Fireteam Zeus: Axis Powers

by FireteamZeus

Summary

After a month long conflict with the insurgent Guardians of the Pantheon, the members of Fireteam Zeus expect some well needed R and R. Instead they get thrown into another war that nobody, not even the Commander, fully understands.

Contains a romantic and combative plot. There is a dom/sub relationship and a vanilla relationship. If BDSM ain't your cup of tea, you'll still enjoy the other relationship and the rest of the plot—hopefully. It's also non sexual dom/sub, so if something pornographic is what you're looking for, this isn't it. I still recommend it nonetheless.

Notes

Just a short preface and prelude before we begin again. A lot has happened, and a lot has yet to happen.
Hi internet! It’s been some time, a month and then some in fact! You may be wondering, what was I doing? Writing a second season to Fireteam Zeus of course! But unfortunately, it was utter garbage! It had a good story, but it was badly presented. Fireteam Zeus is now being reloaded per se, in this brand new work: Fireteam Zeus: Axis Powers. In this volume, I bring back the old cast after a bloody month long war with an organization called the Pantheon. So here’s how it went down.

After Lance defeats Prometheus, Fireteam Zeus is sent to investigate a Vex anomaly. Upon interacting with it a gate forms, releasing a group of Guardians who proceed to eliminate the Fireteam one by one. All but three members survive, namely Ash, Idea-2, and Riley. Church, the first to recover from near death, returns to the Last City only to find it completely overrun by the Pantheon. He rallies his Fireteam at The Farm and begins amassing a resistance called the Liberation. Once it swells to one thousand Guardians, he leads a reclamation of the City, beginning on December 1st and ending in a Liberation victory on December 3rd. This is what comes after.

The series begins bad, I admit. But thanks to a very helpful author (http://archiveofourown.org/users/Lalalelo94/pseuds/Lalalelo94) I was able to really turn it around in terms of character building and storytelling. Thanks a million. Fireteam Zeus wouldn’t still exist without you.

Before you begin reading Fireteam Zeus, be aware. Shit. Gets. Weird. Really weird. In every way. But I adhere to the lore and build off of it, mostly. But it also gets weird in other ways—and yes I know from episodes 1-4 my grammar is shite. Anyway, I’ll explain the character relationships and who these characters are a little. All of them are OCs by the way, and I don’t write first person chapters of the NPCs.

While most relationships are entirely vanilla, there is one D&S (no S&M though) relationship. It’s between two asexual (noun: asexual; plural noun: asexuals 1. a person who has no sexual desires.) people, and it focuses on the non sexual aspects—because those are (in the opinion of I, an asexual) the most interesting and (somewhat) relatable to me. Anyway, it’s not the main focus of the series, but it plays a large role in the romantic side of the plot. Look, if you don’t like that, I’m fine. But I promise you, this story will grab you by the grey matter and pound it with the hammer of entertainment. Here’s the rest of the preface.
Church is a Hunter who was resurrected right at the beginning of the Red War. He is one of the two slayers of Ghaul and a founder of Fireteam Zeus. His physical appearance is as follows.

6’4ish
Human.
Caucasian
Military cut black hair.
Eyes the color of fresh dollar bills.

_____

Skylar is a Warlock who was resurrected four years (approx.) before the Red War. He is well known for slaying the heart of the Black Garden, Atheon, Crota, Skolas, Oryx, Aksis—you get the picture. But all is not right with him and his head, and his past is far more complicated than it seems.

Appearance:
6’1.8
Human.
White.
Long-ish rusty bronze hair.
Brown eyes with green rings around the edge.

_____

Alex is a clone of Skylar created using Golden Age technology found on Mars. Rasputin interfered with the fabrication process, which left him not exactly human. His connection to the Light is considered anomalous and near impossible. It is even more strange that he is a Hunter. In fact, this story deserves a little vague explanation.

[Transcript of conversation between Blue Daniels (Multiple fields. Junior.) and Glenn Brown (Appropriation and adaptation of Vex technologies. Senior scientist.).]

BD=Blue Daniels
GB=Glenn Brown

BD: Voila! I present to you the project I have been working on for three years! The Garden of Eden Machine!

GB: Impressive, yes, but what does it do? I'll have you know that Vex technology is very unstable, and like the Vex themselves is a new discovery.
BD: Have you ever wondered, why is there only one of me? Why do I suck so much? Why isn’t there a better me somewhere?

GB: And not only are you using such a technology without the consent of the Joint Campus or your sponsors at Clovis Bray, but you obtained it illegally. When apprehended you said, and I quote, pardon my French—’Fuck da police’.

BD: Yeah. Now, Glenn, that lame arm of yours. This thing can fix it, and in fact it can create anything biological from literally nothing.

GB: How is that?

BD: Well, these Vex can simulate alternate realities. They can observe alternate timelines and realities. All you have to do is specify exactly what you want and this machine scans alternate realities for it, then copies it exactly. In fact, it could even transfer memories and such from that alternate world. Of course, it’s not stable enough for a test run, and it only does biological stuff. Still, it could be abused. Do not tell any- are you recording this?

Arya is a Hunter who used to work on the old Strike teams, Strike Team Theta specifically. She is known for her uncanny psychological tact, giving her a reputation as a mind reader. In her pre Collapse life she was the child of the Titan Curtis Victoriano.

Appearance:
6’0
Human.
Blonde hair.
Blue eyes.
Probably would have survived the Holocaust.

Bellona is a reputed military genius and the former leader of many Fireteams before joining Zeus. Emotionally and physically tough, heart of steel, hell on wheels, and that was a Man o’ War reference. Bet you didn’t think she was a Titan, seeing as Titans aren’t usually that smart.

6’6.8
Human.
Red hair.
Blue eyes.

Sisu-3

5’11
Exo
Broken eyelights.

Prelude

Unknown location.
Axis/ Concordat base.

The man strode purposefully into the bunker. He noted how reminiscent of Rasputin’s Warmind vault it was. Odds are it belonged to one dead Warmind or another. Whatever. It's not like the Axis hadn't infiltrated such facilities before. The man wasn't here to take in the sights and smells of the blue lit bunker. He was here to visit a friend of sorts. Two Titans in black and red armor bearing the Axis logo, a Concordat fist over the Pillar of the Pantheon (a separate group they once funded) flanked the diamond shaped door.

They stood stock still, even as the man walked right up to one of them and tapped them on the nose, his hand passing through their helmet as if he were incorporeal. The other opened the door for him and closed it behind him.

Inside was a desk with a lamp and countless maps and papers. A Ghost helped a masked man make sense of the papers and plot something that the visitor couldn't care less about. The visitor noisily brushed nonexistent dust from his red and brown robes, coughing into his hand. The masked man looked up, not the slightest bit unnerved. He slid some glasses over the nose of his black metal facemask and got back to work.

“I'm busy Prior,” the man stated. “Give me two hours, then we can talk.”
“Oh but we're talking already,” Prior said. “No need to stop.”

The man sighed and swiftly folded the maps and stacked the papers. He straightened himself to appear taller and made a pyramid with his fingers.

“You're late,” he said.

“Sorry, I had to check on my little brother,” Prior explained.

“You are in no way related to the individual named Skylar Peace or his pre Collapse identify Blue Daniels. It is a foolish thing to think of him as a brother. And he still hates you, even though convinced of your death.”

“That will never diminish the special time we shared,” Prior said with a grin.

“Let's get down to business,” the man at the desk ordered. “Your Pantheon went way too far. The agreement was that you would supply us the men for an attack, not attempt a genocide.”

“You think I run them?” Prior asked. “I merely hired them. I did what I did best and manipulated the variables to create a situation. I did the same thing decades ago. Now look what came of it. The great Axis organization! More than a thousand strong and growing.”

“It was meant to be a show of force you fucking idiot!” the man spat. “And we both know Anubis had a history of deviancy from orders longer than we have even been alive.”

“What can I say? I'm a sucker for good looks.”

“You're a sucker all right,” the masked man grumbled. “May I ask why we even work together anymore? Lysander is pissed off beyond all measure at us, and especially me. Do you know how he punishes those who fuck up as royally as you made us?”

“Hilariously and humiliatingly,” Prior answered, adding, “It was so funny watching him strip you
of your position as a general, and the second part had me in stitches. Just like your face.”

“Don't remind me. What I still wonder is of what use you are to me?”

“My connections. You would never have ascended to Corporal without my help. And you know how good I am at making accidents happen to unfavorable individuals.”

“Ahhh right,” the man sighed. “I was actually wondering, could you pull a few more strings for me and have a tragic accident befall a certain Guardian? I need someone dead, for good.”

“All I need is my payment, my men, and a name.”

“His name is Alan Saraceno. On your way out you'll get an envelope. Everything you need will be inside. The cheque and the contact numbers for the mercenaries. Good hunting Prior.”

“Thanks Y,” Prior said, walking from the bunker in a rather elated fashion.
Episode 1: V Day

Chapter Summary

The war with the Pantheon is over, but not all is perfectly right.

Chapter Notes

In this episode I reference a series written by another author whom I consider to be the internet approximation of a friend. Check her series out, it's better than... Something you particularly enjoy.

___†___

Church
Tower Plaza.
Last City, Earth.
6:15 AM

Skylar refused to come. Said every second he wasn't by his son/clone/brother's side was one of emotional agony. I could sympathize. If that happened to Seth, were he still alive, I would likely be doing the same. So I refused to let myself judge him. The only surprise was how he sold his soul to New Monarchy. Not entirely, as he would still represent FWC in the next faction rally, but he was a registered member of the Monarchy. Anyway, I'm not here to reflect. Zavala had something to tell us, and Ikora wanted to tell Skylar something at his earliest convenience. Something about Osiris. One of the Pantheon no doubt. Then again, not all people named after gods were bad, especially Bellona.

Speak of the devil. While I was reflecting by the gunsmith’s booth she had been watching me, waiting for me to notice her. She strode over to me with purpose and grabbed me by the forearms, slowly pushing me down the hallway. We reached a wall and she forced me against it, leaning in to touch her lips to mine. This was… surprising. But pleasant. Oh so pleasant. Never before had I felt this way, not in this immortal life at least. I parted my lips and encouraged her to explore my mouth with her tongue. She pulled back and giggled rather uncharacteristically.

“Breath mints again?”, she asked. “Oral bacteria haven't been an issue for centuries. The reason for this being-”
“Oh shut up and kiss me. We had something nice go-”, I said, getting cut off be her pushing me against the wall once more and freeing my right hand to grab me round the waist.

We stayed like that for some time, and surprisingly weren't interrupted by anyone whatsoever. I suddenly remembered why I journeyed so far from Alex's hospital room and looked at my watch. Six thirty AM. Shiitake mushrooms! I gently nudged Bellona away with my free hand and someone laughed.

“It's hysterical what people think they can get away with in public.”, a mocking female voice said. “Zavala's been waiting on you for too long.”

“Oh shove off kid!”, Bellona snapped.

“Oh that's why Church is so obedient around you. You must outrank him.”, Sam fake gasped. “And I'm flattered that you mistook me for that woman, but she's been at Zav's side all morning since four.”

“Rank has got nothing to do with it.”, I stated. “She's just great at one of the many things I find attractive, which is to say, being smart. Not to mention she's an amazing kisser.”

“Well it can't be anything else.”, Sam said, filing her nails. “You two are definitely a vanilla couple.”

“What on God's green earth does any of that mean?”, I asked, still letting Bell hold me.

“Tell you another day.”, Sam lied. “Zavala's got the Plaza set up for a celebration of sorts. Ice cream to the left and promotions to the right. Basically the Air Corps.”, she joked. “You can call me Sergeant, First Class, Sam now. Now hurry up.”

Bellona let me go and led me out of the hallway, going slow almost as if to show off her insanely fit form. It looked even better in that new Future War Cult armor, courtesy of Lakshmi. I was offered a place as an Arach in Dead Orbit but I didn't plan on dropping my camo and becoming an edge a sketch any time soon. Sam might though. She wasn't exactly the nihilist type but I wouldn't be surprised if one day she started wearing dark clothing and a spiked collar. Actually yes I would. She was practically the anti edgelord. Never anything but bright colors and light chatter with her. I've got to stop pigeonholing people. She was certainly unorthodox, but not that weird. Come to think of it
honestly, who would join Dead Orbit? Ever. I guess that would be my mental exercise today.

I followed Bellona’s lead to Zavala, trying far less than my damnedest to keep my eyes above her shoulders. I loved everything about her, especially her body. Everything about it was perfect, exactly to my liking except where my liking was absurd. The way the morning sun brought out the fiery red of her hair, and at night her knowing blue eyes piercing the darkness like a lance. Her waist and hips were superb, a slight deceptive hourglass figure, for if one were to grab her they would be met with a firm wall of muscle. Her legs, not the curvaceous shape most men desired but rather two muscular pillars, proof of her frequent physical training. Everything I listed and more. Even after all of Skylar’s preaching about love being more than physical I still couldn't get my mind off of the idea of us sharing a bed and doing something more than sleeping. Still, just thoughts for now. Maybe hanging around three asexual people had left its mark on me. Left me thinking about the true nature of love more than I should instead of just giving in and letting Bellona show me the way. Perhaps that was the smart thing. Or perhaps it was holding me back. You won't know unless you try. I made a mental note to do exactly that the second we were wed.

As we walked through the Plaza people began pointing fingers and whispering about us. Stop about me. I didn't do much this time. Nothing that nobody else did. I fought the Pantheon, and I fought well. Maybe I indulged in a few heroics I guess… Okay fine. A lot of heroics. I began the resistance after all, and I saw it through to the end. There was also one more thing.

When the final battle had begun, Zavala gave an order to consider every breath an enemy Guardian took as a war crime, to have to mercy. When we won, those who remained were sure to die. So I went above and beyond my jurisdiction and gave them an offer of collective surrender. Most agreed, and those who didn't were still taken prisoner anyway, although they didn't exactly get the best treatment. Cole did though. In fact, she was favored above the rest. She had willingly given us some vital information about the Pantheon, and me being a Captain I would get to see it once it came below O-4 classified. Bellona slipped me some information here and there. Apparently there was a plan B. Something about the Axis. I didn't get much though.

We walked slowly along the pathway to Zavala, waiting patiently six feet behind him whilst he conversed with an Awoken Hunter. He eventually noticed me and turned his attention to us. His smile faded entirely as he began talking.

“We lost many yesterday, many good men and women. But fewer than a hundred civilians. Anubis only burned sixty to make a demonstration. The rest were made couriers and servants when they were presumed dead by their families. He was so confident he could just wish them out of existence. But that isn't even the half of what I am here to tell you.”, he said gravely. “We lost three hundred and thirteen Guardians in this war. Counting the enemy the number is more than double. And that's not including the three hundred some who escaped. The biggest disaster since Luna. I should never have approved the no surrender order. I was being rash, vengeful even.”
“Sir, with all due respect,”, I interjected, “Anubis was suppressing the Ghosts, not us. We just hacked the device. And it was kill or be killed.”

“No, no it was not.”, he sighed. “You showed me that. Skylar showed us that. I even had someone put together a handy video to broadcast the fact. It might seem like self serving propaganda but it's not. It's something the people need to see.”

“What video?”, I asked.

“Our video.”, Sam answered smugly. “Me and Zavala spent all of last night on it. And I got Jack to sleep. Why's it so difficult for you Hunters anyway?”

“For one thing, show us.”, I commanded, literally since I outrank her, “For two it's our insomnia. Only a few don't have it.”

“Good to know.”, she stated. “Zavala, can I show him?”

“It would be good to have him review it first I guess.”, Zavala answered.

Sam pulled a tablet out of her robe and expanded it, clamping it to the railing so it functioned like a little television. She hit play and some music began playing, piano music at first. The video was good, and it carried a good message, but it delivered it badly. Just watching the clips included dragged me back.

Bayonets driven into chests, fierce gunfights, ships chasing each other through the air, a Hunter gunning down nine foes in nine shots, bullets whizzing past a Warlock, men falling dead face first onto the snowy ground. Just watching I began feeling those sensations again, the fear, the sorrow, everything. I zoned out and was yanked right back onto the battlefield. People fell around me, their heads and bodies riddled with holes, the patches of snow on the ground stained red with blood. The occasional round struck me as well, but I did not feel it. I did though hear the screams again, the tracer shots slowly passing through and around me. A firm hand yanked me back into reality.

“Are you alright Church?”, Bellona asked desperately, “Church wake up. Hello?”

“Oh, yeah, sorry.”, I said, inhaling sharply, my lungs burning from lack of oxygen. “It's a start you guys, but give it some more thought and time. And you made it seem a little one sided. And not once
did you mention all the civilian deaths. It's a little soon to be honest. Put some more time effort into it sir, and maybe it'll work.”

“I'll make sure that happens,” Zavala assured me. “Now follow me, there's something you need to hear but I suggest we do it in private.”

——[ ]

Bellona

Vanguard study, in the Tower.

Last City, Earth.

We entered the dark room from the elevator two by two, Sera by Zavala, Church by me, and nobody by Sam. She still refused to wake Jack. ‘He’s just too cute when he's asleep,’ she had said. I wouldn’t hesitate to tell her the next time she said something creepy and slash or weird like that again. It was bad enough that she supported New Monarchy. They weren't bad now, but once they had their way with the Consensus we would be in deep shit. How could she think as she did even after encountering a real live monarch and seeing their cruelty firsthand? I would have to explain exactly why her views were shortsighted and invalid one of these days.

If it weren't for men like Church I would have lost my faith in humanity by now. He's saintly in every sense of the word. He even wore a crucifix sometimes, regardless of the truth of reality, because he supported the values the New Testament instilled in people. I didn't want to burst his bubble and ruin anything for him, but someone would have to tell him the truth about Christianity one of these days.

Away from Church and into the room Bellona. Handsome as he is, he's not why you're here.. The study was truly astounding. It was an oddly shaped room, starting in a narrow hallway and ending in a large tear shaped chamber with a sort of domed blue ceiling, a window on the far wall. And that was just the beginning. Inside the study it only got better. Soft blue carpet that made me want to take off my boots, bookshelves I had to run my hands across, a stack of tablets with older models gathering filth on the bottom and the nearly identical newer ones dust free on top, doors on both my right and left leading to likely more chambers like this. In the middle of the room, atop a yellow map of the City surrounded by various Guardian relayed symbols, were a variety of chairs. Fixed to the floor were a set of armchairs, one orange and with a Titan logo, one blue with a Hunter logo, and the last purple with a Warlock insignia, a stack of books on either arm and the seat. There were also navy blue swivel chairs and a few of those memory foam circular bag affairs in red and purple that were apparently trending in more hipster circles, and as usual the classic chair and a half couches which Alex and Arya seemed to favor. Church offered his hand and I took it, leading the way to a red mini couch facing the Commander's seat. Zavala took his place and Sera stole Cayde’s to sit by him.
“Sera, I have already briefed you,” Zavala said. “Head to your quarters. Whatever it is you need I will supply once I finish attending to this.”

She got up and left, trying to convey as best she could how much she resented the fact without speaking. Being Awoken that would be quite easy, telepathic links and whatnot. I don't know what it was, but her exit lacked that feeling of finality I could sometimes pick up. We may not have seen the last of her. Church moved onto my lap to make room for Sam, opposite of what one would usually expect. I would chide her for rudeness but I liked having Church near me, so I guess she was off the hook.

“Sergeant First Class Sam. Please exit. This information is still W-3 classified. As you are an NCO you must leave. I will alert you once this information becomes public.”

“Whatever you say blue man.”, Sam sighed disdainfully.

Church moved back into his previous spot, albeit visibly reluctant to cease physical contact. He wrapped his arm around the seat and let it rest on my shoulder, almost as if assuring me of what I already know.

“Could we please begin?”, Church prompted.

“Indeed.”, Commander Zavala confirmed. “Bellona, I am surprised you didn't show up earlier. You are a full Colonel now.”

“Church isn't, and I already know the gist of it.”, I informed him.

“I see.”, he nodded knowingly. “I'll start from the top. The Pantheon loyalists that escaped have set up base elsewhere in the system, joined an already problematic group known as the Axis. They were originally just some ex Concordat with unknown strength and numbers but I fear they have swelled significantly and are stirring up more disorder than any other terrorist group this century, and we are still classifying the Pantheon as an army. Just today they have staged more than six attacks, three times what they have done in that many months before now.”

“Why is it significant that they're terrorists?”, Church inquired.

“Because that is how you are to deal with them. I was reckless in passing judgement on the
Pantheon before, but the Axis have had years to cease their activities and are fanatically politically motivated. All of them have been offered second chances, all refused, and they are using weapons much like the original Red Death. They are merciless killers. They had their chance, now you are to shoot on sight, only take prisoners when ordered to or when unable to render death permanent.”

“Fuuudge that.”, Church whispered to me. He spoke up so Zavala would hear him. “Sounds reasonable sir. Would you mind dimming those windows though? It's a little bright for my liking this time of day.”

“Certainly.”, he replied, doing so immediately to get it out of the way.

The room was significantly darker now, and the light from the windows was negligible. Zavala activated a few dim lamps around the chamber and in front of him, still leaving us in relative darkness though. I saw what Church was doing, predicting his actions seconds before they happened. He slid himself back onto my lap and I helped him onto me, adjusting my position to make it more comfortable and looping my left arm around his back. God, why must he cling to me like this? Not that it's unusual or undesired though. After such a strenuous thing as w- Nope. Don't ruin this for yourself. A lovely handsome man has crawled into your lap and you mustn't push him away. Not that he would leave. He seemed to prefer that I do the advancing, that I instigate the rom-Damn it all! I prompted Zavala to keep going, trying to shift my mind away from its usual cluttered state.

“Alright. They are terrorists and must be treated as such. Here is why I've hurried the advance of the information. It's been leaked that the Axis are planning to attack the Arcology and use an aggressive hacking tool to steal agricultural data that would be of utmost value to humanity. The tool might end up destroying the data though, and that we shall not allow. As we speak a battalion of just thirty Guardians are holding the line, and we need to send them reinforcements ASAP.”

“So do it!”, Church blurted out. “Sorry sir, but you're being the biggest buffoon I have ever seen today. Why haven't you sent them already?”

Zavala looked shocked at this, as was I. That wasn't exactly what someone would come to expect from Church normally, although his balance between obedience of military authority and his love of the people and instinct to preserve life was a delicate one. I considered giving him a jab or something to punish him but decided not to. That would lead me down the slippery slope of becoming a self obsessed authoritarian airhead. Or maybe he'd interpret it as a game for some reason. I couldn't judge him yet and I liked that, not having a mind map of someone. Instead of using negative reinforcement I just tensed my arm in an attempt to subtly convey my discontent with his recent decision.

“I said sir.”, he mumbled sarcastically.
That almost made me laugh, but unlike the band of ruffians and misfits I had joined I could hold it in. He already knew precisely how to make me laugh, and I took the opportunity to tell him how happy he made me quite frequently. No need further nullify military formality. Zavala answered his question and ignored the remark, one that, with the context that Church knew Skylar, was a particularly severe one.

“I can't let the people know and neither can you.”, he answered. “Terrorists want to spread fear and rot our society inside out. If the people know they will be scared, terrified. I will not allow that to happen. We will quash this menace swiftly and justly, but we cannot let anyone know.”

“Anything else?”, I asked.

Zavala got up from his chair and began to pace across the room and back, his Ghost activating lamps integrated into the map and lighting his way. I felt inclined to stand too, but I wanted to keep Church in my arms a while longer. He began speaking once more, this time almost hushed.

“Time and time again your Fireteam has proven itself to be among the most capable I have ever encountered.”, he stated. “Church. I wish for that success to continue, and I wish for humanity to profit from it. I have studied your team and dug deep to learn of your exploits. I know your hierarchy too. Two founders and a family am I not correct? Whether you acknowledge it or not the Fireteam is your success as well as Skylar’s. If you hadn't done anything he may have deteriorated to a point where he would have to be… I can't say it. I shudder to think of what he was becoming, what I would have to do to prevent it.” His voice grew softer and I got the feeling he didn't want us to hear him say, “He still might turn…”

“Sir, what are you getting at?”, I demanded. “If anything at all.”

“Please, Colonel, be silent.”, Zavala commanded. “Church, as one of the founders you are officially allowed to make this decision. I wish to assist your Fireteam. Zeus has, in quite hard to acquire reports, shown itself to be very capable in dealing with foes like Anubis and the Axis. Prometheus is a prime example. Nicodemus another. Your people may be the best equipped to handle this scenario and many others like it. If you accept my offer of assistance and endorsement, you will become the SAS of your day. I can already draw parallels between you and Jock Lewes, Skylar and David Stirling.”

“Sam left sir.”, Church said. “I don't know who or what any of that is.”
“Think of them like the Navy Seals.”, Zavala responded. “A small elite force with a general mission in mind, a more or less distinct purpose. I want you and all of Zeus to assist me in dealing with the Axis and all that are sure to follow.”

“I will take this up with Skylar, and before you say anything else, I'm not changing my mind on that.”, Church stated. “We built Zeus together, and we'll decide its future together. In fact, everyone gets a say.”

“If you must do it that way then-”, Zavala began.

“I will do it this way. And it's a sad reflection on all intelligent life as a whole that you would go behind everyone's back to do this. It's dishonest, deceitful even. If you can't deal with us in complete transparency and as a collective then you shouldn't deal with us at all.”

“I rescind my previous statement.”, the Commander chuckled. “It appears you are the Stirling here. I never had any intention of being sly, and I will alert the rest of Zeus. From this point you are all to be considered Majors if you were previously below that rank and entitled to O-5 information when relevant to your current objective.”

Well that was unexpected. The situation reeked of dishonesty on some level though. It didn't seem likely that the Commander would trust Skylar with any sort of power, but maybe he had outgrown whatever grudge they once had. Conclusions could be drawn, assumptions could be made, but I decided to err on the side of trust this time. Usually I could make out someone's true intentions and reveal hidden conversations in minutes, but Church, a very tired and rattled Church at that, made things complicated. I guess I would just have to wait and see how things panned out.

“With that more or less sorted out, I'm sending you to Titan immediately.”, Zavala announced. “You aren't exactly the Winged Hussars but… You'll do.”

`//[=]===`

Jack

Jack's apartment.

The Tower.

Last City, Earth.
First sleep in years, wasn't that bad really. Sure, the nightmares and flashbacks were a bit of a bore, but I got to enjoy a few new ones thanks to Nicodemus. Thanks old pal, even in death you still bloody well manage to fuck me up. Made it all the worse was what I woke up to. An empty home. Sam should have been here, she promised to start by my side and be here when I woke. Not that I was worried about anything, especially assassination attempts because of my large kill count and my fifty years as a bounty hunter and mercenary, or my violent action against certain groups. How absurd. No, I simply wanted that woman by me that's all. I slid myself out of bed and- By the Light that woman! Instead of leaving me in my armor as I had requested she actually had the nerve to undress me and proceed to change me into a blue and white striped set of pyjamas. Of what use would they be against bullets eh? I stumbled off out of the bedroom and entered the washroom, leaning hard on the sink. I looked in the mirror and smiled. My hair was finally its natural blonde again, the dye I had used for years to conceal my identity now all gone. And so were the bags under my eyes, the wrinkles on my face, all gone. Valence appeared at my shoulder.

“Wow Jack!” the little Ghost exclaimed, “You look radiant today!”

“Aw thanks Val.”, I said softly, using my true voice as I had been doing for some time.

The reason I had talked so harshly before was because when I turned twenty two post rez my soft voice had become almost iconic, so when I pissed off a group of radicals I used to work with I used to work with back then, it was bye bye soft voiced Alan and hello Jack the Ripper. Now that I had Sam though I felt comfortable in my own skin again, and now that we had overcome two attacking legions I felt more confident that I would be able to protect her and myself. Still, not fully confident whatsoever.

I pulled out my blue contact lenses to reveal my bright green eyes, which I couldn't help but narcissistically admire. I had Val clothe me in a red shirt and black jeans, pulling my cloak on myself and not needing a belt to keep the pants above my hips. As I entered the living room I couldn't help but shout,

“I love being me!”

I took a seat in my armchair, leaning back and diving into the book I had been reading since yesterday night. Look Who’s Back. A book about Adolf Hitler coming back to life in 2014 First Common Era and being mistaken for a brilliant comedian. Superb! It was just so up in your face, so defiant of old social norms. I heard Sam enter the room and completely ignored her, wrapped up in Adolf’s new obsession with the ‘N’ word and rap. She knelt down on my left and started caressing my arm.

“Unwanted contact.”, I chided, reading on and taking a sip from my glass.
Whenever she did something like that the flashbacks and memories tormented me. I couldn't feel that kind of pleasure without being reminded of what Nicodemus had made me associate it with. A ‘reward’ for killing someone under his control.

“Jack, you can't keep depriving yourself of these sensations.”, she said. “I love you and I want you no matter what, but you have to stop beating yourself up for whatever it is that's bugging you.”

A plan struck me. Oh ho ho ho ho! Yes… That would get her off me.

“Sam,”, I began, grabbing my pitcher of ice cold water, “you really need to cool off now don't you?”

I poured the contents of the pitcher onto her head, drenching her and thankfully she didn't scream. Screams were yet another trigger.

“Damn it Jack!”, she laughed. “Now I'll have to change.”

“Couldn't care less.”, I stated.

“Jack, that was a dick move.”, she said dryly. “And do you have like, PTSD or something? I know a good therapist.”

“I'll consider it when hell freezes over.”, I growled, more at the idea a therapist than at Sam.

That's what my lips said. My brain was seriously considering it. The problem is, nobody would believe me if I said a demon worshipped by the Hive made me go around killing people and whatnot. Nobody except...

“On second thought Sam, I'm sorry.”, I apologized. “Could you call up Shen for me?”

---

Alex
When I awoke Arya was by my side, asleep. My father was snoring away in the seat to my right, a book open on his lap, still in full armor, a scout rifle and its magazine lying separately on the table. I chose to wake Arya first, looping my left arm under and around her. The second she woke up a smile spread across her face.

“Good morning Alex.”, she said sleepily.

“Actually…”, Skylar began, pulling on a cowboy hat and drawing an invisible revolver, “It's high noon.”

I erupted in a fit of nearly stitch busting laughter, taking several minutes to calm myself. I stopped laughing after a time to pull Arya closer, tightening our embrace. I ran my hands through her hair and down to a reasonable position on her back.

“I love you Arya, and I never tell you enough.”, I said.

“Same here Alex. Except I love you more.”, she responded.

“Lies.”, I mumbled.

“You know what is a lie?”, Skylar asked.

Oh fuck.

“The Holocaust!”

“Bad taste if I may, Majorl Skylar.”, Executor Hideo said from the doorway. “Please do tread carefully in these times of mourning.”
“Yes, please do.”, I pleaded.

“Righty ho then, that I shall… do. Yep.”, he said, disappointed and bored. “Alex, would you mind if I exit, as much as it pains me to do so. Representing two factions is exceedingly difficult and I underestimated the workload. Gotta file some joint allegiance forms.”

“Sure, I'm fine as long as Arya's here.”, I answered.

Skylar got up and left, slinging his new Good Counsel IX onto his back, a spring in his step. When he exited the room Hideo laughed heartily.

“I'm sorry, but you have been misinformed.”, Hideo stated. “There's free food in the staff lounges, and everywhere here for that matter. Ever since a certain anonymous benefactor started sending such copious amounts of money our way we've been able to run at top efficient, and then some, plus with Lakshmi cooperating we can make political progress in leaps and bounds.”

“Cool.”, I said. “But could you just you know, leave?”

“All in good time.”, the executor assured me. “I would just like to ask you a few questions.”

I would have said no, but it was by his hospitality that I lay here in this bed, receiving top of the class healthcare for free. Why be rude? I unfastened the velcro straps used to keep me in place at night and sat up, Arya still clinging to me lovingly. There wasn't anything sexually suggestive about it, or anything we did. It was merely the contact we enjoyed, being physically unable to enjoy or even engage in intercourse. She leaned into my chest and I let her begin playing with my neck length bronze hair.

“Sure.”, I grunted with the effort of sitting up, “Don't see how it could do any harm.”

“Excellent.”, he said.

Hideo took Skylar's seat beside me and got out a small holographic screened tablet. I looked on in interest, trying to see what he was pulling up.
“I’m so sorry to pry, but how were you born?”, he inquired. “I know from experience and research that Guardians are sterile. Only seven alive aren’t, and that’s just what the math tells us.”

“Don’t you know the story?”, I asked. “The Garden of Eden Machine. Skylar found it on Mars. I was made and that’s the end of the story. A bit of fun trivia though is that he helped Clovis Bray design it at age thirteen in his previous life as the child prodigy and genius Blue Daniels.”

“That's all very interesting and all, but how exactly?”, Hideo pressed. “My doctors, I am once again deeply sorry, had to examine you. You entirely lack certain organs, and your sweat glands are slightly different from a normal human’s just to name a few differences.”

“Why do you care?”, I almost snapped. “I’m just as human as everyone else beyond that. Plus, Guardians are sterile as you said. My lack of certain organs and such shouldn't matter.”

“It's just… Lakshmi sent me.”, he admitted. “A favor for a favor. If I get this information she will owe me a favor of my own and I could use that to stabilize the two factions.”

“Well fuck her all to Hell then.”, I spat. “I'll tell you but that shady fucker doesn't need to know.”

“As you wish.”

“Excuse me, but why are you yourself interested in Alex?”, Arya questioned.

“Human curiosity.”, Hideo admitted.

“Okay, well if you must know I'll tell you.”, I sighed and explained.

“But how?”, Hideo asked. “Skylar just wanted a brother, not a supersoldier.”

“Rasputin interfered.”, I answered, noticing an unwanted break in my voice.
The feelings I had experienced for two years until now were coming back. Questioning my humanity, sadness about my irreversible differences, the works.

“Oh!”, Hideo gasped. “I am so sorry. Truly, I didn't want this.”

“Just get out.”, Arya snapped.

I didn't speak, instead trying to focus on Arya, on our love and how she accepted me. On how my Fireteam accepted me. Hideo left, muttering something under his breath. I ignored it, knowing he would probably still sell my soul to Lakshmi anyway. Then the cat would be out of the bag, for the War Cult was anything but secretive in its inner circles. There was a suppressed crack and a shout from the hallway, and seconds later Skylar entered, a broken tablet in hand.

“Sorry about that Hideo, forgot to activate the safety.”, he called back.

I smiled. This was the Fireteam Zeus I remembered. The Zeus we wanted to build. Love, war, politics, and above all lighthearted shenanigans. Skylar pulled a small box out of his coat and offered it to me and Arya.

“Brought you something to eat.”, he said. “Mind you it's a little hot.”

I opened the small box and inside was a black box with a label on it. A mixtape. Skylar's mixtape.

“God damn it!”, I laughed, any bad feelings turning to dust.
Episode 2: All is not Fair in Love and War

Chapter Summary

Church and Bellona attempt to intervene in an Axis assault on Titan. North tries to find Skylar a companion. A mysterious Exo meets a member of Zeus at a bar. Sounds like the beginning of a joke Cayde would tell.

__†__

Church.

In a jumpship headed for Titan.

December 4th. 7:15 AM.

Coming on four months since my rebirth and yet still I was scared shitless of flying a jumpship.

“Don't worry Church.”, Deacon said, “I know the routes like the back of my… right. No, like the eight parts of my shell. I know them well.”

And so I let him fly. Most of the time. Now Bellona’s Ghost, Ares, would do it. According to him it lowered the chances of a crash by ‘three hundred fifty two point three percent compared with the novice who chose you. I assure you, no Guardian can outdo this here Ghost.’ That wounded Deacon's fragile pride so I made it a point to demonstrate all of Deac’s unique features, taught to him by Shen while his mind was in Deacon's data core, to Bellona’s smug Ghost. I'm quick on the draw and a perfect shot, but Deacon takes it so much further, highlighting targets and seemingly stopping time to give me some strategic advice.

None of that's really relevant though. Bellona owns a jumpship of her own so we took that one. It was a spacious one to say the least. To elaborate, there was enough room for a bed. Yeah. Turns out she had never set foot in the Tower until this October, right before the Prometheus incident, and she has been with us since. Primarily with me.

Anywho, it's a pretty nice jumpship. There's something amenities like a kitchen and bathroom, a bed, basically everything a Guardian needed out in the wild and some more. So while Ares flew the ship me and Bellona could continue our… bonding I guess. I knew she was into me, but I never got a good chance to explore my feelings for her and vice versa. But now, now there was ample time for
anything we wanted. Plenty of time for us to develop together. Not enough time for her to make enough of those always welcome moves on me, for her to press me against the wall and kiss me. My very influential soldierly side opposed us doing this mid flight, told me I should be polishing my hand cannon and loading my rifle. But I made the decision to ignore him, instead exploring something just as interesting as the world of guns and warfare. Since it would be a while until we reached Titan, Bellona offered me a seat on her bed with her and we began a movie called Fury. It was about a tank crew in the second world war, and man did it flick all my history loving switches.

Unfortunately, or fortunately, half an hour in she decided would be a great time to get physical. She pinned me down by my wrists and-

“For the love of the Traveller you two!”, Deacon exclaimed. “Are you actually doing what I think you're doing?”

“What's your issue Deac?”, I asked once Bellona gave me a brief respite, still maintaining her grip on my arms but pulling away a little.

“Two minutes until we land Church.”, my Ghost chided. “Get locked and loaded, as one of your action movie heroes would say.”

“Shoot!”, I shouted. “Why didn't you tell us?”

“You were enjoying yourself and I didn't want to disrupt it.”, Deacon stated. “Little did I know you were doing that.”

“Next time, feel free to interrupt.”, I ordered him.

“Gladly.”, my Ghost replied smugly.

I started to get up and Bellona took just a second longer than necessary in letting me go, as if trying to say we hadn't finished. Good. Between me myself and I, I liked our physical sessions almost as much as our conversations and… Yeah nothing stacks up to it, I tried, but there's nothing they're comparable to. I admit it. I'm just not bachelor material.

I got off the bed and holstered my hand cannon, slung a rifle over my shoulder, and put an SMG in Deacon’s storage for those up close and personal moments that got a ranger like me into real trouble.
I equipped the Knucklehead Radar helmet and pulled up the hood of my fur trimmed forest camo cloak, looking sleek as a bullet and cool as ice if I do say so myself as I exited the ship through the small bay door. Bellona followed, a shotgun in a holster on her back, a New Monarchy sidearm at her hip, and an auto rifle in hand. Ares had flown us quite close to the Arcology, inside its plaza or something in fact. A waypoint appeared on my visor, directing me to go through a closed door on the other side. Great. Let me take a gander. Three waves of Hive and some apologetic dialogue. Still, I jogged out of the pit two steps at a time, vaulting over a planter and through the bush inside, and made a sprint for the door. Surprisingly enough, it opened immediately.

More surprising though was the pair of black and green armored Guardians on the other side. Recalling something Bellona had taught me I tagged them immediately as Axis, recognizing their logo. Without hesitation I drew and fired. Four shots. All hits. Two Guardians fell dead by my gun, their Ghosts standing by to resurrect them.

Bellona came to my side and we followed the procedure for handling criminal Guardians—handcuffing them before they could revive. Almost made me feel like the Mobile Operations Police rather than the SAS. The Warlock and Hunter came back swiftly, struggling against the lightweight but firm titanium alloy cuffs.

“You aren’t going to break them, state your name and serial number.”, Bellona sighed, crouching down by the Warlock to look them in the eyes as best she could through the black visor on his helmet.

“Name's hail Lysander, serial number’s down with the Consensus.”, he spat.

“How funny and original. Not at all cheesy and cringy beyond comprehension.”, I said dryly. “Name, serial number, and any other information we should know before leaving you and your friend here at the mercy of the Hive.”

“You wouldn’t.”, the Warlock almost gasped. “That's-”

“Name, serial number, and any other information we should know before leaving you and your friend here at the mercy of the Hive.”, I repeated.

“Name's Dailey. Here to steal shit for the cause. Who the fuck are you? And tell that bitch to stop staring at me.”
“Major Church.”, I answered. “That woman you just called a bitch was Lieutenant Colonel Bellona.” I decided to add a little bit of half truth and bluff to enhance it. “We're members of FTZ, an elite Fireteam that specializes in unorthodox adversaries, beyond your usual Fallen, Hive, Vex, Cabal and Taken, and terrorists like Lysander.”

Hell if I knew who that was. All I knew was that the bluff worked and he smartened up real quick. He got all quiet all of a sudden and when we got up to leave his Hunter pal spoke up.

“You can't leave us here.”, she pleaded. “We won't stand a chance like this.”

Instead of waiting for her to sweeten the deal I acted immediately to let her know the information was an optional part of the deal, uncuffing her and thinking of how to best handle the situation from here.

“Thanks.”, she said, rubbing her wrists. “Lysander's got us on the advance just a few hundred meters from here, Agricultural Research Center. I'll just take my leave now and…”

“Nope.”, I said.

Before she could attempt some great escape I cuffed her again, apologizing mentally for not handling them as the terrorists they were. I had Bellona put her shotgun to the Warlock’s back and I aimed my cannon a little to the right of the Hunter's head.

We advanced on the Agricultural center, searching for any place to tuck these two away. The whole Arcology seemed like a mall to me, shops and advertisements everywhere, broken escalators and wide stairwells.

Eventually we drew within around two hundred meters of the waypoint and found a good place to put out prisoners, no Fallen markings or Hive gunk. It was an empty store, a metal grate over the glass and doors and nothing inside. I decided this would be the perfect place to put them, cuffing them to some exposed rebar before closing the grates again and continuing on out if the building. If the Axis didn't loop back this way and pick them up then we would have a potential source of information on their future plans. That would prove quite valuable indeed.

We exited through some shattered doors and I was in awe at the sight that greeted me outside. The Arcology was massive. It was marvellous. Sure it was overgrown and broken down, but to think of what it once was… Jesus Christ in heaven! The towering Agricultural center and the building it was
linked to would be equally astounding, if it weren't for the fact that they were crawling with Axis troops. Bellona whistled and lowered her rifle.

“That's a lot of 'em.”, she whispered. “Shame we're going to have to arrest some of them.”

“Why's that?” I asked.

She pulled a pair of cuffs out of Ares’ storage and dangled them from her forefinger.

“Might've been saving a pair for you.”, she said.

“You're kidding right?” I asked, a little bit worried but equally curious.

“Maybe I am, maybe I'm not.”, she replied.

“Bell… Be serious here.”, I pressed, ignorant of events occurring around us.

“Of course I'm joking!”, she laughed, putting the cuffs back in storage. “Who am I to you, Sam?”

“You sure you won't need those cuffs Titan?”, a gruff voice asked mockingly.

While we were chatting it up Axis troops has sent out a couple sentries to deal with us. Were we really that obvious? A Hunter became visible behind Bellona pressed his bayonet to the base of her neck, and I felt a similar blade barely pierce my skin.

“Go on, fetch us a few pairs.”, the Hunter prompted. “In fact, three. Never know when you'll need them.”

“Oh shut your trap Gerod.”, a feminine voice growled from behind me. “Knowing you, you'll be the one wearing them.”
“Ah, you haven't the faintest clue of my tendencies.”, Gerod snapped. “But I'd love to teach you someday. Today if you're good.”

“If you're good I'll consider not breaking your legs and sending Olivia to your quarters tonight, how's that?”, the Warlock answered.

“Touché. A total bitch, but touché.”, the Gerod sighed. “As for the bitch in front of me, how about you just cuff yourself, save me the trouble.”

“It doesn't take a genius to tell you how tactically unviable that is.”, Bellona responded. “But it makes the process faster.”

“How about you do it or I kill your partner here.”, the Warlock offered sarcastically.

She pushed her blade in and a little blood trickled down my neck and back. Bellona made a sort of despairing sigh and had Ares pull a pair from storage for the both of us. Bellona fastened her own wrists together and the Warlock behind me did the same to me, and what choice did u have? They could actually kill me, forever. Better to suffer now and live to fight another day. The tip of the bayonet exited my neck and I was spun to face the entrance to the building. A kick to the back brought me to my knees, and when I looked left Bellona was in the same position. A gun was to her head, as was there one to mine.

_Bang!_

-----[ ]

Bellona

Arcology Agriculture Research Complex.

Titan.

It was horrifying to see that Warlock pull the trigger on Church. Luckily, she was using rubber bullets, so he was knocked out cold but not killed. I admit, I might have made a despairing shout or two, maybe shed some tears, but I didn’t weep. I'm too strong for that. And too smart. No blood, nobody died. A Titan emerged from the building wearing an Axis uniform and stood me up, leading me inside while his accomplices carried Church inside. In the lobby there was a large host of Guardians, packing up to leave. The Titan sat me down on a couch and spoke.
“It took seven times to get Zavala's attention.”, he stated. “I've had enough sevens for one lifetime.”

I did the logical reasoning in my head and reached my conclusion in seconds before speaking.

“This wasn't an attack was it?” I inquired. “It was a stunt to get our attention.”

“Sharp as promised.”, the Titan noted. “Yes, yes it was. To show you how powerful we have become. Guess what else wasn't a real attack?”

“Enlighten me.”, I prompted.

“Anubis.”, he said. “Cannon fodder. An Osiris wannabe with only thirty real loyalists. We supply the men for a symbolic and intentionally unsuccessful invasion attempt and he tries to bend reality to his will. Good thing we disabled his Ghost or he would probably have slaughtered more innocent civilians. His real goal was never to show you the true extent of our power or his, just to show you that the Concordat are not dead, far from it. The killing, the war, that was not part of the plan. That's all for now, so off you go and so do we. You'll be seeing more of us soon.”

“Seriously?”, I asked, suspicious. “Why knock out Church?”

“You can't have a loudmouth like him knowing this all until he needs to can we?”, the Titan answered. “I suggest you give him, no, give everyone a false report. There were only twenty, you drove them out, and Church was k-o'd the whole time. If not, we could cause some issues. There is more at work here than you realize Bellona Cassavetes. It stretches back farther than Zeus, than you. It doesn't have to involve you but we know you better than that. So don't. Don't be the wrench in the machine we know you'll try to be or, and I'll be blunt here for your sake, Church will get hurt.”

This left me muddled and blurry minded. Too many new variables in my head now, too many new scenarios to calculate, how best to keep Church out of harm's way. I was marched out of the Arcology by two Guardians I didn't even talk to and left by my ship by Church. Within a few minutes the message was sent out that the Axis were on the run and the Arcology was safe. I just sat there for a while, trying to formulate something out of my new information. Ares started nudging my right shoulder, Deacon battering my head.

“Bellona.”, Ares chided in his rather Victorian accent, “Do snap yourself out of this daze. This male companion of yours, Chapel was it, has suffered blunt force trauma to the base of his neck and it is agonizing to watch that novice he carries around struggle with the injury.”
“What Ares is trying to say is that Church is bruised up and we should head home.”, Deacon said. 
“He’s coming to, so I suggest you put him somewhere comfortable.” 

What would I do without Ares? And Deacon was useful at times too. I zoned out way too much for my own good so it was always good to have someone like Ares, Church, or the late Idea-2 to snap me out of it. Upon the request of the two Ghosts I scooped Church up in my arms and walked into the rather homey jumpship. This was my backup, but it still reminded me of the old one I shared with many partners over four years. None so close as I wanted Church to be, save for Tom and Zeke, but many all the same. I sat him down on my left forearm and threw the sheets out if the way, laying him down gently on the white bed attached to the right wall. I pulled the covers over him and tucked them beneath the mattress. I wondered what he dreamt of. I remembered the Prometheus dream his Fireteam shared, which was the result of the network’s psionic influence. But when he wasn't tormented by rogue AI and past lives what were his dreams like? 

Church began to stir and I unfolded a chair. By the time he fully woke I had the chair set up, Ares with the ship heading towards Earth, and a bag of trail mix on the go. I two years ago Bellona had the sense to store something other than the stuff on her backup ship but hey, food is food regardless of what my culinary tastes currently are.

“Oh hey Bell.”, Church mumbled. “I just had the craziest dream that I have a feeling actually happened.”

“You bet it did.”, I confirmed. “Those Axis turned tail the second I opened fire on them. Cowards.”

“Regardless, I think we both know that there's a glaring issue here.”, he stated nervously.

“Those two we left back there?” I prompted. “Got picked up in the retreat.”

“No.”, Church said, sitting up. “Us. We did something beyond idiotic. We took our relationship, whatever it is, onto the battlefield. Let's not do that again.”

“Agreed.”, I said. “Do you want to finish that movie?”

“Darn the heck yes mother trucker.”, he said in a humorously gravelly and rough fake voice.
Sisu-3

In a bar near Miro Shen’s favorite bazaar.

December 4th.

7:24 AM

This pub was a fucking mess. Shitty music, shitty red wallpaper, shitty drinks, shitty people, all on top of my shitty memory and shitty new Ghost. Häyhä I had named him after the Finnish sniper Simo Häyhä. That's something I did remember. Before I was an exo I was a Finnish man and I worked a good job. That's probably more than even some human Guardians could say. I also remembered a girl. A Hunter. Forgot her name. Not her face though. Or how cute she looked in absolutely anything. But her name… Her friends. Almost everything else regarding her and me. Gone. I loved her. I loved the people I ran with. I just couldn't remember them for shit. Probably dead. Just like the girl. I remember her dying. And me. And my old Ghost. Most of my life as I knew it was death.

“Sisu.”, the bartender grunted. “You've been here all day since we reopened. Got anyone to go home to? A sweetheart, a partner, a Fireteam.”

I set the glass tankard of black shitty fluid on the shitty chipped wood bar and slowly looked Jorge in the eyes with my lightless eyes, busted out so my foes wouldn't see me a mile away. I just shook my head and put a pile of glimmer on the bar once more.

“Dead. All dead.”, I answered.

“Thought you didn't fight the war.”, Jorge said, cleaning out the tankard to fill it with something new. “Said your people didn't either.”

“He has no people.”, Häyhä responded in my stead. “I found him dead and almost lightless on Io in late November. Nobody else by him. Just him. Cause of death? None. I've seen some spooky stuff in my time but Sisu… He takes the cake, he did that is. Now he's just as you see him today.”

“I did fight in the war though. Just ain't boasting any medals like the rest.”, I corrected.
“Is that so?”, the bartender inquired. “I'd like to hear this one.”

As if on cue the rather rowdy Warlock and his definitely drunk beyond repair Titan buddy made it obvious that they were listening intently. Their chairs turned my way and they downed their shot glasses, staring at me as intensely as they had when I entered. I admit, I might be an interesting sight. A white greatcoat for a robe, dead eyelights, a white fur cloak over my back and head, and the many times notched rifle poking out from beneath it.

“Quite so.”, I responded, leaning in. “In fact, today's been my laziest day. Each day starting on the twenty third of November I made sure to shoot five or more of the fuckers a day, and I never did any less. Count the notches Häyhä.”

“Sixty eight.”, Häyhä announced.

“I've seen more kills in a day kid, if you count ten Hive or otherwise as a single Guardian.”, a growly sounding Warlock said from a table behind me. “But I'm coming on three hundred so that sort of explains it. You ain't bad for a rookie I guess.”

I spun in my chair to stare this shithead down, making my left eye flicker white for effect.

“And who, the fuck are you?”, I asked by way of greeting.

“Miro watch your fucking tongue Shen.”, my fellow Warlock and exo stated coldly.

He was a very tall man, and he radiated wisdom and experience. His robes were adorned with cult symbols or some shit. Pentagrams and eyes and the whole fucking sticker book. His eyes were purple and he had a bow slung over his back. Seems legit. Legitimately boring. I turned around in my chair and requested another drink.

“You've had enough sir.”, the bartender said, snatching away my tankard.

“Fuck it.”, I grunted.

I gathered myself and my possessions and exited my seat. Time to go see about a place to lay my
head, shut down for a few hours. Probably an alleyway or rooftop. Didn't bother me much, but the fucking cold fucked my joints so bad. As I pushed open the glass door a firm hand landed on my shoulder.

“Your Ghost hasn't retreated into your bag yet.”, Miro watch your fucking tongue Shen noted. “Seems like you think you'll need a watchdog. You don't have a destination in mind as I didn't detect a waypoint being set and you keep gravitating towards heated buildings. Conclusion, you need my help.”

“I need nothing.”, I countered. “Now unhand me.”

“Furthermore, I'm sorry for shutting you down back there. Did the math, and no. No I have not had more prosperous days.”

“Your point?”, I grunted, shrugging him off and striding out into the snowy streets.

“I'm from a certain Fireteam.”, he said with audible pride. “Zeus. We could use talented Guardians like you, and we have talented Guardians like you.”

I considered the offer. Join a Fireteam and get a warm place to stay. Don't join and who knows what happens. Me and Häyhä had a little mental conversation and reached a conclusion.

“I'll hit the hay wherever you're going to take me but I'm not just going to blindly join a Fireteam.”, I responded. “Too high commitment. I've got other things on my mind than patrols and strikes.”

“Good.”, Miro said. “Now come with me. I've got a call to answer.”

<{(FileNotFoundException}> Skylar AM The Tower. Last City, Earth.
I strode purposefully through the Tower, passing Ikora with particular speed.

“Colonel Skylar, you can't dodge this forever.”, she called in protest.

“Next week, I promise.”, I said, actually resolving to do that. The Vex weren't known to wait before stirring shit up.

I entered the little tunnel and slid on my thigh to do a funny turn, springing up spryly. I bolted past a sweeper bot and glided above the stairs to the top, leaping into the tree and shaking off some of the leaves. I set up a little perch, laying out a blanket and hanging my book bag from a branch. War and Peace, Mein Kampf, The Taken War, The Red War Collection featuring Fireteam Zeus, Gloria Fortis Miles Adversor et Admorsus, and many other such novels and films, some in digital form on my tablet. North appeared at my shoulder while I was rummaging for a very particular movie.

“You can't keep depriving yourself Skylar.”, he stated.


“Of love.”, North answered.

“Don't want, don't need.”, I said. “You brought the refreshments right?”

“You and I both know that's bull.”, North snapped. “Asexual or not you still want a companion for you not?”

“Look, I love Alex, and I wouldn't have left if Arya wasn't as capable and caring as she is. She'll keep him company and fulfill his emotional needs, as she has for the past three years.”

“Four.”, North corrected. “And his birthday is coming soon.”

“Don't see how that's relevant. I know his tastes and I'm in the fortune five hundred just from Guardian work. I can get him anything he wants and will get him anything he wants. That's how we do it.”
“Well, you missed yours when the Red War broke out.”, North stated. “And Christmas is coming.”

I inserted the ancient disc into my tablet and the movie began playing. North shut off the sound system in my helmet. I gave him the finger.

“You need to do something for yourself too.”, he said.

“You need to stop jerking off to the idea of me getting in a relationship, because I biologically can't.”, I growled, turning the volume back up.

“I… You… Hrrgh!”, North floundered for the right response. “If you don't do it yourself I will arrange to have you beneath the mistletoe some day.”

I pulled out my Song of Justice VI scout rifle and shot the nearest bunch of that stuff. Thanks for reminding me numbnuts. That's always been one of the hazards of the Christmas season. If I ever got caught beneath the cursed plant with a woman shit would not end well. Last time I kissed someone... Not particularly enjoyable. Only did it for the dare, and for the money. Not because I was genuinely interested in whether I would enjoy it. I began to watch intently, taking note of everything. The French were such fucking idiots. Yes, set up an impenetrable line, but make sure it only covers a single border. The SS arrived at the house and began asking questions. It eventually ended with the dairy farmer selling out the Jews hiding in his floor and one escaping. While the movie was unfolding however, I didn't pay nearly enough attention to North.

[↑]N

North

Tower Plaza.

Last City, Earth.

I had to find another Warlock. Not a Hunter, as Jack and Sam were a perfect example of how weird that could get and Idea-2 and Ash were a great example of how tragically it could end. Not a Titan. As much of a comedian as Skylar is he couldn't be further from that level of stupidity. Before the Collapse he was a brilliant genius and responsible for a few breakthroughs in Void Physics and one of the pioneers of the fabrication of biological organisms. So it had to be a Warlock, couldn't be male because reasons, had to be at least 153-157 in modern IQ, and had to positively despise sexuality, certainly had to be oriented in the same way as Skylar. No reproduction drive but a certain need for companionship. Yay. This would be the easiest thing I've ever had to do in my life. For the
orientation criteria I would be facing odds of one in a fucking thousand, and even then there's the possibility that it's less common now since the early Golden Age when the data was gathered. I wondered what kind of hair he would like. Would he like any particular type of hair? Curly, straight, long, short, brunette, blonde, hippie, bald? And eyes. He loved Alex's eyes, said they were his own but a million times better. So he definitely cared about eyes. Fuck fuck fuckity fuck fuck fuck! It's impossible!

I flew about the plaza, looking closely at every Warlock. Crucible girls were usually fit, and I know how much Skylar hates the ‘thicc’ thing. But none were there. Or really anywhere. It's moments like these I find particularly saddening. Why can't I make my Guardian happy? Sure he laughs and smiles but he's empty inside, and Alex and the rest of Zeus only partially filled that void. Where were all the Warlocks?

A particularly friendly one and her partner answered that for me.

“Sleeping most likely.”, the one with bright brown skin and short black hair offered.

“Yeah.”, said the other woman in full armor. “If not that then reading or watching a film. You're… Skylar's Ghost right?”

“Yes, but how is that relevant?”, I demanded, on edge.

“You should know how we tend to cope with recent combat.”, the armored one answered. “Reading and sleeping are quite common things. Usually history. Sometimes comedy. If we're talking early twenty first century, especially pre twenties, then both. If neither, then more combat.”

“Thanks.”, I said. “Do you know where I'll be able to find a few?”

“The Tower Library should have some.”, the black haired one replied.

“Thanks again.”

“Why do you need to know?”, the armored one inquired.
“It's for him.”, I answered, rushing off.

<{ضة}>  
Skylar  
Watching Inglourious Basterds in a tree.  
7:43 AM

I paused the movie about ten minutes in. Didn't want to waste such a good one in a single sitting. Instead I began reading about the European Migrant Crisis. Interesting bit of history, and a very large number of notable figures. A young boy was particularly active back then, responsible for the quote, “We will never overcome the adversary if we are too afraid of offending them to admit they are in fact our adversary.”, and a few others. I personally sided with those who thought we needed less people on the whole. Seven fucking billion? How the hell did they think they were going to sustain that? Good thing a few geniuses called the “Overseers” fixed that with a virus that basically made a third of the population infertile and infected everyone. Then the Traveller came around, we cured it, and smartened the fuck up regarding population. Either that or I had read a Dan Brown novel and a history book and gotten some facts mixed up.

That's enough reading for now. Back to the movie. North was being awfully quiet now. Hmm. Knowing him, probably chatting with Ikora’s Ghost about Osiris and the Vex. Something like that. That's how I learned that we had precisely two weeks from now to stop the Vex. I bet she regretted letting that slip. She knew how efficient I was, alone, and how I could probably tackle it in two days, three at most, but still wanted it done ASAP. I would gladly accept any down time I got.

[↑]N

North

Tower Library.

Last City, Earth.

Those two were certainly right. Warlocks tended to do three things after a good fight. Watch movies, read, and sleep. All three were happening here. And a few Warlocks? Give me a break! More like countless, plus many Hunters and a few Titans. Not a single aisle or table was empty. So I took advantage of that. Awkward thing it is, looking about a library for female Warlocks and asking the occasional one if they had any interest in my Guardian. Depending on what they said I would rank them on a list of possibilities. So far only one even spoke to me. God damn it. I had to find someone for him.
The only thing I had going for me was how notorious Skylar had become, his fame increasing with each war won and god slain. Church increased that effect greatly, becoming notorious himself for perfect aim, killing Ghaul (with Skylar), and his personality. Sound morals and boundless empathy. He got a woman in a single month. And yet the variables hadn't favored Skylar for five years in that regard.

After sweeping the entire library I gave up. I flew atop the highest shelf and just rested there, not making particular haste to return to Skylar. And then, as cheesy as it sounds, I saw her. Lying on her back, a novel in her left hand, the next page in her right, and a flashlight between her teeth. Instead of the usual robes she wore a stunning outfit indeed. Her hair was done up well, which is to say not at all. Instead the semi dark brown locks just sat in a short to medium length mess on her head as if her pillow did her hair and she didn't bother to fix it. She wore a loose ocean blue blouse with sleeves going just below her shoulders and a pair of overalls. Not the short kind, the full length jean kind with brass buttons and whatnot. They fit quite well actually, if not a little closely. The only armor I saw on her were the Transversive Steps boots, her long overalls were tucked into them, and a Warlock bond featuring holographic wintery projections like snow and a mountain prominently featured on it. I noticed a Ghost with a green, blue, purple, and red tie dye shell floating behind her head. I had to see, I just had to.

“Who's she?”, I asked in a hushed voice.

“Max Flynn.”, her Ghost answered. “Who's yours?”

“Skylar, sometimes called Skylar Pearce for some reason.”, I replied.

“Fun fact.”, Max said, her flashlight falling out of her mouth and rolling down her chest. “It was a misspelling of Peace. His real assigned name is Skylar Peace. It's a common error.”

“Why Peace?”, I inquired.

“He'd loosened tensions between the Tower and the Reef and won the Taken War, then went on to stop the SIVA Crisis. You'd know that though. Oh, and he and Church ended the Red War. And the recent one with Anubis. So, hence the name Peace.”, she answered rapidly.

“All correct.”, I noted. Very keen indeed. “Did you fight in any?”

“I ran for cover when the Legion attacked.”, she admitted with a shameful red flush on her face.
“An I spent my time during the Anubis conflict as a PoW.”

“Not that she isn't very good with her rifle.”, her Ghost said in her defence.

“Little liar.”, Max laughed, poking her Ghost. “Anyway North, what else do you want to talk about before I head off to bed?”

“Well, it may seem awkward, but have you ever had a partner of any sort?”, I asked nervously.

“Nope, and I don't plan on it.”, Max answered flatly. “Everyone who's shown any interest in me couldn't keep our conversations above my waist and their eyes above my neck. So I helped them off the edge of the Tower.”

“Do you ever get lonely?”, I continued.

“I've got Jester here so… only occasionally.”, Max replied.

“Well would you be interested in turning ‘occasionally’ into ‘never’?”, I offered.

Max closed her book and sat up, looking directly at my single blue ocular feature. She stared hard and thought harder before answering.

“I'd like to figure out what that means.”, she said.
I never understood why nobody else did as much reading into the lore as this guy. He'd made leaps and bounds in our understanding of our enemies and that knowledge had translated into a great advantage on the battlefield. So why were so few people Loremasters as a profession? Well, probably same as me. Fighting wars and killing gods and dethroning emperors was such good fun.

And there's someone else here. I could just sense it. A Stormcaller thing I guess. Arc is essentially electricity, as is our nervous system. So it made sense that when I was as calm as this I could sense other people ever so slightly. Maybe it was the sweeper bot in the tunnel though. No, too far.

“I swear on Space Jesus's left testicle if anyone other than North has the nerve to occupy this tree with me I'll pound you to a pulp!”, I said in an only slightly agitated tone.

Something thudded onto the sturdy branch and nearly jarred me out of my intense reading trance.

“Start pounding Joker.”, a female voice said with a soft trace of a laugh.

Adam West as Batman. A cultured woman indeed. I dignified her with a sidelong glance and let's just say it went from sidelong to too long. Perfect eyes for one, a dark sky blue that I had scarcely seen before. For two her face was pleasant. High cheekbones, not too high certainty not low. Her hair fell over her ears and really just barely a third of the way down her neck, and it was very curly, just like mine until I deliberately combed it straight. Her nose was smallish and her eyes were evenly spaced, and that's about all I needed to note there other than the total lack of makeup anywhere. Her outfit really stood out, especially in this weather. She didn't have robes on. Probably part of some seductive ploy. Whatever. Her arms weren't very muscular really, no more than a Hunter but not too shabby so that meant she did a decent amount of field work. She wore a bright greenish ocean blue blouse with elbow length sleeves, and her bond featured a snowy mountain range with an aurora borealis like field around it. She wore some close fitting overalls, and even I had to look all over her. Hey, wanting to bang someone and acknowledging how visually stunning they look are two different things, unless you're a paste eating Hunter or a mush brained Titan. Her legs were slender but had some tone to them, suggesting she ran at least once every few days. She seemed to be anything but attractive in a classic sense to be honest, except her face. A small waist, no real hourglass figure, nothing more on her chest than was reasonable to expect. In simpletons terms, dah bih ain't thicc, she don't got no curves. Perfecto.

“What did I do to deserve a torment such as your very existence?”, I moaned, putting my head in my hands as it hit me.

I'll never be with a woman. Ever. That's fucking biology for you. Alex and Arya were an occurrence that could only be described in Church-ese. The sunny side of impossible. In further
Church terms, Jesus H. Christ doing the laundry and finding his lost socks did this hurt to know.

“You tell me.”, the woman said. “My theory is your job might have something to do with it.”

“I'm not complimenting you.”, I groaned. “Just fuck off, I have a son and a Fireteam, not to mention me. You'll never get in bed with me so you can abandon any such thoughts.”

“Well that's rude of you, to address the former.”, she stated. “And I'm not interested in the latter.”

“I'm not going to sign anything either. Go find Church, he'll probably give you his wallet and leg knowing him.”

She didn't leave. She got closer. I pulled my SMG on her to deter any further advances.

“What part of fuck off don't you get?”, I asked.

“The part where you pulled a gun on me.”, she answered, swiftly levelling a hand cannon at my Crown of Tempests helmet.

We just stayed like that. Guns on each other and my nose in a digital book. The woman made a bold move and briefly leaned in to look.

“Lore and Peace? I've got the hardcover edition of the first six installments. Two point five millimeter pages.”, she informed me.

“Is that so?”, I asked rhetorically.

“I'll lend it to you.”, she offered.

“If what?”, I wondered aloud.
“If nothing. You like books don’t you? That’s why you have such a full knapsack of them.”, she noted.

“Really?”, I asked, lowering my Red Mamba SMG and stowing it away. “You would actually lend me hardcover copies of the most updated lore series this century for absolutely nothing?”

“Why not?”, she said with a shrug, holstering her own weapon.

“Well, sorry about the gun then.”, I apologized.

“You sound a little different from what I heard in The Taken War documentary series.”, she stated.

What should one refer to her as? Girl? Woman? Neither seemed to encompass that simultaneous maturity and youth she had. Whatever, I had to keep her talking, as her voice was stirring something in my chest and I wanted to see what it was.

“Yeah, I’ve been a little sick lately.”, I admitted. “Cough syrup isn't doing anything and North says it's out of his ability to handle.”

“Well, that's… shitty.”, she said.

“Not as shitty as my manners though.”, I added, “What's your name?”

“Max.”, she replied. “Flynn if you care about surnames.”

“Just Ma-”, was as far as I got before a fit of coughing cut me off. “Speak of the fucking devil.”

“Hey, watch your mouth or I'll smack it.”, she teased.

“Whatever strokes your hypocritical ego.”, I grunted.
My eyes began to feel heavy and stung slightly, telling me that unlike Hunters I couldn't go three sleepless days without consequence. Out of the blue my vision went dark. I was jolted back awake by a sense of falling and a hand on my chest keeping me from falling. Max had moved in closer, her legs almost touching mine.

“Thanks.”, I gasped, leaning against the trunk and catching my suddenly gone breath.

“You fell asleep there for a bit. Nearly fell.”, Max told me.

I removed my helmet and the chilly air hit me harder than usual. Max, without asking permission, put her hand to my forehead.

“Um… Skylar, you're not a little sick. You’re running a high fever. You're in a cold sweat too.”, she noted.

“Aww, fuck my ass.”, I hissed, shouting to anyone in the Tower, “And that's not an invitation!”

North appeared and got to work doing all the nothing he was able to do, just scanning me and running diagnostics. He reached the same conclusion as Max, but he said it in a wordy and confusing way. Wait a fucking second, I'm never confused! I watched Rick and Morty and understood all the subtle jokes and references! Something's not right here…

“Alright, nice talking with you Max.”, I said, waving and grabbing my bag, noticing I felt physically weaker. “I'll be hitting the road now, see you later.”

