

# OVERWATCH 2

## HEROES ASCENDANT

# LUCKY MAN



*A SHORT STORY BY MELISSA SCOTT*

*WRITTEN BY*  
**MELISSA SCOTT**

*ART BY*  
**BORG SINABAN**

*EDITOR*  
**CHLOE FRABONI**

*PRODUCERS*  
**BRIANNE MESSINA, AMBER PROUE-THIBODEAU**

*DESIGNER*  
**JESSICA RODRIGUEZ**

*LORE CONSULTATION*  
**MADI BUCKINGHAM, IAN LANDA-BEAVERS**

*CREATIVE CONSULTATION*  
**JEFF CHAMBERLAIN, GAVIN JURGENS-FYHRIE,  
PETER C. LEE, MIRANDA MOYER, DION ROGERS**

*SPECIAL THANKS*  
**IAN LANDA-BEAVERS, MADDIY COOK**





**J**ack darted down the empty street, hugging the buildings to the left where the shadows were thickest. He cocked his head to listen for incoming warbots, and his visor pinged once, then twice: Null Sector troops were moving toward him, along one of the narrow cross streets. He could avoid them if he hurried, but they were between him and the rendezvous. No reason not to deal with them while he could. He looked up, checking the rooflines. This had been—and maybe still was—a residential neighborhood, the buildings three and four stories tall, most with flat roofs that sloped on the sides, topped with what had probably been roof gardens just last week, before the invasion broke out. There were fire escapes, as he'd hoped: take one to the top, creep along the rooflines, and he'd be in a perfect position to ambush the warbots as they crossed the larger street just ahead.

He was moving even before he finished the thought, leaping to catch the metal rungs and hauling himself rapidly up the side of the building. The metal was rusted, and the bolts creaked under his weight, but it held long enough for him to make it to the top. No garden here, just a stand of narrow chimney pots. He glanced up once, checking for drones, then leapt to the next roof over. The dividing walls were too low to offer much cover and were brick besides; he jumped to the next roof, crouching in the shadow of its chimney, then edged forward until he could overlook the streets.

His guess had been good. Three warbots were moving up the cross street in a loose V formation: big artillery units, their shoulder-mounted cannons swinging gently from side to side as they inspected their surroundings. Jack grinned. The artillery units were powerful but painfully slow; take the first out, he thought, and the others would be unable to advance past its wreckage, or retreat with any speed.

He popped up over the edge of the roof to take that first, vital shot, the pulse rifle cradled against his ribs. The bolts smashed into the big machine's midsection, rocking it back on its legs, and he switched targets, aiming for the cannons. The first pair blew out, ripping the weapons off the unit's shoulder, but his next shots just clipped the second pair. He went for a leg shot instead and brought the lead machine to one front knee. The other two artillery units swung their weapons toward him, firing blindly along the line of the roof. He ducked, scrambling for new cover, and heard a mechanical clattering as something launched itself toward him from the roof across the street: the warbots had had support after all.

He flung himself backward, swearing, and dodged a cascade of broken brick and stone. He righted himself and fired again, catching the Nulltrooper in midleap, but there was another behind it, and another. He brought them down, then turned his attention to the machines in the street. The first unit was rotating blindly, sensors in disarray; the other two fired again, and Jack switched to rockets, laid a pattern at their feet. The street filled with light and heat, and when it cleared, the wreckage of the warbots was sprawled on the cracked asphalt. One had lost all its cannons but still had three legs and was scattering sparks as it struggled to reacquire its target. Jack fired again, one last long burst, and left it smoking on the pavement.

Jack leaned against the roof's edge, his own breath loud in his ears, all too aware of a sharp ache in his ribs from dodging the Nulltroopers. He should have spotted them—should have taken out the first artillery unit completely the first time. He worked his shoulders, trying to ease the tightness there. At least he'd been lucky this time. He lowered himself down the nearest fire escape, lengthened his stride as he turned toward the rendezvous point. He'd just make it.

There hadn't been as much fighting in this part of the city. The power was out, of course, and windows were blown out all along the street, but nothing was actually on fire, and the locals were either in shelters or had abandoned the area. At least no one was calling for help. In fact, it was spookily quiet: his feet the only sound, crunching the shattered glass that carpeted the pavement. He checked his sensors: Null Sector seemed to be focusing their attention on a district about three miles away. And that was good. He'd be able to meet the informant in something like peace.

The rendezvous point loomed ahead, a skinny modern three-story tower wedged between much older buildings. Its door was locked and barred, the ground floor windows shielded with heavy metal shutters, and the upper windows were outlined with shattered neon tubing. There was an advertising display screen on the roof, but it was dark, a corner of the screen shot away. Jack eyed it carefully, but he saw no signs of movement. Nor was there any movement on the adjoining roofs, nor any suspicious heat shadows on his sensors. The informant had said there

*“LUCKY MAN,” REYES HAD MUTTERED, FINGERING A HOLE IN HIS OWN SLEEVE, AND NAUGHTON HAD LAUGHED AT BOTH OF THEM.*

*“LUCKY? THE ONLY LUCK WAS THAT I CHOSE YOU,” SHE SAID. “IT’LL TAKE MORE THAN A FEW HITS TO TAKE ONE OF YOU DOWN.”*

was access to the roof from the left-hand alley, and sure enough there was a combination of windows and stonework that made an easy ladder all the way to the top.

