

Chapter 1

"Karla!" The words screamed mid sentence from my lungs. Yet I didn't know why. Who did that name belong too?

I knelt on cold stone, ancient, and rough as if scraped by eternal sands. Stalwart wind pulled at the edges of me, gentle and endless. There was no sky, no stars, no moon, no distant hint of a sun on its way. Just a black so deep it stared back into you. I felt so utterly lonely.

And yet, I could see. Not well, but enough to make out the cracks in the stone beneath my knees. Enough to see my own hands, dirty, trembling, scraped raw. There was no source for the light, it was a subtle omniscient glow like moonlight with no moon.

I blinked. Once. Twice. The last thing I remembered was the lightning. It was loud, too close. Such that I swear it had struck me. That crack of sound that tears a person in two and leaves your heartbeat skipping to catch up. And then...

Here.

Wherever here was.

My mouth tasted like copper. Had I died?

Suddenly somewhere off to the left behind one of the hulking stone shapes that loomed like drunken colossi, I heard cursing. Not the wild kind, but the frustrated, muttering sort. Half-spoken and half-spat. It was a strange comfort, honestly. That cursing voice meant someone else was here. I wasn't alone, and maybe that meant I was alive.

I stood, knees stiff, bones cold. Then picked my way through the ruined sprawl. The ground sloped, uneven beneath my boots, littered with fragments older than kingdoms. Towering pillars leaned askew, covered in spirals and symbols I doubt anyone could read. It smelled like dust and forgetting.

The light didn't change, but I could tell I was getting closer. Her voice got sharper, more coherent.

"Come on, you bastard piece of... mierda, I need you!"

I stepped around a chunk of fallen stone taller than I was and saw her.

Kneeling, same as I had been. Except she wasn't lost. She belonged here. Her armor was nothing I recognized. No sigils, no lacing, no leather or chain. It shimmered in a way metal shouldn't, all smooth curves and glowing seams that pulsed faintly with some inner light. It reminded me of twisted metallic flesh.

She was elbow-deep in something I couldn't name. Was that a pile of entrails? She didn't look up.

I stayed still, heart in my throat, unsure what you said to a stranger in a starless place. So I started with the universal greeting.

"...Hello?"

My voice felt small enough to blow away in that endless breeze.

She froze, then looked up.

And the look on her face, well, it was exactly the one I'd been wearing a moment ago. Confusion. Caution. And underneath it, the beginning of a hundred questions.

The woman's eyes snapped to mine, and her whole posture changed, sharp, ready, dangerous. She raised a hand, palm out, and I saw the light gather there. Not fire, not magic, no, It swirled like smoke in a bottle, edges flickering between violet and electric white, humming in a way I could feel in deep in my chest.

"Identify yourself," she barked.

My hands went up before I even thought about it. I didn't know what she was, but there was no point in trying to fight, she had me.

"I, uh, I'm Rook," I said, trying not to stammer. "I don't know where I am."

It wasn't much. But it was the truth, and it seemed to be enough.

The light in her palm fizzled and faded seemingly triggering something in her. Her shoulders dropped a fraction. She looked at me, really looked, then sighed as if being reminded of a very long day.

"Of course you don't," she muttered, rubbing the back of her head with a gauntleted hand. The gesture made her seem a little more human. "The lightning. That must've been you."

I blinked. "What?"

She nodded toward the empty sky. "Iluminación, the lightning. You came in with a strike. Out of nowhere. It's been happening more lately." She glanced back at the fleshy machine beside her, but it didn't seem to be going anywhere. "Name's Cybal. Don't worry, I'm... not going to fry you. But don't be funny chica."

That wasn't exactly reassuring, but it was something.

"You said... this happens? Other people like me?"

Cybal squinted, like she wasn't sure how much to say. "Not many and not exactly like you, But enough. Sometimes the strike is them coming, sometimes it's them going."

The wind stirred between us. I looked up, still no stars. Still that sourceless light. But for the first time since waking up on this stone, I didn't feel entirely alone.

Cybal sat back on her heels, the glow at her fingertips gone now, but her eyes never softening.

With a sigh she explained. "It's the void," she said. "Ever since crossing the event horizon, this started happening. People just...showing up. Always with lightning. Always lost."

She stopped, glancing at me like she'd tripped over her own sentence. "Right... That doesn't mean a damn thing to you, does it."

I shook my head slowly.

She sighed. "Doesn't matter. The point is: you're not the first."

Her hands moved back to the machine, or beast?—at her feet. Now that I was closer, I could see it had legs. Bent and coiled like a hunting cat's. Plates of that same twisted muscle-like armor. Something about its shape felt almost alive, even though it didn't move.

