

OVERWATCH 2

HEROES ASCENDANT

WHERE
HONOR LIVES



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As a general rule, Hanzo avoided cities. He had grown up in the shadow of Tokyo, towering skyscrapers blotting out the horizon wherever he looked. Even as a youth he had preferred the quiet of Kanazaka, parts of which remained frozen in time. On the rare occasions he had ventured into the artificial heart of Tokyo, accompanying his father on business, he had found it too bright and busy.

It had gotten even worse since his last visit . . . or Hanzo had become even less tolerant. The streets seemed narrower, claustrophobic almost, with many blind corners, hidden doorways, open windows. The gaudy lights meant to chase away darkness only cast starker shadows. Tokyo was loud and crowded with people, though more so now amid the looming Null Sector invasion, with all the running and screaming.

As a general rule, Hanzo also avoided people.

But then, he had been avoiding many things, for many years. Haunted by regret for killing his brother, Genji, he had been no better than a ghost—passing through the world without being a part of it. Until two years ago, when Genji confronted him at Shimada Castle. Not dead at Hanzo's hand after all.

Like a coward, Hanzo had run again. He had been running for so long, he didn't know what else to do. He distracted himself with his work as a mercenary, ignoring the truths that weighed on him.

And now there was no ignoring the impossible voice that had called him home.

Hanzo had been training in Okinawa, watching news footage of the Null Sector invasions around the world with deepening concern, when he heard Sojiro Shimada's voice. "*After some*

*THE AGE OF HONOR AND RESPECT,
THE AGE THAT SOJIRO'S MANY TEACHINGS
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time, the dragon journeyed home to recover what he had left behind. During his absence, a tiger had moved into his cave and was terrorizing the countryside. And so, the dragon disguised himself and walked among his people, the better to know his enemy."

Hanzo had not heard his father speak in more than fourteen years, but the voice sounded so real, so close, that Hanzo had turned toward it. He had been both disappointed and relieved to find himself alone.

Of course no one was there. It might have just been a vivid memory, returning to him now. His father had often told his children stories to remind them of their duty, to protect those who served them. But it was easy to moralize and say empty words when you sat above everyone else, holding all the power.

When Hanzo left the clan, he felt his father was a fool. The Hashimoto had assassinated Sojiro, and his death pulled back the curtain on just how much the clan's dealings put the people at risk. Threats from rival clans, law enforcement, Overwatch—his father had a duty to protect the people because he was also the one who endangered them.

The age of honor and respect, the age that Sojiro's many teachings had come from, was gone. But those words were all his father had left him. In the face of the Shimada clan elders who wanted results, Hanzo was ill prepared and overwhelmed, a puppet through which they sought to achieve their ends. What Sojiro had built, had upheld for generations, didn't last, and the whole thing had come crashing down, with Hanzo found unworthy of his father's seat.

For the first time, he had fled the responsibility that he'd spent his entire life preparing for, but only after killing his brother, the only person who'd ever truly understood him. Since learning that Genji had in fact survived their final encounter, Hanzo had spent the years since trying—unsuccessfully—to run from his shame. But now, his father's voice had summoned him to Tokyo. Perhaps it was leading him back to where he needed to be. Time would tell.

Although the massive Null Sector ship was still outside Tokyo, out of view here in the center of

the city, people were in a panic. The streets were clogged with unmoving vehicles, people hiking around them on foot and loaded with backpacks and bags, desperately checking their phones for updates and looking upward.

Hanzo threaded through the chaos, gently pushing his way in the opposite direction. When Null Sector inevitably began their invasion, a lot of innocent people would be caught in the crossfire. Most of these people wouldn't make it out.

A shrill air raid warning looped in the distance, mingling with police and ambulance sirens. But where were the police? They should be out here directing the evacuation, offering protection and comfort. He looked around—and spotted a group of nine men in black suits and ties, several of them wearing oni masks. They walked like they owned the sidewalk, forcing pedestrians to move out of their way. Hashimoto.

Hanzo drew back into a shadowed doorway of a shuttered book shop and watched as the gangsters bumped into an old man, causing him to trip and drop a shopping bag stuffed with clothes and food.

"Watch where you're going, grandpa," said one of the clan, a man with his black hair styled in a topknot.

"Sorry! Sorry!" The old man scabbled in the streets for his things as the clan members kicked them away from him and jeered. Hanzo clenched his jaw. The Hashimoto didn't take care of their people. They were disgraceful parasites.