Jack heaved his way up and circled the perimeter of the roof once, checking the neighboring buildings, then hunkered down beside the screen where he could observe all the approaches. He was early, that was all. The informant would be there, and this long, bitter hunt would finally . . .

He killed that thought, not daring to get his hopes up, and surveyed his surroundings again. He had more pressing threats to deal with at the moment. He could see smoke in the distance from the vanguard of the Null Sector attack and caught the faint smell of burning plastic as the wind shifted.

*Bitter dust—heat, ringing ears, a phantom pain shooting through his thigh—*

He dragged himself back from the edge of memory, warded it off with the thought of Ana, new guilt to drive out old. It hurt, to leave her again after they’d so recently found each other, but he understood the need to help, remembered it entirely too well from the Crisis.

The memory of Ana disappeared. Victoria Naughton’s face rose to replace it, hard and sharp beneath her carelessly tousled hair. The genius of the Soldier Enhancement Program, who would give the United States the win it so desperately needed during those early days of the Crisis. She had come with them that day in the field, their first Omnic Crisis deployment—come to see her handiwork, she’d said, stepping over bodies as she made her way down the length of the transport. They’d lost more than half the unit, and nearly everyone who had survived was wounded, but even two enhanced soldiers had made a difference. They had held the junction and driven back the omnic wave, small as it was. He’d taken three bullets—grazes mostly—and not noticed until they were on the transport home.

“Lucky man,” Reyes had muttered, fingering a hole in his own sleeve, and Naughton had laughed at both of them.

"Lucky? The only *luck* was that I chose you," she said. "It'll take more than a few hits to take one of you down."

Jack had looked around the transport, stinking of blood and hot metal and filled with regular soldiers—as he had been just months ago—who were dead and dying, too many of them and not enough medics, not enough bandages or anything that would help them. They'd been his responsibility, and he'd let them down. If he'd known what he could do, if he'd understood, maybe he could have done more. "Given what happened today, it's hard to think of the op as a victory for the program," he'd muttered, and Naughton clucked her tongue at him.

"Wasn't it Napoleon who said he'd rather his generals were lucky than good? After today, I'd place odds on you both."

She had turned away then, and he and Reyes had exchanged one searing glance: if this was luck, neither of them wanted it.

Sensors pinged, and he snapped back to the moment, focusing on the distant flicker of motion. There, above the dormer windows, a shift of light and the click of a dislodged roof tile. He shifted to cover that approach, pulling back into the shadows, and a bright piece of metal sailed through the air to land in the opposite corner of his roof, shielded by the ad screen. His finger tightened on the trigger, but he managed to hold himself back. He'd been waiting a very long time to see who was behind the leaks and whispers, who had laid the trail that brought him one step closer to learning what *really* happened to Overwatch.

Purple light flared, and a slim figure popped into existence. Jack swore under his breath, recognizing her instantly from their run-in at Dorado, and rolled to the far side of the ad screen, leveling his pulse rifle. He would make this quick.

Sombra spied him immediately and raised empty hands. "Not so hasty!"

"What did you do to my informant?" Jack demanded. He checked his visor, searching for a Talon trap. He didn't have time for this... If they had killed his source, he'd have to start all over again—

"Think it through." Sombra smirked, keeping her hands raised. "I thought you'd get there a little quicker, if I'm honest."

The pieces shifted into place. Jack furrowed his brow. "*You're* the informant."

"In the flesh."

"Then we're done here." Jack kept his aim steady as he began to step away. She'd been stringing him along for years, kept him chasing his tail and out of her boss's way. "I can't trust anything you've said."

"Take it easy," Sombra said, annoyed. "I work for Talon, yeah, but I'm—well, more of a freelancer than your former—"

***“I TOLD YOU, FRIEND,” SOMBRA ANSWERED,  
“THIS IS OFF THE BOOKS WITH TALON. I MEAN . . .  
WHAT HAVE YOU GOT TO LOSE HERE?  
LOOKS LIKE YOU’VE ALREADY LOST A LOT.”***

“We’re *not* talking about Reyes.”

“Yeesh, tough subject for you both. Okay, I get it. I wouldn’t trust me either, but I’ve been after something bigger, something I’ve been chasing for a long, *long* time, and it turns out it’s the same thing you’re after.” She lowered one hand, a twist of light dancing in her palm. “Let me show you.”

“Go ahead,” Jack said, aiming the pulse rifle at her chest. He knew what she could do.

Sombra rolled her eyes, but the light vanished. “All right, fine. You’re a very suspicious *cabrón*, you know that?”

“Un *cabrón vivo*,” Jack answered.