And then I fell out of the tree.


Max gracefully descended from the tree and crouched down to help me up, her multicolored ghost cleaning up my books. My head began throbbing with escalating levels of pain, and I doubted I had the strength to stand without using my rifle as a cane. The Ghost finished putting the books back in my bag and Max picked it up, slinging it over her shoulder. She walked back over to me and offered a hand. I lunged to grab it but at the last moment she thrust it behind my back, almost as if she planned on hugging me.
“What are you doing?”, I mumbled.

“Do you think hospitalization is necessary?”, Max suggested.

“Fuck no.”, I answered.

“Well then we're going to my place.”, she said.

“Why?”, I inquired.

“The Pantheon made sure to wreck your place, made a game of it. You can see the scorch marks from down the hall. My place is a few floors down though. Do you to go there?”

“Yeah sure, help me up will you?”, I commanded.

“Nope.”, Max said with a shake of her head. “Lift you legs.”

I did it as best I could and she looped her right arm around my thighs, standing with a grunt. I laughed at a little thought that came to me.

“What?”, Max queried.

“Women are so assertive nowadays.”, I chuckled.

“Maybe it's a result of men like you.”, Max said.

“Maybe.”, I echoed. “Are you cold?”

“Didn't expect this to happen.”, she stated. “So I didn't bring a coat.”
I didn't continue our conversation, instead throwing my right arm over her shoulder. I closed my eyes and just let her carry me. Five and a half years and I had never before felt so safe while being so weak. I didn't care really who saw. All the Titans would probably forget it and continue monkey business as usual, Hunters would probably be busy eating their glue, and only one Warlock even mattered to me right now. In what seemed like seconds a door was being opened and closed, with quite a deal of difficulty thanks to me. I warmed up a little and I mumbled a quiet and unintelligible thanks again to Max, and she somehow understood the message. I was carried into a room and laid down on something that wasn't exactly a couch. Sheets were pulled over me, words were exchanged between Ghosts and Guardians, and I fell into a deep feverish sleep.
Episode 3: Hell and Medium Depth Water

Chapter Summary

Skylar falls head over heels for Max. The embers of a long dead conflict are stirred. Two unexplained killings occur. An old friend reappears after years of hiding in plain sight.

<°_°>

Max

Max's apartment.

Last City, Earth.

December 4th.

11:00 AM

It was nothing short of both miraculous and strange that the most powerful Warlock since Osiris had ended up in my bed running a high fever unlike any I had seen. One one hand, maybe I had found a companion at last. On the other, what if I hadn't? Skylar had to be one of the busiest Guardians on Zavala's payroll, so what if he didn't have time for me? What if he didn't love me? What if neither of us were even capable of loving? I'd often been told by many people that I was mentally ill, that I was incapable of feeling love, that I was worthless beyond me being a Guardian and protecting the system. What if that was true? I had never been attracted to anyone in that way, and I didn't feel that for Skylar. But I liked being with him and I found him just a little cute. He just seemed interesting, and he certainly fit the description of his Crown of Tempests. Mighty and quick to anger are those of the Stormcloud Thrones, but bounteous to those whom they love. He certainly loved Alex, as he mentioned offhand that he wouldn't have left him if Arya weren't with him.

Arya seemed to be the perfect bodyguard and lover. She was always by Alex's side, and her portfolio included things like ‘extreme feats of master escapism’, and ‘a quick hand and a quicker mind, able to reduce you to tears with a single sentence’. All evidently true as seen in the documentaries. Anywho, Skylar seemed nice enough to his friends too, but I had yet to see him in action anywhere but in the battlefield in documentaries like ‘Chosen’ and ‘King's Fall’. All of that aside, the real highlight here was I was likely going to be taking care of him until he recovered. Of course, that came with complications. His Fireteam had to be notified, and his health could decide the fate of the universe as we know it. I took solace in the fact that since we weren't living in a Vex hell, he probably succeeds in the future, but time could be a shady figure when it came to the Vex. So… No pressure Max. Just act like you're not literally holding all of reality in your hands.

I entered the kitchen, Jester at one shoulder and North at the other. I looked to the silver Ghost
belonging to Skylar and asked him what I should whip up.

“Nothing, thank you very much. He's got all the necessary nutrition for today and all of this week in my storage. He's fine, truly.”, North replied.

“I'm sorry, I couldn't hear you over all that horseshit.”, Jester said. “Please speak up.”

“Fine, I don't know… Hot beverage? Not coffee though. He hates the stuff for some obscure reason.”, North explained. “I him don't know what he would eat though.”

“Thank you.”, I said with a smile.

“You want some music?”, North offered.

I shook my head. Fireteam Zeus was often called the Singing Sword by the Cabal, even before it was called Zeus. Way back in Skylar’s days of pretending to be a whole team, Fireteam Halberd, he had killed the heart of the Black Garden while blaring ‘Bad to the Bone’ and singing along. Actually, I thought hard in it for a second while I fiddled with a one hand ring puzzle and decided I could use some music. Why not?

“Jester, hit it.”, I commanded, pocketing the puzzle and humming along with the song.

♫ I can't stop this feeling. Deep inside of me. Girl you just don't realize, what you do to me.♫

♫ When you hold me, in your arms so tight. You let me know, everything's all right.♫

I reached up to the top cupboard and grabbed my electric kettle and a pack of cocoa powder, snatching a blue mug with my little finger. I set them out on the island (if you don't know what one is, be gone peasant) and got to work. I flicked on the wireless kettle with one hand and tore open the packet with the left, emptying it into the glass.

♫ When you hold me, in your arms so tight. You let me know, everything's all right.♫

I decided to make myself a cup too and repeated the process, grabbing and filling a yellow mug for myself. Behind me Jester had set up a pan and some batter, already sizzling in two perfect discs. I decided I would attend to them while the water boils.
I-I-I-I-I’m… Hooked on a feeling! I'm high on believing. That you're in love with me.

I flipped both discs and set out a plate, spinning back to face the kettle when it finished. I poured the water in and stirred until it seemed reasonably mixed and got back to the pancakes, sliding them onto the plate.

Lips as sweet as candy. Its taste is on my mind. Girl you got me thirst, for another cup of wine.

I grabbed the plates, one in each hand, and carried the mugs precariously in two fingers. Skylar was still asleep when I entered the room, and I noticed he was sweating more heavily now. I set the plates and mugs on the wooden table to the left of the bed and gently pulled the white and red Polish flag blanket off of him. Yeah, I was Polish apparently somewhere in my genes. I couldn't wait to hear Skylar's German invasion jokes.

Got a bug from you girl, but I don't need no cure. I'll just stay a victim, if I can for sure.

I undid the front of his red coat and slid it off him, folding it up and setting it down on the foot of the bed. He stirred a little at this but didn't wake.

All the good love, when we're all alone. Keep it up girl, yeah you turn me on. I-I-I-I-I-I’m, hooked on a feeling!

I pulled the covers back over him, killed the music, and pulled out a swivel chair on the right side of the bed, my left. I grabbed my cocoa in both hands and just watched Skylar, taking an occasional sip. He was just… something. Something I liked, certainly. In our short single conversation he'd stirred something inside me I didn't know could be stirred, hell, that I didn't know I had. I wanted to explore that.

I watched on as he began to fret and moan, cringing in pain for some reason. It hurt a little to see that, as I too had been quite ill before and I knew how a fever like this could feel. The problem is that you shouldn't fight fevers. It's your body trying to push something out, usually a virus or bug of some sort. So he just had to grin and bear it. He began stirring, cussing like a drunken Australian sailor, and he blinked his eyes open. He looked kindly at me and smiled.

“Thank you.”, he said. His throat was raw.
“What are you, Canadian?”, I asked. “Seriously, what's with the manners? I fed you a line there with the Poland blanket and you don't do so much as say sieg heil.”

He raised his arm in a Nazi salute weakly and grinned, dropping it quickly as well as his smile.

“I'm sorry that it's not all you were hoping for.”, he apologized. “Usually I'm gumshoeing around the solar system, not laying in bed and sweating bullets.”

“Don’t sweat it.”, I joked. “I made you hot cocoa.”

“You are a fucking angel.”, he said. He made to get out of bed but gave up, tears welling up in his eyes, and added, “Could you pass it to me?”

Without a word I handed him the mug, handle first so he wouldn't burn his hand. Modern kettles were known for being fast and able to go above and beyond boiling point, so one usually had to leave anything they heated for a few minutes before it was safe. I handled fine, but there then again my hands might be a little more tolerant of heat, me being a Sunsinger and all. Yep. A Sunsinger. Pretty rare nowadays. I could also do the whole Dawnblade thing, but I liked the ability to you know, not die if Jester ever found himself unable to revive me. Skylar took a sip and smiled, and so did I. We began talking again.

“What do you want me to do now?”, I asked, passing him the pancakes.

“I don't know to be frank with you.”, he replied, politely waiting to eat. “Can we talk though?”

“I can't see why not.”, I answered.

“Well, first things first, I hate feeling this weak. It bothers me. I've got all the power in the damn world but I can't stand on my own now, I've got a killer headache, I'm sweating fucking boulders, and it's taking everything I've got to sit up and stay awake.”

“That's reasonable. But I'm here to help.”, I told him.
“I know, and that’s what I don’t like.”, he grumbled, hastily adding, “Not you, I think you’re great, but the situation… And my home’s a fucking crater.”

“Don’t cuss me out or I swear on Loremaster Byf’s left testicle I will literally beat you like a rug.”, I threatened jokingly.

He chuckled heartily at this and smiled ear to ear. Fun fact, you have to slit a throat ear to ear for it to be effective. Gets the major vein, artery, and windpipe. How amazing that I have to know that from experience.

“No but seriously I might.”, I continued, beginning to eat a granola bar from Jester's storage.

“Sam would probably love that herself.”, Skylar said.

“Hmm?”

“It’s a running joke in Zeus. We all know she's got more kinks than a hose put through a washing machine and tied in knots. Only guy who doesn't seem to know is Jack, and they're in a relationship or something.”, he explained. “And if you try it I'll turn the tables on you so fast you'll be seeing stars.”

“All jokes aside, what kind of stuff do you like? Books, movies, games even.”

“He was watching Inglourious Basterds up in that tree three hours ago.”, North supplied.

“I don't think you would like it.”, Skylar interjected. “It's got gore, guerilla warfare, you name it. Not a pleasant sight for such pristine and delicate eyes as yours.”

“I spent a month and three days in a cell in the one place on Earth I ever felt safe. Every day I spent shackled and near starving I planned day thirty five. The guards you see, they weren't exactly George's Order of the Pure or whatever he's calling it now. They were far from it. They were undisciplined, weak, and very very rowdy to say the least. The one who was constantly groping, glass shiv in the back. One that did something far worse and called me demeaning things got a long gash from ear to ear. If you want more, I'll gladly tell you. I can handle twentieth century fake blood and gunfights. Although I am intrigued as to where you acquire such old films.”
Skylar whistled. He looked upon me differently now, respectfully even. He resumed his usual jovial demeanor and wore that goofy grin once more.

“You are tough as nails, and we're talking real hard nails. Hard as fuck. Fucking titanium level hardness. We're talking diamonds on fucking Viagra and crack.”

“Last warning.”, I teased, swinging my fist through the air.

“What's your issue with it anyway?”, Skylar inquired.

“I don’t know. The joke isn't stale yet so I thought I’d give it another try.”

“Well I'm here to say it's stale now.”, he said.

“I thought it was because you're too sick to even stand.”, I said.

“That too.”, he admitted, pensively stroking his chin. “So do you want to watch it?”

“Definitely, but I'd like you to see one of my favorites first.”, I replied. “Same time period, but better.”

“I would love to.”, he said. “If only I could get up to see it.”

Without asking I set down my mug and granola bar and took the covers off the bed. I looped my left arm around him and under his armpits and helped him up. He was surprisingly light. I was expecting him to be far heavier, but then again he could just be stronger than he was letting on, even when this sick. We sat side by side on the couch and he immediately fell asleep once more. Oh well. Progress is progress.

∅

Sisu-3
Jack's apartment.

Last City, Earth.

12:10 PM

What. The. Fuck. It was a fucking bloodbath in here. A Ghost lay in pieces on the floor beside a dead Hunter with blonde hair, its shell red with blood. The Hunter was only clothed in a cape and usual civilian clothing, a half loaded gun in his hand. I wish I could see his final expression, but his face was just a hole. Across the living room a Ghost tried vainly to resurrect a blue haired Warlock, but it simply could not. Shen paced the room, investigating the killer's calling card. A bullet with an engraving on it.

“Lauri Törni.”, he mumbled, his eyelights widening and narrowing as he studied every inch of it.

“Let me have a look.”, I offered.

“It just says Lauri Törni. Nothing else on it except the Axis logo.”

“Well then maybe I could make something of it.”, I said.

“Kid, I shouldn't have dragged you into this.”, Miro apologized. “Go to my place, I'll send you the keypad combination.”

“A man's been shot!”, I shouted. “And the killer left a fucking clue. I thought you were a fucking detective or something, so why don't you call on your dear old Watson for help.”

“Fucking hell, if you want to look at a bullet so bad there's one in the girl's head.”

Häyhä appeared at my shoulder.

“It's just a regular bullet.”, Häyhä said. “The only odd but is the Red Death model rifle it must have been fired from. Those are illegal!”

“Thing with criminals is that they tend not to obey the law.”, Miro stated. “People learned that the
hard way back in the twenty first.”

I grabbed the far taller Exo by the wrist and took the bullet. I swiftly investigated every single nanometer of it, looking for anything Shen had missed. Yep. It was of Finnish make, fired from a German model rifle, and it reeked of American mined cordite. And it said Lauri Törni. The soldier of three armies. This must have something to do with the dead fellow in the living room. Miro swiped the bullet out of my hands and bagged it.

“Tower authorities are on their way.”, he told me. “Go to my place, and I’ll help the cops. Your work here is done, and you never had any.”

And with that, I headed off to a tall strange man's apartment. McGruff the Crime Dog would be disappointed in me.

{ ° >

Raven

Nevermore Pub.

Last City, Earth.

12:30

I was just about to close up shop for lunch before that fucker walked in and blew on the embers of tragedy. I was wiping off the counter and stacking the glasses, everyone having left by habit. Everybody who went through here knew me. Except the fucker with the waxed moustache and top hat with a blue ribbon around it. Silas Krane. Celebrity to most, idiot to those who could see beyond the veil of handsomeness and accidental charm. He’d more or le- no. He’d entirely made it to where he was by accident.

Me? I bought this pub and changed my name after the incident on the Dreadnaught. Of course, I gave the pub to someone else seeing as I had field work up the ass constantly. I just wanted somewhere to get drunk any time of the day and plenty of alcohol at the low cost of buying directly from the producer. I only worked days like this, when Oscar couldn't run the place. Busy mourning his dead husband. I felt good in knowing I would suffer Krane's presence and not him. Poor little guy didn't need that shit right now. Not to say I needed it either.

Silas strode in like a fucking idiot, a cane in one hand and a tablet in the other. He tossed his purple cloak at the coat rack, and missed may I add, and leapt into a seat, spinning it a few times and stroking his blonde moustache. When the spinning stopped he raised a long, crooked, yet oddly
clean, finger and put down his cane and notepad.

Before he could speak I poured a glass of soap and scribbled ‘fuck off’ on a napkin. I pushed it across the bar and got back to work, turning my back on him and searching for either the spray bottle or the shotgun. Whichever I found first. Just my luck. Guess Silas doesn’t have to mop himself up off my floor today. I sprayed a towel and began scrubbing down the taps.

“I’ll have one glass of your finest wine, served with precisely three percent spheres of ice, and a martini, shaken, not-”

“Can’t you read Gump?”, I grumbled.

“Yes, and I found it rather insulting that you think I’m the one who needs to wash his mouth. By golly I daresay your parents never properly disciplined you as a youth.”, Silas said.

Every Guardian knows that no Guardian knows anything about their past lives except a few who by chance found a biography or something. I spun around, raised both hands straight and vertical, leaned in and yelled.

“You dense motherfucker!”

The fucking idiot raised the shot glass to my lips and smiled.

“Exactly my point… Raven.”, he purred.

“I don’t know who you’re talking about.”, I growled, snatching the glass away from him and storming off into the back room.

Once inside I swiped a whole bottle from the shelf and popped off the cap, continuing on to the restroom. How the fuck could he know? Even Suarez didn’t know, and I’d known him since the disaster on the Dreadnaught. I looked in the mirror, taking in the view. My face was quite handsome if I do say so myself. Quite chiseled, more or less high cheekbones, and my god did I have a nice pair of eyes. They were yellow, nearly unique in all of history. Still, as Raven I never removed the mask in public. I downed the bottle and stored it in Poe's storage, patting the Ghost to annoy him. I rubbed my chin, feeling the little hairs that had sprung up around my jawline and considered a shave. Naw. Instead I grabbed my hand cannon and went back to the bar. Silas was still there.
I aimed and shot, blowing his hat to bits. Silas grumbled and wrote a quick review, leaving it on the bar and slinking away like the fucking snake he is.

“It's Arthur!” I shouted. “Raven's been dead for years.”

“So you'd have us think.”, Silas said with a wink. “Also, Zavala called. Forgot to tell you that.”

“'Course he did.”, I muttered. “Well fuck off then!”

Was he lying? Yes. He'd done it before. Was I going to drop in and see anyways? Yeah. Fuck yeah.

<#>

Skylar

Max's apartment.

Last City, Earth.

1:00

About an hour into the film the Commander called. Unfortunately, he didn't understand what, 'too ill to stand', meant, so I had to go regardless. Luckily, North the matchmaker found this beauty. She offered without hesitation to help me along, and I had no choice but to accept. I guess Saving Private Ryan would have to wait. Offhand I wondered how these films still existed.

Max went to get changed and came out even more stunning than before. Now, the overalls were a great choice (between me and me I loved how the sort of tight garment had accentuated her fit form), but this was just fucking amazing. Now she wore a thicker pair of winter pants with grey buttons and a brown belt. One thing I hadn't seen on her a few hours ago was her robes. Now that I could see them, I was blown away. Optimacy robes, black with gold floral designs. She wore no helmet but kept those Transversive Steps on.

I leaned heavily on her as I stumbled off to the elevator, and once we were behind closed doors she scooped me up into her arms. What a woman! The doors opened on the Vanguard briefing room and I got my first glimpse at the new one. It was dark. Very dark. The only light came from a few embedded in the floor of the circular room, one in front of each of the thirty six chairs. Two of the
chairs were occupied by Ikora Rey and Commander Zavala. Two more across from them held my friend Church and Bellona. Nobody else though. Strange. I mean, Arya had to keep close by Alex and Shen was Shen, but I expected Jack to make an appearance at his first major meeting.

Max helped me into a seat beside Church, and the second she took hers to my left the meeting began. The ceiling lights came on, slowly as not to harm anyone's eyes. Zavala opened with a single clap to get our attention.

“Now that you are all in attendance, let's begin.”, he announced. “First of all, Skylar Peace is now officially a Brigadier General. There was debate about that, whether you should be a Colonel or General. Your stars and uniform will be delivered to the address of the woman who has opened her home to you until yours is fully repaired.”

“I would take a bow but I'm sick as a dog.”, I said. “Thank you sir.”

“Now, second issue.”, Zavala continued swiftly. “I have proposition. The Vanguard wish to moderate and support Fireteam Zeus and use it as an el-”

“Just like you used Excalibur.”, a handsome and slightly gravelly voice said from the elevator.

“Exact- What are you doing here?”, the Commander stammered.

The man held up a finger, taking a long swig from a flask. He wore nothing indicative of his class or rank save for a rather torn looking night black cape. Other than that he was dressed quite plainly. A pair of brown dress shoes, black pants with thin grey stripes, an unassuming black belt (aside from the hip flask and hand cannon), a white dress shirt, and a grey coat with medium length coattails. The face though… it actually rang a bell. Yellow, almost gold actually, eyes, almost grey black hair, a ghost of a beard along his jaw, and that cross between a knowing grin and a furious scowl. Raven. I was too shocked for words. He should be dead.

“Visiting a friend, per say.”, he replied. “What are you doing still running the place after what you did?”

“I think you should leave.”, Ikora said.

“Oh no no no no, I think I'll hang around a while longer.”, Raven drawled, leaning against the
wall.

“Who is he and what does any of his horseshit mean?”, Bellona demanded.

“You would know damned fucking well if the Consensus respected freedom of information.”, Raven replied, taking another swig. “But since I know the Vanguard better than that I’ll explain.”

“I would rather you-”, Zavala began.

“I would rather you shut your fucking trap and let me explain.”, Raven growled. “Now let’s begin.”

He told them everything. About Fireteam Excalibur, Project Lumen, operation Greatsword, the whole story, only interrupted by the occasional swig from his flask. Fireteam Excalibur was much like Fireteam Zeus. A team of ‘elite’ Guardians with special talents and abilities as well as experiences that allowed us to take on the more powerful and more unusual threats to the system and its people. The Vanguard under Andal Brask and the other predecessors constructed the plan known as Project Lumen to seek out and organize Guardians more capable with their Light, more versatile. It was scrapped when the few they found even wanted to join a Fireteam in the first place. Twenty eight years ago though, under Zavala, Ikora, and Cayde-6, the project was brought to fruition thanks to a Titan who went by the name of Leonidas. He had something Brask’s Vanguard lacked. Something that few soldiers had. All the traits of a good leader. He not only understood us deviant and rogue Guardians need to do things our way, he encouraged it. That’s how Excalibur became so successful. He was funny and a great friend, able to drop his commanding officer act to be one of the lads, drank merrily, laughed heartily, and formed deep personal relationships with all under his command. He would let Raven, founding member number two, bend the rules when the rules didn’t work for him as long as it didn’t endanger anyone. He brought three dimensional puzzles for Twitch, a female Warlock with immense skill with a wrench and well, any tool really. He let Hawk and Jesse do… whatever they even did when we weren’t looking. The word ‘illegal’ comes to mind. He encouraged Prior to explore the mysteries of the Hive and Taken, to utilize powers beyond those of the Light as long as it stayed safe and experimental. He would bring stacks of books for me when he knew we would be going on an exceptionally long mission. Just a few things among many. I spent three years with them and in that time I had become a loved and in return loving member of our little ragtag band of Guardians. The Hunter dubbed ‘Ink’ always compared us to the X-men. We were a secret force until the Dreadnaught entered Sol, at which point someone leaked our files and we became not only famous, but propaganda tools. Without Zavala’s permission we hooked a stealth drive up to Eris Morn’s ship and made our move. That’s where it ended for Excalibur. The story though didn’t include what Raven revealed. The rampant PTSD and terrible morale drops at times, the scarring and intense Guerrilla combat, the weird shit, ie: Vex infested Guardians, Prior’s temporary infestation by a Hive ‘demon’ (what we called substances that corrupted Guardians and used them as a host), his eventual willing corruption afterwards, list continues. It didn’t detail the horror of not knowing if I would see Alex again, or if we would see the daylight again. Anyway, when the stealth drive failed the Dreadnaught’s weapon fired on us and everyone but me, or so I thought, was annihilated. I was at the back of the ship, and that gave North the fraction of a second he needed to get me out.
“And since he lived, Zav’s been blaming the poor guy for it ever fucking since.”, Raven finished.
“Excalibur was a success but unfortunately we had to be forced into working longer and longer without rest because reasons. You flew too close to the fucking sun Zavala! You tore our family apart! And when we weren’t there to protect him you hurt Skylar too! If you needed someone to blame, why not yourself you blue fucking faggot.”

“That’s enough.”, Zavala said sternly.

“I think not.”, Church said. “If he’s speaking a word of truth, I… Look this is very shady.”

“Church, this is my business, not yours.”, I insisted, standing but leaning heavily on the chair. “Please stay out of it.”

“As your friend and as co-founder of Fireteam Zeus, I cannot.”, he stated.

“He’s got guts.”, Raven chuckled. “I like it.”

“Oh fuck the right hell off!” I shouted. “Where the fuck have you been? I killed a god-”

“As you so often do.”, Raven interrupted.

“Twice, while you were doing what exactly? When Lord Saladin came calling why didn’t you answer as well? Would have made my life a lot fucking easier.”

“Love you too kiddo.”, he said with a grin.

I smiled back. Despite the piss and vinegar of my previous rant, I missed the guy. He was like a cool uncle to me, and legally he probably was considered something of the sort. My head was throbbing, knees were weak, palms were sweaty, I was surprised that there wasn’t vomit on my robes already, mom’s spaghetti. But I still made an effort to reach him.

Max tried to stop me but I disregarded her attempts to get me back in my seat. I took my scout rifle
out of North’s storage and used it as a cane, stumbling off towards Raven. Just as I reached him the long rifle slipped and I nearly fell, but he caught me, standing me up straight.

“You are sick as a fucking dog.”, he noted.

“No fucking shit.”, I replied.

“No swearing on my Christian Minecraft server.”, he joked. Memes. A common interest of ours.

I leaned in and grabbed him tight. This was the best thing that had happened since Church had accidentally cobbled together the family now known as Fireteam Zeus. Raven hugged me and rubbed by back.

“I'm so damn sorry.”, Raven whispered.

“You're back and that's what matters.”, I replied, unsure on what I really felt about it.

Zavala coughed. All eyes were now on him, save for mine.

“Please take a seat Colonel Raven.”, Zavala ordered.

“Is this about the formal apology or no?”, he asked. “Aw fuck it.”

He thumbed a pocket and helped me back over and into my seat, sitting in an open space to my left. He downed the last of his flask and paid rapt attention to the Vanguard in the room. Ikora spoke.

“I am pleased to see that we will not be continuing the Lumen farce.”, she stated. “And Skylar, Arya sent me something for you. She says Alex is doing fine and that he's recovering far faster than expected. He'll be back in action in a few days.”

“Radical!”, I said, making gang signs and pretending to have any clue what they means.
“Alright.”, my former mentor sighed. “I wish you a swift recovery, as a situation has cropped up on Mercury. The Vex have opened a gate traversing timelines and far more. They are surging through in unprecedented masses, preparing to achieve their final goal of becoming a fundamental part of reality. They wish to reshape it and remove anything that doesn't fit. That includes us.”

“I'll see what a bottle of Tylenol and I can do.”, I offered.

“Actually, I'll be his stand in.”, Raven stated. “Shouldn't be too difficult. A few bad jokes and shitty one liners here or there, a curling iron, an annoyingly quiet Ghost, and you won't be able to tell the difference. Right Poe?”

“You got him Art.”, Raven's Ghost said.

Zavala pulled a screen out of his Ghost’s storage and scrolled a little, mumbling to himself before putting it away and getting up.

“I believe I should take my leave.”, he announced before striding swiftly into the elevator.

“Poet and he didn't know it.”, Raven whispered, snickering drunkenly.

Max wrapped an arm around me and pulled me close. She cradled my head in her hands and played with my hair, and I let her. I liked the way it made me feel. I felt that nervous fluttering in my chest, and it was a good feeling. Nervous wasn't really how I would describe it. More like happy, but different. Before I could fully analyze this Ikora began speaking again.

“I was hoping he’d leave.”, she stated. “This involves Osiris.”

Church raised his hand and coughed to get the Warlock Vanguard’s attention. She pivoted to face him.

“Yes Major?”, she said.

“Who exactly is Osiris?”, Church inquired, hastily adding, “Oh and I still think you’re cool. Unless you had something to do with this Lumen thing. Did you?”
“To answer the easier of the two questions, yes I did, but not in the same way as the Commander was. I personally mentored Skylar, and helped him take action against Prior. I supported the project until it became an unfit environment for one of my… more promising students. From that day forwards I advocated against it.”, she explained. “As for Osiris, his story is far more complicated. I could not possibly wish to explain it all in such a short time, but I will try. Osiris was, is, one of the most powerful Guardians to ever set foot in the city. He served as my mentor and held the position of Warlock Vanguard until his controversial prophecies and obsession with the Vex led to his exile.”, she continued, pulling an odd looking Ghost from her robes. “And now there’s this. Something has happened on Mercury, and it’s more than the Vex.”

I sat up straight and gathered the strength to rise, once again meeting silent protest from Max. My former teacher looked me in the eyes, a ghost of a smile on her face. Pride mayhaps?

“I’ll go. Just fetch some Tylenol or some shit and we’ll be good.”, I said.

“Ever the resilient one Skylar.”, she said with a faint chuckle. “Well, I’ll see what I can do about your illness. Seems that this assignment is tailored just for you and your Fireteam.”

“Still comin’ and you can’t do shit about it.”, Raven mumbled, shaking a few drops from his flask before tossing it for yet another. “It’s been too long since I’ve beaten the ever loving fuck out of some Vex.”

“I don’t think I could stop you anyway.”, Ikora stated. “But, regardless of your rank, you are to do as ordered by any and all members of Fireteam Zeus.”

“Fucking bullshit.”, Raven said.

“Thank you for conveniently proving my point for me.”, Ikora said. “You haven't changed one bit since our last meeting, aside from that your alcoholism has worsened.”

“Gee I wonder if your fucking idiotic project crashing down around you and killing all my friends has something to do with it.”, Raven mumbled.

I sat back down and leaned back over Max, flipping up the armrest to make it more comfortable. She wrapped her left arm around me and resumed messing with my hair. I sighed with genuine happiness. It felt like heaven to set aside all my power and all my past achievements to put myself in
someone's arms, and to be just Skylar. Not the Young Wolf, not the slayer of Oryx and other such beings, not a legendary Warlock, not even a Guardian. Just a person. A person who, as egomaniacal and enigmatic I may try to seem, actually has a completely different side to them. A person who just found out that they really enjoyed having someone play with their hair. A person who, as weird as it may seem, actually liked hugs (from their depressingly little experience with them). I never knew until now – as odd as the timing was – just how much I actually needed someone like Max. All my life I was forced to be a recluse, abandon my son, become the people's hero, to do just about anything but what I began to do now. I think I was finally becoming more than just a Warlock. I think this was the day began to figure out who I am at heart. I could just… gah! Can't my thoughts please be fucking organized for once. I came to realize more things about myself. I hated being alone. All of my victories until Ghaul were single-handed, but that was before.

My brain can't handle all of this right now. I buried my face in her left shoulder and hugged her back, not forgetting but rather disregarding my surroundings.

“Should we go now?”, Church inquired.

“Stay, leave, it's all the same to me.”, Ikora replied. “With the Commander gone you are free to say or do anything.”

“I have a question.”, Bellona said swiftly. “What are the Axis?”

Ikora sighed, as if reluctant to answer. Why did Bellona ask something like that? If not for other factors I would be asking about Osiris and Saint-14.

“Let me guess. Zavala already explained it but someone made you doubt his explanation.”, Ikora said. Without waiting for an answer she continued. “I too have had encounters with both the Concordat and the Axis. They are not one and the same. That's merely what they would have you think. In all honesty, the truth is this. The Axis are a splinter cell within the Concordat. They operate under Lysander’s supervision, but they are for the most part independent. Despite being few in numbers they make up a whole sixty percent of all extremist activities in the system. The Concordat without the Axis only make up ten percent, at most. We don't know their agenda, as it definitely differs from Lysander's, but I knew someone once who might. Alois. A Hunter. We were close friends, like Cayde and Andal, but a rift formed between us. Much like Osiris, he had extreme and radical ideas. Dangerous ideas. Intolerably so. We can handle Dead Orbit's nihilism. We can handle the Future War Cult’s secrecy. We can even tolerate New Monarchy’s passive fascism. But Alois promoted an ideology more akin to blasphemy and anarchy. Power beyond the Light. Down with the oligarchy. Slogans like that on posters bearing his face. He left of his own accord. I fear he may be among their ranks, but if not he could prove to be a valuable asset in the coming fight. And now I have a question for you. Did the Concordat tell you something? Threaten to kill someone close to you?”
“How did you-”, Bellona began.

“They did something similar to me.”, Ikora answered. “They were vague, but they said something had been set in motion. Something I could not stop and shouldn't try to stop.”

“They said the same thing to me.”, Bellona said.

“Well they lied.”, Ikora stated. “The Concordat are afraid to act until they become a strong enough force to overthrow the Consensus by force. More effectively than Anubis. Permanently. They aren't planning anything. Anything that is done to further their agenda is done by some edgy teens or by the Axis. Church is safe.”

Church and Bellona began a very heated argument at that, Church demanding answers and Bellona making excuses for her lack of transparency. Ikora turned to me and Max, chuckling as she saw Raven drooling in drunken sleep. She pulled out a seat and sat down, resting her chin on her hands.

“The bud I planted so long ago is finally blooming.”, she said proudly. “After all this time you are beginning to discover who you are as a person. It's a journey all Warlocks must take, as do all people. I feared that after project Lumen you would never find the path, that I had let our ambition ruin you. But here you are. Any revelations you would like to share?”

“I don't know yet.”, I admitted.

“Good. Things like this should take time. As for you Max, I like you. You seem to have made quite the impression on Skylar. How did you two meet?”

“This morning his Ghost came up to me, asked if I wanted to meet the guy, I was all for it, I climb a tree to meet him, he tries to ignore me, he gets sick and falls out of a tree, and now we're here.”, she explained.

Ikora laughed and didn't try to conceal it.

“The best stories are true stories.”, she stated.
I slipped out of Max's embrace and sat up straight. I fixed my hair and began talking with Ikora.

“So when should we go to Mercury?”, I inquired.

“Tomorrow. You are to investigate the threat and see what can be done about Sagira.”, she replied.

I nodded. Just needed a timeline. My eyes began to sting and I grew weary of so much as thinking. Though I still contemplated what I was actually going to do with my life. There was bound to be a rest period, a time of peace where I will suddenly have nothing left to fight until the Darkness threw anything particularly interesting my way again. What would I do? I could explore the system, but why? Patrol is for Hunters, not Warlocks like me who have something better to do. It was easier when Max held me, when I could stop thinking and just be hers, when I could belong to her and feel entirely safe in her arms. North might have actually found the one. After so damn long he might have done it. I could finally know what it was like to love and be loved in return.

Ikora took an unsent cue and left, searching the far wall for a book on something that would probably kill me of boredom if I read it. I gathered up my courage and felt myself growing hot, almost embarrassed to say what I wanted to say to Max. Here goes nothing.

“Max, can I tell you something?”, I asked.

“The drunkard’s asleep and Ikora’s not nosing about so yeah, why not?”

“I don’t know exactly how to put it, but I kind of like you.”, I admitted. “A lot. When you hold me and screw up my hair, when I'm with you at all, I get this feeling in my chest, and I like it. When I put myself in your arms it's not just because I'm tired, it's so you'll hold me. And when you do, it has so much deeper meaning to me. I'm putting something aside, like my power and whatnot I guess. It makes me happy. I feel safe in your arms. Also, tell a soul and I'll wipe you from the face of the Earth, I'm afraid of being alone.”

“Is that all?”, she asked politely.

“There's more, I just don't know what it is.”, I said. “But I've got a question. Can I be yours? When I'm not saving the universe that is.”
Without answering, at least not verbally, Max grabbed me in both arms and pulled me onto her lap. She looked me in the eyes and smiled.

“You're perfect, and don't deny it.”, she said.

“Nobody's perfect.”, I countered.

“Smartass.”, she whispered.

She pulled me in close and I returned the embrace. So this is what it felt like to take off the mask and be a real person. To drop the act and start feeling. It felt like a huge piece of a massive puzzle had been slid into place. I was more fulfilled than I ever had been.
Fireteam Zeus returns from battling the Vex on Mercury. Arya is invited to join a secret organization. Cafe meme begins.

Skylar

Gate to the Infinite Forest.
Mercury.
December 5.
After Fireteam Zeus defeats Panoptes in the Infinite Forest.
hit Panoptes with everything we had. Panoptes was defeated, we left the Infinite Forest, and that brought us to now.

I led the way, slowly walking out of the gates and removing my helmet to slide on a pair of aviator sunglasses. I could not have looked more badass. I'd even shaded my armor black and bronze to add to the effect. Church was just naturally badass though. His forest camouflage armor and NAVY SEALS style helmet amplified the effect. As did the twin ammunition bandoliers and hand cannon holsters. He looked like the perfect mashup of Marine and Cowboy. Raven couldn't be any further above the badassery cap. He wore a white and grey dress coat with medium length coattails, black dress pants, a pair of black leather shoes, and a long red cape. He had discarded his helmet even before our fight with Panoptes so the Vex would ‘Cower in fear of my unparalleled handsomeness,’ as he put it. And his pure silver greatsword was stained, or rather bleached, with sterile radiolarian fluid. Bellona though, she just tried her damnedest to stay casual. She had removed her helmet, bit that was about it. She still wore her usual FWC colors and her weapons were stowed.

Ikora Rey stood straight with her hands clasped behind her back, positively beaming. We reached the bottom of the stairs and gathered around her. Lowered my sunglasses a little and looked over the edge of the lenses at her.

“It appears that Panoptes’s time messing with time has come to an end.”, I said in a low voice. “Seems it was about time someone put him in his place. Whether our victory was decisive though… well, only time will tell. As for if Osiris is going to join us, I think he will in due time. Although he should hurry, because time waits for no man. Say, what—”

“One more utterance of the word ‘time’, and I will have you detained for harassment of a Consensus member.”, Ikora threatened.

“Okay, that's the last time I try to be funny around you.”, I said smugly.

Osiris exited the Forest, his Ghost hovering around excitedly. Osiris reached us and smiled.

“The Vex predicted many things, but the one—”, he began.

“Oh shut the fuck up!”, Raven groaned. “I have had enough of this ‘you’re so special’, and ‘chosen one’ bullshit.”

“I wasn't talking to you Raven.”, Osiris said. “You are actually so predictable that the Vex can
simulate you with one hundred percent accuracy in most timelines. I was talking to Skylar, Church, and the charming young women in front of me.”

“Smartass.”, Raven grumbled, walking off towards the Lighthouse to harass Vance.

Osiris resumed speaking.

“The Vex predicted many things, but not once did they predict you two.”, he said, looking directly at me and Church. “Particularly one of you Gunslinger. Your actions here and today saved reality as we know it. I cannot thank you enough. That's all for now.”

He headed back to the gate, interrupted by Ikora. He stopped and listened to his former student.

“You can come home now.”, she offered. “Your prophecies have come to pass, the Traveller has awakened, and the City is a vastly different place. I am not the only one who changed after the Red War. People would welcome and accept you again. We could use a new Speaker too.”

Osiris chuckled.

“No, as appealing as it sounds, I cannot.”, he stated. “Many other paths lead to the dark future of the Vex, and if they were to discover one again, someone must be there to at least warn you. But I'll leave the Forest open, should you ever wish to find me.”

“I'd like that.”, Ikora replied with a nod.

Sagira began flying around our heads.

“Great! Galaxy saved, you two are friends again, our heroes over there, everything ended well.”, she said. “See you again, hopefully soon.”

Osiris re-entered the Infinite Forest, leaving the door open as promised. North appeared at my shoulder, bobbing gleefully.
“Max is calling. I picked up for you. I’m assuming you want to talk.,” he said.

“Of course.,” I confirmed.

“Well she says that’s too bad, because she wants to talk in person.”

I have never left a planet faster in my entire life.

Arya

Curtis’s grave.

Last City, Earth.

I had journeyed from the multi faction building on foot to this specific graveyard, leaving Alex to do his physical rehabilitation alone, to say one last goodbye to my father. Alex was suffering from many wounds that a Ghost couldn’t heal. Sliced hamstrings, cut tendons, slashed wrists (now painfully stitched), and many other such injuries. But I couldn’t be with him, not fully, until I did this. I had dressed in a nice black winter coat, a black short skirt that went only a little less than halfway down my thighs, some white cotton leggings, and brown winter boots. Couldn’t dress badly for this occasion. I picked up a bouquet from a nondescript flower shop along the way, silently exchanging the currency for the plants, and continued on to the grave. I reached the cemetery and continued down the long path, up the hill, to a large rectangular stone marker. It listed the name, the year he was revived and the date of his death, as well as his deeds. Lives saved, Fallen houses eradicated, and his final words.

I’ll rest easy now. The world is in good hands.

I knelt down and set the roses down in a ‘V’ shape, for victory and for our last name, Victoriano. Once the last was placed, I broke down and cried. Time lost its meaning, and the tears came in rivers. Poseidon appeared at my shoulder and tried to silently console me. He knew that it wasn’t the right thing to do though and disappeared, leaving me to mourn alone. This was the second time he’d died for good, but now there was no cheating death. Just death, plain and simple. He wasn’t coming back. But when he was alive he was a great man. He was an amazing father, and he made the most of our short time as father and daughter. Even after he came back again he maintained a close relationship with me, although he did seem different somehow. I knew why though now. The autopsy revealed he would have died before the year was out, as he was being converted inside out by Vex radiolarian fluid in his blood. I still couldn’t believe he was dead, or that he could die though.
I stopped sobbing after a long time and got on my knees. The tears were gone, but the words had not been spoken.

“I love you dad.”, I croaked. “I wish you hadn't died, but I know that's selfish. You died saving lives. I guess that's a better way to go than just letting a Vex infection take you. You did a great thing that day, and I can't blame you. I'll miss you, and I'll never forget you. They recovered one of your hatchets. The cool Titanium one with the leather handle. If it's okay with you I'd like to keep it. I know you'd let me. Anyway, Fireteam Zeus has been very nice lately. Guess what? Skylar finally found someone. Her name's Max, and from what I've been told, Skylar really loves her. A lot. He's decided he's hers, in the same way I decided I was Alex's. Stupid really, and weird, you can't own people, but he's happy. I can officially say he's got a personality with a clear conscience. I haven't heard from Jack and Sam, but they're no doubt having a relationship struggle right now. Wish I could watch it, because I know it's going to be hilarious. Oh, and Skylar and Church saved the solar system, again. There's a new member joining, two. One looks like Idea-2 but he's Finnish apparently and he's got a different personality and name, and the other is a survivor of something called… Project something or other. One of those conspiracy theories I never listened to. He knew Skylar too, and apparently he was always the way he is. Goofy and airheaded. Go figure. All isn't well in the world yet though. There's a new organization called the Axis. Zavala thinks they are the Concordat, but Ikora says they're a splinter cell. For all I care they could be the bloody Illuminati. You'll probably notice I'm wearing a skirt. The Darkness itself in the body of a God couldn't force me into one of these things, but I couldn't find any clean pants today. It's so damn embarrassing! I don't look tough, and it's so girly. Oh yes, I know I am a girl, but I don't like skirts. That's that. They limit my movement and I just find them humiliating to wear. I swear I will never wear one again if I can avoid it. I'd rather burn, and you know my hate-hate relationship with fire. Anyway, Alex is recovering swiftly, physically. Emotionally though… That's going to take some time. If you heard what he's told me you'd be disgusted. They tortured him for no good reason, for fucking entertainment! I'll kill them all, all of the survivors! I swear it! Also, the strike teams are coming back together. They're appointing me as leader of Strike Team Victory, and Alex when he recovers. Guardians are going to fight some Calus robots on the Leviathan for sport, bit most get forced away before they reach the throne room. A few have won, but I'm looking to set a record with Zeus. Anyway, that's all for now. I'll talk to you soon, once we finish eradicating the Axis.”

I got up to leave but a firm hand on my shoulder forced me down again. Another hand held a knife to my throat, and it drew blood the second it touched me.

“You aren't going anywhere.”, a gruff male voice said.

“What do you want?”, I groaned, bored of this asshole already. “And you know I'm a Guardian right? I'll just come back.”

“I want to teach you a lesson, and I can kill you. I've killed Guardians before.”, he growled.
“You speak as if you aren't one. I can simply whip around, knife you, and use my mini SERE kit to patch any unhealable wounds up. You only have one life, and you're playing a dangerous game here.”

“I'm not a Guardian. But I am a Risen.”, he said, laughing condescendingly. “You actually think you can get out of this? No. No you can't. You've been naughty to say the least, and you know more than you should know.”

“You're a civilian.”, I stated. “Although you died sometime about fifty years ago. You were revived though, which isn't common in the recently dead. You were young, so you grew like a cancer until your Ghost stopped it. You aren't that tall though surprisingly. Your parents were abusive and you are mentally scarred by it. You are a member of an anarchist organization, and you seem to think I have trespassed against them. This warrants a violent punishment in your mind, but not an execution. Cutting off limbs and whatnot. Am I right?”

“Incorrect.”, the man said in a different, smooth, voice. “But impressive too. That was word for word the character's false background story and motive. Impeccable. It's all true what they say about you. I'll remove the blade but only if you promise not to strike me. We have a common cause, and I wish to recruit you.”

He removed the knife and held me still while he wiped away the blood with a white handkerchief, and an ornate red and gold Ghost repaired the wound. He tied a red ribbon around my neck, snug but not tight, and took a step away. I rose and spun, putting my own knife to his throat.

“What the fuck was that?”, I demanded.

The man looked as he sounded. He wore a long brown coat, a round top hat, and some tweed pants. He was caucasian, with black hair and a very well cared for moustache. In his hands he held out an envelope and rested his other on a cane.

“A test.”, he said. “And you passed. If you had slashed at me and asked nothing, you would have failed. If you had removed the ribbon, you would give failed. But you passed. If you removed the ribbon that would not only be a waste of time, but a sign that you had no intention of obeying me, let alone cooperating at all. If you hadn't asked any questions I would just be disappointed and you'd wake up in Alex's arms with a sore head. But I knew you'd succeed. And now I offer you this. An invitation to join my cause.”
I sheathed my knife in its hidden scabbard in my boot and took the envelope.

“What is the cause?”, I asked, politely this time.

“Still she doesn't remove the ribbon.”, his Ghost noted in a hushed voice.

“The cause is my fight against the extremist group, no, army known as the Axis, and one particular member. It is a long game that has only recently started back up after a decade of dormancy, and players on both sides have made their moves. Y has sent agents to kill my former comrades and agents, as he wishes to speed it along and open the game with the upper hand. I wish to recruit new agents and disown and protect the old, so when the game fully begins the right side will stand a fighting chance.”

“Who are you, and what are the Axis? Exactly.”, I asked.

“My name is Alois.”, he stated. “And the Axis… open the envelope, accept my invitation, and I will return to you on Christmas day with an answer.”

“Is that all?”, I inquired.

“No.”, Alois said. “I wish for you to know that you look stunning in that skirt. Nothing wrong with it at all. Oh, and keep the ribbon. It'll have some use later, I assure you.”

___†___

Church
Duke's Café.
The Tower.
Last City, Earth.
With Bellona, Max, and Skylar.

Nothing cools the nerves after literally saving all of reality with not a second to spare like good coffee and better company. I remembered my last visit to this café and dreaded the possibility that this one could end the same way. Nicodemus was something we were done with for good.
lighter note, Bellona was looking exquisite. She’d done her crimson hair up like a Roman god, and her choice of clothing had never been better. She’d done a long red scarf around her neck in a loose knot, wore a white early winter sweater, a pair of black leggings, some mid thigh length high waisted jean shorts, and a pair of winged winter boots (likely in reference to her Olympian namesake). Skylar was wearing a brand new outfit Max had gotten him (despite his insistence that she didn't spend anything on him whatsoever). The black overalls looked like the kind you'd see on a flight suit, the dark red leather jacket was adorned with a single star on each shoulder to show his rank of Brigadier General, the boots were the same he’d worn in our fight with Panoptes, a the dark blue shirt under his overalls, and a white silk scarf that complimented the outfit spectacularly. His brown hair was slightly curled at the ends, and it had reddish highlights in the evening sun. Max wore her white and blue Warlock robes – the ones that the Vanguard awarded for the completion of a strike mission sometimes – a dark green sweater, a pair of knitted gloves, burgundy leggings with floral designs, a pair of shorts matching that color, and relatively normal looking winter boots. I just left my hair as is and wore my dress uniform and medals. While snow did blanket the ground in a thin layer today, I felt not the slightest chill.

It was hard to believe that we had just saved the universe in only five hours, and harder to believe I was regularly in the presence of one of the most powerful Warlocks alive. Osiris himself had praised Skylar for living up to Osirian standards, which said a ton. But then again, he'd said similar things to each of us, praising Bellona for her intellect with particular insistence on her being one of the greatest minds of our time, congratulating Raven for being sober for a whole hour straight, and saying that I showed boundless promise as a Guardian and human being.

Anywho, after defeating a Vex god or something we immediately decided it was an appropriate time to go out for coffee. Why not? While we waited for our orders we made small talk and chatted about trivial things.

“So how goes it between you two?”, I inquired, motioning to Skylar and Max.

“It's been quite…”, he began, pausing to contemplate his response. “Well, she makes me feel things I haven't felt before in this life, and I feel genuine joy around her.”

“He's quite different from what you must think.”, Max said. “Although we should all be in agreement on one thing. He's the cutest thing I've ever laid eyes upon, and nobody can deny that.”

“I prefer to be called, I don't know, something other than ‘cute’, if you find it possible.”, he said, turning away from her and inspecting his nails, looking for nonexistent dirt.

Max spun his chair around and pulled him onto her lap, hugging him close. She stroked his hair and gave him a kiss on the cheek before setting him back down.
“I love it when you talk like that, it's one of the reasons I think you're so cute.”, Max said.

“Please don't call me that.”, Skylar said again, pulling up his scarf to try and conceal his uncontrollable blushing.

I snickered a little, and Bellona let out a hearty laugh. She pulled me out of my chair, onto her lap, and gave me a quick peck on the lips. I got up immediately, straightening my tie and trying to keep a straight face. Skylar gave me a look that said, ‘so I'm not the only one’. Both Max and Bellona laughed at me and Skylar.

“Men are so predictable!”, Bellona said.

“We are not.”, Skylar scoffed.

“You know you are.”, Max said, giving him a ‘no bull’ look.

“I don't like kisses, for the record.”, Skylar said. “Okay, maybe a little, but that doesn't change the fact that it was totally uncalled for.”

Max reached over and tightened Skylar’s scarf, tying it in a tight knot over his mouth.

“Shut up.”, she chuckled. “I didn't hear a no.”

Skylar deftly untied the knot but left the scarf up, likely to conceal any further blushing. I lost it, adding my own soft chuckle to the dimming fire of levity.

“Now do you see what you've been missing out on?”, I asked slyly, leaning on Bellona to prompt her to do something to me.

She rubbed my back, leaning on me in return. Skylar lowered the scarf.
“I'm not missing out on what I don't want.”, he said. “But I am grateful for what I have been given, or rather who I have given myself to.”

“Aww…”, Max sighed, reaching over and ruffling his hair.

This was going to get mushy and weird fast. I straightened myself up in my seat and decided to change the topic. Already Skylar was rambling about a funny feeling in his chest and how a hug is a more intimate gesture than intercourse to the modern human. I pointed at the first thing I thought of, Bellona’s legs.

“What is with those?”, I inquired. “Are wool leggings trending now?”

Bellona inspected the clothes, as did Max, and ran her hand along it. She shrugged.

“It's just comfortable.”, Bellona replied.

“I'll second that.”, Max said. “It seems not a day passes without someone on Zeus wearing overalls though.”

“They definitely aren't trendy.”, Bellona said. “Fireteam leader, would you mind not dressing like an Alabamian farmhand?”

“Hey!”, I said, shoving her lightly, grinning. “I think it looks cute.”

Skylar bashed his face into the table and pounded it, his furious face rising slowly back up, like a red sun. He took a shaky breath, clawed his hands, and released his fury with a sigh. Wow, talk about anger management. His shoulders slumped and he turned his frown upside down.

“Fine, I'm cute.”, he sighed. “But you Church, you look like a stiff.”

“I know how to make him look stiffer.”, Bellona commented slyly.

Skylar slapped the table and broke out in a wheezing fit of laughter. God dammit Church, you done
messed up. I tried to save some face.

“I'm still a virgin in this life.”, I informed everyone at the table.

The laughter spread, and it grew more violent. One by one they stopped laughing and I just sat their confused. Wasn't that a good thing? A virtue even? Skylar always said it would be a shame to see me become a sex driven ape. Skylar finished last, sighing out the final laugh and relaxing. A smile stayed on everyone's face, so I smiled too. It matters not whether one laughs with you or at you, so long as you spread joy.

“You know Skylar, I like the way you sigh when you finish a bout of laughter.”, Max said.

“And I like you for everything about you.”, Skylar stated.

“Meh, I think I did a better job with Bellona.”, I stated. “Not that you're not good looking, I think you look well, but Bell looks leagues better.”

“Don't be an asshole.”, Bellona said, surprisingly.

“What?”, I asked, shrugging my shoulders. “It was a compliment.”

“Hmph, if you say so. Max, you look beautiful.”, Bellona said.

“And you are radiant as ever Colonel Cassavetes.”, Max said.

Before it got any more awkward our drinks arrived. A coffee blacker than deep space for me, one impossibly darker for Bellona (and no, if anything the coffee was compensating, just look at her), a simple latte for Max, and a steaming cocoa for Skylar. Finally. Took the waiter long enough. Duke ran the place himself, but still, he should hire. He's an Awoken. I'm sure that would loop in a few particularly interesting ladies, not that I'd be interested in anyone other than Bellona. In fact, I was hoping she'd seal it with an marriage or Entwinement. Probably the latter, as she seemed to have quite… advanced philosophies. An Entwinement was basically a marriage but the partners are joined by a red ribbon on one of each of their arms, and by rings literally welded together. After three days the rings and ribbon were removed, replaced with singular rings and armbands (the latter not being permanent), and it resumed like a regular wedding. It was based off of the Greek myth that men and women were once singular beings, but when they were together they had power rivalling that of the
gods. The gods being the insecure jerks they were split them apart, and humans have always felt a
void until they find their other half ever since. Something like that. I liked to learn from her. A smart
Titan. Rare and valuable apparently. I took a sip from my coffee and silently asked Bellona for
permission to initiate this next conversation. She silently denied me with a shake of her head,
beginning it herself.

“So Max, what's it been like with Skylar. Is he being a prick?”

“Actually no.”, Max said. “And you're repeating yourself.”

“Sorry, but let's seriously talk about it. Why do you like him?”, Bellona asked.

“I don’t know.”, Max admitted. “I’ve never really had someone like him ever before. It's been a
period of discovery for the both of us. I realized that I was actually capable of love yesterday. I
thought I'd live alone forever, but then North the matchmaker brought us together.”

“I discovered that I even wanted love.”, Skylar said. “I thought I could go without a companion –
but when I met Max and it turned out she’s asexual too, and that we’re a little into each other – I
realized I was wrong. And you know how I'm apparently an Osiris level Guardians or something?
Well, I like giving up that power. I like being somebody else’s. I like the idea that I am hers. And I'm
just a little afraid of being alone. I like being in her arms, having her have some degree of control
over me. You might think I'm weird or something, but fuck you I am.”

“Wait, you're asexual.”, I noted. “How does that-”

because it's how I feel and because of who he is, and it's the same with him.”

“I can confirm that.”, a familiar voice said.

Skylar whipped around to look, smiling like a child on Christmas. We all turned to see what it was.
Alex and Arya. Alex had bandages on most extremities and limbs, but they looked fresh. He wore a
long black autumn coat, as usual, a red Christmas sweater (with an actually not that ugly snowflake
design), black and red snow pants, arctic quality boots, and he leaned heavily on a polished maple
wood cane. Arya had her left arm looped beneath his armpits, and she helped him along the snowy
ground. Arya continued the leggings trend but wore a skirt instead of shorts, and what's with women
and the color black? And that ribbon around her neck? Bellona and I moved our seats clockwise to
make room for Alex and Arya, and a random civilian pulled out chairs for them. Alex said a quick thanks and left it at that. I noticed that ever since Anubis had come in and given us a royal beating the people had a better relationship with us. I decided to keep it that way, and fulfill a personal desire, and got out of my seat and walked across to their table. There was a fair skinned lady in a blue coat, a white man wearing half winter clothes and half City militia uniform with an eyepatch over his left eye, and a kid wearing a forest camo snowsuit and a cloak I hadn't seen since our last meeting in November. Terry's family. The kid had grown to the point that the cloak no longer fell over his eyes, and the man, Bryce, seemed to have aged in reverse almost. These people kept cropping up everywhere. The kid noticed me and his face lit up.

“Captain Church!”, Terry shouted in delight.

“Major now actually.”, I said. “How’s it been going?”

“Amazing actually!”, Bryce said. “Terry's been growing like a weed, and guess who got accepted into a certain project involving Golden Age medicine?”

“That's what it is!”, I gasped. “I actually heard Skylar do a whole rant on telomere repair before.”

“Well I don't care about the science, as long as Bryce keeps that face looking handsome and young.”, his wife said.

“It's not just for you Faizo, it's for all of us.”, Bryce stated. “Human lifespan took a hit after the Collapse, and we're going to have to bounce back up if we're going to stabilize the population. It's been in a hundredth of a percent drop per year for thirty years. That's not good. People deserve to live past two hundred forty, and I'll be glad to help pioneer the tech that makes it possible.”

Deacon appeared at my shoulder and joins the conversation.

“My Guardian here actually used meds much like yours Bryce, in his past life.”, Deacon stated. “Better though.”

“A past life that I've already surpassed.”, I corrected. “I don't want to poke around in that kind of stuff. Just outdated military reports and sad stuff.”

“Well on a lighter note sir, I got a girlfriend like you.”, Terry said.
The table erupted in laughter as did I, and when it was done I felt a slight pain in my gut. From the mouths of babes.

“I think you're a little young for that Terry.”, I said.

“Nope. I'm twelve and a half.”, he said. “I'm almost a teenager”

“I'm about a thousand something, so that argument really doesn't work.”, I chuckled. “One hundred twenty or something if you don't count all the time I spent dead in a church in America. That's actually my namesake by the way. The building, not anyone actually named Church.”

“Actually, could you do me a favor?”, Bryce requested.

“Yeah, that's what I came to see if I could do.”, I replied.

“Terry's thinking about joining the cadets, and I need your say on which one's the safest.”, Bryce explained.

“I don't need protecting, I want to be the protector!”, Terry fumed.

“Not to sound condescending, but I think you should leave the fighting to the people who can't die…”, I suggested. “Although, you could be a drone pilot. No risk there.”

“I feel like an idiot now.”, Bryce said. “There's always a super damn easy solution and I'm blind as a bat as to what it is. Thanks by the way.”

“You’re welcome. And I'll be paying for you guys.”, I said.

“Usually I'd say there's no need to, but I'm in a good mood.”, the woman said. “Stroke your ego Guardian, thanks for the free stuff.”
I walked back to the table, confident things had gone perfectly fine in my absence. Nope. Out of the cooler and into burning hellfire. Okay, it wasn't bad, just a little chaotic. Skylar had migrated from his seat to Max's lap, a wide smile on his face as she stroked his hair and simply held him. Arya and Alex had gotten into an argument though with Bellona. I took my seat again and joined the fun, downing a mouthful of coffee to stay sharp.

“No, I'm serious. A guy with the same name as Adolf Hitler's half brother invited me to join his secret organization and I don't have any other information until Christmas.”, Arya insisted.

“Sorry, what did I miss?”, I inquired.

“Skylar's smiling like a goof, but he's been quiet. These Neanderthals won't explain a simple damn ribbon.”, Bellona explained.

“Okay let's not talk about controversial things then.”, I suggested. “Religion, politics, and apparently a neck ribbon.”

“Okay, let's get some chatter going. Love seems to be a hot topic for us.”, Alex suggested.

Skylar got off Max's lap and made a finger pyramid, genuinely interested for once. It finally hit me, two things rather, finally hit me. For one, he died young. About twenty something? Thirty at most? Compared to his expected lifespan and some genetics and sciencey stuff, that meant he was actually pretty young. And for two, this was a huge period of discovery for him. If we were to become true friends, more than just brothers in arms, then I would have to support him all of the way through it. I began the conversation, calling from some past overhearings and conversations to formulate a good question or conversation starter.

“So Alex, you're like Skylar too right?”, I asked. “You profess that you're Arya's and that she owns you?”

“I did, until I dedicated more time to that particular dynamic of our relationship. I'm hers, but not in that way. We are close I guess, protective, but not possessive of each other. We are more like, I don't know, part of each other. I feel this void, with a lowercase ‘v’, in my heart when she leaves me for a long time. I can't explain it, and neither can she, so we stopped trying to.”, Alex explained.

“But I have a three year psychology degree and a natural gift for this stuff, and I could give a full diagnosis…”, Arya said. “But I'll save that for later. Church, Bellona, what's your love like? I have
always been very, very intrigued.”

“I feel drawn to him on a physical level.”, Bellona replied. “It's rooted in the mating instinct, but then there's way more to it. When we get physical per se, I feel something between pleasure and desire. I want more, and there's something else to it that I couldn't explain for the lives of me.”

Skylar looked deep in thought, taking notes mentally. He took a breath and joined the conversation.”

“Arya, what is your diagnosis?”, he inquired.

“Don't rush me, I'll get to it.”, Arya said. “I'll take one more question.”

“Who's the top?”, Max asked in a sly voice.

The table erupted in laughter, as it seemed to do a lot, and Skylar cooled down the quickest. He leaned back and wrapped an arm around Max's shoulders, waiting for the conversation to resume. I sighed and chuckled both at once, shaking my head.

“Actually I think if there is one it would be me.”, Alex chimed in. “Not like that though, it's just that I'm the one giving the hugs, initiating the romantic stuff, d-”

“Getting shot to bits instantly in a fight, letting me pick the movies, slipping about eight times on the way here, list continues.”, Arya interrupted. “But yeah it's probably him, as clumsy and fragile as he may be. Although our relationship isn't as physical as most. We hug, we cuddle, but it's not the bread and butter of it. We connect on a deeper level.”

Skylar coughed into his left hand and Arya gave him a glare that said, ‘You f**king asked for it.’

“This should be interesting.”, Bellona stated.

“Agreed.”, I said.
“I'd love to know what makes this man tick.”, Max said.

“I know my dad's crazy, but it should be interesting to see just how crazy.”, Alex said.

Arya tugged at her skirt, appearing irritated at its lack of length. She let out a frustrated huff and pulled out a pen an paper out of thin air, the snap of transmat sounding and a white flash stinging my eyes briefly. She turned to Skylar and crossed her slender legs.

“Oh, this shit's serious.”, Skylar said, feigning surprise. “Okay, let's dance. What's going on inside my grey matter.”

“Well, you're not crazy in the slightest.”, Arya stated. “It's just a facade. The word eccentric covers it better. Now as for your dynamic with Max, are you being literal?”

“Certainly.”, Skylar answered.

“Ooooookay…”, Arya sighed. “You might have a case of weird shit, but let's see. What do you like about your relationship with Max?”

Skylar looked to her briefly and was pulled into a tight hug. He sighed happily and his smile changed from the cocky grin of someone who thinks, or knows, they're invincible, to a contented one.

“I think it's the contact.”, he replied, his voice softer and almost happier.

“That’s nothing unusual.”, Arya noted, uncrossing her legs and stowing the pen and paper. “Anything else, anything about the contact?”

“Well, when she holds me and doesn't let go, I don't want her to.”, Skylar answered. “Toland's latest… communication? Yeah, communication. Entry, something or other. Anyway, it hinted that I'm now on the same level as Oryx. Not as powerful, not even in his weight class, but a minor god in terms of power. I doubt it, but I could probably take Osiris in a fight and bring it to a draw. The sword logic only sort of worked on me. Anywho, I like surrendering that power, surrendering to her. And then there’s the intellectual bit. She likes history, I like learning history, she knows some lore, I like learning about the lore of our enemies and legends like Osiris and Saint-14, Shin Malphur and Dredgen Yor, Toland and his journals, and she’s got definitive encyclopedias on each of those. I
know plenty lore myself too, lots, I found the Books of Sorrow after all, so we chat about it a lot too. As for history, she’s teaching me about the world wars. Not just one and two, but their successors and predecessors. Ever heard of black powder? Basically, cordite’s shittier cousin.”

“Yeah, and I still can’t believe Osiris just left though.”, Max said. “He’s probably the only Guardian fit for the role of Speaker, and there’s already an instant alert system for Vex activity. It makes no sense…”

“Makes more sense than most things.”, I said. “And Deacon still won’t explain anything for me.”

“It’s to encourage you to seek answers on your own.”, Deacon told me. “You’re good with a gun, but you need some work in terms of… Look, I have my reasons.”

Alex and Arya turned to each other, talking quietly and occasionally chuckling about an inside joke or something. They both turned to Skylar, and Alex looked like he was having a particularly hard time keeping a straight face. Whatever their conclusion was, it was either funny, embarrassing, both, or neither because I’m a shitty judge of these things.

“Well, using Alex’s Sherlock Holmes like deduction-”, Arya began.

“And Arya’s womanly ability to jump to conclusions.”, Alex interrupted.

“My ability to read people like books, rather.”, Arya corrected. “Anyway Skylar…”, she attempted to say, the words lost in a bout of snickering. She sighed and continued. “Skylar, I diagnose you with… Hahaha! Oh my fucking God, I can’t even say it.”

Arya continued laughing and buried her head in her hands, shaking it either pitifully or condescendingly. Alex giggled like a squirrel on laughing gas and cocaine, but he wiped his eyes dry and managed to gather himself, sighing out a heavy breath that steamed up on the winter air. Skylar moved back into his own chair, leaned back, kicked his feet up onto the table, and put on a pair of aviator sunglasses. He kept his cool, but he looked less sure of himself now though.

“Now dad, bro, guy I'm based genetically off of, whatever. You’re going to hate me, but it’s not my fault. You might not like what you’re about to hear.”, Alex warned.

“Entertain me.”, Skylar promoted.
“Ah nothing.”, Alex said. “You’ll find out in due time. In the meantime, what was Osiris like?”

\[ ° > \]

Raven

Outside the Nevermore pub.

Last City, Earth.

7:00 PM

Holy fuck! No no no no no no no no no! Fuck! I just got back from Mercury and this happens. My pub, and house too, was burning. I watched from the outside as the two story pub that could never decide what it was went down in flames. Inside the tables and chairs were alight, even the walls and ceiling, and the fire was bound to spread to the bar. If that happened… ever tried to put a fire out with alcohol. Don’t. I couldn’t do anything. I stood stock still, stunned, captivated by the inferno. I couldn’t believe it. Why? The fire spread, stretching out from some open windows and seemingly reaching across to latch onto the nearby restaurant and clothing outlet on either side.

A thought struck me. Oscar. He’d been working the bar while I was fighting the Vex. That spurred me into action. I held out a hand to call Poe. The little black Ghost hovered over my hand, looked at the pub, and immediately got to work. He equipped my armor and coated it in fire retardant, and I tore off my cloak. I must have been a frightening figure, a Hunter in feather adorned black and purple armor and a raven's head inspired helmet, standing in front of a furious blaze such as this. I found my water canteen and soaked my cape in water. I bolted through the glass doors at top speed, beating back the flames and disregarding the heat as I made my way to the bar. I had almost made it when the flames beat me to the punch. I kept going, but so did the fire. A bottle fell from the shelves, and the fire greedily consumed it. Then it got the shelves. Then the shelves collapsed. I got one last look at the Nevermore, bathed in hellish orange light, almost beautiful in this state. Then I was thrown back. The flames had not only gotten the alcohol. You know what happens when flower catches fire?

I was thrown a short distance before I felt a sharp pain, heard a wet snap, and all went dark. I awoke on the pavement outside my pub, the blair of sirens approaching already. The concrete was slick with blood, gathered around me in a couple slick puddles reflecting the flames. Poe said some nonsense that I ignored. I got to my feet slowly, and I nearly fell again when I saw who lay dead on the pavement. Oscar. But not by fire. By a bullet. His Ghost too was dead, and I instinctively picked the round out of his head. I inspected it closely, and I grew cold and pale when I read what was inscribed on it. The Concordat fist atop a pillar (the Axis logo), and a name. Or a title rather. A title I once wore. Shit! That should have been me! I had to reach the Vanguard immediately.
Miro

Secret room in the Tower.
Last City, Earth.
12:00 AM.
December 6th.

