Strength Of The Pack

by AFKai

Summary

The adventures of a little Hunter and her rowdy clan. Frea overcomes so much to be the Savior of the City, her dedication to protecting her family and home is an inspiration to those around her. Her relationship with the boisterous Crucible handler started with some innocent flirting, but the history between them ran far deeper than she could have ever imagined.
“Frea, wait up!”

The huntress stopped at the top of the hill, her brilliant white cape fluttered in the soft breeze coming off the mountains.

“Come on, Dex. Use that space magic you Warlocks adore so much and get a move on,” she laughed.

His annoyed grunt echoed over the comms. “You're such a comedian.” Dex finally managed to trudge through the deep snow to join her. “Are we almost there yet?”

“Almost.” Frea pointed toward one of the looming cliffs. “There's a cave at the top, it gives a great view of the entire Forgotten Shore sector. It's a great place to camp out for the patrols here.”

“So you slack off during your patrols then?” He crossed his arms.

The huntress punched him playfully in the arm. “Hey, I always take my patrols seriously. This is just more efficient.” She shrugged. “And it's better than wandering out in the cold.”

“Oh yeah...sure,” Dex said sarcastically.

It didn’t take Frea much effort to scale the cliffside and reach her perch. The cave was a protected haven from the freezing winds of the Cosmodrome, offering a pleasant reprieve from the nearly year long winter here. She nimbly pulled herself up and over the ledge into the entrance. With a quick glance, she confirmed the camp she left here days ago was still untouched by hands before removing her helmet. The icy air entered her lungs as she sighed, blowing a wisp into the air. The cavern wasn't very deep, merely a hole in the rock, but it kept everything inside hidden from curious eyes.

“Little help here?” Dex called, his voice now without the comm interference. Frea turned back and spotted him struggling to climb over the last obstacle. Warlocks weren't the most agile out of the Guardian classes.

“You need to work on your climbing skills too.” She chuckled and bent down to firmly grasp his outstretched hand, pulling him up into the cave.

“I'll try to remember that for next time.” Even with his helmet still on, Frea could hear him breathing heavily underneath.

She opened her fingers to let go of his hand, but his grip on hers tightened. Her gaze dropped down to their intertwined hands, the air between them suddenly tense.

“Dex-” she began.

“I know we've been a team since day one.” His shaking voice cut her off. She lifted her eyes back up to meet his but his expression was hidden behind his mask. “And you only think of me as a brother but I...”

“Guardian!” Her Ghost materialized out of nowhere, the bright red shell decorating it glittered in the
bleak cavern. “Lord Shaxx has requested your prompt attention.” Dex immediately released Frea's hand as an awkward silence fell over the group, the only sound to be heard were the whistling winds outside. “O-oh.” The Ghost stammered, finally realizing its interruption. “Pardon me.” It blinked out of existence once again.

The quiet lasted for a few seconds longer before Dex let out an exasperated sigh and turned away. “Go, I'll take care of patrols here. I'm sure whatever the Crucible handler wants, it's important.”

Frea hesitated for a moment before replacing her helmet. Her heart throbbed nervously in her chest. She already knew about his attraction to her, he wasn't very good at hiding it, but right now she simply didn't have an answer for him.

“Dex.” She gently placed a hand on his arm. He flinched from her touch. “I'm sorry.”

The Warlock moved back to face her and poked her visor, trying to lighten the mood the best he could. “Don't be, now get going. You know how Lord Shaxx gets when you leave him waiting.”

“Right, don't think I can survive another one of his 1v1 sessions.” She lightly laughed and summoned her Ghost into the palm of her hand. “I'll see you around, okay.”

The last image she saw before teleporting to her ship was him waving her goodbye.

No matter the time of day or night, the Tower was always noisy. Frea enjoyed watching her fellow Guardians and others hustling around. Vendors were spread along the outskirts of the plaza, selling their wares to any Guardian in need of a new weapon. And others stood around in groups, trading stories of their great adventures and raids. It was a nice distraction from the battlefield for a time. The huntress walked past the vaults and around a rowdy group of Titans in the middle of a soccer match. One of them head-butted the ball and launched it straight into the Cryptarch's table, earning a hard stare from Master Rahool and laughter from the spectators. Frea entered the hallway leading toward the Vanguard offices at the center of the plaza. There she found Lord Shaxx out of his room, talking with some rookie Guardians. It wasn't often they got new people, it can be difficult for the Ghosts to discover those worthy enough to fight with the Traveler's light. But when they do, it was usually Shaxx who trained them until they were ready for battle. Judging by their armor, this group seemed to have been resurrected just recently, and whatever they were talking about had the Crucible handler acting more lively than usual.

“Ah!” The Titan noticed Frea as she entered the hallway. “Hive-bane, we were just talking about you.” His naturally loud voice boomed out from his horned helmet. The group of Guardians turned around, their eyes widened in terror.

“I'm rather concerned over what you were talking about, Shaxx.” The huntress reached up to remove her helmet. “Should I ask?”

“Did you really save the Last City three times?” One of the rookies, a hunter, skipped up to Frea. Her eyes wide and shining with curiosity.

“Can all Guardians be like you?” A large Titan joined in, stepping a little too closely. Frea had to strain her neck to look up at him.

“Uh, yeah sure. Of course,” Frea said awkwardly. The unexpected attention made her uncomfortable.

“Alright.” Shaxx grasped the Titan by the shoulder and roughly pulled him back. “Training is done
for the day, you all run off now. You can ask the Hive-bane questions later.”

“Yes, Shaxx!” All three of the new Guardian spoke in almost perfect unison while straightening to full attention.

“Lord Shaxx.” He corrected, crossing his arms.

“Lord Shaxx!” They nearly tripped over themselves as they ran out of the hallway.

Frea watched them go, a playful smile spread on her lips. They reminded her of when she was a rookie so many years ago. Times were so different for her now. When she turned back she noticed Shaxx watching her intently.

“You called for me?” She asked.

He waved her in and she followed him to his desk. His office was messy as ever, books, tablets, scraps of metal, and weapon parts were scattered on nearly every surface. A dismantled sword sat off in a corner.

“Yes, I need your help with something.” He grabbed a report off his cluttered desk and tossed it to the huntress. “There's been sightings of Ascendent Hive in the Cosmodrome. We need to clear them out and see what they've been up to.”

Frea studied the carefully written words. It included multiple accounts of missing Guardians and those who died attempting to infiltrate the nest. No one has gotten close to figuring out why these Hive are on Earth. Normally they preferred darker places like the Moon.

“Shouldn't be too much of a problem.” Something clicked in her mind and she looked up.

“Wait...we?”

A soft chuckle escaped Shaxx's helmet. “Yes, I'm coming with you.”

She frowned. “But Shaxx, you shouldn't put yourself in any unnecessary danger. I have a fully capable clan, we can take care of this.” Frea wasn't unhappy about Shaxx wanting to join her, his centuries worth of experience was invaluable, but it was unusual for Tower leaders to go on missions. Her sense of duty to protect someone so irreplaceable overrode the desire to fight at his side.

“I am aware.” Shaxx placed his hands on his hips as he squared off with her, daring for her to challenge his orders again. A very Titan thing to do. “I've lost too many Guardians to this nest already, I need to be there to see it for myself.”

The huntress's mouth twitched with irritation. He wasn't leaving any room to argue, he was just as stubborn as she was, they sometimes clashed because of that. “Fine.” She sighed. “I have someone who can join us then, so at least we'll have a full fireteam.”

“Excellent.” The Titan relaxed. “We'll leave at dawn tomorrow.”

He went to turn away from her but she took hold of his arm. “But first, promise me you will not leave my side. If you die out there the Commander will never forgive me.”

Shaxx's head titled as he peered down at her. She had grabbed his upper arm, where there was no armor, and under her fingertips she could feel him tense up. Frea's face flared hot and she immediately released him, realizing that she might have just overstepped her bounds. He didn't give her the chance to apologize however, as he clasped her by the shoulder, her armor did nothing to hide the warmth from his large hand.
“There's no one I trust more,” he said. “I know I'm in good hands.”

Chapter End Notes

AFKai’s handy guide to original characters!

Frea: Female/Human/Hunter. Specialization: Bladedancer.

Trust

Dreams often haunted Guardians resurrected by Ghosts. Thought to be visions from the subconscious reverting back to when the chosen took their last breath by many Warlocks. The last memory they experienced before waking up again. Some dream of the Golden Age and others go even further back to a millennium long lost to time. Frea dreams of running. Three years as a Guardian and nearly every night she would wake up from a nightmare in a cold sweat, her pistol at the ready. Even so, she had yet to see where she was running to or from what. She preferred the infrequent evenings when only visions of emptiness interrupted her sleep.

The huntress shuddered awake, her breathing raspy and her nerves on high alert. She sighed with relief when only the view of her ceiling greeted her. It was just another dream. Groggy, she swung her legs over the bed and stretched, her joints creaking from the effort.

“Ghost,” she called.

“Yes?” The little bot appeared from thin air, its hollow voice a bit too loud for the small room.

“What time is it?” Frea asked, rubbing the sleep from her eyes.

The Ghost twisted in its shell. “It is an hour before dawn, Lord Shaxx will be leaving soon.”

“Contact Dex, make sure he's up to join us today.” She waved off the Ghost and it vanished again, leaving her alone to gear up. The huntress walked to her single window and brushed aside the curtain, the sun was just starting to touch the horizon. Her room was modest in size, built for Guardians who spent more time in the field rather than in the Tower. Frea liked the view it offered, from here she could see the Cosmodrome beyond the Last City. The rays of light spreading across the starry sky danced over the snow-capped mountaintops. It was often relaxing to stare at after a long day of shooting Fallen.

She left the window with a yawn. Having a dream like that before a mission was a bad omen, last time it happened her raid fireteam got stuck in the Vault for days and barely escaped unscathed. Frea shook the thoughts from her head. Focus. She won't let a few nightmares distract her, duty calls after all.

“Move that crate! Where's my wrench!?”

Frea walked into the Tower hanger bay as she did final adjustments to the straps on her armor. As usual, it was busy and hectic, with Amanda Holliday yelling at everything. Not even the frames were safe from her.

“Get that ship on the rails!” Holliday hollered at two Exos attempting to chain up a beaten junker jumpship well past its glory days.

“Good morning, Amanda,” the huntress said.

The engineer whipped around so quick, Frea wondered how she didn't fall over. “Frea! Mornin'! Looking for Lord Shaxx?” Holliday grinned.

Frea raised a brow. “Yeah, I am. How'd you know?”

“Oh, he just told me to keep an eye out. That clanmate you're always with is here as well.”
A lump formed in the huntress's throat. She doubted things would be awkward between her and Dex after what happened yesterday, but she still worried. He was like family to her, not once has she ever thought of him romantically despite knowing he's had a thing for her for awhile now. And she couldn't just not invite him to the mission, he was a powerful Warlock and her most trusted friend. Frea loudly sighed with frustration.

“That was a mighty big sigh,” Holliday remarked, making the huntress snap back to reality. “You alright?”

“Yes, I’m fine.” She looked up, putting on her best smile. “Just a bit sleepy still.”

Holliday laughed. “Gotcha! Mornings are the worst!”

Frea joined in on the laugh, already feeling a bit better. It was hard not to with Holliday’s cheery demeanor. “I’ll see you later, yeah?”

“Course!” With a short wave, Holliday was off to her work.

The huntress finally made it to the front of the hanger where Shaxx’s ship sat ready for liftoff. It was an LRv1 Javelin painted a bright blue and orange, flashy but somehow fitting for the Crucible handler. Shaxx himself was rummaging through crates of supplies on the off ramp. Frea’s mouth hung open when she noticed his helmet was off, a rare sight to see. The Titan took pride in his armor and heritage to the point of never taking his helmet off. New rumors circled the Tower every year from Guardians theorizing on what he actually looked like, their ideas often went to the utterly ridiculous. This was the second time Frea had the pleasure of seeing him without his visor, the first being an accident over a year ago. She soon found herself staring, engraving all the little details from his combed back hair to his stern eyes into her memory.

“Yo.”

A close voice from behind caught her off guard. Instinctively, she jumped and grabbed the knife off her belt to face her assailant. Her blade was nearly at his throat before she realized it was Dex.

“Dex!” She hissed through clenched teeth. “You know better than to sneak up on me!”

The Warlock threw up his hands in mock surrender, an unapologetic grin played across his face. “Sorry, sorry, you're normally not so easy to spook.” He chuckled.

“Yeah, well I was distracted,” the huntress mumbled as she sheathed her knife.

Dex’s gaze darted to Shaxx and then back to her, a strange look flashed across his features, but then suddenly it was covered by another grin. “Come on, Lord Shaxx and I have been waiting for you.” He walked by her, just brushing her shoulder as he passed. Frea stayed in place for a second longer, that expression he gave her was peculiar and for once she didn't know what he was thinking.

She quickly followed Dex and ducked under the bow of the jumpship. Shaxx looked up upon their approach.

“I see someone slept in,” he said.

Frea's face flushed hot. “No-uh-Holliday stopped me...” A bump on her side from Dex's elbow made her adjust the manner of speaking, she was being too casual again. “Sorry, Sir. Won't happen again.”

Shaxx's eyes flicked to the Warlock for a brief moment. Frea thought he looked annoyed but his
expression was soon hidden beneath his visor as he replaced his horned helmet.

“Time is short, let's get moving.”

The Hive nest was located only two hours away from the Cosmodrome patrol routes, outside of Guardian territory. Frea sat behind the cockpit as she cleaned her hand cannon and knives. Dex was set up at the back of the ship, studying the reports they had about the nest. And Shaxx was piloting at the helm. The huntress's gaze wondered around the interior as she went about her maintenance. The interior was surprisingly clean and well kept, especially compared to how messy he keeps his office desk. Instead of the living quarters normally installed in these ships, he had a small armory filled to the brim with gear. That wasn't as surprising.

Frea's attention drifted back to the pilot, Shaxx probably hadn't flown a ship in years, but it didn't show as he expertly maneuvered the stick. The Titan seemed to notice her stare as he shifted, his head turning just a bit to glance at her.

“How long have you two been together?” He suddenly asked, his voice strained. Frea thought she was just imagining it.

Her hands stopped moving on her gun. “We ran into each other shortly after waking up the first time, been together since. He was part of my fireteam that took down Crota and Oryx.” She smiled slightly, reminiscing about the raid days with her clan. “Dex is one of the most powerful Voidwalkers I've ever fought alongside of, he's almost comparable with Ikora Rey...almost.”

Shaxx chuckled. “I remember training you two in the Crucible years ago. He definitely had the potential. Ikora is a beast though, I have the scars to prove it.”

“So I've heard. Dex is a good friend, and I know he always has my back.”

The Titan didn't reply as a silence settled over them. The second glance he shot her didn't go unnoticed by Frea, she cursed that helmet of his.

“The armory here is small but open to you, feel free to take whatever you see fit.” He finally said, effectively cutting the conversation short.

The huntress placed her gun down and roamed to the shelves stacked with ammo and armor. He had everything, rifles, snipers, and shotguns, it was by no means 'small'. Her eyes landed on something strange tucked away behind the piping in a corner. Her curiosity getting the best of her, she reached in and grasped a handle. Yanking hard, she pulled out a dusty Raze-lighter from its prison. It was much like the ones that recently appeared among the Guardians in the Tower, though it seemed to be far older. Frea wiped away the dust with her gloves fingers and found unfamiliar words etched into the blade, she couldn't make out much in the weak ship lighting.

“We'll be there in five minutes.” Shaxx spoke up, snapping Frea out of her thoughts.

“I'm ready,” she replied and holstered the sword.
Leap

The trio materialized out into the cold air, their boots crunching on newly fallen snow as they landed. Even in full armor Frea could still feel the freezing temperature, a downside to the Hunter's preferred lighter set.

“What's the plan, Shaxx?” She spoke up over the comms, her teeth chattering slightly. The wind around them whipped fiercely enough to yank on her long cape.

“There's a side entrance into the Hive, less guarded. We'll go through there.” The Titan responded as he picked up his pace through the snow.

“I suggest getting out of here before the next blizzard hits,” Dex added.

“Agreed.”

With guns drawn they finally made it to the entry point mentioned in the patrol reports. It was a side entrance to the nest, just out of sight of the main pathway. They crotched close to the ground to stay out of sight of the Hive seeder. The huntress strained her eyes to look for any signs of movement, but it was strangely quiet.

“Hmm...” Frea didn't feel right, something was off.

“This side may be less guarded but we should have seen at least one Hive by now,” Shaxx said as he inched up next to her. He apparently shared her concern.

“Guess we'll have to find out what's going on the hard way!” She replied and jumped up from the snow. Without a second thought, she swung her legs into the narrow shaft and hurtled into the darkness waiting inside.

Instantly, she regretted it and found herself sliding down a startlingly steep tunnel.

“Frea!” Dex called after her, his voice echoing loud.

The air grew warmer the farther she fell and a bitter taste entered Frea's mouth, a feeling she was well acquainted with from her raid days against the Hive. Suddenly, the chute deposited the huntress out from the ceiling of a massive room. She was now airborne, falling fast toward the ground below.

“I don't mean to alarm you, Guardian. But you are not going to survive that fall.” Her Ghost sounded in her head.

“Yeah, I got that,” she grumbled. Twisting to land on her feet, the huntress summoned the Traveler's light into her legs. The skill allowed her to jump from nothing, an invisible foothold made from her own power. She hopped once, just enough to slow her descent, and rolled into her fall. The dust kicked up when her feet hit the ground left her armor a mess, but she was otherwise intact. The moment she landed her comms went haywire with interference from the two yelling Guardians from above. She pressed her fingers to her helmet, trying to understand what they were saying through the static.

“Are...ok?” The voice was so scratchy she wasn't sure who was talking.

“I'm fine. You guys came down. Watch out for an abrupt drop.” Frea tried to be straight to the point, hoping they would receive at least some of the signal.
Taking a second to catch her breath, she peered around the room. It was definitely Hive built, with
dimly glowing lanterns filled with insects and bones scattered all around the floor. Multiple doorways
lined the walls, leading to even more rooms and corridors. Even more alarming, was the lack of Hive
presence. It was eerily quiet just like the entrance up above. A shiver crept up Frea's spine, her
instincts were screaming at her to run. This had to be a trap.

Clattering from above grabbed the Hunter's attention and she glanced up to see Shaxx fly out of the
side entrance she had just come out of. Being much heavier, he fell faster than she did. For a second
his jump boosters kicked in, easing his trajectory, but it didn't last nearly long enough to slow the
Titan. He was going to crash.

“Shit.” Frea ran toward him. The weight of darkness was thick in the nest, choking their light and
turning it into nothing more than a flicker. Reviving a Guardian under these conditions would take
triple the time, and they couldn't wait that long down here. She wasn't sure how her small frame was
going to help him reach the ground safely, but she was certainly going to try. Three jump boosts was
all she had, the most out of all the classes, but it still may not be enough for the crazy idea running
through her head. Guessing his landing point, she looked up to the Titan, catching his eye. “Brace
yourself!” She yelled.

The next moment happened so fast that there wasn't time for him to argue with her. She leapt up with
all her strength and boosted, kicking off from the air like it was solid ground. One. At the peak of her
jump they collided midair, it felt like she ran head first into a brick wall and almost blacked out from
the pain. She could feel Shaxx's arms wrap around her waist and squeeze, and she shook her head to
focus again. Coiling her arms around his neck, she boosted again, barely slowing their drop. Two.
The air whipped at her cape as they continued to fall, still over a hundred feet of the ground. She
jumped off the air just mere inches from the ground, grunting with the exertion of lifting the heavy
Titan with her. Three. They landed in the dirt with a loud thud, kicking up more debris in their wake.
Frea's entire body burned like she had just ran a marathon. When the dust settled her chest began to
pound even louder. Shaxx had landed on top of her, the front of his helmet resting against her visor.
She could hear his heavy breathing echoing inside, the furry mantle on his shoulders rapidly rose and
fell, he was just as breathless as she was. Her senses were acutely aware of his body pinning her
down. And even more aware of the armored knee touching the inside of her thigh. He didn't move or
jump back immediately but instead seemed to let more of his weight press on her, ensuring that she
felt him even through her armor.

“Shaxx...” Frea gasped, her face felt hot underneath her mask. This wasn't the time or place. She was
confused, but damn she could feel herself getting excited anyway. “We need to move.”

Her voice seemed to snap the Titan back to reality. “Ah, of course. Right.” He reluctantly untangled
himself and stood up, offering a hand to the huntress. Frea grasped it and let him pull her up, her
muscles groaning in protest as he did so. “Thank you, for that.” He whispered.

Frea looked up at him, wishing she could read his face. She wanted to say something more but
talking in the middle of a Hive nest was not ideal. “You Titans and your stupid jumps,” she said
instead and laughed, her lungs burning from the effort. Her health recovery process was taking too
long, but she wasn't sure if it was from the darkness or the shock from what just happened. Probably
both.

Shaxx's head tilted ever so slightly. “Yes, not everyone can be as graceful as you Hunters.”

Another crumbling of rock loosened from above and both of them peered up to see Dex fling himself
out of the chute. His cloak billowed behind him like wings as he fell for a brief moment. But soon
the gentle glow of his jump boosters appeared at his feet and he was gliding. Warlock jumps always
reminded Frea of birds, while they couldn't achieve the same height as Hunters or speed as Titans,
they lasted the longest out of the two. Allowing those Guardians to glide for great distances like they were actually flying. Dex landed in the dirt with barely any effort and turned to his companions.

“Did I miss something?” He asked.

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A quick scan of the nest revealed nothing to the Guardians. No Ascendant Hive to be found, no bodies, and no signs of the missing scouts. Frea took up guarding the rear of the group they formed, Shaxx commanded the front, and Dex in the middle with his Ghost. Every room they came across was abandoned, empty of everything except for the annoying bugs that called this place home.

“This is unusual,” Dex said, swatting away a fly. “Hive don’t leave fully formed nests like this.”

The darkness in the tunnels created too much interference for their comms so they had to speak externally from their helmets. Frea didn't like having to, it felt too loud in the empty hallways.

“The last report from this place came to us three days ago. They couldn't have just disappeared in that small time frame.” Shaxx stopped at a lantern and tapped it with the butt of his rifle. The insects captured inside glowed brighter as they scattered away from the Titan.

Everything in Frea's mind still screamed trap to her. She could feel goosebumps prickling on her skin. She used this same tactic when hunting Fallen on Venus. Observe and then pounce when the moment was right. It was highly effective.

“We should be nearing the center of the nest, Lord Shaxx.” Dex broke the silence again.

“Good.” Shaxx stopped and turned toward his comrades, adjusting the grip on his gun as he did so. “I’ll take point, you two guard the back together. Be prepared for anything.”

Frea bit her lip. Shaxx already nearly died on her watch and now he wants to take the front of the fireteam. The worst spot to be in if something goes wrong. She wasn't surprised, he always had the habit of taking the lead. He could handle himself, but putting a Tower leader in harm's way rubbed her wrong.

“Yes, sir!” Dex responded vigorously. When Frea said nothing he looked down at her. She was staring at the wall, even masked he could tell something was bothering her. He badly wanted to ask but he knew better not to, not in front of Lord Shaxx. Instead he lightly elbowed her side, grabbing her attention.

“Uh...yes, of course. We'll be right behind you, Shaxx.” The huntress straightened, tripping a bit over her words.

The Titan was still for a few heartbeats before nodding. They were moving again, this time with Frea and Dex side to side and Shaxx just a few feet ahead of them.

The silence felt heavy inside the nest. The only sound was the soft crunching of their footsteps as they carefully walked through the hallways. Occasionally Frea checked the scope of her shotgun, inspecting the dark corners and glancing at the doorways behind them. She tried to stay focused but Dex beside her kept shifting awkwardly, at times he would even bump into her shoulder. He obviously wanted to ask her something, she knew him well enough to discern that, but she had a feeling it was going to be a strange question.

Finally he cleared his throat, just loud enough for only her to hear. “So...” he began.

She sighed. “So?”
“Why doesn't he ever correct you?”

Frea's head snapped up as she looked up at Dex. He was staring right back at her.

“Correct me on what?” The huntress faked ignorance, cursing to herself. Dex was perceptive as all powerful Warlocks had to be. She knew what he meant without asking.

“Lord Shaxx doesn't let any Guardian call him without his title. But...not you.” Dex glanced toward their leader up front for just a moment before turning back to her. She could feel his eyes burning a hole through their helmets.

He watched the Frea as she shrugged, clearly uncomfortable.

“Maybe he thinks of me as a peer or something, I don't know,” she whispered. Frea really didn't know why Shaxx never corrected her, hell she can't even remember the last time she called him Lord. She did notice that he never seem bothered by her casual nature toward him, he was rarely formal with her as well. It was just how things were between them. She looked back up to meet Dex's gaze. “You're probably reading too much into things.” Her chuckle came out dry and raspy.

“Frea...” Dex started.

Suddenly the ground under their feet shook hard enough to knock them to their knees. A deafening screech erupted down the hallway. Before Frea had the chance to stand, Shaxx was grabbing her arm, pulling her with him.

“Run!”
That's a big dude.

More coherent thoughts have gone through Frea's mind, but that one stuck out the most.

The trio pressed themselves against the wall after diving into the shadow of a nearby rock. The source of the screeching was a group of Wizards accompanying an Ogre. All of them were of the Ascendant class, making them tougher and more intimidating than normal Hive.

“How the hell did they not show up on the scans?” Dex asked in a hushed whisper.

“Could be the interference in here. The darkness is heavier than usual, even for a nest,” Frea replied.

“Doesn't matter right now.” Shaxx shifted into a fighting stance as he readied his rifle. “They're between us and the center of the nest. They need to go.” Frea's gaze drifted over to the Titan, he met her eyes.

“I can distract the Ogre. You two take care of the Wizards.” The huntress said, pulling the dusty Raze-lighter off the holster on her back. She could sense Shaxx stiffen beside her.

“Where did you get-”

She was gone before he could finish.

Frea speedily crept around the wall, keeping low to avoid making any sound. She counted four Wizards guarding their hulking pet. Hive were too unpredictable, once she got close to the Ogre, who knows if they'll attack her or go for her comrades. The huntress crouched for a few seconds and took a sharp breath. The calming sensation of the Traveler’s light crawled over her skin and in the next moment, she vanished. The Bladedancer invisibility trick only lasted for a few short clicks, but that was long enough for an experienced Hunter. Frea immediately stood and sprinted toward the Ogre, her soft steps barely disrupted the dust as she crossed the room. She ran under one of the Wizards and leapt up, readying the sword in her hand.

She landed on top of the Ogre as her cloaking wore out, and suddenly she was staring right into its single eye. The creature released a gurgled yelp, surprised to find a Guardian in its midst. Before it could react, Frea plunged the Raze-lighter into its eye. The Ogre howled in pain and attempted to grab the small huntress off its face, but Frea quickly ducked and rolled out of its reach. A scream next to her signaled the downfall of one of the Wizards, turned to ashes by a rain of Guardian bullets. Focusing back to the Ogre, Frea slashed at its legs, enraging it further. It was unable to shoot at anything with its eye gouged out, however a creature that size was still just as deadly even while blind. She had to make sure it wouldn't charge toward the sound of the gunfire coming from her fireteam's location.

Another pained screech from above sounded off as the second Wizard fell. Thankfully they had yet to notice the small huntress attacking their companion, their attention more directed on the Guardians shooting at them. Frea jumped back onto the shoulder of the Ogre and sank the blade deep into the thick muscle. Finally fed up with her antics, the creature spun in place, catching the huntress off guard and making her lose grip on the handle of her blade.

The sheer force from the maneuver sent her flying off the Ogre's back and crashing into a nearby lantern, breaking the glass and crushing many of the glowing insects inside. The sound reverberated throughout the room, making every Hive still alive aware of her presence, including the pissed off Ogre.
“Shit,” Frea groaned.

The Ogre let out a monstrous roar and slammed the dirt with its fists, preparing for a charge. Frea attempted to free herself from the lantern, the glass shards cut into the unprotected openings of her armor. She was stuck. The ground shook as the Ogre ran at her, sickly yellow blood dripping from its eye and the Raze-lighter still embedded in its back.

Guardians were as immortal as long as their Ghosts were intact, but that didn't mean death was painless. Frea lost count of how many times she died, and every time was as agonizing as the last. The pain was always followed by a gripping darkness, and the shock of the resurrection often felt like she was being electrocuted. It wasn't a pleasant experience. There's a record of Guardians going mad from dying too often, she could understand why.

The huntress closed her eyes and forced her body to relax, bracing herself for the embrace of death. The Ogre's thundering footsteps grew louder as it approached, she couldn't hear anything else over the noise it made, but all of a sudden everything went quiet. A shockwave washed over Frea as her eyes blinked open again. In front of her stood Shaxx holding up a nova shield, blocking the Ogre from getting any closer. The creature furiously pounded against the light barrier. From her spot, she could see the Titan's shoulders shake from the exertion of holding his super up against the brutal attack. He shot a quick glance back at the huntress.

“You alright?” he asked.

“Y-yeah.” Frea nodded, her chest pounded loudly in her ear.

“Good,” he grunted. His shield was starting to crack. “How about finishing this guy off for me before we both end up pulverized?” Despite the harrowing situation, the Titan seemed to have a rather good attitude about an Ogre trying to kill them.

A smile crept to Frea's lips. “Gladly.” With a huff she lifted herself out of the lantern, some of the shards were embedded in her flesh, but she didn't care. The warm light emitting from Shaxx's barrier made her wounds heal and boosted her own power. She stepped up just next to the Titan, his head turning slightly to look down at her. “Thank you,” she whispered. His face may have been hidden, but she had a feeling he was smiling when he gave her a short nod in reply. Hopefully one day she'll get to actually see that smile in person.

Turning away, Frea leapt out of the shield. The Ogre could sense her movement and stepped back with a snarl. Flying high though the air, the huntress pulled her two favorite knives from her belt and summoned arc light into them. The air around her crackled with electricity as she fell back onto the Ogre with the matched fury of a thunderstorm. The creature screamed as her charged blades melted its flesh, its entire body being seared from the inside. And just like that, it was gone.

Frea's boots crunched over embers, the only remaining remnants of the Hive. She walked over to Shaxx, who was bent over the Raze-lighter that had fallen from the Ogre. His armored fingers glided across the metal blade, over the words she wasn't able to read. He twitched when he realized she was watching him.

“Is that important?” She asked.

The Titan was silent for a moment as he turned the sword in his hand. “In a way.”

“Sorry, I didn't realize-” She cleared her throat, using her best formal voice in an attempt to clear the awkward tension that had settled between them. “I should not have taken it from your ship. My apologies, Lord Shaxx.”

Shaxx tilted his head and peered down at her. Frea noticed his grip on the sword handle tighten ever
so slightly. “It's fine. This is a relic now, I'm sure it was happy to see battle again.”

He held the weapon out for her. The huntress hesitated for a moment, trying to study his body language to at least get some idea of what he was thinking about, but finally she carefully reached out to take it. When she grasped the hilt, he held onto the sword and her for far longer than was necessary. A quiet sigh escaped his helmet when he let go, his fingertips gently brushing over hers. Frea had so many questions as she watched the Titan turn and walk away. Something was special about this sword and he wasn't willing to tell her about it. Was it because she was being formal? Dex pointing out her strange relationship with the Crucible handler made her more aware of the distance between herself and Shaxx. She was still considered a young Guardian, yes she's made a name for herself over the years, but compared to Shaxx and the other leaders of the Tower, she was still inexperienced. They have been here for centuries before the Last City was even built, her existence is only a measly sliver compared to that. With a long exhale, she sheathed the dusty Raze-lighter and joined her comrades.

“That was one hell of a show,” Dex commented once she returned. He was the one to finish off the Wizards while her and Shaxx took out the Ogre.

“Hopefully that's the last of the surprises,” Frea said as she rubbed her sore neck. Her wounds were finishing up healing, she could actually feel some of the glass being pushed out of her skin. It was uncomfortable.

“The center of the nest should be around the corner.” Shaxx reloaded his rifle and clicked the mag into place. “We need to see what's in there.”

The fireteam made it into the central point without encountering more resistance. Other than that group of stragglers they found, everywhere else was empty and dead.

“That group couldn't have been the only ones in this nest right?” Dex asked.

No one wanted to reply as they split up to inspect the large room. Normally, the middle of Hive nests were the most congested because the darkness was strongest there, an empty one meant it was abandoned. But why would they have left this nest in such a hurry? Frea ran her hands along the wall as a million questions streamed through her mind. Her foot kicked something metallic and she glanced down, it a Guardian's Ghost.

“Shaxx! Dex!” She called and bent down to pick up the Ghost. Its light was dead inside, whatever master it had belonged to was long gone, never to be revived again. The huntress felt a pang of sadness inside her chest. Guardians were already too few, they lose more than what could be replaced each year. Finding a dead Ghost was never a good sign.

Shaxx and Dex came up to her side.

“Damn.” The Titan clicked his tongue. “Must have been one of the scouts.”

“I'm amazed they had made it this far into the nest,” Dex mumbled.

Frea gripped the Ghost tightly and called the Traveler's light into her fingers. The little bot hummed to life in her palm and wearily blinked up at her.

“You did good, my friend.” She smiled. “Go rest now.”
The Ghost lifted from her hand and vanished, returning home.
“Banshee.”

The Exo made no attempt to look up from the pulse rifle he was dismantling to greet his customer. Frea watched his fingers nimbly move over the delicate pieces, treating them like they were treasures. If only he put that kind of attention into those around him as well. The huntress sighed and dropped the dusty Raze-lighter on top of the table with a little more force than was necessary. She saw his robotic eyes glance over to the weapon for a second before returning to his work.

“Frea,” he grumbled. “What do you want this time?”

“As charming as ever, I see.” She chuckled, earning another grunt from the gunsmith. “Was hoping you could work on something for me. A little restoration project.”

Finally, Banshee straightened to his full height and moved aside the gun.

“You know swords are Lord Shaxx’s specialty, why bring this to me?” He reached out and picked up the relic for inspection. The wear on the blade was much more obvious now in the light of day than it was on Shaxx’s ship. Cracks and dents marred the surface of the metal, Frea was amazed it stayed in one piece when she used it against the Ogre.

“I was hoping we could keep this between you and me.” Frea smiled coolly. The metal plates over Banshee’s eyes rose, the Exo equivalent of a questionable look. “Besides you helped build the new swords right? This should be easy.”

The Exo grumbled again as he carefully placed the sword down. “This isn't even remotely like the blades carried today.”

“What do you mean?” Frea curiosity was steadily rising.

Banshee stooped low and pulled a modern Raze-lighter from behind his kiosk. He placed it next to the relic sword and instantly Frea could see the differences. The weapon she took from Shaxx’s ship was of similar blade design with the same serrated edge, but it was much thinner, made more for puncturing and bleeding instead of slashing. The crystal normally used to power the Raze-lighter's flame was replaced with an orb so tarnished its original color was unrecognizable. “This sword...” Banshee began, cutting Frea's attention away. “Is incredibly old, Golden Age era most likely. Where did you get this?”

She hesitated. Shaxx didn't seem keen to talk about the sword, so maybe he didn't want anyone to know about it. “It uh...I found it. Over in the archives on Venus.”

Banshee gave her a look, he definitely didn't buy that, but thankfully he decided not to press the Hunter. “Spinmetal, relic iron, and an exotic shard,” he curtly listed off the materials. “Bring me those, and it'll be better than new.”

“Thank you!” Frea clasped her hands together with a wide smile. “Knew I could count on you, Banshee.” The spinmetal and relic iron would be easy to retrieve, the shard however was another story.

“Yeah, yeah.” The Exo dismissively waved her off.

Frea practically skipped away from Banshee's table, feeling the same excitement a child does
whenever they got their hands on a new toy. She didn't expect the sword to not actually be a Raze-lighter, though her experience with the blade was admittedly lacking. Her own exotic sword was the Dark-drinker, the void powered version, so she'd only seen the Raze-lighter in person on her comrades' backs.

The huntress turned the corner and briskly walked toward Shaxx's office, her thoughts moved on to last night. The squad had returned from the Hive nest late, with nothing to show for it except for a couple dead Ghosts and even more questions. Whatever happened in that nest before, the Hive were long gone. And now Frea and Dex were responsible for putting a leader, one that happened to command a large part of the Guardian forces, out in front of danger for no reason. Shaxx said he would shoulder all the blame, but she wondered how much trouble they were going to run into because of this bust of a mission.

Frea reached the familiar door and reached out to knock. The sound of loud voices on the other side made her freeze, someone was yelling. At first, Frea turned to leave, Shaxx had company and her report could wait until later. However, something nagged at her mind and she spun back to the door. Glancing around for anyone who may be watching, she quickly pressed her ear to the cold metal. The voices were too mumbled to be understood, but she recognized who they belonged to. Her stomach dropped.

Carefully, she gripped the edge of the door and cracked it open just enough to hear inside.

“Do you have any idea what your actions could have cost us?” Commander Zavala's voice boomed inside the enclosed room.

Shaxx held equal status to the Commander, but even so he stood at attention with his hands clasped behind his back.

“I realize that, Zavala-” Shaxx began.

“That nest has already proven to be dangerous, and yet you go off to inspect it yourself with only two other Guardians to protect you.” The Commander sighed as he clenched the skin between his brows. “My friend, I know that being stuck in this Tower can make one antsy, but the days like Twilight Gap are behind us. We have a responsibility to be here to offer the new Guardians guidance.” Shaxx didn't say anything as Zavala gripped his shoulder. “You need to be here for them. To make them stronger. I can trust that to you, yes?”

The long pause between them felt like it could last forever. Finally Shaxx nodded. “Of course.”

“I'll be waiting on the reports from your mission last night. Please leave the rest of the inspection to the Hunter. She is one of our most capable Guardians after all.” Zavala spoke with a sad smile, his tone much softer now.

“I am aware,” Shaxx replied.

Frea watched the two carefully. Shaxx knew this was coming, she couldn't help but wonder if he did this before, escaping the Tower and going on missions to live out his glory days again. That didn't really seem like his style. Especially since he could just do it in the Crucible anytime.

While lost in thought, the huntress didn't notice the the door before her shudder and move. Suddenly Commander Zavala's hulking form stood before her, a slightly surprised look crossed his features from her presence. Immediately, Frea jumped back and straightened her posture, calling herself to attention.

“C-Commander! Good day.” She stuttered, her pulse beating wildly in her chest.
The Awoken man considered her in silence for a moment before giving her a gentle smile.

“Good afternoon, Frea. I trust you are doing well?”

“Yes, sir. Very well.” She returned the smile.

“Excellent. Have a good day.” He said and walked by her, back toward the Vanguard office.

Frea watched him go. Despite his intimidating appearance Zavala was a kind man. He was always available to listen to anyone's concerns, not matter how small. She reminisced about the first day her and Dex arrived in the Tower, when her Ghost led her to the Vanguard. The Commander was the only one around the office that day. Cayde-6, the Hunter Vanguard representative, had run off somewhere. Which Frea came to find later was a common occurrence. Instead it was Zavala who toured her around the Tower, answering her every question with immense patience.

“Didn't know eavesdropping was your hobby.”

A voice from behind snapped Frea back to reality and she whipped around to find Shaxx leaning against the doorframe with his arms tightly crossed together.

“Sorry about that, guess I came at a wrong time.” She shyly laughed, feeling awkward.

Shaxx still wore his helmet as usual, but she heard the distinct ringing of him chuckling inside. “Come in, you have reports for me I assume? Or did you just come to see your favorite Titan?”

The huntress's face flushed red hot and she quickly dashed past him into the room, hiding her expression. Her mind whirled at his comment. She was quite sure he just flirted with her. They often bantered, trading snarky quips, it was just a thing they did after spending so much time training in the Crucible together. This however, seemed different.

“I brought reports, o-of course.” She tried to rein in her throbbing heart. “You said you wanted them as soon as possible and...” Her voice trailed off. When she turned Shaxx was closing the door, his fingers hesitating over the control panel. His usual proud stance was slumped and forlorn, clearly something was on his mind. The Titan walked by her, plucking the report from her hand as he removed his helmet. He set it down on a dangerously high stack of books atop his desk with a loud clunk and began to scan the tablet.

Frea carefully followed after him, unsure if she should stay or leave. She glanced at his hands, his fingers were so tense it looked like he might break the tablet, then her gaze moved upward. It hovered over his arm and chest, and finally stopped on his face. Her breath caught when he locked eyes with her.

“What is it?” he asked, noticing her stare.

“How you are okay?”

His brow twitched, the question caught him off guard. “Why do you ask?” He dryly chuckled.

“I dunno, you just seem off lately. Did the Commander's comments bother you?” Unable to keep eye contact anymore Frea twisted and rested her back against the edge of his desk. “You can talk to me, you know. I'm a good listener.” She smiled.

The Titan peered down at her as his jaw clenched, he was clearly holding something back. Before she could ask again, he reached over and ruffled her hair.

“H-hey!” Frea complained, batting away his hand and smoothing the damage. When she looked
back up her heart leapt out of her chest. Shaxx was in front of her now and much, much closer. His
hand rested on the table behind her, cutting off any chance of escape. They were barely touching, but
she could feel the body heat emanating from him. She hardly noticed the cold impinging feel of his
armored fingertips on her cheek. The look in his eyes was piercing, like a lion who just caught its
prey. Just his gaze made a shiver run up her spine. “Shaxx.”

She wasn't able to finish before he silenced her with a kiss.
Shaxx's lips were featherlight on her own, just a tantalizing whisper of a kiss. He slowly leaned back and met her eyes, their noses only a few inches apart. He was testing her, gauging her reaction. It was a chaste kiss, but nonetheless lit a fire inside the huntress.

Frea took hold of the fur decorating the Titan's shoulder armor and yanked it hard, forcing him to bend down for her to reach. She returned the kiss, though this one was much hungrier than the last. Shaxx didn't hesitate as he grasped the back of her head, his free hand hooking around her waist to eliminate the remaining distance between their bodies.

“Open your mouth,” he growled. Frea's knees nearly buckled when he slipped his tongue past her lips. The sensation was unlike anything she ever felt before, and she matched his passion with the same vigor. When he finally pulled away, they were both breathing heavily. “Frea...” Shaxx began, reaching for another kiss. A sudden resounding knock from the office entrance made them jump out of each other's arms.

“Sir?” A tiny voice sounded from behind the door.

Shaxx let out a weary sigh and ran a hand over his face. He shot the huntress a meaningful glance before crossing the room to open the door.

“What is it?” He asked louder than necessary, the annoyance clear in his tone.

Frea peeked from behind his shoulder into the hallway. It was one of the Crucible aids, a small Awoken girl who looked visibly shaken to be greeted by the Titan's bad attitude. The girl caught Frea's eye for just a second, long enough for the huntress to feel a sudden wave of guilt crash over her. She just kissed a leader of the Tower, one of the people she's supposed to protect and serve. What is she doing?

“S-sorry to bother you, Sir. But you wanted me to remind you of the training match with the new Guardians starting in five minutes.” The Awoken girl bowed ever so slightly.

“Ah, yes of course.” Shaxx rubbed the back of his neck. “I'll be down momentarily, give me a second.”

The girl bowed again and turned away, disappearing into the hallway.

Shaxx ensured his aid was gone before returning his attention to the huntress next to him. Frea's head was tilted down, hiding her expression from his view. So instead his gaze traveled to her hands as they fidgeted with the handle of the knife strapped to her belt. Something was bothering her.

“I should probably get out of here,” she whispered, breaking the tension. She wouldn't look up at him at all. Did he cross a line?

“Wait. Frea,” he said but she slipped past him toward the door. He reached out and grabbed hold of her slender wrist. Freezing in place, she slowly turned around to meet his eyes at last. Her usual unwavering gaze seemed unfocused, this wasn't the spunky huntress he grew to know so well.

“I'm sorry.” Her voice cracked and she averted her eyes. An ached formed in Shaxx's chest as he gently let her hand slide out of his. The Titan watched her long white cape flutter down the hall until it disappeared against the glare of the morning sunlight.
Frea walked at a brisk pace into the plaza, the sun felt blinding and the usual bustle of the Tower seemed too deafening today. Or maybe it was just her thoughts being loud, she wasn't sure. Her mind kept going back to Shaxx and what just happened in his office. It wasn't uncommon for Guardians to have relationships, some have families and even kids. But normally the leaders of the Tower were untouchable. They were the pillars that held up the community, the ones that have been around the longest. Legends. And she just made out with one.

With a sigh she plopped herself down on the stairs overlooking the City and ran her fingers through her hair. Her skin burned hot from Shaxx's touch and the tingling sensation still lingered on her lips. Frea couldn't remember the last time she was kissed like that, not in this life or the one before. She peered up at the Traveler floating in the sky as she tried to calm her throbbing heart. Nothing but pain will come from falling for the Crucible handler, he was far beyond her rank and out of her league. She can't get excited, not about this. The huntress buried her face into her hands with a huff.

“Hey, Frea.” A familiar voice called to her from behind.

Slowly, she turned around, putting on her best fake smile. “Dex. What's up?”

The Warlock didn't immediately reply as he studied her with a curious look. “You ok? Your face is all red.”

“Oh.” Frea snapped her head away from his intrusive gaze, her mind scrambled for a quick excuse. “Oh, you know. Went out drinking last night and woke up with a bit of a hangover.” She dryly laughed.

Dex's brow furrowed slightly. “Uh-huh,” he said flatly and took a seat next to her. He obviously didn't buy that excuse one bit, Guardians never get hangovers. Frea cursed their superhuman recovery time.

The two sat in silence for some time, both looking up at the Traveler. Frea watched the lights from the City dance across its orbited surface. Occasionally a jumpship would zoom by, dropping off Guardians into the plaza. It didn't seem like Dex wasn't going to press her any farther, which she couldn't help but feel relieved by the quiet moment shared between them.

“So,” the Warlock said, carefully choosing his words. “What are you up to today?”

“Planning to hit up Mars to farm some relic iron,” the huntress replied. “You?”

“Got patrols all week on Saturn,” he groaned. “I hate that damn Dreadnaught.”

Frea chuckled. “Why? It's so charming with the-uh-bones and constant flood of Taken. Like a true paradise.”

“Oh yeah? Then maybe I should plan my next vacation there.” He joined in on the joke, not missing a beat.

They cast a glance at each other and shared a laugh. The hearty feeling was enough to chase away Frea's worries for now. Dex was always good at doing that.

The Warlock stood and lightly bumped her on the shoulder with his fist. “Be careful out there. I'll see you later, okay?” He smiled down to her.

“Same to you.” She returned the gesture.
A satisfied look crossed Dex's features for just a moment, then he pulled out his Ghost and vanished into nothing. And once again Frea was left alone to her thoughts.
Breathe in. Breathe out.

Frea laid perfectly still on her stomach at the top of an outcropping five hundred meters from a Cabal base. She blended into the rock with only the red glint of her Zen Meteor to give away her position. Breathe in, the deep roar of her gun echoed off the stone and one of the giant patrolling Cabal fell to the ground in flames. Breathe out. Frea was more of a run and gun type of Hunter, preferring a shotgun over a sniper. Though, she couldn't help but feel a rush a satisfaction whenever an enemy's head exploded in her scope. Breath in, another guard down. Her gunfire was drowned out by the Cabal's noisy drilling machines, but they were starting to take notice of their missing comrades. She was going to have to move soon.

A chattering of static suddenly resonated in her ear, breaking her concentration.

“Guardian.” Her Ghost spoke up in her comm. “You have a call.”

“Who is it?” She grumbled.

“It's Psyho.”

The huntress pulled up her sniper and backed away from the perch. “Let her through, Ghost.”

The click of someone joining her comm sounded and was soon followed by an obnoxiously loud voice.

“Frea!”

The huntress flinched, her ears ringing. “Psyho, for the love of the Traveler don't yell into the comm. I think my eardrum is bleeding.”

Psyho gave her classic cheery laugh, “Sorry sorry. Heard you might need some company today. Need some help getting relic iron?”

Frea paused for a moment before letting out a long sigh. “Dex told on me didn't he?”

Another laugh from the other end. “Only to me. You know he'd never say anything to the entire clan.”

Frea looked up to peer over the Cabal base, watching the countless soldiers inside. Dex tended to worry too much over her, even so much as to actually tell their friend Psyho about this morning. Even so, Frea didn't feel annoyed. She really could use the company, and especially the company of a Titan at that.

“I need twenty more pieces of iron and a Cabal base is blocking the way.” A smile formed over the huntress's lips. “Wanna race?”

“The first to kill one hundred gets a free lunch?” Psyho challenged.

“At that sweet ramen shop Cayde always talks about?” Frea pulled out her shotgun and loaded it. “You're on.”
The battle was hard fought. Not because the Cabal were difficult, but because Frea was trying her hardest to keep up with the titaness. They eventually wiped out the entire base and easily took down the commander, but it was Psyho who landed the last killing shot on him.

“A-ha!” She hollered. “Free food!”

“How about best to three?” Frea stopped to catch her breath. “Besides, you wouldn't have been able to kill him it was wasn't for my Shadowshot.”

“Excuses, excuses.” Psyho stooped down to open a nearby chest. The inside gleamed red with relic iron. “Most importantly, we scored a nice stash of material for you.”

“Yeah,” the huntress said as she examined some of the pieces, they definitely found quite the stockpile.

“Speaking of which...” The titaness dropped a shard of iron back into the chest. “You could have just bought some from the Vanguard vendor in the Tower. Why come get it yourself?”

Frea felt the blood run into her cheeks, good thing she was masked. “Just you know, sometimes I like doing things the old fashioned way.” She awkwardly coughed. That makes two stupid lies today.

Psyho stared at her for a bit then finally shrugged. “Ok, anyway let's go. Kicking Cabal ass makes me hungry.”

“You're always hungry, Psyho.” Frea laughed.

The night was a welcome change to the long day. Frea waved goodbye to Psyho and walked out of the ramen shop into the chilly air. She glanced up at the waxing moon. It was one night before a full moon, one night before Xur came to the Tower. The mysterious member of the Nine visited on rare occasions and no one has yet to figure out how exactly he came and went. Eventually everyone stopped caring and just continued to buy his wares, he seemed friendly enough anyway. He was now Frea's goal. The only way she could score her last needed material for Shaxx's sword, an exotic shard.

Thinking about the sword brought her mind back to this morning, back to Shaxx. Frea quickly shook her head and turned away from moon gazing. Exhaustion barely described what she felt right now. She spent the entire day running what happened this morning through her head over and over. Trying to decide if she should regret it or not. They were both in the wrong, he started the kiss but she reacted to it...strongly too. Frea thought about the Hive nest, when she caught Shaxx and they landed on top of each other. How he had touched her then. It was easy to see they both desired each other, at least she kinda hoped he did. But where will this lead to?

Frea sighed for the hundredth time that day, her breath making a small wisp in the air. She wondered if her life was this complicated before her destined end. Before she woke up in that ancient rusty car with a Ghost hovering in her face. Sure, it was probably dangerous and something terrible happened that caused her to die. But did she ever fall in love? Did she have a family? What was the Golden Age like? The huntress stopped at the railing overlooking the City. All the people down below weren't Guardians, they didn't have everlasting life. They were fragile. She gripped the railing tightly, her knuckles cracking in the process. The Guardians existed to protect. They were granted another chance at life thanks to the Traveler. When Frea was tasked with her first mission years ago she ran into wanderers outside the City. Her and Dex fought off countless Fallen to get them behind the walls. They managed to save all but one, a human boy. Frea closed her
eyes, remembering the feeling of holding the boy as she ran toward the wall. She was shot in the back by a Vandel and crashed into the snow just before reaching the goal. When she was revived she found the boy dead in her arms, killed by the same bullet that went through her chest. That moment she vowed to protect the City and the people who resided in it as best she could. She'd done so much since then, but the job was never done. Not until her Ghost was destroyed and she breathed her last. A warm feeling started to form behind her eyes, threatening to spill over.

Shuffling in the darkness behind her broke Frea from her thoughts. Sensing a presence, her hand instinctively went to her belt where her knife rested. Before she could turn to confront the shadow, he stopped next to her. Moonlight shimmered over his orange and white helmet and the Crucible style Titan mark on his waist fluttered gently in the breeze. Frea didn't say anything as she sheathed her blade, her battle instinct quickly turned to nervousness as the adrenaline died inside her.

“Nice night.” Shaxx was the first to break the silence.

“Yeah,” she quietly replied, unsure what to do in this situation. She wasn't ready to face him quite yet.

Another silence stretched on so Frea snuck a glance up at him. His hands were clasped behind his back but he was clearly uneasy.

“I wanted to apologize for this morning.” He spoke up again. “I didn't mean to offend-”

“You didn't! I just...” The huntress interrupted, her voice catching in her throat. Frea could feel the warmth behind her eyes growing heavier. She tried to force back the tears and found she didn't have the energy for it.

She looked down, not letting Shaxx see her face. He shouldn't have to see her cry. Not like this.

“Frea.” His voice sounded gentle and she tilted her head back up. His hands met her cheeks and he carefully wiped away the water from her eyes. But as soon as he did so he froze, as if realizing the implications behind the gesture. Frea's face burned hot and she pulled away, wiping the tears with her palm.

“I-I should go. Goodnight, Lord Shaxx.” She twisted around him and ran back toward the living quarters, not bothering to listen for his response.

Chapter End Notes

Psyho: Female/Awoken/Titan. Specialization: Sunbreaker.
A bullet to the head and her helmet shatters from the impact. The kill was so quick she immediately lost consciousness as her limp body collapsed into the snow. She couldn't think, couldn't feel anything except the crushing darkness that consumed all Guardians when they died. But just as quickly as it came, it dissipated, chased away by the warm Traveler's light.

Frea's eyes shot open and she gasped, the cold air burning in her lungs. She'll never get used to the feeling of being brought back to life. With a groan she lifted herself up and yanked off her ruined helmet.

“You okay?” Another huntress hovered over Frea, the one that revived her.

“Yeah, Kannon. I'm fine.” Frea rubbed her head, it still ached from the bullet.

“Bullshit.” Psyho moved into view as she holstered her rifle. “You should've seen that shot coming. You're distracted.”

A twitch of annoyance crossed Frea's face and she locked eyes with the titaness. “I'm not distracted. Don't lecture me.”

“Ok, you two. No arguing among clan members.” Kannon squeezed in between them, pushing them both back. “We're just worried about you, Frea. You've been really distant these past few days.”

The huntress clicked her tongue and looked away. Kannon was always the most level headed in the group, the motherly type. A polar opposite of the eccentric Psyho. For once, her calming demeanor wasn't enough to smooth Frea's irritation.

“I'm out of here.” Not waiting for an answer, Frea summoned her Ghost and teleported back to her jumpship.

Her boots clicked on the metal floor of the ship when she materialized. With a loud sigh, Frea tossed the broken helmet on top of a nearby table. It clattered amongst the dismantled guns and armor. Her vision focused on the scattered parts as she tried to calm herself down. She wasn't normally so short tempered, and fighting with her clanmates was even more unusual. This wasn't her. A fluttering sound next to her ear caught her attention and she looked toward it to see her Ghost still lingered. It slowly blinked at the huntress, watching her silently.

“What?” She grumbled. “Am I going to get a lecture from you too?”

The little bot didn't immediately reply as it seemed to consider its next words. “They are right,” it finally said.

Frea lazily fell onto the bed tucked in the back corner of the ship. She mainly used it for long journeys into the system, when she needed to get some sleep and couldn't spare the time to travel back to the Tower. It always offered the quietest place for her to think.

“Yeah,” she huffed. “I know.”
The Ghost hovered over to the pillow, tucking itself into the folds of her hood. “You can talk to me if you need to. I'll always be here for you.”

The huntress rubbed her eyes. She'd barely slept since that day with Shaxx and it was starting to effect her performance on the field. Psyho was right. The bullet shouldn't have even come close to her, but she was sluggish and reacted too slowly to dodge it. Things could not continue like this.

She reached up and lightly petted her Ghost, a tired smile formed over her lips. “Thank you.”

That evening marked the last night of a full moon, Xur was going to leave the Tower again once dawn broke. Frea was too impatient to wait until the next one, she wanted Shaxx's mysterious sword returned to full power and she was willing to sacrifice for the last piece needed to finish it. She found Xur set up in a corner near the Speaker. Surprisingly he wasn't crowded by other Guardians yet, a lucky break for the huntress, the strange vendor looked up as she approached him.

“Looking for a trade?” Xur asked, his gurgling voice emitting out from seemingly nowhere. His didn't have a face, the only features to him were his glowing yellow eyes and the wispy tendrils that floated out from under his shadowed hood.

Tentacle or Noodle face was the 'loving' nickname the Guardians had for him around the Tower. It wasn't very creative.

“Yes.” Frea nodded. “Was hoping I could get an exotic shard for this?” From her back she unholstered her Zen Meteor and held it out to the member of Nine. She knew she'd miss the gun, it was her favorite sniper after all, but her curiosity won out over her sentimentality.

Xur reached out and took the sniper. He examined it for a moment, running a gloved hand over the scope. “Carefully cleaned and well kept. Odd that you desire to get rid of such a rare weapon for just a shard.” His gaze traveled back to the huntress, his eyes felt like they were burning a hole in her head.

“It's for a good cause,” Frea curtly replied. That was all she was willing to say on the subject.

“I see.” Xur placed the gun next to the rest of his wares and pulled a glimmering crystal out from one of his crates. “One exotic shard for one exotic weapon. Use it wisely.”

The huntress carefully took the shard, it felt heavy in her hand and faintly glowed with light. The shards were power sources for unique and exotic weapons. They could embed shotguns with the ability to regenerate ammo or hand cannons with poison. The possibilities were endless with the right gunsmith. Frea tucked the shard away in her pouch. Finally she had everything she needed.

“Thanks.” She turned away to leave but a harsh whisper from behind made her freeze.

“Ancient exotics hold extraordinary power but beware with what you tamper with. For that power is always dangerous.”

“Wha-?” Frea whipped around only to find the strange vendor gone, leaving behind a deep chill in the air.

It wasn't unusual for Xur to mumble nonsense. Some people spent their time deciphering every word like it was prophecy, while others thought he was just a spy for the Nine. Frea could feel goosebumps form under her armor. What he said definitely seemed like a warning to her. But how did he even know about the sword?

She shook her head and quickly walked away, desiring to be as far away from the dark corner as
possible. It didn't matter. Her mind was fully set on finding out more about the sword and why Shaxx looked so dispirited when he held it out to her in the Hive nest. No warning from some crazy tentacle face was going to stop her, she was stubborn like that.

Frea's feet led her into the Tower's plaza. Most of the vendors had already turned in for the night, their kiosks void of any light except for the glow casted by the full moon. One lantern however still burned brightly on a table in the far right corner of the plaza. The huntress quietly approached to find Banshee still packing up some of his wares, preparing to leave.

“Hey.” She called out.

The Exo jumped and knocked over one of newly finished guns from the table. Frea caught it just before it slammed against the stone floor. She handed the rifle back to Banshee as he shot her a look.

“Don't sneak up on people in the dark,” he grumbled as he gently placed the gun back on the table.

“Yeah, sorry.” She chuckled. “Didn't mean to give you a scare.”

He sighed and turned back to her. “I assume since you're visiting me now means you got the last part?”

“What, I can't visit my favorite gunsmith in the dead of night?”

Banshee gave her another one of his infamous looks, making Frea laugh.

“Of course I got it.” She pulled out the shard and tossed it to him. “Fresh out from wherever Xur gets these things.”

The gunsmith examined the crystal in the light of the lantern before placing it with the rest of his things. “If there aren't any complications, you should have your new toy before the end of the week.”

“Fantastic! Looking forward to it.” Frea smiled.

“Oh? Are we expecting a new weapon?” A voice sounded behind the huntress and her heart skipped a beat. She didn't turn around to face the newcomer, she already knew who it was.

“Lord Shaxx.” Banshee glanced behind Frea and straightened from his task. “What a surprise, I rarely see you out this late.”

“Yes, well...I happened to see someone I was looking for and stopped by.” The Titan chuckled. “Frea.”

Hesitantly, the huntress slowly spun around to face Shaxx. It had been days since she last saw him, partly because he was busy training new recruits and also because she'd been actively avoiding him since that night. “Yes?” She replied, at little too stiffly.

Shaxx's head tilted. “Could I have a moment of your time?”

“Yes.”

He waved a goodbye to Banshee then motioned for her to follow him. She did so, careful to keep a respectable distance behind him. She snuck a glance up at the Titan as they crossed the plaza toward the Vanguards. He was wearing his helmet as usual so she had no way of knowing what he was thinking, but she could feel the tense air between them. Was he going to talk about that night? About how she'd been avoiding him? Her mind reeled with countless possibilities.
Shaxx suddenly came to a halt at the entrance to the hallway, just below a hanging set of dimly lit lanterns. Lost in thought, Frea nearly bumped into his back. She managed to stop a hairbreadth away and quickly stepped back. Shadows danced across his armor as he turned to face her, his arms clasped tightly behind him.

“Frea,” He said.

“Y-yes?” Frea couldn't help but stutter over her words. She could barely breath with the anticipation. A small sigh escaped Shaxx and he looked away. He seemed to regard something before returning his gaze back to her. “I'm training some new Guardians and they could learn a lot sparring with an experienced Hunter. I was hoping you could join us in the Crucible tomorrow.”