“Un *cabrón con suerte*.” She grinned. “We’re after the same people.”

“Keep talking,” Jack said.

“Thing is, my proof is in a UN storage facility here in Zurich,” Sombra said. “The one that contains the remains of Overwatch’s Swiss Headquarters. The one where you—you know—sort of died? Help me get it, and I’ll give it to you.”

Jack shook his head. “No deal. That’s your kind of mission, not mine.”

“Oh really?” She flicked a holoscreen before him.

#### **EXPERIMENTAL WEAPON STOLEN FROM WATCHPOINT: GRAND MESA**

Jack shook his head—he’d taken his weapons back from UN custody with good reason, one the world would appreciate soon enough.

“I’m not helping Talon.” He took another step backward, curious to see how she’d react.

“I told you, *friend*,” Sombra answered, “this is off the books with Talon. I mean . . . what have you got to lose here? Looks like you’ve already lost a lot.”

Jack hesitated. It was stupid even to think about going along with this. It would be hard enough to break in if he was working with a team he trusted. The place would be locked up tighter than

ever because of the Null Sector attack, a perfect tomb if she double-crossed him. Sombra was just the sort of person who'd think it was funny to leave him to die among the wreckage of all he'd built. But if he didn't see this through . . . Even if Sombra was lying, even if she'd been lying all along, she'd presented him with a unique opportunity, to return to the scene of the crime, or at least, what remained of it. This was the only chance he'd ever get to examine the wreckage salvaged from that day. That would tell him something—it had to. "All right. But we avoid the guards, and we don't shoot to kill."

"Pinky swear." Sombra shrugged one shoulder. "Besides, the Null Sector attack is good cover. Half the guards have been deployed to deal with them."

That was true, and it made for better odds. "Was this attack Talon's idea?"

"I don't mix business with pleasure," Sombra answered. "Coming?"

She turned and slipped off the roof without waiting for his reply.

Jack swore again, knowing this was stupid—and dangerous—but it was the only lead he had left at the end of a long road. Pulse rifle ready, he followed.

The UN storage facility was in an industrial district, where the cityscape thinned to faceless warehouses, recent construction put up cheaply. The storage facility was better built, sheer windowless walls rising behind electrified fences topped with coils of razor wire. There was a single gatehouse, armored walls reinforced with a layer of sandbags, and a trio of nervous guards with automatic rifles at the ready. *Sombra was right*, Jack thought, scanning the approaches. Most of the guard detail had to have been called away to deal with the Null Sector attack, or there would have been more of them on the gate. Still, any attempt to get past those guys was going to set off all the alarms, and he looked at Sombra. "I hope you've got a better plan?"

"Pfft. I'm sure you could take them." She pointed to the right, along a trash-strewn alley that serviced the building next door. "But as it happens, I do."

Jack gave the guards one last glance and followed her down the alley. Almost immediately, a concrete wall covered in graffiti cut them off from the storage facility; on the opposite side, the warehouse walls were windowless and unpainted, the kind of concrete that was heavily reinforced from within.

"Come on," Sombra said.

He joined her at the alley's end. The wall ahead of them was three stories high, topped with more electrified razor wire. "So, you're wondering why I led you into a dead end?"

"Nope." Jack shook his head.

"Smart man." Sombra pulled up a holoscreen, lights flashing red, fingers working on the virtual controls. A light winked overhead, and Jack looked up to see a rectangular shape set into the top



of the wall. "That's a regulator for the security fence. Apparently they had trouble keeping power levels from fluctuating without it—lucky us." Her fingers moved as she spoke, more symbols flashing on her screen. "On the downside, I'm going to need you."

"Why?"

"You are so suspicious!" She rolled her eyes. "Because I have to get up there to cut power to this side of the station, and you are just the boost I need."

"Then over the wall?"

"You're catching on nicely."

Jack sighed, but recognized necessity. He stooped, letting her scramble to his shoulders, then straightened slowly, holding on lightly to her ankles. She balanced easily, graceful as a cat, and he felt her weight shift as she reached for the regulator. There was a *snap*, and a mechanical voice said, *Access code required. Alarm sounding in ten. Nine. Eight . . .*

"Sombra . . ."

There was another *snap*, and the voice went silent. "You weren't *really* worried?" Sombra said. There was a *ping* of breaking wire, and suddenly her weight was gone. Jack looked up to find her sitting astride the wall, the razor wire peeled back to make a gap big enough for both of them. "Come on."

Jack braced himself and jumped, just managing to catch the top of the wall with both hands. He struggled for a moment, feeling his age again, then hauled himself up to join her, tucking his pulse rifle against his chest as he scanned the facility's windowless walls. "Cameras?"

"Taken care of." Four holoscreens danced in the air in front of her; she flicked from one to the other, making quick adjustments. "There's a loading bay to the left, see it? When I tell you, run for it."

Jack braced for her signal.

"Go!"