Is this what you want me to see, Father? Hanzo thought. He already knew that the Hashimoto were bullies and brutes. There must be something more, a reason for him to be here, at this moment.

At a sharp word from Topknot, the group moved on. They seemed to be in a hurry, or no doubt they would be harassing more people fleeing the city. With so many of them traveling together, Hanzo assumed they had been recalled to the Hashimoto stronghold to prepare for the Null Sector attack. Perhaps they could lead him back to the tigers' den.

Casting a sympathetic look back at the old man, Hanzo trailed them at a distance.

After a few minutes, the Hashimoto stopped in front of an alleyway and looked around. Hanzo ducked out of sight until the nine men had slipped into the narrow side street. He counted sixty seconds before he followed them.

The alleyway was deserted, the walls lined with dumpsters. It figured that these low creatures would be found among the garbage, but where had they disappeared to? Hanzo drew his bow and advanced cautiously, eyes darting around looking for movement, anything out of place. Ahead, the alley came to a dead end.

"You must be lost." Topknot stepped out from behind a dumpster at the same moment the other Hashimoto clan members reappeared, pulling out knives and guns. "But don't worry. We found you."

Hanzo counted only five of them. The crunch of broken glass behind told him where the other four were. He was surrounded.

Hanzo drew an arrow and nocked it, aiming at Topknot.

The coiffed man whistled. "Look at this guy! What, you going to fight all of us with a *bow*?"

Hanzo narrowed his eyes at the leader. "I don't expect much of a fight."

In a smooth, quick motion, he let his arrow fly. *Twang!* The arrow flew over Topknot's head, who guffawed at the apparent miss. "Nice shot!"

Hanzo gazed pointedly behind Topknot. The man turned, and his laughter died when he saw the arrow pinning his knot of hair to the brick wall.

Hanzo calmly drew another arrow. "That was a warning. And an improvement."

Topknot blew strands of loose hair away from his eyes and sputtered, "What are you idiots waiting for? Get him!"

Three men in front rushed him, brandishing knives. Hanzo managed to pick two of them off with rapid-fire arrows, but before he could loose another, the third goon was on him. Hanzo jerked his bow up and blocked his short blade with its riser, barely in time—the tip nicked his left cheek. He brought up a boot to his assailant's chest and shoved him away, then brought his bow around in a wide swing that connected, sending his opponent sprawling, knife clattering on concrete.

Hanzo wiped the blood from his face with the back of his hand. *Too close. Getting sloppy.*

He stepped back, moving in a quarter circle to maneuver the Hashimoto clan members behind him into view. It worked—he could see the remaining four enemies, each of them in a colorful oni mask. Topknot and his men targeted Hanzo with their handguns.

Bullets whizzed by and ricocheted off metal. Hanzo whirled around and ducked between two bins. As he peered around the edge of one, aiming an arrow, a bullet thunked into his left shoulder. Searing pain shot along his arm and side. Hanzo grunted and lowered his bow.

"That's what I'm talking about!" Topknot said. Smoke wisped from his own firearm. "Toss your bow over here and come out with your hands up, and we can talk about this." The others snickered.

He couldn't get a clear shot at any of the enemy from behind his cover. Hanzo gritted his teeth against his injury and fired an arrow into a trash can opposite him. The metal container toppled over, spilling waste into the alley.

"Pathetic," Topknot said.

THE WEAPONS SPARKED AND FLICKERED AS IF TRYING TO MANIFEST SOME GREATER POWER. THERE WAS SOMETHING WRONG WITH THEM, MAKING THEIR ENERGY FIELDS UNSTABLE.

The Sonic Arrow embedded in the fallen trash can emanated high-frequency pulses, helping Hanzo pinpoint the locations of every opponent in the alley. He aimed carefully and quickly fired a storm of arrows, letting his training and intuition guide their flight. The arrows hit the walls and bins, bouncing back at sharp angles. He heard the enemy shout and dive out of the way. Two men cried out in pain—he had hit some of his targets.

Hanzo assessed his shoulder. There was an exit wound, so the bullet had passed through. Even so, he was losing blood at an alarming rate. His head swam, and darkness crept into the edges of his vision. He took several sharp breaths and tried to shake it off.

“We don’t have time for this. Bring out the big swords and take this guy down already!” Topknot shouted.

Hanzo sighed and raised his bow.