"I need to get her running," Cybal muttered, yanking a cable into place. "Lily, my Demonio de Acero here is our only way out of this sector. Otherwise we'll be stuck here when the Soldiers of Dukar sweep through again with no good way to fight them."

"Soldiers of who?"

Cybal frowned, eyebrows scrunching. "Bad news. They enforce the worship of that Voids-Damned Dragon."

I had about a hundred questions. But I didn't ask them. Not yet. I just looked at the creature-machine, her "Demonio de Acero?", and then back at Cybal.

"So... what do you need?"

She gave me a look. Not a suspicious one. More like she was recalculating something in her head. Then, with a small shrug:

"Can you hold a light? Or a weapon?"

"I can do both," I said.

It was true. Even if I didn't know what the stars had planned for me yet, I could still hold a blade steady. Even in the dark.

So she stood and clipped a small seemingly non-magical light with a clip onto the rusted edge of my chest plate.

"There, just keep it pointed at Lily" She gestured at the open chest towards something resembling a heart.

Cybal didn't wait for my answer. She turned back to Lily with a kind of fierce focus that made me instinctively step back, giving her space. Her hands hovered over its chest, if you could call it that, and the light from her hands came back. But this time, she didn't hold it. She poured it.

It spilled from her palms as if liquid fire, threads of it twisting down into the Demonio's seams, lighting up faint, spidery paths etched into its surface. The creature didn't flinch, didn't stir. Just drank it in, silent and strange, like a statue learning how to breathe.

I watched, uncertain if I was witnessing a spell or something else entirely. Magic didn't behave like that where I came from. It didn't pour like that unless it was flame or water, but this seemed neither.

The Demonio... Lily, I mentally corrected, was shaped like a person. A tall one, lean and armored, made of overlapping metal plates that shifted like muscle. But the metal wasn't cold. It shimmered with something beneath its surface, veins under skin. I could almost swear it was breathing.

After just long enough to believe the effect had done nothing, it moved.

Not all at once. First the chest lifted, slowly. Then its head turned, joints whispering as it sat up like someone waking from a long sleep. Then without being told, reached to the ground beside it and picked up a long, sleek weapon. The large glowing tool with many barrels and looked too heavy to hold with one hand. Yet it did anyway.

I startled back a step, but Cybal didn't flinch. It wasn't until it turned its head towards me that I realized it had no features which could hint at a face. Only seams, fleshy plates and those wicked horns.

"There we go," she said, exhaling hard. "About time."

She looked at me only briefly, still working even as she spoke. "She's linked to me," Cybal said, tapping her temple. "Neural interface. But she's not just a puppet. She's got... instincts. Gut

feelings. Learns. Thinks a little, maybe. I don't fully understand how it works, I just know she listens when it counts."

She didn't wait for me to reply as she was already checking the weapon Lily held, syncing up something on a glowing panel near the Demonio's wrist. Everything about her movements said we didn't have time for awe.

"Questions later. We need to move."

Lily stood fully now, tall and still as a tower. Its head turned toward the dark, as if it already knew the direction of the danger.

And for the first time, I didn't feel like the strangest thing in the ruin.

We moved fast, Cybal in the lead, Lily stalking behind her like a silent shadow, and me trying to keep pace on legs that still hadn't decided if they trusted the ground. The ruins stretched in every direction, pillars leaning like watchers, monoliths etched in half-erased symbols. They blocked out the horizon in every direction, though I had a feeling there wasn't much to see beyond the ruined megastructures. Every few steps, I looked up. Still no stars. Just the call of the void.

Cybal kept her head low, eyes scanning the dark.

Then she stopped so suddenly that I almost bumped into her. She turned, pointing past me.

"Is that yours Chica? You came in from there right?"

I followed her gaze.

There, half-buried in the fractured stone, was a hammer. Enormous. Heavy-looking. Its head was blackened and spiked at each corner, like it had seen fire and come through angrier. The handle was wrapped in worn leather, stained dark by time and use. I didn't remember carrying it. I didn't even remember seeing it before.

But something in my chest pulled toward it.

I stepped forward, hands shaking slightly as I reached for it. The moment my fingers closed around the grip, something clicked. Not a sound, but a feeling. Like my body remembered something my mind hadn't caught up with yet. I wielded the hammer with instinct and purpose. My body knew this weapon.

Mine.

"I think, yeah," I whispered. "Yes, it's mine."

Cybal nodded once, curt, already turning away. “Good. You’ll want to bring it, hope you can remember how to use it.”

Not but a few moments later, I finally heard them. The mysterious antagonist which had been compelling Cybal to move so fast.

