

# ***CONDITIONAL RELEASE***



**A J PRYOR**

The Inbetween Archives Book 2



A.J. PRYOR

## Conditional Release

*The Inbetween Archives Book 2*

Copyright © 2025 by A.J. Pryor

*All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.*

*This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.*

*A.J. Pryor asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.*

*First edition*

*ISBN: 9798262187881*

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.*

*Find out more at [reedsy.com](https://reedsy.com)*



*For the dreamers who look at the stars and wish they could call them home.*



# Contents

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| <i>Preface</i>     | iv  |
| <i>Preface II</i>  | vii |
| <i>Prologue</i>    | x   |
| <br>               |     |
| I   Aurora Solaris |     |
| <br>               |     |
| Chapter 1          | 3   |
| Chapter 2          | 9   |
| Chapter 3          | 14  |
| Chapter 4          | 18  |
| Chapter 5          | 22  |
| Chapter 6          | 27  |
| Chapter 7          | 32  |
| Chapter 8          | 36  |
| Chapter 9          | 41  |
| Chapter 10         | 46  |
| Chapter 11         | 51  |
| Chapter 12         | 56  |
| Chapter 13         | 61  |
| Chapter 14         | 67  |
| Chapter 15         | 71  |
| Chapter 16         | 77  |

## II Solis Invictus

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Chapter 17 | 85  |
| Chapter 18 | 90  |
| Chapter 19 | 95  |
| Chapter 20 | 100 |
| Chapter 21 | 104 |
| Chapter 22 | 109 |
| Chapter 23 | 113 |
| Chapter 24 | 118 |
| Chapter 25 | 123 |
| Chapter 26 | 129 |
| Chapter 27 | 135 |
| Chapter 28 | 140 |
| Chapter 29 | 145 |
| Chapter 30 | 149 |
| Chapter 31 | 153 |
| Chapter 32 | 158 |
| Chapter 33 | 163 |
| Chapter 34 | 168 |
| Chapter 35 | 173 |

## III Sanctus Revenans

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Chapter 36 | 179 |
| Chapter 37 | 183 |
| Chapter 38 | 188 |
| Chapter 39 | 194 |
| Chapter 40 | 199 |
| Chapter 41 | 203 |
| Chapter 42 | 207 |
| Chapter 43 | 214 |
| Chapter 44 | 219 |

|            |     |
|------------|-----|
| Chapter 45 | 224 |
| Chapter 46 | 229 |
| Chapter 47 | 234 |
| Chapter 48 | 239 |
| Chapter 49 | 244 |
| Chapter 50 | 248 |
| Chapter 51 | 253 |
| Chapter 52 | 258 |
| Chapter 53 | 263 |
| Epilogue   | 268 |

#### IV The Ask Short Story

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Author's Intro | 273 |
| The Ask        | 274 |

#### V BONUS EXTRAS

|                                       |     |
|---------------------------------------|-----|
| Shade's Fun Extras Intro              | 281 |
| Transcript: Unexpected Cargo          | 283 |
| Shade on Compartmentalization         | 288 |
| 7 Rules Every Marketer Should Live By | 290 |
| Tactical Cuddles - A Guide            | 292 |
| The Soul-Bonded Survival Zine         | 298 |
| Void Whiskey Origins                  | 302 |
| Void Whiskey - Batch 13               | 307 |
| <i>Book 3 Preview: Flight Risk</i>    | 311 |
| <i>About the Author</i>               | 315 |
| <i>Also by A.J. Pryor</i>             | 317 |

# Preface

## **Cult Welcome Letter** (*Revision 9*)

### **FOR INTERNAL DISTRIBUTION ONLY**

– Unless you're trying to convert someone. In which case, add **glitter** and seal with blood.

**Dear [New Initiate / Unwilling Reader / Ghost of Future Self],**

Congratulations on choosing to dive, stumble, or be violently flung into the dark and tender embrace of **Conditional Release**, the second volume in the *Inbetween Archives*.

Some of you are here because you read *Hard Parole* and thought, *surely it can't get worse*.

You sweet, naive photon.

Don't worry, you'll learn.

Others were seduced by the siren call of trauma-bonded space found family and interdimensional possession.

You're in the right place.

This is a book about what happens **after** the mission, **after** the reunion, **after** the threads should've tied neatly into healing.

Spoiler: they don't.

They unravel harder.

**Before you begin, please be advised:**

This text contains:



- Unreliable narrators (plural).
- Characters with apocalyptic destiny issues.
- Found family with knives.
- Cult indoctrination (there's a newsletter).
- Discussions of trauma, torture, and identity collapse.
- Love, devotion, betrayal—and the paper-thin line between them.
- Non-linear grief. Non-linear timelines. Non-linear morality.
- And a few scenes so hot, they temporarily blind at least one character.

Also: the Void is not a metaphor.

It has opinions.

### **Content Warnings (semi-comprehensive):**

- Psychological manipulation
- Religious fanaticism and brainwashing
- Body horror and possession
- PTSD, dissociation, and depersonalization
- References to past abuse, imprisonment, and war crimes
- Intense emotional dependency
- Involuntary immolation (literal and figurative)
- Violence and death

Also:

- Feelings. Waaaay too many feelings.

We recommend emotional hydration and an emergency comfort character.

Geist recommends you stop reading now.

I recommend you keep going.

We both know which of us you're more likely to listen to.

### **In closing:**

Welcome, dear reader.

You are not safe here.

But you are not alone.

Fold your hands. Open your heart.  
The Void remembers you.  
And it never forgets its own.

With love and daggers,

**Shade**

— Prophet of the Actual Void, Occasionally Zane (if we've snuggled), Galactic  
Icon and Emotional Liability

Also Ghost Command, Rank Redacted

P.S. There's sex in this one. You're welcome.

*This message was approved for limited dissemination by Geist under extreme  
protest.*

*All heretical footnotes removed. Mostly.*

# Preface II

## **CLASSIFIED PRELIMINARY BRIEFING — READ BEFORE ENTRY**

### **From the desk of Geist**

**SID Clearance Level:** Burn After Reading

**Subject:** *Conditional Release*

**Status:** Contained, for now.

**Recommended Reading Protocol:** Alone. Preferably with whiskey.

**Projected Psychological Fallout:** High. Mitigation *unlikely*.

Welcome back.

If you're here, it means you've survived *Hard Parole*.

Statistically improbable. Emotionally questionable.

Yet here you are.

This is not just a sequel.

It is a dissection—of loyalty, of identity, of whatever's left of us.

What began as tactical containment has spiraled into cosmic trespass, meta-physical reckoning, and the attempted emotional rehabilitation of one (1) sun-touched idealist.

It does not go as planned. These things never do.

### **Trigger Warnings. Not exhaustive, but exhausting:**

- Identity erosion and moral compromise
- PTSD, trauma flashbacks, dissociation

- Cult indoctrination, religious symbolism, and Fold-based theology
- Psychological torture (applied and internalized)
- Obsessive loyalty, betrayal, and devotion twisted past recognition
- Interdimensional contamination
- Forced proximity (spiritual and otherwise)
- Death. Rebirth. And something worse in between.

Also includes:

- Intimate violence (emotional and physical)
- Weaponized memory
- Too many secrets. Not enough time.

### **Notes for Returning Personnel (and Readers):**

- Wraith is spiraling.
- Kael is unraveling.
- Shade is the most emotionally stable one in the room. (*Side note: How the fuck did that happen?*)
- And I?
- I'm alive. That's not as comforting as you might imagine.

### **Final advisory:**

This file is not for the unmarked.

If you choose to read it, do so with care.

If you must love, do it with caution.

And never—**never**—assume the war is over just because the chapter ends.

— Geist

Strategic Intelligence Division (Redacted)

Ghost Command (Always)

P.S. If Shade annotated this, ignore it. If he touched your copy physically, burn it. If you feel something watching you while you read, *do not* turn around.

It's probably me.

But it could be worse.

# Prologue

**FROM:** The Mouth of the Fold

**TO:** Scribes of the Hollow Flame

**SUBJECT:** The Returned Sun

Children of the Deep Horizon,

The Sun rises again.

In defiance.

With memory.

Without us.

Yet still, he moves.

Our Vessel did not perish in the fire. He walks beyond Perdition. He breathes outside prophecy. He dares believe in choice.

This is not failure. This is fulfillment.

The Fold never promised ease. Only return.

The prodigal flame walks among the frayed and the faithless, unclaimed yet undeniable.

They call him **Helios** still; a name made of warning, not worship. Let them.

Let the name rot in their mouths while the truth burns behind his eyes.

He is unraveling. That is right. That is righteous.



But the threads pull against us.  
They pull in error, they pull astray.  
There is something else binding him.  
A woman shaped by will. A weapon forged in shadow.  
Find her. Unmake her. (If you must, offer her the truth first. Some knives  
cut deepest from within.)

Prepare the altars. Burn the false gospels.  
Mark the Revelation Path with his course  
He does not know what he carries. He does not know what he is.  
But the Fold does.  
And it is always watching.

In silence and shadow,  
— The Mouth  
***We fall. We fade. We rise again.***



I

## Aurora Solaris

*The flame licks the edge of nothing.*

*It does not warm. It does not bless.*

*It only burns the unworthy.*



# Chapter 1

3,861... 3,862.. 3,863...

“What are you doing?”

Shade craned his head back to see the speaker standing behind him. Barely more than a shadow, but instantly recognizable regardless.

“I *was* counting the stars. But now you’ve made me lose my place.”

He was lying in the spiky grass, one knee bent and swaying. Arms crooked and hands under his head.

The plains in front of him lay cloaked in darkness and the old temple ruins behind him stood silent and still. He could smell dust and smoke as well as the hint of spice that always hung around his visitor.

Geist sat down next to him. Back straight, knees bent. His black uniform made him blend in seamlessly with Perdition’s moonless night—but Shade could see him just fine.

“Did you tell Wraith?”

Shade reached out and laid a hand on Geist’s knee and squeezed affectionately, “In a manner of speaking.”

Geist sighed and rubbed his face. “Okay, Z, *what* did you tell her?”

“That I *might* have found some information on you.”

The night’s silence rolled in like the tide, then back out again.

“So, you lied.”

Shade sat up and scooted closer, resting his head on Geist’s shoulder. The man’s arm came around him automatically.

“Technically it wasn’t a lie.”

For a moment, Geist let his head rest against Shade’s. “I’m the one that

deals in secrets, Z.”

“We both deal in secrets, G, mine are just a little more... esoteric. Mostly.” Shade shrugged slightly. As if none of the secrets mattered. Except for the ones that did.

“She’s coming here, you know,” Geist told him.

Shade’s lips curled in a broad smile, “I should hope so, I *invited* her.”

“She’s bringing Helios.”

All amusement disappeared like a stone thrown in a well. Just the ripples remained, flashing a vision before his eyes too fast to follow. Leaving only dread in its wake.

“That’s... going to be interesting,” he said eventually.

Geist turned his head to look at him, amber eyes tired. “I thought you’d be more excited at the prospect.”

Shade smiled as he stared out into the darkness, “To play with Sunshine? Always.”

“Z...” Geist’s voice was hushed—a warning.

Shade’s smile turned feral, “Why, I’m going to have to start *planning*.”

“Zane!”

He stopped. He hadn’t really thought he’d be able to fool Geist. Not after all this time.

“What’s wrong?”

Light flared in his mind as he tried to chase the vision. A supernova that drowned out everything and left one hell of a migraine that somehow dissipated almost as soon as it hit.

“I don’t know. Something’s coming. Or maybe happening. I’ll let you know if I figure it out.”

“Another vision?”

Shade shrugged a shoulder and Geist tightened his arm around him. For a long time they just stared into the darkness together.

Finally, Shade squeezed Geist’s shoulder and stood, held out a hand to help the spymaster to his feet.

“Are you staying?”

“No. I need to get back.”



## CHAPTER 1

The disappointment hit harder than it should have. So, Shade hugged him, hard. Kissed his nose because he could.

“Travel safe, Old Man.”

Geist nodded as he rubbed his nose, and *faded*.

Zane stared at the space Geist had left behind. Silence pressed in.

It always did.

So why did it still hurt?

\* \* \*

The *Lethe* dropped out of hyperspace with barely a shudder.

Kael leaned over the nav console. Empty gridlines. Static drift. Right where they were meant to be.

With a six-hour cooldown until they could jump again.

“It’s a pity this ship isn’t Fold-capable,” he commented to Wraith, who was sitting cross legged on the pilot seat, checking telemetry readings.

He caught a glimpse of gray eyes as they flicked his way, “It is.”

“Since when?”

She was focused on the console in front of her, “Since I had it modified to Tunnel Inbetween, obviously.”

He sighed, stood and put a hand on her shoulder. Wraith looked at it, then up at him, eyebrow raised.

“You don’t want to take me Inbetween, do you?”

His voice sounded off, even to him.

Asking that question opened a door to a place he wasn’t quite ready to step through. But if they were going to build trust again, then some doors had to be opened. Even the dangerous ones.

Wraith stilled for a long beat. Then she shrugged the shoulder under his hand. He let it fall.

“Okay,” she murmured, “I guess we’re having *this* conversation now.”

She looked down at the console, tapped a few buttons, checked the hyper-drive status.

“What the hell. We have time to kill. Coffee?”

Wraith handed Kael a still-steaming mug of *good* coffee.

He inhaled the aroma, smiling. Tasted it and smiled wider.

“Where in the galaxy did you find this?”

“Seori gave it to me.”

He stilled. Blinked. Stared.

She rolled her eyes, “Yes, I went to see them. Yes, I stayed there for a while. Yes, Elijah would still like to take you on in the Arena. And yes, Seori sends her regards. The Void didn’t, but then, we’re not on speaking terms.”

Kael shook his head like he’d surfaced too fast from deep water.

“There’s a... lot... to unpack in that sentence.”

Wraith chuckled at the Major and sipped her coffee.

*Ex-Major.*

*Whatever.*

She tipped her mug toward him. “But right now, we’re talking about you.”

“And why it’s dangerous to take me Inbetween.”

*Statement.*

“Is it?”

He looked up at her over the lip of his mug, swamp water eyes resigned, “You know it is, but do you know why?”

She shook her head, paused and reconsidered. “Not exactly, no. But I can make a few educated guesses.”

He gestured with his mug, “Please.”

Wraith sat back, kept her breathing even though her heart had started racing as it did every time she *remembered*. Cursed inwardly as she *knew* Kael’s augments meant he could hear her heartbeat.

“Back on that moon—at the SID facility—when we integrated so completely that we became...”

“Us. No boundaries. No barriers. Scary as fuck.”

“Exactly.”

Her breath shuddered, but it helped to know it had freaked him out too.

“When I first came to, before the integration was complete, for a moment I felt... everything. I felt the Void. Its... presence.”

Kael swallowed and nodded for her to continue.

“Then there was your little mental breakdown on the Kraken—it’s called *Tiamat*, by the way, the ship I mean.”

Kael raised an eyebrow at her, although for the naming or her description of his mental state, she wasn’t sure.

“I don’t remember much of my time before you... fixed me.”

She met his gaze, “Did I? Fix you?”

“Yeah, actually. I just kind of... unfixed myself later.”

She cocked her head, took a deep breath and reached over the table to take his hand. Skin to skin.

“Tell me?”

Kael stared at her hand on his. Felt her somehow sliding under his skin and back into his soul like she’d never been gone.

Her hand jerked, but she didn’t pull away.

But she did do something.

“Put the brakes on,” she muttered, “metaphysically speaking.”

He hadn’t said anything. Not aloud.

*Still kinda creepy*, he reflected.

*No kidding.*

Her voice was a bare whisper he wasn’t supposed to hear. Except it was *in* his head.

He took a deep breath, felt a hint of her amusement, of her wariness. Then finally nodded and settled.

“When we were in the Void, it spoke to me. It sang to me. It wanted me to join it. To become... one with it.”

Wraith’s eyebrows raised and her eyes were wide, but she didn’t speak. Just tightened her grip on his hand.

“When you fixed me. When we integrated down there in the Banshee, I lived your memories of that final battle with you.”

“Well, that’s one way to introduce you to full-blown solo-fighter space conflict.” Her wry tone didn’t match the emotional resonance he was picking up, but he couldn’t stop to analyze it.

If he stopped talking, he might not be able to finish.

"I brought it out with me. The Void. When we left, when we were on the *Eventide*. On the Styx, at The Folly. It was with me. The whole time. Whispering. Enticing."

"You know that's not a *good* thing, right?"

His laugh was brittle, "You're telling me. But then, when we were down in the research facility, before we integrated, you were dying."

Her brows drew together, "I'll confess, I'm a little hazy on that part."

"Right after I opened the second-to-last door. You collapsed. Seizing. It wasn't physical, it was a mental barrage. I couldn't feel you. Couldn't *reach* you. Didn't know how."

Wraith's face was bloodless. At some point they'd interlinked their fingers and were holding each other's hands so tightly that it was cutting circulation.

"What did you do, Helios?" Her voice was a whisper.

He smiled at her, let her feel the certainty and deliberateness of his decision. "I said yes. It was the only way to reach you."

She stared at him, speechless.

"I let the Void in, Wraith, let it become part of me. I regret a lot of things, but I've never regretted saving you."

## Chapter 2

“You’re an idiot, you know that?”

Wraith had pulled her hand back and was flicking her fingers to get the blood flowing again. She also paced, even though the mess barely allowed for three steps in either direction.

She stepped out into the corridor to work off the agitation, held a hand up for him to stay where he was. The bastard just shrugged and opened his hands. Apparently, he had finished talking.

She marched down the hall.

He’d let the fucking Void possess him—to save *her*.

*What the actual fuck?*

She’d have accepted it from one of her team, her family. Depending on who it was, she might have even expected it.

But Kael?

How the fuck was she supposed to deal with that?

She passed the mess door again, “You’re a moron!”

To the end of the hall, back again. Leaned on the door and stared at him. He’d slipped into SID Major neutral.

Watching.

Waiting.

Wraith wasn’t sure what scared her more; his calm acceptance of it, or that he’d done it for her.

Part of her wanted to ask why—but she knew why. Even if she wasn’t ready to face it.

Instead she said, “It’s with you now?”

For a moment his face took on a slightly distant look, “Yes and no. It’s... always there. But it’s quiet. Like it’s sleeping. Or waiting.”

She blinked. Once, twice, three times. Pushed back into the corridor.

“Great. I have the living embodiment of a sleeping dimension on my ship. Perfect. Just perfect.”

To his credit, he waited as she paced up and down again.

Finally, she stepped back into the mess, took a deep breath and tried to pull her fractured thoughts together. “You know, going to Perdition might actually be the best thing for you.”

“Why?”

“Because Shade? Knows how to talk to the Void.”

Kael had already started writing a report on Shade before it hit him—he wasn’t SID anymore. Wasn’t even military.

Hell, he was probably on a kill list.

He finished it anyway. Old habits die hard, and he’d learned that information was always the best currency.

Wraith was keeping her distance. Physically and... otherwise. It was a relief for him to feel her presence again; he doubted she felt the same way.

He’d learned from Rina that Ghost Command’s link didn’t work that way. It was a switch. A conscious choice to connect and disconnect.

No wonder Wraith found its near-perpetual presence disturbing.

But after only the Void for company in his head these last few months, having her in his soul again was a comfort.

And thinking of Rina...

He brought up his comm, typed out a quick message:

*A week in and Wraith hasn’t killed me yet. Progress?*

He’d just laid it down when it beeped at him.

*You wish, she’s just biding her time.*



## CHAPTER 2

It seemed they were close enough to a Gate for the FTL messages to be processed in near-real time.

*You told her where I was, didn't you?*

*Ask a stupid question...*

*Fair enough.*

*Thank you.*

*You're welcome... Bill ;)*

*Yeah, I don't think that's gonna happen.*

*Annd... you're still a moron. At this rate Shade's going to win the betting pool.*

**What** betting pool?

*Fuck. I am going to lose. I hate that.*

*Ummm...*

*Nvm. Tell my sister I love her.*

*Will do.*

*Love you R*

*Love you too... Bill ;)*

He shook his head with a smile and put the comm away, hoping that Rina never explained to Wraith what the nickname meant.

Wraith was finalizing their next jump co-ords when Helios walked onto the bridge.

“Rina said to tell you she loves you.”

She turned to him, “And when did you talk to Rina?”

“Just now. Text comms. We must be near a UCG.”

The Universal Comms Gates were like mini, stable wormholes. Only large enough for a thin stream of information to pass through at any time, but without them the Confederation would fall apart.

Wraith looked down at the console.

“None listed. Which is concerning; probably means it’s one of yours.”

“Not mine. I’m not SID anymore,” he reminded her.

“Hmm. Regardless, it’s a good thing we’re about ready to jump. You good to go?”

He sat and fastened his harness. Not strictly necessary, but it was proper safety protocol. She resisted the urge to roll her eyes, but it was a near thing.

The ship lurched into the still of hyperspace. Wraith happened to be watching Helios as they did so, saw the briefest of moments where his eyes shifted color.

Remembered the last time that had happened.

*Oh-kay then. Guess the Void isn’t as sleepy as he thinks.*

She reached over and poked him, “You still with me?”

He drew his brows together, “Yes. Why?”

She debated lying. Decided on truth, for better or worse.

“I just got the impression that your... passenger woke up for a moment.”

Kael frowned, “I don’t think so.”

“Your eyes changed.”

“How?”

“They changed color. Brown to black to gray to white; back to brown. It was pretty creepy.”

He stared at her. “You’ve seen it before.”

“Stay out of my head unless you’re invited, *Helios*. And yes. In that Void-forsaken lab when you *channeled* the Anchor back with... with Spirit.”

She looked away, blinked hard.

He didn't say her name. Didn't need to. Just put a hand on hers as the grief rose. He didn't push, didn't *reach*. But somehow, he steadied her as the wave crashed on her and receded.

A deep breath later, she nodded, and he took his hand back.

"So, yeah."

There didn't seem to be much more to say.

He watched her for a long time before he turned back to the starless sky. "What's our exit point?"

"*Charon's Toll*. Ever been there?"

He frowned, "Only when it was under military control. It was one of the first given over to civilian management. Reports are more... *mixed* about it now. It's not exactly considered the safest station, although almost everyone in this sector stops there anyway."

"So I read. We don't *have* to stop there—"

He cut her off, "One of the first things they taught me was that you can never have too much information. We may be out, but there is still a war coming."

Wraith could feel his rising rage at SID and whoever was behind the fake attacks designed to reignite the war.

"*Charon* is much closer to military space than The Folly," he continued. "Let's find out what the rumors are saying."

"Fair enough. We can stock up on supplies while we're there. We don't need them, but it's still three weeks to Perdition and I think we've both had enough short rations in our lives already."

They dropped out of hyperspace. On the console, the marker for *Charon's Toll* Station blinked.

Right on target.

Kael's grin was boyish and still annoyingly, dangerously appealing. "Good to go."

And all of a sudden, she wasn't sure that she was.

## Chapter 3

Even four years later, there were still signs that the station had once been military.

You had to look for them beneath the noise and chaos caused by the thousands and thousands of people that had overtaken the place, but once you clocked one, the rest became obvious.

Kael amused himself by counting them.

Double-thickness blast doors? Check.

Camouflaged surveillance? Check. He would bet half the credits he'd won in the Arena that SID was still monitoring them.

Disguised gate drops? Check.

These were at choke points that could be sealed to form kill zones; he wondered if the locals even knew about them.

“What brings you to CTS?”

A large man in a uniform—not military, probably station security—stepped up to them.

Kael had sized him up and found him lacking before he'd finished talking, so he just smiled lazily, “A bit of this, a bit of that.”

The man glowered and Wraith laid a hand on Kael's bicep. It was a gesture that looked friendly, but wasn't.

“We have credits to spend, a ship to refuel,” she gave him a sidelong look so hot that his pulse skyrocketed. “Maybe a bed wider than a bunk to spend the night on.”

The guard looked only marginally appeased. “We don't like his kind here,” he told her bluntly, tapping a finger to his temple.

His fucking optics. How did half of the fucking universe know how to spot the micro-signs of his SID-issued augments?

"I'll keep him occupied," Wraith promised with a wink, and Void damn it all, he could feel his IQ dropping.

"You do that," the guard muttered, standing aside.

She linked her arm companionably with his.

He could feel his gaze following them.

"They'll be watching us now," he muttered.

She shrugged, "Let them. I'd be far more concerned about the bounty hunters than Station Security anyway."

He didn't argue, although he wanted to. Besides, she was probably right.

"Hey, Wraith?"

"Yeah?"

"I know *why* you did that, but do me a favor and *don't*."

Her look was quizzical, "Don't what?"

He stepped back and yanked his arm away, "You *know* what. Don't start something you're not prepared to finish."

And with that he turned and stalked into the nearest store.

Wraith froze as her brain caught up with Kael's words and was short circuited by a sudden, visceral *want*.

She had to take a moment. Finally pressed a hand to her stomach and let out a ragged breath before she followed him into the store.

It sold a random mess of tech, clothing, and gear. All pre-owned and probably questionably acquired.

Kael had grabbed a couple of items; clothing and what looked like a set of iron knuckles.

*I guess we're shopping.*

She found a leather thigh sheath that looked like it would fit her preferred blade, but nothing else she'd be willing to spend credits on.

She dropped it on the counter next to Kael's pile that had grown while she was browsing. She wondered what was lurking under the pile of clothes.

The store owner quoted them an outrageous price, that came down substantially after Kael glared at him for a minute.

“You know, you completely ruined that poor man’s day?”

He glanced at her, and she saw him slip the iron knuckles into his pocket for easy access.

“I didn’t feel like haggling. He didn’t know enough to be worth the effort.”

“Huh. And how can you be so sure of that, *Major*?”

“Quoting Shade here, *Captain*, you’re not getting all my secrets without at least buying me dinner first.”

He shocked a laugh out of her, “Void help me, I don’t think the universe can deal with two of you.”

She hooked an arm around his again, mostly to appease their not-so-stealthy watchers, as they slowly wound their way around every type of person imaginable.

Once, Kael reached out a hand and caught the wrist of a terrified looking pickpocket creeping up behind him. He didn’t even turn around. It was impressive.

She raised an eyebrow at the would-be thief who backed away quickly with hands raised.

Finally, she caught the scent of spices and cooking food from somewhere ahead. Her stomach reminded her that it had been a long time since breakfast.

She pulled him forward to the now-visible food market, “So, if I buy you dinner, do I get all your secrets?”

His look was amused exasperation.

“No. Because this is lunch.”

As far as station food went, he’d had worse.

He might’ve even enjoyed it—curry? Stew? Something with meat of highly questionable origin at any rate—if not for the growing sense of impending violence.

Anything close enough to see, he could deal with. A sniper would be another story.

Without considering *how* he did it, he let his senses drift across the room and up the walls to the mezzanine deck. An impossibility, which meant it was probably the Void.

He'd worry about it later given the four targets in the room with them, carrying small weapons. One more on the deck. Rifle hidden beneath a coat.

They intended to take them alive.

Their mistake.

There was also no station security here. Which meant they'd been paid to stay away.

He felt Wraith's hand on his, pulled himself back to himself.

Her face was concerned, but it was a micro expression. He doubted anyone else would recognize it for what it was.

"You went away again." Her voice was barely audible; she knew he could hear it anyway.

"Five bounty hunters, four down here, one on the mezzanine."

Her eyes shuttered as tactical awareness took over.

She sat back lazily, took a bite of her meal and smiled. That particular smile still haunted his nightmares sometimes.

Her eyes idly passed over the crowd as she listened to him.

"Red jacket, three o' clock. Torn jumpsuit, six o' clock. Scar-face at nine, and the scared-looking kid at twelve behind me." He smiled, "He's the one in charge."

Wraith rolled her neck, taking in the upper level.

"Let me guess, beige coat? Utterly failing to be inconspicuous."

He nodded. She sipped her tea and winked.

"Ready when you are, *Golden Boy*."

## Chapter 4

He smirked at her, “After you, *Hunny Bun*.”

She glared at him. Sure, she’d walked into that one, but was still going to enact extreme violence on him later.

Kael’s eyes flicked up behind her. She dropped and rolled as Torn Jumpsuit fired a GlueNet at her—nonlethal restraint tech, standard bounty kit. It splorched against the bench, hardening instantly with the stench of burnt sugar.

So they wanted them alive. Good to know.

Just not good for them.

She’d closed the distance before he’d been able to bring up his secondary weapon. Sloppy.

One uppercut and a hard crack later and he was twitching at her feet. She shrugged inwardly; a little harder than intended, but he wouldn’t have known much anyway.

A PinPoint dart hit the floor next to her, cracking the tile before it bounced. It would seem their sniper’s aim was as bad as his attempt to blend in.

She spun, snapped Red Jacket’s knee sideways with a sickening crunch, and pulled a throwing knife from under her shirt. He hadn’t hit the floor when the sniper plunged over the mezzanine railing, her blade buried through his eye and into his brain.

She didn’t need to look to know that Kael had dealt with Scar-face and was stalking the kid, who was probably in his twenties all things considered.

Red Jacket tried to swipe his dagger at her. She rolled her eyes, stomped on his broken leg again. The man howled and dropped the knife.



She leaned over him, let him read exactly how little she cared about hurting him. “Hush.”

“Bitch,” he spat at her.

*Not even trying to be original.*

She kicked his knife away and pressed a boot to his neck, turned to watch as the boy Kael was stalking gave up all pretense and lashed out.

The kid had training. Military training.

Kael didn’t hesitate. Slid back. Came in harder. But something in his stance shifted.

Recognition.

This kid wasn’t just another amateur, so he was probably SID.

Wraith glanced down at Red Jacket—now Red Face—desperately clawing at her leg. He needed to hurry up and pass out so she could enjoy the show.

It had been a while since Kael had fought an Ethereal—one of SID’s elite shadow operatives.

And the boy was good. Very good.

But was he good enough?

He aimed a punch at the kid’s nose, pulled back at the last moment as the boy ducked to the side.

Predictable.

He swept the kid off his feet, and he landed with a grunt.

Kael knew he could just end it now. But he had so much fucking anger to deal with, and even in the Arena, he couldn’t let himself lose control.

Now there was no more need to hold back.

“Again!”

The boy’s eyes hardened as he pushed himself up, wiping a trail of blood off his mouth.

“Your funeral, old man.”

He darted forward, too fast, but Kael stepped into the movement and hammered a fist to his stomach. A satisfied smile flashing across his lips.

The boy doubled over, but used the movement to roll forward and knock

Kael off balance.

Pain bloomed, white hot in his shoulder. A knife, but not monomolecular, thank the Void. It hit bone. Lodged deep.

*Idiot.*

He spun and kicked the boy over the table.

His left arm was useless, which made the fight almost even. His augments meant he could tamp down the pain that might otherwise have been distracting.

“Come on, boy. You should have been trained better than this.”

The kid snarled and stalked him in a wide circle. About time his training kicked in.

Kael didn’t bother following the manual. Instead he leaned back against the table, perfectly at ease, channeling Shade’s chaotic energy like it was his own.

The boy blinked. Eyes darted to the side.

Calculating the odds and not liking them.

He dashed for the door.

Right into Wraith’s elbow. She caught him in the throat, dropped him like dead weight. She bent down and rapped the kid’s head against the floor, hard enough to echo. Kael couldn’t see his eyes roll back, but he knew that’s what had happened.

“Can you grab that one?” Wraith called as she lifted the boy onto her shoulder.

Red Jacket lay unconscious a few meters from him.

With his shoulder, carrying wasn’t going to happen. Instead he just grabbed the man’s collar with his good hand and followed Wraith out. Dragging the man behind him and pretending that pain wasn’t flaring with every step.

The same security guard as before blocked her way. Wraith gave him her best deranged smile and the man paled.

“Are you going to take us somewhere quiet so we can have a little chat with our friends?” she asked, voice light. “Or are you going to get in my way?”

His Adam’s apple bobbed a couple of times.

## CHAPTER 4

Then he jerked his head, “This way.”

*Good boy.*

## Chapter 5

“Tea?”

The boy—man, but Void, twentyish seemed young—blinked at her in confusion.

Her favorite station security guard had eventually taken them to a small tea house. His first option of an all-too-easy-to-lock cell having been deemed unsuitable.

He’d cleared out the patrons, stationed himself outside. She’d dropped enough credits on the terrified owner to make him serve them *before* he disappeared into the kitchen and out the back entrance.

Now she sat at a small, round table with the disoriented SID operative, while Kael watched them with arousing intensity from a few tables away.

There was still a dagger buried in his shoulder, but it was keeping him from bleeding out, so she didn’t worry too much.

Red Jacket was still out cold. Kael was resting his feet on him as he kept steady pressure on his wound.

Wraith poured the kid tea, added a liberal amount of honey. Nudged it towards him.

“What’s your name?”

His eyes darted between her and Kael. He said nothing but picked up the tea, winced as he swallowed.

“Yeah. Partially crushed windpipe. It’s a bitch, I know. I’d apologize, but I wouldn’t want to be disingenuous.”

His eyes narrowed slightly, but he remained silent.

“I’m going to call you Ed. At least until you decide to tell me otherwise.”

She paused, giving him a chance to object.

“Why Ed?” Kael murmured behind her.

Wraith shrugged without turning, “As good a name as any, and it’s short.”

She sipped her tea, which was surprisingly good.

“Now, Ed, the Major here tells me that you won’t break under interrogation.”

The boy’s eyes narrowed at her use of Kael’s former rank.

“We have a little bet going, and you wouldn’t want me to lose, would you?”

She opened her eyes wide, blinked at him.

“You’ve weighed the odds, Ed. You know you’re not getting out of here easily. If at all. You know that neither of us have any issue with killing you.”

“He does,” Ed whispered. Wraith smothered a smile.

“No, honey, he doesn’t. Not anymore. In fact, I’m the only thing stopping him from taking a lot of frustration out of your hide.”

The boy didn’t pale, but his pupils constricted. They just didn’t build operatives like they used to.

She leaned her elbows on the table, “So, Ed, what can you tell me that’ll make me hold the Major back long enough to give you a head start?”

“You should have let me kill him.”

Kael was sitting shirtless on the diagnostic table, back in the *Lethe*’s MedBay. Wraith was examining his shoulder with more roughness than he thought the situation called for.

And her hands were fucking freezing.

“So you keep telling me, *Major*.” The diagnostic beeped in her hand and she stepped back. “But you have yet to give me a compelling enough reason.”

“He’s a SID Ethereal, Wraith. Do you know what that means?”

“Lie down.”

She emphasized her words by yanking the dagger out. He yelled and was still cursing her as he complied. Warm blood washing down over his arm.

“Drugs or knockout?” she asked.

“Neither.”

A pause, “Any fool can be uncomfortable.”

He grunted. "And stop throwing my own words back at me."

She bent down to look him in the eye, "Not a chance. Now this is going to fucking hurt. You don't have to take the meds, but I'll think less of you if you don't."

He hissed a breath through clenched teeth, "Below the belt, *Captain*."

"That's how I roll, Major."

"Fine, pain meds. And this conversation isn't over."

"Well we can continue it when you're not pouring blood all over my ship."

"My ship," Kael muttered as her footsteps receded down the hall.

The meds took the edge off, but she was right. Fixing his shoulder really fucking hurt.

And he fully intended to take it out on her when it was done.

After too fucking long on the MedTable—and one quick shower—Kael stepped into the mess where Wraith was seated at the table.

She reached behind her, grabbed a bowl, and set it down opposite her. "Soup. Might actually have seen a real vegetable at some point, but the protein is suspect."

He sat without saying a word. She eyed him like he was a battlefield and she was planning her attack. Passed him a spoon.

"I know you're disappointed, but they were all out of GRIM."

Despite himself, he snorted. General Ration Industrial Meals were the absolute "food" of last resort.

He started to eat. MedTech was near miraculous, but it burned through calories like nobody's business.

"One more scar for your collection," she noted.

He grunted. They were not having *that* conversation today.

"And yes, I do know what an Ethereal is. What that means."

He stared up at her, "Do I even want to know how?"

"Spook was one."

Shock made him drop his spoon. It clattered in his bowl and slopped soup onto the table.

"You're kidding?!"

“Nope. She was one of SID’s top assassins for years before she joined the GHOST program. We called her Spook because we liked the ambiguity of the call sign.”

Kael was still trying to process, but managed to utter, “Spy and ghost. Cute.”

“I’m telling her you called her that.”

He shuddered and picked up his spoon, “Please don’t.”

“Coward.”

“No, just not stupid.”

Wraith laughed—her real, unfiltered laugh.

Something inside him tensed, something else loosened. He was in completely over his head and he knew it.

To cover, he started eating again. “So, back to Ed, and why you let him go.”

She rocked her head side to side, thoughtful.

“As you said, we weren’t going to get much out of him. We already knew SID was after you, and now we know they want you back in one piece. Or at least, still mostly functional.”

He grunted in acknowledgment.

“We also know that he’d been briefed well enough to know that you come from the nearly unheard-of *principled* side of SID.”

Huh. He’d missed that.

“And thanks to our little tea party, we also know that there isn’t a general bounty out. On either of us.”

“Surprising,” he noted.

Her eyebrows rose almost comically, “Kael. You spent three months at The Folly. If there was a general bounty out on you, do you really think you would have survived your first week?”

He blinked. “Good point.”

He could blame the pain meds for the confusion—and maybe also for the way her voice hit him when she said his name.

If he tried hard enough.

“I still say you should have let me kill him.”

“He’s just a baby, Major.” Her smile was vicious, “And when babies are hurt, they run back to their mama.”

“And you think that’s a good thing because...”

“Angry mamas are reactive. They make mistakes.”

“SID don’t.”

Her laugh echoed through the room, “Oh, Void, you have so much still to learn about your former brethren.”

She shook her head, loose hair floating from side to side. “Anyway, I got us some supplies, food, extra MedKits—” she raised an eyebrow at him, “—and the like. They were surprisingly eager for us to move along. Hardly tried to cheat me at all.”

It was his turn to laugh, just a little. “I’m still mad at you, you know.”

She smiled at him as she stood, “You’re not mad at me. And if you are, you’ll get over it. I’m going to catch some sleep until we’re ready to jump again. If any mercs, soldiers or pirates attack us...”

“Deal with it and let you sleep?”

She rested a hand on his good shoulder for the briefest moment.

“Exactly.”

The sensation of that touch remained long after he heard her cabin door swish closed.



## Chapter 6

Nearly two weeks out from *Charon's Toll* and still no signs of pursuit. No bounty hunters. No tracking pings. Just quiet.

Too quiet.

And so it was against Kael's better judgment that he'd agreed to dock at Tartarus Nine Alpha.

The moon's colony was small, serving as a resupply station for ships headed for the frontier or coming back. It didn't see much business and the locals were standoffish and unpleasant.

He could admit he'd lost his temper, just a little, at the fourth person that had asked him how much he wanted for Wraith. She might have found it amusing. He didn't.

That the man got a lucky knife strike into the same shoulder he'd injured before was something he blamed completely on being distracted by her laughter.

Later, she'd patched him up in silence, watching him with an unnerving intensity as the MedDoc worked its miracles. He couldn't unravel it. Was still pondering it over now, hours later, watching the stars from his seat on the bridge.

"How's the shoulder?"

Kael rolled it as Wraith settled into the *Lethe's* pilot chair.

"Seems fine."

"If you don't mind me saying, you seem to have a shorter fuse now."

He grinned, "You're not the only one enjoying the benefit of being off a leash."

She fell silent as he realized what he had said. They hadn't spoken about it. About the Tether—the invisible leash that had bound her to him.

About him not telling her he'd disabled it and letting her think she was still a prisoner.

For months.

"I'm sorry. For everything."

It was all he could say, and he knew it would never be enough.

She met his eyes, held them, and eventually shrugged, "Forget it. It's past."

"Is it?"

She considered it, her gaze on the distant stars.

"Yeah. I'm not saying I forgive you. And you can bet that your lifespan will be drastically shortened if you every betray me like that again—"

He winced at the word *betray*. Direct and deserved hit.

"—but I get it. Some of it. And I can move past it. You?"

"Do you mind if I wallow in guilt for a while longer?"

She smiled, the genuine one he had only seen a handful of times, "I'd be disappointed if you didn't."

The sat in silence together, watching the stars.

A few times, Kael noticed her glancing over at him.

When she did it again, he asked, "Everything okay?"

"Yeah, just trying to work through a couple of things."

Her finger was tapping again, but so softly even his augmented hearing couldn't pick up the pattern. A pity, as he'd been getting pretty good at Morse Code.

"Want to talk through it?"

She didn't answer.

He let the silence sit.

Finally, she turned to him, "A lot of it is going to sound obvious."

"Okay."

An almost laugh, "Okay. So, we're about a week out from Perdition."

He nodded.

"Alone in space, at least as far as the mid-range nav can tell."

He glanced down at the console, tapped a few keys and confirmed. "Seems

like it.”

“There are no emergencies, no systems failures, no life-threatening injuries.”

He smiled, “Well now you’re jinxing us, but yes. Sure.”

She paused a moment, “And the Void is quiet?”

He checked the boundary between him and not-him. “So far, yeah.”

She nodded thoughtfully.

“So, in theory, we could both get a full night’s sleep without more than the usual amount of paranoia?” she asked.

“Seeing as they really are after us, it doesn’t count as paranoia. But yes. And feel free. I’m not tired yet.”

She stood, stretched, and stepped towards him with a predatory grin. “Me neither.” His confusion lasted only a moment before she straddled him and fixed her lips to his, her fingers threading through his hair.

As his arms closed around her in an almost crushing grip, Wraith had just enough time to appreciate Kael’s reaction times before his mouth made her lose her train of thought.

She’d never forgotten the taste of him, the feel of him.

She needed more.

Her hands ran down over his chest, gripped his shirt and drew back just long enough to yank it over his head. He pulled her back to him, taking her mouth again, and was not nearly as subtle with her shirt, which he ripped open.

His hands burned against her skin.

Between her legs, she could feel the hard length of him. And there were way too many layers of clothes still between them.

She shifted her hips, moaning even as he drew back and swore. Then he surged to his feet holding her close to him. She wrapped her legs around his waist as he carried her out of the bridge, and bent to nip at his neck. Hard.

He hissed in a breath. She kissed the spot, and gently nibbled at his earlobe as his breathing became more ragged.

She hadn’t even noticed they were in his quarters until they were in a

controlled tumble onto the bunk.

His mouth reclaimed hers and his hands stroked up to cup her breasts and run his thumbs over aching nipples.

She moaned and arched, and he groaned again.

He drew his head back to look at her, his eyes desperate, barely hanging onto control.

Good. She wouldn't want to be the only one feeling that way.

"Fast?" he gasped, "Or finesse?"

Her hands were already at his waist, pulling on his belt. "Fuck finesse."

He grinned at her and sat up, making quick work of removing his pants and boots, *and* hers.

She barely had time lick her lips in appreciation when he rolled back onto her.

She arched her hips, desperate to be filled. And was rewarded when he buried himself to the hilt in one smooth thrust.

His voice was a whisper in her ear, or maybe her head, "Fuck."

"Yes," she told him, biting his shoulder.

Then thought vanished. There was only sensation, her body matching his, meeting each increasingly desperate thrust. Her fingers clenched on hard muscle.

He pressed his lips to hers as he came; collapsed on her with rolling shudders. Fuck, she'd missed this.

He nipped her ear, and when she turned her head, he kissed her. Almost gently.

Almost.

When he rolled to the side, she moaned in his mouth, protesting the loss as he slid out of her, then moaned for a completely different reason as his fingers replaced his cock.

Gliding over her clit, slipping inside her, then out again. Over and over.

He wouldn't release her mouth either.

Just kissed her and worked her until she shattered, body spasming uncontrollably, tears on her cheeks and his name on her lips.

She lay draped over him. Boneless. Still dangerous. And naked.

Kael wasn't complaining.

He kissed her hair. He felt sated and, Void help him, happy. It was a strange sensation; he thought he could get used to it.

