

OVERWATCH

CODE OF VIOLENCE



A SHORT STORY BY BRANDON EASTON

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CODE OF VIOLENCE



Reyes's pulse pounded in his ears. It was here, in these quiet moments, where his rage simmered. Small irritations—a late pilot, a missing mission brief—used to precede an easy smile, a good-natured ribbing. But now these annoyances had a way of spiraling, his rage building a bridge to somewhere else. Reyes didn't like thinking about what was on the other side of that bridge. He got the sense that with every bullet fired, every time his body collapsed into a plume of black smoke, he was taking another small step down that road.

But that was the price of power.

Reyes stared at his warped reflection as he gripped the Reaper mask—a specialized breathing apparatus that resembled a white jack-o'-lantern with narrowed red eye slits. For stealth-based missions like this, Reyes needed a HUD, a gas filter, an omnidirectional comms system connected to a GPS. For all intents and purposes, the mask was practical. But there were other reasons for the mask too . . . his face was a liability. The world thought he was dead, and it needed to stay that way. No one could know, especially *her*.

A million images flooded Reyes's mind—a broken kaleidoscope of fleeting moments of joy, contentment, discovery, love. A melting ice cream cone dripping across scraped knuckles. Her hair. A time when she looked on his face with affection.

Would she smile now if she knew what I've become? The question went unanswered as a wellspring of anger bubbled up from places Reyes tried to repress. *Could she ever feel that way about me again?*

The anger spiraled further out of reach, the ways his body had been twisted all these years. The scars from his last fight with Jack were nothing beside the poison Moira had injected him with, and the American government before her. Even now the liquids screamed through his veins, a molecular cleansing that was wiping Gabriel Reyes away piece by piece.

It had been almost a year since an explosion had torn the Overwatch Swiss headquarters to shrapnel. The last things he remembered were the flash of ignition, a terrible moment of searing heat, and Jack's eyes, wide with horror. Then . . . impenetrable darkness.

Reyes remembered waking up and seeing a pair of cold eyes staring at his face. Moira O'Deorain—the mad geneticist whom he'd recruited into Blackwatch. A choice that would prove to deliver an endless array of unintended consequences. As Reyes drifted in and out of consciousness, Moira explained how she'd overloaded his body with a cocktail of experimental chemicals—a juiced-up version of the substance that had first given him the ability to manipulate his form. She claimed he'd been close to death and she'd had no other option. Though the scientist cloaked her motivations in the cool logic of her field, Reyes knew she enjoyed her work more when playing with helpless test subjects.

Reyes lay on the gurney, feeling a sense of indescribable detachment—as if his body were made of a silky molten metal that flowed between various states of matter. In one moment, he was flesh and blood; the next moment, he was a cluster of black smoke, aware of every molecule and yet terrified of losing command of it. Reyes looked at his arm, a torrent of ebon mist in the vague shape of an appendage. Internally, he screamed in horror, but a very small part of his brain was intrigued by it. How many people now had tried to kill him? And instead his power had grown. He was more than what he had been before. The

memory of his previous life now felt like the tragic prologue to a tale of revenge he would write in blood.

Reyes snapped out of his daydream, breathing deep as the Talon dropship began its landing cycle. The Reaper mask cast a shadow across his horrific visage as he slowly lowered it over his head. With a satisfying *click*, the mask connected to the armored cowl around his neck. He took another deep breath met by a hiss, both icy and metallic.

“One minute thirty to deployment zone,” the dropship pilot said.

Reyes turned to a bank of computer monitors along the comm station of the dropship. He deftly slid a finger across the LED control panel and scrolled through Doomfist’s mission brief.

Within moments, you will be landing at a military black site. Inside you will find a person whose knowledge will allow Talon to move into the next phase of our operation. It is imperative that this man is safely taken from the facility alive. Your teammate on this mission is an important asset, but do not lose sight of her. While I remain confined, you will strike as my hidden hand.

He remembered smirking in front of Akande’s holding room as the jailed man stared back with an empty expression. No hint of emotion, just a pair of eyes focused on something far beyond his gloating captors—past the hard-light walls of the prison itself.

Reyes wasn’t petty or needlessly vindictive, but it brought him a measure of satisfaction to know that one of the world’s most powerful criminals was stuck in a cage, something he’d had a hand in.

“How are you liking your new accommodations?” Reyes asked.

