

He should have looked ludicrous, muddy and dust-streaked in torn fatigues, arms behind his back, orating like a philosopher king.

"My own discretion?" Ocelot called his bluff. "Then they should fuck off and leave me alone."

"You know that can't be permitted," said Esau. "No one is invulnerable to...human error. Everyone suffers from momentary lapses of sanity. There's no point in being here if you aren't part of something greater than yourself. Anyone can succumb to weakness. They will purge it from you, and make you into what you could be."

"You weren't made to fall, ADAM. You're an incredible piece of machinery. You need them to keep you pristine, perfect. Even the best weapons need direction and maintenance. Failure only comes from outside influences. The more complex the mechanism, the greater the vulnerability to...sand in the gears."

"I don't give a flat fuck for your opinions," Ocelot said. He didn't need to hear this. Empty rhetoric. The things they said to get you off your guard, that oh-so-reasonable tone. It made the back of his neck prickle and his teeth want to puncture someone's neck. "Don't waste my time with propaganda. There's things I want to know."

"Like why I'm here alone, completely disconnected, with no backup, and approached you myself."

Esau smiled as though he were confiding something to a trusted friend, one who was likely bright enough to have figured it out already.

"It's a show of good faith."

He was switching tracks too quickly. Contradicting himself. He was babbling to cover something important.

Lightning coiled and nipped at its tail in the concourse of Adamska's veins.

"They've changed," Esau said, taking Ocelot's silence as agreement or permission. His eyes were unsteady, always moving, as if a legion stood around and behind his target and he wanted to memorize each of their faces. "Specials allowances can be made, for you. You could even keep that pet of yours, once their professionals make some adjustments to his loyalties-"

Ocelot's fist drove the air from his stomach in one smooth motion.

The worst was not being able to defend yourself, even if it made no difference in the end. Futile gestures meant plenty to pride.

Esau staggered a step backwards, caught his balance and slumped forward instead. Ocelot caught him by the front of the shirt and hauled him up, close enough to see the broken vein that scabbled across the white of his eye.

"You're hiding something," Ocelot hissed. "I will know what."

"Believe me or don't," said the boy, unsteady eyes belying his pathetic attempt at bravado. "They

sent me here specifically to answer your questions. There'd be no profit in lying to you."

Profit. Seeing the world in shades of red and black. Beautiful in its own way, the heat and the bleeding edges. Ocelot remembered.

His face was close enough that the crocodile eyes held Adamska's form, two tiny, distorted reflections, as though projected on the dark side of the moon.

"Your story has too many holes," Ocelot snarled, grip on the boy's shirt firm as his grip on reality. "If you're as dead to the world as you say, how do you tell them that I've agreed?"

Esau's face twisted with naked adoration that made Adamska want to recoil and fling him away with all the strength in his arm. He clutched tighter.

"We'll use your nanocommunications. The plan was to disengage the interference field once you'd agreed, but the control device has been destroyed, so we'll have to wait until the effect dissipates--"

Ocelot cut him off with a flick of his free hand. "How long will that take?"

"Weeks, perhaps. There's no knowing. It's new technology, not fully tested. This was not part of the projected scenario."

To the point, then.

"And if I refuse?"

Esau smiled. "You won't refuse."

The strain of nearly a man's full weight stood out on Ocelot's tendons. "You're sure of yourself."

"I know you very well." His Adam's apple sprang and recoiled. Over Ocelot's fist, he nodded toward the wall where Hal waited, dreaming. "Far better than *him*."

All at once, Ocelot understood.

The nerve of the little shit.

Breaking him would be fun.

"There, you might be right," Ocelot murmured, voice venomous and sensual. "You think you've found your way. You think you're safe, because *he* thinks I'm a good person."

He leaned in. A lover's whisper.

"The secret is I'm not."

He could feel the heat rising off the boy's body, merging and conflicting with the sun's residue that crept from the ground.

"Everyone has phases," said Esau. "You're not a child anymore, ADAM. I have faith that you'll put away childish things."

The sky behind him was slipping through shades almost visibly, light siphoning off beneath the hidden horizon.

"Do you know why you're still alive?" Ocelot asked, with casual curiosity.

"Because you need me," said Esau, immediately. "You know the opportunities I represent. You wouldn't throw that away. Whether you've decided to believe it or not, you know that what I say is true."

"You're still alive," Ocelot continued, "because it might upset him to watch you die."

He had his attention.

"I think it's time to dispense with games," said Ocelot. "As you said, we're both professionals here. So we can either dance around each other while you think up cute ideas, or I can tell you straight out."

From deep in the jungles of his voice, from the caves with perimeters marked by skulls on stakes (some facing out and some facing in, and a few both ways for good measure), there was the low,

relentless throb of war drums.

"If you so much as let the ghost of the idea of touching him flit through your skull, you'll wish you'd had the foresight to die young. *Do you understand me?*"

The setting sun that sought to blind him only made him angry. The boy hung in his grasp like a body from a gallows before the birds had picked it clean.

Eyes never moving from his, Esau said, "I understand you."

That was enough. Adamska felt an abrupt wave of bile-tinged disgust rise up from his gullet. He flung the spy away to land on his back in the dust. A spasm of pain crossed the boy's face; his arms must have bent in some unpleasant fashion. Adamska hadn't thought of that.

Ocelot stood beside him and spat onto the ground by the spy's hand. There was a foul taste in his mouth that needed clearing.

Goaded by a feeling that could have been either compassion or sadism, Ocelot looked down at him and said, "There's a chance you might make it through this alive. It all depends on you. Either you get a place in a nice quiet cell where no one can hurt you, or you die screaming here. It's your choice."

He turned his back on Esau and walked away. He was done with him. There were things to be done, and it wasn't as though he had anywhere to go.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/57/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/57/>

# chapter 58

## Stray by Dahne

*Suteru kami areba hirou kami ari*

*If one god drops you, another will pick you up.*

-Bleach: Saien

---

*Patience can change the nature of a man.*

It was good to sleep. It was safe now, and blessedly warm. Exhaustion and the nameless fear at the edge of perception had melted like a sugar cube in the rain. Something smelled like chicken.

That was all the encouragement consciousness needed.

Otacon was slumped against a rough wall that had the confident rigidity of granite with a few tons of friends to back it up. Someone had thrown a blanket over him. In the darkness a small fire crackled with manic cheerfulness, throwing up sparks to compete with the stars beyond the bluff's edge. Adamska was roasting something on sticks over it. On the other side was the Patriot agent they'd taken captive, arms and legs bound, trying to look stoic and succeeding in looking sullen.

Poor kid was probably terrified.

It was important that he not know how little he really had to fear. It wasn't as if Hal and Adamska were going to do anything to him. They all had the same problems, and those were just technical difficulties. Stuck on this mountain until they could get through to Big Boss. If they could. If he hadn't already decided that they'd turned traitor and taken off. If Esau didn't have some other, undetectable breed of nanotech embedded in him, and there weren't Patriot forces bearing down closer to them every second.

All this conspiring to steal massive funds from an ultra-powerful shadow organization was making him paranoid and hungry.

Adamska glanced over and said, "Ah, you're awake," as though this were a small but essential part of a plan and had pleased him by being completed satisfactorily.

He handed over a skewer. Hal nodded thanks and bit into it. Not bad. A little greasy. It disappeared fast. It didn't taste like chicken.

Hal finished, asked "What is it?" and realized somewhere along the line he had done things the wrong way around.

"Vulture," said Adamska, sitting down and tearing a chunk out of a haunch.

Hal's face must have been eloquent.

"Oh, don't be a child," Adamska said, rolling his eyes. "No one has died up here for decades. More importantly" -he waved at Esau- "I gave some to him first, and he didn't die." His tone suggested that this would have been an unexpected bonus. "It's fine."

The kid looked less than thrilled about being a guinea pig, but otherwise all right. Hal was ashamed of himself for beginning to feel relief. Enemy or not, Adamska wouldn't hurt him.

Hal shed the blanket, worked the kinks out of his neck and moved closer to the fire. Beyond the circle of light the moon was high and waxing full, its surface tactile and immediate as a scab.

Adamska glanced at him over his...meat. "How are you feeling?"

"Pretty good, actually," Hal said, to his own surprise. However advanced human technology got, sleep and food remained amazingly efficient cures. His nanomachines had regained their equilibrium,

and, while they weren't working properly, at least weren't working improperly anymore.

"Good," said Adamska, nodding firmly, as though he had expected as much. His fine, white teeth tore industriously at the bird. "Early tomorrow we'll reach that point you found where our comms will work."

"Should work," Otacon corrected, automatically. His voice grew wistful. "It's too bad that jamming device got fried. Would've loved to open it up and poke around some, see how it works. It must be on the same principle as a chaff grenade, only much more powerful, and over a much wider area. Maybe some kind of network of prearranged distribution points-"

"Otacon," Adamska said, not loudly. It sounded strange, coming from him.

Hal jerked back to reality from the happy paths of cognition. Adamska was giving him a strange look. The corner of his mouth in shadow was curved, softly, organically, as though it had been left under a benign neglect, free to do as it pleased. Hal caught himself wondering how many other people had ever been allowed to see this expression.

"If it works," Adamska said, without concern or the habitual protective veneer of false unconcern, "we'll make contact from there. If not, we keep moving until we outpace the range of our friend's little dust cloud. There's nothing keeping us here. We've gotten what we came for."

"Yeah," said Hal vaguely. Something of an unexpected shape was caught in the filter of his mind. It took him a moment to fish it out.

"You're enjoying this."

It was an observation. Something a marine biologist might scribble upon discovering microbes basking in the corona of a volcanic vent.

Adamska dropped back onto his hands and put his face parallel to the stars. His native resistance forces had taken the night off, and the smile was annexing territory inch by inch, unopposed.

"You know," he said, "I think I am."

His eyes slid to Hal with a conspiratorial glint.

"And I think you are, too."

"Me?" Hal stared. "Why would I..."

The fire sighed like a nest of salamanders settling in for the night.

"I am," Otacon said wonderingly.

Adamska smirked, lips dyed in flickering red highlights. "You feel it, too."

"Yeah." Otacon watched the sparks spiral, a coven of short-lived fireflies. "I should be terrified – honestly, I kind of am. I don't know what's going to happen. But once you know you're doing everything you can to stay alive, it's not even fear anymore. Just..."

"Tension," Adamska supplied.

"Yeah," said Otacon.

The fire snapped in the wind rolling down the mountain. Hal felt like he could almost see the fluctuating zones of heat twist and shift to the direction of the scraps of smoke. The air was thin with a backbone of frost.

Hal felt a twinge of absurd resentment at Esau's presence. Adamska had kept him warm, before. Heat stirred low in his stomach at the memory, a sloe-eyed lizard of languid lust. Ah, well. Even if your public was a hogtied hostage, public displays of affection were still tacky. There were probably special rules of etiquette for these things. No doubt Adamska knew them.

His profile was strong as he watched the embers. The dark material of the sneaking suit reflected the highlights and absorbed the low, casting him in the colors of the light on the dusty ground and the night beyond its reach, but his eyes remained his alone.

This strong, lone soldier who had come to him wounded. Sometimes it fell around him, and Hal could almost see it. An anti-aura, limning his hatchetblade beauty like notes written in dark matter ink, and made him think of shadows beneath the coals. Is it the composition of the ashes that shapes the qualities of the phoenix?

But he was not alone.

"How long was I out?" Hal asked, in answer to the human need to document time that had slipped away without his permission.

Adamska looked up at the stars. "A few hours. The night's only begun."

Esau's form was partially visible, obscured by the illumination. Adamska had put him well within his own line of sight, directly across the fire from Hal. It made him natural to look at but difficult to see. The unsteady firelight played hell with the eye's assumptions, relocating his outline and revealing strange angles until it was possible to imagine he looked nothing alike from one moment to the next. It made Hal dizzy to watch. Anyway, he didn't want to stare.

"Go back to sleep," Adamska said, in a tone that made Hal smile. He really was used to being obeyed.

"Nah," said Hal. "It's your turn. I'll take the watch for a while."

Adamska turned a sharp glare on him. "You'll be no good if you're exhausted."

"Neither will you," Otacon pointed out reasonably. "You're still human, you know. You've got to sleep *sometime*." He smiled to soften the reproach. "Besides, I feel fine now."

It was true. In fact, it was as if losing nano functionality had made unadorned reality heighten to compensate. Maybe it was just that spark of almost-fear making him pay more attention. Whatever it was, it felt good. Like standing up after being still for a long, long time.

"Far be it from me to turn down the offer," Adamska said.

He gathered himself a nest with the habitual motions of a dog turning around three times.

"Wake me if anything interesting happens. There aren't many directions to cover. The cliffs keep the number of possible approaches down." He waved a hand at Esau. "And if he gives you any trouble, throw him off."

He was asleep before Otacon realized he wasn't kidding.

Soldiers were like that. Dropping off at a moment's notice. Being the sort who most often slept when the necessity clubbed him over the head, Hal sympathized.

He got up and paced to the edge of the firelight. He passed near where Esau lay in a smear of darkness like a rebuked hellhound crouching beneath a crumpled bearskin rug. He glared at Otacon for as long as he could without moving, but said nothing.

Posting a guard was something of a formality, really. If the Patriots knew where they were and what they were up to, they were dead no matter what. Still, Otacon thought, as he stared out and let his pupils expand to the wavelength of the darkness, it was reassuring. Like waiting for a meteor to hit and putting fresh batteries in the fire alarm.

Standing silent, he could feel the last residual warmth of the day drift up from the rock like a sigh. It was quiet enough to hear the displaced dust of a lizard's step, making tracks across the solemn, somnolent silence. No wingbeats. The vultures had gone home to roost. From behind him the fire crackled and gave him faint thermal pats on the shoulder. The ground was clear, with hardly a token scraggle of vegetation, and once he adjusted the light was good.

Whatever could be said for a night watch, it gave you time to think.

Hal stared across the bare ground at the stars and wondered how he'd gotten here.

A few days ago, his life had made sense. Even the parts with gunfire and men in balaclavas and



being told to get down *now*, goddammit, had had a kind of internal consistency. He'd made mistakes- god, he's made mistakes- he'd been afraid, he'd even done a few things that might be considered brave, all without this sense of revolution. As though he were following choices already made. The future was unmade and waiting in a way it had never been before. It all depended on now.

It was another thing that should have been terrifying.

He scanned the horizon and wondered about Esau. That he was here at all was impossible to begin with, though 'impossible' was, as Otacon knew, a constant much more vulnerable to fluctuation than most people assumed. He was too young to be a Patriot spy, though Ocelot didn't have any trouble believing it, and he would be the one to know.

Was that what they used? Children?

Otacon's stomach clenched. It wasn't right, damn it. Nobody should have to suffer for somebody else's choice.

He hadn't looked like he was suffering when he'd walked in on them, guns drawn. Or when he'd hung in Adamska's grasp and preached like a punch-drunk choirboy, and said, *We want you back*.

He'd looked like he was enjoying himself.

Like this was where he was meant to be.

Hal could have almost brought himself to feel sorry for him, if it weren't for that.

He'd wanted to take Ocelot back. Back to the places he wouldn't talk about. Back to the empty weapon they'd tried to make him, because residual humanity in their tools was an inconvenience. Back to the sons of the people who'd hurt him. Adamska. His Adamska. Couldn't they just leave him alone? Hadn't they done enough? He was just a kid. He wasn't theirs to play with anymore. And he wouldn't be. They couldn't really expect him to come back willingly, no matter how many empty promises they made.

Otacon smiled ruefully at the memory of the agent's bribes. *As many as you want*. He really didn't get it. Adamska wasn't going anywhere. Adamska loved him.

Otacon grinned stupidly at the night.

He wasn't delusional, there was no mistake, and nobody was leaving.

Adamska loved him.

No wonder being on a mountain with a Patriot spy and no way home didn't seem like such a big deal.

At heart, Otacon was a hopeless romantic.

It occurred to him that if the sun never came up and this was all there ever was – Adamska asleep behind him, the crackle of fire and hesitant touch of cool wind, the faint hum of active fear that adjusted everything *up*, being part of something important – he might not mind. It was hard to imagine the sun in nighttime.

God, it was a beautiful night.

Once, Hal had had a dream that had taken place in a white room with no walls. Standing in the center was a woman with an open shirt and a long scar that moved and slithered into the box in her hands, and Otacon had dropped his eyes because it was personal. She said "Look," and she was Sniper Wolf with her rifle on her back and her hair over her eye, and when Hal asked her what was in the box she said "Pain," but when he opened the lid what came out was Shroedinger's cat. He figured that was what he got for eating Pocky before bed.

Otacon turned to scan in the other direction, where the slope lead back into the jungle. It was barely visible as a long pool of deep darkness. Odd, how far they'd come. Hal was glad they weren't spending the night down there. Who knew what kind of nasty things crawled out from the bushes when

the sun went down. The array of life present in the forest was a fascinating thing, but not one Otacon would want to discover creeping up his pant leg.

He paced back into the circle of firelight, then turned away quickly when he remembered about the principle of not ruining night vision. There was a tiny flicker of motion that led his eye to Esau.

The kid was staring at the fire with the stoicism of someone who very much wants to project that he was certainly not just looking at you.

"Hey," said Otacon.

The young spy's eyes oozed over to him like a reluctant slug rolling down a hill. "What?"

He had a young voice, too. Like it had changed not that long ago and was still yet to fully settle into its final register.

"You should try to sleep, you know," Otacon advised.

Turned out an agent of the most powerful secret cabal in the world could look exactly like any other sullen teenager. Some things never changed.

"Can't," the boy muttered grudgingly.

Otacon sank down to sit cross-legged. He hated looming over people. "Then as long as we're both awake, we might as well keep each other company."

"Do whatever you want," the kid said. "Not like I can stop you."

Any reputable expert in the field of the psychology of warfare would dictate that, when an enemy combatant falls into one's power, the crucial strategy is to maintain a state of demoralization.

None of them had ever had to contend with Otacon.

"Come on," he said. "It's not that bad."

This had the desired effect, in that it got the boy to look at him. It was to glare, granted, but it was a start.

"I'm not holding anything back," he said, bristling with defiance. "No matter what you do to me it won't do you any good. I already told you everything."

Hal was aware that he might appear to be intending to torture the boy, if by "torture" you meant "annoy slightly." At least he was talking in full sentences now.

"Not everything," Otacon mused. "There's a lot we don't know. Like, where you came from, or why you're working for the Phil- the Patriots. They don't seem like the type of organization that attracts many volunteers."

Esau shrugged off the blanket and maneuvered to a sitting position. The process looked like it took some effort. At least his hands were in front of him now, though rope wrapped his wrists and forearms like scaffolding around the Colossus on Rhodes' repair day.

"Not important," he growled.

Back to fragments. Oh well.

"Sure it is," Otacon said mildly. "People don't just materialize out of nowhere and start waving guns around." He thought back to the past few days. "That is, they didn't used to."

Hal pulled one knee up and linked his hands around it. He tilted back to look at the sky.

"But if you don't want to talk about it, that's okay, too." He smiled sadly to himself. "A lot of people have things in their past they wish they hadn't had to go through. But if you let that shape who you are, then you'll never be more than a victim of circumstance and your own mistakes. You'd let someone else take away your say in your own identity."

A small, odd sound made Hal glance over. There was a strange look on the kid's face.

"You okay?" Otacon asked, feeling his glasses slip down as his brow furrowed.

"Thirsty," the boy muttered, as though cells requiring hydration were a personal moral failing.

"That, I can help with," Otacon said.

Fortunately, water was something they had plenty of. Otacon rummaged through the bag, the pair of pistols near the top clicking together, and came up with a canteen that looked like it had been dragged through every jungle ever to play host to guerrilla warfare. Technology advanced fast, but there would only ever be so many ways to keep water in its own enclosed space.

The boy drank in rapid gulps, needling quick bursts of glare at Otacon as though he expected it to get snatched away the instant he dropped his guard.

"Better?" Otacon asked when he was done, putting the canteen away.

He nodded warily, dark hair making abortive forays toward his eyes.

Otacon sat back down next to him and resumed looking up at the stars. They'd waited for him.

"Esau, right?"

Nod. Glare.

"I remember that story, sort of. Funny thing to take a code name from. Was he the one who wrestled with the angel? I can never remember."

Glare.

"So you've been waiting here for a while, huh?"

Nod.

"All by yourself? Must've been lonely."

Glare. Nod. Glare.

It was like talking to an angry iguana.

Otacon wasn't about to give up. Just because somebody's mission objectives probably included killing you didn't mean you couldn't be friendly, damn it.

Otacon leaned back and looked up at the stars. Hell of a view, from up here. No man-made lights to screw it up.

"Amazing, isn't it?" he said, never one to squander the advantage of a captive audience. He'd found that a good way to get people to start talking was to keep going until they had to to make him stop. "All of the chaos at the beginning of the universe conspired to create this. What started out as a huge, celestial mess created its own logic. Thousands of years of what looked like pure random motion was really writing the rules that turned masses of inert gas into stars. Did you know that a true random number generator is nearly impossible to create? Everything always has meaning behind it, some sort of purpose, even when nobody can know it. Right now, there's these thousands of inconcievably huge conflagrations of burning hydrogen, and to us they're lots of pretty little lights."

Hal fell silent momentarily as a cluster of stars tugged at his memory. He'd tried to learn the constellations a few times, but had never gotten far past the point of lyrical names and silvery outlines, erratic patterns held together with white bars. That one could be Cygnus. Or The Swan. No, those were the same thing. Scorpio, maybe. Cassiopeia? It didn't really matter. None of them looked anything like they were supposed to, anyway. It was a funny habit of humans to put names and faces to things that might actually be hundreds of light-years apart, just because, from one perspective, they looked like they were close to each other. Otacon wondered if aliens had constellations, and what they looked like, or were named after. Zorq the Conquerer. Ktl'Thzz the Several-Limbed. Maybe, to somebody looking from Betelgeuse, the Earth marked a suction cup on a stylized monster's seventh tentacle.

It was dark enough out here that the Milky Way was visible threading across the sky. Otacon had heard an old Japanese story once about how it was a river across Heaven, and a man and a woman who loved each other lived on opposite sides. One night a year, the river would go down enough that

they could cross and see each other. Hal had never figured out why one didn't just stay on the other side. Maybe neither could stand to leave their home behind. Everything they knew. Everything they'd ever been.

Gradually, Hal became aware that the kid was beginning, in fits and starts, to say something.

Handling the words as if they had thorns, Esau said, "You're...not so bad."

Otacon laughed. "Thanks, I think."

"No." The boy was looking straight at him for once, a severe and serious look winding from his incongruous mouth to his dark eyes. "You shouldn't be here."

If it was a threat, it was in Otacon's opinion a fairly absurd one. The boy might, if he was willing to commit all of his energy to a swift burst of violence, manage to fall on him.

"Yeah?" he said, slightly irked. "Why shouldn't I?"

The spy shook his head. A brief, mechanical twist to each side. "You're not made for this. Not like us."

"Nobody's *made* for anything," Otacon said.

Esau's gaze flickered across the fire.

Almost too softly to hear, in that child's voice, he said, "We were."

"You mean you were raised by the Patriots, too," Hal said.

Furtive nod, little more than a controlled spasm.

"You don't have to be, you know. You can get out too. If you want to."

"Not a choice." His lips twisted in a pained parody of a smile. "Been a long time. They've learned. Gotten better."

For no reason, Hal thought of something he'd heard once about tribes in New Guinea who rubbed ash and clay into cuts to scar it permanently into a predetermined shape. Must have been National Geographic or something. He remembered pictures.

The boy's eyes darted back to Hal like rats testing the walls of twin cages.

"Who are you working for?"

"Me?" Hal said, mildly surprised. "Nobody."

"No, of course not," the boy said, almost to himself. "He would have found out if you were someone's agent and you'd already be dead. There's no one else who could have known he'd be here, and you're not one of *theirs*."

"Definitely not," Otacon agreed, with some relief. Whatever it was the Patriots put their agents through, he never would have survived it.

Otacon felt his jaw tighten. That there were people in the world who thought they had the right to pound people into something malleable to be shaped to their own purposes...it was ludicrous. You couldn't just take somebody's autonomy away. People were marvelously incomprehensible machines. You couldn't take them apart and put them together the way you wanted, just to make them easier to control. Hurt them until they became whatever you wanted, just to make it stop. It wasn't right.

How many kids had they done this to?

And these were the men who controlled the world.

But not for much longer.

"You're wrong, you know," Esau said, tugging him out of thought. "About their underlings being forced."

Otacon's mouth set into a grim line, the determined horizontal stroke of a Morse calligrapher. "Nobody would ever get involved with people like that if they had a choice."

"Wrong," Esau said, a look of furtive intensity settling over his dark eyebrows like crow's

wings. "Power attracts. Doesn't matter who holds it. Bare bulb, moth. You wouldn't believe."

As if involuntarily, his eyes went to the figure in shadow on the far side of the fire. They returned to Hal armed with a knowing gleam.

"Maybe you would."

"Huh?" Hal blinked in the way of someone about to walk right into it. "What do you mean?"

"You're working with ADAM." The spy's tongue painted the capitals cleanly. He leaned toward Hal as much as he could. "What's he got on you?"

Hal couldn't be sure, but there seemed to be an intensity of purpose in the kid's stare that was a little unnerving, and didn't match the slumped shoulders and sullen mouth. Like a hyena waiting for a sick antelope to drop.

"What are you talking about?" Otacon said.

"Threats. Blackmail. The classics. It must be good."

Otacon chuckled ruefully. He pushed at his glasses. "Where did you get *that* idea?"

"Logic." The boy's lanky frame jerked in a confined shrug. "A few days in this time. Not enough to gather minions. Must be on loan from Big Boss."

Otacon was amused, if less than thrilled, at the notion of being passed around like a communal floppy disc, but he kept his mouth shut.

"That narrows the possibilities," Esau said. "The old man's tragic flaw. Looks tough, but he's gone soft on the inside, no mistake. Makes him predictable. He wouldn't order a defenseless man out on a mission alone with an unstable element. Not unless he offered. Insisted."

"It's really not like that at all," Otacon said. Out of kindness, he kept a straight face. Back when he was a kid, he used to always be coming up with ridiculously complex explanations for things that were, in reality, incredibly simple. He didn't see what unstable elements had to do with anything, though.

"Can't be," Esau agreed, brows knitting. "The behavior patterns don't match for common coercion. It must be subtler."

Subtle enough to conquer Otacon's whole heart without a shot fired. His incredible, beautiful Adamska.

Esau rested his chin on his hands in the classic pose of thoughtfulness, managing to do so only slightly awkwardly. Talented kid.

"You're no fool. You know as soon as you're no more use he'll kill you."

It took real effort not to laugh that time. Sweet of the kid to be concerned, though.

"That, I'm really not worried about," Otacon said.

The boy's nod was grim as a skull falling from a necromancer's display shelf. "Not afraid. He has you by the neck some other way. No regret to die by his hand."

A whisper of lugubrious cadence, an elegiac strain thin as a knife viewed with the edge facing, made Otacon search the boy's face. The shifting light made it difficult to tell, but for a minute he looked almost sorrowful. As though a mirror had broken and he was giving its frame a drop of carefully isolated lament for each of the seven years irreparably marked.

As if to confirm it, the boy added quietly, "He'll kill me soon."

"You're not gonna die," Otacon said, wanting in some obscure way to comfort him. "We're taking you back with us, remember?"

The boy laughed bitterly. "Standard procedure. A desperate man is dangerous. As soon as he decides I'm not holding anything back, he'll kill me. Probably a little before he kills you. He's too professional to leave survivors."

Hal turned his face away to hide his smile. "Ah, he's not so bad."

When Esau spoke, it was with something like pity.

"You don't even know who he is, do you?"

"I know him pretty well." Otacon's voice was flatter than he was used to hearing it.

"Listen." Esau was still as an idol to hunters and silence. "That man is ADAM. Triple agent embedded in Groznyj Grad. In ten years, he accumulated a higher kill count than most agents get in their entire careers, and that's just the official ones."

The fire snapped and shifted. Otacon's shadow brushed the boy's face.

"He served under a commander legendary for the brutality of his methods. A man so adept at inflicting pain that they used to say lightning flew from his fingertips. A suspicious man, naturally. Anyone he suspected of betrayal died. Not quickly. A single slip or sign of weakness would be the last. Most men would have broken."

The glassy sheen of his eyes could have been the light.

"ADAM thrived."

"He went far beyond expectation. By the time he was twenty, he served as the Colonel's right-hand man. According to reports, they got along well."

The simian slope of the boy's shoulders held the tension and potentiality in abeyance of a spring without a release.

"They say people can get used to anything. It's just a matter of holding out until you don't have to put so much effort into bearing it anymore. Then you start to enjoy it."

"People do what they have to," Otacon said, thinking of scars.

Adamska had let him run his fingers along them, twining around his body like white lianas. Terrible in their testimony to past pain, but beautiful. Part of him. Taken into the skin's structure and the animate mass of him until removing them would make him strange. It was all right. The wounds were long healed. Hal had been unsure but Adamska had seen his curiosity and guided his hand. The rise and fall of his chest had been slow as his cool eyes followed Hal's fingertips, traveling the bas-relief map of his past.

"The only thing more unpredictable than a desperate man," Esau said, his voice jarring over the soft crackle of shifting wood, though it wasn't loud, "is a man with no loyalties."

"Big Boss," Otacon offered in mild contradiction.

The dead man with metal eating him alive, looking up and breathing like a death rattle strained through wire mesh *John*. Time had begun to make it bearable.

Beneath the light that dyed him red it was impossible to tell whether Esau was pale.

"They met here, you know," he said, like a kid telling ghost stories about something he could see coming closer, just outside the ring of firelight. "They were even on the same side, but ADAM was the only one who knew it. They say from the moment he saw him, he admired Big Boss more than anyone in the world. The Colonel captured him, and took the chance to unleash his considerable talents for torture full force."

Wind stirred the shadow of ash into a flight of colorless moths.

"ADAM stood by and watched."

"He enjoyed it."

Heat pressed its thin, insistent hand to the nape of Otacon's neck.

"He even got to try his own hand at the game. It was him who took Big Boss's eye, that day."

The boy's eyes were the color of mossy stone at the bottom of an absinthe river.

"It takes a brave man to survive that loyalty."

Otacon's tongue could not fit around the words for how wrong he was.

Esau's ruddy shadow swayed erratic steps behind him, a distended two-dimensional copy.

"That was fifty years ago.

"Now he has surpassed time."

A speck of daylight's fanatic fervency waved madly, then drowned in the boy's eyes.

"Do you have any idea what this signifies? Even the Patriots can't do that. Not yet, at least. Anything that can be done, they find a way to do it. To outflank them is unimaginable. It's as though the Red Sea had become the Fountain of Youth at his command.

"Do you know the kind of mind that could break the fabric of the universe itself to its will? The level of genius, the madness that would take? What kind of lunatic brilliance?"

"I think I could imagine," Otacon murmured ruefully.

"He has a plan. A man like that doesn't do anything on a whim."

The boy's stare burned through the fire to the dark, low shape barely visible on the other side.

"What terrible purpose could compel him to shatter time and strike out alone?"

"What indeed," Otacon agreed, expression neutral.

Esau turned his face to him. Firelight glistened ruddy on one side. Shadows bit at the other, fangs of rough caress.

"Run now. While you can. I can keep him busy for a long enough time."

Sparks drifted past glassy eyes that stared beyond them, like a basilisk admiring its reflection.

"A long, long time."

"That's okay," Otacon hurried to reassure him, alarmed by the dark, dull resonance in the boy's voice. "I'm not going to run."

Esau's eye flicked to him, sharp as a crow's call. "Then either you've got courage or you're a fool."

"You're really afraid of him, huh," Otacon said softly.

The boy held his gaze and spoke without shame. "More than I ever have been of anything in my life."

He didn't seem like the kind who had much practice.

His hands clenched and unclenched uselessly, like a venus flytrap grasping at motes of dust.

A log crashed downwards in the fire as its support was eaten through, scattering shadow effluvia.

Esau said, "I think I'm not nearly as afraid as I should be."

He fell silent. Otacon let him. He'd annoyed the kid enough for one night.

Hal got up, absently dusting off his knees. The grit of this place already clung to his skin.

"Try to get some sleep," he advised.

Esau didn't answer.

Otacon walked out beyond the light and tracked the patterns the stars made. The cool wind felt good.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/58/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/58/>

# chapter 59

## Stray by Dahne

*Kimi ga tabidatsu hi wa*

*Itsumo to onaji "ja ne" to te wo futta*

*Maru de ashita mo mata*

*Kono machi de au mitai ni*

*On the day you left*

*You said "goodbye" and waved your hand*

*The same as always*

*As though tomorrow*

*We would meet in this place again*

*-Crystal Kay, Motherland*

---

*Progress can change the nature of a man.*

The sun was looking down on them with indecent curiosity when the old storage shed came into sight. None too soon, either. Ocelot had almost forgotten how god damned boring marching up these damned mountains was, and wouldn't have minded the chance to forget completely. Shoving the spy around didn't provide as much amusement as it should have. Whenever he indulged a bit, purely for the sake of form and tradition, Hal gave him a look that never failed to leave him feeling inexplicably embarrassed.

"There it is!" Hal said, moving forward with a sudden burst of energy, for all the world as if he hadn't been listlessly staring off into space all day. Probably dreaming up ways to put together some means to foil this block on their communications.

Adamska felt a touch of proprietary pride. The cutting edge of Patriot technology stood little chance against Hal in the grip of an interesting idea.

He crouched in the shadow of the cliff, pawing through the bag of cannibalized parts like a curious otter.

"Just what are you planning to do with all that?" Ocelot said, his eyebrow raising like the Uroboros getting its back scratched. He paced closer, intrigued despite himself.

Hal had unfolded his small computer and set it on the ground in the center of the strewn debris. "I think with some work we should be able to get through. It'll take time, though."

"How long?" Here on the hillside, they were completely exposed. It made the back of Adamska's neck itch.

"A couple hours. Maybe less, if I get some help..."

Adamska followed his gaze.

Esau halted in creeping closer and failed spectacularly at looking innocent.

"You can't be serious," Ocelot said.

Hal readjusted his glasses. "Every pair of hands can help. The wider the area we can scatter this stuff over, the better. Besides, he's one unarmed kid. What harm could he do?"

Ocelot hadn't needed the images that conjured up.

His fingers found the revolver's hilt and flicked across it, a handshake with an old friend. He could always shoot the boy in the foot, just to be safe. Hal was terribly cute when he got angry and



started lecturing. There weren't many foreseeable opportunities in the near future to make it up to him, though. Better not.

"Think of it this way," Hal said, typing industriously with one hand while he used the other to gesture at the pile of scavenged parts surrounding him. It looked as though a civilization of pygmy cyborgs had been bombed in the middle of their industrial revolution. "I can't do it. I've got to keep up with rotating the resonance harmonics here. Do you *really* want to put all this stuff together yourself?"

Esau stood a few paces back, failing to display disinterest.

"I won't insult you by assuming you don't already know this," Ocelot muttered a few minutes later as he undid the spy's bonds, "but it bears repeating; if you make one move I don't like the looks of, you'll be dead so fast you'll be nicely moved in to Hell by the time you hear the thump."

"Understood," the boy said, too readily.

Ocelot flicked the ropes away with one hand and caressed the trigger guard of his gun with the other.

The Patriot dog let his hands drop, slowly, flexing his wrists with the care of oiling a well-used rifle. There were many ways to kill a man with your bare hands. Adamska had seen them, many times.

A look of sober satisfaction crossed the boy's face. No permanent damage. Too bad.

Esau's fingers flexed.

"Thanks," he said. His gaze never moved from Ocelot's. His eyes were the color of tiremarks on a dead lizard. "That's much better."

Ocelot's palm embraced the revolver's hilt.

One false move.

One move.

One breath.

One atom.

"Hey!" Hal called. "Come get this stuff set up, will you?"

The heads of both combatants snapped to the side in martial unison.

Hal was waving with a fistful of circuitry. His other hand was engaged in braiding together hanks of wiring with quick, deft twists of his wrist. A few lengths surrounded him already, the multicolored strands knotted together and hung with glittering silicon chips like a deranged garland, festive as a cyborg's intestinal tract. They led to a large, flat circuit board, which fed in turn into the back of Hal's computer.

Esau's hands were free for a total of twelve seconds before Hal unceremoniously dumped a bale of knotted cable into his arms. The boy nearly dropped at it, fumbled for a better grip, and barely avoided getting one of the protruding ends in the eye.

Maybe there was less to worry about than Ocelot had thought.

Hal sat in the middle of the synthetic brier patch like a mad scientist version of the princess who spun straw to gold. The spy's gaze traveled over his burden to the piles of mechanical effluvia, then to the rucksack of unexceptional size lying empty in their midst.

"There is no way that all of this fit in that," he said flatly.

Amateur. Ocelot had noticed the same thing, of course, but it didn't bother him. If he'd let simple spatial incongruities get to him, he would have gone thoroughly mad long ago.

"Huh," Hal said. He examined the bag quizzically and repositioned his glasses, leaving a smudge of grease across the bridge of his nose. "You've got a point. Must be bigger on the inside than it is on the outside."

He resumed scrounging through the coils of cording.

"He's joking," Esau said. He glanced at Ocelot unsteadily. "Isn't he?"

"Figure it out for yourself," Ocelot said.

Hal turned around and dropped a matching sheaf of wires into his arms as well.

"I don't have any tools here," he said, "so we're going to have to improvise."

"Looks like you're doing that just fine," Adamska muttered.

"Whatever you're trying to do," Esau said, his voice flat and dissonant, "it won't work."

It was too bad Ocelot's hands were occupied. Some people never learned the value of keeping their mouths shut until they lost a few teeth.

Hal's fingers didn't stop. "If you don't know what it is, how can you tell?"

"They possess the most advanced technology in the world," the spy said, apparently unaware of the difficulties of sounding foreboding when you were peering over what looked like the mangled remains of a cybernetic bird's nest. "Things the military hasn't begun to dream of yet. Do you really think one civilian with a scrap heap can overcome the best this world has to offer?"

"It's worth a shot," Hal replied cheerfully.

"It's a waste of time."

"Then it's good you have a lot of that, isn't it?" Ocelot said, with an impeccably measured degree of acid.

Esau looked at him with the dark, dilated eyes of a shaman caught courting grace by licking toxic toads. "You can't win against them, ADAM. Not in the least detail."

Ocelot could feel his expression harden like setting plaster. "It takes a good little lapdog to sing his master's praises."

"Not anymore, ADAM. You can *be* one of the masters, this time."

Ocelot's lip curled. "You would believe anything they say after they sent you out to die?"

"Not to die. To find you."

"The same. If they know me half as well as you claim, they had to have known I would kill you as soon as you showed your face."

Esau's expression was as flat as an insect's back. "You haven't."

"Not yet."

"The higher up those are, the better our chances of picking up a signal," Hal instructed. He had crouched back in front of his computer. Likely he hadn't heard a word.

Adamska scowled. "High up on what?"

Hal looked up at him and blinked as though he had asked something startlingly self-evident, like whether setting people on fire was considered impolite or which end of the gun to aim away from face.

"The cliff," he said, gesturing upward to the only vertical surface in their immediate environs.

"How?" Adamska said.

Hal shrugged. "Doesn't matter. Any way that'll stick."

Ocelot realized that this was a conversation whose potential for progress had been tapped.

---

One advantage of doing the impossible was that it kept you too busy to talk.

It was bad enough to be climbing around on a rock wall in broad daylight, his back as exposed as a sniper could want. If the spy had started raving again, Ocelot would have had to throw him off.

The sun climbed as Adamska thought of little but where to find the next handhold. It was easier than he had thought. An arrangement of outcroppings and debris made a practical staircase he could have climbed with his hands tied. Years of weathering had eroded spikes and spires that finally had a

chance to be put to good use.

When the last wire was sutured in place with a combination of creative use of outcroppings and luck, Ocelot hopped down. He'd been working low enough that he landed with perfect grace and impunity, though the same could not be said of the iguana he landed on.

Wires spread against the cliff face like a diagram of the Yggdrasil in cross-section. Silvery lines branched out across the rough surface, striking sparks of fading sunlight like a tapestry woven by an enormous brain-damaged spider. Some veins were slender, some thick and intertwined, some taut, some lying in loose loops, all fastened tightly to the projections of the rough surface. Each side converged on a thick central stalk leading back to Hal's computer in Rorschach-blot symmetry.

Evening already. Adamska hadn't noticed. He hadn't felt the intensity of heat change through the damn suit.

The spy was another story. The ratty camouflage shirt clung to his back as he jumped down from the wall a moment behind Ocelot. Irritation had settled into the notch between his too-heavy eyebrows and made itself comfortable. Adamska allowed a smirk to tug at his lips. It was fun to watch the Philosopher dog's direly inflated ego struggle with taking orders from the kind of person he was more used to shoving out of his way.

Hal was sitting cross-legged in the standard mountaintop guru position, typing furiously. He hit a key with a flourish of finality and looked up.

"Now all we have to do is wait for a while, then I can make the final adjustments," he said.

"Wait for what?" Ocelot said pointedly, scowling. He wanted off of this damned mountain. He was done here.

"Think of it this way," Hal said, adjusting his glasses in the two-fingered way that heralded impending didactic. "The interference hanging around here is like a disease. This signal we're emitting is like an antibody. It can drive the pathogen signals out of the area, but it takes time, and I'll need to keep adjusting the dosage."

"That's not how it works," Esau said.

"That's why I had you spread all that out." He nodded up toward the dual-lobed network of branching filaments. "The more surface area, the more antibody signals I can pump into the air."

"That's not how *anything* works!"

"That's just one aspect of the program. While that half suppresses the blocking signal, the other works to boost ours. Once the density reaches a certain level, our CODEC transmissions will be able to bounce through the gaps to get back to home base. All I'll have to do is run a program to comb through the frequencies until the instant the variables converge to make one usable, then freeze everything there."

"Do you even have a basic understanding of what you're talking about? That's all impossible!"

Ocelot had long since learned how to pry the pearl of what Hal meant from the rambling, lustrous oyster of what he said. "You can do all of that with that little thing" - it was still difficult to think of the notebook-sized chunk of sleek plastic as a 'computer' - "and parts from an old database?"

Strange to think of it as old. It had been state of the art when it was built, back when the art was in a much different state.

"No, he can't!"

Wings of color spread across Hal's cheekbones. "It's kind of a talent."

Try as he might to maintain the appropriate picturesque stoicism, the prospect of one of his problems being solved while the other went apoplectic was enough to bolster Ocelot's spirits.

"Might as well eat something while we wait," he said, wiping some of the more viscous gunk off

of his gloved hands. The texture of the suit did not change appreciably.

"What've we got?" said Hal.

Ocelot made a quick inventory. "Leftover vulture, rations, and an iguana on a stick."

Hal made some adjustments to whatever the hell it was his flat-screened thing was doing. The motions of his fingers were deft and smooth. "Sounds good."

"Really?"

"Well, no."

It was something of an exaggeration. It wasn't that bad. Chewy. The spy ate with flickering eyes and a hunted expression, like a schizophrenic raccoon.

Adamska watched his shadow lengthen and the glint of the wires burnish to copper. The forests below, already swathed in shade, breathed cool air on the back of his neck. Somewhere out of sight a bird called vespers. Soon, the reddening sky would cradle a new constellation and a throb beneath hearing, and all of them would be gone from here. Adamska would look down and see the mountains drop away like a giant gone still from his death throes, the curse on its last breath forever unspoken and unfulfilled. Adamska would look down, if it occurred to him, to watch the silhouette blur and fade into an obsolete, mute promulgation of black on black.

For the first time since he had set foot on the soil that once played host to Volgin's ambitions, Adamska allowed himself to be at peace.

"It's a beautiful place," Hal remarked, looking out over the black-green trees to where the sun sifted behind russet-stained pennants of cloud.

"You should see it in the summer," Adamska said fondly. "Mosquitoes the size of your head."

He threw a vulture bone to the vultures, a species that valued practicality over sentiment. Cannibalistic little bastards.

Back by the cliff, the computer made a cheerful chirp.

Hal looked at Adamska. "You ready?"

Adamska nodded, then said, rather redundantly, "Yes."

The three of them converged on the flat blue screen, where a curious cursor blinked, waiting for them.

Hal knelt in front of it and began entering commands. His shadow on the cliff knelt with him.

"It's working better than I expected. All I need to do is input these last few adjustments, and we're home free."

"Amazing," their uninvited comrade said, moss-colored eyes on the display, a distant admiration weaving a network of roots through the slick soil of his voice. "You're really doing it. It shouldn't be possible."

"Never let that stop me before," Hal said cheerfully.

"No, really," Esau said. "Patriot technology is incredibly advanced. To get this far with scavenged resources is astounding. That little device you destroyed was the result of years of work by some of the best engineers in the world."

Ocelot's eyes tracked his avid gestures.

"Of course, the device itself is only needed to initialize and to halt the process. The only way to avoid the effects is to be entirely free of nanos altogether, and in this age that's only feasible for people with very specific goals and methods in mind."

Hal's hands had stopped moving. He was looking at the boy.

"You see," Esau continued blithely, "the signal doesn't just block transmissions. It also opens up a few very special functions. Certain receptions to pre-keyed catalysts. You don't even need any

equipment. Just a simple voice command."

Ocelot didn't understand what the spy was saying. Only that he couldn't be allowed to finish saying it.

In the time it took thought to form, the revolver was out and hungry for the enemy's heart.

Esau looked him in the eye.

Smiled.

"*Die.*"

Ocelot never heard the revolver hit the ground.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/59/>

# chapter 60

**Stray** by Dahne

*Confinement can change the nature of a man.*

Hal could feel the darkness before he opened his eyes. He could feel other things, too. Ropes around his wrists and ankles. Splintery wood against his shoulder. The thick smell of dust in his nose. He was alone.

Just as he'd thought, opening his eyes didn't help. The darkness pressed on them like greedy fingers in black gloves.

01001001

He couldn't panic.

Adamska wasn't there. He'd been knocked out and dragged somewhere back to the Patriots and back to everything they'd done to him except now it would be worse because he'd gotten away, he'd been free, he should've been safe, and now they had him again and god only knew what they were doing to him because no matter what they did he'd never give in and it would never stop-

Come to think of it, Otacon could panic all he liked. It just wouldn't do him any good.

The thought calmed him.

Sooner or later, everything made some kind of sense, even if you had to break it down to its constituent atoms to get there. Every knot was just a pattern of ones and zeros.

Inventory, first. Find out what you have, and what you don't.

Adamska wasn't here. Adamska was alone hurt dead tortured taken-

Adamska was strong. Worrying about it did no good. Once they got out of this, Otacon would tell him that he had been afraid, and he would scowl and say that Hal should have known he could take care of himself.

Ones and zeros. Off and on. True and false. Here and not. Black and not black. Yes and no. When in doubt, revert to the basic.

Fact: Adamska was what they needed. Esau would keep him alive at all costs. However the Patriots commanded them, nanomachines could not kill their host. Parts of the First Law broke down that small. Adamska was not dead, broken and bleeding into the dust on the mountainside, crippled and alone and too late, it was already too late and there was nothing he could do-

01101101 01110101 01110011 01110100

What was here?

Here was a wooden structure, old from the smell and the faint sound of rats' feet. Felt crowded. He was wedged in a corner. Black-

Not all black. A patch of something else high up on the wall. A square of dark blue, the faintest moon stain. A window.

Test shape of what can be seen and conjectured to the shape of the storage shed glimpsed huddled by the mountainside.

Match.

Location: storeroom near project site, meaning that he hadn't been taken far, meaning that he could have been brought here and bound so that he couldn't follow and then forgotten while Adamska was taken away to some place that meant that even if he got out of this alive he'd never see him again-

Theory with no support. Irrelevant.

Possessions: clothes on his back. Few meters of good, stout rope, currently employed. Malfunctioning nanomachines that may or may not possess further means of being used against him. He could almost feel them lying dormant, cut off from control, useless, a curious blankness.

Mobility: limited to none.

