

*CELEBRATE
PRIDE*



FUTURES PAST

A SHORT STORY BY MELISSA SCOTT

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FUTURES PAST

Sunday morning, and the Huntingdon lab building was all but empty. Probably because of State's victory over St. Thomas the night before, Jack Morrison thought as he maneuvered his battered sedan into a parking place near the east doors. People must be sleeping in after staying up late to celebrate, but Jack found himself once again working the weekend. This class was an important step toward his next promotion, the material interesting in its own right. Technology was advancing quickly these days, and somewhere between all the buzz were tools that could help his squadron. Unlike the breathless articles touting mag-lev transportation and near-sentient robotics, always years away, the advancements he was studying were happening *now*. The more he learned, the better prepared his troops would be for whatever threat they'd face next.

Jack let himself into robotics lab twelve and plugged his laptop into his usual workstation. The title of his project appeared—*Integration of Multipurpose Drones and Human Elements in Reconnaissance*—and he opened his simulation. He still hadn't come up with a good proxy for unit morale, but the rest was working well. He fiddled with the initial conditions, trying to re-create the firefight they'd discussed in last week's section.

Something exploded at the other end of the corridor.

Jack shot to his feet, automatically scanning the room for something he could use as a weapon. A second bang followed, and he grabbed the room's fire extinguisher. He burst through the door of chemistry lab ten to see the floor covered with a mix of broken glass, pottery, and a sour-smelling liquid, while some piece of equipment sat smoking and sparking on the central bench. The extinguisher wasn't rated for electrical fires, so Jack dropped it, lunged for the bench, and yanked the cord out of its socket. In the same moment, a young man with dark hair swung up his own fire extinguisher and blasted the device with two precise hits, smothering it in white powder. Jack jerked back out of range, and the man gave him an apologetic look.

"Sorry—are you all right?"

Jack nodded. "You?"

"Yeah." The man set the fire extinguisher aside and grimaced as he poked at the now-destroyed device. "Thank you for pulling that."

Jack was beginning to recognize the smell rising from the liquid: the smell of the worst bar he'd ever entered. "Is that . . . beer?"

The man gave him a wry smile. "Well, it was. Or it was going to be . . . And before you ask, yes, I'm supposed to be making it. I'm TAing for Experimental Archeology 214; we do it every semester. Only this time Professor Theokopolos wanted to use the recipe he'd discovered at the Temple of Hathor, and I wanted to try the method we'd theorized they used to preserve it. Apparently, one of us was wrong."

"Apparently," Jack said, looking around the lab. Several large glass containers stood on a rack against the far wall, seemingly undamaged, but another rack had been overturned. It had contained pottery jars as well as glass carboys, all smashed when they fell. The smell of bad beer was indescribable. Another midsize jar had exploded on the workbench. That was what had short-circuited the device. The other man regarded the mess ruefully, shaking his head.

With the threat averted, Jack's eyes drifted to the man he'd rescued. He had dark hair, sharp features, was still tan even at the end of winter, with muscles that hadn't come from the gym. Jack realized he was staring. *Don't be an ass.* "I could help, give you a hand cleaning up. If you'd like."

"I don't want to keep you from your work," the man said. "I'm Vincent, by the way."

“Jack.” Jack held out his hand automatically, and Vincent took it. “I’m running a simulation in robotics twelve. It’ll keep.”

“Then, uh—yeah, I could definitely use the help.” Vincent looked around. “I mean, it’s nice to have answered one question—that’s *not* the way to ferment this beer—but usually things don’t have to explode to figure that out.” He found a wastebasket and began picking up shards of glass and pottery, and Jack did the same.

“So, sorry, *why* are you making beer?” he asked after a moment. “I mean, if you have a recipe, isn’t that enough?”

“When you say ‘recipe’ in the ancient world, it’s usually more like a memo for someone who already knows how to make the thing,” Vincent explained. “This is—we think—a special recipe, a wedding beer, and there are some ingredients that we don’t entirely recognize.”

“The ancient Egyptians served beer at weddings?” Jack asked, mostly to keep the conversation going.

Vincent nodded, more pieces clinking into the wastebasket. “Well, they drank beer everywhere and always. Royal workers got a daily ration of about a gallon, much of it brewed by the temples. But this note references a royal wedding and suggests that it was meant to be kept for longer than usual. Only the method I thought they used . . .” He held up the neck of a small jar, the lid still glued into place with what looked like tar. “Definitely not the answer.”

“Why make it, though?” Jack asked. “Just to get a taste of history?”

“Because *how* people did things matters.” Vincent straightened, suddenly serious. “No one bothered to write down that you needed seawater to make Roman concrete. That critical piece of information was passed down orally and was lost when Rome fell, but it’s why Roman structures lasted as long as they have. As for the beer . . . what made it special enough to be served at a royal wedding? What does that tell us about the resources available? What mattered most to them? At least the control batch survived—that’s the stuff in the big glass carboys.” He gave a wry smile. “And yes, all this does make the undergrads pay extra attention.”

Jack grinned back. “I see that it might.”

“We generally don’t let them test too much of it.”

“You didn’t have it served at your wedding?”

VINCENT LAUGHED, AS JACK HAD HOPED, AND JACK FELT AN UNFAMILIAR WARMTH STEAL OVER HIM.

