

## Winter's Respite

"Its too cold." Esk chirped, hovering closely to his Guardian, Remus-9. Remus nodded in agreement, observing the familiar snow capped trees.

The forest was exactly as he remembered it, down to even the most minuscule details. It was mesmerizing to witness a mere memory take shape in this way. His eyes glided across the landscape, beholding the beautiful pine trees, the perfectly white snow, the large protruding hands, and the-

Wait. Hands?

Remus sighed. He had almost forgotten why he was here; and the corruption that had befallen this once majestic place.

The Witness' influence clearly had a presence here, though perhaps not as strongly as other places within the Traveler's Pale Heart...at least, not yet.

"Esk, can you find us a path through this forest?" Remus asked his faithful companion, snapping back to focus. Esk nodded, or at least as well as a Ghost could nod, and flew forward, scanning the landscape.

"There's a cavern not too far from here; it should lead us out of here and straight to the Witness' spire."

"Perfect. Thanks, Esk."

As the two traveled to Esk's coordinates, Remus began to recall a poem he had read, not too long ago. It had been included in a book gifted to him by one of his former fireteam members. What was the name again...?

Oh, right. Winter's Respite. How did it go again?

"Esk."

"Yes, Remus?"

"Do you remember the last poem we read? Winter's Respite?" Remus asked, hoping Esk could jumpstart his memory. Remus could hear Esk whirring and chirping; his way of thinking.

"Uh...would you be mad if I didn't?"

"Yes, I'd feed you to a War Beast."

“Are you being sarcastic again?” Esk beeped nervously.

“Me? Sarcastic? Wouldn’t dream of it.” Despite his exo frame limiting his expressions, Remus liked to imagine a playful smirk on his face.

“Well...I don’t remember. I don’t store poems on my database, either. Why do you ask?” Esk inquired.

“I like to recite things I’ve recently read while on missions. It helps me focus.” Remus shrugged. Esk tilted his floating body, confused.

“I’ve never heard you recite anything while on missions.”

“I do it in my head.”

As Remus and Esk conversed, Remus spotted something on the forest’s snowy floor. He peered at it, trying to make it out. Then, it hit him.

“Esk...is that...” Remus stammered, his eyes transfixed.

Esk hovered towards the item on the ground.

“It’s a torn cloak. But...it’s familiar. Is this the cloak that belonged to...?” Esk didn’t even have to finish his sentence for Remus to know. He brandished his trusty Eyaasluna, nodding to Esk.

“Luce’s cloak.” Remus muttered. He knew it wasn’t real, that it was just a physical manifestation of his memory, but even still...it looked real. More importantly, it felt real.

The day Luce was taken into the forest’s wilderness by a Fallen Captain...Luce and Remus barely survived that encounter. It was one of their last times together, before Luce joined the Dredgens. Those damned Dredgens.

Remus sighed, looking up at Esk.

“Does this mean we’ll find a dream version of Luce somewhere?” Remus asked, half joking.

“Maybe. But there’s definitely another dream person here; behind you!” Esk shouted.

Remus spun around, coming face to face with a familiar Eliknsni...the very same Captain who took Luce.

“Dammit.” Remus cursed to himself, leaping away to dodge the Captain’s vicious attack.

“It’s you...” The Eliknsni hissed at him, reaching for its rifle.

“Look, pal, I don't have time for this.” Remus snapped, firing a few shots from his trusty Eyaasluna. The Captain effortlessly evaded, disappearing behind a large tree.

“Great, just what I need. I should be at the spire already.”

“It's just one Captain. You can handle him!” Esk chirped encouragingly in his head.

“Normally, sure. But if my memory serves me right, and it usually does, this particular Elikśni was a real force to be reckoned with.” Remus grunted as a bullet grazed his shoulder.

“He even gave Luce a run for his glimmer.”

Remus returned fire, tossing a few blades for good measure. Suspiciously, the Captain didn't seem to be attacking back anymore.

Remus narrowed his gaze, his breath steady. This Elikśni was certainly skilled...

Remus hears crunching snow behind him.

...but not skilled enough.

Remus spun around, firing a single, well placed bullet in the Captain's head. The Elikśni froze in place, before collapsing to the ground, dead.

Remus holstered his hand cannon, shaking his head.

“Still can't believe he gave Luce and I so much trouble back then.”

“Like I said, one Captain is no match for you!” Esk beeped happily. Remus couldn't help but smile at his ever encouraging partner.

“Thanks, Esk. Appreciate it.”

It was strange to be in this forest again, resurrecting all these old memories. It was...bittersweet.

As Remus pondered this, he finally remembered.

Winter's Respite. Remus closed his eyes, visualizing the words.

*In Winter's embrace, silent and deep, Where frosty whispers gently creep, A bittersweet love, cold and pure, In every snowflake, I find allure.*

*The world hushed in a soft white shroud, Where dreams of warmth are disallowed, Yet in this stillness, a solace found, A fleeting peace on frozen ground.*

*The chill that bites, yet numbs the pain, A paradox where beauty reigns, In icicles that gleam like glass, Reflecting memories of the past.*

*Beneath the silver moon's soft glow, Footprints fade where lovers once strolled, Their whispered promises on the breeze, Now echoes in the barren trees.*

*Oh, Winter's respite, tender and cold, A paradox my heart can't withhold, For in your grip, a love profound, In every silence, you are found.*

*So let the frost adorn the boughs, And blanket earth in icy vows, For in this season's fleeting grace, I find a love that time can't erase.*

"Remus?" The voice of Esk shook Remus out of his trance. He smiled.

"I'm here, pal. Come on, let's get to that cavern."