Time: nightfall. Maybe. He couldn't remember which direction the storehouse's window had faced. Awkward position, but little stiffness; likely hadn't been out for much more than an hour. Assuming the same 'dosage' had been employed on both of them, Adamska's superior physical condition and lack of reliance on nanos should have ensured he woke somewhat earlier.

Wherever he was.

Because he wasn't dead. He couldn't be dead. Whoever was in control here would never let that happen.

Maybe he was somewhere where Hal would never see him again and he'd never get back and all he would have would be memories of smiles and scowls and warm, possessive hands and blue eyes that ran a cool shock down your spine no matter how many times you looked into them or the way he preened when he got a compliment or how he said-

Situation: Esau had betrayed them.

That was stupid. How could he betray them? The kid had never been on their side in the first place. He was just doing his job. He was just a kid. Just doing what he was told.

Every motivation was, somewhere, a line of machine code.

Maybe killing them was part of his job, too.

If all he had wanted was them dead, he would have done it already. He could have done it while still in the stealth camouflage, without ever coming close.

Fact: The Patriots wanted Ocelot.

Possible method utilizing demonstrated means: Knock them both out, kidnap Ocelot, leave Otacon here to rot.

Immediate flaw. If all they wanted was Ocelot, there was no reason to leave Otacon alive. The Patriots didn't leave loose ends unless they meant to tie them to something else. Hypothesis false.

Wind hissed through the gaps in the ancient structure. The stale air shifted, smelling like hints of something whose scent and memory had long since rotted away. The darkness felt full of half-rotted crates and the debris of the forgotten. Sound and air current traveled labyrinthine routes that made it difficult to determine the origin. Somewhere in the darkness a rat's claws scratched.

*01101110 01101111 01110100*

Fact: Adamska loved him.

Wherever he was, Adamska was fighting to get out and get back to him. Whatever Hal did, he wouldn't be alone. Adamska would be working toward him from the other side. They would meet in the middle, and Adamska would chide him for ruining a perfectly good opportunity to sweep in and play the romantic hero.

The thought was strengthening. No matter what happened, Adamska wouldn't give up, and neither would he. There was too much at stake. He just had to find a way out of here and play his part.

First, he'd need to find a convenient sharp thing. There were always convenient sharp things. Otacon rotated his wrists, looking for a weak point. Everything had a weak point.

Fact: They would use Hal against Adamska.

Otacon's hands stopped moving.

His eyes froze on a patch of darkness no different from the rest.

That was why he was being kept here. Why he was still alive. He wasn't part of the game.

He was part of the wager.

*01100110 01100101 01100001 01110010*

Esau must have noticed. It wasn't as though they'd gone to any great lengths to hide it. The lackey pretense could only go so far.

If Adamska lost everything he had been fighting for, Hal would be the reason.

No.

He could be. But he wouldn't.

Hal was no hero. He wasn't strong, or fast, or tough, or a tactical genius.

He was stubborn.

Now, he had two choices. He could sit here and wait for the man he loved to be dragged back and turned into everything he hated, or he could find a way to do something about it.

Otacon took a long breath of dust-laden darkness.

The possibility that they might die here occurred to him.

He did not consider it a useful piece of information, and so put it aside.

Esau wouldn't kill them. Not the kid who had talked to him that night, told him to run and thought there was something to be afraid of.

He stared at the square of dark blue fixed in the black, the sole point of reference for pupils starved of light, and listened to something tell him that he should reconsider.

It was only a suggestion. A light brush against the back of his mind, slipping away and turning back the way things do when they want to be chased. The way to catch them was to follow the tracks, one by one.

Adamska and he could die. Esau could kill them.

The blocky black pistols resting in the holsters back where they began, primed and rich with vicious intent, Adamska with blood matting his hair, a blinding sound and pain-

Just a kid-

No. He had to keep thinking. Carry it through. He couldn't afford to waste time being afraid. He wouldn't make Adamska do everything alone.

They were dead. Then what?

Whether the Patriots got this cache of the Legacy or not, Big Boss would lose it. He would still fight, but he would have no weapons at all that had a chance against them. Him, Snake, Liquid, Wolf, Fox, all of them would die. They didn't even have-

One weapon.

Maybe there was one thing he could do.

Dust and monochrome shadows, black on black.

The same way things were done, they could be undone.

Knots held him in stasis, but there was one thing he could try.

"I don't know if you're there," Hal said. His voice sounded small and afraid. He reinforced it. "I don't know if you can even hear me if you are. Maybe Adamska is the only one you can talk to. I don't know."

He felt like a child dropping pebbles into a well. He kept going so that he wouldn't hear the splash.

"I don't even know your name. Ghost? Mirage? Whatever you are."

Hopelessness pressed the air out of his lungs. Otacon lifted his head and kept going.

"Whoever you are, you helped us once. But now if we- if we die-"

Hal swallowed, tasting dust.



"If we die, there won't be anything left. So we need your help again."

He described what he needed.

The close walls stood silent and absorbed his voice.

"Just that. If you could...at least they'd have *something*. Please..."

He let the sound die away, just a fool babbling to rats and the dark.

Hal held his breath and didn't know what he was waiting for.

Nothing there but rats and wind, and a shadow like blinking sideways across the patch of lighter sky.

Otacon began his inventory from the top.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/60/>

# chapter 61

## Stray by Dahne

*"It's the best. Belonging is the very best thing there is."*

-Cowboy Bebop

---

*The irrevocable can change the nature of a man.*

Ocelot woke in time to watch the remains of light soak out of the sky like the last bit of white on a tourniquet's edge.

Hal was nowhere to be seen.

The spy was standing facing the cliff's edge, hands clasped loosely behind his back, little more than a silhouette with the details sketched in.

Esau was watching the fucking sunset.

Rope pressed into his wrists and ankles. Rock pressed into his back. His arms were caught between them, tied together.

Revenge. Cute. Ocelot couldn't fault him for it.

He could feel more rope leading up in a vertical line between his shoulder blades. He wasn't dead.

That meant neither was Hal.

Ocelot twisted his neck. He was beside the wide, flat waist-high rock shelf they had been climbing on all day. The rope led upward from his wrists along the cliff face above, culminating in a knot around a rock projection above. His muscles remembered the motion, repeated throughout the day, climbing and reaching and baling wire tight. The outcrop served as one of their main anchors. Wires banded it still, the thick rope coarse and ungainly by comparison. The great metal web spread out to either side like the many-veined wings of a monstrous insect, the last light striking glints like distant signal fires.

What, was the spy ensuring that he wouldn't hop or crawl away? Ocelot didn't know whether to admire his paranoia or laugh in his face.

He hadn't been out that long. Hal couldn't be far.

Unless the spy had improvised on another earlier idea and thrown him off the cliff.

No. He needed him. His little device was broken, and Hal was the only one who could restore communications without it. Ocelot was sure of that.

When the curtain of darkness had completed its drop down the sky's stage, Esau turned.

"Ah," he said, face lighting.

He came toward the place Ocelot was tethered with brisk steps of restrained eagerness.

Couldn't wait to get the fun started. How tiresome.

Where the fuck was Hal?

"You're awake."

Esau stood in front of Ocelot, stance holding less of confrontation and more of presenting himself for inspection.

"Excellent powers of observation," Ocelot drawled. "I'm impressed."

The old, effortless state of consciousness slid on like a favorite greatcoat.

Play the game. Nothing that happened to him mattered.

It was true in a way it never had been before.

Ignore it. Part of the game.

Esau gestured upwards, hand flicking like a vulture's wing.

"Sorry about all this," he said, incongruous plump lips like fresh, raw bait bending into a sheepish grin beneath the lampreys of his eyes. "I couldn't insult you with anything less."

What the fuck had he done with him?

"All right," Ocelot said carelessly, "You win. Take the Legacy. The Philosophers can fuck the world until their balls wither for all I care."

Gears clicked. If he was hurt (life bleeding out through gripping fingers, broken fallen dying because he had trusted) knowing would do no good. Asking would reveal to the enemy the value of his hostage.

Every second he held back reduced that value in the enemy's eyes.

Esau smiled.

"ADAM, we can be honest with one another now. No more pretenses. No more masks. You know it was never the Legacy we were after. What need do the Patriots have for money? No, the true objective is something infinitely more precious."

Ocelot waited.

Esau waited back.

Shit. If he didn't cut out the fucking theatrics, this was going to take all day.

In the interest of time, Ocelot bit.

"What?"

Esau's smile was as honest and brilliant as pyrite at high noon.

"You."

Ocelot's brows drew together, low and narrow, bending like a thin branch beneath a raven's weight,. "You said that before."

"Yes," Esau sighed. "It's too bad you wouldn't listen then. The obstacle has been removed. Remember that? 'Find the obstacle, then remove it'? That was one of their favorite lessons. No one's ever been as quick a study as you were. Now it's gone, and you can let the mask drop."

"I don't know what you're talking about," Ocelot said coldly.

Esau beamed. Deepening gloom might have made it invisible, but Ocelot's eyes adjusted fast. The gray stone and umber sky were easily distinguished from that slash of ivory. Bone taken from an elephant while it lay dying, polished and embedded in the lesser ash smear of his face.

"Ah, playing dumb! One of the classics, though not your best. But we don't have to discuss it in the open quite yet, if you'd rather not. We have so much to talk about."

The words sent vivid microscopic sparks rushing through Ocelot's nervature, incendiary signals crashing through blockaded neural pathways.

But it wasn't right.

This was no threat, no hiss of the razor slipping out of sadism's sheath.

It was as if he were proposing a chat over fucking tea.

The spy cocked his head like a crow. The dim nowhere light of day's wake was not enough for his matte eyes to gleam in.

"He's all right, you know."

The hooks biting into Adamska's heart eased their grip. He breathed out.

"Who?" Ocelot said, casting the word away with a flick of his neck.

"No, no, no." Hair lashed Esau's cheeks like coils of congealed woodsmoke as he shook his

head. "Every tendon in your body just uncoiled. I think you know who."

He began to pace, a visitor in front of the tiger cage at an unfastidious carnival. Look, how ragged the fur, how dull the eyes.

"I was afraid I would have to tell you as much before you would listen. Yes, he is alive and well, not far from here."

The fear that had pressed itself against stone to breathe down Adamska's neck departed for warmer climes.

"You don't have to lie to me, ADAM. The game is over."

The game had just begun.

Ocelot's eyes tracked the enemy's steps, that trochaic waltz time. One two three, one two three, turn.

"It must be an awful embarrassment for you, eh?" Esau said, words spaced to the pace of his step's metronome. "Such an amateur's trap, and now you don't know how to climb your way out again."

Ocelot's eyes were narrowed, shutting out all light wavelengths besides the target. The necessity of looking upwards made his jaw jut at a defiant angle.

The spy's voice was seamless and rational as painted porcelain.

"Even a tiger can fall into a pit if the covering is bland enough. He does look innocent, doesn't he? Harmless. Wouldn't stomp on a spider if it was sucking his blood. Utterly blind to reality. Not like you at all."

That smile. In the space between the sun's remains and starlight it was visible. His lips moved to mold words but it never slipped out of place.

"They say opposites attract. I would have thought you of all people to be...adage-resistant. It's terrible, ADAM."

His pacing stopped.

"Tell me. The first thing you wanted to say was, 'where is he?'"

Ocelot crafted his lips into a rictus.

If the only thing Adamska could do was refuse to give him the satisfaction of a response, then he was going to do it as hard as he fucking could.

"You didn't say it," Esau noted. "That's admirable, ADAM. It means you still have some of your faculties intact. A weaker man would have been begging the moment he opened his eyes. I've seen it. Our masters don't take anything on conjecture, and they certainly wouldn't let me speak anything baseless. They run experiments."

The spy frowned, pensive as a philosopher.

"Still, it's good we caught it now, while it's curable. The infection can still be cut out. Oh, not without some pain, but that's hardly too much for your fortitude. You understand necessary pain. Love is a dangerous drug, and the withdrawal symptoms can be terrible. ADAM, don't be afraid. We'll protect you and keep you safe until we can restore your full glory."

"Keep it," Ocelot said. "What I am and what they want to make me have nothing to do with each other. I don't want it anymore."

"Does a gun want to be cleaned and oiled?" He was pacing again. "Does it want to fire when you touch the trigger?"

The best did.

"I'm no one's weapon."

Esau slid across the darkness like oil on troubled waters, moonlight catching the edges of his

profile.

"Did he tell you that? It's too absurd to come from your mind. You're no fool. We're all someone's weapon, obedient to the one who made us. A machine can't act outside of its creator's will. It's only a tool, defined by the hand that directs it. The only choice is whether to aim true or to break."

No. A machine was a thousand choices, gears and circuits axles and coaxials, choices being made over and over again and maybe just once the choice was no.

Another part of Ocelot could have been amused that of all of it this was what made his anger take root.

"You're wasting your time," Ocelot growled. His neck corded. "I don't take an enemy's advice."

"I'm not your enemy, ADAM."

For the bald issue of the patently ludicrous statement, Ocelot waited for the God of Liars to appear and forsake him where he stood.

"I've only done what I had to to ensure you would give me a fair hearing out. I had to remove a few distractions. That's all. I haven't harmed anyone."

He'd better fucking well not have.

Esau's silhouette tracked back and forth, the pendulum of a perverse celestial hypnotist.

"I don't blame you for getting the wrong idea, but, whether or not you want to accept it, I'm working in your own best interest. I have faith that eventually you'll come to understand that."

Ocelot followed the path back and forth, allowing only his eyes to move.

"Once you have it all back in your grasp, you'll know that they're the only ones who can give you all you need. Your little friend has nothing to compare to that."

"Standards have slipped far," Ocelot said, his voice a cold metal coil, "if they'd let you babble this long before getting to the point. By the schedule, you should have started torturing me ten minutes ago. I guess I shouldn't be surprised. If you were anything close to competent, you would have kept me knocked out with your little machine trick and hauled me back to headquarters."

Ocelot smirked.

"That is, unless one unconscious prisoner is more than you can handle?"

Reconfirm the target. Direct his attention. The ultimate goal was to take Ocelot and leave this place. The communications were nearly repaired. With enough time and the captor gone, any bonds could be broken.

"No, no," Esau said, in the common, tolerant tones of a teacher to a slow child. "This isn't an abduction or an interrogation."

His face tilted up, smile flashing like metal in the moonlight.

"It's a negotiation of price."

Out of some perverse inclination to humor him, Ocelot said, "What are you offering?"

Not out of fear's natural inverse, the desire to taunt the energy that coiled deep inside him like the world serpent on the ocean floor, see if this then was the bait that could urge it to lift its head and blink the concentric ink-black islands of its reptile eyes.

Esau stood in midstep, paused, poised.

"Acceptance," he said.

Adamska didn't know whether to laugh or be furious that he was wasting his time.

"We know what you are, ADAM." Steps resuming, carving a furrow in star-rimed dust unused to visitors, breaking a trail to nowhere. "You are what you were made to be. How it must eat at you to hide it! Your talents, your abilities, your penchants, your perversities. Your potential. You've fallen in love with your own mask. It's a crime that you should have to pretend to be an ordinary man. That

little rabbit of yours, how would he react if he could see the wolf you are in its full glory?"

Adamska's eyes tracked motion. The plaster of his face had dried and set. It was the old game. This was what he knew.

(and the whole of it glory, glory, glory)

(had wiped the blood from his face and said Adamska it's all right)

"You should be rejoicing in who you are, not denying it." Esau's steps continued, a dull, relentless throb through the thin coat of dust to the stone below. "You're a master of lies, but only those that serve a purpose. Can you live a lie for no greater goal than your own gratification?"

"Makes an interesting change of pace from living for someone else's," Ocelot said. His voice absorbed what little light was present.

"Ah, but that's exactly it!" The spy sounded pleased. "Do you know what will happen if you were allowed to continue like this, ADAM?"

(snow and soft silence)

"No one can tell the future," Ocelot said.

The apex of a turn brought the enemy's face into focused profile.

"You would get bored."

He pronounced it with demure delight, as though delivering a sentence, harsh but just, incommunicable.

"Not with a bang, but a whimper," the spy recited in the shadow of a demented child's singsong.

"The lie might keep him happy, but it would never be enough for you. You might even come to resent him for believing it. We are the only ones who can accept you in your totality. The only ones who will nurture your talent and give you what you need to flourish. Trying to destroy what makes you special will bring you nothing but frustration and useless pain. You're a rare breed, ADAM."

Ocelot kept his mouth shut. Let him talk all he wanted. Every word was information, ripe for analysis and use. Pebbles dug into his knees and kept him focused.

"It's perfectly logical that you would want to try to be ordinary. Being one of a kind is, above all, lonely. And there are so few who can truly comprehend your genius."

Esau turned, heel scraping in the dust. His path took him through sections of dark and lesser dark, shadow dripping alternately over his curdled features like cold water.

"And so you laid claim to the most excruciatingly ordinary man you could find, one utterly mundane in everything except an extraordinary capacity for self-delusion. He wants to believe that you love him, that it's not only a passing fancy, a momentary lapse of weakness you'll come to despise. So do you. He wants to believe you are the man you pretend to be, and not, say, a magnificently cruel and efficiently ruthless assassin. And- What a happy coincidence."

Esau's tread slowed as he wound near, gazing down as though Adamska were a wounded animal, and he was weighing the benefits of putting him out of his misery.

"Fuck your mother," Ocelot growled. A dull ache flowed from his wrists, a faint glow through adrenaline fog. He could feel the pattern of the ropes imprinting on the sides.

"We all grow to fit our cage, ADAM," the spy said. His hands found each other behind his back. His boots rasped in time with the measured tread. "Those who aren't given them make their own. Try to burst it and you only press the wires deeper. You...well."

The boy smiled, as if indulging a favorite child with a favorite story.

"You fought so hard and so well that the cage became a part of your flesh. And they found that it only makes you stronger."

He stopped abruptly, directly in front of where Adamska knelt. The smile melted away from his

plump, distended lips.

"That is, it would, if you weren't tearing yourself open to try to dig it out."

The unseen ropes were white with focus. Whatever lies spewed from the spy's fat mouth were nothing.

Esau crouched to eye level.

He drew the revolver from Adamska's holster with the reverence of handling a saint's fingerbone. "Forgive me," Esau said, slipping it into his waistband where it was pressed tightly against him. "I'll return this once you come to your senses."

"You talk too much, Philosopher dog," Ocelot spat. "Too bad they never invested in a muzzle."

Those mad, tyrant lizard eyes, cool with a new and loathsome sanity.

He was close enough to throttle, if Ocelot could move.

"I know how much you must hate me right now," Esau said, gently, the reek of the easy lies gone from his voice. "Believe me. I know. I've hated them too, for what they've done to me."

"Then fight!" Ocelot cried. He turned his face away and scowled at the dust in the darkness. "You coward."

There was a sound like a soft laugh, a fluttering of a trapped moth's wings against thick cloth.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Esau's hand lift.

Bile rose in Ocelot's throat. Rock pressed against his back. He had no leeway to jerk away.

The Philosopher dog's hand touched his face, dry and cool as discarded bones.

"Everything I said before was true," he said. His breath was tepid and smelled of nothing. At this range the darkness could not hide his features. "About admiring you. You're an extraordinary man, ADAM. Even crippled you're incredible. Imagine what you could be once you're whole again."

He smiled edgelessly like the ignorant hero of a twisted romance.

Ocelot felt every atom of the millimeter's space that kept him from biting off the spy's thumb and spitting blood in his eyes.

"It's all right now," Esau said, as though comforting a frightened child. His deceptive, lugubriously pretty face was cast in the mold of the warm and earnest. "It's over. You don't have to fight anymore."

"If you think I ever fought because I had to, you're stupider than you look," Adamska said.

"People are fickle things." His tone was mild as flat granite on a desert evening. "Give him water, and he wants salt. Give him the best weapons technology can create, and he wants a relic from before he was born. Give him all the enemies a soldier could hope for, and he begins to want someone he can trust."

There was grit on his fingers. His shadow blocked the moon.

"Make him the most feared man in the world, and he searches for someone who will refuse to fear him. Make him strong, and all he will want is a weakness."

His earnest eyes were vast and black.

"Toe the party line all you like," Ocelot sneered. "It's none of your concern what I want."

"But why do you want it?" He said it in the tone one might say *Why won't you take the antidote?* "Have you ever thought of that?"

Smooth, mechanical silence. Snow on the other side of the light. The understanding he couldn't unravel. The peace he couldn't define.

"It's none of your fucking business," Adamska growled. There was nothing to look at but his face.

"You're not used to having your own desires," the spy said. "You were never inoculated against

them. They kept you under control, instead, and failed to take precautions should you slip it. What you wanted had never before been anything but what they intended you to want in order to further their purposes. Heady, isn't it? You assume that, since the source is you alone, following it against your better judgment can be given a pretty name like 'freedom.' You should know better than anyone that there's no such thing."

"There's something to be said for not playing someone's pawn," Adamska said, tendrils of acid etching patterns of rifling around his tongue. "You should try it sometime."

"ADAM, don't you see?" Esau's lips curved around the shape of sympathy. "You're more enslaved now than you ever were. Them, you followed because your logic found it the most profitable course. They never ask for unconditional loyalty; they make sure the conditions always fall in their favor. Him, you follow...why? For sheer animal instinct. The old fraud's pleasure principle. You follow him simply because you want to. What kind of logic is that, ADAM?"

One of his handlers, a woman with long nails and a cold smile, used to ask similar questions, to signal that in some way he had failed and there was nothing for it now but to be ready.

"So that's what you are," Ocelot said, a bored drawl. "A kicked dog crawling back to beg for more." There was hardly enough give to allow him to shrug one shoulder. "Slobber on their boots all you want. Just don't expect me to join you."

"We're all dogs of war. There are many masters, but only one can be the victor. It's always the same. No one can fight fate. They always get what they want."

"I'll be the one to teach them disappointment."

Esau's eyes flicked up, as if in memory. His thumb ghosted loathsomely across the ridge of Adamska's cheekbone.

"There was a man who thought the same, once," Esau said, as if beginning a parable. "He believed he could abandon what they had gone to such trouble to teach him and stay safe in a dream world, never dirtying his hands."

The oil of his voice poured solemn and heartfelt.

"He ended up a mad scientist's plaything, eviscerated while he lay helpless and screaming."

Adamska lunged forward to smash his head against the traitor-in-waiting's face.

Esau's head snapped back inches out of reach, his grip firm on Adamska's jaw, then settled back with the patience of a snake handler with a cobra on a hook. Close.

"You knew it was true the moment you saw him," Esau said, mild as lye. "A sparrow kept in a lighted room away from its natural sustenance can do nothing but die."

Ocelot didn't have the fucking leverage to keep him away.

"Ah." Delight shivered the edges of his parted lips. "Your eyes are so beautiful when you hate."

The boy smiled.

"Once you're back, you can do whatever you want with me," he said, blissful as a mindless saint. "Our masters are generous, and they reward good service. Kill me however you like. I bet you've thought of some good ones already, eh? "

Out of sheer bloodmindedness, Adamska refused to let him be right.

Esau's smile swelled with a child's happiness. "Like that idea, don't you? It's all right. You're not subject to anyone's judgment anymore. You can be who you are. Who you were made to be. There's no shame in that. Your talents will be fostered, fed. Not just with vermin from the prisons, either. They know your true value now. Compared to you, anyone is expendable. Say the word, and anyone in the world you like will be yours to play with. In fact, they say some of your old handlers are still alive. Wouldn't it be interesting to show them your progress? You could take your revenge for the



pain they've caused you. They say there's nothing sweeter. How funny, the looks on their faces when they see justice has finally caught up with them!"

Those were memories dead and buried. They could have died in a lover's embrace for all Adamska cared. It had nothing to do with him anymore.

The enemy's head cocked like a mocking crow's.

"But you don't have to think that far into the future now. I could be the first, if you like," he offered. "They've got things now that would put Volgin to shame. Just you, me, a locked room, and all the time in the world."

The thumb stroked Adamska's cheek in time with the revulsion biting into his spine.

"You know," he said, still smiling, fucking *smiling*, "we all loved you a little, Adam."

He said it like a name.

"No matter what happened, you were there to hope for, our invincible hero, for all of us. I had many brothers and sisters."

Something drifted in his eyes, mad and distant.

"Many, many, many..."

And was gone.

"But I'm the one who survived to meet you. I wouldn't trade away a moment of it. That's why I can't let you throw it all away, no matter what it takes to make you understand and remember. I'd lay down my life for you and consider it an honor. That's why I can't let you lay down yours."

With every word, his face drew closer. The touch of his hair was maddening.

"May I?" he murmured, his breath a tickling, tactile force against Adamska's mouth, breaking into pieces like a wave against a reef.

It was too late to realize what he intended.

Rock pressed against Adamska's skull.

Esau's lips molded themselves to his in twisted parody, the mauled and desecrated husk of a gentle kiss.

Ocelot's mouth went slack.

The law; lack of resistance is acquiescence in all the ways that matter.

The boy's tongue probed forward, cool and moist as a slug in its dying throes.

Ocelot's teeth met in an iron rush of satisfaction.

The spy flung himself backward with a strangled cry, hand clamping over his mouth in the idiot pantomime of instinct to protect what was already lost.

Turning his head, but not so much that he wouldn't be able to watch, Ocelot spat insouciantly to the side.

The tiny scrap of shadow landed in a patch of dust that was black in the moonlight.

It was the little things that were the sweetest.

His life was his own to do with as he saw fit.

There was a gurgling noise and panting from the four-legged shadow.

"Fuck," Adamska said distinctly, "your mother."

The boy spat blood on the ground and wiped his mouth. He lifted his head.

His smile grew teeth.

"You know," Esau said, barely blurred, "I was kind of hoping you would say that."

With bestial grace he swung to his feet and padded forward to loom, implacable.

"You know why this kind of weakness is unacceptable," Esau said, standing over him in the stance a hyena mocking to mourn a meal's remains. "It makes you so easy to control. A child could do

it. All I would have to do is tell you what I could do to him, and tell you what I want."

The enemy knelt, leaned close.

"Think of him, alone there in the darkness. Afraid. Wondering where you are, why you aren't protecting him like you promised. All alone with the thought that you must be dead; otherwise you would have come to help him. His only comfort the knowledge that you would do whatever it takes to keep him from harm, no matter what it means sacrificing for yourself, and how long can that optimism last in the face of incontrovertible evidence..."

Hah. He didn't know Hal at all.

"I could just leave him there, you know," Esau said thoughtfully. "Cold, alone, and afraid, for days."

last for days

"But that wouldn't be nearly as much fun."

He smiled.

"There would be no point at all if I said this is the last time I'm going to ask," he said, voice dripping tame malice like rancid tallow. "It's just the last time before I start to teach those pretty little hands of his what real pain means."

Ocelot snarled and told him that he was an idiot to think such a cheap trick would work on him.

As his teeth parted to say it he realized that all of his strength was going to keeping back the words reflecting like a scream off the sides of his mind.

Please

Don't do it don't hurt him hurt me I don't care I don't care hurt me instead I can take it anything just don't please I'll do

He held them fast in horror and rigor mortis stasis, and heard another.

*Pull yourself together, boy.*

He recognized the words the voice came cast in.

As well he should, as it was his own.

He felt his pupils dilate in the dark.

The place he had bled from. That had been cut free. Emptied and destroyed.

Nature abhors a vacuum.

The place of anger, loss, pain that had been purified.

The dark place in his heart, shot through with light like steel wires.

It was not *him*.

It was *his*.

"Our masters weren't always infallible," Esau said, all unknowing, a lover's husky murmur. "There are a few differences between us."

His voice became low and intimate.

"They made sure to teach me to love what I do."

The surge of fear and rage should have snapped Ocelot's bonds like brittle twine.

I'll kill you if you

*You will. Know that. Remember that. Careworn and reassuring as a lullaby. Guide yourself by the constant. The end point is his death. Find the path from then to now.*

The enemy's hand crept toward him.

*Don't give him what he wants.*

If he'd gone for the face again, Ocelot would've bitten off his hand if it meant snapping his own fucking spine.

It must have shown. Esau smiled at him.

His hand dipped downward and drew the heavy survival knife from its sheath on Adamska's chest.

The enemy tested the weight in his hand. Tossed it lightly, once, twice. The serrated edge cut watered starlight.

"Scared?" he said, an obscene parody fed on the corpse of concern. "You shouldn't be. Our masters don't want their prize damaged. I'm not going to hurt you."

A slight emphasis was all the last word needed.

no please anything just don't

*An enemy's tactic only succeeds if you let him know it's working.* The reverberation of a drum in confined space. *Have you gotten so weak you've forgotten that?*

Esau hefted the knife. Displayed the edge, the heavy serrated cutting edge, a proud collector with his holy grail.

"Once you return to us, you'll get this back," he promised. "To do whatever you want." please don't

"Ah. But we can't go forgetting the formalities, can we?"

The corner of Esau's mouth skewed like a knife scar.

(His fingers had traced his scars in the cold night and he had been unafraid.)

"Now I have to ask you."

(He'd said "It's sad that you've been hurt so much.")

The enemy's face was close, wide and vivid as the moon wasn't, purile voice and pleading eyes.

"Adam, will you come home?"

He had the eyes of a suppliant and his hand was tight on the knife.

Heavy and serrated, made to tear.

Adamska's blood was black ice.

Adamska had promised

And in the dark parts of his mind there was something relentless.

*Give in now and it will only go worse for him.*

Ocelot's answer came in a silent snarl. He didn't trust his voice.

"Suit yourself," the enemy said, unfolding, a casual casualty. "It's all up to you."

He would die.

His smile was gone.

He turned and walked away.

When he looked back the lack of light gleamed in his eyes.

"If you'd been nice, I would have let you listen," he said. "But I'm not feeling generous enough to give you a free show. I'm a professional, after all. I'll make sure the gag is good and tight. You'll have to rely on your imagination."

"You wouldn't dare," Adamska cried, before the shadows could swallow him.

The glint in the enemy's eyes cut across the distance.

It was almost sorrow.

"It's too bad," he said. "He doesn't have to suffer. It's your choice. Give the word."

*He's lying.*

Adamska's throat was sealed shut.

Heavy boots made dry sounds in the dust.

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/61/>

# chapter 62

## Stray by Dahne

*There will be no battle, no heroics. Only sleep.*

*-Baldur's Gate II*

*Need can change the nature of a man.*

Hands - tied.

Convenient sharp objects – no.

Movement allowance - a few centimeters in any direction, none of them useful.

Location - old storehouse near site of attack.

Esau was smaller than Adamska. Couldn't carry him, at least not far, especially once he woke up and started fighting.

Visual data - complete darkness, interrupted by small high window. A fox could have fit through, maybe.

Auditory data - wind through cracks in walls, a hoarse warning whisper, insinuation, like shreds of fiberglass. Scrape of rats had stopped, Hal didn't know when. Own heart beating.

Snake always said the key was to stay calm.

It was what everybody said, even people whose main involvement with combat was to stay back and be fervently glad they weren't the ones in it, but when Snake said it, you knew what it meant. There were a lot of things like that. The phrase "dumb mercenary" rolled off the tongue, but Snake had a way of knowing things that could strip the paint off metal.

"When you've got to wait," Snake had said once, when they were pinned down in the communications tower waiting for Wolf to get into position and Liquid, Fox, and Raven to engage the enemy from the other side, "once you've already done everything you can to get ready, the trick is to think about something else."

Hal's job was to scramble the enemy's signal at the right moment when Wolf started in. Too early, and they could organize to work around it. Too late and if she was spotted she would already be dead. He hated the plan for putting her in such danger. "*Chivalry*," she'd snorted over CODEC, the brush of her accent not quite scorn. "*How precious.*"

"What, like picture the terrorists in their underwear?" The metal wall cold against his shoulders.

"If it helps. Anything other than what can go wrong." Shoving a fresh clip into his FAMAS.

"They're counting on you to panic. That's an advantage you can take away."

Wedge between his back and splintering wood, Otacon's hands didn't have room to shake.

"Unit 01 is Yui Ikari," he mumbled through numb lips, "Unit 02 is Kyoko Sohryu. Unit 00 is...is..."

Wind caught in the cracks. The ache from the unnatural position sank in and became part of his bones.

"...It could be Naoko Akagi. That could be why when it goes berserk it attacks Gendo, and in a way attacks Rei, too..."

He was pitched forward to try to redistribute his weight, like Narcissus bending over to kiss his reflection. Hard wood pressed into his knees.

Stay calm. Don't panic.

"But if that were true, why would it let her pilot it at all? The synch ratio should be stuck at zero. She tells Asuka, 'You have to trust her,' but how could *she* trust somebody who killed her? That is, a

her... No, that doesn't make any sense. She wouldn't help someone she hated...But she doesn't value her own life at all. And when she detonates that N2 mine at close range, she's sacrificing *both* of them..."

Plenty to be afraid of, but don't be afraid. Keep breathing.

Don't let them win.

"There's the theory that Unit 00 doesn't have a soul at all, and that's why it's so unstable. Maybe it made its own..."

Otacon's mouth moved over meaningless words. His lips and throat were dry. Boards creaked and settled.

*Zero zero zero zero zero zero zero zero.*

Footsteps.

Not rats.

Approaching footsteps. Unmistakable.

Hal froze, bolt upright.

He would have given half his life for eyes that would pierce the dark and the walls.

*Maybe maybe maybe maybe-*

The sound of a key. The soft and penetrating low snick and turn of a key.

A-

The air shifted to the invisible press of the opening door. Chased it as it closed.

A shadow passed across the window like a viscous oil cloud over the reflection of the moon.

A sigh, brief and unrepentant, the release of air that had been expected, prepared for, masticated, and let go once it had served its purpose.

"Sorry about all of this," said Esau's voice.

It was not the voice coaxed from a hunted, captured creature huddled by a fire. It was not the voice of a fanatic crying for converts, suspended inches from madness or martyrdom or wherever good children go, begging listen listen listen, saying the way only a true seasoned madman could *this much I know is true*.

It could have come from anyone Hal had known when he was younger.

It was a voice Plato might have used to talk to shadows on a cave's wall.

It was a voice of reason.

"Where is he?" Otacon demanded, knowing and not caring how little basis a man tied up on the ground with his legs cramped and his shoulders aching had to demand anything. "Is he all right? What did you do to him?"

On the other side of the darkness Esau sighed, like a teacher faced with a student who had insisted upon performing exactly along low, tiresome expectations.

"Not far, yes, and nothing, in that order. Hold on. I'm going to find a light."

There was no reason to lie about it.

Adamska was safe.

Well, not 'safe', exactly. Unhurt. Already more than he had dared to hope for.

Relief freed a few of Otacon's neural cycles to worry about himself.

A scrape blended into the sound of a match flaring.

When Esau's face leapt into infernal focus, dark brows above smeared red and angular shadows and the deep dark wells of his eyes, Otacon could think only, *I don't expect you to talk. I expect you to die.*

"Ah. Here we are."

He bent behind a crate and pulled out an object with a flick of glass. A click, and the two parallel bars of a camp lantern ghosted to life, the bleached waverless radiance searing after the long darkness. Pursued lips like a wince extinguished the match's tiny flame.

"There. Much better." The shadows turned their faces as Esau set the lantern down on a crate. "This little thing has come in handy a lot. Nice of them to leave it for me, eh?"

There was a slight difference to the way he spoke, a blur as though he were suppressing an accent. No, more of a- carefulness, like someone trying to walk without putting pressure on a bruised ankle.

Beneath light that leached color, there was a dark stain that was not the pattern of his fatigues.

"Liar," Hal breathed, horror blooming anew. "You're covered in blood."

The confusion looked unfeigned.

Esau's fingers went to his lips, and with delicacy pulled away the stain.

And for a moment something in his face flashed translucent, something of loss or longing or black twisted humor that stained like soot, visible for a cross-section of an irreparable instant like looking down in a dark forest when a lemur's eyes caught the moon.

"Ah," the boy said. "Don't worry. It's only mine."

"Wh, what happened?" Otacon said, unable to help himself.

Esau opened his mouth wide and wagged his tongue as though he were a child, as though it were candy that had stained it red. A drop fell from the truncated end and landed in the dust.

His lips shut, and he wiped them with the back of his hand as he swallowed.

"Got too close," he said simply. "ADAM bit it off."

Otacon would have accused him of lying, but he wasn't.

Captive or not, Adamska would fight.

As if the matter was of no more concern, Esau sat on the crate beside the lantern, raising a cavalcade of dust motes. If Otacon's hands had not been bound he could have reached out and touched the ragged hole at the boy's knee.

Esau said, "We need to talk, Dr. Emmerich."

Otacon didn't bother being surprised that he knew his name.

The winner took it all.

"You're going to take him back to them," Hal said dully, staring down at coarse wood grain. "To the Patriots."

"Yes."

Grit caulked the uneven spaces where the floorboards had warped or been fitted wrong.

"You're going to kill me."

"Yes."

The word was not unkind.

Otacon looked him in the eye. "You don't have to."

Esau's face was serene, touched lightly with the brush of sympathy. "I'm afraid I do."

"You don't," Otacon said. He was stubborn. "You can stop this. Come back with us to Shadow Moses. You can fight with us. I won't believe that everything you said to me was a lie. You're more than just their tool. You can make your own choice-"

His voice trailed off, subsumed by soft laughter.

"Yes," Esau said. "I can, and do. I choose for them every time. Just as I was made to. You should know better than anyone that we can't escape our programming, Hal."

His hands curled at rest around the edge of the crate, long fingers tapping lightly in time to an

internal sonata. They bore muddy red smears.

Otacon's hands twisted uselessly as he said, "*He* did."

Esau shook his head sadly, hair brushing over his eyes.

"He thinks he did. Or at least, so he says. You may be the only one he has truly convinced. But then, in your eyes, he can do no wrong, can he?"

"What are you talking about?" Otacon tried to demand.

Thick eyebrows curved like the wings of vultures coming home to roost.

"Didn't you know?" Disingenuous disbelief. "Come on. You must have realized."

Keep him talking. Take the bait. "Realized what?"

It worked. The boy smiled, his heels tapping against the crate.

"What you really are to him."

"What's that?" Hal said, knowing that it meant something, something obvious, the insinuating note in his voice and that almost innocent inquisitive look, but thought could get no traction.

Esau tipped his head.

"They say that the best pawns are the ones who want to be used."

He said it as if it meant something.

Hal said nothing. Pressed his wrists together, as if he had any choice.

Esau smiled. The timbre of his voice shifted.

"Let me put it this way. I'd wager the guess that, from the moment he appeared in your life right up until now, you've never been happier."

Gazing down, his eyes were direct and openly quizzical.

"Th, that's none of your business," Otacon muttered.

"In fact," Esau continued, as if an idea had just occurred to him, "Even right at this moment you're happy, because you think you can somehow sacrifice yourself to save him. At heart, you've always wanted a cause worth giving your life for. You can't bring yourself to believe that it might have value in and of itself. By dying for him, you believe you can redeem yourself for being-insufficient, somehow. However, there's one secret."

He leaned forward, heels stilling with a hollow thunk against splintered wood. Otacon could smell dry rot.

"It's not worth it."

"That," Otacon said, "proves that you have no idea what you're talking about."

The boy's arms were casual bars at his sides. The left sleeve displayed a long rip with edges that cut into shadow, as if there were nothing inside it but a void that showed through the cracks.

"What I mean," Esau explained, "is not that he is not worth sacrificing for. Quite the contrary. I mean that the kind of sacrifice you plan to undertake - defiance in the face of the enemy, refusing to yield an inch, so on, so forth - can have no possible effect but to further damage him, possibly to the point of destruction."

So that was the threat.

It was pretty much as Hal had expected, and exactly as he had feared.

"Please," he whispered, edges of the word twisting around the thin edges of fear. "Do whatever you want to me. Just don't hurt him."

The soft, pleasant laugh jarred like broken glass.

"Don't be ridiculous," Esau reassured. "I'm here to help him. Your heart's in the right place, but you've misjudged the situation in every possible aspect. It's amazing, really, that you've stayed alive this long, knowing nothing of the man."



*he's let me get closer than he's ever let*

Otacon said, "I know him."

Only things in the direct path of the light were visible. A single shadow made all the difference.

"Do you know," Esau mentioned conversationally, "he thought I was coming in here to torture you unless he agreed to come back?"

Careless swing. Thunk. The lift of a dark, heavy-scrawled brow. More than ever he was a charcoal sketch of a man.

"You'll notice, I think, that he didn't."

"Are you?"

"Am I what?"

Otacon shifted involuntarily against the ropes. Everything that wasn't numb hurt. It was hard to tell which was which. "Going to torture me."

"Oh." A flick of Esau's wrist, careless. "What would be the point of that?"

He would have taken Hal apart fleck by fleck if it had served his purposes.

Esau's head tilted, like a crow spotting something shining in the grass.

"You imagine that I am some cruel agent of a capricious fate intent on destroying your happiness, yes?"

In the back of Hal's mind there coiled a skein of laughter drawn through the dark side of a mirror. "That's what you are, isn't it?"

"Such a simple way of looking at things," Esau sighed. "I'm envious. I really am."

"Saying that you're gonna kill me makes it pretty black and white," Otacon said.

"You'd think so," Esau agreed, making an amiable gesture. "However, the truth is quite different."

He paused, incongruous lips pursing in the midst of erratic red striations.

"You do understand, don't you? Why you have to die. It's nothing personal. ADAM, you see, is a very finely-crafted machine. Regardless of who or what you are otherwise, your interference in his life is...sand in the gears. Sugar in a delicate engine. You've damaged the mechanism, through no fault of your own, and fortunately not irreparably, but it will be a difficult enough process without you exacerbating the condition."

"Is that what you call loving him?" Otacon demanded, with a surge of terror or anger or bravery or maybe at this point they were the same thing. His heart was beating like a sparrow's wings against the bars of an oversmall cage.

Esau laughed, softly, pleasantly. "Is that what you imagine it is? Poor thing. He really has you fooled. Do you know anything at all about what he is?"

Wind scraped the walls, calling from where Adamska was, somewhere, alone. He would be fighting now. He would be finding a way. There was always a way. Had to be.

Calling directions to him, watching wires weave, a partnership to create in metal the schematics in his head. Working side by side for a way home.

It felt like so long ago.

"I know enough."

The boy examined him, measuring the weight and purity of his words.

Full lips and mossblack eyes condensed into pity.

"Has he even told you his real name?"

"I trust him," Otacon threw into the mottled teeth of that serene smile.

Esau's fingers stilled.

"Yes," he said, eyes solemn. "I was afraid of that."

He put his hands on his knees and leaned forward, as though they were friends discussing their lives over a cup of coffee.

He said, "Let me tell you who ADAM is."

Waking to warmth beside him. the lazy smile and half-closed cat's eyes. *Who are you?*

"Every ruling body must have tools to enforce its edicts and make it strong. Armies. Executioners. Assassins. Secret police. The foundations of a functioning society. But there has always been a problem. You see, these men were born as- well, men. They weren't always the moving apparatus of a greater machine. They existed as such in a temporary state, with a place to go back to. It was an unreliable factor, but one that, in a few crucial cases, succeeded in superceding orders. It was possible to forcibly remove this mitigating factor, with...much trial and error, but the result was invariable unstable, and even less reliable. For the true, enduring ruling power in the world, they needed men who could be relied upon to always, without exception, act in *their* interest. Someone they could trust, if only to betray them in precisely predictable patterns. They needed someone free of this vestigial – forgive me for use of an obsolete term – humanity."

"There's no one like that," Otacon said.

"Precisely." Esau smiled. "That's why they had to make him."

"Then they failed." The harshness in his voice felt as though it belonged to someone else, as if shouted from a distance through a steel grating that led to his own throat.

"Oh, there were problems," Esau admitted readily. "This little incident is proof of that. But in other aspects, the results were, to be frank, more spectacular than anyone had dared imagine. But then-" he smiled- "part of being the perfect liar means keeping anyone from ever guessing what you are. As well as providing perfect defenses against suspicion."

"I trust him," Otacon said.

"That is precisely the problem," Esau said. "That parameter was deliberately excluded."

Hal looked at him sharply. "What?"

Esau sighed, his blackmoss eyes lowering in patient recrimination.

"He is not *meant* to be trusted, Put simply, you're hurting him. Impressive in itself, when he was made to be practically invincible. ADAM is an incredible man, but he can't function in the confines of a normal life."

Otacon was about to say something about a life that was anything but normal, but his voice didn't appear to be under his command.

"Like I said, I'm sorry about all this. It's amazing what lengths one has to go to to get someone to listen to what they don't want to hear."

"Don't do me any favors," Otacon said, air grating on a throat gone dry.

The boy laughed fondly. "That is what I'm doing, you know. Whether or not you believe it. I'm saving you from your choice of a terrible, painful death. This will be quick and easy."

It was one of those things, Otacon was sure, that depended very much on which side of it you were on.

He didn't know if anything in his head was working right, or if the gears had slipped that one crucial millimeter, and nothing made the sense he wanted to make of it. He couldn't move. His wrists hurt. What was 'choice'?

"Ah. I'm sorry." Esau rubbed at his neck ruefully. "I'm not making any sense to you, am I? I'm not used to explaining any of this to anyone who doesn't already know the whole story. Lack of information is your only flaw here, fatal as it is. Let me begin again. I'll tell you everything I can, for

any reason."

It wasn't right. He was supposed to be cackling, scowling, hurting him, trying to force him to betray- Not smiling like a child. Not talking as though they were students chatting about abstract philosophy, not talking about reason.

Trying to take Adamska away from him.

That made him the enemy, and everything he said was wrong.

Otacon's jaw ached. He must have been clenching his teeth.

"I'm not your enemy, you know," Esau said mildly.

"Stop saying that!" Otacon cried.

The dark eyebrows arched. "What? You don't like to hear the truth, when it's something other than you expect? I would think you would be pleased. Unexpected answers are supposed to appeal to a mind like yours."

"What do you know about me?" Why should they care what he thought like?

The boy smiled complacently, friendly and nonthreatening. "Quite a lot, actually. You know how they are. Never leave a base uncovered, no matter how tangential. For example..."

He leaned back, eyes rolling upward in contemplation. His hands laced over his knee, and his leg kicked against the crate in idle, truncated arcs.

"I know how he won your loyalty."

"How's that?" Otacon said, thinking of Adamska alone somewhere nearby, finding a way out, needing time, thinking of lies.

"It can't have been hard," Esau said. His smile was soft with sympathy, warm and golden as the yolk of a poached egg. "He is very beautiful."

Hal turned his face away and refused to rise to the goad.

"Don't tell me you haven't questioned it yourself. How long have you known him?"

"Long enough," Otacon said, to dust and rat's droppings and warped rotting wood. *Always.*

"Days?" Esau inquired, innocently curious. "Hours? Or did he simply appear and sweep you off your feet, no questions asked, no answers expected? As though he were the answer to a longing you had never known you had. Like what you had always been waiting for."

It wasn't like that. He couldn't know.

A slice of gust cut under the eaves and dried the sweat on the back of Hal's neck.

"It was perfect, wasn't it? A beautiful man with no ambition but to give you everything you had ever wanted. Love, acceptance, an object for the desires you tried to deny, and all without the burden of knowing who you are."

His voice (oily, oil-coated, the slick sickly rainbow that came from oil) fell into the rhythm of the steady hypnotic light, a mute metronome flensing thin strips of time to wrap him in and muffle his eyes.

"Perfect, easy love, given without price or strings."

*No strings attached* she said the first time, and smiled with her red chemical mouth.

"You amuse yourself by imaging that it's real. Your own logic refutes you, I can hear it. You can only choose to ignore it for so long. How could it be? You both *think* too differently. The reality of either of you would be a foreign antibody to the other, repulsive and incomprehensible. You could never so much as understand one another."

Otacon's head jerked as Esau leaned forward, his shadow cringing back, as though he were restraining himself from jabbing Otacon in the chest with his finger.

*At least*

"Everything you are feeling at this moment is a construct, based on the deliberate happenstance that, for a moment in time, your weaknesses have dovetailed."

*he wasn't weak.*

Otacon stared the enemy down.

"He is not weak."

Esau's smile showed red teeth.

"You see? You defend him, without even knowing what you're saying."

His pale face was sallow in the lamplight. Red highlights hit the pointed corners where his lips terminated and converged.