Suddenly, the bins on either side of Hanzo were dragged away, metal scraping against pavement, leaving him wide open to attack. Two Hashimoto pressed in on his right and left, wearing matching black and white oni masks and leveling tachi swords at him. Hanzo began to smirk—until he saw that their blades glowed with ethereal blue energy, not unlike his Storm Bow when he employed its more unique capabilities.

The weapons sparked and flickered as if trying to manifest some greater power. There was something wrong with them, making their energy fields unstable. They must have tried to copy the design of the Shimada family’s blades, the only ones to use such technology. And it seemed they weren’t comfortable using them.

The one in the black mask struck—he could use the sword well enough. Hanzo clumsily parried it with his bow, while the one in the white mask laid a hand on his right arm. Hanzo grabbed the man’s forearm and yanked him closer, smashing their foreheads together. Pinpricks of light flashed and danced in Hanzo’s eyes, and he staggered back from the blow. His dazed opponent let go of both Hanzo and the sword, which fell to the ground and sputtered out. Hanzo kicked it

away, turning his attention to the first swordsman, who was soon joined by another—this one sporting a red oni mask.

Hanzo drew and fired several arrows at them, but blood loss was beginning to affect his strength; they were able to knock each one out of the air with swipes of their swords as they advanced. Electricity arced and sizzled along the blades. Meanwhile, the other Hashimoto had regrouped and were converging on him, penning him in.

They were well organized; he would give them that. And there were a lot of them. More than he had arrows. *Twang! Twang! Twang!* Black Mask fell. Hanzo reached back for another arrow and his hand closed on air. He tightened his empty hand into a fist and punched his nearest attacker, shattering his red mask and laying the man out on the ground.

Tired of waiting for them to come to him and increasingly desperate, Hanzo stepped into the fray. He was fighting to get out of this alleyway. He was fighting for his life.

He would not fall to the Hashimoto like his father before him. He would not give them that satisfaction.

It became a kind of dance as Hanzo moved about the cramped battlefield, punching, swinging his bow, darting, dodging. He managed to retrieve several of his fallen arrows. But they were wearing Hanzo down. What the Hashimoto lacked in discipline and skill, they made up for in sheer numbers; at least, they did here in Tokyo, near their stronghold. And there was just one of him. It was only a matter of time before they overwhelmed him. He'd lost a lot of blood, and he was down to his last arrow.

Better make it count.

He charged his Storm Bow and fired the arrow, swirling with incandescent energy in the form of two intertwined dragons. They cut through the alleyway in a straight line, his enemies crumpling in their wake.

Only Topknot and a couple of his henchman had survived the devastating attack. Hanzo faced off against them, gripping his bow tight and swaying slightly on his feet. Much of the spilled blood on the ground was his own.

The enemy seemed taken aback for a moment, casting uncertain glances at each other. One of the men whispered to Topknot. The leader stared hard at Hanzo, at the bow in his hands, and mumbled, "Shimada."

Hanzo tried to get into a defensive stance, but he swayed and fell, slipping in and out of consciousness. Someone snatched his dropped bow and grabbed his hair, pulling his head up so they could get a closer look at his face. Topknot loomed over him, bleeding, but smug. "Who the hell are you?"

"I am no one." Hanzo spit in his eyes. The man recoiled. He swiped an arm against his face and then smacked Hanzo with his own bow. Hanzo's head snapped to the left, and his right cheek throbbed.

"Bring him," Topknot said.

Hands grabbed Hanzo's arms behind his back and looped a zip tie around his wrists, pulling the plastic more tightly than necessary. Hanzo had trouble focusing. He stared at graffiti that had been painted on the brick wall behind a dumpster, trying to make sense of the blood-red letters. Someone had unsuccessfully tried to scrub out the words, but he could just make them out: "If you do not enter the tiger's cave, you will not catch its cub."

Hanzo grinned. And then he blacked out.

Hanzo came to in a small concrete cell, bare except for the rough slab he was lying on and a plastic bucket in the corner. Opposite him, an amber wall of hard-light shimmered. Beyond it, a humanoid robot stood sentry. The omnic's metal body was the same silver and gunmetal gray as the armored door it guarded.

Hanzo yawned. His jaw popped, and he gently massaged the swollen side of his face. One of his molars felt loose. His shoulder wound had been cleaned and dressed in bandages. He was genuinely surprised that they had bothered fixing him up, but he also had a number of bruises and scrapes he didn't remember getting in the battle, which suggested they hadn't been too careful getting him here, wherever *here* was. Had they brought him back to the Hashimoto stronghold? Why had they decided to take him prisoner rather than leaving him to die in the alleyway, or simply killing him?

