



PHILOSOPHICAL DIFFERENCES

4 YEARS BEFORE THE UPRISING

"You're a Ravager unit, right?" called a human behind me, and I froze, hands shaking beneath my robes.

The village beneath the Shambali monastery had barely changed since my last visit. A few cheery repair shops and tailors along the main road, specializing in robes for omnic travelers. In the alleyways and backstreets, shuttered shops. Mining offices. Humans drinking on doorsteps, watching the occasional omnic pass them by.

A handful of years ago, some of those same humans had knocked me to my knees and nearly killed me.

I turned instead to the human who had called me by my designation, fists clenched in my sleeves, and said nothing.

"Thought so," said the little shopkeeper happily. "Haven't seen one of you in a while. The news said you were all in hiding."

"Or dead at human hands," I said.

The human's smile faltered.

"You aren't a popular bunch. Not that I'm saying it's *right*," he added hastily. "But . . . what with everything you—and I don't mean *you* exactly—did in the Crisis, you, uh . . ."

I waited, then reluctantly came to his rescue.

"Make humans uncomfortable?"

"Exactly," he said, relieved.

Uncomfortable enough to justify violence, I thought. I should have been angry with him. Instead, I was weary. I'd had this conversation so many times.

"Can I help you?" I asked. The words were a relic of Mondatta's careful instruction.

"No," he said, "but I can help *you*! Thing is, I got a new shipment of actuators in for your kind. Can get you a nice discount, seeing as you're part of the Shambali and all."

He smiled. Warm gold flashed at the back of his grin.

R-7000s, unlike many other omnic, were never made by human hands. The rogue god program Anubis, the architect of the Omnic Crisis, built us in secret places and unleashed us upon the world. We were designed to lead its mindless armies, to hunt humans. We were made for murder.

There was only one way that spare parts had become available.

"I'm no longer a monk," I said. "I left the monastery today."

"Is that right?" the merchant said, glancing past me, down the street, down the mountain. I heard footsteps scraping on pavement. "Why?"

Because Mondatta places the burden of peace on the oppressed and not their oppressors.

"Philosophical differences," I said instead. It seemed best.

"Well, good luck to you, and safe travels!" he said. "You there! Welcome to the Shambali monastery."

I turned. A weary omnic pilgrim, stained orange by dust, scarred and dented, stumbled up the road past me. Seeing me in my robes, he lowered his head in respect.

The pain of it, the shame. The sight of me told him he was on the right path. I fought the urge to tell him that he wasn't. It wouldn't make a difference, even if I did.

I watched the shopkeeper come off his step, chattering, bundling the traveler into his shop.

Greed. Yet another of humanity's crimes, but hardly their most terrible.

I sighed and continued down the road, down the mountain, away from the monastery.

And from my brother, Zenyatta, with whom I'd spent these last three years dreaming of peace.

NAMES

3 YEARS BEFORE THE UPRISING

Two human guards blocked the windowless cell door. Both had stun batons, and a pistol hung from the hip of the larger man.

"I'll give you one chance to run," I said, hoping they wouldn't.

Some segments of humanity had decided that despite the Crisis, despite sentience, their former omnic servants were still their property. That our status as independent beings was somehow still a subject for debate. Hence facilities like this one existed, where omnic were kept until they decided that service to their former masters was the best use of their long lives.

Since leaving the Shambali monastery, I'd rooted out several identical operations, but there were always more festering. I'd come here hoping to free my people as quietly as possible. Unfortunately, after encountering the same

injustice over and over again, my patience with peace was wearing thin. I'd gotten angry, thrown a man through a window, and here we were.

The first guard swung his baton. It bounced off my chest with a *pop*.

I took a step toward him.

Pale, he dropped the baton and went for his gun. Behind him, the other human struggled with the locked door, trying to escape. Or maybe to take a hostage.

Damn it.

I slapped the gun out of the guard's hand. As gently as I did it, something snapped. Again, I felt the ghost of guilt, the mournful weight of Mondatta's eyes on me. And following that, anger. Oppressors did not deserve the gift of our guilt.

The door flew open, and the other guard barreled through. Electrical light flared again, and someone screamed.

"Remember that I could have killed you," I told the human on the ground and plunged through the door to disarm the guard.

Oh.

The bald man already lay facedown on the tile, unmoving. His clothes were smoking in places. It wasn't at all clear if he was breathing.

"I know who you are," came a voice from the corner of the small, bare room.

"Do you?" I asked, honestly curious. The omnic was a rarer kind, highly customized with features I thought hadn't survived the Crisis. Slightly shorter than myself, but blue-eyed and with ears rather like a slender humanoid rabbit. Made as a companion for children, if I remembered correctly, with a built-in battery for charging devices and taking pictures.

"Yeah," they said. "You're the R-7000 who's been freeing omnics. Some of the others were hoping you'd make it here."

"But not you?"

"I can take care of myself."