"You wondered how it could have happened to someone like you. Someone whose best qualities are the most useful and least glamorous. Kind. Intelligent. Well-intentioned.

"His road is paved with people like you."

"He's not going anywhere," Otacon said.

Esau's expression of didactic was a familiar one twisted through curved mirrors and cast in pitiless light.

"But he is," he said gently. "Whether or not either of you want him to. You didn't think it could last long, did you? What do you have to offer a man like that?"

It was all wrong. The shadows were inverted and the highlights were too low. That look of sympathy. He wouldn't stop.

"Safety. Sympathy. Whoever he was, you would accept it, and believe any of his lies. You would be good enough at it that he could begin to believe, too. Exceptional in your very ordinariness. You could pale demurely beside him and believe whatever he told you was right."

His smile was clear smoke that stung Otacon's eyes.

"It's perfectly understandable. Nothing to be ashamed of. After all, manipulation is his key skill. You happened to be there and vulnerable." Voice coated in acidic comfort. "Why do you think he chose you?"

*His face thrown into angles of anger.*

*I love you, you idiot!*

Esau's sigh filled the close air like cigarette smoke.

"His purpose has been warped, but his core is intact.

"Do you have any idea how dangerous for you that is?"

Otacon stared defiance into the calm, level eyes. "He would never hurt me."

The Patriot agent gave him a long, searching look.

"No," he said finally. "You really believe he wouldn't."

That smile, the Gioconda warped under bubbled glass and cold running water.

"That's why."

There weren't enough bindings in the world to keep Hal from asking, "Why what?"

"Why he chose you. He knew you would help him."

*I want to help you*

Lamplight caressed the isocles shadows of his face.

"There is a key to the profession. Has he told you that? Has he sat you down in a sheltered place and whispered to you all his secrets? Has he asked for yours? Yes, he must have. He must have told you, who believes in him so much, the one thing separates the amateur liar from the artist."

His eyes were earnest, matte black in white light.

"The best let the victim construct his own lie."

There was cold creeping along his skin that Hal didn't feel.

"It's an easy thing to say, isn't it? I love you. But difficult to believe, especially in absurd circumstances. How has he demonstrated? There are so many things only a fool or a man in love will do. He must have put his life on the line for you dozens of times, by now."

Suggestion coiled beneath the surface of his voice.

"But he can't have been here for more than a few days. What answer did he give, when you asked how he could so much as know you?"

The truth lay supine on Hal's tongue and mixed with the taste of dust.

He said, "I never..."

Esau shook his head, carrying the halves of his face in and out of shadow.

"Think about it," he sighed, a professor wondering why a usually promising student couldn't produce the answer to a simple equation. "Do you really think a man constructing a weapon to change the face of modern warfare wouldn't be watched by dozens of organizations, clandestine and otherwise? They would hardly have let you near the thing without extensive psychological testing."

A man in glasses, hands folded over a desk not resembling prayer, a beard with straight boundaries, questions flected and reflected as though caught between two mirrors. Every year the same barrage. *We can't let just anyone*

"Gathering information is what he *does*. After overcoming time, an hour or two of doing what he was born for was nothing. Then, so armed, he came to find you, and watched you perform precisely to expectations. Just as planned."

"You're wrong," Otacon said. He knew that much.

"I am?" His thick brow raised, politely inquisitive, subtle brutality perverted to a gesture of quaint confusion. "How did you think he found you?"

*The base's approximation of quiet, clank of machinery, soldiers' distant voices.* "It doesn't matter."

"Just for clarification's sake." The tone of a casual conversation. Well-bred professionals discussing the terms of a slightly awkward deal. "Did he walk in through the front gates, unarmed, and let them see that he was exactly as he appeared to be? Big Boss has a reliable habit of letting his sense of justice overcome his reason; however suspicious the circumstances, an innocent would have little to fear.

"Or did he infiltrate the base and stay hidden until he could appeal directly to you, who would protect him from whoever else was alerted as a result?"

Otacon's mind started forward again and again, each time hitting a broad, blank wall, and stumbling back. "He..was just there."

*Footsteps on grating, a fleeting measured echo. A heedless call. "What do you want?"*

"Appeared from nowhere, did he?" Esau inquired without condescension. "Just stepped out of the air and walked right up to you? Explained who he was and why he was there? How he had just happened to stumble on you?"

*Strong arms around him. The scent of him, sleep and woodsmoke, and the scent of morning.* "They call that the theory"

*trust me*

"So what?" Hal said, voice rising as though woken, back pulling straight as though the catch of a spring had been released. "So he's told me things that aren't true, or whatever you want me to believe. What's your point?"

Esau's smile was bloodless.

"Only that he's using you."

Otacon's neck hurt from craning upwards to keep the boy's eyes. "I don't care."

"You would, if you knew what he was using you *for*." Esau's mouth was stained with sympathy. "To hurt himself. You're a tool of masochism. A barely more than self-imposed limit to the glory that he so terribly fears. He hopes to escape fate by taking you on as an inversion of the uses he has put people for every moment of his life; a mechanism to *keep* him from achieving what he truly desires. Of course, that's not all. You're using him, too."

"I love him."

A sad smile, stained at the edges and unsurprised, everything he said a smooth step in a dance long prechoreographed. "And that's all you've ever wanted. Isn't it? Some beautiful broken thing to piece back together. To be needed. But who would ever need *you*?"

The rime of scab on his smile broke and reformed and broke again, each stage a new metamorphosis in the unfaithful light.

"It takes one look to know you've always been drawn to them, the little lost puppies no one else could love. All he had to do was play the brave, suffering victim, and you would fall all over yourself to provide him with whatever he needed."

He shook his head ruefully but the smile never moved.

"I was a fool to think he would be blackmailing or threatening you. This is much more efficient."

Hal's blood ran thin and cold as the air.

"No," he managed around the pain rising to block his throat, "You're wrong."

The boy only smiled.

"Am I?"

Sinuuous, like the motion of slipping on wet, mossy rock at the edge of a gorge, he slid down to sit with his back to the crate, arms resting on his knees, a loose lotus.

He could melt away and the smile would still remain, hideous red teeth but how much was real and how much shadow even at this range it was impossible to tell, even with their knees nearly touching, and fervently Otacon prayed to the lost deity of the desperate that didn't happen because god he didn't want to be alone with that smile.

The ropes pulled tight and the walls pulled close to leave an impression on the skin. Shaped him by the confines like a bonsai tree.

"Explain to me," Esau said gently, "how I am wrong."

Nothing in Otacon's mind could break the surface tension of words.

Esau sighed. His smile closed like a poppy turning away from the sun.

"If it was only that, we wouldn't be having these problems. He would use you for his purposes, and kill you when he was done." An eyebrow twitched wryly. "Of course, that last part holds true. After all, it was what he was made for. You can't expect that would have changed. But his purposes have become...corrupt."

*I know you'd never hurt*

"He's fallen into the worst trap someone in our line of work can."

"Caring about someone?" Otacon said, wadding the words into balls of air and spitting them through his teeth.

The smile was gone from the plush Byzantine mouth, and the brows were dark collisseum arches letting scraps of skittish light into pits of skulking sympathy.

"Believing his own lies."

Quietly, Hal said, "You really don't understand at all, do you."

"I do," Esau said, inexorable as the fine powder that flowed above an avalanche. "I think you do, too. You've asked yourself, over and over, what you could possibly have done to deserve him. The answer you found, the only answer there could be, was 'nothing.' An effect with no cause. Your mind wouldn't leave it be. But you resolved to ignore it."

Thoughtfulness draped over the boy's eyes.

"Perhaps it would even have worked, for a time. However, safety and sympathy can only ensure so much, for so long. Every day with him – and there were so few – you must have wondered whether this perfect instant was the last. How many more you would have before he grew bored and threw you away. Or, worse, stayed, pity leeching into and corroding everything you loved about him. The only one who would hate it more than you would be him, and soon the contempt would sharpen and redirect, and...well. Let it only be said that it would go badly for you."

He pulled his knees up, arms settling comfortably over the top. He brushed the hair out of his eyes.

"You'll go on loving him, and he'll despise you for it. He was never meant to be sacrificed *for*."

The boy's voice wore clear and without force, the way water dug a canyon over eons.

"I'm sorry I don't have some kind of epic battle to give you, after you've come so far. There's no one to triumph over. You're fighting a delusion."

Esau rocked forward to a distance forgivable for close friends. There was a smear of blood on the back of his hand, glinting like a sly wink when it slipped into the light.

"You're Pygmalion – you've fallen in love with the shape you've created from acquiescent marble. But there's no such thing as miracles."

There was sedate sorrow beneath the sepulchral brows. He dictated with light-fingered grace, puncturing without pressure.

Otacon had never realized the special helplessness that came with being immobilized. Restless, useless logic insisted that it didn't matter; there was nothing he could have done in any case, a scrawny engineer against a man no doubt trained as a killer from the day he was born. The lack of physical autonomy was grating, terrifying. He couldn't so much as shrug a shoulder, or wipe the dust from his watering eyes. There was no where to retreat, no give to push the boy away.

He thought of a statue, immobile eyes siphoning through the dust and stone flakes of its own emergence, feeling the chisel bite and hearing the workman's muttered plans as he focused on each limb in turn, with nothing to do but watch.

"So this is how you must have felt," Otacon said softly.

It was always when you weren't trying.

Esau looked at him as though a routine calculation in his programming had found the sum of two primes to be *Ambiguity*.

The smile solidified into a seam in a jointless carapace.

It fell away.

God, he was young.

The boy rocked back, molding against the crate, eyes shuttering.

"Don't make this harder," he said, and it was amazing how different the same voice could sound, with all the layers of affectation scraped away, leaving it raw as scalded skin. "It won't help."

"You don't want to do this," Otacon realized, hope flavoring the words with exotic spice that woke his sluggish bloodstream.

The boy's eyes opened slowly, as if the light were bright enough to adjust to. The potential energy coiled in his body released in a long breath.

"No more games," he said, the incipient sadism stripped from his voice, no longer pushing or wheedling. "Let's talk like free men."

Hal's eyes flicked over his shoulder. He couldn't quite bend enough to see his own hands.

"I'll try," he said, wryly.

Esau nodded. "That's all I can ask."

Ever one to press a point, Otacon said, "Why bother telling me all this if I'm just gonna die?"

"Because I don't believe anyone should die alone."

The thin mask of reason had peeled off to reveal a sedate sanity more horrible than the gibbering madness Hal had expected.

It was with a sort of kindness that he said, "You don't have to do it, you know."

"Of course I do," the boy answered by rote. "Anyway, it's better than the alternative."

"Which is?"

"Letting him."

Absurdity struck Otacon a glancing blow between the eyes. "Who?"

The boy smiled without affectation or humor.

"No." Hal could have laughed, if enough air would fit into his lungs. "You're crazy if you think Adam-"

"Of course not," Esau interrupted deftly, arresting his momentum. "The man I spoke to wouldn't have hurt you for the world."

The corner of his mouth tightened wryly, red as if he had bitten in to a fresh pomegranate.

"Believe me, I offered."

He settled back.

"The problem is this:

"People change.

"As I said before, he has been the man you know for at most a space of days. He's been who they, and I, know for the rest of his life. The charade would fall apart with or without our interference, eventually. Together you can fool each other with an admirable success rate, though it would decay as time went on. Separate, it already starts to crumble. His nature is rejecting the transplant."

Esau set his hands on his knees in the iconic mountaintop yogi pose, leaned forward into intimate space where Hal could smell the blood on his breath and catch instants of his blunted tongue. His voice was soft and ruthless. *This will only hurt for a minute.*

"It's the details that are hardest to keep track of. I talked to him for quite a while. Well. You would know that. You were waiting."

It was hard to remember ever having been anywhere but here, with rope around his ankles and the wall at his back.

"He never so much as asked where you were."

Esau rolled his shoulders, slowly, as though trying to resettle a heavy yoke.

"You see? He's trying, yes, but the part of his mind that has kept him alive this long never stops taking weights and measures, and it sees you the same way it's seen a thousand like you;

"Strategically negligible."

The light flickered.

"What do you want from me?" Otacon asked, because he was tired of being too afraid to.

Esau's face was smooth and unlined. "I want your help."

Hal hadn't known that he could bark a laugh like that. "You're crazy."



"Not me." His thin fingers hung still like roots trailing beneath the waters of a mangrove swamp. "I want you to help him."

There was no point to saying it. He already knew the answer. "Then tell me what I have to do."

"Finish your work. Help us bring him back."

Otacon's eyes eclipsed. "You can't be serious."

"They say if you love someone, you have to let him go."

"Not if it's to go be a- a prisoner!"

The boy's smile was wan and tired. "A shark can't leave the ocean. Would you call it caged?"

"If that's what it wanted."

"That's just it." Esau's dark-crowned head lowered like a mourner's. "It's not what he wants. It's only the novelty of a different kind of confinement. It will be bloody, when it breaks."

"I don't care," Otacon said, defiance fitting firmly between his teeth. "It's better than sending him back, after what they did to him."

In Otacon's mind hesitation and intuition collided, and the spark produced emitted as a lower, "What they did to you."

"Don't you get it?" The softness of the boy's voice had not been noticeable until it raised and serrated. The small space held it harsh and tight. Somewhere, there was a dry scurrying, a rat's rest denied. "You'll ruin him. You'll leech away everything that makes him glorious, just by being who you are. All of his defenses were keyed to strength. You... *you* had to be different. There was never any call to prepare for the weak and the ordinary, let alone the means. He'd never had extended exposure to a meek, fawning fool. Even they never predicted that this would be the way to turn him against himself. After everything he has survived, he's mutilating himself for you."

"And you could do better?" Hal challenged, against the acid pouring down his throat.

*has to be some mistake*

"Yes." The anger faded, leaving calm and inexorable sorrow that looked older than the face it marked. Tracks of rain through soot. "They are the only ones who can contain him."

The light made the blood on his shirt front black. The stain looked a little like a bear on its hind legs, a delirious part of Hal's mind noted imbecily.

"Even this time must have been enough to teach you that he is a very dangerous man."

"It doesn't matter," Otacon said, refusing to let himself think. "Everyone can make their own mistakes."

Esau leaned forward, resting his head on his fist, liquid eyes solicitous.

"Tell me," he suggested, without force or rancor. "That Metal Gear you made."

Otacon blinked, taken aback. "REX? What about her?"

"Would you let just anyone pilot it?"

"It's not my choice-"

"Yes, but you know the man whose choice it is. You wouldn't have made it if you didn't trust the man directing it."

That much was true. There was only so much room for free will in a defense contract, but no one was naive enough to drop a weapon like REX into the hands of an unknown quantity. Everyone knew Big Boss, the hero. Hal had been proud to participate, in a small way, in something of that heroism.

Esau's face conspired to convey curiosity. "If REX were to operate without a pilot, what would happen?" he asked, like Socrates trying to distract himself from the dregs in his teacup.

"It wouldn't work," Otacon said immediately, months of blueprints, calculations, and diagrams leaping to the forefront of his mind. "With nobody at the controls she'd just stand still, and even if you

found a way to get her moving she wouldn't be able to do much of anything but blunder into walls..."

Esau was smiling at him, empty and resigned.

"You're wrong," Otacon said weakly.

"They're never wrong." His smile was bloodless. "It's the worst part of the job."

His shadow settled back, the casual loop of his arm making an unbroken circuit.

"They say it takes a monster to fight a monster. It takes more to cage one. There must be rules, and laws, and ways of making them bind. You may think it brutal."

His smile was grim.

"You haven't seen the alternative."

The sound of the Patriot agent's foot scraping the dust from the floor carried faint resonance of the wail of a thin blade against tile.

"You know that he is not entirely sane."

Anger flared, a clean relief. "That's because they made him-"

"Does it matter?" Esau's voice cut through his without being raised. "Yes, they are the ones who made him what he is. I can understand your anger."

He showed red-streaked teeth.

"I can even share it.

"That doesn't change reality."

"If you know him so well," Otacon rallied desperately, "then let him make his own decision."

The composition of Esau's expression was smooth, unwavering.

"That would be logical, wouldn't it? A truly perfect creation could always be relied on to return of its own will, no matter the outside circumstances. However..."

His shoulders sank with his breath, the surfacing of long lament.

"ADAM is an exquisite weapon, but one with a fatal weakness. Not in the design, but the execution. Sometime during the forging, just for an instant, they took their eyes away. The last drop of...humanity...was not completely purged."

Esau looked up and smiled like a tiger glimpsed between stalks of long Serengeti grass.

"But don't worry. They never make the same mistake twice."

Otacon said, "I don't believe you."

"Oh?" An eyebrow arched above a foundation of shadow, a swathe across the field of incongruous prettiness. "Why not?"

Hal's chin jutted upwards, and he spoke above the white noise of fear. "You haven't killed me yet."

Esau looked puzzled.

His expression reformed back into the serenity of a sniper waiting for the target to wander into the cruciform of his or her sights.

"There's a reason for that," he said, with a barely tangible note of irritation.

He smoothed his tone as though stroking the fur of an irate housecat.

"We need you to be the messenger. The destruction of the jamming device was not part of the plan."

"You need me," Hal said.

Esau's fingers opened as though flicking away drops of water.

"Don't be absurd. A journey of a hundred miles begins with a single step, eh? That's about as far as we'd need to cover, through irradiated territory. This entire area has been long abandoned to the wolves. There is the possibility that he could kill me in the process, leaving himself to face it all

alone. I wouldn't put it past him. There are...many things I would not put past him. If that happens, our masters will consider it proof he is irredeemable. He will be found, and he will be killed."

His voice held regret without rancor.

"Here is what you can do. I'll cut you free. You can come with me, and see him one more time. Open the channel that I tell you. Say goodbye."

The matte finish of the pistol in Esau's holster caught the light. (A snub nose, Otacon remembered, as though it had been bashed against a wall again and again.)

"And then you'll kill me," Hal finished.

"Yes."

The regret did not impart hesitation.

In the silence, Esau's eyes dropped. Long fingers sketched curved, abstract patterns on the floorboards.

"It's really too bad," he said softly.

Hal's only option would be to agree.

"You could have had a good life, if they had found you first. Him as well. They reward talent in all its forms. How much easier it all could have been, if you'd been safely and happily ensconced in their labs, hearing a word now and then – you could hardly help it - of the greatest agent in their ranks. The one who so loves his work."

Cool wind crept through the gaps in the walls, smelling of night.

Otacon said, "It wouldn't have been enough."

"They would have given you anything you could want."

The words were earnest and fell smoothly, as though spoken many times.

Hal felt steel drip down his spine

"But I couldn't have him."

The boy's eyes were mossy redwood and stark, unvarnished pity.

"He was never yours."

Fresh pain burned tracks down the inside of Otacon's throat.

Esau sighed, and patted Hal's knee with battered affection.

"You're not a stupid man. You know the viciousness that tries to hide in him. Everything has its dark in proportion, and he burns so very brightly, our ADAM. It's enough to blind you, for now. How long can you ignore how beautiful he is when he happens to be causing someone pain? Until you realize that the exultation on his face when he twists someone's arm just a little harder than he should is greater than than anything you see when he looks at you?"

*the sound of fine bones crushed under his bootheel, raw vicious joy twisting a stranger's face*

The force of the wall against his back.

"I'll deal with it," Hal said.

"Easy to say now, when death is near and real."

He drew his hand back, folded it in his lap.

"That's what he loves best. That precipice between life and death, in its purest, rawest form. The perfect power of holding someone there. When one man is lost, submerged entirely in the indomitable force of another's will. The reciprocity of flawless focus, every fiber down to the last and weakest concentrated on the other with all of its being like daisies turning to the sun, the irresistible compulsion, two beings becoming one magnificent, merciless symbiote, until one breaks..."

His breath was coming more quickly. A smile licked at his lips like flame at dry paper.

*ferocity seen from afar replaced up close by disbelief as he cleaned the blood from his hands*

Otacon's stomach twisted.

"That's not true," he said, as bile burned his throat.

Esau smiled into silence.

"Even if it was," Otacon said, strengthening his voice but all it did was slip out of the cracks in the walls into the endless night, "I wouldn't care."

Adamska was Adamska and had been always and would always be Adamska.

"Of course you do," Esau said. "It's the part of him you love the most."

Somewhere, a rat woke from rodent dreams.

Hal's mouth dropped open and found there was little to fill it.

"You're...you're insane," he managed.

"It's simple," Esau said, in the tone of a casual lecture. "The crueller his nature, the more flattering it is to be the only one who receives kindness. It makes you...special. Important. If only to him. But who else matters? You've found your center, someone worthy of blind love and devotion, and willing to accept yours."

His smile was kind.

"It's nothing to be ashamed of. Really, no one could blame you. I don't. Who could deny the thrill, not only of knowing the deadliest weapon the Patriots have ever produced, but being his only weak point?"

"He's more than a weapon," Hal said. His lips were dry. "I know that."

"You know only what he tells you," Esau said.

He smiled, openly, honestly.

"Wonderful, isn't it, just to be able to follow someone, and always believe in them to be right in every way that matters? You never would have known that was what you wanted, until you had it. Look how hard you fight to keep it. But there is one caveat that makes you so very easy to control."

He lifted a long finger up between them.

"I don't care what you do," Hal said. "I won't betray him."

Esau's finger bisected his smile. "Exactly."

Otacon couldn't tell if he was falling, or the rest of the world was rising. It was all a matter of perspective, always dizzying and sick-making.

Esau's voice was clear, clipped and measured like Clotho's threads.

"You are hurting him. Crippling him. In getting what you want, you hold him back from realizing his own purpose, the destiny he longs for. It's amazing, in its own way. You've made it possible for him to feel fear. And all because he is humoring you."

Cold light followed the shadow of hand, threw exaggerated gestures on the rotting walls.

"You've corrupted him, marred the purity of his purpose, to the point where he can't even see how badly he wants it back."

His eyes were soft and serious.

"He was created to lie, to hurt, and to kill. He does it well."

He paused, as though something had occurred to him, like a crow catching the scent of carrion on the wind through the eaves.

The long-fingered hand, white in the light, went to the revolver tucked into his waistband.

In the slow seconds of stylized motion (like ritual, or choreography half-practiced), Hal wondered what it was that had changed the boy's mind and made this the moment he would die.

Esau held the gun out flat between his hands.

"Look."

Silver, lovingly polished and cared for, ribbons of engraving running down the barrel. A beautiful weapon. More beautiful in Adamska's hand, where it belonged, thumb caressing the hilt as if in reassurance, reminding it that he was there.

"An automatic is better, in nearly every objective measure," Esau said. He stroked the top of the barrel. "Much less of a pain in the ass to reload, for one."

He glanced up at Otacon, gave him a twitch of his lips.

"It's another manifestation of the same weakness of his. A different form, apparent even those years ago. He is...sentimental. A lover of symbols, to his own detriment."

The gun turned over in his hands.

"The explosion that powers a bullet is only elements. Sulfur. Charcoal. Potassium nitrate. If the environment were different, it would reach in every direction, burn whoever happened to be nearby. But, with craft and artifice, it can be focused to one direction, to create a single, aimed strike. Destruction refined to precision. Once made, it can only be what it is. It can be dampened, lost, damaged. But it is still itself."

Otacon's mind rambled lists of processes to change it.

The boy stared down at the gun, as if memorizing its shape and patterns, taking it apart and putting it back together in his mind.

"They say," he said quietly, "to do something well, you must have an interest. To be an artist, you must have love. Some sects believe that God is in devotion to your craft. Like you."

He was babbling. Just saying anything. Not caring whether or not it made sense. He must be.

The boy glanced up, let a wisp of a true smile slip free.

"I've seen your REX, in pictures. She's beautiful."

No one else had ever called her that

(but for the look on Adamska's face, and his hand pressed against the windowglass)

Esau lifted the revolver, feeling the weight in his hand, letting it gleam and shine with the distant cousins of will o' the wisps.

"No one could make something like that unless his heart was one of the gears. It's plain to see. Funny, in a way, what perfect opposites you are. You convert inert metal to life and energy, a moving creature. He strips men down to their barest components, or less.

"He is an artist of pain."

His eyes were leveled at Hal's, dark as the underside of the earth's crust, or the ground beneath a stone a boy had overturned to see the many-legged things writhe.

"It's a gift no one can take from him."

Esau's fingers tapped a light toccata on the gun's barrel.

As though remembering Otacon was there, his eyes flicked up.

"You're a scientist, first and foremost, correct? No, don't worry, that's not the kind of question you have to answer. This isn't an interrogation."

The idea caused him faint amusement.

"What that means," Esau said, drawing his knees up and draping his arms over them, letting the revolver dangle by the trigger guard, "is that you prize logic. In the end, it all comes down to numbers. You align those numbers according to rules, as it must be. Chaos has its romantic appeals, but you know the virtues of order. You believe in it."

The nose of the revolver dipped and surged, throwing flashes of pale light like waves beneath an iron moon.

"That's all they are, our masters. No great evil. Just order out of chaos. They are the only ones

who can control what they have created. They will give him aim and purpose, where there would only be fruitless destruction.

"Beginning, of course," he added, as an afterthought, "with you."

Esau shrugged, smooth and fluid.

"Entropy is a law of matter. Something is always lost."

Matter is neither created nor destroyed.

"It's what he wants, really."

He was very young, up close. You could see where all the lines weren't.

Hal's mouth worked around air that tasted of dust.

"You're saying I should...should betray him for his own good?"

It was meant to come out dripping with scorn. His voice was dry and run with infinitesimal cracks, a flat waste land ending in a whimper.

Esau's brow drew up as if by a hook. "Betrayal? No, no. I wouldn't waste my time trying to convince you to do that. You misunderstand."

And his eyes were level as rock shelves veined with soot-stained malachite.

"This isn't a tragedy. It's coming home."

Hal couldn't get hold of his thoughts. There was a way out of this. There had to be. Something horribly obvious, just within reach, and if he could just hold onto it all of this would be over, and it was right there for him to find, but whenever he managed to reach past thoughts of Adamska all he could find was the steadily ticking clock of how long ago he should have been dead.

"This is insane," Hal said, flashes of reason hitting him like walking through equal stripes of shadow and sunlight, there and gone and there again before his eyes could adjust. "All this, just for one kid? He can't be worth that much to them."

"Who am I to say? Mission objectives aren't mine to judge. But you're taking the short-sighted view. The benefit of having him back under proper control is only one aspect of the whole picture."

Esau flipped the revolver up, catching the barrel between his wrists, and gazed meditatively down it.

"Tell me," he said abruptly. "Are you ready to handle the consequences of letting him off the leash?"

Hal stared at him. "The what?"

"Consequences," the boy said crisply. "Results. The equal and opposite reaction to the penultimate action. Namely, the fallout."

"Like an atomic bomb?" Hal said, rising up onto his knees, or trying to. His balance wasn't that good. "Don't you think you're overdoing it a little? For god's sake, he's not a wea-"

Hal let his voice die a quiet death.

Esau smiled.

"Now you're beginning to get it."

Hal's head jerked upwards as he clutched for the fog and grabbed what mattered like a handful of needles.

"You think I'm willing to let him be their prisoner."

Esau regarded him sadly, soft mouth unbending.

"I think you're not willing to keep him yours."

He linked his thumbs, let the gun swing vertical circles around them.

"Denial is a finite resource, just like anything else. You've been drawing hard on yours lately. I think you're just about tapped."

"So tell me this."

The gun stopped, trapped between his streaked and mottled hands.

"Leave aside you likely you think it he's changed. No matter the odds he'll take matters into his own hands, run free to do whatever he likes, whenever he likes, to whoever he likes. Now we speak in sinless maybes. The operative word for us is 'if'. So forget that for now, and tell me this.

"Could you stop him?"

He couldn't know.

Hal felt every difference in the wall at his back. Not concrete but ancient wood. Not white but the dun color of time and sun and dust. Not cold with impact but warm where he pressed against it.

Esau watched and waited, young, sane, and without malice.

The floorboards bore rat's tracks in the dust.

Hal said, softly, "No."

"They can," Esau said, no louder. "Better. They can redirect it. Give him what he needs, taken from those who deserve it."

"And who judges that?" Somewhere he'd almost found some strength.

The revolver spun.

"*Quis custodiet ipsos custodes*. The same as ever. Them."

The apex of the gun's silver arch flashed, rhythmic nonsense lighthouse code.

"They can give him everything he wants. Everything he is afraid to want, but cannot live without. Out of stubbornness and fear, he would give it up for you. Are you worth it?"

Otacon thought of stars.

"There's only one more question I need to ask you," Esau said, lilting like a indulgent lamia's lullaby. "Just one more thing. Tell me."

The revolver was arrested by his left hand.

Esau leaned forward, held it out of the way, resting his chin on his right fist, eyes serene and bioluminescent with curiosity.

"How do you want to die?"

"I don't," Otacon said immediately.

The boy laughed, genuine amusement spinning lines by his eyes like a tiny, quick-working spider. "That's what everyone says."

He began to spin the revolver around his finger, an indifferent planet focused on his own generated gravity.

It was the motion that told the most. You wouldn't think there'd be many ways to do it, and yet the difference couldn't be more glaring. It was nothing like the easy, careless rapidity of his when he made it dance, whirling the pivot point of kinetic vivacity before flowing the energy back into its resting place in his hands. Storing it away at his side, a smooth seamless part of him, and when he touched Hal's shoulder his fingers were cool and carried the scent of metal.

*Adamska. Adamska.*

"What I mean is this. I am going to kill you."

*Stop saying that.*

Otacon refused to look away.

"That is not to say that you have no choice."

Esau returned the favor.

"You can help us, and have the hero's death you've always wanted. A sacrifice for your friends and your love. In return, unless they strike first themselves, Big Boss and his cohorts will not be

harmful. I give you my word."

"What's that worth?" Otacon said, weighing the cost of a lie.

Esau smiled. "Nothing at all. But it's much better, isn't it?"

The pale light made a ghost game of his features. The revolver swung shadow like a clock's second hand.

"It will be an honorable execution. ADAM will see that your last action was to return him to the fold, and he will, more or less willingly, come home, to be greeted like the beloved prodigal son he is. He won't fight. He won't administer the bite to the master's hand that proves him a lost cause."

"He'll hate me," Hal said. The bindings and position had stopped his blood and turned him numb. *holding tight and the look in permafrost eyes, traitor, traitor*

"For a time," Esau acknowledged freely. "Youth and impetuosity, a high temper. Once he has remembered who he is, he will remember you fondly."

The centrifugal force of his finger stilled, leaving the revolver waving in lazy arcs. His eyes never moved from Hal's.

"You can help him."

The shadow of the revolver rocked against the wall.

"Or," he said, a sepulcher of a syllable, "you can do nothing, and die a victim. No doubt he will seek revenge. Flattering, isn't it, that he'd kill for you? He won't starve for opportunity. Once he kills me, it's only a matter of time before they find and kill him in his turn."

Fiercely, Hal shook his head. All wrong. He had to think. "Just kill him, after all this? They wouldn't..."

"They would," Esau corrected, gently. "Everything has to end sometime. I am the last effort, in case he hasn't already been irreparably damaged. They cover all odds, no matter how low. The absolute objective is that the threat he represents be neutralized; return is preferable. The other recourse is termination. For now until he is returned, he is living on borrowed time. Whether it runs out...Well. That's entirely up to you."

The only words that would consign themselves to be spoken were, "I can't..."

Ruefully, Esau shook his head. "Honestly, what did you think was going to happen?"

He paused, eyes searching Otacon's face. His expression smoothed and narrowed. He leaned forward, and became an old friend imparting good, if difficult and unwelcome, advice.

"If you saw a lion in a cage, you would feel sorry for it, wouldn't you? Yes, you're the type. No one likes to see a magnificent creature confined. You would want to free it, but after a lifetime of captivity, direction, deliberate care, release into the wilds that might have been its own would only be consignment to a slow death.

"If you cared enough for it, you would take it home. In time, it might come to care for you as well, even as its fangs grow dull and its coat loses luster. What could your meager means provide? You can hardly care for yourself, and you need so little. Not the hunt and the rich hot blood it desires, though it may not know them by name. For a while it may subsist on what dessicated morsels you can scavenge. It may lick your hand as it suffers and dwindles, sapped dry, old before its time. And you will look at this pathetic, starved creature, eyes milky with insipid light, and you will wonder if the magnificence in your memory was only a fever dream."

He would be immune to time. The ferocity in his eyes would never pale.

Esau's eyes were opaque as chips of volcanic glass.

"A beast can only deny its nature so long. Some hungers can't be staved off. Eventually, the day comes."



The soft curves of his face were kind and apologetic.

"He'll tear you to bloody rags."

*the slick feel of blood on the pad of his thumb, wiping off easy, not yet set, leaving only a faint tint to feverish skin*

The boy's voice went on. He wasn't the sort to leave a story unfinished.

"Then, with the weak link broken, there will be nothing to hold him back. He'll do as he pleases, having been starved for so long. By the time the handlers corner him – and they will – his purpose will have become so twisted and tangled that the only kind thing to do will be to put him down."

Otacon said, "He's not an animal."

Esau's smile was wistful, a spark of buried anger visible in his eyes like the purple shadow in the heart of a candleflame. "Aren't we all?"

As soon as it had solidified his expression ran and reformed. He leaned forward, examining, brows meeting in an intent ridge.

Though he had little choice, Otacon held his ground. He had nothing to hide.

"No," Esau said finally, slowly, as though each word were being newly invented as he spoke it. "You don't think that way, do you? You take in the convenient lies the world runs on and believe them. Your check is in the mail. The server is robust. People are, on the whole, good at heart."

The boy's head tilted.

"How do you stay alive?"

It was the genuine curiosity that made Hal's fear crumble.

"What did they do to you?" Otacon said, quietly.

The boy smiled, soft and radiant. "Made me who I am. The same as they did to him, and the same as your life did to you. We're all products of an equation. Control the variables, and you control the results. Once you understand that, there's nothing you can't know."

So that was how they thought.

A neat, interlocking matrix. Incredibly complex, but anything can be broken down and made simple if you don't mind what else breaks. Every aspect measured and set in place, predetermined as the pattern of a Persian rug, every step a plain and logical progression from the one before. Madness just another quantity, like the square root of negative one. His own column terminated into clean, blank, black boxes.

Hal said, "Then you already know what I'm going to choose."

Esau's eyes were reflective and free of judgment as cool water in a deep well. "You're going to choose to save him."

Breathing seemed to take a long time. Esau was patient, force in abeyance, ready and at ease. The light and dark of him was striking, vanishing without diminishment into a half-man of shadow, as though ink had been spilled on one side of a perfect dividing line. The air was thin, and tasted of dust.

With a cat's fastidious gesture, Esau wiped blood from the corner of his mouth.

It was easy, now.

Hal said, "You're right."

# chapter 63

## Stray by Dahne

*Quite an experience to live in fear, isn't it? That is what it is to be a slave.*

-Blade Runner

*A man can change the nature of fear.*

Time was a chain of interlinked eternities.

Track it by the movement of the moon, nothing but a sliver of clipped silver nail. It had to end.

Adamska would kill him.

*How?*

He would tear open his ribcage and stomp his beating heart to jelly.

*That's not what I meant.*

He would crack his skull against the cliffs and rip out his liver for the vultures to shred between them.

*Bound and in darkness, unarmed, without the use of your arms or legs.*

He would shatter his-

*You are helpless, boy.*

It was a different kind of anger.

The cancer had turned in on itself and been crushed under its own gravity, become something hard and cold that shone in the center of the black space.

Stars picked uselessly at the shadows and did nothing to penetrate the coal darkness where the simpering *mandavoshka* had vanished. Adamska's eyes burned from the effort to pierce it through will alone. The enemy's footprints were clear as carved marble. Stretched to its limit, the lead line would almost permit Adamska's knees to obliterate them. The strong rope hardly strained at a lunge of his full weight, the wrenching at his shoulders hardly a distraction.

*You're a tied dog, then? Go on, try chewing through it.*

The fibers were thick and tough. A dog might have done it.

*Or you could try acting like a man.*

He would garrote him with his own sinew. If he had so much as touched-

*You're wasting time. How long do you expect him to be gone?*

Until the pressure of eternity split Adamska's skull.

*This is an advantage, you fool.*

It didn't matter. Advantages, drawbacks, slipped nooses and owed favors. Somewhere, his enemy was spilling the blood of the man he should have protected.

*Your enemy is gone.*

He knew where, in intent if not precise location.

The spy would die screaming at Adamska's feet.

*This time is a gift. Use it.*

The time was being put to full use. The seconds were rancid with a red patina, sickly with the vivid purples of fresh bruise cavorting across skin that was never earmarked for a scarman's laboratory. Hal wasn't made for this. He'd never been trained in how to take it for as long as it took, until help came, or, like now, when no help was coming, until death came instead.

When Adamska rose to his knees to heave himself forward again the knowledge took him like a

hand to the scruff of the neck.

*That is what the enemy wants.*

Esau had thought of this, planned this, smiling that fucking smile that made Adamska's arms ache to smash it into a bloody gap and listen to him mumble for mercy around the broken stumps of his own teeth.

*You have been there. Your panic is his bliss.*

There would be no ecstasy of revenge. He was helpless.

Helpless to help him, worse than alone, tied like a dog, nothing he could do but wait and give the enemy what he wanted only let him live-

*Pull yourself together, boy. You wouldn't have brought him here if he wasn't expendable. On a mission, anyone can die.*

That was right.

Dust cloyed Adamska's mouth as he panted at the ground.

It was a fulfillment of a prophecy.

The Patriot catspaw might be the hand that held the gun, but Adamska would be the one to kill him.

Adamska was the one who had brought him here, just because he couldn't stand to let the man he loved out of his sight. Every second of pain Hal suffered could be traced to the moment Adamska decided he couldn't be without his strange insights, sudden enthusiasms, the small sounds he made when deeply kissed.

*Forget the liabilities. Find a weapon.*

He had nothing, nothing, nothing.

*Have your pride.*

"Do you remember what he looked like?" Adamska whispered to the shadows cast by weak moonlight and the hollows in the ground, kneeling at the end of his leash like a penitent. "It was a long time ago. I had him against a wall and told him I would tear out his heart. He didn't believe me. Just kept looking at me with those big eyes. He was so afraid he could hardly move. Just kept staring. On a whim I decided not to hurt him."

He made a choked noise, a retch or a laugh. He wanted to grind his face into the rock-flecked grit until it was nothing but clinging scraps and polished bone.

"Then I decided if I couldn't, no one could." Bitterness cloaked the surface of his voice. "How well that's gone."

*Focus, boy.*

There was no need to, the picture was already sharp. Blood and the knife, moonlight on the heavy serrated blade of the knife, long fingers held down splayed out against stone, the swing and the smile-

*Forget him.*

Adamska nearly sobbed a laugh. How the hell could he do that?

*There are ways. Remember them or you die.*

He would die here alone if he had to, if he could just break this fucking rope and *see* and *do something*, anything, Adamska could see him, covered in sweat of terror and agony and the shadow over him and Adamska wasn't there-

A sensation like a breath of impatience. *Remember them or you both die.*

That was right. There were ways, weren't there? Adamska's knees dug furrows in the cold dust, raising a cloud that he choked on until he spat. Give over as much of your mind to fear as you had to.

Leave the rest to work.

It was an effective method when you only had fear for one person.

*Somehow – a sardonic underthread of thought – I don't think that will be a problem.*

"What do you want from me?" Adamska whispered, sagged into a silhouette of surrender.

*Think, boy. What do you have?*

All weapons were taken from him. Everything was taken from him.

*Are you a puling insect or are you a man? He cannot win unless you lose. Think! Where are you, and what do you have?*

He couldn't waste time with damned stupid questions.

*Then stay here. Wallow in impotent self-pity while he tears your little friend apart. No need to worry about a premature end to the show. He's too effective a bargaining chip to let die so easily. He's only softening him up, now. Once the begging and screaming starts in earnest, the enemy will bring him here to let you watch. Let you try to keep from giving in as he thrashes and begs and cries out to you to make it end. That's what you would do, isn't it?*

The enemy would return, dragging a half limp and trembling prize.

Doubtless he would keep his word. Once Adamska gave in it would stop (blood and muffled screams and tears of pure pain running from eyes whose glass was stolen and shattered). Then they would kill him. They left no loose ends.

Adamska would kill them all, down to the last, for nothing but the sheer fucking principle. Exacted in a world without Hal to return to, revenge would hold no savor.

*Or you can be ready.*

The mountainside gaped emptily at pale stars. Scraping at the silence with his senses for cries of suffering, Adamska heard nothing but the wind scratching its back on the wall of stone and the rustle of wires swaying at its passage.

There was no way to hear the distant sound of fine, delicate bones snapping to mark the moment when the last fool's hope was broken and he knew and finally understood that no help was coming, the hope fading from his eyes at the shock of cruelty, and even as his screams were stifled all he was crying out was help me, I know you'll come, you've got to, make it stop, please, Adamska, *please-*

The keening pitch on the edge of hearing could have been a scream in the distance, muffled with expert care, or the wind whetting itself against the spikes and spires of the mountain's slope.

Adamska was a curve of corded muscle, bent into an arch with ropes girding his arms and ankles, taut like a lizard ready to shed its skin. Rocks studded the cold ground beneath his knees with hot points of pain.

There was one thing he could do.

If the gain was greater than the cost, the choice was already made. The law.

Whatever the cost.

Adamska gave the night his confession.

"I should have killed the Philosopher son of a bitch when I had the chance," he whispered. "I let him out of my sight."

*Yes. You were blind.* The timbre struck low resonances of satisfaction.

"I had him in my hand and I gave him mercy."

*Yes. You were crippled.*

"You're not real," he whispered, closing hot eyelids over cold eyes. "You're only me."

*Yes. You will listen.*

The ground had given up the last breath of day's residual warmth.

"Tell me."

*Find where you are. Everything can be used.*

Ocelot was tied to a wall beside a rock shelf that would have been waist high if he could stand. Above it arched a spiderweb of metal, placed by his own hands. The insipid moon was enough to make the silver glimmer. Long and short, taut and draping, high and low. The place bore no relation to the thing it had been in the daylight. Their hope and means of getting home was now a testament to his failure.

*Find your weapon.*

Nothing but the knowledge that his captor was both paranoid and startlingly careless. While the restraints around his arms were secured with loving care and attention, Ocelot's legs were accorded a single loose loop.

Well. It was a place to start.

Refusing to think about what he was going to do afterwards, Ocelot began a regimen of concentrated wriggling. His earlier thrashing had served to loosen the binding somewhat. The fool had tied it too high, at the curve of the calf. A little coaxing worked it downward, increasing the amount of play to the point where Ocelot could, inch by inch, wrestle off his boots. The rope went with them, and he was free.

Standing was an exaltation that revealed how little he had done.

With leaps, lunges, and a willingness to take bruises for the greater good, he could wrestle his way onto the rock shelf, for what little good it would do him. Without the freedom to climb upwards among the weeping willow wires that flanked it, he could never reach the point where his leash was anchored.

The spreading duel-lobed tree encompassed his world, draping vines cut through with limbs and roots splayed straight as a spear. Trust Hal to make a creation born of scavenged practicality beautiful.

He was not dead yet. Ocelot grasped the knowledge like a hammer.

The dark shone down on him. Tattered clouds touched the cold rind of moon. Jagged ground made itself known to the soles of his feet. Cramped muscles luxuriated in the burn of restored range of motion.

He was anchored to the center. It would all come back to him. He would be ready.

"Find what the enemy wants," Ocelot said softly, running his tongue along the abraded texture of the words, "and do the opposite."

Steps made little sound as they drew the loom of the cliffside close. He pressed his face against the wire-riven wall like a lover at rest.

There are only two steps.

Find your weapon.

Draw.

# chapter 64

## Stray by Dahne

*Wee, sleekit, cow'rin', tim'rous beastie,  
O what a panic's in thy breastie!  
Thou need na start awa sae hasty,  
Wi' bickerin' brattle  
I wad be laith to rin an' chase thee  
Wi' murd'rin' pattle  
I'm truly sorry man's dominion  
Has broken Nature's social union,  
An' justifies that ill opinion  
Which makes thee startle  
At me, thy poor earth-born companion,  
An' fellow-mortal!*

-Robert Burns, *To a Mouse*

*A weapon can change the nature of a man.*

From a raven's eye the fortress was another kind of beast, fallen to its knees and lowing choired human voices into unbroken snow. Closer, there were muddy trails etched through the purity like an albino's veins, closer still the men who had broken them, but that took other eyes to see. These were only passing.

Spread out below was a treasure trove of rare minds. Perhaps Mantis had been drawn to it like twisted needle to a sprawling martial lodestone. So many to choose from, dancing in his second sight like motes of dust in a sunbeam. Individuals drifted in and out and across and over the core where they all converged to make the mind of the place itself, the unit, the luminous lustrous monolith that was all of them and more. A giant of light with component pilot sparks tracing their orbits around it, adjusting it, affecting it.

The phrase *Lilliputian hitcher* occurred to Mantis.

It was all so lovely to watch from here, attached to nothing and no one, his own body resting heedless in a deep torpor, safe in the embrace of the cold walls. Out of sight. Sufficient consciousness remained behind to remind it to breathe. Stupid thing could hardly do anything on its own.

This was work that took little power. It took a light touch, well suited to Mantis's skeletal fingers.

A touch of suggestion and the raven wheeled, the perfect, mobile vantage point.

Suspended above, he wove his consciousness into fine, thin threads, a gossamer net to drift down on the fortress. The moment of contact ignited a sensation equivalent to the quickening of pulse. Dozens of sparks of thought touched the fibers of his web. Here the blue swallowsong melody of patience, there the low throbbing scent of anxiety, or the delicate chlorophyll in the spreading tendrils of a young soldier's frail anticipation. Like a network of neural branchings was the mind of Mantis, spread out across the spaces between them, collecting, connecting, impulse, sensation, whim, the minute pulses and exotic detritus of life.

A certain nexus caught his attention, vibrations thrumming to him like violin strings touched by a

blind man in the dark.

Mantis slipped from the bird's mind, gently, leaving a memory of a nice, ripe caribou carcass as a token of appreciation. Raven would be angry were the psychic to mistreat his friends, and an irate shaman blocked off so many interesting venues. The Inuit was one of the few whose mind contained things Mantis was normally utterly unaware of, and one of the fewer who could deny entry when he so wished. It amused Mantis to no end that the shaman was more defensive about his namesakes' privacy than his own. A rare one.

Mantis let the currents carry him down.

---

"Still nothing," Grey Fox said to the sound of the opening door.

The shape in the space where cooler air leaked into the room said, "How did you know I was gonna ask?"

Fox sighed and spun away from the glow of the screen. "Because, sir, you have been asking every half hour since they disappeared, and the answer has been the same every time. They're gone."

Big Boss gave him an appraising look, unashamed. He leaned one arm against the doorframe. "Why are you still keeping watch?"

"Because 'gone' can mean a lot of things." Fox tapped a key, and one monitor screen cycled through the views of the security cameras on B1.

"You don't think they're dead."

"They could be." Fox quoted the litany that had been running through his head for the past hours, keeping him company. "Or captured, or down somewhere the signal can't break through, or they've cut and run, or turned traitor. They could be stalked by an enemy who can track them by it, and found some way to disable it completely. That's supposed to be impossible, but if anyone could do it, it would be Otacon. There could be an electrical storm. The Russian military could have developed something that can block Codec transmissions and be using it to cover some secret project. Something could have drained the damned batteries."

Big Boss's tone had as much inflection as a block of granite. "You don't believe they've turned traitor."

Fox rubbed at his eyes. "No. I don't."

*Ocelot was never that kind of man.*

It hung between them, a secret shared for all that it lay unspoken.

There was the sound of leather rustling as Big Boss shifted.

"I meant," he said, "why are *you* still keeping watch."

Fox's eyes lifted from the march of black and white images.

"I'm running the base's electronic security checks. All I can do for them is keep a channel open. The interference is gone now, for all the good that does us. The second they come back online, we'll have a location, pretty as anyone could ask for."

The "if" ran into the shadows, pinned and died there by a dagger glance from Big Boss's eye.