Her fingers were idly tracing patterns on his chest, stirring interest far lower.

"You know you're not going anywhere, right?" he told her.

Wraith raised her head, gray eyes meeting his, one eyebrow raising suggestively, "Oh?"

He laughed as he rolled her onto her back, "That too."

Her expression changed from speculative to suspicious. "Meaning?"

"Meaning," he told her as nibbled his way down her jaw, "that after—" he bit her neck, marking her as she'd done to him, "—you're staying here."

He shifted position and trailed kisses down her collar bone, "You're sleeping here, next to me."

Reached a hand up and made her gasp as he ran his palm over her breast. "And tomorrow—" he kissed the other, "—we deal with the emotional side of things like responsible adults."

He closed his mouth over her nipple.

She grabbed his hair and pulled him back, eyes wide with desire warring with shock. "Have you *met* us?"

He nodded, "That's why." Waited a beat, "Or should I stop?"

She cursed him—fairly creatively—and released his head to reclaim its prize.

Fast was done.

Finesse was just beginning.

Later, much later, they lay together in the dark. Kael was drifting, half asleep and floating in the afterglow when she stiffened slightly in his arms.

"Kael?"

"Hmm?"

She was silent for a long time, then she let out a breath and the tension he'd felt dissolved.

"You can call me Ash."

## Chapter 7

“Void damn it all!”

Wraith raised an eyebrow at the man glaring at her from the bottom of the *Lethe*’s ramp, “Good to see you too, Shade.”

He wasn’t as dangerously underweight as when they’d last seen him, but was still thin enough for a wisp of worry to thread through her.

Kael was still in the hold, grabbing their gear and double checking the locked box he was still suspiciously evasive about. She wasn’t pushing him for an answer. Yet.

She left him to it and walked down the ramp. The air was warm and dry; a gentle breeze carried the smell of dust and grass and broken masonry.

She stopped in front of Shade, who was looking at her the way their old drill sergeant used to look at them when they’d found yet another loophole to the rules.

“You couldn’t have waited until you made planet-fall to jump him?” he demanded. “Spook’s never going to let me live down losing this bet.”

Wraith held up a hand, vaguely aware that Kael had just stepped out into the sunshine behind her. “Wait a minute, one, how the fuck do you know that? And two, you and Spook were *betting* on when we’d—?”

Shade stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, lifting her off her feet in a rib crushing hug. “Missed you, babe, but you owe me.”

He set her down and stalked up the ramp to Kael, who was trying to hide a grin.

“And you!”

Kael didn’t let him finish, just stepped forward and hugged the small man.

Taking tactical advantage of the situation, if she had to guess.

Not that Zane was actually that small—he was her height, and built lean—but next to Kael’s defined musculature...

She dragged her thoughts back as she heard Kael whisper to Shade, “I’m kind of glad Rina won.”

Shade wrapped a friendly arm around him and walked him back down the ramp.

“You knew about the bet?” she asked in a quiet, friendly voice.

Both men stepped back. Kael raised his hands.

“Rina mentioned a bet with Shade. She wouldn’t say what it was about and I didn’t connect the dots until about thirty seconds ago.”

“Hmm,” she bent to pick up her bag. Turned her head to Shade, “you sure the ship is going to be okay just standing here?”

They were in an open field, completely exposed. Even if Perdition was at the ass-end of nowhere.

“Come and see,” Shade told her. “You too, Sunshine.” And he pulled Kael towards a nearby hill with far more strength than you’d expect. Which was, of course, the point.

That was half the fun with Shade; he never gave you what you expected, only what you deserved.

It didn’t take long to reach the top, and Shade’s grin was wide and delighted as he turned and looked past them. Kael’s small exclamation had her turning. Nothing amiss. The *Lethe* in a field.

She took a couple of steps toward them, then glanced back over her shoulder—

Just a field. No *Lethe*. Not even a shimmer.

One step down: ship.

One step up: no ship.

“How the fuck did you manage that?”

Shade smirked at his current favorite disasters, wiggled his fingers, “Magic.”

They both rolled their eyes at him.

If they weren't so cute it would be revolting.

"Come on," he told them, strolling down the other side of the hill to the open plain below, "can't wait to show you what I've done with the place."

He heard Helios's whispered, "What place?"

Could feel Wraith's answering shrug.

And if Zane rubbed a hand briefly over his heart? Well, Shade reserved the right to ignore it.

"You're wondering how to get your hands on that cloaking tech, aren't you?"

Kael glanced at Wraith and shrugged a shoulder as nonchalantly as he could with someone who could literally read his mind at times.

"It's amazing. It shouldn't be possible."

"Neither should your traveling companion, but here we are."

She shot him a wink and trotted down to Shade, slinging an arm around his waist and laughing at something he said.

Kael slowed his pace slightly. What she'd said about the Void bothered him. Not that she was wrong; he absolutely *shouldn't* be carrying an extra-dimensional entity in his cells.

But it was more that—

He stopped in his tracks as realization struck. The wind around him stilled. Even the dust seemed to hesitate in the air.

It was awake.

A frisson danced across his skin as if to say, *we wondered when you'd notice. What do you want?*

He'd tried talking to it before, without success.

In fact, the only time he'd ever felt like they had any kind of two-way communication had been back in Chad's lab of horrors, before he and the Void had somehow disrupted the Anchor that was keeping poor Spirit alive.

Which made it a nasty surprise to hear the memory of a whisper in response to his question.

*Protect*, the Void told him.



Wraith and Shade were waiting for him at the bottom of the hill.

As he stepped up to them, it was as if he'd crossed an invisible barrier. Suddenly there were buildings in front of him. Ruins for the most part. Tumbled down and overgrown.

Now the smells of brick dust and broken mortar made sense. It was insane. Impossible. And it drove all thoughts of the Void out of his mind.

He looked Shade in the eye.

"What do you want in exchange for this cloaking tech?"

Shade looked around, pretended to consider, and pointed a thumb at Wraith. "Can I have her?"

The rise of something that felt suspiciously like jealousy meant he hesitated a beat too long and got Wraith's fist in his gut as a result. "You're not getting rid of me that easily."

He wrapped an arm around her shoulders, grinned. "Fair enough."

Shade rolled his eyes, "Okay, you two have officially moved from cute to nauseating."

He didn't apologize. Neither did Wraith.

Shade rolled his eyes again as he turned. "Come on," he waved at them to follow. "Oh, and by the way, Sunshine? Nice knife."

Kael reached for his belt—and froze. The sheath was empty. The Chaos Demon must have swiped it when he'd hugged him.

"Can I kill him?" he whispered to Wraith.

"I'd miss him, sorry." She kissed his cheek and followed Shade down the path of an old road.

And although he didn't know it, his eyes were Void dark when he muttered, "Pity."

## Chapter 8

Shade was counting stars again when he heard her walk up behind him.

“You finally tire him out?”

Wraith lay down in the grass next to him and elbowed him in the ribs.

“Ow.” He paused. “Well, did you?”

She turned her head to him to give him her best, “my best friend’s an idiot” look. He hadn’t seen it in too many years and for a second, he couldn’t breathe. Then she elbowed him in the ribs again.

“I’ll take that as a yes,” he gasped out, only adding mild dramatic flair to the delivery.

She turned her head back to the stars, a smug smile tugging her lips. “You’d be right.”

Zane reached out a hand, tentatively put it over hers. She turned her hand upwards to interlace their fingers. It had been far too many years since that had happened too.

“Remember Iveros?”

He shivered, “Which time? Because both were fucking freezing.”

Her fingers tightened on his, the gesture intimate and familiar.

“The first time. Before the ice storm hit and everything went to hell. When the rest of the unit was asleep, and we snuck out to watch the auroras.”

Zane smiled as the memory surfaced. Not so pretty as the auroras in the Fold, but they were the first he’d seen, and the best for being shared.

“Why the hell they sent a unit of *Flight* cadets down to support a recon crew, I’ll never know,” he said.

Her voice was lazy and relaxed, comfortable just being there. “I heard later

they thought there might be some old fighters stashed in a bunker somewhere. If there were, we certainly never found them.”

“It was alright for you, you’d *been* force recon. The rest of us—”

“For eight weeks and exactly one mission that ended with my full unit being massacred, as you well know. You held me through enough nightmares afterwards.”

He squeezed her hand, “Well, you did keep waking up the rest of the squad and they were starting to complain.”

“Whiny bastards.”

He laughed, stilled. “What made you think of Iveros?”

She stayed silent. He let the night drift over them, content to wait.

“Things shifted so quickly. One moment it’s clear skies and dancing auroras. The next you’re fighting for your lives in minus forty temps and gale force winds.”

“This about Sunshine?”

She hesitated, looked away. “Obliquely.”

“Want to talk about it?”

Her index finger tapped a slow, silent rhythm against his hand—habitual, evasive. “Is it okay if I don’t?”

“Always.”

They watched the sky together as the stars moved slowly across it.

“Are you happy, babe?”

He had to know.

“Yes. And terrified that it’s going to be snatched away from me again.”

He turned to her, released her hand and raised his arm, tilted his head towards him. “Come here.”

She sighed and shifted closer, rested her head on his shoulder and her hand on his heart as he closed his arms around her.

“I don’t know if it’s gonna work out or not, Ash. But I have learned one thing the hard way—there’s no point borrowing trouble from tomorrow.”

“Prophet Shade?”

He smiled, “Nope. Drill Sergeant Bains.”

She raised her head, gray eyes amused, “You’re kidding. Why don’t I

remember that one?"

"You were in the infirmary. Again. After that fight with Solomon if I remember correctly."

She lay back down, "Oh, yeah. He sucker-punched me. Asshole."

"I short-sheeted his bed for a month after that."

Her laugh rolled out and eased the roughest edges of his lonely existence.

"Missed you, Zane."

He gripped her like she might vanish.

"Missed you too, Ashley."

His voice held. Just.

His heart was another story.

\* \* \*

Kael woke to the memory of a song he'd never heard before. Wraith was curled up next to him, warm, but clothed.

She must have gotten up at some point.

It was unusual—almost unheard of—for him to have slept through it. Deep sleep was a luxury he'd never been able to afford.

His lips curved up; he'd certainly earned his rest last night. Glanced down at Ash, considered waking her for round three. Or was it four?

Regretfully concluded that if she had been restless last night, she probably needed the sleep now.

He pressed a gentle kiss to her head and carefully eased out of bed.

He stretched, working out a few kinks, and set to work finding his clothes. Ruefully rejected his ripped shirt and dug in his bag to find another.

The walls of the room were fairly thick, he reflected. Hopefully thick enough to be soundproof. And with any luck, far, far away from Shade.

He slipped out of the room, unaware that he was humming.

Kael found Shade eating breakfast in a large room, at a table half-filled with acolytes.

The robes were a dead giveaway.

Shade waved him in, motioned for him to sit across from him.

No sooner had Kael sat, than a bowl of porridge and a cup of tea were placed in front of him.

“Service with a smile, Lover Boy,” Shade told him.

Kael glanced at the cultist who had served him, and who was now staring at him with unsettling intensity.

“You may want to work on your definition of smile,” he muttered, and Shade laughed.

“Myron’s smiling on the inside, aren’t you, Myron?”

The cultist nodded so deeply it was almost a bow. Kael noticed the way Shade’s gaze lingered; evaluating, protective, or predatory, he couldn’t tell.

“More GRIM?” he asked.

Shade’s head jerked back to him, “Not at all. We’ve evolved since you last experienced our hospitality.”

The man’s smile was bait and challenge.

Knowing he’d almost certainly regret it, Kael took a bite. Chewed. Swallowed.

Like eating salty wallpaper glue.

“Standard Issue Rations, you’re moving up in the world.”

“Like I said, we’re evolving.”

“And farming’s still not your strong suit.”

Shade cackled, slapping his leg. “I missed you, Sunshine. Now eat up and let me show you the arena.”

It wasn’t hard for Wraith to find the boys. She just had to follow the sounds of jeering, rhythmic chanting, and a few bone-jarring thuds.

They led here through the corridors into the sunlight where half-collapsed walls framed a floor of cracked tiles and weeds. An old arena.

Where two idiots, shirtless and bloody and obviously enjoying themselves, were trying their best not to kill each other but still win.

She damn well better not be the prize for this little display.

Keeping to the shadow of a leaning arch, she took stock. Both men were

holding back... but not much.

Kael fought with more precision and control against Shade's chaotic and unpredictable style. Although both seemed willing to accept blows just to take their opponents down with them.

The crowd roared as Shade jumped on Kael's back and locked him in a choke hold, jeered as Kael simply dropped and rolled on top of him with a crunch that sounded painful.

The question was, did she want breakfast more? Or some mid-morning exercise.

The decision was made for her with a gentle tap at her shoulder. Turning revealed an older woman who handed her what looked like a protein shake. She nodded her thanks and sipped. Not bad. At least by prison food standards.

Since the boys seemed to be having fun, she drifted toward a half-standing wall, content to watch.

The cultists had changed since they were last here. Noisier, for one. A few watched the fight with rapt expressions like it was a holy display. Others had feral gleam common to arena crowds.

And one or two just watched in somewhat unnerving silence.

She honestly wasn't sure which group was the most concerning.

A crash snapped her attention back as a body collided with spectators. Some of the cultists hadn't moved fast enough when Kael threw Shade off him.

She heard Shade's mad laugh somehow echo through the open arena as he threw himself back at Kael with reckless abandon.

She shook her head, and headed back inside. They'd be entertaining themselves for a while. In the meantime she may as well go and get the med kits.

But she sure as fuck was going to make them both beg for them first.

## Chapter 9

The room was dim, but he preferred it that way. That it discomfited visitors was just an added benefit.

His current guest was young, wide eyed, and sporting purple bruising around his neck. The MedDoc *could* have fixed it so that it was a distant memory, but failure had a price. Often, that price was pain.

They had been sitting in silence for the better part of five minutes.

A new record.

Of course, in that time, the young man's pulse rate had doubled, which cost him points.

Geist leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers and smiled.

The Ethereal's face paled.

"So tell me, Ed, was it?"

The man gulped, winced at the pain. "No, Sir. I'm Operative Cash Rutherford."

"But that's not what *she* called you, was it, Operative?"

"No, Sir."

"We don't expect our Ethereals to fail as spectacularly as you did, *Ed*."

The man in front of him stopped breathing.

Geist waited for his autonomic system to kick back in. Having a reputation was both useful and restrictive. Sometimes both at once.

"Now, let's start back at the beginning, shall we?"

"Yes, Sir. I was at *Charon's Toll* as ordered, Sir."

"And what were your orders?"

Ed blinked.

"I was there as part of the CIP, Sir."

Geist nodded, slowly. The Cult Infiltration Program: it ran perennially and most operatives put in at least a short stint.

"And how did you come to be part of such an inept capture attempt of two of our most dangerous former operatives?"

The man closed his eyes. He was about two questions away from either passing out or shitting himself. Neither were productive.

"Cash." The operative opened his eyes as Geist tossed him a tube of water, which he caught without flinching. Drank slowly.

Nodded.

"We—the cell—received orders that we were to apprehend the man. Helios. I wasn't aware of his SID history or status."

"And the woman?"

"Capture for preference. Kill if necessary."

"And you blew your cover wider than a hull breach in a firestorm."

"No, Sir."

Geist raised his eyebrow, "No?"

"Not with my primaries, Sir. None of the cell survived the Major and his..."

"Wraith," Geist told him.

Another gulp and wince.

"I was of the understanding that one other member was still alive when they left the station."

For the first time, the young man gave a slight smirk.

"He didn't survive his injuries, Sir."

Geist rose and walked to the darkened viewport. *Ed* leaned away from him instinctively.

"What do you believe in, Cash?"

"Order, Sir."

"Why?"

The man hesitated, "Because I've seen what happens when there is none, Sir."

"And despite that, you let her name you," he murmured. "I wonder why that could be."



*Ed* had stopped breathing again. Geist half turned to him, “Before this is over, you’ll believe in Chaos.”

Something flickered in the boy’s eyes, but it vanished too quickly to name. He returned to his seat.

“Now, tell me everything. You wouldn’t want me to get bored.”

\* \* \*

Wraith had her feet up on the table, reading, when Kael and Zane limped into the room.

“Not a shred of sympathy for either of you,” she said, eyes still on her data pad.

“Fair,” Shade agreed.

“Any chance of one of those med kits?” Kael.

She’d left the MedKits visible, but just out of easy reach behind her chair. They’d have to pass her to get them, and neither were that stupid. Probably.

Unless Shade cheated.

She gave him a warning side eye.

He raised his hands and sat at the table. In her peripheral vision she saw him motion to Kael to do the same.

“Oh great goddess, keeper of the painkillers, how may your most loyal servants appease you to regain your favor?”

Her lips twitched despite herself, and she looked at Zane over the top of her data pad.

“You still think you’re funny, don’t you.”

He grinned, “Seven-time undefeated champion of Friday Night Cult Comedy.”

“Were there any other competitors?” Kael muttered.

Shade turned on him, “You wound me, Sir. Again.” He turned back to her, “He hits harder now.”

“He spent three months fighting at the Folly’s Arena and getting trained by Rina—and you’re surprised?”

“Good point. Wish you’d reminded me of it earlier.”

“We both know it wouldn’t have made a difference.”

Shade turned to Kael, “She knows me too well.”

“Yeah, I’m getting that.”

There was an undertone to Kael’s voice that pissed Wraith off. And it wasn’t the Void. It was jealousy. Of course. Fucking typical.

She pulled her legs off the table and stood up, “You know what, I’m done babysitting. I’m going to my ship. Do not follow me.”

Kael leaned back apprehensively.

“What?” she snapped at him.

“Last time I heard that tone, you smashed my head and Elijah’s together. I’d rather avoid a repeat performance.”

She leaned in as Shade howled with laughter.

“Don’t. Tempt. Me.”

“So, you met The Ex. How did that go?”

Kael was still applying first aid to himself. Shade had only bothered with the bare minimum and was now sitting on the table, swinging his legs like a bored kid.

“Technically, I’ve met two of her exes. You’re the only one I’ve stabbed. So far.”

Shade grinned, wide and openly amused, “Not for lack of trying, I’m sure. And I barely count.”

Kael fixed him with his hard stare, “Don’t you?”

For a blink, he could see Zane, wide eyed and almost vulnerable. Then Shade was back in full force, but looking at the wall and not at him. Kael found himself wondering how much of *Shade* was just a mask.

“We were fuck buddies, Sunshine. Willing bodies to remind each other we were still human in a War that didn’t feel like it would ever end.”

And the trust someone like Ash would require for that told Kael far more than he imagined Shade thought it did. It twisted like a knife inside him, the pain all too familiar.

Even if part of him still wanted to punch Shade for getting to be the one who

was there when she needed someone.

He shifted awkwardly, trying to reach a deep cut on his back.

*Fuck it.*

“Give me a hand with this?”

Shade looked at him, shrugged, and took over. He was surprisingly gentle.

Kael had a thousand questions about what Wraith had been like—before.

But that wasn’t what came out.

“So, Wraith tells me you can talk to the Void.”

## Chapter 10

Wraith was sitting in the pilot's chair of the *Lethe* when static crackled from the speakers and the bridge screens turned on. Which was surprising given that the ship wasn't even powered up.

The screens were grayed out, but even so, she felt it. A pause. Heavy. Considering.

"Not who I was expecting."

The voice was mechanical. Modulated.

"You're GEO, I take it."

She wasn't over her annoyance at Kael and Zane; she'd be happy to take it out on an asshole SID puppeteer.

"Indeed, Captain. It's... good to speak to you at last."

"Uh huh. And why would that be?"

Another long pause.

"I have some information for you."

"Good for you."

A slight exhale. Just audible. Apparently, she was still perfectly capable of annoying senior officers.

"You've managed to terrify one of my more promising junior assets. I must commend you on your technique. Tea and honey. We may have to add it to the training program."

"Won't be the first time I've inspired a change in training protocol."

An almost laugh from the speaker. There was something tugging on the edges of her memory. Something in the cadence. Familiar, but distorted.

"Too scared to show your face, GEO?"

“Of you, Captain? I’d be a fool not to be, don’t you think?”

The responses were all wrong.

*What the fuck was going on?*

“But back to the matter at hand,” the voice continued, “the Cult is becoming problematic again.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Perdition seems a little far off the beaten track to be that much of a problem.”

“Have no fear. Your friend’s little offshoot isn’t the issue. But you *should* tell him to check his mail.”

The screens and speakers died.

“What the actual fuck was that?” Wraith asked the empty bridge.

Unfortunately, no answer was forthcoming.

Grumbling, she unlocked the weapons locker and grabbed a HushTec pistol and two knives. Shade was definitely going to steal one—she may as well be ready.

\* \* \*

They were underground. Two or three levels; even with his night-vision optics, Kael wasn’t sure.

Shade hadn’t spoken since he’d finished patching him up. Since he’d asked what turned out *not* to be an easy question.

He’d seen Shade at his charismatic best, his chaotic worst. He’d even seen Zane in rare moments of quiet and vulnerability.

But the man in front of him? This version of Shade was vicious, intense, and focused. And for the first time, Kael genuinely wondered if he’d be coming back.

They reached the bottom of the stairwell and Shade pushed a metal door open with a raw, scraping sound that hit him in his bones.

It was pitch dark; even his optics were struggling. Shade was not. So either he also had optics of his own, which seemed unlikely, or something else was at play.

He tried to feel for the Void. Got an impression of waiting. Nothing more.

They walked through a tunnel that was partially collapsed in places. Sometimes climbing over rubble, sometimes shuffling under it.

There was a song in his bones. At first, it was just a hum. A pressure behind his ribs. Then it began to form melody—low, insistent, impossible to ignore.

He didn't know when it had started, but it was getting louder.

Finally, they reached the end of the corridor and another closed door. Thick, like an airlock. Or a vault.

Shade looked back at him.

"Do you hear it?"

"I feel it."

Shade's eyes were hard. Dangerous.

"Close your eyes."

"Huh?"

He blinked, and Shade was gone. Then there was a hand over his eyes and a voice in his ear, "I said, close your eyes."

Kael did, for a moment only.

Then he opened them again as light flooded the room. After disabling his night vision first. He'd made that mistake before.

They were no longer in the corridor. They were in a small, round room. In the center, on a simple stone column rested a glowing rock.

He looked to Shade, who said, "Go ahead. It probably won't kill you.

"Probably?"

Shade shrugged.

He took a step forward, unable to stop himself. Laid his hand on the ore. Felt it pulse and surge up to him.

The voice in his head was clear and undeniable.

*I am the flame. We are the darkness at the edge of everything. Together, we Become.*

Shade swore as Helios collapsed. Fell like a Void-damned tree.

"What did you do?" he demanded of the artifact, which remained as silent and smug as ever. For a second, panic flickered under his skin.

Wraith was going to kill him.

*Fuck.*

He knelt next to him and checked his pulse. Thready.

Used a thumb to push back an eyelid. Black, rim to rim.

*Perfect. Fantastic. Of course.*

He exhaled hard, his throat tight. Wraith was going to skin him. Slowly.

He pulled Helios close and phased them out—

Back to the compound.

Back to the room he'd given them.

Possibly the worst decision of the day, as Wraith stepped in just as they appeared.

Her face morphed from surprise to shock to something unreadable.

He looked up at her, down at Helios, back at her.

Tried for a smile.

"Hey, babe. This isn't as bad as it looks... Probably."

Wraith stepped forward, pushing Shade to the side. "Move."

She slipped a hand under Kael's shirt at the collar, rested the other on his cheek.

*Reached for him.*

It took an effort to find him, like swimming against undertow. But she knew he was there—just out of reach. She closed her eyes, ignored the pale glow in the corner of the room where Shade was, focused only on Kael.

It took too long, only seconds in reality, but still an eternity. And then he was there. With her. Right where he was supposed to be.

She opened her eyes as he gasped, and his own eyes snapped open, fading from near-black to their normal brown in an instant.

For a moment he smiled at her. Then he rolled to the side and vomited.

Wraith turned to Shade, stared balefully at him, "You're cleaning that up."

She stepped forward as Kael staggered to his feet, wrapped an arm around him and helped him to the door. "If he dies again, I will gut you." She paused, "Also, some SID asshole named GEO said you need to check your Void-damned

mail. ”

She pulled the door shut behind them.

The click echoed.

Message delivered.



## Chapter 11

Wraith didn't like the way some of the cultists were watching them. Correction: watching *him*.

She'd taken them to the mess to make tea, came back to the table to find that a half circle of cultists had positioned themselves around the room with Kael at the center.

She glared at them, "Out!"

Seven hooded heads turned to her as one. She rolled her eyes.

"You can be creepy later. For now? Get the fuck out."

They filed out. She put Kael's tea down in front of him. He clasped his hands around it as if trying to warm them.

Something in the way he was holding himself reminded her of their time in the Void, when he'd been *emitting* enough mental energy for the Kraken's continued structural integrity to be a concern.

He wasn't emitting now, but she sat down next to him and put a hand on his back, under his shirt onto the warm skin at the curve of his spine.

Her time with Elijah and Seori had helped make sense of how physical contact boosted the mental and emotional connections.

She wished she could chat to them now.

She could use their insight.

Kael sipped his tea, seemed to come back to himself as he turned and smiled at her.

"Thanks."

"What the fuck happened?"

He paused and his eyes did the creepy Void flash-to-black thing again,

“Together we become.”

“Uh, what?”

He shook his head as if dislodging a negative thought. Or an unwelcome passenger.

“I asked Shade how to talk to the Void. That’s what it said. Together we become.”

Dread was seeping through her.

“Meaning?”

He shook his head again, “I wish I knew.”

“Did it say anything else?”

He paused, tapped his fingertips against his mug. “Maybe? I don’t know, Ash. It’s confused.”

She rested her head on his shoulder and his arm came around her. “Maybe this was a bad idea.”

He squeezed her gently, “You say that as if we have any other kind.”

He wanted her to laugh, so she chuckled. Even though it was a little too close to the truth to be funny.

The door slammed open and Shade marched in, eyes hard, radiating irritation. He held a data pad in one hand.

His lip raised in a sneer, “Awww, bless. The Cult’s doing their little newsletter again. And it’s all about you, Sunshine.”

The data pad landed in front of them. Kael looked up at Shade, brows close together, “You *are* part of the Cult.”

“No, Sunshine.” Shade’s movements were jerky and his tone was that of an exasperated daycare worker, “We’re an offshoot. I told you that before. A splinter faction. Completely different doctrine. Also, better whiskey.”

Wraith was still resting her head on his shoulder, seemingly content to let him take point on this part of the conversation.

“So you’re *not* the Void Cult?”

Shade’s palms hit the table—flat, loud. He leaned in, looming over them, “We’re *my* Void Cult. We deal with Chaos and Becoming. We are **not** the fucking

*Children of the Deep Horizon.*”

Ice froze Kael’s veins. He hadn’t heard that name in years. Not nearly long enough to be ready to deal with it again.

Shade nudged the data pad closer to them. “Read it.”

He glanced down, read the words *Returned Sun*. Couldn’t make his hand move and eventually Wraith picked it up. Scanned it.

“What the actual Void-damned fuck is this?”

He glanced at her, raised an eyebrow. She snorted and shook her head.

“It’s ridiculous and bizarre. It’s like they think you’re some kind of Void-crowned Messiah.”

His ears roared, not with the song of the Void, but with the sound of blood rushing too fast. The room was suddenly too small.

“Kael?” Her voice was getting further away. He couldn’t catch his breath. There were too many memories assaulting him at once.

“Kael!”

Spots were dancing in front of his eyes. He needed to breath. Needed to—

The slap cracked through the fog like a gunshot—pain sharp and grounding. Better than ice water. Cleaner than kindness.

Kael reeled, gasped, met Shade’s eyes. “Thanks.”

“Any time, Sunshine. Now,” Shade folded himself into the nearest chair, “I get the feeling there’s one or two little truths you’ve been dying to share with us.”

Wraith hooked an ankle around Shade’s under the table while Kael read the Cult comm. She may be grounding Kael, but she needed some Void-damned grounding herself.

She’d always hated this part of an op, where you knew something bad was about to go down, but you didn’t know *enough* to do anything yet.

Shade met her eyes, held her gaze.

She let out the breath she hadn’t known she was holding. She didn’t have to do this alone. Not this time.

Okay.

Kael set the data pad down. His face was bloodless, his expression back to SID neutral.

She could still feel the edges of his panic. Rubbed his back gently, reminding him she was there.

Kael raised his head and looked at Shade, “What do you know about... this cult.” He tapped the data pad.

Shade leaned back, stretched like a cat waking from a nap. “If you want the full curriculum, we’re going to be here a while.”

For a second, Kael’s lip twitched. Wraith winked at Shade in thanks; the atmosphere had been far too tense.

“Highlights only,” Kael said tightly. “Please.”

Shade shrugged, sat up straight and opened his hands in benediction, “Followers of the Void, in today’s sermon we—”

Wraith kicked him before rehooking their ankles.

His look was chiding. “Spoilsport.”

“Do you want me to kick you again?”

“Fine. Okay, the *Children* are the hidden face behind the main branch of what is typically called the Void Cult. Started out fairly benignly—a belief in something more than yourself. That something being the Void, envisioned as the place where our souls end up at the end.”

He shrugged, almost sadly, “We all need our fantasies. Anyway, they started piling on the crazy as the years went by, really got into it when the Inbetween became common knowledge.”

“Moved to consolidate power,” Kael’s voice managed to be harsh despite the calm tone.

“Started preaching the coming of the end; the enfolding of this universe into the Inbetween where only the *righteous* would remain untouched.”

Shade’s sarcasm meant that finger quotes weren’t necessary, but that didn’t stop him.

“They leaned pretty heavily into prophesy.” He tapped the data pad, “The Mouth is their leader. Supposedly the voice of the Void.”

Kael was very still beside her.

“Then about fifty standard years ago, they added Messianism into their

doctrine. Predicted the coming of the Sun that would rise in the Void and set it to flame.”

Wraith raised her eyebrow at Shade, “Didn’t we already do that? Pretty sure I remember fire and Fold collapse.”

“Eh, we just exploded it a little bit. This is more... channel the Void, summon holy fire, smite the unbelievers unto oblivion.”

Shade’s gaze shifted to Kael.

“Seems they’ve chosen you, Sunshine.” His voice was almost gentle now. “You ready to tell us why they think you’re their messiah?”

## Chapter 12

Wraith's finger was tapping on the table. Seemingly absently.

Tap-pause. Tap. Tap-pause. Tap. Tap-pause. Tap-pause. Tap.  
Tap-pause. Tap-pause. Tap. Tap.

Kael looked at her, "CQD?"

She looked up, surprised and somehow touched that he'd learned Morse code.

Swore anyway.

"I hate it when I do that."

"What does it mean?"

She hesitated.

"Calling all stations, distress." Shade's voice was soft... and Zane's. Kael looked across the table at him. "It was used to let all operators know of an impending distress signal."

Zane shrugged like it wasn't a big deal. Wraith said nothing.

"Why do you—"

"Kael, you're stalling."

*And you're avoiding.*

He closed his eyes. Fought down the spike of annoyance and the bitter aftertaste of jealousy. She was right—they needed to know what he knew. Even the hard parts. Maybe especially those.

"The Mouth is a woman named Lillian Ouro-Voss." It was surprisingly hard to say out loud.

Shade whistled, "I didn't think anyone actually knew the identity of The Mouth. You get that from SID?"

Kael stared at the table, his heart racing. "She's my aunt."

Wraith was sitting on the hill, just low enough to see the *Lethe*.

Shade settled in next to her, briefly considered his usual trick of putting his head on a shoulder, then pulled her close to lean against him instead.

"He's still taking some quiet time?"

The barest movement: he interpreted it as a shrug.

"Are you more upset he didn't tell you? Or that they're after him?"

She wrapped her arms around his waist and held on. He turned into the hug, held her.

"Or are you tired of always being the one who has to hold everything together?"

A laugh, quiet but real. "Fuck yes."

"How can I help?"

She let him go and sat up.

"You're here. That's enough."

"Is it?"

She looked out at the horizon as though it held the answers she was looking for.

"Yes."

"You're a terrible liar, Ash."

She gave him an impressive side eye. He nudged her with his shoulder. She nudged back, harder.

"Don't start what you're not prepared to finish, babe."

He'd said it in jest, but the shutters came down and she glanced back at her spaceship.

He looked too.

"The *Lethe*. River of Forgetting. Is that what you want? To forget?"

A warm breeze stirred the air, carrying the promise of rain. He could smell her hair as stray strands were blown outward.

“I lost... everything, Zane. They put me in a box and forgot about me. I know what it is to have everything you love, everything you care about disappear. To be completely, utterly and totally alone, and to know that will never change.

“But then it did change. I got something back. Not everything, but enough. And I don’t think I have enough spite left to survive losing everything a second time.”

His throat had closed up, making it impossible to speak. And she didn’t want comfort right now, anyway.

*Too fucking bad.*

He phased in behind her, shifting in the blink of an eye from one position to another. Wrapped his arms around her and pulled her back against his chest.

She stayed stiff and still for a very long time. Finally laid her head back on his shoulder, put her hands on his.

They said nothing. There was nothing that could be said.

They just sat, watching the *Lethe* sleep in the field like something half-remembered. And waited.

In the far corner of the hold, the case hissed open.

Kael studied the contents: the weapons and the memories.

War is Sacrifice.

His eyes drifted to the envelope; it was lying on top of everything else with those exact words written on them. Knew that the back said, “*You’ll know when it’s time to open this*”.

His hand moved before he could second-guess it. Picked up the envelope. He stared at it.

Then he turned away from the case, pushing the lid down, and waited for the near-inaudible beep to confirm it had locked.

Part of him wanted Wraith here with him for this. But she was being targeted. Because of him.

They wouldn’t stop. They didn’t know how.

After everything they’d been through, he wouldn’t let them take her. Not now. Not ever.



Knowledge is the first currency. So he'd start there. Decide on a course of action thereafter.

He sat down at the mess table, coffee in hand. The envelope lying like the embodiment of a tribunal in front of him.

He should have burned it years ago.

Should have jettisoned that Void-damned case into the nearest black hole. Had never been able to explain to himself why he hadn't.

He gulped his coffee. It wasn't as good as when Wraith made it, but it was hot and strong. He needed strength.

Then with steady hands and a leaden stomach, he picked up the envelope. Tore it open and unfolded the single page inside.

*Dikaaios*

*You left because you believed you could choose your fate.*

*You read this because you know now that you were wrong.*

*Fate chose you. And you chose to accept it.*

*Your justifications don't matter.*

*Only the results.*

*The time is approaching when you will have to make another choice  
that is already fore-ordained.*

*Until then, know that the Fold is watching.*

*As am I.*

*Lillian*

With a calm he didn't feel, he laid the letter down in front of him. He could hear her voice as if she were in the room with him. Smell the smoky sweet incense of the temple.

He raised his mug to his lips, drank the remainder of the now-cold coffee, and hurled the mug against the wall.

It wasn't Duralex, so it shattered upon impact, raining shards onto the floor. For the first time since he'd left SID, he let himself sink into what he still

thought of as his inner void. The deep pool of calm at the center of his being.

There were so many ghosts there now.

His brother, Ezra. Still screaming.

The men and women they'd killed at the black site. The merc with the scarred face.

Every person whose death he felt responsible for existed here.

He dropped lower—seeking that cold center of self.

And despite the connection he could feel even now, he didn't expect to find *her* there. Ash's image sat, frozen. Not frightened, just still. As if she was watching him.

Somehow Shade was there too, which was truly shocking. He couldn't see him, but he could feel him anchoring Wraith.

The madman stabilizing the woman he loved. There was a cosmic joke there somewhere.

Kael crouched before her image. If leaving would save her, he'd already be gone. But it wouldn't.

She'd chase him. She'd drag him back. And she'd make him pay.

So what now?

What the fuck was he going to do?

He felt a slight stir of the silence behind him; turned to it, but saw nothing. Felt nothing.

Then the song of the Void flooded in, inevitable and inescapable.

He jerked awake to the feeling of tears running down his cheeks.

He swiped his hand across one and stared.

Not tears.

Blood.

His fist clenched, hiding it from view.

*Fucking perfect.*

## Chapter 13

They were sitting together on the hill when he exited the *Lethe*. Face clean, letter in hand.

And although they stood as soon as they saw him, his zoomed-in optics had given him more than enough of a picture of Ash lying in Zane's arms to haunt his nightmares and fuel his workouts for weeks.

The jealousy was irrational.

He knew it. He just couldn't stop it.

Bizarrely, the jealousy was worse with Shade than with Elijah.

Elijah had been her heart. Her choice, until they had different choices forced on them. And they still loved each other.

But he was her past.

Shade? Shade was part of something *present*. And Kael didn't know where that left him.

She'd told him once that they'd been hook-up buddies, a very long time ago. Shade confirmed as much. He didn't doubt them.

But there was so much *more* there. He knew it.

*They* knew it.

They just wouldn't say it. At least not to him.

He paused as a thought crossed his mind like the fireflies he could see making their appearance in the field.

He hadn't actually *asked* her about it.

His SID trainer would have sent him to Iveros for a week for that failure in basic procedure.

He sighed and trudged the rest of the way up to them. He reached for Wraith's

hand, cool and solid against his, and held on like it might keep him from unraveling.

He held up the letter, clocked their shared glance.

“We need to talk.”

“Dikaio?”

Wraith passed the letter to Shade, gaze steady—*steady*.

“It’s my name. The one I was given at birth.”

“Pretentious,” Shade commented without looking up. “Kael suits you better.”

Wraith smiled, “I agree. Kael.”

His name on her lips was both a promise and a seduction.

“Hey, no flirting until after we’re done here.” Shade put the letter down and his expression turned serious.

“It’s pretty standard indoctrination stuff. Remove agency. Reduce resistance. Wrap it in destiny so it feels inevitable, even as it breaks you. It’s not faith. It’s psychological warfare, with incense and bad choreography.”

Kael smiled, and the weight lifted a little at Shade’s almost SID-like analysis of the letter. “How do you know the choreography is bad?”

“Please. I’ve seen you dance.”

Wraith laced her fingers through his. Her eyes were molten.

“Is any of this going to get exponentially worse if it waits til morning?”

Kael lifted her hand to his mouth and kissed it.

He didn’t need to look. He could feel Shade’s eye roll as he said, “I think we’ll take that as a no.” There was the sound of movement and the door clicked shut.

Wraith was looking at him like he was already naked, and if they weren’t in one of the more publicly accessible areas of the compound, he wouldn’t have bothered waiting.

Instead, he pulled her towards him, “Alone at last.”

She claimed his mouth, slow and deep, seeking connection. He was happy to answer in kind.

He stood, lifted her, and carried her out the door and back to their room with

her legs wrapped around him and her mouth fixed to his. It was slow going, but he wasn't complaining.

And he decided to ignore Shade, who opened their door for them like a concierge and closed it behind them without a word.

Void, she needed this. Needed him. A reminder the universe hadn't taken everything. Not yet.

The door had closed behind them. Part of her was relieved that Shade had followed her cleaning instructions from earlier.

She bit Kael's bottom lip and leaned back to look in the eyes, "Slow?" It was more than a request, less than a plea. Dangerously close to a prayer.

A smile full of wicked promise spread across his lips, "Slow."

He pulled her shirt over her head, nipped her jaw, let his teeth graze her neck, and lay her down on the bed like she was precious.

Looked at her like she was everything, which was both terrifying and arousing.

He sat next to her as they both pulled off their boots, then he gently pushed her back down and lay next to her. Kissed her breathless.

She let her hands roam under his shirt, tracing hard muscles under scar tissue. Enjoyed his intake of breath as she tweaked his nipple.

Lost her own when he pulled up her sports bra and took hers in his mouth.

She was on fire, aflame from the inside out, but it wasn't enough.

She pulled his shirt off, unbuttoned and unzipped his pants. Pushed them down over his hips.

"I need you."

It was hard to admit. Much harder than want.

He raised his head, claimed her mouth again. Then stood to remove the rest of his clothes, pull off hers.

She reached for him, hands and mind. Opened the bond between them.

Felt the feedback of his pleasure and desire as he filled her.

Watched as he felt hers in turn.

It was slow, as promised. Connecting, as she needed.

When they finally came, it was together. Her riding him, his thumb pressed between them on her clit, and their gazes held steady and unyielding.

Kael's hand lazily stroked Wraith's spine. She'd collapsed on top of him, showed no signs of intending to move.

Good.

It had been a hell of a day. This? Made up for a lot of it.

He let his mind drift, analyze things from a more distant perspective. Unconcerned if the answers didn't make themselves apparent just yet.

It was working well until he remembered Ash in Zane's arms on the hill. His hand paused for a split second, but she shifted to look at him. Gray eyes sated but aware.

"You want to know about Zane."

It wasn't a question.

"Are you still in my head?"

"Kinda. Do you mind?"

*Not at all.*

She laughed, "Show off."

Shifted position so she could look at him without craning her neck.

"What do you want to know?"

"There's a connection there. Deeper than I realized."

Her finger poked his ribs, "That's not a question, Major."

"Guess my interrogation technique is getting rusty." He rubbed his side, "I suppose I'm asking what you were to each other. What you are to each other now."

She studied him, "You're not going to like the answer."

"What makes you say that?"

"Because you're already jealous and it's pissing me off."

"I know I'm being irrational, Ash. I want to understand so I can... stop. Hopefully."

"I've told you before we were occasional hook up buddies."

"You did. I think you may have left out some of the nuance."

A wry chuckle, “Fair enough. For a while, Zane and I were everything to each other. We met at Basic, just clicked. That instant recognition that says, *oh, there you are.*”

“But you didn’t hook up until later?”

“It wasn’t romantic. Let alone sexual. Not then. We were best friends. Battle buddies.”

“When did things change?”

She shook her head, “That’s what you’re not getting. Things *didn’t* change. They haven’t changed. They just, evolved.”

No, he wasn’t getting it.

And he could tell she was getting annoyed.

“Maybe I shouldn’t have asked.”

“Void—damn it, Kael. Look at me.”

He did. She took his hand and laid it on her heart, spoke in his head.

*Zane was the first person I ever trusted completely. The first one who always had my back. He held me through nightmares that made me wake up screaming. I brought him back from the edge of despair more times than I care to remember.*

*We were there for each other when it counted, and sometimes that meant using each other to remind ourselves we were still alive. Still human.*

*Sometimes it means he holds me while we wait for my Void-infused significant other to finish some solo processing of very understandable past trauma, so I don’t fall apart.*

*Elijah was my heart. Will always hold part of it.*

*Zane is my anchor. My soul mate in a very real way.*

*And you, Kael, are my fucking choice.*

His heart was beating too fast.

She dropped his hand, leaned in and kissed him roughly. Bit his lip hard enough for him to taste blood and pushed to her feet.

“Got it?”

Nodding seemed like the only safe choice.

“Good.”

She found clothes, pulled them on without bothering with her boots.

“Get some sleep, Major. I’ll be back when I’m done being mad with you.”

The door slammed before he could say the one thing he'd wanted to tell her, so he whispered it to the empty room instead.

"Love you, Ash. So fucking much."



## Chapter 14

Geist read the letter, a slight sneer marring his normally neutral expression.

“Did you know?”

Geist handed the paper back to Shade. “That he’d been raised in the cult? Yes. That he was raised to be their sacrifice and savior? No. Strangely enough, he neglected to mention that part during on-boarding.”

Shade had been pacing erratically. Now he stopped and turned to him, “Sacrifice?”

“Blood buys faith,” he replied and shook his head at Shade’s expression. “Come now, Z, you’re a cult leader. You know it’s thematic.”

The pacing resumed. “Are you going to do anything about it?”

“I already am. And no, I don’t know where Ms Ouro-Voss is located. But I am eager to find out.”

Shade materialized behind him, wrapping his arms around Geist’s waist and leaning his chin on his shoulder. “No one does everyday menace like you, G. But you need to go now. Wraith’s coming, and I don’t mean the fun way.”

Geist turned, “How do you always know?”

