

HARD PAROLE



AJ PRYOR

The Inbetween Archives Book 1

A.J. PRYOR

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For Erin & Matt

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Preface

SID INTERNAL BULLETIN – CLASSIFIED MATERIAL NOTICE

Subject: “Hard Parole” – Level 7 Debrief Transcript (*Unredacted Edition*)

The following file contains sensitive content, including but not limited to:

- Post-war psychological degradation
- High-risk exposure to Fold-induced hallucinations
- Mentions of cult programming and Void theology
- Tactical use of recreational and experimental substances
- Instances of inter-agency violence, torture, and prolonged existential destabilization
- Classified operational failures and moral ambiguity
- Inadvisable intimacy

If you are not emotionally, legally, or spiritually cleared to engage with the full spectrum of human (and adjacent) experience, please exit now and file Form 9-22 (“Oh No, Not This Again”) with your immediate superior.

You have been warned. SID accepts no liability for psychological aftershocks, Void awakenings, or spontaneous disillusionment with institutional authority.

Proceed at your own risk. We will not be answering your calls.

—Division 5, Compliance & Containment

Preface II

Void Cult Initiation Document (Recovered Fragment)

File: “Hard Parole”

Designation: Experiential Immersion / Soft-Reentry Simulation

Welcome, Seeker. Or Tourist. We’re not picky.

You are about to engage with a series of events deemed **spiritually dissonant, politically inconvenient, and emotionally volatile**. We commend your bravery. Or your poor impulse control. Either applies.

Please note:

- Contains exposure to unresolved war trauma, institutional betrayal, and morally gray decisions in dimly lit corridors.
- Includes simulated or actual encounters with narcotics.
- Features Cult rhetoric, and seductive Void-based ideologies.
- Depictions of graphic violence, interdimensional body horror, and highly specific emotional wounds (romantic, existential, and otherwise).

- Strong themes of PTSD, failed leadership, questionable mentorship, and whispered Fold theology.
- Also, there's kissing.

If you begin to hear the walls breathing, feel language fracturing, or find yourself justifying very bad decisions with “but it felt right in the Fold,” please consult your assigned acolyte, or pour a glass of Batch 10. Possibly both.

You are not alone. You are merely awakening.

—Shade

Cult Leader, Prophet, Winner of Perdition's Sexiest Cultist three years running

PS: The safe word is “re-entry.” The unsafe word is “destiny.”
Good luck.

I

Conditional Release

You have been found guilty of treason.

There is no appeal.

You will die in this cell.

Chapter 1

1,782 days.

Wraith leaned her head back against the cool plasteel wall of her cell. She had now officially spent longer in this dim three-by-three-meter room than anywhere else in her life; longer than any home, longer than with her team, longer than in the arms of anyone who mattered.

Hell of a thing.

A clunk, and the slot in the wall opened.

"I wonder what's on the menu today, boys and girls," she said aloud, standing. "Oh look, it's a nutri-cube and tepid water. How delightful."

Her voice bounced off the walls and back to her.

She snatched the cube and ate it slowly. There had been a period, oh, three or four months into her imprisonment where the very sight of one made her gag. The taste, even more so.

But calories were calories, and when it was the only thing they fed you, well, you learned to adjust.

Some days she wished she had it in her to kill herself. Just end this purgatory of the body, mind, and soul.

But it turned out she was too fucking spiteful to die.

So, day after day after day she existed. The world she had built

in her head kept her sane.

Or perhaps the opposite was true.

But either way, she was here.

She drank the water, savoring the sensation of the liquid running down her throat as she swallowed.

Finally, she put the Duralux cup back in the slot, which closed with a snick. She'd learned the hard way: you give the cup back or you don't get any fluids.

Nutrition complete, she leaned backwards until her hands touched the floor and pushed herself into a handstand. Balanced.

Lifted one hand. Balanced.

Put it down. Lifted the other. Balanced.

The routine was meditative, driven completely by muscle memory.

There was a click in the distance.

That was new.

Her feet touched the ground, and she stood back, leaning on the wall. Listening.

Her heart hammered as, for the first time in her memory, the door of her cell slid open.

A man stood there, exactly 180cm tall; she knew because by the time he'd taken a step forward she'd already calculated how to break his knees.

Broad shoulders. Dress uniform. Medals she'd once worn herself. Probably mid-thirties unless he'd been hitting the anti-aging treatments, which put him around the same age as her.

Behind him she could see two guards in full battle armor, one holding a Pinpoint bow, the other a SlugGel pistol. The bow's magnetic coil whined at half-charge; the SG pistol's safety was off. Spaceship-friendly, but people-deadly.

She stilled. Her heart rate evened out.

They would have a ship. One that could take her anywhere. There were only three of them; she could take them out. She just had to be patient.

The man took a step forward, the stripes on his shoulders evidencing him as a Major.

His bulk blocked the door. A foolish move, but she'd see how it played out.

He had the kind of face that inspired trust. Calm brown eyes the color of swamp water at sunset. A small scar at the corner of his mouth, which turned upwards into a smile as he looked at her.

"Congratulations, Captain. You're a patriot again."

What the—?

His voice was warm. It was the first human voice she'd heard beside her own in nearly five years. And he spoke like he was greeting an old friend rather than a branded traitor.

"It's been a while since I've held any rank," she drawled.

Her fingers twitched. Three seconds to snap his neck. Another two to disarm the bow. But if she moved now, the SlugGel would liquefy her ribs before she finished.

Just a half step closer, Major. Then we can play.

"Well, you've just been re-enlisted. And paroled."

He turned, already walking. No fear. No hesitation. Like she wasn't a threat.

His mistake.

"Are you coming?"

She paused. She could see the guards' knuckles whiten on their weapons. They, at least, knew enough to be cautious. Not that it would do them much good.

With a shrug, she stepped out of the room and into the corridor.

Blinked at the sudden brightness.

She'd follow. For now.

The space between Kael's shoulder blades crawled, waiting for a strike. He couldn't hear her behind him, only the guards' boots. That was worse.

He'd read her file; he knew exactly what she was capable of. Knew that this could go south at any Void-damned moment. If SID hadn't buried her, she'd be the most infamous person in the Confederation.

But they needed her.

And if he had any hope of getting off this barren, floating rock alive, with the only accessible Inbetween Navigator who'd seen active duty *and* was still hopefully sane, she was going to have to respect him.

Which meant that he could not show any weakness. Any fear. Even though she scared the hell out of him.

Unlike many of his colleagues, he didn't shy away from fear. Fear kept you sharp. Fear kept you alive. And he was a man who believed in using every tool in his arsenal.

He stepped into a small room with only two chairs and a table between them. Made from indestructible Duralex and attached to the floor. Nothing that could be used as a weapon.

Except her body.

He'd watched the vid of her close-quarters sparring. Not the best he'd ever seen, but close. And one of the most creative.

It was educational.

After five years of starvation, he knew the odds were with him if push came to shove. But she'd have the motivation and nothing to lose; he couldn't let it come to that.

He turned to her—she was a scant foot away—and indicated a chair, his heart pounding.

“Please.”

She sat nonchalantly, leaning back like she was sunning herself on a damn starliner.

But her eyes were ice.

He pulled the folder out from under his arm, opened it and spread the prints on the table. He’d been shocked to learn there were no vid screens here, but then again it was a fully automated facility. It didn’t need them.

The prints stank of cheap dye. They showed burnt out hulls, debris, and floating corpses. The detritus of battle.

Except those ships had been civilian. They hadn’t stood a chance.

“War’s coming, Captain. Again. Ready to get back in the saddle?”

For a long moment she looked at the pictures, making no move to touch them. Then she looked up at him.

“Who the fuck are you?”

“Major Kael Veyne, Captain. Call sign Helios. Your new CO.”

She barked out a laugh arising from too many years of isolation. She’d never have been that careless before... before.

“And dare I even ask what the Strategic Intelligence Division might want with little old me?”

A muscle twitched in the man’s jaw, there and gone in an instant. But she’d seen it. He hadn’t expected her to clock him as SID. As if the eyes didn’t give him away.

She let her gaze linger a beat on his temple, where the faint shimmer of MI-grade ocular implants always sat just beneath

the skin. Raised an eyebrow.

"As I said, Captain Raine. The war is starting up again. And you have a very specific set of skills."

"Killing people?"

The look he gave her was... chiding. That particular blend of pity and disapproval officers reserved for enlisted soldiers who weren't living up to potential.

Too bad for him, that hadn't worked when she was a raw recruit. It sure as hell wasn't going to work now.

"Tunneling Inbetween, Captain."

Of course.

It had been going Inbetween that had got her into this cell. Now, it seemed, it was going to get her out.

The Inbetween was exactly what it sounded like: the space between space, the antithesis of reality. A place where physics held its breath and time bled at the edges.

Not many people could survive it. Fewer still could navigate it.

But if you could, you could cross the vast distances of space in a fraction of the time it would otherwise take.

Faster even than hyperdrives, and without the pesky cool-down time.

There *were* one or two teensy, tiny side effects, though. Psychosis being just one of them.

She leaned forward, just enough to make the guards tense.

"Couldn't find anyone else still sane enough to join your little crusade?"

Kael raised his hand slightly and the guard stood back. He leaned back as if this wasn't the most important mission he'd ever been on. Studied the woman in front of him.

She looked carved from the bones of whatever gods still lingered. Corded muscle, pale hair like fallout frost, and eyes that had barely blinked since she entered the room.

In her file photo, her hair had been short. Back then, she had been beautiful—not the in-your-face pageant queen beautiful, but compelling. The type of woman you couldn't keep your eyes away from.

The echoes of it were still there, but sunken eyes and now-razor-sharp cheekbones made her look almost like one of the Others.

It was disconcerting.

"Just you, Captain," he told her honestly.

"Will you stop calling me that?" she snapped, and he smiled.

Finally, a crack.

Just enough to show that there was still some human left in her.

"No, Captain, I can't. Because you only have one way to walk off this rock alive. And that is with me. With this mission."

Her eyes gleamed at him in amusement, and he felt his blood freeze. This was what it must be like to spend time Inbetween. Knowing death was a step away.

"Are you sure about that? Major?"

He had seconds.

"Very sure, Captain. Because I'm also your Tether."

She blinked as numbness spread.

Of course he was.

Chapter 2

The reflection wasn't hers.

Wraith stared at herself in the small, square mirror. The eyes were too hollow, the collarbones too sharp under scar tissue she couldn't remember earning.

And yet it was. It sure as hell moved when she did. And she supposed it bore some resemblance to the person she remembered. A little. Mostly around the eyes.

Scary what half a decade in a box did to you.

She was standing naked in the tiny bathroom on the space hopper—a small transport designed for short range trips. Major Asshole must have another ship waiting nearby.

The sonic shower had left her feeling uncomfortable. The vibrations made her skin crawl as if infested with insects. Five years without touch, and now even air felt like violation.

She was aware of herself as she hadn't been in years.

On the small bench sat a uniform. Her uniform, apparently.

Every instinct told her that to put it on was to die. She wanted to kill the three men aboard the ship instead, take it, and disappear.

But she couldn't.

Her nails scraped over the back of her neck. For a moment she just stared at the blood beneath them.

There, between her third and fourth cervical vertebrae, was a small biochip. She may be out of the cell, but she was still on a leash.

And if she bit the hand that held it? Well, that little biochip would ensure that her last moments would follow swiftly after—quick but painful.

Tether.

She spat in the basin.

The technology was created in the early days of the War, when prisoners were commonly used as experimental fodder for the enhancements needed to survive the Inbetween.

A link between prisoner and warden. Another chain, just hidden below the surface.

Go too far from them, you die. If they die, you die. If they decide to press the kill switch, well, guess what? You die.

She hadn't survived genetic modification, a war, a suicide mission *and prison* to die now.

At least there was the prospect of food other than nutri-cubes.

She sighed and pulled on the uniform. It hung loose on her too-thin frame, but the warmth surprised her. She'd forgotten what that felt like.

She opened the door and walked across to a bench and sat. One guard watched her, SG pistol at the ready. His left eye twitched—he expected a strike.

The other was piloting. She'd tagged him through the thick, ArmorGlass panel in the cockpit door.

Major Pain was nowhere to be seen, but given the tiny size of the hopper, he must be below deck in the hold. Why, was anyone's guess.

There was nothing else going on, and nothing she could do about the Tether.

For now.

She shrugged and closed her eyes and let herself drift. Not sleeping, never sleeping, but resting.

And waiting.

Kael stepped back as the case sealed with a hiss, too quiet for regular human ears. But not for his.

The weapons in that chest were horrors. Void take him, he hoped he'd never have to use them. But sometimes, War is Sacrifice. He had to remember that.

Fortunately, both the case and the weapons were keyed to him, so no accidents could happen. Of course, if Captain Raine ever did get her hands on them, it wouldn't be an accident.

Even though he had been the one to campaign for her release, for the mission, his doubts had grown with every astronomical mile. They had continued to grow since he'd released her.

But what was done, was done.

If they were to have any kind of a chance at defeating the Others. At forcing them back to their part of space, they needed every advantage they could get.

And that meant finding people that could navigate the increasingly unstable Inbetween.

Even if that person had caused the biggest disaster of the War. Even if that disaster had ended it.

He climbed the ladder back up to the main deck.

She was sitting with legs outstretched and crossed at the ankles. Hands resting in her lap. Eyes closed.

Brenkoff was watching her like a viper he was expecting to strike at any moment. His finger held over the trigger guard; just three pounds of pressure needed to go from rest to "blow

your fucking head off”.

He wondered whether he should remind the man that once they set foot on the *Eventide*, she would technically outrank him.

Despite moving silently towards the bridge, her eyes snapped opened as he neared, and tracked him. He nodded, projecting unconcern.

But his pulse hammered against his implants. And he had to wonder whether she could hear it.

The short trip had been uneventful. Calm, even. Despite the SG pistol pointed at her the entire way here.

But now it was too bright. Too loud.

Too much.

Wraith stood at the bottom of the ramp in the *Eventide*'s hangar. She'd stepped to the side, hanging back as panic scraped her bones.

The giant overhead lights stabbed her retinas like needles. Every boot thundered like cannon fire, and the hiss of hydraulics had her wincing.

There were people *everywhere*.

Her hands flexed, reaching for weapons she didn't have. Almost desperate for the comforting weight of blade or pistol.

She could feel her pulse racing like it hadn't done in years. She tried to take deeper breaths, to find the calm in the void, but her breathing remained shallow.

“Captain?”

His voice was too close, she could feel his breath on her ear. She hadn't heard him. *Fuck!* How could she hear him over all of... *this?*

For a second, she could almost feel the Tether stretching

between them.

Right now, killing him—and by extension, herself—didn't seem like such a bad idea.

She turned towards him. Slowly, deliberately. Eyes wide, pupils dilated.

Captain Raine wasn't at home, but *Wraith* was alive and well. And if he were to judge—about to have a full-blown panic attack.

How many people would she take with her if that happened?

He smiled at her, warm, reassuring.

"Why don't we get you to your quarters?"

He gently took her elbow, hyper aware of her next to him. Of her movements. He had to be prepared to act quickly and decisively if necessary.

Her arm felt surprisingly fragile in his hand. Bird bones wrapped in leather that felt like he could snap them with one quick twist.

Not what he'd been expecting. But then, nothing he'd expected had matched up so far.

He calmly walked them through the hangar, ignoring the stares. A few crew tried to come up to them; he shooed them away with a stern look.

"Just a few more steps to the corridor, Captain." He kept his voice soft, calming. But not pitying. He had a feeling she'd react badly to pity.

The doors slid open at their approach. He turned right down the much quieter hall, toward the inter-deck lifts.

This was a scenario he hadn't considered. And he was cursing himself because he *should* have thought of it.

Five years in solitary confinement and he dumped her in a

hangar full of noise and people.

Void take him, he was an idiot.

He needed her to be functional. Sane. Not a spree killer in waiting.

He wouldn't make that mistake again.

They stepped into the lift, and he risked a glance at her.

She seemed slightly calmer, but whether that was the "I'm feeling better" or the "I'm going to murder everyone" kind, he couldn't tell.

The lift stopped at the living quarters deck. He'd decided before even embarking to the prison that keeping her closer was a better idea than having her with the general populace, so he'd put her in the room next to his.

Technically it was designated for the third officer in the ship's hierarchy, but it had been empty for as long as he'd been on the ship.

Rumor had it that it was unlucky. After the third suicide, no-one was willing to sleep there.

The door slid open and he nudged her gently forward.

People claimed it was haunted.

And now, he was the one putting a ghost inside.

Chapter 3

The stars were beautiful.

She'd forgotten that. Forgotten a lot of things, like how to be a person.

Wasn't sure she'd ever get it back.

But she had to give the Major credit where it was due. He was doing everything he could to manage it.

Three days, she had been on the ship.

It was still jarring.

She could feel the rumble of the engines through the walls and floor. A floor she had ended up sleeping on, curled against the wall as she had in her cell. The bed was soft. So damn soft. Like a cloud. So, of course, her body wouldn't let her rest on it.

When the Major had knocked the first morning, he'd brought her breakfast. Nothing fancy, he told her, just oats with honey, and a protein shake.

He'd left her to it, and she'd found herself shaking. Real fucking food.

Even the protein shake counted.

Those damn oats were the best thing she'd ever eaten.

He'd reappeared to invite her to join him for lunch. In the officers' mess. Fewer people, he explained. All of whom gave them both a wide berth.

She didn't care.

Nor could she eat.

Her body wasn't used to it. Which fucking sucked.

Still, she took the opportunity to catalog the officers. A few veterans, but fewer than she'd have expected. They stared through her, like she was already dead.

Good. Let them underestimate.

There were few she'd expect to survive more than a few minutes in a ground battle, although a couple looked like they might know their way around a fighter's cockpit.

The ones who would survive a fight were obvious: they watched her hands, not her eyes.

After he had eaten, the Major took her back to her room.

Rinse, repeat for three days, three meals a day.

The luxury of it—the normalcy of it—staggered her.

Now she was sitting in the briefing room, looking out at the stars. The Major was already at the conference table, reviewing something on his data pad.

She was sure he'd get around to talking to her.

Eventually.

Kael laid his pad down and looked at Wraith, who was looking out of the viewport. He'd tried to keep thinking of her as Captain Raine; but that wasn't who she was. Whoever she had been before the final battle? That woman was gone.

He didn't know whether Wraith suited her as a call sign during the War, but it sure as hell fit now.

"Will you join me?"

She turned and he gestured to the chair next to him.

"I think you might have missed a lesson or two in officer

school,” she told him as she rose. “Specifically the parts about giving orders.”

“Would you have joined me if I’d ordered you to?”

She jerked a shoulder and sat down, “Maybe.”

“But, maybe not,” he said and smiled. She remained expressionless.

“If you’re up for it, I’d like to go over the mission brief with you.”

Wraith regarded him, “And if I’m not?”

“Then we wait.”

“Why?”

His smile widened, “I think you missed the lessons about not questioning superior officers.”

“Oh, no. I was there. I just don’t always choose to follow them.”

Kael nodded. “I’d heard that about you. To answer your question, this mission is critical, but I need you functional. It’s not so time-sensitive that it can’t wait a few days while you acclimate.”

She lounged back, studying him. “Tell me something about yourself.”

“What?”

She didn’t reply, just looked at him.

Okay, he could play.

“Intelligence exchange? One for one.”

She raised an eyebrow, “A more dangerous game than I had in mind. But fine.”

“Very well.” He considered her, decided to go with the most important fact first.

“My brother was on the Onyx when you blew it up.”

Well, that's an opener of note.

But if he was hoping to shock her, if he was hoping for any reaction at all he was going to be sorely disappointed.

"My condolences. Your question."

The Major—what had he said his call sign was? Helios?—nodded slowly as if she'd passed a test. Or at least the first part of it.

"Thank you. Why did you blow it up?"

"That's what you're leading with?"

"It's not your turn to ask a question." His look was smug. He thought he had trapped her.

Wraith could feel the slight shudder of the engines as the *Eventide* prepared for hyperspace launch. She looked at Helios, shook her head, rolled her eyes.

"I didn't."

His jaw dropped.

It was almost funny.

"What?!"

"It's my turn to ask a question."

His look was wild, but he nodded for her to continue.

She hesitated just a beat too long. The next question exposed a weakness like a knife to the throat. Her weakness. But he had probably already guessed where she bled. It was worth the risk.

"What happened to the rest of my team?"

He sat back, "Funny you should mention that." He tapped his data pad, and a screen flared to life behind him. Six faces. Six ghosts.

Her breath caught in her throat and her own eyes stared back. A stranger's eyes, before the cell, before the War stole their light. Damn, they looked young.

"Ghost Command is a big part of your mission."

Ice trickled into her veins, but she shrugged nonchalantly, "It'll be good to see them again. You have one last question."

"If you didn't blow up the Onyx," his voice dropped, deathly quiet, "who did?"

Every cell in his body was attuned to her. He needed her answer. Then he could decide whether he believed her.

She held his gaze, almost pityingly.

"Have you ever been in a large space battle? The question is relevant to the answer," she told him before he could object to another question.

"I was on the *Antioch* for Cryos Six, and on the *Aurora* for the final assault.

"Final?"

He raised an eyebrow at her, "The one you rather spectacularly ended."

She blinked at him, then gave a slight tilt of her head as if filing that information away for future reference.

According to her file, she'd been more than half dead when they'd found her. So maybe she *didn't* know that her actions had been the defining ones.

"So you've been on the edges, but not the center."

He nodded, even though it wasn't a question. She held his gaze.

"I don't know who blew up the Onyx, Major. Or even if anyone did. They'd taken a couple of hits, but were still moving the last time I saw them. Then the Others' big old flagship went boom and I was far more occupied with trying to get the hell out of there, than noticing the exact positions of all the ships."

She paused and tapped a finger on the table. "I'd have thought

they were far enough away to be out of the blast zone. But here's the thing about being in the center of a fight like that, *Major*, it's chaos. It changes second by second."

His knuckles whitened around the data pad. Five years of intel and unanswered questions, and her answer was "*chaos*"?

Her eyes darted to his hand, clocking the gesture.

"So who blew up your brother's ship?"

She shrugged.

"Maybe they just got unlucky. I sure as hell couldn't tell you."

Chapter 4

Kael slipped beneath his emotions. Found his calm in the Void.

It wasn't empty. There were ghosts—more and more as time went on.

His brother floated there; mouth open in a scream no one had heard. Frozen. Still reaching.

But he pushed past and below them to the quiet depths.

This particular trick was just another tool in his arsenal, although curiously it came in handy far more often in briefing rooms like this, than in the field.

He'd unpack her answers later. Right now he had a job to do.

He tapped his data pad and the pictures behind him began swapping between scenes of devastation.

Debris fields from destroyed ships. Smoldering ruins of frontier settlements.

Wraith looked impassively at them.

Charred bodies.

A child's frozen corpse spun lazily across the screen, preserved in the vacuum of space like a specimen.

Her pupils didn't even dilate.

"These aren't from the War. These have all happened within the last six months."

She looked bored, but that single finger tapped slowly and

quietly on the table. Her heartbeat, perhaps?

He waited.

Wrapped the void around himself.

“Where?” she asked finally.

He pulled up a starmap, the points highlighted. Not all of them, the full scope of the attacks was classified, but enough.

The attacks had happened on the edges of their space. At first. She seemed to pick that up too.

“They’re moving in.”

He nodded. “They don’t stick around. Not yet. But we’re showing an uptick in attacks. And yes, each one is just a little bit further into our space.”

Her finger continued tapping. It had seemed random, but...

He waited. Watched.

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

The pattern was off rhythm but deliberate.

A code? A compulsion? He made a note to unpack it later as she stopped tapping and looked up at him.

“So, where do I come in?”

“As I told you before, we’re a little low on individuals that can navigate the Inbetween.”

Helios’s voice was calm. Almost wry. The *Golden Boy* thought he was funny.

His tanned face a sharp contrast to image of the child that still floated behind him. Frost on her lashes.

She couldn't have been more than four.

"And using the Inbetween helps you... how? It wasn't exactly stable last time I was there; I can't imagine things have improved much since then."

She stopped tapping and sat up straighter, falling into briefing mode. Part of her wanted to slouch, but there were more important things at stake than petty albeit satisfying rebellions.

Things like finding her team. Her family. If they were even alive.

War doesn't discriminate. And neither do the Others.

She didn't look at the child again.

"You're right. It's not stable. There have been incidents."

There was a slight hesitation in his voice before the word *incidents*. Yeah. She knew exactly what those looked like.

"And I'm expendable?"

His head shot up, eyes flashing. It seemed there was some fire beneath that nice-guy calm after all.

"You are our best hope of figuring out how to get through it despite the issues."

Interesting.

"I'm going to be honest with you, Captain, if we can't figure out how to re-navigate the Inbetween in its current state, we may as well surrender now. The Others have better technology, better weaponry, and they slip through space like it's not even there."

She cocked her head, "You know they use the Inbetween, right?"

He leaned forward over the table, "That's *highly* classified. And yes. More importantly, it doesn't harm them the way it hurts us."

"I suppose I should be grateful I'm not being dissected in a

lab somewhere.”

A slight flicker around his eyes, barely there.

Uh oh.

“Your mission is threefold: first, we need to find your old teammates and you need to convince them to join us.”

“You don’t think your sparkling personality is going to be enough?”

He ignored her.

“Second, you have to advise our engineers on the shield upgrades and engines for the Inbetween. We’ve made strides, but it’s been hard to judge their effectiveness.”

He paused and she shrugged. Same old, same old. Hopefully she wouldn’t end up in MedBay again this time.

“And third, you map out the Inbetween for us.”

She raised an eyebrow. “That’s not possible.”

“High Command disagrees.”

She rolled her eyes. *Five years and they were still morons.*

“And what will you be doing while I’m traipsing around between reality? Gonna lengthen my leash?”

He smiled with teeth, and for the first time she spotted a person who might just be ruthless enough to be worth knowing.

“Simple, Captain. I’m going to be with you every step of the way.”

Kael looked up as the door opened; he smiled and stood.

Next to him, Wraith did the same, minus the smile. Also, he suspected standing had far more to do with positioning than respect.

The two new arrivals saluted him. Hound was a tank of a man; broad-shouldered, barrel chest, and his face scarred from laser

burns. Patch Ortega was comparatively tiny next to him, her hair pulled back in a ponytail and grease staining her coveralls.

"At ease. Please, sit."

They sat. Hound treated Wraith to his death stare. Patch looked at her with undisguised curiosity.

"Patch, Hound, meet Captain Ashley Raine, call sign Wraith. Wraith, meet Lieutenant Dain Vorsk, call sign Hound, and Chief Warrant Officer Talia Ortega, call sign Patch."

Wraith nodded at them.

"Captain," Hound sneered, and turned to him, "That's no Captain, *Sir*, that's a war criminal with a pulse."

His tone left no doubt that he would remedy that situation if given half a chance. Kael had briefed them both before he'd left for the prison. Apparently, Hound's disdain for the idea hadn't lessened since then.

Patch smiled widely, "Come now, Hound, don't be like that. She's a genuine war relic. Has survived more time in the Fold than anyone else on record." She turned to Kael, "Let me borrow her for twelve hours, Major, I'll deliver that working shield algorithm."

"She's sitting right here," Wraith noted, leaning back, completely at ease.

Shit.

He had to de-escalate this *now*, before the room turned into a blood bath and the mission ended before it even began.

He sank some steel into his tone, "Captain Raine *will* be working with you, with us, to ensure the continued survival of Humanity, Hound. And you'll get your time with her, Patch, but for now you have to wait."

He eyed both of them. Patch shrugged good naturedly, but her eyes drifted back to Wraith with a thoughtful look. Hound

held his gaze a moment longer, before nodding curtly, his lip twitching in the ghost of a sneer.

“Yes, Sir,” he said.

Kael gave Wraith a long look, which bothered her not at all, before bringing the Ghost Command team up on screen.

“To business,” he said.

Chapter 5

She could almost hear their voices in her head.

Phantom. Shade. Geist. Spook. And Spirit.

Their pictures were up on the screen in her room. Staring at her with benign accusation.

Had they survived? Did her last, desperate gamble pay off?

Or were her team now just more ghosts in the Void?

Each were listed as MIA. No bodies found. Whereabouts unknown.

But Golden Boy clearly thought that at least some of them were still around. So she let herself hope. Just a little.

It had turned out that Hound was Head of Security on the *Eventide*. But he'd been an infantry grunt in the War. One, apparently, that specialized in tracking.

She's a war criminal with a pulse.

In the quiet and isolation of her room she let her lip curl into a sneer. You disobey orders once to try to save people and they brand you a war criminal.

Her hand covered her right hip.

Literally.

Not that the brass ever gave a damn about context. Just optics. And bodies. Well, lesson learned, and it was a mistake she wouldn't be making again.

She hesitated, then dragged Phantom's image forward. Let it fill the screen.

Her fingers traced the line of his jaw.

His dark face was grim in the picture but smiling in her memory. His voice a soft growl in her ear as they moved as one, skin and sweat and stolen moments.

Don't you fucking dare, Ash.

Those had been the last words he had ever said to her.

She sank onto the bed and pulled her legs up to her chest. The mattress was soft. The silence wasn't.

Don't you fucking dare.

But she had. She'd had to. One to die so five could live.

Yet she had survived.

And had no clue whether her sacrifice, willingly made, was worth it.

"She's a machine!"

The excitement in Patch's voice felt wrong.

"She's a person," Kael said quietly. A deadly one, a damaged and unstable one, but still a person.

"Yes, yes, but she's an incredible specimen."

He glared at her and she checked herself, "Person, I mean. After five years in a cell with the bare minimum of nutrition, she shouldn't be standing. But she's strong. Conditioned. I bet we could put her in the ring right now against Ramirez and she'd win."

Ramirez was their current featherweight hand-to-hand champion.

Kael suspected they could put her in the ring with Hound and she'd still hand him his ass. Not because she was stronger, but

because he didn't think she'd have any restraint once she got going.

"Now," Patch was saying, "she's definitely not ready to go back into the Fold, but she's picking up weight. A couple more weeks and I think we can chance it."

"Why do you call it the Fold, Patch?" He'd heard the term often enough, but as far as he knew she had never been in it.

She blinked at him. "Because that's what the Inbetween does, Sir, folds space. Also, it's easier to say."

Fair enough.

"And the shield?"

"Eh, I need to get her back in the saddle, so to speak. Measure her responses while she's there. Are you sure you want to go with her?"

He thought of the Tether—his neural signal linked to her spinal column; proximity locked. If they strayed too far apart, it would kill her.

"It's not a matter of want. It's necessary."

"Then we'll have to keep it short to begin with. Your reactions to the Fold have been... sub-optimal."

That was putting it mildly. He'd been sick as three dogs every time, even with only briefest exposure. Even now, just the thought of going back turned his stomach.

But he knew if he *lengthened Wraith's leash*, as she'd put it, they would lose her. Permanently.

"Then I guess you had better get the shield algorithm working."

She nodded and the door beeped, a new visitor.

"Enter."

Hound stalked into the room, nodded at him with the bare minimum of respect due to his rank, and pulled up a display up.

“We’ve lost Phantom, again,” Hound told them. “The man is well named. But I have a line on Spook.”

“That’s my cue to head back to Engineering. With your leave?”

Kael waved Patch on, his attention on the screen. The woman on it had a shaved head, muscular shoulders, and tattoo sleeves covering both arms.

Ghost Command’s hand-to-hand expert and the only other woman on the team. Karina Chekova, aka Spook.

He recalled the vid of her taking down a man three times her size in the ring on Tethys Station. Back when there was a Tethys Station.

“Where?”

“The Folly.”

Kael frowned. Not the answer he wanted to hear.

The Folly was the common name for Ludlow’s Folly. A mercenary stronghold on a black moon, reputedly named for a merc captain that took on a full Battle Cruiser and won.

It topped the list of places people in his position deemed “potentially useful but otherwise too much trouble to mess with”.

“What do you want me to do?” Hound asked, his tone flat.

The man didn’t like him, Kael knew. Didn’t respect him. Didn’t trust him.

He suspected that it wasn’t that he out-ranked Hound that was the problem.

But the rank and file had differing opinions of how necessary an evil the Strategic Intelligence Division was, and Hound apparently fell on the lower side of that spectrum. Despite utilizing their intel for his own purposes.

Or maybe he just didn’t like the way Kael brushed his hair. Or that he was willing to do whatever it took to get the job done.

“Keep tracking the rest. I want eyes on Phantom yesterday.”

He turned back to the screen, ignoring the hammering of his heart in his ears. “I think it’s time Wraith and I went on a little field trip. Let’s find out how well she plays with others.”

Chapter 6

“Nice ship.”

Wraith sat in the navigator’s seat of the *Styx*, the sleek little attack craft the hangar crew had called “the Major’s other ship.”

Golden Boy himself turned to glance at her from the pilot’s chair. Autopilot was engaged, but like her, he seemed to prefer the bridge. That or he just didn’t trust her.

Smart man.

“Thanks.”

It was a nice ship. State of the art, if she were to judge. Certainly way ahead of anything she’d flown back in the War. It was small, designed for only two to four crew, but easy enough to fly solo.

Her fingers twitched, wanting to feel the yoke under her palms, see how the ship responded to her slightest touch.

“So, are you ready to tell me what this field trip is all about?”

He leaned back in his seat, his expression thoughtful.

“We’re headed to a den of inequity,” he told her eventually, humor crinkling his eyes.

“Golden Boy, you really know how to plan a first date.”

He started and she snorted, the laugh escaping because his shocked face was just that funny.

“Golden Boy?”

She grinned once more, then locked her face back to neutral and counted off on her fingers, “Helios the fucking Sun God. Favored senior officer of SID. And how the hell do you keep that tan in space?”

His lip twitched.

“Genetics. And I picked *The Folly* for our first date, *Hunny Bun*, because we’ve had a possible sighting of one of your old teammates.”

Wraith froze next to him. Her face blank.

He’d clocked three reactions when he dropped that line. Recognition at *The Folly*. The prelude to stabbing him for calling her *Hunny Bun*—he’d have to do it again. And then unnatural stillness at the mention of her teammate.

“Wraith?”

She didn’t acknowledge him, didn’t even blink, but he could hear her heart thudding.

“Captain?” Still nothing.

“Ash?”

She jerked, eyes snapping to his. “Don’t call me that.”

She looked a hair away from violence and fear trickled down his spine as he internally logged the reaction. “Noted.”

“Who?”

Which team member, she meant. “Spook. Formerly Lieutenant Chekova. We have reports of a sighting at the Gray Market.”

He couldn’t read her, but her heart settled into an alarmingly calm and steady rhythm. He wondered if she realized he was modified. Decided that mentioning it right at that moment was probably not a good idea.

“Are you going to give me a weapon?” she asked an interminable time later.

He stared back at her, making sure his gaze was unflinching.

“You don’t need a weapon, Captain. You are one.”

The Folly was still the same hell hole it had always been. Even the War couldn’t change it.

Still overcrowded, still reeking of unwashed bodies, gunpowder, and illegal drugs and booze.

It had been more than a decade since she’d last walked the narrow, crooked alleys, but there was familiarity in every step.

As they spilled into a street thick with noise and heat, she casually swiped a blade from a passing merc. Pocketed it.

Golden Boy may think she was a weapon, but in a place like this every advantage counted.

At least he hadn’t been stupid enough to make them walk out here in uniform.

The simple black jumpsuit with scuffed gray spacer armor fit poorly, but that was actually better. The good Major had done his homework. Or had it done for him.

Properly fitting armor meant you’d survived long enough to afford it. That made you a challenge.

Good armor made you a target. People wanted your gear—or the reputation to be gained from taking it. Wearing it was a statement. One she was happier not making in their current situation.

Was Spook here?

The thought rose against her will and her pulse spiked before she could calm it. Refused to leave.

Funny how five years could shift your perspective.

Spook had always thrown the first punch and had to have the last word. Of all the Ghosts, the two of them had the most difficult relationship.

Spook considered her a rival. Wraith considered her a pain in the ass. Phantom and Geist frequently commented that they must be related, because only actual siblings could fight that much and still have each other's backs regardless.

But in her cell, she'd have given a year of her life to argue with Rina again. Hell. She'd have *given* her life for the chance.

She glanced at Helios in her peripheral vision.

And now, perhaps she was.

He stopped at a crossroad, hesitated.

She grabbed his elbow and pushed him forward. You didn't hesitate in the Folly. Any weakness shown was an invitation, and she had better things to do than save his ass and prove to the locals that they weren't worth the effort.

Kael let himself be guided forward, trying to mimic Wraith's attitude.

The contrasting pink and green neon signs cast strange shadows, but Wraith moved as if she were far more at home here than she was on the *Eventide*.

Despite the overwhelming mash of people and sounds and smells. He'd been trying not to gag since they disembarked, without appreciable success.

He glanced at her. She kept her grip on his elbow, casual steel. How did this woman have a near-panic attack on the hangar deck, but blend in so well on the foul streets around them?

She'd been a mystery from the first moment he read her file, but instead of unraveling it, engaging with her only added more

questions.

“Do you know where we’re going?”

Her file hadn’t mentioned anything of The Folly. Had she been here before? Or was she just a chameleon?

“The gray market is up ahead; the fighting ring is just beyond it. We’ll start there.”

“You’ve been here before.”

He saw her shrug, but she offered no details.

One more question for the file.

The stench improved only marginally as they entered the market with its colored awnings. Whether the addition of food smells helped or hurt was debatable.

He casually looked around.

The awning colors seemed to have meaning. Green for weapons. Purple for armor. Blue for clothing. Yellow for tech.

There were insignia sprayed on the walls at semi-regular intervals.

“What are those?” He nodded to one that had been crossed out and a different insignia sprayed underneath.

“Factions. But I’m a little out of touch on the details.”

He zoomed his optics in. The paint was fresh—the power struggle was current.

A convoluted piece of ceramic tech caught his eye, and he tried to turn but she held firm, “Shopping later, Golden Boy.”

“That’s MilTech.”

“Well done, you have eyes. And if you go straight for it, then people are going to start taking an unpleasant interest in us.”

“You could use my name, you know.”

She glanced at him, “Why?”

That was a good point, actually. For all that he didn’t consider her a prisoner, exactly, there was no doubt in either of their

minds that he was her warden.

He shrugged and kept walking, willing to take her lead. For the moment.

He could hear the roar of the fighting ring now. In a universe of high-tech weaponry, one-on-one unarmed combat had turned into a high-stakes sport.

Every ship, station, and city had at least one. Whether the bets happened in the open depended on where you were.

They climbed a few short stairs to the entryway when he saw Wraith duck next to him.

Only his enhanced reactions saved him from being knocked unconscious, and even so the blow sent him sprawling.

"How dare you?" His ears were ringing but he heard the voice clearly enough to realize they were in deep shit.

"How dare you come here wearing her face?"

Chapter 7

“Rina—”

Wraith ducked, Spook’s uppercut missing her jaw by inches. Enough force behind it to break her neck.