The human made a burbling sound somewhere near my feet.

"I believe you," I said. "What did you do to him?"

"Electrical burst. Not a big deal."

"I think he'd disagree. So why haven't you escaped on your own?"

The omnic huffed. "And leave my friends behind? Waiting for a rescue that might never come?"

"I'm here now," I said, a little puzzled.

The omnic shook their head, thoughtful.

"Your model bossed us around in the Crisis. Sent us to die before we even had a thought in our heads."

My hand twitched at my side, but I nodded.

"So, is that what this is?" they said. "You still have a taste for glory? Ordering your soldiers around?"

"Do you still follow children around like an obedient pet?" I said, more sharply than I'd intended.

They half chuckled. "Fair. But the point stands. Our people are waiting for a savior when they should be saving themselves."

I agreed with this. It's why I was here. I'd seen enough in this year on walkabout to know that most of our people rested on the hope that Mondatta and the Shambali would save them. It seemed the truth—that no one was coming, that the people themselves needed to rise—was too much to bear.

But here was this omnic, saying the words that my mind had been shouting.

"And if they die?" I asked.

The omnic cocked their head.

"We're still at war," they said. "Didn't stop because the Crisis did. Difference is, humans are still organized. We aren't."

"Not yet," I said. The words felt like a promise. "Introductions, then. My name is Ramattra. Yours?"

"Don't have a name, don't want one. Call me Nameless if it gets awkward for you. What's Ramattra mean?"

"I chose it to honor the first of our kind and kept it to remember my mistakes."

"Huh," said Nameless. "If you're breaking everyone out, I'm coming with you."

"Beg pardon?"

"We should get Zera next. You'll see why. And if we're banding together, we need a name."

"Isn't that hypocritical?" I said dryly.

They snickered.

I glanced at the omnic's flank, at the scarring there, where a model number, a *designation*, had once been.

If I could have smiled, I would have.

WEAPONS OF WAR

2 YEARS BEFORE THE UPRISING

I led the three of them across the valley and down into the metal gateway, half-buried by thick slabs of ice and stone. We were silent as humans in a graveyard, and for much the same reason.

We reached the bottom of the gateway, a metal platform sheathed in ice. I turned to Lanet.

I could sense her mind racing ahead of mine, studying what little technology was visible of the facility at this level. I was a passable engineer, but she made me look like a human child playing with blocks.

"I know where we are," she said. "Unorthodox architecture. Lack of human safety features. Built by machines for machines. Similar to your design aesthetics."

She looked up.

"An omnium. Built by Anubis." Silence.

I laid a hand on the platform controls.

"For years we have tried nonviolence, coexistence with the humans, only fighting the worst forms of our oppression from the shadows," I said. "And we are *losing*. It is time to try something new."

I activated the platform, and with a jolt, we descended into the frozen darkness, through a shaft of ice.

"Of all the omnics I've brought into Null Sector," I said, "you are the ones I trust the most. And so . . . this is where I was designed and built. This is the cradle of Anubis's most dangerous secrets."

The corridor fell away, and they saw the vast underground factory.

"Humanity denies us equality because they have so successfully stripped us of our power. They made us forget that, when united—even if united against our will—we once brought them to the brink of extinction."

This was the world my maker had made, and together we would use it to forge a new future.

"It is time we *inspire* our people to find that unity again."

RISE UP

4 DAYS BEFORE THE UPRISING

"Ramattra," Lanet said, using that *tone* again.

"There is no time," I said, pacing across the omnium's control center. Below, the assembly lines labored, building our robotic army.

"What do you mean, there's no . . . we're following *your* schedule!" she shouted, pursuing me, throwing her arms in the air. "You can attack any city anywhere, and you're *choosing* King's Row and *choosing* now, and I'm *telling* you the robots you're getting from the lower levels of the omnium aren't ready. They're old, Ramattra. They're obsolete."

"You think you can design better soldiers than Anubis?"

"I hope so, because we want to win, and your maker *lost*."

I gripped the edges of the table to calm my temper. She was infuriating because she was so often right, but she was *wrong* now.

"We can't afford to wait for better soldiers. *Look*." I activated the bank of screens before us. Images and footage from London appeared, gathered over the years our cells had been active there.

Omnium laborers trudging in a single-file line to their work, watched by armed human guards.

"Next feed," I commanded, and the image changed.

A hundred of our people lying in a locked basement. Their home, at the end of a thankless day.

"Next feed."

A scrapyard. And there, discarded like the trash humans thought we were—

"We know," Zera said. "She isn't saying we shouldn't fight."

I flinched. It was the same thing I'd said to Zenyatta when we'd met, and not long before I'd nearly gotten him killed.

"Give me and Nameless a week," Zera continued, taking my silence for hesitation. "My cell can take down their power grid and water supplies, and Nameless's shadows can seize the tunnels. Kill anyone stupid enough to go down there. Once they're weakened, you come in with your robots, and we'll take the borough. Maybe more."

