

Title: Oasis (draft)

Notes: these were written wayyy in 2023 when i was going over you can actually see which passages were recycled and later on used for publishing.

The thin translucent curtains billowed as the summer wind wafted in. Not one light was turned on; only the gray-blue of the moonlight as it slanted in through the terrace, revealing a pool of dull white on the floor.

There she was, standing on the terrace with her bare feet, wrapping the comforter that belonged to the bed around her shoulders, grasping it to her chest. Her blonde hair, being taken liberties by the wind, waved in place as thin strings of gold. All the honking from the streets below and the chatter of half the city asleep at this ungodly hour woke him up. He braved an approach to the figure standing with her back to him. Looked at her. Wondered where her honest green eyes were at the moment.

It slightly worried him that her expression was neutral, blank. Not even contemplating, not dead in seriousness, either. Often he could read her like a book. This wasn't one of those times.

One of her hands was on the railing. Her breathing was steady—either she had recovered from a possible nightmare or she didn't have a nightmare at all. Sometimes her memories showed some mercy.

To his surprise, *she* was the one who posed the question: "Where are you?"

Where *was* he? All he knew was that he was going to be sent elsewhere come tomorrow, back to the grotesque where he seemed to belong, the grotesque he sought rest from, the rest which he found by her side. And yet even that rest was going away now. Barred from him forever. "Right here."

It was all he could say. Because he *needed* to be here, not wander again across his vast mental tapestry of gore and rain and blood, because he had only seconds and he couldn't waste any of it. Now it was his turn to ask a question of habit: "You okay?"

She took a few moments before she gently bobbed her chin, still looking ahead. "Yeah."

So much hanging in the air. A whole galaxy of words. An entire parallel reality.

Finally, exhaling a breath he didn't sense she'd been holding, she said: "I'm just scared I ruined this."

Immediately his defenses came up. No, it was him. The moment his mind breathed the thought of ripping her black dress when they were walking home from the theater, it was all him. Maybe if he had restrained himself and not let himself be tricked by his obscene dreams, tempted so hard and in full he

actually gave in, nothing would have ruined them. When he opened that door to her back in quarantine, to welcome her in the blue darkness where they shared their plans and recurring nightmares, it was all him.

And yet wherever starting point he would choose, the conclusion would be the same: they were together in this. A team of accomplices.

“No, Ash—“

“No, Leon,” she said, resolute now. She wore the same expression she had when he tried to lecture her that she wouldn’t have known Krauser was going to take her. “*I was the one who asked you to sleep with me. I could have single-handedly prevented this...this lie...this fucked up thing we’ve done. If I had just asked you for something else, literally anything else. We wouldn’t have...kept doing it. And because of it I hurt people. I haven’t confessed to my sins yet, but I’ve hurt them already, even without them knowing. I’m going to deserve every punishment.*”

Something below his chest felt dry, hollow, cracking. He swallowed. “I was in it as much as you were.”

Her eyes began to sparkle under the moonlight, pain permeating all across her pale pretty face. Below, the yellow city lights rendered her eyes and cheeks a little shadow, and he saw the weight of guilt pressing down on her. Something inside him was howling, screaming, that she stop this, this wasn’t how it was supposed to end. Just a goodbye, one more for the road, a little laugh at their foolishness these past many years. He’d kiss her forehead and say they had a good run, thank her for everything, hoping that the word could carry his gratitude, could carry all the weight of what he actually wanted to say but eloquence had never been his strongest suit: *thank you for seeing me, for understanding, for giving me a home, for forgiving me, for looking at my moles and scars instead of my wounds and my failures*. Then they’d disperse, she in her white flowing dress he was sure she was going to look ethereally beautiful in, he in his kevlar armor and leather holsters and hard boots. “But I dragged you into it. I...I’m sorry, Leon. I am so, so sorry.”

Not like this, not like this. God, please. Don’t let it end like this. “No, Ash. *Listen to me.*” She was hearing him but she wasn’t listening. Light was coming in a few hours and finally shed its rays on their secret—but they were going to bury the dead body now. Time was up. “We were...we’re friends, okay? But we both know we couldn’t go beyond that. I wanted you, too. This...” he took her hand and placed it on the scar on his chest. He felt foreign to himself; he was always nihilistic and sardonic and only stated plainly whatever needed to be done, especially in the combat of life-and-death. But he needed to be something else now, break out of the character he had maintained all these years in an attempt to shield himself from all the constant loss and fear, and *for fucking once* actually say what he had in his mind, *in his heart*, struggling for the right words though he was. “We had *this*. You...you kept me. By your side. Even when I was wrong. You kept me fighting. You let me know what it was like to *hope*. You let me know what it was like that someone cared, to have a fr—to have *someone*.” He corrected mid-course—the word held so much weight yet it didn’t hold enough. It wasn’t enough to describe the binding of two souls, joys and grief revealed to the

world they had in each other. He put his hand on her cheek. "Don't blame yourself. I wanted this, too. I...I'm sorry, too."