A low clatter at first. Then the metallic thump of boots. Lots of them. Footsteps with no rhythm, just scraping and stomping and dragging. I spun around.

They emerged from the far end of the ruins. A dozen, maybe more, some tall, some hulking, some lurching, their armor not quite fitting. Each one cobbled together in bits of mismatched metal, old-fashioned breastplates patched with sleek panels, medieval helmets fitted with magical optics. Some had banners stitched to their shoulders, black cloth that fluttered in a wind I couldn’t feel. Others bore symbols I didn’t recognize, scrawled in paint, etched in burn marks.

Their weapons were just as wild. Blades. Guns. Things that didn’t belong together held together by sheer will and cruelty.

Lily stepped in front of us without a word, weapon humming deathly soft as it aimed.

Cybal didn’t flinch. “Soldiers of Dukar.” With the utterance of the word she spit on the ground and tightened the fitting on her wrist.

I tightened my grip on the hammer in reaction. It felt heavier now. Real. I stood a little straighter.

“Stay close,” Cybal said, her voice tight. “They don’t talk. They don’t negotiate. If they catch us, we will worship the dragon, alive or dead.”

Chapter 2

They crested the ridge like a wave made of rust and ruin.

The Soldiers of Dukar stood outlined against the voidlit sky, a ragged line of metal and motion. I counted twenty, maybe more. Some dragged serrated weapons, others moved with eerie coordination. One, tall and draped in heavy fur cloaks, raised a hand to the air.

“Cull the Pariahs of the Wastes,” the figure said with a discordant voice that didn’t sound human.

Then came the first shot.

It cracked through the stillness like a whip, striking the stone just shy of Cybal's shoulder. She cursed in surprise. "Mierda!" Then dove behind a fallen pillar, Lily slipping in beside her with a kind of boneless grace that made my skin crawl and admire at the same time.

Another shot rang out, then another and then the ruins erupted in gunfire. Blue-white bolts screamed through the air, lighting up the shattered architecture like stuttering lightning. Stone cracked and metal sparked from physical projectiles. Without command, Lily popped up from cover and returned fire in sharp, methodical bursts, its weapon pulsing with precise heat. Each shot knocked one of the Soldiers back, but they kept coming, relentless. Its head whipped back and forth, its eyeless face training from target to target, tube-like dreadlocks flipping with each shot.

"Rook!" Cybal shouted, not looking at me. "You need to open the hatch! Forward, east, under the split monolith!"

My mouth was dry. "What hatch?!"

She ducked, firing again. "The stone with the broken eye! Just smash through it! Use that hammer you're so cozy with!"

There wasn't time to argue. Or to be afraid. I ran.

Shots hissed past me, burning hot lines through the air. The ridge was chaos now. Shouting, charging, steel feet crashing down the incline. Somewhere in the noise, something shrieked that didn't sound like a machine.

I reached the monolith. It was cracked down the center, its spiral symbol split into two jagged halves. The broken eye, just like she said.

I raised the hammer.

It felt like raw power in my hands.

The first blow rang the hammer's head like a bell. The second sent a tremor through the stone beneath my boots. The third sent a quick snap down the stone face, the split widening some.

"You got that open yet amiga?" Cybal yelled down the slope.

"Almost. There." I yelled between swinging my hammer. Another screech. "Summon, the Wyrms!" Someone yelled from the ridge.

I turned to see a magnificent spectral form appearing above the army. "Uh, Cybal, what's that?"

"Don't worry, just get that damn tunnel open." She fired another round into the crowd.

I turned back to my task. *Come on Rook, focus.* Ping after ping the stone face slowly eroded until the last strike completely crumbled the stone face leaving me almost stumbling into the

fresh hole. I shifted the light Cybal had given me, revealing a dark, square tunnel mouth just wide enough for someone to crawl through.

"Got it!" I yelled over my shoulder.

Cybal and Lily were already moving, covering fire scattering the front line of the Soldiers. But they weren't stopping.

They were closing in.

I slid down into the hole with Cybal right behind me. Lily came last, waiting at the opening long enough to mow down several more soldiers then releasing a modulated growl and sliding down to join us.

"Follow this tunnel to the right. Then go about a mile. I'll explain what we're doing on the way."

Cybal turned to face Lily through the cloud of dust that hung like fog in the rooty tunnel. With a quick gesture Lily tossed the massive weapon aside and firmly gripped the beams that ran along the ceiling.

Before I could question what was happening, Cybal grabbed me by my shoulder and spun me to face down tunnel.

"Vamos, now!"

Just then debris and stones began falling from the ceiling and the floor quaked.