She danced back, feinted left, then shoulder-slammed Spook into a wall.

Fuck, that hurt.

Not enough padding yet—her bones rattled. She rolled her shoulder to realign it.

She didn’t want to hurt her. But she also wasn’t ready to die just to prove a point and Spook would kill her if she wasn’t careful.

Or she could fuck being careful and be tactical instead.

She stepped back. “Shall we take this in the ring? I win, you talk.”

“And when I win, you die.” Rina’s furious eyes bore into her.

The face was older, yes, but the eyes were the same. She’d let her hair grow out a bare centimeter, which did nothing to soften her. And her body, if anything, was more muscular.

Golden Boy got to his feet, mouth half open.

“Come on, Helios, I have a fight to win.”

Rina spat at their feet and stalked into the Arena ahead of them.

"Can you beat her?" he asked quietly.

The truth was no. Not as she was now. But then, she hoped she wouldn't have to.

"Maybe," she told him. "But if I don't, you should get the hell out of here. You stick out like a SID officer in a merc den."

"Very funny."

"I wasn't joking." She pushed him to a seat near the ring's entrance. Wait here. Don't move. And you," she pointed a finger at the kid she was sure he hadn't even noticed, "don't try it."

The kid smiled brightly and melted into the crowd.

On the one hand, the mission was a complete success. They had found Spook. On the other hand, either she or Wraith was probably about to die.

And there wasn't a damn thing Kael could do about it.

He turned to glare at the cut-purse kid that had sneaked forward again. They grinned, shrugged, and disappeared.

The ring smelled of unwashed bodies, sweat, and blood. Wraith had removed her armor, leaving just her jumpsuit. It still hung too loosely on her.

Spook, on the other hand, looked fit, healthy, and strong. She was wearing a tight sleeveless top, and pants loose enough to do the splits in if required.

When she'd been in the service, she had been deadly. By the looks of things, she had only honed her skills since then.

He turned his head as the screen flashed the odds. They were not in Wraith's favor.

Void guide me.

Maybe a show of faith would help tip the scale.

He leaned forward and keyed in a bet for Wraith to win. Not

outrageous. Not enough to draw attention. But if he could do nothing else, he could do that.

A bell tolled through the arena as bets were closed. Lights slammed on, bright and near blinding, illuminating the blood-soaked sand.

He barely saw Spook move. Doubt he would have seen it if it weren't for his optics.

At that speed she would easily break Wraith's bones when she hit.

Except that Wraith side stepped at the absolute last second and tripped Spook, who crashed into the sand face first.

The crowd roared. Wraith backed up. Spook got up.

They circled each other, each rotation smaller. Then Spook struck. Wraith moved, but the blow still glanced off her shoulder, knocking her backwards.

Kael found himself clenching his fists, short nails cutting into his palms. He jerked his head to the side as the kid tried to sneak up on him for the third time. Glared the way he did to terrify green recruits.

The kid faltered, spun around, and fled.

He turned back to the ring.

Wraith was on the ground now, but swung her leg around to sweep Spook off her feet. The woman jumped to avoid, which was when Wraith changed the direction of her sweep and hit Spook mid-jump. Causing her to fall.

She was just pushing to her feet when Spook tackled her, her fingers closed around Wraith's throat. There was no hesitation in her stance, no mercy.

Kael stood, his heart pounding. This was a black ring. Fights to the death were not only allowed. They were encouraged.

All his careful plans were being strangled right in front of him.

And there wasn't a damn thing he could do to stop it.

Spots were dancing in her vision. Spook had the leverage and the strength. And she wasn't letting up.

She leaned down closer to Wraith.

"They didn't do a bad job with you, you know. The look is right, and they obviously trained you to fight like her. But you're not her. Will never be her. And now you're going to die knowing I know that."

Well, shit.

Her body was screaming for air. There was only one thing she could do. Wasn't even sure if she could still do it.

The world was graying out as she *reached* for Rina.

There was a gasp of shock from Spook, then the pressure eased and she could breathe again.

She rolled onto her hands and knees and coughed. Void, her neck hurt. Like someone had shoved a steel rod through to her spine.

Rina was standing a couple of feet away, looking like she'd seen a ghost. A terrible pun. She'd blame it on the oxygen deprivation.

Wraith staggered to her feet and met her eyes.

"Hi, Rina."

Then knocked her out cold.

Chapter 8

The two women sat across from each other like feral cats, tense and silent.

The bruising around Wraith's neck was already purple and brutal. Spook sported a black eye.

They hadn't said a single word in the ten minutes since they'd sat down at a small table down a crooked alleyway behind the arena. A silent man with a pronounced limp had brought them tea before disappearing.

Spook's eyes shifted to him, narrowing.

"Does he need to be here?"

Wraith turned her head to him, "Do you?"

He looked from one to the other. Finally picked up his cup of tea and shifted to the table on the other side of the door. He could hear them perfectly from here. And they'd say more with the illusion of privacy.

"How are you still alive?"

Spook's voice was soft, almost awed.

Wraith smiled. "You always told me I was too mean to die."

"And I stand by that, but seriously. How? Because I've got to tell you, Ash, you look like shit."

Wraith shrugged. "Five years in a small box on a floating prison rig isn't great for the complexion."

Rina looked at her, wide eyed.

Wraith was glad that she was the one facing Golden Boy and not Rina. She was sure he was noting every word despite his affected indifference.

"How?"

Wraith gave a half shrug, "Blast wave, darkness, box. You're the first friendly face I've seen since they sprung me a month ago."

"Is that why you're working with the SID?"

Wraith leaned around to look at Helios, "You see," she told him, "I told you it was obvious." He looked up and glared.

She turned back to Rina.

"They Tethered me."

She said it softly, confession and death sentence.

Rina's eyes filled with horror. Her eyes slid to the side, indicating Helios behind her.

Wraith nodded.

Rina's fist clenched, knuckles white beneath old scars.

"So, why are you here, Wraith?"

"Golden Boy, here, wants us to put the band back together," she jerked a chin towards him.

"I'm strictly pay as you go these days."

"And it looks good on you. The others?" She couldn't stop herself asking.

Rina shrugged, "In the wind."

She met Rina's gaze. "Alive?" she mouthed.

Another shrug. Then, "You sucker punched me."

"I did."

Rina smiled, "I've missed you, Ash."

She stood and pulled Wraith into a rough hug. “Stay strong,” she whispered.

Then flung Wraith backward. Right at Helios.

Kael chased Spook, but the split-second head start she’d gotten throwing Wraith was turning into an insurmountable lead. He had the speed, but she knew the city. And she was using it to her advantage, ducking into side alleys and collapsing crates and other debris to slow him down.

He couldn’t hear Wraith’s footsteps anymore. If she didn’t catch up soon, he’d have to go back to her. If he got too far away, the Tether would finish the job Spook tried to start.

A rapid pivot into a blind alley and he ran straight into a fist. Dropped like a stone.

Wraith had held back when the Major took off after Rina. She was pretty sure a couple of her ribs were broken, so even if she had been inclined to follow Helios’s instruction to “*Keep up!*”, she wouldn’t have been able to.

What she was doing was a risk. A *big* risk.

But she had to know whether the Tether was real.

Better to know now, while she could still—hopefully—recover.

How far was too far? It had been almost ten minutes. That would put him, what, a kilometer away given the Folly’s penchant for twisting alleys instead of streets.

The buzzing came first, then the pressure behind her eyes. And then the pain—sharp, blinding, like her skull was trying to split itself open from the inside out.

Shit. Not good.

Tether activation. It was a warning, and not particularly subtle. She didn't have much time.

Wraith pulled herself to her feet. Hobbled as best she could in the direction the Major had gone.

Swearing the air blue the entire way.

Wraith lay with her eyes closed on the med table. The fight had taken more out of her than she'd let on, and she practically collapsed when they got back on board the *Styx*.

He'd already regained consciousness by the time she reached him, which had taken a surprisingly long time.

He'd been sitting at the entrance to the alley, blinking away disorientation. She'd taken one look at him, rolled her eyes and set off towards the space port. Limping more obviously with every step.

Looking at the MedScreen now, he could see why.

"Intercranial bruising, internal bleeding, three fractured ribs, and a partially crushed windpipe."

These weren't the sort of injuries you just shrugged off, they were the kind that killed you. And it made him fucking furious.

He grabbed her jaw roughly and pulled her head to face him. Her eyes popped open, and she grabbed his wrist, but he used his other hand to press down on the pressure point on her shoulder to make her release him.

"Next time," he told her through gritted teeth, "you say something before you collapse."

"Next time," she muttered. "Can't wait." She closed her eyes, shutting him out.

The white walls and sterile surroundings of the MedBay were a stark contrast to the sensory assault of The Folly.

“We should be out there tracking down Spook. Instead I’m here, trying to make sure my new *asset* doesn’t die on me.”

He thought he saw a flicker of reaction, a slight twitch of closed eyes. Guilt wormed its way through the worry and rage.

“We wouldn’t have found her. Not if she didn’t want to be found.”

“And I’m supposed to take your word on that?”

A half shrug, “That’s your call, *Major*. But it’s true regardless.”

He clenched his jaw as the diagnostic table completed its intervention protocol, beeped loudly.

“This is going to hurt,” he warned her.

Another shrug.

“I can give you a pain killer. Or knock you out. Your call.”

“Is it?” she asked. “Or are you just giving me the illusion of choice?”

Cold fury settled on him. He tapped the start button and turned to leave, “You change your mind, you call. That enough choice for you?”

The Major was right. It hurt like hell. And she would be damned before she called him for help.

Well. More damned than usual, at any rate.

The pain in her body was nothing compared to the emotional overload of seeing Rina again. Of finding out that the others were possibly, even probably still alive.

Until she’d seen Rina, she hadn’t actually let herself believe.

A few minutes. That’s all they’d had together. It would have to be enough.

She had little doubt that this current assignment would kill

her, one way or another, but her sister lived. And for now, was free. Not Tethered to the system that had tried its damndest to kill her.

Pain thrummed through her like she was holding a live wire. Her back arched and she gritted her teeth.

She would not cry out. She would not give the bastard the satisfaction. Below his nice-guy demeanor was the stone-cold asshole that held her leash. She couldn't let herself forget that.

She groaned as pain spiked again, clenched her fists. Tried to sink below the pain, barely noticing as the door slid open.

"You're a stubborn idiot, you know that?"

Helios's voice was ice. The fire from earlier extinguished.

There was a rush of cool through her and the pain subsided.

"Any fool can be uncomfortable," he muttered as he left.

Bastard.

Chapter 9

“Three months, Major, and you have nothing to show for it.”

Vice Admiral Felix Brandt’s voice scraped down Kael’s spine like sandpaper.

“On the contrary, Sir, Captain Raine is completely cleared for Inbetween Tunneling, and we have proof that at least two of the other Ghosts are alive.”

“We turned that cesspit over with no sign of Spook, Major, and Phantom hasn’t been sighted in months. That’s not a point in your favor.”

Kael kept his mouth shut.

“And as for your pet traitor, she may be up to Tunneling, but my reports state that you are the one holding her back. Perhaps we should have Tethered her to a more suitable candidate.”

Kael’s fingers curled, but he kept his voice and face calm.

“Chief Ortega is confident her Void Shield enhancements will help with that, Sir.”

“Well they haven’t yet, have they Veyne? And every day we’re losing more good people. Military and civilian.” The man paused, eyes penetrating through the vid screen.

“I vouched for you on this, Major. You need to deliver and soon. Or I’m going to have to shut this little experiment down. And make no mistake, it will be my finger on her kill switch.”

Brandt cut the signal and Kael found himself staring at a blank screen with a sinking stomach.

The worst part was, Brandt was right. Kael was the problem right now, not Wraith.

But if he disabled the Tether to let her Tunnel without him, she'd disappear. And then the High Council would remote *deactivate* her regardless.

She wasn't going to get weaker. So, he had to get better.

It made no sense. His DNA profile screamed ideal candidate; his test scores backed it up. But still, the Inbetween treated him like prey.

Years of research, billions in funding, and while they still couldn't recreate navigators like Wraith, they'd been able to predict Travellers with near perfect precision. He was the one datapoint screwing the curve.

He sighed and wiped his hand over his face. He was already sweating at the prospect of the next scheduled Tunnel. He'd just have to get over it. Somehow.

Helios was pale when he walked towards her on the flight deck. Patch's team were finishing up her latest tweaks to the shielding.

She could have told her it wouldn't make a difference, but the woman wouldn't have listened, so why bother.

Patch was checking things off on a clipboard as the Major joined them.

"I swear to the Void, Major," Wraith told him, "If you vomit on me again, I will strangle you and damn the consequences."

"Save a piece for me and my engineers," Patch chimed in. "Do you know how long it takes to clean these birds up after you've been in them?" She paused. "Sir."

He let it pass.

“How’s the shielding?”

“I’m confident.”

“I’m not,” Wraith muttered under her breath, and he turned to her as if he’d heard her.

“Let’s get going then.”

He climbed the ladder and shifted into the rear seat, pulling his helmet on once he was in.

Wraith looked at Patch, who handed her the hooded, plastic poncho she’d requested.

The look Helios gave her was withering, but she ignored it and vaulted into the front seat, pulled on her helmet, and positioned the cloak over it to protect her back and neck from any unexpected expulsions.

The engineers tightened their harnesses and closed the hatch.

The fighter swiveled towards the launch tube.

These two-seater birds weren’t around last time she’d flown, but they were based off a similar design to her old Wasp. They called it a Banshee. She hadn’t been able to put it through its paces yet, so she couldn’t comment as to the efficacy of its name.

“Any tips?” Helios asked from behind her.

She sighed. “Stop thinking. Start feeling.”

“The only thing I’m feeling is nausea.”

“That’s anxiety and that’s because you’re thinking too hard. Close your eyes. Pretend you’re in a regular shuttle. Let it all go.”

He grunted and the Banshee rattled into life.

“Banshee One, systems check,” the voice sounded in her helmet.

She eyed the dash, flicked a couple of switches, “Green across the board, *Eventide*.”

"You're cleared for launch. Good luck."

The *you'll need it went* unsaid, but she heard it anyway.

There was a jarring sensation as they were hurtled forward and then they were in space.

Free.

"*Eventide*, I'm going to fly a bit. Give the Major time to find his space legs."

"Roger than, Banshee One."

She flipped the outgoing comms to mute.

"How are you doing back there, Major?"

"I don't appreciate you undermining me with the crew," he muttered.

"I'm helping you, Major. You do the undermining all on your own."

She tilted the bird to the side, and for a moment could pretend that it was just her and the stars.

No Tether. No mission. No war. No nauseous passenger.

Of course, his loud, controlled breathing disabused her of that particular fantasy.

She rolled her eyes.

"Tell me about the first girl you banged."

"What?!"

"Or the first guy, let me not make any assumptions."

"Why the hell do you want to know? And by the Void, please tell me you're not broadcasting."

A grin spread on her face, "Although tempting, no, I'm not broadcasting. I'm distracting you. So, come on, Helios. First person you banged. Close your eyes, remember, and tell me about them."

"I think that's the first time you've used my call sign."

Was it?

“You’re stalling.”

He sighed heavily. “Hayley Carter. Just before I enlisted.”

She gently maneuvered the Banshee into position.

“Tell me about her.”

Kael didn’t think it would work, but he closed his eye and let himself remember.

“It was after our farewell school dance. I was shipping out the next day. We were friends, I didn’t think there was anything more there. So, I was pretty surprised when she jumped me.”

Wraith chuckled, “I can tell you had to fight for your virtue.”

“Hardly.” The memory was warm, if faded with age. “I’d never thought I had a chance with a girl like her. Warm, funny, everyone’s friend. So, yeah, it was awkward and fumbling, like most first times. She told me I kiss too apologetically, like I was waiting for permission. But we laughed, and both enjoyed it so, I’d say it was pretty good.”

“Better than most, I’d say.”

He paused only a moment. “What about yours?”

She was silent. He kept his eyes closed, just to savor not feeling the anxiety of the upcoming Tunnel for a little longer.

“I shared. What about you?”

“Bootcamp,” she said eventually. “I can’t say it was good, but it was quick.” She laughed then, “The drill sergeant walked in on us. Kind of spoiled the mood.”

He smiled, “I can imagine.” Opened his eyes. Blink.

The space around them was wrong. A riot of colors bursting from the black and fading to nothing as distances twisted and bled. It felt like a memory trying to erase itself.

“How long have we been Inbetween?” he asked in a whisper.

“Three and a half minutes. Congrats, Major. That’s your best time yet.”

The Banshee flew effortlessly through the Fold. Being there was as natural to her as breathing. Flying on wings of carbon steel.

She heard wonder in Helios’s voice.

It was a good start.

“I didn’t feel you Tunnel.”

“I know,” she said smugly. “That was the point.”

“So Patch’s shield works.”

“Wouldn’t know. I didn’t switch them on.”

“What?” She could hear the splutter and suppressed a grin, then shrugged, even though he wouldn’t see the motion.

“You know, if you had told me up front that you were afraid of the Inbetween, we could have gotten over this a lot more quickly.”

“I am not—”

“Yeah, keep telling yourself that.”

He fell into silence. The noisy kind full of unspoken commentary and curses.

There was a slight pull to port.

She turned her head, squinted. She couldn’t see it, but there was a change in the darkness. A barely perceptible hollowness to the way it felt that had adrenalin hitting her system.

In the back, Helios said, “I don’t know whether to thank you or throw you in the brig.”

“You’re going to have to hold that thought for a bit.”

She pulled on the yoke, changing direction. The pull moved with them.

Shit.

“Major, it seems that I may get some use out of this poncho after all. Now hold on and shut the fuck up. We have a problem.”

Chapter 10

Whoever said that navigating Inbetween was easy had clearly been out of their Void-damned mind.

The fact that it had been her only proved her point.

The Fold had seemed stable, and she had gotten complacent. Now it was going to do its best to kill them, or at least remind them that they were very unwelcome visitors.

Stars blinked in and out like faulty memories and colors exploded in front of them as space tore sideways in a way that didn't have even a glancing acquaintance with physics.

She spun the Banshee 180 degrees, dove through before they collided with the breach.

Sound didn't travel in space. Nor in the Void. But she heard the crash behind them, nonetheless.

"What the fuck was that?"

And so, apparently, did the Major.

"Rift collapse. It's a domino effect; we have to outrun it."

To his credit, his voice was calm, assessing, "You can't just punch out?"

"I can, but the odds of us surviving aren't good. Better for me to try to find a stable exit point."

"And if you can't?" His voice was calm, mildly curious.

"Well, then we'll have to risk it. Now shut up and let me fly."

He shut up and let her fly.

He'd never appreciated, until that moment, just how good a pilot you had to be to survive Inbetween.

He'd heard the stories. Read the reports. Even interviewed some survivors.

But the reality blew them all out of the water.

It was terrifying.

And weirdly compelling. Like a song in his bones or a pattern he could almost understand.

The Banshee shuddered as Wraith yanked the yoke, maneuvering it in ways he was sure the engineers had never intended.

Another crash sounded. Way too close to them.

There shouldn't have been sound, but there it was. Like the Fold didn't care about the rules... or had rules of its own.

She seemed to be aiming for a darker patch ahead and to the left of them, but the escalating instability meant that the route was becoming increasingly circuitous.

She pulled the Banshee into a sharp upward trajectory and evened out over what looked like a rupture through the fabric of the fold. He could see the stars of real space inside it, but instinct told him it was deadly.

Like staring into the heart of a black hole.

They sped forward like a lightning bolt, Wraith somehow getting even more speed out of the craft.

Almost there.

He let himself take a breath, and immediately cursed himself for jinxing them.

Ahead of them, between their Banshee and the spot she'd been aiming for, an Other Ship sailed into view.

Massive. Angular in ways that hurt to look at. And it didn't flinch as reality buckled around it. It rode the chaos like it

belonged there.

“Shit!”

Wraith’s curse echoed his internal one.

“Hang on, Golden Boy, we’re punching out of here. No other choice.”

He braced as best he could as the Banshee shuddered like it was about to fall apart and reality came pouring in.

The light was too bright, and the Banshee screamed as Wraith realised her mistake.

She’d been so Void-damned close to the exit point before that Other Ship appeared. Flying like she hadn’t in years, and by the Void, it felt amazing. Like being alive again.

Just her and the Inbetween. One vs the other. Winner takes all.

Then a new player entered the game, and she had to change her plan, make a split-second call.

And if she hadn’t just punched out onto a Void-damned *planet* then they might have survived.

She fought with the controls as hurtling spacecraft met air friction. Flames consumed them, heat slowly sinking into the cabin.

She had to slow it down, or die trying.

She braced her feet and pulled on the yoke. Forcing the Banshee’s nose up.

The force was going to pull them apart. Or they were going to crash and make the point moot.

Just a little more.

Too slowly, it inched up. The heat was increasing but the G-forces lessened slightly. She smashed the Emergency Brake. Not

intended to be used for this purpose, but she figured any port in a firestorm.

They slowed further. She could see through the flames now. See the ground coming up way too fast.

Nothing for it.

She pulled the shrieking Banshee into a horizontal spin, barely keeping control but shedding some of the velocity. They'd barely regained horizontal orientation when the craft hit the ground, bounced, and skidded forward.

A hell of a long way.

When they finally came to a stop, she just rested her head back and closed her eyes for a minute. The console was dead. Acrid smoke was starting to curl from the side panels. Her hands shook.

She had no idea how Helios was doing behind her. But seeing as she was still alive, she figured he had to be too.

Then his voice echoed through the cabin, sounding giddy and amused.

"Hell of a landing."

Chapter 11

Kael cataloged threats automatically, the way some men said prayers.

And the crash site was a tactical nightmare.

The Banshee's ruptured fuel lines pooling hypergolic sludge.

The jagged rock formations to the east; defensible, but perfect for ambush.

The too-regular scrape marks near the wreckage. Not caused by their crash. To his eye it wasn't natural erosion—something heavy had been dragged along here and recently.

The air smelled of ionized ozone and something sweetly rotten, a combination that set his teeth on edge.

He palmed his SG pistol; fully aware it was only good for close quarters fights. The SlugGel had perfect stopping power, if you considered melting flesh a way to stop attacks, but limited range.

Wraith was under the Banshee, cursing softly under her breath.

The hairs on the back of his neck prickled. He triggered his optics and zoomed in on the surrounding areas. Saw nothing.

Didn't mean they weren't being watched.

He glanced at Wraith, "What's the prognosis?"

She pulled herself out from under the wreckage. Alarmingly close to the fuel spill.

"If I had the tools and about a week then maybe I could get her flying again. Maybe."

He scanned the horizon again.

"I doubt we have an hour. Let alone a week."

Wraith's eyes narrowed as she looked around, disguising the movement as a stretch.

"Where?"

She didn't question him. That was... unexpected.

"I'm not sure. It almost feels like we're surrounded."

She huffed out a breath, "Figures."

"Yeah."

He strode over to the wreckage, exposed a key panel and tapped in his code. The weapons locker glided open.

He tossed Wraith a Plasma Caster rifle that she snatched out of the air, checked over, and slung on her back.

He took the Stalker Pulse rifle and the HushTec revolver. Hesitated a moment, then tossed her his SG pistol.

"You should get over here," he warned her.

Wraith raised an eyebrow and rounded the Banshee to stand next to him. He tapped a second code on the weapon locker panel, heard the near silent beep of confirmation.

He turned to her.

"Ready to run?"

They ran. Wraith was fast, so it surprised her when he overtook her and started to pull away.

Helios jerked his head to the left, where a small, seemingly haphazard wall of rocks jutted upwards through the earth.

She'd just hurled herself behind it when the Banshee exploded, the blast wave racing past them less than a second later.

Stone fragments rained down on them, but the wall held.

She glared at him between gasps, "Cutting it a little close there, *Major*."

He grinned at her, the expression boyish and, *Void help her*, appealing.

"But we made it. And," the grin widened, "I won."

She decided not to dignify that with an answer. Instead, she closed her eyes and rested her head against the warm rock. Calmed her breathing. And listened.

Heard nothing.

She turned to him.

His head was cocked, eyes closed, brows drawn together. "At least two groups," he said. "One north, one east."

Well, that confirmed one suspicion she'd had for a while. Golden Boy had more than just ocular implants going for him.

"Okay, then. Given that south is out of the question, are we headed west?"

They both peered towards the open expanse of dry plains to the west.

"We have no food, no water, and no idea where we are. I'm leaning to taking our chances with the locals."

He had a point.

"You're the CO. Do we hit them head on? Or split and flank?"

He regarded her for a long moment, then laughed.

"How do you feel about playing bait?"

Wraith edged into the narrow confines of the rocks that formed a veritable maze to the east, SG pistol raised.

She was having doubts about the plan.

It relied on the Major being a lot more competent in the fighting department than she'd seen him so far. In fact, now

that she thought on it, she'd *never* seen him throw so much as a punch. Let alone shoot a weapon.

And while his glares certainly worked on the rank and file on the *Eventide*, it seemed unlikely they'd help much here.

Why the fuck had she agreed to this?

He could move silently, she conceded, and between his preternatural hearing and his optics, he'd be better at finding hidden enemies. She just didn't think he could take them out.

Fuck.

Of course, the locals could just kill her first. The passages were narrow and winding, and if they were any good, she'd probably never see it coming.

In which case, the Major's skills wouldn't be her problem anymore.

She crept forward slowly towards a sharp bend ahead. Barely breathing.

A sharp whine cut through the air, and she dived, heard the classic thunk of a rail dart hitting dirt where she had been standing.

She took in the scene in an instant. Four people. Humans. Wearing robes. Male with a PinPoint bow, already reloading. Two with hoods up carrying black powder revolvers. And a woman with a Sonic Howler.

Shit.

She rolled behind the bowman, sweeping him off his feet. He crashed next to her, and she yanked the PinPoint out of his hands and pulled the magcoil charger out in one smooth motion.

A deafening bang echoed in the narrow passage as one of the hoods shot at her, missing by inches. She rolled, brained them with the PinPoint, turned—and caught a Sonic Howler blast square in the chest.

The force launched her back into the wall, forcing all the air out of her lungs and probably cracking several ribs.

She'd count them when she could breathe again.

She fell to her knees, gasping for breath. Knowing she had seconds to live.

Then two corpses fell in front of her. Hood two and the Howler woman.

She heaved a breath, reinflating her lungs, and sat back slowly on her knees. Her body screamed; her ribs lit up like a reactor breach. But she could breathe.

That would have to be enough.

Helios stood in front of her. Calm. Blood dripping from the monomolecular blade in his hand.

"I said bait, not cannon fodder."

He bent down and slit the throat of the last cultist—still alive, eyes wide, whispering about the rise of the Holy Sun.

He flicked blood off the blade, sheathed it, and held out a hand to help her up.

Her chest was on fire. She grabbed it, struggled to stand even with his help.

"Next time, you be bait," she told him hoarsely.

Wraith napped against the wall of the cave they had found to shelter in. It was small, round, and most importantly had only a single, narrow, defensible opening.

It had taken a long time to get there.

Kael had bound her ribs with strips torn from one of the robes her attackers had worn, but her range of motion was nonexistent and he'd had to help her every step of the way.

She was his weapon of choice and now she was out of commission.

She had to be in a serious amount of pain, but she didn't complain. Which he should have been grateful for, but instead infuriated him.

Fortunately, none of her cracked ribs—seven of them by the feel of things—had punctured her lungs. Yet.

He sighed and looked out of the narrow opening as the stars started to pop into existence. He should be able to work out where they were, once he could compare the constellations to his starmap.

Wraith couldn't tell him.

That was the problem with navigating during a collapse, she'd said. Without a stable exit, you just didn't know where you were going to end up.

So, they were stuck on an unknown planet. Far enough from any Fleet outpost they hadn't been rescued yet. He fucking hoped it was yet. The Banshee would have automatically sent co-ords on exiting the Inbetween, but if there were no beacons or comms gates in range...

He swallowed his anxiety. They had more immediate things to worry about.

Void Cultists.

His stomach dropped as memory tried to surge and was ruthlessly pushed down.

Not who he was expecting to meet and the last people he'd have wanted to come across again.

He hated killing at the best of times, and he knew most of the Cultists were misguided rather than an active threat. But they were fanatics and would fight to the death whether you wanted to or not.

He took a small sip of the water one of his victims had carried. He'd gained two canteens, a small heap of weapons, and some

nutri-cubes.

He'd expected Wraith to balk at the latter, but she'd just taken it with a shrug and eaten it slowly.

He had struggled to force the damn thing down; and because they had to ration the water until they found more, he still had the taste in his mouth.

The adrenalin crash was hitting him hard. He knew he should keep watch, but fatigue mugged him.

At least the weather was temperate. He'd done his share of huddling with comrades for warmth on the sort of missions that came with Ultra Top Secret ratings. He didn't have to get that up close and personal with Wraith.

That was a good thing, he told himself. Necessary. Smart. So why was he disappointed?

More stars appeared.

Should be enough.

He pulled out his handheld data pad and scanned the sky. A few moments later the result popped up.

Perdition.

Why did they always give these frontier planets such bleak names?

Perdition sat on the far edge of their space. Not much on it. One smallish city with a spaceport his data pad was telling him was on the other side of the planet.

Plenty of caves. Even more ruins.

There used to be more settlements. The planet had been hit hard during the War, and not much effort had been made to re-populate it. Too far out, not enough resources to justify it.

But there was a notation that the Void Cult had been cleared out twice in the years since the War. Also, a link to a file called

“The First Altar”, that on inspection informed him his clearance was insufficient to access.

As a Major, that was not something that happened often. And it never boded well when it did.

He blinked slowly, trying to clear away the exhaustion.

It would take at least four or five days for them to be rescued.

If they survived that long.

He drew back into the cave, leaned against the wall opposite Wraith. She opened her eyes for just a moment as he sat.

Did the woman never sleep?

Finally, he set an alarm for two hours and let fatigue pull him under.

Chapter 12

Wraith dreamed on of the Inbetween. Heard the voices calling her. The crashes of subspace that rolled through like waves on the shore.

There was pain.

There was always pain.

Not from being there. The pain of knowing she would have to leave.

Of knowing that everything she sought was there for the taking. She just couldn't find it.

A small clatter of stones rolling loose sounded and she was immediately awake. The dream already gone.

She kept still, kept her breath even.

They weren't alone.

She could hear Helios breathing; either still sleeping or faking it like her.

She hoped it was the latter.

Although the cave was silent, it felt full. There was presence here.

"I know you're awake," an all-too-familiar voice said casually.

She heard the Major's intake of breath, slowly opened her eyes and lifted her head.

There were robed figures on either side of her, but all her attention was on Helios, who was being held by the hair, the razor-sheen of his own monomolecular blade at his throat.

By Shade.

He looked too thin, almost ragged, but there was no weakness in his stance or his hold.

“Sleepy time, babe,” he told her.

A pinprick bit her neck and darkness descended.

Kael struggled against his bonds without noticeable success, unless the painful, raw skin at his wrists and ankles counted.

He somehow thought that it didn’t.

He was trussed up like an animal. The bindings just missing the point of cutting off circulation. Which told him they had done this before.

Probably a lot.

He was lying on his side in a small cell. And it was a cell.

Three by three meters according to his optics. Plascrete rather than plasteel, but thick enough that the use of the slightly weaker material wouldn’t make a difference.

The door was tempered ArmorGlass. The corridor visible beyond it lay in shadows.

Where the hell was he?

The cell had the hallmarks of an old military facility, but there weren’t any this far out. There weren’t even any black sites nearby that he knew of.

Although even his clearance wouldn’t have given him the full list.

But the SID tended to favor floating bases in the middle of nowhere to planet-side facilities. Yet another mystery to add to

his growing list.

He rolled, inhaled stale dust, and coughed hard enough to see stars.

The question at top of his list burned his brain.

Was it coincidence she'd brought them here?

Could it possibly be?

There hadn't been the slightest indication that Shade might have survived the war, the way there had been with Spook, Phantom, and Geist.

Yet clearly, he had. And Wraith had just happened to land them not only on the same planet, but within a couple of hours of him? And he'd just happened to find them?

Almost the first thing they teach you in SID is that one coincidence may be happenstance. Two meant investigation. Three meant conspiracy.

Still, he didn't think their atmospheric burn maneuver was Wraith's first choice of an exit. She certainly didn't know where they were, and he believed her on that score.

So, maybe they had been brought here instead.

But how?

Two hours later he still had no answers. He'd pushed himself up to lean against the back corner of the cell, which gave him the best field of view.

He was worried about Wraith.

He'd alternated between being worried that she'd somehow betrayed him and worrying about her; eventually settled on the latter. He didn't know how much internal damage that damn sonic weapon had done to her. Or what the hell they'd drugged her with.

They hadn't bothered drugging him. Just tied him up and

pulled a foul-smelling bag over his head.

Did they view her as the bigger risk? Or did they have other plans entirely?

“You know, you’re prettier than the picture in your file.”

Kael jerked. He’d heard no one. His optics had picked up no one.

But there was Shade.

Crouching by the ArmorGlass, studying him.

Void take him, that was terrifying.

He let himself settle below the fear, letting it sharpen his awareness without cutting off his faculties.

“Military IDs are like high school portraits—universally terrible,” he said easily.

“Truer words.” Shade settled into a cross-legged sit. Leaned his elbow on his knee, and his chin in his hand.

He’d skipped a lot of meals by the look of him.

He didn’t look as wrecked as Wraith had when he’d freed her. When he’d *paroled* her.

But the man looked about 15 kilos underweight.

He hadn’t been large to start with. Now what had been an acrobat’s body was wiry, almost fragile.

But Kael remembered the strength of being held by the small man. He wouldn’t be foolish enough to underestimate him.

“I’ve been wondering something for a while now, *Helios*.”

The man paused, apparently waiting for Kael to respond. He wondered why he’d put stress on his call sign. Wondered when and where a man like Shade could have seen his file.

“I’d say shoot, but I wouldn’t want you to take it literally.”

Shade laughed. It was a cheerful, almost booming sound. One that didn’t remotely fit him.

“You know, I like you. I didn’t expect to. Light Bringer.”

Kael kept his face neutral only because he refused to show weakness to an enemy.

It had been a very long time since anyone had called him that.

Not nearly long enough.

And the implications were not encouraging.

“I’ve heard that one before. Maybe try for some creativity if you’re going for synonyms.”

“Challenge accepted. But back to my question: why did you release her?”

Did he mean Wraith? Given the circumstances it couldn’t be anyone else.

“I’d tell you, Shade, but then I’d have to kill you. And I’m all tied up at the moment.”

Shade laughed again, slapping his hand on his knee.

“Maybe I’ll let you live long enough to try.”

He stood and pushed a tube of water, a nutri-bar, and Kael’s knife through the small slot in the ArmorGlass.

“I cleaned it for you,” he told Kael as he walked away. “It’s not good for the blade to leave blood on it.”

Chapter 13

Wraith pulled herself towards consciousness, but it was fighting her every step of the way.

Like drowning in toffee. Or that muck on Taurus Prime.

She forced her eyes open, blinked.

A face was next to her, much too close.

She shoved out instinctively. The face vanished followed by a thump as someone hit the floor.

“Ugh, you know I hate it when you do that, Zane.”

His head rose back above the bed, grinning.

“Just making sure it’s really you, Ash.”

She turned her head slowly and looked around the unfamiliar room. Simple four-cot sleeper. But they weren’t on a transport or a ship.

“Where are we? And what the hell happened? I haven’t felt like this since Geist challenged those Marines to a drinking contest back on Tethys.”

His laugh boomed out, just the way she remembered it.

But there was something wrong with his face. He looked too thin.

Claws scraped at her memory as he lay down next to her, nudging her to scoot up to give him room.

Void. Flames. Explosion.

It was like pulling apart fog, she just couldn't grasp it. She reached out and grabbed Zane's hand to ground herself. It was rough. Rougher than she remembered. And somehow fragile.

Something was wrong.

Sonic blast. Dripping knife.

Helios. Knife to his throat—

She shoved Shade off the bed again. "You asshole. You gave me Silk, didn't you?"

"Ouch."

Wraith pushed to a seated position, "Serves you right. At least I know you didn't kill him."

"Careful, babe. We worked on your ribs as much as we could, but they're not fully knit yet."

He sat on the cot opposite her, studied her.

"And how do you know that he's still alive. Maybe I slit his throat with that pretty, pretty knife of his and left him in mountains."

She was still fighting the fog, but there was something not quite right about him. She just couldn't figure out what.

She raised her hands to her face. Smooth. Scarred in strange places. It was—

"Damn it, Zane, how much did you give me?"

He shifted, lighting fast, and slid onto the cot next to her. Slipping gently under her arm and leaning his head on her shoulder.

"Just enough to cuddle."

She thought about pushing off the bed again. Considered a couple of other wildly inappropriate options.

Zane had always been cheerfully indiscriminating, and the Silk was definitely reminding her how touch starved she was.

He turned his head to nibble her ear, and she gave into the

sensation for all of a second before pushing him away.

Hard.

“Not a good idea, babe,” she said.

“You sure about that? Also, ow. Again.”

No, she wasn’t sure. But later? Later she would regret it.

Probably.

“Yeah, I’m sure. No, Zane.”

Shade’s smile was sad. “Your call.”

They had been staring at each other for a while. Wraith couldn’t say how long. But the fog in her mind was clearing, memories sharpening.

Unfortunately, that also made her more aware of Silk’s other side effects.

The lowered inhibitions. Impulsiveness. The desperate need to feel.

She needed to get out of this room, or she was going jump Shade despite herself.

And while it would be fun. A *lot* of fun. Her mental faculties were back online enough to know that whoever the person in front of her was, he wasn’t the Zane she remembered.

And she sure as hell wasn’t the same Ash.

The room tilted sideways when she stood. Shade reached out to steady her, studied her for a moment, then slid an arm around her waist.

The warmth was exquisite, but none of the teasing from earlier remained.

At least one thing seemed to remain true about Shade. No meant no.

“Isn’t it more traditional to keep prisoners... *in* the cell?” Wraith

asked Shade.

They stood in front of the ArmorGlass door of what Shade had assured her was Helios' current abode.

It was empty.

There was a hole in the back wall that Tunneled into the darkness.

Shade was looking amused.

"I wasn't expecting that," he told her with a grin.

They still had arms around each other.

She didn't need the support. But the contact dulled the Silk's sharpest edges, so she let it linger.

Also, she'd missed him so fucking much.

"You gave him his knife back, didn't you? In a cell with Plascrete walls. I think you were expecting *exactly* that."

He smiled at her, the old Zane smile, and it made her heart ache.

"It's more fun this way."

"Well, here's hoping he doesn't go too far."

"Why?" Zane seemed genuinely puzzled.

"Because I'm Tethered to him, you idiot! Why do you think I'm working with SID after they caged me for half a decade? Because I fucking want to?!"

She was speaking too loudly, giving away too much.

Fucking Silk.

But Shade, and it was definitely Shade now, was looking at her with enough cold fury that she stepped back half a pace. Dropping her arm.

"He's what?"