“Off you fade, Poltergeist.”

Shade released him, patted his backside affectionately, and strolled away into the darkness.

For a breath too long, Geist lingered. Logic warred with longing to see her again, even if he didn’t deserve it.

The former won, but just barely.

And by the time her voice carried to the top of the hill, he was gone.

“He’s an idiot!”

“You’re unsettling to mere mortals.”

Wraith stopped ranting to stare at him. Shade smiled, but her Zane was just below the surface.

“Ash, you two have been fucking each other’s brains out for what? Two weeks? Half of that time here, with me. Devastatingly handsome, irresistibly charming—”

“Smug and annoying.”

“Goes without saying. And we have *history*, Ashley. That the Sun God may have known about, but had no way to begin to understand it’s depth. And there’s this lovely aside of family trauma and Void adjacency to deal with.”

“Yeah, what *did* you do to him, by the way?”

“I’ll tell you when you’re not deflecting.” He stepped up to her, put his hands on her shoulders, “What I’m saying is that he may be an idiot. But he’s *your* idiot. And might need a little more time to adjust to—” he waved a hand, “—everything.”

She held his eyes for a beat, looked away.

“And honestly babe, so do you.” He kissed her forehead, gave her a small shove in the direction of the old arena.

“The ring’s that way. Go work it off.”

She looked up at him, “You not going to join me?”

He scoffed at her, “Do I look like I have a death wish?”

Wraith tilted her head, scanned him slowly.

“Not tonight.”

“Go on, then.”

He watched her as she walked away, until she disappeared into the darkness beyond the broken buildings.

“Now, I need to go and have a chat with your glorious idiot.”

Kael looked up expectantly as the door opened and swore viciously when Shade stepped inside.

“Don’t you know how to fucking knock?”

Shade's eyes were six shades of crazy as he plonked himself down on top of the table Kael was working at.

"Nope, never learned."

Kael pulled his data pad away, "What the fuck do you want?"

Shade leaned in close—too close. "So many things, Sunshine."

For a second, he thought Shade was going to try to kiss him, which also put him in convenient head-butting range. Something it should *not* have been possible for Shade to dodge.

"Oh yeah, you are completely fucked," the madman told him as he leaned back against the wall, looked around the room.

"At least you got to be fucked the fun way first."

Kael clenched his jaw and pushed his chair back, not bothering to hide the violence that begged to be released.

Shade pulled his aunt's letter out of his pocket and handed it to him. "What are you working on?"

He stayed silent. Unwilling to be distracted. Hoped that Shade would give him even half an excuse to... dance.

Sadly, Shade seemed perfectly content to wait him out.

His augments could hear the man's heartbeat, which was slow and even, and the nearly silent tapping of a finger against the wood of the table.

"Why Morse code?"

Blue eyes glanced at him, though the tapping didn't stop. "Because it's absurd, obsolete, and just obscure enough to be fun."

A short pause.

"It started as a challenge from our drill sergeant to find a better way to communicate."

Kael furrowed his brows, "Seems off-brand for a drill sergeant."

Shade barked a laugh—the deep sound still didn't suit him—and dropped his voice into a lower register, "If you two don't stop yapping and distracting the rest of the squad, I will personally make sure you're assigned to the front lines straight out the gate."

Despite himself, Kael laughed and relaxed a little, "That tracks better."

"What can I say? Sergeant Bains was a formative force in our lives."

“What am I doing wrong?”

The question slipped out before he could stop it, and he found Zane looking at him with a sad expression—all traces of Shade gone for the moment.

“Nothing. Everything. Take your pick.” The tone was sincere.

“That’s less helpful that you might imagine.”

Zane hopped off the table and pulled up a chair instead. “She’s *damaged*, Helios. Badly. Competence just hides it, it doesn’t mean she’s fixed.”

Kael nodded, waited.

“Imagine you had everything ripped away from you. Never to be returned.”

Guilt wound through him, along with impotent rage against SID and what they’d done to her. Zane put a hand on his knee; supportive, not suggestive.

“Exactly. Now imagine you got something back. Something important. Something you never expected to have again.”

He leaned back, removing his hand and looked Kael in the eye. “She’s not angry, Sunshine. Not really. She’s off-balance and fucking terrified of losing you.”

A hint of Shade’s chaotic energy slipped back in as he stood and walked to the door, looked back over his shoulder, “I’m not a threat to you. Well, no, I am, but not to what you have with her. She’s in the arena. Go find her. Beating the shit out of each other should get you back in alignment.”

## Chapter 15

Wraith was doing her gravity-defying calisthenics routine when Kael walked into the arena.

She opened her eyes as he approached, folding upright from an almost supine handstand—fluid, controlled, impossible. Raised an eyebrow.

He was barefoot, wearing only sweats. He raised his chin and opened his arms wide to give a clean target, “One free hit, and don’t hold back.”

He hadn’t even closed his mouth when her fist drove into his solar plexus, knocking him back a couple of steps.

Ow.

He knew his smile was feral as he raised his head. She stretched her neck to either side, the cracks loud in the pre-dawn silence.

Watched him.

He charged her, but she sidestepped, and only a last-minute hop over her outstretched foot saved him from landing on his face.

“You’re getting predictable,” he told her.

“Am I?”

It was all the warning he got before she darted in, jabbed a fist into his kidney, and knocked out the back of his knee, forcing him to stagger forward.

He threw himself to the side, rolled back to his feet, and pounced. Managed to catch her in a bear hug for a split second before her heel kicked upwards, aiming for his testicles.

He hauled her off the ground, using the momentum to drive them both down hard.

She had speed, but in a wrestling match, his strength and experience

trumped hers.

Not that she made it easy for him.

They were both bruised, bleeding, and covered in sweat when he finally pinned her, nearly his full upper body weight needed to hold her arms in place.

She tried to kick him off, but he had the position and the leverage.

She glared at him, and finally tapped out.

He'd intended to roll off her to the side. Instead found himself maintaining the hold and sealing his mouth to hers.

Any moment now, Kael would shift just enough for her to free an arm and sucker-punch him.

Of course, then he would stop kissing her.

She *needed* him to keep kissing her. Just like they'd needed the violence to realign.

Seori's voice rose in her memory: "Violence is not a substitute for therapy."

*Eh, what did she know?*

Kael pulled back, despite the way she tried to chase his mouth, "If I let you up are you going to behave?"

His irises were black. In their depths she could see the hint of an aurora dancing—that had never happened before.

Adrenalin flooded her as shock drove desire away in an instant.

"Kael!"

He responded to her tone, released his hold.

"Ash? What's wrong?"

She waited for his eyes to change back. They didn't.

"Ash?"

It took a while to find the words, she eventually indicated her own eyes and said, "I don't think it's sleeping anymore."

Wraith held his hand in a vice-like grip, as if she could keep the Void away by touch alone.

They were taking the long route back to their quarters. It seemed preferable after the third cultist dropped to their knees when seeing him.

Strangely, he didn't feel any different. Could still feel what he thought of as the boundary of him and not-him. His thoughts were his own. His feelings were his own.

He felt normal. Better than usual, in fact.

Wraith's presence next to him felt solid. The bond firmly in place despite her unease.

The whispered ***we become*** that floated through his head was almost certainly a memory.

They stepped through the door of their room and she pushed the bolt into place. Was she locking them in or the cultists out?

"You okay?" he asked.

She dragged him into the bathroom and shoved him toward the mirror so he could see himself. See the Fold reflected back in his eyes.

That was... different. Kind of pretty.

"Okay, I get why you're concerned."

"Yeah. Just a titch."

He turned to her, drew her into a hug so she didn't have to see his eyes. "Hey. It's okay. I feel like myself. I'm in control of my body, my mind. Whatever's happening, we'll deal with it."

She gave a soft grunt and wrapped herself around him. He kissed the top of her head and gave himself a moment to breathe her in.

Like coming home. As always.

"Shower," he told her. "I'll grab us some water tubes and protein bars."

"I'm not letting you out of my sight."

He released her and nudged her towards the shower. "That's not practical and you know it. I'll be back before you're done." He lifted one of her hands to his lips and kissed it.

"We'll figure it out. Together."

\* \* \*

*Kronos*

“Care to explain what was so Void-damned important that I had to come all the way out here? I saw you less than six hours ago and I’ve already spent half the night playing therapist to two emotionally repressed disaster bunnies.”

Geist raised his eyebrows. “You were the voice of reason?”

Shade’s sigh was put upon and annoyed, “I have depths, G. I contain multitudes.”

“No argument. Why are you so agitated?”

Shade paused, considered, and slammed a fist into the wall of Geist’s office hard enough to hurt, but not to break anything. “I don’t fucking know. But being here is making my skin crawl.”

Geist regarded him, calm and unwavering, “A fairly typical reaction to being in my office.”

“Not for me and you know it.”

And that was the problem. One of the problems. Fuck, why couldn’t he think!

“I need to get back. I know I just arrived. But I need to get back so hurry the fuck up and tell me what you needed me to know.”

Geist looked at him a beat longer, stepped past him and opened the door. Beckoned a young man inside.

“This is Agent Rutherford. You can call him... Ed. Ed, this is someone who needs to hear what you told me.”

*The non-introduction. Great.*

Ed’s eyes bounced between them. “Sir?”

Geist’s smile was small, patient. Ed looked appropriately terrified.

If he didn’t feel like he was under attack from all sides—despite the obvious lack thereof—Shade might have had some fun with him.

Instead he turned and treated the kid to his Geist impression. Cold as the Void, and twice as dangerous.

Ed blinked a couple of times, glanced once at Geist again, then fell into parade stance.

“How much do you know about the Void Cult, sir?”



He hadn't been called *sir* since Ghost Command, and it teased a small up-tilt of his lips. "Which part of it... Ed?"

Geist rolled his eyes behind the kid's shoulder and Shade realized he'd fallen into Wraith's best menacing tone. His pulse spiked. Geist's brows drew together.

"Speed it up, boy," he barked at Ed.

"I've was part of a sleeper cell for the Children of the Deep Horizon. It was wiped out in the Hades sector; I was the only survivor."

Shade nodded impatiently.

"They're activating everyone, sir. Every cell. Every sector. We were tasked with finding a man called Helios."

Shade nodded again and wished the man would get to the point. He already knew this.

"I believe they've found him, or are about to."

Zane had been tapping his finger softly against his leg. He stopped, "And what makes you believe that?"

The man held out a data pad, hit play on a recording.

"Rejoice, my children. For the Prodigal returns to us at last."

"It's been repeating every six hours, starting around eighteen hours ago."

Right about when Helios touched the artifact.

The vision that had previously only been shattered glimpses suddenly crystalized.

*Fuck.*

With no time for subtlety, he met Geist's gaze and *reached*; even knowing how much the man hated it. He'd apologize later.

*Our problem just escalated. Get him out.*

Geist winced and dismissed Ed.

"What—?"

Shade stepped forward, wrapped his hand around the back of Geist's neck and touched his forehead to him like he'd done to Wraith. But this time, he *pushed* the information Geist needed.

Geist's legs buckled and he collapsed, swearing.

"Sorry, G, but I have to go. Now."

## CONDITIONAL RELEASE

Then he phased back to Perdition, the Void screaming through his soul like static on a dying frequency.

## Chapter 16

Shade appeared in the arena. *Not* where he'd been aiming for. Not even close.

Disorientation was made significantly worse when Wraith stepped into his field of view and shoved him, hard.

"Where the fuck have you been?"

She was actually yelling. And the emotional dissonance pouring off her was clashing badly with the Void-travel-induced migraine.

He held up his hands and she shoved him again. His back hit the cold stone of the ruins.

"I said, where *the fuck* have you been?"

"What happened?"

Asking the question seemed more important than answering her.

In an instant she calmed, smiled, and Shade saw his death in her eyes as clearly as he heard the Void running through his veins.

Well. He'd had a good run. Much longer than expected, all things considered.

"What's happened, Shade, is that Kael has disappeared along with about a third of your cult. About half of those remaining were gutted, quite literally. The halls of this place are dripping with blood and viscera, like Kokytos, only worse. And it all took place in about a ten-minute window while I was in the fucking shower."

She shoved him into the broken column again, but he barely felt it as rage overtook him. His voice was as calm and emotionless as Geist's as he asked, "What?"

"You heard me."

He stepped past her, more *through* her, and strolled to the compound.

Deliberately slow. Whistling softly. Thoughts dangerous.

He paused at the threshold. She was right. It looked like a prophecy fulfilled, if the prophecy had been written in guts.

The corridors ran red with blood; stank of shit and copper and bile.

For a moment he let himself sink into the memory of the place, saw shadows methodically moving and stabbing. No hesitation.

Slowly and deliberately, he approached the epicenter. The mess hall.

And it *was* a mess. Shattered bodies, arterial mist, a severed arm twitching near the doorway.

He'd always liked Sunshine's monomolecular blade.

Helios hadn't gone down without a fight. And if the burnt sugar smell of a GlueNet hadn't been present, he thought that the Sun God probably would have come out on top.

Wraith stood at the door. Silent. Waiting. The first echoes of fear starting to leak through her anger.

But something else was here.

He turned his head slowly, searching for the soft hint of life in the room. Smiled softly as he located it. Phased across and knelt in front of the dying man, ignoring the blood soaking into his pants.

"Hello, Myron. You've been behaving badly, haven't you?"

Wraith had buried her terror, but not deep enough. It vibrated beneath her ribs like a live wire.

Kael was gone. And she didn't know if he'd been taken or had led the massacre. That doubt was scarier than him being missing.

He wasn't dead.

She knew that. Could still feel him, somehow. Like finding a distant star—you had to know where to look. How to squint just right to see it. And he was still there.

But was he Kael or the Void?

Or something else entirely?

Shade was whispering to the cultist he'd called Myron. She couldn't hear

his words, but she could hear Myron's increasingly terrified breathing.

His occasional mumbles.

Shade had it under control. If she stepped in, she would lose all restraint, and they needed information more than she needed to punish.

For now.

Myron screamed—wet and shrill. Wraith didn't flinch.

She could see Shade calmly unspooling intestines from a relatively small stomach wound.

Calm and terrifying.

It wasn't a side of him she'd seen often; one he usually kept carefully buried. But it was on full display now.

She turned and left him to it.

Elanor, the older woman who'd brought her the protein shake, was rounding up the survivors. She'd go and help.

It wasn't enough, but it was better than screaming.

Or watching Shade work.

Shade blinked as he stepped into the sunlight. It stung. Everything did, lately.

They were gathered in the arena. His true acolytes. And his Wraith—presiding over them like he'd anointed her High Priestess.

Some were bruised, some were bloody. Some were afraid.

They should be.

All watched him as he walked out to them. Stood before them.

Soaked in the blood of the fallen.

He let the Void infuse his voice as he spoke, his eyes challenging every damned one of them.

*"They were here, the Children of the Deep Horizon.*

*They prayed with us. Ate with us. Slept beside us.*

*Then they betrayed us.*

*You came here to Become.*

*You did not come here to die.*

*The Children promise salvation if you're obedient.  
I offer you truth, but sometimes truth costs blood.  
False prophets want followers.  
I want witnesses.  
Look to our fallen temple.  
Witness what happens when you strip the lies from hope.  
When you tear down the altar and realize the god they built looks a lot  
like **your shame in a crown.***

*They want your loyalty. Unquestioning. Unyielding.  
I want your questions. I want your spine.  
Don't kneel. Never kneel.  
The Void seeks your acceptance, not your obedience.  
And you cannot accept what you cannot look in the face.*

*Tonight, we mourn our fallen brethren.  
We mourn those who betrayed us, for they shall know my wrath.  
Tomorrow, we pause. We scatter. We wait.*

*And when the time is right, when the false prophets have been brought  
to their knees and burned from even the annals of history—  
We will reconvene.  
We will rebuild.  
**We will Become."***

"Nice speech," Her voice was soft, her eyes were haunted.

"One of my better ones." Shade was battling with anger; an impotent rage that couldn't go anywhere, not yet. Because right now his people needed him.

Leadership was a bitch.

But Ash needed to know what he'd found out. Even if it meant she left immediately. He wouldn't force her to suffer. He wasn't that much of a bastard.

"He didn't go willingly."

## CHAPTER 16

The gray eyes that still appeared in his dreams met his gaze.

“He put up a good fight, but they caught him in a GlueNet. Subdued him. He didn’t leave you, Ash. I hope you already knew that.”





II

## Solis Invictus

*The sun rises.*

*Not as a shield, but a sword.*



## Chapter 17

Kael woke up in his own bed. The one he hadn't slept in for more than twenty years.

A headache pounded behind his eyes and nausea claimed him as he sat up. How the fuck did he get here?

And where the fuck was Wraith?

Pain bloomed as he tried to find her, find that connection that bound their souls. He pushed through the pain, desperate, seeking.

And woke up in his own bed. The one he hadn't slept in for more than twenty years.

A woman sat in the old rocking chair next to him, humming as she embroidered... something.

She looked the same. Dark hair, dark eyes, red lips.

"Been hitting the anti-aging treatments, *Lils*?"

Her eyes flicked to him as her lip curled in annoyance, but when she spoke, her voice was calm as ever.

"We must, of course, keep up appearances, Dikaaios."

He didn't bother to correct her, didn't want her corrupting his chosen name with her breath.

"Kidnapping *and* mass slaughter to get me here. I'm impressed you found so many true believers."

She laid her embroidery down in her lap, folded her hands, and met his eyes. He refused to flinch or look away. Even though the child he used to be was already crying, braced for the hit.

"They do not need to be true believers when I find them, Dikaaios. Because

you are *Becoming*, as I always knew you would. So, when they find you, they *become* too.”

\* \* \*

The smoke was still rising as the *Lethe* took to the air. It looked surreal, seemingly rising from nowhere in an empty field.

“You never did tell us how your cloaking tech works,” Wraith told Shade, who was sitting comfortably in the navigator’s seat.

He wiggled his fingers at her, “Sure, I did.”

“Oh yeah, magic.” Her voice sounded hollow.

Anger had become fear and had now sunk into an eerie numbness.

When Shade had marched up the gangway behind her, bag slung over his back, she’d felt... nothing. Not relief at having him with her. Not dismay at having the living incarnate of chaos on her ship.

Nothing.

She tilted the ship in a wide arc toward dusk. They’d search from the air for any trace of the ship that had taken Kael. It was futile—but it was all they had.

Myron had proven... talkative. At least according to Shade. But talkative and useful weren’t always the same thing.

There had been former *Children* in Shade’s congregation. Not placed there, but who believed they had found their place. At least until the *Holy Sun* appeared and proved their old scriptures correct.

Then all bets were off.

She glanced at him; he was absently playing with a knife that *had* been securely strapped at the small of her back.

It hurt him. The betrayal. Even though he hadn’t said a word about it after his sermon.

They hadn’t been sleeper agents. Then he could have hated them. Instead, they’d seen Kael’s eyes and believed. Reconverted instantly.

She hadn’t told Shade about that yet.

And he still hadn’t told her what he’d done to Kael while she’d been brooding and speaking to SID.

*Wait.*

SID was the Strategic ***Intelligence*** Division.

That had to mean they knew something. GEO, whoever he was, would know something.

One way or another she was going to find Kael. Even if she had to burn everything to the ground to do it.

SID Included.

“Can you handle this?”

Shade glanced at her, still spinning her knife between his fingers. “No problem.”

She nodded, stood, and retreated to her quarters.

It had been almost forty-eight hours since she’d slept. Maybe, if she could sleep, she’d be able to feel something again.

She’d been lying awake for hours, staring at the ceiling, when a quiet knock sounded on the door.

Wraith sighed. “Come in, Zane.”

The door hushed open. “You okay, babe?”

No.

“Yeah.”

Zane snorted. “Liar.”

Wraith shrugged a shoulder.

“Need a cuddle?” he asked.

“Think you can keep it your hands to yourself?”

Zane smiled, and it was Zane. Not Shade. It was the sad, almost-shy smile she had forgotten he used to give her. It had been so many Void-damned years since she’d seen it.

“Promise.”

She scooted over in her bunk. He moved slowly across the room, lay carefully next to her, and gathered her into his arms the way he’d done at Flight training and her nightmares kept waking up their squad.

“You can break, you know,” his whisper was the barest breath. He’d told her that before, but the answer was still the same.

"If I break, I won't come back."

He nodded against her hair.

"How Void Touched is he?"

She stayed silent for several minutes. He'd known. *Of course, he'd known.* But likely not the whole of it.

"He's not so much touched as... possessed."

Shade hissed in a breath. "You're sure?"

"Oh yeah."

His grip tightened on her, arms strong in a completely different way to Kael's.

"Soooo, you've been sleeping with Void. I'm impressed."

It was such a Shade thing to say that it broke through the numbness. She snorted. And punched him—lightly—in the stomach.

"Ass."

His grin was unrepentant. "Yes, I have a great one."

"You know what I need?" she asked.

"Sleep." His tone was firm, uncompromising. He'd never used his command voice often and it was all the more effective for it.

"I need information on the Cult—not yours, the other one—the kind only SID has."

He stilled, not breathing.

"Kael said you had a contact there," she prodded.

"Okay," his breath came out in a rush. "But—"

"But?"

He shook his head. "Sleep for now, Ash. You need it. We'll deal with all the shadows in the morning."

She closed her eyes. Let herself drift.

And still caught his near silent murmur, "And the Ghosts."

Zane hadn't slept. Not really. Sleep wasn't something that he did often anymore.

But he did relax. Having Ash sleeping in his arms again was calming. Like

letting out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

She stirred and he felt the exact moment she shifted from sleep to fully awake, the slight tension as she remembered the wrong arms were around her.

"Morning sleepy head," he kissed her temple.

She sighed and relaxed against him. "Thanks, Z."

"Anytime. I've told you that before."

She nodded, not looking up.

"Hey Ash, what if I told you I never got over you?"

She stilled. Jabbed an elbow into him, "I'd say you were lying."

Shade laughed.

Wraith paused, "Please tell me you're lying?"

He kissed her head again, letting Shade fall below the surface, "Mostly, babe. Mostly."

She was quiet for a long time, but the silence? The silence was loud.

"Only mostly?" It was a whisper that broke Zane's heart all over again. He didn't want to cause her more pain, but he couldn't lie either.

"I missed you, Ashley. More that you'll ever know. I missed... this. The quiet and the connection and the comfort. We were never meant for each other, not in a romantic way, but Void take us, you anchored my soul in a way that no-one else was ever able to."

She turned in his arms to look up at him, gray eyes calm. Laid a hand on his cheek and he couldn't stop himself from closing his eyes and leaning into it.

Her lips touched his then, chaste, but prolonged.

"You are my soul, Zane. You always have been."

She wrapped her arms around him. And in that embrace, he could almost feel something shift. Align.

Maybe even heal—just a little.

"And you're mine," he whispered back.

## Chapter 18

“Good coffee. Seori’s?”

Wraith narrowed her eyes at Shade across the mess table, the enticing aroma of the coffee suddenly repellent.

“And why did neither you *nor* Phantom mention that you’d seen each other?”

“Babe, I was at their *wedding*. I offered to officiate, but they turned me down. No clue why.”

She set her mug down in front of her. Raised her hands and dropped them again. “I don’t know if I have what it takes to survive any more of these little surprises, Z.”

He reached over and took her hand, expression rueful. “Drink your coffee babe, it’ll help. And if that little aside is bothering you...” he trailed off, looked at the table. “Well, you’re definitely going to need the coffee.”

She closed her eyes, picked up her mug and sipped. Held on tight to his hand when he made to pull it away.

She was spiraling and it seemed the hole was even deeper than she’d thought. She needed the contact. She couldn’t call it grounding—she was so far from grounded she might as well be running aerial recon. But it helped.

He was already watching her when she opened her eyes.

“I’m glad you’re here, Z.” She hesitated, “I get the feeling I’m going to want to stab you later... but I’m still glad you’re here.”

He squeezed her hand, “Yeah, that’s why I already took your knives.”

“You’re not joking, are you?”

He shook his head. She laced her fingers with his, as much to ensure he



couldn't escape as for comfort.

"So where do we start?"

A half smile and a shrug, "That depends on whether you want to work your way up to the hard stuff but have context, or get it out of the way first, break a few of my bones, and then get the context."

The scary thing was that he meant it. All of it.

He gave another shrug, "Up to you."

"Will I still break your bones if we do it the long way?"

A pure Zane smile, the kind he'd given her a long time ago when they got away with shit they really shouldn't have.

"Probably, but if I'm lucky, you'll break less of them."

"So, do you figure I won't try to hurt you if we're here on the bridge?"

Shade grinned, "No babe, I'm hoping you'll hesitate just long enough to save the equipment that I can get a head start."

He was lying. How the fuck did she know that?

"No, really. Why here?"

He rubbed a hand over his face, when he dropped it, Zane was there.

"I'm a coward. I don't want to look you in the eye when I stab you in the back. This way I can just look at the stars and pretend what I have to say doesn't change anything."

That was the truth. And it fucking terrified her.

"No."

He looked at her, "No?"

"No."

Wraith checked the console, the mid-range nav, then the long range. All empty. This jump had taken them from the ass end of nowhere to somewhere near its center.

Then she shut nearly everything down and enabled the cloaking mechanism. Not nearly as effective as Shade's but it would protect them from most electronic surveillance.

She briefly considered Tunneling Inbetween, but being distracted if it

decided to collapse on them would be a short and fatal disaster. And she was bracing to be far more than just distracted.

“Come.”

She stood up and didn’t wait to see if he’d follow. She knew he would.

The gym was a level down, part of the hold sectioned off for the purpose. She sat on the bench, removed her boots.

Zane... Shade stepped into the room, radiating calm and amusement as if she didn’t know it was a facade.

He sat next to her, took off his own boots and socks.

“You want to spar?”

“Shirt, off. Now.”

She stood, pulled her own over her head, leaving her bare from the waist up except for her sports bra.

He stepped forward, stretching his neck and flexing.

She’d always found him beautiful. His tattoos that covered his biceps, upper chest and shoulders, and up the sides of his neck were compelling. Drew the eye.

And his eyes were bright, almost eager for violence.

He was going to be disappointed.

“Sit.” She pointed to the floor near the wall.

The line between his eyes deepened as confusion sank in. But he stayed silent, shrugged a shoulder and sat. Back to the wall, legs crossed.

“Uncross them.”

“If you’re going to kick me in the balls, it’ll be more effective if you put your boots back on.”

Wraith said nothing. Just looked at him, waited for him to comply.

*Okay.*

Shade raised his knees, rested his arms on them. Said a silent prayer to the Void for the continued functioning of his genitals.

Then she shocked every thought out of him as she sat, pushed herself back through his arms to sit close and lean against his chest.

She grabbed his hands, wrapped them around her as far as they would go, and shifted to maximize the contact between them.

And thank fuck for that shock, because it meant he could suppress a very instinctual male reaction.

He could feel her hands tremble before she forced them still.

“Integrate.” Her words were soft. The command wasn’t.

“Wraith.”

Integrating with each other, mind to mind didn’t seem like the best idea right now.

“Light touch, but do it, Shade.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t know how to do that weird emotional resonance thing the Others do. This is the next best option.”

A flicker of memory from his short time with the Others. They’d found him... disturbing. The feeling was mutual. But there had been something around touch and trust.

“What for?”

She huffed a breath and turned to glare at him, but there was fear beneath the anger.

“Because I need to know what you know, Zane. But more than that, I think I need to know what you *feel*.”

\* \* \*

### *Elsewhere*

Nobody stopped Kael when he left his room. When he walked around the compound.

What they did do was fucking bow and call him *Dikaio*s or *Holy Sun* or *Lord*.

Knowing that they were misguided was the only thing tempering his desire for violence. But his patience was wearing thin.

Lilian didn’t bow. Of course. She just smiled like she was talking to the entity inhabiting him.

Maybe she was.

He couldn't sense it. But the scariest thing about the entire fucking situation was that Lilian might just have been right.

He tried to remember Shade's words.

Something about indoctrination and inevitability and bad choreography.

They slid from his memory like water through a grate.

There was something missing. Something vital.

*You're my fucking choice!*

The memory of Wraith slammed into him, forcing him to his knees. He reached for her. Tried to find her.

The sunlight shifted too quickly across the courtyard, shadows bending the wrong way.

And he woke up in his own bed. The one he hadn't slept in for more than twenty years.

## Chapter 19

Zane closed his eyes and leaned his head against the wall. His eyes burned with tears he couldn't let fall.

In his whole life, he had never been more afraid.

Because he felt shame. And longing. And a stupid, reckless hope that maybe if she saw what was inside, she wouldn't throw him away again.

If he did this, he may lose her forever.

If he didn't? He **would** lose her forever.

No third chances. No do-overs.

No choice.

She had always been the easiest to find. The easiest to see. The easiest to feel.

And so without fanfare, and with the restraint she'd asked for, he found her soul in the dark and opened the bond between them.

It took a while to settle.

Things were different.

Only two integrated instead of six.

And Kael was a presence that ran through her soul like a wound. There and not there and twisted irreparably with the Void. He nodded at it in passing.

Zane wasn't what he had been. Neither was Wraith.

Five years had changed everything.

And for a moment, maybe an eternity, they struggled to reconcile those changes.

It was only when they stopped struggling, started accepting, that the bond clicked into place.

Natural as breathing.

\* \* \*

*Elsewhere*

*The food had improved while he'd been away. Or perhaps military rations were just that bad.*

*Maybe both.*

*He didn't know how long he'd been there. A day? A week?*

*Time seemed to bleed.*

*He didn't want to attend Lillian's sermon. But information was the first currency, and he wouldn't be getting out of here without it.*

*So he went. Stood in the back, out of sight.*

*It turned out his presence was distracting, and he wasn't willing to let Lillian weaponize that.*

*As far as her sermons went, it was short. And all things considered, it could have been worse.*

*She ended on a familiar note:*

*"War is Sacrifice.*

*But the Fold never promised ease. Only return.*

*The Prodigal Flame no longer walks among the frayed and faithless.*

*He is returned.*

*He is Becoming.*

*And he will bathe the unrighteous in holy flame and usher in a new era."*

*Dikaio wondered if she knew that if what she preached were true, that she would be the first person on his burn list.*

*Smiled at the thought.*

*Then left before the throng finished praying and returned to his room.*

\* \* \*

In the past, integration had been primarily tactical. Action and thought one and the same. But they *had* figured out the other ways they could make it work.

And this one had always been the least comfortable.

Complete awareness.

Of one another. Of emotions. Of what went unspoken.

He could have projected straight into her head. It would have been easier. Certainly faster.

Instead Shade took a deep breath and spoke aloud.

"I knew what Helios was when you first crashed on Perdition last year."

It wasn't what Wraith had been expecting to hear.

She didn't know what she'd been expecting. Didn't know, yet, why that was the place he needed to start. But she accepted without question that it was the right place, because that's what *he* believed.

"Which was what?"

"The Light Bringer. He who would bring light into the darkness."

"You... *believe* it. That he's some sort of messiah." That shocked her more than anything, but it was impossible to *get* emotional feedback without *giving* it too, so his denial came in fast and firm.

"No. No, not a messiah. But the instrument of prophesy. Poor bastard."

"And you knew that how?"

He shrugged, his muscles shifting against her back.

"The Void gets... chatty sometimes."

There was more to unpack there, but it wasn't core to what they needed to discuss. At least as far as Zane believed. But he held back to let her decide what *she* deemed important.

She let it slide. For now.

"Okay, what else?"

There was a conflict of emotions, of memories she couldn't see.

"We need to go back a bit."

He really didn't want to tell her. Was already preparing for the pain of rejection.

She elbowed him, annoyance resonating, "How about you let me make my own damn decisions, Z?"

She felt him kiss her head, an echo of warmth. Of love and affection.

"Okay. But fair warning, some of the feedback is going to fucking suck."

She didn't doubt it. Didn't care.

"Bring it."

Zane let Shade rise. He needed the strength, brittle as it was, to relive the worst memory of his life.

Shade looked down at Wraith, just once, tightened his arms, and closed his eyes. She didn't need the whole story, not now, just the important bits. Even the ones that didn't seem important until they were.

Started narrating as the scenes played out in full Void-damned color in his head. "You were dead. We felt you die."

\* \* \*

They fractured. All of them. Where there had been balance there was now asymmetry. They were no longer whole.

Would never be again.

Slowly, Shade came back to himself.

He was in the Fold.

In his Wasp.

And Wraith was gone.

Someone had been screaming. It turned out it was him.

He flicked the comms broadcast off, and screamed his until his throat bled.

\* \* \*

Spirit had left. Didn't even bother to come to the rendezvous.

Phantom was broken. He hadn't climbed out of his Wasp. Gave no indication he was going to.



## CHAPTER 19

Spook *had* climbed out and was hitting Geist, who was taking it. His face gray and lifeless.

And him?

His soul was dead.

Without a word to the others, he climbed back into his Wasp. Launched, and punched into the Fold before he'd even broken atmosphere.

That maneuver should have killed him.

It didn't.

And in the dark between realities, the Void sang to him.

Just as it had for almost half his life.

## Chapter 20

“Are you sure you want to do this?”

Shade was in his SID uniform, but was sitting with his feet up on the desk while his *superior officer* looked out of the viewport and ignored his insolence.

“You keep telling me I’m too crazy for regular missions.”

“I believe the word I used was *suicidal*.”

Shade rolled his eyes, “You can’t be suicidal if you’re already dead.”

\* \* \*

The First Altar sang.

It had tried to take him.

Tried to break him.

But now it knew who was in charge.

He’d dumped his report on it, tagged #GEO, on one of SID’s many servers. He was getting very bored of writing reports.

\* \* \*

They were in a Vault built deep beneath the ruins of one of the devastated cities.

The walls bled Fold resonance.

“This could kill you, Shade.”

“It won’t. And I know just where to put it to keep it out of the wrong hands.”

The door swung open. The artifact sat in the center of the room.

Just a rock, really. If rocks hummed in harmony with the Void and were happy to see him.

He picked it up, pocketed it.

Gave a mock salute to his *boss* as he walked out and down the corridor, whistling a tune the Void had taught him.

\* \* \*

They were in the artifact chamber. He'd phased them in. The artifact itself didn't glow, but somehow the room did.

Helios reached for it, picked it up reverently.

And collapsed like a Void-damned tree.

\* \* \*

Shade pulled his mind back to the gym and tried to ignore the tension, the outrage, the *horror* that radiated from Wraith. He knew she wanted to push away, to pace, to process. That she didn't was impressive.

"So, do you have any questions before we get to the *really* bad part?"

Wraith was reeling.

It wasn't Shade's words; it was the way he lived the emotions as if he were actually back in the memories. Small vignettes, really, but adding up to an increasingly disturbing whole.

Part of her was desperate to stand, to move, to let physical motion help offset everything else.

But there was more.

She held onto Shade's arms, pressed herself into him like he was the only thing that was real.

Felt his grief, his fear, and his unwavering love for her.

She thought she'd gotten the worst of the emotional backlash over her supposed death when she'd seen Phantom.

She was wrong.

Seori had helped stabilize Elijah. His grief was no less real or visceral, but it was also tempered. Shade's wasn't and it was like being stabbed through the heart.

He sucked in a breath and rocked her, concern and apology coming through as loud and clear as her pain was to him.

She had to push forward. She... *they* couldn't deal with that now. It was too much on top of what was already untenable.

So she breathed deeply to try and center herself and asked, "You became a SID officer? I didn't see that one coming."

He chuckled, quietly for once, "Technically, I still am. It's hard to remove you from payroll when you don't actually exist and your file was... misplaced."

There was no reverence, no loyalty. Not to the institution. But there was something there—below the surface. They were circling it now.

"When Kael spoke to GEO last year—" a flicker of something from Shade, "—he said *he* was the source."

"What can I say, his clearance level is higher than mine. Not that I've actually tried to access SID-Net in years. Perdition's reception is kind of spotty." He paused, "You know, I don't even think I remember my access codes."

She felt him feel her rising irritation and he stopped talking. Sighed.

"I don't bother with reports or missions or the like anymore, but I do check in from time to time. I get told what I need to know."

She heard the smile in his voice, "On rare occasions it gets mailed to me."

She closed her eyes, "Like the cult letter."

She knew now. Had figured it out. And yes, it cut like a Void-damned dagger to the chest. But she needed him to say it.

"Who's GEO, Shade?"

Regret and defiance poured from him and over her.

Curiously, it was the last that let her forgive him. That defiance that came from a place of love.

"You've already worked it out, babe. Our favorite handler turned Ghost. Geist."

Shade lay on his bunk, casually tossing a spare sensor calibration sphere up and catching it.

It required just enough concentration to stop him from taking a ride down the waterfall of regret. The fall could be fun, but the rocks at the bottom were jagged and tended to lodge in uncomfortable places.

After he dropped the Geist bomb, Wraith had stood up and left the gym. Not bothering with either her shirt or boots.

There had been tears on her cheeks.

The bond had still been open, pain echoing, so he pulled back. Gave her—and him—space to be alone.

He'd spent ninety minutes punishing himself with increasingly more complicated and difficult martial arts and acrobatics routines.

It hadn't helped at all.

The shower did, a little. How a ship this small warranted a water shower was a mystery, but a pleasant one. One of the few.

He'd done the right thing. At least he hoped so.

And she wasn't gone yet.

The thought that she might had him dropping the sphere on his head. Painful and deserved.

There was a lot more they'd need to unpack. A lot more she'd need to know.

But she knew the worst of it now.

The rest was just detail.

The door opened and Wraith strode in like she owned the place. Which, technically, she did. He'd seen that look before. It never ended well for the recipient.

He braced as she stopped at the edge of his bed, opened her mouth and closed it again with a click. She shut her eyes and her shoulders drooped, and when she reopened them, they were somber and vulnerable.

She swallowed, met his gaze and whispered, "Can I have a cuddle?"

He opened his arms, "Think you can keep your hands to yourself?"

She crawled onto the bunk with small laugh, blinking away tears. He enfolded her, holding her as close to him as possible, and laughed out loud when she whispered, "No promises."

## Chapter 21

*The night was clear and the sky was beautiful.*

*Dikaïos lay quietly on the apex of a hill near to the settlement, the woven blanket beneath him protecting him from the rocky ground's sharper edges.*

*The hill rose from the surrounding jungle like an ancient altar, ready and waiting to pay homage to the stars. No trees grew on it. No plants. Just rocks and gravel of the earth stripped bare by something older than roots.*

*If he chose to, he could hear the brethren down in the settlement.*

*Talking, working, sleeping, praying, and fucking. It stirred something in him, deep beneath the surface in the cool, calm center of his being.*

*He was awake, but something deep inside still screamed and raged at him to wake up.*

*He tuned it out and cast his attention back to the sky.*

*The Abyss was singing loudly tonight.*

*Harmony between sky and mind and bone.*

*He smiled as he listened to it.*

*This was a good place.*

*He wondered when he had forgotten that.*

\* \* \*

Wraith had slept for hours but somewhere, out there in the darkness, something was calling her.

She woke slowly, her head pillowed on Zane's chest. Clutching him like a lifeline. He was warm; his arms around her a shield against reality.

He was also awake, despite the deep, even breathing.

"So what is your SID rank?"

His arms tightened and he kissed her hair, "Honestly, I have no idea. Commander maybe? I'll have to ask Geist."

She let out a soft snort; it was probably true. And it was far easier to talk to him like this, in the near dark, that it would be if they got up.

He'd called himself a coward yesterday then proceeded to rip himself open to her, certain she would walk away afterwards.

As if she ever could.

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For yesterday. That was the bravest fucking thing anyone has ever done for me. I know I forced you into it—"

"Shh. No thanks necessary. And I won't apologize or thank you either, although I want to, because I know it'll piss you off."

"It will."

"And you didn't force me into anything, Ashley. I made my choice, same as always."

Her throat was tight as she heard what he didn't say. That he'd chosen *her*. Would do the same thing again.

She wanted to punch him. Gently. But that would involve moving and wouldn't get them any closer to finding Kael.

The pain of his absence wove through her. Each heartbeat reminded her of what she was missing. And that the silence between them was growing louder.

"We'll find him," Zane told her as if he knew what she was thinking.

She blinked away tears. "Is it okay if I ask some more questions?"

"Mmm, interrogation. Will there be water boarding?"

The temptation to bite him almost overtook her, but it might be misconstrued. She pressed her fingers into his ribs instead.

He twitched.

“Hey! No tickling.”

“And that is why I don’t have to waterboard you. I already know your weak spots.”

“You’ve evil.”

She smiled into his chest, felt a little better.

“No, I’m effective.”

“Okay, what do you want to know?”

Shade had shifted slightly, the angle felt like he’d pulled an extra pillow under his shoulders and head. Wraith still hadn’t lifted hers up, so she couldn’t be sure.

“The information I was asking about yesterday. Or two days ago. Whenever. About the Cult. Do you have access to it?”

He rubbed her arm, “Maybe. Technically. But I wouldn’t even know where to start looking. Geist will know.”

“What’s he like now?”

It wasn’t the question she had planned to ask. Wasn’t sure she wanted to know the answer but knew she needed to.

“The same. Pretends to be cold and emotionless. Cares far more than he lets on. Ruthless. Compassionate. Three plans and seven steps ahead of everyone else.” He paused, gave a small laugh, “Still anal retentive and loves the sound of his own voice.”

“Says the cult leader who gives daily sermons.”

“Ah, but my voice is a delight; all who listen come away transformed.”

Wraith jabbed her fingers back into his ribs. The resulting squeak was adorable.

“So the cult thing was just an assignment? I really thought you believed all that stuff.”

“I do.” She felt his shrug, “The cult was an accident.”

For the first time, Wraith shifted to stare up at him.

“How do you *accidentally* start a cult?”

“I was checking out the First Altar. There were already cultists there. I killed



the ones that deliberately got in my way, the rest left me alone. At first.”

Wraith turned over, still half draped on his chest. Folded her arms, rested her chin on them and raised an eyebrow at him.

“At first.”

Shade couldn’t stop the smile, “Well, you know how these things go. You spend a few nights communing with the Void through the Altar, don’t go noticeably mad, and then you get annoyed with the lack of showmanship their cleric had. I mean really, I did him a favor by stepping in and correcting a few misconceptions. And stabbing him. But that sermon was a crime.”

Wraith’s look was bland. “So you were bored?”

Shade reached out and brushed a stray strand of hair off her face, “So bored.” She shook her head at him in fond exasperation.

He tilted his head to the side, asked the question he most needed the answer to.

“Why aren’t you mad at me?”

The fond expression slid off her face, replaced with something too deep for simple despair.

“I am too fucking soul tired to be angry at you, Z. And honestly, I don’t have any reason to be. You pointed out to me back at your temple complex that no matter how long it felt, Kael and I had only been *fucking each other’s brains out*—” another bland stare, “—for around two weeks.

“Well, you and I have spent less time than that in each other’s company in the last six months. Void, in the last five and a half fucking years. So cut the guilt trip short. It’s neither earned nor attractive.”

“Not even a little bit cute?” he held his thumb and forefinger close to each other.

She reached out a hand and closed the gap, clasping the two fingers together. “Nope.”

He sighed, “Pity.”

This time, Shade made the coffee. It was pretty good. Much better than Kael's.

Wraith rubbed a hand over her heart.

"Eat."

Shade placed a bowl of oats in front of her, started to sit opposite her and pushed to his feet when he saw the two tears that had escaped on her cheeks.

She held her hand up, "I'm okay, I just need a minute."

He sat slowly, started to eat without taking his eyes off her. Waited just the right amount of time before saying, "My cooking's not that bad, you know."

The laugh escaped unbidden, just like he'd meant it to. She picked up her spoon, had a bite and grimaced.

"Yeah Z, it really is."

"Still better than Rina's."

She dropped her spoon as the laughter escaped again.

She was holding herself together by force of will alone. Walking the razor's edge to keep from plunging into despair; and he could still make her laugh

She wiped away tears and picked up her spoon again, "You're not wrong, but I'm still telling her you said that."

She snorted at his theatrical wince and ate her oats.

Drank her coffee.

