Mights and Maybes
by Gileonnen

Summary

After crushing the broodqueen In Anânh, Kalith comes to an uncomfortable realization about his relationship with the Spider: he's in love.

Kalith emerges from the depths of In Anânh's broodhold with ichor on his hands. The fireteam the Spider had cobbled together was efficient—a tight-lipped titan in hulking pauldrons; another warlock who countered Void with Void. Together, the three of them had burned through a few hundred Hive until they'd reached the many-chambered cavern at the heart of the nest, and there cut down its queen.

_Little morsel_, Spider had called him in that heavy-scented darkness, as though no one else was on the comms. As though no one else could hear the low purr of hunger in his voice, or see how Kalith shivered at being named.

It must have made them uncomfortable. Kalith still isn't sure what it makes him feel.

"There's a Crucible match at Gambler's Ruin, if you're looking for something to do," Pelagia offers. "Still time to queue."

He grins at her--she won't be able to see it through the helmet, but the subtle changes in his vocal harmonics will let her know all the same. "Another time, maybe. Right now, I need to spend time with my thoughts."

She spins her points in exasperation. "Well, in that case, there's a bounty on etheric spirals?"

"That sounds more my speed."
He swings astride his Sparrow and takes off across the grassy wreckage of the Jetsam of Saturn. A few Hive acolytes fire after him, charring the rusted ships' bones along the edge of the asteroid; a knight roars and raises her boomer just as he skids around a corner, and her shot sears into the vast emptiness beyond the Shore.

By the time he reaches Soriks's Cut, he almost feels like he can breathe again. The air of the Tangled Shore is thin and tastes metallic on the back of his throat, like something many times filtered and processed. He's coming to like the taste.

Kalith feels the etheric spiral before he sees it--a strange crispness in the air like a crystalline music just beyond hearing. It feels the way ether tastes, bright and pure and shivery. He leaps down from his Sparrow at the edge of the abyss and kneels beside the spiraling red fungus, watching ether plume gently into the air. "That's one down," says Pelagia brightly as she transmats it into the Orbital Grid.

She's worried about him. She can tell that something's set Kalith adrift, and she doesn't like it, so she's trying to remind him--You're not alone. I'm here for you. The other Guardians are here for you.

She's trying to tell him, as she has so many times before, that she hates it when he disappears into his own melancholy. And maybe she's right about that.

There was a time when he would have been content to be a morsel at the side of the Spider's plate--a thing to be devoured or discarded according to the Spider's tastes. One of the many objects in his vast storehouse of possessions, built for a purpose and set aside when that purpose was complete.

Now, with the blood of In Anânh and her brood still on his hands, he finds himself envying her. Star-crossed lovers, the Spider had called her and the Mindbender, with all the contempt of a creature who has never seen the profit in love.

The ache in Kalith's chest goes deeper than his heart--down to the root of his spine, that tangled nest of nerves that links his mind with the outermost edges of his body. He feels it in his palms, his teeth, the soles of his feet.

This isn't how he had wanted to realize he was in love.

"Um," says Pelagia, and Kalith looks up in time to see a Psion gathering a fistful of Void energy. He hurls himself to one side as that energy carves a long furrow into the rock of the asteroid, then draws and sights down his bow. The Psion's single eye is an easy target; one shot is all it takes.

Pelagia was right about one thing--it's hard to focus on being melancholy when you're fighting for your life.

"Do you think we can still get in on a Crucible match?" Kalith asks as he dusts off the knees of his robe.

"We missed the queue for Gambler's Ruin," she answers. "The next one's on Titan, and I don't know if you want to go that far out--"

"It's fine. You were right; I need something to do with myself."

"I didn't mean it like that. You're going to burn yourself out that way," she says gently.

"Maybe," Kalith says. He can't keep the heaviness out of his voice. "But that's what the path of the Dawnblade is about. We burn."
By the time Kalith returns to the Tangled Shore, he's lost three Crucible matches and won two, and his whole body hums with the strain of wielding Light. His tread is heavy on the metal stairs; he can barely summon a wisp of Light to send him drifting like thistledown to the worn green carpets at the Spider's feet. "Five etheric spirals," he announces, "for your bounty."

The Spider props one elbow on the arm of his chair and rests his chin on his hand. "I had expected you earlier," he says. "When you crushed the broodqueen in her lair. You still owe me a debt, my elegant friend. I'd hoped you had come to pay back what you owe."