"Is she...?"

"Yes! Go! Holy shit Chica." She pushed me down the tunnel and my legs started running. My heart pounded as the entire tunnel shook. The beams splintered sending a thunder crack echoing through the enclosed space. Lily released surreal modulated wails of strain.

I could see Cybal just ahead, legs pumping faster than I could have ever ran. Then she was gone as a blast of dust knocked me to the ground.

I tumbled two or three times before striking a wall with a massive thud. I lay there in the brown beam of murky light from my clip on, waiting for any pain to tell me I had been hurt.

My palms stung and my head was aching along with both knees. But I felt ok.

I heard Cybal cough before releasing a cough of my own. A black metallic hand reaching through the fog nearly stopped my heart when I saw the familiar blue light of what should have been Lily's face.

She gave a modulated whine as I took her hand, nearly yanking my arm off as she helped me to my feet.

"Rook, you ok?" Cybal's smoky light beam emerged from the darkness before entering my beam. My eye immediately was drawn to the large gash that ran across her forehead.

"Yeah... Yeah I'm fine." I looked myself over in the dim light, just a few scrapes.

"Your head, are you ok Cybal?"

"Peachy." She pressed her fingers to her head then examined her blood tinged glove with a sigh.

I exhaled and gave myself a moment to catch my breath. "We need a plan."

"I have one." She checked her wound again with another grimace.

"I know things from back when I was a soldier, before all this." She vaguely gestured to the air around her. "I know of an industrial greenhouse we can get supplies from." She began gathering the scattered items from the tunnel floor. Lily's weapon was trained on the dark tunnel we had come from. Clanks and thuds could be heard faintly, somewhere through the deep rubble.

"Greenhouse? Why a greenhouse?"

Cybal put the last of her items pack and took off towards the right tunnel "Walk and talk".

So I followed with Lily taking up the rear.

"In case you thought it was just night time, it's not and it's not just here. It's everywhere." She ducked under a large root and turned to shine the light on it, shielding part of it with her hand.

"So the only plants are the ones in greenhouses now, not many animals left, food is scarce."

I ducked under the root and Cybal took the lead again.

"But, won't us stealing food just mean less for everyone else?"

"You have a good morale compass amiga, and you're right, but we aren't after the plants. We are trying to start our own greenhouse, one not controlled by the dragons, and for that, we need seeds." Her light scanned back and forth like a lighthouse in the dark, occasionally training on obstacles so I could avoid them.

"Who is this, we?" I asked, stepping over some kind of broken machinery.

"Mostly me, but I'm trying to help the village. What's left of where I grew up. Lot of good people there and mi madre as well. I want to fight against Krux, all in all, but mostly I'm just trying to take care of my familia."

That name, Krux, it made me want to flee, to stop right there and run as far as I could. *Its just a name Rook, your ok.* I took a deep breath and focussed again, my heart quieting.

"Nothing wrong with that. Sometimes that's how it all starts."

"That is true chica." She braced against a beam as she stepped over a rock. It shifted barely an inch, pebbles and dust fell from the ceiling then stopped.

"Maybe don't lean against those..." I searched the ceiling nervously.

"Noted. This way" She nodded and pointed her beam to metal door on the wall.

"This leads to the subway." She started tugging on a circular handle.

"Sub-way?"

"Just a special tunnel, not really important." The wheel groaned as she finally broke it free and it began spinning, then opened with a deafening creak. She grimaced.

"Stay low, all kinds of things travel through here." And with that she stepped through into the darkness.

I pulled the hammer off my back and let the weight of it bounce in my hands. Spun it once, then followed into the darkness.

With another loud groan, Lily pulled the door shut.

The door's echo faded into overwhelming silence. The darkness made my ears ring and woosh in rhythm with my heart.

Cybal's boots broke the silence with crunching steps, her silhouette just ahead. Lily followed behind me, footfalls unnervingly quiet for something her size, the faint whirr of servos almost comforting in the dark.

"Ever been underground this deep, chica?" Cybal's voice was soft and faint.

"No," I admitted. "Closest I've been was a collapsed mine shaft near home. Didn't stay long."

She chuckled under her breath. "Yeah, these tunnels have that effect. The dark likes to settle in your head if you let it."

We moved on, weaving between columns where the tunnel opened wider. In places, the ground was damp, shallow puddles reflecting my light back in trembling shards. Somewhere far away, metal clanged, a single strike that rang just long enough to make me glance over my shoulder. An electronic wail followed, it almost resembled some kind of sound Lily might have made.

"You hear that?" I asked.

"Its nothing you want to meet," she said without turning. "Keep moving."