And steeled herself for whatever came next.

## Chapter 22

Wraith's back crashed into the wall a split-second after Shade's foot connected with her solar plexus.

She threw herself to the side, narrowly avoiding his follow-up punch that hit the wall with a dull thud.

"Missed me, *babe*," she taunted, dancing back.

He clenched his hand a couple of times, checking for damage. "Tell that to your bruises, *babe*."

She darted forward, ducked his overhand right and tackled him to the mat. Not a tactic she'd normally choose, but Shade's reflexes had always been insane, and he was far more dangerous on his feet.

They grappled and her time sparring with Kael had definitely paid off, earning Shade a split lip and ending with him in a hold that should have had him tapping out.

Instead, he turned his head to her, winked, and said, "Flexible, babe. Remember?"

He hooked a leg, shifted his hips, and suddenly she was airborne.

She landed on her stomach with an *oof*, and before she could move, he'd grabbed both arms above the elbows, driving a knee beside her spine. He wrenched her shoulders back, locking her in place.

His grip was too strong.

She *should* have been able to break free—she had the strength. But leverage had other ideas.

Her back and shoulders screamed in protest.

"Fine," she ground out. "You win."

Shade let her down slowly, easing the pressure on her spine, then peeling his grip from her arms. She slowly rolled to a hunched seated position. He held his hand out to her to help her up, but he was already braced.

Surrender did not guarantee safety.

She shook her head, her left arm tucked close to her ribs.

*Right. Shoulders. Stupid.*

“Stay still, I’ll phase us to MedBay.”

“No, I’m—”

He knelt beside her, wrapped his arms around her and then they were there. On the diagnostic table, exactly as intended.

“—okay.” She glared at him.

Zane hopped down and put a hand on her leg, “And how were you planning to climb the ladder?”

She didn’t answer, so he squeezed her leg and started the diagnostic.

“Tore your rotator cuff. Shit, sorry.”

She tried to shrug. Her right shoulder jerked up but the left just twitched and she hissed through clenched teeth.

“Fuck. I was going to say don’t be, but Void that hurts.”

“Sorry.”

“It was a good move.” She shifted as the diagnostic continued its work. “I think you may have pinched a nerve as well. Weird tingling in my legs.”

He looked at the results. Some lumbar spine compression.

“Yeah. Oops.”

“I’ll have to try that one on...” she trailed off.

*On Kael.*

Zane closed his eyes for a moment, felt her grief wash over him. Swallowed the pain.

“Come on, let’s get this started and you can start interrogating me again.”

He hooked an arm behind her good shoulder, “Lean.”

He guided her down slowly, her weight warm and shaky in his arms. Her left arm stayed pinned to her ribs, fingers curled like a dead spider.

He winced, but didn’t apologize.

“You’re thinking of saying sorry again, aren’t you?”

He smiled at the irritation in her voice.

“Me? Never.”

Wraith turned her head slowly. Zane was kneeling by the med cabinet.

“Don’t even think of giving me Silk again.”

He glanced up at her, regret and resignation on his face. “Back on Perdition last year, you had seven broken ribs and massive internal bruising to fix. My compound is not exactly the commercial capital of the galaxy. It was either Silk or aspirin.”

He looked down again, “Besides, you don’t have any.”

She closed her eyes as he stepped back to her, regulation painkiller in hand. Cool flooded her system, blunting the pain and leaving her floaty.

She opened them again.

Zane looked so serious. Still shirtless.

“You’re pretty,” she told him.

He laughed. That was better.

“I am, but hold that thought, babe, I haven’t forgotten my upcoming interrogation. And you need to be sober for it.”

She could hear movement behind her, then reason reasserted itself.

“Probably should have given you the *Anthexis* first,” he muttered.

She didn’t respond.

She wasn’t embarrassed. Not exactly.

“Kick start the MedDoc, Zane, and then go and put on a shirt.”

He kissed her forehead, “Lie still. Be back now.”

He walked out of the room.

Wraith closed her eyes and tried to find Kael. It was like grasping mist. He was there, but so fucking far away.

*I’ll find you*, she promised silently.

And after she did, the Children of the Deep Horizon weren’t going to be a problem anymore.

Hard to cause problems when you’re all dead.

The MedBay door slid open.

“You’re wearing your scary smile,” Shade noted.

She figured that didn’t need a response. Was more menacing without one.

She heard him pull a chair over, and looked over at him when she felt his feet prop themselves against her leg.

The chair was balancing on its back two legs and Shade was as comfortable as if he were on solid ground.

She raised an eyebrow at the long-sleeved shirt he wore.

He grinned. “Wouldn’t want my interrogation to be interrupted because you got distracted by my pretty chest.”

She nudged his feet off the diagnostic table with her knee. He crossed his legs on the chair without letting its front legs touch ground.

She scowled at him.

“When I get full use of my arms back, I’m breaking your ribs.”

## Chapter 23

Shade kept an eye on the diagnostic; let his chair reacquaint itself with physics.

Despite the mostly accidental damage, their sparring session had helped clear the air.

There was still grief and rage and tension and *history*. But it had taken a step back. Gave them to the chance to be tactical rather than reactive.

“Where do you want to start?”

Wraith looked at him without turning her head. “I have no fucking clue.”

She could still make him laugh, even unintentionally.

“Okay, let’s take this from the other direction. Objective?”

She looked at the ceiling. “Find Kael, rescue him, burn the cult to the ground.”

“Theirs, right?”

Her answering look told him that *his* could be on the table if he wasn’t careful.

“Situation. Unknown. Execution... stop grinning.”

She didn’t, but she answered, “Phase one: intel. Figure out what we know and what we don’t.”

He nodded. “Phase two: support. Which probably means a trip to Kronos.”

She glanced at him.

“SID HQ,” he clarified.

“Right. Go and see Geist.”

“Yep.” He couldn’t tell how she felt about that. Wondered whether she knew herself.

“Phase three,” she continued. “Use whatever fucking resources Geist has to find Kael.”

“And phase four,” Shade finished. “Kill everybody. Except Sunshine of course.”

They grinned at each other.

*Just like old times.*

\* \* \*

*Dikaïos trudged the worn path back to the hill.*

*Lillian walked next to him. Not speaking.*

*It would be so easy to reach over and break her neck.*

*Step. Grab. Snap.*

*Done.*

*So, why wasn't he?*

*“Because you still need me, Dikaïos.”*

*His eyes slid over to her, narrowed. Her pulse spiked as fear rolled through her.*

*Good. It would do her well to remember who was in charge.*

*They continued up the hill in silence. And if he made his pace faster than she could reasonably keep up with? Well, it wasn't Kael's fault that she fell behind.*

*His steps slowed as he reached the summit.*

*Kael.*

*He stopped. Stared at nothing.*

*Who was Kael? He felt like he should remember.*

*But was it important?*

*Lillian stumbled over gravel as she reached him. He didn't steady her, and she glared at him.*

*He ignored her, still searching for the elusive memory.*

*“Why do you like it here, Dikaïos?”*

*He turned to her. Studied her, an ant before a giant.*

*Turned back to the hill, the surrounds.*

*Above.*



*Below.*

*"This is where it began," he told her. "This is where it ends."*

\* \* \*

Wraith's shoulder throbbed dully as the MedDoc continued its work. Shade blew out a breath next to her. Nodded. "First: Intel."

He paused, "Fuck, I have no clue where to start either to make it make sense."

Wraith's fingers twitched towards him, but he was on her left side, and they weren't working yet.

"Okay. Let's back up a few days. I'd stormed off because two idiots decided to turn a pissing contest into performance art."

'Really good performance art.'

No point dignifying that with an answer.

"Then my ship powers itself on and I get a call from GEO... from *Geist*. I knew it felt familiar."

"Yeah, he can access pretty much any ship that's gone through fleet maintenance in the last three years."

The implications of that were terrifying. "And here I thought you were the crazy one."

"Nah. I'm chaotic, not insane."

And that was even more terrifying.

She took a moment to corral her thoughts. "We'll get back to *Geist*... eventually. What happened while I was away? Because when I walked back into my room you appeared out of nowhere and Kael was practically dead in your arms."

His movements were minute, but she knew him well enough to recognize most of the emotions he was doing his best to hide. Guilt. Wry humor. Fatalism.

A bizarre combination but quintessentially Shade.

"I told you some of it already."

She thought back, “The artifact? What is it?”

“Yeah. It’s... not from around here.” He held up a hand before she could say anything.

“After you left, we patched ourselves up. Bit of male banter, you know how it goes. But then he tells me that you told him, that I could talk to the Void.”

“You can.”

“Yeah. But I never told *you* that, babe.”

She blinked, *how*—

“Doesn’t matter. But when he said it, I was,” he paused as if trying to make sense of his memories. “I was compelled. That’s probably the best way to describe it.”

“Compelled to do what, Z?”

“That complex sits on top of an older one. *Much* older. Most of it is buried or collapsed, but there is one space that is still accessible. And that’s where I stashed the artifact after Geist and I retrieved it from Astraklasis, where SID had been keeping it.”

“On Leonidas Prime. Shit, that was hit hard.”

“And it was dead when we were there two years ago. And I mean *dead*. Nothing grows there anymore. Whatever the Others hit it with killed the city and *everything* in it.”

Wraith’s mind was threatening to spiral again.

She focused on the cold of the diagnostic table beneath her. The slight high-pitched whine of the MedDoc at work. She could smell her sweat and blood as well as Zane’s. See the way the ceiling tiles connected.

Two deep breaths. Two more. Finally she said, “It’s hard to reconcile that with what I saw with Elijah and Seori. But I think we’re drifting off topic.”

“Yeah, we’ll save that one for another day. Anyway, I took Sunshine down there. There’s a vault. You can’t open it, but I phased us in. He touched it, collapsed. His eyes were black, Ash.”

“Yeah, they’ve been doing the creepy Void thing on and off for a while.”

“No, babe. I mean completely. As in no white, just rim-to-rim black.” He was tapping his knee—*over to you* in Morse. “And just how long have they been doing the *creepy Void thing* for?”

She answered without thinking, "Since Spirit."

She heard his sudden intake of breath and turned to him. His face was bloodless and he was shaking.

"Babe?"

No sign he'd even heard her.

She *reached*.

*Zane. Come here, come to me. I can't come to you.*

His eyes met hers, haunted, filled with tears. He staggered forward and half-collapsed on her, careful not to jolt her.

Clutched her, and wept.

## Chapter 24

Wraith held him with her good arm. He clutched her sides like she was the only thing holding him to reality.

Together, they mourned Spirit.

The grief still caught her at odd moments, but she'd been able to grieve with Elijah. Later with Rina.

Shade had never been able to mourn the loss of their heart. Not properly. Not with anyone who understood.

Except maybe Geist.

"You cuddle better," he whispered. And she realized he'd heard her thought. That they'd integrated. Lightly, yes, but he was there.

Hurting.

Haunted.

The MedDoc had beeped its completion before they moved, and even then, it was just to let him climb more fully up onto the table with her.

She held him and kissed his head, like he'd done to her earlier. Held her lips there and opened her heart.

Found he was already there. Always had been.

"Maybe Seori was right," she murmured.

"Probably," he agreed quietly. "About what?"

"That violence isn't a good substitute for therapy."

He snorted, "Quicker though."

She laughed and cried some more. "Kael said the exact same thing. I thought she was going to slap him."

"And you know that Elijah has shown her how to do it *effectively*."

They both giggled.

"I'd forgotten you knew how to giggle, Ash."

"Excuse me," she told him, "*I don't* giggle. You on the other hand..."

She jabbed her fingers lightly into his ribs. He flinched and—yes—giggled. Even with cheeks still wet with tears.

"No fair."

"Fair's for children, soldier. You're in the army. Suck it up."

He howled, "Drill Sergeant Bains. He's still alive, you know."

She shifted to look at him. "Really? Still terrorizing new recruits?"

"Worse. Retired."

Her mouth fell open in shock. Zane tapped it closed with a finger.

"I'd make a comment about it being a cold day in hell, but we've both been to Iveros. Hell's always cold."

He hugged her tightly. "Okay, let's suck it up like the war crimes we are and get some food. Maybe a drink if you have anything lurking."

They sat up together, "You're not cooking."

"Glad you volunteered, babe." He caught her mouth in a brief, mostly chaste kiss, and hopped off the bed. Nodded at her seriously for a moment.

Thanks. Acknowledgment.

Something.

She nodded back with a small smile.

They may be broken, but they weren't alone.

For now, that was enough.

Two fingers of whiskey later—fine, three—Shade was feeling mostly up to continuing the conversation.

Wraith was nursing her drink, taking slow, occasional sips.

"I'm a cheap date these days," she told him when she clocked him looking at her glass for the third time.

He winked at her, couldn't help himself, "Good to know."

She threw a knife at him. Just a table knife, and he snatched it out of the air like it was floating.

“Show off.”

He shrugged, took a deep breath. “Okay, what exactly was Helios doing when his eyes first did the creepy Void thing.”

She took another sip of her her drink. Set it down on the table.

“Can I push it to you? I don’t particularly want to talk through it right now. I don’t have the emotional bandwidth.”

“Sure.” He held out a hand, which she took, and her memories slammed into him.

The terror following *complete, boundless integration*, the horror of the underground lab. The pain of seeing Spirit chained to the Anchor, more dead than alive. Of him asking if she could kill him.

Her attempting to channel the Void through the Anchor. Screaming as if it was pulling her apart, molecule by molecule.

Which, of course, it was.

Helios slamming into her, knocking her away, connecting with the Anchor. His eyes changing. Brown, black, gray, white. The way the energies swirled, changed, reversed.

The Anchor shifting, freed from its stasis along with Spirit, who disappeared while she was holding his hand.

The grief. The numbness. The necessity.

He rubbed his temples.

*That fucking hurt.*

On so many levels.

He held a hand over one eye and squinted at her with the other. “Wish I’d known that *before* I took him down there. And that I asked more questions about *why* you would have told him that.”

He slumped forward, cheek to cool metal. Leaned into her touch as she stroked his hair.

“I’m telling Geist you overlooked basic intel-gathering protocol.”

“I overlook all protocols. Why should that one be different?”

She kept stroking his head as the memory settled.

She’d done that before, he realized. Many times over the years when things had been spiraling out of control. When *he’d* been spiraling.

“Thanks, babe,” he whispered to the table.

“Always.”

\* \* \*

*Kronos*

Geist was pacing.

It was a bad habit, but one had to indulge sometimes or risk stagnation. And as long as no one saw him do it? Well, the harm was limited.

He'd felt restless since Shade had dumped his memories on him and departed. A week before. The headache had taken more than twelve hours to abate.

Since then he had dug deeper and deeper into the vast volumes of data that SID routinely collected. Unearthed archives that hadn't been touched in decades.

Searching for something that might show precedent for what had happened to the good Major when he touched that Void-damned and Void-saturated artifact.

Found nothing.

They never should have kept it. Not after what happened to Astraklasis.

That was why he'd given it to Shade in the first place.

His preferred option of launching it into a star being rejected only because the odds of the star going supernova exceeded acceptable risk parameters.

That the Children of the Deep Horizon started broadcasting their message of return minutes afterwards could have been a coincidence.

Geist didn't believe in coincidence.

He believed in data.

And he believed that if Shade didn't answer his fucking mail, he was going to do something he'd regret.

He tapped his data pad.

No response. He hadn't even read it.

Not atypical.

But he had been agitated enough to step over Geist's carefully curated boundaries. Not something Shade ever did lightly.

He shook his head, braced himself for the migraine, and phased to Perdition.

It took longer than usual. Felt more difficult—like he was being pulled in two directions.

As soon as he stepped out onto the usual hill, he collapsed, vomiting.

Scrunched his eyes at the bright sunlight as the acrid smell of smoke assaulted his nostrils.

He stood carefully. Pain thrumming through his head.

Turned around.

And stared at the burnt-out ruins of what had been Shade's cult compound, panic rising out of forgotten depths.

He'd know if Shade were dead.

Was sure of it.

But he wasn't here. Was just as sure of that.

Without pausing for thought or operational planning, he staggered down the hill to try to find some kind of clue or remnant of his friend.

His brother.

His last fucking connection to the man he used to be.

And if he had to burn what was left of the galaxy to find him, he would do it.

Even if he had to dig through the ashes with his bare hands.



## Chapter 25

*He sat on a throne at the front of the congregation. Forehead resting on his hand, elbow on the throne's thick wooden arm.*

*Even with his eyes closed, he knew the brethren were kneeling.*

*Knew where each and every one of them were. The ones here. The ones still in the settlement attending to their duties. The ones in the jungle beyond.*

*Lillian was speaking.*

*Dikaio didn't bother to listen.*

*He didn't want to be here, down with the brethren. Listening to the voice of someone who claimed to speak on his behalf.*

*It stoked something primal inside him. Like fragments of bone being struck together to create a spark.*

*She irritated him.*

*She was imperious.*

*High handed.*

*Disdainful and cavalier at the same time.*

*Wrong.*

*He raised his head, eyes focused on her.*

*In her fervor, she did not feel him looking. If she spoke for him truly, then she would have stopped. Would have turned.*

*He turned his hand, still raised next to his head. Held it palm out towards her.*

*Let his power flow through him. Flow out of him.*

*And into her.  
Some brethren screamed. Some fled.  
Some raised their eyes to him in holy awe.  
And Dikaio?*  
*He smiled as Lillian burned to ash from the inside out.*

\* \* \*

Shade's hands were still shaking slightly around the refilled glass of whiskey she'd pressed on him.

"Sorry," she told him again as she sat.

He waved her off.

"Nah, I get why you didn't want to go through that again. I can now say with certainty that once was enough."

*True.*

"You know what it is, don't you. The Anchor."

Shade raised the glass to his mouth, drank about half and placed the rest down. "Exactly that. An Anchor."

"Helpful." She kept her tone dry as her expression.

His lip twitched. "It's not part of this universe. Not really. I don't even know if it's part of the Inbetween."

"Yeah, not even slightly following that."

The movements he made were tiny; physical frustration at being unable to find the words to explain.

"Okay, you know how we navigate Inbetween?"

She nodded. "By feel. For as much sense as that makes."

"Exactly. The Anchors sort of help... facilitate that."

Wraith chewed on the idea. "Anchors? Plural?"

The look on his face said yeah, *definitely* plural. "There are a lot of them. Mostly buried. Mostly forgotten."

"And you're saying we feel these Anchors while we're Inbetween?"

He sighed loudly. "I'm saying they're the map we can't see, but that we

understand anyway.”

“That’s poetic but not helpful.”

He stared at her for a moment, as if trying to figure out how to describe what he felt rather than what he knew. “Okay, think of them as... symphonic resonance points in an ocean of chaos. They don’t anchor you. They *orient* you.”

His finger was tapping. Nothing specific. Just running through the alphabet. She’d done that a lot during her imprisonment.

“Okay. I’m just going to take that on faith for now. What about the artifact?”

He gulped the rest of his whiskey. “It’s a rock. A really dense, really heavy rock that doesn’t weigh anything. It’s not the same material as the Anchors. But they recognize each other.”

“Wait... they’re alive?”

Zane spread his hands in a “*who can say*” gesture.

She rocked in her chair. Processing. Noticed her finger was tapping in sync with Zane’s.

“Is any of this related to the Choir?”

He stopped tapping. Shrugged. “I don’t think so. They don’t feel the same. Did you get anything about them from Elijah and Seori?”

“Didn’t ask, but I got the sense there’s no love lost.”

“Interesting.”

Her turn to shrug. “Not today’s problem.”

“True. I’m going to go with no. It doesn’t feel like them, and things are complicated enough without bringing the Void-Warped Others into it.”

Wraith nodded, lips turning upwards, “Did Geist ever file his report on them?”

Shade smile was wide and slightly bleary from the whiskey, “You know, I think that one might just have been misfiled somewhere. Along with things like Integration and Void Bombs.”

\* \* \*

*Perdition*

Geist phased into the artifact chamber like a vengeful ghost. Paused for a heartbeat to consider his similes, then decided *fuck it* and glared at the rock.

“Alright, you stubborn piece of shit, we’ve been down this road before. You know how it ends. So you’re going to tell me what happened here, nice and easy.”

The vision dropped him between one breath and the next.

He saw the fight. The slaughter. The interrogation.

Heard the sermon.

Felt the pain.

His, hers, and theirs.

Felt something akin to anger coming from the artifact, along with a suggestion.

*Almost* a request.

He lay on the ground, chest heaving, staring at the fucking thing. Finally, pushed to his knees, then his feet.

Braced against the wall while his legs remembered how to hold him upright.

“I do this, I want something in return.”

The silence waited.

“I want to know what happened to Spirit.”

The world paused, frozen in time for the longest heartbeat of Geist’s life. Then normality reasserted itself.

He reached out, cursing himself, and picked up the artifact. Slipped it into his pocket.

And phased back to Kronos.

\* \* \*

“Right, so to summarize, we have Kael, who accepted the Void into him, and channeled something through the Anchor that made it and Spirit disappear. Then we get to Perdition, the Void wakes up, and then gets further activated when he touches that damned artifact. How am I doing so far?”

Shade closed one eye to bring Wraith into focus, gave her a thumbs up.

“Some of your cultists see the *change*, decide that their Messiah has returned

after all and kidnap him. Taking him Void-knows where.”

She paused, considering, “Does the Void know where, Shade?”

He tried opening the other eye. Couldn’t decide which one of her to respond to. He swayed slightly.

Heard her muttered “Ugh,” and then she was gone. Like she’d phased. He giggled. He could phase.

Bad idea doing it drunk, but he could—

The world tilted, his stomach threatening revolt, and then his veins filled with acid. Wraith stepped back, pressure syringe in hand, and Shade found himself completely sober and gasping.

“What the fuck was that?”

“Firebreak. Never tried it, but Kael swears by it. Burns through alcohol in seconds.”

“Yeah, and leaves you feeling your blood’s been replaced with liquid fire.” He rubbed his forearms as if he could extinguish it.

“Does the Void know where Kael is, Zane?”

He closed his eyes. Tried to listen.

Got nothing but static.

“No fucking clue.”

She was pacing now, circling him like a vulture. “Any way you can get a fucking clue?”

“It doesn’t work like that. Not for me, at any rate.”

Hands slammed onto the table, “Well how the fuck does it work?”

She was pissed off. Good. So was he.

“You want to know, Starlight? Come closer, I’ll show you.”

He held out a hand, a deliberate challenge.

She didn’t hesitate, he’d give her points for that. She grabbed his hand. He yanked her forward, stared into her eyes, and *pushed* the mechanics of Void communication into her brain—such as they were.

Perpetual chaos, forgotten songs, hidden memories, and silence loud enough to deafen.

She didn’t so much as blink before she headbutted him and sat back in her chair with a thump.

CONDITIONAL RELEASE

“Fuck you, Shade.”

“Would do, babe, but you’re already spoken for.”

## Chapter 26

It was much later when Shade stepped onto the bridge, slid into the navigator's chair.

She'd been flying on manual, it helped calm her nerves. It had been an emotional few days.

Which was putting it fucking mildly and had her lip curling up in a snarl.

Should I leave?"

It was Zane's voice. If it had been Shade, she might've said yes.

"No, stay."

She pushed the *Lethe* through unending space, feeling the vibrations of the engine under the yoke. The only thing that indicated that they were moving at all.

"You called me Starlight," she heard herself saying.

In her peripheral vision, Zane shrugged.

"It's been a while since you called me by that nickname. Even... before."

Before being thrown in a cell for five years. When they were still in Ghost Command.

He shrugged again.

"You're probably the only one that even remembers my old call sign." Nothing. She glanced at him, "But you forget, I also know yours... Zephyr."

He finally turned to her and rolled his eyes, "Thanks for the reminder... Nova."

She laughed, the tension that had been eating at her loosening. "They don't really fit anymore, do they?"

His chuckle was low, but honest. "I don't know. You still shine." She turned

to look at him. "Of course, it's more the glint on a blade, but still, shiny."

"And you still slip through the air like a breeze. Then step out of the shadows like you were never there."

The deep booming laugh rolled from him, settling her even more than the flying, "If you want to know how I phase, you just have to ask."

"Is that what you call it?"

He shrugged, "It's apt enough."

"We can add it to our growing to do list."

"Are we going to Kronos?" he asked.

"I think we have to, don't you?"

Shade had just started to agree when the speakers crackled with static and the bridge screens turned gray.

"Well of course," said a dry, modulated voice that still managed to convey annoyance and sarcasm.

Wraith turned to the screen and rolled her eyes. "I know it's you, Geist. You may as well show yourself."

Geist's hand trembled as he turned the cam on, the voice modulator off.

Told himself it was anger. Knew that he lied.

They sat together on the bridge of her ship. Formerly Helios's ship.

Wraith and Shade. Ash and Zane.

And once upon a time, Nova and Zephyr.

If he'd thought about it for even a second, he'd have checked in with her earlier. He wasn't usually so... sloppy.

She was looking at him, face pensive. Shade was slouching in the nav chair, but he'd caught the tail end of their conversation before he cut in. Whatever had happened to them since they'd left Perdition, they were back in sync with each other.

The first truly successful pairing on the GHOST program. And all based on a hunch.

He shuddered to think of the risks he'd been willing to take back then.

"How mad should I be with you, Geist?" she asked eventually.



Her voice was dry and still managed to cut.

“Completely, I’m afraid.”

“Did you leave me in that cell?”

“No!” His voice cracked and he leaned forward before he could stop himself.

“No. It was a year before I got a hint that you might still be alive. Took another three to actually find you.”

“We came up with some truly horrendous plans to get you out,” Shade commented from next to her. “I think I mentioned that in passing before.”

She nodded her head, lining the facts up just like he remembered her doing. “So Helios?”

“Was a chess piece I maneuvered to get you out, yes. It pains me to say, I didn’t know they’d biochipped you when they imprisoned you. So, the Tether was neither my idea nor part of my plan.”

And Brandt died too easily for authorizing it.

“And after?” Her voice was brittle over the comm, Shade reached out and took her hand. He’d have to analyze the impact of that later.

“After? I was busy with other things until the good Major sent me a file on Shade’s cult, tagged GEO.”

“What does that mean anyway?”

She glanced at Shade, who was laughing. “Geist’s Eyes Only.”

“Seriously?”

Shade’s grin was typically unrepentant. “It was a joke that got a little out of hand.”

“Did you know about Spirit?” The delivery was deceptively neutral. The question was brutal.

“Shade asked me the same thing. My answer then is the same as my answer now. If I’d known, I would have burned everything I’ve built to the ground and damned the consequences.”

\* \* \*

*Dikaios had no need for sermons. No need for worship.*

*What he needed was labor. So he had them dig.  
It would take time. But he had all the time in the universe.  
He could have stepped through space directly to the door. Could have  
channeled the Void through his hands and drilled down in an instant.  
But a quiet voice somewhere inside him urged to take a more leisurely  
pace.  
He'd have questioned it, but it cost him nothing to acquiesce.  
The cold pool of power at the core of his being rippled like a stone  
thrown in a pond.  
Or a crack forming beneath ice from fists pounding on it.  
He saw neither. Felt neither.  
Concerned only with the song of the Abyss. The layout of the sky. And  
the depth of the tunnel below.*

\* \* \*

"We're coming to see you," Wraith's voice was brisk. Not willing to take any argument.

"I think you'll find that getting here is somewhat difficult. Unknown ships being treated as a threat by default." Geist's voice was flat, but not emotionless.

It had been so long, but there were micro-expressions if you knew what to look for. She looked over at Shade again.

"We could get close enough that I could probably phase her in," he told Geist, "but all in all, it would be simpler to meet us somewhere a little further out."

Geist regarded them, statue still. Only the occasional blink proved they were still connected.

"Phaethon?" he suggested finally. "I can be there within a day."

Wraith had never heard of it, but clearly Shade had as he made a noise of resigned disgust. "Can't you choose somewhere nice for once?"

"We could go to Astraklasis if you're feeling nostalgic."

Shade flipped him off, “We’re at least three weeks out—”

“Get your ass moving, Poltergeist,” Wraith interrupted. “We’ll be there in six hours.” She leaned forward, menacingly, “And that’s the outside estimate.”

She turned back to the console, tapped in a quick code, and Tunneled, cutting Geist off before he could reply.

“Huh,” was Shade’s only comment.

The Fold was at it’s beautiful best.

Colors bled in the distance, fractured and seemingly alive.

A stable rift showed stars not far from where they eased through a still pool of darkness; colder and denser than the rest.

Something in her soul settled, the way it always did when she was here.

A glance at Zane. The same thing. Like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders.

Reluctantly, she took her hands off the yoke and stood.

“You know where we’re going. You fly.”

He stood, hugged her, and took the pilot’s seat. She sat in the nav chair.

More than five years since they’d been in the Fold together.

For a moment she ached to dive deep, to find Phantom. Talk through this whole Void-damned mess. And maybe that would be their next step.

But first, they had an appointment with a spy who became a Ghost. A Ghost who became a puppet master.

He could hold all the answers or none of them. SID’s archives were legendary. But she’d seen military filing systems. Just because the data was there, didn’t mean it was accessible or even usable.

Redacting files being a fun SID pastime. Regardless of whether it was necessary.

She closed her eyes, tried to find Kael. He was no closer here than in real space. She’d hoped he might be.

All she had was the tiny sliver of connection that told her that he was alive. And even that felt like she was losing her grip on it.

She rubbed her eyes, looked back out to the Fold and refocused on Geist.

He'd said she should be completely mad at him. And he'd seldom been one for exaggeration.

What would she do when she saw him?

Hug him? Or stab him?

Or both?

"Stab him later babe," Shade murmured next to her, "we need his intel. Also, I'd miss him. The uptight bastard has been the only thing holding me to this plane of existence the last few years."

## Chapter 27

“Zane, how did you know what I was thinking?”

Shade glanced at her, considered *which* truth he should give her. Opted for the less complicated one.

“You were wearing your stabby face, babe.”

Being here again, especially being here with *her* again, it amplified the resonance.

He could sense the Fold as they flew threw it, straight and true.

Hear the Void as it sang to him, filling his chest with ancient melodies that were more thoughts than words.

Feel *her*, sitting next to him. A mere meter away.

Lost.

And completely focused on him.

“Holding you to this plane of existence?” She repeated his words, her voice light and curious.

He winced. He knew that voice, and she was definitely going to hurt him.

*This* wasn’t a moment for little truths.

But big truths were hard, and he’d had to give her so many hard truths already.

He watched the Fold, hoping for a collapse to get him out of this conversation.

No such luck.

*Typical.*

He didn’t look at her. Tried not to feel her. Kept his voice soft and his eyes forward.

“I’ve been a lot of people over the years, Ash. Zane is who I was when I still thought I could save you. Shade is who I became when I realized I couldn’t even save myself. And after you were gone, I didn’t even want to do that.”

Her hand settled on his shoulder, he closed one of his own over it. Didn’t look up.

“Geist...” Zane sighed. “Spirit was gone. Phantom was gone. Spook became a mercenary and all but disappeared. Geist stayed. He wouldn’t let me quit.”

A hollow laugh sounded, it took a moment to register it was his. “He pulled me out of more dens of inequity and bad situations than he’d care to remember. Although of course, he does. Gave me things to focus on. If not to live for, then to exist for.”

She squeezed his shoulder, he squeezed her fingers back.

“So, yeah. We may have had a friendly rivalry back in the GC days—”

“Semi-friendly. Eventually. At best.”

It made him smile. “He’s kept me here, Ashley. Kept me sane. Ish. I owe him more than I’ll ever be able to repay.”

His breath stuttered, and he dug for Shade, needed his flippant deflection. “Which unfortunately, babe, means I probably have to stop you stabbing him. At least fatally.”

He examined her knife in his hand. The one that had just been strapped to her ankle. Tucked it into his boot.

She said nothing, but she knelt and wrapped her arms around him, rested her head in his lap.

“When you thought you could save me? From what?”

“From everything.”

She hugged him tighter. Stayed like that as the Fold flared and shifted around them.

The Inbetween had always felt more real to him than real space. But right now, Ash was the realest thing in his universe.

\* \* \*

*Dikaaios was dreaming.*

*Not of the stars. Not of the Abyss.*

*He dreamed of sweat and skin, of bodies moving together. Of being lost and found in the arms of another.*

*He dreamed of the taste of her lips, her skin, her clit.*

*Heard her gasp as he thrust into her. Her scream as she came for him.*

*Felt her mouth on him, hot and greedy. Her hands working him.*

*Remembered her riding him, barely holding onto control.*

*Felt her fall as his fingers danced to give her pleasure.*

*Felt himself fall with her.*

*Her name on his lips.*

*Ash.*

*The dream slipped, half-memory, half-hunger...*

And Kael sat bolt upright, fighting for control, even as the pressure of the thing that was **not** the Void crushed him, pain blooming across every cell.

He rolled to his feet, stumbled, and crashed to the ground.

Lay twitching, fighting.

Losing.

*Dikaaios pushed back up, tasted blood on his lip.*

*A half-remembered dream kept him still for a moment.*

*He'd been searching.*

*But for what?*

*With a shrug he started walking, the cut on his lip already gone. And went to check on the progress on the tunnel.*

\* \* \*

“Tell me about Phaethon.”

Wraith was back in the pilot's chair, still unsteady after Shade's admission. They'd just punched back into real space, a couple of hours out from their

destination.

They could have come in closer. Practically in Geist's back yard, if they wanted to. Wraith wondered why Shade chose against it.

"Ugh. Hellscape of a planet. Half is too damn hot, the other half is frozen. There is a thin band which is theoretically habitable. And I use that term lightly."

"So, why would Geist have a... what, residence here?"

Shade jerked a shoulder, "Think of it more like a secret lair. There are some nasty gravitational wells that make flying too close an... interesting experience."

"Is that why we're two hours out?"

"That, and I need some time to regain my composure."

"Fair enough." She tapped her finger on her leg, "Me too."

His expression was rueful. "Yeah. It's been that kind of week. But it could be worse."

She turned to stare at him, agog. "How?"

He shrugged, grinned, "His lair could have been on Iveros."

"Oh Void, can you even imagine. You know what, actually, I can. I bet the bastard *does* have one there."

Shade stood and stretched. "He does. I've been disinclined to accept to his invitations."

Wraith let the laughter come. The tears with it. Letting the lid off the pressure cooker. Shade rubbed his fingers gently over one cheek, held her tears to his heart.

"Whatever happens, Ashley, I'm with you 'til the end."

"You're the only one I'll let get away with calling me Ashley," she told him, wiping the rest of the tears off her face, and let her gray eyes meet his blue ones. "Thank you, Zane. For everything."

"Always. Anyway, I'm going to get half an hour's rack time. Then we swap. We'll need to start concentrating on flying when we're an hour out."

"Rest well, Z."

"See you in thirty."

He walked out, leaving Wraith contemplating the stars and rubbing a hand



## CHAPTER 27

over her own heart. Wondering how she'd ever taken Zane for granted.  
And what the fuck she'd be doing without him.

## Chapter 28

Shade landed the *Lethe* in Geist's hangar. Wraith had handed the controls over to him without a word, let him navigate the weird gravity the planet caused in the space surrounding it.

And Void damn him if it wasn't fun.

His access codes worked; they were the only ones Geist never changed. But he suspected his favorite bastard had found a way to somehow link the codes to his bio signature. Or more likely, his resonance.

Maybe next time, when it wasn't *Wraith's* ship on the line, he'd try a different code. Just to see what happened.

She was next to him, one knee pulled up to her chest, chin resting on it. Silver hair pulled back into a braid. Long hair suited her, it just wasn't what he was used to.

Reminded him too much of the time that had passed.

"Aren't we going in?" she asked him as he killed the engine.

He shook his head, "Not until Geist gets here. In theory, everything should be fine. In practice, well, I'm not saying I don't trust him..."

"You're just saying you don't trust him."

He smiled, "Exactly."

Looked at her. Blinked and *really* looked.

Holding it together by will and spite and... him. That last one shocked him to his core. It's one thing for someone to say you're their soul. Another to realize ***you are.***

He blinked back the Void.

Zane opened his arms in invitation.

She stared at him. He raised the hint of an eyebrow, the smallest edge of his lip. And she crawled into his lap. Held him. Let herself be held.

"I fucking hate feeling this way," she told him softly.

Zane just held her tighter, "Don't worry, I didn't see a thing."

Geist's ship landed on autopilot.

He could have done it manually, but he didn't trust himself. He was too on edge. The *Lethe*, formally the *Styx*, already sat in the hangar.

Waiting.

Had been for almost an hour.

His fingers hovered over the commands that would give him access into their bridge's hidden video feed. Reluctantly decided that it was the coward's way out.

Like a condemned man, he rose. Adjusted his uniform, and left his ship. The hold door of the *Kairos* closed silently behind him.

He stood. Waited for his guests to disembark the *Lethe*.

They moved in tune with each other. He had no doubt that if he were to activate some of the more interesting of his defenses, that they would automatically fight in tandem. And probably beat the record for defeating them.

If there had been one.

Shade's face had slipped into his half-crazy mask, Wraith was neutral. Neither was a good sign.

"Welcome," he told them softly. "Wraith, I'll greet you properly in a moment, but if I may have a word with Shade first?"

Wraith inclined her head and Shade sauntered forward, headfirst into his fist.

Shade stepped back, cracked his nose back into position.

"Ow."

"Next time your cult is slaughtered and you burn your compound to the ground, send me a note. I was worried."

Shade's eyebrows shot up, and he stepped forward and pulled him into a

hug. Dripping blood on the floor and onto his uniform. He closed his eyes and held on, irrational relief suffusing him.

A moment later, he tensed as a second pair of arms enfolded them both.

Wraith kissed his cheek.

"It's good to see you, Geist."

They were sitting in a comfortable living space. Light blue walls, white leather couches, light wood coffee and side tables. Not the sort of space Wraith would have associated with Geist.

He and Shade had opted for whiskey, she stuck with tea. She stared at the bottle Geist was pouring from.

"Is that bottle... glowing?"

Shade was examining the amber liquid by holding his glass up to the light. "It's an experimental batch; notes of sorrow and existential dread. Smooth as a first kiss."

Wraith glanced at Geist, "Do I want to know?"

"No."

*Fair enough.*

She raised her teacup when they clinked glasses. Sipped.

They were quiet and she refused to play *who breaks first*.

"Do you know where Helios is?" Her gaze held Geist in place, but he shook his head.

"We're looking, but no. Nothing that has proven reliable thus far."

She swallowed. Somehow, in her head, getting here and getting through seeing Geist again was going to get her all the answers she needed.

The disappointment was crushing.

"In which case, do you have somewhere I can crash? Otherwise I'll just use the *Lethe*. I'm too tired for any other kind of conversation right now."

Geist stood, held out a hand to forestall Shade, before offering it to her to help her up. She didn't need it, but he'd always been surprisingly old fashioned.

She took it and let him tuck her hand into the crook of his arm, lead her down the hall. He opened a door on the left to reveal a comfortable-looking

bedroom. Much nicer than anything she'd slept in.

Probably ever.

He held her hand a moment, "I'm sorry, Ash. That it took me so long to find you."

Tears welled in her eyes. She wasn't up to having this conversation.

So she just raised a hand to his cheek for a moment, looked him in the eye, and nodded. Then turned into the room, the door sliding closed behind her almost immediately.

She stripped to a shirt and underwear, then climbed into bed. She was getting better at sleeping in them again.

Although an hour later she was still awake and contemplating the relative merits of putting her clothes back on and sleeping on the floor versus not moving but also not sleeping.

And she was desperate for sleep.

Just not able to get there.

The door hushed open, and she knew it was Zane before he spoke. "Need company?"

The answer needed no thought. "Yes."

He walked in, sat on the edge of the bed and pulled off his boots, socks and jacket. Climbed under the covers.

"Spoon, hold, or stay on my side of the bed?" he asked softly.

She paused, almost said *hold*, but that was how she slept with Kael, and she was too overwrought to bring the parallels so close.

"Spoon, please, Z."

He wrapped himself around her. One arm sliding under her neck. His breath in her hair as he murmured, "Sleep, babe. I've got you."

"Thanks, Z."

It still took a very, very long time for sleep to take her under. But Zane's hold didn't falter.

It never had.

And eventually, without even noticing, she fell into dreams.

Geist sat alone in his office, whiskey in hand, contemplating the artifact before him.

“Shade couldn’t feel you. That means you’re deliberately hiding. What are you up to?”

The artifact gave no answer.

Geist hadn’t expected one.

“If you’re hoping to go with them, I’m going to need more to go on than *oh by the way, the rock wants to join you*. Shade *might* accept that. Wraith won’t.”

He sipped his drink. Put the glass down and noticed that he had written something on the page in front of him.

*Not time yet.*

He glared at the artifact.

“I hate it when you do that.”

## Chapter 29

“Ah, good, you’re awake.”

Wraith had followed the smell of food to a large kitchen complete with dining table. Geist was standing at the stove, an apron tied over his spotless uniform.

“You know, your secret lair is suspiciously cozy. Also, are those pancakes?”

“To the latter, yes. To the former....” He gave a small sigh, “I’m the only one that comes here aside from Shade, and he only on rare occasions. By necessity I conform to certain stereotypes outside, so here...”

He trailed off, flipped a pancake.

Wraith didn’t ask why, if no-one came here, his table could seat twelve. Loneliness and hope were uneasy bedfellows.

“Shall I make coffee?”

“Already done. Carafe next to me. But you can pour.”

She stepped around the table, lips curling up in delight as she saw that the pancakes expertly being made were ghost shaped.

She briefly laid a hand on his shoulder—he’d always been less comfortable with touch than the rest of them—and poured them both coffee.

She took her first sip. It was strong and rich. “Shade’s still asleep.”

Geist looked her way, “Really?”

“You know he slept in my room.”

“I did. I was just surprised he was asleep. And deeply enough not to notice that you got out of bed.”

Wraith shrugged, “It’s been a rough few days. Pretty sure he hasn’t slept much.”

Geist nodded thoughtfully, “Indeed.”

“Sit, Ash. Or should I call you Wraith?”

She stared blandly at him until he dropped his gaze with a small smile.

“Ash. Sit, please.”

She slid into a criminally comfortable chair as Geist set the plate of ghost-shaped pancakes between them.

They ate, the silence unexpectedly comfortable.

“I used to dream of your pancakes, you know. The first few months on that rock. I’d wake up with the memory of the taste in my mouth.” She smiled, even as Geist paled. “As far as the whole experience went, that’s actually one of my better memories.”

His hand was on the table. She laid her own on it, softly so that he could pull away if he needed to. “I built a world in my head, just like you taught us. That, more than anything else I think, kept me sane.”

Dark amber eyes met hers, showing the infinite depths of Geist’s intellect and compassion and, yes, ruthlessness.

They stared at each other for a long time, neither speaking, until Shade stumbled through the door.

He touched each of them lightly as he passed, reassuring himself they were there. Poured coffee as if it were holy, drank like it was sacrament.

When he turned, some awareness had slid back into his eyes, which brightened when he looked at the table.

“Pancakes!”

\* \* \*

*Progress had stalled.*

*The miners had hit a layer of solid rock. The brethren who had come to explain this to Dikaïos was now ashes on the wind.*

*They would need tools.*

*He remembered a mine.*

*Somewhere... else. Stepped forward and into it.*

*For a moment he choked on unbreathable atmosphere. Then he*



*straightened, adjusting. Cracked his neck, and continued forward.*

*Where he found tools, he phased them back to Sôterion.*

*Idly wondered why, when he could step between the stars with such ease, that he waited for the mammals to dig down to the Gate.*

*He stopped as a corridor split in two.*

*In front of him, on the ground, was a wide cylinder. VAPOR unit, his memory informed him. Short term breathable atmosphere bubble.*

*He knelt, touched the unit, touched the ground, was hurled into the memory of a kiss. Of his own words, "Just in case this is a one-way trip."*

Kael stood and immediately fell to his knees, choking on atmosphere not intended for humans.

*Shit. So close.*

And he let himself fall.