It took all of Frea's willpower to not let her emotions show on her face. She felt a pang of disappointment in her chest, a feeling that surprised even her. “Okay, sure. I'll be happy to help.” She mustered a small smile.


Without saying more he briskly whirled around and walked away, disappearing into the dark hallway. Frea stood in place and watched his back until she couldn't anymore. She had been determined to put distance between them, but she didn't realize that she would feel so lonely because of it.

“I'll be there...” She whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Kannon: Female/Human/Hunter. Specialization: Nightstalker.
Bannerfall. A crumbling tower once belonging to the Guardians. It was built on the opposite side of the Last City, directly across from the modern Tower used today. It was the location of a terrible faction war many years ago that nearly destroyed it. Now, it stands as both a ruined reminder and as a training ground for the Guardians.

The morning sun was just breaking the horizon as Frea materialized in the plaza. Unlike the Tower she knew so well, Bannerfall was eerily quiet. Only the faint whisper of rustling torn banners could be heard echoing over the stonework. She gazed over the area. The overall design of the Tower was also vastly different, it didn't have the same comforts offered now. It was rougher, created for wartime. Instead of the familiar symbols depicting the Guardians painted on the walls, the blood red mark of the New Monarchy greeted her. She once heard the stories of the Monarchy's rising and the war they created, but she'd never seen the aftermath.

Footsteps caught the huntress's attention and she turned to see Shaxx approach from the inner courtyard. He stopped next to her and noticed her stare.

“This your first time here?” He asked.

“Yeah.”

“Hm...” Shaxx clasped his hands behind his back. “Nasty thing, that faction war.”

Frea looked up at him. “I didn't realize it was this bad.”

“It was a long time ago, back when everything was still new,” Shaxx said, a hint of melancholy in his tone. “We keep a firmer grasp on the factions these days and never let them in politics. They know better than to try something like this again.” He met her eyes. “Come on, the others are waiting.”

With a nod she followed him back into the courtyard, stealing once last glance at the red decorating the walls behind her.

“Allright.” Shaxx's voice boomed off the stone when they reached the yard. “This will be a 3v3 deathmatch. One group led by the Hive-bane and the other led by me.”

“How many kills to win?” One of the new Guardians, a Warlock, spoke up.

Shaxx sighed, his hand rubbed over the mouthpiece of his visor. “For the hundredth time, this is a training session, not a competition.”

“First to twenty?” One of the Titans cut in, earning cheers from the others.

Frea covered her laugh as she viewed the scene. It was rare to see Shaxx so disgruntled, these newbies must be a handful. “Why not? A little competitiveness never hurt anyone,” she said, a grin forming behind her mask. “There's no shame in losing, Shaxx.”

Shaxx's attention snapped to the huntress. She figured he was going to turn down her challenge, but instead his posture straightened as his arms loosely fell to his sides. “Fine. First to twenty-five wins.”
They split off into two groups of three and took up positions on the opposite sides of Bannerfall. Frea was assigned one of the Titans and a Warlock while Shaxx took the other Titan and a Hunter.

“Alright, you two. Any pointers about this layout?” Frea asked.

“Top portion and middle of the tower are open, great for sniping,” the Warlock named Dand, replied as he readied his own sniper.

“Or getting sniped.” The Titan, Unworth, snorted.

“There's some tight hallways on the far sides that offer cover for flanking,” Dand continued. “The courtyard in the middle is always a bloodbath.”

“So, avoid courtyard and stick to the hallways. Got it.” Frea nodded.

“And try to avoid Lord Shaxx too.” Unworth added with a laugh. “He's a beast at close range with that damn shotgun.”

The huntress chuckled, pulling out her hand cannon. “Oh, don't worry. I can take care of Shaxx. You guys focus on the other two okay?”

They nodded at her and readied themselves. A speaker mounted over the arena began the countdown to match start. Frea could feel the adrenaline start to pump into her muscles. Fighting fellow Guardians was a completely different experience to fighting the minions of darkness. Guardians were stronger, unpredictable, and one of them on the other team has been fighting longer than all their lifespans combined. This was going to be an interesting match and Frea was actually excited for it. It'd been ages since she last sparred with Shaxx.

The bell sounded and all three of them took off running. Dand and Unworth went straight for the courtyard while Frea shot to the left toward the plaza. She blink jumped into the upper hallway and landed right in front of the Hunter from the other team. He went down before he could even react, her knife sprouting from his chest plate. His Ghost fluttered away back to the starting point to revive him. He would be back in less than a minute, but for now they had the number advantage.

Frea quickly tiptoed through the hall, being careful to make as little noise as possible. She came to the corner and started to peek around it but her skin prickled in warning. Ducking just in time, she avoided the array of bullets flying over her head. It was Shaxx.

“Every little noise echoes around here so sneaking around doesn't really help,” he called.

“J-just making sure you're on your toes,” she hollered back, her chest pounding from the close call.

Frea pressed herself to the wall. She wanted to go in with her own shotgun, but a Hunter was at a disadvantage against a Titan at medium range. A single charge from him could easily take her out, so she had to be cautious. If she could close the distance and get a knife hit on him, she'll have a chance. Shaxx's heavy footsteps were gradually getting closer.

“Come on, Frea. Show me those moves you used against that Ogre.” He was close enough that she could hear him chuckle inside his helmet.

“Do you normally chat like this with your enemies?” She asked.

“Only when I'm having fun.”

Just as he stepped around the corner, Frea slid past his feet and under the railing. She landed on the
floor below and shot a bullet up at him with her hand cannon. He easily dodged it and hefted himself over the railing after her. She rolled away as he landed, the electric shockwave from his fall licking at her boots. He definitely had Striker equipped, the worst Titan subclass for her to fight against.

“Fun?” She breathed, taking cover behind a pillar. “I thought this was a training session?”

She tried to make a run for the hallway, but another round of buckshot in the wall made her halt. Shaxx was on her then. He charged at full force, the air around him sparking with arc power. Just before he reached her, Frea twisted away and he hit the pillar, cracking the stone. He backed away, slightly dazed from the hit. The huntress took the opportunity and pounced, throwing all her weight on the Titan and knocking him down with her. The impact sent Shaxx's helmet flying as she landed on top of him, the muzzle of her gun pressed against his chin.

“Ha,” she said, trying to muster words between her heavy breaths. “I win.”

A knowing smile played across his lips. “Did you now?”

His comment made Frea realize something hard was poking at her stomach. Glancing down, she saw his shotgun pressed right between the plates of her armor. She also noticed the compromising position they were now in because of her desperate maneuver. The huntress was straddling his waist, her legs sprawled to either side of his legs. The same thing that happened when they landed in the Hive nest, except this time she was the one on top.

Frea felt all the blood rush to her face. “A-a tie then, Lord Shaxx?”

Shaxx's smile disappeared and he reached up with his free hand, pulling her mask off. She averted her eyes as he did so, too flustered to hide her expression right now. Frea dropped her gun and tried to get up, but he held her firmly by the hips. He wasn't going to let her run this time.

“Why?” He whispered. The sudden change in mood made her look back at him, his eyes met her's directly. “You react like this when I touch you and yet...you avoid me and use my title when I try to get closer. It's driving me mad.”

She bit her lip, almost drawing blood. “We shouldn't.”

“Why?” He asked again, his voice harsher.

A touch of irritation bubbled up in Frea's mind. Does he really not realize his importance to the Guardians? Or does he not care?

“Because you're Lord Shaxx!” She shouted. “You're too crucial to the Tower, you've been fighting for decades and you command half the Guardian forces. How can I, a Hunter who's only been around for three years, be so selfish to expect anything more from you?” She pounded on his chest armor with her fists in frustration.

The Titan stared up at her in silence. He went wide eyed for a moment during her rant before relaxing into a calmer expression. “So?”

Frea's head snapped back up. “So?”

“Yeah, so.” He moved his hand to trace her cheek. “Status doesn't matter. Contrary to what Zavala wants to preach, younger generations of Guardians don't exist to protect the elders. You are here to fight alongside us, to protect the City and those who can't come back after death.”

She leaned into his palm and closed her eyes, focusing the warmth of his hand. Shaxx gently pulled
her head down and she felt his lips brush against her forehead.

“I won't force you into anything you don't want,” he whispered into her hair. “But I care for you. Not as a leader or fellow Guardian, but as a man. Don't let status and a false sense of duty stop you from taking what you want.”

Maybe he was right, she'd been worrying too much. She'd done so much for the City and its people, perhaps it was time to be a little selfish for once. The huntress leaned her head into his furry mantle. “I'll think about it.”

Chapter End Notes

Dand: Male/Human/Warlock. Specialization: Stormcaller

Troubling

Frea wasn't sure how much time passed as she laid curled in Shaxx's arms, the fur around his collar ticking at her nose. She always imagined it would smell like gunpowder, but instead it had the faint scent of pine, the same smell that often drifted on the breeze in the Cosmodrome. The Titan's steady breathing beneath her was relaxing, however his teasing fingertips tracing circles on the unarmored section of her back was driving her wild inside.

“Shaxx.” The huntress lifted her head to meet his eyes. “We should probably move, the others could find us any minute now.”

“I suppose.” He agreed but made no effort to release her from his tight grasp.

“They seem like a talkative bunch, who knows what gossip they'll spread if they see us like this,” she said.

He frowned at that comment. Shaxx was already in Commander Zavala's bad graces, the last thing he needed was another lecture.

With a sigh he hefted himself off the ground, lifting the small huntress by the waist with him. Frea bit back a surprised squeak as he carefully set her back on her feet. She'd always been aware of their size difference, but seeing how easily he could pick her up was still a bit jarring. Even compared to his fellow Titans, Shaxx was massive, the only other person to come close to his height was Lord Saladin. And Frea was tiny for a Hunter.

The questionable look that crossed the Titan's face snapped Frea from her thoughts.

“Awfully spacey today, aren't you?” He smirked.

Frea felt her skin flush hot when she realized she had been staring. She whipped around a little too quickly to hide her expression, the tail of her long cape brushing against him.

“I'm always spacey,” she mumbled and retrieved their helmets, tossing Shaxx his.

He replaced it with a click, the air seals locking into place around his neck. “How big of a head start do you want? Five seconds or ten?”

She put on her own helmet, adjusting it under her hood. “Shouldn’t you be the one getting the head start? I am faster than you.”

“So, two seconds then?” He titled his head.

Frea stepped up to the Titan and playfully poked at his chest plate. “Three seconds, no charging allowed.”

Shaxx laughed and gently grabbed her hand, curling his armored fingers around hers as he squeezed. He was getting bolder with touching her, and she found herself wanting more every time he did. “Next time we meet, I won't go easy on you,” he challenged.

“Neither will I,” the huntress replied.

“I swear to the Traveler, Dand, if you snipe me one more-” The shout was cut off as the Titan went
down, bullet to the helmet.

The Warlock next to Frea chuckled as he reloaded ammo into his gun. “Too easy.”

Both teams had twenty kills now, and it was still anyone's game. Frea was hunkered down with Dand in the courtyard, watching his six while he kept anyone from getting too close. Unworth was down and waiting to respawn, gone just long enough that they couldn't expect any last minute backup plans from the Titan. Shaxx and his Hunter teammate had them pinned in the corner. The cover was protecting them for now, but not for long.

Just as Dand leaned around the wall for another shot, Frea noticed a red dot trained on his chest.

“Wait!”

Too late. The Warlock went down in flames, sniped by the rival Hunter.

Frea pressed herself back against the stone. She knew Shaxx was going to close in any second now, between him and that sniper, she had no chance in a fight. The huntress inched to the edge of the wall and spotted a small hole in the farthest corner of the courtyard, an escape route to the enclosed hallways, and her only shot at getting out alive. If she sprinted then maybe...

Suddenly a voice cut into her comms. “Guardian.”

She jumped and nearly dropped her shotgun. “I'm a little busy right now, Ghost.”

Her Ghost materialized into the air in front of her. “You have a call. It's urgent,” it insisted.

Frea sighed and crouched back into cover, there goes that chance at getting away. “Patch them in,” she said.

The Ghost expanded, its light growing brighter as it broadcasted the radio signal. Normally, if the caller was within range they could be wired into Frea's comms. Whoever was contacting her was most likely on another planet.

“Hey.” A familiar voice she hadn't heard in days finally came through the static.

“Dex? You finally back from that patrol?” She asked with a smile. It was good to hear from him again.

“Sort of. I'm still on Saturn. Won't be back to the Tower until tonight.”

“Those Taken been keeping you busy or can you not get the job done without me?” She chuckled, earning a exasperated sigh from the Warlock.

“Actually, I was contacted by the Commander about that mission in the Hive nest with Lord Shaxx-”

“Are you going to hide all day, Hive-bane, or do I have to drag you out?” Shaxx's lively shout bounced off the walls behind her, making Dex pause.

“It that Lord Shaxx? Where are you?” He asked.

“Uh, just doing some practice exercises in the Crucible,” Frea replied.

A long silence dragged out before Dex finally spoke again. “I thought you hated the Crucible.”

The huntress could feel herself start to panic, he was too perceptive for his own good. “Y-you know,
gotta try different things sometimes.” She awkwardly laughed.

“Frea?” Shaxx emerged from over the low wall she was using as cover. He immediately noticed her sitting down with the Ghost and holstered his gun. “Something wrong?”

“Nothing is wrong, Shaxx. Just talking to Frea about a certain mission.” Dex cut in, a noticeable touch of irritation in his tone. Frea stiffened at the way he said Shaxx's name. She glanced up at the Titan but he hardly seemed to care about Dex's blatant show of disrespect.

“Is it about that Hive nest?” Shaxx asked.

“I've been ordered to not include you,” the Warlock curtly replied.

Shaxx crossed his arms over his chest. “By Zavala, I assume.”

Before the conversation escalated any further, Frea stood up and grabbed the Ghost out of the air. “Dex, we'll talk about this tonight at the Tower. You can fill me in then,” she said.

“Fine.”

Her Ghost then shrank back to normal size, indicating the signal was gone. Frea kept her eyes cast down as she processed what just happened. This was the first time she'd ever seen Dex act like that. It was clear he suspected something was going on between her and Shaxx. He was the last person she wanted to know of this, but then again she can never hide anything from that man. Her Ghost blinked up at her with its gentle light.

“How troubling,” it whispered.

The same thought was going through Frea's mind as well.

The huntress felt a gaze and she looked up to see Shaxx staring down at her. She figured he would be mad, especially with Dex's attitude toward his superior, but the Titan just stood there. His body language gave nothing away and his expression was hidden behind his intimidating helmet. Frea found herself unable to say anything, the air between them so tense it was suffocating.

Shaxx finally looked away, summoning his Ghost to his palm. “Let's wrap this up, it seems you have an appointment to keep.”

The coldness in his tone made Frea's chest clench in pain.

How troubling indeed.
Frea's boots barely touched the floor of the hanger bay before her vision was blocked by wide shoulders, arms wrapped around her back and she was lifted into a firm bear hug.

“Dex,” she gasped. “I can't breathe.”

“Ah. Sorry.” He gently put her back down. “I missed you and got a little excited.”

The huntress stretched and rubbed her back. “I think you've been spending too much time with Psyho. Normally her hugs are the ones I have to avoid,” she complained.

He chuckled. Whatever mood he was in before when he called seemed to have vanished, or maybe Frea just imagined it? She sensed something was off. Dex looked like he was about to say something more but his gaze traveled to a figure behind her. Instantly his face took a less cheery look.

“Am I interrupting?” Shaxx stepped up to stand next to the huntress, a little closer than usual.

“No...Sir.” Dex forcibly straightened himself, his movements stiff in front of the Titan. “Pardon my rudeness earlier. I've been stuck on Saturn all week and it's been a bit...stressful.” Despite him apologizing, Frea could see the challenging look in the stare he gave Shaxx. The Titan however, didn't seem to care or even notice as he clasped his hands behind his back.

“Noted.” Shaxx went to walk around Dex but stopped next to him, making the Warlock flinch. “I want a full report on what you two find out about the Hive nest,” he commanded.

“Yes, of course.” Dex nodded.

“Good.” Shaxx then turned and headed for the plaza, not looking back at either of them.

Frea took a deep breath, realizing she had been holding it that entire time. The growing tension was like a weight on her heart. It was not a pleasant feeling.

“What a stuck up ass,” Dex grumbled as he watched the Titan disappear into the crowded hallway.

“I think you trained with him long enough to know that isn't true.” She rubbed her temple, easing the headache forming there.

Dex snorted. “Still...I feel better saying it anyway.”

“So, what's this about the mission from Commander Zavala?” Frea desperately changed the subject, taking a seat atop a nearby supply crate.

“That's right.” Dex moved his attention away from the hallway. “The Commander is giving it to us since we were originally with Lord Shaxx. Looks like scouts located some peculiar Ascendant Hive off Anchor of Light.”

“Hive on the Moon? How is that unusual?” She asked.

“This group wasn't anywhere near the main nest apparently. The Guardians that saw them tried to get close but were attacked and barely made it back in one piece.” He leaned against the crate and pressed a knuckle to his lip in thought. “The report is rather odd, like these Hive are just doing their own thing.”
“We already know these Hive aren't normal.” Frea sighed. “I don't like that we're not bringing Shaxx with us, he knows all the details to this mission.”

Dex threw her a look. “We don't need him. Besides he isn't supposed to lead from the front.”

“A good leader is at the front of their troops, not behind.”

A heavy silence passed between them as they stared at each other. Something fiery was brimming behind Dex eyes and Frea was growing concerned that she was overstepping her bounds.

“What's he to you anyway?” Dex suddenly asked, catching the huntress off guard.

“W-what do you mean?”

The Warlock hovered over her, close enough to make her feel uncomfortable. “You know you're a terrible liar.”

Frea placed a hand on his shoulder and roughly pushed him out of her personal space. “I don't know what you're talking about, Dex.”

“That morning before I left...you were all red.” His eyes widened as the realization hit him. “Something happened between you two, didn't it?”

“Enough!” The huntress shouted as she leapt up from the crate. Exhaustion was making her patience run low. “I hate it when you pry into my life like that, stop it.”

Surprise flashed across Dex’s face for just a moment, but it was quickly gone, vanished behind anger. “I'm only worried about you, Frea.” His voice came out as a harsh whisper.

“Worried for me or worried that the girl you've been crushing on for years is getting swept away from you?” She snapped. As soon as the words were out of her mouth, she regretted them. She already knew Dex wasn't the kind of person to trouble himself just because he had feelings for someone, he cared for all the clan, her raging emotions were getting the best of her.

The Warlock looked away from her, even shadowed she could see the pain in his expression.

“I'm sor-” She started.

“We're going to the Moon tomorrow afternoon. I'll leave without you if you're late.” He cut her off and briskly walked past her, his coat tails flapping behind him.

Frea wanted to cry as she watched Dex leave. She was an idiot for saying such a thing to one of the best people she knew. He didn't deserve it. This wasn't the first time they butted heads, being together for so long it was natural to have occasional arguments, but this one was by far the worst. She took a long breathe to steady herself and force down the tears. This will have to be fixed tomorrow, especially before the mission, or it will become a deadly distraction. The huntress slowly made her way toward the hallway into the plaza, ready to get back to her quarters and pass out for the remainder of the evening. Just as she reached the entrance she was greeted by the sight of orange armor. She glanced up to meet the gaze of the Titan before her.

“Why are you still here?” She asked, flustered.

“I stayed to listen to the new information on the mission and well...” Shaxx rubbed his neck.

“And instead you got to hear that shit show. Great,” Frea grumbled and moved to walk past him, he
caught her arm to stop her. She peered down at her feet in defeat, not bothering to look back.

“Are you okay?” He asked, concern deepening his tone.

“Not really.”

She could feel his grip tighten but they both jumped when voices echoed down the hallway. Another group of Guardians were coming into the hanger.

“You look exhausted. Let me help you to your room,” he whispered.

Frea finally turned back to him. “Alright.”

The sun had just dipped below the horizon as they crossed the plaza toward the Guardians' living quarters. Even though the Tower was still occupied with crowds of people, Shaxx kept a steadying hand on Frea's back. Everyone was too busy to notice them together anyway.

Soon they made it to the elevator tucked away behind all the food shops and weapon stores. The Titan reached up and pressed the call button. After a pause, the door silently slid open to reveal no one else waiting inside. He led her into the small space and tapped her floor, the elevator shuttered to life as it began to travel downward into the depths of the Tower. It was even darker in the elevator car and Frea started to drift off, her eyelids growing heavy from exhaustion. She leaned over and rested her head against Shaxx's arm. It was surprisingly cozy even with their clashing armor.

Her mind was fuzzy when the elevator finally dinged. She suddenly felt weightless and the smell of pine enveloped her nose. The huntress forced her eyes open to find herself in Shaxx's arms.

“I can...walk on my own,” she mumbled.

“Like hell you can.” His voice was so close, just over her head.

Once they reached the room, Frea's Ghost materialized. “Let me get that for you, Sir,” it jittered and shined a thin beam of light on the door panel. The door clicked and slid open into the pitch black room inside. The Titan stepped into the dark as the Ghost fluttered to a small lantern sitting on top of a work table. It tapped at the glass and the lamp turned on, casting dim shadows across the room.

“Thanks,” Shaxx said.

The Ghost gave a short nod then vanished, leaving the two of them alone again. Shaxx took a moment to study the room. It was remarkably well kept aside from the desk cluttered with guns and a alarmingly large collection of knives hung up on the wall. He noticed a helmet sitting in a corner, a charred bullet hole shot right through the forehead, an awful death. He returned his attention back to the small huntress in his arms. Her breathing was a steady tune and her face relaxed in a comfortable sleep. The tips of her eyes were colored red from restrained tears.

When her and the Warlock started arguing, it took all his self control to not interfere. She was strong and she didn't need the protection he wanted to give her. So instead he resigned to be the shoulder for her to lean on. As long as she wanted him, he'd be there for her.

“Frea,” he whispered her name, calling her out of sleep.

She stirred slightly and slowly opened her eyes. The expression she gave him was tenderly sweet, he had to swallow down the fire igniting in his stomach.

“You shouldn't sleep in full armor.” He continued.

Frea blinked up at him as she got her bearings and then glanced down at her gloved hands. “R-
Shaxx bent down and carefully placed the huntress on her feet. She gripped his shoulder as his hands ran over her armor, unbuckling all the clasps and locks holding it in place. One by one each piece was tossed to the floor, the last part to go was her brilliant white cape. Even half asleep Frea was acutely aware of whenever his fingers skimmed her body. He didn't intend to tease her this time, but that didn't stop her heart from skipping a beat anyway.

At last she was down to her undersuit. She reached up and pulled off the tight upper potion of the suit. She was feeling hot, most likely thanks to Shaxx, and she wanted to be in her sleeveless shirt right away. A sigh of relief escaped Frea when the cool air touched her exposed shoulders. A prickling sensation crawled down her neck and she looked up to see Shaxx staring down at her. He straightened when she noticed him.

“I should get going. Be sure to get some sleep.” He hurriedly turned toward the doorway but Frea caught his hand.

“Stay,” she whispered, she could feel him stiffen in her grasp.

“Frea...” He began but caught himself when she walked closer. Her slender fingers crept to the edges of his helmet and pulled it off.

The huntress wasn't prepared to see what awaited her underneath. His eyes burned bright with a fierce desire and his face look strained, as if he was holding himself back. She touched his cheek, savoring the warmth of his skin. Frea lifted to the tips of her toes but she still couldn't reach his height, so instead she planted a light kiss on his jawbone. The stubble there tickling at her lips. As if a switch was flipped, Shaxx wrapped his arms around her waist and raised her up to him. His mouth overtook her own in a rough kiss. He was hungry for her and showed it as he backed her against the wall, pressing his weight against her body. She replied in turn as she coiled her legs around his hips and her hands tangled in his hair.

“Shaxx,” she whispered between the kisses, struggling to breath during the aggressive onslaught.

“Shhh,” he growled.

His lips traveled down to her neck to nip at the delicate skin there. Frea squirmed at the feeling, but she didn't dislike it. She could feel his hand inch under the hem of her shirt, his armor cold against her back, his touch making her mad with ecstasy. Shaxx's lips returned to hers, their hot tongues intertwining. His wandering fingers brushed against a sensitive spot on her side, forcing a feverish moan to escape her throat. Suddenly, he broke away from her and peered into her eyes.

“What is it?” She asked.

Shaxx tenderly ran his thumb over her wet lips. “We shouldn't do this, not tonight.”

A wave of disappoint and confusion washed over Frea. “Are you...” She paused, unsure if she even wanted to ask. “Not interested anymore?”

“Hardly.” Shaxx leaned in and brought his lips to her ear. “I've yearned for you for far longer than you can imagine.” His voice was laced with passion and his breath hot on her skin.

“Then why?” She struggled to keep the fire building inside her at bay.

He met her eyes, the desire in his gaze still burning bright, he was determined to hold himself back. “Are you really in a good mindset for this right now?”
Frea bit her lip. She really wasn't, her mind was a mess and her emotions a disaster. Shaxx was right in front of her and she could barely focus on him.

“No, I'm not.” She rubbed her tired eyes with a sigh and looked back up at him. “I'm sorry.”

He gave her a weary smile. “No apologies needed.”

They reluctantly untangled themselves and he carried her over to the bed, tucking her beneath the blanket. He lightly ran his hand over her hair and pressed a small kiss to her temple.

“Be careful tomorrow. If you need anything, don't hesitate to call me,” he whispered.

“I will,” she hazily replied, the comfort of her bed was already luring her back to sleep.

Shaxx lifted himself away from the bed and grabbed his helmet. He flicked off the lantern and stopped at the doorway, the light from the hall shadowing his large figure. “Goodnight, Frea.”
A tapping sensation on her back roused Frea from her deep sleep. Her eyes slowly opened to the bright sunlight streaming through the curtain. Her dreams were more wild than usual, making the headache she feel asleep with even worse.

“Guardian.” Her Ghost bounced on her back again. “Dex leaves in two hours, you'll be late if you don't get up now,” it chattered.

“I’m up. I'm up.” She swatted the bot away and rolled over.

The Ghost whirled in the air to avoid her hand. With an annoyed beep, it bolted under the blanket and pulled the fabric away. Frea groaned as the cozy warmth was taken away and replaced with freezing air.

“He'll leave without you,” it said.

The huntress let out a long yawn and lazily lifted herself up from the bed. She smoothed out her messed hair as she eyed the room. Armor was scattered everywhere. Her long cape rumbled into a heap on the floor. The only evidence of the time spent with Shaxx. She was so tired and torn up inside, if it wasn't for the lingering sensation of his teeth on her neck then she probably would have mistaken last night as another hazy dream.

She swung her legs over the side of the bed and stretched, reveling in the feeling of her stiff joints popping into place.

“You have a message.” Ghost drifted back over her shoulder.

“From?” She asked.

“Banshee-44.”

Frea immediately perked up, fully awake now. “Is the sword finished? It's been over a week.”

“He didn't say. Only to meet him at his kiosk as soon as you can.” It blinked.

The huntress shot out of bed, grabbing her gear off the floor.

It took all her willpower to not sprint through the plaza, her hurried pace already catching the notice of some Guardians loitering by the Eververse store. As she neared Banshee's table, she noticed another figure already there. A Warlock, donning a vibrant purple robe and an exotic shotgun holstered to her back.

“Good morning, Ikora Rey,” Frea called.

The woman turned around, a small smile spread across her features. “Good morning, Frea. It's been awhile.”

“Yeah, I guess it has,” the huntress replied.
Ikora returned her attention back to the kiosk. Banshee was no where to be found, most likely delivering a gun to the armory. Frea noticed the Warlock studying something sitting on top of the table, though she couldn't see what it was. The huntress didn't dare to peek around or step up next to her. Out of all the other Vanguards, Frea knew Ikora the least. While she exerted an air of kindness much like Commander Zavala did, there was something unforgiving about her eyes. Like she was always seeing through people, watching and learning, and Frea found that difficult to ignore. Starting up conversations with Ikora always felt like handling a ticking time bomb.

“You don't come around the Vanguard very often these days.” Ikora suddenly spoke up, making Frea jump a little.

“Y-yeah. I've been a bit busy lately.”

“Cayde often complains that his favorite pupil doesn't visit him anymore.”

Frea snorted. “Cayde says that to everyone.”

Ikora chuckled as she motioned for Frea to stand next to her. The huntress did so, hesitantly.

“Banshee had to run some errands, but he left this for you it seems,” she said.

That's when Frea saw what Ikora had been staring at for so long. It was Shaxx's sword. Newly restored, it gleamed like molten gold in the morning sun. The engravings that were marred by rust were now crisp, looking like they were just recently chiseled into the metal. Awed, Frea ran her armored fingers over the blade as she traced the outline of the once hidden inscription.

“Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur.” Ikora repeated the phrase, her voice light and airy.

Frea looked back at the Warlock. “You know what that means?” She asked.

Ikora gave her a knowing smile. “It is not my place to say. Perhaps you should ask the owner of this sword.” She then turned away and began to leave, but halted at the bottom of the steps. “The power you now wield is old and dangerous, use it cautiously.”

And she was gone.

Frea looked back down at the sword. That was the second cryptic warning she was given about this relic. It is really that dangerous? It didn't seem to do much when she used it in the Hive nest before. The huntress carefully picked up the blade, noticing that it was much lighter now, and slung it across her back. She considered going to Shaxx, maybe it would be best to find out all she can about this weapon before using it in battle.

But just as she started walking toward the Vanguard, her Ghost sounded in her head. “One minute.”

“Shit!” Frea quickly turned the opposite direction and sprinted for the hanger bay. Shaxx was going to have to wait for later.

The huntress was breathing hard when she reached Dex's jumpship. She was relieved to see the ramp still open and she leapt up to it. Just as she stepped into the airlock she was assaulted by flailing arms and two Titans.

“Frea!”

Psyho hugged her from behind while the other Titan, Timus, got her from the front. The Guardian
sandwich effectively squeezed the air out of her lungs.

“Guys...!” She shouted. “I'm happy to see you too but you're crushing me!”

Laughing, they let her back down.

“It's been ages since we've done a mission together!” Timus patted her hard on the back, a wide grin spread across his robotic features. “It's good to have the old gang back together.”

Frea peered around the ship to see that there was indeed a full team of six. Dex sat at the stern, discussing something with the other Warlock of the group. Kannon relaxed in the back as she sharpened her throwing knives. And then there were the backbones, Timus and Psyho, who greeted Frea at the ramp.

“Did something happen? Why are we going with a full fireteam?” Frea asked.

“Thought you and Dex could use the backup.” Sain, the other Warlock, said as he walked up to them. He cast a smile in Frea's direction. “Good to see you, my friend.”

Frea returned the smile. “Thanks, I appreciate the help.”

“I'm glad you do.” Psyho leaned against the wall and pointed with her chin in the direction of the stern. “Cause that idiot has been crabby all morning.”

The huntress glanced over at Dex, he caught her eye for just a moment before quickly turning away. Unsurprisingly, he was still mad from yesterday.

“Well!” Sain clapped his hands together. “Let's get going shall we?”

The trip to the moon was done in relative silence. Only the distance purr of the engines and occasional clatter of metal from those working on guns could be heard inside the cabin. Frea sat with Kannon and Psyho as she cleaned her auto rifle. She could feel their eyes drilling a hole into her head.

Finally, she sighed and looked up from her work. “Yes?”

“You seem to be in better spirits these days,” Kannon remarked, setting down her knife.

“No kidding. Last time we saw you I thought we were gonna duke it out.” Psyho chuckled.

“Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Was...going through some things.” Frea put down her gun and rested her chin in her palm. “Still kind am, I guess.”

“Hmm...” Psyho roughly indicated toward the head of the ship where Dex resided. “Does it have anything to do with that sourpuss?”

“Psyho!” Kannon playfully smacked the titaness.

“What? I could have used a much worse name than sourpuss, believe me,” she grumbled.

Frea couldn't help but smile at the scene in front of her.

“Nothing,” Frea curtly replied.

The Hunter and Titan stared her down hard. They obviously were not going to take that answer this time. With a groan, Frea rubbed her neck. Maybe talking about this will help, but she had to phrase it carefully. They couldn't know about Shaxx and whatever relationship she was involved in. She paused at that thought. What exactly was going on between her and Shaxx? Was it a relationship? It was certainly beyond the point of friends or colleagues. He did confess to caring for her and she returned the gesture, but did he actually want to be together? Her chest clenched painfully.

“Hellooooo...” Psyho waved a hand in Frea's vision, jarring her back to reality.

“Ah, my bad. Zoned out a bit.” The huntress awkwardly laughed.

“So what's the scoop? Give us some juicy details.” Psyho was practically bouncing in her seat.

Kannon sighed and grabbed Psyho's arm, stilling the Titan. “By that she means we're here for you, Frea. You don't have to tell us, but maybe we can help.”

“How...” Frea hesitated, slowly choosing her words. “How can you be certain that someone wants to be with you? If they show their affection in actions but never in words, then how do you know if they—” Her voice trailed off, uncertain how to continue. The ways of love were foreign to her, at least in this life, and her nervousness wasn't helping matters.

A surprised look flashed across Kannon's face. “This isn't about Dex, is it?” She asked.

Frea flinched. “How did you know?”

“Cause if it was.” Psyho leaned over the table, her voice in a low whisper. “He wouldn't be so pissed off right now.”

“Frea.” Kannon reached over and gently took her fellow huntress's hand. “Have you told him you love him?”

“N-no, I haven't. Wouldn't that just scare him away or something?”

Kannon smiled kindly. “Sometimes you have to take the first leap. If he doesn't reciprocate the feeling, then he isn't the right one for you.”

“And it he breaks your heart, then I break his face.” Psyho cracked her knuckles, a confident smirk played across her lips.

Frea laughed, the image of Psyho squaring off with Shaxx was both hilarious and downright terrifying.

“So who took the first leap then? You or Psyho?” Frea asked.

“I did, of course.” Kannon leaned back into her chair with a giggle. “You really think Psyho would've been the first to say 'I love you'?”

Frea looked over at the Titan. She had already turned her face away but the tips of her blue ears were tinted a shade of deep purple. The Awoken equivalent of a blush.

“Alright, ladies.” Timus emerged from the front of the ship, holding the railing along the roof for support against the swaying. “We're here.”

Savior

Rocks crunched under boots as the fireteam landed on the Moon. They automatically went to the defensive positions they grew accustomed to during their days of raiding. The Titans guarded the back, the Hunters on the sides, and the Warlocks in the middle. Sain took the lead as he summoned his Ghost, scanning the environment.

“How far are we from Anchor of Light?” Timus asked, his voice echoing over the comm.

“The scouts marked the Hive down at least five miles to the south. We should be close to that,” Dex replied.

Frea was stationed to the right of the group. She kept her rifle at the ready and her head on a swivel. Something already felt off about the area. They were above ground and the weight of darkness was pressing on them already. It was unusual.

“I don't like this...” Psyho mumbled.

“This might be a trap...” Before Frea could finish the ground suddenly started to shake, nearly knocking the Guardians to their knees. The rock creaked and groaned, forming an ominous chasm beneath their feet that was growing at an alarming rate.

“Run!”

The group scattered in every direction, all but one made it to safer ground. Frea turned to see Dex stumble. He landed hard in the dust and fell back into the hole, his fingers digging at the ground to no avail, there was nothing there for him to catch himself. Without another thought the huntress bolted back, arc light dancing at her heels, urging her feet to move faster. She slid and grabbed his arm just as he disappeared into the abyss. His momentum dragged her down over the edge but she managed to twist around and jam her clawed gauntlets into the rock face to stop their decent. Frea grunted in pain, both her shoulders and hands screamed from holding his extra weight. She looked down to see Dex staring back up at her, his fingers firmly holding her arm.

“You...idiot,” he gasped, out of breath.

The huntress laughed, more tremors of pain shot up her body from the effort. “You know me, always playing the hero.” The rock shuddered again. The crevice was still widening and her claws were beginning to slide down, she was losing her grip. Mumbled yelling from the others could be heard over the comms, drowned out by the roar of whatever awaited them in the darkness below.

“You can't hold both of us!” Dex shouted. “Let me go.”

“Like hell...I am.” She groaned. “If you die, we're never going to find your Ghost in there.”

“Frea, please!” He desperately cried, his voice cracking.

The world around them seemed to freeze over as she locked eyes with Dex. Even with the helmet she could sense his despair. His hold around her wrist loosened, causing her arm to strain from his weight even more. He was giving up.

Frea's vision started to blur from strained tears. “No.”

A strange feeling crawled under her skin as arc energy crackled in the air, the static around her
fingers cemented her hold on the rock. It would last only for a brief moment, just long enough for her to attempt one last maneuver. Her muscles burned as she lifted the Warlock up with one arm. She gritted her teeth, forcing herself to ignore the pain. With an agonizing scream she threw him over the edge back to solid ground.

Dex immediately rolled to his feet and jumped to the edge of the chasm. He reached out to help Frea but his hands only found claw marks left in the ground. She was gone.

The dream about running again. This time Frea thought she saw something at the end, a light. Warm and reassuring. It was still too far for her to reach and she wasn't sure she even wanted to, so she just continued to run. Nowhere was her destination.

Her eyes opened to a dimly lit room. It was too dark for her to make out where she was exactly, though the smell of Hive gave the huntress some hint. She wracked her brain to recall what happened after she tossed Dex out of danger. All she could remember was hurting and then just blackness. Did she die? Frea attempted to move but an intense pain shot up her left side.

Nope, she definitely didn't die.

Judging by her position she must have landed on her left arm when she fell. She tried to move her fingers and only caused more pain. Something was broken, shattered most likely, judging by the lack of feeling in her hand. With a grunt she rolled herself over to take the weight off her arm. The darkness was heavy here and healing was going to take hours, if she could even recover at all. She tested the rest of her body and gear. Her helmet was intact so at least she wasn't going to die from suffocation. And surprisingly, nothing else seemed to be broken. Though she was certainly bruised in every place her armor didn't cover.

Pressing a finger to her helmet, she tried her comm and got nothing but static on it.

“Ghost...” She breathed and flinched when her torso burned, her ribs must have taken a brutal beating as well.

“Yes, Frea?” The Ghost materialized above her.

“Get a scan and map out this area,” she wheezed. “Then go back up and find...the others.”

The ceiling was was a long way up from where Frea had landed. She couldn't see anything, but she hoped the crevice she fell in was still there.

The Ghost blinked at her, its light flickering in the darkness. “If I leave now and you die...” It faltered.

“I know.” Frea reached up with her good arm and gently poked the little light. “They'll be coming down here soon and I'm only a burden like this. Find them, be their guide.”

“I'll bring help, I promise.” It vanished, leaving the huntress utterly and completely alone now.

Frea closed her eyes and didn't move. She could feel her bones slowly begin to mend themselves, but it would still be hours before she fully recovered. Normally the best course of action would be to stay in one spot until she was found or could move again. However, this was a Hive nest and staying here was not an option. Who knows what will stumble into this room.

She placed her right arm beneath her and willed herself to sit up, her body protesting the entire time. Once she finally managed that, she pulled out her knife and sliced away a strip of cloth from her
cape. Tying the fabric together into a makeshift sling, she hung it around her neck and tuck her broken arm into it. It was rough, but at least it kept the pressure of her arm.

She tried to get to her feet, her legs crumpled under the weight. Her entire body had reached its breaking point and she just didn't have the energy to get up. Finding nothing around her to use as support she instead reached behind her and pulled out the sword.

“Sorry, this is probably the worst job you've ever been used for.” The huntress wearily chuckled to the weapon as she planted the blade into the ground. With a heave, she pulled herself up by the hilt. She nearly fell again but kept her grip on the sword, steadying her legs.

With a long breath, she rested the forehead of her visor against the pommel. All that effort just to get off the floor. This was going to be harder than she originally thought.

Sir.

The Titan didn't turn around to answer, in fact he didn't even hear his Ghost calling him. His mind was preoccupied with other things as he sat at his desk. Crucible recordings and reports were scattering in piles around him, barely touched. His attention had been elsewhere all morning.

“Lord Shaxx!”

He flinched, snapping out of his pleasant daydream. “What is it?”

“You have an urgent call,” the Ghost said.

“Every call that comes to me is 'urgent', who is it?” He snorted, annoyed as he began to sort his crumpled papers and electronic tablets.

“From a Warlock named Dex, Sir. He requires your attention immediately.”

Shaxx dropped the reports he just organized, they drifted to the floor like leaves in the wind. He was well aware that Dex viewed him as a rival. He recalled how the Warlock glared at him in the hanger bay just yesterday and Frea's face after their argument. A sudden realization came over Shaxx, Frea and her fireteam should have left for the Moon hours ago. So why was Dex calling him now?

“Patch him in.”

The Ghost expanded and a multitude of voices came through, all of them sounded panicked.

“Lord Shaxx, we need your help.” Dex hollered over the noise, his voice was noticeably shaky.

The Titan's stomach dropped. From the comm he could make out four other people behind the Warlock, but not the one he would recognize the most. Frea wasn't among them.

“Tell me what happened,” he commanded.

All the background noise came to a stop when the fireteam reacted to his demanding tone.

“We stepped into a trap and Frea is...” Dex choked up slightly but then continued. “We don't know where she is, and the Hive here are too much for just the five of us.”

That was all he needed to hear. Shaxx whipped around and grabbed his gear, slinging a Raze-lighter into the holster on his back.

“I'll be there soon, wait for me.” He cut off the radio and slammed his door open to leave.
Commander Zavala was already waiting for him outside, apparently he heard the screaming from down the hallway.

“Shaxx,” he greeted.

“Don't try to stop me, Zavala.” Shaxx straightened, his hands clenched into fists. His body tensed up, ready to make a run for it if needed.

“I wasn't planning to.” The Commander offered a kind smile. “Holliday already has a ship ready to go to the Moon. Our Savior has done so much for us, go give her a hand would you?”

Shaxx relaxed, all the tension releasing from his muscles. This was not the reaction he expected from Zavala, but he wasn't going to complain about it.

“I'll bring her back.”
A cold sweat formed on Frea's brow as she laid motionless against the shadow of the cavern wall. In her efforts to avoid the clusters of Hive patrolling the halls, she ended up going deeper into the interior of the nest. Each room she passed the darkness grew heavier, the sheer weight of it made her wounds ache. Somehow, the Hive had yet to sense her presence within their territory. All Guardians carried the Traveler's light within themselves, and the minions of darkness could normally detect it, but without her Ghost the light inside her was just a glimmer. Harder to notice, especially if they weren't expecting a single Hunter to be lurking close by.

Stifling a groan, she slid down to the floor behind a pillar to rest for a moment. Frea wasn't sure how much time she'd spent in the nest so far, maybe an hour at least. Walking was steadily becoming easier, but she still had to rely on using the sword like a cane. It would have been a comical sight if she wasn't in so much pain.

Kicked rocks behind her made her freeze, it was another guard coming down the hallway. She held her breath and peeked around the pillar. This group consisted of two Ascendant Knights and a Wizard, a rather powerful force for just a mere patrol. One of the Knights was dragging something heavy through the dust. Frea couldn't see well in the dark but she thought it resembled a coffin, much like the one that ended up being Crota's final resting place. The Hive were using this one like a cart, a dark cloth was draped over the top to cover whatever it held inside.

Frea knew something big was happening, she could feel it in the ground below her feet. The rock was trembling with unknown power. She had to see what it was. Mustering some energy, she waited for the patrol to pass her hiding spot and then silently leapt into the coffin.

Dex wasn't sure if he was angry or in shock. His mind kept reeling back to Frea and the way she sacrificed herself for him. He'd been so prepared to do the same for her and yet...he wasn't the one alone in a nest full of Hive right now. Hell, she probably didn't even survive the initial fall.

He paced back and forth at the edge of the crevice. It had stabilized and stopped growing over an hour ago. At times it looked like a sly grin plastered across the surface of the rock, mocking him with its eerie light.

“Dex.” Kannon lightly touched his arm. “Lord Shaxx will be here any minute, you need to calm down.”

He roughly pulled away. “I'm fine.”

“Fine, my ass.” Timus grabbed him by the collar and forced the Warlock to sit down with the rest of the fireteam.

Dex protested but he couldn't do much against the hulking Titan. “Why aren't the rest of you worried?” He spat.

“Don't mistake this calmness as indifference, Dex.” Sain shot back. “We are just as concerned as you are. Freaking out now will not help Frea.”

“We already tried and failed to get into the nest. Waiting for another Guardian is our best chance now.” Kannon walked back over and sat down.

“Yeah, though I think Lord Shaxx technically counts as three people.” Psycho dryly joked, trying to lighten the mood. Unsurprisingly, no one responded.
Dex sighed and rubbed his hands together, easing the tension out of his joints. The moment after Frea vanished into the abyss they made a run for the main entrance to the nest, only to be stopped by a massive wave of Thralls and Knights. They barely made it back out without any causalities. In his desperation, Dex called the one person he knew could help them.

“Anyone else find it strange that none of those Hive followed us out here?” Timus suddenly asked, breaking the long silence hanging in the air.

“Actually, yeah that was kinda weird,” Psyho replied, tapping a finger to the mouthpiece of her helmet. “Aren't Hive normally attracted to our light like moths?”

“These seem to be different,” Sain added. Another silence came over the group as they all considered what that could mean.

The distinct roar of a jumpship cut through the dark space above them, alerting the fireteam to the new arrival. In a flash of light, Shaxx materialized with a rifle already in his hand. All the Guardians jumped up and straightened in a show of respect for their superior. Dex was the slowest to get up.

“Fill me in,” Shaxx said.

Everyone looked over to Dex. They hadn't asked yet as to why he summoned Shaxx and why the Titan actually came to join them, seeing one of the leaders of the Tower out on the battlefield was an odd sight. He knew they were going to bombard him with questions later, but he didn't care at the moment.

“We hit a trap and lost Frea.” Dex motioned toward the chasm behind them. “The Hive here are acting weird, and we couldn't even get into the front gate.”

Shaxx put his gun away and trudged past the Guardians. He stopped the the edge of the rock and peered in, of course seeing nothing but inky blackness.

“No, there's too much interference out here for our Ghosts to pick up anything,” Sain replied.

Shaxx crossed his arms. His chest was clenched tight at the thought of Frea being down there alone.

“We can't just leave her in there to die,” Dex said.

“Going in blind will be a death wish...” He mumbled to the air.

The Titan snapped his head to him, Dex could feel the glare behind his visor. Instinctively he felt the urge to bow and apologize, Shaxx was that daunting, but he fought against the feeling. He straightened and returned the glare.

“Do the scans show anything?” He asked.

Shaxx reached out and caught the little bot. It was shaking and the light in its eye flickered on and off. Whatever journey it had been through had exhausted it. A Ghost without its Guardian was a bad sign.

“What happened? Is Frea-” Dex started but Shaxx held up a hand to stop him.
The Titan gingerly cupped the Ghost and summoned the Traveler's light into his palms. His fingers glowed white and the bot inside them warmed, recharging its power. Finally he opened his hand, the Ghost's eye shined much brighter now. It repeatedly blinked for a few seconds while it got its bearings.

“Lord Shaxx,” it beeped. “I have a full scan of the nest and Hive. I am here to guide you.”

That wasn't the answer they wanted to hear.

Psyho pushed forward, nearly knocking into Shaxx. “What?! What about Frea?”

The Ghost looked over at her and blinked again. “She sent me away.” Its reply was short and emotionless.

“Is she alive? Can you sense her?” Dex shouted.

“I-I don't know.” The Ghost was shaking again, its calm demeanor now slipping away. It was clear it didn't like leaving its master behind, but it had no choice.

“Enough.” Shaxx's voice rang loud, stilling all talk. He tucked away the Ghost in the fur around his neck and turned toward the fireteam. “We are here to finish a mission, no distractions. If you can't do that-” He cast a firm look at Dex. “Then leave.”

“You son of a-” Dex stepped forward but Sain grabbed him, pulling him back.

“He's right. Frea would want us to finish the mission as well. Her sending the Ghost to us is proof of that.” The Warlock squeezed his arm.

Dex shoulders shook with anger but he lowered his head and nodded. “Fine.”

“Don't worry. This is Frea we're talking about, I'd bet my lunch she's still alive and kicking. Probably giving the Hive one hell of a headache.” Psyho gave him a reassuring pat on the back.

Shaxx stood away from the group and observed, these were the Guardians Frea had been fighting alongside all these years. The ones that raided the Vault of Glass and took down Oryx. He recognized the bond they shared with each other, he once felt it too with his team back in his prime. They were a good bunch, but at the moment they were disorganized, wrecked by the loss of one of their own. He felt it too. It took every ounce of his willpower to not jump into that chasm after the huntress. The fireteam needed a strong arm to lead them right now, and he was determined to be it. He had a feeling Frea wouldn't forgive him otherwise.

He brought out his rifle and checked the Ghost sitting on his mantle. Its warm light peered up at him. “Let's get moving.”
Ghosts

With Shaxx on their side, the fireteam made short work of the Hive guarding the entrance into the nest. The Guardians gawked at the Titan leading them. The man was like a beast. His sword burned with the fury of the sun and any creature that didn't fall to his blade instead went down in a blaze of arc energy from his fists. It was memorizing.

“Damn,” Psyho commented next to Dex. “I should be taking notes.”

They stopped in a room just beyond the front gate to regroup. Shaxx planted a foot on the back of an Acolyte and pulled his Raze-lighter free from its corpse.

“Ghost,” he called. The red-shelled Ghost drifted out from his armor as the other Guardians came over to surround them. “What did you find during your scans?”

The bot twisted and projected a beam of light onto the wall nearby. A hazy diagram flickered to life on the stone. The room went quiet as they studied the map.

“Only ten rooms, this nest must be relativity new. They haven't dug very far down yet.” Kannon was the first to break the silence.

“Yeah, but the hallways are like a maze.” Timus added.

Shaxx ran his hand over the rock, tracing his fingertips along the unending network of corridors. A feeling of dread washed over him. Frea was done here alone, most likely lost. It will take them hours to locate her.

“But why would they build such a complicated structure?” Kannon asked.

“To keep everyone out.” Frea's Ghost spoke up, grabbing the Guardians' attention. “From my readings these are banished Hive, lead by a Prince. Seems they were exiled from the main nest.”

“So...you're telling me whatever these guy are doing down here, the Hive didn't want any part of it?” Dex sounded doubtful.

“With Crota and Oryx gone, the Hive are only a fraction of the force they once were.” Shaxx crossed his arms. “They've been staying low for awhile now. Perhaps they were afraid that this group’s actions would grab the attention of the Tower.”

“Which it has,” the Warlock snapped.

He shot a look over at Dex. “Whatever the case, these Hive are extremists with nothing to lose. We need to be careful.”

“There's more. I saw...” The Ghost faltered, finding difficulty in completing the thought. Whatever monstrosity it witnessed down there had clearly frightened it.

Kannon stepped forward. “Whatever information you have will be a great help,” she reassured. “For us and for Frea.”

The Ghost slowly blinked at her and then looked toward the ground. “They were collecting something,” it whispered.

“Collecting what?” Shaxx asked, he didn't like where this was going.
Ghosts?!

Frea bit her lip to keep herself from making a noise, the metallic taste of blood seeped into her mouth. She made it into the coffin without attracting the attention of the Knight pulling it, but she was not prepared for what was inside. It was filled with countless dead Ghosts, more than she's ever seen in one place. Some of them looked ancient, decorated with unfamiliar shells and covered in rust. While some gleamed like they were brand new. She picked up one and inspected it. The lights were snuffed out but a hint of the Traveler's warmth still remained, so they could be revived. However, she was too weak to do anything. Without her own Ghost to amplify her light, she had no chance of waking any of these without killing herself in the process.

The coffin came to a sudden stop and she sucked in a breath, preparing herself for whatever was about to happen. She felt the stone case move and lift off the ground, then it was flipped over and she spilled out along with the collection of Ghosts. The little bots all landed on top of her, nearly crushing her small frame. The Knight holding the coffin twitched and sniffed at the air. Frea dared not to move, hoping the Ghosts would be enough conceal her. After a few tense seconds the Knight turned and walked away to join its fellow Hive, unaware of the Guardian it left behind.

Once she was alone, the huntress poked her head out. She murmured a silent apology to the Ghosts she knocked loose, their hollow metal bodies echoed as they fell to the dusty ground. In the dim light of the cavern she could see other Ghosts haphazardly thrown into piles, there were hundreds. Her gaze moved toward the center of the room where a large podium sat. Something oddly familiar hovered over it, a serrated shard, it was small and could have easily been mistaken for just a hunk of iron. But the markings covering it glowed with a unearthly light that Frea knew all too well. It was a piece of the Traveler.

She recalled seeing this scene before, back in her first days as a Guardian. Her and Dex stopped a Hive ritual involving them tainting a shard of the Traveler. This seemed different. There was no black mist surrounding the shard. Instead it was glowing brighter, as if being charged with light. A clamor caught the huntress's attention and she turned to see a massive hive Knight walking into the room.

No.

The huntress tilted her head as she tried to get a better view, the creature was too large to be just a Knight. The Hive at its feet were worshippers, there to tend to its every need. It was a Prince. A shiver crept up Frea's body, her every instinct telling her to run. She hadn't seen a Prince since facing Crota, this time she was not prepared for the ordeal.

The Prince approached the shard and hovered his hands over it, feeling its power. He commanded something to the other Hive and they went to work, gathering dead Ghosts off the ground. A Wizard handed him one and he took it into his claws. He touched the eye of the Ghost to the shard and it flashed a light so bright Frea had to look away to avoid being blinded. When she turned back she saw the bot disintegrate into dust, its light completely gone. Her stomach dropped. They were destroying the Ghosts and trapping their remaining power into the shard, making them unable to find another Guardian or return to the Traveler. One less Ghost means one less soul to fight against the forces of darkness.

In her distress Frea shifted, making more Ghost bodies clatter to the floor. The Prince snapped around in her direction and she froze. But it was too late, she couldn't get up in time to avoid his reach. The Prince grabbed her broken arm and pulled her out of the hiding place. She screamed in agony and dropped her sword, the blade buried itself deep into the rock. The Hive Prince stood with
the height of three men so Frea dangled in his grip, her feet far from the ground. He brought her close enough that she could touch his three eyes if she wanted. His fangs laid bare in a snarl.

“Intruder,” he hissed. “How did you get in here?”

She coughed, her lungs burned like fire. “I just...stumbled in.”

The Prince's face twisted. His slit of a nose twitched, tasting the air around her. “Where’s your Ghost, tiny Guardian?”

“Must’ve...misplaced it,” she groaned.

He hissed again, spitting saliva over her helmet. She somehow refrained from shuddering in disgust.

“Look for others!” He yelled at his minions.

The Hive scattered and ran for the exits, but they were stopped just at the doorways. An ear splitting screech resonated throughout the entire nest, the sound of dying spawn.

“Wha-” The Prince whipped around just as a giant purple orb erupted against his back, searing his scarred flesh. A Nova Bomb. He roared in pain and threw Frea from his grasp.

She flew through the air and collided into the back wall. Her bones crunched as she crumpled to the ground, nearly blacking out from the pain. Forcing herself to stay awake, the huntress lifted her head up. The first thing to come into focus was her sword, shining like a golden beacon in the dark cavern. Her gaze moved beyond the weapon to see six Guardians fighting against the waves of Hive, her fireteam had made it.

A glimpse of white and orange armor caught her attention. Frea couldn't believe her eyes.

“Shaxx?” She breathed, her voice barely audible over the noise of gunfire.

The Titan was across the room but he turned as if he heard her call for him.

“Frea!” He shouted.

Shaxx's heart soared to see her alive. The way she was laying on the ground, he could tell she was in bad shape. He started to push through the Hive to get to her, gunning down everything in his way.

“Lord Shaxx, wait!” Sain warned behind him.

The Titan looked up just in time to see the Prince bring his sword down upon him. He rolled, narrowly dodging the blade.

“Guardians!” The Prince screeched, widely swinging his weapon. They had to duck and run to avoid losing their heads.

Frea watched her friends struggle. The Hive completely ignored her, not even remotely considering the injured huntress to be a threat. With a cry of frustration, she slammed her unbroken fist against the ground. She wanted to help so badly.

A warm light touched her shoulder and she glanced up. It was her Ghost.

“I found you,” it said.

Tears formed in Frea's eyes and she laughed, causing her ribs to shake with pain. “Yes...yes you did, my friend. Good job.” The huntress reached out and petted the bot. It disappeared with a beep and
she could feel the Traveler's light surge through her body. It wasn't enough to heal her wounds, but it was what she needed.

Gritting her teeth, she stood and clutched the hilt of her sword. Her broken arm swung lifelessly at her side, yet somehow she managed to pull the blade out of the stone. She inched forward, slow at first, then picked up speed until she was running. Leaping high behind the Prince, she spun, swinging the sword into a wide arc. A roar of pain echoed off the walls as the blade sank deep into the soft underside of his knees. Sickly blood splattered across Frea's armor when she yanked the sword free from his flesh. The Prince stumbled, the muscles in his legs now severed, and he collapsed to his knees. The jolt of the fall knocked the huntress away, sending her tumbling into the pedestal and shard.

Unable to move, the Prince lost all will to fight. His minions went down quickly without his support and soon it was just him that remained. The Guardians surrounded him, guns at the ready to ensure he wouldn't attempt anything else.
Dex turned away from the group when he noticed Shaxx was gone. He spotted the Titan kneeling by the mysterious podium and started to approach. Kannon caught him by the arm, the Warlock looked back to question her but she just slowly shook her head.
That's when the realization dawned on him. He recalled Shaxx yelling for Frea amongst all the chaos. Dex never saw her but he did remember her Ghost's red shell glinting in the darkness, heading for the back wall. He glanced back toward the center of the room and watched Shaxx's shaking shoulders, his pulse beating wildly in his throat.
Burning Light

Shaxx crouched in the rumble of the destroyed stone pillar, the shard of the Traveler and golden sword were half buried in the debris. However, his attention was on the small huntress cradled in his arms. Her armor was caked with dust and her chest plate cracked right down the middle from her unconventional entrance into the nest. He could see it steadily rise and fall, a sure sign that she was still breathing. He stood up and carefully pulled her out of the rocks. She twitched awake from the movement, and after a moment her helmet turned slightly to look up at him.

“Hey...” She whispered.

“All that and the only thing you can say is 'hey'? You're a mess.” He tried to keep his voice cheery, masking his concern.

Frea tried to laugh but her voice caught from the pain of doing so. “If you think this is bad, you should have seen me after my first Iron Banner.”

“Well, at least you still have your snark. I suppose you'll be okay.” Shaxx chuckled.

The Titan brought her to join the rest of the Guardians. Four of them guarded the Hive Prince, their gun barrels leveled at his head, while Sain rushed over.

“Dex is on Voidwalker at the moment so I'll be doing the healing.” The Warlock bowed his head slightly.

“He sucks at healing anyway.” Frea grinned.

“I heard that,” Dex responded from across the room.

Sain reached out and hovered his palms over Frea's body, warm solar light dancing out from his fingertips. He took some time to study her wounds and focus on the worst of the damage, the weight of darkness was still strong here and he had only so much energy to spare into healing.

“By the Traveler, Frea...these wounds,” he mumbled, shocked by what he sensed.

Shaxx ripped his gaze off the huntress and stared at Sain. “How bad?”

“Just do whatever you can, Sain. I can heal fully once we're out of here,” Frea interrupted. She was well aware of how bad of a shape she was in, how close she was to dying for the final time. The last thing she wanted was everyone to worry over her even more, especially Shaxx.

Sain looked between her and the Titan, unsure if he should follow his superior's orders or respect his friend's wishes.

“Tell me, Warlock.” Shaxx commanded, his voice low and challenging. It was a tone that eliminated any thoughts of disobedience.

Sain gave Frea an apologetic nod. “Shattered arm, broken collarbone, slipped discs, and a few crushed ribs. I'm amazed she was able to move at all, much less lift that sword.”

The sword. Frea flinched as she tried to turn her head back toward the pillar, but Shaxx's body blocked her view.

“I'll retrieve it later,” he whispered, just loud enough for only her to hear.
Her gaze moved back to his helmet. Nothing in his body language gave away what he was thinking. She wondered if he saw the blade at all. There was no doubt in her mind that he would easily recognize it.

Sain continued to work his magic over her body. She could feel her bones slowly mend and her recovery process kick in. But it wasn't enough when the Warlock finally put down his arms, his breathing labored underneath his mask.

“That's all I can do for now. I wouldn't suggest walking until we get back to the ship,” he said.

“Thank you, Sain. I appreciate it,” Frea replied. Her ribcage still shook in pain with every breath, but at least she didn't feel like she was going to kill over any second now.

“Sir?” A voice called, it was Timus. “What do we do about him?”

The Titan pointed with his gun at the Prince. The creature still hadn't moved, his many eyes were downcast and blood pooled at his knees. The other Guardians already kicked his weapon away to disarm him, this Hive was powerful and they were taking no chances. Keeping him alive this long was already risky.

Shaxx gently handed the huntress over to Sain, who took her in his arms, and then made his way toward the broken pillar. He bent and grasped the golden sword by the hilt, pulling it away from the stone. Even covered in dust the blade still glittered like the sun, alluring with its light. He had noticed it the second they entered the room to ambush the Hive. Though, now it looked like it had been reforged anew. He couldn't remember the last time he saw the blade shine so brightly. Frea had been busy.

He turned around and came to a stop in front of the Hive creature, just out of the reach of his talons.

“What were you planning to do with the Traveler's light?” Shaxx asked.