Lily made a low, modulated tone, a warning maybe, but didn't break stride.

A few minutes later, Cybal slowed near a rusted door set into the wall. She brushed grime from a faded stencil, the paint too worn to make out the words.

"This is it," she said, and her tone shifted, softer, heavier. "Through here is the way back topside. You follow the track north until you hit a ravine, cross it, and you'll see the first watchfires from the village."

I frowned and my back stiffened. "You're sending me away?"

Her eyes met mine, the beam from my headlamp catching the blood still dried along her temple. "I told you, Rook. What I'm going to do next... it's not your fight. The village, they could use someone like you Chica. Safer for you. Smarter."

For a moment, all I could hear was the quiet drip of water somewhere behind me and my gut sank. "You really think I'm just going to run while you go take all the risks?"

Her jaw tensed. "I think you're smart enough to know when to cut loose from someone else's suicide run. This isn't your world, not your people, don't die for us when you have a world to go back to someday."

I shook my head. "No. I'm not leaving you to go fight alone, Cybal. You got me out of that mess up there. You kept me alive. You think I'm going to pay you back by walking away? Besides, I don't think I can even go back?"

Her mouth opened like she wanted to argue, but I cut in before she could.

"I'm staying by your side. Whatever's coming, we face it together. You're not getting rid of me that easy."

For a heartbeat, the only response was her exhale, part frustration, part something else I couldn't name. Finally, she gave a short, crooked grin.

"Fine, chica. Just don't regret it."

I stepped forward, planting my hammer's head on the concrete beside me. "Only thing I'd regret is not being here when you need me."

Lily's head tilted, that faint blue light across her faceless helm pulsing once, approval maybe?

Cybal sighed, turned from the hatch, and jerked her chin down the darker tunnel ahead. "You're a good soul Rook." Cybal took my hand and squeezed it.

"If you're going to help me see this through, you need to know exactly what we are up against."

"Ok, let me hear it." I nodded and let go of her hand.

"There was no way for us to save ourselves or our world from the black hole. I'm not sure how, but at that point somehow Krux the dragon became involved and our militaries turned on the people. Dukar showed around then too, I'm not sure how, the war happened fast and we didn't get a lot of info at the bottom."

"Ok, stop there, I already have a lot of questions." I took a deep breath before sitting down a bench. It's frame was covered with some kind of gunk that I tried not to think about.

"This... Blackhole and Krux thing sounds familiar. The whole, darkness thing felt alien at first, but there is something to it, like, I can hear something or see something in it that's familiar and you talking about this made it stronger."

Cybal sat down beside me and Lily took a few steps into the shadows, weapon instinctively raised and scanning the dark.

"That's not really surprising. Everyone I've met from the iluminación has a similar tale. Can take them a bit to remember, but it's the same."

I rubbed my temples wishing more memories would come back, I could really use them. "So, I'm from another world where the same thing happened?" The thought made my head spin. I took a braid of my pink hair and began twisting it between my fingers. My head spun a little less.

"Far as I can tell." She opened a pack on her chest and pulled out some sort of stick wrapped in a clear film and began peeling it away.

"Tell me what you do remember, usually helps, and have some of this." She handed the peeled stick to me.

"Will this help me remember?" I studied it, realizing it was some form of meat.

"No, but it's nutritious." She took a bite of her own. "Start from the top."

"Ok... Well, I'm starting to remember my hammer, it was... Or, is my favorite weapon. I think I've had it nearly forever." I spun it in my hand once, studying the intricate carvings in the head. "The darkness is kind of familiar too, but the name Krux when you said it earlier, my heart nearly froze, like the start of a panic attack." Hearing the name again still made my heart beat faster. I took a bite of the meat stick. It tasted smokey, maybe a little spicy, but not bad.

"Ok, anything else?" Cybal leaned forward in interest.

"Yeah, I feel like, I had a lot of people around me, when I first arrived, I felt so lonely, carved out, hollow. And... wait, Karla, I was yelling Karla!" I stood pacing the room like a wild cat.

"How could I forget Karla?" I smacked my forehead in anger. A pit forming in my gut, despair that I could let this happen. "My favorite person in the world and I forgot!"

"Hey, hey! Easy now, it's ok, that's normal." She put her hand on my shoulder. "Just let the memories flow."

I frantically searched my pockets, inside the one on my thigh I pulled a locket and opened it. Relief flooded my body as I saw her fiery face. Her skin so red and smooth. Those black and red curls that I had loved to let play across my fingers. Those loving eyes and silly magic tattoos she loved to get every few weeks. It was my Karla.

I rubbed my thumb over the image and let a smile tweak the corners of my mouth.