Jack launched himself for the loading bay, leaping easily onto the dock and flattening himself into the shelter of the doorway. There was a crackle of current from the fence, and Sombra was beside him, emerging from the shadows with a cat's grin. She rested her hand on the panel that covered the door's electronic locks and sent a pulse of light through her fingers and into the system. With a *click*, the door beside the loading bay sagged open. Jack grabbed it, and Sombra slipped past him into the installation.

The hallway was dark—backup power was obviously on, but the fluorescent lights were all out. Sombra scanned the area, then called up a palm-sized holoscreen that floated in the air.

"I've got the cameras under control. Next steps—" The holoscreen shifted to a schematic, mapping their path. "The core installations; high-security bays, all underground. They go down

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ABOUT THIS PLAN, BUT HE WASN'T REALLY  
SEEING ANY GOOD ALTERNATIVES.*

fifteen levels, and what we want is on level thirteen. That's where they keep their most sensitive materials."

"I'd say half the security team's been called out to deal with Null Sector," Jack said, examining her holoscreen, "but the ones who are left are going to be on high alert. They'll pull back from the perimeter to protect the core installations and call for backup if there's the slightest sign of trouble."

"So we need a distraction," Sombra said with a grin. "Should pull some of the guards away from where you're headed."

"What about the surveillance tech?" There wasn't much Jack liked about this plan, but he wasn't really seeing any good alternatives.

"Easy. I'm putting the systems in the emergency stairs on a feedback loop; they won't see anything but the image I've given them." Sombra's hands flashed in the shadows, conjuring windows, scrolling through menus, issuing commands, and flicking windows away again. "Once you leave the stairs, they'll spot you, but by then most of them should be busy elsewhere."

Jack still didn't like it, but he'd come too far. "All right. Just get me in."

Another set of holoscreens flashed into existence, icons flickering, before she swiped them away again. "And there you go."

"How are we staying in contact?"

"I have your comm frequency."

*Of course she does.* "Don't overuse it. The system here will pick up activity even on non-UN bands."

"Good to know." Sombra flicked a final window out of her way and pointed to the door that led into the body of the facility. "Emergency stairs are ten meters on your left once you enter. Alarms are off, surveillance is hacked. I'll handle the distraction and join you as soon as I can."

Jack nodded and pushed open the door before he could change his mind. No alarm sounded; he looked out into cavernous space, at least five stories tall and crisscrossed by shadows that had to be access catwalks and the rails for cargo-moving frames. The main lights were out here

too—with the Null Sector attack, the whole complex would be running on generators—but through the emergency lighting he could tell nothing was moving on this level. It was harder to judge the higher levels, but he'd have to take that chance.

*Ten meters on your left*, Sombra had said. He edged that way, scanning the shadows above him for any sign of movement. Protocol dictated that the guards should have withdrawn to the control spaces and the core of the secure area, but he had no guarantee there wouldn't be someone wandering loose. Nothing moved, however, and he fetched up against the stairwell door without drawing attention. He put his hand on the lock plate, bracing himself for an alarm, but the door eased open silently. There was a dull *boom* in the distance, metal falling on metal, and he stepped hastily through, pulling the door closed behind him.

The stairwell was even darker than the main body of the facility, only a distant pinpoint of light two levels down glowing faintly red. He waved his hand, but Sombra had disabled the motion sensors as part of her hack. He swore under his breath and switched his visor to night vision, looking around the confined space until he was sure he was alone. Thirteen levels; time to get moving.

He made his way down the stairs, moving as fast as he dared without letting his footsteps echo off the metal treads. He heard another distant *thud*, and then Sombra's voice spoke in his ear. "Hey, friend, I hope you're in the stairs now."

"Oscar Mike."

"And a Carlos Robert to you."

Jack sighed; he'd been working too long with Ana. "Affirmative, on the move."

"Good. I've disabled the motion detectors on the thirteenth level."

"Got it."

There was a *click*, and the frequency went dead. Jack reached the level thirteen door at last and eased it open. The emergency lights were brighter here, and he slipped through, darting across the corridor to take cover in a meager patch of shadow. He was in a corner, the featureless halls stretching left and right, and he risked triggering the comms. "Sombra. Guidance?"

"Hang on." A new schematic popped open in his visor, startling him. *What doesn't she have access to?* It showed a single corridor running around the perimeter, forming a square, and multiple corridors running from it into a central square. "You're here." A blue star appeared in the lower right corner. "Security's there." A handful of red lights appeared around the central square. Most of them were clustered by one corridor, presumably the main access point for the secure storage bays inside the central tower, but a few were separated, scattered around the edges of the square: patrols.

"How many?" Jack asked.

"Want their shoe sizes too?" Sombra answered. "I make it—ten. Might be a dozen if they're clustered together." There was an explosion, close enough to Sombra that Jack instinctively hunched his shoulders. "Oops, gotta go!"

