

ANOTHER LIFE



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ANOTHER LIFE

The night had finally stilled within the Riyadh compound, gunfire and shouts giving way to a deafening silence. Smoke and dust settled gently over the remains of utter carnage. And in the middle of it all . . . was *him*. No longer the monster, but the man. The friend she'd committed everything to finding again.

It had taken Freja Skov months to complete the bounty Maximilien had handed her: to track and intercept Emre Sarioglu, once a vaunted champion on the strike team of Overwatch. In that time, Freja learned more of her old friend than she had ever wished to know: that Emre had left Overwatch, vanished for years, and somehow ended up working for Talon, becoming a coldhearted killer. Even now, she still couldn't reconcile the information she'd gathered—the massacre she'd witnessed with her own eyes—and the memories she had of Emre: strong, kind, committed to all the rules and protocols that had once kept her and her team safe.

“Frej?”

Her mind was reeling as Emre struggled to his feet. Even as he clutched his head, wincing with the movement, he looked at her with the same eyes she'd known in another life.

“Is that you?” Weakly, he managed to smile at her, like not a thing had changed since they’d spoken last. “I can’t believe it. How did you find me? How long has it been since—”

“What happened to you?”

At once, Emre stopped. “What?” The harshness in her voice seemed to sober him. Blinking hard, he finally managed to glance around the room—and witnessed the horror he’d wrought. “Oh, no . . . Frej, this isn’t—I can explain—”

“You disappeared for years, and this is how I find you? Stealing data from a global security compound, slaughtering indiscriminately? I thought hearing you’re working with Talon would be the worst thing I could learn about you, but clearly that was too optimistic.”

Emre stared back at Freja. He looked deeply wounded by her words, but she held firm.

“Frej, wait—”

“I’ve spent months on your trail. I met with—I worked for—Talon agents just to track you down. I refused to believe all the horrible things they said about you.”

Emre raised a conciliatory hand. He took a tentative step forward. “I promise, it’s not what you—”

Sharply, Freja leveled her crossbow at him, and he froze.

“You left Overwatch behind—left me behind—because you couldn’t bear to compromise what you believed in. And now, all this . . . what have you become?”

“Freja!”

Emre’s cry cut through the anger clouding her mind, commanding her attention. Suddenly, she could see him more clearly. The exhaustion that weighed on his shoulders. The hopelessness in his eyes.

“Just hear me out,” he begged. “Please.”

The hitch in his voice made her hesitate. In her heart, she knew it was foolish to hope there might be some explanation for all this, some way she’d be able to leave this place without losing her oldest friend—maybe her *only* friend, now. But Freja prided herself on knowing her target, and that voice told her she was missing something.

Emre’s eyes softened in understanding of the chance her pause offered him. With a quiet sigh, he spoke.

“When I left Overwatch, it was because I thought I could help more on my own. I remember saying goodbye to you and wondering if I was doing the right thing. I remember having options lined up . . . being hopeful for a chance at something new. But some point after that, my memory just . . . stops.

“You want to know what happened to me? How I ended up like this?” He uttered a mirthless laugh, his eyes downcast. “So do I. It’s like I’m being . . . manipulated, compelled to act without mercy to achieve a goal I don’t understand. It tells me to work with Talon; it tells me to infiltrate bases like this one no matter how many lives I need to take. And if I try to fight it, it just . . . takes over. And I wake up like this. I don’t know what it is, what it wants. But it’s turning me into a monster.”

Emre took a tentative step closer once again, and this time, Freja didn’t tense.

“I know it’s difficult to trust me, Frej. There are things I’ve done that . . . I’d rather have never known. But I promise, I’m telling you the truth.”

Freja stared hard at Emre, the struggle to believe his words evident in her eyes. A moment passed, both of them holding their breath in anticipation of her response. But eventually, she conceded, her features tight with anguish as she weakly lowered her weapon.

“Altså for helvede da.”

Emre exhaled. “I’m sorry, Frej. For putting you in this position.” He paused, his eyes trailing away from her. “I wouldn’t blame you if you walked away. Or if you think I can’t leave here alive—”

“No,” she said quickly, her voice softer than it had been before. “No. There’s a reason I came this far to find you. If any part of you is still the Emre I knew . . . then I believe you.”

Emre nearly spoke again, but the distant sound of footsteps from somewhere deep in the compound’s halls caught both of their attention. Freja grimaced. Tilting her head, she gestured toward the entrance of the compound.

“Let’s get out of here, before anyone else finds this mess.”



On the outskirts of Riyadh, the glow of sunlight peeked over the eastern horizon. The private jet Maximilien had given Freja waited right where she’d left it. When





she'd disembarked earlier that night, her stomach had been in knots, and she remained fearful of how this reunion might end.

But now, she returned with her dear friend at her side. He was changed, suffering through something she could scarcely comprehend, but part of him was still Emre, still the one she'd sought at the beginning of this road.

Emre looked around curiously. "This place seems familiar. Where are we?"

Freja cocked her head. "You . . . you really don't know?"

A bitter grin tugged at his lips. "No. I don't know much of anything right now."

"We're in Riyadh."

Emre's expression fell. "I woke up in Lima just a few days ago. I was in Osaka before that. Now I'm here, and I barely remember how any of it happened."

"Well, whatever you remember is more than anyone else knows. From the sound of it, you've been a long time."

"Why did you come looking for me, then?" Emre asked as they approached the craft.

Freja shuffled through the satchel on her hip. She produced the bounty Max had given her and handed it to Emre.

"Your bosses sent me. Seems Talon's got plans they need you to handle."

Emre looked over the bounty. When his eyes met the listed reward, they widened.

"Vay be. Look at that price tag. No wonder you came for me."

In spite of all she'd seen that day, all she'd had to come to terms with, Freja couldn't help the faintest laugh.

"With what you put me through, I'm making Max pay me double."

Emre grinned. "If he needs me back so bad he sent you, hell, call it triple." His smile faltered slightly. "But . . . I'm glad you came. It's been years since I've spoken to anyone I trust, let alone a friend."

Freja's heart ached hearing those words. It dawned on her how isolated she'd been all this time, feeling just the same. How long it'd been since she could lower her guard.

"Yeah. Of course."

A brief quiet fell between them. Emre hesitated, as if grappling with words he couldn't speak. "What happens once you turn me in to Max, then?"

Even with how long they'd been apart, Freja could still read him. The question didn't concern where he'd end up, but where *she* would.

She sighed, weighing the words in her mind to tell him the answer that was all too obvious to her.

"Well . . . I figured I might stay with you."

This seemed to catch Emre by surprise.

"You will?" he asked. "Even if it means . . . working with Talon?"

Freja shrugged. "I don't exactly share Talon's aims, but if that's what it takes, I'll manage." She met his eyes, remembering just how many times they'd linked up before missions, sharing talks just like this one. "You always had my back when we worked together. It's only right I return the favor. I want to help you, Emre."

He smiled, genuine and relieved.

"Thank you, Frej. I think you might be the only one who can."