"You taken?" Cybal peered over my shoulder.

"So very taken."

A fire seemed to take hold in my chest, causing my back to straighten a little. My hammer felt like a part of me, I had defended her and others with that hammer. I could feel it in my bones.

I had people, I had family, and until I could find a way back, I had new people who needed me here. And I would survive until I found them again.

Lily let out a warning sound, her eyeless face focussed on the darkness down the subway. Several purple dots moved about, in between broken crates and strange machines.

A brilliant shot of light streaked down the rails from Lily's weapon. And for a heartbeat I could see their horrible visage. Rotting and skeletonized figures plated with armor and glowing panels. Their mouths far too big for a human. Bodies a mismatch of parts, bones that didn't belong together. Man, beast, machine all at the same time.

"Time to move!" Cybal was already firing, her hands alive with crackling energy, bolts lancing the dark like spectral beams of fire.

The horde poured forward, a dozen, then two dozen, scrabbling over each other in their hunger. Purple glowing eyes filled the tunnel. Lily's weapon thumped in a steady rhythm, dropping several, but too many rose again, staggering onward, jaws gnashing.

One lunged, skittering on twisted limbs. Lily didn't bother to shoot. She caught it by the throat and crushed, the thing splitting apart in a spray of sparks and fetid ichor. Another came from the side, she spun, metallic dreadlocks whipping, and crushed its skull against the tunnel wall with her own head. Her weapon clattered to the floor as both hands became claws of steel and rage. One after another she threw, crushed and clawed them down.

Cybal shouted something in Spanish I couldn't catch over the din, her palms burning with searing blue-white light as she threw bolt after bolt. The tunnel strobed with each shot, and in those flashes I saw how badly we were losing ground. She was sweating, her breaths sharp and ragged. Every cast cost her, and the horde didn't care. They just kept coming. We needed a new tactic.

One of the things raced towards me a great sword raised high. I swung my hammer by instinct, the weight connecting with a crunch that sent it sprawling. More came, metal teeth gnashing, hands clawing at my arms, my chest. I slammed another away, the hammer ringing as it struck plated ribs. Another I rammed with my unbroken horn, ichor sprayed across my face.

We were losing, I had to do something.

Then, a memory that wasn't mine.

Flashes of firelight on polished armor. Voices chanting in harmony. A great river of green flame stretching across a battlefield, holding back an endless tide of the dead. The word etched itself into my bones: Veil Watch.

I gasped, the hammer suddenly weightless in my hands, as if some unseen hand steadied me. The memory told me what to do, how to do it. I understood now, it was my own memory.

"Stay back!" I shouted, my heart pumped with vigor now. Power coarsed through me.

I pressed the hammer head to the ground and whispered the words that surfaced like breath from deep water:

"Rest now, weary soul, the dark is not your foe.

The veil unfolds, return, and find the peace you know."

The floor shuddered beneath us. Pale green fire rippled out from the hammer in a wide ring, crawling along the cracked stone. It didn't roar like fire, it shimmered, a ghostly glow that carried warmth rather than heat.

I covered my eyes with my hand, peering through my fingers at the now brilliant radiance.

The horde shrieked as the flames licked their feet. Not in pain, they weren't burning. They were hungry. They dropped their weapons, fell to their knees, and clawed at the radiance as if desperate to swallow it. The more they touched it, the slower they became, movements stiffening, eyes dimming.

One by one, they stilled, some crumpling like puppets with their strings cut, others freezing mid-step, heads tilted toward the light like worshippers turned to statues.

Silence settled, broken only by Lily's servos whining down and Cybal's harsh breaths.

I stared at the glowing cracks of fire still tracing the tunnel walls. My chest was heaving, but my arms no longer trembled. The hammer hummed faintly, as though approving.

"What the hell did you just do, amiga?" Cybal asked, eyes wide, sweat streaking her dirt-stained face.

"Its, a..." A swallowed hard, trying to find the words to explain it. "It's a memory, something I used to do. Does Veil Watch mean anything to you?"

Cybal scratched her head, nervously prying her eyes away from the inert undead.

"Sorry, not a thing. How long does that last?"

I took a moment to catch my breath and let my heartbeat settle. "We should move to the greenhouse, I don't know how long it lasts."

I smacked my chest lamp which had gone off at some point in the fight and it flickered back on, illuminating Lily who was covered in dark black gore.

"Which way? I'll lead."

Cybal pulled out a map, stared, flipped it once and pointed into the darkness. "Not far. Should be an old emergency exit half a mile from here."

I grabbed my hammer and spun it once. "Great." Then headed for the door.