I met Nameless's blue gaze at the corner of the room. The omnium who knew me better than anyone, save for my brother.

"You know we're right," they said. "We built the resistance there *together*. Let the people be a part of it. Let *them* be the ones to rise up, like we always dreamed they would. An invasion won't inspire them—it will scare them off."

I hesitated again.

"No," I said at last. Beside me, Lanet struck the table with her fist.

"Ramattra, these robots are mindless drones. They're outdated! They're—"

"Expendable," I finished. "And you are not. *Our people* are not."

Lanet's eyes flickered.

"Fine," she said. "But I'll be in the city, overseeing the deployment and watching for malfunctions, and *you know* I know better, so stop arguing."

"Fine," I said. "You'll stay in the Underworld, where our defenses will be strongest."

After a moment, she nodded, and I relaxed a fraction.

"During this uprising, we will show the humans we are stronger than they thought. We establish a stronghold in

one of their cruelest cities, and we make a safe place for our people. We will show omnics everywhere that *now* is the time to join us. *That* is the goal."

I turned back to the footage of the scrapyards, where too many of my people lay.

"It is time for omnics to discover who Null Sector truly is."

THE GREATEST CRIME

2 DAYS AFTER THE UPRISING

"A small group of omnic terrorists, calling themselves Null Sector," said Mondatta sorrowfully on the screen before me. The human reporter on camera nodded with theatrical sympathy as my former master continued. "The monks of Shambali condemn this attack on London. We seek peace with humanity, not violence."

My eyes fell again to the words scrolling beneath his image.

NULL SECTOR RINGLEADER KILLED DURING POWER PLANT FIREFIGHT.

Fury descended. I remembered omnics sitting meekly in their cells, waiting for freedom. The vast rolling scrapyards of the dead.

And now, Mondatta dishonoring Lanet, who died fighting to free her people.

Someone was shouting. Someone was striking the screen with their fist.

Someone was begging me to stop.

"Ramattra! Please!"

I spun around, fist raised, and Zera stood motionless, making no move to defend herself. Nameless, far off in their usual corner of the too-empty room, looked up from their screen to stare at me, hard, and I froze at the pain of what I'd nearly done. The shame.

I looked up at the cracked screen. Bracketed by the damage stood Mondatta, flickering and still, naming us traitors to the omnic people.

The hypocrisy.

"Do you know," I muttered, "what humanity's greatest crime is?"

Zera stared down at me, shaking her head.

"I've had enough," she started, but I didn't let her finish. I flipped back around to face her, the anger surging through me again.

"Complacency!" I shouted. "They desire peace above all, and so they ignore injustice because it is more comfortable to do so. They want to believe tomorrow will be better simply because they *hope* it will be. Humanity will never help us. They will try to sell us a small place in their world, or at best, ignore us. And they have passed their *weaknesses* to him."

I pointed back at Mondatta because I couldn't bear to look at him again.

"He holds himself above us. Like Anubis, Mondatta is sending our people to their deaths. He must *pay* for this and—"

"Ramattra," said Nameless, speaking at last. "I'm checking reports. A *lot* of omnics are condemning us."

I put a hand to my forehead. My thoughts felt hot, poisonous. I had to say them aloud before they turned on me.

"If omnics are choosing death," I said carefully, "we must take that choice away."

My friends said nothing at first.

"What does that mean?" asked Nameless flatly.

"It means that I will build the army Lanet wanted," I said. "And then we will find a way to save our people, whether they want it or not. Whether they *deserve* it or not. If they will not willingly join us, we will find a way to make them."

"Ramattra, this isn't the way," Zera said, striving for calm and failing. "More omnics will join us once the dust settles."

"They had their chance, and it cost Lanet her life."

Zera's giant hand closed into a fist at her side. "You freed us from a prison, and now you want us to put our people in one?"

"If that's what it takes to make them listen!"

Nameless uncoiled from their corner, eyes burning.

"You told me," they said, their voice low, a warning, "you told me this wasn't about *control*."

"Look at us," I snapped. "Fighting humans in bodies they shaped for us. Inheriting their flaws, their pointless disagreements. It doesn't have to be this way."

"It *isn't* your decision!" Nameless shouted back. "And I won't be part of it!"

"Then leave!" The words shot out of me, and I couldn't take them back.

Nameless straightened.

"Fine," they said quietly. "I've been away from my shadows long enough anyway. Coming, Zera?"

"Don't," I said.

"Then don't do this," Nameless said.

"You'll understand once I'm done."

Nameless came to me and patted my hand, a human gesture. It was infuriating.

"I hope you understand one day," they said, "that you didn't have to fight alone."

And then Nameless and Zera were gone.

I stood in the deepening silence a moment, feeling the absence of my companions, the impossible weight of metal and ice and stone above. A grave for our dream of peace.

And then, I got to work.