Fox hit a button to return the screens to the basic base overview. The display had begun to burn its way into the backs of his eyes.

Big Boss didn't ask questions. He waited, exuding the undemanding silence that called to confessions like the moon to a wolf.

"With all due respect, sir, you, on the other hand, have a siege to prepare for."

"Huh." Big Boss's face turned down and to the side. The band of the eyepatch cut through his hair like a black ribbon lying in frost. "I do."

He said it as he might the name of something he had found that he'd forgotten he'd ever been looking for.

His eye swiveled up, locked on.

"You find anything, let me know."

"I will," Fox said, and left out again the possibility that there was nothing to find.

---

Big Boss's mind was a fascination in its own right. Its tides and whorls, ebbs and flows, reefs and unexpected depths. No normal human being could so much as catch a hint of Mantis when he was merely...catching a ride, so to speak. It darkly delighted him that he never ceased to feel as though Big Boss could tell.

Big Boss was crossing hallways, stepping with the determination that telegraphed intent. What the intent was to do was never as clear. Like any competent martial artist; the force was evident, the target concealed.

The destination was a security post, aglow with monitors and occupied by two unstartled soldiers. Big Boss was aware of his reputation for appearing in unexpected places. He wasn't the kind to sit behind a desk and let somebody else make the rounds. Made the soles of his feet itch.

Besides, there were better places to go when he needed time to think.

"Get out of here," Big Boss said. "The rest of this shift's mine."

One of the perks of scaring the hell out of people was never having to say things twice.

John settled into the chair in front of the bank and screens and wondered how anybody ever got used to it. People like Volgin would. Maybe it was something you had to have gotten all your life.

Huh. Volgin. Hadn't thought of the poor dumb bastard in years.

He'd tried to do the same thing, hadn't he? Get a good foothold in the middle of nowhere and take on the world. John knew, without arrogance or, hell, even particular pride, that he might have been the only thing that kept that from happening. History repeats, they said. John got a weird mental image of a copy of himself sneaking through the fortress to find him and blow his own brains out.

It would've been a lot funnier if there hadn't been two people who fit that description as well as a person could.

John smirked to himself. They happened to be two of the very few people in the world he trusted absolutely. If history wanted to repeat, it was going to have to try a damn sight harder than that.

Monitors hummed. It was soothing, in a way. The idea of having every corner of the fortress watched, secure. Jack knew better than anyone that cameras could be avoided, or shot out, or chaffed, or, worse, could instill a false sense of security. He let himself forget it, for now.

As soon as the Patriots realized he'd slipped his leash, they would act. Let the dogcatchers pound at the door. They weren't getting at his family.

Hell, once it was clear they weren't going to be easy to squash, John might even be able to persuade Dead Cell to join up. Colonel Jackson had been an old friend, back before he'd formed the unit. It wasn't out of animosity that they hadn't spoken in a while. The two units had worked together a few times. Big Boss just happened to be busy elsewhere. Far, far elsewhere.

Damn. There wouldn't be any avoiding it this time. Ah, well. One dream was worth another.

A dream of a free world was worth almost anything.

Greyscale glow reflected off of John's eye as he thought of the dead man on the steel table and the blond boy God knows where and tried to decide if it was worth it.

If it wasn't, he would make it so.



Big Boss had decided that a long time ago.

This was no suicide mission. Jack had entertained the thought of going out in one, back before he learned that a blaze of glory couldn't keep a man warm for a day.

If it weren't for his sons, it might've been different. Something about the prospect of a person you were part of, not to mention directly responsible for, going on in the world after you were dead made the future more personal. It made the consequences of trying to speed up the process by getting yourself offed early harder to ignore.

People died. Dreams died. Sometimes one for the other, sometimes both at once. The old turned from substance to effect and memory and fed the new, and nothing was ever truly gone. Times changed. Either you changed with them, or you died, or you didn't. The third option was the least dramatic. It tended to get forgotten, except by the most unfailingly dramatic man John had ever known. He'd said as much, every few years, when the doubt and regret and memory built up like silt at the bottom of a river in Egypt.

That night, those long small hours where confessions bred like mosquitoes in the haze of a whiskey swamp. Him, well, he'd still preferred vodka – you could take the Russian out of Russia, but you couldn't take the vodka out of the Russian – but any flask in a storm. They'd been talking about...hell, who ever knew what started it? And then John had been off and rambling about those things that you nestle in your head and listen to the words of over and over again because you know you can't ever let yourself speak them, those kobold ideas that nestle in your guts and gnaw, and gnaw.

*The smirk and the gesture that never changed, like the bright blue eyes.*

*"Only start an unwinnable fight if you plan on winning."*

Big Boss planned to. Even if all of his aces in the hole had dropped out before the game had started, hell if he was going to fold.

He owed Adam's memory that much.

Regardless of whether or not it was still running around with one of his techs somewhere.

John prodded experimentally at the thought. He kept- damn it, he could admit it. That Ocelot had miraculously appeared and then headed straight for somebody who wasn't John should've been devastating. By all rights, Jack should have been sulking somewhere, half-drowned in whiskey and misery.

Instead, he felt kind of like laughing.

The world had stopped being weird and started being plain stupid.

Except that the kid and the tech were probably dead by now.

The thought sobered him as well as a cold shower.

It wouldn't be the first time he had sent somebody out to their death. Not the last, either. Just the first time it was somebody who was already dead.

Big Boss let his eye drift across the monitors. Black, white, grey. Empty halls or soldiers meant to be there. Men were all he had, but they were the best soldiers the world had to offer. He'd made sure of it. Maybe it was meant to be this way. Just them, against everything the Patriots had to throw. One last night to not go gently into. Winning and losing didn't matter anymore. Big Boss had long since lived past the point where he expected much from last chances, or last rites.

"Nothing to do but wait," Jack said to no one.

It happened a lot in war. He used to hate it. Now it was just another part of the bargain. Just another way the hours moved, shuffling and drifting and dozing between the rapids. Everybody had to rest.

The shadows the monitors cast were black, and white, and grey.

It took John too long to recognize that the shadow in the corner was a man. He chalked that up to the fact it wasn't breathing.

The man bore a sign. The sign bore two words.

---

So that was their trick. They'd hidden it in a place Mantis could not look, any more than he could gaze through a glass at the future. With it, the multiple shades undulating in Big Boss's mind united and resolved into a clear prism. Mantis caught the gleam of a facet never distant and followed the light.

---

A soldier learned a certain kind of multi-tasking. You couldn't always help where the other part of your mind was. You just kept the rest on business.

Soldiers filled the valley between buildings like evenly spaced ants, eyes fixed forward on the twin Snakes as they gave instructions for the upcoming battle. It could just as easily be done over Codec, but there was something to be said for seeing the man giving your orders face to face. Besides, it was damned cold out here. That made them pay more attention.

It wasn't what a traditionalist would call a vigil.

"All right!" Liquid was shouting after patrol routes had been assigned, pacing in front of the assembled ranks. Snake stood back a ways, silent. He left the dramatic coat-swishing to Liquid, who could swish a coat like he meant it.

Classically, this would be the time for the old "they can take our lives, but they can never take our freedom" speech. The Snakes had agreed on something more practical.

"Our position is heavily fortified," Liquid shouted. "A frontal assault by a superior force is a fool's errand, doomed to failure.

"Our enemies are not fools, gentlemen."

Someone near the front coughed pointedly.

"And ladies," he added.

His voice rose back to its former plateau.

"The best way to broach the defenses of a superior position is through single infiltration. Rest assured this is what they *will* do. We must be prepared."

Liquid looked back and nodded at Snake, who trudged to the hangar door that led back into the base.

The clang of fist against metal reverberated through the chill air.

"That," Liquid shouted, "is the sound of someone tapping against the wall to get your attention! If you must investigate it, send someone else around the other side!"

Snake pulled an object out of a pocket on his sneaking suit and tossed it to Liquid, who snatched it out of midair, held it at arm's length, and let it flutter to the ground like a glossy, shot mallard. The eyes of the assemblage followed.

"This is a pornographic magazine! They do not appear on the floor spontaneously! If you see one laying at the very edge of the area you are patrolling and it was not there before, ignore it, capture the intruder, then steal one from Octopus! His are better anyway!"

Liquid kicked the magazine out of the way and resumed pacing.

"If you find yourself feeling a- as if you are going to fall asleep, find someone to cover your shift while you take a fucking nap!

"If you see an object fly from nowhere, do not go to stand over it and stare slackjawed! Follow

the path to the source!"

A soldier raised a cautious hand.

"Yes!"

Above the balaclava dark brows knitted as he attempted to comprehend something foreign to his habitual thought process, like a fish trying to fit into a pair of high heels.

"What about... the vents?" the soldier pronounced laboriously.

"Yes!" Liquid called, pleased. "Good thinking! Some clever bastard has rigged the ventilation system with alarms. The instant someone tries that particular gambit, we will know."

He went on, outlining a variety of tricks and how to deal with them. Some were actually pretty clever. Snake wouldn't have thought of using a box for camouflage among supplies if he hadn't gotten the idea from...

Huh.

Must've been a movie or something.

"Well, that's that," Liquid said briskly to Snake, once he'd dismissed the rank and file back to boredom and ordinary decibel levels. "God help us if they send someone cleverer than a housecat."

Snake shrugged. "Eh, they're not so bad."

"No," Liquid agreed quietly, watched the white-clad shapes disappear into both buildings, "they're not."

The strange thing was that it didn't feel any different. Just preparing for a mission like any other. Just Liquid knowing weird things, like he always did. Once Snake could've sworn he'd overheard him having an in-depth conversation with somebody about Alaskan field mice.

You thought you knew a guy.

Snake pulled out a pack of cigarettes, shook one out. Offered the pack to Liquid, who held his hands up.

"Give yourself wrinkles and yellow teeth all you like. I plan on leaving a pretty corpse."

"Suit yourself."

Vulcan Raven had his rituals. They had theirs.

Snake watched smoke meander over the shapes of departing soldiers.

"You were wrong," he said, at length.

Liquid's eyes cut to him. He said nothing.

Snake exhaled smoke and vapor.

"The best way to bring down an enemy in a secure position," Snake elaborated, "is to plant a mole in his ranks."

"What are you saying?" Liquid said, carefully.

"I'm saying I don't blame you."

Liquid laughed. "Never did learn how to hold a grudge, did you?"

Snake didn't bother to reply. He already knew the answer. It could've had something to do with the times when they both weren't young anymore and the blood was adding up like rainfall in a barrel under the eaves, and Liquid was the one who made it all right to feel alive on the battlefield. It could've just been that times changed and sometimes if you were lucky times changed back, and a gun in the face was no reason to end a friendship. Let alone a brotherhood.

"If anyone inside these walls were a traitor, we'd be dead already."

Why Big Boss's voice sounded more like Snake's than Liquid's was a question that had driven more than one aspiring geneticist off the base. Good riddance to weak wills, Liquid called it.

Nobody had ever figured out how Big Boss could come out of nowhere like that. (Well, there

was Wolf, but all she did was toss her hair back and say, "He is Saladin" like it explained everything, and that didn't count.) Snake gave him a nod of respect, and watched as it was returned.

There was a recklessness burning in Liquid's blood, a strain of latent invincibility finally let free and itching to kick down the gates of Troy. Snake knew, because he felt it too. It was infectious. Rubbed off like soot in the process of proximity. It was the only thing that didn't fade in the blank times, when he was tired of blood and games and just wanted to hole up somewhere with a bottle of anything and not come up again.

He'd tried that, once. Just stomped off, rented a cabin in the middle of nowhere, and left the world behind to deal with its own fucking messes. He'd had two days of nice, self-contained, quiet misery until Liquid kicked the door in, tracked in snow and a flurry of cold air and flung himself down on the couch like a wet dog. Snake contemplated a whole regional plethora of variations on the classic get the fuck out and settled for informing him that it hadn't been locked anyway.

"That was for principle." Kicking off his boots. "I'll have what you're having."

He'd matched Snake shot for shot, until sometime in the long night Snake finally got around to asking why the hell he was there.

"Because," he'd answered, enunciation laborious, "if you're going to have survived half a dozen wars just to drown yourself in whiskey and self-pity, I am going to be here to laugh at you."

They fought like they hadn't since they were teenagers, an aimless all-out brawl full of knees and elbows that had them slamming each other into the floor and employing all the dirty tricks they'd learned over the years from Big Boss or each other. They lunged and swore and broke most of the furniture. The next morning, they went home.

Snake only fought when he had to. Liquid was exactly the same; he just had to all the time. He had something like a fierce idealism that never burned out, that Snake wouldn't have believed a person could keep up if he hadn't been beside him the whole time.

Snake knew some of that had rubbed off on him, just as he knew that some of his restraint had rubbed off on Liquid.

"Ah, Father," Liquid said pleasantly. "Decided to join us after all?"

Well. You couldn't tell if you didn't know him.

"I've been thinking," Big Boss said. A low eddy of breeze caught at the edge of his coat.

"Yes, you've been doing that for quite a long time, in these precious minutes while we still hold the element of surprise." There was an edge to Liquid's voice sharp as the edge on the wind, made up of equal parts impatience and barely bound exuberance. "I would have thought all your planning was done years ago."

Big Boss didn't so much as cock an eyebrow. "Two days isn't that long."

Liquid's bark of laughter startled a raven from the walls above. "There's no need to try to keep it from us, Father. You've been planning this for years. This entire fortress is proof enough."

His arm swept out, encompassing the grey stone that surrounded them.

"Trapdoors. Infrared tripwires hooked to explosives. Electrified floors. Doors that seal and vents that pump poison."

Big Boss gave him the look that meant he was waiting for him to get the point.

"Normal bases *don't have those*."

"You pulled strings to get Metal Gear built here," Snake pointed out calmly. He knew why Big Boss's plans weren't common knowledge – for one thing, Liquid would've wanted to jump the gun – but ignoring obvious truths itched at him like wool socks. "Must be a reason for wanting a thing like that on hand, not to mention the resources to make it."

"You old bastard," Liquid said with admiration. "This is what you've been waiting for."

Big Boss's stance was open, unshaken. "I hoped it wouldn't come to this."

Liquid stared hard, as though the face weren't the same one he saw in the mirror every day, plus some years and minus an eye.

He said, "You're lying."

"Liquid." Snake's hand came to rest on his twin's shoulder.

Some of the anger evaporated in the smoke of Liquid's breath.

"You don't need to lie," he said, and the edges of his voice were filed down. "We are with you, Father. To the end."

"Always have been," said Snake. He let himself smile a little, in the bright, sharp way Liquid did. "You don't have to keep up the old inscrutable bastard routine all the time."

The two of them had known him longer than anybody in the world. Except Ocelot, maybe. But he was dead now. Sort of.

They knew he was both a lot simpler and a lot more complicated than people assumed. They were inured to the habits that made people nervous, like how he thought before he spoke.

"I trust both of you," Big Boss said.

"We are willing to die for this mission," Liquid insisted, pushing the point a little.

Big Boss's eye flinched as if in a wince. "Yeah. I know."

Liquid's voice lowered, glinting like a gaslamp on an underground river. "We deserve to know why we're biding our time here instead of taking advantage of the moment to strike."

Big Boss said, "We're not going to initiate combat while we've got agents in the field."

"Who is- you can't mean *them*?" Liquid's features contorted into the look of outrage only he of the three of them had ever perfected. "They're gone, Father! As soon as you let them go, they ran straight into the Patriots' arms. We've sacrificed enough of the element of surprise."

"Comms failed," Big Boss said levelly. "That could mean a lot of things."

Snake kept his hold. "Hal wouldn't sell us out."

Liquid snorted. A sneer curled his lip. "You're both rotten with sentiment. We can't sit here and wait nicely while your little friends bring the Patriots down on our heads-"

"They haven't betrayed us," Big Boss said abruptly.

Liquid's eyes narrowed at him. "Willing to take that on faith, are you?"

"No."

Big Boss squinted up into the sun. The sky was clear.

"They got a message through."

---

The mind of Mantis flowed through the corridors, an errant breeze brushing against the minds of each inhabitant. He followed the warmth of the trailing fingertips of a boy running his hand against the cool white walls of the fortress that had so long been his home. He was buoyed by the echoing tread of a young man, all images of stoicism and determination. He thrummed to the key of the low, amused boredom of a veteran settling in to wait. He was a fleeting whisper and a ghost caress in halls prepared for war.

---

The red-haired girl halted and looked up.

"What is it?" said the soldier beside her, a nervous tremor in his voice. Though she had never been anything but kind and professional to him, the woman made Johnny very uncomfortable.

"Thought I heard something," she said.

---

The control room watched over the sleeping machine like a mother over her child. Inside, above, lay the innumerable safeguards, locks, and levels of security that ensured its slumber would be uninterrupted. All but one were disengaged.

Big Boss sat at the central console, Liquid leaning over his shoulder to stare at the hulking weapon.

"Look at her," he said, in the low, awed tones of artistic appreciation. "She wants to fight."

"Don't project," Snake muttered.

He had to admit, he saw it too. Something about the lines of it, shining with tempered lethality and endless mechanical patience. If he were a more fanciful man, he would have thought it looked as though it were crouching in wait.

Liquid drew his eyes away from the widow to look at Big Boss. "And you say you have it?"

Big Boss's eye was focused on the black screen where the cursor blinked politely, waiting. "Yeah."

"From who?" said Snake, flanking his other side.

Big Boss said, "An old friend."

Snake's brows dipped like the wing of a shot Harrier. "How do you know it's trustworthy?"

"There's two kinds of bastards," Big Boss said, his voice a deep rumble of meditation. "Some are bastards who get you by lying. Some get you by telling the truth."

It wasn't quite the reassurance he'd wanted. Then again, what ever was?

Liquid's face was intent, the line of his back arched, one hand resting on the edge of the console. "Who dares, wins."

It was as close to a prayer for luck as they would have wanted.

The screen waited.

Big Boss conjured two words.

## **TALITHA CUMI**

*Click.*

There was no fanfare. No flashing red lights, no blaring alarms. It was a minute before they realized that was what they were expecting.

Then they could hear the sound like frozen sap flowing in the veins of an ancient redwood on the first day of spring. Life flowing into land long left fallow. The snuffling, undramatic exhalations of a beast rising from hibernation.

Big Boss got up and went to the window. He looked down on Metal Gear like an emperor saluting his gladiators.

"There's voltage running through her," he said. "I can feel it in my bones."

Modern science. You didn't even have to wait for a lightning strike anymore.

You caught it on the edge of your eardrum and in the jumpspace between neurons. Being hit by lightning was one of the few things Snake's body hadn't been through, but it could feel that this was what the time between strikes felt like, an almost imperceptible tingling of stray electrons and the promise of pain.

Snake looked down and felt words about the foolishness of setting hope in one machine curl up

and die unmourned.

Energy glinted beneath steel skin. The life coursing in it was palpable, thick in the air like the atmosphere before a thunderstorm or the moment threat becomes promise. There was something in its crouch of force restrained, as if the only thing holding it back from tearing through the catwalks and scaffolding imprisoning it was a slender skein of patience.

Metal Gear REX gleamed, lethal and exultant.

Between Big Boss and Snake, Liquid smiled, slow and thorough as a routine massacre.

"If their artillery reflects the sun," he said, "then we'll fight in the light."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/64/>

# chapter 65

**Stray** by Dahne

*Under the spreading chestnut tree  
I sold you and you sold me  
-George Orwell, 1984*

---

*The end can change the nature of a man.*

By the time Otacon was marched to his execution, fear had lost potency. All the pain receptors had shut off. With Esau's light beside him, he drifted through an uncanny valley, an overgrown firefly rift cut in the dark.

*Betray him to save him.*

The most important choices were no choice.

Esau, walking beside him close as a brother, or someone ready to grab him and saw his throat open if he made a wrong move.

As the ropes had fallen away he helped him to his feet, kindly as if he were a child, and explained to him what he had to do.

Otacon's legs were shaky and cramped from being folded beneath him. The blood returned painfully, pulsing in time with his stumbling steps.

Otacon watched dust and pebbles pass into the circle of light beneath his feet and knew this was not going to be the kind of night that ended.

His eyes had lied to him, thousands of years ago when there was such thing as a sun, and they had placed the crippled, sloped shack as a smudge in sight of the wired wall, across a simple distance with finite boundaries. Just a long flat stretch of wasteland where vultures picked in the dust. Feed the birds. Nothing simpler.

Maybe he was taking the same step, over and over, watching the same dirt and rocks pass his feet in the same sway of the same light, walking in place to power an endless feedback loop.

Otacon thought of nothing, great, vast, wide worlds of nothing curling at the edges and folding around him and engulfing him in one swift swallow.

He could have screamed when he felt something at the small of his back. Instead his body tensed into a solid knot in a single inward motion. But the touch of Esau's hand was gentle.

"It will be over soon," the boy said, and there was no telling what target the unpracticed kindness might have leveled if there had been anything left to hit.

Otacon saw him first as a shadow among shadows. As they drew closer and the far echo of light drew definition to the cliff wall, he became a separate feature of it, carved in the same lithium. He stood on the far left edge of the rock shelf at the locus point of the glittering wires like a hoplite at the hot gates of hell.

His face jabbed into him like needles, again and again and always finding unbroken skin. Memory did it no justice. Each line and shadow was an impact, like the pressure and grasping distance of the instant between receiving a terrible injury and when the pain began. The straight strike of his nose, cutting at the angle of a hawk caught by the neck in middiver. The flawless and relentless sweep of his brow beneath the gold crest.

Otacon had felt the grain of that velvet mark his palms, the heavy skull beneath it immediate and



startling. There was the arch of his neck, the hollow at the base where shadows pooled, the proud point of his chin. The devastating sensuality of his lips.

Every time it was seen clearly for the first, as though his sight were an acid that burned away successive layers of scales on Otacon's eyes. It was as though there were some quality that everyone had, but only he possessed the courage and wherewithal to expose to the open air, something raw and brutal as sea salt in a wound and inexpressibly tender. This beautiful, invincible, vulnerable boy. And all Otacon could feel was grateful.

The smooth, sharp shock of his narrowing eyes was the mountainside crumbling out from beneath Otacon's feet.

He realized that, sometime in that eternity, he should have prayed.

Esau touched his arm lightly. The set of his dark eyes seemed to see the depth and contour of his doubt. He handed Otacon the lantern and nodded him forward.

In his useless pool of light, Otacon stepped forward to let Adamska see him unhurt and unbound, and let him understand what it meant.

He felt their twisted chaperone stay back at the edge to watch.

His mouth felt like a wasteland, his tongue a nerveless husk. He forced it to move. Just for now. Just this, and he would be done.

Adamska was watching him, eyes cool and merciless, silent.

An errant breeze stirred the dust between them and made the hanging wires sway.

"A-" Otacon began.

His throat clenched close, his stomach spasmed, his muscles rebelled and locked with shocking violence. Gritting his teeth, he forced them into obedience. Just this was all he had to do. Then he was done. One step at a time. Come on.

Otacon forced air into his lungs and made himself look Adamska in the eye.

God, he deserved that much.

Otacon said, "He promised me they wouldn't hurt you."

Adamska looked at him.

That was all. Only looked.

It was no use hoping he didn't understand.

Otacon could say nothing. Words filled his lungs like water.

Adamska's lips parted like an arcane clockwork mechanism, the gears perfectly and cleverly hidden. All else was still. His voice was the color of dust and stone in the colorless light.

"Hal," Adamska said, his voice wearing the veneer of arrogance and accusation that slipped over it like a glove over long fingers. His neck was stiff and straight. "What did he do to you?"

Otacon tried not to look at him.

Don't think. You have to. Come on.

The laptop lay on the ground, blank as a closed window. The near side of the ledge, far beyond reach of where Adamska stood. Such a fragile, absurd little thing for a life to depend on. Otacon just had to get there.

"He told me the truth," Otacon said.

One step.

Adamska stood sentry like a gargoyle resplendent in the sweep of wire wings. The white globe of searchlight moved over him and revealed nothing.

"What truth?" Economy of words and movement, measuring out bare traces of the kinetic force held in him.

Closer.

"It has to be this way."

Adamska's eyes, the clear deep ice blue, bore down. "Cowards always say that."

Otacon swallowed, his mouth gone dry. The wiring of him had gone faulty. He moved in jerks and stabs.

He had to try. These words were important. There was something he had to say, something he had to tell him, them, before it was over and too late. He would only get one chance. Every word he spoke he felt it falling to pieces around him. Just the little machine. No more. Nothing to be afraid of, now. He can't hurt you. He won't. Not now.

If there were anything else he could do  
there wasn't

it was too late now. He'd made his choice.

Why had that been the easy part?

His feet turned leaden, and he had to stop and drop his eyes.

"I'm sorry," Otacon said, barely above a whisper.

"For what?"

His head jerked up at the cold words.

Adamska's stare froze him. The answers fractured the silence.

"Tell me," Adamska demanded. "Say it. You owe me that much."

Hal stumbled forward. It was important to keep moving. He couldn't remember why.

All Hal could say was, "I have to let you go."

Adamska would have reacted to a blow like that. Otacon had never seen him struck. He wouldn't make a sound, or move if it wouldn't do any good. Just spread his eyes like a Rorschach blot on wet paper, big with the pain blooming in them, lips dropping open as if to breathe it out without sound or air or as if anything he could say any invocation or imprecation would call it back. He would drive it underground to twist through beneath the skin in absolute stillness, self contained as an internal haemorrhage.

Watching it took Otacon like a fist to the gut, smashing through numbness to make him want to crumble to his knees, but more, to stumble and run to him and take him in his arms, embrace him, tell him it's all a joke, nothing's wrong, it's all lies, it's okay.

It was only the start. There were miles to go, before...his mind shied away from it.

The air was heavy as napalm. Otacon pushed.

"He told me why I'm the one you chose."

"I told you why." The ring of his voice was harsh as unfiled iron. Splinters of metal caught and tore.

"Not that." Otacon shook his lowered head. "It's because I was the only one who wouldn't see it."

"See what?"

He wouldn't have asked if he didn't know. He was going to make him say it.

Otacon looked him in the eye, because he deserved that much.

"What you are."

His eyes dropped blindly to the stirring dust.

"You scare me," Otacon said softly.

The white light turned the ground to the color of snow. Otacon watched the eddies coaxed by the shudders of wind. Cause and effect. Every grain of it came from somewhere. It had a reason.

"Even I can feel it. It must be much worse for you."

Now that he'd started it really wasn't that bad. His voice was a machine playing a scratched and damaged recording. That was all.

"I always knew you could hurt me. I just didn't want to see that somewhere, some dark twisted place in you, you want to. You...you want to tear people into pieces, just to see them bleed. I can't change that. Nothing can. And I can't stand to try to do that to you. I don't know who you've been before, or who you might have been. Only who you are now."

He took a step forward, and looked at him once more.

"I wanted to keep you to myself, but I can't help you. I had no right to try to change you."

Keep moving. That was all that mattered.

"You're sick, Ocelot."

He was so far away. He should not have been able to see Adamska's eyes dilate with pain.

"Patriot lies," Adamska said, low and measured.

Otacon's vision was blurring. He didn't have to see. Just to move.

"It's all true. You told me yourself, when I wouldn't listen. All we can do is what we were made for. You were made to hurt people."

There was only a flicker to his eye.

"You're handing me over to them." The absence of inflection was absolute.

He stood, perfectly still. Not raging or screaming or demanding the truth. Not shouting,

Traitor

traitor.

Maybe because he knew how much easier that would have been.

"They can give you what you need," Otacon said.

He felt tears running down his face like feeling the chill of outside air through a window, or heat through a door as the house burned.

"You never asked what I chose."

"There isn't any choice." Otacon's voice caught, nearly begging. *Please, understand.*

"There is always," Adamska said, "a choice."

Ground was passing beneath Otacon's feet in a ragged pulse. Adamska loomed, unmoving.

"They'll let you be what you really are."

"How," Adamska drawled, "would you know what I really am?"

The little pile of plastic, chips and wires was growing closer. He couldn't stop now.

"As...as hard as it is to know you hate me now..." Hal swallowed. Kept moving. It was hard to see. "...it's better than having you grow to hate me slowly, over the years, for twisting you and holding you back, until you killed me."

"I would never hurt you." Adamska's eyes were flat.

"See? That's why you chose me." A desperate cleft of smile ached across his face. "I could believe that."

"So you say," Adamska said, smooth and featureless.

At once, Otacon understood. How he could be so calm, instead of screaming, lashing out, shouting No, or You idiot, how can you believe him over me, *I loved you*, or only,

Traitor.

Traitor.

Otacon stopped still.

"You were expecting this," he whispered.

"You've turned." No expression at all. It was unnatural as lack of motion on that exquisitely expressive face. "They say what's given is taken back."

It was difficult to make out Adamska as anything but a wavering figment, a splotch of color where his imagination had refused to accept there wasn't something beautiful.

Otacon heard himself say, "Love doesn't mean anything unless you can protect it."

"If this is your idea of protection," Adamska said, voice like beaten metal, "I'll live better without."

"A-" Otacon choked on a sob. "I'm- god, I'm so sorry..."

"Enough of your mewling," Adamska commanded, clear and harsh. "Whatever you're going to do, do it like a man."

Otacon's eyes dropped. He couldn't see anything anyway. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

As hard as looking at him was, not looking at him was harder. Otacon made his shuddering chest accept air and took another step forward. Not far now.

For some reason, this part was easier. Maybe because it couldn't get any worse.

It was the eyes that had held him, from the very first. Such beautiful cold eyes.

Taking the last long look he would allow, Hal said, "I love you, Ocelot."

Adamska stood rigid as a terracotta warrior, only face and eyes moving to track Otacon as he knelt by the laptop.

Otacon's fingers began to move, inputting the sequence.

"I'm going to open a channel to the Patriots," he said without looking up from the screen. "Esau is going to use it to transmit our coordinates."

The careworn laptop warmed to him like a trusted sheepdog, glad to do as it was asked, trying, in its way, to help.

All he could do was quickly done. Of course the effects wouldn't be immediate.

Otacon stood. There was a strange easing in his chest, the tranquility of knowing that now nothing mattered.

He stepped back a little, just to see him a little better. A blue and white glow in constant, erratic motion shone from the small screen. His tears had dried.

"That's all I can do," he said to both of them, to Adamska and to the boy in the shadows where good voyeurs lived. "It'll take a minute to go into effect."

"Tell me," Adamska said, low, insidious, "How will they reward you for this? I hope you sold me for something good."

"They're not going to hurt you," Otacon said. His hands weren't trembling anymore.

A clarity lay over everything. The weak light trembling on Adamska's face, the cool wind pressing against him, the dust and rocks and cramps in his legs and the spiderweb of wires, were all imbued with an almost unbearable sweetness.

"They're going to come to get you. They'll take you back, keep the innocent people you hurt to a minimum, and give you everything you've ever wanted. Esau will send the signal."

"Then, he's going to kill me."

It wasn't as hard to say as he had thought.

"Ah," Adamska said, without inflection. "Is that right?"

Esau stepped forward, kissed by the light's ragged edges. "It is."

For the first time in this place in the center of endless night, Adamska showed emotion.

He smiled.

"I don't think so."

There was a glint in his voice that Otacon recognized as the ring of triumph.

"What are you talking about?" Esau frowned at the strangeness and started toward him.

"Ah-ah!" Adamska cried, and now the triumph was brazen as a trumpet, and he lifted his chin.

Finally Otacon understood what was odd about the way he was standing. He was in fact balanced, perfectly and precariously, on the edge of the natural platform.

Around Adamska's smooth, white neck was a loop of wire. It was part of the tapestry adorning the wall, the other ends lost amid the mass of coils and tightly-anchored leylines, coiled around his throat with just the slightest bit of give.

"Take one step closer," Adamska proclaimed, "or make one move toward *him*, and I take one little step off to the side and off the mortal stage."

Esau did not move.

"You don't know what you're doing, ADAM," he said, calmly.

"That's funny, because I don't remember the part where *I* left a notoriously resourceful target alone and assumed the situation would remain the same. In the spirit of comradeship, I shouldn't assume you've noticed that there's more than a little effort of balance keeping me upright." The joy of control flashed in the baring of his teeth. "Easy enough, while I'm conscious. Try your little fainting trick again, and gravity will do its job."

"You're bluffing," Esau said.

But he didn't come closer.

"Willing to risk it? Wait, don't tell me."

His voice was rich with enjoyment of the game. His eyes glittered in the animate face.

"I can see the calculation in your beady little eyes. You're counting the steps. Trying to figure out if you can get here while my last breath is still rattling and ripe for reclamation. Personally, I don't think you can. I only need to succeed once. You've got a lot more to risk than I do."

He tilted into mockery.

"But then, maybe the Philosophers really have changed, while I've been away. I suppose now they're explicitly tolerant of failure. This new breed won't mind at all when they drop in here and find out you've managed to permanently lose a target they've been after for over fifty years, will they?"

"What do you want?" Esau said.

Adamska jerked his head in Otacon's direction, tightening the wire noose in a way that made Hal wince. "His safety. Guaranteed. Into the foreseeable future, past the unforeseeable future, never in any way to be rescinded."

One dark eyebrow lifted. "You can't be serious."

The wire cut a fine line into Adamska's flesh. "Feel free to test me, but keep in mind you only get once."

Esau shook the hair out of his eyes, face gilded with incomprehension. "I feel a pressing obligation to point out that the person on whose behalf you are now threatening to end your life has, just this moment, utterly betrayed you."

"Oh, is that right?" Adamska barked derisive laughter. "Why should I care what words you've tortured him into mouthing? I knew Volgin, remember? I've heard men confess they raped their own mothers ten years before they were born."

A long look, indecision or calculation Otacon couldn't tell. His blood pounded a lunatic crescendo.

*Adamska. Adamska.*

"We can discuss this," Esau said coolly, foot sliding in the dust, "like reasonable men."

"We can not," Adamska bit off. Tightly harnessed rage slipped into his features and made him glorious. He leaned heavily toward the ledge. "Take one step forward and your precious prize is meat on a string."

Adamska was holding his ground with sheer force of will. At any time the mountainside might heave up, and Otacon would tumble off like an errant feather. Fear calcified his heart.

The laptop, working on forgotten, cast a hasty, flickering light.

"Don't do this," Otacon pleaded when he couldn't bear it any longer. "I'm-"

"Quiet," Adamska cut him off.

He was presented in profile, eyes never leaving Esau's face.

"I don't give up what's mine," Adamska said, his voice cool and hard. "Decide. Give me his safety or I give you a corpse."

For the first time, Otacon prayed that Esau knew Adamska half as well as he thought he did.

The scales on the tipping were limned on the boy's horrifically young face. Heart and feather, and the shadow behind them all. The negligent cling of Adamska's bare, boyish foot to the edge of the precipice whitewashed Otacon's mind. It was only a few feet high. He would fall at an angle. It wouldn't be a single snap. The sentence was long, slow, torturous strangulation, kicking frantically, swinging, his face a ghastly, desperate purple, eyes bulging and hands clawing at his neck, and it would take hours, days, and by the time they crossed that handful of meters it would already be too late.

He watched Esau, and knew that he knew it as well.

Forms chased themselves across the boy's face, gone before their shape could be more than fleeting impression.

Tilting his head, he measured Adamska by eye, carefully, noting the angle of his repose, the gauge of the steel in his back, the adamant set of his full mouth.

Esau sighed as if the weight of a titan's burden had been settle on his trim shoulders.

"I was hoping it wouldn't come to this," he said.

His hands hung still at his sides.

"I was given authorization. I didn't want to accept it, but what choice did I have? You've forced my hand."

The boy shook his head, ruefully, all the regret at the senselessness of the world encompassed in the arc of his dark locks.

"Such a waste."

Otacon saw the muscles of Adamska's lower calves bunching.

A silent cry ripped at the inner lining of his throat.

Esau lifted his right hand in front of him like a king issuing a decree.

"If your pet means that much to you," the Patriot agent proclaimed, "you can keep him."

Otacon's head jerked back.

He said, "What?"

Adamska said, "What?"

Esau raised his hands, one toward each of them, the timeless gesture of surrender.

"In this case, a compromised operative is better than no operative at all. It's a security breach, but, well, sometimes sacrifices must be made. No doubt something useful can be found to occupy him."

"He'll come with us," Adamska said, half demand and half question. "He won't be harmed."

"That's what I said."

Esau's focus narrowed to a point like a sniper's sight.

"That is, as long as you agree to cooperate."

"You have my word," Adamska pledged.

"Good!" Esau accepted with crisp cheer. His face broke into a sunny smile. "Then we're all in agreement. Isn't it nice when we all play along?"

"If you renege," Adamska said, his eyes narrow slits, foot still poised at the edge, unable to accept the change in fortunes, "there will no be corner of the world where you or your masters can hide from me."

Esau waved his hands, a dismissing motion. "Yes, yes. Now, would you like a hand getting that ridiculous thing off your neck, or shall I just let the mother bear know where to find her wayward cubs? Plus a...marmot, or whatever you are," he added in Otacon's direction.

"Call in your cavalry," Adamska said. He rocked back from the ledge to undertake the complex process of winding free of the wire, and Otacon could breathe. "No use wasting time."

"Ah, eager to get back to work! Your ethic is admirable, an inspiration for us all."

Joy transformed the boy's face, unfolding the pinched and sullen edges, burning away the trace of heavy lines between his brows. He was radiant as a new-minted coin.

Some time before, the scrolling characters on the computer screen had stopped.

Otacon heard the echo of his voice say, "It's ready."

Esau practically pirouetted in his direction. "Ah, wonderful! What an excellent sense of timing. You'll do beautifully in the service, I can already tell. You know, they're far beyond the cutting edge of research, it's the best place in the world for a suitably bright mind. There, are you ready?"

Kneeling in front of the small, unassuming, innocent laptop, Otacon nodded.

"All right then. Open frequency 214.01."

Otacon's fingers moved. There were mechanical whirring sounds. Symbols appeared onscreen. Esau bent to lean over his shoulder. Otacon could hear the soft sounds of his breathing.

"Give them our coordinates: N3, 31."

Click.

The screen blanked. After the momentary flash of grey Otacon could never help thinking of as a blink, two lines of childish, blocky DOS script appeared.

**TRANSMITTING TO SHADOW MOSES MAIN**

**PLEASE WAIT...**

Esau's fist caught Otacon in the right temple, sprawling him sideways.

*"What the hell did you do?"*

Otacon looked up from the ground in time to see Adamska's lips move as if to cry out, and the flash of onscreen text as Esau's hands jabbed reflexively at the keyboard.

**run**

An eternal little blue spark.

Then the conflagration.

The laptop and Esau erupted into a searing conduit of electricity.

Otacon caught an instant of Esau's face, distended with shock, pleading eyes frozen like a lithograph in the crackling, flashing light.

Silence hit fast and hard, with a low thump and a soft sizzle.

Gathering up his scattered senses, Otacon scrambled to his feet, grabbed the knife from the boy's prone body, and climbed up beside Adamska, who was gaping at him.

"What the hell just happened?" he said.

"I put together a program," Otacon explained, going behind Adamska's back and refusing to succumb to the tidal wave of relief until the ropes were sawed through. "Once it was initiated, the next keystroke would call up an instantaneous self-destruct protocol. I'd played with the idea before, but it wasn't really practical, and it was hard to think of any situation where it would be possible to time it right, or if I could reroute the power to-"

Before the ropes could complete their fall, Adamska had spun and embraced him with almost violent urgency.

"You're alive," he whispered, crushing Hal close to him. "God. I was afraid."

"I'm so sorry," Hal confessed wholeheartedly, if a little awkwardly, his face pressed into Adamska's shoulder. His presence and safety, just feeling him there, made all the horror of the endless night melt into tepid memory. "I couldn't think of anything else, and I had to make him think I was on his side. I know you must hate me now, but I had to try, even though it meant be- betraying you-"

"Don't be an idiot. It doesn't suit you," Adamska said. One hand rose to stroke his hair. The warmth and solidity of him was rich and heady, like a song you thought you'd never hear again. "You're the most faithful ally I've ever had. There's no shame in an effective bluff."

Otacon laughed, drunk on relief and the nearness and reality of him. "Like yours? You had me terrified you were gonna do it."

"I was," Adamska said. "A crude weapon, but the nearest one to hand. It doesn't matter, now. You saved us both."

Hal buried his face in his shoulder. "I won't let anyone take you away from me."

They stayed there, luxuriating in the gift of being alive and free, letting each other heal the rifts clawed by fear.

Adamska pulled back sharply to arm's length, sweeping Hal with his eyes, then thought better of it and patted him down manually.

"What did that dog do to you?" he demanded. "Did he hurt you?"

"H, hey! Cut it out. I'm fine. He didn't touch me."

"Ah." Adamska straightened from his inspection, eyeing him critically, as though suspicious he might be hiding a broken arm behind his back. "Good."

"What about you?" Otacon asked, somewhat belatedly. He didn't look and hadn't felt hurt, but if anyone could take a bullet in the heart without a grimace, it would be Adamska.

Adamska snorted and spread his hands. "By that amateur? What do you take me for?"

Hal laughed. God, it felt good to do that. "I forgot you're invincible."

They climbed down from the ledge, Adamska extending a gallant hand. The computer was a sad, slagged heap breathing wisps of smoke over Esau's back.

"Poor thing," Hal said. "Just following orders."

"He deserved worse," Adamska said pitilessly.

"I was talking about the laptop."

"Ah." Adamska gave the twisted slab of blackened plastic a sympathetic glance. "Any chance your signal got through before the fireworks?"

"Oh, that was a bluff." Hal plucked the revolver from where it was tucked into the boy's belt and handed it to Adamska, who whirled it in his hands and nodded with satisfaction that during the



absence nothing had changed.

"Ah." Adamska showed only a brief hint of disappointment.

"I sent the coordinates twenty minutes ago."

Adamska stared at him. Then clapped him on the shoulder, laughing.

"You magnificent bastard," he crowed. "You killed the enemy *and* got us off of this damn mountain. I should beg forgiveness for ever doubting you had it in you."

"He's not dead," Hal protested, rolling his eyes. Anyone else assuming he was capable of killing a man would have been horrifying. From Adamska, it was kind of cute. "You can't get *that* much power out of that little thing. It just stunned him."

"Is that right?" said Adamska.

In unintentional accord, they turned to look down at Esau.

He lay crumpled like a toy thrown away in favor of one that shone newer and brighter. As if in an unconscious wish for contrast, his hand had fallen so that it lay in repose beneath his smooth, pale cheek, the archetypal pose of a child deep in sleep. The heavy sketch of his brows made them appear to bow towards one another in pain or concentration, above eyelashes the unrelenting color of pitted prison bars outlined against sunset sky. At the corner of his lips he wore a smeared star of crusted blood.

As if the focusing attention were a prodding finger in the side, Esau's eyes flicked open. He jerked, as if in effort to spring to his feet. The sudden motion carried his body upwards and caused the bullet to miss his heart.

When he fell back his fingers gouged long furrows in the dust.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/65/>

# chapter 66

## Stray by Dahne

*Have I been at this post too long, have I failed in my duties? If there was a God stronger than the God that I am, or a God stronger than the Ethos Gods, I would appeal to that God. But there is only silence and the night and the stars, and I'm alone, so alone, so God all alone here, doing what I must, doing my best.*

-Harlen Ellison, "Paingod"

---

*Duty can change the nature of a man.*

Hal took an unsteady step forward. He must have been tied up as well, and still sore.

Ocelot spun the revolver in a lazy arc.

Let the dog bleed to death.

"You killed him," Hal said. Something in his voice was odd.

"No, only wounded," Ocelot corrected, tossing his weapon from hand to hand, refamiliarizing himself with the nostalgic heft and weight. "It should have been quick and clean. It's his own fault. He picked the wrong time to twitch."

They were being treated to a repeat performance. Instead of lying there and bleeding quietly like a good boy, the spy was wrenching himself over. With twists and grunts, he accomplished the feat of rolling onto his back. Light applause would not have been entirely sardonic.

A wet stain was spreading from the small, unassuming hole in his abdomen. It made quick progress. Quite pretty, compared to the irregular blots that had earlier fallen across his front, now dried.

The enemy's face...now, that was exquisite.

The lantern tossed spikes of shadow across his face, courteously emphasizing his blood-rimmed lips, the trembling ellipse of his mouth, and the wide, startled cast of his eyes. It stabbed at pupils bloated to abyssal targets by pain. This was how a man looked when the protections were stripped away. The pure, naked self, lying bleeding on the ground. Flowers would grow where his blood watered.

Ocelot strode toward him. He knew the boy could hear him, though bare feet were hardly suitable for echoing dread. You needed something more ostentatious to let them know you were coming, and that there was nothing whatsoever they could do to stop it.

At the distance where one more step would place his foot on Esau's cheek, Ocelot stopped, allowing himself to bask in the sight of his enemy brought to ruin. The boy's eyes met his and emptied, for one divine moment, of all but fear.

Ocelot smiled.

They might not have long, but he would make every second count.

Some people said that revenge was never as good as appeared from a distance. Ocelot could almost pity them.

It was better. He hadn't achieved it alone. He and Hal had earned this triumph together, each covering the other's back, stepping forward when his strengths were at their apex.

That was what was wrong.

Hal was not at his side.

Frowning, Adamska turned back.

Hal hadn't moved. Ocelot cocked his head, curious.

He was by the wall, all the joy and relief gone from his face.

There was no mistaking the horror that distorted his owlsh eyes.

Immediately Adamska was at his side, laying a hand on his shoulder, though he tried to flinch away. The aftershocks hit some like this. Fear, adrenaline, the sight of Death standing at your elbow. Some it hit hard and fast, some in spaced waves, as if only the perspective of memory made it possible to understand how close the end had come.

"It's all right," Adamska soothed, giving him contact, something familiar to anchor to. "It's over. He's as good as dead. We made it. You're safe."

Hal jerked out of his reach, stumbling back until he hit the cliff wall, staring at him as though he'd been stabbed.

"Y..you shot him," he said.

Adamska frowned, troubled, but kept his distance. As odd a time as Hal picked to panic, pinning him to the wall would hardly help matters. Pale light held him outlined against the stone, glinting off of his glasses to make them for a moment opaque.

"Something's wrong," Adamska said, concern weighting his brow. It jarred not to be allowed to comfort him. "What are you afraid of?"

But he would say nothing. Only gape, as though the answer were so obvious that not to grasp it was in itself incomprehensible.

Ridiculous. All was right with the world. They were both alive and free of the Philosophers' grasping paws. The mission was successful. Soon they would be back at the base. There was nothing left to fear. It was the best possible outcome, next to Adamska's having disposed of the interloper on sight, but no use crying.

Hal's eyes were transfixed, like the way a prisoner would stare at Volgin's hands wreathed in flickering blue light. Not at all like the dreamy way Adamska had found himself growing irrationally fond of.

"It's all right," he said again, softly, words of comfort fitting in an unaccustomed mouth with a sour metallic tang.

Hal said, "You shot him."

"Yes." The repetition was beginning to become irritating. "If you're done stating the obvious, there are much better things we could be-"

He had been gesturing absentmindedly with the revolver. Some flash of Hal's glance against it struck a spark that lit the dry tinder of understanding.

Oh.

Fucking Christ.

"Ah." Adamska's hand struck his forehead. "Of *course*. How could I be so stupid?"

The scope of his insensitivity was staggering. He had been so captivated by bloodthirsty triumph that he hadn't spared a thought for how Hal would feel to see the boy slain by Adamska's hand.

"Forgive me," Adamska said, willing with all his heart that it wouldn't be too little, too late.

He came forward a somber penitent, remorse growing with every flicker of Hal's horrified eyes to the revolver tracing lazy loops under his control.

It came to a stop when he did, a step away, hilt proffered with fine, polished gallantry.

"Here you are," Adamska said, a soft smile revealing genuine generosity. "It was you he was

tormenting. The kill is rightfully yours."

His gesture was rewarded with motion.

"Are you insane?" Hal cried, suddenly animate, knocking the offered weapon away. "I could never k, *kill* somebody!"

His voice was coarsened with outrage. Adamska had never heard it quite like that before. Every day its new surprise.

Adamska let the force of the rejection swing his hand away and back, to hold the offering again between them, inexorable as mercy.