*Dikaïos rose, brows drawn together in confusion. He was still looking at the VAPOR unit as he phased back to Sôterion.*

*There was much work still to be done. And now his miners had no excuses.*

\* \* \*

Wraith and Geist watched Shade eat with shared amusement.

He plowed through the remainder of the pancakes with steady pace and a rapturous expression.

Wraith could see concern in the set of Geist's shoulders. His micro-expressions coming back to her. He stood, and cooked more pancakes, these in the shape of Shade's cult sigil.

She gave a snort when she saw the first one.

"Yeah," Shade said, "He has a sense of humor. We tend to forget that."

Geist didn't reply. Was pouring the last of the batter into the pan when Shade pushed his plate away, stood, and wrapped his arms casually around

Geist from behind. Lay his chin on Geist's shoulder, even though he had to be on his toes to do it.

Wraith blinked.

Shade had said things had changed, but this level of comfort and familiarity still shocked her.

In Ghost Command they seldom interacted outside of the team dynamic. And when they did, it was a passive aggressive rivalry that had led to more than one physical altercation. And not just between the two of them.

There was nothing sexual in the touch now. Geist had never gone in for physical or even romantic relationships. But there was love, deep and true and familiar.

It reminded her how far behind she'd been left.

Geist laid his head against Shade's as he flipped the last pancake onto the plate, turned off the hob. He turned to her, Shade moving with him without changing position, causing him to roll his eyes.

"Come, I have a meeting room we can use. Let's see what this state of affairs really looks like."

She followed the two men down the long corridor, past the room she'd slept in and another that pulled at her to open it.

*Yeah, that's not happening.*

Finally turned into a meeting room as identical as any she'd ever been briefed in. If out there was a hint of Geist, this room was part of GEO's domain.

Geist peeled Shade off him, dropped him into a chair. Wraith sat down next to him and Shade nudged her knee. Examined the knife that had been sheathed on her *other* hip a moment before.

"You know, that stopped being funny several years ago."

He handed her the blade, hilt first.

"Yes, well I told you I'd stop when you caught me in the act." Winked. "Still waiting, babe."

## Chapter 30

It had taken almost ten hours. Countless carafes of Geist's excellent coffee, three near brawls and one actual shoving match to get almost everything they knew out on the table.

And that wasn't including the Geist-mandated meal breaks and Wraith-enforced time-outs.

But now they had the full picture, or as much of one as they were likely to get without getting into the more esoteric side of things.

It wasn't that they didn't trust each other. They did, mostly. At least with the hard data.

But that trust sat uncomfortably and none of them wanted to upset the fragile balance.

Wraith was looking at the data board, hands on her hips.

"So, we have nothing."

Geist sighed, pinched the bridge of his nose. "We have nothing definite. That's not the same as nothing."

Shade held a hand up to him, walked to her. Tension and frustration radiated along every line of her body. He didn't touch her, knew it wouldn't be welcomed at that moment.

"Wanna spar? Get rid of some of that excess energy?"

She spun to him, and her eyes flicked to Geist.

"You think you can take me on, Old Man?"

Which was *not* what Shade had been suggesting, but Geist rose like a cat that had sighted something small and tender. Smiled his scary smile, the one he saved for special occasions.

“That depends, Raine, are you ready to learn yet?”

It was a refrain he used to say to all of them, back at the beginning of the GHOST program. Before he became a Ghost himself and had just been their SID handler and instructor.

Wraith cracked her neck lazily, “Always. But more than that, *Qamar*, I’m ready to teach.”

Shade whistled. He wondered how long it had been since Geist had heard his own surname.

Geist swept out a hand towards the door.

“Ladies first.”

“In which case, after you.”

Shade let out a loud hiss as Wraith’s elbow collided with Geist’s windpipe. Except that he’d somehow dodged back in time for the blow to glance instead of shatter.

She’d barely had time to register the move when he’d countered, a perfectly calibrated blow on her outer thigh, just above the knee. Wraith’s leg buckled as the nerve compressed.

She let herself collapse, caught herself with her hands and pushed off, using her core and upper body strength to slam her good foot into his chest.

Geist stumbled back as she crashed to the mat.

*Should have gone for the groin, babe.*

Shade knew the look in Geist’s eye as he waited for Wraith to stand and turn back to him. His face was devoid of emotion, but his eyes took in everything and he was definitely plotting.

The blows that followed were almost too fast to follow, but they were a sharp reminder that anyone who underestimated Geist’s physical lethality would not be breathing for much longer.

He turned his head away as he recognized the grip Geist got on Ash’s arm. Winced at her scream as her elbow snapped. Yeah, he’d been caught by that one too.

Spun back at Geist’s ragged gasps, to find that Wraith had used his expectation of the fight being over to use her good arm to crush his windpipe with her

elbow.

“Okay kids,” he told them brightly, “Come on. Playtime’s over. Let’s go and get you fixed up.”

He could have helped one or both of them.

Chose not to.

When he was the sanest one in the room, there was a problem. And a few extra minutes stewing in pain would help them calm down.

Probably.

The MedDocs were about halfway through their respective treatments when the Comms beeped.

Priority message. Geist had left instructions not to be disturbed on pain of himself, so it was important and he needed to deal with it.

Which would be easier if she hadn’t crushed his larynx an hour ago.

Shade had left the room. Was Void knew where.

Ash was lying still, eyes closed. Maybe even asleep.

But desperate times called for desperate measures. He *reached* for her. Her eyes popped open and she stared at him in shock.

*That comm needs to be answered. Can you call Shade?*

She nodded, but didn’t let go of him. Instead she somehow *reached* out and touched Shade’s mind. He was in the kitchen. Apparently, making dinner.

How—?

*Comm coming in Z, G wants you to answer it.*

His reply was immediate, *On it.*

Then both of their presences faded from his mind.

She glanced at him, a glimmer of a smile no doubt aimed at his shocked face. “Had you forgotten that the more of us are linked, the further the signal boosts?”

He had. Which irritated him.

“Rest, G. We’ll yell at each other again later.”

Wraith walked into the kitchen a half step in front of Geist. Neither had said a word since their respective medical interventions had completed.

She sniffed the air. "Chili?"

"Only the best," Shade confirmed.

"Did you leave the Ghost Peppers out this time?" asked Geist, still hoarse.

"It was funny. I can prove it; I still have the vid."

"No." Geist sat.

Wraith lifted an eyebrow at Shade, who winked and mouthed, "*Later.*"

She grinned at Geist as she sat.

*Can't wait.*

Shade served them with all the aplomb of a top restaurant waiter. Not that either he or she had ever seen one outside of a vid screen.

Chili was one of the foods that Shade could be counted on to make reliably. And it was very good.

She bet Geist had fresh ingredients.

"So, Ed called while you guys were in MedBay." Shade's tone was conversational. Friendly.

Geist's expression was not.

"Ed?" Wraith asked.

Geist glanced at her, "You remember Ed, Ash. SID Ethereal that you and Helios beat up and then scared the crap out of on *Charon's Toll Station*."

"Wait, his name is actually Ed?"

It felt like a very long time ago.

Geist actually smiled, "It is now." She laughed at the endearing absurdity. Was still smiling when she turned to Shade.

"So, what did Ed have to say?"

Shade's expression had shifted into one Wraith hadn't seen in years. One she'd only ever seen once before. On Iveros. The second time. When the biggest ice storm ever recorded hit them.

It said they'd run out of time.

And they weren't all going to make it.

## Chapter 31

“I recorded it. Or rather, Geist records everything on principle. But this is going to be better from the source.”

They were still in the kitchen. Shade had thought about moving to the meeting room or even the living room. But at the end of the day, the location didn’t matter.

He didn’t give Wraith or Geist time to talk, even though neither seemed inclined to say anything. Just tapped the comms.

A heaviness had fallen across the room while the network connected.

Ed appeared on screen, looking ragged and sporting a black eye. Geist raised his eyebrow and the man winced. He looked at Wraith and reflexively put a hand to his throat.

“Eyes here, soldier,” Shade told him gently. Using a combination of his cult voice and the low but undeniable command tone of an off books mission.

Ed focused back on him, “They need to know what you told me. Don’t leave anything out.”

Ed nodded, and he had slipped into neutral when he turned back to Wraith and Geist.

“The Mouth is dead. The Holy Sun is risen. Woe be to the unbelievers, for they shall become ashes on the wind. We are summoned.”

He waited a beat, continued. “That’s a direct quote. Repeated between cult cells, between cultists and cult sympathizers. And Sir,” he looked at Geist. “The wording never changes.”

Geist’s eyes narrowed. Shade could guess what he was thinking: Wording *always* changed. Drifted. And that it hadn’t, was a problem.

"Your injuries, Ed, what happened?" Wraith's voice was curious. Light. And, Shade knew from experience, deadly.

"An argument about whether we should follow the summons or not got physical. One of my new cell got in a lucky hit."

"New cell?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. You and... the Major took out my cult cell on *Charon's Toll*. We, the cult, had been instructed to bring him in."

Wraith tilted her head. Unless you knew her you wouldn't know it meant she was surprised. Shade wondered who she'd thought was after them. Probably SID.

"Where are they summoned to, Operative?" Geist's voice was clipped.

"They don't know, Sir. But there is a pulling." He hesitated. "I can feel it too."

Geist was doing his statue impression. Wraith looked like she was having a picnic on a summer's day. Both looks meant that they were ready to murder without blinking.

Shade turned back to Ed.

"How did the Mouth die, Ed?"

"The word that's spreading is that the Holy Sun lifted his hand and she burned." He swallowed. "From inside. Nothing left but ash. And it took less than two minutes."

"And you believe the rumors?"

"Yes, sir."

Why?" He'd asked these questions earlier. But the others needed to hear the answers.

"Because I see it, sir. Every time I sleep. I see the Mouth being burnt as a false prophet. I can smell the smoke and ash; it still clings to me when I wake."

He swallowed hard, clearly steeling himself. "I see the Lord..." he took a deep breath. "I see the Holy Sun..." trailed off and tried again. "I see the man identified as Helios sitting on a throne. Raising his hand and burning her. His expression was bored."

The kid looked terrified; he turned to Shade, "Can you help me, sir?"

Wraith was tapping her finger on the table; Geist was unreadable. Shade



looked at him, nodded once.

Ed didn't move, but his relief was evident, "Thank you."

Shade cut the comm. Turned. Wraith was still tapping. Morse code operating signal: Calling all stations: distress.

*Yep. Things were not looking good.*

He got three glasses and a bottle of whiskey, earth-made this time, and poured each of them a couple of fingers.

Both Wraith and Geist downed theirs.

Shade wondered when he'd been nominated to be the grown up.

Still, he filled up their glasses again, glared at Wraith to stop her repeating the maneuver.

"So, that's the bad news. The good news is that we don't need to know where Helios is; we just need to pick up Ed and he'll direct us straight there.

He drained about half his glass in a single gulp. Looked at the other two.

Any questions?

Wraith pursed her lips together. The whiskey burn still making itself felt in her throat.

She was calm. The calm before the storm, before the mission. Pre-battle calm. And as long as she could hold onto that, she would be fine to do what came next.

She'd had her time to break. To fold. Now it was time to stand. To fight.

*Finally!*

"Was is just me, or did that sound suspiciously like Kael wasn't himself anymore?"

Shade gave her a suspicious look, but Geist touched his chin and nodded.

"Something has changed. I'm inclined to believe Operative Rutherford. That is the sort of shift I'd expect to see in mental state after months of careful mental manipulation and drugs. Or two days with Shade."

Wraith's lip twitched. Shade grinned.

"I'd be interested," Geist continued, "to know whether his mental shift is based on his proximity to other cultists, his participation in their rituals, or

something more esoteric.”

“You can ask him when we pick him up,” Shade told him, but Geist shook his head almost sadly.

“As much as I’d like to join the two of you, there is still a war coming. And while neither you nor I may enjoy the fact that I’m a cog in the military industrial complex,” he winked at Wraith, “I still have duties of care. Some of which even save lives on occasion.

“Do you miss it? Being part of the action rather than directing it?” Wraith found herself asking him.

Geist was silent a long time, steepled fingers pushing slowly against each other.

“I miss being part of Ghost Command. Without that? No. I’ve always preferred pulling on the web. People rarely notice the strands until they snap tight.”

“Told you he loved the sound of his own voice,” Shade told her with a wink.

“Good to know some things don’t change.”

Shade laid his hand on Geist’s shoulder; Geist automatically covered it with his own.

*And some things do.*

“Where is Ed these days?”

“Aethon’s Maw; I have the co-ords. Will you be Tunneling?”

Wraith nodded. “I get the feeling that if we leave him alone too long, he’ll end up answering the summons whether he wants to or not.”

She looked at Shade, still standing next to Geist, hands clasped. “You’ve been quiet, Z.”

It took him a long time to meet her eyes. “We will find Helios, Ash. And soon. But...”

“But he may not be the person we knew. The person I... It doesn’t matter. I have to know one way or the other. We have to try to get him back.”

“And if you can’t?” Geist’s voice was quiet. Regret heavy in his voice.

“Then I’ll do what needs to be done. Just like I always have... I think he’d prefer it that way. Don’t you?”

She spun on her heel and left them. Waited for them in the hangar to finish

their farewells.

Hugged Geist herself, just in case it was a one-way trip. Then boarded and went straight to the bridge, powered up the *Lethe* as Shade slipped into the nav seat.

*I'm coming for you now, Kael.*

*Even if I have to cut through your Void-damn god complex to do it.*

## Chapter 32

“Okay, I know we said that Iveros was hell, and Phaethon was a hellscape. So what does that make Aethon’s Maw?”

Wraith was flying manually over seemingly never-ending lava flows and black, semi-cooled volcanic basalt. The atmosphere was thin, making it dangerous to fly too high, but the shimmering heat rising from the surface presented challenges flying too low.

It was difficult, mentally taxing, and she was loving every minute of it.

Shade was checking the nav panel. “Aethon’s Maw is Hell’s anus.”

“Classy.”

He glanced at her again. He’d been doing it a lot since Ed’s call.

“I’m okay, Z. For now at least.”

He nodded, said nothing.

“Are *you* okay?” she asked. Suddenly wondering if she’d missed something obvious.

Again.

“Five by five, babe. I just hope we’re not too late.”

“Yeah. Me too.”

A barely-there chuckle. “Okay, swing starboard. The mine is coming up in about five clicks.”

“You think we’ll be able to land?”

“You’re not going to, babe. I’m going to phase down, find Ed, and phase back up again. I don’t trust the locals, I don’t trust this unstable atmo, and I sure as fuck don’t trust the volcanoes.”

“And you’re normally such a trusting soul.”

“Learned it from you, babe.” He shot her a wink. An old Zane, pre-mission banter wink. She couldn’t stop the smile or the wink back.

“How low do you need me to get?”

“Pretty low. I don’t know the place, so I need to see where I’m landing. After that? If you can sweep down to a couple hundred meters, it should be fine.”

“How do you account for the movement of the ship?”

He grinned, wiggled his fingers, “Magic.”

She rolled her eyes and circled the mine. Waited to see if anyone hailed them on comm. If anyone shot at them.

Nothing.

“You see anyone?” Wraith brought the lower cams up, zoomed in on the mine entrance.

“No one.” Shade was leaning forward, eyes sharp. Wraith dropped lower, “Stay—”

He disappeared. “—safe.”

She saw him appear on the screen as if he’d stepped out of the shadows. She resisted the urge to land and go with him as he looked up at the *Lethe*. “You hearing me, babe?”

“Nope. Can’t hear a thing.”

“Perfect. No one around, but there is a suspiciously familiar cooked meat smell in the air. Rise up a bit, I’m going to check the mine and see if I can find our missing Ethereal.”

Shade’s skin prickled like it was about to blister. It was really fucking hot and he should have taken the time to put on an HZ-rated envirosuit.

He slipped into the mine, following instinct. Or the voices. Possibly the Void. These days, who could really tell the difference anyway?

A sharp frisson raced across his skin. Static electricity turned up to eleven. “Okay, okay, I was joking.”

The meat smell was getting worse along with the putrescence of rotting corpses.

He didn’t open the doors that lined the corridor. Already knew what he

would find, even without the congealed blood pools leaking out from under some of them.

But he needed to know how it had happened.

It was really fucking stupid, but he let himself sink ever so gently into the memory of the place. Should have held back.

Everything twisted and he spent a few minutes vomiting his guts up. The spray steamed slightly on the metal floor, ghosting the air with the smell of acid and bile. It didn't add much to the ambiance.

"Shade?" Wraith's voice was broken up with static.

"Five by five, babe."

"Copy."

He was lightheaded, but the sense of life was close. If it wasn't Ed, he was going to be pissed. Twenty more meters. Ten. Five.

He banged on the right door. "Ed?"

No answer.

He could phase in, but if you didn't know where you were going you could get stuck in the space that belonged to something else. Which was a good way to get dead.

Or at least, require new furniture.

Instead, he just kicked the door in. It was a good door, thick locks. Made of plasteel. Impossible to kick down, even with mech armor.

But Shade's acquaintance with the concept of impossible had been eroded over the years.

A young man sat in the corner, rocking, hands over his ears. Lips moving. Not covered in blood, so at least they weren't bringing a spree killer on board.

Well, not *another* one.

He marched over, crouched in front of Ed. No intelligent life there. He tapped his comm. "Wraith?"

Nothing but static. In too deep. But he could feel her, he knew exactly where she was.

He leaned forward, picked up the terrified young man in a bridal carry, and phased them back to the *Lethe*, appearing in the hall outside the bridge.

Just in case Wraith was feeling jumpy and/or stabby.

She turned to look at them. He could feel her relief although she just nodded and gave him a tight smile.

“Good job.”

Wraith had pulled them back up into space, despite the planet’s deep-seated desire to crash them. There’d been enough wreckage near the mine to suggest that failing to escape atmo was a regular occurrence.

It gave her something to focus on instead of crawling out of her skin while Shade sorted out their passenger and hit the shower.

He’d taken a very long time, but was finally back on the bridge. Hair still wet and slicked back, smelling clean but noticeably not calm.

“Ed?” she asked.

“Hosed down and sedated for now. I left him in the MedBay. There’s nothing wrong with him aside from some bruises. But it takes a lot to break an Ethereal’s mind.”

He looked pensive. Wraith couldn’t fault him for it.

“Yeah, I remember a couple of Spook’s stories. Not that she ever told us much about her time with them.”

“From what you told me of your encounter with him at CTS, he was good. Young, but you get over that if you don’t die first.”

She smiled, mostly because he wanted her to.

“Geist also called him one of his most promising junior agents. Or something like that.”

“High praise. I’m going to keep him under for a couple of hours. I know you’re anxious to get moving...”

She jerked a shoulder, lowered her voice to her best Drill Sergeant Bains imitation: “Big op, Cadets? Rest first. You’re tired, you fuck up. You fuck up, you die. Or worse—the person next to you dies. Don’t be stupid.”

Shade’s laugh boomed. “Nailed it. You should get some rest. Sleep if you can. I’ll hold the ship.”

She didn’t want to sleep. Didn’t want to rest.

*Don’t be stupid.*

*Fucking Sergeant Bains.*

She sighed and stood. "I'm going to take half a drop tab and crash for four hours. Then it's your turn. We can take the boosters before we Tunnel."

He stepped into her arms.

"How bad was it?" she whispered into his hair.

He squeezed her, let her go. "Let's just say I won't be eating meat for a while."



## Chapter 33

Wraith could hear low murmuring as she stepped out of her quarters.

Voices. Coming from the mess.

She didn't bother sneaking. The more she thought about it, the more certain she became that Shade's *phasing* gave him almost preternatural spacial insight. It was impossible, but then, so was phasing.

He'd know she was coming.

She stepped through the door to find Ed sitting at the table, Shade standing at the counter.

Ed swallowed, nodded at her and said, "Ma'am."

Shade handed her a cup of coffee.

She sat, opposite Ed. Shade sat next to her, nudging her knee under the table. She sipped her coffee, raised an eyebrow at Shade.

"Of course, I stole some of Geist's." His tone was mock offended, but his face was delighted.

"Of course you did. Steal anything else good?"

He winked at her, turned back to Ed.

"Wraith, meet Operative Cash Rutherford."

"Cash? Is that a given name or a call sign?"

"Given. Short for Casimir, ma'am. But you can call me Ed."

"Really?"

Shade nudged her, "Geist officially added it as his call sign."

"And you were okay with that?"

"I requested it."

She pondered him. "Why?"

He managed to hold her gaze, "It's as good a name as any. And it's short."  
Wraith laughed. That was exactly what she'd said when she'd bestowed the moniker on him.

"I like him. Can we keep him?" she asked Shade.

"This one's mine, babe. At least until after the mission."

It was strange hearing Shade speak of missions again. She wondered if it was instinctual or deliberate because of Ed.

"And speaking of which, your Golden Boy is broadcasting. Calling all stations, as it were."

She turned to Ed, "Any idea why?"

Ed frowned, "I know this sounds strange, but I feel like it has something to do with... digging."

\* \* \*

*With the increasing influx of brethren to Sôterion, progress on the tunnel was finally proceeding at pace.*

*It turned out that their bodies were frail; couldn't cope without rest and nutrition. Disappointing really.*

*Part of him... rolled his eyes?*

*How odd.*

*Dikaïos was lying on the hill, as he preferred to do. Watching the stars, remembering the way they used to be.*

*Contemplating the difference between life and death.*

*It seemed such an insignificant thing.*

*The spark contained. The spark released.*

*And yet these creatures clung to it. Fought for it.*

*And eventually had to give in to inevitability.*

*His eyes drifted to the side. There were brethren behind him.*

*Dikaïos could feel them without needing to look.*

*Two meters. Four heartbeats, too fast. Too loud.*

*Waiting patiently.*

*Awed and afraid.*

*He cast his mind below, found where the tunnel had collapsed. Not his problem.*

*He raised a hand.*

*Brought the flame.*

*Waited for the screams to subside.*

*Silence, smoke, and ash.*

*Ash.*

*His brows furrowed at a half-remembered dream. He shrugged it off and resumed his contemplation of the stars.*

*It appeared there was not so much difference between life and death after all.*

*The latter was just... quieter.*

\* \* \*

Wraith had practically frog marched Shade to his quarters. Handed him a drop tab. Told him he needed to sleep.

He'd dragged Ed with him in turn, despite Wraith's protests. He'd been ragged enough, annoyed enough to turn to her and say:

"Ed close to me? Ed fine. Ed far away? Ed not so fine. Void stuff, babe, you know how it is."

Then he'd dragged the hapless operative through his door and closed it on her.

He might regret that later.

He'd given half the drop tab to Ed; told him he could have the bunk. Waited until he was asleep, which took barely five minutes.

Poor kid probably needed to sleep for a week.

He slid the other half into a drawer. They didn't work on him anymore.

Sleep wasn't a luxury the Void afforded him often. And he'd slept at Geist's, so he was good for another week or two at least.

The mine had disturbed him. Ed disturbed him.

And he was a man far more comfortable *doing* the disturbing.

A beep at the door. He ignored it. Didn't need the lecture.

But he couldn't ignore her when she *reached* for him.

*I know you're still awake. May I come in?*

*It's unlocked.*

The door slid open. She glanced once at Ed, came to sit next to him. Wrapped an arm around him and lay her head on his shoulder.

Said nothing.

Thought nothing.

Just held him. So he did what Geist did to him, laid his head against hers. She reached over and took his hand.

She didn't ask. Didn't even expect him to talk.

And maybe that was why he could.

"It was bad, Ash. That mine. I thought the temple was bad. This was worse."

He swallowed. Closed his eyes.

"When you learn to phase, you have to learn how to sink into the feel of a place so that you can move around without needing to have line of sight. One of the fun side effects is that sometimes, you can tap into its memories."

She squeezed his hand. It was real. She was real.

"I didn't see the bodies. But I felt the madness. Saw the fights, the rage, and worse, the cold purpose a few of them wielded. They were the ones that took the ships, what few ships they were.

"After they'd slaughtered everyone, they turned off the environmental controls and let them cook in the heat. Punishment for the unbelievers, even after they were dead."

She hissed in a breath.

"Ed... shouldn't be alive. Only is alive, I think, because of whatever is pulling him towards Helios." He leaned back to look at her. "He didn't even have heat stroke. And it was sixty degrees Celsius down there."

"How are *you* alive?"

He laid his head against hers again. "Attitude, mostly. And the Void likes me."

"You've never explained that."

“And the full explanation will take longer than we have. You know it mostly talks to me, not the other way around. But we’re... connected. Like being tuned to the same frequency.”

Wraith tightened her hold. “And right now that connection is keeping Ed from trying to kill us?”

“That and his mental conditioning. Say what you like about SID, but they train their Ethereals well.” He glanced at the bed, “He didn’t participate in the slaughter.”

“Good to know.”

They sat in silence. Listening to Ed’s soft snoring.

“You’re not going to sleep, are you?”

There was concern in her voice. And he could feel it resonate through him.

“No, but I’ll rest. Meditate.”

He turned his head, pressed his lips to her temple and held them there as if that small intimacy could fix him.

“Thanks, Ash. See you in four hours.”

She leaned in and pressed her lips gently to his.

“Rest well, Z.”

## Chapter 34

They were in orbit high above Sôterion. The mid-range nav picked up a steady stream of ships entering atmo. Showed clearly where they were landing.

Ed was adamant about coming with them. Wraith was just as firm about leaving him behind.

Preferably sedated.

“Ma’am—”

“Wraith. I don’t hold rank anymore.”

Ed paused, adjusted. “Wraith. I know you don’t trust me right now. And you’re probably right, but you need to get to the Major soon. I can help you get there quicker.”

“Why the sudden deadline?”

Ed had woken somber but resolved.

“He’s close. I don’t know what to. But if you don’t reach him in time? If you don’t stop him, he won’t have to start a war. We’ll all be *begging* to join it.”

She shifted her eyes to meet Shade’s gaze. No good options.

“And how can you help us get there quicker?”

Ed pulled up a map of the planet.

Sôterion was mostly lush rainforest, environmentally stable and green. No one had ever settled it.

Come to think of it, that was odd.

“The ships are landing here,” he pointed. “But that’s one of the only places that they *can* land. It’s not where we need to go.”

He spun the map, zoomed in on a single spot of brown in the green. More than a hundred kilometers from the landing site.

“This is the place.”

He turned to look at Shade, “And sir, your... alternate travel feels like it might be a really bad idea here.” He spread his hands, “I don’t know why.”

Shade was playing with Ed’s knife. Ed looked down at his belt in surprise. “Fair enough, kid.”

“If we land with the others, it’s a long walk and a lot of hostile opposition.” He spun the map again, highlighted a spot about twenty kilometers from their supposed destination.

“If we jump from high atmo, land here, we can get there with the least opposition. And I’m reasonably good in a fight.” He glanced at Wraith, “Usually. Also...”

Also he was terrified of being away from Shade’s calming influence. Not words she’d ever thought she’d say—at least not for anyone other than herself.

“Okay, Ed. We’ll try it your way.”

He seemed surprised. Shade didn’t.

Both reactions were expected.

“Do you think they’ll try to shoot us down?”

Ed considered this, moving his head from side to side. “I think that if we try to go in any closer, that the Holy Sun might incinerate us before we even jump. Oh, which reminds me. We need to wait for daybreak.”

“Why?”

Ed shook his head in resignation tinged with fear. “Because he likes the night.”

Free falling from the stratosphere wasn’t everyone’s idea of fun, but Shade had no idea why.

Wraith’s grin showed her agreement. Ed, on the other hand was focused, almost grim. He really needed to lighten up a bit.

Without thinking, he *reached* out to Wraith.

*Think it will make Ed’s head explode if I do some aerial acrobatics.*

Her mental laugh was exhilarated.

*You should do it anyway.*

He twisted his body around, gave her a bow, and proceeded to make gravity his bitch.

Wraith moved her body around to slow her descent and shifted into a cross-legged seated position and watched him, hand on her chin like she was a competition judge.

Ed, who had sped past them, bullet fast, had now spread his arms and legs to slow himself. Let them catch up. He was looking at them as if they were mad.

Honestly, fair.

The trees were coming up fast. Wraith saluted him, shifted into glide position and triggered her suit. Ed did the same.

Shade did one, okay, two more somersaults for the joy of it, and followed them. His stomach only just clearing the tops of the trees as the momentum drags kicked into effect.

He'd lost sight of the other two. Almost phased when he remembered Ed's warning.

Instead, he wound around the trees, spotted Ed already on the ground, head in his hands.

*Shit.*

He cut the suit's power, dropped like a stone and caught a low-hanging branch, using the momentum to swing him around and hit the ground next to Ed at slightly less than breakneck speed.

"You doing okay?"

Ed was wide eyed; he grabbed Shade's shoulders with fingers like claws. Shade let the Void infuse his voice, not quite sermon level. More like calm the flock after a particularly enthusiastic games night.

*"The Void doesn't seek to claim you, Ed.*

*It doesn't need your obedience.*

*You can say no."*

Slowly, Ed's breathing stabilized and he released his grip on Shade's shoulders. Nodded his thanks.



Wraith strolled through the underbrush to them.

"I'll give you a 9.2 for the aerial, Z, but I gotta be honest, you lost points on the landing."

He grinned at her.

Ed looked horrified. "You're both actually insane, aren't you?"

Shade pointed at himself, "Cult leader, emotional liability and Void Whisperer." Then to Wraith, "Wasn't exactly considered stable *before* she spent five years in solitary confinement. What were you expecting? Psychological stability?"

Ed didn't answer.

So at least the boy was learning.

Ed took point. It was that or trudge behind them, and the way they completely ignored anything resembling operational protocol was making him feel stabby.

Stabbier.

Which wasn't him at all.

He believed in order, Void damn it. In rules. In—

"I was perfectly stable, and I have the psych results to prove it."

And now they were arguing. Loudly.

Were they trying to get him killed?

"Babe, *my* psych results *still* say I'm stable. Which doesn't speak well of SID analysts. On the other hand, I know you. I saw your face when we jumped that Strike Team on Keryx. You were laughing."

"So were you, babe."

"Never denied it."

There was something nearby. Watching them in the woods. He smoothly faded into the trees, leaving them to their *discussion*. It should distract their assailants enough to take most of them down.

His blade brought swift and silent death to the cultists hiding in wait, weapons primed.

He dimly realized that the voices behind him had stopped. He'd taken out six. Which meant another four to six for a typical cell.

There was a crack to the right; the unmistakable sound of a spine breaking.

Then Wraith stepped out, as relaxed as if they were on a starliner. Shade appeared on his left a moment later, blood splatter on his cheek and twin blades in his hands.

He was grinning. Again.

“Not bad, kid,” Wraith told him.

“Not bad at all,” Shade agreed. “Competent acolytes are my favorite.”

Ed stared at them.

Void help him. He was doomed.

## Chapter 35

It had taken most of the day to reach the barren hill. The jungle had proven difficult to navigate. On the plus side, there had been several cult ambushes to break up the monotony.

Ed was good. Not Spook good, but then, who was? Shade was looking forward to stealing him from Geist.

They'd spoken briefly about the hill, about why it was barren in the otherwise lush jungle. Their aerial scans had showed that there was an excavation happening on the far side from where they were, but nothing to explain why the hill itself had been cleared.

Until he stepped across the boundary and crashed to his knees, gasping.

"Zane!" Ash was at his side instantly, crouching, hand on his arm, stabilizing him.

"Fuck," he muttered. "It was never the Others."

"Z?"

He turned to look at her, eyes wide. Glanced at Ed. This was above his clearance level. Turned back and *reached* for her.

*Remember when I told you about Astaklasis? How the city was completely dead even three years after the War ended.*

She nodded.

*It wasn't the Others. This hill? It feels the same. It's... tainted.* His brain assaulted him. Memories. Vision fragments. Feelings that were more the Void than him.

*That's what he's digging for. There's something under this hill, Ash. Something ancient. We need to get down there.*

"Can you stand?"

Shade pushed to his feet with more effort than he'd admit to. Ed had held position, although his head was tilted towards them.

Shade crept to him, even though there was nothing to suggest that anyone was nearby. "What do you feel? Has anything changed?"

Ed considered the question, a line forming between his brows. "The pull has stopped." His eyes darted from side to side. "A while ago. I didn't clock it, sir."

Shade waved him off.

"If I collapse? Get me off this hill and back into the jungle."

Wraith nodded. Looking cold as Iveros but radiating tension and worry.

He closed his eyes. Let himself sink. No, not sink, radiate. Push outwards, searching, seeking.

It was hard and it *hurt*, but the Void had his back, pushed him further. And further. To the other side of the hill. Down the tunnel ankle deep in ash. To the door.

Where Helios turned, looked right at him and smiled before he phased through the door.

Shade slammed himself back into his body.

"Fuck!"

"Shade?"

"They're all dead. Everyone is just... ash. And Helios... well, he's not himself anymore. We need to get in there now."

Wraith nodded, slipping into ops mode. "Right, let's get moving."

"No babe, I mean **now**!" Power surged, wrong and burning. He felt the blood pooling behind his eyes even before they moved and pain exploded through every cell. Had just enough time to see Helios standing before a Gate. Studying it.

Then darkness claimed him like entropy's to-do list.

"See to him!" Wraith whisper barked at Ed, as she turned. Taking in the room in an instant.

Force recon training had turned out to be more useful that she'd expected it

to be at the time.

They were in a sphere of seamless metal. Triangular plates fitted so close they gleamed. A pedestal stood in the center; a shallow depression carved into its surface.

And beyond it: an arch covered in strange symbols.

In front of the arch, stood Kael.

She let herself focus on him, her heart pounding. He looked the same, from the back. He was ignoring them, studying the Gate.

The fact that her subconscious automatically ascribed the capitalization was only a mild concern.

“Kael!”

He didn’t answer. Gave no indication that he heard her.

Behind her she heard Shade gulp air as he regained consciousness. She didn’t bother reaching, she *pushed* at him, screaming his name in his head, *Kael!*

Kael turned and his eyes were his own. Swamp water at sunset.

He looked at her for a long time, as if memorizing her features. “You should leave.”

“No.”

“You’re too late.” His voice was emotionless. She tried to grab onto their bond, but it slipped through her fingers.

Shade was coughing, she could almost feel his chest spasms as her own. But she couldn’t turn her eyes away from Kael.

Talking wasn’t working. That was okay. She still had options.

She opened the bond as wide as she could in invitation. As she half-remembered him doing for her once when she’d been dying in his arms.

“I’m here, Kael. Find me, damn it!”

He looked at her, knew her. Shook his head and severed their connection. Calmly. Coldly. Deliberately.

“Your soul is your own.” His eyes flicked to Shade, still coughing behind her, “Take it as a gift.”

He turned away. She knew what she had to do.

With the calm that always came in the moment, she pulled the throwing

dagger out from her belt. Offered a curse and a prayer to whatever might be listening and prepared to throw it.

And was knocked out of the way by Ed as Kael spun and an inferno struck where she had been standing.

Ed screamed as fire kissed his arm, his flesh seared to ash in a heartbeat, the bone glowing before it crumbled.

The smell of char lingered even after the arm was gone.

Kael's eyes were Void black and his voice was resonant as he looked at Shade.

*"You should take them away. This is your only warning, out of respect for your... passengers."*

Shade crawled to them, face pained and bloody. Wraith shook her head; she had to finish this, damn it!

*Too late*, he told her and grabbed her hand and Ed's remaining arm.

Phasing with him was normally instantaneous, but this time it dragged like he was struggling to find the power. Before they disappeared, Wraith saw Kael smile and raise both hands.

The Gate flared open.

He stepped through it and it fell silent once more.

And they collapsed in a heap on the *Lethe*.

Shade unconscious. Ed in shock.

And Wraith numb to her core.

### III

## Sanctus Revenans

*The sun drowns in its own light,  
and from the hollow of its corpse,  
the Revenant dawns*





## Chapter 36

Geist's hand trembled as he filled his tumbler to the brim, slopping whiskey on the counter.

Spilled more as he lifted it, drained it. Refilled it.

He walked down the corridor like a man condemned. Stepped into his office where the fucking artifact still sat on his desk. Miraculously not bleeding the Fold into his furniture. Yet.

"They were too late," he told it. "They failed."

Drank deeply.

"Wraith called to debrief. She told me everything. Calm, logical. Completely unlike her. No jokes. No asides. Just the full story, including trying to integrate with Helios."

He drank again.

"With Kael. She called him Kael. That was the only sign that she's a hair away from breaking."

Another glance down at the artifact. "You know, it could have been worse. If Wraith had been the one possessed instead of him? The whole Void-damned universe would be on fire. So would the Void for that matter."

He sighed, deeply, from the depths of the soul he mostly pretended didn't exist.

"You still haven't held up your end of the bargain. But then, you haven't told me what the final part of my end is. And now I have Wraith a step away from either suicide or a murder spree, Shade unconscious with dangerously low brain activity, and a talented Ethereal asset with a missing arm and emotional scarring that will take years to train out of him."

He drained the rest of his glass, laid his head on his desk, not even caring that he was breaking seventeen different protocols just by having the artifact there, let alone by letting himself sleep next to it.

But he was so fucking tired.

"You know the worst part?" he slurred. "Without Shade, the only person, and I use that term very loosely..." he trailed off. Blinked at the door which was losing focus. "The only person I have to talk to is you. And let's be honest, most of the time you're not a great conversationalist."

He let his eyes close. Felt something... familiar. Almost like Shade's hand on his shoulder, although the angle was wrong.

It was comforting. Even if it was a drunken hallucination.

He leaned into it, passed out to the voice he wouldn't remember the next day.

*Shining One.*

\* \* \*

Wraith checked Shade's vitals again. No change.

Body: fixed.

Mind? Well the bleeding from his eyes and ears probably wasn't a good sign, and that was before he got them back to the ship and started seizing.

It was a good thing that Ed's wound had been instantly cauterized. Getting Shade onto the diagnostic table would have been harder without him. And if she'd had to triage? She'd have let Ed bleed out on the floor.

Probably shouldn't mention that to him.

She'd sedated him as well.

His arm couldn't be repaired. *She* didn't have the bandwidth to deal with him, so she drugged the hell out of him.

Considered doing the same to herself. Called Geist instead and reported back.

He'd told her to come back to Phaethon. She'd told him to go fuck himself. Actually, she'd just said *no* and cut the comms. Same difference.

There was a hollow in her chest, in her heart, where the link to Kael had

been.

If it had been the Void or... what was his other name? Chaos? Dikaiois. If it had been one of them, she'd have held on to hope.

But it was Kael. Choosing to let her go.

Not to save her. That she could have understood, even if she'd have had to hurt him for it.

He'd been her choice. But at the end? She hadn't been his.

The comm beeped at her. If it was Geist again...

But no, he'd just cut in directly.

*Asshole.*

She flicked the comm, turned to the screen.

"Void, Ash, you look like shit. And I saw you a month after you were let out of prison, so that's saying something."

She should smile. Couldn't.

"Rina."

"What happened?"

"Nothing."

"Ashley Erin Raine. You're a fucking liar. Don't make me come over there."

Ash looked up at her sister. Didn't have the energy to deal with her.

"It's a long story."

"I have time. And where's Bill?"

"Gone."

Rina's eyes were huge, "I'm sorry, what?!"

"As I said, it's a long story and I've already had to go over it once with Geist."

"With **Geist**? He's even still alive? Ash, I feel like I've missed out on some major fucking developments and I think I need to get in the loop. Yesterday."

Big sister glare: activated. Wraith almost smiled.

"Can I ask you a favor? In a roundabout way it will actually get you the updates you want."

"You can ask. Odds are I'll say yes. There may be conditions attached."

This time Ash's lips did curl up.

"I have an injured Ethereal. He's a good kid, but I don't think going back to SID right now is a good idea. Could you take him for a while?"

Rina's eyebrows had crept up to her shaved hairline.

"Do I even want to know how you ended up with an Ethereal?"

"Knocked him out, offered him tea. One thing led to another."

"There's my girl. You gonna drop him off or do you need me to pick him up?"

"Do you have anything Fold capable?"

Rina froze. "You want to meet me in the Void?"

"No, I just don't think it's such a good idea for me to go there right now. I don't think I'd fly fast enough if a collapse happened."

Which was as close as she'd admit to how near to breaking she was.

Rina blinked twice. Glared at her.

"Send me the co-ords. I'm leaving now." She cut the comms.

Ash sent the details and stared out into the stars. Hadn't moved a couple of hours later when a small two-person craft that looked like an early Banshee clawed out of the Inbetween next to her.

She tapped the airlock commands and went down to the hold to meet her sister. As dead inside as her Ghost status suggested.

## Chapter 37

It probably shouldn't have surprised Wraith when Rina stormed in, slung her over a shoulder without breaking stride and hauled her up the ladder to the mess.

Why she'd believed, even for a moment, that she could just hand Ed over and be done with it; she had no idea.

Rina dumped her on a bench, pointed a finger at her and told her to "Stay!" Wraith couldn't find a reason not to.

When Rina walked back in and saw her, a worried expression flickered across her face. Then she started laying out a variety of pills, vials, and three different types of alcohol.

"If you're trying to kill me, you could just use your hands. Or I have a good knife."

*Somewhere. If Shade hadn't taken it.*

Rina smiled at her. Not her nice smile, but not the scary one either.

"See, there's still a spark of life lurking somewhere in there. And if I have to drug you, get you drunk, or beat you up to help you find it? Well, I'm willing to make that sacrifice. Especially if it's all three."

Wraith's lip twitched.

"You sound like Shade."

"Yeah, how is he, anyway? Weren't you going to see him? I swear, I go out for a job for a few weeks and all of you just drop off comms and leave me in the dark."

Wraith stood, tilted her head for Rina to follow. Picked up the vodka as she walked to the door.

Rina followed her to the MedBay.

“What’s wrong with him?” her sister whispered.

Wraith broke the seal on the bottle, drank deeply. It was vile and she couldn’t have cared less. Rina snatched the bottle from her hand.

“I don’t know. He’s unresponsive.”

Rina walked up to him, put a hand on his shoulder and stared at his pale face, real fear in her eyes.

“And the other one is mine?” she asked eventually.

“Yeah, that’s Ed. Your Ethereal. He’s fine, except for the missing a limb. I just...”

“Drugged the hell out of him. I approve.”

Rina turned back to her; she had to look up to meet Rina’s dark eyes. “I can’t lose them both,” she whispered. It wasn’t a plea. Just a fact, delivered like a death sentence. Her hands shook anyway.

“How close are you to losing it?”

“Honestly? If I didn’t have to monitor Zane, I’d have lost it already.”

“Right.” Rina handed the vodka back to her. “Step one, we’re going back to the mess and you are going to get shitface drunk and tell me everything. Step two, I’m going to pour you into bed. If I’m feeling nice, I’ll even dose you with something to eat the alcohol while you sleep.”

Wraith downed another couple of shots’ worth of vodka.

“Sounds like a plan.”

“Step three, I’ll watch Zane while you sleep. And tomorrow we’ll try to wake him.”

“How?”

“You see, that’s how I know how bad you are.” Rina slung an arm around her shoulders, “Come on, Ash. Let’s get you hammered.

It took a remarkably short time to get Wraith flat-out drunk. Even then, she’d told the whole story in a neutral, emotionless tone; apparently not noticing or even caring about Rina’s increasingly horrified expression.

She dumped Ash’s scrawny ass into bed and looked down at her. She’d dosed

her with a mostly harmless, long-acting alcohol metabolizer.

If she slept long enough, she'd wake up without the hangover.

They'd always worried about what would happen when Wraith lost it. And it was always going to be a when.

She'd studied her before she joined the GHOST program. Expected a rivalry. Forced one, if she were honest with herself.

But she'd been young and stupid with something to prove.

And finding out now that not only was Geist alive, but he was running the shadowiest division of SID? Well, when she caught up with him—and she would—he'd regret running out on her. It was only a matter of time.

Wraith shifted in her sleep, hands clenching in fists. Fighting even in dreams. Rina knew exactly how that went.