So here we gathered. I had barely enough time to don my white robes with their purple runes and my various charms, before being rushed here on a fucking code god fucking damn Skyfall. That meant shit was coming down around the Vanguard's heads and it was going to affect everyone. Didn't even get to polish the ol' silver head. Whatever, Ikora included something else. Something I wore on my wrist before the cause disbanded. A red ribbon. I couldn't have gotten into the fucking room faster. We had to kick out Benedict-50, but he's a sweeper bot so who cares? Zavala, Cayde, Ikora, and a fellow ex ribbon bearer sat around a cheap aluminum rectangular table. I pulled out a chair and we began talking.


“Some guy burned down my fucking bar!”, Raven shouted. “Look at my clothes too! Burnt and bloody. Not to mention they fucking killed Oscar!”

“We are aware.”, Zavala stated. “But Ikora, you have yet to inform me as to what any of this is about. Three Guardians are dead, and more may follow. Any and all information you can give us will be helpful.”

“Yeah, I have no recollection of this.”, Cayde added. “And I never heard Andal mention this once.”

“I can tell you.”, I offered. “So can Raven. And Alan if he were still alive. You probably know Alan as Jack. He was a Bearer too. As was I. As was Raven. I’m surprised I didn’t recognize him on sight.”

“I know my fair share as well.”, Ikora said. “More than anyone in this room. I knew Alois personally. I tried to keep Fireteam Zeus out of this but… He’s recruiting new Red Ribbons.”
“Start from the beginning Ikora.”, Zavala said.

“Truth be told, I wasn’t there at the beginning.”, Ikora admitted. “But here’s what I know from experience and research. Alois was against the Consensus at first, and he likely still is. Being such a short time after the business with the Concordat and Osiris, I was overly concerned about his ideas. He considered us to be an oligarchy, not too far from the truth, and he wished to replace us with a system more akin to a direct democracy. I was a fool to react to him as I did, and it resulted in him becoming more radical. He joined the Axis, a splinter group inside the Concordat, possibly actually founding it. After some time though he had a falling out with another founder, a Hunter named Y, and just a year or so before beginning of Project Lumen he created the League. He recruited Guardians like our Standouts on Fireteam Excalibur, capable of extraordinary things with mind, body, and Light, to his cause. Our friend Miro here joined while still corrupted by the Hive at age two hundred fifty nine. He quit, as I recall, when he nearly lost total control. But Raven here I bet has a more interesting story. Anyway, the League existed to bring down the Axis and Concordat, opposed to their extremist methods and more disagreeable ideologies. I haven’t seen Alois in a long time, but when I do I would like to apologize. We may soon need his help.”

“And now time for me.”, Raven grunted. “Well, here we go. I found the fucker, joined another badass group of more badasses, ascended the ranks, and then quit after the incident involving Excalibur. From there it cooled down a lot. If you want more detail, I joined because my Light functions a little more flexibly. Do you believe in luck? Yeah. I’m naturally lucky. I was the Poet. Alois’s trusted assassin. Shen was the Ranger. Alan, or Jack, was the Soldier. He was a great asset to us. He’d fought for bounty hunters, the Concordat, and then us. I’m assuming they got the Musician too?”

“No.”, I said. “Anubis did. On Io. She was a good woman, and she died for nothing. Plain and simple injustice.”

Zavala pounded a dent into the table, growling in frustration. He sighed heavily, furiously, almost growling. He looked to his fellow Vanguard with fury in his eyes. Cayde made an attempt to leave, but he thought better of it and merely faded into the shadows in the corner of the room.

“We let Oscar’s death go public.”, Zavala said. “As for Jack and Sam, we hide it. I cannot let Fireteam Zeus suffer a psychological blow like this.”

“I’ll second that.”, Ikora said. “One of my brightest students is… Developing. He’s kept me posted and…”, she broke the sentence with a faint laugh. “And it’s been interesting. Funny, even. I couldn’t tell you though seeing as like you all, I value my life. And I respect my pupil’s privacy. Anyways, I cannot let anything hinder or interfere with that development. I can’t end up with another twisted one like Prior.”
“If it’s going to a vote, I’ll do whatever she just said.”, Cayde added. “Hearing that someone you knew just bit the dust really kills the holiday spirit.”

“Well, I guess the Vanguard’s going to be saving Christmas.”, Raven joked. “Yeah, why not? But Oscar gets something special. A monument or something. He deserves it.”

“I’ll personally assure that his memory endures and that you are compensated.”, Zavala promised.

“Well, if I have to cast a vote…”, I groaned, “Fuck it, let’s be sneaky motherfuckers and keep this under wraps”

<#
Skylar
Tower North.
Looking out upon the Traveller.
Last City, Earth.
12:30

The Traveller looked almost as beautiful as it had when I witnessed its awakening firsthand, closer than anyone else. The Light itself illuminated the nighttime sky, reflecting off the snow to create stunning patterns in the sky. You sure as hell didn’t make me shed a single tear when you woke up, but now I had an eye for the beauty that I once overlooked. I could feel its presence, and the presence of the Light, concentrated within me and flowing steadily around me. What a glorious force of creation and destruction it was. I leaned on the railing and rested my head on my hands, thinking many, many beautiful thoughts. My conversation with Church had been one hell of a ride, especially when it came to my defense of German technical superiority.

“I’m not defending my potential heritage, I’m merely stating the fucking obvious!”, I had shouted.

“Five words. Sixth of June nineteen forty four.”, he had countered.

“That was an infantry fight for one, and for two, that’s six words.”, I jabbed. “Eat paste and waste oxygen seems to be your motto, eh?”
Good chat that was. Just like most of history, the lovingly crafted Deutsche *panzer* won out over the mass produced and faulty American tin cans. And the conversation before that, well it died quickly because Osiris wasn’t anyone’s best topic. Before that, the weird one, that one wasn’t going to be forgotten easily. And I was beginning to see the points once they had been brought up again and gone through thoroughly by a dashing Ms. Max Flynn. And you know what, who cares? I killed a godlike being, again, about fourteen hours ago. Those were my defining moments, not whatever I ended up doing or not doing with a companion. Plus, it’s better than crippling loneliness I had brought upon myself for my entire life before. Thinking of what I *might* actually do, just off the top of my head, brought a sly smile to my face. Operative word there being might. As in maybe I wouldn’t. As in I probably would try at least once because I have *way* too much time on my hands. I was sick before that fever even got to me. Shit, but I don’t really care anymore. Common trait among people with ADHD is our ability to move on quick as a Jew to a dropped nickel.

A hand on my shoulder interrupted my thoughts. Max. I whipped around to face her, a sly smile on my face. She looked just as radiant as ever, and her little nose looked cute, reddened by the cold.

“Yes m’lady?”, I drawled, tipping an invisible straw hat.

“What are you supposed to be, an Alabamian farmer?”, she laughed.

“Eeeeyup.”, I said. “Now, pretty ol’ lady, have you seen the man who took my wallet? He’s ‘bout six tall, big lips, an as stupid of a nig-”

Before I could finish uttering the derogatory phrase, she shot forwards like a viper, closing the gap in a blink of an eye. In that same second her lips met mine. A surprise, yes, but a welcome one indeed.

[=]|[=]

Overview of days December 5th to December 24th.

Dec/5

Vex threat thwarted on Mercury in record time.

Arson and murder on 87th street.

-Casualties:
1 Nevermore pub (insured).
1 Oscar Hidalgo, Titan, Widower, Deceased (permanent). Will distributed.

Dec/6
-Oscar’s death announced to public.
-Memorial held.
-Monument for Pantheon War unveiled. Public reception was exemplary.

Dec/7-18
Uneventful (mostly).
-A few missing persons reports filed.

Dec/19
Dawning begins.
-Fireteam Zeus delivered gifts to every vendor and person in the Tower, including every guard and mechanic.
-Skylar Peace does what he does best and spreads pandemonium. What is called a “Snowball Fight” occurred. Projectiles varied in size, averaging in four inches in diameter. No casualties, surprisingly. Civilian and Guardian morale seems to have risen since the events of late October to December 3.

Dec/24
Lord Shaxx turns in Crucible report. Injuries, property damage, and (non permanent) deaths spiked massively upon the introduction of Mayhem. Some Guardians suffering from slow healing due to a new Crimson hand cannon, but no permanent deaths. Nevertheless the Guardian Sports Moderation Committee is looking into it.
-(Brig.) General Skylar Peace and Major Church ‘Cassavetes’ (soon to be wed/Entwined) and other members of Fireteam Zeus - including the new members Sisu-3 and Maxime Flynn (no military ranking for either) - topped Citywide leaderboards in nine out of all nine matches they completed in the Crucible this day. Claims of cheating and other such misdemeanors have been ignored or struck down. Seems that people don’t like it when they can’t compete with skill. I was paid to say that.
Episode 5: Arguably the Best and Worst Christmas Ever

Chapter Summary

The Christmas truce (German: Weihnachtsfrieden; French: Trêve de Noël) refers to a series of widespread but unofficial ceasefires along the Western Front of World War I around Christmas 1914.

In the week leading up to the 25th, French, German, and British soldiers crossed trenches to exchange seasonal greetings and talk. In some areas, men from both sides ventured into no man's land on Christmas Eve and Christmas Day to mingle and exchange food and souvenirs. There were joint burial ceremonies and prisoner swaps, while several meetings ended in carol-singing. Men played games of football (soccer, if you’re an imbecile or an American) with one another, giving one of the most memorable images of the truce. Peaceful behavior was not ubiquitous; fighting continued in some sectors, while in others the sides settled on little more than arrangements to recover bodies. Still, peace was seemingly universal on that day. Nothing of the sort happens this Christmas, but I really like history and I thought I would share it with you. Peace out.

<#>

Skylar

Max’s apartment.

Drinking coffee on the couch by the window.

Last City, Earth.

December 25th.

4:30 AM

So about the well, everything, Alex and Arya were spot on. I was still nowhere near as bad as Sam, who with Jack had left to go live somewhere else in the system for their retirement (heh, retirement). But… I still decided to explore that particular aspect of myself. Though it was a more recent development, so nothing too crazy yet. I think a few kisses that were at most PG 13 was as crazy as it got. We tried other means of creating that same feeling a kiss or warm embrace gave, but mostly I spent my time with Max better than that. Although last Tuesday was an exception, an exception I will choose not to even think about for now. With the reintroduction of Mayhem in the Crucible, I decided to truly let loose. Unfortunately Max was occasionally on the enemy team, so I had to be super careful who I shot. She on the other hand didn't show such restraint. Sure, she didn't kill me, but have you ever spent four minutes with a gun to your head? Not fun for either side. Well, she brought a few books so we weren't too bored, but a gun to one's head is still pretty damn hard to enjoy. The rest of the time though, we kicked ass. I even got called out for excessive force when I cast, what was to me, a perfectly normal Stormtrance and wiped the enemy team about three times before deciding to let up. Church was being Church so he didn't enter the competitive scene, but he
should have. Three kills in four seconds with a nearly empty cannon is impressive. He had some stiff competition though, coming from our newest member Sisu-3. He used only two guns. A very dated grease gun, and an even more ancient bolt action gewehr, sorry, rifle, and he was deadly as a disease with both. Max and I started learning Deutsch, or German, for shits and giggles. And today we had a movie planned. The Christmas Truce or something. Ancient history is pretty interesting when it involves guns, and pretty heartwarming when it doesn't. Except the migrant crisis. That was downright hilarious… if you remove the fact that the fate of humanity and the free world was at stake.

Speaking of Christmas, today's the day. I went all out on her and had a new ship waiting in the hangar with some of her other gifts inside, and I told her I'd vaporize her if she bought me so much as a postage stamp. She told me to stop lying. Anywho, Christmas Eve was great too. Got accused of cheating in Mayhem, somehow, and decided to ease up on the Crucible. We also exchanged some Christmas Eve gifts. Sort of a tradition among impatient people. I got a wittily titled lore book by Byf, a set of blue and black plaid pyjamas, and a beautiful amulet, a faint bluish crystal Stormcaller insignia with a small golden ring embedded in the center. I hated it at first, but I came to see the meaning behind it. What the little obscure thing was trying to say, what it meant to me when I wore it. I wore both the pyjamas and the amulet now as I tried coffee for the first time and looked down out upon the dark and sparsely lit City below. Fuck, this shit's hard to enjoy. Ninety percent of the time of something's brown it will taste like shit. I would have watched a Quentin Tarantino movie, but they got loud and Max was still asleep. Me? I hit the hay at three in the afternoon yesterday, as the Crucible had worn me out so badly. So now I was stuck alone in the dark, and I didn't particularly like solidarity. North must have sensed these thoughts because he popped up out of nowhere to talk with me. It was the usual Guardian to Ghost banter. Why did you leave me to fight three waves of Fallen? Well you should be faster. Why did you grab that dangerous object? Why not? The usual lines.

I sensed someone in the living room. Jester? His ‘sleep’, if it could be called that, schedule didn't match his Guardian’s, so he was usually up when she was asleep. Nope, he wouldn't have an Arc signature. Only a Guardian would. This was a particular signature that I had grown familiar with as of late. I grinned, pacing her approach and concluding that she was trying to be sneaky and would try to scare me. Sorry love, not possible. I braced myself for something like a cold hand on my leg or a loud noise, but it turns out she wasn't doing anything of the sort. She slid onto the couch with me, dressed in red and white plaid pyjamas like my own, and slowly our respectful distance devolved into full on cuddling. The thing is, we were actually sort of physical. I read some of Arya's papers and yeah, I actually got what she was saying, resonated with it. Being asexual doesn't mean being distant with your partner, or not even having one. Some were like that, shy of any physical contact, some were moderate like Alex and Arya, some were a bit more physical like me and Max, and some were the most physical and intimate people you would ever meet. To quote Arya's work, 'Some aces really enjoy that physical stimulation. From my understanding it's sort of like perpetual foreplay until you get bored. I personally would be down for that, (and no, that's not an invitation Mr. Throckmorton you old coot) but the second the pants come off you've lost me. What am I supposed to do, put a hat on it? Asexuality is still loosely defined, but it can be described best as a lack of arousal from the idea or act of intercourse, not an aversion to physical pleasure. Seeing as coitus and physical pleasure are not directly married to one another, it seems entirely plausible that one can be asexual and enjoy physical stimulation.' That paper was written after she met Alex and fell in love. And guess what, she met him in a tree too. Anyway, she must have really gotten bored to tread through the sea of weirdness and grossness that was human sexuality and things commonly associated with it just to find that information. Or maybe it was just soul searching, something I had
just begun doing, as opposed to letting my past achievements and my labels dictate who I am.

Snap back to reality here, something cold was on my back. Oh, just Max's hand. Ha, you have shitty circulation. Thought it was something else, but then again it wouldn't be anything else. I enjoyed the feeling of her hand moving up my spine slowly, sort of an anxious excitement. She moved her hand to my neck and fingered something I had around it.

“You've got something on your neck.”, Max noted. “Feels like a, what did you call it, ‘gay ass necklace’, or something?”

“Yeah, well, I like it on further consideration.”, I admitted. “It’s a nice amulet really, and the meaning behind it makes it better.”

“Glad you like it.”, she said.

“But it must have been expensive as fuck.”, I stated.

“But seeing as you like it that makes it worth more than twice its weight in gold.”, Max added. “And don't swear.”

“You can't fucking stop me.”, I sang.

“I haven't, but that doesn't mean I won't.”, she threatened.

“Bitch please.”, I scoffed. “I've seen Thrall that could snap those arms of yours in half.”

“It's almost like you're egging me on.”, Max said. “And you're pretty scrawny too.”

Scrawny eh? We'll see. I turned around and proceeded to lift Max into the air, holding her up with a single hand on her belly and a single leg supporting hers.

“Point proven.”, she said. “You can let me down.”
“Afraid of heights are we?”, I taunted, calling the Light to my body.

“No, I'm just not confident in your ability to hold me u- ahh!”, she said, getting cut off by what I did next.

I was using some variant of my normal kinetic push ability to hold her aloft, a few feet above my hands. This was nothing compared to the Cabal flagships I'd done the opposite to, that I'd ripped from the sky. She floated as if atop the surface of a body of water, and she seemed intent on grabbing my amulet to get some sort of anchor. I let her down, way too fast may I add, and almost fell off the couch after smashing into me. If not for my intervention she would have fallen, and I didn't want to hurt her – just show her that I'm not weak, I just choose to give her control most of the time. She was now on top of me, grinning like a madman. Oh shit. Instead of getting her revenge she slid off of me, springing up into a standing position.

“I think that's enough of our shenanigans.”, she stated. “If we're to catch the opening we have to at Oscar's Pub by seven thirty, and we've got festivities of our own to attend.”

“Yep.”, I confirmed. “Wait, would you be offended if I spent copious amounts glimmer on you? I know I would, but you're a bit different so…”

“I'll be offended if you don't come check out your gifts.”, she said.

“It's been killing us to keep the secret.”, Jester exclaimed enthusiastically from Max's shoulder.

“Who's us?”, North grumbled. “I don't even like you.”

“Take that back you little shit!”, Jester demanded.

“Well now I'm definitely not going to you cun-”, he began, but I decided to cut out his profanity by shoving him behind a pillow.

“Actually I'd rather you go first.”, I said. “Just wait for me to get changed, we'll be going to the hangar.”
She leaned over me, wrapped the silver chain of the locket around her hand, and whispered, “You do realize what it means to be a good ‘companion’ right?”

“Um, not giving up chivalry.”, I retorted. “And don't whisper, just talk quietly. It's more tactically viable, plus whispering is really uncomfortable on my ears.”

“Witty as ever.”, she chuckled, standing straight once more, pulling me along with her.

“Hey, could you not?”, I requested.

“No.”, Max said. “I can't not.”

“Look, you'll be blown away, I assure you.”, I promised her.

“Look, you'll be listening to what I say.”, Max said. “It's Christmas Skylar, be nice.”

“I am being nice!”, I insisted.

“You're being a bad listener.”, she countered. “I appreciate the gesture, but I decline.”

I gave up reasoning with her and let her pull me along to the second living room (a square twenty five by twenty five foot room), or what Miro called unfair opulence. I sort of liked, no, I definitely liked what she was doing. My heart was positively racing like an overclocked warp drive. But why? The brain is a funny fellow indeed. Whatever, I wasn't going to argue with dopamine and serotonin. Max turned on the lights and I was greeted with a very annoyingly expensive gift. Where our right side couch should be was a blue and gold Sparrow resting on the polished maple floor. That was just the beginning of it, to my dismay. I grabbed her hand and she looked at me.

“This is way too much.”, I said.

“You're probably being a hypocrite there.”, Max stated. “Definitely. Now come along, there's more.”
“Please no.,” I pleaded, imagining the dent this must have put in her bank account. “Please say you didn't actually waste more fucking money on me.”

“I did.,” she said. “And there's nothing you can do about it. And it's hardly a waste, as long as I manage to make you smile.”

I groaned loudly in annoyance as she pulled me to the grey and blue striped couch, showing me the next gift. On the middle cushion was a new ornate helmet, the one that Tess had crafted to accompany the Dawning. Max had even made sure it was polished. She must have known I was looking for a new iconic helmet. She tried to pull me onto the couch with her, but I stood strong. Some things, like unnecessary expenditures, I would not stand for. Or, I would stay standing rather – but the point still stands! Lots of standing.

“Come on Sky, we both know you did ten times worse, or better.”, she said.

“Damned straight I did.,” I said. “So let's go. I'll get changed and I'll show you what I got you.”

“You are awfully insistent.”, she noted. “Well, if I can't win, I guess we'll have to compromise.”

Yes! Okay, I get it, I'm usually not a very assertive person around her, but it's god damned Christmas. I get to have my way now. She let go and I strode out of the room, racing her to the bedroom. Oh, and we have bunk beds. Because bunk beds are fucking cool. Not because of relationship tension, more like for the fact that I liked having a bed of my own to sleep in. Although, that might change depending on what my buddy Mr. Grey Matter had to say about the enjoyability of a shared bed.

I used a Blink to pass her and shut the door behind me. I locked it and wasted no time changing into my ‘badass motherfucker’ outfit. A proper astounding red leather trench coat with a pair of gold stars, one on each shoulder, a long sleeved dark blue shirt with a Stormcaller insignia in grey on the chest, a pair of dark grey pants, a pair of black boots, and my yellow lensed aviators. I didn't even touch my hair, and I removed the amulet, for now, exchanging it for a silk scarf. I didn't want to lose it, because it meant so damn much to me and her. I tied the scarf in a French knot and did a cowboy walk out of the bedroom, opening the door and making a finger pistol at my hip.

“You look ridiculous.”, she snorted.
“Any more ridiculous than before?”, I asked rhetorically.

“No. You always look ridiculous. The outfit doesn't though, so that's a good thing.”

“Oh how I love our banter.”, I said.

She pushed me out of the bedroom and got changed in less than record time. By that I mean it was five fourteen by the time she got out. She entered at five on the dot. But that time didn't go to waist, I mean waste. Damn she's fit though. Like I noted before, not weightlifter fit, but jogger fit. Anyway, she picked an outfit that almost came somewhere close to my magnificence. Her curly short to mid length hair was always great, and somehow by doing nothing to her hair or face made her more beautiful. She wore a brown bomber jacket with her Private First Class insignia on each shoulder, a white silk scarf that matched mine, a red shirt that accentuated her form well, highlighting her semi muscular torso and flatter than most chest. Not super flat, but not excessively large. Everyone knows that if she's got big… god I can't even think that word, but if they're big then she's a thot. A Little Caesars Thot and Ready Pizza. Harry Thotter and the Philosopher's Hoe. I could keep going. That and I was a little bit repelled by what most people liked in a woman. Except fitness, that's always good. Anyway, back to her outfit. Her belt was a brown length of leather with a golden buckle bearing a Dawnblade insignia, despite her being a now rare Sunsinger. Her jeans were also a bit tight, but not too tight; more like a snug perfect fit. She wore fur boots, beaver in fact, that I had bought her for Christmas Eve. Fun fact, those things were in a jar of formaldehyde for a few hundred years, a millennium more likely, and it took a long time to get the smell out. But I would go through hell and high water to preserve her happiness, although making her smile was hardly a chore, more like a reward. I loved these brief periods of peace now, whereas I previously engaged in unhealthy self harm and isolation until the next fight.

“You look stunning.”, I said. “And I'm stating the obvious aren't I?”

“Why don't you shut up-”, she leaned in and kissed me quickly on the lips, “and show me what the fuss is all about?”

“Gladly.”, I said, linking arms with her and proceeding out of our apartment and into the hallway.

We took a right and entered the elevator, selecting the top floor and beginning our idle chatter once more.

“So how did the, you know…”, she searched for the right word. “Thing go down with you?”
“I don't know.”, I said plainly. “I liked it, but I'm new to this.” I dulled my voice and spoke in a comical sarcastic monotone. “I spent four years suppressing this and isolating myself. I haven't done anything like this before. I didn't even know I could like something like that. Life is pointless. Nihilism is cool and edgy.”

Max laughed a genuine and pure laugh, a glorious audible tapestry, the kind of laugh that made you want to laugh too. I remembered why exactly I even gave her a shot. Books. I told her this and she continued laughing for a few more seconds.

“North actually picked me out at the library.”, she said. “In fact our entire relationship is twenty percent books, ten percent 'physical' or whatever it is, and a good seventy percent 'intellectual'.”

“Agreed.”, I said, imitating the annoyingly snobby voice of Bellona’s Ghost.

“Do you think it's true what they say about us Warlocks? That we're all a bunch of brainiacs and IQ elitists with too much knowledge of all the wrong stuff?”

“Dear, I daresay you have been associating with your mental inferiors.”, I said. “Listen not to their drivel, we are above them.”

That put a nice smile on her face. That's what I like. One of Church's sayings. It matters not whether you laugh with me or at me, merely that you laugh. Something like that. The doors to the elevator opened and we walked out into a snowy and bustling early morning Tower. I made my way to the hangar, exchanging greetings with a few vendors and random Guardians I didn't know. I got considerably more attention than usual, probably due to the fact that I was with Max. I'd been in this relationship for a whole twenty days and yet still people were coming to realize, oh, those two are together. I honestly didn't want people nosing around in our business, this morning being a perfect example of why. Fucking cunts would spin it into either dirt on me or a story unrecognizable as the original. Here's a hint. It involved a west European form of kissing and about five minutes of elevator security footage.

As we headed down the last set of stairs to the hangar Max started to talk again. You know, when your silences stop being awkward you know that you've found someone special. And when shit like last week, not that I'll ever tell anyone who didn't already know what that was, just casually fucking happens it's an even clearer sign.

“So anyway, I didn't even get to give you all your gifts.”, Max informed me.
“Yeah, and you completely ignored mine.”, I responded.

“This had better not be something ridiculously expensive.”, she said.

“What would you do if it was?” I taunted.

“I was thinking something along the lines of kicking you in the gut and throwing you off the Tower.”, she said with scary seriousness.

“Good thing you're kidding.”, I chuckled nervously.

We reached Amanda and she waved in greeting. I noticed that despite the cold weather she was keeping the sleeveless top. Odd.

“How's it going Sky?”, she asked.

“Good, good. Nothing out of the ordinary. Just me and Max doing me and Max stuff. Like, normal stuff but boring.”

“Actually, I wouldn't call last Tues-”, Max began, but I cut her off by clamping my hand over her mouth.

“Yeah, actually I tried coffee.”, I added. “It's absolute liquid shit.”

Amanda threw back her head and laughed, clutching her stomach and slapping her knee. So my awkward love life gets more laughs than my fucked up Red War and Pantheon War jokes?

“Aw, I know what y'all's are like.”, Amanda said, waving it off. “Let me guess, something that deserves a spot in both the awkward folder and the shenanigans folder.”

Max pulled my hand from her mouth and confirmed that, being vague and using bare minimum detail. I respect her and she returns that respect.
“From how vague you're being it was extra... You two ish.”, Amanda inferenced. “But nothing beats when Miro paid him five thousand glimmer to kiss me full on the lips. No kidding. I was in on it, and it was worth it. Most hilariously pathetic peck on the planet. And totally worth five k glimmer.”

“Well, that's enough small talk.”, I said, rubbing my hands together. “Max, do you want to see what I got you?”

“That's why we came up here in the first place isn't it?”, Max replied.

“To your left.”, Amanda said casually, beginning to work on a particularly busted engine once more.

It was an old Arcadia class jumpship, but on drugs. I had the thing freshly painted a perfect crimson and pearl white, glossed, and given a juiced up warp drive capable of taking you to the Reef and back in five minutes if you really push it. Inside was more, so much more. The bay door opened and I led Max into the jumpship, gesturing for her to sit down on one of the two white rows of seats, more like couches than seats.

“Skylar... you know I hate it when you spend so much on me.”, she growled.

“But you love it?”, I asked hopefully.

“I do, a lot...”, she answered, feeling the fabric and seeming quite impressed with it. “But I don't like the fact-”

“Cut the horseshit.”, I commanded. “Everyone has stuff because everyone likes stuff. I gave you stuff. You now have more stuff. I have a noticeable dent in my account, but I can fill it in about a year.”

“You really didn't have to.”, Max said. “But thank you.”

“Don't thank me just yet.”, I said, slipping into the cockpit to grab the brand new robes I had gotten her, just the tip of a very substantial iceberg.
The robes came from the same set as the helmet she had bought me, and it was very ornate. Behind her back I had North do her measurements, as she had likely done mine, and had it tailored just for her. It would fit her like a second skin. The only problem was the length. We both stood about six foot three, an inch below Church, and I liked my robes to go down to my ankles. She might not, but she might. I couldn't decide so I flipped a coin on it and had to hope to god that we were just that little bit more similar. And Fireteam Zeus had gone to Mercury to forge some really sweet weapons, all looking very Vexlike. I got the scout rifle, Church got the seventh verse hand cannon, Bellona got the sixth verse SMG, Alex and Arya both made pulse rifles, and I had made a sword to give to Max at a later date. Today is a later date. The later date in fact. I emerged into the cargo area turned lobby and knelt to present her the blade atop the garment.

“This is perfect.”, she said, trying way too hard not to look to happy. “But I can't stress it enough that you shouldn't have.”

“Well I did, now please take them.”, I requested.

She took the blade and examined it, stowing it with a satisfied “hmph”. She set the robes down and looked around, confused a little as to what we were going to do next. I had one more surprise in the cockpit. Now to get her there.

“There's more by the way.”, I stated. “But I'll save it for later. Oh, and the cockpit is empty now. I hid the rest elsewhere. You could go an change there.”

“I'm just changing into a new coat.”, she said. “There's nothing explicit about that.”

“You know how finicky I can be about that kind of thing.”, I said.

“There's no nudity involved.”, she stated.

“Even the word makes me cringe a little.”, I informed her.

“Just a little less than a week ago you-”

“Ahtahtahtaha no, let's not talk about that while even remotely in public. And I was fully clothed.
And you were the reason it happened.”

“Whatever.”, she sighed, getting up to enter the cockpit, tucking the robes under her arm.

As she was about to enter the cockpit she did something most likely intended to aggravate me. She took off her coat and lifted the back of her shirt up, giving me a view of her bare lower back. I flinched, averting my gaze like that admittedly very nice looking body was Medusa's head. People would probably berate me for being wishy-washy and shit, but I'm not. I just don't like excessive displays of bare flesh. I hadn't seen her without a shirt even.

I heard a surprised gasp as she uncovered the last item in the ship. You see, when the Traveller awoke I got a palm sized chunk of it right in the face. That chunk was now on a platinum plated titanium chain about one foot and four inches in length. Yeah, like I said I had a noticeable dent in my account. Platinum isn't cheap. Max burst out of the cabin and wrapped her arms around me, not even taking the few seconds it took to put on her jacket again. I fell back onto the seats and hugged her back. I wasn't expecting this good of a reception.

“I swear if you comment on the price.”, I muttered under my breath.

“This is priceless.”, Max stated. “Positively beyond any quantifiable value. A piece of the Traveller itself! By the Light, I never tell you I love you enough do I?”

She suddenly got up off me and checked the time, suddenly conscious of it. She swore in Polish. Oh, so I can't do it, but you can. You put the hypocrite into hypocrite, and that's the entire damn word.

“Sky, we need to get to Oscar's Pub by seven to meet the rest of the Fireteam.”, she reminded me. “Time really slipped away, it's six thirty. We need to get going.”

“Well, you got me a new Sparrow right? Let's use it.”, I suggested.

“Sure, but we're working a tight schedule here.”

“Who's we?”, Jester asked mockingly. “I, am always on time. Shame you aren't as punctual.”
Man, the new pub was nothing like the last. It seems that the place had grown up rather than burnt down. Instead of a wannabe 1920’s diner it had become a full on proper pub, complete with seemingly idiotic amounts of wood that reeked of fire retardant. Raven was standing at the closed glass doors, swinging the keys on their lanyard and occasionally hitting himself with them accidentally. He wore really nothing special for the occasion, just his grey and white dress coat and black pants. That's about as fancy as it got. I myself wore something that both Church and I agreed looked amazing. A knee length red skirt with a zipper on the back, a pair of black half inch heels (I'm not that stupid, I know what they do to your feet), and some black wool leggings to keep my legs warm. Alex and Arya were here, wearing opposite matching outfits. Alex wore a black tuxedo with Void inspired designs in white and a pair of matching black pants and shoes. Arya wore the same thing, but her tuxedo, pants, and shoes were white with Arc inspired designs. Although Alex was doing something really odd. He was scooting around on one of those segways without handles, blaring shitty rap ‘music’ while chuffing away at a vape pen. I think it was satire, but it was annoying and badly timed. Sure, he was leagues more responsible that Skylar, and he was a professional detective and a Strike Team member, but you could see where he took after his father some days. Church just wore his dress uniform, but navy blue. That's the only difference. He really needed to ease off the whole soldier act when he left the apartment. Miro was no longer a member of Zeus, fully dedicated to his vigilante work. Taking his place was Sisu-3, a steady handed sniper that I trusted to have my back when I needed it. He wasn't as good a shit as my man, but he would come in handy sometime.

Church finished a conversation with Arya and returned to my side. I was getting a little cold, and he noticed this immediately, removing his uniform cloak to drape it over my shoulders and he wrapped his arms around me, trying his damnedest to warm me up. That's one of the reasons why I loved him enough to be getting Entwined with him. He noticed stuff like this. He was also quite the poet. He was currently composing a piece on the Red War and his personal experiences in the wars he fought in. But what really pulled me in is that he's simply a good man. Not in the done to death sense, in the actual proper sense. He is just good. He's a proper Christian, and I didn't know you could be religious and a good person before I met him. Then he proved me wrong. He was nurturing, morally sound, open to anyone who wished to talk, and a very good listener among so much more. I could tell him I had a rock in my shoe all day in full detail for each and every second, and he could repeat it exactly and add to it.

Raven looked at his watch and scanned the crowd. He sighed disappointedly and made as if to start
talking when the Sparrow rounded the corner, coming to a halt about ten feet from me and Church. Skylar took his damn time, but I didn't care. He's here and he's somewhat good company. He dismounted and so did Max. The Sparrow disappeared and they waited side by side for Raven to finally open the doors. The doors opened, and those invited entered the pub. Yep. It literally reeked of fire retardant. I wasn't kidding. The smell was on the air and it wasn't leaving. Me, Church, Skylar, and Max all sat down at a table by the window, and I could at least say these were the same coordinates as my first date with Church, if not the same table. Raven sat down with us, and I could see the new hired service already hard at work.

“I like what you did with the place.”, I said. “But the fire retardant is a bit much. Other than that, I'm glad to see you're finally feeling better.”

“I'm not feeling better and I'm going to get revenge.”, Raven growled. “Okay, maybe that's not the healthiest way to go about it, but… Pah, who am I to talk about health. I quit drinking by the way.”

“That only took you seventy years.”, Skylar said.

“I know right?”, Raven responded, equally sarcastic. “Record fucking time. Where's the double A couple at?”

“Over there.”, Church answered, pointing directly at Alex and Arya.

“Good, they can keep out if this until I go.”, Raven said. “Look, I was going to get you all something more meaningful but I had to pay a lot, even though I'm insured, to restore this place so… Year of free stuff here, how's that?”

“Why? Why must you force us to take your free food?”, I asked.

“Because I can.”, Raven replied. “I'm no Oscar, but I can make some pretty damn good pancakes. And that's all I know. So I'll be making those, and the busboys and chefs will get the rest. I've even got a smoking hot barista to do my bar job for me.”

“Okay Raven.”, Skylar said. “Come back when you're done though, we haven't talked in days.”

“Will do.”, Raven promised.
He got up from the table and swaggered to the kitchen, exchanging greetings and quick banter with old friends like Suarez. He disappeared behind the counter and the second he did the chatter began.

“Church, will you be having anything to drink?”, I inquired.

“I'm a man of God.”, he said. “I don't drink alcohol.”

“It's not against the Bible to get a little drunk or anything.”, I stated.

“Yeah, but it's against my health and wellbeing to get a hangover.”, he replied. “And I don't want that to happen right before our Entwinement, or marriage, whatever it's going to be.”

“Either way it's basically a funeral with cake.”, Skylar said.

“Nobody dies, so how's it a funeral?”, Church asked.

“It's not.”, Skylar said. “I'm just quoting shitty television.”

“Well, with all the subtle jokes and references out of the way, let's actually start talking.”, I suggested. “How's it been going between you two?”

“Pretty good.”, Max answered. “We've built a pretty nice relationship if you ask me. We like talking about the lore and we've got a decent idea as to where Saint-14 might be.”

“Aside from the nerdy stuff.”, I prompted, hoping for a good laugh.

“Well, you know what Alex and Arya said about three weeks ago?”, Skylar began. “It took us a while to get around to it, but they were sort of right.”

“Oh Lord.”, Church chuckled. “I can only imagine what you two did.”
“Nothing too crazy.”, Skylar said. “It's nothing we plan on really focusing on, it's more like a sideshow. Although it's a slightly entertaining sideshow.”

“Agreed.”, Max said.

Church still absolutely lost it. He began laughing heartily and his face went red. He pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed.

“It's nothing that laugh worthy.”, Max assured us. “Okay it was hella awkward and probably the furthest we'll be taking that. Maybe a little, but not full on weird shit.”

“So anyway, awkward relationships aside, how was Christmas morning?” I inquired.

“He spent way too much on me.”, Max said.

“Hypocrite.”, Skylar mumbled.

“If you think your partner went overboard, wait until you hear what Church got me.” I said. “Do you want to tell them?”

“It wasn't that bad, I still have a lot of money to go around.”, Church assured me. “Just a fresh wardrobe and a few other things.”

“By a few other things he means way too many other things.”, I stated.

“One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want. Whoever brings blessing will be enriched, and one who waters will himself be watered.”, Church quoted.

“You gave way too freely.”, I said. “And I'm kind of creeped out that you know exactly what I like, down to the last detail, without being told.”
“Who doesn't like ancient books on war and military strategy?”, Church asked rhetorically.

“Well what did you get him?”, Max asked.

“For one, I got him some war poetry books because I know he likes that.”, I said. “To Hell and Back by Audie Murphy was another book I got him, a positively ancient Iraq war relic of an M16, now mounted on his wall, a few items from Xûr, and a few new sets of clothing. Unlike him I don't go overboard.”

“Women have no concept of hypocrisy.”, Church sighed disdainfully.

“My thoughts exactly.”, Skylar agreed.

“Well, we're being generous.”, Max said. “You two are just compensating.”

That brought a smile to my face and a chuckle or two around the table. It's hilarious to see what happens to a man when you offend his masculinity. Either they get all defensive or they

“I don't have anything to compensate for.”, Church stated. “With your love I am more than complete and fulfilled.”

“Love you too.”, I said, leaning over to kiss him on the forehead.

“Why can't we be normal people like those two?”, Max asked subconsciously.

“Because normal is boring.”, Skylar replied.

“I'm space wizard with a magic flaming pistol.”, Church said. “How is that normal?”

Before we could continue a waitress came to our table. She was about five foot six, blonde, and she certainly hadn't been picked for her resume.
“Hi I'm Penny and—”

“I'll have two number nines, a number nine large, a number six with extra dip, two number forty fives, one with cheese—”, Skylar began, stopping himself. “Actually I'll just have whatever my lady here is having.”

“Bacon and eggs.”, Max said.

“Nope, eggs are gay, I'll be having a plate of pancakes instead.”, Skylar said. “And not the ones that Raven seems to think he can cook.”

“I'll just have water, I already ate.”, Church told the waitress.

“I'll have two plates of waffles with a side of bacon.”, I said, mouthing, ‘He’s lying,’ to the waitress.

The woman took off to the kitchen and we resumed our conversation.

“Church, why aren't you eating?”, I asked with genuine concern.

“Same reason I can't sleep.”, he admitted. “I've seen things, and I'm thinking about what I've seen, and it really kills my appetite.”

“Has everything been okay with you two?”, Skylar asked, dropping the mask of levity to ask a serious question.

“He's been having night terrors and other post traumatic stress symptoms.”, I informed him.

“Nothing I can't power through though.”, Church assured everyone. “I'll be fine.”

“Church, as your friend, I must say that is utter bullshit.”, Skylar said. “I had a few things eating at me for a long time, worse than what you've seen. I've watched a friend fall in radiolarian fluid without his armor on. It's not a good way to die. I've seen things and had things done to me that I
can't even talk about. I hurt myself and those around me to try and cope, but that's not the way to do it. You're a truly outstanding man, and I would hate to see you lose yourself and your friends because of this.”

Church put his head in his hands and took a deep breath. I reached over and rubbed his back, wishing I had the answers to all the questions that were to come.

“I shouldn't be afraid to do my duty.”, Church said. “And I'm not, but I am afraid of what might happen to me and the people I love, to people in general, when I do. If I die, it's going to hurt all of you. If I go to do my job I'll have to witness the same horrors that keep me awake at night. I saw a Pantheon soldier cut the hands off of an innocent child when he did nothing wrong, the same week that Ash was butchered in front of us all. How do you keep going after that?”

“I can't answer that.”, I said. “I wish I could, but I don't know how I do it myself. I guess I just moved on, but sometimes it doesn't work.”

“I usually stick to the method of drowning the sorrow in joy.”, Max supplied. “I had terrible things done to me as a prisoner of war, and before that Pantheon was even a blip on the radar. But I simply did things I liked. I read some good books, classic Warlocks, I know, and I also have Skylar now, who I love for reasons I can't even list fully. And when tragedy occurs, humans tend to try and make light of it. A mere month or two after the planes struck your twin towers in the twenty first century, people were already making light of it. It's because laughter truly is the best medicine. Speaking of which, Sky could we tell him the thing?”

“As long as we keep our voices down, I'll live.”, he said. “Just… be aware that it was just an impulse. It's not really something I'm going to be constantly doing. There are other ways to achieve that emotional high, and the elevator wasn't exactly a good place to do it.”

Skylar and Max spun one hell of a story, complete with full goddamn thought processes and everything. It was hilarious, and he wrapped it up with the line,

“Yeah, so it wasn't exactly your regular Tuesday.”

Church smiled brightly, laughing a genuine laugh. But when it finished his face returned to that same false casual smile. The fact is, you can't heal a scar with a band aid, and that's what they had attempted to do. I swore to myself that I would make sure Church lived the happiest life, whether eternal or brief, that I could give him.
Gabriel

Patrolling the outskirts of the EDZ.

December 25th.

12:00 PM

Argh! Why did I always get the boring missions? I shouldn't even be here, I should be with Eric and Sylvia-9 celebrating the most important day of the year to me. Christmas. I followed that faith now, and I put full trust in the Lord that protected the heroes on Fireteam Zeus, namely Church. That man was notoriously generous, and morally sound, a walking Bible full of all the wisdom God and His prophets had gifted us throughout the centuries. The Lord Himself had intervened during the Pantheon War to save me from a missile barrage, for he sent Church, the Holy Man himself, to shoot those missiles out of the air. His boldness saved me, and I didn't fully realize what I had seen until later consideration. When he cast his Golden Gun, his body was enveloped in pure white flame, the power of the Traveller and God flowing through him. People said I was misinterpreting it and that it was just luck, and that Church was pouring his rage into that Golden Gun, but I know a miracle when I see one. From that day forth I was a devout Christian, and I followed Church's example as best as I could.

I was contemplating the messages God had sent me recently atop a destroyed building when Anastasia, my beautiful blue Ghost, appeared in front of me.

“Yes child of the Light?”, I inquired softly.

“Cut the religious bullshit.”, Anastasia said. “Look, we have to go. Alois sent a message for you. The Axis is back, and so is Prior. They're killing previous Red Ribbons, and you're the next target. First the Musician, then the Soldier, they tried to get the Poet, and now he thinks they'll attack the Squire. That's you.”

“Thank you Ana, I shall prepare.”, I told my Ghost.

“No, we're leaving.”, she said. “You can't fight Prior, Y, or any of their agents and live. Remember what happened when Bannit tried to beat Sundowner? You can't win. We are running now.”

“I will not run merely because the lion roars loudly and has blood in its maw, for the roar is an attempt to frighten me, and the blood it drew is not my own.”, I said, quoting the book of the Holy
“Don't twist his words or treat them as those of a prophet.”, Anastasia warned. “You know why Osiris was misunderstood? Why he was exiled? Because people like you misinterpreted his message.”

I ignored those words, as they were those of one who had yet to be enlightened as I had. I donned my black and gold robes, clamped on my bond, and locked my Xenos Vale helmet into place before slipping off the edge of the building and landing with a roll. Anastasia kept nattering, and I tuned in again once it reached a very desperate tone.

“He's here!”, she gasped. “Gabriel, we have to go.”

“I'll hold my ground, thank you very much.”, I said.

“Please…”, my Ghost begged, sobbing as if I had died already. “I don't want to die, and I can't just leave without you.”

I reached to my hip and drew out my reddish brown titanium alloy broadsword. She had drawn the blood of a thousand Fallen, scattered the radiolarian of countless Vex, broken the helmets of armies worth of Cabal, and vanquished the most wicked of Hive. Now she would either win me one more fight, or serve me well one last time. I crossed myself and touched my helmet to my golden crucifix necklace, preparing spiritually for the fight to come. I sought out my foe, treading right into the most obvious and open spot, the fountain in the middle of the square. I held my blade straight up in both hands, waiting for my adversary to arrive. I heard footsteps and soon my foe came round the corner and into the square. Another Warlock, this one donning a horned pitch black helmet, black and glowing green robes, boots wrapped in tattered and flowing grey cloth, gauntlets with a similar aesthetic, and the whole evil asshole getup. He removed the helmet and let his long red hair fall down over his shoulders, proceeding to tie it into a ponytail. He sniffed the air and looked around.

“Huh?”, he uttered. “Suddenly it reeks of hypocrisy in here.”

“Face me you fiend!”, I shouted, planting my feet and preparing to do battle.

“Oh nevermind.”, the man sighed. “I thought it was the Catholic church, but obviously I am mistaken. You can tell him from the rest by the small child affixed to his dick.”
“I know not of whom you speak, merely that you are not one any longer in God's good graces.”

“Such a shame the magic man in the sky doesn't like me.”, he lamented, stroking his chin. “Maybe I haven't molested enough small children, maybe I haven't car bombed enough heretics, maybe I believe in the wrong one. Pah, gods are so finicky.”

“If you wish not to fight me, then flee like the coward you are!”, I bellowed.

“Wait, you're actually serious!?”, the man laughed, clutching his knees and keeling over with laughter. “Oh fuck, I thought you were joking. Where's the gun? Is it up your sleeve?”

“I would be giving myself an unfair advantage, for He directs my rounds into the hearts of sinners and steadies my hand when I fire upon the Darkness.”, I told him.

“Whatsoever you say Gabe.”, the man sighed. “You know, I was expecting more from Alois' Squire, but apparently he only recruits nutheads and screwballs and degenerates like your friends Alan and Raleigh. I came all this way myself for some entertainment, but instead I just get another senile old cunt with no fucking class.”

“Fucking cut to the chase then!”, I roared, furious with his insistence on stalling. “Unless you lack a blade.”

“I have three fucking guns, each one capable of punching through the armor of a fucking Sand Eater Phalanx’s shield.”, Prior said. “But when one has friends like mine…”

Prior outstretched an arm, and the air bent and warped around his hand. The distortions started to darken and take shape, forming the shape of a broadsword. He yanked the barely visible blade from the air and spun, ripping it into reality with the sound of something between screeching metal and a scream. It was translucent black and engulfed in green flames, much like a Hive Prince's blade.

“You’ll find yourself seldom without arms.”, he finished.

He ran forwards so fast I didn't even see his legs move. I instinctively raised my blade horizontally over my head, knowing the particular fighting style he would employ… hopefully. Our blades met with a sound like a full metal jacket round pounding a steel plate, and sparks flew from mine. He leaned on my blade, cutting a small divot in it, using it to get enough leverage to pull himself up onto
the blade and jump off. He stayed in the air a brief moment before zooming back down at me, spinning and slashing rapidly. I blocked every blow, but I could feel the strain it was putting on my blade. I should have brought a gun. He landed and I decided to push the attack, stabbing, then slashing right, left, uppercut, right, down, down, right, up, left, spinning with each swing. Sparks flew and fell like torrential rain, the world seeming to glow green and orange each time our blades collided. He went on the offensive, changing strategies and the shape of his sickly black blade, now a katana. He spun like a whirlwind, landing the occasional nick or scratch but not the killing blow he needed. Our blades locked giving me time to cast a healing rift, which made short work of my wounds. Prior leapt back, jabbing his blade into the ground when he landed. My rift glowed a sickly dark green and I felt it start to drain my Light rather than channel it. I surged forward, leaving that deathtrap and continually pushing him back with heavy blows. I saw an opening and took it, swinging with all my might at his leg. He dodged and I lost my balance, nearly falling face first to the ground and my death. I recovered fast, but before I could press the attack again he leapt many meters into the air, landing atop the fountain in the middle of the square. He flicked his wrist and rolled his shoulders, causing his blade to change shape into a five foot long claymore, and bony green flaming wings, almost like that of a Dawnblade, sprouted from his back.

“You know, when I had a man named Nicodemus inside me I learned a few tricks that would simply amaze you.”, he purred. “I’d accuse that thing of rape, but I daresay I liked it. Not like the last child your local pastor fucked.”

“Enough!”, I shouted, so loud that I coughed up a little spot of blood.

I leapt at him, using my glide ability to propel myself forward. I reached Prior, but he soared high into the air before I could land a hit. I took his place, precariously balanced on the fountain, and I was forced to stay there as he descended and hung a few feet above me, raining an impossibly rapid barrage of blows down upon me. I blocked each and every last slash and stab, but I could feel the blade in my hand beginning to break. This continued for a long time, but the bell tolled for me once and for all, and my blade broke into shards, some embedding themselves in my chest and one rupturing a lung. My Ghost had not forsaken me though, and when I fell to the ground she patched me up where I could be healed. The lung remained pierced, and I was having trouble breathing. I couldn't bring myself to rise. Prior descended and planted his blade in the ground at my feet and began to chuckle ceaselessly.

“You fought until your last dying breath, or so I would say if your lungs were still in working order.”, he said. “Now, do you want to know why I'm killing you off?”

I did, but I wanted to end the killing first. I gathered all of my remaining strength, life, breath, and Light, casting a Daybreak and springing to my feet. I raised my blade of Solar Light and swung, again and again, launching the infernal projectiles at this demon of a man. He simply shrugged off each attack, resting his hands on his blade and tapping his foot. My blade sputtered out, and I fell oh so slowly. I didn't even reach the ground though before the long blade was plunged through my chest. Unimaginable pain flooded through every nerve, even in places I didn't have nerves. The blade twisted, and I was hoisted up onto my feet. Prior was unharmed and grinning a toothy
madman's grin.

“I don't kill you because you're a threat.”, he told me.

He whipped the blade out of my chest in one quick sweep, taking many internal organs with it. I dropped to the ground and began bleeding out rapidly. I was kicked over so I was looking at the sky, at my destination once I ceased to draw breath. Prior leaned over me and finished his statement.

“It's because I can. It's because I want to. It's for sport. It's all a fucking game. Good night Gabriel. Enjoy your seventy two virgins.”

←———→

Arya

Alex's apartment.

Last City, Earth.

December 25th.

12:10 PM

I had no clue why we even bothered going. Sure, it was fun, but not all that enjoyable in comparison to the party I was going to host for our Fireteam. The company was good, Skylar had a lot more to say, albeit it was a good fifty percent mushy emotional stuff, Bellona let me in on her plan to propose to Church later today (and it was going to be an Entwinement), and Alex was pretty entertaining, doing his Sherlock Holmes thing on everyone at the bar. Just from a misplaced button or a scuff on the shoe, he could conclude what a person had done or been doing within a range of six hours. Now that we were home though, we could finally do something we hadn't done in weeks. Take a nap. Hunters have insomnia, but it could be treated. So that's what we did, resting every few days for an hour or two.

When we got in the door I immediately shut it, locked it, and tossed of most of my clothing on my way to the bedroom. Those suits were stuffy as all Hell indoors. But we had to be classy and we couldn't let the matching outfits meme die. I entered the bedroom and threw myself onto the queen sized bed, having Poseidon fetch my white linen nightclothes.

“I'm your Ghost, not your slave.”, he complained. “And the closet is literally five feet away.”
Alex entered the room, fully clothed because for some reason he could stand the heat, and did my Ghost's job for him. He opened the closet and pulled out two piles of clothes.

“Which ones?”, he asked.

“Fuck it, I'll go with black.”, I answered. “Why not?”

“Black fabric absorbs more light and retains heat better.”, Alex explained. “But I do think you’d look quite dashing in black.”

“Thanks, and you can stop staring.”, I joked, knowing he wasn't even paying attention to anything other than my face.

He smiled and tossed the clothes onto the bed. He took off his tuxedo jacket and left for the living room, a set of blue pyjamas of his own under his arm. I changed as fast as I could, because as usual he returned surprisingly swiftly, his clothes under his arm and the pyjamas in their place. Honestly, I hadn't the faintest clue how he was so quick. I pulled off the covers out of the way and invited him to join me, which of course he did. We pulled the covers over us and he grabbed me quickly, putting his face on my shoulder. I grabbed him back, doing the same. Poseidon and Matchstick did their thing, dosing us both with melatonin. Just enough for maybe a few hours of sleep. I felt myself slowly drifting off to sleep, calmed and comforted by Alex's warmth. Then came the knock on the door. As I fell into a pleasant slumber I remembered something that had happened on the fifth. Nah, he wouldn't be so unceremonious. Or would he…

( . ) ( . )

Prior

Yes those are boobs ↑

I'm not going to fucking tell you where I am you prick.

It's like, a super secret base that isn't at all on Mars.

Fine maybe it's on Mars.

But it's not in a semi spherical greenhouse.

Okay fine it is.

I took a deep breath, loving the smell of Martian air. So… rusty and fresh both at once. Third
greenhouse was pretty cool too. A semi spherical greenhouse with blooming and prosperous vegetation. There were palm trees, pine trees, oak trees, and pretty much every type of fucking tree. Bitches love trees. There was a circular clearing in the center, guarded by nobody except a good friend of mine and a bitch I liked for purely physical reasons. Y wore his metal ballistic mask and lenses, as usual since his face was the ugliest fucking thing you'd ever see, his red hooded cape, and white medium strength armor with black Axis logos on the shoulders. The bitch wore no armor, despite being a Titan, but I liked it better that way. She put the tit into Titan. And I was going to put the dick into Dickson. Instead she wore a black pilot's uniform and flight harness, boasting a General's eagle on each shoulder. Her blonde hair was done in French braids, killing the look, and her eyes were hidden behind a pair of shaded goggles. Seems only I had the guts to show my face.

Of course since the Axis had just split from the Concordat Y promoted himself to General of the Army again. Once he saw me he beckoned for me to enter the little circle jerk they were having, and I gladly joined.

“Yeeeeeess my good sir?”, I said with a polite bow. “Did you watch that video I sent you?”

“Prior I already know it's pornography, so no.”, Y groaned.

“I like how you actually think you have any control over this operation at all.”, I informed him. “It's like watching a five year old try to go and vote.”

“Without my manpower your little group of Satanists wouldn't have gotten this far.”, Y stated.

“Well you're clearly still deluded as ever.”, I noted. “So Dickson, how's life been to you?”

“What do you have behind your back?”, the pilot asked.

“Nothing.”, I said slyly. “Just a magic wand.”

“Enough jokes, what is it Prior?”, Dickson pressed.

“I'm not joking.”, I insisted, using my left hand to push my long hair behind my back.
When I got the signal I whipped the hair forward, revealing that somehow it had been tied into a ponytail. Ooh, spooky.

“I thought you worked alone.”, Y grunted, crossing his arms like a pouty little shithead.

“Until I found a big titty blonde gf, just like I always said I would. And I don't work alone, I have many, many men under my command.”

“Look, I don't care about whoever you have behind your back, let's talk business.”, Y requested.

The petite five foot ten Hunter emerged from behind me, putting on an offended frown. I loved it when she did that, which is to say exactly what I would do in her place. I also liked her armor, yellow like a taxi and she even had a checkered pattern on her cape. Her blonde hair was cut short and her green eyes had a particular sparkle to them.

“Why do is she on a leash?”, Y asked, sounding unnecessarily pissed.

“Because I can!”, Devi cheered.

“So, I know this is a little off topic, but exactly why is she here?”, Dickson inquired.

“Well, after I went for my walk I encountered this crazy fuck strangling someone.”, I explained. “So I helped them out. That man didn't stand a chance against the two of us. Then I got laid.”

“Fucking hell.”, Y groaned. “It seems you can't go thirty minutes without fucking or killing someone.”

“Actually it's been a whole forty minutes since the last time we did it!”, Devi corrected, quite enthusiastically.

“Indeed it has been.”, I confirmed. “Way too long. I get unbearably hard after killing someone.”

“Wait, you're telling me you killed three people today?”, Dickson deduced.
“Nope. Eight.”, I said. “And like I said, I am very hard and you aren’t helping. And why did you assume it was three. I only mentioned one.”

“When you go on a walk someone dies, then you admitted to killing someone, and it takes forty minutes to walk here so I'm assuming you killed someone along the way.”

“Wow, you're a genius!”, Devi exclaimed.

“Devi, I will beat you if you don't shut up.”, I said.

“That just makes me want to keep talking!”

“Exactly.”

“Prior!”, Y shouted. “Did you exterminate the Ribbon or not?”

“As usual.”, I confirmed.

“Good.”, Dickson said. “Now, how are we going to deal with Skylar Peace?”

“He's not a threat, really.”, I assured them. “I spent years conditioning him into a psychological wreck. One time I hired four people to just straight up butcher him until they got bored or killed by whoever decided to rescue him. And yes, I paid by the hour.”

“He hardly seems like a wreck.”, Y said. “I've had eyes on him, and he's gotten far better. He's got a woman now. He feels secure, safe, and loved as he put it. And he's a threat to our cause. If Alois reaches him then we're going to have a lot of trouble ahead of us.”

I laughed in pity and condescension. “Why don't we straight up just fucking kill her?”

Devi leapt up onto my shoulders and stood tall, pointing to the sky. “Master Prior makes an
She leapt back down and knelt at my side. You try way too hard my sweet, but I wouldn't have you any other way. Psychotic and obedient.

Dickson shook her head. “This Max must be a very formidable woman to earn the respect of one such as Skylar. I've seen that man in combat and he's not to be messed with, despite his lack of discipline.”

“I've killed things tougher than a simple Sunsinger.”, I stated. “She can't be that difficult.”

Y crossed his arms. “No, we aren't sending you out again. Take a break, for the good of our cause. Every time you ‘take a walk’, disproportionate amounts of people die.”

“Whatever.”, I huffed. “I've got a hot girl and a throbbing boner. I'll manage.”

“We'll need to know about your actions twenty four seven if you want our continued alliance.”, Dickson said.

I stroked my chin. “Well I was thinking something like-“

A window shattered and a knife flew through the trees and into Devi's back. She gasped and clutched at her chest. She started falling down and I had to release her lead to properly address this threat.

“Well I was thinking something less metaphorical and more my dick inside her, but sure.”

Devi kept writhing on the ground, struggling to dislodge the knife. Y flicked his wrists, a high caliber pistol and folding grip coming out of his sleeves. Dickson assembled a grease gun from parts strapped onto her uniform, sweeping the woods and firing off quick bursts whenever an attacker came near. They wore a familiar uniform. Vanguard shock troops. We must have alerted a patrol somehow. Or… or we had been followed. Or tracked. Oh goody! I undid my hair and let it fall down over my shoulders, pulled two custom made M1911 20 gauge pistols from my robes, yes they shoot buckshot, and got to work on the attackers. I leapt into the wooded area and was surrounded, which would have been fun if I remembered to turn on some music. A Hunter, two Warlocks, and five Titans had me surrounded, guns trained on my head.
I held up my forefinger, keeping hold of my silver pistol. “One second. Devi, do you have my cassette player?”

“I’m hurt!”, she replied. “But yes!”

“You know the song.”, I suggested.

The song ‘Ready to Die’ by Andrew WK began playing throughout the greenhouse. Oh yes.

“Drop your weapon!”, a particularly tall Titan with a shotgun commanded.

I grinned a toothy grin, raising my hands but keeping hold of the guns. “I'll go with… no.”

My arms straightened like an eagle spreading its wings, and I spun slowly as I squeezed the triggers. When my magazines ran dry nobody was left standing, except the Titan with the shotgun. I tossed a greenish ball of Void at him and went deeper into the woods, reloading my pistols and seeking out a more worthy foe. I made the call to switch to slugs and just when the magazine clicked into my second pistol my long time adversary dropped from the ceiling. A Titan in navy blue armor wearing a tuxedo jacket and crucifix necklace over his armor. He wore no helmet, and you could tell the fucker hadn't been showering lately by the greasy white hair. His skin was a bright blue, but I remembered him as having a deeper complexion than that. He rose to his feet and greeted me with a friendly wave.

I waved back. “Ah, Abernathy the Catholic, it's been three weeks but it feels like years.”

“Muh gud lad, I'll have ya know that I grew tiad offa banter long affore I got ere ye daft coont.”, Abernathy said.

“I almost didn't recognize you without the Guinness in you hand.”, I stated.

He pulled out a bottle of the stuff with a rag in it. He lit it with Solar Light and tossed it at my feet. I leapt away from the pool of flaming alcohol and fired all my bullets on the way down. Abernathy didn't even bother to dodge, regardless of the fact that he knew my bullets could actually kill him. He just took all eighteen rounds to the chest and fell, a shit eating grin on his face. I clenched a fist and
the ground feeding the flames grew frozen, denying the fire its fuel. I stalked over to the body of the once formidable fighter and crouched over him. He just kept smiling, even as he bled out.

He placed his hands on his chest and straightened his legs, almost as if preparing for the coffin.

“I jus came to tell ya that I forgive ya.”, he said.

I raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“I forgive ya.”, he repeated. “And so’ll God. You're forgiven and absolved of ya sins me lad, by me and God. Ya might not make anything of it now, but ya will. We all forgive ya. And everyun else’ll forgive ya. It's neva too late to stop being such a coont, and I hope ya do. I know ya will. Just don't hurt Daniel.”

“Don't you mean Danielle?”, I asked.

“Respect 'is pronouns you focker.”

“But... she's a chick. And you're a Catholic. I thought you hated trannies.”

“I don feel like bein' an arsehole afore I meet my maker. Thinkin’ what if God's a filthy Protestant? If he's not then he'll forgive me for this one sin. But please, don't hurt 'im. He's a good lad, and he's got nothin to do with this. Please don't hurt 'im.”

“I will.”, I laughed. “I'll fuck every hole she's got, then I'll shoot a new hole and fuck it, then I'll keep going until she's just a shapeless mass of blood, flesh, and semen.”

His last words were, “And I'll forgive ya.”

He shattered into glasslike shards and the flames disappeared. A projection. Damn that Catholic pig!
Whether or not he was a cocky little bugger, a chaotic leader who didn't take orders from even the
top, and technically a god according to Toland, Skylar had a few soft moments. Like when we got a
little physical. And when he asked me to do stuff like, oh I don't know, tie him up? Yeah. He
actually did, after about an hour of embarrassed stuttering and explanation, citing university studies
and whatnot. And I obliged his request. Seemed like a good time, and we were considering
exploring our physical romance more so why not? He thought it would be fun too, and so did I. So I
get the rope, I do what he asks, and we have no fucking clue what to do after that. He seemed to like
it at least a little, but we just hit a wall, ran out of ideas either of us would be comfortable with. So we
just decided to go with the flow, and by that I mean we watched the movie we had planned with him
like that. Afterwards I untied him and we asked each other things about it like what and why. He
theorized that it was just some semi instinctive impulse to experiment with that sort of thing, asexual
or not. I knew it to be something else. It was just something he liked, for whatever reason, and I liked
playing along with it. We also agreed that it would go no further than that, that that was just a little
weird and definitely the furthest we'd ever go with the physical side of our romance. And that we
might do it again. And we sat down on the couches and just kept talking.

His face flushed an embarrassed red once more. “I think I've always sort of been like this.”

“Why did you ask?”, I repeated.

“Why do you have twenty meters of rope?”, he countered.

“Because I used to work a fishing boat.”, I said sarcastically. “Same thing you said, but minus the
the, I think. I just didn't think I'd find the one.”

“So what exactly are we going to do the next time?”, Skylar asked. “I liked it this time just because
of… the fact of it, but is there anything else we should do?”
“Not so far as I know.,” I answered. “So we agree that this isn’t going to become a central… thing in our relationship right? Nothing we focus too much on or give undue attention. It’s fun, I admit, but not as fun as other stuff we’ve done. Such as—”

“Bring up the elevator Frenching, I dare you.”

Jester appeared to join the fun. “You know me and North got both sides on tape, and we’re going to keep them.”

North took his stance. “Again, who’s we? I deleted mine.”

“Aww, but yours had the audio!”, Jester whined. “Now I can’t hear the sighing and stuff, and that’s the best part!”

“Jester, delete the footage now.,” I commanded. “My fond memories will have to suffice. And unsend the message I know you just forwarded to everyone on Zeus.”

“Buzzkill.”, Jester mumbled, disappearing to avoid further confrontation.

We sat in silence for a while, heads full of thoughts but nothing worth saying. Damn, you could see how hard he was thinking, how much he wanted to keep talking with me. He couldn’t stop fidgeting, and his eyes were flitting about the room, widening a little when he gazed upon me. Again, how do we just casually do shit like that?

“You know, the human pupil widens up to fifty five percent more when one looks at something they love.,” he stated. “That must be why everything seems brighter when I look at you.”

I was speechless. Not once before had he said something so sweet. Sure he’d said he loved me in a thousand other ways, but this one took the cake and ran with it. Holy…

“Thank you.,” I said quietly. “That’s actually super sweet.”
He looked confused. “It was just a fun fact accompanied by a quick note based on the fact.”

I smiled and shook my head. “You don't even have to try.”

“I know. So when’s the party at again?”

“About seven PM.”, I said. “So how are we going to kill the time?”

Skylar shrugged. “I don't know.”

I decided to take care of that and I walked across to the couch to where he was lounging sideways, taking up two of the cushions. I climbed on and got on top of him, repeating the elevator incident but without the illegal deletion of security footage. He melted beneath me, just letting it happen and doing nothing but participating. I grabbed him by the waist and he did the same, but whereas I used my other arm to hold his head up to mine he just left his limp. I directed it onto my back and he left it there. At least we'd made some progress. After a few minutes of kissing like a baguette eating French I pulled away. Skylar went slack and closed his eyes, a satisfied smile on his face.

“That killed about all of two minutes. Although you're still a great kisser. This time it felt different, more like a calming warmth mixed with… fulfillment?”, he noted in a dreamy and soft voice. “What now?”

I got of the couch and found a blanket and a random book out if the many lying around. I returned and unfolded the couch into a bed. I laid down beside my companion and pulled the white and red blanket over us, reading from a book on the Liquidation of Eliksni Houses when the Legion entered the system. Skylar opened his left eye halfway bit to read along with me, and I noticed that he was actually squinting. Oh shit!

I slammed the book shut and threw the blanket off the couch, running off into the kitchen to look for one of the many gifts I had yet to give Skylar. After rummaging through a few drawers I found it, a box about six inches long and three wide. I ran back into the living room and saw that Skylar was already asleep in that short time. After a closer inspection of his breathing pattern I deduced that he was awake and had Jester play an airhorn sound to keep it that way. He rubbed his eyes and sat up.

“I'm trying to sleep you darn hecking beautiful woman.”, he groaned.
I set the wrapped box on the couch/bed by his head. “These are going to change the way you look at the entire world.”

He lazily grabbed the box and slowly tore the paper from it, rather unenthusiastic about it. Of course when he opened it though…

“You weren't joking.”, he gasped. “No fucking… How did you know?”

“You keep squinting at things I can see pretty clearly. I got Jester to do a scan of your eyes and had them made just for you.”, I explained. “Now try them on.”

He took the masterfully crafted rectangular lensed glasses from the box carefully and examined them. Yep, I know my stuff Sky. He seemed particularly impressed by the merge between the polished brass lense rims and the polished maple frame. He chuckled, appreciating the subtle jab.

“We Canadians do love our maple.”, he chuckled.

“Put them on Skylar, please.”

He did as I asked and was immediately blown away by the newfound clarity with which he could see. He smiled so brightly and wide that it warmed my heart, melted it even. And he looked really cute in glasses. He looked around the room, at everything, taking it in in its now crystal clear clarity, gazing lastly upon me. His pupils certainly widened, and I felt his eyes inspecting me in my entirety. Well, he didn't linger too long on certain places since he's Skylar for Pete's sake, but he seemed really impressed.

“You look more stunning than ever.”, he said. “And the fact that I get to see it from this distance makes it so much better.”

Just as that statement finished the large window on the far wall shattered, shards of glass whizzing past like snowflakes in a blizzard. A Titan in blue armor with orange flame designs followed the maelstrom of glass, as well as two men in black uniforms, ballistic masks, and bulletproof vests with auto rifles. Skylar got into his combat headspace and lazily got to his feet, using Kinetic Light to pull his coat from the coat rack and onto himself. I was too stunned to stop him as he walked slowly to confront the Titan and his goons. They stood about five meters from each other, and no guns were raised.
Skylar bowed in a respectful but sarcastic fashion and held out a hand. “Brigadier General Skylar Peace at your service.”