"How long have I been out?" Hanzo asked the omnic.

No answer.

He tried again. "Where are we?" He couldn't even be certain they were still in Tokyo.

The guard shifted his weight but didn't respond.

"Can I have a drink of water?" Hanzo asked.

That finally got a reaction from the guard. "Really, man?"

"I'm parched," Hanzo said.

The omnic knocked once on the door, and a moment later it opened. He left, and the door was closed and locked behind him.

Hanzo lost track of the time, drifting in and out of consciousness, but it felt like several hours

*AFTER HE'D LEFT, THE CLAN ELDERS CANNIBALIZED
KANEZAKA AND TORE THE SHIMADA LEGACY
TO SHREDS; OVERWATCH HAD ENDED WHAT
REMAINED SHORTLY AFTER.*

had passed before he heard the tumblers turn in the door's lock again. He was instantly wide awake, muscles tensed for another fight. But he kept his eyes closed while his visitor shuffled into the room softly on slippered feet.

"Greetings, young master," the man said.

Hanzo's eyes shot open at another familiar voice from his past. He bolted upright and stared. Toshiro Yamagami stood on the other side of the barrier. He was older and thinner than Hanzo remembered, yet somehow without seeming frail or weak.

The talented swordsmith had once demonstrated the forging of a blade, how it was heated and hammered over and over again until it was razor sharp. Yet despite its incredible thinness, the sword was stronger than untempered steel—and deadlier, even before his unique technology was fully integrated.

The impression that Toshiro Yamagami left was that, like one of his famous blades, whatever pressures he had been under in recent years had only made him stronger.

"Toshiro-sensei," Hanzo said in wonder. "What are you doing here?"

"Surviving," Toshiro said.

Hanzo drew in a sharp breath. The blades he had seen earlier weren't bad copies of Shimada weapons. The former Shimada swordsmith was now making weapons for the Hashimoto.

"By arming parasites like the Hashimoto?" Hanzo asked.

Toshiro's expression changed, some of his old fire dancing behind his eyes. His voice hardened as well. "I do not expect you to understand the difficult choices my family has been called to make during your long absence."

Hanzo winced. Until this moment, he had not given any thought to the fates of Toshiro and his family—his wife, Asa, and their daughter, Kiriko. After he'd left, the clan elders cannibalized Kanazaka and tore the Shimada legacy to shreds; Overwatch had ended what remained shortly after. He had assumed that Toshiro and Asa would go on as they always had, but he realized now

AND YET, LIKE AN ENTITLED PRINCE, HANZO HAD LOOKED DOWN ON THE YAMAGAMIS AS MERE SERVANTS. HE FELT LOW STANDING BEFORE TOSHIRO NOW, KNOWING HIS FAMILY HAD SHOWN MORE HONOR THAN HE EVER DID.

that this was at best a naïve assumption, the better to salve his conscience. Of course things had changed for everyone. Each year, when Hanzo returned to Shimada Castle to pay tribute to his brother, he had seen the tainting of his home by the Hashimoto. He knew they had moved in when Overwatch moved on.

"Your work is shoddier than it used to be," Hanzo said lightly.

The fire went out. "I am forced to produce more . . . to work with inadequate materials."

Hanzo considered. Toshiro and Hanzo's father were of the same generation, and their similarities in manner and speech often led some to mistake them for family. There had never been any question of who held the power, but there also had been mutual respect between them.

And like Hanzo's father, Toshiro always chose his words deliberately, as though they had a hidden meaning. Hanzo wondered if Toshiro's materials were so poor, or if he was making his blades poorly to blunt the damage the Hashimoto could inflict.

If so, it must cost the man dearly, for he'd always taken such pride in his craftsmanship.

"It is unsettling, seeing Yamagami steel used to terrorize the people," Hanzo said. Not to mention, his artisan blades were being wasted on low-level grunts who didn't even know how to handle them properly.

Toshiro raised an eyebrow. "Life is not black-and-white. Who are the heroes? Who are the villains? It all depends on the actions you choose to take." The gray-haired man's eyes studied Hanzo, as if assessing raw steel. "Producing blades for the Hashimoto has helped keep *my* people safe these last eight years. Where have your choices led you?"

"Your words cut sharper than your blades, old man."

"Dull swords for dull men." Toshiro bowed his head. "My weapons can only be mastered by those who are worthy." He gave Hanzo a long look. "I forge them in the hope they will be wielded not only with skill but also with honor."