"I'm, um . . . single." Vincent picked up a chunk of glass, wrinkling his nose at the smell. "Plus, it might be what you'd call an *acquired* taste."

"I've smelled worse," Jack said. "But never at a bar I went back to."

Vincent laughed, as Jack had hoped, and Jack felt an unfamiliar warmth steal over him. The simulation seemed a long way away and entirely unimportant.

"That's the last," Vincent said. "If you'll help me get these shelves back in place, I'll find a shop vac to clean up the floor."

"You'll want to mop too," Jack said, and Vincent nodded.

"I'm afraid so."

"Let me help."

"I'm always delighted when someone offers to do the heavy lifting for me," Vincent answered, and Jack felt his own grin widen.

Jack heaved the shelf upright, stabilizing the frame while Vincent replaced the shelves. Together they cleaned the floor, and Vincent dealt with the mess left by the fire extinguisher. Jack looked around and saw that one of the big glass jars was starting to bubble ominously. "Should it be doing that?"

Vincent swore under his breath and snatched the jar from the shelf to the lab table. He fiddled with the stopper, but it broke free. Jack managed to get a hand in front of Vincent's face as the beer erupted like a geyser, but the flying foam hit them both. They looked at each other and then, helplessly, began to laugh.

With order once again restored, Vincent took a breath.

"Look, after everything you've done, the least I can do is offer you a taste of the wedding beer. Once it's ready." His smile was both nervous and hopeful. "No obligation, of course."

Time to take a chance, Jack thought. "Would it be a date?"

Vincent's smile widened. "God, I hope so."



The cargo charter banked hard, setting up for final approach. Jack glimpsed the mountains that cradled Runasapi rising toward the brightening sky. The winds coming off the slopes were unpredictable, but the pilot dropped the plane neatly onto the runway. Jack, sitting in the copilot's chair, listened with half an ear as the local controller steered the pilot toward her gate in the shadow of the commercial hangar. "Nice flight."

The pilot finished the shutdown and unhooked her headset. "Thanks. You've got about twenty minutes before the loaders get here."

Jack nodded. That should be plenty of time to get to the break in the perimeter fence and slip out of sight in the underbrush. He unfastened his safety harness and stood up, stretching, then reached for the pack he'd stowed just outside the cockpit. "I noticed the cargo is all labeled for Oasis—what's it doing here?"

The pilot shrugged. "I've been running a lot of those lately. I hear they're setting up labs in Runasapi."

Jack nodded. He wondered if it had anything to do with the favor Sombra had dispatched him to carry out. He patted the data drive, tucked it into an inner pocket of his jacket, and wondered who she was aiming for. The Oasis Scientific Collective was an all-too-likely target. He hoped the person he was meeting had the skills to deliver it.

The pilot reached for a lever and gave it a hard jerk. A panel opened near Jack's feet, revealing a drop tube and a glimpse of the tarmac beneath the plane. Jack reached into his jacket, found the payment, and handed it to the pilot. "Thanks."

The pilot stowed it in her own pocket. "Will you want a ride back? Leaving tomorrow morning, seven sharp."

"Maybe." Jack lowered his pack into the tube, let it fall to the ground, then seated himself on the edge of the gap, groping for the handholds that would let him lower himself most of the way. "If I don't show, don't wait."

"Got it," the pilot said. "Good luck."

"Thanks," Jack said again, and let himself fall. He landed easily in the big plane's shadow, caught up his pack, and looked around. No one was watching. He headed for the perimeter fence, eased himself quickly through the gap someone

had cut in the rusted wire, and ducked into the underbrush. Nothing moved on the airfield, and he melted into the trees.

By noon, he had reached the outskirts of Runasapi, the lower terraces where the city's crops were farmed. Above, cut into the cliffside, he could see the buildings of the city itself, the heavy walls slanting inward, honoring the ancient cities of Peru. Vincent had talked about that, the deliberate echoes of ancient architecture that gave weight to the postwar cities—a way to honor the past and shape the future. That was not his destination, however.

She'll be near where the disaster happened, Sombra had said. I don't mean the memorial. You go anywhere near the place, trust me, she'll find you.

Jack had memorized the map she had shown him and now looked for a break in the brush that lined the road. Yes, there it was, a gap that at first glance looked accidental, but when you looked more closely, it gave way to a path leading up the hillside. Jack hefted his pack and followed it.

The track got progressively steeper, and Jack had to use his hands to heave himself over the worst bits. He had thought it might be a llama track, but even a llama wouldn't be able to make it over some of those slopes. And then it ended, the track cresting a ridge to reveal a tiny valley. Once there had been a building at its center, but the roof was gone, the walls just jagged ruins. In its center was a stepped pyramid with a broad, flat top: the site of the disaster.

He ducked down behind the ridgeline and activated his HUD, scanning the ruin for any movement. The breeze was cool on his skin, a relief after the effort of the climb, but nothing stirred below. Jack shed his pack, leaving it concealed beneath the underbrush. He drew his pulse rifle and started cautiously down the hill.

As he got closer, he had to move more carefully, skirting chunks of stone that had been blasted out of the original building. Whatever happened here had unleashed enormous power, and for just an instant his ears rang with the echo of the explosion in Zurich, Overwatch's headquarters. This had to have been nearly as powerful to have wrought so much destruction.

A warning flickered in his visor, and he noticed just in time to dodge away from a caped figure swinging a golden rifle at him. He rolled away, came up with his own gun leveled but didn't fire. "Sombra sent me!"