The Prince locked eyes with him but didn't answer, which wasn't surprising. The look in his gaze already gave everything away for Shaxx. They were dead, not a single spark of defiance was left in them. There were no others to follow in the Prince's footsteps, he was utterly alone now.

“Should we just kill him?” Psyho asked.

Kannon looked up from her scope. “What if there's more?”

“These Hive were banished from the main nest, the ones here were most likely all that was left of these...extremists.” Timus added.

Shaxx lifted the sword and aligned the tip of the blade to the Prince's forehead, causing the creature to flinch. “Even if there's more, we are now aware of what they're doing and will be prepared for it in the future. They won't get this many Ghosts again.”

“I agree. We can study the shard later and figure out what they were doing exactly. Trying to get information out of this Prince will only waste time,” Dex said.

The Titan tightened his grip on the sword and twisted the hilt. The orb there began to spin, slow at first, and then it quickly turned into a blur. It pulled the energy directly from his body and channeled it into the weapon. The fiery light bled into the engravings and focused along the edge of the blade. In a flash the entire sword became ablaze with the Traveler's light, bright enough to make the Hive Prince hiss in fear.

“What the hell.” Someone mumbled behind Shaxx.
“You wanted the Traveler's light?” He pulled back the sword. “Then allow me to give it to you.”

With one clean swipe he slashed across the Prince's torso. At first, nothing seemed to happen from the strike. The Prince simply stared at the Titan with a strange look. But in the next moment, a white line arched across the creature's body and he burst into flames, his insides charred with the same fury of a raging firestorm. Shaxx twisted the hilt again and returned the blade back into its normal golden state, which now didn't look nearly as impressive anymore after seeing its fully charged form. He was thankful it still worked as it did a hundred years before, age had barely affected its power.

Frea watched the entire scene from afar, her mouth agape. She couldn't decide if she was amazed or terrified by what she just witnessed. That sword was capable of annihilating a Hive Prince with just one cut, and she was using it as a walking stick less than an hour ago. Her mind was reeling with questions.

“Revive all the Ghosts that you can and collect those that you cannot. It's time to go.” Shaxx sheathed the sword across his back as his comrades scrambled in every direction, too stunned to inquire about what just happened.

The fireteam made it back to the Tower in record time, everyone was in a rush to be as far away from the Hive as possible. Frea was thankful for it. The second they were out of that nest her Ghost was able to finish her healing and she was as good as new. Even so, Shaxx didn't let her out of his sight until they had to separate into different ships.

The entire flight back home was done in complete silence. Timus was the first to speak up when they all materialized in the hanger bay. “That was just...just wow.” The Titan scratched at his head.

“Yeah, no kidding. What the hell was all that?” Psyho put her hands on her hips. “Something juicy is going on and I wanna know about it.”

“Frea nearly died and all you want to talk about is gossip right now?” Dex asked, folding his arms.

“Hey, it's better than talking about why the Hive were stealing Guardians' Ghosts and trying to overpower a shard of the Traveler. But hey, you wanna chat about that? I'm down.”

“Alright, you guys.” Frea cut in. “It's late, we can discuss the mission tomorrow. I'd rather not put too much thought into it right now.”

“Agreed. It wasn't a raid but I believe an after party is in order.” Sain stepped up and placed a hand on Frea's shoulder. “If everyone is up for it, of course.”

“Oh yes!” Psyho practically jumped for joy. “Are we calling the whole clan?”

“It has been awhile since we've had a gathering, why not?” Kannon said.

The roar of an engine outside halted all conversation as Shaxx teleported into the hanger, his boots echoing on the floor with his landing. Frea noticed Psyho glance at the Titan then to her, a wide grin slowly creeping upon her features. She instantly knew that look meant the titaness was up to no good.

“Don't-” Frea made a grab for her, but Psyho was already out of reach.

“Lord Shaxx!” Psyho greeted him. Before he could react she slapped a hand on his back and pushed him toward the group. “We're about to have a celebratory party! And would love for you to join us!”
“Says who?” Dex mumbled.

“Yes!” Kannon added, her voice a little louder than normal. “We couldn't have finished this mission without you after all.”

Shaxx was obviously surprised by the sudden invitation. “I'm not really one for parties these days.”

“Nonsense! It's only a bit of drinking and mingling, very relaxed.” Sain chuckled as he waved a hand like he was clearing the air.

“At least let us buy you a drink or two,” Timus said.

The four Guardians had Shaxx surrounded, pressuring him to come with them. He suspected some ulterior motives were behind their unusual interest in including him in their party. His gaze shifted to Frea in order to gauge her reaction. She immediately noticed his stare and just shrugged in reply, a hesitant smile played on her lips.

“Well.” Shaxx sighed. “If you insist, I suppose paperwork can wait until the morning.”
Frea's clan was large by most standards, a total of sixty Guardians so far and counting. She didn't know everyone personally. Most members stuck to their own groups within the clan, going on missions with the same people but knowing that they could reach out to others as needed. They were like an extended family, the after raid parties they threw were legendary. Often including other clans and more than once some of the Vanguard could be spotted among them. It had been a year since the last gathering, so everyone they contacted was more excited for it than usual.

The huntress made a quick run to her quarters to change into a new set of armor. She thought about putting on civilian clothes instead, but after wearing armor everyday for years, wearing anything else felt too strange to her now. She dusted off her cape after clicking the last buckle into place. It had seen better days thanks to her trample through the Hive nest. The hem was starting to tear where she had made a sling for her arm and holes dotted the gold embroidered design. With a sigh, Frea swung it around over her head and adjusted it to her armor. She'd have to repair the fabric later. Strapping a new knife to her belt she dashed out of her room back toward the hanger.

Being late in the night, the lounge underneath the hanger was free for them to use. It was bursting at the seams by the time everyone who wasn't off on missions arrived. Many of them brought drinks to share, all alcoholic and most likely strong enough to knock down the biggest Titans. Others brought food and games. When the clan partied, they did so to forget their worries for one night. To not think about their duties and to simply unwind after big raids. They were always prepared, no matter how last minute the occasion was.

It was already loud when Frea returned, the jukebox was blasting but most of it was drowned out by hollering voices. She entered the doorway and was immediately greeted by familiar faces.

“Long time!” A Warlock casually waved, a crooked grin set on his face.

“Hey, Maku. It's been awhile,” she said and joined the group consisting of the Warlock, two other Hunters, and a Titan.

“It really has been.” He took a sip of his drink. “Sounds like your group has gotten into some trouble today.”

“Trouble would be putting it lightly.” Frea chuckled.

“Speaking of trouble.” One of the Hunters, Arille, put a finger to her chin as she stared with a curious twinkle in her eyes. “We've heard some interesting things about you tonight.”

“Oh?” Frea frowned. “Like what?”

The Titan nudged Arille. “Those are just rumors. You know you can't trust anything Psyho says.”

“Oh come on, Inu. It's not like they were bad rumors.” She giggled.

“Okay. Are you guys going to tell me or what?” Frea impatiently rested her hands on her hips.

“It's nothing bad, just that a little something is happening between you and a certain popular Crucible handler.” Maku winked. “Never knew you were into Titans, Frea.”
The huntress groaned as she rubbed a palm over her brow, hiding the blood rushing to her face. She was going to kill Psyho later.

“Isn’t Lord Shaxx super uptight or something? Always making us use his title and preaching about war?” Arille asked.

“Not really. I’m a regular in the Crucible and worked with the guy for years, though I’ve never seen him give the googly eyes to anyone like he is right now.” Smirking, Maku pointed with his chin in the direction behind Frea.

She turned slightly and met Shaxx’s gaze from across the room. He was sitting with a group of Guardians playing what looked like a card game. His eyes quickly adverted away when she noticed his stare.

“Here.” Maku thrusted a cup filled with a sparkling purple concoction in her direction. “Liquid courage. Go get him, girl.”

Hesitantly, she took the drink and gave him a doubtful look. “Don’t think I need it, but thanks anyway.”

“Do you have any sixes?”

“Go fish.”

Frea pushed through the crowd and came up to the group surrounding the table. Playing cards were scattered in piles around empty glasses all over the surface. Shaxx was sitting with half of the Hive nest fireteam and a rather notorious Exo, a set of cards carefully fanned out in his fingers. His helmet was off to the side and a drink was in his free hand.

“How about any twos?” Cayde asked.

“Go fish,” Shaxx replied, a look of total seriousness on his face.

“Are you guys...playing Go Fish?” Frea had to put a hand over her mouth to stifle her laughter.

“Sain banned Poker at these parties after he lost his Gjallarhorn in a bet to Cayde.” Dex leaned back in his chair.

“Fair and square, mind you.” Cayde remarked as he organized the cards in his hand.

“I still think you cheated.” Sain grumbled.

The Hunter Vanguard just shrugged as he took a swig from his brightly colored drink. “Can't prove it.”

“Why don’t you join us, Frea? We’ve got the room.” Psyho reached out and grabbed the huntress by the arm, pulling her down to sit between Dex and Shaxx.

The sitting area was already packed tight and Frea could barely fit between them. Her thighs pressed against both of theirs. She still felt awkward being so close to Dex right now, especially since they hadn’t quite made up after the last argument. Out of reflex, she scooted to the side to give the Warlock more space but her knee bumped against Shaxx.

“S-sorry,” She whispered when he glanced down at her.
He didn't say anything. Instead he put his glass down and took her hand underneath the table, pulling her closer to him. Frea could feel her face burn hot as he intertwined his fingers around hers, not caring if Dex next to them saw. She took a long sip of the drink Maku gave her in an attempt to burn away her nervousness.

“Cayde, got any aces?” Dex asked, his tone normal. Either he didn't notice the two next to him or was doing a good job of hiding it.

“Ah damn.” The Exo tossed over an ace of spades. “That's my favorite.”

Dex took the remainder of the cards out of his hand and placed them on the table, all four aces. “I win again.”

Cayde threw his hands up in the air. “No way, I call cheating!”

“Can't prove it.” The Warlock grinned.

“Touche'. You got some wit, kid. Sure you're not one of my Hunters?”

Dex started to collect all the cards off the table to shuffle them back into a deck. “No, but being around Frea so long has sort of rubbed off on me.”

“Hey!” Frea pouted her bottom lip in an exaggerated way. “I feel like I should be offended by that.”

A hearty laugh spread around the table.

“This is the first time I've heard you two banter like this all day,” Sain remarked.

“Yeah, seriously.” Psyho chugged back the rest of her drink and added it to the other empty glasses.

“Don't worry, it'll get better soon.” Dex sighed.

Frea wondered what he meant by that and was about to ask, but Shaxx's tight squeeze on her hand made her catch herself.

“Well. I'd hate to ruin the mood but it looks like I have to go. Arcite 99-40 has been buzzing my comms since we landed.” The Titan stood up from the table.

“Already? It's so rare to see you cut loose, Shaxx. I'm sure that bot can go without you for a little bit longer,” Cayde said.

“Tempting.” He grabbed his helmet and placed it under his arm. “However, the Crucible waits for no man. It's been fun.”

And just like that he left. Frea watched his back as he disappeared into the crowd toward the exit. Disappointment washed over her, she barely got the chance to say more than two words to him after they got back from the mission. An elbow in her side snapped her attention away.

“Aren’t you going to go after him?” Dex asked.

“Wha-” Confusion overcame her disappointment. Dex was the last person she expected to say something like that.

“Don't worry about me, Frea. If you don't go after him now. You'll regret it later.” He said kindly. Her jumbling emotions must of showed because he gave her a supportive smile. It was the calm smile he used whenever he knew she was worried. It worked magic on her.
She took a steady breath and hugged him tightly. “I'm sorry, Dex. And thank you.”

He chuckled and patted her back. “Don't be. Just make sure he knows that if he ever breaks your heart, a clan of sixty pissed off Guardians will be coming for him.”

Frea laughed.

It took longer than she expected to get to the door. While her clan members had automatically moved to the side to let Shaxx through, they didn't quite notice her. She was breathing heavy by the time she stumbled out into the hanger. Now free, she looked up and caught a brief glimpse of a Titan mark hem vanishing around a wall.

“Shaxx!” She called and ran toward it.

Just as she rounded the corner, her vision was obscured by orange and white armor. Shaxx caught her shoulders just before she collided into him, her nose nearly touching the medallion hanging from his furry mantle. His helmet fell from his hands and loudly clattered to the floor in his effort.

The huntress looked up and locked eyes with him, suddenly realizing she didn't know what to say to him now that she got his attention.

“I...uh,” she stuttered. Her heart was pounding, but she was sure it wasn't just because of her sprint down the hallway. “I wanted to thank you, for helping out my fireteam.”

Shaxx was quiet.

“Without you,” Frea continued. “They might have died in there. So thank you.” She offered him a small smile, trying to ease the heavy tension growing between them.

“I didn't do it for them,” Shaxx finally said.

Her smile slowly melted away. “What do you mean?”

“It was Dex who called me, you know. Right after you fell into the nest.” Shaxx let go of her shoulders, his fingertips lightly brushing over her arms as he did so. “I didn't drop everything and rush to the Moon just to give them a hand. Besides, they're a capable bunch, they could have torn through those Hive easily if they weren't so panicked over losing you.”

“I know!” Frea looked down, frustrated. “I tried to play the hero and only ended up creating a burden for my team. I screwed up.”

“No.” Shaxx took her chin in his hand and lifted her face back up. “You sacrificed yourself to save another. I couldn't be more proud.”

The huntress's eyes widened slightly, not expecting the compliment. She averted her eyes from his intense gaze as she gripped her hands together. “You're so damn difficult to read sometimes.”

A surprised look crossed his face for a moment. “Yes. I get that a lot.” He chuckled and took his hand away.

“Have you lost friends before, Shaxx?”

“Clan members, comrades, friends....yes. I've lost many.” He smiled sadly.

Frea had yet to experience losing anyone close you her, she'd been lucky so far. It was part of being
a Guardian. Some chose to never build relationships to avoid experiencing the deep sadness of seeing a close friend or lover die. She always thought that spending her near immortal life alone would be far worse than that. The heartbreak would be insufferable, but at least there would be memories to cherish.

“I can't imagine what it's like but...” The huntress nervously tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. “I don't even want to think about how it would feel to lose you.”

Shaxx was silent again.

She wondered if she said too much, maybe he was uncomfortable with her now. She was too afraid to look at his expression. Feeling the desire to run, she took a step back. “I should probably go, my clan might be wondering where I am.”

Just as she turned, his hand slammed on the wall in front of her, effectively blocking her escape. Her breath caught in her throat and ever so slowly her gaze traveled up his arm to meet his eyes. There she found them burning with fire, the look of a predator who just caught its prey. His other hand moved to cup her cheek, bringing her closer, but he stopped just before their lips touched.

“No more games,” he whispered. “I want to know how you really feel.”

Frea reached up and gripped his hand. “I love you, Shaxx. If I ever lost you, my heart would be crushed-”

She couldn't finish before he was upon her, his lips silencing the rest of her confession.

Chapter End Notes

Maku: Male/Awoken/Warlock. Specialization: Voidwalker.

Arille: Female/Awoken/Hunter. Specialization: Gunslinger.

It may not have been the first kiss they shared, but it was by far the sweetest.

Shaxx kissed her tenderly at first, just a mere brushing of the lips, but it was long as he savored the taste. He broke away only to return at a different angle, his tongue relentlessly teasing hers. Frea's knees nearly buckled from the pleasure he was offering but she still craved for more. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him closer, their armor scraping together. A low moan emitted from his throat as she felt his grip on her waist tighten. He wasn't going to be able to hold himself back this time.

Frea's mind was blank except for him. His every touch, every hot breath on her skin sent tremors down her body. His kisses were growing rougher by the second. She struggled to breath between each one.

They finally separated with a sigh, lips wet and eyes blearily with desire.

"You like interrupting me, don't you?" Frea asked, faking a disapproving frown.

Shaxx laughed. "I'm an impatient man. Besides..." He tenderly brushed the hair out of her face. "I can't help myself when you look so adorable."

"Now you're not playing fair," Frea whispered.

The corners of his mouth twitched up into a smirk as he started to close the distance between them again. However, his body suddenly froze and his eyes unfocused. He was listening, most likely to his Ghost or comms. With an annoyed huff, he hung his head.

"Arcite again?" Frea asked. She remembered him mentioning the Crucible quartermaster frame earlier.

"Yes." Reluctantly, Shaxx took the huntress's arms off his shoulders and pulled away. "Ghost," he called.

His Ghost materialized next to them, sporting a florescent red and blue shell. "Yes, Sir?"

"Tell Arcite 99-40 that it can stop buzzing my comms. I'll be in shortly," the Titan commanded.

With a short nod the Ghost vanished again.

Feeling a little disappointed, Frea picked at the chips in her armor. Her time with Shaxx always seemed to get cut short. She knew her position didn't allow her to be selfish. He wasn't a man she could keep to herself whenever she wanted.

"Well...guess I'll retire for the night. You have work to do and I'd hate to get in your way," she sighed.

Shaxx whipped around after retrieving his helmet off the floor. "Actually..." He tossed it to her. Surprised, she barely managed to catch it without fumbling. "You'll be coming with me."

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Arcite 99-40 waited for them in front of the Crucible offices. The quartermaster was a frame, similar to the ones in the Tower that did menial tasks like cleaning and general upkeep. This one was once part of the Red Jacks, an elite group of combat units designed and coded by Shaxx, they assisted in
keeping the locations used for the Crucible clear of enemies. And in times of war they would also be deployed to help the Guardians protect the Tower if the situation called for it. Arcite was one of the first frames built for the group, but now it was reconfigured to be a vendor. A pair of horns adorned its head, similar to the ones decorating its master's helmet.

“The data?” Shaxx asked the frame as he approached. Arcite placed a tablet in the Titan's open hand. He quickly skimmed through it before looking back up. “I'll finish the rest. You can go now.”


It then turned on its heel and left the two alone in the hallway.

With a sigh, Shaxx tucked the tablet under his arm and pressed a code into the control panel of the door. “I think that frame needs to be recoded to not bother me after midnight.”

Frea giggled as she followed him into the office. “What's the data for?”

“Plans for a new arena for Saladin's Banner. He may not like me but he has no problem using my resources for his own benefit these days.”

“He doesn't like you?” Frea carefully placed Shaxx's helmet on his desk. A glimpse of metal caught the corner of her eye and she glanced over to see the golden sword. It was cleaned and shimmering brightly in a stand next to a Raze-lighter.

“He and I have some rough history. It's a long story.” The Titan sat behind the desk and rested his head against his fist. “Planning this should only take a moment—” His words caught when he noticed Frea had moved over to the sword stand. Her hands hovered over the engravings set into the blade. “The restoration work is rough, but not terrible. Did you take it to Banshee?” He asked.

“Yeah. Took me forever to convince him to do it.”

“Of course, he hates swords.” Shaxx snorted. “You could have brought it to me if you wanted it repaired.”

The huntress turned back toward him, smiling awkwardly. “I kind of wanted to surprise you. I also wasn't sure how you would react to having your sword restored. You seemed a bit sad when you gave it to me.”

He was silent for a moment as he stared at her. “That sword was never mine. Not really.”

“What? You knew how to use it rather well.” She walked back to his desk, her curiosity rising. “What did you do back in that nest?”

Shaxx's hand moved to his chin in thought. Frea wasn't sure if he was trying to remember or didn't want to tell her. “It belonged to a friend. A huntress, much like you,” he finally said. “We were comrades during the Battle of Twilight Gap, her name was Ana Bray.”

“Wait...” Frea's body stiffened. “The Ana Bray? The Hunter who used to own the pattern I now wear? Hero of Twilight Gap?”

He gave her a small smile. “The very one. The Speaker gave you that cape, yes?”

“Yeah, after my first mission. When I failed to save a boy.” She grabbed the tail end of her torn cape, the golden embroidery reflected the dim light in the room.
“The Speaker likes to give honorary items modeled after previous legends to Guardians that he senses great potential in. I am not surprised he gave you that one.”

“And the sword actually belonged to her?” Frea asked.

“Yes, she would never tell me where she found it. But it's power—” The Titan glanced over at the sword. “It can drain the light out of a Guardian's body and amplify it, turning it into a weapon. I'm sure you can imagine what would have happened if you had accidentally activated it in your weakened state.”

Frea could feel the blood drain from her face. “Are you saying...that sword can kill Guardians?”

Shaxx nodded. “It takes whatever light it needs, even if it's all you have left.”

“I can't believe I've been carrying something like that around with me this entire time.” She groaned into her hands.

“My apologies, it no longer worked when I gave it to you. I didn't think Banshee had the skill to restore it again. I'm glad history didn't repeat itself,” he said.

She looked up, puzzled. “What do you mean?”

“*Mutato nomine de te fabula narratur.*” He whispered. It was the inscription on the blade, the same one Ikora had said a day ago. “Change but the name, and the story is told of yourself...It was Ana's favorite saying, that everyone was the main character to their own story.” In the low light a sullen expression crossed his features. “At the end of the battle were were weak and cornered by Fallen, she used the last ounce of her light to cut them down and then died in my arms.”

“I'm so sorry.” Frea said.

Shaxx lifted his head, meeting her gaze. “It's easy to forget that we're not immortal. Not really.” He tossed the tablet back on the table, it made a loud sound when it clattered against a pile of books. “Sometimes remembering the deaths of others forces us to realize that.”

A foreboding silence came over the room. For Shaxx to recall so much about this woman, she must have been special. A thousand questions were streaming through Frea's mind, but just one made it to the surface.

“Were the two of you...” She stopped, her heart was pounding so loudly she couldn't hear herself breathe.

He looked up at her, his eyes brimming with an unknown emotion. Suddenly, he reached out and seized the huntress by the hand, yanking her down. She tumbled into his lap with a surprised squeak, her knees landing to straddle his waist. He cupped her cheek, his thumb pulling at her bottom lip, opening her mouth slightly.

“No, nothing ever happened between Ana and myself,” he said and kissed her hungrily.

She wasn't prepared for the passion he put into the kiss. The Titan was rougher than usual, his hands greedy as they found the openings in her armor.

“Shaxx...wait.” She tried to say between his unrelenting attacks.

“Enough waiting.” He locked eyes with her. “I want you, Frea.”
He firmly took hold of her hips and pulled her harder against him. She shuddered with pleasure when something hard ground against her most delicate region, it wasn't his armor. Holding back a moan she fell against him, burying her face and hands into his furry mantle.

“Not here, please,” she whispered, nearly begging.

“Where to then?” He asked, his breath hot against her ear.

“My ship? Preferably somewhere where people won't overhear? Or walk in? Anywhere but here, honestly.”

Shaxx chuckled as he summoned his Ghost into his upturned hand.

They materialized into Frea's ship together. Her feet barely touched the floor before Shaxx had her pinned to the metal wall, already unbuckling the straps to her armor. Hunters wore minimal protection and it didn't take him long to get her down to nothing but her undershirt and pants. His hand crept to the buckle on her belt before she grabbed his wrist to stop him.

“Impatient indeed.” She playfully smirked.

“As I said before.” He cupped her face and trailed hot kisses to her ear. “I can't control myself around you.”

“At least let me help you out of that armor before you strip me completely bare, okay?”

Shaxx pulled away, looking slightly bashful. “Alright, fine.”

Titan armor was exceedingly more difficult to get off. Shaxx could remove his gauntlets and greaves himself, but he needed assistance with his torso. Frea worked to unbuckle the straps located in the thin crevasses between the metal sections on his back, thankful that her fingers were small enough to get to them without too much trouble. The chest plate clicked and opened, allowing him pull it off and toss it with the rest of their armor.

Frea caught herself gazing at his back. This was the first time she'd ever seen him without armor. Even with the hulking pauldrons gone, his shoulders were still as broad as ever. Unwittingly, she ran her hand over his spine, feeling the fabric of his shirt and the defined muscles underneath. He flinched from her sudden touch. She didn't intend to tease him, but the fire inside him flared brighter anyway.

Shaxx turned to face the huntress, catching her off guard. He took her hands and guided them to the hem of his shirt. “Go on,” he whispered against her hair.

Frea's face burned when her fingertips brushed his naked skin. Taking a steady breath, she pulled at the material and slipped the undershirt over his head. Her mouth nearly fell open when she saw his chest, muscles chiseled from centuries of fighting and scars from unimaginable battles dotted the flesh there. She went quiet as she stared, long enough for him to grow concerned.

“Do they disgust you?” He asked.

She jumped and looked back up at him. “Of course not! I just...” Her voice trailed off. She reached out to touch a scar but stopped herself. “They look painful.”

Shaxx chuckled. “They're not. Not anymore.”

He bent down and kissed her. She was so focused on his lips that she hardly noticed him remove the
rest of their clothes. His aggression was exhilarating, but she wasn't about to let him control the whole situation. The huntress stepped forward, forcing him to move back and then shoved him onto the bed. He didn't exactly fall, she was much too small to actually knock him over, but instead he landed at the edge of the sheets. She was in his lap before he could question, her fingers tangled into his hair as she returned his vigorous kiss.

“Frea.” Shaxx groaned and dug his fingers into her flesh. In this position her every movement rubbed against his erection, threatening to send him into a frenzy. He couldn't wait anymore.

He lifted her up by the hips and in one swift movement lowered her back down on himself. She nearly screamed when he entered her hot core. Already at her limit, her back arched as her entire body clenched in sweet pleasure around him. She weakly fell forward against his chest, her head resting against his shoulder as her orgasm passed.

He wasn't going to let her recover. Shaxx started moving then, thrusting hard against her.

“Wait...I'm still sensitive-ahhh” Her sentence ended with a moan when he slammed into a erogenous spot.

His hands explored her back, finding that one spot on her side from the night before. He teased her there while pressing long kisses to her neck and collarbone. It wasn't long before he had her wrapped around his finger. Already she could feel herself losing it, reaching the end of her limit again. He must have felt it too because he suddenly started to pick up the pace. His assault becoming so rough that he reached her deepest point, sending her flying over the edge of no return. Frea cupped his face as she came again, desperately pressing her lips against his. With one last hard thrust he stopped. She could feel him growl into her mouth as his grip on her hips tightened.

Shaxx pressed his forehead to Frea's, both of them taking a moment to catch their breath.

“That was...” The huntress whispered. “Amazing.”

He gave her a sly smile. The fire in his eyes had hardly diminished at all. “We're not done yet.”

“Wha-”

He twisted, pressing her back against the sheets. Any words she might have said were silenced by his tongue as she found herself at the Titan's mercy for the rest of the night.
Bonus: First Impressions

Chapter Notes

Bonus chapters are flashbacks to Frea's first three years as a Guardian, set during the time of the first Destiny game. Mainly, I just wanted to write about some of her early experiences and other fun things.

Three years ago...

“These two look promising,” Zavala remarked, handing Shaxx papers on the new Guardian recruits.

“That's what you say about every newcomer that crawls out of the cracks.” The Titan took the reports in his free hand and quickly scanned them. They held details on a new Hunter and Warlock, the only aspect that really stuck out was how they entered the City together, most Guardians found the Tower alone.

“Perhaps.” Zavala chuckled lightly. “But these two managed to bring down a Fallen Priest while escorting civilians on their first mission.”

Shaxx nearly choked on the drink he was sipping. “What? Seriously?”

The Awoken man gave him a knowing smile and turned to leave. “Send them an invite to the Crucible and judge for yourself. See what they are capable of.”

And then he was gone, leaving Shaxx alone in his office. He set down his drink and glanced at the papers again. Bringing down a Fallen of such high standing was no small feat, even for an experienced Guardian. And yet, these two did it.

Shaxx tossed the reports aside and called for his assistant. He had a feeling today was going to be interesting.

Frea checked her gear the best she could, her armor was hardly notable aside from the new cape the Speaker had just given her that morning, but it did the job. It had been two weeks since she first awoke in the snow just outside the Cosmodrome, and only a few days since her and Dex were sent on their first mission by the Vanguard. By some miracle they had taken down a major Fallen target and became a subject of conversation around the Tower. And now, that small amount of fame got them invited to the Crucible for a 'vigorous training session'. The exact words used by the handler, Lord Shaxx, in his message.

Dex didn't seem to mind being the center of gossip. Frea, however, hated it. The mission didn't feel like a success to her. She looked down at her gloved hand and made a fist, remembering the boy that died in her arms and the first time she felt the gripping darkness of death. What was the point of this power if she can't save everyone with it?

A hand on her shoulder snapped her out of her thoughts and she looked up to see Dex staring down at her.

“You alright?” He asked.

“Yeah. Just gearing up.” She holstered her pistol and strapped a knife to her leg. Guns still felt
awkward in her hands, but she could land a throwing knife from over twenty yards.

“Uh-huh.” He leaned against the armory door. “So, know anything about this Shaxx guy?”

“Just that he can be difficult to get along with...and loud,” she replied.

Dex snorted. “You've must have only heard the good things then.”

A lot of rumors circled the Tower about the leaders and older Guardians. Enough that Frea could probably write an entire book about each person if she wanted to. She passed by Shaxx in her trips to the Vanguard offices before. He was a Titan of almost ridiculous height, over a head taller than anyone else she's met, and an ex-Iron Lord if the rumors were true. No one she asked would tell her what exactly an Iron Lord was, just that they were around before the Guardians, fighting with the Traveler's light inside them. It sounded like the Crucible Handler was an eccentric man, the tough love sort. Frea wasn't sure if she could get along with somebody like that, but she decided to save judgement for when she actually met the guy.

“Hey, you two.” A Warlock stepped into the armory. “Come up top when you're ready. Lord Shaxx isn't very patient.”

Dex watched the other Warlock leave and then turned back to Frea. “Well, this should be exciting.”

The huntress followed him up the stairs into the afternoon light. She had to shield her eyes from the brightness as she stepped out of the dark room. They were up high on the perimeter of the Last City’s wall, the air felt bitterly cold in her lungs.

“Guardians!” Lord Shaxx greeted the group, hands at his hips and his voice booming off the nearby mountain rock. His heavy armor was painted a brilliant orange and white, and horns adorned his helmet, it was a flashy look for a Titan. “Welcome to Twilight Gap.”

Frea glanced around. They were on the top level of the arena, open and perfect for sniping. The bottom level was packed with close corridors and vantage points for head to head fights.

“You two are the first new Guardians we've had in awhile.” Shaxx continued. “I am Lord Shaxx, and you may only address me as such. Since it's just the two of you, I've decided that 1v1 close combat would be best suited for the situation.” He motioned to the unfamiliar Warlock next to him. “Maku here with help train you, Warlock.”

Maku gave a short nod toward Dex. “I hope you're ready to die a lot, buddy.”

“I'll make you eat those words...buddy,” Dex challenged.

The other Warlock laughed. “Oh, I like you already.”

“Excellent. And you...” Shaxx looked over at Frea. “I don't have any available Hunters today, so it'll be you and me.”

Her stomach clenched up nervously. “Aren't Titans more adept at melee than Hunters?”

“Usually, but from what I read in the report about your last mission.” He shifted to clasp his hands behind his back. “You'll handle me just fine.”

“Meaning...you're going to get wrecked.” Maku next to the Titan winked at her.

Shaxx sighed. “Go on, Maku. We'll take this area. You can have the other end.”
Dex shot a concerned look over to Frea before following Maku toward the other side of the arena. She absentmindedly stared at them as they disappeared around the corner, biting her lip. This wasn’t going to go well for her.

It didn’t.

Frea gasped for air as she lifted herself off the ground.

“With moves like that, you’ll be dead a hundred times over before even getting one knife into your enemy,” Shaxx said, his tone stern.

“Yeah, but my target isn’t normally expecting me,” she grumbled.

“I’m surprised they didn’t. You’re clumsy.”

She shot him an annoyed look.

Her goal was to land one knife hit on the Titan. It seemed simple enough, but she had been going at it for what felt like hours. Shaxx had barely moved from his position, he never even made an attempt to fight back, and even so she had yet to breach his defenses. She leapt to the side without warning, her blade gripped tightly in her fist, and went for his flank. But once again, he took hold of her arm and flung her off to the side. He did so with such force that she toppled over a barrel.

“Frustration will only cause mistakes,” he commented.

She wiped the tears from her eyes and straightened. This man was grinding down her patience very quickly. “You’ve been fighting for centuries! How can I not get frustrated when I stand no chance against you??”

He didn’t say anything then, just stared at her.

Something snapped in Frea’s head and she charged forward without a thought. Shaxx stepped to the side to avoid her attack but she twisted and pounced on his back, swinging her weight to throw him off balance. He didn't budge. Instead he reached behind and grabbed a fistful of her cape. With a hard yank, he rolled her off his shoulder and slammed her face first into the pavement. She was pinned down underneath him, unable to move with his knee planted on her spine.

“Experience doesn’t make a Guardian great.” His voice dipped low. “Did you not see that when you took down the Fallen Priest?”

“W-what do you mean?”

His grip on her shoulder tightened. “What did you fight for? To save yourself?”

“Of course not!” She struggled in his grasp, ignoring the spikes of pain shooting down her back. “Those people we were escorting only had a chance to get inside the wall if the Fallen were taken out. I reacted according to what my instincts told me, and even then we weren't able to protect them all.”

“So it's the regret that's holding you back?” He asked.

She froze. He was more perceptive than she gave him credit for, enough so that he was able to read
her like a book.

“I don’t regret anything,” she lied.

“That isn’t what I see. You regret not being strong enough. If you let the death of one person cloud your judgment then in the end even more will die because you question your every move. Your hesitation will hold you back.” Shaxx released her and stood, holding out a hand. “You're passionate. I admire that. Learn to control your doubts and soon, you’ll become a powerful Guardian capable of doing anything you put your heart into.”

Frea stared up at him, almost memorized. “That's quite a pep talk.” She took the hand he offered and he pulled her off the ground.

A chuckle echoed out from his helmet. “Sometimes, that's all it takes.”

She took a deep breath, washing away all the anger and worry. He was right. Getting hung up on something she couldn't do anything about will only cause more pain. She had to move on, for the sake of the vow she took and for others who might need her help in the future.

The huntress looked back up at him with a newfound fire igniting in her gaze. “I'm ready to continue.”
For the first time in years, she didn't dream of running. Instead, Frea sat at the edge of an unending forest looking over an ocean. The chirping of birds felt so real to her. The calmness of the moment satisfying. She felt a presence next to her and tilted her head slightly to meet the gaze of another Hunter, wearing the same cape as she did and causally twirling a pistol in her hand. The woman smiled kindly and nodded. Frea didn't need words to know the huntress approved of her. The dream shifted then, and everything was engulfed in white light.

Her eyes snapped open. It took a moment for Frea to realize she was still on her jumphip, tucked away in her warm bed. Rubbing the sleep from her eyes she rolled over and buried her head deeper into her pillow. But even then, she couldn't fall back asleep. The strange dream seemed to be burned into her mind.

“Guardian.” Her Ghost appeared before her.

“Five more minutes,” she groaned.

“You have patrols this afternoon, you'll be late.” It blinked. “Are you alright?”

Frea rose up from her sheets, she shivered when her bare feet touched the metal floor. “Yeah, it's just the weird dreams again.”

“About running?” It asked.

“No...it was something else.” She shook her head and got up to stretch. “But anyway, what's going on today?”

“You need to visit Cayde-6 for assigned patrols.”

The huntress chuckled and started to gather her armor off the floor. “If he's even around this early yet, he probably got wasted at the party as usual.”

“You also have a total of 43 messages from Psyho, all of them involving the line 'you go, girl.' And one from Dex, he went ahead and gave the mission report to the Vanguard. He says to take it easy today,” the Ghost added.

Frea let out a long sigh as she started to get dressed. No doubt the entire clan probably knows something is up between her and Shaxx now, especially after she didn't return last night. They do love their gossip. Clipping the last bit of armor on, she bent down and picked up her cape. She went to swing it around her head like normally, but found herself hesitating when she gripped the white fabric. That dream felt too real. The Hunter that wore the same cape, could it have been...

“It needs some repairs,” her Ghost said over her shoulder, catching her attention. “I still remember the day you received that cape.”

“Yeah, me too,” she said as she draped the fabric over her bed. “Do you know the legend of Ana Bray, Ghost?”

“Only what the Speaker and Lord Shaxx have told us.”

“Hm...” Frea took out her sharpest knife and grabbed a needle from her work table. “She was a
"Gunslinger."

"Yes, a powerful one too." The Ghost landed on the pillow, staring with wonder.

The huntress took a seat on the mattress and started to carefully sew together the holes in the cape. This wasn't the first time she's had to fix bullet holes and tears in it, the material was covered with an array of patches, the stitching on the oldest ones rough and uneven. She wasn't very good at the skill in the beginning.

"Seems like almost all the famous Hunters are," she mumbled, almost laughing at herself. "I'm not a very good Gunslinger."

"No, you're better as a Bladedancer. Most would argue you are one of the strongest in recent history."

"Maybe." Frea tied off a loose thread. "But we barely ever hear about the Bladedancers, they were just as reclusive as the Nightstalkers before they died off."

Her Ghost was quiet for a moment. "Do you wish you were a Gunslinger like Ana Bray?" It hesitantly asked.

She looked up from her work in surprise. "No! I'm quite happy being what I am. I wouldn't change that for the world. Besides, planting an electric knife into an enemy's face is much more enjoyable than shooting them."

"I see." The Ghost sighed in relief.

Frea finished the last patch and lightly ran her fingers over the neat stitches, inspecting her delicate work. "I kept this cape for so long because I wanted to be strong, like Ana, to help fulfill my vow. But now...I feel like I'm living under another's shadow."

Ghost blinked and drifted over to land on her knee. "Frea, this design may have belonged to another Hunter at one point but you've made it your own. You've made it mean more than just a symbol of Twilight Gap. It is the colors of the Guardian who has beaten the champions of the Hive, the Young Wolf who fought back the Fallen Splicers from the City, and the one who shut down the Black Garden single-handedly. You may not have heard of any powerful Bladedancers, but others have heard of you."

"Nicely said." A deep voice echoed from the front of the ship. Frea's gaze moved to the door to see Shaxx stepping into the room from the cockpit, already fully dressed in his armor. "Sorry, was finishing work up front and overheard," he commented.

Frea blushed, she didn't realize he was still here. "N-no, it's fine. You just overheard my greatest worry...which is only mildly embarrassing."

Shaxx walked away from the doorway, his weight on the bed bounced the small huntress as he took a seat next to her. "I didn't tell you about Ana last night to compare you to her," he said.

"Is it egotistical of me to want to be remembered when I'm gone?"

"This world we live in is a hard one." A sad smile crossed his lips. "Sometimes the only thing that keeps us going are our stories and legends. They inspired you, did they not? Where would we be without the Guardians that carved their names into history?" He took her hands into his and squeezed. "Your Ghost is right, Twilight Gap was a very long time ago. We haven't forgotten it and..."
those who died to protect the City. But that emblem on your cape no longer represents the Hunter that once donned it. I think Ana Bray would have been rather happy that it continues to live on in new light.”

“You also have your clan,” her Ghost added. “They will never forget you.”

Frea smiled. “That's true.”

Shaxx stood up and took her arm, pulling her with him. He swung the cape over her head and anchored it to her armor. Once finished, his hands slipped to her waist and he bent down to seal her lips with a long kiss. “And I won't forget you either,” he whispered when they parted.

She gripped his forearm tightly. “Promise?”

Instead of replying her kissed her again, this one more passionate than the last. He sighed when they finally separated. “As much as I'd love to stay for the rest of the morning, I have to give Zavala a debrief on the mission yesterday.”

“Yeah, and I have to go talk to Cayde for patrols.” She pouted.

He planted a few kisses into her hair. “See you at the Vanguard office later then?”

“I'll be there.”

Frea found Cayde-6 alone in his usual spot at the top of the Tower, hovering over his map but looking like he was day-dreaming more than studying it.

“Cayde,” she called on her approach, directing his attention away.

“Frea!” The Exo straightened with his arms spread wide. “That party your clan threw last night was the best one yet. Though, you should really talk to Sain about getting rid of that Poker ban.”

Frea lightly laughed. “I'll see what I can do. How was the mission report this morning?”

“Exciting as usual,” Cayde said, his tone noticeably dropping into sarcasm. “I imagine the Hive nest was fun but your clanmate, Dex, made it sound like the most boring thing in the world.”

“To be fair, it did nearly kill us.”

He dismissively waved his hand, grinning. “Ah, small details. Besides you're here now, are you not?”

“Alright, Cayde.” The huntress sighed, furrowing her brow. “Got my patrols for me?”

“Yes, yeah.” He picked up a tablet from the table and held it out for her. She grasped it but he didn't let go, instead, he yanked her closer to him. “So, I couldn't help but notice you run after Shaxx and not return to the party last night,” he whispered.

Frea felt her chest clench up, she hoped it didn't show on her face. “I-I just wanted to thank Lord Shaxx, and then retired early for the night.”

“Really...” Cayde's grin widened. “Because those bags under your eyes say otherwise.”

“I do hope you don't tease all your Hunters like this, Cayde.” A voice sounded above Frea's head.
The Exo glanced up and immediately let go of the tablet, making Frea step backward and bump into the large figure directly behind her. “Just having a bit of fun, Shaxx. No need to get your horns in a twist.” Cayde’s gaze moved back to the flustered huntress. “I gave you the easy patrols today as a little thanks from the Vanguard.”

“Indeed.” Commander Zavala entered the room next with Ikora following behind him. “We just finished reviewing the last details about your mission with Shaxx. You did good, Frea.”

“Uh...thank you, sir.” Frea stepped away to give the Titans some space. “But the credit should go to my clan, they did most of the work after all. I was just the one who needed rescuing.”

Zavala exchanged a glance with Shaxx before turning his attention back to her. “Perhaps. But from what I’ve heard you were the one who risked their life to save a comrade, and even go so far as to send your Ghost away to map out the nest for your team. That...” He placed a firm hand on her shoulder. “Is worthy of praise. Will a few boxes from the Vanguard armory for you and your clan suffice?”

“Loot.” Cayde winked at her. “Loot is good.”

“They would greatly appreciate that, I’m sure,” the huntress said.

“Excellent, we'll leave you to go prep for you patrols then. The crates will be sent to your clan by the end of the day,” the Commander replied.

“Thank you again, sir.” After a quick bow, Frea headed toward the exit. She felt a pair of eyes burning into her back and stopped just in the doorway to catch Shaxx watching her. He gave her a subtle nod of his head when their gazes met and then turned back to the table. A warm feeling spread through her chest as she smiled and left for the hanger.

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“Anyone care to toast?” Sain lifted his glass.

The Tower was quiet that breezy night. After her patrols, Frea ran into her fireteam from the Hive nest. They decided to hold a small drinking party for just the six of them on the plaza stairs overlooking the Traveler.

“To what exactly?” Dex asked.

“I prefer these sort of gatherings over the parties everyone insists on having. I can actually hear myself think,” Kannon commented.

“Yeah.” Frea agreed. “Me too.”

“Speaking of the party.” Timus locked eyes with the huntress. “Where’d you run off to, Frea?”

“Nowhere in particular, right?” Psyho bumped her elbow into Frea’s side with a laugh.

“How long are you guys going to tease her about this?” Dex cut in, leaning against the railing.

“Oh come on, Dex.” Timus patted the Warlock’s shoulder. “All’s fair in love and war.”

Dex sighed in annoyance. “I wasn't saying that out of jealousy.”

“Well, I'm jealous,” Psyho said loudly and nearly knocked Frea over as the titaness clung to her. “Lord Shaxx is one hell of a catch.”
Frea nervously laughed. “Psyho, what about Kannon?”

“Oh, I quite agree.” Kannon giggled. “I could stare at that man for days.”

Laughter spread across the group, the sound danced on the wind into the City below.

“Never change, you guys,” Sain said.

“Here’s a toast.” Dex raised his glass. “To always having each others’ backs no matter the odds. To comrades, clanmates, and most of all…” He locked eyes with Frea. “To friends.”

“Cheers!” They all spoke in unison and clicked their glasses together.

Frea smiled wide. Moments like this made her happy to be alive, to be given this second chance at a new life. She looked out over the Last City and to the Traveler shining like a beacon in the sky. Her legend was far from over.

To be continued in Part II: The Red War...
“No radio transmissions from the Tower, everything is completely silent. This isn't good, Frea.” Her Ghost bounced up and down in the air, its voice chattering.

“Well be there soon, don't worry,” she reassured.

The thrusters on her jumpship were already blaring at full power. The Cosmodrome below them was nothing but a blur of green and white. The huntress's eye were set to the horizon, awaiting the first glimpse of the Tower. The place she's called home for many years now. When they finally reached the City's walls, her heart dropped. She first noticed the ships, the sky was littered with them, painted blood red and billowing black smoke wherever they went. Just barely she could spot Guardian ships among them as well, trying to fend off the attackers. Her gaze then moved to the Tower and her mouth fell open. It was burning. Half of the underside was blown into rubble yet somehow it was still standing. They were too late.

“Oh no. Oh no,” her Ghost mumbled.

Frea shook her head, trying to clear her thoughts. “Ghost, get a long range scan and find me an entrance. We're going in.”

The hanger doors were blocked off, but her Ghost was able to locate a large hole near the top of the Tower. She switched the ship into autopilot and clicked her helmet into place, checking her gear and weapons. Not willing to take the time to let her Ghost teleport her, she swung open the airlock and leapt out into the cold air. Her boots landed hard on a grate, the metal groaned in protest, threatening to drop her into the fiery pit below. She jumped forward to safer ground and took a moment to get her bearings. It looked like she was in one of the storage rooms below the Vanguard offices. Rubble blocked the main entrance, she was going to have to take the long way around.

“I'm getting a transmission.” Her Ghost beeped in her head.

“Guardians!” Zavala's booming voice entered her comms. He was broadcasting on a public frequency. “Prepare arms and meet at the plaza. The Tower is lost, we must buy time for the shuttles to escape.”

Frea pulled out her hand cannon and sprinted toward a crack in the wall. There were no other exits out of the room, so she was going to make one. Summoning lightning into her fist, she chucked an explosive grenade. The stone blasted outward as she jumped through it, right into two Cabal Legionnaires. They were dead before they could even turn around.

“Cabal? Here?” Her Ghost asked, concern dripping in its tone.

“Looks like it.” Frea continued down the hallway, shooting down more Cabal that stood in her path.
Broken Red Jacks were scattered in nearly every corner, evidence of the previous battles that happened there. She came upon a closed door leading directly into the Vanguard office. Just as she reached for the control panel, it slammed open. An Exo tumbled out of the room. “Cayde?!”

The Hunter Vanguard looked up and gave her a crooked grin. “Hey there. Gimme a sec.” His entire body suddenly ignited as he whipped around and shot three rounds of Golden Gun into a group of Cabal. They burst into flames without much of a fight. He turned back to Frea, spinning the hand cannon in his hand to show off. “I'd love to stay and chat but I've got a date with whoever did this. Don't worry though,” He put his hand on the doorframe and leaned in with a wink. “it'll be a short date.”

Frea sighed and ducked under his arm. “I'm going to help Commander Zavala in the plaza. Don't get yourself killed, Cayde.”

“Ah, Frea.” He playfully gripped his chest like he'd been stabbed in the heart. “You're worried for me. I'm so touched.”

She stopped in her tracks and shot him a look. He couldn't see her face underneath the mask she wore, but he got the message.

“Alright, go play hero. Have fun.” He chuckled and summoned his Ghost, vanishing into thin air.

Frea didn’t sprint now, but she kept a quick pace. She walked past where Eris once stayed, the only evidence of her now was the broken urn sitting underneath a fallen wall. It still emitted an eerie glowing green mist that drifted like fog over the stairway. The huntress stepped around it and made her way up the steps. Her breath caught when she saw Red Jacks awaiting her at the top. They blinked at her presence, their metal hands tightly gripping their guns, but made no indication of shooting the huntress. She holstered her own gun and rounded the corner. The hall had been barricaded, the main entrance to the plaza blocked by crates and debris. People huddled into groups along the walls, some were crying and others looked up to stare at her with wide eyes.

She heard them whisper as she passed. Hive-bane. Savior. Young Wolf. They knew who she was. The hope they held in their gazes made her incredibly nervous.

“Guard that door! I don't want any of those damn Cabal to get near it!” A familiar voice snapped Frea's attention back to the situation before her.

She looked up to see a Titan, wearing white and orange armor, barking orders at the Red Jack frames. A Raze-lighter sword was slung across his back. Already Frea could feel her worries wash away, just the sight of him was enough to do that.

“Shaxx,” she called.

His head turned toward her voice. “Frea!” It took him two long strides to cross the hall and take her in his arms. He embraced her hard enough to pull her feet off the ground. “You made it back. Good.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck and buried her visor into the furry mantle decorating his chest plate. His familiar pine scent drifted into her helmet. “What’s happening?”

“I'm not entirely sure, I've been trying to get these people to the shuttles and comms have been spotty since the initial attack.” Shaxx carefully let her down and shook his head. “We weren't prepared for this.”

Frea could sense the frustration in his tone. She regretted not being here when the Cabal first arrived.
She placed a hand on his arm. “I have to get to the plaza. Know any shortcuts?”

“Of course. Zavala was losing ground last I heard, but with you there…” He trailed off and turned back to the only unblocked door. “My armory is open, take whatever you need. You can get to the hanger from there, the path to the plaza should be clear.” He jammed his fingers into the thin opening of the door and wrenched it open. The metal creaked and groaned in protest, giving away to his strength. Frea went to move past, but he grabbed her with his free hand and pulled her back, pressing the forehead of his visor against hers. “If the Cabal want war, give them war. But please come back to me in one piece.”

She smiled under her mask. Her heart screamed at her to stay by his side, to protect him and the others trying to escape. However, her skills were needed elsewhere. It was painful to go. “Don’t I always?” She joked, trying to lighten the mood.

A dry chuckle echoed from his helmet as he let her slip from his grasp. “See you soon, Frea,” he whispered and then slammed the door closed behind her, leaving the huntress alone in the dark room.

“Ikora, what do we know about these Cabal?” Commander Zavala spoke over public comm channels.

Frea bent down to dig her knife out of a Legionnaire's back as she listened in. The hanger was now clear of all enemies, half the area had been blown away in the attack, the smell of burning fuel from the ruined jumpships was chokingly thick. She looked up at the twisted metal that was once part of the stairway leading into the main hall. The exit was covered by concrete debris, but she could make out a small gap beneath the stone. Just big enough to fit a tiny Hunter.

“They call themselves Red Legion,” Ikora answered, her voice was noticeably shaken. “Highly trained and highly dangerous. They are attacking the Traveler, we must-”

“No!” Zavala cut in. “Our people come first.”

The huntress leapt up and took hold of what was left of the metal railing, she easily pulled herself to the upper level of the hanger.

“Oh dear...” Her Ghost said as Frea glanced around. “Amanda will not be happy to see what the Cabal did to her tools.”

“She probably has more troubling things on her mind at the moment, Ghost.” Her gaze drifted over to the lounge's closed doorway. It's been a month since the last clan gathering, since her near death experience at the hands of crazed Hive, and now everything has gone to hell again. She hoped her clan mates were doing alright.

“Guardian.” Ghost snapped her out of her thoughts. “We need to get moving.”

“Right, sorry.”

Frea turned away and crouched into the small hole, careful to avoid the flames and sharp rebar sticking out from the rubble. She wasn't prepared for the sight that awaited her at the end. Her breath caught when she crawled out of the opening. The Traveler shined with its usual light out in front of the plaza, but something was attached to it. The Cabal's target wasn't the Tower.

“What are they doing to the Traveler?” Her Ghost asked.

She started to answer but the hair on the back of her neck stood on end and she rolled just in time to
avoid an incoming drop pod. It missed her cape by mere inches. She scrambled to get to her feet as a
group of Red Legion soldiers streamed out of the pod.

“Duck!” A voice called. Frea slide behind a pillar as a Hammer of Sol flew over her head like a
missile, turning the Cabal behind her into ash. A Titan landed with a loud thump and reached out a
hand to the huntress. “Frea! Nice of you to join us.” She snickered.

“Hey, Psyho. Thanks for not roasting me with that hammer,” Frea said as she took the hand offered
and got to her feet. “Is it just you and the Commander?”

“Nope.” The titaness pointed toward the middle of the plaza. Frea looked over her shoulder. At the
top landing stood Zavala, guarding the barred door leading to the escape pods with his Ward of
Dawn. And next to him was a familiar Warlock. “Dex and I just got here a few minutes ago. It looks
like we're finally starting to push the Red Legion back.” Psyho continued.


Psyho rubbed her neck awkwardly and motioned the huntress to follow. “Well...not exactly.”

“Frea!” Dex greeted her as the two approached. He stepped forward and clasped her by the
shoulders, looking all around her armor. “You good? No injuries or anything?”

She sighed. “You worry too much.”

“I don't blame him.” Psyho crossed her arms. “Bad luck does tend to follow you.”

The Commander cleared his throat, gathering the attention of the other Guardians. “Focus people.
We might have a break for now, but the Cabal are gathering energy as we waste time.”

“Of course, sir. Where do you want us?” Frea asked as she stood at attention.

“Ikora has run for the Speaker, she might need some backup. I will stay here and hold the line.”
Zavala spoke his orders quickly as he reloaded his gun.

“With all due respect.” The huntress stepped forward. “the Red Legion might be back soon.
Shouldn't we stick together?”

“I'll stay.” Psyho gave her a thumbs up. “Those bastards won't get very far with two Titans here.
You and Dex can go after Ikora Rey.”

Frea didn't like the idea of splitting up, something was nagging at her mind against the idea, but she
held her tongue. There wasn't any time to argue. “Alright,” she finally said. “Be careful, Psyho.”

“Aw.” She reached up and ruffled the top of Frea's hood. “You're cute when you worry. I'll be fine.
Dex is the one you should watch out for, he's too cocky for his own good.”

“Hey, I heard that!” Dex hollered, already making his way to the far side of the plaza.

Frea caught up to Dex in the north side of the Tower, he was wrestling with a jammed door that lead
to the Speaker's quarters.

“Here.” She moved around him and slammed her knife into the control panel. It sparked for a
moment, then beeped as the metal doors slide open to let them pass. Incendiors and a Thresher ship
were waiting for them on the other side. “Look out!” She shoved the Warlock and they both fell to
the ground, narrowly dodging the stream of fire from the Cabal's volcanic cannons.

“Shit,” Dex groaned, upholstering his rifle. “These guys are new.” He rolled to his feet and shot the first Cabal directly in the face. The enemy stepped back from the hit but instead of dying, he seemed to only get angrier. They raised their weapons again for another blast.

They didn't have a chance to shoot again. The ground under the Incendiors shook with void power and they suddenly went up in purple flames, disintegrating into dust from the grenade. Ikora drifted over and landed where the Cabal once stood, the remnants of her void energy curled around her fists.

“Ikora!” Frea called.

The Warlock Vanguard glanced at the two of them, a look of sadness and frustration on her face. “The Speaker is gone.” That was when Frea noticed the room that once housed the Speaker and his studies, or more specifically the lack of the room. A charred crater now stood in its place, blown into the stone by some destructive force. “Red Legion!” Ikora screamed up at the Thresher. “You will take no more from us, and you will find no mercy in me!” She leapt into the air and launched a powerful Nova Bomb into the ship's engines, immediately knocking it out of the air. The Thresher went down into the foggy abyss, taking Ikora Rey with it.

“No!” Dex ran forward to the ledge but Frea grabbed his hand to stop him.

“Are you insane?! How are you going to make that jump?”

Dex whipped around to face her. “I am not leaving my Vanguard to fend for herself.”

“This is Ikora we're talking about, she can handle herself just fine.” Frea replied, almost yelling. “Don't get yourself killed trying to protect someone who doesn't need it!”

The Warlock stared down at Frea's hand, shaking his head. “If the Speaker is truly gone, then Ikora is the only one who can replace him. I will not let her disappear too.”

“Fine, just...don't be stupid, ok?”

Dex pulled her into a hug, squeezing her tight. “I'll try my best.” He then released her and jumped over the edge.

The events of the hour before reaching the top of the Red Legion's command ship replayed through Frea's mind. She had infiltrated the ship and destroyed its shield generator to allow Holliday and the other Guardians to counterattack, but it was too late. The comms had fizzled out and no one was there to fight. She was alone.

“How do we come back from this?” Her Ghost materialized next to her as she stepped out into the cold wind to catch her breath. She was miles up in the air, and despite that she couldn't see a single Guardian jumpship from here.

“You don't.” A gravely voice answered behind them and Frea quickly turned around to face it, her gun at the ready. It was a Cabal unlike anything she'd ever seen before. Massive in size and wearing regal white armor, he carried himself with a sense of purpose, a clear sign that he was the one commanding the Red Legion. The look of disgust in his red eyes as he peered down at Frea made her back away. He chuckled and raised a hand toward the Traveler. “Welcome to a world without light.”
She followed his gaze to the Traveler in the distance. The cage around it began to glow as a shield shimmered to life over its surface, enclosing the orb completely. A shockwave rippled through the sky, hitting Frea and knocking the air from her lungs. She clutched her chest in pain, all the energy from her body suddenly gone.

“G-Guardian...something’s wrong.” Her Ghost clattered to the floor, unable to fly, its little metal body sparking and twitching.

Frea's legs gave out and she fell to her knees. She could barely think over the sound of her throbbing heart, it felt like she was drowning. Just breathing was a momentous effort for her. The Cabal leader stepped closer, his footsteps echoing loudly over the ship's surface. Forcing herself to move, Frea reached out and grabbed her Ghost, pulling it closer to her body to protect it. She looked up as he approached.

“Do not look at me, creature.” He snarled and kicked her. The huntress tumbled through the air and landed hard, her gun flew out of reach. “You are weak. Cowering behind walls.” He stepped forward. “You're not brave. You've merely forgotten the fear of death.”

Her instincts screamed at her to move. She tried to get to her feet, but her body wouldn't listen.

He came closer.

“Allow me to reacquaint you.” He hit her again.

She slide farther and nearly went over the edge of the ship. The force of the landing knocked the Ghost from her grasp.

“No!” She reached for it in vain as it sailed into the darkness. Despair enveloped her when its blinking light disappeared into the smoke. Gone forever. Just like her friends, her home, and...

Shaxx's image crossed into her mind. She wasn't ready to die. Not like this.

Frea weakly got to her knees and stared down the approaching Cabal.

“Your kind never deserved this power. I am Ghaul, and your light...” He continued, bending down close enough that she could see the pulsing veins covering his head. “Is mine.”

“You...” Frea whispered, glaring at him from inside her helmet. “Talk too much.”

Willing herself to move, she pulled the knife from her belt and drove it into his shoulder. He howled in surprise and kicked her off the ship. She plummeted to the City below with nothing but the wind to catch her.
Frea was falling, but she wasn't in the Last City. White clouds surrounded her instead of the dense smoke from Cabal ships. She glanced down and saw only trees, no buildings, and no wall. The screech of a bird made her look up again and in front of her fluttered a magnificent falcon, made from pure light. It stared at her with eyes as black as midnight. Curious, she reached out for it and immediately her vision changed. Images soared past her as she flew through the sky, too fast for her to make out what they meant. She came to an abrupt stop at the edge of the forest. The trees here were twisted and burned, corrupted with dark energy, but what stood out most of all was the shard. It loomed high above the branches and teemed with light. It was a piece of the Traveler. The vision changed to white and again she was falling.

The huntress gasped as her eyes flew open, she tried to get up from the crater she found herself in, but a pain in her side made her halt. Her hand went to her abdomen and when she pulled it back, the glove was covered in fresh blood. Somehow, she had survived the fall from Ghaul's ship. Her armor took the brunt of the trauma but it now hung on her in tatters. She reached up and pulled off her cracked helmet, tossing it to the side. No bones seemed to be broken, shock might be keeping her from feeling most of the pain, but she was bleeding profusely. If she didn't get help soon, she was going to bleed out.

Frea grabbed the edge of the hole and pulled herself up, the effort bringing tears to her eyes. Her Ghost should be around here somewhere, if she found it, then maybe it could still heal her.

She gripped her side tightly and peered around. It looked like she landed on the outskirts of the City, only a short walking distance from the wall, her only chance of escape. Screams and the hum of tanks could be heard echoing off all the buildings. The Cabal were taking no prisoners. Frea's heart ached as she slowly moved forward into a drained water channel. She wanted to stay, to help, but she had no power and nothing to fight with. Her foot tripped on a rock and she toppled to her knees. She couldn't even muster the energy to walk.

Gritting her teeth, she got to her feet again and continued forward. Her body was getting weaker by the minute, she could feel the warmth of her blood soaking through her armor. At this rate she wouldn't even make it out of the City. The distance roar of an engine alerted her and she ducked behind a destroyed tank just as a Thresher flew overhead. It searchlight skirted over the ground, looking for Guardians and civilians alike. Frea hid under the tank until it passed, then pressed on. She was nearing the end of the channel where it fed out beyond the wall. Something bright blinked and chattered by the darkened gate ahead.

Her vision started to blur and she realized she wasn't going to make it. She collapsed into the shallow water.

“F-Frea!” Her Ghost noticed the sound and weakly floated over. “You're a-alive...I thought...”

Its light shined over her body and her wounds healed, the color returning to her face. She crawled to her knees and held out her palm for the Ghost.

“Are you ok?” She asked.

The little bot nodded. “Yes. I can heal you, but...” It looked away.

“You can't revive me,” Frea finished.
The Ghost only nodded again.

“Alright, it's time to get out of here.” She got to her feet. Her body still felt oddly heavy, a side effect from the Traveler's light being ripped from it most likely, but she could move. And for now, that's all she needed.