She shook her head and went to check on Shade.

No change. And the longer it went on, the worse it would be.

"You'd better wake up, boyo. Otherwise I'm going to get mad, and I don't think your ribs can handle my left hook a second time around."

She closed her eyes and rested her hand over his heart, let herself feel the beat in her hand. Slow, steady, strong.

She could try to bring him out of it herself. But it had been years since she'd integrated. Maybe too many. And he'd always been most deeply connected to Ash anyway.

Ash, who never saw his heart break when she fell in love with Phantom.

She wondered how much it had cost him to go with her to rescue another lover that wasn't him.

She let out a sigh.

All this reminiscing was making her emotional.

She let her eyes drift over to the other unconscious body in the room. Now, there was something she didn't need to get emotional about.

She studied him, checked the MedTable stats. Strong enough. Good. Time to see what he could do.

She triggered his implants to flood him with Firebreak. It was primarily used for alcohol, but would knock out almost anything synthetic in your system. Painfully, but in record time.

The young man sat up with a gasp of pain, shifted, vaulted off the bed using his good hand and positioned himself at the far wall. Ready, even eager to fight.

She moved the fingers of her right hand in a quick movement. Once learned, you never forgot it. No matter how much you might want to.

His eyes widened in recognition and he slipped into a neutral posture. Still aware, still prepared to react. Being in the presence of another Ethereal was never a guarantee of safety.

Good boy.

He nodded his head gravely at her.

She smiled at him. His pupils dilated but other than that, he didn't react.

"C'mon," she told him. "Let's see how you cope on the mats with a missing wing."

Wraith came out of sleep between one breath and the next. Completely awake. Sober. And if not hangover-free, then at least better than expected.

Rina must have been feeling kind.

Someone had been calling for her.

And it wasn't Kael, who had made his choice. Even if it was a fucking stupid one.

As her door opened, she could hear the sound of hand-to-hand combat down in the gym. For a moment her pulse spiked at the thought that it might be Shade.

But the odds were far better that it was Ed.

A bet she won with herself when she poked her head into MedBay. And there was a change this time. A degradation.

She was losing him.

"Don't you dare fucking die on me, Zane!" she snarled at him.

She found Rina giving Ed a lesson in the finer points of one-armed combat. He was less bruised than she'd have expected, all things considered.

Rina turned to her, caught Ed one handed around his neck without looking and raised him off the ground.



“He’s getting worse. We need to do it now.”

Rina looked up at Ed, who was turning purple. “Looks like I’ll be able to make something of you after all.” She dropped him.

“Stay here. Your training will say follow, listen, gather intel. But I’ll tell you this right now, if you set even one foot out of this room before I get back? I will break every single bone in your body. One by one.”

She walked out, leaving him gasping on the mat.

“Also, my record is a hundred and eighty two before the subject succumbed to his injuries.”

Wraith let Spook walk past her, raised an eyebrow at Ed, and followed her up the ladder.

“You’re terrifying,” she commented.

Rina just laughed.

“I know.”

## Chapter 38

They both stared down at Shade. Even in the few minutes she had been downstairs, his brain activity had plummeted further.

*Please, Void, don't let me be too late again.*

Rina held a hand out to her, placed the other on Shade's shoulder. "I'll anchor you. You find him. He's probably floating in the Void somewhere."

*Truer words.*

Wraith swallowed. She hadn't been enough with Helios. What if—

"Ash!"

Jerked out of her spiral, Wraith grabbed Rina's hand and put her other over Shade's heart, just like she always had.

Closed her eyes.

It took a moment to find Rina, even though she was right there. As it had when she'd integrated with Shade, what they expected interfered with the connect.

"Don't force it, just accept it," Wraith snarled aloud.

Rina clamped her hand painfully, and they were there.

Just the two of them. Not three.

For a moment, Wraith panicked, until she felt the thinnest thread of the bond with Zane. Her Zane.

And it was only connected to her.

No time to puzzle over it. Trusting Rina to bring her back, to bring them back, she flew down the connection and into the darkness.

On his left, the Choir sang. Enchanting, enticing.

Was he ready to join them? Was he ready to lose himself in their song and vanish into the collective?

On his right, the Void danced, its rhythm alive in his soul. It's voice singing in his bones, the way it had since their introduction.

Two options. But how to choose?

How do you choose to Become?

*You fucking don't!*

It was the one voice he'd always listen to.

He turned around and there she was.

He hadn't been expecting her.

Maybe she was dead. That thought terrified him.

*Did I save you?*

Her presence wrapped itself around him, shielding him from forces he didn't need to be shielded from.

*You did, Zane. And now it's my turn.*

And his Starlight turned her attention on the entities.

*You can't have him. He's **mine**. Go. The Fuck. Away.*

Hers.

He heard the Choir try to sing to her. The Void try to reach her. She held her ground. Metaphysically speaking.

Held him.

Hers.

*I think you're scaring them, babe,* he told her without words.

*Good. It's time to come back, Zane. Rina wants to break your ribs.*

He paused for a moment, wondering if she were serious. Regretfully concluded that she probably was.

Then he was flying faster than thought, and where there were two, there were now three.

Together.

Chosen family.

*Thank fuck.*

The world returned with weight and pain and air. He could feel hands, warmth... reality.

"If I say ow before I open my eyes, will you give my ribs a reprieve?" He cracked an eye open to look at Rina.

She smiled at him. Her sweet *I'm about to break your spine* smile that had been the downfall of many a fool.

"Not a chance."

"Pity." He opened both eyes. Wraith was on his left, Rina on his right. He was still facing Rina, who had changed a lot in the years since he'd seen her. Gotten more muscular for one.

"Hot damn, Spook, you're out here making tactical gear look like runway couture and intimidation look like foreplay. ...Remind me never to owe you money again."

She let go of Wraith's hand—the integration faded quickly—and kissed him on the cheek. Then punched him, gently, in the ribs. Didn't break even one.

He turned to Wraith, who looked pale. Even with the integration he couldn't tell what she was feeling, Spook somehow still shielding her. He did feel one thing though, "And what did she do to you, babe? I could feel the headache all the way out in Void."

Wraith leaned over and hugged him. "Lots and lots of vodka." Then *she* punched him in the ribs. A lot harder than Rina had, accompanied by a familiar crack and white hot pain.

"Don't you *ever* fucking do that again, Z. Because if I have to dismantle the fucking Choir or fistfight the Void, I will do it. And then I will make you wish you'd never been born."

She spun on her heel and left MedBay, the echo of her fear and pain hitting him as hard as her fist.

"You know, I think she's mad at you."

Shade turned to his big, scary sister with a forced grin, "Sooooo, what did I miss?"

"The fallout, mostly." Rina checked the diagnostic. Wraith had cracked two

ribs. She'd barely bruised him.

"Fuck! What was that for? You already hit me!"

She hadn't looked away from the diagnostic, now the damage was nice and balanced. Two cracked ribs on both sides.

She activated the MedDoc, which would hurt as much as the breaking. Leaned back against the bed near his hips and looked at him.

"She went looking for you in the fucking Void with only me to anchor her. You remember the one time we tried that with Spirit. It didn't go well and there were *five* of us anchoring."

He didn't answer. Good.

"You scared her, Z. If you'd died—and you were pretty fucking close to the line, there—she'd have broken. How many people do you think she'll take out with her when she finally snaps?"

Shade's brows were nearly touching, it was kind of cute, so she added, "Also, symmetry reasons."

Somehow, he managed to shrug with his face. "Now that, I understand. Still trying to parse your previous statement."

"Which part? Scaring her, you almost *dying*, or her snapping and setting the universe on fire."

"The last one."

Rina looked at him, hard. He'd always loved her, in all the ways it was possible to love someone. Lucky bitch. But maybe it also gave him a few blind spots.

"Do you really not know how dangerous she has the potential to be?"

He sat up, ignoring his ribs which were only half healed. The MedDoc beeped in protest.

"More than you, Spook." His voice was low. Dangerous. And sure.

"I think of all of us, I probably know *exactly* how dangerous she could become, under the right circumstances. Exactly how much damage she could do."

He jumped off the bed, used his elbow to turn off the MedDoc. "But your SID training is showing. Even if she snaps one day, the damage will be targeted. Not general. So, you and Geist had better just amend whatever contingency plan you have for her to take that into account. And hope it's not you."

Rina towered over him, but right now he somehow managed to feel like he was looming over her. Blue eyes piercing.

And she'd never admit it, but like this? If it came to it? She didn't know if she could beat him.

"Why did everyone except me know that Geist was still breathing? And running SID, apparently."

Shade rolled his neck, dialed back the menace, ramped up the chaos demon. "Not all of it. Just one small department that doesn't actually exist, but everyone is terrified of regardless. Excellent use of branding, really."

"Do you talk to him?"

He nodded.

"Tell him to come and visit me at the Folly. Invite is open to you as well, although maybe not at the same time." She'd need to clean up the blood first.

A wink, "Record your beat down of him and you have a deal."

"Goes without saying. Now back to Ash. Or before Ash. What's the last thing you remember?"

Coughing up blood. Ash talking to Kael. Ed pushing her out of the line of very literal fire. The certain knowledge that they'd failed.

Crawling. Trying to phase them back. So much fucking pain, and not all of it his.

Then nothing but the competing songs of the Choir and the Void.

"We failed. Bit hazy on the details though."

Rina nodded, pointed back at the bed. "Don't need it," he told her.

"I'll break them again."

She would too. He climbed up and the bed, lay down. "Further along than I thought. Must not have hit you hard enough."

*Yeah, not responding to that one.*

"What happened, Reen?"

Her lip twitched at his use of his name for her. "She spoke to him. To Kael, not whoever the fuck the thing riding him was."

"She got through? Then why—"

“He chose to leave. Severed their link. She got the feedback when that happened. It wasn’t to protect her. It was because he wanted something else.”

He stared at her. If Geist sexually propositioned him, he would have been less shocked.

“Yeah, surprised me too.”

The MedDoc beeped its completion. “Can I get up now?”

“Yeah, Z. I probably won’t hurt you again.” He pushed to his feet. “Immediately.”

“You had to say that, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” Her smile had teeth, but it softened almost immediately, “Take care of her Z, and tell her I say goodbye. If she’s smart, she’s sleeping off that hangover by now. I have to get my new intern back to the Folly. ”

“Wait, *your* new intern? I called dibs on Ed.”

“She needs you more than you need a new toy, boyo. Now, you take it easy for a few days. Your brain hasn’t been happy with you.” She pulled him into a hug, not quite tight enough to re-break his ribs.

He hugged her hard, “It’s really good to see you, Reen.”

“You too, Z, you too.”

## Chapter 39

The door to the gym beeped once, and opened.

Shade was balancing on one hand, executing a complicated series of motions that did take the rules of physics into account. If only barely.

Spook and Ed had departed without any further injuries to him. The bruises didn't count.

Wraith hadn't said anything, but he knew she was watching him. Couldn't help showing off, just a little bit. Laws of physics be damned.

Finally, he sprung up to his feet. Took her proffered towel and wiped his face.

Her expression was unreadable.

Her heart was another story.

"Oh, baby," Zane stepped forward and enfolded her in his arms. Her pain echoed through the bond between them. The one that had been in place way before Ghost Command. The one he'd never told her about, but had always wondered if she knew of.

"I thought I'd lost you." Her voice was muffled against his neck, her arms tight around him.

His heart ached but he kept his voice easy, "Can't get rid of me that easily."

She nodded and her shoulders shook. He could feel tears mix with the sweat on his neck. He'd seen her cry before, but not like this. Heartbroken and hopeless and lost. Had no idea how to help.

He phased them out of reality and to his room, pulling her down onto the bunk without loosening his grip.

"I almost felt how you did it, that time," she murmured.



“I’ll show you, if you want.”

“Later. Now, I just...” she trailed off as a wracking sob overtook her.

Zane pressed his lips into her hair, his own tears falling. “Need to grieve,” he finished for her.

She sobbed for a long time. So did he. For her. For him. For Helios. For a future that could never happen...

*Fuck that.*

Anger and chaotic determination rose in him as she quieted in his arms.

“We’ll get him back,” he told her.

“I think he made it pretty clear he doesn’t *want* to come back. He made his choice, eyes wide open, and it sure as fuck wasn’t me.”

“Ash?”

“Yeah?”

“Do me a favor and go away. We need Wraith now.”

She raised her head to look at him. Eyes puffy and stormy. “What the fuck do you mean, Shade?”

“You’re thinking like a lover. Start thinking like a Ghost.”

She hissed in a breath, rested her head back down on his shoulder and a finger started tapping on his side.

Tap-pause. Tap. Tap. Tap. Tap-pause. Tap. Tap-pause.

*Break*, his mind translated. Or at least, the short code for it.

He waited while she processed.

Held her tightly and let her take all the time she needed.

“You think his decision was... influenced?” Her voice wasn’t completely steady, but the question was tactical, not emotional.

He considered how best to take almost twenty years of experience with the Void and condense into something that made sense.

Eventually just went with, “Yes.”

Wraith forced her emotions down—the surge of hope, the flood of pain, the

desperation and helplessness. Shade was right. It wasn't helpful now.

Her ragged heartbeat settled, mostly, and she changed her tapping, knowing he understood.

Tap-pause. Tap. Tap-pause. Tap-pause. Tap.

*Over to you. Explain buddy.*

His breath sighed over her and his arms viced almost painfully around her. "It's a long story."

"I'm not going anywhere."

For a second, she caught a flash of resignation from him. She shouldn't have. Yes, she got echoes from Kael, but that was different. This was... familiar. And not in a Ghost Command integration way.

She was starting to realize that there were far too many unanswered questions, and she had a feeling Shade knew the answers to all of them.

"I didn't join the military, you know."

She leaned back and pulled a face at him, "Pretty sure you did, babe. I was there, remember."

He laughed, kissed the tip of her nose. Then his eyes went distant.

"I didn't join—not by choice. I was conscripted."

*What the—?*

"They claimed they didn't conscript. Not until later, anyway, when it became... *necessary*."

"Oh, they did. From penal colonies." He released her briefly to rub his hand over the back of his neck. "You weren't the only one Tethered, babe."

"Zane, you were *seventeen*!"

He kissed her forehead, wrapped his arms around her again and rested his head against hers.

"Yeah. I was sixteen when I got picked up for petty theft and *conspiracy to incite civil unrest*."

She could feel his faint smirk. "I figured out how to reroute local power cells so we could have some heat, taught some others. My home planet not being the warmest of places. Apparently, that made me a *security risk*. So they

shipped me off. Didn't even bother sedating me."

"Where did they take you?"

"Tarnix-3. You've probably never heard of it. It wasn't a penal colony. It was worse. It was a reclamation mine."

Shade could feel her grief seeping into him. For *him*. Zane wanted to reach for it, but Zane wouldn't be able to tell this story. Not the way she needed to hear it.

"They'd found weird deposits down there. Not naturally occurring. Like someone had *bled* the Fold into the rock. The radiation didn't kill—it corrupted.

"They sent in the desperate, the broken, the inconvenient. The cons. The drop zone wasn't even guarded. It didn't need to be. There was one way in and no way out."

The memory was coming faster now, and he could feel his breathing become shallower. Wraith reached out and put a hand over his heart, letting him catch his breath.

"My first day, I met a man who'd carved words into his own chest. Symbols, really. He didn't speak. Just *listened*. I copied him. Not the carving. Not then. The listening."

He swallowed, hard, closed his eyes and let the memory take him back to hell.

\* \* \*

*Tarnix-3 Reclamation Mine | Twenty Years Ago*

Zane huddled in a corner, broken and terrified.

He'd been beaten—again. His ribs were probably broken. Every breath hurt.

The miners fought for everything. For food, for water. To escape going into the mine.

He hadn't said a word since they'd dumped him here.

Promised himself he'd die without giving them the satisfaction.

And dying seemed to be racing towards him. He and about a dozen other *miners* not fast enough to escape were on a hover transpo, descending into the darkness.

They'd stopped screaming, at least.

He'd heard the guards talking. They were going deep. The thing they wanted was deeper. Always deeper.

He was going to die.

It took a very long time to descend down the gaping maw of the mine. Finally, they hit bottom. Roughly. Forcing broken ribs to rub against each other and blinding him with pain.

Then he got a boot to the stomach as a guard ordered, "Out!"

The cons had scattered as he staggered to his feet and the transpo began to raise. "Twelve hours," a voice shouted. "We wait ninety seconds. You're not here? You wait another twelve hours. You don't bring anything back? You don't get on."

No-one had come back in weeks. They were given no food, no water, and only a handful of tools and lights.

All of which had already been taken.

Zane sat down where he was. Listened to the cons fighting as they headed down the tunnels.

His cheeks were wet with tears.

He didn't want to die.

Waited for death to claim him anyway.

## Chapter 40

It started softly. A hum at the edge of awareness.

A promise of an end to the pain.

Zane didn't know how long he'd been sitting in the dark. But he wasn't dead yet. He strained, trying to hear the sound.

Except, it *wasn't* a sound. It was a vibration that hummed in his very bones.

He pushed, painfully, to his feet. Looked around, not to see, but to feel where it was coming from.

*There.*

He limped forwards into the darkness, a hand cradling his broken ribs. It was so far away. But he needed to find it.

His life had so little meaning, but this? *This* meant he could die with some.

It was a knowing that grew with every step. It was important. A secret written in song on his soul.

It took hours and he collapsed twice. After the first he just rested and listened to the hum until he could almost understand it.

Then continued.

The second time—he fell badly. Searing pain burned through his chest and he coughed up blood, which only caused more pain. He felt like he was drowning.

He dragged himself forward anyway. He couldn't stand anymore, but he could crawl. And he had to get there.

It was the only thing that mattered.

The darkness was absolute, but the walls sang. And suddenly he could see it.

Three rocks, different from the rest. Ancient. Alien. And more real than

anything he'd seen in his short life.

He collapsed forward and leaned his cheek on the nearest one.

Now, he could rest.

Now... he could die.

\* \* \*

The present reasserted itself.

Wraith warm and real in his arms, her hand still on his heart. Her tears, shed only for him this time, were pooling by his collarbone.

"It *liked me*," he told her. "It liked that I wasn't afraid. That I didn't beg. It liked that I listened."

He stroked her hair to ground himself.

"I spent hours down there. But then I *walked* back out. Injury free, with a crystal sample it gave me that melted containment, and a laugh that wouldn't stop echoing in my skull.

"They thought I was mad. They were half right. But I wasn't broken. I was *chosen*."

He paused, smiling softly, "I didn't have a name for it back then. Not *Void*. Just... the Whisper. It was the dark that didn't scare me. The ache that felt like home. It sang to me. And I sang back.

"They *should've* killed me when they saw what I pulled out. Instead, they put me in a clean room, ran a dozen tests, and a week later a recruiter in a black uniform slid me a data pad with no insignia and asked if I wanted off that rock."

Wraith was still silent, waiting, so he gave her the rest of the truth. The part that even Geist didn't know.

"They scrubbed my record, but I didn't care. Because I'd already disappeared. The real me? That's still echoing in the mines somewhere, laughing in the dark with something that doesn't have a face."

Wraith blinked away the tears she couldn't stop from falling. Kael had once

told her that he'd lived the memory of her final space battle with her. Now she had done the same with Shade.

Completely unwittingly. Totally devastating.

"So, you are its prophet," she whispered.

"Nah, I'm just a conduit, babe," he continued to stroke her hair. "So are you."

Memories of Taurus Prime, Tarrascoids, and vibrations trying to rip her apart rose without warning and hijacked her. Some days it felt like she'd left herself behind too, in the fetid mire of that swamp.

"Exactly," Shade told her softly, as she pushed the images away.

"How does this help us get Kael back?"

"I don't know. But I'm still me. You're still you. Which means that, underneath it all, he's still your Golden Boy."

She nodded. Not relieved, just exhausted.

"Can we sleep now?"

He kissed her temple, "Sure."

She'd turned in her sleep to face away from Zane, but he'd wrapped himself around her and she woke up to find herself holding his hands like they were lifelines.

Maybe they were.

"Don't you ever sleep?" she asked.

"Not often. But I rest."

"That's... worrisome."

He leaned forward to whisper in her ear, hot breath velvet on her skin, "You have no idea."

Actually, she was getting some ideas. None of them advisable. But still...

"Shade?" Because she didn't need Zane right now.

"Wraith?" His tone mirrored hers and still managed to be mocking.

"Is it bad that I *really* want to use you to forget everything for a while?"

He stilled.

She waited.

"Not a good idea, babe. For either of us."

“That’s not what I asked, *babe*.”

He leaned in and nipped her neck, the pain delicious and arousing. His voice was a growl in her ear, “Then is it bad that I really, *really* want to let you?”

She turned in his arms and met his gaze, which was molten.

Even so, he held back, “But I’m not Kael, Ash. And I don’t want to hurt you more.”

His grip loosened as if he’d already decided to pull away.

*Not happening.*

“Shut up, Zane,” she crushed her mouth to his. Desperate to feel anything that wasn’t the well of pain and despair. There was familiarity in kissing him, but enough had changed to make it different. Better.

*Much better.*

One of his hands was in her hair, the other burning on the skin at the small of her back, pulling her close. She reached down to yank off his shirt...

Which was when the comms, which they had turned off, started spouting static.

Shade drew his head back, cursed, and looked at her. His expression rueful. “Saved by SID. Remind me to kill Geist later.”

Wraith rested her forehead against his.

“Me first.”



## Chapter 41

Geist looked back and forth between Wraith and Shade. Both were glaring at him. Both looked like they'd just rolled out of bed.

So, either he'd woken them, or...

He closed his eyes. Hoped to the Void he was wrong.

"By the way, Rina says you should visit." Shade's voice. With bite.

Geist opened his eyes, "Rina?"

"Yeah, you probably should have mentioned to Ash that Rina didn't know for sure you were alive. I'd have stopped her from spilling the secret, but I was a little comatose at the time."

"Also, I gave her Ed." This from Wraith, delivered with acid and venom.

Void help him. He wasn't wrong.

And Spook was going to murder him and/or corrupt one of his more promising assets. The odds were on *and*.

Which made Ed a *former* asset.

Today was not turning out well.

"I have... information you need."

Wraith raised her eyebrows, "Well?" Shade lounged, twirling a knife between his fingers.

"I have to give it to you in person."

"I hope you'll forgive me if I don't want to take Shade back into the Fold just yet, G. Seeing as when I yanked him out yesterday, there was a bidding war for his soul going on between the Choir and the Void."

Geist paled, looked at Shade who gave the shrug that said *no big deal* and meant the opposite. "What can I say, I'm popular."

He swallowed hard. Looked down at his desk, which was off cam.

“Then I shall have to come to you. I’ll leave immediately.”

She and Shade shared a glance. “Fine, I’ll send you the co-ords you can pretend you don’t already have.”

“That won’t be necessary.”

The screen was blank, the voice was behind her. Wraith spun. Geist was standing on the bridge of the fucking *Lethe* with them. In person.

She looked down at Shade, who was still lounging. He rolled his eyes.

“Hit him in the head, babe. The migraine takes a while to dissipate.”

She pursed her lips and raised a finger, “You didn’t mention that Geist could phase.”

“Well, to be fair, he’s not very good at it...” Shade snapped up, turned to Geist, eyes hard.

“Speaking of which, how did you get here? There’s no anchor, which you’re shit at finding anyway. And you’re not good enough to phase-target me without killing yourself.”

Wraith shelved the need for details. There was something important here, she could feel it. No, she could feel *Shade* feeling it.

Her chest tightened; that shouldn’t be happening. But she was definitely picking up on his emotions, most of which were in the *cold rage* range.

She stepped aside to let him move towards Geist, who had gone silent and honestly looked like he was about to throw up.

He was cleaning it up if he did.

She couldn’t see Shade’s face, but she could feel his focus. Almost as if he was looking at Geist with more than human eyes.

And she really needed her brain to shut the fuck up.

She caught the gesture first, the tightening of shoulders, the shifting of center of gravity. “Poltergeist,” Shade said quietly, “what the fuck did you do?”

Geist said nothing, but he pulled something out of his pocket.

She’d seen it, in Zane’s memories. The stone he’d brought out of the mine.

The artifact? It had to be.

But he'd said it melted containment. He'd been able to hold it because he'd been chosen by the Void. It had almost killed Kael, and he seemed to be a Void-damned deity these days.

*How the fuck was Geist holding it?*

The stare down between the men had lasted more than two minutes now and she'd had enough. She slipped off the bridge and brewed coffee far more loudly and aggressively than necessary.

It made her feel better.

She was intimately aware of the pain of betrayal that Shade was feeling. Less clear, but still evident was Geist's feeling of necessity and resignation.

They definitely weren't integrated.

It had to be the artifact.

*But you've felt Zane before*, her mind whispered. She slammed the thought down like a blade into flesh.

Walked to the door, yelled, "Coffee's ready. Otherwise, go fight it out in the gym. Or just whip your cocks out and measure. I don't care which, just make it fast. My patience is finite. My kill count isn't."

Shade stalked into the mess, Geist a few paces behind him. "Well, we wouldn't want you getting bored, babe. Who knows, you might blow up the universe."

He turned to glare at Geist again, who had just stepped through the door, face glacial.

Wraith took his hand. He closed his eyes for a moment, let her touch ground him. Didn't let go as he sat on the bench at the mess table. She skirted in next to him.

Geist poured the coffee and placed a mug in front of each of them. Sat on one of the chairs opposite them.

No one could weaponize silence better than Geist. And if the Void-damned artifact wasn't giving him a direct feed into Geist's emotional resonance, he would have shut the fuck up and let the silence reign.

“You felt it was necessary. Why?”

He dropped his eyes to Geist’s pocket, where the artifact didn’t even make a bulge against the sleek lines of Geist’s uniform. “And you, shut up. The grownups are talking.”

He felt Wraith’s confusion and, a moment later, amusement when she figured out he was talking to a rock.

The resonance faded to an ignorable level. “Better,” he told it. Leveled his gaze at Geist, who was sipping his coffee.

“Waiting, Gloomlord.” He hadn’t pulled out that particular nickname out in over a decade. The immediate glare showed that it was still devastatingly effective. Good to know.

Geist put his mug down. Smiled benignly at him. And then hit him and Wraith with a *push* of memories.

The intensity was probably the artifact’s fault.

Maybe.

## Chapter 42

### *Memory Interlude*

Geist stalked the smoking ruins of Shade's compound, increasingly desperate. Increasingly angry. Increasingly afraid.

He had been certain Shade was still alive.

Now, he wasn't.

And if he was dead, whoever killed him had better enjoy their last Geist-free days. Because he'd bring enough pain and devastation on them that their ancestors would feel it.

\* \* \*

He phased into the artifact chamber like a vengeful ghost. Paused for a heartbeat to consider his similes, then decided *fuck it* and glared at the rock.

"Alright, you stubborn piece of shit, we've been down this road before. You know how it ends. So you're going to tell me what happened here, nice and easy."

The vision dropped him. The relief overwhelmed him.

And then the Void-damned artifact wanted a fucking favor.

\* \* \*

Geist sat alone in his office. Shade and Wraith were asleep down the hall. Well, Wraith was probably asleep. Shade didn't sleep.

It felt... good, having them here.

He looked down at the artifact that was doing its best *I'm just a paperweight* impression.

"Shade couldn't feel you. That means you're deliberately hiding. What are you up to?"

He sipped his drink. Saw he had written something on the page in front of him.

*Not time yet.*

Looked back at the artifact, "I hate it when you do that."

\* \* \*

Drunk. Broken. Talking to the artifact because he had no one else to talk to. Helios was gone.

Shade was comatose.

He was probably going to have to break out Omega protocol for Wraith, Void help him.

And he was so Void-damned tired.

He laid his head down on the desk. Closed his eyes.

Fell into the past.

\* \* \*

A vague sense of movement.

Voices. Hushed and urgent.

"We've never used the Gates like this."

"We've never had enough power to try."

The sense of being observed.

"If it works, it changes everything. We won't just be able to step between Gates, we can jump between Galaxies."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Where's your sense of scientific curiosity?"

"...Alright, hit it before the Captain wakes up."

Thrumming, vibration. And then presence, vast and overwhelming. It filled the room, chose a vessel.

A scream.

And the sound of footsteps receding.

\* \* \*

Time had passed.

Not eons. Far shorter.

There were footsteps nearby, staggered, uneven. A rasping.

“How... do I... open... the Gate?”

It gave no reply.

Something fell. And then the presence was back. Vengeful, angry. It pushed against the empty Gate, trying to return.

Searched for a vessel, but there were none remaining.

Turned to the only thing left in the room.

And then it was imbued. It shrugged the presence to the side. Off in its own corner.

Forgot about it.

\* \* \*

It was called.

It answered.

And then it shifted.

\* \* \*

For the first time in millennia it was held by human hands. A boy, blessed by its allies.

It liked him.

The presence stirred, hungry. It confined it.

Not this one. *This* one belonged to it.

CONDITIONAL RELEASE

\* \* \*

Endless people. It was getting bored.

\* \* \*

Now, this one? This one was interesting. It spoke to it, not around it. Its communication was rudimentary. Difficult. But possible.

\* \* \*

Orbital strike. Cutting deep, too close to where it lay. It wasn't concerned.  
But the presence awoke, struck out.  
Struck back.  
And all sense of life disappeared.

\* \* \*

The interesting one was back, and so was the boy. No longer a boy. And they were linked.  
Interesting.  
The presence stirred. Was contained.  
The Blessed picked it up. Carried it.  
Sung a tune it remembered from ages past.  
Became the Guardian.  
It was content.

\* \* \*

Something shifted. The Guardian was there, but so was something else. Something it hadn't felt since—  
A hand touched it. Familiar.  
The presence reared up, pushed out.



The Guardian shouted at it. Knelt next to the Vessel.

Phased away, leaving it alone and waiting.

\* \* \*

All three of them were rubbing their heads. Memory pushes could be gentle, but generally weren't. That sure as fuck wasn't.

When she could see straight, Wraith was going to break Geist's nose.

Lovingly.

She squinted her eyes open enough to find her coffee, gulped it like a lifeline. And speaking of which, she was still holding Shade's hand.

Good.

"Okay, so let me just summarize for the Blessed Guardian and the Interesting One at the table."

"You're going to weaponize those names, aren't you?" Shade asked, the edge of amusement creeping in over the existential horror.

"You bet your ass."

"Good, just hold off on your summary for a moment."

He let go of her hand, staggered around the table, knelt, and wrapped his arms around Geist. "I'm sorry, Zahir."

Geist's hand slipped down and around him. His other still held his head.

"I love you, Zane." It was said quietly, with certainty and the weight of years and shared history, from a man for whom love had once been an incomprehensible concept.

"I know. I love you back."

Wraith's eye misted, and she blinked away tears. Even years later, they were still her boys. Her family had fractured, but it hadn't broken. Not completely.

Ten minutes later, more coffee had been brewed and mugs refilled.

Zane was sitting at the chair between her and Geist, his hand on Geist's wrist, his ankle hooked around hers.

She stuck out her other foot and hooked Geist's ankle in turn. He raised an eyebrow but didn't move away.

Family circuit complete.

The artifact sat on the table in front of them.

"I think you were going to give us the summary, babe?"

Shade's voice was flat. None of them were steady yet.

"Yes, oh Blessed Guardian of brain-melting artifacts."

He smiled, just a little. "Finally, a proper form of address."

She nudged his ankle.

"Okay, so the artifact is sapient, possible even semi-sentient. And ancient."

Geist nodded.

She looked at Shade, "It *really* likes you." Turned to Geist, "And it thinks that you're interesting. Void help you."

"Why would it start now?" Geist muttered, causing Shade to grin and squeeze his wrist.

"Also you can communicate with it."

He nodded again.

"Shade? What about you?"

"I've talked to it on occasion, but it's never talked back."

"And I'm not going to try."

"It's never actually melted anyone's brain," Geist noted in his meticulous way, "merely killed most and left the rest comatose or irrevocably insane."

Wraith gave him her most insincerely patient look while he finished. "I think my point not touching it stands. And that leaves Geist as our resident artifact whisperer. It's also powerful enough to keep something contained that's capable of wiping out the life of an entire city—permanently."

"Which isn't concerning at all," Shade deadpanned.

"Now, at some point—I got the feeling this was millennia ago—this presence was let out by..."

*By what?*

"People," Geist said. "I got that much. Humans. Earlyish in our space-faring days."

"But how the fuck is that possible? That Gate tech is way beyond anything we have now."

"The UCGs work similarly," Shade pointed out. The Universal Comms Gates

were small, pinpoint wormholes that enabled faster than light communication.

She considered it. “Okay, mind officially blown. But then they tried something new. Connected somewhere they shouldn’t have. And they let something out.”

Geist picked up, “It burned through its Vessel quickly. No more than a year or two, I think. But it hadn’t left anyone else alive to inhabit, and it didn’t know how to get back home.”

“So, it found a home in this rock. Which, as I mentioned, was strong enough to keep it contained.” She paused. “Until Kael.”

Shade put his mug down and took her hand. “It wanted me because I was Void Touched. Stronger, at least by its requirements. Helios must have seemed like a fucking all-you-can-eat buffet.”

“And then you couldn’t contain it anymore.” She spoke directly to the artifact.

It was probably her imagination, but it felt almost... guilty.

As it fucking should.

## Chapter 43

“Okay. Now we have the history. So, what?”

Geist could feel the edges of Wraith’s irritation, perceived through the artifact as if it acted as a lens.

He could have done without it. Especially now.

“It asked to come here, to you.” He looked up at Shade, who looked down at the artifact suspiciously. “It... wanted you to have the information.”

Shade was looking at him as if he hadn’t known him for twenty years. “So, you’re telling me that the most rational, the most *logical* man in the known universe decided that listening to a chunk of rock was a good idea?”

No. He neither wanted nor needed the resonance feedback.

He spread his hands. Shade dropped his wrist. He missed the warmth.

Wraith stood, paced the tiny mess. Glared at them, and stepped out into the hall where she continued to pace.

Shade spoke quietly, “You don’t do favors without an agenda, G. And you already had the vision about what had happened to my people.” He paused, considered what he’d said, “I’m a little concerned that it can do that, actually. But, regardless, *why* did you decide to take it with you?”

“It was part of our deal.”

Wraith stepped into the doorway. “You made a *deal* with an ancient space rock? I thought it wanted a favor?”

“Shade’s right. I wanted something in return.”

Silence. But the question was coming. Wraith broke first.

“Which was?”

“I need to know what happened to Spirit.”

Wraith stared at him, heart racing. “Does it know?”

His eyes were haunted. “I think it can help me find out.”

She wanted to shake him, scream at him. Instead, she walked over and punched him in the shoulder, a small, human gesture against a man carrying the weight of annihilation.

“Damn it, Geist. You absolute bastard. Why the fuck do you always think you have to do these things alone?”

He probably hadn’t meant her to hear his whispered, “Learned from the best.”

She hit him again. “I hate that I can’t be angry about it. Don’t worry, I’m still going to be. Just... not *now*.”

She collapsed into a chair.

Shade was staring at Geist. Face unreadable.

She didn’t *reach* for him, but somehow found him anyway. In turmoil. Rage, grief, understanding, and that underlying fatalism that had been part of his make up as long as she’d known him.

*I guess I know why, now.*

He looked down at the rock on the table. “You said it sometimes writes things using your hand?”

“Yes.”

He looked up at Geist, who was as still as the stone and just as unreadable. Unless you knew him. “You know that’s called possession, right?”

The smallest movement, hardly worth being called a flinch. But it was there.

Shade looked at her, “Wraith, get us something to write on.”

An order. In his command voice, no less. She met his gaze, saluted him with maximum sarcasm, and left the room.

Shade stared at the rock. At the artifact.

He knew what it was like when something inside you *isn’t* you.

When it picks up your hand like a marionette and starts sketching your future in other people’s blood.

*It feels like consent because it’s easier that way.*

“How far gone are you?”

His voice was barely a whisper, but he knew Geist heard it.

“As far as I’ve had to. Not as far as I’m willing to.”

Geist reached his hand out, almost tentatively. Shade took it. “How do we stop our family fracturing completely, again, G?”

“As counter intuitive as it may seem, I’m trying to do the opposite.”

“And you don’t believe your true death will be as impactful as Wraith’s? As Spirit’s?”

Geist was silent.

“You’re wrong.”

He could hear Wraith’s footsteps rapidly approaching.

“Alright, boys. I brought my *very* expensive paper, data pads, an ink pen, blood vials and a sacrificial knife. Let’s see what the pretty rock has to say.”

She stopped in her tracks, looked hard at the two of them.

“What did I miss?”

“Geist thinks he’s expendable.”

Wraith walked up to them and dropped the items she’d brought on the table. Then she thwacked Geist over the back of his head. “No.”

She sat, and joined him in glaring at Geist, who held a hand up in surrender. He probably would have used both, but Shade wasn’t letting him go.

Not yet.

Geist pulled the paper in front of him and picked up the pen; bemused that Wraith had indeed brought blood vials and a knife. He hoped it wouldn’t come to that.

“I normally just... talk to it. Sometimes it responds...” He trailed off, looked at Shade, “I usually don’t notice until after.”

Shade’s raised eyebrow said volumes.

“So, talk to it.” Wraith. Practical and not entirely wrong.

Shade shook his head. “Why don’t we just take the shortcut?”

And placed his hand on the artifact. Did... something. Pulled the Void closer. Wraith grabbed his hand, “You **don’t** get to keep him, got me?”

Shade turned to her, blue eyes darkened but not quite black, “I’m still here, babe. Love you too.”

Geist blinked. Suddenly exhausted.

Shade was lying on the ground, head in Wraith’s lap. She had one hand under his shirt laying over his heart, the other on his cheek.

“Is he—”

She didn’t look up. “Just over-extended, I think.” She glanced up at him, “Why am I surrounded by idiot men that think that they are fucking heroes?”

He couldn’t help but smile, “You bring out the best in us, Ash.”

She looked down at Shade again, “Idiots. Both of you. Hope you got something useful out of all of that.”

Geist looked down at the table in front of him. And the three pages covered in his neat handwriting.

He picked them up, hands shaking. Scanned them.

“Yes,” he told her. “Yes, we got something useful.”

A lot of somethings.

And if the organization he had dedicated his life to wasn’t so thoroughly determined to murder his family and reignite a war, he might have shared some of it with them.

Once they’d finished the mission, assuming they came back alive at all, the only place these pages would be going was into his private archive.

He set them down almost reverently. Stood up, surprised at how stiff his muscles were.

“Want me to carry him to MedBay?”

“No, I’ve got him.”

“You sure?”

She raised an eyebrow, “You were under for almost eight hours, Poltergeist. Both of you. And yes, I was fucking worried. If you try to pick him up, you might just collapse and then I’d have to carry both of you.”

She shifted position and lifted Shade in a slightly awkward bridal carry. Tilted her head to the door.

“After you. I have a diagnostic table with your name on it just around the

corner.”



## Chapter 44

Despite Shade's protests, Wraith forewent jumping from atmo and just landed the *Lethe* on the forsaken hilltop on Sôterion.

She'd agreed to fly Inbetween to get them here—against her better judgment—but only after Shade reminded her that he'd already phased after his last near-death experience.

He'd also pointed out that *technically* phasing was just Void-walking. She almost choked him out on the spot.

And now they were here. Her boots left deep impressions in the thick ash. Every step was a footprint through someone.... through so many someones.

Her brain kept trying to calculate how many people—

She shut that thought down again. It didn't matter.

The answer was *too many*.

Was Kael aware? Was there enough of him left to care?

Or were they going on a suicide mission with a sapient rock for nothing?

Part of her wanted to turn around. To disappear off into the universe and never return. Drag Zane along for the ride.

Another part of her still desperately hoped to find Kael. To bring him home. To her.

And the cold part that was Wraith understood how little choice they had in the matter.

They'd reached the giant door. Open, it would be wide and tall enough for a decent-sized ground vehicle to pass through.

There was something written above the door, but not in Common Standard. Must be one of the ancient languages.

Geist raised his data pad to translate.

*“Riftwatch.”*

*Which wasn’t ominous at all.*

Shade phased Wraith in, again, despite her protests. He’d pointed out that getting the door open wasn’t going to happen and it was that or turn around. She hadn’t been impressed.

It didn’t hurt this time.

So, maybe what was riding Helios like a trick pony was what was interfering with his phasing the last time around.

The room was the same. Round, bare. Giant ass Gate on one side. Column in the middle.

And light.

He hadn’t been aware enough last time to notice, but the place still had power. Even after thousands of years.

He saw Geist check his notes for the ten thousandth time, and set the artifact in the depression in the column. Spoke in his quiet, briefing voice that filled the room.

“From the memories, the Gate draws a tremendous amount of power. We know the artifact can open the Gate. What we don’t know is how many times and for how long.”

Wraith caught Shade’s eye. Even without the bond, he knew what she was thinking. That was something they should have discussed before they got here.

“And what nefarious reason made you decide not to mention this earlier?” she asked Geist. Nefarious may have been a bit redundant—it was *Geist* after all—but her question stood regardless.

“I’d rather get all the arguments over at once. If we’d started on the *Lethe*, we’d still be screaming at each other.”

Fair.

Probably not entirely true, but fair.

“All the arguments?” Wraith’s tone was mild. He should have brought

popcorn.

"We can't keep the Gate open. And we don't know whether time flows the same way on the other side of the door. Which means that opening it at regular intervals may not be effective. We also don't know what could come through."

"So, you're proposing what, exactly?"

Geist shifted to put the column between him and Wraith. She wasn't going to like his answer and he knew it.

Shade leaned against the Gate, felt it vibrate slightly under him.

"One of us has to stay here, to close the Gate. To open it again. I still think that it's worth trying three-hour windows, but we have to ensure that the time factor is taken into account."

"So, one of us steps through, waits a minute, steps back. If no one is here, well then, time flows differently and I'll have a different problem."

Shade narrowed his eyes, "Who says it will be you?"

"I caved on the phasing, Z. Twice. Don't push your luck."

Couldn't argue with that.

He stepped back again. Waited for Geist to drop the bomb.

"Assuming time isn't the issue, or at least, isn't *much* of an issue, we still need some way to open the Gate in case of emergency." He looked at his papers.

Here it comes.

"According to my notes, and a fair amount of conjecture, I believe that Shade could *reach* me."

"From another galaxy." She'd moved from calm, to light and cheery.

*Oh yeah, Wraith was going to kill him.*

"I believe that it is possible to phase a *reach*. Cut the distance, cut the time."

"And probably have him bleeding from his eyeballs while his brain melts. Again."

*And she's back to stone cold assassin.*

Geist should start running, but maybe he could give him a bit of a head start.

"My brain didn't melt, babe. Just overloaded a tad."

"Shut up, Shade."

He shut up.

Let her and Geist argue while he figured out the mechanics of how a phased *reach* would work.

Geist was right. It was possible.

It would be easier with Wraith, but they all knew that Geist would be the one to stay behind.

Shade looked up at them, waited for a gap in the screaming and dropped a bomb of his own. "We're going to have to integrate. All of us."

Wraith turned to look at Shade, who was leaning casually against the Gate.

"Not disagreeing, babe, but there's something in your tone that suggests I'm going to want to stab you. And don't you dare—"

Shade held up her knife.

"I hate you."

"You love me. But you're right, you are going to want to stab me. We *all* need to integrate. You, me, and Geist. It's the only way I can think of to *reach* him across galaxies."

She stepped up to him, placed her hands on his shoulders and spoke directly into his head.

*I can't lose you too. I'd rather turn back right now than risk losing you.*

He put his hand on her heart, the way she always did to him. It made her want to cry and she was very tired of crying.

*I promised you we'd get him back.*

She lowered one hand to his heart. Felt the strong, steady beat of it that had always been there for her. Been the one constant above all others.

*And the odds suck, Z. I mean, they **really** suck. How about we pack it all in and go and explore the universe together?*

Something flashed in his expression; there and gone in an instant. It felt important and she wished she'd picked up what it was.