“Sundowner.”, the Titan grunted.

“Isn't that a type of boat?” Skylar asked.

The Titan roared with laughter. “No. I'm a man who can't be killed. And I'm not here for you, just the woman.”

“Well you're going to have to get through-”, he began, suddenly clutching at his throat and pretending to choke. “Cliché… Agh!” He relaxed and flipped Sundowner the bird. “Fuck off cunt, I'll kick your ass straight off your body.”

Sundowner cast a furiously bright Hammer of Sol, the clanging sound nearly deafening. “We shall see.”

---

Alex

Arya's apartment.

The Tower.

Last City, Earth.

1:00 PM

I awoke to the smell of tea. Good tea at that, the kind that I wished I could find myself. And Arya was still asleep in my arms, which meant someone else was here. I jolted upright, scanning the room. Yep. Right there at my desk, sipping away at a cup of tea, was a very well dressed man with black hair and a waxed moustache. He wore a Charlie Chaplin style top hat with a red ribbon on it, a tweed jacket, a white dress shirt and red tie, and a pair of black dress pants and shoes that gave him an air of snobbishness. He looked to me with a degree of annoyance.

He set down his tea and folded his hands on his lap. “I was hoping you would be the heaviest sleeper, but I guess now I'll have to make introductions. My name is Alois.”

Alois put a finger to his lips. “Quiet down. There's about five mercenaries at your door, three civilian and two Guardian. I would hate for them to think anyone's home and give them a reason to barge in and wreck the place.”

“Is that a threat?”, I asked furiously.

“No, it's a fact. I'll clean them up on my way out, but I'm going to stay for a little bit.”

Arya woke with a start and was ten times calmer about this than me. She waved at Alois and smiled.

“Heya mate.”, she said. “You here to explain shit now?”

“You know him?”, I asked, incredulous.

Arya nodded. “I already told you all. A man with the same name as Adolf Hitler's half brother invited me to join his secret organization.”

Alois pulled an envelope out of his coat and tossed it to me. “And now I'll offer you the same thing. The envelope is merely symbolic, unless you like inspirational cards. There's a ribbon inside.”

I shook my head. “No, you're going to have to explain everything before I drop you like that arms dealer last week. Bracus Zahn, was it?”

“I'm quite impressed.”, Alois said. “But I'm not afraid. I've heard worse threats and seen them followed through on.”

Arya smiled. “So are you going to explain, because I really would appreciate that.”
How was she okay with this? I'd have a serious chat with her later.

Alois looked at his watch. “I've got about ten minutes to explain and then you'll have to help me out with those mercenaries. Blood stains are hard to clean. Actually, I'll get on it now. Wilcard, explain the situation.”

A Ghost with a red and gold shell appeared, and Alois flicked a cane out of his sleeve. He got up and left, and his Ghost began talking.

“So here’s the deal. The Vanguard don’t know anything about the Axis or the Priory of Prior and Friends, I kid you not that’s what he called it. The Axis is a bunch of dicks who really like the idea of fascism. The only reason my Guardian founded it was because he thought the Consensus was an oligarchy that had to be dethroned. Where he disagreed with his peers is what to do afterwards. Alois proposed a direct democracy, whereas Y and his people decided more fascism was in order. So he left and decided to make a new organization, this one to stop the Axis and other threats like them, like the Priory of - look I'll just call it the PPAF. So anyway, we became a secret but successful force for good. We also had a few Standouts, Guardians like Skylar and Osiris with a great deal more power than most. Abernathy could create exact hard light, as in the technology not the gun, copies of himself, but only one at a time. Raven has his luck, which would explain why he's still alive. Miro Shen has been alive for three hundred years, and over that time he's become a master of the Void. In our time he could teleport across the globe and even straight onto the Moon, despite the Hive essence corrupting him. There's more, like Fitz and his mathematical genius, Blitz and his sheer strength, Ritz just because it rhymed and he was a good shot, I could keep going. But now most of them are dead. That's a problem because the Axis are back and the PPAF is a thing now. We're actually sca-”

Crack! Thump! Boom! Whack! Clang! Thump! Tok! Slam!

“And stay down!”, Alois yelled. “That wasn't an invitation to revive you idiots!”

Wilcard chuckled. “Anyway, were scared now. You know what the Pantheon did? The PPAF and Axis are capable of far worse. I don't know why a man who wants to end the Light and a man who just wants political change would work together, but that’s what's happening and we have only a single chance to stop them. If you're wondering about the PPAF, basically it's that Prior guy from Excalibur but now he's evil and he's got a cult. Any questions?”

Boom!

“That wasn't me!”, Alois called.
I knew that sound. When Rasputin tried to meddle with my genes and mind during the fabrication process, he gave me something that I actually appreciated. A keen ear for gunshots and explosions. I could identify a weapon by its sound and trace it to its source with ease. This was a breaching charge, one to three floors down, outside the Tower, definitely on a window, other side, probably couldn't hear it from the plaza. There was a loud clanging, a Hammer of Sol being cast, and a few muffled gunshots. Wait, nope. The neighbors played Rainbow Six Siege, an ancient shooter game, and tended to turn the volume up a little too high. That was probably it. Alois re-entered the room and sat at the desk.

“Noisy neighbors, that's all.”, I assured him. “And thanks for… Whatever you just did.”

Alois took a sip of his tea and appeared disgusted to learn that it had cooled down. He turned his attention back to us.

“While I'm sure Wilcard explained the Axis and Priory well, there's one more thing.”, Alois said. “If it's not too much of a hassle I'd like you to keep an eye on my son. Fertile Guardians are very rare, I think I'm probably one of the only eight in all of history, and when my wife Luciano, god rest her soul, died that made it seven. Anyway, my son Daniel lives across the hall, one room to the right – you'll see a ‘Do Not Disturb or You Will be Shot’ sign on his door – and I was hoping you could check in on her, sorry, him every few days. He'll be a target, definitely, just because of who he is. He's not a part of this, just a potential target.”

Without waiting for an answer he just straight up left, leaving the tea set on the desk for us to clean up. What the actual fuck? Well, a job is a job, and the detective business wasn't exactly booming, so I'd be up for this as long as it's a paid service. I told Arya this and she agreed. Now time to pretend this didn't happen and prepare for our guests. I wondered if it was a good idea to have wine around seeing as Raven would be coming.

<#>

Skylar

Max's apartment.

The Tower.

Last City, Earth.

1:55 PM
I was getting tired of this guy's shit. So I casually pushed him out of the window and shot the one of the mercenaries. The other one jumped out of the window, probably afraid of my inevitable vengeance. Max looked… surprised to say the least. Oh come on, a little gunfire got you rattled—wait that's seriously cold. Hold up. I took a few moments to get out of my combat headspace and calmed down a little. I ran to Max and wrapped my arms around her, my eyes growing moist. What are we going to do?

I took a shaky breath. “Max, I'm actually fucking scared now. What do we do?”

She squeezed me hard, and I began to shed some tears. It hurt me to know how scared she was. I would have pretended I wasn't afraid, but I had done the tough guy act way too long. Time to start being real.

“We should tell the Vanguard.”, Max suggested. “If everything is fine between you and them now, I'm sure they'll help.”

“I'll do that.”, I promised. “But can you promise me something?”

“What would that be?”

“No matter what happens, promise you'll be there for me to come back to.”

“I'll do one better and never leave your side.”

I was going to tell her that she would probably die if she did that, but I was just simply not there anymore. I was… elsewhere. A deep black space, pitch black sand beneath my feet and grey fog making it impossible to see more than five meters ahead of me. A Warlock wearing white robes with silver buttons, black pants, and brown gauntlets emerged from the mist. His eyes were a glowing neon green, and his long red hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Prior.

He spread his arms. “Long time no see brother.”

I clenched my fists and found that even here I could call the Light, judging by the Arc swirling in the air close to me. “You aren't my brother. Please fucking leave me the fuck alone. I don't want anything to do with you anymore, I just want to live my life, love and be loved, and serve the Light. I don't want to fight you anymore, I just want you to leave.”
Prior laughed mockingly, as if that were preposterous. “No no no dear brother mine, I think I'll have some fun first. I'll leave, I'll even have some Axis people cover up the drama old Sunny caused, but only if you'll humor this one request. A rap battle.”

“Fuck no.”, I spat.

“I can kill Max in the drop of a hat.”, he stated. “Now, I'll give you the first go.”

I took only five seconds to think and laid down the most forced rap I'd ever done, the only one really. “Fuck it. You're as basic as a game with space Marines, lightsabers and laser beams. You think you're new to the Darkness act, you're not, just ask Yor and his Shadows in black. You're an egomaniac, edgy, all black, I'd cut you slack but I'd rather give you flak. I hate you, I didn't do so much as irritate you, so fuck off, I may be a little permissive but I'll never fail to dominate you. No seriously though, fuck off. Anywho, who are you to say you get to ruin my day and play with my emotions, I'm gonna file a motion for your demotion to show my devotion to your death in an explosion. I'll bring an end to your abuse, like a bomb I'll defuse, speaking of which I'm burning a short fuse, and when it blows reviving you's gonna be no use. You want a hand clap, I'll give you a bitch slap, get—”

“...You're a shitty rapper for one, and for two, I just wanted to see if you could drop some bars.”, Prior interrupted. “This was a good laugh, but I've got to go tend to my throbbing erection before I go kill someone and make the problem worse. But sure, I'll leave and work my magic, but I'll be back in due time. Just stay out of the Axis business and we'll be good. That's the deal. You ignore us, we ignore you.”

And then I was back, but not exactly where I was before. Better. In Max's arms on the bottom bunk. I was wearing just my blue shirt, glasses, and grey pants. I felt like shit, and it gave me a theory about how I got sick a few weeks back. Fucking Prior. I felt a vague memory surface, black sand, grey mist, choking to death, the smell of sulfur, toxic air...

I looked up into Max's worried eyes. “How long was I out?”, I rasped.

Max pulled me in, bringing my head uncomfortably close to her upper chest but nothing too bad. I moved my head into her shoulder and hugged her back.

She began playing with my hair and answered me. “About a half hour. Your eyes got all greyish and misty and you fell to the ground. North says you were on the edge of death.”
My Ghost was flying around and fretfully checking my vitals. “Yes, and I was scared I'd lose you. Not as scared as Max, as much as I hate to admit it.”

At a slight physical cue Max let me go, and I curled up and shivered. I was oddly cold. Why had she removed my coat? Whatever. I considered disregarding Prior's warning, and simply wiping out these Axis, but I realized I wasn't actually capable of that kind of thing. The only reason we won the Red War is because the Cabal aren't able to revive, and Ghaul didn't have a good grip on the Light. From what I could gather the Axis were a large group, and definitely with a few very powerful members. As much as I hate bragging about it now, I am one of if not the most powerful Warlock in the City.

Emphasis on in the City. While I could have taken Anubis in a fight without that relic of his, I knew Prior could and would win if I fought him. Although beating Oryx did make me something close to a minor god, Prior was definitely god slaying material. I decided to take the deal I'd been given.

I rolled over and Max saw the fear I wasn't even trying to hide. She picked me back up and laid down, her warmth revitalizing my nerves and soul.

I looked into her eyes, wondering how she would feel. I'd been thoroughly beaten by Prior before, but she didn't even have a clue as to how powerful he was. She might want to take action. I wouldn't want her to get hurt, and her trying to fight Prior would be like a three legged mouse trying to fight a lion on steroids. To me the odds were something like bringing a dull knife to a gunfight. Whatever. I had to be honest.

I sighed remorsefully, already embarrassed that I was considering backing out of a fight with pure evil. “It's going to be okay Max. I made a deal with the devil.”

She looked surprised and worried. “What do you mean? You seem like the kind of guy who'd end up in heaven, if it were real, and-”

“Prior said he'll have some people fix this.” I said. “And he won't hurt us if we stay out of the Axis business. Please don't let them kill us, I don't want the last thing I see before I die be your violated and mutilated corpse, but it will be if you mess with Prior.”

“I'm not af-”

I broke out of her arms and stood tall, removing my glasses and setting them down on the
nightstand. I pointed at her and started speaking in a stern voice. I felt a pain in my head, and something felt just… wrong. I felt something like the creeping of roots within… the fabric of reality. Something was… Probably nothing.

“No. I am afraid. You should be, and you will be. Prior can kill me, and everyone who has heard of me and Church knows that anyone who can kill me should be feared. I'm not bragging, it's a fact. Did you know that I once watched that man rip someone's arm clean off for shits and giggles? That's when we thought he was a good guy. He kills brutally whenever possible, and women get it worse. Please, I don't want to see that, and if you die I'll kill myself before Prior does.”

Jester appeared with North in the air between us. “Stop!”, he shouted. “Just stop! I like you Sky, and Max does too, and fighting each other isn't healthy. Conclusion? You're jeopardizing a great and healthy relationship. Please, let us decide for you.”

North for once agreed with his less professional counterpart. “I agree with Joker-”

“Jester.”

“Jester,” he corrected. “We'll be calling this one. We say you grab the offer you've been given, and use it to stall. We will fight the Axis, but we'll need a bigger force than just one Fireteam. My Guardian is a Brigadier General. He can pull rank and get resources from the Vanguard. Church is a natural leader and a perfect soldier, which is why Fireteam Zeus has two leaders, and people will follow him. But for now we pretend to lay low. I've already repaired the windows, the neighbors are away, the rest of the building is mostly empty, and I'm betting that nobody cares anymore. Sundowner is a grease spot and the mercenaries are too, and I am willing to bet they've been cleaned up already.”

I sighed a sigh of relief. “I'm sorry for raising my voice at you Max. And sure North, I'll try your plan, but only if Prior's up to something particularly sinister.”

Max agreed too. “But I won't back down when things get rough. I don't care if you think I'll die, I know what's right and wrong, and I'll fight for what's right.”

“And I'll be there to stop you from dying just to fulfill a cliché,” I promised. “Anyway, the party is in a few hours, so maybe we should get prepared. Remember, I got Sisu-3, for the exchange, you got Church right? Because I'm not sure who got-”
“You're right,” she assured me. “And I'm not going to let go of this easily. Tim was a good window, and I will avenge him.”

“Stop trying to be funny,” I said. “You might just succeed.”

___†___

Church

Church's apartment.

Watching a film about the Iraq war with Bellona.

Last City, Earth.

5:00 PM

December 25

Man this was a good film! It totally encompassed the war as a whole, loss after loss, farce after farce, and the feeling of constant defeat and that unquantifiable feeling of ‘why?’ Bellona seemed awfully concerned lately with me, but really she shouldn't be. Every soldier gets shell shock every now and then, and odds are it was nothing worse than PTST, the tendency rather than the disorder. And I wasn't going to rest until the Axis was eliminated, whatever they really are. I'm American. War is sort of my birthright. Bellona was enjoying the movie just as much as I was, but with her mind she ended up spoiling the outcome of every battle a few minutes before they began. Still, it was a good movie and a great excuse to cuddle up with my future… whatever an Entwined female would be called. Wife probably, seeing as the second ceremony was more or less the exact same as a wedding, so it would make sense to use the same terms. Whatever, as long as it would mean we would be together forever, or however long we were meant to live.

I would say how long God meant for us to live, but I'd come to understand Him better now. It's not a Him, it's an it. And it doesn't have a plan. I used to think the Light was a metaphor for God, but now I know it to be merely His power flowing through His Chosen. And I was glad that nobody knew that yet, because I think I'm getting followers like Osiris did. And from what I'd heard, you do not want a cult like that following you. Although I don't believe the Testaments fully anymore, I do believe the Traveller talked to us long before it arrived here, tried to push us along by creating prophets to convey its words. Something most don't know about Jesus is that the New Testament was edited. Never once did he claim to be the son of God. The Church, the assholes in Rome, not me, added that bit in for propaganda and control purposes. Anyway, I don't want a cult, I just want to get this God thing figured out.

Back to real life, the movie was winding down, America was withdrawing from 'Nam, and Bellona was easing ever so slowly towards me. And no, by the way, we have not ‘done it’ yet. I'm saving myself for Entwinement/ marriage/ whatever she chose. But we were getting very close physically as
of late. I enjoyed how she did things, always the first to act. Almost always, sometimes I asked if I could make a move, to which she replied with yes and some reiteration of ‘you don't have to ask’. The reason I had her make all the advances was because I simply couldn't do anything to her without her permission, because I was afraid of making her uncomfortable. I would rather myself feel brief awkwardness at her advances than her feel any slight violation at mine. Still, she urged me to take initiative and make my own moves. Maybe I would someday, but not only three months in. We're immortal or something, we can afford to take our time.

Bellona was now lying on my lap, smiling widely and half asleep. I did something I thought she would probably like and decided to play with her hair a little. She closed her weary eyes and sighed happily, relaxing and starting to fall asleep. I too felt myself growing tired.

Still, I hadn't talked to Deacon all day. Usually I'd have extensive conversations with the little guy, unlike Bellona's Ghost who was no nonsense and straight to the point, who didn't do much talking. I held out my hand to get the guy to come out, and he appeared over my palm. His blue eye shone brightly in contrast with the darkened room, stinging my eyes a little.

“Heya buddy,” I mumbled.

Deacon's shell twisted and turned. “Church, I'd love to talk about Vietnam or Twilight Gap, but there's something else that's far more important. The Axis are being extremely active, and nobody even knows who or what they are yet. I think we should be very concerned.”

“Why's that?”

“Because whenever someone says something like that, it's only two lines of dialogue away from something happening. Sometimes three, and sometimes you get cut off mid sentence.”

I chuckled at that ridiculous statement. “Look, life isn't like TV. Nothing is going to happen, and I'm not going to get cut off-”

And then I got cut off mid sentence. Just like on TV. Damn it all, my Ghost's right again.

My vision went grey, then black, and then I was definitely not on my couch anymore. I was someplace that simply felt wrong down to its core. I was in a dark and level field, glistening black sand beneath my feet, grey mist swirling in the air and making it a pain to see anything in a five yard radius. I heard footsteps in the sand, someone laughing softly, and a sound like tapping on fabric. A
man emerged from the mist, wearing a red bathrobe and slippers. His long red hair was a mess, and there was a few stains on the robe. Around the crotch. And I still wore my freshly ironed desert camouflage khaki uniform. See, I have some class, even in some alternative reality or wherever I was.

I dared to speak. “Where exactly are we?”

The man found this quite humorous. “That's what you're going to ask me? Not who or what I am?”

I raised an eyebrow. “Uhhhh… No. No I'm not going to. I guess if it helps me get the answer I want then I'll ask, but what that stain?”

“I'll pretend you asked,” he muttered quickly. “My name is uh… R… R... Something with an R... Ra, Re, Ri, Ro, R- Roman!”

“Are you sure about that? You-”

“And it's a cum stain!”

That just made it harder to take this man seriously. “Okay… So I've got a wife to be sitting serenely on my lap and I was going to play with her hair and tell her I lover her before heading off to the Christmas party in about an hour, so we'll have to keep it brief.”

“Do you actually not fucking grasp what's going on?” Roman shouted. “Don't you know what I am?”

“Am I supposed to care?”

Roman growled but didn't drop his grin. “I'm a fuck mothering Dark Guardian, and I had to kill a lot of fucking people to get that title. The Traveller is annoyingly forgiving when he's asleep. And do you know what that sand is?”

“The souls of the damned? Something edgy like that?”
“Damn he's good,” Roman muttered. “No it's fucking ash! The ash of fucking idiots who thought
they could fucking escape or fight me! I made this place in the Deep so I could intimidate the shit out
of people and flex on those Hive gods. I'm-”

“Please wrap this up,” I begged. “I have a really good life and I don't want to waste a second of it
on people like you.”

Roman clawed his hands and shook them angrily. “Oh my fucking God, Y did not lie! You are one
special sonofabitch! Aren't you intimidated? Don't you want to hear my master plan?”

I hummed and chewed my lip, pretending to consider it. “No, I'd rather not.”

“Well first, I'll fucking warp the most powerful Warlock on your Fireteam, then we'll attack Titan
for the pun of it, then I'll join up with the Ax- wait you don't care?”

“Look, can I go now? Please?”

Roman snapped a finger and I disappeared from that place in a shower of glitter and the strum of a
harp. Drama queens. Can't live with them, can't go a day without one.

Bellona was still asleep, and that was probably a good thing. I'd just tuck this into the back of my
mind and forget about it. All I wanted to focus on was the Christmas party and how much fun it was
going to be, or when to do the Entwinement, or anything but Roman and whatever his deal is. But
something told me that no matter what day of the year it was, he would come back around to haunt
me. And I dreaded that day.
Chapter Summary

Church has hired a mercenary and his men to help combat the Axis. Said mercenary happens to be one of Max's exes. The Axis plan their assault on multiple colonies.

Chapter Notes

So this is the chapter that the D/S relationship starts to bloom in, per se. Just a heads up.

<#>

Skylar

Skylar and Max's new Apartment.

In bed with Max.

Last City, Earth.

Early January.

5:20 AM

What a night that was. Holy fucking guacamole in my holey. I should never have gone to that Dawning party. I tried wine, just a little bit, and it turns out I have no tolerance for alcohol. At fucking all. So you could imagine how that ended. Arc burns fucking everywhere. I don't remember anything aside from a game of Cards Against Humanity and another glass of wine, and a conversation about the pains of moving into my new place. The only benefit was that I was on the same floor as Church now, and maybe the extra square footage.

Then we got home, to our new and amazing apartment (killing gods and stopping the Vex from destroying the fucking whole of reality gave us a few special bonuses, like the mini library), I got sober-ish, and me and Max had some fun with about… Twenty eight meters of rope I'd say? Fuck yes. We actually did what you think we did. Unless it's sex. Then no, I'm happy to say we don't do that. Ever. At. All.

Anyway, turns out Max knew her stuff really well when it came to that particularly weird sort of thing. There's an entire art to it, and it's particularly beautiful if you have an eye for it. Something Asian… Sudoku, seppuku, shibari, I don't remember. The point is, it feels good and looks good too.
And we'd figured out a way to enhance it. Introducing physical contact! As long as one avoids certain areas, you know where, and applies a tender loving touch to others, it can be very enjoyable. I liked it more the third time (this time) around, and next time I'm betting I'll like it more. Max is an artist with her rope, as weird as it is, and I am glad to be her canvas.

I think such mundane stuff in the morning. I blinked my weary eyes open to quite the serene scene. I was in our bed, under nice and warm covers, in the arms of an angelic brunette. I loved waking up in the morning and watching the sun rise, which took a few hours to get to in the winter, so I'd get a nice view of the night sky while I waited. Our room wasn't that decorated because we didn't have the time to yet, but it still looked nice with the few paintings we had hanging, one of the Traveller and another of two hands holding each other for no apparent reason other than postmodernism is trending again.

I noticed that Max's legs weren't under the sheets, and I tried to get up to fix that. Her feet are naturally cold as it is, and I know because I have sleep with those ice cold legs. When I tried to rise I was greeted with a tightening around my chest and found I was unable to move my arms, legs, or torso. Right! Shit, she never untied me and well... No shit. Drunk Warlock with ADHD. Another drunk Warlock who's been awake since last Friday studying the Books of Sorrow for our essays on them. Go figure. And that's right, we write essays for fun. We're Warlocks after all, what are we going to do when we're not putting the other classes in their place in the Crucible?

Anyway, I was still bound. A surprise, and a slight inconvenience, but one I could tolerate if not enjoy. For the record by the way, I was fully clothed in blue linen pyjamas. I don't do nudity. Sadly, Max does things a little differently. Every time we go to bed she takes her top off, which sort of bugs me. Don't get me wrong, I appreciate the skin to skin contact sometimes, but I really wish she'd wear something other than just a sports bra and pyjama bottoms to bed.

And back to the fact that I'm bound thoroughly and artfully and possibly loving it. I would still have her untie me when she woke up, but for now I would just enjoy it. Once again, she knows her sudoku or whatever it's called. I had no clue I even liked this before, but I was beginning to wonder how I had lived without it. It's not the centerpiece of our relationship, but it's a part of it that I like a great deal. Second only to some activities based upon our more emotional and intellectual connection. Such as reading together (she says I'm too fast of a reader, I respond with quips by Sonic the hedgehog), annihilating the scoreboard in the Crucible together, and some other bonding activities that don't involve binding. Haha. No seriously though, we're not complete weirdos. This is what, the third time? Yeah. Not a huge focus in our relationship. It's just artistic, fun, and a great source of dopamine and serotonin. And you don't argue with dopamine and serotonin.

My arms were secured behind my back, horizontally one over the other. Upon my chest was a diamond pattern harness, which wove down the torso and joining with two other constructs on my legs, and that's where it ended. Upper thigh. It's actually quite light really, compared to the freaky shit most other people who like this do. I shuddered at the things that I sadly knew from my research that they did. Personally, I draw the line right after shibari. It's artful, it's fun, and there's not much like that dopamine rush it gives me. We'd only done this a few times, once again, because it's not the only
thing we do. I think I’ve gotten that point across well enough.

I used my legs to throw part of the blanket back over her feet, and I got a shock of cold when my leg brushed against hers. She should really consider taking some circulation meds, or having her Ghost do something about that. Then again, there’s- nope. I’ve weirded you out enough. You probably don’t care about a soft finger dragging across the exposed skin on my belly, or the unique emotions and sensations it gave me. Well fuck you. I’m Skylar motherfucking Peace. I get to do whatever the fuck I want. I killed Oryx and his fucking children. If you have a problem with what I do, I can easily step aside and let the next world ending prick steamroll the entire human race. I get to have fun with rope. I’ve more than earned it.

As this monologue was going in my head, I heard a knock at the door. Shit! Fuck multiple types of duck! I couldn’t answer it, and I didn’t want to even try like this. North was probably in sleep mode, and Jester’s an asshole so he’d probably worsen the problem.

I heard a jangling and a key entering the lock and turning, unlocking the old fashioned. There was a swiping sound and a beep as a valid keycard was entered and accepted. I’d swear in my head, but I had bigger priorities. I didn’t want room service, so I didn’t get any. That meant someone had been given the keys by someone who already owned them, or something far more sinister. Please don’t let it be something sinister.

The door swung open, and an unrecognized Arc signature entered the foyer. There was a rustling as a coat was removed and placed on the chair. Well, at least it was someone with some class. I hear footsteps enter the living room and stop, as did the Arc signature, confirming a definite stop.

“Mademoiselle Maxime,” a voice called, soft with a French accent. Slightly Quebecois. Still a complete stranger.

The man continued. “Maxime, are you home? You called me, sounded quite ivre, really. Or maybe it was the man you called mon compagnon. I never was too good with voices.” He sighed, almost nostalgically. “Ah ma dame, asleep at the best of times and awake at the worst.”

I called back. “Who the fuck are you and what are you doing in my home? Oh, and stay out of the bedroom! I’ll fucking shoot you!”

The man chuckled. “Ah, so you must be the new man she has paired with. I shall be there to assist you right away.”
“Please fucking don't!”

Too late. There was the clacking of high quality boots on hardwood as a six foot four man wearing a brown and silver set of Hunter armor combined with a rather cowboy like brown Western duster and boots entered the room. His hair was a bright rusty brown, pulled back into a long singular French braid, and his eyes were the green of faded dollar bills. His green vest was riddled with pockets, and his white dress shirt beneath had a ruffled collar and the top button undone. He saw me and Max in bed, noticed the rope on my upper torso, and grinned. Not condescendingly. Like he was impressed.

“Madame Maxime’s art has improved vastly since we last met,” he noted.

“Sorry, who the fuck are you?”

North appeared in the a little to the left of my shoulder. He looked to me and completely ignored the intruder. “My god Skylar, you're actually doing that rope stuff again. I found your essays on the Warsaw uprising far more interesting, and you didn't even use a fun font like Comic Sans. Times New Roman… tsk tsk tsk.”

“Well, I see Maxime has paired herself with the intrepid Skylar Peace.” The man bowed politely and gave me a casual salute with two fingers when he stood straight. “Jacques Jessie Ferro, at your service and on your payroll. You may call me Ferro sir.”

On my payroll? There must be a mistake. “What do you mean, on my payroll?”

“Well, not yours. Your Fireteam as a whole,” Ferro answered. “Me and mes mercenaires are now yours to command, if the price is right. I was going to put my men on a different assignment, but… an old friend called before my client could make the arrangements.”

“I'm surprised you didn't catch wind of it Guardian,” North stated. “He's going to help us combat the you know what. Starts with an ‘a’, once composed of Germany-”

“Deutschland,” I corrected.

“- Italy and Japan. Those guys. And they're going to be our bodyguards. Disappearances and killings as of late have most normal people on edge. Especially those who know anything about the
you know-"

I sighed. “They're the fucking Axis. Don’t feel afraid to say it aloud. They aren’t shit compared to me and who I’ve fought before. And I'm ninety percent sure we've already beaten space Nazis before.” I addressed Ferro. “Come on over and let me loose so I can fucking strangle you for just barging in on us.”

Ferro seemed offended. “Monsieur, I hardly barged in. Maxime gave me the keys. We go back a few years.”

“For one, untie me or you're fired,” I ordered. “For two, explain your history with my girlfriend.”

Ferro sighed. “It pains me to unravel such a masterpiece… but if I must, I shall.”

Ferro crossed the room in a few graceful strides, his duster flapping nigh weightlessly behind him. He delicately removed the sheets, flinching as Max stirred briefly, and sat me up, undoing the rope on my arms with delicacy and tact. The bindings were light, so no red marks remained on my arms. Max is undoubtedly at the top of her class in this particular art. Once he had freed my arms Ferro took a seat on the singular blue chair in the corner of the room. My reading chair. Asshole.

I sat up and stretched my arms, yawning, feeling that unique sensation only stretching one’s limbs after a spending whole night like I did can give. I debated whether to remove the rest and decided against it. It’s a waste of time and a distraction. Plus, that feeling it gave me (however small) made it ever so slightly easier to deal with this Axis business and the fact that a French mercenary was sitting in my fucking reading chair. Cools one’s nerves.

Ferro drew out a lighter and cigarette. “Mind if I have a smoke?”

“I'll splatter you all over my walls if you don't put that away right fucking now,” I threatened, remembering the hand cannon I had in the top drawer of the nightstand.

He put them back into his vest and drew out an obsidian black vape pen, intricately decorated with golden floral design, etched and painted onto its surface. If it weren't a vape pen, I'd call it badass. Unfortunately, it just made him look like a huge douche.

“No vaping either you baguette fucker,” I added.
“You are going to be a pain to work for,” Ferro mumbled, stowing his pen. “It won’t be as good without the smoke to add atmosphère, but I shall manage. It began as any good love story begins. In a barnhouse with thirty some men who have nothing to do but get high, read magazines, and jer—”

“I didn't need to know that,” I said, already dreading where this was going.

Ferro raised an eyebrow. “What is wrong with journaling sir?” It then hit him and he laughed briefly. “Non my good sir. My men save that for the barracks. I almost feel bad for the cleaning lady… Oh well, she signed up for it. Anyway, so we were bored out of our minds after completing an assignment in the Italian mountains, clearing out the last of the House of Angels – you probably wouldn’t have heard of them, they were wiped out – and I get a call from about four prospective employers. I am fou de joie! So much money! Such high stakes. I'll explain them to you. One thought we were contractors and needed his fence painted, so we sent the janitorial staff to do that. They promptly quit and now some fat man in the southern hemisphere has all my cleaning ladies working for a measly one extra credit per hour. Pah! Stupid Brazilian colony, never working with them again. Then one wanted us to kill some Guardians, so we killed him instead. Many times. The Vanguard sent some people to detain him and we were rewarded handsomely. Then… back to the ranch. Nearly died of boredom, Dominic got heat stroke, and some guy called asking us to clear out some Hive for him. I asked him if he was putain de fou, and when he answered yes I simply could not resist! That got us enough… bread do you call it? I'm trying to keep with the times, but sometimes street talk is just too… primitif for my liking. Nigga this, nigga that, Yeezy boost, ah! Crazy talk! Anyway, that had us swimming in glimmer, and then we get a few more calls. The men are tired, Torrence is already walking off to bed with Suzanna, probably to… to make the new cleaners hate us per se. Anyway, we had had enough for today, and we almost lost a man. I’m one of the only four Guardians on our team you know, now the only since the Red War killed them off. Odd thing is, all the regulars lived. Back on track, we are not going to fight, we say. We are done for the week. But a sweet little dame with legs to die for and a voice as entrancing as a siren comes wearing this séduisant burgundy skirt that barely covers anything decided to meet me in person. She offers a ridiculous amount for a ridiculous task. She wants to wage war on an entire Cabal division! The Sand Eaters! But the money! Ohoho, and the lady paying… But I do not fall for physical tricks like most. I see personality, not le genre of an individual. But… she still got me. We have a common interest or two, and I do admit, even in front of someone like you, she does get a certain muscle very excited. So, I take it. But it gets more risible. She doesn't want us to fight Cabal, she wants us to fight a band of Guardians! Religious fanatics, and of a religion we French do not like one bit. They called themselves, Dama Allah, or Le Sang de Dieu. The Blood of God. Radical. Islamic. Guardians. I kid you not. Well, not proper Muslims mind you, the explosif kind, not the kind that everyone has to cram into their narratives and countries to encourage diversity. We face a dilemma. Either we take them down and cause a huge media clusterfuck, am I saying that right, or we let these people continue to do what they were doing. I have been forbidden to disclose their crimes to—”

I pulled rank on him. “I'm a Brigadier General, I order you to tell me, or however I'm supposed to say that in fancy schmancy Vanguard talk.”

Ferro’s face lit up. “Ah, so you are interested? I shall explain. They were stationed in… a place dear
to my heart, outside the City walls. That's another reason I chose to fight them. A place near the 
boulangerie where Peu de lumière found me. Yes. It was a bakery. Laugh your arse off. Back to the
story. They were at the docks, had a working cargo ship, and they were loading it with an unknown
cargo. We go in, the jeune fille de guerre Maxime at our side, and silently pick them off. After a
while some guy comes onto the ship, waving a sword like a le fou. He challenges me to a duel,
tossed me a sword. We fucking splattered him. Then we repeated the process. After a while the
Vanguard send some officers to arrest the lot of them and we get a look inside a storage container.
People. They were shipping people. We were barred from even reading about the Blood from that
point forward. But we were rewarded with ludicrous amounts of glimmer, and we became respected
guns for hire, not mere mercenaries. That was the end of our fight with the Sang de Dieu, but the
beginning of something beautiful between me and that woman. Do you ever wonder how she got so
good at Shibari? Well, I showed her the basics. I didn't usually find a lady with a personality like
hers, and the body to go with it, but when I did we got insolite. It just so happened that she likes to
bind as I enjoyed being bound. But… well, we broke it up for the same reason you are together, and
the fact that we were both more or less dominante. When one gets in bed with a lady, one expects
to… get laid non? Well, she wasn't into that. Liked our intellectual relationship better than a sexual
one. So, that was the end of that, but we've been friends ever since.”

“And now you're in my house why exactly?” I asked.

“Like your Fantôme said. I am assigned to your Fireteam as both a mercenary and a bodyguard.”

I laughed at him mockingly. “You,” I pointed at him with my right hand, “are supposed to be
protecting,” I jabbed my right thumb at myself, “me? Fucking absurd. I can look after myself and our
entire Fireteam single-handed. You'll just get in the way.”

“With all do respect, fuck you,” Ferro countered. “I am a master with a hand cannon-”

“We've got Church for that, and he's got perfect aim,” I interrupted.

“And I am a skilled fighter with any other weapon or fighting style. You insult me.”

“Say whatever comforts you meat shield,” I chuckled. “You still aren't a fucking skid mark on the
trousers of someone half as great as I.”

“And out comes the ego,” Ferro sighed. “Look, I understand you may feel insulted, but I quite
frankly don't care. How about we go for a drink, get to meet each other over some cognac, talk about
each other-”
“Are you seducing me?”

“Non, I-”

“Because it sounds like you're fucking seducing me you pansexual baguette eating French fry.”

“I am not,” he insisted. “But I would love to go for a drink with you and the infamous Mr. Church.”

“How’s this, you last two weeks going up against the shit we seem to attract like a magnet, then we'll see about a drink. And why are you here?”

“Visiting a friend,” he answered. “But… I wouldn't dare wake her. Just tell her Jess checked in and requested a rendezvous. Fifty three. She'll know where to go.”

And with that he casually left. Here's the thing. I'd pretend to react, but look. I've seen weirder shit in the mirror. And even stranger yet down the barrel of a rifle. I was about to begin unraveling the masterpiece Max had wound around my torso and upper thighs, when everyone’s favorite pseudo Protestant called. Church (soon to be Church Cassavetes). North projected his image in my chair, holographic rather than still, letting me know that he had an embarrassing full view of me, which I knew it was too late to hide. He casually sipped his coffee, crossed his legs, and took a sip, setting it down on an unseen table. He nearly spot it out when he saw me. He swallowed quickly and winced.

“Skylar, that is not what I was expecting to see floating in my living room this morning,” he choked out, pounding his chest. “Seems you're a bit tied-”

“Finish the phrase and you'll be the lucky tenth person to say that to me and maybe the first not to get kneecapped by a fifty cal cannon,” I said cheerfully. “Please make that fucking joke. I like to play a game called reverse Russian roulette with anyone who says it. Five bullets and one empty chamber, and it's you who gets shot. I was undoing myself when you called.”

Church still looked surprised. “But you're… not the type. I can name a few hundred times where you've said something like ‘I don't take orders from anyone’ or ‘Do I look like I give a fuck about social constructs like “rank” “seniority” and “orders?”’ just to name a few.”
“Well I'm the type, now why are you calling?”

He blinked and did a double take. “Sorry I'm still not sure how-

“Think about sex for a good ten minutes. It's just as weird, far more primitive, much less artful, and you've done it at least once.”

“Actually-”

“Right, saving yourself for marriage,” I recalled.

“Actually it's going to be an Entwinement,” Church corrected.


He looked behind him and called back to Bellona. “Bey Bell, could you give us some privacy?”

“Fucking hell now she knows,” I sighed. “So why are you calling? Trying to convert me or something?”

“Actually, I'm getting Entwined in a few days,” he said. “Are you excited?”

“Almost as excited as when you told me you'd hired a French mercenary as a meat shield,” I said sarcastically.

Church shrugged. “Not my fault you got too drunk to remember. That's why I don't touch alcohol.”

“Speaking of alcohol, how's Raven? He's been awfully… not Raven lately. By that I mean he's currently sipping champagne and not cutting down the Fallen in a drunken stupor.”
“Actually, last I checked he was at the cemetery,” Church corrected. “He hasn't forgotten about
Oscar. Named the new pub after him if I recall. He's not too happy about it, beneath his smile and
slurring there's definitely some damage.”

“Yes about damage, how's the PTST? Got it sorted out, is it the full on disorder, need to take pills?”

“Nope,” Church said. “I channel it into poetry. And I'm proud to say I've conquered my shaky
hands finally.”

“I thought it was just you itching to retake the holy land,” I joked.

“I could lecture you all day about my spirituality and you'd never understand,” he lamented.

“Could you wrap this up?” I requested. “I'm not too happy that Bellona's seen me like this, and I'm
looking to minimize the damage.”

He was about to hang up when the half Polish brunette angel I loved to my last death and beyond
awoke. She stretched her limbs and sighed serenely. She smiled wearily but enthusiastically when
she saw me.

“Morning Sky,” she said. “How did you get out of that?”

“A French fry named Ferro fucking barged in and chatted it up with me. Said something about a
rendezvous at fifty three?”

“I should probably hang up now,” Church stated. “Have a nice day Max. I'll try to unsee this…”

I sighed a sigh of relief. Thank whatever god he believed in that he'd finally hung up. It was
unbearably embarrassing to just get straight up… exposed like that. Max got up onto her knees and
helped me with the knots, being intentionally slow about it.

“So, what are we going to do today?” I inquired.
“I dunno… We haven't read about the Napoleonic Wars yet,” she offered.

“I'm down for it if you are, but I'm actually just a little interested in this Ferro guy,” I said. “Can I come?”

“Of course mój anioł,” Max replied. “Whatever Ferro wants to say or do, he won't mind the extra company.” She finished unwinding the last coil of the masterpiece, and I almost missed it, like a beloved painting taken from a museum for maintenance. “There we go. What's the time?”

“Five forty,” North said.

“Up for an early morning jog?” I offered.

[Π]
Roman
Roman fuck mothering Roirp.
Not Prior Namör, I assure you.
Who's Prior Namör?
Pfft.
Oh wait, I'm supposed to explain my location and the time and whatnot.
Well fuck you.
I'm in a fucking meeting you cunt.
On motherfucking Titan.
On a fucking oil rig.
Because bitches love oil rigs.

The waves rolled. The ocean glistened and glittered. The sky rumbled indecisively, as if unsure whether or not to let loose a storm. The board had chosen quite a nice place to meet. Nothing said space Nazis and the Priory of Roman teaming up to rule the solar system like a fucking rusty oil rig and some fucking L-7 Guardians barely worthy of our attention.

We sat at a rectangular table. I sat all alone, except for my little pet, at one end, Lysander's pitch
black silhouette hologram on another, the Axis representatives to my left, and some boring sponsor guys (with about a hundred mercenaries each just to barely cut it for manpower) sat to my right.

The only Guardians here above the level of L-12, the average power level of Guardians (at least the ones from my generation) were me, a black hologram of the silhouette of Lysander, Cortez (my trusted assassin and an oddly swift Warlock), an Axis Titan in a red and black set of intimidating looking armor with a pair of large rifles on his back, and maybe Y. Everyone else around this table was negligible in terms of their power on the L-40 scale.

Especially Devi, a particularly weak specimen. I had lied about how we met to make her seem tougher and more bat shit insane than she actually is. She's only an L-4, pathetically weak. Which is why she was the perfect person to sit by my side and make me look like an absolute fucking baller. She's the cute little blonde Hunter with heterochromatic shifting colored eyes, currently blue and amber brown, standout yellow armor, and a very petite form that sat cross legged on a leash by my seat at this table. Also, she's got big tits, so that's another point in her favor. Weak, cute, obedient, psychotic, big boobs, and totally under my control.

Every few seconds she'd give me a look and I'd scratch her head, giving her the little bit of attention she was looking for. I'm an asshole, an evil fuck mothering asshole who knows it, a Dark Guardian, and the biggest dick swinger this side of town, but I'm not heartless. I liked the thing, but I wasn't going to get too attached. Weak things like her tended to get smeared all over the walls by something only marginally stronger.

The table was silent but restless. Lysander's hologram was the only one who was still. Cortez sat cross legged in the air, noisily sharpening a long katana. His torn grey robes flapped in the wind, as well as the rough grey fabric streamers that he had wrapped around everything from his toes to the middle of his nose, leaving only his eyes and mid length midnight black hair exposed. Y continued to cough three times into his fist every fifty six seconds, like clockwork. I wondered what the inside of his ballistic mask looked like, let alone the condition of his underclothes seeing as he never changed out of his edgy looking black and dark grey Hunter armor, with hints of red and a red cloak to make him look extra gay. Dickson shifted uncomfortably in her flight suit and her various harnesses and holsters. Here's some advice. Don't fucking carry an entire arsenal in pieces on your uniform. It looks gay, it's impractical, and you might end up with a magazine up your ass. Not that she had one in hers, I'm just being imaginative. There were a dozen other Guardians, all in suits and ties like absolute fucking stiffs, and they too were uncomfortable, fiddling with pens and handkerchiefs. Me? I have my Devi. She's distraction enough. Wait a sec, I'm supposed to do something.

I started the meeting. “Lysander, you're more handsome than we were led to believe. I'm really digging your neo-ghetto-rapper-black-guy getup. Very dark. But could I recommend less facial coverage?”

Devi snickered at my masterfully crafted smug remark. Nobody else was as enthusiastic. Stiffs. All
Lysander's hologram folded its hands. “Y, it is regrettable that you are no longer under my
command. But, I would like to extend my support to your cause. I see it to be a good investment,
despite your reckless and over ambitious tactics.”

Y nodded. “When we seize control, despite out past disagreements, you will have a spot at my side
as a trusted and beloved General.”

“As will you,” Lysander said. “That is, if you fail. And if you survive said failure I will welcome
you back into my ranks.”

“Thank you.”

“So let's talk business,” I proposed. “Deevs, show these old windbags our new logo.”

My kitten (not that I'm attached to her) sprung to her feet and saluted me. “Yes Master Prior- I mean
Roman sir!”

She had her neon yellow Ghost project the new Axis and Priory logos. The new Axis logo was a
red fist gripping a chain Inside a triangle with their motto 'Unquestioned and Supreme’ around it,
whereas mine had a little more pizzazz.

One of the L-6 fools dares to speak. The dull looking blonde Titan only recognizable as such by his
stupidity. “Y, I appreciate your logo but Roman… I find the inclusion of human testicles quite vulgar
in your coat of a-”

“Shut the fuggup.” I commanded, swiftly drawing my new sleek black extended slide M1911 with
a wooden grip, a beautiful gun, and fucking splattering him with a .45 supersonic round to the chest.

Devi had the sense to plug her ears, and sit back down like a good girl, but nobody else did. Y
wasn't affected because he's too edgy, but Dickson looked ready to leave and the five remaining five
windbags, six once windbag four rezzed, were a little more cautious.
I explained my logo. “That is not a ballsack, that's the chin of an iconic cartoon character, Peter Griffin, depicted on my logo smiling serenely. And if you can't read Latin, it says, ‘Your mom gay, laugh out loud,’ or your mom gay lol.”

“Why do you cooperate with such an individual?” a windbag asked.

I fucking blew their entire row away, blowing their heads clean off and swapping out to a mag of explosive rounds for next time.

“His men are effective in combat, only one failure, but only because it was planned because he had a falling out with the operator assigned to it, and he brings a certain chaos factor to the battlefield. And… Pr- Roman. I permit you to release a single percent to demonstrate.”

I snapped my fingers. “Gladly.”

The entire fucking moon went dark. Or so it seemed. Only this particular patch. But hey, I only was allowed to use one percent so… give me a break. There's a lot one percent can do, but I didn't want to scare off our sponsors. I snapped my fingers again and light returned to the moon. Devi had gotten spooked and had moved closer to me, but didn't dare sit on my lap. Good. I am superior to that thing in every way, and its place is below me. Unless… maybe I'm being cruel. Nah, I'm Roman fucking Roirp. I'm perfect in every way.

The windbags seemed impressed.

“Give me a little itty bitty forty percent more juice and I can fucking rip a hole in space time,” I offered. “Can I please rip a hole in space time?”

“No,” Y said. “Last time you did that I lost half of my entire army, and sixty of them didn't resurrect. Not. Again.”

I put up my hands and shrugged innocently. “It's not my fault that a few Taken Ogres happened to come out and slaughter every single living being in a five mile radius.”

“See,” Dickson said. “Chaos factor. You can't beat him because you can't predict him. It's a miracle we managed to get him to restrain himself.”
“And I'm happy to announce that these lovely Nazi scumbags let me join their dinner club,” I added. “The Priory is now a division of the Axis.”

“This is a lot of change in such little time,” Lysander noted. “What are you planning Y?”

“Perceptive as ever,” Y said. “There’s three juicy looking human colonies on Earth. The one in rural Russia, the one in Berlin, and their ally, the biggest one we’ve seen in a long time. It spreads across much of England, almost as much total land as the Last City, and a functional infantry, navy, and air force. That one is at risk. If they contact the City, we lose a great potential foothold in the battles to come. But if we grab it and put a steel chain around its neck now, we might have gained enough strength to take the City by force. Remember the Pantheon? We can do that successfully with the men and firepower we could gain, not just sit around for a month and get booted by our own men and less than a tenth of the Guardian population. We take England, we win. End of story. We take out Russia and Berlin, they've got no more allies to bail them out.”

I added my piece. “Of course, Zavala is definitely going to send a certain Fireteam named after a storm god after us, because that’s become their fallback now. Seriously, even while he was struggling with post traumatic stress, they sent Church to assassinate a potential rising Cabal leader the other day. And Skylar got deployed to Io just yesterday to clear out some weak ass Vex, although he’s Skylar so… You should have seen the party he went to. Even though security cameras, you could feel it on the air. Shit got wild. Maybe you should let me go to one.”

“So what's your plan to take England?” Lysander asked. “And how many men do you need?”

)§(
Ferro
Meeting Place 53.
An inconspicuous indoor café west of the Tower.
Last City, Earth.
6:45 AM

Nice café this was. Pine and walnut tables and countertops, polished brass where there was usually cheap aluminum, shining clear glass inside and out, and nice seats open absolutely anywhere and everywhere. I had selected one near the window, because that is where I felt the most comfortable. I never knew why. I sniper could kill me if he so chose, I could be easily spied on, and so on and so
forth. But still, comfortable. Anyway, excellent café. But there was one problem.

Never order a French latté anywhere west of the Tower. It tasted like overly sweet garbage, a rather inadequate and weak taste covered up by layers and layers of cream. Disgusting! One sip of that des ordures and I was done. And then a waitress had the nerve to ask me how I was liking it. Oh I gave her a piece of my mind that she would be too uncultured to understand.

I made a false grin and answered with over exaggerated enthusiasm. “It is absolute putain de merde!”

She walked away with a ridiculous smile on her face, as if she were proud of this filth. She clearly misunderstood me. ‘Fucking shit’ isn't a compliment in French, English, or Common (basically English but less deteriorated and more solid). I take it back though. What I meant was that it was la pire poubelle que j'ai jamais été présenté avec. I'll leave that untranslated. I would have gone insane if the Homme saint hadn't called. It was a short lived conversation, but a fun one. We plotted the death of Tess Everis, compared careers (his won in officially documented success but mine would win if you counted the stuff that wasn't strictly legal), talked about women, and of course he had to try and turn me into a pseudo Protestant. That's when the call ended. Islam, Judaism, Christianity, fuck them all. Primarily one of them, but the other two are bad for other reasons. Reasons that don't involve as much abuse, rape, and bloodshed. Rape. Somehow it still made one think of Sweden. Ah Sweden. Or as I remembered it, the Islamic State.

I almost laughed at my own joke, but I managed to keep my composure. And look who just entered the café. Sisu-3. One of my clients and a promising Guardian indeed. He wore his white bear skin greatcoat and some bare looking moccasins and bleached hide and fur clothing. Despite the café’s rules on firearms, he wore his notched Mosin Nagant rifle over one shoulder. I noticed that his eyelights were still colorless, just a dull greyish glow. Despite our obvious connection, he ignored me, taking his own table and cracking open a book. Whatever had brought him here I could never guess in a million years.

Then more people arrived. A few men in grey suits looking particularly rattled but also satisfied, and… Would you look at that. Le hussard ailé and le nuage d'orage désagréable. Maxime looked like she'd done a run, as she was simultaneously exhausted and satisfied. Her bronze hair was soft and curly as ever. She wore a dark red coat that reminded me of the one Benedict Cumberbatch as Sherlock wore, except it had swan feathers embroidered on the back. If I recalled the conversation I overheard that was a Christmas gift from Raven. It looked well done, truly, but it certainly wasn't homemade. Drunkards like Raven seldom have such talent with a thread and needle. Beneath the Winged Hussar themed coat she wore an entrancing outfit. Her black winter boots were of fine leather, something I knew on sight, and trimmed with white fur… Fox? Or maybe something bigger. Working our way up she wore burgundy leggings that accentuated one of her best features, her legs, quite well. They were both slender and muscle bound at once, wiry I believe the term is. And that little matching colored skirt that barely went a quarter to a third of the way to her knees, the brown belt hugging her fit and slender waist, everything around that particular area... My mouth nearly watered at it. Unlike some sexually uptight Warlocks, I admit my desires. Sure she doesn't have a sex
drive and neither does he, but still, if she did it would be me holding the door for her, not some goofy Warlock who happened to kill a few “gods”. Right, the outfit. The shirt and undercoat were nice too. A nice black buckskin coat and a white T-shirt with a faded black Sunsinger insignia on it. The coat had a similar symbol stitched into it in white.

The wild haired buffoon wore something that shouted ‘*J'ai un énorme ego*!’ from the highest mountain. His darker than blood red leather trench coat bore his polished silver General's stars upon the shoulders. His black winter overalls with silver buttons clashed with the look he might have pulled off, making look more *mignonne* than *dur à cuire*. The blue shirt further clashed with the coat, and the black leather lace up military boots just ruined everything. If you disagree, it's more likely that you're wrong than that I resented him for any reason. I don't resent a paying client, especially if they're a war hero from before Church even existed. The “French” latté just had me in a bad mood.

The couple entered the café, after much argument about the ladies first rule, and took their seats across from me, Skylar on the left and Max on the right (my left). Immediately I got right down to the point.

“One of my scouts on Titan saw an Axis meeting unfold in its entirety,” I said. “No big deal, just that he has their entire meeting on tape and they just so happened to be discussing a huge attack planned for late January to early February.”

Skylar grimaced and snapped me a pair of finger guns. “That's a pretty big dealio my dude.”

“Now how are you thinking about that drink?” I joked.

“Yes,” he replied. “About how it's never going to happen.”

“We shall see.”

Max coughed. “Anything else? Any details you want to give us?”

“*Non*, this goes straight to the Vanguard, then to you,” I answered. “Although I might be willing to bend the rules a little.”

Skylar stroked his chin. “What else have your scouts seen?” he asked with great interest.
I gladly answered, still hoping to win his approval. “Well, there's a colony in New York and apparently… what are they called? Hot dogs. Those still exist, as do taxis. Some places never change. In Greece there's a man claiming to be a long dead Guardian from a secret Fireteam. In the Vatican city and the surrounding area there's some Catholics obsessing over seven nails made of some pieces of the Traveller, three in particular. Then there's the League.”

“I was hoping you'd mention us,” a man from the seat behind me said. “My name is Alois, and you may have some use to my cause.”

I chuckled heartily. “No thank you sir, I-

An Irish sounding man interrupted me. “Not you yah bloody coont! The focking Warlocks! Daft focker.”

“That's a can of nope I'd rather not open today,” Skylar replied.

The man tossed a pair of envelopes to the Warlocks. “Open them whenever you feel ready. You'll find we have a common interest or two. And more than a few common enemies. Enemies I can protect you and your friends from.”

This guy was hilarious. “Merci beaucoup, it is a kind offer, but I have them covered already.”

“A shame,” the man lamented. “I would have expected more self preservation from one such as yourself, but I guess courage has some merit. We may meet again. Mort, do your thing.”

There was a loud snap and I looked to the source of the sound. They were gone. Entirely. That must mean they had a seriously powerful Voidwalker among them. Like, Miro Shen powerful. A blink that could carry multiple non connected people… only a master of the Void could pull that off. The two Warlocks at my table seemed similarly impressed, and by similarly impressed I mean they brushed it off without a second thought.

“I've seen weirder,” Skylar said.

“I don't understand,” I stated. “Do you-”
Max tucked the envelope into her long coat. “I haven't the faintest clue. And quite frankly, I don't want to.”

Skylar nodded in agreement. “I've had my fill of space Nazis for one decade. Now space Communists though… there's potential there. Plus, I may or may not have been blackmailed by an egotistical drama queen named… nah, you don't need to know. The point is, we've done enough reading to know that neither of us wants to poke around in this Red Ribbon and League bullshit.”

This struck me as odd. “You're Skylar Peace. You don't run away from gods even, and you don't seem like the cautious type. If Church isn't involved either, well have two of the… what's the phrase? Highest caliber? We'll have two high caliber Guardians out of the fight. And I don't understand why. You're… you. Skylar and Church, the renowned savours of humanity in its darkest hour, again and again. Why would you back down now?”

Skylar sighed. “There's courage, then there's irrational recklessness. I'm done being reckless. I can die too. I almost did back in October, on Io. I should be dead. And that was by the hand of Anubis. He wasn't even an L-16. You know the scale right?”

I knew. Despite the fact that the L-40 scale was utter bull, it was the only general measure of this kind of thing. The L-40 scale went something like this. A normal human was an L-1. The more powerful the being, the higher of an L rating it got. Paracausal beings of any consequence to the grand scheme of the universe or anything that even remotely matters tended to score around L-10, the average for Guardians. So back to the scale. Humans are L-1. The Vex range from L-2 to L-15 in the case of Atheon and Panoptes. Cabal were human level beings, as were most Fallen, save for Captains, ranking L-3 to L-7, some Kells being L-11. The Hive break the scale. They range from L-2 to L-37 in the case of Oryx. Yeah. The Iron Lords were on average L-18 to L20. Saladin is about L-19, and Radegast was an L-22. This must be confusing. I'll elaborate on it later. The point is, Skylar was a very powerful Guardian, estimated to be L-26 on the scale at the peak of his power. Theoretically it could be about L-30. So anything that scared him was worth being cautious of. But one had to wonder what that might be.

“Look, it's nothing you need to get concerned about,” Skylar assured me. “It's perfectly fine, and this can be resolved without my involvement.”

“Absurdité ,” I insisted. “You're the best people for this kind of job.”

Skylar sighed. “This is why I don't like my job anymore. When people find someone or something like me, they keep assuming we're the solution to every problem. That's not true. I'm not the most powerful Warlock in the City, and I'm not the solution to every little problem. Church is about to get
Entwined with his sweetheart. That warrants a break, right? Requires it even. So, give him the break, I say. There's plenty of other capable Fireteams out there. The one with the speedy Awoken chick who killed the Fallen Exo thingy? They could handle this, and they would make good martyrs if they can't. I have worked for years without a break. I have been alive for what? Three, four years? Around four now. Look. Guess how much of a break I've gotten. This is the first significant one in a long time, and even then I'm being sent about on errands for the Vanguard constantly. I. Don't. Want. To. Work. Right. Now. I'm tired of it. Fun fact. Fireteam Excalibur existed. Me? Raven? The only two survivors. And look at us. One's an alcoholic, albeit he has improved, and I'm so mentally fucked even I have to admit it.”

Max ruffled his hair. “You're not mentally effed, you're just less than ordinary, more than ordinary rather. Normal is boring.”

Skylar growled. “Were any of you listening? I'm done for now. I'm on break. See you in February. For now, I'm not working. That's. That.”

“But monsieur , t-”

“But nothing,” he growled. “Another Fireteam can cover it. It's not too difficult, I've even written a book on this. I'm assuming you've read it. ‘How to be a Competent Guardian’ I believe I titled it.”

“With all due respect, the book wasn't very helpful,” I said. “On page fifty six, you tell us that to cleanse the world of the true evil we must initiate a strategy called The Final Solution and eradicate the Jews.”

Skylar snickered, stopping quickly when Max gave him a sour glare. “Look,” he said. “That was funny as shit, and I regret nothing. And the rest was solid advice. And look at yourself. I bet even you and your mercenaries could handle this.”

I snorted out a reverse sniff of a mocking laugh. “We are handling it, and it appears you're the only one who isn't.”

Max entered the fray. “Yeah, we agreed to gather some manpower and beat the tar out of them. Not to run and hide.”

“I'm not running,” Skylar snapped defensively. “I'm avoiding the fight entirely.”
“The Skylar I fell in love with wasn't a coward. The Skylar I fell in love with was Skylar Peace, the man who earned his surname by ending wars. The man who faced a god in single combat and won. The man who single-handedly ended the SIVA crisis. The man who conquered his past without even giving it a sidelong glance. The man who charged Ghaul head on and with Church at his side saved us all.”

“All I did was soften him up and throw a bit of Arc his way to keep him from killing my buddy. Church fired that last shot.”

A forest camouflage Ghost swooped in to correct him. “Aaaaaaaaaaaactualy-”

“The Traveller did,” Church said. “And Deac, stop trying to steal my thunder.”

Well. The *Homme Saint et La Déesse de la Guerre* showed up. Church wore a casual outfit. A pine green winter jacket trimmed with brown fur, a simple pair of beige khakis, and military boots that actually matched the pants. His silver crucifix was just recovering from the frosty conditions outside, and a bit of snow remained in his short black hair. His partner wore a similar coat to his, except it was blue instead of green, tight high waisted jeans, and a pair of brown leather winter boots. Simple and not as entirely intolerable as Skylar's outfit.

I moved along the seat so my back was to the window, leaving me right next to my old… partner. That was quite *gênant* to say the least. Our history was a good one, but an intimate one too. If felt wrong being so close to someone I'd done such things with, someone I'd come close to making love to more than once. It was nearly too much.

Church and Bellona took their seats, placing me between a war hero and a past lover. That was… comparable to a migraine. On one side, a person I felt honored to know and be so close to. On my other side, a lady I feared I might still feel something for.

Church pointed at Skylar sternly with his pointer finger. “Listen here you yellow bellied sack of-”

“Woah there!” I chuckled. “*Excusez-moi*, but that is not what I was expecting.”

“Well it's what you're getting,” Church said. He turned his attention back to Skylar. “Now listen. I didn't hire Ferro so he can watch us bickering and infighting. I hired him so we can save lives. So we can protect our freedom. So you can go on your stupid God damn break. Don't back down on me now or I'll kneecap you and haul you along with me.”
Skylar did that grimace and finger gun thing again. “I beg to differ my dude.”

I felt myself and my relevance in this conversation shrinking. I had arranged this meeting for some peaceful chatter, to sort things out with an old friend and try to make a new one. Now I was caught in the crossfire of a heated argument between two of the most well known Guardians of my time. This was not a good position to be in.

“Skylar, what my man's trying to say is that you're being a fucking pussy,” Bellona stated blandly.

Skylar began growling. The low growl of a wild animal that's been cornered. Of a lion ready to maul someone.

“What's got you so scared anyway?” Max inquired kindly. “What you know who doesn't know can't hurt him or us. I say we go for it while the going's still good.”

“The man I fought two wars alongside wouldn't-”

“Could you just shut the fuck up you fucking idiots!” Skylar shouted, drawing some unwanted attention to us. Still, it silenced everyone. Skylar explained exactly why he was afraid. “Look. I've already explained this to Max, but I don't think I did a good enough job then. Prior is. Alive. And he's going to kill anyone and everyone he pleases. So I recommend we don't give him any reason to so much as look at us. He's a fucking monster. He makes Dredgen Yor look like a schoolyard bully. He's not just your run of the mill Dark Guardian. He's worse. More cruel. More powerful. You know that L-40 scale? It's not that accurate, but if it were he would definitely rank L-34. He isn't just a Guardian anymore. He's a force of nature. You can't stop him. Church. He won't kill you. Not until he gets Bellona first. He'll fucking tear her to shreds and let her come back just so he can do it again and again, and he'll do more than mutilate her. I have Alex. Sure, we aren't as close as we should be, but he left the nest early seeing as he was fabricated as an adult. Still though, I would hate to see what Prior might do to him. And to Max. And even to me. To everyone I've ever loved, as a friend, brother, companion, or child. If that's not enough, that fucking… thing, and his cult, then I've got more to tell you. The Axis can get you from anywhere. And they will. They tried to, on Christmas fucking day, and that's when I made a deal with the devil. I can't touch this Axis shit because if I do I break the deal and he breaks me. So I can’t ‘man up and fight,’ I can’t ‘be the Skylar you fell in love with,’ because of that. Prior can't be stopped, and with him and people like him, neither can the Axis. It's done. I lost. You can still move around the few chess pieces you still can while you wait for him to come for you, but he wiped my board before the game even started. I'm done playing. I'm getting out of the casino while the getting's still good.”

Skylar's Ghost decided to intervene. “The thing is Sky, there's no way out of ‘the casino’ as you put
it. When I found you, I felt that you were someone special. Annoying, quirky, a bad comedian, and not exactly the type to shit his mouth when it's in his best interests to, but definitely something special. And I was right. You are special, as is Church. You two have the ability to change the world. But you know that it's not about fate or destiny. It's about choice. Now you have to make yours. Are you going to fulfill your purpose and fight the Darkness, or are you done being a Guardian.”

Skylar scoffed. “I'll never stop being a Guardian, but I know that there's some fights you just can't win.”

“Sloane thought we had already lost the war when she learned if that sun destroyer,” Bellona said. “But I'm pretty sure you and my man didn't quite believe her. You disproved your own point. There's no such thing as a fight you can't win. One on one with a god. He's keeping you from using your Light, it's just you, your wits, a few scraps of weak Light, and a gun. You won. I thought something like that was impossible. Granted you and five random guys beat Atheon on your own, before you were in Excalibur, but I wasn't even aware you existed then. The thing is, cliché and stupid as it may sound, we need you if we're going to win this.”

“You are so cringey!” Skylar fumed. “You're acting like this is some fucking fantasy novel with dragons and wizards, where a magical chosen one saves the world because he's simply fucking special. Fuck you. Fuck all of you. You don't understand it, one fucking bit. Some things can't be done.”

I chuckled. “Says the flying space wizard.”

Skylar seemed near the edge of tears. “You don't know him like I do. You haven't lived through what I have. You don't know and you never will if you're lucky.”

Church got all wise. “It is better to fight for one day as a lion than to live an eternity as a slave,” he said solemnly. “If I must die, then I will die with a weapon in hand fighting for what's right or the closest thing to it.”

“There's no afterlife,” Skylar said. “No God to impress. No creator to please. No Heaven to enter, no virgins, no Valhalla, no Hades, nothing. Just void. Just an ending with no epilogue. When we die, it's over. You can and will die if you get involved.”

“Keep repeating yourself,” Max sighed. “If it was wrong the first four hundred times you said it, why would it be right this time?”
“Maybe you should ask yourself the same thing,” he countered.

“We’re debating the fate of the world in a café,” I noted.

“Would you rather we do it somewhere more dramatic or scenic?” Skylar asked sarcastically.

“Actually, what is it about cafés that makes us so emotionally unstable?” Church inquired.

“I don’t know,” Max said. “Probably something really Alex Jones-y like intergalactic psychic Democrat mosquitoes.”

“In all seriousness though, there’s something wrong with either us or cafés,” Bellona stated.

“Probably the terrible drinks,” I proposed. I held up the trash latté. “They call this *merde liquide* a French latté.”

“You always hated it here,” Max said. “Why did you make it a meeting spot?”

Skylar still hadn't lightened up. “I'm still not fighting the Axis, and I'm still not happy with any of you imbeciles.”

“You'll come around,” Church said confidently. “According to cliché, I'm supposed to hate you now. So, in accordance with our traditions, I'll defy that cliché and be a realistic person. I still like you, you're still my best friend, and although I don't understand your decision, I respect it. Now, let us drink and be merry.”

This was becoming less and less about me. So I decided that I’d just leave.

“Max, I would prefer that I don't interrupt whatever this is. Next place is nineteen. We'll talk there. I must check in with Arya.”
Why did the past keep sucking me back into old feuds and older battles? Why must I be thrown back into a war I no longer wished to fight. I was done with the League. All I wanted was to be a regular Hunter, do regular Guardian stuff, and not be of any consequence anymore. I just wanted to live, not to do anything in particular. I'm done with the special Sammy bullshit. Nobody's special. And when they are, they live an absolute living Hell. So I'd rather not be special. I just wanted to fade into the background and be able to live my life. I might have left Zeus if it weren't for my friend being a leader. That's it.

Anyway, so here I am, wearing my usual outfit, dress coat, coat tails, black pants, blah blah blah. I'm cleaning the counters, waiting for the late breakfast wave to arrive, when some ninja looking son of a gun enters my pub. Fucking Hell. I honestly wished my employees arrived earlier, so then I wouldn't have to deal with people like this. I suppose this is where I describe him. Black hair, grey torn robes, and brighter grey bandages on every part of him, right up to his nose, leaving only his equally grey eyes and his hair visible. On his lower back was a scabbard, about four foot three I'd say, containing a katana. Oh great, a weeaboo. Fuck me…

“Hey kid, we don't let minors in the pub,” I chuckled. “The comic shop is on eighty sixth street.”

That usually got them to leave, but this particular guy had a death wish. He reached over with his right hand to his left hip and wrapped his fingers around the hilt of his sword. He got into a proper fighting stance and slowly drew the blade out an inch, grabbing it with both hands now. Fuck no. I noticed something about the handle of the sword. It was just like mine in the respect that it was wrapped in ribbon, but his was blue and mine was red.