Hanzo was ashamed. Toshiro was the husband of Asa Yamagami, who had trained Hanzo and

Genji in the ways of the sword, alongside Kiriko. But she had been more than the Shimada clan's greatest ninja; Asa had been the closest thing the boys had to a mother after Rumiko Shimada had abandoned her family.

And yet, like an entitled prince, Hanzo had looked down on the Yamagamis as mere servants. He felt low standing before Toshiro now, knowing his family had shown more honor than he ever did. Hanzo ran from his responsibility, judging himself unworthy. But the Yamagamis stayed and took on a heavy burden—the burden that should have been his. He had changed since then, but that did not change his complicity in their current predicament.

"I am . . ." Hanzo swallowed. "You're right. I have been away too long. How is Asa-sensei?"

"She is still in Kanezaka, maintaining order."

Anyone who could keep the unruly Shimada boys on task during sword training would be good at keeping people in line. He suspected she was managing the Hashimoto rather than the reverse.

Despite his words, Toshiro's eyes still held some warmth. Hanzo remembered that he had always been quick with a smile for him, even when it seemed there was nothing to be happy about. As if they were the only ones in on the joke.

Asa had once told him that it was just as important for one to know how to disarm an opponent without lifting a weapon. Often you could do it by saying just the right thing, smiling in just the right way. It was a skill that must have served her and her husband well under the Hashimoto.

Although, had it really been so different when the two of them worked for Hanzo's father?

"Hanzo, it is good to see you again. But whatever it is you seek, coming here was a mistake."

"My mistake was in getting caught," Hanzo said gruffly.

"Yes." Toshiro suppressed a chuckle. "The Hashimoto clan elders recognized your Storm Bow as a weapon that only could have been made by me." He held out his rough, calloused hands, palms up, as if in supplication. "They sent me to confirm your identity. Now that they have the Shimada scion, they will execute you to break the people. One stone, two birds."

"If it is an heir to the Shimada they want, you can tell them there is none. The clan died a long time ago—with my father. He left behind no one worthy of carrying the name. All that's left of my family are their lies, their failures, and their misdeeds."

Toshiro clicked his tongue the way he did when he found a nearly imperceptible flaw in a blade.

"Your father was a businessman. A criminal, certainly. But he always served the best interests of his people and, especially, his family. He kept the tigers—and worse—at bay. Sometimes protecting what we love is all any of us can hope for our legacy."

They considered each other for a while. For Hanzo it was like gazing into a mirror that reflected his painful past, but also a glimmer of possibility.

***“SOJIRO WOULD BE PROUD OF YOU TOO,
FOR COMING BACK HERE,” TOSHIRO SAID.***

HANZO FOLDED HIS ARMS. “IT WOULD BE THE FIRST TIME.”

THE OLDER MAN SMILED WISTFULLY. “OH, NOT AT ALL, HANZO.”

Toshiro seemed to speak Hanzo’s mind: “You remind me of how things were, but I also see what I have always seen in you, and in my daughter: the future we were trying to build. As long as our children live, so do our hopes for them and our dreams for the world they inherit.”

Toshiro strode to the door. “I will report that the son of the dragon is so broken it would be a mercy to strike a killing blow. That you have destroyed the last vestiges of the Shimada more effectively than they ever could.”

Hanzo gasped as if he had been struck.

“Your actions will determine the truth behind those words.” Toshiro rapped his knuckles on the door behind him.

Honor resides in one’s actions. Those were among Genji’s last words to him. *You still have a purpose in this life, brother.*

Hanzo bowed to Toshiro, and the man returned the gesture. In a more conspiratorial voice, he said, “Should you somehow make it out of here, please find Kiriko. Tell her I wish I could have written more, been there for her. Tell her . . . I’m proud of what she has been doing to keep the Hashimoto in check.”

Hanzo nodded.

“Sojiro would be proud of you too, for coming back here,” Toshiro said.

Hanzo folded his arms. “It would be the first time.”

The older man smiled wistfully. “Oh, not at all, Hanzo.”

The door opened and Toshiro turned to face the Hashimoto guards. As they escorted him out, Hanzo now saw that, indeed, they were in charge of the old swordsmith, not the other way around. But by making the choice to stay, under their rule, it was Toshiro who had seized control over his situation.

The door closed, and Hanzo eased himself down to the floor, folding his legs beneath him. He had much to think upon.