Three days passed since Frea escaped from the City out into the wilderness. Surviving out here was nothing new to her, she's had to many times before during patrols in the Cosmodrome, but this time she was without ammo. She didn't know where she was going exactly, only that a falcon seemed to be leading them somewhere since they left the wall. A falcon that closely resembled the one in her vision.

The huntress leapt down from a small cliff and her hand covered her mouth when she saw what awaited her at the bottom, stifling a cry of despair. She stumbled into what used to be a Guardian camp, but everyone was dead, taken out by the Red Legion.

“Oh no.” Her Ghost materialized next to her, inspecting the other Guardians. “They're just...hunting us down.”

Frea moved over the bodies to look at all their faces. She didn't recognize any of them. A loaded gun sat by one of the fallen Hunters. With a silent word of thanks, she took it and checked the reserves. There was plenty enough for her.

“They must have been evacuating after Commander Zavala gave his order,” she said as she holstered the rifle. “They didn't even stand a chance against the Cabal.”

“Guardian,” Ghost called. “There's a radio.”

She walked over to the center of the camp. The radio was set up high on a pole, its speaker fizzled with a multitude of voices.

“It must be picking up transmissions from all over the City,” Frea mumbled and adjusted the tuning.

Once voice, patchy but louder than the rest, came through. “Help...us...Guardians nowhere to be found...Cabal approaching...Tower gone...” The voice cut out suddenly, drowned by shouts.

Frea's hands balled into fists at her side. Everything the Guardians have done, everything they have fought to protect, is now gone in one fell swoop. Are they really nothing without the Traveler's light?

A gut wrenching howl from behind made them turn around. It was a pack of Cabal war hounds, the spikes on their backs gleamed in the sunlight, a single Legionnaire handler stood behind them. He raised his gun and shouted something illegible. The hounds roared and sprinted through the snow, directly at the huntress and her Ghost.

Cursing, Frea leapt to the side and stabbed the first beast with her spare knife. It went down easily enough, but if the others got too close, she would be overrun. She pulled out her gun and took out the rest of the hounds, infuriating the handler more. He threw a fire grenade into her cover spot. Unable to react quickly enough, she held up her arms against the blast. It sent her flying out from behind the rock and she landed right at the Cabal's feet, her gun slipping from her burned hands. He stared down at the huntress with a sneer as he raised his heavy foot.

She rolled to avoid his stomp and slashed her knife against the back of his ankle. He screamed with rage and swatted at her, but she managed to move just out of his range. Mustering all her strength, she grasped her blade with both hands and planted it into the back of the Legionnaire's neck. It cracked through the armor and found raw skin inside, killing the Cabal instantly. He fell over as Frea
landed roughly in the snow. Her chest heaved to breathe, leaving wisps in the chilly air.

“You're hurt.” Her Ghost reappeared to heal the burns covering her arms. “That was amazing.”

Yeah.” She chuckled in spite of herself. “Desperation is a good motivator.”

The huntress flexed her fingers, testing the new skin there. Most of her armor had either fallen off or she had to remove it to regain her mobility, replacing it all with refugee clothes she happened to come across during her long walk here. Everything was gone except for the cape she stashed in the sack slung across her back. The white and gold fabric was charred black, beyond all repair, but she couldn't bring herself to throw it away. She lifted herself off the ground and retrieved her gun.

“I'm starting to really miss being able to jump in midair.” Frea grumbled as she climbed the rock face. The falcon patiently waited for her at the top, watching her every move. She wasn't sure how many days had gone by since the Cabal attack, being out in the wild can make one lose track of time. A week maybe, perhaps more.

“Is that bird following us, or are we following it?” Her Ghost asked, hovering in the air around her head.

She finally reached the top of the cliff and looked around. Wherever they were, the weather was warmer, the light snowfall from the mountains turned into a misty rain days ago. The City was merely a distance memory now. Frea's gaze moved over to the bird. It sat on a rock ahead of her, just a short leap away, and it stared with its black eyes. Normally it would have flown off by now when she got this close, but this time it seemed to want something from her. She backed away carefully, prepping herself to make the leap, and then ran forward. Her jump came up too short. The edge of the wet rock grazed her fingertips and she plunged into the valley below.

Thankfully, a lake was there to catch her fall this time. The cold water knocked the wind out of her as she sank below the surface. She didn't go far before a stranger's hand reached in and grabbed her scarf, pulling her free from the water. Frea coughed and gasped when she was back on dry land, the hand that saved her lightly patted her back as she regained her breath.

“Well, looks like we have another Guardian on our hands,” a voice said overhead with a sigh. The huntress looked up to meet the eyes of a woman dressed in a worn poncho. A spiral of tattoos decorated her face and a sniper rifle was holstered to her back. Behind her hustled a group of people, loading scavenged items into jumpships. “Things must be worse than I thought.” The stranger helped Frea to her feet.

“Wha-“

The roaring sound of a Cabal ship echoed over the mountains.

“That's our cue!” The woman turned around and briskly walked away, waving her hand to the others. “Let's go people.”

“Wait, but...who are you? Where are you all going?” Frea stumbled behind her.

“As far away from here as possible.” The stranger glanced up.

Frea followed her gaze. The falcon she had been following for the past week shot out of the sky and came to a graceful landing on the woman's outstretched arm. “That falcon is yours?”

“Name's Hawthorne.” The woman nodded. “This is Louis. Best pilot we got. What about you? Fit to
fly?”

“Yes, definitely.”

“Good. Take this.” Hawthorne tossed her a shotgun. Frea caught it and adjusted her grip, it felt good in her hands. “Time to make yourself useful, Guardian. We’ve got a long flight ahead of us.”

It took them hours to get to their destination, where exactly that was, Frea wasn’t sure. She watched out one of the portholes in Hawthorne’s ship.

“Welcome to the EDZ.” Hawthorne stepped up next to her.

“EDZ?” The huntress asked.

“European Dead Zone.”

Something glittered on the dark horizon and Frea pressed closer to the window. Her Ghost appeared over her shoulder.

“Look! Do you recognize it?” It bounced up and down. “That’s where we’re supposed to go.”

The fallen piece of the Traveler appeared just like in her vision. It was the same gloomy forest, the same mutated trees. Burning blue smoke billowed out from the top of the shard, snuffing out the sunlight.

“That thing?” Hawthorne asked in surprise. “That thing it the reason we call this the Dead Zone. It’s not a place you want to go poking around.”

Frea backed away from the glass and locked eyes with her. “I have to. This shard, or the Traveler itself called out to me, I have to answer it. Or at least try.”

Hawthorne tilted her head, one of her eyebrows raised. “You Guardians are weird.”

She chuckled. “Yeah, we are.”
Reunion

“So this is our new home?” Her Ghost asked, its one eye peering all around.

“For now.”

Frea stepped out of the jumpship's cargo hold into the what Hawthorne called the Farm. The air smelled so clean here compared to the Last City, the sound of birds and crickets drifted from the surrounding forest. The small cluster of barns bustled with people and the occasional Guardian or two. It was almost peaceful if it wasn't for the desolate look on everyone's face. The effects of the attack reached even here.

“Night is coming in, so I suggest waiting for your little trip until tomorrow. You can take one of the tents we have set up behind the hanger.” Hawthorne walked up behind the huntress and placed one of the storage crates she was carrying into a growing pile.

“Thanks for helping us out,” Frea said.

“Don't thank me yet. I still rather you didn't go, but I know that sometimes trusting your gut is the best route so...I won't stop you.” The woman straightened as she wiped her brow. “You see all these refugees? I haven't lost one yet. Don't go being my first.” She gave Frea a quick pat on the back and then walked off in the direction of the large barn.

“She's an interesting character,” Ghost commented.

“Hm…” Frea mumbled. “She seems a bit overprotective.”

A gentle hand landed on the her shoulder. “Don't worry, she'll grow on you eventually.” The huntress turned to meet the gaze of a Warlock Exo, a sad smile spread across his face when they locked eyes. “I'm glad to see you're still alive, Frea,” he said.

“Sain!?” Frea returned the smile, practically jumping for joy. “You made it here! Does that mean the rest of the clan...?”

He folded his arms. “I've heard from a few that have made it here to the Farm, but communications are down across the system, it's difficult to say who is still out there and who isn't.”

“Ah, I see.” Her heart dropped.

With everyone scattered to the winds, trying to gather the entire clan was going to be near impossible. She regretting splitting off from Dex and Psyho at the Tower.

“Frea,” Sain spoke up, grabbing her attention. “We're a hardy bunch, I'm sure everyone is out there surviving like they always do, even without their light. Don't count them out just yet.”

“Yeah, I know.” She sighed. “We've never faced anything like this before, how can I not worry? The Vanguard and our clan are nowhere to be found, I don't even know if Shaxx is-” Her voice caught.

The Warlock's gaze drifted toward the hanger and then moved back to her. Something mischievous seemed to glitter in them. “Why don't you get some rest tonight? You look like you've had a long journey.”
Frea's hand cupped over her mouth as she took a long breath, calming herself. “Yeah, good idea.”

“Have a good night, my friend. Come talk to me by the docks in the morning, okay?”

“I will,” she mumbled.

Not wanting to shed tears in front of the Warlock, Frea whipped around and quickly walked toward the large barn being used as a hanger. She was frustrated and worried, her mind a mess. It felt like she was going to break down any moment. Sleeping it off was her best option for now. It would be a death sentence to go for the Traveler's shard unfocused.

The hanger was eerily quiet as she passed through, most of the lanterns had been snuffed out and everyone retired for the night. Something bright red in the corner of the barn caught Frea's eye and she stopped. The distinct mark of the Crucible decorated the walls of an offshoot room. She carefully stepped over the threshold for a closer look. Weapon parts and pieces of Red Jack frames were scattered all about, waiting for repairs. That wasn't what her gaze settled upon however. Amongst the blood red banners, sat Ana Bray's golden sword. The blade was broken, the orb at the hilt melted by an intense heat, it didn't survive the attack. She had left it with Shaxx after the Hive mission, thinking it would be best to not carry it around so casually, but now it was here. Wrecked maybe, but it still made it to the farm along with the Crucible. That could only mean one thing.

She absentmindedly reached for the sword.

“I wouldn't do that, Guardian. Unless you plan to meet your final death early.”

The huntress froze. That voice. There's no mistaking it. She turned slowly, her eyes moving up to meet his. There Shaxx was in front of her, looking no worse than the day she last saw him. His hand was hovering over the pistol strapped to his thigh, but it immediately dropped when her face came into the light. “Frea?” His voice cracked slightly.

“Shaxx,” she whispered, the tears she'd been holding back started to spill over.

He stepped forward, taking her face in his hands. His thumbs traced over her wet cheeks. “Is this another vexing dream or are you really here?”

“I'm here.” Frea placed her hands over his. “And you're alive. Thank the Traveler.”

“That's my line.” Shaxx's arms wrapped around her waist to pull her into a tight embrace. “I heard the order Zavala gave you during the attack. When the Traveler's light was gone all I could think about was you, alone on that cursed command ship,” he groaned. “I should have made you stay with me, damn it.”

The huntress grasped the sides of his helmet and removed it. Seeing his alluring eyes again after so long made her stomach flutter with butterflies. Slowly, her fingertips danced along his jaw, treasuring him like he was made of glass. “I had to make sure everyone had the time to escape. It may have been fruitless in the end, but at least you all were able to get away.”

His brow furrowed. “You have a knack for getting out of harrowing situations alive, it seems.”

“It's a Hunter thing.”

He chuckled and pulled away. “Sorry for the threat earlier. We've been dealing with bandits lately and some Guardians have turned to desperate measures.”

“What do you mean?” Frea lifted herself to sit on one of the high tables.
Shaxx moved and relit one of the lamps hanging above the room, it casted a warm glow across the wooden walls. “The rookies, those who haven't had their light for long, now are suddenly without it again. And some of them have started stealing from refugees trying to get here. It's deplorable.”

“Are things really that bad?” She frowned.

“Without the Vanguard, the Traveler's light, or any other means to retake the City...we are lost.” He leaned against the table next to her. “I don't know what those who have turned to thievery are planning, but we drove them away from the Farm days ago. They might as well be dead by now.”

The huntress bit her lip nervously. Considering Hawthorne's reaction, she had a feeling Shaxx wasn't going to take this news she was about to present very well. “I'm planning a trip to the shard tomorrow morning.”

“What?!” He spun around so quickly that his Titan mark whipped at her knees. “That shard is in the middle of Fallen territory. I've already lost other Guardians to it. I will not lose you.”

“I have to.” She returned his intense stare. “The Traveler sent me a vision of that shard when I fell-escaped Ghaul's ship. It's my only lead and I believe it's our best shot to getting our home back.”

“But Frea-”

“Shaxx.” Frea intertwined her fingers in his furry mantle and pulled him closer, his hips came to a stop between her legs and his face just an inch in front of hers. His eyes widened in surprise. “I made you a promise, didn’t I? I will always come back to you,” she whispered. “Trust me...please.”

“This isn't about trust.” He rested his head into the crook of her neck with a long sigh, his hot breath washing over her skin. “For nearly two weeks, I was certain you were gone. How can I just watch you run off to face death again?”

“Because it's better than doing nothing. You once told me a Guardian is more than just their light, our experience isn't what makes us great. I have to at least try.”

The Titan looked back up at her with a slightly weary expression. “I suppose if the Traveler did decide to call upon a Guardian to save us all, then I'm not surprised it chose you.”

Frea smiled. The confidence he had in her was inspiring, it made her feel like she could take on the world.

Something bright glinted in his eyes and he closed the distance between them, slowly pressing his lips to hers. It started as a gentle kiss, a touch they hadn't been able to share in awhile, but they soon demanded more of each other. His tongue slipped into her mouth and drove her mind into a frenzy. He was getting frighteningly good at that.

“You're permitted to go tomorrow,” he whispered against her lips. “But you're not leaving my sight tonight.”

Frea woke up to the sound of a rooster crowing to the sunrise. She yawned and rubbed her eyes, careful to not wake the Titan snoozing next to her. They had somehow made it to Shaxx's tent without alerting the entire camp, though a few Guardians gave them curious looks at their passing. They both had their own reputations and seeing them together wasn't too out of the ordinary, but Shaxx absolutely refused to let go of her hand when he led her through the rows of tents. Which probably made for a suspicious sight in the middle of the night.

The huntress sighed and reluctantly started to get up from the thick blankets. That was the best sleep
she had in days, being out in the wilderness with nothing but the cold ground as her bed had worn down on her body, but now she felt rejuvenated.

A large hand crept out from underneath the blanket and pulled her back down into them. In his half awakened state, Shaxx hugged her to his body, his hair tickled at her chin as he buried his face against her collarbone. His fingers moved devilishly across her bare back. The warmth of his skin was so inviting, threatening to lull her back to sleep. She missed this feeling of waking up next to him.

“Leaving so soon?” He grumbled.

“I was planning to get an early start.”

He hugged her tighter. “One more hour.”

Frea lightly laughed and kissed his hair. “One more hour.”
Frea met Sain by the docks that foggy morning. He sat at the fire pit near the edge of the water with three other Guardians. The huntress's heart leapt in her chest when she recognized all of them, it was her usual raid fireteam, but one particular Warlock was missing from the group.

“Hey, everyone.” She waved on her approach.

“Frea!” Kannon leapt up from her spot near Psyho and took Frea by the hands. “You ok? Sain told us about your mission on the Red Legion command ship. How'd you get out of that alive?”

Frea shrugged. “Got lucky, I guess. Survived a fall from the sky and made it out of the City.”

“The Traveler's light goes out and you had a front row seat.” Psyho smirked. “Told you bad luck follows you.”

“Dunno about that, sounds like it was good luck. She is here after all,” Timus remarked as he shifted in his seat, lazily crossing his legs.

The huntress peered around the group. “Where's Dex?” She asked.

All their faces dropped.

“We're not sure.” Sain was the one to break the silence. “No one has heard from him since the Tower fell.”

Frea frowned and gazed down at the ground. The unforgiving tendrils of anxiety began to gnaw at the back of her mind. If Dex died while chasing Ikora, she would never forgive herself for letting him leave her side in the first place.

“Hey.” Kannon squeezed her hands. “Don't worry yourself, we'll find him once we get comms restored.”

“If we get them fixed,” Timus snorted. “Hawthorne has been trying for days. No one has been able to get past the Fallen alive to set up the beacon.”

Kannon shot the Titan a glare.

Frea slipped out of the other huntress's grasp and straightened. They couldn't fight the Fallen without the Traveler's light, and the more Guardians that died trying, the weaker their forces would become. Her mission to the shard was even more important now. “I should get going.”

She turned to leave but Kannon spoke up loudly, stopping her. “You're going to the shard aren't you?”

“Wha-” Frea whipped back around in surprise. The others got up from their seats and stepped up to surround her. It appeared they all knew about her plans already.

“I heard your conversation yesterday with Hawthorne,” Sain said, bowing his head in apology.

“Whatever you guys have to say won't stop me from going.” Frea braced herself for their retort, putting on her sternest face. “Shaxx already tried.”

“Oh, we know.” Psyho laughed and clapped the huntress on the back. “We just wanted to see you
off since we can't go with you.”

“And hopefully send some good vibes your way.” Kannon added with a smile.

“By good vibes, we actually mean weapons.” Timus tossed Frea a belt of grenades. “Those pack a punch, so don't get yourself blown up alright.”

“Also here.” Kannon stepped closer and held out a newly sharpened blade in her fingers. “My favorite knife, make sure you take out some Fallen for me.”

“You guys...” Frea sighed as she gripped the knife, she could feel warm tears build up in the corner of her eyes. “I appreciate this, truly.”

“It's the least we can do.” Sain offered her a smile. “While you're gone, we'll stay here to watch comms for any signs of Dex or the others. Good luck.”

After saying her goodbyes to her team, Frea made her way out to the field by the big barn. The ship Hawthorne had promised her hovered just above the ground, waiting for liftoff. As she crossed by the front of the hanger, she sneeked a quick glance inside. Shaxx was standing with a group of Guardians and Arcite 99-40, reviewing what looked like training plans and patrols for the day. He apparently noticed her gaze, because he suddenly glanced up from the table to meet her eyes, making her stomach knot up from his stare. Once again she was heading toward what could be her final death and neither her or Shaxx knew how things were going to turn out for them in the end. He had faith that she would come out victorious. Frea, however, wasn't as confident. She disliked not knowing what she was getting herself into, anything could be waiting for her in the Dark Forest. Shaxx placed a hand over his heart and nodded his head slightly toward her. Be careful. He seemed to say. She smiled back in return and then climbed into her jumpship. If the Traveler truly did call out to her, then she was going to answer it. For herself, for those she loves, and for the ones who died at the hands of the Red Legion.

“Well this place is creepy.”

Frea materialized from her ship and softly landed in a grassy outcropping overlooking the forest. Decimated buildings from a civilization long gone dotted the treeline and a ruined highway sat crumbling into a deep ravine. From here, she could see the vitiated energy drifting like a black mist on the ground. Her skin itched uncomfortably just by looking at it.

“The shard has been here so long that its light must have been corrupted.” Her Ghost appeared above her shoulder.

“Think we can still get anything out of it?” Frea asked.

“Maybe.”

The huntress stepped closer to the crevice and peered down. The wide gap separated her from the entrance into the forest, she had to jump for it. She backed away a few strides and took a long breath, one shot was all she had. Sprinting forward, she leapt off the broken road and soared to the other side. Her feet landed hard and dislodged a few sections of asphalt, but she made it across. She straightened herself and continued forward. The sunlight dimmed the moment she entered the forest, blocked out by twisted branches and thick fog. Goosebumps formed under her armor from the jarring cold that hit her as she ventured deeper down the worn path. The closer she got to the shard, the more oddities that appeared, rocks lighter than air floated by and the dead silence made her ears ring. Not a single animal dared to come this far into the forest.
Something scurried behind her and she jumped, pulling out her rifle. In the faint light her eyes caught just a brief glimpse of a glimmering figure as it sprinted past a rusted storage container.

“Look out!” Her Ghost called.

Frea ducked and rolled just in time to avoid the arc spear, the blade grazed right over her hood. She got back to her feet and shot at the hidden creature. The bullets disrupted its disguise and the cloak vanished to reveal a snarling Wretch, wearing Fallen house colors she didn’t recognize. It charged again, right into her throwing knife, and collapsed into the grass. The huntress approached it cautiously and tapped its head with the toe of her boot, confirming it was indeed dead.

Her Ghost fluttered over its body, scanning the corpse. “How odd. We've never seen this house.”

“Didn't all the Fallen abandon their houses after we took out the Splicers?” Frea asked.

“Scout reports said they did. But perhaps they merged into something new?” The Ghost's light danced over the purple scarves and paint decorating the Wretch's armor. “House of Dusk.”

“Dusk?” She reloaded her gun. “That's definitely a new one.” Frea froze as a screech erupted from all around them. More Fallen started to pour out of the trees, all of them wearing the same banners. There were way too many for her to fight alone. “Time to go!” She took off running, following her Ghost as it lead her through the maze of trees.

“They're going to catch us!” It yelled.

“I'm aware!” The huntress took out one of the grenades from her belt and was about to pull the pin when she tripped over a chuck of metal sticking out of the mud. She tumbled down the slope into a creek, the chilly water breaking her fall. Recovering quickly, she clenched the pin between her teeth and yanked it out, chucking the grenade into the air as the Fallen clambered down the hill after her.

She dived into the water to avoid the brunt of the explosion, the surface bubbled and steamed from the blast that was a little too close for comfort. Frea resurfaced again with a gasp, nothing was left of the Fallen horde except for bits of armor and ash. “That should buy us some time.” She took a shaky breath to force down the panic throbbing in her chest.

“Frea.” Her Ghost wasn't looking at the carnage. She looked up to follow its line of sight and her jaw dropped. They had landed right next to the shard. It towered high into the air and teemed with power, beckoning them. “I haven't been this close to the Traveler since...” Ghost shuddered.

Frea climbed out of the creek, drenched, but alive. No doubt the Fallen would be back any moment now, they had to hurry. She walked closer to stand in front of the shard, almost the entire surface of it was blackened except for a single crack at the middle. It glowed with a warm light she knew very well, it was the Traveler's power. Her Ghost flew upward towards the opening.

“This is it.” Its voice jittered with excitement as it peered down at the huntress. “Hang on to your hood.”

“Wai-” She couldn't finish before it disappeared into the light. For a few tense seconds, nothing happened, Frea started to grow concerned. Suddenly, the entire shard lit up like the sun and she had to quickly shield her eyes from the brightness. A radiant beam of pure energy focused down the broken surface and then shot out like a cannon to hit her square in the chest, sending her flying backwards into the air. Power surged like liquid fire through her veins. She crashed into a nearby tree trunk and splintered the wood, but she didn't even feel the impact.

“Frea?” Her Ghost drifted over to her as she sat back against the broken branches. She raised her
hands toward the dark sky, watching the sparking light dance across her fingertips. Her arc class was back, but something was off, it seemed stronger. It felt good. “Eyes up, Guardian. The Fallen are back.”

The huntress jumped up from the remnants of the tree with a smirk. She soared into the sky, her triple jump working again, and summoned the Traveler's light into her palms.

The reinforcements didn't realize what hit them until it was too late. Frea fell from the air and landed with the fury of a lightening bolt. The shockwave disintegrated any Fallen unfortunate enough to be standing too close. She straightened and gazed down at her fists. Clenched in them weren't her dual knives, the telling sign of a Bladedancer, instead she held a staff made from pure electricity. Whatever power she took from the shard had changed her abilities forever.

Frea looked back up to lock eyes with a Fallen Captain. He roared at her with swords grasped in his claws and charged forward. She ducked under his blades and twirled her new weapon, slashing at the creature's arm as she dodged. The static discharged from the pole-arm sent the Captain into a frenzy. He twisted and spun, trying to land a hit on the huntress, but she was too fast. She kicked off a rock just as his blade sank into the stone where her feet had been a second before. Flipping around, she grabbed the purple fabric wrapped around his back and slashed the end of her staff across his neck, beheading him.

Her boots splashed in the shallow marshy water as she stared down at the deceased Captain. The arc staff in her hands vanished into nothingness, ready to be used for another day. She rubbed the sweat from her eyes and laughed. Taking down the Fallen was child's play. Not only was her light back, but she was stronger than ever.

“Frea.” Her Ghost reappeared next to her shoulder. “What now?”

“Now.” She smiled. “We get our home back.”
**Bonus: Masquerade**

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*Before the fall of Crota...*

“Festival of the Lost?”

Psyho looked up from her food. “Oh, that's right. This is your first year as a Guardian. I forgot.” The titaness tilted her bowl and loudly shoved the rest of the noodles into her mouth.

Frea couldn't help but feel a little queasy as she watched on.

With a pleased sigh, Psyho slammed her bowl back down on the table and wiped her mouth with her armored fist. “It's sort of a celebration I guess. It's held every year when the weather first starts to turn cold. We do it to honor those who died during that year, by remembering our accomplishments. It's basically a Tower-wide party with masks, sweets, and all the liquor in the world. It's a blast.”

“Sounds...interesting.” Frea raised a brow. Truthfully it sounded weird as hell, but nothing was normal these days.

“Don't be like that. It's awesome. I promise.” Psyho waved at the ramen shop waiter, asking for another bowl of noodles. “The festival is all week long but the opening party is tonight. We're gonna get you a great mask and then you'll see why everyone gets excited. Maybe if we get enough beer into Dex he'll dance with ya.” She winked.

“Dex doesn't think of me like that, Psyho.”

“Oh, well-” The Titan grinned. “maybe you'll find yourself another partner instead. I imagine a lot of Guardians would be elated to dance with the Hunter who took down the Black Garden.”

The huntress softly chuckled and shook her head. “Maybe I'll just skip and do patrols instead.”

She rose out of her seat to leave but Psyho grabbed her wrist and forced her back down. “Oh hell no, I'm not letting you skip out on your first Festival of the Lost.” She pointed a finger in the Hunter's direction. “We've been stuck raiding in that damn vault for the past month. At least take some time for yourself and check it out with the clan tonight. If you don't like it, then you can leave. Easy as that.”

“Fine. But I'm not making out with some random guy alright?”

“That's up to you.” Psyho's laugher boomed throughout the entire restaurant, drawing the attention of the other guests.

Not having much time to acquire an elaborate mask by nightfall, Frea had to settle with something simple. She stared at herself in her mirror as she positioned the gold half-mask over her face. The nose formed into a small beak, resembling an owl, but it didn't really do much to actually hide her features. After adjusting her hood over her head, she examined her work. Despite her adventures over the year, she hadn't collected much armor. Usually she stuck with one set until it broke, only replacing it as necessary. Though now, she wished she had kept the nicer pieces for occasions like these.
She straightened herself and smiled sadly at her reflection, her face looked tired.

Lately, Frea had been obsessed with doing absolutely everything she could get her hands on. Strikes, raids, and patrols. The last couple of months have passed in a blur and she couldn't even remember the last time she took a break. Even sleep eluded her for weeks at a time. She knew Psyho was trying to get her to relax for at least one night. But after what she witnessed in the Black Garden, even one night seemed impossible. The Darkness was coming and she had to be powerful enough to fight them.

“Yo, Frea.” Psyho hollered from the other side of the door. “You done yet?”

The huntress jumped. She quickly readjusted her cape and checked the buckles on her armor.

Coming!

Frea's breath caught in her throat when the plaza came into view. The Traveler was shining as bright as moonlight in the sky like usual, but something new was covering its surface. An intricate emblem representing the Festival of the Lost was projected over it, stretching out like a shadow over the orbed surface. And it wasn't the only beautiful light decorating the stone walls that night. Burning purple candles covered nearly every table and kiosk. Multicolored lanterns in the shape of engrams were strung up and hung across the banners in the plaza. They formed a ring in the middle, where Guardians were already dancing together to upbeat music. Masks of all kinds made everyone unrecognizable, some were plain like Frea's while others were animated with wisps and blinking eyes. It was a curious sight to see.

“What do you think?” Psyho leaned down to judge Frea's reaction. The titaness's mask was a giant jittering jack o' lantern that looked rather Hive-like.

“I wasn't expecting this at all honestly.” The huntress laughed.

“Good, this would be a weird thing to expect.” A voice sounded from behind.

They turned to see a Warlock donning a mask in the shape of a mini Traveler. He reached up and pulled it off to reveal his face.

“Dex! Nice mask, buddy. When'd you get here?” Psyho asked.


Psyho downed the glass in one go. Frea was more careful and took small sips, whatever alcohol was in the drink burned like lava down her throat. It wasn't easy for Guardians to get drunk because of their fast recovery systems, usually large amounts of liquor taken in a short time was the only way for them to even feel a slight buzz.

“So, Dex…” Psyho skipped to the Warlock's side. “Up for a dance?”

He grimaced a little and stepped away, taking a big swig of his drink as he did so. “I'll need like 20 more of these before I even step foot on that floor.”

“Killjoy.” The titaness pouted and hooked Frea by the arm. “Then I'll just have to find Frea a partner who isn't out of touch with their sensitive side.”

“What? Wait-” Dex couldn't finish before they disappeared into the crowd, his voice drowned out by the music.
“Psyho,” Frea grumbled as she was pulled along with the Titan. “You really don't have to do this. I can just dance by myself or maybe find someone else from the clan.”

“Nonsense! Either I'm going to find you a suitable partner or call Kannon and we're all gonna dance together. But first...more drinks.” She made a sudden turn, making Frea trip over her own feet.

The huntress stumbled out of Psyho's grasp and bumped into another Guardian. Heavily armored hands caught her by the shoulders, stopping her fall.

“Ah, sorry,” Frea said and looked up.

The person that helped her was a massive Titan. He wore a basic set of grey armor and a mask depicting an animated flaming blue skull.

“Don't worry about it.” The skull's mouth moved along with the Titan talking, which Frea found a little disconcerting. Something seemed a bit off with his voice, like the mask changed his tone as well.

“Frea!” Psyho came up to join them but her jaw dropped when she saw the other Titan. “Holy Traveler, you're a big dude.”

He chuckled. “I get that a lot.”

Frea and Psyho exchanged a glance. That was when the huntress noticed the mischievous glimmer in her friend's eyes.

“Actually, my fellow Titan.” Psyho stepped up to the Titan, patting him hard on the back. “My friend here was looking for a dance partner. Any chance you'll like to volunteer?”

“Psyho-” Frea started.

“Actually.” The flaming skull smiled as his gaze moved back to Frea. “I was already on my way over to ask the lovely huntress for a dance.”

“What? Really?”

“Only if you want to, of course.” The Titan bent into a short bow and reached out his upturned hand.

She stared at his palm and then looked back at Psyho. The stranger didn't give her any bad vibes but that didn't mean she wasn't on her guard from his sudden invitation.

The titaness gave her a thumbs up. “Go for it. If you need anything, then you only have to call.” Psyho then whipped back to the other Titan, her face turning serious. “And if you do anything she doesn't like, skull face, then I'll be coming for you. You hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” he responded.

Frea hesitantly placed her hand in his and he walked her out onto the dance floor. The music changed to something slower, quiet enough for them to talk over.

“You sure your boyfriend won't be jealous?” He asked as he slowly turned to face her. His free hand wrapped around her waist and he tugged her close enough for their chest plates to click against each other.

Blood rushed to her face, close contact was not something she was used to. “Boyfriend?”
“The Warlock you were with earlier, he's glaring over here right now.”

She quickly glanced over his shoulder in the direction he indicated and there was Dex, staring just as the Titan said. The expression on his face was blank, but Frea knew that look. He wasn't happy.

“He's not my boyfriend, and he didn't want to dance so here I am,” she commented.

“I see.” The Titan started to sway to the tune. Frea clutched the armor on his back and tried her best to keep up with his lead. She didn't know how to dance, but somehow he made it easy to follow. “You have good friends. Cherish every moment you have with them. You never know how long it'll last.”

“Wise words from a flaming skull.” She smirked.

He only laughed in reply.

They danced for some time in silence. Even when the music switched to another song, he didn't let her go. The Titan moved with surprising grace as he twirled Frea and pulled her back into his arms. It wasn't long before she started to get the hang of it, and soon she was enjoying herself. The soft beat of the music and flickering candlelight made her feel so relaxed that she barely noticed the people around them. And even the stranger, the way he carefully handled her with respect proved that he was no threat. Though, the interest he seemed to show for the huntress was not lost to her.

“It's a nice night.” She finally broke the silence.

“Indeed.” The skull blinked. “A shame we don't hold these festivals in the City anymore. The trees have probably turned colors by now.”

“Turned colors?”

The Titan tilted his head. “You haven't seen autumn in the Cosmodrome yet have you?”

“No, I was only reborn last winter.” Frea stared up at him, wishing she could judge his expressions instead of the weird animations from his mask.

“They turn from green to red, yellow, and even purple. Then they eventually fall off for the winter. If you ever decide to take a break from raiding the Vex, then I recommend checking it out.”

“Wait,” she said, growing suspicious. “How do you know I've been raiding the Vex?”

He chuckled, the skull bounced to mimic him. “I don't mean any ill intent. Everyone knows of the Guardian who took down the Black Garden solo and raided the Vault of Glass. You may be masked but that cape you wear is recognizable from anywhere.”

“Let me guess.” She frowned. “You invited me to dance because of your curiosity?”

“No. My curiosity was already sated awhile ago.” His hand at her waist squeezed as he stepped forward and dropped her into a low dip, catching the huntress off guard. She reflexively grabbed his forearm. “I just wanted to spend some time with you. You’ve been quite busy lately, I had to get creative to get your attention.” He pulled her back up into standing position. The skull's expression shifted into a wide grin, he was definitely smirking under it.

Frea wasn't the type to swoon, but her heart throbbed loudly anyway.

“W-who are you?” She asked.
“Excuse me.” He couldn't answer before a discontented looking Dex shoved himself between them, interrupting their conversation. “Mind if I cut in?” He shot the stranger a challenging stare.

“Not at all. It's about time I leave anyway.” The Titan stepped around, ignoring Dex, and gently took hold of the huntress's fingers. He pressed the back of her hand to the teeth of his mask where his lips would be. “It's been a pleasure. I'll see you around, Frea.”

Dex and Frea watched the stranger vanish into the crowd, the blue flames emitting from his mask became a blur amongst the soft glow of the lanterns.

“I can take care of myself, Dex.” Frea said, not hiding the annoyance in her tone.

“Yeah, I know. He was getting rather cozy with you, seemed fishy.” He shrugged.

The huntress sighed and removed her mask. Something about that Titan reminded her of someone, his mannerisms and confidence, the way he carried himself, and even his voice if she looked beyond the tone manipulation from the mask he wore. She laughed at herself. There was no way he was who she thought. Gatherings like these didn't seem like his style, but then again she didn't know him that well yet.

“I think it's time for another drink.” Dex spoke up.

“Agreed.”

Everyone took notice of the Titan that pushed his way through the crowds. It was hard not to when his towering presence alone demanding them to move out of his way. He finally entered the darkened hallway leading toward the Tower offices and sighed. Being in large groups of people always made him irritated, the noise drove his heightened senses into overload. He didn't understand how everyone else could stand it. But this night, the headache was worth it.

His relief didn't last long when he bumped into the Hunter Vanguard. The Exo held his infamous Eris Morn mask and a drink in his hand. He looked the Titan up and down, a grin slowly appeared across his face when he recognized the stranger.

“Well, look at you. I thought you hated these parties, Shaxx.” Cayde chuckled.

The Titan reached up and took off his skull mask. “Sometimes even I like to let loose on occasion.”

“Yeah, I can see that.” The Exo crossed his arms. “Something good must have happened too. I don't think I've seen you in such a fine mood since you beat Saladin during that Iron Banner years ago.”

Shaxx glanced back toward the crowd with a slight smile. “You can say that.”

Chapter End Notes

I was so sad we didn't get a Festival of the Lost this year.
“Incoming call.” Ghost hovered over the ship controls.

Frea stepped through the low doorway into the cockpit, adjusting her armor. “Patch them in,” she said.

“Guardian!” Hawthorne's voice blasted over the comm speakers, so loudly that the huntress jumped. “Still kicking I hope?”


The other side of the line was quiet for a time. “Wait, seriously? Your weird little vision actually paid off?”

“Looks like it. So, are you calling me just to chat or do you need something?”

“Ah! That's right.” The distinct sound of a clap could be heard over the comm. “Since you've got your fancy space powers back, it would be a great help if you could do something for me. I'd consider it a personal favor both to myself and to the Farm.”

“There's no need, Hawthorne. I'm always happy to help. Is it about the downed comm network?” Frea asked.

“Exactly. We have the location for the last beacon picked out but it's right behind Fallen territory. I can get in, but getting out is the real problem. That's where you come in.”

“Right. Clear out an entire Fallen hideout by myself...easy,” the huntress said, her tone dripping heavy with sarcasm.

“You're a Guardian, aren't suicidal missions your usual forte?” Hawthorne chuckled.

Frea crossed her arms with a smirk. “We try to avoid throwing ourselves at death. It isn't really a pleasant experience.”

“Well, seeing how you managed to get through the Dark Forest on your own. I think you'll do just fine,” Hawthorne continued. “I sent a contact into the EDZ a few hours ago. He's a good guy, great shot, he'll get you up to speed on our plans. I'll meet you at the beacon, alright?”

“I'll be there.” Frea reached over the clicked off the comm radio. She sunk into the pilot chair with a long sigh as she rubbed the tiredness from her eyes.

“We won't be getting much rest these next few days, will we?” Her Ghost drifted over her shoulder.

“We'll rest when Ghaul is dead,” she curtly replied.

The Ghost stared down at her with its unwavering eye, studying her expression. “I realize you're worried over Dex but don't let the desire for revenge cloud your judgment. You have a tendency to obsess-”

“I know!” She snapped.

Revenge or not, she wanted that Cabal bastard dead. She now had the power to do so, but getting to him was going to be tricky. Asking others to join her wasn't an option, the Guardians already lost too
much to the Red Legion. She was in this alone.

Hawthorne's coordinates brought the huntress to an old ruined cathedral sitting in the middle of 
Trostland, a small town well beyond its prime. Maybe during the Golden Age the streets here were 
bustling with people, but now only Cabal and Fallen dared to venture though the decrepit buildings. 
The majority of the town was swallowed by a landslide some time ago, making the single highway 
leading toward the outskirts vanish off the steep cliffside. 
Frea materialized next to the church and ducked inside to avoid the Dregs patrolling the surrounding 
street. She looked up at the stone structure in awe. Despite the years not being kind to the cathedral, 
it was still beautiful. Soft sunlight poked through the stained glass windows, not even the harsh 
storms could dull the vibrantly colored scenes depicted in them. She wished she could have seen this 
place before the collapse.

“Up here!” A gravely voice echoed down from the rafters. The huntress's gaze shifted to see an older 
man waving from the highest window in the church. He was dressed warmly for the elements and a 
long sniper was gripped in hands. “You'd better get up here fast or one of those Fallen will spot you.” His tone was lined with a thick accent. The stairway that once lead to his perch had long been 
demolished, now replaced with improvised scaffolding. Frea cautiously climbed over the rickety 
wood, not quite trusting the structure, it creaked with the addition of her weight but held in place. 
Once she neared to top, a helping hand reached down to her. She took it and the scout pulled her up 
and over the final threshold with ease.

“Thanks.” Frea dusted the wood chips off her clothes. “You must be the contact I'm looking for.” 

“That I am.” The man offered her a weary smile. “Devrim Kay-the Eighth-at your service. City 
militia, back when there was a City, but now I help out my dear friend Suraya Hawthorne. Though I 
must admit, when she told me about the Guardian who returned from the Dark Forest I imagined 
someone-” He looked her up and down. “Bigger.”

“I'm Frea.” She rested her hands on her hips. “Size doesn't matter when you have a gun.” 

Devrim's eyes widened slightly by her retort, but his smile steadily turned into a grin. “Cheeky. I see 
why Suraya likes you so much.”

“Really? She's treated me like a lost child since finding me out in the wilderness.”

He laughed. “Yes, she does that with everyone. Always playing the mother hen, Guardian or not. 
But anyway-” He raised a steaming mug filled with tea to his lips. “More important matters. We need 
to finish the network for the comm system so those seeking refuge know that the Farm is a safe 
place. Hawthorne already went ahead to the salt mine to secure the last beacon, but we've run into a 
problem.”

“More problems other than the Fallen?” Frea asked.

“Seems so. The signal isn't reaching as far as we hoped. Since you're going in anyway, then you can 
get this booster to Hawthorne. Should solve our little conundrum, in theory.” Devrim bent down to 
pick a disc shaped object off the nearby table and tossed it to the huntress. She caught it and turned 
the tiny device in her hands, inspecting the delicate wires.

“Clear the hideout, get to the beacon, retrieve Hawthorne. Anything else?”

“One more thing.” He held out another mug of tea, the pleasant vapor rising from the warm liquid 
looked inviting. “You're going to need this.”
Frea hated being underground.

She approached the old elevator at the entrance of the abandoned mine. Despite being under the surface for nearly an hour, she had yet to see a single sign of the Fallen. Her skin prickled with worry as she pressed the rusty call button.

“Frea.” Her Ghost called in her head. “I don't mean to be pessimistic, but do you recall the last time we used an elevator like this?” Immediately she knew what mission it referred to. The one they ran for Cayde-6 over a year ago, when they had to ascend an old colony ship in the Cosmodrome. The lift they were forced to use was no longer in working condition, it took one nasty death for her to realize that.

The huntress took a step back just in time. The deafening screech of metal followed soon after as the cage broke off its rail and came crashing down with such force that it warped the entire elevator shaft. Frea reached up to wipe the salt dust blown up from the clamor off her visor. “Any other routes up, Ghost?”

“There's another elevator at the back of the mine, farther down,” it answered.

“Great,” she grumbled, unhappy with having to go deeper underground.

Somehow the Fallen hadn't been alerted to Frea's presence yet, even after her ordeal with the elevator. It was doubtful that would last for much longer. She crept along the cavern wall bordering a pit so deep her stomach lurched whenever she kicked a pebble out of place. The stones would fall so far down that the sound of them landing didn't reach her ears. The occasional Shanks that floated by on menial tasks started to grow in numbers the closer she got to the bottom. A clue that the Fallen were amassed just ahead.

The huntress finally reached the main mineshaft and peeked around a rusty crate. The Fallen were everywhere, but worst of all they were between her and the elevator.

“There are snipers,” her Ghost chimed.

She moved her gaze higher to the two Vandals posted on the upper levels. Sneaking around wasn't going to work this time.

“Get a scan of the elevator and call the cage down, hopefully this one will actually work,” she whispered as she checked her ammo reserves.

“What are you going to do?” Ghost asked.

Frea snapped the clip to her auto rifle closed. “I'm going to make sure the Fallen don't want to come back.”

The moment her Ghost blinked out of existence, the huntress went into action. Her arcbolt grenade took out the closest group of Dregs as she leapt out from behind the crate. She rolled at the end of her fall, startling a Wretch, and gunned it down with a rain of bullets. Now the Fallen knew she was there.

She ducked under one of the high hanging walkways lining the mine to avoid the red dotted sights of the snipers. With a triple jump, she took hold of the metal raling and grabbed a Vandal by its purple vesture, yanking the creature down to its death and using the momentum from the maneuver to lift herself up at the same time. Tilting her body to the side, she avoided a bullet from the other Vandal and launched her knife into its head. Its body crumpled into a heap and slide over the side of the
grating, landing just in front of the last remaining Fallen, the oversized Servitor looked up at Frea with a whirling hiss. She unholstered her gun, but the oversized eyeball didn't plan to go down easy like its brethren. It shot a void projectile at the chains holding the walkway to the cavern ceiling, dislodging the anchors and bringing the structure down along with the huntress. Frea cursed as she lost her footing.

The shroud of dust kicked up from the metal colliding with the stone floor obscured all vision in the cave for a few tense minutes. The Servitor slowly moved over the wreckage, confident that it had killed the singular Guardian. But just as it approached the center of the destruction, a knife shot out and stabbed it directly in its bright purple eye. The Fallen floated backwards in surprise, pulling the huntress still gripping her blade out from the broken walkway. Ignoring the pain in her shoulder from the fall, Frea grabbed the Servitor with her other hand and wrenched her knife free. Then she returned it again, over and over, she stabbed the creature in its eye until the light inside it no longer glowed. She kicked herself free of the dead creature and sat back into the dirt. Her head throbbed with her aching heartbeat and she was pretty sure her shoulder was dislocated, but she did it. The Fallen were gone.

“Frea.” Her Ghost drifted over to her from the shadows. “Hold still.”

Its warm light enveloped her body, healing the damage and her weariness. She gingerly lifted herself off the ground with a sigh as she removed her helmet. Her entire armor set was wrecked, not a single piece without a crack, it definitely wasn't made to withstand a Guardian's task.

“How's the elevator coming along?” She asked her Ghost.

“Ready and waiting. Thankfully this one won't try to kill you,” it replied.

The sunlight burned her eyes when the elevator door opened to the outside. The fresh air was a welcome change, Frea had a feeling she'll be tasting salt for the next week now.

“You made it!” Hawthorne cheerily greeted. “Louis owes me money.”

The huntress handed over the signal booster with her eyebrow raised. “You made a bet with your bird?”

Hawthorne smirked at her own joke, but didn't feel the need to elaborate. “Let's see if this works, shall we?” She pushed the disc into the beacon and started to tap away at the controls. Frea crossed her arms as she watched on. “Now, if I read the manual correctly...” A strange look crossed the woman's face. “There's an incoming message already.”

That caught Frea's attention.

“Guardians.” A voice cut through the comm system. She recognized it immediately to belong to Commander Zavala, though he sounded strained. “The City is lost. If there is any light left in the system, we rally on Titan. Be brave.”

“Zavala's alive!” Frea's Ghost bobbed in the air next to her. “If we leave now-”

The sound of Hawthorne slamming her hand over the beacon controls silenced the Ghost. “You are not going to Titan!” She commanded. “We have refugees coming in, the Red Legion on one side and the Fallen on the other.” Her arms waved out toward the horizon.

Frea frowned. “I have to retake the City.”

“Your City is gone!” Hawthorne yelled.
Something snapped in the huntress's head. Anger, irritation, confusion...she wasn't sure which. “I will be back, Hawthorne.” It was a struggle to keep her tone level and calm. “And I will not be alone.”

Hawthorne turned away for a moment as if considering Frea's words, but when she looked back she had venom in her gaze. “You'll know where to find me.” With that, she grabbed her sniper and left without bothering a second glance back.

Frea watched Hawthorne's figure vanish against the lowering sun.

“That was strange,” her Ghost said. The huntress combed a hand through her hair, trying to ease the headache growing in her head. “Are you okay?”

“Not really,” she replied and peered up at her Ghost. Its little light stared back at her, its thoughts unreadable. “Let's go back to the Farm, we'll leave in the morning.”

The sun was just beginning to set when Frea returned to the Farm. She needed to stock up and replace her worn down gear before the mission to Titan. The minimal protection the refugee armor offered wasn't enough anymore, even by Hunter standards. She already knew just the person who could help her out.

Her feet brought her to the Crucible room in the hanger. The barn was busier than before, as was the rest of the Farm, more survivors were hustling around, tending to their errands for the day. She wondered if the comm system was already at work, bringing in new refugees every minute. The Guardians she passed watched her intently, the expressions on their faces were blank but something new was brimming behind their empty stares. Expectations. Hope. Jealously. They could sense the Traveler's light inside her.

The pressure wasn't anything new to Frea. She was given the same look before when her fireteam went after Oryx. At the time, the Taken were quickly becoming a threat to the City and failure wasn't an option for her clan. But now, this feeling was almost unbearable. All their eyes were on her only, burning holes into her skull. She promised Hawthorne that she would bring back the Vanguard, but could she really do it by herself? One mistake was all it took to make everything go crashing down.

The huntress quickly stepped inside the Crucible room to dodge her fellow Guardians' glares. A rush of disappointment swallowed her hopes when she noticed only Arcite 99-40 was present in the room. The frame glanced up upon her entrance.

“Good evening, Hive-bane,” it greeted.

She gave it an awkward wave. “Is Shaxx around?”

Arcite tilted it's horned head. “Lord Shaxx stepped away quite some time ago. I believe he might be around the common area.”

“Thanks.” Frea quickly pivoted and walked out of the barn, keeping her gaze lowered to the ground.

She easily spotted his brightly adorned armor amongst the crowd gathered at the fire pit by the docks. A group of refugee children sat at Shaxx's feet, all looking up at the Titan with shimmering eyes, while the other onlookers surrounded the fire. He was in the middle of one of his many stories, an exciting one judging by his unrestrained attempts at mimicking a fight with some invisible enemy. A voluminous laughter erupted from the crowd and Frea moved closer, straining her ears to hear more clearly.

“I pierced the Ahamkara's heart with my blade, charged with the energy from the storm cloud
overhead.” Shaxx made a tight fist as if he was holding the sword. “The beast fell out of the air with such fury that it crushed the Fallen hoard chasing Zavala, leaving only a vast crater behind.”

A round of clapping came from the crowd.

Frea leaned against one the pillars supporting the hanger barn. Shaxx used to tell her stories like this during their training days in the Crucible when she was still just a rookie. His tales of adventures were inspiring, though sometimes hard to believe. The way he told them however, always made listening to them a joy, he had a natural talent for storytelling. His helmet turned ever so slightly in her direction and she realized he already knew she was there. With one beckoning finger and a small smile, she motioned for him to follow her.
Memorial

Arcite was already gone when Frea returned to the Crucible room. Her gaze landed on the desk cluttered with scout reports. Curious, she picked up one of the papers and studied it. The Guardians were trying to keep to normal patrols as best they could, even without their numbers and power. The Farm's remote location has proven useful so far, but it still needed protection from bandits and Fallen. It was the only place they could call home for now, maybe forever.

“Hawthorne already believes Commander Zavala abandoned her and the refugees.” Her Ghost worriedly bobbed in the air, casting light across the shadowy room. “Now that we’re leaving…”

“We could stay and assist, but that would only help in the short term.” Frea set down the report. “If the Commander is truly trying to set up a counteroffensive on Titan, taking down the Red Legion will save them all and get our City back. Hawthorne might mean well, but not everyone can survive out in the wild like this forever.”

Heavy footsteps from behind signaled Shaxx's entrance, making her Ghost vanish again. The huntress nearly jumped out of her skin when his horned helmet suddenly flew into her line of sight. It skidded across the table, sending papers and tablets scattering everywhere. She didn't get the chance to turn around before warm arms wrapped around her, squeezing her tightly. That gentle smell of pine she'd come to enjoy so much surrounded her like a thick blanket against the cold. Her stiff muscles naturally started to ease.

“I was only gone for a few days.” She smiled.

“Few days too long,” he purred against her ear, sending a shiver down her neck.

The room they were in was tucked in the far corner of the hanger barn, but it wasn't really the spitting image of privacy. Outside of Frea's inner circle in her clan, and maybe a certain observant Hunter Vanguard, no one else knew of her and Shaxx's relationship. They tried their best to keep it under wraps just for the sake of simplicity, so this was bold, even for him.

“Did something happen?” Frea fidgeted in his grasp, making herself enough room to twist around and look at him. His face didn't betray any emotion except for his eyes, which gave away his uneasiness.

He shifted slightly, his hands moving to rest on the small of her back. “I ran into Hawthorne earlier.”

“Oh?” She swallowed hard. This wasn't going to be good.

“Oh.” Shaxx repeated, his pitch dropping low.

Frea steeled herself. “I have to go. This won't end until we have the City back.”

“I know. You're the only person who can fight for us now, but even so I still worry.” Shaxx buried his face into her scarf, his voice just a whisper. “I've lived and died countless lifetimes, seen more battles than I've bothered to count.” He lifted his head back up to meet her eyes. “Nothing frightens me now, except for…”

A world without you.

The Titan faltered for just a second, unwilling to finish the sentence. His eyebrows knitted together in frustration. “I want to go with you, Frea.”
“Shaxx,” she started.

“I don’t need my light to fight, my gun arm is still just as deadly.” He continued, hardly listening.

“Shaxx!” The huntress stood on her tiptoes and cupped his face to draw his attention back to her. “You’re all that remains of the Tower for the Guardians here. They need support and leadership. They need you. Please-” Her gaze fell downward to hide the tears blurring her vision. “I’ve already lost one important person because of my failure to convince him to stand down. I can't lose you too.”

He embraced her harder against his chest. And she cried.

Frea never cried so hard before, all the pent up anxiety and anger from the past few days came out as muffled sobs against Shaxx’s mantle. He patiently patted her hair until she calmed down. After what felt like hours, the tears dried up and she took a long shaky breath. “Sorry. You must be tired of seeing me like this,” she mumbled.

The Titan was quiet at first. He bent down and kissed her wet cheeks, making Frea flinch with surprise. A bittersweet smile eased into his stoic features. “What kind of man would I be if I ran whenever the woman I loved cried?” His fingers gently stroked the smooth skin under her eyes, drying them. Tender words were a rare thing to come from Shaxx. He was a man of action after all. However, when he did use them, they made the huntress’s heart flutter with joy. She unwittingly leaned into his palm, eyes closed from the welcoming warmth of his touch.

Unable to resist, Shaxx kissed her again. His lips just carefully brushed against hers. He held himself back on the night of their reunion a few days ago. Even on that dark evening he could tell she was exhausted from her journey, he didn't want to push her. But now, the Titan wasn't so sure he could do the same again. His resolve crumbled when she pulled at his armor, forcing him to step so close that their legs tangled. They would have fallen over if it wasn't for the table he now had her trapped against.

He coaxed her mouth open with his tongue and dived deeper, earning a soft whimper from the huntress. That sound she made only for him, he craved more of it. His hand lightly gripped her hair and pulled her head back enough to expose her neck. She nearly cried out when he suckled the delicate skin there.

“Shaxx,” Frea breathed. “Someone might come.”

He didn’t care. His hands crept to the strappings of her gear and started to undo the buckles, not that he had much to fumble with.

“This armor is a mess,” he grumbled, throwing the pieces he removed off to the side.

She laughed. “I was planning to ask if you had a spare set.”

“Good, I don’t have to worry about ruining anything then.” His voice dipped lower, almost predatory. With one last jolt, he dropped her pants to the ground and lifted her onto the table. The cool wood felt like ice against her bare skin. Frea was eye level with him now, one of his hands rested against her thigh, the other he brought to his mouth. “If you have to scream.” He clenched an armored finger between his teeth, slowly pulling off the glove with a suggestive smirk. “Then kiss me.”

Her curiosity to ask why melted away the moment his warm hand cupped the apex between her legs. The huntress's entire body clenched up when his fingers started to toy with her. She gripped his shoulder armor, desperate to not let her yowls of pleasure echo through the room, but he was unforgiving. He merely played at her entrance, enticing and driving every one of her senses wild with ecstasy without actually delving into her core. His infuriatingly light stroking was enough to
bring her to the edge but not to tip her over. It was torturous. Frea's muscles hummed with desire as she cupped the Titan's face in her hands. She kissed him again, teasing him in the same way he was doing to her. She knew he wanted her to beg for more, but she wasn't the type to easily bend to anyone's will. Her tongue flitted along his jawbone, following the lines of his neck. Unlike her, he was still fully fitted in his heavy armor, making it a challenge to entice him further.

With a sly smile, Frea inched her fingers into the thin crevasse of his chest plate and found purchase beneath it. Shaxx twitched at her touch, rewarding her with a low growl from his throat. He started to grow rougher, more needy as his hand left her warmth to undo his belt.

The sound of loud voices outside made them both jump. A group of refugees were discussing dinner plans only a few feet away from the door. It wouldn't take much noise for them to notice the two Guardians holed up inside the room next to them.

Frea's face burned hot with embarrassment. Things were just getting good, she didn't want to stop, but getting caught with her pants quite literally down wasn't exactly an option either. She locked eyes with Shaxx, expecting him to be thinking the same thing. However, he lifted a finger to his lips to hush her and instantly she knew what he was about to do.

“Hold on.” Her unsteady whisper faltered when his fiery arousal entered her. She was so ready for him that he buried himself to the base in one single movement. Frea cupped a hand over her mouth to stifle her moan. He was much harder than before, so much so that it felt like he could break her in two. “You're enjoying this, aren't you?”

He chuckled. “You are as well, you've never been this we-” She closed her fingers over his mouth to stop his obscene comment, earning another soft laugh from the Titan. So many emotions were swirling in her head at the moment, desire, fear of getting exposed, and the excitement of it all were intermingled into one raging fire. She couldn't decide what to focus on. Shaxx kissed her lightly on the temple, drawing her attention back to him. “Look at me. Don't think of anything else,” he whispered.

His hips started to move against her, going agonizingly slow to ensure she felt every inch of his girth, but the huntress couldn't stand his teasing any longer. She urgently matched his movements and he hissed with delight.

The Titan grabbed her wrists and pushed her back against the table, pinning her small frame with his weight. His patience at its end, he pounded into her harder, making her back arch with every thrust. When the soft fabric covering her chest pressed against his armor he found himself missing the feeling of her slick skin against his, so instead he made do with tasting every ounce of flesh he could reach. Her hands, her cheeks, her lips, he could kiss her for hours. The way she nibbled at his bottom lip set his loins ablaze.

Frea's hips suddenly bucked upward as she shuddered around him, sending Shaxx spiraling to his own climax. He bent over the huntress with a pleased sigh. How desperately he wanted to continue, but the chatty people still outside his door were grinding on his last nerve.

“Never thought there would be a day where I'd actually miss being stuck in that damn Tower,” he said.

Frea held back a laugh. “How funny, considering how happy you were to leave your office whenever you had the chance.”

“That was because...” Shaxx frowned, stopping whatever thought he had going through his mind. He pulled away and helped the huntress off the table. “There's some armor sets packed away on my ship you can have, at least I can make sure you're prepared for whatever awaits you on Titan.” He turned and started for the doorway, leaving Frea's curiosity unsatisfied.
“Are you not going to finish that first sentence?” She asked.

He froze, his head rotating just a degree to reveal the small smile on his lips. “Maybe another time.”

The huntress walked the path through the Farm toward the docks, the one thing she still kept from the Tower gripped in her hand. The other Guardians had set up a memorial against the wall of the main house facing the ocean. The woodwork was riddled with pictures of missing people and keepsakes rescued from the Last City. The sun vanished under the horizon hours ago, the only light came from the deserted fire pit and the few candles placed at the bottom of the shrine. Frea hefted the makeshift sack off her new shoulder armor and cut away the string, revealing the blackened cape inside. She pulled it out and spread the material wide in her hands. The gold embroidery glistened brightly in the candlelight despite the damage, the wolf emblem still as recognizable as ever. Just the sight of her favorite cape in tatters made her heart clench painfully. The material barely held together in her fingers, now a reminder of her burned home.

“Ghost,” she muttered.

The little light popped into the darkness next to her. “Yes?”

“What's the word from the clan's comms?”

The Ghost stayed quiet for longer than necessary, sensing her concern. “No news on Dex, I'm afraid.”

The huntress sighed. She had to focus on the task at hand. Get the Vanguard back and take out Ghaul. Nothing else matters, yet all she could think about was watching Dex jump into the unknown after Ikora. The guilt on her conscious felt like it was drowning her.

“For those who lives were cut too short.” Frea closed her eyes as she tightly cupped the cape in her hands in prayer. The smell of singed fabric irritated her nose. “I will make the Red Legion pay ten fold for everything they did to us.”

She pinned the cloak up on the memorial, the torn trim caught in the gentle breeze, spreading dancing shadows across the wall. Backing away, the huntress admired her work. Shaxx supplied her with a set of light armor, well-fitted and ready for battle. Her new cape drifted to the ground off her back, gleaming in the familiar snow white color she always wore. Gold thorns decorated the hem and long fur crested the neckline. It was a cape from one of the first Iron Banners he told her. Though, Frea couldn't help but notice how perfectly it matched her usual setup. She was quite sure Banner armor didn't normally come in white. Clipping her helmet in place, she spun away from the shrine and made her way to the hanger.
Frea materialized out of her jumpship and landed on one of the many barges spread across the entirety of Titan. Saturn’s largest moon, every surface of the satellite was covered by immense oceans, the atmosphere able to support life. Once it allowed for colonies during the Golden Age to build a vast city towering over the stormy waves, though now those buildings were nothing but shells of the past. The ship suddenly rocked to the side, nearly knocking the huntress off her feet. She crouched to the ground to steady herself and clicked her helmet into place. Falling into these rough waters would be deadly, even for her.

"Vanguard fleet." Her Ghost expanded next to her as it spoke, honing in on the comm network in the area. "Guardian Hunter on approach, we received your beacon and we’re ready to join the fight." For a moment nothing happened. Frea worriedly chewed on her lip. Maybe something happened to them, she should have gotten here sooner. The breath she was holding came out in a shudder when a voice finally came through the line.

"Guardian, this is Zavala. It's too late. The Hive have overrun Titan, I was wrong to bring us here."

"Commander!" Despite the regret and sadness lining Zavala's tone, Frea was overjoyed to hear he was still alive at least. She hoped the rest of the fleet was as well. "We're here to help," she said.

"Frea?" The Titan responded, surprised by her sudden appearance. "No! I've lost too many lightless Guardians trying to secure this moon. We cannot defeat the Hive."

"That's no problem then, I have my light back." She smiled.

A pause. "What?" He spoke in a mere whisper. "Impossible."