His growled question didn't seem to require an answer as he spun away from her and stepped towards the cell.

No, stepped *into* the cell. Then sped to the hole and disap-

peared from sight.

How?

She touched the solid ArmorGlass. Still whole. No door. No access panel. But Shade had stepped through like mist. She'd seen it. Hadn't she?

They may not be wearing visible armor, but the cultists were definitely patrolling.

Ninety-second intervals. At least four different pairs.

Kael stood silent in the shadows beside a half-fallen wall.

This had been a military compound once. Now it was a dangerous and derelict ruin. He'd emerged in a drain and surfaced a few hundred meters from his cell.

He had no doubt Shade had meant for him escape when he'd returned the blade. It wouldn't have cut through plasteel or the ArmorGlass, but with enough effort and motivation?

Well, cutting through two full feet of plascrete may have left him with an aching arm, but cut through it he had.

He was probably being hunted. If not now, then soon.

One side of his lip curled up. He didn't feel like playing prey.

It was still night. Perdition had massive axial tilt and a slow seasonal shift. Night would be significantly longer than the day.

With the temperature dropping and the stars still sharpening above, he figured he had at least six more hours. Maybe eight. Just enough time to create some chaos in the dark.

His night-vision optics were working perfectly despite the blow to the temple he'd only realized had occurred when he'd run a hand over the spot and found dried blood and pain.

The question was, did he take the more efficient route and kill the cultists? Or the more difficult, stealth route?

The first risked discovery and reinforcements, but could also delay being found and reduce the number of people he'd eventually have to fight.

The second would take longer, be much more difficult, and he'd have to find Wraith before Shade found him.

His aunt would have reminded him that War is Sacrifice.

His SID trainer would tell him to take out the threat.

Brandt would probably tell him to leave Wraith and escape, then come back with a battalion of Marines.

Of course, then Wraith would be dead, and he didn't think that Shade would be as accommodating an asset.

He didn't want Wraith dead.

He didn't want to kill the cultists if he didn't have to, either. He didn't know enough. He couldn't justify it to himself, even if it was justifiable to everyone else.

He stilled his breathing and his heart rate, merging his consciousness with the shadows, dashed silently across the broken path to the next building, vaulting over a broken wall into an empty room.

Waited. Heard nothing but the fading footsteps of the guards.

He'd do it the hard way.

For now.

Chapter 14

Kael was being stalked. He knew it. Could feel it on his skin, like a whisper of smoke.

It may be subtle, but it was there.

He also knew his stalker was closing in, even if he heard and saw nothing.

He'd been circling inward for hours. The ruin was small, but the cultists weren't playing guide. Which meant that every structure had to be checked; methodically, tediously.

The ruins were creepy.

Someone, or perhaps many someones had painted strange sigils and bizarre phrases on the broken walls in fluorescing blue paint.

"The choir sings here."

"And sun will rise in the Void."

"Hallowed are the Hollow."

"We are the ghosts now."

A few were variations of the standard cult rhetoric, but others were strange and somehow resonant in ways he didn't want to think about.

The hairs rose on the back of his neck, and he felt eyes watching him in the dark. He needed to find a place to make a stand.

Set an ambush for preference.

There were a few potential places he'd seen, but it meant going back the way he'd came. But the main compound was up ahead. Almost completely reduced to rubble.

It was an awful place to meet an enemy.

The corner of his lip rose in a half smirk.

Perfect.

Kael sank into his inner void, below thought, below emotions, below the ghosts. He was his body, and his senses extended beyond their normal reach.

The stalker was nearby. Fast and silent.

Kael's back was to a wall, his blade an extension of his hand. The uneven ground posed no concern, even in the darkest shadow.

He waited.

What he hadn't been expecting was to be kicked in the back.

The void shattered.

"How the fuck?"

He stumbled forward and someone jumped on to his back, wrapping an arm around his neck and trying to choke him.

Kael took a hard step backwards and slammed his attacker into the wall. Spun.

No one.

Movement in his peripheral vision. He jerked back and the punch aimed at his face sailed past.

He swiped his knife up and missed.

"You're fast, Light Bringer, but I'm faster."

Shade.

He wasn't surprised.

He turned to face the smaller man, who was watching him

with an unnerving focus and intensity.

“Care to dance?” Shade laughed, the sound brittle and forced. “I’ll lead.”

He feinted forward, darted back, then somehow, he was behind Kael, knocking his knee out from behind, causing him to stumble.

“Watch your step, twinkle toes.”

Kael spun, ducked on instinct, stabbing upwards.

Hot blood splashed his face, and he heard Shade hiss.

“More than just a pretty face. Good. Nothing I hate more than a boring fight.”

Two punches shot out, lighting quick and flicking blood. The first missed, but the second hit its mark, sinking into Kael’s gut.

He kicked a foot out and heard a satisfying crack and grunt. With luck he’d broken the bastard’s leg.

“Oh wait, there is something I hate more than a boring fight.”

Shade’s voice was a meter or so in front of him, but even with Kael’s optics he was lost in shadow. Which shouldn’t have been possible.

“Oh yeah, what’s that?”

Silence.

Where was he?

Kael stood motionless, feeling the air for movement. Straining to catch any sound over his own pounding heartbeat.

Then he felt the blade against his throat. Moved to stab Shade—only to realize his hand was empty.

What the fuck?

“What I hate more than a boring fight, is asshole SIDs who drop my teammates into cages and then, years later, let them out and Tether themselves to them.”

The man’s voice vibrated with fury. He felt blood trickle down

his neck, although not the pinch of the blade itself. It was too sharp for that.

“Now, you know that I’m not going to kill you. Not yet. And you might think that means you have leverage on me.”

Kael could feel Shade’s breath on his ear as he leaned close. Whispered.

“But I have leverage on you too, Sun Boy. And if you ever want to see her again?”

The pressure eased off and Shade stepped around to face him, holding the blade in a way that said he’d have no problem using it.

“Then you had better do exactly what I tell you to do.”

He flipped the blade in his hand and passed it back to Kael. Turned his back on him and started walking away.

“Come on, then, night’s a wasting. And by the way, your dancing is terrible.”

The entrance to Shade’s lair was disguised, not with tech but by the shadows and collapsed masonry of the main compound. Kael could admit to himself that he would have struggled to find it.

They walked through darkness.

Through his optics, he could see the scars of laser fire on the walls. Shade was in front of him, still dripping blood from his arm where Kael had cut deep into his bicep.

The smell of copper and damp assaulted Kael’s nose. He wrinkled it, fighting the urge to sneeze.

Shade either knew the passage so well he needed no light, or he was modified too. He was definitely something.

Nothing about their fight made sense. Kael’s training, his experience—they should have been evenly matched. But the

way Shade moved, the way he changed position... If Kael hadn't just lived through it, he'd have called it impossible.

And how the hell did Shade kick him in the back when said back was against a wall?

This was exactly the kind of puzzle that SID would love to unravel. And at this rate his report was going to take a painfully long time to write up.

"Why the Cult?"

He hadn't realized he was going to ask the question until it was already halfway out of his mouth.

Shade shrugged, "We are all children of the Void."

"Are we?"

"Me? Definitely. You? Jury is still out."

He pushed open a door, the barely used swing variety, and low light spilled out.

"After you, Sunshine."

Wraith sat on her cot and shivered.

In the hours since Shade had disappeared, she had plotted seventeen separate ways to kill him. Each more painful than the last.

Also, six different ways to seduce him.

She'd only used Silk twice before, both in combat training sims. And then the doses had been small.

Also, if she had to guess, he'd given her Liquid Silk rather than the military version, Silk-72B.

The latter was mostly used as pain control.

The former was a notorious street drug tweaked to turn the physical side effects into the main event. A perfect aphrodisiac and sexual enhancer, if you believed the talk.

They neglected to mention that the come down was a bitch.

It had taken every ounce of her control to avoid the people she could hear in nearby rooms and corridors and find her way back here. She had grabbed food from a nearby room. Eating it had been... an experience.

But now she shivered, desperate for heat. For nearness. Terrified her control wasn't good enough.

If she could sleep—but she couldn't.

She'd tried everything from reciting poetry to complex mental calculus to reliving her worst memories, but nothing came close to overcoming the physical wrongness she was feeling.

The door opened and she forced herself still, her nails digging so hard into her palms she could practically feel the blood welling up. At least it was sensation.

She could hear Shade's voice just outside.

"I really, really want to kill you, Sunshine. But instead, I'm going to help you."

Kael stepped into the room, clocked her, turned back to look at Shade who shut the door and called out: "Have fun, kids."

"I really fucking hate you right now, Zane," Wraith muttered.

Even as Helios asked if she was okay, she could hear Shade's voice float back, "Love you too, babe. You can thank me tomorrow."

Chapter 15

“Wraith!”

It was the third time he'd called her name, and her eyes finally snapped to him. Open wide. Pupils dilated.

He started toward her, but she pushed away to the far side of the cot.

“Bad idea, Major, you should keep your distance.”

Coming from Wraith, those words should've been forceful or sardonic. They weren't. And they weren't a threat, or even a warning.

They were a plea.

He stepped back to the bunk farthest from her and sat down; eyes never leaving her. She tracked him the entire time and there was something predatory in her gaze.

“What did he do to you?”

She shrugged one shoulder, and he saw she was shivering.

“Thought it would be funny to give me Liquid Silk. Or it was all they had for painkillers when they worked on my ribs. One of the two.”

Silk.

It was infamous.

He'd never used it. Never had to from a pain perspective. Never chosen to, recreationally. But he'd talked to people that had.

Read the studies on it.

It put your body into overdrive, almost regressing to infant requirements to be held. To be felt. And the effects were always worse if you didn't have much opportunity for physical touch.

And Wraith?

Other than medical attention and the fight with Spook, had she touched anyone? He couldn't imagine what it was like not to touch anyone for more than five years.

She had to be going through hell.

"Come here."

She answered him through gritted teeth, "I already told you, it's not a good idea."

"Void take you, Wraith. I'm not trying to fuck you. I'm offering to hold you. Your virtue is safe."

She stared at him as if he were some kind of impossible puzzle, then slowly rose to her feet. She cocked her head, took a shuddering breath.

"But yours may not be safe with me."

She locked her gaze on his, took a step forward.

"Golden Boy."

Another step.

"Major."

Another.

"Helios."

She was at the bed now. Leaned down on one knee, face mere inches from his.

"Kael."

She paused for three heartbeats, waiting for him to push her back. But hearing his name on her lips shattered his resolve.

So, when she sealed her lips on his, he kissed her back. Desperately. Tasting her. Wanting her. Needing her.

It took control he didn't think he had to push her back gently, even as her whimper had him cursing himself. This wasn't seduction—it was Silk whispering into hunger she hadn't been allowed to feel for five years.

"You'll hate me if we do this."

"I'll hate you if we don't."

He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her close. Lay down, holding her against his chest and stroking her back.

"Just lie here with me for a while, Wraith, it will pass. I promise."

She struggled, just a little. Then huffed out a breath and shifted to what was presumably more comfortable position. One with more points of contact. He hissed in a breath.

"Your lips are saying no, Major," She rocked her hips gently, "But I've gotta say, I'm getting some mixed messaging."

"Just... listen to the words, yeah?"

"Ugh, fine. But I'm going to hold this against you later."

"You promise?"

She gave a snort of laughter, "Definitely. Maybe."

He smelled of blood, and sweat, and under it all, a hint of his aftershave or deodorant. Something that reminded her of the trees of her far distant childhood.

Under her ear, his heart was regaining a calmer rhythm. Slowing. Settling. Wraith wished she could say the same.

He was so warm, and she had been cold for so fucking long. And every soft stroke of his hand up and down her back was an effort not to arch up into his touch.

I'm offering to hold you.

She squeezed her eyes shut. How the fuck was she meant to

deal with that? Especially when it was exactly what he was doing.

Fucking the Major would be easy. Much easier than Zane, despite their history.

Taking comfort where it was offered? That was a whole different battlefield.

But she also understood what no meant.

“Tell me about Shade?”

His voice sighed over her skin like velvet. She squeezed her eyes tighter.

“Gathering intel, Major?”

“Trying to distract you.” The way his voice was wrapping around her was probably not the type of distraction he intended.

“Don’t you have a file somewhere?”

“Sure. Want me to go first? You can fill in the blanks. Or not. As you choose.”

Choice.

Somehow it was always an illusion.

She needed—

Void take it all. She couldn’t ask for that. Could she?

The shakes were starting up again, and his arms came around her, tightening.

“Can I ask a favor first?” The words were quiet, spoken through clenched teeth.

“Sure.”

“Would you... Can I...” she sighed, felt a tear flow a solitary path down her cheek into the soft material of his jumpsuit. “Will you let me kiss you again, just for a minute? Nothing more. I can’t think straight and... it helped.”

Admitting that was harder than testing the Tether had been.

He stilled. She shook.

Then one arm let go of her and his hand tilted her head

upwards. She'd asked to kiss him, but he kissed her instead, slow and deep and enticing. And for a moment more, she let herself forget... everything.

Then she pulled back, nodded at him, and laid her head back down over his heart, and let her hand rest on his chest.

"Zane wasn't the heart of the unit, but somehow he was the glue that held us together."

The words were a murmur, barely audible, and Kael blinked away tears.

This was payment he didn't need. For services freely, Void-damned *given*.

He'd seen exactly how much asking had cost her. And he might just murder Shade for that alone.

She wasn't invulnerable. He knew that. Had witnessed it.

But he'd never expected to see her like this.

Unarmored.

He wrapped his arms more tightly around her as she shivered.

Depending on how much Silk Shade had pumped into her, the shakes could last another one to four hours.

Sex would help, physiologically speaking. But she'd been right all along—

It would be a terrible fucking idea.

He pressed a soft kiss into her hair. One he doubted she'd remember.

He wouldn't take information as payment. No matter how curious he was. So instead, he started to talk.

"We never had much info on Shade. Just what his standard military file said." A beat. Then he deadpanned, "Weirdly

enough, all the info on how you and the others became Ghosts was heavily redacted.”

Wraith gave a low chuckle through chattering teeth, “Funny that.”

“Came back to bite us. Tethys was destroyed, and Nyx went dark. Permanently.”

She tried to focus on his voice. The words instead of the feel.

“Nyx?”

He stilled beneath her, then shrugged.

“The research lab for Inbetween modification. You were probably there at some point.”

“You mean when they rewrote half our DNA? Yeah, little fuzzy on that.”

“Half? Come now, I’d say a quarter at most.”

She clenched her fist, more against the continuing shudders than the words. “I’d hit you if I thought I could stop at just one. Remind me to break a couple of your ribs later.”

“Okay, but fair warning: I may forget to tell you. My memory is terrible, you know. I’m notorious for it.”

“Are you trying to make me laugh?”

“Maybe. Is it working?”

She gave a half smile, “Maybe.”

Closed her eyes.

“Just keep talking, Golden Boy. I like listening to you.”

Chapter 16

“You know, I’m really disappointed to find both of you with your clothes on.”

Kael’s eyes snapped open. He’d been half-awake and would have sworn the door hadn’t opened.

Shade was leaning against said door, the picture of amused nonchalance.

In Kael’s arms, Wraith groaned and rolled over to face the wall.

“Tom, go kill him and then come back to bed.”

Who the fuck was Tom?

Shade clocked his expression and grinned, all teeth and zero sympathy.

“Come on,” he said quietly. “She’ll sleep for another couple hours at least. And we won’t go far.”

Kael gently untangled himself from Wraith, stretching out kinks as he stood. He didn’t think he’d moved at all. Certainly hadn’t slept much.

He glanced down at Wraith, whose breathing had evened out. He’d never seen her relaxed and fully asleep. Another first.

Shade opened the door and yes, it definitely made a sound opening. Kael stepped through silently. Waited for Shade to shut the door. Then hammered his fist into the man’s face.

“Ow!”

Shade cracked his nose back into position, eyes still watering.

“I deserved that.” Another crack. “Maybe. But hit me again and I won’t tell you who Tom is just to spite you.”

Kael unclenched his jaw, but not his fists.

“You think I care?”

Shade smirked at him, “Oh, yeah.”

Asshole.

“Have a seat.” Shade pulled out a Duraalex chair, turned it around and straddled it. Flopped over the back to put both elbows on the table and rest his chin on his hands.

It didn’t look comfortable.

Kael released his fingers and pulled the other chair out, angled it to the side. Sat.

“Now, you see that,” Shade told him, “That right there is a massive tell, Major. You’re prepared for a fight, and I know it. Now me? I’m relaxed, I’m chilled. So, when I slit your throat, you’ll never see it coming.”

Kael kept his face neutral, “Nice to see you’re finally paying attention to rank, *Lieutenant*.”

For a bare second, the shutters dropped on Shades eyes, but then he boomed out a laughed.

“Direct hit, Sunshine. And thanks for the reminder. Don’t worry, I won’t make that mistake again.”

There was a sound of feet in the corridor outside, and two hooded cultists brought in water and a mushy porridge. Three bowls.

They didn’t acknowledge either of them. Just put the food down and left.

“Eat,” Shade told him, pulling a bowl towards himself. “It tastes like shit, but beggars can’t be choosers out here.”

Kael took a reluctant bite. Chewed. Swallowed against his better judgment.

“GRIM?” he asked Shade.

“Yep. Mixed with this and that to stretch them out. We found a cache of them. Farming’s not exactly our strong suit.”

General Ration Industrial Meals were universally loathed by anyone who had ever eaten one. Even worse than nutri-cubes, which were otherwise the nutrient source of last resort.

They ate in silence for a while.

“I’m surprised a suit like you knows what GRIM tastes like.”

Kael held his gaze. “Wasn’t always a suit.”

“Interesting, I’m going to have to see what—” he caught himself, “—I can dig up.”

Kael gave him a half smug smile, and watched as reason drained from the man’s eyes, leaving someone else in charge. He’d seen the same thing with Wraith when she’d had her near-panic attack on the hangar deck.

He needed to tread carefully.

“You clearly wanted to talk, Shade. Or should I call you Zane?”

Or not.

Blue eyes stared at him from somewhere very far away. Then slowly, he seemed to turn human again.

“Only people I’ve snuggled with get to call me Zane. So, what do you say, Sunshine? Wanna cuddle?”

They carried their empty bowls to a small room. Shade dumped his on the counter and nodded for Kael to do the same.

The competition of silence was reaching ridiculous proportions. Kael was about to throw in the towel when Shade spoke.

“Come on, I’ll give you the tour.”

Kael looked back towards the room where Wraith was still

sleeping.

"She'll be fine. Worst case scenario, she wakes up and kills everyone here. More food for the rest of us."

Kael couldn't tell if the man was joking. Was very much afraid he wasn't.

They walked down a corridor and through a door into a large room Kael immediately recognized as a hand-to-hand arena. People milled about. Some sparring, some working out. Some talking in hushed tones.

They didn't look at them. Not directly. But Kael could feel their regard like static under his skin.

He had no doubt they were absolutely aware of his and Shade's every move.

"They want to fight you," Shade told him. "You're a shiny new toy that everyone wants to play with. Mostly to see who can break you first."

Kael wondered how much of that was true. Watched the hooded heads follow them through the room, and was very much afraid that it hid deeper undertones.

On the far side of the arena, the wall had partially fallen down and beyond it, Kael could see soft dawn light filtering in through gaps in ceiling. Another corridor.

"What was this place?" he asked Shade as they approached.

"You don't know?"

"Assume I'm ignorant," Kael told him dryly and was not disappointed with the response.

"But that would be so *hard*, Sunshine, why, it would practically strain the bounds of credulity."

"So, what was it?"

"Most recently? A black site. Research base. You know, illegal

experiments, off-the-books personnel. No one to mourn the failures. One of yours.”

Kael assumed he meant SID’s, “You’re sure about that?”

“Ha, nice try. You’re not getting all my secrets without at least buying me dinner first.”

“You mean the GRIM porridge didn’t count?”

Shade burst out laughing and stopped in his tracks, holding his ribs. The sound echoed in the corridor and a glance back to the arena showed that people were still looking their way.

“I *like* you, Sunshine. I can see why Ash does too.” He sobered. “When she doesn’t hate you, at any rate.”

Kael looked at him curiously.

“You Tethered her, Major. After dumping her in a cage and forgetting about her. Do you think she ever forgets that?”

Wraith opened her eyes. Blinked at the wall.

Not her cell. Not her quarters on the *Eventide* with its weird whispers in the walls. And the color was wrong for a MedWard.

So where?

She rolled over. Looked around.

Let the memories come.

And promptly pulled the thin pillow over her head.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

Although at least Helios had been a gentleman enough not to let it come to that. Neither had Zane, for that matter.

Zane. Shade.

In the quiet aftermath of the Silk, she could see him—them—clearly. Fractured. Not quite sane. And quite possibly warped...

Void save him if he was.

And what would she do if... when the Major decided that he needed to bring him back into the SID's not-so-tender embrace.

A memory shivered through her. Strong arms around her. A gentle kiss on her head. Heart beating like a lifeline beneath her ear.

She closed her eyes, forced calm. That was something she'd be adding to the *not thinking about ever* list.

She sat up and looked around.

Her head throbbed and her ribs still ached.

If this was hell, it was shittier than advertised.

And also... *where the fuck were they?*

Chapter 17

The Void cultists were strange.

Completely silent. And almost deferential.

As Wraith walked through the tunnels, they would step out of her way and bow their heads to her. Standing statue still until she had passed.

Directions, though? Not their strong suit.

Which was starting to vex her. Violently.

She wished navigating real space worked like the Inbetween.

There, it was a *knowing*.

No maps, no instruments. You just knew where you were relative to real space. Could exit accordingly.

She reviewed her current situation.

Usually.

Here, she just had to guess. And that hadn't been working out that well so far.

How the hell had she managed to find her way back from the cells floating on Silk yesterday?

The place had made more sense then. It's corridors as familiar as the Inbetween.

Oh. Of course. Zane, you absolute bastard.

She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the cool plascrete wall of the Tunnel. Let herself sink. Let herself feel.

It was barely noticeable, but it was there. The smallest tug. Tugs. Coming from the same direction.

She opened her eyes and turned back the way she had come. She had a reckoning to get to—and now she knew the way.

“Why is it called the First Altar?”

Kael and Shade sat on the fallen masonry in a broken, circular room that was overgrown with plants of a kind Kael had never seen before.

In the center was a plinth.

Five shallow pentagons stacked on top of each other, each smaller than the one under it, and a rectangular column set in the center—barely a meter high.

All made of rock that looked like obsidian but felt electric when touched.

He’d circled the strange structure when Shade first brought him in, its pulsing presence unsettling him in a way he couldn’t explain.

Shade studied it now.

“It was here first. If you believe the stories, this is where we first touched the Hollow. Where the Choir first sang to us. Where we first worshiped the places between the stars.”

“What or who are they? I saw the graffiti outside, but I’ve never heard of them before.”

Shade turned to him, a predatory sheen in his eyes. “You need to up your security clearance, *Major*.”

“I’m the impatient type, *Zane*. So, why don’t you tell me instead?”

For a moment, the man looked haunted, a true ghost. He even seemed less solid. Then Kael blinked and the impression was

gone.

Shade stood and walked over to him, shocked him by sitting and wrapping an arm around him and laying his head on Kael's shoulder.

The man's grip was firm.

"You called me Zane. That means we can snuggle."

He didn't shrug him off. He needed answers. Needed to understand not just the site, but the man beside him. The one who'd once flown through the Fold alongside Wraith as part of the best navigator unit they'd ever produced.

So, he could work with this. Probably.

"Oh-kay."

Shade exhaled slowly, as if he'd been holding his breath for Kael's answer.

"Have you ever seen the Others? Personally, I mean?"

Kael nodded slowly. He shouldn't be admitting it. Not to this man. But some quid pro quo was going to be needed.

"Then you've seen the Hollow."

"I don't understand."

"It's what they call themselves. The Hollow Travelers."

"And you know this, how?"

Shade gave him a little squeeze, "That would be telling."

Okay, changing tacks.

"And the Choir?"

"If you've never heard it, it's impossible to explain."

"Try."

"To hear the Choir is to become one with the universe. It's not something you can just describe. And it's not so much hearing the song as losing yourself in it. Willingly. And when they decide you're ready, you disappear. Just... *gone*. No body. No fear. No time. Just song."

For the first time since they'd met, Kael heard true fanaticism in Shade's voice. The narrative was similar to the Void Cult's propaganda he'd gotten to know intimately.

But this was more nuanced.

Shade's tone spoke to release, whereas the Cult had always sought to control. Underneath it all.

"That's why you're here with the Cult? You want to be part of the choir."

"You could call us an offshoot. A splinter group, if you will." He raised his head and looked Kael in the eye. "And who says I'm not already part of the Choir?"

"Stop teasing my Tether, Zane."

Wraith stepped into the room just as Shade tightened his grip on the comically stiff Major.

"But he's so snuggly," he said, utterly unrepentant.

She rolled her eyes and smacked him lightly on the back of the head. *Almost* affectionately.

"I don't know how you can stand to be in here." Her gaze landed on the plinth. The column. The key.

Whatever it was, it pulsed like a migraine behind her eyes.

Both men had risen, facing her now.

The Major looked wary, confused. But Shade's expression had gone reverent.

"You hear it, don't you?" he said, voice low. "It sings."

"Singing? More like metal on a hull breach," she muttered.

Shade's eyes slid sideways, fixing on Kael.

"He doesn't hear it. Not yet." He turned his head to face the Major. "But you feel it, don't you, Sunshine?"

Kael said nothing, barely listening. His ears caught the words, but his mind was elsewhere, focused on Wraith, who was only a few steps in front of him but may as well have been on the other side of the Void.

She'd never directly referred to him as her Tether before. As if it was something she preferred not to think about.

And fair enough.

But now, she'd pulled it to the forefront. Placed it between them.

It shouldn't have mattered. He'd known she wasn't someone who would take comfort easily.

But he hadn't realized until Shade told him, how much the leash scraped at her. It wasn't something he thought about, most of the time. But why would he? He held the damn thing. He didn't have to wear it.

But knowing that now? Having her slam it between them like an ArmorGlass door?

It cut him like a dagger to the chest.

And he knew he had *zero* right to feel that way.

"I'll just leave you two to catch up," he told them, turning for the exit. "Wraith, let me know if you need help hiding the body later."

"You stay, Major," she replied, and for a bare second his heart jumped. "This place sets my teeth on edge. Come on, Zane."

And she walked out, followed casually by Shade, who gave him a very smug and knowing look.

Then he was alone.

Staring at the plinth that seemed to vibrate from all the tension in the air.

He didn't need to hear it sing.

He could already feel its judgment.

Chapter 18

“You sure you’re up for this, Sunshine?”

Shade stood shirtless and barefoot in the arena. Kael stood at the sidelines, removing his own boots.

“I mean, the way Ash wiped the floor with you yesterday, you’ve got to still be hurting.”

He was. But probably not the way that the little man meant.

Although his body was reminding him that Wraith hadn’t bothered pulling her punches.

He gave Shade a considering look, then pulled his own shirt off.

As he’d found out the day before, Ghosts had no compunction about choking him with his own clothing given half an opportunity.

Shade raked his gaze over Kael appreciatively. After three days with the chaos demon, he didn’t take it personally.

He glanced across to the other side of the arena where Wraith was sitting cross-legged at the sidelines, her face expressionless.

Watching them.

The hooded cultists—*why did they never show their faces?*—were also gathered. Apparently, they found watching him bleed entertaining.

He took one last look at Wraith, then stepped into the arena's center.

"Ready to dance again?"

"With you, Sunshine?" He grinned, all teeth, "Wouldn't miss it for the end of the world."

And he rammed a punch at Kael's nose.

Kael darted back easily, "Saw that coming a mile away." He stepped back in, battered Shade's incoming fist to the side and smashed his foot into the side of Shade's knee, "But apparently you didn't notice that."

Shade hobbled backwards.

"Just lulling you into a false sense of security."

"Sure you are."

They moved around the arena, and it was like dancing. If dancing involved more kinetic energy, spikes of pain and, eventually, blood.

He wiped his lip where Shade had split it.

"First blood to you. Last will be to me."

And he swept the man's legs out from under him. Except that the small man remembered his acrobatics and somehow managed to twist, catch himself, and swing his full body around to smash into Kael.

They fell to the floor in a maelstrom of fists, knees and elbows.

Kael thought he had the upper hand; until one of the robed men appeared beside them. Silent and respectful.

Shade glanced over, headbutted him, and slipped free of his hold with a fluidity that shouldn't have been possible.

Both of them stood. Kael felt his nose. It was bleeding a little, but wasn't broken.

Kael wiped it again. It stung, but so did the realization: Shade hadn't even been trying. Not really.

Kael had more scars than Wraith had expected.

A lot more.

His chest, back, and arms were criss-crossed with layers of overlapping scar tissue. Most she couldn't identify, but there were some that were obvious. Narrow blade cuts, the raised pucker of glancing laser fire across his bicep, and on one shoulder: massive burn damage.

Given the sort of MedTech that the SID had access to, Golden Boy shouldn't have been *this* damaged. Hell, they could have fixed him, even now.

So, why hadn't they?

His fight with Shade had been amusing. She doubted he realized how little effort Zane was putting into it.

She hadn't expected them to get along, let alone become friends. And yet the evidence was in front of her and somehow it felt like a betrayal. By both of them.

Zane was talking to a tall man. Raja, unless she missed her guess. He was taller than most of the others, but broader shouldered than Mikel.

He had introduced her to a couple of his acolytes.

And it disturbed the hell out of her to discover that they *were* acolytes. Shade had turned himself into a Void-damned cult leader.

And the worst part was that it wasn't an act.

He believed it.

It wasn't the usual insanity that overexposure to the Inbetween caused. He was perfectly and utterly in control of himself. Always.

Void, he might just be saner than she was.

And that was a terrifying fucking thought.

He finished speaking with Raja and jerked his head to get Kael

to follow him. Over to her.

She refused to let her eyes linger on his scars... or the way his body moved like a soldier who hadn't yet decided what he was protecting.

She shifted her focus to Zane's eyes instead, which gleamed hard and bright.

As they neared Kael glanced once at her, then kept his focus on Zane. She stood.

"Time to pack," Zane told them, sharp and certain. "Your ride's almost here."

The cultists were gone. Vanished into the tunnels with little left to say they'd ever been here.

Kael had pulled his flight suit back on and was waiting for Wraith in the silent arena.

"Phantom."

He jerked in surprise and cursed himself.

How the fuck did Shade manage to keep getting the jump on him?

He turned, "What?"

Shade was wearing some kind of spacer armor, painted black. For the first time he looked like the former Fleet officer he'd been.

"Phantom. That's who Tom is. Was. It was her name for him."

Kael felt his brows draw together slightly, despite himself.

That meant—

"Yep," Shade told him cheerfully. "Got it in one. As you well know, Fraternization may not be encouraged, but it *does* happen."

Kael said nothing.

"I would say do with that information what you will. But I'm

not that stupid. So, instead, I'll tell you that if you use it to hurt her, not even the Tether will stop me from raining hell down on you. After all, I'd just need to keep you alive. Not in one piece."

He stepped forward and pulled Kael into a rough hug.

"Been great getting to know you, Sunshine. Hope you're on the right side when we meet again."

He turned and walked away towards where Wraith had just entered.

"Oh," he turned but kept walking backwards, "when you file your reports on my little menagerie, you should tag them GEO."

Kael's brows drew together.

GEO? What the fuck was that?

Then Shade twisted and stepped up to Wraith, pulling her into his arms and kissing her soundly.

Something cold and hollow coiled behind Kael's ribs. He didn't know if it was jealousy, fear, or something worse.

"Just go with it," Zane whispered, and he stepped forward, pulled her into an embrace and kissed her.

His technique had... improved.

But still.

She pulled back, mock glared at him. Part exasperation, part warning.

"Just messing with the Sun God," Zane grinned. "I'm not going to stick around for the cavalry to arrive. You understand."

"Yeah, yeah, leave me alone with them. Again."

His expression turned deadly serious.

"I thought you were *dead*! We *felt* you die. And when I found out you weren't? There wasn't Void damned thing I could do to get to you. And don't you think we didn't try."

His grip was painful on her arms. She couldn't breathe.

"You need to find Phantom. Need to hear what he has to say. But he's not going to be easy to find. You'll need to listen for him in the Void."

Blue eyes held hers.

"After that, and only after, you'll need these."

She felt him *reach* for her, saw the co-ordinates in her head.

"That's where they're preparing our funeral rites. But you're not ready yet. None of us are. If we're lucky, they'll wait. If we're not—"

He shrugged, as if death schedules were someone else's problem, then leaned in and gently kissed her cheek.

"Love you, babe."

She raised a hand to his heart and rested against him for just a moment.

"Love you, too."

II

Behavioral Drift

*After a while you are more a unit than a group of
individuals.*

*The interactions between you change to work for that
unit.*

Patterns change.

Chapter 19

“So. You and Zane.”

Wraith looked up from her data pad where she had been reading about the Void Cult. The original one, not Shade’s group of irregulars.

It didn’t look like it had changed much in five years. Still preaching the coming of the end; the enfolding of this universe into the Inbetween where only the righteous would remain untouched.

They had no Void-damned idea what they were talking about. But somehow it seemed to be gaining followers.

She was sitting on the bench by the large viewport in the officers’ mess. The Major was leaning against the wall nearby.

He’d managed to sneak up on her—she wasn’t sure whether to be impressed or concerned.

“You know he was just fucking with you, right?”

He shrugged, unreadable.

They hadn’t spoken much since that night on *Perdition*. He’d been giving her space. She’d needed it. Didn’t mean she liked how readable she’d been.

Now, they were back on the *Eventide*.

Hound had swept in to *rescue* them, and made absolutely no attempt to hide the fact that he’d have been far happier if they

had both died Inbetween.

The Major had argued with him the entire trip back. They had shut themselves on the Hopper's bridge, but the plasteel wasn't *that* thick.

He seemed to be waiting for an answer. She considered ignoring him, but like it or not, she needed his help to find Phantom.

And while she ostensibly retained her Captain's rank, she had none of the clearance she needed to access their files.

She set her data pad down; invited him to join her with a sweep of her hand. He sat slowly, warily.

But she wasn't Shade.

"Zane and I knew each other before we were part of Ghost Command. Went through Basic together, then Flight."

The Major nodded. Yes, he probably knew that already.

"We were occasional hook-up buddies. Nothing more."

"And after?"

She studied him. Puzzled over why he was so interested.

Maybe if she could explain a little of what it was like, he might be slightly more receptive the request she had to make.

"After, we were a team. A unit. All of us. We were Ghost Command. And no, we never hooked up again after that."

"Why not?"

"Have you ever been part of a long term, tactical unit, Major? The kind that spends more time behind enemy lines than in front of them?"

He shook his head, slowly.

"Not in the way you mean, no."

"It's... different. After a while you are more a unit than a group of individuals. And the interactions between you change to work for that unit. It's not that you don't have conflict or that you are

somehow subsumed. But patterns change.”

She looked out at the stars, thought of Phantom.

“When Zane became Shade and I became Wraith, there wasn’t room for that anymore.”

“And Phantom?”

She turned her head to look at him, eyebrow raised, feigning indifference. Chest too tight.

Helios looked away, then back at her, “You called me Tom by mistake.”

That, she didn’t remember.

“And you assumed I meant Phantom?”

He looked away, guilt flickering across his face.

Zane, you bastard! You fucking told him.

“Phantom and I were... complicated. But if you’re hoping to use our former... connection to bring him in, I think you’ll find you’re out of luck.”

Kael hoped his Void-damned shock wasn’t showing on his face. Of everything he’d rehearsed for, raw honesty was not on the list.

She wasn’t giving much detail, but what she wasn’t saying spoke louder.

Why the shift? Why now?

“Why do you say that?” he asked gently, as if the universe hadn’t just sucker-punched him in a way he didn’t fully understand. Or want to interrogate too deeply.

“Elijah was always the most grounded of us all,” she said, meeting his eyes. “The calm to the chaos the rest of us brought in. The most tactical, the least sentimental.”

She paused, and he could almost see a memory passing in

front of her eyes.

"If he's still alive, he'll consider all the angles before committing to anything. He won't give in to emotion or impulse like me or Spook or Shade."

Another pause. Longer.

He waited.

"Is he alive, Helios?"

"As of three months ago, yes. He pops up onto the radar and disappears again, if you'll pardon the bad pun, like a damn ghost."

The slight drop of her shoulders showed relief.

Whatever their connection had been, it was strong. At least on her side.

"You want me to find him."

It wasn't a question. He answered it anyway.

"Yes. The Others hit three outposts while we were on Perdition. They're escalating. Spook and Shade are off grid. We're still looking but—"

"Good luck with that."

"Yeah. So, we need to find Phantom."

She nodded slowly, "I'll need his files."

He considered her. Considered protocol that clearly stated that her request was out of the question. Then pulled his data pad from his pocket, tapped.

"Done."

Fuck protocol.

Alone in her quarters, Wraith's fingers trembled over the screen. Desperation to know warred with fear of what she'd find.

In the corner of the room, the whispers started up.

Eerie. Echoing.

The crew claimed it was haunted, but a few hours with the ship's schematics had shown it was just an anomaly in the way sound carried through the cable access space above the maintenance corridors below.

Some days it was soothing. A reminder that she wasn't alone in a cell.

Today, it grated against her bones.

Wraith closed her eyes. Bent backwards until her hands touched the ground, and put herself through the calisthenics routine she hadn't performed since Helios had opened the door of her cell.

It was still meditative.

And easier, now she had more muscle and energy stores.

When she had finished, her hands were no longer shaking, and her heartbeat was steady.

Emotions buried below a layer of calm.

She picked up the data pad and opened the first file.

SID ARCHIVE // CLASSIFIED DOSSIER // GHOST COMMAND //
PHANTOM // REDACTED

SUBJECT

- **Call Sign:** *Phantom*
- **Real Name:** [REDACTED]
Rank: Captain
- **Clearance:** [REDACTED] EYES ONLY
- **Evaluator:** [REDACTED]
- **Status:** MIA [CLASSIFIED: PRESUMED ACTIVE]
- **Location:** Unknown.

PSYCH PROFILE SNAPSHOT

- **Disposition:** Calm under pressure. Unemotional.
- **Primary Function:** Heavy weapons, exfil.
- **Secondary Function:** [REDACTED]
- **Weakness:** [REDACTED]
- **Strengths:** Tactical detachment. Emotions do not influence decision making.

TACTICAL HISTORY

- Mobile Infantry. Force Recon.
- Last to join Ghosts. Bonded fast.
- [REDACTED]
- Unexpected fit with team.
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]

BATTLEFIELD NOTES

- “Spiritual tank.”
- Quiet. Unshakable. Spoke when it mattered.
- [REDACTED]
- [REDACTED]
- Post-final battle: multiple sightings. None verified.
- Inbetween [REDACTED]

CURRENT THREAT LEVEL: UNRANKED

Evaluator's Notes:

Given subject's strengths and weaknesses, should [REDACTED]

then threat level should be raised to maximum level immediately.