***SHE'LL BE NEAR WHERE THE DISASTER HAPPENED,
SOMBRA HAD SAID. I DON'T MEAN THE MEMORIAL. YOU GO
ANYWHERE NEAR THE PLACE, TRUST ME, SHE'LL FIND YOU.***

The caped woman paused, then lowered her weapon. She was very young, Jack realized, her hair streaked with gold that matched her armor. "You're not who I was expecting."

"Sombra says hello." Jack waited for the promised passphrase, but she didn't lower her weapon.

"I'm Illari."

"Then I have something for you."

This time she did lower her rifle. "Come with me. We shouldn't talk here."

Jack collected his pack and followed her out of the ruin to another steep and winding path. It led over the ridge in the opposite direction, widened at last to a kind of hanging valley. A ramshackle hut leaned against the cliff, and as they got closer, Jack realized it concealed the entrance to a cave.

"Here," Illari said. "You can speak freely. Oasis has eyes everywhere in the city."

Jack hesitated but followed her inside. It was better appointed than he had expected, monitors and processors built into one wall, a curtained alcove that held a bed, chairs, and a table draped in brightly patterned fabric.

She gave him a look. "You have something for me?"

"In my jacket." Jack touched his chest. "Okay for me to get it?"

"Go ahead." Illari didn't raise her rifle, but she didn't put it aside either.

Jack opened his jacket, reaching slowly into an inner pocket, and brought out the data drive. "The virus you wanted."

Illari took it from him. "Thank you."

Jack waited, but she offered nothing more. Sombra had said she would have information to trade—except Sombra hadn't exactly said that . . . She'd talked around it, and that was just like Sombra. He scowled, annoyed at having been

taken in, and reached for his pack. “If that’s all . . .”

Illari gave him a sharp look. “I hoped—I *need* to deploy this in Oasis’s lab, the one they’re building here in Runasapi. I could use help getting in.”

“Somba didn’t mention that was part of the deal,” Jack said.

“She didn’t tell me Jack Morrison would be making the delivery,” Illari answered. “We learned about you in school—or at least, who you *were*, before they told us you died. Enhanced soldier, ex-Overwatch strike commander . . .”

“That was a long time ago—”

“Well, regardless, you could change the odds considerably.”

She wasn’t wrong: two were better than one, particularly if they were going to have to infiltrate Oasis’s new installation. She looked a bit green; knowing vaguely the timeline of the Inti Warriors, she couldn’t have been with them long before they fell. And he had never yet regretted the choice to damage any organization that employed Moira O’Deorain.

He nodded. “All right. I’m in.”

“Good.” Illari set her rifle aside. “I’ll go over the basics of the op.”

It was his first leave in weeks, but Jack hardly felt like he deserved it. They hadn’t defeated the omnic; they’d barely held their position. Luckily, the omnic had withdrawn without pushing for a breakthrough, no doubt devoting resources to some other, more important target.

The streetlights were working, power restored, though he could see the gaps where buildings had been destroyed by missile strikes or the subsequent fires. He knew Vincent was all right, had heard from him just that morning, but even so he found himself holding his breath as he turned into the apartment complex. All the buildings were intact, light showing at curtained windows: still there, where he’d left it. Vincent had said as much, but Jack knew war could change matters in an instant.

He let himself in and climbed the stairs to their apartment. To his surprise, a line of light shone under the door. He had expected Vincent to be asleep by now, and he knocked softly, not wanting to wake him if he’d fallen asleep with

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the lights on. There was no immediate response, and he was reaching for his key when the door opened. Vincent grinned at him but held up his phone, signaling that he was in the middle of something. Jack obediently said nothing and shut the door behind him, watching Vincent’s thumbs dancing over the keys. Then Vincent finished, and they embraced, Vincent’s lips on his in a heady rush.

“It’s good to be home.”

“I saw the news this morning . . . I was worried,” Vincent said.

“We were lucky,” Jack said, and Vincent nodded as though he believed that Jack’s luck would always hold. “I wasn’t sure you’d still be up.”

“I was sending a copy of my paper on Falkenberg Castle to Matthias.”

Jack couldn’t help raising an eyebrow at that, and Vincent grinned.

“I know, that sounds utterly pointless right now, but—when Beyazit and I were working there three years ago, we discovered that the bedrock is composed of minerals that are just about impervious to most sensor arrays. Including the ones the omnics use. And Falkenberg has deep, deep cellars, carved into that bedrock. It’s a place where civilians can shelter, where the omnics can’t find them. I couldn’t say it directly, you know . . . no one knows what the omnics are intercepting. But Matthias will know what I meant.”

Jack nodded. That was one of the reasons he loved Vincent: the man *cared*, and even if he wasn’t a soldier, he was doing everything he could to help. “It’s a good idea.”

“Hopefully, a useful one,” Vincent said, and shook his head. “Are you hungry?”

They sat down to sandwiches at the folding table in their tiny kitchen, and Vincent brought out his last two cans of beer. “I’ve been saving them.”

“Are you managing all right?” Jack asked. He’d heard about the shortages; everyone in the squad was talking about it.

“Yeah.” Vincent shrugged. “One thing about this area, there are plenty of folks who garden or keep backyard chickens. Neighbors helping neighbors—we’ve been doing all right.” He paused. “How long have you got?”