"Pardon my intrusion." A new voice cut into the line. It was female, belonging to someone Frea didn't know. "Guardian, this is Deputy Commander Sloane. As you know, we have a plan but that station needs to get up and running for us to deploy it. We need access to the control center. If the light really is with you, send the Hive back to hell."

"And Frea," Zavala added. "Please, be careful."

They sent the huntress a barrage of coordinates to the control station and last known locations of Hive nests. It wasn't far from where she landed, but the docks between her and it were going to be a problem. Many of the structures were steadily sinking, becoming victims to the hungry depths below. She was going to have to run for it.

"Well, Ghost." Frea pulled out her hand cannon. "Time to get a little payback on those Hive bastards."

Getting to the control center was going to be harder than she thought. She was swarmed by Hive the moment her foot stepped off the sinking docks. Thralls plagued every nook and their Knight counterparts weren't too far behind. It was worse inside the buildings, where they already infested the walls with pulsing egg sacs and yellowed sludge that made Frea's stomach churn in unpleasant ways. She took the time to shoot out the eggs as she passed through each contaminated room. The Hive reproduced at alarming rates and she wasn't going to give them a chance to bounce back from this.
"They are getting angrier," her Ghost hummed into her comm. "Understandable. I am killing their creepy worm babies." The huntress climbed back out into the foggy air, grateful to be outside again. "How far to the control center?"

"Just around the corner. I'm detecting a massive Hive signature there," it replied. Frea sighed, wiping some sticky goo off her cape. The Hive here were endless, her ammo however, was not. "There's something else." Her Ghost continued. "I'm picking up two weak Guardian signals, they have your clan markings."

"What?" She straightened. "Are they okay?"

"Hard to say, without their light Guardians only show up as a faint ping on my radar. I'm not even sure of their exact locations or conditions."

"Ah," she whispered her reply, her shoulders slumped.

"They could still be alive, Frea." Her Ghost picked up on her disappointment. "We won't know until we find them."

The huntress shook her head, forcing herself to focus on the task at hand. "Right. We secure the control room and then look for my clanmates. They might need help."

With newfound determination, she sprinted toward the central hub where all the docks and barges merged into one. The space was wide open, every metallic surface slick from the constant mist coming off the ocean. Immediately, she spotted the door leading to the command center and the mass of Thralls and Wizards guarding it. Most worrisome was the huge Knight in the middle of it all. If she could surprise them, then maybe they'll fall to her super before getting a chance to fight back. In her rush, it seemed like a gamble worth taking.

Frea fell to a knee and used the wet ground to slide into the group, catching them off guard. She twirled, summoning her Arcstrider staff into her hands, and melted the majority of the Thralls with a barrage of electricity. However the Knight was barely affected by her careless attack, he grabbed the huntress out of her spin without much effort. The staff instantly vanished when he gripped her by the throat, pulling her feet far off the ground. She struggled against his grasp, widely kicking her legs in an attempt to get free. Her lungs burned for oxygen as her vision started to darken.

A shot ran out and she heard the Knight hiss in pain. His spiny fingers on her neck released and she tumbled through the air, her mind still frazzled from suffocation. The huntress braced herself for a hard landing, but it never came. When her eyesight finally returned to normal, she found herself face to face with a Titan, his face hidden behind a helmet she didn't recognize.

"T-thanks," she said. Whoever this was had caught her midair, saving her from a nasty fall.

He peered at her with a tilt of his head. "Stupid," he grumbled.

Frea frowned. Yeah, what she did was dumb but he didn't need to rub her face in it.

The Knight behind them roared and another bullet cut through the rain, silencing the creature's scream. The Titan wasn't alone. Frea fidgeted in his arms to look for the presumably friendly sniper, but couldn't see much over the armor blocking her view.

"Can you let me go now? I can walk," she said a bit too spitefully. The Titan opened his arms, dropping her without warning. Her butt ached when she hit the ground. She shot an annoyed look up at the stranger but he wasn't paying attention. He unholstered a rocket launcher off his back and hefted it over his shoulder, aiming it directly at the injured Knight trying to recover. Frea turned away
just in time to avoid the aftershock of the projectile. The remainder of the Hive were blown away in a cloud of ash and fire, they didn't stand much of a chance against the heavy weapon. With a satisfied grunt, the Titan put away the rocket launcher and looked down at Frea again. He tapped the side of his helmet with a finger.

"What?" The huntress stood up, confused at what this bizarre man wanted.

"Guardian," her Ghost spoke up in her head. "I believe he wants us to open our comms."

"Oh. What do you only speak with insults then?" She commented toward the Titan, who only gave her a shrug, then pressed her fingers to the comm built into her helmet. Immediately a voice she knew came through.

"Frea! Is that you I see in my scope?"

"Maku!?” Her heart leapt. These two must be the source of the signals her Ghost picked up earlier.

"What are you doing here?"

"I should be asking you the same thing." Even over the comm, the huntress could tell the Warlock was grinning. "Your light is back and you've come to save the day as usual I see."

She sighed. "I'm trying to at least."

"Good, Aner and I were dying of boredom." Maku chuckled. "Commander Zavala just got word that everything is clear. Go talk to him, and I'll meet you down there after." A click signaled the line going dead.

Frea looked up to see the Titan named Aner already striding off toward the control center. She hurriedly jogged forward to follow him.

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The rain was coming down in sheets as Frea watched the jumpship land, the water soaked her hair so quickly she regretted not leaving her helmet on. Zavala and a woman she figured was the Deputy Commander stepped off the cargo ramp. Sloane quickly ran by the huntress, giving her a sharp nod as she passed.

"I didn't dare believe," Zavala said as he stopped in front of Frea, his glowing eyes regarding her. "If the light found its way back to you, then perhaps there is hope after all." He smiled slightly, but that soon vanished behind a solemn expression. "Our numbers dwindle by the day, we can no longer protects ourselves, much less the survivors. And without the light..." The Titan looked down at his armored fist. "Are we even Guardians anymore?"

"Commander," Frea whispered. She thought about Shaxx and the lesson he taught her when she was just a rookie. That experience doesn't make a Guardian, and neither does their light. It was the sole reason she hadn't fallen to the same question Zavala was asking himself right now. "Let me help, the light might be gone for now but that doesn't mean we can't still fight."

Zavala averted his gaze as he seemed to considered her offer, finally he clasped his hands behind his back. "We won't last long with dead generators. Wave Energy Converters power this station but thanks to the Hive, they're in need of...attention."

"I can take care of it."

The Commander nodded. "Yes, I believe you can."
Frea walked back into the control center to find her clanmates chatting with Sloane. The shelter was warm and dry, a pleasant reprieve from the constant downpour outside. Though, the entire place was a mess, like the station's previous tenants left in a hurry. Nearly every metal surface was coated with a thick layer of rust, it was a miracle that anything was still in working order.

Maku greeted her with a short wave. "Going for the generators, huh? Sounds like fun," he flatly said, the sarcasm heavy in his tone.

"When is wrecking Hive ever not fun?" Frea asked.

"I mean, that one time when we infiltrated the Hellmouth to go after Crota wasn't really on my list of good moments. But sure, Frea, whatever floats your boat."

"Noisy." Aner cut in with his one-worded comment.

The huntress's eyes drifted over to the Titan. "So who's this, Maku?"

"This is my brother, Aner. You've probably noticed already but he doesn't talk much. Which is fine because that just means I can talk more." The Warlock rested an arm on Aner's shoulder, which the Titan promptly brushed off.

"Is he part of the clan? I'm surprised I've never seen him at any of our gatherings." Frea raised a brow.

"He's been stationed to patrol here on Titan for over a year now. When everything went to hell, I flew out from Venus to check up on him, ended up finding the idiot trapped in a Hive nest after setting fire to it. We decided to stick around when we got word that Zavala was planning something here. Lucky us."

"Are you two going with the Commander to the Farm then?" She asked.

"Maybe. After we clear out the generators first," Maku replied. The tone of his voice when he said 'we' caught Frea's attention.

"No way, you are not coming with me. You could die," she said firmly.

His usual permanent smirk melt away, replaced by a resolute expression rarely seen on the Warlock's blue face. "Because we don't have our light? Didn't we just save you from becoming a Knight's dinner? Besides, we'd much rather die assisting your mission than cower in some corner hoping you'll succeed in getting the City back from the Cabal's clutches."

Aner nodded. "Our home. Our fight."

"Look at that." Maku obnoxiously motioned toward the Titan. "You got him to say more than two words, Frea. He must like you." Aner rolled his eyes with an agitated huff, his brother was a handful to deal with, even for him it seemed.

Frea sighed as she pinched the bridge of her nose. Maku was one of the oldest Guardians in her clan and the best sniper she knew. No doubt his skills and his brother's knowledge of the area would be a great asset. "Alright, fine. But please let me take point, so if anything happens I'll be the one to take the hit."

"Yes, ma'am!" He mocked a salute with another grin plastered over his face. "I'm best at a distance anyway, I can keep an eye on your back while Aner watches your flank. We'll get this place running like new in no time."
Chapter End Notes

Drowning

The generators were set up west of the control center, at the edge of Hive territory. According to Sloane it was going to be a relatively straightforward mission, simply getting in and flipping a switch so the Vanguard fleet can have power again. With Frea's luck however, it wasn't going to be that easy.

“Ugh.” The huntress shook her hands to flick the water off her gloves. “This rain is annoying,” she complained.

“Welcome to Titan, where sunshine and rainbows go to die.” Maku jested over the comms. He was set up far behind in some unknown location, watching Frea and Aner's surroundings with his sniper as they made their way around the endless mazes of piping. An echoing blare could be heard from his direction whenever he picked off the occasional roaming Acolyte.

“Better than snow,” Aner curtly added.

“I actually like the snow,” Frea said.

“Yes, I imagine the cold makes cuddling up to lover boy more enjoyable.” The Warlock snickered.

“Maku!”

He was laughing loudly now for what felt like ages, finally he caught his breath long enough to speak again. “Don't tell Lord Shaxx I called him that, he'll probably ban me from the Crucible forever.”

“No promises,” she replied with a smirk.

“Is Dex still pouting around?” Maku asked.

Frea stopped in her tracks, making Aner bump into her back from the sudden halt. He recovered and glanced down at her in question.

“Dex is... missing,” she slowly said. “No one has been in contact with him since the attack.”

Maku's tone took a serious turn as he contemplated the news. “I'm sorry, Frea. I know you two were close.”

“Yeah.” The huntress composed herself, forcing the dark thoughts from her mind. “Focus up. We have a mission to finish.”

It didn't take them long to come across the bridge leading to the first generator. It was swarmed with Thralls and a Shrieker. The Thralls were small fry, not much of a problem even for lightless Guardians, but the other Hive was a different story. Covered by thick armor and floating high in the air, Shriekers released powerful blasts of energy when they died, capable of killing any unsuspecting person caught in the radius. Frea peeked around the corner, taking mental note of all enemy positions. There was no cover for them to sneak around, fighting through the Hive seemed to be the only option here.

“Alright.” She turned to Aner, opening the comms to make sure Maku could hear as well. “I'll go in first and make the Shrieker drop its defense, Maku you can snipe it down, and Aner can take out the
Thralls.”
“What about the Shrieker's axion bolts?” The Warlock asked.

“I might be able to dodge them,” Frea replied and glanced over the bridge again. She didn't like how narrow it was. “If not...then be prepared to revive me, Aner.” When the huntress looked back to the Titan, he was gone.

“Whoops,” Maku mused over the line. “There he goes.”

Frea spun around to see Aner making a mad dash onto the bridge, pulling out his rocket launcher. With an exasperated sigh, she sprinted after him. So much for that plan.

“Aner!” The Titan stopped and turned at the sound of her voice, but she didn't. “Up there!” She pointed a finger to the Shrieker above them and took the shotgun off her back. Thankfully, he seemed to catch on to her reckless idea. He dropped his weapon and clasped his hands together as she leapt up into the air. Her boot landed firmly into his palms and with a grunt, he boosted her even higher. She underestimated the Titan's strength, his throw nearly sent her soaring past the Shrieker, but she managed to grab hold of its armor and stop herself from falling into the waters below. The Hive took a direct blast from her shotgun just as the thick shell protecting its energy core opened to her presence. It exploded from the buckshot, sending shards of void light in every direction. The huntress jumped from the Shrieker and hit the ground with a roll, grabbing Aner by the arm. “Time to go!” They ran as fast as they could to the other side of the bridge, the eruption from the Shrieker licking at their heels. Every Thrall they passed went down to sniper fire, at least Maku was being helpful.

They were gasping for air by the time the void energy finally dissipated. The bridge was clear now, the first generator just dead ahead, and they were alive. Though, Frea didn't feel very triumphant about it.

“What the hell was that?!” She spun toward the Titan. “We were coming up with a plan and you just run in like an idiot? Normally, I'm all for the 'shoot first and ask later' tactics, but not when there are lives on the line. You're not immortal right now.” Much to Frea's dismay, he barely reacted to her tone. Aner simply stared down at her quietly, his body as still as a statue. The huntress never knew silence could be so frustrating before now.

“He's a Titan, Frea.” Maku was the one to finally answer her over the comm. “As hard-headed and stubborn as they come, you don't need to baby him.”

“I'm not,” she snapped. “Just trying to make sure you two don't die on my watch.”

A sigh from above her caught Frea's attention, and she peered back up at the Titan. “You can't protect everyone,” he abruptly said, catching her by surprise. Then, he turned away and vanished into the dark building where the generator waited for them.

Frea was a patience person, always have been, but no one crawled under her skin quite as badly as Aner was. “Maku,” she called.

“Yes?”

“I'm going to end up punching your brother before this is over.”

He laughed. “You wouldn't be the first.”

The buildings where the generators resided in were a mess. The mechanisms were caked with a
hardened substance of some kind. It took the Guardians at least an hour to clear out and repair the converters. By the end of it, Frea really felt like she needed a bath.

“Looks like the generators are done.” Maku ran his gloved hand over a dead console. “But we need to give the system a kick start. Aner, where's the main circuit breaker?”

“Central platform.”

“Central platform... you mean the central platform that's teeming with Hive Wizards? The same central platform that's been cut off from everything else because all the pathways caved into the sea?”

Aner nodded.

“Lovely,” Maku snorted, adjusting his sniper across his back. “I hate this place.”

“Wizards shouldn't be an issue, getting to the platform however-” Frea thought out loud, tapping a finger against her wet visor.

“Won't be a problem... for you. You can triple jump,” the Warlock said.

“Weren't you just griping on me for trying to keep you guys alive earlier? And now you're suddenly afraid of crossing some water?” She raised a brow.

“Look.” Maku defensively put up his hand. “If I die to the Hive or Fallen, so be it. It'll be a warrior's death in the name of the City. But drowning? No one's gonna be telling stories about the Warlock who couldn't swim.”

“This wouldn't be a problem if you had stayed behind with the Commander,” Frea chided.

“I'm going,” Aner quickly cut in as he stepped around them, heading for the doorway. “Stay or leave.”

The huntress glanced between the brothers. The Warlock's shoulders were slightly slumped, all the energy he had when he convinced her to let them tag along was now long gone. “Do you have Aquaphobia, Maku?” She asked.

He let out a long sigh. “Yes, alright. I'm afraid of drowning,” he reply was short, obviously he's had to answer this same question many times before. “I know it's dumb, a Guardian scared of a little water.”

“I don't think so. Everyone has fears, it's in our nature, being unable to die doesn't really change that.” Frea folded her arms. “I can't believe you came to Titan.”

Maku shrugged. “Had to make sure my brother was alright, even if that meant coming to a moon covered in nothing but the thing I hate most.”

“That's admirable.”

“Aner said it was stupid.” Even masked, Frea could tell the Warlock was grinning a little.

She forced back a laugh. “How about you stay behind and snipe for us? I'll watch over Aner and make sure he doesn't get himself killed.” The huntress turned to leave, but Maku caught her arm.

“No,” he said when she looked back at him. “I promised to help you out on your mission, I'm going to see it through. Besides...” A chuckle ringed out from his helmet. “You're going to get hopelessly lost without someone there to decipher Aner's mime act.”
Frea peered over the broken railing at the waters below. The waves were still just a rough as when she arrived, she doubted they ever calmed down. Fear of drowning or not, falling into that sea would not be a good thing. Her gaze moved up to the walkways twisted by the storms. Much of the path to the central platform had given away at some point, leaving only small sections of metal lattice barely dangling to its anchor cords. The distance between each wasn't too far for her comrades to jump across, but the entire structure looked unstable.

The huntress turned back to her team. “I'll go first and test the walkways, then you two follow okay?”

They nodded their reply.

She took a running start and leapt to the first section of the path. The walkway swayed so violently under her feet that she fell, her boots unable to find traction on the wet metal. Desperately, Frea dug her fingers into the lattice to catch herself. Her legs dangled dangerously over the edge.

“Frea!” Maku hollered behind her.

“I'm fine!” With a groan, she pulled herself back up. The metal creaked from her weight but held this time. She let out a relieved sigh once she found her footing again. “Let's move quickly, who knows how long this walkway will last.”

They crossed as fast as they could, but it was still slower than Frea would have liked. More than once she had to snatch Aner by his armor and yank him out of danger. Finally, they reached the end and the huntress was the first to touch solid concrete, thankful to be back on safer ground. Her fireteam had just one more big hurdle. The Titan was the first to go, he vaulted himself over the gap and landed right next to her with a huff. She turned back to the Warlock, the last one left.

“Come on, Maku. You got this,” she said.

“The confidence is appreciated,” he chuckled.

Taking a step back for extra running distance, Maku went to jump over the divide...and came up short. Panic sprung into her throat and Frea stretched out to catch him, her fingertips just brushing against his armor. He was too far for her to reach. Instead it was Aner who grabbed the Warlock, he took a fistful of his brother's coat and threw him back to the stone floor, the momentum dragging him down as he did so.

“Aner!” Maku cried out as the Titan disappeared over the edge. He crawled to his feet and ran to the gap, nearly falling in himself if Frea hadn't grasped his forearm.

“Stay here,” she commanded, her voice shaking. “I'll get him.”

Without another thought, the huntress threw herself over the side and dived into the sea below, the shockingly cold water knocking the air out of her lungs. The strong current pulled her under immediately, threatening to drown her as well. Guardians' armor was sealed to be airtight, able to survive almost any planet condition, but it wasn't meant for underwater excursions. She had maybe a few seconds to find the Titan and get out before the water pressure cracked her visor. Twisting, Frea spotted Aner just to her right, he wasn't struggling, his armor too heavy for him to fight against the waves. She kicked her feet to reach him and tightly gripped his shoulder armor. The tingling sensation of arc energy crept into her legs and she bounced off the water, using her triple jump in the same manner as if she was in the sky. The huntress saved her final jump for once they broke the surface. Heaving, she leapt up one last time and grabbed the edge of the stone with her free hand, her
muscles screamed from the exertion.

“By the Traveler, Frea!” Maku quickly helped her up, the Titan still slung over her shoulder.

Quickly, she placed Aner down on the ground, the alarm bells in her head blaring. “I don’t think he's breathing!” Frea gasped when she pulled at the Titan's armor. His visor had been breached, water poured out when she unbuckled the seals. With the helmet off, she bent down to listen for the distinct sound of air creeping past his lips. Nothing.

“Oh no. Oh no, no, no...” Maku whispered above her.

Frea worked feverishly to undo the straps to Aner's chestplate. His armor gave away to her fingers and she planted her palms to the middle of his chest, pumping hard to get his pulse moving again. She yanked off her own helmet, and tilted the Titan's head up to press her lips against his, blowing oxygen into his lungs.

“Oh no. Oh no. Oh no...” Maku whispered above her.

Frea worked feverishly to undo the straps to Aner's chestplate. His armor gave away to her fingers and she planted her palms to the middle of his chest, pumping hard to get his pulse moving again. She yanked off her own helmet, and tilted the Titan's head up to press her lips against his, blowing oxygen into his lungs.

“Come on. Come on,” she begged. One breath, nothing happened. The second breath, still nothing. Finally on the third breath, Aner suddenly wheezed into her mouth. She backed away as his entire body shuddered from his first inhale, coughing sea water out of his lungs. His glowing eyes shot open to meet hers, they were unfocused and weary, but shimmered bright with life. He made it.

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Shaxx sat outside his office tinkering with one of the damaged Red Jack frames that just returned from securing a new arena for the Crucible. It was a quiet day in the Tower, tensions high from the recent attacks on the Moon bases, most Guardians were out on patrols attempting to null the threat or participating in the first Iron Banner of the year. Casualties were low so far but each day the Hive were getting bolder, something big was just on the horizon. The Titan could feel it.

“Zavala won't stop going on and on about Saint-14 lately, it's driving me crazy.” Cayde-6 continued, snapping Shaxx out of his thoughts. He had zoned out on the Exo again, apparently no one else was around to listen to his bored ramblings.

“You know what they say about Titans.”

“They're loud and abrasive?” The Hunter Vanguard asked, expecting some sort of reaction from Shaxx.

The Titan barely flinched at the comment. “The good ones are all dead,” he said.

“You don't know that Saint is dead.” Cayde crossed his arms, a curious look inched over his features.

“The greatest Titan who ever lived just disappeared.” Shaxx shrugged as he pulled at some loose wiring on the frame. “Call it a hunch.”

Indeed, when Guardians went missing it usually meant they died off in some corner of the system somewhere. It was a sad fate, but that's what happens when you're unable to die from old age. The wires Shaxx cross suddenly sparked and blasted a smoking hole into the frame. He pushed the scrap off his desk with a sigh.

“No one ever put down a Kell faster than he could. But man, he was a real weirdo.” Cayde chuckled.

“Eccentricity was his strength.”
The Hunter threw up his hands. “Talking about the Speaker like you’re related is eccentric. Claiming to have seen the future, that he fought Six Fronts fueled on the idea that some Guardian savior is coming? That’s insane,” he huffed.

Saint-14 was a strange Titan, Shaxx agreed. He was borderline religious when it came his passions, and his connections to Osiris didn't earn him any favors during the falling out. Saint however, made for a truly compelling leader in his time.

“Belief is a hell of a thing,” Shaxx added.

“Oh sure, yeah.” Cayde paced across the floor. “One Guardian is going to fix everything. Kick Crota off the Moon. Make it look like us Vanguard know our head from our hindquarter-”

The comm in Shaxx's helmet suddenly fizzled to life with Arcite’s robotic voice. “Sir, that Guardian you wanted to keep tabs on just entered the Crucible.” Not wasting time, the Titan stood and started for the exit.

“Hey, where are you going?” Cayde asked as he quickly followed.

“One of the recruits from Old Russia I've had my eye on entered the Iron Banner for the first time,” he said.

“Maybe they're the one.” The Exo playfully poked at Shaxx's shoulder armor with a loud laugh. “We'll call them Crotas End.”

Shouting in the distance snapped Shaxx awake. He rubbed the sleep from his eyes and peered around, half expecting to be back at the Tower again. But no, he was at the Farm, falling asleep at his work like some old man. He was dreaming about a memory from three years ago, before Frea and her fireteam ventured into the Hellmouth. It wasn't strange for Guardians to dream, though this one came from seemingly nowhere. Shaxx couldn't remember the last time he had given the original Vanguards much thought, at least not since Osiris was banished and Saint-14 disappeared. How odd that he would suddenly think about them now.

“Lord Shaxx.” Arcite appeared in his doorway. “A vessel from Titan has just arrived with the Commander inside.”

The Titan smiled slightly. “I’m coming.” He grabbed his helmet off the desk and stared down at the visor, the polished white and orange visage gleamed back up at him. Frea retrieved the first Vanguard already, he wasn't surprised. “Savior huh,” he whispered to the air.
Shortly before the SIVA crisis....

Frea didn't care for the cold, but she loved snow. It reminded her of the day she first woke up in Old Russia, her Ghost hovering in her face, the feeling of the plushy ice underneath her reborn body. She didn't have the time to enjoy it that day, she was much too busy running away from the Fallen. Nowadays, whenever grey clouds formed over the winter horizon, she couldn't help but feel a childish excitement for what was to come. The huntress smiled as she kicked at the snow covering the Tower plaza grounds. The end of the year arrived in a snap, which meant one thing to the Guardians, the Dawning was here.

The Tower took a sort of cheery look during the Dawning, the plaza decorated in a similar fashion to the Festival of the Lost, but instead of shadows and masks, shimmering white lights blanketed the kiosks. Powdery blue banners were hung up on every pole and an icy image of the event emblem hovered high over the Vanguard offices. It was impossible to walk around without getting dusted by the snowflakes drifting from seemingly nowhere, and even the occasional snowball fight would break out among the Guardians. The Dawning put everyone in high spirits, it was a time for celebration with clans and loved ones. And most of all, the Crucible bustled with newfound energy with the SRL and special game modes. Nothing like a little friendly competition to bring in the new year.

This winter marked Frea's second year as a Guardian and a month since she defeated Oryx and his Taken with her clan. So far, the universe has been quiet since she returned from the Dreadnaught, but who knows how long that will last with her rotten luck. It seems that whenever something goes wrong these days it's her who ends up in the middle of it, she really can't complain, her actions do protect the Last City in the end. A long break however, would be nice.

“Good morning, Frea. Looking for something in particular?” A voice snapped the huntress out of her thoughts and she realized she was standing outside the Eververse store, staring at nothing.

“No, I'm just browsing,” she awkwardly replied when the store owner, Tess Everis, came into her view.

The Awoken woman gave her shining smile. “We have countless unique items that make perfect gifts for your special someone. I hope you find something you like.”

“I don't exactly have a 'special' someone,” Frea chuckled.

“Well.” Tess reached down under her kiosk and brought out a cutely wrapped box in the shape of an engram. “The Dawning tends to being miracles this time of year. Here's a little something on the house.”

“W-wow...thank you, Tess. I don't know what to say,” the huntress stuttered, surprised by the generosity.

“No need.” She winked. “Don't open it until midnight, okay? When the last hour of this year ticks away.”

A strange request, but it peaked Frea's curiosity. “Sure,” she said and then carefully picked up the
gift to store away in her Ghost's inventory. “Thanks again.”

“My pleasure.” Tess's smile widened ever so slightly. Something seemed to catch her attention as her gaze shifted to move past the huntress. “Well well, look who it is,” she murmured.

Frea turned around to see what had grabbed the shopkeeper's attention, the looming silhouette of a Titan was crossing the plaza. And it wasn't just any Titan. His muted golden armor was covered in light snowfall and his grand cape billowed behind him like wings, adding to his already intimidating presence. The ground seemed to rumble with his every step, making every Guardian he walked by move out of his way. Only a handful of people commanded such respect from the Tower Guardians, legends and Iron Lords.

“What is Lord Saladin doing here? It isn't Iron Banner season,” Frea asked.

“I believe he's here for the match,” Tess replied.

“What match?”

The woman blinked at her. “Ah, that's right. You've only been awake for a few years now. Every year during the Dawning, Lord Saladin and Lord Shaxx duel in the Crucible. It's how they keep their skills sharp, even though I hear it always ends in a stalemate.”

“Why only during the Dawning?” Frea raised a brow.

“To inspire Guardians for the new year, I assume. And perhaps to teach something as well. It's not often you get to see two Lords of Iron fight each other.”

“Huh,” the huntress mumbled to herself as she watched the hem of Saladin's cape vanish into the Vanguard hallway.

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“For the last time, Cayde. You cannot join us.”

“Aw. Come on, Shaxx! You two do this every year! At least change it up a little, make it fresh.” The Exo dramatically waved his arms in the air. “You know how much I want to try my gun out on Saladin? He'll never duel me otherwise!”

Shaxx ran a hand over his visor with a long sigh. “This is supposed to be a 1v1. We can't have both of us against Saladin. The old man would have a fit.”

“Quit calling me old.” The Iron Lord stepped into the Crucible office, pulling off his heavy helmet with a grunt. “I wouldn't mind making this a doubles match, then perhaps for once we'll actually have a winner.”

“A-ha!” Cayde grinned widely. “That's two votes for yes!”

“There's only three of us, we need a fourth for doubles,” Shaxx huffed.

“Someone to counter Cayde? I have a person in mind.” A tiny smile crept upon Saladin's features, he apparently had a trump card up his gauntlets and it made Shaxx worried. “Arcite,” the Iron Lord called.

The Crucible frame poked its head into the room. “Yes, sir?”

“There's a huntress out in the plaza wearing a white cloak. Go get her.”
“Right away.” The bot spun around.

*White cloak.* Shaxx felt his chest tighten ever so slightly. He couldn't mean.... A second later, Arcite reappeared in the doorway along with the person he was afraid would be following behind it.

“Lord Saladin?” Frea tilted her head. “You called for me?”

“Hive-bane,” Saladin greeted. “Are you up for some Crucible today?”

The huntress snuck a glance at Shaxx, the confusion clear on her face.

“It's a doubles match. Something new for the yearly combat session between Saladin and myself,” he said, straining to keep his voice level. It'd been quite some time since he last saw Frea in action, her training with him was long finished and she rarely entered the Crucible these days. He felt a sense of longing to see her battle again, she was magnificent to watch and even better to duel against. “Would you like to join us?”

“Wow,” Cayde piped up. “What happened to that reluctance from earlier?”

Shaxx shot the Exo a glare.

“I'm flattered, but I don't think I can offer much of a challenge,” she said, clasping her hands together.

“No need to. Just keep Cayde preoccupied and I can take care of the rest.” Saladin gently patted Frea on the shoulder. The tiniest hint of jealousy sparked in Shaxx, which caught him completely off-guard, and he cursed himself for it. Acting like some rookie schoolboy with a crush. He was already aware of how he felt toward the huntress, somewhere down the line his curiosity had turned romantic, but she never showed interest to his subtle flirtations. Though, he had a feeling she was maybe too dense to notice. Perhaps he needed to be more obvious.

“How about...sure. Why not?” Frea shrugged. “Sounds like it could be fun.”

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The huntress locked her gear into place, adjusting the fabric of her hood over her helmet, while Saladin next to her threw his cape to the side to make room for his heavy weapon. The arena was Frontier, a small layout with tight corridors on the sides and an open space at the bridge in the middle. It was a great map for snipers, not so much for Frea's shotgun. Instead she equipped her sword, a thinly curved blade meant for quick slashes, and swung it over her back.

“So, what's the score between you and Shaxx?” She asked.

“0-0.”

“What?” Frea spun around a little too quickly. “Really? How long have you been doing this?”

The Iron Lord checked the ammo in his hefty fusion rifle. “20 years give or take, frankly...I've lost count.”

“And neither of you have won?”

“We're both Strikers, and evenly matched. We usually fight late into the night, and by the end of it we're both so worn out that a winner can't be declared,” he sighed.

“Then why do you continue to do this?”
“Shaxx insists. Besides...” A soft chuckle resonated out from his helmet. “I do sometimes enjoy beating him to a pulp.”

Each team set up on the opposite sides of the arena, the game mode a modified version of clash, no revives and all cooldown timers extended. Any abilities or supers would take a long time to summon, meaning everyone had to rely most on their guns and wit, their light wasn't going to help them much here. The clock above the arena started to tick down from five seconds.

Frea took a shaky breath, this wasn't her first bout in the Crucible, it wasn't even her first time facing Shaxx. But this wasn't training, he won't be holding himself back this time, and that made her incredibly nervous.

“Cayde is best at mid to far range,” Saladin whispered next to her. “Avoid Shaxx if you can.”

“And if I can't?” She asked.

“Then fight with all you got.” The timer above them dinged to life, signaling the start of the match. The last team standing wins. Saladin took off sprinting toward the east with Frea following his lead. They went for the covered side of the arena, staying far away from the open bridge and out of Cayde's scope. “Go for the back,” he said, pointing toward a hallway they were nearing. “Take them by surprise when they're distracted by me.”

“Got it.” Frea made a tight turn and jumped into the darkened corridor, keeping her fast pace light to soften the echo of her footsteps. She leapt at full sprint from the doorway, and right into the person she didn't want to see.

“Woah.” Shaxx stepped to the side, narrowly dodging the huntress. She could hear gunfire off to the left, Cayde must be holding his own against Saladin, so it was just her and Shaxx. Spinning midair, she pulled the sword off her back and swung it toward the Titan, who promptly blocked the attack with his bracers and locked the blade against his armor. Frea yanked hard at the weapon, but he held on. “Frea,” he sighed. “You should know better than to try a sword against me.”

“I-I didn't really think that move through, honestly,” she awkwardly laughed.

He opened his arms, shoving the sword away with the huntress still hanging onto it. She tugged and rolled backward to put some distance between them, the space they were in was too tight for a gunfight and just the perfect advantage for him. Titans excelled at close range, this was going to be tough. Shaxx shifted, holstering his rifle, and reached behind his back to pull out his Raze-lighter. He nonchalantly twirled it in his hand, smirking behind his visor.

“How's your swordsmanship?” He asked.

“Not bad.”

“Good.” He sprung forward, angling the weapon downward as the blade carved itself into the stone where Frea had been standing a second before. She dropped low and aimed a slash at his exposed back, which he easily caught with the flat side of his sword. Sparks flew off their blades every time they clashed, neither of them able to break each other's defense. “You've definitely improved since last time we trained,” he remarked.

“Well,” she huffed, blocking another one of his hard swings. “It's been over a year, I haven't been sitting on my ass the whole time.”
“I'm well aware.” When their swords connected again, he caught her wrist, trapping her arm. “You're powerful, but you need more than that to beat me.” His grip on her tightened as she struggled to get free, the only way to escape would be to drop her weapon, but that would leave her vulnerable to his next attack.

“Oh?” Getting an idea, Frea lifted her free arm and tenderly stroked the Titan's helmet, pressing her body tighter against his. He visibly flinched from her touch. “Tell me more, Shaxx,” she purred, her voice dipping so low and sultry that it even surprised her.

“What-?” He dropped the huntress.

Grasping the opportunity, she slammed her shoulder into his chestplate and knocked him off his feet, his sword went skittering across the room as he landed on his backside. Her own blade stopped just a hairsbreadth away from his collar.

“Was that enough for you?” Frea gasped, taking the moment to catch her breath.

Shaxx bent forward to rest an elbow on his knee, flicking the point of her sword away with his thumb and forefinger. “That was dirty.”

“Yes...well, you made me a little desperate,” she said.

“Hmm.” The Titan got back to his feet and stepped so close that she had to strain her neck to look up at him. “Commendable, but I wouldn't recommend trying to flirt with the Hive or Fallen,” he chuckled.

Frea could feel her face flush hot underneath her mask. “I didn't mean it seriously...I just...”

He reached over and ruffled her hood. “Relax, Hive-bane.” Walking around her, he retrieved his sword off the ground, moving to holster the weapon. “Sounds like Saladin and Cayde are still going at it. How about we split off and never talk about this again?”

She kept her gaze on the Titan, her heart beating wildly in her chest. Frea wasn't sure if it was the adrenaline or something else that was making her so unsettled right now. “Yeah, that sounds like an excellent idea.”

Frea leaned against the railing overlooking the Last City, one of her favorite spots for Moonwatching in the Tower. The plaza was deserted, most Guardians were with their loved ones and friends, celebrating the upcoming new year that was only minutes away now. Nearly everyone in her clan were gone on patrols, and even Dex, who she normally spent the Dawning with, was stationed on Venus until next week. She inhaled slowly, taking the chilly air into her lungs, and rested her chin against her palm. Spending this night alone wasn't that big of a deal, but she was hoping to start the next year off with a bang.

“Full Moon tonight, that's a good sign,” someone muttered next to her.

She smiled slightly, not needing to turn around to know who it was. “Hopefully it means we can go a month without something big and evil threatening the City.”

Shaxx sighed as he gripping the railing with both hands. “I doubt it.”

“So.” The huntress straightened, looking over at her new guest. “I guess it's still 0-0 between you and Lord Saladin?”
“Seems so. At least Cayde finally got the duel he always wanted.”

“And got wrecked in the process,” she added.

“I did try to warn him.” Shaxx shrugged. “But your Vanguard is stubborn...must be a Hunter thing.” His helmet moved toward her slightly, watching for her reaction. She had a feeling he was grinning behind it.

“Really? I could have sworn stubbornness was a Titan trait.” She smirked.

“Perhaps, but at least we're clever about it.”

“Uh-huh, sureeee,” Frea said in her most sarcastic tone, earning a soft chuckle from the Titan.

Shaxx turned his head back up to the sky, the light from the moon reflected off his visor. “You did well today, I'm impressed.”

“Thanks. I'm no longer that rookie Guardian who couldn't even land a knife hit on you,” she said. “You didn't need to go toe to toe with me to prove that, you know.” His voice took on a low tone, making it barely audible for her to hear. The huntress's gaze shot upward, finding him staring down at her again. “Frea...” he started.

All of a sudden, something pinged an alert in her inventory and her Ghost materialized before her. “Incoming!” It yelled and spat out the package Frea had received from Tess earlier that day. It smacked her in the chestplate and spilt open, unleashing a flurry of confetti so thick it covered her and Shaxx like a blanket of fresh snow.

“What the hell?” He swatted at the brightly colored paper, which didn't really help much as it went absolutely everywhere. Frea just stood there, frozen and wide-eyed, with the now torn box sitting in her hands.

“Apologies.” Her Ghost floated between them, shaking itself to remove the paper sticking to its shell. “The gift just started ticking when it hit midnight, had to do an emergency eject to keep it from exploding in the inventory.”

“ Weird,” the huntress said as she peered inside the box, it was empty aside from a few pieces of confetti that didn't make it out.

“Did you get that from Tess? I heard recently she was passing out confetti bombs for the Dawning,” Shaxx asked, leaning in to check out the package as well. When she looked up, Frea had to cup a hand over her mouth, stifling the laugh tickling her throat. The Titan seemed to notice the look on her face anyway and he quizzically tilted his head. “What?”

“Your armor,” she breathed between snickers. He glanced down, shards of paper in every color were stuck to his gear like glue, wet from the snowflakes dancing on the breeze. “You look like a giant pinata.” Frea couldn't hold back her laughter anymore.

What surprised her the most...was Shaxx, she expected him to get angry and honestly, she wouldn't blame him for it. He was quiet for a moment as he stared at himself, then suddenly, he joined in on the joke, his deep voice mixing with hers. Their laughter rang off the stone walls of the Tower, both filled with delightful joy.

When Frea finally calmed down, she wiped the tears from her eyes and reached out to help brush the confetti off his armor with a wide smile. “Happy Dawning, Shaxx.”
“Happy Dawning, Frea.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you all have a fantastic new year! Happy Dawning! -AFKai
Seeing Red

The huntress studied over the blueprint depicting a Cabal ship of enormous size. It was an unusual shape, not meant for fast space travel, and closely resembled the same technology used on the cage smothering the Traveler's light. The scout reports along with it were torn and bloodied, whoever had secured these had went through a great pain to do so.

“They call it 'The Almighty'. Crown jewel of the Red Legion and the life's work of of their leader, Dominus Ghaul.” Sloane stepped up behind Frea, hands tightly folded at her back. “Ghaul has subjugated hundred of worlds, those that resisted...fall to this.”

Frea swallowed hard. “What does it do?”

The titaness locked eyes with her. “It annihilates stars. Nothing-and no one-has survived Ghaul's ambitions.”

“And now it's pointed at our Sun,” Zavala said as he strode into the command center.

“In short, sir...” Sloane straightened, turning her attention to the Commander. “The war's over, we've lost.”

Lost. Frea's hands balled into fists at her side. But they haven't even started fighting back yet.

Zavala took his place at the head of the table. “We built our home under the protection of the Traveler...” The Titan's entire body slumped down, his palms coming to rest on top of the blueprint. “When our enemies attacked, we built a wall that stood for centuries. But now, that means nothing.” His eyes flashed with a fierce determination, his tone steadily growing louder. “The Legion has taken our home, our light, and threaten our very existence! We're going all in on this...Almighty. How long until the fleet is combat ready?”

Sloane jumped. “Zavala, wait-”

A deafening slam echoed across the room as the Commander slammed his fist against the table, cutting off the Deputy Commander completely. “If we wait we die!” He hollered. “But if we attack together, we can take everything back, our light...our hope. Or we die trying.” His gaze moved to the huntress, who couldn't help but fidget under his scrutiny. “Frea,” he said, nearly in a whisper. “I need my fireteam. I need Ikora and Cayde.”

“Guess it's time to go, not that I'm complaining about getting off this rock.” Maku gave his signature grin.

The generators for the station on Titan were up and running, the Vanguard fleet now settled in for the war. Zavala had already left for the Farm some time ago, Maku and Aner were preparing to board the next shuttle for the EDZ.

“Hey, at least you didn't have to swim this time,” Frea said.

The Warlock laughed. “Yes, instead it was you and my brother who had to take the plunge.” His face dropped, taking a more serious tone as he firmly clasped the huntress by the shoulders. “But really, thank you...for everything.”

“Of course, Maku. I'm always happy to look out for my clanmates.”
"Of course," he repeated. His eyes flitted past her for just a moment before he returned to his usual permanent smile. "So, you're off to find the rest of the Vanguard then?"

"Looks like it. I'm not even sure where to start. Ikora and Cayde could be anywhere in the system," she sighed.

Maku tapped a finger to his chin in thought. "A united Vanguard would be the best way to get the rest of the Guardians off their asses. Lead by example and all that jazz. Luckily for you, Aner and I were scanning for off-planet anomalies before you arrived here. We picked up a strange signal on Nessus, I think it's Cayde's Ghost."

"How would his Ghost reach all the way out here from Nessus?" Frea frowned.

"No idea." The Warlock shrugged. "It's probably being boosted, so go in armed and ready for a trap. I hear the Vex control that space."

"Thanks for the tip."

"No problem. I'll update lover boy on your status when we reach Earth, no doubt he wants to know how you're doing. Though..." He winked. "I'll be sure to leave out the part about you making out with my brother."

"That was an emergency situation Maku, and if I didn't give him CPR then your brother would be dead," she grumbled.

"I know, I know." He dismissively waved his hand with a smirk. "Just yanking your chain. You're too easy to tease, Frea."

She playfully shoved the Warlock toward the shuttle. "Go on, get out of here before I strangle you with that chain."

"Oh, I like it rough." Snickering, Maku disappeared into the shadow of the cargo hold.

Frea ignored his comment as she watched him go, her mind drifted into deep thought. Nessus was a centaur out in the Kuiper belt near the edge of the solar system. It should be nothing but rock and ice, so how did Cayde end up there?

"Easy target, aren't you?" A voice behind the huntress snapped her back to reality.

"Aner," she greeted. The Titan had just returned from the hurriedly set up medical tent by the command center. Besides from a few scratches and a raw throat, he was perfectly fine, the near death experience seemed to have barely fazed him at all. "I think everyone is an easy target for Maku." She crossed her arms. "How are you feeling?"

It took every ounce of her willpower to not stare at him with a dumbfounded expression, he just
spoke in an actual sentence. She was pretty sure he just said more words to her in that second, than he had for the entire mission. “Uh...thanks, I'll keep that in mind,” she said.

Aner nodded and offered his armored hand to her, she grasped it with a small smile. “Take care, Frea.”

It didn’t take long for Frea to reach Nessus, her boots crunched on red dyed plumes of foliage as she landed on top of a perfectly cut stone structure. When she straightened and peered around her perch, she almost questioned if she arrived at the right location. The entire surface of the centaur was covered by blood red trees and lush wildlife, vines clung to every sharp cliffside like drapery, and she could just make out the outline of a sparkling waterfall in the distance. If it wasn't for the foreboding Vex constructs peeking out amongst the grass, she would've called this place a paradise.

“Well.” Her Ghost materialized over her shoulder, its shell rotating with slight annoyance. “So much for nothing here,” it groaned.

“Maku warned us about possible Vex.”

“Yes, but I was hoping we'd get a least one easy mission. You know...a simple pick up and leave forever?”

Frea chuckled. “This is Cayde we're talking about, nothing is ever simple with him.” She turned a bit, feeling the soft breeze pull at her cape. “Got that signal yet?”

“Yes, I think I'm picking up something.”

The Ghost expanded as it honed in on the weak signal and suddenly a voice cut through their comms. “In over my head...Vex trap...Failsafe?” Even with the static and distant sound of gunfire in the background, Frea could tell it belonged to her Vanguard.

“Vex trap, why am I not surprised...” she sighed, pulling her hand cannon off her hip. “Any idea where, or what, is blasting that signal into space?”

“Plugging coordinates now. Thankfully it's close by,” her Ghost replied.

They arrived at the ruins of an old transport ship, Golden Age era Frea guessed. Running her fingers over the logo printed on one of the broken wings, she immediately recognized the faded symbols, it was the same language she often saw around the colony ships in the Cosmodrome. This must have come from there, or perhaps built by the same people.

“Guardian,” her Ghost called. “Up here.”

She followed the little bot to the exposed machinery near the cockpit. Despite much of the ship having rusted over centuries ago, there was a brightly shining piece of new tech sitting out in the open. Someone had ripped up the top exterior panels and installed a fresh console recently, much of the wiring was tangled, whoever had done it was clearly in a hurry. The huntress bent down for a closer look and carefully touched the faintly pinging radar.

“Hello! Are you here to rescue the Cayde-6?” A distinctly cheery voice entered her comms, making Frea jump back in surprise.

“Uh?”

“Whoa! You're not Cayde,” Ghost said.
“The Cayde-6 is currently caught in a teleportation loop. He's over there. Now he's over there! Oop!” The voice continued.

Frea twisted to look around but saw nothing out of the ordinary besides a few curious birds. “He's...moving?” She asked.

“Don't worry, I can help you!” The voice paused for a moment. “But I'm going to be super unpleasant about it.” She took a drastic change in tone on the second sentence, almost as if there were two very different people talking.

The huntress shared a glance with her Ghost. “Wait...what?”

“Uploading new coordinates now. Against my better judgment. May I help you with anything else?”

“Yeah, I'm confused.” Frea leapt off the ship and started to make her way toward the new location. “Who are you and are you ok? You sound a little....off.”

“I am the Exodus Black failsafe. Call me Failsafe! I boosted the Cayde-6's signal in hopes he would be rescued and here you are!”

“Ah,” Ghost said. “She's just an AI.”

“A malfunctioning AI,” Frea added.

“I heard that.”

Shaxx crossed the open field toward the newly arrived shuttles coming in from Titan. The improvised hanger in the large barn wasn't quite big enough to hold all the aircraft the Guardians managed to salvage from the Tower, so they had to spread out into the surrounding forest and farmland. He kept a constant guard of Red Jacks around the gear, in case Fallen discovered them or the deserters got any bright ideas. Thankfully, the massively tall treeline kept everything concealed for now.

A group had already amassed at the ramp of the jumpship when the Titan got there, chattering about the Vanguard and what the Commander's appearance meant for the Guardians now. He carefully pushed his way through the crowd with ease and stopped at the front.

“Zavala,” Shaxx called. The Commander turned around at the sound of his name. His features were sullen, it looked like he hadn't slept for days, but something bright sparkled in his eyes. Hope. “Glad to see you safe.”

A gentle smile danced across Zavala's face as he clasped Shaxx's arm. “Same to you, my friend.”

“Titan is secured, I assume?”

“Indeed. Thanks to a certain Hunter...the Hive took a huge hit there. I'd be surprised if they manage to give us trouble any time soon,” the Commander replied.

“Is she with you?” Shaxx asked.

Zavala's hand dropped. “No. She went deeper into the system to find Ikora and Cayde. I'm not sure where exactly.”
“I do!” A familiar Warlock popped up comically from behind the Commander.

“Maku,” Shaxx sighed. “I was wondering where you had disappeared off to.”

“Oh? Did you miss your favorite Guardian?” He chuckled.

The Titan tightly crossed his arms instead of replying.

“Alright, fine.” The Warlock mocked a pout. “We directed her toward Nessus, it's possible the signal to Cayde's Ghost is being boosted from there.”

“Nessus? Interesting,” Zavala remarked, placing an armored knuckle to his lip. “We have some planning to do then.”

“My Red Jacks will direct you to the main house, I'll meet you there shortly.” Shaxx motioned toward the center of the Farm, when the Commander left, he spun back to Maku. “How is she?” He asked.

“What? You doubt her?”

“Never. But it's been a few days since anyone at the Farm has heard back from her, even your clan. I just wanted...”

“To make sure she's okay?” Maku interrupted the thought, cupping his hands to his blue tinted cheeks. “Aw, that's so cute.”

Shaxx slowly shook his head, trying to keep his rising irritation from getting the better of him. Normally, he didn't mind Maku's antics, but he didn't have the patience for it today. Something caught his eye when he took his gaze away from the Warlock. A Titan was leaning against the shuttle in the far back, larger than most run of the mill Guardians, he had a rocket launcher strapped to his back and a harsh stare directed at the Crucible handler.

He didn't have the chance to ponder the strange look before Maku grabbed his attention again. “So...Lord Shaxx.” The Warlock's grin widened. “I've got quite a story for you.”
The Gunslinging Damsel

Frea sprinted through the tunnels beneath Nessus's crust, each one carved with keen precision by the Vex during their terraforming process. She'd seen their work before on Venus and in the Vault of Glass, though the technology here seemed younger and less advanced.

“Cayde’s signal is just dead ahead,” her Ghost sounded over the comm.

She leapt over a low wall and landed hard in a ring of warp gates, her heart skipped a beat when she found the Hunter Vanguard stuck floating in a cluster of glowing particles at the center.

“Cayde?!”

He looked up and caught her gaze, his robotic expression taking on a stunned look. “Frea?” The Exo put up his hands. “Listen-I know what this looks like and I just have to say...it wasn't my fault.”

“Sure it wasn't,” Frea said sarcastically. “You only happened to come to Nessus and just happened to stumble into a Vex portal network, right?” She started to step forward, but the warped reality fragments surrounding Cayde began vibrating rapidly at her approach.

“Ok, it is my fault! I don't know what happened...I don't have time to explain what I don't have time to understand!” And just like that he blinked out of existence, his voice leaving a faint echo behind.

“Incoming Vex,” Failsafe alerted.

She whipped around to see the gates surrounding her come to life, crowds of Goblins and Minotaurs entered the cavern, their guns point right at the huntress.

“I don't have time for this either,” Frea sighed and shot down three Goblins with half a clip from her hand cannon. “Failsafe, get me a new location on Cayde.”

“Already on it,” the AI replied. “The Cayde-6 attempted to manipulate the Vex portal system and is now trapped in a nonlinear loop. I did try to warn him. He's, like, not that smart.”

Ignoring the majority of the Vex shooting at her, Frea took off running toward the next tunnel, going even farther down.

“For some reason...I'm not at all surprised by this outcome,” her Ghost murmured.

Failsafe's new coordinates brought Frea through an active portal and into the core of the centaur. She leaned over a steep edge and peered down the swirling gravity well leading to some unknown location far below her.

“Hm.” Reaching out a hand, she tested the pull of the Vex-built elevator. “I never trust these things.”

“Cayde should be at the bottom, we don't really have a choice,” her Ghost said.

“Right.” She took two steps back. “Get ready for revival, Ghost.”

The huntress jumped off the secure stone floor and into the well. At first, she was free-falling quick enough for her stomach to twist uncomfortably, but soon the gravity took effect and slowed her descent just enough for her boots to touch the ground safely.
“Hey! Over here!” A voice called. Frea looked over to spot Cayde still stuck and levitating dangerously far over a cliff. It wouldn't take much effort for the Vex to simply drop the Exo into the bottomless pit, if he was even in the same reality as her, the fancy time travel mechanics the ancient race used often made her head spin. “Get me out of here!” He yelled.

“I don't know, Cayde. That's a good look for you.” Frea smirked.

Cayde crossed his arms, which made him spin and hang upside down thanks to the lack of gravity in the time loop. “Ha ha,” he scoffed. “Very funny.”

Once again, the huntress moved forward to assist him but Failsafe cut her off. “Warning!” The air next to the Exo shimmered with light as a Hydra Mind materialized into the space. Immediately, Frea froze on the spot, caught off guard by the sheer size of the Vex.

“What is it?” Cayde asked, noticing her sudden change in attitude. When he finally turned around, he stared right into the Hydra's singular red eye. “Oh hell. Ok yeah, handle that first then me!”

Frea didn't like how intently the Vex Mind was looking at Cayde, snapping out of her shock, she recklessly chucked her arc grenade across the chasm. “Hey, ugly!” Her attack meagerly bounced off the Hydra's shield, but at least she now had its full attention. Spinning around, she ran to find a higher vantage point. The area all around her began to sparkle with electricity as other Vex entered the fray to fight alongside their Mind. She ducked to avoid a Goblin's fire and climbed up one of the tall pillars outlining the cliffside, unfortunately she was welcomed by a Hobgoblin at the top, the Vex's best snipers. The robot slammed down its foot in an attempt to knock the huntress off, but she grabbed it by the ankle and yanked hard, pulling it off its perch. Its metal frame shattered as it hit the stone floor below. Pulling herself up with a huff, she removed the sniper off her back and aimed down the sights.

The Vex Mind was slowly making its way toward her, it lacked speed due to its size but would undoubtedly kill her in one hit if it could land it. Working quickly, she gunned down the rest of the Hobgoblins guarding the pillars and then rested the red dot of her sniper over the Hydra's weak point, its eye. Only one bullet was left in her reserves, she had to make it count. Taking a steady breath and holding, she shot. The bullet missed by a hair, ricocheting off the Hydra's metal brow.

“For the love of-,” Frea cursed.

“Wowww,” Cayde hollered from across the cavern. “I saw that.”

“Shut up Cayde, or I'm gonna leave you here with the Vex!” She yelled back, her face burning hot from embarrassment.

“Oh never mind then, you're totally doing great!” He clapped. “Could you speed it up though? I'm getting a little nauseous-ugh.”

The huntress holstered her sniper with a groan and took out her auto rifle, guess she was going to have to do this the old fashioned way. Once the Hydra was close enough, she vaulted onto its head and planted her knife into the hard frame to anchor herself in place. As it thrashed under her, she pressed the barrel of her gun against its eye socket and pulled the trigger. The Vex Mind exploded from the inside out, blasting hot radiolarion fluid in every direction. Frea landed clear of the explosion, hand on her hip with satisfaction as she watched the Vex melt into nothingness.

“Frea!” Cayde hurriedly beckoned. “I know watching the Vex burn up is fun and all but I don't think this portal is going to stick around for much longer.”

She walked back to the cliff edge. “Alright, so how-“
“Stop-stop-stop!” He interrupted. “Look-long story and it may look like I don't know what I'm doing, but I do-ok, maybe not...” His arms flailed wildly as he spoke, trying to keep himself from spinning in place. “Doesn't matter, killing the power source at the origin point should break the loop and get me out. You got that right? Please tell me you got that?”

“Wait, what?” She tilted her head.

The displaced reality particles around the Exo glowed brighter as he ran his hands over his face. “Oh my cotton socks! Did you not hear what I just said?” In the next instant, he was gone again.

Frea checked her ammo reserves and slung the rifle across her back. Her Ghost materialized next to her, the light in its eye glittered in the dim cavern. “This must be why they don't like him leaving the Tower,” it commented.

She laughed.

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“This is the teleporter?” Frea asked as she inspected the odd device, it was much smaller than she expected, about the size of a hand held shield. It emitted the same energy signature as what was surrounding Cayde.

“Yes! The Cayde-6 will want it. You should pick it up,” Failsafe gleefully answered.

Carefully, she closed the circular frame and locked it in place, the gentle humming coming from the device went quiet. The huntress hoped that meant it was deactivated now. When she picked the teleporter up from its pedestal, her comms suddenly went haywire.

“Take that, you scrap heap a-ha! I'm out, baby. Out! Woo!” Cayde's voice poked through the static, the strange echo he had while trapped in the loop was gone.

“Cayde.” Frea strapped the teleporter under her cape, out of harm’s way. “Where are you?”

“Hey, you did it!” He gasped. “You got me out, ha-ha...w-where am I?”

“Cayde Unit. You are near the remains for my reactor core. Welcome aboard the Exodus Black,” Failsafe replied. “Where all your dreams come true.”

“Huh,” he snorted. “Looks like you met my new friends, Failsafe, and her evil twin, Failsafe.”

“Which is the evil one?” Frea's Ghost asked.

“If I had feelings, they would be hurt!” The AI said with a jarring amount of joy in her tone.

“Ok, settle down you two. Cayde, stay put. I'm coming to pick you up,” Frea cut in.

“Uh...yeah about that,” he started.

“Intruder alert!” Failsafe loudly chimed. “Cayde Unit, you are attracting large numbers of Fallen to my position.”

“The Fallen are in a tizzy! And by tizzy, I mean murderous rampage. Dammit. Failsafe, they're shootin' at me!”

“Then I advise to not get shot.”

Frea picked up her pace, boosting her movements with arc energy. “Hunker down in the Exodus
Black, I'll be there soon."

“No problem, Failsafe has shields! The Fallen can't get to us now.” Cayde paused. “They can't get to us, r-right Failsafe?”

“Please stand back, Cayde Unit.”

Finally, the light of day received the huntress as charged out of the Vex tunnels and began to clamber up the grassy hill. The first thing her gaze landed on once she reached the other side was the massive Exodus Black and the Ketch ship that lingered over it. The Golden Age colony ship was in pieces, destroyed by a bad landing long ago, half of it was sitting in water while the rest was most likely scattered across Nessus. The Fallen had swarmed the ground and surrounded Failsafe's reactor core, their constant gunfire was making her shielding bubble, it wasn't going to hold for much longer.

“There's a Captain to the right,” her Ghost pointed out.

Frea glanced to the side and spotted the oversized Fallen wielding a scorch cannon. He was the one leading the pack, taking him out would make the others easy pickings. She crept along the blackened wreckage of the colony ship, staying low to avoid the Vandals' sights, and came up behind the Captain. He barked orders to the Dregs in their Eliksni tongue and turned around, just in time to meet the end of the huntress's arc charged staff. Hissing, the Captain tripped backward, his shield falling to pieces from the hit. She managed to land two more swipes before catching the attention of the nearby Fallen, who all quickly fell to her electric shockwave. The Captain, badly hurt but still willing to fight, tried to lift his arms for a counterattack. With a final slash of her staff, Frea severed his torso from the rest of his body and grabbed the scorch cannon as it fell from his grasp. She hefted it over her shoulder and shot a barrage of fire at the remaining Dregs and Vandals, the torrent of flames left nothing in its wake except for charred scraps of purple cloth.

Taking a second to catch her breath, the huntress dropped the cannon and jogged back toward the reactor core. The shielding went down as she entered, followed by Failsafe's voice. “Updating crew log, welcome aboard Captain!”

“Where's Cayde?” Frea asked, still breathing hard.

Something blinked in the low light of the ship interior and she glanced over to catch the sight of a Ghost hovering over broken railing, it's shell a modest grey and red color. A gloved hand reached up and gently pulled the bot back down to safety. “Shhh, down, down, down,” Cayde whispered and then popped his head out of hiding, his eyes glowing brightly with suspicion.

A sigh of relief escaped Frea and she smiled behind her visor. “Got you a little something,” she said, casually waving the Vex teleporter in the air.

“So it's true.” The Hunter Vanguard slowly straightened and stepped forward. “The light found its way back to you. Not that I'm jealous or nothin'.” He stopped in place with a smirk. “So does this make me the damsel in distress then?”

“Let's be honest, you're not pretty enough to be a damsel,” she jested and tossed him the device.

“Oh? Am I not Titan enough for you?” He winked, plucking the teleporter out of the air.

Frea folded her arms, turning serious. “Tell me, what were you planning to do with that?”

Cayde pressed a dial on the teleporter, making it open up like a blossom as he placed it on the ground. He kneeled over it to fiddle with the inner workings, pulling out a few screws and bolts as he did so. “Get up close to Ghaul, put a bullet in his head.” He shrugged. “Maybe eat a sandwich.”
The huntress ran a hand over her visor, she was afraid he would come up with something like that.
“Gotta work out a few kinks first though,” he continued. “Fun fact about Vex tech; not as intuitive as
you think.”

“Cayde...I know you prefer the whole 'lone wolf' Hunter image, but you can't do this by yourself.”

“The hell I can't,” he grumbled. “Hunters are meant to be lone wolves, Frea. You're the weird one
with that oversized clan of yours.”

“Perhaps I learned long ago that it's better to fight alongside friends rather than die alone,” she
huffed.

The Exo paused for a moment as he locked eyes with her. Suddenly, a spark emitted from the Vex
device and he jumped back in surprise. “Ow!”

Frea’s Ghost appeared over her shoulder. “You know, even if you manage to kill Ghaul, when the
Red Legion leaves a system they leave nothing behind,” it said.

“Yeah, yeah. The Cabal are bad guys who do bad things. I get it,” he said dismissively.

“I don't think you do,” Frea added, her tone stern. “They literally leave nothing behind.” Cayde shot
another glance at them and apparently pressed something he shouldn't have on the teleporter, because
it closed shut over his fingers, trapping them.

“They have a weapon that can destroy a star!” Her Ghost's voice started to strain from desperation.
“And it's pointed right at our sun.”

With a hard pull, Cayde freed himself and raised his palms. “Hey-hey-hey. Easy, you're going to
blow a bulb.”

Frea sighed. “The Commander has a plan. He needs you, Cayde.”

Grabbing up the device, he moved forward. “Yes, Zavala always says he has a plan, but sometimes-
wait...Zavala said he needs me? Me?” He pointed to himself. “As in you heard those exact words
from his mouth?” Cayde stepped even closer, the excitement brimming off him was almost palpable.