I reached for my own blade under the bar with one hand and placed a glass on the bar with another.

“What's your poison?” I asked. “Vodka, cognac, just beer?”

He just grumbled indistinctly, keeping up the silent asshole act. I decided to show my hand, to play the only card within reach, and pulled my blade out. Four feet and six inches long and six point eight
inches wide of hollow titanium with a meticulously placed web of structures within sort of like bone marrow. This made it lighter than any other blade its size with little cost to durability. If anything, it was far better. It could absorb shock far better, and being single edged meant I could sling it over my shoulder like a badass. If this faggot wanted to play with swords, fucking let him. I levelled my blade vertically, between my eyes.

“Kid, I'm not involved anymore,” I told him. “I'm done and I'll never come back to that fucking shit. Now get out while you still can.”

Take a guess at what he did. Like the dumbass he is, he charged. He seemed to cross the gap and loop around the bar in the blink of an eye, appearing on my right and nearly ending it then and there. Unfortunately for him, I saw it coming at the last moment. He tried to hit me with a vertical swipe, and I fucking pounded his blade with mine so hard it should have shattered. Instead it lodged itself in the bar, giving me two things. Time to run, and another reason to kill this fucking shithed. I bolted at top speed out of the pub, throwing a smoke bomb at my feet and vanishing in the middle of the snow covered street. To stay unseen I used a circular Voidwall grenade to melt the snow around me, trying to make myself harder to pin down. When the flames died down and the invisibility wore off, the ninja faggot was right on my ass again. He swung so many times in the space of a single second that it was nearly impossible to counter. I had to make a single block catch two hits just to keep up. Well. I'm fucked.

Sparks flew, the blades continued to clash, and there seemed to be no end in sight. That's what I thought at least. Help can come from strange places. From stranger people. From a nearby rooftop a flash of orange light punctuated a loud crack, followed by a brief respite. The man stumbled back, letting go of his blade with his right hand to grab his heavily bleeding and damaged shoulder. I pushed the attack, lunging at my attacker and swinging up forcefully, Void energy following my blade. I cut them pretty badly if I must say so myself.

My attacker staggered and clutched their chest. A the wounds would take longer for even a Ghost to heal. That's another thing I can do. Good luck and more lasting injuries. That's my Standout talent.

The first one probably wasn't there, just coincidence, but the fact that a stranger had shown up and immediately decided to intervene and take my side was miraculous.

The attacker stumbled back into a swirl of snow blowing on the wind, disappearing in a quick and loud rush of air.

“And stay away!” I shouted.
“I don’t think she'll be gone long,” an exo said from somewhere to my right. Sisu-3. He offered me his M3 grease gun, handle first. “Gun beats sword. Every time.”

I laughed and took the weapon, aware that it was probably another spare that he'd made. “Sure thing Sue. I don't have much in the way of exo friendly drinks, but- wait. She?”

Sisu waved a dismissive hand. “Nothing. It's a guy, I just had someone on my mind. Someone dead. Don't ask.”

I nodded. “Okay buddy. But this means Prior’s promise to me was bullshit. I’m guessing he fed Sky and them a similar lie. We gotta tell them.”

♣ ♦ ♠ ♥

Alois
Unknown location.
Well furnished boardroom.
10:00 AM

Almost every remaining Red Ribbon was here, around this chestnut table. All except two. Me, Abernathy, Professor Amir Throckmorton, and Integra. Abernathy was a tall blue Awoken Titan with a head of white hair, who wore a bright blue tuxedo over his armor, as well as a crucifix necklace. He'd been sending projections to harass the enemy, but he couldn't do anything himself as a result of his last fight with a Priory agent. Something had happened that now made him age like normal again, and the signs of his true age were beginning to set in. Amir was a medium height human Warlock in green robes, and a capable agent of mine. He had a head of shaggy black hair, and a short and well kept beard upon his chin, as well as some fake glasses to give him a more teacher like appearance. Integra was the last of the old team to have been recruited, and she was very promising. She was a caucasian human with blonde hair that went down to her waist, and her armor was not exactly that practical on first glance. It looked like polished wood, but in reality it was a lightweight titanium alloy, laid in slightly curved plates to better deflect bullets. Her eyes were dark grey, almost black, and her once clear whites were riddled with red veins.

I laid my hands on the table and spoke plainly and solemnly. “We have been nearly wiped out. We are not going to win at this rate. The League is done. I don't think we have been doing this right. I apologize for putting you all in danger, and I thank you for your service. The League is officially disbanded.”
Integra stood tall and flung out her arm, pointing accusingly at me. “Objection sir!”

Abernathy put a hand on her back. “Integra, please. We’re done. We’ll have to do what we can from behind the scenes, but we’ve been destroyed. Ya can’t deny it, there ain’t shite we can do anymore. We should just admit that it’s not our fight anymore affore ya end up killin yourself tryina do some good.”

“My thoughts exactly,” I agreed. “Arya and Alex are keeping an eye on Daniel, so I shall protect them and theirs in return. Beyond that, I believe that we should stop recruiting, and just provide support from a distance.”

The fire did not disappear from Integra’s eyes. “I will keep fighting, even if it's the death of me.”

“I won't stop you,” Amir said, “but I can't guarantee nobody else will.”

I stroked my chin. “Actually… you should be the primary protector of Zeus. It only seems right since you're so enthusiastic about it.”

She smiled with sadistic glee. “I've been waiting for years to pop a cap in someone's arse. Finally I get the chance.”
Episode 7: No Rest for the Righteous

Chapter Summary

Church and Bellona are wed by Entwinement. Max and Skylar take a particular aspect of their relationship a little further. Unbeknownst to Zeus, the Axis are working against them behind the scenes.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Skylar

Skylar and Max’s apartment.

The Tower.

Last City, Earth.

Early January.

Morning.

You know the saying, ‘No rest for the wicked,’ right? It’s utter bollocks. The wicked get all the bloody rest they, want — while people like me are expected to be goody two shoes and absolute saints and waste our time fighting something that can’t be fought. I know this. I know when a fight can’t be won, when there’s nothing you can do but save yourself. Hell, odds are I’d be lucky to do that even. Prior’s deal — or Roman, whatever he calls himself now — was a lie designed to buy him time. If anything, I had a massive target on my head now. All I wanted was to be free from his shit. I was more than willing to lay down my arms and take a step back on this one.

But the problem was, it didn’t matter to him or the Axis. I was a threat, so I had to die. I’d rather the Axis get me than him, because then they might let Max live. But… Odds are, she’d get herself killed trying to avenge me. That’s just a fact. Still, none of that mattered now. The deal was a lie, the Axis were on the move, and I’d wasted precious time trying to escape the inevitable death that awaits. Now I probably would end up dead in a gutter before I could do anything to at least try to stop their plans.

But I had to at least try. To go down swinging. To leave a proverbial gash on Xerxes’ face. To try and redeem myself. I was a coward. I backed down when it was me who should have stepped up first. Why hadn’t I? Because I was afraid to die. Still am. But you know what? Fuck it. I’ll either die flipping everyone the bird and letting them know whose fault it was that I had fallen, or I would
succeed and be glad I was wrong. Hopefully I’m wrong. Hopefully Prior can be beaten. Hopefully we can stop the Axis from doing whatever it was they had planned. Hopefully I could live on and be Max’s angel forever. Hope’s a good thing to hold onto. Probably.

Fuck my life. It was just four years of wading through mud that rich with blood did seep, taking a few breaks, slowly falling deeper and deeper into the abyss — and just when I finally see a light in the black, just when I finally begin to crawl out of the hell I’d been consigned to, this fucking clusterfuck happened. Just when I’d finally found someone to share my life with, just when I’d begun to mentally solidify and repair, he came back to ruin it.

I wondered if he’d ever even left. Since that last… communication, I’d begun to recall memories of that place. The black sand, the mist, the sulfuric Venus-like smell, and some things he’d said and done. For the past three years he’d been trying his level best to ruin me, keep me unstable and broken.

Hence why the first time they sent someone after Maxime. She was definitely helping the process, undeniably. When I was with her, even just on that second day, I knew we had something. A connection that I could sense as easily as an Arc signature. She was a piece I didn’t know I was missing.

Despite our feelings, I feared I might have created a rift between us. I had verbally assaulted her, avoided her, and only apologized hours after the fact. I still didn’t understand how she could possibly be idiotic enough to entertain the illusion of a possible victory against Prior. What further perplexed me is her seeming forgiveness. Phrases like, ‘You’re only human,’ and ‘Everybody makes mistakes,’ seemed undeserved and disingenuous. Then again, maybe I was a little more wrong than usual. Maybe, just maybe she really wasn’t letting Axis this get between us. Actions speak louder than words, and she continued to treat me with the same respect, love, and intimacy as before.

So… what was the issue? I could feel something wrong, deeper and beyond the current conflicts we were facing. Something wrong with things as deep as the very fabric of reality itself. If I had to verbally describe it, I would describe it like a young black sapling spreading its blighted and malicious roots through the very framework of existence. If I concentrated, zoned in on it, I could almost hear the tiny windlike whisperings that accompanied the mist from… Prior’s domain. Something related to the Deep was altering variables to some malevolent end, twisting thoughts and… How was I picking up on this? Whatever it was, I couldn’t be expected to understand it, or stop it as I’d likely be expected to if it became known.

I took a seat in the kitchen, still wracked by these troubling thoughts. Sunlight beamed in through the large window in the living room — though it was slightly diminished by the one way glass, and
harder to make out the rays due to the cleaner air. I didn’t bother to change out of my sky blue linen
nightclothes, nor did I procure a meal of any sort. I had been subsisting off of nutrient feeds from
North for the past few days. Why bother making a meal? Why give two shits about taste? There’s an
easier and more effective alternative, so I’ll take it.

I just pulled out a chair and took a seat, trying hard to organize my thoughts and put them to rest,
albeit temporarily. Not as easy as it sounds, especially if you’ve spent the past few months studying
lore, revitalizing old history, and dealing with what can best be described as aliens, space Nazis, and
Satanist space Nazis. It’s a hard feeling to recreate, the feeling of being me and specifically me.
Church had gone through PTST (Post Traumatic Stress Tendencies) and yet he’d still only brushed
the surface of the various horrors Guardians like me tended to endure. Hell, he powered through it
like a Navy SEAL operator on crack. That guy's fucking invincible, mentally at least.

Me? Imagine always having some fucking demented puppeteer pulling strings to make your life
Hell, to ruin you in every possible way, while masquerading as a close friend. Fucking Hell is right.
Now imagine that puppeteer is a Guardian with power beyond the understanding of every Warlock
to ever study the Darkness, even Toland. That’s Kronos/ Prior/ Roman/ whatever the next name is,
for you. I found the fact that he targeted specifically me from the beginning quite disquieting. That’s
like… I’ve been focusing way too much on this psychopath.

The universe seemed to agree, as Max entered the kitchen soon after I had that thought. Too bad me
and literally fucking everything couldn’t agree like this more often. It’s pleasant when some Alex
Jones-y paranoia inducing cosmic force wasn’t fucking around with my life.

Let’s get back to reality shall we? Something about Max’s presence seemed to dispel these dark
thoughts, to remove a layer of translucent grey film from my eyes. She had done something with her
dark chocolate hair, but I couldn't quite place my finger on it. Still curly, still dark, still the same
length… ah, forget about it. She wore an interesting outfit today, which is to say a uniform. An SFC
(Sergeant First Class) dress uniform to be precise. Each class, Warlock, Hunter, Titan (in order of
intelligence, although let’s face it everyone that isn’t a Warlock is basically a vegetable) has a specific
uniform that often corresponded with rank.

Anywhom, the dress uniform looked pretty much the same for lower ranking Warlocks. A dark
purple set of robes, much like Ikora Rey’s, bearing their rank symbol, class insignia, and the
Vanguard logo upon each shoulder. It was also quite comfortable if I recall, back from when I was
an NCO. Upon the left breast of her uniform she bore four medals. One looked like the old
Sunsinger insignia in gold attached to an orange ribbon, awarded for mastery of Solar Light as a
Warlock. The next I didn’t recognize, the shattered silver logo of a faction I could faintly recall,
likely awarded for aiding in its defeat. Then came two that I myself had. A silver V for victory atop a
broken pillar, awarded to every combatant, allied or otherwise, in the Pantheon War. The other was a
cracked bronze insignia of the Red Legion, given to all Guardians alive during the attack on the City,
even those now deceased. Around her neck was the pendant made from a tiny shard of the Traveller.
It almost seemed to be the source of some sort of invisible illumination, dispelling an unseen
darkness. Probably just my head being… whatever it was being lately.
I felt a small twinge of jealousy and also an opportunity for humor. The NCO uniforms were always more comfortable and less formal than the officer uniforms, and regular infantry uniforms were more comfortable than those. This was especially true in the case of the dress uniform for a high ranking Warlock, and as a Brigadier General I had it as bad as it could get. Here’s what mine was like. Imagine a fucking steel cable corset fucked a shoe full of gravel. That’s a fucking pair of premium comfort sport shoes with sweats compared to it.

It was practically designed to maximize the discomfort and drama of every movement, which made sense seeing as literally every commanding officer except me and maybe my buddy Church was an absolute egotistical stiff. I won't torture you even with the description.

I snapped out of my trance, stopped thinking entirely really, when Max leaned over and kissed me on the forehead. That caused a fluttering and a warm sensation all over, as it usually did.

She brushed a strand of hair out of my eyes. “Good morning Sky.”

“Mornin’ Max,” I mumbled.

“Today's the day.”

“Yes,” said in acknowledgement. “The day Church gets Entwined with a hot-headed redhead Titan who, somehow, happens to be a genius. Odd thing that is, when either of the two classes has an IQ in the triple digits.”

Max punched my shoulder lightly. “You are such an ass.”

I nodded in agreement. “I’m an asshole, but not a cunt. There’s a distinct difference.”

“Don’t cuss,” Max commanded.

“Don’t be such a hypocrite,” I countered.
“Don’t tell me what to do.”

“As you wish. But swearing like a sailor is a human fucking right.”

That’s usually how banter like this went. Whether it was a little joking argument or a verbal and mental war fought via real heated debates and essays, odds are I’d either lose or surrender, unless it’s something I’m hugely passionate about. Because that’s just how I roll. Before I met Max, when I wasn’t fighting the Fallen, Vex, Cabal, Hive, Taken, or actual fucking space Nazis—I was just an empty shell of a man, seldom able to do much more than waste time and… Hell, I don’t even remember half of my life in those torturous periods of uneventful peace. But now that I had Max, I found some purpose, a reason to fight other than boredom and money. I believe now that my life belongs to her, that making the two of us happy is a fundamental reason for my very existence. That and fighting the aptly named Darkness to reclaim and surpass the previous knowledge and progress of the human race. But a selfish part of me put Max as the primary reason. For good reason too.

Max was snapping her fingers in my face. “Earth to Skylar, can you read me?”

“Yeah, like a book,” I mumbled. “Sorry, I just…”

“Do a lot of thinking, about everything,” Max supplied.

“Exactly,” I agreed. “Hey, why does your Ghost talk so much? Thought just struck me. He’s really weird. He rests on a different schedule, he’s really talkative, male voice but obvious feminine personality-”

Jester appeared in all his flashy multicolored glory right up in my face. “Excuse me, incel, I’m not feminine. I’m the biggest dick swinger this side of the block.”

If I had anything in my mouth, I would have spit it out. I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing. “I’m not an incel, whatever that is.”

Max sighed and waved her Ghost off. “Involuntary celibate. It’s an insult that people throw around without caring what it actually means—like cuck or Nazi or retard.”

“Well I am a celibate,” I said. “But more like a bio-cel. Sounds like a battery brand, but for the slow idiots in the nonexistent audience, it’s actually a term I made up, short for biological celibate-”
Max sighed and shook her head. “Don't give him the time of day. He's trying to get a rise out of you. And to answer your question, all Ghosts are a little different. Some are a little bit quirky like Jester, while others are seldom present and really quiet like Arya’s Ghost, Poseidon. Although it is odd that North is so withdrawn. Ghosts tend to compliment or complete their Guardian's personality — and while yours admittedly is on rare occasions subject to sudden and brief change, he should still have a similar or complementary personality to yours.”

I felt North poking around my head, trying to talk through the neurosymbiotic link. I wasn't reading him clearly though, and he didn't seem to want to speak in person. All I could gather was that something was bothering him.

“How is Jester compatible with you?” I asked.

“I wish I knew,” she sighed. “Anyway, come on, get dressed, get going. We've got to make it by noon.”

I smiled and shook my head. “A space cowboy getting Entwined at high noon. Fitting. When are we going to? The witching hour? Friday the thirteenth?”

Max giggled. “Hold your horses Sky, it's only been a month. You are so energetic and enthusiastic...”

“It's been a whole month,” I said. “Why don't we take it another step further? Any direction of your choosing. Literally anything. I kid you not.”

“Well, you get dressed, attend the ceremony, and then we'll see,” Max offered. “Maybe we'll do it before if you're quick enough.”

I didn't even register a single word other than ‘we'll see’. “It's a deal. But… I conveniently can't find my atrocious uniform, hopefully because I have yet to receive it. Guess I'll have to settle for a tux or something.”

“It's on the bed, still in the bag,” Max said. “And I can't see what's wrong with it.”
Sweet mother of God. The shit I endure for Church.

------[-]

Bellona
Bannerfall
Last City, Earth.
Mid Morning.

Of course Church would have a ceremony like this at Bannerfall of all places. While it was quite beautiful, and it had been restored and decorated well for the ceremony, its history was a reminder of the danger me and Church had placed ourselves in. Sure, we had Ferro and his mercenaries to protect us, for the right price, but protection wasn’t the issue. The issue was that the second the Entwinement wrapped up we’d be tossed right back into combat, possibly sent to die. No rest for the wicked, or the righteous either. Still, me and Church were very duty bound. Whatever came our way, no matter the costs, we would still follow our orders and fight for the City my predecessors and even peers had worked so hard to create.

Blah! Bad thoughts. Distracting thoughts. Not something I needed now. Anyway, the ex Crucible map had been refurbished and decorated for the occasion. In the plaza colorful canopies had been restored and replaced, navy blue banners with our logo — a complex symbol indeed, a circle of black class and subclass insignias surrounding white a blade wreathed in lightning, the words Ad Inferos et Reversus on a white ribbon beneath it — two squares of thirty six seats, lamps strung across balconies, and elsewhere more decorations and some refreshments awaited the guests.

I sat alone beneath the cherry tree, contemplating a problem far more complex than a war. My relationship with Church. We’d been on God knows how many dates, watched countless films, done no end of patrol missions together to the point where we were told by the Commander to take a break, and fought a cataclysmic Vex mind together, yet nothing really changed. Just the same attraction and interests. We just… complete each other, but nothing really else. Maybe once Church and I are joined in this ceremony and he finally stops being so sexually inactive — no, nonexistent — then it would change. We had forever together — or until our death, which was of a varying possibility, to figure it out.

I pulled out Ares, who had of his own accord changed into a black and orange shell, which suited him well.

“Good morning my lady,” he said in his stuffy Victorian upper class voice.
I let out a small hiccup of a laugh at that. “I'm just asking the time. No need to go all butler on me.”

“As you wish madam. It is precisely nine fourteen in the morning. The ceremony begins in approximately two hours and forty six minutes. Is there any other way I may be of assistance?”

“Nah, you go do whatever it is Ghosts do when they aren't tripping alarms and hacking stuff and making me fight off three waves of enemies.”

Skylar
Max and Skylar's apartment.
Bedroom.
The Tower.
Last City, Earth.
Mid Morning.

I was in the bedroom, and Max was helping me into my Brigadier General uniform. I had actually given it an unfair judgement. Despite being somewhat restrictive, it was nevertheless comfortable. The navy blue silk dress pants were very comfortable. Overly so in fact, especially against my shaven legs. (Yes I shave frequently, because I'm not a hairy fucking Neanderthal, and hair isn't attractive except upon the head.) The undershirt wasn't half bad, a synthetic fiber that felt like it wasn't even there. The long midnight blue trench coat, sorry robes (as some demand they're called), looked and felt badass, especially with a star on each shoulder and more than a few medals on my chest. The belt and boots I was impartial to, they weren't good or bad. A sort of bright blue aviator's scarf with white Arc bolt patterns was also part of the uniform, but I had yet to put that on or the coat on. Overall, pretty nice.

The part I didn't like was a garment that went over the undershirt, a crisscrossing mesh of inch wide blue bands of an apparently bulletproof fabric. It was impossible to put on alone, and it was a bit constrictive.

“I still don't understand why this is part of the uniform,” I complained. “In combat, I like to flow and fly, not waddle like a fucking penguin in a pair of iron boxers.”

Max chuckled lightly. “For one, it's not that restrictive. Secondly, it's because you're a General now.”
You're important, and might have a great career ahead of you as a commanding officer. If someone decides they want you dead and you're at a party or something, this should make it a bit harder for them. And hopefully you won't be fighting anyone.”

I sighed heavily and sarcastically. “Max, can't you see I'm busy complaining?”

Max finished helping me into the impact resistant overshirt and delicately pulled out a few hairs that had gotten stuck in it. She then helped me into the coat, which had yet to be adorned with my medals.

“You should get a haircut,” she recommended. “Not too short, I like your hair, but it would be better if it was just an inch or two shorter.”

I worked the brass buttons into their holes with little effort and flipped up the three inch mantle, which was trimmed with silver thread. I saw her point, as I had to tuck my bronze locks into it so I didn't look like an airheaded goof.

“I see your point.”

Max moved the scarf out of my reach and did something completely unexpected (but welcome).

“Close your eyes,” she commanded.

I did as she said, my heart rate beginning to pick up. “Why?”

“You'll see,” she promised.

I heard her open a drawer and close it. There was the sound of a sealed box being opened, and I heard Jester appear, giggling like a maniac on laughing gas.

“Seriously Max?” the chucklehead Ghost said through a fit of laughter. “Man, you two are weird.”

“Shut your trap,” Max grumbled. “You're ruining it.”
In an imitation of Ares’ stuffy voice he said, “As you wish madam.”

My heart rate probably broke every measurement scale then. This was exciting. Maybe she'd chosen to make a particularly interesting move, as I'd hoped.

“So what are we doing?” I asked.

Max moved up behind me and flipped down the mantle of my coat. She began drilling me for information like an interviewer on speed. “Skylar Peace. What do you think of us, as a couple and more?”

I didn't even take five seconds to think. “I think that the day I fell out of that tree was the best day of my life. Because it was the day I met you. When you came into my life, I had a huge revelation. I suddenly fell for you harder than an asteroid. I knew the next day exactly how you made me feel, and by the end of the first week I knew I wanted to be yours forever — and the fact that I could be, and that you'd accepted me in the face of all my flaws, that you saw me as more than what my reports and documents said — felt amazing. Beyond any description. You never really said much about it, you just led the way and helped me follow. I love you Max, and I never get the chance to say it enough.”

“Anything else?” she prompted.

There was so much more. “I can't even begin to tell you. I feel like you're an essential part of me. I couldn't live without you. I belong to you. I quite literally wasn't actually living before you decided to come into my life. Just existing. I love everything about our relationship. The nights when I fall asleep reading over your shoulder, the days we spend fighting together in the Crucible or the field, always having each other's backs… All of it. Even the odd stuff, especially. I used to hate physical contact, and I still do mostly. When someone touches me, it makes me flinch. I can't handle it. But when you do it, it's irresistible ecstasy.” I felt my face grow warm. “And yes, even the Shibari. It's sooooo weird and it feels so good at the same time. Didn't even know I could like that kind of thing… That I could feel what our… whatever it is, makes me feel. Foreplay? Wait no, that suggests something comes-”

Max chuckled. “I think I get it. And I agree.”

“On what?”
Then it happened. I was expecting it to come later, and I wasn't expecting her to go this particular direction, but I'm glad she did.

She moved my hands behind my head, holding up my hair. An intense and pleasant heat spread across my body. My heart was having a full on nuclear meltdown, preparing to explode from my chest like a bullet from a high caliber rifle. I felt something cold against the back of my neck, a sort of smooth and tough material. It wrapped around, the ends meeting and overlapping at the front. I felt it tighten until it was perfectly snug, and I heard the soft click of a metal buckle being fastened. She nudged my hands away and let them fall down to my sides. She turned me around and I opened my eyes.

“I agree with all of it,” Max stated. “And you do belong to me.”

I couldn't say or do anything. I was shocked, and not in a bad way. I tried to speak but no words came out. I couldn't think of what to say. I stumbled and stuttered over a single word but didn't speak. I reached up a hand and felt the thing just to make sure it was real and that it was what I thought it was. It can't be… How did she know? This caught me totally off guard. She said she'd do the advance after the Entwinement ceremony. Regardless, I loved it more than anything else she'd given me.

I tried to say something. “I… Uh… It's a… I like… How…”

Max looked unsure. “Do you like it?” she asked tentatively, suddenly less sure of herself.


The confident smile returned to her beautiful face. “Of course you do.”

I pulled out North. He appeared sleepy at first, then alarmed.

“Goodness, what!?” he shouted. “What is that ?”

I stowed him away. “Yeah I'll just use the mirror.” Mirrors are less judgy, I thought.
I walked into our bathroom, still in shock. I looked in the mirror, and sure enough, there it was, right on my neck. A collar. I loved it and everything about it. It had a meaning just as deep as the Stormcaller locket. One I couldn't even begin to describe. It looked beautiful. Eight point two inches of maple brown leather that fit perfectly around my seven point whatever inch (circumference) neck. Right in the middle was a polished brass buckle. I do like me my brass. The buckle was odd though. Something didn't quite look right. There was a tiny ring of brass in the middle of the buckle, maybe a five millimeters in diameter. It wasn't for a leash (that was what the D ring was for) and it ran through a hole like the pin did—albeit this hole was specifically for it. A ring for a lock maybe? I wasn't sure how that would make me feel.

The inside felt different from—and definitely more comfortable than—leather. The stitching was done with burgundy thread, which was Max's favorite color, not mine. It was around an inch—maybe a centimetre less or so—wide (or thick or whatever, I didn't do so well with geometry), and I felt its presence with every breath or movement. Perfect in every way. I couldn't believe it.

I tried to even begin to describe mentally what it meant to me. I now fully belong to her, and I wear the fact proudly around my neck. I am hers in every way. She owns me and that's just how I want it. More than that too. It was a symbol of what I wished to tell her but was always too embarrassed to say. Something I couldn't fully even think. I found my liberation in my submission. When I'm with her all the demons of this world and my past seemed to disappear. When I handed my free will over to her, it felt like the best type of joy—like an immense weight and burden had been removed and replaced with a joyous feeling lighter than air.

If I could gather the courage to, I'd possibly wear it—or one like it—out of the apartment too. I wasn't ashamed of it in the least. Embarrassed, maybe, but ashamed? No. Never. If anything, I was proud. I'd found out at least part of who I really am, so I'd gladly display that achievement... if it weren't such an odd one.

I re-entered the bedroom, running swiftly to Max and wrapping my arms around her. “You're the best.”

Jester appeared once more. “Captain obvious strikes again.”

I ignored him, instead concentrating on literally everything else but him. Especially Max. She grabbed me around the waist, and I leaned into her shoulder. She began playing with my hair again, furthering my current happiness.

“Remember when I said this wasn't going to be a huge part of our relationship?” I asked.
Max let out a reverse sniff of a laugh. “Yeah?”

“I am the world's biggest bullshitter.”

“Don't swear,” she said.

I almost laughed out loud at our running joke. “Sorry. I won't.”

“You're a fast learner,” she noted, almost sarcastically. In reality I took a month.

“You're a beautiful person, both inside and out,” I told her. “And I love you more than anything.”

“I couldn't tell,” she joked. “Come on, we've got to get ready.”

She pulled away and went into the living room. I got back to my uniform. I wrapped the scarf around my neck, but didn't remove the collar seeing as it was covered. It felt like a stupid move, and it probably was, but I didn't particularly care.

I pulled North out once more. He appeared eager to talk about something.

“I've got something important to say,” he stated. “But first, what the heck is with the… thing?”

I sighed and shook my head. “You wouldn't get it. Just don't judge me or talk about it.”

North twisted and spun his shell. “Okay Guardian. I promise I won't. I sense it means a lot to you. I'm proud somehow. Now, I need to say something. It's important. It involves-”

“It can wait,” I assured him. “Just get my medals, and we'll talk after the ceremony.”
North huffed in agitation. “Fine. But I need to talk the second the ceremony wraps up, got it?”

“Whatever you say. Now get the shiny metal on a string.”

“It's actually ribbon,” he mumbled.

He laid them all out on the bed and left without a word, apparently angry at me. Jeez, who pissed in his Corn Flakes? Whatever, he's always been sour. Or has he? I vaguely remembered days when we were like Batman and Robin, inseparable best friends. Something was wrong, and had been for a long time, but today wasn't the day for that.

I examined the medals. I didn't want to look like a braggart or asshole, so I wouldn't wear them all. I had many, from merely four years of service. Max entered the room again and sat on the bed. She picked up a silver one shaped like a Hive blade shattering against a hexagonal shield (an allusion to the six sides of the City walls).

“What's this one for?” she inquired.

“I was the one who struck the final blow on Crota. I thought you knew.”

She set it down and picked up another one. “Humor me. Hey, I honestly don't know what this one's about.”

She held a medal I hadn't touched once since receiving it back in my Fireteam Excalibur days. A Distinguished Flying Cross, specifically the old English variant. The purple and white striped ribbon showed no signs of wear or tear whatsoever.

“I used to be a combat pilot,” I told her. “I might actually be able to track down my old Arcadia class fighter, but odds are it's been decommissioned. I received the medal for covering the retreat of another Fireteam on Venus. My fuel tank was damaged and the ship was riddled with holes, but I still did it. That's actually how I got into Excalibur. That and my already promising looking career and the fact that I've got a Standout ability. That kinetic energy thing that lets me move stuff. I have another one, but I'll show you later. Anyway, I actually bailed out Excalibur there. So they put me on the team.”

Max selected another one but asked an irrelevant question. “What was it actually like on Excalibur?
Raven made it sound pretty bad.”

“Not that terrible actually. It was after the sixth mission I went on with them that it began getting bad. It was a great thing they had going. I had a few friends too, despite being shy back then. There were only two problems. I hardly got to see Alex, thank God he and Arya got on well, and the sexual harassment. You would think someone like Raven or Prior would have been the worst offender… but that’s a story for another day.”

“Hmm.” Max set the one she was examining back down. “Why isn't there one for beating Panoptes?”

“Well, it didn't officially happen,” I explained. “If people knew that I met Osiris, that he's still alive, that he's in the Infinite Forest… That's a clusterf- right. That's a big confusing political storm nobody wants, except the media.”

“You do realize you can just wear the ribbon and not the whole medal right?” Max pointed out. “You could probably fit most of these on there.”

I gasped in false bewilderment. “Mind-blowing!”

Max raised an eyebrow. “You didn't know that before did you?”

“Nope,” I admitted. “But now that I do… shenanigans shall ensue.”

“Don't do it,” Max commanded. “It's a special day for Church, and as little as I know him, I know he'd be passively mad at you if you messed it up, even if you're the only one who looks dumb.”

“Okay, I won't,” I wholeheartedly promised. “I won't make a swastika out of medal ribbons.”

Max grinned. “I could get used to this,” she said quietly. “Finally he listens.”

I had a bit of an embarrassing question for her. “Max, do I have to wear the collar? And do I have to in public? Not that I plan on taking it off.”
“You don't have to do anything you don't want to,” she assured me.

“Well, when I feel like it, can I wear it out of the apartment? Unconcealed. Not now though, not yet. I might try it under the scarf though.”

Max giggled awkwardly. “Of course. Why wouldn't I let you?”

“Good point. I'm considering trying it out under the scarf, just because.”

“Go right on ahead,” she said. “I won't stop you. Just don't let anyone see it, yet. You know how the media gets. A whisper from a single guest could turn into a full on 'scandal.'”

“Got it. We should get going.”

Alice

Church
Bannerfall
Last City, Earth.
Plaza.
Almost midday.

I looked out over the railing and took in the view. I never got to do this enough. It was inspiring really. The complex sensations it stirred up really got my grey matter going, and made poetry come easier. Boreas played with my short hair with his windy divine fingers, the Traveller emitted an invisible Light penetrating everything and yet revealing nothing, the thin air made me conscious of my breathing… See? It's easier like this. In fact, I had one written already.

I pulled a few cue cards out of my tuxedo jacket’s pocket and summoned Deacon.

“Another rehearsal?” he complained. “I would rather explain the world to you again.”
I laughed at that. “You didn't explain anything you rascal! I had to figure it all out myself.”

Deacon twisted his shell. “Well now you're well read, so you're welcome.”

“Whatever makes you feel better Deac.” I cleared my throat and read the poem. “In a dark church a continent away, in deathly slumber a soldier lay. A Ghost awoke the phantom, and promised him a sanctum. A blood Red sun was on the rise, yet none foresaw the impending demise. That day I rose, and the City fell. Then began my march through Hell…”

Before I could continue, Deacon interrupted. “We've heard it a million times. Just publish the damn thing already. It's good, it will do good. I've seen Fallen hack computers faster than you can gather your nerve.”

“Whatever,” I mumbled. “I write them for my own sake, not yours.”

“What about me?” a beautiful and melodious voice asked from behind me.

I turned to look for the source of the noise, and saw Bellona in the tree. She was dressed in a rather stunning fashion, looking very much like a Roman god. She wore a flowing white one piece dress with blue swirls decorating the hems. Her shoes were as practical as ever, or as practical as sandals could be. Man did she ever hate heels. Her hair was done up like an ancient Greek queen's, a few locks braided around her head like a laurel wreath, the rest flowing freely down her back. Her eyes glittered like an anime character's. Her long muscular legs were on display, and I noticed that despite them already being bare she'd waxed them. Other than that there was no sign of any cosmetics. A natural beauty.

I noticed I was inevitably looking up her dress and averted my gaze, instead pretending to examine my crucifix. Part of me stowed away that image of her though, for whatever reason. And why was she wearing gym shorts? No! Bad Church! Don't think about that or it'll… too late. Committed to long term memory. Congratulations dimwit.

Bellona laughed heartily, like a barrel chested Viking. “Gotcha!”

“You absolute devil!” I laughed. “Why?”

She gracefully leapt from the tree, using her Lift ability to slow her fall. Huh. I always thought it
was rockets, but I guess even Titans have their fair share of space magic. She caressed my face and kissed me on the cheek.

“Oh you know why,” she teased. “After every wedding — or other such marital ritual — comes the honeymoon.”

I’m proud to say that little Church from the land down below my belt did not make a guest appearance. I did feel a little bit of sexual excitement at the prospect though. I’d been putting it off for so long, because hey, Jesus may or may not be the son of God and I’d rather be safe than sorry. More importantly I'm just a traditional guy. Now that it was about to happen for the first time in my second life… nope. Gotta keep my thoughts professional until the ceremony concludes.

I scratched the back of my head and chuckled nervously. “Yeah, that's a thing…”

Bellona grinned. “Skylar's got a point. You are quite the stiff. And not where it counts.”

“You wouldn't even know!” I protested defensively.

“But you would,” she taunted.

“I'm proud to say I have never touched either it or pornography of any sort.”

“And they say the perfect man doesn't exist…” She changed the topic. “Hey, how are you holding up mentally. I know you say you got over any PTS symptoms, but I need to know the truth.”

“I'm good,” I assured her. “I won't become a mentally deranged wife beater any time soon.”

“Good, because this woman beats back,” she joked.

Ares flew to her shoulder, making a dramatic entrance. He played a few sound effects like a wine glasses clattering on a plate and shoes on a carpet to look as butlerly as possible.

“The guests have arrived, Lady Cassavetes,” he announced.
We went to look and sure enough, the guests were pouring in. Alex and Arya led the charge, once again wearing matching opposite tuxedos. Arya's was white with black angel wings over the left breast, whereas Alex's was black with white ram horns on the right breast. They kept chatting, probably continuing a conversation they started this morning, or last week depending on if they even slept.

Raven and Sisu-3 followed. Raven dressed differently for once, wearing a goofy blue tuxedo with a red — evidently displeased with the outfit. Sisu actually dressed quite nicely, wearing a white and beige striped tuxedo with a blue tie. His loyal Ghost Häyhä hovered at his left shoulder, now in a pearl colored shell. The two appeared to have grown close, and I had the feeling that if they were in a TV show, people would definitely ship them.

The Vanguard decided to make an appearance, wearing their usual uniforms, but I noticed they looked cleaner and fresher than usual.

Ferro entered the plaza with a man he was apparently into on his left. His long reddish French braid remained unchanged, and so did his color pallet. Brown tuxedo, brown boots, white shirt, blue tie. The man beside him wore a green suit and a matching tie. He had blonde hair and green eyes, and—well would you look at that? The he was apparently a she. They were the Daniel Alex told us about. Had something to do with a League and Alois, whoever he is. I was less than eager to talk with them, seeing as the last transgender person I talked to wanted to crucify me over some pronouns. Ferro gave signals to his mercenaries disguised as staff, probably telling them to do nothing whatsoever or telling them nothing at all and just trying to look cool.

Skylar and Max entered next, and they both looked stunning to say the least. Perfect military uniforms with only a few tasteful altercations. Somehow Max's burgundy pants found a way not to clash with her purple coat. Skylar looked clearly awkward or embarrassed about something, and he kept adjusting his scarf as if trying to hide something. He wore an array of impressive medals and ribbons, proudly displaying a Distinguished Flying Cross. Where'd he get that from? Curious indeed…

A few of Bellona’s friends made an appearance, but a few people did not. Miro Shen and all three members of Fireteam Hades were absent, although odds are those damn Aussies would show up for the afterparty. Shen though… he probably wouldn't show up at all. Whatever. He wasn't that pleasant if I must be honest.

We went out to greet the guests, shaking hands and exchanging greetings. Bellona had a few friends that stood out, such as Arya's old psychology professor Amir Throckmorton. The guy was… energetic to say the least. Every movement was instant and concise, and he seemed to simply suddenly be in a different position rather than move to it. He had a few interesting things to say, and
by a few I obviously don't mean a few. He talked in length about the pre-existing psychological link
between Bellona and members of our Fireteam before she even joined, as he knew a member of
Zeus and Bear, so obviously he was solely responsible for us meeting and getting on so well. Then
there was Caesar. He was an outspoken Titan who had lungs the size of busses, loudly and proudly
proclaiming his obvious superiority over everyone and everything. Then came the people I knew.
Alex and Arya didn't even talk to us, instead bickering about something I couldn't understand for the
life of me. Raven tried to promote his pub to everyone and couldn't stop talking about his amazing
service and food. Sisu-3 just talked about guns and some mysterious dead Hunter he once loved.
Ferro was definitely head over heels for Daniel (who's pronouns are he, his, him, etc.). Daniel filled
me in on a secret organization that his dad (one of seven living fertile Guardians apparently) once
ran, and still probably does. I honestly wished I hadn't heard that because now my head hurt from
confusion. Then as if to throw me overboard Max and Skylar decided I hadn't suffered enough. Max
looked more cheerful than usual, and Skylar looked slightly embarrassed about something.

“Hey guys,” Max said in greeting.

Bellona returned the greeting. “Hey you two. Give Church a moment, he's still recovering from
whatever Daniel said. It's pretty easy to confuse him.”

“Untrue,” I insisted. “I'm still not sure what to think about a secret organization of space wizards
that fight space Nazis.”

“I personally didn't think much of it,” Max said. “They tried to invite us but unfortunately for them
we're a good enough team on our own.”

“Wait you've-”

“Long story short, we got envelopes, we burned them,” Skylar explained.

I sighed in disappointment. “Well that's one mystery we'll never solve. How have you been.”

“I've been great,” Max replied.

Skylar nodded in agreement. “Same here, but I've been quite troubled lately. It may seem cliché, but
when I'm near Max, it goes away. I think… nah it's probably nothing. We also… do you want to
Max?”
I noticed that he was being more humble and more clean in terms of speech now. He seemed to be more respectful towards Max and everyone else now, especially Max. I noticed something about the two of them. Although they were almost the same height, Skylar looked visibly smaller, even though Max was maybe a centimetre taller, if even that. Something had changed, and had been changing since the two met.

Max picked up where her companion left off. “Well, to tell you what Skylar isn't, we've been making progress romantically.”

“If you couldn't tell, so have we,” Bellona joked.

A bout of laughter ensued, lasting a few seconds. Skylar pulled his scarf up a little and tightened it. I noticed that Flying Cross again and decided to ask him about it.

I pointed at the medal. “What's that about? I recognize the Red War medal and I remember you talking about the Taken War, but since when did you earn a Distinguished Flying Cross?”

Skylar continued fixing his scarf just right and answered my question in his usual fashion. “Well, I was a helicopter pilot in 'Nam. My platoon was under heavy fire from those damned gooks, and just when Charlie had nearly beaten Uncle Sam at his own game, I gave those Vietcong a good ol' fashioned American style ass whooping.”

“What did I say about the swearing?” Max chided.

“Right. Sorry.”

“He's been well behaved,” Bellona noted. “And what's it actually for Sky?”

Skylar did the Canadian thing to do and dismantled half his armory for no good reason. Then he proceeded to only let in colored refugees for political reasons. Sorry, I meant he politely waited for Max to speak first.

“Well, I haven't the faintest clue why he's actually listening for once,” Max stated.
“It’s because I love you and I want to please you,” Skylar told her. “And the medal is for bailing out Fireteam Excalibur on Venus. That’s part of why I was put on the team. Not to be rude, but isn’t the ceremony going to begin in like, a half hour at most?”

“Yes but we’ve got time,” I assured him. “And I haven’t had a chance to bring up what happened the other day. Can I embarrass you about that yet? Or is it too soon?”

“One word and I splatter you two across the walls!” he threatened cheerfully.

Bellona laughed that off. “I’d like to see you try. Seriously. This is a Crucible arena. I’d love to demonstrate how easy it is to beat the walking overblown ego that is Skylar Peace.”

“Only a Titan…” he muttered under his breath.

“Don’t be so rude,” Max cautioned.

“I’m sure you’d lose in a glorious and admirable fashion,” Skylar said.

I sighed disdainfully at their eagerness to inflict violence upon each other. “The children of the Light mustn’t fight amongst themselves if we are to overcome the Darkness. I’ve got a few more guests to greet, but it was nice talking with you. See you at the afterparty?”

Skylar waited for Max to give her answer. Something he never did for anyone else, even her sometimes.

“We don’t drink, and parties don’t tend to go well with us,” Max said. “We’re going home soon after, but we might hang around a bit.”

“I’ll be waiting for you Peace, in an alley, with a shotgun,” Bellona promised.

“I’ll be making sure you don’t hurt anyone,” I told her. I turned back to Skylar, who was feeling something beneath his scarf. “I’ll see you later.”
Max
Bannerfall.
Plaza.
Last City, Earth.
Just about high noon.

Skylar looked both handsome and cute in his dress uniform. In the slight breeze his wild hair stirred and rippled like wheat in a field on a windy day. I wondered briefly if putting that collar on him was a good decision. Does he actually like it? Is he just being polite? Of course not. I saw it clearly. He loves it and me. He's said again and again that he belongs to me, and I wouldn't have it any other way. I knew he wouldn't either. Still, I completely forgot to ask. I couldn't make a mistake like that again, even if the surprise of it did enhance the experience for him. There are rules regarding a power exchange relationship—and while they do vary with each couple, they're a good set of general guidelines. I should really take the time to establish them better, to talk with Skylar about them.

I felt great, amazing, important, so much more — to be the one he handed his will to. I loved how he'd now do what I said with little to no question. He didn't stop being witty, he was still the living oddity I fell in love with. But now he was more submissive. This was our relationship as it would be from now on, partially. It's still largely intellectual and romantic. But now that he'd fully embraced this particular aspect, we could set the real limits. We could explore within and slightly beyond them if we both wanted to. Personally, I drew the line at light to maybe slightly less light bondage, which I put higher on the oddity scale than a collar and simple submission. And I'm more an artist and owner, not a sadist. To me, there's little beauty or pleasure in pain, but maybe… nah, that's just not right. Borderline abuse if you ask me, although I don't judge anyone who does that kind of thing.

Skylar wasn't all that ambitious with regards to the odd stuff, so I predicted he felt similarly. Funny how the most powerful, cold, and unstable seeming Warlock I'd ever met—was the most submissive and warm man when I got intimate with him.

Just my thoughts though. Nothing worth interrupting something like an Entwinement for too long over.

I wondered who would take the role of the Speaker in this ceremony. Sadly, he died during the Red War, and Osiris wasn't coming back to do his job. Zavala was my bet. He's the second closest thing to a Speaker now, second to Church — who was oblivious to his… everything. Another potential candidate would have been Saint-14, but of course he died and left nothing but a note to Osiris or the
Speaker, I don’t remember, and a pretty damn sweet shotgun. My last guess was — nevermind they’re also dead. Well, I’m out of thoughts.

-(☹)-

Achilles

Anti aircraft tower near Bannerfall.

The Wall.

Last City, Earth.

The mission was simple. Wait for everyone to arrive, let the ceremony conclude, and initiate the plan. Cortez and a team of Axis fighters would seal the exits and cut down anyone they happened to get the opportunity to. Me? I was tasked with the elimination of every single powerful or influential Guardian on Fireteam Zeus. The order of priority was as follows. Brigadier General Skylar Peace, Major Church Cassavetes, Lieutenant Colonel Bellona Cassavetes, SFC Maxime (Serafim) Lato Flynn (a woman with very much personal value to General Peace), any Vanguard members if possible — but best left to Cortez — Lieutenant Colonels Alex and Arya Victoriano, Jacques Jessie Ferro (a renowned gun for hire), Daniel Noctem (unknown if he’s a Guardian, but still considered important), Sisu-3, AKA “The White Death” (he might be an issue considering his resemblance to his namesake Simo “White Death” Häyhä), Colonel Arthur Raven, and anyone else of importance.

Most people would try to escape an engagement with any of the first three targets, but I had something they didn't. I was totally invincible. Mostly. The armor I wore had been designed to deflect bullets, absorb impact, and repair easily. It had two layers, so that if one were to be broken my Ghost could remove it and replace it below the then expanded second layer. Genius, really. Although it was unnecessary. I could kill all of them easily from a distance. The rifles I carried were based off of the famous Guardian killing weapon The Red Death, which stopped Ghosts from resurrecting their Guardians. I could and would end the conflict between Fireteam Zeus and my organization before it even started. Then it would be a simple matter of annexing the U.K. outpost and using the resources that gained us to overthrow the Consensus. I would go down in history as a hero and live forever as a legend.

There was a clicking of a hammer being pulled behind me. The air smelled of tobacco. Integra? I thought she was… Cortez never fails. How? I also realized I had made the fatal mistake of forgetting a helmet.

“Tell me how it feels,” a female voice said.
There was a suppressed crack and immediately after was a short lived pain in the back of my head.

{\°°°\}

Cortez

Bannerfall.

Balcony Overlooking plaza.

Last City, Earth.

It’s amazing what people don’t notice if they aren’t looking for it. Right there I stood, on the New Monarchy balcony, plain for all to see, my wrappings fluttering mockingly in the wind. Fools. Blind fools. Not even the mercenary had noticed that four of his men had gone dark. He was too busy obsessing over that woman masquerading as a man. In my ideal world, such people would not exist.

Sadly, I had not the voice to say this. Not once since my revival had a sound escaped my lips. But while I lacked the gift of speech, I made up for it in a variety of was. Speed, perfect hearing, 360 degree awareness of my surroundings, instant reaction time, and more, including my sharp eyes. Yes, I could see everything there was to be seen from my angle. Daniel Noctem’s chest was slightly larger than a real man’s. Arya was busily scanning her vocal opponent for weakness, her eyes working like machines.

The new Brigadier General had something beneath that scarf that revealed his true weakness. He may wield power beyond even his understanding, the remnant Light of numerous Gift Masts and other such artifacts consumed by Oryx, but he is weak of mind and soul. Partially due to Prior’s mental sabotage, partially as a fact of his existence. He is just weak like that. Only the weak are able to be collared like beasts of burden. Only those weaker still allow it to happen. Somehow weaker yet are those who want and accept it. The weakest of those pathetic scraps of life are those who take pride and find liberation in it.

The truth of it all is, no matter how hard it is to swallow, that some people are created lesser, and for good reason. The worthy are given tools by our creator, the lesser are usually denied them. Hence why I was given a stronger mind than the lesser races, from caucasian to negroid. Hence why I was brought back to do the will of those great as myself and was given the power to shape the world to my will.

Surprisingly enough, I didn’t hate Church or Bellona. Two strong willed people worthy of their Light who simply thought the wrong thoughts. That’s all. They had wrong opinions and needed to be silenced.
The ceremony by which they were maritally bound was an intriguing one, based on Ancient Greek myth. Ancient Greece, another overly libertarian society that died as it was meant to. Essentially, the myth goes that in the beginning man and woman were one, and apparently rivalled the gods in power. Zeus feared them and made the amazing decision to rip them in half. From that day forth man and woman were doomed to spend their lives searching for their other half. This ritual basically represented the union of the two halves.

The two stood facing each other beneath the tree, looking each other in the eyes. Bellona stood in a casual way, but Church was in a military stance — hands clasped behind his back, feet touching at the heels, separating to form a thirty degree angle, chest out slightly, back straight. He showed an almost admirable degree of discipline.

A man in robes and a mask that resembled the late Speaker’s emerged from the main doors to the plaza and approached the two, carrying two lengths of ribbon, one blue one white. He reached them and put his back to the tree. Church and Bellona took a step forwards and joined arms in an odd way. Church put his right arm in a ninety degree ‘L’ and Bellona did the same with her left. The priest or whatever he was said some stuff in Latin and began winding the twin ribbons up the forearms of the two Guardians. He tied them together with a simple half knot that would easily unwind... screw it.

I squeezed the wireless morse transmitter rapidly, giving the order to kill. This was the perfect moment and I wouldn’t let some hippie marriage stop me from completing my mission.

The reply destroyed my hopes of a successful mission.

G-O-\text{pause}^*-H-O-M-E-\text{long pause}^*-I-N-T-E-G-R-A

The bitch wasn’t dead! Damn it! The League was still functioning, and I spotted two members in the Plaza. This would not end well. Should I stay or should I go? Obviously I chose the option that minimized the odds of my death. I left for the Venus base, not currently concerned with the consequences.

___†___
Church
Bannerfall
Last City, Earth.

Plaza.

Precisely high noon.

The ritual concluded with the removal of the ribbons and the placement of the rings. It was truly intriguing, as when the priest removed the ribbons they appeared to have merged into one, symbolic of the joining of the two halves of the soul. Convenient timing it was. Precisely twelve thirty, true high noon, when the sun is at its highest and brightest in the sky.


In the plaza, finally alone, I turned to Bellona, wishing to talk. Unfortunately, an old friend had to come and visit. The Traveller crumbled to dust, the sky went grey, and everything was absorbed in an otherworldly blackness. I was back in Elsewhere as I called it. The grey mist remained a cautious five meters away, and the black sand felt sturdy and sound beneath my feet.

Roman emerged from the mist in front of me, dressed in blood red robes and white dress pants and shoes. His long red hair had been cut to elbow length, but not much had changed. From behind the shorter veil of hair over his face his eyes shone a sickly green, then red. In his right hand he clutched a familiar looking Ghost. North?

He spoke without moving his lips. “Hello again Church, I h-“

I raised a hand to silence him. “Hold up. You’re not scaring anyone. You just look like a complete fool with glowing red eyes. Ooh, spooky! I haven’t seen anything like that before. It’s more terrifying than all the atrocities I witnessed in two separate wars combined! Please, put some actual effort into it next time, if you actually want to try me a next time. I dare you.”

His eyes dimmed, he parted his bangs, and he began talking normally again. “Did you figure out my real name yet?”

“You forgot the accent over the- I mean, guess again. I’m the Queen of England for all you know.”

I almost, almost, lost my cool and swore. “You… Fureaking… Idiot… Roman Roirp Backwards is Prior Namor. Now cut to the chase. And I’ll have you know you’re the opposite of intimidating.”

His grin faded. “You want to see intimidating?” He raised the hand holding North. “I’ll show you intimidating.”

Just like that, North dissolved into a pile of black sand, trickling out of Roman’s fingers. I physically felt the Ghost die. But yet I knew he couldn’t have. That’s not how this works.

“Have you watched Sword Art Online?” Roman asked.

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Tron?”

“Nope.”

“The Matrix?”

“Probably no.”

“Well I’ll tell you what they all have in common with my reality. Die here, you die in real life. Don’t test me next time. Good day.”

<#>

Skylar

Max and Skylar’s apartment.

Mini library.
Mid afternoon.

Losing North felt like losing a frostbitten limb after two years of hanging on to it. It should have hurt. But it didn’t. Not even emotionally. It just felt like something tiny and somewhat important was missing. It turned out that he’d been bearing the brunt of Prior’s mental assaults for years now. That must be why he was always so distant and felt so damaged. I think he became distant on purpose, so I wouldn’t miss him. I thanked him for that mercy, and for the time we spent together as close friends—but most of all for his final good and admirable act. Bringing me and Max together. I’d been looking down a mental cliff into the abyss, ready to jump, but that probably saved me. He was the sole reason I had been able to find such happiness. But I shed no tears nor felt any sorrow. It was just like getting one’s hair cut. It’s gone, but it didn’t really hurt or damage you by losing it. And it could be replaced, could regrow. What I’d taken for just natural bitterness, a slow change into his true personality—was actually a facade to spare me any sorrow at the death he long foresaw.

Max poked me in the shoulder, jolting me out of my trance. She’d changed out of her dress uniform, now wearing a simple blue T-shirt and jeans. She no longer wore the piece of the Traveller around her neck, which was a bad idea if the hypothesis I was formulating was correct.

I guess I should describe the mini library a little. It’s a simple room. Thirty five by forty eight feet, bookshelves along every wall, a desk with a lamp, a blue two person couch, and enough books to keep me entertained for an acceptable amount of time. I lay half dressed on the couch, only wearing a dress shirt and some badass looking… regular jeans. And that other thing, if you get what I’m talking about. Yeah. I make everything look good. The secret ingredient is a mastodon sized ego and pitiable overconfidence.

A wittily titled book lay open in my lap, ‘Lore and Peace Volume Eight: Come to the Dark Side’. The pages I was reading talked about Guardians like Rezyl Azzir and Dredgen Yor—the latter suspected to be alive and well in South Africa by some crackpot conspiracy theorists. Dredgen in South Africa. Sounds like a musical if you ask me.

Max snapped her fingers in my face, shaking me out of it once more. She had migrated to the couch, her legs touching mine. Uncomfortable and awkward, despite what we were. It still took me a split second to accept any physical contact from her or any of my friends—even my clone/weaponized duplicate/brother/son (sweet home Alabama). I rubbed my eyes, which were sore from reading in the dark without glasses.

“Yeah Max?” I groaned, tired and stiff.

She raised a suspicious eyebrow. “Are you sure you’re okay? North just… poof. Turned into ash right in front of you in the hall. If that happened to Jester I’d be unable to carry on.”
Speak of the devil. Jester appeared at his Guardian’s shoulder. “Why thank you. I try my best. But would it be fucked up to say I don’t particularly miss the old grouch?”

I chuckled, genuinely out of humor and not to stroke his similarly sized ego. “Not particularly. I think he wanted it that way.”

Max frowned at her Ghost. “As genuinely screwed up as it is, I sort of agree. He didn’t talk much, and he wasn’t all that pleasant. Still, he brought us together, so he deserves some respect.”

“I’ll make sure to sacrifice goat heads to him every saturday,” I joked.

Max smirked at that. “Well, if you’re actually taking it as well as you’re letting on, you could get paired with a new one soon.”

I nodded. “I’d like that.”

Max looked at what I was reading. “What’s that about?”

“Something I’m working on,” I said. “I have a theory on how we could stop Prior from making guest appearances every couple of days. I think that piece of the Traveller you I gave you might keep him at bay. It makes sense. He’s also never struck when I’m in open air, from what I’m beginning to recall. He hasn’t been able to create a stable connection since the Traveller awakened. I think the reason I don’t remember much of it is because North was soaking up the damage through our neurosymbiotic link, which explains its gradual weakening.” My face went pale when the gravity of the situation hit me. “Max! Get the amul-”

<[-_-]>

Max

Elsewhere

Could we just take a moment to appreciate that Prior is the fucking worst thing that’s happened to me? I find a nice thoughtful, intelligent, witty, submissive, and lovable (and more) man, who’s
asexual, further shooting the odds of such a match occurring into the stratosphere—and he has to fuck it all up. He must have a death wish.

So I was sucked into this pocket dimension, which smelled of Venusian ocean water, and immediately hated this prick a million times more. Beneath my feet was coarse black sand, slick with some fluid. Around me was a tight ring of dark grey mist, giving me only six or seven feet of breathing room. It parted to reveal a tall, red haired, pale man dressed like a clown. His white shoes were not threatening at all, white pants aren’t ever a good choice because stains are a thing, and the red trench coat just exudes ego.

I sighed disdainfully, suppressing my fear. “You look, like a fool.”

“Oh that’s rich coming from you, Ms. Beige Jeans,” Prior quipped. “Since you’re new here I’ll give you the grand tour. Beneath your feet is the black sand that could be anything really, I don’t know myself, around you is the mist, and there’s no visible sky. Speaking of Sky, you are a pathetic excuse of a human being.”

“How so? I’ve earned the respect of one of the most well known and mighty Guardians of all time, the definitive top of his generation. I’ve befriended both slayers of Ghaul, and met the heroes of the Pantheon war. When Skylar Peace tired of battling the Vex do you know who he came to for a brief rest? Me. I myself led an uprising against the Pantheon in mid November, and I paid for it dearly. On Liberation Day, December third, I did it again. I’ve lived this second life of mine for seven years, and not one did I waste. I helped the most well known Loremaster write his ninth volume. My name is hardly well known, but it’s a name that I earned. I was just Guardian for a month and three weeks, until I earned the name Maxime in Norway. I earned the respect of the toughest Titans in that cold outpost by slaying Hive Wizards that they thought to be unkillable. I earned the name Lato in my homeland of Poland. It means summer. I brought light to a place with nothing but despair—and then I brought that place’s people to the City, on foot. The name Flynn I earned for clearing a whole battalion of Cabal from Freehold, which allowed a certain Fireteam to escape. Fireteam Steelheart. You might have heard of them. How am I a pathetic excuse of a human being?”

Prior laughed maniacally, as if all I had done was worth nothing. “That doesn’t mean shit! So fucking what? You were an errand girl, cool. You are still weak, pathetically so. There’s only three people who have ever called the Light here. The least powerful of them had an L-40 rating of L-28.”

“The scale’s bullcrap. Truth is, the power of the Light can’t be quantified.”

Prior snapped a finger and I felt a sudden void in my throat, and it became impossible to speak or even move. “Shut. The fuck. Up.” He took a heavy and shaky breath. “You aren’t able to use the Light here, because you aren’t even a fraction as powerful as the man you ruined. And you know you’re weak. Hence why you need to make others look and act weak for you to feel strong. The man
I spent almost four years shaping wasn’t like this before. He was a cold blooded killer, a man with nothing to live for or lose. When I faced him on the final battlefield, he would have been a worthy adversary. But then you ruined it. That meddling Ghost merely slowed it, and I was patient, but you put it to a halt and reversed it. He was finally at the edge, finally about to break and become malleable, finally going to become a perfect rival or ally, but then you had to fuck it all up! Breaking a man like that would have actually served me. I would have a worthy foe and I would make him my greatest asset. I could have had anything I wanted—with him at my side or dead at my feet depending on if I can use the Sword Logic well enough to drain him. What you did was the most annoyingly stupid move you could have ever made. It’s the fucking end of the line for you bitch. I’ll break you here, violate you in person, and kill you in a least merciful way. In front of him.”

He reached his left out to the slick black sand and began shaping it with his will. A long thick section of it rose like a serpent and stayed perfectly still in the air. It began to ripple, losing thickness and lengthening, becoming smooth as polished soapstone. It flew towards Prior’s hand, and he grabbed it by one end.

He examined what he had created, a lash three times as long as I was tall. “You know, I find it funny though that your couple acronym would be S and M. Very humorous considering, you know. And I know you’re just burning to correct me, to tell me it’s actually mostly D and S, but quite frankly I don’t care. I had a chick that I thought I loved or something just last week. I killed her. Devi was her name. Took her three minutes to suffocate. Let’s see if you can beat that record.”

He reached back and prepared to strike, while I was frozen in place. And I simply wasn’t there anymore. The place simply dissolved around me, replaced gradually with the small library in my apartment. Skylar was holding the piece of the Traveller on a chain in front of my face, shaking it as if to speed up the effect. I pushed his hand away from my face, but stayed on the couch. I couldn’t stand. Somehow, that had really worn me out.

Skylar quickly put the amulet around my neck. His face was a mixture of relief and satisfaction. He let out a nervous and ingenuine chuckle. “So my thesis is correct.”

I raised an eyebrow and smiled just a little. “No, ‘Oh thank god you’re alive,’ or anything?”

“That’s a given really. Of course I’m glad you’re alive.” He smacked his forehead. “Fuck, it just hit me. He’s probably going to go after everyone else on Zeus. Unless… No, he’s probably going to just try and get us all in one go. Luckily, there’s been a meeting called. Zavala’s finally letting us know what Ferro’s scouts found out on Titan. That and more. You’ll see when we get there.”

I tried to make sense of literally anything he’d said. “So we’re going to casually brush this off?”
Jester appeared between us. “Oh hey you aren’t in mortal danger anymore.” He disappeared again, probably to pull some sort of petty practical joke.

Skylar quickly apologized after that interruption. “Sorry Max. I just got used to this kind of thing after a while. You will too, after another week or two depending on how much action we see. Zeus is sort of an electromagnet for this sort of thing.”

Some days I wished Tylenol 3 still existed, because Skylar made a habit of making my head hurt. Still, I was glad I hadn’t died, because despite his flaws he was worth it. I gathered my returning strength to get up and hug him. I knew he liked it when I played with his hair, so I did. He grabbed me back, but still just as awkwardly. After a few minutes I pulled away.

“We should go see what that meeting’s about.”

___†___

Church
The Hangar.
The Tower.
Last City, Earth.
Late afternoon.

They really needed a new Hall of Guardians. I saw it once ever, but the old Tower had a few features I liked, despite having only seen them destroyed and on fire.

Holding meetings in the Hangar was not only cold, but also inconvenient. We had to sit on folding chairs around a plastic folding table in an unoccupied corner of the Hangar. People could easily eavesdrop or interrupt if they wanted to. We were lucky nobody did. I also would have frozen if not for my armor, which thankfully everyone was smart enough to wear to this meeting instead of uniforms.

At the head of the table sat Zavala, with Cayde on his left and Ikora on his right. I sat beside the Hunter Vanguard, with my newly Entwined wife(?) to my right. Across from me sat Ferro, Sisu-3, Raven, Alex, and Arya. Two seats remained to my right, presumably for Skylar and Max.
To kill time me and Bellona talked to each other.

“So, we're a thing now,” I said. “Forever. That's nice. I like what you did with your hair today, and everything else about you as usual. I feel blessed to have caught your eye.”

She smiled warmly. “Thanks. You too. So, what are we going to do. Any honeymoon locations in mind? Also, fun fact. Honeymoons are apparently an ancient Norse tradition. Get a newly wed girl drunk on mead, which contains honey, and get jiggy with it to celebrate your marriage.”

“Nope. I have no idea. It's up to you.”

Bellona grinned mischievously, and I feared she'd do what she usually did and mess with my head on a sexual level and otherwise. Or maybe this was the messing around and she wasn't going to do anything to screw with my head. Or maybe… oh hey migraine, hop right on in. Thanks, you're what I needed right now.

I changed the subject. “What is arguably the best battle in all of history?”

Bellona actually took time to think on this, rather than some quippy reply that leaves nothing but open ends and confusion.

“Call me basic, but I like Six Fronts. I wasn't there, but the strategy and the stakes are what make it the most intelligent and desperate battle I've ever read.” Her tongue poked just a little out of her mouth as she thought of a close second. “Although the battle of Monte Cassino was also great, despite the primitive state of the combatants. So many nations united to beat the tar out of Germany. It's like watching a group of Catholics beating up the only Jew on the block, but the Jew has a knife. Jews loses, but spectacularly. Both sides performed quite well.”

“My personal favorite was the battle of Midway,” I said. “America probably won't because we had our eyes all the way open,” I joked.

Bellona got all serious. “Why aren't we talking about the fact that just at our ceremony you got attacked by Prior? He killed a Ghost. He can kill us too, without even touching us. He can and probably does mess with our heads. That's kind of scary, even to me.”

I didn't want to even think about that, let alone talk about it. Luckily, two eggheads saved me from
that pain. Skylar and Max entered our corner of that hangar, holding hands. I noticed that Skylar lagged a slight bit behind Max. Something ain't right with those two, and I'd seen proof the other day. Don't get me wrong, I won't and don't judge, but I can have my opinions.

Max wore a white scarf, a blood red coat that went down to her knees with swan wings stitched onto the back (if I recall correctly), burgundy jeans (they make those?), And a pair of black lace up boots that went halfway up her shins. Skylar wore something I hadn't seen him in before. He wore a pair of dog tags around his neck, one of them bearing his name and the Fireteam Zeus logo and his name, the other (unless my eyes deceived me) read, ‘Property of,’ and something I couldn't quite make out. Probably Property of Fireteam Zeus or Skylar Peace, because what else would it be? He also wore a brown leather bomber jacket with a fur trimmed mantle, which made sense as he was a combat pilot once. He wore black pants that looked like snow pants, but once again he was actually keeping with the airman theme. Even the boots were on point.

They took their seats, Max directly to my right and Skylar to hers. Only now did I notice, for whatever reason, that Cayde had a chicken on his lap. That thing was still alive? Was he supposed to… I wasn't even going to ask myself.

Zavala opened the meeting. “Greetings everyone. I'm glad you're here, albeit I know some of you are worse for wear, despite the expected levity of this day. I have called you here today to discuss a number of disturbing things I have been told and shown lately. First of all, the Axis plans. Ferro, if you will.”

Ferro bowed his head. “Of course sir. But I won't. Why don't you monsieur? I'm merely a mercenary after all. I just happen to be on the payroll of a very talented Fireteam. You tell them.”

“Fine,” Zavala said. “Here they are in detail. The Axis plan to attack numerous colonies, or outposts, to gain footholds across Europe, middle Asia, and the United Kingdom. There's a colony in Germany, Russia, and England on their list. Once they take down the weaker two, they'll move on England. We haven't heard anything from these colonies, so they aren't likely to want our support. I do have contacts in the New York outpost though. They have a functional Navy, and they know the location of the UK colony. They have promised to come to their aid at their command, but not reveal the location of the colony to me. Finding it is going to be up to you, as I cannot send any of my own men as that would be taken as a threat to their sovereignty. Your Fireteam isn't closely associated with the Vanguard, so maybe the other two colonies will lead you in the right direction. In the case of an attack upon your arrival, it'll be up to you, Ferro's mercenaries, and Fireteam Screaming Eagle to find and defend the colony until reinforcements from the City and New York arrive.”

I raised my hand. Zavala nodded to let me speak.

“With all due respect sir, what's so special about this English colony?”
Zavala responded, “It’s rumored the most powerful outpost on Earth, outside of the City. Maybe even the system. According to the New York outpost, they have a fully equipped Navy, Air Force, and Infantry—Guardian and mortal. Their defensive capabilities are admirable, but nothing compared to the next thing I must address. The proverbial bunker buster that makes any walls or defenses useless.”

“Would it happen to be everyone’s favorite redhead, Prior Namör?” Skylar proposed.

I whispered to Bellona, “You're my favorite redhead.”

Ikora Rey answered that. “Yes. He's been attacking members of your Fireteam if I was correctly informed.”

“Yeah, with mind control or something,” Cayde added.