"Am I your debtor?" Kalith says, raising his gaze to the Spider's. "Another Guardian infesting your Shore, whom you dream of exterminating when your ledger is in the black again?" His eyes feel hot, his throat tight. "Or am I your possession? Have I not given myself to you wholly enough? Is there any part of me that isn't already yours?"

The Spider is quiet for a long moment. In one of his hands, he turns a Ghost shell over and over so that the segments click together. It's impossible to make out any flicker of feeling in his luminous eyes. "Come here," he says at last. "Let me look at you."

Kalith transmats his helm away. He knows that his eyes are bright, but at least he isn't weeping; he has seen horrors beyond recounting without tears, and it would be absurd for him to cry at this. He steps forward, into the gap between the Spider's thighs, and tilts his chin up to offer himself for inspection.

The Spider's claws comb slowly through Kalith's hair, working it free of its tie so that it falls loose about his shoulders. He feels the coolness of the Spider's fingers, slowly warming against Kalith's heated skin.

The Spider's dry, cool palm rests against his cheek. Kalith can't help canting his head into it, seeking a comfort that he has no reason to expect.

"I'm listening," the Spider says, and then, harder-edged, "Speak up."

Kalith swallows. His hands are curled tight at his sides; he could lash out with both fists, strike fire into any foe who came before him, but he can't find the words to say what's tearing at him or why it hurts so much to think about.

Neither can he disobey. He looks up into the Spider's eyes and says, low and sure, "I love you. And I'm yours."

The Spider's hands still in Kalith's hair. His expression warms in a way that Kalith can't entirely explain--a softening in the proud line of his brow, perhaps, or some barely-visible twitch that changes the alignment of his helmet's attachments. He craves even that faint warmth as though he is one of the Shore's sun-starved flowers. "Then perhaps it's time I gave you a gift."

Drawing back, the Spider keys a passcode into the console at the left arm of his throne. A tiny package materializes in his hand, still streaming fragments of code as it drifts out of nothingness and into being. "Open it," he says.

Kalith takes the package into his hands and traces a finger along its edges until the sides fall away. There, lying upon a twist of shimmering silken fabric, is a collar--smooth white leather without buckle or seam, embellished with a stylized metal spider that gleams golden.

White and gold were always Kalith's colors.
He looks up from the collar, and now his hands are shaking. "On Earth," he says, "it's a very serious thing to give a gift like this. As serious as a marriage, to some people. As serious as a warlock's bond. It's not just an ornament. It's an oath. And ... and I don't want it, unless it's an oath."

The Spider hooks the collar on one elegant claw, raising it from the bed of silk and turning it so that the metal spider catches the light. "Having second thoughts?" he asks.

"No." He longs for the pressure of it around his neck the way he has never craved anything else. He wants to be seen wearing it in the Bazaar, and for people who know the Spider's mark to know who owns him--he wants to curl his fingers into the gap between the collar and his throat when he touches himself, and for every orgasm to feel like a gift that the Spider's given him. "No, I just--I want to be sure that you understand what it means to me, before you put it on me."

The Spider raises the collar over Kalith's head and slides it down until the metal spider settles against his neck. He touches some hidden mechanism, and with a gentle hiss, the collar tightens to fit. It's tight enough that Kalith can just barely feel a pressure over his trachea when he swallows--tight enough that it's impossible not to be aware of it, smooth and heavy with promise against his throat.

The Spider slips one long finger beneath the collar, and Kalith lets his eyes slide closed. His pulse pounds against the leather. "How long have you been waiting to give me this?" he asks.

"You ask that as though you expect to learn something from the answer." With a creak of metal and cable, the Spider sits back, chuckling to himself. "If that's all, I think our business is concluded. You may go."

Kalith opens his eyes. The Spider seems as distant as a satellite, reclining upon his throne--but when Kalith touches his collar, he feels how they're tethered together.

Prodding, the Spider says, "I hear there are Crucible matches scheduled for Gambler's Ruin. I've told my associates that I'll be placing my bets on a certain Guardian. I'd hate to be disappointed."

You're going to burn yourself out, echoes Pelagia's voice in the back of his mind. But as Kalith gathers up his tired limbs and makes his bow to the Spider, he finds that he still has a little left to light his way.

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