The frequency went dead, but the map stayed hanging in his visor. Jack eyed it warily, hoping he was still getting good information, then switched it down to a smaller view, considering his options. Take out one of the patrols, maybe, then circle around and take the ones on the door while they were trying to figure out what was going on; that was betting on their breaking protocol to go after the attack instead of staying by the main post, but that was a mistake his soldiers had always made in Overwatch. And even if these guards didn't go for the distraction, he could still take them. He checked his gear and switched to stun rounds; no need to kill anybody if he could avoid it. He turned left, hoping Sombra had in fact disabled the motion detectors, and sprinted for the cross-corridor that would intercept the first patrol.

The motion detectors were out, but some other sensor was still working. The alarm went off as he reached the end of the cross-corridor and readied to face the patrol. There were three of them, likely on edge from the Null Sector invasion and rattled by the sudden alarm. Jack fired three quick shots, and the first two men went down, knocking the third man off his feet. Jack fired again, and the third man collapsed, unconscious. He left them lying there and darted back down the cross-corridor, running full-out now. He reached the perimeter and turned back, hoping the guards at the door would use the inner corridor, and sprinted for the path that led to the main guard post.

"Sombra!" he barked into the comms. "Keep this alarm from spreading!"

There was no answer at first, and then her voice came in, suddenly breathless. "Some *active* boys up here! I'll do what I can!" Automatic weapons fire punctuated her words, and the frequency went dead again.

*Right*, Jack thought. *I need to make this fast.* He could see the guard post at the end of the corridor, a half dozen UN troopers in body armor, one of them bent over a control console, and he loosed a burst of fire at them. The leaders fell backward, and he charged. The guards closest to the door recovered, fired back, and he grunted at the impact against his shoulder. He fired again, sweeping low, visor guiding the shots, and saw the guards go down, sprawling along the corridor. He counted quickly: six, plus the three he'd taken out before. If Sombra's count was right, that left three more to go—

He heard the scrape of boots on metal, flung himself around and sideways, firing in the same moment. He missed the shot, but the concussive blast of his rocket knocked the last group of

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guards off balance. Jack rolled away from their answering fire, came up shooting, and brought them down as well.

He stood for a moment, listening, then expanded Sombra's map to see the level clearly. All the guards were accounted for—the first three he'd attacked, and the rest in the guard shack, all unconscious or too injured to fight. Logic said to finish the job, that any of the survivors could identify him. And the more information they collected, the easier it would be to track him down. It wasn't like he hadn't killed before this, but the circumstances had been different; this would be a killing in cold blood, and he wasn't going to cross that line today.

The guards all carried binders of some kind, and he moved methodically among the bodies, securing each one with their own ties. It was a risk, maybe a stupid one, but he was willing to take it. The last one secured, he turned his attention to the console. It didn't seem to have been damaged, but the displays were all dark: an automatic shutdown, or maybe the guard had had time to shut it down. He poked experimentally at the buttons but got no response.

"Sombra. I need some help here."

"Busy, Jack, I'll have to get back to you." Sombra's words were almost drowned out by the sound of a firefight, at far too close range, and Jack cursed. That didn't sound like a distraction, it sounded more like they'd spotted her, and if they had . . . the only sensible thing was to bail. He could retrace his steps easily enough, be out of the facility before any of the other guards knew he'd been there. But if he did that, he'd never get another chance at this storage area. Even if Sombra had lied, even if her intel was no good, there was bound to be something of value to his mission in the wreckage. This was the closest he'd come to getting an answer, and he wasn't about to let it go now.

One of the guards was stirring, straining against the plastic cuffs even before he was fully conscious, and Jack went to one knee beside him, hands skimming expertly over the pockets and pouches of the UN uniform. He didn't turn up anything useful, not that he'd expected to, and he heaved the man onto his side, turning his face toward the wall. "I want through that door."

"I don't have clearance." The guard winced as Jack shifted his weight, pressing him harder against the unyielding floorplates.

"Who does?"

"None of us—"

Jack growled at that, and the guard hastily added, "We're just guards. It takes two keys—if anybody wants in, they have to get extra clearance and bring the first one. The lieutenant has the companion key, but it's no good on its own."

Jack slammed his hand into the floor, cursing. The guard yelped and curled into the fetal position, but Jack ignored him. That kind of double lock was UN protocol for secure installations. He pushed himself to his feet, keying his mic.

"Sombra." There was no answer, just the empty air, and he resisted the urge to shout into his transmitter. "Sombra, come in, dammit."

Still nothing. He tasted bitter dust and shoved memory back into its box. This was probably the sign that he should run for it, get the hell out before reinforcements arrived, but instead he looked around for the lieutenant. The man was still unconscious, sprawled awkwardly by the control console. Jack hauled him into the recovery position and went through his pockets, hoping either the other guard was wrong or someone had made a mistake and let the lieutenant get his hands on both keys. No such luck. He found the lieutenant's companion key, a black plastic rectangle covered in fine gold lines, and after a moment's study inserted it into the correct reader on the console. A couple of displays lit, flashing warnings, but the lock system remained stubbornly offline.

"Sombra, answer me." He searched the other guards quickly but found nothing. "Sombra!"