“Yes.”

“Please tell me you recorded it!”

Sharing a look with her Ghost, Frea shook her head.

All the energy in the Exo drained away as his shoulders slumped. “Well, did Ikora as least hear it?”
He asked.

“Ikora is missing, we lost her after the City fell.” She averted her eyes, her mind automatically
drifting to thoughts of Dex. “We don't know where she is.”

Cayde looked away, rubbing his metal chin. “Io...it's where she'd go to look for answers.”

“Io?” Frea's Ghost bounced in the air. “Maybe Dex is at Io as well? He could still be with Ikora.”

“Maybe...” Frea whispered. She moved her gaze back up to the Exo. “Do you need a lift to Earth?”

“Yeah actually, I do. Crash landed on the way here.”
“I figured as much,” she chuckled.

“Hey! I'm not a complete train-wreck, you know,” he complained as he followed the huntress back outside. When they reached fresh air, he grabbed her arm to stop her. “Hey, um... thanks, I owe you one.”

“How about you teach me some knife tricks and we'll call it even?” Frea offered.

A wide grin spread across Cayde's features. “I think you're better with blades than me. How about sniper lessons?”

She lightly socked him in the arm. “That was low.”

“Payback for that damsel comment earlier,” he laughed.

A glint in the distance caught Frea's eye and she glanced past the Exo. The red dotted sight of a wire rifle was peeking out from the wreckage of the Exodus Black. It took half a second for her mind to register what it was and that it was trained directly on the back of Cayde's hooded head, her heart dropped.

“Look out!” She yelled and tackled him to the ground.

The roar of a gunshot bounced off the water. Searing hot pain erupted in Frea's chest as the all too familiar crushing darkness consumed her.
Always Her

She ran, keeping her gaze lowered to the tail of his coat, caked with snow and torn from their recent battle against the Archon Priest. He glanced behind and yelled something back at her, but she couldn't make out his words over the harsh wind, the interference from the snowstorm was too great for their comms to operate. A whimpering from her arms made her clutch the child she held tighter to her breastplate.

"Don't worry, we're almost to the wall," she reassured, unsure if the boy could hear her at all.

He stared up at the huntress with wide, teary eyes, and then slowly nodded. He trusted her without question, a Guardian sent to protect him and his family. How could she fail him?
The sound of a gun echoed off the mountains in the distance and the world seemed to freeze in the next second. She looked up to see Dex stop, his face turning to pure horror as he spun in an attempt to catch her. The pain came next. Her back armor cracked from the impact, doing little to stop the Vandal's bullet as it tore through her body. The last thing she remembered was the boy's crying going silent and then absolutely nothing at all.

The scene suddenly shifted, changing to the Tower during the Red Legion's attack. The snow morphed into black ash, the screaming into deafening gunfire. She was reaching out to a shadowed figure standing at the edge of the abyss, his coat whipping in the wind just like that day so long ago.

"Don't go." She heard herself cry out.

The Warlock slowly turned toward her. "You can't protect everyone." The shadow's voice didn't belong to Dex like she expected, instead it matched the same deep tones of the brusque Titan from the water-logged moon. Then, it stepped off the ledge, disappearing into the smoking City below.

Frea jolted awake, her instincts on overdrive, and grabbed the nearest thing in front of her. Which happened to be the collar of Cayde's cape.

"Whoa, whoa!" He placed a firm hand on her arm that was reaching for the knife strapped to her belt. "It's just me."

She peered around, realizing that they were on her jumpship, and let go of the Exo. "What happened?"

"A Vandal got you in the heart." He pointed toward her discarded armor sitting in the corner, a clear hole was punched through the chestplate. "Got your Ghost to call in the ship and high-tailed it out of there to revive you."

"Ah." Frea rubbed her head, trying to ease the light headache at her temple. "Thanks," she murmured.

One of the metals plates that made his brow raised slightly, the light in his glowing eyes narrowing. "Frea, you were out for an entire day. When's the last time you got any sleep?" He asked.

She shrugged, brushing past him as she climbed of the bed. "Dunno, few days maybe."

"Few days?!" Cayde's mouth dropped. "You know resurrection takes longer if you don't have the energy right?"

"Doesn't matter...I'll still revive," she curtly replied, stooping down collect the armor he had removed
during her sleep.

“'Nope, you're going back to bed.'” A shadow crossed the light at Frea's back as he suddenly picked her up from behind.

“H-Hey!” Frea fought in his arms but surprisingly he barely budged in spite of his slender build.

He dropped her on the bed and placed his hands on his hips. “We'll be back on Earth in two hours, if I don't see you napping like a baby in the next five minutes then I'm telling Shaxx on you.”

Her eyes widened. “You wouldn't dare...”

“Oh...” Cayde leaned in, a grin etched across his face. “I would.”

The huntress's cheeks puffed up into a pout, but she fell back into the warm blankets anyway, rolling over to face the blank hull with a loud huff. “You suck,” she grumbled.

“If that were true, then you wouldn't have sacrificed yourself to protect me.” He grew quiet for a second, the purr of the engine was the only thing to be heard in the cabin. “Frea?” Cayde abruptly spoke up again.

“Hmm?”

“Thank you,” he said, his tone dipping low. “Really.”

She smiled slightly. “You owe me two now.”

He chuckled. “Sniper lessons and knife tricks, got it.”

The Exo returned to the helm, leaving her alone in the dark cabin. Frea couldn't deny being tired, sleep eluded her since she left the Farm, and when her eyes finally did close, nightmares tormented her mind. Even death didn't keep them away.

Her Ghost appeared before her. “Are you alright?” It whispered.

“I'm fine,” she shortly replied.

It blinked, casting a glance over at the helm before returning its eye to her. “Cayde didn't say anything because I don't think he wants to pry...but you were mumbling in your sleep. Is it the dreams again?”

Frea grimaced. That would explain why the Exo was so close when she woke up, he must have heard her and came over to see what was wrong. She wasn't in the mood to talk about it, but then again it was often pointless to hide anything from her Ghost. “Bad memories, of the first time I died and of...” Her voice caught, stopping her from finishing.

“I see.” The tiny bot drifted over to land on her pillow. It understood exactly what she meant. “I have no doubt that Dex will be at Io.”

“Yeah?”

“As Psyho likes to say; I'd bet my lunch on it!” It chirped excitedly. “Rhetorical speaking, of course, since I don't have a mouth.”

A soft giggle escaped the huntress thanks to the bot's optimism, she appreciated its attempt at making her feel better. “I hope so, Ghost.”
The resounding chopping of axe blades hitting wood cut through the forest as the Guardians worked on dismantling a large oak for the Farm's fire pit. With a deft swing, Shaxx cleaved a piece of the trunk in two and tossed it into the growing pile. A cool fog leftover from the night before still drifted around the grass and trees, leaving specks of water on his exposed arms. He and the other two Titans with him had to remove most of their upper armor for the menial task, trying to take down a tree in it proved to be too cumbersome. Bending to grab another chunk of wood, his Ghost suddenly materialized in the air above his shoulder.

“You have a message,” it chimed.

“From?”

“Zavala, he says Cayde just arrived.”

“I'm busy.” He swung the axe down again, sending splinters everywhere. “Surely he can handle Cayde himself.”

“Frea is with him as well,” it added.

Shaxx paused then, wiping the sweat off his brow. “I'll be there in five minutes.”

He got back to the Farm in less time than that. Still clicking the last bit of his armor back on, he stomped into the hanger to see the Vanguards talking, but no sign of the huntress.

“Hey, big guy!” Cayde grinned when he noticed the Titan.

“Where's Frea?” Shaxx asked.

“What, you didn't rush over here just to see me? I'm heartbroken.”

“Cayde...,” the Titan warned, his patience thinning.

“She left for the air field a minute ago,” Zavala cut in, glancing up from his reports. “You may still catch her if you leave now.”

Without another word, Shaxx spun on his heel and briskly walked back out of the barn. As he crossed the bridge leading to the field, he caught sight of a white caped Hunter crouched on top of a jumpship. Frea was doing maintenance work before lift off, checking the vents at the base of the wings.

“Leaving so soon?” He asked once he reached the ship.

The little flinch she did when she recognized his voice didn't go unnoticed by the Titan, but she just continued on with her work without looking up. “Cayde thinks Ikora is on Io, that's at least a two day flight...so I figured it would be best to go now.”

The way she avoided his gaze sent a red flag blaring in Shaxx's head. He stretched out an arm, easily reaching the wing with his height, and gently grabbed her wrist. Her hands stopped moving with his touch. “Frea,” he commanded. “Look at me.” Hesitantly, the huntress obeyed. She moved to peer down at him, the morning light casted away the shadow of her hood, giving him a better view of her face. The Titan's heart dropped when their eyes met. In the days since she had left for Titan, she had thinned, her cheeks no longer had the same heart shape that always made it look like she was on the verge of laughing. Her skin was paler, making the dark circles under her eyes stand out even more.
She looked exhausted. “Maybe you should stay for another day to rest. Ikora can wait.”

Frea pulled her arm out of his grip, turning away as she tugged her hood down farther over her head. “No. I need to leave now.”

He frowned. She was in more of a rush than usual, and he had a feeling as to why. “You think Dex is with her, don't you?”

“Maybe,” she coolly replied.

“Frea, you can't let your obsession with finding this Warlock stop you from seeing the bigger picture,” Shaxx said with a bit too much force then he intended. “You're letting it wear you down.”

“And what picture is that?” She snapped back. “To get the City back? Save the Traveler?” Getting to her feet, the huntress slid off the side of the jumpship and landed in front of him. “Why always me?”

“What?” The tone she spoke to him in hit a nerve on the Titan.

“When Crota came, it was me. When it was Oryx, me again. And the same with SIVA.” She thrust three fingers up in his face, counting each and every encounter. “I already tried to take down Ghaul...and what did the Traveler do when I failed? Nothing. I'm tired of being the chosen one, haven't I done enough already?!”

“Done enough...” Shaxx could feel his blood start to bubble with irritation, his hands balled into fists by his side. “Last I checked, the Traveler chose the huntress who made a vow to protect the City and those in it. Not some rookie who gives up just because things are getting hard,” he spat, his pitch rising. “What happened to that fierce determination?”

Frea opened her mouth to say something back, but quickly snapped it shut, the tips of her eyes started to glisten with tears. “What's the point of it all if I can't save those dear to me? I can't keep doing this alone,” she harshly whispered.

“Is everything alright over here?” The two of them froze in place at the new presence drawn in by their shouting, it was Sain, one of the founders to Frea's clan.

Looking down, she discreetly wiped her eyes and then met the Exo's gaze with a fake smile. “Yeah, everything's fine. I was just leaving.”

“Frea, wait...” Shaxx tried to reach for the huntress, but she evaded his grasp and climbed back into the jumpship, immediately bringing the engines to life. In the next moment, she was gone, the exhaust of her ship leaving a white streak against the blue sky. He stared up at the clouds until he could no longer see her.

“Sorry for intruding,” Sain said next to him.

“No, it's fine.” The Titan ran a hand over his visor with a long exhale, his anger had already melted away. “You stopped me from saying more regretful things.”

“Sir, may I speak freely?” The Warlock asked, clasping his hands behind his back.

“Go ahead.”

“For as young Frea is...she's had to take on a lot as a Guardian, and isn't as strong as you seem to believe. Her passion and drive often turns to fixation, and now Dex isn't here to keep her anchored. Unlike the previous times she's had to fight for the fate of the City, she's now doing it without her
pillar.” Sain spoke slowly, choosing his words with great care.

“Am I too unreliable to be her pillar instead?”

“I don't think that's it-this is just my observation of course—but it seems like she doesn't want to trouble you,” the Warlock continued. “Her bond with you is different then the one she shares with Dex after all.”

“I'd gladly welcome any burden she's willing to share with me,” Shaxx said, his voice unwavering. "Then perhaps you should tell her that next time. Even great Guardians destined for legend have a weakness, but you already know that.” A warm smile appeared on Sain's face as he lightly patted the Titan's shoulder. “Good luck.”

He watched the Warlock strode back toward the fire pit, and then turned his gaze to the sky again.

“How can I be so stupid!?” The huntress flung her knife across the ship, it stuck into the thick hull plating with a ringing squeal.

“Frea...” Her Ghost drifted behind her as she paced. “Calm down.”

“Don't tell me to calm down.” She kicked a box in her way, scattering weapon parts all over. “Shaxx must hate me now.” Putting her back against the bed, she sank to the floor with a groan and tucked her knees to her chest.

“If Lord Shaxx so easily hated people, then Maku would have been kicked out of the Crucible ranks ages ago.”

“This is different,” she snorted.

“How so?” The Ghost floated down to her eye level. “It's not like you haven't shown weakness to him before.”

“Losing my temper isn't the same as crying, Ghost.” Frea buried her face into her hands. “I can't believe I yelled at him like that, what was I thinking?” She muttered. Her initial plan after dropping Cayde off was to avoid all distractions and leave for Io immediately to get Dex, but when she heard Shaxx's voice, all she could think about was staying. Fighting that desire made her even more weary, and she ended up venting her frustrations on him. For once she was glad his expression was hidden behind a helmet, she didn't want to imagine the face he made.

“Arguments with people you're close to are normal,” it said. “He did have a point, though.”

She looked back up, letting her chin rest on top her knees. “I know he did, and I'm not breaking my vow, it's just...I haven't soloed a mission since the Black Garden. And you remember how poorly that went.” The countless deaths and revives that nearly drove her to madness, the struggle to fight the Vex on her own when she was just a fledgling of a Guardian, Frea shook her head to force the memories out. “I don't know how I'm supposed to take on an entire Cabal army on my own.”

“You've been doing quite well so far all things considered, saved two of the Vanguard and even some of your clanmates. Perhaps you should try relying on Lord Shaxx more instead of bottling everything up.”

“The last thing he needs to hear is about my problems,” Frea sighed.
The Ghost landed on her head, nuzzling into the folds of her hood. “It that what he thinks? Or you?”

“I...” she faltered. “I-I don't know.”

“Frea,” the Ghost whispered gently. “You're not alone. There's me, your clan, and all the Guardians wishing you the best. You're giving them hope and when the time comes, I believe they will fight by your side even without their light.”

The huntress sniffled, feeling the tears she held back creep into her eyes once more. “Ugh, I'm going to cry again.” Despite that, she couldn't resist the minute smile that formed over her lips. “Shaxx and my clan fighting together, that's a fun thought.”

“Over sixty rowdy Guardians and a massive Titan with a sword? That would make Ghaul himself quake in his boots.”

She laughed, her voice breaking as she wiped the moisture off her cheeks. “Let's hurry to Io, we have a mission to finish.”
Io was the last place the Traveler had touched before the collapse of the Golden Age, its interrupted terraforming process left the plant life in an unnatural stunted state after it was abandoned, making it difficult for voyagers to ever settle here. During the Guardians' rise to power, the moon became a pilgrimage site, many coming to visit the mountain overlooking a crater left behind by the Traveler. They came with the hope of finding answers to their many questions, though Frea wasn't sure if they found anything besides the annoying Vex that swarmed the moon.

The huntress looked up after she materialized out of her jumpship and landed in the dust. Ikora stood at the edge of the green mesa, her hands neatly folded behind her back. Her posture was proud and tall, but Frea could see the slightest shake in her shoulders.

"Of all the places I've been in all the years since my rebirth, this is where I return," the Warlock started, not even casting a glance at her new visitor's direction. "The last place the Traveler touched."

"Searching for those answers?" Frea inquired.

Ikora nodded slowly. "It's been days, and yet I still stand here with nothing."

"Commander Zavala is forming a resistance and he believes-"

"What good is a resistance when you are the only one who would survive?" She cut off the huntress, finally turning around with bitterness lined in her voice.

"If I could fight Ghaul alone...I would." Frea squared off her shoulders, standing taller. "But one Guardian isn't enough to take down an entire army, I need help. And the others, need you."

The Warlock Vanguard averted her eyes for a moment. "I believe this Ghaul creature must know the Traveler blessed this site. I believe he sent his Legion to find something they could possibly never understand. And I believe they will continue to desecrate all we hold sacred." She took a steadying breath, her features softening as she looked back at the huntress. "Frea...save this place, do not squander this second chance."

"Of course, whatever you need."

A roar of engines overhead made the two of them glance at the sky. Cabal Thresher ships soared over the horizon, all of them heading away from one direction as if they were trying to escape from something. Frea didn't have to ponder why for long as the sky suddenly erupted with pure white light, far brighter than the sun, the shockwave left her skin tingling.

"What...," Ikora's face dropped as she cupped her fingers over her mouth. "Energy...the Traveler's energy. What have they done?!” She sputtered. "This is my fault. I could have stopped this."

"Don't blame yourself, you may have died without your light," Frea softly said, reaching out to give the Warlock a reassuring pat.

"I am more than just my light! I should have at least tried," she snapped. "But...all these years dying, being reborn, dying again. The Traveler has left me with one life, and I am afraid to lose it."
The huntress froze, her hand still hovering, and then slowly retracted it. Ikora was a difficult woman
to talk to, and even more impossible to read than Shaxx, soothing words felt empty at this point.

Thankfully, her Ghost appeared in the air next to her shoulder, cutting the awkward tension. “If we
don’t stop Ghaul, then that might happen anyway. He has a weapon that can blow up our sun.”

That got Ikora's attention again. “What?! Why would he destroy what he's worked so hard to
conquer?”

Frea shrugged. “Not even the Commander knows why.”

“Hm...” Spinning away from the edge of the mesa, the Warlock Vanguard returned her focus to
Frea. “There's a Red Legion base to the north of here. Get to it, then perhaps we will find answers
there.”

“Yes, ma'am.”

“Thank you, Frea. I'll be in touch.” When Ikora moved to walk past, Frea stepped in her path to stop
her.

“Um...may I ask you one more thing?” She anxiously wrung her hands together.

“Certainly, what is it?”

“Is there any chance that Dex is with you? He and I split up near the Speaker's quarters during the
attack on the Tower. No one has heard from him since.”

Ikora's brows knitted together. “He found me and was a great help in getting many of the refugees
out safely, but we got separated in the City after the Traveler's light vanished. I don't know where he
is now. I'm sorry.”

“I-I see,” Frea stuttered, her gaze dropping to her feet. “Thank you anyway.”

A weight touched her shoulder and she flinched, looking up again to meet the Warlock's eyes. “Dex
is one of my best Voidwalkers. I have no doubts that he is still out there, surviving.”

Shrugging off Ikora's comforting hand, the huntress turned away. “I'll contact you if I find anything
new about the Red Legion here.”

Without a glance back, she leapt off the mesa and plunged to the crater below.

——

“Guardian...” The Ghost drifted behind her, struggling to keep up with the fast pace. “You're being
awfully quiet. I'm concerned.” When the huntress didn't respond, it grew louder. “Frea!”

She stopped in her tracks and put up a hand, silencing the little bot. Following Ikora's orders, they
entered the Cabal base only to find it empty inside. The Red Legion had cleared out some time ago,
leaving their artificial tunnels and stripped supply crates behind. Desperate for clues, the huntress
went deeper, and now she stared up at a massive drill hanging from the cavern ceiling. The
machinery was dusty and broken, whatever they used it for was clearly too much for the equipment.

Frea pressed a finger to the comm built into her helmet. “Ikora, do you see this?”

“I do,” the Warlock immediately replied. “Could they be mining the Traveler's energy? No, it's not
light. It can't give the Traveler's blessing. Not to me, not to Ghaul.” She paused. “Or could it?”
“Only one way to find out,” Frea sighed and continued her jog forward. Since she stepped into the base, the air around her felt off somehow, like it was heavier with the weight of darkness. But the Cabal didn’t have that power, the only ones who could control it were the Hive, Vex, and...

“Watch out!” Her Ghost warned.

The huntress skidded to a halt just in time to avoid planting a boot into the black mass spread across the ground. She quickly backed away, shuddering from the coldness leaking out of the crevice. It looked like a nightmarish creature had taken a bite out of the world and in its wake left a window to the vast void of space. Only one thing could leave such a dreadful impact on the environment.

“Dimensional rifts,” she murmured. “It’s the Taken.”

The Ghost worriedly bobbed in the air. “Taken? Here?”

The sound of footsteps echoing off the rock behind made her turn. A slim figure dashed out one of the tunnels and ran past her, not even giving Frea a second look as they hopped over the rift and disappeared back into the darkness.

“What the hell...hey! Wait up!” She yelled, following after the stranger. The tunnels soon changed into natural caves outlined with bioluminescent plant life the farther they went down. Frea could barely make out the shape of the figure she chased. He was lightly armored, carrying a fusion rifle across his back, and wore the telling sign of a Hunter. The last thing she expected was to find another Guardian down here. “Hold on.” She tried to get his attention again, when he ignored her like last time, she grew annoyed. Bending down quickly to yank a knife out of her boot, she flung it just as the Hunter rounded a corner. It caught him by the cape and pinned the fabric, along with him, to the wall. The gargling noise that emitting from his throat when he got clotheslined by his own armor was almost laughable. Though, Frea felt a little bad for stopping him in such a way, messing with another Hunter’s cloak was taboo.

He glared up at her from the ground when she approached him, his glowing eyes flickering with anger. “You could’ve broken my neck with that stunt, you know,” he snorted.

“Sorry,” Frea replied as she gripped her blade and pulled it out of the rock. “You wouldn’t stop otherwise.”

“I’m kinda in a hurry right now, so...”

“Xane!” A voice, loud enough for Frea to hear, blasted through the Guardian’s comm. “Need I remind you that Io is about to implode! Get a move on!”

“Yes, Asher. I’m working on it,” Xane answered with a grimace.

“Who’s Asher?” Frea asked.

“Asher?” Ikora was the one to reply through the comm. “Asher Mir? Is that you?”

“Irrelevant! The Taken are sapping the moon’s energy, I hypnotize that Io will be destroyed with us on it if somebody does not intervene!” Asher hollered.

“Guardian...” Ikora started.

“On it.” She offered a helping hand to the Hunter still sitting in the dust. “We’ll get this done faster with the two of us.”
Xane stared up at her with a deep frown that wrinkled his blue tinted skin. He seemed young, even compared to Frea, and undisciplined. She wondered how long he had been a Guardian before the light was taken away. After a moment, he batted her fingers away with a loud huff and crawled back to his feet. “I don’t need your help.”

“Ah, in that case I could just stick your cape back to the wall and take care of the Taken myself then,” she smirked, dangling the knife in her fingers.

His eyes widened slightly, but he quickly turned away and walked toward the direction he was originally heading to. “Fine, whatever. I don't care what you do.”

Frea quietly followed after him as she sheathed her blade. “What a pleasant guy,” her Ghost sarcastically commented in her head.

“Indeed.”

The Taken always left a bad taste in Frea's mouth. The air around them brimmed with a suffocating darkness, the same sort of feeling she experienced with every death. Whatever gave them their power used it as a means of control, it took away all freedom and individuality, basically turning any species into a slave. She thought killing Oryx over a year ago would have ended the Taken, but it seems he was just a puppet for some unknown master as well.

The huntress ducked behind a low concrete wall to avoid fire from a cluster of Taken Psions watching the cave exit. “Where are we?” She asked the Guardian next to her.

“Terrabase Charon. One of the dig sites the Cabal abandoned,” Xane replied, gripping a rifle to his chest. “Guess they didn't feel like dealing with the Taken.”

“Hm...” Frea peeked over cover for a second, catching a glimpse of a large ball of darkness amassing in the center of the blasted rock. Three Wizards surrounded it, chanting in some strange gurgling language. One of the Taken noticed her and she went down again just as a bullet grazed her visor. “Looks like they're summoning a portal,” she said.

“Stop them!” Asher cut into their comms. “Those mindless vermin intend to summon every last one of their spectral friends to devour this moon.”

“Is he always so obnoxious?” The huntress glanced over at her new partner.

“He has his good moments.”

“Really?”

“No,” the Hunter deftly replied, his mocking tone flat.

Frea quietly sighed to herself. She didn't know what crawled up this guy's craw to make him treat her with such disregard, but she wasn't amused by it. Taking a slow breath, she turned back to the Guardian. “If you can keep the small fry occupied, I can kill the Wizards.”

“Why do you get to go after the Wizards?” He shot back.

“Because I can revive,” she said matter-of-factly.

Xane's face shifted as he finally met her eyes, the grip on his gun tightening. “You...have your light back?”
“Yes, help me here and we'll have a chance to return the light to everyone else.”

She imagined he would be joyful, what kind of Guardian wouldn't be? But instead, his head swiveled back to peer at the cave where they had entered, his thoughts unreadable behind his blank expression. “Fine.”

The huntress's gaze traveled to Xane's hands, noting the shaking in his fingers, and then moved back to the field ahead of her. A glint of red near one of the Cabal's mining drills caught her eye.

“Actually,” she placed a hand on his shoulder and pushed him back behind cover. “Just stay here. If anything comes near you, shoot it.”

“Wha-wait!” He complained, but she was already too far away to hear him.

Staying low to avoid attracting unwanted attention, Frea ignored the Taken and promptly made her way over to the abandoned drill. The red she saw earlier came into focus as she neared it, hazard labels, painted over sealed barrels. Warning of the highly combustible and flammable materials locked away inside. She felt a small smirk ease over her lips. Perfect. A firm kick was enough to send the heavy barrel tumbling toward the Taken Wizards. One of them looked up, curious to see what was causing the racket as the drum rolled down the hill. The makeshift bomb exploded with a single bullet from her hand cannon, engulfing the Wizards entirely. The portal went down just as quick, not standing a chance against the fireball, and took the rest of the Taken along with it.

A silence came over the mining pit, quiet enough that Frea could hear the wind blow over the wide opening overhead. She carefully walked to where the dimensional portal had been and inspected the area. No sign of any stranglers, and even the chilling feeling the Taken always sent down her spine was gone. Strapping her gun back to her hip, she pulled off her helmet and took a deep breath of Io's moist air.

“Flashy,” Xane grumbled as he joined her at the bottom of the pit.

“Go big or go home, yeah?” Frea chuckled and summoned her Ghost into her palm. “Ikora, the portal is closed and the Taken are gone.”

“Excellent. Thank you, Frea.” The Warlock Vanguard responded over the comm. “This place is important, but there's nothing here for me on Io. I have one life to give now, and will gladly do so to stop Ghaul. See you back on Earth.”

The definite click of the radio signaled the closed transmission and her Ghost disappeared again. The huntress couldn't help but smile confidently to herself. All the Vanguard were now safe and accounted for, this plan for a counterattack might actually work after all. Her mood soaring, she turned back to her companion.

“So, Xane...” she started to say, but the thought caught in her throat. The Hunter was staring down at her strangely with a thin frown stretched across his lips. The way he looked at her made her hair stand on edge.

“Frea?” He finally said as he tilted his head slightly, his eyebrow inching higher. “As in the Hunter who took down the Black Garden singlehandly? The one who was part of the fireteam that killed Oryx and his followers?”

“Uh...yeah, guess you've heard of me huh.” The huntress offered an awkward smile.

“Hard not to when the Vanguard are always singing praises about great Guardians,” he practically spat out the words, the spite clear in his tone. “So I guess you're planning to be all heroic and restore
Her patience at its end, Frea stomped closer to the Hunter. “What the hell is your problem anyway? You've been nothing but rude to me since we've met.”

If Xane was bothered by her retort, he didn't show it, instead his scowl deepened. “This war, this hell we live in now...none of it would have happened if the Traveler never entered our system. Let the Cabal take the light, then maybe we can live in peace for once.”

“Peace? The Red Legion is going to blow up our sun once they have what they want.”

“So? It's not like we don't have the technology to leave.”

Anger blurred her vision and before she realized it, her hand flew up and slapped Xane directly across the face hard enough to stagger him back a step. “Light or not, we are Guardians and this is our home. As long as one of us stands...then we have a chance. Peace won't be achieved by running away.”

“Then maybe no one should get that chance,” he growled. Suddenly he leapt up and tackled the huntress to the ground. One of his hands closed around her throat while the other grabbed the knife she kept sheathed to her forearm. The metal gleamed bright and unused, the blade Kannon had given her for good luck before the mission into the Dark Forest. She had planned to return it without ever removing the weapon from its hilt, but so much for that.

They landed hard on the concrete together, her arms pinned by his knees, and the sharp blade pressed against the exposed flesh of her neck. She gasped from his weight crushing the air out of her lungs. “Shhh,” he hushed, adding more strength to his grip on the knife. Frea could feel the warm trickle of blood creep down into her armor. “This will be over soon.”

“Stop...I'll just come back,” she wheezed.

“You won't if I smash your Ghost before it revives you.”

“Why? Don't you want your power back?”

“One week,” he snapped. “I was a Guardian for one week before the attack on the Tower. I didn't choose it! I would've preferred to stay dead but no, the damn Vanguard insisted I fight...always telling us rookies about legends like you. Not everyone has that self-righteous desire to sacrifice for the greater good! Dying over and over again...” He looked away, his eyes darkening.

Xane might have been just a Hunter, but even so he was too heavy for Frea to simply knock off. Using her power would most likely kill him in the process...and she wasn't going to drop to his level and murder a fellow Guardian. She started to flex her fingers, making a small space between his armor and the rocky ground. All she needed to do was make sure he didn't notice.

“Why did you stay here after the light died?”

He returned his gaze back down to her. “Oh, I did try to run after they caged the Traveler...but I crash landed on this stupid moon and got roped in to helping Asher because I was a Guardian.” The Hunter sneered. “With you gone, however, the Vanguard will have no hope of defeating the Red Legion. Then I can be free of all obligations and return to a normal life.”

“Coward,” Frea whispered.

The sneer on his lips vanished. “Excuse me?”
Taking a strained breath, the huntress put all the energy she could muster into her voice. “You're a naïve coward! Letting others die just because you don't want to be a Guardian. It's pathetic-” She coughed her last word as his hold on her windpipe tightened.

“I don't care what you think.” He removed the knife from her neck and raised it high, poised to bring it down with deadly precision. Just before the attack reached her, Frea yanked a hand free and rolled to the side. The blade sank into the concrete where her head had been a second before and snapped cleanly into two. Continuing to twist, she grabbed a fistful of his hood and slammed his forehead against the stone.

Chapter End Notes

Xane: Male/Awoken/Hunter. Specialization: n/a.
Xane's body instantly went limp over Frea when his skull came into contact with the ground. She held her breath as the seconds ticked by, until she felt his chest rise and fall against her own. He was still alive.

“Whew...” She let out a relieved sigh.

“Frea.” Her Ghost appeared in the air above them. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, just a little shaken.” Gripping him by the shoulder, she gingerly pushed the Hunter off her and got to her feet. The muscles in her neck ached, making her wince in pain as she massaged the skin there. The wound from the knife had already healed and left a vibrant red blood stain on the collar of her cape, but otherwise she was no worse for wear.

“I'm surprised you didn't kill him,” her Ghost said as it hovered over the knocked out Guardian. “Overpowering him would have been child's play.”

Frea kneeled to pick up the shards of Kannon's knife. “I only kill when I absolutely have to, Ghost. You know that. Besides...I can understand where he's coming from-I don't like it-but I understand.” She peered down at the broken blade in her hands. “Young and clan-less, woken up in a unfamiliar world with powers only to have them suddenly taken away. If I didn't have my friends to rely on when I lost mine...I would have been resentful to.”

The Ghost was quiet as it considered her words. “I see. What do we do with him now?” Storing the busted knife into one of her pouches, she unsheathed a new one off her belt and drove it into the side of a nearby storage crate. The screeching of metal hitting metal echoed throughout the pit as she carved numbers into the rusty paint. The little bot bobbed over to her side to watch. “Coordinates?”

“Coordinates?” It asked. “To the Farm?”

“Xane's going to be stuck on this moon for awhile, this is just in case he finds a reason to not run away.”

“Yeah. Like revenge,” the Ghost soberly replied.

The huntress laughed. “Still a reason. Maybe if he beats me then I'll get Sain to send him an invite to the clan.” Finishing the last of her etching, she stepped back to examine her work. The small smile melted off her face as the realization of her mission began to hit her. “We got all the Vanguard together...but there's still much more to do, isn't there?”

“We'll be okay.” The glittering eye of her Ghost met hers. “I'm with you as always. And once we get the City back, we'll go find Dex together.”

Her smile returned as reached up and playfully poked the little bot. “Alright, time to head home. I've got an apology for a certain boisterous Titan to work on.”

Shaxx leaned against the corner of the large farmhouse, arms crossed as he watched Zavala and Ikora pace. Silver moonlight crept out of the holes in the thatched roof, mixing in with the warm glow of lanterns and sending shadows dancing over the hastily drawn out attack plans he and the Commander had been working on for the past week. The reports laid in piles, the blueprint to the Almighty ship was deeply buried underneath, every time one of the Vanguard crossed the room, a few of the papers would lift up and threaten to flutter off the table.
"If we do nothing, the Almighty will wipe out this system," Ikora sighed, finally placing her hands on the table. "If we fight back, then we may die anyway."

The door to the barn creaked open as Cayde-6 sauntered inside. "So really what you're saying is, we're damned if we do and damned if we don't."

The Warlock straightened. "Cayde, I see you decided to join us."

"Yeah, sorry, had to pick up a friend."

He stepped aside and Shaxx felt his heart miss a beat. Frea was behind the Exo, her hood down and helmet removed, she still looked as exhausted as the day she rushed to Io. The armor he had given her was holding, though he could see new gashes in the metal and a hole cut by a bullet in her chestplate. She’d been through hell. Her eyes followed the room to meet his through his visor and for a moment he could see something glimmer in her gaze, but a second later she turned away from his stare.

"Ah." Ikora smiled slightly. "I'm glad to see you made it back safely, Frea."

The corners of the huntress's mouth twitched up to return the smile. "Thanks, but don't mind me. I'm just here to listen," she said and moved to take a spot on the opposite wall of Shaxx.

"Well, back to the matter at hand. Now that we're together again, we just might stand a chance against the Red Legion," Zavala spoke up, his voice booming.

"The fact is," Ikora started. "If we destroy that weapon, we will ignite a chain reaction that could send our sun into a...supernova." A desolate expression passed over the Warlock's face for just a moment before she composed herself again.

"Huh, at least we have each other." Cayde's comment brought everyone's attention to him in the back of the room, the Hunter stood cuddling the most obedient chicken Shaxx ever laid eyes on. A restrained giggle could be heard from Frea's corner.

Without batting an eye, Zavala continued. "Indeed. We all know what needs to be done. The Traveler must be freed."

"I'm thinking the three of us and a big, fat pile of explosives can get the job done." Cayde gently placed down the chicken and brushed off the feathers sticking to his armor. "Look, I still have that Vex teleporter. It's got a limited range, so we have to get a little too close for comfort."

"Then we get inside the City calls for it to be effective," the Commander said, leaning in.

"But without the light, an outright assault on the Wall is doomed to fail. We could..." Ikora faltered, casting her eyes downward. "There will be no coming back."

"It's worth it," Cayde added.

The Warlock took a shaky breath. "How do we get in?"

"You know," a new voice from the barn rafters cut in, drawing the Guardians' gazes upward. Hawthorne sat on a pillar, her sniper situated across her lap and her foot swinging lazily in the air. "The City wall is kind of like this barn. Plenty of places to slip in unseen, as long as you know how."

Strapping her rifle to her back, she nimbly jumped off and landed right next to Cayde.

He tilted his head to the side. "You sure you're not one of my Hunters?"
She snorted, casting a look at the Exo. “Not really into capes.”

“Clearly.” He grinned with amusement as she walked by him. “Nice poncho.”

“You need to get your team into the City without raising any alarms. My people and I can help you do that,” Hawthorne spoke confidently. “We also happen to be pretty good at shooting bad guys.”

“Hawthorne. It's one thing for us to put our lives on the line, but this doesn't have to be your fight,” Ikora said. “You're not a...”

“A Guardian?” Hawthorne cut the Warlock off. “You think you've cornered the market on sacrifice? You forget that we've had to survive without the light for all our lives!” Her tone steadily rose. “Once upon a time, that big white ball in the sky was there for all of us. I think it's about time we returned the favor. Guardians or not.”

“Agreed,” Shaxx broke his long hanging silence. “The refugees here have fighting spirit, I say we put that to use.”

Cayde threw up his hands. “That's great and all, but let's not forget the whole supernova and complete annihilation thingy.”

“If we can't destroy the Almighty, then we'll have to disable its weapon.” Zavala looked over at the huntress. “Frea, are you up for the task?”

All eyes on her now, she nodded without hesitation. “Yes.”

“We'll need a good disguise if we're going to fly through a Cabal armada,” Ikora added.

“If it's a Cabal ship you need, there's a base nearby packed full of them. It won't be easy sneaking in,” Hawthorne said.

The Commander shook his head, a miniscule smile playing across his lips. “Oh, we're done sneaking. If there's one thing I learned from Cayde...it's the value of a grand entrance.”

“Oh, this is great.” The Exo placed a finger under his eye to wipe away the nonexistent tears and raised his arms. “Anyone want a hug?” When no one moved, he lowered them again. “No hugs.”

The night was unusually cold, or maybe Frea had just gotten used to being off planet for so long, she wasn't sure. She cupped her hands to her mouth, breathing over her fingers to warm them, her armor doing nothing to hold back the chill. It took nearly two weeks for her to retrieve all three Vanguards, and even now she could see a difference in the faces of the Guardians passing the front of the barn house. The fervor in the air was unmistakable, everyone was ready to fight back, for the City and for the Traveler. She just had one more job, one more mission to give them the chance to.

Her eyes moved back to the barn as the last remaining lantern inside was snuffed out. The door swung open and out stepped Shaxx, the moon glinting off his armor like a mirror. Frea wasn't sure if he noticed her standing in the shadow of the hanger, even the moonlight couldn't reach her here, the snowy whiteness of her cape hidden in the darkness. She nervously bit her lip when he crossed the lawn toward the Crucible room. During her flight back from Io she practiced her apologies so many times, but now with his daunting form approaching, they were lost to her.

“You're seriously not going to chicken out now are you?” Her Ghost huffed in her head. “How many times have you laughed in the face of death but when it comes to talking to Lord Shaxx you freeze up?”
“What if he's still mad at me?” She whispered back.

“You won't find out if you just lurk in the dark like this. Go on, Frea, you got this.”

Taking a long breath, the huntress slapped her palms to her cheeks. “I got this. Totally got this. What's the worst that could happen?”

“If it were me and I had to choose between fighting the Templar barehanded or talking to a pissed off Lord Shaxx...I'd much rather take my chances with the Templar,” a voice chuckled behind the huntress.

Frea jumped and stumbled out of her hiding place into the moonlit hangar entryway. She landed face first on the grass with as much grace as a Titan and knocked over a weapon stand positioned outside the door, sending blank gun frames flying everywhere.

“Smooth,” her Ghost tittered.

“Ugh...great.” Grumbling, she started to get up on her own until she saw an armored hand come into her view. Her gaze slowly moved up and met Shaxx's painted visor.

“You alright?” He asked, his deep tone level and clear. If he was still angry at her, he was hiding it well.

Feeling all the blood rush to her face, she quickly looked down to hide her embarrassment as she took his hand. “Y-yeah, I'm okay.”

“Good.” He pulled her back to her feet and tilted his head to glance over her shoulder. “Was that really necessary, Maku?”

Frea turned to see the Warlock step out of the darkness, half doubled over with laughter. “Sorry, sorry.” He held his sides, gasping for air between his nonstop giggling. “She was just standing there....thought I'd give her a little...push.” After a big intake of breath, he calmed himself enough to talk normally. “My bad, Frea. I forget how jumpy you are sometimes.”

“It's fine,” she sighed, feeling her cheeks heat up even more. He might be apologizing now, but she knew Maku won't let her live this humiliating scene down later. “I'm a little frazzled tonight. So, I think I'm just going to go pass out in my tent now...” She tried to run away with the tiny amount of dignity she still had left, but she didn't get far when she realized Shaxx was still tightly gripping her hand.

“Wait!” Maku slide into her path, hands held up. “I didn't come over here just to bug you and lov-ahem-Lord Shaxx.” His glowing eyes darted to the Titan for a second to ensure he hadn't noticed the slip up. “The clan is putting together a small gathering tonight for everyone. One last hurrah before our attack on the City. You know, in case we all...” He paused, the usual grin on his face wavering. “Anyway, we heard you just got back and I came to find you. Wouldn't want to miss out on the booze, right?”

The huntress’s chest tightened. She was leaving for the Cabal base tomorrow and the strike teams were set to assemble the day after that, this might be the last chance she had to spend time with her friends. And if things went poorly and she failed, perhaps the last time she'll ever see them again. But what about Shaxx?

A light squeeze on her fingers snapped her out of the unpleasant thoughts and she looked up. “I hope you're not planning to say no,” Shaxx said, a slight chuckle in his voice. “Or I'll have to turn that invite into an order.”
The Warlock next to her silently gasped. “I'm a little turned on,” he jested, which earned him a hard elbow to the side.

“Alright, Maku. I'll be there as long as Shaxx can come too.”

“Of course he can,” he winked and laid an arm across Frea's shoulders, tugging her from the Titan's grasp. “As long as he's willing to share, you are the star of the party after all.”
The Exile's Confession

The huntress barely had enough time to brace herself before she was tackled by a hulking figure.

“Psyho,” she grunted, winching from the hit when their armor clashed against each other. “One of these days you're going to hurt me doing that.”

“Oh, please!” Grinning wide, the Titan clapped her by the shoulders. “We were so worried after hearing the reports, but you look no worse then the day you left us.”

“Oh...” Maku snorted behind them. “You have no idea.”

Pulling herself away from Psyho's grasp, Frea took a moment to peer around the group, almost everyone from her inner circle of the clan was present, everyone expect for the Guardian she hoped most to see. “Still no word?” She asked, already knowing the answer.

Her tiny shimmer of hope diminished further when Sain shook his head, the light in his robotic eyes darkening. “Nothing, I'm afraid. We thought you may have had better luck.”

“Ikora hasn't seen him since the attack either, he's most likely...” She bit her lip.

He patted a gentle hand on her arm, offering a calm smile. “Don't give up on him yet. Dex would be so proud of you to see what you've accomplished by yourself.”

“No kidding. Sacrificing yourself to protect your Vanguard and diving into an ocean to save my brother. He's going to be downright jealous.” Maku chuckled, taking a sip from his newly acquired drink. His eyes darted around just briefly before returning to the huntress. “Hold on...where's lover boy?”

Frea's face dropped and she quickly spun around, at some point during their walk from the hanger, Shaxx had disappeared. “I thought he was right behind us,” she murmured.

The Warlock grimaced like he been poked with a sharp needle. “Oh dear...”

“What? Do you think he's mad?” She asked, clutching the edge of her cape. Regret was starting to gnaw at her nerves, maybe coming to this party instead of talking with the Titan like she originally intended that night was the wrong call.

“What's this about? Am I finally going to have to give the old man a beating?” Psyho interjected, cracking her knuckles. “Because I'll do it.”

“For Frea's sake? Or because you've always wanted to 1v1 Lord Shaxx?” Maku asked, the smirk on his face returning.

“Hey, two birds with one stone and all that.” She dismissively waved him off.

Kannon cut in between the group, raising a finger in warning. “No fistfights allowed tonight, we don't need anyone getting dunked into the sea.”

“No one's going to fight...hopefully.” Maku titled his head back toward Frea. “I sensed some stress between you and lover boy earlier, did I interrupt something important?”

“If it's what I think it is,” Sain answered first as he crossed his arms tightly over his chest. “Then Lord Shaxx is going to be very unhappy with you, Maku.”
“Alright, everyone. This is our last night together before the big attack on the City, how about we stop wasting time talking drama?” Timus clapped his hand together.

“I agree,” Kannon added, taking Frea by the hand to catch the huntress's attention. “I’m sure Lord Shaxx will be back soon, why don't you tell us all the details from your missions?”

Her heart torn between finding Shaxx and staying with her friends, Frea's gaze quickly scanned over the crowds of people and then returned to the Hunter before her when she didn't spot the familiar color of orange amongst the Guardians. “Sure,” she finally said.

They spent the next hour huddled around the low burning fire pit, listening to her recap everything she could remember from her adventures. She told them about Titan and how it felt to dive headlong into the freezing waters to save Aner, who now leaned against the seat Timus sat in, watching her intently with sharp eyes. He shot her a fleeting smirk when she got to the part about the Hive Shrieker over the bridge. Afterword, she moved on to Nessus and the strange AI she had met there, the antics of her Hunter Vanguard left most of her friends giggling while Kannon hung her head in her hands with a shuttering sigh. Frea's gaze stopped on Sain when she skipped over her visit to the Farm after Nessus, no one else took notice of the gap in her story, it seemed he had kept the encounter to himself. And finally, she told of Io and the Hunter she had met there, how he attacked her in an attempt to run away from the fate he felt so unlucky to have been given.

“Xane, huh?” Psyho leaned forward in her chair, putting a knuckle to her lips. “I don't know if I can trust someone like that in the clan.”

“He got the jump on an experienced Guardian and had the guts to attack without his light. I think he has potential, provided he doesn't run away like a wuss,” Maku added. “Of course that depends on Sain.”

“I'm not the only founder of this clan, Maku. Kannon and Timus have a say in the matter of new recruits as well,” Sain interjected.

“I'm always happy to take in new Hunters,” Kannon said. “He just needs guidance.”

“I don't like it. Feels like we're prepping ourselves to get stabbed in the back,” Timus huffed.

“Let's be honest, the only one at risk of getting stabbed is Frea.” Maku snickered, earning him a stern look from the huntress.

Sain raised his hand, quieting the discussion. “We'll discuss the invite for Xane if we ever get to that point.”

“You mean if we get a tomorrow?” A silence overcame the group after Maku's comment, and he bowed his head slightly. “Apologies, took that joke a little too far.”

“In the meantime,” Timus sighed, lifting his glass. “I am going to happily drink myself in a stupor for the rest of the night.”

Everyone split off into smaller groups while some others left to get more drinks before the rest of the partygoers finished them off. Kannon shifted next to Frea, a concerned expression over her face. “It sounded like you've had a hard time, how are you doing?” She asked.

“Fine,” the huntress flatly replied.

“Really? Because you don't look fine.” Kannon frowned. “I wouldn't be after being assaulted by a
“He didn't do much damage honestly, though...” Frea reached into the pouch on her belt and pulled out the shards of the broken knife. “I can't say the same for your favorite blade.”

Kannon's eyes widened as she took the metal segments and slowly turned them in her hands. “Wait, you said he attacked you with a knife? Was it this one?”

“Yes. Yanked it right out of the holster.” Frea mimicked pulling the weapon off her forearm. “He missed...but uh, sorry about your knife.”

“Don't worry about it, I'm just glad my lucky knife didn't end up killing you.”

“After this is all over, I'll be happy to make you a new one, Kannon. I know you've always been checking out the serrated blade I keep on my hip.”

The other huntress's face lit up with a smile as she practically bounced in her seat. “Really? I've never been able to figure out how to make a sawtooth knife that didn't immediately break after one use! I'd love to have one!”

“Oh it's pretty easy, I just reinforce them with...” Frea started.

“Chatting about knives as usual, I see.” The two Hunters looked up to see Psyho hovering over them, sporting a devilish grin. “Sorry to interrupt, but Sain wants to talk to you, Kannon.”

“Alright.” Rising from her seat, Kannon took Frea's hand in hers and placed the broken pieces of the blade into her gloved palm. “Keep this with you, the metal might be shattered...but it's still just as lucky.”

“Always the superstitious one,” Frea lightly sighed, gripping the knife shards. “Thank you.”

She watched the two Guardians walk back to the center of the party to join the rest of the clan, nonchalantly holding hands as they disappeared into the crowd. The image made her think of Shaxx, and now that she was alone again, her mind drifted uncontrollably. The way he had vanished without a single word, like he was desperate to get away from her, left an ache in her chest. There were too many people in the common area to spot the Titan, even one his size, and the patrolling Red Jacks she occasionally spotted didn't give her any clue to where he could be. The only other option would be to locate him via Ghost and show just how truly hopeless she was right now, and if he blocked her out...she wasn't sure she could handle the rejection.

Groaning, the huntress lifted from her chair and grabbed the barely touched glass of beer off the table next to her. She crossed the small yard to the docks and stopped just at the edge of the damp wood overlooking the sea. With the fire pit so far away, the chill was harsher, the small torches positioned on the supports poles emitted scant heat. Frea closed her eyes and let the sound of the waves drown out the noise from the party. The moon was just a sliver of itself high in the sky, bright enough to cast shadows, and gave the water an eerie pale blue color. It was a beautiful night, and she couldn't even bring herself to enjoy it.

Flipping back her head, she chugged down half her drink and nearly gagged in the process.

“That's a bad idea,” a familiar voice said behind her.

“Don't tell me what to do.” Not turning around, the huntress went to take another swig but a hand shot out and grabbed her wrist. “Maku, what the hell?” When she finally whipped around to face the Warlock, she found herself eye level with an armored chestplate instead. Ever so slowly, her attention traveled up to meet the gaze of a very different man. “Aner!? Sorry, I thought you were fellow Guardian.”
your brother.”

The creases around his eyes deepened at her comment as his usual blank expression was replaced with a scowl. “I sound nothing like him,” he shortly snapped. “Are you drunk?”

“No, I was just...um, a little zoned out.”

“Hm.” Giving her a look that clearly showed he didn’t believe her, he forcibly tilted her hand over the dock, dumping the rest of the drink into the water.

“Ah! Ow, watch it with that grip!” Frea reflexively jumped back to pull her arm away, and at the same time, Aner opened his fingers. The sudden lack of tension on her limb threw her off balance and she had to take another step to catch herself, but her boot only hit air. She didn't flail off the dock far before the Titan was upon her, one of his arms wrapped around her waist and the other clutched one of the support poles to keep them both from falling into the shallows. He nearly knocked the wind out of her lungs as he roughly pulled her into his chest. “You really need to work on controlling that strength of yours,” she coughed.

“Sorry, you're just so...” The Titan's next word caught in his throat from the hard glare she sent his way. “Perfectly normal size,” he corrected himself.

“You were going to say tiny.”

The corners of his mouth twitched into a smile before he quickly hid it away behind a stoney expression. “I was not.”

The huntress let out a long sigh, she really wasn't in the mood to joke around. “Thanks for the help, but can you please let me go now?” When he made no indication of budging, she started to fruitlessly wrestle against his grasp. “Aner...move.”

His glowing eyes flitted away for a second, the hold on her waist loosening slightly, but just as quickly his gaze returned with newfound fire. “Why are you in such a hurry to run back to Shaxx?” He asked, his tone going so low that it sent warning signals blazing through Frea's head. “This is possibly the last chance you two will see each other if the attack fails tomorrow, and yet he's nowhere to be found. Awfully cold of him.”

“Things are complicated right now...” She started, tearing her eyes away from his piercing stare.

“Yeah?” An armored finger hooked under her chin and tilted the huntress's face upwards, straining her neck to look directly at the Titan. “I wouldn't let some petty argument stop me from spending my final moments with the person I love,” he harshly whispered. “You're too good for him.”

The confession was wildly off the mark but it still hit home as everything clicked in Frea's mind. Her heart throbbed loudly in her chest, but this wasn't the fuzzy feeling she usually got with Shaxx. “Stop it, this isn't funny.” She pushed on his chestplate, trying to put some distance between them.

“I'm serious.” Not even acknowledging her struggles, Aner leaned in closer, just enough that their noses were almost touching. “I haven't been able to get you out of my mind since Titan...”

“Enough!” At her wits end and determined to be free, she dug her fingertips into the open crevices between his shoulder plating, the claws on her gauntlets scraped against his painted armor as she dropped to her knee. Her low center of gravity combined with the abrupt addition of extra weight to his one side lurched the Titan over her back, and he went tumbling off the edge of the pier, landing hard into the water with a splash. Not bothering to make sure he was alright, the huntress immediately turned on her heel and stomped toward solid ground.
“Frea, wait!” Aner called as he waddled through the shallows after her.

“No.”

“I'm sorry...I shouldn’t have done that. Please, just listen to me for one moment.”

She halted then, her head turning slowly to look down at him. “Why? So you can lay your hands on me again?”

He slowly came up to the dock, placing his elbows on the wood. Salt water dripped off his hair, and the low waves lapped up to his chest, but he didn’t seem intent on getting out. “What if I just stay here? Will that make you more comfortable?”

After a long second of deciding if he was worth listening to, a heavy sigh escaped her. “Fine, but come any closer and I'll leave.”

“How long were you on that moon by yourself exactly? Before the Traveler's light went out.”

“On Titan? Only a little over a year. But I've been by myself for far longer than that,” Aner replied, lacing his fingers together. “How much do you know about my brother, Frea?”

“Not much other than he's an old Guardian and a skilled sniper, he helped train Dex.” She sat down on the dock, just out of arms reach of the Titan, and brought her knees up to her chest. “I've always been a bit curious...but are you two actually brothers? You're both Awoken but you two don't look very much alike.”

“No, we're not.” He chuckled. “Maku is indeed old. Woken up shortly after the City's wall were built, I believe. I've been around long before that.”

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“Oh, you must have some good stories then.”

The small smile on his face swayed, turning into something sadder. “Before Twilight Gap, yes I do. Afterwords...unfortunately I have no idea what the Guardians were up to then.” When he noticed the questioning look on Frea's face, he continued. “Back before the Vanguards were the people you know today, I had a bit of a reputation. My knack for void energy made me a candidate to train with Saint-14, and when he disappeared I was set to carry on his teachings.”

“You were protege to a Guardian legend? Like....the legend. Saint-14.” She gaped at him, wide-eyed.

Aner nodded. “Yeah, that's the reaction most people had,” he sighed. “Couldn't walk across the Tower those days without a posse of Guardians at my heels, always begging to be trained.”

“Sounds like you hated it.”

“I did, stubbornly turned everyone that asked for my time down...until a certain irritating Warlock met me in the plaza.”

The way his tone changed pricked Frea's interest. “Did something happen?”

The Titan's gaze glided over to meet hers, a slim smirk spreading over his lips. “You could say that. We ended up destroying part of the Tower, took a chuck out of the living quarters. I'm sure you can
imagine the Vanguards weren’t too happy about that.” He shifted, sending ripples across the surface of the water. “Maku got off easy since he was young at the time, I however, did not. Got sentenced to exile for three hundred years.”

“Exile for that? Seems harsh.”

“My...status...had a part to play in that I think. I didn't like being treated like a celebrity just because of my master, but I'm still a Titan, battle is in my blood. When the Fallen attacked our walls, I was forced to skirt the system avoiding outposts so I wouldn't be shot on sight instead of joining my brethren to protect my home.” He frowned, shaking his head. “After my sentence, the Tower was too different, the people I called friends had either died or forgotten about me. So, I decided to keep to myself and took solo missions until you and Maku found me on Titan.”

“But...how does the Guardian who caused your exile end up becoming your brother?” She asked.

“By my good looks and witty charm obviously,” someone else answered. Frea froze and looked over her shoulder to see the Warlock they were just taking about. He stood with his hands on his hips and cast a wary glance from her to the Titan still sunk half in the sea. One of his eyebrows raised, but he didn't ask about the strange scene he just walked in to. “I felt bad about what happened and tried to make up for it by visiting Aner and assisting his missions during his sentence. Once tried to sneak him into the City by claiming he was my ‘long-lost brother’.” He grinned. “It kinda stuck after that.”

“Maku...” Aner groaned. “Poor timing as usual.”

“I suppose so, judging by your position over there it looks like I came a bit too late.” He snorted and stepped to the side. Heavy footsteps thundered across the dock as an approaching figure passed the Warlock and came into the light. The flickering shadows from the torch glinted off the Titan's horned helmet, his arms deftly crossed behind his back as he came to a stop just before the huntress.

“S-shaxx!”
Shaxx radiated with agitation as he loomed over the Guardians on the pier, his stance wide and unflinching with his hands clasped behind his back. No one dared to move when his painted visor scanned the area, going from Aner in the water to Frea sitting at his feet. The sense of dread he gave off made even Maku take a step back for fear of becoming a target of the Titan's wrath.

“Where were-” Frea started, hoping to ease the building tension in the air.

“Come,” he cut her off, briskly turning around to leave just as fast as he had arrived.

As the huntress slowly rose to her feet, Aner shot a remark from behind her. “She’s not your dog, Shaxx.”

The Crucible handler froze in place, his hands falling into fists at his sides.

“Whoa there, Sir.” Maku stepped up to him to block the path to his brother. “Aner didn't mean that...he's not so great with filtering his words and-” He caught himself as the Titan ignored his pleas, shoving him to the side.

Aner was just beginning to pull himself by the cleats anchored to the dock, when a hand flew across his vision and grabbed the scarf draped around his neck. With one arm, the ex-Iron Lord yanked him out of the bay and threw him back onto dry land. He stumbled for a millisecond, trying to regain his footing on the slick wood, and then straightened to comb the wet hair out of his eyes. Seaweed clung to his belt like a newly acquired sash while water leaked from the openings in his armor.

“Care to repeat that, whelp?” Shaxx challenged.

“Yeah, actually.” Aner glowered, squaring off his shoulders, he stood nearly as tall as the other Titan and could easily reach his eye level. “I saw what happened between you two in the airfield the other day. I don't care for the way you treat her, not then, and not now.”

Shaxx poked a stern finger against the four linear scratches carved into the other Titan's shoulder armor, the only sign left of Frea's struggle from earlier. “Ironic,” he growled. “You're the last person to be saying that after the move you just pulled.”

“You bast-”

“Stop it. Both of you,” the huntress intervened, placing her small frame between the towering giants. “What happened at the airfield was my fault, not Shaxx's.”

Aner huffed, his glowing eyes lowering to meet hers. “Considering everything you've been doing for us, I think you deserve to vent without having someone else chastise you for it.”

“And this is how you want to express that opinion? By disrespecting authority?”

His face dropped. “No...I...”

“Bro,” Maku added, placing a hand on the Titan's shoulder. “I think it would be best to go.”

Turning his head sharply to the side, Aner clicked his tongue. “Fine. But Frea...”

“What?” She asked, a little too stiffly.
“I meant what I said earlier.”

Frea wove her fingers together, acutely aware of the hovering Titan burning a hole though her hood with his eyes right behind her. “I know and I'm flattered but....” She took a deep breath. “I love Shaxx. And that won't change anytime soon.”

Her unabashed honesty made the tips of Aner's cheeks tint purple as he averted his eyes and pretended to cover a cough to hide his reaction. “It's a good thing I don't give up easily then,” he mumbled.

“Alright, alright.” Maku pulled at his brother's arm. “Let's go before Lord Shaxx loses his cool, okay? Bye, Frea.”

“Bye.” She returned the Warlock's wave as they left and let out a tired sigh when she noticed Aner sneak one last glance her way before they blended into the party. Her hands moved up to hug her elbows, that was one problem down...now she had to deal with the other, much larger one. When she turned on her heel to face him however, he was walking away, his boots rocking the dock with every step.

“Shaxx? Shaxx, wait!” Frea strained her legs to keep pace with his long strides as he crossed the yard and pushed through the crowd. Displaced and half-drunken Guardians turned to shoot them glares until their eyes landed on the Titan, which made them quickly move back to make space for them. “Please, can't you just stop for a moment?” He halted so abruptly that she collided face-first into his back. With stars now dotting the corners of her vision, she wrapped her arms tightly around his waist. “Please,” she begged, her voice quivering. “I can't understand if you don't talk to me.” His only response to her was silence, or whatever he said was drowned out by the noise from the party, but she could feel his hands fall on hers and then he was tugging her away.

He brought her to the edge of the forest, out of range of the music and any prying eyes, and dropped her hand. She watched him as he strode over to a fallen tree and plopped himself on it, his back facing her.

“Are you mad?” Frea finally asked, unable to stand the quiet any longer.

“At you? Or your friend?”

She walked over to the tree and warily place her hands on the horizontal trunk like it would burn her. “Yes.”

“Then no,” he bluntly replied.

“Ah,” the huntress murmured, looking down. It was obvious that he wasn't up for talking, of course he wasn't, not after that scene he just witnessed. “I can go if you want, Shaxx. If you need to be alone...” When she turned to leave, a hard jolt pulled back on her cape and she tripped, falling into the Titan's outstretched arms.

“Stay,” he said and placed a hand behind her knees, lifting her up and into his lap. “Just give me a moment to breathe, so I can stop feeling the need to punch something.”

“But don't you always feel like punching things?” She grinned. To her upmost relief, his chest rumbled with a soft laugh.

Their conversation drifted into a quietness that ticked into minutes as they sat there together, sharing the gentle thump of their heartbeats. The awkward feeling, the uneasiness, even the nerves that were making Frea on edge, gradually dissipated into a calmness that made her realize just how tired she
was. She fought to keep her eyes open, the warmth of Shaxx's arms making it near impossible to do so, and opted to fiddle with the pendant that dangled from his mantle to keep herself alert. As she did so, she could feel the Titan shift under her, his visor traveling downward to watch. His hand that wasn't supporting her back reached out and gently took hold of the swath of white fabric around her neck, turning it over to reveal the crimson blood stain from her tussle with Xane underneath.

“My anger isn't directed at you or anyone else,” the Titan muttered, rubbing his thumb across the collar of her cape. “Aner is right.”

“Aner is a lot of things, right, isn't one of them at the moment. What happened at the airfield, was all me, I acted out and you just reacted back. I'm sorry for that.” She sighed. “I've actually been trying to tell you that all night.”