Chapter 20

“So, you blew up my Banshee and didn’t even *switch on the shields?*”

Patch’s voice had risen to an earsplitting pitch, causing Wraith to step back, wincing.

“Technically, the Major blew it up.”

“And he didn’t bring back the black box? It’s *protocol*. It’s the size of a data pad! That thing was priceless after a Fold collapse and you *vaporized* it!”

She was yelling now.

The deck crews had backed up out of the blast zone, but she could see them grinning. Enjoying the show.

And fucking Golden Boy wasn’t even here to share the fallout.

“Do you know how many people have survived Void collapses?”

She did, actually. Wasn’t stupid enough to speak up.

“Four! Five if we include the Major!”

It was more. But not by many.

“And speaking of which...” Patch’s voice dropped into a quiet, reasonable tone—far scarier than her yelling. “How is the Major not in a straitjacket right now?”

She stepped up to Wraith, looked up at her and kept her voice low enough not to carry, “Every single entry into the Fold has

negatively affected him. Every single one. And now he not only spends the longest time he's ever been in, but the entire place collapses around him, without shields, and he's *fine*?"

Patch started stalking back and forth. Stopped in front of her again.

"Better than fine. In fact, his neural scans have improved since before you went in. Yours remain the same, by the way."

Good to know.

So, what I want to know, *Captain*, is how the hell that happens?"

She jabbed a finger in the air, missing Wraith's nostril by millimeters. It didn't feel accidental.

"And don't tell me you don't know. Because I know damn well that you have at least some Void-damned clue or you'd have never left those shields off."

Wraith glanced around the flight deck. Sighed. Met Patch's gaze.

"Is there somewhere we can get a drink on this rig?"

"Where's the War Criminal?"

It was the only greeting Hound gave as he stepped into the briefing room.

Kael didn't usually require much in terms of protocol, but Hound's continued insolence was scraping at his nerves. He was a breath away from ripping a page from Shade's book and cold clocking the man.

"I believe that security is your domain, Lieutenant Vorsk."
Vorsk blinked.

"And from now on, while you are in my presence, *and hers*, you will refer to her as Captain Raine. Do I make myself clear?"

The big man's reply was a growl, "Yes, Sir."

Kael considered him coldly. That the man was good at his job was not a question. That he was the worst kind of officer—the kind that believed that force was always the first option—was becoming a problem.

The only way to deal with bullies was to beat them on their level.

Using his rank was triage at best.

"You don't like me, do you Vorsk?"

The man stood at attention, his gaze boring into the wall. He didn't answer.

"And you sure as hell don't respect me."

A slight tightening of the man's fists.

Kael leaned against the table, deliberately casual. Knowing it would infuriate Hound.

He'd have to thank Shade if he ever saw him again.

"Now, I don't care whether you like me, and I don't give a damn what you feel about Captain Raine."

Not entirely true on the last part, but that was irrelevant at the moment.

His smile was humorless, "And that remains true as long as your emotions don't interfere with your fucking job. But right now, your disrespect of me and your hatred of her is causing problems."

He stood and leaned in close—too close—to the other man and looked him in the eye. "So, we need to deal with that."

He watched the man's pupils dilate.

Anger? Or fear?

Kael stepped back, turned his back on Hound and picked up his data pad.

"Captain Raine is on the Flight Deck with Patch. And I will see

you in the Arena in one hour. Open Gauntlet.”

There was a sharp intake of breath behind him.

“Dismissed, Hound.”

Patch was a cheap drunk, and Wraith couldn’t help but be amused by her. And it was only a small step further to liking her.

They were sitting at one of the bars down at the hand-to-hand arena. Alcohol wasn’t exactly prohibited on ships like the *Eventide*, but it was very tightly regulated.

The fact that Patch was drunk despite that: Gold.

Wraith had barely touched her own drink; she couldn’t call it whiskey despite the bartender’s assurances. Maybe the deck crew could use it as engine fuel later.

“So, you’re telling me,” Patch had leaned in and was gesturing way too close to Wraith’s face, “that the shields make absolutely no difference?”

“Honestly? Sometimes they make things worse.”

“How? Why? The science doesn’t make sense.”

“That’s because you’re using the wrong science.”

“There’s science. And there’s fantasy.”

“No, there’s real space. And there’s Inbetween. And the rules are different.”

Patch sat back, brows scrunched, chewing on the problem like it had insulted her engineering degree.

More and more people seemed to be entering the arena.

Was there a match scheduled?

“I need to go to the Fold.”

Wraith turned back to Patch, “Why haven’t you?”

“Wrong profile. They say my brain will melt. S’not fair.”

Tell you what. Get the Major’s sign-off, a ship that can take

at least three, and sign whatever the fuck waivers they're using these days? I'll take you."

The tiny woman's eyes filled with tears. She rose and wrapped her arms around Wraith. "You're the best. It'll never happen, but you're the best anyway."

Wraith patted her shoulder gently as a horrible thought hit her.

If Patch and Shade ever met, then Void help the universe.

Kael walked into the Arena in loose sweatpants and a tight shirt. There were still ten minutes to go, but the room was already almost full.

News travels fast.

Good.

Instead of heading straight to the mats—a luxury after the bare concrete floors on Perdition—he wandered around the edges of the large room.

There were several refreshment stations that were doing brisk business, but his jaw nearly dropped when he spotted Wraith sitting at a table with Patch at one of the few places on the ship that allotted alcohol.

He stalked over, Wraith noticing him almost before he'd taken his first step.

Patch was talking animatedly when he reached them, both hands gesticulating. He looked down at her, taking in the slightly unfocused eyes and the rapid, irregular speech patterns.

"Is she—?"

"Drunk? Yes."

"How? They won't serve you more than one drink."

Wraith spread her hands, "She's tiny. And she practically

downed it.”

“Major!” Patch looked up at him, “You blew up my Banshee. And you didn’t get the black box! I’m mad at you. Remind me to yell at you later.”

She put her head down on the table, closed her eyes. Wraith shocked him by reaching out and patting her head gently.

“I’ve made her drink half a liter of water,” she told him. “Fifteen minutes and she’ll either be fine, or she’ll vomit and then be fine.”

She turned her attention to him and looked him up and down.

“Why do I get the feeling that you in that outfit and the large crowd down here are related?”

“I got tired of Hound’s attitude. We’re having an Open Gauntlet match in about five minutes.”

Wraith’s lips expanded into a genuine and slightly feral smile. “Who holds the better pool around here?”

“It’s a Fleet ship, Wraith. No betting allowed.”

A slow, dangerous smile spread across her lips. “That’s not what I asked.”

He frowned at her. A bell chimed.

“Off you go then, your dance partner awaits.”

Chapter 21

Hound's blow caught his cheek.

Kael staggered back a couple of steps, blinking away momentary disorientation.

So far, Hound was keeping the upper hand, but he was pulling his punches. They still hurt like hell, but it wasn't good enough.

He rolled his neck. Spoke loud enough to be heard by the crowd.

"Come on, Hound. This is an Open Gauntlet challenge. There is *no rank* in this match. Stop holding back."

Hound's eyes narrowed, searching for the trap.

Kael opened his arms wide, chin lifted. A clean target.

"Come on, I'll even give you one for free."

Hound's lips curled into a half smirk, and with barely a warning, he slammed his meaty fist into Kael's midsection.

Kael tensed, rolled with the impact and landed on his feet two meters back.

Met the man's eyes.

"Much better."

He pulled his shirt off, heard the shocked curses and muttering as the crew saw his scars. Watched Hound's eyes widen as the implications hit him.

That Major Kael Veyne had not always sat behind a desk.

Then Kael swept his legs out from under him, grabbed him and locked a forearm across Hound's bicep like a vice. One savage twist, and Hound gave a strangled curse and tapped out.

Kael released him. The crowd cheered in appreciation.

He locked gaze with Wraith, who had made her way to the front of the mats. Her eyes were alive in a way they hadn't been when he'd sparred with Shade.

"Too easy," he roared. "Again."

Hound pushed to his feet, humiliation and anger showing in every line of his body. He charged Kael, who waited for him, stepped aside and tripped him. Exactly mirroring the move that Wraith had used to take Spook down.

He caught a glimpse of her smile as he turned back to Hound.

There was no thought left in the man's face. No tactics. None of the savvy that had gotten him to the rank of Lieutenant.

There was just the grunt. Looking to kill him.

This time, Kael let him get close. Parried punches, avoided kicks, played defensively until the big man reared back for a massive hit. Kael smiled and smashed an uppercut into his jaw.

Hound's eyes rolled back in his head, and he crashed to the floor.

The crowd was silent.

Kael took his time to slowly look around the arena. His kept his stare cold. Accusing.

"Don't you all have jobs to do?"

His voice was quiet, but it cleared the room faster than an evac alarm.

A couple of medics ran up to Hound.

He left them to it.

Wraith was waiting at the edge of the mats.

She handed him his shirt as he strolled up to her, satisfied

he'd made his point.

"Good fight, Major. But I'm *definitely* going to let Shade know you were holding back on him."

Wraith walked into the *Eventide's* MedBay as if she had every right to be there. The med staff barely glanced at her.

"The Major isn't here, Ma'am, we've released him already."

A young doctor with an ensign's stripe stepped up to her. She recognized the woman from the neural scans Patch insisted on after every Tunnel Inbetween.

"Thank you, Dr Rho, but the Major is not who I'm here to see."

The woman nodded and stepped back. Clearly wanting to question further, but not willing to risk it.

Wraith briefly wondered what the rumor mill was saying about her and Helios that sparked the woman's assumption.

She'd bet on scandalous or seditious.

Maybe she'd ask Patch later.

She stepped silently around a curtain, stood posed at the foot of the bed as Hound opened his eyes. His hands gripped the sheets as he reached for weapons that weren't there.

She gave him her deranged smile—the one that had ended as many fights as it started—then let it drop like an executioner's axe.

"I think it's time we cleared the air, don't you?"

Hound had pushed the bed up to a half-seated position, and if looks could kill then Wraith would need immediate resuscitation. Fortunately, they didn't, so she pulled the single stool up next to him and sat.

She'd considered channeling Shade's chaotic energy, but

Kae—the *Major* had already done that.

Instead, she opted for a tack she'd rarely used even during the War.

Full military formality.

"Lieutenant Vorsk," she said, her voice parade-ground precise, "while we've exchanged nods, we've never stood proper introductions. Captain Raine."

The name was ashes on her tongue.

He nodded, slow and suspicious. "Ma'am."

And he didn't choke on it. Surprising.

"I need to understand just one thing, Lieutenant. Who did I kill that has you so hostile."

"Are you ordering me to tell you? Ma'am."

"Not at all, Lieutenant. But the more time I've spent on this ship, the more I've realized something. People know that I'm the *Major's pet traitor*. But they don't know the details."

Void, even she didn't know them. Not fully.

"But you know something. You're tracking my team, after all, so you have some clearance. But your clearance isn't high enough to know the details of why I was on that floating rock."

The tightening around his eyes confirmed it. Good. That made the next bit simpler.

"Which means it's personal for you. So, I'll ask again, who did I kill?" The silence stretched. "And I'll make it even easier. Tell me the details, and I'll fill in the gaps where I can. One time offer."

She didn't have to wait long.

"Taurus Prime," he spat.

That was interesting. That was before she became a Ghost. Way before.

"A hell hole if there ever was one. Who did I kill?"

"My whole damn team."

Wraith cocked her head at him. Resisted the urge to say *Funny, you'd think I'd remember that.*

"How?"

"We were sent in after you when you and your recon team dropped off the radar. S&R. Search and recover. It was a fucking suicide mission from the start."

"I don't disagree with you. But I am failing to see where I come in. I was green as grass when I was on Taurus Prime. Barely survived myself."

"No shit. You lived because I pulled your unconscious ass out of that swamp."

And *that* was information she'd never had before.

"Thank you."

He frowned at her.

"But I'm still failing to see how a newly-minted ensign took out your team."

"Because you *were* the Void-damned mission. Eleven men died to pull out one inexperienced little girl"

He paused. "Captain."

She laughed. She couldn't help it.

"Vorsk, of all the things I did during the War, you're holding a grudge for the *one* thing I had exactly zero control over?"

He stared at her, color rising in his cheeks.

"You said you'd fill in the blanks. Ma'am."

"I did, Lieutenant. Although I doubt it will give you anything close to a complete picture."

She leaned her head back, stared at the ceiling.

"Alright, here's what I remember," she started, even knowing that what she *didn't* remember had given her nightmares for months.

Chapter 22

Taurus Prime | Fifteen years ago

There was something wrong with the mission.

Ash felt it in her bones and saw it mirrored in the tight line of Lieutenant Rush's shoulders. But orders were orders, and they were going to follow them.

She wished Zane were coming with them. But he'd been fast-tracked to Flight, assigned to a different team. He'd always had the fastest reflexes of their cadet squad.

She missed him.

Ash was assigned to a ground team. Force Recon.

She would have to fight twice as hard for the chance to fly. Not that she'd let that stop her.

Now, they were heading down to a planet that wasn't even populated. Had no mineral wealth to speak of. Had little strategic value.

Or at least, that was what Rush had been saying to Colonel Brandt before they left. Not as quietly as he thought.

She couldn't find much information on Taurus Prime on OpNet. Just the name and the co-ords, and basic geo-data.

"Ensign Raine," Rush spoke to her, his voice coming through her earpiece, and she looked across the transpo to where her CO

was strapped in. "You ready for your first mission?"

"Sir, yes, Sir."

"Excellent."

He switched to the general channel. "All right, boys and girls. Hope you brought your waders. Because we're hitting swamp the second we land. We're headed to a suspected Other outpost. Standard Recon, Surveil and Secure if possible. If not, we hold the perimeter until the grunts arrive."

A chuckle went through the transpo, which was cut off as the ship hit atmosphere and rattled like it was about to fall apart.

A minute later, it smoothed out, and a minute more and the transpo hissed, hydraulics groaning as the rear door dropped like a guillotine. Swamp mist billowed in, thick and rank.

Rush released his harness and grinned.

"Show time, boys and girls. Boots down. Eyes up. Go, go, go."

Two days in the stinking swamp and still no sign of the supposed outpost.

There were hillocks of so-called dry ground that was really just firmer mud. But most of it was waist-deep water or knee-deep muck.

If Ash never saw another swamp, it would be too soon, although she'd admit that the sun on swamp water was kind of pretty.

It was nearing sunset, and they had set up a miserable camp spread out across two neighboring islets. Rush was speaking with Command.

If Ash squinted, she could pretend that one of the first stars was their ride home.

But wishful thinking wouldn't get them off this planet.

Rush flicked his fingers at her, ordering her over.

She stepped up to him. He had a map spread out on the ground in front of him.

“Command says to try here,” he indicated a spot on the map to the east. “Your thoughts?”

She looked at him, hesitated. Rush was a good team lead. A good mentor. But it wasn’t an ensign’s place to question orders.

“Judging by the terrain we’ve just slogged through, we’d do better circling north first. East is deeper water. Unless we feel like swimming,”

“Hmm,” he studied the map. “What was your first thought?”

“Sir?”

“You’re not wrong in your assessment, but I want to know what you actually think. Not what you think you should say.”

Ash bit the inside of her cheek.

“It’s not east.”

He looked at her. Waited.

Ash crouched and pointed. “We landed here, circled northwards. Then north-west. Now they want us to cut across directly to the east.”

“And that doesn’t make sense?”

“It’s not that, Sir. I’m sure have their reasons to order us east.”

“But?”

She looked up from the map. Looked around the swamp. One direction was as indistinguishable as the next. But something in her bones pulled sideways, soft and insistent.

She tilted a head to her left, “It’s that way.”

“Southwest.”

“Yes, Sir.”

He nodded, thoughtfully.

“Why, Ensign?”

“Gut feel, Sir.”

It was more than that, but she didn’t know how to explain it.

“Sergeant Bains said you had good instincts.”

She looked at him. He seemed to be waiting.

“Thank you, Sir.”

“We’ll try your way. If nothing else, the water’s shallower that way.”

“If I may, Sir?”

Rush nodded.

“Why?”

He regarded her, “Gut feel, Ensign.”

By mid-morning, Ash was doubting her gut and by noon, was convinced she was mad.

There was nothing here. Just stagnant water, muck, and drowned vegetation.

“One more hour, boys and girls, then we break for our delicious GRIM. In the meantime, fan out. Find us a rest spot if nothing else.”

They automatically moved out in teams of two in an arc covering about 90 degrees.

Ash was with Pottersly, a veteran recon scout and one of Rush’s core team members.

He was abnormally silent as they waded forward. She nudged him with her elbow and raised an eyebrow.

He looked around them warily. Gave the hand gesture for *be alert*.

She nodded, pulling her Plasma Caster off her back, and letting Pottersly take the lead.

The pace he set was glacial. The water barely rippling as they waded through it.

To their right, there was a sharp yell that cut off suddenly, and the familiar zap of a plasma caster sounding. Once. Twice. Then nothing.

Ash and Pottersley waited, but there were no comms. Which meant one pair was either dead or disabled. Grief stabbed at Ash, and she shoved it down. Away.

This is war, cadets, Drill Sergeant Bains' voice played in her head, people will die, and unless you want to be dead too, you mourn them later.

Pottersley jabbed a hand in the direction of the fire.

Unlike the infantry grunts, force recon did not go charging in. Too many unknowns. They'd be converging slowly.

There was no sign of Jiang or Govender. Not even any blood in the water.

There were six of soldiers standing at the assumed last point of contact, and five were silently looking at her.

Crap. She was the officer. Technically.

She scanned the surrounding swamp. By now, the rest of the team would be with Rush, somewhere to their right.

She nodded to continue in the direction they were going. Took point with Pottersley a bare step behind her.

They'd gone about a hundred meters when there was a sharp crack and a splash to the left, followed by eerie silence.

Nothing for it.

She gave the signal to split the team—half to investigate, half to provide back up.

She wanted to be with the investigators, but it had been drilled into her: sometimes you lead from the front. Most times, you lead from the back. Because when everything goes south, they're counting on you to get them out.

The minutes ticked by, slow as syrup.

The three men reappeared. Nothing. She heaved a silent sigh of relief.

Then *something* surged out of the water, landed on Hank Cortez, and dragged him under.

Fuck!

They automatically fell into fighting positions. Back-to-back.

It hadn't looked like an Other. But it sure as fuck felt wrong.

Pottersly's PinPoint gave a high-pitched whine as it charged, and he shot a rail dart into the water where it rippled as something moved through it at speed. He must have missed, because a creature launched itself at them.

It was over six feet long and looked like it was made of glass. Giant and scorpion-like, but designed for swimming, not scuttling.

Three Plasma Casters sounded at once. The creature fell, just as four more joined the fray.

Pottersly's warning shout echoed across the water, then cut off too suddenly.

Ash spun. Sighted, shot, sighted again. The weapon warmed in her hands.

Something grabbed her foot and pulled her under the water. She let go of her gun, grabbed her knife from its sheath and stabbed the creature. Over and over.

It didn't let go.

They were moving at speed, approaching something that hummed, vibrating the water around her.

Her lungs were burning. She needed to breathe. This wasn't how she was supposed to die, damn it!

The vibrations felt like they were tearing her apart. Black spots danced in front of her eyes and without meaning to she opened

her mouth to take a breath...

* * *

“And that’s the last thing I remember.”

Hound’s eyebrows were drawn together, his eyes bright.

“So, you see, Lieutenant Vorsk, you didn’t lose eleven good men on that mission. Between us we lost twenty-two.”

He nodded, slowly. “We’d had no intel there were Tarrascoids on Taurus Prime.”

“Neither did we. May I ask where you found me?”

He looked at her. “On this island. Bigger than any of the others. My whole team had been taken out by those bug-like fuckers. I’d called for extract but was told your LIFE unit was still active. They made me continue.”

LIFE units, or Live Individual Field Emitters, were worn by all ground forces.

“You were half dead. Just lying there next to this weird pile of rocks.”

“Weird?”

“Large black rocks. Three of them. Never seen anything like them, not before or since,” he was silent a moment, then, “They didn’t belong.”

A flicker of memory danced across Wraith’s mind, too fast to grab onto, but unsettling, nonetheless.

“Then the fucking comms wouldn’t work, and I had to drag your ass back through the swamp or they would have left me there to die.”

He didn’t spit, but Wraith knew he wanted to.

She nodded slowly, stood, and saluted him.

“Thank you, Lieutenant. For saving my green ass. And my

condolences on the loss of your friends.” She paused. “And mine.”

He just stared at her—like the ground had shifted beneath him and he wasn’t sure whether to salute or sink.

She didn’t wait to find out which he chose. Gave him a final, curt nod and stepped out.

The silence heavy behind her.

Chapter 23

Kael was in a foul mood.

His post-mission dressing down from Vice Admiral Brandt had gone... poorly.

This despite submitting a dense—if incomplete—report on their Perdition op, packed with more intel on the cult than SID had gathered in years.

When he'd mentioned that, Brandt had smirked at him and informed him that if there were actually anything *meaningful* in Kael's report, he would have been informed of it. Which meant the fucker hadn't even bothered reading it.

Which, in turn, made him question why he bothered writing it in the first place.

Then Brandt had informed him that he had two weeks left to show enough progress to justify keeping this *experiment* going.

Two weeks to do what he was realizing might be impossible.

They had lost Spook and Shade. Phantom was literally living up to his name.

He finally understood why mapping the Inbetween was a pipe dream, and now Patch informed him that all her work on the Fold Shield technology had been for nil.

How the fuck was he supposed to keep Wraith alive?

The comm began to beep. Insistently.

High priority communication. Brandt again?

He schooled his face into parade ground neutral. Accepted.

There was static, which was unusual. Then a voice stated: "Enter response for encryption key ranger-oblong-zero."

Kael blinked. That was the encryption for *ultra* top-secret comms.

Even as a Major, he wasn't typically cleared for it. That level of access was reserved for Commanders and the Admiralty.

Not something that would normally come his way.

"Kael-Veyne-Helios-emerald-nova-starfish."

"Authenticated. Stand by."

The screen blinked into unrelieved gray.

"Helios." A low voice greeted him. "Sit."

He obeyed, wary. This was a shadow call—be seen but not seeing.

"Sir."

The silence lingered. Kael could imagine the person at the other end studying him.

"Do you know who I am?" the voice asked. Low, probably male.

"No, Sir."

"Good. Now, do you know why you're talking to me?"

"No, Sir."

A shorter silence.

"You're talking to me, because *I'm* the person that reads all reports tagged GEO. I'm curious why you used it."

Kael's pulse kicked up a notch. He knew a threat when he heard it. And honesty was only safe play.

"Former Ghost *Shade* suggested I do so, Sir."

"And do you always follow instructions from insane cult

leaders, Helios?”

Kael winced before he could stop himself.

“No, Sir.”

“Glad to hear we managed to train that one out of you. But it does beg the question: why did you do so this time?”

Kael paused, sifted through his memories and impressions of Perdition.

“As you’ll see from my report, Sir, Shade’s knowledge of SID internal operations far surpassed what he *could* reasonably know.”

“You thought he was an asset?”

“No, Sir. Even Tethered, I don’t believe Shade could be controlled.”

An understatement of note.

“So, you think a leak.”

“Yes, Sir. I tagged the file GEO to see what or who appeared.”

More silence.

“And you found me. Congratulations, Helios. Do you think that I’m the leak?”

“I couldn’t say, Sir.”

“And that answer, Veyne, is why I green-lit your operation with Captain Raine. You take chances others won’t take. And you’re just insubordinate enough that she might respect you.”

There was no safe answer to that.

“Your impressions of the good Captain?”

The very slight irreverence in the man’s voice was tantalizingly familiar. Not in a way that said he’d met the man behind the voice, although it definitely reminded him of something or someone.

But he had no time to dwell on it.

“Unpredictable but not erratic. Expert tactician. Best damn

pilot I've ever seen."

"Yes, I read that part. Not many people have survived punching out of the Fold directly into a planet's atmo. In fact, your little hard landing brings the total to three. What else?"

He paused, cursed himself for revealing a weakness they could exploit. "Damaged, Sir."

"Far more surprising if she weren't, don't you think?"

Not the response he was expecting.

"Yes, Sir."

"Can she be repaired?"

"With respect, Sir, she's not a Void-damned engine."

This time the silence went on long enough that Kael wondered whether they had been cut off. But he sat, stock still, and waited.

"What are your next steps, Major?"

How far to push this?

"Honestly, Sir, I have no damn clue. Priority is to find Phantom, but there hasn't been a sighting of him in several months. And with the deadline that Brandt has put down, it's impossible to meet our other objectives."

"What of the other two Ghosts?"

"There have been no signs of Geist in years, Sir, and Spirit is believed to be dead. Unless you have extra intel to share?"

The ghost of a chuckle echoed from the screen.

"Nothing to add there, Major. But I do have a tip for you on Phantom."

Kael sat up straighter, "Yes, Sir?"

"You need to spend more time in the Void, Major. You may not find him. But she will. If he doesn't find her first."

The comm cut off and the screen went blank.

Kael stared at the blank screen; fingers white-knuckled in his lap. Not moving. Not breathing.

What the fuck just happened?

Chapter 24

“Do I need to ask about the *second* person you banged?”

Wraith echoed the question that had gotten them through the Fold the first time. From the back seat in the Banshee, Kael growled.

“Very funny.”

They had just launched from the *Eventide*, and he couldn’t claim to be looking forward to going back Inbetween. He was wired and queasy, caught between excitement and dread.

How was Wraith so calm?

“You’re not worried after what happened last time?”

“Oh Void, I *am* going to have to ask you, aren’t I?” She gave a low, amused chuckle, “No, Helios, I’m not worried. That wasn’t my first Fold collapse. It won’t be my last. And let’s face it, when the last one happens? I won’t be around to worry about it anymore.”

The first wisp of true nausea echoed through him.

“That’s less comforting that you might think.”

His tone was dry, but the words were pure truth.

She sighed loudly.

“So, tell me about the second person you banged.”

He couldn’t see her eye roll, but he could hear it.

And that calmed him more than her words.

“That was more than I ever wanted to know about the fourth-floor conference room at Phobos,” Wraith kept her tone plain-tive, but damn that was amusing.

She’d had briefings there; the mental image of the Major under that table would forever add color to those memories.

“You going to share yours?”

Her second lover had been Zane. Her third—and final—had been Phantom. Somehow, she didn’t think he’d want to hear details of either.

“Nope. We’re in, and you seem to be holding it together.”

The Inbetween was calm, like the surface of a lake. If it hadn’t been for the feel of the place and the sudden lack of stars, she’d have thought they were still in real space.

“It’s so different from last time,” Helios said in a quiet voice. “Before the collapse, I mean.”

Her smile was soft as she let the Void pull her. “It used to be like this a lot more. In the beginning.”

“What changed?”

Screaming. Tearing. Crashes of silent sound and backlash from hell.

“Same thing that always happens when you try to control the uncontrollable. We broke it.”

Kael collapsed on his bed. Exhausted but still too wired to sleep.

The week had been brutal. Twice-daily Tunnels Inbetween. Each for a longer period of time. Followed by neural scans. And he still had to get through his normal work.

Considering he was sitting for most of that time, it shouldn’t have been as tiring as it was. But despite clear scan results, each

trip left him more drained. More weary. More anxious.

It was a nameless dread layered on top of the very real worry that he was running out of time. Less than a week left to meet Brandt's deadline.

The Fold was magnificent. And terrifying. And completely unpredictable.

And Wraith treated it like an old friend.

Tension he hadn't realized she was carrying bled out of her every time they punched through.

She'd shown him the dark calm centers of absolute, almost haunting silence. The stable rifts where you could see real space but that would rip you to shreds if you were foolish enough to enter them. The auroras that danced and merged and danced some more.

The Fold had started to collapse twice. She got them the hell out both times. *Not* into a planet's atmo.

The first time he'd thought they'd have to wait to be picked up, but Wraith had told to watch and learn. And then she'd flown for a while and Tunneled *back in*.

And the Fold was calm again. Except both times, he'd felt something at the edge of his consciousness—a prickle that said the collapse hadn't stopped. Just moved.

Patch's excitement about the data they collected had given him a migraine.

Then he'd tried to find out how they'd *broken things*, but either the files were above his clearance, or they didn't exist.

And Wraith wouldn't tell him.

He rolled over, stared at the ceiling. He needed sleep in the worst way. Couldn't take a drop-tab, because there'd been too many *deleterious effects* when traveling Inbetween afterwards.

But he needed something. Connection. Clarity. Anything to

break the crush of inevitable collapse.

He cursed and stood.

It was a terrible fucking idea.

But he was desperate enough to try it anyway.

Wraith opened her eyes as the door chimed.

She sat up, orientated herself, glanced at the time. She'd been asleep less than thirty minutes.

And no one ever came to visit her.

There were no klaxons blaring, no running feet or the shudder of hyperspace jump warm-up procedure.

So, no emergency.

She stretched and stood.

At least it would only take a few seconds to kill her unwelcome guest. Then she could get back to sleep.

Wraith's face was annoyed when the door slid open.

"Oh, it's you."

There were worse greetings. Not that he could think of any right now.

He gave a half smile, already regretting the impulse he'd known was stupid. "You sound disappointed."

"I was going to murder whoever woke me up. But seeing as it's you, I'll have to settle for breaking a few ribs instead."

She frowned, "Which is not nearly as satisfying."

"Sorry, I'll go," he turned back to the corridor.

"What do you want, Major?"

Helios turned his face to her. There were dark circles under his eyes. And they'd been deepening all week.

Shit.

"I... just wanted to talk. Sorry I woke you."

Her fingers drummed on the door.

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

She glanced at them, the sudden dissonance between body and mind stopping her short. Morse code was ancient. Used on earth centuries before they'd conquered the stars.

She'd used it as a mental exercise during her imprisonment. And she'd just unwittingly typed out the short code for *wait*.

Fuck.

He was almost back to his door.

"Major."

He turned. She jerked her head, "Come on."

Wraith's room was sparse. Technically, that was true of all military quarters, but most people left something of themselves.

Here, there was nothing. Even the bed was still made, pristine. Only the pillow on the floor hinted that she'd slept at all.

"I thought you said you were asleep."

"I was."

He sat on the bench by the desk, which was empty except for her data pad. She chose to sit on the floor by the pillow, which she threw back up onto the bed.

"So, you made your bed before answering the door?" he gestured to the tucked and unwrinkled blanket.

She shrugged like it didn't matter, "I sleep on the floor. Force of habit."

He stared at her. His fatigue-fogged brain struggling to make sense of her words.

"Stop looking so horrified, Helios. Here is a lot cleaner and warmer than my last set of long-term accommodations. I'm fine."

But he wasn't.

His body shifted before his brain registered the movement, and he sat down next to her. Looked at her.

"I'm sorry."

She met his gaze, gray eyes unreadable, then she shrugged and looked away from him. Eyes fixed on nothing.

"So, what did you want to talk about?"

Chapter 25

“Fuck, I don’t know. Does it matter?”

Wraith glanced back at him. He’d crossed his arms on his knees and was leaning his head on them.

“I don’t know,” she told him quietly. Leaned slightly to the right and nudged him ever so gently with her shoulder. “Does it?”

He shrugged but his voice came out raw, stripped bare. “I’m just so fucking tired, but I can’t sleep.

“I’ve had nightmares before. The real kind. My teeth still ache from the cold on Iveros—five days without food, marching through ice. That kind of pain, I know what to do with. But the Fold?”

He shook his head. “It’s like something’s watching. Waiting. Like I’m coming apart molecule by molecule and just pretending I’m still here. How do you stand it? How the fuck can you *like* it?”

Wraith closed her eyes. Leaned her head back against the wall the way she had countless times in her cell.

Part of her still hated the man next to her. Part of her respected him. Another part actually liked him. And the last part... she wasn’t thinking about.

And right then, none of that mattered.

Because this unraveling of the soul he was describing was something she intimately understood.

Without opening her eyes or giving herself time to reconsider, she put an arm around him, pulled him to lean against her. Spoke softly.

“When I first went into the Fold, it was like coming home. I don’t know how to explain it. It was like... like I’d been out of phase with the world my whole life, and suddenly everything snapped into place. Then I came out again and—”

She laughed bitterly. “It was like being flayed. On the inside. That’s when I realized real space was what felt wrong. What was wrong. So, I lived for the moments I spent Inbetween. Felt like I was dying the rest of the time.

“This was before I was part of Ghost Command. I had just been modified to improve my chances of surviving the Fold, and the navigating was a side effect. Not design.”

She gave the barest shrug, “Probably why you can’t replicate it.”

For several minutes there was nothing but the sound of breath and heartbeats.

“Do you still feel like that?” he asked her.

He didn’t raise his head. Didn’t shift position. Didn’t move away.

So, she told him the truth.

“No. But I was headed straight for full-on Inbetween Psychosis. Hell, I was probably 90% of the way there.”

“What changed?”

“The GHOST program. Being in Ghost Command... stabilized things. Brought me back to a balance.” She paused a moment. “It had the opposite effect on some of the other teams they tried it on.”

"I don't have access to the unredacted files, if they even still exist. And the ones I can see didn't have that much in them that *wasn't* redacted. I think I told you that both program locations were destroyed."

"You mentioned."

She wondered how much to say. How much would he use against her? But if he died, she was dead anyway.

"You're leaving too much of yourself Inbetween, Helios. That's why you're feeling like this. It's why it keeps getting worse."

"But I don't feel better there. Not like you did. I feel worse."

"You're fighting against it. Which is probably why you haven't gone completely off the deep end yet."

"So, what do I do about it? It's not like we have a team program anymore."

There was one way she knew to anchor him. One way she absolutely knew worked. But to do it to Helios? That terrified her more than anything.

Not the thought that he might die. That would almost be easier.

What scared her... was that he might survive it. And then what?
Shit.

There were no good options. Either she tried it during their next Tunnel or he'd be dead in days. And so would she.

"First, you need to get some sleep."

"Can't sleep."

Damn it, Helios.

She did *not* want to do this.

Without warning, Wraith pulled her arm back and stood. Where

the warmth from her body had been was a wild, stinging loss.

"Up," she told him briskly.

She'd already given more than he'd expected. He had no right to want more.

Kael pushed to his feet, nodded at her without meeting her gaze.

"Thank you. I appreciate it. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Void help me, you're an idiot," she muttered, then grabbed his arm before he could step away.

"Lie down." She pointed at the bed.

"Uhh—"

"To repeat what you told me in *Perdition*, Helios, I'm not trying to fuck you. I'm offering to hold you. And it's a one-time offer, so lie down and shut the fuck up."

Of everything she'd said so far, this was by far the most shocking. His heart was pounding as he sank onto the bed.

"On your side. Face the wall."

He obeyed. Could do nothing else. And when she wrapped herself around him, the sigh he couldn't stop escaping was half relief, half surrender.

This felt like coming home.

"Why didn't you ever test the Tether?" he asked her.

"I did."

Somehow, it didn't surprise him. "When?"

"The Folly. When you were chasing Rina. As you can tell, the Tether worked well enough for me to stick around."

They lay in silence. Kael could feel his body relaxing, his mind finally letting go.

"I'm sorry for that too," he murmured. "For the Tether. For all of it."

She tensed at his words, but sleep was already taking him, and

if she replied, he didn't hear her.

Chapter 26

The Fold echoed with stillness—a soundless hum beneath his skin. Colors pulsed in the distance, soft as a dream. It was peaceful. Calm.

Wraith was not.

She had been tense since she'd woken him when she'd rolled off her bed and exited her quarters without a word.

How do you thank someone for giving you exactly what you needed? Especially when you're the last person they ever wanted to give it to.

He still didn't know. So had said nothing.

He could hear her tapping her finger on the yoke, rapidly and repetitively.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap-pause. Tap-pause. Tap-pause. Tap, tap, tap.

“What's with the tapping?”

The sound ceased immediately. Followed by a soft curse.

“It's a long story.”

“We have time.”

A pause.

"No, we don't."

The tapping started again. Slower this time, and only one repetition.

"Look, Major. *Helios*. The Fold is going to kill you. You have days. Maybe. If you're lucky. And you're going to take me with you."

He started to speak but she cut him off.

"Don't interrupt. I know what I'm talking about. And I *also* know one thing we can try that might stop it. Again, Maybe."

She fell into silence and the tapping resumed.

There were so many things he could say. Should say. Couldn't.

"It's risky," he guessed.

"You might say that."

"Well, if I'm dead anyway, why not just go for it?"

"Because if it works, you won't be the same. And I can't undo it."

"Undo what, Wraith? Help me understand."

In the distance, the aurora bloomed. Violet and green and pink.

She barked a humorless laugh.

"You can't."

"Are you talking about becoming one with the Choir like Shade was talking about?"

Another laugh. Almost ragged.

"Actually, that's close. But no. This isn't the Choir's brand of subsumption."

She breathed deep. "I do this, Major, and it works? You become like me. A Ghost. Half in. Half out. Forever."

"I don't understand."

"I know."

Whatever she was feeling ran deep. Not anger—maybe fear.

And he'd been so sure she'd had all of that scraped out of her long ago.

He wanted to see her face. Couldn't. So, he leaned forward and reached over the seat to put a hand on her shoulder.

"Ash?"

Her voice was a whisper and almost fragile. "I've told you not to call me that."

Wraith swallowed hard.

Helios hadn't moved his hand. Hadn't said a word. Just held the space, as if she hadn't handed him a death sentence and a possible life sentence in one breath.

Her finger tapped out SOS again. She couldn't stop herself.

Then she lifted her hand and placed it over his. For just a moment. And in that breath, that brief contact, she let it go. The last, bitter dregs of her hatred.

Not for the system. She'd hold that grudge until her final breath.

But for him.

Against all odds, Golden Boy had turned out to be that rarest of creatures.

A good man.

If somewhat misguided in his loyalties.

She put her hand back on the yoke, pushed the Banshee forward, and looked out into the Fold.

Distant auroras flared, the silence steady and strangely comforting. Her pulse settled. She was ready to make peace with whatever was coming.

"Okay, Helios. We're going to fly for a bit." Her voice was steady now. Doubt was gone. It would either work, or it

wouldn't.

If it didn't, she'd be past caring. And if it did?

Well, she'd burn that bridge when she came to it.

The cabin felt different. In an instant the tension had vanished, sucked out like air vented to space.

He kept his hand—still tingling from her touch—on her shoulder a moment longer. Drew it back.

"What now?" he asked.

"Now? I need you to lean back and close your eyes. Focus on my voice. On the feel of the Void."

"The Void? Don't you mean the Fold?"

"Helios... did you really think they were different?"

Uh, what?

The Void was at the core of spiritual belief. The Fold was the Inbetween. The idea that they were one and the same was somehow... heretical. And he did *not* consider himself a religious man.

Somehow, he managed to huff a laugh, "Believe it or not, yeah. I did."

"My voice, Helios. Focus on it. And let me know when you feel the *Fold* change."

"Change?"

"You'll know it when you feel it. Now shut up."

"Can I say thank you first?"

A beat of quiet. "You just did. Now close your eyes and hush. Try not to think."