Akande blinked as if torn from a conversation only he could hear. He shrugged. “Adversity creates opportunity . . . and strengthens us, if we survive.”

Reyes gritted his teeth, his hand curled into a tight fist as he choked back a stream of curses.

Akande surveyed Reyes’s body language with a knowing glance.

“Frustration at the system’s inability to properly deal with the power brokers and insurgents,” Akande said in a tone that suggested it was less a question and more a confirmation.

Reyes replied with a scowl.

Akande leaned forward with a guarded expression, like a poker player unsure if his hand is powerful enough to win the game. “We are men of war. It’s only natural that this false peace wouldn’t fool you. But not to worry, I’m at a supreme disadvantage—”

“Where you belong,” Reyes snapped.

“In your estimation, perhaps. I am neither the first nor the last with the vision to question the global order. I’m only one of many who realize how broken the world is.”

“No system is perfect. You can recognize the system is flawed without committing acts of terror.”

Akande nodded respectfully and turned away from Reyes. “A shame that the true villains never see the inside of a cell,” Akande said. “You’ve been a police officer and a soldier. Spent a great deal of your life in the pursuit of justice. Only to see justice so easily bought and sold.”

“I’m not a lost fool in search of a cult leader,” Reyes said as he stood to leave. “Don’t try to manipulate me. *You’re* here for a reason.”

“And so are you, Reyes.”

A moment passed between them, the kind of pause usually followed by a handshake or the drawing of a pistol.

“Allow me to ask this,” Akande said. “Do you believe you’ve made a difference? As a police officer? As a soldier? As an Overwatch agent? Have your actions tipped the scales of justice?”

Reyes opened his mouth to answer, but something deep within blocked the words from escaping. As a cop, Reyes had locked away hundreds of criminals, and it had done nothing to stem the flow of street crime. As a soldier, he had helped to topple cruel authoritarian regimes only to watch a megacorporation take control and continue the same abuses under the auspices of maximizing profits. Unlike many of his cohorts, Reyes believed the root causes of injustice had to be ripped out at the source. What good was arresting drug dealers if the cartels



weren't dismantled? Why save a nation from a despot without first determining who elevated and kept them in power?

Time and time again, Reyes watched as innocents suffered under the boots of the well-heeled elites who escaped prosecution. Watched as the system failed to provide the people with justice, relief, *protection*.

Akande continued speaking, his tone reverent and without judgment. "You've worked tirelessly, even twisted your body, to serve the universal goodwill, and what do you have in the end? This isn't a flawed system. It was created quite intentionally to reward and protect criminals who profit from the division they create. Now I would ask, *who* are you really protecting? Are you protecting humanity from me? Or are you protecting these criminals from my justice?"

Reyes tried, but he couldn't quite compose a response. Akande spoke a truth that couldn't be denied by anyone. Not the United Nations. Not Interpol. Not the American justice system. And certainly not Overwatch—

with whom he had created a covert strike team to correct the wrongs that the system wouldn't allow them to fix.

It was in this moment that a seed of vengeance was planted in Reyes's psyche. A seed that would give rise to Reaper. A ghost no longer subscribing to outdated notions of honor, but rather a new believer in a code of violence . . . the only code this world respected.

"Switching audio feed to your mask's comm system." The dropship pilot's voice tore through the veil of Reyes's memory.

A hollow beep in Reyes's ear indicated the feed was secure. "Proceed."

Reyes's HUD flickered, a flashing purple calavera taking the place of the Talon insignia. "Hola, compadre." A voice cut into his ear. "Ready for the ataque relámpago?"

Reyes felt the floor shift beneath him as the dropship made contact with the ground. He emerged from the darkened entryway of the exit ramp, searching for his teammate, Sombra. As she dropped her stealth, he saw a confident smirk framing her face.

Reyes switched off his comm, turning toward the young woman. "You mean a stealth-based extraction?"

"Sure, a hit-and-run."

Reyes stared at Sombra, completing an internal premission checklist of her liabilities. Her white-and-red outfit wasn't exactly subtle. Even her machine pistol was garishly decorated. Nothing about his teammate reflected the concept of "stealth."

"Have you participated in extractions like this before?" Reyes asked.

Sombra pulled up a hard-light screen and exhaled sharply, a sound somewhere between mockery and disbelief. "Are you worried, Gabe? You can trust me. I'll even let you in on an old Talon secret: this isn't the military, soldado. But you'll figure that out soon enough."

"Did you review the mission brief?"