“How about,” he added, his tone brightening. “We both take credit for it and move on?”

A tender smile crept onto her lips. “Deal. Still mostly my fault though.”

“Frea.”

“Okay, it was both of us.” She laughed, patting his armor playfully. If felt so good to banter with him like this again, how long had it been since they were able to trade quips? “Do we need to talk about what happened at the pier?”

“Do we?” Shaxx asked, titling his head. “If pronouncing your undying love and throwing a Titan three times your size across your back isn't enough to send a message, then your friend is an idiot.”

“Ugh.” A rush of blood come up to Frea's cheeks as she buried her face into her hands. “I can't believe I did that. Maku is never going to let me live it down now.”

“I'm sure he has more pressing matters to worry about right now than to tease you. Did you get to spend time with your clan tonight?”

“Yes. Speaking of which, where did you go? I thought you were going to join us.”

“I...” The Titan nervously scratched at the subtle dents in his chestplate. “Thought it would be best to give you some space, to see your friends before the mission tomorrow. They tend to stiffen up whenever I'm around.”

A cozy heat spread inside her heart and she swung her leg over his waist so she could face him directly, her hands coming to rest on his shoulders. This entire time she was worrying about him avoiding her, but he was actually looking out for her well being, making sure she wouldn't have any regrets if things didn't turn out as well as they hoped. Her friends were like her family, they were the anchors that kept her levelheaded and secure when the world threw too much at her, and Shaxx...he was there to light her way when her resolve wasn't enough. How could she fail?

“Thank you,” she whispered, resting her cheek against the fur of his pine-scented mantle. “For everything.” Her tone sounded almost final, it could be, for all she knew. But everything she had experienced in the years leading up to this, the time they had shared together, felt like a dream. A dream she did not want to wake up from, and she wasn't sure how to express that except to simply thank him for it all.

His arms tightened around the huntress, his fingers straining against her armor. “Frea,” he said painfully. “Don't speak like that, you will win.”

She lifted her head and traced the sides of his helmet, her fingertips grazing the base of the horns, and
pressed a long kiss to the thin line of his mouthpiece. The metal left a coppery taste in her mouth, like blood. “Whatever happens, if one of us doesn't make it...will you wait for me?”

The way she looked at him, with a hint of tears lining the bottom of her eyes, made Shaxx's stomach clench. He pulled his head back and reached around to unlock the seals at his neck, his haste to relieve himself of the armor made him yank the helmet away so roughly that it bounced off the tree trunk once before rolling to a stop on the forest floor.

“I,” he started, taking her head into his palm. “Will wait a thousand more lifetimes if I have to.” The Titan's lips crushed against hers, desperate in their need to touch her, and she responded to him in kind as she opened her mouth to allow access for his tongue. She shifted her body to move closer against him and his breath hitched when she brushed against the fire building between his legs. Her hips rolled over him again when she noticed his reaction, enticing him further. “Frea.” His hand flew up to tightly grip her soft thigh, stilling her movement. “You need to rest tonight.”

“Do you not want to?” She asked, biting the bottom of her lip with a smirk.

He sighed. “Giving me the puppy dog eyes is unfair.”

“But it works doesn't it?” Frea softly trailed a finger down the front of his chest armor, stopping just at his belt. She could tell he liked the teasing when the hand he still held to her leg flinched. “Shaxx,” she whispered, almost singing his name. “I want a better memory than saying a quick goodbye in a burning Tower...in case luck isn't on my side this time.”

She didn't need to say more.

In mere seconds, they had each other nearly out of their undersuits, armor vigorously tossed to the side much like Shaxx's helmet. As she reached for his pants again, he grabbed her wrist. “You'll hurt yourself if you rush,” he growled in her ear. The Titan then slid off the tree trunk, carrying the little huntress with him, and pinned her against the wood.

When he bowed to one knee and lifted her leg over his shoulder, Frea's face lit up like furnace. “Hold on, you're not about to...” Her voice caved as he hooked a finger around her underwear and buried his face between her thighs. Had he not been holding her up, she would have toppled over. His tongue worked magic over her most delicate region, building her desire up by tenfold, the sheer pleasure of it was almost unbearable for her as she quivered in his grasp. Her fingers tangled in his hair when she bucked against his mouth in climax, waves of heat washing over her like lava.

Her body was still shaking when he stood up, a miniscule smile of confidence plastered across his lips. “Good?” Unable to form her thoughts into words, the huntress just nodded, earning a chuckle from him. “Good.” Shimmying out of the rest of his clothes, he lifted her up so their hips aligned and pressed her harder against the tree, the fabric of her cape keeping the bark from scratching at her bare skin. The huntress tucked her face against the crook of his neck as she locked her ankles around his torso, tilting herself in an impatient attempt to get him to move faster. “Careful now, it's been awhile since we've done this,” he purred.

“When did you become phlegmatic?”

His answer came when he eased into her flesh, she yielded to him so effortlessly that he reached all the way to the base with the shallow thrust, making her gasp from the feeling of fullness. “Patience sometimes has its perks.” He gave her a moment to adjust to him, their mouths finding each other during the time. He only broke away to skirt his teeth around her jaw, to the supple flesh of her ear, and nibbled on it. Frea's legs suddenly tensed around him, forcing him even deeper into her core. Shaxx lifted his head with a hiss, locking eyes with her, the provoking grin she offered him when she
did it again was enough to send the Titan over the edge. He plunged into her without hesitation, each slam of his hips created angry red marks across his scarred shoulders from her nails.

“Shaxx...” she cooed, already so close to another release.

He pulled back, placing her feet down on the ground and bent her over the fallen tree, his hands guided hers to the wood and laced their fingers together as he pounded harder into her from behind. Frea's back arched into his chest as she came, trying her best to stifle the cry. The Titan groaned in response and he sank his face into the folds of her cape, his own orgasm brought on by her body clenching around him.

“Guardian...Guardian? Frea!”

The huntress opened her eyes, blinking wildly when she was greeted by a harsh glare of fabric. The sun outside was beating on the tent she was in, making the light seem much brighter than it was.

“Ugh,” she rubbed a hand over her face. “What time is it?”

“Dawn. The sun came up half an hour ago,” her Ghost responded in her head.

Her body creaked in protest when she rose to a sitting position, the warm blanket sliding off her shoulders, and looked next to her. Shaxx still slept steadily, unperturbed by her movement even though his arms reached out for her. She smiled and carefully brushed some of the loose hair out of his eyes, taking in the image of him and burning it into her memory. There was no 'one more hour' this time, she had to go. Her smile dropped when her chest ached and she leaned down, planting a soft kiss to the Titan’s temple.

“Goodbye, love. I'll make sure this won't be our last day,” her voice cracked as a single tear ran down her cheek. “Even if that means I have to fight until my light runs out, just...stay safe, okay?”

Frea climbed out of the blankets and grabbed her armor, casting one last look back into the tent before she walked out into the rising sun.
Hey everyone, sorry this chapter took so long to get out! It's not because my desire to write this story has diminished or anything, I've just been super busy lately and haven't had much time to work on it. In fact, I already have a part 3 planned out and possibly a sequel depending on how the Forsaken expansion goes. (Don't you kill my boy Cayde, Bungie!) But anyway, hopefully I'll be back to somewhat regular posting soon because I'm really excited to finally get to part 3. Frea's story has been a blast and I'm looking forward to writing more about my favorite Guardian. Thanks for reading! -AFKai

His armored fingers glided over the corroded metal that made up the base of the Last City's walls. Old paint chipped away at his touch, revealing jagged lines of rust underneath. Years of bad weather and war had done a number on the wall but it still held firm.

“How long has it been?” The Titan next to him mused, looking up the sprawling barrier. “Since we've stood at the bottom of the wall like this?”

Shaxx stepped back as he shook the dingy flecks of pigment from his glove. “A century maybe. I've lost count.”

“A shame we only do this during times of war or crisis,” Zavala sighed.

“Regretting being holed up in that Vanguard office all those years?”

“A little,” the Awoken man chuckled. “Once we have the City back, I believe we'll need to revise how things work in the Tower. The strict boundaries we kept between old and new Guardians aren't needed anymore.”

“Is this something you've been thinking about for awhile or did it only take us losing the Traveler for you to realize that?” Shaxx inquired.

A knowing smile spread into Zavala features and he clasped his hands behind his back. “It took a spunky little Hunter to knock some sense into the Vanguard. Times have changed, and we need to adapt as well. We won't get a second chance again.”

“You have a lot of confidence that we'll succeed.”

“And you don't?”

Shaxx frowned to himself and moved his gaze back to the wall. He knew with full certainty that Frea will succeed in her mission, but she was only one Guardian, and she had already done so much. His mind drifted to that morning, when he had woken up just before dawn and cuddled the still sleeping huntress to his chest. The light inside her felt so dim, weaker than it should have been. How long can she keep going?

“Lord Shaxx, Commander.” The Titans turned toward the scout that called out to them, he was wheezing heavily from the run around the City perimeter. Every willing Guardian and refugee from the Farm gathered for this final attack against the Red Legion. They formed three strike teams in
total, lead by each Vanguard; Ikora headed the distraction team, Cayde with the infiltration group, and Zavala commanded the main assault. The couldn’t use radios between the teams in fear of the Cabal being able to tap into their signals, so instead fast hunters were deployed to relay messages to each leader. It was a rather archaic way of planning, but necessary to avoid detection. They waited for the scout to regain his breath, and when he finally straightened his face was still burning red from exertion. “We just received word...the Almighty has gone offline.”

“Excellent. Give the signal to the rest of the teams. We move in ten,” Zavala boomed.

Shaxx followed the Commander back to the small makeshift camp they prepared below an old underpass just a few yards away from the wall. For all the security the Cabal had inside the City, they didn’t scan for anything outside the walls, it didn’t seem like they cared to. He moved around the nervous Guardians prepping their weapons and ducking inside the armory tent.

“Sir.” A robotic greeting met him out from the shadows of the shelter.

“Arcite,” he answered back. “Are the Red Jacks ready?”

“Of course.” The frame’s glittering eyes moved to watch the Titan. “This is the tenth time you've come to check on the guns in the last hour.”

The comment made Shaxx's hands still over the rifle and he slapped his palms against the table in defeat, letting the weight of his helmet drag his head down. “Am I that obvious?”

“You're concerned,” Arcite said with its pragmatic tone. “We'll win.”

“Yeah,” the Titan sighed, stepping away from the table. It wasn't the battle he was so worried about. “Just...be ready to move at a moment's notice. We have a big fight ahead of us.”

_____

“Aw, shit.” Frea fumbled with dials as she attempted to recover from the hit her engines just took. Turrets had been placed all over the wall, tuned in to shoot down anything that flew too close to the City, even the personal shuttle she had stolen from Thumo's base didn't have clearance. She peeked out the starboard side of the cockpit and saw flames spreading across the hull. It was time to go. Jumping out from the pilot chair, she slammed her fist against the emergency cargo hold release. The heavy metal door blasted off its hinges, spinning into the air, and without a second thought she leapt out after it. She soared through the smoke billowing off the burning ship, her vision obscured by the thick ash.

“Watch out!” Her Ghost warned in her head. The huntress realized a building was in front of her too late. She smashed headlong through a window and crumpled into a heap on the top floor with a gargled groan. That hurt. “Guardian? Frea!” The little bot materialized in the air above her, its voice seemed distant over the sound of her throbbing head.

“I-I'm alright,” she grumbled and slowly rolled over to rest on her back. Reaching up, she slapped the seal off her helmet and yanked the armor off, the visor had shattered from the rough landing. “I don't feel any broken bones. Ghost?”

“One moment.” A light from its scanner flashed over her and the Ghost beeped with satisfaction. “Just a concussion looks like.”

With a sigh, Frea hefted herself back to her feet and tossed the broken gear aside. “I've had worse. Where are we?”

“The east side of the City. Where Commander Zavala's strike team entered,” it answered.
“Good. They shouldn't be too far from here then.” She kicked out the remaining glass shards sticking in the distorted window frame and carefully climbed out. The building was about five stories high and had only a smattering of windows built into it, it was a miracle she didn't crash land into the brick siding. Sucking in a deep breath, she dropped down to the ledge and plummeted toward the ground. Her joints ached when she bounced off the air and landed. It was an easy maneuver, one she had done countless times before with no problem, but this time searing hot pain shot up her legs. “Ugh,” she gasped. Every muscle in her body seemed to shudder and she fell, her knee hit the pavement hard in a feeble attempt to catch herself.

“Frea...your light...”

“I know.” She clenched her teeth and forced herself to stand again, ignoring the spasms running along her spine. The weariness from her missions and lack of sleep was finally starting to catch up with her. Her limbs felt like lead, she wasn’t sure she could summon the energy for her arc staff at this point. “I can hold out, until the end.”

The bot blinked at her, giving a look like it wanted to say more, but instead went silent.

Frea took the moment to scan the area. The structures around her were a mess, the ensued wreckage of the battles that took place there perviously. Scraps of burning cloth and paper blew across the ruined streets on the chilly breeze. Her eyes darted over to the intersection ahead, the remains of a smoking Thresher ship blocked it, and just beyond it she could see patrolling Cabal surrounding a shimmering blue barrier.

“What do we've got, Ghost?”

“The Legion just activated some kind of defense across the City, trying to corral us with barriers. Hawthorne's working on a hack now,” it replied.

“Great,” she sighed. “How long is that going to take?”

“There's a network of tunnels that run underneath the roads,” the Ghost said as it circled the ground, shining its light over the concrete. “Perhaps we can...”

Its sudden silence made the huntress turn around. “What?”

“I'm detecting multiple Guardian signatures just under our feet!” The little bot's body twisted and turned with excitement. “Too small to be part of the Commander's team, and they're heading for the barrier.” Not wasting a second more, Frea spun on her heel and sprinted for the wreckage of the ship. She climbed to its wings to get a better view of the field ahead of her and crouched low against the metal. There were at least a dozen Legionnaires, all of them alert and active. Her heart sank when her gaze landed on a chunk of metal sticking up from a hole in the road. A drop pod had blasted the intersection wide open, revealing and opening up the tunnels below. She could just barely make out movement in the darkness inside, if the Guardians tried to continue forward, they were undoubtedly going to get spotted. “What are we going to do?” Her Ghost whispered next to her.

“We...” She took the hand cannon off her thigh with her right hand and a knife in the other. “Are going to do what we do best.”

The Cabal were hardly a challenge. Frea finished off the last one by dazing him with a smack across the head with her gun and then sending an exploding bullet screaming through his helmet. The Legionnaire went down with a cry as she casually flicked the cylinder open to reload.

“Thanks for the help, we would've been caught if you hadn't shown up.” The voice from behind
froze her in place. In her surprise, one of the shells for her gun fumbled out of her fingers and bounced off the ground with a resounding clink. She could sense movement and when she finally turned, a Warlock was bending to pick up the dropped ammo. The gear he wore, and even the scout rifle he had strapped to his back, she instantly recognized. When he straightened and opened his palm to hand her the bullet, it fell out of his grasp. “Frea?!”

“Dex?”

He smiled cheerfully and stepped forward with arms spread out wide. “Of course it's you! I couldn't tell at first because your armor is different. I'm so glad to see you made it.” Before he could embrace her, the huntress jumped back and punched him in the chestplate. “Ow!”

She couldn't believe her eyes. If it wasn't for the new dent in his armor, she would've mistaken him for a phantom. “What do you mean of course?! Do you know how long I've been looking for you?”

“Frea, calm down.” Dex's palms lowered into a more guarded stance. “Don't freak out.”

Her arm swung around for another blow and he ducked, narrowly dodging her fist. “I thought you were dead! I've been so stressed out trying to find you!” She yelled.

“Okay! I'm sorry!” He hollered back. “Please let me explain before you beat me to a pulp, alright?”

Breathing heavily now, Frea's eyes stung with tears. She came to accept the thought of Dex being gone, but now that he was right in front of her, she wasn't sure if she was relieved that he made it or furious at him for never contacting her this entire time. Sniffling, she forced down her tears and jammed her pistol back into its holster. “Idiot.”

“I missed you too,” the Warlock chuckled.

“This isn't funny, Dex,” she snapped. “Where have you been this whole time? Why didn't you ever call me?”

The grin on his face dropped. “I wanted to, truly, but...”

“Dex.” A man from the group huddled by the tunnels cut in, a refugee by the look of his gear. Frea's gaze darted to the rest of the people behind him. They were a mix of Guardians and civilians, all armed to the teeth with weapons, she counted nine of them. “Sorry for the intrusion, we need to get moving.”

“Right,” Dex sighed and then peered back down at the huntress. “Why don't you come with us? Then I can explain everything on the way there.”

“Where exactly?”

His smile returned, taking on his usual cocky demeanor. “To join the Vanguard. We're not going to miss the fight for our City.”

Footsteps and the sound of clattering armor echoed off the rounded tunnel walls as the group made their way underground. The smell could have been better, the rainwater splashing at their boots made the air muggy and stale, and Frea could hear the clattering of tiny clawed feet run by them in the fog. She thanked the Traveler this wasn't a sewer.

“How did the Legion never find these?” She finally asked, noting the lack of barriers or turrets.
“A scouting party did stumble into the entrances occasionally, but we made sure they didn’t get the chance to report back,” one of the Guardians answered.

“This system stretches all across the City too, so getting around has been a breeze,” another added.

“Were you all trapped here since the attack?”

“Yes and no,” Dex said. When the huntress lifted her head with a questioning look, he smiled sadly. “The group you see here are the only ones who can shoot a gun, counting them...there's about thirty of us. Mostly families.”

“Dex found us after the Traveler’s light vanished. We tried to get the refugees across the wall but the Legion were guarding every exit so heavily, there wasn’t enough of us to protect them all,” a Titan sighed.

“So we decided to hunker down. Kept to these tunnels and listened to the Legion's comms until the day we could finally move,” Dex continued.

Frea frowned. “How did you know someone was going to come?”

A glint crossed the Warlock’s eye as his slim smile changed into a grin. “We’re Guardians, we don’t give up easily. I had faith the Vanguard was going to mount a counterattack eventually, just didn’t expect you to be at the front of it all.” He nudged the huntress’s shoulder lightly. “Actually, forget that...I’m not surprised at all. Why does it seem like you’re always the one getting into trouble?”

“Bad luck, I suppose.” She chuckled.

“Hm.” Dex’s arm dropped to his side. “I’m sorry, Frea. For leaving you in the dark. I should have contacted the clan sooner, but...”

“Don’t be,” she waved him off. “Trying to send out a radio signal inside the City would have been too risky with the Cabal around. You did the right thing.”

“Thanks.”

“You’re still an idiot for going off on your own during the Tower attack, though.”

“That’s fair.” His gaze met hers through the dim light and after a second of silence, they shared a muffled laugh.

“We’re almost at the meeting point for the strike teams. You two ready?” A refugee from the front of the group called back.

“To kick Cabal ass?” Dex asked.

Frea unholstered the loaded hand cannon from her hip and smirked. “Always.”
“Lord Shaxx. The Vanguard arrived to the drop point.”

The Titan glanced up from reloading his rifle to peer at Arcite. “Go reinforce our flank. We can't let any more Legion past us,” he commanded. With a nod and short salute, the frame took off running toward the left, staying low to dodge constant gunfire from the Cabal troops. Once it was out of his sight, Shaxx scooted along the low hanging concrete wall to get a better view of the battle beyond it. Despite the Cabal's best efforts to halt their surprise attack, the strike teams made it to the zone for Cayde's Vex teleporter. Now all he had to do was keep the Legion preoccupied while the Vanguard finished setting it up. That was the hard part.

A scream in the distance caught his ear and Shaxx's gaze darted to one the alleyways just in time to see another group of Guardians go down to Cabal fire. His chest squeezed tightly as his hand balled into a fist. Everyone here was fighting with passion he hadn't seen in a long time, for their home, for their lives, but at this rate there won't be anyone left once the dust clears. Taking a deep breath, he pressed a finger to his helmet to open his comm. “Vanguard. What's your status?”

“Almost there!” Cayde was the first to chime in. “But I can't shoot and fix this thing because the Cabal just shot off my arm!”

“We need more time,” Ikora added breathlessly.

“The Legion is closing in every minute now. We don't have any more--”

Another yell, this time closer to his position, snapped Shaxx's attention away. A Hunter rolled over his cover and landed in the dirt with a cough. He started to get up but froze as the pack of Cabal Warhounds chasing after him leapt around the wall, their lips bared to reveal wet, gnarled jaws. Wasting no time, Shaxx jumped forward and smashed the butt of his gun into the closest hound before it could sink its teeth into the Guardian. The beast crumpled to the ground, only to be replaced by two more of its kin. Ever so slowly, the Warhounds closed in, their hungry eyes flicking from the hulking Titan before them to the much smaller Hunter behind. Letting his rifle drop to the ground, Shaxx spread his arms out carefully, waiting for the moment they decided to pounce. And soon they did. His hand shot up to grab the hilt of his Razelighter and he swung it in a wide arc through the air, slicing down three more hounds in a trail of fire. He noticed movement in the corner of his vision and saw two of the Warhounds break off to go after the Hunter. Twirling his flaming blade, he drove the end of it into one of the beast's eyes and raised his arm against the other. Instead of crushing the Guardian's helmet, the beast whined as its jaws locked around the Titan's gauntlet and stuck there. The sheer strength of the creature drove Shaxx to a knee. Its teeth sinking deeper into his armor and the flesh underneath. He grunted from the painful jolts spiking up his arm and tried to free his sword from the corpse of the other hound, only to realize too late it was stuck. The Warhound growled and clawed at his chestplate, determined to rip his limb away. Shuffling at his back and the distinct purr of a fusion rifle sounded over Shaxx's head. Suddenly, the beast's hold on him loosened and the last he saw of it was its wide eyes before it turned to dust from the energy weapon.

Breathing heavily, Shaxx shook the bloody soot from his armor and tested his fingers. His hand trembled with pain, the nerves shot and the bones broken. He tucked his wounded arm to his torso and bent to free his sword.

“T-thank you. For that.”

He turned to the Hunter next to him. Immediately he could tell the boy was new just by his stance, freshly wakened and lacking in formal training. He visibly shook under the Titan's piercing gaze, the
fusion rifle barely staying in his grasp.

“I owe you, Guardian. What’s your name?” He asked as calmly as possible.

“Xane...uh, S-sir.”

Shaxx raised a brow. The Hunter didn’t have much experience talking to someone of higher rank either. Before he could say more, his radio came to life with static and the sound of Arcite’s voice.

“Incoming Threshers!”

His head snapped to the sky. Darkened shadows of countless ships blocked the horizon like irregular storm clouds.

“Everyone! Down!” Every nearby Guardian dropped into cover, many of them simply falling to their stomachs and shielding their heads. Shaxx grabbed Xane and pulled him against the low wall. The ground behind them trembled seconds later as missiles struck the surrounding building and rained debris upon them. The chaos didn't stop. Not caring if they hit their own comrades, the Thresher ships constantly unloaded a hail of gunfire upon the area. Incoherent screams and shouts echoed over the sound of bullets whizzing by.

A wave of the gunfire washed over the wall Shaxx hid behind, blasting away chunks of stone and making his teeth chatter. He felt something grip his arm and glanced over to see the Hunter looking up at him with wide, fearful eyes. “We can't fight against something like this. We've lost,” Xane whimpered.

For a moment, Shaxx's thoughts drifted to another time. To other wars, to memories he hadn't dredged up from his mind in many long years. The sounds of the battle almost drifted away before he refocused again, his hand coming up to clasp the Hunter on the shoulder. “It only takes one Guardian to make a difference. As long as one of us still breathes, we haven't lost.”

A flash of lightening lit up the sky and everything went quiet as suddenly as the Threshers had arrived. The barrage from the ships stopped, even the high-pitched hum of their engines was gone. Everyone wearily stood up from their cover with eyes turned upwards for any hint was what just happened. The Threshers seemed to be frozen, the smallest glints of electricity arcing across their hulls. And then, they just fell out of the air, many of them crash landing into the empty streets and turning into fireballs. One ship was aimed for the middle of the battlefield and Guardians scrambled in every direction to avoid it, but the Thresher never hit the ground. Another crack of thunder and the ship was cleaved into two, each section crumbled into nothing as the arc energy burned away all traces of the metal. A small figure landed in the dirt where the Thresher would have been, bringing a slim smile to Shaxx's face when his gaze landed on the flickering arc staff in her hand and the shining white cloak billowing behind her.

Frea's clan surrounded her when the Titan made it to the middle of the field. He contemplated pushing his way through the crowd before deciding to step back and wait. She wouldn't have much time here, better that she spend it with her family. Though, it tore him up inside to sacrifice his time with her. He never liked waiting...or sharing.

Movement at the edge of the group caught his eye as a familiar Warlock stepped out and greeted him with a wave. “Lord Shaxx,” Dex said.

Somehow, the Warlock's appearance didn't surprise him one bit. “Dex...was wondering when you would show up,” he sighed. “I hope you have a good excuse as to why you made Frea worry.”
“It’s a long story.” He awkwardly scratched at his collar.

Chuckling softly, Shaxx held out his good hand. “Hopefully one you'll get to share with me soon.”

Dex returned his hidden grin and firmly shook the Titan's hand.

“Hey, you two.” Frea appeared out from behind the Warlock, her gaze swiftly landing on Shaxx. She smiled for just a moment when he met her eyes, until she looked down at his arm. “You're hurt.”

“I'm fine. It'll heal once I have the energy for it.” He stepped forward, ignoring Dex's stare, and took her hand. “You're late.”

“You know what...I think I heard Maku calling for me,” the Warlock stammered while he backed away. “I sh-should go.”

They barely acknowledged him as he ran off to give them privacy. After a long minute of silence, Shaxx sighed again, his fingers moving to weave tightly with Frea's. “We've got to stop parting like this,” he said.

She smirked. “True. It is getting a little old.”

Taking a step closer, the huntress reached up and removed his helmet, feeling the weight of the armor in her palms. She barely had time to lower it before he twined his hand in her hair and sharply leaned in. Their mouths met hungrily, greedy in their desire for more, but as soon as it started they had to separate. His fingertips skirted the curve of her back as he pressed another hard kiss to her lips and pulled away with a smack.

As she peered back into his eyes, Shaxx swallowed hard, searching for the right words to find. Telling her to come back safely felt hollow at a time like this. Knowing that their chances of victory were slim to none. Just through touch alone, he could tell how little Light she had left inside her, even less than the night before.

He exhaled a slow breath and shifted to unholster the Razelighter across his back, splaying it across his hands for her. “Make those bastards regret ever stepping on this planet.”

Frea’s eyes glossed over and she looked down at the sword, only to return with a confident smile spread over her features. “They won't want to once I'm done with them,” she whispered and took the blade. “Stay safe, Shaxx.”

Frea bounded up the stairs as fast as she could go, taking two steps at a time. Her eyes widened when she saw a group of Legionnaires at the top. Their attention wasn't focused on her, but instead at something she couldn't see around the corner of the building.

"Look out!" Ikora's voice rang out. Instantly the Cabal were blasted away by buckshot, one of them tumbling over the edge into the streets below as its brethren crumbled to the ground.

The huntress hopped over their bodies and slid to a stop. She arrived at what used to be a rooftop garden, now partially destroyed and on fire. Zavala sat slumped against the wall with his gun in his lap. His eyes were closed but she could see his chest slowly rise and fall like he was sleeping. Ikora was gripping the side railing of the garden as she struggling to reload her emptied shotgun with shaky fingers. And Cayde...Frea's heart dropped when her gaze landed on him. He was the first to notice her and gave her a lopsided smile, his glowing eyes unsteady.

“Fashionably late has it limits you know,” he started to chuckle but his breath hitched with pain. He sat on the ground, his leg tucked against his chest to keep himself from falling over. His other leg
ended in sparks at the knee and one of his arms was missing.

“Cayde--”

He raised his only hand to stop her. “Don't mind me, didn't like that arm anyway.” Reaching over, he hoisted the Vex teleporter and tossed it across the garden. It clattered across the stone and came to a stop just before Frea's feet, humming to life as it beckoned for her to enter. “We'll be fine here,” he grunted, trying to shift himself into a more comfortable position. “Get going.”

Fighting back her hesitation, she nodded. “I'll be back soon.”

The Hunter Vanguard's dim eyes locked with hers across the garden. “You better be.”

She stepped into the portal and her body felt like it was ignited, invisible threads pulled at her limbs until suddenly, it was gone. The smokey smell in the air was no longer present, the concrete under her boots turned to metal. Stumbling slightly from the drastic change, she straightened and her jaw fell open when she realized where she was. The top of Ghaul's command ship now spanned before her. The exact place where the Light was torn from her and where this entire war started. She spun and took in the sight of the Traveler before her, so close that she could almost touch it.

“Fitting your Traveler would send you.”

The voice that had been haunting her dreams since the day she lost her home called behind her. Slowly, Frea turned, her eye glowering as she met Ghaul's gaze. His towering presence demanded fear, but she gave him nothing except unyielding resolve. “Your Legion has overstayed it's welcome. It's time to leave.”

He scoffed and snapped his fingers. The doors surrounding them opened and Cabal troops streamed out, all of them with guns leveled at the huntress. “I don't know how you got your Light back, but you've been a thorn in my side since I threw you off this ship. This time I'll make sure to watch closely as my men drain the life from you.”

“Afraid to face me alone now that I'm no longer powerless?” Frea hollered loudly as he started to turn away. He moved back to her with a raised brow. “I mean--I've killed so many of your lackeys that I could do it in my sleep now. What's a few hundred more?” She causally shrugged with a wide smirk that stretched ear to ear.

Something unreadable flashed across Ghaul's face as she studied her.

“Frea...what are you doing?” Her Ghost panically asked in her head.

“Shh.” Her smile didn't waver as she returned the stare, her hand carefully going to the hand cannon on her hip. She couldn't rely on her Light this time, all of it used up to take down the Threshers earlier, but she hoped her bluff will at least even the odds. Maybe just a tiny bit.

After a long and draining silence, Ghaul finally straightened, his hand waving to dispel his troops. “I am Dominus Ghaul, slayer of gods and conquer of the Light. I don't fear some measly Guardian when I have this power.” He stepped back and from his feet a wave of hot fire erupted from the ship, encasing him like a cocoon. Forced to shield her face from the shockwave, Frea blinked against the brightness. She could sense the sheer energy coming from the flames. It was the Traveler's, much like the power inside her, but something about it was off. She watched as the fire changed into a deep purple color, the low hum turning into a deafening screech. Something was crying.

Another gust hit her and she toppled over with a groan, her fingers clutching at small hollows in the hull to keep from blowing off the ship. “Ghost, please tell me that's not what I think it is.”
“Somehow he's stolen Light from the Traveler. I think it's channeled though the cage into this ship,” it replied.

The huntress grumbled unpleasantly as she lifted to her feet. “I thought stealing Light was impossible.”

“Taking pure Light is. Only the Traveler can willingly grant that. The more energy Ghaul pulls, the more corrupted it'll become.”

“So,” Frea started, stretching out the new ache in her neck. “Force him to take more and hope he'll burn out in the process?”

Her Ghost shot her a worried look. “That could work...in theory.”

It was better than nothing. Rushing forward, she pulled a rifle off her back and hopped onto a pillar overlooking the purple fire. Ghaul's hulking form had yet to emerge from it and she couldn't spot him among the whirling flames. Maybe she got lucky and he just burned up in them?

Unfortunately she was never very lucky.

A column of solar energy suddenly shot up from the fire, nearly singeing her hood. She jumped backwards to avoid the fiery sword that embedded itself where her feet had been a second before. The flames lowered at last, and there Ghaul hovered on massive wings. Tendrils of Light wrapped around his limbs like writhing snakes. His gaze scanned across the ship until it landed on the huntress, a sneer etching across his face.

“You won't escape me this time!” Thrusting his hand into the air, he summoned hundreds of flaming swords and with a flick of his fingers, they all came raining down. Scrambling, Frea knocked a few of the blades to the side with her gun before making it underneath an archway for cover. “Look at your dead god,” Ghaul hollered, his voice echoing off the Traveler itself. “It won't save humanity a second time!” Peeking around the corner, Frea launched a barrage of bullets his way, which dented his armor and yet he seemed to simply shake off the attack. A void powered shield shimmered around his body. “How pitiful.” The air around him sparked with electricity and he flew forward, grabbing the huntress before she could dodge him. His hand wrapped around her wrist as he wretched the gun from her grip, pulling her up high into the air where she dangled. “You know nothing of sacrifice, nothing of worth.” His free hand reared back and the connected with her stomach, making her nearly black out.

Coughing, Frea put on her best smile despite the pain. “You're more pitiful than...” Another cough, this time she could feel warm blood trickle from her lips. “Us.”

Ghaul's brows furrowed. “A creature's words mean little to me.”

“If that were true, then you wouldn't have accepted my challenge.”

His hold on her tightened to a crushing pressure. “Then what makes me more pitiful?” He snorted. She winced as her bones creaked in his grasp. “You take, take, take, and take. But never earn.”

“I take what is already mine.”

“You steal from those you deem weak. The only thing that makes you worthy of is the lowest depths of hell. The Traveler would never choose someone who puts themselves before others. Also...” Keeping his eyes preoccupied with hers so he wouldn't notice, Frea carefully reached behind her back. “You talk too much.”
A flash of fire and metal. The look on Ghaul's face become one of shock and then pain as a Razelighter stuck out of his breastplate. The blade buried deep with the huntress's bodyweight behind it. His hand released her and she left the sword in him, rolling to slash at his legs with her knife.

“This isn't enough to kill me! I just need more...Light.” he sputtered, reaching for the purple flames burning in the middle.

“Then go!” Planting her boot on his back, she kicked him forward. He fell into the fire with a scream. The heat too much to bear this time. Frea followed behind him and fearlessly stepped though the fury, the corruption clawed at her exposed face like pins and needles raking across her flesh. She ignored it and bent forward to grasp the hilt of the sword.

“Why!?” Ghaul abruptly called out, his hands catching her arm. “Why did the Traveler choose you?”

The huntress stilled. She briefly looked up at the giant orb in the sky, the cage along its surface still holding firmly. “I don't know,” she whispered, closing her eyes. She opened them with a sigh. A new fierceness glinted in her gaze. “And I don't care. I came here to take my home back and now my friends won't have to live in fear anymore.” With a twist of her hand, she yanked the Razelighter out of Ghaul's chest and slashed it over his throat. His head twisted back and he fell one last time, hitting the hull of the ship with a sickening thud. The flames around them died down. The corruption fading as the huntress shook out her blade.

“Frea,” her Ghost called.

Her attention returned to where her Ghost stared and her mouth dropped. A ghostly silhouette in the shape of Ghaul, ten times larger then he was, floated in front of the Traveler. He extended a phantom arm toward the orb and was overwhelmed by a flood of light. The Cabal-built cage crumbled to pieces and along with it the Traveler expanded, part of its surface cracking and catching in its gravitational pull. Frea's eyes burned with tears as she watched the last of Ghual's form vanish. She could feel it. No longer held back by the cage, the Light had returned to the world. With a deep breath, she quickly wiped the corners of her eyes against her gauntlet, relief washing over her like a summer rain.

Ghost blinked at her side and bobbled, giving its best dance. “We did it! We really--”

The ship underneath her feet abruptly rocked to the side, nearly knocking Frea down. Stumbling, she clutched the railing to her chest to steady herself.

“What's happening?”

“The trapped Light seems to be reacting to the Traveler's awakening! It's tearing the ship apart!” Her Ghost exclaimed, scanning over the hull. A vent next to them blasted outward, sending sparking metal rocketing up into the sky. Frea plucked the little bot out of the air as another vent exploded. Muffled by her palm, it continued. “I can't locate any nearby jumpships. If we contact the Vanguard then perhaps they can try to teleport us again?”

The huntress looked up in time to see the airlocks leading to the interior of the ship contort and bend from the heat building up behind them. Her head whipped around as more vents around her went up in flames. This ship wasn't going to stay in the air much longer. “We can't wait that long,” she said, gasping on the smoke rising from the hull. She took a few uncertain steps toward the edge and peered over. Only the tops of buildings could be seen below.

Her Ghost wiggled out of her hand and deftly floated up to a mere inch from her face. “No! Your
Light is too weak, Frea! If you don't make that landing then there's no telling how long it'll be before I can revive you.” Its voice faltered. “I may not even be able to.”

She quietly stared at her Ghost, a sad smile appearing on her lips. “You know I have no choice. It's either stay here when this ship turns into a fireball, or take my chances with a leap of faith.” She gave the tiny bot a gentle pat. “Have a little faith, my friend.” Frea risked one last glance behind her before she jumped. Wide gashes crept across the ship's hall, tearing the metal open with a hiss. She started to whirl back, prepping for a far leap, but she hesitated...and it cost her. The command ship went up in an enormous explosion. Burning hot wind and debris sailed over the side of the ship, taking the huntress with it.

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She wasn't sure how much time passed as she fell. Dazed from the aching in her head, she tried to shake herself awake, which only made her spin wildly through the air.

“Frea!” Her Ghost screamed next to her, barely audible over the howling wind. “You're falling too fast. You've got to jump!”

She tried to, she honestly did, but the Light inside her didn't listen. At last her mind cleared enough that she could open her eyes and saw the ground coming up fast. Close enough now that she could make out the individual street lamps lining the roads. A flash of blue glinted down below and suddenly a large figure collided against her side, changing her momentum instantly. Instead of falling down, she was now flying across the sky, carried by warm arms and the tingle of arc energy dancing over her. She looked up at her savior and saw the horned helmet she could always pick out from a crowd, her fingers buried into his furred mantle with a smile.

The wind rushing past them slowed as Shaxx landed on the roof of a building, his boosters cushioning their fall. Frea felt his chest rise and fall with a relieved breath. His shadow over her moved as he peered down at her.

“Falling from impossible heights seems to be becoming a hobby of yours,” he sighed, his tone giving away the slight concern in his voice.

“I distinctly remember having to catch you once,” she retorted.

The Titan laughed. “And I'll gladly fall again if that means I'll end up in your arms.” Frea jumped up from his grasp, wrapped her arms tight around his neck and he reacted the same. “You did it,” he whispered. “It's finally over.”

“We all did it. I couldn't have done this alone.” She pulled away to look directly into his visor. Her fingertip traced the line between the orange and white painted along the surface. “So, I'm thinking vacation time. You, me, a sparrow, and this little spot I know in the Cosmodrome.”

“I think you've earned it,” Shaxx happily chuckled.

Part II Epilogue

Frea stood watching the waves gently lap against the shore. The soft breeze she'd come to enjoy at the Farm brought the fresh smell of pine. Inhaling a deep breath of the air, she looked down at the charred cloth in her hands. The remnant of her old cape had taken a beating from last time she hung it up on the memorial. The material nearly crumbled in her fingers and the white no longer had the
bright sheen of snow. The gold overlays had diminished from the salt in the sea wind. It was like all life in the cloak had been used up, the hope she once held in it no longer there.

“Hero of the hour and here you are. All by yourself.”

She smiled, casting a quick glance to the newcomer at her side. “Kinda tired of parties right now, honestly.”

Dex grinned, his eyes glinting with humor. “Where is Frea and what have you done with her?”

Laughing, she playfully punched his arm. “A lot has changed since the Tower fell. Have you seen the new one yet?”

“Briefly. I like it, it's very...cozy.”

“Dex. It's twice the size of the old Tower.”

“Yeah, but it doesn't have trees in the plaza,” he grumbled, crossing his arms over his head. “I used to love climbing those things and dropping apples on people's heads.”

“That's probably why they didn't put any,” Frea sighed.

They locked eyes and shared a laugh, thinking of memories that seemed so long ago now. Dex's head tilted when he noticed the fabric in her hand.

“What are you going to do with that?” He asked.

She raised it, letting it hang in the light so he could see the burned emblem. “Don't know. I put it up to honor you, but well...” A smirk crossed her lips. “You're not dead.”

“A shame. Truly.”

Tucking the material into one of her pouches, she nudged the Warlock away from the rocks. “Come on. We've got packing to do”

To be continued in Part III: A Thread Unfurls...
Part III: A Thread Unfurls

Chapter Notes

You've all been so patient with my slow updates lately, so I'm immediately starting up Part 3! This takes place after the events of the Curse of Osiris expansion and I've been so looking forward to writing this. Hope you all enjoy! -AFKai

In all her days as a Guardian, Frea had done a lot of traveling. Usually by Sparrow, sometimes by the occasional Pike she wrestled off some Dregs, and most recently by tank. But never had she flown by Titan shield. It wasn't the most graceful sight as she screamed through the air and crash landed into a pile of Vex bodies. The door behind her closed shut just as the hem of her cape passed through its threshold, the Sentinel shield that was her peculiar transport got knocked out of her grasp and ricocheted around the interior walls until the void energy creating it finally dissipated.

"Frea? You ok?" Dex's voice echoed from a small hole in the middle of the vault door.

"How was the landing?" Another voice, this time belonging to Aner's, called out.

Shaking off the metal bits sticking to her armor, the huntress climbed to her feet with a groan and stumbled back to the doorway. She lifted herself so she could peer through the small diamond shaped hole at the Warlock and Titan standing on the other side. "When I said I needed a quick way inside, that wasn't what I meant, Aner."

He shrugged. "But you did make it."

"Yeah, yeah." She sighed and dropped down. For nearly a week she had been searching for this room, or more specifically for the creator of the immense source of Traveler's Light that was weaving its way through the Infinite Forest. They had their suspicions of whom the Light belonged to, but not the reason why he was in the stimulant future, the darkest timeline created by the Vex.

"I still don't get it," Aner said from the other side. "My Master may have loved a good fight, but he wouldn't go out of his way to start one. So why would he be here?"

"Why not? There's no Guardians in this simulation, no Light or Traveler. If I had the free time, I'd want to spend my weekends crashing this place too," Dex replied.

"I'm going to explore further in," Frea cut into their chatter. Whatever they said back to her was lost as she stepped away from the door. Her Ghost appeared over her shoulder, shining a light across the mountains of Vex bodies thrown against the walls of the room.

"Wow," it mumbled next to her ear.

Something soft crunched under the huntress's boot and she stopped to peer down. A daisy, its stem now broken, laid next to her heel. Bending, she gently plucked it from the ground. The splash of color from the petals was a stark contrast from the rest of the cavern. Rusted metal and corroded rock decorated the floor and ceiling, yet somehow tuffs of flowers and grass were growing out from underneath the robot carcasses.

"I've never seen greenery in this simulation," she whispered, rubbing the stem between her fingertips.
“There's Light up ahead.”

Her gaze lifted to see that there was indeed a faint glimmer of white shining in the middle of the room. Tucking the daisy into her chestplate, Frea silently crept around one of the towering piles of metal and gasped. An Exo's body hovered over a blossoming bed of flowers, adorned with purple wrappings and placed with care, its hands crossed over its chest. It was a memorial.

“Is this...” She started, unable to finish her thought.

“It is.” Her Ghost fluttered around the body, scanning over the dusty armor. “Saint-14. His Light is gone.”

All the energy in Frea's body seemed to be ripped away as she sat down next to the shrine. “I don't get it. The Light we followed felt so alive. How could it have come from this?”

“I don't know. Saint was an odd Guardian and his power was almost limitless, he overflowed with Light.”

Crossing her arms over her knee, she rested her head against her forearms and stared up at the corpse. “You met him before right, Ghost? What was he like?”

“He was charismatic. The type of person you'd follow into battle without question,” someone else next to her answered.

Springing to her feet, Frea reached for the knife on her belt. She inhaled a relieved breath when she met the glowing gold eyes of Osiris's reflection. “Still following me, I see.” Her hand dropped as the shimmering image walked by her.

“Of course,” he chuckled. “You have a knack for finding things that my reflections cannot.”

“My reflections?” She raised a brow. Every time she ventured into the Forest, Osiris would send one of his phantoms to watch her. Normally they would refer to themselves in third person whenever she got the chance to talk to one.

The fiery figure sighed as he looked over the body of Saint-14. His hand hovered over it, as if he was too afraid to touch the armor. “Shortly after the Battle of Twilight Gap, he chased me here in the Forest and must have gotten trapped. Such a waste.”

“I'm sure he knew the risk. Don't blame yourself, Osiris.”

The Warlock moved his eyes to meet hers. “If I don't, then who will?” With a spin of his coat tails, he turned away from the body. “Don't linger too long here, Frea. This simulation is unstable around Guardians, we can't have you getting trapped like Saint...or worse.”

“What could be worse than dying here?” She grumbled as he vanished again. Osiris's cryptic tendencies drove her mad sometimes, she had a feeling it was because he didn't get out often enough. Time was funny inside the Infinite Forest. Depending on the location, she could spend days inside while only hours passed outside. It was convenient for exploring but trying to adjust back to the real world when she stepped out of the portal was often jarring.

“Frea. Over here.”

Turning on her heel, she met up with her Ghost. Something on the ground had the little bot's attention.
“What is it?” She asked.

“A gun,” it responded. Her gaze landed on a shotgun sitting against a pile of Vex husks. The weapon stuck out strangely, not a single hint of rust or corrosion marred the metallic surface. She scooped the gun into her hands and tested the weight. Something clinked inside the barrel, a sign of the mechanisms being broken, most likely from overuse judging by the charred end of the muzzle and dented stock. Her fingertips ran over the number XIV engraved above the trigger. “There's a note attached.”

“Read it for me?”

The Ghost’s frame expanded and twisted as it deciphered the message attached to its scan.

“I never found Osiris, but I've killed enough Vex to end a war. And they, in turn, struck a fatal blow: they completed a Mind with the sole function to drain the Light from me. It worked very well. Don't worry. It took them centuries to build, keyed to the unique frequency of my Light. And I sit atop its shattered husk. I mourn that I will never reach the heights you have. To me, you represent everything a Guardian can become. Yours is a thriving City. So different from mine. My whole fourteenth life I fought to make my City yours. I never finished. All I have left is this weapon. The Cryptarchs say you crafted it yourself, built it out of scraps and Light and sheer will, inside the Infinite Forge. I'll make sure it finds its way back to you. When you gave it to me, I swore I would make it my duty to follow your example. I'm still trying. —Saint-14”

“Ugh.” A splitting headache stabbed behind Frea's eyes and she looked away, shaking her head as the pain disappeared just as quickly as it came.

“Guardian?” When her vision focused again, her Ghost was floated in front of her visor, its concern clear in its eye. “Your Light just flickered for a moment. Are you alright?”

“Yeah, I just--” She ran a hand over her helmet. Every sense in her body was suddenly agitated, like she could feel an attack coming, it was suffocating. “We need to get out of here.” Strapping the shotgun to her back, she gave one last look at the body and pulled the daisy out from her chestplate, placing it upon the Exo's clasped hands. “I'm sorry I couldn't come sooner. Rest in peace, Saint.”

Whatever Dex and Aner were talking about halted when Frea returned to the door.

“Hey!” The Warlock hollered when he heard her footsteps. “See any buttons or a way to open this thing up over there? We couldn't find anything.”

She searched around and ran her hands over the stone carvings surrounding the entrance, of course finding nothing. The Vex weren't keen on convenience.

“I don't see anything,” she called back.

A scuffling sound from the other side could be heard and a moment later, the gleam of a Titan helmet poked out from the tiny hole in the middle of the door.

“Frea,” Aner said, his tone lined with concern. “Where's Saint?”

The huntress broke her gaze away, looking down at the floor. “He's dead. I'm sorry, Aner.”

A sound like a sigh escaped his visor as he glanced away. “I figured as much, honestly...but thanks for finding him at least. How are you going to get out now? The interface we hacked earlier is gone.”
Another head popped up into the opening. “Can I join the party?” Dex jested.

“Do you mind?” The Titan snapped, pushing the Warlock away. “There’s not enough space on the ledge for the both of us.”

“If you weren't so damn big then this wouldn't be a problem!”

They struggled together, sending rocks tumbling down and then suddenly they were gone from Frea's view. She didn't have to ponder long when a crash echoed on the other side of the door.

“Argh!” She heard Dex shout. “You tore my coat!”

“Relax. It looks better that way,” Aner snorted.

Groaning loudly, Frea rubbed her neck, feeling a new headache forming there. “Boys... boys!” When they finally quieted down, she continued. “Head back to the Tower. I'm going to see if my Ghost can teleport me out of here.”

“Is that a good idea? You'll automatically be transported to the nearest major Light source and who knows where that is in the simulate future,” Dex said.

“It's my only option. If I'm lucky then I'll just end up next to you guys.”

“You could always kill yourself. Maybe your Ghost will fit through that hole,” Aner offered. When the whole fireteam went silent he added. “That was a joke.”

“I see your brother's humor doesn't run in the family,” Dex curtly replied.

“Just go on. I'll join you guys soon,” Frea yelled. When the sound of their footsteps become too far for her to hear, she turned back to her Ghost. “Alright, let's go.”

The little bot nodded. “Hang on tight.” A second later, her entire world lit up like a beacon and then vanished. She now stood in the middle of a wide cavern, Vex architecture still surrounded her, but at least she was longer trapped in the tomb. “Huh, that's strange. We should have ended up somewhere where there's Light, but there's nothing--” The Ghost went silent for long enough to worry the huntress. She followed its line of sight and froze. Across the spacious cavern fought a Titan against an onslaught of mechanic Vex. He moved with a grace unlike she had ever seen, his tactics and style was old fashioned, yet effective in dealing with his enemies. No doubt he had many years, perhaps thousands, of experience to lean back on. “Guardian!” Her Ghost's warning snapped her out of the trance and she deftly rolled to the side, dodging a Minotaur's stomp. Reaching behind her back as she recovered her footing, she pulled a thinly curved sword from its sheathe and slashed apart the buckling at the Vex's ankle. The Minotaur fell to a knee with a groveling sound and the huntress used the opportunity to drive Quickfang into the glowing core in its midsection, ending its life entirely.

Letting out a long breath, she whipped around to return her gaze to the mysterious Guardian, but found him no longer ahead of her. “Where the hell.” When she turned back, her eyes landed on the barrel of a scout rifle pointed so closely to her helmet that could see every scratch and scorch mark covering the surface. She gasped in surprise and knocked the gun to the side, dodging a Minotaur's stomp. Reaching behind her back as she recovered her footing, she pulled a thinly curved sword from its sheathe and slashed apart the buckling at the Vex's ankle. The Minotaur fell to a knee with a groveling sound and the huntress used the opportunity to drive Quickfang into the glowing core in its midsection, ending its life entirely.

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“Oof!” She grunted as his fist connected with the unarmored section of her torso and she went down like a sack of bricks, the wind knocked right out of her lungs. The barrel of the scout rifle was on her again, this time pointed directly over her heart.
“Drop the weapon or this time I won't give you the chance to dodge,” the Titan commanded.

Frea could immediately tell by the robotic subharmonics in his voice that the stranger was an Exo, but something else had her attention more now that she had a better look at him. He donned the exact same armor set as the one she had just seen on Saint's body in the simulate future, it was newer and less rusty, but still had the same cracks running along the surface.

“No way.”

“Saint?” Her Ghost materialized over her shoulder, its eye glittering brightly. “Is that really you?”

The strange Titan twitched, his gun inching away from Frea's chestplate. “You again. I thought we sent the Ghosts away to prepare for the Fallen's attack.”

“But,” the Ghost stammered. “That was hundreds of years ago, before Six Fronts.”

Tired of having a gun pointed at her, the huntress grabbed the rifle and yanked it out of the Titan's grasp, sending it skittering across the floor. Before he could go for another weapon, she planted her sword into the stone and raised her hands. “Look. We're both Guardians. There's no need for any hostilities.”

“Are we?” Saint's hands stopped over the pistol on his belt, but he didn't pull it out. “We're in the Infinite Forest. How do I know you're not some Vex creation? And a bad one at that.” He thrust a finger in her direction. “What kind of armor are you wearing? You're so tiny...and since when did anyone other than Shaxx use a sword?”

Frea's hands slowly dropped, her fingers twitched with irritation from the Titan's rude comments. “Listen here, you crazy-”

“Saint,” her Ghost cut her off. “The Vex cannot replicate Guardians. You can sense her Light, correct? We're real.”

His head tilted to the side, the frill adorning his helmet followed the movement. Finally, after a few tense seconds, his guard seemed to relax as he crossed his arms over his chest. “Fine. Tell me Hunter, why are you in the Infinite Forest? I thought only Osiris knew how to get inside.”

“First of all, my name is Frea.” Climbing to her feet, she brushed the dust off her gear and retrieved Quickfang to sheathe it. “And secondly, shouldn't I be the one asking the questions? How are you alive right now?”

She flinched when the massive Titan suddenly stepped up to her. Only a few measly inches from her visor, his helmet moved up and down her body, inspecting. “Your Light is too powerful for a new Guardian...and strange....”

“Frea,” Ghost hummed in her head. “Something's not right, he's younger than the body we encountered in the Vex tomb and he mentioned something that happened centuries ago.”

“Are you saying what I think you are?” She quietly questioned. “Is that even possible?”

“Maybe. Osiris did mention the Forest being unstable, perhaps that means time travel is possible...or some form of it.”

Returning her attention back to the Guardian before her, Frea reached into her hood and unlocked the seals to her helmet. Exposing her head, a delicate weak spot, like this was a small symbol of trust, she hoped it would put the Exo more at ease. It definitely surprised him at least, enough so that she
could see his shoulders jump when her eyes met his visor.

“You mentioned the Fallen attacking the City. How so?” She asked, her voice now louder without the interference from her helmet.

“The House of Devils has been testing our new walls since they were finished two months ago. We believe they plan to attack any day now, so I've come to retrieve Osiris for it,” Saint said.

The huntress shared a look with her Ghost. House of Devils. New walls. The Fallen were in no position to go to war with the Guardians in her time...because he wasn't talking about her time. “The Battle of Six Fronts?” She hesitantly inquired.

He nodded. “The Cryptarchs are predicting the Fallen will approach in six waves. I didn't think that was common knowledge yet.”

“Saint,” she extended a careful hand toward him. “I need to show you something.”

The Titan was quiet as he sat at the end of the cargo ramp, his feet dangling over open air. Frea guided him out of the Infinite Forest and flew him to the Last City to explain everything. He declined her offer for a tour around the new Tower and instead watched the bustle of people below from the safety of her ship.

“Everything is so...worn down,” he whispered when she took a seat next to him. “Old and beaten, yet I've never seen the City so full of life.”

“Yeah,” she agreed, looking out over the buildings.

“How many years has it been after my time?”

“Well, Six Fronts hasn't happened for you so I think a few centuries? I'm not sure.”

“And I'm assuming there's been many wars between then and now?” He asked.

“Naturally. We just got done with-”

“No spoilers,” he interrupted. “I don't want to know the details.” With trembling fingers, he reached up and removed his heavy helmet, setting it aside so he could stare at the Traveler with his own robotic eyes. “I've dreamed of a City like this. Where Guardians and people lived together in harmony, unafraid of each other. Just knowing that it eventually comes true.” His gaze lowered to meet hers, a smile dancing across his face. “Thank you, Frea.”
“Is this it?” The huntress asked, looking up at the time gate. The structure was no doubt made by the Vex, circular in shape and thinner than a knife blade. The outer rim held together a rotating steam of light that closely resembled the waterspouts she often saw in the Cosmodrome during the Spring.

“Yes. This is where I entered the simulation and hopefully, where I'll be able to return.” Saint stretched an open palm toward her. “Despite our rough first meeting, it's been a pleasure.”

She smiled, grasping his hand. “Likewise. It was pretty cool getting to meet a legend in person.”

He chuckled as his grip on her fingers squeezed. “Legend, huh...”

“So, any chance I could come with you sometime?”

His hand slid away from hers and he replaced his helmet, clicking the seals to lock. “Your place is here, in your own time, your presence in the past may change things here in the future.”

“Ah.” Frea's face dropped slightly. “Good point. Oh, by the way...” She brought out the shotgun she found in his tomb, its strange metal casing radiated in the light emitted by the time gate. “I believe this is yours.”

Saint's head tilted slightly but he made no movement to take the gun. “I don't believe so. I've always been more of a rocket launcher fan myself,” he said. Her brows knitted together in confusion as she put away the weapon. Maybe the shotgun was placed in his tomb after he died? But it clearly had the number 14 etched into the side. “Take care, little Hunter.” The Titan's farewell snapped her back to the present. “I hope your future is as bright as mine.”

“Thank you, Saint. Safe travels.” She bowed her head slightly.

The Titan returned her nod before stepping into the swirling light of the portal. The energy inside shifted with his presence then once again returned to its natural state once his dark figure vanished. Frea bit her lip as she watched, the desire to satisfy her curiosity rising. Before her was a doorway to the past, hundreds of years before she woke up as a Guardian, where legends lost today are still alive and fighting. She wanted to see what the Tower was like when it was new, with shining marble walls and freshly painted railings. She wanted to meet the Iron Lords, and most of all...see Shaxx as one.

Without realizing it, her hand lifted toward the portal. The glow seemed to tug at her fingertips, beckoning with untold adventures on the other side.

“Stop!” A figure made of solar fire leapt between her and the Vex machine. Frea stumbled back, surprised by the sudden arrival, but quickly regained her footing and her senses when she realized it was another Osiris reflection.

She grumbled with annoyance. “You need to tell Osiris to stop harassing me with his magic. I'm getting tired of it.” The huntress walked forward, expecting to pass right through the mirage as she had once done before, but it caught her by the shoulders. The energy around the reflection flickered and slowly diminished to reveal a very real, and very aggravated, Warlock.

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“Frea.” Letting her go, he glanced behind at the portal and then returned his attention back to her, a look of irritation and concern hung over his features. “What did I say about staying here for too long?”
“But Osiris...I just met...”

His hand lifted in her face, cutting her off. “We may have control of the Infinite Forest but the Vex’s rules still thrive here, including their tricks. Anything could be a fake.”

“I know what I saw,” the huntress snapped. “And I’m not a child. Do not treat me like one.”

“Compared to the Guardians who have been around for centuries, you always will be.”

The comment made her eyes go wide and she whirled around, her cape smacking against the Warlock. She had planned to tell him everything about her meeting with Saint, maybe it would have given him closure after seeing the body in the simulate future, but now she didn't think he deserved it. “Then this child will be sure to stay out of your way next time you nearly die to another Vex creation.”

His next words were lost to the wind as she sprinted for the Forest exit.

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Frea jogged across the Tower's plaza toward the gunsmith's shop set up in one of the side corridors. It had been nearly three months since the Guardians and Vanguard finished settling in. They took an open area on top of the wall for the new Tower; positioned just below the old one both for convenience as they try to salvage whatever gear that survived the Red Legion attack, and as a reminder of those who lost their lives to get the City back.

“Hey Banshee,” the huntress greeted as she arrived at his kiosk.

The grumpy Exo looked up from his work, his metal brow twitching with recognition. “Frea. I hope you're not bringing me a sword this time.”

“Lucky you, I just need some parts!” She handed him a list she jotted down, hopefully it was everything she needed to fix the shotgun she found near Saint-14's body.

His glowing eyes skimmed over the paper and then slowly raised to meet hers. “These are some odd pieces. What are you fixing?”

“Just working a small project, nothing too crazy.”

Banshee's face held his usual blank expression as he tossed a bag of parts over the counter to her. “Uh-huh. Make sure this one doesn't have the potential to kill you, alright?”

“I'll keep that in mind. Thanks.” Trading the materials for Glimmer, she waved a goodbye before making her way toward the Crucible office.

A smile naturally eased over Frea's lips when she rounded the corner and saw Shaxx speaking to some rookie Guardians. Just recently they had a influx of new people, most likely brought on by the Traveler's awakening, and it's kept the Crucible handler very busy. Between her frequent bouts in the Infinite Forest and his training sessions, they rarely had free time to spend together these days. She still made an effort to visit him when she could, to recharge her batteries after a long day, but secretly she hoped things would quiet down around the Tower. At least for a week or two.

The Titan sensed her as she approached and looked up from his discussion, his hand rising to beckon her closer.

“Why don't you two run along now,” he said to the Hunter and Warlock staring up at him. “Arcite doesn't appreciate tardiness.”
The newbies scampered off toward the hanger, nearly bumping into Frea in their scramble. She watched them go and then turned back to Shaxx with a chuckle. “You didn’t have to chase your adoring fans away so quickly.”

“If I didn’t then they were going to continue to talk my ear off for the next hour,” he laughed. “Good afternoon, by the way.”

“Good afternoon,” she returned the greeting as she crossed the room and passed by the Titan, his head following her as she went. The new Crucible set up was less modest than the tiny, dinky office in the previous Tower. Scenes depicting in-progress matches lined one wall, while the rest of the area was open air and overlooked the City below. Shaxx often complained about the lack of privacy, but she could tell he enjoyed not being cooped up for once, she often caught him mindlessly staring out at the skyline.

“You're in a bad mood,” he commented.

She sighed heavily. “It's been a long day.”

“Oh yeah?” Shaxx crossed his arms. “Did you find Saint?”

The huntress dropped her satchel onto one of his desks, the scraps of metal and weapon parts clanged loudly inside. “We did. Unfortunately, he was dead.”

“I'm not surprised.”

She raised a brow. “How come?”

“A man like that doesn't just go missing for a few hundred years and then end up alive.”

“That's kinda depressing,” Frea said and stepped up to his side. “How are things here?”

“Quiet, or as quiet as they can be. We're still dealing with small groups of Red Legion, but they're no longer the power they used to be.” His helmet tilted to look down at her. “How's the old man?”