"No, no," she was shaking her head, just as guilty and stubborn as he was. "No, Leon, no—"

"No. Come here—" The hand on her cheek caught her nape and he pulled her in for a tight hug. *Last one*, he promised to himself. His own throat was threatening to choke him. "This...this is it, okay? We're gonna stop here. We *gotta* stop here. We can't do this anymore."

She was sobbing into his chest, his shoulder—wetting his skin, his scars, the constellation of his moles that she so adored. Her hand that wasn't grasping the cloth was clutching at her chest, scratching it, as if she could tear herself apart and of all their sins—every rough breath, every sob a delayed remorse compounded by the years, a dying wish in the face of this reality that they had chosen for themselves because they found a loophole in the unfairness. Their debt had become too heavy and the collector had come to charge what they were due. "Forgive me, Leon. Please, please forgive me."

"No, no," he said again, adamant in his disagreement; she didn't even need the forgiveness because before they had become whatever they were now they were friends, and friends shared faults and divided their burdens. They were equally sinful. He pulled back and planted his forehead against hers. "Live your life, Ash. This is what I saved you for. I'm gonna be happy too, I promise. *I'm* happy for you. Not gonna waste anything you gave me." And he echoed what he said some almost-twenty years ago, when they were surrounded by cold linoleum floors, under the dim illumination where they began to share their secrets and recognized each other's soul: "Promise me you're gonna be okay."

It took a while or two for his point to make it across her stubbornness. He had to shake her once gently, reiterating: "Promise me, Ashley."

"I'm scared," she confessed, sniffing.

A little miserable laugh escaped him. They were nothing if not reminding each other. He echoed himself the day they met, when he was but a man with a job and she a mission that needed to be carried out, before they became so much more and became more than either of them ever bargained for: "It's okay to be afraid, you know."

She sniffed, sobbed, every tear and snot rolling down her face a surgical cut in the excision of the tumor he had kept with him all these years. "Promise me you're gonna be okay, Ashley."

Finally, to his immense relief, she choked, "Okay," then tried again with a resolute nod to show that she was sincere and intentful in this change: "Okay, Leon."

He kissed her on the forehead. *Last one*, he promised again. If she could promise, then so could he. If God willed him to stay alive long enough he was going to find his own happiness. Someday.

And they embraced, one last time, now brave and true in the oncoming daylight: a pair of tortured lovers but the greatest friends, emboldened and unafraid that they could bask in its unforgiving rays because they were well and free at last.

Two weeks later, Agent Leon Scott Kennedy was welcomed by Agent Ingrid Hunnigan with her hands in her pockets and a proud nod. The nod meant simple enough: *Job well done. I'm glad you're alive. Now, onto the next one.*

He grinned at his colleague. He was so drained he couldn't stop himself from teasing: "At one point you're gonna have to give me a hug."

"No." But her frown said otherwise.

"Seems like you wanna."

She rolled her eyes, scoffing at the knowledge that familiarity does sometimes breed friendship. Then relented, anyway, if just a little side hug with her left arm as they walked together, because this was their life, and it was rare to find a friend in it. "Welcome home, Agent Kennedy."

"Glad to be back, Agent Hunnigan."

Days before, while he was out hiding from the undead as he reloaded his firearm, Ashley Graham was facing herself in the long oblong mirror, glowing and blushing under the golden rays of her day like she never had before. Her friends cooed when she teared up. She was here now, at last, in this happiness she crucified herself for. She wiped the tear off her eye and rested her hand on the place below her scar from many years ago, stroking it in a little circular motion as a way to calm her nerves. One day she will have to confess to her sins. But today was a day of happiness. Love was waiting for her down that aisle.

It gave her a sad, yet complete kind of peace. Before they broke apart, she asked Leon, just when the sky was lightening: "Did you love me?"

Because the time for pretenses and lies was over, he replied simply with a smile: "I did."

Sadly she didn't hear the unspoken: *I did but it wasn't enough.*

But because she understood him so well, she still would have known, anyway.