“Forty-eight hours.”

“Well.” Vincent plastered on a smile. “I’ll take what I can get.”

“First . . . we need to talk.”

Vincent raised an eyebrow.

“Not like that,” Jack said instantly, surprising a smile from the other man. “It’s just—you know things aren’t going as well as we’d like.”

“It sounds like things are going to hell,” Vincent said, abruptly sober. “I’m not stupid, Jack. I can see what’s happening.”

Jack nodded. “They’re starting a program to counter the omnic advantage, using biology, not robotics. Genetic modifications, to give us a better chance against them. An enhancement program. They’ve said I’m a candidate.”

Vincent was silent for a moment. “Who’s ‘they’?”

“The army—one of their scientists. *Naughton* I think is her name.”

“And the risks?”

“Unknown.” Jack made himself meet Vincent’s gaze squarely. “Probably significant. They said the program has been in development for years, but it’s not entirely safe. They’re accelerating it because of the Crisis. My CO didn’t want to let me go, said I was too valuable where I was. But he finally relented and gave me the offer, and . . . it’s a chance to make a real difference.”

“If it works,” Vincent said. “If it doesn’t?”

“Anything from permanent disability to death,” Jack said. The people behind the Soldier Enhancement Program had been honest about that, at least. “But it’s not like I’m safe now.”

“Don’t I know it.” Vincent shook his head. “What do you want me to say, Jack? I’m already risking losing you. What do *you* want to do?”

“I want to do it,” Jack said. “Look, we’re . . . not winning. We’re not even

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holding our own most days. This is a chance to change that. I’ve got someone I’m fighting for. If I can do more to make the world safe for you, I have to do it. No matter what it costs.”

Vincent was looking off into the distance, perhaps at an unknowable future or a happy past. He gave a rueful smile. “Well, I knew what I was getting into when I took up with you. You wouldn’t be *you* if you didn’t do it. Just . . . come back to me.”

I will, Jack vowed silently. It wasn’t a promise Jack had any right to make, though. “Even if I’ve changed?”

“We all change,” Vincent said. “Just come back.”

“Do my damndest,” Jack said.

They retired to the couch, Vincent falling asleep on Jack’s chest, fingers tangled in his own. Jack smoothed his dark hair, watching explosions bloom in the far distance.



Illari bent over a hologram model that seemed to float above the table, its colors reflecting on the bright patchwork of the tablecloth. "This is the Oasis facility. They've taken over an old building that was part of the Paqarina Research Group and given it some upgrades."

Jack nodded, studying the model. The buildings were elaborate: nothing but the best for O'Deorain and her colleagues, it seemed.

"From everything I've observed, security is tight on the perimeter," Illari went on, "but lighter once you're inside the laboratories. The main door and the loading dock are under close observation, active and passive, but there's a pair of code-locked side doors reserved for the staff that aren't as well monitored."

She didn't sound worried. "Guessing Sombra provided you with something to deal with the locks?"

"No need; I've been staking it out." Illari paused. "I'm surprised you're working with Sombra."

"She has no loyalty to anyone but herself. So long as you know she's playing every side, she can be useful."

Illari cocked her head at that. "You know what she's given to me. What . . . did she give you?"

Jack looked at the young woman. He couldn't quite encapsulate what it was about her that felt familiar, what made him feel like he could open up to her.

"She got me information I couldn't get anywhere else," Jack offered.

"Even so . . ."

"She gave me the key to finding out what really happened to Overwatch," Jack said. "A lot of people pinned the destruction of the Swiss headquarters on me and Reyes, but something else was at play." He met Illari's gaze. "I owe it to everyone, the survivors and those who died, to find out what really happened. I can't stop until I give them that justice."

"I can . . ." Illari blinked, a sorrow older than her years passing across her face. "I can understand that. My people, the Children of the Sun—the Inti Warriors, you call them—I owe them too." She touched her armor where she'd put the data drive.

“They were our protectors, our providers, and Oasis wants to take their power for themselves.”

“I thought everything was lost when the Inti Warriors were destroyed,” Jack said.

“Our facilities were decimated, but much of the data survived,” Illari answered. “Paqarina fell on hard times, partnered with Oasis, traded the data for resources. They see it as a way to reclaim what was lost, but I know Oasis can’t be trusted.”

“You were there that day, weren’t you?” Jack recognized her particular mix of guilt and grief entirely too well.

Illari looked away. “I trained my entire life to join them, from the moment they said I had the potential.”

“What happened?”

She poked a finger through one of the hologram’s walls. “The *what*, that’s easy.” Jack waited, and she jerked her hand away.

“It was a solar threading—that’s the final step that makes someone a full-fledged Inti Warrior. It’s painful, it *changes* you, but it allows you to channel the sun’s power. Only with this one . . . there was an explosion. The Inti Warriors were all killed. Except me.”

“And you want to know what went wrong,” Jack said after a moment.

“Of course.”

There was something in her voice that shifted the image in his mind, presenting a new picture. Not his business, not his problem, but sometimes it was better to talk about it rather than letting the memories fester. Though he wasn’t exactly the poster child for managing well. “It was *your* solar threading, wasn’t it?”

Illari’s eyes flickered closed, and she shook her head hard, not in denial but as though she was shaking away pain. “Yes. It was mine. It was . . . It was done, complete, perfect. And then the power just exploded back out of me. In that instant, they all died. And there was just . . . me.” She straightened. “I’ve been over everything that’s left, and I can’t make any sense of it. But I know I can’t let Oasis steal what they were. Their legacy. I won’t.”