We walked in silence, the tunnels ambient light faded as the residual flames died, plunging us back into darkness. But the door wasn't far. It was an old steel door which had a large red symbol painted on its face. After a well placed hammer strike it groaned open and revealed stairs which lead up to a plastered over wall which had been erected to close off the tunnel from the greenhouse.

"What now?" I pressed my ear to wall, nothing to be heard but a low electronic buzz.

"Leap of faith, no good way to tell what all's on the other side. But this should be the green house... Here, let me through."

I stood aside and Cybal pulled out a small pocket knife and began carefully cutting a small slit in the plaster between boards.

She placed her hand near the slit and into the emerging blade of purple light.

"Grow lights, this is it." She pocketed the knife and tightened a buckle on mismatched plate on her shoulder.

"This place is pretty well hidden, I only know it because I was here once, long time ago. It's underground and shouldn't be secured. Bust in, grab any seeds we can find, some grow bulbs if we can, and vamos."

She turned to Lily who towered a good two and a half feet over her and smacked her chest plate. "I'll let you do the honours mi amor."

Lily stepped forward and pivoted, placing her shoulder against the thin wall then readied her weapon. Eyeless face turned to us and her hand silently counted down.

3....2....1

Lily walked through the wall like it was paper, boards and plastered splintered and crumbled around her. Then suddenly her frame stumbled backwards. I tried to dodge her falling form but I slammed straight into a wall. Her body fell atop me crushing my armor plating. The wind was gone from lungs and I couldn't feel my arm. It was cold and numb as if frozen. The world spun as I heard Cybal cursing.

Lily's metal skin sizzled and the air smelled of sulfur. Thick hairy vines the size of my arm twisted and curled from everywhere, busting apart the floor and walls.

I desperately tried to push Lily off me, but she was utterly immovable. Ice blue light strobed somewhere in the room.

I gasped for air, but I was being squeezed everywhere. My leg was numb now too. I breathed in tiny shallow breaths as the vines crushed Lily's form into me.

Lily began flailing as well, her arm slammed back towards my face and the world went dark.

Chapter 3

I stopped counting days a while ago. It made things worse. Measuring time like I might do something useful with it. But there's nothing to tend, nothing to mend, no purpose in this cold cell.

The walls don't echo. They are heavy and mute, even the stone ignores me. I talk to them anyway, sometimes. Whisper things. My name. A song I half-remember.

The worst part isn't the cold. It's not even the hunger when it comes, it's the quiet.

I keep reaching. Not with my hands, but with my heart, my breath, that little part of me that used to stretch out like a vine in sunlight. I call to the mosses, the roots, the smallest of insects. I open myself to the air and try to feel the flutter of wings or the warmth of fur.

But there's just, nothing.

I press my face to the wall, hoping, foolishly, again, that maybe there's something left in the stone. Some warmth. Some ancient memory. Even a lichen would be enough. Just one patch of stubborn green that remembered me.

But there's silence. Only occasionally can I feel the faintest warmth from far, far away. On those blessed days when the wind blows just right, I can feel it on my face in furthest corner of the cell, through the stones. There is something out there.

"I'm still here," I whisper to that far away something.

Today, however, was a better day than most. Because today someone's food a few cells down had begun to mold. I did not like talking to mold on most occasions, but it had been so long, I couldn't help but smile a little when I felt it first begin to flourish.

My thoughts are interrupted when the door creaks open with a sound like a bone snapping, I flinch before I even realize what I'm hearing. A figure blocks the light and the smell that follows is of rust and decay.

"Dukar will see you now," the guard says.

The breath reeked of death, there is no life here. My throat closes up, but my body moves. I've learned the difference between an invitation and a command.

He grabs me by the chain looped through my shackles and yanks. The iron is ice on my skin, even though the cell is not cold. Everywhere it touches seems to sap some part of my life away.

We walk through the winding gut of the dungeon. Smells of mildew and old pain waft everywhere, the stone slick beneath my bare feet. But as we climb, something changes.

The light grows brighter.

The walls stop sweating and start buzzing.

I can feel energy, but not the kind I know. Not life, not warmth. It prickles at the back of my teeth like fire, makes my ears ring. There are no windows, but somehow everything is glowing. Every light hums with this angry fire. Lines of it trace the walls like veins under skin. With every step, the world vibrates. The earth beneath my feet trembles near imperceptibly, like a crying child.

I hate it.

I miss the dark. Please, take me back to the dark. The burning in the walls, the cold on my wrists, it's not natural, none of it. Take me back! My mind screams.

Then we stop.

All of that buzzing and humming, suddenly overshadowed by a roiling presence, at the far end of the room, sitting like a storm held in human form, is her.