He laid his head back. Closed his eyes. He had no idea what he was supposed to be feeling. Was just starting to analyze it when Wraith started talking.

“The Inbetween’s an ocean under the surface of real space. Most of the time, we skim the shallows. But when you dive deep... the whole ocean changes.”

Her voice seemed to resonate; a concordance with the fractured hum of the Fold that was always just beyond his reach.

“The depths are different. They don’t just hum. They echo. Go deep enough? They *sing*.”

She seemed closer, somehow. He could almost feel her wonder. Her resolve.

Something seemed to settle on him. In him.

And he could feel the ebb and flow of the Inbetween.

It was—not alive. So much *more* than alive. It existed. It *was*.

Then it changed pitch. Like a tuning fork had been dropped into deep water.

Something was coming.

He opened his eyes, “Uh, Wraith?”

She didn’t move, but it felt like she’d been jerked away from him like a snapped wire.

“Oh fuck,” she said flatly.

Then he saw it. The largest Other Ship he’d ever laid eyes on rising like a monument beside them.

Wraith would have cursed herself, but there was no time.

She yanked the yoke hard to starboard, the whole cabin lurching with the strain. A sickening vibration passed through the frame of their Banshee that was not designed to operate this deep.

If they punched out here, they were dead.

If they stuck around: dead.

And just when she’d thought they might actually survive.

Reaching for him had been working.

Sluggish. Strange. But working.

They were integrating.

But she'd been so focused on Kael that she hadn't even felt the Others.

He had.

She pushed as much speed out of the Banshee as it would give. Rising from the depths far too fast. She could hear Kael gasp for breath.

Shit.

She was going to kill him before the Leviathan could.

A quick roll of the Banshee and they were diving again. Kael's breath evened out a bit.

"What... the fuck?" His voice was hollow, disoriented.

"Later."

Now they just had to survive. Her only hope was to outrun them.

And that hope died a second later when the Banshee shuddered once... and then just fucking died.

The Leviathan rose, and swallowed them whole.

Chapter 27

The murmuring was driving her fucking mad.

It was there, just at the end of awareness. Perpetual. Unreachable.

And worse, she was back in a *fucking cell*.

Not one of her better days.

Kael—no, *Helios*—was still alive. Presumably. Unless the Others had some way of interfering with a Tether.

Wraith sat down with a thump. The floor was a smooth white material that glowed with some strange inner light. The walls and ceiling were the same. There was no sign of a door.

The wrongness of *wanting* the Tether to still be in place chilled her even more than being back in a three-by-three-meter room.

Why the fuck did they always make cells that size?

She'd assume he was alive until proven wrong.

And why couldn't she keep hold of her own thoughts? They kept slipping, no matter how hard she tried to hang onto them.

She pushed her hands to her temples. The physical pressure did nothing to relieve the crushing mental weight.

She was on an Other Ship. A big, fucking, Leviathan Class Other Ship. And by the feel of it, there were a *lot* of Others on board.

She needed to think. Couldn't think.

Wanted to hit something.

Now *that* was the best idea she'd had all day.

She stood and slammed her fist into the wall. Which did nothing to the wall, but pain blossomed through her hand and for a moment, the overwhelming *presence* of the Others flinched back.

She smiled the way Shade would; like someone about to start a holy war with their bare hands. Turned a 360 in the room with her hands held out. She didn't know if they were watching, but she hoped so, because the idea of it felt fucking good.

Then she hammered the wall again. Heard the crack of bone. Felt the mental flinch again.

It seemed the Others weren't used to pain.

But pain had been *her* companion for longer than she cared to remember.

She clenched her fist, almost reveling in the near-blinding intensity and the grating, crunching sensation of fractured bones rubbing together.

A quiet swish sounded behind her, followed by a breath of air and a voice that stopped all thoughts in their tracks.

"I wish you wouldn't do that, Ash."

She turned, each movement suspended, like the air itself had thickened.

The one voice she'd most needed to hear for the last five years. The one she had never been able to fully convince herself she'd hear again.

Was here.

On an *Other* ship.

Opening doors like he owned it.

He looked the same. Still huge. Somehow graceful. His dark

face serious, but with a softness around his eyes as he looked at her.

In her head, she ran to him and collapsed into his arms like the past five years hadn't carved her hollow. Locked her lips to his and kissed him hard to make sure he was real. *Reached* for him. Found him again and made everything okay...

Instead, she stood still.

"Elijah," she murmured, the name anchoring and unmaking her all at once. "Or do you still prefer Phantom?"

He smiled at her. That smile twisted in her chest like the dull edge of a blade.

"Don't I get a hug?" he asked quietly.

She fought not to shake. Not to think. Not to feel.

Fought hardest not to move.

She didn't know if this was real. It couldn't be.

And if it was? Then the universe was even more fucked up than she'd given it credit for. And she was also completely screwed—just not in the fun way.

"Where's the Major?"

His smile dimmed. She swore she saw hope die in his eyes before he turned away, hands falling to his sides.

"This way."

There were no guards in the corridor, but the parallel to meeting Kael for the first time was not lost on her.

And now she *couldn't* move.

Every step forward felt like it would cost more than she had left to give.

But as usual, she had no choice.

So, she swallowed hard. Centered herself as best she could. And followed him out.

Kael lay on what she tagged as a medical bed. Face pale. Eyes closed. Breathing even.

Elijah loomed beside her.

There was no sign of anyone else, but the murmuring had started up again at the edge of her awareness.

“You’re keeping him under?”

“He’s reacting oddly to the Void. We’re monitoring him. He’s stable, and in no immediate danger.”

We’re monitoring him.

He may not have meant the statement as a threat. But Wraith had too much experience not to treat it as one.

“Come on, let’s fix your hand.”

She turned to him. The physical pain was so distant from her current reality that she’d forgotten it was broken.

He walked around to the other side of a nearby bed and tapped a few controls.

A light flared, too bright, and dimmed again.

“Here,” he patted the bed. “Just put your hand here.”

He smiled—and she felt him then.

Not reaching, not pushing. Just... there. Sad. Tired. Hopeful.

*Void save her, it **was** him.*

“How are you here?”

Her voice cracked; she knew was very close to losing it.

He shrugged, “Kind of a long story.”

And that just... pissed her off. Five years and a thousand different ways of grieving him, he says *that*?

She stepped forward and slapped her hand down on the bed, too furious for the pain to register.

“Well, unless the rules of engagement have changed drastically; I’m not going anywhere.”

She looked up at him, her gaze hard, ignored his mental flinch.

“You may as well get started.”

Chapter 28

“I mourned you, Ash.”

Wraith’s hand was prickling where Phantom was doing... something to it. He spoke quietly, looking down as he said it, and the careful shield of anger she had just built up shattered.

“Void damn it, Tom, are you *trying* to kill me?”

She couldn’t hold back the tears. Didn’t bother to try.

He looked up at her, reached out a huge hand and brushed a tear carefully off her cheek.

“It’s true. And I was so fucking angry at you, Ash.”

“Yeah.” She managed a half smile. “I kind of got that.”

“Why?”

His voice was ragged. Haunted.

All these years, and it had *never* occurred to her that he wouldn’t know. Hadn’t figured it out.

She raised her good hand, mirroring his, wiped the solitary tear that had escaped off his cheek.

“My Wasp clipped debris when I punched out. I couldn’t Tunnel. So, I figured—go out with a bang. Maybe save a few lives.”

She shrugged.

“The bang part worked. Saving lives? Apparently not so much.”

Phantom looked down, and they both dropped their hands. He fiddled with the instruments for a moment, and her broken hand jumped as stinging pain shot through it.

Then it eased.

Phantom walked cautiously around the bed. Paused. Reached for her like she might shatter. And when she didn't stop him, when she stepped in and wrapped her arms around him, he broke.

Kael felt... wrong.

Asleep, maybe. But not dreaming.

Or maybe dreaming someone else's dream.

It was like he was aware of everything except himself.

*Of Wraith, so close he could reach out and touch her...
but never reach her. So wrapped up in pain. Her own, and
another's.*

*Their grief—and love—woven together in a fragile
harmony.*

But the edges were frayed.

It wouldn't hold.

It hurt to see it. To feel it. Whatever it was.

Beyond, the Void was singing.

The sound curled through him, strange and familiar.

He thought he'd go and listen for a while.

Wraith and Phantom sat together. Gazes locked.

Holding hands.

Behind them, he'd turned a wall transparent, letting the Void provide a backdrop Wraith might have appreciated in different

circumstances.

She'd thought she'd never be whole again.

Fucking hated that she was right.

She scrounged up a half smile, as if Phantom couldn't feel her
heartbreak as clearly as she could feel his.

"So, when do I get to meet her?"

Chapter 29

Another section of the wall slid open, seamless as breath, and *she* stepped through.

Wraith looked at her with the strange juxtaposition of seeing her through her own eyes, and through Elijah's.

She was tall. Taller than Wraith, and lean almost to the point of being too thin. Her hair was long, dark and tied in a thick waterfall that fell down her back in soft waves.

Her eyes were large, the irises almost as black as her pupils. Her cheekbones were pronounced. Her skin pale to the point of translucence.

She was beautiful.

And she was Other.

Elijah smiled and reached out a hand to her; his other held Wraith's tight like he had no intention of ever letting it go.

The woman glided forward, and as she reached them, a section of the floor rose to form a seat for her that would put her at the point of a triangle between her and Elijah.

She smiled softly as she took his hand, sat down, and placed her other on Wraith's.

"Ash..."

He glanced at the woman. Back to her. His voice was gentle.

"This is Seori. My wife."

The second Seori touched her, resonance flared: echoing, joining. Wraith felt her as deeply as she felt Phantom. Knew Seori felt her, too.

It was intimate as hell, and it should have been violating. But it wasn't.

Seori mourned *with* them. For the love they'd shared, and lost, and could never regain in the way they both still wanted.

Which made her a much better person than Wraith. Void, it probably made her a much better human, even though Seori clearly wasn't.

"You know," she told Elijah, "when they talked about crossing enemy lines, I don't think this is precisely what they had in mind."

He chuckled, the low wry laugh she'd heard so seldom and loved so much.

It had always struck her as funny that Zane's laughed boomed, and Elijah's was soft. As if they'd swapped mannerisms to be deliberately annoying.

She found she was crying again.

Closed her eyes against the two-way burn of longing between her and Elijah, and the three-way collision of love and grief between all three of them.

"Will you give us some time?"

Seori's voice was soft, kind, and rock steady.

She felt Elijah's hesitation.

Not rising from lack of trust or any type of concern. Just his bone deep need to not let her, Ash, out of his sight.

Ever again.

He'd have to get over that.

He chuckled again as if she'd said it aloud.

Of course, she didn't have to.

Then he squeezed her hand and gently let go. His presence didn't fade, but his touch on her mind receded.

"I'll go and check on your Golden Boy."

He touched Seori's cheek, and left them alone.

"Would you like to walk?"

Seori had let go of her hand. Wraith could still sense her, but not in the visceral way that Phantom's presence still resonated. Instead, it seemed she was feeling Seori *through* Phantom.

She looked up at the ceiling.

You know what? Yes.

Yes, she would very much like to walk. Possibly run. Almost certainly scream.

"Please."

They stood together. Seori lifted a hand and the wall slid open again, revealing a long corridor.

For several minutes they walked in silence. The air was cool, dry, and tinged with something metallic. Not blood, but not exactly pleasant either.

Somewhere beneath her own thoughts, knowledge that wasn't hers was surfacing—Elijah's understanding. Seori's knowing. *These Others* didn't just use their ship. They were part of it. And of each other.

That explained the damned murmuring.

Which was still annoying the hell out of her. The temptation to hit the wall again, to hit out at them *and* to drown out her own emotional pain was growing with every step.

The corridor curved toward what looked like a dead end. But the wall slid open again—responsive, not mechanical.

As if it had been waiting for them.

The Void sang to him—haunting, melodic, almost too beautiful to resist.

It offered everything:

Peace.

Purpose.

Demanded nothing in return.

Only that he let go.

The room they stepped into was large. Living quarters, if Wraith were any judge.

And nicer than anything she'd seen on *any* ship. Ever.

A kitchenette and dining space with real furniture; cups and plates still on the table.

A massive viewport that welcomed in the darkness and the echoes of the Void like a guest.

And an area with couches—*actual* couches, not benches—and a low table with...

She stopped. Stared.

Were those books? Real paper-based, Void-forgotten books?!

"Tea?" Seori asked her.

And... the Others drank tea.

Somehow that, just that, was finally a step too far.

"With respect, Seori, who *the fuck* are you?"

Where there had been only harmony, a tiny dissonance stirred.

He paused—

Caught between peaceful promise...

And something stronger.

Seori passed Wraith a steaming, fragrant cup of tea.

Invited her to sit.

Wraith lowered herself to one of the couches, moderately worried that it might eat her whole.

Seori's eyes danced with amusement, all directed at her, and she sat with a grace that Wraith could never hope to match. The woman studied her with obvious and unexpected fondness.

"You're everything he said you were," she said, eyes warm. "And so much more."

Wraith searched for something to say. Found... nothing.

To buy time, she had a small taste of tea. It was rich and reassuring, with a hint of citrus. It was, without a shadow of a doubt, tea.

She placed the cup carefully down on the table in front of her, looked up at Seori, and spread her hands helplessly.

"It's overwhelming. Elijah felt the same way when he first came here."

"How... *did* he come to be here?"

"He came looking for us. But what he found wasn't what he expected."

"No shit," Wraith muttered, and Seori's laughter was like water spilling over rocks.

The Other woman leaned back and studied her.

"We're more tactile than most of you. It aids understanding. But I don't think you'd be comfortable with that just yet."

"A safe assumption."

Seori gave her a delighted smile. "Then, I'll just ask you to stop me if you need more detail or clarification. If that's okay?"

There was cold fear whispering over her skin, coiling in her gut.

Truth was a dagger as often as a hearth.

But Wraith needed to hear it. All of it.

So, she nodded.

"When we first met, Elijah was broken. Not just his body, but his mind. His soul."

Tears welled in the woman's eyes at the memory.

"He'd been diving deeper and deeper into the Void. Trying to find us. To take revenge on us after losing you." She sighed quietly. "He came after us, not to win—but because he couldn't live without you."

Wraith wiped a tear from her own cheek.

The stubborn fool.

"I couldn't tell you what his plan was the day he finally found us—because he didn't know himself. But find us he did. A single-man attack craft against a Kraken."

Seori gave her a look that was three parts exasperation, one part admiration.

Wraith blinked. "Kraken... it's this ship?"

"Its type, yes. A creature of the deep."

Wraith hesitated, instincts and impressions colliding. "It's really alive, then?"

"In a manner of speaking. Perhaps we'll show you."

She smiled again, "More tea?"

Kael

—if that was who he was—

hesitated

at the Edge of Beyond.

He turned

what was not his head.

And

listened...

The re-filled cup was warm in Wraith's hands but didn't touch their chill.

Fear saturated her; completely irrational as she *knew* he survived.

"What did he do?"

"He could probably give you the technical details. But as I understand it... he tried to ram us."

Wraith stared.

Then she started laughing. Deep, helpless laughter that carried all the way to her bones.

She couldn't stop. Tears followed.

If someone had told her that Shade or Spook had done it, she would have whole-heartedly agreed.

Spirit or Geist? She'd have been surprised, but would have accepted that they had their reasons. Albeit on completely different ends of the spectrum.

Her? Well, she'd already proven once that she was capable of a literal suicide run.

But Tom?

To do the stupidest thing she could possibly imagine? Even *knowing* he'd been suicidal?

She'd be more likely to accept Colonel Brandt's romantic dinner invitation than believe that.

But it was true.

Seori raised her hand in a resigned, *what can you do?* motion, which only served to set Wraith off again.

Eventually, she wiped her eyes, amazingly feeling... better. She blew out a breath, half-laugh, half-sob.

"I'm guessing that didn't work out so well."

Chapter 30

“Depends how you define *well*,” Seori said, then paused. “And whether you mean short term, or longer.”

Wraith snorted.

“Do you make him laugh, too?”

Seori beamed, her pleasure briefly washing over Wraith like a wave at the shore. “On occasion.”

“Good. He needs to laugh more.” She picked up her tea, looked at Elijah’s wife. “So how did you two crazy kids meet?”

He floated.

Contemplated eternity.

Calm...

or Chaos?

And was it ever really a choice?

“I’m a doctor. I don’t know if you picked that up earlier.”

Wraith shook her head, but wasn’t surprised. She’d met a few doctors before who radiated care and competence the way Seori did. Healers, in the truest sense.

“His attack wasn’t exactly successful. But he was able to

breach the outer defenses. So, by the time he *didn't* hit us," she added dryly, and much to Wraith's surprise, they shared a smirk, "his ship was broken and his body with it."

Seori shook her head sadly, "The Void is not kind to strangers. Even strangers who are sometimes friends. And I'm sorry to say that a lot of the time, neither are we."

So, I should be grateful I'm here drinking tea instead of back in that cell... or worse. Got it.

"He was brought on board. More, I think, to find out whether more of you were coming than out of any duty of care. But care for him, I did, according to the Oath I swore."

She paused, took a long swallow of tea as if steeling herself against the memories to come.

"Healing his body was easy. But he would not speak to us. Would not let us in. He just watched. And blocked. And waited. I've never met another with a will as strong." Her gaze met Wraith's, "Until today."

How the fuck do you accept a compliment from your ex's Other wife?

"Thank you. I think."

Seori laughed at her, "Void, he missed you. He once told me that he loved you before he ever kissed you. That you taught him how to fight and how to feel, sometimes in the same breath."

The dagger was back, wrenching through her heart.

Seori's gaze sharpened, realization dawning on her face. "I can't apologize. You shaped the man we both love into who he is."

Wraith closed her eyes against the pain and against the truth she couldn't deny any longer; whispered, "So, have you."

Something in the darkness was breaking.

Was it him?

Or was it—

Seori's eyes were kind as she nodded in acknowledgment.

For a moment, Wraith hated that she *could* be kind. Hated that she'd already lost a battle she didn't even know existed, to an enemy who wasn't an enemy. At least, not to her.

Her voice was still too quiet as she asked, "So what happened next?"

"They did what armies have done to prisoners of war for millennia: put him in a cell. Tried to forget about him."

She gave Wraith a sly look, "It took him a lot longer than you to start hitting the walls."

"What can I say, I'm a prodigy."

The musical laugh again. "I can believe it. It was... distracting. And I got so angry. I'd just spent so much time fixing this damn man and here he was damaging himself again and again."

"You guys get angry?"

"Oh, you have *no* idea. We'd been knocking him out to heal him, but eventually I lost my temper. Stormed in and yelled at him for a while. Maybe longer than a while. He stared at me like..."

"Like he'd seen a ghost?"

"Yes."

"Yeah, I used to do that to him."

"I know." Her smile was not-quite apologetic. "That's how it started. It was a long journey from there. Longer still to build trust with the others on the ship. But Elijah's nothing if not persistent."

Threads of insight had been twining together as Seori talked. There was something beneath, a greater truth that she could almost grasp.

“Who *are* you, Seori?”

Seori leaned forward, held out a hand. Wraith hesitated, then took it.

The rush of connection reasserted itself. Not deep, just enough to give weight—to give truth—to words.

And with it, the universe reared up and punched her in the face. Again.

“We’re you, Ash. We’re human.”

Kael slammed back into his body—hard, like the Banshee crash on Perdition. He jolted upright, gasping.

The world spun.

A giant of a man stood over him, dark-skinned, serious, radiating concern.

“You!”

He knew him.

Thought he knew him.

His mind reeled. His body was starting to shake.

Didn’t matter.

“*Where is she?*”

They were still clasping hands.

Wraith reeling. Seori anchoring.

This wasn’t crossing enemy lines. This was finding out the line had never been real in the first place. It undid the reasons for almost everything she had ever done.

Then something whispered through the bond that felt like Phantom. Along with something else.

Seori smiled at her and squeezed her hand, but Wraith could feel the shadow of her unease.

“Your Golden Boy is awake.”

The murmuring started up again the second they entered the corridor. Wraith hadn’t realized it had stopped.

She lifted a hand, pointed at the ceiling, “They’re not in your head the whole time?”

“That would drive us all mad, don’t you think?”

“It’s already driving me fucking nuts.”

“Here,” Seori stopped and held out a hand again. “Let me help.”

Wraith halted. Blinked.

Why the fuck not?

She took Seori’s hand, felt the woman do... something. It reminded her of pushing away a *reach*. Refusing the connection.

And the murmurs quieted.

They were still there. Accessible if she looked for them, but otherwise ignorable, like the low roar of engines or the quiet rush of wind.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. If you were feeling more... yourself, you wouldn’t have needed me to help at all.”

A crash sounded in the distance, and Phantom’s frustration resonated across Wraith’s consciousness along with a jagged, terrified anger she could only assume was Helios.

Seori sighed and pinched the bridge of her nose, her calm cracking just a little as she spoke.

“Oh dear.”

Chapter 31

The SID Major in Kael wanted intel from Phantom. The Helios part wanted situational control.

Unfortunately both those parts were buried deep under the all-consuming desire to *fucking murder* the man.

And if he had been even slightly more in control of himself, the hulking bastard wouldn't have him in an unbreakable strangle hold a foot above the ground.

"Well, this is awkward."

It was Wraith's voice. He could feel her now.

He stopped fighting against Phantom, and instead fought for breath.

"Major, if I tell Elijah to drop you, are you going to behave?"

"Honestly?" he gasped, "It's fifty-fifty".

She didn't sigh. Didn't say anything. But the pressure on his neck eased, and gravity reacquainted itself with him and he landed on his ass on the floor.

He surged—staggered—up, but Wraith stepped between him and his target, who even now was slowly backing away.

His head was spinning. Thoughts fracturing like the light between the Void.

And he toppled forward as darkness rolled through him. He thought he felt her catch him.

Then there was nothing.
Again.

“Can you lift him back up here?” Seori asked her.

Helios was currently dead weight in her lap. His collapse shouldn’t have taken her down too, but her catch had been as awkward as his chaotic flailing in Elijah’s arms.

“Sure.”

She reached an arm under his back, hooked her hand beneath his armpit and lifted him enough to free her legs. Knelt. Slid the other arm under his knees and pushed to her feet.

“Fucking hell, Major, you weigh a ton.”

She staggered forward and laid him on the bed. His head bounced a little harder than she’d intended. She stepped back to give Seori room.

Elijah was standing at the far end of the room, staring at them. She could feel a clash of emotions from him without being able to name them.

Because suddenly Helios was being too damn loud.

Mind screaming despite being unconscious.

What the actual fuck?

She looked up at Seori, who was squinting at some kind of instrument and wincing.

In fact...

She reached out and touched the collective she’d only just pushed away. Yep. They were reacting too. Poorly, by the feel of things.

“That’s bad, isn’t it?”

“Could you... could you touch him again? Skin to skin?”
Seori’s voice was strained, and Elijah rushed forward to stand

behind her and place his own hand on her shoulder.

She exchanged a glance with him. He had no clue either.

She placed her hand on Kael's cheek.

It was cold.

Too cold.

The roar faded from thunderous to rolling.

Seori looked at her, the pinched look fading slightly. She didn't have to ask aloud, Wraith knew what she wanted.

She just... didn't know if she could do it. Not with Elijah right there.

He brushed a finger over her cheek, soothing, and a mental barrage erupted from Kael. Elijah stepped smartly back from her.

Fuck.

Fuck, fuck, fuckity fuck.

She kept her hand on Kael's cheek, kept her eyes on Elijah's. Unzipped her flight suit and shrugged out of the jacket on one side, swapped hands, and did the other.

Seori was carefully doing the same to Helios.

She wore a sleeveless vest under her suit—*thank fuck*—because she was *not* getting naked in front of Elijah.

Not now.

Seori had removed Kael's vest, leaving him bare from the waist up, but fortunately seemed content to leave his pants on.

Small mercies.

Both Elijah and Seori's gazes were drawn to Kael's scars. She could feel their questions.

Had no answers.

"Any chance this thing can expand a bit?" Wraith asked of the bed.

Seori tapped the data pad she held, and the bed widened with

a whisper, forcing Wraith to lean over it or risk losing contact with Kael.

She stared at it a moment longer, weighing the intimacy against the necessity. Then climbed on, slow and stiff, like she was facing a firing squad instead of a mattress.

Carefully, she slipped her arm under Kael's neck and shifted onto her side. She lay her head on his shoulder, wrapped her arm over his chest, her hand resting on his heart. Swung a leg over his.

Ignored the pained reaction she felt from Elijah. Didn't look at him.

Couldn't.

Kael took a shuddering breath, the kind you take when you've almost run out of air and can finally breathe again, and his mind quieted.

"How long do you think I'm going to have to stay like this?" Wraith asked. "Because it seems kind of a... temporary solution at best."

Four hours brought no answers, just a rising tide of frustration bouncing between the three parties currently conscious, and about a thousand new questions.

As long as Wraith stayed where she was, Helios remained stable.

If she moved away from him, he started *emitting*, and Seori and the collective went into apoplexy.

If Elijah got too close to her, physically *or* mentally, Helios would start thrashing and his mind would scream.

In fury.

Which wasn't awkward in the slightest.

At least the malleability of the Other ship meant she was able

to use a swiftly created bathroom in record time, while Seori clutched her head, and her husband glared at Kael like he'd personally engineered the scene just to spite him.

It turned out that protein bars tasted the same regardless of where in the universe they were produced. It had been the easiest thing to eat while lying down.

Under normal circumstances, they would have just tranquilized him into oblivion. But his neural patterns showed that he was already in an unconscious state, despite every evidence of awareness.

Wraith wasn't uncomfortable.

At least not physically. Everything else, on the other hand...

"I need to get some sleep," she told Seori. "Think that's going to be an issue?"

"I... no. I don't think so. His mind is locked on you, but I think it's protective. He hasn't lashed out at you once."

Who he *had* lashed out at remained unsaid, and was currently glowering out at the Void through the viewport.

"You both should get some rest too. Or at least—" she tried to think of a polite way to put it. Failed. "—leave."

"I'm not leaving you alone with him."

Phantom's voice was vibrating with emotion. She heard Seori walk over to them. Felt their unspoken conversation without hearing the content.

"Fine!"

He stalked out of the room, snarling like an angry bear.

"Nice to see some things haven't changed," she muttered and Seori chuckled, low and tired.

"*Reach* out if you need us, Ash."

"I will."

The not-door swished closed, and the room dimmed.

"Where are you, Major?" she asked, letting her fingers brush his cheek, then trace the scar from a wound that must have missed his heart by centimeters.

She was so damn tired, exhausted on every possible level.

"Third time we've ended up like this," she muttered. "People are going to talk. And you know Shade's never going to let us live it down."

She sniffed quietly, let the tears fall and felt them pool in the hollow of his collarbone. She brushed them away.

"Come back, Major. Wherever you are. For the first time in five fucking years I've seen my family. At least some of them. But it turns out that I'm more alone than ever."

She laid her hand over his heart again and closed her eyes.

"Please come back to me," she whispered, and let sleep take her before the agony drowned her again.

Chapter 32

Kael's arms were tightly wrapped around Wraith. He kissed her hair before he realized he wasn't dreaming.

He didn't know where they were.

Nor how they got there.

But Wraith was real. Solid, breathing, and warm against him.

More real than he was.

More real than anything.

She was draped heavily over him; the still, deep sleep of the drugged or the terminally exhausted.

He hoped to the Void they hadn't drugged her again.

They?

Had he been awake before?

Fragments stirred at the edge of memory, just out of reach.

He cast his mind back to the last firm thing he could find: his hand on Wraith's shoulder in the Banshee. Hers held briefly over his.

She'd told him to listen to her voice. To feel the Void.

Static flooded through him, saturating every nerve. A comms signal out of frequency.

The Void.

It was there. It knew him now.

His breathing became shallow, and his arms jerked reflexively

tighter around Wraith. He might have been her Tether, but right now, she was sure as fuck his anchor.

She shifted a little, mumbled something he couldn't hear.

He let himself loosen his grip, just slightly, and she relaxed against him. He took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of her hair and letting it ground him.

Where the fuck were they?

He stared up at the ceiling then carefully turned his head to look around the room without disturbing Wraith.

It was dark, but not so much that he couldn't make out high beds and unfamiliar equipment—definitely a MedBay, but not like any he'd seen before.

Something scratched at the edges of his memory, begging to be let in. To be remembered.

But before he could grab it, a door he hadn't seen slid open, letting warm light and a huge man into the room.

Their gazes met and the man stopped in his tracks and raised his hands, signaling he had no ill intent.

"I wasn't expecting you to be awake," he whispered. "That's twice I've made that mistake. It's becoming a bad habit."

Kael knew him.

From pictures. From his file. From... somewhere else.

"Phantom. I guess she found you after all."

Phantom lowered his hands but made no move to come closer. "So you're not planning to attack me again?"

Kael's brows drew together. "Should I be?"

The big man sighed. Glanced down at Wraith in Kael's arms. *She'd been his.*

The realization hit like an ice storm on Iveros. Sudden and inescapable.

And he'd been hers.

Something deep in him, something feral and fierce he didn't understand, bared its teeth. Ready to fight for something he couldn't even name.

He pushed it down, jaw clenched painfully.

Not his call to make.

"Maybe we should talk," he suggested to Phantom, and shifted to let go of Wraith.

"Uh, why don't you stay there for the moment, Major," Phantom said quickly. "I'll bring a chair."

"When you said *bring a chair*, I really wasn't expecting one to just pop out of the floor."

Kael kept his voice low, even though Wraith showed no signs of waking.

Phantom was watching him the way Brenkoff had watched Wraith on their first return to the *Eventide*—ready to shoot if he even breathed wrong.

Not saying anything.

What in the Void was going on?

"Do you know where you are?"

"Not a Void-damned clue."

The echo of a smile passed over Phantom's lips.

"Okay, what do you remember?"

Kael looked out towards the wall, towards the Void.

Tensed.

"Okay, maybe we'll leave that one for later," the big man told him carefully.

He was definitely nervous about Kael, but why?

"You're not dead, then."

Not the best opener in the history of the galaxy. But it was a start.

Phantom looked down at himself as if surprised.

"You know, I think you're right. How did that happen?"

Kael rolled his eyes, "Is sarcasm a side effect of being a Ghost? Or was it an entrance requirement?"

Phantom chuckled. It was quiet and suited the man about as well as Shade's booming laugh suited him.

Not at all.

"Definitely a requirement. Just not a listed one," he paused, "that I'm aware of."

Phantom glanced down at Wraith again. He'd been doing it every thirty seconds or so. It seemed compulsive. Like he was assuring himself she was still there.

Kael considered it.

The Ghosts loved each other.

They were closer than any unit he'd ever encountered, whether because of what they were or something else he was only beginning to understand.

He'd seen it with Spook. Again with Shade. And now, with Phantom. But this was different. More.

This was a man watching someone else hold his soulmate like a lifeline.

And Kael was holding onto someone that could never be his.

"You still love her."

Phantom smiled, "Always."

"She still loves you."

It hurt to say it.

Tomorrow, he'd pretend it didn't.

"I know."

Kael nodded his head without meeting Phantom's dark eyes and shifted out from under Wraith, pushed himself carefully off the bed.

Phantom's hand grabbed his arm before he'd fully let go of her. The man was fucking fast.

"That's *really* not a good idea," he hissed.

Kael felt a spike of emotion. Concern, anger, fear, regret. But it *wasn't* his.

Then Phantom let go of him and the sense faded like a dream.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that right now, she's about the only thing that's stopping you from mentally tearing this ship apart."

Wraith felt Kael *and* Elijah.

Heard them whispering.

She opened her eyes and blinked in the dim light. They were standing on either side of the med bed, staring at each other. Kael's hand was still resting on her leg.

"Oh for fuck's sake," she cursed as she sat up. She looked at one, then the other.

"You know what? I don't care. I'm tired. Go kill each other, but do it *somewhere else* and let me get some *fucking sleep*."

Elijah's lips twitched. Helios pressed his together.

She felt their concern and, *Void help them*, their amusement.

It would take time and effort to kill them herself. But then Seori would probably be sad, and Wraith would be dead.

So, she did the next best thing.

Flashed her arms up, grabbed each man by the back of their heads and smashed them into each other with a satisfying crack. It wouldn't have worked if either were remotely expecting it.

"Figure yourselves out," she told them and jumped off the bed.

She paused just long enough to make sure that Kael's mental

voice remained quiet, then she marched out of the room and down the corridor.

Seori's couches had been comfortable. And as long as the idiots remained in MedBay, maybe she'd let Wraith crash there.

Chapter 33

The door to Seori and presumably Elijah's quarters slid open in front of Wraith, revealing the *Other Wife* herself.

"They're in MedBay. They're morons. They're probably trying to kill each other."

She rolled her eyes.

"Can I crash here, or can you please just put me back in my fucking cell so I can get some sleep? Otherwise the Major's little mental temper tantrum is going to feel like a Void-damned lullaby compared to what I'm going to do."

Seori stepped back with a small smile, "Through there," she pointed to a wall that did not have an opening in it a second before. "Guest room."

"I'm not even going to ask about why a spaceship has *guest rooms*. Thanks."

She walked across to the new door, spoke without looking back, "If he starts melting down again, wake me."

The room beyond was small, containing a wide bed with a deep, lilac comforter on it and a tall counter along one wall. It smelled floral and comforting and alien.

"Or just kill him. Whichever is easier."

The door closed on the sound of Seori's laughter, even though Wraith wasn't joking.

She collapsed face down on the bed. It was soft and welcoming. Much softer than her bunk on the *Eventide*.

Exhausted tears rolled down her cheeks and she screamed into the pillow for a long, long time, letting everything out.

Then she rolled onto the floor.

Curled up against the wall as she had nearly every night since her parole.

And finally slept.

Kael and Phantom—“Call me Elijah,”—sat on opposite sides of a round table in a small mess hall near what Elijah had confirmed was a MedBay.

Not *the* MedBay.

“So, when you said *mentally tearing the ship apart*, was that a metaphor?”

Elijah had served them bowls of soup from a large pot on the galley counter. Very good soup. Kael was starving; was already on his third bowl and his body showed no signs of being satiated any time soon. He wondered how long it had been since he’d eaten.

“No, I meant that completely literally.”

Kael tilted his head, spoon hovering over his bowl, and considered the man.

“How? I exhibit exactly zero signs of psionic ability. I know. I’ve been tested. And anyway, it’s so rare, it’s practically a myth.”

“You work for Strategic Intelligence, don’t you?”

“Am I wearing a sign? Because every member of your team has clocked me within seconds of meeting me.”

Elijah stroked his temple to indicate Kael’s optics.

"It's pretty obvious if you know what to look for."

"And how *do* you all know what to look for?"

Elijah shrugged, "SID ran the GHOST program. It's not like we didn't engage with your colleagues on a regular basis."

Kael shook his head, mildly annoyed but not sure why.

"I'm getting off topic again. You were going to tell me how I was somehow going to destroy this ship—this very large ship by the looks of things—with my confirmed non-psionic brain. And also how Wraith was somehow stopping me."

"I never said I was going to tell you."

"And now you sound like Shade."

Elijah chuckled again, "Where do you think I learned it?"

Kael closed his eyes for a moment. Ate more soup.

He was feeling more like himself. Just struggling to focus. The missing memories were crowding nearer, but he wasn't ready to face them yet.

"Will you tell me?" A beat. "Please?"

Phantom's gaze sharpened, "That's a word I didn't think SID officers knew how to say." There was bitterness in his voice. Old and scabbed, but never healed.

Funny how almost every member of Ghost Command seemed to be two people. Rina and Spook. Zane and Shade. Elijah and Phantom.

And Wraith.

Kael waited. Finished his soup.

Phantom got up and fetched him another bowl.

"Thank you."

"We're going to need Ash for this conversation," Phantom, no, *Elijah* told him eventually. "I can make some guesses, but it's conjecture. Also, Seori will want to hear it directly."

"Seori?"

“A doctor.” He paused. Looked down at the table almost sheepishly. “My wife.”

*The Choir was whispering to Wraith. Insistent. Incessant.
She needed them to shut the fuck up.*

“You have a wife?”

Elijah nodded.

“And you still love Wraith?”

“I told you, already. Always.”

“And your wife is... okay with this?”

Elijah smiled fondly, and Kael could almost feel the love and affection he felt for his wife, “She’s always known. She saved me when I couldn’t save myself.”

“But... who do you choose? *How* do you choose?”

Phantom’s eyes locked onto his. The shift was immediate. Razor-edged.

“My choices are not the question here, *Major*.”

The tone was identical to Wraith’s.

Phantom stood. His face was a mask, but tension radiated, clear and dangerous.

“We should get some rest. Come on.”

There was something strange about the ship they were on. It wasn’t a design that Kael had ever seen or even heard of.

The faint vibrations of the engines were there beneath his feet if he took the time to feel for them, but everything else was... off.

It wasn’t a military ship.

It wasn’t a typical civilian cruiser or transport.

And he’d seen no other crew, even though the ship was large enough that they had been walking for several minutes down a

long, curving corridor with no doors.

Another oddity.

“What type of ship is this?” he asked Elijah, who had settled back into himself as they walked.

“It’s called a Kraken.”

“Never heard of it.”

A small smile appeared on Elijah’s face. “It’s not what you’d call... common, Major.”

A door slid open ahead of them. Perfectly blended into the corridor wall. Beyond was a large, comfortable living space. Definitely civilian.

Elijah raised a finger to his lips and crossed to open *another* disguised door. He poked his head in with a half-smile, and reared back in shock.

Kael double-timed it to him. The man’s eyes were huge in his dark face.

At first glance he thought the room was empty. Then he spotted her, asleep, curled against the wall.

He sighed, looked at Elijah.

“Almost five years in a bare cell on a floating prison,” he told him softly. “Four months out. Comfort is as foreign to her as the Others are to us.”

Elijah winced.

Then, he carefully stepped into the room, bent down, and lifted Wraith. She curled into him before he laid her onto the bed. Kissed her temple.

There were tears on his cheeks as he stepped out again and gestured towards her.

“In you go, Major.”

“I can sleep on a couch.”

“No. She needs comfort, no matter how foreign it’s become.”

He wiped his cheek. "And as for you? If you wake up and you're not... you, again. It's better for everyone if she's grounding you."

He turned away from Kael and walked across the living area and through a door on the other side.

Kael stood for a long time, just staring at Wraith. Thought about just sleeping on the floor, like she had.

Thought about Elijah's words. His pain *for* her.

Then he stepped inside with a sigh that was lost as the door whispered closed.

Ever so carefully, he lowered himself onto the bed. Wrapped himself around Wraith the way she had done for him.

"Four times, Ash," he murmured. "People are going to talk."

Chapter 34

A loud curse, a startled cry and a crash had Wraith instantly awake and out the door.

She burst into the living area at the same time as Elijah from the opposite end of the room.

Seori was pressed against the counter, wide-eyed, her breath coming in sharp, silent gasps. Shards of a broken teacup glittered at her feet like shrapnel.