Jack nodded. In the back of his mind, he could hear Reyes shouting, and then the overwhelming shock of the explosion, the walls collapsing in a thunderous roar he’d been too angry to hear. He saw suddenly why Sombra had sent him here, and she

HE LOOKED AT ILLARI, LOST TO THE PAST AS HE WAS. HAVING GIVEN HER LIFE TO A CAUSE THAT NO LONGER EXISTED, AS HE DID.

wasn't wrong. There were similarities between what had happened to Overwatch and what had happened in Runasapi. The circumstances were different, but an organization dedicated to bettering humanity, protecting people, decimated in a single massive explosion . . . he'd want to check that out.

He looked at Illari, lost to the past as he was. Having given her life to a cause that no longer existed, as he did. He'd chosen the Soldier Enhancement Program not just out of duty but because he believed it was the best thing he could do, the best way to protect Vincent and everyone else he loved. Naughton had been honest about the risks. He'd gone in with open eyes, and in the end, he'd been lucky. He'd survived the Program and won the war and built Overwatch into something that made a difference.

Right up to the instant it was all snatched away.

He knew, horribly and intimately, just what it was like to give yourself to something, to sacrifice everything to it, only to see it crumble before your eyes.

He nodded again, forcing his attention back to the hologram. "All right. Run me through the plan again."

The fog was starting to rise by the river as they made their way out of the park and along the Embankment. Jack saw Vincent shiver amidst the damp and felt his own body react, his metabolism adjusting so he didn't feel the chill. "That was a nice dinner," he said experimentally, and Vincent gave a flicker of a smile.

"It was. It's a new place, just opened after the war." He swept across the road, Jack hurrying in his wake, and slowed as they came up to a platform jutting out into the river. Improbably, an Egyptian obelisk towered over a bronze sphinx—not

Egyptian—the thickening fog blurred their edges, and Jack dredged the name out of memory.

“Cleopatra’s Needle.”

Vincent nodded. “My uncle brought me to see it when I was eleven, when we visited him here. I wanted to see it again.”

“Looks like it took some damage,” Jack said, pointing out the shrapnel holes that marked the nearest sphinx, and Vincent laughed.

“Not recently—at least not that one. That was done in the First World War.” Vincent grimaced as they walked around the first sphinx and came abreast of the obelisk. “The other one got it, though.”

“Yeah.” Jack could see the empty plinth where a second sphinx had been, the stone blackened and gouged. From it rose a hologram that matched the first sphinx, the glowing face serene and unmarked. A marvel of new technology, restoring at least the image of what had been lost.

“We need to talk,” Vincent said.

Jack winced. He’d been expecting this ever since he’d come to London. He and Vincent had been trying to figure out some way to live together, but with Overwatch headquartered in Zurich and Vincent’s academic career based in the States, it had proved all but impossible. “Yeah.”

“I want you *home*,” Vincent said. “To be together—start a family.”

“I know.”

“I *know* you know, but I keep saying it and nothing changes.” Vincent stared out over the river, his expression unreadable.

“They’ve made me strike commander,” Jack said. “But that doesn’t mean they’ll move Overwatch for me. There are American programs everywhere in Europe—American colleges, even. What about getting a job with one of them?”

Vincent sighed. “I probably could. I’ve thought about it, even asked around. But if I did . . . what would change, Jack?”

“We’d be on the same continent?”

It wasn’t much of a joke, but Vincent smiled anyway.

“All right, the time zones would be easier. But you’d still be in Zurich, and I’d be somewhere else. I’d see you when Overwatch didn’t need you. And I’ve been doing some hard thinking, Jack. I want children. I want a partner who’s there to raise

them, someone who's as committed to our family as to his work. So I'm asking . . . Have you considered retiring?"

Jack blinked. "I can't."

"The war's over," Vincent said. "You've done everything they asked of you and more. You've made Overwatch what it is. You've got good people behind you—the best, you always tell me. You could let it go."

"I *can't*," Jack said again. "Look, I want this as much as you do. I want a family, *our* family, us, just not—"

He stopped, and Vincent finished the sentence for him. "*Just not right now*. All right. I can wait, and I trust you. If not now, when?"

Jack stood silent, the chill from the river seeping through his jacket, through the soles of his shoes. He didn't have an answer, and that was unfair, wrong, and still the only truth he knew.

"The war's over," Vincent repeated. "We won. When do *you* get to go home? When do *you* get a future?"

"The war's not over," Jack said. "I wish it was, but there are so many opportunists rising where communities—*countries*—were hit hard."

"All right, I'll accept that," Vincent said. "But when it *is* over, Jack, what are you going to do?"

Jack stared past him at the river, where a barge crawled slowly downstream, its lights blurred by the fog. *Have a house and a yard*, he wanted to say. *You. Kids. Backyard barbecues. Sandals with socks. Family vacations in overpriced theme parks. Peace*. But he couldn't make the images real, and that meant he couldn't say the words. "It's strange a historian should be so focused on the future."

Vincent laughed. "History is about change. The one thing I know for sure is that what's coming isn't going to be the same as what we have now."

"What if you don't like the changes?" Jack remembered asking that before, when he'd joined the Soldier Enhancement Program, and grimaced at the memory. That hadn't been a simple choice either, but it had been worth it in the end.