"It's easy," said Ocelot, ever helpful. "Just point and squeeze."

It was easy to forget that it wasn't standard to be taught how simple the act was, with a handler's grip to steady you, keep you pointed ahead. Most often the blond one with the divot between the eyes and the kindly, mocking smile. The affectation of crisp consonants. *Pretend it's someone you hate.* The smug irony. Pointing his chin at paper silhouettes. *Take control.*

"You're insane," Hal said, something in his eyes almost pleading.

"What's wrong?" Ocelot asked, taking an inadvertant step forward to close the distance between them, genuinely intrigued. Never let it be said he would ignore an opportunity to learn. The mechanisms of Hal's mind were intricate, tightly interwoven. It was possible to see how the signals led and interacted, if one looked closely enough, with a keen enough eye and discerning enough attentions. There was time. The boy would wait. He had little choice in the matter.

Hal gaped and fumbled and finally found his tongue. "For god's sake, Adamska, he's just a kid! I'm not a murderer!"

For such an intelligent man, Hal was often confused on simple matters. He had to be encouraged to stand up for himself.

"There is no shame in wanting vengeance," Adamska told him. "Pain taken. Pain repaid. The word is justice."

The revolver lingered between them, prettily engraved muzzle and patient hilt, unwavering, a practical man's alternative to a peace offering.

Hal began to say something, broke off and moved toward Adamska.

Past him. As if to brush by.

One-armed, a stiff, straight casting motion, Adamska caught him.

"Forgetting something?" he said, lifting the gun in a beckoning arc

Hal struggled. New, raw instincts loosened Adamska's grip. He pulled back and allowed Hal to stumble free.

He knelt by the enemy's side.

Ocelot was above them, revolver pointing an argent path to the enemy's heart.

The boy's eyes were dilated with pain, round as tarnished coins at the bottom of a wishing well. He gazed up at Ocelot with quiet expectation.

"Have it your way," Ocelot said carelessly, thumbing down the hammer. "I don't mind doing the dirty work."

"Don't!" Hal cried, throwing an arm over the boy protectively where he lay broken on the ground.

Ocelot's eyes narrowed. His thumb slid back to rest.

Well. There was no reason to rush.

"You were talking a lot," Ocelot said pleasantly, gazing down at Esau. "What do you have to say for yourself now?"

He was gracious enough not to mind much when the enemy's fear was replaced inexplicably, by recrimination.

Esau drew in breath with a rasp.

Lips drawing down, as though cruelly teased by an older brother he had trusted, he said, "You weren't supposed to do that."

"Yes, they never do figure failure into their plans. Too bad for you. If you had been better-"

His eyes refocused on where Hal fumbled at the worn buttons of Esau's fatigues, his efforts given little help by the erratic pitch of the boy's chest, spasms like brutalized mirth.

"What are you doing?" Ocelot asked, coolly curious.

Hal did not look up. "The bleeding-"

"Won't stop," the spy's voice was like a snake's belly over dry leaves. "Until it does."

"See?" Ocelot said. "Already taken care of."

Hal's hands kept moving. "We've got to help him."

"You don't help the enemy," Adamska pointed out indulgently. "You kill him."

"No need now," Esau said in answer to both, blood in his voice. A trembling smile played at his lips. "Gutshot. Nothing anyone can do, even if...so inclined."

Something in his voice made Hal believe him.

His hands slid away from the bloody cloth.

He didn't back away.

He leaned forward, and took the dying enemy in his arms.

Hal looked up to Adamska, eyes vivid with accusation.

"You didn't have to kill him."

"We thought as much before." Ocelot's thumb stroked along the revolver's hilt. The motion was soothing. "I don't make the same mistake twice."

Hal froze, staring at Adamska as though his lips had pulled back to show slavering fangs. "Y-you're heartless..."

Adamska knelt in the dust to face him over the enemy's prone body, to drive words forward like needles on a straight lateral thrust. "He would have killed you."

The words scalded on flesh already raw.

He watched Hal try to find an angle to contest their truth.

He did it as easily as any other impossible thing.

Eyes down not from shame or shyness but attention to the enemy's wound. "It doesn't matter."

The ludicrous audacity of untruth stopped Adamska's throat.

"No, no," Esau sighed, mournful and corrective. "Wouldn't have killed you. Never..."

Ocelot slid languorously into a sideways recline, his weight on one hand. He used the other to jam the revolver against the enemy's pale throat. It shone with the damage already inflicted, rich with the promise of more to come.

"Don't lie," he said sweetly.

"Not." White teeth caught at rich red lip, eyes sparkling like black ice on asphalt. "It would be...bad form. After all this time."

The familiar touch of Hal's hand closed on Adamska's wrist and eased the gun away.

Esau took advantage of the range.

The enemy's hand clenched around Hal's shirt, pulling him forward.

His cough sprayed red flecks against Hal's shirt and neck.

"Good," he croaked obscurely. "Want to stain you..."

The revolver jammed against his temple.

"Let go of him," Ocelot hissed.

The boy smiled. As though a puzzle he had been laboring on for a long time were finally solved.

"Now you see," he said. His voice crept above a whisper. "You understand."

"Understand what?" Hal said.

The boy's smile was peaceful, the pain at the edges granted purity as he gazed into Hal's eyes.

"It was all for you."

Ocelot pressed the revolver's muzzle pressed forward savagely and snarled.

"Speak the fucking truth once before you die-"

"Ocelot, stop it!" Hal cried. "He-"

Hal swallowed, and did not watch the slow, spreading pool soaking the dust.

"...he doesn't have long."

Just to be fucking dramatic – even now he couldn't stop playing the game – Esau's grip weakened. Maybe as the life bled away slowly, whatever shredded excuse for a human soul would be the first to go, and for a few minutes there would be a man-shaped pile of meat and manipulation. A cockroach's legs twitched after the head was crushed.

With a grace the opposite of the enemy's rote memorization of human behaviors, Hal's arm braced Esau behind his back.

Esau smiled like a child fighting off sleep. The end of the bedtime story was too good to miss.

"Good," he said. "That's good. Will you stay? It would suit my sense of irony nicely. It would make a n excellent epitaph, I think. 'Here Lies Esau, real name unbothered with. Died as he lived – ironically.' A joke no one gets. Too bad. It's very funny."

Hal said, "Don't try to talk."

"No, no." His hand flapped. "It was a good idea Adam had. Speaking the truth. They say it feels nice. I'm supposed to die first, but I think...I won't. Just out of spite."

"There's no reason not to," Ocelot judged. "You've failed your mission."

"Yes," Esau sighed. The effort seemed to diminish him. One molecule at a time. "Such a simple mission at that. They must have told me the objectives a thousand times, you know how it is. Not for memory, but to make them the most important things in the world. More so than my own life, if that was saying anything. Sometimes when the jungle was quiet I could hear them singing in the back of my mind."

His voice swayed into a chant made disconcerting by the clotted, breathy heralds marking him for death's own.

"Capture Hal Emmerich alive, unharmed, and willing."

The world lost dimension and fell flat.

Adamska could feel Hal's tendons pull taut.

He said, "What?"

Dying men made mistakes.

"It was me you wanted," Ocelot grated.

He should have died in silence.

"Ah..." Esau's eyes shuttered, his lips parted, in the look of a man borne beneath a silent wave of pain. "So good of you to think so. Pride makes you as beautiful as anger... It's so easy to convince someone of what he already believes to be true. So prideful, Adam...It would have been good to have you. The greatest spy, traitor, and assassin the world has ever known."

Sudden as dry lightning, he was racked by rattling giggles. Hal's arm around him tightened.

"A minor bonus, beside the power to control time itself."

Hal managed to speak first.

"They wanted the machine."

"Yes," the boy breathed, as if he had been waiting all this time to. "Their powers of foresight and calculation are superhuman, but they are not flawless. Luck. Error. Circumstances impossible to foresee. Not only could they control the past along with the present and the future, they could *never make a mistake*. They could sculpt every circumstance to their desiring, every outcome to their whim. They could reign over the entire course of history."

Hal said, "It doesn't work that way."

"Why not? Free will?" What he could manage of a laugh was derisive. "You should know better than to believe in such childish things."

"No," Hal said, unaware of the cruelty as only he could be, "Quantum physics. The machine functions to form a causality loop and remove itself from the timestream."

A film lay over the boy's eyes. He blinked it away.

"I don't understand a word of that, but I am presuming you mean that all I did was for nothing."

Hal's lip caught between his teeth.

"Yeah," he confessed, quietly.

"Ah." Esau's eyes closed. "How funny. All for nothing...if only we had a time machine, we could have kept from ever making the effort."

Hal's mouth opened, but the boy's head lolled, and he said, like the eulogy for an ill-tempered friend,

"So close to finally having you...We have been waiting for so long..."

"Bullshit," Ocelot said, far from amused. Whatever damage the bastard hoped to wreak in the last moments of his petty life, Adamska would cut to the heart of this little charade. "They couldn't have known he existed."

"Oh, Adam, still you doubt? Here, touch the wound, you'll see, it's real as real can be."

The enemy burst into a fit of choking giggles. Hal blanched in alarm and clutched hard to keep him from tumbling to the ground.

"I would have shown you all of it. The machines, machines, machines. They tried to make one, you know. There's a whole little graveyard. The closest to success was a clever thing that could measure fluctuations in the proper flow of time...as good as a signpost from heaven itself, pointing your way. The machines that tracked your rise...someone is always watching. Such talents do not go unnoticed."

A soft smile, marred and mocked by smeared blood.

"By the time you were twenty, they knew you better than you knew yourself."

"How did they *know*?" Ocelot snarled.

"Simple...Whatever worlds exist, they have something of the same people...you must have found one, to make you such a thing. You are a weapon, Adam. You don't build them. You're a killer, not a creator."

For a moment, the hilt of the revolver imprinting his palm felt like a haft hung with gears, in the silence and warmth and scent of oil.

The boy's eyes slipped in and out of focus. He kept going. Once silence was broken, it was hard to reclaim.

"You had proven that it could be done. So there must have been someone who could do it. They tried, ah, they tried. A theory, once understood, can be harnessed by any individual. Once you

understand the principle, or even know that there is a principle *to* be understood, it takes no special genius to bring it into reality...or so it should be. So it must be. But it isn't. Years they spent, the brightest minds they could bribe or steal...and found only that it would take a special kind of mind. A cultivation of steel and wire like topiary, a loving hand... Absurd...such a waste. The world does not work that way. No one would treat it as if it did, and if he did, he would get nothing in return for his pains.

Then they found you."

He dragged his eyes back upwards, refusing to let them slip.

"They only needed a plan. A delicate balance. Blunt coercion, their favorite son, that would rip it to shreds. You had to be willing, kept in ignorance, coaxed and tempted and tamed...For that purpose, tools were made. From the far-off evidence, they knew what sort of man you would help."

His trembling hand reached for Hal's stricken face, as though to touch a fading light and ask where it would go.

"Every part of me was crafted to appeal to your sympathies."

There was a cold star in Adamska's stomach that shone whenever someone spoke the truth. It pulsed through his blood and stained the anemic ghostlight in deeper colors.

"You used me as a decoy," Ocelot said, soft as the pad of a tiger's velvety paw on the thatch of jungle underbrush.

"Yes," said Esau. Death's shadow became him and left him no shame. "What's the old line? 'Tell them the lie they already believe'? You believed our masters would hunt you across the breadth of time...you believed" -and here he looked to Hal, in whose arms he lay, dyeing him in slow spreading red - "you were of no consequence. Who was I to argue? When you had done me the favor of making it easy..."

Ocelot said, "You talk too much, dead man."

The pain in Hal's eyes was shocking as ice water.

Ocelot felt words shrivel in his mouth.

"As soon as I saw, I knew," the boy mumbled, his audience forgotten, "The two of you are interlinked, inextricably as two gears interlocked. Pull on one and push the other...Let your goal be staying together, and you worked toward mine as well..."

"Why me?" Hal said, tiny cracks spreading from the two words into the foundation of his voice.

The boy gazed into the dark, smeared red lips forming an unintelligible chant.

Ocelot grabbed his dangling wrist and twisted just enough to make the spy gasp, his eyes dilating as his back arched to the curve of wretched triumph. His flesh was firm and waxy, a sheen of sweat providing Ocelot's gloves a good, solid grip.

He growled, "Answer him."

"Stop it," Hal croaked, stark and ragged. "Don't hurt him any more."

The naked pleading snapped Adamska's anger like a spine.

He unfastened his fingers from the boy's arm and took his hand away, eyes never leaving Hal's.

"Because you are the only one who can," Esau answered, pitching his thready voice to the moon. "Genius is a kind name for a special sort of madness. That much is true for the both of you. Your respective fields... Their tame automata can't replicate it. They are made flawless, and it cripples them. They might have learned...You were all playing along so well..."

His lips sagged into a pout.

"Then you ruined it."

"I was the reason," Hal whispered. "I'm why you had to go through all of this..."



"Of course." He affected mild surprise. "Did you really ever think you could live as you were with impunity? No one gets that luxury."

His dark moss eyes were clearer for the clouds.

"Do you know," he said, tones of unexpected understanding cut with mild disbelief, "I'm afraid to die? I really am. I never was before. Fear of death is driven out of us, as well as fear of failure. You can't destroy what you fear. I'm so afraid right now I can hardly stand it."

His hands lifted and made fists around the front of Hal's dirty, bloodstained shirt. He dragged himself upwards to press his face to Hal's chest. Adamska's muscles solidified to stone.

Hal's hand was flat on his back, spread like a collector's butterfly, as he held the enemy in his arms.

"I'm afraid," Esau whispered.

The light cast strange glittering specks on Hal's face. Tears falling free.

"I'm sorry," he said, half choke and breath and gasp, embracing him like a brother. "God, I'm sorry."

All Adamska could think, in the heart of selfish, child terrors that had never been allowed voice, was that it wasn't fucking fair.

"No," Esau sighed. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Nothing to mourn. After what I've done to you, or worse, tried..."

"You helped us, by telling us," Hal said. "You didn't have to do that."

Until it broke, and Adamska understood.

When Esau's face lifted, his smile was clean and his eyes were flecked with the fossils of old, cold regret.

"It's only spite," he said. "Selfishness. If I can't be the one to bring you in, no one can. No, it's pettier than that. I can't accept being a fragment of an unfinished story. I want to be remembered in full by a better man... the opposite of apostolic."

He coughed raggedly, his body heaving. When it subsided, he drew shallow breaths, Hal murmuring soothing words that Adamska couldn't hear.

"You're passing it on," Adamska said, comprehension slipping in through the cracks in his voice. "You're handing over your stake in the game, so the part you've played won't come to a dead end."

And the boy smiled up at them like summer.

"You understand."

Adamska inclined his head, soldier to soldier. "I do."

"After all," the boy whispered, the tendrils of energy in his voice withering, "you won the game. You're entitled to a prize. And I'm all out of pretty fish in little plastic bags. Knowledge of your enemies is nicer in a bowl. Surprise them when they come hunting for you... They'll never stop. They have long reach and longer memories."

"I know," Adamska said.

The boy's dark hair was blackened further and slicked to his pale forehead.

"Keep each other sane." He smiled sorrow. His teeth were flecked with rust. "Whatever that means."

Half consciously Adamska mirrored Hal's stance, head bent over the other side of the bleeding boy.

The enemy's head sank back.

"How did you change?" he murmured in the cadence of delirium. "It was for him, wasn't it. He reached into your fabric and twitched the threads, and for that inch a pattern was lost and gained...Not

in his own image, but something that might have been...might not... That was all it took. The best-laid plans of the micely men who nibble at the world's weft edges...all raveled, now. How did you change?"

"I chose not to die," said Adamska. "You made a different choice."

Esau said, "I wasn't talking to you."

Hal was blinking fast. The weight of the boy in his arms stole the freedom to wipe his vision clear.

"I never changed," he said.

"Of course you did." It was without recrimination. "You, who were meant to be constant...the most reliable variable. You, who would lay down your life before dreaming you could hurt anyone...ADAM, all the ADAM models, all variant parameters within the range and stages of decay, will find some way to exert their will on the scenario. Most offer the locations of the remaining Legacy in return for being allowed to keep one thing that belongs to them... My favorite was the one who threatened to burn down the warehouse around all of us if he couldn't have his way. He always made me laugh. I liked him almost as much as you, Adam..."

"The difficult part was putting all the things he needed in place without him noticing being led along. That and the timing. Too much reluctance and he really will do it. Do you know what it feels like to burn to death in VR? Exactly like the real thing! Haha... There was an ad campaign like that once, wasn't there? Except I think the word they used was "fly"..."

"So many simulations. They never pull the plug early. It would be a waste of a learning experience. I've died so many times, but I was never afraid after the first. Why now? There should be no difference...but there was. Is. Over and over. God, I was sick of it... You'd think once you're dead they'd leave you alone. And yet, not one of the games went exactly as this one has. I could love the both of you just for that. Thank you, thank you, you've been so kind..."

"Accepting his helplessness, Emmerich [primary target, O for info agrees to be executed for the sake of his lover's safe rehabilitation, is overcome with relief and joy when they are allowed provisionally to remain together, follows without question and does precisely as he is asked'... It's a nice epilogue, if a little heavy-handed. One of the better endings."

Esau touched his stomach and raised his fingers to his face, unsteadily, and observed the red with wonder.

"This is one I've never gotten before."

"This is no game," Adamska said, because he was not and never had been that fucking cruel.

Crusted blood cracked around Esau's pouting lips. "I know that."

"Hold on," Hal was pleading. "Please. Just a little longer. We can help...you just have to hold on."

The dark brow creased. "What for? My mission is over. Nothing worse than a visitor who overstays his welcome...but you had a good idea. It would have been interesting, I think, to come with you. Impossibilities always are. There were a few models that included it as a temptation, or a ploy to keep me docile...but the ending was dull, just another execution...I've died on my knees in front of Adam...but never in your arms..."

Urgently, he jerked, as if trying to sit up. Hal steadied him.

"But it's so obvious now. Of course your parameters would shift as well. No one lives unscathed. No plan survives the moment of contact... Who would want to? When all it takes is one bite of viciousness, one determination, to change...They never thought of it. They knew what they knew. And acted, researched, trained, accordingly."

The boy smiled. He reached up to touch Hal's face. The muddy marks of blood across his fingers became wet and smudged.

"Thank you. For teaching me that they are fools."

The weight of the endless night pressed them close together within the boundaries of cold light. Somewhere, a pebble fell.

"You would have given us both to them," Adamska said. It was not an accusation.

Esau tried to nod, and swallowed.

"Yes." A red trickle ran down his chin. "That's why he shouldn't cry. All the lies I told you...were true sometimes, someplace. Don't cry. It's such an absurdist cliché. Two living people in a dead place, one hating and one mourning a bit of broken esoteric machinery as it emits its last feeble clicks."

"Don't flatter yourself," Ocelot said. "I don't hate you."

Esau croaked a laugh.

"No. You wouldn't, would you? You know better than that. Don't give the enemy the satisfaction..."

His hand dropped and fell to drag in the dust.

Hal caught and supported his head as it tipped back.

"But, you know, I'm glad."

The last drops of oil were stripped from his voice, leaving it pitted and dry.

"You broke the game. And I got to tell you. Forewarned is forearmed. They say that, don't they? It's better when you know the why. Gives you some of the how."

Ocelot said, "No one after you will get this far."

The boy smiled, honesty hazed with pain. "Good. I got to do...one real thing."

Sliding his bare heels over cool dust, Ocelot shifted his weight forward. His hand cupped the close of a parenthesis beneath the boy's cheek. The heat of his skin was startling.

Gently, he turned the boy's face, to look into the glassy eyes. Nearly all pupil now, with a rim of black-green narrow as a needle.

"You lost with good grace," Ocelot gave him without regret. "You've earned my respect."

It was the best benediction Ocelot knew.

Esau's smile curved counter to the bare pressure of Adamska's hand.

"I'm going to do something terrible now," the boy said, whisper eroding his edges. His breathing was shallow and quick, careful. "Ah, I feel the coins falling from my eyes...After all...I need to ask for a favor."

"Say it," Hal told him, brushing the hair back from his pale smooth forehead, his eyes unclear behind glass, the rote and motion of late comfort. The sort given in the night when the embers glow low and the insect cries merge with the mind's melody, and the cold dew-wet world is on the other side of sleep.

The light glowed white as burning phosphorus.

A smell like charred, dark hallways where few but the bats ever went, damp stone fresh crusted with ash, and silence where the rage has been burned away.

It was something like the way Ocelot had always thought he would die.

Buy time and sell the fruitless moment of explosion that would have you be a supernova with no progeny. Twist to take it slow, all the time you need to let the ghosts of your lies and secrets slip from your lips and herald your way home.

That was the plan. Attainable, realistic or not. Boys always make them.

That was the ideal. Pass along the game.

"Just one favor," Esau said.

Delirium filmed the entreaty in his eyes.

"What do you want?" Hal said, but Adamska knew he had already been told.

"I've told you everything I can. I'm done lying. It hurts..." He swallowed, lines gouged into his face deepening with shadow. "Will you end it for me?"

His fingers pressed against the epicenter of the stain at his stomach.

"*Da*," Adamska said, and lifted the revolver to point the way through bone and skin and the husk of pretense to his heart.

Esau's smile was thin and weak.

"I wasn't talking to you."

Hal's hand stilled beneath the boy's neck.

"Y- you want me to do it?" he said, and the fear it brought to his face made something twist in Adamska like a thumbscrew.

"Yeah." More a cough than a laugh. New red flecked his lip and was bright as fresh paint against dried blood. "Selfish, isn't it, that I want to be a novelty? But more than that. Feels right, for it to be by the target's hand. You were right, Adam. Justice...is that a word?"

"He won't." The word struck sharply from Ocelot's mouth. He felt protective muscles coil.

Where his hand lay by the boy's shoulder, the touch of Hal's.

"Adamska," Hal said softly, looking at him with a shadow of that ridiculous puppyish obstinacy, cleaned and purged and forged into something new in his beautiful grey eyes through the residue of salt. "This isn't your choice to make."

"Let me," he answered, in the same even tone.

"I owe him." Hal's voice was like a dead leaf in a jar. "It's all because of me."

"What does the butterfly say to the storm?" Esau half-chanted through listless lips. His face was streaked as if with war paint. The rips and large, conspicuous dark stains, glistening in the light, had taken the standard issue fatigues and warped them out of all recognizability with any uniform, a mad tailor wielding buckets of sticky crimson dye. "There are causes, and there are effects. The mistake people make is in thinking they have anything to do with one another. Still, I'd like it if you did it. A pleasing...symmetry. And what more can anyone ask?"

"I don't know how," Hal said, his voice uneven and inevitable, a thin sheet of fragile ice over the deep-running current of resolve. Frail and weak until you tried to break it.

The boy's smile deepened the lines etched beside his eyes.

"It's easy." Heavy with relief. "First, you take the gun."

Hal's arm uncoiled from beneath Esau's neck, gently disentangling, and held out above him, waiting.

Adamska's fingers hovered above the hilt, bent in its shape, at the distance of hesitation.

Revenge cleansed and sterilized. This was something else that entreated and encroached, and might never be gone.

He had asked trust from Hal too many times to deny him this.

At Ocelot's side the gun snapped a measured ration of revolutions, and lifted upwards, coming to rest held by the barrel, hilt quiescent in Hal's palm.

"Nothing easier," Esau was murmuring, his lids lowering. "Nothing in the world."

Hal's hand grasped the handle, looking unnatural and out of place, wrenching as a puddle of quiet sense in a Dadaist landscape.

It had been easy to give it to him before.

Adamska said, never leaving his eyes, "You don't have to do this."

He blinked rapidly to clear his eyes.

Softly, Esau babbled to himself.

"Is there a Life Over screen? I've had enough of 'Continue,' thank you, I think I'd rather Exit...So nice of you to give the choice...I think I'm going to like it here... "

"Yeah," Hal said. "I do."

The light was unable to harshen the curves of his face, soft like wood worn by the pressure of a hand to show the heart of itself. The tracks of salt, parallel paths, glittered like war paint. Determination stiffened the line of lips made for thoughtful words by warm light. It was like looking at a picture that appeared to be a blank pattern with nothing to catch the eye, unless you knew the secret, and once the hidden image was uncovered you could never go back to seeing it the other way. An unassuming face to fool those who made assumptions. Stubble marked his neck, shadows his eyes. Adamska knew the outward signs of a mind and body that wanted nothing more than to crumble and give in.

His hand was shaking badly.

He didn't withdraw it.

Ocelot let the revolver leave him.

Strange, to see that barrel shake.

"It never made any sense," Esau was saying conversationally, logic binding his bloodshot voice like glue and string. "There was never any Jacob. No one grasping my heel. Ah, what a mess...I've got nothing to sell, not a rite for first or last...All for nothing but a message, without so much as a pot to put it in...They weren't thinking at all, were they? All their plans that such a little thing as a bullet can break. All the plans, plots and plants, and all it comes right down to is chance. How impractical. No, don't tell me. Maybe the secret to a working watch is not to look too close. Ah."

The beacon of light off the revolver caught him in the midst of whatever delusion he inhabited. It pulled him back. He looked up at Hal and smiled.

"A little too late to make it quick, but better late than days of agony, right?" His laugh, high and fluttering, became a wince and groan. "Don't mind that, just a little gallows joke. Or firing squad. Whatever this is. What is this?"

His fevered eyes jerked from one man kneeling over him to the other, wanting an answer.

Adamska looked to Hal. His hand was white around the gun's handle, eyes lowered and not averted, a stiffness firmer than pride visible in the slender iron of his spine. His throat jumped, and tears slipped now and then from behind the glass that mirrored and magnified them. His hands had never flinched to stir the vague substance of reality. Now they shook to take a man's life. Exhaustion pervaded the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes. Every second, he should have stood down. Every second, he chose, and didn't.

What resources a man had mattered nothing to what he would do when pushed beyond them.

"This is mercy," said Ocelot.

A drop of blood meandered from the crack of the boy's smile. His eyes were remote behind pain, as if watching from the distance of a dream. Something triumphant flashed in them.

"I don't know how to do this," Hal said.

"It's simple," Adamska told him, knowing the simple things weren't what he meant.

"It is." The rise and fall of Esau's ribcage seemed monumental. Miles between each ragged breath.

Hal's grip around the gun shifted. He was used to lighter tools. It was in his left hand, but the discomfort had little to do with dominance. He was ambidextrous, Adamska remembered, as if it had been an incidental aside read in a letter from an old friend.

Esau smiled. There was something nice about a plan that was going smoothly. "Now, you lay me down."

Adamska lent his arm. In mirror image they knelt to lower the boy to the ground. He was lighter than he looked. Dust escaped from the edges of him.

That task was done. In unspoken accord, they stood and stepped back.

There was a moment of vertigo, looking down at the boy with his back to the ground. As if it were a wall he were propped insouciantly against, head tilted at a jaunty angle.

"Good," Esau sighed. "Almost there."

The hand covering his stomach fell to his side. The wound was a small, clean circle. It was difficult to see if you weren't looking for it. Easy if you followed the lines of pain that made it the center of the boy's faint, halting movements.

Hal made a choking noise at the sight and raised the revolver.

His grip was all wrong. The aim was canted.

"No," Ocelot said, coming up behind him, pressing against him and laying his arms against his, taking his hands in his grasp. So thin and cold. "Like this."

Adamska steadied him, ranged along him like an exoskeleton. Absorbed his trembling. Taught him with his hands the language of the revolver. He murmured in his ear, felt terse nods and the angle of adjustment. He learned quickly. Shadows mimed them on the cliff wall.

It wasn't difficult. The range was close and the target was still but for the movement of his eyes, following.

Ocelot did not insult Hal by asking again to fire the weapon in his place.

"Hurry now, love," Esau whispered, halves of the moon closed over his eyes. His smile had melted away into peace. "Give me the traitor's reward. There's a hole in my heart shaped like a bullet. It's waiting for you. Let me try the forbidden pleasure. Give me mercy."

Adamska kept his hands on Hal's wrists.

The recoil broke through both of them like a sound wave through water.

Esau did not jerk. He lay still, eyes half-closed. It would have been difficult to know anything had changed, if you couldn't see him standing above it, insubstantial, bluegrey, his fingers formed into the shape of a pair of pistols as he faded and was gone.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/66/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/66/>

# chapter 67

## Stray by Dahne

*Entropy can change the nature of a man.*

Hal stumbled forward and left the gun behind.

The ground wasn't moving. It pitched and heaved under Hal's feet. The boy wasn't moving. He was gone.

"He's dead," Otacon said, the gears of his mouth moving without any current to power them.

"He was dead a long time ago," said Adamska's cool voice. "All you did was to make it official."

Hal jerked a glance over his shoulder. He was there, the shining revolver just barely wisping smoke in his hand, a step behind him, unwilling to let him face the corpse alone.

Esau lay on his back in a pool of blood and cold light. His lips were slightly parted, his eyes lidded low. His lashes cast long shadows. His right hand curled pathetically at his side. Two holes marked his torso. One at his stomach, the other over his heart.

"I killed him," Otacon said.

"Not a bad shot," Ocelot said, stepping around him to get a better look. "Not perfect, but close enough to be clean."

The boy lay still. No breathing, no blinking, none of the innumerable subliminal tics of a functioning soul.

There was a tear in his pant leg just above the knee. His head shouldn't have been tilted like that.

"I killed him," Otacon said.

The revolver was spinning on Adamska's finger. "He made his choice."

The boy looked almost delicate. Small, or distant, though he was only a few steps away. The light bleached him from pale to inhuman white, touched with black and maimed with red. Flowing abstract shapes. A Rorschach test. Only a test. *I see a butterfly.*

The whirring sound, familiar as the muscle memory of taking a step forward. The acrid sulfur smell of cordite made his eyes water. Dull steps on stone that seemed to echo and ring, like the clink of metal.

The boy's halfclosed eyes made it unbearable.

"Don't you get it?" Otacon cried, turning on Adamska and away from the corpse. "Esau's *dead*. I- I- oh, god..."

Ocelot came toward him. His eyes, ice blue, searched his face and tabulated the findings.

"He wanted to die." The lines of his mouth held no pity. "He wouldn't have come here if he hadn't. He said it himself. You granted his wish, in the way he wanted it. Anyone should hope to be so lucky."

The shock and thin shell of words Hal had been hiding behind cracked. The word he was running from was all he could see.

It fell to the ground, burning between them.

"I'm a murderer."

"You did what needed to be done," Ocelot said, and if Hal had been paying attention he never would have missed the dangerous note in his voice.

Hal stared at his hands, hardly feeling the sense of sudden, unnatural stillness. "I really did it. I

murdered some poor, damn, dumb kid. Oh god- how could I-

"Dead is dead," said Ocelot. "If you hadn't done it, I would have."

"You don't understand." Hal was staring at his hands, grimed and bloodstained fingers outspread as if to catching the falling light. "I've never killed somebody before. Not- like this. I can't, I can't face this...I..."

White light smearing over the boy's broken body, still, his hands, dark blood smeared across them with the mud made out of dirt and blood, his mouth open like he was waiting, what was he trying to say? Just two little holes and the blood all over. In the shed he kept smiling like he knew a secret, but it wasn't a good one, all it had gotten him was here and killed. So still. Pale. He was always pale, even when he was bleeding.

*alive without breath, as cold as death*

"He's dead because of me."

The accusation was low and throbbing, like a heartbeat. Like the reverberations of the piston driving the knowledge into the base of Hal's neck, again and again until it was numb and never stopping. When the balance of the tilting ground broke he would slide off into the sky.

He could feel the walls of his mind dissolving into acid and vertigo.

"With my own hands."

"Hal." A voice from nearby. A hand on his shoulder. Startling weight, no gloves. His head snapping up like recoil. That face, knife edged nose and ice blue eyes and the concern that fit them oddly, familiarity untraceable like invisible ink until you held it over the fire.

Color and image soaked through his mind.

Like a blind man he reached up to touch Adamska's face.

"You were there," he said, with wonder. "You're why he was screaming, and there was nothing I could do but pray you would stop. Any one of them could have killed me, would have if I wasn't useful, but you scared me the worst. The revolver. How did you change? You can't. It doesn't work that way. You're gone, and you're not coming back. You're not the same. Who are you?"

There was nothing he could grasp. It all flowed over him like water, running red. Showing something to him and then pulling it away the instant before it all made sense.

"It doesn't make any sense."

He couldn't see. Water was blurring the boundaries. He had to hold it and he couldn't, it slipped, it ran, precious and irreplaceable and it was

gone

gone

"His whole life was my fault."

Hal's voice was thin and pulled out of him juddering like a spool from bad machinery. His hands spread out in front of him, empty, dirty. All ten fingers and nothing hurt, nothing he could feel, nothing more than a phantom limb which was just the nerves and body calling out look here, someone help, oh god something's wrong. Mud and blood all over, drying into a paste and a shell and soon it would crack.

"None of this would ever have happened if it hadn't been for me. All for me."

His voice was cracking, flaking, splintering like dry rotting wood.

"I never wanted it. Adamska, I never asked. Who told me? All that I did that I should have, it was never meant to hurt anybody else. Why did they hurt him? Did they think they had to? Did they think it would help? I never wanted to hurt...And I killed him. It was me."

Adamska's voice cut through like a hot knife through cartilage.



"Do you think if it were me it would mean nothing?"

Hal's head jerked away from the sight of Esau's corpse.

"Th...that's not what I..."

There was only one Ocelot. This one, standing in front of him, arms spread wide. His pale gold eyebrows drew up in exaggerated curiosity.

"You're right. It doesn't mean anything to me. Why should it? He who needs to die is killed. Does it make a difference? Not to the gun. Not to me."

Otacon said through dry air, "Liar."

"Absolutist, aren't you? Let me see if I have this right."

He lifted his hand in that strangely graceful cut of a gesture, long finger extended in front of the mocking severity of his face.

"Killing someone who is dying and has asked it of you as a favor horrifies you. Killing someone as part of a job, or just because he's in your fucking way – that's just the lower end of the same scale."

His eyes sharpened, the fine veil of mockery dropping from raw anger.

"And that's what bothers you, isn't it."

He closed the distance.

"Now, you're no better than me."

Shock slashed through Hal.

"W, what are you-"

"Isn't it?"

The shout echoed off the stone wall.

Ocelot bore down.

Otacon's mouth drew into a firm line. He jerked, as if beginning to step back and arresting the instinct. He felt erratic tears ran in the tracks from his eyes, a mechanism forgotten and not fully disengaged.

"I'm the one who killed him," he said. "Not you."

"Yes, and isn't that sweet." His lips twisted with vicious disgust. "Now you're down to my level. Gotten your hands a little dirty, eh?"

Ocelot leaned forward, stealing the freedom of space. His voice hissed a caress.

"Do you like it?"

Hal couldn't understand this. Nothing was making sense.

He stared into Adamska's face, searching for something he recognized, and could only say, "What?"

"You must have enjoyed it," Ocelot pressed. "You don't often get to experience that kind of power. Making a man's life *yours*. Feels good, doesn't it? Even better than when you feel it through me."

Hal's face tilted upward to follow him. The back of his mind noticed that he was close enough to feel the heat of his body, but the suit seemed to block it.

It was as if the choking fog had cleared and taken him with it, just a little up and above his right shoulder, watching with sudden clarity and hanging close, waiting. He could read every layer of Adamska. Below this the anger, below that the pain.

"If what you want," Hal said, and he had never heard his voice so calm, "is for me to say that everything you've done is okay, you're not going to get it. I can't absolve you of anything. Just like you can't absolve me of this."

Ocelot spread his hands, a gesture of exaggerated loss. He scanned the surroundings. His gaze

brushed over the rocks, open sky, and the cooling corpse.

"Was there a sin here? All I see is a job done – not badly either, ask any of my men how often I say that."

His eye gleamed.

"No. I see what's happened here. You wanted a taste of the thrill firsthand. You finally couldn't stand to let me keep all the fun, but you forgot that you wouldn't be able to stay the hero, pretty and pure. Now you're having regrets because you've come down to my level."

His face twisted into a snarl like a long wince.

"But we're not and never will be the same."

Ocelot loomed over Hal, their faces nearly meeting at the apex of his shadow.

Shock, anguish, and sorrow were consumed by anger.

"Your level?" Hal's voice struck out, thinned to an edge. "Like killing people is some sort of game and I had a better score? Adamska, I murdered a man. Do you even understand what that means?"

"I," Adamska said archly, virulent with compressed wrath, "know more about murder than you'll ever dream."

"Then how do you do it?"

Hal's voice was raw, too loud.

His arms pulled tight across his midriff, bent him forward into a crouch. Cold ground filled his blurred, aching vision.

The reality of it hit him in the temple like a fist and didn't stop.

He swallowed.

"How do you..."

There was a soft sound of crunching gravel.

Adamska knelt in front of him. He set his hands on his shoulders and coaxed him to raise his eyes.

"You carry it."

"I can't," Hal whispered. His voice struggled out of him like the last rat from a ship already sunk.

Ocelot's eyes, realer than anything had a right to be. Blue pale as ice. Hal's glasses were smeared and askew. He couldn't remember how to fix them.

"You are."

White light melded to one side of his face exactly. It pulled out the green in the suit that covered him, all but hands and feet, both bare, the green that was so near to black.

The pressure of his voice was low and insistent, like the grip of his hands.

"If you want to kill yourself with guilt, you're not weak enough to make it easy. *He* won't help you. All he left is gratitude."

Hal stared in incomprehension.

Adamska licked his lips. His eye darted to the side, quickly returned. He leaned forward, conspiring.

"Can't you feel it?"

"Feel...?" Hal began, and stopped.

He had forgotten.

Ghosts didn't frighten him anymore. He was too tired.

"Adamska." The attention in the blue eyes sharpened to him. "Is he still here?"

"No." Ocelot didn't turn to scan the mountainside. He must not have had to. "He's gone."

Adamska helped Hal to his feet. His limbs were cold and stiff, and it took deliberate thought to move them. Exhaustion made replicas of age appear in Adamska's movements as well.

Adamska looked long at where Esau's corpse lay. Already it was hard to tell it had ever moved, and wasn't a formation of rocks throwing shadows in white light.

"I know murder when I see it done," Adamska said. "You set him free."

"I'm trying to believe that," Hal said.

He was.

"Listen to me." His face was an island in black. "Don't romanticize killing or make it some kind of special sin. It's a job. Nothing more. You did well."

Otacon nodded in a jerk, as though the string supporting him had been fumbled. He pushed his glasses up to rub at the fatigue that stuck like napalm to his eyes. Refuge in self-hatred was closed to him.

"I've been responsible for death before," he said. "I guess this shouldn't be any different, huh?"

Adamska had gone to retrieve his boots and pull them on. "It's always different."

In midmotion as he stood he paused, face averted in profile.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No," Hal said, quiet in a way that was not shame. "You were right."

How strange that even now there could be a bloom of satisfaction at understanding.

Adamska straightened, watching him.

"If I hated myself for this, I would have to hate you too."

He anchored to the impossibility.

Adamska looked at him with a strange wariness.

Whatever he was looking for, he must have found it. He gave a brief nod, and glanced, maybe involuntarily, to Esau's body.

Anything was worse the less you saw of it. It was the law that made low-budget horror movies possible. Never let the audience look at the monster straight on.

Hal walked to where Esau's body lay, and crouched by the dead boy's side.

Adamska said nothing.

He lay just as they had left him. Wind tugged at his dark, matted hair to give it the illusion of motion. In the holsters at his hips the two pistols rested, back where they began. His brow was unlined under the dirt. Blood caked his chin and mouth, muddily streaked his neck. His mouth hung slightly open, as if to protest, displaying the narrow end of his abbreviated tongue. A red rivulet ran down his arm. It was as lean and angular as if the muscle wrapped between skin and bone with nothing to spare.

"He's so thin," Hal said.

Adamska offered a distracted nod while freeing the spent shell casing from his revolver. It flashed as it tumbled and made a ringing one-note song on the rock. "An animal is only dangerous if it's starving."

Hal stood.

"Come on."

"And do what?" Adamska asked, slotting a bullet into the empty chamber.

"Help me lift him."

Perplexity crossed Adamska's brow, gilded with a trace of distaste. "What for?"

He looked like he was made of paper. Stained and charred. More than Hal could carry alone, insubstantial as he looked. It wouldn't need to be far.

"We have to bury him."

Adamska shrugged.

"There's nothing left."

The observation was without malice.

"Let the vultures have the rest. It's what they're here for."

Hal said, "We have to bury him."

"Why bother?"

"Because it's what you do."

Adamska tapped his reshod heel significantly on the ground. "You can't dig in rock."

Practical applications. He was good at that.

"Then we'll pile rocks on him. Build a cairn. Something."

Adamska's hand and gun found the holster on their own impulse. That strange grace. "If it makes you happy."

Once, Otacon would have said he'd never be able to touch a dead body. Funny, how easy it was to do things you thought you couldn't when there wasn't any choice

Hal took him beneath the shoulders, Adamska at the legs. Beneath the thin, tattered shirt there was a little warmth left. It would have leached quickly into the stone. .

It was good he had Adamska to help. He couldn't have carried Esau on his own. Dragged him, maybe. It was better this way.

By unspoken agreement, they set him by the wall, beneath the wild wire sculpture that spread like silver vines. It was sheltered there.

The open mountainside was covered with scree. It didn't object to letting them gather up its castoffs, thrown like dice in a long forgotten game.

Where to start was the hardest. Once a stone outline bordered him, the rest was easy.

Otacon almost said something about not dropping them on the body so heavily, before he realized that it didn't matter anymore. Ocelot caught his train of thought and looked at him, paused half bent, and snorted a wry inverted laugh.

The cairn rose with the disjointed speed of a dream, as though forming the resolve and engaging in its motions were all it took to turn a few sad rocks strewn over the boy to a rough, concealing shroud, secure in its mass and weight.

For the first time, when he covered the last place where an uneven join let still white skin show with dun rock warm from his hands, Hal understood why people buried their dead.

*Like the world's most morbid Tetris clone*, he thought, but the place for hysteria was empty. God, he was tired.

"I guess that's it," he said.

They stood back to survey it. Their work amounted to a rough mound of scree in the shelter at the side of the shelf where Adamska had made his desperate stand. It lay beneath the silver filigree, as if a section of the mountainside had slid down to expose its nerveture.

"He's dead," Hal said, the words foreign with finality.

"Yes," said Adamska, at his side.

"We're alive."

"Yes."

He shaped a word and held it up to the cold, steady light. "How?"

Adamska's eyes covered the stones. "We won."

"It doesn't feel like a victory."

"The real ones never do."

The lamp stared past him like a beacon on the makeshift grave and gave the shadows more definition than anything else.

Adamska's face was the color of bone, pale as a prow pushing back the waters of the night. He must have been feeling it. Adrenaline turned sour in his veins. Gravity pulling him down.

Hal reached down and switched the light off.

"Come on," he said.

Adamska looked at him in the cast of blue, dark like the color they used to call Prussian before everyone had forgotten that name. He nodded.

They sat at the cliff's edge where the ground dropped away and waited for dawn to come.

---

## Notes:

-You just know Hal has read Watchmen half a dozen times.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/67/>

# chapter 68

## Stray by Dahne

*"He's not mine, is he? His madness... his madness keeps him sane."*

-Sandman: Brief Lives, Neil Gaiman

---

*Vigil can change the nature of a man.*

The forest lay below them in the stars' meek phosphorescence, rustling in its sleep.

"I'll keep watch," Adamska said. "You can sleep."

Hal sat beside him, arms looped loosely over his knees. "I won't."

Adamska shrugged. "Fine."

The sky was black and white, stirred by a breeze that carried the forest's damp, green night scent. Someday the horizon would smear into light, and from somewhere there would be noise, and confusion, and the way back to the real world.

"You know," Hal said, voice soft and stripped bare, "I used to be afraid of heights. I'm not, now. I could walk right off the edge here and fall until the ground or the jungle catches me, and I wouldn't be scared. I could."

His hand was cool beneath the light touch of Adamska's fingers. "Don't."

Whatever he said, there was fear in his eyes, and a loss that made Adamska want Esau alive so he could throw him against the wall until his skull cracked.

"Why not?"

Adamska flicked a stone off the edge. Whatever it hit was too far and muffled to hear underneath the shuffle of wind.

"It would be a pain in the ass to go down and pick you up."

His laugh was weak, but fuck them all and fucking god damn, it was something.

---

"So this is where you grew up, huh," Hal said.

"Mostly." Adamska toyed with a loose fiber on the arm of his suit. Looked like cutting edge technology wasn't all that different from anything else, when it came down to it. "I was on assignment often. They left it up to me to convince Volgin that they were all on his behalf. Some were. Others, I don't know. They didn't bother telling me much."

He craned his head back to watch the stars.

"Half the men I've killed, I never knew their names."

---

"Is there anybody you left behind?"

A shift of wind pressed cool grit against the side of Adamska's face. "You asked me that before."

"Oh." Regret shaded Hal's voice. "I don't remember."

"I lied, anyway."

Adamska leaned back and settled weight onto the heels on his hands, feeling the reassuring weight of rock beneath the dirt.

"You said no."

"You guessed."

"Am I right?"

"Yes."

---

The moment of drawing breath and hesitation before speech. Hal's shoulders made a dark, curved shape.

"Everything I said to him, before... It wasn't true. You know that, right?"

"I know."

He had suspected, which wasn't the same thing, quite.

"Except that I am afraid, a little."

The hung head of quiet surrender.

"Hal." A spark struck off bent and battered ferocity, tempered by the night. Adamska lifted his hand to his face across the gap between them to raise his downturned eyes. "I will never hurt you."

"No, no." He shook his head, letting the words hop between them like crickets at a finger's touch. "I mean...that's not what I'm afraid of. It's...seeing how easily you can destroy yourself. It wasn't just how you would have done it. It was how happy you looked about it. Proud, and fierce, like it would have been a victory. Worse...it was worse than when you just gave up, almost."

In his memory the heft of the revolver turned backwards in his hands, the darkness down the barrel and counting spinning chambers like cards. Click.

It could have ended there.

"It...it scared me," Hal confessed, turning his face away without drawing back. "A lot."

Instead, he was here.

There was a law.

Adamska said, "There's more than one way to win."

---

"Did you ever think of running away?"

"No." Adamska flicked the word like a switchblade.

Hal thought, before speaking. They had time.

"It must have been pretty bad, though."

The words left him like moths unfurling wings, learning the heft and pitch of air currents. His mouth was visible as movement. Some animals tracked that way. Not by color, or even so much by shape, but a razor-thin margin of kinetic communication.

"Sometimes." Adamska folded a leg beneath him and settled his ankle on the cool dust. He could feel it along the length of his leg, through the suit's thick membrane. "They gave me the chance a few times. It never occurred to me to take it."

"But... why not?"

"Isn't it obvious?" He snorted slightly. "They made it a challenge."

Adamska's muscles released the tension that bound them in concert, one by one.

He said to dark air:

"I always won."

---

"I could find them for you. People from your time."

Adamska's shoulder gave a listless tilt. "If they're still alive."

"Well, yeah." A tinge of silence. "I could find that out for you, too."

"There was no one important. A few contacts, and the unit. They would have lost usefulness in a few few years' time. Some already had."

The wind batted lazily at exposed skin. Behind them, there was a soft sough of shifting wires.

"Still. Wouldn't you rather know?"

Adamska gave him a look.

"Yeah." Hal looked out at where the horizon cut off the sky. "I guess you're right."

---

"This is going to sound stupid."

Indulgence smoked Adamska's reply.

"Has that ever stopped you before?"

In the place where Hal's voice should have risen in argument, wind rustled in the trees below.

It was in the rough, ragged space above whisper when it came.

"I've never hurt anyone before."

Adamska snorted softly. "If you wanted to shock me, try again."

Hal let out a breath at right angles to the breeze.

"No," he admitted. "That's not true."

Adamska, remembering, spun the revolver in his hand and paid the courtesy of inattention.

Soon, Hal's voice wove across the rustling silence.

"My stepmother...she had a daughter. Emma. She was a lot younger than me. I guess it was weird that we were so close. But, after- that- happened...I couldn't face what I'd done."