“Different,” Ikora said. “But similar. Psionic assault. He can kill anyone he wants from any range, although it seems it is very taxing for him to do so. Nevertheless, it is terrifying. He could kill us and end the war before it begins, and yet he doesn't. I fear he might soon, if ordered to. His sights seem set on Zeus though, and he can't be blocked—or so we thought. Brigadier General Skylar Peace sent me a remedy to this though.”

Skylar nodded. “Indeed. Max has a necklace made from a small thumb sized piece of the Traveller. I think Dusklight shards would do the trick though. Prior can't manipulate or attack us if we're near a source or channel of Light. With that settled, let's talk about our battle plans again shall we? I wasn’t listening to anything anyone was saying.”

Bellona raised her hand. “I'll second that. They aren't that fleshed out.”

Zavala nodded in agreement. “Then let's get to work.”

Chapter End Notes

Please say you got the subtle Hellsing references, anyone?
Episode 8: Love and the Warpath

Chapter Summary

Skylar, Max, Church, and Bellona get sent on two similar missions that disrupt their love lives—somewhat. Skylar and Max initiate negotiation with a reformed New Berlin. Elsewhere, Church and Bellona try and obtain the location of the United Kingdom colony from an ally of the City, New New York.

<\(\text{°_°}\)>

Max

Forests outside New Berlin.

Walking with Skylar.

Mid afternoon.

So today, right after the Entwinement ceremony and a similarly special event between me and Skylar, Zavala rushed us out into the field to talk with some German outpost and essentially try and get them to help us fight a war that, to them, was their business and didn't concern us. Same with Church, but to a more friendly outpost. The other two, Sisu-3 and Raven, were already in Russia, looking for the rural colony. On Church's honeymoon and the day I planned to do some ‘experimentation’ with Skylar. Whatever. The forests are nice and isolated, and a nice place for a morning walk. And we'd finally get to put our knowledge of the German language to use, unless they spoke Common too.

The sunlight was pleasant and warm, despite the current season, and not a single flake of snow had fallen. The tall ancient oaks towered above us like motionless giants. The ground was cold and coarse, the grass and leaves white with frost.

The path to New Berlin was well worn and clear, but not a single person walked it. Probably due to the fact that nobody needed to leave and nobody wanted to come. The city was self reliant, according to Zavala. Which made them very patriotic and unwilling to so much as talk with the City about anything, even trade.

Despite assurances that the way was safe, we still opted for caution and wore armor. I wore the red and gold robes Skylar had gotten me for Christmas, and the sword he had forged for me lay across my back. I wore no helmet, but I would equip it in a blink of an eye if I saw any hostiles. Upon my feet were the Transversive Steps boots. Their blue glow reflected off of the frosty landscape in a rather dazzling way. My gauntlets were rather lackluster, just the usual Crucible Ankaa Seeker
Skylar decided to throw subtly out the window and wear the goofiest and cutest attempt at a badass outfit. He wore a Hiero Camo cloak with a black and bronze shader, which would have looked cool on any other robes/coat. This one though looked like a winter jacket and a trench coat with a fur trimmed mantle. His boots were a good and close fit. They were black with a bronze colored armor plate on the front of each foreleg. His gauntlets were the same as mine, except obviously his were—you’ll never guess—black with bronze rings. But instead of the aviator sunglasses you expected, he wore his regular glasses. With his new haircut—which left his hair still covering his ears but now only an inch or so more than halfway down his neck and just less than half an inch past his eyebrows—and his collar, he looked positively adorable. His green rimmed brown eyes glittered with the seemingly undiminishable joy he'd begun to show ever since we met.

We walked in near silence, occasionally exchanging looks and smiling at each other. That's how you know your relationship is healthy and stable. When you don't have to make small talk to fill the silence because it doesn't make you uncomfortable.

Skylar, having ADHD, broke the silence about thirty minutes in. “I'm beginning to miss North. After thinking on it a while, he wasn't a bad Ghost. Everything he did was to make my life happier and easier. I'm forever in his debt for going and finding me an owner.” He snapped out of his dreamy trance and looked me straight in the eyes. “Wait is it weird that I said that? It's true but… Actually, when we're at home should I call you anything different?”

“Nope,” I answered. “Just Max. Nothing else. You don't have to call me anything else. And it's not weird to acknowledge that I'm your owner, in most situations. If we're with company, that changes. Other than that, feel free to say whatever you want.”

He stroked his chin. “Hmm… Anything. That's a cunt eating good fucking idea bitch.”

I laughed and swung a fist at his shoulder, barely clipping him lightly. “Except that.”

He gave me a smug and mischievous look. “What are you going to do about it. You already established that you don't punish, so I'm off the hook.”

“I don't punish with pain,” I corrected. “But if you don't keep that mouth clean, you'll find you won't have use of it later. And you can ask any of my exes, I'm quite the creative woman. Watch your step or you'll find out just how creative I can be.”
This seemed to make him uncomfortable. He shrunk into his mantle and looked away, instead admiring the scenery. I realized what I did wrong. Talking about my exes, and meeting them in the case of Ferro, made my angel insecure and uncomfortable.

I moved closer to him and caressed his face, stopping us both. “Hey, you're mine forever. You're the last guy I'll ever be with. The rest didn't work out because they never could. Even the self proclaimed celibates who promised they weren't there for my body couldn't do it. But you're a perfect match, and you're the first one I've ever collared. We'll last until the end of time and then some.”

His smile slowly returned. I could physically see his sigh of relief on the frigid air. His shoulders relaxed. We resumed walking, hand in hand towards New Berlin. I watched yet another mischievous smile spread across his face.

“Mind if I play some music?” he asked innocently. “Who knows, the locals might like it.”

Jester appeared at my left shoulder between us. “Yes. He recommended a good song.”

“I'll regret it but… sure.”

Immediately a familiar metal band began playing on Jester's speakers.

“Attero! Dominatus! Berlin is burning! Demique! Interimo! The Reich has fallen!”

The loud music gave me a jolt. The brief adrenaline rush and genuine disapproval nearly made me do something stupid. I might have slapped him right then and there, but I kept my cool.

Jester began singing along and bobbing to the beat. “We stand at the gates of Berlin, with two and a half million men. There's six thousand tanks in our ranks, we use them as battering rams. Artillery leading the way-”

I waved him away. The only thing I had to thank him for today was rearranging my sock drawer and encouraging the hardest brat I'd ever had to tame. Don't get me wrong, it was fun and I could do it (Jester gave me plenty of experience), but today wasn't the day for that.
I shook my head and frowned. “Don’t. You'll piss off the locals, and we don't need that.”

Skylar did something he never did before and pulled rank. “As Brigadier General and a leader of Fireteam Zeus, I order you to let me play whatever music I want.”

“What a dick move!” I complained. “Why were you promoted anyway? You aren't the commanding type. Church would fit the role better.”

“Ikora recommended it,” he replied. “She said while I wouldn't get any of the responsibility of a full General or even a Major General, I would have plenty of freedom to do whatever I wanted on the battlefield. Guardians like me and Church bring what they call a chaos factor to the battlefield. Church has uncanny instincts and aim, knows his stuff, and is their go to man for difficult missions. And I'm generally… me. Unpredictable as a thunderstorm.”

“That's still a dick move,” I said.

Skylar nodded. “Which is why I rescind the order and apologize. In fact, I'm not technically on duty now. This is a diplomatic mission, and you're the one who's good with people. If anything you should probably be able to give the orders on this one.”

“You wouldn't actually ever pull rank on me would you?” I asked.

Skylar laughed as if that were absurd. “No! I couldn't really now could I? I'm your… what actually is it called?”

Finally an easy subject again. I would have begun talking about that. But the universe didn't agree with me today.

A Titan and two Hunters in grey armor with matching helmets emerged in front of us. They leveled their auto rifles at us and flicked the safety switches in unison.

The Titan began shouting. “Hands in the air City rats!”
Church

New New York outpost.

Early morning.

The trip here was an uneventful flight. Upon landing it got even easier. We were greeted warmly by the locals, and offered tours of various establishments. New New York was marvellous. Somehow a whole quarter of the city had been reclaimed and refurbished. The border was walled and reinforced, and atop the buildings you could spot an AA gun or two.

Me and Bellona had been dressed nicely for the occasion. I wore my Major's dress uniform and a Dusklight crucifix, but Bellona chose something significantly different. She wore professional looking black leather boots, white cotton leggings, a blue short skirt, and a blue blouse that looked as if it were designed to bring attention to her body. Even her Dusklight shard necklace looked attractive somehow. I had been informed that Jake, the Warlock who headed this outpost, was quite the ladies man. Even with our rings I bet he'd be checking my lady out.

We were led to a restored town hall and rushed past any distractions into the office. It looked like the oval office two point o. There were two seats for us in front of a wooden desk. Behind the desk were windows with drawn curtains and flags on poles. It looked like the old American flag, but with a few barely noticeable altercations. At the desk with their feet up sat a Warlock who I presumed was Jake. He was caucasian and goofy faced. His bright brown hair reminded me of Alex's (who planned on quitting Zeus to lead Strike Team Victory), but it was trimmed shorter. His his eyes were amber brown and had an energetic look to them, just like the rest of him. He wore a flashy yellow trench coat and skinny jeans. His T-shirt legitimately said 'I ♥ NNYC' on it. He spat out fragments of a toothpick and motioned for us to take a seat.

I sat down on the left in a wooden chair, adjusting my position to try and feel less uncomfortable. Bellona sat to my right.

Jake whistled. He said in a Brooklyn accent, “Damn girl. Nice legs.”

Bellona pretended to be abashed, pulling down her skirt and fake blushing.

I coughed into my hand. “If you would stop objectifying my Entwined wife, that would be great. We're here to talk business, not try and cuck the slayer of Ghaul.”
“Aight aight I get ya,” Jake said. “So Zavala wants me to sell out my buddy Winston does he? Sends a war hero and some eye candy my way to try an loosen my tongue? Well I tellin ya it ain't happening!”

“Jake, we weren't saying anything of the sort,” I assured him. “I carry grave news.”

“Axis, space Nazis, I know. Winston rings me up and I come a runnin.”

“You severely underestimate them sir,” I told him. I decided to switch tactics. “You won't beat them alone. And we don't plan on looping your friend into any contracts. I'm not a stiff, aight? I only dressin’ to pass. Fireteam Zeus? We don't roll by no Vanguard playbook. Alex and Arya do but they ain't gonna be round no more. Gonna go be Vanguard shills. The other six of us though? We're the real deal. We plan to help the England outpost with troops I hired. Mercenaries. I got about a hundred. That's firepower you can't turn down. And if y'aint convinced I ain't a shill, this might sway you. Tell em Bell.”

Bellona sounded like she'd had a pint of helium, as her voice sounded more weak and feminine. “We're here on our honeymoon. If you wouldn't mind lending us a few rooms and having someone show us the sights that'd be nice. We'll pay too, and I won't forget to tip the cleaning lady for her troubles.” Bellona winked. “We plan on getting rough.”

Ever seen a facial erection before? It's when someone gets that stupid grin and starts looking really self conscious at the same time. That's what Jake got. I was disgusted and impressed.

“I'll get you two a room and consider your offer,” Jake said.

Bellona stood and curtsied, making sure to pull her skirt up just a bit too high. “Thank you sir. And if you so much as looked below my waist I'll punch your fucking teeth out you chauvinistic pig.” She smiled and winked. “Have a nice day!”

[ ¥ ]

Y

Axis bunker.

Northern Martian ice cap.
Every angle of the attack was gathered in my little room, standing at my desk. Our air General, Dickson, in her black flight suit already. Our Admiral and my protege, Z, in a similar uniform to mine, except he was a Warlock and his ballistic mask only covered half his face. Our special forces leader and our greatest asset, Roman, in a set of torn black and red robes—no Devi with him now. Good. She was a distraction. And of course, me.

We planned the assault on a paper map of the United Kingdom. The colony was mostly in England, the capitol was still in London. They had a great Navy, but most of it was in the Irish Sea and the English Channel. Which meant either Winston was a fool or his air force and infantry would be more focused in the North. That meant I'd hit them from the air from the East and see if our bomber jumpships could get their airfields and barracks. Our navy would have to face theirs head on to properly surround the colony, but I figured Z’s ships would force them into a deadlock. Our destroyers would be the first to go if any losses occurred, but the battleships could definitely hold their own and the destroyers would go down swinging. We didn't need to win on the water, just keep our aircraft carrier safe and get our infantry ashore.

Once we got them ashore, we'd have two thousand Guardians of our own immediately ashore, followed by seven hundred mortal mercenaries from our sponsors and a thousand of our own. Once we reached London, the five hundred Concordat reinforcements would help us crush the defenders. But what would really do most of the work was the Priory. Roman was practically a god, and his men were unrivalled and, despite being only eighty strong, could very well turn the tide in our favor. They would pave the road to London and keep on paving. All we had to do was castrate them politically and conscript their military. Not too difficult.

In the air, it would be up to Dickson. She was the aerial expert, not me. She didn't plan past the initial strike because her strategy was essentially improv. Good improv at that.

We had to act now though, as Roman's refusal to stop toying and start killing left the threat of Fireteam Zeus and the Vanguard still present. That and the League could still be functional, maybe even watching us right now. And we couldn't use him against them anymore as they'd found a way to counter his psionic assaults. We would strike after tomorrow. The only thing that remained was to get either Skylar or Church out of the battle. Luckily, I had a plan for that. Time to put my old one of Blue Ribbons to use. Namely Silas. Silas Krane the deceiver.

<##>

Skylar

Rommel's ‘war room.’

New Berlin.
The three Guardians who apprehended us were actually quite hospitable. I didn't even have to ask them twice to cuff us, verbally demean us, and rough us up—to the point where Max got three separate broken noses in eight minutes—before taking us to their leader. Their leader just so happened to think he was Erwin Rommel born again, which started to make sense as we talked more. Pre Golden Age humans sometimes did become Guardians, and this guy gave me serious Rommel vibes. He wore the right uniform, minus the trench coat and plus a black and silver Hunter cloak. He even looked like Rommel, down to the last wrinkle.

Rommel's ‘war room’ could be described in two words. Awkwardly cozy. It looked like a proper office. Grey walls and boring paintings. Maps on a desk. The whole shebang. But it was bigger, thirty five by forty five feet, and it had various types of furniture within. While he didn't have the courtesy to uncuff us, he did offer us a seat together on an expensive looking green two person couch. He also kept the Guardians from confiscating anything other than our weapons and had his Ghost (Blitz, go figure) repair my glasses—which a rude Hunter had broken on the way here.

Erwin put his hands flat on his desk and began profusely apologizing, in Common if you must know. “I am so sorry you two. My men probably didn't recognize you. It's truly an honor to meet you Skylar Peace. I would love to meet your friend Church as well. The heroes of the Red War, the Pantheon conflict, and slayers of Panoptes. Nevertheless, whether they recognized you or not, they are still going to be punished accordingly. While Hanz does need the pay, he can kiss his rank goodbye. I will tolerate no violence against guests or prisoners.”

I spoke up. “Assuming we're guests, what are the cuffs about?”

He grinned. “I love doing this.” He snapped his fingers and the locks disengaged. “It's so satisfying. But I did not specify they should have been put on you in the first place. Yet another mistake. Now, what have you come to me for?”

Max took her place as negotiator while I sat quietly (but not still). “Erwin Rommel, we require the location of the outpost in England. An organization called the Axis plans to take it and use it as a foothold in a longer war against the City. They might also attack your colony. If you cooperate and help us, the Vanguard will extend their support to you in case of an attack. I mean no offense to your military-”

Rommel waved dismissively. “None taken. They're the offense.”
“But you could really use the support. And if you legitimately don’t, I know your arrangement with the English colony. If they’re attacked, you send your troops and armored divisions to help. The Vanguard could send people to hold the fort for you in case the attack is larger than initially projected and includes your colony as a target. Also, if you truly are Rommel—”

“I am,” he assured her.

“Then I’ll have you know I’m a huge fan of you in your first life. War Without Hate is my favorite book of its era! Sure it's just memos and such, but they're good damned memos.”

Erwin's cheeks reddened slightly and he smiled, warmed by the compliment. “Well spoken and well read. Very well then. I shall consider your offer and I will have an answer in precisely six hours. I shall give you a private room in this very building. Feel free to do… whatever it is you wish while you wait, as long as you clean up after yourselves. This is Germany, so we’re no stranger to anything peculiar, but lots of us still don't want to see it. And stay in this part of town. For one, only a fifth of Berlin is human territory. The rest… is iffy. And stay near or in this building if possible, I cannot stress that enough. The last leader didn't take kindly to City Guardians, and the progressives tend to stay near this area.”

· · ·

30 minutes later.

Guest suite.

Parliament building.

New Berlin.

Earth.

The guest suite wasn't half bad, but not that luxurious either. It was basically a hotel room. There were two rooms, a living room and a bedroom. The living room had a folding couch, a coffee table, a single forty inch non holographic screen and no windows. The bedroom had a four poster bed and a nightstand. There was no kitchen or washrooms—you had to go down the hall for that. There wasn't even a mini fridge, so we'd have to go out for food or rely on nutrient feeds—which I couldn't do without North. I was actually beginning to miss him a little.

It really opened my eyes to just how well I lived in the City, and I got a new respect for non City colonies. It was admirable that they got even this far. And if their military was as good as I hoped, rude as they are, that would be even more impressive.
Once inside the room me and Max immediately put up a ‘Bitte nicht stören’ sign and worked on curing our immediate boredom. I realized that the leader of this colony had seen me in my collar, something I most certainly not okay with.

I felt my cheeks redden. “I was… wearing this… in front of…”

Max giggled and pushed my shoulder. “Don't worry. He didn't seem to care if even notice. Plus, I'm ninety percent sure you could wear it right out on the streets of the City and nobody, except the media, would give it a second glance.”

“I know, and I feel a little bit more comfortable wearing it out now, obviously, but still… Erwin. He's an influential person. Plus, I wouldn't wear it out in public yet. Not in the City anyway. The forest was fine because it was empty.”

“If you stop thinking about it then it'll stop bothering you,” Max recommended. “And you're the only one who cares. Why were you asking about it anyway?”

Gah! My only weaknesses! Awkwardness with intimacy and love! I was going to ask to try something today, and then this mission became a thing, but now we've got a private room and I got the courage to ask again because I'm me, I've got confidence for days, but now I can't… Fuck it. I'm doing it. I faced a god in their throne world, I can face the awkwardness of the early stages of a power exchange relationship.

I tried to be as vague as possible. “Well, today we had some stuff planned… And I'm bored as all Hell…”

Max tilted her head and smirked. “Sky, we’re working. We’re in a foreign colony negotiating on behalf of the Vanguard. What are we honestly going to do? Plus, there’s a whole bunch of other things we can do together.” She pulled her book bag out of Jester’s storage and began fishing around. “Ah, there it is! Krieg ohne Haß, made from Erwin Rommel’s memoirs. I recommend we read it, seeing as there’s a chance we might actually be dealing with Rommel here.”

I nodded in reluctant agreement. So this is what it’s like to actually have to work, instead of just rushing in guns blazing. Sure, I like my job—I get to be an immortal space wizard after all—but I hate when it’s so devoid of action and when it disrupts my personal life. It had been a while since I'd shot anything bigger than a Knight or done a mission more important than a patrol. I was almost looking forward to my fight with Prior.
Max left for the bedroom, and I presumed I was to follow. When I entered she was already cross-legged on the bed, reading. Her coat and boots lay on the floor neatly. Damn she’s quick. She looked up and motioned for me to join her.

“Interesting… Hardly seems to have any reservations against these SAS.” Max continued to read and take notes.

I joined her on the bed, reading over her shoulder. For whatever reason she hadn’t bought the translated version. Probably because things tended to be lost between old languages and Common—save for English seeing as that’s the base of Common. She reached behind my back and began playing with my hair, which I appreciated. It cooled my nerves, and they needed cooling all right. I realized recently that we are at the very end of our time. The Axis would strike soon—everything seemed to indicate that. That was stressing. Plus, despite not quite really missing him, I lost my Ghost. That hurt just a little to a lot. It took time for it to set in, but I was beginning to feel this sort of hole in my chest—right around where I’d get that fluttering of happiness, but deeper.

I heard a click and felt a tugging at my neck. I looked to Max and she was grinning. In her hand she held the end of a—you might’ve guessed it—leash.

“What?” she asked innocently. “You asked for it.”

I shrugged. “Can’t argue with that logic. You are always springing stuff like this on me with no notice or warning. Kind of like it that way. Not always, but you know.”

“Shut up and read,” she commanded. “And try to keep up.”

Church
New New York outpost.
In a hotel overlooking Upper New York Bay.

Despite their less than qualified leader, the New New Yorkers ran a good outpost. It wasn’t entirely independent, as the City supplied a third of their food and gave them a lot of the technology they needed to advance and keep the place running—but they had something good going nonetheless. It was exactly as my brain thought it should be. Hot dog stands, wheeled and non-wheeled taxis, the
works. The only thing different was the better traffic due to the lack of mainstream ground transport vehicles. Other than that, it was pretty damn similar.

As promised, me and Bellona had been given a room and were told we had free roam of the outpost until the decision had been made. On the way I spotted a music store and Deacon had the amazing idea that I could probably play the acoustic guitar. If I could shoot well from muscle memory, maybe that applied to other things too. The guy sometimes made a valid point, and I bought a sleek red one. I realized that the value of glimmer—still hate that it’s called that—was higher here. Only a little, but still a noticeable difference.

Once we got to the hotel room, which was on the seventh floor and overlooked the bay, we were amazed by how well these people were doing. The thing had to be two thousand square feet or something. There were three holographic screens—one stationary, two handheld—all of adjustable size. There was a full kitchen with a well stocked refrigerator (although most of the food was imperishable which confused me) and a four burner stove. The bedroom had a queen size bed with red sheets of an expensive looking fabric. In the living room were two full sized leather couches and the mounted screen. Everything was at least average quality.

I sat on a couch with Bellona, still dressed the same as before, and tested Deacon’s theory using a metal pick I had bought. I began strumming a random tune and after it had begun to form into a cohesive one a, long forgotten song from a long ago time came to mind. The chorus only, but nothing much else. How did I remember this.

The few lyrics I recalled escaped my lips unintentionally. “Bye bye Miss American Pie. Drove my chevy to the levee but the levee was dry. Them good ol’ boys are drinking whiskey and rye, singin this'll be the day that I die. This'll be the day that I die…”

Bellona began formulating theories and asking me to play a few more tunes I shouldn't know. After that we'd ordered some wine and put on a film to set the mood. The problem was, streaming services were better now. The movie selection was so good I hardly felt the need to do any, ‘Netflix and chill’ as it was called. We got through four glasses total while ‘The Heroes of Six Fronts’—a movie about the battle and the few who stood out as particularly heroic, like Shaxx, Saint-14, and Osiris—played before finally deciding to… loosen up.

What we did in the bedroom can be described is not exactly strictly PG 13. Bellona stripped down to her underwear, a white c cup brassiere and a pair of something that looked like white gym shorts that didn't even go a sixth of the way down her thighs. I'd seen her in shorts before, and that was exciting. The view I got of her fit body and especially her legs… Damn. Like this it was so much more intense. I felt heart pounding and I found it impossible to control myself. After so long of her being the one who made the advances I finally made one of my own. She crawled into the bed and I followed her. I used one of her own moves on her, pinning her by the wrists and doing something a little more than just kissing.
I won't torture you with the details, but it was enjoyable to say the least. There was a lot of grasping and clutching at sheets and… yeah like I promised, no more details.

Of course when one tries to juggle both love and the warpath, love tends not to last too long before the battlefield wants a turn with your life. Just when we were finished, Jake gave us a summons. Deacon told me this in a rather odd way. It seemed since I put on that Dusklight crucifix he’d begun to develop a new personality. Had Roman been doing it to me too? How long had he been doing this exactly?

He appeared over our covers and quietly wolf whistled. “Appears I've caught you at a bad time Major Cassavettes sir. But Colonel I daresay I got here right in time. Anyway sir, the president himself has called you to his office. They've decided what they're going to do, and I'll wager there's a bajillion strings attached.”

<\(°_°\)>

Max

Guest suite.

New Berlin.

I loved how we were letting the power exchange dynamic bleed into other aspects of our relationship. Right now we were having a sort of intellectual conversation about D&S on the couch while we picked at some leftovers. After a few chapters of Krieg ohne Haß, I let Skylar off the leash and we went to get some food from the vendors inside the building (which was no bigger than a well funded public library). And no, we did not get sausage. That's the wurst thing to eat in this part of the world with such a diverse local cuisine available. Get it? I'm funny too.

Skylar brought it up. We were about to see what was on TV in this part of the world—or outside the City even—when he decided he'd lay in my lap and go to sleep. Offhand he noted that while we did a lot of stuff, we never discussed it enough. So I decided to pick it up from there. I asked him about what he thought about the leash I'd put on him.

He looked up with glittering eyes, even clearer without his glasses on. “Why don't we talk Napoleon or something?” he suggested.
I gave him, ‘the look’ to loosen his tongue. “Do you want to talk about Napoleon?”

“No, but why this?”

I began playing with his ever soft hair and listened to the sigh of pleasure that escaped his lips. He got so much satisfaction and pleasure from such simple things, and I liked that about him. I felt somehow bad that he looked at me as his only real source of happiness. Even around Church, his best friend, he wasn't as happy.

“It's important in a relationship like ours to be open with our feelings and preferences so we can set and build upon our limits and ground rules,” I explained. “I tend to be a little spontaneous-”

“Just like me!” Jester cheered, spinning through the air and disappearing.

I chuckled at that. “Yes, just like Jester. I do things without warning. I know you say you like it that way-”

“In certain situations,” Skylar added.

“Well the point is, I should ask more,” I continued. “Before and after. It should become part of the aftercare too, especially when we do experimentation and progression. I also like your insights on submission. It's interesting to learn about the other side.”

Skylar nodded. “I get that.”

“So, how did you feel about that?”

He paused to think. He fidgeted a little and drummed his fingers on the couch while he thought, and you could see the gears turning behind those eyes.

“If you couldn't tell I've got ADHD,” he joked. “So I don't particularly fancy sitting still. When I have to do it though, whether bound or on a leash, it's a mixed feeling really. There's this… nyeh… not exactly good feeling because I can't move. But what overpowers it is the pleasure, which comes from the exact same thing for the same reason. Every act of submission I commit is pleasurable in its
own tiny unique way really. When I was on the leash it was the same feeling I get from behind bound but different. For one, I was kind of free. For two… has anything just felt right? Like, this is my place, this is how it should be. And something else, that surrender of control and something like… I'm grasping at straws here. Mostly the pleasure is similar, but there's different triggers for it that make the feeling differ. You get that right? I'm not talking nonsense?”

My head was piecing it together and trying to fill the gaps. “Yeah I think I get it. It's similar with me. To tug on the leash and get a response, to be obeyed. I also like knowing that you aren't going anywhere, that you'll be right by me, and that as long as the leash is connected I control where you go. You belong to me and I dictate what you do. Mostly. You're a bit of a brat.”

He snapped me a pair of finger guns. “That's it with me in reverse. And then there's the bondage. I like it a lot, and I do believe it was the first thing we did of this sort.”

I nodded, recalling that day. I had mixed feelings about it. It had been good and bad. “Christmas day. You asked me to tie you up, and it took you an hour to rationalize and explain it.”

He grinned. “That I did. Anyway, you're an absolute artist really. I like it when I can't move, because it's just… that feeling. The fact and feeling of being restrained is ecstatic. And the thing I really like is that—you know how I am with physical contact and stimulation right? It feels awkward and pleasurable. For some reason I sometimes want to flinch away because it's too… intense? And sometimes I want more and you tease me by keeping your hand just a little too far away from my body. I like not having any say—not being able to physically, and sometimes verbally, resist you. And on a side note, we've never used cuffs.”

I had a valid reason for this. “To me, cuffs are a bit lazy. Too quick. Shibari is like a good relationship. It requires time, love, effort and commitment to create something binding and beautiful. I don't think there's anything wrong with cuffs, but I don't think they're anywhere near the level rope and scarves are at.”

Skylar said, “True, but we should try them sometime soon. I'm curi-”

*Knock knock knock*

“Lady Maxime,” Erwin called. “The council has called upon you. I suggest you wrap up your… whatever it is, and come down there with me.”
“Okay,” I shouted back. “You weren’t listening in on us were you?”

“Eavesdropping is impolite and bad etiquette,” Rommel replied. “I just arrived. You have twenty five minutes to prepare. I recommend dressing in your robes or coat. It makes you more relatable and similar to these people. We may be negotiating more than just a defense contract and some coordinates.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” I promised. “Wait! Are you really Rommel?”

That got him to laugh. “Was Rommel really Rommel? The Rommel who speaks with you today may or may not be the same body, but he is not the same person. The Rommel the world romanticized and looked up to was a legend. I saw fit to carry on his, or my, legacy. To be the Rommel legend. But if you’re curious, I had cyanide still in my system. Make of that what you will. But to one you may know, I am Tom.”

I… I shouldn't be alive. Able to think. To... Was Heaven real? Did Ghosts go to Heaven? Was it Hell? I couldn't see or feel or anything. I was just… there. Had I rejoined with the Light? With my creator? The… everything else, said something between yes and no.

If so, I could not accept it! Skylar is in danger! Prior plans to use him. Y plans something worse. What will come of his decision will be far worse than my Guardian's death. It will spawn an unstoppable monster that no longer resembles the loving, sensitive, and overall Skylar-ly Guardian I had bonded with. I just had to hope Max really was the one. Not only the one to love him, but to save him. To save us all.

Part of me, or the Light, maybe the Traveller itself, told me not to worry. All would be fine in the end. As long as they didn’t lose hope or mercy, as long as they tried, the children of the Light would prevail. I myself began to think this. I became more similar with everything else. I became a part of it. Is this what the Thanatonauts saw…
Max and Skylar pave the way for a City-New Berlin alliance. Church and Bellona are sent on a mission to clear a reputedly unkillable Kell out of the ruins of the Bronx.

Church

City State Hall.

New New York, Earth.

Early evening.

The City State Hall looked like a freaking palace. We were of course ushered right into the meeting hall, but I still got a glance or two at the eye melting opulence. All was not exactly right here on second thought. Civilians with guns was okay in theory, maybe even practice, but it was irresponsible in times like these. And I had seen between the cracks and noticed heinous inequality.

Our outfits had changed significantly. I wore my armor as that was how I would be recognized by most, as did Bellona. My forest camouflage armor looked like that of a US Navy SEALS’, but with harder armor plates and a forest camo cloak. Bellona’s looked different from before. Now it was red and bronze, and the Titan mark at her hip was red. She truly did look like a goddess. Well, more so than usual.

Once in the oval shaped meeting hall me and Bellona were sat down side by side on one end of the table in rather comfortable cushioned wooden chairs. On either side of us six men sat (all men, all old, all white save for one). At the very far end with his feet up and a toothpick in his mouth sat Jake, dressed no different than before.

Jake clapped once. “Excellent. You’re already dressed for the occasion. Now, we’ve voted almost unanimously to let you know where Winston’s Britain colony is—on one condition.”

“What would that be Mr. President?” I asked.
He rubbed his hands eagerly. “We've been slaving day an’ night to go take back the Bronx, or some of it. Problem is, there's a mean looking Kell keeping us from doin' so. Most Fallen liquidated into the House of Dusk, but Kordiks runs a sweet gig called the House of Wind. We'd 'ave wiped 'em out if we could, but we can't. Kordiks just shrugs off any and all damage. We think, hey, this seems like a nice Herculean task, so let's send Church and his hot wife. So, you up for it?”

Bellona cracked her knuckles. “I've been wanting to punch someone since we got here. I guess a Kell will have to suffice.”

---

Skylar

Rommel's office.

New Berlin, Earth.

Mid evening.

We had actually expected a meeting hall. Not Rommel's office again. Nonetheless, with the extra people it felt bigger. I had done as Erwin recommended and worn my armor, plus changed my bond to the Dawning one instead of the Vanguard one. I also removed the collar and replaced it with my crystal Stormcaller locket with the golden ring embedded in the middle. I wore my glasses as well just to appear intellectually superior. Max dressed in her usual armor as well, and she still managed to make it look way too beautiful for words. Maybe she was reborn with it. Maybe it's my bias towards my—well, not mine, I'm hers, not the other way around—companion.

Inside the office were a variety of people in a variety of outfits and chairs.

In a wooden rocking chair sat a fair skinned man in jean overalls, a white shirt, work boots, and a bow tie. He looked like he handled agricultural operations around here.

In a sturdy looking wooden chair sat a blonde caucasian Titan in polished silver and red armor with an eagle on each shoulder. He had a scar over one eye and an intimidating buzz cut. I noticed that clutched in the painted eagle's claws was an Iron Cross, which was a recurring theme here. An eagle holding a cross. He also had a General's eagle on his left breast. I assumed this made him the Defense Minister or something.

In a recliner sat a pudgy black man in a business suit and a green tie. He practically reeked of
money. Probably the head of the bank or the Finance Minister. I made a note not to mention the reichsmark.

An actual kid in a grey mechanic jumpsuit sat in a blue bean bag chair in the left corner of the room. He was caucasian with brown hair and amber eyes, and he looked no older than seventeen to thirty. That was young, (as I've said before) especially compared to his expected lifespan of around three hundred. He was spinning and tossing a wrench in a careless way that made me wish I brought a helmet. He looked like he handled construction or repaired tanks for a living. Probably both.

And on Erwin's desk sat a Ghost. It wasn't his, his was red and had a black Iron Cross on its shell (sort of a Red Baron theme). This one was marble white with a lion figurehead. It looked as elegant as North had when he was alive.

Rommel motioned for us to take a seat on the same two person couch as before. We did, but we refrained from any intimacy, for the duration of the meeting at least.

Rommel made a finger pyramid and began speaking. He pointed the pyramid at the fat man. “This is Mr. Gault, not to be confused with Ghaul,” he joked. “He's our Finance Minister. He would like to arrange a trade deal between us and the City, as well as establish currency values between the two sovereign entities.”

Gault raised a hand off the armrest briefly. “Indeed I do.”

Erwin gestured at the Titan. “This is Heinrich. You can call him Rich. He's our General of the Army and Defense Minister. He will be negotiating anything remotely military related, including whether or not your City gets involved in this conflict.”

Heinrich nodded. “And my mind is set on the latter,” he said in German.

“He speaks Deutsche and not much Common,” Rommel explained. “But I'm assuming you two know the tongue?”

“Yes we do,” Max confirmed.

“Good.” Rommel pointed at the kid. “That's Hugo. He handles the construction and maintenance of our colony and military vehicles. He's only twenty eight, but he's a prodigy, I assure you.”
Hugo groaned. “Can I go now. I literally have like, no reason to be here. I'm not immortal. I don't have forever to waste. Our Panzers are in dire need of my attention! And it's been six hours since their last tune up.”

Rommel waved him off. “Fine, leave.” He then muttered, “Unfortunately he's obsessed with tanks.”

Hugo left in a flash. “That I am, deaf I am not!” he called back.

Rommel sighed and put his smile back on. He gestured at the farmer. “Lastly we have Sebastian. He's our Agricultural Minister. He built the first farm in this colony one hundred sixty two years ago. He'll be doing… not much really, but he's very intelligent. He'll have some valid input, I promise.”

Sebastian just grunted and closed his eyes.

“Will you tell us where the England colony is?” I asked in German so everyone would understand.

Rich grinned. “Straight to the point. I like him,” he said, once more in German.

Rommel's smile dropped slightly. “Yes and no. We'll take you and ten other Guardians from the City to England for diplomatic purposes.”

I shook my head, not satisfied at all. “No. England could be in danger. England is in danger. By the end of the month they will be under the control of the Axis. We need the location so we can aid in their defense.”

Rommel gave me a suspicious look. “Why didn't you mention that earlier?”

“Because I thought it was obvious,” I stated. “And we did tell you. Must not have heard over your… Nevermind.”

“In that case, I will need some Vanguard assistance after all.”
Rich got an idea. “Here's my idea. Take most of our army to England to crush these Axis as we would anyway, but with most of our army instead of a mere hundred men and ten tanks. But only if the Vanguard agrees to protect us until we return.” He looked to Max. “Lady Flynn, could you arrange that?”

“I can,” Max said.

Rommel nodded. “That is a good plan. Since the situation is so dire, we will also allow one hundred City Guardians to join us.”

I smiled. This was going great! “Thank you Rommel sir!” I blurted out. “You are God himself!”

Mr. Gault coughed, spitting up a few crumbs. “I say we should charge them for it.”

We all gave him a look of disdain.

He laughed awkwardly. “I was only kidding,” he said defensively. “But make sure the Vanguard send someone to do the financial and trade negotiations. I understand you are only here for military purposes.”

Sebastian added something. “You should trust the Vanguard more. They built the ‘Last’ City. They can be of some use here or something I’ll just go back to…”

Max spoke up. “I'm not sure one hundred Guardians will be enough. While my partner here thinks it's a good deal, I say it's rubbish.”

“Don't push it,” I warned.

Rich began cackling maniacally. “We have a thousand men! Two hundred panzer! We will wipe them out!”

“Look, Church is handling stuff with the New New Yorkers, I'm sure we'll be good,” I assured Max. “And I'm pretty sure the Russians will cooperate.”
Rommel smiled. “Yes, that is good. Zhukov loves war! He will help us, but even he won't sell out Winston. To be honest, we're more than a little afraid of him, Winston, so we tread carefully around him.”

Sebastian mumbled, “Taxes us for stupid trade and defense contract. Takes our food to feed his people for less than half the value. Deutschland for the Deutsche I say. But oh no, that means I’m a nationalist so that makes me a Nazi. Dang liberals and their…”

Mr. Gault nodded his chubby head. “Too much money out of my- I mean our pockets.”

Rommel nodded in agreement once more. He snapped his fingers and made a face as if he'd just recalled something important.

He pointed to the Ghost. “Athena?”

The Ghost rose lazily and looked to Rommel. “Yes sir?” it asked in a weary voice.

“Skylar Peace,” Erwin said, “I saw and heard Max's Ghost, how could I miss that thing, but I never saw you with one. Are you without?”

I felt that ache in my chest again. I nodded but didn't speak.

Rommel smiled. “Guess who's without a Guardian?”

{ ° >

Raven

Town Hall.

The twelve towns of Zhukovgrad, Earth.

Past midnight.
Holy Hell did I ever love this place. Sure, it was just twelve towns of wooden houses and a few airfields and barracks, but Russia! Russia was back, and better than ever! Vodka! Communism! Vodka! Bears! Vodka! Russian comedy! Vodka! Nationalism! Vodka! Strong resilient women and men! Vodka! Did I mention the vodka!

Me and Sisu-3 wore our usual armor, his fur robes and my feathery Hunter armor and wing shaped cloak. The Russians greeted us beautifully and politely, a few Guardians challenging us to fistfights right then and there. No matter who left with a bloody nose, there was universal laughter and joy.

We were ushered into the town hall and negotiation was swift. The place looked more like a tavern than a town hall, and there were rooms upstairs—for politicians and guests alike. The leader of Zhukovgrad was a winter white Awoken Titan with bluish grey hair and blazing orange eyes named—you’ll never guess—Vladimir Zhukov. He insisted we call him Zhukov though, as that's what his friends call him. His best friends called him Suckoff. Zhukov wore intimidating chipped red armor and a long cloak that went over his shoulders made of three bearskins.

We sat down at a table, and a hot Hispanic bartender—in a distracting short skirt that covered just enough and not enough at the same time—served us vodka by the bottle. Zhukov held up a finger while he downed half of his. He wiped his lips and exhaled in delight.

“Now, what do you young men want?”

I nervously explained. “We know you’re allies with the British colony-”

“False!” Zhukov bellowed. “We merely know where they live. We have no affiliation with them.”

Sisu-3 tried a different tactic. You could see the intelligence in those glowing white eyelights. “What do you love Zhukov? I myself love my rifle. I love guns. I like making guns. I like cleaning guns. I like shooting guns. I like the M3 grease gun. I like the click of a fresh magazine being slid into place. I like the clang of a top fed magazine running dry in an old American rifle. I like emptying a gun into my enemy and switching guns to do it again. I live guns. I breathe guns. Me being a Warlock was a mistake. Guns are my life. Not even Banshee could surpass my prowess with a rifle, making or firing. So Zhukov, what do you love?”

Zhukov was impressed. He emptied his bottle and loudly answered. “I love anime! And I love war! Mostly war! Anime is too hard to find on old computers. Wasn't too popular round here. But I really love war! I know the entire I like war speech by heart.”
I saw where this was going. “Well Zhukov, do you like war with Neo Nazis?”

“How would you like to help the Last City wage war on the Axis?”

At that be promptly began preparing for battle, ordering soldiers around and ushering pilots to their jumpships. He didn't tell us where the colony was, but he gave us an invitation to join him. Good enough.

------[-:]

Bellona

Ruins of the Bronx.

New York State.

America, Earth.

Just after sunset.

So here I am, minding my own business, pushing Church up against the wall and giving him a good R rated Frenching—and then these Fallen in grey rags decide to start shooting.

Let's describe the situation and formulate a good strategy. The building in front of me was a decimated apartment building. Not a lot of cover, and the upper floors were collapsed. Then to our left was a gas station. Nope, probably nothing left to blow up. It was good cover though. The other buildings were irrelevant. That gas station was in good shape, and I was genuinely curious to see if it had been raided yet.

So while the Fallen pelleted us from the rooftops, we made a beeline for the gas station. I shoulder charged through the doors and slid on my right thigh to get down behind a rack of expired junk food. Church joined me and equipped his helmet, as did I. His looked like a United States Marine's helmet but it was airtight with a green visor and a mask. His cloak didn't fully fit over it, but it stopped bullets so he went for it. My helmet was themed after an ancient Spartan helmet, with a glowing orange chroma mohawk on it. Yeah. The FWC armor looked good, but my own armor was far cooler. Badass as Skylar would put it.
Church pulled two matching Old Fashioned hand cannons from their holsters and prepared to do something both cool and idiotic.

“Church, you can't handle the recoil with just one hand,” I warned.

A Dreg and a Wretch barged in on us, and Church popped a round straight through each of their skulls. He handled the recoil masterfully.

“Oh really?” he teased. “And dual wielding is a good tactic when one's wearing the Lucky Pants. Every noggin shot puts a round back into the other cannon.”

“Sounds fun,” I said. “But have you ever tried this?”

“Tried what?”

“Stay here and cover me,” I commanded.

“Got it Colonel,” he said, leaning out of cover to take potshots at any Fallen he saw.

I pulled a hammer, an actual sledgehammer, out of Ares’ storage. Well, it was actually a hexagonal headed war hammer, but let's just call it a sledgehammer for brevity's sake.

I said nothing, not even ‘it’s hammer time’, as I rushed out to meet the Fallen. There was a Captain standing near a gas pump, and he was the first to go. A single swing and his head was no longer there. A pair of Marauders appeared and tried to get me from behind. Sorry, that's Church's job now. A bullet whizzed through one's head, and with my left hand I punched the other into a wall.

From the ruins of a shop across the street came more Fallen. I did the most Titan thing possible and charged them head on, using the Lift ability to boost my speed. There were a few Wretches, a Vandal with a scrap cannon, a Dreg, three Shanks, and a single Captain with two swords. I slung my hammer over my back and leapt into the air, coming down covered in raging Arc electricity. The shockwave wiped out the Fallen, save for the captain. I glided back to the pumps to get a better look at him and avoid the swords.
He was a tall one, eleven foot eight. He wore a tattered grey cloak over his shoulders. His helmet was similar to most Captain's, except it had tusks attached. In its upper arms it held two blades. I now saw that in its lower hands were two long metal poles with spiked tips. It dropped its swords and grabbed a Scorch Cannon off its back.

I heard a rush of flame and saw six golden flaming streaks fly past me and slam into its head.

Church drew even beside me and aimed his cannons at the Kell's head. “That doesn't usually happen.”

“I guess we found Kordiks then,” I said.

“There’s literally not a single joke I can make out if that name,” Church complained.

“Sure there is. When I'm done, he'll just be Kors.”

“Why?” Church asked.

“Because I'm going to remove his dik.”

Ares chided me for foul language via the comms, whereas Church couldn't help but snicker.

“We going to do this then?”

“On three.” I then paused. “Actually now!”

We charged Kordiks. I held my hammer in one hand and an SMG in the other. Church flanked left and used grenades, gunfire, and throwing knives to distract Kordiks. I leapt into the air and made a fast descent, planning to smash the Kell's skull in. I pelleted him with bullets on my way down, just for good measure. They all ricocheted off, but my hammer made him stagger.

Something hit me, and it wasn't Kordiks. I got back behind a pump before that could happen. Hercules. The Nemean Lion. Only blunt force could kill it, as its hide was invulnerable. Hercules
killed it with a club.

“Get back here Church!” I shouted.

“Gotcha!” he called back, dodging explosive shots from the Scorch Cannon.

He pressed his back against the pump. “What's the plan?”

“Can you use the Arcstrider subclass?” I asked.

He scratched the back of his head with the barrel of a cannon before realizing how stupid that was. “Haven't cast an Arc Staff since my fight with Ghaul. But I can do it.”

I nodded. “Good. Switch attunements now and I'll batter Kordiks a little while you charge up. Once you feel it's ready, get on top of the roof above us. When I give the signal, leap into the air and drive the staff into the top of his helmet. I put a dent in it, so you might be able to pierce it. If an Arc Staff can't pierce it, nothing can. If not, you'll probably kill him from sheer blunt force.”

He put his helmet to mine and kissed the air. “You're a genius.”

“Thanks Captain obvious.”

“It's Major obvious now,” he joked.

With that said and done, we got to work.

We dashed opposite ways, me towards Kordiks and him away. I heard the rushing air of a double jump and knew Church was atop the roof now. I took my war hammer in both hands and let it trail at my left hip as I charged. When I reached Kordiks I swung hard, aiming for the gut. He blocked my hammer with his right spear and thrust his left at me. I grabbed it in my right hand and thought I'd created a deadlock. Until I saw the Scorch Cannon aimed at my face.

I leapt away just in time to dodge the projectile. It exploded at Krodiks’ feet and stunned him.
Good. I rushed him again, aiming for the crotch this time. I swung a mighty uppercut, and I must have hit him where it presumably hurt because he dropped the Scorch Cannon. I slung my hammer over my back and grabbed it.

I dashed back a few meters and erected a Rally Barricade. Kordiks charged, and I emptied the cannon in his face. This stunned him once more, and I rammed the empty cannon into his gut before discarding it for good measure.

I tossed an Arc Pulse grenade at his feet to keep him stunned.

“Church, you better be ready!” I shouted.

“Almost there!” he promised apologetically.

Shit! The grenade stopped going and Kordiks recovered. He grabbed his blades off of his back. I was out of tricks. Except one. An ability I hadn't used once. Maybe now I could… no. No, I wanted to be seen as a regular and successful Guardian with no special advantages. I would do this without my Standout ability. I couldn't let anyone know, not yet. I guess I'd have to wing it.

I took a few steps back and unslung my hammer, gripping it in both hands. “Hit me with your best shot!” I roared.

Kordiks charged me like an angry bull, the points of his spears and blades all pointed my way. I dodged at the last moment, spinning out of the way and giving him a pat on the back with my hammer for the effort. He stumbled into the gas station, collapsing part of the roof. He too fell.

“It's now or never Church!” I shouted.

“O Deus! Lava quod est sordium!” he shouted, leaping from the roof and descending like a lightning bolt sent by God to smite the wicked.

His spear not only pierced the helmet. It shattered it. And the head inside. Lovely. Really built my appetite. Church brushed the dust off his shoulders and walked slowly towards me, blowing on his hand cannons and holstering them like a gunslinger after a duel.
“What did you say?” I inquired.

“It means, ‘Oh God, cleanse that which is unclean,’ or ‘Oh God, cleanse this filth.’” he explained. “I'm smart ain't I? S-M-R-T. Smart.”

I giggled and rapped my knuckles on his head. “Come on Church. We've got a horny American to impress.”

“Which one?” he joked.

“The one that hasn't gotten laid, ever.”

—

Athena

Market Near Parliament.

New Berlin, Earth.

Near midnight.

My Guardian was the best of the best! Skylar Peace himself! Thank the Traveller! And he was so much better than expected too. I was expecting an angry little man who's always got his nose in a book who hates everyone and calls you a Neanderthal for having sex with anyone ever, who only happened to be just a bit more powerful than a bunch of other people. Instead I got the cutest and most… different from what I expected, Warlock I could have ever asked for. And his companion, and owner as he thought, was a good woman, Maxime Lato Flynn. She'd been quite the hero more than once. And her Ghost was a funny guy. He told me that he'd rearranged her underwear drawer before they left for Berlin.

The couple walked through the nighttime market picking up food and browsing through some of New Berlin's more mundane and cool stores that were open at this hour.

The general setup of the place was pretty convenient. In the middle of New Berlin sat the large library sized Parliament. In a square around it were four rows of establishments and buildings.
To the North was a row of apartment buildings, which contained nice people mostly—although they were slightly snobbish as they were upper middle class.

To the West was a row of bakeries and restaurants, with the Red Baron pub at the farthest end. That was a fun place if I recalled. Or maybe it was the Virtue of Gluttony eatery. I don't remember really. It's a little fuzzy.

Anyway, to the East was the market, then further East was the farms and rural housing, then finally a military garrison by the forty foot wall.

To the South was the more mundane area of Parliament Square. Where the odd shops were. Mystics peddled Dusklight jewelry—which the couple actually bought something from. There were less reputable or innocent places too. The couple entered a gun shop with a sign that read Nur Wächter oder Militär erlaubt (Guardians or Military only).

I watched with great interest as my Guardian picked out a new hand cannon. In the end he chose one with eight rounds, high impact, and outlaw. He also got a box of green tracer rounds with explosive tips for it. I asked him why and he said it was because it looked cool. Max said it was because he had a mastodon sized ego and he wanted to look cool and flashy. Max was a good companion for him. She was very warm hearted, spontaneous, and also… controlling in a way. He liked that, and I could tell.

There were other shops here too. Different shops. Of a rather... disreputable and or interesting variety. Primarily interesting. There was only one that really made me curious. There was also a music store here, and I found out that Skylar was a bit of a metalhead. We bought physical and digital copies of songs by Sabaton, Powerwolf, Manowar—and lighter artists Max liked such as Elton John, The Arcbolts, and The Spitfires (a new rock and roll band gaining popularity within the City).

Anyway, onto the slightly disreputable or unorthodox one. You know what Germany produced way back when? Not concentration camps. Not sausage. Think weirder. Ever played Cards against Humanity? I have, and I'm a Ghost. If you haven't, I'd love to know what rock you live under. Yeah. You know what Germany, and anywhere really, can get like. Anyway, while Max went in we were told to wait. So we did. And then stuff took a turn for the shady.

“Psst,” a voice hissed from the alleyway between this store and the mystic’s shop. “Warlock!”

My Guardian turned his head and his hand drifted towards his new hand cannon. He forgot to load it, so I helped him out with that.
“Come out,” Skylar commanded. “And I don't mean tell me that you're gay, that much is already apparent.”

A Hunter in a nice black business suit, a purple cloak, and a black top hat with a blue ribbon around it exited the alleyway laughing. He had blonde hair and a waxed moustache. The social media sensation Silas Krane. He casually thumbed his pockets and began talking.

“Word on the street is you're having trouble with a Dark Guardian,” Silas said.

Skylar grunted in annoyance. “The word in the street is that my boot is ten seconds away from your ass. Starting now. Ten… Nine… Eight…”

Silas laughed and put his hands up. “Now be patient will you. I can help you alright?”

“Seven… Six…” Skylar grabbed the handle of his cannon.

“Okay listen! I know how you can beat this guy, guaranteed. On Titan there's an urn okay? You listening?”

My Guardian nodded. “I'm listening.” His hand eased away from the gun.

“There's a Knight guarding it,” Silas continued. “It's very powerful, but I have faith that you can beat it. Now, inside the urn is a substance containing captured Light. You gotta smash the urn and when the substance reaches out to you, don't move. No matter what. It will temporarily make you more powerful than anything you could possibly imagine. You then just need to find the guy you're looking for and beat the tar out of him.”

“Thank you for the help,” Skylar said. “Sorry about what I said earlier okay?”

Silas chuckled. “No problem man. Now, I gotta hit the road. Have a good day.”

Silas disappeared into the blackness. Skylar turned to me.
“So Athena,” he said. “We haven't talked much yet. Did you have a Guardian before?”

I shook my shell right and left. “Nope. You're the first. And lucky me! I didn't think I had it in me to keep looking.”

Skylar chuckled. “Well, I hope you're happy with what you got. Hey, are you the talkative type? I love taking. About anything to anyone. War, peace, War and Peace, love, history, philosophy, anything you want.”


“Love it.”

“Good. I did some reading on Hive mutations, and I uncovered something cool and scary at the same time. Andiron.”

Skylar raised an eyebrow. I more sensed it than saw it because his hair was a bit long. It went a little into his eyes.

“What does iron have to do with the Hive?” he inquired.

I giggled. He was so goofy. “No silly! Andiron. That's its name. He's a Hive Prince with the ability to wield the Sword Logic in a way that lets him accelerate and alter the mutation process—according to the rumors. If we found it, the bounty could buy you stock in Colt and Hække, maybe a percent of Omolon.”

“Hmm. That's interesting. I wonder what he'd create, what he has created.” He shuddered. “I've seen the Hive do scary shit.”

Max exited the shop. I wondered what she could possibly be there for. I mean, I know Guardians have personal lives, and I already knew how it was between them—sort of—but still. Whatever. It would be interesting to study. My Guardian's mind was already significantly different from many others with the ADHD, asexuality (lowered or nonexistent sex drive), and the fact that he's a
Warlock. I knew better than to pry, but to examine his brain when it was being stimulated in various ways—like when Max and him were talking about the Art of War, or when she'd grabbed his locket and pulled him away from a place he deemed to have high shenanigan potential—would be almost too interesting to resist. Man, I'd gotten the best deal with this guy. Interesting, well known, and definitely powerful enough to hold his own in battle.

<[°_°]>  
Guest suite.  
Parliament building.  
New Berlin, Earth.  
Past midnight.

While Skylar fell asleep beneath the sheets, I sat on the bed talking with the Commander on my portable screen. He wasn't too happy, but he wasn't mad either. Just sort of satisfied.

“I will send one hundred of my finest,” he promised. “I can't attend myself for political reasons, but I assure you, I will make those hundred count.”

“You aren't mad?” I asked.

Zavala scoffed and almost smiled. “Why would I be. The Russians are going to help with the defense. And am also glad we're going to be sending reinforcements to New Berlin. I didn't tell you this at the meeting, but there is a chance you could be in the crosshairs. But don't worry. They don't find New Berlin too important. England is their main focus. And about the trade negotiations, I'll send a few professionals for that. How's the Brigadier General holding up?

I gave him a short glance at Skylar, the glow of the tablet illuminating his face with bluish light.

The Commander sighed. “I remember the days when I could rest like that. When I could sleep restfully. I do wonder though, how does he do it?”

I chuckled. “Commander, are you making small talk with a Sergeant?”
“Not at all,” he said defensively. “I just wonder. How? We may be on the brink of war and he's just so… calm.”

Ikora began talking in the background. “He's a Stormcaller Zavala. While he may not show it, he's got the temperament of a hurricane. Harmony within, storm without.”

“Exactly,” I confirmed. “He's terrifying on the battlefield, and I remember that patrol he let me come along with him on. He's not to be fooled around with. But at home… he's usually calmer. Grumpy occasionally, yes. Bratty, always. But he's not usually all that stressed. And now he seems like he can't wait to fight Prior or Roman or whatever.”

Zavala nodded. “That is good. I have other issues to attend to now, but I'll prepare the couriers and troops. Have a good night.”

“You too Zavala. Or whatever it is there.”

I ended the call. So that was that. I wondered if I should call Church. It was probably night there in New New York, and I might interrupt something I don't want to interrupt. Still, I bet my bottom dollar that he'd want to talk with Skylar. Whatever. When the time comes they could.

I slipped under the covers and wrapped my arms around Skylar. He liked that a lot, being held. Luckily, I'm a huge hugger. Usually one of us would wake up in the other's arms. I closed my eyes and drifted off to sleep.

|°~ |

Alois

Ruins of an apartment building.

Pool room.

Fallen territory.

Southern Scotland, Earth.

We gathered here for the last time to prepare for our final battle with our oldest enemy. Abernathy had the notion that God intended for him to die, so he’d come in person instead of sending a projection. Integra was still watching over Alex and Arya, as we'd made the mistake of branding
them as one of us so that made them targets. As if now they were no longer members of Fireteam Zeus and now led Strike Team Victory. Under their command was a third Hunter, which I approved of. Warlocks always have their heads way too full to concentrate. Titans have skulls denser than gold. But we Hunters, we have the essentials and nothing more. Maybe a bit more, but that's called overkill.

Amir had escorted my son, Daniel, here for the meeting. If I died, it would be up to him to carry on my legacy, no matter how small. While he wasn't a Guardian, he wasn't quite normal either. He could be revived by a Ghost, but he didn't have any powers. Sort of a half Guardian. The Light wasn't hereditary, so I was perplexed as to why that connection existed. Anywhom the League could be rebuilt, and he could do it, Guardian or not. Unfortunately, he just wanted to whine and complain.

He kicked his feet up on the table and crossed his arms. “That's bullshit! I was on a date with someone you know. A Guardian. This isn't worth interrupting that for.”

“He doesn't give a shit,” Abernathy commanded, reaching over the table to swipe Daniel's feet back onto the floor. “Back in the good ol' days, before me even, a good father would tan their child for talkin' like that. You oughta sir. Got a mighty lip on 'er she does.”

Daniel growled. “My pronouns are he. Him. His. Etcetera. And don't tell my dad what to do you kiddy fiddling Catholic.”

“Oh I'm the kiddy fid'ler eh?” Abernathy roared. “Look at that Amir!” He pointed accusingly at the Warlock. “See 'es the guy who's prophet fucked a nine year old! Me, my faith doesn't say shit 'bout that 'celt ya shouldn't do it! I don't control those fag priests, and neither does God. Freakin posers don't represent the church.”

“Just like every radical with some C-4 and a lust for blood doesn't represent every Muslim,” Amir countered.

I tapped my cane on the floor. “Gentlemen. No. Fighting. We have a battle to plan. And son, I love you and I'm sorry. If I survive to do so, I will personally apologize to your date for interrupting. I hope it works out between you two.”

“God, Alois, the League's always been either steers or queers, and that kid ain't no steer,” Abernathy said. “And you're encouraging an unnatural mentality. You're a girl! Act like one!”
Daniel smirked and put his feet up. “How do you get a nun pregnant?”

Abernathy shook his fist. “You better not say that. Shut ’cher mouth affore I teach you what boot leather tastes like.”

“Gentlemen!” I shouted. “Amir, check for any Fallen that may have alerted. Abernathy, stop antagonizing my son. Son, stop quarrelling with Abernathy. He’s a good man at heart. Now. There truly is no plan.”

Amir returned almost instantly after hearing that. “What?”

“You heard me. We’ll just have to go with the flow. Support the defenders and if you see either Prior or Y or any of his Generals, or his Admiral if he comes ashore, kill them. That’s all. Daniel, I want you to stick near that mercenary when he arrives.”

Daniels smile returned. “Really?”

I nodded. “For your protection. He’s been useful to this cause. I’ve also whispered in the right ears to assure the arrival of Fireteam Zeus to this location. Take note that I did not directly tell them, I did it-”

“Via subtle influence, yeah!” Daniel said. “I get it. Now can I go practice with my knives? I’m bored!”

“As you wish,” I said. “Be careful though, and remember to use the whetstone to keep them sharp and safe. A sharp knife is a safe kn-.”

Daniel was already bolting down the hallway. “Will do dad!”

Abernathy grumbled. “I say ya didn't raise ‘er right.”

Amir shook his head. “Pronouns Abe,” he chided. “I know how people like you think, and I assure you, God doesn’t care what you say or do. Why do you think Bolverk-”
“Don’t utter his real name,” I warned.

“Fine. Why do you think Y exists? God doesn’t care what you do a good ninety percent of the time. Be nice to Daniel. He deserves your kindness.”

Abernathy scoffed. “Yeah right. You know what the lass deserves? She needs some sense beaten into ‘er. You got the cane sir, put it to use.”

I pointed it at Abernathy. “Sure. It’s loaded with a single twelve gauge slug and buckshot shell, the latter beneath the removable handle. The former is pointed right between your eyes.”

Amir sighed. “Since when were we like this?”

I lowered my cane. “If only Raven were here. He’d bring the whiskey and rye and cool it all right down, loosen us up. Fitz was good at diffusing situations like this with just his words. Ritz was too… All three of the Itz trio to be honest. I think we were better friends when we were more numerous. We weren’t so focused on the-”

“When you were more numerous eh?” a growly voice asked from the hallway. “Mind if I join in?”

Miro Shen, at long last. I knew him from the news, the Vigilante. He was always an advocate for truth and justice, and it seemed fitting he’d Thale the latter into his own hands.

The seven foot tall exo entered the pool room. He had polished his silver body all over, and his white cloak had glowing purple runes on it, matching his eyelights. He smiled as best as an exo could.

“It’s been a whole twelve years and one Fireteam since I last saw you,” he said. “Thought, hey, let’s pop in and see if Alois chucked the tracker I put in his cane yet. Guess not.”

“I’ve missed you Shen,” Amir said. He got out of his corner and offered Miro his hand. “It’s an honor to have the opportunity to serve by your side once more.”
Abernathy enthusiastically got up, broke the handshake, and hugged the exo so hard the metal groaned. “I fockin’ missed ya my good lad.”

“As have I,” I said. “So Shen, how do you feel about a last stand?”

I could practically feel his smug aura. “Sounds like a blast and it won’t be the last…”
Chapter Summary

Skylar goes to Titan in pursuit of a way to defeat Prior. All is not as it seems with the Americans. Max meets up with some old friends in England.

<#

Skylar

Guest suite.

New Berlin, Earth.

I woke up and was a little uncomfortable that I wasn't in Max's arms. Usually that's how I would wake up. But, I smelled coffee and cocoa. That got me right out of bed.

Athena appeared at my shoulder. “Good morning Guardian!” she chirped cheerfully.

I smiled. “Mornin’ Athena. And please, call me Skylar.”

“Will do,” she said. “Do you want me to help you with your clothes? Those linens certainly won't do in public. And I noticed how well shaven you are. Good job. You'll notice that I noticed enough not to remove the collar, because I am a considerate Ghost.”

I chuckled. “Thanks, and sure. Why not? Actually, put my armor on me will you? We're going on a trip today. I'm bored of fighting my fellow Guardians, so the Hive should be a refreshing change.”

Athena transmatted my armor (minus the helmet) onto my body and I thanked her. I walked into the living room and saw Max on the couch, drinking black coffee. She too was wearing her armor, and I wondered why. She patted the couch.

“Sit,” she ordered.
I took a seat beside her and she offered me cocoa in a red mug, which I gladly accepted. I didn't touch it though, and she set her coffee down. I waited for my owner to speak first.

“Skylar, today we ship out to England,” she said solemnly. “And I hope to Hell we win. Church hasn't called, so I'm suspecting he's had similar success. Are you ready?”

I scratched the back of my head nervously. “Well you know how I can't beat Prior, no way no how, right?”

She nodded. “Yes, I know you're deluded into thinking that.”

“Well, there's something on Titan that may help,” I explained. “I just need to go and get it. Silas sent me the coordinates, and I need this. Please can I go? I promise it will work.”

She raised an eyebrow. “It sounds… aw, what would he have to gain? Sure. But promise you'll come back ASAP. And come back in one piece.”

“I swear it.” I offered her my neck. “I'll even seal the promise with lock and key.”

She grinned. “Well, I can't say no to an offer like that.”

She pulled a small silver padlock out of Jester's storage and clipped it onto my collar. I loved wearing it really, and I wouldn't mind if the Hive saw it because they're completely oblivious to what it means. Athena examined me like a bacteria cluster in a petri dish.

“Not to be rude, but what's it about?” she asked.

“Tell you later,” I promised.

“Okay. I'm interested in your psychology, truly, and you as a person. By the Light, your brain is like a universe in dire need of exploration. Hey, mind if I examine your neural… nevermind. I'll ask when the time comes. And this lock by the way, I can't even scan it.”
Max grinned. “Course you can't. And it can't be picked either.” She became serious. “Don't die on me, got it? I wouldn't be able to keep going if you did.”

“Same here,” I said. “And I swear, I will come back to you master.” I was shocked at what I'd said. “Forget I said that last thing.”

“Naw, think I won't,” Max teased. “But please, call me Max. I'm no master, merely a loving companion and owner.”

Athena looked on in amazement. “You two are beyond just interesting. I would love to examine you further, and then converse about my findings with you.”

†

Church
Jake's office.
New New York, Earth.

I dropped the large chunk of Kordiks' mask on Jake's desk. He looked stunned. His jaw dropped and his toothpick fell out of his mouth.

Jake stammered, “I-I-I-I wha- huh?”

“Where's the colony?” I demanded.

Jake chuckled nervously. “Heh heh. Aight, imma be straight with y'all. I wasn't expecting you to succeed. But since you did, imma be nice. You can come with if Winston comes a callin’.”

Bellona growled. “We'll have those coordinates thank you very much.”

Jake shook his head. “Naw Miss Legs, you won't. Imma take you. You take it from there, report the coordinates to the blue guy, I don't care. But I ain't gonna be the one who blows Winston's cover.”
Bellona pounded the desk, cracking the wood. “You're a fucking snake, and I hope you know that.”

“Babe, if not a snake, what would I be?”

[ ¥ ]

Y

Axis Naval Infantry Carrier

Atlantic ocean, Earth.

I stood at the head of the massive boat at a podium in front of five hundred men. These were my finest. They deserved to hear my speech in person. I looked out upon the sea of Guardians and saw not just people, but tools for change. Each man had their place in the grand Axis scheme. Even Prior, who was still trying to work the slide of his dual M1911 pistols with his teeth for some reason.

I spread my arms and my men looked to me expectantly. The expect me to speak. They forget the power of silence. My silence silences them, but it draws their attention and grabs their interest. Good, good. I wait ten long minutes, enjoying my power over these Guardians. And then once I counted the six hundredth second, I gave this silence a sound.

“Gentlemen,” I boomed. “Welcome to the beginning of of a new era!”

“You took a while, but I don't think it was that long,” Prior quipped. “Now what does Big Brother decree? Oh sorry, was that wrongthink?”

I ignored him and kept going. “For years we fought and struggled to create the Axis as it is now. Building just these ten ships was not easy. We had to fight brutal wars with old friends, we had to latch onto the Concordat, and we nearly started a genocide on the way—but look at what we have achieved now! Look at us! We will take London! And then, the Last City! We will reign supreme over Sol! Nothing can stop us! Tomorrow we strike, and we will not stand alone. We have a great many allies. The Concordat, the Priory, and even the Fallen. Yes, you heard that right. On the same day we take England, the Fallen will destroy the allied colonies. And once they do so, we will destroy them! And once I am supreme leader we will continue to do so until Earth is clean—but first comes London. And once the dust settles, we will be on the road to a great war. A war the whole world and every living person on it has wanted for so long. The sequel and end to all world wars! The final war! When we rule supreme, there will be no ideas to fight over. There will only be life
and everything within it, with no conflict or dissent. We will redefine and reach Utopia! And how?"

My men held short lengths of chain in their fists. They pounded their chests and raised their fists to the air—mimicking our logo. Even Prior, with bloody teeth at his feet.

“Strength in leadership!” the answered. “Unrelenting force! Silence of dissent! That is the only way! We will stand unopposed! Hail to the Axis!”

Even Cortez tried to join the shout with his ruined vocal cords. I felt warm inside. This… it was beautiful. And I couldn't wait to see the end results. Lysander and my fellow visionaries will be proud. I guarantee it.

<#>

Skylar

Hive tunnels deep inside the Arcology, Titan.

Time unknown.