Or had it?

"I loved you before the Soldier Enhancement Program," Vincent said. "Before Overwatch, before the Crisis, from the day you came to my rescue when I blew up that stupid beer. I love you now."

**“IF YOU EVER FIGURE IT OUT—WHO YOU ARE
AFTER YOUR WAR ENDS—GIVE ME A CALL.
I’D LIKE TO MEET HIM,” VINCENT SAID, AND
TURNED AWAY.**

“But.”

“But.” Vincent nodded. “I need to know we have a future. Do we?”

The words stuck in Jack’s throat. He wanted to say they did, to promise everything Vincent wanted because Jack wanted it too. There had to be a way. Other people managed it, even in Overwatch. But he couldn’t. He was . . . *responsible* in a way those around him were not. Jack felt every failure, grieved every loss. He made the calls that kept the world safe. And Overwatch was still new, still fragile; without him running things, criminals would go free, lives would be lost. The cost was too high. Even if they weren’t together, Jack would breathe easier knowing he’d done everything he could to make a world where Vincent was safe.

Jack closed his eyes, not wanting to see the misery on Vincent’s face. “I want to,” he said at last. “I want it so much. But I can’t promise. And I won’t lie to you.”

Vincent made a sound that was somewhere between laughter and tears. “No. You never would. One of the many reasons I love you. And yet—”

Jack made himself meet Vincent’s eyes. “I’m sorry. I wish—” He stopped, not knowing what to say, what he wished, except that this wasn’t happening, and Vincent nodded.

“Me too.”

“It’s better than yelling at each other,” Jack offered.

“That was never our style,” Vincent answered. He reached out, and Jack stepped into the offered embrace. Vincent’s lips tasted of the fog that thickened around them, and Jack closed his eyes as though he could make it last forever. Live in this kiss and never face what came after.

Then Vincent pulled away, and Jack let him go.

“If you ever figure it out—who you are after your war ends—give me a call. I’d

like to meet him,” Vincent said, and turned away.

Jack watched him dissolve into the fog, then reached for his phone. Seven missed calls, all from Overwatch. He thought this was what was right for the world.

If only it didn’t feel so empty.

Jack followed Illari down another of the narrow mountain paths, his visor activated for night vision. The sickle moon was setting: a good night for infiltrating the Oasis compound. Except that Oasis would have the best sensors available . . . or they’d have the place lit up like a city center . . . or both. Illari’s plan was to create a distraction that would draw the perimeter guards’ attention and let her open the code-locked staff doors. Simple was usually the best, but nothing was ever simple when it came to dealing with Oasis.

Illari lifted her hand in warning and crouched at the head of the trail. Jack went to one knee beside her, peering through the line of scrubby bushes at the complex below. Oasis had cleared the ground between the buildings and the perimeter fence, posting short guard stations at regular intervals. There were four guards in sight, and when Jack adjusted his HUD, he could pick out three more farther along the fence line. “Heavy security.”

“There weren’t so many before,” Illari muttered.

Jack studied the guards, watching them pace back and forth beneath the towers. There would be automatic weapons on the towers, maybe short-range explosives, and Oasis’s limited guard detail wouldn’t have much compunction about using them. He could see the slight dip in the ground not quite midway between two guard towers: Illari was right, that was the best place to break through. Beyond the fence, the buildings of the complex were in relative shadow; getting to the lab doors would be easy enough. The main gate was out of sight to the north, where the fence curved to the left around another larger building; the back gate, where the heavy equipment was brought directly to the labs, was out of sight to the south. If they could draw attention to the gates, make it sound as though someone was attempting to breach both entry points, that might be enough to pull the guards out of position. Leave their approach uncovered. “What about the sensors?”

“Not in use,” Illari answered. “Too much wildlife around—too many false alarms.” She gave a crooked smile. “Some of which I may have arranged.”

That was a help. Jack produced a couple of fist-sized devices. His pulse rifle wasn’t the only thing he’d stolen from Watchpoint: Grand Mesa years ago. He handed one to Illari, who examined it warily.

“Grenade?”

Jack shook his head. “Rattler. Overwatch used them to draw fire.” He displayed the controls. “It generates the sound of gunfire. Should convince the guards that people are moving on the slopes above the two gates. Will draw them off long enough for us to get in.”

Illari studied the device thoughtfully, then nodded. “Understood.” She took the rattler and melted into the shadows.

Jack turned back the way they’d come, found a game trail, and followed it along the crest of the ridge, keeping low. When he paused to check his progress, he could see the guards moving mechanically along their patrol lines. Hopefully, his distraction would shake them out of their complacency.

The ground was steeper opposite the main gate, the access road curving up from the east through a gap in the hills. Jack pinpointed a spot halfway down the hill to place a rattler, then edged away. He found good cover a little farther along and collected a handful of rocks. He tossed one down the hill ahead of him, listening to it thump through the underbrush, and saw one of the gate guards lift his head. He tossed two more to the right of the first, and two more guards stopped to confer. He tossed another stone, not as far as the others, and saw one of the men beckon to an officer down the line. Another man unholstered a light, let its beam play over the slope.