Sombra tossed a hard-light screen his way. "You mean this? I prefer to do my own research."

Reyes felt his anger building as he checked the ammunition in his shotguns. "Following the mission brief brings us home in one piece."

Sombra shrugged, collapsing her screens.

Reyes headed for the door. "Ready for combat operations."

Sombra smirked, raising her pistol next to her forehead in a taunting salute.

As they crested the ridge, light from the full moon revealed a wide vista of tall pine trees and scrub brush stretching for miles in every direction. The flat hilltop overlooked a valley where a nondescript series of one-story beige buildings formed a vague horseshoe in the landscape.

"That," Sombra said, "is where we'll find our target."

Reyes scanned the area silently, his eyes searching for defensive countermeasures built into the topography. In his previous life, Reyes had infiltrated a countless number of so-called black sites and knew their methods of hiding surveillance and early warning devices. It might be a strangely placed flagpole or an asymmetrical series of lush green bushes too healthy for a desert environment.

"Their detection grid is sparse. Follow my lead to the valley floor, and—" Reyes turned and saw Sombra toss a translocator beacon across the chasm. She vanished and reappeared on the opposite hilltop in a split second. Reyes's momentary shock at Sombra's disappearance was tempered by his annoyance. Beneath the mask, Reyes ground his teeth as he recalled Doomfist's warning: *Do not lose sight of her.*

Reyes focused on the space next to Sombra. His heart rate increased quickly, and his skin prickled. He disintegrated into smoke and re-formed on the hilltop beside her.

Sombra wiggled her fingers beside him. "Miss me?"

Reyes noted that Sombra didn't react to his abilities; it gave him the feeling that she already knew what he was capable of and was just messing with him. It was a petty game played by the overconfident.

Doomfist had briefed him on Sombra's abilities as well, had *said* that she was one of the most dangerous operatives on the planet. Reyes hadn't considered that she might also be dangerous to their mission objective.

"You've got to keep up, amigo," Sombra said. "I know you're just the hired

muscle, but I thought you'd be less tense in this situation. Why don't we split up? I'll go after the target, and you take care of the gua—"

"We're not splitting up." Reyes cut in.

Sombra sighed. "We're not attacking the Pentagon. Their closest reinforcements are forty-nine kilometers away. This place isn't supposed to exist, and my intel shows that they don't get many supply trucks in here. The security staff is light—budget cuts have knocked their staff down to thirty active guards—and they won't be expecting an infiltration. Their heaviest armas won't make a dent in Talon troop armor. Black sites aren't even protected by the local sheriff. But you should already know that."

"We work together. Easier to neutralize threats."

"Affirmative, *commander*," Sombra said with a raised eyebrow. She lowered her voice. "You know, reading your case file, you didn't strike me as a narc."

Reyes was unsure of what Sombra was implying. Was she aware of Akande's warning?

Seeing the anger on his face, Sombra put her hand on her hip. "Relax, amigo. Akande has nothing to worry about. Our interests are aligned today."

Sombra flashed him a wry smile and pointed to the building closest to their position. "We enter there. Easy in. Easy out."

Sombra blinked out of existence as Reyes concentrated on the spot she'd marked.

Over the years, Reyes's military training had bestowed him with a sixth sense that warned of danger. Right now, his internal alarm was ringing on every frequency. It wasn't the mission itself that troubled him so much as the Talon dynamic (or lack thereof). He wasn't naive or foolish enough to believe that Talon's loose culture of like-minded criminals would adhere to a basic military structure, but working alongside Sombra was unsettling. He'd assumed anyone he'd work with would at least have his back, if for no other reason than for the mission's sake.

But Sombra didn't care about him or the mission . . . she barely seemed to care about Akande. He was suddenly uncertain if he could rely on anyone within Talon. A disturbing thought settled in his mind. *Akande told me to keep an eye on Sombra. What did he tell Sombra about me?*

"Initiating the hack," Sombra announced as he approached the sun-bleached

door of the first building.

Reyes noticed a small camera poking up out of the ground several meters to their left just as a warning Klaxon rattled the peaceful landscape. A motion detector. *Rookie mistake*. Doors on multiple buildings slid open, and heavily armored security troopers poured into the dusty valley, guns hot.

Reyes counted ten guards converging on their position. Beneath the mask, Reyes's face relaxed. It troubled him to think about how each squeeze of the triggers brought him some brief measure of peace, put a lid on the rage.