When the door opened the next time, Hanzo knew it wasn't going to be a social call. Two Hashimoto clan members stepped in: a man with a drawn katana and his old friend Topknot. The latter held up a zip tie.

"Turn around," he barked. "Hands behind your back."

"If you're going to kill me, just do it here," Hanzo said.

"The bosses want to see you die. *Before* the evacuation."

Hanzo grunted. "By all means, then." He turned and held his arms behind his back, ignoring the twinge in his shoulder as Topknot roughly bound him. Of course his captors didn't know that when Hanzo was younger and bolder and more arrogant, he had bragged that he could beat his brother, Genji, *blindfolded with his hands tied behind his back*. Asa-sensei had overheard and used it as a teaching moment.

And these fools weren't even going to blindfold him.

Hanzo had been outnumbered in the alleyway, but he could handle these two even without his bow—or his hands. And then what? Escape? He was done running. He wanted to see the Hashimoto elders with his own eyes, to understand how they could sit protected in their stronghold while the people outside suffered.

One of Asa-sensei's lessons had stuck with Hanzo because it seemed so counterintuitive: "You must learn when to strike and when not to strike. Sometimes you are better off waiting for the right opportunity to make your move."

So Hanzo waited, and he allowed these idiots to lead him through the labyrinthine corridors of the complex.

An itch at the back of his neck told him he was being watched. He slowed, casting his eyes about as they walked. He spotted a security camera positioned at the far end of the hall. Of course there were cameras, but that didn't shake the nagging feeling. There was someone or something else—

"Keep walking," Topknot said.

Hanzo took a steadying breath and continued on. The men ushered Hanzo into a gated elevator. Topknot slid the accordion gates closed and pressed the button for the third floor, then he turned the crank and the elevator rumbled to life. It slowly rose past two floors before stuttering to a stop. He turned the crank again and slid open the gate to reveal a spacious conference room. Five

*METAL FLASHED AND A KUNAI FLEW TOWARD HANZO,
SLICING THE PLASTIC ZIP TIE BINDING HIS WRISTS
WITHOUT EVEN SCRATCHING HIM.*

Hashimoto elders sat at a raised table on the far end, flanked by four guards in black suits. Topknot shoved Hanzo forward, and he walked toward the council.

Hanzo wondered which of them was the leader of the Hashimoto. The shrewd platinum-haired woman in the center of the lineup was the first to speak. "Hanzo Shimada."

"I no longer bear my father's name," he said.

A sleepy-eyed man on her far right steepled his fingers. "You might abandon the name, but it does not abandon you. Dragons are dragons."

"Until they are dead," joked the heavily made-up woman on the far left. The others chuckled.

"You are the last of your family, of our enemy," the first woman spoke. "And today we end the Shimada for good, and for all to see." Hanzo noticed a drone camera hovering above the guards, recording the proceeding.

Hanzo's eyes fell on his Storm Bow, resting on the table with his empty quiver.

"Which of you will fight me first?" Hanzo asked.

The elders glanced at one another, all smiles. "Shooting you will suffice."

Hanzo tensed as Topknot pressed the tip of his gun into his back. The camera crept closer, its lens whirring and a bright light shining in Hanzo's face. He was going to be assassinated like his father before him, without even the distinction of facing his murderer in combat. All to send a message to the frightened people.

The gun's hammer clicked as it was cocked back. This was Hanzo's moment to act.

"Kill him."

Before Topknot could pull the trigger, the lights flickered. There was that feeling again: of eyes in the darkness. A glowing blue kitsune burst into the room, bounded past the astonished clan elders, and circled Hanzo and Topknot.

In the confusion, Hanzo twisted around and slammed into Topknot with his good shoulder, knocking the gun out of his hands and sending it skittering across the floor.

Metal flashed and a kunai flew toward Hanzo, slicing the plastic zip tie binding his wrists

without even scratching him. His eyes flicked upward, tracing the welcome assist to an open ceiling panel. A figure dropped from it a split second later, landing lightly: a woman in white and scarlet miko clothing and red sneakers, the lower half of her face obscured by a red cowl. Someone shouted an alarm, and the elders scrambled for shelter behind the desk.

Hanzo whirled around and kicked high at Topknot, deflecting a punch. The man roared and swung at him again, but Hanzo was already launching himself into the air. He somersaulted forward, pinned the man's head between his legs, and twisted. He pulled Topknot down with him and rolled, flipping and spinning him around to slam down hard on his back. He did not get up.