The mention of Osiris soured her mood further. “I don't want to talk about it,” she grumbled.

“That bad, huh?” He took hold of her hand when she averted her eyes. “Maybe I can make it better?”

Frea's head moved back to the Titan with a smirk, a heat flickering in her gaze. “What do you have in mind?” In the next second, he pulled her into an empty alcove just to the side of the Crucible room. She hit the wall with a small gasp as his body pressed against hers, his visor burying into her hair.

“I've missed you,” he whispered with a deep husk in his voice. His hands roamed up her thighs, his fingers moving in slow circles around her armor. It was the lightest of touches, enough to start the fire inside her but not satisfy.

“Not as much as I've missed you.” Finding the locks around his neck, she took off his helmet and tossed her head back, his lips going to the soft skin along her jaw. He trailed hot kisses from her collar to her cheeks, at last landing on her lips when she impatiently yanked on his Titan sash. He briefly pulled away with a sly grin. “I hate it when you tease me,” Frea complained, playfully patting his chestplate.

“It's hard not to when you look at me like that.”
She smiled and cupped his face, leaning in for another kiss.

“Lord Shaxx? You here?”

They both jumped from the sudden interruption. Shaxx’s head hung down with an annoyed groan as he reluctantly pulled his body away from her. He recognized the voice and so did Frea when her eyes widened slightly. “Is that Dex?” She asked in a quiet whisper.

“Hold that thought.” Retrieving his helmet from her hands, he left the alcove to greet his guest. “I’m here. What do you want?” He snapped, not bothering to hide the agitation in his tone.

Dex flinched with the Crucible handler seemingly appeared out of nowhere, and in a very bad mood too. “I uh-was wondering if you happened to see Frea yet today? We haven’t heard from her since leaving the Infinite Forest.”

The Titan rested his hands on his hips. “Did something happen?”

Trying to not wilt under the piercing gaze, Dex fiddled with his sleeve. “Well...we ran into a problem and she got trapped. She said she was going to call us when she found her way out.”

Shaxx could feel his blood start to boil. Why didn't she tell him this at all? “She came by earlier,” he lied, using all his willpower to keep his voice calm. “Said something about working on her jumpship at the hanger.”

“Oh, good.” The Warlock laid a hand over his heart, obviously relieved. “Thank you.”

Once he was gone, Frea emerged from the corner. “Shaxx, don't be mad.”

“Mad?” He turned toward her. “Haven't I warned you about how dangerous the Infinite Forest is? Why didn't you tell me you got trapped?”

“So you wouldn't freak out like you are now!” She cried, raising her hands. “Everything turned out okay. I found Saint-14 and even this amazing shotgun.” When she lifted the weapon off her back, something flashed over the Titan's eyes as he peered down at it. Was that...recognition?

“Don't go there anymore. You don't need to,” he commanded.

“But...”

“Frea.” He was almost yelling now. Using a tone she hadn't heard in a long time. He straightened when he realized what he had done and ran a hand over his hair, inhaling a steady breath before returning his gaze to hers. “As ranking Guardian, I order you to never enter the Forest again. Doesn't matter if Osiris needs you or not, you will not go there. Do you understand me?”

Frea’s upper lip quivered as she returned his stare. Her knuckles turned white from her grip on the shotgun. “Yes...Sir.”

A strained silence passed over them and he extended a hand to her shoulder. “Believe me, I'm not doing this without a good reason.” She slapped his hand away and spun, grabbing her bag off the table. “Frea? Wait.” The huntress didn’t stop, her white cloak melted into the crowded plaza. Never turning to glance back at him.

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Her head held in her hands, she forced down any tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. The soft glow of the Infinite forge casted a shadow over her face, the hum of it continuing as its beam
scanned over the broken shotgun.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean it,” her Ghost murmured next to her ear. “Shaxx would never order you like that normally.”

Frea sighed, wiping a gloved hand over her brow. “Exactly. He knows something. I’m more mad he won't tell me about it.”

“You didn't tell him about getting trapped in Saint's tomb...or meeting Saint.”

She shot a glare at the little bot. “Who's side are you on again?”

It hovered in the air like it was shrugging. “I'm just saying. Both of you are holding secrets and it's obviously affecting your relationship.”

The forge signaled that it finished the repair cycle and at last the red hot beam turned off. She took the gun from the metal plate and ran her fingers over it. The nicks and dents were gone, the rattling inside fixed. It should shoot just like a brand new gun now. Hefting it against her shoulder, she tested the sights. “I want to know what's going on. And I think it has something to do with that portal Saint came through.”

“Wait,” her Ghost said, floating up to land on the barrel of the gun. “Both Shaxx and Osiris have warned you about going there, and yet you're still going to do it?”

Frea grinned. “I'm a Hunter. We don't listen to rules.”

The search for the time gate was much shorter than she expected. In fact, she felt the same power that drew her in earlier pull on her through the entire Infinite Forest. Standing before it, she watched the waves of light inside spin in a slow circle. Such a simple looking thing, yet somehow it held the power to traverse time and reality. She glanced behind to ensure she wouldn't be stopped and then took a deep breath. No Osiris reflection to be seen. Perhaps he was busy with another simulation.

“Let's see if this is really just a fake, shall we?” Her hand went through first and she felt an odd tingling sensation creep over her body. Then the surface changed. The gentle pool of energy that was once calling to her reached out like claws and wrapped around her arms. She was yanked forward, her vision flashed blue and white, making her gut wretch like she was falling from Ghaul's command ship once again. In the next instant, the swirling stopped and she tumbled to the ground with a cough, her head spinning unpleasantly.

“Frea?! Are you alright?” Her Ghost appeared at her side.

“Yeah,” she groaned. “Just a little nauseous.”

“I imagine so. That trip isn't a pleasant one.” The new voice made her raise her head, her mouth dropping when her eyes landed on the Exo casually sitting on a rock before her.

“Saint? Why are you still here?”

Giving her a helping hand up, he beckoned behind her. “I should be asking you that.”

The huntress turned and her heart dropped just like her stomach had. The time gate she came through that was once brimming with energy was now void of all power. Only an empty, shadowed frame stood in front of her. She was stuck.
“No!” She banged on the deactivated time gate. The rim trembled under her strength, yet made no sign of coming to life again. She was curious, yes, maybe a little rebellious after being told no so many times, but being trapped here was not what she wanted. The regret that swelled in her chest left her gasping for air.

“Frea, calm down.” A large hand touched her shoulder and gently pulled her away from the portal. “Breaking it won't help your problem.”

The huntress circled on her heel. “What are you doing back in the Infinite Forest, Saint?” She asked, a slight accusation in her voice. “I thought you were going back to Earth?”

The Titan lowered his arm, taking a step so he could study the time gate as well. “I did leave. I was actually on my way to tell you about our victory at Six Fronts. It's been two months since...” Trailing off, his head moved back down to look at her. “How much time has passed for you since we met?”

“We met this morning,” she replied as her eyes widened. The realization hit her like a rock. “Just a few hours for me.”

“So our timelines don't move at the same rate. Interesting.” He walked away from her and the gate, his heavy boots crunching over rocks.

“Hey, wait. Where are you going?”

“Home.”

Frea stepped up to follow but the Exo stopped in his tracks. “You can't.”

“And why not?” She frowned.

“I told you before, did I not? You risk everything by being in the past. You're not supposed to exist yet,” Saint said flatly.

Her hands balled into fists, clutching at the edges of her snowy cape. “I know and I'm sorry, what I've done was stupid and utterly selfish...but I can't just stay here. I have to find a way back.”

A loud sigh bounced off the walls from him and finally he turned around. “You were kind to me when I was misplaced, so I suppose I should return the favor. Or at least try to point you in the right direction. Come.”

Seeing the old Tower in all its glory was the last thing Frea ever expected to experience in her new lifespan. She slowly stepped off of Saint's ship into the hanger bay. It was exactly how she remembered it to be, though much shinier and filled with faces she didn't recognize.

“We just finished the construction on this one,” the Titan next to her muttered as he lead her toward the plaza. “After the last Tower was demolished thanks to civil war.”

“Bannerfall.”

His glimmering eyes snapped to hers for a moment and then looked away. “Yes. A year rarely goes by where we're not repairing something. Right now it's the wall near Twilight Gap, the fighting
during Six Fronts did quite a number on the structure.”

The skin on the back of the huntress's neck prickled and she glanced to the side, noticing some Guardians casting weary stares her way.

“Interacting with that shard in the Dark Forest changed your Light, Frea. I think they can sense that,” her Ghost quietly said in her head.

“Yeah, I can see that.” Hunching down to not draw more attention to herself, she pulled her hood over her face. “Saint, it this a good idea? What if we run into someone I know in the future?”

“You practically begged me to bring you. Would you rather me leave you to fend for yourself then?”

“What's the harm in that?”

Saint stopped in the shadow of the hallway leading to the Vanguard office and turned to face her, his metal brow furrowing. “This isn't the same City you know. Leaving a Guardian such as you alone here would be dangerous.”

“What do you mean?” She asked.

He flinched and opened his mouth to reply, then closed it as if deciding to say something else. “It's complicated. Don't worry, we'll be out of here quick. I just need to access the console in the next room to see where my Father has moved Osiris's writings.”

“Hopefully they'll come in handy like you think they will.”

The Exo shrugged. “It's the next best thing besides finding the man himself. And he's the only one who knows enough about the Forest to reactivate a time gate. We'll find a way, Frea.”

“Yeah,” she mumbled. Spinning around to continue where they were heading, she accidentally bumped into something hard. Grimacing, she reached up to rub her sore nose, and froze. Just an inch in front of her was a white and orange chestpiece, painted in a familiar pattern, with a medallion hanging off a furred mantle. Panic sent her heart pumping and she immediately backed away into Saint's shadow.

“Sorry...oh, Commander,” the deep voice just above her head said.

“Shaxx,” the Titan returned the greeting with a professional smile, his face giving no emotion away.

“What brings you to the Vanguard today?”

“Just putting in a new supply order for the wall...” Keeping her eyes firmly planted to the ground as they talked, Frea's heartbeat got so unbearably loud with anticipation. She debated running away, but that would be too obvious. Maybe materializing back to Saint's ship? That probably wouldn't look any better. She settled for staying as still as possible and hoped she would just be ignored. Meeting anyone here could mean changing the future, for better or for worse. “So,” Shaxx continued, his tone getting loud enough to snap the huntress from her thoughts. “Who's this?”

*Dammit.*

“This is uh--” Saint's blank demeanor finally broke as he hesitated for far longer than he should have. “A new Guardian I just took in.”

The huntress rolled her eyes underneath the cover of her hood. Even she didn't believe that lie.
“Hm.” Shaxx tightly crossed his arms over his chest. He definitely didn't believe it either. “Since when did you train Hunters?”

“I occasionally make exceptions.”

“Saint, please, you're a bad liar. Any self respecting Guardian can see she's not freshly awakened with that powerful Light. Who are you, Hunter?” When she didn't meet his gaze, a growl rumbled in the Titan's throat. “Don't you know how to talk to someone who outranks you, Guardian?”

The harshness in his words finally made Frea lift her head up, her eyes landing directly on his visor. For a second, she was surprised by his armor. There were two unbroken horns adorning his helmet and it made his already menacing figure feel even more formidable. The attitude he extruded now didn't even compare to her recent argument with him in her time, this was far more venomous.

Despite his face being covered she could tell he was glaring down at her, and she returned the same look with as much vigor. “Excuse me?” She snapped.

Shaxx's looming form twitched from her rude outburst, his arms unlocking to hang at his sides as he took a threatening step forward. “How dare--”

“But Saint...” he started.

“You talk about rank. I hope you're not losing track of where you sit on the ladder, Shaxx,” the Exo warned as his hand landed on his brethren's shoulder and squeezed tight. “This Hunter is important to me. I expect you to treat her with the same respect as you treat me. I doubt your Master would be happy to hear about your insubordination.”

A grumbled complaint snuck out from his helmet, but he moved to the side and lowered his head. “Yes of course, Commander. My apologies.”

Saint trudged by the Titan and Frea quickly followed behind. She felt a cold sensation down her spine as she passed and glanced up, realizing Shaxx was watching her closely as she did so. Was this really how he was in the past? He was always imposing, but now he seemed so calloused, lacking the energy that inspired generations of Guardians. This wasn't the Shaxx she knew. It took all her effort to tear her eyes away from his and she jerked her hood down more, forcing herself to walk faster after Saint.

“Do you know Shaxx well in your time?”

“Ah, what?” She stumbled over her words from the sudden question.

Saint fixed her with a scrutinizing gaze. “Shaxx. Are you close with him? You reacted strangely back there.”

Biting her lip, she gripped her forearm, unsure how exactly to answer. “Y-yeah, you could say that.”

“I see.” Fingers gliding over the control panel, he slid the door open to a dark room and flicked on the lights. The office was modestly small with a simple desk and monitor set up in the corner. A collection of rifles hung up on the opposite side of the wall. “Lord Saladin keeps Shaxx busy. I doubt he'll remember you from that awkward introduction.” Her eyes followed the Exo as he plopped down at the desk and started typing into the console. A part of her hoped he was right, her being so
easily forgettable, but her chest tightened at the thought of someone special to her not bothering to
give a second thought. She quietly shook her head, chiding herself. This was the past and everything
was different here. She had to keep that in mind. “Here it is,” Saint spoke up. “Looks like Osiris's
books were moved to my Father's private library.”

The Speaker's library. Frea moved to stand behind the Titan, staring at the screen. She recalled the
library before the Red War. It was where banished information and real hush-hush things were kept,
definitely not open to the public. “Let me guess, I'm not allowed inside?”

“You're not.” Turning the console off, he rose from his seat. “My Ghost can send access codes for
the door to yours. Everyone in the Tower has been preoccupied recovering from the war so sneaking
inside should be easy. Just don't get caught. Even I won't be able to bail you out if you do.”

“Noted. How crowded is it after midnight?”

The Exo tilted his head. “It's empty most of the time these days. Are you only planning to go in at
night? What are you going to do during the day? I can get you a room in the Tower.”

“No, that's alright. You've done enough already.” The huntress tapped her chin in thought, an idea
clicking in her mind. “You said they were repairing the wall near Twilight Gap, right? The less time
I spend in the Tower the better, so I think I'll try to lend a hand with the construction there. Keep a
low profile and all.”

“Sounds good. Contact me if you find anything.

That night was warm as Frea quickly crossed the plaza. Silver light from the full moon shined over
the Tower, making the shadows under the archways easier to blend into. She arrived at the Speaker's
quarters and took a sharp left down the corridor. It wasn't often that she came down here, even in her
time, she never had a reason to. The hall was built lavishly with intricate wooden arches overlooking
the courtyard a floor below, she could smell the flowers growing there on the breeze. It was beautiful
and she found herself regretting never taking a moment to visit before.
Unfortunately, she couldn't enjoy it for long as she came upon the door to the library. With a weary
sigh she reached up to key in the code she received from Saint.

“What are you doing?”

Her fingers hesitated over the control panel with a silent curse. She didn't need to turn around to
know who it was and she definitely didn't want to, but when an armored hand gripped her arm, her
every instinct told her to run. Jumping backward suddenly, she used her weight to knock her
assailant off balance and then leapt over the railing into the courtyard. As soon as her boots touched
the ground she took off running.

She didn't get very far.

With a squeak, her cloak was caught and she toppled over, she rolled to lighten the fall and then
bounced back to her feet a bit dizzy. Her reaction time was too slow to avoid the oversized Titan as
he grabbed her by the fur adorning her collar and pinned her against the wall high enough that her
feet no longer touched the ground.

“So it is you,” Shaxx growled. “I knew you looked suspicious, and now you're trying to break into
the Speaker's library? Explain yourself.”

Gripping his arm for support, she struggled against his grasp. “I'm not your enemy, Shaxx.”
“Lord Shaxx, Hunter.”

Frea's chest tightened painfully. She didn't expect the correction to hurt so badly. “Lord Shaxx,” she repeated. “I don't mean any harm, truly. Isn't Saint's trust in me enough proof of that?”

The Titan huffed. “Saint is a good man but sometimes naive. His trust is too easily given, just look at Osiris, it's a miracle they've yet to banish that Warlock.” His head titled, the pendant hanging from his neck mimicked the movement. “I heard what he called you. You're name is Frea, correct? Who are you and why is Saint trying to cover for you?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.” She gave her best smile, trying to mask the fear starting to bubble in the pit of her stomach. “I'm just a rookie.”

He pulled her away from the wall and closer to him. Her nose nearly touched his visor. “If I find out you're a threat to this Tower then I will personally crush your Ghost. Do you understand me?” She swiftly nodded her head and he dropped her, watching her stumble to keep her footing. “Don't let me catch you near the library again,” he growled and then turned away, leaving Frea alone in the dark.

“Well, that went poorly,” Ghost quietly whispered in her mind.

The huntress let herself slide to her knees, her eyes locked on Shaxx's back until she could no longer see him in the moonlight. “I'm an idiot.”

Her Ghost materialized over her shoulder. “What's done is done. Now you just need to figure out how to fix it.”

“Fix it!” She waved a hand to indicate all around her. “I'm stuck hundreds of years in the past with no way back! And not only that, but Shaxx thinks I have some sort of ulterior motive.” Her hands slapped the marble tiles decorating the ground in frustration, her voice choking on tears. “He knows me, knows my name, if I do return...I can't even imagine how things have changed now.”

“Then we'll have to try harder to stay out of his way,” it said. “It may not be too late.”

Frea took a few shallow breaths to calm her pounding heart and then climbed to her feet, fixing the collar of her cape thrown askew by the Titan. “Yeah, you're right. Saint said he's been busy lately,” she mumbled, pressing a knuckle to her lip. “The Crucible hasn't been created yet, but if it's Saladin giving him work then I bet Shaxx is stuck in the Tower most of the time.”

“Indeed. We can go camp out near the wall for a few days and assist with the repairs, maybe by then he'll give up and we'll be able to get into the library.”

Smiling slightly, she poked the Ghost. It bobbed in the air and blinked up at her with a joyful hum. “Good idea, my friend. At least it'll keep my mind off of everything for a few hours while we get out of this mess.”

She cursed with at least ten different words.

Shaxx stared down at her, his glare intense enough that it seemed to pierce his visor right into her heart. “What are you doing here?” He asked.

“Oh-um-just thought I'd come to help with the construction,” Frea replied. She wasn't lying. The morning after her stressful encounter with the Titan, she came to Twilight Gap to assist with the wall in hopes that she would be able to avoid running into anyone else she knew. Regrettably, fate seemed to be laughing at her right now. “What are you doing here?”
He crossed his arms. “I'm running the project. Getting this place built up as quickly as possible before the Fallen decide to attack us again,” he spoke quickly, avoiding any details. It was clear the night before was still fresh in his mind.

“Well!” She clapped her hands together with a small smile. “You look like you have more than enough people, so I'll just get out of your way.”

“Hold on...”

A loud clattering from behind caught their attention and they turned to see a group struggling to keep a heavy metal beam aloft. Shaxx immediately dashed for it, helping them lift one side before it fell, but the other end swung out dangerously and knocked a regular City worker holding it off the high ledge. The man went over the side with a scream.

“No!” Frea was the quickest to react. She leapt over the edge and grabbed the worker by the hand, tucking him against her as she reached out and managed to grasp a piece of rebar protruding from the wall. She bit down a whimper when she halted the momentum, the pull dragging on her arm and shoulder, a sickening pop echoed in her ear.

“No!” Frea was the quickest to react. She leapt over the edge and grabbed the worker by the hand, tucking him against her as she reached out and managed to grasp a piece of rebar protruding from the wall. She bit down a whimper when she halted the momentum, the pull dragging on her arm and shoulder, a sickening pop echoed in her ear.

“You two alright?” A Warlock hollered as he leaned over the side and spotted them. In the next minute, they were pulled back over the ledge and to safer ground.

“Thank you,” the man she saved gripped her hand. She forced herself to not flinch when he took the one that grabbed the rebar. “Thank you so much.”

“Of course,” she patted his back. “Just watch yourself next time, okay?”

He nodded fiercely. “I will, I will!”

She gave him a hesitant smile as he returned to the rest of the group and then turned back, feeling a presence behind her.

“Nice thinking,” Shaxx commented. “I haven’t seen many Guardians move with that speed.”

“I've had a lot of practice catching people,” she jested, her smile wavering as her shoulder throbbed again.

The Titan's helmet beckoning toward her arm. “You know, that won't heal until you reset it.” Her reply was lost in her throat when he suddenly stepped forward and took her elbow in careful hands. “Take a deep breath,” he whispered. With a jolt of his wrist and another gut-churning pop, he relocated her shoulder back into the socket. She nearly howled from the pain and unwittingly clutched the long fur around his neck to keep from falling over, the movement forced him to step so close that their chestplates rubbed together. A sound escaped his visor, something mixed between a gasp and groan, before he abruptly pulled away.

Realizing what she had done, Frea adverted her eyes and tried to hide the blood rushing to her face by pretending she was more preoccupied with testing her injured arm. “Thanks,” she mumbled.

A longer than normal silence crossed between them before Shaxx finally spoke up again. “Why don't you stay? We could use the extra help.”

“Wha-” She looked up, her brow raised in confusion.

He defensively lifted a hand. “Don't take that as a sign of trust, but I suppose you'll do less harm here than at the Tower.”
Frea bit her lip. She was running out of options for places to hide. If she declined his invite, then she would look even more suspicious, however, staying here was risky with Shaxx around. After another long second of thought, she sighed and held out her hand to him. “I'll help...for now.”

The Titan peered down at her palm and then spun away without taking it. “I'll have my eye on you, Hunter.”
The shotgun burned hot in Frea's hands as she finished off the last of the Fallen patrol, its auto trigger sending every shell searing through the Captain until there was nothing left of it. As she tiredly sat down on a boulder to reload it, her fingers brushed against the XIV carved into the barrel. A week had gone by in a flash since she crossed through the Vex time gate. She settled pretty quickly despite the weird circumstances, spending her days guarding the repairs on the wall under Shaxx's orders while during the night she snuck away to the Tower. Her search through Osiris's studies in the Speaker's library yielded less than prolific results however, nothing in there seemed to tell her how to get back to the future yet.

“These scouting parties are becoming more and more frequent lately,” a voice cut her from her daze. She glanced up to meet the eyes of a Hunter she'd come to know as Faelan, one of the few Guardians she allowed herself to chat to these days since they often teamed up for guard duty.

“Seems so,” she agreed, looking over the bodies of the Fallen in the dirt. Their sashes were dyed a deep blood red, the telling sign of the House of Devils. “Are they really just scouting parties though?”

Faelan followed her line of sight. “Think it's something more?” He asked.

“Maybe.” Frea rose to her feet and returned the heavy shotgun to her back. “They don't seem to be looking for anything and if they were, then they would have already known about this breach in the wall ages ago. But they keep sending more of these small groups here as if--”

“They're testing our defense,” someone else finished her thought behind them.

The huntress twitched and hopped in the opposite direction of the new voice, putting distance between herself and the Titan.

“Ah, Lord Shaxx,” Faelan greeted. “Do you need anything?”

“I came down to lend you two another gun but I see everything is already taken care of,” his helmet drifted slightly in Frea's direction. “I do need you though.”

The Hunters exchanged a glance and Frea felt her insides curl as she gripped her hands together. “Sure, of course,” she said.

Without another word, Shaxx turned and strode for the narrow stairs leading to the top of the wall. Dragging herself to go after him, she shot one last look at Faelan who shrugged and silently mouthed something back to her. “Good luck.”

The Titan's long strides made him able to take three of the steps at a time and when they finally made it to the top, Frea was out of breath from trying to keep up with him.

“I hope you're not claustrophobic,” he said over his shoulder.

“Um, what?” Smoothing the hair out of her eyes she saw what he pointed to and her heart dropped. A section of the wall was collapsed except for the tiniest of holes, held up by a single rusted metal beam. Just beyond the slim passage she could see a dim blue control panel for a door.
“This part got hit the worst during Six Fronts and we haven't been able to reach the room on the other side since this happened,” Shaxx explained. He extended a hand to tap on the metal and then stopped, thinking better of the idea. “Anyway, we need to hit that button and open the door to shift the rubble so we can clear it.”

She sighed heavily, understanding what he wanted. “You mean, you want me to crawl in that mouse-sized hole to open the door?”

“You're the only one here small enough to do it.”

“And how do we know if this whole thing isn't going to fall on me? Can't we just push it over and clear it like this?”

“If we try to move it now then we risk the chance of breaking the door permanently and then we'll have to destroy more of the wall to get to whatever is in that room.” He rested his hand on his hips, turning fully to face the huntress. “Besides, if it does happen to buckle, then I'll be there to make sure you won't get hurt.”

“Or to res me,” Frea grumbled.

“That too.”

Defeated, she spun back to the crevice. “Alright. Let's make this quick.” Placing all her guns on the ground first, she ever so slowly snaked her boot into the passage and then froze, waiting for the whole thing to immediately collapse on her. When it didn't, she continued forward. She took a deep breath and held it, trying her best to suck everything in as she inched farther into the wall until finally her fingertips were nearly touching the control panel. “I think I've got it.” Stretching a little too far, her knee slipped out of place and rammed against the edge of the wall. An ominous rumbling followed soon after.

“Frea!” She felt a hand envelop her wrist as the entire section of the wall came down, kicking up dust in its wake. Coughing and sputtering, her vision cleared after a few moments and she realized Shaxx was on his back beneath her, his arms wrapped around her head to protect it while she straddled his hips. Instinctively she wanted to struggle, but his hold on her tightened. “Shh, stop! You're going to make this thing fall more.”

She willed herself to calm down and tried not think about the feeling of his body tightly pressed to hers or the place his armor was rubbing against. The structure above them still creaked and groaned with the threat of collapse, but so far it hovered in place just enough to not crush them, though moving was nearly impossible. “So what now, huh?”

His helmet titled slightly to look above them and she tracked his gaze. The panel was still there, still waiting. “Think you can get to that? If we open the door then the debris should fall to the other side and give us enough room to climb out of here,” he said, his voice even louder in the tightly enclosed space.

“Can't you just Titan punch us out?”

“In this position?” He flailed his arms, the only part of him that was free enough to move.

“Alright, I get it,” she said with a groan. Gingerly, she reached her hand through the small opening between two slabs of concrete and came up only a few inches short of the panel. Her arm fell down with an annoyed sound. “I'm almost there I just need...something.” An idea popped in her mind and she tried to grab for the holster on her thigh, but the metal pressing on her shoulders kept her unable
to do so. “Lord Shaxx, any chance you could reach the knife strapped to my leg?”

He twitched beneath her, his muscles flexing with tension. “Why?”

“To hit the panel,” she replied, picking up on the sudden abrasiveness in his tone. “I know you don't trust me but I'm not so cold-blooding to stab the guy who just kept me from getting crushed. Even though your clumsy rescue attempt only got the both of us stuck.” She couldn't help the smirk that crossed her lips. In the days she spent here, she avoided Shaxx as much as possible, yet her eyes often wandered to him whenever she had a free moment to herself. His attitude may be different from what she was used to, but she slowly started to notice the same charming quirks that made falling in love with him so easy. Once she was even treated to a taste of his dry humor while fighting off another scouting group of Fallen.

He almost seemed like he was going to retort but then he sighed as his hands left her head. “I'm sorry.” Frea didn't need to ask why when his fingertips blindly found the curve of her waist and then steadily inched downward to her belt. Biting her lip, she slipped forward in an attempt to help him reach her leg easier, but his hand suddenly flew up and gripped her hip to stop her. She felt a shudder course through him underneath his armor. “Don't,” he snapped. The pitch in his voice when he spoke was one she knew very well, low and raspy, brought on when her groin accidentally ground against his as she moved. She stilled and closed her eyes, trying to not lose herself to the desire building up inside her. His fingers left trails of fire down her body where they roamed, the sound of his quickening breath behind his helmet only brought her more excitement. This was torture.

Shaxx's hand finally came upon her thigh and thinking that her knife was there, squeezed. A moan escaped Frea's mouth before she could stifle it. The tense silence that overcame them after that noise was heavier than the pounds of rubble pushing on their backs from above. “Other leg,” she quietly said. Mumbling another apology, he changed his angle and finally found the hoop built into her knife hilt, his finger hooking around it to yank the blade from its sheathe. She hurriedly grabbed it from his hand, desperate to get free before she made more of a fool out of herself, and tried again for the door panel. The tip of the knife was nearly there and she scooted forward, ignoring the Titan's soft groan and the way his fingers dug into her flesh as she did so. The sharp blade sunk into the panel with a satisfying shriek and the door opened. Just as predicted, the pile of metal and rock shifted into the room and the pressure pinning them down to the floor loosened. Frea ducked to dodge a sliding rod from knocking her in the head, when suddenly her world turned upside down as Shaxx rolled her over underneath him.

“Cover your head and don't move,” he said.

Frea braced her arms over herself as he summoned Arc Light into his body. Electrified and brimming with power, he thrusted an elbow into the rock. It gave away to his strength, the metal mixed in with the debris conducting the lightening, and blasted a hole the size of the Titan through the rubble. Her teeth were still chattering from the static when Shaxx helped her out. Faelan and some other workers came running up behind them.

“You two alright? We suddenly heard--” The Hunter stopped when his gaze drifted down to the thick layer of dust covering them and the pile of rock behind. “What the hell happened?”

“Nothing happened,” Shaxx answered quickly, suspiciously so. “Just a small cave in. Get this cleared up by the end of the day, alright?” Then he pushed through the group, heading for the opposite end of the wall.

Faelan turned back to the huntress. “And you, Frea?” He inquired.

Preoccupied with shaking the dust out of her cape, she snapped back to attention. “Nope. Nothing
Frea yawned wide as she keyed the code to the Speaker's library, the door sliding quietly to allow her access just like the last three nights before.

“I think my hair is going turn grey from stress if I have any more days like today,” she grumbled.

“Maybe you should have stayed in tonight,” her Ghost appeared over her head, lighting up the entryway until she could flick some of the lanterns on. “Losing sleep won't do you any good.”

“Yes, mom.” She stopped when she noticed another faint glow leaking from around a bookshelf that blocked the view of the center library. The room was a large, filled with shelves that stretched from the floor to the ceiling and a massive oak table set up in the middle. Every night since she started coming here it was empty, this was the first time it wasn't completely dark when she entered. Did she leave a lantern on when she left last night? Her hand clutched the bag filled with scrolls and books hanging from her shoulder tighter. No, she wouldn't have made that mistake. Spinning slowly to not make any noise, she reached for the door.

“Don't bother leaving. I already know you're there,” the intruder called. The huntress cursed and hesitantly stepped back, finally coming into the light cast by the lantern positioned on the table. Shaxx sat on the desk, relaxing with his foot against the headrest of a chair and a book in his hand. The emblem for Osiris's disciples blazed a bright gold across the cover. His helmet lifted when she stood there in silence and then he snapped the book shut, the sound muffled by the parchment surrounding them. “Interesting read.”

“Not really. Kinda boring if you ask me,” she dryly replied. “So does this mean you'll be crushing my Ghost now?”

He snorted. “If I was then I would've done so when you came here again three days ago.”

The comment caught her attention and her eyes widened. “You...knew?”

“Oh course I did.” He rose off the table and gently placed the book back in its place on the shelf. “I believe my exact words were I'll have my eye on you.”

“Then why didn't you stop me?”

The Titan's hand stilled as it traced the worn bindings and then fell to his side. “I was hoping following you would give me a lead to Saint's intentions,” he sighed, turning back to her. “Unfortunately you're much more guarded than I thought.”

“Then I guess your mistrust is ill-considered.” She set her bag down and eased into her usual chair, spreading the tomes out across the table's surface. “Don't push your luck,” he shot back at her without skipping a beat. “So. Assuming you're not coming here just to engage in some cheerful reading, what are you trying to find?” The glance she shot him plainly displayed her unwillingness to abide by his game. “Okay. Easy question then. Your cape, where did you get it?”

Frea's eyes finally flitted up from her book to meet his visor. “You're awfully eager for someone who's been spying on me for the last week. Tired of slinking in the shadows?”

“My impatience got the better of me actually.” He shifted in his chair, the wood squeaked loudly
under his weight. “Indulge me at least. Then I'll let you keep coming back here, it's a fair trade I think.”

“Alright fine,” she sighed. “It was a gift. Given to me after my previous cloak burned up.”

“From someone special?” He asked.

Her heart skipped a beat as her eyes locked on his, then she quickly averted them.

“That's...personal.”

“Hm.” Shaxx placed an elbow on the table and rested the chin of his helmet against his knuckle. “I ask because that pattern, the gold thorns, is distinctly Iron Lord design. Very similar to a design belonging to someone—that I can say with the upmost certainty-didn't give to you.”

“I didn't steal it if that's what you're implying.”

“I'm not. You wouldn't be alive if you did.” His head tilted. She could tell he was studying her closely, watching her reactions. “Your special someone must have quite the influence to get that cloak.”

Giving up on her reading, she crossed her arms and stared at the flicker of the lantern on the table. “I suppose an Iron Lord would know, wouldn't he?”

A chuckle escaped his helmet. “Apprentice, actually. I'm not a full fledged Iron Lord until next Spring, though, if the old man gets his way then I won't be an Iron Lord ever.” He exhaled a long breath, running his gloved palm over his visor. “

“Titles and formalities isn't what makes you great, Shaxx. You already are,” Frea whispered. She didn't realize the weight of her words until the Titan grew strangely quiet and looked up to see him frozen still, his hands gripping the edge of the table. “I mean uh...” Stumbling to recover the conversation, she sprang up from her seat. “Nevermind. I should call it a night.” She didn't bother to gather her strewn research and immediately bolted for the door.

“So are you?” Shaxx loudly called out behind her.

She hesitated and then slowly glanced back. “Am I what?”

“Saint's lover?”

The question caught her so off-guard that she nearly tripped over her own feet, giving him a look mixed between shock and horror. “What?! No!”

He leaned back in his chair and rested his arm over the headrest. Any thought he had going through his mind completely unreadable. “Goodnight, Frea.”

Lips pursed and her grip tight on her bracer, she awkwardly bowed her head. “Goodnight...Lord Shaxx.”

Chapter End Notes

Faelan: Male/Human/Hunter. Specialization: Bladedancer.
Thunder cracked the sky. Like a meteor, Shaxx came down, his fist connecting with the ground and incinerating the Vandals scrambling to avoid him.

“Okay, everyone. This way. This way,” Frea beckoned the workers inside the fort, the rain cascading down her visor made it difficult to see and the whirling winds stifled any noise except for the storm.

“I'll lead them to the safe room!” Yelled Faelan over the comm. He placed a hand on her shoulder and gently pushed her back toward the edge of the wall. “You go help Lord Shaxx!”

“Got it!” Kicking up water behind her, she placed a hand on the tip of the railing and leapt over the edge. Her stomach dropped as she plummeted to the ground and hopped once to soften her landing in the middle of the Fallen attack. She counted at least three Captains and even more Vandals, the first time the House of Devils ever brought in snipers for a scouting mission. Spotting a Dreg heading for Shaxx's unguarded flank, she pounced upon the Eliksni and plunged her knife into its neck, using the momentum to propel herself forward and land with her back up against the Titan's. “You look like you could use a little backup!” She hollered over the rain with a wide grin.

He took a step back, pressing closer to her. “Are you offering?”

“Depends.” Frea deflected a Dreg's spear with her gauntlet and shot a single bullet directly into its head. “Do I get a reward?”

She thought she felt a resounding laugh against her back for a second, but that could have just been the thunder. “We'll see,” he said.

He ducked down to a knee and taking the cue, the huntress rolled over his shoulder, smacking an unsuspecting Captain across the face with her heel. He reeled with a snarl, four hands grasping for her, but Shaxx connected a punch into the Fallen's carapace and sent him flying across the field.

“We've been out here for ages. There's no end to these guys!” Frea gasped, knocking a Vandal away with her hand cannon. For every Fallen that fell, it seemed like two more to their place.

“They must be hiding in the mist.”

“Is this a real attack this time?” Sidestepping to avoid a Captain’s fire, she slipping for a moment in the mud. He caught her by the arm and hefted her behind the decrepit remains of a car.

“I don't think so. If it was then we'd be seeing higher ranked Fallen,” he replied, reloading his rifle.

She peeked out of the top of their cover, trying to memorize every position taken by the Eliksni. Two of the Captains still remained, one with a scorch cannon and the other with a sword, both wrly coming closer to their hiding spot with each second that ticked by. Killing both would be incredibly hard with the Vandals hidden in the rain, their snipers having the potential to kill in one shot. If she could take them out quickly enough...

“If you summon your staff here then Shaxx will know you're not a bladedancer,” her Ghost spoke up in her head.

“I know,” she said, hesitating. Bringing out her arc staff now would no doubt confirm Shaxx's suspicions and crush any form of trust she had built up with the Titan in the last two weeks of being
here. She didn't want to risk that. Her gaze darted over to him next to her. He wasn't staring at the Fallen, but instead his visor was turned to the breach in the wall. Just beyond it where homes and families. They were the last defense for the people of the City. If this group got past them, she didn't even want to imagine the causalities. She gripped his furred pauldren, drawing his attention to her.

“Stay low.”

“Wha--”

Jumping over their cover, bright arc energy sizzled to life over her skin. Frea glided around the Captains, her staff forming into her hands with a hum as she sliced it across their abdomens and then charged the Vandals. She slammed it down and vaporized them instantly, the lightening scattering across the wet ground. Smiling with gratification at her quick work of the group, she turned back to the rock and saw Shaxx's tall form standing in the rain, he was oddly still as if entranced. His gun hung slack at his side. Her eyes automatically shifted to movement behind him and she reached out a hand in warning, but everything happened too fast for her to call out. The sword-wielding Captain, the last to survive her attack, raised his massive weapon and brought it down upon the Titan. Her heart clenched when she saw the blood mix with rain and Shaxx's Ghost materialize, hovering above the grass. Its blinking eye looked up and grew wide when the shadow of the blade arced over it next.

Willing her feet to move faster, uncontrolled Light danced at Frea's boots from the effort. She dropped to a knee, skimming over the slick mud and under the blade, and plucked the Ghost out of the air just the sword slashed down. She didn't feel the pain at first as she twirled the staff over her shoulder and lacerated the Captain in two. His final scream lost to her fury. It wasn't until she took a moment to breathe, that she even realized she was bleeding profusely.

“Frea!” Her Ghost appeared before her, alarmed.

Falling against the wall with a groan, her staff blinked out of existence, the energy spent. She clutched her side, triggering more spasms of pain up her abdomen. “I'm fine. Rez Shaxx first,” she waved off the bots with the command.

Once the Ghosts were out of her sight, she let herself slide down the base of metal wall to rest. Adrenaline still pumped through her veins at a rapid pace and it felt like her ribs was on fire despite her soaked armor. Her breathing was too shallow, she practically gasped for air, and it made the bleeding worse. The rain falling on her suddenly stopped and she lazily looked up to meet Shaxx's painted visor, her vision blurred and unfocused.

“Hold still. You're hurt pretty badly so this might take awhile,” her Ghost murmured as it scanned a beam over her body, kickstarting her internal healing process.

Frea watched the Titan standing before her and noticed his helmet gradually move from her wound to her face. His weight shifted from one foot to another. She guessed his Ghost must have filled him in on what happened after reviving him and judging by his stance, he wasn't too happy about it.

“That wasn't necessary,” he finally said.

Anger flashed in her eyes. “Not necessary? Are you serious?” She spat and got to her unsteady feet, ignoring the complaints of her Ghost. With two shaky steps forward, she poked a firm finger against the middle of Shaxx's chestplate. “When someone risks their ass to save you then you should thank them, not...” The world before her swirled dreadfully and she went along with it. He caught her by the waist before she could fall into the muck and easily lifted her up to carry her back to camp.

“You can lecture me after you're done healing,” he sighed.
She couldn't feel pain from the wound on her side anymore but the blood loss was still getting to her brain. The warmth of his arms, however, was so inviting that she unwittingly snuggled her head into his fur mantled. It smelled like pine. At least that was still the same. “I hope you're ready for a long talking to later,” she grumbled.

Before blacking out, Frea almost thought she heard the slightest of chuckles above her head.

“Shaxx,” she looked over at him from her seat on top the railing, her head tilting slightly. “Tell me about Twilight Gap.”

The Titan's eyes moved downwards, to the slim view of the white and gold cape adorned with Ana Bray's wolf emblem hanging off her back. “I figured the Speaker already told you the grisly details when he gave you that cloak.”

She shrugged. “He told me the basics but not about what happened after the fort was overtaken.”

“Ah,” he started, his tone changing to amusement. “You want to know what happened between Saladin and me? Why I disobeyed orders and lead the counterattack?” When she nodded down at him, he smiled sadly and leaned his elbows against the railing. “Before that battle I would have never dreamed of going against the Iron Lords.”

“If you hadn't then the Fallen would have taken the City.”

“True. But I had no idea at the time that my plan would actually work.” He gazed over the Last City, the night lights glinted like stars in the moonlight.

“Then why did you do it?” She asked.

Chuckling, he snuck a glance at the little huntress. “I was inspired.”

Frea awoke with a start, her head throbbing intensely. She bolted upright, only to be stopped by a large hand on her shoulder.

“Relax. You're safe.”

Her gaze met Shaxx's and found him sitting next to her cot, a stern expression across his face, his helmet off. Without thinking, she sprang into his arms and buried her face into his mantle.

“Thank the Traveler. I had this crazy dream about getting trapped through a Vex gate and...” Her voice caught when her eyes landed on the corner of her tent. Her armor, still waterlogged from the storm, was laid out to dry and with it was his helmet, the horns unbroken and perfect. She inhaled a sharp breath and pulled away, falling back into her bed.

The hands Shaxx reached out to catch her dropped back into his lap, clenching into tight fists.

“Remember where you are now?”

“Yeah.” She wrapped the blanket around her closer. The thin shirt she wore did nothing against the cold breeze drifting into her tent form the rain still pattering outside. “What happened?”

“You passed out before you healed fully. The blood loss mixed with your lack of sleep didn't do you any favors.”

The huntress rolled her eyes. They both went silence for some time, listening to the distant sound of thunder. “Are you not going to ask any questions?”
His eyes locked with hers. “Not at the moment. You saved my life, so you deserve at least some peace and quiet.” Getting up from the small chair, he bent and picked up his helmet, rolling it in his hands. “Try to get some rest tonight. The library can wait.”

“You’re going out in this rain again? Aren’t you cold?” She asked, staring at his soaked armor. The maroon fabric hanging off his belt still dripped water occasionally.

Shaxx’s brow lifted inquisitively. “Is that an invite?”

“No! I mean…” Frea looked down at her hands, cursing herself. Her heart throbbed loudly in her ear until the cot shifted as he sat down next to her, his shoulder brushing against hers. Her eyes roamed over to meet his, the color in them still as vivid as she remembered. He suddenly broke his gaze away with a chuckle. “What?”

“I guess I really do owe you a reward now,” he said.

“Bring coffee to the library next time and we’ll call it even.”

He laughed again, a small smile eased over his features. “Deal.” She watched him twine his fingers together tightly, a sign that he had something on his mind. “Listen, I wanted to apologize for the way I treated you when we first met.”

“You had reason to not trust me.”

“Perhaps. But I was harsher than usual, I tend to get protective when matters of the Vanguard are involved. Especially Saint.”

“Are you two close?”

The Titan shrugged. “I wouldn’t say that. We’ve fought side to side many times and he’s proven just how capable he is as our Commander. It’s admirable.”

Frea smiled. “You look up to him.”

His eyes darted over to her. “Why does that sound like an accusation?”

“It’s not, it’s just cute.”

“Cute,” he practically choked on the word. “That’s funny.” Placing his palms on the soft blanket, he let himself relax as he leaned back. “So. I’ve answered a question for you. How about one for me?”

“Again with this game?” Frea huffed with exasperation.

A mischievous flicker flashed in his gaze. “You’re a mysterious Guardian brought back after one of Saint’s bouts in the Infinite Forest. Your Light is one of arc, but the power you wielded against that Captain was not Bladedancer. Your gear is more advanced than anything I’ve seen before. And--”

He picked up one of the heavy Osiris tombs stacked next to her cot and dropped it back with a loud bang. “Every night you’ve been sneaking around the Tower to study the writings of a man obsessed with the Forest. If you know how that wouldn’t incite curiosity, please, tell me.”

“Okay, I get your point. You can ask me a question but not about my Light or the Forest.”

Barely taking a second to think, Shaxx asked. “Where are you from?”

“Here,” she replied. When he shot her a sharp look, she laughed. “Alright, I awakened in Old Russia, right outside the Cosmodrome four…” she caught herself, clearing her throat. “Awhile ago.”
"If it's something that simple, then why lie about it?"

Frea tilted her head coyly, a smirk appearing on her lips. "Isn't it my turn to ask a question now?" He met her eyes in silence, which only made her smile grow wider. "Why are you leading the construction project on the wall?"

"Saladin's orders. Though I suspect it's to keep me out of trouble," Shaxx said with a sigh. "I occasionally train new Guardians when I can, but the old man is determined to keep me away from the Tower and out of City politics. He says Iron Lords should be above such matters."

"What you told me about becoming an Iron Lord at the library last week...sounds like you two don't get along very well."

"We don't. Our opinions on the future of the Lords differ too much. Saladin wants to distance the Iron Temple from the Last City, I think we should be more involved. If you asked him who his favorite pupil was then he'd tell you Zavala without hesitation. I'm too..." He paused, considering his words. "Intense."

"You? Intense? No." The huntress stifled a giggle. "I don't see how he got that idea."

Chuckling softly, Shaxx playfully nudged her on the shoulder, his hand lingering for longer than normal. It was a surprisingly casual touch, one that sent a tremor aching down her spine. Her smile melted away as she looked down. He noticed. "You okay?"

"I'm fine," she said, feeling a pang of sadness rise in her chest. She was letting herself get too close to the Titan. Acting like strangers everyday left her missing him more. And each time she let him in, she risked everything in her future. Her warring thoughts vanished when he suddenly hooked his index finger under her chin and lifted her face to meet his eyes.

"Did you know," he whispered, his thumb slowly stoking over her bottom lip. "That your lip quivers when you lie?" At a loss of words and drawn in by the tenderness in his gaze, she laid an inviting hand on the center of his chestpiece. His eyes traveled down at her touch then back up. "Frea." He almost growled her name, his voice thick with lust as his fingers gripped her thigh and guided her into his lap. Her blanket fell off her shoulders as she straddled him, revealing her transparent shirt, now dampened by the water droplets sticking to his armor. His stare flitted downward to her bare body underneath before he leaned his face up to hers. "I have another question for you."

Frea slowly sighed when his lips teasingly brushed against hers, but didn't give her what she hoped for. "And what is that?"

"How do you want it?" Shaxx's hand inched under the hem of her shirt and traced up her back, making her shiver. "Gentle?" He then skirted his teeth along her jaw, nipping at the soft skin at her throat. "Or rough?"

"I want..." Any doubts flowing through her mind were immediately taken over by him, by his touch, she couldn't help herself. She didn't want to. Cupping his cheek, she brought his face back up to hers. "Just you, Shaxx. I don't care how you give it to me."

His eyes widened for a brief moment before he closed the distance between them, mouths coming together in a fervent kiss. He moaned deeply when her tongue twined with his and her small hands started to unfasten the couplings to his armor. She had him out of his gear and naked in almost no time, her trained fingers having no problem finding his buckles. At last, the last piece of his gauntlet hit the ground and she had her pressed up against the cot, her back sinking into the mattress. "You're wearing far too much for the occasion." His head dipped low as he pushed her shirt up her body and
kissed the skin it exposed. The huntress quivered beneath him, crying out as his lips covered one of her breasts, his tongue swirling in tantalizing circles. She felt his chest rumble with a satisfied chuckle at her reaction.

Fire raging inside her, she bucked her hips into his, earning a groan from the Titan. “Please,” she begged and wrapped her arms around his neck so she could press soft kisses to his jaw. “No more teasing.”

Their mouthes crushed together again as he spread her knees to him, the heat coming off her like a furnace. He moved forward and she gasped as he entered her. Stopping about halfway, he met her eyes with a curious glint in his gaze, then snapped his pelvis against hers suddenly. Dots erupted behind Frea's eyelids as her orgasm flowed over her body, her nails dragging across his biceps. He ran his palms over her thighs and relished in how they trembled. “You don't like to be teased,” he grinned slightly. “But your body says otherwise.”

The huntress buried her fingers in his hair and pulled him down against her. “Less talking. More kissing,” she demanded.

Shaxx's smile only grew wider as he braced his arms over her head. “Gladly.”
The storm broke at the beginning of sunrise. The dark clouds gave way for the morning rays and the last of the rain lingered in the trees and mud. The camp set up at the base of the wall, outside of the Last City's protection, was just starting to stir with the light. The night watch retreated back to their beds, while splashes from Guardians' boots wading through puddles mixed with the tired voices of early rising workers. Each getting ready for the new day. These were the sounds Frea had grown accustomed to during her time here. They had become almost normal to her now, though this morning was a little bit different from the rest. She stretched her arms out into the air, her back creaking in response after her deep sleep. She felt a shift in movement on the mattress behind her and suddenly she was encircled with warm arms and a broad chest.

“Where do you think you're going?” Shaxx asked, making her skin prickle with goosebumps as he pressed long kisses to the curve of her shoulder.

“To work. We can't stay in bed forever.”

The Titan made a huffing sound and pulled her tighter against him, inciting a giggle from the tiny huntress. “I believe your boss orders that you can,” he chuckled and nibbled at her earlobe.

She turned toward him with a smile and leaned in, her nose just a mere inch from his. “Well, I suppose another hour wouldn't hurt,” she whispered. His eyes softened, unable resist the grin that etched across his features as he met her lips with a gentle kiss. It didn't stay like that for long. He pushed her back against the sheets and ran his hand down the soft skin of her belly, entrapping her mouth with his own. His fingers crept lower and lower, until a loud coughing sound from outside made them both freeze still.

“Uh, Lord Shaxx?” Faelan's voice called out a bit awkwardly. He knocked on one of the wooden support poles at the entrance of the tent. “Lord Saladin is on his way to see you. Thought I'd give you a heads up so you could get uh...dressed.”

“I'll be right there,” Shaxx answered back after a moment of hesitation. There was no point in trying to hide now. He met Frea's gaze in silence, both unwilling to move as they listened to the Hunter's fading footsteps. “I suppose that extra hour will have to wait.”

She suppressed a sigh, feeling a small ball of frustration form in her chest. “Duty calls.”

They were dressed in their gear in minutes. Thankfully, it was dry despite being tossed on the floor recklessly the night before. Shaxx gave her one last apologetic look before sliding his horned helmet over his head and leaving. She waited a few extra seconds before brushing aside the flap to follow. The sun was already bright in the sky when she stepped out, and she blinked for her eyes to adjust.

“Psst!”

A noise to her left caught her ear and she turned to see Faelan hunched behind a storage chest, his hood pulled closer to his face than usual. Apparently he hadn't left like they thought.

“What are you doing?” Frea asked.

He stood and beckoned her closer with a wave of his hand. “You curious to see why Lord Saladin is here?”

She raised a brow. “Should I be?”
He shrugged. “The Iron Lords, besides Shaxx, rarely come down from Felwinter's Peak these days. It's gotta be something important.”

“So you want to eavesdrop?”

“Eavesdrop is such a strong word,” Faelan said. “I prefer keeping informed.”

Frea tried her best to stop herself from rolling her eyes. She had to admit, however...she was curious. Glancing back in the direction Shaxx had left, she racked her brain for what she knew of Twilight Gap. It wasn't much aside from the battle itself, but she did remember reading that tensions with the Iron Lords were elevated then, just before they started to disappear from history. Her gaze returned to the Hunter. “Fine, but I'm throwing you to the wolves if we get caught.”

They crept along the shadow of the command tent, staying low to avoid rattling any of the weapon racks set up along the thick fabric walls. Once they reached a spot where hushed voices could be heard inside, Faelan pulled out a slender knife from his belt. He delicately slashed a small hole into the grey material and opened it just enough so they could hear more clearly.

“I'm too busy to do errands for you, old man. If you haven't noticed, the House of Devils is sending Captains now. I can't leave the fort undefended.” Shaxx's harsh tone blared out from inside, he was obviously straining to keep his anger under control.

“You have more than enough capable Guardians under your command. They can hold Twilight Gap for a day while you're gone. Don't give me excuses.” Saladin, as calm and stern as ever, retorted. Clearly, he hadn't changed much in a few hundred years. “We need this Archon Priest eliminated as soon as possible.”

A deep grunt emanated next along with a rustle of papers. “These reports are a mess, your scout barely got a glimpse of the hideout. I won't leave my post on just maybes. You should have sent Gheleon.”

“You know we cannot spare any Lords right now. Everyone at Felwinter is prepping for our assault on the Cosmodrome-”

A slam interrupted the Titan, it sounded like an armored fist hitting the table. “Can't? Or won't?”

“We're not arguing this again, Shaxx.” The old Iron Lord sighed.

“No. You're all so obsessed with this SIVA that you're neglecting your duty to the Last City. There's another war on the horizon and instead you choose to chase fantasies instead. The Guardians at Six Fronts didn't die for you to play pretend.”

“Do not,” Saladin growled, his voice growing louder as all patience for his apprentice came to an end. “Assume what I do isn't for the City, boy. An Iron Lord does not question his superiors' orders. Do I make myself clear?” Silence. “Well?”

Quiet and submissive, Shaxx finally answered. “Yes...Sir.”

“Good. Burn the hideout and remove the Priest. I expect your report by tomorrow morning.”

Thundering footsteps too close for comfort made Frea jump backward in panic, she whirled around to tell Faelan to run, but found him already long gone. Sneaky bastard. She straightened and attempted to look casual when a cloak-wearing Titan burst out from the tent. His gaze landed on her immediately, his face unreadable as his dark eyes swept over her.
“G-good morning,” she quickly stammered, bowing her head slightly and clasping her anxious hands behind her back. Her fingernails dug into her palms, attempting to calm herself down to no avail. It wasn't Saladin's looming presence that was making her so nervous. No, the mere mention of SIVA always put her on the verge of hyperventilating. The nightmare she lived not so long ago. She closed her eyes, forcing herself not to think about the Splicers or corrupted Iron Lords trapped behind a sealed vault door for centuries. This was the point in time before that, before Saladin's greatest mistake. Her head snapped back up, her gaze meeting the Titan's directly with a determined gleam. “I agree with Lord Shaxx, Sir. SIVA is unpredictable and more importantly...uncontrollable. Trying to find it will not end well.”

Saladin's frown deepened, his pupils narrowing in warning. “And who are you?”

The huntress opened her mouth to speak and then slowly shut it, she had no answer for him.

“She's one of mine.” Shaxx vouched for her instead, stepping out of the dimness of the tent. The remains of the report was tightly gripped in his fist, the sole victim of the Titans' argument.

The Iron Lord shot him a glance before returning his attention back to the huntress. “I suggest you improve your subordinate’s manners next time, Shaxx. Your bad attitude is rubbing off on them.” Clicking his golden helmet back on, he brushed past Frea without another look, the cape hanging from his shoulders billowing wildly behind him.

Once he was out of sight, Shaxx breathed a heavy groan. “Ass.”

“I'm sorry. That probably didn't help much.”

“He'll regret it later.” The Titan gave her a sidelong look then, as if truly noticing she was there for the first time. “Care to tell me why or how you've come to know about SIVA?”

Frea's eyes widened in realization of what she had nearly done, tried to change the past, and berated herself for it. She had forgotten where she was for just a moment too long. It was getting harder to keep herself focused. “I...can't.”

A sound like the click of the tongue emitted from his helmet and he turned his head away. “Of course you can't,” he said with a raspy, disappointed voice that had already known what she was going to say. His stance changed, his hands moving to rest on his hip armor. “I need you to pull double duty and help Faelan until I return tonight. I expect this place to be still standing when I do,” he commanded, speaking so agonizingly formal that it made the hair on the back of Frea's neck stand straight up.

She swallowed down on the hard lump in her throat. His guard was back up, the wall between them rebuilt thanks to her secrets. It was probably for the best, she had to distance herself, but that thought didn't make her feel any better. “Are you not taking anyone with you?” She hesitantly asked, already guessing the reply.

“Just follow your orders.”

Frea sat at the campfire with a long sigh, rubbing the headache forming at her temple. They were becoming more common now, this one being the second she's now had today and it wasn't even noon yet. She rested her chin against her palm and prodded at the dying flames with a discarded stick. Four hours have passed since Shaxx left for the Fallen hideout and they hadn't heard a word. Worry ate at her like a parasite. He could take care of himself, she didn't doubt his skill, but her heart ached to be by his side anyway. They always worked best together. She tried to shake the
uncertainties away and shielded her eyes from the sun, wishing it didn't feel so blinding. No...they weren't a team, not yet, not here. Reaching for her calf, she pulled out a serrated knife, this one worn down with use. And from her arm, she grabbed another, one she never used in battle. Fine seams decorated the metallic surface, the repairs she had done after it was shattered on Io, and along with those were etch marks for every sunrise she was stranded here. She scratched a tiny diagonal line across four others to mark the new day. One side of the knife was almost entirely covered by her makeshift calendar, thirty in total. A month had flown by without her finding anything in the library about the Infinite Forest, and Saint’s sporadic messages about Osiris’s possible locations yielded nothing useful. She thought back to a meeting at the beginning of the week.

“This isn't working, Saint.” Frea charged into the Vanguard office, finding the Titan in the middle of meeting with Guardians she didn't recognize. Not that she cared that much anyway right now. It was midday at the Tower and she remembered to throw her helmet on for once so her face was hidden.

Saint-14 slowly turned his head to acknowledge the huntress and then waved off the others. “Come back later. This it important,” he commanded. With a nod of their heads and questioning glances, the Guardians left the room. As the Exo shut the door behind them, he swiveled back to her. “I take it that the hunt in the library isn't going well?”

Frea shook her head as she ripped off her helmet. “I'm getting antsy and Shaxx is asking a lot of questions.”

The Titan's head tilted curiously. “Shaxx,” he repeated, noting the way she said the name. Whatever he thought about the slight flush spreading into her cheeks, he didn't say. “There's more, isn't there?” He continued, matter-of-factly.”

She met his eyes for a second and then looked away, her fingers knotted together. There was more. She was experiencing odd pains, headaches, and even blackouts. Her memories were starting to jumble together, like she couldn't keep the ones made here and the real ones from her timeline separated anymore. “I-” she hesitated. “Think I'm getting side effects from the time gate, and they're getting worse.”

His glowing eyes widened and he stepped forward, suddenly grabbing her by the chin so he could study her face. She tried not the flinch from his cold, metal hands or hard fingertips. He wasn't trying to be rough, Titans often forgot the extent of their strength. He let her go quickly and moved away to tap something into his console. “I will redouble my efforts on finding Osiris but....” he trailed off.

“What?”

A worried look crossed his face. “Nothing. I'll update you as soon as I find anything. Try to stay patient.”

“Hey, stranger.”

A familiar voice from above snapped her back to reality and she looked up, slipping the lucky knife back into its holster. “Faelan,” she returned the greeting flatly. “I see you crawled out from your hiding place.” She really wasn't in the mood to chat.

“Yeah, yeah. Sorry about that.” When she said nothing in reply, the Hunter plopped down on the log next to her and stretched out his legs, the joints at his knees cracking. “I'm surprised you're still here.”

She finally sighed, letting herself take the bait. “Why do you say that?”
“Oh, come on.” Faelan playfully bopped her on the shoulder with his knuckle. “You and Shaxx are not nearly as discreet as you think. The last thing you should be doing right now is moping at this fire.”

“I'm not moping.” The edges of Frea's mouth tilted downward.

“Righttttt. And I'm actually a Warlock by the way,” he replied sarcastically, wiggling his fingers in mock gesture of the ‘space magic’ Warlock's were famous for.

“We have orders, Faelan...”

He grinned and stood back up, dusting bark off his green cloak. He then turned toward her and reached out a gloved hand. “Has that ever stopped you before?”

The huntress's gaze slowly moved from his palm to his face. “What about the fort?”

“Oh please,” he chuckled. “The others and I can take care of this place for a day.” He lifted her back to her feet as she took his hand, his smile widening. “Besides, with you there to help, Shaxx will be back sooner rather than later. I doubt he'll complain about that.”

“Yeah,” she halfheartedly agreed and looked up at the wall. The breach made at the Battle of Six Fronts was significantly smaller than when she first arrived, the construction rapidly nearing completion. Returning her attention back to the Hunter, she put on a smile and clasped him tightly on the arm. There was some truth to his words. Shaxx may be upset that she ignored his orders, but they'd be more efficient if they worked together. Her worries would be sated, and he would be back here to guard the wall sooner. Everyone's happy...at the cost of her getting an earful from the Titan, unfortunately. “Thanks, Faelan.”

He nodded. “Be careful out there.”

Frea took off running, reaching the edge of the camp in no time and summoned her Ghost into her hand. It blinked once and in the next moment, her Sparrow materialized like a brilliant bronze rocket next to her. She swung her leg over the side of the hovering vehicle without breaking stride and sank into the seat. Her hands found the familiar controls and with a flick of her fingers, the engine roared to life, shooting blazing fire out the back and propelling her over the wet grass.

“Pinpoint Shaxx's location, Ghost. We've got a party to crash.”

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