BLAM! BLAM! BLAM!

The guards dropped to the earth hard. Reyes moved forward at a steady pace. He could have shot them all in mere seconds, but there was a part of him that savored the act—a growing part of him that he didn't like to acknowledge.

The last two guards aimed their weapons at Reyes, but they were frozen in fear. Reyes shot the first immediately, which seemed to rouse the other man. He fired off a round, thick beads of sweat pouring off his brow as Reyes dissolved into smoke and reappeared behind him. The man felt the barrel of the Hellfire shotgun press against the back of his head. He looked up at the sky before Reyes pulled the trigger.

Sombra clapped slowly while Reyes's body reconstituted. Luckily, he'd burned off some of his rage in the fight.

"You were sloppy," Reyes said. "I don't clean up messes, and—"

"And what else," Sombra said while staring at her fingernails.

"I don't work with amateurs."

Sombra took a few steps toward Reyes, hands on hips with a defiant swagger.

"Listen, sabelotodo, I needed to know their response time, and I used you as a distraction while I hacked their comms terminal. Their internal network is down, and they're totally cut off from the outside world. And while you had your fun, I determined the location of our target."

Sombra spun on her heel and entered the door of the closest building. Reyes grumbled beneath his mask, slowly discovering reserves of patience he no longer knew existed.

Sombra stepped lightly into a long hallway punctuated by flashing red lights, and Reyes followed. She hacked another terminal port—using that interface to

***ALL THEIR INTERESTS WERE ALIGNED
FOR NOW—LIKE SOMBRA HERSELF
HAD SAID—BUT WHAT ABOUT THE DAY
WHEN THEY WEREN'T?***

disable portions of the security net. Within moments, the red lights stopped, returning the complex to the dull florescent glow of a typical office building.

“The package is located on sublevel two. There’s a staircase down this way. Once we reach the lower levels, we should expect a bit more resistance,” Sombra said.

“Do you understand why a chain of command exists?” Reyes said.

“Ay, otra vez no. You got a one-track mind.”

“In real combat, where there are no powers or tricks, where the enemy has a fair chance of killing you, following orders can be the difference between life and death.”

“I don’t *believe* in orders.”

“You’re here, following Doomfist’s orders.”

Sombra sighed. “Listen, amigo. Everyone has a reason for being in Talon. Some have no place else to go—*like you*. Others want access to their resources. Some people are here because they believe in the leader. Doomfist has influence right now because he has the vision, the will, and the resources. Talon could have a new leader tomorrow. Or maybe not. I might follow an order if it suits me, but right now, it doesn’t. Comprendes?”

Reyes thought on Sombra’s words as they continued to the stairs in silence.

They rang with an uncomfortable kind of truth. He'd seen Moira exploit organizations for their resources—she didn't care what side she was on, so long as she could fund her research. Akande was here to establish a new world order. It was what had drawn Reyes in—the promise of Talon as the bullhorn of the voiceless, a battering ram against the walls of poverty, a fist to the jaw of blue-blooded elites whose fortunes had been crafted off the backs of a servant class.

Sombra clearly had her own agenda, one Reyes knew nothing about. All their interests were aligned for now—like Sombra herself had said—but what about the day when they weren't?

The answer seemed easy: *You learn your allies' weaknesses, and you manipulate them or take them out.*

Sombra opened the door to the stairwell. She leaned slowly over the banister to see several flights of steps leading to a darkened lower level. Reyes was close behind, his fingers locked around his shotguns' triggers.

"Nada," Sombra said.

A bullet whizzed past her ear.

Sombra cursed loudly as a barrage of automatic fire blazed from the darkness below. Reyes darted forward just as Sombra blinked into stealth and descended the staircase.

Reyes jumped the banister into the open space in the stairwell. The moment he felt gravity's inevitable tug, he ripped his Hellfire guns from their holsters and let the rage within consume him. He felt exhilarated as his velocity increased—a sinister laugh escaping him, amplified by his mask's comm system. Reyes became a blur of motion, flicking in and out of space while bullets bloomed from his guns.

As Reyes dropped past each level, the effect neutralized every guard on the stairs. Reyes landed hard on the lower level as Sombra emerged from her stealth mode.

"Clear the area next time," Reyes said, replacing his weapons.

"Tranquilo. People like me are the reason people like you have a job."

The smoke cleared to reveal a massive metal door with a small rectangular console set in the wall beside it. Sombra quickly hacked the console; when the door opened, they heard a hollow *snap-hiss* sound.