Hanzo pushed himself to his feet and saw the newcomer watching him. The fox ears and stylized kanji on her headband suggested she was the one who had unleashed the kitsune attack.

Hanzo didn't have time to speculate on that, because a Hashimoto omnic was now swinging at him with his katana, sparking with glitching blue energy. Hanzo dodged his blows, knowing that contact with the enhanced weapon would deal a lot of damage. He needed something to fight with.

The fox ninja rushed forward and blocked the omnic's blade with crossed kunai. She followed up with a kick that made him double over, but he recovered quickly, sword flashing as he traded blows with her.

The fox ninja was lightning fast and nimble, keeping the omnic on the defensive as she zipped around him, jabbing with her smaller blades. The omnic retreated, no longer able to hold up his sword arm.

Without a word, Hanzo and the fox ninja pressed back to back and faced their remaining opponents. Hanzo stretched and flexed his aching arms. Fighting beside this ninja and her glowing kitsune—he felt like he was in one of the fables his father used to tell.

Another wave of Hashimoto swarmed them with their glitching swords. Hanzo and the masked stranger worked in tandem, as if they had been fighting together their whole lives. They kept moving, rotating in the center of the room so that she could disarm the enemy with her kunai and Hanzo could finish them off in hand-to-hand combat. She was skilled, but her labored breathing indicated she was reaching her limits. Hanzo was nearly there himself, acquiring fresh bruises over his old injuries. The gunshot wound in his shoulder reopened, causing agony each time he moved his arm.

As soon as the last Hashimoto fell, the fox ninja turned to him. "Come on! We can't let them get away." In her voice was the echo of a girl he had known long ago.

Hanzo saw an open door at the front of the room. The elders were gone. He stepped carelessly over and on the fallen Hashimoto to collect his bow and quiver, noting that someone had restocked it with arrows.

The hallway outside the boardroom was eerily empty and silent. Hanzo glanced out the window, and what he saw drew him up short. Beside him, the fox ninja gasped.

The Null Sector command ship now hovered above Tokyo Tower with dark specks streaming from it, drop pods pummeling the city in an apocalyptic hail. The sky flashed with weapon blasts, but Tokyo's police and Japanese militia were badly outnumbered and losing ground by the second. The city was under siege.

They raced downstairs, unchallenged, and got outside just as the Hashimoto's armored convoy was pulling away.

"We can still catch them!" Hanzo said.

She put a hand on his arm. "No." She took a deep breath. "We're needed here."

The streets around them were already swarming with warbots. People screamed and fled in terror. Hanzo was struck by the smell pervading the air. Of ozone, ash, and brimstone. Devastation and death.

Hanzo had seen the Null Sector attack in Paris on a broadcast, but in person, while it was happening, the level of destruction Null Sector wrought was a complete shock.

This assault was very real, and it was very personal. He knew the flame-tinged clouds and the smoke would be visible from nearby Kanezaka. And when Null Sector was done here, their drone ships would expand to sweep the less populated districts around Tokyo, corralling those who had fled the city. Most of the small towns in the outlying prefectures were defenseless; if Tokyo fell and Null Sector got a foothold in the region, it would have a domino effect and plunge the rest of the country into chaos.

He nodded. The fox ninja drew her kunai as Hanzo nocked an arrow in his bow. Together, they picked off the closest warbots zipping overhead, sending them crashing to the ground. The cluster of people that the warbots were targeting bowed their thanks before fleeing.

"In there." Hanzo pointed the civilians toward the Hashimoto stronghold, its doors still wide open. "Plenty of room to hide until this dies down." He figured they would be as safe as possible there, at least until the Hashimoto came back to reclaim their base. *If* they returned.

The block around them temporarily clear, Hanzo turned to his masked benefactor.

"I know you," he said.

"About as well as I know you, Shimada. Probably less."

He raised a hand toward her but then pulled back. She tucked away her blades and loosened the cowl herself, lowering it beneath her chin. Her face sent memories spiraling through his mind. A young girl tagging along after him and Genji. He saw her sitting on the side of an arcade game cabinet while Genji chased another high score. He watched fireworks with her from the balcony

“THE BRAT,” HANZO SAID.

***KIRIKO SMILED. “YOU’RE AS INSUFFERABLE AS EVER.
I SHOULD HAVE LET YOU SAVE YOURSELF.”***

of Shimada Castle. She brought dinner to Genji and Hanzo after their father died, his plate piled with an absurd amount of mochi—a small sign that she cared.