Helios was standing in the living area, a good six meters away from her, but radiating menace and hostile intent.

Shit.

She surged forward, putting herself in front of Helios, blocking his view of Seori. She didn't look back, but she felt the shift. The soft brush of Seori's fear folding into Elijah's arms.

And she knew his back was towards them as a shield.

She grabbed Kael's face in both hands, fingers digging into his skin.

"Major!"

She didn't often use her command voice, but it was good to know it was still effective. His eyes jerked to her; the mental assault she didn't think he was even aware of cut off like it had never been there.

It was jarring. And terrifying.

She jerked her head back to her room. He tried to pull away.

"Now, Major."

For a second, he deflated. She'd probably find that amusing later. Then he yanked himself back out of her grip and disappeared through the door.

She glanced at Elijah. She could just see the top of Seori's head on his huge shoulder. Could feel his anger, which was growing. Her fear, which was slowly subsiding.

"I'll deal with this," she promised them, and followed Helios through the door.

"I don't know if you noticed," Kael snarled, "but that's a fucking *Other* in there."

Wraith's eyes flashed as frustration and anger roiled through her. That he *knew* what she was feeling was less important than other factors at the moment.

He added it to the list of things to yell at her about.

"If you hadn't just tried to murder her, *Major*, I would've introduced you," she snarled back.

"I was nowhere near her, *Captain*."

Her eyes narrowed at him, "You want to fight, Major? Fine. Let's fight."

She raised her voice and glanced towards the door, "Could you increase the size of the room a bit?"

The room shifted, doubling in size, and he jumped back in alarm.

"Thanks!"

She turned back to him, started stalking towards him.

He held his ground. "What *the fuck* is going on?"

She smiled with teeth, and not the nice kind. "Quit whining

and fight.”

And she threw a punch at his face with more speed than finesse. He dodged, but she still caught him a glancing blow on the cheek and for a moment he saw stars.

All reason drained out of him as the need for violence overtook rational thought. He charged her, catching her around the waist and slammed her against the wall.

She chopped her forearm against his neck. Blackness threatened and he dropped her. She swept his feet out, but he rolled before her follow-up stomp could connect. Not that her bare feet would have done *that* much damage.

He hoped.

He grabbed her ankle and yanked her down with a crash and a curse. She landed on top of him, already swinging.

He took the first hit—let the momentum carry his head to the side—and smashed his elbow into her side, just below the ribs, knocking her off him.

Her *oof* of pain was deliciously satisfying.

He rolled to the side, on top of her, using his knees and feet to lock her legs down. He pressed his forearm down above her collar bone, pushing on the nerve, and slipped his other hand under her neck to drive a knuckle into the base of her skull, which he knew from experience caused disorientation.

She stilled, blinking at him. Bared her teeth. Refused to tap out.

He smiled. Fuck, he'd needed this.

As he looked down at her, something shifted.

The anger didn't fade—it twisted. Coalesced into heat.

Wraith saw the second Kael's cold anger shifted into something

hotter and far more dangerous.

Much too tempting.

Felt the desire as it surged through him and slammed into her like a wave.

She didn't resist. *Didn't want to.*

Could do nothing *but* feel as he lowered his head, gaze fixed on hers, and claimed her mouth.

It was like being devoured by a supernova.

His grip loosened, and she raised her arm to hit him. Found herself grabbing a handful of his hair and pulling him closer.

Just one more minute.

She lost herself in him. In *them*.

But a cold, logical part of her waited. Watched.

Knew it had to end.

On a silent oath she bit his lip, hard enough to taste blood. He lifted his head, raised a brow, clearly undeterred.

And she smashed her forehead into his nose and pushed him off her.

She scrambled to the far wall. Heart racing, breathing ragged.

Feeling... she had no fucking clue what.

His nose was bleeding. His eyes were watering from the pain. And she watched as the man reemerged, confused and broken and bleeding.

He sat back against the wall, leaned his head back.

Pinched the bridge of his nose.

Eyes still wild, but his voice came out raw.

"What the fuck is happening to me, Ash?"

Chapter 35

Her name on his lips hit her like shrapnel: fast, sharp and impossible to ignore.

She flinched.

It was that or kiss him again. There was no middle ground.

He saw the motion—clearly misunderstood it. “Sorry. I know. Wraith.”

She couldn’t tell him it was okay. Because it wasn’t.

Even though in that moment, it was all she wanted.

She just couldn’t trust *why*.

“I think we... need a minute,” she told him.

His laugh was so stricken, it was like being cut, “Maybe more than just one.”

She nodded. Closed her eyes and knuckled away a tear that had somehow escaped.

She couldn’t feel Phantom or Seori.

Thank the Void.

Phantom’s feelings were about the last thing she needed to add to the mix right now.

But she needed calm in the worst way. And with sparring *categorically* off the table, she’d have to find another outlet.

“Just... ignore me for a bit, yeah?”

She took his silence as assent.

Kael watched, slightly awed, as Wraith worked her way through a slow, smooth physical routine. She moved with her eyes closed—part gymnastics, part calisthenics, part war on gravity itself.

He was ragged.

Wrecked in the worst possible way.

And heading towards numb.

He knew if he could just close his eyes, he could get there. Could sink below the pain and the ghosts into the well of cold silence that lived at the bottom of his soul.

Instead, he clung to the shape of her. The motion. The hushed noise of not being alone.

When had she stopped being *the* mission and become *his* mission?

He was very much afraid it was before he'd even opened the door to her prison cell.

Which meant that his aunt—insane as she was—had been right.

And he was screwed.

When Wraith opened her eyes, she was calm again. Not as calm as she *wanted* to be. But calm enough.

It would have to do.

Kael—*Helios*, damn it—was sitting where she'd left him. Watching her. Eyes and presence unreadable.

She wanted off this fucking ship. It was hard enough managing her own shit without others—and *Others*—leaking into her head. At this rate she was going to have a Void-damned breakdown.

She paused, considered the last two days.

A bigger Void—damned breakdown.

Why hadn't she just stayed in that cell?

She let herself take a slow, cleansing breath.

First order of business, make sure that Helios didn't kill Seori.

Second, stop Elijah from killing Helios.

Third... third she'd have to make up if and when they got there.

"So, funny thing," she told him, "it turns out the Others aren't aliens like we thought. They're human."

Kael stared at her, jaw hanging open.

"I'm sorry, what?!"

She spread her hands wide, sat on the edge of the bed.

"I know, right? Who knew?"

She stilled suddenly, and her eyes bore into him, "*Did you know?*"

"Wraith, fuck knowing. I don't even think I *believe* you."

She regarded him. Every line of her body was calm, and her face was so relaxed, she could have been talking about the fucking weather.

"Yes, you do," she told him. "You just don't want to."

Don't want to believe her, she meant.

No, I fucking don't. It's not fucking possible.

That was when something inside him opened; a window slammed wide. And people came flooding in. Dissonant. Shouting. And—

He blinked.

He was lying on the floor. Wraith was kneeling next to him, her hand hot on his skin under the collar of his shirt.

What? How—?

"We need to talk to Seori," she muttered. "The sooner, the

better.”

She met his gaze, and he could see, could *feel* her concern. And not just for him. Which kind of sucked.

Her eyes narrowed like she'd heard him.

“Okay, stop,” she told him. “Stop thinking. Stop feeling. Stop *emitting!* This fucking feedback loop is driving me crazy.”

“I don’t understand.”

Believed her. But didn’t understand.

She bent closer and looked in the eye.

Not too close. Not close enough.

“I said, that’s enough!” She seemed to push him away, even though she didn’t move.

“Now, I’m going to speak, and you’re going to listen. Got it?”

He nodded.

“One, Seori is *Other*, yes. She is also human. Somehow. If you don’t try to kill her again, then maybe we can ask about it. Yes?”

He considered. Nodding seemed the safest course of action, so he did. Just one sharp tilt of his head.

“Two, she is Elijah’s wife. Threaten her again and he’ll kill you. Which will kill me. And none of us, *including* Elijah, want that.”

He could agree with that, even if—

“Three, we are on an *Other Ship*, near the bottom of the damned Void. So, even if you do manage to kill both Seori *and* Elijah, we’re still fucked. And I *will* kill you if you do that. Got it?”

*They were **where?**!*

Also yes. Yes, he did.

“And four, something is happening to you. I don’t know what,” she looked away, “but I’m the one that triggered it.”

“How?”

She shrugged, looked back at him. "By trying to save you. And now, we need to fix you, Major. Fast."

Wraith stood up, hand tingling where it had lain on Helios's chest. She held it out to help him up and he hesitated, just for a moment, before he took it.

"They're human."

Not a question.

She pulled him to his feet. Answered anyway.

"Yes."

"Fuck."

"Yeah," she said. "That was pretty much my reaction too."

Chapter 36

They stepped out into the living area again. Wraith followed close, her hand wrapped around his bicep and feeling like his tether to reality.

The irony was not lost on Kael.

Phantom and the *Other* woman, Seori, were seated on the couch. She gave him a small, calm smile. Phantom's eyes promised a painful and not-too-distant end.

How the fuck did someone end up marrying—
Wraith's fingers tightened on his arm. Not support.

Warning.

"I'm sorry," he told the woman.

She and Phantom rose. Seori stepped half a pace forward, Phantom's hand resting on her back. "I'm Dr Seori Tommasi."

Her eyes swept over him, then Wraith.

For a moment he was hyper-aware of his cuts on his face. The swollen lip and broken nose. Of the bruises blossoming on Wraith's skin that he'd put there.

"Oh, for the sake of Void," Seori lifted her head to the ceiling. He could see her lips moving. Counting, he thought.

She looked between them, threw her hands in the air.

"What the fuck did you two do to yourselves?" She demanded, with a small stomp of her foot. Spun to face her suddenly

grinning husband.

“And you? You think this is funny? I healed them both yesterday.”

“Guess you weren’t kidding about your temper,” Wraith noted.

Elijah had saved her more times that she could count. Returning the favor cost her nothing.

Seori whirled on her, stalking forward.

*Okay, maybe not **nothing**.*

She stepped forward to put herself between Kael and Seori—just in case.

Seori jabbed a finger towards her face, reminding her of Patch.

“Despite what I can only assume they taught you somewhere, violence is not an acceptable substitute for therapy.”

“Quicker though,” Kael muttered, earning himself a *look*. Seori had some good ones.

“Elijah, take them to the MedBay and sort them out. I’ll make breakfast. *Do not* put any more bruises on him.”

“Yes, dear,” Elijah’s tone was repentant, but his amusement practically sang. Wraith didn’t even need to *reach* for him.

“That includes before you get there.”

His face fell. Seori was still staring at her, so Wraith managed to keep her expression parade ground neutral.

“Yes, ma’am,” Elijah muttered and tilted his head to the door. They followed him out into corridor.

“She didn’t say anything about broken bones or internal hemorrhaging,” Phantom mused. “Or bleeding at all, now that I think about it.”

Wraith laughed and nudged him with her hip, causing a weird resonance between the three of them. It ricocheted between

them, hissing and static, and faded slowly.

She took a deep breath. "Right, not doing that again. Shall we?"

An hour later they were back in the Tommasi quarters, sitting at the table and eating what was honestly the best breakfast Wraith thought she'd ever had.

Eggs and bacon that almost certainly came from actual animals. Fluffy pancakes with purple-staining berries. Coffee that didn't taste like engine fuel.

If all their food was like this, then she could see the appeal of staying.

Next to her, Helios ate silently. He'd slipped back into *broadcast* mode while she'd showered. Apparently, telling him that they were on an *Other* ship at the bottom of the Void was not her best tactical decision.

Now, she sat with her knee pressed against his under the table and doing her best to ignore the way her stupid pulse jumped every time he reached down to touch her leg to center himself.

The intervals were getting shorter.

Almost certainly a bad sign.

She couldn't feel Elijah or Seori. Couldn't even touch the murmuring collective of the rest of ship's residents. Everything she had was being spent containing the man next to her.

Finally, everyone's food was gone.

"To business," she said with a look that dared anyone, namely Elijah, to disagree.

He met her gaze and smiled.

Helios put a hand on her thigh. Left it there.

Elijah's brows drew together.

She had to bite off the suggestion that they might like some

alone time together. They'd probably take her up on it and she was *not* some fucking prize to be won.

Wraith ignored the men and looked straight at Seori. Her hand white-knuckled in her lap. Jerked her head towards Kael and kept her voice was steady.

"How do we fix him?"

It was getting harder to concentrate. Seori's voice seemed to be coming from very far away and he couldn't make out the words.

Wraith's, on the other hand, were crisp. Delivered in that post-mission debrief tone you got to know really well in SID.

Phantom was still present. Always fucking present. But quiet. And outside, if he let himself listen, the Void howled his name.

Helios reached over and grabbed the hand she'd been gesturing with. She glared at him over the interruption, and her breath caught as she realized that wherever he was, it wasn't here.

She was going to have to kill him.

The weight settled over her like a shroud.

Seori didn't know what was wrong. Didn't know how to fix him, if he even *could* be fixed.

And it was becoming more and more obvious that the hour-glass was on its final grains of sand.

"Is my Banshee still in one piece?"

"Ash?" Elijah's voice had her opening her eyes. When had she closed them?

"My fighter, Tom, is it still in one piece? Or can you loan me one? Give me one, actually. Because you're probably not getting it back."

His confusion morphed into pure horror.

“No. No fucking way. Not again. Not happening.”

Seori reached out to him, but he batted her hand away and leaned forward, towards Wraith.

“You are *not* doing this.”

She met his gaze. Pulled her soul into the thinnest possible thread. *Reached*. She had to make him understand.

Kael stilled.

“He’s losing it, Tom, we don’t have days. Fuck, I don’t even think we have hours. You need to let me get him off this ship. Now.”

She could feel his pain, knew he could feel hers in the way she hadn’t let touch him last time she... left him behind.

“The Void was killing him *before* we came down here. It was *why* I brought him down here. But we’ve just run out of time.”

Seori’s presence joined Elijah’s as she placed her hand on her husband’s. Her pain echoed through the bond, sharpened by fear, but tinted with something else.

“Wait,” she said, “what do you mean he was dying before you came here?”

Wraith tore her eyes away from Elijah and looked at her.

“We pushed him too far. Too fast. Too hard. The Void was eating his soul.”

Seori’s face was bewildered, so Wraith glanced back at Phantom, “You know what that feels like.”

He nodded, thoughtfully. The calm tactician had surfaced, was reviewing all angles. It was... comforting.

“Why bring him down here?” he asked.

She raised an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

For such a smart man, he could be dense as hell. It only took

him a couple of heartbeats to figure it out.

“Did it work?”

Seori’s head was bobbing between them. Out of her depth and trying to catch up.

“It was starting to. Then a Void-damned Kraken rose up and ate us.”

Chapter 37

“So, you didn’t completely integrate?”

Kael heard Phantom’s voice. Clear, calm, familiar.

But not with his ears. He was hearing it through Wraith.

That should have disturbed him.

It didn’t.

It felt like nothing could.

“Yeah, we got a little distracted.”

Understatement, Captain.

“What’s integration?”

Seori.

Yes. Good question. He’d like to know that himself. Hoped he wouldn’t have to create a report on it.

“Pretty much what it sounds like. And not so different to your.... coexistence. But more—”

She faltered. He felt her searching for words.

“It’s a conscious choice, Se.” Phantom again. “We figured out how to do it as a team. The first time all six of us were in a Fold collapse together.”

Wraith managed a wry smile as the memory smashed through her.

“Yeah, what’s a small war crime between friends?”

Elijah rewarded her snark with a snort, but there had been nothing funny about that mission.

It also wasn’t going to help Kael, or save Seori and her shipmates.

“So. Ship?”

“Wait, wait.” Wraith felt the ripple of Seori’s command through the bond she still shared with Elijah.

He cracked his neck at the same time she did to shake it off. She met his eyes, grinned.

Stilled.

“We don’t have time,” she told them both as gently as she could. Let them feel her conviction. Her understanding.

“We’re going to *make* time!” Seori slapped her palm down on the table.

“You can do that?” Elijah asked his wife, and she glared at him.

Wraith smiled. Somehow, even at the end of her road, there was still room for amusement.

“Explain integration to me,” Seori ordered. And it was an order.

Wraith raised her eyebrow.

Glanced at Phantom, let him know to take point. He sighed.

“Do you want the story or the science?”

“Start with the story. You’ll just get the science wrong.”

“And maybe give the short version,” Wraith added.

He glowered at both of them.

“Fine. As a team of six, we hadn’t been flying together long. A month. Maybe a bit longer.” His voice was resonant. Wraith had forgotten how good a storyteller he could be.

“We were given a mission. Carry a new kind of bomb into the

Inbetween. Detonate it. Record the results.”

“For science,” Wraith quipped.

“For science,” Phantom agreed, although Seori did not. “So, we did. I still don’t know what it was. But it caused a rupture. And then another. And then a cascade effect.”

“We’d scattered,” Wraith continued as he trailed off. “Trying to outrun it. There was no way we were going to make it. Then someone—”

“Spirit.”

She looked at him, “Really?”

“Yeah, pretty sure.”

“Okay. Spirit’s voice erupts over the comms. Tells us to dive, to converge on each other.”

Phantom shrugged. “Die or dive. Not much of a choice, so we dove.”

“Somehow, we found each other. Started screaming at each other.”

“Not all of us.”

“My apologies, *Phantom*. Everyone but your husband was yelling at each other,” she told Seori. “Then Shade says, *Do you hear that?*”

She and Phantom both stilled for a moment.

“The Void?” Seori guessed.

“The Choir,” Phantom told her. Not that I knew what that was back then.”

The Void screamed. Kael didn’t listen.

He focused on where the warmth of Wraith’s hand in his should be.

It was the only real thing left.

This was important. Maybe *the* most important.

“It was terrifying,” Wraith continued with a laugh. “All of a sudden there was this giant, rolling roar of accusation. “Like a thousand dead voices trying to crawl inside your skull. I thought I’d finally hit the truly crazy part of Fold Psychosis.”

“Me too,” Elijah confirmed, placing his free hand over his wife’s. “All I knew was that the Inbetween was collapsing, something was coming, and I wasn’t ready to die.”

“We were all thinking that,” Wraith confirmed. “Different nuances. But the same thoughts. And then everything snapped into focus.”

Elijah looked at his wife, “That’s integration, Seori. Multiple parts, willingly joining to form a single whole. Suddenly we weren’t Wraith and Phantom and the rest. We were Ghost Command. It wasn’t scary, it felt completely *right*.”

“And we had access to everything each other had. Phantom’s calm. Shade’s reflexes. Geist’s guile. Spirit’s heart. Spook’s tactics.”

“And Wraith’s flying ability.”

She nodded at him. “We got the fuck out of there. Punched out as soon as we could. A little too close to that moon, but we were still so closely wound together that it didn’t matter.”

Phantom finished the story, “As the adrenaline faded, we seemed to separate again. Geist was the first one to speak. He told us, *Never speak about this to anyone*. And we didn’t. But we learned how to do it again. How to use it.”

Seori stood up, paced. “You’re wrong, Eli. That’s not how we connect. Not even close. What you’re talking about, if I’m understanding it correctly... shouldn’t be possible between

people.”

“I’m sure you can figure it out,” Wraith told her. “Now. The ship?”

“And you didn’t integrate fully with—” she waved her hand at Kael.

Why the hell wouldn’t they just give her the Void-damned fucking ship?

“No, as I said, we were interrupted.”

Seori nodded, back in full healer mode. “Then I suggest that you try completing the *integration* first. Before you irreparably damage my husband’s heart again—and mine.”

III

Containment Failure

If you'd obeyed orders, we wouldn't be here today.

Chapter 38

“You know, Major, it really annoys me that this didn’t occur to me before I thought I’d have to kill you,” Wraith told Kael conversationally. “It would have saved me some emotional fallout.”

They were sitting in the Banshee, which was *miraculously* working again.

She’d won the argument with Elijah and Seori. That if things went south, and they probably would, it was better if they *weren’t* nearby.

At least she got to say goodbye this time.

Flying one-handed was awkward, but she had to keep her other hand at her shoulder, fingers interlinked with Kael’s, anchoring him to her.

She hoped.

She was taking him further into the Void. No doubt a fucking terrible idea. But she didn’t have any better ones.

“How the fuck am I supposed to do this?” she asked him. “I mean. I can already *feel* you. But Void, you are so far away.”

She pulled the Banshee into a sideways glide. Settled it at what felt like a good spot, and shut down the impulse engines.

Leaned her head back and closed her eyes. Squeezed his fingers.

"I didn't plan to like you, you know. You're a senior officer in the Strategic Intelligence Division, that's strike one. You put me on a Tether, strikes two and three.

"And if I needed another, you came across as a desk jockey. Way too pretty and polished to have ever been closer than the fringes of combat.

"But you have, haven't you? Your scars tell a story, and it's not a good one. In fact, it's a lot of really shitty ones."

She sighed. Tried to let her mind wander, let herself feel more than the bone-deep weariness that never let up.

"I was on Ivaros too. A couple of times. Why do they never give us enough rations? I don't think I've met anyone who's been there that *hasn't* had to march through an ice blizzard to get to a rendezvous point. Watching your friends and comrades collapse. Knowing that you can't do a damn thing.

"I tried once. Picked up a rookie. Green as grass. Didn't realize he was full dead until he was half frozen. Literally. Not sure how I got through that one alive.

"Not sure how I got through a lot of things alive. Before I became a Ghost at least."

She smiled, "Did you know that *Hound* rescued me from Taurus Prime when I was an ensign? I didn't. The rest of his unit was taken out. So was mine. That's why he hates me."

The silence was heavy. Maybe she should just shut off the life support. As Ghost Command, they had integrated when they were trying to survive. Aligned thoughts. Feelings.

But he was too far gone already.

"I had a sister," she found herself saying. "Not Rina. A blood sister. A twin. She died young. We were four or five and she got sick. I don't even remember her."

She idly tapped KN—*over to you*—on his hand in Morse code.

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

Over and over again.

“You told me you had a brother. You said he died on the Onyx. In what was apparently the *final* battle of the war, so maybe I did do something right. You wanted to know what happened.”

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

“Okay, Major, I’ll tell you the story. But you’re not going to like it.”

* * *

Five Years Ago

Wraith ripped the yoke and the Wasp screamed into a 360 spin. The missile that had been tracking her slammed into the Other ship beside her—a design they’d taken to calling a Creeper for the way it slunk into battle.

She laughed in adrenalin-fueled delight as it silently exploded. Flicked the team comms switch.

“Still alive out there, boys and girl?”

The responses were immediate.

“Nope.”

“Nuh-uh.”

“Died a year ago.”

“Never born.”

And: “We’re Ghosts, Wraith. I think the answer to that question is self-evident.”

She dodged debris, aimed for the center of the chaos.

“You know, Geist. I’d have thought being in the middle of a giant fucking space battle would have made you a little less verbose.”

“Pot, kettle,” he snarled back.

“She has a point.”

“Shut up, Shade.”

“Make me.”

Wraith’s smile was feral. She may die at any moment, but she was with her family. It was when they stopped fighting that you had to worry.

“What are we seeing?” she asked. “I’ve got two Creepers and a Moth trying to sneak in from below.”

Phantom’s voice rolled out like liquid velvet, “I have three Wisps,” a pause and a chuckle, “make that two Wisps tailing. They’re holding back, waiting for something.”

“Well that’s just great,” Spook. Annoyed, as usual. “You’re behind us swatting at insects while I’m taking the fight to the Razors on the beam. Four of them. You could do something useful and join me.”

“Sorry, Spook,” Wraith could hear Spirit’s smile. His sheer joy of being alive. “Shade and I are playing tag with the Goliath.”

“It’s ignoring us. Annoying really.” Shade.

“Coming in hot, Spook. And I bet I take out a Razor before you do.” And Geist.

Shocked silence, then, “Not on your life.”

Damn, she loved them.

She may love Tom best, but she loved them all. And being here, at the edge of death? Made her feel so Void-damned alive.

Something pulled on her to right. A flicker.

“Anyone else... feel that?”

Silence. Then Shade’s voice, “The sudden creeping existential dread?”

“That’s the one.”

“Yeah. I think we may have a problem.”

Something shifted. A gravitational wrongness. And then a fucking Leviathan punched out of the Fold. Right into the center of the battle.

Wraith toggled comms to All Channels.

It was chaos. All orders and counter orders as Command tried to adjust from the sidelines.

One voice, colder than the rest, stood out.

“*Obsidian, Onyx, Ebony*, move to Moirai positions. Kerberos lock. Control, initiate Typhon Protocol.”

What the fuck?

No time to puzzle over it. The Leviathan had just released a swarm of Locusts—single enemy fighters—into the fray.

She flipped the comms back to her team channel and pushed her Wasp forward, circling to cover the Onyx as it moved away from the enemy flagship. Engaged some Locusts, destroyed them.

The moments bled into each other. Fire, roll, dodge, fire.

The small Locusts weren’t as fast as her Wasp, but damn, they had a lot of them.

“You doing okay?”

Phantom. She glanced down at her instruments. Private channel.

“Five by five. You?”

“Dancing on the wind. Let me buy you dinner later?”

She laughed and her pulse that had been rock steady, spiked. “You’re flirting with me in the middle of all this fucking chaos? Buddy, with that kind of audacity, I’m gonna be buying *you* dinner later.” She waited a beat, “*Much* later.”

He chuckled and clicked off the channel.

And there was another excellent reason to live.

She’d taken out five Locusts at once by making them chase her and then yanking on the yoke at the very last second, pulling her up and over the Goliath. They weren’t quite so lucky. And the Goliath gained a nice hole in its hull.

“Swarm is thinning,” Geist’s voice, “but they’re prepping for something.”

Wraith looked at the Leviathan. It was shifting, turning. Its shields seemed impenetrable. Not a single missile, laser, or ship had breached them yet.

What was it up to?

A loud burst of static crackled in Wraith’s ear.

Ow.

“Captain Ashley Raine. Send response for encryption key freefall-skulk-boomarang.”

And that wasn’t ominous at all.

“Ashley-Raine-Wraith-ruby—omicron-solo.”

“Authenticated. Stand by for orders.”

Chapter 39

Wraith's hands were shaking so hard it took three fucking tries to switch on her team broadcast. And if the panic surging through her system would just abate even slightly, maybe she could get some words out.

Words like *Run*. Or maybe, *I love you*. *Run*.

Another Wasp appeared beside her, rolling up from beneath her position.

She looked left. Spirit.

You okay, Baby Bird?

His voice was in her head, not on the comm.

With it, reality snapped back into focus, and she knew what to do.

Not even slightly, she told him.

She couldn't see his expression, but she could guess.

"Ghosts; Wraith. We need to Tunnel. Now."

She hit the button and smashed Inbetween. Spirit appeared next to her almost immediately.

Then the other four, appearing one after the other in close succession. Much nearer here than their positions in real space.

"We have a problem, boys and girl, a big one."

"Bigger than that fucking Leviathan, Wraith?"

"Yeah, Spook. Much bigger. We have to integrate."

Silence.

“Why?” Phantom. Not questioning the need, seeking to understand.

“You remember when we first integrated? *Why* we first integrated?”

No one responded, no one had to.

“Well, I’ve just been ordered to do that again, except at the exact moment of Tunneling.”

“It’s one way to end the battle,” Geist’s voice was barely audible.

“And it would let the Fold bleed through and destroy this part of the galaxy with it. Oh, and also us and anyone else in the vicinity.” Shade, getting to the heart of the matter as usual.

“So, what do you propose?” Spook. Calm as Phantom, who was unusually silent.

“We need to get past the Leviathan’s shields. We need absolute precision, so we integrate. Punch through right next to the damn thing, launch everything we have at it, and Tunnel out again.”

“Ready when you are,” said Spirit, sounding subdued. It was not a good feel for him.

As plans went, it was one of her better ones. With one teensy, tiny little problem. As they exited, Wraith clipped debris and her dash lit up. The Wasp was not happy.

She ignored it, blocking it from the others. They needed to focus.

They were almost out of missiles, but the shield was flickering. The Leviathan couldn’t destroy it short of a suicide run, but they could make sure it could *be* destroyed.

“Now, Captain.”

The cold voice sounded in her earpiece. She killed all comms.

Time to get out of here.

Tunnel. Now!

She slammed a fist on the button. The rest disappeared. She didn't.

"Oh, fuck."

The connection to Ghost Command fractured. She could still feel them, but barely. A new swarm of Locusts was emerging from the Leviathan. Two more Goliath's flashed into the fray. She had just disobeyed orders, or, as a Military Tribunal would say, committed treason.

But she could still save her family. One missile left.

I'm sorry, she told them.

Don't you fucking dare, Ash!

Tom.

She closed her eyes. Severed the connection.

* * *

"So, I flew my broken Wasp into the Leviathan." Wraith told Kael. "We'd made kind of a large hole. There was something at the center. I could feel it pulsing. I got as close as I could, and sent off that one final missile.

"Hightailed it out of there.

"I was beyond their shields when the blast wave hit. Like a giant fucking EMP. My instruments died. My Wasp just floating, dead in space. But I was alive."

"I remember starting to laugh, and then the second blast wave hit. A hell of a lot harder than the first. Fire this time. Debris. So much debris. I was flung backwards...

"Next thing I know, I'm waking up in a cell. That same cold voice tells me:

"You have been found guilty of treason. There is no appeal. You will die in this cell."

She wiped tears off her face with her free hand.

"Asshole."

Kael's voice sounded from behind her and his fingers tightened on hers. She realized he was *there*. Part of her. Had been with her for a while, reliving her memories with her.

They'd integrated and she hadn't even clocked it.

"You okay?" she asked.

Not even a little bit. His voice was quiet in her head. *But I'll get there.*

"We can't stay long," Kael told Wraith as they approached the Other's giant vessel. "Being down here isn't... good for me."

He didn't know how to put it better than that, but Wraith didn't ask him to explain.

"Agreed."

He felt strange.

Not like before, when the Void was clawing him open while whispering promises.

He felt... no, not whole. Real.

Disturbingly real.

Wraith felt distant.

Maybe it was the loss of physical contact after almost three days of using her as a very real anchor. Maybe it was the way he'd lived through that final battle with her—as her—and he was now just Kael again in his head.

Maybe it was something else.

A hanger bay door opened. Wraith easily maneuvered them inside and set them down with barely a vibration.

Still the best flyer he'd ever seen or even heard of.

"Why didn't they fast-track you for Flight?" he asked her. He'd seen her Basic records. Putting her with ground forces was a poor decision.

"Your guess is as good as mine." She cut the engine, equalized the cabin pressure. "In fact, with your clearance, your guess may be better than mine. Let me know if you ever figure it out."

He released his harness. He'd have to make up for all this sitting with some serious time on the mats.

Wraith was already on the ground as he climbed out, twisted and dropped to the floor.

He eyed Phantom, who was walking towards them along with Seori. *That* would be an interesting hand-to-hand match. He imagined Elijah felt the same way.

His gaze flicked to Wraith.

She didn't need to know about it. At least not until *after* it happened.

"You survived."

Elijah's smile was huge, his relief written clearly on his face.

"Nah, died years ago," Wraith replied.

She'd expected a chuckle. Got tears instead.

"Don't try to kill me," Elijah warned Helios. "*Or my wife.*"

Then he wrapped his arms around Wraith, pulled her close. She tensed, waiting for a reaction from the man behind her.

There was none.

She closed her eyes, wrapped her arms around Elijah, and leaned into him. Let herself be Ash. Just for a moment.

"I'd like to do a medical check, if that's alright?" she heard Seori say to Helios.

“Thank you, Dr Tommasi, but we need to get back.”

Wraith sighed, and Elijah tightened his grip.

“But before we go, I do need to ask you some questions.”

Void damn it all.

The Major was back. And in full SID mode, no less.

There was no way this was going to go well.

Chapter 40

They sat in the hangar bay.

The Major had declined Seori's offer to return to her quarters with Elijah, which did nothing to improve Wraith's mood.

And if the man didn't pull that damned protocol manual out of his ass in the next minute, she was going to let Phantom loose on him. Void, she was going to cheer him on.

"We have a unique opportunity here," the Major was saying. "One I didn't expect to get. So, I'll ask the most important question first. *Why* are you restarting the War?"

The reactions were not what Kael was expecting.

Seori looked shocked. Turned to her husband with a question in her eye.

Believable.

Wraith rolled her eyes.

Expected.

But Phantom...

Phantom smiled, crossed his arms, and leaned back on his chair. Said nothing.

They sat at a circular, black-surfaced table, the kind that looked custom-grown rather than built.

It probably was.

Kael had chosen the seat directly across from Phantom without even meaning to. Wraith sat to the side, halfway between them. Seori lingered beside Elijah, not yet seated.

Silence echoed through the hangar. Wherever they kept the rest of their ships, it wasn't here.

Kael didn't mind silence. He weaponized it. Wait long enough, and someone always cracked.

Wraith drummed her fingers on the table. Not the tapping she normally did. But an irritable, repetitive cascade of fingernails on whatever this table was made from.

He would have glared at her. But she'd just ignore him.

"Eli?"

Seori put a hand on Phantom's shoulder. He didn't move.

Time to press the knife in.

"Here's what I know," he told them. "Over the last eight or nine months, your people have been making increasingly brazen attacks on our settlements and ships."

He leaned forward, "*Civilian* ships, more often than not. Then you disappear until the next time."

He laid the data pad he'd retrieved from the Banshee on the table. The images on it were the ones he'd shown Wraith when she'd first arrived on the *Eventide*.

Seori gasped and placed a hand over her mouth.

"Now, you *could* tell me that this is the work of just a few of you. Pirates. A splinter group. Except for one thing."

He swiped to the next set of images. Even Wraith leaned forward. These, she hadn't seen.

"This was a full military command post. It hosted two battalions and a Flight wing. It was completely destroyed. Overrun and overwhelmed in under three hours. By an army."

His eyes were hard and fixed on Phantom's.

He waited. Was rewarded for his patience when Phantom leaned forward again, loomed over the table towards him.

"You're absolutely right."

Wraith leaned back in her chair. Glanced at Seori, who was looking horrified. It seemed she didn't know her husband quite as well as she thought she did.

The two men were leaning towards each other, all fake formality and a hair away from violence. Wraith considered banging their heads together again. It would be so easy.

But it would solve nothing and probably disturb Seori even further.

The seconds dribbled past.

Okay, enough.

"Are you going to tell him *what* he's right about, Tom? Or are you waiting for him to gut you with the blade he's holding under the table?"

They both turned to look at her.

"What?" she asked, spreading her hands, eyes deliberately wide.

Kael looked at Wraith, exasperated.

He drew his blade and laid it on the table with a quiet clink. Seori's eyes widened.

Phantom was clearly trying not to laugh.

"Spoilsport," the human tank told Wraith, who remained unrepentant.

"Seori and I were about to pass out from testosterone poison-

ing. Besides," her gaze darted to Seori, "I get the feeling she hasn't seen this side of you that often."

Elijah turned to his wife, stricken. He wrapped her in his arms the way he'd held Wraith only minutes before. They didn't speak, but Kael was sure they were communicating.

It was probably a good thing Wraith hadn't shown him how to speak to her that way, yet. He hoped it was yet.

Because right now, he had a hell of a lot to say to her and most of it warranted shouting.

He had to settle for glowering.

She blinked her eyes at him. The picture of insincere innocence.

His lip twitched.

He stilled it, but she'd seen it and gave him a smug look.

Elijah sat back down. Shifted into Phantom.

"You're right that it's an army, Major. It's just not ours."

"Ours?"

"Don't get me wrong. I like you. And I love her." He tilted his head to Wraith. "But if this war really does reignite? I've changed sides."

There was a lot to unpack in that statement. But most of it was deliberate misdirection, and he refused to be baited.

"Whose army, Captain Tommasi?"

Phantom shared a look with Wraith, "Does he do this a lot?"

"You have no idea."

Dark eyes turned back to him, held his gaze with unflinching steel. "It's quite simple, *Major*, that army you're chasing, the one killing your people and destroying your infrastructure? It's yours."

Kael's eyebrows drew together. Phantom couldn't be saying what he thought he was saying.

“Yeah,” the big man replied with a humorless smile. “Your army. Your Fleet. Completely SID-planned and High Council mandated”

Phantom gave it a beat, let the weight drop. “What do you have to say to that, *Major?*”

Chapter 41

The door chimed again. For the third time in three minutes.

Wraith lay on the bed, staring at the ceiling like it owed her money. She glanced at the door with a hint of a sneer.

Ignored it.

It slid open on its own thirty seconds later.

“Command override. Cute.” She didn’t look at him. Refused to turn her head.

“I came to find out whether you were done being childish.”

“Nope.”

“Can I come in?”

“I think ignoring my door answered that.”

She could picture him closing his eyes, counting to ten. Good luck to him. There was nothing he could say that—

“Please, Wraith?”

Fuck.

She made him wait. At count one-oh-three, she sat up, shot him a glare, and muttered, “Ugh, fine. But we are *not* cuddling.”

Another mental image I didn’t need right now. Thanks.

Even his thoughts were sarcastic. She was bringing out the worst in him. Again.

They'd butted heads the entire trip out of the Void to real space. Back on the *Eventide*, she'd gone from stony silence to fully locking herself in her quarters two days ago.

As he crossed the threshold, he pulled a protein bar out of his pocket and tossed it to her. She snatched it from the air. "Thanks."

"You're welcome."

He sat at her desk and waited until she'd taken a bite before speaking, "You *know* I had to submit the report on Phantom and the rest. It's literally my job."

Her look was withering, and she didn't bother to swallow before saying, "Get out."

He raised his hands. "Not the best start. Right. But it's context. For what comes next."

She set the half-eaten bar down on the bed next to her and met his gaze. "If you're going to tell me we have to go after them, I'm going to tell you to go fuck yourself."

His eye twitched, and keeping his voice light was more of a struggle than he'd care to consider. "You've already told me to do that this week. Twice. Maybe come up with something a bit more creative."

"Don't ask for something you're not prepared to handle."

"Don't alienate the one person standing between you and permanent termination." The words were out before he could stop them.

Shit.

Didn't mean to say that... out loud.

Wraith's eyes widened and Kael hoped she'd lash out. A physical bout would go a long way to calming his nerves.

But she smiled, shifted to her hands and knees, and crawled across the bed towards him.

He *knew* she was baiting him. Still couldn't breathe.

"Go ahead," she whispered, close enough that he could feel her breath on his skin. "Terminate me. I dare you."

Wraith watched his pupils dilate. Was near enough to catch the delicious spike of pure male panic.

And unfortunately, just close enough to catch a flicker of emotional feedback.

He wasn't *reaching*, not quite.

And she had no intention of showing him how to do it.

But there *was* an echo—part pain, part resignation.

Void damn it all.

She wasn't ready to stop being mad at him. Might never be ready, she admitted. Because him filing a SID report on Elijah and Seori was a betrayal that stung worse than... anything.

She pushed that thought down.

Okay, she could back off on the childishness, just a little.