This was the way apparently. The Hive had infested this entire floor. Everything was covered in brown and black waxy gunk, pillars of the stuff held up the ceiling. There were eight tunnels, only two able to fit anything bigger than a Thrall. In the middle of this room lay a statue surrounded in a pool of what Athena confined to be salt water from Earth with a radius of five feet.

I approached the statue, stopped at the edge of the pool, and tapped the side of my helmet to activate the LED lights around the visor. The statue was seven feet tall and made of solidified black Hive wax, now hard as obsidian. Athena began scanning it while I examined it. I was beginning to get over North. Hell, I had already as fucked up as it is.

The statue looked like your usual Hive statue. A Hive Prince with its blade stuck into the ground. It looked different though. It had a singular visible eye the size of a baseball rather than three small ones, and its head looked more triangular than most. Along its neck were tumor like growths with jagged slits in them. Something told me this was one special Hive.

Athena turned to me. “Skylar, remember that Andiron I was talking about outside the… unorthodox, shop yesterday?”
I nodded, remembering the conversation. Even though it was outside of armor, I still felt my collar through the thin joining material between my torso armor and helmet when I did this.

“This is a statue of him,” she stated. “This is a shrine. And the tumors with slits… we may be looking at a prototype for aquatic Hive. This is bad. If they manage to mutate to thrive underwater, they could entirely infest the Earth, and all of this moon.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Well I'll be fucked.”

“Don't swear,” Athena said, almost jokingly.

I smiled. “God, first Max, now you. Did she put you up to this?”

“First, here is no god,” Athena stated. “Not even the Traveller. And I'll tell Max if you misbehave.”

I would have liked this, but I also recognized the (albeit thin) line between work and our personal lives. “Don't. She'll catch me when I want her to. It's part of the game.”

Athena raised a piece of her shell and tilted, reminding me of Max even more. “I'd ask what game, but this place is giving me the creeps. We need to go deeper sadly.”

I pulled out my hand cannon, wishing to use it some more. “I'll explain on the way if you want. I know you like to talk.”

“You bet your cute butt I do,” she said.

“Okay, Max definitely put you up to that,” I said.

“Possibly,” she admitted. “But if I could have an opinion on such a thing, I'd agree.”

I pointed my cannon forward without aiming down sights. I felt my cheeks redden. “Just tell me
what tunnel I need to go down. Forward or left?”

Athena sighed. “Fun while it lasted. Hey, we should get a picture for Max somewhere. You seem very close. She would like to see how her angel is holding up, I would bet. And its left by the way. And I'm detecting some motion in that pool. We should skedaddle.”

I did exactly that and went carefully into the tunnel. It was about the size of a regular hallway in a place like an office, library, or school, maybe a foot thinner. It was only a slight decline, and I dreaded the long walk ahead. Andvari should be a good seven hundred meters deeper. I followed the waypoints Athena set, checking my corners and so far encountering no Hive. Disturbing. After a quiet half hour we encountered another cave, this one full of puddles. Each one was filled with water from different places in the solar system. Odd.

Athena stopped me by moving in front of me, a silent signal we’d established. “I'm not detecting any movement, and I haven't scanned these tunnels yet. Can we talk while I do that?”

“Sure. What about.”

Athena whizzed about the gymnasium sized cave scanning holes. She entered the comms. “Not to be offensive or rude or intrusive or anything bad—I couldn't afford to do that-”

I scoffed. “Pfft, please. I've got a thick skin. Hell, roast me. I can take it. Sticks and stones may break my bones and whatnot.”

Athena continued. “Okay. What's with your collar? And everything else between you and Max. I liked your debates, but this is a bit interesting. And I know that you think of Max like she's your owner.”

“What tipped you off Sherlock?”

“The collar and some hints from the developing neurosymbiotic link,” she said. “And the fact that I heard it myself. So explain. Ooh, this tunnel might—nope. Anywho, enlighten me.”

I was definitely blushing now. God damn it. Who cares though. She's a Ghost and it wouldn't kill her to know.
I tried to explain something I knew only a little about despite it being part of my lifestyle. “Well, you know a certain four letter acronym that starts with B?”

“Yuh huh. The sex one?”

“No, it's not about sex,” I said with an awkward laugh. “We don't do that. What are we, Neanderthals? We like the non sexual asp-”

Athena giggled. “Just yanking your half figurative chain. Continue.”

“Well me and max engage in two sections of the acronym,” I continued. “For pleasure, we do B and D which is…” I felt my face grow hot. “God, why do you care?”

“I need to know everything about you if we're going to be partners now.”

“That's not unreasonable, just awkward beyond belief,” I muttered. “Okay, right. So for pleasure we do bondage and discipline, but she doesn't do pain and I'm pretty sure I don't either but I don't know yet. Probably no. I'm allergic to bullets so I'm probably not too keen on pain. Her punishments are more creative. I have a feeling all this swearing isn't going to end well for me, wink wink. Anyway, by applying a touch to the right nerve clusters… look, I bet my liver it's better than sex.”

“So it's basically foreplay?” Athena gasped in surprise. “Andvari is closer than I thought. And… Gun up Guardian! I'm detecting motion all around you!”

“Shit!” I whipped my hand cannon up to aim.

They were everywhere, crawling out of every pool. Thrall. And some were cursed Thrall, their heads glowing icy blue and giving off wisps of smoke. They all screeched in unison and charged. I had enough time to notice that they had those tumors and small webs between their claws—but it looked like they couldn't stand the water that well yet. Little flakes and grains were rubbing off already.

I whipped around and loosed off three shots, the tracer rounds bathing the chamber in a brief green glow. I hit a cursed Thrall and I was using explosive rounds. Three Thrall erupted into a storm of
bony limbs. An arm hit my helmet with a wet smack and split in two, leaving a few chunks behind. The water seemed to weaken their bone integrity. I felt a scratching on my back that wasn't the kind Max gave me and spun to pop a bullet into a rust colored Thrall positively covered in abrasions and growths. The Thrall were all around me now, so I decided to shine a little Light on my dark predicament.

I gathered Arc in my right fist, reached out to the Storm within me, and swung my fist. A blue bolt struck the ground and the shockwave struck a half dozen Thrall. I was now wreathed in lightning, hovering a few inches above the ground. I felt alive. Electrified. Literally. I could feel the Arc channeling through me. I spun around in rapid circles, wiping out these Thrall as they came. Some had the sense to run, but I just dialed up the intensity, making the Arc chain between Thrall. I began moving, hunting them and chasing them. I think I might have shouted, ‘Unlimited power!’ and cackled like Palpatine at one point. When I had finished, nothing was breathing but me. I hadn't even had to use half of my full potential. What a bunch of pushovers and pos- okay, that's definitely my ego talking.

I exited the Stormtrance and landed gracefully back onto my feet. Athena took her usual place at my shoulder.

“Very impressive Skylar,” she said proudly. “You killed them all, eight times too. You went crazy!”

I scratched the back of my helmet and chuckled. “I guess I did. Might've gone a little overboard.”

“Hmm, definitely went overboard.” Athena flew to a mixed pile of intact remains. “I should take samples. Ikora will be interested and proud, maybe even elated at this discovery. We may well have discovered a Hive plot before they could hatch it—but I fear with Andiron still alive we'll see more of these warped Hive.”

I picked up a bone and began twirling it. “Send a pic to Max will you? Make me look super cool but also a little cute.” I fumbled with the bone and leaned over to try and catch it.

Athena let out a clicking noise. “Got it. A little too much cute, but I think it'll work. Now let's go teach Andvari… let's just kill a Hive Knight that probably hasn't done anything to warrant us doing so.”

“Sounds like a good time.”
And then we continued down a long, straight tunnel to the right. I continued explaining my relationship with Max to Athena.

“So as I was saying before I was rudely interrupted,” I continued, “that’s only half of the equation. And I haven't done enough B and D if you ask me. Just started the bondage and submission ten days or so ago and even then, not enough in my opinion. Anyway, the other half is D and S, or domination and submission. Also, for the record, I'm no expert on this and I can't even explain what I feel in words, I'm not even going to try that hard. Anyway, if you couldn't tell, I'm the submissive one.”

“Really, I thought you came off as the dominant type,” Athena joked.

I gave her a polite and genuine chuckle. “Well as surprising as it may be, the one wearing a locked collar is usually a sub. Anyway, I did a test—under the genius alias of Smitty Werbenjagermanjensen—and my results put me as primarily a pet, rope something, experimentalist, and brat.”

“I don't know where they got the best part from,” Athena said sarcastically.

“I know right?” I pretended to be astonished. “All I did was—oh wait shit seriously I should not have done that I'm sooooo dead when we get home.”

“What?”

I waved my hand dismissively. “Aw nothing. Just a small prank. It was Jester's idea. Might end me up on a leash for a day or something, but that's the point. Anyway, I found the pet bit confusing seeing as I don't identify with an animal. I'm her angel as she calls me. I hardly qualify as an angel. More like, a super cool badass space wizard who eats angels for breakfast and bullets with milk for lunch. But, if my master says I'm an angel, then I'm an angel. A super cute space angel in a collar who eats space wizards for breakfast.”

I would have continued, but I heard a loud rhythmic thudding and a scraping noise. Either Andvari was pacing, or I'd found a mating ground. I would rather the mating ground for once—smug as I may be.

The tunnel descended a little deeper, eventually ending in one of those skin things that the Hive tend to put up. I grabbed my cannon and used my left hand to quietly tear a hole in the fabric. Yep. Andvari was pacing back and forth. He was about a whole seventeen fucking feet tall and carrying a
fucking pair of huge fucking swords! Other than that, he was just your run of the mill Knight, plus a row of eyes below the usual three. The chamber looked to be well carved into the ground in a circular shape. It was about sixty feet in diameter, thirty feet high, and lit by those creepy orange Hive lamps just lying around. At the far end on a raised platform was an urn, glowing green. It beckoned to me, asking to be claimed. For whatever reason, I shuddered in anticipation.

Andvari walked towards the urn and planted his blades into well worn grooves on either side of it. He sat down like a grumpy child, looking almost pouty. I tore away the skin and strode confidently into the center of the room. Athena disappeared, telling me to try stealth next time. No can do buckaroo. Andvari looked at me as if annoyed. He grumbled something in the Hive language and stood up again, putting his hands on his knees as if they hurt and using his swords to help.

I crossed my arms and laughed. “So this is what passes for a powerful Hive Knight nowadays? Pathetic! Fuck my ass and call me Sally Sue if you ain't just pathetic. And yes Athena, you can tell Max I said that.” I made a toothy smile beneath the helmet and got into my proper combat mentality. “Now let's get fucking freaky.”

<\(°_°\)> 

Max

Rural Southern England, Earth.

Late morning, nearly midday.

You know, for some reason I wasn’t expecting this Winston guy to be so hostile. But he was. Me and ninety nine others had to be smuggled onto the continent in troop transports already packed full of New Berlin Guardians. And despite him thinking we were just troops from New Berlin, we were told to halt and stay put two hundred kilometres south of London. On the bright side, the Fallen kept their distance (for now) and the area was nice and… just nice. Green rolling hills spotted with trees, a nice flat area the size of about three (European) football fields to land, and a small town further south (which our scouts confirmed to be Fallen territory.

We offloaded from the Minerva class jumpships and began setting up camp, waiting for those damned Brits to show their faces. There were around thirty five infantry carrying jumpships, so only twenty could comfortably land. With the help of the Hunter in charge of the troop deployment we managed to arrange them into two rows of seven, with one in the middle that Rommel (or Tom as he’d revealed his real name was) was using as his war room. The Guardians from the City were outfitted with the grey silver and red uniforms of the New Berlin Expeditionary Force to blend in better. I said, and I quote, “How about the fuck no?” which somehow actually gained me some respect. I was still made to wear the damned uniform and I looked like a freaking SS officer from the Old Wars—but I was treated with a slightly higher degree of respect by the New Berliners. The
robes weren’t that bad, but still, I would rather get my brains splattered than wear a standard issue helmet. Instead I just used a silver and red shader on it and hoped that would look convincing enough. Even still, I chose to let my neck length almost black brown hair show. Better to stand out than blend in. I was expecting someone, and I’d rather he find me quickly.

I hung around a cluster of trees at the bottom of a hill and checked to see if Skylar had sent me an update. Probably not. He didn’t believe in social media and whatnot, so I seldom received anything short of a video call—usually a personal appearance at the slightest hint that I might be thinking about considering paying a small bit of attention to the notion that I might possibly want to consider acknowledging his existence, and that’s if he even left my side. I wouldn’t have him any other way. Surprisingly enough, I got a few pictures. Him being him, they were all either cute, funny, or a cute and humorous attempt at casual ‘badassery’ as he called it.’

I heard raucous laughter and smelled a hint of alcohol on the air—as well as a male voice with a slight Norwegian accent. Jo? I looked up from my screen and saw in fact all of Fireteam Steelheart heading my way wearing their distinctive red berets and the New Berlin armor they had been issued. They were a really nice and rowdy and overall chaotic bunch. The leader was Stirling, a dashing and immature Hunter with brown hair who wore aviator sunglasses just like Skylar. He tended to disregard authority just as much as his namesake David Stirling did, and it yielded him copious amounts of success. Then there was Mayne, a bald white Titan with a soft voice but a large and muscular body, with a tendency to solve issues with his fists and think with them too. Then there was Joakim, a short five foot eight Titan with a tiny mohawk and a goatee, who even now wore his black vest with metal plates. Just like a certain Warlock, he was a huge metalhead. Lastly came Liam, a six foot five Warlock with red buzz cut hair and furiously passionate green eyes. He must have been a better negotiator than I, because he still wore his red black and green plaid trench coat. He was the one who spotted me, as he pointed, shouted at his friends, and charged towards me. Oh god.

They reached me in seconds, Joakim lagging behind a little. I got to my feet and took what was coming like a woman. The four men gathered around me and all hugged me at once, shouting greetings and praise.

I pushed them away. “Guys, what did I say about greeting me like this?”

Liam replied, “Ah, dick all really lass. We ain’t seen ya in about two months I wager.”

“I was busy,” I said. “As were we all. How’s it been?”

Stirling grinned, preparing to spin a wild tale of adventure, glory, and hot women. “Well we went to Switzerland to find some action, and then we find this map okay? Now, it’s an old one, in binary and playing on repeat on this old radio. One, zero zero zero one—you know right? Joey translates the coordinates, and we end up in the Falklands islands. So when we get—”
Joakim sighed. “Nothing of the sort happened. If you want to know, ask the House of Dusk. While you were doing whatever, we were fighting them for weeks on end trying to escape the Arcology.” He glared at Stirling. “If it weren’t for your idiocy Fireteam Leader, we would have been fighting the Pantheon and doing some good.”

Liam was a little more polite. “So how were you lass? Still a heartbreaker and life taker as per usual you fierce little black bear?”

I smiled at the use of that nickname. “Well, I’m still a life taker, but I’m proud to say Maxime Flynn is no longer in circulation.”

“Really?” Liam seemed amazed. “I don’t do maths, but I know that you statistically have to be feeding me bollocks stew on that one.”

“One second.” I pulled out my screen and swiped to a picture of Skylar posing with a dead Fallen Dreg, his mouth a wide and toothy grin.

Mayne leaned in and squinted. “Well by the skin of my teeth.” He looked up at me. “How long did he last before pushing for second base? More than two weeks this time?”

“Nope,” I said. “He’s like me.”

Everyone paid more attention now. Joakim seemed surprised I actually found someone, and Stirling was the only one who didn’t recognize him. Probably because his ego rivalled—if not surpassed—Skylar’s in size.

“That’s a mighty fine catch,” Liam said. “He legit? Or is he just yankin’ a poor lass’ chain for kicks. He seems like the type.”

“Oh no, he’s a definite ace,” I confirmed. “And he’s not going anywhere. He’s mine. We sealed it the other day, if you didn’t notice.”

“Ahhh.” Stirling nodded. “So he’s a beta male.”
“You wouldn’t get away with saying that within a hundred kilos of him.” I slapped the fool in the face, although he seemed not to notice or feel it. “You won’t get away with it within a million light years of me. But yes, he considers himself mine. I agree.”

Liam put his hand on my shoulder and smiled proudly. “Well done then. You beat those odds into the ground. Glad you found a companion. We should do some Crucible to celebrate, after these Axis recieve their arses on a plate, courtesy of us. You should bring Church along too. Always wanted to meet him. The last of the true good ol’ lads.”

“I will,” I said. “So, how’s it looking? Hear anything from the war room?”

Mayne and Joakim explained the situation. We had a total force of eight hundred fifty Guardians here. Seven hundred fifty Germans, and one hundred City Guardians. One hundred fifty of the Germans would be manning Drake tanks that were upgraded to far surpass even City Drakes. In fact, they were so different they were classified as Wyvern panzers, not Drakes. Our Guardians would just be infantry, but they had been selected out of the top ten Crucible teams and the best teams in the field. Including Fireteam Screaming Eagle, a Fireteam almost as infamous as Zeus. I heard they had taken some losses recently though, and Hartman was having trouble training the new guys. I was shown a video of him tossing a fistful of bullets at a Hunter who kept mishandling and jamming his rifle shouting, ‘You useless sack of shit!’ and ‘Well don't worry Private Pyle. If God wanted you to hit that target he'd have miracled those bullets there already’. I felt bad for Pyle, but at least he'd outclass all his peers by the time he turned a year post rez.

“So we're going to do okay,” Mayne summarized. “Plus, I'm pretty sure we've got Russians inbound, and the Americans will be a huge help.”

I nodded. “Good. I just hope my angel gets back here quickly.”

<#>

Skylar

Deep below the surface of Titan.

Well this was fun. Really fun. I aimed my cannon at Andvari as he was picking up his swords and fired off four shots before the mag clicked empty. The green tracer bullets slammed into his head and sent chips of bone flying, but they did no real damage. I swiftly reloaded. Andvari grabbed up both
blades and swung at me with both, one after the other. I ducked one and glided into the air to avoid the other. While in the air I fired a shot at Andvari’s right hand, but he held his blade firm. I stranded left and fired off seven shots at his head. Andvari looked bored by me. I refused to stoop to the level of using my sword.

Andvari planted one blade in the ground and grabbed the other in both hands. I reloaded my gun and decided to keep going with my strategy, whittling away his head. He swing forcefully down, nearly cleaving me in half. I dodged it by a nose hair. He swung again, way faster this time, and I just barely got clipped on my right shoulder by the horizontal slash. I dropped my cannon by accident, and Andvari crushed it under his foot. Hey! That was a gift!

“Oh fuck you!” I shouted. I grabbed a single edged sword with a red handle off my back one I’d won in the Crucible. “You’re actually going there? Well let’s fucking throw d-”

I barely had time to block his next swing, a powerful download slash. The colliding blades spewed green and purple sparks. I leapt and rolled left, then charges Andvari. I slashed at his leg, meeting woodlike resistance. I would have followed up with a grenade, but he stomped hard, releasing a shockwave that knocked me into the far wall. Right by the urn. Checkmate. I reached out to it and released a burst of Arc energy. The urn tipped and shattered. A glowing green substance curled out. It solidified and blackened. This isn't right, I thought. It crawled slowly towards me and I had an urge to run. I tried. Then everything went dark. I felt something snap inside. And I could feel myself killing. Athena tried to reach me. I ignored her. Because I was no longer me.

___†___

Church

Jake's flagship, USS Brooklyn. Earth.

Late evening.

So me and Bellona were pissed as it is that we hadn’t gotten the coordinates out of Jake. Then when he ushers us onto his aircraft carrier (one of his only three ships) he decides now would be a good time for some James Bond villain exposition.

We were marched below decks by Titans in dark green armor with American flags on the shoulders and showed our room. It was just a ten by twelve foot room with a bunk bed. And it locked from the outside. Then Jake had his goons put us at gunpoint (using original Red Death pulse rifles), strip Bellona of her outer clothing—but not me because he's fucking a disgusting chauvinist—and began to explain his true allegiance while occasionally making me want to kill him on the spot. If only I had my guns.
He ran his finger across Bellona's stomach. “Ya know, I really wish I'd decided to take ya sooner bitch. Finna bout to get sucked off if y'all don't mind cooperating.”

Deacon appeared at my shoulder. “Hands of the Colonel you bloody traitor!” he commanded.

I focused on something else. One didn't have to be holding a gun to cast a Golden Gun. Just needed to charge it up. I gave Bellona a look that tried to say, ‘Hang in there babe, I just need time’.

Jake did something a little worse, tracing the waistband of her shorts while he passed her, turning around and counting to pace. “Now I was wonderin’, just how didja not notice it before?”

“I wasn't expecting the land of the free to fight for fascism,” I spat.

“Fascism ya say?” He cocked his head. “And don't spit on me please. Makes me-”

He stopped in front of Bellona, grabbed her wrists and pinned them above her head. He cocked back his other arm and swung his fist at her stomach. This actually hurt her, and the yelp of pain I heard made me share her pain. I reached out to the Light but still wasn't quite ready.

“Makes me quite violent,” he continued. He swung twice more, bringing tears to my beautiful wife's eyes and mine too. “So fuckin’ shut the fuck up-” He swung once again and Bellona began sobbing. “Shut up whore. I have some shit to explain. Think you can keep quiet?”

Bellona nodded. Never had she ever even seemed weak before. Never. Not once. She was always a fearless lion, seemingly invincible. Now she looked hurt, weak, and scared.

I reached out to Jake. “Please stop,” I begged, my voice hoarse. “Please don't hurt her. I love her.”

Jake took a step back and released her wrists. “Aight. Since ya were so polite.” He pulled a pair of handcuffs from his pocket. “I'll stop.” He fastened one cuff around Bellona's right wrist and looped the chain over a pipe above her head. “When I feel like it.” He fastened the other cuff and made sure they were both tight. “Oh, and by the way,” he snatched the Dusklight crucifix off of my neck and tossed it into the hallway, “I have friends in high places who ain't having none of your Golden Gun bullshit. Try it.”
I tried it but found that I quite literally could not call the Light. I felt helpless, inert, borderline useless. Luckily, Bellona was indeed a lion with a heart of iron. Jake swung again, and Bellona brought up a knee to block it. I now saw that the tears had been fake and that she had not in fact been hurt all that badly. See, she’d been reading those Joe Ledger books lately. She was using a trick from the book Dragon Factory. A way to absorb a gunshot and minimize the pain. To the person swinging, it felt like a solid shot, a finisher. But by using this simple trick it really felt to you like nothing.

Jake cradled his fist and scowled. “Okay, bitch, ya actually goin’ there with me? I could have you shot, right here right now.”

“But you won’t,” Bellona taunted.

Jake scratched his chin. “Aight. You got me. But I ain’t feedin’ neither of ya or doin’ shit for ya. You’ll jus’ hafta sit an’ rot. Now listen up. Why, ya may ask, did I turn? Cuz it was the only way to save my people! The only way to create the utopia I did. The Axis are the only reason we’re so prosperous. The deal with the Vanguard? Utter bullshit. A smokescreen. Y’ain’t shit anymore pal. I’m the new top dog, and the world will know the power of the United States of America once more! After a thousand years of dormancy we rise again!”

☠

Jake East North Atlantic Ocean Dusk

That little fucking bitch had some fight in her, I’ll admit, but she won’t for long. And Church? I’ll make sure his execution is public. But first comes London and the City. For now I’d just make him wish he was dead. I knew how to get to men like him, and he’d already shown me one of his weaknesses. Love. Cliche really. But I’ll take it. That woman would be a nice challenge to break. A fun one too.

Now here was the plan. The Axis would push back the Germans and Russians to the edge of the isle, trap the fuckers. Then my ships would unleash a salvo of shells and a storm of fighter jumpships to wipe them out. Then we’d send our infantry ashore and join the fight. London was a powerful colony, the rival to the Last City in fact, and my navy of three ships wasn’t shit to theirs—but with the Axis at our side we’d make short work of them. I believe an ‘America Fuck Yeah’ is in order.
Episode 11: No Turning Back

Chapter Summary

Prior sees his fate and tries to reconcile his crimes. Church escapes and goes after Jake. The New Berlin and Vanguard forces are pushed further to the edge of the Isle.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

‡

Prior

Elsewhere

I returned here to my ashen world of mist and sand with a heavy heart. Not so long ago I had killed someone here someone I had felt something for. Devi. Weak and innocent Devi. I regretted it more than anything. Now that I dared to bargain with the Deep to peek at my future, I realized that something had to change. I couldn’t change my fate—I was no longer fully paracausal—but I could alter the details.

I heard that the Hive could undo death. My power came from the Deep, like the Hive. Logic dictated that I should be able to revive her. Hopefully. Then I would change, become a different, better person. I think Rex or Austin would be an okay name, maybe Ted. Or Evan. Ooh, maybe something Celtic! I had the hair for an Irish name after all.

I strode through the mist, my black and white coat flapping behind me in a nonexistent wind. After an hour I found her. Due to the way this place worked, she still looked the same. Still wore the same yellow armor and checkered cloak. Still had red rings around her neck. Still had blood dripping slowly from her lips. My chest constricted and I let out an involuntary sob. All this just for some stupid game I played? All this to be the puppetmaster? All this death and sorrow and hate just to prop up a fascist government?

I knelt and channeled the power of the Deep. I reached out to her and felt for any life force or something of—found it! I pulled on it with imaginary hands and felt something stir. I checked the poor thing’s vitals hopefully. A pulse! She rolled over to face me.

“Master Roman?” she groaned.
I smiled, not maliciously but joyfully. “Call me Prior. I’m no master.” I frowned and felt anger towards myself. “I’m a monster. Now listen Deevs.”

“Alright master R- Prior.”

I sighed. “I need you to run. Far away from me and anyone else. I’ve glimpsed my fate. It’s not good. I realized that I must change and do some good where I still can.”

Devi’s eyes widened. “Are you dying master Prior?”

I didn’t answer that. “I saw something okay? Now listen. I have to fight for the Axis. I can’t avoid that, and I am still passionate about their goals. But I won’t let my legacy be subjective. I wish to do some objective good before my time runs out. Now, find a new partner, a Fireteam. Fight for the City. Be happy for me.”

She nodded. “I will master Prior. What are you going to do?”

“You’ll see. I just hope you don’t have to see it in person. No matter what I do, it leads to those evil acts. So forgive me when you find the heart to.”

<\(°_°)>

Max

Dartford England, near the River Darent, Earth.

Early morning.

We had advanced quite a bit, at Winston’s request. He’d received an anonymous tip regarding ten large ships heading towards the English Channel. So now he wants us a little bloody closer. Typical Brits. Just like bulldogs. Square shouldered, overly defensive, a little too stubborn, and able to run like Hell when threatened with eradication. I was worried sick about Skylar, and Church’s silence was concerning. Raven called to tell us about Zhukov’s position, which was just south of Watford. Zhukov only had three hundred men, but from what I’d heard they were worth about thirty times that in terms of their fighting capabilities. But other than that, I knew nothing.
While we waited for the assault I'd been following my old friends around and catching up. They had more than a few interesting stories to tell me. Even though I was enraptured by Stirling's adventures on Io and Liam's escapades on Mercury, I couldn't help but keep thinking back to Skylar. Jester dropped his act to console me, but that didn't do anything. If anything it made me think more about my angel.

When we reached our current position we were allowed some rest. Winston didn't want us any closer yet, for whatever reason. I couldn't imagine why he wouldn't want us there. It would be better to have the defenders close to the target, not hundreds of miles away. This man must be insane.

I was sitting with Fireteam Steelheart under a tree chatting about what I'd been doing lately. Stirling seemed impressed by my story of the uprising, and ironically it was everyone but him—the self proclaimed ladies man—who cared about my love life. I was telling them an embarrassing story about when Church had caught Skylar when he was a little tied up per se, when we heard it. The roar of warp drives, followed by the sound of distant explosions.

I saw the jumpships too, mere specks on the southeastern horizon. Around a dozen broke off from a larger formation and went towards our position at full speed. Whistles sounded, troops were rallied, and the battle began. But this wasn't our fight. I unslung a long black boxy Omolon sniper rifle from my back and took aim at the ships. I began compensating for the range and realized that I simply couldn't hit them. They were too fast and too far. This was an aerial battle. This simply wasn't my job. Hundreds of Guardians and tank crews disagreed, firing rockets, bullets, and shells into the air, but quite frankly nothing hit and nothing would.

A ship must have noticed the large group of Guardians and tanks around my position as it broke formation to attack us and us specifically. When it was drawing near it began dropping it's lethal payload. Two rows of bombs began dropping in a line, striking the ground and throwing up dirt as they exploded in blasts of kinetic force and flame. Joakim got in front of us and thrust out his arms. A purple protective bubble of Void energy spread around us.

“Ward of Dawn!” he announced. “Get in if you value your lives.”

It filled up quickly and the ship was a mere six seconds away. Mayne did something bold. He leapt out of the Ward to cast one of his own, allowing more people to find shelter. The bombs struck, and I could see Joakim struggling to keep the Ward up. The bombs shook the ground and pounded the bubble with the force of Mjolnir.

Joakim and Mayne kept the bubbles up and Liam exited it to let an injured Titan in. He climbed atop a nearby tank and gathered Void Light in his right hand. He began using both arms, creating a
bigger and bigger ball of Void. Once it was about the size of a yoga ball he pulled back his arms and held still.

“What are you doing?” I shouted. “Get back here!”

The jumpship came back around for another run, dropping two large bombs on a row of tanks on its way. The tanks fires back, firing salvos of orange Solar missiles, but they only managed to disrupt the bombs. The ship remained unharmed. Joakim was panting.

“Come down and see what happens you fucking shit,” he wheezed.

As the ship drew within a hundred metres, Liam thrust his right arm towards it, releasing a large Nova Bomb. It missed, but it followed the ship afterwards. It dropped its rows of smaller bombs. They struck the tank and bubble, blinding us with blooming flowers of death, fire, and soil. I screamed as I saw Liam eradicated in flame and shrapnel. I knew that these bombs could kill us just as well as their rifles. I couldn't believe that he'd just died. Joakim was screaming in emotional pain and from the effort of keeping the bubble going. Beads of sweat rolled down his beet red face.

“Fuck you!” he sobbed.

When the dust settled I saw something amazing. Liam was holding a sword to the air, projecting a small Arc shield. He put it into his back, climbed out of the crater, and watched something in the distance. I looked at what he was staring at and saw his Nova Bomb collide with the jumpship, making it crunch inwards and disintegrate in a violent purple blast. So violent that the air boomed like thunder and the grass rippled like Skylar's hair in the wind. Another three of Titans created a Wards of their own, giving us some legroom and giving poor Joakim and Mayne a break. Liam casually entered the Ward I was taking cover in, thumbing his pockets.

He made a talking motion with his hand and started talking in a whiny voice. “What are you doing? Get back here.”

I punched him in the shoulder. “Shut up. That was serious. You c-”

“But I didn’t,” he said. “You’re welcome. He turned around and pointed to the sky. “Look. Those Brits ain't so useless after all.”
Thirty green and brown Vector class jumpships roared towards the attackers, frontal guns blazing. They looked majestic in the morning sun, its orange glow reflected by the occasional steel plate or cockpit. The RAF being the RAF won in less than a minute, cutting the bombers out of the skies with ease, frontal guns rattling off burst after butts into the enemy’s engines. There was a collective cheer from the Germans and City Guardians, which I joined enthusiastically.

Of course, nothing good ever lasts. Around forty black Echo class jumpships screamed into the fray from the southeast. They opened fire on the Vectors and many furious dogfights broke out, the agile Vectors dodging missiles but getting torn up by machine gun fire and the heavily armed Echo fighters having trouble avoiding the Vectors. I would say the odds of victory for either side were about even, but we could do nothing to influence the fight. The Titans swapped out and Joakim once again was on bubble duty.

Then the Americans came, a row of twenty black and blue Odyssey class jumpships. We cheered, expecting a swift victory. Then our sentiments changed. The American jumpships gave us all welcome gifts, dropping bombs on us as they passed to join numerous dogfights. A pair of Vectors chasing an Echo found themselves the targets now. They were shot down by rapid bursts of gunfire, one bouncing off of Joakim’s Ward of Dawn before landing in the River Darent.

Stirling was displeased and oblivious. He shook his fist at the sky. “Oi, friendly fire you fat fucks!”

I didn’t think he grasped the situation fully. We had been betrayed. I feared not only for Church and Bellona, but for everyone in the system.

___†___

Church
Jake’s flagship.
English Channel.
Mid morning.

I felt explosion after thunderous explosion rocking the ship as jumpships occasionally got close enough to drop a bomb. It got monotonous and I managed to tune it out. We were in English waters now, and the battle had begun. I was worried sick about Skylar, Max, Raven, Sisu, and everyone on the isle. Bellona was doing fine though. I’d draped my cloak around her to keep her warm and less exposed, but I couldn’t do anything about the cuffs. She could though, and it was annoying how she was teasing me in a time like this.
“C’mon, one more try,” she taunted. “I'm waiting Mr. knight in shining armor. Come save your damsel in distress before she had to do it herself.”

“Just do it!” I shouted and flinched at my harsh tone. “Sorry, but please. This is war.”

She laughed. “Made you say it. Now I'm gonna sing it.” She noticed my serious face. “Just kidding.”

She yanked the section of pipe out of place. It fell to the ground with a loud clang, leaving her hands not exactly free—but at least she wasn't trapped anymore.

I sighed. “There, was that too hard?”

She smirked. “Don't get smart with me. It's surprisingly difficult to rip a lead pipe out of place. I needed to make it look cool too, and if you were listening I was waiting for the guards to leave.”


“I forgive you.” She raised her cuffed hands. “But I'm keeping these for later.” She winked at me in a way that said, ‘I might be serious’.

“Cool. I don't care. Right now we have to make sure there even is a later.” I dared to ask her something that would only lead to more teasing. “Are you serious though?”

Bellona giggled like an anime character on helium. “Of course not Church kun. Unless you want me to. I'm so naughty. Tee hee.” She retched in disgust. “Of course not. I'm not like that. Now help me smash that door like an altar boy will you?”

I didn't bother to tell her that I'm technically Lutheran. Instead I picked up the lead pipe. I tossed in and caught in a few times to gauge its balance.

“Deac, what's that doorknob made of?” I asked my Ghost.
“Aluminum, Major Cassavetes sir!” he replied. “Do you like my new act?”

I smiled briefly. “Sure do Private Deacon. Sure do.”

Ares appeared with the usual sound effects and classical music. “I daresay I do it better. Every maiden needs her servant. Why do you think-”

Bellona glared sourly at Ares. “Don't try to justify or explain those two. They're good soldiers and friends, but I could care less about their personal lives.”

“I was actually going to use the Queen of England in the past to evidence this,” Ares huffed. “And I will not allow my Guardian to even mentally slander her allies. Slander aside, your neural state is exemplary. Right now I am detecting an endorphin rush at the prospect of combat.”

“Whatever Ares, you're the one poking around in my head.”

I loudly smashed the doorknob and lock. I gave them a look that tried to convey some words but probably just looked like a fool making a funny face.

“Let's a go!” I said in a fake Italian accent. “The Mushroom Kingdom is a under attacka! We a musta stoppa Bowser and save a the princess!”

Bellona laughed. “Mussolini on drugs! I get it! Nice one.”

“No, Mario,” I corrected.

She raised an eyebrow. “Who's that?”

I shook my head and signalled for her to follow me and stay behind me. She did that obediently and began acting like a soldier. It was dead silence from then on out. We headed right down the hallway towards the stairs. I heard footsteps and chatter from the stairs some fifty yards away.
“No, Jake wouldn't mind!” a man laughed. “And I bet the bitch is going to like it. I was listening to their apartment. If a needle dick like Church can make her sound like that, I can make her fucking scream. And it's not rape if you like it.”

Conveniently I spotted my Dusklight crucifix on the floor. I clipped it back around my neck and felt nothing change. In fact, I felt something much earlier and thought it to be the cold. Whoever had been suppressing my Light had stopped—for whatever reason. I called Solar Light to my left hand in the shape of a scatter grenade and brandished my pipe in my right. I would make sure to literally shove it up that guy's ass.

They entered the hall, a Hunter and Warlock. I threw the grenade like a baseball and it soared right into the Hunter's chest—burying itself there before exploding into many small orange projectiles that sought out the Warlock and did lesser damage to him. The Hunter fell in a heap, and I violently tossed the pipe at the Warlock's head to knock him off his feet. He cried out in the same voice I had heard and fell on his back. Okay fucker. Mess with Church and you get the birch… I don't know really, I'm improvising.

I dashed like Usain Bolt right down the hall, using the Warlock's testicles to stop my foot. He gasped and I saw red spread through his pants. A Ghost emerged, but it shook its shell disappointedly.

“Don't worry, he had it coming;” it sighed. “He's not getting back up. Good luck Major Church.” She noticed Bellona behind me. “Oh, let me get those cuffs.”

The green Ghost flew to Bellona and freed her hands. She put the cuffs in Ares’ storage.

“They're for you or the next guy, whichever I feel like,” she teased. “You wouldn't handcuff me would you Church kun? I mean, I have been-”

I groaned and rubbed my face. “Oh my God in heaven and His son Jesus H. Christ, prophet and touched by Light… You are making that a really tempting offer.”

She giggled. “Oh, you'd like me to h-”

“Are you sure you're alright?” I asked. “You're being pretty not okay.”
“Jeez I was just joking…”

I grabbed the Hunter's M16 like Häkke rifle and Omolon sidearm, handing the latter and the pipe to Bellona. I promised we'd steal the armor from the first Titan we saw, but for now she had to settle for the Warlock's undershirt and a pair of boxers—which yes, were mine. Our wardrobes got a little mixed the other night per se. It's her fault that she wears those weird shorts things.

I noticed the Hunter had a nice knife and decided I liked the bear on the handle. I stabbed the groaning Warlock in the crotch. He jerked and screamed. I continued up the stairs, the knife in my old one's holster. We reached the top and checked our corners. Nothing so far. Just the same old fluorescent lights and baby blue walls littered with doors.

We must have been heard, because pretty soon footsteps were pounding down the stairs to our left and right, only thirty yards away each. No time to plan. Me and Bellona aimed our weapons down either side of the hallway. A door opened, and I would have shot the person who exited if it weren't for his distinctive brown duster and French braid. He looked over his shoulder, a fire in his eyes and a cigarette in his mouth.

“You seem surprised monsieur,” he said. “As am I. Alas, ma cherie has yet to tell me how she got us onboard.”

I heard another door open. I looked to the left and saw a woman in a black jumpsuit covered in grey harnesses and bandoliers of knives and grenades. Daniel. Her chest was flatter than it should be, so I deduced that Daniel was still in fact a guy.

He winked at us. “I have a friend in the industry.”

I clutched my chest and gasped in pride, recognizing the reference. “A fellow Joe Ledger fan?”

Before I got an answer green clad Guardians stormed into the hallway. Ferro calmly put them to rest with his Bulldog revolver on his end, while Daniel tossed knives into the heads of Warlocks, Hunters, Titans, any Guardians who came down the stairs. Ferro stopped to reload and ducked back into the room he had come from. I laid down cover fire with the rifle, being conservative with my ammo and getting only quad tap headshots to barely secure the kill. My mag clicked empty and Bellona was about to take my place when Ferro quickly finished off the last three.

“Miteux,” Ferro chided. He shook his head. “Didn't even fire back. How are you… holding up—if
“Fine love!” Daniel chirped, tossing a knife into a final Titan's head. “Let's call in the cavalry shall we. Oh!” He slapped his forehead. “I forgot to say it. Since we're in England—cheers love, the cavalry’s here!”

Bellona laughed at that joke but it was lost in me. She gave me a condescending head shake.

“You've got to do some digging in the digital archives one day,” she recommended. “You can sometimes find something fun, like a history book or a video game.”

“Let's just focus on taking Jake out,” I said.

Bellona used her signature move and forced me to the wall, but she held back. I got a bit excited, but it was for nothing. Just a quick peck on the lips.

“There's more where that came from,” she promised. She released me and got out to pick at some corpses for armor. “Come on. Let's get going.”

Ferro nodded. “As you wish madame. I have Torrence’s division on standby and Pops is already fighting our enemies on the front line.”

Daniel tossed a knife and caught it. “Yeah, and my dad's got something to say. You won't meet yet, but he says you gotta stop this ship. If you don't, the Germans and City Guardians are going to be annihilated.” He smiled cheerfully. “No pressure.”

Liam

Hastings, near the ocean, Earth.

Late morning.
The Axis had pushed us back close to the ocean, so close that I could not only see and hear, but feel the battle on the water. An English battleship fired all four of its large triple cannons into a destroyer’s hull, tearing it in half. Axis aircraft pounded the decks of English destroyers and aircraft carriers with bombs. One ship stood out, a superdestroyer. It was far from shore, but I could still see it. It was an immense blue steel boat with a Union Jack printed onto the side and flying in the wind. It had two rows of four double cannons on both the front and back decks, and I could barely make out the heavy machine guns and AA guns that littered the deck. Echo class jumpships tried in vain to get their Minerva class jumpships within range to destroy it with bombs, but the ship's crew was vigilant in knocking them out of the sky with barrages of flak.

I heard a groan as the battleship I had noted earlier sunk below the waves. True, we had reached a deadlock on the sea, but the Americans could change that—and our infantry and armored divisions weren't doing too well. We'd lost one hundred men approximately, but the Wyvern Panzers gave us hope, seemingly invincible. Only twelve had been lost, and even then they went down swinging.

I noticed at times that I sometimes didn't need to shoot Ghosts. They either weren't there or didn't revive their Guardians. Lots of the time they were just mortal mercenaries in black body armor. I ducked behind a rock, a sign we were being pushed further to sea, and shot down an Axis Titan holding a rocket launcher. His Ghost didn't revive him, it just left. I was confused. Then again, I was always somewhat confused about something.

A young lass with hair the color of dark chocolate and eyes that reminded me of the sea shook me out of my numb and unfeeling trance.

I blinked and came back to my senses. “Yeah lassie? Watcha need to say?”

“I'm hearing reports of American ships heading this way,” Max said. “We'll be annihilated. On a brighter note, look at Mayne.”

She pointed to a skirmish occurring two hundred yards to our left, nearly losing her hand to a sniper bullet. I peeked out from behind the rock and returned the favor, finding him atop a hill. I took the cheeky bugger’s head right off. Huh. Guess Hunters do have brains after all. I then looked to Mayne, and I was impressed. He was wading through the sea of black and red Axis and green Americans with Joakim atop his shoulders. Mayne used a shotgun from his hip, while Joakim used an auto rifle to make sure his buddy had some breathing room. Joakim accidentally let an American Warlock get too close and he ended up with one of Mayne’s tree trunk legs in the chest, followed by two shotgun blasts. Resourceful, I'll admit, but not smart. Titans can't be smart.

Nonetheless, we were on the retreat. The lines of black and green advanced, and we retreated at the blowing of a whistle. Twenty panzers went the opposite way, covering our retreat. I watched as they used their turrets and missiles to stall the inevitable as they were hacked to pieces and blown to bits,
the people inside no doubt facing a similar fate.

We retreated until we were almost up against the ledge, close as we could get to the sea. I looked at our lines, spread out thin and weak. About one hundred eighteen tanks remained, and around five or six hundred fifty men left. Not good. I wondered how the Russians were faring. Probably not much better.

I emptied the magazine of my Suros scout rifle into the mass of enemy Guardians and mortals, killing a few. Max tossed a Solar grenade into the enemy lines, taking out a few Guardians. Supers were being used now too. I saw shields thrown, Daybreaks cast, Golden Guns fired, Nova Bombs flying, Hammers of Sol exploding, Shadowshots racing through the sky, and much more. I contributed a Nova Bomb to this and continued with my rifles.

I looked behind me and saw something terrible. Three ships advancing fast, a pair of Axis battleships rushing to protect them from the superdestroyer. I thought, God help us. And God bless our damned souls.

/°>

Raven

London Bridge, Earth.

I had been assigned to defend this bridge by Winston himself with a unit of eighty Guardians from Zhukovgrad at my side. The city itself was in great condition, rivalling that of the Last City almost except a few Fallen sectors around the edge and the walls being only fifty meters. The people were tolerable but largely patriotic. They didn’t take kindly to us trespassing on British soil. Oh boo fucking hoo. We were doing them a favor while their Guardians were sitting around the borders probably having a picnic. I saw a few and found their uniforms quite odd. All wore black armor with Union Jacks on the shoulders, and all their helmets looked like gas masks.

I was expecting a long and boring wait for the Germans to come and help us reinforce this position. But instead we got a boatload of pure concentrated nope. You know your fucked when an infantry carrier the size of a soccer field comes casually down the river, blasting music and covered in about a hundred colorful Guardians. I noticed one in particular. Wearing a purple trench coat, white pants, and black gloves and shoes was my old brother in arms. Prior. He held an M1911 in each hand and was striking a variety of ridiculous poses. I had the Russians split into four groups of twenty. The fur clad Guardians enthusiastically obeyed. I wondered how they’d gotten past the Thames Barricade. Probably explosives. I would have heard though. Odd.
We fired upon the carrier with scout rifles in perfect rhythm. The outer rows fired half of their twenty round magazines before the inner rows got going. From then on it was ceaseless gunfire, as one row was always shooting. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Sisu-3 sash towards an apartment building and begin to climb. I used my sleek midnight black Disrespectful Stare pulse rifle to join the firing lines for morale purposes. The Axis shot back with a variety of guns. Grenade launchers, rockets, auto rifles, an LMG, and some robotic spiders. I kid you not. Prior levelled his long slide M1911s at me, and I swapped to my Crimson hand cannon. He loosed a barrage of red tracer fire at me. I dodged and spun before returning fire while running to the north of the bridge. Russians and Axis fell in disproportionate numbers to each other. I predicted I had about sixty Ruskies left to fight the ninety remaining Axis.

I reached the north end of the bridge and was greeted by a friendly face. Weeaboo Dude. His sword was out, robes were flowing, and wrappings I fired a burst from my cannon at him. He deftly dodged and drew his blade. He rushed me, rapidly swinging and forcing me to use the tiny bayonet on my gun to block his blade while backing up onto the bridge. A bullet whizzed past, cutting my cloak and slamming into Weeaboo Dude’s face. I followed up with a burst of my own as he fell. I heard rumbling explosions behind me. Shit! I looked to see rockets striking the bridge and bombers over London. They dropped their payloads, one annihilating the building to my right. I covered my head and watched something worse happen. Prior leapt from the ship, trailing thick smoke behind him. He landed on the bridge and began spinning and shooting, red lines whizzing from a smoky whirlwind and into Russian skulls. Those poor guys didn’t stand a chance. They were all dead in seconds.

I reloaded my cannon and holstered it. Poe transmatted my sword into my hand. The only way to fight drama is more drama. Nothing says drama queen like a long ass greatsword with little to no practicality. I heard civilians screaming and looked behind me to see a group of local troops shooting into a unit of black and green clad Guardians. I could either help them or settle an old dispute.

Yellow tracer bullets began flying from a nearby rooftop into the Concordat troops. Sisu was one slick son of a gun.

“Thanks mate!” I called.

“Just kill that fucking clown,” he grumbled over the comms.

I grinned and levelled my blade between my eyes. “Gladly.”

I tossed a smoke grenade at my feet, flipped the blade over, and charged. Prior saw right through the invisibility. We met at the middle of the bridge. I swung my blade at his neck, aiming for a decapitation. He calmly raised a pistol to block it.
He shook his head. “Tsk tsk Raven. Didn’t you get the memo from that last fight. Gun beats sword. Every time.”

Then shit got real. He raised his other gun to my head. I did a backwards roll and raised my blade just in time to catch a burst of gunfire in the Void barrier. He kept firing until his guns ran dry. Then he simply holstered them.

I laughed and planted the tip of my blade in the ground. “Done already?”

He shrugged off his coat to reveal the gold painted armor beneath. His eyes began burning with a furious green intensity, much like Hive runes. He reached out to the air in front of him and I raised my blade to block whatever came next. The air began rippling in front of him, the ripples solidifying into a midnight black rapier of some slick black material. It seemed to radiate the same black smoke Prior had before. Dark grey mist began swirling around us, and I felt reality begin to shift, upturning like soil in a field. I knew this place. Prior’s equivalent of a throne world. I looked hard through the mist and saw that he wasn’t taking us to the throne world, but taking his throne world here. I couldn’t allow that.

He whipped the rapier out of the air and charged. He began rapidly swinging, forcing me to use my blade itself to counter it. Those blades he could create simply ripped through energy shields. Sparks flew, purple and white. Prior began laughing like a maniac. Me? I shut the fuck up and put my energy into stopping him. I saw an opening and took it, swinging hard at his left thigh. My blade skidded off and jolted out of my hand. I rolled back and pulled my eight inch hunting knife from my belt and planted my feet. I held the blade upside down and used it to block a vertical slash. I slid my blade down and bent my knees to lock our blades by the crossguards.

Prior grinned. “Oh look what you’ve done now oh child of the Light,” he taunted. “I should just mercifully blow your head off here and now. Or maybe should tell you who and what I really am. This place does feel rather James Bond-sy doesn’t it?”

I grunted as he pressed down with more force. My visor began to fog up from exposure to the grey mist. It wouldn’t end well like this.

“I know who you are,” I said with a strained voice. “You are Prior. My old friend who was corrupted by a Hive based demon substance called Nicodemus.”

Prior cackled and pressed harder, cutting a small divot into the pure titanium blade. “No. I am Nicodemus. He was a facade, another false identity.”
“No!” I shouted in denial. “Hell the fuck no! Only demon substances can control Guardians! You can’t! You’re lying!”

He cut another centimetre into my blade, forcing me to kneel. “I made that up. I bargained with the Deep for this power, just like Oryx. I can do than with only a fraction of the power available to me.” His face became somber and serious. And I am so sorry that I did. But now there’s no going back. I became what I had to—to create a utopian world again. To unify humanity and destroy the possibility of all future wars.”

“What?” That had to be bullshit. I pushed back, knowing my blade was breaking as I did.

Prior ended it, taking his left hand off his rapier and using a miniscule amount of force to cut my knife in tow. The blade kept going, tearing through my lightweight Hunter armor like a hot knife through butter. My chest erupted in white hot pain and I fell onto my back. Warm blood oozed from a deep gash down my chest. I noticed the wound was smoking. With that same midnight black smoke and grey mist. Prior stood tall and flicked the blood from his blade.

“I truly did do the right thing,” he lamented. “Did it for the right reasons. Just didn’t do it the right way. Anyway Raven, you’ll be of some use later.” His coat fluttered like a bird back onto his shoulders and he discarded his rapier. He pulled his long red hair back into a ponytail and drew his dual pistols. “Or as Roman would say, it’s quite funny really. No amount of luck could save you in the end. Now, I brought a plus one to this party. Once we eradicate the Germans the Axis will flood the city like I flooded your mom last night. And London. Will. Burn.” His face changed to that calmer one from before. “I have my regrets, but there is no turning back.”

Chapter End Notes

This was a shorter chapter, but I’m trying to keep them below 40k characters from now on. Also, comment if you got any references or want me to do something (ie: kill myself, change my writing for the better, etc.). I won’t moderate or remove comments, but go easy on me.
Episode 12: An Unexpected Ally

Chapter Summary

Skylar returns to Earth, but he's not quite himself to say the least. The battle to stop the American naval formation rages on. Alois defeats an old enemy and makes a new and unlikely ally.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

♚

Winston

Winston's war room.

London, United Kingdom, Earth.

I leaned heavily on my desk and ran my hands through my gray hair. This was bad. According to Lieutenant Lejonet Från Norden, the Concordat and an elite unit of Axis had already breached London. On the naval front it wasn't much better. We had to give it our all in terms of keeping the skies clear and keeping those American ships away from the shore. If they got close enough, all the Guardians from New Berlin would be annihilated. Gone. Poof. One less line of defense. My hand almost drifted to my screen, I almost called the Last City, I almost made the call that would end our independence. Then I got worse news. News that made me want even less to do with the Vanguard. There was an anomaly in the Irish Sea, and it was destroying ships and aircraft indiscriminately. If I handled this on my own, I would have Zavala's respect and fear. He wouldn't think of trying to assimilate my colony. Some people said I was insane for having these fears, but I know that man better than they do.

The black clad female Hunter pounded my desk, the rubber on her gauntlets leaving a mark. I looked into her intense face and mane of blonde hair. She was baring her teeth and trying to intimidate me or something.

“London bridge is falling down,” she growled.

This surprised and scared me, more than Zavala’s contracts ever would or could. “Falling down?”

Lejonet nodded. “Falling down.”

“London bridge is falling down,” I said, shocked. “Oh my lady!”

<#>
I could kind of make out what my physical body was doing. In disturbing and unwanted clarity. I was on a large isle somewhere in the UK, controlling a storm that was tearing up the Axis and British ships in the Irish sea. Black storm clouds bubbled overhead, spanning many miles. Red lightning flashed and rippled through the clouds. I saw myself a little. Ribbon like lengths of some slick black material came flying out every time something damaged me, quickly snapping back in and repairing the wound.

A blue destroyer came zooming towards me, its wake throwing up waves and white froth. The main cannon screamed, releasing a blue linear fusion bolt that pierced my chest. I, or not me, stretched my right arm towards the destroyer and reached out to the malicious and warped storm above. A red bolt screamed down from the sky, a red gash in the skin of this reality. It struck the deck of the destroyer, punching a large smoking hole in it, flames licking at the deck. The destroyer continued sailing forward, now almost ashore. The guns continued to shred my body, and those ribbons continued to patch up the wounds. The ship struck the shore and Guardians in black and silver armor and gas masks leapt from the decks.

They ran fast, the Hunters leading the pack and kicking up sand clouds behind them. I simply moved my arm in their direction and felt something snap as a result. They dropped dead, no apparent cause visible. The rest kept their distance, more than a dozen muzzles flashing as various weapons tried in vain to damage me. I wanted this to stop, but I really truly couldn’t. A Titan took a knee and aimed a rocket launcher at me. I did something different this time, leaping into the air and descending on him headfirst like a bullet—impaling him on my horned helmet. I threw him off and spread my arms, letting the bullets tear into me.

“It’s quite useless,” a voice said through me. “You can not resist. You are doing nothing. I will kill you. As I have done to countless species and worlds before that cowered beneath the Traveller and its Light. This is a good host. It was better than you before it let me in.”

A sentinel shield sliced me in two from behind. The body repaired as usual, but now I gave my attacker some actual attention. I felt a burning sensation where I had been struck instead of the numbing sensation. Tendrils of black smoke and red Arc emerged from my arms, rapidly lashing out and striking the Guardians dead before they could make any further moves. Then I changed tactics. Instead of letting the storm eradicate the corpses, I detached the smoky appendages and watched them consume the Guardians and sucking the remains into some unseen tear in reality. Taking them. Capital ‘T’ Taking. As in Taken. What had I done? I just wanted it to stop. I wanted to go back in time and tell Max not to let me go to Titan. But instead I was forced to remain fully conscious and able to see and feel my body doing terrible things.

There was a thundering sound as a ship near the English shore unleashed a futile salvo of shells. They whistled as they fell and struck the beach, throwing up sand and unleashing Hell. One eradicated my torso, ripping through my chest and exploding beneath me. Unfortunately, those tendrils emerged again, repairing my body and replacing it even. I walked towards the sea, and then on top of it—the waves calming and solidifying beneath my feet. I walked kilometres in steps, space seemingly bending and folding beneath my feet. I pointed silently at the long black battleship and
willed the storm to eradicate it. The storm complied, tearing it to bits in a split second red flash. I watched it sink with horror, my now heightened sense of hearing picking up the terrified screams of the men I had killed. The ship sunk below the waves and dragged the men—innocent or not—to their undeserved deaths. I tried to regain control but simply had nothing to do it with. I could merely see and think. Nothing more.

Once the ship had sunk I targeted a large black aircraft carrier about four hundred meters away to the south. I turned slowly to face it and just looked at it. Thirteen black and red Arcadia class jumpships soared from the deck into the sky, heading towards me and the mainland. The eight heading my way opened fire with their main guns, each one shooting a single line of lead at me. Some hit the water, causing little splashes far from their target. Many just stopped in my vicinity. The wall of bullets began to form slowly in front of me, a semicircle about ten feet wide.

Once I could no longer see the jumpships from the sheer mass of the bullets I shoved forward with my left hand—using the kinetic push ability that was already intrinsic to me. The mass of metal flew out in a dense cloud, striking the eight jumpships a about fifty metres away and shredding them. A Vector class jumpship to the east gave me a thankful wiggle of its wings. I said ‘you’re welcome’ by reaching towards it with both arms and making a ripping motion, tearing it from the sky. As it collided with the rocky shore, sparks flew, followed by a bright orange explosion.

Damn me all to Hell. I should have killed myself before I had the chance to find a reason to live. It wasn’t worth the pain and destruction I was causing. Not in the slightest.

Daniel

Jake’s flagship, the USS Brooklyn, Earth.

Engine room.

Early afternoon.

We had made good progress, clearing out floor after floor of the USS Brooklyn and getting closer to our objective. Church wanted to go up, but I convinced him to go down. Alois sent me and Ferro and a team of twenty mercenaries to do two things. Rescue Church, and stop the flagship. Then we would leave it open to air strikes from the RAF. Easy peasy lemon squeezy. Then Abernathy would work his magic, using a hard Light projection to clear one battleship and clearing the other one himself. That Catholic asshole was useful sometimes.

We found where they had locked Bellona and Church’s weapons and armor and reclaimed them. Church spun his revolvers and played with them a little, doing cool gun spinning and tossing tricks before holstering them and putting on his helmet and cloak. Bellona looked like an ancient Spartan in her armor—if spartans fought with long ten gauge shotguns and submachine guns.

We then went deeper, and I impressed Ferro with my tactful use of throwing projectiles. I felt a little sad that I couldn’t use my grenades—as the tight hallways wouldn’t permit that. Nonetheless, I can proudly say I got a good thirty percent of all the kills per floor.

After three floor clearings we came into a large room. It was mostly dark and lit a line of by three
miniature wave generators, arc energy climbing up the visible pillars and throughout the ship. I wondered how it converted kinetic energy from the waves into Arc. That seemed a little far fetched. Nonetheless, we were here to destroy it, no matter how wonderfully entrancing and intriguing it was. But we had to fight through some Americans to get to them.

Church and Bellona kicked in the double doors with a loud crash. Ferro led his brown clad mercenaries into the room and down the short flight of stairs, sweeping it with their guns. The blue light of the generators illuminated around forty green clad Guardians, mostly Titans with a few Hunters and Warlocks. Ferro and his mercenaries used the element of surprise to their advantage, opening fire on the Guardians and getting about ten before they started firing back. A bullet pierced the skull of someone to my right. Ezekiel. I had liked him. So I avenged him. I grabbed a pair of round impact grenades carefully and pulled the pins. I leapt into the air and tossed them both into the disorganized crowd of Americans. I took out a Hunter and two Titans—but I took a bullet to the chest in exchange. I shouted in pain and immediately Ferro was at my side. His Ghost, Lumière, patched up the wound and Ferro stood me back up again.

“See?” he said. “Ce n’était rien. Tu vas bien.”

He left my side and I watched Church swing his right hand cannon into the air, casting a Golden Gun. His body was wreathed in flame and his voice was pure.

He fanned six shots into the dwindling crowd and their Ghosts while shouting, “Vitae, libertatis et beatitudinem consequendam!”

If that isn't the most American thing in the world I don’t know what is—because America sure as hell wasn’t all that American anymore. The last Titan dropped, and a non lethal shot put his Ghost out of service temporarily. The mercenaries had seen better days. Once twenty strong, we had only thirteen left counting Ferro. The remaining men were in states ranging from gleeful and unfazed to straight up puking from the stress of the situation.

“C’mon,” I said. “We gotta blow this ship outta the water, if you will.” I pointed to the most sane looking group of mercenaries. “You guys. Grab the explosives bag and evenly distribute the C4 amongst the generators. Then we get out of here and blow these fuckers sky high. They’re gonna feel this one down in Bikini Bottom.”

Church chuckled at the reference and it was lost on everyone else. Typical. The men began planting the charges and Ferro began talking with the less stable looking of his men, telling stories about their lost friends and giving his heartfelt condolences for their loss—in his charming broken Common dialect. I found one I’d met on the same day I bumped into Ferro with Arya and Alex. He was cleaning his rifle, disassembling it, putting it back together, and doing reload drills with empty magazines. His face was blank. I would have gone to talk with him, but everyone’s favorite Irish Catholic Awoken made a guest appearance. His projection looked weaker, as did the person it was based off of. His skin was greyish blue, his eyes were dull, his glasses were bent and cracked, and a small bloodstain was on his chest.

He spoke in a very grave and final tone. “I got one ship. Jake’s on the other. He ain’t here. Ye have to stop ‘im. They’re breakin’ the naval blockade. I’m gonna get ya some time.” He winked at me. “God go with you my good lad.”

Then he disappeared. I got a sense of finality from that statement. He was never nice to me, and he only ever ironically called me what I am—usually opting to refer to my unfortunate biological gender. He must have wanted to make it right before he went. I could forgive him. Magic men in the sky do stupid shit to your head. I smiled. I’d send him a prayer just in case once this was all over.
Church broke the silence. “Right. Let's evac the ship, join up with the rest of the mercenaries, and give Jake an ass kicking.”

|°~

Alois

Outside the Tower of London, United Kingdom, Earth.

Of course he wasn't on the front lines. Of course my adversary, Bolverk, was here. Making a cowardly assault on London while his men distracted the Germans and pushed them into a killzone. Luckily, I knew him well. He'd stick near the tourist attractions. He always had a taste for cliché. That and a company of defenders was huddled up in there, fighting for their lives against a larger force of Concordat and grey clad mercenaries. So I donned my tweed and top hat, put on some kevlar beneath, grabbed my trick cane, and took a leisurely stroll through London as it came crashing down around me. I felt confident that Amir and Shen were doing a good job at defending other sectors, so I had free reign of the city.

I strolled onto the lawn, watching the black and green clad Concordat Guardians shooting at the windows and receiving ample returning fire. They had the audacity to use the ancient trees and sculptures, including a statue of Winston Black holding a rifle and pointing at imaginary enemies. I did not appreciate this. I got behind the main firing line, maybe forty men strong.

“Tsk tsk tsk,” I chided. “Destruction of public property is quite the heinous crime.”

I Hunter turned to look first. I swung my black cane with my right hand, smashing it into his head and shattering his helmet. The more turned to face me.

I laughed softly. “My, I sure am loving the attention.”

The lead Titan pointed at me and shouted for his men to open fire. I rolled to the left and dodged a ghastly barrage of bullets. I stood straight and slammed an Arc charged left fist into a Warlock’s face, following up with three cane strikes. One to his face, legs, and Ghost. They opened fire again—although the mortal mercenaries had the sense to run—and I dodged to the right, calmly humming a song. I repeated the process on a Hunter and kept going. Roll, punch, three whacks, snide or ironic remark, repeat.

This made them furious. Even when they adjusted their firing patterns and whatnot they only hit me a total of twice to the kevlar. I continued narrowing down their ranks until only ten remained. I rolled back a few yards and stood tall, resting my hands on my cane.

“So, do any more of you naughty boys want some of daddy's cane?” I taunted.

They of course shot again. Wrong more. I dodged left and threw an Arcbolt grenade into their ranks, following up with a slug from my trick cane to strike the Titan dead. I then began the final act. I slowly began striding towards the panicking Concordat Guardians and spinning my cane. They opened fire one last time, and when their magazines ran dry I bolted towards them. Once I reached their lines I swung my cane eighteen times in two seconds, snapping necks and downing Ghosts. When all was said and done, Bolverk (or Y) entered the fight. I turned slowly, facing him without fear. He was just the same. Same black armor, same red cloak, same torn up face—courtesy of his
beloved Lysander—same black steel mask covering it.

“I thought I ended this long ago,” he said.

“Long ago?” I grinned. “Don’t you mean, a long time ago? Or has your vocabulary deteriorated to a similar degree as your combat skill? Seriously. I was expecting Axis troops, not some rent a Guardian Concordat amateurs.”

“I see your as quippy and big mouthed as ever,” Bolverk countered. “All talk.”

He unslung an automatic rifle from his back, forcing me to elicit a pitying laugh. I laid my left forearm horizontally over the back of my hips and pointed my cane at him.

“You can’t face me like a man?” I taunted. “Are you actually incapable of chivalrous warfare? Come on. Draw your blade. I know you have one. And if you lack one…”

I reached him in a flash, cane to his neck. He was still as quick as ever though. As I had hoped he had brought up a short sword, more like a long knife, to block my blow. Impressive. I leapt back, tossed my cane, and pointed the spherical handle at him. I twisted the cane to open the sphere and flicked a switch to release a buckshot round. Bolverk leapt into the air and descended upon me like a vulture, his blade poised to stab me. Instead of blocking, I calmly took a step back and watched him shatter his knife on the concrete walkway.

“Cheap metal,” I noted as I struck him upon the head. “And bad tactics. Whatever shall you do, oh adversary mine?”

He leapt back, landing at the gate. He reached up with his right hand and ripped an Arc Staff into existence, his body becoming covered in blue Arc Light. I tossed my cane aside and let Wilcard put it into his storage. Then I cast an Arc Staff of my own, spinning elegantly as I did so. We met in the center of the walkway, our staffs rapidly spinning and colliding in a long lasting display of skill and experience in the form of a duel. I continued spinning mine defensively until I saw an opening. I pole vaulted over my foe as he swung down to cleave me in two. I flipped and spun to dodge his staff before swiftly descending like a lightning bolt and letting loose a shockwave that knocked my foe into a tree. He cracked the wood and let out an audible yelp of pain, but he got right back up again. Admirable.

I spun my staff in one hand and advanced slowly, walking deliberately and carefully. He did so as well, walking as if on a tightrope. Before I even reached him I swung once, twice, three times, and thrust my left palm out—letting loose a violent blast of Arc energy. I am proud to say the I damn near finished him. He fell to the ground and skidded across the lawn into a wall. I slowly moved in for the kill, stopped by his laughter.

“You can’t win,” he said. “I gave my men their orders in advance. And I have an Admiral, an Air General, and Prior to command them. Even then, any commanding officer or Sergeant can just take command. The cause is bigger than just one man. You should know that.”

I tossed the Staff at him like a javelin, watching it bury itself in its chest and slowly begin to disintegrate him into a cloud of Arc and ash.

“I don’t care,” I stated. “I am satisfied now. I have made the world safer for my son, and I will continue to do so until I die. Even if I have to kill each and every last one of you one by one.”

He continued laughing. “Here’s the thing. I never intended to win. I never intended to take London you fool. That’s absurd. The world I fight for will never be achieved as long as the people have a free
will to defy it. I just wanted to draw you out into the open again. To get my revenge. I gave my men orders to raze this city to the ground and kill anyone who disobeys. Why? Because. If a species cannot live in peace with itself, it doesn't deserve to live.” He coughed as his left lung began turning to ash. “I have created something that will not stop until every living non Hive being in this system is dead or Taken. Humanity had its chance. The Formless One has taken a host. He will wipe us clean…”

I willed the staff to consume him, swiftly reducing him to ash. I heard another set of footsteps approach behind me. I drew my cane and pointed it at the source of the sound. Prior, remembering that I had spent both rounds. He wore a purple trench coat and black dress pants, black loafers, and black silk gloves. His hair was flowing wildly, but his eyes were calm. He spread out his arms and closed his eyes.

“He,” he calmly requested. “It is my destiny. I die by your hand here and now once the cause I once fought for is no longer worth fighting for. I have accepted what I am. A monster. I die here and now. Nothing stops that. I have done terrible things in the name of peace.” A tear escaped his right eye, slowly trickling down his cheek. “I have killed innocent people and worse, righteous ones. I have hung women and children from flagpoles, crucified soldiers, Taken Guardians, brought my world here to plague and choke the city. I deserve this. I couldn’t stop it, but I altered the details.”

I lowered my cane and rested my hands upon it calmly. I shook my head.

“Where did you get this information?” I inquired. “Where did a paracausal being learn its causal fate, hmm?”