*I'd say yes, but we won't. So, let's go and find Sunshine and bring him home.*

He pulled her into his arms, held her as tightly as she held him. Finally, they stepped back and turned to Geist, who was reading his notes again.

"Okay, G. Let's get in each other's heads and get moving before I break

something.” Preferably one of them; but she didn’t say it out loud.  
Figured she didn’t need to.

## Chapter 45

Geist had never been comfortable with integration. Could appreciate its benefits. But that close, intimate contact, even with the five people in the galaxy he truly loved was difficult for him.

Not in the moment.

During integration everything felt as natural as breathing.

It was after that he tended to fall apart as his nature and his training reminded him that there were corners of his mind walled off with barbed wire and blood.

Integration didn't just scale the walls—it dissolved them. He hated how naked it made him feel.

But he acknowledged the necessity.

Physical touch wasn't needed to integrate, but it helped. So, he linked hands with Shade and Wraith. Felt the flicker of something that existed only between the two of them.

And let go of his resistance.

It was surprisingly easy.

And they were there. With him but still giving him the space he needed.

It was strange to be understood.

"Alright," he told them aloud, even though it wasn't necessary. "Get your HZESes on and let's give this a try."

If they hadn't been integrated, Wraith would have fought Shade on coming with her for the environment and time test.

And she would have lost.

*See, saved some time already.*

His thought came with a mental wink and what she interpreted as a quick kiss on the head.

They waited as Geist powered up the Gate, and Wraith didn't want to think about how a *rock* knew the mechanics of ancient human technology.

The Gate hummed, vibrated, and filled with light. A dancing aurora, almost identical to the ones in the Fold.

She shared a mental nod of acknowledgment with Shade, seeing as the envirosuit helmets weren't conducive to side glances.

Behind them, Geist anchored them.

They took each other's hands and stepped into the aurora.

It felt a little like phasing. A little like a Void collapse. And a lot like she was about to be violently ill.

Not great in a sealed envirosuit.

Then her foot hit solid ground and the nausea abated somewhat. It was night; they were on a plateau and standing too damn close to the edge of the cliff. She could see trees of some sort in the near distance.

The light was strange, almost iridescent. She turned back and saw that the Gate wasn't anchored on this side. The auroras just floated in midair.

Shade nudged her.

Right. Not here for the scenery.

She checked her data unit. The air was more oxygen heavy than EarthOx standard. But within acceptable parameters.

No toxins detected. Temperature cool, around twelve degrees Celsius.

All *seemed* fine.

She pulled her helmet off, waited to see if she was going to collapse. Didn't. Gave Shade the thumbs up.

He closed his eyes and she felt him throw his thought out to Geist, who was somehow with them and not with them.

He nodded, and they stepped back through. Geist was still there, which was a good start. And he shut the Gate down as they emerged.

She checked her time, "Fifty-seven seconds."

He nodded, "Same. And your lack of helmet means the environment is at least not immediately hazardous."

Shade had pulled off his own helmet and was stripping out of his HZES. "Not immediately. You're such an optimist, G."

Geist didn't bother replying, although his exasperation came through loud and clear.

She followed Shade's lead, stripping down, and looked at Geist, "It also means we can wear armor, which I think might be a plus."

"And the mistress of understatement."

She turned her baleful stare on a grinning Shade, "What can I say. G taught me well."

And she didn't need to turn to know that Geist was rolling his eyes.

Shade straightened, looked past her, "Did you get the message?"

Geist nodded, "Just before you came back through. It's faint, but I heard it."

"Then we're all systems go and ready for Sunshine."

They were walking along the plateau; had been for more than two hours.

Shade carried a stun pistol, a Plasma Caster, and seven different knives. Just in case.

Wraith had gone heavy with rifles, grenades and some of Geist's experimental ammo. In theory, they would fracture on impact and deliver an electrostatic shock, but he *had* warned them that it only worked about seventy percent of the time.

She'd brought frangible rounds as back up.

They were both wearing black spacer armor. Plasma-rated *and* stylish. Who said you couldn't have both?

Wraith smiled as she heard his thoughts, and gave a slight shake of her head. Fond. Amused.

And contemplative.

"What are you thinking?"

A glance at him, "You can't tell?"

"Nope, not really. Mostly surface emotion and tactical alignment."



She stopped. Waited for him to turn to her.

“How long have we been soul-bonded, Z?”

Ah. *That* question.

Not integrated, which was a conscious and temporary choice .

Bonded. Quieter, deeper, intimately connected.

And it had no off switch.

“Since they brought you back from Taurus Prime. The first time I held you through a nightmare, I could feel you. Never stopped until...”

“Until you felt me die. Even though I didn’t.”

“Yeah.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

He tilted his head, a wry, Shade smile on his lips. “Hey babe, you know those nightmares you can’t remember but wake you up screaming every night? Well, the living presence of the Void that I bonded with as a teenager recognizes it and now we’re bonded in ways I don’t understand and can’t explain. You’re cool with that, right?”

Wraith actually laughed. “Okay, fair enough. And after Ghost Command?”

Shade didn’t drop the smile; buried the pain deeply enough that she wouldn’t feel it, “Hey babe, I know Phantom’s your one true love and all, but our souls are connected in a way that’s similar to integration but a bit more... permanent. You don’t think he’ll mind, do you?”

She stared at him.

“I—” She stopped, and he could feel the tightness in her throat. “I’m sorry, Z.”

That wasn’t anywhere close to what he expected her to say.

“What for?”

“For taking you for granted. For... abandoning you when Phantom came along.”

They both looked to the ground, aware that if they brought Helios back alive, it would happen again. He’d go back to Perdition and she’d leave with Sunshine.

For a moment, deep below the surface where she couldn’t hear, he wished he could have been selfish and take her up on her offer to just disappear together.

*Mine.*

That's what she'd said. She'd fought the Void and the Choir for him, and won.

She was right. He was hers, always had been.

But she'd never be his. Not really.

"You're alive, Starlight. Everything else? There's nothing to apologize for. Except stealing my favorite knife."

"This one?" she asked, holding it up.

He was about to answer when they froze as something shifted in the silence.

Their tactical integration kicked into high gear.

And shadows tore the darkness as something vast swooped in, talons reaching out to grab him.

## Chapter 46

Shade ducked and stabbed upwards as Wraith shot an electro-round. The creature's claws missed him by millimeters.

It spasmed mid-air, crashed to the ground and lay still.

She trained her PinPoint on it as Shade scanned the skies.

Nothing else. Yet.

It looked like a bird if someone had carved one out of quartz. Giant serrated wings, crystalline body, eyes hollow and hungry.

"Fuck me, it's flying Tarrascoid."

The glass-looking, swimming scorpion creatures that took out her team on Taurus Prime.

The bond resonating between them meant they needed no words to describe how much more fucked they were.

"You think they come from here?" asked Shade quietly.

She had no fucking clue.

Four hours later, they might not know whether the glass creatures originated here, but Shade *did* know that there were a fuck-ton of them. And they were all predatory.

Wraith's laser rifle was useless, it just reflected off them. The electrorounds and his stun pistol worked best, but they sometimes got up again.

His Plasma Caster worked, but took too long to melt through their *skin*. Which meant letting the fuckers get close, stunning them, and following up with either a PinPoint to the skull or a Caster to the chest.

Not exactly efficient.

There had been no sign of Sunshine.

The second Gate window had just passed.

*We should head back.*

They'd thought it at the same time. They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

"Just like old times."

"And no ice storms."

"Yet."

\* \* \*

Geist closed the Gate. If they hadn't found Helios yet, they'd be turning around. Coming back.

If they followed the plan.

They never followed the plan.

He laid a hand on the artifact, closed his eyes and felt the barest silk thread that connected them over time and space.

Still there.

They weren't dead.

It was all the hope he could allow himself.

\* \* \*

The trek back towards the Gate had far fewer attacks. Wraith could be grateful for it even as her instincts screamed that there was a reason for it, and she wouldn't like it.

But they were making good time because of it. They'd already missed the next open window, but at this rate they'd be back with almost ninety minutes to spare before the twelve-hour mark.

The light was changing.

Sunrise?

She looked out over the plateau at the plains beyond. Plains that were gaining

features in the lightening sky.

Not the greens and browns common on their side of the galaxy. More blues and turquoise with spots of deep red and bright pink.

She hadn't realized she'd stopped.

Shade stepped up next to her, handed her a nutri-bar.

"You think we'll die a horrible death if we sit for a bit?" she asked him.

He had already dropped, "Absolutely."

She sat next to him. "Good. Just checking."

They watched the sun rise. It was almost white in color, turning the sky the barest shade of cyan. The light was soft, slightly blue, and it brought little warmth.

At some point, her fingers had threaded through his.

They didn't speak, even if there was so much that needed to be said.

She didn't think of the future.

Didn't touch the past.

Just let the present breathe and for a few quiet moments, she let herself be Ashley, sitting with Zane, enjoying the sunrise.

Then came the low, rolling wave of sound: the beating of wings. Lots of them.

She knew it had been too good to last.

They ran flat out, aiming for the trees. The integration allowing them to duck, strike, and dodge; keeping them just ahead of the flock.

But it was still too close. And gaining.

Shade tackled Wraith as one of the death birds dived them, phased them a bit more than halfway back to their starting point. It was a spot that glowed bright in his head, much clearer than the place where the Gate's portal would open, so he didn't think he'd kill them.

Besides, they were going to be breakfast if he didn't.

They landed and rolled to their feet, back-to-back, weapons drawn.

Silence.

Just their own breathing and the rush of blood in his ears.

“You okay?” Wraith’s voice was quiet, still watching the surrounding area. There was something eerie about it.

Shade checked himself, “Five by five.”

“So, no bleeding from your eyeballs, then?”

He chuckled quietly, scanned the trees. “Fortunately no. Turns out it’s not the best look for me.”

“Understatement. Why here?”

“Good question.” There was a shiver in the trees ahead of him. Not physical. “But maybe not a good answer.”

She pivoted, weapon raised; the PinPoint whining as it powered.

*Wait or run for the Gate?*

Whatever it was was getting closer. It hummed in his bones. Running seemed like a good option, but it was familiar.

*Depends. Are you up to facing Helios? Because I’m pretty sure that’s who’s stalking us.*

Wraith calmed her pulse by force of will. Let herself sink below everything; to the place where soldiers go before the battle. It was the calm ahead of the coming storm.

She felt Shade do something similar, but instead of calm, he reached for chaos. Wrapped it around himself like armor. Grinned at her, like he had a hundred times before they did something stupidly suicidal.

*You know what, fuck it.*

She let go of everything, leaned into his soul and let it tear her calm to shreds. Grinned back at him with teeth.

Together, they waited for the storm.

The man who was definitely not Kael—but wore his face—stepped from the trees.

Wraith ignored the sharp ache in her chest.

Lifted her chin.

And projected pure boredom.

She stood with the butt of her weapon on her hip, elbow balanced on Shade’s

shoulder.

He was juggling knives. Neat trick.

They looked casual and relaxed. Disrespectful.

Their enemy's eye twitched.

And annoying. Perfect.

"Nice place, love the wildlife," Shade didn't even bother looking up at him.

She stretched her neck, yawned into her shoulder. "So, what do we call you? I mean, I can go with not-Kael, but it just doesn't roll off the tongue so well."

Black eyes shone as the man stepped forward. **"I am Helios. I am the Sun risen in the Void. And you? Didn't heed my only warning."**

"Remind me, was that when he burned Ed's arm off?" Wraith asked Shade, who caught his knives and sheathed them.

"Nah, it was after."

"Oh yes, when you were bleeding from the eyeballs. Gotta agree, babe. Not your best look."

In her peripheral vision, she saw Helios raise his hand, and unholy flame roared up from the earth, swallowing the ground at their feet.

## Chapter 47

Geist paced. Had been pacing for hours.

He checked the time again—forty-five minutes to the next opening. The twelve-hour mark.

He had run through every possible scenario and outcome. The good, the bad, and the truly horrendous.

Unfortunately, of every possible situation, only 4.39% resulted in all three of them coming back alive. Only 9.72% had Wraith and Shade returning alive, but without Helios.

The stats dropped significantly if he took near-fatal injuries into account.

They shouldn't have done this.

Not even for Spirit, who would never have forgiven him if he lost Shade or Wraith because of a quest for knowledge.

Especially one about him. One that would change nothing.

He absently wiped a tear off his cheek and checked the time.

Forty-three minutes to go.

And he was fucking terrified.

\* \* \*

“You know,” Shade said, “I think that might have hurt.” The pillar of flame where they had been standing was still burning.

**Helios** spun to face him.

Shade snapped his fingers, “Oh, you expected us to just stand there and die. Wow. You don't remember us *at all*.”



**Helios** took step towards him, which was when Wraith hit him with the stun pistol. Several shots, in fact.

**Helios** crashed to his knees, and flame erupted outwards from him in a circle.

Shade phased to Wraith, grabbed her and phased in close to **Helios**, let her go and punched him in the nose, which broke with a satisfying crunch.

Wraith kneed his groin and swept his feet out from under him. He knew what she needed without it being said, and he channeled the Void through their bond and into her voice as she leaned over him, looked into his eyes.

***“You can’t have him.”***

He could feel **Helios’s** anger. But underneath it, he could feel the Void. And it fucking agreed. It had already claimed Kael and it was pissed.

That was how they could reach him.

**Helios** threw Wraith off him; she crashed into a tree, bounced and rolled to her feet.

Shade stepped forward, sliced at Helios as he rose, a deep cut on the back of his neck. Painful, yes. Fatal, no.

Except the damn thing closed immediately and when **Helios** turned, his nose had realigned.

*Well that fucking sucks.*

He phased out of the way of a punch, a burst of flame, and a kick aimed at his face.

*Who knew Sunshine was so flexible?*

Inbetween, he slashed, cut and bled **Helios**, little by little. Wraith waited on the edges, shooting stun rounds when she could. It would be impossible to do without hitting him if they weren’t integrated.

And the whole while, he was *reaching* for the Void.

The divided attention was tiring, and he paid for it when **Helios** slashed out with a knife of his own and he phased a split second too late. Pain lanced his side.

Nothing to do but ignore it.

*The cuts aren't closing anymore.* Wraith's voice.

*Finally. Want to help me kick his ass, babe? Oh, and try to reach Kael at the same time.*

*Nah, I thought I'd just watch.*

He laughed, laughed harder at **Helios's** stunned expression.

*Love you too, babe.*

Wraith waited, not patiently, but she waited. Then she hit **Helios** with a stun round, ran in and slammed a kick next to his spine. The same nerve cluster Shade had got her with when they sparred.

**Helios** collapsed forward, and Shade darted in, grabbed both his arms above the elbows, and drove his knee into the spot she'd just kicked. Wrenched his shoulders back, a good deal harder than he'd done to her. Pulled him up and back.

They were probably seconds away from incineration.

***"I already told you; you can't have him."***

**"Then I'll kill him and take you instead,"** he spat at her.

If she opened herself to Kael, **Helios** would get in. She wound the bond between her and Shade tighter around them, forming what she hoped would be an impenetrable barrier.

*I've got you, babe. Always.*

She leaned in close, stared into black eyes and whispered, soft as a lover, "Try it, I dare you."

Kael hurt. Everywhere.

His vision was blurred, and he thought he could see Wraith. But he couldn't feel her.

Memories swirled, strange and alien.

Dikaio.

He'd been Dikaaios, chosen by the thing that had decided to take his call sign and make it literal.

**Helios. Sun God.**

If he lived, he was going to need a new one. And he wasn't feeling so great right now.

His vision cleared as **Helios** seemed to pour out of him. He could still see him, the essence of him, smashing into Wraith and bouncing off her.

*Don't worry, Sunshine. I've got you.*

"Shade?"

*The one and only. Now, hold still and let me and the Void work or your unwelcome guest is going to try to come back.*

"Wraith?"

"Will keep him busy. Now shut up."

Kael was getting a bit tired of members of Ghost Command telling him to shut up. But if it meant he got to be himself again, Void, they could do it daily.

He could almost feel what Shade was doing. Winding himself into him, around him. It was like integration. Closer to the soul-bond he'd had with Wraith before he'd... severed it.

But the closer Shade wrapped him, the more he could feel Wraith. So near. Connected, but not to him.

Without thinking, he pushed out along the bond between her and Shade, using the link Shade was creating with him as an entryway.

Found her.

Offered himself.

Wraith was holding the line, but barely. **Helios** was so fucking strong. But the shield they'd wound around themselves was strong too.

Shade was distracted, doing something with Kael. *With Kael.*

Her relief was momentary as the entity smashed into her again. And then she felt him. Within the bond but not part of it.

Open. Offering.

She grabbed him with both metaphysical hands and smashed out at **Helios**.

The bond burned white-hot, then... Silence. **Helios's** presence was gone.

She doubted that would last for long.

She staggered forward, lungs heaving, as Shade lowered Kael into the dirt.

Those rotator cuffs were definitely not going to be happy

Kael met her eyes, smiled, and passed out.

## Chapter 48

“Z, you’re bleeding.”

“All fine, babe, just leaking a bit. Let’s get him back to the Gate before the *Sun God* pulls himself back together.”

With a shared wince for Kael’s shoulders, they lifted him, one of them under each of his arms, and half carried, half dragged him. Behind them, he could feel the alien presence gathering itself.

Felt Wraith wrap herself more tightly around him and Kael, even as he did the same. Mentally shielding them.

Even as he knew that with Kael out cold, it may not be enough.

He winced with every step, for once grateful that Wraith was hurting too. He didn’t need her to notice that his *little leak* was probably a little deeper, a little more fatal than he’d let on.

Thank the Void for black armor.

They were close now, he just had to get her there.

The presence struck and they stumbled. Wraith turned back and snarled. A wordless *fuck you*.

“What she said,” he muttered even as he *threw* his thought through the Void: *Geist!*

In the *Riftwatch*, there were still eight minutes on the clock. Geist was counting the triangular panels in the dome in an effort to distract himself.

He was on 3,742 when he felt a prickle on the back of his neck. The memory of a shout.

Heart pounding, he turned back to the artifact. "It's time."

Went through the power up sequence, which stuttered, failed. The artifact lay almost dormant before him.

Cold panic shot through him. "No!"

He went through the routine again. And again.

They'd used up the artifact's power.

*Fuck!*

He grabbed it with both hands, *reached* for it in desperation. There was a spark still. Not enough. But maybe he could feed it.

He poured himself through the bond into the rock, his energy, his emotions, his soul. The spark brightened, then flared.

With effort that felt like lifting a mountain, he opened his eyes.

Hit the final button in the power up sequence.

And crashed to the floor.

The Gate filled with that Fold-like auroral light.

"You owe me, you bastard," he told the artifact as he spiraled into darkness.

In the distance, the Gate flared to life. "Cutting it fucking close there, G," Wraith muttered as she and Shade repelled another metaphysical attack.

*Hold on*, Shade's voice told her, and he phased the three of them forward.

They crashed through the aurora into the dome.

Wraith took in everything in an instant. Geist was down. The artifact was pulsing. No enemies.

She dropped Kael and surged forward, slammed her hand on the console, closing the Gate.

Turned to stare at it, but Helios hadn't made it through. She laughed out loud. They'd done it.

They'd actually fucking done it!

Geist? Shade was still speaking in her head.

Her stomach dropped as she pressed a finger to his neck. Heartbeat strong. "Unconscious."

*Hope he'll be okay.*

Something in the tone turned Wraith's veins to ice. She turned around, the world seeming to move in slow motion.

Shade was lying next to Kael, where it seemed they'd collapsed when she'd dropped her side. Kael was face down, but Shade had turned onto his back.

He was bleeding from the eyes again. That last phase had cost him. But his face was gray.

"Babe?"

She didn't remember moving, but she was at his side. Zane smiled at her. She started to turn, "I'll get the MedKit."

*Too late, Starlight. Just... stay with me?*

"No! No, you said you were okay," she peeled back his armor, found the gaping wound in his side.

*May have neglected to mention **how much** I was leaking.*

"You can't die, Zane."

*We got him back for you. And you're safe. G's alive.* He smiled again, whispered, "Worth it."

"No. No damn you. Not worth it. Not to me!"

*Love you, Ashley. Tell the others I love them too and that I said goodbye.*

Her tears were dripping onto him as she gripped his hands, too cold in hers.

"I love you, Zane. Please don't go. I can't lose you."

He blinked once more and closed his eyes. Still breathing, but not for much longer.

This wasn't happening. *Couldn't be happening.*

Wait—the Void had healed him.

She remembered. In his memories of the mine. He'd been hurt, dying, and walked out without a scratch.

And he'd said she was a conduit too.

*Void!* She yelled it in her head. In his. Out into the whole damn room and beyond as far as she could *reach*.

*Fix him! You did it once. Do it again!*

Nothing.

Just silence and Zane's increasingly slower breathing.

She was going to watch her soul die and there was nothing she could do to

stop it.

Her heart turned to lead in her chest, and she leaned on him and wept.

*Warrior.*

It was a whisper, barely there.

She looked around. Saw nothing.

*Warrior. Give me to the Guardian.*

Her eyes fixed on the column. On the artifact on it.

Any port in a firestorm.

She jumped up, grabbed it—the risks of touching it forgotten—and placed it in Zane's hands.

Held her own over it, gripped Zane's hands beneath it.

*Please work, please, please, please work.*

Beneath her hands, the rock seemed to liquefy. It flowed through his fingers, moving like black mercury into the wound in his side.

She'd worry about that if he lived.

Nothing happened.

Then his back arched like he'd been shocked with a live wire. His body started shaking, then seizing.

*Anchor us.*

She grabbed him, body and mind. Intertwined them so closely that if he did die, he'd probably take her with him.

She didn't care. She'd go willingly.

*Stay with me, Zane. I love you. I need you. Stay with me.*

She repeated the refrain over and over to him. Tapped out Morse code on his hand.

He'd stopped seizing, but there were still slight tremors.

He was still breathing.

She felt his hand move. Opened her eyes to look at it.

Tap. Tap-pause. Tap.

R. Received.



She sat up, breathing in short, painful gasps. His wound wasn't just closed. It was gone as if it had never been there.

He was still pale, but not that terrifying deathly gray.

And he seemed to have gained some new tattoos. She could see the edges of designs at his wrists.

Suddenly wondered if he'd gotten the first set at the bottom of that mine. If they were ever tattoos at all.

Decided she didn't care.

Zane opened his eyes. Still bright blue, but the outer edge had gained a more indigo hue.

"Am I dead?"

"No, not anymore. You nearly pulled it off though."

She pressed her forehead to his shoulder, laughing and sobbing all at once. Relief made her dizzy. Then she drew back, wiped her face, and fixed her hard stare on him, "Of course, now *I'm* going to kill you."

## Chapter 49

“You know Geist’s gonna murder us when he wakes up, right, babe?”

Wraith’s arm was around his waist.

Except for phasing Geist and Kael up to the *Lethe*, she hadn’t let him go. Even when she had her hand on Kael’s cheek while the diagnostic ran, hope and worry running through her.

She rested her head on his shoulder, “Don’t give a Void-damned fuck.”

Shade kissed her hair. “Good. Then we’re aligned.”

And triggered the bombs.

The hill collapsed, dust and rock spewing out of the tunnel like rounds from a black powder shotgun.

He phased them a bit further away.

“Did you save his notes?” she asked him.

He snapped his fingers, “Damn. I knew I forgot something in there.”

The dust was clearing. The hill was gone, leaving a shallow depression instead.

“Oh well, too late.”

She laughed quietly.

“What am I going to do, Zane?”

He knew what she was asking. Had no good answers, but he knew what the right one was.

“You’ve got your Golden Boy back, Ash. Body, heart and soul. What are you going to do? You’re going to be happy. You know, while trying to stop a war and the ones responsible for trying to start it again.”

He squeezed her. “And every so often, you’re going to come and visit me

on Perdition. And we're going to lie on the hill and count stars together. And when you call me, I'll be there instantly. For anything. Every time."

He could feel her grief leaking through the bond. Was careful to limit his own.

"It doesn't seem enough," a whisper.

A truth. A gift.

He wrapped her in his arms, gave her truth in return. "It's never enough. And at the same time, it's so much more than enough. Trust me."

She leaned back just enough to let her slide her hand between them to rest on his heart. "Always."

Time flowed around them, and the sun was setting when they reluctantly stepped back. "I suppose we should check on the patients."

She nodded but didn't move.

"May I see the new tattoos?"

"I don't know, babe, they're pretty sexy. What if you can't control yourself?"

She jabbed her elbow into his ribs.

He shrugged out of his shirt, held his hands out and turned a slow circle. The design wasn't that different. Just extended—further down his arms to his wrists, lower on his chest and now nearly covering half his back instead of just his shoulders.

Her eyes traced them, both her expression and her emotions unreadable.

"So, have they always been—"

"Yeah."

"I can see why you glossed that over. Alien tattoos is kind of a red flag on an intake form."

He shrugged his shoulders and pulled his shirt back on. Decided he could make one, last bad decision.

"Hey Ash?"

"Yeah?"

He stepped forward, threaded his hand through her hair and pulled her to him. Kissed her, slow and deep. Finally stepped back with a rueful half smile and unshed tears in his eyes.

She did too, which made him feel better.

“Come on, let’s get back. I’ll apologize to Sunshine later.”

Her smile broke his heart as she pulled him back towards her, “Just one more minute.”

And kissed him goodbye.

Geist was awake and in the mess when they phased back. He glared at them over the pancakes he was making, looking like he’d aged ten years.

“You blew it up.”

Wraith opened her eyes wide, “It just collapsed, G, we were lucky it happened after we got you out and we’d moved the *Lethe* to orbit.”

“Sure. And the artifact?”

She glanced at Shade, “Melted.”

Geist turned to her, “Melted?”

She let him feel the truth of her words, even if they didn’t tell the full story. “Melted.”

He shook his head, “How does a rock melt?”

“Rocks don’t generally communicate either, G. Let’s just agree it was a weird rock and move on.”

Shade let go of her hand and wrapped himself around Geist, “And what happened to you, Poltergeist?”

He hesitated, flipped another perfect pancake onto the waiting plate. Plain circles this time. “There wasn’t enough power left in the artifact to open the gate again. I may have helped, a little.”

Wraith stood staring, mouth open. Shade had twisted around, still holding onto Geist, to look him in the face.

“You fed an ancient, alien artifact your life force? Are you out of your Void-damned mind?” Shade only said it before her because she was so fucking shocked.

“I’d have let it drain me dry to get you home. Now let me go, or these will burn.”

Wraith collapsed in a chair, anger and relief tangling so tightly she couldn’t tell them apart. “I don’t know how many more of these heroic, suicidal

tendencies I can cope with. Also, thank you, Zahir. For our lives.”

Shade kissed his cheek and sat next to her, “What she said.”

“I still don’t know what happened to Spirit. But I’ll keep looking. And we got Helios back.”

“No,” Wraith corrected, “We got Kael back. The thing possessing him decided it liked the name Helios. We won’t be using it anymore.”

“Guess we can break out his shiny new call sign then,” Shade said with a sly smile.

She raised an eyebrow, “Dare I even ask?”

“Revenant.” Geist’s voice was quiet. Firm.

“You’re making him a Ghost.” It wasn’t a question, but Geist answered anyway. “He already is, Ash. No making required.”

He set the pancakes down in the center of the table.

“Eat. Then I need to talk to you alone.”

“You know I’ll just tell Zane whatever you say, right?”

“Yes, but this way I have a better chance of him getting me to MedBay first.”

## Chapter 50

“Why the bridge?”

Geist sat in the nav chair, looking surprisingly comfortable. Despite knowing he was an expert pilot, despite having flown with him through the Fold for years, it always seemed to surprise her.

He looked like a bureaucrat.

It was a disguise he cultivated because it hid exactly how deadly he was. In every sense of the word.

Wraith looked out at the stars.

“Someone once told me that sometimes when you have to stab someone in the back, it’s nice to look at the stars and pretend that nothing’s changing.” She glanced back at him, “You almost died for us, I thought I’d give you the option.”

He turned to look at out at them. Twinkling lights across the endless night.

Then he turned back to her, because that was who he was. He’d look her in the eye and say his piece, then accept the consequences because he’d weighed everything and decided on the appropriate route.

“You never did go for the easy option,” she murmured.

“Oh, I have. All too often, even when it mattered.” He looked down at his hands, back up at her, “These days when it matters, I try to choose the right route, not the expedient one.”

“Okay. Will me knowing change anything?”

He tilted his head, pondering it. “Only how you see me.”

“I see you as the man who was willing to die yesterday to make sure we lived. Whatever else you did, it won’t change that simple fact. Which means I don’t

need to hear it, unless you need to say it.”

She could see him hesitating. Caught between want and need, but she didn’t know which was which.

Finally, he held out a hand to her. She took it in both of hers and waited.

“Do you know the full details of that last battle?”

Wraith’s stomach twisted as memories hit.

“Not really, no. My Wasp clipped debris so I couldn’t Tunnel, so I figured I’d go out heroically and kill the Leviathan. Shot my last missile into its heart, metaphorically speaking, and got the hell out of there.”

She sighed, remembering, “The Leviathan went boom and I got hit with an EMP, but I was alive. Then the secondary explosion hit and I woke up in a cell with a voice telling me I had been found guilty of treason and would die there.”

The voice had belonged to Chad, SID’s director of terrible research and more recently: corpse.

“Then when Kael and I took out your Research Black Site problem,” she gave Geist a pointed look, “Chad said something about Kael’s brother being the one that triggered the explosion. So who the fuck knows.”

Geist closed his eyes. “*I* know. I didn’t at the time, not everything. But I found out, later.”

There was a lot of ambiguity in his use of the words: *not everything*.

“Let’s start with the worst. My betrayal to you.” He met her gaze, tired and unflinching.

“I knew they’d been talking about using the Void bombs, about how to use them. I didn’t know they’d loaded our Wasps with them that day. At least, not until I got the same orders you did.”

Wraith’s hands started shaking. She didn’t know how to stop them.

“You didn’t say anything. Were you... were you going to follow them?”

He shrugged, shame leaking through the bond she’d thought was closed.

“I don’t know. I’d love to say no, but I’ll never be sure. I was hyperventilating in my Wasp when you told us to Tunnel. And then you had that crazy plan that just might work. I should have told you I got the orders too. Told everyone. But I stayed silent.”

"You said it was one way to end the war," Wraith knew her voice was horrified. Wished it wasn't.

"And as Shade so rightly pointed out, it would have been a disaster. Destroyed part of the Galaxy and all of us, *our family*, with it. Between the two of you, I was able to move past the orders, past that dangerous ideal of the *Greater Good*. Thank you."

She couldn't speak. Couldn't move. Even though part of her wanted to run—to escape more truths she didn't want to hear.

But at least her hands had stopped shaking.

"Then you died. I don't know if it was the EMP or the explosion or if you actually did die for a few minutes, but we lost you."

"Shade told me about the rendezvous," she murmured.

"Yes. We went our separate ways. Spirit disappeared. Phantom took the fight to the Others. Spook turned her back on SID and became a merc. And Shade tried to kill himself with an in-atmo Tunnel. And then in more creative ways over the years."

"He told me, said you kept him alive."

Geist jerked a shoulder. "Maybe. I threw myself into SID. I needed to know what had happened. Who had given the order. Why. And the more I dug, the more I found. The more I found, the deeper I buried myself. And one day I will burn it all to the ground."

He was actually growling; the most emotional she'd ever seen him while sober.

"But back to the battle. There was, *is* a section of the High Council that exists in the shadows. Consolidates political power. The war had dragged on too long, so they allowed a plan conceived by a certain Colonel Brandt and the Void Research Director to be executed if the right conditions presented themselves."

Wraith searched her memory, heard Chad's cold voice again on the All-Channel Comm. "Moirai positions. Kerberos lock. And Typhon Protocol. I heard it on the comm."

"Geist nodded. Three ships carried neutron bombs. Moirai positions were the co-ords triangulated for maximum devastation. Kerberos lock was the



final pre-authorization. Once triggered, there would be no escape. For anyone.”

“And Typhon Protocol?”

“That was us, with the Void bombs. The *Onyx*, the *Obsidian*, and the *Ebony*—terribly clichéd names—were the backup plan. The fail safe. They *shouldn’t* have been triggered after you took out the Leviathan.”

“No one told them to stand down?”

“Worse. The final auth happened *after* the Leviathan exploded.”

“Kael’s brother was on the *Onyx*.”

Geist nodded. “I can’t tell you who on the ships knew what their mission was. If they did at all. After five years of research, the odds suggest they didn’t.”

It was a lot to take in.

Wraith swallowed hard. She’d have to tell Kael—when he woke up.

“Okay, anything else?”

Geist looked down at their hands, as if surprised she was still holding them.

“Yes. We didn’t actually genetically modify you. Or anyone else on Ghost Command, for that matter.”

Her mouth went dry as another foundation cracked. It felt like if she moved, she’d shatter.

“Should I be relieved or concerned?”

Geist shook his head regretfully.

“Take your pick. I can tell you that genetic modification wasn’t working. But I had a hunch on what might make the Fold survivable.” He glanced out to the stars, back to her, “I hand selected you and Zane. And the others. You were exceptional candidates, yes, but there was another far more compelling reason.”

Wraith closed her eyes.

“We’d been exposed to the Anchors and survived.”

Geist nodded, “Exactly.”

“And so had you?”

“No, but I’d spent a lot of time with the artifact. I was one of the few who

could. I wasn't expecting it to give me the ability to survive and navigate the Fold, but it turned out to be true regardless."

"So we weren't created. We were just... compatible." Her voice sounded strange, hollowed out.

"Correct. Not modified. Just marked."

Wraith squeezed his hands, let go of them and stood.

"There is a... lot to take in there, Geist."

She was pale.

"I know."

"I still love you. You're still the man who would have sacrificed himself for us. For Spirit too, even though he's gone. But I'm also going to need some processing time."

"As much as you need. Even if it's forever."

She huffed out a breath, "Probably not quite that long, Poltergeist."

And she left the bridge. Leaving him staring at the stars and wondering why, if he had no wounds, he still felt like he was bleeding.

## Chapter 51

“Still no change?”

Shade walked into MedBay, laid a hand on Wraith’s shoulder as she sat next to Kael.

“Nope. The MedDoc says he’s fine, it just can’t wake him up. You’d think a three-day nap would be enough.”

He shifted slightly to rub her neck, and was grateful she stifled the moan. “I could sing to him?”

She burst out laughing, “We’re trying to heal him, Shade, not damage him further.”

“Hey, I have a lovely voice. So do you. Or have you forgotten karaoke night on—”

“I thought we agreed never to talk about that again.”

“But we didn’t agree not to *sing* about it...”

She giggled. Not something she did often, and he was proud of himself for it. “Don’t you fucking dare.”

He shifted his hands to the sides, dug his thumbs into taut muscles, “Tell you what, you let me sing and I’ll keep massaging your shoulders.”

She stayed silent a minute, either considering the offer or just enjoying the neck and shoulder rub.

“Counteroffer, you keep massaging *without* singing for, oh, the next two or three hours, and I don’t crush your windpipe.”

He considered it. “Deal. But I get a future favor.”

“Ugh, fine. But I get veto rights.”

“Only always, babe, only always.”

There was laughter near him. Laughter, love, and... threats of violence?

Kael opened his eyes. He was in MedBay on the *Lethe*.

Wraith was sitting next to him on a chair, threatening Shade who was rubbing her shoulders. He, in turn, seemed to be threatening to sing.

Maybe he was in hell.

He blinked and he could see the bond between them, so bold and bright and true. He could see that the connections that flowed from each of them to him were different. Thinner. Softer.

Wraith's like woven silk, Shade's like braided smoke.

And he could see the bonds that reached out from them and out of sight, stretching into the universe. Four of them.

For four more Ghosts.

He blinked again and he could see the Void. It's presence completely suffused him, no physical boundary in place.

It had claimed him as its own and he wasn't sure where he ended and it began.

With Shade, it wrapped itself around him, upper body and arms. The edges of the tattoos he could see at Shade's neck and hands seemed to glow with it.

And Wraith. A channel, a conduit. But not a repository.

He closed his eyes.

Things had shifted between them. Between all of them, Void included.

He had died and been reborn. Twice. Was almost certain Shade had died at least once.

He remembered Wraith taking his offered bond, remembered Shade's voice in his head: *Don't worry, Sunshine, I've got you.*

They were all bonded together now.

Something to think about.

He reached out a hand, reopened his eyes. Met Wraith's gray ones, even as he saw Shade step back smartly.

"Hey you," he told her.

She grabbed his hand. "Hey back."

In the corner of his eye he could see Shade at the door. "Good to have you back, Sunshine," he said, and blew him a kiss. Then disappeared around the

corner and out of sight.

Wraith bit her lip. Kael was just watching her; looking at her like she was the center of the galaxy.

Like he *knew* her, all of her, and wasn't afraid.

He probably should be.

And he *didn't* know her, not yet. But with time, maybe they could get there.

"I don't know whether to kiss you or punch you," she admitted.

His smile widened, "We're already in MedBay. Why not do both?"

Which was enough to have her dissolving into tears. Again.

*Damn it!*

She swore once he was back on his feet, she was giving up crying for fucking good.

He stroked her hair softly.

"Bad month?"

He didn't mean it as funny, but she laughed anyway. "Well let's see, my already Void-possessed boyfriend touches an ancient artifact and gets possessed by *another* entity. Then gets kidnapped and disappears without a fucking trace."

She punched him in the leg.

"Then, I discover Geist is not only alive, but he's GEO from fucking SID."

Kael's eyebrows shot up, but he said nothing.

"Shade and I go to visit him in his super secret lair and he makes us fucking pancakes. Really good pancakes I might add. And then Ed—you remember Ed?—he calls and says that the Void God has returned and can we please save him before he pledges allegiance to your unholy ass.

"So, we save Ed, find Sôterion, find you, and you flip me off like we were an entertaining diversion that you lost interest in."

He winced.

"At the same time, Shade is bleeding from his eyeballs, a blink away from death and the Void and the Choir are having a shouting match over who gets his soul and Spook has to help me drag him back from the edge of oblivion."

She hit him again, in the stomach this time. The oof settled her nerves.

“At this point I’ve had about seven nervous breakdowns and the only thing that stopped me from rampaging all over the galaxy is Zane.

“Then Geist *phases* into the *Lethe*, with the fucking artifact that possessed you, and says *Hey, the space rock says we can rescue you*. And off we go. Geist almost died, Shade *did* die, briefly. And we managed to drag your unconscious ass across the galaxy in a single step.”

She turned to face him, “So, did I have a bad month? No, it was lovely, thanks for asking.”

“You’re amazing, you know that?” Wraith looked at him like he was mad. And maybe he was. He could live with it.

“You came for me. Twice. Beat the shit out of me, well, my body, once. And you’ve sat here with me, not knowing if or when I’m going to wake up, and who I’ll be when I do.”

He shook his head, awed by it.

“I’ve never meant that much to anyone, Ash. And I say that as someone who annihilated several thousand literal worshipers.” His voice shook at the last. She reached up and put her hand on his cheek, “Not you. Never you.”

“I remember it as if it were me. Even as I was screaming at myself to wake up.”

She stood and kissed him then. Not with passion.

But with comfort. Connection.

He threaded his fingers through her hair and reacquainted himself with her mouth. It was like kissing her for the first time back on Perdition, only this time, *he* needed the comfort.

And he pulled away, not because he wanted to, but because he was carrying truths he couldn’t yet put into words. Besides, regardless of where they were headed or where they ended up, right now it felt like they were back at the beginning.

And there was a big, Chaos Demon-shaped elephant in the room.

“Any chance we can head to the mess? You don’t even want to know what

those glass bird things taste like.”

She laughed and helped him up. He was surprisingly unsteady, almost like he’d forgotten how to move his own body.

She put her arm around his waist, shrugged her shoulder under his armpit. “Come on, Major. Let’s get you fed.”

## Chapter 52

Wraith could smell Shade's chili even before they'd stepped out of MedBay.

Kael turned to her as they made their way down the hall, "He cooks?"

"Usually very badly, but his chili mostly makes up for it."

"I heard that," Shade's voice floated out of the mess.

She raised her voice, even though they were just outside the door. "If you put ghost peppers in this batch I'm tossing you out the airlock."

They rounded the door. She didn't even want to think about where Shade had found a frilly pink apron. She *hoped* he'd phased out to get it. It disturbed even her that he might have had it in his bag the whole time.

"Not this time, babe. Thought you might enjoy *not* sleeping in a chair in MedBay tonight, and besides, it wouldn't be sporting to put Sunshine back there immediately."

Kael was looking at the apron. He leaned in to whisper, "Do I—"

"No," she hissed back. "No you don't."

She helped him onto the bench, hesitated, then chose the chair next to him, rather than sitting on the bench with him.

Kael didn't look upset. In fact, he just smiled and nodded at her as if he understood. Which was honestly more confusing than anything else.

Shade served them, but without his usual dramatic flair.

Kael ate like a man who had been starved. He was on his fourth bowl when Shade stage-whispered: "I don't think he likes my chili, he's barely touched it."

Wraith winked, "Well it is inedible, babe."

They'd hooked feet under the table. No decision making involved. Wraith



wondered if she should pull her foot back, caught the resonance of Shade thinking the same thing.

“You guys okay?”

*Of course Kael noticed.*

“Yeah. Just figuring out dynamics.”

Shade stood, kissed her on the forehead automatically, then smoothly leaned over and did the same to Kael.

“I’ll be in the gym. Or my bunk. Or possibly Perdition. Will see you later.”

*Oh no, no way.*

“Z?”

He turned back, Shade grin firmly in place.

*Don’t you fucking **dare** phase out of here and leave me alone to deal with this.*

*She hadn’t reached. Hadn’t needed to.*

*That was new.*

Aloud she said, “You’re still on clean up duty. You lost the bet, remember?”

Shade rolled his eyes and stepped back in. “Well then, I hope Sunshine can regale us with fantastical tales. Such as how the Children managed to predict your *Becoming* so accurately. Now, I get visions, mostly after drinking Void-infused whiskey, but they’re glimpses of possibility. This was a full-on fulfillment of fucking prophesy.”

He stopped a foot from the table and posed, “Also, neither of you commented on how fabulous my apron is.”

“Stunning.”

Kael kept his voice dry as dust, and both Shade and Wraith snorted. He still wasn’t quite himself, or maybe who he was now hadn’t quite settled. Either way he could almost feel the emotions flying around the room.

Just as he was certain Wraith had spoken directly to Shade’s mind. Probably to stop him leaving.

Back on Perdition, he’d been threatened by their connection. By their history. Now it felt different; strong and tempered, forged in fire.

It should have intimidated him.

For the life of him he couldn't explain why it felt like home.

*I've got you, Sunshine. | You are my fucking choice!*

Okay, yes, maybe he could explain it.

He was part of it, not as entangled, not as... conflicted. But part of it.

Shade reached over the table and grabbed his empty bowl.

"You know, Kael, I'm only doing the dishes because Wraith asked me with her murder-eyes."

"Good to know it's actually possible to threaten you."

Shade's laugh boomed—a real one this time. "I do like you, Sunshine."

"As you should. And I think I might have an idea about the cult's beliefs at least."

Wraith turned to him, "Really?"

"Yeah. When I was... Dikaaios, I could see some of his memories. He'd been to Sôterion before. Long enough ago for the stars to have changed position. Possessed someone before. But he also indulged in the human experience."

"Meaning?" Wraith asked.

"Feasting, fighting and fucking," Shade called out from the sink.

"Yeah, pretty much. Now, he killed pretty much everyone back then, but there were some survivors. There always are."

He looked down at the table.

"The cult had some very old books. Ones that had been copied and recopied over the years. I had a pretty lousy childhood, and I got to know those stories intimately. They matched up with the memories."

They were both watching him now. Listening.

"So, I think that the stories of his first *visit* were kept alive. Became myth, then legend, then religion. And when we, humanity, found the Fold? They decided it meant that their god would return. I just drew the short straw."