It was time to bail. There was no point in waiting any longer. Sombra's plan had obviously gone wrong, and he was going to be lucky to get out of this one alive. He glared at the door, a plug of concrete and reinforced steel, assessing its strength. The pulse rifle was no good against it, but maybe a rocket or two—

He reined himself in. The guard post was hardened, as close to blast proof as the UN could make it; if he tried to blow the door down, he'd set up a pressure wave that would kill everyone in here and wouldn't do him a whole lot of good either. More to the point, it wouldn't do enough damage, not to this setup. What he needed was some kind of super-efficient laser cutter—or for Sombra to hack the system, but she'd abandoned him. He slammed his fist against the door, hard enough to feel it in his bones. So close, so terribly close to all the answers he'd been searching for—revenge for the ones he'd lost, justification for everyone he'd been responsible for . . .

The bitter taste was back in his mouth, the deafened silence that had followed the explosion, pain everywhere, worst in his leg—but that was then, not now. There was no haze in the air, it was

*THE WARNING LIGHTS FLASHED BACK AT HIM,  
MOCKING HIM: INTRUDER ALERTS, BREACH WARNINGS—  
TIME AND PAST FOR HIM TO GET OUT OF HERE.*

all illusion. He was the lucky man who'd walked away. He shook himself hard, tried the comms again.

"Sombra—Sombra, answer me!"

There was no answer, and he'd expected none. He turned his attention back to the console, scanning the controls for something, anything, he might have missed. The warning lights flashed back at him, mocking him: intruder alerts, breach warnings—time and past for him to get out of here.

Something clattered against the floorplates at the end of the corridor, and he swung around, pulse rifle ready, managed to swing the barrel aside as he recognized one of Sombra's devices. It flared, emitting a V of purple light, and Sombra materialized out of the brilliance.

"Where the hell have you been?"

"Excuse me? One of us had the hard job here. Distractions aren't easy," she answered. "But I'd never leave a friend behind."

Jack ignored her, gestured to the door. "We've got to get this open, fast. We don't have much time before the rest of the guards get here."

"So true, so true," Sombra said. She pulled a thin slip of plastic from a pocket, ran her hand over it so that lights danced across its surface. "Oh, good, you got the first one already." She slid her card into the other open slot and drew a line from it to a window she opened in midair. Lights flashed on the console; she clicked her tongue, fingers working. Behind her, the door sighed open.

Jack hauled it back, feeling counterweights shift inside the walls. "Which bay?"

"Hang on." Sombra did something else to the console, nodding to herself as the lights changed their patterns, then hurried to join him. "Should be 4A."

Jack was already moving, sprinting down the catwalk. It ran between what looked like two enormous stacks of boxes, each heavily sealed and reinforced with its own climate control system clinging to the outside. Isolated environments, he thought, dredging up memories of the

old protocols for evidence collection and storage. Each one set apart from the others, each containment unit individually fitted into the framework, so that breaching one or even two wouldn't affect the others. There was no logic to the labels, FG10 next to 052 next to C-17, but then he saw it, red letters above the sealed door. "There."

"I see it." Sombra skidded to a stop beside him, pulling holoscreens out of the air. There were warning symbols next to the labels: BIOHAZARD, FLAMMABLE SUBSTANCES, CARCINOGENS, CORROSIVES. Jack gave her a look.

"What the hell is in there?"

"I told you, it's the wreckage from Overwatch HQ," she said impatiently, fingers flying.

"Yeah, but—"

"Look, if they're warning for everything . . ." She frowned at her window, and then at the door controls. "Kind of makes it seem like they don't want anybody taking a look, right?"

Jack frowned, but he thought she was right.

"Got it!" The lights on the door controls glowed green, and Sombra swung to face him. "You're up, Jack. Time to play your part."

"I already helped you get down here. What—"

He paused. For the first time, her expression was entirely serious. "This is where I need *you*. There's something in there I need, something that doesn't belong . . . and I have no way of knowing what it is."

"Then how the hell do you expect me to find it?" Jack demanded.

"Because *only* you will know it." Sombra pointed one elegant finger at him. "You were the strike commander of Overwatch. You *lived* at HQ, knew everyone, took care of those people. You know what was there, what *should* be there. You were there when it happened. You're the only one who can possibly recognize something that doesn't belong."

Jack stared at her for a moment. "You'd better be kidding."

"Listen, my information tells me there's something here that shouldn't be. The UN has to retain this evidence as part of its ongoing investigation into that explosion, yet it's been sealed up like this so nobody will ever take the time to sift through it properly. But you, you're the wild card, the one who's not supposed to exist. You can see what no one else can. You'll know."

That was a lot of guessing. And it was still worth the chance—it was worth any chance if he could find justice among the ruin . . . Jack hauled open the door and stepped through.