“A bargain with the Deep,” he replied sorrowfully. “Now end it.”

I almost laughed. “The Deep. That’s what told you this?” I gave him an intense and serious look. “The Deep, the Darkness, Satan, Lucifer, Hades, all one and the same really. The Bible was written by the first Guardian, and the New Testament by the second. Moses used the Light to part the seas. Jesus was resurrected, much like a Sunsinger. Or so Church would say. I hardly believe that—but it has some truth and merit to it. The Darkness, The Formless One, it is the father of lies. It lies and deceives. I would not even be able to kill you.”

Prior opened his eyes, hope glittering in them like dying embers of a long extinguished fire. “If that’s true…” He lowered his arms and rew out a long handgun, barrel first. “You’ll need this sir.” He held it out to me. “I would like to redeem myself. I think the Concordat would be willing to cooperate.”

I took the handgun from him and tucked it into my belt. I bowed in thanks.

“It appears we have a new and unexpected ally,” I said.

Yet another set of footsteps entered the courtyard—bare metal feet. The only exo I knew who didn’t wear shoes. Miro Shen. We turned to greet him, Prior doing so with his hands behind his head in surrender. Shen gathered Void Light in his right hand and reached up as if about to crack an invisible whip. He made a whipping motion and the air cracked loudly. In his hand he held a seventeen foot long Abyssal Lash, a whip of pure Void energy. I chuckled.

“A little late Miro,” I chided. “Be more punctual next time.”

The tall exo shook his head. “No. I’m just in time. You see, I learned a lot while doing the Vigilante thing on the streets. You know what that was?” He began dancing with the Lash, creating rings of Void around him and lengthening it. He stood still but kept the Lash moving, maintaining the rings.
“Fascism is the only true way to peace. Where there is dissent there is conflict. With so many ways to view the world humans are tearing themselves apart. They have become a vermin. Bolverk is right. We don’t deserve to live.”

‡

Prior


So I guess I’m a good guy now? I reached out to the Deep and found it no longer available to me. I felt for my own Dark power and was relieved to see it was still there. I was still just as mighty as before. Just unable to grow stronger. Ha! As if I needed to. I’m already basically a god. I drew my silver M1911s and loaded an extended twelve round magazine of explosive red tracer rounds into each. I took a martial arts stance that probably looked ridiculous and aimed my guns at Miro.


Alois calmly entered the Tower. I could hear the warm reception he got from here. What did—oh there we are. A huge pile of corpses and cracked Ghosts. Ouch. I turned back to Miro and got my Roman Roirp persona going on.

“Nice bathrobe,” I sneered. “Where’d you get it, Satanist Old Navy? How much did it cost, nineteen souls and ninety nine virgins?”

“I made it myself you psychopath,” he growled. “And the pentagram means magic, not evil.”

My eyes lit up. “Oooh! You play Magic too? I run a blue white control deck. What was your favorite set before the Collapse? I liked Scourge.”

Miro began slowly advancing. “I personally consider myself a scourge. The scourge that will wipe out the impure and help the Formless One make the universe a place that the worthy races will appreciate.”

“Well I know you want to eradicate humans, but what about the blacks?” I asked sarcastically.

He struck, his lash wrapping around my right arm. He yanked on it and I screamed as it disintegrated, becoming smoke on the air. I leapt back and used my left arm to fire off a magazine at him. Twelve loud bangs echoed through the courtyard, but none struck. His Abyssal Lash moved at his command to absorb them all. He blinked, snapping into existence behind me. I felt the Lash wrap around my torso and legs, shooting away to wrap around tree limbs and statues. I remained there, suspended by the long lengths of pure dark Void. He came around to face me. I began cackling like a maniac. He pointed a .44 revolver engraved with glowing purple runes at my face and flicked the hammer.

“What’s so funny?” he growled. “It’s over.”

I screamed and laughed at once. “Ahahahahahahahahahahahaaaa! Oh my goodness me! You are thick.” I put on a silly and smug voice. “Don’t you remember me Miro Shen? I was inside of you for forty years! I’m…” I began talking like an anime character on cocaine and helium. “Nico Nico Nii…” I began talking in my Roman Roirp voice, speaking quickly and concisely but leaving varying spaces
between words. “Nico fuckmothering demus.”

The old exo didn’t believe me. He pulled the trigger and I felt the bullet pass through the head of my host. But I didn’t let go just yet. I needed to do one last thing with Blitz’s body. I removed the ethereal smokescreen, revealing the body of a young black man with a bomb shape shaved into his short hair. I flipped Shen the bird before switching bodies. I barely felt him tug on the Lash and reduce Blitz to dust.

All went black, black as the void of death, but when the blackness cleared up I was in Raven’s body, smoke still oozing from his chest wound. I dashed across the walkway with the Nevermore—a blade named after his old pub—in my hand. I stopped just short of Miro and rested the blade on my shoulder. I chuckled in Raven’s voice.

“Kid, you just got Alucarded,” I said with a malicious chuckle.

“What the-” He spun to face me.

“Anime reference,” I said. “Hellsing Ultimate Remastered episode ten I believe, or nine. I forget, it’s been decades and I lost the drive with the episodes on Mercury, so the Vex probably turned it into a clock or some shit. Hasn’t aired again for centuries. The point is, you suck, and I’ve been taking control of Guardians like this for centuries and adding their bodies to my collection—buried deep below the black sands of my Ashen Basin. Now, I have actually not taken an exo for… I think forty years. This should be a treat… Oh fuck me!” I slapped my forehead. “Forgot to say the actual line. Whatever.”

His jaw dropped as I ran him through with Raven’s blade. He simply couldn’t comprehend what had just been rehashed. I saw something in his eyes as he died. The same thing I had seen in the reflection pool when I had glimpsed my fate. The desire for a second chance. I couldn’t deny him that. He did that himself. I saw that look in his eyelights and face die and knew that he regretted nothing. I grinned cruelly as black smoke curled up the blade and into his body. Grey mist swirled and the ground beneath him crumbled and disintegrated into sand, which then blackened. Once the circle of sand was about ten feet across, I tossed the blade and exo into the air. The ground opened up like ravenously starving and eager jaws, and I watched with satisfaction as he fell screaming into the hungry and unending abyss. I let the mist clear and closed the link to my world.

The charred and upturned gravel and soil shifted as the Nevermore rose to the surface. I grabbed it in my hands. I did something I hoped would work. I let go of Raven’s body, and as the Basin prepared to consume him I closed the link again. I took a step back and was surprised to see that it had worked. My translucent incorporeal form exited the Hunter’s body and left him standing before me, confused and exhausted. I took physical shape, risking the use of my own body, and coughed into my hand.

Raven whipped around and with a single hand tried to take my head off. I put up my right arm and stopped the blade with my forefinger—or rather just a nanometer away so it appeared I could not be harmed. I kept the blade there using a force akin to magnetism and calmly explained the situation.

I sighed and shamefully bowed my head. “Raven. I was wrong. What I did was and is wrong. On the bright side, I’ve seen the light. I’m fighting for the League now. You can have your body back, I don’t want it.” I grinned. “I would have had a quick wank while I was there, but I’ve never been good with small targets.”

Raven growled. Then he began to chuckle. Then laugh. Then he let go of his blade as his eyes rolled up in his head and he fell face first onto the ground. I knelt over his body and felt an unexpected presence at my left shoulder. I looked and saw nothing. Huh. I used my… whatever, to
wake Raven. He jolted awake and scrambled away from me.

“What the fuck?” he shouted.

Alois strolled down the walkway to meet us and bowed briefly. He gave Raven a tip of the hat and me an approving nod.

“Good, good,” he said thoughtfully. “You killed a hostile and restored one of my Red Ribbons to life.” He looked at the dirt smeared sword on the ground. “You left the weapon filthy, but other than that you not only completed your objective, but outdid yourself. Good. Seven out of ten.” He walked toward the gate. “Come on now my good lads, there’s more fish in dire need of frying.”

<{°_°}>

Max

South of Hastings Castle, near the water.

England, Earth.

Late evening.

The superdestroyer fired off a barrage of sixteen red linear fusion bolts that shredded a black Axis battleship defending the American one. It sunk in many pieces, leaving the battleship and aircraft carrier open—but an oversized Axis aircraft carrier took its place. It looked like it could take about three barrages, which would take twelve minutes to charge up total. At this rate though, it wouldn’t matter. The American assault ship would be in range in ten minutes. The other one had been sunk, and I’d seen a group of people jump from the aircraft carrier onto it, but I would bet my life they were also hostiles. So… I cried. I lay on my side and cried as I heard men fall on in the battle raging to the north. Artillery shells trailed hellish flames behind them as they fell to the earth and unleashed their incendiary payloads upon Erwin and Lieutenant Commander Örszem’s men—illuminating patches of the darkening bluish sky. I heard the rumble of thunder as well as the roar of guns and remembered a song Skylar loved to play.

Crack of the lightning splitting the ground!

Thunder is sounding, artillery pounding!

Wrath of the Nazi’s cast on Bastogne!

Facing their forces alone!

I was alone here. Utterly alone. So yeah. It worked. I thought back to Skylar and hoped I had given him a happy life. I tuned out the hellish naval war and closed my eyes, remembering the special time we had together. I remembered our races in the public library to find certain books in december, the winner getting something from the other like a kiss or their choice of movies—something small like that. I remembered his smile, which could mean a million things ranging from, ‘I love you’ to, ‘Pet me already you lazy fool! Don’t I look cute?’. I lovingly remembered the feeling of him in my arms. I recalled the evolution of our relationship, becoming closer and closer, changing to the point that you would look at a picture of us in early december and not match it with us now. Back then when
we got physically close he’d need physical cues to reciprocate the contact—and in fact he’d sometimes flinch and wiggle out of a loving embrace. Now though… Oh god I would miss him. I recalled our fondest memories. I remembered a conversation we had while I was unwinding an intricate Shibari tie.

“It’s the small things you know,” he said.

I looked up from my work, which was then unravelling part of a diamond box tie. “Hm?”

“The little things,” he repeated. “That make me feel… controlled would it be? I don’t know, but it’s those small things that I like.”

“Like what?” I had asked with some interest, recalling then the collar I’d bought for when the occasion arose.

“Like how you pick my outfits and how I really can’t stop you from doing anything,” he explained. “You’re way too generous. And then when you do stuff like stroke my hair or give me the look when I’m—intentionally, mind you—being a prick. Stuff like that. In fact, I sort of consider myself to be yours in a way, if that makes any sense. Also, we should do this again. I know three times in a row is a bit much but… hey, I like it.”

That made perfect sense, and we did do it again. And then I’d given him the collar. The next day, this fucking clusterfuck happened. I missed him so much. I couldn’t wait any longer. I curled up in a ball and waited for the end. Hoped for it even.

[>I<]

Commander Zavala

Tower Plaza, overlooking the city.

The Tower, Last City, Earth.

I was just helping a rather new Warlock exchange their tokens for armor and other such rewards after a strike when the call came in. Another call, not from Rich—who called to thank me for the overwhelming Vanguard support and tell me about the Fallen assault we had helped them fend off—but from a different colony entirely. A call I never thought I would receive. A call from a lanky grey haired man with too much pride and too little sense. I told the Warlock to go wait with his friends and answered the call. Neptune—my Ghost—projected his six foot eight form in front of me, altering it so it was only visible from my angle. The tall man twitched his moustache and straightened his black tie. I thought that I might look a small bit intimidating in my armor but… what could I do? He must have thought he looked quite practical in his suit, as I thought the same about my armor.

“Well,” Winston said bitterly. “I regret that I must humbly request your assistance. The Isle is under attack and Concordat, Axis, and even mortal mercenaries are wreaking havoc on my streets. What’s worse, some of the Concordat pulled a turncoat—and now I have to tell my men to only shoot this, watch for a white X, don’t shoot the redhead guy, do this, don’t do that…” He rubbed his temples. “It’s a damn headache. We’ve got some anomalous storm making landfall, the Royal Navy is dwindling—now still six ships to the Axis’ five but still not doing too hot in the Channel—the Germans are being pounded into the ocean by one Axis Battalion while the other advances on my

“I will do everything in my power to bring an end to the slaughter,” I swore. “In fact… I think I can do more than just send more of my own men…”

“What does that mean?” Winston inquired.

I smiled. “I was always suspicious of the Americans, and I have yet to hear back from Church. Luckily I have other allies in the West.”

Chapter End Notes

Zavala's Ghost's name was not a work of my literary genius, but rather a reference to the Fireteam Survivor series by Lalalelo94, who has made Fireteam Zeus what it is now via her immense support and help. Please, check out her works.

https://archiveofourown.org/users/Lalalelo94/pseuds/Lalalelo94
Episode 13: An Immovable Object

Chapter Summary

The battle of London rages on, and it isn't looking good. The New Berliners decide whether to fight or wait for the cavalry to arrive.

___†___

Church

Deck of the USS Aquila.

Strait of Dover, Earth.

Just after sunset.

We landed on the deck and turned to watch as the USS Brooklyn was left behind and torn to pieces by a British destroyer. We were greeted by an enthusiastic team of mercenaries led by a redheaded man about five feet tall but certainly not weak—scarily muscular in fact. Nothing compared to Bellona mind you, but pretty impressive still. Our total force was three and a half Guardians (as Daniel didn't have any sort of powers) and sixty mercenaries. The deck was littered with corpses of khaki clad mercenaries and green armored Americans. I heard the sounds of a battle raging below and wondered how the ship was still going. All I could see of the bridge was shattered windows and the scalped corpse of a sailor in a green uniform.

Daniel put his hands on his hips. “What a mess!” he complained. He looked back to Ferro lovingly. “I'm impressed.”

Ferro chuckled. “None of my men could hold a candle to you ma cherie.”

“It's because I'm not a man now,” Daniel said. “In fact, I'll need to find a place to change later. Oh, and my pronouns are she, her, hers, etcetera.”

I nodded. She was a formidable fighter, and I'd respect whatever pronouns that deadly son/daughter of a gun wanted me to. Bellona pulled a shotgun, the Belligerent if I remember right, and cocked it. She also accepted a riot shield a mercenary handed her. I drew a single revolver and held it in both hands. We went to the door to go below decks, followed by Ferro and his men—and one woman. Bellona over aggressively kicked the door off of its hinges and led the way, the shield up and her shotgun in her right hand. We carefully advanced down the stairs and when we entered the room below—about thirty five yards wide and one hundred twenty yards long in either direction with wooden floors—and were greeted by Jake screaming and stabbing an already dead Abernathy in the chest with a detached bayonet, ruby red droplets of blood splattering all over his face and taxi yellow robes. We filed into the room and formed a firing line, fifteen mercenaries and Bellona kneeling with their shields while me, Ferro, Daniel, and the rest of the mercenaries stood and leveled our guns at the lone Warlock. Many corpses littered the ground, mercenaries and Americans.

Ferro whistled to get Jake's attention. He held out his bulldog revolver and gave a hand signal to his
men. We all began shooting, tearing Jake to red and yellow ribbons in seconds. His Ghost emerged and we kept firing, reducing it to tiny shards. Ferro whistled twice and his men stopped shooting. We all stood and got our bearings, reloading and relaxing.

He sighed as if disappointed. “That was rather bathétique.”

Daniel nodded as if on cue. “That it was. A terrible anticlimax.”

I levelled my revolver at Jake's somehow intact head. I squeezed the trigger one last time, popping his head like a zit. I felt a grim sense of satisfaction.

“Nah,” I said. “He died a traitor's death. It's how it's always been done. The traitors are either strung up or shot down.”

I actually envisioning him hanging by a noose, clawing at the rope and slowly dying from lack of oxygen, occasionally being allowed a breath to prolong his pain. Deacon appeared at my shoulder.

“Well done Major Cassavetes sir!” he announced. “And well said too!”

Daniel put her hand up. Ferro nodded. I could sense a silent exchanging of words, something along the lines of ‘May I?’ followed by ‘Yes you may’. I was becoming better at picking up on these things. Daniel walked around to the other side of the stairwell and I heard zippers being undone, pockets being opened and shut, harnesses and bandoliers being readjusted, and other such sounds. A fair skinned mercenary holding a shield made an attempt at rubbernecking around the corner of the stairwell, and in return received a backhand to the back of his head. He hissed in pain and glared at his boss.

“Nothing you wouldn't see on any other woman,” Ferro said. “Although I do say, she is quite éveiller sexuellement to behold while dénudé in her female state.”

“Sorry sir,” the mercenary said. “Didn't know, I swear!”

Ferro frowned. “We have bigger issues at hand than ma cherie's body.”

“Such as, who's keeping the ship going?” I supplied.

A rather gruff but enthusiastic voice boomed down from the top of the stairs, “Cap’n Garcia at yar sarvice!”

We all looked to see a caucasian man with salt and pepper hair with a rough beard in a blue navy captain's uniform. His eyes looked crazed, and I wasn't sure if he had it all quite together up there. Ferro thumbed the hammer of his revolver and shrugged slightly as if to say, ‘Do I shoot?’. I shook my head and tried the negotiator approach. I looked him in his crazy blue and green eyes and saw not insanity, but passion. It may sound cliché, but I daresay it was passion for the American dream.

“Are you alright Captain Garcia?” I asked tentatively.

He saluted me and replied, “Having a bomb run day in the naval way Major! Now I was wondering if I should call off the artillery strike or nah?”

A brilliant idea struck me. I looked around the room. “Anyone got a Union Jack or something?”

A bald white mercenary with suspicious tattoos stepped forward and raised his hand. He looked like the kind of guy who thought you were crazy if you didn't carry a switchblade at all times.
I pointed at him. “You there! Got a Jack?”

“N-no sir,” he said. “But Germany's an ally and…” He reached slowly into a large pocket in his khaki trousers and pulled out a big red rectangle of fabric with a swastika on it. “I know it's a little outdated but…” He shrugged and handed it to me. “Nyeh? Might work.”

<\( ^{°_°} \)> Max

Hastings Castle.

Southern England, Earth.

Early nighttime.

We weren’t going to pull through. I knew it. Liam told me the situation. Fifty two tanks and about four hundred men left. Not good. I didn't even bother to fight. I just watched the battleship edging closer and closer, definitely in range by now. I stretched out on the grass and removed my helmet. I pretended the war wasn't even happening, that I was on a green hill in the middle of nowhere with Skylar at my side, enjoying the moment, enjoying the feeling of the wind in my hair, and the Earth and grass beneath me. I felt at ease. No more sorrow. No more war. Nothing to worry about anymore. I was actually anticipating my death eagerly. I'd finally have the answer to the final question after so long of coming back no matter what.

I heard rapid booming and cheering from the Axis lines. The shells whistled down audibly and… I heard a loud explosion and mass confusion from our lines—followed by more shells and cheering from our ranks. I dared to open an eye and saw the battleship right along the shore, flying a Nazi flag and firing its six cannons rapidly, pounding the battlefield behind me. Along the railing were mercenaries and a few Guardians, including… Church and Bellona? Church fired his cannons into the air and did an awkward dance, and Bellona pounded a riot shield with a shotgun. They were cheering and shouting, leaping over the railing alongside around ten American Guardians with white X's painted on their chests and backs. I stood tall and waved both arms.

“What even happened?” I shouted to Church as he ran up the beach.

“Super cool Hunter stuff that you'd never understand!” he called back.

“So you just shot your way out of every problem?” I guessed.

“Pretty much!” he replied. “Where's Skylar?”

“Wish I knew!”

Liam and Stirling rounded the corner of the castle. Liam had what he would call a shit eating grin, and Stirling wore a smug and self satisfied smile. Stirling cheered and swung a fist at the air. Liam wrapped his arms around me and pounded my back twice.

“We're prolly gonna win on second thought,” he said with a chuckle. He pulled away. “I heard we can expect three thousand Vanguard reinforcements.”
I didn't know what to make of that. “That's... wow!”

Stirling grabbed me by the shoulders, his left hand “accidentally” partially touching my right breast. “I know right? I did it! They're gone! On the run!” He stepped back and examined his nails, making his best indifferent and modest face. “I'd say I got, let's see, uno dos tres quatro five six... Ten!”

I grabbed his shoulders and smiled with fake enthusiasm. “Wow! It's amazing how little anyone fucking cares!”

“T'm simply the greatest,” he said smugly, swaggering into the castle—probably for looting purposes.

Church turned me around and pointed to the southern sky. “Any clue what that is?”

I looked to see an unnatural storm of pitch black clouds and blood red lightning, blowing towards London at an uncanny pace. I couldn't for the life of me understand it or come up with any theories.

---

Skylar

Rural England, South of London.

Earth.

Five hours to midnight.

I stood at the head of an army, arms spread. One thousand Axis Guardians in red armor—all red, no black—knelt before me. The clouds above began swirling, and around a thousand crackling black and red tendrils of smoke and Arc swirled down from the sky, descending upon the Guardians. They made no sound, nor did they die. Instead the tendrils went into them, eventually stopping and leaving the Axis before me unchanged, except a barely visible smoky aura. Then I continued my march, travelling unnaturally fast and seemingly not moving at all save for a few steps—a legion of not quite Taken Guardians behind me. London came into sight in moments. God help those poor souls. God damn mine.

‡

Prior

Trafalgar Square, London.

England, Earth.

Four hours and forty five minutes until midnight.

I stood at one fountain with a unit of thirty SAS Guardians—the usual London Guardians but far
more skilled and with the various SAS symbols stitched into their uniforms—shooting into an unrelenting crowd of Concordat and Priory Guardians who didn't switch teams. Amir stood atop the other, using a small black stick to order around the formidable SAS fighters in a way I could only describe as spontaneous, reactive, and lethal.

I used my power to warp the stone upon which we stood, erecting barricades for my SAS Guardians to duck behind before joining the fight myself, flying towards the Concordat Guardians as a pillar of black smoke that arched high into the air, before descending upon them and landing feet first. I spun rapidly and let my arms fling about freely, white tracer rounds slamming into the heads of Guardians around me.

When the smoke cleared and my magazines were empty, nobody remained standing who wasn't wearing a shoulder patch that read ‘Who Dares Wins’. Aside from Amir. That classless bastard didn't bother to appropriate the local culture and piss off the locals. I myself decided to switch into a black SAS Warlock uniform, save for the helmet. I mean, the guy who was wearing it before wouldn't miss it really. Because, you know, he's dead.

Lejonet slowly walked into the square with her cloak—which bore a gold SAS sword and banner—clapping sarcastically. “Well done, you sure did an amazing job. Only took you a bloody half hour to even get here.” She passed me and walked towards Amir's fountain. “Amir Throckmorton. Shame you aren't in our ranks. You would be an excellent commander.”

Amir bowed, obviously flattered. I was surprised he hadn't been shot dead yet—as he wore only a green sweater vest, a white dress shirt, and some black dress pants that made mine from before look peasanely. His shoes ruined it though. Who wears pointed tip shoes. A fucking elf in Santa Claus’s fucking workshop? I grinned and spun around to look at her impressive posterior as she walked. I truly did admire it—both me and my fake persona. It was... beautiful. Just the right size, firm and yet somehow smooth enough to make me want to-

I had somehow gotten a little too close to the beaute for Lejonet’s comfort—and I was knocked on my own ass by a forceful strike to the face from the heel of her hand. I was still smirking though, as I was still able to look at it. She turned around and gave me a fierce stare through her gas mask. What a woman! What! A! Woman! I wolf whistled and got a foot to my shin. Doesn't hurt, can't usually feel pain, yadda yadda yadda. I stayed perfectly still, staring up at the night sky and getting a decent view of a pair of C cup boobs.

“You're a fucking pervert,” she stated. “And as much as I hate you, I have to speak to you.”

I hummed, taking in the amazing body before me. “Well your motto is who dares wins, so I dared and I won a damn good view. What is it you need you fine piece of ass?”

“You're to meet up with President Erwin Rommel and President Vladimir Zhukov in Lullingstone Castle,” she commanded. “They'll be briefly discussing the defense of London, and you count as a force in the battle for whatever reason, so you get to attend. The rest of your League and my SAS will hold the fort and evac the civvies.”

“I wish you and your amazing ass the best of luck.”

<°_°>
Lullingstone Castle.

England, Earth.

Four hours to midnight.

Rommel took the large desk backed by a wall of windows, making his usual finger pyramid and sizing everyone and everything up. Zhukov sipped from his eighth bottle of vodka in a corner while humming a song—occasionally mumbling about the motherland or Russian women. Ferro leaned in the doorway smoking a cigar, while Daniel tossed and caught a knife beside the threshold. Me and the other two members of Fireteam Zeus present sat in chairs in different spots—Church and Bellona sitting by the bookshelves on the left wall while I brooded in the dark right corner. Everyone here wore their armor, except me. I opted for my red coat with a swan wings design on the back, a pair of burgundy pants, a black blouse tucked into my pants, and a pair of military style lace up boots. But everyone else thought just removing their helmets was formal enough.

Rommel checked his watch. “They should be here by now,” he mumbled.

“Who?” I asked.

I felt hands grab my shoulders and shouted, or screamed if I must be honest—jumping out of the seat and drawing my Better Devils hand cannon. I saw Prior, dressed in an SAS uniform, walk straight through the wall and into the room. He chuckled and laughed, pointing at me. I found it hard to believe that he switched sides as well.

“My goodness Maxime!” he said. “Did you ever tell Skylar you were only pretending to be asexual?”

This was untrue and confusing. “What? Where are you getting this from?”

He snickered. “Why look at your crotch—which naturally I did after your ass. You're positively frothing in the presence of such a handsome man as I.”

I looked down and saw a palm sized wet spot. What in Satan's vacation home? Oh… wait. Fucking Hell! That dipstick!

“It's sweat,” I said defensively. “I'm a jogger. I jogged here.”

Prior hummed in contemplation. “Nope. Froth. You are turned on by me.”

“Sweat,” I insisted.

“Froth.”

“Sweat.”

“Froth…”

“Sweat.”

“That. Right there. Is froth. No need to be ashamed, I'm quite the arousing man.”

I growled. “It's. Sweat.”
“Froth!” Prior sang.

“Sweat.”

“Froth.”

Jester appeared and I wished he hadn't. “Hmm… Nope, it's neither.”


“Actually it's water,” Jester corrected. “And you have a slightly depleted canteen of it. Conclusion… What an astounding prank! You know, I once did the hand in a warm bowl of water trick on her, and it actually w-”

Rommel coughed. “We should not waste time that we do not have.”

“Agreed!” I said, giving Prior a glare that said 'This isn't over'.

Froth…” the provocative Warlock whispered. He raised his left hand and made a ring with his thumb and forefinger, then he put his right pointer finger through it. “We should fuck…”

“Rommel, sir, the male League representative is harassing me,” I complained.

Erwin glared at Prior. “Prior, I was expecting more of a change out of you.”

“The name's Roman,” he said. He dropped the act and offered me his hand. “Kidding. Prior. Just having some fun. No hard feelings?”

I ignored him and moved to the left side of the door. I noticed that Daniel's chest wasn't as flat anymore. I assumed that meant she wasn't male anymore. I knew she usually identified as male, but sometimes she felt female. That's all I got from our brief conversation at the Entwinement.

Rommel got all of our attention and explained the plan. “We have thirty eight panzer remaining. With the Russian reinforcements and some American turncoats we now number around seven hundred strong. I am asking you whether we should go straight to London and join up with the defenders, or wait for the cavalry to arrive. I'll call it to a vote. All in favor of going, say aye.”

“Aye,” everyone said, except Prior.

“Neigh,” he said in that ridiculous smooth voice again. “What? I said aye in horse language.”

Rommel ran a hand through his hair. “Well I guess that's settled. Aye.” He looked up. “You realize this means we'll be fighting for three hours on our own before the Vanguard and Canadians arrive?”


“No.” Rommel sighed. “I will in a moment. I'm talking about the coastal Canadian outpost. A little bigger than New Berlin and one of the only two outposts with a navy, unless you count the Axis as an outpost.”

“Okay.” I dared to ask, “What about Skylar?”

Rommel sighed heavily. “You know the anomaly that's come ashore, the one going towards London? It's him. He's causing it. I don't know how or why, but it's him.”

I couldn't speak. What had he done? What had he found on Titan? Was this even true? Please…
“Impossible,” Church said—probably out of action movie character reflex. “He's powerful, but not that powerful. And he wouldn't do that.”

“Well fuck,” Prior commented. “Well, I have a piece of ass to chase, you guys have fun planning your suicide.” He looked to me and waggled his eyebrows trying to charm me or something. “Eat me, don't forget to write!”

He stepped back through the wall and was gone.

“What a confusing figure,” Bellona commented. “And with a punchable face as well.”

Church shrugged. “At least he's on our side. Can't say that's a bad thing.”

I glared at him. “Is it?”

“Point taken.”

Rommel snapped and we all looked to him.

“Tonight... we march on London,” he announced. “The real Rommel would be proud.”

‡

Prior


Earth.

Three and a half hours to midnight.

I stood atop an apartment building, watching the storm approach. I was transfixed by how the thing that had once been Skylar moved, seemingly folding space to make a single step take him a whole kilometre. The storm raged on over him, striking at random. I pulled my long slide M1911s out of my coat and prepared to do everything in my vast power to stop that thing. I saw a vast sea of red following the thing, running with their arms flung back. I would poke fun at that. Guardians Naruto running. Of fucking course.

I listened to the calming sounds of the storm and the burning city—crackling and rumbling, the occasional burst of gunfire spicing it up. This would be fun. Oh so fun. I was still having trouble deciding whether to be Prior or Roman, to be serious or not, to go out in style or fade away as a boring man with a black sword. I grinned. I could do both. Easily.

The thing entered the city, and its army soon followed, trailing smoke and red crackling electricity behind them. I watched them trample entire divisions, watched the red lightning strike buildings and reduce them to rubble, watched the storm spread across the city. I chuckled. I couldn't wait. And I wouldn't have to. The thing saw me and stopped just fifty meters away and two hundred below. And it pointed at me. The army kept going, a vast river of death.

“What's that supposed to fucking do, make me feel ashamed of some unspoken crime?” I mocked. “Seriously, I could do way better.” I glared at his soldiers, a thousand Guardians running through the city and killing everything in their path. “You realize you're Naruto running right?”
The thing appeared confused. It tried a different tactic, hand motions.

“Oh so where trying hang signs now?” I flipped him the bird while still holding onto the guns. “This one means fuck you.”

I felt something gathering above me, a malevolent force preparing to strike. I looked up just in time to recognize the threat and counter it. I raised a hand and cast a shadowy spherical shield around myself. The world went blank, then blinding bright red. I maintained the bubble with ease, but I felt myself falling as the building crumbled. The lightning stopped and I let the barrier drop. The dust slowly settled and I remained standing atop a pile of rubble and rebar. The thing in the street tilted its head.

“What, confused are we?” I taunted. “Well here’s the thing. You can’t fucking beat me. I’m Roman fuck mothering Roirp, the only real Dark Guardian of my generation!” I levelled my handguns at the thing. “I make Dredgen Yor and his Shadows look like a fucking drama club! You are nothing! Just some bad guy juice in a pot that happened to spill near the right guy to wreak havoc. Me? I fucking sacrificed shit to get where I am now. I don’t need the Deep to fuel my power anymore. I’m independent now! A god among men! Come! Come forth and embrace me! Come and welcome me! Come and greet me as a friend, for I am Death!”

“Hi Death,” the thing said in Skylar’s voice. “I’m dad. Or as you may know me, the Darkness, the Deep, the Formless One, the bane of the Traveller and the Light—or at least a part of myself manifesting in this way. I can not be stopped. Step aside and I may consider welcoming you back Nicodemus.”

I cackled violently, spreading my arms and calling flame to the ruins around me for dramatic effect.

“I think I won’t.” I pointed both pistols at the thing. “And I cannot be moved.”

The thing grunted. “Hmm. I guess the humans will finally know what happens.”

I nodded. I lunged and rapidly squeezed the triggers. “When an immovable object…”

[To be continued]
The Formless One has entered London, fifteen hundred attackers remain to battle a mere eleven hundred defenders, and the fate of the human race rests on a knife's edge. The final battle has begun.

“Meets an unstoppable force!” the thing replied with the volume and force of a nuclear explosion.

It outstretched a hand and stopped me and my bullets mid air before launching me back to the rubble heap. I scooped up my guns and strafed left while pounding the Formless One with explosive rounds. It didn't care, as any damage I did was immediately repaired by slick black tendrils. I ducked behind a rock to reload, slapping a large fifteen round magazine into each gun. A red bolt from the sky shattered the rock, and out of instinct I became incorporeal. Just in time too. A series of sharp black appendages shot through the dust, passing through my stomach and striking the wall behind me.

I slid right and became solid again. When the dust settled I continued, dodging tendrils and shooting off a few rounds every now and then. After a while of this I tired of the charade and leapt back onto my rubble pile. I cast my robes into the air and altered them and myself using the stolen power of the Deep, letting it fall upon my shoulders as a black cape. My body was adorned with golden painted plate armor, in truth a lightweight titanium alloy. The thing cocked its head again.

“What has changed?”

I didn't answer. I reached forwards with my right arm and back with my left, summoning long rapiers to my hand. In seconds they were ready—one silver and one black—radiating grey mist and black smoke respectively. I held the black blade upright in my right hand, and the silver one upside down. I shot towards the thing like a bullet, spinning and trailing smoke. Just as I was about to strike it ripped two red bolts from the sky, wielding them as swords. I slashed downward with my right blade and blocked an uppercut with the left. My swing was blocked as well, and sparks of varying colors flew—mostly red and white.

After holding the blade lock for a while I leap back and shot into the air, descending behind my foe to slash at his back. He pivoted swiftly and blocked the many blows as they came. We must have looked dazzling, a flashing display of blades and sparks too intense to behold for long.
After a long while keeping that, up my adversary landed a blow on my side—doing me no harm but smashing me into the wall of an apartment building. I leapt back at him, slashing rapidly and trying to establish an offensive and defensive, but the thing wasn't having any of it. So I tried a new approach. I soared back and up into the sky, landing on a small two story building. I pointed my right rapier at the thing's feet and began using my powers to their fullest. The ground beneath his feet began turning to black sand and a grey mist began rolling in. My throne world.

Soon the entire road beneath it was sand, as far as one could see through the mist. I began manipulating the black sand, creating thick tendrils of it that shot out of the ground and shot at the thing like snakes lunging at a mouse. He blocked most of them, disintegrating them in puffs of black smoke and red lightning, but not all. I watched in satisfaction as I struck a visibly damaging blow on him. The thing staggered when it failed to block a large tendril. It smashed the thing's chest in, burrowing into it and ripping it to shreds. It swiftly reformed and used some space magic of its own. The sky rumbled and bolts of blood red lightning struck at random, barely missing me a few times. I cast a shield just to be safe, and once the storm let up I felt almost a little exhausted from the battle. This fucking thing seriously couldn't be stopped.

I leapt down onto the sand below and I faced the thing calmly. I discarded the rapiers and spun rapidly, kicking up sand. When I stopped spinning I was different entirely. My hair was no longer in a ponytail, now flowing wildly down my shoulders and reaching halfway down my spine. In each hand I held an M1911 pistol. Over the armor I wore a blue trench coat and blue dress pants, complimented by a pair of white velvet gloves.

“He's ba-a-ack!” I sang.

“What?” the thing boomed. “There is only you and I.”

“Man you are really a buzzkill,” I said. “First the dad jokes, now this? Fuck man, you need to get laid.”

It cocked its head in that questioning way again. “I do not understand. This host physically cannot achieve an erection nor does it mentally wish to engage in intercourse.”

I laughed. “Erectile dysfunction too? Fuck that guy had a lot of shit going on with him!” I levelled my pistols at him. “Well maybe you should go get some Viagra! It might help you go fuck yourself!”

“This host does not have a prescription for said d-”

I blew the thing's head off, then and again as it kept repairing until both magazines ran dry. I reloaded and tried something new but definitely possible. I willed the mist towards me and told it to reshape me. It complied, and when it withdrew I had a second pair of slick black arms with two elbows each sprouting from my back. I reached for my secondary sidearms with my new appendages, a pair of polished black .44 Desert Eagles.

“You know they used to call me Juan Deag!” I pointed all four guns at the thing's head. “Well, they didn't, but that's not the point!”

“Then what is the point?” it asked.

I squeezed the four triggers nine times each, unleashing a barrage of bullets so fierce it ripped my foe to pieces with ease. The magazines clicked empty and I changed once again, returning to the cape and golden armor look—also sloughing off the extra arms. I called a tar black smoking rapier to my hand and slashed it through the air. It began burning in a few places, looking cool but not exactly being all that practical.
I planted the blade in the sand and bent my knees. I spread my arms wide and stood tall, feeling hundreds of holes open in the sand—thousands. I began slowly standing straight and raising my arms, willing my legion to come to my side. My army slowly rose, crawling out of their prisons. I spent centuries building this army, using mortals, Guardians, animals, even a tree named Ed. I grabbed my blade from the ground and pointed it to the sky. Just in time too, as the Formless One tried that lightning trick again. I caught the bolt on my blade and absorbed it.

“Lightning? Really? Is that your only trick?” I raised my voice. “Come on! Bring forth your legions of taken dead! Bring forth the horde! Don't hold back! I didn't, so neither should you!”

My mist cleared up and the sand began turning to gravel and torn up road. No no no! Behind the thing black smoke gathered and crackled with red Arc electricity, slowly forming the shape of a thousand red clad Axis Guardians, weapons drawn. Among them were Taken too, in the shape of glowing red and pitch black Guardians in gas masks.

“Here are my legions,” it boomed.

___†___

Church

In a troop transport lorry (truck) headed for London.

England, Earth.

Three hours to midnight.

I know that we're at war, but I needed to say something to Bellona. We were sitting side by side in the truck with people I didn't know.

“Bellona, why do we always butt heads on the battlefield?” I asked.

“Simple,” she replied. “I'm more intelligent, not to brag. It's just a fact. You're a high ranking soldier and you think you need to give the orders and be the hero, but truthfully you don't. And I like to tease you in battle. It gets you mad and you take it out on the enemy. We have trouble working as a team because you're just… Try and make something of that.”

I nodded. “I understand. It's just not pleasant. We go from pure and ecstatic joy, hand-holding and hugging, to constantly arguing.”

“Then let’s establish something,” she proposed. “You may be in charge per se at home—but I outrank you in the field. I make the orders here, not you. In bed, I don't care, but here I command you. Got it?”

“Seems rational,” I replied. “But Skylar's a Brigadier with no brigade. Rank is a funny thing nowadays isn't it? And Max pretty much always dictates what he does. Well, except now because he's… whatever now.”

She gave me a look of condescending superiority. “You haven't figured it out yet?”
“What?”

“You saw him tied up.”

“Yeah?”

“You see how those two are.”

“Yep.”

“You notice the petting and caressing?”

“Indeed.”

“And you saw that hoodie?”

I cocked my head. “What hoodie?”

“The white one with the joke on it,” she prompted. “It said, ‘I told her to make me a sandwich so she made me a sub,’ if that rings any bells.”

“So? I don't get it.”

She patted me on the head. “You are so pure and I love it.” She got serious again. “Basically, sub means submissive, not a sandwich.”

“And?” I pressed, still not understanding a word.

“That's their lifestyle,” Bellona said. “She's just always the one in control. But with us, we do it by the book. Military and love life.”

I made my best handsome and roguish face. “Bell, our honeymoon was hardly by the book.”

She slapped me lightly across the face and smiled. “Oh shut up! I'm surprised you even had any clue what you were doing. I thought I'd be on top to be honest.”

A German man loudly declared, “Get a room you two!”

Bellona snorted and glared at him. “I'd tell you to get fucked, but I can't name anyone who would fuck you. Maybe with some medical assistance you could fuck yourself—but I have heard that sex changes are quite expensive young lady.”

The Germans seemed impressed by this as it quieted down real quickly after that. Max was rubbing her thumb sized piece of the Traveller compulsively, mumbling to herself. I put a hand on her shoulder.

“Are you okay Max?” I asked.

Max looked up as if startled. “Huh?” She continued rubbing her necklace. “Yeah I'm good. It's just… a lot to take in. Prior's a good guy now, the Axis want to wipe out humanity, Skylar's under the control of that thing, and I don't even know where the battle lines are drawn.” She looked at me. “I have an idea though. It might work, it might not, but it's worth a try. I think I can do something about Skylar, but I'm not too keen on fighting the Axis. I haven't ever been that good against fellow Guardians really. I'll leave that to you. But if… He's so dead if this works, and I don't mean it'll kill him—I hope it won't at least. I mean…” She smirked. “He won't be happy to say the least.”
I nodded. “He's always been an eff the rules kind of guy, but this is just idiocy.”

“I'll tell him you said that,” Max said.

Bellona snorted. “You two are being way too optimistic. He's going to have to die. He's probably dead already and that thing's just using his body.”

I glared at my wife. “We can't afford not to be optimistic. And don't say stuff like that. Max is right here.”

Max sighed. “Odds are she's right.”

‡

Prior


Two hours and fifty minutes to midnight.

Well I had to admit, those were some pretty impressive legions. My wild mixed bag wouldn't last long against these supersoldiers and demons. Sure, mine outnumbered his three to one, but his were far better than mine in terms of power and… Everything. Nonetheless, I made my stand. I pointed my rapier at my foe and its hordes, ordering my armies forth.

They surged forward to meet the enemy, who surged forward in turn—Naruto running if you must know. Smoking dull wolves ripped an Axis Guardian to pieces while a Taken SAS Hunter cut down a horse and its smoldering rider. The thing rose into the sky, followed by a trail of black cloud and red Arc. I rose in turn, trailing mist and smoke as I twirled and soared above the highest rooftops. I thought about how much of a wasted opportunity my life had been. I could have taken Devi flying. I could have made her just a little bit happier. I could have enjoyed the wind in my hair myself—Hell, I probably could have done endless amounts of good with this stolen power.

As our armies clashed down below we fought in the skies above. I shot towards the thing and it dodged up into the air and struck me in the back. I recovered, planting my feet on the side of an apartment building. I leapt back off and waited for my adversary to make a move. It charged me, too fast to easily dodge, still trailing that stormy brew of Darkness and Arc. I dodged left, spun around, and sped forward. I managed to strike it with my rapier, slashing through its back with ease. It repaired and turned to me—meeting my boot all too quickly. I kicked it into the building with such force that I made a huge dent in the wall, which then collapsed—killing a few red Axis and some of my minions. If you're wondering about Ed the tree though, he's still doing fine.

But it kept coming, emerging from the rubble unharmed. It rose to meet me and did a bad guy monologue.

“You cannot beat Darkness with Darkness,” it boomed.

“Well by that logic you can't beat me,” I countered.

It did that fucking stupid head cocking thing again. “No. I can. It is my purpose to eradicate life in systems to make way for the Perfect Shape.”
“What, are you talking about Commander Lejonet's fine ass?” I asked.

I felt myself becoming Roman again. I called a cloud of smoke around me and got back into the blue outfit with the gloves and shit. Arms sprouted from my back once more, and I drew all four pistols—now loaded with fifteen round extended mags with explosive rounds. I moved away from the thing and gained some elevation. I let the smoke clear and let loose a torrent of gunfire—but I was only aiming one gun at it. The rest were aimed at his hordes below. I watched with satisfaction as thirty of his minions fell as a result of my action. I dropped the mags and reloaded all four guns. The thing flew at me again, moving erratically through the air. As it approached I laid down a river of gunfire, slowing it down.

It reached me, gained some elevation, and summoned a handheld bolt—ready to impale me. Just then an angry woman saved my ass. From the rooftop behind me Commander Lejonet let loose a barrage from a pair of submachine guns, letting out a sound between a furious shout and a roar. The thing jerked about like a puppet on strings as the bullets passed through it. We both looked to her. Her amber eyes were ablaze with fury, and her hair blew in the wind like a lion's mane. Oh! I get it. Lejonet is Swedish for lion. Lejonet Från Norden is Lion From the North.

Lejonet dropped the submachine guns. “By God, the queen, and the fucking church, what a day it is to be alive.” She pointed to the city below. “The Nazis are invading, while the Satanists are crusading, and our only real line of defense present is acting like a character from an abridged anime!”

I gasped. “Do you-”

“Yes I fucking god damned well know!” she bellowed. “Team Four Star made some amazing shit!”

“Okay, I'll test you.” I coughed into my hand. “Screw the rules, I have money.”

“Seto Kaiba. Yugioh the Abridged Series.”

“A quantum supercomputer calculating for a thousand, years could not approach the number of fucks, I do not give!”

“Kirito! SAO Abridged! Something Witty Entertainment!”

“I'm a fuck mothering vampire, and-”

“Alucard! Hellsing Ultimate Abridged! Team Four Star!” She drew a sidearm that looked like a Glock 17 and aimed it at the thing.

“Holy shit you're the real deal…” I mumbled.

“ Heathcliff! SA fucking O Abridged!”

“I wasn't quoting that-”

The thing made a coughing sound. “As you humans often say, may we cut to the chase?”

Lejonet planted her feet and shot her sidearm at the thing until it ran dry. I wondered briefly what the actual fuck she hoped to achieve. She pulled out a revolver and aimed at the thing's head.

“Take a fucking hint you imbecile!” she shouted. “I'm buying you time. Run asshole!”

“That's fucking stupid!” I shouted back. “Get your fine ass out of here!”
“I am bound to my duty by King, Queen, and country!” she replied. She began emptying her revolver. “I will not leave London at the mercy of this thing without a fight.”

Well, that was fucking idiotic. Admirable. Typical of Brits. But still idiotic. I ignored her from then on out, resuming my fight with the Formless One. I lunged at it, striking it in the face with my fist. It moved back a single foot. For whatever reason it was focused entirely on Lejonet.

“Such bravery…” It slowly extended its arm. “Such foolishness… You deserve to be purged.”

I looked back to see the world’s finest ass dead on the ground. No dramatic choking. No wounds. Nothing. Just death. I felt the fire of fury begin to flow through my veins. I called a massive pillar of smoke around me, changing into something between Prior and Roman. When I released it I wore a blue cape, gold armor, and had my hair in a wild ponytail. In my right hand I held a rapier of smoke and glass from the black sand. In my left I held a single M1911 pistol with a holographic sight and an extended magazine. Fucking Hell yes.

I growled in anger and anticipation. “You just killed the best piece of ass, the best posterior on the planet, second only to Devi’s. Now you pay.”

“So you fight for not life. Not liberty. Not the human race. But a pair of upper thigh muscles ar-”

I charged him, shouting, “For the world's best ass!”

I made one last charge, as did the thing. We must have looked dazzling from the ground, twin serpents of smoke, mist, clouds and red Arc chasing each other through the sky—clashing spectacularly and letting loose sparks and shockwaves that shook the foundation of the world. The clashing became more and more rapid, and I felt myself tiring. I couldn't keep this up. I lunged at him from above and shot off a burst before slashing with my rapier and being blocked with ease. Again and again I repeated this, occasionally reloading. And it was wearing me out. I couldn’t continue on like this much longer. And I didn’t.

The thing struck me with its bolt, sending me back to the ground with the force of a meteor strike. I felt a wet snap in my back. When I tried to move I found I could not. I reached out to the stolen power one last time to rise once more, manipulating my own body like a puppet. I stood tall and looked around me. My army was almost eradicated—even Ed, who was now a mere stump. The hordes that the thing had called to its side were undiminished and unbroken, still at least seven hundred strong—not counting the Taken. I looked to the sky and made a final decision. I couldn't beat this thing. But I'd be truly damned if I didn't at least tenderize it a little. I glided across the street towards the massive army of Taken and Axis. When I reached it I lost control—hacking, slashing, shooting, calling parts of my throne world to consume my foes, and slowing down ever so gradually.

After a solid twenty minutes of this I felt my body grind to a halt, exhausted physically and otherwise. I stumbled and looked around. I smiled with pride. I'd gone down swinging all right. The Taken hordes were noticeably smaller, and I'd say I got about a hundred of the Axis. I let myself fall and closed my eyes, blocking out the pain of bullets, blades, teeth, and nails tearing me apart.

------[·]

Bellona


Two hours and ten minutes to midnight.
I watched with admiration and awe as a man I once wished to kill made his last stand—a storm of bullets, smoke, and blades cutting through our enemy like the absolute monster he was at heart. When he fell, I almost shed a single respectful tear. Almost. Instead though, I chose to honor his memory in combat. I raised my left arm to my mouth and confirmed the thing's position to the remaining RAF divisions. I looked to the sky and watched the jumpships soar towards the monster I had once known. They opened fire, the orange tracer rounds contrasting with the black clouds above, streaks of righteous fire against a cursed and demented sky. They drew near and the moment of truth came. I watched as they passed the event horizon—as I classified it—and were destroyed in various ways, being torn apart, struck by lightning, engines suddenly failing, and one poor fellow was ripped straight out of his cockpit and quite literally torn limb from limb.

Church slowly walked up beside me, his boots crunching on the gravel and making me think about dry cereal for whatever obscure reason. He gasped, unable to comprehend or accept what he was seeing. Almost immediately he made a judgement call that I myself would have made for once.

“This isn't our fight,” he stated.

I nodded. “Agreed.” I pointed to the horde of Axis, Taken Guardians, and Taken mortals too. “That is. Max has a plan. It's a bad plan, rooted deeper in superstition than logic, but it's the only plan we've got.”

A Guardian appeared at my side, dressed like a gentleman. “Indeed. A pleasant cliché that is.” He offered his hand. “Alois. Former leader of the League. And that,” he pointed at the thing in the sky, “is my fight. I am bound by an oath I created to do everything in my power to stop or stall that thing.”

“Mhm.” I looked at this idiot condescendingly. “You go kill yourself, we'll do the real legwork.”

And so we did. Ferro gave the signal and his hundred or so remaining mercenaries entered the street. They charged the horde, guns blazing. Me and Church followed, then passed them to lead the charge.

We collided with the vast horde like a line of mice charging a group of lions. An Axis Warlock leapt into the air and gathered red Arc in his hands. I pointed my shotgun at him and put a hole in his chest, killing him before he hit the ground. Beside me Church was pulling off headshot after headshot, pretending to be a cowboy or whatever. I noticed white diamonds on his visor and realized that for once he was actually letting Deacon help—highlighting priority targets and such. I didn't need any such assistance, nor did I want it.

A pair of Taken Guardians got a little too close for comfort and I told them to back off using the universal language of buckshot, pumping a round into each of their heads. I stumbled as bullets thudded into my back, and I decided to put a particularly suicidal red clad Hunter to rest. After a while going like that I realized, ‘Wait a second, I'm a fucking space wizard!’.

I reached out with my right hand and called the flames, reaching out to the Solar Light within. I swiftly yanked a Hammer of Sol into existence with a resounding clang. As if on cue a unit of Axis zoomed towards me, guns blazing. I tossed a hammer at the lead Titan and eradicated the whole group in an explosion so bright and fierce it briefly rivaled the sun. Claws raked down my back and I spun around to strike whatever it was with my hammer. A Taken wolf? Whatever. I struck it and it disintegrated into ash, blowing on the wind with the smoke and ash of the fires burning around us.

Despite my military genius, I couldn't easily discern the direction the battle was going. From the
sound of the mercenaries dying and being ripped apart around me, I assumed it was downhill. And it only got worse. Far worse. From the other end of the street I could hear the sounds of the larger conflict growing near. The sounds would haunt me forever. Machine gun fire from enemy lines. The sickening sound of a bayonet tearing through human flesh. The mercenary next to me firing his sidearm in desperation. All those sounds would forever echo in my mind. And as conducted by Death himself it all comes together as music. A rhythm of death. A symphony of war.

I had been reading way too much of Church’s poetry.

<°_°>

Max

Atop a high apartment building.


One hour from midnight.

Looking upon the battle raging below, I lost hope of victory. Those red Axis had some sort of Dark power that functioned like our Light, and it made them far harder to kill. As for Rommel and them, they weren't doing so hot either. And then there was the fight in front of me. As I took cover behind the door to the roof, Alois tried to stop Skylar single-handedly. You can imagine how that went.

The thing in Skylar's body released a dozens of black tendrils from its back and flung them forth to strike Alois. The gentleman Arcstrider used his cane to block the tendrils and swung with enough force to sever them. He seemed confident in his abilities, but I knew better. After watching this for a while I noticed that he forgot to cover an opening and… It was fatal. A tendril ran him through, coiling in and out of his body, ripping him apart. I was too stunned to do anything, too stunned to accept that the thing doing this was using Skylar's body, too stunned to stop Daniel. He (he only identified as female briefly on occasion) pushed past me, a grenade in each hand, and tossed them at the thing floating a few feet above the roof. Its head snapped to her.

"Oh. The human's child has come to avenge it," it said. "This is the typical behavior of your species in such a situation."

Daniel shouted and tossed knives and grenades at the thing in an endless silver and orange torrent of fire and knives. I had to do something. The bandoliers were running out and the thing was rearing back its appendages to strike the kid. The young, innocent, barely drinking age child was going to die and I was too unsure and afraid to stop it.

After the bandoliers ran dry and he tossed his last knife, the thing struck. The appendages shot forward like arrows to rip Daniel to shreds. And someone died. But it wasn't Daniel. Ferro was on the rooftop before, commanding his mercenaries from above. And he never left. He leapt in the way of the appendages and the passed right through him in a vicious explosion of blood, flesh, and bone. He fell to the ground, a huge hole in his chest. You could see his tattered heart struggling to beat, a single lung sucking in air weakly.

As blood dribbled out of his mouth he spoke one last sentence. "Take Lumiere. And go. I love
you.”

Daniel did as he said, leaping from the rooftop though instead of using the stairs. Had he killed himself? I couldn't allow this to continue. I stepped forward, my hand cannon in my right hand and the piece of the Traveller hanging from a chain in the left.


“Quite simply put, he can't,” the thing stated. “The mind no longer controls the body. That's not how this goes. You humans would call that a cliché.”

“You're damn right,” I growled. “And it's a damn good one at that. Now, get the fuck out of my angel.”

“I need this host to pave the way for the Perfect Shape.” It stretched an arm out towards me. “But I sense that the host once loved you. I will end you quickly.”

And then, unceremoniously, I died. But I still had a few cards left in my hand, still had my ace in the hole. I reached out to the Light and pulled myself back into the world of the living. I rose like a phoenix from the ashes, my body engulfed in flame and infernal wings sprouting from my back. The tendrils that had struck me were set aflame, burning to ash. The thing merely sprouted new ones. Still, I hadn't died.

“Now that you have expended your Light this should be easier,” the thing said.

I dodged a barrage of appendages, which buried themselves in the rooftop. I shot off a few rounds from my hand cannon, blowing off limbs and even the head. Black ribbons emerged and repaired the wounds, undoing any damage I had dealt. I dropped my hand cannon and held the amulet out towards the thing, hoping for a miracle. I didn't get one. The sky above rumbled and before I died my final death my world was engulfed in red.

And then I returned, despite having already done so before. What? I… The thumb sized shard floated in front of my chest, Light flowing from it and into me. My burgundy armor looked pure white in such an intense light, and I should have been blinded. But I wasn't. I felt myself begin to rise, and white fire began climbing from my feet up my body. I was soon covered in it, and unable to do much but observe. I felt pure white wings of flame spring from my back, and from those wings shone beams of bluish Light.

The being before me constructed a barrier of appendages, but the Light burned through them in seconds. I watched as it began smoking, and small white flames began to form. The ribbony tendrils burnt and began to resemble tattered cloth, soon disappearing entirely in fire. And it just kept burning. The thing raised its arms in a final attempt to shield itself but it was a futile and unsuccessful attempt. Then I rose so the Light would shine upon the army below. The flames consumed it, burning it all until nothing remained. Nothing except an injured yet still intact Skylar, albeit most of his clothing was in burning shreds—although the Light conveniently didn't see his boxers as tainted by the Deep. Thanks Mr. Traveller or whatever just did that! Keeping it PG 13! Maybe you'd like to see our bedroom literally every night. Super family friendly!

He landed near the edge of the roof in an unconscious heap. I rushed to his side and listened to his Ghost speak while I grabbed him up in my arms and prepared to leave.

“Good news,” Athena said. “He’s still alive! And his vitals are a-ok. He’ll be happy to wake up in his own bed tomorrow.”
I scowled, unsure what to think. “I’m not entirely sure that’s true.”

___†___

Church

Streets of London.

England, Earth.

A furious and righteous light shone from a large T of white flame above. I legitimately thought it was Jesus himself until I looked harder, eventually noticing it was a female. Not to be disrespectful, but let’s just say Max’s chest isn’t that defined.

The thing burned away to nothing, as did its armies and the storm—leaving the sky black and starry. Soon I just found myself in an empty street with a bunch of injured mercenaries and Guardians. Daniel took some time to check in with Ferro’s mercenaries and talk with them, and I immediately knew something was wrong. I didn’t see Ferro anywhere, so I assumed the worst had come to pass. I went to console him, but when I came within a certain distance of him I realized he simply didn’t want or need to talk to me about it.

I wandered about until I found Bellona. We latched onto each other like barnacles, and our Ghosts did all the talking.

Deacon opened with, “Hey Ares. I got more assists than you.”

Ares huffed. “As if. I healed a total of zero wounds, as my Guardian is simply too skilled to sustain any damage.”

“You didn’t even participate you old wanker!” Deacon said. “Your Guardian did all the work. That’s nothing to brag about.”

“If your Guardian’s name is Bellona Cassavetes, yes you do.”

The sound of badly played trumpets interrupted this tender moment. We all looked down the street to see a line of white winter camouflage Drake Tanks farading down the streets, with Guardians in armor of the same color marching with rifles shouldered. A Titan with medium length black hair who looked like puberty missed him by five miles was standing atop the lead tank waving like an ancient queen and greeting the local troops and Germans by saying, ‘Gluten tag!’ and waving a little Canadian flag. Marching bands began playing on bagpipes and the soldiers began congratulating each other.

This did not please anyone in the slightest. An SAS Warlock gave these Canadians a piece of his mind.

“Oi!” he shouted. “What the bloody hell are you wankers celebrating?”

The Titan jumped down from the tank and offered the Warlock his hand. “Hi I’m Justin!” he cheered. “And we just saved your island! See?” He gestured to all of London. “The enemy was so scared of our Canadian fury that they ran away before they even saw us!”
“Bollocks!” the SAS Warlock shouted. “You didn’t do shit! Our fockin’ ancient enemy, the bleedin’ Wehrmact for Chrissake, did more than your sorry ass!”

The Titan began admiring himself with a small mirror. “Well you are right. I am quite handsome.”

A five foot seven Warlock with super curly reddish brown medium length hair and a pencil between his teeth, crawled out of a tank. His winter camo trench coat was splattered with ink in some places and his eyes were a particularly dark brown. Upon each shoulder was a crown, which in the Canadian military was the symbol for Major. He stuck his pencil between his right ear and scowled. He purposely strode up to Justin, grabbed the taller Titan’s arm, and ripped the mirror out of his hand.

He gestured at the Titan with both hands and shouted, “You dense motherfucker! You are a fucking mistake! You utter cuck! Why did that fucking Ghost choose you of all the fucking frozen corpses we’ve got up north? Who even had the audacity to fucking even birth you in your first fucking life?” He stood in front of Justin and offered the other warlock his hand. “Sorry about that guy, he’s a little slow. Major Ryan West of Fireteam Inkwell at your service.”

The SAS Warlock shook his hand. “Jock Lewes, SAS.”

“It’s an honor to meet one of the illustrious Special Air Service,” Ryan replied. He looked at an invisible watch. “Well, my shameless self cameo and political statement is done.” He walked back to his tank and called back, “Have a great day Jock!”

“You too Major!” Jock replied.

Me and Bellona exchanged similar looks of confusion. ‘What the hell was that?’, her eyes seemed to say. There was a loud bang from atop a nearby Wyvern Panzer and we looked to see Rommel with a scowl on his face and his C96 Mauser.

“I stand by Lewes!” he shouted. “You idiots did not do anything for Great Britain or her people!”

There was a resounding shout of agreement. Justin seemed oblivious. We all seemed to be wishing him equal amounts of bad luck, and sure enough our wishes were granted. A sphere of cubic shapes fell from the night sky, crushing Justin and unleashing a unit of Cabal.

“Oh fuck various types of duck!” Bellona shouted.

We pulled away from our embrace and drew our weapons, firing upon the Cabal. I cut down three from the original pod and a mercenary got the other two. They kept coming, the drop pods falling from the sky like hail and smashing tanks, Guardians, and Justin for a second time. The real leader emerged from the ranks of infantry, a modestly armored General who looked almost identical to his soldiers except the pink OwO painted on the front of his helmet. He ordered his men into formation and shouted to us.

“We’ve got it from here!” he promised. “Go home, my men will help with the evac and defense. We’ve got City forces inbound. You’re relieved of your post.”

We didn't ask any questions. We just took the opportunity and left. You can't pass up an opportunity like that. I'd seen enough fighting for today, and I bet Bellona had too. I wondered offhand what had happened to Ferro and Skylar, or even the mysterious Alois and the confusing Prior. We'd likely never know.
Prior


Three hours to sunrise.

So you may be wondering what happened to me, Alois, and Ferro. Well, the Hive can undo their own deaths if they’re powerful enough, and I could undo Devi’s death so it stands to reason I could do it to myself. So I did that and waited for the dust to settle. As for Alois, he was beyond repair—but Ferro… You’ll soon see. The flower of the League isn’t dead. It’s just beginning to bloom. And I daresay I’m proud to be one of its new roots. Now, I have a rather attractive girl to find and a perfect assed woman to revive. Good night, nerds.

Chapter End Notes

This will be the last Axis Powers chapter. Fireteam Zeus will be returning for another, hopefully neater, season. The state FTZ is in now is a result of assistance from a fellow author, Lalalelo94. Check out her Fireteam Survivor series.
http://archiveofourown.org/users/Lalalelo94
Chapter Summary

Winston and Zavala meet and talk about the futures of their sovereign entities, but it takes a chilling turn. Just a short epilogue before the next season.

[>I<]

Zavala

City Foreign and Extraterrestrial Sovereign Entity Relations Office (CF SERO)

One day after the Razing of London

Last City, Earth.

Early morning.

The meeting room I sat in now was smaller than the others, as it was intended for one on one meetings between sovereign leaders. It was a small miniature library with two equally sized cushioned chairs, a circular tea table, and book from every part of the system connected to the City on each shelf, a new one lying open atop a short shelf behind Winston. It was called ‘Great Britain, our Nation Refuses to Die’, which I found fitting as we were currently negotiating his political position within the City, the culture of his people and its survival, and other such things. I hoped we could reach an agreement that satisfied both parties equally.

Winston and I had dressed for the occasion, wearing business suits of opposite colors—mine being black with an orange Six Fronts themed necktie, his being white with a Union Jack bow tie. Up close I noticed he was a mortal man, with grey hair, tired greyish blue eyes, and no Ghost. When I asked him how long he’d been running London he said he had been running the city for two hundred fifty six years, having been almost unanimously elected by the people first when he was merely thirty eight. That made him two hundred ninety four now.

His moustache was well kept and waxed, and his medium length silver hair had yet to recede. He told me that this was because—without telling the people—he had begun to lace the water of London with a Golden Age medication meant to slow, but not stop or reverse, telomere damage. We found a common ground here as I was doing something similar, allowing civilians to participate in free human trials of a similar drug. This conversation ended quickly though, as Ikora was the primary overseer of this project. Nonetheless, we continued successfully building a friendly atmosphere until it became time to get serious.

Winston changed the subject from light politics over to the main focus of the meeting.

“So,” he said, “almost every Londoner was safely evacuated to the City. Thank you for that.”

I chuckled dismissively but politely. “You would have done the same.”
He sipped his tea and grunted in disagreement. “No, I likely would not have. Not to be rude, but the City simply has too many people. We could not easily sustain such a large population growth, especially from a foreign land and culture. Our culture and identity would be flooded out and destroyed.”

“How so?” I inquired.

Winston grabbed a spare cup and filled it half a centimeter less than halfway with steaming tea. “Allow me to demonstrate.” He placed the cup in the center of the table. “Look. The tea is my people and their identity. Right now you would say that the tea is most definitely there, and that you would be pleased to drink it, would you not?”

I nodded and politely remained silent. Winston grabbed a few packs of sugar and a fraction of a teaspoon of cinnamon.

He poured a bit of the sugar packet into the cup and added a small pinch of cinnamon. “This is our regular stream of refugees. Can you still see the tea?”

“Yes,” I confirmed.

“Good, you should. Now.” He stirred the tea and added a bit more tea, sugar, and cinnamon into the cup, putting it at halfway full and visibly still mostly tea. “Now, I have stirred the sugar and cinnamon into the tea and added more tea. The populations have grown proportionately and the refugees have successfully joined, at least partially, with the local culture. Now, you almost want to take the tea and drink it at this point do you not?”

I chuckled politely. “Indeed, just from the smell… Where is it from?”

“London of course,” he answered. “The seeds were from India, but they were grown on British soil, although the Fallen would beg to differ. So as you can see, the culture has been richened and has even grown.” He opened multiple packets of sugar and took a heaping spoonful of cinnamon. “It’s a regular day in London…” He moved the teaspoon closer to the cup. “But little do we know, our ally the ‘Last’ City has been attacked and destroyed. So you all come running to us, and we let you all in like good allies.”

He dumped the cinnamon into the cup and poured in all the sugar packets he had grabbed. Pretty soon the cup was full to the brim and then some with sugar and cinnamon, a little damp with tea.

Winston spread his hands questioningly. “Where is the tea?” He raised a finger to stop me from speaking. “Oh it’s there, but it is far out populated by the sugar and cinnamon. And nobody in their right mind would try to drink it. So you see, now our identity is all but… gone.” A tiny tear formed in his left eye and trickled halfway down his cheek. “We are dead at that point. Soon a new foreign leader is running London and our nation finally dies what you Guardians call a ‘last death’.”

I saw what he meant and knew exactly how I could help him. I would give it to him. I would make sure that no matter what his culture wouldn’t die. He was an old man who’d ran his ninetieth lap out of a hundred. He just wanted his people to be safe before he passed, and after.

I smiled warmly. “Guardians never say die.”

He looked up. “Hmm?”

“Great Britain may now be Cabal and Fallen territory to the last mile, but her people are not.” I put a fist over my heart. “I swear to you, as long as I hold my seat on the Consensus you people and their identity will remain vibrant and healthy. Until such time as we can stage a reclamation and
restoration mission, your people will be safe and welcomed in the City. They shall be housed in
proximity within one another, room physically and chronologically will be made for your cultural
events, everything. I swear it. And one more thing. You and your successor will have a seat on the
Consensus.”

He raised a skeptical eyebrow and sipped his tea. “That’s all?”

“What?” I put my hands back on the table. “What else could your people need?”

He grinned. “Remember remember, the fifth of November. The Gunpowder Treason and plot. I
know of no reason why the gunpowder treason should ever be forgot…” There was a fiery glint in
his eyes. “Ring any bells? I know who is responsible. A Brigadier General of yours. My people will
want revenge, and they will have it.”

I was shocked, horrified, disgusted. “You aren’t suggesting…”

He continued reciting the poem, slightly changing it. “Skylar Peace and his vile mind did the
scheme contrive…”

I clenched my fist and talked loudly and firmly over his chilling rendition of the poem. “He was
used. Don’t you understand?”

He just continued on reciting. “...But, by the Light’s providence, him they catch. With a Dark
power in hand, burning London like a match! A gun and a stake, for the people’s sake. If I can’t
have a shot, I’ll take two. The better for me, and the worse for you. A stake rope and stock to bind
the Warlock, a long noose to string him up. A barrage of bullets to cut him down-”

“Stop!” I shouted. “There will be no further discussion on this matter. And if you want your war
criminals, they’re already dead. Silas Krane committed suicide. Bolverk was killed in action, as was
his Air Force General and protege. Not to mention the traitors in the American outpost being
overthrown and killed. The only other possible one to blame, Prior Namör, is dead. Skylar is an
innocent and tragically abused pawn-”

His voice picked up and drowned me out. “Fire boys, fire boys! Through the night the gunshots
ring! Reload boys, reload boys! Or him back to life a Ghost will bring! Hip, hip, hooray!”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!