It wasn't the whole truth, but it was what he could back up with hard data. The full truth was based on instinct, was much more complicated and, if he were honest, certifiably insane. He wasn't ready to tell them about it yet.

Wraith reached over and squeezed his bicep.

“Kind of a weird month for you, huh?”

His lip twitched, “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Dinner had wound down soon after. But now, hours later, Kael lay on his bunk wide awake and staring at the ceiling.

Wraith was on the bridge. Shade was in the gym.

He knew it as surely as he knew where he was. Just as he remembered how **Helios** had stepped between the stars. His pulse hammered, almost panicked. It had been scary as fuck and there was no way he was trying it again.

Even though it felt like he *could*.

It was clear he wasn’t going to sleep, which begged the question: should he go and talk to Shade first... or Wraith?

Shade looked up when Kael walked into the gym. Well, technically he looked down because he was playing with the more malleable of the laws of physics at the time.

But the point stood.

He pushed to his feet, didn’t quite meet Kael’s eyes.

“Come to dance, Sunshine?”

“Tempting, but no. Not up for it just yet.”

Shade sighed, deep and theatrical. “No one wants to play with me.”

“I’m sorry about your acolytes.”

Pain rose, crested, and subsided, “Yeah, me too.”

“Will you start over?”

And there it was. The ten million credit question.

Not *will you rebuild?*

Just: *when are you leaving?*

“The cult was kind of an accident, and has been at least temporarily disbanded. And the last few weeks have been kind of intense. So, I don’t know, Sunshine. I haven’t decided yet.”

“Good answer.”

The man was serious. That was... unexpected.

To buy time Shade flipped backward and landed on his hands. Pushed up to balance on just his fingertips. Jumped back to his feet.

“Hey, do you want to know your new call sign?”

“Is it Sunshine?”

“You’ll always be Sunshine to me. But no. You’re a Ghost now, Kael. One way or another. You’re Revenant.”

## Chapter 53

Kael walked onto the bridge, still contemplating Shade's words.

Revenant.

It fit. It felt right. And that scared the hell out of him.

So did she.

"May I join you?"

Wraith glanced his way, "Sure."

She was flying manually, even though there was little point in it. You couldn't even feel it, but maybe she could.

He sat in the nav chair as she switched back to auto and turned to face him.

"The last person who sat in that chair dropped a veritable freighter's worth of difficult truths on me."

"Shade?"

"Geist."

That's right, she'd said he'd been here. Also...

"And did I hear you say that Geist was GEO?"

"Yep. The Ghost who's pulling a lot of SID's strings. Almost ironic."

"Did he abandon you in that cell?" Kael's tone was furious and it made her inexplicably happy.

"No. I asked that as well. He got me out, through you."

Kael unclenched his fists and his jaw. Wraith wondered if he knew how often he did the jaw thing, and what a big tell it was.

"You look very serious, what did you want to talk about?"

He tilted his head downwards, out the door. "The Chaos Demon."

*Oh fuck. I am not ready for this.*

"Okay."

"You're jumpy with each other. With me. And you don't have to be, I know what you are to each other."

She managed to hold his gaze for five heartbeats before she looked out at the stars.

"There are some things you should probably know about before you commit to that statement."

Wraith's tone was flat, her gaze out on the stars. Kael reached over and laid a hand on her knee.

Waited.

"When you were... gone... I leaned on Shade. A lot. He kept me from breaking. And for the first time since before Ghost Command, maybe the first time ever, I actually saw him. Bothered looking rather than just accepting and taking him for granted."

She wiped a tear away, the movement irritated as if the tear had offended her.

"And eventually, I kissed him. It didn't go further, but if Geist hadn't interrupted with his GEO bullshit comms, it would have. I wanted it to, and was really pissed off at Geist about it."

She turned to meet his eyes. Not asking for forgiveness or understanding. Not trying to push him away or beg absolution.

But because the person Ash was wouldn't let her stay silent on it.

It was important enough that he hear it. That he be able to make his own decisions, even after everything. Maybe especially after everything.

"When?" he asked softly.

"After Sôterion."

He nodded, squeezed her knee. "You mean after I mentally and emotionally eviscerated you?"

She raised a shoulder slightly. "Yeah... Was that you, by the way?"

“Not so much, no.”

There was relief in the set of her shoulders. He and **Helios** had hurt her when he’d cut the bond. Badly.”

“Show me?”

It was a big ask. And if it hadn’t been so important to her that he understand it, he wouldn’t have.

She didn’t hesitate, just swallowed and opened her memories to him. The grief, the pain. The desperate need to feel something other than despair with someone who understood. Who’d let her break and still be there afterwards.

Kael reached over and pulled her into his lap, smiling at her surprised squeak. Held her tight and kissed her hair, tears on his cheeks.

“I’m so sorry.”

She leaned into him, still stiff. “Not the reaction I was expecting.”

“Is that why Zane’s been glancing guiltily at me when he thinks I’m not looking?”

He could feel the ghost of a smile. “Probably. That and the other kiss, but that was more of a goodbye.”

“A goodbye?”

“Yeah. You’re still my fucking choice, Kael.”

His heart leapt as warmth suffused him. She tried to move, but he held her tight. Whispered into her hair.

“You didn’t betray me, Ash. And I am so damn glad you had Shade with you. That you had him to lean on.”

“Are you sure? Because it’s killing me that I had to choose.”

For a split second, insecurity flooded him and anger threatened, but Kael shoved it down. That wasn’t who he wanted to be anymore.

Besides... “Ash, is there anyone else you would have let yourself fully grieve with? Anyone else you would have let hold you? Let you break if you needed to and be there to put you back together? Is there anyone else you *could* have loved enough, trusted enough to be there with you?”

Her shoulders shook although she didn’t make a sound. He held her until they stopped. Wiped the tears he used to think she wasn’t capable of off her cheeks. They sat like that for a long moment, the hum of the engines the only

sound between them.

Finally, Kael set her gently aside and stood.

“Come on,” he told her. “We need to talk to Shade.”

Shade was still in the gym, still practicing the sort of gymnastics that would earn him a place in any of the top acts around the Confederation.

He stood as they entered, looked at Wraith and Kael could feel the effort it took for him to remain in place.

It was almost funny. Mostly heartbreaking.

Kael looked between them.

In many ways he was less than he'd been with **Helios**, but still so much more than he had been before. He understood—so much more.

“You’re both carrying a lot of misplaced guilt around for being there for each other when you needed each other. For loving each other. It’s irritating.”

He stepped towards Shade, who eyed him warily.

“But I do have an idea of what we can do to balance the scales a bit.”

And he leaned in and kissed Shade. A proper kiss too, full but brief.

He felt Wraith’s shock shift to amusement; Shade’s shift to interest as he stood back.

“There, now we’re all even.”

He turned his back on Shade and slung an arm over Wraith’s shoulders.

“Come back for seconds anytime, Sunshine,” Shade called after him as he led Wraith back out. Kael didn’t need to look back to know he was still standing there, caught between laughter and grief.

“Now, I’m not saying we invite him into our sex life, but I figure there are already three of us in this relationship—” he tapped his temple, indicating the Void “—I think we can manage one more, at least as far as tactical cuddles go.”

She was grinning at him, “Hey Kael?”

“Yeah?”

“I love you.”



Kael stopped. Stared at her for a heartbeat.

Then her back was against the wall and his mouth was devouring hers like he needed her to breath.

In her head, his voice was warm, welcome, and clear as a bell, "*I love you too. Ashley Erin Raine.*"

## Epilogue

Geist sat in the low light of his private MedBay, as he had every night since returning from their ill-advised—but successful—rescue of Helios.

No, of Revenant.

Helios was dead and gone, and they'd all come back irrevocably changed. He wondered whether anyone but Revenant realized it yet.

He'd gone to see Spook, as requested.

His ribs still ached, but after she'd hit him a few times, they'd had a drink. Then a few more. It had been a good reunion. One long overdue.

"She's grown up a lot," he said out loud. "Still hits like a freighter at full speed. But matured. Found her place."

He shrugged and squeezed the hand he held in his. So fragile now. Too still.

"Who'd have thought it would be in the most notorious merc den this side of the galaxy? Also, she won't return Ed. I've had to redact his records."

He paused for a long time, listening to the two heartbeats in the room.

"I... reached out to Phantom too. Now, the whole team knows I'm alive. Knows I'm complicit, maybe even responsible for so much of the pain they've been through."

He swallowed the guilt that threatened to overwhelm him.

"Phantom wasn't impressed, but he's agreed to meet. Eventually."

Geist sighed.

"Wraith hasn't forgiven me yet, either. She takes betrayal to heart, and I betrayed her worst of all for letting her think she was alone."

Silence reclaimed the room and he closed his eyes. Let the tears he'd never show slowly trace down his face.

## EPILOGUE

“Zahir,” it was a whisper, barely audible. Geist whipped his head around to stare at the man in the bed. Who looked the same. Eyes closed. Monitors showing unchanged vitals.

*Great, now I’m hearing things.*

He rubbed a hand over his eyes. He was so Void-damned tired.

There was an increase in pressure on his other hand. Not enough to be a squeeze—but he *hadn’t* imagined it.

“Spirit?” he whispered.

The voice that *reached* into his head was quiet, distinct, and amused; and for the first time in years, Geist forgot to breathe.

*Hey Zahir. Shining One. Still taking responsibility for everyone else? I’d hoped you’d have learned better by now.*



## IV

### The Ask Short Story



## Author's Intro

Normally I'd get Shade to write the intro to any extras, but the further I got into this book, the more I realized that I needed to add a story about what happens after.

Now, some books you write.

Some books write themselves.

And some books write you.

This book was one of those.

Shade was never meant to be as important as he turned out to be, but without him, without what he meant to Wraith, what he went through in the mines, without everything, this book wouldn't exist. In fact, the rest of the series couldn't happen.

Shade's existence is lonely. Has always been lonely, except when he was with Ash. And he needs to be chosen for once rather than left behind.

Not as a weapon. Not as a Cult leader. As... himself.

I had no intention to stray into reverse harem territory for this series.

Wraith had other ideas.

So, I have included one extra story.

This is canon. Though if reverse harems aren't your particular brand of Void whiskey, feel free to ignore the implied sex.

The emotions are what's important. They always have been.

This short story exists because there is no #TeamKael and #TeamShade.

Because Wraith doesn't have to choose between them.

Which gives her the freedom and ability to choose *both*.

# The Ask

*A few weeks later*

Shade wondered if Ash and Kael knew how much feedback he got from them when they were... enjoying each other.

He leaned his head back against the plasteel wall and let the sensations roll through him.

He'd tried ignoring them. Tried blocking them.

And seeing as neither had worked, he figured he may as well enjoy it.

Secondhand sex wasn't quite as good as the real thing, but it would do in a pinch.

Although voyeurism wasn't really his thing.

Exhibitionism, sure.

But if he hadn't felt the edges of Ash *reaching* for him in the center of everything, he would have phased out and gone to visit Geist.

He doubted she realized she was doing it. Had no clue what it meant.

The waves crashed over and through him; finally receded. Leaving him shaky and unsatisfied.

He phased to the gym, not wanting to chance running into them in the hall. Tried to work out the excess energy and tension on a punching bag with only marginal success.

Eventually, he just rested his head against the bag. Breathed in sweat and pain and blood, which on inspection came from his knuckles.

"Did it help?"

He hadn't heard Ash come in.



“Not really. I think I’m going to duck out for a bit. Give you two some alone time.”

“You’re going to phase?”

He looked up at her, standing near the door. She was wearing sweatpants and a sleeveless tank top and looking loose and satisfied.

He phased in next to her. She didn’t jump, which was irritating.

“Long distance phasing is not without its side effects, but I don’t think that I can stay here.”

She cocked her head, “Why not?”

“Because I get caught up in the feedback loop.”

Realization dawned and a slow blush claimed Ash’s cheeks.

“I can’t block it,” he admitted. “I did try.”

“I’d wondered after your... comments the other day.”

“That was mostly messing with your boyfriend.”

She raised an eyebrow, “So you didn’t get the juicy details?”

He gave a mock shudder, “Voyeurism is more Geist’s thing than mine. Although he still calls it *surveillance*.”

She laughed, low and easy. Then she put her hand on his cheek, met his eyes. “I won’t stop you if you want to go. But I actually came down here to ask you if you wanted to cuddle. Kael’s taking first watch. And he thinks we need to talk.”

“You want to take me to bed, babe?” The look he gave her was provocative, deliberately scandalous. Except she didn’t flinch. Didn’t back away. Just waited with a small, expectant smile on her face.

“You don’t know what you’re asking, Ashley,” Zane told her.

She stepped forward, into his space. Touched her forehead to his, laid her free hand on his heart.

“Yeah, Zane, I do.”

Wraith held Zane’s hand as she led him to her quarters. The ones she now shared with Kael.

That felt... odd. Not wrong, but odd.

Kael was still with her, his presence calming. If she let herself, she could see the stars of space through his eyes as he sat in the bridge. Could feel his relaxed contentment.

She could have pushed him out. Could have done this alone. But that wasn't the point.

The point was that they *were* connected. All of them. Including the Void-damned Void. Which seemed pretty fucking smug now that she thought on it.

The problem was that one point on the constellation was an outlier. An outcast. By situation, by reluctant choice, maybe even by design.

But a stable pyramid has four points. All in balance. And if they didn't all want to descend into madness, they had better figure out how to get to that balance ASAP.

It was funny that Kael was so much more relaxed about it than her. Pre-**Helios**, she was sure he wouldn't have been.

There was a wry nod of agreement in her head as he heard her thought.

*Your call how far you push it, Ash.* His voice was a whisper. *Love you.*

*Love you too,* she told him, and his presence faded to the periphery. Zane's surged to the forefront.

Discomfit. Apprehension. And so much damn loneliness she couldn't bear it.

She turned to him as they stepped into her room and the door slid shut behind them. Pressed her hand back to his heart.

"How long?"

A wry and almost lazy eyebrow rose as Shade took center stage. "How long what, babe?"

"How long have you been this lonely? This fucking isolated?"

Shade drained out of his eyes and Zane—the Zane she'd first met nearly two decades before—stared back at her. She hadn't seen then, how broken he was. But she saw it now.

He covered her hand with his. Broke her heart with truth.

"Since my soul became a Ghost and fell in love with a Phantom."

He'd called her his soul before. Just as he was hers. Had always been hers.

And it was true in a way that not Phantom or even Kael would ever, could ever understand.

And suddenly what she had to do was easy. She smiled at him.

"You told me at some point on this Void-damned journey that we were never made for each other in a romantic way. You were right, but only in part."

He didn't look at her, stared down to where their hands still rested against his heart, which jumped unsteadily beneath her palm. She could feel resignation from him. And a deliberate numbness against the pain he was sure was coming.

She bent to the side and twisted her head so she could see his eyes, "We were never made *only* for each other, Zane."

He shifted to look at her, confusion drawing his brows together.

Her own heart was thudding against her chest, but not in fear. She lifted her free hand to cup his cheek, leaned forward and kissed him.

Gently, but in a way that left no doubt that this *was* an invitation.

Zane yanked his head back, "Kael—" he started.

She didn't *reach* for him, but she opened the bond wide enough that he could feel her certainty. And beyond that, Kael's calm acceptance. Even his invitation.

"Is here." She touched her head, her heart, and then his.

"Now shut up and kiss me before I have to stab you just to end this conversation."

"With what?" Shade asked, examining the knife that had been sheathed on her leg a second before.

"Cute." She grabbed for the blade, but he held it out of reach.

His eyes were troubled when they shifted from the blade to hers, dropped to her mouth, back up again, "No going back after this."

She nodded, blood already aflame.

"I think forward's better, don't you?"

When Kael walked into their quarters a couple of hours later, both Wraith and Shade were passed out on the bunk. Wraith's head resting on Shade's shoulder, his arm tight around her. Curled together, protecting each other

against a universe that would never bother to understand them.

He smiled down at them.

Judging by the debris, none of their clothes had survived the experience intact. Knife play as foreplay—he wasn't sure if he was aroused or concerned.

Callsign: Helios would have been jealous, he reflected. Furious. But then, that version of him didn't have the capacity to love the way that he needed to.

He wasn't that person anymore.

He was Kael.

He was Revenant.

And Ash had taught him to love without boundaries. Without measure. And with a certain amount of appropriate violence.

He pulled off his shirt and carefully slid onto the bunk beside her. Wrapped himself around her and Shade both.

He kissed Ash's hair, letting himself breathe her in.

This new paradigm would take some getting used to.

But it felt necessary.

And more than that? It felt right.

*Sleep well*, he whispered to both of them in his head. And let their nearness lull him to sleep while the Void hummed lullabies in his bones.

V

BONUS EXTRAS



## Shade's Fun Extras Intro

You've reached the bonus section of *Conditional Release*.

Congratulations!

You survived emotional devastation, cult logic, the Void, and Kael's morals. That last one's the real miracle, I mean, who has those?

What follows is a curated collection of chaos.

Not the strategic kind Geist likes.

Not the prophetic kind Ash summons (whether she wants to or not).

No. This is *my* chaos.

These are the moments that didn't make it into the main narrative because the galaxy wasn't ready. You, however, clearly *are*. Or you've given up trying to understand the tone of this series. Either works.

So.

Pour a drink.

Light a candle.

Tell no one you read this. Especially Geist.

And remember:

just because it's classified doesn't mean it can't be funny.

See you in the footnotes,

—**Shade**

(*Cult Leader, Tactical Disaster, Emotional Support Liability*)

P.S.

If you brought this book into SID headquarters, please return it to your nearest ethics officer. After you finish laughing.

**P.P.S.**

The opinions expressed in the following pages do not reflect the official stance of Ghost Command, the Strategic Intelligence Division, or any sane military agency past, present, or hypothetical.

Some of these documents were never meant to be declassified.

Several were *explicitly* meant to be burned.

At least one was scrawled in Void ink on the back of a tactical napkin and still carries a mild hallucinogenic risk.

**Reader discretion is advised.**

Emotional preparedness is not assumed.

And if you begin to hear Shade's voice in your head?

You are *not alone*.

Seek tea. Or therapy. Preferably both. Preferably far away from him.

Proceed only if you understand that the line between tragedy and comedy has long since collapsed and we're dancing in the ashes.

—**Geist**

*(Acting Intelligence Director, Ghost Command. Against my better judgment.)*



# Transcript: Unexpected Cargo

**Lethe | Mid-cycle | Transcript: Internal Audio Log 3.17 – [Unintentionally Archived]**

**Participants:** WRAITH (Ashley Raine), REVENANT (Kael Veyne)

**Context:** Unpackaging cargo. One very cursed item included.

**WRAITH**

*(Opening crate)*

Okay, we got supplies, ammo, med kits—

*(Pauses)*

What the actual Void-damned fuck is this?

**KAEL**

*(Peering over her shoulder)*

Are those... dice?

And why are they glowing?

**WRAITH**

*(reading)*

One side says “Fold Restraints.” The other one says “Pinned Against Bulkhead.”

Kael.

Did you order sex dice?

**KAEL**

What?! No!

*(beat)*

...I mean, not *those* dice.

**WRAITH**

Void take me. There's a note.

*(reads)*

"For my two favorite disasters. While I'm rounding up cultists, you can let the Void decide who ends up on top. Yours in eternal chaos, Shade.

*P.S. Don't ask me how I got your shipping address. The Void provides."*

**KAEL**

Of course.

I'm burning them.

**WRAITH**

Too late. I rolled.

**KAEL**

You what?

**WRAITH**

Says “Bridge Console” and “Emotional Honesty.”  
What do you suppose that means?

**KAEL**

*(panicked silence)*

**WRAITH**

Because if it means you confess something while I have you pinned over the nav console, I’m open to that interpretation.

**KAEL**

*(Audible internal screaming)*

We are not letting Shade gamify our sex life.

**WRAITH**

Why not? He’s already narrating it.

*(pause)*

What do you think he’d roll?

**KAEL**

Something criminal.

Probably “Weaponized Guilt” and “Aftercare.”

**WRAITH**

You say that like it’s a *bad* thing.

**KAEL**

Ash.

**WRAITH**

Kael.

**KAEL**

*(beat)*

...Roll them again.

**WRAITH**

*(Smiling)*

That's what I thought.

**DICE**

*click-clack-clack...*

**BOTH READ ALOUD:**

“Low Lighting” and “Neck Biting.”

*(Beat of silence)*

**WRAITH**

Well. Seems the Void has spoken.

**KAEL**

*(Exhales)*

I hate him.

**WRAITH**

You love him.

*(Pulls him toward the console)*

Take off your shirt.

**END OF TRANSCRIPT**

**Postscript:** While the current whereabouts of the dice in question are unknown, Shade tweeted a blurry photo of them (the dice!) on top of a Banshee with the caption:

**“Still rolling. Still winning.”**

And yes—he sells replicas. With disclaimers.

*“Results may include euphoria, temporary possession, and questionable decision-making. Void seduction sold separately.”*

## Shade on Compartmentalization

Look, I compartmentalize. It's a survival mechanism.

You try being the punchline *and* the prophecy *and* the ex-boyfriend *and* the interdimensional cult leader who still cries at dog vids, and tell me you don't need a few spare identities to shuffle through.

Zane is who I was when I still thought I could save her. Shade is who I became when I realized I couldn't even save myself.

Zane curls up with her in the dark and says "*you can break.*" Shade whispers to the Void and teaches it to scream.

They're both me. They just... don't always answer the same phone.

**Geist, dryly:**

He files his trauma alphabetically.

**Shade:**

Color-coded, actually. Geist is green for guilt. You're a very robust shade.

**Geist:**

You're deflecting.

**Shade:**

You're projecting.

**Geist:**

And you're still talking.

...And that's the point, isn't it?

Because that first night on the bunk? That was Zane. No theatrics. No prophecy. Just bare hands and soft-spoken truth.

And when she finally breaks—because she will—Shade will be the one who makes sure the universe doesn't *collapse* when it happens.

Both necessary.

Both dangerous.

Both *mine*.

# 7 Rules Every Marketer Should Live By

*(Because reality is branding, and truth is optional)*

## **1. Emotion First. Accuracy Later.**

If they feel it, they'll follow.

If they cry? That's conversion.

Bonus points if you can't tell if they're weeping from revelation or psychic whiplash.

## **2. Confuse. Intrigue. Sell.**

Never explain the offer. Whisper it through metaphor.

If they understand it too quickly, it lacks mystery.

Think less price tag, more prophecy.

## **3. Make the Brand a Cult.**

No, really. Devotion > Loyalty.

Create inside jokes. Secret handshakes.

Offer T-shirts that double as emotional armor.

If they'd follow your newsletter into the apocalypse, you're doing it right.

## **4. Speak in Prophecies, Not Promises.**

"Limited time offer" is dead.

Try: "When the moons align, your chance will pass."

Urgency, but make it cosmic.



**5. Every Campaign Needs a Villain.**

It can be a rival brand, apathy, capitalism, or Tuesday.  
Name the enemy. Give the people something to rebel against.  
Even if it's just poor font choices.

**6. Never Go Viral. Become a Contagion.**

Virality fades.  
Contagion lingers. It mutates.  
Your brand should haunt inboxes, timelines, and dreams.  
If Geist tries to block you, you're on the right path.

**7. If All Else Fails, Summon a Bird.**

When strategy breaks down, aesthetics glitch, and ROI vanishes into the Fold—post a photo of a chicken judging a spreadsheet.

It won't make sense.  
It *will* go viral.

*Marketing isn't about value. It's about vibration. Make them feel something. Make them spiral. And if all else fails, post the bird.*

—**Shade**

*Cult Leader. Branding Oracle. Shadowbanned Prophet.*

# Tactical Cuddles - A Guide

[EXCERPT: Void Cult Field Manual | Appendix VII | Shade's Personal Annotations in the Margins]

*Doctrine Subsection: Interpersonal Recalibration Protocols*

**Topic:** Soul-Bonded Comfort Snuggles (SBCS)

**Status:** SANCTIONED | RECURSIVE | HIGHLY EFFECTIVE

*"There are wounds that no blade can reach—only arms."*

—Prophet Shade, half-asleep, absolutely shirtless, comforting three operatives and a teacup pig

*Definition:*

**Soul-Bonded Comfort Snuggles (SBCS)** refer to the **ritualized act of holding one's bonded counterpart (or emotional war-crime of choice) in a secure, affirming position**, typically post-trauma, mid-crisis, or after the last cup of whiskey is gone.

Snuggling may involve:

- Mutual crying (optional)
- Strategic hair stroking
- Protective big spoon energy

- One (1) arm flex, just to remind them you *could* still kill for them

## CULT TENETS:

### 1. The Flesh Remembers Safety Before the Mind Does.

A soul-bonded operative in burnout shutdown mode may resist verbal reassurance, but will instinctively relax into familiar arms. This is not weakness. This is firmware.

### 2. Cuddles are Tactical.

The battlefield extends beyond the body. Comfort is pre-emptive damage control. Post-snuggle operatives report 73% fewer hallucinations and 82% more willingness to *not* commit homicide at breakfast.

### 3. Snuggles Are Sacred (But Not Solemn).

Jokes are allowed. Sarcasm is encouraged. Pillow forts are doctrinally approved. But if they need to be held in silence? You hold them.

*Even if they smell like cordite and shame.*

### 4. Do Not Weaponize the Snuggle.

Never initiate SBCS to manipulate, coerce, or gain intel. That's what seduction is for. (See Appendix X: Fold-Based Flirtation and Consent.)

## SHADE'S MARGINALIA:

- If you can't handle your partner sobbing into your hoodie at 0300, you don't deserve to be soul bonded.
- Yes, this is real doctrine. Yes, I drafted it drunk. Yes, Geist edited it sober. Yes, we both cried. No, you may not skip to the aftercare annex.
- Fun fact: snuggles with Geist have the approximate effect of an emotional

concussion grenade. 8/10. Highly disorienting. Would recommend.

## EMERGENCY CUDDLE INVOCATION PROTOCOL:

If your operative says any of the following:

- “I’m fine.”
- “I don’t want to talk about it.”
- “I didn’t mean to break the ship’s hull *that* hard.”

**You are authorized to initiate SBCS.**

***With consent. Always with consent.***

*Unless they’re Void-tranced, in which case refer to Appendix IX: Possession Blanket Burrito Tactics.*

**FINAL NOTE** (*scrawled by Shade in glitter pen*):

*“You don’t come back from the Fold whole.  
But you can come back held.”*

## **Bonus Page — Classified Addendum**

How to Snuggle a Soul-Bonded Operative Without Dying

**(Or at Least Without Causing a Flashback, Weapon Discharge, or Existential Spiral)**

*Filed under Shade’s “Snuggle Protocols – Black Tier”*

**STEP 1: Announce your approach. Loudly. From at least three meters away.**

*“Hey, emotionally compromised murder-angel! Incoming comfort attempt!”*

*Prevents accidental stabbing.*

*May cause eye-rolling or snark. This is good. You’ve engaged the coping mechanisms.*

**STEP 2: Assess trauma temperature.**

***Use the patented TACTICAL SNUGGLE SCALE™***

Level 1

**Mild brooding**

Casual arm around shoulder.

Level 2

**Quiet seething**

Sit near them. Offer snack. Wait.

Level 3

**Shaking hands, clenched jaw**

Weighted blanket. Warm drink. No words.

Level 4

**“I’m fine.” (they are not)**

Initiate silent touch: back of hand, shoulder. Monitor for flinch.

Level 5

**Catatonic Void-stare**

Lie down. Wrap arms. Breathe for them. Call for backup (preferably Wraith

or Rina).

### STEP 3: Snuggle Execution

- **DO:** Move slow. Stay present. Be warm.
- **DON'T:** Try to “fix it.” Just exist beside them.
- **ALWAYS:** Keep one limb free to deflect potential attacks or sudden attempts to vanish into the Fold.

### STEP 4: Optional Anchoring Techniques

*As developed (unwillingly) by Geist, refined by Kael, perfected by Shade.*

- **Forehead Touch + Name:** “You’re here. I’ve got you.”
- **Heartbeat Syncing:** Works best when reclined. One hand to chest, other to hand.
- **Verbal Loop:** “You’re safe. Right now, you’re safe.” Repeat until their eyes stop seeing ghosts.

### RED ALERT WARNINGS:

- Never say “calm down.”
- Never say “it’s over” unless you *know* it is.
- Never leave without saying *you’re coming back*.

### SHADE’S CLOSING NOTES:

*Snuggling a soul-bonded operative isn’t a reward. It’s a privilege. You don’t get access to that kind of broken unless they believe—deep down, despite everything—that you’re not another betrayal in disguise.*

*Hold them right, and they’ll burn the universe down to keep your hands*

warm.

*Hold them wrong, and they won't flinch when they walk away forever.*

In tiny, scribbled handwriting at the bottom:

*PS: Geist says this whole page is 'emotionally manipulative.' I say he cried last time Wraith hugged him, so shut up, Geist.*

*— Sincerely, Prophet Shade*

In different handwriting:

*You'll notice he never specifies who's supposed to catch **him**.*

*-G*

# The Soul-Bonded Survival Zine

*Written by Prophet Shade, Illustrated by Sleep Deprivation, Published by CultPress™  
(Est. last Tuesday)*

**Fold-safe. Ink runs, but only metaphorically.**

## COVER:

A lovingly hand-drawn Void spiral, ringed with weapons, blankets, and mismatched mugs labeled:

- “World’s Okayest Cult Leader”
- “I’m Fine (I’m Lying)”
- “Spicy Trauma Juice (Handle With Care)”

In the center, a crude sketch of two exhausted operatives in a blanket fort. One’s holding a knife. The other’s holding them.

## Caption:

*“You can bring a blade to a snuggle. Just don’t use it unless you’re cutting through denial.”*



## PAGE 1: THE SNUGGLE IS MIGHTIER THAN THE SWORD

A flowchart:

- **Are they bleeding?** » “MedKit, then hug.”
- **Are they dissociating?** » “Weighted blanket & forehead press.”
- **Are you dissociating?** » “Mutual cling and hope one of you remembers your name.”

In the corner: a cartoon Geist holding two mugs and a vaguely concerned expression. Speech bubble:

*“This is emotionally reckless and alarmingly effective.”*

## PAGE 2: ADVANCED POSITIONS

### **The Tactical Burrito**

- One person completely wrapped in a blanket, the other as an anchor. Best used after Void exposure or flashbacks.
- Improves grounding.
- May result in nap attacks.

### **The Folded Over Freighter**

- One operative lies full-length on the floor. The other collapses on top.
- Deadweight comfort, high intimacy, medium-to-high sighing.

### **The Aftermath Tangle**

- Debriefing snuggle post-high-stakes mission. Optional sobbing. Mandatory forehead kiss.

- Note: If they ask, “Did I make it?” you lie. Until they believe you didn’t have to.

Sketches are annotated in Shade’s handwriting:

*“Spook patented the Tangle. Geist denies ever participating. He’s lying.”*

**PAGE 3: FIELD NOTES (ANONYMOUSLY SUBMITTED, TOTALLY NOT BY SHADE)**

*“They tried to snuggle me mid-breakdown. I bit them. They stayed. That’s when I knew.”*

— Definitely Not Wraith

*“He held my hand through the worst of it. Said nothing. Said everything.”*

— Kael, probably, if I drugged him with honesty tea

*“We snuggled. Then stabbed someone together. That’s love.”*

— Every Ghost Command member, ever

**PAGE 4: MERCH PAGE (100% CULT FUNDED)**

**VOID-CERTIFIED SNUGGLE KITS** include:

- Anti-trauma tea (may scream when brewed)
- Black-out cuddle cloak (shade-stitched, pocketed for snacks or knives)
- “Emotionally Unavailable But Available For Cuddles” enamel pin
- Sticker sheet: “Hug me or shoot me, I’m cool either way”

## FINAL PAGE: THE UNSUBTLE TRUTH

*“You think it makes you weak?*

*Letting someone hold you?*

*Nah.*

*Weak is pretending you’re fine until your heart eats itself.*

*Strong is knowing when to collapse.*

*Strong is letting someone catch you.”*

At the bottom: a fold-out flap labeled:

**“In case of emotional emergency, tear this page in half and find someone who’ll sit in the wreckage with you.”**

Underneath:

*“If you’re reading this, you’re not alone. The Void doesn’t judge. And neither do we.”*

*—Shade.*

*Also Geist, reluctantly.*

# Void Whiskey Origins

**Shade:**

*You get my gift?*

**Geist:**

What in the Void did you send me?

**Shade:**

Top-shelf homebrew. Distilled through a Fold seam, aged five seconds inside a paradox, filtered through micro-singularity ash.

**Geist:**

My toaster tried to strangle the comms tech.

**Shade:**

Ah. Batch 1.2. Still a little unstable.

**Geist:**

A little unstable?

**Shade:**

He was only mildly strangled.

**Geist:**

He coded for forty-seven seconds.

**Shade:**

And now he can smell sound. You're welcome.

**Geist:**

The whiskey restructured itself when I poured it.

**Shade:**

Into what?

**Geist:**

Into the shape of my regrets.

**Shade:**

Artisanal.

**Geist:**

It spoke.

**Shade:**

That's how you know it's working.

**Geist:**

It offered me investment advice.

**Shade:**

You take it?

**Geist:**

I shorted a war. It worked. I hate you.

**Shade:**

You're not mad.

**Geist:**

I'm not *not* mad.

**Shade:**

Did it taste good?

**Geist:**

Like childhood trauma and cinnamon.

**Shade:**

Perfect. Batch 1.3 might not be as... talkative.

**Geist:**

If it doesn't whisper geopolitical analysis while rearranging my molecular structure, I'm sending it back.

**Shade:**

You love this.

**Geist:**

I labeled the bottle "Never Again" and locked it in a quantum safe.

**Shade:**

So... Tuesday?

**Geist:**

The toaster's still sulking.

**Shade:**

Have you tried apologizing?

**Geist:**

It tried to become a god.

**Shade:**

Only once. It's learning.

**Geist:**

Shade?

**Shade:**

Yeah?

**Geist:**

Don't ever send me whiskey again.

**Shade:**

Sending three bottles.

**[END TRANSMISSION]**

Note to reader: *Congratulations, you're now part of a very exclusive tasting group. Side effects include enlightenment, strangulation, and better margins.*



# Void Whiskey - Batch 13

## TOP SECRET – CLASSIFIED TRANSCRIPT

**ARCHIVE:** VOID-CODED COMMS – GHOST COMMAND SHADOW NETWORK

**PARTIES:** SHADE // GEIST

**SUBJECT:** Batch 13 – Not My Fault This Time

**EMOTION INDEX:** Rising. Agitation suppressed by sarcasm. Occasional tenderness flagged. Possible existential drift noted mid-transmission.

**[BEGIN TRANSCRIPT]**

**SHADE:**

You're going to hate me.

*(beat)*

Actually, no. You'll hate yourself. But you'll blame me. Which is sort of the brand, isn't it?

**GEIST:**

You distilled another one.

**SHADE:**

Batch 13. Lucky number.

Didn't mean to make it Void-active. Again.

Someone was spiraling in MedBay, I got inspired. You know how it goes.

**GEIST:**

Did you label this one "For Internal Use Only" or are we waiting for another courier to hallucinate their childhood pet leading a rebellion?

**SHADE:**

...That cat was *very charismatic*.

Anyway. This one's mellow.

Complex flavor profile. Starts with regret. Ends with absolution.

Middle note's a kiss you didn't expect to remember.

**GEIST:**

Are you trying to emotionally compromise me?

**SHADE:**

Not trying. Just bottling what's already there.

That's what prophets do, right? Take divine madness and make it drinkable?

**GEIST:**

It's glowing again, isn't it.

**SHADE:**

Slightly. More of a... shimmer than a burn. Think melancholic aurora.  
You'll like it.

**GEIST:**

You said that about Batch 9. I touched the bottle and relived every  
moral failure I ever committed—in *second person*.

**SHADE:**

Which you called “cathartic” once the nosebleed stopped.

**GEIST:**

If this one tries to unionize my appliances, I'm blaming you.  
Send the damn bottle.

**SHADE:**

Already did.  
Marked it with a tag:  
“Open when you've forgiven yourself. Or never. Your choice.”

**GEIST:**

That's a remarkably cruel way to say *I care*.

**SHADE:**

Yeah.  
We're not good at soft.  
But we're better than we were.  
(beat)

Just... don't drink it alone.

**GEIST:**

...Noted.

Anything else I should know before this turns into another inter-dimensional trust fall?

**SHADE:**

One warning:

If Wraith drinks it, she might try to hug you.

If Revenant drinks it, he'll absolutely kiss you.

And if I drink it again, I'm rewriting your will to name me  
"Emotional Executor."

**GEIST:**

Too late.

You always were.

**[END TRANSMISSION – Logged under: Batch 13, Subfile: "Ghosts Taste Better with Guilt"]**

## Book 3 Preview: Flight Risk

Phantom stared at the comm screen like he expected it to bite him.

The message wasn't open, but it was using an encryption protocol he hadn't touched in over six years, and unlocking it seemed like a really bad idea.

A slim hand closed on his shoulder and he covered it automatically. As always, his wife's calm helped balance him. Slightly.

"Eli?"

Her voice was soft and it teased the hint of a smile from him. He turned and pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms around her, burying his face in her neck.

"What's wrong?"

Her hand gently stroked the stubble on his head before settling between his shoulder blades.

"Just the past. It's nothing," he murmured to her, nuzzling her neck. Trying to distract himself as much as her.

Unfortunately, she knew him too well and pulled back enough to look at him.

"Eli..."

That soft voice was a warning and a balm. He sighed and gestured to the screen, which she glanced at and asked, "Aren't you going to open it?"

"I don't want to," he admitted.

She pressed her lips to his for a moment. "But you need to."

It wasn't a question and for a moment he hated that she was right.

Wished she would let him walk away and ignore it, even for a little while. But she wouldn't. Not in this case. She had always been better at knowing what he needed than he did, and if what he needed was time or to forget her had ever received it, she would let him.

Unfortunately what he needed was to get it over with and deal with it, one way or another.

He let his head rest against hers as he swiveled them back to the screen. Kept his arm around her waist to hold her close he while used his free hand to decrypt and open the message.

With a short intake of breath, he turned to read it.

GHOST COMMAND BRIEFING SUMMONS

Classification: GEO

Originator: Geist

Distribution: All Active Operatives, Ghost Command Division

Subject: Operational Convergence Required

Directive:

You are hereby summoned to convene under Ghost Command authority. Attendance is not optional; absence will be recorded as either dereliction or death. Should you prefer the latter, kindly ensure the paperwork is in order before expiration.

Location:

Asphodel Relay, Sub-level 9.

Yes, that one. The codes are the same. Don't be late.

Purpose:

1. Re-establish operational cohesion (some of you have been busy dying, defecting, or cultivating suspicious hobbies in the past six years).
2. Conduct situational intelligence alignment across factions, operatives, and shadow assets.
3. Review current threats (see attachment).
4. Reaffirm core doctrine and chain of command. Consider this a reset. Ghosts don't retire, they regroup.
5. Initiate forward planning for sustained, ongoing operations.

Rules of Engagement:

1. Keep comm chatter to a minimum. I can hear you rolling your eyes, Shade.
2. Loyal allies will be allowed if they serve utility.
3. Remember: We are already ghosts. Act accordingly.

Closing:

Ghost Command exists because others forget. We endure because others fail.

Consider this your call to arms, to silence, and to memory.

-Geist

Commander, Ghost Command

"What is remembered, survives."

Phantom read the message three times before he sat back and looked at his wife, "He's insane."

Seori kissed his cheek, "You did say you would meet with him."

"Yeah, eventually. This isn't a meeting; this is a fucking military operational summons. I'm not going."

Her eyes twinkled, "Are you going to submit the *paperwork* he asked for?"

She startled a chuckle out of him, and he murmured, "If I have to," as he caught her mouth.

The low tone of an incoming message distracted him and he turned automatically, despite Seori's protest.

RE: Ghost Command Summons

From: Shade

To: Geist, All Active Operatives

He says convergence. He means reunion.

@Rina: Bring alcohol. We'll pick you up on the way.

@Phantom: Bring Seori. And coffee.

@Geist: You're in charge of snacks.

I'll bring/be the entertainment.

-Shade

Cult Leader (on sabbatical), Emotional Liability (always),  
Professional Geist Translator (someone has to)

PS: Wraith swore for two full minutes when she saw the location  
and didn't repeat herself once. It was impressive, actually.

PPS: The Void God (aka Kael) wants to know "why now?"

Seori slipped out of Phantom's arms. His brain was still saying *what the fuck?*  
on repeat, so it took him a moment to turn to her.

"Where are you going?"

Her smile was bright and deeply suspicious, "To pack."

He stood and glared down at her, "We are **not** going."

She blew him a kiss as she disappeared into their bedroom, her voice  
ghosting out to him in a tone that brooked no argument.

"Yes, Eli, we are."



# About the Author

## **SID FILE 0187: PRYOR, A.J.**

**Status:** ACTIVE THREAT

**Clearance Level:** GEO

**Alias:** “That Void Author”

**Affiliations:** Unverified links to multiple rogue elements. Confirmed proximity to Cult Leader “Shade.” Ongoing surveillance required.

### **Summary:**

A.J. Pryor is the primary architect and instigator of the Inbetween Archives, a multiverse-spanning emotional destabilization project poorly disguised as “fiction.”

Subject exhibits advanced narrative manipulation skills, recursive lore entanglement, and a worrying affinity for traumatized super-soldiers.

### **Criminal Allegations Include:**

Harboring cultists and emotionally compromised operatives.

Weaponizing prose for psychological warfare.

Emotional devastation of civilian populations.

Repeated violations of the Narrative Stability Accords (7 and counting).

Teaching Shade to brew Void Whiskey.

### **Risk Level:**

Tier 9 – High threat. Capable of weaponizing a character’s backstory mid-breakdown without blinking.

### **Known Weaknesses:**

Stray characters with tragic pasts (i.e. ALL of them).

Cannot resist a redemption arc.

Chronically underslept.

Affinity for good coffee and literary praise.

**SID Directive:**

Monitor, contain, and if necessary, bribe with fan art and existential questions.

DO NOT engage emotionally. She will win.

Resistance will only result in bonus content.

**You can connect with me on:**

 <https://shadesvoidcult.com>

 <https://x.com/thatvoidauthor>

## Also by A.J. Pryor

**The Inbetween Archives** is a space opera for the morally gray, the Void-touched, and those who suspect their therapist may actually be a government asset. (Spoiler: you're right).

It begins, as all good cautionary tales do, with a woman too dangerous to kill and a man too principled to leave her behind.

Add in ancient alien tech, collapsing dimensional travel, emotionally unavailable operatives, cults (mine's the fun one), and a morally bankrupt intelligence agency that insists it's all under control.

It isn't.

This series is about loyalty and loss, trauma and power, redemption and revenge.

Also kissing. Sometimes stabbing. Occasionally both.

—Shade



## Hard Parole

Book 1 of the Inbetween Archives.

(aka: *The official SID-denied, Void-sanctioned record of “that time Wraith didn’t die, again.”*)

Look, I *told* them letting her out was a bad idea.

Five years locked in a blacksite, and they thought giving Wraith a parole was smart? Cute. Enter Major Kael Veyne: strait-laced, steel-jawed, and so far up SID’s chain of command he probably salutes in his sleep. He thinks he’s in control.

He’s not.

One mission, one war criminal, and one terrifyingly intimate tether, and these two are hip-deep in Fold anomalies, shady agendas, and people who just won’t stay dead. (Present company included.)

I’d say, “nothing is what it seems,” but honestly? It’s all *exactly* as bad as it looks.

There’s a prison, a plot, and a possibly sentient Void.

Also, I may have started a cult.

If you like your space operas morally gray, emotionally devastating, and lightly seasoned with tactical foreplay, *Hard Parole* might just ruin your life in the best way.

You’ve been warned.

– Shade

(*Cult Leader, Void Enthusiast, Not Legally Responsible For The Events Of Chapter 15*)