The scent of burnt concrete and scorched metal filled his lungs, choking him as the door slid closed behind him. Lights flashed on, bright as an explosion; he shook his head, ears filled with phantom ringing, drowning out anything Sombra might have said on the comms. He'd been in the



*NAUGHTON'S LUCK HAD RUN OUT AT LAST,  
AND HE DESERVED EVERYTHING  
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middle of this before, nearly died before, buried under a slab of concrete, a piece of rebar thicker than his thumb punching through his thigh to pin him in place. He had healed long ago, but the pain of that injury haunted him, unlike the thousand lesser bruises and cuts that covered him. He remembered heaving at the concrete, certain he was trapped—dying, dead—and equally certain he deserved exactly that for all the stupid things he'd done leading up to that point. He'd never gotten it right, not in time to save his people, and he'd been too much of a fool to avoid fighting Reyes when they should have been working together—

He could still feel Reyes's punch, feel himself block the following blow and launch a punch of his own, but before it landed the world dissolved into smoke and flame. He'd had one last glimpse of Reyes's face before he was blown backward, tumbling with the debris into unconsciousness, to find himself trapped under the rubble, bleeding and beaten and sure he was dead.

Naughton's luck had run out at last, and he deserved everything he had coming to him.

Except it hadn't, not quite. He wasn't dead, and if he wasn't dead, Reyes might still be alive and trapped—there would be others too, people who'd been farther from the explosion. He moved his arms experimentally, then with purpose, then, with more effort, freed his good leg. That gave him room to work, and he levered a slab of concrete up and off, raising more dust to mix with the thickening smoke. He could feel heat too, though he was still too deafened to hear the flames or the screams, and he extracted the rebar from his leg. He staggered to his feet, shielding his eyes, and looked into an inferno where the walls had been—

It was a storage bay, the air hazed with drifting dust where he'd disturbed the layer that coated the metal floor. The space was full of crates and boxes of every size, jammed in on top of each other in no apparent order. A couple of garbage skips had been pushed up against the nearest pile of boxes, and chunks of concrete and twisted strands of rebar jutted out of them. A storage bay as chaotic as the explosion, and yet the explosion was years in the past, and he had a job to do.

Sombra's voice was sounding in his ear. "Hey, Jack, talk to me . . . you all right in there?"

"Fine." Jack cleared his throat, tasting bitter dust: the real thing this time, not the memory. "You're sure you don't know what I'm looking for?"

"If I knew that, I wouldn't have needed you," Sombra said. She paused. "You know I hate to rush you, but we don't have all the time in the world."

"Yeah." Jack scanned the room. There was so much here, and in no order; it looked as though whoever had cleared the disaster site had just boxed up everything and locked the door. And that was maybe a good sign, or at least a sign that Sombra was right—there was something here, something important enough to keep. He worked his shoulders, feeling muscles crack, and turned to the nearest box. "Working on it."

He ripped back the lid, dust and ash flying into his face, and began sorting through the contents. Burned particleboard that might have been from someone's desk, a packet of half-burnt papers, the Overwatch logo still prominent . . . Bayless's coffee mug labeled #1 DAD, the one his kids had gotten him the last Father's Day before, miraculously unbroken: all ordinary, painfully familiar, nothing out of place. The next box was the same, and the next; the one after yielded a melted stapler with a scrap of burnt paper still taped to the melted plastic. He knew what it had said: *Do not remove from 4th floor!!!!* Cassidy had brought it to Saipan, had taken a picture of himself with it on the beach.

"Security is breaking off from the Null Sector attack," Sombra said, in his ear.

"It'll take time for them to get back here," Jack said, ripping open another box.

"And it'll also take *us* time to get out of here," Sombra said sharply. "Factor that in, Jack."

"Understood." Jack rifled through the box—more papers, a smashed data drive, blobs of melted plastic—and moved on again. Sombra was right, he needed to hurry, but he needed to find this whatever-it-was even more.

The next boxes were piled with papers and shards of fire-stained glass and, at the very bottom, the ruin of Keller's fancy coffee machine, the one she charged everyone else a euro to use, the coins piling up in the paper cup beside her phone. The next one looked like the contents of someone's desk, with a melted keyboard and a smashed phone and an Overwatch-issued lanyard with a tag still attached. The ID picture was smeared and blackened, unrecognizable; he set it aside and moved on.

"We've got ten minutes left," Sombra said. "And that's cutting things really close."

Jack straightened, the dust clogging his chest like the memory of the explosion, his leg burning where the rebar had pierced it. Something that shouldn't be here—but everything he had seen so far was perfectly familiar, the wreckage of Overwatch and nothing more. He went through another couple of boxes—more melted data drives and scorched keyboards, finished off with a handful of brass cartridge cases, flattened and fire-stained.

"Five minutes," Sombra said.

"Okay."

"I mean it. They're moving quick."

"I hear you," Jack said. It was all he could promise, and he kept moving, climbing over a section of concrete that had to have been a piece of floor. The next skip was more shattered office machinery, smoke-blackened; the box beside it was papers and a stained chunk of metal that, when he pulled it out, proved to be a desktop clock that had once been topped with a palm tree. The head of finances had had one just like it, a prize for coming in second in a golf tournament. Beneath it was a layer of paper and shards of wood, and beneath that, something metallic that ate the light.