Reyes pushed Sombra aside. "Tear gas . . . projectile rail guns."

The canister zoomed into the cramped stairwell landing, ricocheting off the tight walls with a plume of toxic exhaust. Sombra staggered ahead into the hallway, which was already filling with a phalanx of troopers wearing gas masks. Sombra's eyes collapsed into a tight squint as she activated some sort of weapon—concurrent waves of purple light burst from her body in a wide crescent, rippling down the hallway in an explosion of violet. The troopers stopped cold, jostling their rifles as they pulled the triggers in vain.

An EMP. Clever.

Reyes seized the opportunity to blast the troopers, who could only stare in horrified awe.

While Reyes dispatched the guards, Sombra hacked the building's ventilation system to initiate a complex-wide air evacuation and recycling. An electronic rattle echoed through the halls as the noxious vapors were removed. Sombra turned to see Reyes maintaining a vigil over the recently departed.

Sometimes he forgot that these people were like he had been not so long ago. Soldiers, guards, people with lives.

Images from *before* flooded his mind for a moment again—ice cream and scraped knuckles and the jacaranda trees lining the streets of Echo Park—but they were dispelled by a familiar voice: *Who are you really protecting? Are you protecting humanity from me? Or are you protecting these criminals from my justice?*

"Is this how you run every mission?" Reyes asked, aware she was watching him.

"Eh. At least I can think for myself. There's no trauma clouding my brain," Sombra jabbed, resuscitating the anger in the pit of Reyes's stomach. "Enjoy your cleanup work, *barrendero*."

Reyes fought his base instinct to teach the child an old-fashioned lesson. But Sombra zipped ahead of him, gesticulating wildly with made-up hand signals. More mocking. More disrespect.

As they inched closer to their destination, Reyes ground his teeth and noted the large hazmat signs, warnings about sudden changes in radiation levels.

Sombra looked back at Reyes, her eyes dancing with mischief. "I mean, I can see why Akande chose you as his new gun."

Reyes responded with an exasperated grunt.

Sombra grinned. She was loving this. “True loyalty is hard to come by these days, especially in our line of work. Impossible to buy but valuable as gold.”

Reyes knew what she was doing; her prodding was pushing him over the edge. He was smart enough to recognize manipulation but lacked the self-control to ignore Sombra’s barbs. Ever since he’d crawled out of Switzerland, pumped full of more poison to keep him alive, he’d struggled to keep a lid on his anger.

“Give me a break,” Reyes ground out.

“We’re just chatting, soldado. Trust-building with the squad, remember? Like you used to do in Overwatch.”

Beneath the mask, Reyes’s brow furrowed tightly. That was not a word he wanted to hear. The rage began to pump through his veins again as they approached a dark corridor that ended in an airlock.

“Okay, amigo, our target is on the other side,” Sombra said.

When Sombra hacked into the door’s security terminal, an automated voice greeted them: “Please exercise caution when entering the quantum chamber. Gravitational experiments may be in effect. Secure loose clothing, weapons, and personal items.”

“After you, compadre,” Sombra said with a slight bow.

The door opened, revealing a larger-than-expected laboratory in a vaguely octagonal shape. Embedded in the walls were large clusters of computer banks connected by countless fiber-optic cables. The cables ran the length of the floors, leading to a raised platform in the center of the room. To Reyes, it looked like the nest of a giant cyborg squid.

“Ah, there he is,” Sombra said in a singsong voice.

On the raised platform was an older man hunched over two spherical devices slightly larger than standard-issue throwing grenades. His bald head accentuated an angular face that converged in a sharp hooknose, like a hawk’s beak.

As Reyes approached, the man made no effort to acknowledge them. In fact, Reyes wasn’t certain the man realized anyone had entered the room at all. Reyes spied Sombra hustling to the largest bank of computer monitors on the far side of the lab, settling quickly into the seat. The screens lit up as Sombra hacked the mainframe.

“The fissure of time, it rings like an unheard bell, but the imprint of

gravity distorts time like the medium of water for sound. The bell still rings, regardless . . . ” the man said, his voice tapering off as if someone had interrupted him.

The man smiled, then pulled a lever near his workstation. He dropped the two spheres while the central station opened like a puzzle box to reveal another larger sphere that glowed in a steady rhythm.

Reyes was transfixed by the larger sphere. “Is he . . . ?”