Kael shifted to follow her as she leaned back—perhaps a little slower than necessary.

Her lip twitched.

"Okay, Major, why are you really here?"

She was going to kill him. It was inevitable. He just had to accept it.

Kael ran a hand over his face, trying to gather his fractured thoughts.

Why was he here?

For a second, the Void hummed in his veins, its song a question and an invitation.

Not happening, he thought at it.

The hum fell quiet.

Rational thought resurfaced.

"They denied it," he told her. "All of it. Even with the data Phantom sent through. Claimed it was manufactured."

Her look was pitying, merciless. "Were you really expecting anything else?"

"I was *expecting* them to be less ham-handed about it."

Wraith blinked.

Finally! A crack in her shield.

"They sent back a full assessment less than a day after I filed my After Action Report. Now, under normal circumstances, you might get an assessment back in weeks. *If* it's urgent and there's a reason for you to know."

Kael stood up and started pacing. He could only manage three steps forward and back, but he had to move.

"But when an AAR includes corruption, a potential inside job, or a rogue military wing? Sure, it's urgent, but they're going to take their time to check everything. Twice. And then they sure as fuck won't be sending it anyone below the Admiralty."

He turned to Wraith, met her gaze.

"I should have been summoned for an in-person debrief. Or killed. Not given an assessment report that included incidents that weren't even in my initial report."

Wraith stared at him, mouth hanging open.

He'd have laughed if he weren't so Void-damned angry.

"You know," he said finally, "I don't think I've ever seen you speechless."

"You believed him," she whispered. Shut her mouth.

"No. You believed him. I believed you." He shrugged, "Then I verified."

Wraith opened her mouth. Closed it again.

“Take your time, Captain.”

Considered violence.

Regretfully put it aside as her thoughts coalesced enough to unclench her fists and ask Helios the most important question:

“Have they tried to kill you yet?”

“Twice.”

He glanced down at her, “I’ll tell you all about it if you help me figure out what the fuck to do next.”

Chapter 42

“Got it!”

Wraith’s voice was muffled under the *Styx*’s control console.

From Kael’s vantage point in the pilot’s seat, all he could see were her legs sticking out... and her hips. Which he was definitely not looking at. Again.

He flicked his eyes back to the sky as she pushed back out and climbed to her feet, a small electronic component in her hand.

“No more pesky SID or Fleet trackers.” Her smirk was smug enough to register on the sensors.

“You ready to tell me where we’re going?” he asked.

“Why don’t we get a little further away from the people who want to kill us first.”

He nodded and activated the hyper jump, chuckling as she lost her balance, recovered, and slid into the navigator’s chair.

“Not funny,” she told him.

“That really depends on your perspective. From mine it was hilarious.”

Wraith raised her middle finger.

Around them, space seemed frozen.

“Hyperspace seems so strange, after the Fold,” he commented.

“I’ve always thought it was the edge of it.”

He turned to look at her.

"You remember my ocean metaphor for the Inbetween?"

Kael nodded.

"If we extend that a little further, hyperspace is the waves breaking on the sand."

"You're not going to get that far on them, but you can skim the surface?"

"Precisely."

The ship shuddered once, and they dropped back into normal space.

"Where are we?" she asked.

"Near the Folly. Seemed as good a place as any."

Wraith grinned, "In which case, let's go and get a drink."

The Folly hadn't changed, Wraith noted. No surprise.

Still the same stinking merc den-slash-death trap it had been three months ago. And right now? Perfection.

The bar they'd found was crowded, grimy, and full of spree killers in waiting. Helios had raised a brow when they walked in, but she'd just winked at him.

"My kinda place."

They'd found a small table at the back. It had been occupied when they'd arrived, but after a short discussion with the Major, the two mercs agreed to move on.

Wraith wiped a blood splatter off the table with her sleeve.

"You know, Helios, I think you might be a little on edge."

He sipped his beer, grimaced. "Don't know what you mean."

"Just saying you didn't have to break his arm. At least not in three places."

Helios shrugged, "He was rude. It was... punctuation. Empha-

sis, maybe.”

Punctuation. Right.

“You know that little display means we’re not getting out of here without a brawl?” And if she was excited at the prospect, she didn’t need to admit it.

He opened his eyes wide, “You know, I hadn’t considered that.”

And that did it. She laughed.

And doing so released the knot of anxiety that had been making itself at home in her gut.

Helios toasted her and took another sip.

“This is worse than the stuff they serve on the *Eventide*.”

She sipped. Considered. Raised her glass to him.

“You’re not wrong.”

He held his beer up to the light. “You think it will taste better near the bottom of the glass?”

She lifted her own up, looked at the particles floating in it. Drinking might not fix anything, but it would provide a nice reprieve.

“Only one way to find out.”

“On a scale of one to thirteen, how drunk are you?” Kael asked.

Wraith paused, considered, “About a nine.”

“That high? I’m a six. Ish.”

“I had exactly two sips of alcohol in five years, He—Hel—Major. And you are a ten.”

“I’m not that drunk.”

“Wasn’t talking about your *drunk*-ness rating.”

They walked through the back alleys in easy silence.

“You think the ship will still be there when we get back?”

Wraith wondered.

"If it's not, we'll just steal another one."

She laughed at that and wrapped an arm around his waist. Companionably. "I *like* you, Major. Wasn't 'sposed to."

His arm snaked around her shoulder.

"Likewise, Captain."

They rounded the corner to the dock where they'd left the *Styx*, grinning at each other.

A shadow stepped out of the darkness and a voice cut through the night like a blade.

"You have *got* to be kidding me."

Kael's implants flooded him with Firebreak—a synthetic enzyme that streamed through his veins like acid and tore through the alcohol, turning him stone-cold sober between breaths. He triggered his night vision to find the threat.

Next to him, Wraith blinked, looked around and squealed, "Rina!"

Kael froze. He didn't know she was *capable* of squealing.

She lurched out of his grip and towards the tattooed titan currently glaring at them. Spook met his gaze, *what the fuck* written in every line of her muscled-bound stance.

She looked back just in time to catch Wraith, who had launched herself into Spook's arms.

He looked at Spook, lifted his hand in resignation and pointed at the *Styx*, "Coffee?"

"How did you get her this drunk?"

In the *Styx*'s cramped mess, Rina barked questions at Kael. Wraith gave her a sideways glare from her spot on the bench.

“I’m *right here*, and I’m *barely* drunk.”

“Ashley Erin Raine, the only time I’ve ever seen you drunker was that time on Tethys, with Geist and the Marines.”

Wraith considered it. A memorable night—right up until the memories cut off.

“Really? Also, don’t *full name* me, Karina Vsevolodovna Chekova.”

“How can you manage... that, but you can’t say Helios?”

Wraith turned to Kael—he looked so pretty—and smiled.

“Family.”

Chapter 43

Kael poured coffee into mugs as Spook walked back into the mess. Handed her one.

She sipped, tilted her head as if she'd had worse, and sat down opposite him.

"I dosed her with Sobren and shoved her in the shower. She should be okay-ish by the time she gets out."

Kael swore he felt his eyebrows hit his hairline. "Sobren causes brain damage."

Spook shrugged, "So does that swill you were drinking. And it's only like, a one-in-five chance. She'll be fine."

"If she's not—"

"Yeah, yeah. You'll make me wish I was never born. Yadda yadda."

Kael took a sip. "Good. As long as we're aligned."

Drinking coffee with her felt like sitting across from a tiger—claws sheathed, but just barely.

Shade had been chaotic and impulsive, but Spook was reactive. And that was far more dangerous in the immediate term.

"How did you know we were here?"

"Oh, you mean besides the giant bar brawl?"

He shrugged and she rolled her eyes.

"I bribed the dock master to keep an eye out for your ship."

Wraith held a hand over one eye and squinted at the lights in her quarters. Light? Lights.

What the fuck had Rina given her?

It felt like the headache portion of every hangover she'd ever had hit her at once.

She sat on her bunk in her towel.

How a craft as small as the *Styx* had water-based showers was a mystery she wasn't complaining about. The hard-coded time limit was another story.

Clothes. She needed clothes.

She looked down.

She *could* just wear the towel.

It seemed like a fuck-ton less effort. She smirked; Kael's reaction would be gold.

But Rina would probably kill her.

Or him.

And honestly, a nap sounded like an amazing fucking idea.

She eased down to a prone position, wincing at the pain. Closed her eyes.

If Rina and Kael really got into it, the noise would wake her.

Probably.

"I'm sure she's fine."

Spook's voice followed him up the short corridor.

"Good for you," he muttered.

"Like, eighty percent sure."

He suspected she didn't mean for him to hear that part.

"Wraith!" He banged on the cabin door.

No answer. No sound.

"Wraith!"

Spook stuck her head out of the mess, eyes worried. He met her gaze for a moment. She didn't flinch, but he'd like to think she wanted to.

"Styx, interior door override."

The door slid open. Kael stepped inside and stopped dead in his tracks. Wraith was lying on her bunk. Eyes closed. Still as death.

He was on his knees with his ear to her chest before his brain told him to move. Her heartbeat was steady.

"Wraith," he whispered, shaking her shoulder with the careful panic of someone trying not to break something already cracked.

"Ash, wake up."

Her eyes flickered, and she squinted at him. "Fuck off, Major." And rolled over.

"That would be the hangover, Major, not brain damage," Spook told him from the doorway. "Although I'll be happy to give you some if you keep staring at my sister's naked ass like that."

Until Spook spoke, it hadn't registered that Wraith was wearing nothing but a towel. One that had fallen off her as she rolled.

Kael snapped his eyes away, but not before his brain etched the image into permanent storage. Gaze firmly on the ceiling, he backed out of the room, trying not to breathe.

Spook was grinning at him. "You know what, you can call me Rina. After this, we're practically in-laws."

Of all the things Wraith expected to hear when she finally rolled out of bed—screams, groaning, crashing furniture—rolling laughter came in dead last.

And yet.

She moved slowly down the corridor, staying close to the wall. Each footfall silent. Rina's voice rose above the howling laughter.

"—and that's when Ash decides to make a sock puppet. With Shade's sock, no less. She called him Sergeant Squidge, and then proceeded to tell seventeen very drunk marines that they were cogs in the military industrial complex, while Geist and Shade kept telling *Sergeant Squidge* to hush and stop revealing classified information."

She was still dreaming. That was the only possible explanation.

"Although, you have to give the marines some credit. They made it four rounds into a Void-fueled drinking game with Shade, Geist, Ash, and Spirit. And lived. That's either a war crime or a wedding ritual depending on which culture you ask. Personally? I call it Wednesday."

Wraith crept forward and peeked around the corner.

Kael was *crying* with laughter. Rina was as relaxed as she'd ever seen her. And there was no alcohol in sight to explain it.

"And you weren't taking part in this... competition?" Kael asked.

Rina shrugged, "Someone had to be the corpse courier, I drew the short straw."

"Corpse courier?"

"You know, the person who gets you home even if you're practically dead."

They both laughed.

"So, who won?" Kael asked finally, holding his ribs with one hand.

"Me. With enough blackmail material to last a lifetime." Rina glanced towards the door, winked at Wraith. Kael turned too.

Wraith sighed and stepped into the mess. "Actually, I think a coffee machine was eventually declared the winner."

"Yeah. That's how wrecked you all were."

Wraith shrugged, pretended her cheeks weren't burning. "On that note, is there coffee?"

Kael stood and poured her a mug.

His ribs ached, his cheeks hurt, and if Rina ever asked him for anything? She'd have it without question.

He handed Wraith the coffee. She still looked pale, blushing cheeks notwithstanding, but otherwise almost back to normal.

"So," he started, sitting down and fixing her with a serious look, "what happened to Sergeant Squidge?"

Rina cackled and slapped the table. Kael couldn't keep the smile from spreading on his face.

Wraith looked from him to Rina and back again.

Shook her head like she was the only adult at a toddler's party.

"I'm going back to bed."

Kael gave a solemn two-finger salute.

"Rest well, Sergeant Squidge."

Chapter 44

“*Shade* gave these co-ords to you?”

Rina’s voice was almost as skeptical as Helios’s look.

Wraith just shrugged. “Yep.”

“You know he probably hallucinated them?”

She didn’t sigh. “Yep. Doesn’t mean he’s wrong.”

“Doesn’t make him *right*, either. Sanity hasn’t exactly been one of his strong suits lately.” Rina’s voice was tinged in sadness.

Wraith laid a hand on her sister’s arm. Said nothing, even as she reflected that the truth of the matter was infinitely more complicated.

Rina turned on Helios, “You’re being remarkably quiet over there, Bill.”

Bill?

“Dare I even ask why you gave him that nickname?”

Rina grinned even as Helios said, “No,” in his officer voice.

Wraith looked between them.

Nope. Not touching that one.

She turned to Helios, pointed at the star map, “Got any better ideas, Major? Because from where I’m standing, this is all we’ve got.”

He considered the blinking location for over a minute. It was in the center of their space, but isolated. A dead rock moon orbiting a gas giant.

"None," he admitted, "But I don't think Shade hallucinated the location either."

Wraith tilted her head, "What makes you say that?"

He paused, wondering how much to say. Remembered that he'd burned his bridges when he stepped onto the *Styx* with Wraith and disabled the trackers. Exhaled slowly.

"Someone in SID is leaking him information. For all I know, he has a whole cell of acolytes hiding somewhere."

Wraith shared a look with Rina, "How do you figure?"

He shrugged, "He had a lot of information that he *couldn't* have known." His eyes narrowed at Rina, "Have you ever heard of GEO?"

Rina shook her head, "No. What is it?"

"Something Shade told me to find, buried deep in SID. I went looking and the scariest person I've never seen calls me on ultra top-secret encryption and tells me to look for Phantom Inbetween."

"Never seen?"

"Face grayed out, voice modulated. The whole thing felt deliberately staged, like a scene in someone else's play."

Rina raised her eyebrows, "Yeah. 'Cause that makes everything way better. Are you really going to do this?"

He met Wraith's eyes and didn't look away as he nodded.

"I think we are. Want to come?"

He could feel the intensity of Rina's gaze, but didn't turn from Wraith.

"You know what, I don't think my nausea quotient is up for the honeymoon phase."

Wraith's head pivoted to her.

"But you call me if you need me. I'll be there."

Rina stepped over and hugged him, lifting him off his feet and damn near cracking a couple of ribs.

She hugged Wraith next—same rib-crushing affection, just with slightly more care. Whispered something to her that had Wraith's head jerk back in surprise as Rina chuckled.

Then she nodded at both of them.

"Stay alive, kids. Or I'll have to kill you myself."

And left.

* * *

It took two hyperspace jumps and almost three days to reach the right star system.

Kael had tried to access what information he could on the moon; creatively named Moon XK-447. Got nothing.

According to OpNet, it didn't exist.

According to SID-Net, *he* didn't exist.

If he'd had any family left, they'd have gotten the usual condolences by now—a tragic training accident, probably. Or, if an intern wrote it, something about space pirates.

They were running cloaked. All comms off. Low-range nav only. Everything they could do to remain silent and undetected as long as possible.

If Shade was wrong, they wasted nothing but time. If he was right, and this was a site where their—presumably Ghost Command's—funeral rites were being prepared? Then every caution was both needed and probably not enough.

Wraith was asleep.

They'd fallen into a comfortable routine. Meals, sparring or

workouts, and planning they did together. They took turns at the bridge, keeping an eye on the sky.

Otherwise gave each other space.

It felt like re-balancing. And a holding pattern. And he wasn't sure what the outcome would be when it finally broke.

They both held back when they sparred.

Neither mentioned why.

He cracked his neck. One side, then the other. The sound loud in the confines of the bridge.

Then a crackle of static burst from the comms.

He stared at it for half a second, checked the console. Nope, comms were definitely off. Must be interference from—

“Major. You're a difficult man to track down.”

All four screens in the bridge switched to gray and seemed to stare at him in accusing amusement.

He kept his mouth shut.

A chuckle emerged from the speakers, still slightly crackly.

“While silence is the better part of valor, you may want to ask a few clarifying questions in a minute. Just a suggestion.”

Slowly, Kael reached out and primed the weapons systems.

The console died. So did the engines.

The screens and speakers did not.

“Now that we've established I could take you out any time I please, shall we have a civilized conversation?”

Kael pulled calm around him like a shield. “Then I'd like to see whom I'm talking to.”

The screen flickered, and the silhouette of a man appeared. Back lit. Features hidden in shadow. He seemed to be leaning forward and resting his chin on his hands.

“Your wish is my command. Well, let's be honest, it's not. But I'm indulging you anyway.”

“Do you always talk this much?”

A pause. Near-silence, broken only by static.

“I so seldom have anyone... interesting to talk to. So, you’ll forgive me if I indulge.”

Kael knew this. Where did he know it from?

“What do you want to talk about?”

“You and the good Captain are heading into a situation that you’re probably not ready for. Definitely not prepared for. But we seldom get to choose our moments of greatness.”

“So, the co-ordinates are real.”

“Physically? Yes, but you knew that. Metaphorically? Also, yes.”

“How did Shade know them?”

He imagined he could see the smile spread across the shadowed face.

“Because I gave them to him, Major.”

“So, you are the leak.”

“No, Major, I’m the source. Which is a good thing for you. Brandt is very upset that you are still drawing breath. Even more so that he can’t seem to... deactivate the good Captain.”

Kael said nothing. Refused to even think.

Another chuckle. “Good. I knew I chose you for a reason. Now, to business. The facility you are looking for is on the dark side of that moon. It’s cliché, I know, but we do have to play to our stereotypes every once in a while.”

Kael didn’t bother to stop the eye roll. He didn’t know if the man—GEO—could see him. Didn’t care.

“Now, if you were to try a direct approach, you would fail. There is far more security there than there first appears. And even if you survived long enough to make ground fall, you wouldn’t reach your prize.”

The man paused. “No questions yet, Major? Your restraint is admirable. But I digress. I’m going to give you alternate co-ordinates. There is an old mine shaft, just on the light side of the twilight meridian.

“Defunct. Has been for decades. But if a pair of determined infiltrators were to plumb its depths, they would find the point where it meets a very different facility.”

“And how would we find that? Mines aren’t known for their consistent layout plans. And SID doesn’t exactly hang up *welcome signs*.”

“Ah, but you are still SID too, Major. Brandt revoked your clearance, but I think you’ll find your access codes work just fine. And as a Major, why, practically every door at that site would open for you.”

Kael frowned. Processed the implications. “You didn’t answer my question.”

“I didn’t, did I?” His voice turned serious, “Wraith must lead the way, Major. Just tell her to navigate it.”

The screens went blank. The engine and console flared back to life.

Wraith lurched into the room, wide eyed. “I thought I heard—”

“You did,” he told her. “GEO found us, somehow. But he seems to be on our side.” He paused. “Or at least, not on the side of whoever is down there.”

Her brows were drawn together in confusion, “I think you’d better start at the beginning.” Her eyes snapped up to his, “And this time, Major—don’t leave anything out.”

Chapter 45

“By the way, what’s in the case?”

Wraith pointed at the large, square box in the corner of the hold.

They’d just landed near the mine entrance and were pulling on HZ-rated enviro-suits. Part armor, part hazardous-environment protection. The protection rating wasn’t as good as spacer armor, but what it lacked in stopping power, it made up for in versatility, breathability, and not flash-cooking the wearer in volatile atmospheres.

Kael glanced at the case. His gut tightened, but he kept his voice steady. “Random gear.”

“Anything useful?” She pushed an arm into the HZES, wiggled her fingers in the glove to position them.

Kael’s mind raced through the contents, not altogether willingly. “Not for this mission, sorry.”

“Pity. When I couldn’t open it, I thought it might be where you kept the cool toys.”

“Not so much,” Kael muttered as he pulled on his helmet.

The assistive display popped up in front of him.

He shut it down immediately.

In theory, AD was great. Providing extra details and highlighting friendlies and hostiles with *reasonable* accuracy. Except that

it took up your entire fucking field of view and there was always a half-second lag. In combat, even half a second counted.

He tapped the integrated data pad on his wrist instead, checked the seals.

“Good to go on my side. You?”

Wraith was doing the same check. He couldn’t see her face properly behind the visor, and he found himself wishing he’d taken one last look at her.

“Good to go.”

“Have you figured out what GEO meant by telling you to navigate it?”

There was a soft sigh in his earpiece.

“Maybe. But I hope I’m wrong.”

The mine was hot. Over 50 degrees Celsius if her suit data was to be believed. And Wraith was feeling very grateful for the temperature control in that suit right now.

“How is a dead rock this hot?”

She kept her voice quiet, even though there were no signs that anyone had set foot here in years.

“The filters are still running—I can hear the hum—but they’re pushing out heat, not clean air.” Helios paused, “No clue how that happens.”

They reached another T-junction. They’d been slowly working their way down the mine for more than two hours and were now over eight hundred meters below the surface.

“Left or right?” Kael asked her.

She looked both ways. They were identical.

“I have no fucking clue.”

His slight head tilt was the only sign that he’d heard her.

“Let’s take a break,” he said.

He stepped forward and placed a wide cylinder on the ground. Activated it. It flashed once and shone a circle of light on the floor, about a meter and a half in diameter.

She sat down, legs crossed. “So, you did bring some cool toys.”

“One or two.”

She could hear the smile in his voice.

The Variable Atmosphere Portable Oxygen Refuge (VAPOR) beeped. They’d get about fifteen minutes of breathable air.

She checked her suit. O2 levels checked out, and the unit had even managed to cool the air by about ten degrees. It was still going to be hot, but it was better than recycled suit air.

She pulled her helmet off, shook out her hair. Smiled at Helios who smiled back, eyes warm.

Smiled wider when he handed her a water pack and nutri-cube. “You always bring the best picnic food,” she told him, taking a small bite.

“Anything for you, Hunny Bun.”

And she choked, spraying nutri-cube as her eyes narrowed in homicidal disbelief.

Wraith was still glaring at him ten minutes later. Kael was still grinning.

She hadn’t said a word to him, but he was sure that by now she’d plotted six, maybe seven *creative* ways to murder him.

“The spit take was fucking funny,” he commented. Her eyes flashed.

Make that eight.

She sucked down the rest of her water. Rolled the tube between her fingers. Then smiled.

Not one he'd seen on her before. It was... the only word he could come up with was deranged.

"You're going to wish you hadn't said that, Helios."

The urge to back out of the VAPOR dome and into certain death was suddenly looking appealing. Then she dropped the smile and snapped back into neutral. Which was somehow more terrifying.

"How much time do we have?"

A glance, "Seven minutes. Any clue which way to go?"

She started to shake her head. Stopped.

"These gloves don't come off, do they?"

He raised an eyebrow, "Uh, no?"

She closed her eyes, took one slow, deep breath, re-opened them.

"When we were on Perdition, I could feel Shade. That's how I found the two of you near that altar thing."

"But you weren't—"

"Integrated? No. And no, it doesn't normally work like that. I think that damned altar might have helped."

"Why?"

"It was like a beacon. Separate from Shade and... and distinct."

He got the feeling she'd intended to say something else.

"You think there is another altar or a beacon down here?"

She spread her arms, "I can't tell. No offense, Major, but every time I try to *reach* out, all I can sense is you."

He smiled. The fucker actually smiled at that. Killing was too good for him.

"What does that have to do with gloves?" he asked her.

Death by awkwardness or suicide-by-Tether?

Decisions, decisions.

The VAPOR unit beeped. Five minutes. It was now or never.

Fuck it.

“Lean forward, Major. I need to separate you from the signal—if there is one—and the only way I can think of to do that is by touch. Cheek to cheek, unless you have a better idea?”

He leaned in and claimed her mouth.

Not gently. No. There was nothing gentle about that kiss.

But memorable? Absolutely.

Another beep from the VAPOR unit. Four minutes.

He pulled back, breath ragged, and leaned his forehead against hers.

“Just in case this is a one-way trip,” he murmured. Then, “Can you feel the beacon?”

And despite the fact that her heart was trying to claw its way through her ribs, despite the kiss still tingling on her lips—she could. And it was closer than she’d thought. Barely a couple of hundred meters away.

Strangely, hauntingly familiar.

And waiting for her.

Chapter 46

You don't expect to find an airlock at the bottom of a mine.

Kael blinked once, then again. The door didn't vanish. Just loomed. Huge, matte gray, and foreboding

"Time to find out if GEO was right about my access," he noted, keeping his voice neutral.

"Being trapped in an airlock is not my preferred next step. You trust him?"

Kael laughed, "No. But it's either this or turn back. You game?"

He was surprised to find he meant it. If she—

"Punch in the code, Major."

Or they could just go forward.

It was a standard airlock and keypad, so the comparatively thin gloves of the HZES posed no problems entering his access key.

"That's a long access code," Wraith commented.

"Sixteen digits. Pretty standard for low level stuff."

She stared at him as if she wasn't sure if he was serious—he was—and then the airlock hissed and swung open. He heard her mutter something about SID needing more hobbies.

"One at a time?" he offered.

"Not unless your code will let you enter twice."

Good point.

He held out a hand, "Together then?"

The door swung shut behind them, its massive clamps locking into place.

Kael was still holding her hand. Or she was holding his.

One of the two.

The airlock was blindingly white. Clean. Clinical. The lights flared as the clamps locked, bouncing off the walls and floor. Wraith felt like a lab specimen.

It reminded her of her cell on the Other Ship. Only colder and less likely to react if she punched the wall.

Kael squeezed her hand as they waited. To measure the time, she counted heartbeats.

Seventy-two. Seventy-three.

A muffled beep from the inner door. Then it slid open, revealing a dim hallway ahead.

She and Kael glanced at each other, then down at the suit monitors. The air was Standard EarthOx mix. No toxins detected. Grav normal.

She shrugged at him, released her helmet and pulled it off. His was off less than a second later. He glared at her.

"You're the one with the access codes, Major. Technically you're less expendable."

And that didn't even take the Tether into consideration. And she wasn't going to think about *that* right now.

He frowned at her, but didn't argue. Good.

She stripped off her HZES. Beneath it, she wore a *Penumbra* suit. It was a significant upgrade to the active camo gear she'd

used in the War.

Skintight, it would fool thermal sensors, help them blend into the shadows better, and as an added bonus, could take two hits of SlugGel before melting.

Speaking of which...

She picked up her pistol and holstered it. Then reached into her backpack and pulled out the monomolecular blade she'd swiped in the Folly along with a couple of nasty surprises Rina had given her.

Something was definitely pulling on her now.

Kael checked his HushTec revolver—basically the silenced version of an SG pistol—and pulled out his own blade.

They'd kill quietly as long as they could.

Then they'd switch to something a little... noisier.

Kael wiped blood off his blade.

The man at his feet retained the surprised expression you get when a shadow stabs you unexpectedly.

He looked like a civilian scientist. The SID prototype weapon slung under his coat told a different story.

Ahead, Wraith raised two fingers. Two more coming.

Since they'd left the airlock, he'd become increasingly aware of her. Like the bond they'd shared in the Void had snapped back into place.

He wasn't sure if it was integration. Couldn't ask her, because her attention was far more focused on whatever was calling her than on him.

But she remained tactically aware.

And deadly.

He crept forward, stopped behind her.

The footsteps were coming closer. If they turned in through the door, Wraith would take them. If they walked past the door, he'd ensure they were dead before they knew they were dying.

Closer. Closer.

They were talking about vibration thresholds and the latest genetic results. They walked past the door.

He stood and shot twice. Two silent head shots. Two thumps. Two dead operatives. He'd swapped standard rounds for frangibles.

Cleaner kills, less mess. Less chance of screaming.

Wraith dashed into the corridor, footfalls nearly silent. He frowned. Her steps were too loud in his ears—he'd have to show her proper technique.

He waited a five count, then followed. Silently.

By the time he reached her, she was standing in a small office, blade still wet. A fresh corpse on the floor.

It was going to take him a long time to work his way through the death they were causing.

Void help him, he hoped it was necessary.

The frisson of a reply whispered over his skin. He shoved it away.

He needed some new emphatic oaths.

Yesterday.

It was getting louder. They were getting closer.

The sound of metal scraping on a hull. The vibration of a transpo hitting atmosphere. A creeping dread she couldn't ignore.

Although that last one might just be internal.

Part of her wished they'd convinced Rina to come with. But

her big sister didn't have the patience for stealth or silence.

Still, the extra backup would have been nice.

She stepped around the wall she'd been leaning against and swiped her blade in an upwards arc.

A blond woman crashed at her feet, gurgling slightly through a sliced throat. It wasn't loud, but a man stepped out of a nearby room, brows furrowed.

Hadn't heard him. Shit.

She dashed forward, but he collapsed as Kael shot him between the eyes.

On the other hand, the Major was proving to be enough back up all on his own. Who knew?

Her head turned, almost of its own accord. They were almost there. She couldn't slow now. Couldn't rush either.

She looked back at Kael, pointed left and raised a finger to her ear.

Three fingers.

She nodded once, then again as he offered to take point. The noise in her head was getting distracting. She couldn't afford another misstep.

She leaned against the wall, breathing even. Waited the five count they hadn't even discussed and stepped around the corner. He was standing at a door a short distance ahead, three bodies lying between her and him.

She moved forward. The door was keypad locked, by the looks of it, so she crouched next to him, covering the corridor as he stood and entered a very, very long sequence.

The door opened.

The mental assault hit her like a wave—anxiety, then fear, then pain. None of it hers. Not from within. It tore through her, as if the walls themselves remembered something terrible.

And just as she thought she might be getting to grips with it, a voice dropped her to her knees, blade clattering from her fingers.

Baby bird. Fly away.

It's already too late.

Chapter 47

Wraith collapsed next to him, gasping for breath.

Kael grabbed her, dragged her to his side of the door, HushTec raised. Nothing moved. He heard nothing but her panicked gasps.

Shit.

Shit shit shit.

He bent down to her. What the hell had they hit her with? He couldn't see a wound.

She grabbed at him, clawing at his chest. Her eyes were wide and unseeing. There was no wound. He checked as best he could as she thrashed.

Someone would be alerted soon. He had to get her somewhere safer. He had to—

He couldn't *feel* her.

The thought slammed into him like a freighter.

He couldn't *feel* her. And in one way or another, he'd never stopped being aware of her presence since their time in the Void.

This wasn't a physical wound.

"Wraith," his whisper came hoarse and urgent. "Wraith, look at me." He tried to turn her head to him, but she'd started to shake.

No—she wasn't just shaking. She was seizing.

Shit.

He looked around the corridor as if it would give him answers. None were forthcoming.

Void damn it!

A ripple.

Wait.

Void! He screamed it inside his head as he struggled to hold on to Wraith's increasingly violent seizures.

Help me! Help me help her.

A whisper answered, then a hum, then a swell—ending in a question.

Yes, yes. Whatever you need. But later! Now, HELP ME!

Something flooded him. Awareness and presence that sank into every molecule of his being, alien and discomforting. And settled.

He still couldn't sense Wraith. But suddenly, he knew how to reach her.

He pulled her up to him, arms straining to contain her. Held her against his chest. His cheek against hers and his lips at her ear.

"Wraith," He whispered it with his lips and his mind. "Ash. I'm here. I'm with you. Find me."

And without even knowing how, he opened his soul to her.

The world shifted. Tilted. Then tore.

Wraith had spoken of a reach. This wasn't it.

This was... arms open to give a hug. Not forcing. Ready.

She gripped at him, fingers clenching painfully into his shoulders. Pushed herself back and somehow found his eyes. Met them.

And then she was there. Inside him.

Silence shattered. Connection sealed.

Wraith was not herself.

She wasn't Ghost Command either.

She was more.

For a moment, she was everything.

Then the paradox of full integration snapped into place, and they were something else.

For a second, they could see Wraith in Kael's arms. Eyes still wide but pupils constricting back to normal size. Muscles relaxing.

They could hear heavy footfalls in the distance. The near silent breathing of the soldiers creeping up behind them.

They were aware of the tug of the anchor, and the cries of the bound—Spirit, part of them thought, and others.

Then they were moving.

There was no doubt. No hesitation.

They made no sound as they moved. Two bodies, one purpose.

The enemy soldiers fell. All of them.

And then they stood before the door and—

“Stop!”

Wraith wrenched herself away. Stepped back from Kael. From the Major. Held a hand up so he'd keep his distance.

That had been... unreal. Too close. *Too* integrated.

There had been no sense of individuality. No sense of self.

How the fuck had he managed that?

And how could she stop him doing it again?

The hall was slick with blood, littered with bodies. She didn't have a scratch on her.

The Major was pale. Breath hitching slightly as he surveyed the carnage.

He looked up at her, eyes as wide as she remembered hers being. “What the fuck was that?”

Kael couldn't catch his breath. This was nothing like before when he'd lived through her memories.

This was... an obliteration of self.

There were no boundaries between them. There was no her or him. They were them. And for those few scant minutes, everything was clear.

All the doubt he'd ever felt about killing: Gone.

Consequences: Not even a question.

Let alone a concern.

How much of that was her? How much was him?

Kael swallowed as the memory of something alien settling inside him surged.

And how much of it was the Void?

He waited a moment, as if it might respond. But there was nothing. And he wasn't sure whether he was relieved or disappointed.

Wraith's eyes kept darting away from his, as if she was worried that looking at him too long might reintegrate them.

He could still feel her. The connection wasn't broken, just waiting. But he needed answers, and she was the only one who might be able to give them to him.

"Again, what the fuck was that?"

She stared at him. Opened her mouth—

"You know, that's something I'd be interested in knowing myself." A cold voice carried through the corridor. He recognized it from Wraith's memory.

The door next to them clicked, opened.

"Why don't the two of you come in?"

Hard as she tried, Wraith couldn't meet Kael's eye.

Run, Baby Bird!

And there was Spirit again. Great. Just fucking great.

You know there is no way we can go now, right? she mentally yelled at him.

And Kael's voice sounded in her head, as comfortable as if it had always been there. *So you... do... want to walk into that trap?*

Without thinking, she looked up, met his gaze and glared. *I wasn't talking to you.*

"Come now, children. Time's wasting. And we have much to talk about."

Kael again, softer now. *This is bad, Ash.*

No shit, Major. And don't—

Call you that. I know.

She could almost catch his deeper thought, it sounded vaguely sarcastic. But she wasn't digging.

Go, Baby Bird. Please.

Kael's confusion slipped into the link, *Who?*

It's Spirit, Major. Leave if you want, but I'm going in to get him.

She stood up, started to wipe the blood off her blade and saw her *Penumbra* suit was saturated to the point of dripping. An overwhelming scent of copper hit her, and she swallowed as anxiety threatened.

Fuck that.

She found her rage, instead.

She was already soaked in blood. A little more wouldn't make the suit any less ruined.

She stepped over a body. Through the open door.

Didn't look back.

Chapter 48

Kael charged in a second behind Wraith, almost crashing into her as she stopped cold.

They stood in a cavernous room, larger than the *Eventide's* arena, stinking of blood and antiseptic. The walls were lined with medical tools and diagnostic screens with half-decipherable biometrics.

The room was filled with corpses. *Other* corpses.

Some floated in yellow-tinged tanks, limbs distended from long immersion, their skin peeling like wet parchment. More lay drained on slabs, chests pried open to expose organs hooked to clear tubes, still pumping artificial fluid. One hung suspended by his spine, neural cables burrowed into his skull, eyes milky with death.

In the center of the chamber was a circle. The shimmer of a shield formed a dome over in.

Inside were three large, black rocks. *The Anchor*, the Void whispered the word to him.

Tied, no, *chained* to the rocks was a mummified skeleton.

Kael wondered why you would bother to chain a corpse—then watched in horror as it lifted its head and opened its eyes.

“Spirit,” Wraith whispered next to him as the door slammed closed behind them.

She saw his lips move.

“Baby Bird.”

Everything inside her went cold.

Then silent.

Then sharp.

Kael had been prepared for Wraith to run to Spirit. He was ready to try to grab her.

Instead, she seemed to relax.

In an instant he was taken back to the first time they met on that prison rock. The way she lounged on the chair, fully confident of her ability to kill him and everyone one else with him.

It froze something deep in his chest.

He tried to *reach* her. Gently. With no clue what he was doing.

She batted him away without changing expression.

His eyes darted around the room again. This was an abomination. And there would be a reckoning.

Yes, the Void whispered, *soon*.

“Are you planning on joining us,” he called out. “Your museum is cute, but once you’ve seen one vivisection, the impact is somewhat dulled.”

Silence echoed.

At the Anchor, Spirit’s head had fallen again. As if it were too heavy for his neck.

Disrupt, said the Void.

No further instructions were forthcoming.

Great.

There was a brief whining of gears under strain and a section of floor opened, revealing an elevator rising with a single man

on it.

He was not what Kael had been expecting.

Short, round faced and cheerful looking, but there were no laugh lines around his eyes. He was probably in his sixties, and his hair was gray and thinning.

“Major Veyne, we haven’t had the pleasure. Although Captain Raine and I have shared brief acquaintance.” His voice didn’t match his appearance. It was cold, brittle, and deadly.

But Wraith smiled like he’d brought her a bouquet of roses and complimented her shoes, “He ordered me to detonate a rift bomb in the middle of one of our largest space battles,” she said brightly. “Then locked me in a cell, called me a traitor, and told me I’d die there.”

“If you’d obeyed orders, we wouldn’t be here today.” He smiled at her. “And I wouldn’t have had one of the most successful experiments in all my years as Research Director.” His eyes flicked to Spirit. “Perhaps I should thank you.”

Kael raised his eyebrows, glanced at Wraith who was still smiling. That would be a very bad idea.

“You seem very calm for a man in a room with two people who carved through a corridor full of your guards,” he commented.

“And I am very much looking forward to finding out how that works, Major. But to answer your unspoken question, I am the Tether to this site. If I die—” he brought his hands together “—boom.”

“Oh, you don’t have to die,” Wraith noted casually, and for the first time, the Director’s pallor grayed.

“Torture. How quaint. Of course, then Major Veyne would never find out what really happened to his brother. Ezra was a

true patriot, born and bred.”

Kael had gone very still next to her. Very... quiet.

She hesitated. She needed to be able to do whatever came next.

For Spirit.

And she wasn't sure if she could do that with him in her head.

But as the other options were explosion or dissection...

She sighed inwardly, even as she kept the Director locked in her gaze. She didn't want to break Kael. Knew she may have to cross a line he wouldn't. And she now knew exactly where that line was.

But they needed every advantage they could get.

She buried her resolve, built a shell around the core of *her*, and *reached*.

His anger was cold. His voice clear, taut, *We need to disrupt the Anchor*.

He meant the... thing that Spirit was attached to. *How?*

Kael shrugged, started walking a slow arc towards the Director. And shut her out.

Kael's pulse, which had spiked when Wraith spoke to him, settled.

This wasn't about Ezra. It couldn't be. This was about information. About whatever data this facility held. He needed to preserve all of it.

And then put it on display for the universe to see.

Which meant that—for now—the Director had to live.

But he'd play.

He was looking forward to it.

“Ezra the patriot,” he barked a laugh, “I don't think you knew him at all.” Paused, “Unless you're one of those officers that

thinks that everyone that dies in battle is a patriot rather than a tragedy.”