The rattler went off, a sudden blast of noise that rapidly crescendoed, mixed with brief flashes of light. The gate guards shouted, reinforcements boiled out of the compound heading for the gate, and Jack retreated. A chunk of fallen tree blocked his way, and he levered it free, sent it crashing down the slope. The guards shouted in answer, and Jack scrambled back up the hill.

Illari was near, just ahead of him, crouched low in the brush overlooking their chosen entrance point. She pointed to the guards on the southern side of the fence. “They’re not all gone.”

Jack nodded. “Wait for it—” Illari’s rattler went off as he spoke, and the perimeter guards turned toward the sound. He heard shouting from the back gate, and two of the visible guards moved off at a trot. The third hesitated, then followed. “Now.”

Illari reached the fence, and Jack dropped into the hollow behind her, ready to provide cover. He waited while she clipped a wire, then frowned at the broken ends, concentrating. Her hair was fully gold for a moment, alight like the sun. A spark leaped from her fingers, and the perimeter lights winked out.

“Nice work,” Jack said, following her through the gap.

They fetched up in the shadows behind the lab building, the lock pad glowing faintly beside the entrance. Illari slung her rifle and punched in a code. Jack heard a faint click, and the door sagged open.

“We’re in.”

The halls were dark and empty: Illari’s intel was good so far. Jack checked the door to be sure it had locked behind them, and Illari pointed down the right-hand corridor. “This way.”

Jack trailed behind her, checking for any unanticipated guards or late-working technicians. So far, everything was empty, the labs shut down for the night, offices closed and deserted. He risked a question. “You know where the mainframe is?”

For a moment, Illari seemed not to hear, then he heard her take a shaky breath. “Over here. I think.”

You should be sure. Jack swallowed the words, knowing they were counterproductive. “Toward the center?”

“Most likely, yes.” They had reached a cross-corridor, and Illari stopped, scanning the junction.

Caution, Jack thought, then saw her eyes flutter closed. She shook herself and turned left. Jack followed.

This hallway held more labs, bigger ones, with narrow windows that gave glimpses of hulking machines; odd, overgrown plants; reptiles of a species he didn’t recognize: Oasis was well and truly settled here. Illari stopped at a heavier door, one that had no windows, and studied the keypad.

“This is it?” Jack asked, and she nodded.

“I have a code.” She typed it as she spoke, fingers darting over the keys, but a red light appeared. “Maldición!”

**HER HAIR WAS FULLY GOLD FOR A MOMENT,
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She glared at the door, one hand moving toward her rifle. She wanted to blow it open, Jack realized. That would be a disaster, draw the attention they'd avoided so far, but before he could say anything, she controlled herself and tried the keypad again. This time, the door slid open.

Jack flattened himself against the wall inside the door, scanning the space. Illari darted from station to station, touching keys to wake terminals long enough to check their function, then moving on. Then at last she made a soft noise and stopped. "It's here."

Jack gave a last look down the hall and moved to join her, not liking the wild note in her voice. As he watched, she touched more keys, bringing up screen after screen, and settled on one that showed what looked to be a list of files. "This is it," she said softly. "This is everything."

"You're sure?" Jack stared at the screen. There were dozens of listings, and they were clearly only the top layer of the file structure: Oasis had managed to recover more of the Inti Warriors' data than he had expected.

"Yes." There was a hitch in Illari's voice. "Yes, this is it. All that's left." Jack gave her a wary glance, but she was already reaching into her armor for the drive Sombra had provided. She snapped it in place, typed a string of letters, and took a half step back as the screen suddenly streamed with symbols.

"Problem?" Jack asked, but she shook her head.

"It's loading."

Sombra was good, Jack told himself. Sombra was just that good, and—yes, there it was. The screen flashed back to the file listing, and as he watched, the files

began to vanish, winking out of existence and taking the knowledge of the Inti Warriors with them.

Illari's hands closed convulsively, knuckles showing pale, and her jaw clenched. Jack knew that look, that weight of responsibility, the knowledge that the power of the Inti Warriors was too great to give to anyone else. She alone must protect it, and to protect it, she had to destroy it. He felt that way often on this lonely road, carrying the legacy of Overwatch, even after it fell and the world buried his memory in an empty grave.

The last file disappeared, and he saw two tears tracking down Illari's cheeks. Then she shook herself and bent over the terminal, checking to be sure the files were completely destroyed.

Now she was truly the last Child of the Sun.

He hated to rouse her, knew what this moment must mean. Jack glanced toward the door, gauging how much time they had before the perimeter guards realized they'd been tricked, and saw Illari nod. "It's done."

"Then let's go."

They retraced their path through the building, then paused at the doorway while Jack scanned the strip of open ground. The perimeter lights were still out, and there was no sign of movement along the fence. "Go!"

Illari darted for the gap, and he leaned against the side of the building, ready to cover her. He saw her wriggle through the fence and then vanish into the underbrush. A moment later, she popped up, rifle ready, and Jack charged after her. It took him a little longer to work through the gap, but he made it. He bounded up the slope, into the brush beside her. A heartbeat later, the perimeter's emergency lights flickered on: they'd made it just in time.

"We're clear," Illari said, her voice filled with pride and sorrow.

They made it back to Illari's hideout without incident. Jack dropped into a chair, dragging his pack to him to check and replace his equipment. Illari turned her attention to her screens, then swung back, holding out a data drive. "Here." Jack blinked once, startled, and Illari added, "Energy readouts, footage from my solar threading. I don't . . . know that it's related to what happened to Overwatch. But if it furthers your mission, I can repay you for helping me."