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Yet of course, long was the night still, for their days had become numbered and short. This was still a friendship—or at least that was all they ever let themselves call it, though the friendship had not once

made it across the threshold once they shut the door in its face, in their hurried pace to expel each other of clothing. It was all they ever called it when they were back to pretending in the light of day, as they exited her room and opened the door again and smiled at the thing simmering in rage, because love was for children and the oblivious of the real danger. In a language only they spoke they comforted themselves with a manifesto that went like this: that they belonged here, by the warmth of this fire they built in search of comfort, that they understood and were at home with each other, that maybe even if humanity didn't know sex they'd still adore each other like this, for theirs was an affair of the mind and soul, not just the body. The body was just an additional, blessed extension of how they could express their adoration.

Nearly everything else they had done in the name of their togetherness had been a lie. But if one thing was true, it was their home in each other.

Years later, when they would recount the blissful—if tainted—time to themselves, they'd find it could just be summarized in plain words: *it so easily could have been a great love. But greater was her fear, and, even greater, his circumstances.*

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EPILOGUE

The Celtic understanding of friendship finds its inspiration and culmination in the sublime notion of the *anam cara*. *Anam* is the Gaelic word for soul; *cara* is the word for friend...With the *anam cara* you could share your innermost self, your mind and your heart. This friendship was an act of recognition and belonging. When you had an *anam cara*, your friendship cut across all convention, morality, and category. You were joined in an ancient and eternal way with the “friend of your soul.”

John O'Donohue

She moved to Minnesota, in the hometown of her estranged mother, to be with her in her last moments. She had lost a parent before. She was going to make the most out of the time with the last one she had left.

There's already more sadness in this life than time to measure it against. So she decided to move, uproot the career she recalibrated the rest of her life for after the living nightmare she had to go through, the dreams about which would still haunt her even decades later. Even after she reached the triumphs she sought after the loss of her innocence. Even after she met the man who had eyes like the ocean, not the one with eyes of glaciers hidden in some cold, imperial, unreachable place—much like himself—though she knew she would always share her soul with the latter. Even after she made a name for herself in the war against bioterrorism. She wasn't at the frontlines, as she was no protector; no. But it was people like her that the villains feared more: for in her white coat and sterile gloves, she used their own weapons against them. She worked not only on parasites. She also worked on viruses. Bacteria. Other vectors that had potential. At some point she even worked on a mutant black mold that had something to do with a very unique girl under the care of a family friend.

She sought the knowledge and democratized it, just as she had planned in her little black dress, to the ire of the greedy and the tyrannical. So the people who had no one to defend them or the princess who had no knight to come rescue her would have a fighting chance when an evil that would take over the mind, break the spirit, and malform the body would arrive and challenge the guardians who just want to protect. No more father who would have to put his daughter out of her misery by putting a bullet through her head. No more father worried sick at home, whose resources included the entire arsenal of weapons of the most powerful nation of the world, yet none could bring him the peace of mind over his daughter being spirited away. No more of these pitiful things. Not when she could do something about it.

The world is far from safe. Of course not. So much left to do still, but she has done her part. She has laid the foundations. They can fight back and not be caught unawares by hooded figures in the dark. Sometimes she would get visitors at her home, carrying inquiries of the scientific kind: these are the ones who follow the trail she blazed.

She's glad to help.

She lost a lot. Lost her dream because it was taken from her through the betrayal of the one with whom she shared her soul. Lost her life's work—initially. Fortunately she was able to build it back up. But what she didn't regain: she lost the man she thought she deserved to be with for the rest of her life. She wanted something he couldn't give. He loved her but didn't love her enough; not when he couldn't love her wholly and honestly; certainly not at the cost of the lives that needed him. She decided not to resent him for either. He was afraid, and it didn't take long for her to realize that she was, too. For a while they were at an impasse, let themselves get scorched and consumed by the fire they built together in search of warmth. At least they were wise enough to know when they were burning.

Good thing they fit well together in soul as much as they did in the flesh, so they both understood, recalling to mind what they agreed on years before, it felt like another lifetime: *it's okay to be afraid*.

So they let go.

Love is a choice.

Hurting someone, all the more.

At least they know that at least once, they found someone who saw and understood them. They had found a home.

They're just grateful they found each other.

They call them “the dynamic duo,” “Ice & Spice”, “the Two Non-Blondes”. The last one because his hair is an odd shade between blond and brown (apparently it's called tawny—but does anyone ever use that word?), while his partner likes to color her hair to conceal its natural color, as if hiding a part of her identity that everyday she runs away from. He keeps assuring her that she looks fine however. She merely replies that he doesn't understand.

They call her spice not just because of her feisty personality but also because she was named after one. As fun as it is to watch her try to tamp her anger because she's so peevish, he tries not to push her buttons, because, firstly, the other agents already are; secondly, he doesn't want to be at the receiving end of her alleged mutant powers.