Dukar.

Her chaotic form draped across a throne of silver and black metal, the edges jagged like broken teeth. Her skin is ash-gray, like steel scorched and reformed. One of her horns curves back proudly. The other, snapped near the base.

Her eyes burn not with flame, but with something colder. A violent, glowing violet that pulses with the very absence of life. It sees through more than just flesh. Her gaze chilling my very being more than the iron chains ever could.

She wore silver armor that clung more like jewelry than protection. Her chest laid bare under the collar of silver. All across it, scars exposed, burns, marks where darkness had kissed and clawed. Her entire body was a battlefield.

And the air around her—

It writhes.

I can feel it the moment I'm thrown forward onto the floor, knees slamming against the smooth surface. Her presence doesn't just fill the room—it boils in it. Energies swirl off her in violent bursts, every one of them different. Cold, heat, hunger, decay. They twist and bite at one another, not in harmony, but in constant war. A storm held barely in check, one no one else could see.

I can't breathe right. My instincts scream to run, to disappear into the roots, the trees, anything—but there's nothing here to flee into. Nothing natural to shield me.

Only Dukar.

"Liana, is that right?" Her voice drips rich with power and confidence.

I didn't dare look up, but I knew she was staring at me by the feeling of frost building on my skin.

"Yes, I am Liana." I managed through the dizziness that was building in my head.

"Your songs have not gone unnoticed child, we have heard those lovely little melodies." She paused but only a moment. "You're a druid aren't you? One fabled to make the plants grow and the animals sing?"

"There are no plants here...?"

"That wasn't the question child, but you've answered it all the same." As she examined something under her nail I noticed her fingers, frost bitten black.

"Now you have two options." She looked back to me and the chill returned. "You can help me. Without the sun, the plants are not growing and despite the gene tweaks and fertilizers, they refuse. So you can make them."

She let the air hang only but a moment before continuing.

"Or, and I don't think you'll care for this one, I can take your life, your soul and your power and shove your reanimated corpse into a temple for Krux's purposes." The lick of her lips and further examination of her claw like nails on mention of the second option was not lost on me.

She was right, the option was easy. I couldn't help but feel the chance to get out of that cell and to use my power again...well, it felt too good. But I saw no deception. I had seen outside felt the quiet. The very bottom of this worlds foodweb was collapsing.

"I was created to care for the flora of my world. And this world, is mine now too." It pained me to admit that I would likely never be able to return to the Eternal Garden. "I will help you restore your world's flora."

Dukar frowned only for an instance before the corner of her lip curled upwards. "Good... This one is smart."

"I have a question though." I interrupted, lifting my eyes from the marble floor to meet her frosty stare.

I waited only a moment. Long enough to gather my courage. Dukar raised an eyebrow expectantly.

"I can see you, your Aura. Why? I see them fighting, raging. It wants to devour you, but you allow it in, why?"

As I asked the question, the storm within began to flare. The ice was gone now. The storm flared with flaming hunger— gnashing, wild, angry.

Dukar leaned forward. Her scant armor clinking.

"Because I do whatever it takes to protect my people. I consume my very flame to shield them."

That's when I understood the storm, it's eye revealed.

"But, who is left for you to love?"

The storm broke into wild frenzy. Mouths snapped and roared with rage. My skin grew clammy and wet as the room baked with fervant heat.

Her arm snapped up towards me with those darkened claws. Black fur erupted up her arm taking on a bestial resemblance.

Before I could react she was on top of me with inhuman speed. Her claws already sinking into my throat.

"I will sacrifice everything to save this world from the void. No soul is sacred on my quest, not even my own. Do you understand child?"

That's when I saw a glimpse, beneath the savage, roiling beast. A much younger voice. A hurt voice. One that wanted to control the world around it, to make the pain go away. Then the eye of the storm passed, quieted once again by dark.

The breath was gone from my lungs. Tears rolled as I struggled for air. My mind screamed.
Break free. Break free now!

"I, understand." I finally coughed with the last of my air. Red spots peppering her face.

"Good." Finally she released me. I embraced the cold marble below me and the coolness that entered my lungs through deep breathes.

"Take her to the garden. Have that worthless Green Warden oversee her."

With that she walked back to her throne, calm and elegant, as if nothing had happened.

Massive figures emerged from along the walls, silent and sudden. I had somehow missed them before. Obsidian floating hands jointed with brass and lined with gold. They moved to surround us as the shambling servant forced me from the hall.

I didn't fight. I let the chains on my wrists carry me, feet dragging. The relief of numbness embraced me. Finally the world around me had gone quiet again. I'd never been so happy to have it back.