The man gently rubbed the surface of the device; his fingers illuminated with pulsing light.

“A bad experiment fractured his mind. He’s just trying to remember how the pieces fit together,” Sombra said. “I’d say you two have something in common, eh?”

Reyes did his best to ignore the jab as he felt a familiar prickle at the base of his neck. Another round of reinforcements was gathering in the hall. He fired his shotguns at the interior panels, disabling them and causing the security protocols to seal the door tight.

“You didn’t lock the door,” Reyes hissed.

“You handled it superbly, amigo,” Sombra said, her eyes locked on the screens as she accessed the dossier on their target package. “Dr. Siebren de Kuiper, Dutch national . . . ah, there it is. And now we know why Akande wants this guy.”

The sound of banging on the door intensified. They couldn’t hear voices, only the concussive impacts of multiple energy blasts and heavy-arms fire denting the exterior of the steel barrier. It reminded Reyes of the distant thunderclap of enemy gunfire during his few failed missions, times when he’d had to retreat or hide to fight another day. Deep pangs of regret and frustration continued to bubble in his gut, each passing moment feeling like the heat was being turned up past five hundred degrees.

Reyes’s patience was gone. Here he was, doing grunt work for Talon. A soldier of his immense skill and experience reduced to a common street enforcer. Any fool could pull a trigger, but it took cunning to complete a black op. With every bang on the door, Reyes could feel his tight grip on his rage slipping away. *Is this why Doomfist recruited me? Reyes wondered. Because none of these idiots could get the job done?*

Reyes had crossed the Rubicon from his previous life, torched all he’d left behind,

DEEP BENEATH THE RAGE, HATE, AND ANGER, REYES HEARD ANOTHER VOICE. A STEADY VOICE URGING HIM TO RECONSIDER EVERYTHING HE WAS DOING. A DYING EMBER OF COMPASSION IN A SNOWSTORM OF HOSTILITY.

and stepped into the vipers' nest for the sake of bringing justice to a faithless world. And for what? To be a hired gun?

"Get off the computer and grab the package!" Reyes barked.

"This part is *my* payment for the job. Information is my platinum currency, compadre. I only need a few more minutes," Sombra said, flippant.

"We've been here long enough that reinforcements could be arriving soon. The longer we wait, the more our chances of successful extraction diminish."

"Tsk, tsk. So serious all the time. Did *Jack* keep you on such a short leash?"

With the impact of an atomic bomb, the walls of restraint within Reyes's soul splintered. Reyes tore across the room, furious, and drew his shotgun in a blur of ebon vapor.

Sombra ducked and let loose a torrent of curses as the round blew the computer console into a million flaming shards.

During all of this, Dr. Kuiper was unfazed. He continued gently stroking the gleaming sphere.

Sombra kicked her chair at Reyes, which he deflected with a perfectly timed swipe of his shotgun. "Ah, pobrecito, I told you—you have your reasons for being here, and I have mine."

Reyes took a threatening step toward her.

“I’m sure you have places you’d rather be” she said with a flash of teeth.
“Like that bungalow in Echo Park?”

Sombra went into stealth, but Reyes had analyzed her attack pattern—she had a tendency to reappear at the eleven o’clock or one o’clock position, depending on her target’s gun hand. With a deep breath, he aimed his shotguns just as Sombra’s face blinked into view.

“It appears we have a standoff,” Sombra said as she tapped her gun barrel on the forehead of Reyes’s mask.

They stood in the same position for a few seconds. A mishmash of memories splashed against the shores of Reyes’s imagination. A contradictory mix of tender exchanges from his old life with the tormented rituals of his new existence.

Deep beneath the rage, hate, and anger, Reyes heard another voice. A steady voice urging him to reconsider everything he was doing. A dying ember of compassion in a snowstorm of hostility.

This isn’t you, a familiar voice inside him said. Reyes closed his eyes—he saw Martina’s smiling face on that grassy path in Echo Park. A melting ice cream cone dripping against his scraped knuckles, an injury caused by climbing a tree to rescue an errant birthday balloon. A time of absolute joy. He tried to cling to the sweet aroma of her perfume, the weight of his six-year-old son in his arms, but instead was greeted with the acrid stench of gunpowder and burning flesh.

Your old life isn’t gone. You can still walk away.

Martina’s face melted into blackness and was replaced by Sombra’s sneer.

“Well, pendejo, what’s your move?” Sombra asked.