His voice sank like his silhouette.

"I ran."

The gun's arc struck sparks of light from the stars.

"There are things," Adamska said, and the revolver flashed from hand to hand, "that you have to leave behind."

"Th...that's not it. She trusted me." His voice dropped. "And I betrayed her."

"What happened to her?" The trigger guard made a smooth pressure in a ring around his finger.

"I don't know how she dealt with it all. All alone. All I know is, she works with AIs now." His voice twisted ruefully. "For the government. But they say she's one of the best in the world."

The last was with a battered pride.

Ocelot frowned at him over the mirage of the revolver, spinning an example for the ponderous stars. "AIs?"

"Artificial intelligences. You know, like in 2001."

The moon cast a dim, pale light. It was enough to illuminate the look Adamska gave.

"Oh. Right. You wouldn't. Anyway, I mean the movie, not the year. Well, it was a book first. The movie's more famous. Nobody really understands it, though, with the monkeys and the monolith and the thing with the baby at the end- they say it's about evolution, but I still don't get what was with the weird white room, and the guy being all different ages at once..."

He trailed off. Ocelot didn't interrupt. He had no idea what Hal was talking about, but that had never been the point.

"Anyway," Hal resumed, after his neural detour had been completed, "the main part is about these guys on a spaceship going to Jupiter. Mostly it's run by this really advanced computer – advanced to the point where its processes are essentially thought. It's almost human. But at some point somebody had programmed it to go against the personality set down in its code – that is, they made it lie. It couldn't handle the contradiction, so it went kind of paranoid and crazy. It killed off most of the human crew, and tried to kill the last guy, but he managed to get into its systems and take it offline. Killing it."



His smile was wan and off-center.

"The funny thing is what the computer was called."

Blackened at the edges.

"HAL."

He laughed like air rattling in a paper bag.

"Stupid thing to name your kid after, huh?"

The wind stirred tangled strands of hair above his lowered eyes.

"I always hated my name. Seemed like a bad joke."

Somewhere below them, a trick of the air brought the sound of wings. Something startled out of sleep in the branches.

"It's bullshit, you know," Adamska said abruptly.

Hal looked up from his hands. "What?"

"Names. Giving a different one to the part that does the bitter things and pretending it belongs to someone else. You can't divide it into a part you like to look at and a part you don't. It doesn't work."

"Yeah." Hal's hands had stilled, folded over one another. "I kind of figured that."

For a while, they watched the dark shapes stir in the valley below them. The air came up cool and smelling of trees.

"He said he never had a real name," Hal said softly.

"He was lying."

"It's weird, isn't it?" His casual tone bent at an unsteady angle. "It shouldn't make any difference if he was really called Michael or Paul or whatever, but he wasn't. And it's- it's so damn *stupid*..."

His thin fists were white in the moonlight.

"Damn it," he whispered. "God. God damn it."

---

"It doesn't make any sense at all. They should have sent somebody with experience, who'd been working for them for years, who wasn't so...so..."

His voice broke.

"God, Adamska," he whispered. "He was just a kid."

Ocelot said, "No one who works for them is an innocent."

"I can't understand."

A jerk of gravity struck his hand against the ground. Long fingers clawed a cage around a dark pebble.

His hair fell over his eyes. His shoulders hunched protectively.

"Just yesterday, before the sun set- he was alive, then. Was it that long ago?"

He clutched the stone in his fist.

"Or was he dead already? Like a variable set to decay until it hits zero. How do you tell the difference? If they set this all to happen, except... We broke the script. We're a bug. It wasn't planned. We mutated the code and now it's an accident or a miracle that we're still pinging around at all, a freak of nature, and soon the infection'll spread and all of it will degrade and disintegrate until there's, there's nothing..."

Hal's fists shoved his glasses up and pressed against his eyes. He tore breath from a gasp, like drowning and hitting the surface he hadn't known to expect.

Ocelot wouldn't do him the insult of saying it would be all right.

---

His shoulders shaking in their fold of night.

Dying was easier in darkness.

---

"If there was a way." Thick-voiced and desolate, desperate. "If I could go back, and stand there one more time, and, and do it again..."

"Don't think like that." Harsh. "The choice is made."

"No." Lower, carrying on a flicker of air current. "That's not..."

His head hung, cords of suspension had abandoning him in confession.

"I would do it again."

---

Every man who was weak dealt with the first kill in the same way. Every man who wasn't dealt with it differently.

---

Moonlight washed the dirt, salt, and specks of blood on his face to its own spectrum of silver grey. Mare Tranquilarus, the stubble on his cheek.

His eyes were lowered to the sleeping forest. Raven's tracks marked the corners, deepened by the exhaustion that canted his profile downwards. The price of the night's struggles and their survival was written there in flecks of dried blood.

Adamska had never fully understood how beautiful he was.

He looked old like a caryatid was old.

His hands rested on his knees, unmoving.

"E.E. would be about his age, now."

---

"Adamska?"

"Yeah?"

Hal's voice was soft and tarnished.

"Talk to me."

---

He did as he had been trained to never do, no matter what was done to him.

He told him everything he knew.

---

He told him the stupid things; Lyosha's tricks. How Sasha would never admit that the burn scar on his chest was from falling asleep with a cigarette in his mouth and setting his shirt on fire. How Kifa could jam the barrel of a machine gun into a man's stomach and let loose without blinking, but would cold-cock anyone who killed a spider in his sight. How nothing could stop Fedya from playing with the guard dogs until one pranced up, proud as Caesar, carrying an unexploded claymore in its mouth. How that was the day he had begun to believe in luck.

He told him about ambushes crouched in the blue-green patter of rain on leaves and the shifting sand sounds of each other's breathing. He told him about looking up to see thousands of hornets make a buzzing wire net between him and the sky. He told him about walking into enemy territory like it was where he'd been born.

---

"I don't remember how old I was," Adamska said in answer to the question Hal wouldn't ask. "I'd gotten used to simple assignments already."

A night breeze stroked his neck.

"It was the handler they called Tridtsat Dva. Smile like a fucking machete. Habit of tapping his nails together. I'd met him before, under a different name. They changed them often so none would pick up associations or get interesting by proxy."

Adamska kept his eyes leveled at the night. The last thing he wanted to see was sympathy.

"They'd given me the gun a while before. Their idea of a dare. Said to get used to it. Take care of it."

Cool metal under his hand. Smooth as a cat's pelt to his touch.

"An M1911A1, all mine. A lesson in power, they called it. They thought it would be a toy."

He lowered his head.

"It was the first thing that was mine, though I wasn't the first to hold it. He smiled when he said that. Shining and curved up at the corners, sharp."

Adamska caressed the texture of his gun.

"The handle was a little worn, the color just beginning to deepen, just begun to be polished by a man's hand. There was a notch near the base like a chip in a tooth. Put me in a dark room with a thousand guns and I'll find you that one by touch."

"I believe you," said Hal, soft confidence.

"There was a time I had to drop it in favor of something more conventional, to keep up appearances. It could be in a warehouse somewhere still for all I know."

Waiting, patient and faithful. His marks still on it. They say you never forget your first.

"I'd learned its habits by the time they gave me the target."

"What was his name?" Hal said. He was looking out over the dark huddled shapes of the trees, knowing it would be better that way.

"All I know is what they told me."

Adamska kicked at the ground.

"Fucking Ivan Ivanovich."

Hal was silent, attentive.

"I don't know why they wanted him dead. He didn't look important. I was expecting some old, fat bureaucrat like a decrepit seal stuffed in a suit, not someone barely in his thirties. He looked like a fucking librarian. He was out alone in a little house up the ass of nowhere."

Ocelot's thumb caressed the curve of the revolver's hilt.

"Someone must have told him he would be safe there."

Their operatives were required to have excellent memories.

"He put his hand up and shouted, 'wait,' as if that would slow the bullet down."

He felt his lips twist into a grim smile.

"I hadn't asked what to do with the body. That lesson was fast learned. It was luck that he wasn't heavy. I ended up hauling it out into the woods and digging a grave with a fucking garden trowel. I jumped every time I heard a fox rustle in the bushes. Later I found out that there wasn't a living person in thirty miles."

It had been the longest night of his life, once.

"In the morning they came to find me, Tridtsat Dva and a few of the oxen without so much as numbers as far as I knew. I nearly hauled off and shot them all. Would that be an embarrassing way to go, eh? Killing as many of them as I could not for freedom or revenge or anything pretty but because of being alone and young and scared, and them the first things to move. When I was back at the base I realized I'd never found out his real name."

He watched the distant, passive sway of branches in the dark.

"I hadn't thought to ask."

---

"Do you ever wish you hadn't?"

"No."

Weariness was part of Hal's voice now, like mold in a house built too close to the sea. "I haven't said what, yet."

Adamska shifted one leg over the other. "What?"

"Come to the future."

"Oh." Adamska thought it over. "No."

"Even with all that's happened?"

"Yes."

"But..." Hal gestured, for some reason not considering the topic properly put to rest. "You've missed a lot. A lot of history, I mean."

"History is given too much credit. If I'd been around, I would have had to do most of the work. People don't assassinate themselves, unless you've got uncommon luck."

"I mean," Hal said, in the tone that meant his mind was still going and his ears would have to wait their turn, "there's been the Berlin Wall falling, and perestroika, and the internet, and space exploration, and star wars- the strategic defense thing, I mean, not- well, the movie, too- and JFK's assassination, and Chernobyl..."

"All right," Adamska said. "Then tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"All of it."

A hint of exasperation sharpened the numb corners of his voice. "I can't tell you everything that's happened in the past fifty years."

Adamska looked at the place of dim reflections and lesser darkness where his face lay. The memory of tracing its shape lay in his fingertips, tingling like static.

"You were making a good start."

---

"See, people were still worried about nukes, long after your time. It still seemed like the Cold War could break open any day. Mutually assured destruction wasn't doing anybody any good, except the sci fi writers who could always use a good setup for something post-apocalyptic. So they came up with this idea to set up satellites and shoot down enemy missiles with space lasers-"

"All right." Adamska put up his hand. "If you don't want to tell me, you don't have to tell me."

"Huh?" Hal blinked, his momentum derailed. "What are you- hey! I'm not making this up!"

"Of course you're not," Adamska assured him.

He leaned back on his hands, feeling the roll of pebbles beneath his palms.

"Tell me more about the space lasers."

---

"Adamska."

"Yeah?"

Something along the cliff's wall surrendered to gravity. The mountain shifting in its sleep.

"Did you see him, after... I killed him?"

The words fit poorly in his mouth.

"Not for long," said Adamska.

In the long night watches it was hard to remember there were colors other than midnight blue.

Trepidation deepened the shadows at Hal's mouth.

"Did he...say anything?"

Adamska pretended not to notice the thread of desperation.

"Yeah."

He watched the glacial motion of the stars.

"Thank you."

---

"Hey."

Hal was looking at him sideways.

"Yeah?"

"Did you really bite his tongue off?"

Adamska refolded his legs. "Only a small piece."

Hal laughed and rolled a pebble in his palm. "You really are a savage."

"You like it," said Adamska indulgently.

---

"..but gets redeemed in the end when he kills the Emperor, and then dies right after. Then the good guys blow it all up, and the war's over, so they go and celebrate with all the little bearpeople puppets."

"Then what?"

"Nothing. That's the end. Everybody's happy."

"Huh."

"What?"

"That's it? Kill the right people, blow something up, and you're done."

"Pretty much."

Adamska's fingers traced trails in the cool dust.

"What a nice dream."

---

"It's not like I've never seen anybody die before," Hal said.

His fingers drummed against the dirt with soft sounds.

"I've helped FOXHOUND on missions sometimes, and somebody's always trying to break into Shadow Moses. After REX."

He smiled grotesquely.

"So it's been because of me before, too."

His voice was cracked from misuse. He stared down at his hands where they curled against one another.

"I've told them where to plant the claymores. I've given directions to the best point to snipe from. I've opened vents so that Snake could guide a NIKITA missile into a room full of enemy combatants."

"This shouldn't be any different."

---

Hal's hands were clasped between his knees like a boy's around a captured firefly.

"You know what gets me," he said, as if whispering it a secret.

"What?" said Ocelot, because he wasn't the kind of man who wouldn't.

"What gets me," and his voice was low and even, a carefully loose control – press too hard and it will be crushed, the delicate insect - "is that it was a mistake."

"No it wasn't," Ocelot said sharply.

A weak smile. "That they were after the time machine."

"Ah." Adamska nodded toward nothing. "That."

"If they'd asked, I would have told them." His fingers opened and re clenched, white in the moonlight. "If he'd just asked..."

"He wouldn't have believed you," Ocelot said. "The lie is too obvious."

"But... it's true."

"That's what makes it obvious."

Adamska's fingers tapped against the plastic-like material covering his knee. It bent well around the joints. A good amount of give.

"I would have sent them a, a god damn pamphlet." Long fingers curled into a fist on his knee. "'Why Things Don't Work The Way You Want Them To, So You Can Give It Up And Go Home Without Anybody Getting Hurt. By Hal Emmerich.'"

"There was nothing you could have done," Adamska said.

*"I know that!"*

In the echo, silence reformed, hesitant in its fragility.

"How do you do it?"

Hal's voice was soft, as though he had slackened his grip for the instant it took his strength to fly away. Just above a whisper and without the strength to shake.

"How can anybody live knowing that there's somebody always watching, always reaching in and twisting everything? Even if it's just a, a whim, or something you do just to see if you can. But somebody's depending on that. Somebody's life is shaped around it. They've been there, the whole time. Maybe even now."

His eyes were wide and white-rimmed, and he was very still.

"This could be all part of their plan. Everything always was. The multiple worlds, you coming here, me meeting you, loving you, killing him. Every choice, that was never really a choice."

He turned to Ocelot, luminous with pain.

"How can you live if you don't know how much of you is *you*?"

His face was stark in supplication, desperation in the slight parting of his lips. His subtle and imperfect defenses were stripped away, leaving him raw and pure and with nothing but a desperate desire he had to reach out to another and beg to fulfill, not that it stop, but that it be anchored to a point of reality and made into sense.

The hilt of the revolver was cool against Ocelot's palm.

He rose to a half-crouch, fingers of the other hand pressed into the dust.

He moved closer. Close enough to touch, in the air Hal's scent permeated. Oil. Machinery. Terror gone cold and not yet obsolete. The low, musky, sustained note of dried blood. Him.

Crouched in front of him, he took Hal's hand and placed it on the revolver's hilt. His fingers were thin and cool between Adamska's hands, formed in the shape of the grip beneath.

"Hold it," Ocelot said, holding Hal's eyes.

Grey behind glass, listening. Not staring at anything far-off or invisible. Only seeing him.

"Feel its shape. Good, solid steel. It turns as you direct. Take the trigger, and your will is the last word. Trust that. The will to aim and fire in the absolute moment is the smallest unit of decision. The direction is a single lapse of whim. You are the only source. No one can breathe for you. Some men are alive only because they aren't dead, because they would rather stay neither than choose."

Ocelot's hands were molded around Hal's steadily, as if bracing, though there was little need.

The weight of the gun was only enough to tell you it was there. Hal's hands supported it without detectable thought.

"Every instant you choose. It doesn't matter which. The choice makes you real."

Hal's face was close, limned in fine detail, like porcelain broken into an arrangement of shards infinitely more artful than the intended design

Beneath Adamska's palms, he felt Hal's hands grow warmer, the same as the gun's hilt.

---

Hal was silent for a long time. Adamska had fallen into the white hypnotic noise and sensation of his lazily spinning gun himself. Hal was asleep, probably. He didn't stop, to keep the cessation of sound from waking him.

Weariness in Ocelot was well trained. It stood outside the door until it was invited in, and that wasn't going to happen until they were well away from this place.

The last time he had stood guard had faded to more sensation than memory. His skills were too precious to waste on grunt work. The best spies made themselves indispensable to the victim. It was almost too easy.

It was strange to take the watch.

Ocelot shifted, countering his muscles' threats to stiffen. If he'd needed any help staying awake, the hard ground would have been glad to provide it.

Hal was still as cast silver, staring straight ahead at physical nothing.

"When you told me you'd made it," Adamska said, tone low and casual, gun's arc continuous, "I didn't believe you."

Hal blinked, and looked at him.

The little victories brought satisfaction.

"Made what?"

"That pet of yours." A hint of fondness took the place of scorn. "The metal beast."

"Oh, you mean REX." He sat up a little, working the stiffness from his shoulders. "I made her in the other world, too? Must be destiny." He smiled wanly.

"Even now I would think it a lie, if I didn't know better." He gestured with the spinning revolver. "You and that tank. It's a fucking odd pair. It's hard to believe you could make a thing like that. At the first look, I would have said you didn't have a drop of fight in you."

Ocelot wasn't used to being wrong.

"It's funny," Hal said quietly. "A few days ago, I would have said you were right."

His fingers trailed through the dust.

"But I've seen too much to stay still. Them...I'll fight them to the end of the earth. Even if I have to kill them. For what they did to him, and what they did to you."

Vehemence tautened his voice. It was odd to hear. Adamska hadn't thought anger could take root in the soil of this man's soul.

In *their* dealings, rainfall was rarely accidental.

Hal's hands clenched into fists.

"I'll help bring them down, no matter what it takes."

What the dying boy had suggested was true, when he gave the reason *they* would want the thing Hal alone could build.

They made mistakes.

"Would you give me a weapon like the one you made?" Adamska asked.

And Hal smiled.

"For the way you looked at her, I'd make you a hundred."

"Huh," said Adamska.

He leaned back, arching his neck at the starlight. Grit scraped his palms.

"So that's what you meant by a combination of sweet and scary."

---

"He didn't move at all," Hal said.

His knees were drawn up to his chest. His heel was twisting a halfmoon on the ground.

"Aren't you supposed to...jerk a little?"

"Some do." Adamska tugged at the wrists of the strange suit to resettle them. Wherever it fell into shadow, the material seemed to melt into the precise shade. It was disquieting to have parts of his limbs disappear. "Some don't."

"It's funny. Up until I was thirty, I'd never even seen somebody killed. Not really. Just in movies and anime."

Adamska was going to ask what in the hell *that* was. He had a distinct, almost metaphysical feeling that it was better not to.

"Now...I couldn't even tell you when I lost count."

He emitted a low, choked huff of a laugh.

"In movies, there's always a good reason. Either he's the bad guy, and he has to get killed because that's how you know the good guys've won, or he's just somebody nameless to throw in front of an explosion to make it more exciting. Or they're making an important sacrifice, and it's for a good reason, and that's how the story goes, and it's what they were made for..."

Hal swallowed hard.

"And anyway," he said, more softly, "it doesn't matter, in the end. None of it's real."

"It takes planning to die for a good reason," said Adamska. "Initiative. It's rare to be that lucky. They die for bad reasons, or none at all. There's no word for some but fucking stupid. I lost one of my best officers to hornets." He snorted under his breath. "Friendly fucking fire."

"Hornets? Did they sting you, too?"

"No. I fought them off." He nodded toward the revolver resting in his hand.

"You *shot* bees?"

Ocelot rolled his eyes. "Like this."

He twisted his wrist to snap the gun into a whirring arc.

"I had a pile of dead ones at my feet by the time it was over."

Hal's attention sharpened, eyes following the motion, as if it were a performance and he the ideal audience. The kind who thought, and wondered, with awe and fascination. "That's impossible."

"Not this, exactly." Ocelot flicked an appraising eye at the flash of silver in his hand. "I had two, then."

Stubbornness straightened Hal's back. "That would only get the ones that were flying directly in that area. If there were that many of them, all the rest should have been stinging you from every other direction."

"So you might think." Ocelot shrugged without a hitch in the gun's gleaming circle. The rotating flash was as much a function of his swirls of native kinetic energy as the pulse of blood. "They flew straight toward them. It was easy to swat them down."

"That doesn't make any sense."

He said it as if that had ever kept anything from happening.

"Moths, flames. Why should it be different?"



Hal sat up and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose.

"Moths are attracted to flames because they navigate by light. They don't just plunge toward something *because* it'll kill them."

Adamska passed the gun behind his back. "All I said is that's what happened."

"It's not possible." He strengthened around a didactic backbone. "No whole species can actually, actively seek its own destruction. It doesn't make evolutionary sense. They'd die out before they could get anything done. It'd self-correct. Of course, every once in a while you'll have the ones that'll die for a greater cause, like bees protecting the queen. Or you'll individuals who'll do something counter to their genetic programming and no one really knows why, maybe because they have to, or they're crazy, or they *think* they have to, or they've gotten twisted until there's no other choice, when they could have just...he never had to..."

Hal took a breath like tearing cloth, deep enough to scream with.

He let it out in a long, whispering sigh.

"Adamska." Barely audible above the rustling wind.

Hal was hunched in on himself, arms folded tightly over his stomach, head bent, like the body's token gestures to ward off absolute zero.

Adamska's thumb caressed the hilt of his revolver.

"I'm here," he said.

Hal's eyes were shadowed.

"Does it ever get easier?"

The pale shadows. Visible without light. They always asked why, even when it was obvious. It was rare the answer wasn't, 'Business.'

Strands of hair fell across Hal's eyes, batted by the wind. He didn't move to brush them aside.

Ocelot said, "Yes."

---

The rustling of the trees below was almost visible. The mind and eye associated sound and shadow and filled in the gaps.

A breeze with sting of chill slid over Adamska's skintight suit and fluttered the loose hem of Hal's shirt.

He spoke a sussurrus beneath the night sounds in the dregs and remnants of his voice.

"What scares me is that it's really not that bad."

"There is a story," said Hal.

His voice had settled to a low swaybacked chant, like the ones who surrendered and spoke just before losing their voices to screaming.

"When the world was young, there was a man. He was given gifts he wasn't meant to, and it was too late to take them back. Gods have their own rules too, you know."

The stars had turned their bright backs.

"So instead, they sent another. A box, this time, and they said never open it."

"And they expected that to work?" said Ocelot, with lightly acrid scorn.

"No, and they were right."

His tone was empty as the sky above the forest, below them.

"Another gift they gave was curiosity."

There was a tear in his hem that his fingers flayed.

"Out of the box came all the evil in the world. War. Hunger. Sickness. Death. They all came flying out, too fast to catch back. All out of that little box."

He put his hand to his face to push his glasses up. Somehow, they had stayed unlost and unbroken. Divine intervention, or only that they were too much a part of his face to let go.

At the juncture of the frame, the apex of the gesture, his finger fumbled. As though the habit, practiced while giving instructions over a pile of mismatched circuitry in a dog-scented garage, or with aplomb between shots of vodka and stories half confession and half boast, or at the feet of his pet behemoth, looking down, all unaware of Adamska's approach and the impeccable joy of being where he needed to be, had been forgotten in the details. As though his hands had become foreigners, trying to adapt to customs that they had observed but never understood. His finger slipped, lowered. The lenses glinted askew in the moonlight.

"But at the bottom, when they all were gone, there was one thing left."

His voice dredged a husk of black humor.

"Hope."

Somewhere in the night a raven cried.

"Let me guess," said Adamska. "Because as long as people have that, they'll keep playing along with the sadistic odds the powers get off on inflicting on them."

"Yeah," said Hal. "Something like that."

He separated a thread from the fray and rolled it between his fingers.

"Really, I'd never thought of it that way."

The thread twisted to the ground.

"See, the point is, out of everything the box holds, it also contains the key to undoing them. It has, inside it, its own nullification. From the very beginning, the solution is part of the puzzle. The weak point is part of the design."

He plucked at the frayed edge.

"Take that out and the whole thing breaks."

The sky was deep, and wide, and abiding.

"A character flaw," said Ocelot.

Hal's hands came to rest and fell still.

"Yeah," he said. "Yeah. That's exactly right."

---

The ink the sky was written in shifted from black to blue in the middle of an hourlong sentence. Adamska could smell dawn.

The silence shifted color, too. Dyed in darkness turned to rose grey, filling in Hal's outline in different shades. His arm rested on one knee, the other bracing behind him, the streaks of muddy blood the same black dirt alone would have been. His eyes were fixed on the fading stars. Dawn stained the stone his thumb stroked red.

Almost imperceptible, in the distance, there was a throb of helicopter blades.

Hal said, "Hello, world."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/68/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/68/>

# chapter 69

## Stray by Dahne

*Departure can change the nature of a man.*

Otacon had never waited for morning before. Dawn was something that slipped up without warning, a number in the lower right-hand corner or a patch of light projected over his shoulder, always when work was nearly done.

He had never seen dawn as a beginning.

Not as light that came over the mountains and filtered across in the shades of a stained glass window, sharp with the edge of the night's chill. Not as the cawing of black birds and the astonishment of wings rising from a forest that had begun to admit to green, becoming a constellation of arched lines and wheeling toward the north.

Adamska's face turned toward him, and Hal realized he was crying.

"We're alive," he explained.

Adamska looked where he was looking and nodded once.

And there was Adamska, who had been there for every moment of that night, no matter into how small you divided the components.

Hal wanted to throw his arms around him to press his face against his, and babble his immense and tangled gratitude.

Like sleep, once he started, he wouldn't stop again for a long time.

"We have to go," Adamska said. He had to raise his voice a little. There was a bass thrumming coming from somewhere.

*Helicopter*, Otacon's mind supplied. He squinted into the sunlight.

He'd forgotten about that.

Adamska unfurled to his feet in a smooth motion. "They'll sweep the mountain. There's a serviceable place to land not far from here."

This was his native ground.

Hal accepted Adamska's hand up with gratitude. Standing was a necessary mistake. The world tilted, but could be cajoled, with care, into staying more or less horizontal.

The touch of Adamska's hand was startling. It was as if Hal had expected there to be some sort of molecule-thick, impermeable shield around himself, to block out the press of warm skin. Adamska's hand was softer than you would expect, if you'd never felt it before. Somewhere in the years of that night he'd lost his gloves. He almost always wore gloves. Like most people who used guns for what they were made for. Not like the ones who knew the inner mechanisms by touch, from the inside and never the out.

Adamska's eyes were very blue.

He said, "Come on," not unkindly.

He must have been holding on for a long time.

Hard to tell what that meant.

Hal followed Adamska, feeling each footstep halfway into the next. Their path took them past the wall of wires and the makeshift cairn beneath it.

Otacon stopped.

A last glance was the least of what he owed.

The double-lobed tree, spreading out in search. The tumble of apologetic rocks. Fractal above and random below, a jumble as if by a natural fall. But they had put each one in place with secure and careful hands.

A sudden thought seized Hal.

"Do all of them want something better? They must all want another life, or another chance. Or just a better grave. They must scream..."

Hal shuddered hard, his spine striking against the inside of his back.

"God, Adamska. How do you stand it?"

Ocelot's brows drew together. "How do I..."

He lost the rest of the thought somewhere in the gaps between stacked stones.

"Some of them want things," he said. His face was averted, tautness evident at the corner of his lips. "Some of them demand, for all the good it does."

Adamska tipped his head toward the monument and caught Hal's eye.

"He wanted nothing."

There was something in Hal's left hand. He uncurled his fingers and saw a red pebble. It was new to his eyes, but his skin recognized it. Warm from his hand. Scavenged somewhere on the cliff in the long night.

Odd, that he had held it for so long and only now knew its color, and could now no longer imagine its oval weight without the rust red.

He walked closer to the cairn. In the raw light size was hard to judge. The boy had looked so small bound by the fire under the sky, then so large sitting above him in confined space, feet tapping against the crate, saying in his boy's voice *you always knew*. Had they been overzealous and buried him deep beneath layers rock, with his pale bruised body the lowest strata? Or was there only a thin shale blanket between him and the cold air, encasing him like a shell? The opposite. An egg was a beginning.

If Hal brushed aside a few rocks the size of his fist, he might uncover a hand reaching up, blue and white, fingers curled in supplication.

The thought brought a cool deluge of sorrow.

Maybe there was a world somewhere where it had all been different. The boy, bound and sullen, had come with them, spent a while in a cell. He was safe there. Big Boss never hurt kids. He would talk him around. They all would. Not bad people, any of them. Esau would learn that here he could have a life, a name.

In some world. Somewhere.

On top of the cairn, Hal set the red pebble.

"Esau," he said.

The distant thrum was the echo of his heartbeat.

Adamska stood near him, in his wake.

Hal said, "He wanted to be remembered. Isn't that all anybody wants?"

"The ones with low standards," said Adamska.

Hal turned to face him. "I won't forget him."

He hadn't intended the accusatory edge.

"It's not an option," Adamska said, the corner of his mouth twisting sardonically.

They left it.

Hal wondered, watching Adamska's straight back, whether the rarity of his talent didn't have more to do with how few people could bear it.

Maybe people only left graves because there was nothing to call them back.

The sound of the helicopter was louder now. Less an insinuation than insistence. They began to walk toward it. Up the slope, as it happened, toward where the shed was. Otacon had stumbled down a slight incline that night, with Esau behind him. Funny that he should remember that now. Or notice that he remembered.

Somebody hurt in a dozen places. It might have been him.

He wondered what REX felt like when she was moving. Tanks were never meant to have legs. Gravity conspired against it. Half the work of the design had been finding ways around that. He wondered if she knew.

Did REX feel numb and graceless when she ran, sensing that she should have her belly pressed firmly to the safe and solid ground, not suspended and loping above it? There was so much farther to fall. He wondered if she had nightmares about that. There had been so much time spent quiet in the hangar, waiting, half-born.

Sometimes Hal would be the first one in, at the morning shift, and he'd flick the switch at the forefront of the vast black space to hum the fluorescent lights to life. They would shine on her shell. Otacon would rest his hand on her flank, still chill, not yet heated by construction and the constant hundred pressures of her human coterie, in the still vastness like a metal egg with bare steel beams high overhead. In those times here was nothing for it but to ask, quietly, though no one was there, "Did you have a nice dream?"

He had had a habit of talking to her. He couldn't help it. Mostly just when no one was around, since it was embarrassing to get caught. But all Snake had done was say, with a kind of indulgence, "It's not gonna answer, you know."

"I know that!" Otacon said hotly, his hand still on the steel of her bones.

And, more honestly, when he had seen that Snake had been there between shifts just to look up at her and the spaces where she would take shape:

"That doesn't mean it's not polite to ask."

He had never asked if this was what it felt like to be made of silicon and wire, somewhere between alive and dead.

"The problem isn't which you are," Hal mumbled over the uneven ground, words like pebbles slipping from his failing grasp, "It's how you tell the difference."

"Yeah," Adamska said, and caught his elbow to center his balance. "That's what it is."

It must be something like this. Learning that he was taking steps and moving forward secondhand, through the reports of sets of sensors.

It was hard to be conscious of anything. He didn't think he was doing it right.

Adamska was beside him.

Hal held on to that awareness.

He imagined rising up away from here and looking down at the mountainside, watching the mountain draw away with its sad pile of rocks, getting smaller, farther, fading as the distance and the sun glare rose, but still there, the image still holding, until the unimaginable moment when it ceased and they were gone from this place.

Dust rose and cloaked him upward from the soles of his feet.

The silence and his heartbeat were pounding at his ears from inside and out. Dust was skimming past over the ground in waves. He couldn't understand it until he looked up across wide open ground and there was the body of a helicopter descending like an iron grey benediction from the sky.

Had anything ever been so beautiful?

"It's here," he said, inaudibly, unnecessarily.

From the corner of his eye he saw Adamska nod. He was squinting up at the helicopter, a patch of reflected light painting a shape in paler hue at his temple. The tips of his close-cropped hair made the same kind of waves as the dust.

There was a man at the controls Otacon didn't recognize. He wore dark glasses.

Hal realized that he hadn't really believed it would come.

And now, he hesitated. It was as though there were a cord binding them here, him and Adamska, and trying to breaking it would be the moment of finding out that it couldn't be broken. There was some libation they should offer to this hungry mountainside so that it might decide to let them go.

Adamska's boot made a ringing sound on the step. He stood in the doorway and pulled Hal up.

"Hello," said Hal.

"Hi," said the pilot.

There were those dreams where you dream of getting up, and half wake, and think of it, and fall back asleep and dream it again, and never get it done.

He looked away from the pilot and forgot his face.

Adamska told him the location of the vault, told him that the doors were open and reiterated the codes for good measure. He gave a full description of the traps that Otacon was glad he hadn't told him about in detail before.

The man nodded and touched behind his ear in the gesture of codec communication. As he subvocalized his throat moved up and down.

Then Hal and Adamska fell into the seats at the back and the floor dropped away. The weight of the air changed.

Hal watched Adamska.

There was silence in his face, though it wasn't closed or barred. It was the face of a man watching the march of his secrets as they turned a corner in their phalanx and disappeared, out of sight and into mind, moving somewhere. He was watching the departure of their ordeal and, somewhere in the slight tension at the purse of his lips, the premeditated and held back line at his brow, the shield of his eyelids against the breaking sun, he wanted to go back.

Hal would never fully know this man.

When he remembered to look back, the cliff was lost in mist.

"It was mercy," Ocelot said, giving the words to Otacon while his eyes never left where the land had been. "Don't forget that."

"I won't," said Otacon, as the colors of everything else slipped and ran, but the promise only thickened, like the honey that touched Adamska's hair in the light of the morning of a night without end, and caught him like a spider and bore him without struggle or recompense down.

This eBook was generated by the [FanFiction Recommendation Engine](http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/69/) | This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge |

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/69/>

# chapter 70

## Stray by Dahne

*Return can change the nature of a man.*

Weariness did not catch up with Ocelot. He was riding the clarity of a mission completed, and was loath to let it go.

Ocean flashed beneath them.

Neither shore was in sight.

Ocelot watched the light spark from the wavecaps, and looked back over his shoulder to where Hal slept, hands open, all forgotten.

The sound of rushing air became, for a moment, immediate.

The pilot glanced back. He met the look in Ocelot's eyes and said nothing.

---

Ocelot woke to the shift of velocity and changing key of the engine's hum.

The interior was brown, but for the two of them and the pilot, empty. Just as he had left it. It smelled of leather and fuel.

Smelled like home.

He was slumped down in his seat with his head resting on Hal's shoulder. Hal was out like he'd caught a haymaker on the jaw.

Little wonder. He wasn't used to this.

Ocelot sat up and looked out the window. The sun shone high and bright off snow that held on against encroaching swathes of bare brown earth. In Groznyj winter was fierce but fickle, melting away as soon as spring gave its arm a good twist. Here it was more tenacious.

The base wasn't terribly impressive from the air. It neither lurked nor declared itself, but crouched, straight-backed, watching with eyes of concrete grey.

A significant portion, he knew, was underground.

Ocelot watched the horizon rise. As they fell other helicopters rose around them, switching places on the pulley of the sky. Touching ground struck in his bones like a tuning fork.

He put his hand to Hal's shoulder.

Sleep-stained, Hal muttered to the wall, "Back..."

"Hal."

"Huh?" He jolted awake, as though underwater and unsure which way was up without gravity's guide. He looked at Adamska with startled eyes, hand instinctively gripping the arm of the seat.

Ocelot had seen the look before. Rookies had it, while learning that they could wake into an uncertain situation.

Ocelot said, "We're home."

It was less sardonic than he had intended.

"Oh," Hal said blearily. "Yeah."

There was a welcoming party waiting for them on the tarmac. Skirls of snow scribbled lines across it and fetched up against Snake's boots.

*Or should I say, Big Boss.*

Adamska would have to get used to that stupid title. Seemed like it had stuck.

He hadn't aged badly. Still recognizable, eyepatch or not, as the soldier Ocelot had faced across

a ravine a long, long time ago.

The two twin also-Snakes flanked him.

John gave him a long look, as if weighing his sins.

"You look like shit," he said.

"Good to see you, too," said Ocelot.

Hal was getting out of the helicopter, hand braced on the doorframe. Squinting in the sunlight, he looked like he'd been dragged through hell and half-drowned in high water.

"Otacon." The bestubbed Snake moved toward him. They must have known each other in this world as well. Ocelot remembered him fondly as a growling shape in the background, comforting as a scheduled threat. "What the hell happened to you?"

"Oh." Hal blinked away the haze of thought and stepped down. "Snake. We opened the doors and found the vault. Not in that order. But we did. There were vultures and iguanas. Also I think I killed a man."

John said, "Debriefing. Now."

Adamska caught the eye of Hal's Snake and nodded back toward him. "Find him somewhere safe to rest."

"Look at the prodigy, giving orders," the blond and already irritating one drawled. "Maybe you're used to a place where being a clone is considered special."

"He's not a clone," said John.

"How do you know?"

"I know."

The look on his face when there was no use arguing hadn't changed, either.

"I'm coming," Otacon said.

Adamska turned back to glare at him, for all the good it did.

Stubborn little bastard never gave up.

"I'll handle it," said Ocelot, because neither did he.

Hal was already shaking his head, stepping down onto Shadow Moses soil. "I'm seeing this thing through to the end."

John said, "It's only beginning."

Ocelot hated it when people who weren't him said things like that.

Then Big Boss took a one-eyed look at Hal and shook his head.

"You'll be debriefed separately. Then you're needed elsewhere. We've got to bleed all the information we can out of the enemy's systems, keep them blind, and slow them down. Can you do that?"

Hal straightened. Determination was written in the weary lines by his mouth.

"I can turn every surveillance report on this region into a picture of somebody's cat."

Big Boss nodded. "Good. Do it. Every computer on the base is yours."

The way his eyes lit up at that would have been enough to warn off any ordinary man.

John turned, long leather coat swishing, motioning Adamska to come along in his wake. The twin Snakes went to Hal. No doubt in disbelief that the mouse they knew was capable of violence.

Fools.

Activity brought the base alive. Ocelot looked up to watch the oblong body of a transport lift above them and disappear into the sky. It had been a long time since he'd been in a base preparing for war. It looked a little different but smelled the same. Fuel, cordite, expectation.

"Has the enemy made contact?" said Ocelot, watching a group of soldiers loading a truck.



"Not yet," said John. "We're running on borrowed time. Got a few of our own slowing them down from the inside. Should be enough leeway to pick up your present and call in a few favors I'm owed the world over."

Ocelot snorted. "They've gotten sloppy without me. I would have had agents filling half your ranks by now."

Big Boss grunted a laugh. His mouth drew up in the same way it always had. "And they'd all be reporting stright to you."

"Naturally."

John began to reply, his eye flicking over to Adamska. A flash of startlement became eclipsed by pain. Then the shield settled over his eye again, opaque as the patch over its brother.

Ocelot realized he had taken, by instinct, a place by his left side.

"What did you find there?" said Big Boss, returning to business.

Adamska glanced over his shoulder. He could make out Hal's back, flanked by the twin Snakes, growing smaller as he went to weave the noose for the enemy's neck.

Ocelot answered, "That they can be wrong."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/70/>

# chapter 71

## Stray by Dahne

*He was part man, part dreamer, part machine.*

*He was something new.*

- "Asleep: With Still Hands," Harlan Ellison

---

*Necessity can change the nature of a man.*

Actually, he was kind of grateful.

The landing was a blur. It was as though a tornado had spun through his mind and demolished some houses of memory while leaving ones next door standing. Waking with Adamska's hand on his shoulder. The scent and cut of clear Alaska air. Talking to Big Boss like he promised aid to splinter militia leaders every day. Pitching forward and arresting himself serially until it resembled walking, trying to answer Snake, trying to skew what had happened on the sere and empty mountainside so that it made sense.

Or maybe there had never been anything except this console and its seraphic glow, and the gratitude that there wasn't time to think.

Or maybe that just made it worse.

Otacon typed and coded and cracked and evaded through defenses that took every fiber of his skill and attention. That left none of it to keep down the subconscious stream of thought, image, impression. Like the moment of waking when you aren't sure you've really woken yet, and you can't remember your dream, but you're not entirely sure that it's not still going on.

*keep each other*

Click. Click.

This was his world in block letters, black and white. Infinite complexity in a closed system. He could do anything, within those bounds. This was the constant. It hadn't been an idle boast that he'd said to Big Boss

*'s remains. The terrorists are demanding*

Memory was black and green with a half transparent overlay.

Otacon stole their information and replaced it riddled with wrongs. There was no time or place to be terrified at how much they knew. He broke it beautifully, with obfuscatory art, a tightrope walker's fever of divine inspiration. Nothing could touch him.

*time is not dead*

His way of fighting was not noble, but it had its grace.

*no, no, not now, not when I've just found you, just hold on, not yet, I'll call you Emma*

He made the signs of an army ready to strike vanish before they could appear. His touch made ghosts.

He had no attention to spare to chain the thing in the back of his mind or stop it from going methodically mad.

A bolt of fierce joy shot through him when he found the reports he was looking for.

Nothing amiss.

They didn't know. There was still time.

*come on Snake come on (the smell of seawater) be alive please be*

Otacon bought it for them.

He was not looking for the four common letters, two simple syllables, until they found him.

E S A U

*Liquid I saw ten minutes ago is dead a dozen times over and part of him*

His birth. His life. His making. His assignment. All of him they knew, there in black and white.

He copied it like a grave etching.

Time was doubling back on him. He couldn't find an end or a beginning.

*The muzzle of a gun against his back in the place of safety and the voice he didn't understand,*

*a boy's voice and it meant something*

He went in without thinking, because there were things he had to know.

*hunched in metal darkness and fear hiding from them but more from the long hoarse scream*

*becomes too great to bear, just give up and*

Leave the greater mass alone for now No time to parse or carry who he was. Only to find what he did, had done, and use it.

With a pang of fondness Otacon learned that he had lied. There were reports from a radio waypoint scant miles from where they had met. Scarce, scrawny things, just like he had been. No sign of the target. Little else. He must have been saving words for people who would hear them.

*woman in white bleeding her life out on the snow*

They would notice that he was gone.

Otacon invented a world where ESAU lived, alone in the jungle, unnoticed, waiting still for the confluence of impossibilities.

*if*

*life is mine*

*he was there, with him there, young and alone and out of place, and if he knew the name of the thing that was wrong*

Otacon filled in the blank space that was Esau, and they would never know the difference.

If there was room for apology he would have said it then.

He lifted and transformed without leaving a trace or being touched by time. It was always like this. When he got into something that really mattered, the world disappeared.

This time it didn't come back.

"Otacon." A heavy hand on his shoulder. "You've done enough. There's better places to sleep."

At the sight of his friend's face it all came back.

"Snake!" He spun around fast. Inertia kept his head going after he'd stopped. "What are you doing here? Are you okay? Listen, this place is swarming with guards, you've gotta get out-"

"Otacon." His friend was giving him a long, strange look. Didn't he understand there wasn't any time? "What are you talking about?"

"What do you mean what am I-"

Hal cut off.

What had he been talking about?

There was some reason. Something terribly urgent was terribly wrong.

It was like trying to reconstruct a dream, in the moment of waking. What was all perfectly clear in one instant was gone in the next, and you'd never get it back.

Hal hated that.

"Nothing," he said, face tripping into a tired smile. The corners of his eyes ached, and his face felt dry. "I was just out of it for a second there."

Snake was giving him that level look that said he'd play along, as long as he didn't have to pretend to believe a word of it.

He said, "You did good, Otacon."

The cold remains of a groggy, half-remembered confession rose in Hal's throat. The first thing he had told Snake, while the wind on the tarmac tried to steal his words, was what he had done. He'd needed to get out the truth before it smothered him like a feather caught in his throat. It burned like a fleck of dust in his eye, carried from that dry mountainside over endless acres of ice that did nothing to insulate him from what he had done. Playing at innocence would leave him there, the boy with his black-green eyes that said *please*, leave him there alone without the knowledge that he had ever been murdered or lived.

Snake clapped him on the shoulder.

"Take a break."

Otacon gestured helplessly at the computer, as if it would fall apart without his constant and undivided care. "I've got to--"

"No, you don't." Snake's tone was the kind made to not argue with.

"But-" Otacon argued.

You could hear all the soldier's years in his sigh.

"Look. Nobody can keep this thing from happening forever. It's going to break free. All we can do about it is be ready. We've got a whole team on electronic surveillance. So get some rest."

And Otacon wanted to say that he had to stay there and fight for every minute and inch he could gain them, every brick in the wall, because the wave was coming, and it would smash it apart and shatter and drown all of them and drag them down until they were skulls resting forever half-buried in the silt.

But, in the look under the eternal dark blue bandanna, Snake already knew.

And it was funny, because he could have sworn they'd had this conversation a thousand times before.

---

The elevator took Otacon to a world of ghosts.

It was the uniforms that did it. Those narrow, blocky white carapaces looked like the lost spirits of some race of insectoid bipeds. Thankfully no one was wearing the helmets, or Hal would have thought he was the only human left in the thawing world.

They'd been ready to don them to complete the uniform when the operation began, along with code names, all according to regulation. Big Boss had other ideas.

"We have faces, and names. Let's use them."

And that felt right, too.

The upper level was a murmurous world. It was wide, flat, and open to the wind, half roof and half plateau. Soldiers and mechanics flowed back and forth, formed clusters around trucks, jeeps, tanks, and transports like bees around flowers. Every helicopter they had must have been en route to the Legacy. Nobody wanted to be in the air when the storm hit. Soldiers crossed his path like white cats. The remnants of the last, late snow were being trod under by their passage. He'd have thought his eyes had gone monochrome if it weren't for a glimpse of a red-haired soldier.

It occurred to Otacon that he might never leave this place.

That was what a siege was, wasn't it? One side trapped, and the other side free.

At the same time, for them, this was the safest place in the world.

In the same way that there was a shallowest place in the ocean.

Still.

There was that word again. He said it to himself, quietly, under the calls and distant laughter and curses of men and women ready for war. *Still*.

The whole scene looked almost post-apocalyptic. Which was funny, since it was the opposite.

Otacon wandered among them. They rerouted around him without visible pause. He didn't know what he was doing here. There wasn't anything for him to do. These were people with jobs, goals, definite thoughts with logical conclusions.

He waited for someone to tell him to get the hell out of the way, because he didn't belong here.

But they weren't divided into subgroups anymore, were they. Now they were all citizens of a strange new state, and the rules were suspended. Maybe even changed.

Time would tell, though it was good at keeping secrets.

The weariness beating on the inner walls of Otacon's skull wasn't enough to drive him out of this bright place, fortified by the sounds and grace of people living, or to make him close his eyes.

The wind slapped at him lightly, as if trying to wake him from a faint.

Every time he blinked he could feel and not quite see the thing that waited, like those millisecond subliminal messages that they say over and over don't work but somehow it's possible to believe that an image glimpsed once for less time than it took to think could burn like a branding iron and leave you wondering why you couldn't stop smelling smoke and char, and why you hurt.

Faces passed by and he knew that they could be dead soon, and knew that they knew it too. He'd never realized how much the life of the base had sunken into him, absorbed through sideways and distracted glances. There was that boy who looked older than he should, whether through the gene therapy or experience there was no way of telling. There was Everett with the bright blue eyes, new to see in daylight, because his presence used to mean that the clock had turned unnoticed while Otacon was working. There was one of the young cocky ones, the one would always be on duty with this big, swarthy guy. Or they'd be between shifts leaning on a railing, passing back and forth the pitch of their voices and a cigarette. Otacon saw them sometimes. He was one of the ones who never shut up except when the sound of gunfire broke out, that deafening impact that destroyed direction and imploded the mind into aching empty white, and when it stopped and their small group made it through to a hallway Otacon could secure, it took a second to understand what it was that looked asymmetrical until you thought it was like his shadow was missing and then you knew, and the one who was left was there against the wall, his hand covering his face, quiet, until it was over.

Hal had never found out his name.

A raven crossed Otacon's shadow. It hopped forward, shrugged its wings open, and skimmed low across the tarmac and over the edge.

The iceblue sky accepted it like a welcome into a new world.

Hal drifted between interlocking paths. The men he had known for years were strangers that he only now understood. He had never seen them before. He had never heard their voices, though they had spoken and been near him. There was Wolf, blonde and striking, who had always looked right through him in a way that was sad because it always felt like it was her who wasn't there, or was a second and a breath away from fading into the snowfield. Some sort of sniper's trick. She was with Meryl – he'd thought he had recognized that flash of red - who was gesturing quick cuts at the air and saying,

"You should see some of the stuff we found down there. There's this cage full of little purple gerbil things..."

before old man Doppler took her voice away.