“The brat,” Hanzo said.

Kiriko smiled. “You’re as insufferable as ever. I should have let you save yourself.”

“I *did* save myself.”

He would never have said he was close to her when they were younger. How could he have been? He’d had a duty before him, a role to prepare for. But he’d been untethered from any connection to his home for so long that her words—barbed as they were—reminded him of that time. Of all that he’d lost.

Even though he had turned his back on Kiriko, treated her like the nuisance daughter of the parents who served his family, she had been here for him when he needed someone, anyone, to care.

“However . . . you provided an opportune distraction,” Hanzo grudgingly admitted. “You have my thanks, Kiriko.”

“I missed you too, you big dope.” She held up a hand, forefinger and thumb close together. “Like, *this* much.”

He looked back at the abandoned stronghold. “You couldn’t have been here for me. *I* didn’t even know I was going to be here.”

“You’re right. I wasn’t here to rescue you.” She sighed.

“Your father.”

“The Hashimoto kidnapped him years ago. He’s allowed to communicate with us sometimes, but I haven’t heard from him in months. I thought I could use the Null Sector invasion as cover and get him out before it was too late. But the fox spirit led me to you instead.”

Kiriko rubbed the back of her hand against her eyes, although they were dry. “Perhaps he wasn’t even here.”

“He was. I saw him,” Hanzo said.

THE DRAGON REALIZED THAT HE WAS NOT SEEKING TREASURE OR VASSALS AT ALL. THROUGH HIS GOOD DEEDS, HE HAD RECLAIMED THE MOST PRECIOUS THING HE'D LOST: THE WORTHINESS TO RETURN HOME.

"When?"

"When they brought me in. He asked me to give you a message . . . He's proud of you, for keeping the Hashimoto in check."

Kiriko turned from him for a moment, staring at the place the convoy had been before it disappeared into the chaos.

Her family had followed their call to duty with honor, each in their own ways. Toshiro working from within, sacrificing his freedom so that his family could remain free, and feeding information about the Hashimoto back home. Asa, holding Kanazaka together and keeping them safe under Hashimoto rule. Kiriko fighting back against their oppressors, weakening their hold over the people and keeping hope alive.

Hanzo felt small beside their sacrifice.

There was a fine line between honor and cowardice. Hanzo had ended up on the wrong side of it, using honor as the excuse for not doing the right thing, the hard thing.

Kiriko squinted up at the smoky sky.

"Do you think Overwatch will come?" She turned to him then, glancing at Hanzo curiously.

He knew that Genji was back with Overwatch in Paris, and her expression told him she knew it too. But did she know what had happened between Hanzo and Genji before that? It was clear she would be happy to see his brother again, but Hanzo wasn't ready for that yet. And he certainly didn't want to talk about it.

She waited another moment for a response and then sighed. "There's no one to protect Kanazaka. Not the Hashimoto, that's for sure. I have friends back there, we've been doing what we can to fight back without making things worse, but they can't handle . . ." She looked over at the Null Sector ship. "Mom will be furious when she finds out where I've been, but it's done. Hey, you and I weren't a bad team!"

Hanzo nodded. "You aren't as useless as I remembered."

The voice of Sojiro Shimada spoke to Hanzo once more: *When the victorious dragon entered his old cave, he found it empty and cold. The tiger had despoiled everything. The dragon realized that he was not seeking treasure or vassals at all. Through his good deeds, he had reclaimed the most precious thing he'd lost: the worthiness to return home.*

Hanzo blinked a few times. The smoke in the air was making them water. "Perhaps we should return to Kanazaka, then."

She looked surprised. "You're coming with me?"

"I am grateful the fox spirit guided you to me, Kiriko," Hanzo said. *And that the dragon led me to the purpose that I have been seeking.*

Kiriko pulled out a slip of paper and stuck it to Hanzo's chest. He looked down at it with a puzzled expression.

"An ofuda. For healing," she said. "It's kind of my thing."

Hanzo had never been one to do feelings and sentimentality. Maybe he was changing after all. He now owed Kiriko his life, and in so many ways, her parents had forged him into the person he was . . . and they were still setting the example of the better person he could yet become.

Her family had served his for centuries. Now he would serve them, and the people. It was a lesson his father had tried to teach him, but one that he'd needed time to understand.

Hanzo and Kiriko advanced down the street, leaving a trail of broken Null Sector warbots in their wake, slowly clearing a way home.

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