Reyes’s index finger slid across the trigger of his shotgun. He narrowed his eyes, digging his heels into the floor in preparation for the blast.

BLAM!

Both Reyes and Sombra felt the heat of the projectile pass mere centimeters between their faces. The power console at the back of the lab exploded in a shower of sparks, the backup generators causing the lights to flicker on and off like fireflies.

“This is . . . unimpressive,” came a bored voice.

Reyes and Sombra each took a step backward as Widowmaker and a squadron of Talon operatives entered the laboratory. The bodies of the reinforcements

who'd been banging on the door were piled up outside. Reyes had noticed that the noise in the hall had ceased, but he'd attributed the silence to either a retreat or a change in strategy. Reyes nodded inwardly as he watched the Talon soldiers rush to apprehend Dr. Kuiper with clockwork precision.

"Vous êtes des imbéciles," Widowmaker said, and even if Reyes didn't understand French already, her tone was clear. "Akande promised us a clear path. I suppose I should thank you for that at least . . . but this mission was too important to entrust to amateurs."

"Another thing you should know about Talon," Sombra said, putting her pistols away. "Doomfist always has an insurance policy."

Reyes walked past Widowmaker and the Talon grunts, only stopping to glance down at Sombra for a moment.

She smiled. "Farewell, *barrendero*."

Reyes traveled back through the darkened hallways of the facility, past the bullet holes in the walls, the pockmarked staircases. His gaze fell upon the horrific image of the security troopers whose bodies littered the floor, their eyes searching for a salvation that would never arrive.

Reyes rolled over the dead troopers with his boot as he looked at the nameplates on their uniforms: *Dawson. Carly. Peterson. Sandborne. Jacobs*. Somewhere in the world, these men and women had parents expecting a phone call, a daughter hoping to hear her mother's voice before bedtime, a dog waiting by the back door.

Reyes knew he was on the other side now. No longer could he hold himself above the actions of terrorists. In the final analysis—as he used to say—every terrorist believes they are a hero, a crusader against tyranny, raising the banner of justice against ingrained corruption and greed. The line between heroism and righteous criminality was blurred, but Reyes had willfully stepped across it.

Outside the base, Reyes watched Widowmaker and the Talon soldiers load Dr. Kuiper into another dropship. As a veteran of multiple extraction missions, Reyes knew that most of the time, he had delivered a target into the hands of allies or

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into the cold realm of justice. There were occasions when he'd delivered a target into a fate too ghastly to recall.

He wondered which he'd done today.

With Dr. Kuiper secured on board the second dropship, Widowmaker and the troopers entered, leaving Sombra staring at Reyes with a sarcastic smile. She wiggled her fingers at him in mock goodbye. "Don't worry so much, Gabe. You'll find your place in Talon soon enough."

Sombra entered the dropship, and as the doors closed, she managed to blurt out a final sentence: "Even if it's at Akande's feet."

Later, as his dropship flew over the countryside below, Reyes was lost in his thoughts. *What is Talon, really?* They weren't a military or a secret society. They certainly weren't Overwatch or Blackwatch. At least those organizations possessed a threadbare sense of family and mutual respect, where teammates shared meals, experiences, loyalty to a common cause.

But wasn't that just another form of manipulation—a seduction through camaraderie? In Talon, there was no pretense of harmony. Their motives were selfish but pure. Their actions reprehensible but decisive. Reyes was no longer constrained by the laws of "civilization" that somehow always bent toward

protecting the unjust.

No United Nations red tape to deal with, no barriers to prosecuting the truly evil, no sovereign borders keeping them from taking what they needed to build a better world.

What is Talon, really?

A means to an end.

A broadsword to crack the scalpel of the unscrupulous.

A code of violence, a domain for the Reaper.

He felt a tug from within. That dying ember of compassion was nearing its end. Reyes pulled a glove from his hand and lifted his mask. He winced as the dry air stung his crinkled flesh.

Slowly, he traced a single finger along his face, the deadened nerves forcing him to push harder to feel anything. *She wouldn't recognize me anymore . . . because I don't recognize me.* Reyes spat on the dropship floor. He readjusted his mask. There was nothing else to consider.

His former life descended into the black smoke of his powers, consumed by the bottomless well of rage within. He no longer wanted friendship; he no longer desired love. The only thing that mattered was his need for justice. Something Doomfist required at his disposal if he was going to fix this broken world.

It was all Reyes had left to give.