He kept his tone to what he thought of as SID-light.

Just enough judgment to bait.

Just enough contention to argue.

The Director blinked. Smiled.

And he's taken the hook.

“I consider most War deaths to be lost opportunities. Or failed experiments.”

He leered at Wraith. It wasn't sexual, but Kael instinctively wanted to punch him regardless.

Wraith put two fingers to her throat, checked her pulse, “Sorry, I don't think I qualify as a War death.”

The Director glared at her.

Kael let his lips curl up, genuinely amused and wanting the old man to see it.

Deliberately ignoring the psychopath's goading was annoying him and hopefully putting him off-balance enough to make a mistake.

He'd probably gone unchallenged for decades. He was overdue.

“So, Ezra,” he started again, mentally apologizing to his brother. “He wasn't what you'd call a... stellar candidate. Decent hand-to-hand, but that was mostly size and strength.”

Ezra had been huge. Larger even than Phantom. But—

“Not the sharpest mind. It's why he ended up as a Fleet bomb-tosser, rather than SID.” He shrugged. “Could be worse. He could have been an infantry grunt.”

The Director was staring at him. Kael had strolled almost two thirds of the way to him, occasionally pausing to look at the displays.

He felt ill every time he looked at one.

“What’s your name?” he asked, looking up from a particularly unpleasant tank, “because calling you *the Director* in my head is getting repetitive.”

Kael was holding the Director’s attention. So, Wraith turned her attention to Spirit.

She didn’t bother with stealth. She just walked up to the barrier and crouched. Her heart didn’t break, looking at him.

It shattered.

“Hey, Matt,” she whispered.

Ash. You... didn’t run.

“Did you expect me to?”

Hoped you’d... learned better... by now.

“Was never going to happen.”

Can... you... kill me?

He raised his head. His eyes were sunken so damn deep in his skull, but they were still the same sky blue.

“I’ll try,” she promised. “Any idea how to disrupt—” she waved a towards him “—this?”

Void.

His head fell again, and she felt him slip into unconsciousness.

She brushed away tears.

She had to bring the barrier down.

Chapter 49

The Director's name turned out to be Chadwick Merriweather. Junior. The universe had a sense of irony.

"I wouldn't get any closer, Major."

Kael turned, the slight hint of ozone giving the barrier's presence away. Continued walking as if that had been his plan all along.

"Are you really not going to ask me about your brother?" *Chad* was clearly dying to tell him.

Kael looked back over his shoulder, "Why bother? She," he tilted his head at Wraith, who was crouched near Spirit, "already told me."

He continued his horror walk.

"Brandt said you were stubborn," Chad called, "I see he was right."

Kael's hands clenched. "The Admiral and I have had our differences of opinion."

"Indeed. He's most upset that you disabled the Tether on Captain Raine. He'd planned to deactivate her personally."

"That's because I declined his dinner invitation," Wraith called, as if she'd already known. She stood up, looked their way. "Well, technically I laughed at him first. But that wasn't intentional."

"I created the Tether, you know. Marvelous piece of technology. One of my more reliable creations."

"Hmm," Kael agreed noncommittally. He couldn't turn around and look Wraith without giving her ruse away. Briefly tried to *reach* for her. Couldn't.

He was not looking forward to that conversation later. If they survived this.

Chad was baiting them. He wondered what reaction the man was hoping for. What would happen when he got it.

It would come down to who blinked first.

Nearly a decade of field repair on damaged fighter craft had given Wraith a good working knowledge of engineering. Enough to see where the power for *both* shields was coming from.

And maybe, just maybe, she could see how to break it.

She was concentrating hard on the problem, because otherwise the words, *He un-Tethered you, he didn't tell you*, started looping through her brain again.

"Does it bother you, seeing your teammate like that, *Ashley*."

She glanced up at him, "Sure, Chad, I'm not a monster."

He sputtered. She could see the spittle fly.

Yuck.

She spotted a rolling chair, pulled it near the right console, and sat down. Put her feet up. Yawned.

Chad was looking between them now. Her lounging, Kael walking around as if this torture chamber was a mildly interesting art gallery.

He should have known they were too blasé and maybe he did, but he clearly couldn't fathom it.

She wondered what he'd make of Shade. Laughed at thought,

which caused Kael to turn to her.

Now was as good a time as any.

“Hey Major, I’m going to have a nap. Wake me up in thirty, forty-five minutes?”

“Want me to clear some space for you?”

Good boy, she thought to herself. Get in position.

“Nope, here’s fine.”

She closed her eyes just as Chad’s voice cut across the room, “Your brother triggered the blast that destroyed the fleet.”

It couldn’t matter.

It did. But it would have to wait.

Kael had wandered back to the roughly thirty-seven-degree mark in the room, per Wraith’s instructions. He tilted his head to the side and gave Chad his best SID Officer receiving a briefing from an ensign look. Sighed loudly.

“Yes. I know. And?”

Chad’s eyes widened, his mouth flopping open and shut like a fish.

“I’m a SID Major, Director. With GEO clearance.” Chad’s face lost all its color. *Interesting.* “Did you really think I didn’t know?”

Which was when there was a bang of explosive—Rina’s grenade, he thought—and the power went out. He triggered his night vision optics and cursed a second later when the emergency lighting kicked in. Blinked rapidly to clear the spots from his eyes.

Baby Bird. Don’t.

His head snapped to the center of the room. Wraith was standing in the middle of the Anchor, her hand on Spirit’s cheek.

He saw her mouth *love you* to dying man before she laid her hands on the rocks.

The Void screeched.

It hurt. Void, it hurt.

And not just her pain. Spirit's too. The feedback loop from hell.

She just... needed... to reverse it.

Kael had just stepped forward when the powercell whine gave him half a second's warning. He ducked behind the solid slab and its partially autopsied resident, silently thanking Wraith for the positioning.

The three smart projectiles hit the corpse and exploded.

He was showered with tissue and bone.

Wraith screamed behind him. Rage, pain, and frustration all braided together.

The Void was screaming too, its emotions less obvious.

He needed to help her, but first, he had to disable Chad.

The Stalker-12 rifle was a nasty weapon and you didn't need to be a good shot to be deadly. The smart targeting did that all on its own.

Kael could have just shot him, but there was the small matter of the promised *boom*, and the not so small matter of needing evidence.

The Stalker whined again.

Kael dashed, vaulted another corpse with a muttered apology and dropped prone. Again, the bullets hit the unnamed Other.

That was enough. No more games.

He charged Chad, who raised the rifle. Just not quickly enough. Kael snatched it from his hands and used it to knock the man unconscious with a single thwack.

He dragged him off and away from the elevator, just in case, paused a moment and kicked Chad in the balls.

If he did wake up, he wouldn't be going anywhere fast.

Wraith screamed again.

Ash!

He ran.

Almost... there... Matt.

Just a little... bit... more....

Kael stopped in front of Wraith. Her jaw was clenched so tightly, for a second he was absurdly worried she was going to crack teeth.

He didn't know what to do. If he even *could* do anything that wouldn't collapse everything.

He couldn't do nothing.

He looked down at Spirit. The man was... he didn't know. He crouched. Alive. Barely.

Help... her.

The voice was a whisper that cut through the Void.

"How?"

Push.

"Not helpful, my friend. I don't know how to do that. I'm new to this whole integration thing.

There were no words, but Kael got the distinct impression of eye rolling. Could almost imagine he heard Spirit's muttered,

Idiot.

And then he knew. It was so simple that he'd missed it.

He launched upwards. Shoulder slammed Wraith up and off the rocks and took her place.

The Void laughed.

Reality slammed back into Wraith at the same time her back slammed into the floor, knocking the air from her lungs.

She rolled onto her knees, arched her back to expand her lungs. Tried to cough to reset her breathing.

Your body know how to do this damn it!

Tried coughing again and air hammered back into her lungs, loud and almost painful. She pushed to her feet, still coughing and eyes watering.

Kael was standing at the Anchor.

"Helios!"

She'd meant to scream at him, but it came out as a hoarse whisper. She staggered forward, around the Anchor.

Kael's hair was standing on end, and his eyes—

What the fuck was wrong with his eyes?

They shifted from white to gray to black. The swamp-water brown gone.

She looked down. Matt was smiling. At her.

Wraith knelt and took his hand. There didn't seem to be anything else to do.

Suddenly Kael yelled. A raw scream that scraped her skin from the inside out.

The energy in the room shifted, reversed, and was sucked back into the Anchor which promptly disappeared.

Along with Spirit.

Wraith was left grasping at nothing, the chains that had held him falling with a final, hollow clatter.

Chapter 50

Wraith couldn't move.

Kael sat beside her, still trying—unsuccessfully—to get his hair to lie flat again.

There was a groan from the far side of the room.

Kael placed a hand on her shoulder, squeezed, and stood.

The groaning increased. The cursing began.

Whiny bastard.

Couldn't give her five minutes to grieve in peace.

She patted the spot where Spirit had been.

Whispered:

“Soar with the Eagles, Spirit. You've earned it.”

Kael hadn't been gentle when he tied Chadwick Merriweather Junior to a chair. He hadn't been as rough as he *could* have been, but it wasn't gentle.

The man whined the entire time.

Crying, he would have dealt with. Begging, he would have understood.

But whining?

Maybe he could get a message to Shade. Let him torment Chad for a decade or two. He'd enjoy it.

And the man deserved it.

He walked over to the wall and chose a couple of particularly nasty looking instruments. Strolled back to Chad. Whistling.

Chad paled. Swallowed. Still managed to raise his chin in a semblance of defiance.

“Let’s talk about your... experiment there with the Void rocks and the tortured, living, human!”

He was yelling and he didn’t care. Chad cringed away.

“You won’t find the answers you’re looking for, Major,” he whispered.

“What makes you say that?”

Chad swallowed, “Because I can’t give them to you.”

Kael lifted a long, jagged medical saw. Studied it. It was still crusted with dried blood and Void knew what else.

Glanced back at Chad, “Are you sure about that?”

The smell of urine wafted up.

Kael rolled his eyes. Considered his options.

“Helios?”

He turned to Wraith.

“A word?”

Wraith was still sitting where he’d left her. In the circle where the Anchor was not.

Her finger was tapping again.

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

He still hadn’t figured out what it was. If it meant anything at all.

“Hey, what’s up?” He sat down next to her. The tapping

continued in the silence.

He pointed at her finger, "You never told me what that means."

She looked down as if surprised. The tapping stopped.

"Morse code."

He frowned, "Never heard of it."

"It's a little outdated."

She shifted her shoulders and neck, which crunched in response.

Kael wanted to tell her it would be okay. But grief doesn't work like that.

"When did you disable the Tether?"

The question was utterly emotionless. She could have been asking what he ate for breakfast. And he wasn't getting any kind of emotional hint from their... bond? Connection?

Stop stalling.

"Perdition."

Wraith looked at him, surprised. "When?"

"After Shade left us, before Hound picked us up."

She nodded. Back to neutral calm. Bad sign.

"Why?"

For so many reasons.

Because she'd trusted him. Because she hated him. Because holding her while the Silk wore off was the most human he'd felt in years.

Because the sound of his name on her lips had short circuited his brain. Because he didn't want her to die if Shade decided to kill him.

"I don't know."

"And you chose not to tell me," her voice was grave. "I suppose I understand why."

He'd tried to tell her. Many times.

"I didn't know how to."

She turned to him. Met his gaze.

"And you needed your asset."

He didn't deny it. Just looked down.

And hated himself for it.

"Were you going to tell me?"

She deserved honesty. Had earned it so many times over. And this was the hardest answer.

"I don't know."

She didn't say anything. Just stared out into the distance.

Behind them, Chad had started whining again.

"If you'll excuse me?"

She didn't answer, but he stood anyway. He had some self-loathing to work out on one of the scumbags of the universe.

Wraith was numb. It had been that kind of decade.

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

She looked at her finger. Stilled it.

Knew what had to be done.

Kael cracked the next bone in Chad's finger. He screamed. It was getting tiresome.

All he wanted was to go back in time and change what he'd done.

He was going to have to settle for the site's data access codes.

But Chad was proving surprisingly reluctant to co-operate.

He heard Wraith's footsteps.

"Want a turn?" he asked her dully.

She shook her head. Looked at Chad. And shot him twice in the stomach with his HushTec pistol.

The man howled as Kael surged to his feet. "What the fuck, Wraith? Is vengeance so important to you that you can't wait?"

She shifted her gaze to him without moving her head. The woman he'd pulled out of prison was in those eyes.

"This wasn't vengeance. It was just necessary. If he doesn't move around too much, it should be about twenty or thirty minutes before he bleeds out and triggers the *facility shutdown*."

Kael stared at her. Speechless.

"You can try to stop the bleeding if you like. Or leave. It doesn't matter to me. I'm out. Goodbye, Major."

She turned and left without looking back. Chad was still screaming.

He had to move. But his legs wouldn't obey.

He just stood there, useless.

Fuck.

Chapter 51

It had taken nearly a week to get to Kronos; SID's mostly secret base of operations. He'd gotten back to the *Styx* a little singed but otherwise physically okay.

He'd waited two days for Wraith.

She never showed.

For the first time since he'd read her file, he couldn't confirm with certainty whether she was alive or not.

Eventually, he'd had to leave.

He spent the trip writing up two reports. One Top Secret. One tagged GEO.

Neither had full details.

Both listed Wraith as KIA. He hoped it wasn't true.

He didn't expect to make it out of his confrontation with SID alive, but if he did, he knew exactly where he would go.

Brandt looked up as Kael strode into his office.

Unsummoned. Uninvited.

Kael smiled at him as he sat. He'd opted for full military dress uniform coupled with Shade-style insouciance.

The Vice-Admiral's vein was pulsing madly in his temple before Kael even opened his mouth.

"Brandt."

The bastard deserved no respect for his rank. Not anymore.

Kael waited for him to start building up steam, then cut him short by dropping pics—print outs, for old time's sake—onto Brandt's desk.

He'd left Chad's house of horrors with less than he'd have liked, but not with nothing.

Brandt raised an eyebrow, clearly about to embark on another rant or a cover up. So, Kael tapped his data pad and played the recording of Chad. Talking about Brandt. About his knowledge of the experiments that had been taking place over more than three decades.

It turned out all the motivation Chad needed was certain death. And the promise that Kael would stop the bleeding if he co-operated.

He'd promised.

He'd lied.

Now, he leaned in towards Brandt, face as empty as the Void, and as full of promise.

"I'm out. Now, you can kill me, detain me or jail me, but if I don't regularly reset the timer on these files? Everything gets released. Publicly."

"You're playing a dangerous game, Veyne."

Kael yanked his ranks off his shoulders and dropped them on Brandt's desk.

"I'm done playing games."

* * *

He stepped silently from the shadows.

The air was still thick with tension from Helios's departure, and Brandt was punching his finger into his data pad with

increasing frustration. His face was maroon, approaching puce.

You'd think someone who had worked in SID for more than two decades would realize that if their data pad isn't working—it's for a reason.

"Let him go, Brandt."

Brandt gave a small hop in his seat. He spun with a snarl that died as soon as he saw who was speaking.

"Sir," Brandt saluted.

He had to smile. Internally, of course.

Brandt hating saluting anyone.

"I didn't know you were here."

The Vice Admiral's eyes darted around the room, looking for where he could have been standing that he didn't notice him. Gave up, and fixed him with his *I'm-an-Admiral* stare.

"We don't need your GEO interference on this. Veyne's a traitor. He will be taken into custody, immediately. Court marshaled. Executed. Or maybe thrown into BS-7271 Prison and forgotten about."

The man trailed off. Most people did when he observed them. Eventually.

He knew what he looked like: unremarkable. Unreadable. Like staring into the abyss before it got to know you.

Okay, one person had said that. Drunk, admittedly, but not wrong.

"As poetic as it would be to drop Helios into the same cell that used to belong to Raine, the *good Major* has not quiet outlived his usefulness."

He turned his head to the closed door. Briefly connecting his optics to the cam-net, and watched Helios march out of the building. He imagined there would be murder in the man's eyes. Soon to be replaced by doubt and existential dread.

He disconnected.

Next to him, Brandt was spluttering.

There was a small bang—more of a *bonk*—and he glanced down. Brandt was face down on the desk. Not moving.

“You, on the other hand, should have been *retired* years ago,” he told the corpse.

The back of his neck prickled, and a slim man congealed from shadows that hadn’t been there a moment before. He looked at Brandt, and grinned.

“About damn time.”

The new arrival was still too thin, and he couldn’t quite suppress the wave of concern. Not that he’d ever admit it out loud.

The small man seemed to blur, and then he found himself with an arm wrapped around him and a head on his shoulder. He sighed and settled his hand at Shade’s waist.

“Told you, you’d find that little trick useful.”

“I’m still not convinced the side effects are worth it, Z.”

“Eh, what’s a headache and a few nights communing with the Void against being able to jump scare a guy like Brandt?”

“We’ve always had different opinions on *communing*. That’s why you’re leading a cult and I’m... not.”

“I dunno. I still think you’d make a fair acolyte.”

The way Shade said *acolyte* was indecent. But, of course, that was the point.

They stood in comfortable silence for a while. He’d never admit it—*ever*—but he found these moments with Shade restorative.

Eventually, Shade gave him a squeeze and tilted his head up to look at him. He looked down, met dark blue eyes heavy with challenge.

“Did you know about Spirit?”

Pain cut across him, twisting, burning. Grief and guilt and the burden of his choices. He let his soul speak as much as his mouth.

“If I’d known, I’d have burned everything I’ve built to the ground and damned the consequences.”

Shade nodded and rested his head back down, grip tightening around him.

“Do you think he’s dead?”

“We can hope.”

He looked away and silence fell heavily across the room. He waited.

“You know,” Shade said eventually. “If Helios is joining us, he’s going to need a new call sign.”

Geist looked at him for a moment, then back at the door Helios had so recently departed through.

“Yes. I was thinking... *Revenant*.”

Epilogue

The Folly | Three months later

Kael sat at the Outpost and contemplated his beer.

This bar was marginally better than most of the others in The Folly. If only because there were fewer *obvious* particles floating in their beer.

His shoulder ached.

His last competitor had managed to slam him into the ground and break his collarbone. Kael broke his neck in return.

Carefully.

After all, the man was still breathing when they'd carried him out of the Arena. It may be a black ring, but he wouldn't kill unless he had to.

He'd grudgingly visited one of the MedDocs, who had patched him up and charged him a fortune for the privilege.

Fighting in the Arena twice a day—or more—had been cathartic at first. And the coin added up nicely.

He'd sold the Styx when he arrived. He'd needed the credit, and it wasn't like he was going anywhere.

Unfortunately, he was now getting progressively more bored. Not quite enough to take Rina up on her offers of *Merc Work*, but he knew that day wasn't far off.

He never asked about Wraith.

Rina never offered. But she seemed to be waiting for him to crack. Certainly, she made sure she ended their weekly drinks by scowling at him and telling him he was an idiot.

She wasn't wrong.

He sipped his beer.

The Void still waited at the edge of awareness.

It was silent. And patient.

And he didn't know what would happen next time he let it in.
Still worth it.

"You know, when Rina told me you were trying to kill yourself, I thought she meant in the Arena. Not by drinking the barely disguised sewerage they serve at the Outpost."

He set his drink down. Turned.

She looked like all the dreams he told himself he wasn't allowed to have.

Longer hair. Same fire.

Well-fit spacer uniform in unrelieved black. And enough weapons to discourage most of the locals from trying anything... at least without back up.

She walked up to him, snapped her fingers in front of his face.

"Major, you still alive in there?"

He laughed, able to breathe again.

"Nope. Died three months ago."

She gave him a half smile—Void, he'd missed that smile.

"Well, then. Shade thinks he's found something on Geist. I'm headed back to Perdition." She paused, "Want to tag along?"

They walked in companionable silence.

Wraith knew there was probably a fuck ton to be said, but now didn't seem to be the time to say it.

They had plenty of time on the trip to the outer reaches. More than a month, once you factored in station stop overs.

She had modified her fancy new ship to be Fold-capable and it flew like a dream. But she remembered Kael's shifting eyes at the Anchor. She wouldn't be taking him back Inbetween in a hurry.

She glanced at him as they neared the dock.

He'd changed. Hardened. But not in a way she minded.

She still thought his eyes were pretty.

She'd parked her ship near the back of the dock, and they'd walked past several others in varying states of space-worthiness when Kael stopped in his tracks.

"Wait a minute, isn't that *my* ship?"

Wraith smothered a grin as the hold ramp opened smoothly in front of them.

"Don't know *what* you're talking about. This is the *Lethe*."

She turned and winked at him, "Come on, Kael, let's get out of here."

Wraith walked up the ramp. Kael stood frozen; momentarily stunned.

"You know," he called, hurrying after her, "that's only the second time you've ever used my real name."

She was standing a few meters inside, checking a crate. She glanced at him, "Really?"

"Yeah." He crossed his arms, raised an eyebrow, "The first time, you were high on Silk, and you said it right before you kissed me."

She didn't turn, kept her attention on the crate, "Huh."

"So," his lips curled up, "Should I be worried about my virtue?"

Finally, she stood and turned towards him.

Her gaze raked over him, slow and deliberate.

He forgot how to breathe.

"Maybe," she said. "Eventually."

He sucked in a breath, grinned, and hit the ramp close button.

"I can live with that."

IV

EXTRAS

Introduction by Shade

Ah, you made it. The back pages. The whisper spaces. The unredacted footnotes and postscript sins.

Welcome to the **Extras** section of *Hard Parole*: the bits that didn't fit neatly into official records, structured chapters, or Geist's increasingly anxious mission logs. What you'll find here are classified files, leaked comms, bad decisions preserved in digital amber, and at least one whiskey-related... *incident*.

This is the section Wraith pretends doesn't exist, Kael refuses to read, and Spook once tried to set on fire. I've curated it anyway.

Why? Because stories don't end with the last chapter. They echo. They bleed. And sometimes they drunk-message you six months later asking if you ever really meant it.

So consider this your invitation to go deeper. To unpeel the layers. To witness what happens when memory is fragmented, the truth is subjective, and someone (*hi*) keeps editing the records with poetic license and petty vengeance.

Read at your own risk. Some fragments bite back. Others might make you feel something.

And if you come away changed?

Good.

—**Shade**

(Prophet. Archivist. Emotional liability.)

P.S. The Void says hi.

Liquid Silk & the Morality Olympics

Author's Note: *These messages were sent immediately after the events on Perdition (Chapters 12 – 18)*

SECURE COMM | UNTIMESTAMPED | ENCRYPTION: LUX-VIOLENTIA

TO: Geist

FROM: Shade

SUBJECT: Liquid Silk & the Morality Olympics

Dearest Murder-Master,

Before you polish that moral high ground any shinier, I'd like to clarify a few *factual* items re: the recent pharmacological scandal:

1. **No**, I didn't *choose* to dose Wraith with Liquid Silk. It's not like we keep a MedBay stocked with your tidy little hypo options and SID-standard trauma protocols. We're in the back end of Perdition with a bunch of half-feral acolytes, two operating needles, and just enough duct tape to make a decent confession booth.
2. **Yes**, I knew it would lower her defenses. You know what

else lowered her defenses? Seven cracked ribs and a two-day adrenaline crash. So maybe give me a medal for not just smothering her in Void oil and calling it a sacrament.

3. **Also yes**, I stayed. I didn't leave her alone. I didn't fuck her. I didn't even make a cult joke. *I held the line.*
4. Until she kicked me off the cot. Twice. That's growth.

Now, if you're worried about *Kael's delicate sensibilities*, rest assured he passed his first real test. He didn't break her, didn't fuck her, didn't flinch. And in doing so, he made himself indispensable.

Congratulations! You've got your emotionally tethered asset pair. Should last until one of them breaks the universe. Or each other.

But if this is your passive-aggressive way of saying you'd have handled it better?

Cool.

Next time you can drag your ghostly ass out of the shadows and *be* the one getting blood on your hands.

With love and illicit biochem,

—**Shade**

Prophet. Patient zero. Emotional war crime.

P.S. You're not mad about the Silk. You're mad she let someone else see her. *Don't lie to me.* I know your tells.

REDACTED COMM | PRIORITY: SHADOW-LIT | ORIGIN: UNKNOWN NODE

TO: Shade

FROM: Geist

SUBJECT: Re: Liquid Silk & the Morality Olympics

Shade,

You always mistake my silence for permission.

You always mistake my anger for guilt.

Let's be clear.

You dosed her with **Liquid Silk**, Shade.

Not Silk-72B. Not trauma protocol. Not *anything remotely medical*. Liquid Silk is an aphrodisiac wrapped in a mercy drug, **engineered to break control**.

And I know you know that. Because *I taught you the formula*.

You say you held the line.

Good.

You don't get a reward for that. You get a baseline level of decency.

As for Kael...

Yes, he passed the test. And no, I'm not surprised. He has restraint buried so deep it might as well be fused to his bones.

But don't pretend that was your intent. You were angry. Jealous. Curious.

You *pushed*, because you wanted to see what would crack.

And now you've bound them tighter than any mission file.

That's not strategy. That's sabotage disguised as insight.

The difference between us, Shade, is that I've never confused loyalty with possession.

You want absolution for what you did?

Tell her the truth.

Or don't.

We both know it won't change what happens next.

—**Geist**

Director Emeritus, Ghost Command

Unforgiven. Unrepentant. Watching.

Phantom's (Mostly) Unredacted File

Author's Note: *The redacted file can be read in Chapter 19*

SID ARCHIVE // CLASSIFIED DOSSIER // GHOST
COMMAND // PHANTOM

SUBJECT

- **Call Sign:** *Phantom*
- **Real Name:** Elijah Tommasi
- **Rank:** Captain
- **Clearance:** [REDACTED] EYES ONLY
- **Evaluator:** GEO
- **Status:** MIA [CLASSIFIED: PRESUMED ACTIVE]
- **Location:** Unknown.

PSYCH PROFILE SNAPSHOT

- **Disposition:** Calm under pressure. Tactical. Unemotional.
- **Primary Function:** Heavy weapons, exfil, recon-in-force.
- **Secondary Function:** Wraith's goddamned heart.
- **Weakness:** Wraith. *Full stop.*

- **Strength:** Tactical detachment. Emotions do not influence decision making.

If Wraith bled, Phantom bled second. And whoever made her bleed first rarely walked away.

–GEO

HISTORY

- Mobile Infantry. Force Recon.
- Last to join GHOST program. Bonded fast.
- Multiple minor disciplinary actions prior to joining program
- Unexpected fit with team.
- Inbetween compatibility: 98th percentile
- Served as emotional anchor during early phase volatility

He was too grounded. They were chaos incarnate.

–GEO

BATTLEFIELD NOTES

- “Spiritual tank.”
- Quiet. Unshakable. Spoke when it mattered.
- [Redacted]
- SID command unaware of connection with Wraith
- Post-final battle: multiple sightings. None verified.
- [Redacted]

CURRENT THREAT LEVEL: UNRANKED

Evaluator's Notes (GEO):

Given subject's strengths and weaknesses, should he ever find out that Wraith is alive, threat level should be raised to maximum level immediately.

Incident Debrief: Taurus Prime

Author's Note: This incident can be found in Chapter 22

SID ARCHIVE // CLASSIFIED DOSSIER // SID23312 //
REVISION GEO-205

- **Subject:** Incident Debrief – Taurus Prime
- **Compiled:** Post Event
- **For:** The Council
- **Clearance:** GEO

DO NOT CIRCULATE

INCIDENT SUMMARY:

- Taurus Prime Reconnaissance & S&R Operation
- **Subjects of interest:** Lt. Vorsk, Ensign Raine (now Captain Raine, “Wraith”)
- **Initial deployment:** Operation BLACKSWAMP
- **S&R Operation:** NIGHTSTALKER
- **Result:** Catastrophic engagement and loss of life following unexpected contact with non-native bioforms (prob. Class

E or higher—later positively identified as Tarrascoid). Final recovery of Subject Raine confirmed.

[LOG ENTRY: G-205.TP-1]

- Official record blames the terrain, the compromised comms, and bad intel.
- The unofficial truth? *We sent in children with knives and asked them to kill nightmares*
- Raine was green. Too green. I'd flagged her for secondary observation during her academy simulations—primarily for what she *didn't* do. She didn't panic. She didn't hesitate. She also didn't follow the rules when they got in her way.
- What did she do? Walk into hell. And *survive*.
- Vorsk's grudge is understandable—misplaced, but understandable. Eleven men dead because Command prioritized one anomalous LIFE signal. That signal was Raine. They didn't explain why to Vorsk, and he never forgave her for being the one picked to survive.

[LOG ENTRY: G-205.TP-2]

- The creature descriptions line up with Tarrascoids, previously only encountered during Fold-surge anomalies in Sector Delta-7. No correlation to Taurus Prime previously recorded.
- Raine's firsthand account provides more than Command's dry data logs. Especially the detail about "vibrating water" and the *hum*. Not environmental.

- That's *Void signature bleed*. Which means either:
- A) The Inbetween had already begun warping planetspace pre-War,
- B) Taurus Prime sat on a rupture node,
- C) someone was testing something they shouldn't have been.

Likely all three.

-GEO

[LOG ENTRY: G-205.TP-3]

- "Three black rocks."
- That's the line that stops me cold.
- Vorsk dismissed them. Command missed them.
- But Raine *remembers nothing after that point*. Not the creatures. Not the retreat. Not even survival.

Three black rocks. Likely the same material as the First Altar.

Coincidence?

Never is.

This is not the first report we've had of them. It's just the first one we're admitting exists.

-GEO

FINAL ASSESSMENT: GEO

ASSESSMENT:

- Raine didn't just survive Taurus Prime. She was *changed* there.
- This was her first known Void adjacency.
- She walked out hollowed. Memory gone. Team dead.
- And something else already whispering inside her.
- She calls what happened "instinct."
- She's wrong. It's not instinct.
- It's *resonance*.

[FLAGGED: POTENTIAL EARLY INTEGRATION SYMPTOMS.]

- No known Fold trauma markers post-Taurus. But that may be because the *damage wasn't trauma—it was alignment*.
- She's been syncing to the Void ever since.

GEIST NOTES:

I once asked Shade what the odds were of a first-year Ensign surviving a full recon team wipe. He said it would take either divine intervention or suicidal stubbornness. In this case, I suspect both.

Speculation:

Ashley Raine didn't become Wraith with Ghost Command.

Ashley Raine didn't survive Taurus Prime.

Wraith did.

We just didn't notice the switch.

SID Tag: TOP SECRET GEO

HARD PAROLE

Cross-reference: VOID_NODE. MONOLITH-TRACKER

—End Dossier—

Auto-Reroute: GEO Archive Only

LOCK: VOIDSIGMA

Dossier GEO-223H: Helios 1st Contact

Author's Note: *The conversation between Kael & GEO is in Chapter 23*

GEO ARCHIVE // OBSERVATION ENTRY // GEO-223.H

- **Subject:** Helios, Kael Veyne – Initial Direct Contact
- **Clearance:** GEO

SUMMARY:

First encrypted exchange with Major Kael Veyne Helios. Initiated upon detection of GEO tag in post-Perdition report. Assessment follows.

CONTEXT NOTES:

I've been watching Helios since his first request to reopen the GHOST files.

Then, with interest when he proposed releasing Raine.

Not because I thought he could *control* her (no one can), but because I was curious whether someone molded by command

structure could *survive* her.

Turns out the man can not only survive her—he's started orbiting dangerously close to syncing with her. That wasn't part of the plan. But plans, like ships, are only useful until they catch fire.

INITIAL IMPRESSIONS:

- **Demeanor:** Guarded but not stiff. He understands the danger of the room, and he doesn't posture. That alone puts him above most of SID.
- **Cognition under pressure:** He parsed the situation fast. Tagged the file as bait. Didn't flinch when the hook landed something big.
- **Loyalty markers:** The man follows orders right up until they become stupid. Then he pivots. Efficiently. Respectfully. *Deliberately.*
- That last one matters.

ON RECORD TAGGING: GEO

Smart move. Reckless, but *smart*.

He used the tag the same way Shade used to: not as a cry for help, but as a challenge.

And he did it to see who was watching.

Which means he *knows* the game is rigged. And he's still playing.

ON SHADE:

Kael doesn't trust Shade. But he does *listen* to him.

He's learning what every Ghost knew instinctively: the differ-

ence between madness and method is usually just how loud the brass is yelling.

He *learned* from Perdition. Which is more than I can say for 90% of SID's upper command.

ON WRAITH:

When I asked for his assessment, I expected what all handlers give: sanitized psych speak, emphasis on threat mitigation, warning bells about control.

Instead, I got this:

"Unpredictable but not erratic. Expert tactician. Best damn pilot I've ever seen."

And when I pushed?

"Damaged, Sir."

"With respect, Sir, she's not a Void-damned engine."

That? That's a man who sees her. Not as a weapon. Not as a project.

As a person.

And that might just be the most dangerous thing about him.

CONCERNS:

Helios is too competent not to notice the holes in his orders. Too principled to play Brandt's games forever.

The moment he starts asking the *wrong* questions—about Taurus, about integration, about *what really happened at the end of the war*—they'll pull his clearance or pull his spine out through his nose.

But if I cut him loose now, I lose the only stable bridge between Wraith and the people who still think they are in charge.

CONCLUSION:

He's not a GC Candidate. Not yet.

But he's standing at the edge of the ramp, staring into the Fold, and asking the right questions.

All it'll take is one step.

And Void help me—I think I want to see what he becomes on the other side.

ACTION:

Leave him in play. Track Void resonance metrics after each Tunnel. Observe. Archive. Prepare fallback protocol: V-Helios.

End Entry

LOCK: GEO // EYES ONLY

Personal Log: Dr. Seori Tommasi

[Personal Log: Dr. Seori Tommasi | Vessel: Tiamat | Void Time: 0111 | Security Level: Personal-Sync Only]

The Ghost He Loved

She's everything he said she was.

And nothing he could've ever explained.

Wraith. Or as he calls her, Ash, like the name is both a prayer and a blade.

She moved like a shadow. Sat like she was wired to detonate. And looked at him like he was the last star in her sky; and the one that burned her alive.

I didn't expect the grief.

Not from her.

I knew to brace for Elijah's. I've lived it with him for years. But hers?

It was the kind of grief that makes your skin too tight. That frays the air when you breathe near it.

She looked at him like he was *home*.

And she knew she wasn't welcome there anymore.

I felt her pain like it was mine. It bled through Elijah like frostbite. Quiet. Deep. And absolute.

Even as he held my hand, I could feel him aching in her direction.

But I wasn't angry.

How could I be?

She was his first heartbreak.

His first love.

His first gone-too-soon.

She's not a threat to me. She's a wound we both carry.

Elijah once told me he loved her before he ever kissed her. That she taught him how to fight and how to feel, sometimes in the same breath. That he mourned her like a soldier mourns fallen brothers—ruthlessly, quietly, forever.

I never asked him not to love her.

I just asked him not to lie about it.

And he never has.

Now she's here. Alive. Hurting. Still in love with the man I married.

And just realizing she'd already lost him. Not because he chose someone *better*, but because life made it impossible for her to be the one standing beside him.

I don't pity her.

I honor her.

She helped make the man I love into who he is. She burned through him and left scars, yes, but also shaped his courage. His empathy. His darkness. His fire.

And in return, I think I owe her something.

I owe her the truth:

She's not alone.

She's not forgotten.

And if she ever needs someone to sit beside her in the dark and hold what Elijah can't?

I'll be there.

Not as a rival.

As a sister-in-arms.

—Seori

Spook's Rookie Training Guide

How To Spot A Liar (and when to let them lie)

Presenter: Karina “Spook” Chekova

Training Audience: Junior field operatives, unfortunate interns, and that one guy from Fleet HR who thinks trust falls count as security clearance.

Cover Slide

“The Truth is Tactical: Spotting Bullshit in a War Zone”

Slide 1:

Common Lies Told By Officers:

- “It’s just a recon mission,” **means** “You’re bait. Bring extra ammo.”
- “We’re not sending her in alone,” **means** “We already sent her. Pray.”
- “Your sacrifice won’t be forgotten,” **means** “It already has been.”
- “We don’t negotiate with terrorists,” **means** “We’re actively

negotiating. Don't answer your comms."

Slide 2:

Tells to Watch For in the Field:

- Micro-pauses before answering. Classic.
- Too much eye contact = rehearsed.
- Not enough eye contact = raw panic.
- Touching temple or jaw = internal monologue is losing the argument.
- Fingers twitching? Gun nearby. Clock it.

[GEO Side Note: Helios does the jaw thing. Constantly.]

Slide 3:

When to Let the Lie Live:

- If the lie keeps the unit from splintering.
- If the truth breaks the mission spine.
- If they're lying to *themselves* to keep breathing—let 'em. For now.
- If it's about love? Duck, don't interfere, and *definitely* place your bets.

[Shade Side Note]: I hold the book. Call me. Free Cult membership with every loss.

Slide 4:

When You Are the Liar

- "I'm fine," *means* "You're not."

- “Just following orders,” **means** “You aren’t.”
- “I didn’t care,” **means** “You did.”
- If you’re lying for the mission: good luck.
- If you’re lying for survival: carry on.
- If you’re lying for love: Welcome to Ghost Command.

The Whiskey Incident

Author's Note: Not canon, probably, but fun.

[ShadowComm.052.W - Geist↔Shade | Subject: Re: Whiskey Situation]

**Timestamp: D+18 | URGENT FLAG: BIOHAZARDOUS
INCIDENT REPORT ATTACHED**

[SHADE]:

Okay, in hindsight, perhaps “Fold-aged” wasn’t the correct descriptor. But how was I supposed to know a cask of my finest Void-brewed whiskey would try to eat the courier?

[GEIST]:

Was this before or after you wrote “To my dearest bastard, Geist—may this haunt you like I do” on the label?

[SHADE]:

Before. I'm not a monster.

(Also: technically it was sentient when I bottled it. I named it Barry.)

[GEIST]:

Barry ruptured containment and tried to sing the color out of two engineers.

They now only dream in static.

[SHADE]:

You're welcome.

Also: You owe me a thank-you note. And a drink. Maybe not Barry. But something less inclined to devour sound.

[GEIST]:

I hate you.

[SHADE]:

So... hypothetically, if I had a second bottle named Susan—

[GEIST]:

Fine.

But if Susan decorporealizes any logistics officers, I'm

charging you personally for the replacements.

Conditional Release Preview

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.

He moves in defiance.

He moves with memory.

He moves without us.

And yet, 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 faithless.

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 best from within.)

Prepare the altars. Burn the false verses.

Update the Revelation Path with his current trajectory.

He does not know what he carries. He does not know what he
is.

But the Fold does.

And it is watching.

In silence and shadow,

— The Mouth

We fall. We fade. We rise again.

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.

You can connect with me on:

 <https://shadesvoidcult.com>

 <https://x.com/ThatVoidAuthor>

 <https://x.com/ShadesVoidCult>

 <https://x.com/GeistRedacted>