He pulled it out, frowning: a flat disk, the size and shape of a mine, but definitely *not* a mine. Most of the casing was matte black, and it felt almost rubbery, and heavy for its size; it was the silvered edge that had caught the light. There were no identifying marks, no obvious seams, nothing to give him a clue as to its purpose. It wasn't Overwatch, and it wasn't UN—he'd never seen anything like it. This had to be what Sombra had meant.

Jack turned toward the door, keying his comm. "Got it."

"About time." The door slid open, Sombra's hands weaving patterns in the air. "We've got three minutes."

"Then we'd better hurry."

They made it back up the stairs and out of the building with seconds to spare. Sombra led the way, down an alley and up onto the nearest rooftop. She stopped there, pulling up another holoscreen, frowning at its images as she entered commands. Over her shoulder, Jack could just see captured security footage, his running figure only too recognizable, and he grimaced. But the clip dissolved into static, and the screen flashed green before Sombra waved it away. "You erased that."

"Of course I did," she answered, and jumped for the next rooftop.

There was no "of course" about it, but Jack wasn't going to complain. He followed, leaping from building to building until at last Sombra slowed. The sky was lightening—sunrise, not fires—and Jack looked back the way they'd come. There were drones circling the storage facility, but they were still far enough away that they shouldn't draw notice. Sombra saw where he was looking and flipped her hair.

"Don't worry, I left a little present in their system. They'll ignore us."

"Let's hope no one spots it," Jack growled, but it was more reflex than real concern. He knew how good Sombra was. The air was stirring with the dawn, the stench of burning fuel and broken

*JACK PAUSED AGAIN, THE MEMORY SWEEPING THROUGH HIM, THE TASTE OF BLOOD ON HIS LIPS AND REYES'S UNBRIDLED ANGER. AND THEN THE EXPLOSION, THE INSTANT OF WIDE-EYED SHOCK ON REYES'S FACE BEFORE EVERYTHING WAS SWEEPED AWAY.*

concrete and cordite fading. To the east, the towers of smoke that had marked the main Null Sector attack on the city had thinned, were faded from oily black to gray as the firefighters asserted control. They'd been lucky: Null Sector was refocusing its efforts on some shinier target, and Zurich had—mostly—survived. This time.

Sombra cleared her throat. "Now. I think you have something for me?"

"Yeah." Jack reached into his jacket and held out the silver-edged disk. The black coating seemed to absorb the rising light, making it look more sinister than before.

Sombra's gaze sharpened, but she made no move to reach for it. "You're sure?"

"You told me to look for something that didn't belong," Jack said. "This isn't anything Overwatch made, and it's not anything out of the UN arsenal either. So unless *you* know what it is . . . here we are. And it's time for you to pay up."

"I don't recognize it," Sombra said. "Can I scan it?"

Jack shook his head. "Payment first."

"Fair enough." Sombra paused. "Tell me, who do you think brought down Overwatch?"

Jack hesitated. "At the time, everyone said it was Talon, with Reyes's help, maybe O'Deorain's. That's still the obvious answer, but it never felt right. And the information you gave me doesn't point that way. So, not Talon. Someone else."

"And you believed that," Sombra said. "Even before I started sharing what I found."

Jack paused again, the memory sweeping through him, the taste of blood on his lips and Reyes's unbridled anger. And then the explosion, the instant of wide-eyed shock on Reyes's face before everything was swept away. "I was with Reyes when everything exploded. I saw him. He was as surprised as I was." He shook his head. "If it had been Talon, he would have known."

Sombra nodded. "Let me scan the casing."

Jack held out the disk. Sombra moved forward to scan it, the light from her hand seeming to vanish into its surface. She pulled up a holoscreen, data churning on its surface for a moment before disappearing . . . and a strange mark slowly appeared: a stylized eye with three dots above the pupil and another three dots below it.

"I've seen that before," Sombra said. "The threads that should lead to Talon, but go beyond, hints and whispers of something, someone even more powerful than they are. That's why I started sending you the information too. I knew you had pieces of the puzzle I didn't, and I knew you wouldn't work with me unless I offered something in return. And this—" She nodded to the disk. "That mark, that's the proof. That's their symbol. Find that, track that down, and you'll have them. I'd start in Oasis. And once I crack this beauty—you'll hear from me." The screen closed, and Sombra held out her hand. "Fair payment?"

Jack looked at the disk, and then at Sombra's hand. This was the break he'd been looking for, something solid—something real to track, instead of the hints and whispers and theories. It wasn't much, but he was the man who could leverage it, could turn a single mark into something more. He was the only one left who could do it, and he'd do it for the ones who hadn't made it, all the deaths that weighed him down. He held it out, nodding. "Yeah."

"Thanks, then." Sombra sounded almost surprised, as though she'd expected more of a protest. Her other hand moved, tossing something over the edge of the roof, and an instant later she vanished.

Jack shook his head. It didn't matter. She'd given him what he needed, something real to chase. He might be old and beat up, but he'd find a way. After all, he'd always been a lucky man.

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