God, when had she ever been so young?

A bone-thrumming groaning noise came from the snowfields below.

So that was what everyone was waiting for. He'd come up here for a reason. The self of the recent past, opaque as a stranger, had sent him.

Everyone was gather toward the western edge of the rooftop staging area as if it were a tilting pinball machine.

"Come on!" he heard Meryl's voice cry, and saw that she had turned back to him. She grabbed him by the wrist and nearly pulled him off his feet. "You want to see the test, don't you?"

"H-hey! Easy!"

Once she had hauled him to a place with a good view she let him loose.

The groan, distinctly metallic now, grew louder, and drew their collective eyes to the main hangar hatchway as it opened reinforced steel butterfly wings.

Darkness beyond them.

REX nosed out into the slanting light, her steps almost shy.

"If it sees its shadow, do we get six more weeks of winter?" said someone.

"Shut up," said someone else.

The only mark in the silence was the elevator's sigh.

REX rose up on her legs, lifting her face to test the air. Otacon could feel the whirr of stabilizers. He saw numbers flow beneath her skin.

She took a step forward like a newborn faun.

Otacon watched his calculations dance, practically pirouetting, oil-smooth machine grace like its joints had not been built but carefully cultivated into the shape laid for them and desired by them and joyfully attained, like the heart of an unimaginable plant growing layer upon layer in shelter and finally spreading its petals under the sky. Her feet clutched the ground and sprang from it, leaving behind a trail of tracks never before seen in the thin rime of snow. Her carapace gleamed like crystal. The radome captured sunlight.

Otacon was the only one who knew the unbearable delicacy cradled beneath her thick hide. A machine that could take rockets full to the face without a flinch, run by mechanisms that could be murdered by a grain of sand.

At his ear, Adamska's voice said, "She's beautiful."

Watching the careless lope of his creation, feeling the massive weight and painstaking balance and suspension that sustained her, Hal said, "Isn't she?"

They watched her walk in a communal silence, observing a sacrament, though she had long ago been christened. This was the one who would protect them, and who they would protect. This was the keystone of the mad, fantastic thing they undertook. This machine was their salvation, and they had never been lost. It was new a elegant, streamlined brutality that turned the fear and latent anxiety in them to peace.

Blaring alarms slashed the silence across the jugular.

Before Otacon's mouth could form *what*, CODEC clicked to life for the basewide transmission.

"They were waiting for this." Big Boss's voice was flat and calm. "Missiles are in the air. Impact in forty-four minutes."

Pandemonium held for a full second's count.

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/71/>

# chapter 72

## Stray by Dahne

*Invention can change the nature of a man.*

Ocelot grabbed Hal by the arm to haul him toward the elevator and control his panic.

"Stop that," said Hal.

The flaw in the plan was that he wasn't panicking.

Hal walked along beside him, perfectly calm.

"Were you not paying attention?" Adamska shouted at him over the alarms. "I'm not going to stand around slackjawed waiting for orders to evacuate. If I'd wanted to get turned into a pile of ash by a megalomaniacal lunatic's assault I would have *stayed fucking home*."

"You know, I've been wondering who you learned English from. Where'd you get 'megalomaniacal?'"

Ignoring that was an effort assisted by the howling klaxons. "We're getting out of here."

At second look with a skilled eye, the chaos was more orderly than Ocelot had first presumed. The soldiers moved rapidly, but not without purpose and coordination. People given to panic tended to weed themselves out of the veterans' garden.

CODEC clicked to life, with the age roughened version of John's voice Ocelot had been slowly growing used to.

"Somebody turn off those damn alarms."

The klaxons halted.

Ocelot's analytical centers were impressed with John's hold over his subordinates. There was no hysteria, no blind running toward the elevator and egress. The soldiers around them took the news of impending death with impeccable discipline.

"I didn't expect them to go this far so early," said Ocelot over his shoulder to Hal.. "They must be desperate. We still have a chance to escape and regroup-"

"Things have changed, Ocelot," said Hal.

His eyes were grey and cool.

Ocelot's narrowed, compressing the sight of him to a slit. "We have to go. Now."

If they were quick they could purloin a helicopter, and gently suggest to someone that it would be a good idea to fly it for them. They could be well away from here by the time it was all blown to hell.

Maybe even far enough.

If there were any such thing, in this world or any other.

Hal turned from him, as well as he could with the grip on his arm, to look out over the horizon. You could see the columns of numbers meshing in his head, as he watched the blue sky that would be specked with sleek swift black shapes in forty three minutes time.

Hal said, "I'm not leaving."

Adamska grabbed him by both shoulders and turned him back by force.

"It doesn't work," he said, in the sharp-cornered voice he used for orders, when urgency was paramount and nothing could be wasted. "You can't buy his life back with yours."

Distantly Ocelot felt the report of his fingers tightening.

"I won't allow it."

Hal looked at him as if it weren't the most obvious thing in the world.



Then he laughed.

It was clear as cracking ice in the open silence.

Ocelot glared at him with eyes crafted for the purpose.

"This," said Adamska, "is a fucking stupid way to die."

"It would be," said Hal, "if we were going to."

The lines of pain in his brow had smoothed, and he looked more at peace than Ocelot had seen him for a long time. He was looking down at the Metal Gear as if he were waiting for it to say its first words.

"What are you talking about?" said Adamska, voice cabled low and taut.

Around them soldiers moved with orderly haste. Hal's grin was brilliant.

"There's one thing I haven't told you about REX..."

---

Shadows of girders passed over the sinking elevator. It vibrated with a low hum.

"Like the space lasers," said Ocelot, finally.

"Yep." Otacon nodded, eyes clear and brow smooth. He was standing straight and at ease, arms clasped behind his back. "Except that this'll work."

Ocelot's eyes cut to him. "Has it been proven?"

"No time like the present."

A note in his voice lead to the quiescent, measured breathing of another world's night, the paradox and woodsmoke scent of warmth in air that smelled like snow, and vodka's slow burning kiss on his throat. He had said something about a missile attack on this place, and if Adamska hadn't known better he would have said it was wistful.

The throng passing through the halls that lead to the command center melted out of their way. Hal moved quickly and with purpose, eyes straight ahead.

"Have we got the location and velocity?" he said as they entered the room full of screens and people with the eternal look of officers.

"Pinpointed," said the one they called Fox, a lean older man who looked as though he had been diecast from steel and painted from a restricted palette, looking up from a console.

"Good." There was a free screen and keyboard that Hal took like an old friend's hand. "Give me the numbers."

There followed a rattled chain of digits and jargon that Ocelot recorded in the back of his mind without giving attention. His eyes went to John, stentorian and leatherclad in the middle of the room. He was looking through the glass at the empty place where the Metal Gear had been. A pair of great doors at the back opened to the plain where she had been going through her paces.

"It looks like you've made them mad," Ocelot said, coming up on his blind side.

John began to answer, mouth twisting with wry bravado for an aside to a coconspirator.

When his good eye hit Adamska, his expression changed.

Big Boss's face turned forward, stoic as ever.

Satisfaction glinted when he said, "We've made them scared."

Ocelot's eyebrow raised. "*They're* scared?"

"Look how fast they went all-out. Truth is, they've been looking for an excuse to get rid of us. We're a risk to them, and they don't like risks. They've been waiting for the whole super soldier project to turn into more trouble than it's worth, so they can wipe out all the evidence." The low, focused chatter and clicking of keys leaves them in an island. "But we've got some good tricks. They'll have to work harder than this to make us sweat."

Ocelot snorted, folding his arms. "I'm sure they'll ask the rubble if it was impressed."

"Watch."

There was no need to ask what. Computer screens around them were alive with views of the machine. A few showed grids and streams of numbers in a scheme of green and black Ocelot recognized from Groznyj Grad's cutting-edge systems. He couldn't have said why it was good to know that some things held to tradition.

A stream of lead-dense information was flowing between Hal and the others. Hal broke it with a starkly comprehensible, "Ready, Liquid?"

"Give the word," said the blond Snake's image. He spoke from the corner of a screen displaying what must have been the view from the cockpit. A feral smile cut the visible edge of his mouth.

Modern technology. Ocelot would have Hal explain it all when there was time. He liked to have a full catalog of his resources.

Every face turned toward John.

Big Boss handed down the word like a sentence.

"Fire."

It wasn't an impressive show, as they went. All that happened was the beast settled back on its heels, raised the round buckler on its shoulder like a hero catching a monster's reflection on his shield, and a series of needles winged into the sky. The flash of sunlight off of them was incidental.

And it was gone.

The communal focus point shifted to a green gridded screen, as luck or planning would have it, directly in front of Hal. On it a moving point flickered.

There were six people in the small space, crowded with consoles and oddmented machinery. There was no sound but a steady beep.

"Come on," Hal said under his breath like a prayer, eyes bound to the display. "You can do this. I know you."

It moved. Not fast, through the machine's reckoning. Ocelot knew it must be measuring, calculating, ramming bolts of numbers home, picking up radar or modern man's equivalent and making it palatable to their senses. The machine gave them green specks weaving through green crosshatch, blinking at a stately, sedate pace toward each other.

What it meant was weapons slinging through the air with that screaming sound the mind gave things going too fast for it to catch. Smooth, innocuous, armed, teeth bared, eating the sky.

Once Armageddon was set, you thought about how to hit them back. Hope or regret was a waste of time. Run, and pray you could run far enough. The only thing between you was time.

Thirteen eyes fixed on the blinking marks like their focus was the only thing keeping them alive.

All the equipment in the world couldn't stop them from willing those blips onwards. Old habits die hard.

Empty air all around, shrieking past needles that took up no more space in the world than a bullet did, because the best ratio is small cause to large effect. If a pin could sow devastation that's what they would use. All that force compressed until it clawed at the sides and sharpened its teeth on the walls of its prison until it hit the ground and roared free.

"This is what she was made for," Hal said.

From a thousand miles away they braced for impact.

The lights were the width of a finger apart.

Adamska realized that he didn't know what would signal success or failure.

One group of tiny green lights vanished.

Then the other.

No one exhaled.

What the hell did it *mean*?

In the stillness, John reached down and pressed a switch.

His voice echoed basewide.

"All clear."

None of them were the kind to cheer.

Hal let out his breath and sagged back in his chair. Around him duty and chatter resumed, carried out in the key of relief.

Just like people. They went on to the next crisis and forgot the one who had saved them from the last.

"We're out of beta," said Hal, to no one in particular.

Ocelot put a hand on his shoulder.

"Good work," he said, quietly.

Hal turned away from the screen as though covering a great distance. "Huh?"

His eyes were glassy and distant.

Frowning, Adamska gave him a light shake. "I said you did well."

"Oh." Hal accepted it with bemusement. "Thanks, Ocelot..."

He was looking at the point of contact as if he'd never seen a right arm before.

"Something's bothering me," he said, more of an echo than an origin.

His disorientation had a sickening boiling oil stench, and Adamska's hand gripped hard.

"Are you all right?" he demanded.

"Great!" Hal's eyes focused, clarified, his spine snapped straight, and for a moment Adamska believed, he really believed it was going to be all right. "The launch went off fine, the attack got intercepted, and we got some great-"

He stopped like a tape snapped off midway through playback.

"What?" Adamska said. He snapped his fingers in front of his still face. "Hal!"

Otacon said, to a distant point, "Combat data."

This eBook was generated by the [FanFiction Recommendation Engine](#) | This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/72/>

# chapter 73

## Stray by Dahne

*Field experience can change the nature of a man.*

Otacon was in a state of perfect, precarious clarity, the lesser and more practical cousin of Nirvana. He had trespassed there before, after late nights and days and periods when you weren't sure of the difference of coding, when he'd finally looked away and found that the numbers didn't stop.

"Tell me again what I was doing in the other world."

Adamska's eyebrow angled. "Building a time machine."

Hal's hands cut an impatient gesture. "Besides that."

They walked rapidly through the halls of the main wing. Otacon was aware of an impression of white and walking soldiers and the low-lying static of conversation. Moving was more important than a destination. His mind threw off excess heat into his legs.

"You were destroying the copies of your Metal Gear," said Adamska, keeping pace beside him.

"Copies made by who?"

"Everyone who wanted the balance of power to tip in their favor, from what I heard."

Otacon made an abrupt turn to the right. Adamska followed smoothly.

"So the plans got out."

"I sold them." The corner of Adamska's mouth twisted. "Or so I heard."

"Were you working for the Patriots?"

"I must have been." His tone had a flat edge.

"Then if you were our enemy, like you said, we must have been fighting them. Was it just me and Snake?"

"You wouldn't have survived if it were." Adamska stated bald fact. "I don't know how you did as it was."

"Yeah." Otacon's concentration intensified. "You need every shred of information and help you can get. Was FOXHOUND involved?"

"No. They were dead. Your Snake was the last." The twist of his lip, like a cat with something distasteful under its nose. "Besides me."

It was a stark contrast to the way he'd spoken of the same man down in the quiet, sketching a chart of his crimes with jagged sweeps of his hand and lettering *torturer*, what felt like so long ago. A stray, quiet receiver in Hal's flashing neurons noted it.

"How did we even know about the Patriots?" he continued, speaking rapidfire. "Was Big Boss leading it?"

"Big Boss was dead. So was that other blond clone of his, though he didn't like to stay it."

The dead tell tales. Every contact leaves a trace.

What you really learned from was mistakes.

Hal turned a corner sharply and missed slamming into a startled technician by an inch. His step didn't falter.

"There must have been a lot of losses, even if they were letting us stay around. Unless we used their own power and spread against them. The wider the base, the more cracks there are to slip through. But *how* did we fight them? Did we just go wherever there was a Metal Gear, and find them pulling the strings? Or was did that vary? Was there a pattern?"

"You never mentioned it," Adamska said, irritation glancing off of his voice. "There were limits to what even you would tell an enemy."

There was a warning emphasis on the last word.

"No, of course you wouldn't know everything," Otacon said, never slowing. Soldiers sidestepped out of his path. "You were only there for a while, as a visitor, and you weren't involved in it. You wouldn't have seen anything firsthand. But still-"

He pivoted and rapidly walked in the opposite direction, hands clasped behind his back.

Data. Dry runs. Tests. Every time it failed, you learned something important. What theories held. What didn't.

How to make it work.

Change the materials. Adapt to conditions. Shift the mass.

"But still what?" Adamska prompted.

"Remember what Esau said he wanted my machine for?"

He didn't wait for an answer. Words marched out, each tripping closer on the heels of the one before like a perpetual motion machine just hitting its stride.

"They wanted it because they thought that it could give them *more than one chance*."

Turn. Step. Step. Step.

"Yes," Adamska said patiently. He would never give up if he smelled an answer anywhere near. "So?"

"Do you have any idea how much you learn when something goes wrong?"

There was an irony that pointed to a specific incident in Ocelot's mind when he said, "I can guess."

"They thought that, whenever they hit a setback, or got defeated, they could learn how to prevent it and try again."

Infinite test runs.

"But it doesn't work that way." Ocelot's boots made no sound on the tile. The suit was well designed.

"Yes." He pushed up his glasses. "Except that it did."

Adamska gave him a sharp look, as if catching on to a trick. "You were lying?"

Hal shook his head swiftly. Hair brushed against the back of his neck. Irrelevant input. "No. The way I see it - and this could be wrong, since we can't easily test it - but the way I see it is... Look. The world that produces the time machine gets canceled out, but the things *in* that world, they don't disappear. They get- reconstituted. Like a deck of cards getting shuffled. Memorizing the order doesn't do you any good, since that changes, but they're still made of the same matter as before. A queen is still a queen."

All the same, until you changed it. Or changed the use.

Ones and zeros, millions of combinations.

The language of machines.

Hal paused, eye flickering to Adamska. The iceblue eyes were locked on him, as he nodded, and the serious set of his lips, the sense of absorption from an utterly foreign kind of intellect, sent a razor of indefinable nostalgia through him.

"Think of it like this," Hal said, voice out of key through the distortion of *deja vu*. "The REX in the other world and the REX here could be made at different times, for different reasons. Maybe there could be a timeline where it doesn't get made at all. But if it *does*, then the calculations, the physical process of building it, they'll be the same. One ton is still one ton; it'll still need the same amount of

support. The principle behind the radome will be the same, though I might use it differently. The laws of physics don't change. If I discovered some principle in that world that I haven't here in the 'real' world, that doesn't mean it wouldn't work."

Innovation. Repair. Discovery. Vision quests. Inspiration.

Metal under his hands. The sense, strange and good and fragile, that he had done this before. Follow the path. Break the ground.

Senses he was vaguely aware of told him that a wall was coming up, and he pivoted and headed back the other direction. Adamska swung seamlessly around the edge of his vision.

"It's true that you can't just go back over and over again, fine-tuning things until they go exactly the way you want. Because what the *timestream*, or whatever principle behind determines its flow, what *it* wants is to remove your means of doing that. If you're reaching through a hole to get the materials to patch it with, once it's done, you can't do that anymore. But you've still got everything you saw on the other side."

Turn. Pace. Hal bumped into somebody and didn't spare the mental cycles to apologize, which was all right when he noticed a few steps later that they were an ammo crate.

Forewarned. Forearmed. Beta.

"And they don't. There's all that data, a whole other world's war, that they don't have any access to. Just you."

Adamska had gone perfectly silent.

"That's how you did this in the first place, isn't it?" Hal pressed on. He couldn't let it slip away. Not when he was so close. "You took what you learned in the other world and applied it to your own time. That this world exists at all in place of the first one proves that the information you get there is valid. So it stands to reason that things other people learned could still apply, even if they were wrong, or the exact circumstances have changed, if they could just remember..."

He stopped.

His hands lifted to hold the sides of his head, hair slipping through his fingers.

"If I could just *remember*..."

He felt Adamska's hand on his bicep, pulling him back.

The sudden silence finally registered.

The worn white tiles had a shadow on them.

Just above that, a pair of black boots.

"Good boy," said Mantis' dessicated rasp, "You came right where you need to be."

With the clamor in his head, Otacon hadn't noticed the faint strand of strange music until it faded away.

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/73/>

# chapter 74

## Stray by Dahne

*Choice can change the nature of a man.*

"What do you want?" Adamska said, eyes narrowed to gunsights, hand at the altitude of his holster. He couldn't have much lingering fondness for Mantis, after the psychic had rifled through his mind. Nobody liked that sort of thing, and he would even less.

The shining insect eyes of the mask were fixed on Hal. There was something unnerving about facing a man who knew all your secrets, and knew that you knew. Who knew that you were thinking about the story you'd heard about how he'd gotten too close to a sociopath's mind and lost some of his own, and that you were trying not to. Like being so naked your organs were showing.

"Your thoughts are loud," Mantis said. "Spinning. Grinding. I overheard and took an interest."

His thin limbs stirred gently in midair, like a stick insect pinned in a restless breeze. Instead of grotesque, Hal found that the image struck him as sad.

"You can," Mantis rasped.

Otacon blinked. "Can what?"

"Remember." You could hear the slick smile in the filtered rattle of his voice. "I can give it back to you. All of it. Your memory can match his. A perfect pair. If...that's what you want."

Adamska's lips were drawn tight, like a dog trying not to snarl. "Liar."

"Why would I lie?" That voice couldn't hold much innocence. Mantis wasn't trying very hard.

"Why would you help?" Ocelot threw back in challenge.

"Because you are still afraid."

Shock crossed Adamska's face like a slap. In an instant defiance covered it.

Otacon listened and said nothing.

He was thinking.

"Go back to the rock you crawled from under," Adamska said, smooth with derision. "I don't have interest in your parlor games."

"Go on," said Mantis, with a wire-wrapped taunting note, "Guess what card I'm holding."

Adamska snorted. "The old King of Sadists? You'll have to do better than that."

"Things are much different when you see them firsthand than when someone tells you a story about them," Mantis mused, air and metal mixed. "Almost...a whole different world. Especially with the device of the unreliable narrator."

He was floating backwards, through a pair of doors that opened behind him. Otacon followed, into a large office he'd rarely seen. He hadn't thought anyone used it.

"You mean that I actually have memories of the other world?" he said suddenly. "It didn't all vanish?"

"Yes," hissed Mantis, tolerant of a slow student. "It happened in another lifetime, but that life was *yours*. Where else would it go? The mind doesn't rip out parts that aren't to its taste. That world had to have happened in order to bring about the events that made it have never happened."

"That makes sense," said Hal.

"It had to have happened," said Adamska, facing the floating psychic with adamant eyes, "because that is where I met the only person in existence who would say that right now."

Mantis' shadow rippled over the carpet as his arms stirred air and he drew back, without sound

or effort, like an image on the horizon.

The extraneous portion of Hal's mind wondered why somebody whose feet never touched the ground would pick a room with nice carpet.

"Because it's useless," Mantis answered. "Exactly as useless as when no one used the room at all, but the color of thought in reaction is much different."

He could hear everything else that was going on in Hal's head, too. He was choosing not to voice the storm of connections linking, possibilities forming, and ideas clashing that stormed outside the safe cove of banality.

Adamska shot a glare back and forth between them. Hal must have been a little psychic too, because he picked up the *What the hell are you talking about?* loud and clear.

"I can't remember it," Hal confessed to him, frustration leaking into his voice. "But it's like I can...remember remembering it. Have you ever woken up from a dream knowing that there was a whole system you were operating inside, with all of its own rules, and you knew them, but you can't remember a single one, or even what they were about?"

"Yes," said Adamska.

"No," said Mantis.

"But now I *need* to know." His voice was hungry. He began to pace across the room's soft carpet, hands clasped behind his back. Portraits passed the corner of his sight. "Their biggest advantage is in volume of information. Besides this tiny little island, and whoever joins us, they have absolute control of this world's information systems. But they can't get to the *other* world. And we have the lynchpin: you, Adamska."

His steps across the width of the room gained rapidity. Mantis' and Adamska's faces followed from opposite sides.

"But that isn't *enough*, damn it! It's the details that are going to decide this war, and you just weren't in a position to get all of them."

"Next time I'll prepare a report," Adamska drawled.

Otacon shook his head, mingled brown and grey lashing his forehead. More grey than he'd had a while ago, some corner of his mind noted with a touch of chagrin. "That's just it. It'd still be secondhand. I still wouldn't *understand* that world. You learn by experience, right? And I have that experience. I just can't *get* to it. We were fighting the same enemy, and we've changed, but they haven't. That's a huge tactical advantage. Maybe even enough to offset all the ones they have on us. Secondhand in bits and pieces, filtered through the knowledge you don't have and without context – that's just false confidence."

"Yes," Mantis said, significance cutting through the air. "Things are so much different witnessed with your own eyes."

Adamska's silence could shout.

"You'll regret that," he said softly.

Each breath Mantis took was a dessicated sigh.

Otacon was going to put his hand on Adamska's arm and tell him to relax, Mantis was their ally, they were all on the same side, he wouldn't threaten them, and anyway bullets couldn't hit him.

He noticed he wasn't saying it, then noticed that he wasn't sure it was true.

Ocelot had the look of somebody who would be very inventive in finding ways to hurt him. He would come up with something either very stupid or very clever, and no one would ever decide for sure which.

"Can you do it?" Hal said to Mantis.



"Not that," the psychic corrected. "The question is if I will."

The slanting, oval orange viewports were opaque from this side. They gave the look and patience of a strange insect.

"This is your home, too," Hal said. "You want to protect it. When you looked in my head, I felt that."

"I've seen it gutted in the mirror of your mind," Mantis retorted.

A finger like a glove around a skeleton key crooked at a place on the carpet.

"I've seen my corpse lying on that spot."

Hal inched away. Adamska craned his head around, as if trying to pick out a telltale stain.

"I don't remember that," Hal said, eyes fixed on the unremarkable area of plush red carpet. There was nothing to see. Somebody could bleed all over it and you wouldn't be able to tell unless you were

*kneeling in the silent room in the chill draft from a passage left open, hand down for balance at the side of the dark unmoving twisted figure (how had he thought it like a rift creature like something from the manga that had given him some of his most trenchant nightmares, when it was only a man stretched and bent and broken), pulling back fused and itching madly with something sticky and cold*

There was nothing there but four regular, rectangular indentations a chair had left in the pile.

There was the sound of metal pulled into a glove.

"What are you doing to him?" Adamska demanded, gun in his hand.

"Nothing at all. My hands are off." They eddied in midair. "The memories are locked inside of him by his own subconscious will. Under stress and...specialized stimuli, they may leak and blur into the current reality. You see, a mind divided against itself can only stand so much."

The quality and modulation of his voice gave the feeling of talking to a Forties radio broadcast. The crackle of bad reception.

Adamska's mouth was tight-lipped, face controlled to stillness. A thin rim of white was visible all the way around his eyes. "You mean to say his..."

He broke off and looked to Otacon. "Hal, are you all right?"

Concern was vivid and strange on his face, like a white butterfly on a black tree.

"I'm fine," Otacon said. "I just...can't remember."

He was touched by Adamska's worry, though a bit confused. Just because there were two conflicting sets of data, even with the paradoxical stipulation that both were true, sharing space in his mind, that didn't mean there would be anything cataclysmic. Nobody was that fragile.

"It's like...I can feel it in there." His fingers pressed at his temples experimentally, as if the locked data would click open at the touch of a button. "Like a song you can't quite remember the name of. It's like something's holding me back. I can almost see the shape. If I could just push through."

Mantis's laugh rattled like a tin can full of rocks. "Press your palms together. Can one arm break the other?"

Ocelot seized on that. "You're offering to reach into his head and break it?"

"I won't hurt him." The mask's distortion put an odd emphasis on the first word. "A minor headache, at worst. Temporary disorientation. It can be difficult to get used to seeing the familiar in a new light."

"So I would remember it all," Hal said, testing the idea on his tongue. "Everything that happened in the other world."

"Just as you lived it," Mantis confirmed.

Hal thought of it.

"That's..."

His face lit up.

"That's great! This is exactly what we need! Mantis, you're a genius! Adamska, we...Adamska?"

Ocelot was staring at him, face cold and still, eyes like the circle of water at the bottom of a well.

"You really don't get it, do you?" he said.

"He doesn't," confirmed Mantis.

"Shut up." Ocelot's eyes didn't move. The insistence on his face was almost pleading. "Hal. I was in that world, too."

The significance stilled his transient joy.

"I know," said Hal, softly.

Adamska had told him about the Other One. The one he'd refigured a world to destroy.

The one who had shown his face in the basement, in the cloying smell of formaldehyde and blood.

Hal stared into Adamska's face and tried to make it morph into the shape of anything but the boy he knew. The shape of his nose, how his eyes were placed, the crest of his hair, his incongruously full lips. It was impossible to imagine any other way.

He'd gotten the full story of that world through Adamska's filter, as he had been told or shown them. There would be things he couldn't know, dropped details and accidental omissions, things that would only have meaning to Hal himself. They said you could only know an animal in its natural habitat.

Or, maybe, came a horrible creeping thought, there were omissions that weren't accidental.

"You don't think that would really matter to me, do you?" Hal said.

Adamska's eyes averted. "We've run that experiment."

He'd mentioned that, too, in the outpouring of ragged-winged, bloodless words.

"That was somebody else," said Hal, deliberately. "It only applies if there's the same conditions."

He fixed Adamska's gaze.

"Maybe the me in that world was stupid."

Adamska's eyebrows vaulted. There was a look of unsettled potential on his face. Paused in the act of deciding whether or not to believe him.

He shifted to a third option.

"I suppose it doesn't matter what I think." He shot a glance fletched with mistrust at Mantis, floating as though hung on a spiderweb in a breeze. "If it's true that he can dodge bullets."

"It does matter," Mantis interjected smoothly. "You see, I won't do it without your consent."

Adamska stared.

"Call it a whim," Mantis added, pleased in the knowledge that it wouldn't help at all.

"How humane of you." Ocelot's eyes narrowed.

There was a moment of silence, and a sense of listening.

"Because it would ruin the joke if you had someone to blame," said Mantis suddenly. "If you can claim you had nothing to do with it, you're absolved. I'm not interested in that. By my rules, it's perfect; the lie you've gone to such trouble to construct, destroyed with your own compliance. Our past catches up to us, Ocelot. It's no use running."

Could it really be that bad? Or did Adamska just not have any faith in him? The questions

gnawed at his brain, a pair of isolated and relentless locusts.

The muzzle of the gas mask turned to Otacon.

"Ah, you see? He's already beginning to wonder."

"Yes," said Ocelot, looking at him with an appraising and resigned eye. "You would have to, wouldn't you."

Before Hal could respond, the blue eyes sharp as frost were turned back on Mantis.

"What's your target?" he demanded. "You're no philanthropist. Why make us the offer? You have nothing to gain."

"That's where you're wrong," answered Mantis, a placid phantom. "Think of me as an angel. A messenger. There's something I want someone else to understand."

He rose to above the shining, pristine desk. His feet nearly touched a black and gold pen in an ornamental holder. Hal found himself staring at it, transfixed, waiting for a floating toe to knock it onto the ground.

"That, in this world, no one is innocent."

Vehemence carried through the aerated holes in his voice and abraded, sand against bone.

Ocelot was the first to speak.

"I see. So it's your own kind of sadism."

An understanding climbed above Hal's event horizon.

Looking at the masked and skeletal man in black, like what would be left if someone were starved, boiled, burnt, and mummified in leather, he said, without thinking, "Everybody wants to be less alone."

Silence sliced like glass through the atmosphere. Hal felt, as if from a step away, a sense of being stunned.

"Like you," Mantis said, the mask turned to Adamska, cutting off the moment as if it had never been, "You wouldn't be alone anymore. That's what you're thinking. You and he would be the only ones in this world with living memories of the one that went before. He would be bound to you. He won't have a choice. Any ally is better than none."

There was the look on Adamska's face that said none of this was made from whole cloth, but skimmed from his own mind.

His jaw set.

"You want my consent?" Ocelot said sharply. "Fine."

He turned to Hal with exaggerated finality.

"I agree to whatever you decide."

"So you are a coward," rasped Mantis, disappointed or delighted.

"Fuck off, eunuch," said Ocelot without looking away. He set his hand on Hal's shoulder. "Do what you need. I trust you."

The words came out misshapen, as though they had to fight their way up through a larynx that had never seen their kind.

"Adamska..." Hal said, watching his face.

His mind was a mass of images.

Adamska, broken and staring at the gun in his hands, confessing the life that might have been. Standing at the edge of a short cliff and a long long drop with a wire around his neck shining when his heartbeat pulsed. Above the mad doctor with the knife in his hand and blood on his face that wasn't as shocking, gut-wrenching, marrow-freezing, as the terrible joy.

And between it all, in the spaces where his eyes could settle, a *something* he could almost

remember, could almost see if he could for the one requisite instant let go of the fear.

Not that what hid there would make him stop loving Adamska.

But that it wouldn't.

Whatever it was Adamska feared him seeing, it could only be so much worse it could be than killing a helpless, wounded boy.

He should have been thinking logically. There was a clear answer if he could reason his way to it. Adamska's past, his past, the man with the code name Ocelot and the long dying. All he could think of was Esau's thin fingers clawing tracks in the dirt straight as tick marks on a prison wall.

Maybe that world had been a better one.

The world Adamska wanted dead and gone and unremembered, unmourned.

Looking made it real.

Here is your box, Pandora. Maybe there's a cat in it.

It's anything you want, as long as you don't look.

Leave it alone and it can be alive and dead eternally. The word for that was immortality.

What never really lived would never have to die.

Hal faced Mantis' mask, its eyes a crystal ball halved, dyed, and distended.

He said, "I have an answer."

"Wait. There's more," said Mantis, and Hal had to blink, because he'd sounded exactly like the devil making an offer over latenight TV. "You don't think I would make you an offer without giving something to your friend, do you? That wouldn't be fair."

"There's nothing I want from you," said Adamska coldly.

"So impatient." Really. He hadn't even made a suggestion yet. "That's another difference, isn't it? The other one can wait a lifetime for the perfect moment to strike."

His tone insinuated slithering wrath hidden in plain view behind the mask.

Ocelot's face twisted into disdain. "I'm not so easy to scare off."

"I can see it all, Adamska." The name was harsh and wrong through the metal filter. "The dark heart of your can feel him there, can't you? Yes, you must. He is the spider who spins at the center of your exquisite web. How much of it is your design? Is there any way to tell? He could be guiding your hand, like...yes, like a ghost, precisely. He twists and takes, hoarding and biding. He sees through your tricks, because it was he who made them. His patience is infinite. His time is endless. He waits for the day when the doors lock and you have nothing but to realize that you are alone in your mind."

Adamska threw back his shoulders and snorted.

"Nice speech. Too bad I've heard it all before. If that's your threat, you're wasting my time."

His stance was taut, like wires or readiness. His hand hovered near the revolver, though he had to be aware that it wouldn't be any use against Mantis. It was more instinct than rationality, Hal realized.

"Threat?" A lilting hiss. "No, no. I told you, it's a gift I bear."

His hand rose in front of him as if there were something invisible cradled in the black leather of his palm.

"You've partitioned yourself. It's not uncommon for people to take their worst impulses, attractions, desires, and give a lower nature the blame. You've heard the saying, 'The devil made me do it.'"

His tone leaked derision at the pretense that a human mind needed demonic help to plunge to the depths.

"But, in your unique case – ah, yes, this is interesting – you've seen your demon face to face."

You've met him autonomous. So you found the matching life inside yourself, and built him a prison that's become a shrine. After all, demons are only angels with a different message...You've shuttled off all of the darkness in your soul into his capable hands."

There was a breath of satisfaction at a good find. A dark amusement, as though appreciating a film that artfully captured the macabre.

"A lot of it, isn't there."

Adamska's fingers played at the air near his holster like a movie cowboy waiting for the command to draw. It wasn't a threat, but low-scale expression, one of those riffs of kinetic energy that were a part of his presence in whole.

"Only children," he said crisply, "are afraid of the dark."

"A brave face you put on, and a brave heart. You're not wondering, yet, if that's his doing."

A pause.

Adamska's face was stoic, brows flatlined.

Behind the mask, Mantis smiled.

"Now you are."

The gentle swaying of his limbs was the logical reversal of Adamska's sharp, focused tics.

"You'll never know whether any concept comes from him. The barest impulse defies scrutiny. It could be your own, yes; or it could be his whisper from the shadows, indistinguishable from your own, moving you to designs you aren't aware he has constructed. How funny. You're enslaved to your own free will."

Adamska's gaze was hard and unwavering.

"As long as you live," rasped Mantis, "he will never stay dead. He will always be there, waiting for you to be alone in darkness, for when your despair deepens until you would do anything to be vicious, sly, and brutal enough to claw victory from the red coals, no matter how it burns. And he will be born again."

A decision passed over Adamska's face.

He tilted his head forward once, perfunctorily.

He turned and walked toward the door, motioning to Hal to follow.

"Come on," he said. "If he intended to restore your memory, he wouldn't waste time with these games. He's fucking us around."

Hal nodded. He'd been wrong about Mantis. All the psychic wanted to do was torment people with their weaknesses. He wasn't going to use his ability to help them.

The door gleamed welcome back to the real world of bright white halls, soldiers, and the smell of gun oil.

His voice wafted behind them.

"I can destroy him for you, Adamska."

Ocelot froze in midstep.

His eyes slid to the side like a deadlock.

He said, "I don't believe you."

"I can do what you and your quaint self-preservation can't," said Mantis, who didn't care. "I can pull him out by the roots and salt the earth so nothing ever emerges again."

His black glove gestured, strangely graceful.

"I can flick the devil from your shoulder. It's only a set of synapses, after all. All I have to do is put out the fire."

"What will it cost me?" Adamska's voice was frank.

Mantis' was smooth, or had been at some point. Only remains made it through the filter, like gravel from a polished statue. "Your consent."

"What else?" His accent chopped the consonants.

"Nothing." Sere amusement wafted from the psychic. "Haven't you ever had a gift before?"

In Ocelot's turn back, there was resignation like a fear fulfilled.

He said, "Keep talking."

Above them, Mantis spread his hands as if bestowing blessings.

"It's simple. Nothing up my sleeves."

His voice scythed back and forth between them with the orange ovoid stare. Otacon kept wanting to blink in sympathy.

"Returning *your* memory, and removing *your* malignant little friend. As for price...there is none."

Hidden, Mantis smiled.

"From me."

In front of and below the black-clad, skeletal psychic Adamska looked terribly human. His skin looked impossibly fair beside the midnight green sneaking suit. Otacon felt a sudden stab of nostalgia for the torn, grease-stained uniform from the catwalk in REX's shadow that day, that had felt organic in his hands.

Neither set of eyes blinked.

"But you might find you miss your knowledge."

Mantis' gaze and attention laid on Hal like a physical grip.

"And you might miss your ignorance."

His reflection in the orange lenses was dark, distorted.

There were things you could see out of the corner of your eye, almost. Maybe if you turned around a little faster. Was there something about that bust wrapped in cloth by the wall, or the portrait of a laughing man? There was the feeling that cut deeper than *deja vu*, not that you had been here before but that you had *been* before, and this was a part of it. If you could grasp it the whole would reveal itself, that *it* had been somewhere else before, and if you could understand that everything would change. Like dessert being the name of the appetizer's poison.

In the other world was a coward who had pushed Adamska away.

The man he had loved.

There was someone Adamska had come this far to kill.

He thought of REX's missiles, needles in the sky.

Use one weapon to stop another.

Combat data.

What's known is still valid.

Not everything can change.

"Give me your answer," said Mantis in the stirring air, movements gentle as a creature in the black seas where light never reaches.

"Shouldn't you already know?" said Adamska. His hands hung steady at his sides.

"Out loud." The death's head mask with its protruding filter was out of proportion to the emaciated body. "Go on. Say it."

There was the silence of calibration, of a clock somewhere striking. The moment was there of itself, and presented itself accordingly. It took no planning to speak in unison.

"No," said one.

"Yes," said the other.

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/74/>

# chapter 75

## Stray by Dahne

*Surrender can change the nature of a man.*

It wasn't betrayal. Ocelot told himself that.

It was only confusion that made them stare at each other as if meeting for another first time, common failure to comprehend raised to sublime artistry.

"I have to know," he said, grey eyes behind glass already mourning.

"Wait," said Adamska, trying to explain and finding no other word.

Mantis swept down.

"Come along," he said, and mixed in among the pieces of that broken voice there was alien satisfaction. "I know a more suitable place for the procedure."

Untouched, a bookcase at the back of the room slid aside to reveal a tunnel into darkness.

The insectoid head swiveled to Adamska.

"This won't take long."

Hal followed him to the hidden corridor.

Before disappearing into the shadows, he stopped, one hand on the shelf as if to keep it from flying back into place of its own decision.

"I'll come back," he said.

It was neither threat nor promise, forgiveness nor plea for it.

Ocelot said, "You will."

Otacon stepped back into the hallway. The shelf slammed the window of sight closed hard enough to rattle leatherbound volumes together.

Suddenly, the room was very empty. Silent as a grave would be if it weren't for the dead.

Nothing but a current of cold air suggested there had ever been a door.

Ocelot went to the bookcase and gave it a shove. He wasn't really surprised when it didn't move.

He picked up a book and flipped it open.

*The Art of War*. Figured.

He put it back. He went to the wall a few steps away. He put his back against it and slid down.

"What the hell kind of place puts a door behind a bookshelf?" he said to no one.

The same as put a plush office in the middle of a fortress, no one answered.

Adamska sighed, let his eyes close, and leaned his head against the cool wall.

What Hal would never understand, he who had wanted to take Esau back with them like a wounded bird, was that it didn't work that way. Live long enough in shadow and it becomes a part of you.

Hal had been right about one thing. They needed every advantage they could get.

*That's what you are, isn't it, old man. You twist everything to your favor. You've managed to win, even now, by promising me what I need. But we're not done yet. I've sold my soul to you, but you've sold yours to me.*

There was no answer. He hadn't been expecting one.

For all the lengths he had gone to to outrun it, it was almost a relief when the past caught up.

Nothing for it now but to have faith.

Ocelot was too tired to laugh.



*You've won. You may take him away from me, and to what good? For what? I've got you, and I will use you like any other tool. Despite the both of you. That's what comes of making yourself useful.*

The smooth wall against his back was different from the cliff that night. He could still feel a place where the rock had poked beneath his shoulderblade like a bayonet.

It was a burden of proof.

Ocelot imagined he could feel hints of cold wind coming through the bookcase to his right.

*Kharasho, you old bastard. I accept you. Take your satisfaction in that, because you won't get one instant of pleasure from it. Because all you will ever do, by whatever sick means are necessary, is protect him.*

Ocelot drew the knife from its sheath, tucked and held close by the suit's design. He was coming to adjust to the shadowmelting color and the catsoft boots. It was left to his own devices to draw the eye.

His wrist flicked, flipped the knife into the air. Caught it. Tossed again.

Heavy. Built to last. It cut both ways, if you knew how to turn it.

Reflexes shifted it to an aggressive grip at the sound of footfalls approaching. Light, rapid taps, barely pausing to open the door. Ocelot's spine straightened.

The intruder was a redheaded girl in the local soldier's uniform, white but for the hulking gun slung over her back. It didn't have any noticeable effect on her stride as she passed him.

"Who are you?" she said, wedging her shoulder against the bookcase and giving a shove. "Damn."

"Don't bother," he said. Then, because there was no reason not to: "Ocelot."

The woman took a step back, nearly onto his toes, and crossed her arms to glare at the shelf. "Mantis playing games again, huh? Damn it. Here I thought I'd go do something useful and dodge the crowd on the main route. I'm getting tired of hearing, 'So, how many times do you think they'll try to nuke us?'"

She looked down at Adamska with a flicker of secondhand recognition. "Oh, right! You're that time traveler, huh?"

"Is there another?" he said dryly.

"Not yet."

She sat down beside him and slung the gun to rest in her lap.

"No reason there shouldn't be more of the same where you came from, yeah? We could be getting reinforcements all the time."

Ocelot snorted softly. "Don't count on it."

"I wasn't going to."

After a second of silence, Adamska looked up and found that the woman was searching his face. Hers was young, tomboyish, more rogue than rouge. Her hair was shoulder length and looked like an explosion in progress. She had the look of the stage just after rookie and before soldier, when you'd learned everything except that you weren't invincible.

So Adamska had been told. For himself, he'd never quite believed that last.

"I see the resemblance," the girl said finally.

Adamska scowled. "To what?"

"Yep." She nodded recognition. "Definitely Ocelot."

"You're taking this well."

"What?" She looked genuinely curious. "What should I be saying?"

Ocelot gestured aimlessly with the knife. "'That can't be,' maybe. Or try, 'That sort of thing is impossible,' that's a good one."

She looked at him with sympathy. "You really haven't been here long, have you?"

He glared across a flicker of light from metal. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Just that life isn't always simple."

Ocelot gave the woman a long, glacial stare.

"I believe the phrase is," he said, deliberately coarsening his accent, "'preaching to the choir.'"

The girl stuck her legs in front of her and crossed one ankle over the other. A clump of muddy snow disengaged from her boot and was absorbed by the red plush carpet.

After a while, she said, "This is it, huh."

Adamska's eyebrow raised, but the girl was no mind reader. The echo was inadvertent.

"The last showdown," he drawled.

"The decisive battle," the girl concurred.

Ocelot flipped the knife into the air and let the handle fall back into his palm.

"No."

The girl looked up from her weapon. "No what?"

"There's no such thing as the final battle," he said clearly. "Once this thing starts, it's going to keep going. There's a thousand battles, the big ones, the little ones, the ones you don't see happening unless you lose. They bend you, over and over, back and forth, until you break. The secret isn't to win. Anyone can do that, once. It's to keep winning, and never stop."

The knife was a glitter from hand to hand.

The girl's eyes followed.

"Don't sound so hopeless," she said, with a trace of insistence. "Nobody lives forever. And nobody's invulnerable."

"There's always a weak point." The shape between his hands did not rest long in either. "There has to be, if there's going to be anything like strength or structural integrity. Put it all in one place. Keep it from spreading through all the little cracks and breaking at the first strain of a burden."

Adamska caught the knife by the handle and jammed it blade-first into the carpet like stabbing a beast in the heart.

"Know it and make it yours."

His eyes fixed hard on the weapon, as though it were their force that kept the blade from leaping free and burying itself in his soft throat.

Abruptly Ocelot relaxed, sinuously feline. This boneless body could not be capable of sudden violence. The wall met his back.

"The pretty things," he said languorously, "they can only do so much. You know the real protectors when their charges can barely stand to look at them."

The blade was buried in red to the halfway point. The feel of pile and the padding beneath it parting, and the jar at striking whatever was beneath that, lay as a residue on Adamska's hand. The blade was canted slightly to the right, a hair off from the ninety degree ideal.

The girl's rifle lay across her knees, her arms crossed over the impromptu shelf. That she might be confused by the incomplete information didn't seem to occur to her. Her eyes were as artlessly direct as the hands on her rifle.

"That's what a soldier is," she said.

Her eyes ran patrol around the silent room and returned. An old habit.

She began, "When the Boss came back from—"

"Big Boss," Ocelot corrected.

"Same thing."

A flicker of stubborn loyalty set Adamska's lips. "It isn't."

"Whatever gets your rocks off," the girl ceded companionably. "When he came back, they called him a hero. He'd spent most of his life doing their bitch work. If we run out of bullets during this thing, we can melt down the medals they gave him and last another month. Then, once they're done congratulating him on how nobody'll ever forget what he did for them, they ship him out here with their science projects."

"Cowards." Ocelot said with little inflection. Despising them was a part of his bones wasn't worth expression. "They make the weapon and can't take the recoil."

They could make tools, but did not have the love to maintain them.

"So the guns start firing back." She took evident satisfaction in the idea. "That's what you're saying, right? Can't dodge the consequences forever."

"No," said Ocelot. "You can't."

The cold in his voice was not the bite of frost, but the numbing chill of shadow washing over a man who had almost begun to believe that sunset wouldn't come.

The girl's attention had risen from her gun. She was watching him with eyes that would have been more in place sighting along a sniper scope, waiting for the target to turn and show his face, and the irrevocable moment would fall, because pity would be as good as a squeeze of a trigger.

Behind her the bookshelf slid away. Cold air poured over them.

The passage was shorter than it looked, with pale, blue-white light obscuring the far end. After so long inside it made his eyes ache, even at a distance.

The girl stood and shouldered her rifle.

She gave him a soldier's appraising look.

"Wanna help me feed the dogs?"

"You know," said Ocelot, "I really do."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/75/">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/75/>

# chapter 76

**Stray** by Dahne

*"There cannot be two skies."*

-Planescape: Torment

---

*Faith can change the nature of a man.*

The new world was full of dogs. Huskies all, grey, brown, white, and black, a sniffing, shifting, shouldering crowd at knee level in the middle distance.

A delegation emerged from the main mass to bound to the newcomers and see if they passed muster.

Apparently the girl did. They swarmed to her, tails lashing, pushing their heads beneath her hands.

"Hey guys," she said.

One of the dogs went straight to Ocelot. Without knowing how he'd gotten there, Ocelot somehow wasn't surprised to see him. His hands sank into thick fur, white as an angel's wing.

The passage from the office had lead to a wide, high-walled corridor, open to the sky. At the far end a tall building loomed, window-studded. A perfect sniper's nest.

While the place might not be built to any human logic, clearly defense was in mind.

Their entourage chivvied them to the main mass. Hal was at the center. He was laughing.

"Look!" he cried as they approached. "Snake went and brought all the dogs in. Should've known he wouldn't leave you behind, huh?"

He met Adamska's eyes, smiling.

Ocelot understood immediately.

The psychic hadn't done it.

"Come on," the girl said, somewhere in his peripheral vision. "Let's get you guys some food."

Ocelot felt the tide of dogs draw away and waited for the elation to begin.

Hal chivvied Kaworu to join them. He resettled his glasses.

"There's always been dogs here," he said.

"Yeah," said Adamska.

They watched the pack follow Meryl out of sight, around the corner of another building in the motif of hulking and grey.

"One of them bit you, didn't she," Hal said quietly.

Wind slipped down the long passageway with just enough force to chill.

Distant soldiers' voices carried like a revoked reprieve.