(Not alleged. She showed him her actual data.)

(And because he's the son of a scientist, he knows better than to defy concrete facts.)

They call him ice because they like to point out his eyes are blue, like...well, ice. If one were to look closely, though, they'd realize that's not true at all: his left eye actually has the faintest green in it. Like the genes for his eyes found a middle ground and compromised—maybe it was that? Science has never been his strongest suit, and he just went through college to please his mother. Also because that was their deal, so afterwards he could pursue what he really wanted: become a protector.

His mother told him that they're not wrong. “Ice” isn't entirely accurate, though, she added. Somewhere far, in places away from the sun, are mounds of ice so big they're bigger than hills, so massive they're not just blue or white, they have gray in them. Like the flecks in his blue eyes.

Like glaciers.

He was promised answers. Why his father, sometimes, would get up in the middle of the night and fetch water for his mother, whose screams of nightmares of hooded figures and black liquids would be drowned by the walls of his parents' room. Why it mainly had to do with his grandfather—his mother's father—whom he never met. Why his mother used to spend extra hours at her laboratory when he was a child, though still did her best to play with him and his sister when she got home even despite being

half-dead from exhaustion, he actually grew a conscience at such a young age. Why she did the things she did.

When she deemed him old enough, she told him the story. He understood.

Because as he got older, he understood more.

He saw the pictures: of the man who was his mother's greatest friend and ally, the man he was named after. He didn't really get to see the man when he was growing up but to him he was real enough—strong and brave, as he was often described. He came to understand the tender look on his mother's face. The sad contentment.

Ignorance truly is bliss.

He wanted to confront her. The confusion, measured against the inkling of doubt in him that was growing everyday since he *understood*, made him want to throw it at his mother's face. But he couldn't find it in him. Not when he was clothed and protected and loved so well his entire life, despite the ups and downs, for their family was far from perfect.

The anger would melt away each time. Not before his mother's gentleness, but in the face of the steadfastness of his father. The one who disciplined and forgave him growing up. The one who loves him and calls him son.

In his head he called him naïve. Stupid. A fool. When his parents weren't looking, he tried to read through the man he *did* grow up with, the man he shares no face with: either he's none the wiser or he's playing blind, so obvious it's pathetic.

Or maybe that's just what love is, he came to realize. Not that it completely erased the anger he felt at his parents; relationships are complex. One could die for someone in a heartbeat and still harbor feelings of resentment towards them on ordinary days.

One could also accept someone for all they are and what they've done and not hold it against them.

It's a choice.

"Package for you," his partner taps on the frame of the door twice as she passes by. "Breakroom."

He obliges. At the center of the deserted breakroom sits a rectangular black box. *Heavy*, is his first thought. He can only hope it went through scans before it got here. Well, of course it should have—they'd be idiots not to. They're under direct presidential oversight for god's sake.

He opens the box; the packaging is elaborate, with layers of hard flaps. Seated on the foam at its center is a black handgun. It's old and worn—that's how he knows this thing was put to good use. He has studied the history of this agency well enough to remember the name of this gun.

Moreover, he knows whose this is.

The man has retired. He caught the tail end of his training of the new crop of agents here, though. He was friendly when he discovered he's part of the new blood and even gave him a hug that lingered for a second. He ever rarely shows up on radar these days; they just know that sometimes he's a source for intel. Sometimes, too, he actually *still* gets in trouble (at his age!) and gets in touch with them to call for backup. Even though he's officially not part of them anymore, how could they not send help, when he was one of the pioneering members of this agency?

They say he's out of the country, finally taking the vacation he so deserved—but never got—when he was still in service. They say he's found someone. Some say it's a woman with dark hair who wore red, per the accounts of those who claim they saw the honeymoon photos. Maybe he could confirm with Chris Redfield. He's a family friend.

Gossip later; gift now, he chides himself. Sometimes his mind wanders too much.

It is by no means excellent; somewhat inconvenient, even. *But it's his*. He runs his fingers across the barrel, the grip, appreciating the scratches, a tally of the times its old owner escaped death. Below him, still on the box, is the stock he hadn't noticed earlier. He attaches it, chuckles when he realizes that it's even bigger than the handgun itself. But no matter.

He tries pointing it, the stock fitting so well on the curve of his shoulder, and it feels like he's home.

"We're gonna have a great time, Matilda," he smiles.

Something white on the table catches his eye. It's the note.

To: Scott

For wherever you find yourself.

Take care of her.

LSK