Jack accepted the drive. He knew what this took, to trust him with something so

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personal. The hope it represented, not just for him but for her as well. “I’ll let you know for sure once I analyze the data.” He tucked the drive into his pack, hefted it once to be sure it was balanced properly. He needed to get moving before Oasis’s security decided to probe more deeply into the city, needed to get back to the airport in time to catch his ride out of here. And yet. He felt a connection to Illari, a responsibility for her safety, and that was something he hadn’t felt in a long time. “Oasis is going to be looking for you.”

“I’ve taken care of that.” Illari didn’t look up from her screen. “They won’t connect me to that attack.”

“I don’t doubt it,” Jack said. “But once they realize what’s been taken, they’ll know someone is trying to protect the Inti Warriors’ secrets, and that will lead them straight to you. Moira O’Deorain is smart and dangerous—you need to watch out for her.”

Illari swung away from her terminal. “Sombra is also smart and dangerous.”

“You should be careful of her too,” Jack said. “Even if she is useful. But O’Deorain is unrelenting . . . She has ties to other organizations, resources you can’t begin to imagine.” He thought Illari would protest, but instead she gave a crooked smile and a nod. At least she was listening.

He took a breath and decided to risk saying the thing he’d been thinking. “You know . . . you don’t have to stay here, in Runasapi, holding vigil over your friends’ graves, over the life you might have had. You could make another choice. I know some people who could help—”

“Listen. I know what you’re trying to do here, but I can take care of myself. This is my responsibility.”

Jack winced. She was so like him, and yet he could hear Vincent’s voice in hers. Indicting him for not making a better choice.

In spite of himself, his voice was tired and sad. “A long time ago, someone told me that all wars end. That *my* war would end. He said I needed to be sure I had something waiting for me when it did. I never had that, never made those plans—and so, my war goes on. I’m near the end of a long road now, and I wish I’d made a different choice.”

Illari’s hair flashed gold. “This—protecting the legacy of the Children of the Sun—is not over! It’s not that simple. I’d expect you of all people to understand that.”

She paused and looked away, then shook her head slowly, seeming to regain control. “I-I don’t know when this mission will end, but I’ll know when it does. This is my path, and I am not a victim of my choices. I will walk this journey with pride.”

“Good luck, then,” Jack said, and received a grave nod that said she knew he meant it.

He hoisted his pack onto his shoulders and began the long hike away from Runasapi.

Vincent would have liked her, he thought. They might have argued, but they would have understood each other’s passions. And neither of them would have had regrets. Jack had so many regrets—so many choices he wished he’d never made, so many things to look back on and wish undone. *And maybe that’s the problem.*

The thought was unexpected enough to make him stop short, half in shade and half in sunlight, unfamiliar birdsong filling the morning air. Maybe that was the reason he’d felt so stuck since the fall of Overwatch. Maybe that was the reason he’d been so fixated on saving the world after the Crisis. There were so many choices he hadn’t made, things he’d wanted and didn’t allow himself to have.

He closed his eyes, imagining the life he hadn’t chosen. In that world, he and Vincent had married, raised children together—he’d always thought they’d take the kids to Europe for the summer, while Vincent did his research and Jack picked up consulting gigs, Rome and Vienna, Birka and Falkenberg, museums and open countryside, while someone else saved the world. But the time for that was long

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BACK. MAYBE IT WAS TIME, FINALLY, TO LET THAT GO.
TO CHOOSE SOMETHING NEW.**

past. He'd made his choice, and there was no going back. Maybe it was time, finally, to let that go. To choose something new.

He reached the top of the ridge that looked across to Runasapi, the blocky towers rising against the sunlight. The breeze had freshened, carrying the rich green scent of the forest behind him. He reached into his jacket, digging deep until he found the innermost pocket. His fingers brushed against the fraying edge of the photograph, and he pulled it out, studying the familiar image: himself and Vincent, arms around each other's shoulders, smiling into the camera. It had been taken before the Crisis, when everything was still possible. The picture fluttered, caught by the wind, and he tightened his grip. He'd carried it with him for so long, the last piece of what they'd had, the reminder of what he'd fought for. He could keep it a little longer. Surely there was no harm in that. Except . . . it wasn't even a memory anymore, just the ghost of what might have been. The wind tugged harder, and he let it go, Vincent's smile the last thing he saw as the picture soared away into the sun.

Jack smiled back and turned away.

Dear Vincent,

I've been wanting to write to you for a while now, to let you know I survived Zurich. A part of me thinks you won't be surprised—you knew my luck, after all.

I still think about our last conversation in London. I'm not sure I could have been the one you needed. That man thought he had to save the world for you. In truth, he needed to look toward a future he couldn't begin to imagine. He needed to know his past so he could grow beyond it. Since then, I've learned that all wars do end, and I'm beginning to think I might want to see what comes after.

Don't expect me on your doorstep. I know you found the love you deserved, and I'm happy for you. I just wanted you to know that I'm not dead, that I'm grateful for all we shared, and that—not for the first time—you were right.

Jack



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Melissa Scott was born and raised in Little Rock, Arkansas, studied history at Harvard College, and earned her PhD from Brandeis University. She has published more than forty original and tie-in novels plus a handful of short stories, most with queer themes and characters, winning four Lammys and four Spectrum Awards in the process.