Adamska rolled up the slick green material over his arm. He stuck it out to display the red, still livid mark. Things always took longer to heal than you thought they would.

Sometimes they never did.

Hal took him by the arm, thumb tracing the edges of the wound, gently as he had cleaned it. His touch felt the same as it ever had.

"So it's real," he said. His eyes had the quiet avidity that told that something was happening behind them, with no hint as to what it was.

"You didn't think so?" Nothing moved of Adamska but his senses.

"I wasn't sure."

Ocelot watched Hal's hands move across the mark, the halfway point between wound and scar.

"Now you know," said Adamska, softly.

Hal's hands traveled up his arm, pushing back his sleeve further, to the place beneath the elbow where a seam bound flesh to flesh in another world. His thumbs stroked the smooth skin, questing, curious. He was near enough for Ocelot to catch oil, machines, and the scent of him. His hands reached his shoulder and exerted a pull to bring Ocelot down and forward into a kiss that lingered.

He had always known.

"I thought I should ambush you, for once," Hal said, over the brief space between them. Words did not need to be projected, but only released. They roamed to the target on their own will.

"It's not an ambush if you let them see you coming," said Adamska. The impression of him reflected in the glass over Hal's eyes, a faint self-colored sense.

"Does it matter, if it works?"

Right arm of one interlocked with left of the other, hand laying on the inner curve of the forearm.

"You know who I am," said Ocelot.

This was the man he had spent weeks beside, building a machine that was its own dissolution. This was the man who had held him unwillingly at gunpoint, trapped and steadied by his own hand. This was the man he had longed for and left, and found.

Hal said, "You look different without the mustache."

He let go and fell back a step to look Adamska up and down, scanning him like a thumbprint.

Ocelot said, "Are you all right?"

"Yeah." He looked unsteady and unconvinced. "Yeah. It's just going to take some getting used to."

Adamska looked up to the broad highway of blue sky above them.

"The psychic," he observed, "didn't tamper with your gift for understatement."

Hal looked down the long corridor. The area was abandoned, potential intruders perhaps funneled to some other route. The architecture of the base had no internal logic that Ocelot could see, but the soldiers seemed to have an intrinsic understanding. He would learn it.

Hal said, "It's been a long time, Ocelot."

Clarity overlaid the edges of the walls where they met the sky, like they were trying to make up for drab content by presenting it in exceptional definition. A brighter shade of grey.

There was no one in sight to hear.

In the synthetic valley the air was sheltered. Adamska's voice drifted low like the border of snow along the walls.

"Any way you twist it."

It would be in his own time to answer whether it had been a kiss goodbye.

Hal said, the tenacious grudge of nostalgia or regret in the fine lines by his eyes, "I'm losing track of how often I've met you for the first time."

Adamska came closer, near enough to touch, though he didn't. Hal didn't step back.

"Tell me about the first," said Ocelot. "The real first. You never wanted to talk about it."

All along, he had never asked. Like many other things, it had never been possible until this moment.

"Because you didn't," Hal said, with that wry smile. "You didn't have that good a grip on sanity, remember? I didn't want to be the one who broke you."

Adamska snorted. "Like you could."

It was a fine joke. He could have done it whenever he liked, with a push to the right pressure point, a twist to the right joint, or one of the innumerable careless cruelties humans generated like sparks from a dynamo.

His miracle was that he hadn't.

Hal looked off across concrete and years.

"I only ever saw you from a distance," he said, in the voice for recollection, distant while present. "I was terrified."

His smile was rueful. Each mark of it could be traced.

"I was afraid of everything, in those days."

He watched a raven hop across the top of the wall, his eyes narrow against the reflection of sun.

"You were just one of the terrorists. You never paid any attention to me. You didn't have to. Every minute that passed, I was sure I was going to get dragged in and tortured if what I knew was still useful, or shot if it wasn't."

His voice was even, unforced. There was no hurry.

"They called you Shalashaska. I don't know why."

He spoke as if recovering a lost artifact, brushing away the dust carefully, professionally, to reveal the shape and shine. Pointing it out to a layman observer. *Look.*

"A little after it all started, I saw you talking to one of the soldiers. It seemed like it went on for a long time. I couldn't hear any of it. He didn't seem angry, from the way he moved, how he gestured. Just telling you something, leaning in a little. You gave a few short answers. Then you shot him. Right through the neck. Smooth, clean motion, spinning the gun on your finger while he was falling. He never took his facemask off. The look on your face never changed."

Hal rubbed his forehead with his hand, over a tremulous smile.

"Isn't it weird? I'm talking about it like it actually happened."

Ocelot watched him, and listened. Like a cat, he knew when to wait.

In the empty courtyard, outlined like a living chalk sketch on the wall, Hal looked unaware of whether or not he was alone.

"I saw you once, later," he went on, as if he couldn't stop, or wouldn't. "There was a bandage around your arm, and the hand was missing. Grey Fox cut it off, before he went and killed all those soldiers, and would have killed me if Snake hadn't been there, but I didn't know that, then. I was covered by the optic camouflage, so I was safe. Have I told you about that? It bends light, makes you functionally invisible, just a kind of rippling outline. I'll show you sometime. You couldn't have seen me, then, while I was running and hiding, trying to help Snake. But I got caught in the halls and had to get past you. Even invisible, I was afraid. I pressed my back against the wall, and you passed so close I could feel the air move, and I smelled leather, and saw the ribbon holding your hair. Isn't that weird? A ribbon, not a rubber band. A green one. Just when I was breathing again you turned around. I thought, Here it is. Now I'm going to die. And just for that second, I stopped being afraid. Like the circuit overloaded, and I couldn't anymore. I was almost relieved. That's its own kind of cowardice."

The walls held the air still and silent. His voice carried, though no effort went into the pitch.

"Turned out it was just a mouse you saw. Almost ran right over my shoe. I waited a long time after I couldn't hear your spurs anymore – that little silvery clink – before I moved."

It wasn't something he could apologize for.

Hal wasn't looking at him. It wasn't avoidance of his gaze, but the middle-distance stare of memory, the concentration and dropping of polite pretense that made it possible to speak truth. You only took your eye off a target that you knew would be there when you turned back.

"But then, when you came through the machine, and you had your gun jammed in my back, I wasn't afraid at all." He looked back to Adamska. "Funny how time changes things, huh."

A cloud stumbled across the sun, diluting the reflection off concrete and snow. Adamska squinted up into it.

Ocelot said, "I remember that."

"But you don't remember the other part, do you?" said Hal, not unkindly. He was close enough, almost, to feel the warmth rising from him into the still air. "No, you wouldn't. It hasn't happened for you. I'm the only one who ever knew him – that him - in person. He's living in my mind, too."

Hal's eyes traveled up the walls. His shadow was clear-edged on the concrete.

"Now I've got the advantage. There's no memories of that in you for Mantis to unlock. There's a whole world now that only exists in my head."

There was sorrow in his voice, and wonder.

"That's how it is for everyone," said Adamska.

Silence settled around them.

Boots innumerable had pressed through the thin layer of snow on the ground, making a river of concrete with white banks near the walls.

Ocelot asked, "What now?"

Hal studied him, the same look on his face he had always had when contemplating something strange. "You mean between us."

Adamska's wrist snapped an encompassing gesture. "The rest is decided. I fight beside you. Whether it's as more or less than an ally is your choice."

When the world rebrightened, for the first time he noticed the glitter of the thousands of specks of glass embedded in the concrete walls.

Truth evaporated fear into the obsolete.

Adamska felt the surge of a new, strange power. He spoke it.

"Whatever I am, whatever I've been, I'll continue loving you. I don't care if I have to do it from a distance. If you can't accept it, then so be it. If protecting you means being something you can't stand to look at, I'll wear The Fear's fucking camouflage. If you want me dead, once the war's over, I'll take the bullet with a smile on my face. I'm your enemy? Fine. I'll be the last of them to die. Break every bone in my hands for what I've done, and I'll keep pulling the trigger. Only tell me what you want."

The surprise on Hal's face could have meant anything, and it would be beautiful.

"There's really a question?" he said.

Adamska nodded. "The answer's all the briefing I need."

Hal looked at him.

He burst out laughing.

Ocelot scowled. It had been a good speech, damn it.

"What's so fucking funny?"

Hal smiled at him, with warmth and affection startling as a strike from the blue sky.

"We really don't know each other at all."

Adamska glared. "What are you talking about?"

There was a strange sympathy in Hal's face.

"That after all this time – relatively speaking – you're still not sure."

Uncertainty was not the word for it. Adamska could see that he knew that.

"Are you afraid?" said Ocelot, softly.

Silence closed over it.

From the distance, there was the rumor of an engine starting. Soldiers shouting. The business of the base, going about its restless rituals.

"Sure I am." Hal met his eyes. His voice was not loud, but carried clearly, like a whisper from a step behind. The laughter was gone from his features. "Because...I see him in you, Adamska."

Above them the raven on the wall took flight. A sound of wings, a caw, and a moving shadow.

Ocelot said, "Why is honesty one of the things I like about you?"

"Because you don't have the patience for polite fictions." Hal smiled, then looked away, toward the border of trampled snow. The remnants were left piled out of the way. "That's what I'm scared of. You've been fighting so hard...I don't want you to lose a part of yourself."

He looked up and caught Ocelot's eye straight on.

"I understand the decision you made."

Ocelot's shoulders were squared, back straight. His hands were still at his sides.

"You think you do?" he said, cutting his voice to an acute angle.

"I know."

Clear-eyed, without hesitation. He spoke that way about machines, the things he stroked and shaped with his hands.

"Then tell me." It was a challenge. "What was I thinking, when I told the psychic to get his bony fingers out of my head and leave the poison behind?"

"Adamska." Hal's face was still as a reflection in clear water, marked with concern. "Do you really think I would hold that against you?"

Ocelot let his face speak for him.

A sigh brushed Hal's lips.

"It scares me, Adamska. I won't pretend it doesn't. You deserve better than that. That part of you, back underground, in the blood and the pain, and even from a distance the coldest eyes I'd ever seen...it *is* part of you. You may not like it. I won't pretend I do. But cutting away the bad parts, making somebody only into the shape you want...that's what *they* do. Asking you to rip away who you are would be worse than anything he ever did. You wouldn't be you anymore, without him."

Unconsciously Hal's hand fell to the hilt of the pistol they had given him. Ocelot wondered if he knew how to use it. No doubt he knew how to take care of it, with the attention weapons needed.

"And if I stopped loving you because of it, I wouldn't be me."

Ocelot covered the distance between them in a half step. His boots were soundless on the naked concrete. The kinetic boundaries breached, and the flash of his hand was too fast for the eye or mind to follow. The fabric of Hal's collar crushed in his hand.

"Do you mean that?" he demanded.

Hal didn't move to pull away. Clear eyes met his. "Absolutely."

Gentle, Hal pried loose Adamska's hands, and guided them to his waist. He linked his hands behind Adamska's neck and smiled.

"I love you, Ocelot."

The kiss began soft, searching. Adamska's passion broke over it like a fever, and Hal answered him in kind, amplifying and reflecting until beginning and end were the same. He never knew if he pulled Hal to him or was pulled, or if both of them fell to a newly flaring center of gravity. His weight and warmth and scent were sharp and reckless.

"You're an idiot," Adamska breathed.

Hal's smile slipped in through half-closed eyes. "So are you."

His face was close, breath slow and easy.



"You're a good man," said Hal.

Ocelot realized, with wonder and a strange appreciation, as for music half in a key above hearing, that he did and always would believe it.

That nothing could break that myth for him made it precious and worth protecting.

"It's going to be strange, now," Adamska warned, lifting his hand to between his shoulderblades, letting his fingers follow the tracks of his spine.

Hal laughed, and he could feel it as both vibration and movement of air. "Hasn't it always been?"

Up farther, past his neck, with a touch that made him shiver, to tangle in his hair.

"Get moving," said Ocelot. "We have a world to conquer."

"It'll still be there in five minutes."

"Hmm." A low, rich laugh. "I think you're right."

He kissed him as his hands explored terrain both familiar and strange, new and as known as every part of him was. Hal lifted his palms to press against the flanking ridges of Adamska's collarbone, caressing with no need to pull him close, where he already was. They stood in the empty courtyard and didn't hear the ravens call.

Reality was the warmth of him, and a cut with the shining, flawed diamond of the fact that he would not leave. He rested his forehead against Adamska's, weariness melding into intimacy, given to him alone. The air stirred, and stray wisps of his hair touched Adamska's temples. His long fingers curled where sneaking suit met naked throat.

"Pretty hands," murmured Ocelot.

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/76/>

# chapter 77

## Stray by Dahne

*Directive can change the nature of a man.*

Silence spoke for them.

Hal stroked the rough velvet hair of the man in his arms and tried to reconcile who he was.

Adamska. Ocelot. Shalashaska, whatever that meant. Maybe as much, or as little, as any of them.

Nobody fit quite neatly into a name.

Hal would learn him through feel, the hidden strike of his heartbeat, the press of the side of his face against his, absorb him through the skin like welcome poison.

"Do you know about the arm thing?" he said, at length.

"I know," said Adamska, breath warm by his ear, "about the arm thing."

All he needed was time. It would reconcile. This was their world, now.

Hal opened his mouth to find words for coming back to one world with the whole of another, and finding him there.

The CODEC whined to life like a mosquito slinging by at mach speed.

"Ocelot. Otacon," grated Big Boss's voice. "My office."

Adamska spoke a clean affirmation, as though it didn't take any thought to process an order. The connection broke.

Big Boss was a to the point kind of guy.

It was oddly easy to balance that with the thought that he'd been dead for years.

"Ready?" said Adamska.

Hal extricated himself from his arms, felt the backs of his fingers stroke his hair in passing. The air felt colder by contrast.

Ocelot. His Ocelot. He kept wanting to repeat it, as though trying to remind himself of something, though there was nothing left to have forgotten.

Mantis was right. It was different, firsthand.

Like seeing Snake through bars instead of over Codec. In person he could see the pain tightening the corners of his eyes, and what it cost him to move, and he thought – it could have just been the lighting off the tile, but he thought – he could see the sheen of electrical burns, laying all over him.

It wasn't, he discovered, a question of forgiveness.

"Yeah," said Hal. He gave Adamska a sideways glance. "Are you?"

In the right light, from the right angle, he could see it. Something about the area right in the center of his face, where the eyes swept down. Hal could lay the face of memory right over it, and that epicenter stayed the same.

But the other Ocelot's head had never given that sardonic tilt, and his hands had never made swooping guns in the air.

The hallways teemed with footsteps, voices, and people. Soldiers, mechanics, engineers, essential personnel of every stripe. Shadow Moses was a turtle that carried everything it needed on its back. In an extended siege, the only issue would be supplies. If Big Boss had been planning for this, he'd have that under consideration. He would have connections. Otacon wondered how long Liquid had been prepared to hold out, when he'd tried.

Hal was already getting used to those thoughts pecking at reality.

The base he had worked in for years was a different place, filtered through a reunited life.

Each face opened webs of memory, like one side of a rorschach blot that had been covered was suddenly revealed. This one, passing on your right, is it Ed, the guy who's helped you lug odd pieces of sheet metal in and out of the way depending on what's working, or is it one of the soldiers under Wolf's direction who hauled Snake away? Well, sir, that all depends on how you look at it.

Adamska met the curious stares with challenge.

"What's the problem?" he said, head held high. "Never seen a time traveler before?"

"No," said someone.

"Shut up, Johnny," said someone else.

Doors beeped obligingly and swished out of their way. Otacon fingered the stiff keycard in his pocket, though there was no need to do anything besides have it there. It wasn't yet worn with nervous handling, like the one he'd been carrying since REX was a blueprint and an idea. FOXHOUND was highest clearance, and that was what they were, now.

A collection of freaks, Ocelot had called them.

Otacon wondered, as he had then, if he was consciously counting himself among them.

Most of the story had come secondhand, in long nights of poring over CODEC recordings with Snake, trying to make sense of it all. The pieces he'd glimpsed, frantic, blurred with fear, had been knitted together with the crisp images recorded as Snake lived them. It would've felt intrusive, if they hadn't spent so much time looking through the same eyes that it was second nature.

Had Snake known what he was warning him about, in the time so long ago that, now, had never happened? How would Snake feel about the life that had been pulled out from under him?

*Could you do this for the rest of them? Unlock their memories?*

*No.* Mantis' voice kept something of a rasp mind to mind. *For you, it's possible. You were the nexus of the change. None of them will ever know, unless you tell them.*

The cold, spidery laugh had skittered across his mind.

*No doubt they wouldn't thank you for that.*

There were moments when nothing had changed, and moments when reality was malleable as Semtex. They ran into one another until it was hard to tell the difference.

The halls had always been white.

*Only you,* Mantis told him, running his thin black hand over where a metal bed would have been.

Ocelot's steps kept time at his side.

They passed familiar faces in the living corridor, all along the spectrum of suppressed curiosity. Some Otacon recognized from both sides of the coin. His colleagues, on more than one occasion his protectors. His captors. There but for...

He laughed as they turned a corner.

Adamska's curiosity lit on his shoulder like an insect.

"I didn't know there were situations where you could replace 'the grace of God' with 'a time machine,'" he explained.

Ocelot gave him a look of oblique amusement. "I can think of a few."

He understood him well enough that he didn't have to completely understand.

Otacon felt a stab of gratitude.

He could see the corridors they passed through both as full and briskly moving, as they were, or empty and silent but for a guard's even tread. It was a little like having your eyes slip out of focus just enough to there to be two images. Then, when you made them resolve, it was the one you thought would vanish that was real.

"Don't think of them as ghosts," said Ocelot, as they passed through.

"Guess you would know, huh," Otacon muttered.

He earned a sideways smirk.

The tide of people rose as they approached Big Boss's office. The earlier debriefing was little more than a soft, blank space in Otacon's head. Funny. He could remember some things that hadn't happened years ago in perfect detail, but he couldn't remember what he had told his commander this afternoon. That was probably good.

He hadn't left anything out.

"I wonder if Esau would be still alive, in the other world," Otacon murmured, without thought or direction. "I wonder if he was ever born."

"He was where he wanted to be," said Adamska, without looking at him.

Faces passed, wearing submerged inquisition. One young soldier lingered too long. Adamska gave him an appraising glance and stroked the revolver at his side. The soldier remembered somewhere he needed to be.

For a moment, in the ebb and flow of the base's heartbeat, the hall was empty but for a mechanic at the far end. He checked something off of a list.

Eyes fixed on him, Ocelot said under his breath, "Do you regret it?"

Hal watched the corridor pass them by, and watched the memories cross the back side of his eyes. "You said, once, that it's better to know."

Adamska nodded recognition. His eyes cut to him. "Is it?"

Otacon smiled softly. "You would know."

Ocelot smirked.

*Mantis*, Hal had thought back to him, under a cluster of bright lights. *Thanks*.

Ocelot stepped forward, activated the mechanism of the office door, and swept a graceful gesture. "After you."

The office was spacious enough to hold all of FOXHOUND and spartan enough to suit them. There was a hulking filing cabinet, a desk, and a high-backed chair of the breed James Bond villains used to reveal themselves with appropriate drama. Big Boss was leaning forward in it. He pored over a diagram, tapping it from time to time with his forefinger.

His presence filled the empty room, and, for that matter, the base. He was the constant, uniting force of its psyche. How strange that elsewhere this same conflict would have his corpse as a bargaining chip.

*Don't think like that.*

Big Boss's gaze rose to meet them.

Maybe it was the contrast of knowing that he shouldn't be alive that sketched him in bold lines of clarity and force.

"Otacon." His voice was direct as a tap to the temple, measuring out enough force to get your attention. "Ocelot."

The single blue eye, bright and focused, didn't flicker.

"Sir," said Ocelot.

Hal wondered what he'd ever seen in that one eye full of purpose that had made him afraid, back before he'd used up his fear.

"Sir," said Otacon.

The eye passed over one, then the other. It must have been satisfied.

"The late Colonel Volgin's cache is being lifted here as we speak," said the FOXHOUND

commander.

Otacon had almost forgotten about that.

Another long look.

"You two did good."

Ocelot stood straight, his shoulders back. "Is that all, sir?"

"You know damn well that's not all." Big Boss's brow lifted with the barest trace of amusement.

He leaned forward over the desk, arms coming up to rest on it. He was a tough-built man. Age hadn't diminished him. Years had crashed against him and left him stronger.

"I've got a job for you two."

"It was a nice vacation while it lasted." Ocelot's eyes wandered the white walls. "Scenic."

Big Boss ignored him. "Tell is this war going to be fought?"

"I was guessing the place where the soldiers and giant robots are mysteriously appearing," said Ocelot laconically. "Do you want us to go out onto the snowfields and find you a spot with better lighting?"

"Everywhere." Big Boss cut across him. "Every damn place on the earth where they have their hooks. Every head they've crawled inside. This war's fronts will number in the millions."

The shutter of his voice opened a crack to show a glimpse, for an instant, of hatred that ran bottomless black.

He paused, eye focused, frozen for an instant.

"Look," he said, his voice downshifted in intensity. "What're their advantages?"

Otacon would never have figured Big Boss for a fan of the Socratic method.

"Numbers," said Ocelot.

"Complete political control," said Otacon.

"Indoctrinated troops."

"Weapons."

"Resources."

"Huge information network."

"Anonymity."

"Unlimited movement."

Big Boss's hand made a cutting motion. They stopped.

"We," he said, "have you two."

Ocelot looked at Otacon. He tilted his head, considering.

"That sounds fair," he concluded.

Past, future, and alternate present all considered, at that moment, Otacon would have built him an army to conquer the world.

"Numbers and indoctrination," Big Boss intoned. His voice was the kind that, over the years, gained gravel and didn't lose power. "Information. That's what you'll be in the field fighting."

Adamska slashed his arm out. He'd always done that.

"Don't dick me around," he said with sudden ferocity. "He's too valuable to send outside of the walls with only one protector."

"That's it. The fewer, the more mobile and harder to spot. We can't afford to have all of our resources locked in here, right in their sights. We need you on the move, getting their information, spreading ours."

"Wait." The servos in Otacon's mind stopped, focused. "You want me to break into – consistently – the network run by people so secret and secure almost nobody knows they exist?"

Big Boss nodded. "Got it in one."

Otacon gave it thought.

"Sounds..."

"Insane," Adamska suggested.

Otacon's eyes were lifted to pick through the innumerable, invisible waves rippling the air.

Radio, broadcast, high frequency.

"...interesting."

He did always like a challenge.

Adamska searched him with a look, iceblue eyes intent.

"Can you do it?" His voice was low.

Otacon passed him, sideways and underhand, a coded smile.

"You don't know me."

Ocelot caught it on the edge of his smirk.

Expressions smoothed in unison on the curve to face Big Boss.

He had been watching them, like a gull, head turned slightly to the right to fix them in his field of vision. As attention returned the FOXHOUND commander's axis straightened. One of those habits, Otacon thought, that you never broke, but developed new ones to cancel out.

He must have looked a lot like Snake when he was young.

"Actually," Otacon said, "it's not that different from what I've- heard about people doing before. A two-man team can go anywhere and keep from getting noticed. You can do a lot of damage and get out fast."

Changing names, slipping out of sight, wiping out the targets one by one. He'd done it before. The knowledge that he could do it, *had* done it, whetted fear down to a keen edge of excitement.

"And you," Big Boss said, nodding to Ocelot. "Face to face, you know them better than anyone. Your intel's a little out of date, but you know how they think. That won't have changed much. Ways and means of enforcement make advances, but their *modus operandi* is status quo."

The massive wooden desk looked out of place between the plain white walls. Though the dark wood made it difficult to tell, Otacon could have sworn there was a bullet hole or two. He wouldn't be surprised if the top was riddled with them, underneath the maps, papers, and plans. Big Boss was the kind of man who appreciated furniture you could take cover behind. He must have had it since he first took command, back in the sixties.

"Hey." Something occurred to Otacon. "You're taking this time travel thing pretty well."

Big Boss's eyebrows raised sardonically. It was odd to watch both make the same movement when one was over blank space.

"I've been around. As long as your story doesn't have vampires in it, I've got no problems."

"Actually..." Otacon began, with a pang. *E.E...*

Big Boss's palm came up. "Quit while you're ahead, kid."

He leveled his shoulders and looked to both of them, though how he managed it was less apparent.

"Blocking and distributing information," Big Boss said, "will be one part of your job."

"Yes, I thought it sounded too easy at that," said Ocelot. A gesture morphed into flicking his revolver from the holster into the air, catching, spinning, and palming it back. "What other hydra do you want us to slaughter?"

"Not kill," said Big Boss. Throughout the gun's aerial dance, his eye hadn't moved. It went to Hal, steady as a sunning basilisk. "Tame."

Otacon's mind stalled and sparked.

"You don't mean..."

Big Boss's eye was cold and clear.

"You told me everything, remember."

His voice banked away from the edge of sympathy.

"The boy you found."

Breath hissed between Ocelot's teeth as he took a step forward

"What about him?" he said sharply.

"Adamska," Otacon murmured, touching his arm. He didn't look away from Big Boss's steady stare. "It's all right."

Reluctance palpable, Ocelot stood down.

Big Boss's hands folded to display battered knuckles.

"There's got to be more like him."

His eye fixed on Ocelot.

"Like you."

It was hard to imagine the one behind the patch couldn't have blinked a bullet away.

Ocelot's eyebrow made a mild arch. "So?"

"I want the two of you to bring them in."

Ocelot's eyes narrowed.

"I don't know if you've noticed, *sir*, but the last wasn't exactly cooperative."

"He's dead," said Otacon, from a distance.

"I know that." Big Boss didn't blink or move. It was like trying to stare down a hurricane. "But you wouldn't have killed him as long as there was a choice. And he gave you valuable information nobody else could have gotten."

While the boy was bleeding and smiling Otacon had imagined he could already feel him growing cold.

Big Boss leaned forward over his desk in a faint rustle of attendant leather.

"By their rules, that shouldn't have happened. Once you've broken that wall, the rest – well, that's just a matter of degree. They'd had him since birth, and you nearly got him. I'm not entirely convinced, if things had been different, you couldn't have gotten him to transfer loyalties. Yeah, I see that look, Ocelot. It doesn't sound like much. But everything under one hundred percent is a point in our favor. They have the mass, no conflict, no question. We make it a fight of the individual."

"You want missionaries," Adamska said flatly.

"That's right," Big Boss ground forward. "Who better?"

*Anyone*, Hal almost said, before he realized it wouldn't be true.

Big Boss lifted a hand to each of them in turn. His hair was a rime of white, his one eye a spark holding back frost.

He gestured to Adamska. "You broke their hold over you."

To Hal. "You broke the laws of god damned physics."

Otacon tried to look modest.

Big Boss's hands came together and landed on the desk with a solid thud.

"You're both proof of things that shouldn't be possible."

"So?" Despite himself, Ocelot was interested.

"You're wild cards." Big Boss spread his hands in the international gesture for nothing up my sleeves, a shadow of an old cat's indulgence. "I say we stack the deck."

"By *talking* the enemy to death?" Adamska dispatched the word as though it were a harmlessly unlovely insect.

"If you can. Adding to our ranks and damaging their means of production will give us more of an advantage than just depleting their ready stock. If not, well, I remember you being pretty good at the traditional combat style. But I don't think you'll let it come to that often."

In the long second of that eye laying on him, Hal understood.

Two criteria matched by subject Hal Emmerich new data;

1. will kill if he has to

2. never wants to have to again.

"You bastard," Otacon breathed.

He felt Adamska's hand make an abortive flicker toward him.

"Go ahead," Big Boss said, not unkindly. "I have a feeling I'll be hearing that a lot in the next few months."

"You want us to find more of them," Otacon echoed. There was the empty air feeling of his mind leaping one step beyond him. "Kids like Esau."

"You couldn't save him." There was no way of telling whether Big Boss's pitiless tone was intention or habit. "Save them instead."

A spark of clarity from air.

That was one rumor explained.

"Like the way you take in child soldiers and war orphans." Otacon heard words he hadn't felt his mouth manufacture.

"Yeah." Big Boss's shoulder sloped forward, a heavier lean that deepened his asymmetry. If anything, he sounded tired. "Like that."

"You're using us." Each syllable issued from Ocelot as a flechette of accusation.

Big Boss returned a stately nod. "That's right. If you can't fight the enemy on his strengths, use what he calls a weakness."

"*Art of War*?" Ocelot said dryly.

"No. Just something an old friend used to tell me."

Quiet fell like a pebble.

Big Boss shifted forward, chair creaking.

"The two of you match the ideal specifications."

*Is he giving us a mission or ordering sheet metal?* the back of Hal's mind thought giddily.

"You won't let him die, and he won't let them die." His voice was even, reasonable. "It's part of who you are. We can use that."

Particles that had been floating blind in Hal's head turned solid and vandalized the surface.

"That's exactly how they think," said Otacon.

Big Boss looked at him, and he was sure that the soft-edged accusation would be his last words.

"That's right," said Big Boss. "To defeat your enemy, you have to let him live on, a little, in you."

"Old friend?" said Ocelot, softly.

Big Boss gave him a look that could have been regret, sorrow, nostalgia, remorse, forgiveness or long, low, endless loss like the ache of a phantom limb.

Or nothing at all.

"Yeah."

Watching Adamska watch him, Hal wondered how well they had known each other, fifty years ago.



"But we're not them," said Big Boss.

"What's the difference?" Ocelot baited.

Big Boss's hands flattened on the desk.

"We give you a choice."

Ocelot smiled thinly. "Between your bidding or a firing squad?"

"That's not how I run things." Big Boss's eye was steady on him. "Take the mission or don't.

You're not our only trick. Stay here, fight here, be a conscientious objector and feed the damn dogs if you want to. We'll live either way. It's your choice."

The way they stared each other down, the next word could only be "*Draw.*"

Adamska sighed.

"Give us time," he said.

Otacon nodded along to his decision.

"I'll do it," Hal said.

"Exactly that much," Adamska finished smoothly.

Big Boss said, "Good."

And there it was.

Otacon had always thought life-changing events should come with a special sound effect, to let you know they were happening. Otherwise, your life could be off and scuttling before you knew it was ready to shed its old shell.

"Fox will give you the rest of the details." Big Boss reshuffled the strata of paperwork on his desk. Otacon wondered, unkindly, if he had a tick in a checkbox to make. "You leave tomorrow."

Adamska spread his arms, shaking his head.

"It figures," he said sadly. "I get here just in time for the war of the century, and you send me off before the first shot."

The revolver was in his palm, and it spun up in the familiar noise like beating wings to stand at mast and divide his face.

"Which, by the way, would be mine."

Big Boss's sigh was a long, low landing.

"I hate to be the one to break it to you, kid, but it doesn't work that way anymore."

The chair and his coat creaked a duet in baritone and tenor leather as he leaned back.

"Climactic, decisive battles are pretty on paper. We don't get those."

His hands spread open.

"What we get are endless, tiny little fights. We'll struggle for every step. It won't be pretty. It won't end fast. It might not end. That's the way the world keeps going; not with a bang, but with a million, million, million tiny little clicks."

Ocelot's eyes had fallen, hidden beneath half-lowered lids. His fingers gently stroked the revolver.

"Never stops," Adamska echoed.

Otacon could almost feel it, cool and smooth.

Finally, he identified the new sharpness to Big Boss's movements, the focus that crystallized his eye and gave him the tautness of a violin string about to thrum. Feeling it from the man beside him made it familiar and gave it a name.

Anticipation.

Ocelot's eyes rose, direct, electric blue.

"Let's get started."

---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/77/>

# chapter 78

## Stray by Dahne

*Anything can change.*

Morning sighed mist down the mountainside and turned to fall back into uneasy sleep. The terraced level, carved for tanks and transports, made a resting place for the early fog. Were there eyes to see, there would be a darker place in the soft, diffuse light, in the shape of a man's memory.

There was another by the cliff wall, where condensation gathered on metal bound to the mountain's bones. Drops of water fell, from time to time, from the lowest silver loops.

"You've returned," said the man in grey, as in the predawn red touched his eye.

Mist touched tattered, faded fatigues.

The sun was not far. Pale light lived suspended between weightless water.

The boy lifted his eyes and smiled back.

"They made a grave for me."

The first breath of warmth threaded through the hushed air.

"Would you like to stay?" said the other, gently.

The boy smoothed a stone with his hand, as if to steady it, though it did not move. He turned away from the cairn.

"I'm ready to go, now," he said.

The other took his hand.

If there had been eyes to see, they would have watched the grey world turn to rose as two figures walked off the edge and did not fall.

---

If there had been eyes to see, they might have seen others lift away, one step back in time. Were there eyes exhaustion hadn't closed, nerves not numbed by sleep, they might have felt the rush of air as the hatch opened, seen the narrow crack of midmorning light drunk on salt water reflection. They might have watched long enough for a small, grey-green object to fall through the interval and be caught in white foam, and seen no more.

---

Shadow Moses, in full war mode. Teeming, massing, moving. A murmur in pulses, a hum of machinery, distant engines.

Two Snakes on the sidelines, in a gridded maze of crates, metal at their backs.

"You try to tell the poor bastards that most of it's waiting," said Snake, exhaling smoke. "Do they ever listen?"

"Did we?" drawled Liquid.

Snake flicked an ember away. It fell beneath passing boots.

"Raven says there's blood on the sunrise," he muttered.

"Raven always says that."

"Is he right?"

"Depends on how you look at it." Liquid slid him an oblique glance. "They haven't beaten us yet, brother."

"A week, and we're still standing." Snake exhaled a cloud of mist. "That a new record?"

"Yes." Liquid gave the edge of a private smile. "What can anyone ask for, but a fighting chance?"

Snake's head turned, tracking an aberrant flicker, a live thing that didn't fit the soldier's pattern.

"We'll be getting plenty of those."

Liquid's arm swept across the base around them. "All I see is opportunity, brother. All the world will break free and flock to our--"

Snake crouched down, hand outstretched.

Liquid's eye followed. He bent forward.

He said, "That is the ugliest cat I have ever seen."

---

"They know somebody is getting into the system."

"Is that a problem?" Ocelot sprawled across the bed, its pattern the same anonymous, muddy floral print of every hotel.

"It will be." Otacon resettled his glasses. The laptop's glow glinted. "For the high-level inhouse tech the trail leads straight to."

Ocelot barked a laugh and rolled over. "That should be fun. Nothing works them up like a traitor who can't keep it out of the family."

"They're already pretty angry," Otacon said serenely. He turned in his chair and draped his arms over the back. "What with somebody leaking information all over the place, and every department blaming everybody else. How did you find an old Western on Russian TV?"

"Somebody has to keep the classics alive." Ocelot's eyes tracked the gunfire onscreen. "That divisive, are they? Grabbing the first chance to leap for each other's throats?"

"Oh, it's not arbitrary." Otacon's tone was demure, eyes devious. "There's plenty of evidence."

Ocelot turned away from the muted muzzle flash to look at him with approval.

He said, "You're turning into an underhanded, conniving bastard."

"Is that a compliment?"

Ocelot sat up and pulled his shirt over his head. "Naturally."

"Thought so." Otacon's hand wandered behind his back and tapped a sequence of keys. The laptop issued an obedient bleep. "It's not even that hard. Do you have any idea how many schemes they have going on, all over the world? How carefully it's all orchestrated? They're practically moving the joints of every doll by hand."

"In their sweet dreams. Hah!" A man in a charcoal Stetson clapped his hand to his heart and stumbled from a wooden sidewalk to fall in the dust. "The minor details have to be decided in the field. That's what operatives are trained for. It's not feasible to stay in direct contact for every second."

He snorted softly.

"I bet they'd like that."

"They do." Otacon's heels tapped against the base of the chair. "They can travel alongside, right in your head. That's what CODEC and nanomachines are for. Silent, instantaneous, constant communication."

His hand waved the invisible shape of them in the air.

"You could have someone getting tortured, thousands of miles from you, and tell him exactly what to say."

Screenlight flickered on Ocelot's casually rapt eyes. "The things your friends injected me with?"

"Yeah," Otacon conceded. "But it's not the tools. It's how you use them. Think of it another way; in the same situation, you could have an operative who knows he's not alone."

Glow stained Ocelot varying greys, secondhand sage and heather. "Wouldn't it be nice if everyone thought that way."

There was nothing in his tone to reveal if it was mocking or sincere.

"But, see, for them, it's actually a disadvantage." Otacon leaned forward over the chairback. Light flashed across his glasses, painting them opaque. "Because their schemes, they're so complex and delicate. Each one's a whole microcosm. It all has to stay organized somehow, so they have to keep it all somewhere. It's amazing what you can do just by finding that one vulnerable point, and making sure the wrong thing gets out to the wrong people. They can catch a lot of things, but they can't put out all the fires."

Ocelot cut him a sideways glance. "Because you keep setting them."

"Yep," Otacon agreed cheerfully.

He closed his laptop and unfurled onto the bed. He sighed toward the ceiling.

"God. This is more fun than it should be, isn't it?"

Adamska rolled to raise himself onto his palms and give a darkly amused look from high ground.

He purred, "I love it when you use your powers for crime."

Fondness turned Otacon's lips. "Good, because we're just getting started."

He reached up to touch Ocelot's face, smooth and angular under his hand.

"Tomorrow's the real test," Otacon said quietly.

"Waltzing straight into one of their strongholds," Ocelot murmured, eyes lidding. He turned his face to kiss Otacon's palm. "Raiding their precious cargo in broad daylight."

"They'll be guarded."

"Then we'll have a good fight."

"What, like a wild west shootout?"

"Exactly." Ocelot's teeth flashed. "All out rebellion against the biggest gang in town. Do you have any idea how long I've dreamed of this?"

"I've kinda given up on measuring time," Otacon said. He took off his glasses. This close, he didn't need them. His eyes looked bare, unframed by metal.

"It's easy," said Ocelot. His wrist flicked to undo Otacon's belt, thumb pushed the zipper down, and hands spread over the ridge of hipbone and plain of soft-haired stomach. "It starts now."

Nude, without accoutrement, the natural contrast between them was heightened and made null. They met on the other side of difference.

Bare palms pressed against each other, fingers knitted, pairs of hands shaped similarly by different species of labor and grace.

Otacon came up to meet his kiss. They moved toward one another, equivalent pressures, figures in a kinetic mirror. They moved against one another, meeting the acceptance of smooth, even resistance. Otacon's arm wound around his shoulders and brought him down.

Ocelot memorized his body with the pads of his fingertips, because he would not have to be kept in memory, and time was theirs. He ran the path of his hands parallel down his flanks, catching the hitch of his breath by sound and sight and the tactile tightening of his ribs. He sank down to trace his legs, to cup his heel in his hand and kiss the place on his calf where the long, thin, silver scar ran.

Otacon's palms ran over his hair. Ocelot gathered his hands and kissed his wrist over the quickening pulse, the twin of his own.

Freeing one hand to stroke Ocelot's shoulders, Otacon said, "I never thought I'd be helping somebody take over the world."

"Someone has to do the grunt work."

"The dangerous part," Otacon agreed, drawing a quick breath as Ocelot's lips brushed his stomach.

"The wetworks," Ocelot murmured, and ran his tongue up the hollow between his ribs.

"It all comes down to men with guns." Otacon's palm lay on the small of his back.

Ocelot's thumb marked below his shoulder, where the hidden holster had rested. "Are you used to carrying it yet?"

"A little." Otacon wrapped his arms around Ocelot's back, lifted himself up to kiss his collarbone. There was a tiny white scar the width of his nail on the left ridge. "It feels strange to know it's there, and I might have to use it."

"Soon you'll forget ever not having it."

"Aren't you afraid?" Otacon's legs wrapped around him.

"Of what?" Ocelot's body lowered over him.

"Doing this. Dying. *Uhn*." His face transformed, made rapt.

Sparks traveled through Ocelot's eyes as conductive material. "Between the two of us, what is there to fear?"

Otacon's eyes were loose to roam him. No tags rattled on his chest.

Otacon was no soldier, not used to counting his life in bullets. Ocelot felt lucky.

Ocelot pressed forward, and he moved to meet him.

"The first man to raise a weapon toward you," Ocelot whispered in a breath of languid heat by his ear, "I'll make you a gift of his beating heart."

"I always knew you were a romantic," said Otacon, a smile arching his lips.

His breath released in a low hiss. His fingers curled a vise around Ocelot's shoulderblades.

"But it's you – *ahn*, yes – I don't want to see hurt."

"You like my scars," Ocelot purred.

Otacon brushed lightly over a long, arcing line on his back, smiling at the low-lidded response. "But I won't let you get any more."

"Hmm." Ocelot's face fit against the side of his neck. "Demanding."

"You like it."

Ocelot kissed his neck, drew his palms up his stomach. "But there's nothing to fear. Bullets won't hurt me. I know them too well."

Otacon's hands ran over his back, followed the contour of his spine.

Their breath accelerated and expelled in extravagant promises. Proximity to fate enriched time and made touch lavish, heady as a concerta mixed with the scent of Rome's hot ashes.

"You're not afraid," Otacon gasped, grasping his elbows and pulled up to meet him. "You're looking forward to this."

"The secret is-", Ocelot's mouth dipped by his ear, "so are you."

"Yeah." His eyes were wide, staring, the distance between them brief as breath. "It's- exciting."

Quickening motions shadowed truth.

"Isn't it?" Ocelot murmured, warmly. "We are a new art."

"Beginning our masterpiece."

"It's the knowing," Ocelot breathed his secrets. "That's the best part. The tension."

"The anticipation."

Ocelot's eyes slitted, focused, driving straight ahead.

"Getting close," he murmured.

"Yes," Otacon hissed. "When you- know you're going to break through. Everything's there, in

front of you."

"Everything," Ocelot agreed, back arched. "There for the taking. Ours."

The days were clearest before a storm, the eyes clearest before battle. At the last moment the gears fell into connection, the spark leapt across the wires, and they were alive again. The moment of pulling the trigger, when it could be either click or bang, it was both and neither. Every room they entered and left was the antechamber to paradise.

Otacon bit into Ocelot's shoulder, one of the few places where there had been no mark before.

He whispered, "*Ours*."

---

*The phone rang.*

*A hand struck it silent.*

*"Yes?" His voice was blurred.*

*He rolled over, half-buried in pillows. Light leaked through the gap in the curtains, but it wasn't time to wake yet.*

*"It's been a while, boy."*

*Russian or English made no difference to the that voice, pitted and scored, thick as tar and silver as snake oil.*

*"So it has." His was smooth and amused. "Do you like your prison?"*

*"It's roomier than I'd imagined." Equal and opposing. "Moreso than you imagine, as well."*

*"Cooperation buys you privileges." He saw his hands lying still beneath cool sheets, and felt the revolver spinning. "I won't let you starve."*

*"How gracious. In return, I'll let you imagine you're really the one who decided to let me live."*

*"Come on, don't try that on me." Light scorn, as in a shared joke. "I'm the one who invented it."*

*Warmth and even breathing beside him. Hal made a murmuring question in his sleep. A touch to his arm quieted him.*

*The voice on the end of the line was solicitous.*

*"Do you think he knows that he's the reason? He's a clever boy. He might already be aware that I'm the one who will keep him safe."*

*The receiver lay trapped by his shoulder. "Fallen for him?"*

*A low laugh, less than convincing. "It's part of our deal."*

*"And don't you forget it."*

*"For that, I'll give you fair warning." Oil over gravel. It wasn't that bad. "It's not over. I don't give up easily."*

*"Who do you think you got it from?" A smirk never aged.*

*"Pride is one of many things will be your downfall, boy." Bitter almond in his amusement.*

*"Don't count on it." Easy return. "If you want an inch, you'll have to fight me for it."*

*Acquiescence rich as venomous wine. He could see his smile. "I wouldn't have it any other way."*

*"You won't have it at all." Laughter in his voice, reclined in warmth. "But it would be too cruel to deprive you the fun of trying. Every dog has to be allowed exercise."*

*The tang of metal.*

*"I'll whisper those words to you when you're weak and beaten. I'll enjoy driving you to your knees."*

*There was no resentment to sully the anticipation.*

*"Keep your delusions close. They'll keep you company over the long years."*

*"I'm a patient man." A reminder that gravel was once a mountain.*

*"But not an immortal one. Keep to the rules, or I'll root you out, no matter if it takes my own death."*

*"So you say." An ironic twist careless as the flick of a hand fanning the hammer. "You love life too well, my friend."*

*"So do you. You'd rather face a few orders than a firing squad."*

*"You have me there." Comfortably facetious. "I'll come when you call."*

*The voice went on, darkened, gleaming concrete grouted with a paste of broken promise.*

*"Only remember this: the time will come when you won't want me to leave."*

*Cool plastic was held against his skin. The other hand kept contact, the shape behind him. Soft. Warm. The slow movements of breath.*

*His voice in answer was unconcerned. "As long as you're in my psyche, you'll do as I say."*

*"I've had masters before." He liked to sound amused. "None of them could hold the leash. What do you have that they didn't?"*

*"Good senses, and someone to protect."*

*"Does he know who you really are?" Threat gleamed in a smile.*

*Triumph and love like a silver wire for the garrotte. "Yes."*

*Silence on the other end.*

*The voice pressed negligently against his ear, grating like steel on polished steel. "It's not over."*

*Beside him, the hand that had broken him free closed over his, seeking even in sleep.*

*With the love of a man for a worthy adversary, Adamska said, "It's just begun."*

*If there was a reply, he didn't bother hearing it. He put the receiver down blind.*

*Click.*

---

In the filtered silver light, the two shapes in the sheets were gunmetal grey.

Hal touched the shoulder where the mark of his teeth was left. Adamska opened iceblue eyes that didn't look asleep.

Anticipation ran a live current between them, bright and bare.

Hal said, "It's time."

This eBook was generated by the <a href="#">FanFiction Recommendation Engine</a>	This story belongs to the original author, and is provided free of charge
--	---

Original Source: <http://www.fanfiction.net/s/2711502/78/>



# Table of Contents

[Chapter 1](#)  
[Chapter 2](#)  
[Chapter 3](#)  
[Chapter 4](#)  
[Chapter 5](#)  
[Chapter 6](#)  
[Chapter 7](#)  
[Chapter 8](#)  
[Chapter 9](#)  
[Chapter 10](#)  
[Chapter 11](#)  
[Chapter 12](#)  
[Chapter 13](#)  
[Chapter 14](#)  
[Chapter 15](#)  
[Chapter 16](#)  
[Chapter 17](#)  
[Chapter 18](#)  
[Chapter 19](#)  
[Chapter 20](#)  
[Chapter 21](#)  
[Chapter 22](#)  
[Chapter 23](#)  
[Chapter 24](#)  
[Chapter 25](#)  
[Chapter 26](#)  
[Chapter 27](#)  
[Chapter 28](#)  
[Chapter 29](#)  
[Chapter 30](#)  
[Chapter 31](#)  
[Chapter 32](#)  
[Chapter 33](#)  
[Chapter 34](#)  
[Chapter 35](#)  
[Chapter 36](#)  
[Chapter 37](#)  
[Chapter 38](#)  
[Chapter 39](#)  
[Chapter 40](#)  
[Chapter 41](#)  
[Chapter 42](#)

[Chapter 43](#)  
[Chapter 44](#)  
[Chapter 45](#)  
[Chapter 46](#)  
[Chapter 47](#)  
[Chapter 48](#)  
[Chapter 49](#)  
[Chapter 50](#)  
[Chapter 51](#)  
[Chapter 52](#)  
[Chapter 53](#)  
[Chapter 54](#)  
[Chapter 55](#)  
[Chapter 56](#)  
[Chapter 57](#)  
[Chapter 58](#)  
[Chapter 59](#)  
[Chapter 60](#)  
[Chapter 61](#)  
[Chapter 62](#)  
[Chapter 63](#)  
[Chapter 64](#)  
[Chapter 65](#)  
[Chapter 66](#)  
[Chapter 67](#)  
[Chapter 68](#)  
[Chapter 69](#)  
[Chapter 70](#)  
[Chapter 71](#)  
[Chapter 72](#)  
[Chapter 73](#)  
[Chapter 74](#)  
[Chapter 75](#)  
[Chapter 76](#)  
[Chapter 77](#)  
[Chapter 78](#)